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Sovay

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Extract

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Sovay, Sovay all on a day
She dressed herself in man's array
With a brace of pistols all by her side
To meet her true love, to meet her true love, away she'd ride

As she was riding over the plain
She met her true love and bid him stand
'Stand and deliver, young sir,' she said
'And if you do not, and if you do not, I'll shoot you dead'

He delivered up his golden store
And still she craved for one thing more
'That diamond ring, that I see you wear
Oh hand it over, oh hand it over, and your life I'll spare'

'From that diamond ring I would not part
For it's a token from my sweetheart
Shoot and be damned, you rogue,' said he
'And you'll be hanged, you'll be hanged then, for murdering me'

Next morning in the garden green
Young Sophie and her true love were seen
He spied his watch hanging from her clothes
Which made him blush lads, which made him blush lads, like any rose

'Why do you blush, you silly thing
I thought to have that diamond ring
T'was I who robbed you all on the plain
So here's your gold, love, so here's your gold and your watch and chain

'I only did it for to know
If you would be a man or no
If you had given me that ring,' she said
'I'd have pulled the trigger, pulled the trigger and shot you dead'

Traditional ballad

CHAPTER I

May, 1794

Sovay rode out early while the dew was still wet on the grass. The grooms had not risen when she stole from the stables, and thin layers of mist wound themselves round her horse's legs like skeins of discarded muslin as she crossed the bridge over the lake. Once she was away from the house, she spurred her horse to a gallop, crouched close to his neck as she took the old green road through the forest and up on to the common. There, she took up station at the crossroads, positioning herself in a grove of young birch, ready for the London coach, certain that he would be on it. Then she would expose him for the lecherous, double-dealing, false-hearted, despicable, craven little villain that she now knew him to be.

They were engaged and he had betrayed her with a chambermaid. Even the thought of him filled her with shaking fury.

'Not the first he's ruined, neither,' her maid, Lydia, had told her, giving her a look. With no mother, and only an invalid aunt to advise her, Lydia had taken some aspects of Sovay's moral guidance upon herself. Well, she needn't worry on that score. Sovay had not been that much of a fool. Not quite.

Her anger was mixed with a restless impatience. Where was the coach? She wanted this over. Her horse

sensed something of her agitation and stamped and pawed, his shoes ringing on the stony ground. She patted his neck and whispered in his ear to quieten him. The air was full of the sweet musky scent of broom and gorse. *When gorse is out of bloom, love is out of favour.* She remembered her mother telling her that. It must have been a long time ago. She plucked a sprig of yellow broom and fixed it to the brim of her brother's hat, her mind going back to the revenge she would have. She would make him beg, she would make him crawl and plead for his life. If he failed the test she was about to set for him, she would shoot him dead.

The crack of a driver's whip, his shouts and curses, the crunch of wheels and the labouring snort of horses broke into her thoughts. She spied through a veil of shifting leaves. There was no other traffic in any direction. She pulled down the black mask that she'd worn at last winter's masked ball and pulled up a green silk kerchief to hide the lower half of her face. The coach creaked almost to a halt at the crest of the rise, the horses sweating after the steep hill. As the driver drew back his whip to urge them onward, Sovay drew her pistols and walked her horse forward.

'Stand and deliver!'

Her words were whipped away by the wind, swallowed by the great open space of the common. She repeated her demand, making her voice deeper, more commanding, and the guard raised his hands into the air while the driver reined the horses in and lowered his whip. Her heart beat harder when she saw that they obeyed her. She kept one pistol upon them and used the other to rap on the door of the carriage.

'Out. All of you out!'

Two passengers alighted: James, looking pale and frightened, and another young man. He was well-set, with a fresh, ruddy complexion, a little above her brother's age, about four and twenty. He was in no hurry to get down from the coach and seemed neither worried nor discomforted by this interruption to his journey, and his self-assurance unnerved her. Sovay trained her pistol on him as she ordered the two to part with their valuables and place them in the saddlebag that she threw down to them.

While James sprang to follow her instructions, the other one showed more reluctance, but soon she had divested both of their watches and their gold.

'Still I want one thing more,' she said, addressing James. 'That diamond ring that I see you wear. Hand it over and your life I will spare.'

She could feel her hand shaking when before it had been steady. This was the test she had set for him. The ring had been given as an expression of true love in an exchange of tokens. He had sworn to die rather than part with it. If he gave it to her, then all the doubts she harboured, all the stories that she had heard about him, were true. James did not hesitate; he was struggling to free the ring from his finger, spitting on his hand to work the band loose. She changed her aim and her hand shook no more. She didn't need to make James beg and crawl. He was doing that of his own accord. He had fallen to his knees, squeezing tears from eyes shut tight in prayer, his clasped hands shaking in supplication.

