

THE TEMPEST: The Isle of Noises

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My name is Ned Blood. I am afraid of no man but I am scared half to death by thunder and lightning. Every night for the last six months my dreams have been filled with the sound and flashing of a terrible storm. I wake up and cry to God to never let me dream again.

A day in October when the sky was bright blue, I was walking by Blackfriars and heard that self-same thunder from my nightmares. I cried out in fear.

‘What is it, lad?’ said a stranger standing close by.

‘Thunder in bright broad daylight,’ I said. ‘I think some devil must be after me.’

The stranger laughed and told me come and look. He was standing by a strange device - a kind of wooden see-saw with a groove down the plank and a metal ball in the groove.

‘Know what this is, lad?’

‘A cannonball, sir. I was a sailor all my life until now.’

‘A sailor eh?’ He tipped the plank. The cannonball ran down the groove. I jumped for it sounded just like thunder. ‘If we can fool an old sailor like you, Ned, we’ve done our job well,’ said the stranger.

‘But why would you want to make pretend thunder, sir?’

‘Help us move the thunder machine inside and I’ll show you.’

Inside the old priory they were making a theatre, though it was not like any theatre I had ever seen.



'Did you ever see a play at The Globe, Ned?'

'I saw *Henry V* sir, which was wondrous, and a play about some lovers in a wood which was not so wondrous.'

The stranger laughed and said his name was Will Shakespeare and he had made those plays himself. Now he wanted to make a different kind of play. 'My plays at The Globe were acted in broad daylight. The only magic I could make was with my words. But in here we have curtains and candles and mirrors and the thunder machine. We can make illusions. I can make a tempest.'

'But a tempest,' I said, 'is more than thunder, sir. There is lightning too ...' As I spoke I seemed to see and hear again the storm I saw in all my nightmares. 'The wood of the ship groans, sir, like a wounded soul ... and the waves explode against the cliffs like guns ... and the men cry out ... the ship scrapes against the rocks ... which is the worst sound of all.'

'How do you know all this, Ned?' asked Will.

'I was cabin boy aboard the *Sea Venture*, sir, that was wrecked in the Bermudas. Our ship was lost. I was one of those that was saved. I swore I'd never go to sea again. Every night I dream about the wreck.'

'What was it like when you climbed ashore?'

'We were afraid, sir. The isle was full of noises. We thought we heard spirits in the air about us. And demons howling in the woods upon the hill. No, sir. When the sun rose we saw that all the spirits of the rocks were but flocks of birds, and all the devils in the woods were but herds of pigs.'

'But,' said Will, 'how if they were not? How if the island was really enchanted? Would that make a good play do you think, Ned?'

'It would, sir.'

'And would you help me make the sounds for it? A shilling a week.'



'Why yes, sir.'

That night there was thunder in my dream the same as ever but I thought to myself it's nothing but a wooden box with an old cannonball inside. Nothing to be afraid of. And went back to my slumbers and slept for the first time since I came back to land.

Will told me the story of his play. 'It begins with a tempest, Ned. As you described ... thunder and ... we'll need lightning.'

'I've thought of lightning, sir. If I throw resin dust into the flames of the candles, they will flash and crackle like sea-lightning ...'

'Good, Ned. So we begin with a tempest. A ship is caught in the storm. In it are the Duke of Milan and his friend the King of Naples and the king's son, Ferdinand. They are wrecked and washed ashore on a strange island ...'

'Just like I was, sir?'

'Just like you, Ned.'

'What they don't know is that on the island is the Duke's brother, Prospero. And Prospero is the rightful duke. Long ago his brother, Antonio, plotted against him, overthrew him and cast him off to sea in a little rowing boat with his baby daughter, Miranda. He thought that they would drown but instead they landed on this island and here Prospero studied magic from his books ...'

'His books, sir? Did they not get wet and fall apart when he was in his little boat?'

'They were magic books, Ned. And now Prospero is a great magician and his little girl is a young woman. Miranda. And the storm was no storm at all but a piece of magic he made to bring his wicked brother and usurper to the island. The ship is not wrecked but hidden away. Can you hide a ship, Ned?'

'You can anchor on the far side of a headland, sir, and no one would see it.'

