

'Aisy enough, sir,' replied Condy, 'bekase I am left-handed. This, holding up the left, 'is the right hand to me, whatever you may say to the contrary.' Condy's countenance expanded after he had spoken into a grin so broad and full of grotesque sarcasm that Stinton and his companion both found their faces, in spite of them, get rather blank under its influences.

'What the deuce!' exclaimed the gauger, 'are we to be here all day?'

'Come, sir, bring us at once to the keg.'

He was interrupted by a laugh from Cartwright, so vociferous, long, and hearty, that he looked at him in amazement. 'Hey, dey,' he exclaimed, 'what's the matter? What's the matter? What new joke is this?'

For some minutes, however, he could not get a word from the other, whose laughter appeared as if never to end. He walked to and fro in absolute convulsions, bending his body and clapping his hands together, with a vehemence quite unintelligible.

'What is it, man?' said the other. 'Confound you, what is it?'

'Oh!' replied Cartwright, 'I am sick, perfectly feeble.'

'You have it to yourself, at all events,' observed Stinton.

'And I shall keep it to myself,' said Cartwright; 'for if your sagacity is overreached, you must be contented to sit down under defeat. I won't interfere.' Now, in this contest between the gauger and Condy, even so slight a thing as one glance of an eye by the latter might have given a proper cue to an opponent so sharp as Stinton.

Condy, during the whole dialogue, consequently preserved the most vague and undefinable visage imaginable, except in the matter of his distinction between right and left; and Stinton, who watched his eye with the shrewdest vigilance, could make nothing of it. Not so was it between him and Cartwright; for, during the closing paroxysms of his mirth, Stinton caught his eye fixed upon a certain mark barely visible upon the hoar-frost which mark extended down to the furze bushes that grew at the foot of the slope where they then stood.

As a staunch old hound lays his nose to the trail of a hare or fox, so did the gauger pursue the trace of the keg down the little hill; for the fact was that Condy, having no other resource, trundled it off towards the furze, into which it settled perfectly to his satisfaction; and, with the quickness of youth and practice, instantly turned his coat, which had been made purposely for such encounters. This accomplished, he had barely time to advance a few yards round the angle of the hedge, and, changing his whole manner, as well as his appearance, acquitted himself as the reader has already seen. That he could have carried the keg down to the cover, then conceal it, and return to the spot where they met him, was utterly beyond the reach of human exertion; so that in point of fact, they never could have suspected that the whisky lay in such a place.

The triumph of the gauger was now complete, and a complacent sense of his own sagacity sat visibly on his features. Condy's face, on the other hand, became considerably lengthened, and appeared quite as rueful and mortified as the other's was joyful and confident.

'Who's sharpest now, my knowing one?' said he. 'Who is the laugh against, as matters stand between us?'

'The sorra give you good of it,' said Condy, sulkily.

'What is your name?' inquired Stinton.

'Barney Kerrigan's my name,' replied the other, indignantly; 'and I'm not ashamed of it, nor afraid to tell it to you or any man.'

'What, of the Kerrigan's of Killoghlan?'

'Ay jist, of the Kerrigan's of Killoghlan.'

'I know the family,' said Stinton; 'they are decent in their way.'

'But, come, my lad, don't lose your temper, and answer me another question.'

'Where were you bringing this whisky?'

'To a better man than ever stood in your shoes,' replied Condy, in a tone of absolute defiance—for a gentleman, any way, with a peculiar emphasis on the word gentleman.

'But what's his name?'

'Mr. Stinton's his name—Gauger Stinton.'

The shrewd exciseman stood and fixed his keen eye on Condy for upward of a minute, with a glance of such piercing scrutiny as scarcely any consciousness of imposture could withstand.

Condy, on the other hand, stood and eyed him with an open, unshrinking, yet angry glance; never winced, but appeared, by the detection of his keg, to have altogether forgotten the line of cunning policy he had previously adopted, in a mortification which had predominated over duplicity and art.

He is now speaking truth, thought the gauger; he has lost his temper, and is completely off his guard.

'Well, my lad,' he continued, 'that is very good so far; but who sent the keg to Stinton?'

'Do you think,' said Condy, with a look of strong contempt at the gauger for deeming him so utterly silly as to tell him—'do you think that you can make me turn informer? There's none of that blood in me, thank goodness.'

'Do you know Stinton?'

'How could I know a man I never saw?' replied Condy, still out of temper; 'but one thing I don't know, gentlemen, and that is, whether you have any right to take my whisky or not?'

'As to that, my good lad, make your mind easy—I'm Stinton.'

