

THE FRIAR'S TALE

The Friar's Prologue

Our worthy limiter, the noble Friar,
Kept glancing with a lowering sort of ire
Towards the Summoner, but, to keep polite,
As yet had said no ugly word outright.
At last he turned towards the Wife of Bath,
'Madam,' he said, 'God be about your path!
You here have touched on many difficult rules
Debated, I assure you, in the Schools.
Much you advanced was excellent, I say!
But, Madam, as we ride along the way
We're only called upon to speak in game.
Let's leave the authorities, in Heaven's name,

To preachers and to schools for ordinands.
'But if it meets the company's demands,
I'll talk about a summoner, for a game,
Lord knows, one can be certain from the name
A summoner isn't much to be commended.
I hope that none of you will be offended.
'A Summoner's one who runs about the nation
Dealing out summonses for fornication,
Is beaten up by every villager
At the town's end . . . 'Now, mind the manners, sir,'
Our Host called out, 'befitting your estate.
In company we do not want debate.
You tell your tale and let the Summoner be.'
'Nay,' said the Summoner, 'makes no odds to me.
Say what he likes, and when my turn's to come
I'll pay him back, by God! I'll strike him dumb!
I'll tell him what an honour it is, none higher,
To be a limiter, a flattering friar!
I'll tell him all about that job of his.'
Our Host replied, 'Let's have no more of this.'
Then turning to the Friar, 'We prefer,'
He said, 'to hear your story, my dear sir.'

The Friar's Tale

In my own district once there used to be
A fine archdeacon, one of high degree,
Who boldly did the execution due
On fornication and on witchcraft too,
Bawdry, adultery and defamation,
Breaches of wills and contract, spoliation
Of church endowment, failure in the rents
And tithes and disregard of sacraments.
All these and many other kinds of crime
That need have no rehearsal at this time,
Usury, simony too. But he could boast
That lechery was what he punished most.

They had to sing for it if they were caught,
 Like those who failed to pay the tithes they ought.
 As for all such, if there was an informant,
 Nothing could save them from pecunial torment.
 For those whose tithes and offerings were small
 Were made to sing the saddest song of all,
 And ere the bishop caught them with his crook
 They were all down in the archdeacon's book,
 And he had jurisdiction, on inspection,
 And powers to administer correction.

He had a summoner ready to his hand,
 There was no slyer boy in all the land,
 For he had subtly formed a gang of spies
 Who taught him where his profit might arise,
 And he would spare one lecher from his store
 To teach the way to four-and-twenty more.
 Though it may drive him mad as a March hare,
 Our Summoner here, I mean, I will not spare
 His harlotries. He has no jurisdiction
 On friars and he cannot make infliction
 Upon us, now or ever, or take dues
 From friars . . . 'Nor from women of the stewys'
 The Summoner shouted, 'We have no control
 On either lot.' 'The devil take your soul!'
 Called out the Host, 'I say I won't have squalls.
 On with your story, sir, and if it galls
 The Summoner, spare him not, my worthy master! . . .'
 This treacherous thief (the Friar said) was pastor
 To certain bawds that ate out of his hand,
 Lures for a hawk, none such in all the land,
 They told him all the secret things they drew
 From sinners: their acquaintance was not new.
 Each was his agent, say, his private spy;
 He drew large profits to himself thereby.
 Even the archdeacon didn't always know
 How much he got. He didn't have to show
 A warrant when he chose to make things hot
 For some obscure, uneducated sot;

For he could summon under threat of curse
 And they were glad enough to fill his purse
 Or give him banquets at the *Lamb and Flag*.
 And just as Judas kept a little bag
 And was a thief, just such a thief was he.
 His master got no more than half the fee.
 To give the man his due and not to skimp,
 He was a thief, a summoner, and a pimp.

