

The English Highwayman

Tom Rocket was a highwayman. No one ever christened him Tom, and his father's name was not Rocket. When he was tried for his life in Warwick assizes, he was arraigned as Charles Jackson, and they were particular about names then.— If you indicted a man as Jim and his true name was Joe, he got off; and when the law was altered, so that they could get such errors corrected at the trial, people, leastwise lawyers, thought that the British constitution was being pulled up root and branch. But that's neither here nor there. I cannot tell you how it was that he came to be know as Tom Rocket, and, if I could, it would not have anything to do with my story. For six years he was famous thief in the midland counties, and for six years no one knew what he was like. He was a lazy fellow, was Tom; he never came out except when there was a good prize to be picked up, and he had his scouts and his spies all over the place, to give him information about booty and warn him of danger. But, to judge by what people said, he was “on the road” at half a dozen different places at once, every day of his life; for, you see, when anyone was robbed of his property, or found it convenient so to account for it, why he laid it upon Tom Rocket as a sort of excuse for giving it up easily, because, you see, no one thought of resisting Tom. So it was that all sorts of conflicting descriptions of his person got abroad. One said he was an awfully tall man, with thunder; another that he was a mild little man with black eyes and light hair, He was a fiery fat man, with blue eyes and black hair, with some; he had a jolly red face—he was pale as death; his nose was Roman one day—Grecian or snub the next. His dress was all the colors of the rainbow, and as for his horse, that was of every shade and breed that was ever heard of, and a good many more besides, that have yet to be found out. He wore a black half mask, but somehow it was always obliging enough to slip off, so as to give each of his victims a full view of his face, only no two of them could ever agree as to what it was like.

My father was a Gloucestershire man.—He stood six feet three inches in his stockings and measured thirty-six inches across his chest. He could double up half a crown between his finger and thumb, and was brave as a lion. He had many a time and oft, when anyone talked of the dangers of the road, would set his great teeth together, shake his head, and say that he should like to see the man that could rob him on the highway, and, as I said before, he did see him, and it was Tom Rocket.

My father was a lawyer, and was at the time I have mentioned, engaged in a great tithe case that was to be tried at Warwick assizes. So, shortly before Christmas, he had to go over to look at the evidence. There was no cross country coach, so he rode; and being, as I have said, a brave man, he rode alone. He transacted his business, and my poor mother, being ill, and not liking to leave her alone longer than he could help, he set out to ride home again, about nine o'clock the same evening. It was as beautiful a night as ever you were out in. His nag was a first-rate hunter, docile as a dog, and fit to carry his weight over or past anything. He had a brace of excellent pistols in his holsters; and he jogged along, humming a merry tune, and neither thinking nor caring for any robber under the sun. All of a sudden, it struck him that the pretty barmaid of an inn just out of Warwick town, where he had stopped to have a girth that had broken patched together, had been very busy with those self-same pistols; suspecting that she might have been tampering with them, he drew the charges and reloaded them carefully. This done, he jogged on again as before.

He had ridden about ten miles, when he came to a wooden bridge that there was in those days over the Avon. Just above it rose a hill, at the top of which was a sudden bend in the road. Just as my father reached this turn, a horseman suddenly wheeled round upon him and bade him, "*Stand and Deliver!*" It was Tom Rocket. In a second my father's pistols were out, cocked and snapped within a yard of the highwayman's breast; but one after the other they missed fire! The pretty barmaid—a special favorite of Tom's—was too sharp to rely upon the old man's drawing the balls or damping the charge; she thrust a pin into each touch-hole, and broke it short off.

"Any more?" Tom inquired as coolly as you please, when my father's second pistol flashed in the pan.

"Yes," shouted my father in a fury, "one for your nob." And seizing the weapon last used by the muzzle, he hurled it with all his might and main at Rocket's head. Tom ducked; the pistol flew over the hedge, and my father, thrown out of his balance by his exertion, lost his seat and fell heavily upon the grass by the roadside. In less time than it takes to say so, Tom dismounted, seized my father by the collar, and presenting a pistol within an inch of his face as he lay, bade him be quiet, or it would be worse for him.

"You've given a deal of trouble," said Tom; "so just hand over the purse without any more ado, or, by G-d, I'll send a bullet through your skull just, there," and he laid the cold muzzle of his pistol on my father's forehead, just between his eyes.

It is bad enough to have to look down the barrel of loaded fire arms upon full cock, with a highwayman's finger upon the trigger, but to have the cold muzzle placed upon your head—ugh! It makes my flesh creep to think of it.

My father made a virtue of necessity, and quietly gave up his purse.

"Much good it may do you," he said; "for there's only three and sixpence in it."

"Now for your pocketbook," said Tom not heeding him.

