

The Pardoner's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



Here begins the Pardoner's Tale.

Once there dwelt in Flanders a company of young people who made a habit of folly, such as debauchery, gambling¹, brothels, and taverns, where with harps, lutes and citterns² they danced and played at dice day and night, and ate and drank more than they could, through which they did service to the Devil by unnatural excess within those Devil's temples.

Their oaths were so great and so damnable that it was grisly to hear them swear; they tore our blessed Lord's body into pieces anew (as if the Jews had not torn him enough), and each laughed at the others' sins. And then came graceful and slim dancing girls, young girls selling fruit³, singers with harps, pimps and confectioners, who are all true officers of the Devil to kindle and blow that fire of lust, which is allied to gluttony. I take Holy Scripture as my witness that lechery is in wine and drunkenness.

But, sirs, I will now tell my tale. These three rioters of whom I speak, long before any bell had rung for prime⁴, were sitting in a tavern to drink. And as they sat, they heard a bell tinkle that was carried before a corpse to his grave. One of them called to his servant, "Go quickly," he said, "and ask without delay what corpse passed by here, and see that you report his name correctly."

"Sir," said the boy, "there is no need. It was told to me two hours before you came here; he was an old friend of yours, by God, and he was slain suddenly in the night, as he sat very drunk on his bench. A stealthy thief that men call Death, who slays all the people in this country-side, came with his spear and

struck his heart in two, and went his way without a word. He has slain a thousand in this pestilence; and master, before you come before him, it seems to me that you would be best if you were wary of such an adversary. Be ready to meet him at all times; my mother taught me this. I can say no more.

"The child speaks the truth, by Blessed Mary," said the tavern-keeper, "for over a mile from here, in a large village, he has slain both man and woman, child, servant, and page. I believe his habitation to be there. It would be a bit of great wisdom to be forewarned before he does him great dishonor."

"Yes, by God's arms!" said this reveler, "Is it really such peril to meet with him? I vow to God's bones I will seek to meet him in the highways and the byways. Listen, friends, we three are all one in this; let each of us hold up his hand and become the others' brother, and slay this false traitor Death. He shall be slain before night that slays so many, by God's dignity!"

These three pledged their word together, each to live and die for the rest as if he were their sworn brother, and up they all started in this drunken fury, and forth they went toward that village of which the tavern-keeper had spoken; and they swore many grisly oaths, and Christ's blessed body they rent to pieces-- Death shall be dead if they can catch him!

When they had gone only a little way, just as they were climbing over a fence, an old and poor man met them, and greeted them meekly, and said, "Now, gentle people, God be with you!"

The proudest of these three revelers answered, "What, churl, bad luck to you! Why are you completely wrapped up except your face? Why live you so long to such a great age?"

This old man began to peer into his face, and said, "Because I cannot find a man, even if I should walk from here to India, in city or in village, who will exchange his youth for my age. And therefore I must keep my old age as long as it is God's will. Alas, death will not take me! Thus I walk, a restless wretch, and thus day and night I knock with my staff upon the ground, which is my mother's gate, and say, "Dear mother, let me in. Lo, how I vanish away, flesh and skin and blood! Alas, when shall my bones be at peace? Mother, I would exchange my chest with you⁵, which has been long time in my chamber, yes, for a hair-cloth shroud to wrap myself in!" But still

¹ Gambling. Throughout the tale, the term "gambling" is used for Chaucer's "hasardrye," which refers to gambling in general, but may at times refer to the specific game of dice known as Hazard.

² Citterns. Guitar-like instruments.

³ Girls selling fruit. This is sometimes a metaphor for prostitutes, or at least the occupations at times coincided.

⁴ Prime. 9 am.

⁵ My chest. I.e., his chest containing valuables.

she will not do me that favor; wherefore my face is pale and withered.

But sirs, it is not a courteous thing to speak rudely to an old man, unless he should trespass in act or word. You may read yourselves in Holy Scripture, "Before an old hoary head man you shall arise⁶." For this reason I counsel you, do no harm now to an old man, no more than you would like it to be done to you in your old age, if you remain so long. And now God be with you, wherever you may walk or ride; I must go where I have to go.

"Nay, old churl, not so fast, by God," said this second gambler without delay. "By St. John, you shall not depart so easily! You spoke just now of that traitor Death who slays all our friends in this countryside. By my word, you are his spy! Tell where he is, or, by God and the Holy Sacrament, you shall pay for it. Truly you are in conspiracy with him to slay us young people, false thief."

