

The Ghost of the Cross-Roads

by Frederick Manley

An Irish Christmas Night Story

Night, and especially Christmas night, is the best time to listen to a ghost story. Throw on the logs! Draw the curtains! Move your chairs nearer the fire and hearken!

Not one among the little group that sat in the snug parlour of Andy Sweeny's homestead, that wild Christmas of 1843, when Mrs. Sweeny went to the window and drew the snow-white curtains very close, remarking at the same time, "God shelter all poor travellers!" but whose thoughts were as plainly expressed in the general huddling-up which took place as though each one had told his neighbour his particular idea of comfort; and when, in answer to the good woman's prayer, they joined their voices in one deep, fervent "Amen!" and huddled together in the brave glow of the turf fire, the general sentiment of the party was published by a red-haired, dapper little fellow named "Reddy," who said, in a rich voice:

" 'Tis thanking God we should be for this comfort, not forgetting Mrs. Sweeny!"

Although the Sweenys were known the county over for their hospitality, on this particular night they outdid all their previous efforts at entertaining. The oak table in the middle of the floor was covered from end to end with good things. We say good things, and we mean it so. There were no wafer-like sandwiches on that table, nor cold liquids in colder bottles, nor frail china-ware (no china-ware could stand food so substantial), not fancy salads, nor any of those dainties which as good as say to a hungry man, "Come and eat me; I'm too nice to be lying here," and which, when he has done them justice, spoil his evening's enjoyment and cause life to be a burden to him.

No; there were no such insidious edibles on Mrs. Sweeny's table. To think of that supper is to be hungry. Hills of potatoes, all in their coats on account of the severe weather; lakes of soup, mountains of roast beef, with goose and turkey in the valleys between; pigeons, imprisoned in cells of crust, in which were little slits like

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

loopholes, through which the inmates might peep—indeed, one brave bird that, we daresay, had become alarmed at the great number of diners, was attempting to escape, and actually succeeded in getting a leg through the bars, where he stuck and became discouraged; mounds of bread and butter; the whole Pie family, from plebeian Apple to rich Mrs. Mince, were there in their crusty suits. The table mumbled and groaned. But who cared for the table's sorrows? In truth, who could think of anything but gladness in that home of light and joy on that frozen night?

Outside, the storm raged. The country around, a bleak stretch of moorland, was buried deep in snow. The winds had been busy, and many were the quaint mansions they had built, and strange and weird were the changes they had wrought. The sign-post at the four cross-roads—a most commonplace affair in clear weather—was now a terrible monster with four hideous arms, that were thrust out to seize the belated traveller. All traces of the road were lost, and it would have gone hard with a stranger had he been caught in the storm that December night. Derry Goland, in King's County, Ireland, is so drear and wild that the destroying elements have made it their meeting-place. Here the winds gather and plan their courses. Here they start from, and to this place return. Any winter's night you may hear them. At first they whisper among themselves as they map out their ways. Then may be heard deep murmurs, angry murmurs, shaking the boughs, as though the Storm King had given out orders which they did not like.

How the Storm King hated Andy Sweeny's snug home and the cheerful light shining from the windows, throwing a golden pathway into the night!

More turf for the fire! Every one has a glass of steaming punch in his hand; every one's face is lighted with love and radiant with joy; every one toasts every one, sings merry songs, dances with his sweetheart, or makes love to her in some shady corner, while the aged every-ones make matches for their boys and girls; and the blind fiddler plays away for dear life. The flames grow brighter as the storm without increases in violence. The punch glows a deeper red and sparkles as with delight. The old clock in the corner has a drowsier tick, and is at peace with the world, for the jolly round face on its dial smiles on the scene; and even the table, forgetful of its complaints, has ceased to groan. In short, there never was a happier home; there never were such music and such punch as Mrs. Sweeny's, nor jollier souls to drink

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

it.

The floor had just been cleared for dancing, and the fun was at its height, when out in the storm, seeming far away, there rose a cry—a terrible cry—a cry that spoke the anguish of a soul. Those within were silent, and listened with blanched faces to that cry without.

“God save us!” cried Andy. “What was that?”

