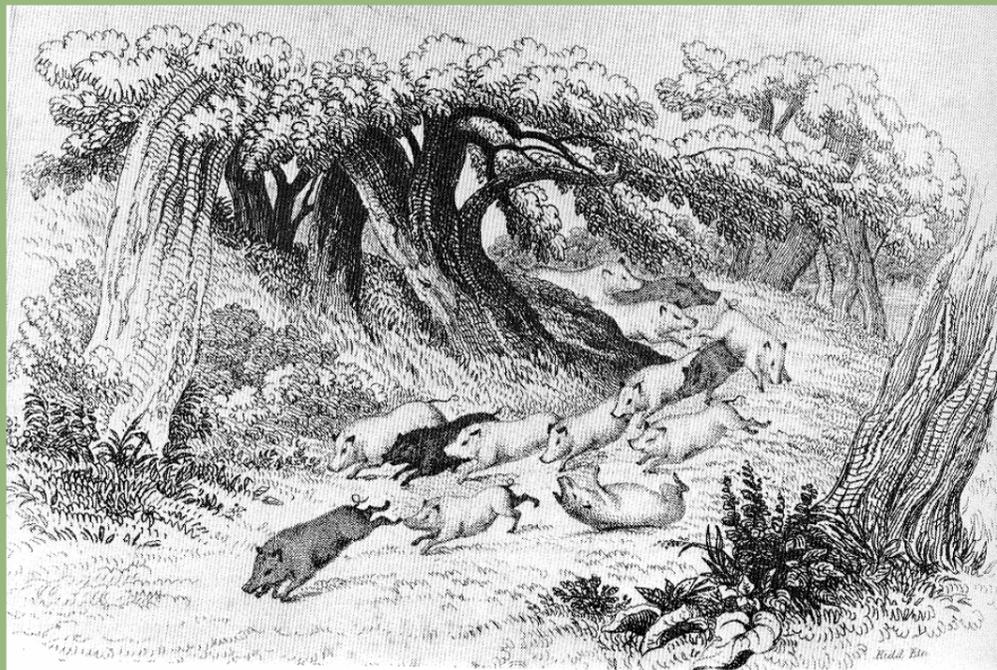


TALES OF THE NEW FOREST



PHILIP KLITZ

CHAPTER XII

MOOTY 'OODGATE'S ADVENTURES

MANY years have now elapsed since the occurrence of the circumstances I am about to relate, but time will never efface their effects from the memory of those who happened to be in the confidence of Mooty 'Oodgate. At the time to which I am adverting, the south-western coast of this kingdom was infested by gangs of desperate smugglers, who not only followed their unlawful occupation with impunity, but, in defiance of the law and its authorities, committed depredations and atrocities of every grade between petty larceny and murder. The customhouse and riding officers, appointed to protect the revenue, were in constant peril of their lives in the prosecution of their duty. The leaders of these desperate marauders had a regularly organised system of operation, in which they were frequently joined by the forest peasantry, who, encouraged by reward, and stimulated by drink, frequently jeopardised their own liberties and lives as accomplices. The parochial records of this division of the county are quite sufficient to convince any inquirers on the subject of the misery and wretchedness of many of the unfortunate and misguided creatures who lent themselves as accessories to these designing criminals. Instances are related in which the smugglers sometimes were defeated. In such a case the most deadly hatred ensued between them and their adversaries, and the spirit of deathless animosity thus provoked was generally pretty certain to rankle, till it had satisfied itself by some sanguinary deed of revenge.

Perhaps, for the information of the general reader, it may be well to state that the circumstances recounted here occurred long before the establishment of an efficient coastguard, and at a period when the major part of our soldiery was engaged on foreign service. The opposition most formidable to free-traders of that age was in the enterprising spirit of the crews of the different revenue-cutters, then in the height of activity. To land a contraband cargo was the main difficulty, that feat achieved, its subsequent disposal was accomplished with comparative ease.

