

# The Friar's Tale

By Anonymous

In several convents situated among the mountains which divide France and Italy, a custom prevails that does honour to human nature: in these sequestered cloisters, which are often placed in the most uninhabited parts of the Alps, strangers and travellers are not only hospitably entertained, but a breed of dogs are trained to go in search of wanderers, and are every morning sent from the convent with an apparatus fastened to their collars, containing some refreshment, and a direction to travellers to follow the sagacious animal: many lives are by this means preserved in this wild romantic country. During my last visit to the south of France, I made a trip into this mountainous region, and at the convent of ----, where I was at first induced to prolong my stay by the majestic scenery of its environs; as that became familiar, I was still more forcibly detained by the amiable manners of the reverend father, who was at that time superior of that monastery. From him I received the following pathetic narrative, which I shall deliver, as nearly as I can recollect in his own words:

'About twenty years ago, (said the venerable old man) I was then in the fifty-seventh year of my age, and second of my priority over this house, a most singular event happened through the sagacity of one of these dogs, to which I became myself a witness. Not more than a dozen leagues from hence, there lived a wealthy gentleman, the father of Matilda, who was his only child, and whose history I am going to relate. In the same village lived also Albert, a youth possessed of all the world deems excellent in man, except one single article, which was the only object of regard in the eyes of Matilda's father. Albert, with a graceful person, cultivated mind, elegance of manners, and captivating sweetness of disposition, was poor in fortune; and Matilda's father was blind to every other consideration; blind to his daughter's real happiness, and a stranger to the soul-delighting sensation of raising worth and genius, depressed by poverty, to affluence and independence. Therefore, on Matilda's confession of unalterable attachment to her beloved Albert, the cruel father resolved to take advantage of the power which the laws here give a man, to dispose both of his daughter and his wealth at pleasure; the latter he resolved to bequeath to his nephew Conrad, and Matilda was sent to a neighbouring convent; where, after a year's probation, she was to be compelled to renounce both Albert and the world.

'Conrad, whose artful insinuations had long worked on the weak mind of this misguided father, was not content with having thus separated these lovers, but by inciting persecution from the petty creditors of Albert, drove him from his home; and after many fruitless endeavours to communicate with his lost mistress, he fled for sanctuary to this convent. Here (said the hoary monk) I became acquainted with the virtues of that excellent young man, for he was our guest about ten months.

'In all this time, Matilda passed her days in wretchedness and persecution. The abbess of the convent, sister Theresa, who, to the disgrace of her profession, and our holy church, disguised the disposition of a devil in the garment of a saint, became the friend and minister of Conrad's wicked purposes, and never ceased to persecute Matilda by false reports concerning Albert, urging her to turn her thoughts from him to that heavenly spouse to whom she was about to make an everlasting vow. Matilda scorned her artifice, and love for Albert resisted every effort of the abbess to shake her confidence in his fidelity.

'She was in the last week of her novitiate, when her father became dangerously ill, and

desired once more to see her. Conrad used every endeavour to prevent it, but in vain; she was sent for; and the interview was only in the presence of Conrad and the nurse: but when the dying father perceived the altered countenance of his once-beloved child, his heart condemned him; he reflected that the wealth which he was going to quit for ever belonged to her, and not to Conrad, and he resolved to expiate his cruelty by cancelling the will, and consenting to the union of Albert and Matilda. Having made a solemn declaration of his purpose, he called for the will; then taking Matilda's hand in one of his, and presenting the fatal writing with the other, he said, "Forgive thy farther!—Destroy this paper, and be happy; so be my sins forgiven in heaven!" The joy of his heart at this first effort of benevolence, was too much for his exhausted spirits, and he expired as he uttered the last words, letting fall the will which he was going to deliver.

'Matilda's gentle soul was torn with contending passions; she had lost her father at the moment when he had bestowed fresh life; and, in the contest betwixt joy and grief, she sunk on the lifeless corpse, in an agony of gratitude and filial tenderness.

