**Hell’s Bells by Gabriel Griffin**

Thorn-apple! So that’s what it was, that scraggy, evil-smelling, toothy-leaved plant growing on the compost heap down the end of my garden. I looked again at the illustration in uncle’s yellowed *Flora of Britain & Northern Europe*. Yes, *Datura stramonium* all right. The flower must be that limp white tatter hanging down, nothing like the faded watercolour illustration of a white, trumpet-shaped bloom.

I read on… commonly called ‘devil’s snare’. *Devil’s snare?* Why on earth call it that? I rather liked the idea of snaring the devil, an elusive entity at the best of times. *Other names include: stinkweed* (I can vouch for that), *devil’s trumpet, thorn-apple* and *hell’s bells*. Wow! This plant must be something! I decided not to pull it up and chuck it on a bonfire. Well, not just yet. A mistake, as it turned out.

‘That weed stinks!’ said Jillie, peering over my shoulder. ‘You should call in a gardener.’

I’m not much of a gardener. Throw some seeds around and hope to see a bit of colour, that’s my line. Jillie was right, I should. Lick the garden back into some sort of order.

 She was as staggered as I was when Uncle Marcus, who had seen me only occasionally over the years, left me the house in his will. The garden too, of course. I liked to patter through his – no, mine, now – vast, overgrown garden with its cypresses and yews draped with creepers, past the pond where no fish could survive under a viscid green slime. Yes, I’d better call in a gardener.

Where was Uncle’s gardener, I wondered. When the solicitor had read the will, the housekeeper, Mrs Plummer, was present, as was Betty, the cook, Mary who came to do the washing every week, and Nurse Simmons, who’d looked after Uncle at the end. Uncle had left each of them a tidy sum. But no mention was made of the gardener – what *was* his name? I couldn’t for the life of me remember even his face.

As for me, I inherited enough to live on. Nothing outrageous. But I had the house and moved in – well, wouldn’t you? Think, no more rent to pay, a ready-made home. A tad old-fashioned of course. Jillie didn’t like it, never wanted to stay nights, said all the corridors and dusty rooms gave her the creeps. I offered her a feather duster… needn’t tell you how *that* ended!

Jillie nagged on: *Sell it!* Why should I, I said, house prices are rock bottom, better wait until they rise. Besides, I liked living there. The big house, all my own! Just right for my work. (I’m a graphic designer, work online.) This place was ideal, no noise, no callers, no interruptions.

No heating, either. But it was summer when I moved in, the hottest for a hundred years, so experts said. Hot, all right, hot as hell. I stayed in during the day; the sun was too bright, hurt my eyes. Wandered around the garden in the evenings, looking to see what flowers had bloomed. I like knowing the names of flowers and trees, they have such strange names; you wonder why they are so called. Who gave them those names? How does a name stick and end up in a dry book of botany? There must be some reason behind each one, perhaps forgotten over time.

*Hell’s bells,* for instance. Ok, the trumpet flower in the watercolor is rather bell-shaped, so that part of the name is explained. But the *hell* bit? And *devil’s snare*? I meant to do a bit of googling.

Forgot. Had work to do; logo and web design for an impatient and difficult client. Friday evening I’d finished and emailed it, hoping there’d be no reaction till Monday. I decided we’d celebrate with a bottle of uncle’s best and made my way through the dim corridors to the back of the house and the cellar steps.

Behind me I heard a sound that I couldn’t pinpoint – as though a velvet curtain had brushed against a door or a sack of feathers had been emptied onto the floor. I turned but could see nothing in the darkness.

‘Mice,’ I said to myself. Didn’t sound like mice, more like something softly moving. I began to understand why Jillie wouldn’t stay nights. I’d heard other noises like this before, but had been always too busy or too tired to register and analyze them. I switched on the cellar light and descended the steps slowly, my ears pricked. Once down, I quickly found a bottle of white, brushed away the cobwebs with my hand, and hurried up the steps, closing the door firmly. Too firmly, the old wood door shuddered and the bang echoed through the cellars below.

Jillie arrived. I poured two glasses of uncle’s Chardonnay and we wandered out to the garden, glasses in hand.

‘This is all right,’ said Jillie, flopping onto a stone bench greened with moss. ‘Better than showing grumpy people who aren’t sure where they want to live around houses all day. Terrible on the feet, especially in this heat.’ She emptied her glass. Providently I’d brought the bottle with us. I went to refill our glasses but halted and looked around suddenly. Something had stirred in the bushes.

Jillie heard it too. ‘Did your uncle have a cat’, she asked?

‘Not that I know. But a cat may have wandered in from another garden. Probably after birds or mice.’

