

The Devil's Hunting Horn

By Eden Phillpotts

Them That Be So Mighty Fond of Explaining Everything on Earth May Find Themselves Explaining Out of Heaven One of These Days.

There's a lot more stories told of two men and one woman than you'll find about two women and one man; but that's only because women are cleverer to hide their secrets than men are, though, if the truth were known, there's just as many adventures in man-hunting as woman-hunting. Only the females keep their mouths shut closer and don't shout so loud when they bring down their prey, nor yet make such a fuss when they fail.

But in the case of Henry, Jacob and Jimima—called "Jem"—for shortness—in just the common situation of two men after one girl; only, thanks to the Devil's Hunting Horn and certain other mighty queer features of their affair, the story is worth the telling. The men also made it a lot out of the common, for one was a churchman and a shining light, who done a power of good in his way, while the other belonged to the ancient order of anointed swamps that cause us moderate people to despair of human nature.

In another station of life no doubt Jacob Clegg might have passed to his grave as a respectable figure, for all he wanted was to be let alone to shoot and fish and play; but, not being born to that condition where shooting and fishing and boating and fishing, or, in fact, was a failure. The difference between him and Squire Buller amounted just to that. Squire inherited his land and fur and feathers, and he could devote his days to slaughter and games without a disrespectful word from anybody; while Jacob, being a wood cutter's child, who lost his father as a years old, had no sort of right to birds and beasts and fishes, or, in fact, to anything but work. Yet his nature craved to be hunting before all else; and so it came about that he was a bagging young poacher, with no friends but his mother, though it was well known he had a good brain and could stand to work as well as anybody when he pleased to do so.

By trade he was a thatcher—a very skillful man—and it was well in his power to be a respectable character and a credit to the parish if he chose. But he didn't choose, and he'd been locked up more'n once and done a good few things to make his mother weep and the golly sigh. And I'm sure that nobody sighed oftener than Henry Bird. Indeed, he had tried once or twice to win over Jacob to righteousness and plain dealing, but so far couldn't point to no success.

"If ever I'm reformed," said Jacob, "I'll be by a chap from the Establishment, because I haven't got no use for psalm-smiting dissenters, and least of all for you, Henry, 'cause a fiddle-faced fool in my opinion, and you're only so amazing good because you haven't got the pluck and spirit to be anything else." So spoke Jacob, and the good man replied:

"The Lord forgive you for that speech as readily as I do," answered Henry, because he always offered the left cheek if anybody smote him on the right. And yet there was a secret hid in him as nobody guessed at, and the first thing that showed he was only human, after all, happened in the matter of Jimima Mason. In a word, Henry fell in love with her, much to the surprise of a good few maidens of his own persuasion, who listened to him like lambs and who thought, of course, he'd make one of them when the time came. But Jimima was Church of England, and yet he fell in love with her most furious and made the running in a very manly way at first. She weren't a beauty, but she had a lot of sense for 25 and she was independent having a clear fifty pound a year left her by her grandfather, who knew her worth. Her parents were well to do and she had a woman cousin—a widow a good bit older than herself—in that nice double cottage just outside Thorpe.

She did needlework and made a useful bit of money by it, and she kept herself to herself and was well thought upon for a sensible and self-respecting creature. She had a mind, too, and a good education, and she didn't go to town now and again, and she'd often leave home and put in a week all on her own at Exeter or Plymouth, just to keep in touch with things and rub off the rust of the country. Out of the common, you may say, and Thorpe was proud of her and hoped she'd take Henry Bird as being the young man among us most worthy of a suitor.

And now I'll just name the Devil's Hunting Horn and then we'll get going. It weren't a public house, as you might think, but a lone tower built a hundred years before this tale, by the Squire Buller of those days, at the time we were fighting the French. He lifted it in the midst of Thorpe Wood, and why for doods nobody may know, but nobody else ever did. A gamekeeper lived there for a bit, but it had been empty for more than half a century, I daresay, and it got its name from a curious fact, because, often and often, there came a strange and wistful sound from the tower's noise between a bittern booming and a hunter's horn heard far away. 'Twas an unnatural and creepy note, and not a man, woman or child at Thorpe but had often heard it.

