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## THE CROOKED MAN.

(BY A. M. BURRAGE).

I guessed that he was dying when I received his letter, for it came by the post after another letter, and I saw at once a likely irony of Fate.

Raymond Healy wished to see me urgently—he had something of importance to communicate and could not stir from his bed. Dour, morose man that he was, he was not of the kind to make important communications unless he feared that his life would soon be sealed for ever. He owned no man for friend, but he had shown less aversion for me than for the rest of mankind. If there was little to like in the man, there was at least plenty to interest. Healy's wife was dead, and he had quarrelled with his only son some long while since. Young Healy had gone away, after the way of the old-fashioned prodigal, vowing never to return. And it was from young Healy that I had news by the previous post.

The boy wrote to me from a military convalescent camp. He had been wounded in France, but had now recovered, and wanted to see his father again. He proposed to get leave and visit the old man on the following afternoon, and left it to me to prepare his father for the shock.

So, when I went to see Raymond Healy my visit served a double purpose.

He lived in a small flat near King's Cross, and the old woman who let me in—his only servant—only grunted when I inquired after him, and motioned to me to enter his bedroom. I did so, fully prepared for what I was to see.

He was but the ghost of his own old haggard self—a poor self at the best. And as he struggled to a sitting posture and turned on an elbow to greet me I was shocked by the haggard misery that was written on his face.

"It was good of you to come," he said, in a faint, colourless voice. "I've deserved nothing of you, but I trusted your good nature, and perhaps your curiosity. I suppose you gathered from my letter that I am going to die?"

I was carrying a chair to the head of the bed, and halted at the word.

"Come," I said. "I hope it is not as bad as that."

"It is just as bad as that," he answered, dully. "And I have carried my sickness all my life. It is sickness of mind that has changed by slow degrees to sickness of body. The doctors call my complaint by long names, but it is that, and no more. And the end is somewhere near at hand."

I said nothing. He was not the sort of man that one could rally, and to argue with him would but cause him irritation. More, I did not know at the moment how best to give him the piece of news I had brought.

"I suppose," he went on, "I have little in common with most human beings, except this—a desire to tell my closest secret before I die. I do not look to die at ease, but I want to tell somebody—you—of the thing that has poisoned my life. You have known me for a man eaten up by some subtle poison of the mind. I have sinned, and if my penitence has been incomplete, God knows I have been punished. I have hardly lived one happy moment since that dreadful night, and—this is the worst—I shall never see my boy again."

"How do you know that?" I asked, leaning forward.

"I feel it! Besides—how long have I to live?"

It was on the top of my tongue to tell him straight out that he would see his son that very afternoon. But his eyes were gleaming feverishly and I left the words unspoken for the time being, fearful of giving him too sudden a shock.

"Well," said I, "tell me what you wish me to hear. I will listen to every word, and keep a still tongue afterwards."

"You may tell the whole world when I am gone," he answered. "I shall not then be concerned with human laws or the chatter of human tongues. For your sake I will make a long story as short as I can; and if my thanks to you seem surly, believe me they are offered in all sincerity."

He moved down lower into the bed and closed his eyes.

"This is the story," he said, "and it goes back to the days when I was quite a little boy. I was brought up on a small west-country farm, where money was short, and the land hard to conquer and

yielding little profit. My playmates were the children of other small farmers, and among them was Mary Roden, the girl whom I afterwards married. Poor soul! she is at rest now, but she knew—and—and suffered.

"Children will always have some bogey, some person living near them whom they laugh at and shun and fear, and of whom they invent amongst themselves the most strange and terrible stories. We had one, and we called him the Crooked Man.

"At the time of which I am speaking he could not have been more than twenty-five, but he seemed quite old—as old as our own fathers and mothers.

"We gave him his nickname because his frame was crooked and he walked with a crutch, but by childish intuition we knew that his nature was crooked too. He was hideous to look at, a local figure of mystery, for nobody knew who he was or whence he came.

"In social status he came somewhere above us and below the gentry. Nobody knew him, and he lived alone with his mother, from whom he had inherited much of his ugliness. We used to call him by his nickname in the street, and he would turn and curse us horribly. I can see him now, shaking his crutch. His infirmity made it impossible for him to pursue us. 'Crooked Man!' I can hear myself shouting it now, 'Crooked Man! Crooked Man!'

"In the good books which I was given to read at those times people with bodily infirmities were almost supernaturally good. They sat on sofas and shamed their healthier brethren by their monumental patience. But the Crooked Man was not like those. I have never seen the devil look through a man's eyes as it looked through his, nor have I ever heard more appalling curses."

