

The Storyteller

[THE GAUGER OUTWITTED.]

Two men in the garb of gentlemen were riding along a remote by-road one morning in the month of October, about the year 1827 or '28, I am not certain which. The air was remarkably clear, keen, and bracing; a hoar-frost for the few preceding nights had set in, and then lay upon the fields about them, melting gradually, however, as the sun got strength, with the exception of the sides of such hills and valleys as his beams could not reach, until evening chilled their influence too much to absorb the feathery whiteness which covered them. Our equestrians had nearly reached a turn in the way, which, we should observe in this place, skirted the brow of a small declivity; but, be this as it may, the flat at its foot was studded over with furze bushes, which grew so close and level that a person might almost imagine it possible to walk upon its surface. On coming within about 250 yards of this angle, the horsemen noticed a lad, not more than 16, jogging on towards them, with a keg up on his back. The eye of one of them was immediately lit with that vivacious sparkling of habitual sagacity which marks the practiced gauger among ten thousand. For a single moment he drew up his horse, an action which, however slight in itself, intimated more plainly than he could have wished, the obvious interest which had just been excited in him. Short as was the pause, it betrayed him, for no sooner had the lad noticed it than he crossed the ditch and disappeared round the angle we have mentioned, and upon the side of the declivity. To gallop to the spot, dismount, cross the ditch also, and pursue him, was only the work of a few minutes.

'We have him,' said the gauger, 'we have him. One thing is clear, that he cannot escape us.'

'Speak for yourself, Stinton,' replied his companion. 'As for me, not being an officer of his Majesty's Excise, I decline taking any part in the pursuit. It is a fair battle, so fight it out between you. I am with you now only through curiosity.' He had scarcely concluded when they heard a voice singing the following lines, in the spirit of that hearty hilarity which betokens a cheerful contempt of care, and an utter absence of all apprehension:—

"Oh! Jemmy," she sez, "you are my true lover,
You are all the riches that I do adore;
I solemnly swear now, I'll ne'er have anoder,
My heart is fixed to never love more."

Then the music changed to a joyous whistle, and immediately they were confronted by a lad, dressed in an old red coat, patched with grey frieze, who, on seeing them, exhibited in his features a most ingenuous air of natural surprise. He immediately ceased to whistle, and, with every mark of respect, putting his hand to his hat, said, in a voice, the tones of which spoke of kindness and deference:—

'God save ye, gentlemen.'

'I say, my lad,' said the gauger, 'where is that customer with the keg on his back? He crossed over there this moment.'

'When, where, sir?' said the lad, with a stare of surprise.

'Where? when? why, this minute, and in this place.'

'And was it a whisky keg, sir?'

'Sir, I am not here to be examined by you,' replied Stinton. 'Confound me, if the conniving young rascal is not sticking me into a cross-examination already. I say, red-coat, where is the boy with the keg?'

'As for the boy, I did see a boy, sir; but the never a keg he had.'

'Haden't he a grey frieze coat, sir?'

'He had.'

'And wasn't it a daunny bit short about the skirts, please your honor?'

'Again he's at me. Sirra, unless you tell me where he is in half a second, I shall lay my whip to your shoulders!'

'The sorra a keg I seen, then, sir. The last keg I seen was—'

'Did you see a boy without a keg, answering to that description I gave you?'

'You gave me no description of it, sir; but, even if you did, when I didn't see it how could I tell your honor anything about it?'

'Where is the fellow, you villain?' exclaimed the gauger, in a fury.

'Where is he gone to? You admit you saw him. As for the keg, it cannot be far from us. But where is he?'

'Dad, I saw a boy wid a short frieze coat upon him crossing the road there below, and runnin' down on the other side of that ditch.'

This was too palpable a lie to stand the test even of a glance at the ditch in question, which was nothing more than a slight mound that ran down along a lea field, on which there was not even the appearance of a shrub. The gauger looked at his companion, then, turning to the boy, 'Come, come, my lad,' said he, 'you know that lie is rather cool. Don't you feel in your soul that a rat could not have gone in that direction without our seeing it.'

'Bedad an' I saw him,' returned the lad, 'wid a great coat upon him, that 'was a little

too short in the tail. It's better than half an hour agone.'

'The boy I speak of you must have met,' said Stinton. 'It's not five minutes—no, not more than three—since he came inside the field.'

