

# JASPER'S HOLLOW

by

Janet Annan

## CHAPTER 1

“CASSANDRA PHILLIPS, pay attention!” snapped a voice from the front of the classroom.

Cassie jumped, to find Miss Chalker glaring at her, and several of her classmates giggling and nudging one another.

However, this was nothing out of the ordinary. Cassie’s day-dreaming was always a welcome distraction during lesson-times.

“Answer my question quickly!”

Cassie wriggled uncomfortably in her seat.

She racked her brains frantically.

What was the question?

She knew that the lesson had been about Noah, who’d built an ark and taken with him two animals of every kind. She could remember that much.

She’d wondered how so *many* animals could all fit inside one boat.

How did they keep it clean? It’d get so smelly! ..... and what would they eat?

Elephants, birds and tigers wouldn't eat the same food.  
No..... tigers eat meat but how would they keep meat  
fresh for twelve months?  
It would have gone bad.

What a pity there was no electricity in those days.  
They could have taken a freezer.

Now that would've been *really* useful..... and so Cassie's  
thoughts drifted on and on, until she was brought back to  
earth with a bump by Miss Chalker's icy voice.

"I will repeat my question.....  
When Noah set the dove free from the ark, what was he  
hoping that it would find?"

Time had run out.

Cassie drew a deep breath. "A freezer?" she stammered,  
knowing in her heart that this was definitely *not* the answer  
which Miss Chalker was looking for.

She was not mistaken. Miss Chalker's face turned pink,  
her lips tightened, her eyes bulged.

As Cassie waited for the inevitable explosion, the thought  
fleetingly crossed her mind .....wow... Miss Chalker's  
eyes look as if they are going to pop out of her head.....  
What if they *do*? ..... but she had no time to dwell on *that*  
possibility for more than a moment.

"A freezer..... A FREEZER", choked Miss Chalker, almost  
as though she could not believe her ears.

“STAND UP! How dare you give me a silly answer like that..

I have been standing here talking to you for fifteen minutes and it is quite obvious that you have not listened to one word that I’ve said”.

She turned to Janet Black and her features softened.

“Janet *please*, tell Cassandra the correct answer to the question..... What did Noah hope that the dove would find?”

As she spoke, she turned and strode to the front of the room.

She did not see Janet turn and pull a face,

“Thicko, thicko, ” she whispered spitefully to Cassie but by the time Miss Chalker had turned around, Janet was standing up behind her desk, wearing that smug smile that the others detested.

“Yes Miss Chalker,” she said sweetly “Noah hoped that the dove would find something which would show that there was dry land again and so it brought back a branch from an olive tree.”

“Thank you Janet, I’m pleased to know that somebody is listening and that I have not entirely wasted my breath. Put yourself two points up on the chart.”

Janet smirked as she made her way across the room.

She was well in the lead for points this term and certain to win the book prize, and if she did, her mother had promised her ten pounds to spend exactly as she pleased.

She boasted about this to the other children and they resented it. Most of them could have answered the question about Noah and earned points but were not given the opportunity.

Janet was the teacher's pet. She could do no wrong. Cassie could do no right.

Miss Chalker turned her attention back to Cassie.

"Rest assured young lady, when I next see your mother, that I shall have something to say to her.

You come to school to *work*, not to dream your time away. By nine o'clock tomorrow morning, I expect to see fifty lines on my desk, '*I must not day-dream in class.*'

I think Dollydaydream would have been a better name for you than Cassandra".

Janet and her friends sniggered and the others glared at them. They were used to Cassie's day-dreams.

They found it funny when she disappeared into her own little world, but they were fond of her and it angered them to see her upset.

Cassie blushed to the roots of her long blonde hair. Tears pricked her eyes and she longed for the bell to ring.

Even then her misery was not complete.....

“Dollydaydream!, Dollydaydream!” called Janet and the chant was picked up by two of Janet’s friends and some boys from the class next door.

She rushed across the playground, to where she could see her mother’s car parked outside the school gate.

Her mother was chatting to two of her friends’ parents and she waved when Cassie appeared.

“I’ll only be a minute”, she called.

However, it was a minute too long, for even as she turned to make her way towards the car, Cassie heard the all-too-familiar click-click of Miss Chalker’s high-heeled shoes.

“Er... just a moment please Mrs Phillips.  
May I have a word with you?”

Cassie sank down low in the car seat and covered her ears.

Her last school report had been a disaster and she dreaded what her parents would say.

She really did her best to concentrate at school, but somehow her mind seemed to wander and by the time she came back to reality, all the others had moved on to the next piece of work and she had to spend almost every play-time catching up.

She sat for what seemed an eternity, until at last, the fading click of Miss Chalker's heels told her that the conversation was over.

The driver's door opened and her solemn-faced mother sat down behind the wheel.

Cassie looked up at her with mournful eyes

"Sorry Mum"

"Oh Cassie what can I say?"

That's the second time Miss Chalker has complained to me.

She tells me that you are falling well behind the others in class. I *do* worry about you. We'd better get home and talk it over with your dad".

# # #

It was a subdued Cassie who sat with her parents around the big oak table in the farmhouse kitchen that afternoon.

"Cassie, you *know* how important it is that you try hard at school.

When you grow up and go to work, nobody is going to want to *pay* you to sit there all day dreaming".

"I know that Dad but I really don't do it on purpose. I *will* try harder..... I promise"

"I know you will, lass," said her father kindly.

Recalling his own childhood, he found it difficult to feel cross with her.

How hard he had found it, to sit at a desk, whilst his thoughts were still out in the fields of his parent's farm ..... rounding up sheep, feeding the hens, milking the cows.

