


The Lazarus Curse (Part 2)

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

- **Jules du Plessis** - French emigre.
- **Kerr Avon** - Scholar of the Occult
- **Captain Richard Blake** - Temporarily landed.
- **Sir Henry Percy** - The Wizard Earl of Northumberland.
- **Dorothy Percy** (née Devereux) - wife of Sir Henry Percy.
- **Dominique and Christabel** - Ladies in waiting to Lady Percy,
- **John Cavell** - Master at Arms to Sir Henry Percy
- **Jack Welling** - a traveller by coach, card sharp, Catholic.
- **Danial Barrow** - a merchant, 'big in goats'
- The village folk of **Petworth**.

Friday 24th August, Evening (...Continued)

Act 1 Scene 1 - Shrove Goat

he afternoon had worn on, and after an enlightening conversation with Sir Henry Percy about the details his extensive library revealed concerning the activities of the Spaniards relating to Lazarus, Sir Henry retired to his library for further study. This rather left Kerr Avon and Jules du Plessis at a loose end for Sir Henry's wife, Lady Dorothy, was attending other matters and would not be overseeing any formal meal.

Eschewing eating alone Kerr and Jules decided to find some simple fare in a Petworth Tavern, while Blake retired to his rooms to consider Other Matters for a while. Kerr and Jules slipped out of the side door of the House and into the village of Petworth proper, there to find what entertainment they could.

Their port of call was the Lamb's Head tavern, a coaching Inn and near centre of the village. Attracted by the noise and hearty songs echoing from within, sung by hearty village folk (and the occasional merchant or traveller), the hearty smell of spit roast pig wafted out with the fug of a crowded room full of fire smoke and ale vapours. Just the place!

Jules and Kerr settled, decent enough ale in hand after the barrel was changed, and fine food served quick from the pig that smelled most appealing, at least to Kerr. Little inclined to talk of what and why they were here, they sup, and listen to the snatches of conversation all about.

"...heard that Tawdry girl, all skirts around her ears with the Younger Batty Lad in the barn..."

"...she said put a toad on it overnight. Tried, bloony thing kept hopping awf..."

"...awww them sheeps' got a sign o' th'wimple! Get 'em slaught'd the morrow an' up the big 'ouse. Them never notice..."

"...devils every one - seen 'em with me own eyes grow 'horns 'n' tails on the new moon..."

"...Blind Dudurs' shiftin' 'em to the west field bloody fool it'll flood in next Tuesday, see if ti don't..."

"...all in, then? Shrove-goat it be..."

After a while Kerr and Jules elected to cards. With good fortune an existing game of Shrove-Goat would take them: already two yokels (Nate and Tom), a merchant Daniel Barrow ('I'm big in Goats') and a man named Jack Welling who travelled upon the Coach that departed tomorrow, welcomed them. Jules and Kerr used this opportunity for word of anything concerning in the village that might pertain to their own activities and Sir Percy's in Petworth House.

Many hands of Shrove-Goat were played and many pennies flowed about the table, but with a net loss to the two country lads they eventually withdrew, pockets emptied of several days pittance. In part pity part care Kerr Avon ensured their last pint of ale from his own pocket as they leaned at the bar, thoroughly disgruntled at their 'misfortune'.

Further play saw stakes raised to the shilling for the four players left: Avon, du Plessis, Barrow the merchant, and Welling the coach passenger for London. Ebb and flow the pennies and shillings ran while Kerr's disastrous luck showed throughout. Jules less so but still poor to a loss in general to Welling, a man looking after his Knaves who repeatedly (and irritatingly) advised them do the same.

Richard Blake joined the throng but did not play, and wondered aloud why Kerr and Jules wasted time with card games. Kerr explained 'intelligence', and picking up on the undercurrents of villainy within the village.

