

The Crooked Man

There had been no premonition of the Crooked Man's coming before he had, at last, arrived. On the day that he came to the village, the sky, the earth, the very fabric of nature itself seemed to forebode his imminent arrival. The sky was bruised with harsh grays and browns, and a smattering of malicious black clouds molested the normally-blue dome. In the village, bordered on one side by a verdant forest and on the other with a beach that was engulfed with magnificent black sand, not one man, woman, or child caught wind of the chirping of birds, the braying of mules, the howls of wolves at their everlasting hunt. Along the large main road that ran through the village, paved with cracked and pockmarked stones, a vicious wind gusted. This ferocious gale blasted at the trees and houses, bending them over until they were as crooked as Death himself. The trees, nearly doubled-over, gave the impression of a mouth full of shark's teeth; curving in brutally to keep any prey caught in its savage jaws from escaping. The houses groaned in terror; they seemed to whisper-scream throughout the entire village a warning of the Crooked Man's coming. *Run!* they appeared to shout to the unheeding masses. *Run! Flee! Escape! Dear God, run!* It was a true shame that not one of the townsmen-and-women took note of their warnings.

Philip, on the day of the Crooked Man's coming, was taken with a noticeable sense of unease. As many children do, he was born with the innate ability, shared with many animals, to sense the approach of a coming menace, and today was no exception. He wandered the town he had called home all his life with a strange purposelessness. He knew something bad was about to arrive, but he was not possessed with the knowledge as to what that thing was, and that feeling of not knowing was worse *than* knowing. Currently, Philip stood at the foot of the main road, facing out into the wilderness. The gale blasted at Philip's cloak; it felt as if his cloak, of the deepest brown, was being torn from his slim frame, so powerful were the winds. He observed the rise and fall of the stone path, witnessing it undulate through the landscape like some

monolithic sea serpent. At last, the road curled up a steep hill and vanished from sight. It was atop this hill that the Crooked Man now emerged.

The Crooked Man, from this distance, appeared as nothing more than a tall, spindly black blotch marring the green of the grass and the trees. The wind had grown ever stronger, so that now Philip had to brace himself against the stone road, and yet it seemed to have next to no effect on the Crooked Man's ebony cloak. To the cloth that the man was ensconced in, one would think that no more than a light breeze was blowing. Philip could ascertain no features of the man's face—to him, it appeared to be just a black cape affixed to the shoulders of a mannequin—and yet he had the distinct sense that the man was watching him. He felt the weight upon his back that comes of one being seen, weighed, observed. Gooseflesh at once sprouted from Philip's arms and legs, and it had nothing to do with the frigid winds. He observed the Crooked Man shuffle, and suddenly a black ring encroached upon the edges of Philip's sight; it spread through his eyes with unprecedented speed, soon consuming all vision until only darkness remained.

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A hand on his shoulder. A raspy, grotesque voice in his ear. The feel of sharp, uneven nails digging grooves into his hide. Philip murmured protest against the sensations, against the darkness, and yet the inky black did not budge. Then, he felt the most peculiar feeling. It felt as if a stick were tapping at his head in the cadence of a woodpecker. What in God's name? *Tap tap tap*, the stick went. Philip murmured again, this time in frustration. *Tap tap tap*. The incensed words *could you stop?* nearly escaped his lips, and yet something held them back. *Tap tap tap!* The taps grew louder, and harder. *TAP TAP TAP!*

"STOP!" Philip shouted at last, and with it sight returned.

The Crooked Man stood before him, face bared. The man's visage was distinctly *wrong*, distorted in every aspect in the slightest way to create an unsettling impression of inaccuracy. It

was as if he were a clay doll made by some being who bore no knowledge of what made a proper human. His light-gray hair was mangy and unkempt. His nose gave the idea of having been broken and healed in the wrong way. His right eye was curved down towards his nose, while his left was curved outward. His mouth was slit into a leering, sinister grin, and his teeth were cockeyed in his mouth. His entire face was engulfed in wrinkles; he seemed to have lived for a thousand years. Clapsed in the man's hand was a long stick, acting as a cane.

Overcome with a sinking feeling of dread, Philip nearly bolted down the road, but, upon noticing that the man's hand was firmly planted on his shoulder, decided that he would wait for the proper moment to flee. He was as good as a prisoner in the man's grasp.

"Now, don't look at me like that! I know I'm not exactly a pretty face to look at, but I can't look *that* horrid!" The Crooked Man sounded amiable, almost kindly, and yet that sense of foreboding remained in Philip's breast.