He paused and licked his dry lips, shifted himself a little in the bed, and proceeded:—

"By the time I reached manhood the Crooked Man had already stepped across the borders of middle age, but I saw no change in him. He was the same as he had always been, and, strange to say, he had almost the same vague terrors for me as he had had when I was a child. By that time his reputation in the countryside had grown. There were terrible stories told in whispers by old and young. Wherever he went, silence preceded him, and mutterings and head-shakings followed.

"At that time my eyes were newly opened to the beauty of Mary Roden. She was two years younger than I, and lovely as the loveliest Devon maid. We had been friends as children, but adolescence seemed to create a sudden barrier between us, for now we met shyly and almost as strangers.

"One Sunday morning I plucked up courage and waited for her as she came out of church. 'A'mry,' I said, 'you and I have been friends a long time, and now you treat me as if I were a London stranger stopping at the inn.'

"She coloured all over her pretty face. 'I do not mean to,' said she.

"Then meet me outside the church gate here and come for a walk with me this evening," said I.

"She hesitated a long while, and said at last that she would come. I was but a boy then, for all my twenty-one years, and I did not know that the same love that set my heart clamouring in Mary's presence put a break upon her tongue and made her distant to me and seemingly cold. But I learned it all that night in the lane where all local lovers wandered and troths were plighted."

He closed his eyes and began to speak very softly, in a voice I hardly recognised.

"Very lovely and very fragile she looked that night—the white rose ripe for plucking, so sweet that one wondered if it were not better to let her bloom on untouched in her sweetness. It seems so short a while ago. She was so shy yet so pitiful for me who was heavily laden with my love and feigning the sadness of despair. But at last she made but a half-hearted attempt to evade the arms that sought to grasp her, and, only weakly protesting, yielded her lips to mine. So we pledged ourselves to each other under the magic of the May skies, between the scented hedges. And, while our first kiss lingered, we heard that sound that had so often frightened us as children—the tap of a crutch—and we sprang apart.

"I drew her into the shadow of the hedge, close by an old gate, as, stamping and swinging his misshapen body, the Crooked Man went by. As he approached he laughed in the hard, sneering way he had, and said something to us in a low voice, which we did not catch. But he did not stop, nor alter his pace, and swung on until the darkness swallowed him.

"For a moment I wondered if this eerie, mysterious figure was to overshadow our lives as it had done until then. I could not but see something ominous in his coming upon us just at that moment. I turned to Mary.

"Has that fellow spoken to you lately?" "She seemed to hesitate, then nodded.

"Yes—once or twice."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing much."

"I did not like her tone; but waited for her to say more. Presently it came out in a little burst.

"Raymond, I'm afraid of that man, just as I was when we were children. I don't know why. He never says anything horrid to me. In fact—he tries to be nice."

"I laughed at that, thinking I could well afford to. I was young then, and not ill-looking. Mary cared for me. For a thing like the Crooked man to cast eyes at her seemed a matter for mirth. But—by God, it wasn't!"

Raymond Healy paused as if trying to collect his thoughts.

"I will tell you as briefly as I can," he went on, "and to be very brief indeed, it was the old story. Mary's people were poor, the Crooked Man was well off. One night Mary returned from a walk with me to find him sitting in the kitchen, talking to her father and mother.

"I needn't tell you the agonising times that followed before she gave in. Her mother talked to her about grey hairs and the workhouse, and how her heart would break when she donned the grey shawl of the pauper, and how wicked it was to hate a man whose bodily infirmities gave him the right to be loved and pitied. That woman's tongue was like a fretsaw, and home was hell to Mary until she gave in.

"I had to relinquish her. What could I do? God knows I reasoned and prayed until I saw Mary—torn both ways—was like to become desperate. She was obsessed by the difficulties of her parents, which I think they had greatly exaggerated.

"Those days were dreadful to me, for all the village knew, and I was the object of a pity which I could not bear; and some ill-natured derision besides.

"Well, one night I was crossing Dead Man's Ridge when I heard that familiar tap, tap upon the road. And suddenly I seemed to see very clearly. A voice whispered: 'If he died he couldn't marry Mary. She'd marry you then. And if you pushed him, who would know? Look! There's not a soul in sight.'

"I held my breath. I don't know if I really meant to do it then, but I waited. And presently up he came, walking near the edge, and laughed at me. His laugh was just the little impetus that was needed to send me mad with a horrible, cold, calculating madness. I went up to him quite slowly, my fingers hooking to grasp him.

"I'll make your crooked body a bit more twisted," I said, and with that I pushed him and felt his body reel away from me.

"Over he went without a sound or a word, and that to me was the most horrible part of all. If he had only cried out! It wasn't natural for him to go quietly like that. I—well, I crept away like Cain, sick with the horror of what I had done."

