

THE CANTERBURY TALES: THE MILLER'S TALE

In Oxford there once lived a rich old lout
Who had some guest rooms that he rented out,
And carpentry was this old fellow's trade.
A poor young scholar boarded who had made 3190
His studies in the liberal arts, but he
Had turned his fancy to astrology
And knew the way, by certain propositions,
To answer well when asked about conditions,
Such as when men would ask in certain hours 3195
If they should be expecting drought or showers,
Or if they asked him what was to befall
Concerning such I can't recount it all.
This student's name was Nicholas the Handy.
He led a secret love life fine and dandy, 3200
In private always, ever on the sly,
Though meek as any maiden to the eye.
With Nicholas there were no other boarders,
He lived alone, and had there in his quarters
Some fragrant herbs, arranged as best to suit, 3205
And he himself was sweeter than the root
Of licorice or any herb at all.
His *Almagest* and books both great and small,
An astrolabe for plotting outer space,
And counters used in math were all in place 3210
On shelves between the headposts of his bed.
His storage chest was draped with cloth of red,
And on its top there lay a psaltery
On which at night he'd play a melody,
So sweet a sound that all the chamber rang; 3215
And *Angelus ad virginem* he sang,
And after that would follow "The King's Note."

Folks often praised him for his merry throat.
And this was how this sweet clerk's time was spent,
While friends provided money for his rent. 3220
The carpenter had newly wed a wife,
One whom he loved more than his very life;
Her age was eighteen years. He jealously
Kept her as if inside a cage, for she
Was one both young and wild, and he had fears 3225
Of being a cuckold, so advanced in years.
Not educated, he had never read
Cato: one like himself a man should wed,
He ought to marry mindful of his state,
For youth and age are often at debate. 3230
But since he had been captured in the snare,
Like others folks he had his cross to bear.
And fair this young wife was! She had withal
A body like a weasel, slim and small.
She wore a belt with little stripes of silk; 3235
An apron was as white as morning milk
Upon her loins, pleated daintily.
Her white smock, too, had fine embroidery;
The collar was embellished round about
With lovely coal-black silk inside and out, 3240
And ribbons on the snowy cap she wore
Were of the same silk that her collar bore.
She wore a silken headband, broad and high.
And certainly she had a wanton eye;
Her brows were thinly plucked, and like a bow 3245
Each one was arched, and black as any sloe.
Indeed she was a blissful sight to see,
Moreso than any pear tree that could be
And softer than the wool upon a wether.

Upon her belt was hung a purse of leather,	3250	"Upon my faith, you'll get no kiss from me!	
Silk-tasseled and with brassy spangles pearled.		Why, let me go," she said, "stop, Nicholas,	3285
And there's no man so wise in all this world,		Or I will cry 'Out!', 'Help me!' and 'Alas!'	
Though you may go and search it every inch,		Unhand my body, show some courtesy!"	
Could dream a doll so lovely, such a wench.		But then for mercy he made such a plea	
And brighter far did shine her lovely hue	3255	And spoke so fairly, offering so fast	
Than gold coins in the Tower when they're new.		His all to her, that she agreed at last	3290
Her song was loud and lively as the call		To grant to him her love: she made her promise	
Of any swallow perching on the wall.		To be at his commandment, by Saint Thomas	
She'd skip about and play some game or other		Of Kent, when she saw opportunity.	
As any kid or calf behind its mother.	3260	"My husband is so full of jealousy,	
Her mouth was sweet as any mead whatever		If you don't wait and privy be," she said,	3295
Or as a hoard of apples on the heather.		"I know right well that I'm as good as dead.	
Skittish she was, just like a jolly colt,		You must be secret, keep this matter quiet."	
Tall as a mast, straight as an archer's bolt.		"Nay," Handy said, "don't you be worried by it.	
The brooch on her low collar was as large	3265	A clerk has for his time not much to show	
As is the boss upon a shield or targe.		If he can't fool a carpenter." And so	3300
Her shoes, well laced, high up her legs would reach.		The two were in accord and gave their word	
She really was a primrose, quite a peach,		To wait awhile as you've already heard.	
One fit for any lord to lay in bed		When Nicholas got through with all of this	
Or any worthy working man to wed.	3270	And felt her good below the waist, a kiss	
Now sir, and sir again, it came to pass		He gave her sweetly, took his psaltery,	3305
That one fine day this Handy Nicholas		And played it hard, a lively melody.	
With this young wife began to flirt and play,		Now to the parish church it came to pass	
Her husband off at Osney (anyway		That in her Christian works and for the mass	
These clerks are cunning when it comes to what	3275	This good wife went upon one holy day.	
They want), and slyly caught her by the twat;		Her forehead shone as bright as day, the way	3310
"Surely," he said, "if I don't have my will,		She'd scrubbed it so when washing after work.	
For secret love, dear, I'll have quite a spill."		Now in that church there was a parish clerk	
He held her hips as he went on to say,		Whose name was Absalon. His curly hair	
"My darling, you must love me right away	3280	Was shiny, bright as gold found anywhere,	
Or I will die, God save me!" Like a colt		And spread out like a broad fan on his head	3315
Inside a shoeing frame she tried to bolt,		With straight and even part. A healthy red	
She turned her face away defiantly.		Was his complexion, eyes gray as a gander.	