'Meanwhile Conrad did not let slip this opportunity to compleat his plan, which, by the dying words of his uncle, had been so nearly defeated. He secured the will, and corrupted the nurse by promises and bribes never to reveal what she had witnessed; half persuading the interested, doating old woman, that it was only the effect of delirium in the deceased. This idea was but too well supported by the first question of Matilda, who exclaimed, as she came to herself, "Where am I?—sure 'tis a dream! my father could not say I should be happy; he could not bid me tear that fatal will!—Speak, am I really awake, or does my fancy mock me with such sounds?" The artful Conrad assured her that nothing of the kind had passed, telling her, that her father had only mentioned Albert's name to curse him; and, with his last breath, commanded her to take the veil at the expiration of the week. All this the perjured nurse confirmed; and then Matilda, being perfectly recovered, first saw the horrors of her situation. It was in vain for her to deny what they asserted, or remonstrate against their combined perfidy. She was presently, by force, conveyed to her nunnery, in a state of mind much easier to imagine than describe.

'Here she was more violently than ever attacked by Theresa's persecution, who urged, with increasing vehemence, the pretended positive commands of her dying father; and, by the advice of Conrad, used severities of conventual discipline, which almost deprived the devoted victim of her reason; still pleading that *religion* justified her conduct. Can it be wondered that such cruel treatment should, at length, disturb the piety and faith of poor Matilda; and induce her to exclaim, with presumptuous bitterness, against the institutions of our church, and brand the sacred ordinances of our religion with unjust suspicions?

"Why," said she, "why are these massy gates permitted to exist; why are these hated walls, sad prisons of innocence and youth, where fraud and cruelty have power, and to torture and confine the helpless?—Religion is the plea; Religion which should bring peace, and not affliction to its votaries; then surely that religion which justifies these gloomy dungeons must be false, and I will abjure it; yes, I will fly to happier regions, where prisons are allotted only to the guilty; there no false vows are exacted, but Albert and Matilda may yet be happy."

"The possibility of an escape had never before presented itself, and, indeed, it could never have occurred but to one whose reason was disordered, for she well knew that the doors were secured by many bars and locks, and that the keys were always deposited beneath the pillow of the abbess.

'Her imagination was now too much heated to attend to any obstacles, and with a mixture of foresight, inspired by insanity, she packed up all her little ornaments of value, carelessly drew on her cloaths, and put in her pocket some bread and provision which had been left in her cell; then

wrapping round her elegant form one of the blankets from the bed, she lighted a taper, and fearless walked towards the cloister door, idly expecting that it would fly open of its own accord to innocence like her's.—And now, methinks I see her with hair dishevelled, face pale and wan, her large black eyes wildly staring, and the whole of her ghastly figure, lighted by the feeble glimmer of her taper, majestically stalking through the gloomy-vaulted hall. Arrived at the great door, she found it partly open, and, scarcely believing what she saw, she quickly glided through it; but, as she passed, an iron bar, which she had not observed, and which projected at the height of her forehead, slightly grazed her temple; and though she scarcely felt the wound, yet it added new horrors to her look, by covering her ghostly face with streaks of blood.

‘Although Matilda had never considered the improbability of passing this door, she now reflected with wonder how she had passed it, and fear of a discovery began to operate, as she, with more cautious steps, moved silently through the cloister, towards the outer gate; at which, when she approached, she heard Theresa’s voice whispering these words: “Adieu! dear Conrad;—but remember that your life, as well as mine, depend on the secrecy of our conduct.” Then tenderly embracing each other, a man ran swiftly from her, and the abbess, turning round, stood motionless with horror at the bloody spectre firmly approaching. The guilty mind of Theresa could only suppose the horrid vision to be the departed spirit of one whom she thought her cruelties had murdered; and while the panic seized her whole frame, a gust of wind from the gate extinguishing the taper, Matilda seemed to vanish, as she resolutely pushed through the postern door still open.

‘Theresa was too well hackneyed in the ways of vice to let fear long take possession of her prudence: the night was dark, and it would have been in vain to pursue the phantom, if her recovering courage had suggested it; she therefore resolved to fasten both the doors, and return in silence to her own apartment, waiting in all the perturbation of anxiety and guilt, till morning should explain this dreadful mystery.

‘Meanwhile Matilda, conscious of her innocence, and rejoicing in her escape, pursued a wandering course through the unfrequented paths of this mountainous district, during three whole days and nights; partly supporting her fatigue by the provisions she had taken with her, but more from a degree of insanity, which gave her powers beyond her natural strength: yet in her distracted mind, this last instance of Theresa’s wickedness, had excited a disgust and loathing, bordering on fury, against every religious or monastic institution.’

The monk had proceeded thus far, when he was called away to attend the duties of his convent, and promised to continue the narrative at his return.

