

The Cavern of Steenfall

A Scottish Legend

By Wilhelm Hauff

From *The Inn in the Spessart*, (1827)

(Translation by S. Mendel, 1886)

Transcriber's note: In The Inn in the Spessart, "The Cavern of Steenfall" was a story told by one of the characters. I have removed the elements of the framing story, which were originally appended to the end of the chapter, from this transcription.

Many years ago there lived upon one of the rocky islands of Scotland two fishermen in happy concord. They were both unmarried, had no relatives, and although they were differently engaged in their common work, yet it supported them both. They were nearly of the same age, but there was as much resemblance between them in person and character as there is between an eagle and a sea-calf.

Kaspar Strumpf was a short, stout man, with a broad, fat, full-moon face, kind laughing eyes, to whom cares and sorrows were unknown. He was not merely stout, but also sleepy and lazy, and therefore it fell to his lot to attend to the housework, cooking and baking, the netting of nets for catching fish for their own use and for sale, as well as tilling a part of their little ground.

His companion was quite the reverse; he was tall and thin, had a bold hook-nose and fiery eyes, and known to be the most active and courageous fisherman, the most venturesome climber after birds and down, the most industrious field-labourer on the islands, as well as being the most greedy money-maker in the market-place of Kirkwall; but as his goods were of the best quality, and he was honest in his transactions, everybody liked to deal with him, and Will Hawk (this was the name given him by his fellow-countrymen) and Kaspar Strumpf, with whom the former, in spite of his greediness, gladly shared his hard earned gain, not merely lived well, but were also in a fair way of reaching a certain stage of opulence.

It was not, however, wealth alone after which Hawk's greedy mind was striving; he was bent upon acquiring wealth, and as he soon learned to perceive

that in the usual way of industry he could not get rich so quickly, the idea at last occurred to him that he must obtain his wealth by some extraordinary chance of fortune, and this thought having once taken possession of his powerful working mind, nothing else found room in it, and he began to talk to Kaspar Strumpf about it as a certain thing. The latter, to whom all that Hawk said was regarded as Gospel, related it to his neighbours, and soon the rumour spread — Will Hawk had really either sold himself to the Evil One for gold, or he had at least received an offer for it, from the prince of the lower regions.

Although at first Hawk ridiculed these rumours, yet gradually he delighted in the idea that some genius might reveal to him some day a treasure, and he no longer contradicted whenever his fellow-countrymen taunted him with it. He still carried on his business, but with less zeal, and often lost a great deal of time, which he formerly spent in catching fish, and other useful pursuits, in aimlessly looking out for some adventure, by which he might suddenly become rich. As ill-luck would have it, he was one day standing on the lonely shore, and looking with uncertain hope upon the moving sea, as if his great fortune were to come thence, when a great wave which had uprooted a quantity of weeds and stones, rolled a yellow ball — a ball of gold — to his feet.

Will stood there as if bewitched; his hopes had not been empty dreams; the sea had presented gold to him, beautiful bright gold, probably the remains of a heavy bar, which the waves had rubbed down on the bottom of the sea until it became the size of a bullet. And now he clearly perceived that at one time, somewhere on this shore, a richly-laden ship must have foundered, and that he was selected to fetch out the buried treasures from the depths of the sea. This was henceforth his sole longing; to endeavour to carefully conceal his discovery even from his friend, in order that others might not spy it out; he neglected everything else, and spent days and nights on this shore, but he did not throw out a net after fish, but a drag, which he himself had made, for gold. But he found nothing but poverty; he earned nothing more himself, and Kaspar's sleepy exertions were not sufficient to maintain them both. In searching for greater treasures, not merely did the gold which he had found disappear, but gradually also the whole property of the bachelors.

