

The Fashionable Highwayman

by Emerson Bennett

Perhaps no other country in the world had so much romance connected with its highway robberies, as England during the last century; and notwithstanding that the penalty of conviction for this daring crime was death by the hangman, there were never wanting bold knights of the road, every ready to demand a purse and take the chances of ending their lives by the rope.

Some of these fellows might be classed as rogues and rascals rather than villains, since they stole and robbed merely to support themselves in idle extravagance and dissipation, and really bore no malice against their race, and shrank as much as better men from the idea of taking life except in self-defense. Some of them, too, professed an outward degree of refinement in dress, manners and language, and were probably no worse at heart than many of the proud, rich and fashionable men whom it was their ambition to mingle with and imitate.

Such at least was one William Derwent, who figured in London about the middle of the eighteenth century. He was born in the country, of respectable parents, received a good education, and at the age of one-and-twenty came into possession of a handsome legacy, left him by an uncle. This was enough, with care and prudence, to have rendered him independent of the monetary annoyances of life; but unfortunately he made the acquaintance of some extravagant young men from London, who portrayed that city in such glowing colors that he at once resolved to take lodgings there and see life; and against the advice of his friends, and the tearful prayers of his parents, he went, and at once entered on a giddy round of dissipation, the result of which was ruin in two short years.

When Derwent at length saw the end of his fortune was reached, that his last check had drawn his last shilling from his banker, that he owed more than he could pay, and that all his luxurious surroundings would soon be in the hands of the bailiffs and himself perhaps in prison, he sat down in his chamber and gave an hour to very serious and sober thought.

“I have it,” he at length muttered, with some clearing up of the cloudy brain; “I will turn highwayman and politely ask gentlemen of plethoric purses for liberal contributions. Why not? Some strict code of ethics might declare it a moral wrong, but I hardly know why. I shall take but to give. I shall take from the rich to circulate among the poor. The rich man has wrung it from the poor in the first instance, and why should not I be the channel of restoration as well as any other? The law says it is wrong, it is true; but of course the law was made by the rich man, who views it in that light. The law, too, says the offender shall be punished with death; but he must first be caught and proved guilty, and that I must be sharp enough to avoid. And after all, is it not better to have a gay, merry life and a sudden death, than wear out in some laborious and dirty calling? Or pine away in some filthy prison? Yes, I am resolved! I will take to the road! I will go disguised, and who dare suspect me?”

Such was the immoral philosophy and final resolution of William Derwent. He was a bold, energetic man, and he lost no time in setting about his new design. He at that time owned a phaeton and a pair of fine horses, and not infrequently drove out into the country. This was so much in favor of his plan, which was to drive out in the character of a gentlemen of fashion,

conceal his vehicle in some unfrequented locality, disguise his person by change of dress, wig, false whiskers, and so on, and either mount one of his horses, or take to the road on foot, as circumstances might determine.

His first adventure was a decided success. Driving out into a lonely part of the country, he turned off into a narrow by-road, and thence into a thick, dark wood, where he concealed his phaeton, tied one of his horses, and effected such a wonderful change in his personal appearance that he was forced to laugh as he viewed himself in a small mirror.

“I should like to see the man,” he said, “that would take such a looking object as I am now for William Derwent, Esq., the sprig of fashion!”

Mounting his other horse, he rode off in high spirits, gained the great highway by a circuitous route, and then, heading his horse in a direction opposite to the city, continued quietly along the road, like an ordinary traveler. About an hour after, he met the mail coach; but finding it full of passengers, he did not offer to molest it. A mile further on, he entered a long strip of heavy wood, which he considered a fine locality for his nefarious purpose. Here he soon after met a mounted man, that looked like a substantial farmer; and observing that his saddle-bags appeared to be heavy loaded, he resolved to try his chance on him. He made no indications of his design till within a few feet of the stranger, who he perceived was eyeing him with suspicion and timidity, when, suddenly spurring and wheeling his horse in front of him, he pointed a heavy pistol at his breast, and in a bold, gruff tone, demanded his money or his life. The man trembled from head to foot, turned white, and his teeth chattered as if he had the ague. Without a word, he drew his purse and handed it to Derwent, who, as he took it with a matter-of-fact air, and transferred it to one of his capacious pockets, added, as he glanced up and down the road:

“Quick, now, your saddle-bags!”

The other fairly groaned, and remarked, with the sweat standing on his brow, as he tremblingly complied with his demand:

“You rob me of all I’ve got in the world.”

“Well, don’t say I’m not liberal!” returned the highwayman, handing back the purse as he took the saddle-bags; “and now ride on for your life, and don’t tempt me to shoot!”

