

The Witches of Waltham Abbey

Hurried Notes from the pen of Mr Ben Jaffa

My companions and I are resting up and licking our wounds after a most troubling night spent in the crypt under the bell-tower of the ruins of Waltham Abbey. Of course there were witches and devil worshippers there – such characters seem positively endemic in my adopted country. Of course we were forced to engage them in combat and though we were victorious, some of our enemies escape and the whole matter is still shrouded in mystery. Of course.



The Mission

Walsingham is troubled by “strange goings on” at Waltham Abbey, we are told. It seems that we are now the go-to men for “strange goings on” in Walsingham’s mind. Our minder, Blyth, furnishes us with a letter for Edward Dennty, Walsingham’s factor who is supposed to have charge of the Abbey, a Royal Possession since the Dissolution. Our instructions thereafter are a bit vague, but I expect that once we deliver the missive, further instructions will be forthcoming.

As I am getting my gear together, Burbage comes bustling into my rooms. He has exciting news – and to be fair it is quite exciting – regarding an opportunity for a new company. He has a meeting lined up with the Lord Chamberlain and wants me to come along. I have to disappoint him. When he presses me I suggests he take it up with Walsingham. This shuts him up – as I knew it would. I say that I’ll do my utmost to get back as soon as possible and he leaves me to it.

Of course, Bell wanted to ride there, but I could never abide the smelly, sweaty creature (the horse that is, not Bell, although.....). Hard words were spoken – but luckily they were in some Scotch brogue that none of the rest of us could understand. I was not alone in my aversion to riding so we obtained a wagon. I look forward to the day when we have to take a ship somewhere. We’ll see who the “hapless gowk” is then.

A Restless Night

It turns out to be quite a trudge to Waltham Abbey and we’re on expenses so we stay at an inn some miles short of our destination. There we encounter a group of merchants coming from the other direction. When quizzed, the main piece of information gleaned was that there had recently been an unpleasant murder of a matron, who had the reputation of being a wise woman, done to death in her own house, and talk of house fires.

That night Bell hears a scream that seems to come from a nearby wooded hill. Leaving the Men of Letters to their beauty sleep, Bell, Culpable and myself make our way up the hill in the dark. At the summit are three ancient trees. From one of them we could discern a woman, hanging by the neck with two cloaked onlookers standing below. As we approach, it appears that we are mistaken for there is nothing there to be seen. Yet as we cast around we see it again. This time the apparition – for apparition it surely was – appears on a different tree. It fades once more but reappears on the third tree.

There is a rocky knoll at the apex of the hill – perhapos the remains of an ancient structure. With the skill of a man accustomed to looting the buried treasures of others, Bell finds a nook in the rocks where lies a gold ring. We pocket this. Then in the moonlight we

catch a glimpse of some sort of beast, that walked upright like a man. It disappears almost as quickly but looking around we found the spoor of some kind of large beast that may have walked upon two legs. This at least is not an apparition.

Augustus Dacre

Arriving in Waltham the following day we repair straightway to the Vicarage where we have been told that Dennty resides. Dennty is not in. We are received by a fellow who introduces himself as Augustus Dacre. He is a friend of Dennty's and looks after the house when Dennty is away. Dennty is currently in Cambridge.

Dacre is an awfully nice chap – so we suspect him right away. However, although most of us have the skills to spot when we feel someone is lying to us, we can find no hint of dissembling in his open, honest and earnest manner. He warns us not to go poking around in the Abbey because it is in a dangerously ruinous state.

Waltham Abbey by Day

So as soon as may be we go poking around in the Abbey. It is indeed ruinous and has clearly been extensively scavenged for its stone. However, we notice that the altar end of the nave seems devoid of the piles of rubble to be found elsewhere and that the old stone altar seems likewise clear of spoil. Our suspicious minds are drawn immediately to witches and midnight assignations. We also note that there are steps that go down under the belfry that seem remarkable clear of clutter. We resolve to return by night.

Waltham Abbey by Night

There is a waxing gibbous moon, but a few days from full, high and bright in the sky, sufficient for an approach without lanterns. We are accoutred more for stealth than mayhem, but nevertheless well armed with sword and pistol. We are unsurprised to see lights inside the nave as we draw near. Bell leads us in a clandestine approach – he's obviously done this sort of thing before. It becomes plain that the bearers of the lights are too intent upon their own business to notice their approaching doom.

We see before us what we had rather expected to see. A coven of witches: chanting and dancing naked before the altar of a deconsecrated abbatial church, what else could they be? As they cavort and sing we can see growing above the altar a swirling mass of ectoplasm. It begins to coalesce into – who knows what? For at that moment, we all decide that it is best it not be ushered into this world and launch our attacks. There were many of them – thirteen, of course – but they are unprepared, unclothed and mostly unskilled in arms.

A few managed to flee our initial assault. Bell gives chase to a couple who make off together, I pursue another and catch her. She fights and spits and utters curses at us when we attempt to interrogate her. Bell returns, looking a little pale and glassy eyed. He has no patience with the harriidan and runs her through. Ned looks unhappy at this. I confess that while it does not exactly sit well with me, it may in the end be a kindness. It is also pragmatic given what Bell has to report.

It seems that when he caught up with one of the fugitives, she suddenly transformed into a demonic creature with the head of a snake who proved extremely difficult to overcome. He did so, but the experience had palinly shaken him. While they fought, her companion ran on towards the belfry and disappeared down the stairs.

The Crypts Beneath the Belfry

After Bell's recent experience with the snake woman he expresses a strong desire to go and fetch his armour. I am keen to do likewise and so we return to our lodgings briefly to don the accoutrements of war. We return to the steps leading down from the belfry, having picked up a few of the lanterns left by the witchy ladies.

We soon find ourselves in a maze of crude interlinked passages and caverns. There we encounter large numbers of what we thought of as lizardmen. These were man-sized figures of a distinct saurian appearance who did not stop to discuss the time of day but assailed us with crude but potentially deadly weaponry. They were not our match in skill or quality of arms but there were many of them and they knew the ground better than we.

I recall in particular entering a cavern and finding myself surrounded by four. It was fortunate indeed that I brought to mind the lessons of old Bartram Bartleby, my weapons master aboard the *Minion*, who taught me the Old School manoeuvre known as the Whirling Blade, that allowed me to put down all four before they could strike at me. Meanwhile, Ned was doing sterling work in shooting and swiftly reloading his belt of pistols, while Bell demonstrated his customary brand of northern violence supported by Blythman and Plymeswoode.

Eventually we find ourselves in a much larger cavern in which there are many more lizardmen, along with several snake-headed witches and a cloaked and cowed figure. In the centre of the cave is a pool, and in the middle of that a cage in which there is a captive.

Bell, who by now appeared to be lost in some kind of desperate fighting frenzy, charges down the left side of the pool. I advance down the right with Plumswood in support. Ned maintains a rain of accurate pistol shots. Blythman, for reasons best known to him, wades into the midst of the pool is unceremoniously dispatched by the enemy, who seem more at home in he water than he.

Despite this slight setback it becomes plain that we are in the ascendancy. The lizard men began to waver and flee. Two of the snake-headed women extract the captive from the cage and begin to lead him away. However, Bell and I are converging upon them from opposite directions. We slay the two leading the prisoner, but the cowed figure and one of the snake-headed women escape our vengeful blades along with perhaps a handful of lizardmen.

The field was ours. Ned and I drag Blythman from the water. He is alive - if barely. Bell is sitting on a rock, pale and shaking, staring off into the middle distance with blank eyes. The rescued prisoner proves to be Augustus Dacre.