The tracery of Saint Paul's was no grander
 Than his shoes' openwork, with fine red hose.
 The lad was trimly dressed from head to toes; 3320
 He wore a sky-blue tunic that in places
 Was tricked out with the loveliest of laces,
 And over it his surplice was as bright
 As any blossom seen, a purest white.
 A merry child he was, as God may save. 3325
 He well could let your blood, and clip and shave,
 And draw you up a deed and quittance too.
 Some twenty different ways the fellow knew
 To demonstrate the latest Oxford dance;
 He'd kick his heels about and blithely prance 3330
 And play some merry tunes upon the fiddle.
 Loud treble he was known to sing a little
 And he could play as well on the guitar.
 In Oxford there was not a single bar
 That he did not go visit with his act 3335
 If there was any barmaid to attract.
 To tell the truth, a fart would make him squeamish,
 And he was always proper in his English.
 This Absalon so jolly, fond of play,
 Went with a censer on that holy day 3340
 To cense the parish wives. And as he passed,
 Many a longing look on them he cast--
 Especially on this carpenter's wife.
 Just looking at her made a merry life.
 She was so neat and sweet, this wanton spouse, 3345
 That if he'd been a cat and she a mouse
 At once he would have caught her. Absalon,
 This parish clerk so jolly, full of fun,
 Could not, for the love longing in his heart,
 Take offerings from wives, he'd take no part, 3350
 For courtesy, he said, and never might.

The moon, when night had come, was full and bright
 As Absalon took guitar under arm,
 His thoughts upon whom he might wake and charm;
 Thus amorous and jolly, off he strode 3355
 Until he reached the carpenter's abode
 Soon after cockcrow. He then took his station
 Beside a casement window, its location
 Right in the old man's bedroom wall. And there
 He daintily began to sing his air: 3360
 "Now, dearest lady, if your will it be,
 It is my prayer that you will pity me."
 He sang and played the guitar right in tune.
 The carpenter awoke and heard him croon
 And said then to his wife, "Why, Alison, 3365
 What's going on? Is that not Absalon
 Who's chanting there below our bedroom wall?"
 And she replied, "Yes, John, no doubt at all,
 As God knows, I can hear him tone for tone."
 Now shouldn't one leave well enough alone? 3370
 From day to day this jolly parish clerk
 Wooed her till he was woebegone. He'd work
 Upon it night and day and never rest;
 He'd comb his spreading locks, he smartly dressed;
 By go-betweens and proxies he would woo 3375
 And swore he'd be her servant ever true;
 He warbled to her like a nightingale;
 He sent her honeyed wine, some mead, spiced ale,
 And cakes still piping hot. And since she knew
 Of city ways, he offered money too; 3380
 For some folks can be won by such largess,
 And some by blows, and some by kindness.
 To show her his abilities so varied,
 He even went on stage, portraying Herod.
 But what would this avail him with the lass? 3385

