

The General Prologue

WHEN APRIL WITH his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower;
5 When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,
Quickened again, in every holt and heath,
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun
Into the Ram one half his course has run,
And many little birds make melody
10 That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)—
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.
15 And specially from every shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury wend,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek
Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.

Befell that, in that season, on a day
20 In Southwark, at the Tabard, as I lay
Ready to start upon my pilgrimage
To Canterbury, full of devout homage,
There came at nightfall to that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
25 Of sundry persons who had chanced to fall
In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
That toward Canterbury town would ride.

The General Prologue

When the sweet showers of April have pierced the roots made dry by the drought of March and have bathed each root with a liquid that has the power to bring forth the flower; when the west wind with his sweet breath has also roused the tender buds in every grove and field, and the young sun has run one-half its course, and many little birds that sleep through all the night with open eye now make melody, then folks long to go on a pilgrimage, and pilgrims go to seek out foreign shores and to travel to distant well-known shrines. And, especially, from every town of England they go to Canterbury to seek the holy blessed martyr there, who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.

So it was that on a day in that season, in Southwark, at the Tabard Inn, as I, full of devout homage, made ready to start upon my pilgrimage to Canterbury. There came that night to the hotel twenty-nine people. These people who had happened to fall into a fellowship, were all pilgrims on their way to Canterbury town.

The rooms and stables were and wide,
 And well we there were eased, and of the best.
 30 And briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
 So had I spoken with them, every one,
 That I was of their fellowship anon,
 And made agreement that we'd early rise
 To take the road, as you I will apprise.
 35 But none the less, whilst I have time and space,
 Before yet farther in this tale I pace,
 It seems to me accordant with reason
 To inform you of the state of every one
 Of all of these, as it appeared to me,
 40 And who they were, and what was their degree,
 And even how arrayed there at the inn;
 And with a knight thus will I first begin.

The Knight

A knight there was, and he a worthy man,
 Who, from the moment that he first began
 To ride about the world, loved chivalry,
 Truth, honour, freedom and all courtesy.
 5 At Alexandria, he, when it was won;
 Of mortal battles he had fought fifteen,
 And he'd fought for our faith at Tramisene
 And always won he sovereign fame for prize.
 Though so illustrious, he was very wise
 10 And bore himself as meekly as a maid.
 He never yet had any vileness said,
 In all his life, to whatsoever wight.
 He was a truly perfect, gentle knight.
 But now, to tell you all of his array,
 15 His steeds were good, but yet he was not gay.
 Of simple fustian wore he a jupon
 Sadly discoloured by his habergeon;
 For he had lately come from his voyage
 And now was going on this pilgrimage.

The rooms and stables were spacious and wide, of the best, and we rested well there. And when the sun had gone down, I had spoken with each of them briefly and said that I was a pilgrim as well. Afterwards we made an agreement to rise early the next morning and begin our journey. But while I have time and space, and before I go any farther in this story, it seems to make good sense to give you some information about each person as they appeared to me; who they were, and what was their station in life, as well as how they were dressed; and with a knight I will begin.

The Knight

There was a knight, he was a worthy man, who, from the time that he first began to ride about the world, loved chivalry, truth, honor, freedom, and courtesy. He was at Alexandria when it was won and he had fought fifteen deadly battles. He also fought for Christianity at Tramisene. In each battle he fought, he won the greatest fame. Though very celebrated, he was also wise, and he acted as humble and meekly as a maiden. No matter what, he never spoke out of anger. He was truly a perfect and gentle knight. But now I'll mention the things he wore; while his horses were good, he was not showy. His simple tunic was rust-stained from his coat of armor because he had recently returned from a voyage before going on this pilgrimage.