Kerr and Jules played on, while casual observation saw Daniel Welling exchanged words with and be followed out by one of the yokels (probably Tom) as he went for a piss, before he returned alone. There was a shuffling of seats, as Avon ensured he backed to the fire that none might have stood behind, for he was becoming a suspicious man about the fall of the cards and flow of shillings in the general direction of away from his pocket.

Stakes raised *again* they played, but Blake became restless as he watched, worried of the focus on peasants instead of the vial and Sir Henry Percy in the House. However, by chance as Welling leant to scoop his winnings both Blake and de Plessis spotted a gold chain about Welling's neck, and latterly the flash of a small gold cross and the Jesus crucified thereon. Du Plessis 'accidentally' crossed himself when Welling looked and knowing looks were exchanged. Finally, Jack Welling saw off Daniel Barrow the Goat man to the bar with a friendly hand upon his shoulder when Barrow suddenly won big just as he stated he was going to fold. To Kerr and Jules, it seemed there was some sort of finale that approached.

Act 1 Scene 2 - Alley Action

Impatience grown, Blake departed the tavern (not least for the reason that there was no wine, let alone fine and Spanish, albeit that was no surprise), and into the street. He strode forth and passed an alley on the short walk to the side gate of the House. From the alley he heard an altercation, a single clash of steel and a cry - *'I am hurt! Damn you both!'* And the hissed words between two assailants *"You fool, Tiberius didn't say kill him, but just show him the way!"*

Blake shouted a challenge as he strode into the alley drawing his sword, but the assailants ran and left a dying man upon the floor. Blake cradled his head and there was moment of recognition

between, for this was Perry Spelman a shipmate from his youth on the smuggler *Sienna* under Captain Garcia and his First Sam Elliot.

"Who did this?" Demanded Blake

Spelman struggled, for there was much blood, but managed to cough out two names

"Hornbolt an' Edwards", then mumbled indistinct words about a woman, and the next night, and then more clearly "...take her, so they'll do what we say!"

Finally Blake felt him stiffen and try to sit up, speaking clearly again for but a moment.

"Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do!" Spelman cried, before he slumped in Blake's arms and his life dribbled away in a pool of blood to Blake's unanswered questions.

Blake slipped his hand across Spelman's lifeless eyes to close them, mumbled a few grim words of prayer, then searched his body for anything useful. Surprised, Blake found Spelman had been clutching a rosary. Not just a shipmate then, Blake thought grimly, but a Catholic who had died in his arms.

Act 1 Scene 3 - Meanwhile back in the tavern

Meanwhile in the tavern Kerr Avon had hurriedly arranged a back room to talk with Jack Welling, the coach travelling man, in suspicion he was Catholic. Kerr, Jules and Welling conversed. After tentative probes as to who was what, Welling was disconcerted to discover they were both Catholic (apparently), and staying with the Earl. He let slip that Something Was Going To Happen, and they should not be there, they should leave tonight, for the woman will be taken. Kerr explained they were guests and could not. Welling urged them to avoid involvement with anything that happened tomorrow night.

Before Kerr and Jules could languidly interrogate Welling further, Richard Blake, returning from the murder of his old ship mate in the alley outside, burst in. Welling, spooked, made his excuses and departed, confused, worried and concerned at the sudden influx of apparently Catholic brethren into the village of Petworth the night before ... something ... would happen.

Richard Blake recounted events outside, and Kerr/Jules recounted of Welling. There was uncertainty if the lady referred to was another lady upon the coach due out tomorrow morning that Welling would be on (a simple enquiry of the Lamb's Head's landlord announced her name as Prudence Skipworth (and her maid)) or the Earl's wife, Lady Dorothy.

For clarity Richard Blake decided upon a direct approach, for time might be critical: with his best season smile he inveigled the Lady's room number in the tavern out of a Wench, thence pounded upon the door of the Lady Prudence, introduced himself, and asked her about herself. It was quickly apparent under his skilled but delicate questioning that she was unlikely to be of interest to Catholic plotters, unless Richard had entirely misunderstood her inconsequential nature by his questions. He took his leave with a bow and a flourish. The Lady Prudence was left confused. The maid was left slightly flustered. Surely that wasn't Richard Blake. *Captain Richard Blake. The Captain Richard Blake...*

Prudence then was dismissed from their consideration, for the threat was clearly against the Earl and his wife. They hurried back to Petworth House to inform the Earl.