"Now sirs," he said, "if you are so glad to find Death, turn up this crooked path; for by my faith I left him in that grove under a tree, and there he will wait, and for all your boasting will he hide. Do you see that oak? There you shall find him. May God, Who redeemed mankind, save you and amend you!" Thus spoke this old creature.

And each of these revelers ran until he came to that tree, and there they found nearly eight bushels, as it seemed to them, of florins coined of fine round gold. They no longer sought then after Death, but each was so glad at the sight, for the florins were so beautiful and bright, that they sat themselves down by this precious hoard.

The worst of them spoke the first word. "Brethren," he said, "heed what I say; though I jest often and make sport, I have a good mind. Now Fortune has given us this treasure so that we may live the rest of our lives in mirth and jollity, and as easily as it comes, so too we will spend it. Ah! God's precious dignity! Who would have thought today that we should have so wonderful a grace! Could this gold be but carried from here to my house or else to yours--for you know well all this gold is ours--then would we be in great joy. But truly it may not be done during the day. People would call us harsh thieves and hang us for our own treasure. It must be carried by night, as wisely and slyly as can be. Therefore I advise that we draw straws among us all, and he that draws the shortest shall run with a happy heart to the

town and do so quickly, and secretly bring us wine and bread. And two of us shall secretly guard this treasure, and at night, if he does not delay, we will carry it where we all agree is safest."

One of them brought the straws in his fist and told them to draw, and see where the lot would fall. It fell to the youngest of them and he went forth without delay toward the town. As soon as he was gone, the second said to the third, "You well know you are my sworn brother, and now I will tell you something to your advantage. Here is a great abundance of gold to divide among the three of us; and you know well our friend is gone. Now if I can plan it so that it will be divided among the two of us, will I not have done you a friendly turn?"

"I do not know how that can be," the other answered. "He knows the gold is left with us two. What shall we do? What shall we say to him?"

"Shall it be a secret?" said the first villain. "I shall tell you in few words what we shall do to carry it out successfully."

"I agree," said the other, "not to betray you, by my word."

"Now," said the first, "you know well we are two and that two shall be stronger than one. See to it that when he is set down; you will arise and scuffle with him as in sport, and I will pierce him through the two sides, and you will see to it that you do the same with your dagger. And then shall all this gold be shared between you and me, dear friend. Then may we both fulfill all our desires, and play at dice at our own pleasure." And thus were these two villains agreed to slay the third, as you have heard me say.

The youngest, going to the town, turns over and over in his heart the beauty of those bright new florins. "O Lord," he said, "if only I could have all this treasure to myself, no man living under God's throne should live as merry as I!" And at last the fiend, our enemy, put it into his mind to buy poison with which to slay his two friends; for the fiend found him in such a way of life that he had permission to bring him to ruin, for utterly his full purpose was to slay them both and never to repent. And he went forth without delay into the town to an apothecary, and asked him to sell him some poison so that he might kill his rats; and there was a pole-cat in his yard, he said, which had killed his capons, and he would gladly avenge him upon the pests that ruined him by night.

⁶ You shall arise. See Leviticus. 19.32.

“And you shall have such a thing,” answered the apothecary, “that, so may God save my soul, no creature in all this world who can eat or drink the amount of a grain of wheat of this compound without dying immediately. Yes, he shall die, and will do so in less time than you can walk a mile, this poison is so violent.”

This cursed man gripped the box of poison in his hand, and then ran into the next street to a shop and borrowed three large bottles. Into two of them he poured his poison, but the third he kept clean for his own drink, for he planned to labor all night long carrying away the gold. And when this reveler (may the Devil take him!) had filled his three great bottles with wine, he returned again to his friends.

What need to describe it more? For just as they had planned his death, even so they slew him, and did so quickly. When this was done, one of the two said, “Now let us sit and drink and make merry, and then we will bury his body.”

And with that word he happened to take one of the bottles where the poison was, and he drank and gave his friend a drink also. Therefore, they both died soon. And surely Avicenna⁷ never wrote in any canon or any chapter more wondrous signs of poisoning than these two wretches showed before they died. Thus these two murderers met their end, and the false poisoner also.

⁷ Avicenna. Eleventh-century Arab (Persian) physician, who compiled the important treatise on medicine, “The Book of the Canon of Medicine.”