

"Stand and Deliver!"

By Cecil
Fanshaw



THE FIRST CHAPTER. A Hold-up on the Highway!

HERE comes the London coach! Now for a rich haul o' plunder!"

Highwayman Nat Norris, famed through the countryside as "Swift Nat," uttered that hope excitedly.

Nat was sitting his black horse in the gloom of trees overhanging the moonlit road, and his eyes flashed through his mask-slits as he heard the rumble of wheels, saw the glimmer of approaching coach-lamps. His three-cornered hat was jammed low on his forehead, and his right hand gripped a heavy bell-mouthed pistol; another pistol-butt protruded from a pocket of his long blue riding-coat.

Outlawed by trickery, Nat had been forced to become a highwayman at the age of nineteen. Bold horseman and crack shot, he had come to love his wild life, however.

But he knew the risks of it, for in the year of 1740 "Gentlemen of the High Toby" were

A thrilling old-time yarn
of the romantic days when
highwaymen roamed the
King's Highway.

ruthlessly hunted by Law officers, and always hanged soon after capture.

Several close shaves had even Swift Nat had, but these only made him keener and more resourceful. His nerves thrilled as he heard the approaching din, but little he guessed the trouble in store for him.

"No Runners'll catch me while I ride Midnight." He grinned, and dropped his reins and whipped out a spare barker.

On came the thundering coach with a roar of hoofs and wheels, postillions crouching on the horses' backs. Nat, invisible in his cover, on his black horse he had named Midnight, sat motionless. He saw the leading coach-horses whirl up almost abreast of his hiding-place, then he clapped home his heels.

Forth from the shadows leapt the big black horse, to bar the road; then loudly rang out Nat's challenge:

"Stand and deliver!"

With angry yells, the postillions reined up, seeing Nat's pistols levelled and the road

barred. The coach-guard blazed at Nat with a blunderbuss; but Nat ducked, smashed his weapon with a bullet. Then, like lightning, he pocketed his smoking barkers and whipped out two others from his saddle-holsters.

In a moment Nat had the postillions standing on the ground, obediently holding their horses, and the furious guard disarmed.

Laughing heartily, he rode up to the coach window and looked inside.

Somewhat disappointed he was to see only one passenger, who looked scared out of his wits. A mean old rascal, looked the passenger; wrinkled, hock-nosed, wearing a long travelling cloak, and with his night-cap over one eye.

But he lost no time in turning out his pockets, seeming to know Swift Nat was not to be trifled with. His bony fingers trembled as he spread the contents on the seat.

"A purse o' guineas and a bundle of papers," laughed the masked Nat, eyeing the booty. "Faith, you cowardly old skinflint, you may keep your papers. But I'll have your gold."

Laughing, Nat snatched up the purse, then backed his horse.

All had been done with the speed and skill of an expert highwayman. Less than three minutes after Nat's appearance from the shadows, the mail-coach was thundering on towards London again, with guard and postillions roaring abuse and threats.

Swift Nat only laughed as the coach vanished.

He was not very pleased with his booty, although it had been an easy haul. He never guessed the trouble he had let himself in for when he neglected to take the roll of papers.

Even as he stuffed the purse into his pocket, however, there sounded a fierce drumming of hoofs down the road. Quick as thought, ready for any adventure, hoping for more plunder, Nat reined *Midnight* back into the shadows.

A moment later he made out the dim shape of a solitary horseman, coming along at full gallop. Nat waited breathlessly, then all at once clapped home his heels.

"Stand and deliver!"

Once again Swift Nat's challenge rang out in the night. But this time the summons was not obeyed. With a yell of fury the newcomer let fly with a pistol and rode straight at Nat.

But Swift Nat was not the sort of fellow to be overcome by a wild rush, however bold. He dodged the bullet, deftly reined *Midnight* aside, then drove home his heels again.

Crash!

The newcomer was down in the moonlit road, so was his horse, knocked flying by the clever thrust and drive of *Midnight*'s heavy shoulder. Even as he made to leap from his saddle, however, to secure some plunder, Nat uttered a shout of surprise.

He saw his latest victim was black-masked like himself!

"Zounds! Another tobyman!" Nat laughed. "Up with you, culy! Dog does not eat dog. I'll not rob you; but, i' faith, a pretty sort o' tobyman are you to be bowled over so easy."

