

THE FIRST CANTO OF THE SQUIRE'S TALE OF CHAUCER,¹ MODERNIZED.*

Of Cambus,² the great Tartar King,
And his fair flower blossoming;
And what came riding in the hall,
When he held his festival.

At Sarra, in the land of Tartary,
There dwelt a king, the best beneath the sky:
In prime of life he was a valiant man,
And Cambus was he called, the noble Khan.
No where, in all that region, had a crown
Been ever worn with such entire renown.
Hardy he was and wise, true to his word,
He kept his oath as stoutly as his sword.
His presence marked so well the soul within,
Men trembled when they heard his pomp begin;
And yet his ways were gentle and benign;
But there seemed something in his star, divine;
For not more fresh was he for arms anew,
Than sure to beat where'er his trumpets blew;
And therewithal he ever kept a state
So fit to uphold a throne so fortunate,
That there was no where such another man.

* Author: Leigh Hunt / Transcribed and annotated by Alessandra Crotti.

This noble king, this Tartar, Cambus Khan,*
Had by the late Queen Elfeta, his wife,
Two sons, named Cambalu and Algarsife,
And a dear daughter, Canace by name,
Whose perfect beauty puts my pen to shame.
If you could see my heart, it were a glass
To show perhaps how fair a thing she was;
But when I speak of her, my tongue appears
To fail me, looking in that face of hers.
'Tis well for me that I regard not those,
Who love what I do, as my natural foes;
Or when I think how dear she is to be
To one that will adorn this history,
And how her heart will love him in return,
My paper, sooner than be touched, should burn:
But she knows nothing of all this at present,
She's only young, and innocent, and pleasant;
And sometimes by her father sits and sighs,
On which he stoops to kiss her gentle-lidded eyes.

And so befel, that when this Khan supreme
Had twenty winters borne his diadem,
He had the feast of his nativity
Cried throughout Sarra, as it was wont to be.
It was in March; and the young lusty year
Came in with such a flood of golden cheer,
That the quick birds, against the sunny sheen,
What for the season and the thickening green,

*This commencement of a fresh paragraph with the second line of a couplet (together with the couplet itself) is retained from the original. It has a fine air of resumption with it, at least to my ear; and is the only good thing which the French have had taste enough to retain from their old poetry.

Sung their affections loudly o'er the fields:
They seemed to feel that they had got them shields
Against the sword of winter, keen and cold.

High is the feast in Sarra, that they hold;
And Cambus, with his royal vestments on,
Sits at a separate table on a throne;
His sons a little lower on the right;
His daughter on the left, a gentle sight;
And then his peers apart from either wall,
Ranged in majestic drapery down the hall.
The galleries on two sides have crowded slants
Of ladies leaning over and gallants;
And o'er the doorway, opposite the king,
The proud musicians blow their shawms and sing.
But to relate the whole of their array
Would keep me from my tale a summer's day;
Ans so I pass the service and the cost,
The often-silenced noise, the lofty toast,
And the glad symphonies, that leaped to thank
The lustre-giving Lord, whene'er he drank.
Suffice to say that, after the third course,
His vassals, while the sprightly wine's in force,
And the warm music mingles over all,
Bring forth their gifts and set them in the hall;
And so befel, that when the last was set,
And while the king sat thus in his estate,
Hearing his minstrels playing from on high
Before him at his board deliciously,
All on a sudden, ere he was aware,
Through the hall door and the mute wonder there,
There came a stranger on a steed of brass,
And in his hand he held a looking-glass;

Some sparkling ring he wore; and by his side
Without a sheath a cutting sword was tied.
And up he rides unto the royal board:
In all the hall there was not spoke a word:
All wait with busy looks, both young and old,
To hear what wonderous thing they shall be told.

