

The Highwayman of Epping Forest

By Angeline Hawkes-Craig

The winding, dirt path that passed for the main road to Essex went straight through the dense overgrowth of Epping Forest. Highwaymen were thick in these parts. Some worked alone—others in numbers. They all sought shelter from the law under Epping's green canopy that blocked out all but the tiniest slivers of the sun. They were cut-throats and fiends cast out by society and banished by clergy, all with bounties on their heads and more enemies than could be counted. It wasn't that unusual to find thieves murdering thieves in competition for their prey. There were only so many travelers and so many purses to go around. The more ruthless of the bandits stayed to a particular portion of the road, thus establishing a sort of pseudo-rights to that section. If the highwayman lived long enough then eventually the other thieves recognized his portion of the road as his and left him to it. No one had safe passage through Epping Forest. This road belonged to the thieves—only those who must, traveled there.

Wyatt Campbell—otherwise known by the Sheriff and the good law-abiding folk of the country as 'The Crazy Scot of Epping'—stood by the bubbling, clear stream that flowed through the forest and brushed the mane of his loyal and gentle companion—his horse. Wyatt was a loner. A recluse. His social skills were lacking at best, so he avoided most social situations and stuck to his haunts in Epping and his visits to the Red Boar Inn. An orphan from an early age, he was used to fending for himself and often found animals more loyal than people. The people he had encountered in his life, for the most part, abused him or used him for their own benefit and suffered no remorse for their actions. Wyatt had little use for people these days except to relieve them of whatever gold, silver and valuables they might be carrying. He robbed them all—rich and poor alike. Made no difference to him if their children starved or their parishes went without a new church—farmer and priests—they were all the same to him. Some of them he only stole from. Some of them he maimed. And, some of them he murdered. Out right. In cold-blood—without a second thought about his actions. It was all a matter of his whim and how he felt that day. What did he care? He had a price on his head and any of those he ran into in the forest would happily turn him over to the Sheriff given the opportunity. The forest was his playground, and play he did. Harsh reality had hardened his heart years ago.

A carriage rumbled closer. Wyatt could hear it even though it was far off—his ears had grown accustomed to the rumble and creaks, clanks and groans of approaching carriages and the clip clop of horse hooves thudding on the packed soil.

He jumped to his horse and galloped through the forest to the road.

Wyatt reached the road minutes before the carriage came rumbling into view.

The driver saw him—perched on his horse—sword brandished high—long hair flowing in the breeze that lifted the branches and filled the air with a soft swishing sound.

"Whoa!" the driver called to the horses, pulling back on the reins. The horses tried to rear up but could not attached as they were to the carriage.

Wyatt rode up alongside the impeccably dressed driver and killed him with a single slash to the neck before he could even hear the man's protests. Wyatt had no time for drivers—they never had any money on them. They were simply paid slaves serving the wrong masters at the wrong time. He usually had little pity for such servile individuals who claimed to be men.

He rode around to the door and kicked it sharply with his booted foot.

“You in there! Come out and bring your gold with you!” Wyatt commanded in his thick brogue—his voice seeming louder within the confines of the trees. He sat and waited, wondering how this would all play out. Usually they just came out, but once in a while he came upon a tough guy who wanted to be a hero. One that had to make things more difficult for himself than it had to be. Wyatt really despised those types. He mostly just got things over with and moved on. It wasn’t prudent to linger on the roads for too long. One never knew when the King’s soldiers might be roaming about seeing what they could shake out of the trees.

Two trembling hands appeared—shaking violently—a fat man clad in a velvet coat and satin breeches wearing a curly gray wig appeared. He almost stumbled from the carriage, his knees wobbling fearfully.

“I have no gold,” the paunchy old man stuttered, as he looked Wyatt up and down with wide, terrified eyes.

Wyatt laughed, swung his long leg over his horse, his plaid kilt flying in the air in a blur of color, and leapt to the ground agilely before the startled old man.

“Everyone that passes through this forest tells me, ‘I have no gold!’” Wyatt boomed and laughed heartily. “All of England must be penniless!” Wyatt shook his head and laughed some more. He smiled warmly at the man as if he had abruptly changed his mind about robbing the old fellow, and then he said somewhat casually, “Hold out your hand.”

“What?” the old man said, looking confused, certainly thinking it an odd request. “Why?”

“I want to show you something!” Wyatt laughed again like a small boy with a new and clever trick to show off. The man seemed to relax a little at Wyatt’s good-natured laughter.

The man held out his hand. His watery, brown eyes searching Wyatt’s face for a clue of what was to come.

Swoosh! Wyatt sliced his sword through the air—the man’s hand flew behind the blade—blood spurted in a crimson fountain and the man screamed, fell to his knees, clutching his spurting stump.

“Now, once more, give me your gold!”

