

# The Snake, the Leper, and the Grey Frost

By A. C. Benson

In the heart of the Forest of Seale lay the little village of Birnewood Fratrum, like a lark's nest in a meadow of tall grass. It was approached by green wood-ways, very miry in winter. The folk that lived there were mostly woodmen. There was a little church, the stones of which seemed to have borrowed the hue of the forest, and close beside it a small timbered house, the Parsonage, with a garden of herbs. Those who saw Birnewood in the summer, thought of it as a place where a weary man might rest for ever, in an ancient peace, with the fresh mossy smell of the wood blowing through it, and the dark cool branching covert to muse in on every side. But it was a different place in winter, with ragged clouds rolling overhead and the bare boughs sighing in the desolate gales; though again in a frosty winter evening it would be fair enough, with the red sun sinking over miles of trees.

From the village green a little track led into the forest, and, a furlong or two inside, ended in an open space thickly overgrown with elders, where stood the gaunt skeleton of a ruined tower staring with bare windows at the wayfarer. The story of the tower was sad enough. The last owner, Sir Ralph Birne, was on the wrong side in a rebellion, and died on the scaffold, his lands forfeited to the crown. The tower was left desolate, and piece by piece the villagers carried away all that was useful to them, leaving the shell of a house, though at the time of which I speak the roof still held, and the floors, though rotting fast, still bore the weight of a foot.

In the Parsonage lived an old priest, Father John, as he was called, and with him a boy who was held to be his nephew, Ralph by name, now eighteen years of age. The boy was very dear to Father John, who was a wise and loving man. To many it might have seemed a dull life enough, but Ralph had known no other, having come to the Parsonage as a child. Of late indeed Ralph had begun to feel a strange desire grow and stir within him, to see what the world was like outside the forest; such a desire would come on him at early morning, in the fresh spring days, and he would watch some lonely traveller riding slowly to the south with an envious look; though as like as not the wayfarer would be envying the bright boy, with his background of quiet woods. But such fancies only came and went, and he said nothing to the old priest about them, who nevertheless had marked the change for himself with the instinct of love, and would sometimes, as he sat with his breviary, follow the boy about with his eyes, in which the wish to keep him strove with the knowledge that the bird must some day leave the nest.

One summer morning, the old priest shut his book, with the air of a man who has made up his mind in sadness, and asked Ralph to walk with him. They went to the tower, and there, sitting in the ruins, Father John told Ralph the story of the house, which he had often heard before. But now there was so tender and urgent a tone in the priest's voice that Ralph heard him wonderingly; and at last the priest very solemnly, after a silence, said that there was something in his mind that must be told; and he went on to say that Ralph was indeed the heir of the tower; he was the grandson of Sir Ralph, who died upon the scaffold; his father had died abroad, dispossessed of his inheritance; and the priest said that in a few days he himself would set out on a journey, too long deferred, to see a friend of his, a Canon of a neighbouring church, to learn if it were possible that some part of the lands might be restored to Ralph by the king's grace. For the young king that had newly come to the throne was said to be very merciful and just, and punished not the sins of the fathers upon the children; but Father John said that he hardly dared

to hope it; and then he bound Ralph to silence; and then after a pause he added, taking one of the boy's hands in his own, "And it is time, dear son, that you should leave this quiet place and make a name for yourself; my days draw to an end; perhaps I have been wrong to keep you here to myself, but I have striven to make you pure and simple, and if I was in fault, why, it has been the fault of love." And the boy threw his arms round the priest's neck and kissed him, seeing that tears trembled in his eyes, and said that he was more than content, and that he should never leave his uncle and the peaceful forest that he loved. But the priest saw an unquiet look in his eye, as of a sleeper awakened, and knew the truth.

