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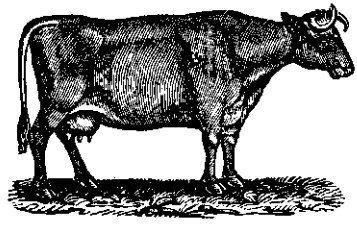
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Essex Marshes

31 October 1589

1
The Shape Shifter



It began with a cow. Agnes Ferret, the village wise woman, had been called to a difficult birth – nothing out of the ordinary in that. Sick cows, ailing sheep, childbirth and deathbeds were all in a day's work. But this time she'd made a mistake. The burning feather she'd placed under the animal's nose to encourage an easy birth had produced quite the opposite effect, and a dead calf lay in the bloody straw next to its dying mother. Far from calming the terrified creature, the smell of the feather had sent it into a fearful frenzy, bucking and thrashing against the walls of the small thatched barn. At last, bruised and exhausted, it had collapsed in a heap on the straw. A few minutes later the calf struggled into the world, took one first shuddering breath, closely followed by its last.

Agnes wiped her hands on her apron and rolled down her sleeves. What had gone wrong? It was a tried and tested remedy. Perhaps they were right; perhaps she *was* losing

her touch. The villagers gathered at the byre door. She could feel their hostile eyes boring into her back, hear the spiteful whispers of the mischief-makers mingling with the sigh of wind in the autumn hedgerows. Agnes knew them all – the gloaters, the eavesdroppers, the taletellers. She shivered as an icy finger of fear traced a line from the nape of her neck to the base of her spine. It was not the first death this week.

Straightening her back, she pushed a damp strand of hair from her brow with the back of her hand and turned to face them. The cold harvest moonlight flooded the barn, gilding her pale auburn hair. As she pushed her way through the grim crowd, some shrank back for fear of touching her, but others jostled her on purpose – she was sure of it.

The air was thick with suspicion and blame. She was trying to be brave, quiet, matter of fact, but her feet crunched too loudly on the dry beech leaves that lay in drifts about the farmyard like piles of copper coins. It was getting late. Charlie would be waiting for his supper, but first she needed to wash her hands at the pump.

She was just about to grasp the handle when a muscular fist gripped her arm, wrenching it back. It was Farmer Prentice, thickset, red-eyed and smelling of ale.

'Best not touch that, shape-shifter. We don't want our water poisoned!'

Agnes flushed angrily, twisting out of his iron grip. 'Let go of me, William Prentice! Who are you calling a shape-shifter?'

'Be off with you!' he spat. 'My Robbie saw you turn into a hare the other night up on Devil's Barrow. His dog

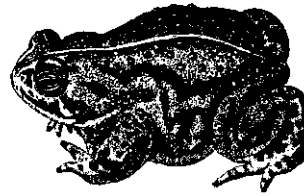
caught it by the back legs as it scampered off, and you turn up here today with a limp!'

'You watch your wicked tongue! I'm no more of a shape-shifter than you are, as well you know. It's evil talk,' she snapped, 'and dangerous! I'm sorry about the cow,' she added more humbly, turning away from the pump towards the farm gate and the rutted track beyond. 'There was nothing more I could do.'

He grunted out of the way, avoiding her eyes. 'Wash your hands in your own stream, Widow Ferret!'

The malicious whispers gathered about her like evil bats, thronging the bare branches of the late October trees, crowding in the shadows under the thatches. She passed silently through the farm gate, past the stagnant pool and out into the lonely lane, the velvet silence surging in behind her, shutting out their spite.

2
All Hallows' Eve



Charlie Ferret crouched in the old church porch and tried to hold back the tears that were spilling down his face and splashing on to his filthy knees. He fumbled in his pocket for a piece of rag and gave his runny nose a hearty blow.

'What a honking, Charlie!' came a kindly voice from behind. 'I thought we had a goose in the porch! What's happened to your nose? Not fighting again, I hope.'

The plump young priest filled the doorway, mopping the sweat from his freckly brow. His long grey robes were stretched tight across his belly and his bright ginger hair stood straight up on his head, as coarse as pigs' bristles.

'Oh, it's you, Father Hubert,' mumbled the boy, twisting the rag between his grubby hands. His knuckles were bleeding.

'Have you been brawling again?' Father Hubert looked stern.

'I won't have them spreading rumours about Mother.

They're calling her a witch again. She's a herbalist, that's all! She cured Eliza Burton's sister and Ellen Wilmot's old cow.'

'Come inside and tell me all about it,' he said, putting a friendly arm around Charlie. 'No point snivelling in the porch. I might even be able to find you a bite to eat.'