The man was pale as a corpse. “It’s in there—under the seat,” he wailed and moaned over his arm, his gray wig sliding to one side in his frenzied fit of agony.

Wyatt smiled and bowed gallantly, doffing his feathered hat dramatically towards the wretched man. “Thank you, that’s better.”

Inside the carriage, he yanked the plush seat up by its creaking, iron hinges and hauled the engraved wooden coffer of gold from its hiding place. The coins clinked together inside the coffer as he jumped from the carriage.

“And the gold in your pouch,” he said, plucking the brass buttons from the man’s embroidered vest with the end of his sword, one-by-one. The buttons flew off and rolled around on the soil, a few of them bumping up against the severed hand that laid oozing on the road.

The man was near collapsing. Letting go of his bleeding wrist, he pulled a leather pouch from his vest and threw it to Wyatt. “Fiend!” the man hissed defiantly.

“Ah! Such compliments!” Wyatt laughed some more. He flicked through the coins in the pouch and looked back towards the shivering man. “Is this all?”

“Yes. Yes. That is all!” the man cried, rocking himself, his arm bleeding profusely. His white linen shirt was stained scarlet and the velvet of his coat was slicked down with the copious amounts of blood.

“Good then!” Wyatt laughed again and with a rapid forward thrust ran the man through. He then rolled the gurgling, gasping man into a deep ravine and watched him roll towards a tangle of

fallen dead trunks. The man wasn't dead yet, but he would be shortly. Wyatt saw no point in lingering about and waiting for the man to give up the ghost. He slapped the horses and they rumbled off in the direction of the city—carriage door banging the side noisily as it went.

Wyatt scooped the gold and silver from the coffer and poured it into the pouch in his bag. He flung the bag over the back of the horse. This would probably be the best he would get for the day. For today was Samhain and the superstitious locals would not travel far from the security of home. Oh, the bloody church tried to discourage the old ways, but country folk never quite got it out of their systems. No bonfires were lit, and no long-bearded Druids traversed the countryside, but old beliefs die hard. The events of Samhain were tempered by the Christian beliefs and the activities of All Hallows Eve, but the peasants would never really sever their beliefs from the ways of old. They might not publicly evoke the names of the old gods, but they knew of them and held them in reverence. The cities had more modernized versions of religion, but out here in the villages and country, the old gods still held sway and the old festivals still found their way into the lives of simple folk who upheld the ways of their grandparents and those before them. The English had done their best to replace the ancient ways. Not so, in his homeland.

He could remember—back in Scotland—when he had been a lad—that Samhain was a celebration. Bonfires and meals for the dead were prepared. The old Druids would make their predictions for the winter. Children born on Samhain were endowed with the gift of seeing. But, for the most part, the good Christians of England had stamped out their pagan festivals and the people only clung to the remnants of the old annual events. They would light their candles for the dead and place them in their windows—but gone were the bonfires, dancing and music. Wyatt could remember the pipes and drums playing and beating over the countryside—the whirling of plaid around the fire—the ghostly mists rising around them.

Then his mother brought him to England and went and died on him—and he'd been stuck here ever since. Couldn't complain—Epping gave him the gold he needed and he wanted for nothing.

So his Samhain plans consisted of catching a rabbit or something with meat on it, roasting it over a blazing fire and then turning in at the Inn late at night—the dead walking about the Earth did not bother him. He had stared death in the face too many times to be afraid of it. He looked upon death more as a joker—a trickster. Something to outwit as many times as possible before it outwitted him.

Catherine would be waiting in his bed for him. Some inns would have him share a bed with four or five travelers, but the Red Boar Inn kept a room waiting for only him. He paid them a hefty sum to protect and shelter him. They fed him well and he served as a form of protection from other would be thieves. It was a good arrangement for the both of them. Catherine was the inn keeper's daughter and she seemed to have her own arrangement with him—most of the dainty rings and baubles he acquired went onto her slender white fingers—or around her creamy ivory neck—in return she gave him her body and did a fine job at it too. She was his lass—a Highwayman's Lass—not a lifelong commitment that arrangement. He'd be lucky if he made it to thirty without feeling a rope around his neck. It was a profitable career while it lasted. Most highwaymen—robbers and thieves—thought they'd be the one that got away—the one that escaped—that they'd strike it rich and fade into the country to live comfortably with fat children around their ankles and a plump wife to warm their bed at night. Never happened. Wyatt wasn't delusional. What better lot in life did a whore's son have? No—better enjoy the gold while he had breath in him. Men in his position never knew when Death would call. He had no intention of being cheated out of what prosperity he could acquire in the meantime.

Wyatt had his Samhain plans and doubted he'd see another traveler until late the next day. He checked his traps and found a large hare caught there. Aye, he could get good food at the Red Boar, but nothing beat fresh meat roasted over an open fire, blanketed by the thick green of Epping. He loved the isolation of the forest—only the fairies and wood nymphs would know where to find him. And sometimes, Wyatt believed he could elude even the magical ones.

