

Friar Tuck ~ Chapter 1

The three primeval unities:

One Divinity; one truth; one point of liberty.

Triads of Bardism

Fountaindale Abbey, Advent 1199.

The arched oak door banged open with an almighty crash. The silently dining monks sprang to their feet, ready to run.

"Brother Michael Tuck." The Sub-Prior swept in with a tight grin. "The Abbot wishes to see you. Right now."

Under his tonsure of nut-brown hair, Tuck's auburn eyes turned dark with dread.

"I've never seen the Sub so happy. You're in for it, Tuck. Stay steady." The friendly whisper from one of his brothers set Tuck's hands trembling.

The brethren sat, muttering in annoyance and relief, while Tuck slid out between their bald pates to answer his summons.

Early twilight hazed golden-marine through the open cloisters as the Sub-Prior hurried Tuck towards the chapter house. Tuck scuttled along, scrambling for his wits.

They fairly raced across the empty scriptorium, then down a tight corridor to the Abbot's office. The Sub-Prior knocked two loud raps, shot Tuck a withering glance, then flung open the door.

The Abbot of Fountaindale Abbey sat bolt upright behind a broad desk of plain timber, deeply engaged with a large, curling letter. A purple ribbon hung from its cracked wax seal. The flame-topped tallows of a three-armed candelabrum guttered high on the right, fluttering warm yellow light over the old stone walls.

The Sub-Prior stopped just inside the door, and nodded for Tuck to advance alone.

The Abbot folded his letter with a snap.

"Brother Michael." The Abbot cut Tuck to the quick with a flash of his stern blue eyes. "You know why you are here. Please explain yourself."

Tuck's excuses turned to dust on his tongue. He had no idea which of his mischiefs had been discovered. Mindful of past successes with this tactic, Tuck adopted his best shamed-face.

"Father Abbot, a wicked devil tempted me, and I was not strong enough to resist. I beg your forgiveness."

"Your confession will help you in heaven, Brother Michael, but not here." The Abbot's prayer-sharpened gaze turned over every stone in Tuck's soul. "My forgiveness is not what you need."

Tuck's toes tingled in alarm. The Abbot usually went for sensational rollickings, not grim resignation.

"Father, actually, I'm not sure what-."

"Stealing from the Abbey stores."

"Oh, but Father Abbot!" Tuck's voice quaked with relief. "I haven't stolen from the Abbey stores."

The Abbot cast a blistering look over Tuck's shoulder.

"Brother Michael," the Sub-Prior spoke up loud and clear, "I personally witnessed you, this morning, passing Abbey supplies to peasants over the back gate."

The words pierced Tuck's ears like hate-driven nails.

He'd almost forgotten.

On his way to the kitchen after Matins, he'd come across a half-frozen little family begging at the Abbey gate. Moved by their need, he'd not thought twice about sharing from the brethren's surplus. Of course, he hadn't asked permission, but never imagined it theft. Stealing from the Abbey was stealing from God.

Tuck's guts twisted.

"Father Abbot," Tuck appealed with all his heart, "those people had *nothing*. This harsh winter-."

"This winter has been harsh on us all." Sadness shaded the Abbot's voice.

Tuck quailed.

Practiced at finessing misdeeds, justifying goodness flummoxed him. He'd expected punishment for the brewery behind the chicken coop, or helping a brother slip out at night, but not this.

The Abbot stood to pronounce judgment, a dour crease on his brow.

"Brother Michael Tuck, for robbing Fountaindale, you are sentenced to 50 strikes of the lash, and immediate expulsion."

Tuck couldn't breathe. He'd lost everything, ruined by an act of charity.

"Father-." Tears leaked from Tuck's eyes.

"Michael, I will not hear your appeal." The Abbot held up a broad, flat hand.

"You are no longer a coenobite of this Abbey. You are a gyrovague, a vagrant monk, of no interest to me. May Our Lady show you the mercy I cannot." The Abbot stared down at his desk, implacable.

The Sub-Prior approached from behind, righteous satisfaction ringing in every step.

"But Father-."

"Father Abbot has spoken." The Sub-Prior took a tight grip of Tuck's elbow.

"Brother Michael, come with me."

Tuck wanted to throw off the Sub-Prior's grasping hand, but shame sucked the air from his lungs, leaving him too weak to resist.

In charge of rich holdings and a ready labour force, Abbots often ensured monthly returns before heavenly rewards. Fountaindale's Abbot was one of the honest few, a true spiritual Father. To be judged a thief by the man, curdled Tuck's soul.

