

(Ftf 23-24 Feb 2024)

The Lazarus Curse

ACT 1, Scene 1 - Fire and Fury; 2nd August 1582 and on

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY:

- Jules du Plessis.
- Captain Richard Blake, and his crew of the fast sloop Kestrel.
- Kerr Avon, noted man of physic and philosophy.
- Rodrigo Delgado - Walsingham's Intelligencer.
- The townsfolk of Bristol.

Aboard the Kestrel all is well as the Spanish coast shrinks behind. The best of plundered Spanish wine is supped, congratulations are given, and wounds are further treated. Stronger spirits still are consumed to assist revery and an air of merriment is evident among the Friends, evident even to the crew.

Until a knock most polite upon the Captain's cabin, barely an hour later

"Weather's up, Cap'n. There's a storm coming."

Blake glanced around the assembled.

"Finally." He said. "Matthews is never wrong, but sometime it takes a while. Excuse me." Blake departed for the deck to ensure all would be well in rough weather.

Before long the change on behaviour of the ship was obvious to all, and in anticipation they headed for the deck. It was then that the true nature of the storm became revealed.

About the masthead the dancing glow of witch fire sparkled and cracked with a blue - green radiance. The skies were dark and the wind erratic, undecided, sudden and gusting. Kerr Avon was the first to voice concern.

Is that ... normal?" He asked of Blake as the watch fire crawled and skittered about the masthead, almost as if alive.

"Well, I've been at sea most of my life, Kerr, and normal is a broad church. I've never seen it so broad, nor so colourful, though." Blake reassured, then ordered the crew to do nautical things no-one else understood.

It was then Kerr Avon's keen eyes that first saw the oncoming storm front as the seas settled for a moment. Lightening flickering and yet other strange lights within, and the ... hot wind of malevolent presence as it swept about them from the south east from behind their departure.

"Captain! This is no normal storm! This is...". Avon's voice was blotted out as the wind tore about them and the rain lashed for a moment, before the deafening crack and crash announced the mast struck by the playing lightning. In but a moment as vision cleared it was evident some evil force had Brought fire to the Kestrel. Fire with a will of its won, dancing and darting across the deck as

an animal hopped and scampered. Single flames seeking all that was combustible to expand and engulf!

“BUCKETS!!” Roared Blake. “ALL HANDS! BUCKETS and SEA WATER! DOUSE THE FLAMES!”

With a ship of wood, sail, rope and caulk, let alone the barrels of prime powder below, the crew were quick to find the tarred canvas buckets and ropes to fill over the side, and all aboard ran after the fires.

“Sprites!” Avon muttered “They’re Sprites! Created within a storm of rage and hatred. But what Angelic Host would act in such?”.

Another strike upon the mast, and another, causing little damage but spawning more of the lifelike flames, and in the last strike something larger, almost man-like stalked the deck for moments, its very feet charring the wet wood in clouds of steam, driving rain saving the ship from instant incineration.

It was by good fortune then, and Blakes efficient, well-trained crew that of spirited flame by then there were few, many doused with an accurate bucket of sea water flung upon a smouldering sail, and about a dancing flame attempting to slip through the cracks about a hatch and below, it’s intent upon the powder store within the heart of the Kestrel!

Finally, the greater fire, surrounded by seawater buckets was doused in a soaking from directions all.

Clinging to the bow and soaked in sea water Kerr Avon felt the presence and its malevolence about them fade, circling with the storm as it tore away and the Kestrel ran hard and fast under light sail to the West as the winds swung. With the storm the lightning that fed the fire sprites, until the sea calmed and fell to order of wave and wind.

Avon peered back from the stern, and felt the distant regard, anger and frustration of the Magicks cast by those they evaded, and wondered who had such power. Gui himself? Or Narcisa his sister. Perhaps Romerez Estafen for Avon had already witnessed his control of the White Worm. Avon grimaced. And failure, for he had also witnessed the birth of the Golem in those same White Worm tunnels. Or perhaps some other for Delgado had mentioned other names, and Avon feared they may all be Sorcerous Devils of the Papist church.

