

THE TALE.

Whilom* there was dwelling in my country *once on a time An
archdeacon, a man of high degree, That boldly did execution, In punishing
of fornication, Of witchecraft, and eke of bawdery, Of defamation, and
adultery, Of church-reeves,* and of testaments,
*churchwardens Of contracts, and of lack of sacraments, And eke of many
another manner* crime, *sort of Which needeth not
rehearsen at this time, Of usury, and simony also; But, certes, lechours did
he greatest woe; They shoulde singen, if that they were hent;*
caught And smale tithers<1> were foul y-shent, *troubled, put to
shame If any person would on them complain; There might astert them no
pecunial pain.<2> For smalle tithes, and small offering, He made the people
piteously to sing; For ere the bishop caught them with his crook, They weren
in the archdeacon's book; Then had he, through his jurisdiction, Power to
do on them correction.

He had a Sompnour ready to his hand, A slier boy was none in Engleland;
For subtly he had his espiaille,* *espionage That taught
him well where it might aught avail. He coulde spare of lechours one or two,
To teache him to four and twenty mo'. For, -- though this Sompnour wood*
be as a hare, -- *furious, mad To tell his harlotry I will not spare, For we
be out of their correction, They have of us no jurisdiction, Ne never shall
have, term of all their lives.

"Peter; so be the women of the stives,"* *stews Quoth this
Sompnour, "y-put out of our cure."* *care

"Peace, with mischance and with misaventure," Our Hoste said, "and let him
tell his tale. Now telle forth, and let the Sompnour gale,* *whistle;
bawl Nor spare not, mine owen master dear."

This false thief, the Sompnour (quoth the Frere), Had always bawdes ready
to his hand, As any hawk to lure in Engleland, That told him all the secrets
that they knew, -- For their acquaintance was not come of new; They were
his approvers* privily. *informers He took himself at great
profit thereby: His master knew not always what he wan.*
won Withoute mandement, a lewed man *ignorant He
could summon, on pain of Christe's curse, And they were inly glad to fill his
purse, And make him greate feastes at the nale.* *alehouse
And right as Judas hadde purses smale,* *small And was a

thief, right such a thief was he, His master had but half *his duety.*
 what was owing him He was (if I shall give him his laud) A thief, and eke a
 Sompnour, and a bawd. And he had wenches at his retinue, That whether
 that Sir Robert or Sir Hugh, Or Jack, or Ralph, or whoso that it were That
 lay by them, they told it in his ear. Thus were the wench and he of one
 assent; And he would fetch a feigned mandement, And to the chapter
 summon them both two, And pill* the man, and let the wenche go.
 *plunder, pluck Then would he say, "Friend, I shall for thy sake Do strike
 thee out of oure letters blake;* *black Thee thar* no more as
 in this case travail; *need I am thy friend where I may thee
 avail." Certain he knew of bribers many mo' Than possible is to tell in
 yeare's two: For in this world is no dog for the bow,<3> That can a hurt deer
 from a whole know, Bet* than this Sompnour knew a sly lechour,
 *better Or an adult'rer, or a paramour: And, for that was the fruit of all his
 rent, Therefore on it he set all his intent.

And so befell, that once upon a day. This Sompnour, waiting ever on his
 prey, Rode forth to summon a widow, an old ribibe,<4> Feigning a cause, for
 he would have a bribe. And happen'd that he saw before him ride A gay
 yeoman under a forest side: A bow he bare, and arrows bright and keen, He
 had upon a courtesy* of green, *short doublet A hat upon
 his head with fringes blake.* *black "Sir," quoth this
 Sompnour, "hail, and well o'ertake." "Welcome," quoth he, "and every good
 fellow; Whither ridest thou under this green shaw?"* shade
 Saide this yeoman; "wilt thou far to-day?" This Sompnour answer'd him, and
 saide, "Nay. Here faste by," quoth he, "is mine intent To ride, for to raisen up
 a rent, That longeth to my lorde's duety." "Ah! art thou then a bailiff?" "Yea,"
 quoth he. He durste not for very filth and shame Say that he was a
 Sompnour, for the name. "De par dieux," <5> quoth this yeoman, "leve*
 brother, *dear Thou art a bailiff, and I am another. I am unknowen,
 as in this country. Of thine acquaintance I will praye thee, And eke of
 brotherhood, if that thee list.* *please I have gold and silver
 lying in my chest; If that thee hap to come into our shire, All shall be thine,
 right as thou wilt desire." "Grand mercy,"* quoth this Sompnour, "by my
 faith." *great thanks Each in the other's hand his trothe lay'th, For to
 be sworne brethren till they dey.* *die<6> In dalliance they
 ride forth and play.

