

The Smuggler's Song

By Steven W. Hooper

At the National Customs Museum Foundation (NCMF), we often get requests to publish more poetry about smuggling. Well, maybe not a lot of requests for poems about smuggling. Okay, maybe we have never received a request to publish a poem about smuggling. But it just so happens that one of the most popular poems of all time is about smugglers and the “excise men” who pursue them.

Let me set the stage for this poem. The action takes place on the east coast of old England in the 18th century. Those were the days when sailing ships and horses were the smugglers’ common means of transportation. French luxury goods and alcohol were in great demand in England and French smugglers were willing to take the short trip across the English Channel to supply the English black market.

Since the author uses some unfamiliar old English terms in this poem, here is a short glossary:

Baccy: short for tobacco

Brishwood: Sussex dialect for brushwood

Brushwood: undergrowth, twigs, small branches, or kindling

Laces: this can either mean French Lace or silk threads for tying stays

Woodlump: a woodpile

Valenciennes: French lace from the town of the same name

And now the big reveal. The poem is the “*The Smuggler’s Song*” by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). This poem was published in 1906 and remains popular today. If you explore the internet, you will find many “readings” of the poem as well as musical groups that have recorded their versions of Kipling’s work.

Your children and grandchildren might know Kipling better as the author of the children’s story “*The Jungle Book*” which inspired a Hollywood movie and Broadway musical.

Okay, saddle up; let’s go catch those smugglers.

The Smuggler's Song

If you wake at midnight, and hear a horse's feet,
Don't go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street;
Them that ask no questions isn't told a lie.
Watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!

*Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark —
Brandy for the Parson,
Baccy for the Clerk;
Laces for a lady, letters for a spy,
And watch the wall, my darling,
While the Gentlemen go by!*

Running round the woodlump if you chance to find
Little barrels, roped and tarred, all full of brandy-wine,
Don't you shout to come and look, nor use 'em for your play.
Put the brishwood back again — and they'll be gone next day!

If you see the stable-door setting open wide;
If you see a tired horse lying down inside;
If your mother mends a coat cut about and tore;
If the lining's wet and warm — don't you ask no more!

If you meet King George's men, dressed in blue and red,
You be careful what you say, and mindful what is said.
If they call you "pretty maid," and chuck you 'neath the chin,
Don't you tell where no one is, nor yet where no one's been!

Knocks and footsteps round the house — whistles after dark —
You've no call for running out till the house-dogs bark.
Trusty's here, and Pincher's here, and see how dumb they lie —
They don't fret to follow when the Gentlemen go by!

If you do as you've been told, 'likely there's a chance,
You'll be given a dainty doll, all the way from France,
With a cap of Valenciennes, and a velvet hood —

A present from the Gentlemen, along o' being good!

*Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark —
Brandy for the Parson,
'Baccy for the Clerk;
Them that asks no questions isn't told a lie —
Watch the wall, my darling,
While the Gentlemen go by!*

From now on, you cannot say that the NCMF has never published poetry or great literature. Rudyard Kipling was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907 and was for many years the most popular author in England. Former U.S. Customs officers and authors Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne would be proud.

Primary Sources

Kipling, Rudyard. "A Smuggler's Song." All Poetry website, www.allpoetry.com/A-Smuggler's-Song. Accessed 15 May 2021.

Kipling, Rudyard. "A Smuggler's Song". Kipling Society website, www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_smuggler.htm. Accessed 15 May 2021.

"Rudyard Kipling." Wikipedia website, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling. Accessed 15 May 2021.

The Smuggler's Song Images

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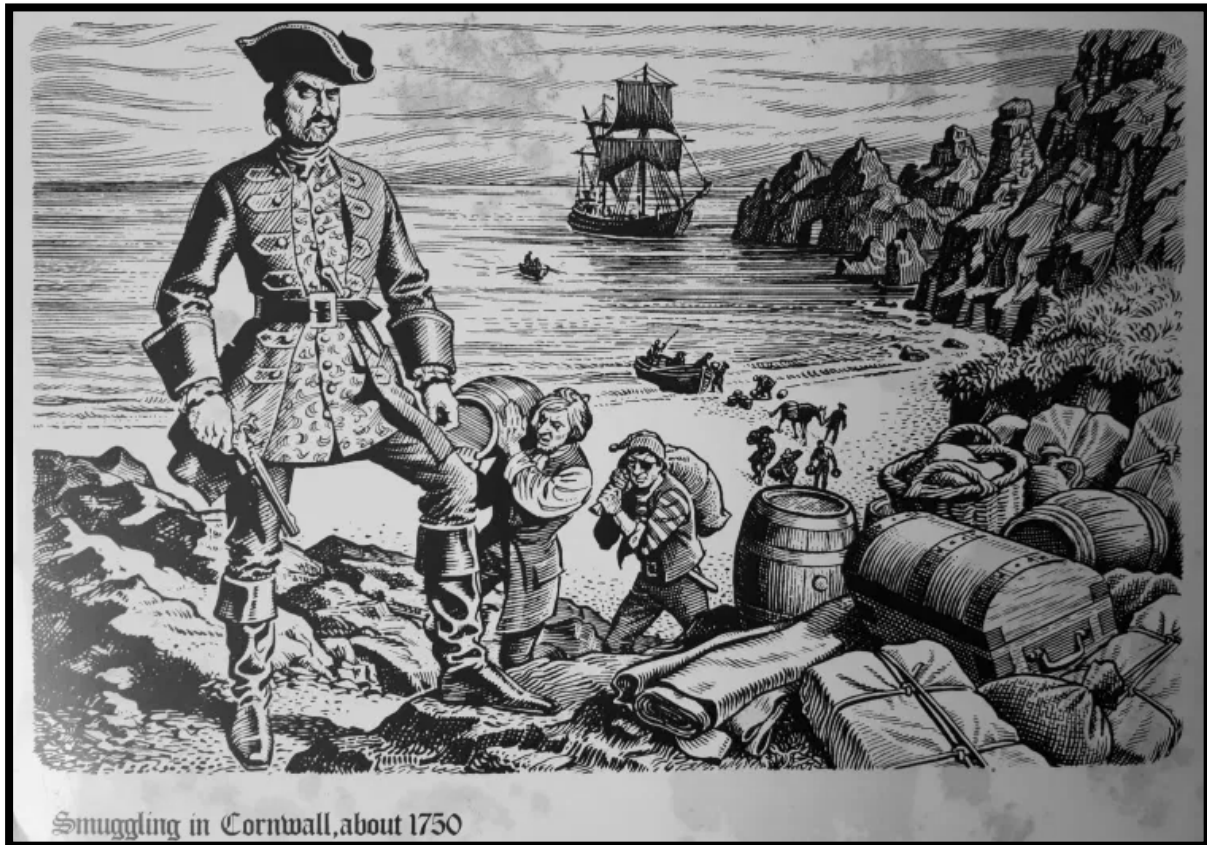


