

TWISTED TALES

Marsh Mystery

After all that scandal with the vicar, the village jaws had only just settled down to eating again. At last there was peace in the village, that's when it happened.

Way back then on a Saturday night the local diggers, rakers and fishermen would gather in the smoky back room of the Red Lion. After a few pints some of them might be persuaded to tell stories of the legends of the marsh. There were always tales of the big black ghost dog and occasionally something even more frightening. As the candle light flickered on the weathered faces, and outside on the marsh the wind howled over the dancing reeds, the tales would start and it was usually Little Bertie who would begin them.

"I know it's out there, my father told me about it and he never told a lie in his life. And more than that his father told him. It was years ago that my grandad and young Filbert Goosgog found the dreadful remains."

Little Bertie was different to the other men, firstly he didn't dress like the fishermen, no mucky slop, rubber boots or muddy trousers. Some said it was because he didn't have a wife, and he had never had one as far as any of them knew. The village gossips said that no woman would put up with his eccentric ways. Truth to tell, Bertie had been wearing the same scruffy old jacket with patches on patches and the same dirty torn trousers for donkey's years. He was never seen without the same battered pork pie hat decorated with pheasant feathers.

"Go on then Bertie get on with your story, tell us what happened and what's out there."

Bertie drew his right hand across his stubbly chin and took a deep breath. He leaned backwards and squinted through his broken glasses, then he said:

"Right boy get me another pint, and I shall start."

"Right you are Bertie."

"That was a strange old night, a barn owl drifted silently over the marsh and a big harvest moon hung in the sky, spreading its silver light everywhere. The water in the creeks shone like a fancy mirror, it reflected the moonlight on the samphire and the sea lavender, just like in the daytime. That salty tang of the distant sea wafted in on a light evening breeze. The sound of the distant waves crashing on the shoreline echoed over the eerie marsh."

Bertie sat back in his chair, swilled his beer and thought deeply. The outstanding feature about Bertie was his socks. One was red and the other was bright

green, he always tucked his trousers in them as far as his knees. Everyone suspected that he had another pair exactly the same at home. Pinned to the lapel of his scruffy jacket was his pride and joy, a little polished brass badge which declared him to be a *master bell hanger*, god knows where he found it but it would often lead him into one of his rambling stories.

“Go on Bertie, so what happened next?”

“Well that night it was so light that an old worm digger called Wobbly Smith decided to go out to dig some lug and rag for a fishing trip the next morning. He took his brand new bucket to put them in, he called it his Sunday bucket, because it hadn’t been used much. Anyway Wobbly hadn’t been there for many minutes when it happened.”

Bertie relaxed and stoked up his old briar pipe with country bacca.

“So what happened Bertie?”

“I am coming to that. Fill up my glass boy and I shall tell you.”

“Right.”

“Wobbly was digging away when suddenly the bright moon disappeared behind a dark cloud, and a patch of odd, silent, mist swirled around him, his fork, and his bucket. Then there was a riotous gulping noise and the bucket disappeared.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing... he just stood there. Poor old Wobbly didn’t know what to do.”

“Soon after it disappeared the bucket was spat out again. Of course it was badly chewed and bent and the handle was off, in fact it was beyond repair. So truth to tell after that it was no good to man nor beast. But more than that all the worms had gone. All Wobbly heard was a giant belch of appreciation. Then as suddenly as it had come, the strange patch of mist was gone.”

“So is that the end of the story, Bertie?”

Bertie sat in silence and thought about his home and his old dog. He didn’t live in a tied-cottage with a thunder box at the bottom of the garden, like everyone else did. No, Bertie lived in an old abandoned shepherd’s hut right on the edge of the marsh. It still had its iron wheels although years of salty water had taken its toll and left them sadly rusty. Anyway apart from looking different, smelling different and living his own unusual lifestyle and being what the locals called a; *rum old bugger*; Bertie had one thing that set him apart from the others. Little Bertie was a renowned

story teller. He had the ability to hold an audience as close as a fag paper, and that really was something, considering he had never washed in his life.

“No boy there is more to tell and this is where it gets really frightening, just fill up my glass and you listen good... It must have been about a year later, I remember it well... There was a dance in this very room to celebrate the harvest festival, I was here with my squeeze box.”

He looked around the bare room and indicated where he had been standing on that dreadful night.

“That was a similar sort of night, you know a big bright moon hanging over the marshes.”

He brought his hand up to shelter his eyes from the Moon’s glow and peered through the dusty window panes.