The Squire

- With him there was his son, a youthful squire,
 A lover and a lusty bachelor,
 With locks well curled, as if they'd laid in press.
 Some twenty years of age he was, I guess.
 5 In stature he was of an average length,
 Wondrously active, aye, and great of strength.
 He'd ridden sometime with the cavalry
 In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,
 And borne him well within that little space
 10 In hope to win thereby his lady's grace.
 Prinked out he was, as if he were a mead,
 All full of fresh-cut flowers white and red.
 Singing he was, or fluting, all the day;
 He was as fresh as is the month of May.
 15 Short was his gown, with sleeves both long and wide.
 Well could he sit on horse, and fairly ride.
 He could make songs and words thereto indite,
 Joust, and dance too, as well as sketch and write.
 So hot he loved that, while night told her tale,
 20 He slept no more than does a nightingale.
 Courteous he, and humble, willing and able,
 And carved before his father at the table.

The Squire

With him was his son, a young Squire, a lover and lusty aspiring knight, whose curly hair appeared as if it had been pressed. He was about twenty years of age, I guess. In stature he was of average height and very athletic; he possessed great strength, and he had once served with the cavalry in Flanders, Artois, and Picardy. Considering his youth, he carried himself well in hopes of winning his lady's favor. He was embroidered like a meadow full of white and red fresh cut flowers. Singing and playing the flute all day, he was as fresh as the month of May. He wore a short robe with long, wide sleeves. He looked good on his horse and he rode it well. He could write songs and compose verse, joust and dance, too, as well as sketch and write.

He searched for love so much at night that he slept no more than does a nightingale. He was courteous, modest, and capable, as he carved for his father at the table.

- Since riding and the hunting of the hare
 Were all his love, for no cost would he spare.
 I saw his sleeves were decorated at the hand
 With fur of grey, the finest in the land;
 Also, to fasten hood beneath his chin,
 He had of good wrought gold a curious pin:
 A love-knot in the larger end there was.
 His head was bald and shone like any glass
 And smooth as one anointed was his face.
 Fat was this lord, he stood in goodly case.
 His bulging eyes he rolled about, and hot
 They gleamed and red, like fire beneath a pot;
 His boots were soft; his horse of great estate.
 Now certainly he was a fine prelate:
 He was not pale as some poor wasted ghost.
 A fat swan, loved he best of any roast.
 His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

The Friar

Note: Friars are also priests, but unlike cloistered monks, during this period their orders required them to go about their district begging for money. There were four religious orders of friars who lived by begging—Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, and Augustinian. Aside from the small amount of money necessary for them to live, they were expected to provide for the needs of the poor with the money they received. By the time of Chaucer, many friars were frequently seen as greedy, grasping men, who lined their own pockets and chased after women. While it was only suggested that the monk may have been more interested in women than a person who vows to remain celibate should have been, the friar's sexual interests are made very clear. A "limiter" was a begging friar, who was given a specific district to beg in.

- A friar there was, a wanton and a merry,
 A limiter, a very festive man.
 In all the Orders Four is none that can
 Equal his gossip and his fair language.
 He had arranged full many a marriage

Since riding and hunting were his greatest loves, he spared no cost on them. The sleeves of his robe were decorated with the finest of gray fur, and his hood was fastened beneath his chin with a finely made gold pin that had a loveknot at the larger end. His bald head shone, and his smooth face was not creased, but was like a young man's. He was fat and he had hot, bulging eyes which he rolled about. They were red like fire. His boots were soft and his horse of great value. He was not, like some monks, as pale as some poor wasted ghost. When he sat for dinner, he loved a fat swan more than any other roast. His saddle horse was as brown as a berry.

The Friar

There was a shameless and merry friar. In all the Four Orders there was no one who could equal him in gossip and pleasant language. He had arranged many of the marriages of the young women in town and he did this at his own expense. He was a noble pillar to his Order. He knew all the wealthy landowners and women in the district and was well liked by them; when he heard their confessions, he treated them gently and gave them an easy penance, for he knew he'd get a good donation. For money given to a friar is a sure sign a man has been well confessed. He boasted that if a person gave a good donation to him, he knew that the man's repentance of his sins was genuine. For, the friar says, there are many men with hearts so hard that they cannot weep, no matter the pain; therefore instead of weeping and prayer, men should show their repentance by giving money to poor friars.