"Oh... oh, no, sir, I meant no offense! Just a bit... um—frazzled, is all, I suppose."

"Well, we all have our moments, do we not?" The man's tongue curled around his words, and those snagged teeth appeared as fangs in a predator's maw. "Lad, do you happen to know of a place where an old priest such as myself might find a place to stay and get a drink? I have traveled day after day, feasting only on scraps of meat and stream water, and now all I desire is a warm bed, a mug of ale, and a meal to fill my belly."

"There's a bar and inn not two minutes' walk from here... Father. You can't miss it. Called the Pig and Swallow."

"Thank you, son. Much gratitude... and let the Lord be with you," he hesitated at the end. Nodding to Philip, the Crooked Man set off down the street. On both sides, he was bordered by simple wood-and-stone cottages and shops. Soon, this would all be returned to the Earth. But for now, it was time for rest. He spied the sign marked "Pig and Swallow" affixed to one of the only two-story buildings in the town. He marched up to the door and pushed it open, a wide, revolting grin transfixing his face.

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The inn was bustling with life. Upon observing the hostile weather, most had decided it better to huddle inside the bar. In the morning, it had been quiet and pensive, but, after warming their blood and tongues with a few mugs of ale, the party had begun, and now the inn was filled with raucous laughter and various sounds of merriment. However, as the Crooked Man had drawn near the inn, the voices had slowly died down, and the initial worry and displeasure that had filled the space occupied it once more. Now, as the Crooked Man entered the bar, the only sound was a low murmur that faded in and out of existence. He approached the bar, placed himself down on a stool, and spoke into the silence.

“Hello, dear. God bless. May I have a mug of your best ale, and a warm mutton chop to go along with it?” He placed a gold coin on the counter and slid it over to her. The waitress nodded absentmindedly and stalked off to the kitchen. The Crooked Man whistled a jolly tune; he heard some behind him shift uncomfortably in their seats as his music filled the air. “Blustery out there, isn’t it? Seems as if God’s in a bit of a tizzy, no?” He cackled, his voice filled with a strange humor. None laughed with him. “What? Don’t be so serious,” he snorted. The inn remained quiet as death. The Crooked Man shrugged. “Suit yourselves,” he said, and took a sip from his mug. Time passed, and the serving girl returned, bearing with her a plate of steaming mutton. She set it down in front of the man, and he nodded his acceptance.

“*Alright*, that’s enough.”

The Crooked Man shifted around on his stool, and met the eyes of the man now occupying the space behind him. He looked the man up and down—large, gruff, covered in scars and twice as much hair—and spoke. “Yes?”

“You seem to me to be some sort of priest; you look the part and seem to throw around the Lord’s name like one. But something about you is off. You make my skin crawl standing fifty feet

away. You just aren't right, and, frankly enough, I don't trust you worth a damn, so I would recommend that you tell me exactly who you are, unless you're interested in tasting the dirt outside. *Father.*"

"Well, gentleman, hello to you too! To answer your first question, yes, I am a priest. Of a sort, I suppose. But don't take that askance. I praise the Lord God just as much as I'm sure all of you fine fellows do. And to answer your second question, I must say that you are much more observant than you seem. Good on you! Allow me to elucidate. I am the one priest walking this Earth today that is the closest to our Lord. And yet, I am oh so far from him. I know his wishes, follow his commands, and yet you will not believe that I am. When you learn of my purpose, you will shout '*demon! Hellspawn! Son of Satan!*' or some such drivel, because you will not believe what God wishes for you, and for the ones you love, and for all the sniveling, slobbering members of your disgusting, insipid, appalling species!" he finished with a shout. Regaining his composure, his smile carved itself once more into his lips. "Now, are you satisfied, and may I return to my meal?"—turning to the serving girl—"And may I say, this mutton is absolutely *delectable*. Give the cook my regards, will you?"—his gaze returned to the man—"Or must I explain further? I feel that I have said quite enough, and you are sure to see my objective soon. So?" He spread his hands in a gesture of query.

The large man—Jaime—spluttered, spittle spraying from his gullet. His eyes, two wide, white eggs burrowed into his face beneath large brows, grew massive in response. "Wh-what kind of *priest* are you?! You are no priest! You... you must be some monster, some insidious *devil*, with the form of a priest taken!"

