Highwayman's Footsteps

NICOLA MORGAN

THE HIGHWAYMAN'S FOOTSTEPS

江苏工业学院图书馆 藏 书 章

Books by the same author

Chicken Friend
Fleshmarket
Mondays Are Red
The Passionflower Massacre

Blame My Brain
The Leaving Home Survival Guide

The Highwayman's Footsteps

NICOLA MORGAN



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously.

First published 2006 by Walker Books Ltd 87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

24681097531

Text © 2006 Nicola Morgan Cover illustration © 2006 Christian Birmingham

Full text and quotations from *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes by permission of The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Alfred Noyes

The right of Nicola Morgan to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Cochin

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Creative Print and Design (Wales), Ebbw Vale

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

> ISBN-13: 978-1-4063-0311-7 ISBN-10: 1-4063-0311-9

www.walkerbooks.co.uk

With thanks to:

Elizabeth Roy, my agent, for her calm wisdom and for always fighting my corner with steely charm.

And Chris Kloet, my editor, for consistently and enthusiastically battering my books into shape, for generously sharing her knowledge and for being great fun to work with.

Elizabeth and Chris have been with me since my first novel. I owe them huge gratitude. This book is for them, though by now they will have read it more times than they would want.

Not forgetting the wonderful people at Walker Books, who make me feel so welcome – thank you ALL!

Chapter One

I felt cold metal on the side of my skull before I heard the voice. I knew at once what it was. A pistol. Resting on the bone just behind my ear. The favourite place for murderers, robbers, highwaymen – because, by angling the pistol slightly inwards, they could be sure to blow a man's brains out before he might have time to scream.

I had been warned of them. Many times. But this evening, my mind had been occupied with other worries. What would my father say if he discovered the trouble I had found myself in earlier that day? His own son, on the run from soldiers?

What would he say if he never saw his son alive again? I had been running away, yes, but this was not how I had planned it to end. Perhaps he would care little. My mouth was dry with fear and I tried to swallow. Above all, I tried not to faint with terror.

Then came the voice. It was an odd voice, uneven and croaky. Muffled too – I supposed he spoke from behind a mask.

"Drop what you carry. Take four paces forward, slowly. Then lie face down on the ground." When I hesitated, trying to do everything just as I was told, the voice snapped, "Now!" and I could hear the heavy rasping breath.

Lying on the ground, my face pressed into the earth, I tried to think. I turned my head to one side, the better to breathe. "No!" came the voice, tight as a whip. "Face down!"

The damp soil was in my nostrils, and more than soil, for this had been a dwelling and the ground was steeped in the stinking rot of people's lives. My neck hurt as I twisted it, pushing my nose as far out of the dirt as I dared. Now I could feel the hard round mouth of the pistol beneath my shoulder blade, on a level with my heart, I guessed. The man's knee was pressed into my back. I could move no part of me.

I tried not to think about what would happen. How could I die like this, unnoticed and unknown? If I could only think hard enough, think deeply enough, perhaps some trace of my thoughts would find a home and someone would know that I had died here. Perhaps I could leave a ghostly breath behind

to speak of me to others coming later to this place? These moors were haunted, were they not, riddled with the spectres of royalists and roundheads, dying in agony for their chosen cause? If they could speak from beyond death, then could not I?

And so, squeezing my eyes closed, the better to concentrate, I repeated these words in my head: I am William de Lacey. I am fourteen years of age. I live—lived—at Hedley Hall, some miles from Hexham, until some days ago when I ran from my home. I had no choice. I could not stay. My father and my brother had both insulted me. If I had been a true gentleman, and truly honourable, I would have challenged them to a duel for what they said to me, even though they are my father and my brother. But perhaps they were correct: I am not a true gentleman. I am a coward. A gentleman cannot be a coward, can he?

If my mother and father discovered me dead with a pistol wound to my back, it would be proof of what they already believed: only a coward would be shot in the back. It would be proof that I was bolting like a frightened rabbit, instead of standing and facing danger.

They were right. They had wished me to become an officer. But I knew I would be of no use, whether in the King's army or the militia so beloved of my father: my fear would turn me to stone. If wishing for a better life than fighting is cowardly, then I am indeed a coward. If I want something more than to die on a distant battlefield, shattered by the musket of a man who has never heard my name, then I must be a coward.

I could not say what frightened me the more – the thought of losing my life and the terrible pain as the lead ball entered my body, or how God would judge me when I came to Him. Would I deserve to go to Heaven with the stain of cowardice on my character? Would God judge me as my parents had done? How could He not, when I judged myself in the same way?

The pistol remained pressed into my back as the man's hand expertly searched through my pockets. He found what he was seeking – a purse weighty with guineas. The purse I had stolen that day, because my hunger drove me to it. I wished I had never taken it. Another day of hunger would have been better than this. If I had not stolen it, I would not have hidden from the militia in this ruined hovel and I would not now be at the mercy of this robber. And, furthermore, if this man did not shoot me dead, the hangman would be pleased to put his rope around my neck.

How had I stooped so low? Why was I, William de Lacey, the second son of a gentleman, High Sheriff of Hexham, colonel in the militia and Member for Parliament, now choking on dirt in a ruined peasant-dwelling instead of sitting at a table weighed down by rich food?