For she so loved this Handy Nicholas
That Absalon could elsewhere toot his horn;
He had for all his labor only scorn.
And so she made poor Absalon an ape,
Made all his earnest efforts but a jape. 3390
The proverb tells the truth, it's not a lie,
Here's how it goes: "The one nearby and sly
Will always make the distant dear one hated."
Though Absalon go mad, wrath unabated
Because he was so far out of her sight, 3395
Nigh Nicholas was standing in his light.
Well may you fare, O Handy Nicholas,
For Absalon must wail and sing "Alas"!
And so it was that on one Saturday
The carpenter to Osney made his way, 3400
And Handy Nicholas and Alison
Were in accord on what was to be done,
That Nicholas should now devise a wife,
This simple jealous husband to beguile;
And if their little game turned out all right, 3405
She then could sleep in Handy's arms all night,
As this was his desire and hers as well.
So right away--no further words to tell,
For Nicholas no longer meant to tarry--
He slyly to his room began to carry 3410
Both food and drink to last a day or two.
He told her what to lead her husband through
If he should ask for Nicholas: she'd say
She didn't know his whereabouts, all day
Upon the lad she had not laid an eye; 3415
She thought some malady he had was why,
For though her maid cried out, the lad to call,
He wouldn't answer any way at all.
So this went on for all that Saturday;

This Nicholas up in his chamber lay, 3420
And ate and slept, or did what he thought best,
Till Sunday when the sun went to its rest.
This simple carpenter began to wonder
About him, if some ailment had him under.
"By dear Saint Thomas, I'm now full of dread 3425
That things aren't right with Nicholas," he said.
"O God forbid that suddenly he's died!
For sure a ticklish world's where we abide;
Today I saw 'em tote a corpse to kirk
Though Monday last I saw the man at work. 3430
"Go up," he told his knave at once. "Go on,
Call at his door, knock on it with a stone,
See how it is, and tell me truthfully."
The knave went up the stairway sturdily
And cried out at the chamber door; he stood 3435
There pounding like a madman on the wood.
"What are you at, O Master Nicholay?
How can you sleep for all the livelong day?"
All was for naught, for he heard not a sound.
But then a hole low in the door he found 3440
(The one through which the cat was wont to creep),
And through this hole he took a thorough peep
Until at last he had the lad in sight.
This clerk sat gaping upward as he might
If he were staring off at the new moon. 3445
He went back down the stairs, and none too soon,
To tell his master how he'd seen the man.
To cross himself the carpenter began,
And said, "Help us, I pray, Saint Frideswide!
A man knows little of what shall betide. 3450
This man has fallen with his astromy
Into some madness or some malady.
I always figured it would end just so!

God's privacy's a thing men shouldn't know.
 Yea, blessed always is the simple man 3455
 Who knows his creed and that is all he can!
 So fared another clerk with astromy:
 He walked out through the fields to try to see
 The future in the stars, and got for it
 A fall into a fertilizer pit, 3460
 One he had not foreseen. Yet by Saint Thomas,
 I pity Handy Nicholas. I promise,
 He shall be scolded for such studying,
 If that I may, by Jesus, heaven's King!
 Get me a staff, and neath the door I'll pry 3465
 While you heave on it, Robin. By and by
 He'll come out of his studying, I'll bet."
 Then at the chamber door he got all set.
 His knave was very strong in any case
 And by the hasp he heaved it from its place, 3470
 The door went falling in right to the floor.
 Nicholas sat as stonily as before,
 Continuing to gape into the air.
 The carpenter assumed it was despair;
 He took him by the shoulders mightily 3475
 And shook him hard, and cried reproachingly,
 "What is it, Nicholay? Look down! Awake,
 Think on Christ's passion! Here the sign I make
 Now of the cross, from elf and evil sprite
 To keep you." He began then to recite 3480
 At once a night spell on the walls about
 As well as on the threshold leading out:
 "O Jesus and Saint Benedict, we pray
 You'll bless this house from every demon's sway.
 Night falls--White Paternoster, help defeat her! 3485
 Where have you gone, O sister of Saint Peter?"
 And then at last this Handy Nicholas

