

## THOMAS DUN

*Head of a Gang of Outlaws, on Account of whom  
King Henry I. is credibly supposed to have built Dunstable.  
Executed Piecemeal.*<sup>1.</sup>

THIS person was of very mean extraction, and born in a smallholding between Kempston and Elstow, in Bedfordshire. It is said he had contracted thieving so much from his childhood, that everything he touched stuck to his fingers like birdlime, and that, the better to carry on his villainies, he changed himself into as many shapes as Proteus, being a man that understood the world so well — I mean the tricks and fallacies of it — that there was nothing which he could not humour, nor any part of villainy that came amiss to him. To-day he was a merchant, on the morrow a soldier, the next day a gentleman, and the day following a beggar. In short, he was every day what he pleased himself.

When he committed any remarkable roguery his usual custom was to cover his body all over with nauseous and stinking sear cloths and ointments, and his face with plasters, so that his own mother could not know him. He would be a blind harper to commit one villainy and a cripple with crutches to bring about another; nay, he would hang artificial arms to his body.

His natural barbarity and cruel temper were such, that two or three men together durst scarcely meet him; for one day, being upon the road, he saw a wagoner driving his wagon full of corn to Bedford, which was drawn by five good horses, the sight of which inflamed him to put the driver to death; accordingly, without making any reflection on the event, he falls on the wagoner, and with two stabs killed him on the spot, boldly took so much time as to bury him, not out of any compassion for the deceased, for he never had any, but the better to conceal his design; and then, mounting the wagon, drives it to Bedford, where he sells it, horses and all, and marched off with the money.

Dun at first thought it the best way to commit his robberies by himself, but finding, upon trial, the method not so safe as where they were a company together, he betook himself to the woods, where he was soon joined by gangs of thieves as wicked as himself. These woods served them as a retreat on all occasions, and the caverns and hollow rocks for hiding places, from whence, night and day, they committed a thousand villainies. The report of their barbarity diffusing itself round about, caused all the country to keep off from them, and more especially to avoid the road leading from St Albans to Towcester, betwixt which they every day acted insupportable mischiefs, murdering and robbing all travellers they met, insomuch that King Henry I. built the town of Dunstable, in Bedfordshire, to bridle the outrageousness of this Dun, who gave name to the aforesaid place. However this precaution of the King was no impediment to Dun's designs, who still pursued his old courses.

Though the age he lived in was not so ripe for all manner of villainy as it is now, yet the gang under his command consisted of several sorts of artists, who were made to serve different purposes and uses, just as he observed which way every man's particular genius directed him. Some of these being very expert in making false keys and betties, he never suffered them to remain idle or without business; others were ingenious at wrenching of locks and making deaf files, which wasted the iron without noise, making the strongest bolts give way for their passage. His fraternity being thus composed of lifters, pickpockets and filers, he refines, corrects, augments and establishes their laws, and one day having read to them some few comments on

the art and mystery of robbing on the highway, he for a while leaves them, but in a short time returns.

Dun having intelligence that the Sheriff of Bedford with his men were in search of him, and that they had determined to beset the wood where he then was, obliged him to be upon his defence, which, however, did not make him lose his usual courage; wherefore, to prevent any danger that might happen, he musters up his company of grand rogues and retires into the thickest part of the wood, to a place in his opinion the most advantageous; where, having left necessary orders, he sent out scouts; but judging it not safe to put his confidence in spies, in a case of such importance, he puts on a canvas doublet and breeches, old boots without spurs, and a steeple crowned hat on his head, and so draws near them, where taking notice that they were unequal to him, both in number and strength, he comes back to his companions, makes them stand to their arms, and so encourages them, by words and example, that in setting upon them, as they did immediately, they were presently routed; and pursuing them closely, they took eleven prisoners, whom they stripped of their liveries, and hanged them on several trees in the wood, after which they made their coats serve them to commit several robberies in.

