The Barrowman’s Game

There was once an old barrowman who lived to the south. He worked all the day and gambled all the night. He barrowed the dead from the town to the crypts, where he toiled to lay them in their final houses. After he laid each in their graves he would stroke his beard and roll up his sleeves and toss a copper card into the grave with a prayer to the Watcher.

Now the barrowman went to gamble one day and found that he had forgotten his purse at the crypts. Afraid that a robber would steal away his coins, the barrowman spun on his heels and returned to the hills as night fell upon the country. The trees were dark and menacing, and nightly crows screamed from their branches as the old barrowman passed underneath.

As the barrowman stepped upon the consecrated grass of an ancient lord’s mausoleum, a great screeching came from within and a billowing mist spewed forth from the buttressed mouth. Frightened, the barrowman called out to the darkness. “Who’s there?” the old man said. “If it be thieves, I have not any coins not items of value, for I am but a poor barrowman.” From the mouth of the mausoleum stepped a man of towering height clad all in tattered blacks. He had upon his face a mask of black wood, tall, with jagged spikes sprouting from its flat top. His hands were long, with five long fingers ending in five sharp points.

“Barrowman, I am here to offer you great riches and power,” the man in black said. “You need only play a simple game of riddles.”

The barrowman looked at the being and stroked his beard before tentatively speaking: “What sorts of riches?”

“Bounties fit for a king and tracts fit for an emperor!” replied the being.

The barrowman was taken in by the being’s offer. “What are the rules of this game?”

“You must correctly answer from me riddles three, and if you err, then you shall face my wrath! If you succeed, however, you shall never want again. I warn you, though, that none have ever solved my riddles,” the man said.

“I’ll play your game then,” the barrowman affirmed. The man in black waved his hands and a small table and chairs appeared.

“Sit, and you shall have your first question,” spoke the riddler. The old man sat, and the riddler asked his first question.

“I'm the part of the bird that's not in the sky. I can swim in the ocean and yet remain dry. What am I?” the sly being said.

The barrowman scrunched his nose and thought long. He was distracted, however, by the promise of riches, and he could not focus. Finally, the old man figured it out. “The shadow!” he cried in excitement.

The sly being raised his chin. “Very good. Now, another. I never was, am always to be. No one ever saw me nor ever will, and yet I am the confidence of all who live and breathe upon this world. What am I?

The barrowman stroked his beard and thought long. He fidgeted in his chair and stared intently at the sly man in black. Finally, he gave a great cry and said, “The future! That is the answer!”

“Close, but wrong,” whispered the man in black. “The answer was ‘tomorrow.’” The tall man sighed, “Well, it seems you’ve lost already—how pitiful. It seems now that you must face your consequences!” With that, the man cast off his black mask with a swirl of shadow. His form grew larger, and his black rags ripped further as his muscles bulged. He grew to be twenty feet tall, and his head mounted five great horns. His body had no skin, and his muscles were white and sinewy. His mouth was wide and his teeth were gnashing knives. From his back sprouted great white bat wings, and in his chest beat a large, black heart, open to the world. “Fool,” he said, “I am a great demon! You failed to entertain me, now you shall die! After you, I shall destroy your entire town!” The demon raised a clawed hand, ready to swing.

“Wait!” cried the barrowman, “I was not wrong, for the future is tomorrow, and would solve the riddle as justly!” This stayed the powerful demon’s hand, and the devil looked down upon the man.

“Do you mean to say that I have erred, old man? I, a great and powerful demon?” The fiend looked down at the barrowman, who then continued: “Indeed. All beings look toward the future as they look for tomorrow, and the future in itself is just as elusive as tomorrow! You are wrong, great demon!”

The demon roared in anger, “I cannot be wrong! I am the great riddler!” In his rage, the demon grabbed his own arms and ripped them from their sockets. In his shame, he spun his neck so violently that his own head twisted off.

The barrowman rejoiced in his life, and pledged never to gamble again. He found his coin pouch and set off back to the town.