Began to sorely sigh, and said, "Alas!
 Shall all the world so soon be swept away?"
 The carpenter replied, "What's that you say? 3490
 On God, like we hard workers do, now think."
 And Nicholas then said, "I need a drink,
 And afterwards we'll speak in privacy
 Of certain things concerning you and me.
 I'll surely tell no other what I've learned." 3495
 The carpenter went down, then soon returned,
 With a full quart of strong ale, up the stairs;
 And when they both had finished up their shares,
 Nick tightly shut the door. As to confide,
 This carpenter he set down by his side. 3500
 He said, "Now, John, my host both kind and dear,
 Your word of honor you must give me here
 That to no man this secret you'll disclose;
 For it is Christ's own secret that I pose,
 And if you tell it, sad will be your fate. 3505
 There's such a vengeance if you should relate
 What I'm to say, you'll reap insanity."
 "By Christ's own holy blood, it shall not be,"
 Old John replied, "for I am not a blabber,
 No, I must say, I'm not an idle gabber. 3510
 Say what you will, which I will never tell
 To child nor wife, by him who harrowed hell!"
 "Now, John," said Nicholas, "believe you me,
 I found this out through my astrology
 As I looked on the moon when it was bright. 3515
 This Monday at a quarter of the night
 There shall come down so furious a rain
 Not half its force did Noah's flood contain.
 This world," he said, "in less than one small hour
 Shall all be drowned, so hideous the shower. 3520
 Mankind shall thus be drowned and lose all life."

The carpenter replied, "Alas, my wife!
My Alison, alas! She too will drown?"
And in his sorrow nearly falling down,
He said, "No remedy will make it pass?" 3525
"Why, yes, by God," said Handy Nicholas,
"If you'll work by sound learning and advice.
Don't work from your own head, that won't suffice.
As Solomon once said (and it is true),
'Work all by counsel and you'll never rue.' 3530
If you'll work by good counsel, I've no doubt
That mast and sail we then can do without,
For I will save your wife and you and me.
Have you not heard how Noah came to be
Saved by our Lord, who warned him beforehand 3535
That water was to devastate the land?"
"Yes," said the carpenter, "quite long ago."
"Have you not heard," said Nicholas, "also
Of Noah's troubles with his fellowship
Until he finally got his wife to ship? 3540
There is no doubt, I daresay, as to whether
He would have given up his last black wether
That she might have a vessel to herself.
Do you know, then, what's best to do yourself?
Haste is required, and for a hasty thing 3545
No time for preaching nor for tarrying."
"Be off at once and fetch into this inn
Three kneading troughs or tubs--we'll have one then
For each of us; but see that each is large,
So each of us may float as on a barge. 3550
And have therein some victuals too, at best
Enough to last a day--fie on the rest!
The waters will subside and go away
At nine or so on the following day.
But Robin must not know of this, your knave, 3555

