



BY BENJAMIN HOPE

Blackmarsh should never have been built. Although *built* was perhaps not the word best suited to describe the hamlet of rough-hewn timber and black earth structures that stuck up at precarious angles on stilts from the fenland on which it stood. It was more that it was cobbled together out of desperation, with drift wood and cakes of mud dry enough to handle. It was more that it grew in this way, like an ill-formed fungus out of the wet ground, into the small community of settlers who made up its number. Swamp-dwellers, the townsfolk called them. Those who had found their sorry way to that stretch of coastline hoping to scratch a living from the salt they baked from the mineral-rich seawater on great waxen sheets and from the sea kelp and samphire they harvested from the silt beds. Swamp-dwellers, who

sold their nature's harvest to the servants of these rich townsfolk at the market the other side of the swelling estuary, to supplement winter suppers of cod-cheek and dab, or lobster and crab come summer.

The settlement was almost completely inaccessible most of the year, all but for the narrow trench of churned grey-black clay that made up the ferry road, hemmed in by raised banks. Perhaps this came some way to reasoning why the townsfolk never ventured that side of the estuary themselves and made pariahs of these so-called swamp-dwellers. Perhaps this came some way to fathoming why not even one of them came to their aid when the children started to go missing.

The ferry road merely led to a rotten platform from which a single ferryman worked against the treacherous eddies and currents to carry the inhabitants of Blackmarsh back and forth, like Charon on the river Styx, to the small harbour on the other side and from there to the town so that they might make a day's pitiful earnings at market. And yet, there was another way, through the mudflats and marshland, through the never-ending reed beds and brackish silted water, on a path of gravel raised by the shape of the current that was exposed for but an hour twice a day at the lowest point of the tide. It was rare that anyone chanced it, for even if the weather was fair, the invariable coastal wind (which helped the drying of the salt)

made this particularly narrow track a perilous crossing at best. Some said it was this road by which the devil came to wreak his devastation upon the villagers; others that he'd been there all along.

Either way, and whether it was the devil or not, it didn't arrive in Blackmarsh for the plentiful kelp and samphire. The village's people were vulnerable and exposed: trapped by their ill-fortune. They represented easy prey; the little clutch of souls were ripe for the harvest, and someone, *something*, was ready to gather in the crop, to scythe them down one by one like the grim reaper. And it would start with the young.



The fact that anyone might raise a child in such a relentlessly harsh environment in the first place was anyone's guess. But families did grow amongst those who populated the shore, and the children were put to work, picking tender briny shoots or treading the drying salt to a fine crumb as soon as they could walk. Such was life out there on the marshland that when the first child did go missing, sad as it was, it was not unexpected. Death came knocking with the regularity of an old friend to their cold dismal huts and it came as no surprise when one of their number was taken in the night in a pleuritic fit of coughing or the rot that too

often took hold. And so, when the children came stumbling back from their night-time harvesting at the change of the low-tide that first time, even the mother of the boy who'd disappeared merely met the news with a silent tear. No shriek. No violent sobs. No clamouring to search the midnight mire beyond the threshold of her home. If her boy was gone, it was futile to think he might be found.

'There was nothing could be done,' quaked the eldest of the children, a minder, whose job it was to keep the others to their task. 'One moment he was there, the next simply vanished without a trace.'

The mother turned back to the fire with a stare that spoke of the acceptance of this cruel turn of events and continued with her task of reed-weaving.

'I'm so sorry,' spoke the girl again, 'he must have trod wide of the safer path and fallen to a sink-hole.'

'Or else been pulled down and carried out by the changing of the tide,' said the girl's companion, 'it was drawing fierce out there tonight.'

The fire spat in answer.

Then too, did the mother. 'It matters not how it happened. 'There's nothing can be done. Though I thank you for coming to me. Spare a thought for him in your prayers afore you sleep.'

And for a full day and night, the people of Blackmarsh continued with their lives without incident.

Yellow-green is the flame, as you describe.'

'My God,' shuddered another, 'think of what you say. It could just as well be one of the children by that logic.'

The first man shook his head. 'Tis too soon for that. Trapped in the salt-water, it takes more than a day or two for the gases to build. Fear not on that score.'

But the second man's worries would not be allayed. 'We should take a boat out there at first light. To be sure. If we can send just one of them out on a pyre-raft to their peace, that would be something, at least.'

And so, on the fifth morning, the two men, with poles held aloft, punted their way through the filmy dawn air to the spot where the light was thought to have been seen. But though they cast their poles into all the recesses they could, not a thing was to be found. Not a child. Not a bloated beast either. Yet as they turned about and set their minds to greeting their fellows with nothing but wet hands and dampened spirits, another light glimmered out to the right of their path home, turning the mist to gossamer silk that billowed in the stirring wind.

