

## THE PARDONER'S TALE

In Flanders some years ago, there lived three young men who lived a life of folly and wickedness. They spent their time drinking and gambling in taverns, playing dice night and day, throwing away money on dancing girls, and eating and drinking far more than they either needed or could possibly use. Their curses were so foul and bloodcurdling that it was really terrifying to hear them swear. Each of them laughed greatly at the other's sins. Needless to say they could not get enough money by honest means to live such a life.

One day these three young men were sitting in a tavern drinking, although it was still quite early in the morning. While they were sitting there, they heard a bell tolling as a funeral procession passed by. One of them called to the serving boy and said, "Go out at once and find out what corpse that is that is passing by- and make sure that you report his name correctly."

"Sir," said the boy, "there is no need to ask. I heard all about it before you came here two hours ago. He was an old companion of yours. Last night he was here in the tavern in his usual place, and very, very drunk, and suddenly he was slain. There came a thief called Death, who slays all the people in this land. He struck your friend in the heart with his spear- and went on his way. He has slain at least a thousand during this plague. Master, in case you meet him yourself, you had better beware of him. This is what my mother taught me, I don't know any more about it."

"By Saint Mary," said the tavern keeper, the boy is right. This year death has slain so many men, women, and children in a little village about a mile from here that I expect he must live there! Certainly it is best to be very careful and to always be on the watch to avoid him."

"By heaven," said one of the drunken men, "is it then so dangerous to meet him? For myself, I vow I shall seek him in every highway and every byway. Listen, comrades, we three should be in this together. Let each of us hold up his hand and swear to be a brother to the others, and help them in all things, and then we will slay this false traitor death. He, that slays so many others, shall himself be slain before nightfall!"

The others agreed, and all three swore to live and die together as brothers. Up they jumped in their drunken rage and started toward the village which the tavern keeper had mentioned. By many a grim and bloody oath they vowed that death would die if they could catch him.

When they had gone not quite half a mile, they met a wretched-looking old man. He greeted them politely and meekly, and said, "God protect you, my lords."

The proudest of the three answered with a sneer, "Well, fellow, you certainly are a sorry sight! Why are you all wrapped up, except for your face? Why do you go on living so long as old as you are?"

The old man looked him full in the face and said quietly, "Why? Because I could not find a man anywhere, even if I walked from here to India, who would exchange his youth for my old age. Therefore, I must keep my age as long as it is God's will. Nor will Death take my life. So I must walk like a restless captive. On the ground, which is my mother's gate, I knock with my staff and say, 'Dear mother, let me in! Look how I am fading away, flesh, and blood, and breath. Alas, when shall my bones be at rest?' But still, she will not grant my wish, and that is why my face is pale and withered.

"But sirs, it is not courteous of you to speak so rudely to an old man. Let me give you some advice: Do not harm an old man now any more than you wish men to harm you when you are old- if you live to be the same age. Now God be with you, wherever you go; I must be on the way."

"Oh no you don't, you old rogue," said another of the three. "By Saint John, you're not getting away from us that easily. You just spoke now of that traitor death, who kills all our friends in this country. Since you seem to be his spy, tell us where he is, or we'll make you pay dearly for it! False thief, we know you're on his side, planning to slay us young folk!"

"Sirs," said the old man, "if you are so eager to find death, turn up this crooked path. I left him there in the wood, under a tree, and there he shall stay. I assure you your boasts won't make him hide. Do you see that oak? You'll find him right there. May God save you, and may He help you to mend your ways."

None of them paid any further attention to the old man, for at once they all ran up to the tree he had pointed out. But there, to their enormous delight and astonishment, they saw a huge pile of shining gold coins- there seemed to be about eight bushels of them. They forgot all about looking for Death, seemed each of them was overjoyed at the dazzling sight of the bright gold.

They sat down to gaze at this precious pile, and the worst of the three was the first to speak. "Brothers," said he, "pay careful attention to what I say. My wits are sharp, even if I seem to use them only in joke. Fortune has given us this treasure so we can live our lives in jollity and games. It came lightly, and it is right that we should spend it lightly. Who would have thought that we should have such luck today? But the gold must be carried home from this place to my house- or yours- before we can really enjoy it. However, we certainly can't do it by day, for then people would say that we were bold thieves and hang us for taking our own treasure. It must be carried away by night, as slyly and secretly as possible. So, I suggest that we draw lots, and he whose lot it is shall immediately run to town and bring us all bread and wine. The other two will keep guard over the treasure while he is gone. Then, when it is night, we'll take the treasure to whatever place we all agree is best. Here, brothers- draw lots."

