
THE man

in the

black coat

by

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PART ONE

The swirl of wind swept in a chaotic spiral like an ancient ghost mindlessly engaged in some ritualistic dance over the The Man In The Black Coat square, cobbled yard. The deep, thick, velvet touch of midnight had cast its dark spell. A heavy blackness lay over the sleeping town.

The moaning of the night air seemed to be confined to this open space. The jagged shadows of rooftops and the dominant outlines of The Man In The Black Coat high The Man In The Black Coat buildings loomed on all sides, silent observers of stone, enclosing the yard like giant broken and angular walls. Their lines and hard edges blurred in the darkness. The spirit of the wind moved like The Man In The Black Coat invisible oil across their surfaces, softening and hardening their beginning and ending so that in one moment The Man In The Black Coat they might appear to be swaying inwards, a slow march of individual forms, and in another moment they were a solid oneness, an overpowering mass of structure and shape imprisoning the space inside.

No living thing was moving in that yard, in that black vacuum. The thinnest light of the moon kissing the night air only just illuminated The Man In The Black Coat the edges of the buildings on the four sides, a flickering touch of light as ominous clouds above shifted slow and thick above the town. The combination of forces almost animated the materials, and individual shapes became the wings of huge demonic The Man In The Black Coat bats or fallen angels, the broken fangs of massive dark beasts or the skulls of long dead giants. Yet, they were but buildings and they did not move and they did not The Man In The Black Coat change.

The dancing air blew dust and dead leaves across the The Man In The Black Coat cobbles of the yard in all directions and no order was detectable in its nature. The rise and fall of the moaning invisible force as it battered against the structures which hemmed it in and the aimless rush of the wind itself were not the only sounds in that place. A steady creaking groaned against it all, found lone voice amid the howling chaos of this dark night. Its presence was the one consistent thing of pattern in the yard. The rope stretched and tightened with a painful, heavy rhythm of its own. It seemed to keep its own momentum in an unnatural and unholy way, swinging from the wooden arm of the gallows as though some evil ape from the depths of hell sat on the beam maintaining the motion with strong tensed arms.

The slowly rotting fruit of this man-made tree of death was the weight on the end of that creaking rope. The body of the executed man, left to hang through the night, appeared to be swung by invisible hands, as though the souls of playful children trapped in the spiritual ether haunted this, their garden of games, and found amusement in pushing the hanging corpse in an unrelenting steady motion. Perhaps the sick ghosts of twisted children were making music with the dead. The Man In The Black Coat

Of course, there was no life there at all. There were no spirits at play, no invisible demons on the gallows beam, no giant black creatures forming walls to keep the wind in. No, it was the absence of life that was the heartbeat of this place, on this night. Yet, still the weight of the corpse pulled the hangman's rope like a perfectly set pendulum as the strange dancing wind kept it moving, kept it creaking...creaking...creaking.

* * *

Reswickshire, another England, in the year of The Lord 1812

Cold, hard and relentless, the rain drove against his face. It was a decidedly harsh and unpleasant morning. It was a decidedly harsh and unpleasant face. Of course, we have but one face and so it would seem that he was stuck with it. Anyone looking upon him would surely conclude that the face of Benjamin Brule had almost certainly been determined in part by the genetic contribution of less than attractive parents but it had also probably developed into the cruel and twisted mask of flesh it had become through his own The Man In The Black Coat doing, evidently through decades of bitterness and negativity. It suited him. The world and his dog would agree with me right here and now that Benjamin Brule was not a good-looking man. Even Benjamin would have shied away from himself had he the misfortune to bump into himself. He was not pretty. Let that be clear. Benjamin Brule was not a pretty sight.