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The father soon returned, and proceeded with his narrative as follows:

‘During the whole twelve months of Matilda’s noviciate, no intercourse of any kind had passed betwixt her and Albert, who continued under the protection of this house, alike ignorant of her father’s death, and of all the other transactions which I have now related: yet knowing that the term of her probation was about to expire, he resolved once more to attempt some means of gaining admittance to her convent. With this view he made a journey thither in the disguise of a peasant; and on the very morning on which his mistress had escaped, he presented himself at the gate.

‘Conrad, who had, by letter from the abbess, been informed that her prisoner was fled, was desired to come immediately, and devise some excuse to the sisters for what had happened; for,

although both to Conrad and Theresa the fact was evident enough, yet the sister nuns were distracted in conjectures: till, by one of those artful stretches of assurance which consummate villainy finds it easy to exert, Conrad recommended a plausible expedient.—And now religion (that constant comfort of the good, and powerful weapon of the wicked) presented itself as the only resource in this emergency. Theresa was taught to say, for the present, that she had no doubt the sinful reluctance of Matilda to receive the veil had excited the wrath of heaven; and that she was miraculously snatched away, or, perhaps, annihilated, to prevent the dreadful profanation of the holy ceremony at which she must that day have assisted.

‘This plan had been settled, and Conrad was going, with all haste, in pursuit of the fugitive, when, at the outer gate, he met the pretended peasant.—The penetrating eye either of love or hatred soon discover a friend or enemy, however carefully disguised—Conrad and Albert knew each other—Instantly the flames of hatred, jealousy, and fury, kindled in their bosoms; and Conrad, seizing Albert by the throat, exclaimed, “I have caught the villain, the sacrilegious ravisher!” A severe struggle ensued, in which Conrad drew his sword; but Albert, who had no weapon, dexterously wrenched the instrument from the hand of Conrad, and plunged it in his bosom— The villain fell; while Albert fled with the utmost precipitation from the bloody scene, and returned in the evening to this convent.

‘How shall I describe (said the good old monk) the contrast betwixt the looks of our unhappy youth at this moment, and on the preceding morning when he left us!—Then innocence, faintly enlightened by a gleam of hope, smiled in his features, as he cheerfully bid us adieu, and said, “Perhaps I may again hear tidings of Matilda;—should the will of heaven deny me happiness with her, I will come back resigned, and dedicate my future life to holy meditation void of guilt.”—But now, he returned breathless and pale, his hands besmeared with blood, his limbs trembling; he could only utter in faltering words, “Save me, reverend fathers! save me from justice, from myself, if possible!—Behold a murderer!”

‘Some hours elapsed before we could collect from him the circumstances of a crime which had produced this extreme degree of horror and compunction in a mind so virtuous and innocent as that of Albert; and having heard the whole, in which he took all the blame to his own hasty conduct, we promised him protection; and endeavoured, though in vain, for two whole days to speak comfort to his troubled mind, and to inspire confidence in the boundless mercy of his God. On the third day, we were diverted from this arduous task by the return and behaviour of one of our dogs; the poor animal, who had been out all day, was restless, and shewed evident marks of a desire that we should accompany him to the relief of some poor wretch, who was unable to reach the convent.

‘Father Jerome and I resolved to follow him; and we proceeded about half a mile, when we turned from the beaten track, guided by our dog, to a retired glen where human feet had hardly ever trod before. Here, on a rock which projected over a dreadful precipice, sat an unhappy, half-distracted object;—I need not tell you it was Matilda. She had crept, with wondrous difficulty, up a steep ascent to a ledge of rock which overhung a fearful chasm:—the very recollection of the place freezes my blood! When we first discovered her she was eagerly clinging to a branch of yew, which grew from a fissure in the rock above, and which half shaded her melancholy figure.

‘The dog followed her steps; but Jerome and I, unable to ascend a path so dangerous, stood, unobserved by her, at a little distance, on the opposite side of the glen.

‘When Matilda first perceived the dog, she looked with wildness round her; then fixing her eyes with tenderness on the animal, she said, “Are you returned to me again?—and are you now my friend?— Fie! fie upon it! shall even dogs seduce the helpless!—Perhaps you repent of what

you would have done.—You look piteously!—Poor brute! you know I followed you all the day long, and would have followed you for ever, but you led me to a detested convent!—thither Matilda will not go—Why should you lead me to a prison?—A dog cannot plead religion in excuse for treachery!”

