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THE MERCHANT'S TALE

Peter Ackroyd

The hour before dawn had come quietly into St John's Street. A pig wandered down Pissing Alley, having escaped the attentions of the night warden, and from one of the many small tenements along the street came the sound of a baby crying. The haberdasher, Radulf Strago, was about to leave the bed while his wife was still sleeping. He had suffered a bad dream, in which he had said to his mother, 'I will give you two yards of linen cloth in which to wrap your body when you are hanged.' Even at the time he knew that she had died peacefully, some three years before, from a surfeit of strawberries. In his dream there had begun to fall great flakes of snow, as if they had been locks of wool. He had been trying to knock them away with the flip-flap used to swat flies, but the wool then turned into pieces of frieze cloth and broad cloth. He had awoken in a sweat but, as a practical man whose thoughts were already forming around the business of the day, he dismissed these visions as

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fantasies. The cramp or flux in his stomach was still there; he had trusted himself to shit it out, but it remained like a hard knot within his body.

He blessed himself and rose from his bed; with a groan he crept over to a small wooden table where he combed his hair before washing his face and hands in a basin of water. He was still naked but he slipped on a linen shift before kneeling on the floor for his pater noster and credo. Then he sat down upon the side of the bed and, muttering a litany to the Mother of God, he drew on a pair of short woollen socks and some woollen hose striped in blue and mustard yellow. There was no need for a doublet on this spring morning, and so he put on a simple jacket of blue serge cloth; he whispered the invocation 'Memento, Domine', so as not to disturb his wife, as he donned his green tunic and scarlet hood. I have prayed faithfully, he said under his breath, so the Lord send me good profit. He slipped on his pointed red shoes, fashioned out of the finest leather, and laced them carefully before walking down the wooden stairs to the solar below. His apprentice was sleeping on a pallet, and he roused him with a 'Torolly-lolly, Janekin. It is the spring time of the world.'

Radulf Strago, at the age of fifty-seven, might have been considered to be in his declining time; but he had married a much younger woman two years before, and had reason to consider himself blessed. It is true that he had been sore and sick in recent weeks; he had cause to vomit every day, and his stools were as loose as running water. He sometimes feared that he had a cancer

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or imposthume, but he tried to dismiss these symptoms as part of his sanguinary complexion. A change in the aspect of the stars would change everything. His business continued to flourish, in any case, situated as it was between the priory and the city; St John's Street itself led directly to the gate of the priory of St John of Jerusalem, and many visitors passed Strago's door. All the travellers to Smithfield came this way, too, in search of hats and shoelaces, combs and linen thread.

The shop itself was on the ground floor facing the street and, without waiting for Janekin, he descended; he unlocked the wooden shutters and unfolded the counter. He opened the door, too, and breathed in the air of dawn. The rays of the sun touched the painted cloths and the children's purses, the whistles and wooden boxes, the beads and parchment skins, solemn and still in the early morning. Then the bells began to ring, and the street itself seemed to know that it must awaken.

At the top of the stairs Janekin coughed and spat; he muttered some oath, unintelligible, to which Radulf replied, 'God give you good day!'

The evening before Janekin had been engaged in a battle of words with the young citizens who supported Henry, duke of Lancaster, in his struggle with King Richard. Janekin was of the king's party, and wore a pewter badge of the white hart in his tall hat of felt. John of Gaunt, father of Henry, had died seven weeks before. Now King Richard had revoked Henry's inheritance, keeping the Lancastrian legacy for his own use, and had consigned

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Henry to perpetual banishment. Whereupon some Lancastrian supporters had rioted through the streets, overturning barrels and breaking down signs.

Janekin had been watching them at the corner of Ave Maria Lane, and had called out 'Torphut! Torphut!' as a signal of his contempt. Two of them heard this and ran in chase of Janekin, who turned upon his heels and fled down the lane. There was a fish-stall at the corner of a small yard and he sent it flying across their path. As they slipped upon herring and eel, he laughed out loud, with an exhilarating sensation of panic and excitement, before taking shelter in the porch of St Agnes the Cripple. An old woman there offered him a candle. He took it, and walked reverently into the nave of the church. He blessed himself, lit the candle and left it by the shrine of St Agnes with the prayer that he might escape his pursuers.

St Agnes must indeed have looked down upon London and touched Janekin with her blessing, since he made his way to St John's Street without any injury.

He had been Radulf's apprentice for the last three years. Before entering the merchant's service he had sworn in the Hall of the Haberdashers and Drapers that he would not copulate or commit any fornication, and that he would not play at dice or hazard; on these matters, however, he had not proved entirely faithful to his oath. He had also agreed that 'ye shall be obedient unto the wardens and unto all the clothing of this fellowship', a stipulation

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which he had also disobeyed; he favoured the short hair and short tunics of the fashionable youth, and his slender legs were shown to best advantage in scarlet hose. Radulf was not a harsh master, and dismissed these failings as the way of the world. His wife, Anne Strago, had also pleaded on the apprentice's behalf. 'Can a young man,' she asked her husband, 'be happy in such sad and wise stuff ? Can he wear a slashed doublet in West Chepe? The dogs would bark at him.'

