

THE SNAKE'S PASS.

Quarto, cloth, gilt edges, price 6s.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

UNDER THE SUNSET.

Some Opinions of the Press.

"... This particularly is a book which all clever and imaginative children should read.... The stories all paint a grand moral, are deeply pathetic, and of absorbing interest."—*The World*.

"...A charming book...."—*Punch*.

"...This collection of delicate and forcible allegories."—*Daily Telegraph*.

"...The style of the book is characterized throughout by remarkable purity and grace."—*The Daily News*.

"...A really beautiful book, which may be enjoyed, not only by children, but by their elders."—*Morning Post*.

"...The tales are in the best style of imaginative narrative, with charming little touches of nature and reference to every-day things."—*The Spectator*.

"...The book is pervaded by a dreamy beauty of style, which cannot fail to be fascinating."—*The Echo*.

"...A mystical, supernatural tale, told as it should be told, hovering airily and luminously in a medium half imaginative, half ethical...."—*Liverpool Daily Post*.

"...It ought to be in the book-case of every pastor, Christian, teacher, and scholar in the kingdom...."—*Elgin Courant*.

"...The tales one and all captivate the young intellect by the charm of innocence and freshness they possess...."—*Dublin Freeman's Journal*.

"...We have rarely met a more delightful or more thoroughly wholesome book to place in the hands of children...."—*Cork Constitution*.

"...The thoughts of the book are high and pure, and the scenery of it is finely coloured and attractive...."—*New York Tribune*.

“A charming book, full of ingenious, refined, and poetical fancy.”—*The Australasian*.

The Snake's Pass

BY

BRAM STOKER, M.A.



LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE & RIVINGTON, Ltd.

St. Dunstan's House,

FETTER LANE, FLEET STREET.

1891.

All rights reserved.

CHISWICK PRESS:—C. WHITTINGHAM AND CO., TOOKS COURT,
CHANCERY LANE.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
Chapter I. A Sudden Storm	1
II. The Lost Crown of Gold	15
III. The Gombeen Man	36
IV. The Secrets of the Bog	58
V. On Knocknacar	83
VI. Confidences	106

VII.	Vanished	126
VIII.	A Visit to Joyce	147
IX.	My New Property	160
X.	In the Cliff Fields	176
XI.	Un Mauvais Quart d'Heure	195
XII.	Bog-Fishing and Schooling	213
XIII.	Murdock's Wooing	235
XIV.	A Trip to Paris	254
XV.	A Midnight Treasure Hunt	278
XVI.	A Grim Warning	297
XVII.	The Catastrophe	320
XVIII.	The Fulfilment	344

The Snake's Pass.



CHAPTER I.

A SUDDEN STORM.

Between two great mountains of grey and green, as the rock cropped out between the tufts of emerald verdure, the valley, almost as narrow as a gorge, ran due west towards the sea. There was just room for the roadway, half cut in the rock, beside the narrow strip of dark lake of seemingly unfathomable depth that lay far below between perpendicular walls of frowning rock. As the valley opened, the land dipped steeply, and the lake became a foam-fringed torrent, widening out into pools and miniature lakes as it reached the lower ground. In the wide terrace-like steps of the shelving mountain there were occasional glimpses of civilization emerging from the almost primal desolation which immediately surrounded us—clumps of trees, cottages, and the irregular outlines of stone-walled fields, with black stacks of turf for winter firing piled here and there. Far beyond was the sea—the great Atlantic—with a [Pg 2] wildly

irregular coast-line studded with a myriad of clustering rocky islands. A sea of deep dark blue, with the distant horizon tinged with a line of faint white light, and here and there, where its margin was visible through the breaks in the rocky coast, fringed with a line of foam as the waves broke on the rocks or swept in great rollers over the level expanse of sands.

The sky was a revelation to me, and seemed to almost obliterate memories of beautiful skies, although I had just come from the south and had felt the intoxication of the Italian night, where in the deep blue sky the nightingale's note seems to hang as though its sound and the colour were but different expressions of one common feeling.

The whole west was a gorgeous mass of violet and sulphur and gold—great masses of storm-cloud piling up and up till the very heavens seemed weighted with a burden too great to bear. Clouds of violet, whose centres were almost black and whose outer edges were tinged with living gold; great streaks and piled up clouds of palest yellow deepening into saffron and flame-colour which seemed to catch the coming sunset and to throw its radiance back to the eastern sky.

The view was the most beautiful that I had ever seen, and, accustomed as I had been only to the quiet pastoral beauty of a grass country, with occasional visits to my Great Aunt's well-wooded estate in the South of England, it was no wonder that it arrested my attention and absorbed my imagination. Even my brief half-a-year's [Pg 3] travel in Europe, now just concluded, had shown me nothing of the same kind.

Earth, sea and air all evidenced the triumph of nature, and told of her wild majesty and beauty. The air was still—ominously still. So still was all, that through the silence, that seemed to hedge us in with a sense of oppression, came the booming of the distant sea, as the great Atlantic swell broke in surf on the rocks or stormed the hollow caverns of the shore.

Even Andy, the driver, was for the nonce awed into comparative silence. Hitherto, for nearly forty miles of a drive, he had been giving me his experiences—propounding his views—airing his opinions; in fact he had been making me acquainted with his store of knowledge touching the whole district and its people—including their names, histories, romances, hopes and fears—all that goes to make up the life and interest of a country-side.

No barber—taking this tradesman to illustrate the popular idea of loquacity *in excelsis*—is more consistently talkative than an Irish car-driver to whom has been granted the gift of speech. There is absolutely no limit to his capability, for every

change of surrounding affords a new theme and brings on the tapis a host of matters requiring to be set forth.

I was rather glad of Andy's 'brilliant flash of silence' just at present, for not only did I wish to drink in and absorb the grand and novel beauty of the scene that opened out before me, but I wanted to understand as fully as I could some deep thought which it awoke within me. It[Pg 4] may have been merely the grandeur and beauty of the scene—or perhaps it was the thunder which filled the air that July evening—but I felt exalted in a strange way, and impressed at the same time with a new sense of the reality of things. It almost seemed as if through that opening valley, with the mighty Atlantic beyond and the piling up of the storm-clouds overhead, I passed into a new and more real life.

Somehow I had of late seemed to myself to be waking up. My foreign tour had been gradually dissipating my old sleepy ideas, or perhaps overcoming the negative forces that had hitherto dominated my life; and now this glorious burst of wild natural beauty—the majesty of nature at its fullest—seemed to have completed my awakening, and I felt as though I looked for the first time with open eyes on the beauty and reality of the world.

Hitherto my life had been but an inert one, and I was younger in many ways and more deficient in knowledge of the world in all ways than other young men of my own age. I had stepped but lately from boyhood, with all boyhood's surroundings, into manhood, and as yet I was hardly at ease in my new position.

For the first time in my life I had had a holiday—a real holiday, as one can take it who can choose his own way of amusing himself.

I had been brought up in an exceedingly quiet way with an old clergyman and his wife in the west of England, and except my fellow pupils, of whom there[Pg 5] was never at any time more than one other, I had had little companionship. Altogether I knew very few people. I was the ward of a Great Aunt, who was wealthy and eccentric and of a sternly uncompromising disposition. When my father and mother were lost at sea, leaving me, an only child, quite unprovided for, she undertook to pay for my schooling and to start me in a profession if I should show sufficient aptitude for any. My father had been pretty well cut off by his family on account of his marriage with what they considered his inferior, and times had been, I was always told, pretty hard for them both. I was only a very small boy when they were lost in a fog when crossing the Channel; and the blank that their loss caused me made me, I dare say, seem even a duller boy than I was. As I did not get into much trouble and did not exhibit any special restlessness of disposition, my Great Aunt took it, I suppose, for granted that I was

very well off where I was; and when, through growing years, the fiction of my being a schoolboy could be no longer supported, the old clergyman was called “guardian” instead of “tutor,” and I passed with him the years that young men of the better class usually spend in College life. The nominal change of position made little difference to me, except that I was taught to ride and shoot, and was generally given the rudiments of an education which was to fit me for being a country gentleman. I dare say that my tutor had some secret understanding with my Great Aunt, but he never gave me any hint[Pg 6] whatever of her feelings towards me. A part of my holidays each year was spent in her place, a beautiful country seat. Here I was always treated by the old lady with rigid severity but with the best of good manners, and by the servants with affection as well as respect. There were a host of cousins, both male and female, who came to the house; but I can honestly say that by not one of them was I ever treated with cordiality. It may have been my fault, or the misfortune of my shyness; but I never met one of them without being made to feel that I was an “outsider.”

I can understand now the cause of this treatment as arising from their suspicions when I remember that the old lady, who had been so severe with me all my life, sent for me when she lay on her deathbed, and, taking my hand in hers and holding it tight, said, between her gasps:—

“Arthur, I hope I have not done wrong, but I have reared you so that the world may for you have good as well as bad—happiness as well as unhappiness; that you may find many pleasures where you thought there were but few. Your youth, I know, my dear boy, has not been a happy one; but it was because I, who loved your dear father as if he had been my own son—and from whom I unhappily allowed myself to be estranged until it was too late—wanted you to have a good and happy manhood.”

She did not say any more, but closed her eyes and still held my hand. I feared to take it away lest I should[Pg 7] disturb her; but presently the clasp seemed to relax, and I found that she was dead.

I had never seen a dead person, much less anyone die, and the event made a great impression on me. But youth is elastic, and the old lady had never been much in my heart.

When the will was read, it was found that I had been left heir to all her property, and that I would be called upon to take a place among the magnates of the county. I could not fall at once into the position and, as I was of a shy nature, resolved to spend at least a few months in travel. This I did, and when I had returned, after a six months’ tour, I accepted the cordial invitation of some friends, made on my travels, to pay them a visit at their place in the County of Clare.

As my time was my own, and as I had a week or two to spare, I had determined to improve my knowledge of Irish affairs by making a detour through some of the counties in the west on my way to Clare.

By this time I was just beginning to realize that life has many pleasures. Each day a new world of interest seemed to open before me. The experiment of my Great Aunt might yet be crowned with success.

And now the consciousness of the change in myself had come home to me—come with the unexpected suddenness of the first streak of the dawn through the morning mists. The moment was to be to me a notable one; and as I wished to remember it to the full, I tried to take in all the scene where such a revelation first [Pg 8] dawned upon me. I had fixed in my mind, as the central point for my memory to rest on, a promontory right under the direct line of the sun, when I was interrupted by a remark made, not to me but seemingly to the universe in general:—

“Musha! but it’s comin’ quick.”

“What is coming?” I asked.

“The shtorm! Don’t ye see the way thim clouds is dhriftin’? Faix! but it’s fine times the ducks’ll be afther havin’ before many minutes is past.”

I did not heed his words much, for my thoughts were intent on the scene. We were rapidly descending the valley, and, as we got lower, the promontory seemed to take bolder shape, and was beginning to stand out as a round-topped hill of somewhat noble proportions.

“Tell me, Andy,” I said, “what do they call the hill beyond?”

“The hill beyant there is it? Well, now, they call the place Shleenanaher.”

“Then that is Shleenanaher mountain?”

“Begor it’s not. The mountain is called Knockcalltecore. It’s Irish.”

“And what does it mean?”

“Faix, I believe it’s a short name for the Hill iv the Lost Goolden Crown.”

“And what is Shleenanaher, Andy?”

“Throth, it’s a bit iv a gap in the rocks beyant that they call Shleenanaher.”

“And what does that mean? It is Irish, I suppose?”

[Pg 9]

“Thru for ye! Irish it is, an’ it manes ‘The Shnake’s Pass.’”

“Indeed! And can you tell me why it is so called?”

“Begor, there’s a power iv raysons guv for callin’ it that. Wait till we get Jerry Scanlan or Bat Moynahan, beyant in Carnaclif! Sure they knows every laygend and shtory in the bar’ny, an’ll tell them all, av ye like. Whew! Musha! here it comes.”

Surely enough it did come. The storm seemed to sweep through the valley in a single instant—the stillness changed to a roar, the air became dark with the clouds of drifting rain. It was like the bursting of a waterspout in volume, and came so quickly that I was drenched to the skin before I could throw my mackintosh round me. The mare seemed frightened at first, but Andy held her in with a steady hand and with comforting words, and after the first rush of the tempest she went on as calmly and steadily as hitherto, only shrinking a little at the lightning and the thunder.

The grandeur of that storm was something to remember. The lightning came in brilliant sheets that seemed to cleave the sky, and threw weird lights amongst the hills, now strange with black sweeping shadows. The thunder broke with startling violence right over our heads, and flapped and buffeted from hillside to hillside, rolling and reverberating away into the distance, its farther voices being lost in the crash of each succeeding peal.

On we went, through the driving storm, faster and faster; but the storm abated not a jot. Andy was too[Pg 10] much occupied with his work to speak, and as for me it took all my time to keep on the rocking and swaying car, and to hold my hat and mackintosh so as to shield myself, as well as I could, from the pelting storm. Andy seemed to be above all considerations of personal comfort. He turned up his coat collar, that was all; and soon he was as shiny as my own waterproof rug. Indeed, altogether, he seemed quite as well off as I was, or even better, for we were both as wet as we could be, and whilst I was painfully endeavouring to keep off the rain he was free from all responsibility and anxiety of endeavour whatever.

At length, as we entered on a long straight stretch of level road, he turned to me and said:—

“Yer ’an’r it’s no kind iv use dhrivin’ like this all the way to Carnaclif. This shtorm’ll go on for hours. I know thim well up in these mountains, wid’ a nor’-aist wind blowin’. Wouldn’t it be betther for us to get shelther for a bit?”

“Of course it would,” said I. “Try it at once! Where can you go?”

“There’s a place nigh at hand, yer ’an’r, the Widdy Kelligan’s sheebeen, at the cross-roads of Glennashaughlin. It’s quite contagious. Gee-up! ye ould corncrake! hurry up to Widdy Kelligan’s.”

It seemed almost as if the mare understood him and shared his wishes, for she started with increased speed down a laneway that opened out a little on our left. In a few minutes we reached the cross-roads, and also[Pg 11] the sheebeen of Widow Kelligan, a low whitewashed thatched house, in a deep hollow between high banks in the south-western corner of the cross. Andy jumped down and hurried to the door.

“Here’s a sthrange gintleman, Widdy. Take care iv him,” he called out, as I entered.

Before I had succeeded in closing the door behind me he was unharnessing the mare, preparatory to placing her in the lean-to stable, built behind the house against the high bank.

Already the storm seemed to have sent quite an assemblage to Mrs. Kelligan’s hospitable shelter. A great fire of turf roared up the chimney, and round it stood, and sat, and lay a steaming mass of nearly a dozen people, men and women. The room was a large one, and the inglenook so roomy that nearly all those present found a place in it. The roof was black, rafters and thatch alike; quite a number of cocks and hens found shelter in the rafters at the end of the room. Over the fire was a large pot, suspended on a wire, and there was a savoury and inexpressibly appetizing smell of marked volume throughout the room of roasted herrings and whisky punch.

As I came in all rose up, and I found myself placed in a warm seat close to the fire, whilst various salutations of welcome buzzed all around me. The warmth was most grateful, and I was trying to convey my thanks for the shelter and the welcome, and feeling very awkward over it, when, with a “God save all here!” Andy entered the room through the back door.

[Pg 12]

He was evidently a popular favourite, for there was a perfect rain of hearty expressions to him. He, too, was placed close to the fire, and a steaming jorum of punch placed in his hands—a similar one to that which had been already placed in my own. Andy lost no time in sampling that punch. Neither did I; and I can honestly say that if he enjoyed his more than I did mine he must have had a very happy few minutes. He lost no time in making himself and all the rest comfortable.

“Hurroo!” said he. “Musha! but we’re just in time. Mother, is the herrins done? Up with the creel, and turn out the pitaties; they’re done, or me senses desaves me. Yer ’an’r,

we're in the height iv good luck! Herrins, it is, and it might have been only pitaties an' point."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Oh, that is whin there is only wan herrin' amongst a crowd—too little to give aich a taste, and so they put it in the middle and point the pitaties at it to give them a flaviour."

All lent a hand with the preparation of supper. A great potato basket, which would hold some two hundredweight, was turned bottom up—the pot was taken off the fire, and the contents turned out on it in a great steaming mass of potatoes. A handful of coarse salt was taken from a box and put on one side of the basket, and another on the other side. The herrings were cut in pieces, and a piece given to each.—The dinner was served.

There were no plates, no knives, forks or spoons—no ceremony—no precedence—nor was there any heartburn[Pg 13]ing, jealousy or greed. A happier meal I never took a part in—nor did I ever enjoy food more. Such as it was it was perfect. The potatoes were fine and cooked to perfection; we took them in our fingers, peeled them how we could, dipped them in the salt—and ate till we were satisfied.

During the meal several more strangers dropped in and all reported the storm as showing no signs of abating. Indeed, little such assurance was wanting, for the fierce lash of the rain and the howling of the storm as it beat on the face of the house, told the tale well enough for the meanest comprehension.

When dinner was over and the basket removed, we drew around the fire again—pipes were lit—a great steaming jug of punch made its appearance, and conversation became general. Of course, as a stranger, I came in for a good share of attention.

Andy helped to make things interesting for me, and his statement, made by my request, that I hoped to be allowed to provide the punch for the evening, even increased his popularity, whilst it established mine. After calling attention to several matters which evoked local stories and jokes and anecdotes, he remarked:—

"His 'an'r was axin' me just afore the shtorm kem on as to why the Shleenanaher was called so. I tould him that none could tell him like Jerry Scanlan or Bat Moynahan, an' here is the both of them, sure enough. Now, boys, won't ye oblige the strange gintleman an tell him what yez know iv the shtories anent the hill?"

[Pg 14]

“Wid all the plisure in life,” said Jerry Scanlan, a tall man of middle age, with a long, thin, clean shaven face, a humorous eye, and a shirt collar whose points in front came up almost to his eyes, whilst the back part disappeared into the depths of his frieze coat collar behind.

“Begor yer ’an’r I’ll tell ye all I iver heerd. Sure there’s a laygend, and there’s a shtory—musha! but there’s a wheen o’ both laygends and shtories—but there’s wan laygend beyant all—Here! Mother Kelligan, fill up me glass, fur sorra one o’ me is a good dhry shpaker—Tell me, now, sor, do they allow punch to the Mimbers iv Parlymint whin they’re spakin’?” I shook my head.

“Musha! thin, but its meself they’ll niver git as a mumber till they alther that law. Thank ye, Mrs. Kelligan, this is just my shtyle. But now for the laygend that they tell of Shleenanaher:—”

[Pg 15]

CHAPTER II.

THE LOST CROWN OF GOLD.

