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opening extract from

The Crowfield Curse

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Pat Walsh

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From The Chicken House

Old magic, woodland folk, strange saints, curses and cures. I love all those legends and mysterious stories that are half belief, a quarter legend and a quarter just a mad bit someone made up!

This novel is terrific, but I'm not surprised, Pat Walsh is an archaeologist by day so she digs up mysteries all the time.

THE CROWFIELD CURSE will make you shiver, wonder and laugh. It's great. You'd better read it with the light on, though!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher



The Crowfield Curse

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To John, David and Kate

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Chapter One

Winter 1347

William crouched behind the fallen oak tree and listened. Close by, someone or something was whimpering in pain.

‘Oh, for pity’s sake . . . my leg.’ Soft groans, a snuffling grunt, and then, ‘My leg! Oh, my leg, mylegmylegmyleg, my leeeeg . . .’

Cautiously, William got to his feet and peered over the trunk of the tree. He could not see anyone. He stared around the woodland clearing uneasily. Frost rimed the hanks of dead grass and thin branches of hazel and elder bushes. Nothing moved. The whimpering stopped and William had the uncomfortable feeling he was being watched.

‘Who’s there?’ he called. He waited for several moments, and then called a little louder, ‘Do you need help?’

There was no reply.

William climbed over the tree. He lost his footing on the icy bark and fell, landing heavily on his hands and knees.

‘Kill me, why don’t you?’ a voice said, weak with pain and despair. ‘Land on top of me and finish the job. What is one hob more or less?’ The voice trailed away into a low moan.

Startled, and more than a little alarmed, William scrambled to his feet and stared around. There was a movement in the grass by his feet. He leant down to take a closer look. The first thing he saw was a pair of large green eyes, flecked through with splinters of gold. The eyes stared back at him warily. Then he saw a small, pointed face, the skin as brown as a beechnut, pointed ears that ended in tufts of reddish brown hair and a small, thin body no bigger than a cat. A long, thin tail curled and uncurled around the body. He was a creature the like of which William had never seen before.

For a few moments, William’s mind went blank. He stared down into the large, watchful eyes and felt the hairs on the back of his neck hackle. This was neither animal nor man, but he could speak. What manner of creature could do that? Fear stroked a cold finger

down his spine. His mouth had gone dry and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Part of him wanted to turn and run, but another part of him was rooted to the spot by curiosity.

And then William saw the blood, and the crude iron trap that gripped the creature’s leg in its rusty jaws.

‘Oh, no,’ he breathed, horrified. ‘Stay still and I’ll try and free you.’ Whatever the thing was, he could not leave it to suffer like that.

Pushing his fear aside, William looked around for something to prise the trap open with. He grabbed a fallen branch and carefully wedged it between the jaws, taking care not to touch the creature’s injured leg. Slowly, he began to force the jaws apart. The creature gasped and, glancing down, William saw him clamp his mouth tightly shut against the pain.

‘I’m sorry,’ William muttered. ‘It’s going to hurt, but I can’t help that.’

The creature nodded and closed his eyes, and seemed to brace himself for William to continue.

Watching the small pain-twisted face, William leant his weight on the branch. The rusted hinge squealed. William gritted his teeth at the noise. The creature gripped his leg with his paws and eased it out

of the trap. His fur was matted with blood and the leg was twisted at an unnatural angle. William let the branch go and the trap bit into the wood, almost snapping it in two.

‘Your leg is broken,’ William said, ‘and that cut is very deep. If you let me take you back to the abbey, Brother Snail will be able to help you.’

The creature shook his head. He rocked back and forth, keening under his breath with the pain. ‘No,no,no,no.’

‘But you can’t even walk by yourself, and you won’t last long in this cold. The abbey is not the warmest of places, but it’s better than freezing to death out here and Brother Snail is skilled at bone-setting.’

The creature sat hunched on the frosty ground, his long thin arms wrapped tightly around his trembling body. The wound oozed dark blood. ‘No.’

