

Canterbury Tales

Friar's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

Copyright © Richard Scott-Robinson, 2011, 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. The download of a single copy for personal use, or for teaching purposes, does not require permission.
richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



Friar's Tale

This worthy limitour, this noble Frere, he made alwey a manner louring chere upon the Somnour, but for honestee no vileyns word as yet to him spak he – This worthy friar who was with us had been spending a lot of his time scowling at the summoner, but had refrained from saying anything coarse to him and now turned to the Wife of Bath and said:

‘Madam, may God send you a rollicking good life! But you’ve touched upon a matter that is currently under great debate amongst the scholars and although you’ve said a lot that is true, madam, as we ride along here in very mixed company I believe that we are in the business of having fun, so for God’s sake let’s keep learned authorities out of it. I suggest we leave all *that* business to colleges of clerics and other learned folk. But if it would please this company, I would like to tell you all a joke now about a summoner. By God, you may guess by the very name “summoner” that it’s going to be a story about a rogue! I hope none of you will take offence, but I must tell you that a summoner is a fellow who scurries about with summonses for crimes of fornication, and normally receives a well-deserved beating in every town that he visits.’

Before the friar begins his tale he hurls an insult at the summoner by castigating all summoners, that is, those allegedly corrupt individuals employed by an archdeacon to summon folk to answer for offences against the Church. The insults and slander continue as he goes on to portray a summoner riding enthusiastically in the company of a devil from hell, trying to steal from an old lady and finally receiving his just deserts. Perhaps the friar harbours a private grudge against those who would try to prevent fornication.

This tale from the friar follows the tale from the Wife of Bath in all versions, and is another of Geoffrey’s Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

‘Steady on, friar,’ said our host. ‘Let’s all be gentle and courteous – especially you, as a friar – and let’s not have any arguments. Tell your tale and leave the summoner alone.’

‘Oh, it’s alright,’ said the summoner, nonchalantly. ‘Let him say what he wants. When it’s my turn, I’ll pay him back, every penny. I’ll show him how great an honour it is to be an obsequious limiter, and I’ll tell you what he really gets up to.’

‘Peace! Come on, lighten up!’ exclaimed our host. ‘Now tell us your tale, dear Master friar.’

Heer biginneth the Freres tale

Whilom ther was dwellinge in my contree an erchedeken, a man of heigh degree, that boldly dide execucion in punisshinge of fornicacioun, of wicchecraft and eek of bauderye – Once, there lived in my country an archdeacon, a man of high birth, who was very enthusiastic in the punishment of fornication, witchcraft, pimping and prostitution, adultery, foul language, slander, church-theft, breaches of contract, fraud and deception concerning Church

dues, laxity in performing the Eucharist and many other crimes as well, there is no need to go through them all now – the sale of ecclesiastical jobs for a fee, for example, lending money with interest – but certainly, those convicted of sexual crimes received the severest punishment, and were made to confess if they were caught. People who were found cheating on their tithes were cruelly punished as well, and if anyone testified against them, the fines would be huge – withholding taxes from the Church was punished horribly! Before the bishop could begin to get involved, this archdeacon had his claws into those who were accused and, through his jurisdiction, he had the power to administer correction.

‘He had a summoner always on hand to do his bidding, and there was no more cunning a young scoundrel in the whole of England. To seek out likely prey, he kept a secret network of spies. He would be lenient with one or two offenders on the condition that they give him the names and locations of two dozen more. And even if the summoner who is riding along with us here gets as mad as a March hare, I’m going to tell you everything about this fellow, for summoners have no powers of correction over me, not for the rest of their lives – we friars are out of their jurisdiction.’



‘By Saint Peter!’ exclaimed the summoner. ‘So are the prostitutes who work in the public baths, I’ve no power to set them on the right path either!’

‘A plague on you both if you don’t QUIETEN DOWN!’ – exclaimed our host. ‘Let the friar tell his tale. Tell on, dear Master friar, and don’t pay any regard to this summoner’s interruptions.’