Once, however, and perhaps within the memory of some of my forest readers, an unusually active riding officer was appointed, whose vigilance had often frustrated the plans of the contrabandists and his destruction, by a dastardly and inhuman process, was therefore determined on. Two of the gang proceeded at midnight to his house, which stood alone and having disguised themselves, they knocked at the door significantly, as having an important secret to communicate. The officer, ever alive to his duty, threw up the sash of his bedroom window and inquired who was there? The reply was that a party of smugglers were then running a cargo inland in the immediate neighbourhood of his dwelling and that his informants, in the hope of a reward, had come to disclose that fact. Perfectly deceived by this statement, the officer rose, intending to accompany the men in pursuit of the offenders but in the act of crossing his threshold, a blow from either side of the doorway felled him to the earth, with his brains dashed out. I mention this circumstance of savage violence partly to illustrate the "Will Watch" character, sometimes commended for its daring and romance and partly as giving pleasure to the contrast which our own times present, in the extinction of deeds of blood by violators of the public law.

Returning to worthy Mr. 'Oodgate, it is not difficult to imagine, considering his fiery thirst for gold, that if an enterprising smuggler solicited Mooty's co-operation and, *made it worth his while* to enlist himself and ponies in the business, that Mooty was not the sort of person to scruple overmuch, or whet up his conscience to a keen edge on the score of the unlawfulness of the pursuit. And Mooty was an agent on land of no little value to his bold confederates on the sea. He knew every bypath of the forest, knew perhaps, better than any one, where goods might be secreted safely as if "in bond." Knew too, the safest route by which to remove them inland, and the best times and seasons for "running" and removing.

Before long (for Mooty's worth was quickly seen and appreciated,) he found this new career so lucrative and so much to be loved, that he weaned himself by degrees from jockeyism and threw his affections and his energies into the subtler but more profitable engagements of free-trade.

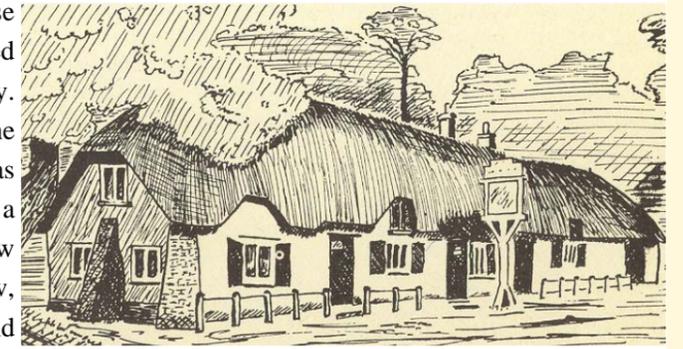
At the period of which I am writing the smuggling corps was exceedingly strong, probably at its maximum in respect to numbers, and the bribes they offered for the services of those on shore were so captivating, so numerous and so eagerly sought after, that the spirit of contrabandism carried itself defiantly before the lawful power that was too weakly armed for its repression.

I have heard persons, who well remembered the time, speak of the interest excited by the daily story of some new and daring exploit, and the growing contempt for law which was showing itself in all who shared the lucre of the trade. It may be conceived as somewhat "exciting," when a body of more than two hundred armed men, accompanied by many of the villagers, gathering as they went on, boldly marched through the district with wagons, carts, horses and ponies, all laden with goods innocent of excise-duty, paraded in the face of day! The leaders of these bands were also notorious characters in their day. One Peter Warren and a Billy Dear, as resolute and reckless as any who ever risked life and property in perilous adventures.

Then there was a celebrated Gipsy Joe, a *land-agent* like unto Mooty, but who made the Grand Route of many counties, while Mooty kept himself to his snugery in the forest. Gipsy Joe was ostensibly a grinder of razors but as his movements were at times very rapidly executed - in one county to-day and in a distant place to-morrow - it was believed respecting him, that he had a large and scattered stock of grinding apparatus about the country, which he exhibited here and there wherever he knew of parties who liked to purchase foreign commodities duty-free. Then also might be found enlisted in the same pursuit, bold adventurers from Spain, Portugal and France - lawless but well-organised marauders, who feared neither the judgments of earth or heaven.