And he had wenches in his retinue,
 So when the Reverend Robert or Sir Hugh
 Or Jack or Ralph, whoever it was, drew near
 And lay with them, they told it in his ear.
 He and these wenches made a gang at it.
 Then he would fetch forth a fictitious writ,
 Summon them both before the Chapter-bench
 And skin the man while letting off the wench,
 Saying, 'Dear friend, I know you would prefer
 Her name were struck from our black register;
 Trouble yourself no further, my good man,
 On her account: I'll help you all I can.'
 He knew so much of bribery and blackmail
 I should be two years telling you the tale.
 There is no sporting dog that's more expert
 At knowing a wounded deer from one unhurt
 Than was this summoner who could spot for sure
 Lecher, adulterer or paramour.
 Indeed on that his whole attention went
 Because it was the source of all his rent.
 So it befell that on a certain day
 This summoner rode forth to catch his prey,
 A poor old fiddle of the widow-tribe
 From whom, on a feigned charge, he hoped a bribe.
 Now as he rode it happened that he saw
 A gay young yeoman under a leafy shaw;
 He bore a bow with arrows bright and keen
 And wore a little jacket of bright green
 And had a black-fringed hat upon his head
 'Hail, welcome and well met!' the summoner said.

'Welcome to you and all good lads,' said he.
'Whither away under the greenwood tree?'

Pursued the yeoman, 'Have you far to go?'

The summoner paused a moment and said, 'No,
just here, close by. In fact I'm only bent

On going for a ride, to raise a rent

That's owing to my lord, a little fee.'

'Why then you are a bailiff?' 'Yes,' said he.

He did not dare, for very filth and shame,

Say that he was a summoner, for the name.

'Well, I'll be damned!' the yeoman said. 'Dear brother,

You say you are a bailiff? I'm another.

But I'm a stranger round about this part.

I'll beg acquaintance with you for a start,

And brotherhood, if that is fair to offer.

I have some gold and silver in my coffer

And should you chance to cross into our shire

All shall be yours, as much as you desire.'

'My word!' the summoner answered, 'Thanks a lot!'

The pair of them shook hands upon the spot,

Swore to be brothers to their dying day

And, chatting pleasantly, rode on their way.

This summoner, always ready with a word,

As full of venom as a butcher-bird,

And sticking his nose into one thing or other

Went on, 'And where do you live at home, dear brother?

I might come calling there some other day.'

The yeoman said in his soft-spoken way,

'O, far away up north; I'll tell you where.

I hope that some time I shall see you there.

Before we part I shall be so explicit

About my home I'm sure you'll never miss it.'

'Brother,' the summoner said, 'I'd like to know

If you can teach me something as we go.

Since you're a bailiff just the same as me,

Tell me your subdler tricks. Now, seriously,

How can I win most money at the game?

Keep nothing back for conscience, or from shame.

Talk like a brother. How do you make out?

'Well, I break level, brother, just about.

I'll tell a truthful story; all in all

My wages are extremely tight and small

My master's hard on me and difficult,

My job laborious and with poor result,

And so it's by extortion that I live.

I take whatever anyone will give.

At any rate by tricks and violences

From year to year I cover my expenses.

I can't say better, speaking truthfully.'

The summoner said, 'It's just the same with me.

I'm ready to take anything, God wot,

Unless it is too heavy or too hot.

What I can get out of a little chat

In private – why should conscience boggle at that?

Without extortion, how could I make a living?

My little jokes are hardly worth forgiving.

Bowels of pity, conscience, I have none.

Plague on these penance-fathers every one!

We make a pair, by God and by St James!

But, brother, what do you say to swopping names?'

The summoner paused; the yeoman all the while

The summoner spoke had worn a little smile.

'Brother,' he answered, 'would you have me tell?

I am a fiend, my dwelling is in Hell.

I ride on business and have so far thriven

By taking anything that I am given.

That is the sum of all my revenue.

You seem to have the same objective too,

You're out for wealth, acquired no matter how,

And so with me. I'll go a-riding now

As far as the world's end in search of prey.'

'Lord!' said the summoner. 'What did I hear you say?

I thought you were a yeoman, certainly

You have the body of a man like me.

And have you, then, another shape as well

Appointed for your high estate in Hell?'

'No,' he replied, 'for Hell admits of none.
But when we like we can appropriate one,
Or rather make you think we have a shape;
Sometimes it's like a man, sometimes an ape,
Even an angel riding into bliss.

There's nothing very wonderful in this;
A lousy conjuror can trick your eye,
And he, God knows, has far less power than I.'