William shrugged helplessly. ‘You don’t really have a choice, unless you have someone else who can help you.’ He looked around uncertainly. Were there more of these creatures in Foxwist Wood? And what had it called itself? A hob? ‘Is there anyone?’

The hob shook his head again. ‘Nobody.’

‘Then it’ll have to be Brother Snail at the abbey.’

‘Mends hobs, does he?’ The hob squinted up at

him, a pinched expression on his face. William had the feeling the creature did not greatly trust humans. ‘*Likes* hobs, does he?’

‘I don’t think he’s ever met one,’ William said, after a moment’s thought. ‘But I know he will do what he can to help you, whatever you are.’

The hob seemed to consider this. He winced as another wave of pain hit him and that seemed to help him make up his mind. ‘Very well,’ the creature gasped breathlessly, ‘I will come with you.’

William hid the firewood he had been collecting under a low sweeping branch of the fallen tree. As soon as he had made sure the hob was in the capable hands of the abbey infirmarer, he would hurry back to retrieve it. This part of Foxwist Wood was on abbey land, and villagers from Weforde and Yagleah were not allowed to gather wood here, but that rarely stopped them. Any doubt he might have had that the villagers used the wood as their own was banished by the sight of the iron trap. They were not permitted to hunt in Foxwist either but a handful of them clearly did, safe in the certainty that Prior Ardo would not do a thing about it.

The hob could barely manage to struggle to his feet, so William picked him up and carried him.

The track to the abbey wove its way through the wood and dipped down into a shallow valley. A river meandered through low-lying flood meadows, a glint of pewter shining in the winter sun between the reed beds. On a rise of ground beside it stood the grey stone buildings of Crowfield Abbey.

The abbey was small and as poor as grave dirt. It had been William's home for a year and a half now; long enough for him to know there were few amongst the monks who would look upon the hob with anything less than deep suspicion. He would need to smuggle the creature into Brother Snail's workshop without being seen. Luckily, as he crossed the bridge over the river, the bell for tierce clanged out clear and sharp, calling the monks to the church. Tierce, closely following High Mass, would be short, with just a few psalms sung, and immediately afterwards, the monks would file into the chapter house to deal with the matters of the day. That would keep them safely out of the way and busy for a goodly while, long enough for William to settle the injured creature in the workshop and hurry back to Foxwist to collect the firewood.

They reached the gatehouse and William pushed open the wicket door to one side of the main gate. He peered around the edge of the door and saw that the

yard between the gatehouse and the kitchen was empty, except for a few hens scraping about on the frozen mud. Wrapping a corner of his jacket around the hob, William hurried over to the kitchen door, slipping and skidding on the icy puddles, and let himself in.

So far so good; as he had hoped, there was nobody around. The kitchen was empty. It would be a while yet before Brother Martin started to bake the day's bread and prepare the pottage for dinner.

The thought of food, even Brother Martin's vegetable pottage, made William's mouth water. Hunger rarely left him and he often daydreamed about the hare stew and mutton broth his mother used to cook, before a fire at the mill had claimed the lives of his parents and younger brother and sister. Quickly, he put the memory of that terrible night out of his thoughts. His old life had died in the fire with his family and now he had to make the best of this new life. It wasn't what he would have chosen for himself, but at least he had a roof over his head and food in his belly and for now, that was enough.

A fire burned on the hearth in the middle of the room, directly below the soot-blackened smoke hole in the roof. The kitchen was one of only a couple of

rooms in the whole abbey that had a fire, and it was never allowed to go out. William paused beside it for a moment, wishing he could stay longer, but he could not risk the hob being discovered. A broken leg would be the least of his worries if Brother Martin caught sight of him.

