

# Victims of the Forest

A Medieval Tragedy

by

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## **Victims of the Forest**

**This Medieval tragedy is based partly on and inspired by 'The Pardoner's Tale' from 'The Canterbury Tales' by Geoffrey Chaucer.**

**Set in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century in the south west of England, the action is sparked by the burning of an alleged witch in the fictitious village of Breenham, Joe's bid to avenge the killing of his best friend and the deception and greed of the killers, who flee to the forest. The play also revolves round the poaching of deer by a banished monk, the formidable Gert and her sons, the eventual demise of Joe and some of his companions and the ultimate dramatic event in the forest.**

**The author has used a 'colloquial' dialogue pattern with the idea of capturing the mood and atmosphere of the era.**

### **Production Notes**

**The play lends itself to simple staging and lighting, using computerised projections onto the back wall to create scenery. The author has provided suggestions at the beginning of each scene.**

### **Suggested Doubling for casting**

**Male Villager/Wilfred  
Male Villager/Apothecary  
Bart/Old Man  
Nat/Innkeeper  
Female Villager/Margaret**

**Female Villager/Gert**  
**Male Villager/Soldier 1**  
**Male Villager/Soldier 2**

## **Costumes**

**The actors should be dressed in the costume of the period.**  
**Suggestions are provided in the script.**

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## Victims of the Forest

Cast in order of appearance

JOE

DICK

JACK

BART

NAT

ARTHUR

TOM

BEN

ANNA

STEPHEN

MALE VILLAGERS (4)

FEMALE VILLAGERS (2)

GEOFFREY

ULRICH

JOHN

MARGARET  
EDMUND  
SAM  
GERT  
AMBROSE  
OLD MAN  
INNKEEPER  
GUARD 1  
GUARD 2  
WILFRED  
GUARD 3  
SHERIFF  
SOLDIERS 1 and 2

## **VICTIMS of the FOREST**

### **Act One**

#### **Scene 1: The Tabard Alehouse in the village of Breenham**

*JOE, JACK and DICK, farm labourers, are drinking at a table RC, which has four chairs, at The Tabard Alehouse, which is a very small establishment consisting of one large room and a bar with a door which leads to the street at UL. The three men drink from clay pots and share a small flagon which is in the middle of the table, where there is also a wooden plate of bread and scraps of meat and cheese. Seated at a small table L is NAT, an old scruffy unshaven individual, with tousled hair. He wears a dirty brown smock, which reaches as far as his knees. His leggings are holey and he has ill fitting dirty flat shoes. Uncannily, he has the ability to overhear conversations at a distance.*

*JOE is a burly man in his twenties and in some way appears to be more intelligent than the others. However, his intelligence is really cunning, yet he appears worldly than the other men. JACK is a thin, willowy, simple innocent young man in his late teens. He finds it difficult to understand the ways of life in the village, let alone life's*

*mysteries. DICK is short, in his early twenties, with dark tousled hair. He enjoys JOE'S company and tries to emulate his cunning and outlook on life. He does not have much time for JACK and regards him as the Village Idiot.*

*The landlord, BART, a portly, red faced, white haired and bearded man in his early forties, wanders in and out of the bar and perches on a high stool when he does remain, waiting for custom. He eaves drops on conversations and often has his say about the topics discussed. The current topic is the fearful threat of the plague. He is currently eaves dropping on three men's conversation.*

JOE: I reckon it's true.

DICK: How can the plague be spread by the wind? We ain't had nothing like a wind these past weeks. It's been a calm summer.

JOE: According to them that are learned, those who know better than we do, the plague first started in the eastern end of the world a long time ago.

JACK: Where's that then, beyond our village?

JOE: Yes Jack. (to DICK) Now you tell me, how else could it spread?

JACK: Beyond London?

JOE: What?

JACK: Is the place you said, beyond London?

JOE: (*irritably*) Course it is!

DICK: But it can be passed on by those who have it?

NAT: By those from foreign lands?

Dick: Aye, sailors and merchants can bring it over from plague ridden areas.

JACK: Beyond Dover?

DICK: What are you on about, you daft beanpole?

JOE: (*dismissively*) Yes Jack, beyond Dover.

JACK: France?

JOE: Yes, beyond France.

JACK: Popish Rome?

DICK: (*exasperated*) Shut up, Jack. It's God's punishment, that's what it is.

JOE: For what?

DICK: What d'you mean, for what?

JOE: Why would God want to punish us?

JACK: Brother Michael says it's because of us being so wicked, that he sent the plague to punish us.

JOE: (*scoffs*) D'you think you've been wicked Jack?

JACK: No, I don't reckon I have.

*Pause, while they all think about the subject.*

NAT: A man can get it from a rat.

JOE: What are you talkin' about? How can that happen?

DICK: How much porter has he had Bart?

*BART chuckles.*

NAT: (*firmly*) Now don't you mock me son.

*NAT rises, belches loudly and crosses to the table occupied by the three men*

NAT: I'm talking about the plague. Now there was this traveller...

JOE: (*chuckling as he interrupts*) Oh Nat, not another one of your stories?

