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Mattie  
and the  
Highwaymen  
(the first chapter)

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# 1 *The Highwaymen*

In the darkest hours before dawn on August the 4th, 1845, a young girl was trotting west on a small grey Arabian mare. Stars in a cloudless night followed her down the chalky Hampshire road, giving just enough light to reveal its many ruts and potholes. She sang occasionally to keep her spirits up and paused once to eat a slice of meat and potato pie, which she shared with the tame jackdaw travelling with her.

Then she settled a large black cloak about her thin shoulders, pulled the hood over her short-cropped blond air, and set off again. The cloak flapped gently against the tops of ankle-high black boots that were several sizes too large for her. After a time the quiet, even pacing of the horse rocked her to sleep.

When she awoke, there was a barely perceptible brightening of the eastern sky behind her. The mare had paused to crop some grass from the verge and moved on reluctantly, only to stop yet again. They were at the edge of Harewood forest now, and darkness breathed from the very trees.

'Come on, girl,' urged Mattie, giving the mare a little squeeze with her legs. 'It's not far to Andover now.' They entered the forest, bearing a little to their right, to the north.

'Why, it's hardly more than a wood!' the girl said reproachfully. 'And the road mostly runs along its edge, in any case!'

For the next mile, this was true. But then the road bent due west and the forest spilled across the road from left to right, blocking out the little light that remained. The horse's hoofs echoed and were answered by scuttling sounds from the trees that leaned hard against the margin of the road and met overhead.

Mattie peered forward but could make out only the faint white of the chalky road surface. The mare slowed, then halted abruptly, throwing Mattie forward onto her mane. Ghostly shapes moved in the darkness about them.

'Who's there? Who is it?' Mattie whispered, trembling.

For answer there was a low laugh from the bushes on her left. Then a deep voice cried:

'That's good, then, my fine boys! Let's have a light now and see what's in the net, shall we? Don't sound like much of a catch though, do it? Hey?' The voice was well-spoken, with a rustic edge to it.

A lantern was lighted and held in Mattie's face. Its holder was tall and skinny and wore a black mask covering the top half of his face. Below the mask was a sharp nose, bad teeth, and a filthy, matted beard parted on the left by a wide scar. Behind him, another man held the horse's bridle. There were others waiting in the shadows.

'Just a tiddler, cap'n!' cried the one with the lantern. 'A gel, what's more!'

The leader stepped into the pool of light. He was tall and broad, with dark curly hair and a clean-shaven face. In one hand he held a full-length mask, which he twirled about on a ribbon as he studied Mattie with amusement and disbelief. His other hand rested on a pistol tucked into his wide belt.

'Well, well, what have we here? A minuscule mermaid, is that it, boys? Swimming here amongst the sharks, was she? Well now, young Missy! You must consider yourself becalmed, marooned, boarded, plundered, scuppered and

shipwrecked!' He laughed loudly and the noise echoed in the gloom. He made a small, mocking bow and added, 'But you are most welcome, young'un. Dicker am I - keeper, you might say, of the Queen's highway!'

Mattie sat up straight and tried to control her voice. 'I - I would be much obliged -' she said in little more than a whisper, 'if you were to - to move out of my path - and - and -'. The man with the lantern laughed at her. She became angry and her voice rose. 'And I would be obliged also if this - this *creature* here would be so good as to stop poking that light in my face, and if the other creature would release my horse's bridle! I am on my way to Miss Bell's Academy for the Daughters of Gentlefolk, where I intend to continue my studies.'

In the darkness to her left, someone snorted at this speech. Dicker laughed derisively and then copied her refined accent.

'What?' he cried. 'Surely - oh, *shorely!* - you are not going to Miss Bell's Academy? Why did you not say so? We were just going there ourselves, weren't we, boys?' He nodded towards his men and changed his voice again.

'Me and my crew, we was goin' to enrol there and learn how to be wise and good, 'cause our mothers never taught us - did they, lads?'

'That's sure as dammit right, Dicker, me old Mam never taught me nothin' but sinfulness, an' that's a fact!' one of the others exclaimed.

Dicker stroked the horse's mane with a large, hairy hand. 'Aye, Missy, we're poor orphan boys what never had the loving direction we needed, and we reckon your Miss Bell is just the lady to give it us! So I expect you'd be pleased if we was to go with you and protect you from brigands and highwaymen and other outcasts from polite society. Hey? Besides, we knows a shortcut, don't we, shipmates?'

