

The Highwayman

Alfred Noyes

Part 1

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon² tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—

5 Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.

He'd a French cocked hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his
chin,
A coat of the claret⁸ velvet, and breeches of brown doeskin.
They fitted with never a wrinkle. His boots were up to the thigh.
10 And he rode with a jeweled twinkle,
 His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt¹² a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn yard.
And he tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked
and barred.
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting
15 there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
 Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting¹⁸ a dark red love knot into her long black hair.

2. galleon (gal'ē-ən) *n.*: large sailing ship.

8. claret (klar'it) *n.* used as *adj.*: purplish red, like claret wine.

12. rapier (rā'pē-ər) **hilt**: sword handle.

18. plaiting (plāt'in) *v.* used as *adj.*: braiding.

20 And dark in the dark old inn yard a stable wicket^o creaked
Where Tim the ostler^o listened. His face was white and peaked.
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like moldy hay,
But he loved the landlord's daughter,
 The landlord's red-lipped daughter,
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say—

25 "One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize tonight,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning
 light;
Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry^o me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
 Watch for me by moonlight,
30 I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way."

He rose upright in the stirrups. He scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair in the casement.^o His face burnt like a
 brand
As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,
35 (Oh, sweet black waves in the moonlight!)
Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away
to the west.

Part 2

He did not come in the dawning. He did not come at noon;
And out of the tawny sunset, before the rise of the moon,
When the road was a gypsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,
40 A redcoat troop came marching—
 Marching—marching—
King George's men came marching, up to the old inn door.

19. wicket *n.*: small door or gate.

20. ostler (*äs'lar*) *n.*: person who takes care of horses; groom.

27. harry *v.*: harass or push along.

32. casement *n.*: window that opens outward on hinges.





They said no word to the landlord. They drank his ale instead.
But they gagged his daughter, and bound her, to the foot of her
narrow bed.

45 Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets at their side!
There was death at every window;
And hell at one dark window;
For Bess could see, through her casement, the road that *he*
would ride.

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest;
They had bound a musket beside her, with the muzzle beneath
50 her breast!
“Now, keep good watch!” and they kissed her. She heard the
dead man say—
Look for me by moonlight;
Watch for me by moonlight;
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way!

55 She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held good!
She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or
blood!
They stretched and strained in the darkness, and the hours
crawled by like years,
Till, now, on the stroke of midnight,
Cold, on the stroke of midnight,
60 The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at least was hers!

The tip of one finger touched it; she strove no more for the rest!
Up, she stood up to attention, with the muzzle beneath her
breast.
She would not risk their hearing; she would not strive again;
For the road lay bare in the moonlight;
65 Blank and bare in the moonlight;
And the blood of her veins, in the moonlight, throbbed to her
love's refrain.

Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot! Had they heard it? The horse hoofs ringing
clear;
Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did
not hear?
Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
70 The highwayman came riding,
Riding, riding!
The redcoats looked to their priming!^o She stood up, straight
and still.

Tlot-tlot, in the frosty silence! *Tlot-tlot,* in the echoing night!
Nearer he came and nearer. Her face was like a light!
Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep
75 breath,
Then her fingers moved in the moonlight,
Her musket shattered the moonlight,
Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him—with
her death.

72. *priming* (prīm'īn) *n.*: explosive for firing a gun.

He turned. He spurred to the west; he did not know who stood
Bowed, with her head o'er the musket, drenched with her own
80 blood!
Not till the dawn he heard it, his face grew gray to hear
How Bess, the landlord's daughter,
The landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Had watched for her love in the moonlight, and died in the
darkness there.

85 Back, he spurred like a madman, shouting a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier
brandished high.
Blood-red were his spurs in the golden noon; wine-red was his
velvet coat;
When they shot him down on the highway,
Down like a dog on the highway,
And he lay in his blood on the highway, with the bunch of lace
90 at his throat.

*And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the
trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
A highwayman comes riding—
95 Riding—riding—
A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn door.*

*Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn yard;
He taps with his whip on the shutters, but all is locked and
barred.
He whistles a tune to the window, and who should be waiting
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100 But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love knot into her long black hair.*