But as Strumpf had silently allowed Hawk formerly to earn the greater part of his food, he now also allowed, silently and without grumbling, his aimless activity

to deprive him of it, and it was just this gentle endurance of his friend which spurred on the other more strongly to continue his restless search for riches. But what made him still more active was, that whenever he lay down to rest, and his eyes closed in slumber, somebody whispered a word in his ears, which, although he appeared to hear it very distinctly, and which always seemed to him the same, yet he could never remember. True he did not know what this circumstance, however strange it was, might have to do with his present endeavours; but on a mind like that of Will Hawk everything made an impression; and even this mysterious whispering strengthened him in the belief that a great fortune awaited him. which he hoped to find in one single heap of gold.

One day a storm surprised him on the shore where he had found the golden ball, the violence of which urged him to seek refuge in a cavern near. This cavern which was called by the inhabitants the cavern of Steenfull, consists of a long subterranean passage which has two outlets into the sea, giving a free passage to the foaming waves, which worked their way through continually, with loud roars. This cavern was only accessible in one place, and that through a crevice from above, which was, however, seldom entered by any one except naughty boys. In addition to the peculiar dangers of the place, it was also known to be haunted by ghosts.

Will let himself down with difficulty, and took his place about twelve feet from the surface upon a projecting stone, and under an overhanging piece of rock, the roaring waves under his feet, and the raging storm over his head, when he sank into the usual train of thought about the foundered ship, and what sort of a ship it might have been; for in spite of all his inquiries from even the oldest of the inhabitants, he had been unable to obtain any news about the place where the ship had foundered.

How long he had sat in that manner he did not know himself; but when he awoke at last from his dreams he discovered that the storm had passed. He was about to ascend again when he heard a voice from beneath, and the word "Car-mil-han" was quite distinct to his ears. Terrified, he started up and looked down into the empty abyss. "Great God!" he exclaimed, "that is the word which has tormented me in my sleep! For Heaven's sake what can be the meaning of it?" "Car-mil-han!" it sighed once more up out of the cavern, when he had already one foot out of the crevice, and he fled like a hunted deer towards his hut.

Will was, however, no coward; he was merely unprepared for the affair; and besides, his greediness for money was too strong in him for a semblance of danger to frighten him from continuing his dangerous course. Once when he was fishing for treasures with his drag very late at night, by moonlight, opposite the cavern of Steenfall, it stuck fast suddenly on something. He pulled with all his might, but the mass remained immovable. In the meantime the wind rose, dark clouds covered the sky, his boat rocked terribly, and threatened to upset; but Will was not so easily baffled, he kept on pulling and pulling until the resistance yielded, and feeling no weight, he believed his rope was broken. But just as the clouds were about to cover the moon, a round black mass appeared on the surface, and the tormenting word Car-mil-han resounded. He was about to seize it quickly, but just as quickly as he stretched out his arm towards it, it disappeared in the darkness of the night and the impending storm compelled him to seek shelter under an adjacent rock.

Here he fell asleep from fatigue, again to suffer those torments which an unchecked power of imagination and his restless longing after riches caused him to endure during the daytime. The first beams of the rising sun were now falling upon the quiet surface of the sea when Hawk awoke. He was again about to go to his accustomed work when he saw something coming towards him from a distance. He soon recognised it to be a boat which contained a human figure; but what excited his greatest surprise was that the boat went along without sails or rudder, and with the bows turned towards the shore, and the figure sitting in it did not seem in the least concerned about the rudder, if indeed it had one. The boat came nearer and nearer, and stopped at last close to Will's boat. The person in it now appeared to be a little shrivelled-up old man, dressed in yellow linen, and with a red nightcap, standing upright, with his eyes closed, and sitting there, immovable, like a dried-up corpse. After having vainly called to him and pushed him, he was about to fasten a rope on the boat to pull it away, when the little man opened his eyes, and began to move in such a way that he filled even the bold fisherman with terror.

"Where am I?" he asked, in Dutch, after a deep sigh. Hawk, who had learned something about the language from the Dutch herring-fishers, told him the name of the island, and asked who he was and what had brought him here.

