

Of Witches (Part I)

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

- **Ned Culpable** - Leach master.
- **'Sandy Bell'** - Berserker.
- **Thomas Blitheman** - 'Do or die'.
- **Valentine Plymmyswoode** - Scholar.
- **Ben Jaffa** - Of The Theatre.
- **A Trio of Emissaries** - From distant lands.
- **Blyth** - Walsingham's man.
- **Prudence Warner** - A Lady travelling.
- **Augustus Dacre** - A most charming man.
- **A Coven** - Of disreputable women, some Thirteen.
- **Assorted Reptiles** - Scaled, and most cold blooded.

Act 1 - A Debt Repaid

arly, and three upon horseback drew up outside the Bell Tavern. Dusty from long travel and a distant home but with the cut of professional an little expense spared. Casual observation would suggest their horses were well cared for and rather eye catching, for their fine form and lineage. Of both traveller and horse it was clear they were not from these parts.

The lead hollered at the windows of the Bell until a wench appeared. In broken English heavy with accent he asked after the Blackamoor. She expressed surprise but admitted he stayed there and in the theatre opposite. Eventually through the means of further shouting someone had the sense to find Ben Jaffa, for who else could it be) He was roused and stumbled out to the early light. Not his usual rising hour after a later performance

The leader of the trio established that Ben was who they wanted to talk with, and then asked after others, quickly recognised from description as those most regularly involved about the Theatre and London, Messrs Culpable, Bell, Blitheman and Plymmyswoode. Ben agreed that they were not there but could be, say, that afternoon. He asked why they should come, to be told the three had been tasked to bring them a 'gift' as payment for a debt, that of the life of the Persian Emissary they had rescued from kidnap and fate worse many months before.

After some haggling Ben agreed with the three that they would return to supply their 'gift' when all were present. Their leader finally introduced himself simply as Methasa.

Despite the early hour there was always an urchin Theatre side ready to earn a penny by running errands and carrying messages, so Ben sent messages via urchin to all.

Later that day at The Bell as the sun drifted downward in the sky the three horsemen returned down the North road. Methasa, their leader, identified each man there to meet them as one of those they had been tasked with finding.

Methasa explained they had come far from the east in the last month or more to carry a gift of gratitude from a man for his life - The Emissary. The gift was revealed (despite some nervousness from all, for the notion of a 'gift' had taken them aback somewhat) as 5 gold torcs, each inscribed with something on the inner surface. Methasa was disinclined to translate but was eventually persuaded to do so, for the inscriptions were of no form known to any of those receiving, much to their surprise:

I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak
From the evil of what He created
And from the evil of Darkness when it settles
And from the evil of the Blowers in Knots
And from the evil of the Envier when He arrives

To this there was some puzzlement from all for they found its meaning obscure, and Methasa could only, or would only translate. But they were grateful, and all drank and broke bread together before the three riders remounted and turned back upon the north road.

After their departure there was more puzzlement: why did they not they go west, perhaps toward Bristol, or south into London to gain passage there, but it was dismissed. Some speculated about what the torcs were for, other than gold, and if the inscriptions were part of some magical or powerful thing, but none could gain any feel of Magicks from any of the five.

Act 2, Scene 1 - Concerned of Waltham

None so common as an urchin, but a man delivered a note from Bythe, requesting and requiring their attendance that very afternoon. Upon arrival all are shown through halls and stairwells and into Blythe's room, his work room of sorts. For Blythe, he was unusually agitated and perhaps upset, something clearly bothered him more than the other occasions of their meeting.

Blythe nervously stated that he had need of good men to investigate Waltham Abbey, for there were rising concerns around witchcraft there, and everywhere, and the Witchfinder General was busy in the North burning villages of the Northern Lords. He further hinted that Walsingham might be unaware of these concerns and that the matter was must urgent and to be cleared up before Walsingham became aware. Of course this roused suspicion amongst all assembled that Blythe was involved in some way, yet none dared ask!

To ease their passage and investigations Blythe supplied a letter of introduction to Edward Denny, the man charged with looking after the estate and ruins (for it was the last abbey to be closed by Henry VIII), and a letter personally from Blythe to Denny that was already sealed. With details supplied, and some small recompense for such short notice and unavoidable expense, Blythe encouraged that the matter should be addressed most promptly, and stressed a departure towards Waltham as soon as possible. Perhaps the same evening. Or better, yesterday. Eventually it was agreed that the next morning would have to be for Arrangements had to be made.