The stranger, who appeared a noble page,
High-bred, and of some twenty years of age,
Dismounted from his horse; and kneeling down,
Bowed low before the face that wore the crown;
Then rose, and revered lady, lords, and all,
In order as they sat within the hall,
With such observance, both in speech and air,
That certainly had Roustan's³ self been there,
Or Hatem Tai⁴ with his old courtesy,
Returned to earth to shew what men should be,
He could not have improved a single thing:
Then turning lastly to address the king
Once more, but lightlier than at first, he bowed,
And in a manly voice thus spoke aloud:—

“May the great Cambus to his slave be kind!
My lord, the king of Araby and Ind,
In honour of your feast, this solemn day,
Salutes you in the manner he best may,
And sends you, by a page whom he holds dear,
(His happy but his humble messenger)
This steed of brass; which, in a day and night,
Through the dark half as safely as the light,
O'er sea and land, and with your perfect ease,
Can bear your body wheresoe'er you please.
It matters not if it be foul or fair:
The thing is like a thought, and cuts the air

So smoothly, and so well observes the track,
The man that will may sleep upon his back.
All that the rider needs when he would turn,
Or rise, or take him downwards, you may learn,
If it so please you, when we speak within,
And does but take the writhing of a pin.

“This glass too, which I hold, such is its power,
That if by any chance, an evil hour
Befel⁵ your empire or yourself, ’twould show
What men you ought to know of, friend and foe;
And more than this, if any lady’s heart
Be set on one that plays her an ill part,
Or is in aught beneath her love and her,
Here she may see his real character,
All his new loves, and all his old pursuits:
His heart shall all be shown her, to the roots.
Therefore, my lord, with your good leave, this glass,
And this green ring, the greenest ever was,
My master, with his greeting, hopes may be
Your excellent daughter’s here, my lady Canace.
The virtues of the ring, my lord, are these—
That if a lady loves the flowers and trees,
And birds, and all fair Nature’s ministers;
And if she bear this gem within her purse,
Or on her hand, like any other ring,
There’s not a fowl that goes upon the wing,
But she shall understand his speech or strain,
And in his own tongue answer him again.
All plants that gardens or that fields produce,
She shall be also skilled in, and their use,
Whether for sweetness or for stanching wounds:
No secret shall she miss, that smiles in balmy grounds.

“Lastly, my lord, this sword has such a might,
That let it meet the veriest fiend in fight,
'Twill carve throughout his armour the first stroke,
Were it as thick as any branched oak:
Nor could the wound be better for the care
Of all the hands and skills that ever were;
And yet, should it so please you, of your grace,
To pass the flat side on the wounded place,
Though it were ready to let out his soul,
The flesh should close again, the man be whole.
Oh heart of hearts! that nobody shall break!
Pardon me, Sir, that thus my leave I take
Even of a sword, and like a lover grieve,
But its own self, unbidden, will not leave
The hand that wields it, though it smote a block
The dullest in the land, or dashed a rock:
And this my master hopes may also be
Acceptable to Tartary's majesty,
With favour for himself, and pardon, Sir, for me.”

The Khan, who listened with a gracious eye,
Smiled as he stopp'd, and made a due reply,
Thanking the king, his brother, for the great,
Not gifts, but glories, added to his state,
And saying how it pleased him to have known
So young an honour to his neighbour's throne.
The youth then gave the proper officers
The gifts; who, 'midst the music's bursting airs,
Laid them before the king and Canace,
There as they sate, each in their high degree:
But nothing that they did could move the horse;
Boys might as well have tried their little force
Upon a giant with his armour on:

The brazen thing stood still as any stone.
The stranger hastened to relieve their doubt,
And touched his neck, and led him softly out;
And 'twas a wonder and a joy to see
How well he went, he stept so tenderly.

