

Family Papers #2

(Vance Muller's Diary, dated 1823)

Irving Helzer is a good man, no matter what the wags may say. I know this, but I cannot convince the good folk of Bower, for they seek an answer to their lost stock and lost children. 'Tis not a simple drowning—I'll give them that—but if there be evil in the swamp, it is not in Irving Helzer.

...Spoke with Irving again today and again he declined my invitation to Mass. But he is afraid. He told me he hears things slithering and whispering through the dark outside his house at night and fears that there is truth to the stories of a curse upon the swamp. I tried to dissuade him of this ridiculous thought, but he then brought forth a most curious object.

A strange box it was, with eight sides and covered with carvings. It was a gift from his brother in the Caribbean, he said, washed up on the beach. When I commented that the box was broken, Irving shook his head sadly and explained that he himself had broken it out of curiosity. There had been something inside it and he wanted to see what it was. He never did see it, for it slid through his fingers and between the floorboards, leaving a greasy green trail. An unreasoning shudder went through me then as I saw the stain still bright upon the boards.

Irving said the drownings began shortly thereafter. He holds himself not a little responsible. I tried to tell him he was being foolish, but I fear I was not entirely convincing.

...Little Maggie Nobel is dead, and they seek to blame poor Irving. He is beside himself with fear and guilt. When I warned him of angry murmurs of lynching, he seemed resigned to his fate. He merely handed me the broken box and instructed me find some way to "fix it" and contain the evil he had released.

...Irving Helzer is dead. They hanged him and burned his house. He didn't even fight.

...Lost another farm to the swamp this week. It grows daily, lapping at the edges of civilization and reaching for us with its vines and branches. Four more have died since the lynching. I know now that Irving was right about the box and the root of this new evil. I hold the box and study it, trying to see how the pieces go together, but to no avail. For such a primitive item, it is curiously intricate. If I had time, perhaps I could comprehend it. But I do not, and so I seek a more unorthodox solution to the unholy presence in the swamp.

...Tonight I risk my soul in hopes of saving the lives of those around me. I also risk my life, for I doubt the thing in the swamp will go quietly.

If I succeed, I hope God has mercy on my soul.

If I fail...we will all need His mercy.