'There! There!' cried the first man lurching forward and nearly throwing them both in the water. 'We'd been searching too far east, is all. We'll find the poor beast now. You'll see I was right.'

It was two nights later, that the second child disappeared, also under the cloak of darkness. And yet again the news was simply met by that child's mother with silent tears and the community's grim acceptance of their collected ill-luck.

Although, when the third child was taken from them on the following evening, not yet fully dark, and accompanied by an elder of their group, a ripple of unrest did finally stir the brine with the seed of disquiet it cast. For three child deaths in near as many days was uncommon to say the least, even for a place like Blackmarsh. And those that had been out, spoke of a strange dull light glowing green-yellow in the mist. No-one had dared venture beyond the relative safety of their known night-path, for fear of being claimed themselves.

The men of the village came together.

'There's nothing to be done about the child,' said one man. 'Tis sad enough but you know as well as I that life deals a cruel hand, especially out here. And regards the light, it'll be some foolish beast wandered too far into the bog and drowned. I've seen it many times afore now, the reeking gas that issues from a bloated carcass set to burning at a tear in the flesh.

But the closer they got to the shallow light, the dimmer it became, until upon arrival at where they both agreed it had emanated, it was lost altogether in the gloom.

Again they cast their poles in the water. Again, they stirred up nothing but sulphurous silt. And no sooner had they turned about once more, did another sickly glow draw their eye even further out of their way. They were about to press ahead in pursuit when the second man pulled up short, laying a weathered hand upon his friend's coat sleeve. The memory of a once forgotten story had floated to the surface.

'Wait!' the man hissed at a whisper. 'See where it draws us? Further and further from our true path home. 'Tis some dark trick. Something means to lead us further and further out afore the day is fully broke and away from the shallow channels that we know. Something means to drown us. It's the same thing as took our kin, I'll be sworn of it.'

The first man felt a chill finger at his nape.

'You know of what I speak,' continued the man, 'it's not so dark I can't see it in your face.'

'The Demon in the Marsh is but a story,' came the response, the first man's eyes not moving from the halo of light for one moment. 'It's but an old wives' tale to keep children to their work; to keep them vigilant and to parts that are known.'

'Care to chance it? Care to drag our little boat out further in the bogs? Even if I'm wrong. Even if it is but a story, we work our way out there, we'll be trapped by the tangle of reeds and the hidden currents. Let's away home.'



Again the men of the village came together, and the women and children who were left too, drawn by the account of the two who had returned. The community hung their heads in grief and silence crept between them but for the railing wind.

'Tis no story.' It was the eldest of the women who spoke. Blind and mostly mute, it came as a surprise to all and they heeded her words with mounting fear. 'My grandfa' grew up in a sorry salt-house like ours and he told me once of the same happenings as now. Children disappearing. First one. Then two. Then groups at a time. Right from under their brine-caked noses.' She cracked the cold from her bony fingers. 'His father got them out of there while there was still time. Worked inland afore resettling here when times were desperate enough and memories eased enough and when there was simply naught else by which to make a penny from. But word still reached them, in time. The children: the last of 'em, all but my grandfa' had been snatched in broad daylight under the protection of the men. Sucked right into the swampy ground one after

t'other. Nothing left but a single woollen hat, as he heard it.'

The mothers hugged their children to them as the men set their jaws.

An older child, the teen girl who'd witnessed the first of the disappearances not a few nights before, drew away from her own mother's arm.

'What happened then?' she asked.

The old woman's blind eyes flickered in her direction, clouded white, thick as the mist that enveloped them. 'The lights,' she replied, 'the lights began in earnest. In the dusk. In the dawn. Deep into the night. People were desperate for answers, sometimes swearing it must be one of their kin, sometimes drawn by the shape of a boat, not of the likes we use, but a sailing boat they said, with a sail pocked with holes. And whatever they were drawn by, every time the fools followed, blind as I am now, onto unknown ground. You know how treacherous the land is on this coastline. A single ill step and you can be snuffed out quicker than a tallow wick. And that's how they went, as my grandfa' heard it: one, two, three at a time, taken to their deaths, by drowning in their own surroundings.'

'That's enough,' somebody said, 'the children are terrified as things are without you planting nightmares in their heads.'

'A boat?' the girl asked.

'Aye. White, my grandfa' said. 'Made of the bones of the children that the devil who sailed it stole.'

