

On the

BY FRANCES REED

This an excerpt from Canterbury, a novel about the pilgrimage told from the point of view of Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

The revel at Ospringe went on long after the last bone of the last roast goose had been licked clean, the wine and ale flowing freely. A few tipsy minstrels led us in some decidedly unholy songs of the road—"welcome Bacchus, glorious god"; "we made our bed beneath the bowers, where now you see the broken flowers," and so forth. With each of the many puns about cocks rising in the morning, mugs were raised to father John, saviour of the day. He sat in the midst of his adoring circle, utterly unperturbed by the gleeful ribaldry and looking very rosy. Having travelled and supped together the last few days, overcoming such hardships as fleas, mud, and monkish gloom, most of the pilgrims seemed to feel they'd been friends forever; tonight was for pleasure—tomorrow meant Canterbury and at least the pretence of piety.

I wasn't surprised to see the homely nun slip upstairs as soon as she could, and of course the scholarly clerk had already escaped to the attic. The parson, a little rosy himself, stood nervously aside, trying to hide his smiles as the bawdy jokes flew by. The monk sulked briefly, but was too fond of his food and drink to hold out for long. Robyn lurched over to Oswald and swore they must be friends—by God's bones wouldn't he share his pitcher of ale (of which a great deal had evidently already been consumed) with him. The shipman was several sheets to the wind,

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clutching the table for support; the lawyer sat stiffly apart doing his best to look dignified, but no one paid him any mind. Though Harry, the host, was busily filling and refilling mugs, he glanced my way often enough that I knew he was looking forward to our meeting. But where were Mme E. and her swain? Not in evidence. I knew they wouldn't be upstairs—let alone behind the barrels in the hall—but where else could they be? They were getting positively foxy. I'd have to keep an eye out for them.

For now I had other fish to fry. During the meal I'd wrapped up a few dainties—figs, oysters, sweet-

meats—and slipped them into one pocket; into another went two goblets and a little platter; under my arm I cradled a bottle of Spanish red. I went up the stairs, casual as could be, and then burst out laughing as I skipped along to my little room. It had one chair, which, setting out the treats, I quickly turned into a table—lest Harry in a mistaken gesture of gentlemanliness felt he should sit there instead of on the bed. Back down the hall I paid a visit to the men's bedroom, helping myself to the lawyer's candles and the merchant's cushions. On the way out I noticed the monk's fur-lined cloak and grabbed that up as well—I was sure he wouldn't notice its absence tonight. I spread the cloak fur-side up over my bed, setting the cushions against the wall; the candles I put here and there, sprinkling into them a bit of cinnamon, to sweeten to air.

Stepping back, I had to admire my handiwork—the plain little room had been transformed into a magical courtly chamber. There was still the problem of the window—easily solved. Taking off my outer riding skirt (which would save time later anyhow), I went over to hang it from the casement . . . and who should I see in the garden below? Eglentyne and the knight! It was dark, but not too dark for me to see that they were standing very close, holding each others' hands! The little vixen! How far would she go? I wished I could wait to see what would happen next—but Harry was a far more tempting prospect—given the choice I'd certainly rather make my own love than watch someone else's. So I let the curtain fall on that little drama and went back down to the dining hall.

Harry beamed, and strode over to greet me.

"Alison," he said, "where have you been? I've looked everywhere. I thought . . ." and here he hesitated and looked down, reddening, "I . . . I was afraid you might have forgotten about our . . . our plan." I was touched. It hadn't occurred to me to play hard to get, but my sojourn upstairs had had the same effect—he was keener than ever.

"No, Harry, no, no. It's just that I could see you were busy for the time, and the jokes were beginning to wear thin—especially after the third time around. So I went to my room for a bit."