“Well, in the ould ancient times, before St. Patrick banished the shnakes from out iv Ireland, the hill beyant was a mighty important place intirely. For more betoken, none other lived in it than the King iv the Shnakes himself. In thim times there was up at the top iv the hill a wee bit iv a lake wid threes and sedges and the like growin’ round it; and ’twas there that the King iv the Shnakes made his nist—or whatever it is that shnakes calls their home. Glory be to God! but none of us knows anythin’ of them at all, at all, since Saint Patrick tuk them in hand.”

Here an old man in the chimney corner struck in:—

“Thru for ye, Acushla; sure the bit lake is there still, though more belike it’s dhry now it is, and the threes is all gone.”

“Well,” went on Jerry, not ill-pleased with this corroboration of his story, “the King iv the Shnakes was mighty important intirely. He was more nor tin times as big as any shnake as any man’s eyes had iver saw; an’ he had a goolden crown on to the top of his head, wid a big[Pg 16] jool in it that tuk the colour iv the light, whether that same was from the sun or the moon; an’ all the shnakes had to take it in turns to bring food, and lave it for him in the cool iv the evenin’, whin he would come out and ate it up and go back to his own place. An’ they do say that whiniver two shnakes had a quarr’ll they had to come to the King, an’ he decided betune them; an’ he tould aich iv them where

he was to live, and what he was to do. An' wanst in ivery year there had to be brought to him a live baby; and they do say that he would wait until the moon was at the full, an' thin would be heerd one wild wail that made every sowl widin miles shuddher, an' thin there would be black silence, and clouds would come over the moon, and for three days it would never be seen agin."

"Oh, Glory be to God!" murmured one of the women, "but it was a terrible thing!" and she rocked herself to and fro, moaning, all the motherhood in her awake.

"But did none of the min do nothin'?" said a powerful-looking young fellow in the orange and green jersey of the Gaelic Athletic Club, with his eyes flashing; and he clenched his teeth.

"Musha! how could they? Sure, no man ever seen the King iv the Shnakes!"

"Thin how did they know about him?" he queried doubtfully.

"Sure, wasn't one of their childher tuk away iv'ry year? But, anyhow, it's all over now! an' so it was that none iv the min iver wint. They do say that one woman what lost her child, run up to the top of the [Pg 17] hill; but what she seen, none could tell, for, whin they found her she was a ravin' lunatic, wid white hair an eyes like a corpse—an' the mornin' afther they found her dead in her bed wid a black mark round her neck as if she had been choked, an' the mark was in the shape iv a shnake. Well! there was much sorra and much fear, and whin St. Pathrick tuk the shnakes in hand the bonfires was lit all over the counthry. Never was such a flittin' seen as whin the shnakes came from all parts wrigglin' and crawlin' an shkwirmin'."

Here the narrator dramatically threw himself into an attitude, and with the skill of a true improvisatore, suggested in every pose and with every limb and in every motion the serpentine movements.

"They all came away to the West, and seemed to come to this wan mountain. From the North and the South and the East they came be millions an' thousands an' hundhreds—for whin St. Patrick ordhered them out he only tould them to go, but he didn't name the place—an there was he up on top of Brandon mountain wid his vistments on to him an' his crozier in his hand, and the shnakes movein' below him, all goin up North, an', sez he to himself:—

"I must see about this.' An' he got down from aff iv the mountain, and he folly'd the shnakes, and he see them move along to the hill beyant that they call Knockcalltecore. An' be this time they wor all come from all over Ireland, and they wor all round the [Pg 18] mountain—exceptin' on the say side—an' they all had their

heads pointed up the hill, and their tails pointed to the Saint, so that they didn't see him, an' they all gave wan great hiss, an' then another, an' another, like wan, two, three! An' at the third hiss the King of the Shnakes rose up out of the wee fen at the top of the hill, wid his gold crown gleamin'—an' more betoken it was harvest time, an' the moon was up, an' the sun was settin', so the big jool in the crown had the light of both the sun an' the moon, an' it shone so bright that right away in Lensther the people thought the whole counthry was afire. But whin the Saint seen him, his whole forrum seemed to swell out an' get bigger an' bigger, an' he lifted his crozier, an' he pointed West, an' sez he, in a voice like a shtorm, 'To the say all ye shnakes! At wanst! to the say!'

"An' in the instant, wid wan movement, an' wid a hiss that made the air seem full iv watherfalls the whole iv the shnakes that was round the hill wriggled away into the say as if the fire was at their tails. There was so many iv them that they filled up the say out beyant to Cusheen Island, and them that was behind, had to shlide over their bodies. An' the say piled up till it sent a wave mountains high rollin' away across the Atlantic till it sthruck upon the shore iv America—though more betoken it wasn't America thin, for it wasn't discovered till long afther. An' there was so many shnakes that they do say that all the white sand that dhrifts up on the coast from the Blaskets to [Pg 19] Achill Head is made from their bones." Here Andy cut in:—

"But, Jerry, you haven't tould us if the King iv the Shnakes wint too."

"Musha! but it's in a hurry ye are. How can I tell ye the whole laygend at wanst; an', moreover, when me mouth is that dhry I can hardly spake at all—an' me punch is all dhrunk——"

He turned his glass face down on the table, with an air of comic resignation. Mrs. Kelligan took the hint and refilled his glass whilst he went on:—

"Well! whin the shnakes tuk to say-bathin' an' forgot to come in to dhry themselves, the ould King iv thim sunk down agin into the lake, an' Saint Pathrick rowls his eyes, an' sez he to himself:—

"Musha! is it dhramin' I am, or what? or is it laughin' at me he is? Does he mane to defy me?' An' seein' that no notice was tuk iv him at all, he lifts his crozier, and calls out:—

"Hi! Here! You! Come here! I want ye!'—As he spoke, Jerry went through all the pantomime of the occasion, exemplifying by every movement the speech of both the Saint and the Snake.

“Well! thin the King iv the Shnakes puts up his head, out iv the lake, an’ sez he:—

“‘Who calls?’

“‘I do,’ says Saint Pathrick, an’ he was so much mulvathered at the Shnake presumin’ to sthay, afther he tould thim all to go, that for a while he didn’t think it quare that he could sphake at all.

[Pg 20]

“‘Well, what do ye want wid me?’ sez the Shnake.

“‘I want to know why you didn’t lave Irish soil wid all th’ other Shnakes,’ sez the Saint.

“‘Ye tould the Shnakes to go,’ sez the King, ‘an’ I am their King, so I am; and your wurrds didn’t apply to me!’ an’ with that he dhrops like a flash of lightnin’ into the lake agin.

“‘Well! St. Patrick was so tuk back wid his impidence that he had to think for a minit, an’ then he calls again:—

“‘Hi! here! you!’

“‘What do you want now?’ sez the King iv the Shnakes, again poppin’ up his head.

“‘I want to know why you didn’t obey me ordhers?’ sez the Saint. An’ the King loked at him an’ laughed; and he looked mighty evil, I can tell ye—for be this time the sun was down and the moon up, and the jool in his crown threw out a pale cold light that would make you shuddher to see. ‘An’,’ says he, as slow an’ as hard as an attorney (saving your prisence) when he has a bad case:—

“‘I didn’t obey,’ sez be, ‘because I thraverse the jurisdiction.’

“‘How do ye mane?’ asks St. Pathrick.

“‘Because,’ sez he, ‘this is my own houldin’;’ sez he, ‘be perscriptive right,’ sez he. ‘I’m the whole govermint here, and I put a nexeat on meself not to lave widout me own permission,’ and he ducks down agin into the pond.

[Pg 21]

“‘Well, the Saint began to get mighty angry, an’ he raises his crozier, and he calls him agin:—

“‘Hi! here! you!’ and the Shnake pops up.

“‘Well! Saint, what do you want now? Amn’t I to be quit iv ye at all?’

“Are ye goin’, or are ye not?’ sez the Saint.

“I’m king here; an’ I’m not goin’.

“Thin,’ says the Saint, ‘I depose ye!’

“You can’t,’ sez the Shnake, ‘whilst I have me crown.’

“Then I’ll take it from ye,’ sez St. Pathrick.

“Catch me first!’ sez the Shnake; an’ wid that he pops undher the wather, what began to bubble up and boil. Well thin! the good Saint stood bewildhered, for as he was lukin’ the wather began to disappear out of the wee lake—and then the ground iv the hill began to be shaken as if the big Shnake was rushin’ round and round it down deep down undher the ground.

“So the Saint stood on the edge of the empty lake an’ held up his crozier, and called on the Shnake to come forth. And when he loked down, lo! an’ behold ye! there lay the King iv the Shnakes coiled round the bottom iv the lake—though how he had got there the Saint could niver tell, for he hadn’t been there when he began to summons him. Then the Shnake raised his head, and, lo! and behold ye! there was no crown on to it.

“Where is your crown?’ sez the Saint.

“It’s hid,’ sez the Shnake, leerin’ at him.

[Pg 22]

“Where is it hid?’

“It’s hid in the mountain! Buried where you nor the likes iv you can’t touch it in a thousand years!’ an’ he leered agin.

“Tell me where it may be found?’ sez the Saint starnly. An’ thin the Shnake leers at him again wid an eviller smile than before; an’ sez he:—

“Did ye see the wather what was in the lake?’

“I did,’ sez Saint Pathrick.

“Thin, when ye find that wather ye may find me jool’d crown, too,’ sez he; an’ before the Saint could say a word, he wint on:—

“An’ till ye git me crown I’m king here still, though ye banish me. An’ mayhap, I’ll come in some forrum what ye don’t suspect, for I must watch me crown. An’ now I go away—iv me own accorrd.’ An’ widout one word more, good or bad, he shlid right away

into the say, dhrivin' through the rock an' makin' the cliff that they call the Shleenanaher—an' that's Irish for the Shnake's Pass—until this day."

"An' now, sir, if Mrs. Kelligan hasn't dhrunk up the whole bar'l, I'd like a dhrop iv punch, for talkin' is dhry wurrk," and he buried his head in the steaming jorum, which the hostess had already prepared.

The company then began to discuss the legend. Said one of the women:—

"I wondher what forrum he tuk when he kem back!" Jerry answered:—

"Sure, they do say that the shiftin' bog wor the forrum[Pg 23] he tuk. The mountain wid the lake on top used to be the fertilest shpot in the whole counthry; but iver since the bog began to shift this was niver the same."

Here a hard-faced man named McGlown, who had been silent, struck in with a question:—

"But who knows when the bog did begin to shift?"

"Musha! Sorra one of me knows; but it was whin th' ould Shnake druv the wather iv the lake into the hill!"—There was a twinkle in the eyes of the story-teller, which made one doubt his own belief in his story.

"Well, for ma own part," said McGlown, "A don't believe a sengle word of it."

"An' for why not?" said one of the women. "Isn't the mountain called 'Knockcalltecore,' or 'The Hill of the Lost Crown iv Gold,' till this day?" Said another:—

"Musha! how could Mither McGlown believe anythin', an' him a Protestan'."

"A'll tell ye that A much prefer the facts," said McGlown. "Ef hestory es till be believed, A much prefer the story told till me by yon old man. Damn me! but A believe he's old enough till remember the theng itself."

He pointed as he spoke to old Moynahan, who, shrivelled up and white-haired, crouched in a corner of the inglenook, holding close to the fire his wrinkled shaky hands.

"What is the story that Mr. Moynahan has, may I ask?" said I. "Pray oblige, me, won't you? I am[Pg 24] anxious to hear all I can of the mountain, for it has taken my fancy strangely."

The old man took the glass of punch, which Mrs. Kelligan handed him as the necessary condition antecedent to a story, and began:—

“Oh, sorra one of me knows anythin’ except what I’ve heerd from me father. But I oft heerd him say that he was tould, that it was said, that in the Frinch invasion that didn’t come off undher General Humbert, whin the attimpt was over an’ all hope was gone, the English sodgers made sure of great prize-money whin they should git hould of the treasure chist. For it was known that there was much money goin’ an’ that they had brought a lot more than iver they wanted for pay and expinses in ordher to help to bribe some of the people that was houldin’ off to be bought by wan side or the other— if they couldn’t manage to git bought be both. But sure enough they wor all sould, bad cess to thim! and the divil a bit of money could they lay their hands on at all.”

Here the old man took a pull at his jug of punch, with so transparent a wish to be further interrogated that a smile flashed round the company. One of the old crones remarked, in an audible *sotto voce*:—

“Musha! But Bat is the cute story-teller intirely. Ye have to dhrag it out iv him! Go on, Bat! Go on! Tell us what become iv the money.”

“Oh, what become iv the money? So ye would like to hear! Well, I’ll tell ye.—Just one more fill of the[Pg 25] jug, Mrs. Kelligan, as the gintleman wishes to know all about it.—Well! they did say that the officer what had charge of the money got well away with some five or six others. The chist was a heavy wan—an iron chist bang full up iv goold! Oh, my! but it was fine! A big chist—that high, an’ as long as the table, an’ full up to the led wid goolden money an’ paper money, an’ divil a piece of white money in it at all! All goold, every pound note iv it.”

He paused, and glanced anxiously at Mrs. Kelligan, who was engaged in the new brew.

“Not too much wather if ye love me, Katty. You know me wakeness!—Well, they do say that it tuk hard work to lift the chist into the boat; an’ thin they put in a gun carriage to carry it on, an’ tuk out two horses, an’ whin the shmoke was all round an’ the darkness of night was on they got on shore, an’ made away down South from where the landin’ was made at Killlala. But, anyhow, they say that none of them was ever heerd of agin. But they was thraced through Ardnaree an’ Lough Conn, an’ through Castlebar Lake an’ Lough Carra, an’ through Lough Mask an’ Lough Corrib. But they niver kem out through Galway, for the river was watched for thim day an’ night be the sodgers; and how they got along God knows! for ’twas said they suffered quare hardships. They tuk the chist an’ the gun carriage an’ the horses in the boat, an’ whin they couldn’t go no further they dhragged the boat over the land to the next lake, an’ so on. Sure one dhry sayson, when the wathers iv Corrib[Pg 26] was down feet lower nor they was iver known afore, a boat was found up at the Bealanabrack end that had lay there for years; but the min nor the horses nor the treasure was never heerd of from that day to

this—so they say,” he added, in a mysterious way, and he renewed his attention to the punch, as if his tale was ended.

“But, man alive!” said McGlown, “that’s only a part. Go on, man dear! an’ fenesh the punch after.”

“Oh, oh! Yes, of course, you want to know the end. Well! no wan knows the end. But they used to say that whin the min lift the boat they wint due west, till one night they sthruck the mountain beyant; an’ that there they buried the chist an’ killed the horses, or rode away on them. But anyhow, they wor niver seen again; an’ as sure as you’re alive, the money is there in the hill! For luk at the name iv it! Why did any wan iver call it ‘Knockcalltore’—an’ that’s Irish for ‘the Hill of the Lost Gold’—if the money isn’t there?”

“Thru for ye!” murmured an old woman with a cutty pipe. “For why, indeed? There’s some people what won’t believe nothin’ altho’ it’s undher their eyes!” and she puffed away in silent rebuke to the spirit of scepticism—which, by the way, had not been manifested by any person present.

There was a long pause, broken only by one of the old women, who occasionally gave a sort of half-grunt, half-sigh, as though unconsciously to fill up the hiatus in the talk. She was a ‘keener’ by profession, and was [Pg 27] evidently well fitted to, and well drilled in, her work. Presently old Moynahan broke the silence:—

“Well! it’s a mighty quare thing anyhow that the hill beyant has been singled out for laygends and sthories and gossip iv all kinds consarnin’ shnakes an’ the like. An’ I’m not so sure, naythur, that some iv thim isn’t there shtill—for mind ye! it’s a mighty curious thin’ that the bog beyant keeps shiftin’ till this day. And I’m not so sure, naythur, that the shnakes has all left the hill yit!”

There was a chorus of “Thru for ye!”

“Aye, an’ it’s a black shnake too!” said one.

“An’ wid side-whishkers!” said another.

“Begorra! we want Saint Pathrick to luk in here agin!” said a third.

I whispered to Andy the driver:—

“Who is it they mean?”

“Whisht!” he answered, but without moving his lips; “but don’t let on I tould ye! Sure an’ it’s Black Murdock they mane.”

“Who or what is Murdock?” I queried.

“Sure an’ he is the Gombeen Man.”

“What is that? What is a gombeen man?”

“Whisper me now!” said Andy; “ax some iv the others. They’ll larn it ye more betther nor I can.”

“What is a gombeen man?” I asked to the company generally.

“A gombeen man is it? Well! I’ll tell ye,” said an old, shrewd-looking man at the other side of the hearth. “He’s a man that linds you a few shillin’s or a few pounds[Pg 28] whin ye want it bad, and then niver laves ye till he has tuk all ye’ve got—yer land an’ yer shanty an’ yer holdin’ an’ yer money an’ yer craps; an’ he would take the blood out of yer body if he could sell it or use it anyhow!”

“Oh, I see, a sort of usurer.”

“Ushurer? aye that’s it; but a ushurer lives in the city an’ has laws to hould him in. But the gombeen has nayther law nor the fear iv law. He’s like wan that the Scriptures says ‘grinds the faces iv the poor.’ Begor! it’s him that’d do little for God’s sake if the devil was dead!”

“Then I suppose this man Murdock is a man of means—a rich man in his way?”

“Rich is it? Sure an’ it’s him as has plinty. He could lave this place if he chose an’ settle in Galway—aye or in Dublin itself if he liked betther, and lind money to big min—landlords an’ the like—instead iv playin’ wid poor min here an’ swallyin’ them up, wan be wan.—But he can’t go! He can’t go!” This he said with a vengeful light in his eyes; I turned to Andy for explanation.

“Can’t go! How does he mean? What does he mean?”

“Whisht! Don’t ax me. Ax Dan, there. He doesn’t owe him any money!”

“Which is Dan?”

“The ould man there be the settle what has just spoke, Dan Moriarty. He’s a warrum man, wid money[Pg 29] in bank an’ what owns his houldin’; an’ he’s not afeerd to have his say about Murdock.”

“Can any of you tell me why Murdock can’t leave the Hill?” I spoke out.

“Begor’ I can,” said Dan, quickly. “He can’t lave it because the Hill houlds him!”

“What on earth do you mean? How can the Hill hold him?”

“It can hold tight enough! There may be reasons that a man gives—sometimes wan thing, an’ sometimes another; but the Hill holds—an’ holds tight all the same!”

Here the door was opened suddenly, and the fire blazed up with the rush of wind that entered. All stood up suddenly, for the new comer was a priest. He was a sturdy man of middle age, with a cheerful countenance. Sturdy as he was, however, it took him all his strength to shut the door, but he succeeded before any of the men could get near enough to help him. Then he turned and saluted all the company:—

“God save all here.”