"Pocketbook?" inquired my father, turning a little pale.

"Aye, pocketbook," Tom repeated; "a thick black one; it is in the left-hand pocket of your riding coat."

"Here it is," said my father; "you know so much about it perhaps you can tell what its contents are worth!"

"I'll see," Tom replied, quickly taking out and unfolding half a dozen legal looking documents.

"They are law papers—not worth a rush to you or anyone else," said my father.

"Then," Tom replied, "I may tear them up;" and he made as though he would do so.

“Hold! on your life!” shouted my father, struggling hard, but in vain, to rise.

“Oh, they are worth something, then,” said Tom with a grin.

“It would take a deal of trouble to make them out again,” my father replied sulkily; “that’s all.”

“How much trouble?” Tom inquired, with a meaning look.

“Well,” my father answered, “I suppose I know what you are driving at. Hand me them back, and let me go, and I promise to send you a hundred pounds when and where you please.”

“You know very well that these papers are worth more than a hundred pounds,” said Tom.

“A hundred and fifty, then,” said my father.

“Go on,” said Tom.

“I’ll tell you what it is,” cried my father; “I’ll stake five hundred against them if you loose your hold and fight me fairly for it.”

Tom only chuckled.

“Why, what a ninny you must take me for,” he said; “why should I bother myself fighting for what I can get without?”

“You’re a cur, that’s what you are,” my father shouted in a fury.

“Don’t be cross,” said Tom; “it don’t become you to look so red in the face. Now attend to me,” he continued in an altered tone; “do you see that bridge? Well, there’s a heap of stones in the center, isn’t there? Very well, if you will place five hundred guineas in gold, in a bag, amongst those stones, at 12 o’clock at night this day week, you shall find your pocketbook and all its contents in the same place two hours afterwards.”

“How am I to know that you will keep your word?” my father replied, a little softened at the hope of regaining, even at so heavy a price, the papers that were invaluable to him.

“I’m Tom Rocket,” replied the robber, securing the pocketbook upon his person; “what I mean I say, and what I say I stick to. Now get up; and mind,” he added, as my father sprang to his feet, “my pistols don’t miss fire.”

“I shall live to see you hanged,” my father muttered, adjusting his disordered dress.

“Shall I help you catch your horse?” Tom asked, politely.

“I’ll never rest till I lodge you in jail,” said my father savagely.

“Give my compliments to your wife,” said Tom, mounting his horse.

“Confound your impudence,” howled my father.

“Good night,” said Tom, with a waive of his hand, and, turning short round, he jumped his horse over the fence, and was out of sight in a moment.

It was not quite fair of my father, I must own; but he determined to set a trap for Tom Rocket, baited with the five hundred guineas, at the bridge. He posted up to London, saw Bradshaw, a famous Bow street runner, and arranged that he and his men should come down and help to catch Tom; but, just at the last moment, Bradshaw was detained on some important government trail, and so another runner, Frazer, a no less celebrated officer, took his place.

It was settled, and the runners should come by different roads, and all meet at a wayside inn, about five miles from the bridge, at eight o’clock P.M., on the day my father’s pocketbook was to be returned. An hour afterwards they were to join him on the road three fields further on.—Their object, you see, in taking this round about course, was to baffle Tom’s spies and accomplices, and to get securely hid about the appointed spot long before the appointed time.

My father was a little late at the place of meeting, but, when he arrived there, he could see no one about except a loutish looking countryman in a smock frock, who was swinging on a gate hard by.

“Good night, maister,” said the yokel.

“Good night to you,” said my father.

“Can you tell me who this yer letter’s for?” said the yokel, producing a folded paper.

My father saw in a moment that it was his own letter to Bradshaw.

“Where did you get that?” he said quickly.

“Ah,” replied the yokel, replacing it in his pocket, “that ud be tellins. Be yer expecting anybody?”

“What’s that to you?” said my father.

“Oh, nought,” said the yokel, “only a gentleman from London—”

“Ha!” cried my father, “what gentleman!”

“Would a name beginning with F. suit you?” asked the yokel.

“Frazer?” The word fell involuntarily from my father’s lips.

“That’s the name,” replied the yokel, jumping down from his seat, and changing his tone and manner in a moment.—

“I’m Frazer; sir, and you’re Mr. Sandiger, as been robbed of a pocketbook containing valuable papers; and we’re going to catch Tom Rocket, as has got it—that’s our game, sir. All right, sir, and now to business.”

“But where are your men?” my father asked, when Frazer had explained the reason for his disguise.

“All right, again, sir,” said the same runner—“they will join us. We have not much time to lose, so please lead the way.”