'But why,' pursued the summoner, 'track your game
In various shapes? Why don't you stay the same?'
Just to appear,' he said, 'in such a way
As will enable us to snatch our prey.'

'But why do you have to go to all this bother?'
'For very many reasons, my dear brother;
You shall know all about it in good time.

The day is short and it is long past prime,
And yet I've taken nothing the whole day,
And I must think of business, if I may,
Rather than air my intellectual gift;

Besides, you lack the brains to catch my drift.
If I explained you wouldn't understand;
Yet since you ask why we're a busy band,
It's thus: at times we are God's instruments,
A means of forwarding divine events,

When He so pleases, that concern His creatures,
By various arts, disguised by various features.
We have no power without Him, that's a fact,
If it should please Him to oppose some act.

Sometimes, at our request, He gives us leave
To hurt the body, though we may not grieve
The soul. Take Job; his is a case in point.
At other times the two are not disjoint,
That is to say, the body and the soul.

Sometimes we are allowed to take control
Over a man and put his soul to test,
But not his body; all is for the best;
For every time a man withstands temptation
It is a partial cause of his salvation,

Though our intention is, when we beset him,
Not that he should be saved, but we should get him.
At times we slave for men without complaint
As on Archbishop Dunstan, now a saint;
Why, I was servant to the apostle once.'

'Tell me,' the summoner said, '- I'm just a dunce --
But do you make new bodies as you go
Out of the elements?' The fiend said, 'No;
We just create illusions, or we raise
A corpse and use it; there are many ways.

And we can talk as trippingly and well
As, to the Witch of Endor, Samuel.
And yet some people say it wasn't he;
I have no use for your theology.

'One thing I warn you of, it is no jape;
You will be learning all about our shape
In any case, hereafter, my dear brother,
Where you'll not need me, no, nor yet another,
To teach you; for your own experience
Will furnish you sufficient evidence
To give a lecture on it, and declare
As well as from a professorial chair,
Better than Virgil when he was alive,
Or Dante either. Now, if we're to thrive
Let's hurry on, I'll keep you company
Unless it chance that you abandon me.'

'What?' said the summoner, 'Leave you on your own?
I am a yeoman, pretty widely known;
I'll hold to my engagement, on the level,
Though you were Satan's self, the very Devil!
I keep my word of honour to a brother,
As I have sworn, and so shall each to other;
True brothers we shall be; the bargain's made
And both of us can go about our trade.
You take your share -- whatever people give --
And I'll take mine, and that's our way to live.
If either should do better than the other,
Let him be true and share it with his brother'

'Agreed,' the devil answered. 'As you say,'
 And on the word they trotted on their way.
 Just at the entry of the very village
 The summoner had it in his mind to pillage
 They saw a farm-cart loaded up with hay.
 There was a carter driving, but the way
 Was deep and muddy and the cart stood still.
 The carter lashed and shouted with a will,
 'Hey, Brock! Hup, Scottie! Never mind for stones!
 The foul fiend come and fetch you, flesh and bones,
 As sure as you were foaled! Mud, ruts and rubble!
 Lord, what a team! I've never known such trouble!
 The devil take all, cart, horse and hay in one!
 The summoner said, 'Now we shall have some fun!
 And, as if nothing were happening, he drew near
 And whispered softly in the devil's ear:
 'Listen to that, dear brother, use your head!
 Didn't you hear what the old carter said?
 Take it at once, he gave them all to you,
 His hay, his cart and his three horses too.'
 'Don't you believe it!' said the fiend. 'I heard,
 But he meant nothing by it, take my word.
 Go up and ask him if you don't trust me,
 Or else keep quiet for a bit and see.'
 The carter thwacked his horses, jerked the rein,
 And got them moving; as they took the strain,
 'Hup, there!' he shouted, 'Jesus bless you, love,
 And all His handiwork! Hey! Saints above!
 Well rugged, old fellow, that's the stuff, Grey Boy!
 God save you all, my darlings, send you joy!
 That's lifted the old cart out of the slough!'
 'What did I tell you,' said the fiend, 'just now?
 That ought to make it clear to you, dear brother,
 The chap said one thing but he meant another.
 So let's go on a bit. You mustn't scoff.
 But here there's nothing I can carry off.
 When they were out of town a little way
 The summoner whispered to the fiend to say,

