

The Witches of Waltham Abbey

Notes from the pen of Mr Ben Jaffa

Once more I scribble in haste as it seems we are bound for another mission for Walsingham in the morning and I have many things to do before I leave. It very much seems that I am trying to cram two lives into the space of one at the moment.

A Brief Respite

After our struggle with witches, lizardmen and snake women in the passages below the Belfry of Waltham Abbey we take the rescued Augustus Dacre back to his cottage in the village and commandeer its neighbour where Dennty lives. As he is apparently in Cambridge he has no need of it at present. Of our party only Blythman is seriously injured in a physical sense. Ned attends to him and I mix up some xerion powders to assist his recovery. All of us are experiencing some mental strain from the horrors we have witnessed below Waltham Abbey. Bell in particular seems to sleep little and but sits and stares into the middle distance moaning occasionally.



In the morning, Bell announces his intention to go fishing for the day on his own. I too retire to a secluded meadow to complete those dances and other rituals that remind me of my roots and my sense of self. Ned seems strangely obsessed with his pestle and mortar and because he is the only one left in the house (and conscious) it is he who is subjected to a stupendously boring lecture from Plymmeswood on the architecture of our abode. Eventually, after some hours his throat becomes dry and he goes off down to the village for ale.

When I return from the meadow, I think to check on Dacre. He is not in his cottage. We think it slightly odd that after his experiences of the previous day he should be out and about and not resting. However, we take the opportunity to have a thorough search of the two dwellings. Dacre's cottage takes little time. It is poorly furnished and bare. There is but a pallet with a blanket that may or may not have been slept in and little else. By contrast Dennty's abode is clean, well-furnished and generally well appointed. We find a half written letter to the Master of Caius College Cambridge upon his desk. We also find a series of correspondence from a Mistress Eileen Pennybrygg of somewhat intimate tone, and a little money.

As we complete our searches, Plumswoode returns with the news that he has seen Dacre in the village, apparently about his normal business, talking in a friendly but earnest manner to many of the villagers in turn. He does not return that night.

Plemmyswoode, Ned and I take turns to watch through the night. It is Ned who, around midnight, spots a light moving from the village in the direction of the Abbey. He and I arm ourselves up and venture forth in pursuit. It is a bright moonlit night and we carry no light, but are equipped with a lantern against future need.

Under the Abbey Again

The light is moving somewhat faster than we can walk and seems to be bobbing up and down oddly. The explanation manifests itself when we find three horses tethered in the ruins of the Abbey. We make a cursory search of their saddle bags. From the contents, two plainly belong to women; the third is a man's. On the man's horse is a fine sword and a note with an address in Fleet Hill. We untether and chase off the horses, thinking to hamper any swift escape by the riders.

Prior to our investigation of the horses we had noted that the direction of travel of the now steadier light was towards the Belfry where we surmised, the group had taken the stair downwards. Arriving there ourselves we see no lights below so consider it both safe and necessary to light our own lantern. By its light we follow the steps spiralling down into the rough hewn passages of the maze below. There are no immediate signs of the struggle that took place there so recently - all the lizard-man bodies had disappeared. However, closer examination reveal a trail of blood-smears that lead down to the room with the pool. There too there was little sign of our battle with the lizard-men and snake-women. Plainly someone had been here to clear up and collect all the bodies.

There is a choice of exits from the pool room but I sense the correct one. As in the pool room there is sufficient ambient phosphorescence to see without our lantern and we notice as we creep onwards that the floor has become more regular as the rough-hewn tunnels give way to walls and paving slabs. After a little time we see ahead of us what seems to our dark-adjusted eyes a veritable blaze of lights coming from a passage to our right and the sound of voices. We follow it.

We find ourselves upon a sort of circular parapet with a low wall above what look much like a bear-baiting pit – though rather better-wrought in worked stone - with steps running down to either side of our position. Its floor is inlaid with a seven-pointed star and upon a pallet at the point of each lies a heavily pregnant and apparently unconscious woman. In the centre of the room are two snake-women in earnest converse with Dacre, who seems to be giving them instruction.

The time for creeping was done. Ned charges down the steps to the right. I pause only to ignite and toss a grenado into the pit – more in the hope of causing confusion than damage - before following him down sword in hand. "Kill them all", cries Dacre. At first I thought he meant us (perhaps thinking there were more in our company) but while one turns to face Ned, the other, before receiving my charge, calmly draws her knife across the throat of the nearest sleeping women.

The snake-women are swiftly dispatched with sword and pistol, but Dacre does not stay to cross blades with us. Instead he swarms up the vertical wall of the pit – much as might a lizard – and disappears somewhere above us. We give chase, using the more mundane means of the stairs, and find a passage leading out of the pit-room on the opposite side from our ingress.

