

The Canon's Yeoman's Tale
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The Prologue of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale

When the life of Saint Cecilia¹ was finished, before we had ridden fully five miles, at Boughton-under-Blean² there overtook us a man clad in black garments, and underneath he had a white surplice. His hackney, a dapple gray, so sweated that it was a marvel to behold; it seemed he had spurred hard for three miles; and the horse that his yeoman rode sweated so that it could scarcely walk. The foam lay thick about the breast-harness, and the rider was all flecked with foam like a magpie. A bag doubled-over lay on his crupper; it seemed he carried little clothing. 567

This worthy man rode lightly clad, as if for summer, and in my heart I began to wonder what he was, until I observed how his cloak was sewed to his hood; from which, when I had long considered, I deemed him to be some canon. His hat hung down at his back by a string, for he had ridden faster than a walk or trot; he had spurred at all point like mad. He had a burdock-leaf under his hood against the sweat, and to save his head from the sun. But it was a joy to see him sweat! His forehead dripped like a still, full of plantain and pellitory³. 581

And when he had reached us, he began to call out, "God save this merry company! I have spurred fast after you," he said, "because I wished to overtake you, to ride in this pleasant company." 586

His yeoman also was full of courtesy, and said, "Sirs, but now in the morning-tide I saw you clatter out of your hostelry, and warned my lord and sovereign here, who is glad to ride with you for disport; he loves dalliance." 592

¹ The life of Saint Cecilia. I.e., *The Second Nun's Tale*.

² Boughton-under-Blean. About five miles from Canterbury and five miles beyond Ospring, where pilgrims departing from London typically spent the second night of the pilgrimage.

³ Plantain and pellitory. Herbs used to treat a variety of conditions from urinary problems to epilepsy.

"Friend, God give you good fortune for your warning," said our Host then, "for certainly it would seem your master would be a good judge, and so I well believe. I will pledge also he is merry. Can he perhaps tell a merry tale or two, to gladden this company?" 598

"Who, sir? My lord? Yes, and no mistake; he knows more than enough about mirth and jollity. Also, sir, trust me, if you knew him as well as I do, you would marvel how well and craftily he can work, and does so in various matters. He has taken on himself many great adventures that would be hard for any man here to achieve, unless they learn it from him. As plainly as he rides among you, it would be to your advantage if you knew him. I dare stake all that I own that you would not forego his acquaintance for many riches. He is a man of great discretion; I warn you well, he is a superior man." 614

"Well," said our Host, "I pray you then tell me, is he a clerk, or not? Say what is he?" 616

"No, he is greater than a clerk, certainly," said this yeoman, "and in a few words, Host, I will show you something of his craft. I say my lord knows such deception (but from me you cannot know all his cunning, and yet I help somewhat in his work) that he could turn clean upside-down all this ground on which we are riding until we come to Canterbury, and could pave it all with silver and gold." 626

And when this yeoman had spoken to him thus, our Host said, "God bless! This thing is a wonderful marvel since your master is of such great wisdom, and for this men ought to pay him reverence, since he heeds so little his own worship. Truly, his cloak is not worth a mite, for such a man. By my head, it is all foul and all torn also. Why is your master so slovenly, I pray you, since he is able to buy better clothes, if his performance accords with your words? Tell me, and that I beseech you." 639

"Why? Why do you ask me?" said this yeoman. "So God help me, he shall never prosper! (But I do not wish to own up to what I tell you, and therefore, I pray you keep it secret.) In faith, I believe he is too wise. What is overdone will come to no good; as clerks say, it is a fault. Therefore I hold him ignorant and foolish in that. When a man has too great a wit, often it happens that he misuses the same; so does my lord, and it sorely grieves me. May God amend it, and that is all." 651

"No matter for that," said our Host. "But good yeoman, since you know of the cunning of your lord,

I pray you heartily, tell us how he does, since he is so deceptive and skilful. Where dwell you, if it may be told?" 656

"In the outskirts of a town," he said, "lurking in corners and blind alleys, where these robbers and these thieves naturally hold their secret cowardly dwelling, as they who dare not show their presence. So fare we, to tell the truth." 662