Great was the press that from all quarters came
To gaze upon this horse of sudden fame;
And many were the struggles to get close,
And touch the mane to try if it hung loose,
Or pat it on the shining flanks, or feel
The muscles in the neck that sternly swell;
But the Khan's officers forbade, and fear
E'en of the horse conspired to keep the circle clear.
High was the creature built, both broad and long,
And with a true proportion to be strong;
And yet so "horsely" and so quick of eye,
As if it were a steed of Araby;
So that from tail to ear there was no part
Nature herself could better, much less art;
Only the people dreaded to perceive
How cold it was, although it seemed alive;
And on all sides the constant wonder was
How it could move, and yet was plainly brass.
Of magic some discours'd, and some of powers
By planets countenanced in kindly hours,
Through which wise men had compassed mighty things
Of natural wit to please illustrious kings;
And some fell talking of the iron chain
That fell from heaven in old king Argoun's⁶ reign.
And then they spoke of visions in the air,
And how this creature might have been made there,
Of white lights heard at work, and fiery fights,

Seen in the north on coldest winter nights,
And pale traditions of Pre-Adamites.
Much did the talk run also on the sword,
That harmed and healed, fit gift for sovereign lord.
One said that he had heard or read somewhere,
Of a great southern king, with such a spear;
A chief, who had for mother a sea-fairy,
And slew a terror called the Sagittary.
As to the glass, some thought that it might be
Made by a certain clear congruity
Of angles and reflections, as a pond
Shows not its sides alone, but things beyond;
Iskander set one, like a sleepless eye,
O'er a sea-town, its twin security,
In which the merchant read of storms to come,
Or saw his sunny ships blown softly home.
But most the ring was talked of: every one
Quoting that other ring of Solomon,⁷
Which, wheresoe'er it married, brought a dower
Of wisdom, and upon the hand put power.
A knowledge of the speech of birds was known
To be a gift especially its own,
Which made them certain that this ring of green
Was part of it, perhaps a sort of skin
Shed for some reason as a serpent's is;
And here their reasoning was not much amiss.
The wiser sort pondered and doubted; folly
Determined every thing, or swallowed wholly;
The close and cunning, foolishhest of all,
Feared that the whole was diabolical,
And wished the stranger might not prove a knave
Come to find out what liberal monarchs gave,
And ruin with his very dangerous horses

People's eternal safety, and their purses.
For what surpasses vice to comprehend,
It gladly construes to the baser end.
Some wits there were began at last to doubt
Whether the horse could really move about,
And on their fingers' ends were arguing,
When lo! their subject vanished from the ring;
Vanished like lightning; an impatient beast!
But, hark! I hear them rising from the feast.

The dinner done, Cambus arose; and all
Stood up, prepared to follow from the hall:
On either side they bend beneath his eye:
"Before him goeth the loud minstrelsy;"
And thus they pace into a noble room,
Where dance and song were waiting till they come
With throng of waxen lights that shed a thin perfume.
But first the king and his young visitor
Go where the horse was put, and close the door;
And there the Khan learns all about the pin,
And how the horse is hastened or held in,
And turned, and made to rise or to descend,
And all by a mere thumb and finger's end.
The stranger further tells him of a word,
By which the horse, the instant it is heard,
Vanishes with his sparkling shape, like light,
And comes again, whether it be day or night.
"And, Sir," said he, "my master bade me say
The first time I was honoured in this way,
(For on the throne you might prefer, he said,
To wave such speeches from a crowned head)
That one like you were fitter far than he
To ride the elements like a deity,

And with a speed proportioned to your will,
Shine on the good, and fall upon the ill;
For he, too sensual and too satisfied
With what small good lay near him, like a bride,
Was ever but a common king; but you
A king, and a reforming conqueror too.”*

Glad is great Cambus, both at this discourse,
And to be master of so strange a horse,
And longs to mount at once, and go and see
His highest mountain tops in Tartary,⁸
Or look upon the Caspian,⁹ or appear
Suddenly in Cathay,¹⁰ a sparkling fear.
And any other time he would have gone,
So much he longed to put his pinions on,
But on his birth-day ’twas not to be done;
And so they have returned and joined the guests
Who wait the finish of this feast of feasts.

But how shall I describe the high delight,
And all the joys that danced into the night?
Imagine all that should conclude a feast
Given by a mighty prince, and in the east,
And all was here, from song to supper stand,
As though it had arisen from fairy-land.
The feast before it was a thing of state;
But this the flowery top, and finish delicate.
Here were the cushioned sophas, the perfumes,
The heavenly mirrors making endless rooms;

*In making these additions to the original, the author had an eye to a continuation of the story, which he would willingly conclude, if he had health and leisure.

