

## THE TALE.

Whilom there was dwelling in Oxenford A riche gnof\*, that \*gwestes held to board\*, \*miser \*took in boarders\* And of his craft he was a carpenter. With him there was dwelling a poor scholer, Had learned art, but all his fantasy Was turned for to learn astrology. He coude\* a certain of conclusions \*knew To deme\* by interrogations, \*determine If that men asked him in certain hours, When that men should have drought or elles show'rs: Or if men asked him what shoulde fall Of everything, I may not reckon all.

This clerk was called Hendy\* Nicholas; \*gentle, handsome Of derne\* love he knew and of solace; \*secret, earnest And therewith he was sly and full privy, And like a maiden meek for to see. A chamber had he in that hostelry Alone, withouten any company, Full \*fetisly y-dight\* with herbes swoot\*, \*neatly decorated\* And he himself was sweet as is the root \*sweet Of liquorice, or any setewall\*. \*valerian His Almagest,<1> and bookes great and small, His astrolabe,<2> belonging to his art, His augrim stones,<3> layed fair apart On shelves couched\* at his bedde's head, \*laid, set His press y-cover'd with a falding\* red. \*coarse cloth And all above there lay a gay psalt'ry On which he made at nightes melody, So sweetely, that all the chamber rang: And Angelus ad virginem<4> he sang. And after that he sung the kinge's note; Full often blessed was his merry throat. And thus this sweete clerk his time spent After \*his friendes finding and his rent.\* \*Attending to his friends, and providing for the cost of his lodging\* This carpenter had wedded new a wife, Which that he loved more than his life: Of eighteen year, I guess, she was of age. Jealous he was, and held her narr'w in cage, For she was wild and young, and he was old, And deemed himself belike\* a cuckold. \*perhaps He knew not Cato,<5> for his wit was rude, That bade a man wed his similitude. Men shoulde wedden after their estate, For youth and eld\* are often at debate. \*age But since that he was fallen in the snare, He must endure (as other folk) his care. Fair was this younge wife, and therewithal As any weasel her body gent\* and small. \*slim, neat A seint\* she weared, barred all of silk, \*girdle A barm-cloth\* eke as white as morning milk \*apron<6> Upon her lendes\*, full of many a gore\*\*. \*loins \*\*plait White was her smock\*, and broider'd all before, \*robe or gown And eke behind, on her collar about Of coal-black silk, within and eke without. The tapes of her white volupere\* \*head-kerchief <7> Were of the same suit of

her collere; Her fillet broad of silk, and set full high: And sickerly\* she had a  
 likerous\*\* eye.            \*certainly \*\*lascivious Full small y-pulled were her  
 browes two, And they were bent\*, and black as any sloe.  
 \*arched She was well more \*blissful on to see\*            \*pleasant to look upon\*  
 Than is the newe perjenete\* tree;            \*young pear-tree And softer  
 than the wool is of a wether. And by her girdle hung a purse of leather,  
 Tassel'd with silk, and \*pearled with latoun\*.    \*set with brass pearls\* In all  
 this world to seeken up and down There is no man so wise, that coude  
 thenche\*            \*fancy, think of So gay a popelot\*, or such a wench.  
 \*puppet <8> Full brighter was the shining of her hue, Than in the Tower the  
 noble\* forged new.            \*a gold coin <9> But of her song, it was as loud  
 and yern\*,            \*lively <10> As any swallow chittering on a bern\*.  
 \*barn Thereto\* she coude skip, and \*make a game\*            \*also \*romp\*  
 As any kid or calf following his dame. Her mouth was sweet as braket,<11>  
 or as methes\*            \*mead Or hoard of apples, laid in hay or heath.  
 Wincing\* she was as is a jolly colt,            \*skittish Long as a mast,  
 and upright as a bolt. A brooch she bare upon her low collere, As broad as is  
 the boss of a bucklere. Her shoon were laced on her legges high; She was a  
 primerole,\* a piggesnie <12>,            \*primrose For any lord t' have  
 ligging\* in his bed,            \*lying Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