'That my feet may grow to the ground, then, if I seen a boy in or about this place, widin that time, barrin' myself.'

The gauger eyed him closely for a short space, and, pulling out half-a-crown, said, 'Harkee, my lad, a word with you in private.'

The fact is, that during the latter part of this dialogue the worthy exciseman observed the cautious distance at which the boy kept himself from the grasp of him and his companion. A suspicion consequently began to dawn upon him, in defiance of appearances, the lad himself might be the actual smuggler. On reconsidering the matter this suspicion almost amounted to certainty; the time was too short to permit even the most ingenious cheat to render himself and his keg invisible in a manner so utterly unaccountable. On the other hand, when he reflected on the open, artless character of the boy's song, the capricious change to a light-hearted whistle, the surprise so naturally, and the respect so deferentially expressed, joined to the dissimilarity of dress, he was confounded again, and scarcely knew on which side to determine. Even the lad's reluctance to approach him might proceed from fear of the whip.

He felt resolved, however, to ascertain this point, and, with the view of getting the lad into his hands, he showed him half-a-crown, and addressed him as already stated.

The lad, on seeing the money, appeared to be instantly caught by it, and approached him, as if it had been a bait he could not resist; a circumstance which again staggered the gauger. In a moment, however, he seized him. 'Come now,' said he, unbuttoning his coat, 'you will oblige me by stripping.'

'And why so?' said the lad, with a face which might have furnished a painter or sculptor with a perfect notion of curiosity, perplexity, and wonder.

'Why so?' replied Stinton; 'we shall see—we shall soon see.'

'Surely you don't think I've hid the keg about me?' said the other, his features now relaxing into such an appearance of utter simplicity as would have certainly made any other man but a gauger give up the examination as hopeless, and exonerate the boy from any participation whatsoever in the transaction.

'No, no,' replied the gauger; 'by no means, you young rascal. See, here, Cartwright,' he continued, addressing his companion—'the keg, my precious,' again turning to the lad—'Oh, no, no, it would be cruel to suspect you of anything but the purest of simplicity.'

'Look here, Cartwright,—having stripped the boy of his coat and turned it inside out—there's a coat—there's thrift—there's economy for you.'

'Come, sir, tuck on, tuck on instantly. Here, I shall assist you. Up with your arms, straighten your neck. It will be both straightened and stretched yet, my cherub. What think you now, Cartwright? Did you ever see a metamorphosis in your life so quick, complete, and unexpected?'

His companion was certainly astonished in no small degree on seeing the red coat when turned become a comfortable grey frieze—one precisely such as he who bore the keg had on. Nay, after surveying his person and dress the second time, he instantly recognised him as the same.

The only interest, we should observe, which this gentleman had in the transaction arose from the mere gratification which a keen observer of character, gifted with a strong relish of humor, might be supposed to feel.

The gauger, in sifting the matter and scenting the trail of the keg, was now in his glory, and certainly when met by so able an opponent as our friend Condy, for it was indeed himself, furnished a very rich treat to his friend.

'Now,' he continued, addressing the boy again, 'lose not a moment in letting us know where you've hid the keg.'

'The sorra bit of it I hid—it fell off o' me, an' I lost it. Sure I'm looking ather it myself, so I am; and he moved over while speaking, as if pretending to search for it in a thin hedge, which could by no means conceal it.

'Cartwright,' said the gauger, 'did you see anything so perfect as this, so ripe a rascal? You don't understand him now.'

'Here, you simpleton; harkee, sirra, there must be no playing the lapwing with me. Back here to the same point. We may lay it down as a sure thing that whatever direction he takes from this spot is the wrong one. So back here, you, sir, till we survey the premises about us for your traces.'

The boy walked sheepishly back, and appeared to look about him for the keg, with a kind of earnest stupidity which was altogether inimitable.

'I say, my boy,' asked Stinton, ironically, 'don't you look rather foolish now? Can you tell me your right hand from your left?'

'I can,' replied Condy, holding up his left hand; 'there's my right hand.'

'And what do you call the other?' said Cartwright.

My left, bedad, anyhow, an' that's true enough. Both gentlemen laughed heartily.

'But it's carrying the thing a little too far,' said the gauger.

'In the meantime let us hear how you prove it.'