

“The Ballad of Crooked Lane”

by Tom Mclennan



First Performed at Unity Theatre, July 2002, as part of the Drama in the Dingle event.

The sketch is set in 1779 just after Rushton’s father had set him up in a pub in Crooked Lane.

Characters

Billy

A Ballad Monger

Edward Rushton

A Blind Poet.

Isabella

A young woman working in the pub

A Press gang Lieutenant

A seaman trying to escape the Press gang.

1. In a Liverpool street, 1779

Billy, a ballad-monger, is selling broadside ballad sheets.

He is reciting from one of the ballad sheets.

BILLY: *Tw'as one morn when the winds from the Northward blew keen
And sullenly roared the the big waves of the main;
A famed smuggler, Will Watch, kissed his Sue then serenly,
Took helm and to sea boldly steered out again.
Will had promised his Sue that this trip if well ended
Should coil up his hopes and he'd anchor on shore
When his pockets were lined, why his life should be mended,
The laws he had broken he'd never break more.*

And you can find out what happens to brave but impetuous Will Watch and his dopsy, Sue, by buying this ballad from me for just one half-penny. Not much to ask for a stirring tale that'll inspire the whole family. Come on, going like hot-cakes!

Rushton approaches.

RUSHTON: I'll have one off you!

BILLY: Certainly, sir! Obviously a man who knows a bargain when he sees one. (**notices Rushton is blind**) Oops! Didn't see the white stick. No offence meant, sir!

RUSHTON: None taken! Has this ballad got a tune?

BILLY: Not really, sir. It's better related by being narrated unaccompanied. Although it could be sung, sir, if you wanted to put a tune to it. It's got the customary ballad quatrain, the tell-tale abcb rhyming pattern, the four stress/three stress lines.

RUSHTON: You seem to be a bit of an expert.

BILLY: Well, I've been in the business since I was a kid. My old-fella used to take me to the pub, stand me on a table, and get me to recite the "Workhouse Orphan" to the assembled clientele. There wasn't a dry eye in the house by the time I'd finished. We sold thousands of them. Course I used to hate wearing the dress and having my hair done in plaits, but there you are, that's showbusiness! Would you like me to read this one for you? (**Meaning Will Watch**)

RUSHTON: That's alright. I'll find someone to read it for me. I've just taken over a tavern around the corner in Crooked Lane. The Swan.

BILLY: I know it.

RUSHTON: I'll maybe get one of the regulars to read it out. They love a good ballad.

BILLY: They'll enjoy it. It's one of the best I've had in a long time. It'll go all the way to the top of the best-sellers list! Mark my words. The name's Bill, by the way. Billy the ballad-monger.

RUSHTON: Edward Rushton.

BILLY: Pleased to make your acquaintance.

RUSHTON: So, what is it about a ballad that makes it good or not?

BILLY: Now you're asking! See you've got your traditional stories, like your Robin Hoods, then all your favourites like your bold smugglers and dashing highwaymen, you've even got your contemporary topics of the day...but, whatever it is, it's got to have that certain something that touches the emotions...that's what people are after. Something that grabs them right here.

RUSHTON: Well, Billy, say if you wrote a ballad, how would you go about getting it published....?

BILLY: Ah, got literary ambitions, have you, sir?

RUSHTON: Well, I've scribbled down the odd verse.

BILLY: All I do, sir, is go to a publisher down by Exchange Flags, and he gives me this week's offering. He's the one who decides which ones get published. He has a couple of writers he keeps to write for him, but sometime he just lifts them from whatever he comes across. I'm not sure what he pays though.

RUSHTON: O I wouldn't be interested in the money. I'd just like to have something in print.

BILLY: Now, I'll tell you a subject you'd do well to get your teeth into: this John Paul Jones fella whose terrorising the coastline.

RUSHTON: The American Privateer.

BILLY: That's the one! They reckon the Corpie have just ordered a new battery of cannon just in case he decides to drop in. Now, if you wanted a good subject to capture people's imagination, that would be it!

RUSHTON: Thanks for the advice.

R goes.

BILLY: Any time, sir, any time! Get your ballads here. Smugglers, highwaymen, young ladies fallen by the wayside! Get your ballads etc.

2 Rushton's pub. A back room.

Rushton is reciting a verse from a poem he is writing.

RUSHTON: With Freedom's wind upon my sail
I'll fight for Truth and Liberty

With Freedom's wind inside my sail.....

With Freedom's wind blowing on.....

(He grunts in disgust)

Isabella enters and Rushton hears.

RUSHTON: Who's that?

ISABELLA: Isabella, Mr Rushton. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt.