The subject of our sketch, still taciturn, began to be alive to the excitement consequent on the arrival of a fresh cargo. The communication necessary to this end involved the greatest risk. As I before observed, the chief difficulty in landing was to evade the sharp-sighted cutters-men who then scoured the coasts, but the cargo once on shore was soon quietly cleared, or if attacked, was too strongly defended to be captured. The landing-stage arrived at, our hero's active duties commenced in conveying to the private haunts of the forest the illicit property consigned to him and, that business ended, there sat Mooty surrounded by spirit-casks and tobacco-bales and calculating with infinite satisfaction his own personal share in the bulk before him. Then followed negotiations with Gipsy Joe, himself the proprietor of many ponies, and shortly afterwards a general assembly of those animals took place, preparatory to a clearance and sale of the last cargo. This arrangement had for some time prevailed between Mooty and the Gipsy, when an unexpected event deprived our hero of his friend's assistance and at the same time, as a consolation, put him in free possession of his friend's ponies. Gipsy Joe loved the company and the life of a smuggler for its daring, its dexterity, its riotous cheer. Mooty 'Oodgate adored it for the gains it brought a thrifty body like himself. Mooty, as you know, was no epicurean. Joe had learnt to be luxurious and among other savoury meats he had a passion for venison. Preparing for an indulgence of this kind, Joe was seized one moonlight night on his way to an encampment with a fine fat buck across his shoulders and Justice consequently interposed a seven year's separation between the Gipsy and his home acquaintance. Whether he ever returned to cheer his admirers, I cannot say. Mooty, although affected by the inconvenience of his removal, was not inconsolable or paralysed. He surveyed the new accession to his pony-stock as a man contemplates a very comfortable legacy and, as he saw the increased facilities for smuggling traffic which were now in his own hands, reflected on the present flourishing condition of his finances, a new ambition filled him to become the sole charterer of a vessel and so secure to himself the happy privilege of undivided profits.

"Vaulting ambition," however, in Mooty's case "o'erleapt itself" and the path that was to have led him up to wealth, brought him down to poverty. In the scheme on which he was now intent he associated with him an English sailor known as Cherbourg Jem, who had once escaped from a French prison and was now a member of the New Forest gang. He was a shrewd, intelligent fellow, careless of danger, of a roving disposition and possessed that which gave him more pride than a



world wealth - one of the fastest sailing luggers then employed in the free trade. It was in the management of his vessel that he had acquired his fame. How often had he played at hide-and-seek with the revenue cutters, now on this shore, then on that and had won and laughed in all games! His reliance was more upon the sailing properties of his bark than in the numerical force of his crew. These were, however, brave and willing and prepared to stand by their chief to the last extremity. Not deficient in courage, as will be hereafter shown, Jem's policy was to fly rather than to fight and not to expose himself or his men unnecessarily. Considering the busy state of the channel at that time, with vessels stationed there for the protection of our shores from the then dreaded French with others for the protection of the revenue and the capture of suspicious cruisers, it is evident that an individual in Jem's position required peculiar tact to elude successfully the dangers which beset him.

As for money, it was the possession not the absence of it which gave him anxiety. Thoughtless on shore as reckless afloat, his chief care was to spend it and he was rarely known to leave port with a shot left in his "locker." Such a man was just suited to our hero's purpose and for some time they went on successfully. Cargo after cargo had been safely landed and lodged in a store provided in the gloomiest depths of the forest. Here it was that Mooty loved to dwell and congratulate himself on the accumulation of his wealth, here, in the very bowels of the earth, in a cavern formed by nature, which Mooty, with the help of a few confidential assistants had so completely arranged and covered in as to escape the eye of the most discerning excise man that ever made a seizure. In this work of "laying up his treasure" none could be more indefatigable than Mooty.

Often, while his subordinates were carousing and enjoying themselves, secure in their forest retreats, their master was trudging after his ponies, sometimes to the verge of the forest, for he took good care they should never be found in the same locality as his riches. After having collected as many of his herd together as were necessary for the journey about to be undertaken, in the darkness of the night he approached his secret depot and then, having completely equipped his ponies, he would sally forth through the mazy windings of the forest into the neighbourhood of the high road, where arrangements had been made to forward his contraband goods to the metropolis. The money once returned, all hands were ripe for another trip, having little dread of discovery or fear of danger.