And Jill your maid I also cannot save;
Don't ask me why, for though you ask of me
I will not tell a soul God's privy.
Suffice it, John, lest you go raving mad, 3560
To have the same good grace that Noah had;
Your wife I'll surely save without a doubt.
Be on your way, get busy hereabout.
"But when you have, for her and you and me,
Secured these kneading tubs, then hang the three 3565
Up in the roof--and hang them very high,
That our provision no man may espy.
And when you have accomplished what I've said,
And stored enough good fare to keep us fed,
An ax besides to whack the cord in two 3570
When comes the rain, so we can ride it through;
And when you've knocked a hole up in the gable,
Toward the garden and above the stable,
That we may freely pass upon our way
Until the mighty shower's gone away, 3575
Then merrily we'll float, I undertake,
Just as the white duck floats behind the drake.
'How, Alison! How, John!' I'll call to you.
'Be merry, for the flood will soon be through!'
And you will say, 'Hail, Master Nicholay!
Good morning, I can see you, it is day!' 3580
And then we shall be lords, throughout this life,
Of all the world, like Noah and his wife.
"But of one thing you must be warned about:
Be well advised, on that night never doubt 3585
That when each one of us has gone on board,
We must not speak a word. We can't afford
One call or cry but only silent prayer,
For it's God's own dear will that I declare.
"Your wife and you, therefore, hang far apart;

<p>That twixt you two no sinful play may start (And I refer to sight as well as deed) This ordinance is said. God give you speed! Tomorrow night when everyone's asleep, Into our kneading tubs we then shall creep And there we'll sit awaiting God's good grace. Be on your way, I have no longer space To sermonize on this, and so I'll cease. It's said, 'But send the wise and hold your peace.' Well, you are wise, so you I needn't teach. Get going now and save us, I beseech." This simple carpenter went on his way With many an "Alas" and "Wellaway," And to his wife he told his privy. Now she was well aware, much more than he, Of what this cunning plan was to imply. She acted, though, as if about to die; "Alas! go now immediately," she said, "Help us escape or all of us are dead! I am the truest of devoted wives, So go, dear spouse, and help to save our lives." See what a great thing is emotion! Why, Of what one may imagine one can die, So deep is the impression it can make. This silly carpenter began to shake; He feared he was to witness verily Old Noah's flood come rolling like the sea To drown young Alison, his honey dear. He weeps and wails, he looks so sad and drear As many a sigh he heaves, a mournful sough. He goes and gets a kneading trough somehow, One tub and then another, which he then Has privately transported to the inn; In privacy he hangs them as instructed.</p>	<p>3590 3595 3600 3605 3610 3615 3620</p>	<p>Three ladders with his own hands he constructed By which they would go climbing rung by rung Up to the rafters where the tubs were hung. He put in each of them some cheese and bread And good ale in a jug, to keep them fed Sufficiently for what would be a day. Before beginning, though, all this array He had his knave and maid as well to go Upon an errand to London. And so Upon that Monday, as it drew to night, He shut the door, lit not one candlelight, Arranged all things to look as they should be, And up into their tubs then climbed the three. They sat the time a furlong takes to walk. Said Nick, "Now Paternoster, then no talk!" And "Mum," said John, and "Mum," said Alison. The carpenter's devotions were begun, He stilly sat, prayed to the Holy Spirit, And waited for the rain, intent to hear it. But dead asleep from all his weariness The carpenter soon fell--it was, I guess, Around the curfew time. Yet even then He sorely groaned, such pain his soul was in. (He also snored, the way his noggin lay.) Then down his ladder crept young Nicholay, And Alison down hers as softly sped; Without a single word they went to bed Right where the carpenter was wont to be. And there the revel and the melody! For there lay Alison and Nicholas-- What mirth and pleasant business came to pass!-- Until the bell of Lauds began to ring And friars in the chancel were to sing. Now Absalon, the amorous parish clerk</p>	<p>3625 3630 3635 3640 3645 3650 3655</p>
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(Still woebegone from being so lovestruck),
Upon that Monday was down Osney way
To join companions for some sport and play. 3660
While there he chanced to ask a cloisterer
In private about John the carpenter.
They went outside the church, and to this clerk
The monk said, "I've not seen him here at work
Since Saturday. I'd say, as best I have it, 3665
He's been sent out for timber by the abbot.
For timber he will very often go
And stay out at the grange a day or so.
If not, he's surely at his house today.
Which place he's at I can't for certain say." 3670
This Absalon was thrilled, his heart was light.
"It's time," he thought, "to stay awake all night,
For I saw not one stirring of the man
About his door, not once since day began.
"As I may thrive, at crowing of the cock 3675
Privately at his window I will knock,
The one so low there in his bedroom wall.
To Alison I'll speak and tell her all
About my longing. This time I won't miss
But at the least will get from her a kiss. 3680
That will be, by my faith, some consolation;
My mouth has itched all day, a situation
That is a sign of kissing at the least.
And, too, last night I dreamt about a feast.
Therefore I'll go and sleep an hour or two, 3685
Then I will stay up all the night and woo."
At first cockcrow, at once from his repose
This jolly lover Absalon arose
And donned attire as smart as any viewed. 3690
Some cardamon and licorice he chewed,
To scent his breath, before he combed his hair.

