

The Smuggler's Cave

From the papers of a Revenue Officer

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

For more than a year our revenue vessels upon the sea, and a posse upon the land, had been in search of the smuggler, Ralph Morewood; but he had eluded us at every step, and still carried on his illicit traffic in spite of us. We knew that the northern part of Lancashire was flooded with rum and brandy of his smuggling; but the people along the coast were all friendly to him, and lent him their assistance. Finally we learned, through careful spies whom we sent out, that his usual place of entry was somewhere on the eastern shore of Morecombe Bay, between the wash of the Loyne and Westmoreland, and, furthermore, that he had a great quantity of contraband liquor stored near the coast.

After considerable consultation, it was decided that I should take the matter into my own hands, and ferret out the dept of the smugglers if I could. I had not much hopes of success where so many had failed; but perhaps fortune might favor me, and so I took it. I was permitted to call for as many men as I wanted, and I selected thirty of the most reliable, and bade them make their way to Lancaster, and there remain till I called for them. I instructed them not to go in company, but to travel along as though each was on business of his own, and not herd together after they reached the city, only being sure to have such an arrangement among themselves that they could be assembled with the least possible delay. A lieutenant, named Windham, was to be their leader, and with him I had an understanding, so that I could find him at any moment.

These arrangements were made at Liverpool, and as soon as I had seen my men off—some by water, and some by land, I proceeded to get ready to start myself. I got a peddler's license, and then bought a couple of small tin trunks, which I filled with trinkets and knickknacks of almost all descriptions, and having assumed a garb befitting my new calling, I took the stage for Lancaster, from whence I traveled on foot as far as Carnford. At this latter place I made some inquiries, but could learn nothing which I had not known before, though I suspected that much more was known than was told to me. I had my trunks hung over my shoulders by a broad leathern strap, and I stopped and opened them, and bartered and gossiped at the same time.

A short distance beyond Carnford the post road makes an abrupt turn to the right, while a narrower way leads on by the coast towards the confines of Westmoreland. The latter road was the one I took, for I felt that the nearer I kept to the sea, the more likely I should be to learn something of the smugglers. As I left the post route, the houses became few and far between, and the people seemed poor enough; but I stopped at every dwelling, and as I exhibited and descanted upon my wares, I touched upon the subject of the contrabandists. But nobody knew anything about them, and some solemnly declared that they had never heard of such a thing in that section of the country.

I had now reached a point where the road led through a wild, woody and rocky district, sometimes close to the coast, and at others farther off. Where it was furthest from the water there

were hills, and woods and huge crags intervening, and it struck me as being the very sort of a spot wrongdoers would chose for a landing place, for amid such a wild, intricate mass of rock and wilderness, there must be paths in which one acquainted with them could easily elude a number of pursuers. And, besides this, we knew that much contraband stuff had been landed near here. But this was not all. I had another proof, and a very conclusive one, too, that I was on the right track. It was in the flat denials which the peasants made when I spoke of the smugglers. I knew that there had been much smuggling done in that neighborhood, and that these people must, at least, have heard of it; so when they flatly denied having ever heard of any such thing, I simply knew that they lied. And I knew more: I knew that they must have a purpose in lying. If the smugglers had only been there occasionally, and had no regular depot in that vicinity, they would not have been so anxious to hide their knowledge.

It had got to be near five o'clock, and the nearest village ahead was in Westmoreland, so I determined to keep on to that place and spend the night, and then hover about until I could gain some positive intelligence. I had just started on with this intention, when I noticed that a storm was at hand. Heavy black clouds had rolled up over the rocks and hills, and the wind was rising. I could not see the waters of the bay, for a long line of crags and woods was between them and the road; but I could hear the breakers dashing over the rocks, and I knew the sea was not very far distant. Very soon the wind broke into fitful gusts, and large drops of rain began to fall. I hurried on, and ere long had the good fortune to see a dwelling by the roadside, only a short distance ahead. It was a small, steep-roofed cot, thatched with straw, with a few dilapidated outbuildings situated on the left-hand side of the way, and surrounded by dense woods. The door was open, and I entered without ceremony, for at that moment the rain came pouring down in a torrent. The only inmates were an old woman and a girl, the latter being a stout, rugged-looking creature, some sixteen years of age.

