



Read Rhyme Repeat

The Bet

Theater Adaptation
by Jill Craddock

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Rhyming Reader's Theater Adaptation by Jill Craddock

Characters

BANKER

LAWYER

WATCHMAN

WATCHMAN

When I agreed, a few years ago, to take this post,
I had of it no greater expectations than most.
A watchman, that's me,
Mostly, I watch, and there is nothing to see.

BANKER

I hired him to keep an eye on the lawyer I'd locked inside.
The watchman needed no information, only to keep watch as a point of pride.
I find some business deals are best left concealed.
Although, watch long enough, and this one will be revealed.

LAWYER

Watchman, come to me, please.

WATCHMAN

Okay, but keep it quick. I'm not supposed to speak with you.

LAWYER

Am I to talk only to myself?
If that's the truth, I'm afraid I'll come unglued.

WATCHMAN

That's the rules by which I get paid. No talking—just watching you every day.
Yet, as I understand it, no one's forcing you to stay.
Would you care to enlighten me on this point?
People are saying you get twenty million if you stay in this joint.

LAWYER

You heard the story correctly.

WATCHMAN

Then, can you put in a word with the banker for me?
I'm doing the same thing, practically, but I do it for free.

LAWYER

Hardly. You go home to a family. You're allowed to travel.
You see, the bet the banker made was that, left alone, I would unravel.

WATCHMAN

So the twenty million? Is that all there is to your voluntary isolation's purpose?
Because, even at that price, I'd never take on the task, I confess.
Or did the banker place a gun at your temple to make you take his bet?

LAWYER

Not at all! It was at an extravagant soiree that he and I met,
A party I know I'll now never forget.
Those gathered debated a topic that's been disputed across time:
What's the best punishment for a capital crime?

WATCHMAN

And your reply?

(Enter BANKER.)

BANKER

The lawyer said, "To live anyhow, is better than not to live at all."
So now he sits alone, staring at the same four walls.
If he makes it fifteen years, I hand him twenty million on his way out
But you, you just watch him. Making friends is not what this is about.

WATCHMAN

And if he lasts half the time?

BANKER

Not even a dime.

WATCHMAN

But if this good lawyer makes it fourteen years, eleven months, three weeks, two days?

BANKER

No pay.

LAWYER

I am convinced that the death penalty should be abhorred.
Confinement, even solitary, as a punishment is much to be preferred.
To prove this, the year I turn forty, I'll walk free, and you'll swallow your words.

WATCHMAN

I've never heard of anything so absurd.

BANKER

With which of us do you not concur?

WATCHMAN

You've both gone wrong. You, who'll throw twenty million to the breeze,
For nothing more than impulsive caprice!

(To LAWYER)

And you! I don't know which is the worse shame.
You give up your youth, for some supposed truth.
Yet, when your fifteen years have gone, the law will still be the same.
You are both fools filled with an over-abundance of pride.
This exorbitant waste of life and money is impossible to abide.

BANKER

Remember, sir, you work for me.
Just guard the lawyer. Patrol the premises. Keep sentry.
I expect your full amenity.

(Exit BANKER)

WATCHMAN

Twenty million for him is just pennies.

(Sad piano music is heard.)

WATCHMAN

Lawyer! Your playing sounds like a pro,
It's so melancholy, your oh-so-sorrowful solo.
Chin up! You do know you can smoke here? Or drink a glass of wine?

LAWYER

Let me be. I'm fine.

WATCHMAN

Come on, just a puff. I'll pass you up a toke.
Quite a bit of pleasure can be had from a bit of a smoke.

LAWYER

It will only foul my already stale air,
And stink up these clothes, the only ones I have to wear.

WATCHMAN

What about wine? It's been a year since you had a drink.
A whole year! Imagine that. Gone in a blink.

LAWYER

Nothing could be drearier than drinking good wine alone.

WATCHMAN

Alone? Hey, I'm here, too. Like you, I can't roam.
I spend day after miserable day listening to maudlin you moan.

LAWYER

Get me a book. Can you do that please?
Just for entertainment—a quick and easy read.

(Enter BANKER)

BANKER

How's our man? I haven't heard music for a couple of years.
I knew that piano wouldn't keep him cheered.
We've got a pool on him. I say, he can't take much more.
I'm shocked he hasn't carved himself a back door.

WATCHMAN

No. He played today! I couldn't believe my ears.
After all this time, it nearly brought me to tears.

