

THE LAWYER'S TALE

INTRODUCTION TO THE LAWYER'S TALE

"Well," said the host, "this is a fine affair!
You say you will and then you won't! But there
Are others in the company who will
Regale us until we've had our fill.

"It's just past ten now, the gambling's over at one.
A quarter of our time has thus far run,
Pleasantly, I hope. For precious is
Each moment, and we find our joy in this:
That though we cannot have again what's done,
There's always more to have till we are gone.

"So, lawyer, come now! You must have a tale
So full of lusty truth our own lives pale
Beside the secrets told in confidence
That you might now disguise in fiction, whence
Good tales all come -- from life, but subtly bent,
Sufficient to protect the innocent."

"I'm afraid," the lawyer said, "that I
Have little in my head to satisfy
The need to hear a tale yet unheard,
And what I have strikes me as absurd.

"Yes, much in my long life that I have done
Might easily into a tale be spun,
But Chaucer, in his massive oeuvre has
Already done it all with more pizzazz
Than I could ever generate. And so,
Like the chef, I'll to his great work go,
But this time to a tale he finished, taking

All the essential ingredients of its making,
And bringing it up to date, as you will see
In this, a tale from Chaucer and from me."

THE LAWYER'S PROLOGUE

O may we be spared from poverty,
Hunger, torture, rape, of loved ones shorn,
And all descendants of this company
From being of the starving billions born,
All their lives to suffer and to mourn,
Or through some twist of fate or will of war
From being cast among the wretched poor.

But if misfortune come to us, then let
Us bear it patiently and with good grace,
For what we are is more than what we get,
And fortune is far more than time and place,
Ready to return a strong embrace,
As you will hear in this, my tale of woe
And courage, that makes one of high and low.

THE LAWYER'S TALE

PART I

Anna Weiss was born to wealth and ease,
A daughter doted on in early years
By parents whose greatest pleasure was to please,
And with love to inundate her fears,
And with kisses still her infant tears.
Till she was four, she knew nor want nor pain,
Nurtured in a world both safe and sane.

With her father she was very close.
Often he would take her on his knee
And read to her, or talk of what was most
On her childish mind, but seriously,
As though there were no better company.
She was indulged, not spoiled, as she grew
To imitate the generous love she knew.

She was affectionate and trusting, shy
At first, but then a little chatterbox,
Quick to laugh, not easy to make cry,
Innocent as yet of painful shocks
That later fit the soul with doors and locks.

Universally she was adored,
An angel whose sweet face one's faith restored.

All that wealth could do for her, it did:
She had a spacious room chock-full of toys,
And what she wanted, want did not forbid.
But most of all, she learned the deeper joys
That later lie beneath the foreground noise --
All that taste and culture could instill,
And compassion could shape into will.

Her father wanted her to learn what men
At that time exclusively were taught,
And to be equal to her husband when
She married, in both character and thought,
And bring to life more than her mother brought,
Not stunted in what she could say or do
By being limited in what she knew.

So was she destined for a happy life
Of pleasure, plenty, privilege, and praise,
To marry well and be a loving wife
And mother, who in turn would ably raise
Children bright and gentle in their ways.
But fate had something else for her in store,
As you will see, if you listen more.

When she was four, the Germans came to town.
Soon Anna had a Jewish star to wear
On all her clothes. Now rarely she went down
With her parents to play. The Germans there
Would curse and spit at Jews, or cut their hair.
And so they stayed at home and waited for
The end of what seemed just another war.

One day her parents told her she would go
With Luba, a former nanny, for awhile
Into the country, how long they didn't know,
Until the Germans, as was oft their style,
Finally left. And then (this with a smile),
She and Luba would return, and they
Would be just as before she went away.

Anna naturally could see behind
The veil of normalcy to what the heart
Was saying, quite the opposite of mind,
And understood, for all her parents' art,
That they would for a long time be apart,

Perhaps forever. She wept and held them tight,
And nothing that they said could make it right,

Till Luba had forcibly to pry
Her from her parents, and drag her out the door
While they, weeping, did not even try
To stop her, so that Anna became sure
That Luba was a witch, the kind that tore
Children from their parents so that she
Might eat them up, once fattened properly.

They took a train out to the countryside,
And then a horse-drawn cart, and then on foot
Through snowy fields to a barn with cows inside,
Some goats and horses, too. Then Luba put
Down the things they brought with them and shut
The door, and said that Anna must stay here
Until there were no Germans left to fear.