We pursue. The passages become more natural once more, yet embedded within them are what seem to be the remains of ancient buildings wrought by the hand of man. We arrive at a large rough-hewn cavern, which is nevertheless lined with fluted columns. At the far end is a tower-like edifice, perhaps thirty feet in height with steps winding up it. At the top, just below the spire it is set with a strange monolith, more than the height of a man, set like a cabochon into the fabric of the tower but plainly not of it. It is covered in symbols. I note that there is a gap of about two feet between the top of the stone and the

arch that supports the spire. Dacre is rummaging in a chest next the tower with his back to us.

As we approach he turns to face us and I discharge my pistol at him. The ball strikes him squarely in the chest and he staggers back. I think to have wounded him severely, but he straightens up and grins a lizardly grin. He speaks some words in an unknown (to me) language and two shapes peel themselves off the columns to right and left. They are lizard-like but oddly articulated, as if some airy spirit animated a shed skin. I leave them to Ned and run pell-mell at Dacre, who is making for the tower.

I catch him at the foot of the steps and there is an exchange of blades. I score a palpable hit. My blade slices through his shirt but once more is turned by on what must be some form of hidden armour. I think on my struggle with Carluccio who likewise seemed to be invulnerable to my blade. On the next pass I pull out a trick from the Old School and follow up with a grapple. I push him back upon the stairs and, dropping my blade, I put my hands around his throat and squeeze. At last I have his full attention. He struggles in my grasp and I am aware that the skin of his throat seems to be of strange texture. To further discomfit him I bring the peak of my morion down sharply upon his forehead. The skin of his brow splits – as well it might, for it was a forceful blow – but no blood issues forth. Instead I can see clearly that below his skin there is another, this one greenish and scaly.

In my shock at this discovery my grip must have slackened a mite, and he took the opportunity to throw me off. He has his sword still while mine lies on the steps. I tug a dagger from my belt and parry as I execute an esquivé defence and jump a couple of paces back. He drops his blade, turns and runs up the steps. I rummage for one of the two remaining grenades in my pouch. I light it from the slow match twined into my hair and tucked behind my right ear and throw. I am aiming for the gap above the great monolith set in the tower. It is a difficult cast and I do not have high hopes, but it is all I have left.

My aim is true. There is a bang and a belch of smoke. The spirits animating the lizard-skins dissipate so that Ned finds himself now facing two lifeless bladders. I snatch up my blade and run up the stairs to find..... nothing.

The steps wind up to the back of the monolith. Of Dacre there is no sign. The force of the grenade would have been amplified by the relatively small space within which it ignited, but it would not have vaporised even a human caught in its blast. Ned and I are left to speculate as to where Dacre is and we can only think that the great stone, which has a carved design upon the back as well as the front, is some kind of portal to *elsewhere*, through which Dacre stepped before the grenade exploded.

Disappointed, and somewhat battered and bruised by our struggles, Ned and I head for home. Perhaps it is the thought of what we must attend to next that completely drives the chests in which Dacre had been rummaging from our thoughts. For we must return to the “birthing room” and dread what we must do there.

Ned proposes to carry out an autopsy upon the poor unfortunate that was slain by the snake woman on the orders of Dacre. Who am I to argue with a Master Surgeon and Physician? I have little doubt as to what he is like to discover. I do not know exactly what he finds in the woman’s belly and never want to, but when he opens her he stares in horror at what he sees therein. With a terrible scream he plunges his surgeon’s knife again and again into the subject, before subsiding onto the floor, covering his face and weeping.

I have mentioned before, in passing, my people's uncompromising views on allowing demons to be born into this world of ours. It is clear to me what needs must be done. It falls to me to do it. Ned is plainly incapable of anything at this moment, and that is perhaps a mercy for I know it would touch deeply upon his conscience. When I am done, I help poor Ned up and together we climb back up into the fresh, clean night air. We gather the three horses, which have not gone far, and return to the cottages and our comrades.

Murder and Mayhem in Waltham

In the morning, Plemmyswoode returns from the breakfast run to the village for provender, with word that mayhem is afoot in the village. Women are being stabbed and hanged by their husbands and fathers. Bell and I make our way down there and discover the truth of his tale. A woman is hanging in the village square. Others have been slaughtered in the street and houses are being burned. There seems little we can do in the face of all this madness but repair to the inn. There we find a tinker, a travelling fellow who we have met before. He is helping himself to beer and helps us to some too. He tells us that many men have discovered their womenfolk to be witches. It seems that when cut their blood flows yellow. I ask about the hanging woman. It is Alice Letherer. We have heard the name – she was said to be a wise woman. He says that she had been warning for years about witches in the village so why she was the first they turned upon he does not know. We finish our beer and return outside. The rioting continues and there seems little we can do about it. As we pass by Alice, I cut her dangling foot. The blood is red. I have an idea that we should have spoken with Alice long ere this day. We cannot do so now.