The girl was ashen but probed further still. 'And the sail?'

'Stitched from their skin, he was told. Although I hear from your voice that you already knew that part of the tale.'

'And when all had been reaped and everyone drowned,' the girl recited, 'their souls lit the way out of the mire in which the demon had been trapped so that it might sail free of the weeds that shackled it and out to feast freely wherever it next roamed.'

'So says the story,' the old woman agreed, 'though a story it is not.'

'But your grandfa'. He -'

'Survived. Until the winter took him all too many years ago.'

'Then -'

Again the woman finished the girl's thought. 'The devil is still trapped here. For without its full score of souls, the way is closed, the creature still bound. 'Tis the same stretch of coast. 'Tis all part of the Blackshore, as you all well know. And the devil has risen again to break free of its watery prison once more and must drown every one of us to do so. For it's the children by which it'll fashion its craft, and our souls that will light the last stretch out of the marsh and set it to freedom.'

'The Demon in the Marsh,' spoke the girl once more.

The old woman nodded her head in answer. 'And if you've any sense, every one of you will leave this hour. Find work inland like my grandfa's fa and never return.'

'Tis fool's talk,' came an answer.

'I'll not be moved by no one,' came another, 'be they man or some devil-beast. This is our home, as pitiful as it might be, and we've nowhere else to go.'

'Nor work to go to. God knows we've all tried. This marsh is all we have. And I don't see you setting foot on the ferry road out of here, old woman.'

Her puckered mouth stretched into a smile. 'I'm too old and weary to be gone from here now. I've lived my life's lot. If the devil would claim me, then let it be so. But, as for the rest of you, you'll heed my words or meet the same fate too.'

By agreement, the two men who'd gone out that dawn, made haste along the ferry road to seek help from the townsfolk. They had reasoned that they surely, not living in the mire, would be safe from the stirrings out in the waters and could guard the children with fresh eyes. They need not know the details, only that kin were going missing; that they were in need of support. The men would offer them what little they had in the way of money and would supplement further by way of their trade. Someone was sure to come to their aid.

But, as black clouds above them began to swell and the rain thundered down about them, they were met with mistrust and scorn. Swamp-dwellers had no business being there with no market, and no rights to ask anything of them. The dead children, people said, were down to careless elders and foolish young kin, nothing more, and the men had no choice but to return to the ferryman not an hour or more later and return home, without aid, to their settlement.

It was the first time they had heard the ferryman speak, his voice barely audible in the downpour. 'You too have seen the lights out there in the reeds and I know what haunts your thoughts. I'll give you 'til dusk to give you all safe passage, and then you're on your own.'

Again the men hastened along the ferry road, by now, slipping and sliding in the black mud, their spirits dampened by more than just the torrential rain. Spirits which were guttered entirely upon their arrival at the news of another child lost during the hours they'd been gone. And as they all gathered to agree a plan, the water-level swelled about their feet. Seven children were left, huddled together under waxed sheets whilst the elders gathered what meagre possessions they had to their names. For it was decided. They would flee. Too many had already died.

The old woman sat unmoving, listening, soaked to the bone, and resigned to meet her fate.

Still the rain fell, in great iron sheets, thicker than ever before, the black clouds plunging them all into an unnatural darkness. And the swamp-dwellers staggered through the quickening marsh toward the ferry road, the children surrounded on all sides by the elders. But the paltry mud embankments, that held back the water in most conditions, had collapsed, their way now blocked by the flood. And as fear took a hold, their footing became clumsy and their tight circle broke apart.

Still the water-level swelled, the mud sucking like leeches to their feet, dragging them over, forcing them to wrestle for purchase, to find a way to stand and retreat back the way they had come.

'The children,' somebody cried, the voice lost in the frenzy of water, 'where are the children?'

But it was the lights that gave the answer. Lights that shone yellow-green and sulphurous in a flickering but definite line towards where the others all tumbled and sprawled, and further out past the deeper pools not quite as far as the sea.

Not one of them saw the boat coming as it split its way through the darkness. Not one of them felt it as they were dragged down to their watery graves.

The ferryman stood watching the storm from his hut. From his position at the head of the harbour wall, the expanse of blackness was more deafening than the fury of the water from the sea and the sky that met with great clashes like gods. But as the wind railed and the bitter rain lashed, it was the sickly lights that sprung up, dotting the landscape out north toward the marsh, that chilled his marrow. And it was the spectral shape that drew near that occasioned his descent into the deadly current below.

And wrapped warm in their homes, not one of the townsfolk suspected what came their way next, after the little white boat moored up against the harbour wall.

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