

THE GUINEA SMUGGLERS.

A STORY OF THE COAST.

(Concluded.)

George Wilson, are you the person here named, and is that your signature?

'I'm George Wilson, and that's my signature,' said the traitor-guard gruffly, as if rather ashamed of himself.

'Astonishing! astonishing!' gasped the magistrate. 'And may I ask, Mr. Wedger, how you became acquainted with this man?'

'That's my secret,' said Wedger, coolly taking snuff, 'cozy as a hangman when the "little affair" is comfortably over—it is sufficient that here's the man.'

'And now, sir,'—Damerham called every one 'sir,' sometimes as a rebuke and sometimes as a compliment—turning to Belton, alias Wilson, under whose coat appeared suspicious peeps of scarlet, 'can you aid his majesty's government a little more by just telling us the depot of those guinea smugglers?'

Wilson scratched his head, and said: 'Well, he didn't know; it was a bad affair. He hoped they wouldn't go and hang any of the poor fellows; but as the cat was almost out of the bag, he saw no harm in making a clean breast of it, and saying that the guineas were, he had heard, taken to some sea-side inn near Seaford.'

'Exactly—the Zebec!' said Wedger, triumphantly pointing the feather-end of a pen he held at the magistrate, who was astonished at the lawyer's presumptuous energy.—'Wilson, you may go; you shall hear from me.'

'I should like to see if I have some of these sea-side inns for this, gentlemen, but I have got friends here' (tapping his breast-pocket), 'as have settled many a highwayman, and I see no reason why they shouldn't pull just as true on a guinea smuggler. At all events, I've now made clean hands on it, and I wish you a very good-morning, gentlemen. Good-morning, gentlemen all. Good-morning, Mr. Wedger.—It'll be a pretty stroke as ever you made, netting 'em all; but mind when you trawl for whiting you don't get a shark in the net in mistake.' With this fisherman's metaphor, Wilson muffled up again, doubled himself up like an old man, and departed.

'We'll catch these miscreants next Tuesday,' said Wedger nodding. 'Have two eight-oared custom-house galleys, Mr. Damerham, waiting just round the point, beyond Seaford, out of sight of the Zebec, at night-fall. Directly the signal I saw goes up again, one shall pull for the Zebec jetty, and another shall cut off the guinea boat as it makes for the French coast.'

The magistrate, puffing himself up, said he knew very well what it became him to do with-out interference or direction. 'Thank you, Mr. Wedger.'

Now was the time to put on the handcuffs. Mr. Wedger pulled out a letter from the Minister of the Home Department, requesting him to give his (Wedger's) best assistance to the Seaford magistrates on the subject of guinea smuggling. The magistrate was cowed; but he bent his head to the storm, and affecting extreme urbanity, he shook Mr. Wedger by the hand, and thanked him for his important, he might say his invaluable information.

'Delighted with your help and advice.—And now, my dear sir, that business being settled, and we public men having a moment's breathing-time, try a glass of sherry.'

Wedger said he never touched sherry when there was anything to be done.

'Curious! Well, now, it makes me work better, good sherry. And, before we part, let me ask you, my dear sir, how you get on with your son, that you once consulted me about: not so wild, I hope? Why not send him to sea? No school for wild youths like a man-of-war?'

Wedger shuddered at the thought of losing his boy: he was softened for a moment by the very idea.

'No,' he said. 'Mr. Damerham, you are kind, but I can't part with him. Sir, I love that boy; he is my only child, my only solace, and he reminds me of my dear wife.—No, I'll try him again. I think he is sorry for what he does, for only this morning, when I sat on his bed, and warned him of vice, told him how vice turned to crime, and how sooner or later justice overtakes crime—talking of these very smugglers whom we shall soon have on the gullows swinging—he buried his head in the clothes and seemed struck dumb. No, no, there is grace and innocence in the boy yet; he'll do, he'll do, sir. He is my Absalom, but—'

Here the door was thrown open, and a voice shouted in a monotonous way: 'Two

smugglers, sir, from Cragford to be examined. Officers took 'em last night, tubs and all, after a tussle.'

'The very thing,' cried Mr. Damerham, radiant with an idea at last, 'the very thing. Call them in, Mr. Town-clerk; they'll be very sure to know something about the guineas, and the extraordinary white boat.'

'Bring in the Cragford smugglers,' cried the town-clerk grandly, through the cautiously opened door.

The door opened, and four custom-house officers entered, leading between them two rough men in torn pilot-coats, with black and cut faces, and with hands coupled together with bright steel handcuffs. The head-officer advanced and made his statement.

'Was on duty last night, as ever was, at Cragford Waste, top of Cragford Cliff, when I sees the smugglers' flash-boxes answering along shore; and presently down a road to the sea-shore cut in the chalk, I sees, five hundred yards off, about two hundred horses ridden or led by some fifty men, and on every horse two casks of 'Godsend.' as we folks call it. The men were in white round frocks, and every one seemed to carry pistols or cutlasses, and they were led by a man on a big black mare, riding between two brandy-tubs. 'We shall soon be at home, men,' says he as they passed us.'