Return for the Loot

It was while I was telling the tale of our second venture beneath the Abbey, that remembrance came to me of the chests in the Spire Room. Bell, who was looking bored and listless until I mentioned them suddenly perks up. It turns out that the prospect of loot is as fine a remedy for his doleful dumps as a day's fishing. He immediately volunteers to accompany me back down there to investigate. Ned has no wish to return (and is furiously bashing away with his mortar and pestle), Blythman is still abed and Plumyeswode feels he is better occupied looking after them.

So Bell and I return once more to the crypts beneath Waltham Abbey. This time there has been no attempt to clear up and the smell of decaying flesh permeates the "Birthing Room". I avert my eyes from the scene there as much as I may.

In the "Spire Room" we find two chests made of some exotic hardwood. One – the one Dacre had been rummaging within – contains papers. Some have been burnt and it comes to me that perhaps that is what Dacre had been trying to do when we interrupted him. The second contains much treasure in the form of gold, silver and gems. There are also three large pistols of Ottoman design, a mail shirt and a pair of gloves that at first seem to be silk but on closer inspection appeared to be an extremely fine leather.

Ned had expressed an interest in the carvings upon both the back and the front of the monolith, so I had come equipped with much paper and charcoal – most purloined from Dennty's stores but more supplied by Ned. I take rubbings of the back of the stone first. Then, at no little risk to myself, I climb round to do the same for the front. I am quite exhausted by the time I climb down, making it a torturous business to help Bell carry one of the chests filled with our loot back up to the surface. However, spurred on by greed, we persevere.

Next Steps

We spend much of the rest of the day and into the night discussing and speculating over the events of the last few days.

Plainly, what had been going on in the village had been in train for many months if not years. However, when was Dacre turned? Had he always been a lizardly villain? If so, why was he held in a cage by the snake-women? Had he simply been recaptured by them yesterday morning and turned then into a man-suit for the Lizard Master just then? Where did he go? Where did he come from? The contents of the chest and the two Damascus steel swords we had captured from him (one on his horse and the other dropped in his struggle with me) suggested an Eastern connection – the Ottomans perhaps? What were his objectives? Ned in particular seemed mightily disturbed by the idea that lizard-folk might be walking, undetected amongst us. We did have the address in Fleet Hill, just to the North of London, that we surmised was Dacre's next stop had we not interrupted his plans and forced him to exit via the monolith (if that's what indeed he did).

We conclude that we must find Dennty and deliver the letter - our main objective in the first place. I privately doubt that Dennty would be found there, but it is decided that Bell should ride swiftly to Cambridge. Meanwhile the rest of us would take the wagon back to London. Bell was confident that he could catch us up.

We arrive in London in the morning of the second day. I have time to show my face in The Theatre and instruct the scenery makers for the next show. Burbage is still excited by the prospect of his meeting with Master Tilney. He is convinced that there are plans afoot to create a new company under the patronage of the Queen herself. He plainly thinks himself to be in the frame to be its manager and has plans to cherry-pick the best actors from all the other companies. "There's nothing they'll be able to do about it," he cries triumphantly. We'll see – I should be flattered myself so firmly in his plans.

Dennty

Sandy did not catch up with us on the road, but he was not too far behind. It is fairly late in the evening when two men enter the Bell Tavern opposite The Theatre, where Ned, Blythman and I are just thinking about calling it a night. One is Sandy Bell; the other is a swaggering young toff, who to be fair turns out to be a pleasant enough lad who buys all our drink for the rest of the evening. He introduces himself as Edward Dennty.

My doubts about him ever having been in Cambridge proved unfounded and Bell had been able to track him down easily enough. He had delivered the letter – which outlined Blyth's disquiet at the reports he had been receiving from Waltham Abbey and asked what he was doing about them. It also contained a further letter to Miss Eileen Pennybrygg (she of the fragrant correspondence we discovered in Dennty's cottage) who it seemed was a cousin to Blyth. We further discover as the young man falls ever more into his cups (Edward Dennty surely liked his wine) that he and Eileen had once been affianced but that Dennty had put a stop to any thought of marriage between them.

He asks whether we had seen Eileen while we had been in Waltham. We had not encountered anyone by that name, but when he furnished a description, I was fairly sure as to the occasion and circumstances under which I had seen her. I say nothing.

Blyth

We tell Dennty that we must go in the morn to report to Blyth. Dennty seems dismayed (and fairly gulps at his wine) but we tell him that there is nothing for it but that he must accompany us. In the morning I send a note of hand by one of The Theatre runners to Blyth seeking an appointment. He returns a couple of hours later with a note bidding us attend upon Blyth that afternoon, with Dennty. Dennty is glum and spends much of the day filling himself with the sort of courage popularly attributed to the Dutch. He is in a bit of a state by the time we find ourselves sitting in Blyth's office, outlining what had occurred in Waltham.