This dishonest rogue, this *summoner*, maintained an army of brothel-keepers of old acquaintance who would come to his lure as reliably as any hawk in England, to keep him up-to-date with the comings and goings in their establishments. They were his informers and he gained great profit through them, a financial advantage that was not always passed on to the archdeacon.

Without any authority, this summoner would visit some uneducated man or other and under threat of excommunication, frighten the poor devil so much that he would be only too pleased to fill the summoner’s purse and buy him a meal at the tavern. And just as Judas had his own private bag to syphon money into, so this summoner was a dishonest rogue and passed on to the archdeacon only half the money he received in fines. He was, in brief, an extortionist, a thief and a man who in every sense lived off immoral earnings; in short, he was a *summoner*. He had prostitutes under his control, and if Sir Robert or Sir Hugh, Jack or Ralph or whoever it might be had used their services, he quickly got to know about it, for he and the girl were both in it together. He would forge

a warrant for their arrest, threaten to summon them both to the legal assembly, and then rob the client and let the woman off.

‘Friend,’ he would say, ‘as a favour to you I shall remove her name from my register and we can do this all very quietly. You needn’t worry any more about it. I’m your friend, and my help will be a great advantage to you.’ He knew more about blackmail than I could possibly explain to you in two whole years! There is no hunting dog in the entire world more adept at spotting an injured deer than was this summoner at spotting a lecher or an adulterer, he could do it from a mile off. It was the source of all his income and he gave it his full attention.

One day, it happened that he was on the lookout for another victim and decided to visit an old widow on some pretext or other, but with the sole intention of stealing from her. Suddenly, in front of him in the forest, he saw a well-dressed yeoman on horseback. The man was holding a bow and had a quiver full of arrows and was wearing a short, green coat and a hat fringed in black.’



‘Good day to you, Sir!’ called the summoner.

‘Welcome, Sir, to you and to every good fellow!’ the yeoman replied. ‘Where are you making for in this forest? Are you going far?’

‘No, not far at all,’ replied the summoner. ‘I’m here to collect a rent owed to my lord.’

‘Are you a bailiff, then?’

‘Yes.’ He didn’t have the courage to admit to the filth and shame that he was a *summoner*.

‘By God’s mercy, then you are a bailiff and so am I!’ exclaimed the yeoman. ‘But, my friend, I’m a stranger in these parts and I would welcome your acquaintance, indeed your friendship if I may. I have gold and silver in my chest. And if ever you chance to come into my county then you’ll want for nothing, I assure you – you’ll have everything you desire.’

‘Thank you,’ said the summoner and each swore loyalty to the other and shook on it, pledging to be firm friends for the rest of their lives. Then they rode on, chatting merrily together and soon this devious summoner, who was as full of enquiring chatter as a butcher bird is full of deception – a butcher bird which impales its meal on a thorn to keep it from moving – began to interrogate the yeoman:

‘My friend, whereabouts do you live – just in case I should be in those parts one day and wish to look you up?’

‘I live far in the north,’ replied the yeoman, equitably. ‘I’m sure I’ll see you there one day. Before we say goodbye I’ll give you such good directions that you won’t be able to

miss it.’

‘Friend,’ said the summoner, ‘tell me then, while we ride along, since you are a bailiff like myself, share with me some of the tricks that you know and tell me how I can make the most money out of what I do. Don’t be shy or bashful but tell me as a friend.’

‘Well, in all honesty,’ replied the yeoman, ‘I shall tell you the truth and say that my wages are pretty modest. My lord is hard on me, his generosity is not at all to be trusted and my work is laborious, so I tend to live by extortion. I take all that I can persuade people to give me, to tell you the truth. I survive from year to year through deception and violence. I can’t put it more honestly than that.’

‘It’s exactly the same with me!’ exclaimed the summoner. ‘I’ll steal anything unless it’s too hot or I can’t lift it! And I have no conscience at all when it comes to a few quiet words in somebody’s ear. Were it not for blackmail and extortion, I wouldn’t be able to live. And I never confess to these sins and have no sense of guilt for any of these tricks of mine. I just lie to priests in confession and play the same tricks on them, all the time! We are well met, by God and Saint James. But tell me, what is your name?’