Now, sir, and eft\* sir, so befell the case,            \*again That on a day  
 this Hendy Nicholas Fell with this younge wife to rage\* and play,            \*toy,  
 play the rogue While that her husband was at Oseney,<13> As clerkes be  
 full subtle and full quaint. And privily he caught her by the queint,\*  
 \*cunt And said; "Y-wis,\* but if I have my will,            \*assuredly For  
 \*derne love of thee, leman, I spill."\*            \*for earnest love of thee And helde her  
 fast by the haunche bones,            my mistress, I perish\* And saide "Leman,  
 love me well at once, Or I will dien, all so God me save." And she sprang as a  
 colt doth in the trave<14>: And with her head she writhed fast away, And  
 said; "I will not kiss thee, by my fay\*.            \*faith Why let be," quoth  
 she, "let be, Nicholas, Or I will cry out harow and alas!<15> Do away your  
 handes, for your courtesy." This Nicholas gan mercy for to cry, And spake so  
 fair, and proffer'd him so fast, That she her love him granted at the last, And  
 swore her oath by Saint Thomas of Kent, That she would be at his  
 commandement, When that she may her leisure well espy. "My husband is  
 so full of jealousy, That but\* ye waite well, and be privy,  
 \*unless I wot right well I am but dead," quoth she. "Ye muste be full derne\*  
 as in this case."            \*secret "Nay, thereof care thee nought," quoth  
 Nicholas: "A clerk had \*litherly beset his while\*,            \*ill spent his time\*  
 \*But if\* he could a carpenter beguile."            \*unless And thus  
 they were accorded and y-sworn To wait a time, as I have said befor. When  
 Nicholas had done thus every deal\*,            \*whit And thwacked



\*chamber And she answer'd her husband therewithal; "Yes, God wot, John, I  
hear him every deal." This passeth forth; what will ye bet\* than well?  
\*better

From day to day this jolly Absolon So wooeth her, that him is woebegone. He  
waketh all the night, and all the day, To comb his lockes broad, and make  
him gay. He wooeth her \*by means and by brocage\*, \*by presents and by  
agents\* And swore he woulde be her owen page. He singeth brokking\* as a  
nightingale. \*quavering He sent her piment <20>, mead, and  
spiced ale, And wafers\* piping hot out of the glede\*\*: \*cakes  
\*\*coals And, for she was of town, he proffer'd meed.<21> For some folk will  
be wonnen for richness, And some for strokes, and some with gentiless.  
Sometimes, to show his lightness and mast'ry, He playeth Herod <22> on a  
scaffold high. But what availeth him as in this case? So loveth she the  
Hendy Nicholas, That Absolon may \*blow the bucke's horn\*: \*"go  
whistle"\* He had for all his labour but a scorn. And thus she maketh  
Absolon her ape, And all his earnest turneth to a jape\*.  
\*jest Full sooth is this proverb, it is no lie; Men say right thus alway; the  
nighe sly Maketh oft time the far lief to be loth. <23> For though that  
Absolon be wood\* or wroth \*mad Because that he far was  
from her sight, This nigh Nicholas stood still in his light. Now bear thee well,  
thou Hendy Nicholas, For Absolon may wail and sing "Alas!"

And so befell, that on a Saturday This carpenter was gone to Oseney, And  
Hendy Nicholas and Alison Accorded were to this conclusion, That Nicholas  
shall \*shape him a wile\* \*devise a stratagem\* The silly jealous  
husband to beguile; And if so were the game went aright, She shoulde  
sleepen in his arms all night; For this was her desire and his also. And right  
anon, withoute wordes mo', This Nicholas no longer would he tarry, But  
doth full soft unto his chamber carry Both meat and drinke for a day or  
tway. And to her husband bade her for to say, If that he asked after  
Nicholas, She shoulde say, "She wist\* not where he was;  
\*knew Of all the day she saw him not with eye; She trowed\* he was in some  
malady, \*believed For no cry that her maiden could him  
call He would answer, for nought that might befall." Thus passed forth all  
thilke\* Saturday, \*that That Nicholas still in his chamber  
lay, And ate, and slept, and didde what him list Till Sunday, that\* the sunne  
went to rest. \*when This silly carpenter \*had great marvaille\*  
\*wondered greatly\* Of Nicholas, or what thing might him ail, And said; "I am  
adrad\*, by Saint Thomas! \*afraid, in dread It standeth not aright  
with Nicholas: \*God shielde\* that he died suddenly. \*heaven  
forbid!\* This world is now full fickle sickerly\*. \*certainly I saw  
to-day a corpse y-borne to chirch, That now on Monday last I saw him