'I don't think -' began Mattie.

'Then you shouldn't be talking! Bring her along, lads!'

Lump, Stump, Pirate, Scarecrow - on the double now! We don't want her to be late for the wondrous Miss Bell, do we?'

Mattie was hustled off the road to her right and all her protests were answered by bursts of rough laughter. They jogged along a path at considerable speed. Branches slapped her face and strong, rough hands pulled at her until she was lying flat along the horse's back, clinging to its mane. The path dropped suddenly and spiralled to the right, down and down until the trees silhouetted on the skyline were high above her, and she could imagine she was in the dark hold of a steep-sided ship, with rats scuttling about her on every side.

They turned a final bend and stopped. The gang were panting from their exertions and two of them sat on the ground to recover while the growing light restored Mattie's whirling senses.

Not counting Dicker, her captors were four. Two of them were bearded; three were scarred about the face; all were filthy. One had large gold earrings, long black hair tied behind his head, and a hook nose set crookedly on a scarred face. A second had an arm that ended above the wrist; apart from a wispy red beard, he had the face of a boy. A third was fat, balding and beardless. He sat wheezing and sweating long after the others had caught their breath. The fourth was the thin, unkempt, scarred man with blackened teeth who had held the lantern.

Mattie stared at them: Pirate, Stump, Lump and Scarecrow. Dicker, standing calmly at the horse's head, was biting a fingernail.

'You shouldn't do that, you know,' Mattie told in him in a shaking voice. She hardly knew what she was saying. She was talking just to keep herself from fainting.

'Beg pardon? Shouldn't do what, Missy?'

'Bite your nails. Miss - Miss Bell says the pieces get stuck in your - your appendix, which then rots inside you, so

that you die an agonising death.'

'Bully for her! I'll wager you a guinea that the lying old bird snuffs it afore I do! Hey?'

The jackdaw, who had dozed fitfully throughout Mattie's adventures, roused himself at this last cry. He crept out from within Mattie's cloak onto her shoulder and fixed the man with a bright eye. 'Heh! Heh!' he mimicked.

'Sblood! It's a devil bird!' exclaimed Dicker. He drew the pistol from his belt. 'Shoo the hell-creature off your shoulder, Missy. I'm good with this pistol, but it does jump a bit when it fires, and sometimes the ball goes astray.'

'It's my bird, and I'll thank you leave it be!' she countered, suddenly fearless.

Dicker stared at her. 'Leave it be? Leave it be?! I'm not having that thing in my camp, my little pretty! But it's up to you, girl. I'll take off his head as he sits there on your shoulder, or else as he flies away. But off it most definitely goes, my lovely! Can't abide witches, ghosts, black cats, haunted houses, the gibbet - or ravens!'

'It's not a raven. It's a jackdaw!'

'Looks plenty like a raven to me in this light, and that's enough!' He cocked the gun and raised it slowly.

'You won't!'

'I sure as hellfire will!'

Mattie snatched Jasper from her shoulder and tucked him inside her cloak again. 'Now try it, you - you great *oaf!*' she raged.

The one called Lump gave a great guffaw. 'Got you there, hain't she, Dicker?' he called out.

'Shut your fat face!' Dicker swung at the man and Lump fell backwards with the weight of the blow. The others laughed. Then Dicker's gun turned back to point at Mattie on her horse, slowly, deliberately, as if it were a live thing moving of its own will.

Dicker looked up at her along the barrel and spoke quietly. 'The only thing that stops me from putting a bullet through the both of you is the thought that you may be

worth more to us alive than dead, little Miss Bigboots. Perhaps - so as to save your scrawny little skin - you could tell us who you are, and why you were passing along the public highway in a manner likely to bring danger to yourself at this time of the day's dawning?'

Mattie climbed down from the horse. Once on the ground, her bravery left her as suddenly as it had come. She leaned against the mare and tried to stop her legs from shaking. 'I'm - I'm Matilda Harris,' she said haltingly. 'I am thirteen years old -'

'Now that's bad luck, for a start!' Scarecrow exclaimed, dragging at his beard. 'Havin' a woman on board is bad enough, but one that's thirteen in the bargain is not to my likin'!'