A few days after, the priest rode away at sunrise; and Ralph was left alone. In his head ran an old tale, which he had heard from the woodmen, of a great treasure of price, which was hidden somewhere in the tower. Then it came into his mind that there dwelt not far away in the wood an ancient wise man who gave counsel to all who asked for it, and knew the virtues of plants, and the courses of buried springs, and many hidden things beside. Ralph had never been to the house of the wise man, but he knew the direction where it lay; so with the secret in his heart, he made at once for the place. The day was very hot and still, and no birds sang in the wood. Ralph walked swiftly along the soft green road, and came at last upon a little grey house of plaster, with beams of timber, that stood in a clearing near a spring, with a garden of its own; a fragrant smell came from a sprawling bush of box, and the bees hummed busily over the flowers. There was no smoke from the chimney, and the single window that gave on the road, in a gable, looked at him like a dark eye. He went up the path, and stood before the door waiting, when a high thin voice, like an evening wind, called from within, "Come in and fear not, thou that tarriest on the threshold." Ralph, with a strange stirring of the blood at the silver sound of the voice, unlatched the door and entered. He found himself in a low dark room, with a door opposite him; in the roof hung bundles of herbs; there was a large oak table strewn with many things of daily use, and sitting in a chair, with his back to the light, sate a very old thin man, with a frosty beard, clad in a loose grey gown. Over the fireplace hung a large rusty sword; the room was very clean and cool, and the sunlight danced on the ceiling, with the flicker of moving leaves.

"Your name and errand?" said the old man; fixing his grey eyes, like flint stones, upon the boy, not unkindly. "Ralph," said the boy. "Ralph," said the old man, "and why not add Birne to Ralph? that makes a fairer name."

Ralph was so much bewildered at this strange greeting, that he stood confused—at which the old man pointed to a settle, and said, "And now, boy, sit down and speak with me; you are Ralph from Birnewood Parsonage, I know—Father John is doubtless away—he has no love for me, though I know him to be a true man."

Then little by little he unravelled the boy's desire, and the story of the treasure. Then he said, kindly enough, "Yes, it is ever thus—well, lad, I will tell you; and heed my words well. The treasure is there; and you shall indeed find it; but prepare for strange sounds and sights." And as he said this, he took the young hand in his own for a moment, and a strange tide of sensation seemed to pass along the boy's veins. "Look in my face," the old man went on, "that I may see that you have faith—for without faith such quests are vain." Ralph raised his eyes to those of the old man, and then a sensation such as he had never felt before came over him; it was like looking, from a window into a wide place, full of darkness and wonder.

Then the old man said solemnly, "Child, the time is come—I have waited long for you, and the door is open."

Then he said, with raised hand, "The journey is not long, but it must be done in a waking hour; sleep not on the journey; that first. And of three things beware—the Snake, and the Leper, and

the Grey Frost; for these three things have brought death to wiser men than yourself. There," he added, "that is your note of the way; now make the journey, if you have the courage."

"But, sir," said Ralph in perplexity, "you say to me, make the journey; and you tell me not whither to go. And you tell me to beware of three things. How shall I know them to avoid them?"

"You will know them when you have seen them," said the old man sadly, "and that is the most that men can know; and as for the journey, you can start upon it wherever you are, if your heart is pure and strong."

Then Ralph said, trembling. "Father, my heart is pure, I think; but I know not whether I am strong."

Then the old man reached out his hand, and took up a staff that leant by the chair; and from a pocket in his gown he took a small metal thing shaped like a five-pointed star; and he said, "Ralph, here is a staff and a holy thing; and now set forth." So Ralph rose, and took the staff and the star, and made a reverence, and murmured thanks; and then he went to the door by which he had entered; but the old man said, "Nay, it is the other door," and then he bent down his head upon his arms like one who wept.

Ralph went to the other door and opened it; he had thought it led into the wood; but when he opened it, it was dark and cold without; and suddenly with a shock of strange terror he saw that outside was a place like a hill-top, with short strong grass, and clouds sweeping over it. He would have drawn back, but he was ashamed; so he stepped out and closed the door behind him; and then the house was gone in a moment like a dream, and he was alone on the hill, with the wind whistling in his ears.

He waited for a moment in the clutch of a great fear; but he felt he was alive and well, and little by little his fear disappeared and left him eager. He went a few steps forward, and saw that the hill sloped downward, and downward he went, by steep slopes of turf and scattered grey stones. Presently the mist seemed to blow thinner, and through a gap he saw a land spread out below him; and soon he came out of the cloud, and saw a lonely forest country, all unlike his own, for the trees seemed a sort of pine, with red stems, very tall and sombre. He looked round, and presently he saw that a little track below him seemed to lead downward into the pines, so he gained the track; and soon he came down to the wood.

