

Introduction

Everyone loves an outlaw. When I decided to enter this competition, I sat down and made a mind-map of favourite time periods, places, people, jobs... and I kept coming up with characters, whisps of characters, that were not perfect, often not very good people. Of course, it's fair to say that a perfect character is not one written about often - what kind of story is that? But I knew I didn't want to tell the tale of some virtuous person who was wronged by the world, because I am not a virtuous person who has been wronged by the world. Yes, I'm not on the same level as Jack, and Jack is not on the same level as, say, Jack the Ripper. But I wanted to explore how things all go wrong, how one decision or action could be the step too far you take off the cliff.

Deciding to write about John Rann himself, out of any highwayman I could find, was practically a coincidence. As I mentioned, I created a mind map of potential ideas - and promptly forgot about it for the better part of around two months. I suppose it was good for me, in the end, to come back to it with fresh eyes - even if it meant drafting a few redundant characters and stories to get to the good bits. Dick Turpin is arguably the best-known highwayman, so it was my first thought to delve deeper into his tale - there is no shortage of sources available, I am sure - but instead, to be entirely honest, I opened the Wikipedia page of notable highwaymen in England and clicked on one randomly. I think that John Rann was a fascinating man, and rather underrated, for lack of better word. My research into the man himself was quite strained - there was an old play written about him, the only copy available to me was very difficult to read, and so I struggled through various sections, before deciding that perhaps more creative liberty could be taken for the plotline. I did spend a fair amount of time familiarising myself with the coach trade of England, grasping different types of coaches, and learning the word 'postillion'.

So, please enjoy the story of a boy who went too far, and let yourself be transported into 18th Century England, with our somewhat reliable narrator, John Rann.

Sixteen String Jack

28th November 1774

"Stand and deliver!" My voice cuts harsh though the soft evening air. Before me: my latest exploit, a man with creased skin and sharp, fearful eyes. He gazes up from his coach, and I watch his focus move from my muscular horse to my colourful breeches.

"There's nothing of value!" His tone wavers. I note a chest sitting on his left.

"Give me the box."

"Oh, no," The man raises trembling hands, "Nothing of value in there, kind sir, nothing at all. I promise you that. Only letters, from my wife. Nothing, nothing of value to you. My wife, they're letters -"

"Show me."

"But kind sir, I assure you, they're nothing -"

"Nothing of value, yes, I believe you mentioned that. Prove it, now."

His unsteady hands fumble opening the lock, but it eventually clicks. Impatiently, I snatch it, rummaging through the contents. Papers, a locket I quickly conclude not real silver, more papers,

and... a striking ruby set into a ring. Small but well-kept. I toss the rest back at him, slipping the ring onto my finger. He watches, his jaw working as I admire the glinting gemstone.

"Move on," He takes up the reins with visible relief, forgetting his lost jewel. "Though, I suppose I could kill you." I feel a twist of satisfaction as I scrutinise the fear flooding his eyes, "But I believe time will soon perform that task for me. Good day."

Pleased, I turn my horse around, remembering to call one last laugh over my shoulder.

"I am no kind sir, kind sir. I am Sixteen-String Jack!"

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This truly is what I was made for, I decide. My youthful days as a postillion were boring, and when I picked my first pocket, this glorious life of crime and adventure made me feel something. That thrill never goes away. The first gala I managed to enter utterly changed my life, more than anything.

That gala... my, what an age ago.

~

20th June 1766

Heat seeped through the air, furious and sluggish. I was a lad of sixteen, earning my keep as a coachman. Drops of sweat rolled down my back, moistening my spine with damp warmth. The stench of manure clinging to the seams of my tattered clothing, I navigated the roads of Bath. They bustled even at this hour; horses' hooves kicking up yellow clouds of dust around me.

The sun was only just beginning to descend from its throne when I returned to the stable where I worked. Absent-mindedly, I prepared my horse and fed it, leaning against the stable door and dozing off to the rhythmic munching. My moment of calm was interrupted, however, by my young mistress.

