

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



A Smuggler's Song

By Rudyard Kipling

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,
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 brushwood 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 give 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!

Favourite Poem cont.

Instead of telling me bedtime stories, my father often recited poems by heart: 'The Highwayman', 'The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God', 'Sir Patrick Spens', 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix'. He favoured rollicking, rhyming ballads with stirring tales and could remember every word. My favourite was 'A Smuggler's Song' (the 'Little Yellow God' gave me nightmares!) and I visualised with a delightful thrill the shadows of the *Gentlemen* creeping along my bedroom wall. I did so want a *dainty doll, all the way from France!*

It is still not very fashionable to like Kipling but I do, even, treacherously, 'If' (which I once rewrote with a daughter as the focus, along with several other furious feminists). I like dramatic monologues by people like Kipling, Hardy and Browning, again, deeply unfashionable, but there is something about a character slowly revealing themselves on the page, or better still, performed by a good reader that I find as thrilling as the adventure stories that unfolded from the tip of my father's tongue.

The Smuggler's Song still appeals, partly for its music, for the memories of my childhood it evokes but also because of its sly subversiveness. You are on the side of the smugglers, the poor folk getting one over on the strong arm of the law and I love the sense of a whole community, from the parson to the clerk, conniving to outwit the distant central government.

I know the reality was much nastier and more brutal than the poem pretends. I know the smugglers were as ruthless as the soldiers and excise men who hunted them, but they were the underdogs, evading high taxes imposed by people far richer and more privileged than they, on things that brought a little colour to life, like alcohol, tobacco and tea.

Interestingly, I read 'The Smuggler's Song' as part of the sea-themed walk we did for *Poetry in Aldeburgh* some years ago, and someone commented that they had never realised how sinister the poem could actually sound, so perhaps Kipling wasn't so far off the mark. Anyway, I love it, so there!

Beth Soule