All present tried to do him some service. One took his wet great coat, another his dripping hat, and a third pressed him into the warmest seat in the chimney corner, where, in a very few seconds, Mrs. Kelligan handed him a steaming glass of punch, saying, “Dhrink that up, yer Riv’rence. ’Twill help to kape ye from catchin’ cowld.”

“Thank ye, kindly,” he answered, as he took it. When he had half emptied the glass, he said:—

[Pg 30]

“What was it I heard as I came in about the Hill holding some one?” Dan answered:—

“’Twas me, yer Riverence, I said that the Hill had hold of Black Murdock, and could hold him tight.”

“Pooh! pooh! man; don’t talk such nonsense. The fact is, sir,” said he, turning to me after throwing a searching glance round the company, “the people here have all sorts of stories about that unlucky Hill—why, God knows; and this man Murdock, that they call Black Murdock, is a money-lender as well as a farmer, and none of them like him, for he is a hard man and has done some cruel things among them. When they say the Hill holds him, they mean that he doesn’t like to leave it because he hopes to find a treasure that is said to be buried in it. I’m not sure but that the blame is to be thrown on the different names given to the Hill. That most commonly given is Knockcalltecore, which is a corruption of the Irish phrase Knock-na-callte-crōin-ōir, meaning, ‘The Hill of the Lost Golden Crown;’ but it has been sometimes called Knockcalltore—short for the Irish words Knock-na-callte-ōir, or ‘The Hill of the Lost Gold.’ It is said that in some old past time it was called Knocknanaher, or ‘The Hill of the Snake;’ and, indeed, there’s one place on it they call Shleenanaher, meaning the ‘Snake’s Pass.’ I dare say, now, that they have been giving you the legends and stories and all the rubbish of that kind. I suppose you know, sir, that in most places the local

fancy has run riot at some period and has left a good crop of absurdities and impossibilities behind it?"

[Pg 31]

I acquiesced warmly, for I felt touched by the good priest's desire to explain matters, and to hold his own people blameless for crude ideas which he did not share. He went on:—

"It is a queer thing that men must be always putting abstract ideas into concrete shape. No doubt there have been some strange matters regarding this mountain that they've been talking about—the Shifting Bog, for instance; and as the people could not account for it in any way that they can understand, they knocked up a legend about it. Indeed, to be just to them, the legend is a very old one, and is mentioned in a manuscript of the twelfth century. But somehow it was lost sight of till about a hundred years ago, when the loss of the treasure-chest from the French invasion at Killala set all the imaginations of the people at work, from Donegal to Cork, and they fixed the Hill of the Lost Gold as the spot where the money was to be found. There is not a word of fact in the story from beginning to end, and"—here he gave a somewhat stern glance round the room—"I'm a little ashamed to hear so much chat and nonsense given to a strange gentleman like as if it was so much gospel. However, you mustn't be too hard in your thoughts on the poor people here, sir, for they're good people—none better in all Ireland—in all the world for that—but they talk too free to do themselves justice."

All those present were silent for awhile. Old Moynahan was the first to speak.

"Well, Father Pether, I don't say nothin' about Saint[Pg 32] Patrick an' the shnakes, meself, because I don't know nothin' about them; but I know that me own father tould me that he seen the Frinchmin wid his own eyes crossin' the sthrame below, an' facin' up the mountain. The moon was risin' in the west, an' the hill threw a big shadda. There was two min an' two horses, an' they had a big box on a gun carriage. Me father seen them cross the sthrame. The load was so heavy that the wheels sunk in the clay, an' the min had to pull at them to git them up again. An' didn't he see the marks iv the wheels in the ground the very nixt day?"

"Bartholomew Moynahan, are you telling the truth?" interrupted the priest, speaking sternly.

"Throth an I am, Father Pether; divil a word iv a lie in all I've said."

"Then how is it you've never told a word of this before?"

“But I have tould it, Father Pether. There’s more nor wan here now what has heered me tell it; but they wor tould as a saycret!”

“Thru for ye!” came the chorus of almost every person in the room. The unanimity was somewhat comic and caused amongst them a shamefaced silence, which lasted quite several seconds. The pause was not wasted, for by this time Mrs. Kelligan had brewed another jug of punch, and glasses were replenished. This interested the little crowd and they entered afresh into the subject. As for myself, however, I felt strangely uncomfortable. I could not quite account for it in any reasonable way.

[Pg 33]

I suppose there must be an instinct in men as well as in the lower orders of animal creation—I felt as though there were a strange presence near me.

I quietly looked round. Close to where I sat, on the sheltered side of the house, was a little window built in the deep recess of the wall, and, further, almost obliterated by the shadow of the priest as he sat close to the fire. Pressed against the empty lattice, where the glass had once been, I saw the face of a man—a dark, forbidding face it seemed in the slight glimpse I caught of it. The profile was towards me, for he was evidently listening intently, and he did not see me. Old Moynahan went on with his story:—

“Me father hid behind a whin bush, an’ lay as close as a hare in his forrum. The min seemed suspicious of bein’ seen and they looked carefully all round for the sign of anywan. Thin they started up the side of the hill; an’ a cloud came over the moon so that for a bit me father could see nothin’. But prisintly he seen the two min up on the side of the hill at the south, near Joyce’s mearin’. Thin they disappeared agin, an’ prisintly he seen the horses an’ the gun carriage an’ all up in the same place, an’ the moonlight sthruck thim as they wint out iv the shadda; and men an’ horses an’ gun carriage an’ chist an’ all wint round to the back iv the hill at the west an’ disappeared. Me father waited a minute or two to make sure, an’ thin he run round as hard as he could an’ hid behind the projectin’ rock at the entrance iv the Shleenanaher,[Pg 34] an’ there foreinst him! right up the hill side he seen two min carryin’ the chist, an’ it nigh weighed thim down. But the horses an’ the gun carriage was nowhere to be seen. Well! me father was stealin’ out to folly thim, when he loosened a sthone an’ it clattered down through the rocks at the Shnake’s Pass wid a noise like a dhrum, an’ the two min sot down the chist an’ they turned; an’ whin they seen me father one of them runs at him, and he turned an’ run. An’ thin another black cloud crossed the moon; but me father knew ivery foot of the mountain side, and he run on through the dark. He heerd the footsteps behind him for a bit, but they seemed to get fainter an’

fainter; but he niver stopped runnin' till he got to his own cabin.—An' that was the last he iver see iv the men or the horses or the chist. Maybe they wint into the air or the say, or the mountain; but anyhow they vanished, and from that day to this no sight or sound or word iv them was ever known!”

There was a universal, ‘Oh!’ of relief as he concluded, whilst he drained his glass.

I looked round again at the little window—but the dark face was gone.

Then there arose a perfect babble of sounds. All commented on the story, some in Irish, some in English, and some in a speech, English indeed, but so purely and locally idiomatic that I could only guess at what was intended to be conveyed. The comment generally took the form that two men were to be [Pg 35] envied, one of them, the gombeen man, Murdock, who owned a portion of the western side of the hill, the other one, Joyce, who owned another section of the same aspect.

In the midst of the buzz of conversation the clattering of hoofs was heard. There was a shout, and the door opened again and admitted a stalwart stranger of some fifty years of age, with a strong, determined face, with kindly eyes, well dressed but wringing wet, and haggard, and seemingly disturbed in mind. One arm hung useless by his side.

“Here’s one of them!” said Father Peter.

[Pg 36]

CHAPTER III.

THE GOMBEEN MAN.

“God save all here,” said the man as he entered.

Room was made for him at the fire. He no sooner came near it and tasted the heat than a cloud of steam arose from him.

“Man! but ye’re wet,” said Mrs. Kelligan. “One’d think ye’d been in the lake beyant!”

“So I have,” he answered, “worse luck! I rid all the way from Galway this blessed day to be here in time, but the mare slipped coming down Curragh Hill and threw me over the bank into the lake. I wor in the wather nigh three hours before I could get out, for I was foreninst the Curragh Rock an’ only got a foothold in a chink, an’ had to hold on wid me one arm for I fear the other is broke.”

“Dear! dear! dear!” interrupted the woman. “Sthrip yer coat off, acushla, an’ let us see if we can do anythin’.”

He shook his head, as he answered:—

“Not now, there’s not a minute to spare. I must get up the Hill at once. I should have been there be six[Pg 37] o’clock. But I mayn’t be too late yit. The mare has broke down entirely. Can any one here lend me a horse?”

There was no answer till Andy spoke:—

“Me mare is in the shtable, but this gintleman has me an’ her for the day, an’ I have to lave him at Carnaclif to-night.”

Here I struck in:—

“Never mind me, Andy! If you can help this gentleman, do so: I’m better off here than driving through the storm. He wouldn’t want to go on, with a broken arm, if he hadn’t good reason!”

The man looked at me with grateful eagerness:—

“Thank yer honour, kindly. It’s a rale gintleman ye are! An’ I hope ye’ll never be sorry for helpin’ a poor fellow in sore throuble.”

“What’s wrong, Phelim?” asked the priest. “Is there anything troubling you that any one here can get rid of?”

“Nothin’, Father Pether, thank ye kindly. The throuble is me own intirely, an’ no wan here could help me. But I must see Murdock to-night.”

There was a general sigh of commiseration; all understood the situation.

“Musha!” said old Dan Moriarty, *sotto voce*. “An’ is that the way of it! An’ is he too in the clutches iv that wolf? Him that we all thought was so warrum. Glory be to God! but it’s a quare wurrlid it is; an’ it’s few there is in it that is what they seems. Me[Pg 38] poor frind! is there any way I can help ye? I have a bit iv money by me that yer welkim to the lend iv av ye want it.”

The other shook his head gratefully:—

“Thank ye kindly, Dan, but I have the money all right; it’s only the time I’m in trouble about!”

“Only the time! me poor chap! It’s be time that the divil helps Black Murdock an’ the likes iv him, the most iv all! God be good to ye if he has got his clutch on yer back, an’ has time on his side, for ye’ll want it!”

“Well! anyhow, I must be goin’ now. Thank ye kindly, neighbours all. When a man’s in throuble, sure the goodwill of his frinds is the greatest comfort he can have.”

“All but one, remember that! all but one!” said the priest.

“Thank ye kindly, Father, I shan’t forget. Thank ye Andy: an’ you, too, young sir, I’m much beholden to ye. I hope, some day, I may have it to do a good turn for ye in return. Thank ye kindly again, and good night.” He shook my hand warmly, and was going to the door, when old Dan said:—

“An’ as for that black-jawed ruffian, Murdock—” He paused, for the door suddenly opened, and a harsh voice said:—

“Murtagh Murdock is here to answer for himself!”—It was my man at the window.

There was a sort of paralyzed silence in the room,[Pg 39] through which came the whisper of one of the old women:—

“Musha! talk iv the divil!”

Joyce’s face grew very white; one hand instinctively grasped his riding switch, the other hung uselessly by his side. Murdock spoke:—

“I kem here expectin’ to meet Phelim Joyce. I thought I’d save him the throuble of comin’ wid the money.” Joyce said in a husky voice:—

“What do ye mane? I have the money right enough here. I’m sorry I’m a bit late, but I had a bad accident—bruk me arrum, an’ was nigh dhrownded in the Curragh Lake. But I was goin’ up to ye at once, bad as I am, to pay ye yer money, Murdock.” The Gombeen Man interrupted him:—

“But it isn’t to me ye’d have to come, me good man. Sure, it’s the sheriff, himself, that was waitin’ for ye’, an’ whin ye didn’t come”—here Joyce winced; the speaker smiled—“he done his work.”

“What wurrk, acushla?” asked one of the women. Murdock answered slowly:—

“He sould the lease iv the farrum known as the Shleenanaher in open sale, in accordance wid the terrums of his notice, duly posted, and wid warnin’ given to the houldher iv the lease.”

There was a long pause. Joyce was the first to speak:—

“Ye’re jokin’, Murdock. For God’s sake say ye’re jokin’! Ye tould me yerself that I might have time to[Pg 40] git the money. An’ ye tould me that the puttin’ me farrum up for

sale was only a matter iv forrum to let me pay ye back in me own way. Nay! more, ye asked me not to te tell any iv the neighbours, for fear some iv them might want to buy some iv me land. An' it's niver so, that whin ye got me aff to Galway to rise the money, ye went on wid the sale, behind me back—wid not a soul by to spake for me or mine—an' sould up all I have! No! Murtagh Murdock, ye're a hard man I know, but ye wouldn't do that! Ye wouldn't do that!"

Murdock made no direct reply to him, but said seemingly to the company generally:—

"I ixpected to see Phelim Joyce at the sale to-day, but as I had some business in which he was consarned, I kem here where I knew there'd be neighbours—an' sure so there is."

He took out his pocket-book and wrote names, "Father Pether Ryan, Daniel Moriarty, Bartholomew Moynahan, Andhrew McGlown, Mrs. Katty Kelligan—that's enough! I want ye all to see what I done. There's nothin' undherhand about me! Phelim Joyce, I give ye formial notice that yer land was sould an' bought be me, for ye broke yer word to repay me the money lint ye before the time fixed. Here's the Sheriff's assignmint, an' I tell ye before all these witnesses that I'll proceed with ejectment on title at wanst."

All in the room were as still as statues. Joyce was fearfully still and pale, but when Murdock spoke the [Pg 41] word "ejectment" he seemed to wake in a moment to frenzied life. The blood flushed up in his face and he seemed about to do something rash; but with a great effort he controlled himself and said:—

"Mr. Murdock, ye won't be too hard. I got the money to-day—it's here—but I had an accident that delayed me. I was thrown into the Curragh Lake and nigh drownded an' me arrum is bruk. Don't be so close as an hour or two—ye'll never be sorry for it. I'll pay ye all, and more, and thank ye into the bargain all me life; ye'll take back the paper, won't ye, for me childhren's sake—for Norah's sake?"

He faltered; the other answered with an evil smile:—

"Phelim Joyce, I've waited years for this moment—don't ye know me betther nor to think I would go back on meself whin I have shtarted on a road? I wouldn't take yer money, not if ivery pound note was spread into an acre and cut up in tin-pound notes. I want yer land—I have waited for it, an' I mane to have it!—Now don't beg me any more, for I won't go back—an' tho' its many a grudge I owe ye, I square them all before the neighbours be refusin' yer prayer. The land is mine, bought be open sale; an' all the judges an' coorts in Ireland can't take it from me! An' what do ye say to that now, Phelim Joyce?"

The tortured man had been clutching the ash sapling which he had used as a riding whip, and from the nervous twitching of his fingers I knew that something was coming. And it came; for, without a word, he struck[Pg 42] the evil face before him—struck as quick as a flash of lightning—such a blow that the blood seemed to leap out round the stick, and a vivid welt rose in an instant. With a wild, savage cry the Gombeen Man jumped at him; but there were others in the room as quick, and before another blow could be struck on either side both men were grasped by strong hands and held back.

Murdock's rage was tragic. He yelled, like a wild beast, to be let get at his opponent. He cursed and blasphemed so outrageously that all were silent, and only the stern voice of the priest was heard:—

“Be silent Murtagh Murdock! Aren't you afraid that the God overhead will strike you dead? With such a storm as is raging as a sign of His power, you are a foolish man to tempt Him.”

The man stopped suddenly, and a stern dogged sullenness took the place of his passion. The priest went on:—

“As for you, Phelim Joyce, you ought to be ashamed of yourself; ye're not one of my people, but I speak as your own clergyman would if he were here. Only this day has the Lord seen fit to spare you from a terrible death; and yet you dare to go back of His mercy with your angry passion. You had cause for anger—or temptation to it, I know—but you must learn to kiss the chastening rod, not spurn it. The Lord knows what He is doing for you as for others, and it may be that you will look back on this day in[Pg 43] gratitude for His doing, and in shame for your own anger. Men, hold off your hands—let those two men go; they'll quarrel no more—before me at any rate, I hope.”

The men drew back. Joyce held his head down, and a more despairing figure or a sadder one I never saw. He turned slowly away, and leaning against the wall put his face between his hands and sobbed. Murdock scowled, and the scowl gave place to an evil smile as looking all around he said:—

“Well, now that me work is done, I must be gettin' home.”

“An' get some wan to iron that mark out iv yer face,” said Dan. Murdock turned again and glared around him savagely as he hissed out:—

“There'll be iron for some one before I'm done. Mark me well! I've never gone back or wakened yit whin I promised to have me own turn. There's thim here what'll rue this day yit! If I am the shnake on the hill—thin beware the shnake. An' for him what

shtruck me, he'll be in bitther sorra for it yit—him an' his!" He turned his back and went to the door.

"Stop!" said the priest. "Murtagh Murdock, I have a word to say to you—a solemn word of warning. Ye have to-day acted the part of Ahab towards Naboth the Jezreelite; beware of his fate! You have coveted your neighbour's goods—you have used your power without mercy; you have made the law an engine of [Pg 44] oppression. Mark me! It was said of old that what measure men meted should be meted out to them again. God is very just. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked. For what things a man shall sow, those also shall he reap.' Ye have sowed the wind this day—beware lest you reap the whirlwind! Even as God visited his sin upon Ahab the Samarian, and as He has visited similar sins on others in His own way—so shall He visit yours on you. You are worse than the land-grabber—worse than the man who only covets. Saintough is a virtue compared with your act! Remember the story of Naboth's vineyard, and the dreadful end of it. Don't answer me! Go and repent if you can, and leave sorrow and misery to be comforted by others—unless you wish to undo your wrong yourself. If you don't—then remember the curse that may come upon you yet!"

Without a word Murdock opened the door and went out, and a little later we heard the clattering of his horse's feet on the rocky road to Shleenanaher.

When it was apparent to all that he was really gone a torrent of commiseration, sympathy and pity broke over Joyce. The Irish nature is essentially emotional, and a more genuine and stronger feeling I never saw. Not a few had tears in their eyes, and one and all were manifestly deeply touched. The least moved was, to all appearance, poor Joyce himself. He seemed to have pulled himself together, and his sterling manhood and courage and pride stood by him. He [Pg 45] seemed, however, to yield to the kindly wishes of his friends; and when we suggested that his hurt should be looked to, he acquiesced:—

"Yes, if you will. Betther not go home to poor Norah and distress her with it. Poor child! she'll have enough to bear without that."

His coat was taken off, and between us we managed to bandage the wound. The priest, who had some surgical knowledge, came to the conclusion that there was only a simple fracture. He splinted and bandaged the arm, and we all agreed that it would be better for Joyce to wait until the storm was over before starting for home. Andy said he could take him on the car, as he knew the road well, and that, as it was partly on the road to Carnaclif, we should only have to make a short detour and would pass the house of the doctor, by whom the arm could be properly attended to.