“The Lord bethune us and all harm! It was the banshee’s cry!”

At this name, so fearful to an Irish ear, the children ran to their mothers and buried their little heads. Wives clung to their husbands, sweethearts to their sturdy lovers, and all waited anxiously for a repetition of the cry. Then something happened which caused all hearts to stand still and sent the cold blood rushing down the back. It was a human voice calling aloud for help! Soon after, the crunch of flying feet was heard. They came nearer and nearer.

“Open the door! Fling it wide!” cried Andy.

Willing hands soon had a broad pathway of firelight streaming from the doorway. The storm rushed in and scattered the turf and tore pictures from their places and made sad havoc with everything. But no one cared; no one noticed it. All eyes were watching a man who came flying towards the house; for though it was a blustering night, the moon peeped at intervals through the storm-rift clouds, casting a ghostly light. And now it shone down upon this figure that sped to the door and cried, in a voice made weak by fear and running, “Save me!” then tottered across the threshold and fell prone upon the sanded floor.

Andy Sweeny turned quickly to the door, and, listening, peered long and searchingly into the darkness. At last he cried out:

“Who’s there?”

The only answer was the sougning of the wind across the moor, and a gruesome

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

answer it was.

“Who’s there?” asked Andy again.

“Sure, no wan, avick,” returned his wife. “Shut the door and be aisy.”

Andy cast a rueful, backward glance at the door, as Mrs. Sweeny led him away from it.

“Look at the poor man foreninst ye!”

The poor man before the fire was unconscious. One motherly body was chafing his cold hands, another was bathing his forehead with punch she had seized in her hurry instead of water, and yet another forced the steaming liquor between his clenched teeth.

He was a young—a boy almost—whose age might have been guessed as twenty, and guessed correctly. That he was a stranger in Derry Golland was easily discovered, for the suit he wore was made of fine cloth and cut in the most approved style. Fashionable clothes were as common in Derry Golland as bears, and there wasn’t a bear in the county. A silk-lined cloak, thrown back from his broad shoulders, disclosed a sparkling gem that winked and blinked at the firelight as though the sudden brilliancy was too much to stand. His features, although well formed and regular, had a suggestion of weakness in them, especially the chin and mouth, which lacked firmness, and wore a smiling expression of gentleness more fitted to a woman than a man. The people immediately divined that a gentleman, presumably an Englishman, judging from his dress, had fallen among them, and they went to work on him as though he were the dearest friend of each man who bent over him, or the husband, brother, or sweetheart of each good woman who carried pillows for the weary head and brought a glow of life into the pale face, so numerous were the little offices performed, so heartfelt and deep their solicitude. At length, to the great relief of all, the stranger slowly opened his eyes.

“Here ye are, sir, safe an’ sound!” cried an old woman, cheeringly. “Look up, sir; ’tis wid fri’nds y’ are.”

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

The young man raised himself up, and asked Andy to assist him to a seat. He trembled violently as he moved with livid face to the chair which Andy had placed near the fire for his use. They stood at a respectful distance from the young man, regarding him with looks of half fear, half wonder. As the moments passed, he seemed to grow stronger; and presently he raised his head from his breast, in which position he had been gazing intently at the fire, and asked whether any one believed in ghosts.

“Ghosts, your honour?”

“Ghosts.”

“We do, your honour,” chimed in an old woman. “ ’Tis me well knows we do. Wasn’t there Mary Doolan’s mother—Lord rest her!—dead and gone ten years come next Ash Wednesday—as fine a woman as iver put foot to leather, as I’ve often said, and always will say, please God, if I die for it—an’ I don’t care who knows it—a fine lump of a girl when I first knew her. I knew her mother before her—a dacent body, too, who married Mike Carlin after he’d buried his first wife, and then married Pat Doolan when Mike kicked the bucket—God forgive him for a rascal! Didn’t Mary Doolan—rest her soul!—didn’t she meet a ghost at the cross-roads? Didn’t she?”

As no one contradicted, the old woman was preparing to give the story in its entirety, when the stranger interrupted.

“At the cross-roads, did you say?”