Figure 1: Smuggling on the English coast, about 1750. In 1789 when U.S. Customs was established, the same type of smuggling threat existed along our coastline. (Source: The Cornish Bird blog website, www.cornishbirdblog.com/2019/03/22/silas-finn-amram-hooper-smuggling-at-portwrinkle/.)



Figure 2: Paintings like “Smugglers Unloading Contraband” on the English coast by George Moreland (1793) may have inspired Rudyard Kipling to write the poem “The Smuggler’s Song.” (Source: Sailing By: Tales from our oceans, seas, coasts and inland waterways website, www.sailing-by.org.uk/a-tale-of-cornish-smuggling-sennen-1803/.)



Figure 3: “And watch the wall my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!” (Source: Historic UK website, www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Smugglers-Wreckers/.)

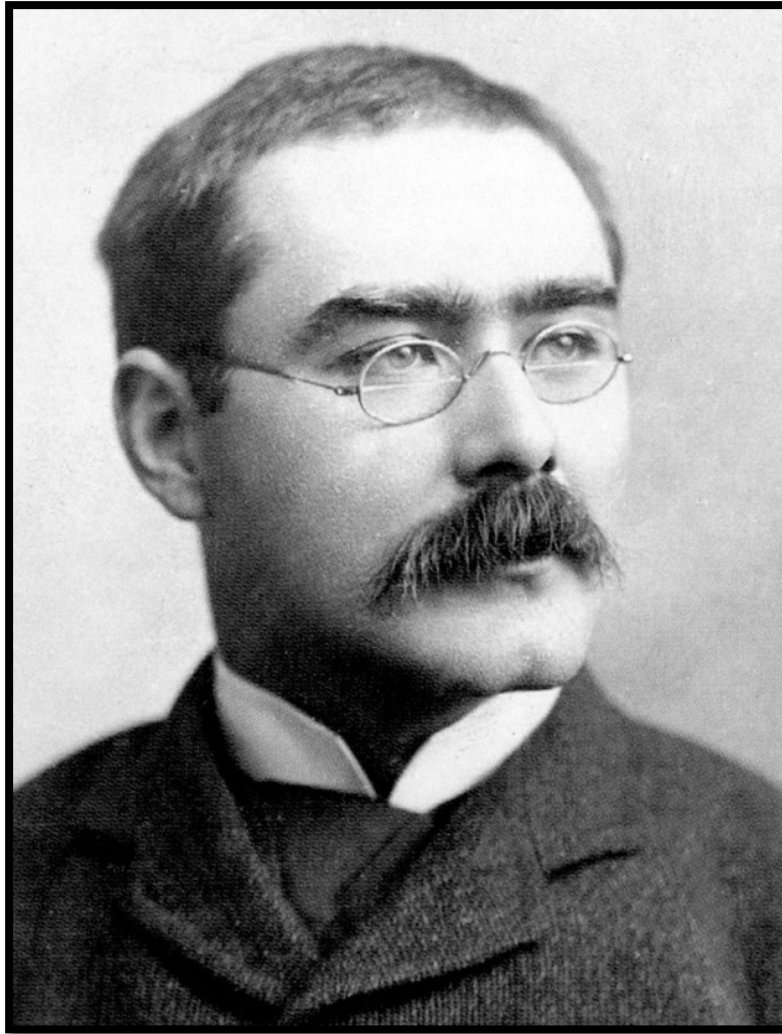


Figure 4: Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), author of the poem "The Smuggler's Song" which is included in his book *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *The Jungle Book* (1894), was a British citizen born in Bombay, India. Kipling's ashes are interred in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey in London. (Source: Wikipedia, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling.)