Dun, going one night to a castle near this wood, ordered, in the King's name, the gates to be opened, pretending that Dun and his companions had hid themselves there. Accordingly the gates were opened without the least suspicion of what afterwards fell out. Dun made pretence of searching into every corner for thieves, bustling everywhere throughout the castle with the greatest eagerness imaginable; but happening to find none, he would needs persuade the waiters that they had concealed themselves in the trunks. Upon this he gave orders for the keys to be immediately brought him; when, opening the trunks, and having loaded himself and companions with everything that was any way valuable, he returns back to the wood. Meantime the lord of the castle was extremely enraged at this proceeding, and could not brook to think that he should be thus robbed, concluding that the sheriff's men, under colour of searching for thieves, had thus pillaged him. Upon this he addresses the King and Parliament, giving an account by whom he thought he was thus robbed, who immediately issued out an order for examining the sheriff's men, one of whom was hanged to see what influence it would have on the other; but they persisting (as well they might) on their innocency, and discovering how eleven of their companions had been used by Dun and his associates, were set at liberty.

By this time the person we are speaking of was become formidable to all; for not only the peers and other great personages of the kingdom stood in awe of him, but also those of the lower rank durst not frequent the roads as usual. What a melancholy circumstance in his conduct was his generally committing murder; and we find but one instance, among the several particulars of his life, in which he refrained from this barbarity.

We shall draw now to his last period and only endeavour to show the extraordinary struggles he made to obtain his usual liberty and preserve his life, without being called to give an account of his actions or answer the laws of his country what he was indebted to them for the many villainies and barbarities he had committed. He had continued in his wild and infamous course of life for above twenty years, and about the River Ouse in Yorkshire was the general scene where he played his pernicious and destructive pranks, where men, women and children fell a prey to his attempts, for he went constantly attended with fifty horse, and the men of the country round about were so much terrified at his inhuman cruelties, and the number of his partisans, that very few had the courage or even durst venture to attack him, in order to apprehend and bring him to justice. We may venture to affirm that if his life contained many unaccountable and

strange exploits, yet that his death was as remarkable. He having transacted things beyond imagination, his fame, or rather infamy, increased every day, so that the country was determined to put up with his insolences no longer.

It seems threatenings against him came from all parts, but these, instead of working a reformation, or making him reflect on his past conduct, only the more inflamed his audacious and villainous temper.

'Various legends have arisen to account for the origin of the name and town, and the lawlessness of the time and place has been personified in a robber called Dun, whose evil deeds exasperated Henry. The latter, according to one version, is supposed to have defied Dun by fixing his ring to a pole in the highway by means of a staple and daring anyone to steal it. The ring and staple vanished, but were traced to a house inhabited by the widow Dun, whose son, the robber, was finally taken and hanged, but had the satisfaction of seeing his name and deed commemorated in the name of the newly-founded community.' <sup>2</sup>

In 1086, when William I sent his officials out to make a detailed survey of his newly acquired kingdom of England, Dunstable did not exist. The name does not appear in the Domesday Book and most of the area we now know as Dunstable was part of the King's manor of Houghton. It was William's third son, Henry I, who was to decide that a town should be built where the Roman Watling Street crossed the ancient Icknield Way. <sup>3</sup>

Other sources say that Henry did not found Dunstable until 1109. <sup>4</sup>

A stout fellow, we are told, about Dunstable, had made five or six of the sheriff's officers to come to his house with a design to apprehend Dun, who sometimes would venture to walk out by himself. But Dun, having got previous information of this design against him, came in the night-time with his partisans to the man's house, and filled it with a thousand oaths and curses, which presently got wind throughout the town, and among the sheriff's men, who came and pursued him with all their forces. The fellows, his partisans, finding they were closely pursued, divided themselves into separate companies, and fled away to what places they could come to; but Dun got out into a certain village, where he took up his quarters for that time.