“Tin years come Ash Wednesday. She”——

“There is a milestone near by”——he appeared to be murmuring to himself, as he kicked the blazing turf with the toe of his riding-boot——“a flat milestone, like a gravestone?”

“The same place, sir. And Mary Doolan—rest her soul!——a dacent, thrifty”——

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

“Which of you is the landlord of this place?”

“There’s no landlord here,” said Andy Sweeny. “This is my home. These are my friends and neighbours.”

“Will you give me a bed? I’ll see that you are paid for it.”

“You are welcome to my place, sir, without money. I don’t want that,” said Andy, rather sharply.

The young man noticed the touch of anger in Andy’s voice.

“I beg your pardon. I did not mean to hurt you. I hardly know what I am saying.”

He buried his face in his hands, leaning his elbows on his knees.

Andy’s guests, who but lately had stood in fear of the young stranger, now looked at him with great pity stamped on their kindly faces; and even the garrulous old woman whom he had interrupted so persistently ventured close to him, saying, in a friendly way:

“Is it on Christmas, sir, ye’d be givin’ way so?”

“Christmas!”

“Av course. What else? Here, Mrs. Sweeny, ma’am, if yez please, a glass o’ punch for his honour!”

The young man had been stony-hearted, indeed, could he have refused the steaming glass which comely Mrs. Sweeny handed to him; hard as granite had he not melted before the expressions of homely sympathy that poured from all sides in a shy manner, as if they feared to offend; for only sufferers, brothers in sorrow, no matter what their station in life may be, know how to comfort sufferers.

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

The fiddler went to work once more, and played better than ever, too. The punch flowed again. The rough but sonorous voices joined in familiar airs that brought back many a half-forgotten holiday time. Hands were joined in reels and jigs, until it seemed that the storm had at last taken hold of Andy's cottage and was shaking it to pieces, so lively were the couples who "lathered the flure wid their heels," as Reddy remarked. The young people who had sought the terpsichorean honours of the evening, "by holding out to tire each other down," had at last tired themselves, and all sat round the fire, anxious for some other amusement than that which left them fatigued and short of breath. The old lady spoken of before, with the inherent instinct of a gossip—for gossips are born, not made—said to the stranger during a lull in the conversation:

"Did ye see a ghost to-night, sir?"

Andy Sweeny, imagining the old woman was annoying the gentleman, quickly interposed, and begged he would not mind her thoughtless questions.

"I am not offended," said he. "But I hardly know how to answer."

"Who was it that chased you when you came running here, screaming for help?"

"Something in black."

"How did it come to happen? You must pardon the question, sir, but as this is Christmas night, and knowing it is a time for great freedom, I thought you might be good enough to tell us all about it, sir—asking pardon once again, if I've offended you."

Andy Sweeny, like most men of ordinary intelligence and education among the Irish peasantry, had the reputation of being a "foine shpaker" and a "shmart man;" and when he had finished his tentative address, his guests winked and nodded among themselves to express their great admiration, and Reddy even went so far as to say, "There's for you."

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

“It’s all very strange, to be sure,” said the gentleman. Then he added, with a little forced laugh that would hardly come from a person whose nerves were in good condition, “I will tell you all that happened.”

At these words, which promised the glorious entertainment always to be had from a ghost story, more especially when you sit in the midst of friends before a roaring, crackling fire, with a sparkling punch in your hand, listening to the storm that rattles the windows and doors, and hurls the snow down the broad chimney, hissing into the fire, as if it hated to see you so snug, and was determined to extinguish the cheerful blaze. It is then your mind wanders over dolorous, wind-swept moorland, trudges along the bleak path on the hillside, struggles with the storm on the highway, where every white-robed tree is a phantom and every rock a hiding-place of robbers and hideous somethings that await your approach and crouch in readiness to spring upon you.

Now every inoffensive oak is a terrible Briareus, stretching out its gaunt arms to seize you; now you feel certain a thing is dogging your footsteps while you fear to look behind, knowing that you would encounter its awful glance and be struck dead that instant, until the fancy becomes so strong that you break into a trot, from that to a run, and finally, with its footsteps but a few yards behind and gaining with every stride, coming so close you can feel its breath over your shoulder, your run quickens—faster—faster yet, till it ends in a wild flight, while you see nothing, think of nothing but it, and only stay the mad chase when the ruddy lights from some cottage window tell you that men, fellow-creatures, people of flesh and blood, are within hailing distance.