The fellow on the ground sprang to his feet with a shout of rage. His mask fell from his face, and Nat saw that he was quite a lad, younger than himself. He looked a dashing young fellow, but, with his powdered hair, laced hat, and ruffled cuffs, he certainly did not look like a hardened highwayman.

"Who the deuce are you?" snapped Nat.

"Ralph Wyndham's my name!" The reply came furiously as the lad helped up his horse, which limped. "Plague take you, tobyman! I lay you've ruined me by stopping me! There's a chance yet! Did you stop the London coach?"

"Zounds, I did!" Nat laughed.

"Did you take any papers?"

"Nay, only a purse! I left the plaguy papers."

"What, not the papers!" Young Ralph looked wild with dismay. "Why, man, that old scoundrel you robbed is my uncle, Squire Medlicott, and those papers are a forged will to cheat me out of my inheritance. I was chasing my uncle, to seize them. Now—too late! You've lamed my horse!"

At that, Nat gasped out words of regret. At once he realised that young Ralph had

donned a mask and become a highwayman for this night only, being desperate to wrest the forged will from his rascally uncle. With his horse lame, Ralph's chances looked hopeless. Doubtless the lad would be cheated out of his money and estates.

He examined his horse's leg; but further pursuit was plainly impossible.

"Listen, cully," snapped Swift Nat, wheeling Midnight. "I'll get yon forged will for you."

"Can you?" cried Ralph. "Nay, 'tis impossible now—my uncle has too long a start."

"Nothing's impossible to Swift Nat, when he's on Midnight," came the laughing reply. "Wait for me near yonder barn, cully. The mail-coach changes horses at the Green Dragon Inn—I lay I'll secure your papers there, and be back in a jiffy."

As he spoke, Nat pointed to an old thatched barn, surrounded by trees, near a sign-post a little way down the road. Ralph uttered a gasp, surprised and delighted to learn that his assailant was the famous Swift Nat. If anyone could seize the forged will before the villainous old squire Medlicott got it registered in London, surely Nat could!

"But hurry, Nat!" shouted Ralph. "I fear Runners, warned by my scoundrelly uncle, are on my trail. Someone told him I meant to seize those papers at any price."

With a reassuring laugh, Nat shook up Midnight, and drummed away down the road, his three-cornered hat pulled low, and the tails of his long blue coat flying in the wind. He glanced back, to see Ralph leading his horse towards the old barn, until a bend in the road hid Ralph from sight.

Nat had not liked the look of old Medlicott, and felt mighty sorry that he had hindered young Ralph, who seemed a dashing youngster, determined to guard his rights at all costs.

Riding full speed, Nat soon came in sight of the Green Dragon, an old, thatched inn, with gabled roof, two-storeyed, and having diamond-paned windows. Black timbers were built into its white walls, and a creaking sign hung over the front door.

At one side stood shadowy out-houses and stables, built round a walled courtyard.

A hum of voices and jingle of harness reached Swift Nat's ears, and, peering into the courtyard, the highwayman saw that the London mail-coach had, in fact, stopped there to change horses.

Lights showed at the inn windows, indicating that supper was being served. Nat chuckled grimly, seeing in the yard the very postillions he had stopped, and the guard whose blunderbuss he had shot to bits. The men were busy with ostlers, clattering around with buckets and harness, and the place hummed with activity.

Anyone but Nat would have hesitated to dive into such a hornet's nest after his quarry. Recognition would bring a crowd of men on him, all eager to earn the three hundred pounds reward offered for his capture—dead or alive.

But Swift Nat delighted in running risks; besides, he had given his word to young Ralph to get the will.

"Wait hidden in these trees, Midnight," he whispered to his horse with a grim smile.

He whipped off his black mask, and crammed it into his pocket. Next he peeled off his long blue riding-coat, and turned the garment inside out. Grey was the inner lining, for Nat had purposely had the cloak made reversible, for purposes of disguise.

Few, indeed, would have recognised Nat as, unmasked and grey-cloaked, he strode into the yard, impudently greeting the very coach-guard and postillions who, a half-hour since, had vowed vengeance on him.

None recognised Nat. The men touched their hats to him.

Laughing inwardly, Nat entered the inn, and passed along a narrow passage into the dining-room.

