



## **Galloping Dick**

By Anthony Malone

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I woke up in a ditch. Across the muddy track that was the Great North road the doxy from the mail coach was screaming and closing fast were the shouts of righteous men. My plan had failed. Turpin lived, my horse had bolted and that rum Duchess was giving me earache. I pulled myself up into a sitting position and gazed at the wreckage of the overturned coach, suitcases and trunks scattered everywhere. "You!" a voice cried and I turned to see a sprawling coachman with a face like thunder scrabbling for his flintlock. Not much you can do in a situation like that except run and so it was, in a most undignified manner, I cut loose and limped away thinking that was what you got when you tried to hold up the most famous mounted robber in all of England.

You'd think the sight of young John Palmer twitching at the end of a noose would have put me off mounted robbery for good, but that's not accounting for my Nancy's wicked charms. She had crooked teeth and hair the colour of mouldy hay but she meant the world to me even though her love of musical theatre cleaned me out of tin on a regular basis. Aye, musical theatre and even though chanting thespians weren't to my taste I had betimes been driven to mounted robbery to keep Nancy in the seats to which she had become accustomed. Bless her heart, she thought I worked in the City, and I had a mind to keep it that way. That said, all I wanted as I limped the last mile to the White Hart Tavern was some shepherd's pie and a warm fire. In fact I was still so addled by the throw from my horse I entered too swiftly through the door of the Tavern, caught the pocket of my coat on the handle, yanked it free, lost my balance and made my entrance into that great fraternity of rogues and villains sprawled on the floor amid sawdust and ale.

The White Hart that evening was filled with waggoners, carters, trampers, whip-jacks, beau-traps, some obvious pad-borrowers, a brewer from Truro, a lot of sallow-faced

strowlers 'cos of the fair and a lost-looking parson going from table to table drumming up God's holy trade. The innkeeper – a burly growler named Hewertson – spied me getting to my feet from behind the bar and bellowed "Oi! Ferguson. Stop treating this place like a mail stop!" and strode out brandishing a crumpled note. In a trice, he'd spun me round, grabbed the scruff of my neck and started shoving the paper down the back of my shirt to shouts of laughter from all around. I wriggled and yelled at this but no one stepped forward to help and when he was finished he pushed me away and I darted for the furthest corner. "Gallopig Dick!" some wag cried triumphantly and the place erupted into laughter at my expense. Scowling, I slid into one of the wooden booths closest to the fire, nodded curtly at a shadowy figure across the table and helped myself to swig of his ale. "It's no good," I hissed at him out of the corner of my mouth. "It can't be done."

The fellow opposite was a shady-flash dandy in a fustian frock, a finely combed periwig and a pair of pumps that smacked of blunt. Jerry Abershaw was his name and I had recently approached him with a view to riding with his gang of rogues and sharing in their greater profits. Not for fun, mind, but to fund Nancy's theatre tickets more easily. Abershaw had been open to this idea but had set a price of his own. "Well now, Dick, here's the rub. The boys will want proof of your credentials, like. Any buzzard can hold up a coachload of fusspot actors. You come back when you've apprehended your namesake, that cattle-stealer and house-breaker, Richard Turpin. Then we'll talk."

It sounded simple enough, which showed how much I knew. It had turned out apprehending Turpin meant suicide as sure as Sunday meant sermons and right then in the White Hart as glasses clinked and the low murmur of chatter grew around us I told Abershaw to his face he was mad if he thought it possible. In the flickering firelight I described how after three weeks skulking in the woods waiting fruitlessly for Turpin to show up, I had thrown caution to the wind that very afternoon and stopped the mail coach, demanding a place on board thinking it the perfect place to lie in wait for a villain like Turpin. Unfortunately, in the melee caused by my sudden appearance from the woods, my pistol had discharged, the horses had reared and I had been thrown senseless into a ditch as the coach overturned. Those horses scared so easy. In fact it was a good thing the passengers hadn't had their wits about them or I would have swung for sure. Abershaw chewed on his pipe and said the basic idea was solid but he didn't want to hear excuses. The greater the risk, the bigger the reward he said but I

shook my head emphatically. What I wasn't telling him was that I knew as long as I had the love of good, kind Nancy, I didn't need his gang of villains. I'd find the money for her theatre tickets – and my debts, and for a place for the two of us to live – one way or another, but I'd do it alone and with less risk of Nancy finding me out. So I tipped my hat to Abershaw, said "thank'ee but no thank'ee" and cheekily finished the rest of his ale. He left soon after.