The yeoman smiled. ‘Friend, do you really want to know? I am a fiend and I live in hell. I’m riding about here looking for things to take – anything men are willing to give me, really. Those things that I’m able to get are all the payment I receive. You tell me you ride about in the same way, looking for things to acquire, you don’t care how? Well I do as well. I would ride now to the ends of the Earth to get my hands on a victim.’

‘May the Lord bless you, what are you saying?’ said the summoner. ‘I really thought you were a yeoman. You look to have a man’s body just like me. Do you have another body then, one that’s natural to you when you are in hell?’

‘No, certainly not,’ he replied. ‘But when we feel like it, we can assume a body, or else make you think that we have one, sometimes of a man or perhaps an ape. Or I can even disguise myself as an angel if I want to. But this shouldn’t come as a great surprise to you really; after all, any juggler or conjurer can do magic tricks and illusions and, by God, I’ve much more skill than they have.’

‘But why, then, do you take on lots of different forms and not ride about in only one?’

‘We like to assume those shapes that will give us the greatest advantage over our prey,’ replied the fiend.

‘So why do you go to all this trouble?’

‘For many reasons, my dear Sir summoner,’ said the fiend. ‘But there is a time and a place for everything. The day is short, the morning is already wearing on and I haven’t won anything for myself yet. I would rather apply myself to this than reveal to you the inner workings of my mind. You’re not up to understanding it yet, my friend. But since you ask why we go to all this trouble, I should tell you that we sometimes act on God’s behalf; he uses us to carry out his divine will in many different ways. Without him we would have no power, certainly, if he chose to stand in our way. Sometimes, we have permission only to torment the body and must leave the soul alone, like Job, to whom we gave so much sorrow. On other occasions we have power over both, that is, body



and soul. Sometimes we’re allowed to seek out a man whose soul we can torment, but not his body. It’s all for the best, because if he refuses our temptations, his salvation is assured; although it isn’t our intention to save him but to seize him for ourselves. And sometimes we fall into the service of a human, like the archbishop Saint Dunstan. I was once a servant to one of the apostles.’

‘Do you always make a new body, then, just out of basic elements?’ asked the summoner.

‘No,’ explained the fiend. ‘Sometimes we make an illusion and other times we use dead bodies – we reanimate them and speak through them as fluently and convincingly as the dead prophet Samuel did through the oracular priestess; although some men say that it wasn’t really him speaking. But I won’t argue divinity with you, I don’t care about it. But I warn you of one thing and I’m not joking: you’ll have no doubt what we look like soon, my dear friend, for you’ll be arriving at a place where experience will quickly remove all need for me to explain these things to you. You’ll be able to expound the truth from a lectern better than Virgil or Dante. But let us ride quickly! I intend to keep you company, until you’ve had enough of me.’

‘You needn’t worry on that score,’ replied the summoner. ‘I’m a yeoman as well, as all the district knows, and my friendship with you is firm. Even if you were Satan himself I would honour my promise of sworn friendship to you, as you have to me. We’ll travel alongside one another and look for profit together – you take whatever you can get and I’ll take whatever comes my way. That way we’ll survive, and if one of us gets more than the other, we’ll share it. Is that fair?’

‘I agree,’ said the devil.

They rode on, and at the very outskirts of the town towards which this summoner had been heading, they saw a cartload of hay being urged forwards by a carter. The lane was deep with mud and stones and one of his wheels had got stuck. The man was whipping his horses and shouting for all he was worth: ‘Hey, Brock! Hey, Scot! The ground’s wet,

so what! As surely as you were born, the devil can have all three of you! You're useless, I say! May the devil take all of you, horse, cart and hay!

'Now for some fun,' thought the summoner and rode up very close to the fiend, casually, so as not to arouse suspicion and whispered to him: 'Do you hear that? Take it, for he's given it to you: hay, cart, all the carthorses and everything.'

'No, I'm afraid not,' replied the devil. 'God knows, it wouldn't work. He doesn't mean it, trust me. Ask him yourself if you don't believe me, or else wait a bit and you'll see.'