There was no sign as yet of any habitation; he heard the crying of birds, and at one place he saw a number of crows that stood round something white that lay upon the ground, and pecked at it; and he turned not aside, thinking, he knew not why, that there was some evil thing there. But he did not feel alone, and he had a thought which dwelt with him that there were others bound upon the same quest as himself, though he saw nothing of them. Once indeed he thought he saw a man walking swiftly, his face turned away, among the pines; but the trees blotted him from his sight. Then he passed by a great open marsh with reeds and still pools of water, where he wished to rest but he pushed on the faster, and suddenly, turning a corner, saw that the track led him straight to a large stone house, that stood solitary in the wood. He knew in a moment that this was the end of his journey, and marvelled within himself at the ease of the quest; he went straight up to the house, which seemed all dark and silent, and smote loudly and confidently on the door; some one stirred within, and it was presently opened to him. He thought now that he would be questioned, but the man who opened to him, a grave serving-man, made a motion with his hand, and he went up a flight of stone steps.

As he went up, there came out from a door, as though to meet him with honour, a tall and noble personage, very cheerful and comely, and with a courteous greeting took him into a large

room richly furnished; Ralph began to tell his story, but the man made a quiet gesture with his hand as though no explanation was needed, and went at once to a press, which he opened, and brought out from it a small coffer, which seemed heavy, and opened it before him; Ralph could not see clearly what it contained, but he saw the sparkle of gold and what seemed like jewels. The man smiled at him, and as though in reply to a question said, "Yes, this is what you came to seek; and you are well worthy of it; and my lord"—he bowed as he spoke—"is glad to bestow his riches upon one who found the road so easy hither, and who came from so honoured a friend." Then he said very courteously that he would willingly have entertained him, and shown him more of the treasures of the house; "but I know," he added, "that your business requires haste and you would be gone;" and so he conducted him very gently down to the door again, and presently Ralph was standing outside with the precious coffer under his arm, wondering if he were not in a dream; because he had found what he sought so soon, and with so little trouble.

The porter stood at the door, and said in a quiet voice, "The way is to the left, and through the wood." Ralph thanked him, and the porter said, "You know, young sir, of what you are to beware, for the forest has an evil name?" And when Ralph replied that he knew, the porter said that it was well to start betimes, because the way was somewhat long. So Ralph went out along the road, and saw the porter standing at the door for a long time, watching him, he thought, with a kind of tender gaze.

Ralph took the road that led to the left, very light-hearted; it was pleasant under the pines, which had made a soft brown carpet of needles and the scent of the pine-gum was sharp and sweet. He went for a mile or two thus, while the day darkened above him, and the wind whispered like a falling sea among the branches. At last he came to another great marsh, but a path led down to it from the road, and in the path were strange marks as though some heavy thing had been dragged along, with footprints on either side. Ralph went a few steps down the path, when suddenly an evil smell passed by him; he had been thinking of a picture in one of Father John's books of a man fighting with a dragon, and the brave horned creature, with its red mouth and white teeth, with ribbed wings and bright blue burnished mail, and a tail armed with a sting, had seemed to him a curious and beautiful sight, that a man might well desire to see; the thought of danger was hardly in his heart.

Suddenly he heard below him in the reeds a great routing and splashing; the rushes parted, and he saw a huge and ugly creature, with black oily sides and a red mane of bristles, raise itself up and regard him. Its sides dropped with mud, and its body was wrapped with clinging weeds. But it moved so heavily and slow, and drew itself out on to the bank with such pain, that Ralph saw that there was little danger to one so fleet as himself, if he drew not near. The beast opened its great mouth, and Ralph saw a blue tongue and a pale throat; it regarded him hungrily with small evil eyes; but Ralph sprang backwards, and laughed to see how lumberingly the brute trailed itself along. Its hot and fetid breath made a smoke in the still air; presently it desisted, and as though it desired the coolness, it writhed back into the water again. And Ralph saw that it was only a beast that crept upon its prey by stealth, and that though if he had slept, or bathed in the pool, it might have drawn him in to devour him, yet that one who was wary and active need have no fear; so he went on his way; and blew out great breaths to get the foul watery smell of the monster out of his nostrils.