I asked if I could have shelter there from the storm. The woman looked into my face with a searching glance, and finally said yes. So I placed my trunks in one corner, and then sat down. I was considerably wet, and feeling somewhat chilly, I asked if there was any spirit in the house. At a sign from the old woman, the girl brought me some, which I found to be pure old French brandy.

“That is something of the right stamp,” I said, as I wiped my lips.

“Yes,” returned my hostess, “It is some that my son brought up from Lancaster.”

I had a strong suspicion that she was lying, but I kept my thoughts to myself, and pretty soon she commenced to get supper.

The storm grew more furious, and I noticed that both the females were very anxious, and that they frequently went to the back door, and listen-ed to the roar of the distant breakers. Nine o'clock came, and as it still rained hard, I remarked that I should have to remain with them overnight. The old woman made no objections, but took up a candle, and led the way into a little apartment in one corner, where I found two mattresses spread upon the floor. She told me that was the best she could do, and if I could sleep there I was welcome. I answered that I was grateful for any port in a storm, and with a mumbling reply, which I could not understand, she

left me. I quickly undressed, and having found some old pieces of sailcloth which had been used for sheets, I covered myself up.

I soon fell asleep, but the events of the day, and the various suspicions which I had entertained, so worked upon me, that my slumbers were uneasy and troubled. I had lain thus perhaps an hour, when I was awakened by a lull in the storm, and I supposed it was clearing off. I soon fell asleep again, and when I was next awakened, it was by someone's entering the cot. I heard a rough voice call out for the old woman, and in a few moments more I heard her reply.

"Hush!" she uttered. "Is that you, Ralph?"

"Yes," said the newcomer.

"Be careful," she added, "for there's a 'loper in the bunkroom."

"A 'loper?" repeated the man, with an oath. "What's he doin' here?"

"He's only a poor peddler that got caught in the storm. He'll do no damage if ye let him be."

I heard thus much, and then I heard more men enter—two more, at least—and then the door was closed. After this a light was struck, the rays from which shone through the cracks of my thin partition, and then followed some conversation in suppressed tones. Fortune had thrown me upon the track now, sure enough. That Ralph Morwood was in the next room I was certain, and I was equally certain that this was one of his regular posts. Presently I heard the old woman say that she knew I was asleep, and then Morewood replied that he would convince himself of it before he trusted me. I saw, from the motion of the light, that he had taken up the candle, and as quickly as possible I sank down, and pretended to be in a sound sleep. He came into my room, and having gazed upon me a few moments, he held the candle close to my face, and passed it to and fro. But I made no movement. Then the light was withdrawn, and the fellow muttered—
"I'll kill him while he sleeps, and there'll be no more trouble! This knife'll find his heart before he can know he's hurt!"

For a single instant there was a thought of self-preservation flashing through my mind, but before I had made any movement with that design, I remembered that this might be only another test, and I pretended to sleep on. I heard him draw his knife, and knew that he was bending over me; but he soon went away, and softly closed my door after him, after which I heard him in conversation with his companions.

I got upon my hands and knees, and crept softly to where I had seen the widest crack, through which I easily gained a view of the occupants of the other room. There were three of them—stout, hard, rough-looking fellows—and the old woman was with them. It would be useless to note all the conversation I heard; but I heard all I could have desired. I learned that the smugglers had a secret place, close at hand, where they stored such of their contraband goods as they were forced to land before they were sold; and also that they had a cargo on the coast which they must bring up as soon as possible, and they had come up now to make arrangements for that purpose.

"We shall be ready to commence at twelve o'clock tomorrow night," said Ralph Morwood, "and

you must see our friends in the morning, and be sure that they will be on hand.”

These “friends,” I learned, were peasants who lived in the neighborhood, and who lent their assistance in landing goods when required. The old woman promised that everything should be attended to in season, and furthermore remarked that she would see that the coast was kept clear.

Morwood came into my room again to try me, but I stood the test, and shortly afterwards he and his companions left the cot.