The last quintessences of drinks, the trays
Of coloured relishes dressed a thousand ways;
The dancing girls, that bending here and there,
With asking beauty lay along the air;
And lighter instruments, guitars and lutes,
Sprinkling their silver graces on the flutes;
And all the sounds, and all the sweets of show,
Feeling victorious while the harpings go.
Not all the lords were there, only the best
And greatest, all in change of garments drest;
And with them were the wives they thought the loveliest.
You must not judge, my Tartars, by the tales
Of nations merely eastern and serails:
The eastern manners were in due degree,
But mixed and raised with northern liberty;
And women came with their impetuous lords,
To pitch the talk and humanize the boards,
And shed a gentle pleasure in the place,—
The smooth alternate with the bearded face,
As summer airs divide the blustering trees,
And sway them into smiles and whispering gentleness.

Our young Ambassador conversed with all,
But still attendant on the sovereign's call,
Who, like the rest, whatever the discourse,
Was sure to turn it to the gifts and horse;
Till to the terror of some lovers, word
Was given to fetch the mirror and the sword;
The ring meanwhile being handed round, and tried
Upon fair fingers with a fluttering pride.
Some longed to have the birds awake, and some
Were glad enough the tattling things were dumb.

Good God! thought one, and seemed to faint away,
“What (ah! my Togral!)¹¹ would the parrot say?”
“And what,” conceived another, “would the jay?
“I’ve often thought the wretch was going to speak,
“He trolls the shocking words so in his beak:
“I’m sure the very first would make me shriek,”
Cambus, as sage as he was valiant, thought
There was no need to have the creatures brought;
Nor, when the mirror came, would he permit
That any but himself should read in it;
For which, as he perceived, but mentioned not,
Full thirty ladies loved him on the spot.
As to the sword, he thought it best to try
So masculine a thing in open sky;
Which made him also chuse¹² to take a course
Over the towers of Sarra on his horse.
So issuing forth, he led into the air,
Saluting the sweet moon which met them there,
And forth the steed was brought; you would have said,
It knew for what, so easily ’twas led,
And leant with such an air its lively head.
But when at rest, still as before it stood,
As though its legs had to the ground been glued.
Some urged it on, some dragged, and some would fain
Have made it lift a foot, but all in vain.
And yet when Cambus whispered it, a thrill
Flashed through its¹³ limbs, nor could its¹⁴ feet be still,
But rocked the body with a sprightly grace,
As though it yearned aloft, and weighed it for the race.

The youth had talked of armour like an oak,
And how the sword would joint it with a stroke.
The Khan had no convenient foe at hand,

To see what sort of carving he would stand:
But in the moon there stood some oaken trees,
And suddenly, he struck at one of these:
Back, like a giant, fell its towering size,
And let the light on his victorious eyes.
The blow was clearly the sword's own, and yet
The Khan, as if inspired, felt proud of it,
And leaping on the horse as suddenly,
He touched the pin, and bade the fair good bye,
And, 'midst their pretty shrieks, went mounting to the sky.

Cambus scended such a height so soon,
It seemed as if he meant to reach the moon;
And you might know by a tremendous shout,
That not a soul in Sarra but looked out;
But the fierce noise made some of them afraid,
That it might startle even a brazen head,
And threatening looks were turned upon the youth,
Who glowed and said, "By all the faith and truth
That is, or can be in the heart of man,
Nothing can happen to the noble Khan:
See, he returns!" And at the word, indeed,
They saw returning the descending steed;
Not round and round, careering; but at once,
Oblique and to the point, a fervid pounce.
For to say truth, the noble Khan himself,
Though he had fought on many a mountain shelf,
And drooped through desarts, and been drenched in seas,
Felt somewhat strange in that great emptiness,
And was not sorry to relieve his court,
By cutting his return some fathom short:
Such awful looks has utter novelty
To dash and to confuse the boldest eye.

