

**URSUS**  
a tavern play in verse

**Dramatis Personae:**

**The Balladeer/The Landlord**

**The Barfly**

**The Wanderer**

*(As the play begins, The Balladeer/Landlord stands behind the bar, surreptitiously wiping the counter. The Barfly sits at the bar, staring into an all-but-drained pint glass.)*

**Balladeer:**

Bear with me now as I recount  
The story of a bet  
It's such a tale of derring-*don't*  
Once heard ~ you won't forget!

It is a tale: a *grizzly* one  
A boy now lost to fame  
One night a mighty wager won  
But failed to give his name.

He came from somewhere else, it seems  
Into the chill-wind North  
We know he came to chase his dreams  
But not whence he set forth.

We know for sure his road was tough  
By foot and train and car  
So once arrived; he'd had enough  
And stepped into a bar.

*(The Wanderer bursts through the door of the bar.)*

**Balladeer:**

The patrons grew suspicious. They  
thought him a foreign sort.  
The leader of the barflies says:

**Barfly:** (aside, to audience)

I know! Let's have some sport.

**Balladeer:**

And turning to the new-come lad:

**Barfly:** (loudly, to **The Wanderer**)

Hello, my wandering friend,  
A tiring journey you have had  
But this is not the end.

For if you want to count as one  
Amongst our honoured swarm  
There are three tasks, without a gun,  
We need you to perform.

**Wanderer:**

Without a gun?!

**Balladeer:**

...the boy replied

**Wanderer:**

Why levy such a rule?  
In doing this, has someone died?

**Balladeer:**

The barfly left his stool:

**Barfly:** (standing, moving towards **The Wanderer**)

No! No-one died ~ no, not at all!

**Balladeer:**

He moved with simple grace  
The barfly leader, stout and tall,  
with smileless, guileless face

Bore down upon the traveller  
with guileless, smileless eyes:

**Barfly:**

But bar room bet's a leveller  
And he who gets the prize

Can drink with us, with me and mine  
Carouse and laugh and sob  
From opening till closing time  
If he but does this job.

**Wanderer:**

So what's the wager? What's the bet?

**Balladeer:**

Our weary wanderer asked

**Wanderer:**

What triple trial will you set  
with which I'm to be tasked?

**Balladeer:**

The barfly leader thanked his luck

**Barfly:** (aside)

This fool is dim, unwitting  
And if he is a kind of duck  
that kind is used to sitting!

**Balladeer:**

These thoughts he kept unto himself  
But spoke, once more, aloud

**Barfly:** (pointing behind the bar)

There is a drink upon that shelf  
Kept secret from the crowd.

**Balladeer:** (taking a distinctive bottle from behind the bar)

He told the landlord to break out  
The hardest of the grog  
It was a most peculiar stout  
Which rendered all agog!

Our hero licked his upper lip  
and eyed the proffered draught

**Wanderer:**

All right!

**Balladeer:**

...he said...

**Wanderer:**

I'll have a sip!

**Balladeer:**

The barfly cruelly laughed.

**Barfly:** (laughs cruelly)

Oh no, my friend! It has to be  
the whole of it, or none!

But once you've drunk your fill, on me,  
Your wager's not yet won!

*(The Barfly takes the bottle from The Balladeer, fills a glass from it and forces it into The Wanderer's grasp)*

**Barfly:**

Remember, this is just the first  
You've two more tasks to do!  
And once you've quenched that growing thirst  
Two meetings await you.

The first you'll meet is rather staid  
and well equipped for slaughter!  
The second is a comely maid  
in fact, our landlord's daughter!

**Balladeer:** (glancing up, briefly)

At this, the landlord's watchful gaze  
shot upwards to her picture.  
Whilst outwardly he seemed unfazed ~  
He smashed a crystal pitcher!!

*(the sound of smashing glass is heard from behind the bar)*

**Balladeer:**

The barfly leader heard the crash  
And grabbed the landlord's throat

*(The Barfly reaches across the bar and grabs The Balladeer by the throat)*

**Barfly:**

Your counter needs a timely wash!

**Balladeer:**

The landlord just said...*Croak!*

It should be clear by now, I think  
that though this story's silly  
It's not about a bet or drink  
But is about a bully.

Who rules his bar room kingdom so  
With strong-armed iron fist  
And brooks no contradiction, though  
more oft than not ~ he's pissed!!

The barfly leader, tall and fat  
A tyrant amongst men:-  
Turned to our hero; then he sat:

**Barfly:** (sitting on the stool)

Now where was I again?!

