

The Tale of Albert the Eelman and the White Worms of Rainham Marshes..... Continued

The Conclusion to a Play in Four Acts written by Mr Ben Jaffa

A Reprise of Protagonists:

Mr Valentine Plumswood – Topiarist, Architecture Bore, Gentleman of Philosophy

Mr Edward Culpable – Physician, Surgeon, Apothecary, Pistoleer

Mr Alexander (Sandy) Bell – Vicious, murdering Scotsman, Entrepreneur

Mr Ben Jaffa – Theatrical Artist, Pirate (reformed), Alchemist (aspiring), Blackamoor

Act 2; Scene 3: Clearing up at the Roundhouse

The Company examine the bodies after the scrimmage at the Roundhouse. Most appear to be ordinary Marshfolk, most bear the marks of Mr Bell's broadsword. However, amongst them are two genuine lizard men. According to Ned, these appear to be of a slightly different kind from those encountered under Waltham Abbey. The apparition that gave Bell and Plumswood so much difficulty is revealed to be a Snake-woman, again of slightly different ilk according to Culpable, who knows about such things.

There are a few survivors amongst the Marshfolk who have not fled or have returned for news of missing loved-ones, including the guard knocked over the head by Jaffa. None can believe that the snake-woman is their beloved preacher. All swear that they have known him for years. It is striking that each of them when pressed offers a different description of the fellow. Jaffa forms the view that the snake-woman might well be the proprietress of the Roundhouse herself who has not reappeared after the fight. He well remembers such counterfeiting at Waltham Abbey. They take the heads and pack them in salt so that they have some proof of their tale to show Walsingham.

Act 2; Scene 4: Rest, Recuperation and a Sense of Unease

In the morning, Albert arrives in his punt. He tells them that his lad saw lights last night off in the distance in the part of the marsh whence the White Worms first appeared. He accompanies them back to his stilted dwelling place, where they spend a couple of nights recovering from their exertions in the fight and eating eels. All experience a distinct uneasiness while on watch. It seems to emanate from the satchel containing the box they believe to have belonged to the Jesuit, Lucien Rafael. More lights are seen in the distance, visible when the wind blows and the intervening reeds bend and flatten.

On the first day Albert returns from a trip to the Roundhouse to say that while Jacob has returned, his mother has not. Jaffa's hypothesis still stands. Albert confirms that the "preacher" had been around for about two years, since the old preacher retired.

Act 3; Scene 1: Deep in the Marshes

Plainly they need to investigate the pool where the lights have been seen before they return to London and report to Walsingham. Albert leads them in his punt through the marshes, they following upon their skiff, swivel gun in the bow, charged with a bag of musket balls. As they approach, Albert pulls over to indicate the channel they should take. He says he will go no further. Glancing at the armour worn by Ben and Sandy and the pistols and fowling pieces they all carry, he says that this is no business for an eelman with but a gutting knife. He bids them good fortune and poles back the way they have come.

They continue in the skiff, Bert the boatman at the tiller. As they progress they observe a distinct change in the atmosphere. The autumnal notes of an English September are replaced by a warmth and humidity familiar only to Ben, while Ned starts to notice strange flora and fauna that surely do not belong in Essex.

Act 3; Scene 2: The Ziggurat

The truncated ruin of some sort of tower or ziggurat hoves into view, rising above the surrounding marsh. They back water to hide amongst the reed beds and observe. The unmistakable silhouettes of lizard men may be seen upon it – clearly a picket of some sort. They moor the boat, leaving Bert in charge with the loaded swivel gun. Led by Sandy, he Ned and Ben creep forward. Plumyswode they leave upon the bank for he is as welcome upon a quiet infiltration as a loud fart at a soiree.

Reaching the foot of the steps of the edifice, Ben and Sandy charge up them to engage the lizard men at the top. They are outnumbered at least two to one but they have surprise and blade-skill in their favour. Despite prior agreement that this should be blades only to avoid alerting other lizard men, Ned chooses to support them with his fowling piece. In a matter of seconds and long before Plymswood has joined them all the lizardmen lie dead.

Act 3; Scene 3: The Lizardman Encampment

From the Ziggurat they can see the ruin of another building, smoke rising from it. It is perhaps far enough away that any there might not have heard the pop of Ned's fowling piece. They wait awhile to see if its inhabitants come to investigate. None do. Once more Sandy, Ned and Ben creep forward, Ben in the lead this time, with Plemmyswode in position to run in and join them once the need for stealth is past. They find an encampment that might belong to any group of soldiers – though sloppy ones for there are no pickets.