So, my father led the way, followed by Frazer, and, by the time that they came in sight of the bridge, they had been joined by four London officers, in different disguises, and from different directions. One appeared as a tramp, one as a peddler, another as a gentleman’s servant leading a horse, and a fourth as a soldier. No one could have guessed that they were engaged together in a preconcerted scheme. My father gave Frazer great credit for the dexterous way in which he had collected his forces.

The bridge upon which the money was to be placed consisted of two arches across the river, and was joined on the other side by a long sort of causeway, built upon piles over meadows that in the wintertime were generally covered with water. It so happened that, the very next morning after the robbery, a heavy rain set in, and soon the floods were out, so that there was no way of getting on the bridge but by going along the causeway, which extended a distance of a hundred yards, sloping down gradually to the road, on each side of the river. This causeway was built of wood. At some places the timbers were covered with earth and stones, but at others the roadway had worn out and they were bare so that anyone looking up from underneath could see who was passing overhead. Mr. Frazer’s sharp eye took in the position in a moment. He got two hurdles out of a field close by, and, with some rope that he had brought for another purpose, fastened them to the pullies, so that they hung like shelves to the roadway and the flood, one at each side of the bridge and about 20 yards from it. This was his plan: Two of his men were to be hidden on each hurdle, whilst he and my father, in a boat that was concealed beneath the main arch of the bridge, unseen themselves, could watch the heap of stones where the money was to be placed and the stolen pocketbook left in exchange for it. As soon as Tom Rocket, or any of his friends, removed the bag in which the gold was placed, Frazer was to whistle, and his men were to climb from their hiding places and secure whoever it might be. If he leaped over the railing of the causeway, and took to the water, there was the boat in which to follow and capture him.

Mr. Frazer was very particular to practice his allies in springing quickly from their place of concealment, and impress upon them and my father the necessity of all acting together, keeping careful watch and strict silence. “And now, sir,” Mr. Frazer said to my father, as a distant clock chimed a quarter to twelve, “it is time to get our places and to bait the trap,

so please hand me the bag that I may mark it, and some of the coins, so as to be able to identify them at the trial.” He had made up his mind to nail Master Tom this time.

My father gave him the bag, saw him write upon it and make some scratches on about a dozen of the guineas, and then my father let himself down into the boat, in which he was immediately joined by the runner.

“It’s all right,” said Frazer in a low tone.

“Do you think he will come?” whispered my father.

“Certain,” replied Frazer, “but, hush! We must not talk, sir—time’s up.”

For three mortal hours did my father sit in that boat, and the runners lay stretched out on the broad of their backs upon those hurdles, watching for Tom Rocket to come for his money; and for three mortal hours not a soul approached the bridge, not a sound but the wash of the swollen river was heard. But the time that the clock struck three, my father, who had been nodding for the last twenty minutes, fell fast asleep as he sat covered up in his cloak, for it was a bitter cold night; but was very speedily aroused by hearing Frazer cry out that they were adrift.

Adrift they were sure enough. The rope that held them had been chafed against the sharp corner of the pile (so Mr. Frazer explained) till it broke, and away went the boat, whirling round and round in the eddies of the river, fit to make anyone giddy. So strong was the stream that they were carried a mile and a half down it before they could get ashore. My father was for returning directly to the bridge, and so was Frazer; but, somehow or other, they lost each other in the dark, and when my father arrived there, having run nearly all the way, he found, to his great surprise, that the officers had left. He rushed to the heap of stones, and there the first thing that caught his eye was his pocketbook—*the money was gone!*

Lord, how he did swear!

Determining to have it out with the runners for deserting their posts, he hurried on to the inn where they had met, and were to pass the night. He knocked at the door. No answer. He knocked again louder. No answer. He was not in the very best of temper, as you may guess; so he gave the door a big kick. In it flew, and a sight met his view that fairly took away his breath. Tied into five chairs, hand and foot, trussed up like so many Christmas turkeys, with five gags in their mouths, and five pairs of eyes glaring owlishly sat the real Mr. Frazer and his four Bow street runners.

Tom Rocket had managed the business at the bridge himself! How he managed to get scent of the plot, and to seize the officers, altogether, just at the nick of time, my father never could find out, and no one knows to this day.

Upon examining his pocketbook, my father found all his documents, and a paper on which were written these words:

“By destroying these writings I could have ruined you. In doing so I could have injured your client, whom I respect. For his sake I keep my word, though you have played me false.”

“TOM ROCKET.”

Here Mr. Josh paused, and smoked for some time in silence.

“And what became of Tom?” asked one of the company.

“Well,” replied Mr. Josh, “after having been tried three times, and getting off on some law quibble on each occasion, he who had robbed the worth of thousands of pounds, and escaped, was executed at Nottingham for stealing an old bridle!” — *Once a Week* [London]

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