Here I was a little less than honest—most times I would leap at the chance to carouse with a tavern crowd, and took pride in being able to sing the bawdiest ballads and drink everyone under the table. Harry needn't know this; but I didn't want him to start seeing me as another Mme E., either. So I smiled at him and said, "Look, Harry. It's too

noisy here, it's too bright, it's too crowded, and I don't fancy a walk in the garden" (for more reasons than he knew); "why don't you come up to my room?" He looked like he thought I'd never ask.

"Why, that would be splendid, Alison. I do believe my work here is done"; (those who could still walk were freely helping themselves at the taps, and weaving back with reinforcements to their bench-bound fellows). We crept upstairs.

Harry was as pleased with the room as I'd hoped.

"Why Alison, this is just lovely. How did you ever manage this? It's like a dream come true. I can't believe it."

"Well," I said, "I wanted us to be comfortable while we talked." I noticed that Harry was looking around uncertainly. "There's no chair, Harry. I'm sorry about that, but I had to turn it into a table. You'll have to sit here beside me—but don't worry, it's not a bed anymore, I've turned it into a sort of divan, like the saracens have, for sitting on. I saw them when I was in the Holy Land—they're much better than our wooden chairs and benches, really. Try it."

Harry sat gingerly on the edge. "No, you have to sit back. Give yourself over to it, Harry. Lean against the cushions. Put your feet up. That's right—how does it feel?" He was starting to smile. I went on. "The problem with England is that comfort is only supposed to be for the upper classes. You can believe they have plenty of soft stuff to sit upon. Well, just for tonight, Harry, I'd like to pretend that you are royalty. You deserve it. Soon enough we'll both be back at work." He moved a little deeper into the cushions.

"It does feel wonderful, Alison, I have to admit. I guess those pagans aren't all bad."

"Right—and now let me serve you. You've been waiting on every one else all night, and taking care of us since we left London. It's your turn." I filled up the goblets, offering one to him and taking the other. "Let's drink to each other, to our time together." Harry drank, and so (needless to say) did I. "Now we have to get really comfortable. Give me your foot." He did, and I took off his boot. I looked meaningfully at his other foot, and he gave it to me. I took off the other boot, and set them both on the floor. "Now, isn't that better?" He had a funny look on his face. "Now I'll just rub your feet a bit, as you must be tired from all that running around downstairs. Meanwhile, why don't you have something to eat?" I passed him the platter of treats and started working on his feet. He

took a few of the oysters and sighed with pleasure.

After a bit a shadow came over his face. "But Alison, this isn't fair. What about you?"

"Oh, you get to take my shoes off, too, Harry," I said, and draped an ankle across his knee. He fumbled a bit with my shoe, but soon had it off.

"Now for the other?" he asked. "Please."

"You don't have to be so polite, Harry," I said, placing the other ankle a little higher on his thigh, and showing off a bit more leg, "this one will be easier." And sure enough he slipped it right off and set the pair next to his boots on the floor.

"And shall I rub your feet as well?" he asked.

"As you like, milord. But first I have a favour to ask. Will you please let my hair down—I can't relax when it's bound up like this." I turned and arched my neck back towards him. "Just pull out those pins." He did, one at a time, quite timidly, but finally my wonderful (if I do say so) auburn hair came tumbling down, right to my waist. I heard Harry let out his breath. "Oh, thank you, Harry—you can't imagine how good that feels. Now you can do my feet." My feet are not exactly delicate, but in his huge hands they seemed so. He stroked them ever so softly, as if he feared they would break. It felt glorious. I didn't want it to stop.

"Oh, I forgot!" he suddenly said, and passed me the plate. I tried a fig and an oyster together, a lovely combination, sweet and smoky. "Now," he said, still keeping one big warm hand gently round my feet, "now let me guess—it's time for another drink to each other. Am I right?"

"An excellent plan, milord." So we drank, and worked some more on the figs and oysters. "One more favour, though. Would you mind brushing out my hair? It gets so uncomfortable, being on the road all day." Without waiting for an answer, I handed him the brush, and he began to run it through my hair. Now I have to say that I find these sensations—having my feet stroked and my hair brushed—utterly exquisite. The air was heady, fragrant with cinnamon. The wine was warming my blood. I was beginning to tingle.

