

The Hayling Island Smugglers

A tale of smuggling on
Hayling Island

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THE SMUGGLERS.

a tale.

At the commencement of the latter half of the last century, and immediately after Byng's unhappy failure off Minorca, Ralph Rogers and Peter Crasler, two young men, natives of Hayling Island, once more visited this peaceful spot in the fond expectation of finding their much loved and never-forgotten home, after having passed many an eventful year, and experienced many a hardship together, as seamen, on board one of His Majesty's ships, then just returned from a foreign station. A singular fatality attended them both. Parents and near kindred were all gone; the unsparing hand of death had swept them all away, some in the fullness of age, and others in the greenness of youth; and their home—that only solace in the hour of toil and peril, the endearing remembrance of which had been unction to their wearied and troubled spirits whilst bending beneath the lash of the task-master and the frown of despotism—was in the hands of strangers, and refused them a shelter. Such of their more distant kindred as survived, looked upon them with eyes of suspicion, and disowned consanguinity. None would entertain the remotest recollection of them, save one innocent maiden, who, previous to Ralph's departure, had, in modest simplicity, plighted her troth with him. To the dwelling of Jane Pitt, therefore, Ralph's steps instinctively wandered; and from her kindness, and from the frank and hearty welcome of her parents, his generous heart soon learned to forget its grievous disappointment, and to infuse some portion of its altered feeling into that of his brother adventurer.

At this time smuggling was carried on to an immense height on the southern shores of Britain: large gangs of daring and outrageous characters violated the laws at mid-day, and set the constituted

authorities for its suppression at defiance. It was no uncommon occurrence for the "gauger" and his military assistants to be dragged from their posts, and, under horrible threats of prompt and fearful vengeance, compelled to assist in performing that which they were employed to prevent. Government, too, weakened by the distractions of its counsels, and the struggles of party, had lost the energy requisite to cope with these depredators on its resources; change in their favour; and they now found a hearty and cheerful welcome, where, on the former occasion, they had experienced nothing but harshness and rude incivility.

Soon after their arrival, Ralph rewarded the affection of Jane Pitt; and Peter, more out of compliment to them than for any other reason, also "changed his condition." For a time all was gaiety and pleasure; but when the novelty of living on shore had somewhat abated, and they began to feel the cares and wants attendant on their new situation, they found it necessary to look about them for employment. No great variety of choice awaited their decision; and even if there had, the little ability they possessed would not have allowed them to engage in any other than the one they had so lately followed. From necessity, therefore, more than choice, they once more resumed illicit trading, and very soon became known to all the neighbourhood as confirmed and established smugglers.

Success at first attended both their endeavours, but a twelvemonth had scarcely elapsed before the fickleness of fortune became painfully apparent to poor Peter. Loss after loss followed close upon each other, and a few months convinced him that he was ruined beyond redemption.

It was at this period that government discovered the inefficacy of her

measures for the suppression of smuggling, and that her late offer of an amnesty to those smugglers who should enter into the naval service, had rather augmented the practice, than decreased it. As a last resource, therefore, the plan was adopted of offering a large reward and permanent employment, in a civil capacity, to such as should discover their lawless associates, and the means by which the system of smuggling was pursued with such unparalleled success.

Peter Crasler found himself a husband and a father, with no means of fulfilling these duties; without resources for his present support, or hope for the future; and incumbered by a heavy debt (incurred indeed for contraband articles, but which must be discharged before he could proceed further in his career) from which he never could hope, by fair means, to extricate himself. On the other hand, government had offered him the opportunity of retrieving his fortunes, a permanent and safe employment, and quick and efficient means of discharging the debt which oppressed him. His situation was without hope and friendless, and the temptation strong, besides, he himself had no security against the treachery of his accomplices, and surely, he thought, surrounded as he was by want and danger, there could be no harm in performing an act, which the law had made a duty, and his own distress a moral necessity. His decision was soon made, for his wants were powerful and pressing: his offer was as promptly accepted and immediate relief granted, accompanied by instructions to make all the observations he could, and to attend at the custom-house in London on a day named.

His absence was soon observed by his companions, for suspicion ever attaches itself to the poor and unfortunate as well as to the guilty; and his wife, being boisterously and roughly urged by Ralph Rogers and other smugglers, acknowledged her husband's apostacy.

Consternation seized them all, for the knowledge Peter possessed forboded universal ruin. Ralph, in the bitterness of his rage, denounced him a villain, and swore eternal enmity against him, and prompt revenge. He renewed these threatening expressions in his cooler moments, and from the uncontrollable passion he evinced at the mention of Peter's name, and the reserve and gloomy silence he observed on other occasions, it was generally supposed that he meditated some signal act of vengeance. Poor Jane, who could in most matters soothe him into tameness and quietude, found her usual influence gone, and her endeavours to soften him met only by increased rage and vows of animosity; nothing daunted, however, by want of success, she resolved to renew her exertions upon every fitting occasion, and to keep a strict and guarded eye upon her husband's every action.

When the panic which had seized the smugglers upon the news of Peter's defection had somewhat subsided, they began to take measures for counteracting the effects which were naturally to be expected from it. With this view they emptied all the caverns on the south beach of the Island, and disposed of their commodities at as great a distance from home as safety would warrant. Having made everything secure, they suppressed their smuggling operations until the approaching storm was blown over, when they hoped to be enabled to resume them with greater safety.

Two months had now elapsed since Peter Crasler had left the Island, and the last quarter of an October moon warned the smugglers that the time of year best adapted for their pursuits was rapidly passing away unattended by the usual advantages. Peter knew the use made of the season likewise, and suddenly, in the dusk of the evening, made his appearance in the Island, attended by six dragoons. After giving his

party directions to proceed onwards, and wait his arrival at that part of the road in the south parish where the two branches leading from the beach first meet, he hastily and alone sought his home; and in the embraces of his wife and child slowly and heavily advanced over the shingle in the south-east direction.

Ralph, whose anger had been considerably increased by the attempt made to arrest him, had dogged them from the first moment of their advance. Keeping within the fields to the left of the road, he was enabled distinctly to hear their conversation; and having satisfied himself that Peter was now one of the party, and that their intention was to search the caverns, he diverged a little to the south-east and increased his speed, so as to arrive on the beach before them. Having cleared the last hedge, which divides the enclosures from the shore, he ran eastward, close besides the fields until he came parallel to his own subterraneous recess. Here he paused to observe their ulterior motions. He saw the lights moving slowly in a compact body along the strand; and his every faculty at once became overpowered with a keen and burning desire of vengeance. He advances to take them in flank, and sees the object of his bitter revenge in advance, on foot, shrouded in the shades of night, near the mouth of his cavern, apparently pointing it out to his followers ! Now is the moment of vengeance! he can accomplish his purpose and escape pursuit! Full of these blood-thirsty emotions, he raised the deadly weapon to his shoulder, and, taking unerring aim, with savage joy, pulls the fatal trigger! Oh, God—a loud and terrific shriek conveys to his horror-stricken and bewildered ear the dreadful truth—the life blood of poor Jane Rogers is poured out by the hands of her infuriated husband—and frail mortality is once again taught the often repeated, and in this instance, fearful lesson, to beware of the influence of passion, and pause on the actions which its headlong impulses dictate.