The other, finding himself at liberty, though lightened of a very important load, rode off at a gallop. Derwent sat and watched him till a turn in the road shut him from his view, when he deliberately went back till he came to the point where he had entered the highway, and then made the best time possible to his phaeton. A little after dark he drove back into the city in fine style, and none of the young bloods who met him that night, dreamed of the bold deed he had so successfully performed. On counting the money in the saddle-bags, he found he was richer by five hundred pounds.

Thus began the career of young Derwent as a highway robber, and which, without the slightest taint of suspicion, he continued for several years. He had some perilous adventures and several very narrow escapes.

On one occasion, having robbed his man in the usual manner, he was quietly returning to his phaeton, when, at a bend of the road, he suddenly found himself confronted by three mounted men, one of whom excitedly exclaimed:

“There his is! there he is! that’s the villain that robbed me a month ago!—catch the scoundrel! catch him! shoot him!”

Instantly Derwent wheeled his horse and dashed away, and the three followed with wild shouts. Being much better mounted than either of his pursuers, he could easily have got clear of them, but for the fact that there unluckily chanced to be two other horsemen coming the other way, instantly prepared to intercept him. With his holster pistols Derwent might have forced his way through them perhaps; but he had firmly resolved never to shoot except in the last extremity; and turning his horse, he leaped over a hedge, and dashed off across the fields. The five horsemen followed him, and the chase now became very exciting. In the course of a quarter of a mile, he came to a stone fence, with a ditch on the other side. In leaping this, his horse fell and broke his leg; and he had barely time to disentangle himself and get into some bushes that skirted a heavy wood, before his pursuers were fairly up with the unfortunate beast.

Derwent now succeeded in making his escape and getting back to his phaeton; but fearing his horse would be recognized, he was a good deal troubled at first as to what course to pursue. His ready invention, however, saved him. Quickly removing his disguise and resuming his fashionable apparel, he tore this in several places, soiled it with dirt, pricked his arm and bloodied it, and then deliberately bruised himself about the head and face by blows from a stone. This done, he drove back to town with his own horse, and dolefully reported how he had been attacked by a highwayman, robbed and left for dead, and that, on coming to himself, he had found that the villain had gone and taken away one of his animals. This story was readily believed, accounted for the missing horse, and not only relieved him of all troublesome suspicion, but created for him a good deal of genuine sympathy.

On another occasion, an intimate friend of his set out on a journey to Paris, and persuaded him to be his traveling companion as far as Dover. One night at an inn, where they occupied together a room whose windows opened upon a balcony, the friend was suddenly awakened by a great noise and outcry, and found Derwent at the raised window, pistol in hand, shouting, “help! murder! thieves!” and the like. The house was soon alarmed, and Derwent excitedly told his story. He had seen a robber in the room, who had disappeared through the window before he could get a shot at him. On examination it was found that his friend’s trunk had been broken open and robbed of two thousand guineas. It is only necessary to add that Derwent had himself transferred this money from this friend’s trunk to his own, before raising the outcry that left him free from all suspicion.

Derwent at length got married. The lady was neither young nor beautiful, but of a good family and a reputed heiress. He supposed he was uniting himself to a lady of great wealth, and she

thought she was securing a gentleman of immense fortune. Both were deceived, but he only knew it. It was not his policy to let the truth be known concerning his own circumstances, lest his vocation should be suspected; but he took occasion to quarrel with her and bring about a separation at the earliest possible moment, and the whole affair made quite a stir in the fashionable circles of the time.

The last adventure of Derwent on the road, was a very unfortunate one for himself, and finally resulted in a tragedy. He stopped a mounted officer, who, instead of producing his purse, suddenly drew his sword and made a blow at his head. He dodged, but did not wholly evade the stroke. It took effect on his left ear, and completely cut it off. Derwent alarmed at the consequences of this serious maiming, at once shot the officer, who fell from his horse. Supposing him to be dead, or mortally wounded, he instantly dashed away, and got safely back to the city, where he endeavored to account for his mishap by the statement that the officer had attempted to rob him, and he had shot his in self-defense.

Had the officer been killed, as he supposed, the story would probably have been believed, and the memory of the latter been forever disgraced; but unfortunately for Derwent, his intended victim was not fatally injured, and came into London the same evening, bringing his severed ear with him. Going at once before a magistrate, he stated all the facts and swore to them. When Derwent's story was heard along with the officer's, suspicion of the former's honesty was for the first time awakened. Several curious incidents were put together, and a clue to the truth was thus obtained; and by little and little the evidence was collected, till it became so strong that a warrant was issued for Derwent's arrest. He in the meantime had prepared himself for the worst; and when he found there was no longer any hope of escape, he put one of his pistols to his head and blew out his brains.

Thus perished, at the age of thirty-three, this remarkable highwayman, who, in the course of his ten years of crime, had, as was subsequently ascertained, robbed ninety-three persons, and all this time had been moving in good society, as a gentleman of wealth and fashion.

The New York Ledger, December 24, 1864