"Now," said our Host, "let me talk to you. Why is your face so discolored?" 664

"Peter!" he answered; "bad luck to it! I am so used to blow in the fire, that it has changed my color, no doubt. I am not accustomed to peer into any mirror, but toil sorely and learn to multiply⁴. In our art we grope continually onward, and pore over the fire, but for all that we fail of our end, for it ever turns out amiss. We delude many people, and borrow gold, be it a pound or two, or ten or twelve, or many more sums, and make them think that at least of one pound we can make two. Yet it is false. But we always have good expectation to do it and grope after it. But that art is so far ahead of us that we cannot overtake it, though we had sworn to do so, it slides away so fast. In the end it will make us beggars." 683

While this yeoman was talking thus, this canon drew nearer, and heard everything the yeoman spoke; for this canon was ever suspicious of what men said. For Cato says that he who is guilty truly believes everything to be said of him. This was the cause that he drew so nigh his yeoman, to hear all his speech. And then he said to his yeoman, "Hold your peace, speak not a word more; if you do, you shall pay for it dearly. You slander me here before these people, and reveal what you should hide." 696

"Yes, tell on, whatever befall," said our Host. "Care not a mite for all his threatening!" 698

"In faith, no more I do, but little," he replied. 699

And when this canon saw that it would not be, but that his yeoman would tell all his secrets, he fled away, for true sorrow and shame. 702

"Ah!" the yeoman said, "here comes sport. I will tell now without delay all that I know, since he is gone-- may the foul Fiend strike him! For after this, I promise you, I will never have anything to do with him, neither for a penny or a pound. He who first

⁴ Learn to multiply. To perform the operation of alchemy, turning base metals into gold.

brought me to that game, sorrow and disgrace to him before he die! For by my faith it is bitter earnest to me; I feel that well, whatsoever men say. And yet for all my pain and sorrow, labor and mischief I could never in any fashion leave it. Now I wish to God my wit might be sufficient to tell all that belongs to that craft! But yet I will tell you part; since my lord is gone I will not spare anything; I shall declare those things that I know." 719

Here ends the Prologue of
the Canon's Yeoman's Tale.

Here begins the Canon's Yeoman's Tale.

With this canon I have dwelt seven year, and of all his wit I am never the better; through this I have lost all that I had, and, God knows, so has many another besides. Where I was accustomed to be bright and festive in clothing and other fine gear, I am now glad to wear an old stocking on my head; and where my color was fresh and ruddy, it is now pale and leaden. Whosoever practices it shall regret it sorely. And with all my toil the wool is pulled over my eyes until they water. Lo the gains of multiplying! 731

That slippery science has made me so bare that wherever I turn I do not have a penny; and into the bargain I am so in debt: thus, for gold that I have borrowed, that in truth I shall never pay it as long as I live. Let every man take warning by me forevermore! Whatever manner of man inclines thereto and continues in it, I hold his thrift done with. So God help me, he shall gain nothing but to empty his purse and thin his wits. And when through his madness and folly he has lost his own goods through this hazardous game, he then incites other people to it, to lose their goods as he has done. For it is a joy and comfort to scoundrels to have their fellows in pains and distress; thus a clerk taught me once. No matter for that--now I will tell of our art. 749

When we be where we practice our elfish craft, we seem wondrous wise, our terms be so book-learned and outlandish. I blow the fire until my heart faints. Why should I tell each proportion of things we work on, as five or six ounces, it may well be, or some other quantity of silver; and busy me telling you the names of orpiment, burnt bones, iron sheets, that be ground into fine powder? And how all is put in an earthen pot, and salt put in, and pepper also, before these powders that I speak of and well covered with a glass plate, and many another thing which there was? And of the cementing of pot and glasses that no part of the air should pass out? And of the moderate or the smart fire which was made, and of the care and woe

which we had in the sublimation of our matters, and in the amalgaming and calcining of quicksilver, called crude mercury? 772

For all our sleights, we fail of our end. Our orpiment and sublimated mercury, as well as our litharge ground on a porphyry slab, of each of these a certain number of ounces, nothing helps us, our labor is vain. Nor the ascension of vapors, nor the solid bodies that lie fixed at the bottom, can help us anything in our operation. For all our labor and travail is lost, and all the cost which we lay out upon it is gone also. May twenty devils take it away! 783