wirch\*.                               \*work "Go up," quod he unto his knave\*, "anon;  
 \*servant. Clepe\* at his door, or knocke with a stone:                               \*call  
 Look how it is, and tell me boldely." This knave went him up full sturdily,  
 And, at the chamber door while that he stood, He cried and knocked as that  
 he were wood:\*                               \*mad "What how? what do ye, Master  
 Nicholay? How may ye sleepen all the longe day?" But all for nought, he  
 hearde not a word. An hole he found full low upon the board, Where as the  
 cat was wont in for to creep, And at that hole he looked in full deep, And at  
 the last he had of him a sight. This Nicholas sat ever gaping upright, As he  
 had kyked\* on the newe moon.                               \*looked <24> Adown he  
 went, and told his master soon, In what array he saw this ilke\* man.  
 \*same

This carpenter to \*blissen him\* began,                               \*bless, cross himself\* And  
 said: "Now help us, Sainte Frideswide.<25> A man wot\* little what shall him  
 betide.                               \*knows This man is fall'n with his astronomy Into  
 some woodness\* or some agony.                               \*madness I thought aye  
 well how that it shoulde be. Men should know nought of Godde's privity\*.  
 \*secrets Yea, blessed be alway a lewed\* man,                               \*unlearned  
 That \*nought but only his believe can\*.                               \*knows no more So far'd  
 another clerk with astronomy:                               than his "credo."\* He walked in the  
 fieldes for to \*pry Upon\* the starres, what there should befall,                               \*keep  
 watch on\* Till he was in a marle pit y-fall.<26> He saw not that. But yet, by  
 Saint Thomas! \*Me rueth sore of\* Hendy Nicholas:                               \*I am very  
 sorry for\* He shall be \*rated of\* his studying,                               \*chidden for\* If  
 that I may, by Jesus, heaven's king! Get me a staff, that I may underspore\*  
 \*lever up While that thou, Robin, heavest off the door: He shall out of his  
 studying, as I guess." And to the chamber door he gan him dress\*  
 \*apply himself. His knave was a strong carl for the nonce, And by the hasp  
 he heav'd it off at once; Into the floor the door fell down anon. This Nicholas  
 sat aye as still as stone, And ever he gap'd upward into the air. The  
 carpenter ween'd\* he were in despair,                               \*thought And hent\* him  
 by the shoulders mightily,                               \*caught And shook him hard, and  
 cried spitously;\*                               \*angrily "What, Nicholas? what how, man?  
 look adown: Awake, and think on Christe's passioun. I crouche thee<27>  
 from elves, and from wights\*.                               \*witches Therewith the night-spell  
 said he anon rights\*,                               \*properly On the four halves\* of the house  
 about,                               \*corners And on the threshold of the door without.  
 "Lord Jesus Christ, and Sainte Benedight, Blesse this house from every  
 wicked wight, From the night mare, the white Pater-noster; Where wonnest\*  
 thou now, Sainte Peter's sister?"                               \*dweldest And at the last this  
 Hendy Nicholas Gan for to sigh full sore, and said; "Alas! Shall all time world  
 be lost eftsoones\* now?"                               \*forthwith This carpenter answer'd;

"What sayest thou? What? think on God, as we do, men that swink.\*"  
\*labour This Nicholas answer'd; "Fetch me a drink; And after will I speak in  
privity Of certain thing that toucheth thee and me: I will tell it no other man  
certain."