'And - and I was going to Miss Bell's Academy, as I have already told you. And Sir Lucid will be very annoyed when he finds -'. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

'I like that name,' Dicker said. 'Say it again. "Sir" Lucid, I think it was?'

Mattie shrugged her shoulders.

Dicker smiled, pityingly. 'What a poor memory you have, Missy! Can't even recall what you said a moment before, hey? I expect you would be a bit of a trial to Miss Bell, right? So maybe you'd better put off your education a few days, whilst we tries to discover how much Sir Lucid misses you, and how much salvage he's willing to pay.'

'Salvage?'

Dicker was all sea captain now. 'It's what they pays you, my little lubber, when you comes across a ship what's floatin' about lost and helpless on the open seas, and out of the salty kindness of your tender heart you takes it in tow and brings it back to port.'

'I was *not* lost!' Mattie's grey-green eyes glittered a little and her chin came up defiantly.

'You are now, young'un!' said Lump, who had righted himself and was edging cautiously out of Dicker's reach.

Dicker continued, 'But at least you're in royal company,

little Clonkabout: under the protection of Dicker - *Sir Dicker*, I should say! - highwayman by appointment to Her Majesty Queen Victoria!

'I don't believe *that!*' Mattie exclaimed.

Dicker gave her a warning grimace. 'Seems to me you'd best believe what you're told, my cocky little firebrand! If I say I'm Sir Dicker, it's true enough while I've got a knife in my pocket and a pistol at my belt. That pile of mossy stones over there is my manorial seat, and these here nobly-bred boys with perfect manners and bad teeth are my royal retainers.'

Mattie remembered something. 'Miss Bell says that the age of the highwayman has passed. She says the last real highwaymen were at the beginning of the century. Miss Bell says -'

'I think I'm going to grow powerful tired of hearing of that lady quite soon, Missy. Her name rings no bells with me, you might say!'

Lump, now out of Dicker's reach, turned a worried eye towards Mattie. He wiped his brow and panted, 'Say - Dicker - what'll we do if - if they won't pay ready money?'

'She walks, don't she?' - and Dicker gave his men a broad wink.

Mattie considered this. 'You mean I get to go home, but you keep the horse?'

A chorus of laughs greeted this. 'No, my fine prisoner. You walk the plank! Come this way, sweetheart.'

She was pulled along a muddy path, rough hands pinching her arms and shoulders, until they reached a clearing. On one side of it, a steep chalk wall rose. In the past someone had tried to quarry from it, and made quite a deep cave within - which Mattie could see was now a storage place for the gang. Nearby was a ramshackle timber cottage and in front of one of its two grimy windows was a ring of crumbling stone which rose a couple of feet from the ground. It was to this stone ring that she was led.

'Now, my poppet,' said Dicker in a confiding tone. 'This here's a well. The water's still good for drinking, and I once saw Stump washing with it - only once, mind! Furthermore, it would be a fine place to put things when you no longer need 'em and don't particularly want anyone else to know you've had 'em. Know what I mean?'

Mattie looked at the well and said nothing.

Dicker grinned. 'What d'you say, lads? Reckon she understands?'

Scarecrow answered grimly, 'She needs to be shown, Dicker.'

Dicker grubbed about in the dirt by the well and came up with a fat worm. He placed it on a flat stick, which he laid on the stones. The worm crawled slowly along the stick.

Dicker dropped his voice to a whisper. 'Now you see, Missy. I have no need for this old worm, have I? He's nothing to me. And when he gets to the end of that stick, he's nothing to no one. Right?'

The worm came to the end of its short journey and felt forward uncertainly. Dicker tilted the stick and the worm wriggled clumsily and fell. A few seconds later a tiny splash was heard.

'I understand,' said Mattie quietly. 'You're a bunch of bloodthirsty pirates.'

'Got it in one, little Miss! This here's the finest band of thieves, cutpurses and scoundrels you'll ever meet,' Dicker confided.

'Led by the last of the highwaymen, aye, Dicker?' cried Pirate.

'And why not? The Dickers have always been pirates, bootleggers, buccaneers, poltroons, highwaymen, throat-slitters and kidnappers. It's what we do best!'

'Except when you're in gaol, Dicker!' Lump said.