She would bring her food each day, she said,
But warned her never, never to go outside
Because the Germans wanted all Jews dead
And searched for Jews to murder far and wide.
So should some stranger enter, she should hide
Beneath the hay and not come out at all
Until she heard Luba to her call.

Then Luba left the child there alone
With nothing but the cows to keep her warm.
Whether she returned cannot be known,
For little Anna, weeping, left the barn,
Thinking that the witch might do her harm,
Fattening her up to eat her, as occurred
In a tale that she had lately heard.

How else explain the power of the witch
Over her parents? She must have cast a spell!
Or maybe Luba engineered a switch
With demons that in deep, dark forests dwell
And her loving parents! Who could tell?
Her parents never would have sent her here!
So much, then, was absolutely clear.

Little Anna walked across a field
And found a path that led into a wood.
It was past four, the light began to yield,
And there before her evil demons stood,
Five of them, all dressed as demons should

In shrouds that blended with the ambient snow,
And blocked the path on which she now would go.

One came near and knelt in front of her.
"Who are you?" he asked, "my dear, sweet child?"
She was not used to Polish, though there were
Many words she understood. He smiled
And said, "A little Jewish girl!" Then piled
Some snow into his hand, a little mound,
Covered her face and threw her to the ground.

What they did to her, I need not tell.
Enough to say she bled from front and back,
Left lying naked in the snow that fell
Like heavy, frozen tears down from the black,
Half-burying her on the drifted track,
As she, freezing, could not move, but lay
Dying on the unfrequented way.

And then she saw an angel coming near,
Who dropped a sack of wood and knelt beside
Her praying silently, yet she could hear
Music like an overwhelming tide
Drown her in love, when else she would have died,
A love just like the pain she could not bear
Flowing from the angel with blond hair.

PART II

Twenty-eight years now pass, and Anna Weiss
Is Anna Michnowicz, a Catholic Pole,
Married to her angel, who is twice
Her age, unquestioned icon of her soul,
Father, husband, lover, joy -- the whole
Passion of her life, but for Christ,
Whose love alone for her would have sufficed.

The horror in the woods became a gift
Through which she found divine and earthly love,
A trauma that eventually would shift
Her childish vision to perception of
The permanence of pain and need to move
With dancer's grace to choreography
Beyond what she could comprehend or see.

It was enough to witness pain, of course,
And feel the fullness of our suffering,

For God alone had wisdom, wit, and force
To render good and true salvation bring.
The love one felt was what made one's soul sing,
One billionth part of what one had received
From Christ, if one's heart could be believed.

Still, one ought to imitate His life,
Who came to Earth to illustrate the good,
Teaching by example man and wife,
Who otherwise might not love as they should,
Not knowing love within as now they could.
Love was the gift that Christ gave on the cross,
Turning into gold life's bitter dross.

So Anna loved her husband long and well,
A farm wife with two sons. At times she thought
Of her strange past, though it was hard to tell
Fantasy from memory. She caught
Glimpses of a time that sometimes brought
Such pain to think about she let it go,
Wondering whether it was real or no.

Her husband Jacek was a fiery man
Who fought against injustice and oppression,
First against the lords of his own land,
Then against the foreigner's aggression,
The Nazis and the Reds in swift succession.
Often he was beaten and in jail,
But now he was becoming old and frail.

One day some friends came to the house and said
That he would be the special target of
A campaign to remove all those who led
Some protests that had too successful proved,
And so the government to slander moved.
They would say he was a Zionist spy,
And his wife a Jew, which was a lie.

Jacek blushed and said that it was true.
He found his wife when she was just a child
Raped and dying in the woods. A Jew,
Yes, she was by birth (and here he smiled),
But now with Christ completely reconciled,
Spending so much time upon her knees
That he would often miss his midnight squeeze.

This is no joke, they said. They will accuse
You of Zionism, and your wife.

You must go into exile, now, or lose
For good your freedom and, perhaps, your life.
The capital is with these rumors rife:
That to crack down on protests, they will use
The age-old Polish hatred of the Jews.

Jacek didn't want to go, but when
They warned that Anna might be tortured, too,
He gave in reluctantly, and then
Did everything they said that he should do,
Afraid of what his wife might be put through
After all she suffered long ago
When he found her dying in the snow.

Off they went, they and their two boys,
Adam and Pavel, guided on their way
From house to house by those who found their joys
In making their dark midnight into day,
Living as they would while others lay
In darkness, slaves to history and will,
The innocent accomplices of ill.

