

## Ligonier Valley Writers Flash Fiction Contest

### Honorable Mention

### Night Watch

by Dana Weber of Ligonier, PA

*“The author of The Tallest Timbers and A Hat for Two Heads, Dana weaves decades of East Coast, Deep South, and international travel into playful storytelling tinged with the mystical ways of the universe.” —Weekly Book Recommendations on Facebook (Dana Thomas Weber)*

“Ten o’clock and all is well!” cried Jack the nightwatchman. His cumbersome lantern clanked to rest on the stoop while free hands turned cloak collar up against billowing autumn mist. A bump to patched boot, a rat was afoot. When the trusted torchlight dimmed, nocturnal creatures stirred.

*Not so.* A fox spied a body, hunched over a dark lantern, creeping toward the moor.

*Whoa, not so.* A horse previously tucked in for the night now cantered toward the common, a cart of stolen barrels bouncing in tow.

*Certainly not so.* The brewer shook his head, finding his cellar raided.

*Indeed, ’tis so.* One pickpocket advanced on a dangling timepiece.

Night aroused debauchery in 17<sup>th</sup>-century London, and Old Jack was not spared when his beam faded. When he reached to resurrect the flame, intention turned to despair with a clutch of soggy air.

Worn soles shuffled into the watchhouse. Aged hands plucked necessities from meager provisions strewn about dark shelves. Even the moon had abandoned the forlorn, so he slumped behind his post on a garden bench.

Jack’s defeated voice updated his call. “Eleven o’clock and thieves are about.”

Despite ragged edges of town being suppressed by gloom, denizens traversed footpaths to and from pubs, craving mugs before bed. Cold-hearted crickets chirped encouragement, until the heartbeat of fiddle song cajoled revelers inside. Biddle Street’s Fife and Pipe Tavern thrummed and the ale flowed freely, quite literally when two men and a horse carted a pile of kegs from the back cellar door.

Deep in London’s center, a rather refined lot of watchmen donned taller caps and shinier boots than their hamlet counterparts. One such gentleman had a go of, but failed, the hourly call to sleepy residents of his polished beat. Awkwardly, his esteemed pocket watch was no longer at the end of a curiously shortened chain. A frantic search of cobbles proved futile since the silver timepiece was now buried in a burglar’s sack.

Nestled in the town's boggy common, a rogue quartet gathered like rodents in a den cut from willows. Surmising their haul around that snatched tin lantern, one raspy robber queried the time.

"My friend," a bloke named Ben declared, "my fine pocket watch tells me 'tis nearin' the stroke of midnight." He paused for dramatic effect before mimicking Great Britain's sentinels. "And all is well."

With mustered flair, he dangled the watch to catch the gleam and flaunted his prized windfall of the evening. His acquired possessions deeply contrasted with the collective rotten teeth and grime, highlighted at this late hour by a pilfered yellow beacon.

Another, named Willard, coated in dust from a day of chimney sweeping before his secretive duties commenced, seized the watch from the hand of his mate for a closer inspection. Letting the thicket wall support his weak spine, he declared, "Aye, then who needs Big ol' Ben with a right piece such as this?"

"And who," the one they called King appealed, "needs to pay the innkeeper when we gets a tad thirsty, I say?" Swigging from a jug, the leader of the group chortled and wiped drink from whiskers.

"Aye, 'tis the reason you're King," a youthful Tommy commended his elder, who routinely came through with the plum catch, before lapping spicy ale from a stolen keg.

A snapped twig triggered alarm.

The horse whinnied from her birch post and King crouched toward the lantern to extinguish the flame. Only then did those four sets of glassy eyes dare to peer from the brambles. Their survey revealed a flickering slice though the haze.

Mystified, they gawked at the jagged glow looming, threatening to erode their refuge. Lopsided orbs bobbed through the reeds to return the gaze of the huddled troupe. Closer and closer, that face became sharper until the evil glare mocked the bandits from their lair.

Clawing through branches and thorns, they dispersed like beetles from an overturned rock. Too frightened to look back and too pickled to think clearly, the deviants would have only a story to tell in the morning.

Returned to its rightful owner, the tin lantern illuminated the disorder with newborn radiance when Jack revived it using the candle from the substituted hollowed-out gourd.

He smiled back at the carved face, now hanging from a willow branch and still deviously eager to keep crooks at bay. Coaxing the mare with the cart, Jack loaded the scattered chattels for the jaunt to the guard-house.

Glimpsing over his shoulder from atop the horse, the nightwatchman observed the candlelit grin widen a tad. A new kind of chill crept up his neck, and Jack marveled at how his lantern carved from a pumpkin had served him so well.