Blyth has hard words for Dennty, and some for us. He scarcely listens to our report but repeatedly demands tidings of Eileen Pennybrygg. We have nothing to tell on this subject. There had been no mention of her in Blyth's instruction to us when he sent us to Waltham Abbey. Eventually I put it to him that given the wholesale slaughter of womenfolk in Waltham, it is probable that she is no more. He literally screams in anguish at this and shouts at us to get out of his office. We hear further shouts and screams and the smashing of crockery and furniture as we make our retreat.

As we leave St. James' Place I ponder that Blyth was to a great extent the author of his own misfortune and that of his cousin. Had he given us the letter for Eileen Pennybrygg. directly then we would have sought her out directly and perhaps the outcome might have been different. Instead he sent us in search of a man who knew nothing of value about what was going on in Waltham Abbey and whose only role was to pass on a message to Prudence.

The Spanish Ambassador

We return to the Bell Tavern, to find a large party of extremely well-dressed Spaniards awaiting us. They appear to know who we are. Their leader introduces himself with a huge mouthful of impenetrable Spanish. Dennty mutters in my ear that this is the Spanish Ambassador. He wants a meeting with us sometime in the next couple of days – but not here and now. We neither accept nor refuse the invitation. They depart on what I am told are *magnificent* horses tethered outside.

Clearly we are most intrigued. However, we are not fools and the following day we make our way to St James to make report of this and seek instruction. Much to our surprise we are ushered not into Blyth's office but into a much better appointed room where Sir Francis Walsingham himself is at his correspondence. There are no chairs. After a full five minutes he looks up and acknowledges us. He explains that Blyth is indisposed and may be away for some time. We inform him of the reason for our attendance and await instruction.

He looks pensive for a moment. It seems that this Spanish Ambassador has lost influence at home, has annoyed Burghley and the Queen. He is about to be expelled. Walsingham thinks he is likely to be executed on his return to Spain. Walsingham allows just a slight tone of regret. It appears that Walsingham has some measure of respect for this fellow and is concerned about who might replace him. He speculates that this might be a move on the Ambassador's part to save his skin – though he cannot imagine what he has in mind. Apparently the papers exiling him will be signed off that very afternoon. He is intrigued and bids us attend at the Ambassador's pleasure, if only to find out what he wants.

A couple of days later we are contacted by a fellow who leads Bell, Culpable, Blythman and myself a merry dance around the City of London to an anonymous door in the vicinity of St Pauls. The door opens to reveal a mansion with a courtyard full of horses and Spaniards. The Ambassador himself joins us and much to my dismay we are all required to mount up. A veritable cavalcade departs the mansion and heads east towards the docks. Luckily my horse, which even I can see is a cut above any other nag that I have had the misfortune to sit upon, knows to follow the arse of the horse in front. All I need to do is cling on. The Ambassador manoeuvres his steed close to us and his men form a perimeter. As we ride the Ambassador talks. He seems in an oddly fey mood.

He has to return to Spain where he knows he will be put on trial and executed. He has made his peace with his fate. He disagrees with the current policy direction and sees a change in his king (Philip II). He speaks of a growing darkness and mentions that he does not like "what has come back from the New World". He warns us of a dangerous Spanish Agent landing soon somewhere in Rainham Marshes by the name of Lucien Rafael – a Jesuit priest – bringing money and "something else". He further mentions two other names: Fra Luis de Bollandos and Le Bellafre (which I'm told means Scarface in French). He then hands me a heavy saddlebag, bids us adieu and gallops off with his entourage. We are left with four magnificent horses and a bag that proves to be stuffed with 200 Spanish doubloons – a fortune.

The doubloons are unspendable directly in London, so we take them to a bank where we each open an account and take letters of credit. In the coming days we come into a second fortune when after some false starts Bell and Blythman contrive to sell the horses without being hanged as horse-thieves. That too is banked.

Walsingham again

We report directly to Walsingham regarding our conversation. This time there are chairs. He does seem at least to have been keeping an eye, because he does allude to our horse-flesh windfall, with something of a nod and a wink. He makes no mention of doubloons and we do not raise the subject. Otherwise we report in full on our conversation with the Ambassador.

There had been some disagreement on priorities within our group about our next steps. Some thought we must act immediately on the Ambassador's warnings. I wanted to follow up the Fleet Hill address. I rather took the view that indestructible lizard-men walking amongst us in human skins might be a greater threat in the long run than yet another Catholic plot, which I felt might be dealt with by others. What were Bodie and Doyle for anyway? In the end we agreed to put the matter to the boss.

Rather unsurprisingly he has sent us off to Rainham Marshes in the morning. He did at least appear to take our warnings about lizard-men and snake-women seriously enough to send someone off to check out the address in Fleet Hill. I hope he remembers to observe the colour of their blood when they return.