They crossed the borders of those states enslaved
On foot, through woods or over mountain passes,
Crossing streams in small boats, or on paved
Roads traveling in holes carved into chassis,
Barely breathing as a guard harasses
The driver at a checkpoint drowned in light,
Harsh and ugly adjunct to the night.

And then at last a crossing so remote
To a place so backward none can tell
What century it is, where a boat
Awaits to take them out of that cold hell
Across the sea to where one might rebel
And speak the truth, and say what one believes,
And not be ruled by murderers and thieves.

But here the brave, like-minded network ends,
And smugglers for pay must take their place,
Far less dependable than were their friends
Among the many dangers that they face.
The smuggler leads them at too fast a pace
And soon is gone, too far ahead to see,
Abandoning the winded family.

And there upon a ridgeline Anna saw
The same five evil demons she had seen

So long ago, when she was only four,
Coming towards them like some awful dream
That could not be, but is. Anna's scream
Echoed like a banshee's off the hills,
The kind the heart with dread and anguish fills.

But why detail what those demons did?
First, they stifled Anna's screams and tied
Her hand and foot, then took all that was hid
In clothes that her sweet angels wore; then tried
To find out more with torture till they died --
Anna's angels buried in a wood
While Christ looked on and wept, as well He should.

After raping her till they were done,
They sold Anna to a brothel in some town
Deep in the mountains, far from anyone
Who spoke her language or might help her. Down
In a dark cellar she was tightly bound
Until the owner finished eating dinner,
Then came down to teach the raw beginner.

She found her deep in prayer on her knees,
For Christ had come to see her there, and held
Her in His arms. She had begged Him please
To take her to her angels, but life knelled
Incessantly for her as bright tears welled
Into His eyes. "Not yet, not yet," He said.
"You've much to do before you join the dead."

Then she wept for comfort in His chest,
As child to parent, burrowing inside
Towards something that made sense of all the rest,
A love for all that was, that never died,
In which all things might innocent abide.
The owner then unbound her, let her be,
For never did she such sweet radiance see.

And so it was the next few months as Anna
Became a prostitute in that small place,
Accepting what her fate had thrust upon her
Without complaint and with uncanny grace
That made the men ashamed to see her face,
And gave to those who shared her slavery
New hope in what they sensed but could not see.

But, knowing that Christ wasn't welcome here,
Anna learned the teachings of Islam

As she taught the others not to fear,
But to find strength in God, the "am that am,"
While they taught her the ways of the Koran
And their language, which was of the same
Kind as hers, and so words quickly came.

As Anna practiced well the Muslim faith,
She came to love it also, and to pray
To Allah purely, as the Prophet saith,
Without Christ's human image in the way.
Yet for her faith she dearly had to pay,
Especially since she influenced the others
To treat even their customers as brothers.

Yet there was something beautiful within
That made even the brutes that owned her pause,
Evil as they were, and steeped in sin,
But human still, and touched by higher laws,
Though rarely acting without selfish cause.
And so they sold her to a pious man
Who freed her and then asked her for her hand.

PART III

Thirty years now pass, and Anna Weiss
Is Anna Spahiu, wife of Muhamedin.
Although a Muslim, she's still in love with Christ,
Adding new loves to what loves have been,
Seeing through eyes shaped by what she's seen.
She is poor -- the years show on her face --
Yet she is grateful for this time and place.

Most of all she loves the times of prayer,
Alone with Allah, pure and full of peace,
A breath upon the void, no more than there,
Free of all that must begin and cease,
A bit of longing, longing for release.
At such times all her suffering and joy
Become one love no demon can destroy.

Her husband was a widower with three
Young girls, for whom he needed soon a mother.
Hearing of this saint, he went to see
Her for himself, and then would have no other.
The first few years he was to her a brother,

But then she came to love him as a wife,
And shared with him his sweet but meager life.

They now were getting old, the daughters gone
To their husbands' villages nearby,
Married and with children. Left alone,
Anna and her husband oft would lie
Hand in hand and share a silent sigh,
The house full of memories, calm and still,
Rich with love, untenanted by will.

But one night demons knocked upon their door,
Then knocked it down and came inside, the same
Five demons that had come for her before,
Laughing as they called them both by name,
Anna and Muhamedin, then came
Into the bedroom, neighbors that they knew,
Yet now doing just what demons do.