Now the fear, which up to this moment has paralyzed your tongue, comes forth in one scream that startles the quiet villager, and brings him, candle in hand, to his door, where he finds you stretched insensible upon the snow, and whence he carries you to his blazing turf fire, beside which you slowly regain your senses, thanking Providence you are saved. No wonder the cottagers huddled round the fire! So Andy’s guests being Irishmen, and having adamant faith in the existence of all manner of “uncanny” things, awaited the stranger’s story with breathless interest.

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

"I may presume," he began, "that you all know Squire Goodfellow?"

"We do! Long life to his honour!"

"Well," he continued, "I was returning from his house to the inn at the village, where at present I am staying. What I had been doing there it is needless to say. The squire, who, as you all well know, is a downright good fel—gentleman, endeavoured to dissuade me from going home afoot in the storm, and invited me to sleep under his roof until morning. I, knowing he already had as many guests as his place could hold with comfort, thanked him for his kind offer, and started out for the inn—and bed, for I have been up—— Well, I have been travelling for the past few days. I need not remind you of the weather. Suffice it to say that the snow was blown into my eyes until it blinded me and I wandered from the road. My fingers were stiff and frozen, so that I found it impossible to hold my cloak about me. I could not see an arm's length before me, the snow fell so thick and fast, the night was so dark. My eyes were growing heavy. I felt sleepy. But, knowing to lie down in the treacherous snow meant death, I made one last, mighty effort and struggled on. At length I got so weak I could only stumble forward, and three or four, maybe ten times I fell. Then I cried out for help—cried, screamed, yelled as I never did before. I called. How lonely, how awfully gravelike the stillness was! My very voice seemed muffled. Then a feeling of rest, a sensation of great calm, came over me. I no longer felt the cold, nor heard the wind, nor knew fear, and I was about to sleep—it would have been my last—when some stories of travellers who had kept themselves awake by self-administered punishment came—most strange to tell—to my mind. The thought of death on that desolate moor, far from the hearts that loved me and awaited my homecoming, was so overpoweringly maddening, I tell you, that I tore my hair and shrieked out:

"I will not die! I will not!"

"I pulled open my coat and found my pocket-knife. That saved me. See where my coat is punctured. It's a mercy I didn't run it up to the handle into myself in my efforts to stimulate myself. In spite of all my efforts, I was slowly but surely—oh, so surely—sinking, till I cried again in desperation:

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

“ ‘Fool—fool! Why did you venture it? What wouldn't I give to be back at the squire's? All—everything! Anything to be saved—anything!’

“ ‘I'll save you!’

“My good friends, the voice that uttered these words was so close to my ear that it seemed a whisper from another land, and I thought I was already dead. How was I to reason otherwise? In that moment of death, on that distant moor, the words were like a supernatural answer to my prayer. I trembled. The sound of the winds, the falling snow, brought me to myself. Then the words were repeated:

“ ‘I'll save you!’

“I turned and looked at the speaker. His voice had sent a shiver—not like that produced by cold—through my frame, so that I was afraid to meet his gaze, which I know—I can't tell how—was fastened on me and pierced me through and through. Without venturing to meet his eye, I said:

“ ‘Who are you?’

“And he answered:

“ ‘One who will save you!’

“ ‘Are you a farmer hereabouts?’ I inquired, at a loss what to say.

“ ‘Look and see,’ he answered.