"No, you have to sit back. Give yourself over to it, Harry. Lean against the cushions. Put your feet up. That's right—how does it feel?"

Maybe I was going a bit too fast—we were supposed to talk, after all, and I didn't want it to be over too soon.

"And now—" asked Harry a little hoarsely, "now you get to brush my hair?" He was catching on fast. Slowing down was going to be a challenge.

"Very good, milord. But for me to do that you'll have to put your head in my lap. You're so tall, you see, I won't be able to reach your hair otherwise." He obeyed, and I slowly ran the brush through his thick locks, spreading them out over my lap. Harry's eyes were closed, and he was breathing deeply. "Now you don't look so much like a lord as a god from the other world. What a fine forehead you have," I said, stroking back his hair. Harry gasped and reached up for me. The brush went flying. He wrapped his great arms around me and I forgot about the talking. I worked at the ties on his shirt and soon had it open, running my fingers through the rich mat of hair on his chest. With a little help from me we soon had my bodice off and I fell into the fur. It was wonderful against my back. "Wait, Harry," I laughed, "you have to feel this—take off your shirt." He tore it over his head and threw it across the room; we wrapped our arms around each other, delighting in the feel of skin on skin, revelling in the plushness of the cloak, whose unsuspecting owner proceeded with his stupefaction below.

"Harry," I managed to whisper, as we struggled with the rest of our clothes, "Let's take our time."

"That's fine ... with me," he said, catching his breath. So we did. We took it as slow as we could manage, and it was grand—one of those times when the pleasure of the journey was such it was almost a pity to reach the destination. Afterwards, we finished what was left of the wine and the sweetmeats. A sort of dessert.

I suppose neither of us really wanted to break the spell, but falling asleep didn't seem like a very interesting alternative. "Harry," I finally said, "I thought we were going to talk."

"Yes, of course, Alison, sorry—of course, that's why I'm here, isn't it? I guess I've been awfully selfish."

We took it as slow as we could manage, and it was grand—one of those times when the pleasure of the journey was such it was almost a pity to reach the destination.

"No more than I have," I replied, surprising myself with my frankness. "And in truth, milord, I've loved every minute so far. But I am curious to know more about you."

"Well, thank you—but why don't you go first? I want to hear your story too." I obliged, and gave him a shortened account of my first three husbands, the unholy trinity—how young I'd been, how they'd used and abused me. I didn't think I needed to mention my extracurricular dalliances, but did tell him about number four's infidelities, and Jankyn's sudden

death. By the time I'd finished, tears were streaming down Harry's face and collecting in his beard. "Oh—my dear Alison, that's terrible! Terrible!" He took my hand and pressed it against his wet cheek. "I wish the world knew of such things. You know, I think you'll have to tell your tale first thing tomorrow—or is it today by now?—and perhaps others who have daughters may learn from your sad experience." I privately doubted that too many girls would be saved by my story—from all I knew, their commercial value most always outweighed parental devotion. But I was pleased at the prospect of having my turn, being the centre of attention and shocking the prigs. I thought about this a moment.

"Harry," I said, "don't be surprised if tomorrow's version is a little spicier than what I've told you. You know, I don't want to be depressing. And it'll be a challenge to penetrate all those hangovers."

"Of course, dear Alison. Whatever you want. I'm so pleased that you've been able to confide in me tonight." I felt a pang of conscience, but what could I do? I had told Harry the truth—just not all of it. I squeezed his hand. "And now, please tell me your story."

"I hardly know how to start," he said sadly. "I don't want to be depressing either, but there's no way around it. The fact is that my marriage has been hell on earth. My wife—her name's Goodelief—dear good one, now that's a poor joke—despises me. I don't know how else to put it. I don't know what she wants from me. It's true I'm not rich, but I work hard and get her whatever I can afford. We have no children—soon after we were married she declared me a failure in bed and would have no more of that."