"Dirty Muslim pigs!" they said, then dragged
Them out the door and set the house on fire.
"Your wife will love this!" the cruel demons bragged
As they tied her husband up with wire,
Then raped her till they had all their desire.
"Just wanted you to see!" they laughing said,
Then shot her weeping husband in the head.

And then they left, those demons, as she lay
Bleeding on the ground from front and back,
As she had so long ago that day
She met her angel on the forest track
As snow like frozen tears fell from the black,
And she lay nearly dying and in pain.
But this time her angel lay beside her, slain.

And so she prayed to God that she might die
And not be rescued this time. Her desire
Was simply to beside her husband lie
And never move again, but to expire
As though to sleep. No hope did she require,
Nor faith, nor love, but all was bleak despair,
For life itself was more than she could bear.

O those who stoke the evil in each heart
For power, vengeance, greed, or hope of gain,
Know that as you play your ugly part,
There is a part of you that writhes in pain
And drives you on to massacre again.

You shape your inner world, and outer, too,
By everything you think or say or do.

And so for good the opposite is true,
For love allows the loving soul to flower,
And being's sweet effulgence to renew
With more resilience and with greater power,
As it did in Anna's darkest hour,
Moving her to move and then to rise,
Though no one heard her sharp and painful cries.

She found a shovel near the burned-out barn
And buried her dear husband where he fell,
Untying first his feet and then his arms
That he might rest in Heaven safe and well,
Away from this advertisement for Hell.
And then she left her smoldering abode
To join her fellow Muslims on the road.

For days they walked with little food or water,
Thousands, tens of thousands, on the run
Towards a distant and indifferent border
Where they were left in limbo, and undone
By hunger, thirst, and sickness one by one,
In their thousands slowly dying there,
A nation dispossessed and in despair.

Anna searched the camp for her stepdaughters,
Hearing things that filled her heart with dread,
Many seeking kin as she sought hers
Only to find for certain they were dead,
Killed by Christians or dying as they fled.
Two sons-in-law were dead -- that much she heard.
But of the others there was not a word.

Sick with grief and hunger, still in pain,
Anna fainted, and there she would have died
But for some angels finding her again
And with a stretcher taking her inside
A tent, where volunteers from Israel tried
To save those that they could, though Muslims all,
And they were Jews who came at mercy's call.

When Anna woke, she heard a doctor say,
In a language that she knew she knew,
"She will be fine." He knelt down where she lay
To feel her pulse, then, satisfied, withdrew.
"Wait!" she said. "Please wait! I am a Jew!"

The translator translated, the doctor turned
As lost, beloved memories through her burned.

"My name is Anna Weiss," she said, "born
Somewhere in Poland soon before the war.
But then I was from my poor parents torn
And became a Christian. After more
Troubles, then a Muslim. Please, before
You go away, I wish that you would see
Whether anyone still looks for me."

The doctor nodded, then withdrew again.
Anna waited white with hope inside
The tent, while he contacted Yad Vashem
In Israel, to say that he had tried,
Certain she, to stay alive, had lied.
But sure enough, Anna Weiss was there,
A little girl lost near Lublin somewhere.

The doctor then returned to her and said,
"There is an Anna Weiss among those named
As missing, though none knows alive or dead."
And looking for some proof she had not feigned,
He said a prayer perhaps she still retained:
"*Baruch atta* --" "No! No! It is *atto!*"
And so they hugged and kissed and wept with joy.

PART IV

Six months later, Anna Weiss was on
A plane from Tel Aviv to JFK,
Looking for her father, who was gone
From the last place he'd been known to stay
After moving to the USA.
For fifty years he'd faithfully sent in
His address and his phone to Yad Vashem.

He had never given up on her.
He registered her name soon after he
Had come to Israel. The others were
All dead, each member of his family
Gassed or shot. He could not know that she
Had been saved by her angel, and then grew
Up barely knowing that she was a Jew.

She followed him upon the ledger there,
From Tel Aviv to Dan to Jerusalem,

And then Seattle, Cleveland, and Bel Air,
But always, always, telling Yad Vashem
Address and phone, that they might tell him when
She had been found, or, perhaps, they'd heard
From someone somewhere sometime just one word.

His last address and phone, in Riverdale,
The Bronx, was sent in just four years ago.
She called and wrote to him, to no avail,
And now was flying in that she might know
If he was still alive, and then, if so,
Would want to come to live with her at last,
To heal the wound inflicted so long past.