‘She paused; then taking a rosary of pearls from her side, she fantastically wound it about the dog’s neck, saying, “I have a boon to ask, and thus I bribe you; these precious beads are your’s: now guide me to the top of this high mountain, that I may look about me, and see all the world!—Then I shall know whether my Albert still be living—Ah no! it cannot be! for then Matilda would be happy! and that can never, never be!” She then burst into a flood of tears, which seemed to give her some relief.

‘When I thought she was sufficiently composed, Jerome and I discovered ourselves. On this she shrieked, and hid her face; but, calling to her, I said, “Albert is still alive.” She looked at us, till, by degrees, she had wildly examined us from head to foot; then turning to the dog, she seized him by the throat, and would have dashed him down the precipice, saying, “Ah, traitor! is it thus thou hast betrayed me?”—But the animal struggled and got from her. She then firmly looked at us, and cried, “Here I am safe, deceitful monsters! safe from the tyranny of your religious persecution; for if you approach one single step, I plunge into this yawning gulph, and so escape your power.—Ha! ha! ha!” Then, recovering from a frantic laugh, she said, “Yet tell me, did you not say that Albert lives? Oh! that such words had come from any lips but those of a false monk.—I know your arts; with *you* such falsehoods are religious frauds; this is a pious lie, to ensnare a poor helpless linnet to its cage: but I tell you, cunning priests! here I defy you; nor will I ever quit this rock, till Albert’s voice assures me I may do it safely.”

‘You will easily imagine (continued the monk) the situation of Jerome and myself. Ignorant then of the manner in which Matilda had escaped, we could only know from her words and actions that it was she herself, and that her senses were impaired; perplexed how to entice her from this perilous retreat, and knowing that one false step would dash her headlong down the dreadful chasm that parted us, at length I said, “Gentle maid, be comforted; Albert and Matilda may yet be happy.” Then leaving Jerome concealed among the bushes to watch the poor lunatic, I hastened to the convent to relate what I had seen.

‘Meanwhile Matilda, looking with vacant stare around her, from time to time repeated my words, “*Albert and Matilda may yet be happy!*” then pausing, she seemed delighted with the sound reechoed from the rocks, again repeating, “*Albert and Matilda may yet be happy!*” still varying the modulations of her voice, as joy, grief, doubt, despair, or hope alternately prevailed in her disordered mind.’

At this interesting period of the narrative, the venerable father was a second time called out, and promised to conclude his story when he returned.

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I will not long detain you, resumed the reverend friar, with the effect my narrative had on the dejected Albert, how he at first exclaimed, ‘Can there be comfort for a guilty wretch like Albert?’ and eagerly ran towards the place; then moved more calmly on my representing how fatal might be surprise to one in so dangerous a situation; and, at length, shrinking back as he approached the spot, and turning to me, he said, ‘Father, I will go no further! Heaven has ordained, as a punishment for the murder I have committed, that I should become a witness to the shocking death of the poor lost Matilda; at my approach, in frantic extacy, she will quit her

hold, and perish before my sight.' I urged him to proceed, but it was in vain, he sat down on a bank, and was silently wrapt in an agony of irresolution, when he heard, at a little distance, the well known voice of the poor lunatic, still repeating my words, '*Albert and Matilda may yet be happy!*' Roused by the sound, he started up, and cautiously advancing, he exclaimed, 'Just heaven, fulfil those words, and let them indeed be happy!'

Matilda knew the voice, and carefully treading a path, which would have seemed impracticable to one possessed of reason, she descended from the ledge on which she sat, and approached with cautious steps; hut at the sight of Albert, she flew impetuously forward, till, seeing me, she as suddenly ran back, and would have again retreated to the rock, shrieking, 'It is all illusion! priestcraft! it is no real Albert, and I am betrayed!' We pursued, and caught her; then finding my religious garb augmented the disorder of her mind, I withdrew, leaving only Albert to calm her needless fears.

But no persuasion even from him could induce her to come within view of the convent gates; I provided, therefore, accommodations for her in the cottage of a labourer, at some little distance; where, for many days, her delirium continued, while a fever threatened a speedy dissolution. During this period, Albert was labouring under all the anxiety which his situation could inspire: the deed he had committed sat heavy on his soul, and he dared not hope for an event, which his own guilty thoughts reproached him with having not deserved.