RUSHTON: It's alright. I wasn't getting very far. I've been trying to write a ballad.

ISABELLA: Ah. I thought you were talking to yourself at first.

RUSHTON: Before my father set me up in this pub, I used to live in lodgings. I had a lad who read to me. And take down my scribblings. Had to pay him of course. Was there something you wanted?

ISABELLA: The draymen have arrived. I've sorted them out.

RUSHTON: I don't know what we'd do without you. I haven't got the faintest idea about how to run a pub. Or the interest in it.

ISABELLA: You'll soon pick it up.

RUSHTON: How's business?

ISABELLA: A bit slow. It's all these press gangs roaming round, causing terror. The lads are afraid to show themselves in a public place in case they're grabbed. It's got even worse since this John Paul Jones business.

RUSHTON: Don't mention him to me. It's him I'm trying to write a ballad about.

ISABELLA: One of the lads in the bar was telling me, the other day, this ship was coming along the coast heading back to Liverpool after a year out, been through hell the crew in Africa and the West Indies, just as they sail into Liverpool Bay, a Navy Frigate boards them, and presses the whole crew into service...every single one of them straight onto a Navy ship bound out to protect our shipping in the West Indies.

RUSHTON: Piracy.

ISABELLA: Imagine how those poor sailors felt, nearly at their homes, looking forward to seeing their wives and kids again, and then, snatched like that.

RUSHTON: And it's all sanctioned by the Crown. It's a disgrace.

ISABELLA: O well, I'd better get back to it. By the way you know what you were saying about having someone to read and write to you, I'd be more than happy.

RUSHTON: You can read?

ISABELLA: My dad taught me. Said it was the key to a thousand doors. The only door he ever found was the door to Davey Jones's locker. It was a lovely gift he left me though, to remember him by.

RUSHTON: Well, thanks, Isabella. I might just take you up on that offer.

3 The Street again.

Billy is plying his trade, while Rushton talks.

RUSHTON: So, did you read it?

BILLY: Very good, Mr Rushton! Very good! I especially liked your ending...very patriotic. Especially if you're American! Shame we live in Liverpool.

RUSHTON: But apart from that?

BILLY: Really good, really good. Rhymed to rule. Couldn't fault it on rhythm.

RUSHTON: Not too political?

Billy Political stuff can sell well but it's usually better if it's the Union Jack you're waving rather than the stars and stripes.

RUSHTON But, apart from that...not quite good enough?

BILLY: It didn't have "IT", Mr Rushton. A ballad needs "It". That special something...that's has them "Aaa-ing!" ...something that touches them. A ballad that has them running to my outstretched hands like birds desperate for crumbs.

People like a story, Mr Rushton. A story with Human Interest. They don't want to listen to some speech about Freedom...even if it is being spoken by John Paul Jones.

RUSHTON: Thanks for the criticism.

BILLY: It's not as easy to write one of these ballads as you think, Mr Rushton. I know people in high culture see these and think "O it's just a piece of doggerel any fool could knock out." But wait till they try it themselves....they see it's not so easy.....

As he speaks a sailor rushes on, barging into them.

BILLY: Heh, blind man here, la'!

SAILOR: Sorry! They're after me!

He gathers his breath and runs on. Rushton and Billy act as if others are running by them in pursuit of the sailor.

RUSHTON: What's happening?

BILLY: Press Gang after some poor bugger. He's nipped up an alley. Go on, lad. You can do it.

RUSHTON: Has he got away?

BILLY: No. They were waiting for him round the corner. They've got him pinned.

RUSHTON: Poor man. He'll wake up tomorrow on some leaky bark bound for the Gold Coast. **(He hears the commotion getting louder)** What's that?

BILLY: Eh up, some of the locals have seen it and joined in. They've started pelting the press gang with stones.

RUSHTON: Kidnapping! That's all it is.

BILLY: The press gang are backing off. He's wriggled free. He's got away!

The sailor comes back to them and stops briefly.

SAILOR: Me again!

He runs off.

RUSHTON: Good luck to you!

BILLY: If he can just make those crowds. Yes! He's done it! That was exciting, wasn't it.

RUSHTON: Certainly was. I'd better be going home.

Rushton goes.

BILLY: Now don't go getting depressed about that ballad-writing. Remember the old saying: "Who makes a ballad for the ale-house door, shall live in future time for ever more!" Fame doesn't come easy!

4 The Pub

Rushton and Isabella are reading turn apiece.

ISABELLA: "These wounds behold."

RUSHTON: "Alas! By them too plain the griefs are told.
But whence or why these stripes? My injured friend,
Declare how one so mild could thus offend."

