

The Friar's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Friar's Tale

This noble Friar, this worthy limiter¹, was casting ever a kind of scowling face upon the Summoner, but as yet, for the sake of propriety, he spoke no rude word to him. But finally he said to the wife, "Madame," he said, "may God give you joy! So may I prosper, you have here touched upon a great difficulty and a subject for debate at the universities. You have said many things and very well, I would say. But, madame, as we ride by the way here, there is no need to speak of anything but mirth; and in God's name leave quoting of authorities to sermons and to the schools of learning as well. 1277

"But if it would please this company, I will tell you a jest about a summoner. By God, by the very name you may well know that no good may be spoken of a summoner. I pray none of you be ill-pleased. A summoner is a runner up and down with summons for fornication, and is beaten at every town's end." 1285

Then our Host spoke: "Ah, sir, you ought to be courteous and gentle, a man of your station. We will have no brawling in this company. Tell your story, and let the Summoner be." 1289

"Nay," said the Summoner, "let him say whatever he likes. When it comes my turn, by God, I shall repay him every bit. I shall tell him how great an honor it is to be a flattering limiter, and of many other kinds of crimes that need not be retold at this time, and I shall tell him how he carries out his duties, in truth." 1297

"Peace, no more of this," said our Host. And then he said to the Friar, "Tell your tale, my beloved dear master." 1300

Here ends the Prologue of the Friar.

Here begins the Friar's Tale.

¹ Limiter. A friar who is licensed to beg within a certain district.

Once there dwelt in my country an archdeacon, a man of high estate, who boldly executed the punishment for fornication, witchcraft, pandering, slander, and adultery; likewise, offences of churchwardens, breaches of wills and contracts, neglect of the sacraments, and many other types of offence, of which there is no need to rehearse at this time; and usury and simony as well. 1309

But surely, he brought greatest woe to lechers. They would have to sing², if they were caught! And those who fell behind in their tithes³ were handled roughly, if any parson would make a complaint against them; they could escape no monetary punishment. He made the people sing piteously for too small a tithe or offering; for they were in the archdeacon's book before the bishop caught them with his hook⁴. And then his jurisdiction gave him power to visit them with penalties. He had always nearby a summoner; there was no slyer boy in England; for he had his subtle crew of spies who told him about whatever might be to his profit. He could well spare one or two lechers to direct him to four-and-twenty more. For though this summoner was mad as a hare, I will not refrain from telling of his rascality. For we are beyond his power; they have no jurisdiction over us friars, nor shall they ever, to the end of their lives. 1331

The Summoner said, "Peter! So are the women of the brothels put out of my power.

"Peace, may the black Devil take you!" thus said our Host. "Let him tell his story. Now tell on, my own dear master, and spare not, even if the Summoner should make an outcry!" 1337

And then the Friar went on: "This false thief, this summoner, always had bawds as close at hand as any hawk in England to come to the lure, and they told him all the secrets that they learned. For there was nothing new in their acquaintance with him; they were his secret agents, and he drew great profit from that; his master did not always know how much. He could summon ignorant men on pain of excommunication, and they were glad to fill his purse and give him great feasts at the ale-house. And just as Judas had a little purse of his own and was a thief, the

² Sing. Cry out in pain.

³ Tithes. Members of the Church were expected to give at least ten per cent of their income to the Church.

⁴ Hook. Bishops have as a sign of their authority and their role as shepherds of the people a crosier, or "hook," a long staff that is curled at the top.

very same sort of a thief was he; his master received only half what was due him. 1352

He was, if I shall give him his full praise, a thief, and a summoner, and a pimp. He had prostitutes also at his call, who told it in his ear whether Sir Robert or Sir Hugh or Jack or Ralph were with them, or whoever it might be. Thus the prostitute and he were often in partnership. And he would fetch a forged mandate and summon both of them before the chapter, and he would rob the man and let the prostitute go. Then he would say to him, "Friend, for my love to you I will have her stricken from our black books; you need have no more trouble in this matter. I am your friend, wherever I can aid you." 1366

