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opening extract from

Stories from England

written by

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published by

Oxford University Press

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JACK HANNAFORD



There was once an old soldier named Jack Hannaford. For over twenty years he had been at the wars in the Low Countries, fighting and marching, sleeping in tent and barn, stealing a goose here and a guinea there to make up for a soldier's poor victuals and small pay. He was not a rogue by nature, but the wars had turned him into one, for he possessed nothing of his own, and had never learned a trade.

When he got back to England, he was thin and ragged, with a patch over one eye and very little hair on top of his head. He was rusty and weather-beaten and the brightest thing about him was his one bright eye. Off he went to tramp through the county of Suffolk and make what he could by beggary and trickery and such-like ways.

Now at that time there was living in the county of Suffolk a foolish farmer and his foolish good wife. Fat and rosy they were, for they lived well, though they had but little money to spend. Yet there were always eggs in the larder, plenty of butter and milk, a fat cockerel ready for the pot, and a fine ham swinging from a hook in the kitchen. In all his time the foolish

farmer had saved ten gold guineas, and these he kept in a pocket of his brown cloth jacket.

One day he had to ride to town to see a lawyer about a cottage that stood on his land, but he was afraid he might be robbed, so he left the ten gold guineas with his wife.

'Wife,' says he, 'I shall be back before nightfall, but I may be stopped on the road and robbed. Here are my ten guineas. Look after them for me and keep them safe.'

'Oh dear me,' says his wife, 'I don't like this at all, for you know I am a foolish body, and never could keep money.'

But she took the money and wrapped it in a handkerchief and wrapped the handkerchief in a bit of sacking and put the bundle in a hole above the chimney.

'Now whoever comes,' thinks she, 'would never dream of looking there for the money, so surely it will be safe and sound.'

Well, the farmer went off on his horse, and when he got near the town an old soldier with a patch over one eye met him on the road, but the farmer took no notice of him and went on his way. His wife, meanwhile, had put on her apron and taken up her broom, and she set to work to sweep up the farmhouse.

After a time she looked out of the window and saw the same old soldier who had met her husband on the road an hour or two back. She thought of the ten gold guineas in the handkerchief, but she knew they were safe in their hole above the chimney. Presently there was a knock at the door, and the farmer's wife went to it and opened it, and there stood Jack Hannaford, the ragged soldier from the Low Countries.

'Good day, ma'am,' says he.

'Good day,' says she, 'and what may you be wanting?'

'Nothing but a crust of bread and a mug of water—or maybe of ale, if you have such a thing.'

'Come inside,' says she. 'I've no ale, and the crusts of bread I keep for the two black pigs; but I have a cup of new milk for you and a piece of dough-cake that's not been out of the oven above an hour.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' says Jack politely, and steps inside, remembering to limp a little to show how worn and weary he was. The good wife gave him the food and drink and he sat down by the fireplace, and they got to talking. Jack's one bright eye was peering round the room to see if there was anything silver that he might make off with if the farmer was not at home; but nothing worth while could he see, for the room was bare and simply furnished. Once or twice the good wife glanced up towards the hole in the chimney, but nothing was to be seen of the money in the handkerchief. She told the old soldier about the farmer her husband and about her first husband, who had been a cobbler but was dead these ten years.

'A fine man he was,' said she, 'and a good cobbler. From London he was,' she said, 'and he came out here to escape the plague. And where might you be from?'

'Why, as for me,' says Jack, 'I am from Paradise.'

'From Paradise?' says the simple wife. 'Well, fancy that! Now if you come from Paradise perhaps you have met my first husband, for it's there he is, for sure.'

'What was his name?' asks Jack.

The good wife told him.

'Why, to be sure,' says Jack, 'he is a good friend of mine, and I how him well. A fine cobbler he is, as you say. Why, it's he who makes all the shoes for the blessed saints and angels.'

'Well, fancy that,' says the simple wife. 'And how is he doing now?'

'Poorly, ma'am, poorly,' says Jack, looking very sorrowful. 'He has spent his last shilling, and he hasn't money enough to buy shoe-leather to go on with his work, and it's in a bad way the saints and angels of Paradise will be if he can't get leather to mend their shoes.'

