

# JOAN BRACEY

A true tale of Stuart crime and punishment

by Miss Bellwood



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Written By:  
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“Why are you so tangled? Oh, how I hate you!”

In a fit of rage, Joan flung her hopelessly knotted piece of sewing to the floor. She loathed sewing, hated and detested it, yet it was somehow the thing respectable young ladies had to do to fill the overwhelming dullness of their days. Either that or play dreary piano pieces (which Joan did badly, and with very little patience) or drift around the garden picking pointless roses and arranging them in silly little vases. Joan could have howled with frustration.



*Joan Bracey*

Yes, she was rich (Father owned a huge farm) and yes, Father gave her everything she wanted (the best dresses, the finest hats and a stable full of magnificent horses) but was she happy? No. Joan was bored. Terribly, horribly bored. And what did she have to look forward to in the future? Marriage, followed by more sewing, piano-playing and flower-arranging until she dropped dead of pure boredom.

Aiming a vicious kick at her sewing, Joan stamped to the window seat and sank into it with a sigh. Miserably she stared out at her father's endless fields, dotted with fluffy sheep.

One day all the land would be hers, but she felt not a single flicker of pride or excitement. Who wanted to be mistress of a hundred muddy fields and a thousand brainless, bleating sheep? What fun was there in that?

As she gazed morosely over the landscape, two dark dots came into view and gradually grew larger. The shorter, fatter one, grandly pointing his riding crop at hedgerows and fences, was her father, John Phillips. The other, tall and lanky, nodding politely with his hands clasped behind his back, was Mr Edward Bracey, a wealthy farmer from the south who was apparently interested in renting some of Father's land. The sight of him made Joan groan aloud. So he was visiting again. She could really do without yet another evening in Mr Bracey's interminably dull company, with his awkward conversation and painful politeness. She thought she might scream if he compared her with an angel one more time. Clearly, he had his eye on her as a future wife.

And what fun THAT will be, thought Joan bitterly. I'd rather marry one of Father's sheep.

Before long, Joan heard the front door slam and her father's booming tones echo through the house.

"You'll want to dip the sheep every month or so, I'd think, get the fleas

off 'em, and those fences'll need fixing before winter," he was instructing Mr Bracey as he burst into the room. "Ah, hello there, my girl, look who's joining us for dinner!"



*Joan's grand country house*

Joan cast a disdainful glance at Mr Bracey, who looked chilled to the bone after his tour of the fields. Hardly surprising, seeing how thin and shabby his cloak was. Really, she reflected, sometimes he didn't look rich at all. And from the way he was frowning at the mud splattered up his legs, he didn't seem much like a farmer either. Not that he was ugly, with his curling hair and moustache... it was just a shame he was such a bore.

Now he swept off his hat and gave a ridiculous bow.

"Will you be gracing us with your angelic presence at dinner, madam?" he asked awkwardly.

Joan resisted the urge to grab his hat and stamp on it in a most unangelic manner.

"I will, sir, seeing as I live here," she smiled back through gritted teeth.

"That's my girl, Joan. You can entertain us on the piano after," bellowed her father heartily, then turned back to Mr Bracey and began again to drone on about sheep. Joan sighed and turned back to the window.

That night in her bedroom, Joan combed her hair with angry strokes after possibly the most boring evening of her whole boring life. The mutton was overcooked, her father had talked endlessly about dull farm matters and Mr Bracey had contributed precious little to the night apart from agreeing with everything her father said (Joan had never known a farmer with so few opinions of his own) and heaping tedious praise on Joan. She had deliberately played the piano even worse than usual, thumping on the keys and mixing up notes, but he had still clapped politely and told her she "played like an angel". It was enough to make her want to slam the piano lid down on his fingers.

Joan tossed her hairbrush aside and was about to flop into bed when she heard a faint clatter downstairs. Instantly alert, she listened hard, but now there was nothing. Her father was already snoring in bed, Mr Bracey had gone, and the servants would be in their quarters, so there was nobody left downstairs. She lay down, but a moment later was up again. This time she had definitely heard something. A burglar? Joan was not a girl to scare easily. She grabbed a candle and padded softly downstairs in her nightgown.

