

Alfred Noyes (1880-1959)

2 *The Ballad of Dick Turpin*

The daylight moon looked quietly down
Through the gathering dusk on London town.

A smock-frockt yokel hobbled along
By Newgate, humming a country song.

Chewing a straw, he stood to stare 5
At the proclamation posted there:

*Three hundred guineas on Turpin's head,
Trap him alive or shoot him dead;
And a hundred more for his mate, Tom King.*

He crouched, like a tiger about to spring. 10

Then he looked up, and he looked down;
And, chuckling low, like a country clown,

Dick Turpin painfully hobbled away
In quest of his Inn — *The Load of Hay.*

.
Alone in her stall, his mare, Black Bess, 15
Lifted her head in mute distress;

For five strange men had entered the yard
And looked at her long, and looked at her hard.

They went out, muttering under their breath;
And then — the dusk grew still as death. 20

But the velvet ears of the listening mare
Lifted and twitched. *They were there — still there;*

Hidden and waiting; for whom? And why?
The clock struck four. A step drew nigh.

It was King! Tom King! Dick Turpin's mate. 25
The black mare whinneyed. Too late! Too late!

They rose like shadows out of the ground
And grappled him there, without a sound.

"Throttle him — quietly — choke him dead!
Or we lose the hawk for a jay," they said. 30

They wrestled and heaved, five men to one;
And a yokel entered the yard, alone;

A smock-frockt yokel, hobbling slow;
But a fight is physic, as all men know.

His age dropped off. He stood upright. 35
He leapt like a tiger into the fight.

Hand to hand, they fought in the dark;
For none could fire at a twisting mark,

Where he that shot at a foe might send
His pistol-ball through the skull of a friend. 40

But "*Shoot, Dick, shoot!*" gasped out Tom King.
"*Shoot, or damn it, we both shall swing!*

Shoot and chance it!" Dick leapt back.
He drew. He fired. At the pistol's crack

The wrestlers whirled. They scattered apart, 45
And the bullet drilled through Tom King's heart.

.
Dick Turpin dropped his smoking gun.
They had trapped him now, five men to one.

A gun in each hand of the crouching five,
They could take Dick Turpin now, alive; 50

Take him and bind him and tell their tale

As a pot-house boast, when they drank their ale.

He whistled, soft as a bird might call;
And a head-rope snapped in his bird's dark stall.

He whistled, soft as a nightingale. 55
He heard the swish of her swinging tail.

There was no way out that the five could see,
To heaven or hell, but the Tyburn tree;

No door but death; and yet, once more,
He whistled, as though at a sweetheart's door. 60

The five men laughed at him, trapped alive;
And — the door crashed open behind the five!

Out of the stable, a wave of thunder,
Swept Black Bess, and the five went under.

He leapt to the saddle. A hoof-spurned stone 65
Flashed blue fire, and their prize was gone.

II.

Away, through the ringing cobbled street, and out by the Northern Gate,
He rode that night, like a ghost in flight, from the dogs of his own fate.

By Crackskull Common, and Highgate Heath, he heard the chase behind;
But he rode to forget — forget — forget — the hounds of his own mind. 70

And cherry-black Bess on the Enfield Road flew light as a bird to her goal;
But her Rider carried a heavier load, in his own struggling soul.

He needed neither spur nor whip. He was borne on a darker gale.
He rode like a hurricane-hunted ship, with the doom-wind in her sail.

He rode for the one impossible thing; that, in the morning light, 75
The towers of York might waken him — from London, and last night.

He rode to prove himself another, and leave himself behind;
And the hunted self was like a cloud; but the hunter like the wind.

Neck and neck they rode together; that, in the day's first gleam,
Each might prove that the other self was but a mocking dream. 80

And the little sleeping villages, and the breathless country-side,
Woke to the drum of the racing hoofs; but missed that ghostly ride.

They did not hear, they did not see, as the drumming hoofs drew nigh,
The dark magnificent thief in the night that rode so subtly by.

They woke. They rushed to the wayside door. They saw what the midnight
showed, — 85
A mare that came like a crested wave along the Great North Road;

A flying spark in the formless dark, a flash from the hoof-spurned stone,
And the lifted face of a Man, that took the star-light, and was gone.

They heard the shout of the pounding chase, three hundred yards away.
There were fourteen men in a steam of sweat and a plaster of Midland clay. 90

The star-light struck their pistol-butts, as they passed in a clattering crowd,
But the hunting wraith was away like the wind at the heels of the hunted cloud.

He rode by the walls of Nottingham; and, over him as he went,
Like ghosts across the Great North Road, the boughs of Sherwood bent.

By Bawtrey all the chase but one had dropt a league behind, 95
Yet that one Rider hunted him, invisibly, as the wind.

And northward, like a blacker night, he saw the moors up-loom,
And Don and Derwent sang to him, like memory in the gloom,

And northward, northward as he rode, and sweeter than a prayer
The voices of those hidden streams, the Trent and Ouse and Aire; 100

Streams that could never slake his thirst. He heard them as they flowed.
But one dumb Shadow hunted him along the Great North Road.

Till now, at dawn, the towers of York, rose on the reddening sky,
And Bess went down between his knees, like a breaking wave, to die.

He lay beside her in the ditch. He kissed her lovely head; 105
And a Shadow passed him like the wind, and left him with his dead.

He saw, but not as one that wakes, the City that he sought;
He had escaped from London town, but not from his own thought.

He strode up to the Mickle-gate with none to say him nay;
And there he met his Other Self, in the stranger light of day. 110

He strode up to the dreadful Thing that in the gateway stood;
And it stretched out a ghostly hand that the dawn had stained with blood.

It stood, as in the gates of hell, with none to hear or see.
“Welcome!” it said, “*thou’st ridden well; and outstript all but me.*”

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