BANKER

Do you think he has really read all those books he asks for?

WATCHMAN

I think so. What else would he do? He's got to be bored.

BANKER

Anna Karenina, War and Peace, Moby Dick. All classics.

WATCHMAN

Unabridged, even! The stack is getting thick, pretty quick.

BANKER

Well, he's at least enjoying civilized wining and dining.

WATCHMAN

He's also been writing—and intermittently crying.

BANKER

Besides classics, the man's been ordering books on foreign words.
I'm at the bookshop every two days,
Looking for titles on conjugating Latin verbs.

LAWYER

(Writing and speaking simultaneously)

*My Dear Jailer,
Six languages make up these lines.
Please find translators to read and help you define.
If they can read my words, fire a single gunshot,
Just to prove my efforts aren't for naught.
It makes no difference how humankind communicates.
We are all created to deteriorate.*

(Pause. A shot is heard.)

WATCHMAN

Ten years down, five to go. Are you starting to get worried?

BANKER

That I'll lose my bet?
I'm not. Not yet.
But something's off.
He's read but one book this whole year.

WATCHMAN

He says with the Gospel, a man mustn't hurry.

BANKER

At least I can get him a Bible for free.
I've nearly had to file for biblio-bankruptcy.

WATCHMAN

Knowing him, he'll now want to read every word on theology.

BANKER

That's it. This town simply needs a bigger library.

LAWYER

I've just two years left, but no idea which direction I should heed.
Which wines do I drink? Which books should I read.
Do I jump from Byron to aesthetics to chemistry, indiscriminately?
What's next for me?
I need a plan, a predictable path.
Ah, me. I've no one to ask.

WATCHMAN

We've arrived. The lawyer has only one more day to go. Imagine!

LAWYER and BANKER

I'm feeling panicky!

BANKER

Unfortunately, my fortune has run rather dry and been, ahem, disrupted.

WATCHMAN

I tried to tell you that the stock market is nothing but a gamb—

BANKER

I didn't hire you so I could be interrupted!
I expected he'd die before the end of the bet.

WATCHMAN

You gamble. You lose.

BANKER

You're fired.

WATCHMAN

I've served you for fifteen years. Where's your gratitude?
You're remarkably rude.

BANKER

I'll have none of your attitude.
Get out of my sight.

WATCHMAN

So you've no use for me now? That's it?
You'll live to regret what you've said this night.

BANKER

That lawyer will walk off with my very last penny, and him just forty years old!
With my hard-earned millions, he'll marry and live long and bold,
While I end up bankrupt, my home, my furniture, everything sold.

(Exit WATCHMAN)

No. That won't do. I'll put him in a chokehold that will turn his body cold.
No one will suspect me.
I'll frame that disgruntled watchman, my former employee.

*(BANKER approaches LAWYER from behind. LAWYER is asleep
and BANKER attempts to suffocate LAWYER.)*

Visions of my millions no doubt,
Give him a sound sleep and pleasant dreams.
Ah, well, after fifteen years, there are worse ways he could go out.
Wait, is this a letter written from him to me?
What on earth could this note mean?

LAWYER

*Dear Jailer,
I could be as wealthy as you, come twelve o'clock, noon.
But before the hour strikes, I've a few words to share with you.
You see, I've learned to despise freedom, life, and health.
And most of all, in fifteen years, I've come to despise your wealth.*

*Alone in my cell, I've studied much, and much I've learned.
By story and song my mind's been filled and churned.
If books offer wisdom, then wisdom I've gained.
Poems and prophecies inhabit my brain.*

*You may be proud, fine, and wise,
But I declare your life a mirage made of lies.
Only one fact is true across history.
Man knows nothing of truth and beauty.*

*You lost your reason and took the wrong path,
Exchanging heaven for earth and incurring wrath.
To show you how I feel about all you live by,
My personal choice is to live out my life quite deprived.*

*I bid you farewell, five hours before our agreed time,
And don't expect you to understand why
I've gone before the noon-bells chime.*

(Exit LAWYER, Enter WATCHMAN)

WATCHMAN

Sir, I saw the lawyer in town, and it isn't yet noon!
What on earth are you going to do?

BANKER

That's twenty million more I can invest with my agent.
As for the lawyer, he knew the precise terms of our arrangement.
It is he, not me, who elected early estrangement.
As for you! Don't look at me that way.
You were fired.
We're through.