William opened the door to the cloister and listened. The sound of singing came from the church, thin and distant; too few voices lost in the huge stone emptiness of the abbey church. He hurried along the cloister alley to the narrow passage between the church and the chapter house, and out into the monks' graveyard. A path led away to his right, to the vegetable garden and the dovecot. Beyond it, fringed by reeds, was the abbey fishpond, and to one side of that, half hidden beneath the branches of a blackthorn tree, stood a small reed-thatched timber hut. It was here that Brother Snail prepared potions and salves from the plants he grew in the abbey garden and gathered in the fields and woods around the abbey.

Peter Borowe, Crowfield's only lay brother, was busy pulling up leeks in the vegetable garden, working them loose from the frozen earth with a hoe and throwing them into a nearby basket. He straightened up and waved when he saw William. His face and

hands were red from the cold. He leant his elbow on the top of the hoe and blew into his cupped fingers to warm them.

William swore under his breath, but he waved back as he made his way quickly along the path to the door of the hut. He lifted the latch and went inside, closing and bolting the door behind him.

He was reasonably sure Peter would not follow him, but with Peter, you could never be entirely certain what he would do. A grown man of twenty years, he had the simplicity and mind of a child. The world he lived in was very different to the real world around him and sometimes he forgot what he was supposed to be doing. He liked William because he was one of the few people at the abbey who took the time to sit and talk to him, but right now that was the last thing William wanted.

'You should be safe here,' William said, setting the hob down carefully beside the stone-lined fire pit in the middle of the floor. The fire was covered with a large pottery *couvre-feu*, a domed lid with holes poked through it, to stop stray sparks landing on the wooden floor or a basket or sack and setting fire to the hut.

William wrapped a rag around the handle on top of the lid and lifted it aside. He added a few pieces of

wood to the embers.

‘Can I trust you to watch the fire,’ William asked, ‘while I go back and fetch the wood? I won’t be long. You can rest here in the warm.’

The hob nodded and looked around, his eyes full of curiosity in spite of his pain. ‘I will watch your fire. Where is the snail brother? The one you said would help?’

‘In church, for tierce.’

The hob frowned. ‘What is a tierce?’

‘It’s not a what, it’s a when. It’s one of the times during the day when the monks go to the church to pray and sing.’

The hob slowly eased his leg into a more comfortable position. ‘Why?’

William was a little startled by the question. It was not something he had ever thought about. He had always simply accepted the monks’ routine of prayer and work. ‘That’s just what they do. They’re monks,’ he added with a shrug, as if that explained everything. It clearly didn’t, not to the hob anyway.

‘Are they singing because they are happy?’

‘I suppose so, in a way. They’re praising God.’

‘And they can only do that by singing?’ The hob put his head on one side and gazed up at William.

‘Of course not,’ William said. ‘They pray and work and copy holy books with writing and small pictures in them.’

‘That is what their god wants them to do for him?’ The creature sounded surprised. He was quiet for a moment. ‘What does he do with all the books?’

William felt a flicker of impatience. He had more than enough work of his own waiting for him; he did not have time to try and explain things to the hob that he did not fully understand himself. ‘The monks don’t give the books to God, and before you ask anything else, I have to go. Wait here and don’t touch anything. I will be back as quickly as I can.’

The hob lay down on its side and curled its tail over its body. ‘Very well.’

William hesitated for a couple of moments. Was it safe to leave the creature here? What if Peter came in unexpectedly and startled it? What would it do?

‘It might be a good idea, if anyone comes to the hut, for you to hide,’ he suggested.

‘Humans cannot usually see me,’ the hob said, ‘unless I choose to let them, or if they have the Sight.’ The creature closed his eyes. William felt a flicker of worry. The hob was in terrible pain and he had lost a lot of blood. What if he died before Brother Snail

could do anything to help him?

Well, everything dies, sooner or later, William thought, a bleakness of spirit wrapping itself around him like a fog. When your time came, that was that. It was just the way of things.