Act 1, Scene 2 - Of Women and Worms

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY:

- Captain Richard Blake, and his crew of the fast sloop Kestrel.
- Susie, ‘his’ Tavern wench.
- Kerr Avon, noted man of physic and philosophy.
- The townsfolk of Bristol.
- Eelers, various.

Bristol, Saturday 11th August 1852, and thereafter.

A welcome return to Bristol for the Kestrel under Captain Richard Blake, with all but the odd member of crew missing, and much battering and bruising relieved by sea air, fine Spanish wine, and fine food, for unbeknownst to many Blake's cook is French. And Blake considers him excellent.

It is a pause, then, that the docks of Bristol Quay and town are full of pamphleteers and preachers decrying association with the Devil by those referred to as 'PINO's (Protestants In Name Only), orating, thrusting papers upon the casual passer-by, and making wild accusations in the usually calm streets of Bristol Town.

But none of this bothers, and all are quickly off board and to the Silver Eel, for something land-locked and ale-ey coupled with one of Gilbert's huge roasts, a favourite with all but Jules du Plessis whose refined tastes much prefer the delicate culinary artistry of Blake's French cook.

Blake at least is greeted by Susie, a Tavern Wench from and to whom much favour is both received and given between them. Kerr Avon is greeted by Gilbert, and handed a letter from Cally, his ward, currently residing at Avon's deceased mother's estate north of Bristol.

The evening drifts on but there is a tension from the Tavern girls that is only finally explained when Susie asks Blake to walk with her through the night, but adamantly away from the river. Puzzled, he questions her, and she breaks down, fearful of the river after the disappearances of late. Good women, working women, and none to see them after the last night - Bridgette, Dotty, both Tavern girls, Mary Ellis the seamstress, and Alice Yate, late of the quay and only set to work in the Olde Jugged Hare the last week before she vanished near the river.

Concerned now that only Susie knows of these four women, and there may yet be more they ask about the taverns, and are horrified to learn of others - Old Tom the ship victualer, Daniel Ballin the waterman, and indeed The Barstow Tart, and eel boat from upriver that regularly supplied eels were all missing from their usual dates and rendezvous of late.

After some debate it is later that Blake and Avon walk down from the quay and along the river, seeking sign or spore of the missing women, or whatever, or whomever, may have taken them. It is no surprise that there is a rustling in the reeds, and as Blake approaches to investigate, fearing perhaps someone in distress crawling ashore, a man-sized worm of sickly white lunges at him from the reeds, oozing mouth parts of sickening pincers grabbing at him!

Blake, no fool, is armed, and lets fly both pistols in the worm's direction, causing it to slither back in to the water sorely wounded, and perhaps to die. But the fear they voice between them, is that one so relatively small would surely not have dragged away so many victims from the river, so the ghastly possibility arose that there was more than one. Now Blake and Avon are clear: they have a hunt to undertake, a Worm Hunt!

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In no short time word is raised about Bristol Town, and a Worm ambush planned within scant days. Briefly, the Kestrel will be moored mid-stream, swivel guns loaded with bags of pistol and musket shot. Up stream the remains of recently slaughtered goats and pigs, will be cast into the waters as the tide turns, to attract the Worm, even perhaps a tethered animal cast into the water such that it's struggles would tempt the worm to attack. Upon the bank's are men lined with muskets who can shoot, and within small boats also. The plan is hatched!

Upon the day the weather is fine, and after last moment instruction to all Blake and Avons plan (mostly Captain Blake's, it must be said) is in motion. The bloodied offal is cast into mid stream, boats and men await, the tang of lit match upon the air identifying their readiness.

The minutes pass, and concern sets in that no worm is yet tempted when suddenly - a swirl, a splash - an eel perhaps? But no! A sickly pale form crests the water and a chunk of floating pig is grabbed and the order to fire given! Amongst bangs and smoke drifting upon the wind the water churns, suddenly with not one but two worms! The Kestrel's mighty swivels blaze leaden death into the water about the bloody bits and all await the powder smoke to clear.

There is rejoicing - one worm bloodied floats upon the water, but of the other there is no sign. Sunk perhaps? Or escaped!