I have come to look for the Carmilhan."

"The Carmilhan? For heaven's sake! what is that? " cried the fisherman eagerly.

"I do not answer questions which are put to me in this way," replied the little man, evidently terrified.

"Well," exclaimed Hawk, "what is the Carmilhan?"

"The Carmilhan is nothing now, but once upon a time it was a beautiful ship laden with more gold than any other ship has ever carried."

"Where did it run aground, and when?"

"It happened a hundred years ago; where, I do not know exactly; I have come to look for the place and to fish up the lost gold; if you will assist me we will share the treasure with each other."

"With all my heart, only tell me what I must do?"

"What you have to do requires courage; you must go just before midnight to the most barren and lonely place on the island, accompanied by a cow, which you must kill there, and get some one to wrap you up in her fresh hide. Your companion must then lay you down on the ground, and leave you. Before the clock strikes one you will know where the treasures of the Carmilhan are buried."

"In this way the old Engrol was ruined both in body and soul!" cried Will with terror. "You are the evil spirit," he continued, whilst rowing away hastily, "away with you! I will have nothing to do with you."

The little man gnashed his teeth, abused him, and sent curses after him; the fisherman, however, who had seized both his oars, was soon out of his hearing, and after having rowed round a rock was also out of sight. The discovery, however, that the evil spirit endeavoured to profit by his greediness and to allure him with gold into his clutches, made no impression on the beguiled fisherman; on the contrary, he thought he was able to turn to advantage the communication of the little yellow man, without selling himself to the evil one; and as he continued to fish for gold on the barren shore, he neglected the wealth which the large shoals of fish offered to him in other parts of the sea, as well as all other means on which he had formerly employed his energies, and sank day after day, together with his companion, into deeper poverty, until at last they often stood in need of the necessaries of life.

But although this ruin must be ascribed entirely to Hawk's stubbornness and vain desire, and the support of both now alone fell on Kaspar Strumpf, yet the latter

never reproached him in the slightest degree; nay, he still showed the same submissiveness, the same confidence in his better judgment, as at the time when he had succeeded in all his undertakings; this circumstance increased Hawk's sufferings very much, but induced him all the more to seek for gold, because he hoped thereby to recompense his friend for his present deprivation. At the same time the fiendish whisperings of the word Carmilhan still tormented him in his sleep. In short, necessity, disappointed expectations, and greediness brought him at last to a kind of frenzy, so that he finally resolved to do that which the little man had advised him, although he was fully aware according to the old tradition that he was giving himself over with it to the powers of darkness.

All Kaspar's representations to the contrary were in vain. Hawk only became the more furious the more the other entreated him to abstain from his desperate intention. The good-natured, weak-minded man at last consented to accompany him and help him to accomplish his design. Both their hearts were painfully moved when they put a rope round the horns of a beautiful cow, the last of their remaining property, which they had reared from a calf, and which they had always refused to sell, because they could not bear to see her in strange hands. The evil spirit, however, who had mastered Will now stifled all better feeling in him, and Kaspar was unable to resist him in anything.

It was in the month of September, the long evenings of a Scotch winter had begun. The dark clouds of evening rolled heavily before the boisterous wind and rose like icebergs in the whirling stream, deep shadows filled the ravines between the mountains and the damp turf marshes, and the gloomy beds of the streams appeared dark and terrible like dreadful gulfs. Hawk went first, Strumpf followed, shuddering at his own boldness, and tears filled his dim eyes as often as he looked at the poor animal which went so confidentially and unconsciously towards speedy death, which it was to receive from that hand which had hitherto given it food. With difficulty they reached the narrow and marshy mountain-valley which was covered with moss and heath, with large stones, and surrounded by a rocky chain of mountains which was lost in the grey mist, and whither the foot of man seldom strayed. They approached a large stone on the unsafe ground which was in the centre, and from which a frightened eagle flew upwards screaming.

