The Tale of Sir Thopas
Geoffrey Chaucer

Prologue to Chaucer’s Tale of Thopas

Behold the merry words of the Host to Chaucer.

When this miracle had been entirely told, everyone was rather sober, until our Host began to jest, and then for the first time he looked on me and said, “What sort of man are you? You look as if you are hoping to find a hare? I always see you staring at the ground. Come nearer and look up merrily. Now make way, sirs, and give this man room! His waist is shaped as well as mine, small and fair of visage; he would be a little doll for any woman to embrace in her arms, small and fine in face. He seems elf-like in his countenance, for he is sociable with no creature. Now tell us something, as other people have done. Tell us now a tale of mirth.”

“Host,” I said, “do not be displeased, for certainly I know no other tale but a rhyme that I learned long ago.”

“Yes, that is good,” he said. “Now it seems to me by his face we shall hear some excellent thing.”

Here begins Chaucer’s Tale of Thopas.

The First Fit

“Listen, lords, with good will, and truly I will tell you of mirth and joy, all of a knight, fair and noble in battle and tournament, Sir Thopas was his name. Born he was in a far country, beyond the sea, in Flanders, at Poppering in the manor-house. His father stood in high degree, by God’s grace lord of that country. Sir Thopas grew into a spirited swain, with a face as white as wheaten bread and lips as red as a rosebud. His hue was like deeply-dyed scarlet cloth, and I tell you of a truth he had a seemly nose.

Like saffron was his hair and his beard, which reached to his girdle. His shoes were of Cordovan leather and his brown hose from Bruges. His robe was a rich silken material which cost many half-pennies.

He could hunt wild deer and ride along the river hawking, with a gray goshawk on his hand. He was a good archer as well and he had no peer at wrestling, wherever a ram was staked as the prize.

Many a maiden, bright in her bower, mourned for love of him when she had better have slept; but he was chaste, and not a lecher, and sweet as a flower of the thorn that bears the red hip.

One morning it so happened that Sir Thopas would ride forth, and he got upon his gray steed, in his hand a lance, and a long sword by his side.

Through a fair forest he spurred, where many wild beasts were, yes, both bucks and hares; but as he rode south and rode north, I tell you a sorry chance had nearly happened to him.

There sprang herbs great and small, the licorice and ginger and many a clove and nutmeg to put in ale, whether fresh or old, or to put away in a box.

The birds, the sparrow-hawk and the popinjay, sang, and without a doubt that was a joy to hear; the male thrush as well made his ditty, and the wood-dove on the branch sang loud and clear.

Sir Thopas fell into love-longing when he heard the singing of the thrush, and spurred on like a madman; his fair steed sweated so with the spurring that one might have wrung out water, and his sides were all bloody.

Sir Thopas too was so weary from riding over the soft grass, so fiery was his spirit, that he laid him down in that place and rested his charger and let him feed.

“Oh St. Mary, God bless you! What ails this love to bind me so sore? By God, I dreamed all the night long that an elf-queen shall be my love and sleep under my cloak.”

Sir Thopas too was so weary from riding over the soft grass, so fiery was his spirit, that he laid him down in that place and rested his charger and let him feed.

“Oh St. Mary, God bless you! What ails this love to bind me so sore? By God, I dreamed all the night long that an elf-queen shall be my love and sleep under my cloak.

“I will truly love an elf-queen, for in this world is no woman worthy to be my mate; I renounce all other women, and I will take myself over dale and hill to an elf-queen.”
He climbed straight into his saddle and spurred over stile and stone to find his elf-queen; until he found in a secret retreat the Fairy Land so wild; for there was no other who dared to ride into that country. 806

At length came a great giant, Sir Elephant by name, a perilous man in his deeds, and said, “Young knight, by Mohamed, unless you spur out of my haunt, I will slay your charger with my mace. Here dwells the queen of Fairy Land with harp, and pipe and tabor.” 816

The knight replied, “As I hope for bliss, tomorrow I will meet you when I am in armor. And I hope, by my faith, you shall yet very bitterly pay for it by this lance’s point. I will thrust through your maw, I trust, before prime of day; and here shall you be slain.” 826

Sir Thopas drew back quickly. The giant cast stones at him from a fierce staff-sling; but Child Thopas escaped, entirely through God’s grace and his own noble bearing. 832