The Khan returned, they all go back again
To their warm room, but do not long remain:
For late, and long, and highly-wrought delight
Cannot, at will, resume its giddy height;
And so his story told, and flatteries paid,
He kindly waved his gaping court to bed;
For that they did gape, ladies e'en and lords,
Our bard, a courtier, specially records;
By which we must suppose that courtiers then,
In some respect, resembled natural men.
Yet still in bed, and dozing oft between,
Their fading words recalled what they had seen:
Still of the ring they mumbled, and the glass,
And what amazing things might come to pass:
And when they slept, a thousand souls that night
Were riding on the horse with all their might;
They skim, they dive, they shoot about, they soar,
And wonder that they never rode before.

Aye: such, quoth the wise wit, is human life:
We dream of joy, and wake, and find one's wife:
Nay: quoth the wiser wit, the best way then
Is to wake little, and go sleep again.
Wake much, if life go right: if it go wrong,
Learn how to dream with Chaucer¹⁵ all day long:
Or learn still better, if you can, to make
Your world at all times, sleeping or awake;
The true receipt, whether by days or nights,
To charm your griefs, and double your delights.
Fancy and fact differ in this alone;
One strikes us like a thought, one like a stone;
But both alike can bring into our eyes
The tears, and make a thousand feelings rise

Of smarting wrongs, or pleasant sympathies.
E'en Fact, the little, worldly gentleman,
Must get from poor starv'd Fancy all he can;
Talks, dresses, dines, has notions, makes a stir,
Endures himself, nay loves himself, through her;
And cannot clothe even his ungrateful scorn,
But in the web she weaves from night till morn.

See—like the others, whom I've sent to bed,
The horse itself is put out of my head:
Ring, sword, and mirror, all of them depart,
While the dear kind one clasps me to her heart;
And I intend to have a dream divine,
With arm across her, and her hand in mine.
Like all, however, when we've rested well,
We'll meet again; and talk of what befel¹⁶
The lady of the ring within a warbling dell.

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EDITORIAL NOTES

¹ “The Squire’s Tale” is one of the verse narratives in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400). Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) is often referred to as the Father of English literature. In “The Squire’s Tale”, the Squire tells the story of a knight named Cambyuskan, who receives magical gifts from a mysterious, otherworldly figure. The tale includes a mechanical horse that can fly, a mirror that shows the future, and a sword that protects the person wielding it. The unfinished narrative blends themes of chivalry, love, and the supernatural.

² Genghis Khan (c. 1162-1227), called Cambyuskan in Chaucer’s version, founder and first khan of the Mongol Empire.

³ Antoine-Jacques Rouston (1734-1808), Genevan pastor and theologian.

⁴ Hatim al-Tai (d. 578), Arab knight and poet, known for his altruism and as a model of Arab manliness.

⁵ Misprint for *befell*.

⁶ Arghun Khan (c. 1258-91), fourth ruler of the Ilkhanate division of the Mongol empire.

⁷ The Seal of Solomon or Ring of Solomon is a legendary artifact associated with King Solomon, who was believed to be possessed of magical powers. In various traditions, the ring is said to grant the wearer control over demons, the ability to communicate with animals, and wisdom.

⁸ Toponym used as a blanket term in Western European literature and cartography to describe a vast area of Asia, bordered by the Caspian Sea, the Ural Mountains, the Pacific Ocean, and the northern borders of China, India, and Persia, at a time when this region was mostly unexplored by European geographers.

⁹ The world’s largest inland body of water, the Caspian Sea lies between Europe and Asia.

¹⁰ Historical name employed in Europe to indicate China.

¹¹ In the 1855-60 editions of the text, *Togral* was substituted with *Khojah*, probably referring to the Khoja, a caste of Muslims.

¹² Archaic form of the verb *to choose*.

¹³ Misprint for *its*.

¹⁴ Misprint for *its*.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, English poet.

¹⁶ Misprint for *befell*.