The brethren gathered in witness on the far side of the whipping yard. Their habits hung ghostly in the cold slanting dusk, faces obscured under full cowls. Tuck wanted to call to his friends. Fear of none answering, deadened his tongue.

Disaster tore at Tuck's heart.

As one of Fountaindale's coenobites, Tuck enjoyed close-knit community, a strong roof over his head and at least two proper meals a day. Life at the Abbey had filled all his future.

Expelled, he had only his habit to protect him from the wicked winds of the world. Rootless and unwarranted, vagrant monks were notorious for living by wit first, and sanctity second. Tuck would be cursed out of every tower and town in Christendom.

Tuck's thoughts focused in immediate terror of the lash as a stout pair of brothers tied his hands to the time-worn whipping post.

Friar Tuck ~ Chapter 2

The three obligations of humankind:

To suffer; to change; to choose.

Triads of Bardism

Tuck regained consciousness deep into the night, slow with cold. Sawing blades of pain sculled his back when he lurched to his feet, his hands still bound. A scurrying wind flew freezing fingers over Tuck's bruised body, triggering bouts of violent shivering.

The high heavens held a scatter of winter-brittle stars, echoing the exile in his soul.

Then, a cowed monk stood beside him, tenderly untying Tuck's hands. Without word, the brother took off his cloak and wrapped Tuck firmly into its warmth. Tuck was formulating his thanks when the mystery monk shoved a heavy bag into his arms, and hustled him toward the Abbey's gate.

Tuck reeled through the portal in a fog of pain and confusion. Seeking direction, he looked back.

A trick of moonlight revealed the Abbot of Fountaindale's cobalt eyes under the mystery cowl. He gave Tuck a subtle smile, then shut the Abbey door.

Tuck thought of thumping and shouting until they let him return, but couldn't summon the will to raise his fist. He'd be banging 'til doomsday.

Holding back a wretched sob, Tuck reached into his bag to adjust its weight, and discovered a sack of wine. Grateful beyond measure, he swallowed three swift gulps. The bursts of blackberry and vanilla in his mouth were sure signs of the Abbot's private recolt.

Gathering all his courage, Tuck took two large paces, then stopped short. His first instinct had been to head for the closest village, but he would only be a burden there. Tuck cast about, seeking what lay in each direction of England's dreaming lands.

The thick December night reduced the surrounding fields to a series of swells, bleak as the North Sea. Beyond them lay only foreboding.

Nearby, a bare, black oak swept up from the earth. Its broad limbs spread wide, then high, splitting into scores of branches that ended invisibly in the wind-stripped sky. Tuck shuffled over a patch of crackling, frozen mud to lean against the tree's rippled trunk. His back ached terribly as he remembered his blind contentment at dinner, scant hours before.

Tuck shed a tear that iced his eyelash. The pain would pass if he could rest, but he needed to find shelter. The cold tugged at his toes like river fish.

Taking plentiful nips of the blessed wine to keep warm, Tuck tried to assemble some options. The only place he could think to find food and firewood was a forest. Tuck withdrew what turned out to be a venison pastry from his miraculous bag, and munched it in meditation.

Venerable Sherwood began a few miles to the east, but hunting there was strictly forbidden. The woodland belonged to the King, and Sheriff's patrols enforced the Royal privilege. Tuck wondered if he dare break the law on his first night as an outcast. His hands chilled to numbness as he stalled, but no other way forward presented itself.

Tuck prayed that a quiet tread would keep him safe, clasped his cloak and

belted his bag.

The wind harangued him, homeless and forlorn, across the clodded dales, blustering through the twiggy hedgerows as it gusted. Tuck clamped down on his rattling teeth. If he stopped before he found cover, they'd find his corpse silver-shrouded in icy Advent dew.

Tuck squinted into the pre-dawn distance. Sherwood's sentinels beckoned with arms of pewter against the slated sky.

A drop in temperature muffled the stars as Tuck closed the final half-mile. With false-dawn turning the edges of the world to white, he clambered over the boundary-fence, then pioneered between the trees.

The ground melded into a crisp carpet of old leaves crunching underfoot. The falling rays of the rising sun revealed the forest in soft-edged shades of black and tan. Tuck trudged on, his eyes bright.

Already, the old stone Abbey with its solid certainties and comfortable community seemed no more real than Camelot. Seeking asylum in the arboreal arms of Sherwood, existence itself fundamentally changed.