Within the town there is rejoicing - the worm menace is destroyed! The terror is over! Victory in Blake's plan that has saved Bristol Town! The Taverns are crowded, and a sense of relief and celebration pervades the town. But in the Silver Eel Blake and Avon sit quietly in a dimly lit corner.

"There were two. And one might have got away." Stated Blake.

"And where there are two, there may be many more." Agreed Avon.

"And I have no evidence that either of them were the one from the river bank - I saw no holes in either from my pistol shots."

"So already then perhaps a third." Avon frowned.

No stranger to white worms of the greater size, such smaller versions are a puzzle, their potential numbers a grave concern, but as Blake and Avon sip upon fine bottles of plundered Spanish wine from Gilbert's overflowing cellar, another thought strikes them.

"Did it look a bit like ...?"

"Now you mention it..."

"We both got a good look at the one in Spain..."

"We did"

"You don't think it's the same as ..."

Kerr Avon shuddered.

"We must acknowledge there may be more, perhaps a lair for worms have tunnels and have to identify the lair - with all the reeds and mud we could search for days, weeks without spotting where they might be hiding." Mused Blake. "Kerr - do your Mystic Arts offer any solution in such a search?"

"Just so, Richard. A divination may assist us - a shame we have no part of the beast to use, but no matter, we can use something else in its stead."

Blake frowned upon hearing this.

“We will not need as many chickens this time I hope? Bristol was without eggs for weeks after your last endeavour.”

Avon chuckled, shaking his head and hurriedly trying to think of something other than chickens in the ritual he envisaged.

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That next night, a hastily acquired map of Bristol Town spread upon the floor, and after some hours of chants and mystical mutterings, powders, unguents, smokes, fires and half a gallon of fresh pig's blood splashed about, Kerr Avon's hastily crafted pendulum swung lazily and repeatedly over a point amongst the marshes to the south of the Town bordering the river. But not solely there, a hesitancy and a faint suggestion to the west edge of the map, as if something was yet there, but much further still away towards the estuary of the Seven itself, or even the Bristol Channel.

The next day it was clear that the muddy banks of the river were shallow and difficult for a vessel such as the Kestrel to draw near. The marsh and banks are not the place for an ocean vessel and an ocean crew as Blake was quick to see. After some thought and on hearing that 'Eeler' Didcot is now talked of as one of the mislaid, Blake and Avon decide to enlist that help of the local Eel men, those that hunt eels in the streams and marsh for food and profit.

With Blake's new found regard and reputation in the Town it is not long before introductions are made and several eelers are under Blake's employ, and a plan is agreed between all to find and drive out, capture and kill the worms from their lair most likely in these muddy banks of the river.

The Kestrel is crewed and ready. Blake takes her out and down the river to the marsh south of the Town. In passing they identify a half submerged boat beached upon the mud. With the tide high Blake eases the Kestrel near, and they read the name 'Barstow Tart' upon the side, the very side with a hole visible the size of a barrel. Blake and Avon exchange worried words: it was one thing for a worm to drag away an unsuspecting woman, another to break a hole in the side of a boat, a hole as big as a barrel!

The eelers are sent in on their flat-bottomed boat to the muddy, reed filled shallows most closely identified by Avon's map at X marking the spot divined to be the worm lair and they soon signal an out sized hole in the bank has been found.

The eelers business is all their own, but Blake and Avon had seen the strong trap-nets, stakes, eel hooks and wire nooses upon long poles, vicious looking forked harpoons, and clubs arrayed about their boat. As Blake commented with some admiration 'Traditional, but effective'. High praise indeed from a man more likely to stuff a swivel gun into any convenient hole and damn the consequences.

An hour passes, and it is signalled that they are setting traps and lures. From the Kestrel Blake and Avon wonder at what assistance they can give, but they are instructed to stand off and leave the men to their work. It is a short time later when the reeds begin to thrash violently and shouts carry distantly across the water that Blake orders the Kestrel in again, and muskets to be loaded.

After a time a signal comes - one worm dead, but one of the eelers has been caught by it, albeit not seriously.