Suddenly he began to feel weary; he did not know what time of day it was in this strange country, where all was fresh like a dewy morning; he had not seen the sun, though the sky was clear, and he fell to wondering where the light came from; as he wondered, he came to a stone bench by the side of the road where he thought he would sit a little; he would be all the fresher

for a timely rest; he sate down, and as though to fill the place with a heavenly peace, he heard at once doves hallooing in the thicket close at hand; while he sate drinking in the charm of the sound, there was a flutter of wings, and a dove alighted close to his feet; it walked about crooning softly, with its nodding neck flashing with delicate colours, and its pink feet running swiftly on the grass. He felt in his pocket and found there a piece of bread which he had taken with him in the morning and had never thought of tasting; he crumbled it for the bird, who fell to picking it eagerly and gratefully, bowing its head as though in courteous acknowledgment. Ralph leant forwards to watch it, and the ground swam before his weary eyes. He sate back for a moment, and then he would have slept, when he saw a small bright thing dart from a crevice of the stone seat on to his knee. He bent forward to look at it, and saw that it was a thing like a lizard, but without legs, of a powdered green, strangely bright. It nestled on his knee in a little coil and watched him with keen eyes. The trustfulness of these wild creatures pleased him wonderfully. Suddenly, very far away and yet near him, he heard the sound of a voice, like a man in prayer; it reminded him, he knew not why, of the Wise Man's voice, and he rose to his feet ashamed of his drowsiness. The little lizard darted from his leg and on to the ground, as though vexed to be disturbed, and he saw it close to his feet. The dove saw it too, and went to it as though inquiringly; the lizard showed no fear, but coiled itself up, and as the dove came close, made a little dart at its breast, and the dove drew back. Ralph was amused at the fearlessness of the little thing, but in a moment saw that something ailed the dove; it moved as though dizzy, and then spread its wings as if for flight, but dropped them again and nestled down on the ground. In a moment its pretty head fell forwards and it lay motionless. Then with a shock of fear Ralph saw that he had been nearly betrayed; that this was the Snake itself of which he had been warned; he struck with his staff at the little venomous thing, which darted forward with a wicked hiss, and Ralph only avoided it with a spring. Then without an instant's thought he turned and ran along the wood-path, chiding himself bitterly for his folly. He had nearly slept he had only not been stung to death; and he thought of how he would have lain, a stiffening figure, till the crows gathered round him and pulled the flesh from his bones.

After this the way became more toilsome; the track indeed was plain enough, but it was strewn with stones, and little thorny plants grew everywhere, which tripped his feet and sometimes pierced his skin; it grew darker too, as though night were coming on. Presently he came to a clearing in the forest; on a slope to his right hand, he saw a little hut of boughs, with a few poor garden herbs about it. A man was crouched among them, as though he were digging; he was only some thirty paces away; Ralph stopped for a moment, and the man rose up and looked at him. Ralph saw a strangely distorted face under a hairless brow. There were holes where the eyes should have been, and in these the eyes were so deeply sunk that they looked but like pits of shade. Presently the other began to move towards him, waving a large misshapen hand which gleamed with a kind of scurfy whiteness; and he cried out unintelligible words, which seemed half angry, half piteous. Ralph knew that the Leper was before him, and though he loathed to fly before so miserable a wretch, he turned and hurried on into the forest; the creature screamed the louder, and it seemed as though he were asking an alms, but he hobbled so slowly on his thick legs, foully bandaged with rags, that Ralph soon distanced him, and he heard the wretch stop and fall to cursing. This sad and fearful encounter made Ralph sick at heart; but he strove to think God for another danger escaped, and hastened on.

Gradually he became aware by various signs that he was approaching some inhabited place; all at once he came upon a fair house in a piece of open ground, that looked to him at first so like the house of the treasure, that he thought he had come back to it. But when he looked more

closely upon it, he saw that it was not the same; it was somewhat more meanly built, and had not the grave and solid air that the other had; presently he heard a sound of music, like a concert of lutes and trumpets, which came from the house, and when it ceased there was clapping of hands.