In the morning I got up, and eat breakfast with my hostess. She was very particular to know if I had slept well, and I assured her that I was never better satisfied with a night’s rest in my life. I gave her half a crown, and then slung my trunks over my shoulders, and took my leave. The distance to Lancaster was only fifteen miles, and I reached that city by the middle of the forenoon. I found Windham at his tavern, and before noon all my men had been notified. It was arranged that we should meet, at eight o’clock that evening, in a small wood between there and Carnford, when we would proceed upon our mission.

At the time appointed we were all together in the wood, and I then related to my men what I had seen and heard. I described to them the location of the cot where I had spent the night, and order-ed them to follow me, and halt at my further di-rections. I was to go ahead, and they were to drop along, singly or in couples, so as not to excite the suspicion of any of the peasants who might chance to see us. By eleven o’clock we were together again, close by the smuggler’s cot. We found a good hiding place in the wood, where we could observe anyone who might approach the dwelling, and there we lay in wait. About half an hour after midnight we heard the tramp of men coming up through the wood from the sea, and ere long we saw dusky forms approaching the cot. We could not distinguish much by the dim starlight, but we could see that there were a large number of them, and that they stopped by one of the small outbuildings. In a few moments more, we heard the squealing of a pig, and shortly after that the fellows seemed to be very busily at work.

Now was the time, I thought, and I passed the word for my men to be ready; and as soon as they had their weapons at hand, I gave the order for starting, We took our way carefully down, under cover of the wood, and when we came to the point where we must show ourselves, I gave a loud shout, and dashed forward, with my men close at my heels. The smugglers were taken so completely by surprise that we had a score of them down and handcuffed ere they knew what had happened. The remainder showed some fight, but we easily and quickly overcame them; and when we had no more fighting to do, we looked around to see what had been going on. There were some forty small kegs of spirit lying upon the ground, while close at hand I observed a broad opening in the earth, like the mouth of a pit, with a board fence upon three sides of it. I took one of the lanterns which the smugglers had dropped, and examined the mysterious-looking place. I found it to be a curious contrivance. In the daytime this had seemed to be but a very ordinary pigpen, the bottom covered with straw and dirt, and a pig grunting about in it; and it had been passed and re-passed many times by officers who were in search of the smugglers’ depot, without exciting suspicion. But now the pig had been removed, the straw cleared away, the plank flooring taken up, and the way opened to a vast subterranean vault, where we found over five hundred casks of various sizes, and containing various kinds of liquor, besides several boxes of

tea, tobacco, and sugar!

As soon as I had seen my prisoners safe I took half of my men and moved down to the coast. It was a crooked, hidden way, among rocks and trees, but it had been traveled so much that, by the help of the lanterns, we managed to follow it. At the water's edge we found three boats, in charge of six men; and as they thought we were friends until we got close upon them, we had no difficulty in securing them. The boats were loaded with kegs of brandy, and had just come to the shore.

Not far off I saw a brig at anchor, which I knew must be the smugglers' vessel, and having learned that only two of the crew were on board, I had one of the boats cleared out, and then sent off four of my men in her to take the brig, and stay on board till I relieved them.

My next movement was to find a horse, which I did without trouble, and then I sent a man off to Lancaster with orders for a posse of men from that port. Just at daylight my messenger returned with twenty men, and our work after that was easy. We captured the whole smuggler crew, took their vessel, and got contraband goods to the amount of between five and six thousand pounds sterling.

"Aha! You're the peddler, eh?" cried Ralph Morwood, when he saw my face by daylight.

"Exactly," said I.

"Oh!" he added, with a gnash of the teeth, and a furious clanging of his irons, "I wish I'd only known it!—ye wouldn't have done this, my fine fellow!"

"I'm just as much obliged to you," I returned. "But if you'd pricked me with your knife, or burnt my nose with your candle, I might have waked up."

He said no more, and I passed on to the cot, in hopes to find the old woman and the damsel there, whom I had entirely neglected during the night. But they had flown. However, we had enough, and as the hospitable dame had helped me so much I was rather glad she had gone.

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