William pulled up his hood, tucking the long strands of his untidy blond hair inside, and walked to the door. What had started out as an ordinary November day had taken a very strange turn indeed. He just hoped he hadn't made a mistake in bringing the creature to the abbey.



Chapter Two

William left the hut and set off back to the abbey. Peter looked up hopefully as he passed by, but William did not stop to talk. He did not have time. He merely waved and broke into a run, heading for the passageway into the cloister.

The monks had left the church and were now in the chapter house. William heard Prior Ardo's voice as he passed the door, low and monotonous, reading the day's chapter from St Benedict's Rule. According to Brother Snail, it sometimes took an effort of will to stay awake during one of Prior Ardo's readings. 'I think God sent the prior to us to test our patience and our devotion to Him,' Snail had once told William, a sly twinkle in his eye. 'And I fear we don't always do too well.'

William jogged back to Foxwist. He reached the

fallen tree and was relieved to find the bundle of firewood still hidden beneath the branch. He hefted it onto his back, twisting his fingers through the hemp rope he had tied it with and turned to go, but then he paused. The trap. He could not leave it here to be used to maim or kill some other hapless creature.

William lowered the firewood again, twisting his body to let it drop from his back and grunting with the effort.

The trap lay where he had left it, its jaws still gripping the branch he'd forced it open with. For a few moments William wondered what to do with it. If he hid the trap, someone might find it and use it again. He could not bury it because the ground was frozen as hard as stone. He needed to get rid of it altogether.

An idea suddenly occurred to him. There was one place where the trap would be safely out of reach for good, one place nobody would go anywhere near, day or night: the Whistling Hollow. Even the track from Yagleah to Weforde looped out of its way to avoid it.

William hesitated for a few moments. His heart beat a little more quickly with the first stirrings of fear. What if the stories he had heard about the Whistling Hollow were true? What if he heard the strange whistling sound that local people believed

called up the Wild Hunt? It was all too easy to imagine the pack of ghostly hounds, red eyes glowing, jaws gaping, as they chased terrified victims through the wood, to tear their immortal souls from their bodies and carry them off to hell.

William swallowed a couple of times and licked his dry lips. It would only take a moment to throw the trap into the pool at the bottom of the Hollow. Then he would make a run for the safety of the abbey as if all the demons in hell were hard on his heels. Did he have the courage to do it? He glanced down at the trap and saw the dried blood and tufts of brown fur caught between the iron jaws. He felt a surge of anger and decided he had no other choice.

He picked up the trap and held it cradled awkwardly against his chest. It was heavy and the iron was painfully cold. The trap was crudely made but effective. As far as William could work out, an animal only had to step on a thin iron plate to release the jaws. Then the saw-toothed edges would clamp shut, hard and fast, cutting through flesh and snapping bone. The animal would have no hope of freeing itself, and the trap would be a dead weight on its injured limb, making escape virtually impossible. Pain and loss of blood would soon leave the creature weak and

helpless. William felt the sting of angry tears and blinked them away. To do that to a living creature was too cruel for words.

William knew where the Hollow was, though he had never seen it for himself. The first time he had gone to Weforde with Brother Gabriel, to sell the abbey's surplus vegetables at the Wednesday market, the plump little monk had warned him never to venture near it. The monk had crossed himself several times and prayed aloud until they were safely past the dense thicket of bushes and holly trees that hid the Hollow from the track.

'This is an unholy place, boy,' Brother Gabriel had told him. 'Step off the track between the Boundary Oak and the sighting stone above Weforde Brook and you'll be lost. The devil himself walks the woods hereabouts and he is always on the lookout for Christian souls.'

William had wondered what was to stop the devil from merely walking out onto the track and helping himself to the souls there.

'And if you hear whistling in this part of the wood,' the monk added, giving William a hard stare, 'run, boy, and don't look back.'