Charlie followed Father Hubert into the cool dark church. Rainbow patterns dappled the stone floor as the evening sun slanted through the stained glass. He felt suddenly calmer. His vicious anger of the afternoon drained away as he breathed in the heady smell of the creamy beeswax candles standing on the altar.

'It used to be a lot jollier than this in here you know, Charlie,' said Father Hubert over his shoulder as he led the way down the aisle. 'I mean before King Henry broke with the Pope and all the lovely pictures were painted out.'

It had been one of those golden October days when the world seems to be clinging on to summer, and there had been some hot tempers to match; but the wind was changing. A stiff easterly breeze had sprung up and there was tension in the air, that strange uneasy calm before a storm. As Charlie followed the young priest into the chilly vestry at the side of the church, he shivered with apprehension. Things were turning ugly, and he felt fear in the pit of his stomach.

'Some ale, my child?' said the priest, as he handed Charlie a wooden trencher of coarse rye bread and creamy fenland cheese. He frowned. The boy had definitely lost weight.

'Yes, please, Father,' said Charlie, grabbing it hungrily.

'Come on, lad. Where's that cheeky grin of yours? Race

you with the ale? First to finish gets the last slice,' he urged, nodding towards the remains of the loaf.

The boy smiled sadly. Father Hubert had been a good friend since his father died, taking him under his wing and teaching him Latin and Greek when the money ran out for the grammar school. But Charlie was in no mood for their usual games.

'It's the same old problem!' blurted Charlie, passing a grubby hand through his untidy mop of blond hair. 'They're still saying Mother's a witch and that she'll hang for it. Robbie Prentice says his mother saw her flying through the air and dancing with the Devil; then the Devil suddenly turned into a toad and sat in her lap! He calls her a shape-shifter – says she turns into a hare at sunset! They say she makes wax dolls and sticks needles in their livers and that's why old Alice Hexham died. She knows about herbs and flowers and how to cure the sweating sickness, but she can't cast spells and she wouldn't if she could,' he finished indignantly, glaring at Father Hubert.

The priest cleared his throat, nervously picking some wayward crumbs from his grey robe. He shot Charlie an anxious glance. He didn't want to worry the boy needlessly, but then again it was his duty to warn him. Father Hubert felt responsible for this fatherless boy. There was something about him – a curious sensitivity beyond his years. Father Hubert felt drawn to him, but the village ragamuffins were less sure. He wasn't exactly unpopular, but children could be unkind – quick to pick on differences, and there was certainly something unusual about Charlie that filled Father Hubert with foreboding.

'Aye, Charlie, she knows how to cure a rumbly stomach all right,' the priest replied airily, trying to lighten the atmosphere. 'It was getting very embarrassing for me in church! Those dill seeds she gave me certainly did the trick!'

'It's all right for you to joke, Father. You don't believe in witchcraft in the way they do. Most people see the Devil all around us, inside frogs, cats, toads and – and even flies! People spread wicked stories, and they'll get her in the end, I'm sure they will.'

'I know, Charlie,' admitted Father Hubert with a sigh. 'I'm not making light of it. You're right to be afraid of gossip. The witch-finders have dreamed up some fearful punishments ...'

Charlie gave a strangled groan. Father Hubert reddened and wriggled uncomfortably. Perhaps Charlie hadn't yet heard of the witch trials in the nearby villages.

'It ... it was bad luck about Farmer Prentice's cow,' stammered Father Hubert. 'Especially as it happened the day after old Alice Hexham died. But the two deaths are quite unconnected. Look, Charlie, people are always restless at this time of year. There's nothing folk like better than to sit around their firesides and frighten themselves. It is All Hallows' Eve after all. Everyone's on the lookout for evil spirits tonight.'

'But why do they call her a witch? They'd never have dared to when Father was alive and we lived in a grand farmhouse. In those days people used to come for miles for her cures for boils and bunions.'

Father Hubert nodded sadly. 'I know what'll cheer you

up, Charlie,' he said with a guilty grin. 'What about a glimpse of the relic? I know you always love to see it!'

'Can I really, Father?' said Charlie, suddenly eager. His stomach flipped over.

'Not a word to anyone, mind,' said Father Hubert, looking furtive. 'You know I only show it to you because ...' He paused, frowning.

'What, Father?' said Charlie.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Father Hubert, feeling along the vestry wall. 'Because you're not like the others I suppose,' he winked, as his plump fingers found the loose stone. He slid a long golden casket from its hiding place. 'The bishop would have my liver and lungs for breakfast if he found me keeping this.'

Charlie watched breathlessly as Father Hubert took a small key from the bunch in the folds of his belly and opened the lid. The boy peered in as the priest lifted the crimson fabric from around a lumpy object in the bottom. Charlie's flesh prickled. It was a hand – the bones yellow with age. On the middle finger sat a huge gold ring set with a blood-red stone.