“Well as it happened young Morston the whelker, from the next village was there, and he was a bit of a *Jack the Lad*, if you understand me. Anyway after a few beers he got quite close to that gal Dora Dewdrop. She was the village bicycle and several of the lads had learned to ride with her. Anyway at the end of the night he offered to take her home...so to speak.”

Bertie paused again and gave a knowing wink.

“Come on Bertie what happened next?”

“All this storytelling is making me thirsty boy, fill up my glass.”

“Right Bertie, will do.”

“Well that night Morston had borrowed his father’s pony and trap to get to the dance. So when it finished, to be a bit private, if you know what I mean, he drove down the lane and out onto the marshes with Dora. They hadn’t been out there very long when suddenly that eerie mist surrounded them, they couldn’t see a hand in front of them. Suddenly something wet and slippery grabbed hold of Dora Dewdrop and she let out an almighty scream. Enough to wake the dead.”

“Is that right Bertie?”

“Oh yes boy, I wouldn’t lie to you. Then several men left the pub to go and look to see what had happened, but do you know they had completely disappeared... Pony, trap, Morston, Dora Dewdrop and all. They had just gone from sight and couldn’t be found. The next day at low tide there was a party of men who went out to look for them again and do you know what...they never did find them.”

“Well Bertie that can’t be the end of the story somebody must have found some trace of the pony and trap.”

“Yes you are right boy so just you listen up. The next summer some of the local lads, my grandfather included were dragging for flat fish along the main creek, when their dragging bar got caught up on something solid.”

“What did it get caught on Bertie?”

“Now hold you hard and I shall tell you. After they untangled it they were left holding the remains of a wheel which had come off the trap Morston had been driving on that fateful night. Of course by this time it was bent, broken and useless.”

“Never mind the wheel Bertie you will have to tell us, what was the monster out there on the marsh?”

“Now look here boy I can’t tell you something as important as that with an empty glass, now can I?”

“No Bertie, you are right.”

The boy headed back to the bar to get a refill. As soon as he was sat down again the story continued.

“Now they do say, and I want you all to promise never to tell a living soul about this. Do you all promise?”

They all held up a grimy hand in acknowledgment of their promise.

“Right boy, check that door, and make sure that nobody is listening outside.”

“Right Bertie.”

“And while you’re up there get me one for the road.”

Bertie cupped his hands around his lips, he leaned forward over the table and his voice changed into a low, sombre whisper.

“Now don’t any of you repeat what I am about to say.”

There was a long pause as the tension rose, then he said;

“They do tell of how the monster which haunts these marshes is a giant, evil... Stewkey Blue.”

After the initial gasps there was total silence in the back room of the Red Lion. After a long thoughtful pause the boy spoke up.

“So Bertie will you tell us the rest of the story before I run out of beer money.”

“Well news of the monster spread all around the village like wildfire. The silent jaws sprang back into life. The new vicar even mentioned it after his Sunday sermon.”

“Lord protect us.” He said, “Something must be done to capture this evil monster before it breeds and we are all doomed to an eternity in hell.”

“Yes the vicar was right, good on him.” Shouted Cuthbert Crust. “Tell us more of the story Bertie.”

“So then a specialist had to come all the way from Wells. He was called Cranky Platten and they said he was an expert who had done this sort of thing before. Well old Cranky arrived with thick ropes, traps and all sorts of paraphernalia. He set the traps on the marsh and then it was just a matter of time, waiting in the pub. One moonlit night there was a sudden commotion out there and an alarm bell started to ring, the monster had been caught.”

“How big was it Bertie?”

“Just fill up my glass and I will tell you all the details.”

“You asked how big it was, well let me tell you it took two village tug-of-war teams to pull it off the marsh and they do say it fed the whole village for a fortnight.”

There was a stunned silence as they all tried to imagine the size of it.

“And do you think there are any more of them out there Bertie?”

“Oh who knows boy there could be. So do you be very careful next time you are out on the marsh.”

There was another prolonged silence as they stared into each other’s eyes through the fog of the tobacco smoke. Bertie smirked as he finished the dregs from his glass, he was very pleased with his night of storytelling and all the free beer. Of course Little Bertie had become a well-known character in the village, the locals said that he liked nothing better than to be spinning a yarn and getting a belly full of free beer for doing it.

“I bid you all farewell, and do you take care together.”

He waved his hand as he headed for the door, then walked out into the moonlit night. He was staggering down the overgrown lane and making his way back to his shepherd’s hut at the side of the marsh... but he didn’t arrive. Just as he got close to the marsh suddenly a strange mist surrounded him... and Bertie was never seen again.