He skinned the rabbit and impaled it on a newly cut spit. He stuck the skewer between two y-shaped logs over the fire and listened to the fat sizzle and pop. The aroma filled the crisp night air and made his mouth water.

No drums beat. No pipes played. Seemed a shame to let Samhain pass without so much as a whirl. Wyatt spun around his fire—feet kicking dried brown leaves—tumbling over broken tree limbs and sticks. He sat back down, laughing and out of breath. His rabbit was crisp and nearly finished roasting. He laid back and stared up into the trees and towards the slivers of moonlight that penetrated the lush foliage of the forest. He sighed deeply.

At last, he pulled the hare from the fire and delicately holding the wood—for it was hot—blew on the steaming meat. He held the hare by the stick that was through it and tore its juicy flesh with his teeth. Nothing was better than fresh meat roasted over an open fire. He washed down his meal with a flask of rum and listened to the owls hooting in the trees. It was late. Safe enough for him to make his way to the Red Boar.

Suddenly, Wyatt's ears picked up the sound of a rambling, noisy carriage bouncing through the forest. His eyes grew wide. Who would travel at night? It would have to be someone as fearless as he was—and he knew of few such men. An emergency messenger, perhaps? He soon would find out.

The carriage rumbled and jolted nearer, growing louder as it approached. Not wanting to miss an opportunity, Wyatt leaped to his horse and darted towards the road.

He halted the carriage. Two splendid black stallions decked out in silver harnesses pulled it. The carriage also had the peculiarity of having no driver. Wyatt frowned. He cast a glance this way and that looking for the man in the bushes. The driver probably jumped and hid before Wyatt had spotted him. Easy to do in dark clothing and with little moon out tonight. Who traveled through Epping Forest on any night—especially on Samhain? Must be some sort of a lunatic. Wyatt laughed at the thought. He jumped from his horse and walked around the carriage looking for the wayward driver.

“Ho there! Where are you, my good man?” he called into the night. The two lanterns on either side of the carriage swayed and cast a golden glow into the darkness.

No reply.

Never mind then, Wyatt thought. On to more profitable matters. He haughtily flung open the carriage door and then gasped.

Recoiling in terror, Wyatt stumbled backwards and fell over a broken tree limb. He scooted backward on his bum away from the open carriage.

“Saints preserve me!” he whispered, crossing himself with a flurry of hand movements.

Inside the carriage, was hunched a foul, stinking ghoul. Its long, yellow claws tearing into the decomposing flesh of an overripe corpse that most likely had been the original owner of the lavish carriage.

The ghoul's shaggy hair streamed down its bony back in wisps and its yellow eyes held Wyatt in their stony gaze. Wyatt wanted to scream, but found the sound trapped somewhere in the middle of his throat. It came out a garbled gurgle of a grunt. He was too petrified to move.

The ghoul bit into the decaying meat of the man beneath him and tore a bite off with ferocious savagery. Images of eating the rabbit earlier filled Wyatt's mind. Raw meat dangled from the side of the creature's mouth and it slurped and chomped the stringy flesh into its blackened mouth.

The ghoul crawled over the dead man within the carriage and hobbled out in a lurching sort of manner. Its stooped, skeletal body seemed nothing more than gray skin stretched over bones. Large, bumpy vertebrae protruded from beneath its taunt skin and its wispy white hair blew out behind it in the wind.

It scratched its head with a bony, knobby finger.

Wyatt dared not move. He knew the ghoul had seen him, but having never met a ghoul, Wyatt didn't know what to expect next. Wyatt looked around him, trying not to panic. Men he feared not, but creatures of the undead, he only knew from tales woven around the fires at night from old men trying to scare children. Where were the dead? This thing was an undead creature that inhabited the nightmares of men. Where were the spirits of Samhain walking the mortal realms? Where did this foul thing come from? Which dimension had it crossed through on this night? Surely, the same veil that held the spirits back from the mortal world was not the same veil that reigned in such deranged and vile beasts as this. He would gladly face a ghost over this repulsive abomination any day.

Wyatt took a chance. "Mother?" he called into the dark of the forest. "Save me!" He begged for her ghost to appear, to walk beside him. But, as in life, she had abandoned him once again. No familiar ghost appeared. He heard a rustle and saw crawling through the forest the ghosts of others who had heard his cries. Ghosts of the slain—ghosts of the robbed and beaten and murdered.

The man he had killed that morning came clawing his way up the dirt ravine with his one hand and putrefied stump. His face transfixed in an eerie stare. The ghosts seemed to be drawing nearer.

Ghosts around him. Ghosts before him.

Wyatt swallowed hard. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a heavy gold cross he had stolen from a fat friar and held it towards the ghoul.