Tuck followed any trail leading farther into the woodland, stopping at noon to catch his breath on a rise above a fast-flowing stream. The trees strode and gaited away on all sides, trunks and branches turning tones of old amber against the centuries-green humus. Tumbles of sunbeams breathed up steamy twists of dew from the damp earth, filling the air with a misty golden silence.

Tuck let his feet follow the stream-bank to a natural ford, casting a happy smile over the fat fish frolicking under the water.

Crossing the melodic shallows on three flat stones, an unusual firmness braced Tuck's soul. The reality of his destitute situation didn't shock him anymore. Where he'd come from was gone, and the future in heaven's hands. With a lift of his chin, he dedicated himself to the present.

Near mid-afternoon, Tuck paused to shake the last drops of wine from his sack. Here in the deepwood, trees spired from foundations broad as three good men, flying boughs as buttresses to Saxon-arched branches. Oak and elm grew so close, their roots twined before gnarling beneath the loam.

Framed by the sable pillars was a luminescent emptiness. It reminded Tuck of Lincoln Cathedral at Easter. His ordinary senses detected only air between the trees, but his spirit thrilled to the surge of the Sacred Breath.

With the splendour of Sherwood rising all around, freedom's exhilarating invitation buoyed Tuck's tiring legs. He tramped on with the sun swinging westward, low into streamy clouds of caramel-cream.

A pair of deer capered onto Tuck's path, sliding to a stiff-legged halt when they caught his scent. He marvelled at their thick winter coats, then the nobility in their huge, hazel eyes. They were the first living creatures Tuck had seen since leaving Fountaindale, and his heart opened in spontaneous friendship.

The lead deer, a young male, lowed a great call and stamped the ground. The second, a sleek female, nibbled at leaf-fall, glancing up as if in invitation to share. Tuck chuckled at the idea, startling the deer into bounding away.

Smiling as darkness crept over the cloud-knuckled sky, Tuck looked for somewhere to spend the night. Straight-standing maple spaced this spinney, but a thick stand of dogwood clustered nearby.

Tuck squeezed between the trunks to find a natural covert three paces wide.

Animal traces indicated the place was occupied during summer, but there was nothing fresher. He shook off his cloak and put down his bag, already right at home.

Feeling lucky, and therefore blessed, he gave thanks to the Holy Mother for her care. Gathering a swift armful of kindling, Tuck also gave a grin for his capability.

The campfire's first flames warmed his toes magnificently.

Friar Tuck ~ Chapter 3

The three things that is Divine in all things:

What is most useful; what is most necessary; what is most beautiful.

Triads of Bardism

Over the following days and weeks, Tuck's mind plunged into the liquid quietude that exists far from human doings.

Using skills his fingers remembered from boyhood, he set noose-traps for rabbit and wood-rat. To supplement his diet, he fished the frozen-edged streams of Sherwood for rainbow-tinted trout.

The season's mid-afternoon sundown saw Tuck collecting firewood as he ambled back to his covert. There, he'd built a nesty bender, complete with buried fire pit at its mouth.

During the long nights Tuck fed his fire, laughing and brooding over his life, sometimes singing to himself.

Living for survival, and finding abundance, transformed Tuck's faith. The routines of religion fell away. Instead, prayers leaped to his lips, and the Divine occupied all his thoughts. Advent passed with each breath tasting like sacrament within the peace-vaulting, winter-fresh forest.

Tuck's contemplative state shattered on an overcast, January afternoon. He was walking to keep warm, skin sodden under his soaked clothes, when a sound that wasn't natural to Sherwood tickled his ears. Tuck stopped, head tilted like a puzzled dog's.

Through the swaddling drapes of misting rain, the jingle of a horse's harness, more than one, and muted hoof beats, carried between the trees. The metallic jangle and hollow stump grew louder, seeming to come from everywhere at once.

Tuck disappeared into the nearby foliage of an evergreen yew, just as a company of Sheriff's Foresters came into view.

The Foresters warded the King's hunting rights like guards in a tree-barred jail. Ancient laws empowered them to penalise, torture and kill without need for evidence, court or judge. Even the innocent avoided their patrols at all costs. They'd find a gyrovague guilty of everything.

Tuck gasped to see them in the backwoods. They usually stayed on the outskirts of Sherwood, as poachers are easiest to catch on their way home.

Wrapped in greased skins against the drizzle, five Foresters trotted their horses along a narrow path, cradling heavy crossbows.