I flopped back in the booth then, well-pleased with this turn of events and only irritated by the scratchy ball of paper Hewertson had shoved down my back. Twisting and turning I pulled it out, flattened it on the table and cast an eye over the delicate writing. Much to my surprise the writing was Nancy's:

"I know your secret," it read. "Go to the devil."

In a lifetime that has included far too many unpleasant surprises, I can think of few nastier shocks than that moment. It hit me like a blast of icy water. So Nancy knew the truth! This was shipwreck! That lovely girl was the only thing that made my wretched life worth living and I beat at the table with my fists and cursed most foully. Aghast, I lurched sideways out of the booth, righted myself with a twisted foot but staggered into a table of elbow shakers, their shouts and cries following me as I reeled out of the tavern and into the cold night air.

Amid swirling mist I stole a black gelding with a star on its forehead from the livery behind the inn and soon I was thundering over the heath, my waistcoat flapping as my mount surged up the long, rising incline towards Wimbledon village. I could hear the thud of the hooves, see the clods thrown up from the wet turf and feel the wind in my face as the trees flew past but all I could think of was Nancy and my terrible luck and why it was I always seemed to hurtle from one disaster to another in life; never winning, never succeeding, always failing. I reached Wimbledon in record time and when my horse's hooves skittered over the cobbled stones I jumped down, wiped fresh tears from my eyes, and banged my fist on the wooden door of Nancy's lodgings praying to God her note had been part of some evil dream and that lovely girl still thought I was something big in the City.

"Ugh!" Nancy exclaimed on seeing me and slammed the door in my face. I knocked again, hearing muffled curses, then a third time, eventually rewarded with the contents of a chamber pot flung at me from an upstairs window. Sopping wet I pledged contrition

and assured her of my continued ardor but she would have none of it. In a way, I protested, it was her fault I had fallen so low; she shouldn't have been so wretchedly enticing but she just squealed at this and slammed the upstairs window so hard the building shook. Some burly types appeared then and I knocked one down which caused a tremendous uproar, a constable being summoned and it was a near thing I wasn't hauled up before a magistrate which would have been the end of me for sure.

A smooth sea never made a skillful mariner but what is a man to do when the woman he loves abandons him on account of his history of violent robbery? Sit and pick posies? I stumbled through the streets of Wimbledon that night without a clue of where I was going or what I would do and in fact barged into two hams flouncing out of the side of the theatre who turned their noses up at my sodden state. Without thinking I snarled at them and relieved them of their purse and that, God bless 'em, paid for a much overdue plate of shepherd's pie at the local Tavern. Indeed, I later overheard gossip that the two stars of the play had been so unmanned by the experience the performance had had to be cancelled and I knew Nancy would be sorely dismayed by this and wondered why such a thing did not happen more.

Well, it did happen more; out of spite, I admit but over the next few days and weeks I turned a pretty penny frightening actors out of their wits and relieving them of their purse. In fact I would have continued on to a nice sized fortune if left alone except for one morning on the Great North road I drew back the scarlet curtain of a coach window, growled "Hand it over, Banquo!" and found, instead of the usual assortment of blubbing actors, none other than Jerry Abershaw grinning back at me, his flintlock cocked, a triumphant grin on his face. Abershaw roared with laughter when the wind unmasked me and said he would never have credited it – so Gallopig Dick was the one responsible for persecuting the acting fraternity! Whatever next? I gaped and he laughed and he explained some patron of the arts had put up a reward for the capture of that horrible rogue who was terrorising her favourite actors and Abershaw had realised all he had to do was ride with the local thespians and wait for me to show up; in fact he'd gotten the idea from me. "This villain invaded our coach without permission!" protested one of the actors but Abershaw just knocked him out with his pistol and roared at the others to be quiet. He turned back to me and I observed bitterly if my idea worked so well Abershaw could apprehend Turpin himself now and walk off with all the glory.

"Turpin swung twenty years ago, my friend" Abershaw said. "Didn't you know?"

I was silent. Abershaw said if I laid off the hams he would pocket the reward and I could ride out with his men but suddenly that didn't seem so attractive a proposition. I couldn't help wondering what the reward would be if I turned Abershaw himself in and what Nancy would say if I returned to her as hero and man of wealth. It wouldn't involve chamber pots, that was for sure. The coachman caught my eye and nodded towards my flintlock and suddenly I remembered something I had learned from my many misadventures: those horses scared so easy. So I smiled at Jerry Abershaw, said "thank'ee but no thank'ee", and – thanking God for the gift of plans come to naught – I raised my pistol in the air and fired.