

The Highwayman

Loreena Mckennitt

The wind was a torrent of darkness
Among the gusty trees
The moon was a ghostly galleon
Tossed upon the 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 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
And 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
"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 the moonlight
Watch for me by the moonlight
I'll come to thee by the 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
His face burnt like a brand
As the black cascade of the perfume
Came tumbling over his breast
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight
Oh, sweet waves in the moonlight
He tugged at his rein in the moonlight
And galloped away to the west
He did not come at the dawning
He did not come at noon
And out of 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 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 the casement
With muskets at their side
There was death at every window
Hell at one dark window
For Bess could see through the casement
The road that he would ride

They had tied her up to attention
With many a niggering 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 the moonlight
Watch for me by the moonlight
I'll come to thee by the 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
Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot, had they heard it?
The horses hoofs ring 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
Tlot, in the frosty silence
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
He turned, he spurred to the west
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 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
And 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 the spurs in the gold moon
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
Still of a winter's night, they say
When the wind is in the trees
When the moon is a ghostly galleon
Tossed upon the 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

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