“Should we land a shore party to assist?” Wonders Avon. But Blake shook his head.

“Those Eelers may yet do our work for us, Kerr. But be ready in case the call comes...”

It is then that there is more disturbance in the reeds, shouts and cries, and strange noises neither he nor Avon had heard before reach the Kestrel as it stands in, leaving the crew nervous and muttering prayers. Blake is more concerned with the tide, anxious lest the Kestrel beach upon the mud so close below the keel as it ebbs.

After a time there is silence and stillness until the eel men emerge, two carrying another. They report his terrible death, his leg lacerated to the bone by one of the monster worms, one of three they caught and killed. They return to the reeds for their nets and tools, dragging out the bodies of the worms and shoving them into the ebb of the tide with an air of disgust, green ichor smearing their skin and oozing into the brown water as the worm corpses drift. They are confident there are unlikely to be more in the hole.

With some little trepidation the Kestrel returns to Bristol quay, and make good the future of the dead eeler's family for the future with a generous donation from Blake's personal funds to ensure the wife is kept until such time as she might remarry, or not, and the children are ensured an apprenticeship fee or education as their future holds.

Blake reports to the town council the success of the worm hunt. Over the coming days all eyes are watching for any sign of further worm activity, but there is none. Tentatively Blake and Avon hope they have eliminated the white worm threat to Bristol Town, but the faint, distant hint from Avon's ritual of something else to the west, weighed still upon their minds. Something, perhaps for another day, for the weeks spent in the hunt of worms has delayed their progress to meet Lord Henry Percy.

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 1 - Petworth House.

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY:

- Captain Richard Blake.
- Kerr Avon, noted man of physic and philosophy.
- Sir Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland.

Petworth House in Sussex, Home of Lord Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland - Thursday, 23rd August, and thereafter.

From Bristol the journey west towards London and the Sussex counties for Blake, Avon and Delgado is slow upon horseback, and takes the best part of the week amidst Blake's grumbles that it would have been quicker to sail for the Solent and walk, but arrive at Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland's abode beside Petworth village, a fortified manor house with extensive grounds and wider estate. Here they are most courteously received by Lord Percy, dined and refreshed after a long week upon the road. After an overnight rest Delgado departs for London at the instructions Walsingham, leaving vial entrusted to Lord Percy for assessment. He promises to return, Walsingham allowing, or send word.

The day passes uneventfully after the long journey from Bristol yesterday, and while Avon and Blake await Percy to attend (for his servants say he is busy within his library, and has not been seen since returning from a brisk walk with his dogs at dawn) they relax and recover, and are well fed by Percy's attentive staff, who see most efficiently to all their needs.

It is late afternoon then before Percy finally appears from his Library to discuss with, now, Avon alone, for Blake has slipped out to the village of Petworth itself to a Tavern where he can find a song, ale if there is no palatable wine, and a wench for his knee.

Percy and Avon exchange pleasantries and cautious conversation as to each others' expertise and knowledge. Eventually the conversation turns to the vial, and Percy bids Avon follow him for a walk in the estates of the House. As they emerge into the late afternoon warmth Avon can see a tower of several stories (considerably taller than the House) built upon the estates perhaps some half mile away, a little before the estate turns to woodland. There, Lord Percy explains, he has isolated the vial both away from the ground, as Avon's indication that it may have attracted devilish things in Spain being at or below the ground, and from the air, by way of the tower itself.

They walk together to the tower, and Percy highlights to Avon the precautions he has taken without - his own men upon the single doorway, and another some hundred yards away observing them from a small copse of woodland. With a word to each of the watchers and guards to the tower, Percy unlocks the door with a Great Key. He ushers Avon within, and up the narrow stone stairs that circle the solid core of the tower to the single room at the top. As Percy led the way he mumbled and whispered to himself. To Avon's sensitive ear, while too low to hear clearly either the language or form, it had the rhythm of a ritual chant, or perhaps a prayer

After several apparent circuits of the tower (Avon was unsure, for there were no windows) they reached the top of the steps and entered into a circular room, with cut stone for door and walls, and the beams and roof of the tower above. In the centre of the room a small but robustly made wooden box sat within a circle of ashes and salt. Therein, explained Percy, lay the vial, protected and isolated until he, they, choose to examine it further with an appropriate ritual, perhaps of enquiry, for any sort of summoning might be unnecessarily brave until they had some idea of what they were dealing with. Lord Percy suggested perhaps the next day, after he made further extensive use of his own library. Kerr Avon most assuredly agreed, for Percy's caution mirrored his own!