ISABELLA: "I'll tell thee, Jumba...."

RUSHTON: Stop! It's no good.

ISABELLA: What isn't?

RUSHTON: I though I might be able to make something out of my eclogues, but, it won't work.

ISABELLA: Why not? I know the general public in Liverpool are usually pro-slavery, but not all of us are.

RUSHTON: It's not that. Eclogues are poems with people talking to each other, different thing from ballads altogether.

ISABELLA: I like them

RUSHTON: So do I. And they're best left as they are. Not mangled into a ballad.

ISABELLA: I like the way it's two slaves talking to each other. You see it from their side of things. Are things really like that.For the slaves?

RUSHTON: Worse. That's only the half of it...what happens on the plantation. What happens on the journey to the plantations is even worse.

ISABELLA: Your sister says you lost your sight on a ship carrying slaves.

RUSHTON: I did. Ophthalmia broke out among the slaves. It spreads like wildfire.

ISABELLA: What is ophthalmia, exactly?

RUSHTON: An infection starts under the eyelids ,then spreads to the eyes themselves. Very, very contagious. Crews just leave the slaves to it. And you can understand why. It's incredibly contagious....it's not impossible to come across a ship in those waters with every single one on board blind as a bat.

ISABELLA Gives me the shivers just thinking about it.

RUSHTON I persuaded the Captain to let me go down and at least take them food and water. He thought I was mad. Maybe I was.

ISABELLA: Mad for caring about your fellow human beings! And nothing can be done? About your eyes?

RUSHTON: Before we fell out, my father took me to the best surgeons. Nothing doing, I'm afraid.

A commotion. Thumping on the door. The sailor runs in.

SAILOR: Press gang jumped me by Wood Street. Can you hide me in the cellar?

RUSHTON: They'll find you there. Isabella, take him to the back-yard. You might get away if they haven't thought of it already.

ISABELLA goes off with SAILOR:

RUSHTON: I'll meet them at the front.

A Navy Lieutenant of the Press-Gang approaches.

LIEUTENANT Don't mind if I search your shop, do you, landlord. We're on King's business. **(Points to two imaginary men)** Down into the cellar, you two. Quick as you like! You, out the back! I'll rest my legs while I wait. We're after a runaway. The sergeant swore he saw him running in here. You haven't seen anyone?

RUSHTON: No. Haven't seen a thing.

LIEUTENANT I'll have a pint of your best ale as well while I'm about it. Not very busy, I see.

RUSHTON: People round here are afraid to poke their noses out of the house these days for fear of being snatched.

LIEUTENANT The Navy's got to have men for His Majesty's ships. Safety of the realm and all that, eh.

Isabella returns.

RUSHTON: Perhaps you should think about treating your crews properly, if you want men to sail in your ships.

LIEUTENANT O, you're one of *them*, are you! A radical!

RUSHTON: Do you know the reason why the French sailors call the English sailors "Tigers", Isabella? It's because of the stripes on their backs from being flogged.

LIEUTENANT Well, we all need reminding of our duty from time to time, don't we, sir!

The press gang return and confer with the Lieutenant.

LIEUTENANT (To RUSHTON:) It seems the back-yard door was open!

He rises.

LIEUTENANT Nice pint. You know I think we'll make this our local for a while, lads. I'm sure the landlord will welcome our custom.

He Goes.

5. The Street

Billy is chanting the first verse of "The Flying Highwayman".

BILLY: *Come all ye bold and swaggering blades
That go in search of plunder
With pistols cocked and courage bold
Have voices loud as thunder
Young Morgan was a flashy blade
No youth had better courage
Much gold he got on the Highway
That made him daily flourish.*

RUSHTON: comes in.

BILLY: Hello, Mr Rushton. How's business? Not as bad as mine, I hope! I've only sold 3 all day.

RUSHTON: I'll make it four.

BILLY: Thanks. The problem nowadays is people have an insatiable appetite for novelty. Doesn't matter how flashy Morgan's blade is, it just doesn't grab them like it used to.

RUSHTON: Would you do me a favour, Billy. Read another of my ballads?

BILLY: You don't give up easy, do you, Mr Rushton? What is it this time? "The Rights of Man" in twenty verses?

RUSHTON: Just have a read.

RUSHTON goes.

BILLY: No problem. I'll put it away and peruse it later.

(Chants) *Stand and deliver was the word
We must have no denial.*

He exits.

5 The Pub. The back room.

RUSHTON is musing. Isabella comes in.

RUSHTON: Isabella....can I have a word with you?

ISABELLA: How did you know it was me? Recovered your sight, have you?