They drew lots, and the lot fell to the youngest. He started out towards the town at once. As soon as he had gone, the one who had suggested the plan turned to the other, and said, "You know that you are my sworn brother. Now I'm going to tell you something for your own good, You know well that our comrade is gone, and here we have a great deal of gold which is to be divided among the three of us. However, if I can manage things so that it will only be divided among the two of us, won't I be doing you a favor?"

The other answered, "I don't know how that can be done. He knows that we have the gold. What shall we do? What can we say to him? "

"If you'll swear to secrecy," said the first villain, "I'll tell you in a few words what we can do."

"I swear it," said the other. "I wouldn't dream of betraying you."

"Now then," said the first, "You know well that we are two, and two of us are bound to be stronger than one. As soon as he comes back and sits down, you get up as if you wanted to wrestle with him in fun. While you struggle with him, as if in play, I'll stab him in the side and back. At the same time, you draw your own dagger and do likewise. Then, dear friend, all this gold shall be divided between you and me. We two can have everything we desire, and play at dice to our hearts' content."

And so the two villains agreed between themselves to slay the third in this manner. Meanwhile, the youngest of the three, as he went to town, thought a

good deal about the beauty of the bright gold coins. "Lord," he said to himself, "if only I could have all this treasure to myself alone, there wouldn't be a man in the world who could live more merrily than I." And it wasn't long before it came into his mind that he could buy poison, in order to kill both his companions and get the gold for himself.

Walking at a fast pace, he wasted no time. He went at once to a druggist in the town and asked him for some poison to kill the rats in his barn, as well as a skunk which, he said, was carrying off all his chickens. The druggist was sympathetic, and assured him, "I'll give you something that no creature alive can eat or drink without losing his life. Even if he has a bit of it as small as a grain of wheat, this poison is so strong and deadly, he shall die in less time than it takes to walk a mile."

The villain was well pleased with this recommendation and bought the poison. he took the box in his hand and went on to a shop in the next street. There he bought three bottles of wine, and in two of them he poured his poison. The third he kept pure for himself, knowing he would need it to give him the strength to work all night carrying away all the gold.

When he returned to his comrades they killed him in the manner that they had planned. When that was done, one of them said, "Now let's sit and drink and be merry; we'll bury his body later." And as he spoke he happened to pick up one of the poisoned bottles, and drank from it, and gave his comrade a drink from it also. And so they were both poisoned.

Thus were the two murderers slain, and the false poisoner as well. They had found Death under the oak tree, although they had not recognized him in the pile of gold.

*Here ends the Pardoner's Tale*

"Now, good men," said the Pardoner, "may God pardon all your sins, and keep you from the sin of avarice, and all the evils which come from the love of money." And, since he usually told such stories as part of a sermon, he went on to finish the sermon in his usual way: "I have the power to grant you all pardons, if you'll offer me gold or silver. Step up, you wives, and offer up your fine woolens, and I'll put your name in my book! Any of you who want pardons, come forth, and I'll give them to you, at a price. Or if you prefer, I'll give you pardons as we go, a new one at the end of each mile, provided you pay me every time! Aren't you lucky to have me, a real Pardoner, with you on this trip? Who knows? Maybe one of you will fall off your horse and break

your neck. You can never tell what's going to happen on the road, and a comprehensive pardon is the best insurance to cover such risks. I think the host had better step up first, since he looks like a terrible sinner. Come forth, sir Host, and make your offering, and I'll let you kiss my relics for only a shilling!"

"Not on your life!" cried the Host. "You rascal, you'd be likely to make me kiss the rottenest egg you could find, and swear it was a relic of a saint!"

The Pardoner was speechless with anger, and the Host began to curse the Pardoner with the worst insults he could think of, to the great amusement of some of the pilgrims, but the knight stepped between them, and said, "No more of this; you have both said enough! Sir Pardoner, be merry and pleasant; and you, sir Host, whom I love, I pray you embrace the Pardoner. Let us all ride together as good friends."

So they embraced and jogged on.