

DICK TURPIN'S LAST RIDE

by

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with music

by

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INTRODUCTION

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This play does not search for truth. It examines the way posterity has recorded a life and the circumstances pertaining to that life and seeks to work out why posterity has made the choices it has done.

In order to achieve this, the play examines real events, anecdotal evidence and fully-blown mythology through the perspectives of different people at differing times. Just to make it more complicated I have added my own take on some of the events and interpolated it into some of the stories to contribute to the construction of the mosaic which is posterity's version of the Turpin legend.

A group of balladeers arrive to interpret the story of Turpin through song. They sing often in the play. When they are not singing they play the characters of the play.

In an impossible construct, the three major chroniclers of Turpin's career and life meet to argue the supremacy of the value of their own particular individual contribution. These three real people are Richard Bayes and Thomas Kyll, who both date from the 18th century, and William Harrison Ainsworth, a major novelist of the following century. They are conjured for us by the balladeers.

The life is examined and where necessary the characters of Turpin's story are brought to life by the balladeers to offer testimony. They always tell the story or re-enact events from the point of view of either Bayes, Kyll or Ainsworth. These latter never 'act out' the roles of the other characters in the story. They argue, they commentate, they observe.

The audience is judge and jury. Each member of the audience is asked to decide for themselves which version of events they have the most sympathy with.

PROLOGUE

The BALLADEERS arrive and sing an initially familiar collection of words. The familiarity dissipates quite quickly ...

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich Man, Poor Man, Highwayman, Thief!

Butcher, Tailor, Poacher, Stealer, Rich Man, Toby Man, Highwayman, Thief!

Butcher, Turpin, Poacher, Stealer, Rapist, Murderer, Highwayman, Highwayman, Highwayman, Highwayman,

Thief, Thief, Thief, Thief, Thief, Thief, Thief, Thief!

The quality of the music changes as the familiar romantic representation of the highwayman is offered by the BALLADEERS

THE GAME OF HIGH TOBY

***Now Oliver's putting his black nightcap on,
And each star its glim it is hiding,
And forth to the heath is the scampsman gone,
His matchless black prancer he's riding;
Merrily over the common he flies,
As fast and as free as a rocket,
His crape-covered vizard drawn over his eyes,
His tol by his side, his pops in his pocket.***

***Oh who can name
So merry a game,
As the game of all games - high toby?
I'll drink to the fame of the game of all games,
I'll drink to the game of high toby.***

***The traveller hears him, away! and away!
Over the wide heath he scurries;
He heeds not the thunderbolt summons to stay,
But ever the faster he hurries.
But what daisy-cutter can match that black tit?
He's caught - he must "stand and deliver;"
Then out with the dummy, and off with the bit,
And Oh! for the game of high toby for ever!***

***Oh who can name
So merry a game,
As the game of all games - high toby?
I'll drink to the fame of the game of all games,
I'll drink to the game of high toby.***

***Believe me, there is not a game, my brave boys,
To compare with the game of high toby;
No rapture can equal the tobyman's joys,
To blue devils, blue plumbs give the go-by;
And what if, at length, boys, he come to the crap!***

***The worst punch has some bitter in it,
For the mare-with-three-legs, boys, I care not a rap,
For all will be over in less than a minute.***

***Oh who can name
So merry a game,
As the game of all games - high toby?
I'll drink to the fame of the game of all games,
I'll drink to the game of high toby.***

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

An Inn. Merriment. Drinking.

RICHARD BAYES raises his glass and tries to propose a toast. He is one of life's self-servers. He also has a propensity to drink too much.

RICHARD BAYES

A toast, gentlemen. Let us bung up our eyes in drink!

AINSWORTH

Spoke like a true landlord, Mr Bayes!

Laughter, yet there is already needle between BAYES and AINSWORTH.

RICHARD BAYES

Who will give it?

THOMAS KYLL, bookish and precise, steps forward and raises his glass

THOMAS KYLL

Permit me. To truth gentlemen.

RICHARD BAYES

Aye. A bumper to truth! And damnation to all fiction. Eh, Mr Ainsworth? Will you not drink?

AINSWORTH

To truth, certainly. Yet neither will I damn invention.

RICHARD BAYES

Spoke like a true scribbler! Drink, sir, drink. Take no offence but drink to whatever you will.

KYLL is conciliatory where BAYES is aggressive.

THOMAS KYLL

Ignore this provocation but set out your stall Mr Ainsworth. Display your invention. The famous novelist who outsold Dickens in his time. Prove your craft more valuable than truth. Let us continue our discourse of Turpin.

RICHARD BAYES

I knew him.

AINSWORTH

You have said so many times this evening.

RICHARD BAYES

I alone. Actually knew him, man and boy. In the flesh. Damned ugly flesh withal. Face marked with the pox.

THOMAS KYLL

And I saw him hang at York. And recorded such. We two can claim first hand knowledge of the man. So, Mr Ainsworth? Will you take the challenge? The value of your invention or the value of our truth. For the sake of posterity?

RICHARD BAYES

Posterity?

THOMAS KYLL

The version of events understood by future generations to be truth.

