

W. Harrison Ainsworth (1805-82)

2 *Black Bess*

I.

Let the lover his mistress's beauty rehearse,
And laud her attractions in languishing verse;
Be it mine in rude strains, but with *truth* to express,
The love that I bear to my bonny Black Bess.

II.

From the West was her dam, from the East was her sire, 5
From the one came her swiftness, the other her fire;
No peer of the realm better blood can possess
Than flows in the veins of my bonny Black Bess.

III.

Look! look! how that eyeball glows bright as a brand!
That neck proudly arches, those nostrils expand! 10
Mark that wide-flowing mane! of which each silky tress
Might adorn prouder beauties — though none like Black Bess.

IV.

Mark that skin sleek as velvet, and dusky as night,
With its jet undisfigured by one lock of white;
That throat branched with veins, prompt to charge or caress: 15
Now is she not beautiful? — bonny Black Bess!

V.

Over highway and by-way, in rough and smooth weather,
Some thousands of miles have we journeyed together;
Our couch the same straw, and our meal the same mess:
No couple more constant than I and Black Bess! 20

VI.

By moonlight, in darkness, by night, or by day,
Her headlong career there is nothing can stay;
She cares not for distance, she knows not distress:
Can you show me a courser to match with Black Bess?

VII.

Once it happened in Cheshire, near Dunham, I popped 25
 On a horseman alone, whom I suddenly stopped;
 That I lightened his pockets you'll readily guess —
 Quick work makes Dick Turpin when mounted on Bess.

VIII.

Now it seems the man knew me; "Dick Turpin," said he,
 "You shall swing for this job, as you live, d'ye see;" 30
 I laughed at his threats and his vows of redress;
 I was sure of an *alibi* then with Black Bess.

IX.

The road was a hollow, a sunken ravine,
 Overshadowed completely by wood like a screen;
 I clambered the bank, and I needs must confess 35
 That one touch of the spur grazed the side of Black Bess.

X.

Brake, brook, meadow, and ploughed field, Bess fleetly bestrode,
 As the crow wings her flight we selected our road;
 We arrived at Hough Green in five minutes, or less —
 My neck it was saved by the speed of Black Bess. 40

XI.

Stepping carelessly forward, I lounge on the green,
 Taking excellent care that by all I am seen;
 Some remarks on time's flight to the squires I address,
 But I say not a word of the flight of Black Bess.

XII.

I mention the hour — it was just about four — 45
 Play a rubber at bowls — think the danger is o'er;
 When athwart my next game, like a checkmate at chess,
 Comes the horseman in search of the rider of Bess.

XIII.

What matter details? Off with triumph I came;
 He swears to the hour, and the squires swear the same; 50
 I had robbed him at *four!* — while at four *they* profess

I was quietly bowling — all thanks to Black Bess!

XIV.

Then one halloo, boys, one loud cheering halloo!
To the swiftest of coursers, the gallant, the true!
For the sportsman unborn shall the memory bless 55
Of the horse of the highwayman — bonny Black Bess!

(From *Ballads: Romantic, Fantastical, and Humorous*. London, 1855)