"I promise you she's dead wrong there," I interposed.

"Well, I can't say I enjoyed it either, she was so cold, and complained all the way through. But I would dearly have loved a few little ones to brighten my days. She insults me at home, telling me I'm useless and a weakling. If one of our servants disobeys and I have to use the switch—which I hate to do—she brings me a staff and shouts 'slay the dogs! break their backs!' When I refuse she calls me a milksop and wonders why God has sent her such a miserable creature for a husband. If someone at church does not treat her with what she sees as the respect she deserves she cries out in front of everyone that I'm a coward—an ape—who dares not defend his own wife. She says she should take the knife, and leave me the spindle, to do a woman's work. What she would like is for me to fight my neighbour, and slay him, to restore her honour. She gets me so worked up—so humiliated—that I'm afraid some day I will. Of course I hate the thought, but I hate her insults more—they burn into me. Sometimes I find myself believing her—maybe I am as worthless as she says. Sometimes I even wonder if she might despise me less if I did the 'manly' thing and broke the servants' bones, or killed someone for her sake. But then I realize it would do no good. I would hate myself, my life would be destroyed—and she'd still hate me too."

Now I was crying. This Goodelief was making me look like a saint, and that took some doing. I had been hard on the unholy trinity, but they'd offended first—and they'd been nothing like the man Harry was—sensitive, gentle, courteous—a rare enough combination—and on top of all that a warm, generous lover. I wondered briefly what my life would have been like if he'd been my first husband—but that would not have been possible—my father must go for the best offer, get the highest price. Of course. I knew I'd survived by growing an ever thicker skin, by learning to laugh and learning to lie. I wondered how Harry had managed.

"Harry—oh Harry," I cried, and hugged him to me. "How is it possible you are still so sweet? How can you live with such pain and not be angry?" I really wanted to know.

"Dear Alison, I'm not so wonderful. Don't forget I'm a man, and I'm not stuck at home as you were. To tell the truth, the reason I offered to come on this pilgrimage was to escape. My position at the Tabard allows me to get away often. Now don't think there are other women—you may believe it or not, but you're the first, and after our wonderful night I don't mind if you're the last—after you anyone else would be a disappointment.

"No, I go with the pilgrims when I can, and I try—I try

to pull them together, to head off or to settle grievances, to make sure they have a good time, love one another if they can, be healed of their hurts, feel somehow—it's different with each one—but somehow better about themselves and their lives for having come to Canterbury. And you know, it's not so bad. There's a lot of gratitude—people realize I've made a difference, and then that makes me see that Goodelief must be wrong, there are other ways to be strong than to go after someone with a knife. And I do see them feeling better. Many a time—most times—pilgrims think they are just going for a lark—but they are changed—almost despite themselves—by this journey. There's something about it that moves people, makes them more open, more able to love. . . . I don't know how else to describe it. But for me, to be a part of it makes life worth living—you might almost say, restores my faith. So there you have it, Alison. I hope you don't think me an ape."

"Hardly, milord—you're as fine as a man can be." I hugged him some more, and we lay down beneath the monk's fur and cried together until we slept, close in one another's arms.

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MONIKA LEE

sun, pines and prophecy

beneath the pines splayed needles abound,
 spiky to eye — yet unthinkable soft.
 are visors for the sun, pine trees
 with such glare; no eyes should unite
 rays' caress direct and while skin welcomes the solar
 unatoned, in those fields she wanders
 a Cassandra cursed, deviant and prophetic.
 vision and knowledge are merciless solar fire
 piercing an eggshell retina.
 let eyelids enfold and encrust to grant a
 willing blindness, to fulfill a mope-eyed,
 glare-resistant urge, this time to unknow,
 so an eyeless wanderer, purged of prophecy,
 stroke her body with sunlight and pine.
 may

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