'Saint Oswald's hand!' breathed Charlie.

'It's been here for over fifty years,' said Father Hubert, 'ever since those wandering monks begged our village priest to hide it for them. It's the hand of a Saxon saint, martyred by the Vikings! The monks fled south to escape King Henry's men when their monastery was destroyed.'

'I don't know why it always makes me shiver,' said Charlie, his eyes shining. 'I know we're not supposed to worship relics these days but there's something –'

'I know, Charlie. I feel just the same as you. That's why I showed it to you in the first place – I knew you'd understand. But the bishop says that relics encourage superstition, so don't forget …' he smiled nervously. 'Our little secret!'

The light was fading. Through the tiny vestry window, Charlie noticed with surprise that the wind had risen and the trees were swaying strongly against a leaden sky. The great church bell boomed directly above them, shaking the vestry walls.

'Oh, Lord!' gasped Father Hubert. 'I hadn't realized the hour. You'd better be running along now, Charlie. It looks like a storm's brewing and your mother will be worried.'

Charlie's fears crowded in on him again as he sped through the windy churchyard towards the open countryside beyond, dodging the gravestones that lay scattered across the scrubby grass. The taunts of the village children from earlier in the day still rang in his ears. 'Child of the Devil, witch's brat! Your mother's a witch. She'll hang for it!'

He peered through the driving rain as he ran, eyes searching for his own little home in the distance. There it was, candlelight glowing dimly through the rags at the windows. He could just make out the figure of his mother fighting with the cottage door, trying to keep it open and stop it blowing off its hinges at the same time.

'Mother! Mother! You're safe, you're all right!' he cried, sprinting across the clearing.

'Of course I'm all right! Whatever's the matter? I've been out of my mind with worry about you!' She pulled

him inside the cottage and slammed the door on the wind. 'Just look at you! You're soaked to the skin!'

Water was streaming down his body and forming puddles around his feet. He stood in front of the fire, sodden clothes steaming. Balthazar the cat was stretched out in front of the glow, but Agnes pushed him firmly aside.

'Get those wet things off at once or you'll catch a chill. Don't forget you have to take our honey to market in the morning. I've promised to take some juniper linctus to old Lily Burdock tomorrow. She won't last beyond the end of the week, poor soul, and you need to get some sleep or you'll never be up in the morning. Besides, we're down to our last candle.'

'Oh, Mother, I'm so glad you're safe!'

'Of course I'm safe! Anyway, I've got Balthazar to look after me,' she smiled, glancing towards the cat, who was busily reclaiming his position in front of the fire.

Charlie lay down on his rough straw pallet. He pulled a woollen blanket up to his chin, but sleep wouldn't come. His body was exhausted but his mind was in turmoil. He felt itchy and uncomfortable. At last his eyelids began to droop as he listened drowsily to his mother's voice. Her sleeping potion was beginning to work.

'Rest now, Charlie. You've a busy day tomorrow, but you'll enjoy the juggling and the dragon parade once you've sold our wares. I've tried to smarten up your doublet and hose a bit,' she added sadly, smoothing the fabric of Charlie's best suit of clothes, 'but they're still looking very shabby, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, don't worry, Mother,' mumbled Charlie sleepily. 'I'm happy to wear my old breeches.'

'You most certainly will not, Charlie Ferret! I'm not having any of those fair-weather friends of ours looking down their noses at you!'

Charlie slept, but only fitfully, dozing and waking, his mind alert and watchful. At first he thought he was dreaming. There were voices in the room. He raised himself up cautiously on one elbow and squinted into the darkness.

'If the worst happens ... look after Charlie,' whispered Agnes. 'I'm entrusting him to you. And take my book of herbal remedies. My time's running out.'

Her tones were soft and urgent, but the voice of her companion was like nothing Charlie had ever heard before – a low rumble, a sort of hum, deep and rasping.

'But what about you?' thrummed the voice.

'I can look after myself,' said Agnes briskly. 'You know you can only work for one person at a time. You're Charlie's familiar now.'

Alarmed, Charlie wriggled to the end of his straw pallet to eavesdrop. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could see his mother kneeling by the dying embers of the fire – alone, except for Balthazar! The cat's green eyes glowed in the darkness, as if with an inner fire. Sensing Charlie watching, Agnes twisted round suddenly.

'What are you doing, Charlie?' she snapped testily.

'Who are you speaking to, Mother?'

'Why ... er ... nobody,' she retorted, casting a furtive glance towards the hearth. 'It's the middle of the night!

What strange fancies you have, child.'

'But I heard –'

'Sleep now,' she said more gently. 'I'll sit with you until you doze off.'

Puzzled, Charlie glanced over to the fire – but the cat had gone.