She traced him to a nursing home nearby
Where he had lived, and went to see him there,
Directed to a ward, she knew not why,
To which she had to be buzzed in, and where
There seemed to be but little nursing care.
Residents roamed up and down the halls
Aimlessly, or leaned against the walls.

She found a desk, deserted, then a nurse
In a white coat, and asked her for her father.
She led her to a room where someone cursed
Them viciously, got up, began to totter
Towards them, then decided not to bother,
Collapsing back to bed. "That's him," she said,
Then went back out, no longer interested.

"Papa!" Anna cried, though knowing he
No longer was, yet was. She was too late,
And yet on time to live the irony
That was the last expression of their fate,
So long had both of them had had to wait
To be rejoined, and now he could not know
The daughter he had lost so long ago.

Two years she stayed to care for him, while she
Worked as a companion and a maid,
In the USA illegally,
Alone and poor and ever more afraid
Of being caught, the longer that she stayed.
She wrote to her stepchildren, now back home,
And talked to them from time to time by phone,

But could not go to see them, lest when she
Returned, she would not be allowed back in.

Every day she could she went to see
Her father, though unrecognized within,
And fed him that he might not get too thin,
Until he died, and she was free once more
To start again, as she had done before.

She went back to Israel to live
In Bat Yam, a suburb by the sea,
Living off a pension that they give
To Holocaust survivors, and what she
Was sent by her remaining family
For her share of the farm, which they had sold
To someone who had paid for it in gold.

They reburied their father properly,
Inviting her to come, which now she could,
And did, though as a Jew, which all could see,
And prayed and wept for her dear husband, good
Man that he was, and later stood
Deep in the mountains, where her angel lay,
And her two sons, and on her knees did pray.

"Dear Christ," she prayed, "and Allah, and Jehovah,
A trinity now of a different kind,
Three-in-one, my Gods, may you look over
All my loved ones gone, and help me find
Them once I leave this gift of life behind."
She hungered then for death, when she might be
Reunited with her family.

Her stepdaughters were anxious she remain
With them, to spend in comfort her last days,
But she returned to Israel again,
Which was to her, her home, in many ways,
The first she felt her own, where no bright glaze
Need cover her dark truth, as it had done
Till she to Israel's tent had finally come.

She studied Hebrew and the Talmud, too,
Kept a kosher home, observed Shabbat
And all the holidays as they came due,
Turning her home into a *Migdash Me'at*,
A little space of holiness, where not
One demon would not bow the head and pray,
So pure and clean and simple was her way.

Yet well she knew the demons were still there,
Waiting to be summoned by the heart

That would call out and draw them from the air
To play their ghastly, cruel, inhuman part
And commandeer the souls that now would start
To massacre and torture, burn and rape
Those whom for their difference they would hate.

The demons, yes, were rampant among Jews
And Arabs both, just itching to begin
The reign of hate, that would collect the dues
Long owed by both sides for their years of sin,
A retribution savored long within.
Yet angels, too, were hovering nearby,
Singing songs that filled the radiant sky.

Just as the sun casts its light on Earth
Not meaning to, so Anna gave to her
Small circle of good neighbors something worth
Far more than those whose words the many stir,
A peace that helped to calm what passions were
Dancing in their hearts; also a grace
That helped to make a sanctum of that place.

So there's my tale, the best that I can render,
Leaving Anna innocent but wise,
Tiresias of faith instead of gender,
Having worshiped God through many eyes,
Becoming what would else have been disguise,
And joining in her prayer all those who love,
And whose sweet will to peace might others move.

EPILOGUE TO THE LAWYER'S TALE

"By God, that was a most affecting tale!"
The bartender exclaimed, lifting his ale.
"And long enough for two or three, I'd say.
But now enough of God, I humbly pray,
And preaching in the guise of narrative.
I want to see some characters who live
As I do. Minister, is that OK?
The lawyer's stole your thunder! If I may,
Could we have a tale without religion?
But I say too much -- it's your decision."

"That it is," the minister agreed.
"Perhaps I shouldn't go, if you have need --"
"I'll take his turn!" the engineer broke in.
"I have a tale steeped in venal sin,
Some bitter beer, the taste of everyday,

Where morals are a universal gray.

"Let the minister assume my place
Later on, perhaps when we can face
Another tale to profit from. Right now
We'd favor one distinctly lower brow."

All agreed that's what they'd want hear,
And so this next went to the engineer.