Oh yes!

**Balladeer:** (pouring another drink for him)

...he cried; a fearful chime:

And got another round in

**Barfly:**

I clear forgot Old George!! It's time  
he came down off the mountain.

**Balladeer:**

At these fell words; a hush came down  
the bar room felt quite odd.

**Wanderer:**

Is George your friend?

**Balladeer:**

...our hero frowned

The barflies all guffawed!

**Barfly:**

Why yes! He is a friend, of course!!

**Balladeer:**

the barfly leader bellowed

**Barfly:**

Though strange in ways ~ and rather coarse  
He is an ersine fellow.

Each night, at dusk, as nature calls  
And winter takes possession  
of mountains, valleys, forests, all  
Old George comes for a session

Of drinking, feasting, climbing heights  
With George there is no barter!  
It is with him that you must fight  
And George will give no quarter.

He's taller than the tallest man  
and stronger than old Samson  
Eats fish alive; not from a pan:  
and no-one thinks him handsome!

His face is long and grizzled ~ fierce  
He wears a dark brown coat  
His eyes are small and black and pierce  
as they stare at your throat.

He walks with strange and sloping gait  
Though none would ever stare  
His arse is higher than his pate  
Of course George is a Bear!!

**Balladeer:**

So now you see with scales erased  
The barfly's cruel plan  
He means to have our hero face  
A Bear and not a man!

**Barfly:**

The final trial you must meet,  
If you survive the former!  
Is more inviting to complete  
and not a little warmer!!

You see, our landlord has a girl  
The apple of his eye!

So dainty, decked with golden curl  
and haunched with shapely thigh.

For once you've supped and wiped your face  
and tangled with Old George  
The landlord's daughter must embrace  
your combat-whetted urge.

**Wanderer:**

But that's no trial ~ that's no test!

**Balladeer:**

...the wanderer exhorted

**Wanderer:**

No maid's affections can be wrest  
or brutally extorted!

**Balladeer:**

The landlord flashed a rebel-grin  
at this display of courage  
The barfly...

**Barfly:**

Keep your breath within  
and saved to cool your porridge!

The landlord's kid is not so clean  
as virgin white snowfall  
For years now she has ever been  
enjoyed by one and all!

**Balladeer:**

The vicious laughter was amiss  
The wanderer's mind recoiled  
from brutal visions; cruelly, this  
sweet maid so oft despoiled.

But now ~ alert as a bloodhound;  
With this reviled admission  
Our Hero-Wanderer had just found  
A new and noble mission.

**The Wanderer:** (aside, to audience)

Now I'm determined in my mind  
to end this base behaviour  
And once I meet this maid, I'll find  
a way to surely save her!

But first I'll have to face the fact  
that few have yet survived:  
Old George won't leave me too intact  
or easily revived!

**Balladeer:**

With narrowed eye, the boy stares out  
the barfly's darkened frown  
Then raises high the glass of stout  
and bravely gulps it down.

*(as described, **The Wanderer** raises the glass and drains it; over the next couple of stanzas, he stumbles and staggers about, then teeters on the brink of collapse)*

**Balladeer:**

At first the liquid burned his tongue  
and scorched his very innards  
It then recoiled from deep among  
his organs to his gizzards!

His eyes, just momentarily,  
went blind ~ like in the sun.  
He felt all his extremities  
go slowly, strangely numb.

The barfly leader caught his arm  
before he hit the floor.

**Barfly:** (catching **The Wanderer** by the arm)

The time has come for you to charm  
Old George. So there's the door!

But don't forget that post the fight  
There is a maid within  
You'll have to meet for stirring night  
of forced, unbridled sin!!

*(**The Barfly** forces **The Wanderer** out the door)*

**Balladeer:**

With these dread words and cruel tones  
Our Wanderer was ejected  
And left to face the bear alone  
Forlorn and so dejected.

The draught had spilled its full effect  
into his clouded mind.  
The stars seemed to him to be flecked  
with visions, ill-defined.

Yet in the distance, he could hear  
a savage battle-cry  
And then, before him stood the Bear  
with blank and savage eye!!

Old George, with terrifying glance  
drew in a mighty breath  
Then leapt into his primal dance  
of war and brutal death.

Within the bar room's shadows long  
The landlord called 'Last Orders'  
The barflies waited for the song  
of George's night of murder.

They didn't have too long to wait  
to hear that song so mangled.  
As boy and bear met at the gate  
and there became entangled.

They bellowed out their battle-cries  
They screamed and roared and swore  
But then! A sight which chilled barflies:  
The boy burst through the door!!