“As he said this, I fancied he chuckled quietly. Then, though I had no desire to do so, despite my efforts to do otherwise, I felt myself turning to meet him—I felt myself do this, I say, while I endeavoured most strenuously to keep my back to him. Shall I ever forget his eyes? Shall I ever forget the devilish leer on his face? Never, though I live to be a thousand years old. He was a very tall, thin, middle-aged man, dressed all in black, from the beaver, on which, I remarked, not a snowflake fell, to what I could see of his lower parts. I noticed his appearance in a second; and while

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

I glanced at him, he stood grinning at me with the greatest good humour. I dared not speak. I could not speak. It was he who broke the silence, asking me in a very deep, musical voice, whether he resembled a farmer. I admitted that there wasn't the faintest analogy—wishing deep down in my heart that there had been. You must not think I was frightened, for I wasn't. The place, the hour, the solitude, his sudden appearance, cast a sort of spell over me, and it was only by the putting forth of all my remaining strength that I had the heart to ask him to put me on the right path for home.

“ ‘I will do so with pleasure,’ said he.

“I thanked him for his kindness, and off we started. He was so very affable, telling humorous stories to shorten our hard tramp; so extremely anxious regarding my comfort; so persistent in his efforts to please, and so polished and gentlemanly withal, that gradually I came to look upon him with less distaste, and before the cross-roads were reached, was actually exchanging addresses with him—verbally, of course. We had been speaking of the many ways which men have of amusing themselves, and I confessed that I was partial to card-playing as a pastime. He assured me it was his greatest pleasure. At length we came to the weird-looking post which stands at the cross-roads, pointing its long fingers in every direction in a most confusing manner. From that point my road was clear. ‘Now,’ said I to myself, ‘to bid him good night.’ And I proceeded to do so, holding out my hand and saying:

“ ‘A thousand thanks for your timely assistance—a safe journey—and good-bye.’

“He did not seem to notice my outstretched hand, but looked into my face with a steady, fascinating stare, for all the world like a snake trying to fix its prey.”

At this point the auditors gave vent to so many cries of surprise and fear that the narrator was forced to stop and wait until they became calm again.

“ ‘We may never see each other again,’ I returned, though why I spoke those words is a mystery. They invited conversation, and knowing this, I could have torn out my tongue with rage at my thoughtlessness.

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

“ ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘we shall surely meet once more—where there shall be neither snow nor frost, wind nor rain.’

“I proffered my hand a second time, thinking he might not have seen it before—the night being so pitch-black—and I repeated my thanks and adieus.

“ ‘Do you really wish to thank me for whatever small service I have been to you?’ he asked.

“ ‘If it be in my power to do so,’ I said.

“ ‘The simplest thing in the world,’ he answered.

“ ‘What is it?’ I inquired.

“ ‘Do you see this milestone?’ said he, pointing towards a white mound.

“ ‘I see something,’ was my reply.

“ ‘It is a milestone;’ and as he spoke he brushed away the snow, disclosing the long, flat slab beneath.

“ ‘Well?’ said I.

“ ‘You can thank me by sitting down facing me on that stone and appeasing a craving—a hunger—which tortures me.’

“By this time, as you may well suppose, I had grown very suspicious, and feeling certain that I had fallen in with a highwayman, whose dark purpose was to murder me for my money and jewellery, I determined to act with great circumspection—to humour his every whim, until a suitable opportunity of escape presented itself. Accordingly, I sat down on one end of the wet slab, and said to him in a voice which I endeavoured to make cheerful, ‘Here I am!’ His grim words, ‘Appeasing a craving, a hunger,’ kept me from being at all cheerful, for I anticipated being eaten alive. I put the best face I could on the matter, assuring myself that it

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

was better and more manly to die fighting than to sit down and calmly consent to be metamorphosed into a midnight supper for the pleasure of the gentleman in black. And reasoning thus, I felt for my knife—my only means of defence—opened the largest blade, and waited for him. You must remember, my good people, that I thought of all these things in a second, while he advanced to the milestone, on which he presently seated his black self. I clenched my teeth and clutched my knife in readiness for the fight I thought must surely come. But to my surprise, he took from his back pocket a pack of cards, placed them between us on the slab, and said:

“ ‘I will play you a few games of forty-fives, at a sovereign a game, before we part.’

“ ‘Is this the craving you spoke of—this the hunger you must satisfy?’ I asked him, almost too bewildered to articulate.