Anne had been present at the ceremony in the guild's hall. When her husband had been asked, according to custom, whether his apprentice was of good growth and stature, and whether he had any disfigurement of the body, she looked at Janekin with curiosity. He was not disfigured at all; he was slender and graceful, already taller than her husband. She had been married to Radulf for four years, in a union properly conceived for purposes of trade. Her father had been a haberdasher, also, with a substantial shop in Old Jewry; she was an only child and, on his death, she had inherited the business entire. It was now only lent to Radulf Strago for the duration of his life; when his soul changed house, she would be a wealthy widow indeed. In the meantime she was disgusted by her duties concerning the merchant's cod – his coillons, his bollocks, his yard, his testicles, call it what she would in her disgust – and she prayed God for an ending. She devoutly wished her husband to die.

Janekin was Radulf's only apprentice. The guild had asked him to employ at least one other, but the merchant insisted that he

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had been made feeble by life and had not the strength to raise two. Anne Strago supported this plea, adding only that two boys in one house would never accord. 'There are three things full hard to be known which way they will go,' she had said. 'The first is of a bird sitting on a bough. The second is of a vessel in the sea. The third is the way of a young man.' With remarks such as these she had already acquired a reputation for wisdom among her neighbours.

So Janekin lived in a household where there was little restraining hand. Contrary to oath he played at hazard with other apprentices in the ward, and engaged in a violent game known to them as 'breaking doors with our heads'. He had also participated in the frequent struggles between the competing groups of tradesmen and merchants. The cobblers and cordwainers, for example, fought each other over the right to mend shoes; the grocers and fishmongers pitched against each other in running street fights. After one such fight Janekin returned with a broken head. Anne bathed it for him, and anointed the wound with an ointment made out of sparrow grease. 'What sharp shower of arrows reached you, fool?' she asked him.

'From the butchers of the Chepe. They made a great roistering.'

'And you did not? What woman would love such a wretch as you?'

'They say, mistress, that pity runs swiftest in a gentle heart.'

'But I have no gentle heart. I have no heart at all.'

'Then fortune is my foe.'

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'Why so?'

'I had looked to you for – for grace.'

'Grace, wretch? Or favour?'

'Greedy are the godless. I want all.'

'Who taught you courtesy?'

'A lighthouse hermit.'

She laughed at this, and soon an understanding was reached between them. They could do nothing in the presence of the little haberdasher but, when he was gone for a day or even for an hour, they played the devil's game.

After their first lovemaking Anne Strago had sighed and complained that Radulf did not keep her in her proper estate. 'Other women,' she said, 'go gayer than I.'

'Fine gear will come your way.'

'From you? You have no more of money than a friar has of hair.'

'When the will is strong, there is a way.'

The fate of Radulf Strago was then determined.

Janekin had buckled his shoes and now, on this spring dawn, he came down the stairs with an ivory box in his hand. 'What is this,' he asked, 'left with the woollen caps in the solar?'

'What do you think? A comb case.'

Radulf Strago walked over to his apprentice, and opened it upon his palm. 'Here are your ivories. Your scissors. Your ear-pickers and all your other knacks.'

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There was suddenly a loud explosion, which sent Radulf and Janekin flying across the open counter. It had come from the other side of the street, where a hermit's oratory stood. The hermit himself had died some three months before, and the adjacent parishes were arguing over the appointment of his successor; but the oratory had remained a well-known place of prayer on behalf of those who had departed into purgatory. The loud explosion sent people shrieking into the street. The walls of the oratory had been blown out, and its thatched roof demolished. Radulf could not rise to his feet, and he lay among the hats and purses as wisps of straw floated through the air.

Janekin had roused himself, and was brushing the dust off his taffeta jacket when he thought he saw a tall figure running towards the city. He was too shaken to raise the hue and cry. Instead he helped to support Radulf as he struggled upright, murmuring, 'Christ and His tree save us!' All those around them were shrieking 'Fire!' Some were wrapped in cloaks, some had quickly pulled on hose and jacket, while others were already dressed for the day's work. They clustered around the smouldering oratory, where a wooden image of the Virgin lay in fragments among the blackened stones. The air smelled of sulphur, as if the smoke of hell itself had ascended into the outer world. Radulf walked unsteadily towards the ruin, and noticed traces of dark powder on the earth floor. 'They have used Greek fire,' he said to no one in particular.