The carter used his whip over the horses' backs once again and they began to pull and heave even more strongly until the cart began to move forwards. 'Hey, well done! May Christ bless you, I knew you could do it!' congratulated the carter. 'That was well extricated, my grey beauty! God save you, and Saint Loy! Now we are free of that horrible mire.'

'What did I tell you?' said the fiend. 'That churl said what he said, but he was thinking just the opposite. Come on, let's get going. There's nothing for me here.'

When they had got a little nearer to the town, the summoner said quietly to the fiend: 'My friend, an old crone lives nearby, who would rather have her head cut off than give away a penny of her wealth. But watch me take a shilling from her. I'll take it however angry she gets at me, or I'll drag her along to the Ecclesiastical Court. She's entirely blameless, of course; a paragon of virtue, probably. But since you seem to be having some difficulty winning anything here in this country, you'd better take a lesson from me.'

The summoner knocked on the widow's gate. 'Come out, you old crone! I bet you have a priest in your bed!'

'Who's there?' asked the widow, emerging from her house. 'God bless you Sir, how can I help you?'

'I have a bill of summons here, requiring that you go on your bended knees before the archdeacon and explain fully to his court certain irregularities that you have been accused of. If you don't, you will be excommunicated forthwith.'

'May Jesus Christ help me, but I haven't a clue what you're talking about, good Sir. I've been ill recently, you see. I can't walk that far, anyway, or ride. The journey would kill me, the pain in my side hurts so much. Can't I make a written statement and send it by proxy?'

'Yes you may,' replied the summoner. 'If you pay me, let's see, a shilling. In fact, for a shilling I can acquit you at once. All the money will go to the Church, I'll get only a tiny fraction of it. Come on! Twelve pennies and I will ride away. I'm a busy man.'

'Twelve pence? Saint Mary, help me! Even if I owned the whole world I haven't got a shilling in the house! Can't you see how old and poor I am? Have mercy upon me!'

‘Mercy? May the devil take me if I let you off, even if it costs you your life.’

‘But I’m innocent!’

‘Pay me, or by sweet Saint Anne, I’ll seize your new copper pan as well, in lieu of an old debt you still owe me from the time when you had that adulterous affair behind your husband’s back. I paid that fine for you, if you remember.’

‘You liar!’ screamed the old woman. ‘By my salvation, I’ve never been summoned to your court, not as a widow nor as a wife, and I was always faithful to my husband. The devil can come and take you and my copper pan as well!’

When the devil heard the old woman say this with such conviction, he said: ‘Mother Mabel, my dear, do you really mean this?’

‘The devil can take him!’ she repeated. ‘May the devil take him and the pan as well, unless he apologises.’

‘Are you stupid, you old hag?’ exclaimed the summoner. ‘I’m not going to say sorry for taking anything from you! I’ll have your smock and all your clothes as well if you’re not careful.’

‘Don’t be angry,’ said the devil to the summoner, ‘but your body and her pan are now mine. You’re coming to hell with me tonight. You’ll soon know more about us fiends than even a Doctor of Divinity!’

With this, the fiend seized him and took him, body and soul, to that foul place which is reserved for *all* summoners.

‘God, who has made mankind after his own image,’ preached the friar, ‘guide and save us all and let this summoner become a good man.’

‘Lords and ladies, I would have told you, if this summoner had let me, what Christ said, and Saint Paul – and Saint John the Divine and many other learned men as well – about the torments of hell. It is enough to make your heart shudder, although no tongue can properly describe them, not in a thousand winters. But to protect us from that cursed place, I urge you all to be alert and to pray that Jesus Christ may be merciful enough to save us from Satan. Listen to me! Be vigilant against temptation. The lion is always alert to his prey and will destroy the innocent when he can, so make sure that your hearts are always in good order and able to withstand the devil who wishes to take you captive and lead you off. He has no power to tempt you if you make an effort to ward him off, so let Christ be your champion and your redeemer. And pray that all these summoners may beg forgiveness for their sins, before it is too late, before Satan comes for them.’