“ ‘This,’ he answered, slowly, ‘is the first tool with which I worked my own ruin. Since I first had being, I have craved to win for myself all things which belong to others. The spirit of gaming was made part of me. It has grown with me, gained strength with years, until now it is all I live for. I began at an early age by wagering with another that the darker cloud of two which went sailing by in the heavens would disappear before the lighter one. He with whom I wagered won. Then, to regain what I had lost, I doubled the amount—I forget the subject of our bet. I lost again. I went on doubling and trebling, losing and winning alternately, until at last I found I was ruined. Then, indeed, I became desperate. Then was my whole mind given to the devising of schemes by which I was to recuperate my losses. I borrowed, I begged, I did everything to secure the necessary means wherewith to gamble. I have since gone on—sometimes living in luxury, sometimes in the most wretched penury; now sipping rich wine, again parching for a draught of clear water; to-day the guest of princes and lords, to-morrow the companion of filthy mendicants! But why waste time? Why tell you all this? Enough that last night I was lucky. I have money. On the way here you confessed a love of cards. Come; we will play!’

“These are his words as well as I can remember them. You may laugh at me

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

when I tell you that, when he had finished speaking, I was seized with a desire to gamble and win the money he had mentioned. And there, on that wet milestone, in the dark night, with the storm raging round us, that and I began to play forty-fives for a sovereign a corner, with all the nonchalance and little amenities on his part which we observe when ladies and gentlemen play a rubber in the snug corner of a well-lighted parlour. I groped for the cards and cut them. He dealt. I picked up my five.

“ ‘Look here, sir. I can’t tell what I’m holding. It’s too dark,’ I cried.

“ ‘Wait,’ said he. With that his hand went down into the mysterious black pocket, and shortly afterwards, I heard a rattle as of iron.”

“God bless us!” ejaculated the listeners.

“Then,” continued the young man, “I heard a scratching, a light spluttered and hissed; and before I could make out what he was about, a lighted lantern was casting a broad glow of light on the slab and extending a few yards round it until it melted in the blackness beyond. My wonderment was momentary only. My nature seemed to have undergone some startling change, for I thought of nothing, forgot everything—my late suffering, the desolate place, the hour, the cold that had but lately been turning my fingers to stone, my mysterious companion—all save that there was a small heap of gold near the stranger—two golden coins in the middle of the slab—and that I was to gamble and win. The first game I won; the second, too. In the third I was successful. Luck continued to be with me, and I was quickly transferring the heap of gold to my corner of the slab. Up to this neither of us had spoken, but when I had taken all but a few pieces from him he remarked:

“ ‘You play a shrewd game.’

“ ‘Thank you, sir,’ said I.

“After that we went on playing in silence. My luck was changing. I lost repeatedly, and when we had played several hands, he succeeded in getting the gold back to his end, with five pounds of mine along with it. This angered me, and I

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

proposed that we should raise the stakes and play for two pounds a side. He was quite agreeable. I lost another five. Then I said we had better play for six pounds each hand. Still I was unsuccessful; still he drew my money to his end, until the last piece of gold having been swept into his pile, we played for half-crowns, then for shillings, then for sixpences, and at last I had only a few coppers at stake. The cards were given out. Eagerly I grasped mine, with the hope of holding the better hand. Alas, it was worthless! He won! Every farthing of two hundred pounds was gone, and I was constrained to tell him I could play no longer.

“ ‘Tut, man!’ said he; ‘the game is young.’

“ ‘Yes,’ I answered, despondently; ‘but my last penny is lost. There’s nothing left.’

“ ‘Then I’ll tell you what I’ll do,’ said he. ‘I’m anything but a bad man, so I’ll give you a chance of getting your money back.’

“ ‘You will?’ cried I, delighted.

“ ‘I will,’ he replied. ‘What would you say if I were to wager all I have here’—he pushed the glittering pieces forward—‘and all I have here’—taking a bag from his black pocket and emptying its golden contents on the slab—‘that I will be victor in two games out of three?’

“ ‘You would be very magnanimous,’ I returned, burning to hear the conditions. ‘But I have absolutely nothing left.’

“ ‘You have your word.’

“ ‘What do you mean?’ I cried.