RUSHTON: Saw you in my mind's eye.

ISABELLA: What do I look like...in your mind's eye?

RUSHTON: Very pretty.

ISABELLA: Just as well you're blind, then.

RUSHTON: The way things are going, I think we're going to have to give up the pub.

ISABELLA: O, well. Never mind.

RUSHTON: What's it like out there?

ISABELLA: Dead. The Lieutenants visits have put paid to the few customers we had.

RUSHTON: You'll be able to find work?

ISABELLA: O aye. I've been offered a few jobs since I came here.

RUSHTON: Have you? Why haven't you taken them?

ISABELLA: I like it here. I like the reading we've done. You don't get too many opportunities to discuss Shakespeare working behind a bar round these parts.

RUSHTON: I'll miss our readings too.

ISABELLA: You'll find someone else, I'm sure.

RUSHTON: It's not just the reading I'll miss.

ISABELLA: What, then?

RUSHTON: The company.

ISABELLA: What are you going to do with yourself? Stay with your father?

RUSHTON: A friend of mine is starting a newspaper. He wants me to edit it.

ISABELLA: O well, then. There you go. You won't miss the likes of us then? You'll be much too busy.

RUSHTON: I'll miss you nevertheless.

ISABELLA: I suppose it doesn't have to end....

RUSHTON: Mmmm?

ISABELLA: Our reading doesn't have to end....especially if we formalised the relationship.

RUSHTON: How do you mean?

ISABELLA: Well, I've heard of the blind having to be led, but this is ridiculous.

RUSHTON: Are you suggesting we formalise it by getting married?

ISABELLA: It would be one way round your reading problem.

RUSHTON: You'd marry me? A blind man with no prospects.

ISABELLA: You're not that bad a catch. You're different from any man I've met so far. *And* you can't see how plain I am.

RUSHTON: You're not plain.

ISABELLA: How do you know?

RUSHTON: A man may see feelingly.....

They are settling into an embrace when there's a commotion.

ISABELLA: What the hell's going on out there?

RUSHTON: Not our friend the Lieutenant again!

ISABELLA goes out. She meets Billy. RUSHTON joins them.

BILLY: It's me, Mr Rushton. I'm just doing the rounds with my latest best-selling ballad. "The Ballad of Will Clewline"

RUSHTON: My ballad! It's been printed?

BILLY: Printed and selling like hot-cakes, Mr Rushton.

RUSHTON: (**To ISABELLA:**) I've had one of my ballads printed!

ISABELLA: Really? Let's hear it then.

BILLY: Again? O go on then. Here we go. "The Ballad of Will Clewline" by Edward Rushton.

BILLY reads the poem.

View the rapture that beams in his sun-embrown'd face,
While he folds his loved Kate to his breast,
While his little ones, trooping to share his embrace,
Contend who shall first be caress'd:
View them climb his loved knee, whilst each tiny heart swells,
As he presses the soft rosy lip,
And of cocoa nuts, sugar, and tamarinds tells,
That are soon to arrive from the ship.

Then see him reclined on his favorite chair,
With his arm round the neck of his love,
Who tells how his friends and his relatives fare,
And how their dear younglings improve.

The evening approaches, and, round the snug fire,
The little ones sport on the floor,
When lo! while delight fills the breast of the sire,
Loud thunders are heard at the door.

And now, like a tempest that sweeps through the sky,
And kills the first buds of the year,
Oh! view, midst this region of innocent joy,
A gang of fierce hirelings appear;
They seize on their prey all relentless as fate,
He struggles - is instantly bound,
Wild scream the poor children, and lo! his loved Kate
Sinks pale and convulsed to the ground.

To the hold of a tender, deep, crowded, and foul,
Now view your brave seaman confined,
And on the bare planks, all indignant of soul,
All unfriended, behold him reclined.
The children's wild screamings still ring in his ear,
He broods on his Kate's poignant pain,
He hears the cat hawling - his pangs are severe.
He feels, but he scorns to complain.

Arrived now at Plymouth, the poor enslaved tar
Is to combat for freedom and laws,
Is to brave the rough surge in a vessel of war
He sails - and soon dies in the cause.
Kate hears the sad tidings, and never smiles more,
She falls a meek martyr to grief,
His children, kind friends and relations deplore,
But the parish alone gives relief.

Ye statesmen who manage this cold-blooded land,
And who boast of your seamen's exploits,
Ah ! think how your death-dealing bulwarks are mann'd
And learn to respect human rights.
Like felons, no more let the sons of the main
Be sever'd from all that is dear;
If their sufferings and wrongs be a national stain,
O! let the foul stain disappear.

General cheering.

The End