**The Friar’s Prologue**

1 This worthy limiter, this noble friar,

2 He turned always a lowering face, and dire,

3 Upon the summoner, but for courtesy

4 No rude and insolent word as yet spoke he.

5 But at the last he said unto the wife:

6 Lady, said he, God grant you a good life!

7 You have here touched, as I may prosperous be,

8 Upon school matters of great difficulty;

9 You have said many things right well, I say;

10 But, lady, as we ride along our way,

11 We need but talk to carry on our game,

12 And leave authorities, in good God's name,

13 To preachers and to schools for clergymen.

14 But if it pleases all this company, then,

15 I'll tell you of a summoner, to make game.

16 By God, you could surmise it by the name

17 That of a summoner may no good be said;

18 I pray that no one will be angry made.

19 A summoner is a runner up and down

20 With summonses for fornication known,

21 And he is beaten well at each town's end.

22 Our host then spoke: O sir, you should attend

23 To courtesy, like man of your estate;

24 In company here we will have no debate.

25 Tell forth your tale and let the summoner be.

26 Nay, said the summoner, let him say to me

27 What pleases him; when it falls to my lot,

28 By God I'll then repay him, every jot.

29 I'll then make plain to him what great honour

30 It is to be a flattering limiter;

31 I'll certainly tell him what his business is.

32 Our host replied: Oh peace, no more of this!

33 And after that he said unto the friar:

34 Tell now your tale to us, good master dear.

**The Friar’s Tale**

1 Once on a time there dwelt in my country

2 An archdeacon, a man of high degree,

3 Who boldly executed the Church's frown

4 In punishment of fornication known,

5 And of witchcraft and of all known bawdry,

6 And defamation and adultery

7 Of church-wardens, and of fake testaments

8 And contracts, and the lack of sacraments,

9 And usury and simony also.

10 But unto lechers gave he greatest woe;

11 They should lament if they were apprehended;

12 And payers of short tithes to shame descended.

13 If anyone informed of such, 'twas plain

14 He'd not escape pecuniary pain.

15 For all short tithes and for small offering

16 He made folk pitifully to howl and sing.

17 For ere the bishop caught them with his crook,

18 They were already in the archdeacon's book.

19 Then had he, by his competent jurisdiction,

20 Power to punish them by such infliction.

21 He had a summoner ready to his hand,

22 A slyer rogue was not in all England;

23 For cunningly he'd espionage to trail

24 And bring reports of all that might avail.

25 He could protect of lechers one or two

26 To learn of four and twenty more, mark you.

27 For though this man were wild as is a hare,

28 To tell his evil deeds I will not spare;

29 For we are out of his reach of infliction;

30 They have of us no competent jurisdiction,

31 Nor ever shall for term of all their lives.

32 Peter! So are the women of the dives,

33 The summoner said, likewise beyond my cure!

34 Peace, with mischance and with misadventure!

35 Thus spoke our host, and let him tell his tale.

36 Now tell it on, despite the summoner's wail,

37 Nor spare in anything, my master dear.

38 This false thief, then, this summoner (said the friar)

39 Had always panders ready to his hand,

40 For any hawk to lure in all England,

41 Who told him all the scandal that they knew;

42 For their acquaintances were nothing new.

43 They were all his informers privily;

44 And he took to himself great gain thereby;

45 His master knew not how his profits ran.

46 Without an order, and an ignorant man,

47 Yet would he summon, on pain of Christ's curse,

48 Those who were glad enough to fill his purse

49 And feast him greatly at the taverns all.

50 And just as Judas had his purses small

51 And was a thief, just such a thief was he.

52 His master got but half of every fee.

53 He was, if I'm to give him proper laud,

54 A thief, and more, a summoner, and a bawd.

55 He'd even wenches in his retinue,

56 And whether 'twere Sir Robert, or Sir Hugh,

57 Or Jack, or Ralph, or whosoever 'twere

58 That lay with them, they told it in his ear;

59 Thus were the wench and he in partnership.

60 And he would forge a summons from his scrip,

61 And summon to the chapter-house those two

62 And fleece the man and let the harlot go.

63 Then would he say: My friend, and for your sake,

64 Her name from our blacklist will I now take;

65 Trouble no more for what this may entail;

66 I am your friend in all where 'twill avail.

67 He knew more ways to fleece and blackmail you

68 Than could be told in one year or in two.