Truly, he knew of more ways of extortion than I could tell in two years. For there is no hunting dog in this world that can tell a hurt deer from a sound one better than this summoner knew a sly lecher or an adulterer or a concubine. And because that was the best of all his income, therefore he set his entire mind to it. 1374

And so it happened one time that this summoner, ever watching for his prey, rode to summon an old widow, forging a case, because he wished to rob her. And it happened that he saw riding before him under a forest-side a cheerful yeoman. He carried a bow, and bright, sharp arrows; he wore a cape of green, and on his head a hat with black fringes. 1383

"Sir," said this summoner, "hail, and well met!" 1384

"Welcome," answered this yeoman, "and every good fellow too! Where are you riding you under this green wood? Are you going far today?" 1387

"No," this summoner replied; "near here is the purpose for my ride, to raise a payment that pertains to my lord's dues." 1391

"Then are you a bailiff?" 1392

"Yes," he said. He dared not, for the very filth and shame of the word, say that he was a summoner. 1394

"By God!" said this yeoman. "Dear brother, you are a bailiff and I am also. I am not known in this land. I would ask you of your acquaintance and brotherhood as well, if it would please you. I have gold and silver in my chest; if you happen to come to our shire, all shall be yours, just as you would like it." 1402

"Mercy, by my faith," said this summoner. And each pledged his word in the other's hand, to be sworn brother until death. And they rode on their way in pleasant conversation. 1406

This summoner, who was as full of chatter as butcher-birds⁵ of spite, and always inquiring into all things, said "Brother, now where is your dwelling, if I should seek you another day?" 1411

This yeoman answered him in a mild voice: "Brother," he said, "far in the north country, where some time I shall see you, I hope. Before we part I shall so well direct you that you shall never miss my house. 1416

"Now, brother," spoke this summoner, "I beg you, while we ride by the way, since you are a bailiff as I am, teach me some subtle trick and tell me faithfully how I may gain the most in my office. And spare nothing for conscience or sin, but tell me, as a brother to me, how do you carry it out?" 1423

"Now by my word, dear brother," said he, "I shall tell you a faithful story. My wages are very small and restricted. My lord is hard and stern to me, and my duties are very laborious; and therefore I live by extortions. In truth I take all that I can get; at least all that I spend I gain from year to year by cunning or by violence. Truly, I can tell it no better. 1433

"Now surely, so I do also," said this summoner, "I never neglect to take something, God knows, unless it is too heavy or too hot. What I can get secretly, I have no manner of conscience about that. Without my extortion I could not keep body and soul together. And I will not be shriven⁶ for such tricks; I curse these shrift-fathers, every one of them. By God and Saint John, we are well met! But, dear brother, tell me your name then," said this summoner. 1445

And in the mean time this yeoman began to smile a little. "Brother," he said, "would you like to know it? I am a fiend; my dwelling is hell. And I ride around here to get what pickings I can outside the law, to see whether men will give me anything. My pickings are all my income. Lo! How you ride for the same purpose, to win goods, you never care how. I do just the same; for I would ride now to the end of the world for a prey." 1455

⁵ Butcher-birds. Shrikes, which were believed to pin their prey (insects) on thorns that were poisonous.

⁶ Shriven. Confessed or absolved. He will not go to confession and confess his sins to priests.