There is also many another thing appertaining to our craft; though I cannot rehearse them in order, because I am an unlearned man, or set them according to their nature, yet I will tell them as they come to my mind; as Armenian clay, verdigris, borax, and sundry vessels of earth and glass, our urinals and descensories, vials, crucibles and vessels for sublimation, flasks, and alembics, and other such-like things, dear enough at a farthing. It needs not rehearse each of them, reddening waters, bull's gall, arsenic, salammoniac and brimstone; and many herbs I could tell you, as agrimony, valerian, moonwort, and other such if I wish to tarry; our lamps burning day and night to bring about our end, if we ever could; and our furnace for calcining, albification of waters, unslaked lime, chalk, white of egg, divers powders, ashes, dung and the like, clay, waxed bags, saltpetre, vitriol, and divers fires of coal or wood, salt of tartar, alkali, prepared salt, matters combust and coagulate, clay mixed with horses or men's hair, and oil of tartar, alum, glass, yeast, unfermented beer, crude cream of tartar, red orpiment; and of the absorbing and incorporating of our matters, our citronizing of silver, our cementing and fermentation, our moulds, assaying vessels and many another thing. 818

I will also tell you in order, as was taught me, the four spirits and the seven bodies, as I oft heard my lord name them. The first spirit is called quicksilver, the second orpiment, the third sal-ammoniac, and the fourth brimstone. Also the seven bodies, lo here they are! The sun is gold, the moon we hold to be silver, Mars iron, Mercury we call quicksilver, Saturn is lead, Jupiter tin, and Venus is copper, by my father's soul! 829

Whosoever will practice this cursed craft, however rich he be, shall not be rich enough; for all the goods he spends about it he shall lose, I have no doubt of that. Whosoever wishes to display his folly, let him come forth, and learn multiplying; and every man

who has anything in his strong-box, let him come forth now and become a philosopher. Perhaps you deem that craft easy to learn? No, no, God knows! Whether he is a monk or friar or priest or canon or any other, even if he sits at his book night and day learning this silly elvish lore, all is in vain, and worse by God! And to teach this deception to an unlearned man--Fie! Speak not of that! It will not be! Whether he knows book-learning or not, in the end he shall find the results all the same. For, by my salvation, both learned and unlearned end equal in multiplying, when all is done; that is to say, both fail. 851

Yet I forgot to enumerate corrosive waters and of metal filings, of fusible metal, of mollification of bodies and of their induration, oils and ablutions, - to tell all would exceed any Bible that is anywhere; therefore it is best I should desist from all these names. For I believe I have told you enough already to raise a fiend, look he never so savage. 861

Oh no! Let be! The philosopher's stone, called elixir, we all seek after hard; for had we that, we should be secure enough. But I declare to the God of heaven, for all our craft and all our sleight and when we have done everything, it will not come to us. It has made us spend much gold, the loss whereof nigh drives us mad, save that good hope creeps into our hearts, and makes us ever to trust, for all our pains, to be relieved by finding it. But such trusting and hoping bring discipline sharp and hard; I warn you well, it is ever to seek. That future tense, in trust thereto, has caused men to part from all that ever they had. Yet of that art they never think they have had enough, for it is bitter-sweet to them; thus it seems. 879

For if they have but a sheet to wrap them in by night, and a rough cloak to walk in by day, they would sell them to spend on this craft; they can never stop until nothing remain. And wherever they go, men may know them evermore by the smell of brimstone. They stink for all the world as a goat; their savor is so hot and rank, trust me, that though a man be a mile from them, the savor will infect him. 889

Lo, thus by their smell and their threadbare array men may, if they wish, know these people. And if a man would secretly ask them why they be clothed so scurvily, Then they will whisper in his ear and say that if they were seen, men would slay them, for their art. Lo, thus they betray the innocent. 897