Half a dozen travellers were having supper, served by the stout landlord in white shirt and brown knee-breeches. Nat's eyes flashed as he saw his quarry, the hawk-faced old Squire Medlicott, seated at one end of the table.

That moment old Medlicott was holding forth to the interested company.

"I tell you, gentlemen," the old rogue croaked untruthfully, "'twas Swift Nat himself who stopped the mail-coach. But he

got nought from me, for I fired my barkers in his face, then jumped out, drawing my sword, and he promptly fled, like the coward he——”

“ By my life, that's a pretty tale ! ” broke in a ringing laugh.

The diners twisted round, to gape at the grey-cloaked young stranger who had entered unnoticed.

“ Who the plague are you, sir ? ” rasped old Medlicott.

“ Swift Nat, cully ! ”

Gasps of dismay and unbelief broke from the diners. Some of them clapped hands to

coat-pockets ; others made to dive under the table. Squire Medlicott gave one croak of fury, his wrinkled face turned pale, and he looked about to throw a fit. Like magic, however, two bell-mouthed pistols appeared in Nat's hands, and the agitated company kept their seats.

Nat smiled grimly, nodded, then addressed the speechless squire.

“ Come on, you old braggart ! ” he snapped.

“ I had your purse easily. Now hand over those papers I returned to you, or, or, by thunder——”

No sooner had Nat reached the old barn than there sounded the thudding of hoofs and hoarse yells. Turning quickly he saw a bunch of Bow Street Runners come leaping over the hedge !



The hammers of his pistols rose.

Gone was Squire Medicott's swagger. He bared yellow teeth in a furious snarl, but his bony hands shook as he quickly pulled out a roll of papers and thumped them on the table.

Nat snatched them up and backed away, keeping the dismayed guests covered. Abruptly he leapt backwards through the door, with a ringing laugh, and banged it behind him.

Instantly there was uproar. Yells and

Ralph who fired at him. At that instant sounded a thudding of hoofs and hoarse yells, and Nat saw a bunch of mounted Runners come leaping over the hedge.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Twice Trapped !

"By thunder, 'tis Swift Nat! We've got him, lads! Three hundred pounds reward, dead or alive! That's his black horse, Midnight. Ay, and—"



shouts followed Nat as he raced across the yard for his hidden horse. Two minutes later, with bullets humming past him, Nat, mounted on *Midnight*, was galloping away down the road, and his pursuers were soon left behind.

The forged will was safe in his pocket. He put on his mask again, and ere long he was riding up to the old barn. He could see Ralph in the shadows.

"Halloo!" cried Nat. "I've got—"

Bang! came a pistol-shot in reply. To Nat's astonishment and fury, he saw it was

On all sides rose the grim shouts of triumph, and the night seemed filled with rushing forms of men and horses. Pistols roared, orange flashes stabbed the gloom, bullets whistled around Nat, two ripping through the sleeve of his cloak.

"Treachery!" roared Nat. "You young cur!"

He could just make out Ralph in the darkness and confusion, saw the lad trying to pull out another weapon. Nat fired swiftly in reply at Ralph, and uttered a grim laugh as he saw the latter spin round, then drop, clutching his shoulder.

But cloaked Runners were spurring at Nat. With uncanny speed, the highwayman pocketed his smoking barks, drew others, fired again and again. He saw one Runner fall

from his saddle, saw another crash down in the dust with his horse.

Then a bullet scored burning across his ribs. Reeling from the pain of his wound, Swift Nat knew it was hopeless to continue the fight against such odds.

Pistols empty, Nat whirled Midnight round, and was off up the road quick as thought.

Hard on his heels came the pursuers.

There sounded the drum of hoof-beats and yells of triumph. Nat glanced over his shoulder, to see three Runners in cloaks and three-cornered hats spurring after him full-tilt.

Nat was bewildered at the strange turn of events. He had glanced at the roll of papers he took from old Medlicott, and knew that, in fact, the documents formed a will purporting to leave a large estate to the hawk-faced old squire.

As promised, Nat had seized the document for young Ralph. Then why had Ralph fired at him? And how was it the Runners were hiding in ambush?

"I warrant 'twas a trap, after all," Nat gritted, as he galloped. "Old Medlicott and the lad arranged with Runners to snare me, it seems."

