

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA
(How the Tales came to be told)

It happened in the merry month of May
In Canterbury restless as I lay;
To bed confined with both my shin-bones broken;
Of foolish overweening pride a token.
That worthy woman from beside Bath city
Came visiting; she brought me grapes from pity.
One of our company a monk right able
In levity had wagered me at table,
That I his prancing palfrey durst not ride,
From Sittingbourne to Stour; and woe betide,
A quart of wine had addled my poor wit,
Or else would I have had no part of it.

Early next morning at the spring of day
Sober I rose and girded for the fray.
My brains I racked for pretext; I would now
Right gladly have escaped from my vow.
But all the company spoke with one voice;
I mounted up, forsooth I had no choice.
This palfrey was as brown as is a berry,
With rolling eye, a wanton one and merry.
I rode never like pale Palamon at tourney,
Nor ever on horse took I so brief a journey.
To tell it short; like speeding arrow shot,
I flew from horse through air, to ground, to cot.

Enough! No more of how my ills befell,
It is of Mistress Alison I tell.
"My Lord," quoth she, "it grieves me strait
To see you lie here in such sorry state;
Had I my way I'd tan the naked arse
Of that fat monk that brought this thing to pass.
The whole world loves a joke 'tis true enough,
But broken bones; forsooth he plays too rough!"
"Nay, Mistress, do not take so harsh a bent
It was no better than an accident.
Chance rules us all for better and for worse,

As meet to lay the blame upon the horse.
What's done is done and no use weeping for it,
Needs must accept, and best as can ignore it."

She smiled and sat her down, took off her hat,
And loosed her kerchief; as on chair she sat
She crossed her legs, revealing hose of scarlet;
Not that she played in any way the harlot.
By God above! I make no such suggestion;
The whole world knows that women without question
Seek artlessly to draw a lover's stares;
What merchant does not best display his wares?
"Good Mistress mine, I am of goodly cheer
To see you at my bedside sitting here.
Your countenance has warmed me like the sun:
I'd rise up if I could, like anyone,
To pay you my respects, as is your need.
But pray accept the gesture for the deed.
This wine is strong; refresh yourself and drink."

"And so I shall; a Bordeaux wine I think
Of vintage fine, best of the vine's sweet berry.
I'll fill your goblet too, we'll make us merry.
So drink and cheer your heart, then you shall tell
How spake the doctor. When will you be well?"

"Apothecary and physician both,
And grounded in astronomy, my oath;
My stars he knew, their aspect and position,
He is a perfect practising physician.
A very Aesculapius, no perjury;
He is no novice at bone surgery.
Hippocrates could make no better junction;
The swelling he anointed first with unction,
Of which he had abundance in both senses.
He'd seen my coin; no worry on expenses.
By Galen he can spin a pretty tale;
Sum up a pretty tale too, never doubt it.
But here's the rub; for four full moons I've got
To languish discontented in this cot.
The doctor plain forbade till August's heat
That I should try to stand upon my feet.

I'd sooner take my chance in purgatory,
Than rot in idleness in Canterbury.
So Madam, rack your brains and conjure ways
To ease the tedious passing of the days."

"For shame, good Sir! What woman needs a plan
To entertain a handsome gentleman?
A widower to boot, no wife in sight;
Four moons forsooth! In but a single night,
For such a one I'd dance so merry a fit,
That many a man were like to die of it.
But hold, kind Sir! From this take no offence,
I do but speak in jest, not in plain sense."

"Rest easy, Madam; whether truth or jest,
I take all in good part. As for the rest,
About the world I've been, make no mistake;
Known many women though I am no rake
Whose progress can but lead to fiery hell.
Your jolly countenance betrays you're well
Versed in Venus' arts; I do not doubt it.
Morals aside, naught can be done about it;
My limbs are broke." She laughed, "And as to that,
There are more ways than one to skin a cat.
You seek diversion, that is all you ask;
And seems to me I have the very task
Will keep you out of mischief for a space,
If I judge you aright. And by God's grace,
It will bring joy to many another,
Who never yet with pilgrimage did bother.

"Good Sir, you well recall the company
That with us came on pilgrimage to Canterbury;
And how they laughed and talked as on they rode,
With cheer and fellowship to ease our load;
And many a song they sang and story told."

"Right well do I remember. And I'll hold
Never such a varied congregation,
Of jolly folk of every trade and station,
Were gathered in a single place together.
In truth I cannot justly tell you whether
The journey or the people pleased me more."

“My very words you speak, and I deplore
How all that band is gone, to every part
Dispersed, of this fair kingdom, and their art
Is vanished like a ghost into thin air,
When daybreak summons him from castle stair.
All wasted and no vestige shall remain:
And future folk will know them not again.
But if Sir Geoffrey, you take up your pen
To write the history of these worthy men;
And women, let us not forget the best!
In centuries to come they’ll take their rest,
Immortal, shrined in verses and your wit.
Nay Sir, protest not! Just consider it.
That you are able, Sir, I have no doubt.”