However, the pursuit still continued very warm, and Dun's adversaries, arriving at the house where he had concealed himself, asked where he was hid, and at last found that he was concealed there. Immediately on this report, the people in crowds gathered together about the house, and two especially posted themselves in the threshold of the door to apprehend him; but Dun, with an insurmountable courage, started up, with his dagger in his hand, from the table, and laid one dead that instant, and then dispatched his companion, who ventured to oppose him. But what was the most surprising, he had the boldness to bridle his horse in the very midst of this confused uproar, mount and force his way out of the inn. The people no sooner saw this but they fell upon him to the number of one hundred and fifty, armed with clubs, forks, rakes and what else they could next come at. With these weapons they forced him from his horse, but this was so far from dismaying our adventurer that he mounted again, in spite of all oppositions and made his way clear through the crowd that opposed him, with his sword. The countrymen upon this found there was more difficulty than they at first apprehended in taking him; but, fresh supplies coming in to their assistance, they gave him chase still.

Our adventurer, now finding the last period of his life drawing on, made all the haste he was able, and got among the standing corn, and then taking to his heels (for by this time he was forced to quit his horse) outstripped his pursuers a matter of two miles, a circumstance that seems almost incredible. Dun having procured this advantage, as he thought, would have lain him down to rest, and composed himself a while, but was presently, to his exceeding surprise, hemmed in with no less a number than three hundred men. Thus was he brought into as great a dilemma as before, but, resuming his wonted courage, he pushed valiantly through them, and got to some valleys, where, considering there was but one expedient left to save himself, he presently undressed himself, and then, taking his sword between his teeth, plunged into the river below, and fell a-swimming. Instantly were all the banks covered with multitudes of people, some of whom were drawn together merely out of curiosity to be eye-witnesses of the event; while others got ready boats, with a design to give him chase, and try if they could take him. It was an astonishing sight to behold him, with the sword all the time between his teeth, swimming so many cross and various ways as still to elude his pursuers. At length he got upon a little island which was in the river, where he sat down to get breath a while; but his adversaries, having determined not to let him have any rest, followed him in their boats, but were forced to return back wounded in the attempt. After this he jumps in again, falls to swimming, and tries to gain the shore at another place; but ill-fortune attends him, and the people, crowding thither, make at him with all their oars, when they found it no way possible to take him without blows. Several times they struck him on the head, and, the blows stunning him, it was no hard matter then to apprehend him, which they did, and conveyed him to a surgeon, in order to have his wounds cured and care taken of him. When his wounds were dressed, he was conducted before a magistrate, who, with very little examination, sent him to Bedford Jail, under a strong guard, to hinder his being rescued by his companions.

Within a fortnight after this, being tolerably well cured, he was brought on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1100, into the market-place at Bedford, without being put to the trouble of undergoing a formal trial, where a stage was erected for his execution and two executioners appointed to finish his last scene of life. Dun, on beholding these dreadful men, was so far from giving in to the least concern or dismay, that he warned them, with an unconcerned air, not to approach him for fear of the consequences, telling them he would never suffer himself to undergo the punishments determined him from their hands. Accordingly, to convince the spectators round him that his usual intrepidity and greatness of mind had not left him, he grasped both the executioners, and struggled so long with them that he was seen nine times successively upon the scaffold, and the men upon him. However, he had still strength to rise up from them, and taking his solemn walks from one end of the stage to the other, all which time he cursed the day of his birth, vented a thousand imprecations on those who had been the cause of his being apprehended, but chiefly on him who had been the first to beset him. But his cruel destiny is determined not to leave him; he finds his strength diminishes, and that he cannot, in spite of himself, defend himself any longer. He yields, and the executioners chop off his hands at the wrists, then cut off his arms at the elbows, and all above next, within an inch or two of his shoulders; next his feet were cut off beneath the ankles, his legs chopped off at the knees, and his thighs cut off about five inches from his trunk, which, after severing his head from it, was burnt to ashes. So after a long struggle with death, as dying by piecemeal, he put a period to his wicked and abominable life; and the several members cut off from his body, being twelve in all, besides his head, were fixed up in the principal places in Bedfordshire, to be a terror to such villains as survived him.

Sources:

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