"Ah, God Bless! What are you saying! I thought you were truly a yeoman," said this summoner. "You have a man's shape as well as I. Do you have then a definite figure in hell, where you are in your natural state?" 1460

"No, certainly," he said, "not there. But when we wish, we can take a shape upon us, or else make it seem to you that we have one, sometimes like a man, or sometimes like an ape or like an angel; I can ride or walk in any form. It is no marvel that it should be so; a lousy juggler can deceive you, and I know more tricks than he does, by God!" 1468

"Why," said the summoner, "do you ride or walk in various shapes, then, and not always in one?" 1470

"Because," he answered, "we will make ourselves into such forms as are most fit to capture our prey." 1472

"Why do you go through all this labor?" 1473

"For many causes, dear sir summoner," said this fiend. "But there is a fit season for everything. The day is short, and it is past prime⁷ now, and yet this day I have won nothing. I want to give my mind to gain, if I can, and not to explain our deceptions. For though I told them to you, your wit is all too bare to understand them, brother. But yet, you ask why we labor; sometimes we are God's instruments and means to do His commands upon His creatures, when it pleases Him in various ways and shapes. 1486

"Truly, we have no might without Him, if it should please Him to resist us. And sometimes at our prayer we have leave to hurt the body only and not the soul. Witness Job, for whom we made woe. And sometimes we have power over both, that is to say, over soul and body also. And sometimes we allowed to tempt a man and to bring unrest to his soul and not to his body; and yet all is for the best. When he resists our tempting, it is cause of his salvation, though our intention was to seize him, and not that he would be saved. And sometimes we are servants to man, as to Saint Dunstan⁸, the archbishop. And I was servant to the apostles as well." 1503

"Yet tell me faithfully," said the Summoner, "do you always make new bodies thus out of the elements?" 1506

⁷ Prime. 9 a.m.

⁸ Saint Dunstan. Archbishop of Canterbury, 961-88.

The fiend answered, "No; sometimes we pretend, and sometimes we arise with dead bodies in various manners, and speak as reasonably and fairly as Samuel did to Phitonissa⁹. And yet some will maintain that it was not Samuel; I care not for your theology. But of one thing I forewarn you, I do not mock you. You wish by any means to know how we are shaped; hereafter you shall arrive where you will not need to learn about me, my dear brother. For out of your own experience you shall be able to lecture from a pulpit on this subject better than Virgil, while he was alive, or Dante¹⁰ either. Now let us ride quickly; for I will keep company with you, until you forsake me." 1522

"No," said this summoner, "that shall not happen. I am a yeoman, as all men know, and I will hold my word to you. For even if you were the devil Satan, I would hold my pledge to my brother, as I am sworn, and each of us is sworn, to be faithful brothers in this matter. And we both are going about our pickings. You take your part, whatever people will let you have, and I shall take mine. Thus we may both live. And if either of us should have more than the other, let him be loyal, and share it." 1534

"I agree, by my faith," said the devil." And with that word they rode forth upon their way. And just as they entered the outskirts of the town where this summoner planned to go, they saw a cart laden with hay, which a carter was driving forth on his road. Deep was the mire, for which reason the cart was at a standstill; and the carter struck, and cried as if he were mad, "Giddy up! Brock! Scot! Why do you spare yourselves for the stones¹¹? May the fiend fetch you, body and bones, as sure as you were born! Such woe as I have had with you! Devil take all, horses, cart, and hay!" 1547

This summoner said, "Here shall we have sport," and he drew near the fiend secretly as if nothing were the matter, and whispered in his ear, "Listen, brother; by your faith, listen. Do you not hear you what the carter says? He has given it to you: seize it immediately, hay and cart and his three nags as well." 1554

"No," said the devil, "never a bit, God knows; that is not what he means, trust me. If you do not believe

⁹ Phitonissa. The Witch of Endor. The story is told in 1 Samuel 28.8-25.

¹⁰ Virgil . . . Dante. Virgil: author of *The Aeneid*. Dante: author of *The Divine Comedy*. Both include, as is appropriate to the devil's speech, trips to the underworld.