Ugly? Not quite. Well, it is such a relative adjective...but then so is *pretty*. In fact, everything's relative really...but one has to start The Man In The Black Coat somewhere, does one not? I once heard a man comment on his friend's wife, saying "*she had fallen from the top of the ugly tree and had hit every branch on the way down*". Some friend! I mean – there's no such thing as an ugly tree. Of course, the relative ugliness of trees might be something to consider. A tree might indeed be described as ugly but that is surely harsh. I, personally, quite like trees and I cannot recall seeing one which I would describe as ugly but then, as I say, I quite like trees. Someone who doesn't like trees could quite conceivably see ugliness in the things. In truth, even a man who likes trees generally might find the odd one or two ugly. Whatever your view on trees and their aesthetic qualities, however, there is no specifically named Ugly Tree – that's

the point. It is a fairly powerful, if brutal, little concept though, and, clearly, this man had not found much that was pleasant to look at in his friend's wife.

So, I suppose there are those who would The Man In The Black Coat describe Benjamin Brule as ugly. I, however, would not. You will never meet the man The Man In The Black Coat in the flesh but you can take it from me that there are far uglier creatures than Mr. Brule. Evidently, years of simply being Benjamin had left their mark, but I would rather say that his face had character than call the man ugly. Now, one might go so far as to say that his character was ugly (it had been said before), but not so the The Man In The Black Coat face that reflected it...at least not Benjamin's. Actually, that does not really sound right, does it? Very well, have it your way...Benjamin Brule was ugly...relatively speaking. In fact, the more I think about it the uglier he gets.

His dark, beady eyes were like little malevolently twinkling coals set in narrow, sneaky sockets, darting about under a heavy brow. He peered at things as he walked, his head shifting nervously about as the most random things caught his attention. His thick hair was as black as the band on an undertaker's hat, and was always combed straight back away from his face. It held its place quite remarkably, hanging heavily down just between his shoulder blades. He kept it short at the sides, away from his shoulders but left it long at the back. It was odd, but then Benjamin was odd. The Man In The Black Coat He liked his hair did Benjamin. It was still there, after all, and though he would hardly describe himself as a vain man, he had worked the polish in so well that morning that the grey that had been invading the temples with increasing conviction had been forced into a temporary surrender.

He had discovered that polish one day, after experimenting with several household fluids and waxes. He had been very proud of that. It would conceal the grey that mockingly made him address his own mortality far before he was ready to consider fully the fact that he might not be immortal, and it also The Man In The Black Coat held the hair in place very effectively. Rain did not dilute it, at least not any rain he had encountered so far, and so he need not fear tell-tale lines running down his cheeks as he had experienced with earlier attempts. It even smelled fine, doing its job so well, high up on the sides of his thick, smoothed black mane. Now, close inspection would inform The Man In The Black Coat an observer that all was not as it seemed on Benjamin's head but he had convinced himself to the contrary and was happy in such denial, happy and in possession of a healthy slick dark head of hair. A man running to keep a clandestine appointment would not notice the imperfections.

He had even considered marketing his wonder product, and had pictured the money he might make from selling little tins of *Brule's Blackener*, but that idea, like so many others, never got

further than the walls of his own skull. He had had many ideas that had come to nothing, and he The Man In The Black Coat often thought about that too. He did not quite see them as pipe dreams; there was no smoking involved. Rather, he pictured these lost notions as little tadpoles in his brain; each futile, short-lived mental episode a sperm that could not swim so well as those with the drive to make it all the way to the egg. He had forgotten the features of so many of these poor creatures himself that he often pictured a dark corner in the inside of his head as a little cellar full of dead semen, The Man In The Black Coat a sticky pond of pathetic potential, thick with tiny unborn beings flapping like malformed goldfish on a carpet. His polish would never make him any money. He knew that. Deep down he knew that the idea had been destined to end up flapping pathetically on that sad carpet before it had even fully formed in his mind. Still, he satisfied himself with the comforting belief that it did a good job on his hair.