Upon departure from Blythe's offices travel was discussed. Horses would be needed, and riding expertise beyond the occasional mule was regrettably uncommon amongst the gathered. Eventually, over the grumbling noises of Sandy Bell, a wagon was agreed to be rented for the journey so that those unable to ride could be even more uncomfortable on the lumpen tracks strewn with rocks and pits as the wagon would bang and rattle across them. All departed to respective lodging to gather what they might need for the next morning.

While Ben Jaffa sorted his pile of equipment from his chest at the back of the Theatre's curtain Burbage bustled up. Word from Master Tilney had reached him that the formation of the Queen's Men was proceeding apace. Indeed, there was to be an informal meeting between Burbage and Tilney (and others) that related to just such in a day's time, and Burbage thought it would be excellent to show support for the back stage mastery for which The Theatre has become so renowned, which meant Jaffa must be ready to accompany him, and with ... and here he sniffed noisily ... a significant improvement in his presentability to such important people. Before Ben could protest Burbage thrust a parchment into his hands with the details of Burbage's tailor.

Ben interrupted the eloquent flow of enthusiasm from Burbage to outline the impossible, for he was to be sent elsewhere at the request of Blythe. Burbage doth protest, and loudly, but the mere mention of Walsingham's name abruptly broke his flow of outrage, most suddenly and oddly Ben had never know Burbage to be silenced by so little as a name, not even Master Tilney's or The Queen's. But for mention of Walsingham...

Act 2 Scene 2 - The Road

The roads were treacherous and rough, any rain fast turned them into sticky mires that then dried into deep treacherous ruts, trenches and ridges, making travel by wagon painfully difficult in the late summer sun. The wagon lurched, slid, rolled and tossed, moving slowly lest a wheel come down hard and break. Indeed so slowly that the passengers speculated on whether it be quicker, and more comfortable, to walk. However, none dared to do so under the dour, silent gaze of Sandy Bell from atop his horse where he sat mostly stationary for most of the time while he awaited for the cart to catch up.

As early evening drew in it was deemed a stop was preferred, and the next Inn was selected by default - The Queen and Geese at Pelham. A decent meal and some fine tavern brewed ale, and the acquaintance was made of a group of merchants headed into London. A beer and casual conversation of the road North suggested Waltham Abbey had its own troubles: a matronly murder; a cottage fire unexplained that neatly dealt with the body, but not perhaps the soul. Whether the woman of wisdom was dead before or only after the fire was speculated upon.

Another traveller to London also attracted their attention, Prudence Warner and her maid, escorted by two quiet but efficient looking men being as discrete as such can. When it became clear that Mistress Warner was quite taken by the Blackamoor and was happy to talk with him they stepped away to a discrete distance.

Mistress Warner was a little vague as to her origins to the North, but was clear she was heading for London and she and Ben got on *very* well. Upon discovering his work in The Theatre she confessed guilty pleasure in seeing the various troupes of performers in Tavern yards about the country, wherever her business took her. She and Ben parted upon good terms, such that he invited her to The Theatre should her business in London and his out of London conclude at mutual convenience. She made a charmingly enthusiastic commitment to attend if she could.

Act 2 Scene 3 - Later, That Same Evening.

In the hours nearing midnight it was a restless Sandy Bell who was awoken by something, although he was not sure what. It took moments to process what dragged him out of slumber, old habits kicking in. The dream he had was fading fast, but the interruption of a shout or scream was not. He listened hard to the silence of the building. No creaks from the corridor and

the chair still held the door closed, while the open shutter let in fresh air. Then from the shutter to outside a briefly raised voice before a door slammed nearby. With that sense that something was not right Bell slipped off his mattress and shook Ben Jaffa awake to give a whispered explanation. It was a moment to awake Ned Culpable too.