Peering through a gap in the dining room door, Joan caught her breath. – Sure enough, someone was moving stealthily in the darkened room, quietly opening and shutting drawers. She saw the gleam of a silver serving spoon being drawn out, then disappearing into the dark mouth of a sack already bulging with stolen items. Without a second thought, Joan boldly pushed the door open wide.

“Stop thief!” she cried, then gasped as the figure spun around and revealed his face in the flicker of her candle. It was Mr Bracey.

The two stared at each other for a moment, Joan in shock and Mr Bracey in horror, then he grabbed a silver butter knife and brandished it in her face.

“Looks like you’ve found me out then, little miss rich girl,” he snarled. Joan could hardly believe her eyes. Gone was the sickly smile and pathetic expression. Edward Bracey’s eyes glittered dangerously and his mouth was set in a vicious sneer. Joan didn’t think she’d ever seen anyone so handsome. Her heart turned somersaults in her chest.

“Mr Bracey! You ... you don’t want to rent Father’s land, then?” she managed to say.

Mr Bracey laughed harshly. “Of course not,” he spat. “I hate the whole filthy place. I thought I’d bag you as a wife and inherit all his money. But I decided tonight it’s more trouble than it’s worth. So I planned to pinch a few valuables and disappear.

Though I suppose now you’re going to run to dear Father and get me arrested. Unless I shut you up ...” and he moved the knife menacingly close to her neck.

Joan ignored it. “So you didn’t really think I played like an angel?” she asked, a smile starting to curl round her lips.



*Edward Bracey*

“Of course not,” he frowned. “You play with all the grace of a tone-deaf circus monkey. One of your father’s sheep could probably hit the notes better than you.”

Joan burst into giggles. Mr Bracey’s hold on the knife wavered. He hadn’t really expected this.

“And now you were going to steal our silverware?” she managed to splutter between snorts of laughter.

“That’s right. Are you going to stop me?”

“Oh no,” said Joan, looking him right in the eye. “I’m going to show you where he keeps his gold.”

Mr Bracey could only gaze in open-mouthed surprise.

“On one condition,” continued Joan breezily, plucking the knife out of his fingers and wagging it playfully at him. “You take me, too.”

Half an hour later, Joan and Edward Bracey were galloping away on two of her father's best horses, their saddlebags jingling with money, silverware and candlesticks.

The wind rushed through Joan's unpinned hair and her cheeks flushed with excitement. Here was a chance to have fun at last!



And what fun she had. Life became a wild, whirling ride – gambling and dancing in riotous bars until the early hours, gorging on lavish meals then running away without paying, cantering across the countryside to lounge in the grass at country fairs, enjoying apples and cider and ripe strawberries stolen from right under the nose of unsuspecting stallholders... Joan was giddy with the excitement of it all.

Edward couldn't believe the bloom and beauty of her, told her she was the best girl he'd ever clapped eyes on, and she took to calling herself Mrs Bracey, even though they never married. And, best of all, she discovered that those hands of hers that had been so clumsy at piano-playing and sewing were surprisingly nimble when it came to cutting ladies' purses from their belts or plucking watches out of gentlemen's pockets.



*A cutpurse (someone who literally cut off purses hanging on belts)*

Her father's money hadn't lasted long (for it was such good fun to spend) so after a while they relied on what they could steal in bustling country markets, always moving from town to town to reduce the chance of being caught. Joan thrived on the thrill of it all.

Then the winter came and the fairs ended. Suddenly it wasn't quite so much fun to ride for hours through the night or hang around dreary marketplaces in the rain. Though she still loved being on the move, there came times when tiny, treacherous thoughts stole into Joan's mind about how much money she'd wasted, or how Father must miss her, or how those ordinary people felt when they realized their hard-earned savings were gone forever. Perhaps Bracey noticed this, because he took her one day to an inn and whispered in her ear, "How'd you like to be the landlady of a pub, Joanie?"

Joan looked at the place doubtfully – it was dirty and drab, a beggar curled up in the doorway and the windows thick with grime. But Edward squeezed her arm and told her they'd make it the best bar in town – after all, they had enough money and perhaps now it was time to settle down... And Joan saw herself as a glamorous landlady behind the bar, bossing the serving girls and charming the customers, and her heart began to skip all over again. Yes, it would be fun!