“Dame Alys, you know not what you’re about,
Espousing such a mighty cause, a task
Too great for such as I; as soon to ask
An ape to undertake it; I lack wit
And art to venture on it. I’m unfit.”

“Unfit in body but in mind as sharp
As any dagger. Sir, why do you harp
On insufficiency? You speak you ill;
The talent is not lacking, only will.
Do but attempt it. Prithee, where’s the loss?
She gazed on me and gave her head a toss;
She was persuasive when she chose to be.
At any rate the game appealed to me.
And so of all her urging I took heed;
In short, to take this labour I agreed.

Quick up she jumped as jolly as a colt
And kissed me heartily; I could not bolt.
I’d no complaint, for she was comely still;
The sap of youth I lack but not the will.
“Now we’re agreed,” said she, “another plan
I shall propound, to please you if I can;
If you will hear me out. But first your glass
We’ll charge, and raise to that sweet lass,
Mistress of rhyme and verse, that Muse of old,
Persephone; though if the truth be told,

Whenever I take wine I have to think
Of Venus, wanton goddess, and I link
My fortune to her chariot. Now hear my plan;
It has much merit; fault it if you can.

“In this drear inn your bones will never mend,
While rowdy ribes of jolly pilgrims wend
Hard by your chamber, passing to and fro.
You cannot rest, your days are full of woe.
You must have lodgings of a different kind;
To heal a body needs a quiet mind.
And quite by chance I know the very place;
A cottage, small but with a private space,
Where you can take your ease, enjoy the sun,
And listen to the birds sing, where no one
Can you disturb. It is a modest fee;
I did enquire – from curiosity.
And I will come, companion and nurse,
And housekeeper, take nothing from your purse
Save what you need to keep you in good stead.
And I will make you broth and bake you bread,
And tasty meats fit for the gentlest knights.
Long since I tumbled to men’s appetites!
As well you know, I like to laugh and chat;
But while you write I’ll sit as still as cat
Before the hearth, and weave my Flemish cloth.
A pretty scene I picture, by my troth!”

“Now hold, Dame Alison! you go too fast;
You lay before my eyes a fine repast,
Would tempt a better and a holier than I,
From the true path of Christian celibacy.
Mean you to share the very selfsame house?
Right there beside? In all but name a spouse?”

“Marry, good Sir! How other can I render
Service your recoument will engender?”

“Dame Alys, all my scruples turn to dust
At your fond bidding; but it seems you must
Consider both your honour and your station.
I would not compromise your reputation.

People do talk." "Then let them talk! I care
No fig for what they think, or how they stare.
Through all my life I've followed my own path;
And Canterbury is distant far from Bath."

What else to say!; no need for more debate
We gave our hands on it. I said, "That Fate
That governs all our actions has conspired
To break your journey, and has me inspired
To write a book; would that I had the wit
To do it justice. I shall title it
'The Pilgrims' Progress'; how say you to that?"

"Nay. Of our journey it gives no true sense;
It smacks of holy church and penitence.
Pray leave it for some unborn pious wight,
Who in long years to come may seek to write
Some moralistic tale; 'tis not your bent
To preach, but chronicle our merriment.
It is not meet to censure and condemn,
Or sit in judgement of our fellow men.
You know as well as I, no need to ponder,
A pilgrimage is but excuse to wander.
So lovingly of our companions tell,
Of how they spoke and what they wore, as well
As all those tales they told for our delight.
I sometimes feared they'd talk away the night.
Such diverse folk, with every fault and fancy
As could be conjured up by necromancy.
These citizens of station high and humble,
All fated through life's grievous maze to stumble;
With all their simple wisdom and their follies,
Hopes, courage, fears, desires and melancholies.
Draw them so true the reader, as they pass,
Will see himself in them as in a glass.
Time passes swifter than the eye can blink,
So treat them all with kindness, for I think
Our gracious Lord above must have a pail
Of every vice and virtue without fail;
Which he doles out, and each and every man
Must take his chance and do the best he can,
In life's brief shadow show. And in such case

It's plain that every soul however base
Has something in him of God's golden glory.
This should be the burden of your story.
It was on pilgrimage we rode like snails
So call your book "The Canterbury Tales."

ANNE LLOYD

"IL MIO BEL FOCO"

- I Sometimes, on holiday, your throat rises warm
from the locked music room, expanding
practising arias, and plaintive in its zeal.

Adolescent caress, who but you would woo
with notes the humble friar-bird, silence his
lifetime's exercise of interval, atonal largesse?

- II Ha ha ha ha haaaa, ha ha ha ha haaaa.
From the diaphragm, insistent, your walnut of a
vaunting of self puffs up, scales irreproachable steps.

All summer long we shut out percussion, kerosene-drum
cane-toads bloated after heavier rain, and yearn
the a-rhythmic cadenza of coupling crickets: