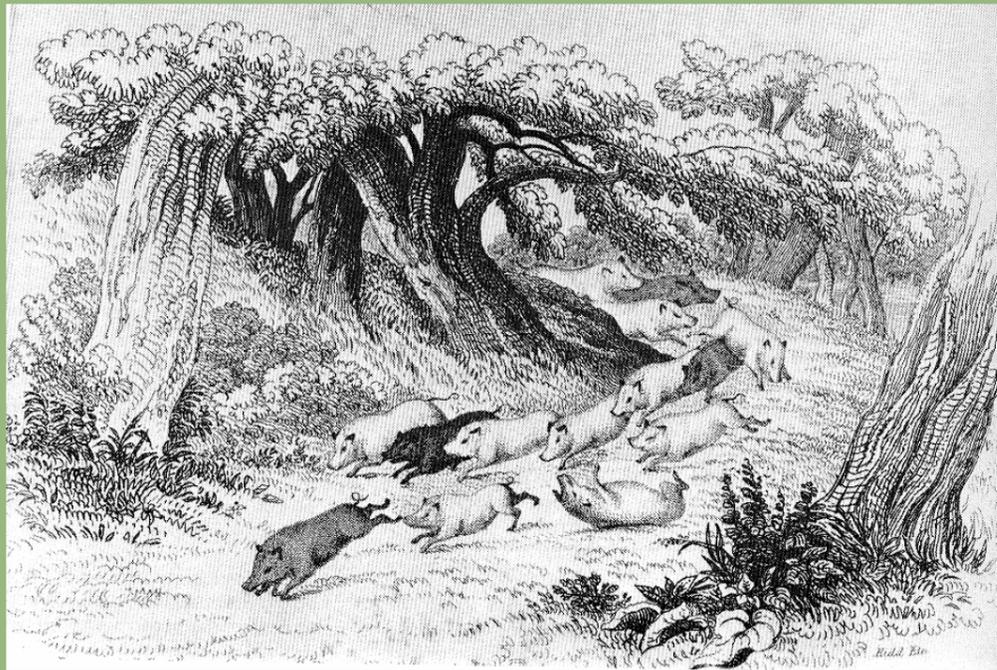


TALES OF THE NEW FOREST



PHILIP KLITZ

CHAPTER XI

MOOTY 'OODGATE

THE euphonious cognomen which heads this sketch was rejoiced in by the hero of my tale; and although, when surveyed in the abstract, one might hardly say that such a title could really be *applicable* to its owner, there was something in the person of its present proprietor that naturalised it, so to speak, and made it quite seemly and appropriate. His history belongs to a date so remote that few, I presume, survive who could speak as eye-witnesses of Mooty's actions or of his "belongings" and I myself have gathered the particulars of this narration chiefly from those who take an interest in the study of character, as developed in the retired nooks of the New Forest. Those who have lived long enough in the neighbourhood to recognise the characters introduced in this story, will also recognise the great change which has of late years been operating on all that pertains to this locality and I suppose that, "seek him all the forest thoro" you would not find in this day the counterpart of Mooty 'Oodgate.

Mooty was a very old man when I was a mere boy but he was of the sort of constitution sometimes spoken of as "wiry", a member of that meagre but sinewy class of which Charles Lamb has said, that "having got into the habit of living, they can't leave it off." He (Mooty) had always been a spare liver, not from necessity but choice and at the time I knew him, I question if he had any regular mealtime and if any irregular repast he made had any specific name. After having once broken his fast on anything he might have caught, his dietary for the remainder of the day was quite an affair of chance. One thing, however, in reference to Mooty's meals was certain - what he ate had cost him nothing. He contrived to keep his body and soul together without investing any capital in food and there was in his appearance much to mislead a stranger's opinion of his necessity and to induce the exercise of charity. I never heard of Mooty having begged but his sharp eyes glistened at the unsolicited gift. Then, and at times when a good meal had been won for him by his seeming destitution, it was amusing to those who really knew him to mark the secret delight he was inwardly enjoying at his benefactor's deception. Indifferent was he as to the quality of his fare. The delusion of his *needing* it, that was its luxury and as this thought prevailed while he fed, it imparted to his actions an eagerness which was commonly mistaken for the greed of pitiable hunger. He kept up this illusion too by a series of squeakings and chuckles, conveying to a charitable ear the impression of a starveling's joy in the timely relief of his distress. But what, in reality, was the ground of Mooty's glee? For it is pretty clear that his rejoicing is not that of a famished wayfarer. Why it arose simply from the consciousness that he could, in most cases, buy the party upon whose bounty he was feasting! In the utterance of this glee or, as it was erroneously thought, in the expression of his gratitude, there was a peculiarity which deserves notice.

It could on such occasions be scarcely said that he had a voice. His thin white lips were constantly in motion and a strange guttural murmur was the general result but varied by a sound assimilating more with the chirp of a grasshopper or cricket, than any enunciation of the human voice, which sound being once emitted, and again and again rapidly repeated, produced the effect of "chink'ee, chink'ee, chink'ee," for what Mooty intended as "thank ye, thank ye." There were, however, occasions when more important interests than those of meat and drink were involved, that he could be perfectly intelligible and make himself distinctly understood despite a permanent peculiarity in speaking. Under other circumstances, silence was so marked a trait in his character that it had gained for him the reputation of a mute or dumb person, and hence, in the dialect of the foresters, he had been designated 'Mooty'. In stature he was small. A frock or smock gave a deceptive rotundity to his body, of which the bulk was uncertain to the mere beholder but, as I before stated, he was spare in person and not disproportioned to his short thin legs which, encased in leathern gaiters, implied a prominency of sinew and a scarcity of flesh.

One of the actions expressive of his gratification was the passing of his hands over either arm with rapidity and then the placing them underneath his frock, apparently in active search of something he had missed, a singular process which none but those familiar with him could at all account for. His liberal entertainers little thought that the attenuated object of their compassion was clothed with *money*; that as the juggler's raiment is covered with glittering spangles of worthless metal, so the beggarly garb of Mooty the Illusionist teemed with glittering gold invisible as in its mine. Girdled, vested and altogether habited with not "gaudy gold," moved Mooty 'Oodgate among his fellow men. Money, not food, was *the* primary essential to his existence. No one would have suspected him of costly apparel of a richer than kings' clothing. A clean smock was a rarity, but no wonder, considering the care required in its trimmings. In the article of hat, the dandy who immediately adopts the newest *mode* was surpassed in variety of fashion by Mooty who, with one hat, which long wear had made exceedingly flexible, contrived to give it a novel appearance as often as he put it on.

One appendage to his person did certainly appear like a piece of extravagance and an inconsistency that is to say; that slung over his right shoulder, hung a leathern case, enclosing one of the best of Dollond's day and night telescopes, which must have cost him, if he bought it new, no inconsiderable sum. His care of this article evinced the value which he put upon it but it requires some investigation into his history and occupation to comprehend how and in what manner Mooty turned his telescope to a profitable use.



A 'Dollond'

His history was as singular as his habits were eccentric. He had been tenderly reared by a fond mother, whose only son he was and she was the widow of a retired tradesman of forest extraction who, when her husband died, chose to reside in her native village among her few poor relations. Here, with her son, who was extremely delicate as a child, she remained, till maternal anxiety co-operating with the ordinary infirmity of age, removed her we will hope from a forest to an Eden. Some years prior to her decease, Peter (for that was his proper name,) had gone through the educational programme of the village school, in which he had displayed such aptitude in the study of arithmetic as to make his learned preceptor nervous lest his pupil might by-and-by puzzle him. In connection with his precocity in calculation, he evinced in early life a doting regard for money and, true to that selfish bias, became the very paragon of juvenile usurers. After leaving school, it was his mother's wish that he should follow the business of a grocer which had been his father's and with this "fixing" in view, he was sent to take his trial behind the counter of a tradesman in the neighbouring town. But growing weary of the confinement and monotony of "town life" he returned after one month's imprisonment, to the freedom of his native wilds. To occupy himself and turn over his little money to the best advantage, he commenced in a small way as befitted so puny a dealer. Then it became his custom to wander from his home and be absent for days, for weeks as the custom and he, Mooty, grew. Nobody knew his route on these occasions, nor cared to inquire about it. Mooty expressed no solicitude for any living soul and society reciprocated the indifference:

He did not love the world, nor the world him.

When he returned from these peregrinations, he generally brought with him a family of pure forest colts, a hardy and most useful breed of animals, at that time in great request. From making these a profitable commodity, he formed an astonishing affection for them and his enthusiastic eye enabled him to make so judicious a selection that, in process of time he became recognised and celebrated as the prince of jockeys.

On the death of his mother and his accession to her little property, a house with land and a trifling income, he gained a renewed zest for speculation in this particular animal. He converted his "landed property" into hard cash and, by a second conversion, into a drove of forest colts, selected with infinite care and skill.

Whether it was the more genially to fraternise with the objects of his love, or whether, as his heart was with his treasure he thought his body might as well be too, he broke up his establishment from this date, and thenceforth had no regular home.

He and his colts were fellow-travellers and for aught that anyone knew to the contrary, were fellow-lodgers under the greenwood tree. They were generally sure to be encountered on the route leading to fairs and large markets. At other times they kept themselves pretty much aloof from mankind. In a family so numerous as Mooty's, it is easy to conceive that some member or members would be often found missing - and these were the emergencies peculiar to his profession which made his Dollond's telescope invaluable. In the act of reconnoitring he would be seated on the highest eminence or tree, and when his patient survey had been blessed by the recognition of his strayed friends in the distance, he briskly descended from his observatory and gave chase. Thus, for years, existed Mooty 'Oodgate. "His only care was to increase his store," to sell and not expend, to drive his forest companions from one fertile spot to another and so bring them into the market as to illustrate what, I believe, stock masters consider as the grand desideratum, namely, the best condition of the animal attainable at the least possible expense.

When on the occasion of an illness, which kept him to his bed for a long time, he was obliged to seek a sheltering-place, but it was no kind neighbour who took compassion on him, it was not that any kinsman sought to alleviate his pain. No, all the attention he gained was by the influence of his money and to part with that was as the bitterness of death to him. His asylum was in a miserable road-side alehouse. Here, without the consoling sympathy of any one individual, did Mooty 'Oodgate almost starve himself to pay his doctor's bill. He was impatient and fretful and from this time became so taciturn, that a stranger, familiar with forest sounds, might have guessed the origin of his cognomen.

Such as I have described this singular being, he continued for years. How he disposed of his money, or in what way he passed much of his time, remains to be shown. Those with whom he did business knew he had plenty of cash, for though he was a hard hand to deal with, Mooty 'Oodgate was always punctilious in paying honourably. Cunning and crafty in all transactions, he could, where such a policy was calculated to be profitable, assume the aspect of a perfect dolt, could personate so faithfully the vacant stare and wandering intellect of an idiot, that none except those who had the honour of his intimate acquaintance, would have given him credit for sanity, or have considered him competent to manage his own affairs. So much for Mooty's personal characteristics. Of his adventures we will speak after a little breathing time.