Once more surprise is on their side. This time they open with a volley of ordnance. Once more the lizardmen are chaff before the blades and shot of Walsingham's Men. In a very short time indeed, those that have not already succumbed are fleeing.

A Comedic Interlude: Of Pursuit, Counter-Pursuit and Cannonade

- The Company pursues the fugitive lizardmen. Another force of perhaps a score of lizardmen led a snakewoman is bounding towards them. The Company stops, turns tail and flees back to the boat.
- The reptiles pursue. They are gaining. They form two natural files, one chasing Bell and Plomyeswode, the other Culpable and Jaffa. The latter reach the spot where the boat is moored, lizard folk hard upon their heels. Ned dives left; Ben dives right.
- In the bow sits Bert, glowing match in hand, sighting down the barrel of the swivel gun, double-shotted with musket balls. There is a **Boom!**
- The smoke clears. The bloody corpses of the lizardmen are strewn all about as the file pursuing Ned and Ben disintegrates. The other file flee, followed by a limping serpent-woman.
- Ned and Ben give chase. Sandy and Valentine, mop up then follow. Ben and Ned catch up with and slay the wounded serpent-woman.
- The remaining lizard men head for a shallow pool. At its centre is a small pavilion. The lizardmen enter it and disappear from sight.

Act 4; Scene 1: Beneath the Pavilion (or Monopteros)

The others are apprised of the situation. "Of course," says Plumswood, "*Pavilion* is rather a loose term. I think *Rotunda* a better one, although perhaps *Monopteros*, which is absolutely not to be confused with *Tholos*, is even more apt....," but his audience is already wading through the pond to reach the central edifice which proves to house steps spiralling downwards. Sibilant whispers waft up from the depths.

Ben reaches into his pouch for a Spanish grenado. He lights the fuse and tosses it down the stairs. They hear it clanging off walls and steps as Jaffa turns away, fingers in ears and mouth open, bidding the others do the same. Oddly, Culpable and Bell already have their fingers in their ears. There is a muffled bang and the Company descend into the sulphurous smoke below.

Ben notes with some satisfaction that the bottom steps are choked with dead and dying lizardmen, but there are still more. Ned notes that some of these are of a different species to the others they have met. Some are armed with javelins. One has a firelock, he notes, somewhat belatedly, as a bullet strikes him in the shoulder. These lizards are faster, more skilled with weapons, more resilient. Nevertheless they are dispatched as the Company proceeds through the underground complex.

Act 4; Scene 2: White Men Can Dance!

Jaffa and Culpable in the lead, they emerge into a strangely familiar space. It is of exactly the same shape and dimensions as the "birthing room" under Waltham Abbey. Culpable swallows hard as unwanted memories surface. They enter at the top of a curving open stairway leading down to an "arena". In the centre of the arena is what looks like some sort of armillary sphere around which dance nine chanting snake women.

It is clearly a summoning that needs must be disrupted. Ned charges onwards down the steps. Ben pauses and reaches into his pouch for his second and last grenado. His throw is accurate and the fuse just so. It explodes within the ambit of the sphere, destroying it completely and strewing the dancers all around, dead or injured. Yet as the smoke clears half a dozen of the dancers, some badly injured, have nevertheless scrambled to their feet to commence their dance once more. There is an air of desperation to it.

Sandy arrives and he Ben shoot another two snakewomen, only to hear a wail from behind them. "Noooooo!" cries Plemmyswod, who up until this time had been keeping up a relentless monologue upon the architectural features as they ran through. "They are not summoning; they seek to keep something out." This observation is accompanied by a further wail as he counts the remaining dancers. "Oh no!" he cries, "Just four! What an inauspicious number!" Ben and Sandy, enquire whether three would be better than four, but Ned takes him at his word and instead of engaging the lizard men who are also in the chamber, he throws down his weapons and joins the dance.

Even Ben thinks he makes a pretty good fist of it – for a white man. However, he and Sandy have no leisure to admire his performance, hotly engaged as they are by several of the new sleeker type of lizardmen. As they cut them down a new threat arrives. A freezing miasma – much like an alchemical effect Ben might produce for a theatrical show – begins to creep down the stairway opposite and pool around the feet of the dancers.

Ben leaps upon the balustrade and runs up it, as if it were a yard arm, his feet above the icy fog. At the top he peers through the doorway. He sees beyond an identical room, a mirror to the one they are in. The mist seems to be belching out of another doorway on

the far side of the arena. In its folds Ben can see a huge, serpentine head. He runs back down the balustrade in time to see Ned, his feet now like blocks of ice, in the fog, at last stumble and collapse, just as the ritual comes to its climax. It is Ben's turn to join the dance. Ned has done a sterling job considering his stunted cultural heritage and his stiff English hips. Ben is a professional performer, he has natural rhythm and has danced like this since he was a child. Indeed, there is something about the dance that reminds him of similar rituals held in his village to prevent evil spirits entering the world.

