

Rev. Jasper Pickery and Three Manifestations of the Devil

by G. Arthur Brown

I, the Rev. Jasper Pickery, having been the vicar of Dunnbroke for now 48 years, have much in the way of wisdom to offer the world and, as such, have I set about to collect the more useful pieces of my prudential advisements in a convenient memoir, which can be purchased in a bookshop near you for no more than a shilling, whilst the true value of this work easily exceeds a sovereign and sixpence.

In order to gain the trust of my reader--for why should my advice be of any more import than that of your own local cleric?--I will therefore set forth to offer an anecdote that shows clearly my credentials in a light that cannot be contracted by whatever rumours about my affairs you may have picked up round the seedy pub, for a man with my experience has ample tales of a cautionary nature to offer the reader, and there are none too few of my own tales that I cannot expose one here in a promotional pamphlet as an exemplar in a good faith effort to convince you my book might indeed be worth buying and yet jeopardize the sales of my memoirs. In lieu of an endless list of my fascinating endeavours, including but not limited to an encounter with a water witch who could conjure ice in the non-winter months by no means electric, dealings with several cagey itinerants being gipsy or tinker or other, visits from no less than two fairies to my own homestead, and my trip to see the grave of a man who cannot die; I shall simply give you an account of the Devil's own attempts to thwart my godly work and the three forms in which he came unto me.

Founded on the assumption that you are not a person of the village of Dunnbroke, nor have you been a visitor who in the course of his travels has made his way to this parish, I will offer a brief portrayal of this blessed place. When a man comes to Dunnbroke by the high road, the first thing he shall see that signifies he is no longer in the open country, shall be a grain silo that stands 230 feet in height, making it over four times higher than the famous Silo of Esterton, a silo which nonetheless remains impressive owing to the fact that it once played host to the Hidden Army of Sir Edric Brates during the Sudden Siege of '73; and that the silage within fed his six Untiring Horses. When a man comes to Dunnbroke by the low road, the first thing he shall see shall be a cairn crafted by pagan hands, left intact by the good Christians here solely because of the wickedness that would no doubt be unleashed should they undo that heathen earthwork, for housed inside it are the bones of the Sinner-King himself, Anarwed the Wayward. When two or more men come to Dunnbroke, expect to be challenged before entry by an unrested spirit who dresses in the style of our grandfathers and claims to be a champion pugilist. My advice to any who may see Mad Masher Chiggins is to simply ignore him, because he inevitably tires of his own blustering and returns to Boxers' Limbo to await the next unwary party of travelers. These claims to fame notwithstanding, our village is a quiet place, its main commerce being the harvesting of wool and seasonal trade with the coastal towns upon a bay not more than a half-day's travel by wagon, coach, or cabriolet, given that your horses or oxen be of that magical and noble blood that most animals in this county are possessed of.

In Dunnbroke, my parsonage sits atop a green hill, which in midsummer is encircled in a meticulous, though not manmade, spiral pattern of larkspur of such a vibrant blue that on seeing it one may think he has been transplanted to some realm of the Elves, for it is not a blue that one may ever see in the sky, nor in the sea, nor a blue that can be seen in the eyes of a newborn child, but a hue that can only be recalled in dreams, the colour of some forgotten age. The cottage in which I dwell can be seen from most all streets in the

town, for as the scriptures dictate, a man who does the work of the Lord should be as a city on a hill, not to be hidden from the eyes of the world, as there be no need to hide when in the service of Christ. It is my home whence this story springs, occurring at parts around my garden and at my doorstep, and thence to my dining room in other parts. And as thus, the tale begins.

It was just before the Great War when the Devil began to assail me with all the fury of Perdition. He had taken the form of beautiful women to tempt me in youth, but never had he pursued my soul in such earnest as began on 5th April, '12. As I tended to my stewardship of God's Green Earth and plucked impish weeds from around the flowerbeds, I espied a cat, perchance which had come from a neighboring hamlet in search of church mice. His coat, brilliant in the sunlight with not a hair out of place, was the black of jet stone.