Act 2, Scene 1 - Plans

Upon return to the manor House Kerr Avon Took Charge. He demanded frequently and loudly the presence of either the Earl himself, or at least his Master at Arms *IMMEDIATELY* to counter an imminent threat to the Earl and his family, and sent servants scurrying in all directions to find one, the other, or preferably both. *Now!*

While others were seeking out Sir Henry from his labyrinthine library, his Master at Arms John Cavell arrived at a measured pace, buckling on his armour. A scotsman, John Cavell, was dour, experienced, measured, and not known for getting excited about anything. He found Kerr Avon, effete scholar of the arcane and occult, irritating in no small way. There was some friction, and as a professional relationship it did not start well as loud demands and rebuffs echoed back and forth between them both. Eventually servants were sent and the guards turned out for the night, and after some delay Sir Henry was drawn from his library to the situation explained.

Plans were proposed and agreed. The suggestion was that whatever would happen was to be on the morrow (Saturday 25th) evening or night. Lady Dorothy habitually chose to ride out around dusk across the estates to the far side of the woods and back with only 2 ladies in waiting, the better to look across the valley and take air before end of day. This occasion was seen as the most likely time for any plot to develop. However there was much concern in discussion that this was a mere distraction for some nefarious attempt at the vial of darkness held within the Tower, for they had already experienced how other malign influences from Spain might follow and take gross actions to intercept its travels.

After much discourse it was decided to replace the vial in the tower with a fake vial full of black liquid for it was deemed safer in the possession of Kerr Avon. For him to carry the vial about his person, it was wrapped in silk and splints from the original hawthorn box twined together to form a cylindrical holder. In addition Kerr would replace the Lady Dorothy on her evening ride, in disguise as her Ladyship, accompanied by one of her ladies in waiting, and also Jules Du Plessis disguised as the other lady in waiting.

Meanwhile, Blake would be locked into the Lady Dorothy's rooms with her as a last defence, with a loyal guard outside the door, under command of Master at Arms John Cavell, lest there be an attempt upon her in the House. The Earl himself, concerned by both the danger to his wife and the vial, was vague about his whereabouts and intentions, in a way that none dared question.

Plans laid, disguises made, the evening arrived.

Act 2, Scene 2 - A Stage Set in Two Halves:

Upon The Ride:

Kerr, Jules, and Dominique, a lady in waiting, set off on the regular dusk ride in 'disguise' - perfect in du Plessis' Lady-in-Waiting role, but relying on bad light and the blinding sunset behind for Avon's attempt at doubling for Lady Dorothy. Meanwhile Richard Blake locked himself into the Lady Dorothy's rooms with her alone (and Christabel her other lady in waiting) with assorted guardsmen outside the door, with his orders to them to strike first and apologise later.

The three dusk riders are out of the gates after a minimal involvement with anyone of the House in the stables or the courtyard, with orders that the stables are cleared of grooms, and the courtyard equally so. With minimal lighting despite it being set in shade as sunset as dusk approached 'Her Ladyship' and 'ladies in waiting' are mounted with a minimal of assistance. They set out at a trot through the gate, and only those from high windows see them depart. Of the Earl, there is no sight.

It was a canter out across the open meadow that covered the lands for half a mile to the bale Tower, and then a quarter mile beyond to the wood. To the left a lane veered away before the wood's edge, and the space between was Lady Dorothy's usual route to range around the far side of the wood, some mile and a half or more to the edge of the valley beyond, and the rise from which there was clear sight for many miles northeast and west. In the right seasons a clear sight of weather led dawn or dusk, although rarely both. Away from the manor House the riders closed together and final instruction was given. Should anything untoward happen then Dominique was to ride away (for by chance she could ride quite well) and make all haste back to the Manor for assistance and alarums. She agreed that both du Plessis and Avon were more capable of dealing with all and any than she, a mere woman.