69 For in this world's no dog trained to the bow

70 That can a hurt deer from a sound one know

71 Better than this man knew a sly lecher,

72 Or fornicator, or adulterer.

73 And since this was the fruit of all his rent,

74 Therefore on it he fixed his whole intent.

75 And so befell that once upon a day

76 This summoner, ever lurking for his prey,

77 Rode out to summon a widow, an old rip,

78 Feigning a cause, for her he planned to strip.

79 It happened that he saw before him ride

80 A yeoman gay along a forest's side.

81 A bow he bore, and arrows bright and keen;

82 He wore a short coat of the Lincoln green,

83 And hat upon his head, with fringes black.

84 Sir, said the summoner, hail and well met, Jack!

85 Welcome, said he, and every comrade good!

86 Whither do you ride under this greenwood?

87 Said this yeoman, Will you go far today?

88 This summoner replied to him with: Nay,

89 Hard by this place, said he, 'tis my intent

90 To ride, sir, to collect a bit of rent

91 Pertaining to my lord's temporality.

92 And are you then a bailiff? Aye, said he.

93 He dared not, no, for very filth and shame,

94 Say that he was a summoner, for the name.

95 In God's name, said this yeoman then, dear brother,

96 You are a bailiff and I am another.

97 I am a stranger in these parts, you see;

98 Of your acquaintance I'd be glad, said he,

99 And of your brotherhood, if 'tis welcome.

100 I've gold and silver in my chest at home.

101 And if you chance to come into our shire,

102 All shall be yours, just as you may desire.

103 Many thanks, said this summoner, by my faith!

104 And they struck hands and made their solemn oath

105 To be sworn brothers till their dying day.

106 Gossiping then they rode upon their way.

107 This summoner, who was as full of words

108 As full of malice are these butcher birds,

109 And ever enquiring after everything,

110 Brother, asked he, where now is your dwelling,

111 If some day I should wish your side to reach?

112 This yeoman answered him in gentle speech,

113 Brother, said he, far in the north country,

114 Where, as I hope, some day you'll come to me.

115 Before we part I will direct you so

116 You'll never miss it when that way you go.

117 Now, brother, said this summoner, I pray

118 You'll teach me, while we ride along our way,

119 Since that you are a bailiff, as am I,

120 A trick or two, and tell me faithfully

121 How, in my office, I may most coin win;

122 And spare not for nice conscience, nor for sin,

123 But as my brother tell your arts to me.

124 Now by my truth, dear brother, then said he,

125 If I am to relate a faithful tale,

126 My wages are right scanty, and but small.

127 My lord is harsh to me and niggardly,

128 My job is most laborious, you see;

129 And therefore by extortion do I live.

130 Forsooth, I take all that these men will give;

131 By any means, by trick or violence,

132 From year to year I win me my expense.

133 I can no better tell you faithfully.

134 Now truly, said this summoner, so do I.

135 I never spare to take a thing, God wot,

136 Unless it be too heavy or too hot.

137 What I get for myself, and privately,

138 No kind of conscience for such things have I.

139 But for extortion, I could not well live,

140 Nor of such japes will I confession give.

141 Stomach nor any conscience have I, none;

142 A curse on father-confessors, every one.

143 Well are we met, by God and by Saint James!

144 But, my dear brother, tell your name or names.

145 Thus said the summoner, and in meanwhile

146 The yeoman just a little began to smile.

147 Brother, said he, and will you that I tell?

148 I am a fiend, my dwelling is in Hell.

149 But here I ride about in hope of gain

150 And that some little gift I may obtain.

151 My only income is what so is sent.

152 I see you ride with much the same intent

153 To win some wealth, you never care just how;

154 Even so do I, for I would ride, right now,

155 Unto the world's end, all to get my prey.

156 Ah, cried he, ben'cite! What do you say?

157 I took you for a yeoman certainly.

158 You have a human shape as well as I;

159 Have you a figure then determinate

160 In Hell, where you are in your proper state?

161 Nay, said he, there of figure we have none;

162 But when it pleases us we can take one,

163 Or else we make you think we have a shape,

164 Sometimes like man, or sometimes like an ape;

165 Or like an angel can I seem, you know.

166 It is no wondrous thing that this is so;

167 A lousy juggler can deceive, you see,

168 And by gad, I have yet more craft than he.

169 Why, asked the summoner, ride you then, or go,