Let us pass over this. I shall go to my tale. Before the pot is placed on the fire, my lord, and none but he, compounds metals with certain quantities of other matters--now he is gone, I dare speak boldly--for, as

men say, he is cunning at his craft, at least I know well he has such a repute, and yet often he runs into blame. And know you how? Often it happens that the pot breaks to pieces, and farewell, all is gone! These metals be so violent that our walls cannot resist them, unless they are wrought of stone and lime. They pierce so, and go through the wall, and some parts sink into the earth, and some are scattered all over the floor, and some leap into the roof. Thus at times we have lost many pounds. Without a doubt, though the Fiend may not show him in our sight, I believe he is with us, the scoundrel! 917

In hell, where he is lord and master, there is no more woe or rancor or anger. When our pot is broken, as I have told, every man scolds and deems himself abused. One will say that it was all along of the building of the fire; another says no, it was the blowing (then I was afraid, for that was my duty). "A straw for that," says a third, "you are a pack of fools! It was not mixed as it ought to be." 926

"No," says the fourth, "stop, and hear me; because our fire was not made with beech-wood, that and no other is the cause, as I hope to prosper!" 929

I cannot tell what caused it, but well I know we have great strife. "What!" said my lord, "there is no more to do now, and another time I will beware of these perils; I am right sure the pot was cracked. Be that as it may, be not confounded. As we are accustomed, let the floor be swept now, and pluck up your hearts and be glad and joyful." 937

The rubbish is swept on a heap and a canvas spread on the floor, and all this rubbish thrown into a sieve and many times sifted and picked over. 941

"By God," said one, "there is yet here somewhat of our metal, though not all. Though the thing may have miscarried this time, it may go well enough another time. We must venture our wealth. A merchant, trust me, cannot always remain in prosperity, by God! One time his merchandise is drowned in the sea, and another time it comes safe to land." 950

"Peace!" said my lord. "Next time I will try to bring our craft to another issue. And unless I do, sirs, let me bear the blame. Well I know there was a defect somewhere." 954

Another says the fire was too hot; but hot or cold, I vow we end evermore amiss. We fail of what we would get and forever rave in our madness. And when we are all together, every man seems a Solomon. But all that shines like gold is not gold, as I

have heard tell. Nor is every apple good that is fair to the eye, howsoever men prate. Lo, even so it is among us; he that appears the wisest is the greatest fool, by the Lord, when it comes to the test, and he that seems the truest man is a thief; that you shall know, before I leave you, by the time I have made an end of my tale. 971

Here ends the first part.

And here follows the second part.

Among us there is a religious man, a canon, who would infect a whole town, even if it were as great as Nineveh, Rome, Alexandria, Troy, and three more as well. His sleights and his infinite falseness no man could describe, I believe, even if he lived a thousand years. His match for falsehood lives not in all this world, for he would so involve himself in his cunning terms and speak his words so slyly, when he would converse with a man, that he would soon make him act foolishly, unless it were a fiend, as he is himself. He has beguiled many men, and will more, if he lives any longer. And yet men ride and walk many miles to seek him and have his acquaintance, knowing nothing of his false manners. And if you wish to hear me, I will tell of this. 991

But, worshipful religious canons, judge not that I slander your order, though my tale may be of a canon. In every order is some rogue, and God forbid that a whole company should pay for the folly of one man. It is in no way my intent to slander you, but only to chide what is amiss. This tale is told not only for you but for others besides. You know well how among Christ's twelve apostles there was no traitor except only Judas⁵. Then why should all the guiltless remnant have reproof? As to you I say the same, save only this, if you will hear me: if any Judas be in your convent, remove him in good time, if there be fear of shame or loss, I counsel you. 1009

And be not displeased, I crave, but hearken to what I shall say. In London dwelt many years a priest, an annualer⁶, who was so pleasant and serviceable to the landlady where he was at board that she would allow him to pay nothing for food or clothing, however fine his clothes were. And he had plenty of spending money. No matter about that; I will now proceed and

⁵ Judas. One of the twelve apostles of Christ, the one who betrayed Christ.