The poor cow lowed gently, as though she recognised the terrors of the place, and her impending fate; Kaspar turned away in order to wipe away his tears which

were flowing in torrents. He looked down through the crevice of the rock by which they had come up, and whence the distant surges of the sea were heard, and then up to the mountain tops upon which the clouds as black as coal had settled, and out of which was heard from time to time a deep murmuring. On turning round to Will the latter had already tied the poor cow to a stone, and with uplifted hatchet was about to strike down the good animal.

This was too much for his resolution to acquiesce in the will of his friend. With his hands clasped he threw himself upon his knees. "For heaven's sake, Will Hawk!" he exclaimed in a voice of despair, "spare yourself, spare the cow. Spare yourself and me. Spare your soul. Spare your life! If you must tempt God wait until tomorrow, and sacrifice rather any other animal than our beloved cow!"

"Kaspar, are you mad?" cried Will like a madman, whilst he was still holding up his hatchet ready for action. "Shall I spare the cow and die of hunger?"

"You shall not die of hunger," replied Kaspar, in a resolute manner, "as long as I have hands you shall not die of hunger. I will work for you from morning until night, only do not forfeit your soul's salvation, and do grant me the poor animal's life."

"Then take the hatchet and split my head," exclaimed Hawk, in a despairing tone. "I shall not stir from this place until I have what I want. Can you raise the treasures of the Carmilhan for me? Can your hands earn more than the barest necessities of life? but they can terminate my misery — come and let me be the sacrifice."

"Will, if you kill the cow, you kill me. It makes no difference to me, I only care for your salvation. Alas! this is, as you are aware, the altar of the Picts, and the sacrifice which you are anxious to offer belongs to the prince of darkness."

"I do not know anything about such things," exclaimed Hawk, laughing wildly, like one who is determined to be ignorant of anything that might divert him from his resolution. "Kaspar, you are mad, and make me mad — but there," he continued, throwing away the hatchet and picking up the knife from the stone, as if he would kill himself, "there keep the cow instead of me!"

Kaspar was immediately by his side, snatched the murderous weapon from his hand, seized the hatchet, lifted it up high into the air, and brought it down so

powerfully upon the head of the beloved animal that it fell dead at its master's feet without moving.

Lightning, accompanied by a thunder-clap, followed this rash act, Hawk staring at his friend as a man would do at a child having ventured to do what he himself would not have dared. Strumpf, however, did not seem to be either frightened at the thunder or disconcerted at the rigid surprise of his companion, and without saying a word attacked the cow and commenced to pull off the hide. On Will having recovered a little, he assisted him in this work, but with as evident a dislike as he had before been eager to see the sacrifice completed. During this work the thunderstorm had increased in fury, the thunder resounded amid the mountains, and terrible flashes of lightning were winding around the stone and over the moss of the ravine, whilst the winds, which had not yet attained to their height, filled the valley beneath and the sea-shore with terrible howlings. When the hide had at last been pulled off, both fishermen were already drenched to the skin. They spread the hide on the ground, and Kaspar enveloped and tied Hawk firmly in it, just as he had been instructed by him. It was only after this had been accomplished that the poor fellow broke the silence, and looking pitifully at his foolish friend, asked him in a trembling voice: "Is there anything I can do for you. Will?"

"Nothing more," replied the other, "Farewell!"

"Farewell," replied Kaspar, "God be with you, and pardon you as I do."