This carpenter went down, and came again, And brought of mighty ale a  
large quart; And when that each of them had drunk his part, This Nicholas  
his chamber doorfast shet\*, \*shut And down the carpenter  
by him he set, And saide; "John, mine host full lief\* and dear,  
\*loved Thou shalt upon thy truthe swear me here, That to no wight thou  
shalt my counsel wray\*: \*betray For it is Christes counsel that I  
say, And if thou tell it man, thou art forlore:\* \*lost<28> For this  
vengeance thou shalt have therefor, That if thou wraye\* me, thou shalt be  
wood\*\*." \*betray \*\*mad "Nay, Christ forbid it for his holy blood!"  
Quoth then this silly man; "I am no blab,\* \*talker Nor, though  
I say it, am I \*lief to gab\*. \*fond of speech\* Say what thou wilt, I  
shall it never tell To child or wife, by him that harried Hell."  
<29>

"Now, John," quoth Nicholas, "I will not lie, I have y-found in my astrology,  
As I have looked in the moone bright, That now on Monday next, at quarter  
night, Shall fall a rain, and that so wild and wood\*, \*mad That  
never half so great was Noe's flood. This world," he said, "in less than half an  
hour Shall all be dreint\*, so hideous is the shower: \*drowned  
Thus shall mankinde drench\*, and lose their life." \*drown This  
carpenter answer'd; "Alas, my wife! And shall she drench? alas, mine  
Alisoun!" For sorrow of this he fell almost adown, And said; "Is there no  
remedy in this case?" "Why, yes, for God," quoth Hendy Nicholas; "If thou  
wilt worken after \*lore and rede\*; \*learning and advice\* Thou may'st not  
worken after thine own head. For thus saith Solomon, that was full true:  
Work all by counsel, and thou shalt not rue\*. \*repent And if  
thou worke wilt by good counseil, I undertake, withoute mast or sail, Yet  
shall I save her, and thee, and me. Hast thou not heard how saved was Noe,  
When that our Lord had warned him beforne, That all the world with water  
\*should be lorn\*?" \*should perish\* "Yes," quoth this carpenter, " \*full  
yore ago\*." \*long since\* "Hast thou not heard," quoth Nicholas, "also  
The sorrow of Noe, with his fellowship, That he had ere he got his wife to  
ship?<30> \*Him had been lever, I dare well undertake, At thilke time, than  
all his wethers black, That she had had a ship herself alone.\*  
\*see note <31> And therefore know'st thou what is best to be done? This  
asketh haste, and of an hasty thing Men may not preach or make tarrying.  
Anon go get us fast into this inn\* \*house A kneading  
trough, or else a kemelin\*, \*brewing-tub For each of us; but

look that they be large, In whiche we may swim\* as in a barge:  
 \*float And have therein vitaille suffisant But for one day; fie on the  
 remenant; The water shall aslake\* and go away \*slacken,  
 abate Aboute prime\* upon the nexte day. \*early morning But  
 Robin may not know of this, thy knave\*, \*servant Nor eke thy  
 maiden Gill I may not save: Ask me not why: for though thou aske me I will  
 not telle Godde's privity. Sufficeth thee, \*but if thy wit be mad\*,  
 \*unless thou be To have as great a grace as Noe had; out of thy  
 wits\* Thy wife shall I well saven out of doubt. Go now thy way, and speed  
 thee hereabout. But when thou hast for her, and thee, and me, Y-gotten us  
 these kneading tubbes three, Then shalt thou hang them in the roof full  
 high, So that no man our purveyance\* espy: \*foresight, providence  
 And when thou hast done thus as I have said, And hast our vitaille fair in  
 them y-laid, And eke an axe to smite the cord in two When that the water  
 comes, that we may go, And break an hole on high upon the gable Into the  
 garden-ward, over the stable, That we may freely passe forth our way, When  
 that the greate shower is gone away. Then shalt thou swim as merry, I  
 undertake, As doth the white duck after her drake: Then will I clepe,\* 'How,  
 Alison? How, John? \*call Be merry: for the flood will pass  
 anon.' And thou wilt say, 'Hail, Master Nicholay, Good-morrow, I see thee  
 well, for it is day.' And then shall we be lordes all our life Of all the world, as  
 Noe and his wife. But of one thing I warne thee full right, Be well advised, on  
 that ilke\* night, \*same When we be enter'd into shippe's  
 board, That none of us not speak a single word, Nor clepe nor cry, but be in  
 his prayere, For that is Godde's owen heste\* dear.  
 \*command Thy wife and thou must hangen far atween\*,  
 \*asunder For that betwixte you shall be no sin, No more in looking than  
 there shall in deed. This ordinance is said: go, God thee speed To-morrow  
 night, when men be all asleep, Into our kneading tubbes will we creep, And  
 sitte there, abiding Godde's grace. Go now thy way, I have no longer space  
 To make of this no longer sermoning: Men say thus: Send the wise, and say  
 nothing: Thou art so wise, it needeth thee nought teach. Go, save our lives,  
 and that I thee beseech."