⁶ Annualer. Priest who sings mass daily at chantry chapels of city churches; the masses were anniversary memorial services, i.e., masses sun on the annual death-day of those who paid for the masses.

tell my tale of the canon who brought this priest to ruin. One day this false canon came to this priest's chamber where he dwelt, beseeching him to lend him a certain sum of gold, and he would repay it to him. He said, "Lend me a mark for just three days, and on my day I will pay it you. And if it should be so that you find me false, the next time have me hanged by the neck!" 1029

This priest handed him a mark, and did so immediately, and this canon thanked him again and again and took his leave and went his way forth; and on the third day brought his money back, for which this priest was so very glad and eager. 1035

"Surely," he said, "it annoys me not a bit to lend a man a noble, or two or three, or whatsoever I may have, when he is so trustworthy in character that he will in no way fail to pay on the day agreed upon. To such a man I can never say no." 1041

"What!" this canon said. "Should I be untrustworthy? No, that would be a new thing! Faith is a thing that I will maintain forever, to the day when I shall creep into my grave; and God forbid anything else! Believe this as sure as your creed! I thank God, and in good time may it be said that there never yet was a man ill-content for gold or silver that he loaned me; and never was falsehood in my heart. And sir," he said, "since you have been so kind and shown me such courtesy, I will show you something of my secret knowledge, in order to requite your kindness somewhat; and, if you wish to learn, I will teach you fully how I can work in philosophy. Take careful notice, and you shall well see with your eyes that I will do a master-stroke before I leave you." 1060

"Yes," the priest said. "Yes, sir, and do you wish so? Marry! I heartily pray you for that." 1062

"At your commandment, sir, in truth," the canon replied; God forbid else! 1064

Lo how this thief could proffer his service! It is very true that such proffered service stinks, as these old sages testify. And soon I will prove it by this canon, root of all treachery, who evermore delights, such fiendish thoughts press into his heart, to bring Christ's people to mischief. May God keep us from his false deception! 1073

This priest knew not with whom he dealt, and saw nothing of his harm to come. O guileless priest, poor innocent! Soon you shall be blinded by your covetousness. O luckless creature, blind is your wit, you are in no way aware of the deceit that this fox

has planned for you. You can not escape his wily tricks. 1081

Wherefore, unhappy man! to come to the consummation of your ruin, I will hasten me forthwith to tell your unwitting and folly, and the falseness of that wretch, so far as my cunning may go. 1087

You think this canon was my lord? In faith, and by heaven's Queen, it was not he, but another canon, that knows a hundred times as much deception, Sir Host. He has betrayed people often; it dulls me to rhyme of his falseness. Whenever when I speak of it, my cheeks grow red with shame for him, at least they begin to glow, for redness have I none in my face; for sundry fumes of metal, which you have heard me rehearse, have consumed and wasted my redness. Now take heed of this canon's cursedness! 1101

"Sir," he said to the priest, "let your man go for quicksilver, that we may have it immediately, and let him bring two or three ounces. And when he comes, soon you shall see a marvelous thing, which you never saw before this." 1106

"Sir," said the priest, "it shall be done without fail," and he bade his servant fetch this thing, and he was ready at his word, and went forth and straight returned with this quicksilver, to tell the truth, and handed these three ounces to the canon. And he laid them down and bade the servant to bring coals, that he might go quickly to work. 1115

The coals were fetched forthwith, and this canon took a crucible out from his bosom and showed it the priest. "This instrument which you see," he said, "take it in your hand and do you put therein yourself an ounce of this quicksilver; and begin here to become a philosopher, in the name of Christ! There are few to whom I would offer to show thus much of my knowledge. For you shall see here, by experience, that I shall mortify this quicksilver without delay, right in your sight truly, and make it as good silver and as pure as any in your purse or my or elsewhere, and make it malleable. And else hold me as false, and unfit to show my face among people forevermore. I have here a powder, which cost me dear, and shall make all good for it is the ground of all my cunning which I shall show you. 1135

Send your man out and let him stay outside and shut the door, while we go about our secret, so that no man may spy us while we work upon this craft." 1139

All that he bade was done; this servant straight went out and his master shut the door,, and they went speedily to their labor. This priest, at the bidding of this cursed canon, quickly set this thing upon the fire, and blew the fire and busied himself diligently. And this canon cast into the crucible a powder (I do not know not what it was made from, either of chalk or of glass or something else that was not worth a fly), with which to blind the priest; and he ordered him to hasten and bed the coals all above the crucible. "For," this canon said, "as a token that I love you, your own two hands shall do all that shall be done here." 1155