'Dear, oh dear,' says the farmer's wife, and she begins to shed tears as she thinks of her poor old husband, the cobbler from London.

'But I shall be going back there tonight,' says Jack, 'and if you had a few guineas or even only a few shillings I could give him, 'twould make him happy again for certain.'

Well, the poor wife was so upset with sorrow for the sad case of her first husband that she forgot all about her promise to the farmer to keep his guineas safe.

'Why, to be sure,' says she, 'and there is a little money hidden away, and I'll get it out this minute, if you will be so good as to take it to my poor dead husband.'

So she got up on a stool and took the bundle down from the hole above the fireplace and laid it on the table. She unwrapped the sacking, and next the handkerchief, and then she asked Jack how much he thought the cobbler needed.

'Why, ma'am,' says Jack, 'it wouldn't do to be mean in a matter like this, now would it? For I may never come this way again—indeed, I think it's very unlikely I will; and this may be your only chance of doing the poor fellow a bit of good. So why not give me all you can spare, and think no more about it?'

The simple woman hesitated no longer, but put all the ten gold guineas into the soldier's hand.

'Here,' says she, 'take all we have, and give it to my poor dead husband with my love and blessing. And a blessing on you too for doing an honest woman so kind a turn.'

Jack put the ten guineas into the pocket of his ragged coat, thanked the farmer's wife for her blessing, and made off as fast as he could; and the simple wife was left to get her husband's supper, for she knew he would not be long coming back from the town.

As soon as the farmer came back, she told him about the old soldier and how she had given him the money to take back to Paradise.

'Paradise!' says the farmer. 'Paradise! Why folks don't come back and forth from Paradise as if it was Ipswich Market! You're a fool, wife! You have given all my money to a common thief and a vagabond, and left me as poor as when I married you.'

The wife began to weep.

'Well, if it's a fool I am,' she sobbed, 'it's you are the bigger, for you knew I was nought but a simple woman, and you should never have left the money with me!'

'You never said a truer word, old woman. It's the biggest fool I am in all the county for trusting such a ninny as you with my money. Where's my horse? I'll catch the rogue if I drop down dead and the old horse as well!'

So the farmer ran out into the yard, jumped on his horse, and galloped away down the road that Jack had taken.

Now Jack had not gone above two miles down the road, and he was thinking what a clever fellow he had been, when he heard the sound of horse's hooves in a furious gallop.

'This'll be the farmer,' says he to himself, 'come after me

for his money. He'll take the money from me and give me a sound beating into the bargain, I shouldn't wonder. Now where shall I hide?'

But there was no time to find a hiding-place. The road was long and straight, and by now the farmer had already caught sight of him. Very quickly Jack stepped to the side of the road, lay down in the ditch, and began to look very intently up into the sky. Presently the farmer came alongside and got off his horse.

'Hallo,' said the farmer. 'What are you doing there, my fine fellow, and why do you look up into the sky?'

'Look there,' says Jack, shading his one eye with his hand.

'What is it?' asks the farmer, looking up. 'I don't see anything.'

'And I see a fellow flying away as fast as he can,' says Jack. 'Come and lie down here, and you'll see the same.'

'Very well,' says the farmer, 'if you'll be so good as to hold my horse, I'll lie down and take a look.'

So up jumps Jack, and the farmer gets down in the ditch and lies on his back, looking up into the sky.

'Now take a look!' cries Jack. 'Now do you see a fellow flying away as fast as he can?'

And he jumps into the saddle of the farmer's horse, digs his heels in her sides, sets off at a flying gallop, and disappears down the road before ever the farmer can get to his feet. And that was the last he saw of Jack Hannaford.

Presently the sound of hooves died away in the distance. Slowly the farmer trudged home on foot, cursing himself for his foolishness. He had lost both his ten gold guineas that he had been ten years saving, and his stout brown mare into the bargain.

'My wife be no more than a fool,' said he to himself, 'but I be twice a fool—firstly, for trusting such a fool as she with the money, and next for letting such a rogue get away from under my very hand.'

And when he got home he told his wife what had happened and owned that he was the bigger fool of the two. So they sat down to supper, and after supper they both fell to laughing to think how easily they had been cheated of their money.