

The Good Wife's Tale

The story of a yeoman's wife living when St Leonard's had recently been built

Introduction for teachers and readers

Within the medieval social and economic structure, a yeoman owned the freehold to a small estate, which he cultivated with his family and servants. This is the story of an imaginary wife of a yeoman farmer living in Flamstead in the 12th Century. Although this "good wife" is imagined, the world and life that she describes is based on historical fact.

This written version matches the long audio recording with the same title.

The Good Wife speaks

Good morrow to you weary travellers!
Will you tarry awhile in the cool shade of
my apple trees? Here, take a mazer of
cider and a hunch of bread and cheese
to revive you.

My name is Agnes and I am happily
married to Henry Godwinson. We have
two growing daughters, Cecilia, who is
six and Viola, who is nearly five. We
have also been blessed with a baby boy
who is 18 months old and, by God's
grace, he has survived and thrived. To
this day all three children are healthy and
I am so thankful for that great mercy!

My husband is a yeoman farmer. Henry
is a free man and owns the land where
we live and farm. We are of English
descent and so are known as yeomen,
but if we were of French heritage, we
would be known as Franklins. We know
the Burgoyne family from the next

village; they are franklins, good people
and very hardworking. From time to time
my husband does business with them
and they are most honourable and fair. I
am hoping that Mistress Burgoyne may
teach my girls some of her native tongue
because French is spoken by refined
peoples and it will help us to make a
good match for our daughters when the
time comes for them to be betrothed.
Alban, our son, will inherit his father's
land and interests and hopefully will be a
successful and well-respected man, with
a good wife of his own.

We have 40 hectares of farm land here
in Flamstead, and with some help from
labourers we grow peas, wheat, barley,
beans and rye, We give over some of our
land for the raising of sheep for wool. We
are lucky to have some milch cows,
some hogs and hens and a team of two
oxen to draw the plough. I spin our wool
and weave the cloth to make our clothes,
with help from some of the village

women. Elis, William of the Field's daughter, shows great skill at this craft. I encourage her to improve her work so that she may better herself and perhaps she too may be able to make an advantageous match when she is old enough to marry. I work hard and long on our farm and brew our barley beer, bake the brown bread that we eat every day, and make cheese and butter in our dairy, as well as keeping our house in good order and raising our children. I need to make plenty of beer and bread because our servants and labourers receive some of each as part-payment for their work.

Our home is a wattle and daub long house. We sleep in the two small rooms on the south side of the building. Next to that is a large room with a central fireplace where we cook our food and keep warm in winter. We have two small windows in that room, but they have no glass in them. That's only for the nobility! I like to throw open the shutters on warm summer days to let in the light and the sweet, fresh air, but in winter Henry shuts them up tight so that we're all protected from the worst of the icy air and chilly winds! On winter nights we light tallow candles and sing the folk songs that we all know from our childhood. Some of these tunes are altered, to serve as the music for the hymns and psalms we chant in church. To the north of that room is a barn where our animals shelter during the cold winter months and it's easier for us to take care of them. These gentle beasts are the source of our food and our income, so

we must ensure that we take excellent care of them!

As a household, we all rise at daybreak, servants and labourers included, and set to work immediately. In the late morning, that you would know as about 11 o'clock, we all break our fast, breakfast as you would call it, with a sort of porridge called pottage. It's made with cracked wheat, boiled in water or broth, and has peas, beans, vegetables and choice herbs mixed in it. Sometimes we may add some meat or salt fish, but we must observe the rules that the Church sets down regarding our food, as gluttony is a dreadful sin. Frumenty is a similar dish, but this time it's sweet with fruit, honey or even spices mixed in! I'm lucky enough sometimes to have a small amount of cinnamon bark, some ginger root and even a tiny nutmeg. These spices are very expensive and Henry pays well for them, but they're delicious and make a real difference to our meals. Naturally, I would not waste these precious things on the servants' meals. I keep them locked away in a secret place in the larder so they don't 'go missing', shall we say!

After the breaking of the fast, it's back to work until late afternoon, around five o'clock in your time. At this hour, with help from my house servants, I'll prepare an evening meal which will be a little more substantial and satisfying for all. Eggs and bacon are allowed at certain times of year, but we also eat fish and vegetables, more savoury pottage or

soups, with fresh or preserved fruits or pickles, and even more bread that gets washed down with what we call small beer, that's quite weak. Then it's back to work until sundown. The children, if they get hungry between meals, will be given something called 'sops', which are pieces of yesterday's bread soaked in milk or broth and this sustains them until the larger meals are served. If our bread goes stale and hard, we use thick slices of it as 'plates' and then these are fed to the hogs after the meal. Nothing but nothing goes to waste! Waste is wicked and the devil take those who indulge in it!

I make time to go to our village church every day and ensure that our workers do likewise. Godliness is a quality that Henry and I insist upon; we discipline any of our staff who don't attend. As I enter our Church from the south side, I look up at the huge painted figure of St. Christopher and give thanks to him, and to the Almighty, for blessing and protecting our family. St. Christopher is the most important saint in our time and I pray to him to watch over Henry if he journeys away from Flamstead on business. The road from Dunstable to St. Albans, that runs along the valley below Flamstead, is plagued with vagabonds and robbers and I worry greatly about Henry if he travels that way.

I have to sit on the north side of the Church, because women are considered hot tempered and therefore must sit in the coolness of the north. Men, on the

other hand, are seen to be calm, even-tempered creatures that need the warmth of the southernmost part of the Church. The children sit beside me and learn their prayers, but I am sure that Peter and Wyot, sons of Aldith of the Field, and other young ruffians are at the back playing games of chance. For shame, Mistress Aldith, for shame!

It is my great sorrow to tell you I lost two children to sickness between Viola and Alban. I too was weakened by fever, but by God's mercy and the tender ministrations of Mistress Etheldred, Elis's grandmother, I was spared. Etheldred is a herbalist and healer and was taught about plants and their medicinal properties by her own mother and grandmother. I lost my dear mother when I was but a child and so look to Etheldred for advice if any of us are ailing. Despite having a reputation as a fearsome woman, she's patient and kind with me and I feel blessed to be able to offer her a few pennies for her remedies, especially for the children. If I can ever spare a couple of eggs, some cheese or fruit, I like to offer it to her family as they are so very pressed to make ends meet. I cannot bear to think of them going hungry, as sometimes I'm sure they do. They have so little of their own and with a household of seven, it must be a constant struggle to provide for them all.

Well, I must be going, I have talked much too long and I have a great deal to do before the sun sets and I may go to my

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Sharing the heritage of St Leonard's Flamstead



rest. Fare thee well good dames and
good sires and may God and St.
Christopher watch over you, always!