These were the last words Will heard from him, for the next moment he had disappeared in the ever-increasing darkness, and at the same moment one of the most terrible thunderstorms Will had ever heard burst forth. It commenced with lightning, which showed Hawk not merely the mountains and rocks in his immediate neighbourhood, but also the valley beneath him, with the foaming sea, and the rocky islands which lay scattered in the creek, among which he believed he saw the appearance of a large quaint-looking and dismantled ship, which also again disappeared instantly in the most intense darkness. The claps of thunder became quite deafening. A number of pieces of rock rolled down the mountain and threatened to kill him. The rain came down in such torrents, that the narrow marshy valley was flooded in a moment with a high flood, and soon came up to Will's shoulders; fortunately, however, Kaspar had placed him with the upper part of his

body upon an elevation, or else he would have been drowned at once. The water still rose higher and higher, and the more Will strove to extricate himself from his dangerous position, the more tightly the hide held him. In vain he called for Kaspar, who was far away. He dared not call upon God in his danger, and he was seized with terror as he was about to call upon the powers of darkness, to whom he felt he had surrendered himself.

The water had by this time almost penetrated his ears, and nearly touched his lips. "I am lost!" he exclaimed, as he felt a shower coming down upon his face — but at the same moment he heard a faint sound in his ear resembling that of a near waterfall, and immediately his mouth was again free! The flood had made its way through the stones, and as the rain ceased somewhat at the same time, and the clouds disappeared, his despair also vanished, and a ray of hope seemed to return to him. Although he felt exhausted just like one fighting with death, and ardently wishing to be released from his captivity, yet the aim of his despairing longing had not yet been attained, and with the disappearance of the imminent danger so also avarice returned into his bosom with all its fury. Being convinced, however, that he was obliged to persevere in his position in order to attain his object, he kept quiet, and sank from cold and exhaustion into a deep sleep.

He might have been asleep for nearly two hours when a cold wind, passing over his face, and the rushing like that of approaching sea-waves awoke him out of his happy self-forgetfulness. The sky had again become darkened, a flash of lightning, like the one which had caused the first storm, once more illuminated the whole country round, and he believed he saw again the strange boat, which was now close to the Steenfall-cliff, suspended upon a great wave and then suddenly shoot into the abyss. He was still staring after the phantom, for an incessant lightning kept the sea illuminated, when all of a sudden a water spout the height of a mountain, poured out of the valley, throwing him with such might against a rock that he became senseless. When he came to himself again, the thunderstorm had passed, the sky was serene, but the sheet lightning still continued. He lay close to the foot of the mountains, which surrounded this valley, and he felt so bruised that he was scarcely able to move: He heard the quiet sound of the surges, and amongst them solemn music like church hymns; these strains were at first so weak that he thought it to be a delusion. But they were heard ever and again, and every time more distinctly and nearer, and it seemed to him at last as if he could recognise in

them the chanting of a psalm which he had heard in the last summer on board a Dutch herring smack.

At last he even seemed to recognise voices, and it appeared to him as if he even heard the words of that hymn. The voices were now in the valley, and after he had pushed himself to a stone with difficulty, upon which to lay his head, he actually saw a procession of human figures from whom this music proceeded, and which was making its way straight towards him. Sorrow and anxiety were depicted on the people's faces whose clothes seemed to be dripping wet. They were now close to him, and their singing ceased. At the head were several musicians, followed by a number of sailors, and behind these walked a tall, strong man, clad in old-fashioned dress richly embroidered with gold, a sword at his side, and a long, thick Spanish reed with a golden knob in his hand. On his left walked a negro boy, who gave his master a long pipe from time to time, out of which he smoked in a solemn manner, and then went on his way. He stood still right in front of Will, and other less splendidly dressed men placed themselves at his side, all having pipes in their hands, less costly than that which was carried after the stout man. Behind these latter, other persons took their places, amongst them several women, some of them having children in their arms, or leading them by the hand, all in costly but quaint dress. A crowd of Dutch sailors closed the procession, each one of whom had his mouth filled with tobacco, and a little brown pipe between his teeth, which he smoked in gloomy silence.