So we sat around the fire again, whilst, without, the storm howled and the fierce gusts which swept the valley seemed at times as if they would break in the door, lift off the roof, or in some way annihilate the time-worn cabin which gave us shelter.

There could, of course, be only one subject of conversation now, and old Dan simply interpreted the public wish, when he said:—

“Tell us, Phelim, sure we’re all friends here! how Black Murdock got ye in his clutches? Sure any wan of us would get you out of thim if he could.”

[Pg 46]

There was a general acquiescence. Joyce yielded himself, and said:—

“Let me thank ye, neighbours all, for yer kindness to me and mine this sorraful night. Well! I’ll say no more about that; but I’ll tell ye how it was that Murdock got me into his power. Ye know that boy of mine, Eugene?”

“Oh! and he’s the fine lad, God bless him! an’ the good lad too!”—this from the women.

“Well! ye know too that he got on so well whin I sint him to school that Dr. Walsh recommended me to make an ingineer of him. He said he had such promise that it was a pity not to see him get the right start in life, and he gave me, himself, a lettter to Sir George Henshaw, the great ingineer. I wint and seen him, and he said he would take the boy. He tould me that there was a big fee to be paid, but I was not to throuble about that—at any rate, that he himself didn’t want any fee, and he would ask his partner if he would give up his share too. But the latther was hard up for money. He said he couldn’t give up all fee, but that he would take half the fee, provided it was paid down in dhry money. Well! the regular fee to the firm was five hundhred pounds, and as Sir George had giv up half an’ only half th’ other half was to be paid, that was possible. I hadn’t got more’n a few pounds by me—for what wid dhrainin’ and plantin’ and fencin’ and the payin’ the boy’s schoolin’, and the girl’s at the Nuns’ in Galway, it had[Pg 47] put me to the pin iv me collar to find the money up to now. But I didn’t like to let the boy lose his chance in life for want of an effort, an’ I put me pride in me pocket an’ kem an’ asked Murdock for the money. He was very smooth an’ nice wid me—I know why now—an’ promised he would give it at wanst if I would give him security on me land. Sure he joked an’ laughed wid me, an’ was that cheerful that I didn’t mistrust him. He tould me it was only forrums I was signin’ that’d never be used”—— Here Dan Moriarty interrupted him:—

“What did ye sign, Phelim?”

“There wor two papers. Wan was a writin’ iv some kind, that in considheration iv the money lent an’ his own land—which I was to take over if the money wasn’t paid at the time appointed—he was to get me lease from me: an’ the other was a power of attorney to Enther Judgment for the amount if the money wasn’t paid at the right time. I thought I was all safe as I could repay him in the time named, an’ if the worst kem to the worst I might borry the money from some wan else—for the lease is worth the sum tin times over—an’ repay him. Well! what’s the use of lookin’ back, anyhow! I signed the papers—that was a year ago, an’ one week. An’ a week ago the time was up!” He gulped down a sob, and went on:—

“Well! ye all know the year gone has been a terrible bad wan, an’ as for me it was all I could do to hould on—to make up the money was impossible. Thru the lad cost me next to nothin’, for he arned his keep be exthra[Pg 48] work, an’ the girl, Norah, kem home from school and laboured wid me, an’ we saved every penny we could. But it was all no use!—we couldn’t get the money together anyhow. Thin we had the misfortin wid the cattle that ye all know of; an’ three horses, that I sould in Dublin, up an’ died before the time I guaranteed them free from sickness.” Here Andy struck in:—

“Thru for ye! Sure there was some dhreadful disordher in Dublin among the horse cattle, intirely; an’ even Mither Dochter Perfeshshinal Ferguson himself couldn’t git undher it!” Joyce went on:—

“An’ as the time grew nigh I began to fear, but Murdock came down to see me whin I was alone, an’ tould me not to throuble about the money an’ not to mind about the sheriff, for he had to give him notice. ‘An’, says he, ‘I wouldn’t, if I was you, tell Norah anythin’ about it, for it might frighten the girl—for weemin is apt to take to heart things like that that’s only small things to min like us.’ An’ so, God forgive me, I believed him; an’ I niver tould me child anything about it—even whin I got the notice from the sheriff. An’ whin the Notice tellin’ of the sale was posted up on me land, I tuk it down meself so that the poor child wouldn’t be frightened—God help me!” He broke down for a bit, but then went on:—

“But somehow I wasn’t asy in me mind, an’ whin the time iv the sale dhrew nigh I couldn’t keep it to meself any longer, an’ I tould Norah. That was only yisterday, and look at me to-day! Norah agreed wid me that we shouldn’t trust the Gombeen, an’ she sent me[Pg 49] off to the Galway Bank to borry the money. She said I was an honest man an’ farmed me own land, and that the bank might lind the money on it. An’ sure enough whin I wint there this mornin’ be appointment, wid the Coadjuthor himself to inthroduce me, though he didn’t know why I wanted the money—that was Norah’s idea, and the Mother Superior settled it for her—the manager, who is a nice gintleman,

tould me at wanst that I might have the money on me own note iv hand. I only gave him a formal writin', an' I took away the money. Here it is in me pocket in good notes; they're wet wid the lake, but I'm thankful to say all safe. But it's too late, God help me!" Here he broke down for a minute, but recovered himself with an effort:—

"Anyhow the bank that thrusted me musn't be wronged. Back the money goes to Galway as soon as iver I can get it there. If I am a ruined man I needn't be a dishonest wan! But poor Norah! God help her! it will break her poor heart."

There was a spell of silence only broken by sympathetic moans. The first to speak was the priest.

"Phelim Joyce, I told you a while ago, in the midst of your passion, that God knows what He is doin', and works in His own way. You're an honest man, Phelim, and God knows it, and, mark me, He won't let you nor yours suffer. 'I have been young,' said the Psalmist, 'and now am old; and I have not seen the just forsaken, nor his seed seeking bread.' Think of that, Phelim!—may it comfort you and [Pg 50] poor Norah. God bless her! but she's the good girl. You have much to be thankful for, with a daughter like her to comfort you at home and take the place of her poor mother, who was the best of women; and with such a boy as Eugene, winnin' name and credit, and perhaps fame to come, even in England itself. Thank God for His many mercies, Phelim, and trust Him."

There was a dead silence in the room. The stern man rose, and coming over took the priest's hand.

"God bless ye, Father!" he said, "it's the true comforter ye are."

The scene was a most touching one; I shall never forget it. The worst of the poor man's trouble seemed now past. He had faced the darkest hour; he had told his trouble, and was now prepared to make the best of everything—for the time at least—for I could not reconcile to my mind the idea that that proud, stern man, would not take the blow to heart for many a long day, that it might even embitter his life.

Old Dan tried comfort in a practical way by thinking of what was to be done. Said he:—

"Iv course, Phelim, it's a mighty throuble to give up yer own foine land an' take Murdock's bleak shpot instead, but I daresay ye will be able to work it well enough. Tell me, have ye signed away all the land, or only the lower farm? I mane, is the Cliff Fields yours or his?"

Here was a gleam of comfort evidently to the poor man. His face lightened as he replied:—

[Pg 51]

“Only the lower farm, thank God! Indeed, I couldn’t part wid the Cliff Fields, for they don’t belong to me—they are Norah’s, that her poor mother left her—they wor settled on her, whin we married, be her father, and whin he died we got them. But, indeed, I fear they’re but small use be themselves; shure there’s no wather in them at all, savin’ what runs off me ould land; an’ if we have to carry wather all the way down the hill from—from me new land”—this was said with a smile, which was a sturdy effort at cheerfulness—“it will be but poor work to raise anythin’ there—ayther shtock or craps. No doubt but Murdock will take away the sthrame iv wather that runs there now. He’ll want to get the cliff lands, too, I suppose.”

I ventured to ask a question:—

“How do your lands lie compared with Mr. Murdock’s?”

There was bitterness in his tone as he answered, in true Irish fashion:

“Do you mane me ould land, or me new?”

“The lands that were—that ought still to be yours,” I answered.

He was pleased at the reply, and his face softened as he replied:—

“Well, the way of it is this. We two owns the West side of the hill between us. Murdock’s land—I’m spakin’ iv them as they are, till he gets possession iv mine—lies at the top iv the hill; mine lies below. My land is the best bit on the mountain, while the Gombeen’s is poor soil, with only a few good patches here and there. Moreover, there[Pg 52] is another thing. There is a bog which is high up the hill, mostly on his houldin’, but my land is free from bog, except one end of the big bog, an’ a stretch of dry turf, the best in the counthry, an’ wid’ enough turf to last for a hundhred years, it’s that deep.”

Old Dan joined in:—

“Thru enough! that bog of the Grombeen’s isn’t much use anyhow. It’s rank and rotten wid wather. Whin it made up its mind to sthay, it might have done bettther!”

“The bog? Made up its mind to stay! What on earth do you mean?” I asked. I was fairly puzzled.

“Didn’t ye hear talk already,” said Dan, “of the shiftin’ bog on the mountain?”

“I did.”

“Well, that’s it! It moved an’ moved an’ moved longer than anywan can remimber. Me grandfather wanst tould me that whin he was a gossoon it wasn’t nigh so big as it was when he tould me. It hasn’t shifted in my time, and I make bould to say that it has made up its mind to settle down where it is. Ye must only make the best of it, Phelim. I daresay ye will turn it to some account.”

“I’ll try what I can do, anyhow. I don’t mane to fould me arms an’ sit down op-pawsit me property an’ ate it!” was the brave answer.

For myself, the whole idea was most interesting. I had never before even heard of a shifting bog, and I determined to visit it before I left this part of the country.

[Pg 53]

By this time the storm was beginning to abate. The rain had ceased, and Andy said we might proceed on our journey. So after a while we were on our way; the wounded man and I sitting on one side of the car, and Andy on the other. The whole company came out to wish us God-speed, and with such comfort as good counsel and good wishes could give we ventured into the inky darkness of the night.

Andy was certainly a born car-driver. Not even the darkness, the comparative strangeness of the road, or the amount of whisky-punch which he had on board could disturb his driving in the least; he went steadily on. The car rocked and swayed and bumped, for the road was a bye one, and in but poor condition—but Andy and the mare went on alike unmoved. Once or twice only, in a journey of some three miles of winding bye-lanes, crossed and crossed again by lanes or water-courses, did he ask the way. I could not tell which was roadway and which water-way, for they were all water-courses at present, and the darkness was profound. Still, both Andy and Joyce seemed to have a sense lacking in myself, for now and again they spoke of things which I could not see at all. As, for instance, when Andy asked:—

“Do we go up or down where the road branches beyant?” Or again: “I disremimber, but is that Micky Dolan’s ould apple tree, or didn’t he cut it down? an’ is it Tim’s fornent us on the lift?”

Presently we turned to the right, and drove up a short avenue towards a house. I knew it to be a house by the[Pg 54] light in the windows, for shape it had none. Andy jumped down and knocked, and after a short colloquy, Joyce got down and went into the Doctor’s house. I was asked to go too, but thought it better not to, as it would only have disturbed the Doctor in his work; and so Andy and I possessed our souls in patience until Joyce came out again, with his arm in a proper splint. And then we resumed our journey through the inky darkness.

However, after a while either there came more light into the sky, or my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, for I thought that now and again I beheld “men as trees walking.”

Presently something dark and massive seemed outlined in the sky before us—a blackness projected on a darkness—and, said Andy, turning to me:—

“That’s Knockcalltecore; we’re nigh the foot iv it now, and pretty shortly we’ll be at the entrance iv the boreen, where Misther Joyce’ll git aff.”

We plodded on for a while, and the hill before us seemed to overshadow whatever glimmer of light there was, for the darkness grew more profound than ever; then Andy turned to my companion:—

“Sure, isn’t that Miss Norah I see sittin’ on the shtyle beyant?” I looked eagerly in the direction in which he evidently pointed, but for the life of me I could see nothing.

“No! I hope not,” said the father, hastily. “She’s never come out in the shtorm. Yes! It is her, she sees us.”

[Pg 55]

Just then there came a sweet sound down the lane:—

“Is that you, father?”

“Yes! my child; but I hope you’ve not been out in the shtorm.”

“Only a bit, father; I was anxious about you. Is it all right, father; did you get what you wanted?” She had jumped off the stile and had drawn nearer to us, and she evidently saw me, and went on in a changed and shyer voice:—

“Oh! I beg your pardon, I did not see you had a stranger with you.”

This was all bewildering to me; I could hear it all—and a sweeter voice I never heard—but yet I felt like a blind man, for not a thing could I see, whilst each of the three others was seemingly as much at ease as in the daylight.

“This gentleman has been very kind to me, Norah. He has given me a seat on his car, and indeed he’s come out of his way to lave me here.”

“I am sure we’re all grateful to you, sir; but, father, where is your horse? Why are you on a car at all? Father, I hope you haven’t met with any accident—I have been so fearful for you all the day.” This was spoken in a fainter voice; had my eyes been of service, I was sure I would have seen her grow pale.

“Yes, my darlin’, I got a fall on the Curragh Hill, but I’m all right. Norah dear! Quick, quick! catch her, she’s faintin’!—my God! I can’t stir!”

[Pg 56]

I jumped off the car in the direction of the voice, but my arms sought the empty air. However, I heard Andy’s voice beside me:—

“All right! I have her. Hould up, Miss Norah; yer dada’s all right, don’t ye see him there, sittin’ on me car. All right, sir, she’s a brave girrul! she hasn’t fainted.”

“I am all right,” she murmured, faintly; “but, father, I hope you are not hurt?”

“Only a little, my darlin’, just enough for ye to nurse me a while; I daresay a few days will make me all right again. Thank ye, Andy; steady now, till I get down; I’m feelin’ a wee bit stiff.” Andy evidently helped him to the ground.

“Good night, Andy, and good night you too, sir, and thank you kindly for your goodness to me all this night. I hope I’ll see you again.” He took my hand in his uninjured one, and shook it warmly.

“Good night,” I said, and “good-bye: I am sure I hope we shall meet again.”

Another hand took mine as he relinquished it—a warm, strong one—and a sweet voice said, shyly:—

“Good night, sir, and thank you for your kindness to father.”

I faltered “Good night,” as I raised my hat; the aggravation of the darkness at such a moment was more than I could equably bear. We heard them pass up the boreen, and I climbed on the car again.

The night seemed darker than ever as we turned our[Pg 57] steps towards Carnaclif, and the journey was the dreariest one I had ever taken. I had only one thought which gave me any pleasure, but that was a pretty constant one through the long miles of damp, sodden road—the warm hand and the sweet voice coming out of the darkness, and all in the shadow of that mysterious mountain, which seemed to have become a part of my life. The words of the old story-teller came back to me again and again:—

“The Hill can hould tight enough! A man has raysons—sometimes wan thing and sometimes another—but the Hill houlds him all the same!”

And a vague wonder grew upon me as to whether it could ever hold me, and how!

[Pg 58]

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRETS OF THE BOG.

Some six weeks elapsed before my visits to Irish friends were completed, and I was about to return home. I had had everywhere a hearty welcome; the best of sport of all kinds, and an appetite beyond all praise—and one pretty well required to tackle with any show of success the excellent food and wine put before me. The west of Ireland not only produces good viands in plenty and of the highest excellence, but there is remaining a keen recollection, accompanied by tangible results, of the days when open house and its hospitable accompaniments made wine merchants prosperous—at the expense of their customers.

In the midst of all my pleasure, however, I could not shake from my mind—nor, indeed, did I want to—the interest which Shleenanaher and its surroundings had created in me. Nor did the experience of that strange night, with the sweet voice coming through the darkness in the shadow of the hill, become dim with the passing of the time. When I look back and try to analyse myself and my feelings [Pg 59] with the aid of the knowledge and experience of life received since then, I think that I must have been in love. I do not know if philosophers have ever undertaken to say whether it is possible for a human being to be in love in the abstract—whether the something which the heart has a tendency to send forth needs a concrete objective point! It may be so; the swarm of bees goes from the parent hive with only the impulse of going—its settling is a matter of chance. At any rate I may say that no philosopher, logician, metaphysician, psychologist, or other thinker, of whatsoever shade of opinion, ever held that a man could be in love with a voice.

True that the unknown has a charm—*omne ignotum pro magnifico*. If my heart did not love, at least it had a tendency to worship. Here I am on solid ground; for which of us but can understand the feelings of those men of old in Athens, who devoted their altars “To The Unknown God?” I leave the philosophers to say how far apart, or how near, are love and worship; which is first in historical sequence, which is greatest or most sacred! Being human, I cannot see any grace or beauty in worship without love.

However, be the cause what it might, I made up my mind to return home viâ Carnaclif. To go from Clare to Dublin by way of Galway and Mayo is to challenge opinion as to one’s motive. I did not challenge opinion, I distinctly avoided doing so, and I am inclined to think that there was more of Norah than of Shlee [Pg 60] nanaher in the cause of my reticence. I could bear to be “chaffed” about a superstitious feeling

respecting a mountain, or I could endure the same process regarding a girl of whom I had no high ideal, no sweet illusive memory.

I would never complete the argument, even to myself—then; later on, the cause or subject of it varied!

It was not without a certain conflict of feelings that I approached Carnaclif, even though on this occasion I approached it from the South, whereas on my former visit I had come from the North. I felt that the time went miserably slowly, and yet nothing would have induced me to admit so much. I almost regretted that I had come, even whilst I was harrowed with thoughts that I might not be able to arrive at all at Knockcalltecore. At times I felt as though the whole thing had been a dream; and again as though the romantic nimbus with which imagination had surrounded and hallowed all things must pass away and show that my unknown beings and my facts of delicate fantasy were but stern and vulgar realities.

The people at the little hotel made me welcome with the usual effusive hospitable intention of the West. Indeed, I was somewhat nettled at how well they remembered me, as for instance when the buxom landlady said:—

“I’m glad to be able to tell ye, sir, that yer carman, Andy Sullivan, is here now. He kem with a commercial from Westport to Roundwood, an’ is on[Pg 61] his way back, an’ hopin’ for a return job. I think ye’ll be able to make a bargain with him if ye wish.”

I made to this kindly speech a hasty and, I felt, an ill-conditioned reply, to the effect that I was going to stay in the neighbourhood for only a few days and would not require the car. I then went to my room, and locked my door muttering a malediction on officious people. I stayed there for some time, until I thought that probably Andy had gone on his way, and then ventured out.

I little knew Andy, however. When I came to the hall, the first person that I saw was the cheerful driver, who came forward to welcome me:—

“Musha! but it’s glad I am to see yer ’an’r. An’ it’ll be the proud man I’ll be to bhring ye back to Westport wid me.”