‘Mice!’ Jillie shuddered. ‘Rats, more like. You’d better get a cat, a big one.’

The rustling in the bushes had stopped. Probably the cat had stolen off with its prey and was gobbling it up somewhere. I always feel sorry for cats’ victims; they don’t stand a chance against those sharp-clawed hunters.

It wasn’t long before another bottle was called for. I flip-flopped back to the house and down the damp cellar steps while dusk slipped into the garden, thieving the colours. I had forgotten my previous uneasiness; there’s nothing like a dose of alcohol to banish the creeps!

Uncle certainly had kept a good cellar, the cobwebbed racks were half full still of dark bottles. I drew out a bottle at random, blew the dust from the label and the dust rose up, making me cough. There was just enough light from the hanging bulb to allow me to read the name of the wine: *Inferno*. Good grief, what kind of wine was that? I made a mental note to uncork it some other time – say, Hallowe’en. I hunted for and found the Chardonnay.

Almost at the top of the cellar steps, I heard a noise. A shuffling sound, then something like a choked cough. I turned to look but couldn’t see anything in the gloom below. Must be rats! Jillie was right, I’d better get a cat.

Jillie wasn’t on her stone bench. I looked around but could see little in the twilight. ‘Jillie!’ No reply. Silly to feel uneasy, she must have wandered into the trees where the cypresses hid her from sight. I left the bottle on the carved stone table, along with the glasses, and went to hunt for her.

The night was warm on my skin and its swirled scents almost inebriated me. By the time I reached Jillie at the end of the garden, I felt half-drugged. Jillie was standing by the compost heap, staring at something. I followed her gaze.

Before us was the thorn-apple, miraculously transformed from a rubbishy weed into a plant of great beauty. The tatty white rag had swelled into a milk-white trumpet that arose on a slim stem from a kirtle of leaves. Its mouth was upturned to the sky, and just above it floated the largest moth I had ever seen. It was huge, dun-colored, covered in a soft fur, and hovered over the bell-mouth of the flower as though it were drugged with the fragrance the flower emanated.

I felt as though I had intruded on something private, like when you turn a corner of an alley and almost bump into a guy humping a woman in the shadows, or when, walking through the woods, you come upon a girl lying in the leaves half-naked, a boy heavy on top of her.

Then – so suddenly we both started – the moth plunged into the flower’s bell. The skin-white petals quivered, trembled, the entire plant shook. Neither of us said a word, almost hypnotized by the scene.

As suddenly as it had flown in, the moth flew out, straight up into the air. A soft dust fell from its wings, powdering the air around the flower’s bell that was now drooping. ‘Hell’s bells!’ I said, breaking the enchanted stillness. ‘Come on, I’ve got another bottle of wine.’ We returned to our drinking.

That night, for the first time, Jillie didn’t go home. We had both drunk too much of Uncle’s Chardonnay and fell onto the carved wood bed, asleep at once.

Sometime in the night, I was startled into wakefulness. I had no idea what hour it was. I listened, but the only sound was the shirring of leaves outside the open window. Feeling nauseous, I just managed to stagger to the bathroom at the end of the corridor in time before I was sick.

I stayed in the bathroom for some time, I guess, until I stopped vomiting and felt I could make it back to the bedroom. I had been vaguely aware of noises in the house: stealthy footsteps, a door closing perhaps, but they didn’t penetrate far into my queasy consciousness at the time. Probably Jillie was feeling as queasy as I was.

At the door of the bedroom I halted – something wasn’t right but I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what. Then, from the moonlight shivering in through the open window, I made out the crumpled bed and, on it, Jillie’s naked body. What was wrong was that she wasn’t alone. Crouched over her was a shadowy figure.

Was I dreaming, was it some kind of nightmare? The effects of too much wine? I stared at the creature, praying it would vanish. But it didn’t, it stayed crouched over Jillie, its large body seemingly furred, so hairy was it.

I couldn’t move. Of course, I must be dreaming, I thought. That blasted wine… I fixed the scene, stunned – and then the awful creature moved. Jillie’s body shook and arched. She moaned and the sound broke my paralysis. I shouted and rushed forward. The creature jumped down from the bed, flew past me in a cloud of dust and vanished out of sight down the dark corridors. I rushed after it and just managed to see a shape leap onto a windowsill – I’d left the upstairs windows open to let in cooler night air.

Before I could get to it, it had jumped. I arrived too late and stuck my head out, thinking to see the creature, whatever it was, broken on the flagstones below. The moon illuminated the terrace but it was quite empty of all but the shadow of the balustrade.

My next thought was for Jillie; how ghastly this must be for her, the poor girl; the victim of some horrendous being, raped in her sleep.