“ ‘I mean that if you will pledge me your word to serve me hereafter at any time I may chance to call upon you, I will wager my gold against your word. If I lose, the gold is yours, all of it, every bright sovereign; and you may take back your vow, too.’

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

“As he spoke, he leaned forward, took the gold in his hand, letting it slip through his fingers in a sheeny, clinking stream. I did not hesitate to consider the import of his dreadful propositions. Gold I must have—not for its own sake, not because I am avaricious—simply because I hungered to gamble.

“ ‘It’s a bargain,’ I said.

“ ‘Then repeat these words after me,’ he commanded.

“ ‘I swear’—he dictated, and I repeated word after word to the end—‘I swear to be the servant of this man from this hour unto the end of time, to renounce all other masters, and to serve him faithfully and well in all that he may command.’

“I could hardly wait for him to finish, so eager was I to resume the play. Once more we seated ourselves on the milestone; again the cards were dealt out, and the strangest game that ever men played was begun. I won on the first hand. The cards came round a second time. He won. A game for each. Then I prepared myself for the last—the great struggle. Victory meant riches and freedom; defeat, I know not what. My brain was on fire; my hands trembled so that in picking up the cards he had placed near me—the cards which were to decide for or against me—they fell out of my shaking fingers and dropped on the snow at my feet.” Here the speaker faltered and appeared reluctant to proceed. “My good people, when just as my fingers were about to fasten on the cards, my eye saw something that caused my blood to turn as cold as this snow on the ground—something that took from me the power to move, to speak, that petrified me and left me gazing at it like a statue. Think of being alone with that man out on the snow, away from all help, in a place seemingly deserted by its Maker, and shudder to dream of what I saw—of it!”

He shuddered even then—even as he sat in the midst of Andy’s guests—in Andy’s cheerful parlour. But surely he is not to be termed a coward, when we know that the cottagers at this point of the recital turned their heads and cast many uneasy glances towards the door, drawing closer to the fire as they did so.

“I was telling you I was rooted to my seat. No wonder! Before me, with the sickly light from the lantern shining right down upon it, was—a cloven hoof!”

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

“A cloven hoof! The devil!” cried everybody.

“I closed my eyes, thinking I was dreaming. But no; for when I opened them, there was the cursed hoof before me!”

“Lord save us!”

“Then the awfulness of the compact I had made came to my mind with terrible force. I was bartering my soul for gold. Now I see that Providence watched over me, for it was the thought of what I was doing that caused me to leap to my feet with a cry for help, and run with feet of wind—feet winged with fear—away from that thing! Every moment I expected to feel his hand on my shoulder, to be dragged back to that hellish game of cards at which my soul would be lost to it—to the thing in black. You must have heard my screams, for as I ran I saw—and how I thanked God for it!—I saw a stream of glorious light burst in the blackness! It gave new courage to my heart and new strength to my limbs. After that I remember nothing. I suppose I became unconscious. The rest you already know; and, believe me when I say it, I cannot easily forget your prompt assistance and heartfelt sympathy. I have finished.”

With the stranger’s adventure and all its hideous details fresh within the mind of every man, woman, and child present, the very idea of leaving that hospitable roof was thrilling in itself; so motherly Mrs. Sweeny found resting-places for the women and children, while the men slept on improvised beds of chairs, tables, &c., the greater part of them lying on the floor before the fire. The stranger retired shortly after he had concluded his story, and it was not long until the Sweeny household was asleep and snoring.

To the reader:

If you doubt any part of this narrative, you may visit Mrs. Sweeny and have it from her lips. Ask any one in Derry Goland, King’s County, Ireland, the whereabouts of Andy Sweeny’s house, and you will be sure to find it.

The Ghost of the Cross-roads by Frederick Manley (1893)

There were some cynics who said that the young man had been drinking freely at the squire's, had lost considerable money at playing cards, had wandered from the squire's in a maudlin state, had rested on the milestone and dreamed about the man in black, and that the only devil he saw was a creature of his drunken fancy, generally termed a "blue devil." But Mrs. Sweeny and most of her guests maintain that the gentleman could not have related his adventure, and described it so graphically, too, had he been intoxicated. I give no opinion in the matter. The readers may take what view of it they please.