“I’m sorry Andy,” I began, “that I shall not want you, as I am going to stay in this neighbourhood for a few days.”

“Sthay is it? Begor! but it’s more gladerer shtill I am. Sure the mare wants a rist, an’ it’ll shute her an’ me all to nothin’; an’ thin whilst ye’re here I can be dhrivin’ yer ’an’r out to Shleenanaher. It isn’t far enough to intherfere wid her rist.”

I answered in, I thought, a dignified way—I certainly intended to be dignified:—

“I did not say, Sullivan, that I purposed going out[Pg 62] to Shleenanaher or any other place in the neighbourhood.”

“Shure no, yer ’an’r, but I remimber ye said ye’d like to see the Shiftin’ Bog; an’ thin Misther Joyce and Miss Norah is in throuble, and ye might be a comfort to thim.”

“Mr. Joyce! Miss Norah! who are they?” I felt that I was getting red and that the tone of my voice was most unnatural.

Andy’s sole answer was as comical a look as I ever saw, the central object in which was a wink which there was no mistaking. I could not face it, and had to say:

“Oh yes, I remember now! was not that the man we took on the car to a dark mountain?”

“Yes, surr—him and his daughther!”

“His daughter! I do not remember her. Surely we only took him on the car.” Again I felt angry, and with the anger an inward determination not to have Andy or anyone else prying around me when I should choose to visit even such an uncompromising phenomenon as a shifting bog. Andy, like all humourists, understood human nature, and summed up the situation conclusively in his reply—inconsequential though it was:—

“Shure yer ’an’r can thrust me; its blind or deaf an’ dumb I am, an’ them as knows me knows I’m not the man to go back on a young gintleman goin’ to luk at a bog. Sure doesn’t all young min do that[Pg 63] same? I’ve been there meself times out iv mind! There’s nothin’ in the wurld foreninst it! Lukin’ at bogs is the most intherestin’ thin’ I knows.”

There was no arguing with Andy; and as he knew the place and the people, I, then and there, concluded an engagement with him. He was to stay in Carnaclif whilst I wanted him, and then drive me over to Westport.

As I was now fairly launched on the enterprise, I thought it better to lose no time, but arranged to visit the bog early the next morning.

As I was lighting my cigar after dinner that evening Mrs. Keating, my hostess, came in to ask me a favour. She said that there was staying in the house a gentleman who went over every day to Knockcalltecore, and as she understood that I was going there in the morning, she made bold to ask if I would mind giving a seat on my car to him as he had turned his ancle that day and feared he would not be able to walk. Under the

circumstances I could only say “yes,” as it would have been a churlish thing to refuse. Accordingly I gave permission with seeming cheerfulness, but when I was alone my true feelings found vent in muttered grumbling:—“I ought to travel in an ambulance instead of a car.” “I seem never to be able to get near this Shleenanaher without an invalid.” “Once ought to be enough! but it has become the regulation thing now.” “I wish to goodness Andy would hold his infernal tongue—I’d as lief have [Pg 64] a detective after me all the time.” “It’s all very well to be a good Samaritan as a luxury—but as a profession it becomes monotonous.” “Confound Andy! I wish I’d never seen him at all.”

This last thought brought me up standing, and set me face to face with my baseless ill-humour. If I had never seen Andy I should never have heard at all of Shleenanaher. I should not have known the legend—I should not have heard Norah’s voice.

“And so,” said I to myself, “this ideal fantasy—this embodiment of a woman’s voice, has a concrete name already. Aye! a concrete name, and a sweet one too.”

And so I took another step on my way to the bog, and lost my ill-humour at the same time. When my cigar was half through and my feelings were proportionately soothed, I strolled into the bar and asked Mrs. Keating as to my companion of the morrow. She told me that he was a young engineer named Sutherland.

“What Sutherland?” I asked. Adding that I had been at school with a Dick Sutherland, who had, I believed, gone into the Irish College of Science.

“Perhaps it’s the same gentleman, sir. This is Mr. Richard Sutherland, and I’ve heard him say that he was at Stephen’s Green.”

“The same man!” said I, “this is jolly! Tell me, Mrs. Keating, what brings him here?”

“He’s doin’ some work on Knockcalltecore for Mr. Murdock, some quare thing or another. They do tell me, sir, that it’s a most mystayrious thing, wid poles [Pg 65] an’ lines an’ magnets an’ all kinds of divilments. They say that Mr. Murdock is goin’ from off of his head ever since he had the law of poor Phelim Joyce. My! but he’s the decent man, that same Mr. Joyce, an’ the Gombeen has been hard upon him.”

“What was the law suit?” I asked.

“All about a sellin’ his land on an agreement. Mr. Joyce borried some money, an’ promised if it wasn’t paid back at a certain time that he would swop lands. Poor Joyce met wid an accident comin’ home with the money from Galway an’ was late, an’ when he got home found that the Grombeen had got the sheriff to sell up his land on to him.

Mr. Joyce thried it in the Coorts, but now Murdock has got a decree on to him an' the poor man'll to give up his fat lands an' take the Gombeen's poor ones instead."

"That's bad! when has he to give up?"

"Well, I disremember meself exactly, but Mr. Sutherland will be able to tell ye all about it as ye drive over in the mornin."

"Where is he now? I should like to see him; it may be my old schoolfellow."

"Troth, it's in his bed he is; for he rises mighty arly, I can tell ye."

After a stroll through the town (so-called) to finish my cigar I went to bed also, for we started early. In the morning, when I came down to my breakfast I found Mr. Sutherland finishing his. It was my old schoolfellow; but from being a slight, pale boy, he had[Pg 66] grown into a burly, hale, stalwart man, with keen eyes and a flowing brown beard. The only pallor noticeable was the whiteness of his brow, which was ample and lofty as of old.

We greeted each other cordially, and I felt as if old times had come again, for Dick and I had been great friends at school. When we were on our way I renewed my inquiries about Shleenanaher and its inhabitants. I began by asking Sutherland as to what brought him there. He answered:—

"I was just about to ask you the same question. 'What brings you here?'"

I felt a difficulty in answering as freely as I could have wished, for I knew that Andy's alert ears were close to us, so I said:—

"I have been paying some visits along the West Coast, and I thought I would take the opportunity on my way home of investigating a very curious phenomenon of whose existence I became casually acquainted on my way here—a shifting bog."

Andy here must strike in:—

"Shure the masther is mighty fond iv bogs, intirely. I don't know there's anything in the wurruld what intherests him so much."

Here he winked at me in a manner that said as plainly as if spoken in so many words, "All right, yer 'an'r, I'll back ye up!"

Sutherland laughed as he answered:—

"Well, you're in the right place here, Art; the difficulty[Pg 67] they have in this part of the world is to find a place that is *not* bog. However, about the shifting bog on

Knockcalltecore, I can, perhaps, help you as much as any one. As you know, geology has been one of my favourite studies, and lately I have taken to investigate in my spare time the phenomena of this very subject. The bog at Shleenanaher is most interesting. As yet, however, my investigation can only be partial, but very soon I shall have the opportunity which I require.”

“How is that?” I asked.

“The difficulty arises,” he answered, “from a local feud between two men, one of them my employer, Murdock, and his neighbour, Joyce.”

“Yes,” I interrupted, “I know something of it. I was present when the sheriff’s assignment was shown to Joyce, and saw the quarrel. But how does it affect you and your study?”

“This way; the bog is partly on Murdock’s land and partly on Joyce’s, and until I can investigate the whole extent I cannot come to a definite conclusion. The feud is so bitter at present that neither man will allow the other to set foot over his boundary—or the foot of any one to whom the other is friendly. However, to-morrow the exchange of lands is to be effected, and then I shall be able to continue my investigation. I have already gone nearly all over Murdock’s present ground, and after to-morrow I shall be able to go over his new ground—up to now forbidden to me.”

“How does Joyce take his defeat?”

[Pg 68]

“Badly, poor fellow, I am told; indeed, from what I see of him, I am sure of it. They tell me that up to lately he was a bright, happy fellow, but now he is a stern, hard-faced, scowling man; essentially a man with a grievance, which makes him take a jaundiced view of everything else. The only one who is not afraid to speak to him is his daughter, and they are inseparable. It certainly is cruelly hard on him. His farm is almost an ideal one for this part of the world; it has good soil, water, shelter, trees, everything that makes a farm pretty and comfortable, as well as being good for farming purposes; and he has to change it for a piece of land as irregular in shape as the other is compact; without shelter, and partly taken up with this very bog and the utter waste and chaos which, when it shifted in former times, it left behind.”

“And how does the other, Murdock, act?”

“Shamefully; I feel so angry with him at times that I could strike him. There is not a thing he can say or do, or leave unsaid or undone, that is not aggravating and insulting to his neighbour. Only that he had the precaution to bind me to an agreement for a

given time I'm blessed if I would work for him, or with him at all—interesting as the work is in itself, and valuable as is the opportunity it gives me of studying that strange phenomenon, the shifting bog.”

“What is your work with him?” I asked: “mining or draining, or what?”

He seemed embarrassed at my question. He “hum'd[Pg 69] and 'ha'd'—then with a smile he said quite frankly:—

“The fact is that I am not at liberty to say. The worthy Gombeen Man put a special clause in our agreement that I was not during the time of my engagement to mention to any one the object of my work. He wanted the clause to run that I was never to mention it; but I kicked at that, and only signed in the modified form.”

I thought to myself “more mysteries at Shleenanaher!” Dick went on:—

“However, I have no doubt that you will very soon gather the object for yourself. You are yourself something of a scientist, if I remember?”

“Not me!” I answered. “My Great Aunt took care of that when she sent me to our old tutor. Or, indeed, to do the old boy justice, he tried to teach me something of the kind; but I found out it wasn't my vogue. Anyhow, I haven't done anything lately.”

“How do you mean?”

“I haven't got over being idle yet. It's not a year since I came into my fortune. Perhaps—indeed I hope—that I may settle down to work again.”

“I'm sure I hope so, too, old fellow,” he answered gravely. “When a man has once tasted the pleasure of real work, especially work that taxes the mind and the imagination, the world seems only a poor place without it.”

“Like the wurld widout girruls for me, or widout[Pg 70] bog for his 'an'r!” said Andy, grinning as he turned round on his seat.

Dick Sutherland, I was glad to see, did not suspect the joke. He took Andy's remark quite seriously, and said to me:—

“My dear fellow, it is delightful to find you so interested in my own topic.”

I could not allow him to think me a savant. In the first place he would very soon find me out, and would then suspect my motives ever after. And again, I had to accept Andy's statement, or let it appear that I had some other reason or motive—or what would seem even more suspicious still, none at all; so I answered:—

“My dear Dick, my zeal regarding bog is new; it is at present in its incipient stage in so far as erudition is concerned. The fact is, that although I would like to learn a lot about it, I am at the present moment profoundly ignorant on the subject.”

“Like the rest of mankind!” said Dick. “You will hardly believe that although the subject is one of vital interest to thousands of persons in our own country—one in which national prosperity is mixed up to a large extent—one which touches deeply the happiness and material prosperity of a large section of Irish people, and so helps to mould their political action, there are hardly any works on the subject in existence.”

“Surely you are mistaken,” I answered.

“No! unfortunately, I am not. There is a Danish book, but it is geographically local; and some informa[Pg 71]tion can be derived from the Blue Book containing the report of the International Commission on turf-cutting, but the special authorities are scant indeed. Some day, when you want occupation, just you try to find in any library, in any city of the world, any works of a scientific character devoted to the subject. Nay more! try to find a fair share of chapters in scientific books devoted to it. You can imagine how devoid of knowledge we are, when I tell you that even the last edition of the ‘Encyclopædia Britannica’ does not contain the heading ‘bog.’”

“You amaze me!” was all I could say.

Then as we bumped and jolted over the rough by-road Dick Sutherland gave me a rapid but masterly survey of the condition of knowledge on the subject of bogs, with special application to Irish bogs, beginning with such records as those of Giraldus Cambrensis—of Dr. Boate—of Edmund Spenser—from the time of the first invasion when the state of the land was such that, as is recorded, when a spade was driven into the ground a pool of water gathered forthwith. He told me of the extent and nature of the bog-lands—of the means taken to reclaim them, and of his hopes of some heroic measures being ultimately taken by Government to reclaim the vast Bog of Allen which remains as a great evidence of official ineptitude.

“It will be something,” he said, “to redeem the character for indifference to such matters so long established, as when Mr. King wrote two hundred years ago, ‘We live in an Island almost infamous for[Pg 72] bogs, and yet, I do not remember, that any one has attempted much concerning them.’” We were close to Knockcalltecore when he finished his impromptu lecture thus:—

“In fine, we cure bog by both a surgical and a medical process. We drain it so that its mechanical action as a sponge may be stopped, and we put in lime to kill the vital

principle of its growth. Without the other, neither process is sufficient; but together, scientific and executive man asserts his dominance.”

“Hear! hear!” said Andy. “Musha, but Dochter Wilde himself, Rest his sowl! couldn’t have put it aasier to grip. It’s a purfessionaler the young gintleman is intirely!”

We shortly arrived at the south side of the western slope of the hill, and as Andy took care to inform me, at the end of the boreen leading to the two farms, and close to the head of the Snake’s Pass.

Accordingly, I let Sutherland start on his way to Murdock’s, whilst I myself strolled away to the left, where Andy had pointed out to me, rising over the slope of the intervening spur of the hill, the top of one of the rocks which formed the Snake’s Pass. After a few minutes of climbing up a steep slope, and down a steeper one, I arrived at the place itself.

From the first moment that my eyes lit on it, it seemed to me to be a very remarkable spot, and quite worthy of being taken as the scene of strange stories, for it certainly had something ‘uncanny’ about it.

[Pg 73]

I stood in a deep valley, or rather bowl, with behind me a remarkably steep slope of green sward, whilst on either hand the sides of the hollow rose steeply—that on the left, down which I had climbed, being by far the steeper and rockier of the two. In front was the Pass itself.

It was a gorge or cleft through a great wall of rock, which rose on the seaside of the promontory formed by the hill. This natural wall, except at the actual Pass itself, rose some fifty or sixty feet over the summit of the slope on either side of the little valley; but right and left of the Pass rose two great masses of rock, like the pillars of a giant gateway. Between these lay the narrow gorge, with its walls of rock rising sheer some two hundred feet. It was about three hundred feet long, and widened slightly outward, being shaped something funnel-wise, and on the inner side was about a hundred feet wide. The floor did not go so far as the flanking rocks, but, at about two-thirds of its length, there was a perpendicular descent, like a groove cut in the rock, running sheer down to the sea, some three hundred feet below, and as far under it as we could see. From the northern of the flanking rocks which formed the Pass the rocky wall ran northwards, completely sheltering the lower lands from the west, and running into a towering rock that rose on the extreme north, and which stood up in jagged peaks something like “The Needles” off the coast of the Isle of Wight.

[Pg 74]

There was no doubt that poor Joyce's farm, thus sheltered, was an exceptionally favoured spot, and I could well understand how loth he must be to leave it.

Murdock's land, even under the enchantment of its distance, seemed very different, and was just as bleak as Sutherland had told me. Its south-western end ran down towards the Snake's Pass. I mounted the wall of rock on the north of the Pass to look down, and was surprised to find that down below me was the end of a large plateau of some acres in extent which ran up northward, and was sheltered north and west by a somewhat similar formation of rock to that which protected Joyce's land. This, then, was evidently the place called the "Cliff Fields" of which mention had been made at Widow Kelligan's.

The view from where I stood was one of ravishing beauty. Westward in the deep sea, under grey clouds of endless variety, rose a myriad of clustering islets, some of them covered with grass and heather, where cattle and sheep grazed; others were mere rocks rising boldly from the depths of the sea, and surrounded by a myriad of screaming wild-fowl. As the birds dipped and swept and wheeled in endless circles, their white breasts and grey wings varying in infinite phase of motion—and as the long Atlantic swell, tempered by its rude shocks on the outer fringe of islets, broke in fleecy foam and sent living streams through the crevices of the rocks and sheets of white water over the boulders where the sea rack rose and fell, I thought [Pg 75] that the earth could give nothing more lovely or more grand.

Andy's voice beside me grated on me unpleasantly:—

"Musha! but it's the fine sight it is entirely; it only wants wan thing."

"What does it want?" I asked, rather shortly.

"Begor, a bit of bog to put your arrum around while ye're lukin' at it," and he grinned at me knowingly.

He was incorrigible. I jumped down from the rock and scrambled into the boreen. My friend Sutherland had gone on his way to Murdock's, so calling to Andy to wait till I returned, I followed him.

I hurried up the boreen and caught up with him, for his progress was slow along the rough laneway. In reality I felt that it would be far less awkward having him with me; but I pretended that my only care was for his sprained ankle. Some emotions make hypocrites of us all!

With Dick on my arm limping along we passed up the breen, leaving Joyce's house on our left. I looked out anxiously in case I should see Joyce—or his daughter; but there was no sign of anyone about. In a few minutes Dick, pausing for a moment, pointed out to me the shifting bog.

“You see,” he said, “those two poles? the line between them marks the mearing of the two lands. We have worked along the bog down from there.” He pointed as he spoke to some considerable distance up the hill to the north where the bog began to be dangerous, and [Pg 76] where it curved around the base of a grassy mound, or shoulder of the mountain.

“Is it a dangerous bog?” I queried.

“Rather! It is just as bad a bit of soft bog as ever I saw. I wouldn't like to see anyone or anything that I cared for try to cross it!”

“Why not?”

“Because at any moment they might sink through it; and then, good-bye—no human strength or skill could ever save them.”

“Is it a quagmire, then? or like a quicksand?”

“Like either, or both. Nay! it is more treacherous than either. You may call it, if you are poetically inclined, a ‘carpet of death!’ What you see is simply a film or skin of vegetation of a very low kind, mixed with the mould of decayed vegetable fibre and grit and rubbish of all kinds which have somehow got mixed into it, floating on a sea of ooze and slime—of something half liquid half solid, and of an unknown depth. It will bear up a certain weight, for there is a degree of cohesion in it; but it is not all of equal cohesive power, and if one were to step on the wrong spot—” He was silent.

“What then?”

“Only a matter of specific gravity! A body suddenly immersed would, when the air of the lungs had escaped and the *rigor mortis* had set in, probably sink a considerable distance; then it would rise after nine days, when decomposition began to generate gases, and make an effort to reach the top. Not succeeding in [Pg 77] this, it would ultimately waste away, and the bones would become incorporated with the existing vegetation somewhere about the roots, or would lie among the slime at the bottom.”

“Well,” said I, “for real cold-blooded horror, commend me to your men of science.”

