

The Highwayman

Words & Music:
Old English Poem
Arr: Loreena McKennitt

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the ghastly trees
the moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon the cloudy seas
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor
when the highwayman came riding, riding, riding,
the highwayman came riding up to the old inn door.

He'd a french cocked hat at his forehead a bunch of lace at his chin
a coat of claret velvet and breeches of brown doe-skin
They fitted with nary 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 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 should 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 up right in the stirrups he scarce could reach her hand
But she loosened her hair in the casement his face burned like a brand
As a black cascade of 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 of the moon
When the road was a gypsy's ribbon looping the purple moor
a redcoat 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 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 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!
but she writhed her hands 'til 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 her finger touched it the trigger at least was hers.

Tot-a-lot, tot-a-lot had they heard it? The horse's hooves rang clear
Tot-a-lot, tot-a-lot in the distance were they deaf they did not hear?
Down the ribbon of moonlight over the brow of the hill
The highwayman came riding, riding, riding,
The redcoats looked to their priming she stood up straight and still.

Tot-a-lot in the frosty silence Tot-a-lot in the echoing night
nearer he came and nearer her face was like a light
Her eyes grew wide for a moment she drew a 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 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.

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 golden noon wine-red was his velvet coat
When they shot him down in the highway down like a dog on the highway
And he lay in his blood in the highway with a bunch of lace at his throat.

Still on 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.