Miraculously Jillie hadn’t woken. The wine had had a greater effect on both of us than I would have thought. She lay there with her naked body bleached by the moon, moaning softly. I passed my hand very lightly over her stomach and dust rose from her pale skin. I covered her with the sheet. She turned onto her side and seemed to sleep more easily.

What was I to do? I locked the door and lay beside her, wide-awake, all the rest of the night, wondering if I should tell her what had happened. Should we go to the police station? I couldn’t give much of a description of the rapist and Jillie obviously could give none. And she would have all the unpleasantness of questioning and so on.

In the morning, Jillie woke. ‘How are you feeling?’ I asked. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘But I had a strange dream. I can’t remember it exactly but there was a huge moth in it. Like the one we saw in the garden.’ She smiled, ‘I’m starving,’ she said. ‘We didn’t eat last night. Let’s find something!’

I never mentioned the happening in the night to Jillie, it would have only upset her. No point, either, in denouncing a case of rape when the victim herself seemed unaware of being violated. But I worried a good deal and had a locksmith come in and change all the locks immediately, fitting the latest models on doors and windows. A technician added closed circuit cameras. Told Jillie it was to protect against burglars. But Jillie didn’t stay overnight again and I never asked her to.

When Jillie was back at work I searched the house, every larder and cupboard, every nook and cranny. Found nothing, no trace of an intruder. Well, whoever it was wouldn’t get in again, not with all I was spending on electronic gadgetry.

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It was Hallowe’en when she told me. ‘Pregnant?’ I exclaimed, ‘”Are you sure? What about the pill? Didn’t it work?’

‘You bet I’m sure! Did the test twice.’ Jillie was smiling. ‘Must have forgotten now and again to take that blasted pill.’ She looked over the moon. What could I say?

‘Well, if you’re happy, I’m happy,’ I said, ‘And so would Uncle be if he knew. Carrying on the family line and all that.’ Then a thought struck me…

I put it out of my mind. Jillie’s pregnancy went without a hitch and in early spring the baby was born. I sat on the hospital bed. All I could see of the baby was her tiny crumpled face and faint wisps of soft brown hair. ‘She’s lovely,’ I said, as Jillie expected, though it looked more like a little hamster than a baby to me.

It wasn’t until Jillie bathed her that I saw the down covering all her body. ‘Nurse says babies are born occasionally with a kind of fur,’ said Jillie. ‘Later it disappears.’ She cocooned the baby in towels, chanting an old rhyme I can remember my mother singing. For no reason I remember my mother saying ‘Never be afraid to run!’ when I was a kid and the bigger boys bullied me. I decided to get Jillie’s colleague at the Estate agents to put the house up for sale.

I left Jillie dressing the baby in lots of miniature garments and went back to the house and into the garden. I hadn’t found a gardener and it looked overgrown and neglected, which it was. The daffodils were almost over, but there were still self-seeded violets under the stone bench, bluebell spears were rising from the earth and I heard the cuckoo call. I wandered around, enjoying the cool, damp air on my skin until dusk. It was then I found it.

Hidden in a cluster of old yews and bushes was what must have been the gardener’s shed, almost entirely covered in ivy. Strange I hadn’t noticed it ever before. The door was slightly ajar, a padlock hanging open from the rusting chain. I looked in, couldn’t see anything in the darkness, needed to bring a torch. I went around the side where there was a cobwebbed window and was about to brush away a cobweb when I heard that sound again, the sound of something rustling through the bushes. This was followed by a footstep on the wooden floor of the shed, the stealthy closing of the door and a flutter like that made by soft wings.

So *this* was where whatever it was hung out! My chance. I returned quickly to the door, now shut but not locked, hooked the prong of the padlock through the chain and clicked the padlock shut, taking out the key. As I returned to the house, I heard the door being rattled. The shed shook. It was a stoutly built shed and the door didn’t yield. I tossed the key in the slimy pond, it rested a second or two on the algae, then disappeared from sight.

I took Jillie and the baby from the hospital to her mother’s. She stayed there until our new home was ready, which it was pretty quickly, thanks to Jillie’s agency finding the new-build home that we could move straight into. Uncle’s house was up for sale for a couple of years before being bought, The buyers planned to knock it down and build a complex. A pity, in a way.

In those two years I went back occasionally and checked on the shed, before the bulldozers flattened it and all that was inside it. For a time, staring through the window, a giant moth would flutter down and dash itself repeatedly against the panes before my eyes. The last time I went, I saw only a huge cobweb stretched behind the glass. In it was

the moth, bound like a mummy with grey and dusty spider’s thread, hanging there, dead still in the gloom.