



## The Highwayman

*Based on the poem by Alfred Noyes*

Storm clouds blew across the night sky, while the moon was tossed upon cloudy seas like a ghostly galleon. A blanket of purple heather clung to the moor below where a ribbon of moonlight stretched far into the distance. Along the road came a highwayman, riding on a handsome white stallion. On his head, the highwayman wore a French cock-hat and a bunch of lace around his neck. His red, velvet coat shone in the light, more for show than protection against the howling gale. He kicked his thigh-high boots into the side of his steed and guided it towards the old inn-door. As he rode, the butts of his pistols twinkled.

When he arrived at the inn, the doors were locked and barred. The highwayman pursed his lips and whistled a gentle tune underneath a particular window. After a short while, the shutters were eased open and Bess, the landlord's daughter, stared down sweetly: her black eyes twinkled.

Unbeknownst to the smitten pair, they weren't alone. Hidden away in the stable, behind a bale of straw, Tim the ostler listened. His hollow eyes, tinted green by what he witnessed, looked out of a pale white mask. Silently, he listened as the highwayman told Bess his plan for the night.

"I shall be back before the morning light," the highwayman promised his love. "Though if the wretched King's men harry me, wait for me by moonlight. I promise I will return!" With those parting words, he rose in his stirrups and leaned to take the girl's pale hand. She pulled it away and released the ribbon around her hair. Smiling at his love, the highwayman kissed the long, black waves and rode away to the west.

True to her word, Bess waited by her window at dawn. There was no sign of her love. No dot on the gypsy's ribbon that looped amongst the heather. Noon came and went, and soon a tawny sunset cast its glow across the lilac hills. And then, from out of nowhere, a troop of red-coated men came marching along the road and knocked on the old inn-door.

King George's men said nothing as they entered, preferring instead to sit and drink the ale. Bess screamed to no avail as half a dozen of them left the rest and bound her to the foot of her bed, a tight gag in her mouth. She screamed a muffled curse as they set themselves down at her casement and kept a tight eye on the growing shadows outside. She daren't move: when they had bound her, the red-coats had strapped a musket to her chest, and she was afraid to struggle against it too much. The handle sparkled in the

moonlight, just like the pistols of her betrothed.

Look for me by moonlight.

They would see him! Now she had no choice but to struggle, despite the threat. The knots held against her writhing, and soon her wrists were sore. Undeterred, she worked against them, hour after hour, until, on the stroke of midnight, she felt the trigger beneath her finger. She knew there was only one way to warn her love. Silently, Bess waited until she heard the familiar sound in the distance.

*Tlot-tlot.*

The unmistakable sound of her highwayman returning. He had kept his promise! Now, she must keep hers. She closed her eyes and pulled.

Outside in the darkness, the sturdy steed reared up at the sound of a gunshot. The highwayman dug his heels into the white flanks and spurred his horse to the west. It wasn't until dawn that he heard of his beloved's sacrifice.

Shrieking a curse to the sky, the highwayman spurred his horse back towards the road with his rapier held high. His spurs glistened red in the golden noon, but still, he pushed on until he rode straight into the red-coats as they left the old inn. They shot him down like a dog on the highway, his last thoughts filled with Bess, the landlord's black-eyed daughter.

## RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. What type of boots was the highwayman wearing?
2. What colour were Bess' eyes?
3. Who listened in to Bess and the highwayman's conversation?
4. How many guards bound Bess to the foot of the bed?
5. What was the sound of the horse that Bess listened out for?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

Use the context of the sentence to work out the definition of **unbeknownst**.

**V**

Use a thesaurus to find a synonym for **harry**.

**I**

When Bess has to struggle, what is the threat that she faces?

**E**

When she **closed her eyes and pulled**, what did she do? Explain why she did this.

**E**

Use a quote to explain how you know the highwayman rode quickly back to the guards.

Answers:

1. Thigh-high
2. Black
3. Tim the ostler
4. Half a dozen - 6
5. Tlot-tlot

V: Unknown or without knowing

V: Harass, assault, attack etc

I: That she would accidentally trigger the musket/gun or the soldiers would kill her

E: She shot herself to warn the highwayman before the guards saw him

E: His spurs glistened red in the golden noon (he was spurring his horse hard enough to make it bleed).