'There's an old fiddle here, an ancient wreck,
 Dear brother, who would rather break her neck
 Than lose a penny of her goods. Too bad,
 She'll have to pay me twelve-pence. She'll be mad,
 But if she doesn't pay she'll face the court.
 And yet, God knows there's nothing to report,
 She has no vices. But as you failed just now
 To earn your keep, I'd like to show you how.'
 The summoner battered at the widow's gate.
 'Come out,' he said, 'you old inebriate!
 I'll bet you've got a friar or priest inside!
 'Who's knocking? Bless us, Lord!' the widow cried,
 'God save you, sir, and what is your sweet will?'
 'Here!' said the summoner. 'I've a summons-bill.
 On pain of excommunication, see
 That you're at court at the archdeacon's knee
 To-morrow morning. There are certain things
 To answer for.' 'Christ Jesus, King of Kings,'
 She said, 'have mercy! What am I to say?
 I can't! I'm ill, and have been many a day.
 I couldn't walk so far, nor even ride,
 'I would kill me. There's a pricking in my side.
 Couldn't you write it down and save a journey,
 And let me answer it through my attorney,
 The charge I mean, whatever it may be?'
 'Yes, if you pay at once,' he said. 'Let's see.
 Twelve pence to me and I'll secure acquittal.
 I get no profit from it - very little.
 My master gets the profit and not me.
 Come off it, I'm in haste. It's got to be.
 Give me twelve pence. No time to wait, old fairy.'
 'Twelve pence!' said she. 'O blessed Virgin Mary,
 Help me and keep me clear of sin and dearth!
 Why, if you were to offer me the earth
 I couldn't! There's not twelve pence in my bag!
 You know I'm nothing but a poor old hag,
 Show kindness to a miserable wretch!'
 'If I excuse you may the devil fetch

Me off! Though it should break you! Come along,
Pay up!' he said. 'But I've done nothing wrong!'

'You pay at once, or by the sweet St Anne,'

He said, 'I'll carry off your frying-pan

For debt, the new one, owed me since the day

You cuckolded your husband. Did I pay

For the correction then or did I not?'

'You lie!' she said. 'On my salvation! What?

Correction? Whether as widow or as wife

I've never had a summons in my life;

I never cuckolded my poor old man!

And as for you and for your frying-pan

The hairiest, blackest devil out of Hell

Carry you off and take the pan as well!'

Seeing her kneel and curse, the devil spoke:

'Now, Mother Mabel, is this all a joke,

Or do you really mean the things you say?'

'The devil,' she said, 'can carry him away

With pan and all unless he will repent!'

'No, you old cow, I have no such intent,'

The summoner said, 'there's no repentance due

For anything I ever had of you.

I'd strip you naked, smock and rag and clout!'

The devil said, 'What are you cross about,

Dear brother? You and this pan are mine by right.

You yet shall be in Hell with me tonight,

Where you'll know more about our mystery

Than any Doctor of Divinity.'

And on the word this foul fiend made a swoop

And dragged him, body and soul, to join the troupe

In Hell, where summoners have their special shelf.

And God, who in the image of Himself

Created man, guide us to Abraham's lap,

And make this Summoner here a decent chap!

My lords, I could have told you, never fear,

Had I the time to save this Summoner here,

Following texts from Christ and Paul and John

And many teachers who are dead and gone,

Of torments that are fit to terrorize

Your hearts, though tongue of man can scarce devise

Such things, or in a thousand winters tell

The pain of that accursed house of Hell.

Watch therefore, and pray Jesus of his grace

To keep us out of that accursed place

And ward off Satan, tempting us from glory;

Ponder my words, reflect upon my story.

The lion's always on the watch for prey

To kill the innocent, if so he may;

And so dispose your heart that it withstand

The fiend who would enslave you in his band.

He may not tempt you, though, above your might,

For Christ will be your champion and your knight.

And, Summoners, flee the sins that so beset you,

And learn repentance ere the devil get you.