This silly carpenter went forth his way, Full oft he said, "Alas! and Well-a-  
 day!,' And to his wife he told his privity, And she was ware, and better knew  
 than he What all this \*quainte cast was for to say\*. \*strange contrivance  
 But natheless she fear'd as she would dey, meant\* And said:  
 "Alas! go forth thy way anon. Help us to scape, or we be dead each one. I am  
 thy true and very wedded wife; Go, deare spouse, and help to save our life."  
 Lo, what a great thing is affection! Men may die of imagination, So deeply  
 may impression be take. This silly carpenter begins to quake: He thinketh  
 verily that he may see This newe flood come weltering as the sea To





parfay\*,                   \*by my faith My mouth hath itched all this livelong day:  
That is a sign of kissing at the least. All night I mette\* eke I was at a feast.  
\*dreamt Therefore I will go sleep an hour or tway, And all the night then will  
I wake and play." When that the first cock crowed had, anon Up rose this  
jolly lover Absolon, And him arrayed gay, \*at point devise.\*                   \*with  
exact care\* But first he chewed grains<34> and liquorice, To smelle sweet,  
ere he had combed his hair. Under his tongue a true love <35> he bare, For  
thereby thought he to be gracious.

Then came he to the carpentere's house, And still he stood under the shot  
window; Unto his breast it raught\*, it was so low;                   \*reached  
And soft he coughed with a semisoun'\*.                   \*low tone "What do  
ye, honeycomb, sweet Alisoun? My faire bird, my sweet cinamome\*,  
\*cinnamon, sweet spice Awaken, leman\* mine, and speak to me.  
\*mistress Full little thinke ye upon my woe, That for your love I sweat \*there  
as\* I go.                   \*wherever No wonder is that I do swelt\* and sweat.  
\*faint I mourn as doth a lamb after the teat Y-wis\*, leman, I have such love-  
longing,                   \*certainly That like a turtle\* true is my mourning.  
\*turtle-dove I may not eat, no more than a maid." "Go from the window, thou  
jack fool," she said: "As help me God, it will not be, 'come ba\* me.'  
\*kiss I love another, else I were to blame", Well better than thee, by Jesus,  
Absolon. Go forth thy way, or I will cast a stone; And let me sleep; \*a twenty  
devil way\*.                   \*twenty devils take ye!\* "Alas!" quoth Absolon, "and well  
away! That true love ever was so ill beset: Then kiss me, since that it may be  
no bet\*,                   \*better For Jesus' love, and for the love of me." "Wilt  
thou then go thy way therewith?", quoth she. "Yea, certes, leman," quoth  
this Absolon. "Then make thee ready," quoth she, "I come anon." [And unto  
Nicholas she said \*full still\*:                   \*in a low voice\* "Now peace, and thou  
shalt laugh anon thy fill."]<36> This Absolon down set him on his knees,  
And said; "I am a lord at all degrees: For after this I hope there cometh  
more; Lemman, thy grace, and, sweete bird, thine ore.\*"                   \*favour The  
window she undid, and that in haste. "Have done," quoth she, "come off, and  
speed thee fast, Lest that our neighebour should thee espy." Then Absolon  
gan wipe his mouth full dry. Dark was the night as pitch or as the coal, And  
at the window she put out her hole, And Absolon him fell ne bet ne werse,  
But with his mouth he kiss'd her naked erse Full savourly. When he was  
ware of this, Aback he start, and thought it was amiss; For well he wist a  
woman hath no beard. He felt a thing all rough, and long y-hair'd, And  
saide; "Fy, alas! what have I do?" "Te he!" quoth she, and clapt the window  
to; And Absolon went forth at sorry pace. "A beard, a beard," said Hendy  
Nicholas; "By God's corpus, this game went fair and well." This silly Absolon  
heard every deal\*,                   \*word And on his lip he gan for anger  
bite; And to himself he said, "I shall thee quite\*.                   \*requite, be even with