- Of young women, and this at his own cost.
 Unto his order he was a noble post.
 Well liked by all and intimate was he
 With franklins everywhere in his country,
 And with the worthy women of the town.
 He heard confession gently, it was said,
 Gently absolved too, leaving naught of dread.
 He was an easy man to give penance
 When knowing he should gain a good pittance;
 15 For to a begging friar, money given
 Is sign that any man has been well shriven.
 For if one gave (he dared to boast of this),
 He took the man's repentance not amiss.
 For many a man there is so hard of heart
 He cannot weep however pains may smart.
 20 Therefore, instead of weeping and of prayer,
 Men should give silver to poor friars all bare.
- His tippet was stuck always full of knives
 And pins, to give to young and pleasing wives.
 25 And certainly he kept a merry note:
 Well could he sing and play upon the rote.
 At balladry he bore the prize away.
 His throat was white as lily of the May;
 Yet strong he was as any champion.
 In towns he knew the taverns, every one
 30 And every good host and each barmaid too—
 Better than begging lepers, these he knew.
 For unto no such solid man as he
 Accorded it, as far as he could see,
 To have sick lepers for acquaintances.
 35 There is no honest advantageous
 In dealing with such poverty-stricken curs;
 It's with the rich and with big victuallers.
 And so, wherever profit might arise,
 Courteous he was and humble in men's eyes.
 40 There was no other man so virtuous.

His hood was always stuck full with knives and pins which he gave to young, pretty wives. And he certainly kept a jolly tone. He sang and played upon a lute songs from memory so well that he had won prizes. Although he had a lily-white throat, he was as strong as any champion.

In the towns, he knew all the taverns, bartenders, and barmaids better than he knew the begging lepers. He could see no point in having sick lepers for friends, since there was no benefit to be had from dealing with these poor, contemptible creatures. It is in dealing with the rich that a profit might be gained, so wherever he might gain profit with the rich people, he was always courteous and humble. There was no other man so virtuous.

He was the best beggar in his order so he had an assigned district that none of the other begging friars dared to enter. When he began his speech, "In the beginning," he was so persuasive that even a poor widow without shoes gave him a donation. He got money wherever he went, and he lived well from his donations.

He could run around as well as any youngster. For he was not, like some monks, secluded in a monastery with the threadbare robe of a poor scholar. Rather he was like a lord or like a pope with his robe that went around his stomach like a bell. To make his words sound softer, he purposely lisped a little. And after he finished singing and playing the harp, his eyes twinkled as bright as any stars on a frosty night. This worthy limiter was named Hubert.

The Merchant

There was a merchant with a forked beard and a colorful gown who sat high on his horse. On his head he wore a Flemish beaver hat; his boots were fastened very elegantly and he spoke his mind very pompously when he told of his profits, but not his losses. He wanted the sea between Middleburg and Orwell to be safe for commerce at any cost. He made a profit at money changing. This worthy man kept his wits about him so well that with all his bargaining and borrowing and dealing, no one could tell that he was in debt. Indeed, he truly was a worthy man; but, to tell you the truth, I cannot recall his name.

He was the finest beggar of his house;
A certain district being farmed to him,
None of his brethren dared approach its rim;
For though a widow had no shoes to show,
So pleasant was his *In principio*,
He always got a farthing ere he went.
He lived by pickings, it is evident.

And he could romp as well as any whelp.

For he was not like a cloisterer,

50 With threadbare cope as is the poor scholar,

But he was like a lord or like a pope.

Of double worsted was his semi-cope,

That rounded like a bell, as you may guess.

He lisped a little, out of wantonness,

55 To make his English soft upon his tongue;

And in his harping, after he had sung,

His two eyes twinkled in his head as bright

As do the stars within the frosty night.

This worthy limiter was named Hubert.

The Merchant

There was a merchant with forked beard, and giirt

In motley gown, and high on horse he sat,

Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat;

His boots were fastened rather elegantly.