¹¹ Stones. Why do you [the horses] let the stones, mud, stop you?

me, ask him yourself, or else wait a while and you shall see." 1557

This carter patted his horses upon the crupper, and they began to stoop and pull. "Up, now!" he said. "May Jesus Christ bless you, and all his handiwork, great and small! That was well pulled, my own gray boy! I pray, may God and Saint Giles¹² save you! Now my cart is out of the slough, by God!" 1565

The fiend said, "Lo, brother, what said I? You may see here, the churl spoke one thing, but thought another. Let us go forth upon our journey. I have gained nothing here in giving up my claim to the cart and the team." 1570

When they came out of the town somewhat, this summoner began to whisper to his brother; "Brother," he said, "there dwells here an old crone who had almost as rather lose her neck as give a penny of her goods. I wish to have twelve pence, even if she should go out of her wits, or I will summon her to our office, though I know no fault of her, God knows. But since you know not how to gain your living in this country, here take this example from me." 1580

This summoner knocked at the widow's gate. "Come out, you old hag," he cried. "I believe you have some friar or priest with you." 1583

"Who knocks?" said this widow. "God bless you! God save you, sir, what is your sweet pleasure? 1585

He said, "I have here a bill of summons. On pain of excommunication see that you are before the archdeacon's knee tomorrow to answer for certain matters before the court." 1589

"Now," she said, "may the Lord Christ Jesus, King of kings, so truly help me, as I cannot! I have been sick, and for many days," she said; "I cannot ride or walk so far, or it will kill me, so it pricks in my side. May I not ask for a bill of the indictment, Sir Summoner, and answer there through my proctor to such a thing as I will be charged with?" 1597

"Yes, pay me here on the spot," said this summoner, "let us see, twelve pence, and I will clear you. I shall have only a small profit from it; my master has the profit, not I. Hurry, give me twelve pence, and let me ride away quickly; I can wait no longer." 1603

"Twelve pence!" she said. "Now may my lady Saint Mary so surely help me out of care and sin, I do not have twelve pence in my possession even if I should gain this wide world. You well know that I am poor and old. Show your charity on a wretch like me!" 1609

"No, then," he said, "may the foul fiend fetch me if I excuse you, even if you perish for it." 1611

"Alas!" she replied, "I am not guilty, God knows." 1612

He said, "Pay me; or by the sweet Saint Mary I will bear away your new pan for the debt you have long owed me, what I paid for your penalty when you made your husband cuckold." 1617

"By my salvation, you lie!" she cried. "Never in all my days, as a wife or widow, was I summoned unto your court before now; nor was I ever anything but faithful of my body! I would give your body, and my pan also, unto the Devil black and rough!" 1623

And when the devil heard her curse so upon her knees, he said, "Now Mabely, my own dear mother, is this that you say your wish in earnest?" 1627

"May the Devil," she said, "take him, before he die, and pan and all, unless he will repent himself!" 1629

"Nay, old cow, that is not my mind, to repent me for anything that I have had from you," replied the summoner. "I wish that I had your smock and all your clothing." 1633

"Now, brother, be not angry, but in all fair dealing your body and this pan," said the devil, "be mine by right. You must go to hell with me tonight, where you shall know more of our secrets than a master of divinity." And with that this foul fiend seized him; body and soul he went with the devil to the place where summoners have their heritage. 1641

And God, Who made mankind after His likeness, save us and guide us one and all, and grant this Summoner to become a good man. 1644

And gentle people, said this Friar, if this Summoner here would grant me the leisure, I could have told you, according to the text of Christ and Paul and John and of many other of our doctors of the Church, such torments that your hearts might shudder; albeit, though I might speak for a thousand winters, no tongue can fully describe the pains of that same cursed house of hell. But, in order that we may be

¹² St. Loy. The patron saint of carters.

saved from that cursed pit, watch, and pray Jesus for
his grace so to guard us from Satan, the tempter.
Listen to this word, and beware. The lion lies in wait
at all times to slay the innocent, if he can; dispose
your hearts always to resist the fiend, who will make
you slaves and servants. He may not tempt you above
your power, for Christ will be your knight and
champion against him. 1662

And pray that these summoners may repent
themselves of their misdeeds, before the fiend may
seize them. 1664

Here ends the Friar's Tale.

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