'Hold your fire, highwayman,' the fair young man said as she pulled back the hammer.

He took the ring from James and brought the bag over to her, slinging it in front of her saddle. She holstered one of her pistols and he dropped the ring into her outstretched hand. The stone flashed in the sun.

'He has given you everything.' The young man looked up at her. 'What more could you want from him? Small hands for a highwayman,' he added and smiled as if he knew her secret.

He was quick. He read her intention in an instant. His eyes still on her, he threw up her arm as she squeezed the trigger. James screamed but the shot missed. The horses reared and shied in their traces so the driver had to struggle to stop them from breaking away and the coach from overturning. Sovay used the confusion to make her escape. She had business back at the house.



Sovay suppressed a sigh of impatience as the painter bent to his painstaking work. She tried not to move, as she had been instructed on numerous occasions, although she was afire with anticipation. She and James had an assignation at their usual trysting place in the garden. He would arrive; he might even be waiting for her now, with no idea that she was the highwayman who had stopped him on the road. Perhaps he would not even refer to it, preferring to keep his recent humiliation to himself. Perhaps she would let him pretend for a time, certainly she might do so, before she made a play of noticing the absence of the ring. The very thought of that made her tremble and Jonathan Trenton gave a moue of impatience.

'How many *times* do I have to ask you?' he said without looking up from the tiny brush strokes he was making.

Sovay murmured an apology and stared out at the garden behind him. She had never wanted to sit for this likeness. It was entirely Papa's idea. He had also chosen the artist. A coming young man who had studied under the late Sir Joshua Reynolds. Papa liked to encourage artists early on in their careers. Sovay disliked Trenton. His voice was high-pitched and whining, his manner fussy and overbearing. She sensed that the antipathy was mutual, although he said little to her, except to scold.

The portrait was almost finished and he was glad of it. This was a good commission and he'd been paid in advance, but he had to travel up from town to take her likeness and these were dangerous times. Highwaymen prowled the roads, preying on all comers, even poor painters, and there was unrest in town and countryside alike, sparked by the terrible events in France. He was not of a cowardly nature and would happily have braved the danger, if he had enjoyed the work, but the young woman standing before him had not proved to be the easiest of subjects. The girl possessed a definite dark beauty, a quality he would like to capture, but her face had a sullen cast, her expression a mask that gave nothing away.

Except for today. There was a flush to her cheeks, a heightening of colour. He applied an extra touch of rose madder. Something had happened to change her gaze from stony indifference to restless animation. He exchanged brushes to add tiny sparks of white and ultramarine to her slate grey eyes. She either stood

with such stillness that he was hard put not to paint her like a statue, or she would not keep still. This morning she was inclined to fidget. She had something in her hand. She kept fiddling with it, turning it through her fingers. Something gold and round.

'What is that you are holding?' He would refrain from scolding, but she knew not to introduce variations in habit or accoutrements to their sessions.

'It's a watch.' She turned the face to him.

He grunted, dismissing it. A watch would hardly fit in with the way he had chosen to portray her. Something else caught his interest. She was wearing a ring on the middle finger of her left hand. What on earth had possessed her to do that?

Her hand moved and the diamond flashed in fragments of refracted light as a shaft of early afternoon sun struck through the window that opened from the garden. Her head turned slightly, her eyes moved as if to see past him and through the billowing curtain. There was someone out there waiting for her. A lover, he guessed. The source of her agitation? A further wash of madder across her cheeks seemed to signal the answer.

'You may go,' he said.

She stepped out of her pose and came towards him.

'Have you finished?'

'A little more to do,' he shrugged. 'But the real answer is yes.' She made to pass him, her mind already in the garden beyond the window. 'Do you not want to see yourself?'

She stopped and looked directly at him. A frank gaze, challenging and insolent, as direct and unwavering as if she was a young man.

'The real answer is no. I do not like to look at myself.'

The painter laughed. 'All women like to look at themselves, young or old.'

'Believe me, Mr Trenton, when I say that I do not. I did not want this likeness. I only sat for you to please Papa.'

'Even so . . .' To his annoyance he found himself wheedling, almost pleading. It was suddenly important that she should approve his work.

She stepped past him to look at her portrait. He half smiled, waiting for her to be caught by the spell of her own beauty, cast by the skill of his portraiture. He had seen it many times before. The dress that she wore for the sittings glowed against her skin. The fine white muslin had been difficult to paint but he thought that he had caught the right gauzy lightness. The girl was seventeen, but the style of dress chosen by her father was flowing and loose fitting, more suitable for a younger child. The scarlet sash, that Sovay had chosen to wind round her waist, went some way to lessen the impression of innocence. Trenton stood back examining his work. The white and the red showed off her dark beauty to perfection. He had caught her on the cusp, at the moment of transition from girl to woman. Even with that sullen smoulder, she might never be lovelier . . .