Yet by the following spring, the fun had faded again. True, the place was always packed with drinkers, but they weren't exactly pleasant folk. – Most evenings ended with a fight and flying chairs, and the place was gaining something of a bad reputation.





*A rowdy inn, like Joan's*

True, they made money, but it just seemed to slip through their fingers, what with replacing all the smashed bottles and broken furniture. Edward's gambling didn't help, even though he was usually able to pay off his debts with money stolen from stupid or drunken customers. And as for their

grand plans of smartening up the place, they'd just lost the will to bother. After a few months, Joan was finding it hard enough to just drag herself out of bed in the morning and face all the sweeping and scrubbing to get rid of the mess from the night before.

One night, when they'd finally rolled the last drunk out of the door, Edward and Joan looked at each other's tired, worn faces and knew that things had to change.

"We've lost the fun again, ain't we, Joanie?" sighed Edward.

Joan felt tears sting her eyes. "I was thinking maybe I should... go back to Father," she blurted out, hating herself for admitting it. With a sob she buried her face in her apron.

"Now just you stop that," said Edward.

"I've been thinking. Let's go – now, tonight – take everything we can sell and leave town. Be free travellers again."

Joan raised a red, puffy face. "I'm not sure I can, Edward," she said wearily.



*Joan the unhappy landlady*

“Pickpocketing a coin here and a purse there ... we’ve done it all before.”

“Ah, but I’ve a better plan,” Edward grinned. “I’m talking big money. And it’ll be fun. Trust me.”

So she did.

And Edward was right. This new scheme was more fun than anything they’d ever done – more wicked, too, and certainly riskier, but who cared? For Joan was now a dashing highwayman.

Each night, she put on her male disguise – leather breeches, waistcoat, lace collar, wide cloak and high boots – and tucked her long hair inside a low-brimmed hat. With a scarf tied over her nose and mouth and a pistol in her gloved hand, Joan was every bit the handsome villain. Then she and Edward spurred on their horses, galloping down country lanes in the dead of night, watching and waiting for coaches carrying ridiculously rich noblemen and women laden with lavish jewellery and purses crammed with gold.

It was so easy Joan almost giggled every time some fat, double-chinned fool, shaking like a leaf with fear, tremblingly handed over glittering rings and watches. She could have shouted for joy whenever she reared her horse dramatically at the terrified victims before racing away in triumph, her cloak streaming behind her and the horse’s hooves pounding the hard earth. But she was careful never to reveal she was a woman.



*Joan on horseback*

She let Edward do the talking, and thrilled with admiration every time she heard his ringing tones:

“Stand and deliver your purse! Your money or your life!”

During the day they laid low, gloating over their loot and hearing from the local network of criminals where the big events were being held, the race meetings and balls that were sure to attract dozens of grand coaches.

They learned the best places to hide out (wooded areas, of course, not so near a town that pesky local watchmen might be out on patrol) and became so respected among fellow robbers that no-one dared steal their patch. Though perhaps ‘respected’ was not quite the word; Edward wasn’t afraid to use his pistol when threatened, as several fellow robbers had discovered to their cost.

But every so often – usually when she awoke in the grey mornings, her body aching from the cold and the latest hard, wooden floor she had slept on – those nagging thoughts came back to taunt Joan. She had been rich once. She had been grander than any of those pampered ladies cowering behind their fans in those plush carriages. And no matter how many coaches she and Edward robbed, she would never be able to sink back on silk cushions and relax, never be able to sleep soundly without keeping one eye open for danger. Never, unless... unless she went back home.



*Flintlock pistols, used by highwaymen*

And one day, as she knelt on a dirty boarding-house floor, clumsily sewing up a rip in her cloak (she'd had to escape through brambles the night before) the needle stabbed her finger and something broke inside her. She flung down the cloak and cried. She didn't want fun any more; she'd had enough. She would find Edward and tell him right now.

But Edward was already looking for her, with exciting news bubbling inside him.

"Joanie! Joan!" he shouted, coming up the stairs two at a time. "This is it, my girl. This is the big one we've been waiting for!"

"Edward –" she began firmly, but he couldn't stop.

"This is the big one," he repeated, his eyes shining. "Listen – the Duke of Staffordshire won a fortune at the races yesterday – a proper fortune, bags of money – and tonight he's trotting back to his estate with the whole lot of it safely tucked in the coach beside him." He chuckled.