The man's knee was lifted from my back. I could no longer feel the pistol. I heard the soft click of metal on metal. The pistol being cocked, ready to fire. I held my breath, waiting for what was to come. His heavy breathing disturbed me – if he was ill at ease himself, he would perhaps be more inclined to shoot. Should I speak, to plead with him, to reassure him that, if he would let me run away, I would never speak a word of his whereabouts? But my voice was trapped within me and my mind could not grasp what I should do.

Distant sounds assailed my ears. I could hear the evening curlews on the darkening Yorkshire moors, the soft crunch of wheels and the clattering of a horse passing on the nearby track, the occasional call of sheep settling for the night, the swish of northern wind though the hanging doorway. And still I held my breath, still waiting.

I thought of my home far away: my sisters, my elder brother – the one whom my parents respected and favoured. I thought of my mother and her weak and frightened face and how the way she gently stroked my hair meant nothing if she did not stand up to my father's sternness. And I thought of my father, and how little he thought of me. And of my friends at

school, especially Harry and Robert, my age and my equals in everything. Would they ever understand why I had run away? I had never told them – or anyone – of my feelings. But when I thought of my horse, Blackfoot, and my new spaniel puppy, that was when I had to struggle hardest against the tears. Who would care for them as I did? People said I had a special skill with animals, though when they said that my father would only turn away with a small sneer.

Now, I feared I should never see them again.

I could no longer feel my hands, my feet, my legs, my arms. A cold numbness was creeping through my body. Perhaps I was dead already? Perhaps the shot had come and I had not heard it? Some say that death is merciful. Perhaps this is its final mercy – that you do not hear it come?

And then the words, as sharp as gunshot. "Stand up!"

What was this? A way to torture me? A way to draw out the moment that must come? I had heard of worse things than death, things that murderers can do first.

I stood up, slowly and with some difficulty. As I did so, I carefully turned towards the man.

"No! Face the door." Something strange hung in his voice, as though he were afraid. But he could not be. Not standing near me with a gun, and me unarmed.

Or perhaps as though he was in pain. His breathing was even harsher now, and faster than ever.

Before I turned away, I had caught a glimpse of him. He was smaller than I had imagined, and thinner. Slightly hunched; clothed entirely in dark or black; his face masked from the nose downwards, below narrowed eyes.

"What do you want of me?" I asked, trying to make my voice sound strong. "You have my money. I have nothing more."

He did not reply. Only the sound of quick breathing filled the space between us.

Then I heard a soft groan and a sound as though of something falling. I turned to see him crouching, head almost touching the ground. One hand was held to his side, under his jacket, and when he took his fingers away, I saw dark liquid glistening on the black glove. Even in this gloom, I knew it was blood. A quantity of blood. The pistol lay on the ground. I leapt to pick it up. I could not see its pair anywhere.

I could shoot him now or hold him as my prisoner until I might alert passing soldiers. I would earn a large reward for capturing a highwayman or a robber. Then, surely, everyone would know that I was not a coward.

But no! I had stolen a purse full of money. We could hang together, this robber and I. I could turn

him in no more than I could go back home. And shooting him would serve no purpose other than perchance to draw the soldiers towards the sound.

No, must I not take the purse back and leave the man to die as he deserved? Who knew how many poor souls he had killed in his life of robbery. His death would be of value to the world. I could not be sure of the nature of his crimes but from his apparel he was a highwayman, in clothes of a certain quality, the coat with large cuffs turned back and sewn with ebony buttons, a black kerchief over his lower face, and a tricorne hat edged in silver.

More than that I could not see, though I did notice his long thigh-high riding boots without spurs. But there was no horse, nor any sign of one. Perhaps it had been lost in whatever action had caused the man's injury. A highwayman would not easily give up his horse.

With my foot, carefully, I pushed him, trying to see where my purse might be. He moaned, a strange mewing like the sound an injured cat might make. He raised his head and as he did so, his kerchief slipped from his face. He was younger than I'd imagined, much younger. His cheeks were smooth and unshaven. He was no older than I.

Standing there with the pistol in my hand and an injured boy in front of me, I began to feel less fear.

He had sweat on his forehead, from a fever perhaps, and his face was twisted in his effort not to cry out. Groaning again, he began to slip sideways until he lay curled on the hard floor. But it was as his head touched the ground that I had my greatest surprise. His hat was dislodged from his head, revealing black tresses of long, thick hair.

This highwayman was no man, but a girl.

Chapter Two

At first, I made no movement, too shocked to know what to do. She groaned again, twisting slightly and sliding one hand beneath her, to where the wound was.

I moved to the doorway, still holding the pistol in my hand, ready to use at any moment. And I could have used it, accurately, although not willingly – I had been taught to aim and to handle a pistol. Tutored in Latin and Greek at my Grammar school, as well as mathematics, poetry and the suchlike by a tutor at home, and shooting, swordplay and horsemanship on my father's estate. Though no better than average at my books, I was proficient at such physical pastimes – I could shoot a pigeon with ease and jump the highest hedges without hesitation. But could I ever shoot a girl? Even if she were about to