This Sompnour, which that was as full of jangles,* *chattering As full
 of venom be those wariangles,* * butcher-birds <7> And ev'r
 inquiring upon every thing, "Brother," quoth he, "where is now your
 dwelling, Another day if that I should you seech?"* *seek, visit
 This yeoman him answered in soft speech; Brother," quoth he, "far in the

North country, <8> Where as I hope some time I shall thee see Ere we depart
 I shall thee so well wiss,* *inform That of mine house shalt
 thou never miss." Now, brother," quoth this Sompnour, "I you pray, Teach
 me, while that we ride by the way, (Since that ye be a bailiff as am I,) Some
 subtilty, and tell me faithfully For mine office how that I most may win. And
 spare not for conscience or for sin, *conceal nothing* But, as my
 brother, tell me how do ye." Now by my trothe, brother mine," said he, As I
 shall tell to thee a faithful tale: My wages be full strait and eke full smale;
 My lord is hard to me and dangerous,* *niggardly And mine
 office is full laborious; And therefore by extortion I live, Forsooth I take all
 that men will me give. Algate* by sleighte, or by violence,
 *whether From year to year I win all my dispence; I can no better tell thee
 faithfully." Now certes," quoth this Sompnour, "so fare* I; *do I
 spare not to take, God it wot, *But if* it be too heavy or too hot.
 unless What I may get in counsel privily, No manner conscience of that
 have I. N'ere* mine extortion, I might not live, *were it not for For
 of such japes* will I not be shrive.** *tricks **confessed Stomach nor
 conscience know I none; I shrew* these shrifte-fathers** every one.
 *curse **confessors Well be we met, by God and by St Jame. But, leve
 brother, tell me then thy name," Quoth this Sompnour. Right in this meane
 while This yeoman gan a little for to smile.

"Brother," quoth he, "wilt thou that I thee tell? I am a fiend, my dwelling is
 in hell, And here I ride about my purchasing, To know where men will give
 me any thing. *My purchase is th' effect of all my rent* *what I can gain
 is my Look how thou ridest for the same intent sole revenue* To
 winne good, thou reckest never how, Right so fare I, for ride will I now Into
 the worlde's ende for a prey."

"Ah," quoth this Sompnour, "benedicite! what say y'? I weened ye were a
 yeoman truly. *thought Ye have a manne's shape as well
 as I Have ye then a figure determinate In helle, where ye be in your estate?"*
 *at home "Nay, certainly," quoth he, there have we none, But when us liketh
 we can take us one, Or elles make you seem* that we be shape
 *believe Sometime like a man, or like an ape; Or like an angel can I ride or
 go; It is no wondrous thing though it be so, A lousy juggler can deceive thee.
 And pardie, yet can I more craft* than he." *skill, cunning "Why,"
 quoth the Sompnour, "ride ye then or gon In sundry shapes and not always
 in one?" "For we," quoth he, "will us in such form make. As most is able our
 prey for to take." "What maketh you to have all this labour?" "Full many a
 cause, leve Sir Sompnour," Saide this fiend. "But all thing hath a time; The
 day is short and it is passed prime, And yet have I won nothing in this day; I
 will intend* to winning, if I may, *apply myself And not intend

our thinges to declare: For, brother mine, thy wit is all too bare To understand, although I told them thee. *But for* thou askest why labour we: *because* For sometimes we be Godde's instruments And meanes to do his commandements, When that him list, upon his creatures, In divers acts and in divers figures: Withoute him we have no might certain, If that him list to stande thereagain.* *against it