The Crooked Man sighed greatly and turned back to the serving girl; her eyes, too, were widened with shock. "What did I tell you they would say? So predictable, humans." He faced Jaime once more. "Believe my words or not, I truly do not care. No matter what you say or do, or how much spit you fling at me,"—he brushed a glob of spittle, ejected from Jaime's mouth, from his cheek with a grimace—"I will complete my mission, move on to the next town, the next

people, and you will be nothing more to me than another face, another soul, that I have claimed for my own. Do you really wish to die for such a futile cause?”

Jaime swung his fist, large as the slab of meat on the Crooked Man’s plate, at the man’s head. The Crooked Man brought his cane up to meet it, and Jaime’s fist reverberated off with a resounding *crack*. Wincing, Jaime swung again, and again, and again, and each time the Crooked Man parried the blow with such astounding, humorous aplomb. At last, fists too bruised to continue, Jaime ceased his assault. The Crooked Man was noticeably unaffected; he stood above Jaime, a wry grin piercing his flesh. “Are you quite finished?”

“No... priest... are you,...*demon*.” Jaime swung his fist up with startling speed at the Crooked Man’s chin. Caught off guard, the blow connected, and the man stumbled back, clutching his chin. Seizing his opportunity, Jaime rushed the man, hoping to beat him into submission. In his fury, he failed to notice the point of the Crooked Man’s cane lodged in his skin. Jaime halted, looking down at the thin trickle of blood running from the minuscule wound. He looked to the Crooked Man’s eyes and gave a snarling laugh. “That the best you can do, filth?”

“No. Not even close.” The Crooked Man grinned. Veins of flame ran down his staff, biting into Jaime’s skin. They covered him, consumed him. He tried to cry out, but found his tongue converted to molten lava, which ran down his throat in some gross imitation of a waterfall and spewed from his mouth like spittle. His flesh charred and cracked, red rivets forged into his skin to and fro. His hair became strands of flame, burning into his scalp in an instant. Like a building caught in the throes of an earthquake, he fell to pieces, crumbled to chunks of molten flesh before finally disintegrating into ash and flame. The stunned silence was at last broken by another proclamation from the Crooked Man. “That’s not even the best I can do. Count yourself lucky that you have not an iota of my potential.” Looking up, he finally seemed to notice the other patrons, gaping wide-eyed at the carnage. “Damn. Well, I’d hoped to get some rest for at least a day, but no rest for the weary, I suppose. Let’s just wrap this up, shall we?” With that, he stood before the gathered crowd, lifted his cane above his head, and proclaimed “*mors vincit*

omnia!” With a flourish, he slammed the wooden staff into the ground. Miniature, flaming chasms broke through the ground all around him, and a mist like spilt blood expanded out from him. Suddenly, everything felt distinctly *wrong*. The Crooked Man just smiled. “Now *that*... that is the best I can do!”

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Death pushed open the front door of the inn, walking stick in tow. His ebony cloak swirled in the blustery wind. Around him was gathered the blood-red mist, and that mist grew to consume the entire village. Already, yet more flaming chasms opened around the town, swallowing houses, blasting gouts of searing magma from their confines. *A damn shame that I must reveal my magician’s trick so soon*, he thought to himself. *A nice village, but alas, many more await me, and He will not be pleased until the purge is completed. Who knew God would be so needy?* Death turned from the tavern and made for the main road. As he left the bar in his wake, he caught wind of the sounds of a clash; screaming, shouting, the clang of metal on metal, the spilling of fresh blood. Death smiled. A certain satisfaction came from his journey. Another box checked off the list; one step close to returning home. Death was so pleased, in fact, that he found himself humming a merry tune. The very same that he had upon taking his seat at the bar. So consumed was he in thought that he barely noticed the small hand clinging to the edge of his robe. Flustered, he turned to face the culprit. On the ground, huddled, was Philip. Nothing occupied his eyes but sheer terror.

“What... *are* you?”

Death took a moment to gather his response. “Just an old, road-weary man, doing his duty, wishing to return home.” He considered killing the boy, but decided against it. He had always had a soft spot for the children, and a shred of pity. Let fate decide whether or not the boy would die; Death had done his part. Finished, he gently brushed Philip’s hand from his cloak and

resumed his walk. He breasted a hill, and turned back one last time to face the town; now that he had escaped the confines of the mist, it appeared as no more than a crimson blob, a blight on the landscape. He turned back to the road, began walking once more, and took up his humming once again. The wind carried his song on down the path for leagues, finally arriving at the next town down the line. There, standing at the road, playing with a wooden sword, a young boy found himself enraptured by the most mesmerizing song. A song filled with life, death, hope, sorrow, and, strangely enough, homesickness. And with that song, most curiously, came the feeling of impending annihilation....