While he doubted whether to draw near, he saw that the door was opened, and a man, richly dressed and of noble appearance, came out upon the space in front of the house. He looked about him with a grave and serene air, like a prince awaiting guests. And his eyes falling upon Ralph, he beckoned him to draw near. Ralph at first hesitated. But it seemed to him an unkindly thing to turn his back upon this gallant gentleman who stood there smiling; so he drew near. And then the other asked him whither he was bound. Ralph hardly knew what to reply to this, but the gentleman awaited not his answer, but said that this was a day of festival, and all were welcome, and he would have him come in and abide with them. Ralph excused himself, but the gentleman smiled and said, "I know, sir, that you are bound upon a journey, as many are that pass this way; but you carry no burden with you, as is the wont of others." And then Ralph, with a start of surprise and anguish, remembered that he had left his coffer on the seat where he had seen the Snake. He explained his loss to the gentleman, who laughed and said that this was easily mended, for he would send himself a servant to fetch it. And then he asked whether he had been in any peril, and when Ralph told him, he nodded his head gravely, and said it was a great danger escaped. And then Ralph told him of the Leper, at which the gentleman grew grave, and said that it was well he had not stopped to speak with him, for the contagion of that leprosy was sore and sudden. And then he added, "But while I send to recover your coffer, you will enter and sit with us; you look weary, and you shall eat of our meat, for it is good meat that strengtheneth; but wine," he said, "I will not offer you, though I have it here in abundance, for it weakeneth the knees of those that walk on a journey; but you shall delight your heart with music, such as the angels love, and set forth upon your way rejoicing for indeed it is not late."

And so Ralph was persuaded, and they drew near to the door. Then the gentleman stood aside to let Ralph enter; and Ralph saw within a hall with people feasting, and minstrels in a gallery; but just as he set foot upon the threshold he turned; for it seemed that he was plucked by a hand; and he saw the gentleman, with the smile all faded from his face, and his robe had shifted from his side; and Ralph saw that his side was swollen and bandaged, and then his eye fell upon the gentleman's knee, which was bare, and it was all scurfed and scarred. And he knew that he was in the hands of the Leper himself.

He drew back with a shudder, but the gentleman gathered his robe about him, and said with a sudden sternness, "Nay, it were discourteous to draw back now; and indeed I will compel you to come in." Then Ralph knew that he was betrayed; but he bethought him of the little star that he carried with him, and he took it out and held it before him, and said, "Here is a token that I may not halt." And at that the gentleman's face became evil, and he gnashed with his teeth, and moved towards him, as though to seize him. But Ralph saw that he feared the star. So he went backwards holding it forth; and as the Leper pressed upon him, he touched him with the star; and at that the Leper cried aloud, and ran within the house; and there came forth a waft of doleful music like a dirge for the dead.

Then Ralph went into the wood and stood there awhile in dreadful thought; but it came into his mind that there could be no turning back, and that he must leave his precious coffer behind, "and perhaps," he thought, "the Wise Man will let me adventure again." So he went on with a sad and sober heart, but he thanked God as he went for another danger hardly escaped.

And it grew darker now; so dark that he often turned aside among the trees; till at last he came out on the edge of the forest, and knew that he was near the end. In front of him rose a wide

hillside, the top of which was among the clouds; and he could see the track faintly glimmering upwards through the grass; the forest lay like a black wall behind him, and he was now deathly weary of his journey, and could but push one foot before the other.

But for all his weariness he felt that it grew colder as he went higher; he gathered his cloak around him, but the cold began to pierce his veins; so that he knew that he was coming to the Grey Frost, and how to escape from it he knew not. The grass grew crisp with frost, and the tall thistles that grew there snapped as he touched them. By the track there rose in several places tall tussocks of grass, and happening to pass close by one of these, he saw something gleam white amid the grass; so he looked closer upon it, and then his heart grew cold within him, for he saw that the grass grew thick out of the bones of a skeleton, through the white ribs and out of the sightless eyes. And he saw that each of the tussocks marked the grave of a man.

Then he came higher still, and the ground felt like iron below his feet; and over him came a dreadful drowsiness, till his only thought was to lie down and sleep; his breath came out like a white cloud and hung round him, and yet he saw the hill rising in front. Then he marked something lie beside the track; and he saw that it was a man down upon his face, wrapped in a cloak. He tried to lift him up, but the body seemed stiff and cold, and the face was frozen to the ground; and when he raised it the dirt was all hard upon the face. So he left it lying and went on. At last he could go no farther; all was grey and still round him, covered with a bleak hoar-frost. To left and right he saw figures lying, grey and frozen, so that the place was like a battlefield; and still the mountain towered up pitilessly in front; he sank upon his knees and tried to think, but his brain was all benumbed. Then he put his face to the ground, and his breath made a kind of warmth about him, while the cold ate into his limbs; but as he lay he heard a groan, and looking up he saw a figure that lay close to the track rise upon its knees and sink down again.