Tuck hunkered onto his heels as they ambled by, ten yards in front, the blunt heads of the horses hanging parallel to the ground. Three horses passed Tuck's position without catching his scent, but the fourth reared as if stung. The beast brayed out a sharp staccato, then lunged straight towards Tuck's hiding place.

Tuck was dashing away before the rider shouted his surprise.

Tense twanging syncopated the thwack of a foot-long crossbow-bolt slapping into the side of a nearby chestnut. Tuck lifted his robes, picked up his knees, and ran like Holiness was a foot race.

The Foresters spurred their horses up the side of the chase, and onto Tuck's tail. The riders crouched low over their saddles, eyes fixed on Tuck's retreating form. They couldn't fire crossbows from this hunting half-gallop, but were catching up fast.

Tuck jinked clumps of tangling brake, keeping a vital few yards ahead of his

pursuers. Splashing across a sudden stream, he spun right to hare up a boulder covered slope. Close behind, the horses surged over the water, sending black divots waking into the air.

Halfway up the slope, scrambling past a boulder the size of a house, Tuck was too shocked to scream when something snagged his ankle. He crashed to the ground, then was hoisted backward under the boulder. A pair of bony hands clamped over Tuck's mouth, and a bearded face glared into his frantic eyes.

The sounds of pursuit rushed around the hidden hollow, the horses' hooves hammering overhead, then faded as the Foresters crested the hill, and tally-hoo'ed away.

The hermit peeled his hands off Tuck's mouth, but scowled at him to keep quiet. Tuck lay motionless as the hermit listened intently for a long time, his face rigid.

"*You're* the idiot who lights a fire every night, aren't you?" The hermit finally whispered, unmistakably furious.

Tuck's jaw dropped open.

"You're the one who brought them this way. *Idiot.* I've been here three years, and the Foresters haven't ever come this close. *You* arrive, and they follow quick as pestilence to a corpse!"

Tuck made to reply, but the hermit bristled his chest-long beard in perfect outrage.

"Shut *up.* You don't have the right to speak. *Idiot.*" The hermit poked his head above the rim of the hollow, listened again to the silent woodland, then slithered his skinny form free.

Tuck stayed still a moment more, confounded, then followed, squeezing through the gap on undignified heaves of his elbows.

"Sure, now you'll need a mug of wine to steady your idiot nerves, won't you?" The hermit stood proudly, as if the boulder-strewn slope were his ancestral hall.

Tuck pulled bits of twigs out of his hair, catching up to events. Giddy, but finally given a chance to speak, he determined not to be out-done.

"Not only idiots' nerves are soothed by wine," Tuck pitched his voice low and friendly, "but only a fool offers what he does not have."

"*Ah,*" the hermit replied with a sneaky grin, "but *only* an idiot looks a gift-horse in the mouth, and insults it to boot."

Tuck's wit deserted him: "You mean you *do* have wine?"

The hermit's ringing laughter sounded off the boulders as he traipsed down the slope, waving for Tuck to come along.

The hermit's long strides took the men into Sherwood's deepest recesses, dusky and moist, dotted with stag-headed oak, and wolds of split-trunk hazel.

"In summer, it really is very pleasant here." The hermit waved an airy hand, as if presenting an unseasonal garden. "And over there," he motioned definitively to his left, "we have the wine cellar."

Tuck didn't know what to make of this outlandish figure. The hermit appeared more or less out of his wits, but he was a bit too sharp *with* his wit to be completely mad.

The hermit took Tuck to a grove of tall ash. The trees encircled an innocent-looking pile of rotted leaves and wind-fallen branches.

The hermit reached a long arm beneath, and pulled out a swollen wine sack.

"What did I tell you?" He guffawed at Tuck's stupefied expression. "You're an

idiot."

The first slug of wine curled Tuck's tongue tight, pickled his tonsils, and scorched down his throat to set his belly ablaze.

"Now, that's forest wine if I ever tasted the like!" Tuck sputtered. "What d'ye make it from? Nettles?"

The hermit looked at Tuck as if he was beyond salvation.

"If forest wine could be sold for what this cost, we'd all be rich." The hermit poured a long arch of ink-red ichor cleanly into his mouth. "*This*, my forest friend of unfortunate taste, is the finest French mountain wine money can buy." The hermit smacked his lips. "*C'est un premier cru du Château Mas, qui enrobe Le Pic Saint Loup comme un poème.*"

Tuck eyed the hermit dubiously at the sudden French, but didn't refuse the offered wine. The second abrasive mouthful quenched better than the first. By the third, Tuck thoroughly enjoyed the spicy attack on his senses.