The fisherman looked with terror on this strange assembly; the expectation, however, of that which was to happen, kept up his courage. They thus stood round him for a long time, and the smoke of their pipes rose like a cloud over them, through which the stars blinked. The circle drew closer and closer round Will, the smoking increased more furiously, the cloud which rose from their mouths and pipes became more dense. Hawk was a courageous and audacious man; he had prepared himself for extraordinary things, but as this enormous crowd always came nearer and nearer to him, as if they would smother him with numbers, he lost courage, large drops of perspiration bathed his forehead, and he expected to die of fear. His fright may be imagined, when he was about to turn his eyes, he saw sitting upright and stiff close to his head the little yellow man, just as he had seen him for the first time, only now as if to mock the whole assembly, he too had a pipe in his mouth. In the agony of death which now seized him, he called out, turning towards

the chief:

"In the name of him whom you serve, who are you, and what do you require of me?"

The tall man puffed three times in a more solemn manner than before, then gave his pipe to his servant, and replied with terrible coldness: "I am Alfred Franz van der Swelder, captain of the ship Carmilhan from Amsterdam, which foundered on this rocky shore with all on board, on its way homeward from Batavia: these are my officers and passengers, and those my brave sailors, who were all drowned with me. Why did you call us up from our dwellings in the deep sea? Why did you disturb our rest?"

"I should like to know where the treasures of the Carmilhan are buried."

"At the bottom of the sea."

"Where?"

"In the cavern of Steenfoll."

"How shall I get them?"

"A goose dives into the abyss for a herring; are not the treasures of the Carmilhan worth as much?"

"How much of it shall I get?"

"More than you will ever be able to spend."

The little yellow man grinned, and the whole assembly burst out laughing.

"Have you finished?" asked the captain further.

"I have. Farewell!"

"Farewell, till we meet again," replied the Dutchman, on the point of going away; the musicians again went in front and the whole procession went away in the same order in which it had come, and with the same solemn chanting, which became quieter and more indistinct with the distance, until at last after some time the noise was lost entirely in the surges. Will now used his remaining strength to free himself from his fetters, and succeeded at last in freeing one arm, with which he severed the rope which bound him, and at last rolled himself entirely out of the

hide. Without turning round, he hastened towards the hut and found poor Kaspar Strumpf lying on the floor in rigid unconsciousness. With difficulty he brought him round, and the good man cried for joy on seeing his old friend again, whom he had thought lost. This gleam of happiness, however, soon vanished again on hearing from him what a despairing undertaking he was now bent upon.

"I would rather throw myself into hell than look any longer at these naked walls and this misery; whether you follow or not, I shall go."

With these words Will took a torch, with flint and steel, and a rope, and then hastened away. Kaspar ran after him as quickly as he could, and found him already standing on the piece of rock on which he had formerly found protection against the storm, and ready to let himself down by the rope into the roaring black abyss. Finding all his representation to the madman useless, he got ready to descend after him; Hawk, however, ordered him to stay where he was, and to hold the rope. With terrible exertion, to which only the blindest avarice could give courage and strength. Hawk climbed down the cavern, and at last found himself upon a projecting piece of rock, under which black waves tipped with wreaths of white foam, dashed forward. He looked about him eagerly, and at last saw something sparkling in the water just under him. He put down the torch, threw himself down and seized something heavy which he brought up. It was a little iron box full of gold pieces. He told his companion what he had found; he would not, however, listen to his entreaties to be satisfied with it, and ascend again. Hawk thought this was only the first result of his great exertions. He threw himself down once more—a loud laughter resounded from the sea, and Will Hawk was never seen again.

Kaspar went home alone, quite a changed man. The strange sensations which his weak head and sensitive heart suffered, unsettled his mind. He let everything belonging to him go to ruin, and wandered about day and night, staring vacantly before him, pitied and avoided by all his former acquaintances. A fisherman is said to have recognised Will Hawk on a stormy night amidst the crew of the Carmilhan, near the shore, and Kaspar Strumpf also disappeared on the same night. People looked for him everywhere, but no one has ever been able to find a trace of him. But the legend says, that he, together with Hawk, had often been seen amongst the crew of the phantom ship, which has ever since appeared at regular times near the cavern of Steenfull.