In fact, it seemed that a plan had been formed to capture Swift Nat at last; for, elusive as a phantom, he had taken toll of many rich travellers. But the country-folk remained his friends. Apparently the will was a sham, just a scrap of paper to bait the trap for Nat.

Yet, somehow, Nat didn't feel satisfied. Young Ralph had not looked like a treacherous schemer.

"Maybe 'twas not a trap, after all! Then why the deuce did yon lad shoot at me?" Swift Nat muttered furiously.

The problem baffled him.

But this was no time for solving riddles. As he thundered along the road, Nat knew he was in the tightest fix of his wild career.

The pursuing Runners were well mounted on fresh horses, while Midnight had already done a good night's work. Also, Nat felt weak from the wound in his side, and reeled once or twice in his saddle.

Mists seemed to swim before his eyes. He knew if he lost consciousness, or if a bullet lamed Midnight, all would be up with him. He would be captured, and soon afterwards hanged at Tyburn, down in London.

But he clenched his teeth and galloped on. He set Midnight at a bristling hedge and, landing on the other side safely, tore away across moonlit fields; but still the Runners followed him. They didn't mean to lose such a badly wanted quarry as Swift Nat, now that at last they had him in sight.

Away over hill and dale, past wooded coves and sleeping farms, Swift Nat led the chase. Haystacks loomed up, came abreast, were left behind; ditches and hedges were cleared without hesitation.

Again and again Nat glanced back. The Runners were still following. The young highwayman could see them, cocked hats pulled low, cloaks flying in the wind, barely a hundred yards behind him. The grim chase had lasted for an hour, but there seemed to be no escaping the Runners.

"By my life, this cannot last!" Nat gritted. "My only chance is to reach my cave in Burnley Woods, and there, I lay, these knaves will not find me! On, Midnight!"

The black horse put on a gallant spurt and thundered away across the dim meadows, drawing well ahead of the pursuers for the moment. Glancing back, Swift Nat could no longer see them, but could still hear their drumming hoof-beats.

But Midnight now reeled in his stride. He had been tired when Nat started this headlong ride. Now his nostrils were red and wide, his black neck was lathered with sweat; foam blew back from his jaws on to Nat's big riding-boots.

That moment, as he turned into a narrow, hedge-bordered lane, Nat saw a big hay-wagon rolling away some distance down it. The wagon was piled high with hay, and it seemed the farmer must have a good distance to cart his crop, to be out so late at night with it.

Nat didn't bother about that. His keen wits, sharpened by his wild, venturesome life,

at once seized on a slight chance of escape.

" 'Tis a faint hope—but the only one," Nat laughed grimly.

With that, he put *Midnight* at the hedge, and sent the gallant horse sailing over into a field. Then he drew rein, swung to the ground, and clapped *Midnight's* shoulder. The gallant but spent horse dropped down flat in the black shadow of the hedge, knowing its master's signal.

Then away Nat dashed, crouching under cover of the hedge, gasping and stumbling at the pain of his wound. He came level with the slow hay-wagon, then slipped out through a gap into the lane.

A leap and a scramble, and Nat was up atop of the great load of hay. Burrowing downwards, he was soon out of sight.

Not a moment too soon!

Quick as Nat had acted on his plan, the Runners came drumming down the lane a second later. They pulled up and yelled at the wagoner, to ask if he had seen a highwayman.

"Nay!" shouted the old fellow. "No one's been this way."

Followed anxious seconds for Nat, who could hear the movements of the horses and bafled Runners shouting in bewilderment.



With capture imminent, Nat lashed out with his barker, but the rascally squire parried the blow with a chair, and called his menservants into the room!

But suddenly, to his relief, they went on.

"Zounds, he's gone!" roared one. "He must ha' gone on across t' fields, lads, but we'll catch him yet."

Away they thundered, hoping to glimpse Nat again galloping across the moonlit fields on a tired horse, but little guessing he was within a few feet of them.

Nat heard them go. Then he slipped down over the tail of the slow-moving wagon, and hastened back to his hidden horse. The wagoner had never suspected his presence.

"Fooled 'em, *Midnight*," Nat gasped painfully. "We'll reach my cave in the woods, yet. And later I'll learn the meaning of all this from master *Ralph* and old *Medlicott*. They've not finished with me, by thunder!"