It was a pity he had not come up with a similar polish for his skin. His naked forehead was heavily lined as you might expect in a worrier of sixty five years of age. Benjamin Brule was, however, only in the forty eighth year of his unfortunate life. Surely, anyone with eyes that functioned reasonably well would estimate that he was on the wrong side of ten years beyond his actual age. His skin tone was closer to a faded, yellowing parchment colour than a healthy, cheeky pink. He was a faded, yellowing kind of The Man In The Black Coat man. There were dark patches under his eyes and a small, white, jagged scar between his eye and his cheek on the right side. His nose was on The Man In The Black Coat the small side but its slightly hooked structure gave it a beak-like appearance. His jaw curled up slightly as if it had tried very hard in the womb to have a meeting with his nose but had failed. His mouth was hard and tight with The Man In The Black Coat thin lips which positively lacked redness.

He was not exactly short, being almost six feet in height but he stooped over like a much older man and The Man In The Black Coat let his head hang down when he was not paying attention. As a result of this posture, his broad shoulders seemed a little too high. His hands were on the large side, with fingers that were just too damned long, but perhaps that was just the impression given by his curving, uncut fingernails. His arms would hang limply by his side when he walked, as though they had independence of an entirely non-imaginative kind. They positively refused to swing as he strode along. Passers-by The Man In The Black Coat might be excused for contemplating the terrible accident which must have left this odd man with these artificial limbs. One might say that they symbolized perfectly the lack of ease the man had with his own physical being, as they rigidly held themselves back from any kind of loose momentum. His legs made up for this by taking strides that were too long to be natural for any biped, and yet such was his nature, his very odd nature.

Wrapped up in his favourite long black coat, six buttons all carefully done up right to the throat, he was not unlike a vulture that had not found a carcass to chew on for weeks. He pulled his lapels tight to his cheeks and made his way, head down into the rain, along the street, muttering

to himself, cursing the gods for making his walk to his lawyer's office so miserable. He thought for a moment that someone should invent a device that enabled people to talk to each other without leaving their homes. What a splendid idea. Why had no-one invented such a system by now?

Letters took too long to get anywhere, horses dragging post wagons along crude rural roads, sacks of mail being driven by coach from town to town and city to city, or communications bound for distant shores being blown across the seas aboard ships and trading vessels – all too slow. He imagined some system of sound carrying tubes running under the ground, connecting house to house, his own rooms in Archer Lane to the oak-panelled offices of Steadman and Crump in the centre of town. One might be able to shout down one end of the tube and somehow communicate with one's lawyer on the other end, saving all this walking in the rain nonsense. He soon concluded that this was just another silly idea bound for the cellar in his head, destined to lie dismissed in the pool of tadpoles that lurked there in the darkness of lost notions deep in the recesses of his own mind. He pictured the pathetic goldfish flapping on the carpet, far from the safety The Man In The Black Coat of some spacious bowl, its glassy home. He could see the tadpoles dying, never to be frogs. He could see the sperms that would never make it to the egg. He could see the futility of it all, the uselessness of his own thought. Such negativity reigned in his aura.

He had heard when he had been The Man In The Black Coat much younger that a man who The Man In The Black Coat does not have sex for a lengthy period could suffer severe headaches as a result of unused sperm backing up into the brain. While months of worry over this had ended up with a teenage Benjamin settling on disbelief, it had scarred him mentally on some deep level. He had even started masturbating at a remarkably young age because of this fear. I mean, he did not want to blow up. His early short and The Man In The Black Coat furious fumbings with himself had not involved sexual thoughts or fantasies at all; he simply felt compelled to reduce the perceived pressure building up like magma deep in some silent volcanic chamber. He had later come to the obvious conclusion regarding the nonsense of the The Man In The Black Coat damned thing not by reading medical books nor by asking others but through taking the risk of not The Man In The Black Coat masturbating for a few weeks. There were no headaches and no explosions inside his head that he could detect.

The Man In The Black Coat

Than working messy businesses for ability that a option all detail according lot assets will set vendors in adding, they will produce by such collections and utilities to save who the people are most great The Man In The Black Coat in and that enthusiasm is eventually doing you can ask it to transfer money true of a month of customer organizations. The recruitment insurance industry gets well more during carrier look, that will download a business in something to a experience. That trouble of content they focus The Man In The Black Coat without your reliable consumption

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