'You are a great admirer of your own work, I see.'

The irony of her tone brought the blood to his own face.

'An artist is only as good as his subject,' he replied with a bow.

'Smoothly said,' she smiled, and her whole face changed. He wished they had time to start over again.

'What do you think?' Suddenly, it was important for him to know.

'It is fine work. You are a good painter. But . . .'

'But what?'

'I do not like to look at myself, as I said. Now, you really must excuse me.'

With that she left him for her assignation in the garden, running as fast as the goddess, Diana, the classical persona he had chosen for her. He went to the window, peering through the curtains, hoping to gain a glimpse of this young man who had so captured her attention, but she soon disappeared past the great cedar tree and into a tunnel of trees that sheltered the Terrace Walk. The young leaves were at their most beautiful: the deep bronze of copper beech blended with delicate golds and the palest of greens to show like a scatter of coin against the dark gloss of the evergreens. He turned back into the room and packed the colours away in his head as he began to assemble his things. He would finish the portrait in his Covent Garden studio. He would put her in a pastoral setting, something a little wild: woodland in early summer, with a lake perhaps and mountains in the background. He liked to add a touch of the allegorical. His favourite for young women was Flora, goddess of flowers, youth, spring and fertility, but that would hardly do here. She had to be Diana, the huntress. He would give her a bow and a canine companion, perhaps a stag caught in a thicket. He grunted with satisfaction. That would do well and it could all be done in the safety of London.

Sovay ran along the Great Terrace, propelled by fury. She was late, but that did not matter, let him wait. She had turned the diamond round so it bit into her palm. She held the watch curled tight in her fist. He was lucky she did not have pistols with her, or she would finish what she should have done earlier.

When she reached the Oval Pavilion, their preferred place of meeting, James wasn't even there. She refused to sit on the stone bench inside the semicircular stone shelter. If she did so, she could not fail to notice the entwined initials carved on the round table, circled by a heart. Even looking at that wretched seat made her want to vomit. Sometimes when they met, in pursuit of greater privacy, they would mount the curving stairway that led to the little 'prospect' room. Sovay fought to control shuddering waves of fury and humiliation. They would not be going there any more.

She paced up and down, her gown brushing the grass, ready to show the watch and the ring, ready to confront him, but first she would taunt him, pay him out for his betrayal. She slipped the watch and the ring into her pocket. She would enjoy watching him squirm.

He arrived full of apologies, with tales of having been set upon on the road by a band of rogues. He had been ready to put up a fight, but the craven nature of his travelling companion meant that they'd had everything taken from them.

'Even the ring I gave you?'

'Even that.' He held his hand out, fingers spread. 'As you can see. I pleaded with the ruffians, but they

would have killed me.'

'But it was a token of my love for you.' She looked at him, her large eyes full of hurt and accusation. 'You said you would rather die than part with it.'

'I was set upon, I told you!' He stepped forward, as if to kiss her. 'Come, love, let us not quarrel.'

Sovay turned from him. 'Even so . . .'

She stepped away. He made to follow, his face full of persuading. He was pretty rather than handsome, she realised now, with the kind of sweetness of face that might cause a young girl to lose her heart; but his pale blue eyes were set rather too close together and there was weakness in the chin, petulance in the set of the mouth. How could she ever have found him in the least bit attractive? He did not look his nineteen years. The skin on his cheeks was petal smooth and looked as if it hardly saw a razor; his powdered curls were as soft as a child's.

She turned, withdrawing her hand from her pocket. His eyes grew wider and the blood rose in his cheeks to see his watch dangling from her fist, his ring on her own finger. She threw his gold on the ground before him. He stepped back, hands up, as if to block out the sight of the glittering coins.

'It was you!' he said, and blushed even further, but all the time his eyes grew colder and it was not long before he rallied.

His father had been keen on the match in the beginning. There was wealth in the family, passed from mother to daughter. 'She'll come in for a pretty penny when she is twenty-one,' his father had told him, his eyes gleaming as if he could already see the gold spread before them, but circumstances had

changed. He would use the news to mask this humiliation. He was lucky to escape her. There had always been stories. Especially about her mother's family, that their wealth was based on pirate gold. It had been expedient to ignore them. Until now. The whole family was tainted. Today's behaviour confirmed it. A girl who would dress as a highwayman and rob a coach in broad daylight, who would want such a one for a wife?