"Now to get even with my enemies! I'll learn what the game is from that lad who tried to betray me, or from Squire Medlicott. Come on, Midnight; people don't play treacherous tricks on Swift Nat without paying for 'em!"

Indeed, Swift Nat looked a dangerous fellow to play tricks on, as he rode away from his cave in the woods on his big black horse. Masked, and wearing his blue riding-coat, the highwayman was almost invisible; but two pistol-butts, sticking out of his coat-pockets, gleamed in the moonlight.

It was a week since Nat had been forced to fly so hurriedly to the shelter of his secret cave.

Now he was quite well again, while Midnight danced and fretted, full of life and fire.

Nat knew Squire Medlicott's house, an old stone-built grange, about five miles away from the Green Dragon Inn. He intended to force explanations from old Medlicott, and another fat purse of guineas, as recompense for his narrow squeak.

Few highwaymen would have ventured into the grange, risking encounter with several menservants, to solve a mystery and exact retribution.

An hour's steady riding brought Swift Nat to Highfields Grange. He rode boldly into the park through an open gate, and drew rein amongst the trees. He looked across lawns at the moon-bathed mansion, with its many windows and chimneys. His eyes came to rest for a while on a lighted window.

Then Nat swung to the ground, bade Midnight wait under the trees, and stole towards the house, hugging the shadows, to reach the lighted window.

A few seconds of deft fumbling, then the window opened silently.

Nat entered quietly and halted to peer through a chink in the curtains, to see into a room lined with bookshelves. He clenched his teeth as he recognised the hawk-faced old squire seated at a table, smiling grimly as he read some letters by the light of a hanging lamp.

"You'll not smile in a moment, you rogue!" Nat gritted, and abruptly stepped through the curtains.

There sounded a gasp from the seated man. But it seemed more like a gasp of satisfaction than one of dismay.

For some strange reason old Medlicott did not look aghast at the sudden intrusion of Nat, black-masked, and with bell-mouthed pistols levelled. He leaned back in his chair, regarding the highwayman, and an evil leer crossed his cunning features.

"Ha!" he croaked. "I have been expecting a visit from you, Swift Nat!"

Nat stood rigid. He sensed danger. It was not like old Medlicott to face levelled pistols boldly.

"Have you?" he snapped. "Faith, then you're not disappointed!"

"I assume you've come to try to sell me that document that you stole," leered the old rascal. "I thought you would."

"I've come for a reckoning!" snapped Nat. "You—and a young knave who calls himself your nephew—tried to betray me to Runners!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" The reply came in a croaking laugh. "My nephew did not betray you! Faith, he was caught himself at the farm that night. He's been sentenced, and hangs tomorrow morning at Tyburn Tree."

"What?" Nat gasped in horror.

"Ralph hangs as a highwayman," leered the old wretch. "So I shall get his estate! Fool that he was to ask aid from a real highwayman. 'Tis thanks to your wounding him, and lamming his horse, that he got captured!"

Nat felt as though stunned. After all, young Ralph had not intended to get Nat trapped, but had really wished to seize the documents from his scoundrelly uncle. Why Ralph had fired at him was still a mystery to Nat. He stepped forward angrily.

"Stand still!" snapped old Medlicott, gloating. "This house is surrounded by hidden servants and Runners waiting for you! You're trapped, Nat! One shout from me, and you're doomed!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER. Doomed to Die!

NAT was shocked for a few moments. Now he realised why the park gate had been open, why he had so easily gained

entrance through the window. For once in his life he had walked into a trap.

Rage filled him. At all costs he must save young Ralph somehow, he told himself, for he had caused the lad's capture.

A lot was now plain. Old Medlicott wanted his nephew hanged as a highwayman, so that he could seize the lad's estate, and he was indeed delighted at the turn of events.

Also, it seemed he wanted back the forged will, so that he could destroy this evidence of his knavery, there being no need for it, once Ralph had been wrongfully hanged a tobyman.

"The will, Nat!" he croaked, extending a bony hand.

"Not likely!" snapped Nat.

"I'll not pay for it," old Medlicott croaked. "But give it to me, and you shall go free."

"Never!" barked Nat, eyes flashing behind his mask. "I mean to save your nephew and prove you to be——"

"Then I'll sound the alarm!"