His face convulsed a little, as if he were living those horrible moments over again.

"There was an inquest," he went on, in a thin, dry voice, "and they brought in Accidental Death. What more natural than for a cripple to miss the path in the dark and fall over the sheer cliff? And after a time I married Mary?"

"Did she know?" I put in.

"Yes. I never told her, but she knew. She could tell by the change in me, and we both suffered. And when our son was born I knew it would be a child of sorrow. The secret poisoned both our lives, for the vengeance of the Crooked man has always followed us. I heard the tap, tap of his crutch the night Mary died. I swear it was he who came and fetched her away. He will come for me, too. When my last moments come I shall hear the tap, tap of his crutch. Oh, my God! how shall I bear to face him?"

"That's all nonsense!" I said. "He's dead, and he can't hurt you. You—my God! how you must have suffered!" "Suffered! Aye. When I cast my son away from me—the son I loved in spite of everything—I knew I should never see him again. That was part of the Crooked Man's revenge."

I thought my opportunity had come, and I decided to make the best use of it.

"Really," I said, "there at least you are wrong. I want you to brace yourself up to

hear a piece of news about your son. Listen! I heard from him only yesterday. He is a soldier, and has come back wounded from France. He is coming to see you this afternoon. He wrote to ask me to prepare you for his visit."

There was a gleam of hope in Healy's eyes, but it died out after a moment, and he shook his head.

"It is useless! I shall be dead before it comes. I know!"

"Nonsense! You must brace yourself up. You are not as ill as all that. You have days before you yet. You may even recover."

"I tell you No! Man, do you think the Crooked Man will let me see my boy again? Before he comes there will be another. I shall hear a tap, tap on the stairs, just as I heard it the night Mary—My God! What's that?"

I started violently, and listened involuntarily. Then I turned to him again.

"I heard nothing. You must not imagine—"

But Healy raised himself in the bed, his face distorted, his eyes glaring horribly.

"It's he! He's come!"

I sprang to my feet. Either I had gone mad or I could indeed hear the tap of a crutch on the hard floor outside. Somebody tried the handle of the hall door, it opened, and somebody—something, shuffled in, leaning on a crutch. The croak beat loudly and rhythmically. It was ghastly, unmistakable.

Raymond Healy struggled up to a sitting position and raised his hands above his head.

"My God! My God!" he screamed, and fell forward limp. I knew at once he was dead, but all my mind was fixed upon the door of the room, that slowly opening.

A moment later young Healy, the man's wounded son, came slowly in, was leaning on a crutch!

The End.

## NIBBLES FROM NEW BOOKS.

"There's eddication, and there's common sense," I ses. "Some people have some sense, and some people have no common sense."

"That's wot you want," he ses, nodding.—Deep Waters. By W. W. Jacobs.

Lady Pence . . . had distinction and a nose which had been handed down in her family for generations. . . . Agatha was the only child, and it was rumoured that the old father waited to die until he could convince himself that she was carrying on tradition, and when he saw that she was indeed going to be a quibble, he exclaimed, "Thank God, she's got the nose," and died soon after.—Crab House. By Howel Evans.

Captain Shotover: "It's a dangerous thing to be married right up to the hilt like my daughter's husband. The man is at home all day, like a damned soul in hell."

Ellie: "Old-fashioned people think you can have a soul without money. They think the less money you have, the more soul you have. Young people nowadays know better. A soul is a very expensive thing to keep; much more so than a motor-car."

—Heartbreak House. By Bernard Shaw.

"I like the high roads of literature, the muddy lanes. Look at Stevenson, the dramatist explained. 'When Stevenson wrote a love-scene he used to think of the high road, not the muddy lane.'"

"So would anyone who wrote love-scenes as bad as his," sniggered a young man who seemed oblivious of his very recent election to the club. The old member looked at him severely, not because he had sneered at Stevenson, but because without being spoken to he had uttered a remark in the smoking-room at least five years too soon.

"After all," he argued, "life is all sex. I've lately been enormously ruck by that in the course of my work. Take Joan of Arc, for instance. Do you find any sex obsession in her? None. It is she less psychologically interesting that account? No. Sex is the backbone of modern writers. I suppose not read a novel nowadays. I suppose I am old fashioned, but I'd rather be old-fashioned than asked to appreciate one of these young modern writers. Poor relations. By Compton Mackenzie.

"You have the true gift. . . . It is women's gift par excellence," she answered. But women are not content to accompany these days."

"That means they are not content to inspire. And if ever they give up the God help the world!"—The stormy night. By Maud Diver.