This passage brought us to the door of Murdock's house—a plain, strongly-built cottage, standing on a knoll of rock that cropped up from the plateau round it. It was surrounded with a garden hedged in by a belt of pollard ash and stunted alders.

Murdock had evidently been peering surreptitiously through the window of his sitting-room, for as we passed in by the gate he came out to the porch. His salutation was not an encouraging one:—

“You're somethin' late this mornin', Mr. Sutherland. I hope ye didn't throuble to delay in ordher to bring up this sthrange gintleman. Ye know how particular I am about any wan knowin' aught of me affairs.”

Dick flushed up to the roots of his hair, and, much to my surprise, burst out quite in a passionate way:—

“Look you here, Mr. Murdock, I'm not going to take any cheek from you, so don't you give any. Of course I don't expect a fellow of your stamp to understand a gentleman's feelings—damn it! how can you have a gentleman's understanding when you haven't even a man's? You ought to know right well that what I said I would do, I shall do. I despise you and your miserable secrets and your miserable trickery too much to take to myself any[Pg 78]thing in which they have a part; but when I bring with me a friend, but for whom I shouldn't have been here at all—for I couldn't have walked—I expect that neither he nor I shall be insulted. For two pins I'd not set foot on your dirty ground again!”

Here Murdock interrupted him:—

“Aisy now! ye're undher agreement to me; an' I hould ye to it.”

“So you can, you miserable scoundrel, because you know I shall keep my word; but remember that I expect proper treatment; and remember, too, that if I want an assistant I am to have one.”

Again Murdock interrupted—but this time much more soothingly:

“Aisy! Aisy! haven't I done every livin' thing ye wanted—and helped ye meself every time? Sure arn't I yer assistant?”

“Yes, because you—you wanted to get something, and couldn't do without me. And mind this! you can't do without me yet. But be so good as to remember that I choose my own assistant; and I shall not choose you unless I like. You can keep me here, and pay me for staying as we agreed; but don't you think that I could fool you if I would?”

“Ye wouldn't do that, I know—an' me thrusted ye!”

“You trusted me! you miserable wretch—yes! you trusted me by a deed, signed, sealed, and delivered. I don’t owe you anything for that.”

“Mr. Sutherland, sir! ye’re too sharp wid me. Yer[Pg 79] frind is very welkim. Do what you like—go where you choose—bring whom you will—only get on wid the worrk and kape it saycret.”

“Aye!” sneered Dick, “you are ready to climb down because you want something done, and you know that this is the last day for work on this side of the hill. Well, let me tell you this—for you’ll do anything for greed—that you and I together, doing all we can, shall not be able to cover all the ground. I haven’t said a word to my friend—and I don’t know how he will take any request from you after your impudence; but he is my friend, and a clever man, and if you ask him nicely, perhaps he will be good enough to stay and lend us a hand.”

The man made me a low bow and asked me in suitable terms if I would kindly stop part of the day and help in the work. Needless to say I acquiesced. Murdock eyed me keenly, as though to make up his mind whether or no I recollected him—he evidently remembered me—but I affected ignorance, and he seemed satisfied. I was glad to notice that the blow of Joyce’s riding switch still remained across his face as a livid scar. He went away to get the appliances ready for work, in obedience to a direction from Sutherland.

“One has to cut that hound’s corns rather roughly,” said the latter, with a nice confusion of metaphors, as soon as Murdock had disappeared.

Dick then told me that his work was to make magnetic experiments to ascertain, if possible, if there was any iron hidden in the ground.

[Pg 80]

“The idea,” he said, “is Murdock’s own, and I have neither lot nor part in it. My work is simply to carry out his ideas, with what mechanical skill I can command, and to invent or arrange such appliances as he may want. Where his theories are hopelessly wrong, I point this out to him, but he goes on or stops just as he chooses. You can imagine that a fellow of his low character is too suspicious to ever take a hint from any one! We have been working for three weeks past, and have been all over the solid ground, and are just finishing the bog.”

“How did you first come across him?” I asked.

“Very nearly a month ago he called on me in Dublin, having been sent by old Gascoigne, of the College of Science. He wanted me to search for iron on his property.

I asked if it was regarding opening mines? he said, 'no, just to see if there should be any old iron lying about.' As he offered me excellent terms for my time, I thought he must have some good—or rather I should say some strong motive. I know now, though he has never told me, that he is trying for the money that is said to have been lost and buried here by the French after Humbert's expedition to Killala."

"How do you work?" I asked.

"The simplest thing in the world; just carry about a strong magnet—only we have to do it systematically."

"And have you found anything as yet?"

"Only old scraps—horseshoes, nails, buckles, buttons; our most important find was the tire of a wheel. The[Pg 81] old Gombeen thought he had it that time!" and Dick laughed.

"How did you manage the bog?"

"That is the only difficult part; we have poles on opposite sides of the bog with lines between them. The magnet is fixed, suspended from a free wheel, and I let it down to the centre from each side in turn. If there were any attraction I should feel it by the thread attached to the magnet which I hold in my hand."

"It is something like fishing?"

"Exactly."

Murdoch now returned and told us that he was ready, so we all went to work. I kept with Sutherland at the far side of the bog, Murdoch remaining on the near side. We planted or rather placed a short stake in the solid ground, as close as we could get it to the bog, and steadied it with a guy from the top; the latter I held, whilst Murdoch, on the other side, fulfilled a similar function. A thin wire connected the two stakes; on this Sutherland now fixed the wheel, from which the magnet depended. On each side we deflected the stake until the magnet almost touched the surface of the bog. After a few minutes' practice I got accustomed to the work, and acquired sufficient dexterity to be able to allow the magnet to run freely. Inch by inch we went over the surface of the bog, moving slightly to the south-west each time we shifted, following the edges of the bog. Every little while Dick had to change sides, so as to cover the whole extent of the bog, and when he came[Pg 82] round again had to go back to where he had last stopped on the same side.

All this made the process very tedious, and the day was drawing to a close when we neared the posts set up to mark the bounds of the two lands. Several times during the day Joyce had come up from his cottage and inspected our work, standing at his own side of the post. He looked at me closely, but did not seem to recognize me. I nodded to him once, but he did not seem to see my salutation, and I did not repeat it.

All day long I never heard the sweet voice; and as we returned to Carnaclif after a blank day—blank in every sense of the word—the air seemed chiller and the sunset less beautiful than before. The last words I heard on the mountain were from Murdock:—

“Nothin’ to-morrow, Mr. Sutherland! I’ve a flittin’ to make, but I pay the day all the same; I hould ye to your conthtract. An’ remember, surr, we’re in no hurry wid the wurrk now, so ye’ll not need help any more.”

Andy made no remark till we were well away from the hill, and then said, dryly:—

“I’m afeerd yer ’an’r has had but a poor day; ye luk as if ye hadn’t seen a bit iv bog at all, at all. Gee up, ye ould Corncrake! the gintlemin does be hurryin’ home fur their tay, an’ fur more wurrk wid bogs to-morra!”

[Pg 83]

CHAPTER V. ON KNOCKNACAR.

When Sutherland and I had finished dinner that evening we took up the subject of bogs where we had left it in the morning. This was rather a movement of my own making, for I felt an awkwardness about touching on the special subject of the domestic relations of the inhabitants of Knockcalltecore. After several interesting remarks, Dick said:—

“There is one thing that I wish to investigate thoroughly, the correlation of bog and special geological formations.”

“For instance?” said I.

“Well, specially with regard to limestone. Just at this part of the country I find it almost impossible to pursue the investigation any more than Van Troil could have pursued snake studies in Iceland.”

“Is there no limestone at all in this part of the country?” I queried.

“Oh yes, in lots of places, but as yet I have not been able to find any about here. I say ‘as yet’ on purpose, because it seems to me that there must be some on Knockcalltecore.”

[Pg 84]

Needless to say the conversation here became to me much more interesting; Dick went on:—

“The main feature of the geological formation of all this part of the country is the vast amount of slate and granite, either in isolated patches or lying side by side. And as there are instances of limestone found in quaint ways, I am not without hopes that we may yet find the same phenomenon.”

“Where do you find the instances of these limestone formations?” I queried, for I felt that as he was bound to come back to, or towards Shleenanaher, I could ease my own mind by pretending to divert his from it.

“Well, as one instance, I can give you the Corrib River—the stream that drains Lough Corrib into Galway Bay; in fact, the river on which the town of Galway is built. At one place one side of the stream all is granite, and the other is all limestone; I believe the river runs over the union of the two formations. Now, if there should happen to be a similar formation, even in the least degree, at Knockcalltecore, it will be a great thing.

“Why will it be a great thing?” I asked.

“Because there is no lime near the place at all; because with limestone on the spot a hundred things could be done that, as things are at present, would not repay the effort. With limestone we could reclaim the bogs cheaply all over the neighbourhood—in fact a lime-kiln there would be worth a small fortune. We could build walls in the right places; I can see how a lovely little harbour could be made there at a small expense.[Pg 85] And then beyond all else would be the certainty—which is at present in my mind only a hope or a dream—that we could fathom the secret of the shifting bog, and perhaps abolish or reclaim it.”

“This is exceedingly interesting,” said I, as I drew my chair closer. And I only spoke the exact truth, for at that moment I had no other thought in my mind. “Do you mind telling me more, Dick? I suppose you are not like Lamb’s Scotchman that will not broach a half-formed idea!”

“Not the least in the world. It will be a real pleasure to have such a good listener. To begin at the beginning, I was much struck with that old cavity on the top of the hill. It is one of the oddest things I have ever seen or heard of. If it were in any other place or

amongst any other geological formation I would think its origin must have been volcanic. But here such a thing is quite impossible. It was evidently once a lake.”

“So goes the legend. I suppose you have heard it?”

“Yes! and it rather confirms my theory. Legends have always a base in fact; and whatever cause gave rise to the myth of St. Patrick and the King of the Snakes, the fact remains that the legend is correct in at least one particular—that at some distant time there was a lake or pond on the spot.”

“Are you certain?”

“A very cursory glance satisfied me of that. I could[Pg 86] not go into the matter thoroughly, for that old wolf of mine was so manifestly impatient that I should get to his wild-goose chase for the lost treasure-chest, that the time and opportunity were wanting. However, I saw quite enough to convince me.”

“Well, how do you account for the change? What is your theory regarding the existence of limestone?”

“Simply this, that a lake or reservoir on the top of a mountain means the existence of a spring or springs. Now springs in granite or hard slate do not wear away the substance of the rock in the same way as they do when they come through limestone. And moreover, the natures of the two rocks are quite different. There are fissures and cavities in the limestone which are wanting, or which are at any rate not so common or perpetually recurrent in the other rock. Now if it should be, as I surmise, that the reservoir was ever fed by a spring passing through a streak or bed of limestone, we shall probably find that in the progress of time the rock became worn and that the spring found a way in some other direction—either some natural passage through a gap or fissure already formed, or by a channel made for itself.”

“And then?”

“And then the process is easily understandable. The spring naturally sent its waters where there was the least resistance, and they found their way out on some level lower than the top of the hill. You perhaps noticed the peculiar formation of the hill, specially on[Pg 87] its west side—great sloping tables of rock suddenly ended by a wall of a different stratum—a sort of serrated edge all the way down the inclined plane; you could not miss seeing it, for it cuts the view like the teeth of a saw! Now if the water, instead of rising to the top and then trickling down the old channel, which is still noticeable, had once found a vent on one of those shelving planes it would gradually fill up the whole cavity formed by the two planes, unless in the meantime it

found some natural escape. As we know, the mountain is covered in a number of places with a growth or formation of bog, and this water, once accumulating under the bog, would not only saturate it, but would raise it—being of less specific gravity than itself—till it actually floated. Given such a state of things as this, it would only require sufficient time for the bog to become soft and less cohesive than when it was more dry and compact, and you have a dangerous bog, something like the Carpet of Death that we spoke of this morning.”

“So far I can quite understand.” said I. “But if this be so, how can the bog shift as this one has undoubtedly done? It seems, so far, to be hedged with walls of rock. Surely these cannot move.”

Sutherland smiled. “I see you do apprehend! Now we are at the second stage. Did you notice as we went across the hill side that there were distinct beds or banks of clay?”

“Certainly! do they come in?”

[Pg 88]

“Of course! If my theory is correct, the shifting is due to them.”

“Explain!”

“So far as I can. But here I am only on surmise, or theory pure and simple. I may be all wrong, or I may be right—I shall know more before I am done with Shleenanaher. My theory is that the shifting is due to the change in the beds of clay, as for instance by rains washing them by degrees to lower levels—this is notably the case in that high clay bank just opposite the Snake’s Pass. The rocks are fixed, and so the clay becomes massed in banks between them, perhaps aided in the first instance by trees falling across the chasm or opening. But then the perpetually accumulating water from the spring has to find a way of escape; and as it cannot cut through the rock it rises to the earth bed, till it either tops the bed of clay which confines it or finds a gap or fissure through which it can escape. In either case it makes a perpetually deepening channel for itself, for the soft clay yields little by little to the stream passing over it, and so the surface of the outer level falls, and the water escapes, to perhaps find new reservoirs ready made to receive it, and a similar process as before takes place.”

“Then the bog extends and the extended part takes the place of the old bog which gradually drains.”

“Just so! but such would of course depend on the level; there might be two or more reservoirs, each with a deep bottom of its own and united only near the[Pg

89] surface; or if the bank or bed of clay lay on the surface of one shelving rock, the water would naturally drain to the lowest point and the upper land would be shallow in proportion.”

“But,” I ventured to remark, “if this be so, one of two things must happen; either the water would wear away the clay so quickly, that the accumulation would not be dangerous, or else the process would be a very gradual one, and would not be attended with such results as we are told of. There would be a change in the position of the bog, but there would not be the upheaval and complete displacement and chaos that I have heard of, for instance, with regard to this very bog of Knockcalltecre.

“Your ‘if’ is a great peacemaker! If what I have supposed were all, then the result would be as you have said; but there are lots of other supposes; as yet we have only considered one method of change. Suppose, for instance, that the water found a natural means of escape—as, for instance, where this very bog sends a stream over the rocks into the Cliff Fields—it would not attack the clay bed at all, unless under some unusual pressure. Then suppose that when such pressure had come the water did not rise and top the clay bed, but that it found a small fissure part of the way down. Suppose there were several such reservoirs as I have mentioned—and from the formation of the ground I think it very likely, for in several places jutting rocks from either side come close together, and suggest a sort[Pg 90] of gap or canon in the rock formation, easily forming it into a reservoir. Then if the barrier between the two upper ones were to be weakened, and a sudden weight of water were to be thrown on the lower wall; suppose such wall were to partially collapse, and bring down, say, a clay bank, which would make a temporary barrier loftier than any yet existing, but only temporary; suppose that the quick accumulation of waters behind this barrier lifted the whole mass of water and slime and bog to its utmost height. Then, when such obstruction had been reached, the whole lower barrier, weakened by infiltration and attacked with sudden and new force, would give way at once, and the stream, kept down from above by the floating bog, would force its way along the bed rock and lift the whole spongy mass resting on it. Then with this new extent of bog suddenly saturated and weakened—demoralized as it were—and devoid of resisting power, the whole floating mass of the upper bog might descend on it, mingle with it, become incorporated with its semi-fluid substance, and form a new and dangerous quagmire incapable of sustaining solid weight, but leaving behind on the higher level only the refuse and sediment of its former existence—all the rubble and grit too heavy to float, and which would gradually settle down on the upper bed rock.”

“Really, Dick, you put it most graphically. What a terrible thing it would be to live on the line of such a change.”

“Terrible, indeed! At such a moment a house in the[Pg 91] track of the movement— unless it were built on the rock—would go down like a ship in a storm. Go down solid and in a moment, without warning and without hope!”

“Then with such a neighbour as a shifting bog, the only safe place for a house would be on a rock.”—Before my eyes, as I spoke, rose the vision of Murdock’s house, resting on its knoll of rock, and I was glad for one reason that there, at least, would be safety for Joyce—and his daughter.

“Exactly! Now Murdock’s house is as safe as a church. I must look at his new house when I go up to-morrow.”

As I really did not care about Murdock’s future, I asked no further questions; so we sat in silence and smoked in the gathering twilight.

There was a knock at the door. I called “Come in.” The door opened slowly, and through a narrow opening Andy’s shock head presented itself.

“Come in, Andy!” said Dick. “Come here and try if you can manage a glass of punch!”

“Begor!” was Andy’s sole expression of acquiescence. The punch was brewed and handed to him.

“Is that as good as Widow Kelligan’s?” I asked him. Andy grinned:—

“All punch is good, yer ’an’rs. Here’s both yer good healths, an’ here’s ‘The Girls’ an’”— turning to me, “the Bog.” He winked, threw up his hand—and put down the empty glass. “Glory be to God” was his grace after—drink.

[Pg 92]

“Well, Andy! what is it?” said Dick.

“I’ve heerd,” said he, “that yer ’an’rs isn’t goin’ in the mornin’ to Shleenanaher, and I thought that yez couldn’t do betther nor dhrive over to Knocknacar to-morra an’ spind the day there.”

“And why Knocknacar?” said I.

Andy twirled his cap between his hands in a sheepish way. I felt that he was acting a part, but could not see any want of reality. With a little hesitation he said:—

“I’ve gother from what yer ’an’rs wor sayin’ on the car this mornin’, that yez is both intherested in bogs—an’ there’s the beautifulest bit iv bog in all the counthry there beyant. An’, moreover, it’s a lovely shpot intirely. If you gintlemin have nothin’ better to do, ye’d dhrive over there—if ye’d take me advice.”

“What kind of bog is it, Andy?” said Dick. “Is there anythin’ peculiar about it. Does it shift?”

Andy grinned a most unaccountable grin:—

“Begor, it does, surr!” he answered quickly. “Sure all bogs does shift!” And he grinned again.

“Andy,” said Dick, laughing, “you have some joke in your mind. What is it?”

“Oh, sorra wan, surr—ask the masther there.”

As it did not need a surgical operation to get the joke intended into the head of a man—of whatever nationality—who understood Andy’s allusion, and as I did not want to explain it, I replied:—

“Oh, don’t ask me, Andy; I’m no authority on the[Pg 93] subject,” and I looked rather angrily at him, when Dick was not looking.

Andy hastened to put matters right—he evidently did not want to lose his day’s hire on the morrow:—

“Yer ’an’rs! ye may take me wurrd for it—there’s a bog beyant at Knocknacar which’ll intherest yez intirely—I remimber it meself a lot higher up the mountain whin I was a spalpeen—an’ it’s been crawlin’ down iver since. It’s a mighty quare shpot intirely!”

This settled the matter, and we arranged forthwith to start early on the following morning for Knocknacar, Andy, before he left, having a nightcap—out of a tumbler.

