

Notes to the Sompnour's Tale

1. Trentals: The money given to the priests for performing thirty masses for the dead, either in succession or on the anniversaries of their death; also the masses themselves, which were very profitable to the clergy.

2. Possessioners: The regular religious orders, who had lands and fixed revenues; while the friars, by their vows, had to depend on voluntary contributions, though their need suggested many modes of evading the prescription.

3. In Chaucer's day the most material notions about the tortures of hell prevailed, and were made the most of by the clergy, who preyed on the affection and fear of the survivors, through the ingenious doctrine of purgatory. Old paintings and illuminations represent the dead as torn by hooks, roasted in fires, boiled in pots, and subjected to many other physical torments.

4. Qui cum patre: "Who with the father"; the closing words of the final benediction pronounced at Mass.

5. Askaunce: The word now means sideways or askint; here it means "as if;" and its force is probably to suggest that the second friar, with an ostentatious stealthiness, noted down the names of the liberal, to make them believe that they would be remembered in the holy beggars' orisons.

6. A Godde's kichel/halfpenny: a little cake/halfpenny, given for God's sake.

7. Harlot: hired servant; from Anglo-Saxon, "hyran," to hire; the word was commonly applied to males.

8. Potent: staff; French, "potence," crutch, gibbet.

9. Je vous dis sans doute: French; "I tell you without doubt."

10. Dortour: dormitory; French, "dortoir."

12. The Rules of St Benedict granted peculiar honours and immunities to monks who had lived fifty years -- the jubilee period -- in the order. The usual reading of the words ending the two lines is "loan" or "lone," and "alone;" but to walk alone does not seem to have been any peculiar privilege

of a friar, while the idea of precedence, or higher place at table and in processions, is suggested by the reading in the text.

13. Borel folk: laymen, people who are not learned; "borel" was a kind of coarse cloth.

14. Eli: Elijah (1 Kings, xix.)

15. An emperor Jovinian was famous in the mediaeval legends for his pride and luxury

16. Cor meum eructavit: literally, "My heart has belched forth;" in our translation, (i.e. the Authorised "King James" Version - Transcriber) "My heart is inditing a goodly matter." (Ps. xlv. 1.). "Buf" is meant to represent the sound of an eructation, and to show the "great reverence" with which "those in possession," the monks of the rich monasteries, performed divine service,

17. N'ere thou our brother, shouldest thou not thrive: if thou wert not of our brotherhood, thou shouldst have no hope of recovery.

18. Thomas' life of Ind: The life of Thomas of India - i.e. St. Thomas the Apostle, who was said to have travelled to India.

19. Potestate: chief magistrate or judge; Latin, "potestas;" Italian, "podesta." Seneca relates the story of Cornelius Piso; "De Ira," i. 16.

20. Placebo: An anthem of the Roman Church, from Psalm cxvi. 9, which in the Vulgate reads, "Placebo Domino in regione vivorum" -- "I will please the Lord in the land of the living"

21. The Gysen: Seneca calls it the Gyndes; Sir John Mandeville tells the story of the Euphrates. "Gihon," was the name of one of the four rivers of Eden (Gen. ii, 13).

22. Him that harrowed Hell: Christ. See note 14 to the Reeve's Tale.

23. Mr. Wright says that "it was a common practice to grant under the conventual seal to benefactors and others a brotherly participation in the spiritual good works of the convent, and in their expected reward after death."

24. The friar had received a master's degree.

25. The regular number of monks or friars in a convent was fixed at twelve, with a superior, in imitation of the apostles and their Master; and large religious houses were held to consist of so many convents.