"Many thanks," said the priest, light of heart, and heaped the coals as the canon told him. And while he was busy, this fiendish wretch, this false canon--may the foul Fiend take him--took out of his bosom a beechen coal, in which a hollow had been made craftily with an ounce of silver filings therein; and the hole was securely stopped with wax to keep the filings in. And understand that this false contrivance was not made there but earlier. 1167

And hereafter I shall tell of other things which he brought with him. before he came there, he thought to beguile the priest, and so he did, before they parted; he could not cease until he had skinned him. It dulls me to speak of him; if I knew how, I would gladly avenge myself for his falseness. But he is here today, gone tomorrow; he is so variable, he abides nowhere. 1175

But now take heed, sirs, for God's love! He took his coal and held it secretly in his hand. And while the priest busily bedded the coals, as I told you, this canon said, "Friend, you do wrong. This is not bedded as it should be, but I shall soon amend it. Now let me take a hand in it for a little, for I pity you, by Saint Giles! I see how you sweat, you are right hot, take a cloth here, and wipe away the wet." And while the priest wiped his face, this canon--may bad luck come to him--took his coal and laid it above, over the middle of the crucible, and then blew hard until the coals began to burn well. 1192

"Now give us drink," said the canon; "all shall be well soon, I warrant. Sit down and make merry." 1195

And when this canon's beechen coal was burned, all the filings soon fell out of the hollow and down into the crucible; and so it must needs in reason, since it was placed so exactly above. But alas! the priest knew nothing thereof; he deemed all the coals alike good, for he perceived nothing of the trick. 1203

When this alchemist saw his time, he cried, "Rise up, sir priest, and stand by me. Go, step out and bring us a chalk-stone, for I know well you have no mould; and if I have good fortune, I will make a thing shaped even as a mould. And bring with you also a bowl or a pan full of water, and then you shall well see how our business shall prosper and stand test. And yet, that you shall have no distrust nor wrong conceit of me in your absence, I will never leave you, but go and come back with you again." 1216

To tell it briefly, they opened and shut the chamber-door, and went their way, carrying the key with them, and came again without pause; why should I linger the day long? He took the chalk and fashioned it as a mould, as I shall tell you. I say, he took out of his own sleeve a thin plate of silver, which was only an ounce in weight. And take note, now, of his cursed trick--may he meet an evil end! 1227

He shaped his mould in length and breadth after this plate so slyly that the priest noted it not; and he hid the plate again in his sleeve. Then he took his matters off the fire and put them into the mould with merry cheer, and cast it into the water-vessel when he was ready, and immediately bade the priest, "Look what is there; put your hand in and grope. You shall find silver there, I believe. - What the Devil of hell should it be else? A shaving of silver is silver, by God! 1239

This priest put his hand in, and took up a strip of fine silver. And glad in every vein was this priest when he saw it was so. "God's blessing, and his mother's as well, and all hallows' may you have, sir canon!" he said; "and I their malison, if I become not your man in all I am able, if you agree to teach me this noble craft and this deception!" 1248

Said the canon, "Yet I will make assay a second time, that you may watch well and be expert in this, and another time if need be, try in my absence this study and this skilful science." Then he said, "Get another ounce of quicksilver, without more words, and do therewith as before with that other which is now silver." 1257

This priest busied him as best he could to do as this canon, this cursed man, bade him, and blew the coals hard that he might achieve his desire. And meantime this canon was all ready to beguile the priest again; and for a show he held in his hand a hollow stick (take heed and beware!), in the end of which was put an even ounce of silver filings, as in his coal before; and the end was well stopped with wax to keep every bit in his filings. And while this priest was at his work, this canon with his stick without delay went

there and cast in his powder, as before. I pray to God that the Devil may flay him out of his skin for his falsehood, for in thought and deed he was forever false! And with the stick, which was ordained with that false contrivance, he stirred the coals above the crucible, until the wax melted in the fire, as everyone, unless he is a fool, knows very well it must, and all that was in the stick poured out and fell straight into the crucible. 1282