'Well, never mind what he said, but get on,' said the Solon. 'And then you stopped them?'

'What! stop two hundred horses and fifty men, your honor? Not I; I knows better. But I flashed my pistol as soon as they were out of sight, and up comes Bill Davis here, to where I lay hid, and we watches.'

'So you watches?' said Mr. Damerham sincerely.

'And we watches, your honor,' said the stolid witness, quite unmoved at the keen sarcasm. 'Presently up goes a rocket—whizz, and who comes by but three men, the prisoners and one other.'

'And where is the other? It doesn't do, sir, to let prisoners go.'

'Flat as ninepence, your honor. Ran away, and fell over Cragford Cliff. Got him outside, sir, on a stretcher. Well, as I was observing, these three men begin fastening a rope with hooks to run tubs on to the top of the cliff, when we leap up. They out with cutlasses, and to it we went, one up, another down, for ten minutes. At last I fetches that black fellow a wipe that cuts him from his nose to his chin.'

Here the black fellow obligingly pointed out on himself the 'cutlass' slash alluded to.

'And he ups and cuts my hat through from crown to brim.' Here he produced the severed hat.

'And but for the blessed iron in it, had sent you after poor Tom Jackson,' said the wounded smuggler.

'Eventually we overpower them, and puts on the darbies; and that is the long and short of it.'

'Your name, prisoners?' said Mr. Damerham, impressively.

'Matthew Walker; and 'Davy Jones,' were the answers.

The magistrate wrote the names down deliberately in a royal hand.

'Lor love you, sir, don't put down that gibberish,' suggested the custom-house officer under breath. 'Them's only make-believe names.'

'Rig in the booms, and coil away the gear, Jack, for we're coming to anchor,' whispered one smuggler to another, as they saw they were about to be examined.

'I think it right to inform you, prisoners,' said the magistrate, 'that your future treatment will depend very much on your present behaviour. And now we want to ask you a question. Have you heard anything about the Seaford guinea smuggling? Do you know anything of it?'

The men looked at each other. The wounded man answered saucily: 'No more than a monkey knows of the barpipes.'

'Impertinent fellows,' growled Mr. Damerham. 'Oh, you're making pretty rods for your own backs. This is not to be borne. It is no use, officers. Take the men away, and put them both in irons.'

'Lor, it's never no use asking smugglers questions,' said the preventive-men to each other, as they jostled their prisoners into the next room.

'They do say,' said the town-clerk to the magistrate, 'that these guinea smugglers are encouraged and led by some young man of good family.'

'Impossible!' said the great man, 'impos-

sible! Young men of family don't take up with smugglers and thieves. Impossible, Mr. Town-clerk.'

Mr. Wedger, having received many congratulations at his success in unearthing the conspirators, now left the room with many bows and much handshaking.

'And now he is fairly gone,' said Mr. Damerham, looking first at the glass-door, next at the keyhole, and then at the town-clerk, 'between ourselves what is your real impression of this person Wedger? Now, come, speak fairly, — remember we are friends.'

'A low, mischievous, dangerous attorney, Mr. Damerham, who fomented quarrels, inculcated innocent persons, and preys on the widow and orphan; but with much power at headquarters, ever since he helped Lord Treveser at the last Seaford election. Besides, he has, I am told, a strong personal motive in this case, for he has been slighted by the pretty daughter of the landlord of the Zebec. My advice is, however, don't check him; do whatever he wishes. If you don't, he'll set all the corporation by the ears, and plunge us into endless expense, sir.'

The magistrate—contradictory and a very lion in public, in order to show he was not led—in private was a very lamb. He followed the town-clerk's advice to the letter. The attack on the guinea smugglers was carefully planned by Wedger—planned with all the care with which a gamekeeper draws his nets round the covert in anticipation of the next day's shooting. Two custom-house galleys, remarkable for their swiftness, were carefully conveyed into a boat-shed not far from the Zebec, and two crews of eight strong, sinewy men, each armed to the teeth, hidden in the same place, prepared, the instant they saw the Zebec's rocket, to run down with the boats, launch them, and pull off after the guinea smugglers. The men were eager for smugglers as half-starved greyhounds for a hare. They had heard that the guinea-boat was painted white, so as to best escape detection by night; but this time, taken by surprise, she would have no chance of escaping. They were all eager for the reward, waved glitteringly before their eyes by Wedger. The sixteen men spent the whole morning of the appointed day in grinding their cutlasses and cleaning their pistols, for they swore, whether dead or alive, no guinea smuggler should that night escape uncaught.

The night came. It was dark and heavy, as had been anticipated. Almost at the exact moment that Wedger had seen the signal from the Zebec window, a rocket rose up with a swift hiss into the air, and scattered its golden sparks in a momentary shower over the Zebec's roof. The next minute, a second rocket rose in answer from some vessel hidden by a point of chalk-cliff. Then there was a sound of muffled oars. 'I think there must be two on 'em,' said a gray old officer, peering intently into the darkness through a diamond-hole in the planks of the shed, 'for I hear the oars at the Zebec landing every time as the rocket goes up over the cliff. Now, if I know a spunker-boom from a yard-arm, that there boat never sent up that there rocket. Get your pistols ready boys, and be ready for a start when I cry, 'Now!'