William set off along the track. The sharp edges of

the trap dug into his arms and he had to stop every now and then to shift it to a more comfortable position. Before long, he reached the huge old Boundary Oak, marking the westernmost limit of abbey lands. Beyond it, the track turned sharply away to the left. Small scraps of rag were tied to the branches of nearby trees and bushes as a warning to unwary travellers not to stray from the track, on peril of their souls.

William paused to take a few deep, steadying breaths before pushing his way through the tangled branches of a hazel thicket. He glanced around all the time, alert for the first hint of danger. Fallen branches littered the ground, good kindling for the most part, but left to rot where they fell. It seemed that none of the locals were desperate enough for firewood to risk coming here.

Holly bushes grew abundantly in this part of Foxwist. Clusters of scarlet berries weighed down the branches. William wondered why they hadn't been picked clean by birds. Now that he thought about it, he noticed there *were* no birds. In the distance he could hear crows cawing, but close by the wood was silent. No bird song, no small rustlings from some animal in the undergrowth, nothing to disturb the absolute stillness. But it was not a peaceful silence. It

wrapped itself around William like a cold shadow and he shivered. He quickened his pace, not wanting to stay there a moment longer than he had to.

An ancient yew tree stood like a dark-cloaked sentinel in the gloom, guarding the wood. Fear twisted in the pit of William's stomach. The atmosphere around him had changed subtly. He felt as if something was watching him with baleful, hostile eyes.

William couldn't turn back now. The trap seemed to carry with it the spirits of the creatures that had died in its grip. William was determined that it would never harm another animal. It would lie in the water at the bottom of the Hollow and rust away to nothing.

A breeze swayed through the undergrowth. 'There will be other traps, other deaths,' it seemed to whisper.

William's heart leaped in fear and he stared around, wide-eyed and terrified. There was nobody there. He could not be sure if he had really heard the words, or if they had been inside his head. In spite of that, the feeling of being watched grew stronger by the moment. It took every shred of courage he could muster to force himself to start walking forward again.

Why didn't I just take the trap back to the abbey? he

thought. *What made me think coming here was a good idea?*

On the far side of the yew, the ground sloped downhill. The scrub thinned, and he could see a shallow, marshy pool of water at the bottom of the slope. This was the Hollow. He knew it, he could *feel* it.

It was noticeably colder now. William's breath clouded on the still air. Frost silvered the reeds around the pool and the water's edge was frozen over with a crust of blue-white ice, leaving just a circle of dark water in the middle.

Hesitantly, William made his way towards the pool. His hands were clammy, making it awkward to keep hold of the trap. He could feel sweat trickle between his shoulder blades. His heart seemed to be trying to beat its way out of his chest, making it difficult to breathe. *Doing the right thing is not always the easy choice*, he thought grimly.

An old hazel tree grew on the edge of the pool and spread its branches out over the water. There were several moss-covered stones beneath its twisted roots. Water trickled between them.

What magic stopped the spring from freezing over in the middle of November, when the rest of the land was held tightly in winter's bleak grip?

The centre of the pool was a black mirror that reflected an upside-down world. The water might have been knee-deep, or it might have been bottomless, there was no way of knowing, but William had the oddest feeling that if he fell into the water, he would find himself sinking down into that shadowy otherworld.

He did not like this place, not one little bit. It did not want him here, either. He was an intruder, an outsider. If he stayed much longer, it would make him wish he hadn't.

With a huge effort, William threw the trap as hard as he could, out over the ice, towards the dark heart of the pool. There was a loud splash as it hit the water and sank beneath the surface.

He stepped back from the edge and watched the ripples die away. The water became still again. A movement of cold air touched his cheek and he turned quickly, grabbing a branch of the hazel tree to stop himself from falling backwards onto the icy margin of the pool. For a heart-stopping moment, he had the feeling that someone was standing close by. He could not see anything but he felt a presence so strongly he could almost touch it.

'This will not be forgotten.' The whispered words

had no more substance than a breath of wind through branches.

William went hot and cold with terror. Forcing his shaking legs to move, he turned and ran.