At length the crisis of the fever shewed signs of a recovery, and now his joy was without bounds, even the blood of Conrad seemed a venial crime, and he triumphed in the anticipation of reward for all he had suffered: but this happiness was of short duration, for at that time I received a letter from the abbess Theresa, demanding back the fugitive, whose retreat she had discovered. This requisition I knew I must obey; and giving the letter to Albert, I was going to explain the necessity of my compliance, when he burst out in bitter execrations against this and all religious houses; cursing their establishment as a violation of the first law of nature, which commands an intercourse between the sexes.

Having heard with a mixture of patience, pity, and resentment, all that his rage or disappointment could suggest, I answered nearly in these words, beginning calmly, but by degrees assuming all the authority the case required: 'My son, blame not the pious institutions of our holy church, sanctified by the observance of many ages; nor impiously arraign the mysterious decrees of providence, which often produces good from evil. This sacred edifice has been consecrated like many others by our pious ancestors, for purposes honourable to heaven, and useful to mankind; these hospitable doors are ever open to distress; and the chief object of our care is to discover and relieve it. This holy mansion has long been an asylum against the oppression of human laws, which drove thee from thine home; and, but a few days since thou thyself blessed an institution which saved the wretched Matilda, perishing with madness. Nay, at this very moment, its mercy shelters from the hand of justice, a murderer! yet thy presumption dares deny its general use, from thine own sense of partial inconvenience, and execrates monastic institutions, because by a separation of the sexes, lewdness and sensuality are checked: but know, short sighted youth, that the world will not remain unpeopled, because a few of its members consecrate their lives to holy meditation; nor shall the human species become extinct, because Albert and Matilda cannot be united to propagate a race of infidels and murderers.' I stopped, for I perceived the gentle Albert was touched with my rebuke; and falling on his knees, he cried in the emphatic words of scripture, 'Father! I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight.' 'It is enough, my son, I replied, and now I will compassionate your situation; I will do more, for though I cannot detain Matilda longer than till she is well enough to be removed; yet in

that time (if heaven approve my endeavours) I may contribute to your happiness, by interceding with her father, and should I fail in the attempt, this roof, which thy hasty passion has profaned, shall yet be a refuge to thee from despair; and I will strive to raise thy thoughts above the trifling disappointments of a transitory world.'

I could not wait the reply of Albert, (said the prior) being at this time called out to welcome the arrival of a stranger, who they said was dangerously ill; and who proved to be no other than the wounded Conrad. He, in a few words, explained the motive of his visit, telling me, that immediately after the rencounter, dreading that awful presence in which no secret is concealed, and to which he apprehended he was summoned by his own sword in the injured hand of Albert, he had vowed, if heaven would grant him life, to repair the wrongs he had committed. He had already executed a deed, resigning all the fortune of her father in favour of Matilda; he had declared his guilty commerce with Theresa, that she might present, or suffer punishment; he had paid all the debts of Albert, and justified his character to the world; and finally, he had resolved to implore the prayers of myself, and the venerable fathers of this house, to make him worthy of becoming one of our holy order; that if he lived he might be useful; or if he died he might be happy.

The prior then concluded this interesting narrative, by saying, that Albert and Matilda were united, and are still blessed in each others virtues, improved by difficulties thus surmounted; that Theresa had too far profaned the laws of heaven to have any confidence in religion, and died by her own hands; but that Conrad recovered slowly from his wound, and, after living many years an honour to the order he professed, he died in peace: the faithful dog (he said) was the favourite companion of Albert and Matilda, who had begged him from the convent, and encouraged him to pursue his task of discovering travellers who had lost their way, but whom he now brought to the hospitable mansion of this virtuous pair.

He then briefly hinted arguments in favour of monastic institutions; yet liberally allowing that the religion of his country might in certain points be wrong, and knowing me to be a protestant, I suppose that he acknowledged more than I ought in justice to his candour to relate. For this reason I have purposely suppressed the name and situation of his convent; but I shall ever remember these words, with which he finished this discourse. 'True religion (said he) howsoever it may vary in outward ceremonies, or articles of faith, will always teach you to do good, to love and help each other; it will teach you that no sin, however secret, can long remain concealed; and that when the world and all its vanities have palled the sated appetite, you must seek refuge in conscious innocence, or a sincere repentance.'