5 His spoke his notions out right pompously,

Stressing the times when he had won, not lost.

He would the sea were held at any cost

Across from Middleburgh to Orwell town.

At money-changing he could make a crown.

10 This worthy man kept all his wits well set;

There was no one could say he was in debt,

So well he governed all his trade affairs

With bargains and with borrowings and with shares.

Indeed, he was a worthy man withal,

15 But, sooth to say, his name I can't recall.

The Pardoner

With the summoner rode a gentle pardoner who had come straight from the court at Rome. With the summoner accompanying him, he sang loudly, "Come hither, love, to me." Never was there a trumpet half so powerful. This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax, but it hung down as smooth as a hank of flax. The wisps of hair hung down and spread over his shoulders in thin strands.

For the fun of it, he wore no hood, but kept it packed in his bag. He thought he rode in the latest style, disheveled and bareheaded except for his cap. His bag, which lay in front of him on his lap, was crammed with pardons from Rome, still warm from the oven. He had a small voice that sounded like a goat. He had no beard, nor would he ever, for his face was as smooth as if he'd just had a shave. I believe he was a gelding or a mare.

But in his occupation, from Berwick to Ware, there was no pardoner who could compete. In his bag he had a pillowcase which he said was the Virgin Mary's veil; he said he had a small piece of the sail that St. Peter had when he sailed on the sea until Jesus Christ rescued him. He had a cross of brass set full of gems, and in a glass case he had some pig's bones. With these relics, however, whenever he found a poor parson living in the country,

The Pardoner

Note: A pardoner gave out a papal pardon, for sins, to those people who contributed to the charitable institution that he represented. A pardon could cancel out all or part of the penance imposed on sinners by their confessors.

With him there rode a gentle pardoner
Straight from the court of Rome had journeyed he.

Loudly he sang "Come hither, love, to me,"
The summoner joining with a burden round;
5 Was never horn of half so great a sound.

This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
But lank it hung as does a strike of flax;
In wisps hung down such locks as he'd on head,
And with them he his shoulders overspread;

10 But thin they dropped, and stringy, one by one.
But as to hood, for sport of it, he'd none,
Though it was packed in wallet all the while.
It seemed to him he went in latest style,

Dishevelled, save for cap, his head all bare.
15 His wallet lay before him in his lap,
Stuffed full of pardons brought from Rome all hot.
A voice he had that bleated like a goat.
No beard had he, nor ever should he have,
For smooth his face as he'd just had a shave;

20 I think he was a gelding or a mare.
But in his craft, from Berwick unto Ware,
Was no such pardoner in any place.
For in his bag he had a pillowcase
The which, he said, was Our True Lady's veil:
He said he had a piece of the very sail
That good Saint Peter had, what time he went
Upon the sea, till Jesus changed his bent.
He had a latten cross set full of stones,
And in a bottle had he some pig's bones.
But with these relics, when he came upon
Some simple parson, then this paragon

30

In that one day more money stood to gain
Than the poor dupe in two months could attain.

And thus, with flattery and suchlike japes,

35 He made the parson and the rest his apes.

But yet, to tell the whole truth at the last,

He was, in church, a fine ecclesiast.

Well could he read a lesson or a story,

But best of all he sang an offertory;

40 For well he knew that when that song was sung,

Then might he preach, and all with polished tongue,

To win some silver, as he right well could;

Therefore he sang so merrily and so loud.

Now have I told you briefly, in a clause,

45 The state, the array, the number, and the cause

Of the assembling of this company.

within a day he made more money than that parson got in two months. And so with fake sincerity and tricks, he made monkeys out of the parson and the people. But to be fair, in church he was noble; he could read a lesson or a story, and he could sing a very good oratory. For well he knew that when his song was done, then he would preach and with his sharpened tongue win silver; therefore, he sang merrily and loud.

Now, I have told you briefly the status, the dress, and the purpose of the people gathered in this company.