'Ah, but I'm out now, see? Out for near on six months and not caught yet! Oh, we've got some merry times ahead of us, lads - merry times! And I've a feeling that our young

friend here will give us hours of entertainment, and make us all considerably rich besides! That's right, isn't it, my sweet fireball?

He leaned towards her until his broad face was close to her own. His breath smelled of raw onions and beer. Mattie tried to pull away, but he grabbed her by the shoulder and repeated his question. She kicked out at him feebly, and he laughed. But his shaking of her had dislodged Jasper from her cloak. The bird panicked and stabbed his beak deep into the man's cheek. Dicker fell back clutching his face while the bird flew into the trees.

'Devil's bird! I swear it's a raven, after all. Where's my pistol, Jack?'

Pirate spoke urgently, grabbing Dicker's arm. 'Don't shoot a jackdaw, Dicker. 'Sbad luck, it is. Like - like killin' an albatross at sea.' Mattie was surprised that his voice trembled a little, as if with fear.

Dicker raised the pistol. He sighted along it carefully, then looked around at his men. He gave a long, exasperated sigh. 'All right, boys. Mustn't tempt fate! The damned bird lives.' He put the pistol away and turned to Mattie. He chucked her under the chin.

'What about your folks, then, littl'un? How rich be they?'

Mattie had recovered her courage once more and regarded him coolly. 'If you think I'm going to tell you anything, you're going to be very, very disappointed,' she said.

Dicker laughed. 'What shall we do with her, lads? D'you reckon she'll talk if we roast her feet on the campfire?'

There were laughs of approval at this suggestion but Pirate spoke up again, saying doubtfully, 'She's just a girl, Dicker.'

'Just a girl? She's a clear thousand in gold pieces, you lily-livered babies! But no matter. No matter! We know the name - she gave us that. And I reckon if we look in the pony's saddlebags, we'll discover most everything else we

need to know. She wouldn't be travelling to school without taking a few necessaries. Fetch'em, Jack! Stump, tether the pony with our own horses. Scarecrow, you see the girl to the cave. Tie her up, if you've a mind to! I expect she'll stay put until the work'us brats get back with our breakfast.'

Mattie was led away by Scarecrow, wondering what a "work'us brat" was. Pirate ransacked her bags, and Stump - who so far had said nothing to anyone - stroked the mare kindly with his good arm and then whistled gently to her as he led her away.

'Dicker! Come look at this, would ye?'

'What is it, Pirate me old sport? A letter? Who from and who to, me barnacled ship's underbelly?' Dicker turned the envelope over. '*Please send to Sir Lucid*' he read.

'Don't reckon we'll do that, will we, Jack?' He took a thick knife from his belt and slit the envelope deftly, like a man accustomed to much slitting. He extracted the letter and read it, his lips moving silently.

*Dear Uncle Lucid*

*By the time you get this letter, I shall be at Miss Bell's Academy. I know you did not wish me to go back there before term starts, but I would be very unhappy to remain at Druddery Hall alone. I have previously stayed with the caretakers, Mr and Mrs Mills, and they were always very good to me. I am certain that they be willing for me to board with them while you are in Cornwall.*

*I will write to you again once I have arrived. I remain your dutiful niece*

*Matilda Harris*

'Well, well,' he said, mostly to himself. 'Looks like the young lady ran away, meaning to leave behind a letter

telling of her whereabouts - but she put it in her bags instead. So... so he doesn't know where she is. Perhaps he doesn't even know she's gone. Methinks... methinks Sir Dicker could make something of this.'

'What's up, Dicker?'

'What's up, old crewmate, is that we've got some digging to do.'

'Diggin'? What for? Gold? Or maybe you mean diggin' graves? Look, Dicker, I done a lot of wicked things in me time, but -'.

Dicker placed a hand firmly over the other's mouth. 'Put a bung in it, Jack, there's a good tar. No one's to be hurt - at least, not unless it's necessary. I meant digging for *information*. There's for sure a gold mine at the bottom of all this, my friend, but it's maybe a long ways down! But first I need some breakfast - and then I need to don my finest rags and assume a right royal bearing, so as to make a social call on Sir Lucid Somebody. Mayhaps Ay shall be Terence Dicker, Esquire, late of Pall Mall, wishing to make the acquaintance of gentlemen of similar breeding, what?'