

John de Waltham

A Fragment of a Play

SCENE: A FOREST

Enter Marion Levenoth, a reputed witch, and a disguised Priest.

Priest. 'Tis about her hour. There's no Ave Maria to remind Christabel, but as soon as the day slopeth the sweet child maketh her way hither. She cometh for consolation to our divine effigy. (*Points towards the bower.*)

Marion. She cometh for consolation to me!

Priest. 'Tis a miracle of God that these Gospellers and loud Puritans have not discovered our blessed crucifix i' the Forest. We have hedged Him from the fury of these desolate years. But shall we hear the Angelus again? Will these invaders triumph for ever?

Marion. Their time is nigh past. Their day sinketh. Somewhat telleth me a new time dawns.

Priest. I do long to say Mass again. Our old Abbey of Waltham hath stood the pillage an hundred years, and now lieth prone like a huge ghost of the cross. Marion, thou art a divining woman. If God be with thee, say will the King carry it and the persecuting of our holy Faith cease? Marion, they report thee a witch. Thou hast a familiar? I'm afeared to speak with thee. Tell me, are not those whom Satan assaileth found dead i' their beds?

Marion (bringing plants from her basket). That's Vervain and Solanum. That eases babes i' their convulsions and women in travail. They say I'm a witch. But sith I make ointments out of the resin of the earth that soothes them they come humbly again, and ask more. My mother taught me the properties of the wild grasses o' the woods. There's hemlock and enchanter's nightshade. That's saffron. Whiles these kind herbs do cure them, they say the magick's white, but whiles they fail because of their unbelief, the magick's black. But hark you. All's magick! The wind and the stars and the sea and the unutterable depths o' things are the secret of a divine Magician. And thoughts which come like waves i' the mind and are invisible, and speech which beckoneth and doth allure men by words which are invisible things, and sorrow which doth crumble our hearts away—that's all sor-

JOHN DE
WALTHAM

JOHN DE
WALTHAM

cery! 'Tis all invisible power. Hark you, many a woman hath brought hither her sick babe to me and many a babe have I carried at my heart through the night i' the Forest and bathed it in a pool in red moonlight, and heard its little sobs grow dumb in a soft sleep. There's no ill that hath not its remedy could we but find it.

Priest. But the Church, the Holy Mother, Marion, hath ever burnt herb-gatherers and witches as evil-doers.

Marion. Your Church is blind. Sooth, from the beginning she hath persecuted the physician of the body and called him poisoner, but lo, now medicine hath triumphed, and all men run to it.

Priest (earnestly). Canst thou make gold, Marion? Canst thou build me an invisible Church in the which I might pray and hear the old musick, the old chants and see the effigies of the expelled saints?

Marion. There is an invisible, invulnerable world raised above the tossings of this.

Priest (suddenly). Look, Christabel comes.

(Enter Christabel in haste.)

Benedicite!

Christabel. Good e'en, Father; Good e'en, Marion. O, I've come in haste!

Marion. }
Priest. } What now?

Christabel. In haste to tell ye what hath happed. Have we not cast spells for my father's liberty? Well only a doubtful miracle hath been vouchsafed us. Verily my poor father was ta'en out, but 'twas to lay a trap for him and me. 'Twas to compass a foul bargain that John de Waltham brought him out. Wot you what, he did propose to marry me, and sith I spurned it, the old man was convoyed back to the loathsome prison. O his cries and his curse were loud against me and a' called down God's visitation upon me whiles the vile chains were locked on him again.

Priest. Nay, Sir Hubert had no ought to command you to love. 'Tis a thing impossible. Duty not love may be commanded.

Marion. John de Waltham made love to you?

Christabel. Ay, his eyes shone with a ribald agony on me.

Marion. Trouble yourself not. His date is out. His date is in the prophetick almanack. Tell your father still to have a patience till his enemy hath been overblown.

Christabel. Yes, I whispered it to him, but he hearkened not. He may die i' the prison. O all's in doubt. Who knoweth if verily the King will carry it.

Marion. Fear not. (*Takes a philtre out of her basket.*) Drink this. That's electrum. 'Twill protect you against his evil spirit when he striketh at your maidenhood and at your life.

(*Christabel drinks, and keeps the phial.*)

And get you by moonshine and gather hedge hyssop, moonshade and saffron, and thereafter wash ye in a river flowing South. But the name of your enemy, look ye, 'tis writ amongst the stars of death. This plenary physick 'll protect you from him.

Christabel (kissing Marion). O thanks to thee, Marion. Thy nigromancy caseth me somewhat, and yet I am afear'd for my father's curse.

Marion. I have read i' the books of the alchemists that a man may be killed by the imagination of another. We'll evoke the forbidden for you. I'll to my incantations.

(*Goes within the hut.*)

Priest. The sun sinketh. Shall we not on our knees?

Christabel. Ay, father, lead forward.

BENJAMIN SWIFT