We were astir fairly early in the morning, and having finished a breakfast sufficiently substantial to tide us over till dinner time, we started on our journey. The mare was in good condition for work, the road was level and the prospect fine, and altogether we enjoyed our drive immensely. As we looked back we could see Knockcalltecore rising on the edge of the coast away to our right, and seemingly surrounded by a network of foam-girt islands, for a breeze was blowing freshly from the south-west.

At the foot of the mountain—or rather, hill—there was a small, clean-looking sheebeen. Here Andy stopped and put up the mare; then he brought us up a narrow lane bounded by thick hedges of wild briar to where we could see the bog which was

the object of our visit. Dick's foot was still painful, so I had to give him an arm, as on yesterday. We crossed over two fields, from which the stones had been collected and placed in heaps. The land was evidently very rocky, for here and there—more especially in the lower part—the grey rock cropped up in places. At the top of the farthest field, Andy pointed out an isolated rock rising sharply from the grass.

“Look there, yer ’an’rs; whin I remimber first, that rock was as far aff from the bog as we are now from the boreen—an’ luk at it now! why, the bog is close to it, so it is.” He then turned and looked at a small heap of stones. “Murther! but there is a quare thing. Why that heap, not a year ago, was as high as the top iv that rock. Begor, it’s bein’ buried, it is!”

Dick looked quite excited as he turned to me and said:—

“Why, Art, old fellow! here is the very thing we were talking about. This bog is an instance of the gradual changing of the locality of a bog by the filtration of its water through the clay beds resting on the bed-rock. I wonder if the people here will let me make some investigations! Andy, who owns this land?”

“Oh, I can tell yer ’an’r that well enough; it’s Mistor Moriarty from Knockaltecore. Him, surr,” turning to me, “that ye seen at Widda Kelligan’s that night in the shtorm.”

“Does he farm it himself?”

“No, surr—me father rints it. The ould mare was riz on this very shpot.”

[Pg 95]

“Do you think your father will let me make some investigations here, if I get Mr. Moriarty’s permission also?”

“Throth, an’ he will, surr—wid all the plisure in life—iv coorse,” he added, with native shrewdness, “if there’s no harrum done to his land—or, if there’s harrum done, it’s ped for.”

“All right, Andy,” said I; “I’ll be answerable for that part of it.”

We went straight away with Andy to see the elder Sullivan. We found him in his cabin at the foot of the hill—a hale old man of nearly eighty, with all his senses untouched, and he was all that could be agreeable. I told him who I was, and that I could afford to reimburse him if any damage should be done. Dick explained to him that, so far from doing harm, what he would do would probably prevent the spreading of the bog, and would in such case much enhance the value of his holding, and in addition give him the use of a spring on his land. Accordingly we went back to make further

investigations. Dick had out his note-book in an instant, and took accurate note of everything; he measured and probed the earth, tapped the rocks with the little geological hammer which he always carried, and finally set himself down to make an accurate map of the locality, I acting as his assistant in the measurements. Andy left us for a while, but presently appeared, hot and flushed. As he approached, Dick observed:—

“Andy has been drinking the health of all his relatives.[Pg 96] We must keep him employed here, or we may get a spill going home.”

The object of his solicitude came and sat on a rock beside us, and looked on. Presently he came over, and said to Dick:—

“Yer ’an’r, can I help ye in yer wurrk? Sure, if ye only want wan hand to help ye, mayhap mine id do. An’ thin his ’an’r here might hop up to the top iv the mountain; there’s a mighty purty view there intirely, an’ he could enjoy it, though ye can’t get up wid yer lame fut.”

“Good idea!” said Dick. “You go up on top, Art. This is very dull work, and Andy can hold the tape for me as well as you or anyone else. You can tell me all about it when you come down.”

“Do, yer ’an’r. Tell him all ye see!” said Andy, as I prepared to ascend. “If ye go up soft be the shady parts, mayhap ye’d shtrike another bit of bog be the way.”

I had grown so suspicious of Andy’s *double entente*, that I looked at him keenly, to see if there was any fresh joke on; but his face was immovably grave, and he was seemingly intent on the steel tape which he was holding.

I proceeded up the mountain. It was a very pleasant one to climb, or rather to ascend, for it was nearly all covered with grass. Here and there, on the lower half, were clumps of stunted trees, all warped eastwards by the prevailing westerly wind—alders, mountain-ash, and thorn. Higher up these disappeared, but there was still a pleasant sprinkling of hedgerows. As the verdure grew on the[Pg 97] south side higher than on the north or west, I followed it and drew near the top. As I got closer, I heard some one singing. “By Jove,” said I to myself, “the women of this country have sweet voices!”—indeed, this was by no means the first time I had noticed the fact. I listened, and as I drew nearer to the top of the hill, I took care not to make any noise which might disturb the singer. It was an odd sensation to stand in the shadow of the hill-top, on that September day, and listen to *Ave Maria* sung by the unknown voice of an unseen singer. I made a feeble joke all to myself:—

“My experience of the girls of the West is that of *vox et præterea nihil*.”

There was an infinity of pathos in the voice—some sweet, sad yearning, as though the earthly spirit was singing with an unearthly voice—and the idea came on me with a sense of conviction that some deep unhappiness underlay that appeal to the Mother of Sorrows. I listened, and somehow felt guilty. It almost seemed that I was profaning some shrine of womanhood, and I took myself to task severely in something of the following strain:—

“That poor girl has come to this hill top for solitude. She thinks she is alone with Nature and Nature’s God, and pours forth her soul freely; and you, wretched, tainted man, break in on the sanctity of her solitude—of her prayer. For shame! for shame!”

Then—men are all hypocrites!—I stole guiltily forward to gain a peep at the singer who thus communed with [Pg 98] Nature and Nature’s God, and the sanctity of whose solitude and prayer I was violating.

A tuft of heath grew just at the top; behind this I crouched, and parting its luxuriance looked through.

For my pains I only saw a back, and that back presented in the most ungainly way of which graceful woman is capable. She was seated on the ground, not even raised upon a stone. Her knees were raised to the level of her shoulders, and her outstretched arms confined her legs below the knees—she was, in fact, in much the same attitude as boys are at games of cock-fighting. And yet there was something very touching in the attitude—something of self-oblivion so complete that I felt a renewed feeling of guiltiness as an intruder.—Whether her reasons be æsthetic, moral, educational, or disciplinary, no self-respecting woman ever sits in such a manner when a man is by.

The song died away, and then there was a gulp and a low suppressed moan. Her head drooped between her knees, her shoulders shook, and I could see that she was weeping. I wished to get away, but for a few moments I was afraid to stir lest she should hear me. The solitude, now that the vibration of her song had died out of the air, seemed oppressive. In those few seconds a new mood seemed to come over her. She suddenly abandoned her dejected position, and, with the grace and agility of a young fawn, leaped to her feet. I could see that she was tall and exquisitely built, on the slim side—what the French call *svelte*. With a grace and pathos which were [Pg 99] beyond expression she stretched forth her arms towards the sea, as to something that she loved, and then, letting them fall by her side, remained in a kind of waking dream.

I slipped away, and when I was well out of sight, ran down the hill about a hundred yards, and then commenced the re-ascent, making a fair proportion of noise as I came—now striking at the weeds with my heavy stick, now whistling, and again humming a popular air.

When I gained the top of the hill I started as though surprised at seeing any one, much less a girl, in such a place. I think I acted the part well—again I say that at times the hypocrite in us can be depended upon! She was looking straight towards me, and certainly, so far as I could tell, took me in good faith. I doffed my hat and made some kind of stammering salutation as one would to a stranger—the stammering not being, of course, in the routine of such occasions, but incidental to the special circumstances. She made me a graceful curtsey, and a blush overspread her cheeks. I was afraid to look too hard at her, especially at first, lest I should frighten her away, but I stole a glance towards her at every moment when I could.

How lovely she was! I had heard that along the West coast of Ireland there are traces of Spanish blood and Spanish beauty; and here was a living evidence of the truth of the hearsay. Not even at sunset in the parades of Madrid or Seville, could one see more[Pg 100] perfect beauty of the Spanish type—beauty perhaps all the more perfect for being tempered with northern calm. As I said, she was tall and beautifully proportioned. Her neck was long and slender, gracefully set in her rounded shoulders, and supporting a beautiful head borne with the free grace of the lily on its stem. There is nothing in woman more capable of complete beauty than the head, and, crowned as this head was with a rich mass of hair as black and as glossy as the raven's wing, it was a thing to remember. She wore no bonnet, but a grey homespun shawl was thrown loosely over her shoulders; her hair was coiled in one rich mass at the top and back of her head, and fastened with an old-fashioned tortoiseshell comb. Her face was a delicate oval, showing what Rossetti calls "the pure wide curve from ear to chin." Luxuriant black eyebrows were arched over large black-blue eyes swept by curling lashes of extraordinary length, and showed off the beauty of a rounded, ample forehead—somewhat sunburnt, be it said. The nose was straight and wide between the eyes, with delicate sensitive nostrils; the chin wide and firm, and the mouth full and not small, with lips of scarlet, forming a perfect Cupid's bow, and just sufficiently open to show two rows of small teeth, regular and white as pearls. Her dress was that of a well-to-do peasant—a sort of body or jacket of printed chintz over a dress or petticoat of homespun of the shade of crimson given by a madder dye. The dress was short, and showed trim ankles in grey homespun with pretty feet in thick country-made wide-toed[Pg 101] shoes. Her hands were shapely, with long fingers, and were very sunburnt and manifestly used to work.

As she stood there, with the western breeze playing with her dress and tossing about the stray ends of her raven tresses, I thought that I had never in my life seen anything so lovely. And yet she was only a peasant girl, manifestly and unmistakably, and had no pretence of being anything else.

She was evidently as shy as I was, and for a little while we were both silent. As is usual, the woman was the first to recover her self-possession, and whilst I was torturing my brain in vain for proper words to commence a conversation, she remarked:—

“What a lovely view there is from here. I suppose, sir, you have never been on the top of this hill before?”

“Never,” said I, feeling that I was equivocating if not lying. “I had no idea that there was anything so lovely here.” I meant this to have a double meaning, although I was afraid to make it apparent to her. “Do you often come up here?” I continued.

“Not very often. It is quite a long time since I was here last; but the view seems fairer and dearer to me every time I come.” As she spoke the words, my memory leaped back to that eloquent gesture as she raised her arms.

I thought I might as well improve the occasion and lay the foundation for another meeting without giving offence or fright, so I said:—

“This hill is quite a discovery; and as I am likely to [Pg 102] be here in this neighbourhood for some time, I dare say I shall often find myself enjoying this lovely view.”

She made no reply or comment whatever to this statement. I looked over the scene, and it was certainly a fit setting for so lovely a figure; but it was the general beauty of the scene, and not, as had hitherto been the case, one part of it only that struck my fancy. Away on the edge of the coast-line rose Knockcalltecore; but it somehow looked lower than before, and less important. The comparative insignificance was of course due to the fact that I was regarding it from a superior altitude, but it seemed to me that it was because it did not now seem to interest me so much. That sweet voice through the darkness seemed very far away now—here was a voice as sweet, and in such a habitation! The invisible charm with which Shleenanaher had latterly seemed to hold me—or the spell which it had laid upon me, seemed to pass away, and I found myself smiling that I should ever have entertained such an absurd idea.

Youth is not naturally stand off, and before many minutes the two visitors to the hill-top had laid aside reserve and were chatting freely. I had many questions to ask of

local matters, for I wanted to find out what I could of my fair companion without seeming to be too inquisitive; but she seemed to fight shy of all such topics, and when we parted my ignorance of her name and surroundings remained as profound as it had been at first. She, however, wanted to know all about London. She knew it only by hearsay; for some of the questions which she [Pg 103] asked me were amazingly simple—manifestly she had something of the true peasant belief that London is the only home of luxury, power, and learning. She was so frank, however, and made her queries with such a gentle modesty, that something within my heart seemed to grow, and grow; and the conviction was borne upon me that I stood before my fate. Sir Geraint's ejaculation rose to my lips:—

“Here, by God's rood, is the one maid for me!”

One thing gave me much delight. The sadness seemed to have passed quite away—for the time at all events. Her eyes, which had at the first been glassy with recent tears, were now lit with keenest interest, and she seemed to have entirely forgotten the cause of her sorrow.

“Good!” thought I to myself complacently. “At least I have helped to brighten her life, though it be but for one hour.”

Even whilst I was thinking she rose up suddenly—we had been sitting on a boulder—“Goodness! how the time passes!” she said; “I must run home at once.”

“Let me see you home,” I said eagerly. Her great eyes opened, and she said with a grave simplicity that took me “way down” to use American slang:-

“Why?”

“Just to see that you get home safely,” I stammered. She laughed merrily:—

“No fear for me. I'm safer on this mountain than any [Pg 104] where in the world—almost,” she added, and the grave, sad look stole again over her face.

“Well, but I would like to,” I urged. Again she answered with grave, sweet seriousness:—

“Oh, no, sir: that would not do. What would folk say to see me walking with a gentleman like you?” The answer was conclusive. I shrugged my shoulders because I was a man, and had a man's petulance under disappointment; and then I took off my hat and bowed—not ironically, but cheerfully, so as to set her at ease—for I had the good fortune to have been bred a gentleman. My reward came when she held out her hand frankly and said:—

“Good-bye, sir,” gave a little graceful curtsy, and tripped away over the edge of the hill.

I stood bareheaded looking at her until she disappeared. Then I went to the edge of the little plateau and looked over the distant prospect of land and sea, with a heart so full that the tears rushed to my eyes. There are those who hold that any good emotion is an act of prayer! If this be so, then on that wild mountain-top as fervent a prayer as the heart of man is capable of went up to the Giver of all good things!

When I reached the foot of the mountain I found Dick and Andy waiting for me at the sheebeen. As I came close Dick called out:—

“What a time you were, old chap. I thought you had taken root on the hill-top! What on earth kept you?”

[Pg 105]

“The view from the top is lovely beyond compare,” I said, as an evasive reply.

“Is what ye see there more lovelier nor what ye see at Shleenanaher?” said Andy with seeming gravity.

“Far more so!” I replied instantly and with decision.

“I tould yer ’an’r there was somethin’ worth lukin’ at,” said he. “An’ may I ask if yer ’an’r seen any bog on the mountain?”

I looked at him with a smile. I seemed to rather like his chaff now. “Begor I did, yer ’an’r,” I answered, mimicking his accent.

We had proceeded on our way for a long distance, Andy apparently quite occupied with his driving—Dick studying his note-book, and I quite content with my thoughts—when Andy said, apropos of nothing and looking at nobody:—

“I seen a young girrul comin’ down the hill beyant, a wee while before yer ’an’r. I hope she didn’t disturb any iv yez?”

The question passed unnoticed, for Dick apparently did not hear and I did not feel called upon to answer it.

I could not have truthfully replied with a simple negative or positive.

[Pg 106]

CHAPTER VI. CONFIDENCES.

The next day Sutherland would have to resume his work with Murdock—but on his newly-acquired land. I could think of his visit to Knockcalltecore without a twinge of jealousy; and for my own part I contemplated a walk in a different direction. Dick was full of his experiment regarding the bog at Knocknacar, and could talk of nothing else—a disposition of things which suited me all to nothing, for I had only to acquiesce in all he said, and let my own thoughts have free and pleasant range.

“I have everything cut and dry in my head, and I’ll have it all on paper before I sleep to-night,” said the enthusiast. “Unfortunately, I am tied for a while longer to the amiable Mr. Murdock; but since you’re good enough, old fellow, to offer to stay to look after the cutting, I can see my way to getting along. We can’t begin until the day after to-morrow, for I can’t by any possibility get old Moriarty’s permission before that. But then we’ll start in earnest. You must get some men up there and set them to work at once.[Pg 107] By to-morrow evening I’ll have an exact map ready for you to work by, and all you will have to do will be to see that the men are kept up to the mark, look at the work now and then and take a note of results. I expect it will take quite a week or two to make the preliminary drainage, for we must have a decided fall for the water. We can’t depend on less than twenty or thirty feet, and I should not be surprised if we want twice as much. I suppose I shan’t see you till to-morrow night; for I’m going up to my room now, and shall work late, and I must be off early in the morning. As you’re going to have a walk I suppose I may take Andy, for my foot is not right yet?”

“By all means,” I replied, and we bade each other good night.

When I went to my own room I locked the door and looked out of the open window at the fair prospect bathed in soft moonlight. For a long time I stood there. What my thoughts were I need tell no young man or young woman, for without shame I admitted to myself that I was over head and ears in love. If any young person of either sex requires any further enlightenment, well! then, all I can say is that their education in life has been shamefully neglected, or their opportunities have been scant; or, worse still, some very grave omission has been made in their equipment for the understanding of life.—If any one, not young, wants such enlightenment I simply say—‘sir or madam, either you are a fool or your memory is gone!’

[Pg 108]

One thing I will say, that I never felt so much at one with my kind; and before going to bed I sat down and wrote a letter of instructions to my agent, directing him to make

accurate personal inquiries all over the estate, and at the forthcoming rent-day make such remissions of rent as would relieve any trouble or aid in any plan of improvements such as his kinder nature could guess at or suggest.

I need not say that for a long time I did not sleep, and although my thoughts were full of such hope and happiness that the darkness seemed ever changing into sunshine, there were, at times, such harrowing thoughts of difficulties to come, in the shape of previous attachments—of my being late in my endeavours to win her as my wife—of my never been able to find her again—that, now and again, I had to jump from my bed and pace the floor. Towards daylight I slept, and went through a series of dreams of alternating joy and pain. At first hope held full sway, and my sweet experience of the day became renewed and multiplied. Again I climbed the hill and saw her and heard her voice—again the tearful look faded from her eyes—again I held her hand in mine and bade good-bye, and a thousand happy fancies filled me with exquisite joy. Then doubts began to come. I saw her once more on the hill-top—but she was looking out for some other than myself, and a shadow of disappointment passed over her sweet face when she recognized me. Again, I saw myself kneeling at her feet and imploring her love, while only cold, [Pg 109] hard looks were my lot; or I found myself climbing the hill, but never able to reach the top—or on reaching it finding it empty. Then I would find myself hurrying through all sorts of difficult places—high, bleak mountains, and lonely wind-swept strands—dark paths through gloomy forests, and over sun-smitten plains, looking for her whom I had lost, and in vain trying to call her—for I could not remember her name. This last nightmare was quite a possibility, for I had never heard it.

I awoke many times from such dreams in an agony of fear; but after a time both pleasure and pain seemed to have had their share of my sleep, and I slept the dreamless sleep that Plato eulogizes in the “Apologia Socratis.”

