

The Highwayman

PART ONE

I

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,

And the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—

The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

2

He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin;
They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!

And he rode with a jewelled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

3

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 there

But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

4

And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim the ostler listened; his face was white and peaked;
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy 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—

5

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

PART TWO

I

He did not come in the dawning; he did not come at noon;
And out o’ the tawny sunset, before the rise o’ the moon,
When the road was a gypsy’s ribbon, looping the purple moor,
A red-coat troop came marching—
Marching—marching—
King George’s men came matching, up to the old inn-door.

2

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,
The highwayman came riding,
Riding, riding!

The red-coats looked to their priming! She stood up, straight and still!

3

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 breath,
Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
Her musket shattered the moonlight,

Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him—with her death.

4

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 red blood!
 Not till the dawn he heard it, his face grew grey 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.

5

Back, he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky,
 With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high!
 Blood-red were his spurs i' 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 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—
 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 there
 But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
 Bess, the landlord's daughter,
 Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.*