Some said there was a sort of a natural trumpet in the stonework—a rift through which the wind blew when it was southwest, and made the noise; but for my part I don't like to hear every strange sound explained away in the modern fashion, and I steadfastly believe that all sorts of dark and deep things happen round about us far beyond the power of human wits to understand. 'Twas not accident that made that fearsome and creepy sound; the reason was hid with Providence, and, as I tell the young folk, the Devil's Hunting Horn was explaining everything on earth may find themselves explained out of heaven one of these days. 'Tis a faithless generation; and so sure as God's alive a lot of us will be called to pay an ugly price for our unbelief when our turn comes.

The Devil's Hunting Horn stood in the very thick of the woods on top of Thorpe Knoll, but not much above a mile from the highroad. It was a four-square tower, stained and time-bitten, gray and yellow and moldering, with ivy-tods hanging from the window holes and ferns festering in the rotting mortar—the home of bat and owl and mouse and the little chambers and eaves of the flat roof up on scattered shingles at one angle, where the lightning struck some time before living memory. And you can still see the great rusty nail where the Dark Hunter was said to hang his horn. Then of wistful nights he'd blow it, and the sound of the air would come out of the storm to do his wicked will and harry poor, naked human souls.

A fearsome place in a narrow clearing, with pines towering 'round about and a straggle of thorn and laurel and sapling rowans in the undergrowth. And of a moony night, if any had the pluck to go there, they'd see the tower rising up like a white ghost in the midst of the black forest. And some had heard strange noises within at such times—noises half man, half beast—and laughter that made 'em go goose flesh; and Dicky Tremlett told the little mind he had to lose after being light-footed under the pluck of the air would come out of the storm to do his wicked will and harry poor, naked human souls.

There's some be feared of the place," I said, "but not such a righteous man as you nor yet such a godless creature as me. For wickedness and goodness be often alike in brave-men. I'll await you, and I'm very hopeful you'll turn me some good learning, for I'm willing to do better, and I will know you're the man to guide me if you will."

of rope 'round his neck was never twisted by mortal hands.

Among the young men in my youth 'twas thought a pretty plucky deed to go up over at midnight, when the horn was sounding, and a good few more vowed they had done so than ever did; but Henry Bird he feared of evil powers, being shod with the shoon of righteousness and girt with the shield of truth. He'd gone there more than once to show he was not afraid of the devil or his works; but he was young, and, alas! he didn't know that when the Prince of Darkness can't get in by the front door he'll force a window or even come down the chimney. For the house of the soul has plenty of weak spots, and nobody knows 'em better than the Enemy of Mankind.

Well, Henry he fell in love with Jimima and fate willed that the danger spot in the man should be touched by that innocent woman. He was a pious character without any doubt, and, though nobody could ever say that he weren't an honest man, and didn't believe all he said, and didn't strive all he knew to show the light to others and gather straying sheep for the fold, yet, when his own crossing came and his love wasn't returned, then his better nature failed him.

It was the case of a man who had never been tempted before and never found life to thwart him and flout him, suddenly up against a crushing trial and a denial of his passion; and

"I like to be free," she answered. "Tis my little bit of fun for the year."

"You'll go to worship on Sunday, I hope," he said, for even then, with Satan working double tides in his heart, he had to be his pious self. "Yes," she answered, "I go where they sing fine anthems—to St. Andrew's parish church."

They went along, and then, mournful and steady, the Devil's Hunting Horn sounded through the woods; but Henry already knew it was blowing that night.

"Have you ever faced the tower after dark?" he asked, and Jimima said she never had.

"Now's a good opportunity, then," he told her, "and I dare say you'll be the first woman in Thorpe to say you have. It will be a good example and show the maidens they must not be superstitious."

"I don't fear it, because I know there's nothing there for an honest girl to fear," she answered.

So they strolled into the fir trees and soon stood under the tower rising above 'em with the horn shouting its melancholy note aloft.