As the riders passed the far side of the woods and paused to observe the sunset, for it was a splendid sunset with most comforting views across hill and valley, a group of four riders broke from the woods at speed to approach. As planned Jules ordered the Dominique to ride her best to the House, while Kerr dismounted and hurriedly drew up a circle of salt, for as that moment unfolded he came upon discomfort: an air of attention he could not account for, an unseen gaze with much weight upon his mind and soul, and the vial warmed his chest in turbulence, despite the splintered Hawthorn and wrapped silk that enclosed it.

Jules, then, cast aside his shawl and his feathered hat, kicked aside his skirts to spur his dapple horse to gallop as he grabbed an ear to remind it of its duty to France. In the four riders view she alone rode forth towards the galloping four as one of her party peeled away at to ride like the wind for the other edge of the wood and the third dismounted to scrabble upon the ground. They seemed disconcerted, but intent upon whom they assumed to be the Lady Dorothy, such that they only began to release something was amiss as Jules drew his sword but a moment before they all met head on! Jules' slash took down the first rider in one blow, the rear pair swerved as realisation arrived that all was not as it should be. Jules recovered and thrust wildly at the rider behind on the off chance he may get a stab as the horse passed. His swordsmanship was rewarded amply as he plunged his rapier deep into the shoulder of the second and toppled him off his horse also!

Within The House:

Within her Ladyships rooms Blake had ensured the shutters were barred, the room was carefully and well lit, and both Her Ladyship and her Christabel her lady in waiting were close to the door between the room they sat within and the Earls' bedchamber. None of them were in line with the doors or shuttered and barred windows, for Richard Bake was a cautious man. While the Lady Dorothy attended to some pass-time involving needles and threads, fussed upon by Christabel, Blake cleaned his pistols most carefully, scraping all powder residue clear, sifting his powder, and polishing each ball individually as he loaded them anew.

It was after some considerable time that John Cavell called from beyond the barred door after much stamping and shouting of orders to rearrange the guard. Cavell wished to check the shutters and security of the room but Blake was having none of that and refused to unbar the door. It was a discourse that took some time shouted through the thick oaken door from both sides, and while Blake is no Avon, no measure of trust could be established. Blake would not unbar the door once

he thought that the game was afoot, and Cavell would not stand for a newcomer to his Lordship's acquaintance without introduction that was ensconced with Her Ladyship! In fury and concern Cavell called for axes to break down the door lest his apparent duty be impeded, for he was concerned of Her Ladyships safety, Blake's responses having been unsatisfactory!

Upon The Ride: (2)

Meanwhile back across the wood, du Plessis used skills learned from years in the saddle across France and Spain as a younger man to turn on the spot with his willing steed and pursue the remaining two riders. Before the third rider realised that du Plessis had turned and was in pursuit, he was set upon and cut down by du Plessis from behind. The fourth remained, back to all of du Plessis' activities, and tried to ride down the disguised Kerr Avon in the belief Avon was the Lady Dorothy. Avon dodged behind his horse as the rider approached, but was more concerned at the weight of an attention he felt come upon him, an attention that dulled the sky, left the air feeling thick as the vial twitched and roiled upon his breast in its silk and hawthorn cage.

Finally, perhaps he sensed a lack of thundering hoofs behind him from his companions, just the one set from du Plessis' horse, the last rider turned his head to discover he was alone, with a raging French sword master in ladies clothing in hot pursuit. He veered away from Kerr Avon's horse and spurred his own down slope into the valley to make his escape, all thought of his evil intent now discarded for that of survival as the ambushers became the ambushed. He fled

Within The House (2)

Axes thudded into the door of Lady Dorothy's chambers while Blake finished loading his pistols. After some minutes of relentless axe attack the door splintered.