So Ralph struggled again to his feet with the thought that if he must die he would like to die near another man; and he came up to the figure; and he saw that it was a boy, younger than himself, wrapped in a cloak. His hat had fallen off, and he could see his curls all frosted over a cheek that was smooth and blue with cold. By his side lay a little coffer and a staff, like his own. And Ralph, speaking with difficulty through frozen lips, said, "And what do you here? You are too young to be here." The other turned his face upon him, all drawn with anguish, and said, "Help me, help me; I have lost my way. And Ralph sat down beside him and gathered the boy's body into his arms; and it seemed as though the warmth revived him, for the boy looked gratefully at him and said, "So I am not alone in this dreadful place."

Then Ralph said to him that there was no time to be lost, and that they were near their end. "But it seems to me," he added, "that a little farther up the grass looks greener, as if the cold were not so bitter there; let us try to help each other a few paces farther, if we may avoid death for a little." So they rose slowly and painfully, and now Ralph would lead the boy a step or two on; and then he would lean upon the boy, who seemed to grow stronger, for a pace or two; till suddenly it came into Ralph's mind that the cold was certainly less; and so like two dying men they struggled on, step by step, until the ground grew softer under their feet and the grass darker, and then, looking round, Ralph could see the circle of the Grey Frost below them, all white and hoary in the uncertain light.

Presently they struggled out on to a ridge of the long hill; and here they rested on their staves, and talked for a moment like old friends; and the boy showed Ralph his coffer, and said, "But you have none?" And Ralph shook his head and said, "Nay, I left it on the seat of the Snake." And then Ralph asked him of the Leper's house, and the boy told him that he had seen it indeed, but had feared and made a circuit in the wood, and that he had there seen a fearful sight; for at

the back of the Leper's house was a cage, like a kennel of hounds, and in it sate a score of wretched men with their eyes upon the ground, who had wandered from the way; and that he had heard a barking of dogs, and men had come out from the house, but that he had fled through the woods.

While they thus talked together, Ralph saw that hard by them was a rock, and in the rock a hole like a cave; so he said to the boy, "Let us stand awhile out of the wind; and then will we set out again." So the boy consented; and they came to the cave; but Ralph wondered exceedingly to see a door set in the rock-face; and he put out his hand and pulled the door; and it opened; and a voice from within called him by name.

Then in a moment Ralph saw that he was in the house of the Wise Man, who sate in his chair, regarding him with a smile, like a father welcoming a son. All seemed the same; and it was very grateful to Ralph to see the sun warm on the ceiling, and to smell the honeyed air that came in from the garden.

Then he went forward, and fell on his knees and laid the staff and the star down, and would have told the Wise Man his tale; but the Wise Man said, "Went not my heart with thee, my son?"

Then Ralph told him how he had left his treasure, expecting to be chidden. But the Wise Man said, "Heed it not, for thou hast a better treasure in thy heart."

Then Ralph remembered that he had left his companion outside, and asked if he might bring him in; but the Wise Man said, "Nay, he has entered by another way." And presently he bade Ralph return home in peace, and blessed him in a form of words which Ralph could not afterwards remember, but it sounded very sweet. And Ralph asked whether he might come again, but the Wise Man said, "Nay, my son."

Then Ralph went home in wonder; and though the journey had seemed very long, he found that it was still morning in Birnewood.

Then he returned to the Parsonage; and the next day Father John returned, and told him that the lands would be restored to him; and as they talked, Father John said, "My son, what new thing has come to you? for there is a light in your eye that was not lit before." But Ralph could not tell him.

So Ralph became a great knight, and did worthily; and in his hall there hang three pictures in one frame; to the left is a little green snake on a stone bench; to the right a leprous man richly clad; and in the centre a grey mist, with a figure down on its face. And some folk ask Ralph to explain the picture, and he smiles and says it is a vision; but others look at the picture in a strange wonder, and then look in Ralph's face, and he knows that they understand, and that they too have been to the Country of Dreams.