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978-1-107-63962-1 - Stories from Chaucer: Re-Told from the Canterbury Tales

Margaret C. Macaulay

Excerpt

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THE PROLOGUE

WHEN April showers have pierced the drought of March, moistening each root, and bathing the veins of every plant so that the flowers begin to bud; when the sweet breath of the west wind has called forth tender shoots in every holt and heath, and the little birds make melody, never closing their eyes all night for joy of the spring; then men are stirred with longing to go on pilgrimage and to seek strange lands. Many are the distant shrines to which they journey; and above all, from every shire's end in England, they make their way to Canterbury, to visit the shrine of the holy and blessed martyr St Thomas, who has aided them when they lay sick.

It chanced that on a certain day in April I had taken lodging at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, ready to set forth with devout intent upon my pilgrimage to Canterbury, when there came to the same hostelry at

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2

Stories from Chaucer

nightfall a company of nine-and-twenty travellers, whom chance had thrown together, all pilgrims bound for Canterbury, like myself. The rooms and stables of the inn were spacious, the entertainment was of the best, and, not to make more words, that same evening I talked with them all, and joined myself to their company, agreeing to rise early and take the road with them.

But before I go further with my tale I think it well to set down a description of each of the pilgrims, telling you who they were, and what was their rank, and how they were equipped.

To begin, then, there was a Knight, a gallant man, who from the time when he first rode forth to fight had been a lover of chivalry, of truth and honour, liberality and courtesy. He had fought worthily for his king, and was renowned also for his prowess in distant lands, both Christian and heathen. He had made expeditions in Lithuania and in Russia, no knight of his degree so often; and many a time in Prussia he had sat at the head of the table above all the knights of other nations there. In Africa, in Turkey, and in Armenia he had harried the infidel; he had been at the sieges of Alexandria, of Granada and of Algezir, and had taken part in fifteen deadly

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[More information](#)

The Prologue

3

battles. Thrice he had fought for our faith
in the lists at Tramysene, and each time slain



The West Gate, Canterbury

his foe. Everywhere he had won renown; and
though he was so worthy, yet was he modest,
and as gentle in his manners as a maiden.

1—2

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[More information](#)

4

Stories from Chaucer

Never in all his life had he spoken to anyone a discourteous or unseemly word. He was indeed a very perfect, gentle knight. For his



The Knight

equipment, his horses were good, but he himself was not gaily dressed. His doublet was of plain fustian, all blackened by the marks of his armour, for he had lately come

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[More information](#)

The Prologue

5

back from the wars, and was making his pilgrimage in thanksgiving for his safe return.

With him rode his son, a young Squire of twenty years of age. He was a curly-haired youth of middle height, wonderfully strong and



The Squire

active, who had seen service in Flanders and in France, and had acquitted himself well, hoping thereby to win his lady's love. His gown was short, with sleeves long and wide, brodered all over like a field of red and white flowers. He was as fresh as the month of May, singing

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6

Stories from Chaucer

and playing on the flute all day long; a good rider, and an ardent lover, able to compose songs and to write poetry, to joust, to dance, and to draw. With all this he was courteous, humble, and serviceable, and carved before his father at table.

There rode with them one servant only, a Yeoman, clad in a coat and hood of green. Under his belt he bore a sheaf of arrows, sharp and bright, and plumed with peacocks' feathers, well trimmed so that they did not droop in their flight; and in his hand he carried a mighty bow. Well practised he was in all wood-craft, a good forester, as I should guess. His face was brown, his hair close cropped. He wore a gay bracer on his arm; a sword and buckler hung at his side, and a dagger, sharp and well mounted. On his breast was a bright silver brooch with the figure of St Christopher. He carried a horn slung to a green baldrick.

There was a Nun, too, a Prioress, with a quiet smile on her face, whose name was Madam Eglantine. Well able she was to chant the divine service, and she spoke French fairly and fluently, after the school of Stratford at Bow, for the French of Paris was unknown to her. If ever she swore, it was but by St Loy. Her manners were courteous, and at

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Prologue*

7

table she took her food in a seemly fashion, letting no morsel fall from her lips, and dipping only the tips of her fingers in the sauce. She carried her food to her mouth so that not a drop fell upon her breast, and she wiped her lips so clean that no grease was to be seen in her cup after she had drunk.



The Prioress

Mirthful she was, too, and pleasant, though she cultivated a courtly bearing, and desired to be held worthy of reverence. Her heart was so kind and pitiful that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap. Some little dogs, too, she had, which she fed with roast meat, or milk and wastel bread; and sorely

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

Stories from Chaucer

she would weep if one of them died or were struck with a stick, so tender hearted was she, and full of feeling. This Prioress was tall, and had a fair, wide forehead; her eyes were grey, her nose well formed, and her mouth was



The Nuns' Priest

small, soft, and red. She wore a close-pleated wimple and a cloak neatly fashioned, and on her arm she carried a rosary of coral beads with green gawdies, from which there hung a clasp of gold with the device of a crowned 'A,' and below it the words, 'Amor vincit

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The Prologue

9

omnia.' With her she had three priests, and another Nun, who was her chaplain.

Then there was a Monk, a handsome man, well fitted to be an abbot. He loved hunting, and had many a good horse in his stables.



The Monk

The bells on his bridle jingled in the wind as he rode, as clear and loud as the ringing of the chapel bell. The rule of St Benedict was too old-fashioned and strict for him, and in the house where he was Prior he let old things

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10

Stories from Chaucer

go by, and held to the newer fashions of the world. It was little he cared for the saying that hunters are profane men, or that a monk out of his cloister is like a fish out of water. And I say that he was right. Why should he lose his wits poring over a book in a cloister, or labour with his hands as Augustine bids? Let Augustine work if he will; but it is not for such as these. Therefore this Monk was a hard rider, and kept swift greyhounds; for the hunting of the hare was his delight, and he would spare no cost for it. His sleeves were edged with fine and costly fur, and his hood was fastened with a gold pin adorned with a love-knot. His bald head shone like glass, and so too did his face, and his eyes were bright and roving. His boots were supple and his horse in fine condition and as brown as a berry. He was a goodly prelate beyond all doubt, well-favoured and ruddy; and a fat swan roasted was his favourite dish.

We had a jolly Friar with us, too, who in all the four orders had no equal for fair speech. He was a pillar of his order, well known and well beloved through all the countryside, and especially by the women; for by his licence he had greater power, he said, to hear confession and grant absolution than a parish priest; and for those who paid