And sometimes, at our prayer have we leave Only the body, not the soul, to grieve: Witness on Job, whom that we did full woe, And sometimes have we might on both the two, -- This is to say, on soul and body eke, And sometimes be we suffer'd for to seek Upon a man and do his soul unrest And not his body, and all is for the best, When he withstandeth our temptation, It is a cause of his salvation, Albeit that it was not our intent He should be safe, but that we would him hent.* *catch And

sometimes be we servants unto man, As to the archbishop Saint Dunstan, And to th'apostle servant eke was I." "Yet tell me," quoth this Sompnour, "faithfully, Make ye you newe bodies thus alway Of th' elements?" The fiend answered, "Nay: Sometimes we feign, and sometimes we arise With deade bodies, in full sundry wise, And speak as reas'nably, and fair, and well, As to the Pythoness<9> did Samuel: And yet will some men say it was not he. I *do no force of* your divinity. *set no value upon* But one thing warn I thee, I will not jape,* jest Thou wilt *algates weet* how we be shape: *assuredly know* Thou shalt hereafterward, my brother dear, Come, where thee needeth not of me to lear.*

*learn For thou shalt by thine own experience *Conne in a chair to rede of this sentence,* *learn to understand Better than Virgil, while he was alive, what I have said* Or Dante also. <10> Now let us ride blive,* *briskly For I will holde company with thee, Till it be so that thou forsake me." "Nay," quoth this Sompnour, "that shall ne'er betide. I am a yeoman, that is known full wide; My trothe will I hold, as in this case; For though thou wert the devil Satanas, My trothe will I hold to thee, my brother, As I have sworn, and each of us to other, For to be true brethren in this case, And both we go *abouten our purchase.* *seeking what we Take thou thy part, what that men will thee give, may pick up* And I shall mine, thus may we bothe live. And if that any of us have more than other, Let him be true, and part it with his brother." "I grante," quoth the devil, "by my fay." And with that word they rode forth their way, And right at th'ent'ring of the towne's end, To which this Sompnour shope* him for to wend,** *shaped **go They saw a cart, that charged was with hay, Which that a carter drove forth on his way. Deep was the way, for which the carte stood: The carter smote, and cried as he were wood,*

mad "Heit Scot! heit Brok! what, spare ye for the stones? The fiend (quoth he) you fetch body and bones, As farforthly as ever ye were foal'd, *sure So mucche woe as I have with you tholed.* *endured<11>

The devil have all, horses, and cart, and hay." The Sompnour said, "Here shall we have a prey," And near the fiend he drew, *as nought ne were,*
 as if nothing Full privily, and rowned in his ear: were the
 matter* "Hearken, my brother, hearken, by thy faith, *whispered
 Hearest thou not, how that the carter saith? Hent* it anon, for he hath giv'n
 it thee, *seize Both hay and cart, and eke his capels* three."
 horses <12> "Nay," quoth the devil, "God wot, never a deal,
 whit It is not his intent, trust thou me well; Ask him thyself, if thou not
 trowest* me, *believest Or elles stint* a while and thou shalt
 see." *stop The carter thwack'd his horses on the croup, And
 they began to drawen and to stoop. "Heit now," quoth he; "there, Jesus
 Christ you bless, And all his handiwork, both more and less! That was well
 twight,* mine owenliart,** boy, *pulled **grey<13> I pray God save thy
 body, and Saint Loy! Now is my cart out of the slough, pardie." "Lo, brother,"
 quoth the fiend, "what told I thee? Here may ye see, mine owen deare
 brother, The churl spake one thing, but he thought another. Let us go forth
 abouten our voyage; Here win I nothing upon this carriage."