"Hello, my little friend," to him I said.

He looked back at me with understanding. I found this an odd behaviour as most cats pretend they do not notice you until you have amply ingratiated yourself to them by the offering of a warm saucer of milk or the bones of a fish to pick clean. At that time it occurred to me that black cats have been known to be the familiars of witches, mayhap even the transformed shape of a witch who fears her own demise. I set immediately to finding a suitable test: one that would differentiate a mundane cat from one that was evil.

I picked up my water canister and poured some of the water on my hand. I waited until the cat approached me and, when ere long it had, anon splashed the water from my hand with a vigour into the face of the creature. The cat started and ran away forever, showing the true nature of that beast to have been diabolical. Alas for Satan, I keep no ordinary water in my watering can, but Holy Water I had put thereinto, for it can never be guessed at which times the Devil may send his minions to undo you. This may happen in the garden, certainly, or it may happen elsewhere.

(Upon reflection I also recall whenas I addressed the cat, he not only appeared to ken my words, but he opened his mouth as if to

speak. Because the Devil is clever, he remembered soon enough that speaking while in the form of a cat might give away his infernal nature and lay his plans asunder. Though my mind was still sharp enough to devise the effective strategy I have described.)

At a later time that year in Dunnbroke, another attempt was made on my soul. And as one might expect, the second was even more puissant than the first, though not so puissant as the third as I should come to find in due time.

One Sunday, after a particularly successful sermon, did a strange woman appear on the thoroughfare begging alms and it would not surprise me now to find she had been offering the most arcane secrets to any who took pity upon her. She stood, dressed in the rags of the vagrant, or perhaps in the rags of the crone for her age was considerably advanced though she moved with the grace of a gazelle. Nay, she did not leap into the air in my presence, but there was an ease of motion in her that I can only liken to that brilliant beast of the African savannah.

I chanced upon her, wished her good day and offered her a ha'penny.

"Thank ye kindly. I shall take this to buy bread, I shall, and bring a loaf with me back to my ramshackle home where my children have abandoned me for nigh ten years and naught but crows and rats do visit."

Such a moving story! Left to wither alone by her own flesh and blood in a shack! My heart went out to the woman. "Good woman, why do you not come to stay here in Dunnsbroke where you shall find kindness and charity in the actions of the townsfolk? I will certainly do my Christian duty and allow you stay in the church until another arrangement of lodgings can be made. I will send right away for a supper."

"No, sir. You are very kind, but you must believe that I am satisfied in my hovel with a hole that I have dug in the dirt floor in which to sleep. If only I had visitors to keep me company in the last of my days, then I should be truly happy indeed."

What a woman! What a strong soul here to throw off the trappings of luxury for fear of burdening those who cannot afford to take her on as an expense! "Good woman," to her I said, "think not of the cost to me or the townsfolk. We have had a good harvest and trade has been kind to us this year. Not one of our children goes barefoot but from a desire so to do--for what fun is it to wade in a pond with shoes on one's feet--and we do not turn away needy travelers. We are not merely obliged but honestly ecstatic to have an opportunity to aid our fellow man. Of course you are a woman, and are not a man, but the sentiment is preserved I think you will find."

"You seem insistent and you seem a good hearted man, Reverend. Yes, it is true that the ache goes deep into my every bone and joint and I do not wish for myself the mile sojourn back to my dilapidated home to-night. I shall be happy to stay a night here in town only because you persist in the offer. But when I do return to my own home, I will again be lonely for company. So long has it been since a child's voice was heard in my house!"

"You need not leave, good woman. You may stay the rest of your days. If we in Dunnsbroke were to turn away an aged woman and send her off to the trash heap, what scoundrels would we then be?"

"Aged woman? Trash heap? This talk of yours offends my ears!" The woman struck out at me with a fist and then with her walking stick. Her strength was suddenly enlivened tenfold and the quickness of her motion was clear enough that even some of the neighborhood toddlers made comment on it to their playmates. My best spectacles were irrevocably broken in that onslaught of elderly aggression.