After a quick decent from their window to the tavern yard below it took but moments to identify the only light being from the cottage next door to the tavern. Through an open shutter the conversation could be heard in part. A poacher perhaps, out so late, exclaimed about something upon the hill away from the tavern by half a mile. It was unclear whether he'd seen such before, or just heard about it. Whatever it was it was enough to make a man experienced in the odd sights and sounds of the night, regularly about his illicit business to back away hurriedly and call it a night. What he described sounded like a vision, or perhaps a disturbing presence upon the hill, that left a chill in his heart, and a mind to stay in places well lit until dawn.

Bell, Jaffa and Culpable set out for the hill, having taken pause to return to their room and equip lightly with stout armour and a couple of shuttered lanterns. The dew had not yet fallen, and the clouds occasionally slipped across the moon so the land was lit in a silvery sheen for much of their walk.

Atop the hill were three twisted trees old and likely dead, and in the midst of them a circle of rocks raised upon the rocks from the land that thrust up low through the thin cover of soil.

At one tree a light could be dimly discerned where two men stood below a woman hung by the neck from a high branch. Her body swayed slightly the same light breeze that drove the clouds far above. With great caution they approached, careful to make no sound, but the two at the tree appeared oblivious. The rustle of breeze about the bushes carried away their faint words. Sandy Bell caught a few as the wind paused momentarily "*...she's done now...*", and "*...that'll be the end of 'em...*", although who was speaking to whom he was unable to discern.

Then as the moonlight was dimmed for a moment by a passing cloud, the scene was gone when the moon light returned. No men, no woman. But from the tree behind them a rustle of distant conversation, and when they turned the same tableau presented.

Once again, but with yet more caution, Bell, Jaffa and Culpable approached. While a little closer this time Bell snuck it ended with the same result half overheard words, and the vanishment as the moonlight dimmed. Then, to everyone's concern but not surprise, a third time presented at the third tree. However, on this occasion Jaffa and Bell approached the men, and called softly to them to try and gain a response or longer moment. Meanwhile, Ned shinned up the second tree, there to find an old, rotted, knotted rope swinging from a high branch in the breeze. Truly then, he concluded, a hanging tree.

For the third time the tableaux vanished as the clouds skimmed by the moon, and there was no repeat. Upon all three trees Ned's examination revealed old rope. Ned took from one and slipped what was left of the rotting fibres into his belt for later examination.

Further study of the hilltop revealed dark pools behind each tree, perhaps fed by natural springs but only gently for they appeared almost stagnant. In the centre of the three trees the rock of the land peeked through the earth and was surrounded a few of stones. Two low carved stone steps rose a few inches to the ring, and an old, chest high standing stone opposite the steps overlooked this small stony patch set apart from the earth.

The stones were examined as best they could be by lantern light. It was Bell's keen eye that caught the glint of metal in a crack between the standing stone and other rock, a glint perhaps too feeble to be noticed in daylight was revealed by lantern light and luck. After some prizing and digging to loosen the stone a ring was discovered and fished out. Even in the lantern light it was clearly delicate, perhaps that of a woman's betrothal.

It was at that moment that the moon light dimmed behind a cloud once again. As it returned a moment later, a ghastly apparition stood at the bottom of the low step to the stones. A man beast upon two legs and fully 8 feet tall, horned, thorny club raised and taloned hand reached towards those standing within the stones. Yet as the moonlight faded and brightened again, it was gone. Surprise, even shock paused all hearts for moment at this ghastly sight, both appearance and thankful vanishing. On examination of the soft ground before the step there was consternation to discover two deep hoof marks evident, but with no trail leading to or from.

With nothing further to see or do they returned to the tavern and their beds, but with the shutter firmly closed for the night.

Act 2 Scene 3 - Waltham and Abbey.

The next day they arrived at what was left of the Abbey, and the village of Waltham nearby. Two cottages sat close to the decaying and ruined Abbey remains, both cottages still clearly whole and used. They likely had been associated with the Church that fronted the Abbey behind it in decades past. One of these cottages was the residence of Edward Denny, warden of the estate that was the remains of the Abbey and its environs, and whom they had been instructed to approach.

They chose the larger of the two cottages as the first door to be knocked. A smiling man opened the door. He was clearly a man of the outdoors from his tanned and frankly weatherbeaten face, and was tall and wiry beneath modest garments. While he was most happy to try and help, he admitted to not being Edward Denny, but one Augustus Dacre. He explained that he often assisted Denny albeit in no official capacity.

