

Ballad: Annie Protheroe. A Legend of Stratford-Le-Bow

The ballad of Annie Protheroe is a whimsical yet macabre tale, set in the humble neighborhood of Stratford-le-Bow, where Annie, a young woman with a simple post-office job, harbors love for Gilbert Clay, a renowned, yet gentle, executioner. Gilbert's profession, while dreadful to some, is painted with a romantic hue, as his deeds are from a time where such acts were seen in a different, almost chivalrous light. The couple finds solace and companionship in each other, sharing walks and talks under the elderberry tree, with public executions often lingering as their peculiar subject of conversation.

Annie's fascination with Gilbert's skill is evident, as she listens intently to his explanations of the executioner's craft, cherishing his favourable notices like treasures. The tale takes a twist when Gilbert brings up his next "client," Peter Gray, a man with whom Annie shares a past. Gilbert, consumed by a mix of jealousy and bewilderment, confronts Annie, leading to a crucial revelation: Annie's heart belongs solely to Gilbert now, and her history with Peter Gray is nothing but a closed chapter.

Despite Annie's assurances, Gilbert's jealousy festers into a vengeful resolve, deciding to take an especially torturous approach towards Peter Gray's execution. Annie, horrified at the thought of unnecessary cruelty, tries to dissuade him, but Gilbert, stubborn and provoked, continues his grim preparations.

The narrative reaches its climax as Gilbert, ignoring Annie's pleas for mercy, steps onto the scaffold, hatchet in hand, a grotesque tool he intends to use on Peter Gray. This impending act not only challenges Gilbert's professional integrity but also strains the very fabric of his relationship with Annie, putting her compassion and love to the

test.

In this darkly humorous ballad, W.S. Gilbert explores themes of love, jealousy, and the complex morality of revenge, all wrapped in the peculiar setting of 19th-century England's execution yards. Annie's and Gilbert's tale is a striking reflection of how personal emotions and professional duties can clash dramatically, underscored by the ballad's rhythmic verses and ironic wit.