A true-love herb as well he chose to bear
Beneath his tongue, thereby to be exquisite.
Then to the old man's house he made his visit.
There quietly he stood beneath the casement 3695
(It reached down to his breast, so low its placement);
He cleared his throat and spoke in softest voice:
"What are you doing, honeycomb, my choice
And fairest bird, my sweetest cinnamon?
Awake and speak to me, sweet Alison. 3700
How little do you think upon my woe;
I sweat for your love everywhere I go.
No wonder that I sweat and slave for it:
I'm longing as the lamb longs for the tit.
Yes, darling, I have for you such a love 3705
You've got me mourning like a turtledove,
My appetite's that of a maid," he cried.
"Get from the window, jackass," she replied.
"So help me God, there'll be no 'come and kiss me.'
I love another and, by Jesus, he 3710
Is better far than you or I'm to blame.
Unless you want a stoning, in the name
Of twenty devils, let me sleep. Away!"
"Alas," said Absalon, "and welladay,
That my true love is ever so beset! 3715
At least then kiss me, if that's all I get,
For Jesus' love and for the love of me."
"Will you then go," she said, "and let me be?"
"Yes, darling, surely," he was quick to say.
"Get ready, then," she said, "I'm on my way." 3720
To Nicholas she whispered, "Shh, be still;
Of laughter you're about to get your fill."
Now Absalon got down upon his knees
And said, "I am a lord by all degrees,
For after this I hope there's more to follow. 3725

Come, grace me, darling, my sweet little swallow!"		Across the street a little ways he slipped	3760
She opened up the window then with haste.		To see a blacksmith, Master Gervase, who	
"Come on," she said, "be quick, no time to waste,		Was known for plow parts, shares and coulters too,	
We don't want neighbors seeing you've come by."		And at his forge was busy making more.	
Absalon wiped his mouth till it was dry.	3730	This Absalon knocked softly at his door	
The night was dark as pitch, as black as coal,		And said, "Quick, Gervase, get this door undone."	3765
And from the window she stuck out her hole;		"Who's there?" he asked. "It's me, it's Absalon."	
And Absalon, not knowing north from south,		"Why, Absalon! By Christ's sweet tree, I say,	
Then kissed her naked ass with eager mouth		Why up so early? <i>Benedicite!</i>	
Before he was aware of all of this.	3735	What's ailing you? God knows, some merry girl	
Then back he started, something seemed amiss:		Is what brings you out prowling in a whirl,	3770
A woman has no beard, he knew as much,		And by Saint Neot you follow what I mean."	
Yet this was rough and hairy to the touch.		But Absalon was caring not a bean	
"O fie!" he said. "Alas! what did I do?"		For all his play, he didn't speak or laugh,	
"Tee hee," said she, and clapt the window to.	3740	For he had much more tow on his distaff	
Poor Absalon had reached a sorry pass.		Than Gervase knew. He said, "My friend so dear,	3775
"A beard, a beard!" laughed Handy Nicholas.		This red-hot coultter in the chimney here--	
"God's body, this is really going swell."		Lend it to me. There's something I must do	
Poor Absalon heard all this very well,		And then right soon I'll bring it back to you."	
In anger had to give his lip a bite,	3745	"Why, surely," Gervase said, "if it were gold	
And to himself he said, "I'll set you right."		Or a poke of nobles in a sum untold,	3780
Who's rubbing now, who's scrubbing now his lips		As I'm a smith, 'twould be yours every bit.	
With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,		But what the devil will you do with it?"	
But Absalon, who's crying out "Alas!		"Let that," said Absalon, "be as it may.	
May Satan take my soul if I'd not pass	3750	I'll tell you all about it when it's day."	
Up owning this whole town that I might be		He grabbed it by the handle, which was cool,	3785
Avenged for this despite they've done to me.		And quietly went out, and with the tool	
Alas," he cried, "I didn't turn aside!"		He went again to the carpenter's wall.	
His hot love then was cold, indeed had died;		He cleared his throat to give a little call	
For from the time he kissed her naked ass	3755	And knocked upon the window as before.	
He didn't give one cress for any lass,		"Who's there?" he heard young Alison once more.	3790
For he'd been cured of all his malady;		"Who's knocking there? It is a thief, I'll bet."	
All lovers he denounced repeatedly		"Why, no," he said, "God knows, my little pet,	
And wept just like a child who has been whipped.		It's Absalon. My darling little thing,	