Dacre explained that Denny was away, up in Cambridge for the week at least, but he was more than happy to assist them if he could in Denny's absence. Dacre was friendly, quite charming, and of instant suspicion to everyone despite no sign that there was anything odd or nefarious about him. After they ascertained that Denny was unlikely to return from Cambridge for several days, they departed to explore the ruins of the Abbey. Dacre, ever helpful, warned them to take the utmost care, for the decrepit state of the ruins made them treacherous to the unwary.

It was a pleasant hour they spent and wandered about the decaying church and Abbey ruined behind. There was some concern amongst everyone that while much of the ruin has been at least part plundered of stone for other buildings in the last few decades, some areas did appear notably clear of rubble, perhaps before what might have been a larger area and steps rising to an alter platform. And within the decaying church, blackened marks upon the empty floor before the alter suggested a fire there once at least in recent weeks or months. Finally, beneath what had perhaps once been a bell tower a set of steps leading down below the ruin of the tower were sighted. Unlike other areas, these were clear of undergrowth. After much discussion in the afternoon sunlight it was deemed cautious to return later in the evening after resting from the journey, and with a full set of arms and armour to discover what lay below.

Act 2 Scene 4 - Later That Same Evening

With hooded lanterns beneath a scudding sky of intermittent cloud and a moon waxing the ruins of the Abbey were once again explored but armed and ready for anything, most concernedly witchery, but for a stealthy approach rather than an armoured charge.

It was a surprise then when a flicker of poorly concealed light escaped the standing remains of the church nave fronting the abbey ruins behind. Sandy Bell slipped to the fore and bid his companions follow in his footsteps as best they could, he being likely the most silent in his passing through rough country when his mind was set to it.

But all was not well with the plan for stumbles and missteps amongst those behind Sandy prompted watchers at the doorway above to be concerned, albeit not fulsomely alerted. There was overheard conversation indicating someone was to be sent out to scout around at odd noises down the hill. Noises, alas, caused by sticks breaking and rocks turning beneath careless feet of those less stealthy than Sandy Bell.

Our heroes split forces - Bell took the left side of the church, for a slight glow suggested an entrance to the side. Jaffa and Culpable the main entrance, while Master Blitheman hung back amongst the bushes of the slope up, ready to accost any that might flee that way by way of stout cudgel and rapier.

With no little horror in their guts the trio assaulted the church and burst in through their entrances to be confronted with their worst fears and then some. In the centre of the open church devoid of pews a fire burned, it's flames strange and discoloured a sickly green while about it thirteen women danced and chanted, naked or nearly so, shameless bodies smeared with symbols that no God fearing Protestant would conceive of. As they cavorted and danced the smoke for the fire began to coalesce into something firmer, hovering, boiling and settling to an unholy solidity in which something formed!

Before it was too late and the thing within the smoke and flames formed fully our trio let loose with pistol and rapier upon the unsuspecting witches, for what else could they possibly be!? Pistols blazed, women fell and the ritual faltered. They screamed and scattered, and the pursuit began as swords swung and bit deep into fulsome womanly flesh in cohort with the devil! There was chaos, and despite the fulsome assault of blade and shot some of the witches escaped the church through unnoticed exits. Bell and Jaffa pursued while Culpable finished any remaining in the building. The church walls echoed with their screams as Ned's merciful blade thrust again and again as he moved amongst the wounded until none remained alive.

Elsewhere Ben Jaffa managed to catch one he pursued, wounding her. He dragged her back screaming and fighting to the church proper. There, despite attempts to quiet her and question, she continued to scream insult and claw at them, spitting in fury, and assaulted their ears with curses most foul.

Then Sandy Bell returned, but not red faced and panting from exertion and excitement of pursuit, but pale and drawn with a cold sweat upon his clammy brow. Without hesitation and to both Jaffa and Culpable's surprise he ran through the shrieking witch they had bound and questioned. He explained he had pursued two, but caught one while the other fled on. That one turned to fight him as a woman, but when their blades met she was transformed into a coiling serpent woman taller than he, with vicious blades in each hand, and a temper to match. He had overcome her, but it had been no easy fight.

These were not then just mere witches. Others stood amongst them, their forms disguised to the eyes of men. Forms that were awful to behold.