The ghoul reached out and, unfazed, snatched it from Wyatt's hand.

The thing bit it savagely.

"It's gold, you bloody bastard—not food!" Wyatt cursed the fiend.

The ghoul sniffed like a hungry dog towards Wyatt. The slits on its face that were once a nose oozed mucus and dripped slime. The creature wiped at it with the back of its gore-covered hand. It didn't speak or make any other noise. It just looked around with those glowing, yellow eyes.

Wyatt started to move slowly towards his horse. If he could get on the horse, he might have a chance to escape the demented thing that stood before him.

The ghosts gathered nearer—slowly, surrounded by a white mist—they came silently, curious about him and about the ghoul.

The ghoul turned to look at the gathering of ghosts wandering towards them. Looking at the hovering ethereal spirits, the ghoul stood quietly. Wyatt seized his opportunity, ran to his horse and jumped upon it.

No sooner had he mounted his horse, than the ghoul had sprung onto his back in a savage, inhuman leap—its talons tearing at Wyatt's flesh, gouging out hunks of meat. Wyatt screamed in pain. "Get off me you devil!" he bellowed to no avail.

The horse bolted upwards, sending Wyatt and the now shrieking ghoul flying through the air. They landed in a clump of bushes—the ghoul still attached to Wyatt’s back like some demon-child eternally playing and torturing him. He couldn’t shake the foul being off.

Wyatt felt for his sword but discovered instead an empty scabbard—it was gone. He struggled to reach for the dagger concealed in his stocking and finding it there, grasped the jeweled hilt. He ran it into the side of the ghoul—but the blade just sank into the rotting, worm-ridden gore that was the innards of the evil beast.

“Blessed Mary!” Wyatt screamed in agony as the ghoul bit off a mouthful of his bicep. He thrashed about trying to plunge into trees to scrape the creature from his back—but it clung too tightly.

Soon they were back beside the carriage rolling about in the dirt. The ghoul reached out an arm and grabbed the side of the carriage door and heaved it and Wyatt’s wrestling body inside. Wyatt fought to cling to the doorframe, but the ghoul was too powerful. He watched as the ghoul used its bony, twisted leg to kick out the body of the decayed man—it rolled over the side and thudded into the dirt.

Wyatt began to lose control of his body as the paralyzing effects of the ghoul’s poisonous bites took hold. He could see and hear, but he could not move. And, unfortunately, he could still feel every bite the ghoul took—tearing his flesh from his bones.

He watched as his own blood sprayed the black interior of the carriage.

The ghosts of Epping’s slain and slaughtered closed in around the carriage in a morbid display of curiosity—or was it that they wanted to ensure that the ghoul gave Wyatt his just deserts? Had they just come for the show?

The spirits said nothing—only watched as the ghoul feasted on the body of the dreaded and despised highwayman, fed on notorious ‘Crazed Scot of Epping’.

Gold fell from Wyatt’s pouch and the ghoul paused for a moment, picked up a piece and turned it over—the glint golden and luminous in the pale moonlight. Wyatt thought perhaps the ghoul would lose interest in him now that it had found the shiny gold. He hoped the creature was simple-minded and childlike, distracted easily by the pretty glimmer the gold could provide.

The ghoul plucked two gold coins from the dirty, blood-splattered floor of the carriage and looked at them—feeling the roundness of the coins in each filthy hand.

Then it cocked its head and looked Wyatt directly in the face. It smiled a distorted, demented smile and then thrust the gold coins deep into Wyatt’s eyes and onward to the very back of his bony sockets.

Wyatt tried to scream—but he could not.

Feeling faint as the blood poured from him and pain engulfed him, Wyatt listened as the ghoul shuffled around. Wyatt could feel and smell the ghoul pressing its body against the flesh of his own back and then—in one horrifying bite—he felt the ghoul’s sharp yellow fangs sink deep into his skull.

The ghosts somberly and slowly turned their backs and floated off to their resting places—trailing off in ghostly whiteness through the dark trees to the hollowed out logs, silted up river beds, and holes in the ground where their mortal bodies had been dumped, rolled and hidden after their violent and untimely deaths.

A carriage with black horses rumbled past the Red Boar Inn with a flash of silver. Catherine watched it go by—anxious for her lover’s return.

“Didn’t see no driver on that fine carriage,” she said to her father, who was lighting and re-lighting candles in the windows.

Her father looked up from the candles and through the window and out into the dark. “Aye—carriage of death that was. The spirits are out on this Samhain. I can feel the chill of death’s cold hand in the air. Wyatt should not be out on such a night.”

Catherine pulled her woolen shawl closer around her and watched the road from Epping Forest for Wyatt’s return. “Ah, he’s not afraid of anything,” she muttered, and kept her tired eyes on the road.