'You, sir!' said Condy, with well-feigned surprise.

'Yes,' replied the other, 'I'm the very man you were bringing the keg to. And now I'll tell you what you must do for me.'

'Proceed to my house with as little delay as possible; ask to see my daughter—ask for Miss Stinton—take this key, and desire her to have the keg put in the cellar.'

'She'll know the key; and let it also be as a token that she is to give you breakfast. Say I desired that keg to be placed to the right of the five-gallon one I seized on Thursday last, that stands on a little stillion under my blunderbuss.'

'Of course,' said Condy, who appeared to have misgivings on the matter, 'I suppose I must; but somehow—'

'Why, sirrah, what do you grumble now for?'

Condy still eyed him with suspicion. 'And, sir,' said he, after having once more mounted the keg, 'am I to get nothing for such a weary trudge as I had wid it but my breakfast?'

'Here,' said Stinton, throwing him half-a-crown, 'take that along with it; and now be off—or stop. Cartwright, will you dine with me to-day, and let us broach the keg? I'll guarantee its excellence, for this is not the first I have got from the same quarter—that's entre nous.'

'With all my heart,' replied Cartwright, 'upon the terms you say, that of the broach.'

'Then, my lad,' said Stinton, 'say to my daughter that a friend, perhaps a friend or two, will dine with me to-day, that is enough.'

They then mounted their horses, and were proceeding as before, when Cartwright addressed the gauger as follows:

'Do you not put this lad, Stinton, in a capacity to over-reach you yet?'

'No,' replied the other; 'the young rascal spoke the truth after the discovery of the keg, for he lost his temper and was no longer cool.'

'For my part, hang me if I'd trust him.'

'I should scruple to do so myself,' replied the gauger, 'but as I said, these Kerrigans—notorious illicit fellows, by the way—send me a keg or two every year, and almost always about this very time. Besides, I read him to the heart, and he never winced. Yes, decidedly, the whisky was for me; of that I have no doubt whatsoever.'

'I most positively would not trust him.'

'Not that perhaps I ought,' said Stinton, 'on second thought, to place such confidence in a lad who acted as adroitly in the beginning. Let us call him back and re-examine him at all events.'

Now Condy had, during this conversation, been discussing the very same point with himself.

'Bad cess forever attend you, Stinton, agra,' he exclaimed, 'for there's surely something over you—a lucky shot from behind a hedge, or a break-neck fall down a cliff, or something of that kind. If the ould boy hadn't his croubs hard and fast in you, you wouldn't let me walk away wid the whisky, anyhow.'

'Bedad, it's well I thought o' the Kerrigans; for sure enough I did hear Barney say that he was to send a keg in to him this week, and he didn't think I knew him either. Faix, its many a long day since I knew the sharp puss of him, wid an eye like a hawk. But what if they follow me, and do up all? Anyway, I'll prevent them from having suspicion on me before I go a toe farther, the ugly rips.'

He instantly wheeled about a moment or two before Stinton and Cartwright had done the same, for the purpose of sifting him more thoroughly, so that they found him meeting them.

'Gentlemen,' said he, 'how do I know that either of yous is Mr. Stinton, or that the house you directed me to is his? I know that if the whisky doesn't go to him I may lave the country!'

'You are either a deeper rogue or a more stupid fool than I took you to be,' observed Stinton; 'but what security can you give us that you will leave the keg safely at its destination?'

'If I thought you were Mr. Stinton, I'd be very glad to lave the whisky where it is, and even do without my breakfast. Gentlemen, tell me the truth, bekase I'd only be murdered out of the place.'

'Why, you idiot,' said the gauger, losing his temper and suspicions both together, 'can't you go to the town and inquire where Mr. Stinton lives?'

'Bedad, thin, thrue enough, I never thought of that at all, at all; but I beg your pardon, gentlemen, an' I hope you won't be angry wid me, in regard that it's kilt and quartered I'd be if I let myself be made a fool of by anybody.'

'Do what I desire you,' said the exciseman; 'inquire for Mr. Stinton's house, and you may be sure the whisky will reach him.'

'Thank you, sir. Bedad, I might have thought of that myself.'

This last clause, which was spoken in a soliloquy, would have deceived a saint himself.

'Now,' said Stinton, after they had recommenced their journey, 'are you satisfied?'

'I am at length,' said Cartwright. 'If his intentions had been dishonest, instead of returning to make himself certain against being deceived, he would have made the best of his way from us. A rogue never wantonly puts himself in the way of danger or detection.'

That evening about five o'clock, Stinton, Cartwright, and two others arrived at the house of the worthy gauger, to partake of his good cheer.