170 In sundry shapes, and not in one, you know?

171 Because, said he, we will such figures make

172 As render likely that our prey we'll take.

173 What causes you to have all this labour?

174 Full many a cause, my dear sir summoner,

175 Replied the fiend, but each thing has its time.

176 The day is short, and it is now past prime,

177 And yet have I won not a thing this day.

178 I will attend to winning, if I may,

179 And not our different notions to declare.

180 For, brother mine, your wits are all too bare

181 To understand, though I told mine fully.

182 But since you ask me why thus labour we-

183 Well, sometimes we are God's own instruments

184 And means to do His orders and intents,

185 When so He pleases, upon all His creatures,

186 In divers ways and shapes, and divers features.

187 Without Him we've no power, 'tis certain,

188 If He be pleased to stand against our train.

189 And sometimes, at our instance, have we leave

190 Only the body, not the soul, to grieve;

191 As witness job, to whom we gave such woe.

192 And sometimes have we power of both, you know,

193 That is to say, of soul and body too.

194 And sometimes we're allowed to search and do

195 That to a man which gives his soul unrest,

196 And not his body, and all is for the best.

197 And when one does withstand all our temptation,

198 It is the thing that gives his soul salvation;

199 Albeit that it was not our intent

200 He should be saved; we'd have him impotent.

201 And sometimes we are servants unto man,

202 As to that old archbishop, Saint Dunstan,

203 And to the apostles servant once was I.

204 Yet tell me, said the summoner, faithfully,

205 Make you yourselves new bodies thus alway

206 Of elements? The fiend replied thus: Nay.

207 Sometimes we feign them, sometimes we arise

208 In bodies that are dead, in sundry wise,

209 And speak as reasonably and fair and well

210 As to the witch at En-dor Samuel.

211 And yet some men maintain it was not he;

212 I do not care for your theology.

213 But of one thing I warn, nor will I jape,

214 You shall in all ways learn our proper shape;

215 You shall hereafter come, my brother dear,

216 Where you'll not need to ask of me, as here.

217 For you shall, of your own experience,

218 In a red chair have much more evidence

219 Than Virgil ever did while yet alive,

220 Or ever Dante; now let's swiftly drive.

221 For I will hold with you my company

222 Till it shall come to pass you part from me.

223 Nay, said the other, that shall not betide;

224 I am a bailiff, known both far and wide;

225 My promise will I keep in this one case.

226 For though you were the devil Sathanas,

227 My troth will I preserve to my dear brother,

228 As I have sworn, and each of us to other,

229 That we will be true brothers in this case;

230 And let us both about our business pace.

231 Take your own part, of what men will you give,

232 And I will mine; and thus may we both live.

233 And if that either of us gets more than other,

234 Let him be true and share it with his brother.

235 Agreed, then, said the devil, by my fay.

236 And with that word they rode upon their way.

237 As they drew near the town- it happened so-

238 To which this summoner had planned to go,

239 They saw a cart that loaded was with hay,

240 The which a carter drove along the way.

241 Deep was the mire; for which the cart now stood.

242 The carter whipped and cried as madman would,

243 Hi, Badger, Scot! What care you for the stones?

244 The Fiend, he cried, take body of you and bones,

245 As utterly as ever you were foaled!

246 More trouble you've caused me than can be told!

247 Devil take all, the horses, cart, and hay!

248 This summoner thought, Here shall be played a play.

249 And near the fiend he drew, as naught were there,

250 And unobserved he whispered in his ear:

251 Listen, my brother, listen, by your faith;

252 Hear you not what the carter says in wrath?

253 Take all, at once, for he has given you

254 Both hay and cart, and this three horses too.

255 Nay, said the devil, God knows, never a bit.

256 It is not his intention, trust to it.

257 Ask him yourself, if you believe not me,

258 Or else withhold a while, and you shall see.

259 This carter stroked his nags upon the croup,

260 And they began in collars low to stoop.

261 Hi now! cried he, May Jesus Christ you bless

262 And all His creatures, greater, aye and less!

263 That was well pulled, old horse, my own grey boy!

264 I pray God save you, and good Saint Eloy!

265 Now is my cart out of the slough, by gad!

266 Lo, brother, said the fiend, what said I, lad?