With that the skinny old ruffian leapt from his chair and hurled himself at a bell-rope. Fearing to fire and raise an alarm himself, Nat leapt forward, a pistol clubbed. But——

Clang!

Medlicott reached the bell-rope just in time, jerked it violently, then flung himself aside. Instantly a bell pealed somewhere in a passage, and all over the house sounded stamping feet and loud shouts. Out in the grounds shouts sounded, too.

Swift Nat realised he was cornered. Heartily he wished he had taken those papers when first he held up the London coach and robbed old Medlicott. Now it seemed the papers would cause the death of Swift Nat, as they surely must of young Ralph.

But Nat kept his head. He had been in tight corners before this.

He lashed out at old Medlicott, who parried the blow with a chair, however, then dived behind a table, croaking and bawling for help. That instant the library door burst open, and in swarmed several men servants with fire-irons, cudgels, and even a blunderbuss.

Nat blazed his barks over the servants' heads. The men threw themselves back-

wards, yelling, falling over each other for fear of getting shot.

Then Nat was out of the window at a bound, and running for his life to his hidden horse.

In the dark grounds outside, however, there were sturdier foes. On all sides sounded yells and shouts. Nat glimpsed men dashing up with lanterns, brandishing hay-forks and other weapons; glimpsed, too, a couple of cloaked runners, armed with horse-pistols.

He reloaded as he ran, and banged into the midst of the men. There sounded howls of pain. Nat raced on, to reach *Midnight* some distance ahead of his pursuers, and leap into his saddle.

But even as Nat spurred forward, there sounded drumming hoof-beats. Grooms were galloping down from the stables, making to head Nat off from the park gates.

Nat uttered a gasp of dismay as he saw their dim shapes and yellow flashes, heard deafening reports, then the whine of lead. But he thrust out his chin, and rode at full gallop across the moonlit park, with the hue and cry at his heels.

"Come on, cullies!" Nat hooted over his shoulder. "Your trap's not closed on me, and I warrant you can't catch *Midnight*——"

Nat broke off with a shout of anger, however. That instant he heard a dull clang, and, right ahead of him, he saw a lodge-keeper crashing home the big, iron-barred gates. Desperately he drove *Midnight* on, and fired at the man.

Too late!

The tall gates were locked, and the lodge-keeper ducked away out of sight. Swift Nat reined in to glance at the park walls; but these were six feet high, built of stone, and bristling with cruel iron spikes atop. No horse could jump them. From behind came yells of triumph and a thunder of hoofs and footfalls.

"Got ye, Nat, ye rogue!" sounded the screeching voice of old Medlicott. "He mustn't escape, lads! Take him—alive or dead."

Nat whirled *Midnight* round, to see a dozen dim forms rushing towards him. The trap had closed in. What hope had he now of escape? And what chance had he of saving

young Ralph from an undeserved fate? The lad was really no tobyman, had only taken to the road for one night in a desperate effort to guard his inheritance from his scoundrelly uncle.

But Ralph seemed doomed, as also did Swift Nat. Old Medlicott, well in rear of his men, uttered a triumphant screech.

London streets were crowded. The sun blazed down on a vast throng, gathered to see the execution of young Ralph Wyndham, sentenced to hang at Tyburn as a highwayman.

Men swarmed on roofs, at windows, stood packed along the pavements. Shouts of excitement went up as a horse-drawn cart came slowly rumbling along from Newgate Prison, guarded on either side by scarlet-clad soldiers.

In the low cart stood young Ralph, hatless, his wrists bound behind him, but with his hair carefully powdered, and with a brave smile on his face. The lad knew he was doomed to die. Beside the cart walked the ghoulish public hangman, commonly called "Scragsman Peters," clad in a long black cloak, black cocked hat, and wearing an eye-shade.

With muskets and pikes, the redcoats pushed back the eager crowd as the cart rumbled on. From all sides rose excited yells from ground to roofs. Ralph clenched his teeth, seeing over the heads of the crowd the grisly gibbet known as Tyburn Tree.

Outwardly cool, the lad felt bitter inwardly. His uncle would be delighted at his death, for he would then seize all Ralph's estates without any further trouble.

Anxiously Ralph's eyes swept the crowds, but he could see no friendly face. The ghoulish hangman beside the cart began to barter with the crowd.