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But who would wish to destroy a place of prayer, a corner of London where the souls of those in purgatorial fire were perpetually remembered? It was for the living as well as for the dead. The chantry priest of St Dionysius the Martyr, a small church in a nearby side street, had claimed that anyone who prayed in the oratory all night would be rewarded with ten years' release from purgatory. Who would violate such a place with fire and gunpowder?

Two brothers hospitallers had come running from the gate of St John, and begun howling that the nun of Clerkenwell had prophesied this. The merchant glanced at them with contempt, and in that instant he glimpsed something daubed upon a wall beside the oratory. It was some crude device, depicted in white lead paste. On peering closer at it, he saw circles linked one with another. His head ached, and he felt himself falling forward.

He was woken by the strong scent of vinegar in his nostrils. He opened his eyes, and found himself gazing at his wife. 'Have you closed the shop?' he asked her.

'Janekin has bolted it and locked it. All is as safe as could be.'

'Did you hear the din? The oratory has gone.' She nodded. 'Today is Friday. Friday is a hard day. An unfortunate day. An Egyptian day. It was on a Friday that I bought that false silver.'

'Hush. Rest.'

'Monday's thunder brings the death of women. Friday's thunder portends the slaughter of a great man. Who will we lose after this? May it be the king himself ? The foxes of division are

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among us.' He had been undressed by his wife. He lay beneath a white cover garnished with golden lambs, moons and stars. 'I must go to siege,' he said. 'Help me.'

He had told his wife some weeks before that he had felt a 'wambling' in his stomach, but nothing had cured it. He had also experienced an airiness in his head and heels, as if he were walking on moss. He ascribed these symptoms to newly corrupted blood, and had been cupped on several occasions. But the letting only made him more weary. Then he had begun to vomit. His wife encouraged him to try every remedy although she knew that nothing would save him.

She had gone to the apothecary in Dutch Lane, some way from her parish, and had asked him what poison was needed to kill rats. She had also told him that there was a weasel coming into her yard to eat the hens; this, too, must be destroyed. She had taken away some grains of arsenic in a linen bag, with careful instructions how to use them, and from that evening she had begun to mingle them with the pottage which Radulf always consumed for his supper. She had not told Janekin, fearing that he might blab her secret.

'Help me,' Radulf said again as he rose impatiently from his bed.

'Here. Take this cloak. And tread upon the cushions. Your naked feet should not touch the tiles.'

The house of office was in a yard behind the shop, next to the kitchen and the stables. He walked slowly downstairs, his hand

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upon Anne's arm, but he was still very feeble. He stopped on the next landing underneath a woollen tapestry depicting Judith and Holofernes; he felt the ague in his stomach, and sat down upon a large wooden chest. 'Friday is the day of the Expulsion and the Deluge, the Betrayal and the Crucifixion. Take me into the yard.'

She assisted him down the last flight and watched him as he walked slowly across to the privy. 'May Friday be your own doom day, dear husband. May it be your expulsion and your betrayal.' And then she remembered the scriptures. Let old things pass away.

Radulf Strago sat down carefully on the hole of the siege.(1) He could feel his stomach turning in its agony. It was a fire. There was a wooden pipe in the corner, leading to a stone-lined latrine pit beneath the soil, and for a moment it seemed to move as if it were a living thing. He was bathed in a great sweat. 'The sun,' he said, 'is none the worse for shining on a dunghill. So may it shine on me.' There was a trickle of water in the lead cistern just outside the door, but it seemed in Radulf's ears like a storm. Blessed is the corpse that the rain rains on. But if I besmear the seat, no one else will come at it. He put out his hand to grasp at the arse-wisps, the pieces of hay and the cut squares of cloth which were piled beside the privy.

Anne Strago found him crouched upon the clay floor with a piece of cotton in his hand; there was a stream still flowing from his buttocks. She did not want to touch the body: those days were over. So she ran out into the street, crying, 'A death! A death!' Then she

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came back into the house, and embraced Janekin. 'The apprentice no longer has a master,' she told him. 'He has a mistress.'

At the subsequent inquest the coroner declared that Radulf Strago had suffered a fit after the oratory had been visited by fire, and had died a death none other than his rightful death; his verdict satisfied the five guardians of the ward, who paid for a trental of Masses to intercede for Radulf's soul. And what could be more natural and appropriate than that, after a period of mourning, Anne Strago should marry Janekin? She told her neighbours that excessive grief only harmed the soul of the departed, which was considered a wise saying. It was then generally agreed that the business would prosper, as indeed it did. As Anne Strago told Janekin, 'Friday is a good day.' There was an ancient belief, however, that murder could never be concealed in London and that it would always find its season to appear.

(1) Every Londoner was accustomed to the smell of faeces, and there were still parts of the city that were shunned for fear of contagion — shunned, that is, except for the snufflers and gongers or rakers who collected the dung to spread upon the fields beyond the walls.

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