"John! Have you got the carriage ready?"

Miss Erwin came tearing down the steps of her home, gathering gorgeous skirts in one hand and frantically fixing her hair with the other. We were bound for Eggington Manor, for a gala - the occasion about which I was none the wiser.

"All ready, Miss Erwin!" I delicately took her hand and helped her into the carriage. "Have you your purse?"

"Yes."

"Your best pearls?"

"Indeed."

"And the name of the Baron's new-born son?"

"George. After his grandfather."

"Then, we leave."

~

Warm lights radiated from the windows; sweet, fantastic smells floated through the air. I took in this deliciousness as I helped Miss Erwin down. This part of my job was one I couldn't tire of.

"I'll wait right here, Ma'am," I smiled, aware of the graceful flurry of people entering the house.

"Thank you, as always, John,"

The night air was warm, but a breeze lifted my hair. I passed the time by periodically walking around, on one occasion relieving myself in a bush I'd convinced myself was well out of sight. Most of the other coachmen had headed to the local tavern, to enjoy ale and a round of cards, though I couldn't handle my alcohol very well.

This was by no means my first time outside a gala, and I admit that many times I was sorely tempted to sneak in, invisible to wine-softened eyes. Of course, it'd be idiotic of me to try: my clothing would give me away instantly. But that night, something felt different. Magical. Abruptly, a choking gag came from behind a nearby tree. Instinctively, I hurried towards the noise, bracing myself for revulsion. A boy, only about a year my elder, leaned with his arm against the tree, pale and sweating, over a large puddle of bile. I cleared my throat.

"Sir, I apologise -" He spotted me and relaxed. I was just another serving boy.

I gingerly made my way over, feeling distinctly green. Nevertheless, I comforted him with one hand and held my nose with the other.

"All right?"

Another retch. I glanced at his uniform: a butler for the Manor's party. An idea, wry and glowing, came burrowing into my head.

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The smell was the first thing that hit me. Rich food, sweet wine, a thousand scents. For a moment I let myself stand, wearing that boy's miraculously clean uniform, my face giving no hints that I was, suddenly, uproariously alive.

I drifted, smiling serenely at an older woman patting her beehive-like wig. She was distracted, looking for someone. I noted an exquisite hairpin lodged in her locks. Without thinking, I extended a gloved hand, slowly ... there. It slipped into my palm, and I dipped it into my pocket without examining it further, though I wished to. Heart thudding like the wheels of a coach on a cobbled road, I turned away, fingers still trembling. Tonight, I was to have fun.

By the time I returned to reality outside, my pockets sagged with trinkets. Beside myself with childish glee, I ducked out the backdoor and made for the coach. Miss Erwin would be another half-hour at least, so I could exchange clothes, send the boy back inside - I stopped in my tracks. Miss Erwin was crouched beside the boy, lying unconscious. I swore.

"Miss Erwin!"

She looked up at me, tears filling angry eyes. Pretending I hadn't any knowledge of this boy was out of the question. I bit my tongue.

"What -" Her voice came out shakily, edged with quiet betrayal, "- in God's name did you do to this poor boy?"

“Nothing! I promise you, I promise you Miss Erwin, he was sick, he vomited, everywhere, so I said I’d take his place, so he wouldn’t get in trouble, see, the Baron would’ve beaten him, and I couldn’t let that happen, see how sick he is, Miss Erwin? But I didn’t hurt him!” I despised myself for lying to her face, but the words kept pouring out. They were founded on truth, of course, but I hadn’t any idea how I’d hide my newfound riches from her. She stared at me, long and hard, chewing her cheek. Eventually, she took a heavy breath.

“We’ll bring him inside, we must, then leave. You’ll return tomorrow morning to exchange uniforms and apologise sincerely to Baron Eggington. Am I understood?”

I’d never seen her so stern. I nodded dutifully.

“Now, lift his head, I shall lift his legs. On my call, one, two...”

“Ma’am, please don’t exert yourself. I can carry him alone.” I avoided her eyes. She’d already grasped his legs.