"Woman, calm yourself!"

She did not heed my words. Instead she huffed, "Woman is it now? What words of disrespect are these! I will calm myself when I am good and ready!" She struck out at me again and again, bruising my head, neck and shoulders considerably. My shin was also sore, though I cannot be certain that I had not injured it early in the day when I tripped over an ottoman.

"Is the Devil in you? Has he seized your capacity for reason and replaced it with ape-like savagery?" I held a large, iron cross that I had brought with me from the sanctuary to have polished. At this point I reasoned that if this woman was in league with Satan, I could attempt in the manner of the papists to touch her forehead with the cross and speak the name of our holy saviour to drive the evil spirit away.

But the woman was utterly bestial. She lunged forward with such force that the large, iron cross did not merely tap her forehead but it did smack her, making a hollow thump. She fell instantly to the ground, a product of the demoniac being relieved of her hellish puppeteer. Perhaps in accordance with the might behind its blow, the cross had worked very well all on its own. I thought then that I should raise this question to the Bishop when next we met to understand what theological implications may be derived from the velocity of sacred objects.

There she lay. I gave her a moment to recuperate from her ordeal as I continued on my way. After the cross was cleaned and polished, I did return by the same path to check upon the woman. I could not believe my own eyes; she had vanished. I think that my initial intuition may have been incomplete. It is quite possible that she was no mortal possessed by a demonic spirit, but a demon herself--one of those imps of the wilderness who waylaid travelers to make meals of their bones--who was thereby dispelled back to Hell. Woe unto me had I sent the children of the town to visit her in her crumbling homestead carrying sweets and bread to this witch! I was chilled to the bone by this realisation for it meant that the Devil would not cease to hound me until he had taken my soul or had destroyed my body, and the next encounter would clench that as a fact in my mind!

When the time came for the town to have its excises levied, again the Devil tried to ensnare my soul in a web of sin, for it is not bad enough that a collector of taxes profaned our town, but he requested a meeting with me in my own house. If his plan was to corrupt me through my financial dealings then he was being even more foolish than I had thought a devil could be. I have no more value for money

than I do for acorns or sand fleas. There is nothing in the town of Dunnsbroke that would be denied me were I to be in need of it. And there is nothing I wanted that could not be got from the town. What a queer notion, that I should love money!

In any case, the Devil assailed me just this one last time, though during my assailment I had no reason to think this should be the end to the affair. It began innocently enough when the exciseman, Mr. Calabash, arrived in town to account for what we owed the Crown this year in duties. As accounts were frequently disarrayed in towns like Dunnsbroke, he took up lodgings in Mrs. Winscombe's boardinghouse; his job would not be a quick one. Mrs. Winscombe was not happy to have him and refused to speak a word to him that was not required in the line of business. When he awoke each morning and roused himself, he would call to her, "Good morning, Mrs. Winscombe." She would give no reply. But when he asked, "What is for breakfast, pray tell?" She would obligingly answer, as this was part of her business, you see. (The answer was, for the curious, many times eggs.) Once he presented to her a conundrum by saying, "This is a beautiful house. How many rooms do you have for rental?" which could have been idle chatter or could have been a legitimate question about the operation of her business. At first she could not decide whether he deserved an answer to this question; he had after all commented on the beauty of her house, which was outside the normal scope of business talk. But she was saved from having to resolve the matter further when another lodger answered in her stead: four rooms for rent all told, two occupied currently. Mr. Calabash made a note on a paper tablet, but this act still did not clarify whether it was for tax business or for future leisure travels that he made this note. Mrs. Winscombe was just as glad to not have answered him. She over-peppered his kippers for the inconvenience and was disappointed when he took no notice of her efforts. (Perhaps in Hell black pepper alone is eaten in large servings.)