'Good.'



'And all this time,' I asked, 'there was no one but Prospero and Miranda on the island, sir?'

'No. For when Prospero and his daughter land on the island there is a creature living there already. A monster named Caliban who has no speech, only roars like a bull. Could we do a bull-like roaring, Ned?'

At first the roaring was not loud or animal enough but I discovered that if I roared into a metal bucket ...

'Perfect. So Prospero takes the monster, teaches him to speak and makes him his servant. He makes him cut wood and helps them build a house for him and for Miranda and there the Duke studies his books of magic. He also finds a magic spirit - Ariel - trapped inside a tree. He frees him from the tree ... but binds him to his will to be his messenger. And orders him to pinch his servant Caliban whenever he tries to shirk his work. So now the good Duke has his wicked brother and the King of Naples and the King of Naples' son at his mercy on the island. At last he can get revenge and win his kingdom back.'

'Like in your play of Prince Hamlet, sir? Where everyone dies at the end? I liked that. He could set the spirit Ariel to haunt and pinch his enemies and scare them to death, sir?'

'Or,' said Will, 'he could have the monster Caliban hunt them down ... and devour them ...'

'How is that, Ned? People like revenge.'

'So the play ends with a belch, sir?'

'Hmmm,'

'And what about Miranda. She has never seen a man except her father. Will she fall in love with the King of Naples' son? And what if he doesn't love her?'

'Good night, Ned.'



‘Also if everyone else is dead, sir, how will Prospero sail the ship back to Milan? He’ll need a crew.’

‘I need to think about that,’ said Will.

That night I devised a way to make explosions for the thunderstorm. I bought gunpowder from the ironmonger’s and packed it in a tube of cardboard. I thought how if I attach a wire from one side of the stage to the other and fix a fire cracker to it, the firecracker will shoot across the stage and that could be the spirit Ariel.

‘Ha!’ said Will. ‘So I have it. Prospero uses his magic to lead his brother and the King across the island. They’re lost and afraid. The bad duke realises his sins and confesses them to the King and then Prospero can forgive him. Not revenge and blood and belches but forgiveness. How’s that, Ned?’

‘Good, sir. And what of Ferdinand and Miranda?’

‘Ah. They fall in love of course.’

‘But Prospero won’t like that, sir. It was never in his plan.’

‘You’re right, Ned. So Prospero has to test Ferdinand - to see if he’s good or bad. He puts him to work with Caliban, chopping wood and drawing water. If he does it willingly, without complaining, for the sake of Miranda, then we’ll know that he’s good.’

‘And is he good?’

‘Of course! There has to be a happy ending. They sail home and Prospero is duke again and all is well that ends well.’

‘Not for everyone, sir.’

‘Who have I left out?’

‘Caliban, sir. The monster. It was his island. Prospero stole it from him as sure as Antonio stole the dukedom.’



'Why so he did.'

'And Prospero taught him to speak. Did he do that just so he could obey orders. So he could cut wood more quickly?'

'No!'

Two days later I saw the play. The audience cowered during the storm ... they gasped when they saw Ariel blaze by ... but it was I - Ned Blood - who gasped when I heard Caliban speak so kindly ...

Be not afraid the isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not, sometimes a thousand twanging instruments will hum about my ears ...

'What do you think, Ned?' whispered Will as I readied my fire crackers.

'It is like every play you have ever written, sir, all rolled into one. The lost king like *King Lear*. The lovers like *Romeo and Juliet*. The wicked brother like in *Prince Hamlet*. Ariel is like puck ... and Prospero is like you, sir, spinning stories to enchant and scare and bring all to peace at last.'

'That's right, Ned.'

At the end of the play the plotters are forgiven and the lovers are married and Prospero throws his books and magic staff into the sea. And as the people clapped Prospero began to speak. But as he spoke I seemed to hear, not the actor talking to the audience, but Will Shakespeare talking to me. I didn't understand every word but I seemed to understand the meaning ...

*'Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind ...'*



'Will,' I whispered, 'this sounds like you are saying goodbye, not to the audience tonight, but to the theatre forever.'

'As you said goodbye to the sea, Ned?'

'Sir, is it true?'

He winked at me.

*'We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.'*