"We'll go in and climb the stone steps and look at the moon—there's plenty of time," he told her, and, rather enjoying the adventure, Jim followed him.

There was a heavy oak door at the bottom, that most time hung open on the rusty hinges. They climbed the steps and got up on the flat roof, and then Henry's manner changed and

either up above, she heard footsteps ascending to her again, and, as she had seen the blackguard go after he'd made her fast, all she knew was that some other creature must be alone in the tower with her. And then her heart failed indeed, for she reckoned that it couldn't be anybody much less this time than the Demon Hunter himself. She couldn't scream, though she tried, and her terror made her faint off once more; so when Jacob, who had got the door free, climbed up to see who it was, he fastened in by the villain he came across the poor girl lying flat on her back and dead to the world.

And then he picked her up and carried her down below.

"Don't be afraid no more, miss," he said, when she'd got back a little of her scattered wits. 'Tis Jacob Clegg, with no intention but to save you from that limb of the Devil. I heard you holler, where I was to work half a mile away, and came along just in time to see Henry Bird take his look after he'd made the door fast on you. And you be Miss Jimima Mason, by the look of it."

The blessed fact that she was safe very near made the poor girl go light-headed, but she soon pulled herself together, and, knowing Jacob by sight, thanked him with all her heart for saving her under the grace of God. She didn't hide nothing, either, but told the whole fearful story, and Jacob got so mad that at

as Henry had left it, and then he took Jimima's "hold-all" and very soon they was gone. He lived two mile away, in a cottage near North Mill, which belonged to his mother, and he bade the girl stop at a certain place while he slipped back and got his birds and air gun. Jimima was always calm and self-possessed, and when he joined her again she saw only too clearly what he'd been up to and was sorry.

"Oh, Mr. Clegg," she said, "I shall always feel very grateful and kind to you for this night's work, but I'm terrible ashamed that such a brave, fine chap should sink to this. I'm sure you be made of too good stuff to sink to such things."

He felt sheepish and cursed himself for showing her what he'd been up to.

"Lucky for you I was poaching, anyhow," he said, "for if I hadn't been at Thorpe Woods you would still be jagged in the 'Devil's Hunting Horn,' my dear woman. But don't you think I'm not very thankful I was there, for I very well know this is the best night's work I ever done in my life, and I shall be terrible proud of it to my dying day."

She liked his voice and she liked his looks as he marched her in and woke up his mother, and made the old woman come down house and find some supper for Jimima.

Then Mrs. Clegg heard the awful news and was sworn to secrecy, and next morning Jacob drove his pony along, just after dawn, and fetched the girl to catch the first train to Plymouth from Cornford station, four miles down the line.

She promised to write and tell him where she was, and she kept her word, and the moment he'd got her address, at a little inn down on the Barbican, where she was used to put up, if Jacob didn't travel down for a day and call in upon her and see her to come and have a bit of dinner with him, and so on.

She knew by now there was something drew her to him, and instead of being vexed at his check in coming to see her she felt quite pleased and must needs buy him a present, because, after all, a life is a life, and Jacob delicately reminded her over a veal cutlet that she'd be at her last gasp now and dying with hunger in the Devil's Hunting Horn but for him.

"But for you and Providence," corrected Jimima.

"Providence first," he granted, "and I may tell you that this affair have made me take a much more serious view of Providence, Miss Mason. Because my mother has pointed out to me that the Lord chose a backslider like me to do this useful piece of work; and if the Lord haven't thrown me over, as everybody, including myself, imagined long ago, then there must be hope for me and a rare chance of making good. And I hope you'll help me to do so."

Well, when a handsome young man tells a woman he wants her help to make good, his eye odds she'll feel a bit pleased at the prospect, and before Jacob went home that night Jimima found herself a good bit along the road to liking him. She brought him a tie pin in the shape of a little silver fox, costing 6 shillings, and she bought him a green silk tie also; and she made one soon condition, that Jacob would come to church next Sunday; and he swore he would do so, and wear his fine adornments.