"A crown an inch for the rope, cullies!" chanted the miserable wretch, pointing to the rope awaiting Ralph. "Ho, ho! Who'll buy souvenirs?" he croaked, according to custom. "A crown an inch for t' rope that hangs this highwayman. It's my right to sell it."

Hoarse laughter and offers made answer.

A few minutes later, the cart, surrounded by soldiers, halted under the gibbet. A breathless silence fell as the "Scragsman" entered it to adjust the noose over Ralph's head.

That instant, however, a startling thing happened.

The "Scragsman" hurled off his cloak, and tore off his eye-shade; then he whipped out a knife and slashed Ralph's bonds.

"Jump, lad!" he yelled. "We'll ha' to fight for it!"

Two pistols appeared in his hands.

Astounded, Ralph could not believe his eyes, could not understand the amazing transformation. Then a yell of delight burst from his lips:

"Swift Nat!"

It was Nat who had suddenly thus revealed himself, having somehow taken the real hangman's place. Instantly roars of glee and excitement burst from the crowd. The famous Nat had many friends among them, it seemed.

The soldiers yelled, and smote around with their muskets. But the crowd rushed at them, and foremost into the press rode a bunch of hard-looking horsemen.

Pandemonium broke loose. On all sides sounded yells, the thud of bludgeons, and the reports of muskets. In a second a fierce battle raged round the cart; backwards and forwards swept fighting men, grappling with soldiers, rolling on the ground. Stones and bottles flew thick and fast.

From out of the cart sprang Nat and Ralph, to fling themselves into the turmoil, battling fiercely. Nat's pistols cracked, men dropped, then he was lashing out with his fists.

"A rescue! A rescue!" rose roars. "Tis Swift Nat to the rescue! This way, cullies!"

The authorities had not feared any attempt to rescue the unknown Ralph. This sudden onslaught by friends of the famous Swift Nat, obviously waiting the signal in the crowd, took them by surprise. Many more soldiers would have been there had Nat's presence been suspected.

Nevertheless, for some minutes escape seemed doubtful. Nat and Ralph were seized by soldiers, dragged back, only to break loose again, aided by friends.

At last, after five minutes of frantic fighting, Swift Nat and Ralph burst out of the crowd, their friends fighting along behind them. In a side-street stood two horses—one was Midnight—held by a masked man.

Up sprang Ralph and Nat, to clap home their heels, and thunder away out of London town. Behind them the din of fighting grew distant and faint. Swift Nat laughed, as they galloped along, knowing his friends were sufficiently numerous to overcome the handful of soldiers and make good their escape.

"But how did you do it, Nat?" Ralph gasped, when at last they drew rein in a country lane.

at the old barn that night with the forged will as I promised? Here it is!"

"'Twas you?" gasped Ralph. "I took you for another highwayman! Though you were masked when you returned, you wore a grey cloak instead of your blue one! Those Runners that appeared were really after me, but recognised your horse, and leaving two men to take me, chased after you."

Swift Nat laughed heartily. He remembered changing his cloak round, for disguise, when he entered the Green Dragon Inn to take the will from old Medlicott. He had forgotten to turn it again when he returned to Ralph! Hence the mistake, resulting in



Guarded by soldiers, with crowds swarming the street, the cart containing the bound Ralph rumbled towards the gibbet—and a highwayman's death!

"Faith, cully, your rascally uncle nearly nabbed me," grinned Nat, relating all that had happened at the Grange. "But I escaped by jumping Midnight over the park-gates. Then I gathered friends, and we rode all night for London.

"As for the real 'Scraggsman Peters,' I suppose he still lies bound in his room in Newgate Gaol, unless he has been found. Ho, ho! I gained access to him in the garb of a Runner, whom I held up on the way. One tap of my pistol-butt silenced him."

Ralph roared with laughter.

"But why the deuce did you shoot at me, cully," said Nat, "when I returned to you

the narrow escape of Ralph from a highwayman's death, and nearly bringing about his own capture twice."

Delightedly Ralph took the will from Nat. Able to prove it a forgery, the lad soon established the fact that he was not really a highwayman, and caused his uncle to fly from the country.

Swift Nat refused to quit the road, however, having learnt to love his wild life. But he knew that whenever he needed a refuge, he would find one at Highfields Grange, actually Ralph's property saved from the villainous old Medlicott by Swift Nat.

THE END