Now, good sirs, what more would you like? When this priest was beguiled again, and suspected nothing but good faith, he was so glad that I can in no way describe his mirth and his gladness. And once more he offered body and goods to the canon. 1289

“Yes,” said the canon, “though I be poor, you shall find me skilful; I warn you there is more behind. Is there any copper here?” he asked. 1292

“Yes, sir,” said the priest, “I believe there may be.” 1293

“Or go buy us some, and do so immediately. Now go your way, good sir, and hasten.” 1295

He went out and returned with the copper, and this canon took it in his hands, and weighed out an even ounce of it. My tongue is too simple a minister of my wit to express the duplicity of this canon, root of all cursedness. To them that knew him not he seemed friendly, but he was fiendish in heart and mind. It wearies me to tell of his falsehood and yet I will express it, to the end that men may beware of it, and truly for no other reason. 1307

He put his ounce of copper in the crucible, and immediately set it on the fire and cast in powder, and made the priest blow and bend over in his work as he did before; and it was all a fetch. He made the priest his ape, just as he wished. 1313

And afterwards he cast it into the mould and at last put it into the pan of water and thrust in his own hand; and he had a strip of silver in his sleeve, as you have heard me tell before. 1318

He slyly took it out, the priest all unwitting of his false art, and left it in the bottom of the water-pan, and he rumbled to and fro in the water, and wondrous privily took up the copper plate as well--this priest perceiving nothing--and hid it, and caught him by the breast and spoke to him and thus said sportively, “Stoop down; by God, you be to blame! Help me now as I did you the other time. Put in your hand and look what is there.” 1329

The priest took up this strip of silver forthwith, and then said the canon, “Let us go to some goldsmith with these three strips which we have made, and see if they be anything. For in faith I lay my hood that they be pure, fine silver; and that shall straight be tested.” They went to the goldsmith with the three strips, and assayed them with fire and hammer; no man could gainsay that they were as they ought to be. 1340

This stupid priest--who was gladder than he? Never was bird gladder of dawn, never was there nightingale in the season of May who wished better to sing, never a lady delighting to carol or to speak of love or womanly virtue, never a knight to do a bold deed of arms so as to stand in the grace of his dear lady, than this priest to learn this sorry craft. And he spoke thus to the canon, “For the love of God Who died for us all, if I may deserve it of you, how much shall this receipt cost? Tell it, now!” 1353

“By our Lady,” the canon said, “I warn you well, it is dear; for there can no man in England work it, save myself and a friar.” 1356

“No matter,” he said. “Now, sir, for God's sake, what shall I pay? Tell me, I beg.” 1358

“In truth I say it is very dear,” he replied. “Sir, in a word, if you desire it, you shall pay forty pound, so God save me! And were it not for the friendly act that you did me a while ago, you should pay more in truth.” 1363

Quickly this priest fetched the sum of forty pound in nobles, and handed them all to the canon for this receipt; yet all his operation was but fraud and cozenage. 1367

“Sir priest,” he said, “I care to have no praise for my craft, for I wish that it would be kept secret. Keep it secret, as you love me. For if men knew all my secret learning, by God, they would have such great malice toward me for my philosophy that they would kill me without fail.” 1374

“God forbid!” said the priest. “What are you saying? I had rather spend all the goods I have (or I have lost my mind!) than you should fall into such harm.” 1378

“For your good will, sir,” said the canon, “right good luck to you; and so many thanks to you, and farewell!” 1380

He went his way, and the priest never saw him after that time. And when, at such time as he wished, this priest came to make trial of this receipt, farewell, it would not be! Lo, thus he was tricked and beguiled. Thus that canon insinuates himself to bring people to ruin. 1387

Consider, sirs, how in every station there is such strife between men and gold that scarce any gold remains. This multiplying blinds so many that in good faith I believe it is the greatest cause of such scarcity. Philosophers speak with such misty terms in this craft that men cannot take hold of it by any wit that they have now. They may well chatter like jays, and put all their delight and pains on polishing up their terms; but they shall never attain their end. 1399