*(The Wanderer re-enters, his clothes are torn and in disarray)*

**Balladeer:**

His clothes were rent and flayed and torn  
His hair was thick with blood  
And yet his face, quite strangely, wore  
A look none ever should

The barflies swarmed around him; they  
thought he'd a tale to tell:-  
Their leader's face went ashen grey  
as at the Gates of Hell.

**Wanderer:**

I've done it! Yes!! Old George was mine  
Though he's a gruff old bastard  
He's rather sweet ~ can take his time  
Went longer than I lasted!!

But where is she whom I must fight  
Where is the comely wench?!  
For fresh from wild love's dreadful height  
My bloodlust's now entrenched!!

**Balladeer:**

At these weird words the barfly slumped  
upon his sturdy stool.

**Barfly:**

You mean to say that you've just humped  
Old George ~ you bloody fool!?!

**Wanderer:**

Yes! That's the wager ~ that's the bet!!  
A girl I must now beat:~  
This stupid trial that YOU set  
which I will now complete!!!

**Balladeer:** (smiling evilly)

The landlord's face creased in a smirk  
at such a beastly error  
The barflies, to a man, just lurked  
in shadows of dark terror.

Till now the landlord's daughter has  
been little more than cypher  
A doleful damsel ~ Our hero was  
to come and promptly save her.

*(he dons a blonde wig and mimes the Damsel's actions as he describes them)*

She now steps into settling dust  
and though she doesn't speak:-  
She does allay the boy's bloodlust  
with sweet kiss on his cheek.

*(The Barfly angrily rushes forward and rips the wig from his head)*

**Balladeer:**

The barfly leader rose once more

and by the maid's hair, grabbed her

**Barfly:**

Get out of here! And take your whore  
For you can damn well have her!!

**Balladeer:**

The barflies looked on him anew  
and saw a bottom-feeder  
They rushed upon the boy and threw  
their arms round their New Leader.

The barfly balked at this affront:

**Barfly:** (in a rage)

I'll brook no contradiction!  
You cannot Hail this little runt  
and serve ME with eviction!!!

I am your king ~ you shower of stoats  
You cannot mark MY card!

**Balladeer:** (grabbing **The Barfly** by the throat)

The landlord grabbed him by the throat  
and said, *Right mate ~ you're barred!*

*(he forcibly escorts him out the door; then, as he describes the action, places **The Wanderer** on the empty stool)*

They threw him out into the night  
where he chilled to the bone.  
And promptly set the Wanderer high  
upon his wooden throne.

But Heroes are not kings by rule  
Their realm's the open road  
The Wanderer stepped down from the stool  
and said:

**Wanderer:** (stepping away from the stool)

I have to go.

Your landlord is your rightful Earl  
He'll rule you with good sway.

*(**The Balladeer** dons the wig again, as **The Wanderer** moves in and kisses him on the cheek)*

**Balladeer:** (swooning)

He gently kissed the swooning girl  
and quietly slipped away.

(**The Wanderer** *exits.*)

**Balladeer:** (removes the wig and, slowly, takes his place on the vacated stool)

And so, my tale is all but done  
of Wanderer with no name:-  
One night a tin-pot kingdom won  
which he refused to claim.

There is one final aspect, though  
I'll finish, since I've started  
Unlike the Wanderer, I shan't go  
till all has been imparted.

The barfly living in the wild  
upon the mountainside;  
The climate in the North's not mild  
and this, he can't abide.

Within a cave he made a fire  
Then cursed and wailed and wept  
He stoked and nursed his growing ire  
and then thereafter ~ slept.

And as he slept, he dreamed of days  
so old and long-forgotten  
Of times before such evil ways  
had turned his heart so rotten.

For once the barfly was a boy  
The landlord's lowly boarder  
Who'd loved, with such unbridled joy,  
the landlord's only daughter.

But boyish love is oft ill-borne  
And so, by maids despised  
Whilst she, in turn, had poured such scorn  
On joyous, hopeful eyes.

Awaking such a tyrant-king  
So newly discommoded  
Who still remains a dangerous thing  
Spurned heart, now freshly goaded.

But in the morn, he rudely woke

**Barfly:** (off)

Hello my ersine friend!

**Balladeer:**

Old George; with less than gentle stroke:

Gave him a fitting **End**.

*(a brief, terrified scream from **The Barfly**; then silence. **The Balladeer** turns in the stool, contemplates the abandoned drink on the counter, then drains the glass in one go)*

**Curtain.**