

BRAM STOKER

**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 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 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 countryside.

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 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 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 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 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 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 Knock-calltecrore. 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?"

"Thrue for ye! Irish it is, an' it manes 'The Shsnake's Pass.'"

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

"Begor, there's a power iv raysons guv for cal-lin' 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, avye 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 star-

ting 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 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 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 gentleman, 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.

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 hoight 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 flavioir.”

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 heartburning, 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 sthrange gentleman an tell him what yez know iv the shtories anent the hill?”

“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!