“None of that, John,” She planted her feet. “Ready? One, two, three...”

She was right. An unconscious body was heavier than I’d thought. We shuffled back to the Manor. I carried the boy backwards up the stairs, glancing carefully over my shoulder. We were so close to the top when that same older lady let out a shrill scream behind me. Something about a corpse. The excitement of the past hours, combined with the startling yell, frightened me more than I’d care to admit. I stumbled, trying to cushion the boy’s fall with my stomach - that much, I was successful. But the vigour and angle of my fall led to something I hadn’t accounted for: my stolen items spilled over the stone steps, clattering accusingly. So many of them. I was dazed, pinned down. The commotion attracted guests, enticing them from the party to the sorry scene outside. Miss Erwin slowly lowered the boy’s legs as the confused, frightened hubbub faded to shocked silence. Coming to my senses, I pushed his head off me, and scrambled to my feet. The older woman picked her hairpin from the floor. Raised a single, wizened finger. Pointed it right at me.

“Thief,” she said, voice hoarse from screaming, “disgusting, little thief!”

The commotion started up again. Someone threw a pastry at me, landing stickily on my cheek. Not bothering to wipe it off, I turned to Miss Erwin, she’d forgive me...

“This boy is my postillion,” she announced. “I’m not proud to say it, but he is. He’s committed a crime, a petty one at that, tonight. I already know what I must do. I haven’t any way to know whether this is the first time he has done this. But... I haven’t the heart to punish him.”

Thank goodness. I’ll not go unpunished, but I’ll return the items, and once I’ve earned her trust again, it shan’t be spoken of.

“So, I leave it in the law’s hands. John Rann, I dismiss you. You are no longer under my protection as my servant. I want no more part in this. Goodnight.”

She made for the bottom of the stairs. I followed her, desperate to say one last... goodbye? Apology?

“Miss Erwin...”

“Jack,” We locked eyes. “I hope...”

And then she walked away.

~

28th November 1774

Every time I'd reminisce about those first goods I stole, I'd always try to block out Miss Erwin. The pain she regarded me with was enough to destroy all the glory. It was easier to pretend that she never existed. Or, on longer nights, I'd imagine all sorts of other endings. Maybe I could have changed clothes in time. Maybe that old woman wouldn't have seen us and screamed. Maybe my nerves would have been tougher, and I wouldn't have jumped so. Maybe I could have somehow explained myself. Maybe Miss Erwin could have somehow forgiven me.

My attention is grabbed by a group of torch-bearing police. One of them points a finger at me. Right at me.

"John Rann?" A gravelly voice. "Halt, you are under arrest."

They surround me, five or six of them, all furrowed brows and importance.

"We've caught you at last, Rann," one says, swaggering forwards.

"Well, be careful not to credit yourselves too much, gentlemen," I smirk, "I've been caught before. But there was never quite enough evidence, was there?"

"We have evidence a plenty now, Rann," another one reveals, "Sixteen String Jack, is that right? For those ridiculous breeches, I assume."

"Quite right, sir," I smooth them down, "Thank you for noticing. They have a story behind them if you'd care to listen."

"We wouldn't," he says shortly, "You've made a pretty name for yourself, Rann. But you've also made a mistake."

"Oh?"

"You robbed a man this evening."

"My, was he your brother? You have matching wrinkles."

"The chamberlain of Princess Amelia."

"I suppose I ought to be honoured."

"You ought to be hanged."

I don't say anything to this. They all stare at me, a peculiar combination of disdain and wonder and I want to make some witty remark, but strangely no words form, and I let them take me to some Newgate Gaol, and for the first time in eight years I allow myself to picture Miss Erwin's face.

30th November 1774

Lost the trial. Smiled through it. I'll be hanged tonight.

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Cold in here.

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Managed to use a contact to get a pea-green suit for the... last moment.

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Windy. I should say something. I talk loudly to the executioner. Laugh. Entertain the crowd with a jig. One last time.

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The trapdoor swings out beneath me. Oh. I can't remember my last words.