I was awakened to a sense that my hour of rising had not yet come by a knocking at my door. I opened it, and on the landing without saw Andy standing, cap in hand.

“Hullo, Andy!” I said. “What on earth do you want?”

“Yer ’an’r ’ll parden me, but I’m jist off wid Misther Sutherland; an’ as I undherstand ye was goin’ for a walk, I made bould t’ ask yer ’an’r if ye’ll give a missage to me father?”

“Certainly, Andy! With pleasure.”

“Maybe ye’d tell him that I’d like the white mare tuk off the grash an’ gave some hard ’atin’ for a few days, as I’ll want her brung into Wistport before long.”

“All right, Andy! Is that all?”

[Pg 110]

“That’s all, yer ’an’r.” Then he added, with a sly look at me:—

“May be ye’ll keep yer eye out for a nice bit o’ bog as ye go along.”

“Get on, Andy,” said I. “Shut up! you ould corncrake.” I felt I could afford to chaff with him as we were alone.

He grinned, and went away. But he had hardly gone a few steps when he returned and said, with an air of extreme seriousness:—

“As I’m goin’ to Knockcalltecore, is there any missage I kin take for ye to Miss Norah?”

“Oh, go on!” said I. “What message should I have to send, when I never saw the girl in my life?”

For reply he winked at me with a wink big enough to cover a perch of land, and, looking back over his shoulder so that I could see his grin to the last, he went along the corridor—and I went back to bed.

It did not strike me till a long time afterwards—when I was quite close to Knocknacar—how odd it was that Andy had asked me to give the message to his father. I had not told him I was even coming in the direction—I had not told anyone—indeed, I had rather tried to mislead when I spoke of taking a walk that day, by saying some commonplace about ‘the advisability of breaking new ground’ and so forth. Andy had evidently taken it for granted; and it annoyed me somewhat that he could find me so transparent. How[Pg 111]ever, I gave the message to the old man, to which he promised to attend, and had a drink of milk, which is the hospitality of the west of Ireland farmhouse. Then, in the most nonchalant way I could, I began to saunter up the hill.

I loitered awhile here and there on the way up. I diverted my steps now and then as if to make inquiry into some interesting object. I tapped rocks and turned stones over, to the discomfiture of various swollen pale-coloured worms and nests of creeping things. With the end of my stick I dug up plants, and made here and there unmeaning holes in the ground as though I were actuated by some direct purpose known to myself and not understood of others. In fact I acted as a hypocrite in many harmless and unmeaning ways, and rendered myself generally obnoxious to the fauna and flora of Knocknacar.

As I approached the hill-top my heart beat loudly and fast, and a general supineness took possession of my limbs, and a dimness came over my sight and senses. I had experienced something of the same feeling at other times in my life—as, for instance, just before my first fight when a school boy, and when I stood up to make my maiden speech at the village debating society. Such feelings—or lack of feelings—however, do not kill; and it is the privilege and strength of advancing years to know this fact.

I proceeded up the hill. I did not whistle this time, or hum, or make any noise—matters were far too [Pg 112] serious with me for any such levity. I reached the top—and found myself alone! A sense of blank disappointment came over me—which was only relieved when, on looking at my watch, I found that it was as yet still early in the forenoon. It was three o'clock yesterday when I had met—when I had made the ascent.

As I had evidently to while away a considerable time, I determined to make an accurate investigation of the hill of Knocknacar—much, very much fuller than I had made as yet. As my unknown had descended the hill by the east, and would probably make the ascent—if she ascended at all—by the same side; and as it was my object not to alarm her, I determined to confine my investigations to the west side. Accordingly I descended about half way down the slope, and then commenced my prying into the secrets of Nature under a sense of the just execration of me and my efforts on the part of the whole of the animate and inanimate occupants of the mountain side.

Hours to me had never seemed of the same inexhaustible proportions as the hours thus spent. At first I was strong with a dogged patience; but this in time gave way to an impatient eagerness, that merged into a despairing irritability. More than once I felt an almost irresistible inclination to rush to the top of the hill and shout, or conceived an equally foolish idea to make a call at every house, cottage and cabin, in the neighbourhood. In this latter desire my impatience was somewhat held in check [Pg 113] by a sense of the ludicrous; for as I thought of the detail of the doing it, I seemed to see myself when trying to reduce my abstract longing to a concrete effort, meeting only jeers and laughter from both men and women—in my seemingly asinine effort to make inquiries regarding a person whose name even I did not know, and for what purpose I could assign no sensible reason.

I verily believe I must have counted the leaves of grass on portions of that mountain. Unfortunately, hunger or thirst did not assail me, for they would have afforded some diversion to my thoughts. I sturdily stuck to my resolution not to ascend to the top

until after three o'clock, and I gave myself much *kudos* for the stern manner in which I adhered to my resolve.

My satisfaction at so bravely adhering to my resolution, in spite of so much mental torment and temptation, may be imagined when, at the expiration of the appointed time, on ascending to the hill-top, I saw my beautiful friend sitting on the edge of the plateau and heard her first remark after our mutual salutations:—

“I have been here nearly two hours, and am just going home! I have been wondering and wondering what on earth you were working at all over the hillside! May I ask, are you a botanist?”

“No!”

“Or a geologist?”

“No!”

“Or a naturalist?”

“No!”

[Pg 114]

There she stopped; this simple interrogation as to the pursuits of a stranger evidently struck her as unmaidenly, for she blushed and turned away.

I did not know what to say; but youth has its own wisdom—which is sincerity—and I blurted out:—

“In reality I was doing nothing; I was only trying to pass the time.”

There was a query in the glance of the glorious blue-black eyes and in the lifting of the ebon lashes; and I went on, conscious as I proceeded that the ground before me was marked “Dangerous”:—

“The fact is, I did not want to come up here till after three, and the time seemed precious long, I can tell you.”

“Indeed, but you have missed the best part of the view. Between one and two o'clock, when the sun strikes in between the islands—Cusheen there to the right, and Mishcar—the view is the finest of the whole day.”

“Oh, yes,” I answered, “I know now what I have missed.”

Perhaps my voice betrayed me. I certainly felt full of bitter regret; but there was no possibility of mistaking the smile which rose to her eyes and faded into the blush that followed the reception of the thought.

There are some things which a woman *cannot* misunderstand or fail to understand; and surely my regret and its cause were within the category.

It thrilled through me, with a sweet intoxication, to realize that she was not displeased. Man is predatory[Pg 115] even in his affections, and there is some conscious power to him which follows the conviction that the danger of him—which is his intention—is recognized.

However, I thought it best to be prudent, and to rest on success—for a while, at least. I therefore commenced to talk of London, whose wonders were but fresh to myself, and was rewarded by the bright smile that had now become incorporated with my dreams by day and by night.

And so we talked—talked in simple companionship; and the time fled by on golden wings. No word of love was spoken or even hinted at, but with joy and gratitude unspeakable I began to realize that we were *en rapport*. And more than this, I realized that the beautiful peasant girl had great gifts—a heart of gold, a sweet, pure nature, and a rare intelligence. I gathered that she had had some education, though not an extensive one, and that she had followed up at home such subjects as she had learned in school. But this was all I gathered. I was still as ignorant as ever of her name, and all else beside, as when I had first heard her sweet voice on the hill-top.

Perhaps I might have learned more, had there been time; but the limit of my knowledge had been fixed. The time had fled so quickly, because so happily, that neither of us had taken account of it; and suddenly, as a long red ray struck over the hill-top from the sun now preparing for his plunge into the western wave, she jumped to her feet with a startled cry:—

[Pg 116]

“The sunset! What am I thinking of! Good-night! good-night! No, you must not come—it would never do! Good night!” And before I could say a word, she was speeding down the eastern slope of the mountain.

The revulsion from such a dream of happiness made me for the moment ungrateful; and I felt that it was with an angry sneer on my lip that I muttered as I looked at her retreating form:—

“Why are the happy hours so short—whilst misery and anxiety spread out endlessly?”

But as the red light of the sunset smote my face, a better and a holier feeling came to me; and there on the top of the hill I knelt and prayed, with the directness and fervour that are the spiritual gifts of youth, that every blessing might light on her—the *arrière pensée* being—her, my wife. Slowly I went down the mountain after the sun had set; and when I got to the foot, I stood bareheaded for a long time, looking at the summit which had given me so much happiness.

Do not sneer or make light of such moments, ye whose lives are grey. Would to God that the grey-haired and grey-souled watchers of life, could feel such moments once again!

I walked home with rare briskness, but did not feel tired at all by it—I seemed to tread on air. As I drew near the hotel, I had some vague idea of hurrying at once to my own room, and avoiding dinner altogether as something too gross and carnal for my present exalted[Pg 117] condition; but a moment's reflection was sufficient to reject any such folly. I therefore achieved the other extreme, and made Mrs. Keating's kindly face beam by the vehemence with which I demanded food. I found that Dick had not yet returned—a fact which did not displease me, as it insured me a temporary exemption from Andy's ill-timed banter, which I did not feel in a humour to enjoy at present.

I was just sitting down to my dinner when Dick arrived. He too had a keen appetite; and it was not until we had finished our fish, and were well into our roast duck, that conversation began. Once he was started, Dick was full of matters to tell me. He had seen Moriarty—that was what had kept him so late—and had got his permission to investigate and experiment on the bog. He had thought out the whole method of work to be pursued, and had, during Murdock's dinner-time, made to scale a rough diagram for me to work by. We had our cigars lit before he had exhausted himself on this subject. He had asked me a few casual questions about my walk, and, so as not to arouse any suspicions, I had answered him vaguely that I had had a lovely day, had enjoyed myself immensely, and had seen some very pretty things—all of which was literally and exactly true. I had then asked him as to how he had got on with his operations in connection with the bog. It amused me to think how small and secondary a place Shleenanaher, and all belonging to it, now had in my thoughts. He told me that they had covered a large[Pg 118] portion of the new section of the bog—that there was very little left to do now, in so far as the bog was concerned; and he descanted on the richness and the fine position of Murdock's new farm.

“It makes me angry,” said he, “to think that that human-shaped wolf should get hold of such a lovely spot, and oust such a good fellow as the man whom he has robbed—

yes! it is robbery, and nothing short of it. I feel something like a criminal myself for working for such a wretch at all.”

“Never mind, old chap,” said I; “you can’t help it. Whatever he may have done wrong, you have had neither act nor part in it. It will all come right in time!” In my present state of mind I could not imagine that there was, or could be, anything in the world that would not come all right in time.

We strolled into the street, and met Andy, who immediately hurried up to me:—

“Good evenin’, yer ’an’r! An’ did ye give me instructions to me father?”

“I did, Andy; and he asked me to tell you that all shall be done exactly as you wish.”

“Thank yer ’an’r.” He turned away, and my heart rejoiced, for I thought I would be free from his badinage; but he turned and came back, and asked with a servility which I felt to be hypocritical and assumed:—

“Any luck, yer ’an’r, wid bogs to-day?” I know I got red as I answered him:—

“Oh, I don’t know! Yes! a little—not much.”

[Pg 119]

“Shure an’ I’m glad to hear it, surr! but I might have known be the luk iv ye and be yer shtep. Faix! it’s aisy known whin a man has been lucky wid bogs!” The latter sentence was spoken in a pronounced “aside.”

Dick laughed, for although he was not in the secret he could see that there was some fun intended. I did not like his laugh, and said hotly:—

“I don’t understand you, Andy!”

“Is it undershtand me ye don’t do? Well, surr, if I’ve said anythin’ that I shouldn’t, I ax yer pardon. Bogs isn’t to be lightly shpoke iv at all, at all!” then, after a pause:—“Poor Miss Norah!”

“What do you mean?” said I.

“Shure yer ’an’r, I was only pityin’ the poor crathur. Poor thing, but this’ll be a bitter blow to her intirely!” The villain was so manifestly acting a part, and he grinned at me in such a provoking way, that I got quite annoyed.

“Andy, what do you mean? out with it!” I said hotly.

“Mane, yer ’an’r? Sure nawthin’. All I mane is, poor Miss Norah! Musha, but it’ll be the sore thrial to her. Bad cess to Knocknacar anyhow!”

“This is infernal impertinence! Here——” I was stopped by Dick’s hand on my breast:—

“Easy, easy, old chap! What is this all about? Don’t get angry, old man. Andy is only joking, whatever it is. I’m not in the secret myself, and so can give no opinion; but there is a joke somewhere. Don’t let it go beyond a joke.”

[Pg 120]

“All right, Dick,” said I, having had time to recover my temper. “The fact is that Andy has started some chaff on me about bogs—meaning girls thereby—every time he mentions the word to me; and now he seems to accuse me in some way about a girl that came to meet her father that night I left him home at Knockcalltecrore. You know, Joyce, that Murdock has ousted from his farm. Now, look here, Andy! You’re a very good fellow, and don’t mean any harm; but I entirely object to the way you’re going on. I don’t mind a button about a joke. I hope I’m not such an ass as to be thin-skinned about a trifle, but it is another matter when you mention a young lady’s name alongside mine. You don’t think of the harm you may do. People are very talkative, and generally get a story the wrong end up. If you mention this girl—whatever her name is——”

“Poor Miss Norah!” struck in Andy, and then ostentatiously corrected himself—“I big yer ’an’r’s pardon, Miss Norah, I mane.”

“This Miss Norah along with me,” I went on, “and especially in that objectionable form, people may begin to think she is wronged in some way, and you may do her an evil that you couldn’t undo in all your lifetime. As for me, I never even saw the girl. I heard her speak in the dark for about half a minute, but I never set eyes on her in my life. Now, let this be the last of all this nonsense! Don’t worry me any more; but run in and tell Mrs. Keating to give you a skinful of punch, and to chalk it up to me.”

[Pg 121]

Andy grinned, ducked his head, and made his exit into the house as though propelled or drawn by some unseen agency. When I remarked this to Dick he replied, “Some spirit draws him, I dare say.”

Dick had not said a word beyond advising me not to lose my temper. He did not appear to take any notice of my lecture to Andy, and puffed unconcernedly at his cigar till the driver had disappeared. He then took me by the arm and said:—

“Let us stroll a bit up the road.” Arm in arm we passed out of the town and into the silence of the common. The moon was rising, and there was a soft, tender light over everything. Presently, without looking at me, Dick said:—

“Art, I don’t want to be inquisitive or to press for any confidences, but you and I are too old friends not to be interested in what concerns each other. What did Andy mean? Is there any girl in question?”

I was glad to have a friend to whom to open my mind, and without further thought I answered:—

“There is, Dick!”

Dick grasped my arm and looked keenly into my face, and then said:

“Art! Answer me one question—answer me truly, old fellow, by all you hold dear—answer me on your honour!”

“I shall, Dick! What is it?”

“Is it Norah Joyce?” I had felt some vague alarm from the seriousness of his manner, but his question put me at ease again, and, with a high heart, I answered:—

[Pg 122]

“No! Dick. It is not.” We strolled on, and after a pause, that seemed a little oppressive to me, he spoke again:—

“Andy mentioned a poor ‘Miss Norah’—don’t get riled, old man—and you both agreed that a certain young lady was the only one alluded to. Are you sure there is no mistake? Is not your young lady called Norah?” This was a difficult question to answer, and made me feel rather awkward. Being awkward, I got a little hot:—

“Andy’s an infernal fool. What I said to him—you heard me——”

“Yes! I heard you.”

“—— was literally and exactly true. I never set eyes on Norah Joyce in my life. The girl I mean, the one you mean also, was one I saw by chance yesterday—and to-day—on the top of Knocknacar.”

“Who is she?”—there was a more joyous sound in Dick’s voice.

“Eh! eh!” I stammered. “The fact is, Dick, I don’t know.”

“What is her name?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know her name?”

“No.”

“Where does she come from?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about her, except this, Dick, that I love her with all my heart and soul!” I could not help it—I could not account for it[Pg 123] —but the tears rushed to my eyes, and I had to keep my head turned away from Dick lest he should notice me. He said nothing, and when I had surreptitiously wiped away what I thought were unmanly tears of emotion, I looked round at him. He, too, had his head turned away and, and if my eyes did not deceive me, he too had some unmanly signs of emotion.

“Dick!” said I. He turned on the instant. We looked in one another’s faces, and the story was all told. We grasped hands warmly.

“We’re both in the same boat, old boy,” said he.

“Who is it, Dick?”

“Norah Joyce!”—— I gave a low whistle.

“But,” he went on, “you are well ahead of me. I have never even exchanged a word with her yet. I have only seen her a couple of times; but the whole world is nothing to me beside her. There! I’ve nothing to tell. *Veni, Vidi, Victus sum!*—I came, I saw, I was conquered. She has beauty enough, and if I’m not an idiot, worth enough to conquer a nation!—Now, tell me all about yours.”

“There’s nothing to tell, Dick; as yet I have only exchanged a few words. I shall hope to know more soon.” We walked along in silence, turning our steps back to the hotel.

“I must hurry and finish up my plans to-night so as to be ready for you to-morrow. You won’t look on it as a labour to go to Knocknacar, old chap!” said he, slapping me on the back.

[Pg 124]

“Nor you to go to Shleenanaher,” said I, as we shook hands and parted for the night.

It was quite two hours after this when I began to undress for bed. I suppose the whole truth, however foolish, must be told, but those two hours were mainly spent in trying to compose some suitable verses to my unknown. I had consumed a vast amount of

paper—consumed literally, for what lover was ever yet content to trust his unsuccessful poetic efforts to the waste basket?—and my grate was thickly strewn with filmy ashes. Hitherto the Muse had persistently and successfully evaded me. She did not even grant me a feather from her wing, and my ‘woeful ballad made to my mistress’ eyebrow’ was amongst the things that were not. There was a gentle tap at the door. I opened it, and saw Dick with his coat off. He came in.

“I thought I would look in, Art, as I saw the light under your door, and knew that you had not gone to bed. I only wanted to tell you this. You don’t know what a relief it is to me to be able to speak of it to any living soul—how maddening it is to me to work for that scoundrel Murdock. You can understand now why I flared up at him so suddenly ere yesterday. I have a strong conviction on me that his service is devil’s service as far as my happiness is concerned—and that I shall pay some terrible penalty for it.”

“Nonsense, old fellow,” said I, “Norah only wants to see you to know what a fine fellow you are. You won’t [Pg 125] mind my saying it, but you are the class of man that any woman would be proud of!”

“Ah! old chap,” he answered sadly, “I’m afraid it will never get that far. There isn’t, so to speak, a fair start for me. She has seen me already—worse luck!—has seen me doing work which must seem to her to aid in ruining her father. I could not mistake the scornful glance she has thrown on me each time we have met. However, *che sara sara!* It’s no use fretting beforehand. Good night!”