When I became aware that Mr. Calabash wished to take tea with me in the parsonage, I made arrangements to obtain the assistance

of Miss Clemence, a very useful and busy young lady who does not mind tidying my abode. She agreed, provided I did not require her to wash my windows. I only needed her help with the service of tea, hence an agreement was struck. She arrived at three o'clock, over an hour in advance of Mr. Calabash who insisted on taking his tea at half past four. Her spread was most marvelous; she made exquisite cucumber sandwiches, delectable current buns, and buttery scones with clotted cream. And of course, she brewed ample amounts of tea by my own recipe.

Mr. Calabash arrived dressed all in black, looking rather like the sort of undertaker one sees in woodcuts of the American prairie. His manners and fashions were of an older era, such as I was much accustomed to seeing, and I almost forgot for one moment that he was a servant of Mammon. He did not excel in the art of conversation, but he seemed a good listener as I recounted the history of Dunnsbroke to him in the briefest a manner of which I am capable. He seemed quite interested in the tales of the Sinner-King, with which he was already partially familiar. He ate several sandwiches, yet did not touch his tea.

While Miss Clemence was away in the kitchen, he quite abruptly interrupted my account of how the first oxcart came to Dunnsbroke: "I beg your pardon, reverend, but frankly I have come here with my business mind. As you know, I am sent as a collector."

"A collector of taxes, don't you mean?"

He grinned at me like a gambler might. Having seen very few gamblers, I rely on the images in my head of how they probably behave just as they show the cards that would win them what is colloquially referred to as the pot. Mr. Calabash did not appear to me to be a gambler, though. What had he up his sleeve?

"Yes. I collect taxes, but that is not all I collect. My employer seeks many other things of value apart from crowns and pounds."

"Then you are sent from the very pit of Hell to collect my soul?"

He grinned more widely, less like a gambler and more like a particularly exuberant wolf. "Know you not who is the master of your soul? I cannot steal such a thing, surely. There is a strange

fear within you, Jasper Pickery. Rest assured, though, my employer shall have his due or else...."

At that moment Miss Clemence, the darling dear, returned to serve us. My tea pot had recently been broken, and I was rather particular about which tea pots I would allow in the parsonage, so she had been serving directly from a kettle kept on my stove. She carried with her two cups of freshly brewed tea and, being rather in good health, she walked at a brisk pace. I stuck out my foot a few inches thither and caused her to trip. The tea cup, filled to its brim with steaming liquid, fell in the lap of the strange gentleman who was my visitor. He screamed in a shrill tone like that of a bat.

Miss Clemence was in quite a state. "Oh dear! I am so sorry, sirs."

Instantly a grey mist arose from Mr. Calabash where the tea had met his flesh. The unmistakable smell of brimstone was upon the air.

"What is that dreadful smell?" Miss Clemence was evidently not familiar with brimstone, being only a woman of courting age.

Mr. Calabash attempted to dab away the liquid from his lap, but it was far too late for him. His eyes flashed red with hellfire and he began to dissipate into an incorporeal form.

I picked up my Bible and held it in front of me as a shield against spiritual attack. "Back to Hell with you, you foul fiend!"

The man hissed like an inmate of the Bedlam Lunatic Asylum. In a puff of noxious smoke, he vanished, returning to his master empty handed.

Miss Clemence, simple lass, was confused by the eerie event. "What in the name of Heaven? Did the tea boil him away?"

I laughed briefly, which irritated her. "Allow me to explain. Thank you for following my instructions and brewing the tea with holy water, Miss Clemence. I had a suspicion that this would be the day when my dietary precaution would pay off in full. You have helped me to send an evil spirit where it can no longer do any harm."

Yes, I have fought the Devil and defeated him with only the most simple of instruments drawn from the variety available to all

Christian men. It takes only a modicum of ingenuity, but ingenuity is something that I can honestly boast I do not lack. I am sure I could fill a whole book.

After all, how many people can honestly say that their lives were saved by a piping hot cup of tea?