"What say we meet him on the way, eh Joan?"

He grabbed Joan's hands and kissed them, but she pulled away. "I want to stop this," she said, starting to panic, her voice rising. "I want to go home."

"But you don't need to," Edward laughed, catching her waist and twirling her round. "Not now, not ever. We'll get this lot tonight, then we'll leave this rotten country once and for all. How do you fancy going abroad, see a bit of sunshine for a change?"

Joan felt dizzy. She couldn't think straight. Go abroad? Or go home? The farm, or the bags of money? Edward saw her hesitate and knew he had her.

"Come on, Joanie," he grinned. "One last hold-up, I swear it. Come on."



The horses heard it before they did: the steady rumble of coach wheels along the rutted track. Joan gripped her pistol and steadied her mare, keeping hidden under the low, overhanging branches at the edge of the wood. Slowly the vehicle loomed into sight, the faint glow of the coachman's lantern creating swelling and shrinking shadows as it swung to and fro above the horses' backs. Beside her, she felt Edward tense his grip on his reins. Closer and closer came the coach, but still they waited, knowing the exact moment to spring. A little closer... and ... NOW!

As Joan plunged forward and burst on to the road, there was a sudden commotion behind the coach, then out of the gloom sprang a pack of wild beasts which flew at her. No, not wild beasts. Night watchmen on horseback.

The coach lurched to a halt and the lantern rocked wildly, illuminating flashes of chaos all around: horses rearing and whinnying in fear, the night watchmen yelling, the brutal crack of shots puncturing the night. Whirling

around in terror, Joan's horse stumbled and fell, hurling Joan to the ground. In a moment the watchmen had surrounded her and rough hands pinned her down.

Struggling helplessly, Joan saw Edward kick out at one of the watchmen, who fell heavily from his horse. Before another man could get close, Edward tugged on his reins and wheeled his horse around.



*A night watchman*

For a moment his eyes met Joan's and he hesitated, then urged his horse into a gallop.

"Edward!" screamed Joan in despair. "Edward! Don't leave me!"

But it was too late. He was gone, swallowed up into the night, muffled hoof beats rapidly fading.

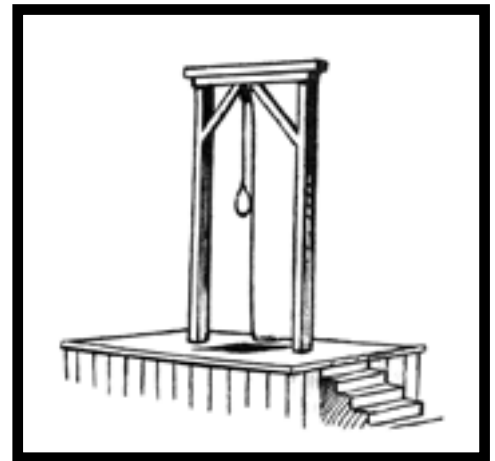
Meanwhile, the watchman gripping Joan looked at her with new interest. Dragging off her hat, he burst into laughter at the sight of her long, tumbling hair.

"Well blow me down," he exclaimed. "If it ain't a lady highwayman!"

It was a raw April morning when Joan Bracey went to the gallows. Stinging pellets of hail pelted the huddled crowd, but no-one cared. The hangings of highwaymen were generally exciting affairs, the outlaws defiant and dashing right to the end. Sometimes they even told jokes, sang rude songs or blew kisses at pretty girls.

And this was a female highwayman, who promised to be even more glamorous.

Yet as Joan was led out, a wave of disappointed grumbling rippled through the crowd. With her head hanging low and her dress grimy and tattered, she was a small, pathetic figure.



*The gallows*

"Where's yer costume then?" someone yelled.

Others joined in. "Come on, gal, what you got to say for yourself?"

"Give 'em a piece of your mind, Joan!"

At the sound of her name, Joan automatically raised her head, but she didn't see the jeering, jostling crowd.

She looked beyond them, to the beautiful rolling fields of emerald green where groups of pure-white sheep grazed peacefully. Joan gazed at them until the scene swam with tears. Then she closed her eyes and didn't open them again.