Blake waited until the door splintered enough to poke a couple of pistols through, and did just that. He discharged them into the ranks of axe wielding guardsmen there out to cries and screams as his balls blindly hit home on unknown targets, burning wad and powder remnants of point-blank range adding to the mayhem. He had given warning, shouting through the door in most certain terms to discourage those by name where he could gain it, and generally where not, that his pistols would make short work of the axe wielders and his sword there after if the door was breached to threaten Lady Dorothy.

There were more shouts and cries, and Cavell's bellowed orders to return to the axes, and others with ready swords to strike any more pistol barrels that showed themselves.

Upon The Ride (3)

Du Plessis, cloak flapping and skirts awry, turned back after a few yards pursuit of the fourth rider concluding the remaining three, should any be alive still, would tell him more than they wished anyway. He rode back, dismounted and poked the bodies to identify a live one. As he did so Sir Henry Percy trotted out of the woods on his horse from his vantage point, and suggested they return in haste to the House to ensure no further machinations were at play. All agreed, they took off with a surfeit of horses, the surviving kidnapper with tied hands behind upon one, the reins led by Kerr Avon's horse.

Within the House (3)

Within Milady's chambers Blake calmly reloaded his pistols as the guardsmen without shouted and there were cries as the injured were pulled away. After a couple more tentative taps on the door with axes, the passage outside sounded to descend into a confusion of shouts, and many talked at once. Blake listened intently, but could only make out the call for someone to fetch the Master at Arms, Cavell. Which was odd, thought Blake, as he was quite sure Cavell had been present shortly before, giving orders for more axes. With all the time he needed, Blake finished carefully reloading both pistols. It would never do for them to misfire.

Upon The Ride (4)

Leading the horses and prisoner, Kerr Avon agreed that du Plessis and the Earl should make for the House at haste, while Kerr would lead the horses carrying the dead and the prisoner. All agreed they raced away towards the House, but du Plessis attention was drawn to a lone rider on the nearby lane, cloak billowing over dark clothes at full gallop, apparently fleeing from the House! If du Plessis was not mistaken that person had a passing resemblance to John Cavell, the Master at Arms. The Earl well ahead and too far to signal or shout, du Plessis wheeled his horse and set off in pursuit. Alas, it was clear within a couple of minutes that Cavell (if it was he) had the better horse, and perhaps was the better rider in the moment as he quickly distanced du Plessis, who was forced to abandon pursuit.

Within The House (4)

Back at the House the Earl arrived and identified himself outside the door, but Blake refused to open it lest a trick was at hand, and asked that one of his loyal friends be present. The Earl pondered Blake's words but reluctantly agreed, and sent for du Plessis or Avon, whomever could be found first.

It was only a few minutes later that du Plessis returned and leaped up the stairs, identifying himself with the 'secret sign' on a handful of fingers thrust through the splits in the door. Blake was relieved and unbarred the battered door. There was a touching reunion between the Earl and his Lady wife.

When Kerr Avon arrived du Plessis dragged the remaining kidnapper from his horse and demanded he tell all. Alas, he appeared to be a simple hire to do a job, with little more than suspicion the man who hired may have Catholic sympathies, but no name, and little description. Over Avon's protests du Plessis put the prisoner to the sword before any could intervene and question him further.

Act 2, Scene 3 - Anon:

Thoughts turned to the traveller from the Lamb's Head, Jack Welling, who had made such a hurried exit. While there was some desire to search the village for him or at least attend any early coach departures, it was agreed that rousing the village or searching every tavern room would be unlikely to find him now the plot of kidnap had failed. If he was involved, or at least knew of it as seemed likely from his words, then he would be away at the first hint of

failure. A description was agreed, and passed to the Earl, lest Welling reappear in the village at some future date.

Finally, the thoughts of the Wizard Earl Henry Percy, and the Occult Scholar Kerr Avon turned to the vial itself, returned to the high tower and waiting for their touch...

(To be continued....)