He was no dreamer now though.  
Busy farmers have no time to dream!  
He worked hard from the crack of dawn, until sometimes long after dark and was acknowledged by all, to be one of the best farmers for miles around.

He knew every one of his animals, from the hugest cow down to the tiniest new born lamb.  
Nothing escaped his notice.

As he looked at Cassie's dejected face, he understood exactly how she felt.

It seemed like only yesterday, that he had sat here in this very kitchen, in front of his worried parents, explaining how he struggled at school... and now, here he was with his own daughter.  
It was history repeating itself.

He understood Cassie well.  
He'd watched her at work on the farm, and seen how she loved and cared for the animals.  
There was nothing of the Dollydaydream about her then.

He remembered how she had once sat all day, nursing and feeding an orphan lamb and how carefully she'd measured and mixed the milk for its bottles.

He could always rely on her to check that the hens were safely locked up at night, in case the fox paid them an unwelcome visit.

He recalled how she had made herself late for her best friend's birthday party, when one of the calves had gone

missing ..... and not grumbled at all, even though she knew that she would miss the magician who would be performing.

No, he knew that Cassie would turn out alright and when the time came, he would gladly hand over the reins and entrust the farm to her care.

He reached out and ruffled her hair .

“Don’t worry lass”, he said softly. Just do your best and things will turn out alright, you’ll see.

What about a drink Mum?”

Mum had just cut three thick slices from a fruit cake that she had made earlier that day and she brought the plate across to them.

“Don’t let this spoil your tea”, she said kindly. “It’s your favourite ..... chicken pie and chips”

“Yummee”, smiled Cassie.

## CHAPTER 2

The summer had been long and hot.

The ground was parched, and crisp brown patches had appeared around cracks in the lawn. The only sound was that of the bees, as they droned lazily from one wilting flower to another.

As the sun poured down, an old black dog rose stiffly to his feet and staggered across the farm-yard, to where the over-hanging branch of an old oak tree offered some welcome shade.

He flopped down, panting heavily, and felt a gentle hand drawn over his head and along his back. He looked up, gave two grateful slaps of his tail on the dusty earth and with a contented sigh, drifted back to sleep.

The hand belonged to Cassie and she smiled fondly at her old friend, as she leaned back against the sturdy trunk, her long legs out-stretched, sipping ice-cool lemonade through a straw.

Behind her, stood the old stone farmhouse, which had been her family's home for almost a hundred years.

Away in front, the land fell sharply and a patchwork of fields stretched into the distance.

Cassie adored this view. She loved to watch the changing colours of the seasons... the rich reds and golds of autumn, the wildness of winter, giving way to the fresh greens of spring.

“I feel as if I’m on top of the world!” she would say as she gazed out across the plain.

She loved especially to wander through the fields, with the dogs scampering at her heels, whimpering and snuffling down rabbit holes, exploring the hedgerows, in the hope that a nice fat rabbit would pop out for a game of chase.

Behind the farm-house, the fields sloped gently down towards a wooded valley, and there at the bottom, gurgling merrily through a tunnel of hawthorn, passed a stream as cool and clear as crystal.

This was Cassie’s special place.

She called it ‘*The Hollow*’.

It was a place of her own, a place where nobody but she, ever stepped.

It was there she liked to sit and read, or simply dream.

She loved listening to the burbling of the water, or watching a cow take a welcome drink on a hot summer’s day, before ambling along the shadowy green tunnel on its way back to the field.

If she came alone and sat as quiet as a mouse, she could watch the squirrels twisting and twirling overhead, amongst the sun-speckled branches.

Nose-twitching rabbits would peep from their burrows.

If all was clear, out they would pop, hopping around in front of her, nibbling the soft green grass, yet with eyes and ears always on alert for sign of danger.

There were rabbits of every size .She loved them all, but especially the babies, some no bigger than a tennis ball.

They were quite unafraid of her and once, as she sat *very* still, a tiny brown baby had come right up to her, so close that she could easily have touched its furry nose and twitching whiskers.

She had hardly dared breathe but suddenly, the spell was broken.....

She heard its mother give a warning stamp on the ground and in the twinkling of an eye and a flash of white bob-tails, both mother and baby had disappeared from sight.

Whatever could have startled them?

Maybe the old red fox, who lived 'way across the other side of the valley, in a hole, deep in the earth, covered by thick prickly gorse bushes.

Perhaps he was on the prowl, hunting for a nice plump rabbit for his dinner.

Cassie saw and heard nothing but she understood that special sense that animals have, which warns them of danger.

Of all the places around the farm, this leafy hollow was her favourite .....

There were tall oaks and sycamores stretching their sinewy roots down towards the bubbling stream, as it flowed over its stony bed.

Perhaps they too, like Cassie, loved to feel the cool water rippling past their toes in the heat of the day.

Tiny paths, worn by years of animal footprints, threaded in and out of the bushes in a never-ending maze.

A giant sycamore lay stranded at the side of an enormous holly bush, which opened up inside to reveal a dark green cave, so dense, that the sun's rays could barely pierce through.

This place was special. It belonged only to Cassie and to share it with another human being, would be to break its spell.

It was her secret ..... shared only with the creatures who had made it their home.

# # #

And now, as she lounged back against the tree, on this hot summer's day, sipping her lemonade, and absent-mindedly stroking the warm silky head and ear, her thoughts drifted back to that summer of her seventh birthday and the strange events which had taken place.

Some three years had lapsed but the events were as vivid now, as if they had happened yesterday.....