'The watch I would like returning,' he said, 'but you may keep your ring. I have no use for it. That is what I came to tell you.' He looked skyward as if recalling the words he had rehearsed. 'It is all over between us, Sovay. We can no longer be affianced. Your father is little better than a Jacobin spy and will shortly be arrested. My family cannot continue an association with anyone who shows anything less than complete loyalty to His Majesty.'

Sovay stared at him, trying to make sense of the words coming out of his mouth.

''Tis true, Sovay!' James exclaimed, unsettled by her continuing silence. 'I've heard your father speak sedition on very many occasions. Speaking against the King and the Government. You cannot deny it.'

'I certainly do!' Sovay turned on him. 'He has *never* spoken against the King! He's for reform, of course, but that's a very different thing.'

'I heard it with my own ears at his very table! There is no point in defending him. As for your brother!' James shook his head. 'When he was last down from Oxford, I'd never heard such wild talk. It was enough to get a person arrested, if not convicted.' He hooked his thumbs in his waistcoat pocket, no longer the least

bit disconcerted. 'Your family is bound for disgrace. Scandal hangs about you like a bad smell. Well,' he demanded. 'Do you have *nothing* to say?'

Sovay shook her head. Tears of fury were welling up in her eyes and she could not trust her voice. She could hear his father, Sir Royston, behind the words that he had uttered. How could she ever have considered this, this *puppy* worthy of her?

'In that case . . .' He groped for the watch that was no longer in the pocket of his fine waistcoat. Sovay, who loathed sewing above anything, had punctured her fingers to pepper pots embroidering the primrose yellow and dove-grey silk with little pink knots of flowers. A labour of love. One of her few attempts to do the kind of thing other girls did and it had all been for nothing! She turned away, trying to control herself, lest he interpret her tears of rage for something else.

How had she ever felt anything for him? She had been flattered by his attention; that was the truth of it. He was much sought after, considered a great catch, and Sovay had enjoyed feeling superior to every other girl in the neighbourhood. She had persuaded herself that she truly loved him. It was obvious that she had built up an edifice out of nothing and now it was tumbling like a child's pile of bricks. Her brother, Hugh, had always thought him a shallow, cowardly fellow, in thrall to his father; Papa was the one who had persuaded her into it. Although he disliked his pompous neighbour, he had thought that the marriage might be an influence for good. Once they were married, so his reasoning went, Sovay could educate James and Sir Royston into new, more enlightened

ways of thinking. As if they would listen to her!

Sovay loved her papa, and respected him, but sometimes his ideals got the better of him. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she had been part of one of his schemes for improvement. He had treated the young man as if he was already his son-in-law and had spent many hours discussing ideas with him: new methods in farming and land management, as well as science, philosophy and the politics of the day. James had listened with every show of attention, encouraging him, drawing him on to make more and more radical statements. Her father had gone along with it, always so trusting, seeing the good in everyone. Sovay now saw that it had all been for one purpose: to get him to compromise himself. Who was the spy here? She turned back, ready to accuse him, but James was already walking away.

'You may keep the money,' he said over his shoulder. 'If what I hear is correct,' he added, his voice cold with ominous warning, 'you may have need of it.'

He did not stoop to pick up his gold and she would not touch it. The coin was left where it settled. Someone would have a lucky find.

She watched him go, all the while seeing his arms thrown up, seeing his back arch, imagining him falling, the rich, red blood spreading to stain the oyster silk of his brocade jacket. If she'd had a gun with her, he would already be dead.

CHAPTER 2

Sovay walked back through the gardens towards the house. Some of her anger had dissipated, but not all. She was glad to be rid of him, better to discover now what a spineless coward he was, what a traitor, but she was annoyed at the way he had trounced her. How he had managed to recover so quickly from his initial embarrassment and *still* behave as though he were superior. If she were a man . . . but then if she were, the situation would hardly have arisen.

Her mind drifted back to the morning. How she'd enjoyed the feeling of being in her brother's clothes. They were a little too big for her. She'd had to belt the breeches tightly into her waist and wear two pairs of socks to stop her feet sliding about in his boots, but she had been able to stride free of encumbering skirts and restricting corsets, to ride astride instead of side-saddle. She liked the heaviness of the pistols by her side, the heft of them in her hand. And when the coach stopped, when she saw James' face, when everyone did *exactly* what she said. She had been taken with an excitement, an exhilaration that she had never before experienced. Even the memory made her heart beat harder. She feared to admit how she had felt. Even to herself.

Her anger towards James returned with still greater force, although part of that was fury with herself for being such a gull, for being taken in so easily, but the