

**1906**

**THE HIGHWAYMAN**

**Alfred Noyes**

**Noyes, Alfred (1880-1958) - English poet, dramatist and critic best known for his work dealing with English history. Noyes was professor of modern English literature at Princeton University from 1914-1923. The Highwayman (1904) Noyes' best-known poem. Opening lines: The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees, / The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon the cloudy seas, ...**

## **THE HIGHWAYMAN**

### ***PART 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.

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 jeweled twinkle,

His pistol butts a-twinkle,

His rapier hilt 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  
 there

But the landlord's black-eyed daughter, Bess, the landlord's  
 daughter,

Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

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:

"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 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."  
 He rose upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,  
 But she loosened her hair i' the casement!  
 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,  
 (Oh, sweet black waves in the moonlight!)  
 Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to  
 the West.

## **PART II**

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 gipsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,  
 A red-coat troop came marching,  
 Marching, marching,  
 King George's men came marching, up to the old inn-door.  
 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;  
 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 barrel beneath 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!

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,

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 barrel beneath her breast,  
 She would not risk their hearing! she would not strive again;

For the road lay bare in the moonlight,

Blank and bare in the moonlight;

And the blood of her veins in the moonlight throbbed to her love's  
 refrain.

Plot-plot, plot-plot! Had they heard it? The horse-hoofs ringing clear;  
 Plot-plot, plot-plot, 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!***

Plot-plot, in the frosty silence! Plot-plot, 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.

He turned; he spurred to the Westward; he did not know she 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.

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.

THE END