AINSWORTH

The contest is not so simple.

RICHARD BAYES

He has too much to lose. He will not take the challenge.

Beat

AINSWORTH

I am prepared. The prize?

BAYES raises his glass ironically

RICHARD BAYES

Ale.

THOMAS KYLL

Or immortality. A challenge it is then.

RICHARD BAYES

A trial.

AINSWORTH

A debate.

THOMAS KYLL

Do you play with words, sir?

AINSWORTH

With nothing else. They are my only weapon.

A BARMAID materialises

BARMAID

There's to be no fighting here.

THOMAS KYLL

We only test a man's reputation.

BARMAID

Then test it elsewhere.

AINSWORTH

I will not submit to cross examination of my character in a public place.

RICHARD BAYES

You have too much of which to be ashamed Ainsworth?

THOMAS KYLL

Bayes! You are a drunken sot! I speak not of you Mr Ainsworth but of Turpin.

BARMAID

Men he made to stand, and women he made to fall.

THOMAS KYLL

Not he. Not he.

The BARMAID drifts out of the action once more.

AINSWORTH

Begin, I pray.

KYLL enlists the support of the audience.

THOMAS KYLL

Posterity naturally enquires after persons that have been either famous or infamous. For this reason we think the account of a man who hath been not only the terror but talk of a nation, cannot but be of interest to those who follow.

AINSWORTH

Very well Mr Kyll.

ALL

Kill, kill, kill!

KYLL produces a sheaf of papers from his possessions.

THOMAS KYLL

An exact account of the said Turpin, from his first coming into Yorkshire to the time of his being committed to York Castle and subsequent hanging on being found guilty of several felonious acts. Including his gallows confession. Taken down in shorthand. Of which science I am a studied and skilled exponent.

AINSWORTH

And you Mr Bayes?

BAYES searches his possessions and discovers a disorganised collection of published material.

RICHARD BAYES

Here. And here. This too. And this. Mine is the Genuine History from one who knew him. Man and boy. Alone in this company I say. Certified and published in the year of his death. All others are an imposition on the public.

THOMAS KYLL

Can you match this, Mr Ainsworth?

AINSWORTH lovingly produces a leather-bound book

AINSWORTH

Once started writing, I found it impossible to halt. My pen literally scoured over the pages. Animated by kindred enthusiasm with Turpin and his gallant Bess, I cleared every obstacle in my path with as much facility as he disposed of the impediments that beset his flight to York. In his company, I mounted the hill-side, dashed through the bustling village, swept over the desolate heath, threaded the silent street, plunged into the eddying stream, and kept an onward course, without pause, without hindrance, without fatigue.

RICHARD BAYES

Laughable!

THOMAS KYLL

It seems that Mr Ainsworth seeks in his romancing of the past some solace in the face of a bewildering present.

RICHARD BAYES

John Palmer,

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THOMAS KYLL

alias Paumer,

RICHARD BAYES

alias Richard Turpin was indicted for stealing a black mare at Welton.

AINSWORTH

If blood can give nobility
A noble steed was she;
Her sire was blood, and blood her dam,
And all her pedigree.

THOMAS KYLL

The horse of which you speak is naught but a product of your own fertile imagination, sir. A fiction. Turpin was indicted, truly, for stealing a black mare at Welton and a foal and a black gelding in the County of York on or before the first day of March 1739.

AINSWORTH

You did not know him as I know him. With him I shouted, sang, laughed, exulted, wept.

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RICHARD BAYES

You did not know him at all. Your lies are brazen.

AINSWORTH

Lies?!

THOMAS KYLL

Truth civilizes us, distinguishes us from the beasts.

AINSWORTH

Yet myth colours life.

THOMAS KYLL

You may sigh for the days that were, the days that are no more

RICHARD BAYES

....the days that have never been

THOMAS KYLL

.... by all means, but you must not fabricate truth. Facts sir. Well attested facts. Posterity demands them. I demand them.

AINSWORTH

You, sir, are one who records the past and must deal with fact. I am a writer, a rescuer of reputations lost. Learned the subject at my father's knee.

RICHARD BAYES

A scribbler!

AINSWORTH

Forty books.

RICHARD BAYES

All now forgotten.

AINSWORTH

Outsold my good friend Dickens in my time.

RICHARD BAYES

You have said so many times this evening.

THOMAS KYLL

And your work was published in 1834. One hundred years after his death.

RICHARD BAYES

Naught but fiction!

AINSWORTH

Historical.

THOMAS KYLL

Hysterical hyperbole!

RICHARD BAYES

Hyperbolic imaginings!

THOMAS KYLL

Imaginary authenticity!

As the row grows we hear the sound of hoofbeats approach. They get louder and louder and drown out the argument. DICK TURPIN steps forward. He regards the others with disdain and addresses the audience directly.

DICK TURPIN

My chroniclers all and all of me mistook. Facts are few. Such or such may be my after-fame and I ain't about to put the record straight. Ticklish eh? If you want sooth, then must you seek it yourselves. If not, then must you create your own. I was whelped a napper. I croaked a tobyman. I am renowned. The rest is up to you.

He sings

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