267 Here may you see, my very own dear brother,

268 The peasant said one thing, but thought another.

269 Let us go forth upon our travellers' way;

270 Here win I nothing I can take today.

271 When they had come a little out of town,

272 This summoner whispered, to his brother drawn,

273 Brother, said he, here lives an ancient crone

274 Who'd quite as gladly lose her neck as own

275 She must give up a penny, good or bad.

276 But I'll have twelvepence, though it drive her mad

277 Or I will summon her to our office;

278 And yet God knows I know of her no vice.

279 But since you cannot, in this strange country,

280 Make your expenses, here take note of me.

281 This summoner knocked on the widow's gate.

282 Come out, cried he, you old she-reprobate!

283 I think you've got some friar or priest there, eh?

284 Who knocks then? said the widow. Ben'cite!

285 God save you, master, what is your sweet will?

286 I have, said he, a summons here, a bill;

287 On pain of excommunication be

288 Tomorrow morn at the archdeacon's knee

289 To answer to the court for certain things.

290 Now, lord, said she, Christ Jesus, King of kings,

291 So truly keep me as I cannot; nay,

292 I have been sick, and that for many a day.

293 I cannot walk so far, said she, nor ride,

294 Save I were dead, such aches are in my side.

295 Will you not give a writ, sir summoner,

296 And let my proctor for me there appear

297 To meet this charge, whatever it may be?

298 Yes, said this summoner, pay anon- let's see-

299 Twelvepence to me, and I'll have you acquitted.

300 Small profit there for me, be it admitted;

301 My master gets the profit, and not I.

302 Come then, and let me ride on, speedily;

303 Give me twelvepence, I may no longer tarry.

304 Twelvepence! cried she, Our Lady Holy Mary

305 So truly keep me out of care and sin,

306 And though thereby I should the wide world win,

307 I have not twelvepence in my house all told.

308 You know right well that I am poor and old;

309 Show mercy unto me, a poor old wretch!

310 Nay, then, said he, the foul Fiend may me fetch

311 If I excuse you, though your life be spilt!

312 Alas! cried she, God knows I have no guilt!

313 Pay me, he cried, or by the sweet Saint Anne

314 I'll take away with me your brand-new pan

315 For debt that you have owed to me of old,

316 When you did make your husband a cuckold;

317 I paid at home that fine to save citation.

318 You lie, she cried then, by my own salvation!

319 Never was I, till now, widow or wife,

320 Summoned unto your court in all my life;

321 Nor ever of my body was I untrue!

322 Unto the Devil rough and black of hue

323 Give I your body and my pan also!

324 And when the devil heard her cursing so

325 Upon her knees, he said to her just here:

326 Now, Mabely, my own old mother dear,

327 Is this your will, in earnest, that you say?

328 The Devil, said she, take him alive today,

329 And pan and all, unless he will repent!

330 Nay, you old heifer, it's not my intent,

331 The summoner said, for pardon now to sue

332 Because of aught that I have had from you;

333 I would I had your smock and all your clo'es.

334 Nay, brother, said the devil, easy goes;

335 Your body and this pan are mine by right.

336 And you shall come to Hell with me tonight,

337 Where you shall learn more of our privity

338 Than any doctor of divinity.

339 And with that word this foul fiend to him bent;

340 Body and soul he with the devil went

341 Where summoners have their rightful heritage.

342 And God, Who made after His own image

343 Mankind, now save and guide us, all and some;

344 And grant that summoners good men become!

345 Masters, I could have told you, said this friar,

346 Were I not pestered by this summoner dire,

347 After the texts of Christ and Paul and John,

348 And of our other doctors, many a one,

349 Such torments that your hearts would shake with dread,

350 Albeit by no tongue can half be said,

351 Although I might a thousand winters tell,

352 Of pains in that same cursed house of Hell.

353 But all to keep us from that horrid place,

354 Watch, and pray Jesus for His holy grace,

355 And so reject the tempter Sathanas.

356 Hearken this word, be warned by this one case;

357 The lion lies in wait by night and day

358 To slay the innocent, if he but may.

359 Dispose your hearts in grace, that you withstand

360 The Fiend, who'd make you thrall among his band.

361 He cannot tempt more than beyond your might;

362 For Christ will be your champion and knight.

363 And pray that all these summoners repent

364 Of their misdeeds, before the Fiend torment.