The dance reaches its climax. The serpent women collapse in exhaustion. One staggers over to Ben and grips him by the cuirass. "It is not enough," she rasps in quite passable English, before falling at his feet. They all turn to Plumeswode.

Act 4; Scene 3: The Guardian

The freezing mist has evaporated. Following Plumswood, they bound up the stair and into the next chamber. There they dispose themselves along the balustrade of the mirroring stairway as a huge serpent head, followed by a humanoid torso, followed by more snake, issues from the doorway opposite. It has in its hands a curious weapon that resembles nothing so much as a quarterstaff made of iron that makes a curious ringing as it swings. It slithers from the opposite doorway, down the wall and across the arena to engage them. They place some telling shots upon it but still it advances, incredibly it seems able to parry bullets with its iron bar.

It slides up the wall that they stand upon and looms over the balustrade to menace Sandy and Ben who have at it with broadsword and boarding axe. Ned and Valentine persist with ordnance. It sweeps with its staff and both Ben and Sandy have reason to be grateful for their armour as both are wounded and spun away by what thankfully is but a glancing blow. Ned intervenes with a shot from his pistol in which he has invested his own blood. This makes it hiss. Sandy and Ben pick themselves up and have at it again. At last it goes down under a welter of blows and subsides to the floor of the arena, already starting to decompose.

"That's not it!" cries Plummyswoode. "That's just its Guardian. On, on!" Then "Oh no! It has Ned." They look at Ned in horror. Ned has an expression of intense concentration upon his visage. Through gritted teeth, he says, "Yes, but I still hold it at bay."

"Come, there's not a moment to lose," cries Plumeswood, and they follow across the chamber, where Ben stops briefly to snatch up the iron bar, up the stairs and through the doorway into another large chamber

Act 4; Scene 4: The Lady and the Chaos Squid

On the far side of this chamber a young woman is pinned to some sort of makeshift altar. She is naked and her veins have been carefully opened to drip blood into a variety of receptacles wrought of silver. Beyond her are a pair of mighty pillars. They are close together, but not so close that a number of huge tentacles cannot protrude from between them. It is plain that they are engaged in pulling the pillars apart to facilitate the passage of the rest of the horror to which they belong.

Ben and Sandy, do what any gentleman must do for a damsel in such distress and charge forward to release her. Bending to loose her bonds, Jaffa immediately recognises the young lady. It is Prudence Warner, the lady with whom he flirted, in the inn where they stopped en route to Waltham Abbey. While Jaffa works upon her bonds, Bell stands over them fending off the questing tentacles that now pause in straining at the pillars in order to

grope at the tender morsels it senses ahead. As Ben pulls the lady free, Sandy's broadsword goes flying off into the darkness but their work is done and Prudence is carried to safety.

Meanwhile, Plemmyswode is chanting. Ben and Sandy's attention is still held by the naked lady, but they turn around at a distinct thumping sound behind them to see Ned lying unconscious upon the floor. Plimswode stands above him, horse pistol reversed in his hand. He is still chanting. As his chanting comes to a climax he raises his hands speaks a few more words in a language they do not understand, and with a terrible grating sound the two pillars come together. As they do so the questing tentacles slither back through into the darkness beyond and are gone. Plemiswode falls insensible in a heap.

The ground beneath them begins to shake. Ben and Sandy look at one another and count the number of bodies they need to carry. Sighing, they decide it must be comrades first. They drag Ned and Valentine to the next chamber as the tremors grow. Then Ben rushes back. He returns with Prudence wrapped in his cloak and slung over his shoulder. He is carrying the iron bar, which he uses for support. Fortunately, his other companions are starting to come round, one babbling incoherently, the other complaining that he has a lump the size of a duck egg on his pate.

They make their way back through the underground complex as it crumbles around their ears. Sandy takes over carrying Prudence as Ben picks up a handful of javelins – the weapons of his youth. They exit as they arrived, through the pavilion in the pond, but as they look back, it collapses in upon itself. The other ruined buildings are sinking below the marsh. By the time they reach Bert and the boat there is no sign of them and, to Ben's slight regret, the warm and humid ambience is replaced by the freshness and nip of the English autumn.

They climb aboard and start to pole their way back to Albert's. Bert takes the addition of a scantily clad young lady to their party in his stride. As they approach Albert's place, he comes out on the walkway to greet them. "So you're back. Thought something must have happened to you. Where you been these last ten days?"

Ten days? The companions look at each other. It's definitely time they returned to London.