Another moment, and a dark boat could be seen dimly, its cargo taken in, stealing under the cliff, and passing round the shoulder of land. It is not a white boat, then, after all.

'Now?' cried the old boatswain.

The men ran like tigers, with their boats on their shoulders. In a moment they had them in the water, and had leaped into them; in another moment the oars were in the row-locks, and the men pulled swiftly in the train of the smugglers. Suddenly, they swerved round the point of land; two objects met their eyes—the boatswain was right—a large heavy lugger, painted a light grey colour, evidently to better escape detection at night; and a long, sharp-nosed, white centipede—a sort of boat built specially for swiftness, and with planks no thicker than crown-pieces. They both lay in the dark shadow of the promontory, as if waiting for some signal. In a moment, however, they had caught sight of their enemies, and with a shout of defiance and a blaze of small arms at the approaching boats, put out to sea, aided by a wind just then blowing freshly from the land. The lugger tacked, and putting out sweeps that moved like two great wings, bore off in a contrary direction from the attendant boat, that shot across the sea swift as an arrow, and straight for the French coast. At that moment, the moon shone full upon the smuggler as it left the shadow, and showed its white sides with ghostly distinctness.

At last, then, they were on the trail of the guinea-boat. 'Put your backs to it, lads!' roared the boatswain in command; 'we Cragford men take the guinea-boat; you Seaford lads bore the lugger. Pull away with a will, boys—with a will!'

Off dashed the boats, each after its peculiar prey. Let us follow the more important of the two, the guinea-boat, closely pursued as it was by the boatswain and his crew, leaving the lugger to its fate. The coast-blockade men were now so near that they could all but see the faces of the smugglers as they bent savagely at their oars, driving their boat on till its white planks quivered at every stroke.

'Another mile, and we have them between us and the Knocker Sand,' said the boatswain, who was steering; 'our fortune's made if we only get up to them. Give way, then—give way!'

'I think the beggars are planning some mischief, bosun. I hope they ain't going to fling grenades in on us,' said the stroke-oar, as a movement in the guinea-boat was now clearly perceptible.

'Hand-grenades, be hanged, Jack!' said the boatswain; 'but I'll be cursed, though if they ain't going to fling some of their shiners over, to lighten their craft; and we shall get hold of nothing but an empty purse after all, if we don't look out; so pull boys, pull!'

The boatswain was right. In the clear moonlight that now shone full on the chase, still much ahead of the blockade-men, a man could be seen to stoop over the side of the boat, with a small bag he had dragged to the gunwale, and slash it twice with a knife; the guineas poured out in a golden stream into the sea. Six times he cut open bags, and six times the gold poured into the sea. The coast-blockade men gave a yell of rage and vexation as the bright spadaces flashed in the moonlight and disappeared for ever.—The smugglers answered with a laugh of triumph, as their boat, now so much lighted, shot forth as if a steam-engine had suddenly propelled it. In ten minutes, they had gained considerably on their opponents; in another twenty, their boat was out of sight, faded away into the inner brightness of the moonlight.

'If old Harry hasn't had a trick as coxen in that craft to-night, I'm a dutchman,' growled the boatswain, as reluctantly he gave orders to pull back to the shore.

'And the blessed golden guineas,' said the stroke-oar, gone to make oyster-beds of it. 'It's a sin and a shame, that's what I call it. But get home, boys; the cursed boat has witchcraft in it. Master Bosun is right: no one will ever catch it; that's my opinion.'

A more serious misfortune, in the meantime, happened to the companion-boat.—The revenue-men had already headed it, and were turning to board—cutlasses between their teeth and loaded pistols in their belts—when suddenly, to their horror, the lugger boldly put on all sail, and bore straight down on them. There was no possibility of escape. In a moment, their boat was cut in two, and a few shattered planks were all that were left of it. Three of the men, encumbered with their heavy coats, instantly sank; another clung to the rudder, and for a moment or two floated; four others, crying for mercy, clung to the gunwales of the lugger.

'Mercy!' cried one of the smugglers, seizing a carpenter's axe; 'yes, the same mercy, you devils, as the poor fellows who rot in chains at Cragford got: well have no one to witness against us.' And as he said this, with dreadful curses, the wretch lopped at the hands of one of the revenue-men, who fell bleeding into the sea. The other three relinquished their hold, and fell backwards, and were almost instantly drowned.

Then, crowding all sail, the lugger steered straight for Gravelines with its crew of murderers and outlaws. The night after this cruel murder, and while all Seaford was shuddering at the news, Wedger's son ran away from his father's house, leaving a short letter behind to say that, sick of the law and the severity and dulness of his father's house, he had enlisted, and hoped no further inquiries would be made for him. Wednesday bore the disappointment with deep grief, though he treated the act as a mere young man's caprice, a mere intention. He would soon tire of it, he said; he would return when the freak was over, and all his money was gone.

A few days after, news that could not be gainsaid, reached Wedger. The guinea