But a man may lightly so learn multiplying that he shall bring his goods to nothing, if he have any! Lo, such profit is to be gained in this lusty sport! It will turn a man's joy to anger and grief and empty great and heavy purses, and gain the curses of those who have lent their goods for that. Oh fie, for shame! Can not those who have been burned flee from the fire's heat? You who follow this craft, I counsel you leave it, lest you lose all. For better than never is late; never to succeed would be too long a period. Even if you prowl far and wide, you shall never find your object. You are as bold as blind Bayard the horse, who blunders forth and thinks of no peril; he is as bold to run against a stone as to pass beside it in the way. Just so will you that multiply fare. 1417

If your eyes cannot see well, look that your mind lack not its sight. For though you stare and look never so widely, you shall not gain a mite in that business, but lose all that you can borrow, beg, or steal. Withdraw the fire, lest it burn too hot; I mean, meddle no more with that craft, for if you do, your savings will be entirely gone. And I will here tell you immediately what philosophers say on this matter. Lo, thus says Arnold of the New Town⁷ in his *Rosary*; in good truth he says exactly this: "No man can mortify mercury unless it should be with the aid of its brother." And he says how that he who first said this thing was Hermes⁸, father of philosophers;

⁷ Arnold of the New Town. Arnaldus de Villanova, French physician and alchemist of the Thirteenth Century. His *Rosarium philosophorum* (*Rose garland of philosophers*) is not likely the source Chaucer needed to cite here; rather, Arnold's *De lapide philosophorum* (*On the Philosopher's Stone*).

⁸ Hermes. Hermes Trismegistus, or "thrice-great Hermes"; identified with the Greek god Hermes (Mercury, known for transformations) and the Egyptian god Thoth (the mythical founder of alchemy).

he tells how the dragon does not die, in truth, unless he should be slain by his brother; and that is to say, by the dragon should be understood mercury and nothing else, and by his brother, brimstone, which is drawn out of sol and luna⁹. "And therefore," he said, "take heed to my saw, let no man busy him in this art, unless he can understand all the mind and speech of philosophers if he do, he is a foolish man. For this knowledge and this cunning is of the secret of secrets¹⁰, by God. 1447

Also there was a disciple of Plato who once said to his master, as his book *Senioris*¹¹ will testify, and made this demand of him in truth, "Tell me the name of the secret stone." 1452

And Plato answered him directly, "Take the stone that is called Titanos¹²." 1454

"Which is that?" he said. 1455

"The same is Magnesia," said Plato. 1456

"Yes, sir, and is it so? This is to interpret ignotum per ignotius¹³. I pray you, good sir, what is Magnesia?" 1458

"It is a water, I say, that is made of four elements," said Plato. 1460

"Tell me," he said then, "the principle of that water, if it be your will." 1462

"No, no," said Plato, "that I will not, certainly. The philosophers were all sworn never to discover it to any, or in any fashion write it in any book. For to Christ it is so precious and dear that He wishes not that it be discovered, except where it pleases His Godhead to inspire man, and to forbid whom He wishes. Lo, this is all." 1471

⁹ Sol and luna. Literally sun and moon, but, in the language of alchemy the sun and the moon, or father and mother of alchemy.

¹⁰ The secret of secrets. Common phrase for the practice of alchemy. As many of the later tales in the collection are, in a sense, advice on ruling, he likely has the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta Secretorum*, advice to Alexander on being a good ruler, on his mind, though it probably has little to do with this tale.

¹¹ *Senioris*. *Senioris Zadith fil. Hamuelis Tabula Chemica*. Originally an Arabic text, in which the conversation, here attributed to Plato and otherwise attributed to Solomon, is led by Muhammad ibn Umail.

¹² Titanos. (Or Thitaros). The Grek word means lime, gypsum, white earth, or chalk. (Skeat.)

¹³ *Ignotum per ignotius*. An unknown thing through (or by) a thing more unknown.

Then I conclude thus; since the God of heaven wished not that the philosophers explain how a man shall come by this stone, I judge it to be the best counsel to let it go. For whosoever makes God his adversary, to work anything against His will, surely, he shall never succeed, even if he should multiply to the day of his death. And here I stop, for my tale is done. May God send every honest man the remedy for his suffering. 1481

Here is ended the Canon's Yeoman's Tale.

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