[The Second Fit]

Yet listen to my tale, lords, that is merrier than the nightingale, for I will whisper to you how Sir Thopas, with his slender flanks, spurred over hill and dale and came to town again. 838

His merry men he told to make glee and jollity, for he must fight a giant with three heads; all for the love and joy of one who shines fair. 844

“Call here my minstrels, to recite tales while I arm myself; and royal romances, of popes and cardinals and of love-longing!” 850

First they fetched him sweet wine and mead in a wooden bowl; royal spicery, gingerbread and licorice and cumin with excellent sugar. 856

Next to his white flesh he donned breeches and a shirt of fine clear linen, and over his shirt a quilted tunic and over that a coat of mail to save his heart from piercing. 862

Over that he wore a hauberk of strong plate, all of Jews’ work, and his coat of armor white as a lily. 868

His shield was all of red gold, and bore a red gemstone and a boar’s head. There he swore by bread and ale how that the giant should die, come what may! 874

His leg armor was of hard leather, the sheath of his sword of ivory, and his helmet bright and brazen, his saddle of whale-ivory, his bridle shone like the sun or as the moonshine. 880

His spear was of fine cypress and boded war, and no peace, with its head ground sharp. His steed was dapple-gray and went a soft and gentle amble all through the land. 887

Lo, my lords, here is the end of a fit! If you will have more, I will seek to tell it. 890

The [Third] Fit

For charity’s sake, now hold your tongues, knight and gracious lady, and hearken to my story. I will tell you now of battle and knighthood and of ladies’ love-longing. 896

Men speak of noble romances, of Horn Child7 and of Ypotis, of Bevis and Sir Guy, of Sir Lybeaus. But Sir Thopas bears the flower8 for royal knighthood. 902

He bestrode his good steed and glided forth upon his way like a spark out of the burning log. His crest was a tower with a lily within it. May God shield his body from harm! 908

And because he was an adventurous knight, he would not sleep in a house, but lay outside in his hood; his bright helmet was his pillow and his courser grazed beside him upon the herbage fine and fresh. 914

He drank of water from the spring, like Sir Percival the knight, who was so worthy under his garments; until one day-- 918

Here the Host Stops Chaucer of his Tale of Thopas.

“No more of this, for God’s dignity!” said our Host; “you so weary me by your very silliness that my ears ache with your rubbish-prattle, God so bless my soul!

3 Tabor. A small drum.
4 Staff-sling. Sling on the end of a stick.
5 The following line seems to indicate a new start to the tale, so the Riverside Chaucer tentatively marks this as the beginning of a second fit.
6 Following the marking of the second fit above, a new fit, the third, begins here.
7 Horn Child. King Horn, the hero of a fourteenth-century adventure Romance. (Child is an antique word for a knight.) Ypotis, Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, and Lybeaus Desconus (“The Fair Unknown”), all fit roughly the same description.
8 Bears the Flower. Takes the prize.
To the Devil with such a rhyme, well may men call it doggerel!" 925

“Why so?” I said. “Why will you stop me in my tale more than another, since it is the best rhyme I know?” 928

“By heaven,” said he, “because, to speak plainly, your stinking rhyme is not worth a curse; you do nothing but waste time. Sir, flatly, you shall rhyme no longer. Let us see whether you can tell us anything in worthy poetry, or at least something in prose, in which there may be some mirth or instruction.” 935

“Gladly,” I said, “in God’s name! I will tell you a little thing in prose that ought to please you, I believe; or truly you are hard to please. It is an edifying moral tale, though it may be told in various ways by various folk, as I shall show you. 942

As thus: you well know that each evangelist who tells of Jesus Christ’s passion tells not everything as his fellows tell it; but nevertheless their substance is all true, and all agree in their substance, albeit their telling differs. For Mark and Matthew, John and Luke, some say more and some less when they tell of His piteous passion; but doubtless their meaning is all one. 952

Therefore, gentle people all, I pray, if you think I vary in my speech, as thus--though I tell somewhat more proverbs in this little treatise to enforce my matter with than you have heard other people tell, and though I do not say the same words that you have heard before, yet I pray you all do not blame me. For in my meaning you shall not find much variance from the meaning of that little treatise after which I make this pleasant tale. Therefore, I ask of you to listen to what I shall say, and let me tell my entire tale.”

Here ends the tale.

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