As the afternoon drew to evening, Percy suggests they retrace their steps back to the House for in a few hours Dinner would be served and there would be much to discuss! They descend the stairs, but with Percy notably reversing his steps, walking backwards, and muttering his prayer or ritual words at every step of the staircase down to the tower door where his strange actions ceased with the locking of the tower door with the iron key. Percy explained it was his intent to reverse his presence as precisely as he could, to leave no trace that whatever was within the vial, or associated with it, could grasp. Kerr Avon was impressed with such thoroughness, albeit less certain of such action's usefulness.

It is evening then when they finally return to the House, and Percy's generous and well stocked kitchens and staff serve them all a fine meal and much telling of tales.

Friday, 24th August

Blake and Avon arrived at the breakfast call to find a tired, disheveled Lord Percy already there. He had not slept, he said, and is keen to discuss his findings from his own library. After they have all heartily broken their fast Lord Percy takes them to his library.

Percy recounts what they already know from Delgado and what he had heard of others, of Azir the man recently dead and his sisters Maria and Marta, the cries of those from the crypt, Azir's reappearance some days after his death, then his death again and corruption of the flesh in moments upon the steps of Santa Iglesia. He suggests that if Father Naloné's account was true, and it seems strange he died suddenly if it was not true, then Catholic Evils are at work through Gui, de Deza and de Bolaños. Why, he wonders, would they seek to call a poor man back from death on a whim, seemingly in the knowledge he would again die. A test, perhaps?

Percy takes them to his library and draws them close to consult a very old, heavy, iron bound bible. Avon notes its latin text, and comments. Percy simply replies that it is very old, and hence a historical work for research purposes, rather than a Catholic obscenity.

Percy reads, translates and paraphrases as he goes, the parable of Lazarus, and his two sisters Mary and Martha; He tells how Jesus told his followers that *'This sickness will not end in death, it is for glory so that God's son may be glorified through it'*, and then *"Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him."* When the apostles misunderstand, he clarifies, *"Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."* All the sources agree that by then Lazarus is dead and has already been in his tomb for three or four days.

When Jesus reaches Bethany Mary is bitter - *"if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* but Jesus replies *"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die"*. Mary turns away but Martha affirms that she does believe and states, *"Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, who has to come into the world."* Thereafter Lazarus returns to life at the moment his grave is opened.

There Percy pauses, before noting that of Mary there is no further mention. However of Martha there is, but in the pages of another gospel, rather less well read, or perhaps, he says, 'suppressed' is a better word. He draws down another volume from a shelf, even more ancient. He opens it carefully and notes that in these, the hidden pages of St. Elba's Gospel, Elba writes that after 30 days Martha condemns Lazarus as not her brother, but another, and flees Bethany to the wilderness, again no further mention of her either. Elba notes that Lazarus flees Bethany 90 days after the resurrection, to eventually reside in Cyprus for some 30 years or more, and is there allegedly buried, but without note of a grave upon the island. Upon Cyprus he is barely mentioned, only noted as the man who never smiled, sombre with the weight of what he saw in the 4 days, allegedly in Hell.

Percy closes the volumes carefully and returns them to their shelf spaces before speaking.

"Are these coincidences Kerr Avon? Or do they seek that which Jesus called upon to return Lazarus? Perhaps they seek to return another to life as happened to Lazarus. But what of his time in Hell? What life did return? Here it seems they seek a way to another Lazarus, using the Blood of the Lazarus Heart, and something besides Lazarus that was returned from Hell..."

He paused and glanced out of the window towards the tower housing the vial some distance away.

"Do they understand that which they have wrought?" He whispered.

(To be continued....)