Then he began about Henry Bird, for they'd been so interested in each other up to now that they almost forgot what had thrown 'em together.

Jimima saw Jacob to his train after they'd took a cup of tea, and it was fixed up that she'd come to his mother's cottage for a night on the way home in three days' time; and then he was going to tell her of the wonderful plot he'd hatched against the would-be murderer. She asked him if he'd seen Henry or heard aught of him since she left, and he said that he had not. But Jacob had took occasion to go up to the tower the day before he came to Plymouth to see if Henry had been there.

"The devil haven't stirred a finger to save you," he explained, "I don't mean Satan, but Henry Bird. The great loss are against the door, and no doubt he thinks you be dead and gone by now. But his turn will come next week, and I've got a very pretty clever thought upon the subject. And yet, God forgive me, I can't feel so righteous mad against him as I ought to feel."

"Why for not?" asked Jimima. "Be you such a Christian as all that?"

But Jacob explained.

"'Tis because if the wretch had never bawked 'e up there I should never have recused 'e; and because if I hadn't done that I should have lost the bestest thing that ever happened in all my life."

And then the train went off afore she had time to answer him.

Well Plymouth seemed a thought empty to Jimima Mason after Jacob had gone, and she asked herself what it was about the man had took her fancy, above the fact that he had saved her life; and she judged that it must be his voice and his cheerful nature. Besides, he was terrible handsome, and, though she knew handsome is as handsome does, her wits began to grow quick in the matter of young Clegg, and she reckoned that, by nature, he was a nice-minded and kind-hearted creature, and might very like turn from his present ways, and be a successful man in clever hands. At any rate, she dreamed a good few dreams about him, and, strange though it seemed even to herself, Jimima soon found a lot more interest in her heart for Jacob than bided there about the man who had tried to murder her. Her only kind thought, and hope for Bird was that he'd gone daft and would be proved so.

Clegg was at the station to meet her with his trap when she came back and alighted at Cornford. Then he drove her home for that night and told her what a clever thing he'd hatched. "As to Henry Bird's sentence, that's in your hands," he said, "but I've fixed up a very pretty trial for the blackguard, and you've got to help Jimima; and if I'm too forward in calling you 'Jimima,' then tell me so; but 'tis a very beautiful name and I'm very wishful to call you by it."

"My few friends call me 'Jem,'" she answered, but he said he thought 'Jimima' better, because his wife was like the name a graybird begins his song with. And then he told her what he'd been up to.

"I've fallen in with Henry," he said, "and it's very easy to see that he's a haunted man. In fact, more than one at Thorpe marks it, and reckon that too much religion is turning his head. Of course, I didn't whisper there was a very different reason for his wild eyes and wild speech, but I went to the man himself, so humble as a worm, and told him that things had happened to me, and I'd hoped and hoped to turn over a new leaf and mend my ways. And that's true as Gospel, Jimima, for I fully intend to do so after hearing you on the subject. But I didn't mention that you was the Light; I just said I should be very wishful to hear Henry, because he was well known to be a great sinner of some sort. He shivered and gasped when I said so, but he made an effort to listen and I asked him if he'd come some night after dark and have a good, long tell with me and put me on the narrow road."

"I want to be quiet about it," I said, "and I ain't going to be the penitential bench at your chapel, nor nothing like that; but if you'll give me an hour on Tuesday night in Thorpe Wood, out of the way of prying eyes, then you may very like save me alive. 'Tis a great favour in any man's cap to save his neighbor's soul," I said, "and I'll give you the chance to do it, Henry Bird. And I'll pray for you, but if you'll give me an hour on Tuesday night in Thorpe Wood, out of the way of prying eyes, then you may very like save me alive. 'Tis a great favour in any man's cap to save his neighbor's soul," I said, "and I'll give you the chance to do it, Henry Bird. And I'll pray for you, but if you'll give me an hour on Tuesday night in Thorpe Wood, out of the way of prying eyes, then you may very like save me alive. 'Tis a great favour in any man's cap to save his neighbor's soul," I said, "and I'll give you the chance to do it, Henry Bird. 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