Act 2 Scene 4 - Crypts and Tunnels

There was a pause while those in possession donned armour after a hurried return to lodgings but a moment in the wider scheme. Then, lanterns high, they descended the steps into a crude maze of tunnels and passages long extended through the earth and rock from the original crypt to which the steps had once led. After a number of turns noises off alerted everyone that others were abroad in these passages. But a moment later the first lizard men round a corner before them!

One lizard's surprise is another man's pistol shot, which quickly dispelled the surprise. Abruptly there were lizards everywhere as another group of heavily armed lizard men appeared at the sounds of fighting. Briefly battling on two fronts, all were thankful when the lizards retreated and some forward progress was made in a random direction.

But again and again lizards appeared from a corner, there was sword play and they retreated, just for another group to appear from another direction. Concern grew amongst the Just and God-fearing that the lizards were no simple beasts for their hit and run tactics were deliberate to wear down the spirit and fatigue Good Men.

This was not to downplay the skills of men with pistol and sword - the path was littered with the bodies of lizards too slow to retreat or those caught squarely with ball from a reloaded pistol, and the green ichor that passed for blood in their cold, scaly bodies trailed the passages, leading the party towards their unknown goal.

After a series of encounters too many to number our bloodied heroes burst into a wider cavern with the sound of water and a dim, sickly glow emanating from fungal and crystal growths across the walls. To their dismay they saw that throughout the cavern dozens of lizard men were supported by sinuous snake women that surrounded a cage in the centre of a shallow pool. Without hesitation our heroes charged!

The battle was bitter and not without casualties.

Alas, Sandy Bell finally succumbed to the weight of evil he had seen throughout that day. Howling he charged forward with the light of madness in his eyes, and face twisted into his own inhuman grimace as he attacked anything scaly that moved before him.

Ben Jaffa met a crowd of lizard men and it was heavy work despite the support of Valentine Plymmswoode fending off lizards from his back and matching blows to ensure they were not surrounded. But for every lizard that fell three more pressed in.

Ned Culpable saw a few lizard men not occupied with the frothing Bell or plodding Jaffa, and having made short work of reloading his pistols, lurked a few steps behind and picked his shots in support of any and all as the targets presented, and left a scattering of dead lizards throughout the cavern, their bloodied guts punched through with a well aimed ball.

However, it remained with Thomas Blitheman to seek do or die glory. He alone observed the numbers of lizards and snakes that closed upon his hard-pressed companions, and those that converged upon the cage at the pool's centre to extract the occupant (presumably to be dragged

away for some other nefarious purpose). Seeing that all might be lost Blitheman waded into the pool alone and attacked lizard man and snake woman alike, he dropped one, then another, then a snake woman in a quick succession of masterful cuts and thrusts with his rapier, despite the hail of blows that rained upon him from them and their compatriots in evil. Blitheman was already a mass of bloody wounds when a lucky blow from a second lithesome but scaly snake woman brought him down, and he fell to float motionless in the pool.

Finally, as their losses mounted relentlessly the lizard men broke and ran, quickly followed by the snake woman that remained and the one watching from a distance clothed in the way of men despite the lizard form. It was only by the quick action of the still consumed Bell and Jaffa as they charged the snake woman leading away the figure who had been imprisoned in the cage that a rescue was staged.

In all, amongst the dead lizards and snakes scattered all about, it was estimated that a few escaped, perhaps less than a handful. But the one clothed in human garb was gone, away into the darkness of other passages.

Sandy Bell was still shaking but his rage had passed with the death of the last scaly fiend within the cavern and he slumped trembling and mumbling against rock, the light of madness in his eyes replaced by exhaustion. The body of Thomas Blitheman was retrieved from the pool and dragged to shore where Ned Culpable began his grisly work, for he detected a spark life remained in Thomas's motionless form. Ned set about him to tip and press the the water violently from his lungs, bound and poulticed the wounds that gaped, attached leaches to every available extremity, and thrust a small funnel into Thomas's mouth the better to administer his curative draughts and concoctions.

When the victim of the cage and kidnap sat up from between the bodies of the two snake women that had dragged him away, it was to everyone's astonishment to see Augustus Dacre.

Here ends Part I