Handing back the sack, wanting to laugh in relief at their escape, Tuck was overtaken by deep affection for his rescuer.

The hermit took the wine with an indulgent squint of his eyes as he caught Tuck's mood.

"Aye, well," the hermit rattled his beard, "since the All Merciful looks after idiots and drunks, you can be thankful for your double blessing."

Tuck laughed from deep inside, mainly at himself, but also for the forgotten pleasure of sympathetic company. A tear or two threatened to escape alongside his chuckles as their merriment faded away.

The trees stretched up to divide the eastern sky into sets of early stars. The architectural perfection of static-lightning limbs and straight-laced trunks stitched Heaven to Earth.

"I was serious about your camp." The hermit stood, gesturing Tuck to follow. "The Foresters only care about those who hunt the deer ... Or, who are too stupid to be ignored. You can stay with me tonight, but will have to find your own way tomorrow."

Tuck accompanied the hermit with a spring in his step, wondering how the forest air could be so dark, when the ground glowed beneath his feet.

The hermit led Tuck past a snagging thicket and into a countryman's snug. In a trice he'd lit a fat beeswax candle, its flame dancing blue and white. Tuck took another long pull of wine as the hermit busied about.

Sturdy log walls sloped at a low angle toward the rear. A packed-earth roof nestled above, complete with pale roots dangling around the neat smoke-hole in its centre.

Flourishing each dish, the hermit presented a late dinner of finely-roasted wood-pigeon and wild onions, finished by shrivelled summer fruit, tart and delicious.

"How long have you been a guest of Sherwood?" The hermit's curiously formal tone caused Tuck's ears to twitch.

"Ah, not more than two months."

"*Hm.* So, you won't have seen the Lords and Ladies yet?"

Tuck wondered if his drunken ears had deceived him.

"Lords and Ladies? In Sherwood?"

"Yes." The hermit jutted out his beard. "The Wild Hunt? The Tuatha Dé Danann? You know, *The Little People*?" The hermit dropped into a raw-edged whisper. "Aye,

an' have ye never shuddered at the sound of the full moon carried on the wrong wind?"

Tuck gave a solemn shake of his head.

"Nor seen the colours at midnight?"

Tuck shook his head again, superstition tickling up his spine.

"You *must have* come across the hilltop mushroom rings."

"Yes, I have seen those!"

"Idiot. The mushrooms are *playthings*." The hermit's eyes bulged fearsomely above the roiling coils of his beard.

Unnerved by his host's swerves of emotion, Tuck looked for the right answer.

"*Err*, do you mean fairies?"

The hermit convulsed as if gripped by a piercing torment.

"Sweet *Mother*. Don't *ever* call them that. *Epecially* not here." The hermit swiped the wine sack away. "Idiot! Don't you know they *hate* being called that?"

Tuck stared open mouthed, then remembered his manners. His guestly duty required he accept his host's eccentricities as graciously as he received his vittals.

"Ah, no. I didn't know. I'm sorry." Tuck applied his most polite tone. "So, when did they last pay you a visit?"

The hermit went beetroot with rage, then flung the wine sack back at Tuck.

"*I'm* not the idiot here. You would do well to remember that." The hermit's eyes sank into the shadows above his craggy nose. "*If* you manage to survive a few more months ... You'll be alone in the weald ... Late in the waxing ... And with abomination gnashing at your very soul, *you will witness the Tuatha Dé Danann for yourself!* Call 'em what you want then, but sure, it'll be respectful."

Harrumphing at the general impertinence of the world, the hermit lay down in disgruntled silence. Robbed of words, Tuck decided to settle to sleep as well. He quietly laughed off the hermit's strange stories, but his dreams were phantasmagoric.

Tuck awoke with a start soon after dawn, somehow already knowing he was alone. The hermit had left the half-full wine sack as a gift, and Tuck picked it up with a soft smile. Remembering his eldritch dreams with a shudder as he made his way out of the snug, Tuck resolved not to drink too much of the stuff in any one go.

His good humour morphed to dismay on reaching his homely covert.

The hermit had been right. The Foresters had smashed a horse-sized hole through the encircling dogwood branches. Tuck found his bender trampled to the floor, the fire pit filled with faeces. He shed a desolate tear. While not much more than a convenient arrangement of sticks, the covert had been his first shelter away from Fountaindale.

Gathering his few belongings, Tuck sent a prayer for mercy into the cloud-cluttered January skies, and headed for the heart-woods.