THE REEVE'S TALE.

THE PROLOGUE.

WHEN folk had laughed all at this nice case Of Absolon and Hendy Nicholas, Diverse folk diversely they said, But for the more part they laugh'd *were diverted And at this tale I saw no man him grieve, and play'd;* But it were only Osewold the Reeve. Because he was of carpenteres craft, A *left He gan to grudge* and little ire is in his hearte laft*: blamed it a lite.** *murmur **little. "So the* I," quoth he, "full well could I him quite** *thrive **match With blearing* of a proude miller's eye, *dimming <1> If that me list to speak of ribaldry. But I am old; me list not play for age; <2> Grass time is done, my fodder is now forage. This white *head Mine heart is also top* writeth mine olde years; *grown mouldy And I do fare as doth an moulded* as mine hairs; open-erse*; *medlar <3> That ilke* fruit is ever longer werse, *same Till it be rotten *in mullok or in stre*. *on the ground or in straw* We olde men, I dread, so fare we; Till we be rotten, can we not be ripe; We hop* away, while that the world will pipe; *dance For in our will there sticketh aye a nail, To have an hoary head and a green tail, As hath a leek; for though our might be gone, Our will desireth folly ever-in-one*: *continually For when we may not do, then will we speak, Yet in our ashes cold does fire reek.* *smoke<4> Four gledes* have we, which I shall devise**, *coals ** describe Vaunting, and lying, anger, covetise*. *covetousness These foure sparks belongen unto eld. Our olde limbes well may be unweld*, *unwieldy But will shall never fail us, that is sooth. And yet have I alway a coltes tooth, <5> As many a year as it is passed and gone Since that my tap of life began to run; For sickerly*, when I *certainly Death drew the tap of life, and let was born, anon it gon: And ever since hath so the tap y-run, Till that almost all empty is the tun. The stream of life now droppeth on the chimb. <6> The silly tongue well may ring and chime Of wretchedness, that passed is full yore*: *long With olde folk, save dotage, is no more. <7>

When that our Host had heard this sermoning, He gan to speak as lordly as a king, And said; "To what amounteth all this wit? What? shall we speak all day of holy writ? The devil made a Reeve for to preach, As of a souter* a shipman, or a leach**.

*cobbler <8> Say forth thy tale, and tarry not the time:

**surgeon <9> Lo here is Deptford, and 'tis half past