When that they came somewhat out of the town, This Sompnour to his
 brother gan to rown; "Brother," quoth he, "here wons* an old rebeck,<14>
 *dwells That had almost as lief to lose her neck. As for to give a penny of her
 good. I will have twelvecence, though that she be wood,* *mad Or
 I will summon her to our office; And yet, God wot, of her know I no vice. But
 for thou canst not, as in this country, Winne thy cost, take here example of
 me." This Sompnour clapped at the widow's gate: "Come out," he said, "thou
 olde very trate;* *trot <15> I trow thou hast some friar or priest
 with thee." "Who clappeth?" said this wife; "benedicite, God save you, Sir,
 what is your sweete will?" "I have," quoth he, "of summons here a bill. Up*
 pain of cursing, looke that thou be *upon To-morrow
 before our archdeacon's knee, To answer to the court of certain things."
 "Now Lord," quoth she, "Christ Jesus, king of kings, So wisly* helpe me, *as
 I not may.* *surely *as I cannot* I have been sick, and that full
 many a day. I may not go so far," quoth she, "nor ride, But I be dead, so
 pricketh it my side. May I not ask a libel, Sir Sompnour, And answer there
 by my procuratour To such thing as men would appose* me?"
 *accuse "Yes," quoth this Sompnour, "pay anon, let see, Twelvecence to me,
 and I will thee acquit. I shall no profit have thereby but lit:*
 *little My master hath the profit and not I. Come off, and let me ride hastily;
 Give me twelvecence, I may no longer tarry."

"Twelvecence!" quoth she; "now lady Sainte Mary So wisly* help me out of
 care and sin, *surely This wide world though that I should
 it win, No have I not twelvecence within my hold. Ye know full well that I am

poor and old; *Kithe your almes* upon me poor wretch." *show your
 charity* "Nay then," quoth he, "the foule fiend me fetch, If I excuse thee,
 though thou should'st be spilt."* *ruined "Alas!" quoth she, "God
 wot, I have no guilt." "Pay me," quoth he, "or, by the sweet Saint Anne, As I
 will bear away thy newe pan For debte, which thou owest me of old, -- When
 that thou madest thine husband cuckold, -- I paid at home for thy
 correction." "Thou liest," quoth she, "by my salvation; Never was I ere now,
 widow or wife, Summon'd unto your court in all my life; Nor never I was but
 of my body true. Unto the devil rough and black of hue Give I thy body and
 my pan also." And when the devil heard her curse so Upon her knees, he
 said in this mannere; "Now, Mabily, mine owen mother dear, Is this your will
 in earnest that ye say?" "The devil," quoth she, "so fetch him ere he dey,*
 die And pan and all, but he will him repent." *unless "Nay,
 olde stoat,* that is not mine intent," *polecat Quoth this
 Sompnour, "for to repente me For any thing that I have had of thee; I would
 I had thy smock and every cloth." "Now, brother," quoth the devil, "be not
 wroth; Thy body and this pan be mine by right. Thou shalt with me to helle
 yet tonight, Where thou shalt knowen of our privity* *secrets
 More than a master of divinity."

And with that word the foule fiend him hent.* *seized Body and
 soul, he with the devil went, Where as the Sompnours have their heritage;
 And God, that maked after his image Mankinde, save and guide us all and
 some, And let this Sompnour a good man become. Lordings, I could have
 told you (quoth this Frere), Had I had leisure for this Sompnour here, After
 the text of Christ, and Paul, and John, And of our other doctors many a one,
 Such paines, that your heartes might agrise,* *be horrified Albeit so,
 that no tongue may devise,* -- *relate Though that I might
 a thousand winters tell, -- The pains of thilke* cursed house of hell
 *that But for to keep us from that cursed place Wake we, and pray we
 Jesus, of his grace, So keep us from the tempter, Satanas. Hearken this
 word, beware as in this case. The lion sits *in his await* alway
 on the watch <16> To slay the innocent, if that he may. Disposen aye your
 heartes to withstond The fiend that would you make thrall and bond; He
 may not tempte you over your might, For Christ will be your champion and
 your knight; And pray, that this our Sompnour him repent Of his misdeeds
 ere that the fiend him hent.* *seize