I've brought for you," said he, "a golden ring.
So help me God, my mother gave it to me. 3795
It's well engraved, it is a fine thing truly.
I'll let you have it for another kiss."
Now Nicholas was up to take a piss,
And thought he would improve upon the jape
And have him kiss his ass ere he escape. 3800
He hastened to the window, turned around,
And stuck his bottom out without a sound,
Both buttocks and beyond, right to the thighs.
Then Absalon, who had to strain his eyes,
Said, "Speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art." 3805
And Nicholas at this let fly a fart
So great it sounded like a thunderclap--
It nearly blinded Absalon, poor chap.
But he was set with his hot iron to move,
And Nicholas was smote right in the groove. 3810
Off came the skin a handbreadth wide and some,
The hot iron had so burnt him in his bum,
And from the smart he thought that he would die.
Just like a madman he began to cry,
"Help! Water, water! Help me, for God's sake!" 3815
The carpenter by then had stirred awake;
He heard mad cries of "Water!" loud and clear,
And thought, "Alas, the Flood of Noel's here!"
He sat right up without the least ado
And grabbed his ax and whacked the cord in two, 3820
Then down went everything--no time for sale
Of any of his bread or any ale:
He hit the floor, and there unconscious lay.
Then Alison and Handy right away
Cried out "Help!" and "Disaster!" in the street. 3825
The neighbors, high and low, ran there to meet,
They stood and stared at poor unconscious John

Who lay there on the floor so pale and wan,
For from the fall he had a broken arm.
But he himself was blamed for all his harm; 3830
For when he spoke, each word was then denied
By Nicholas and Alison his bride.
They made the claim to all that he was mad:
Some ghastly fear of "Noel's flood" he had,
A fantasy that had him so deranged 3835
Three kneading tubs the old man had arranged
To buy and hang there in the roof above;
And then he had implored them, for God's love,
To sit up there and keep him company.
The people laughed at such a fantasy; 3840
Up at the roof they all began to gape,
And turned the old man's harm into a jape.
No matter what the carpenter insisted,
It was for naught, his reasons were resisted.
With such great oaths the fellow was put down, 3845
He was considered mad throughout the town;
Each learned man agreed with every other,
Saying, "The man is mad, beloved brother,"
And everyone just laughed at all his strife.
So she was screwed, the carpenter's young wife, 3850
Despite all jealous safeguards he could try;
And Absalon has kissed her nether eye,
And Nicholas is scalded in the rear.
This tale is done, God save all who are here!