Nat: Now listen, ye might learn somethin'.

*BART, JOE and DICK chuckle. JACK scratches his head, bemused.*

NAT: There was this traveller heading for Stokes Hill whose horse threw him and he had to limp the rest of the way.

JACK: Our Stokes Hill?

NAT: *(kindly)* Yes Jack, ten miles from here. *(Back to the story)* Anyway, he lost his way but he didn't realise he was on the outskirts of Stokes Hill. His leg was giving him a lot of pain and he was 'ungry, wishing he had ate his 'orse I suppose *(he chuckles, but the others do not appreciate his attempt at humour. He clears his throat)* And so...

JOE: *(interrupting)* What's this got to do with a rat?

NAT: I'm just coming to it. Our traveller found an old barn and rested for a while. Two days later and almost starving, he decided to leave and suddenly he saw this large rat in the corner of the barn. Somehow, and don't ask me how, he killed the rat and being so 'ungry he bit its 'ead off and ate it.

DICK: *(laughs)* He must've been 'ungry!

NAT: Well he was! The next day, he limped to Stokes Hill, and within a few days he was dead.

DICK: He was probably poisoned.

NAT: *(seriously and obviously enjoying and believing his story)* He died of the plague and that's how Stokes Hill got it.

DICK: And has it again, the Lord help them.

JOE: Have any of you seen a rat suffering from the plague?

*The others look at each other, seeking a response.*

JACK: Can't say as I've had.

BART: Joe's got a point, lads.

JOE: Nah, he probably had it before he bit the rat's head off.

NAT: You believe what you want to believe.

JACK: I've eaten rat, boiled. No food in the 'ouse, my ma said, so we ate it, boiled.

BART: There's nothing like a cooked rat, when yer starving. *(he chuckles and exits behind bar)*

JOE: *(irritably)* That's enough about rats!

NAT: *(returning to his table)* We'll be next and not far off I reckon.

JACK: What d'you mean?

NAT: Catching the plague lad.

JOE: There's not much you can do about it, unless you move on, quickly.

NAT: Where would ye go, Joe? You tell me that.

JOE: Aye and how would you live? Jobs are difficult to come by these days.

NAT: Aye.

*BART enters and listens to the conversation while pouring ale into his mug.*

*NAT holds up his mug and BART approaches and pours him a drink.*

DICK: I blame the witches.

NAT: Aye, there's truth in that.

JOE: Well that's nothing new.

DICK: They carry the devil's curse.

JACK: My ma says that about the one in the village.

JOE: Who's that then?

DICK: The woman that lives at Crouch Rise.



JOE: How d'you know she's a witch?

JACK: She's a witch alright. I've heard her talking to her cats. She's got six of 'em. At night you can hear 'em moaning.

JOE: I talk to my old nag when I have to giddy him up. Does that make me one?

JACK: Cats is different, and you're not a woman, Joe.

JOE: And as for your moaning, all cats mew, especially at night.

JACK: Not the way they do, Joe.

NAT: What about her husband then?

DICK: He's dead.

BART: Don't tell me he wakes up in his grave at night and moans too.

*BART and DICK laugh. BART returns to the bar.*

NAT: Most folk say she poisoned 'im.

BART: No, I heard he died of blood poisoning, cut his hand on a flour sack hook. He refused to be bled and died as a result. She seems a bit young for a witch, don't yer think?

DICK: Age has nothin' to do with it. Some witches keep their youth until they die. They look young, but underneath they're as old as an over ripe crab apple. The Crouch Rise witch keeps herself to herself, sings strange songs and sells potions to cure warts and all.

JACK: Madeleine's her name and she's always in black.

JOE: Her husband died about a year ago, didn't he?

BART: That'd be right.

JOE: Well there's your answer. She's still in mourning.

BART: Some women are in mourning for the rest of their lives.

JACK: My pa says that about men, or at least about himself.

DICK: Jack, you're gabbling!

*NAT laughs*

JACK: No! He says that from the day he married my ma, he was in mournin' for the rest of his life.

*The others laugh*

*BART and NAT raise their mugs in a mock toast.*

*ARTHUR, TOM and BEN enter the alehouse UL in a hurry. They are in their early twenties, all labourers and scruffy. ARTHUR is tall and well built, TOM is short stocky, BEN is tall and olive skinned. They carry wooden staffs and are prone to becoming hot headed and violent. They cross to JOE and company.*

ARTHUR: Have you heard? There's plague on the edge of the village!

BART: Well I won't be open for much longer, if that's the case.

JOE: Where is it?

TOM: Crouch Rise, that's where!

ARTHUR: The old miller, Bert Danns, got it, but it's far enough away from the centre of the village.

BEN: It's that witch Madeleine, she's to blame. They say she's French.

JOE: What's her being French got to do with it?

BART: She was born in Freshfield. Her ma was French.

DICK: How do you know?

BART: I'm the Landlord of this tavern Dick. I get to hear about most things.

TOM: She's a witch no matter where she comes from.

JACK: I reckon she's that alright.

BEN: I know most of the village would be glad to see her go.

JOE: That may be so, but would they take any action?

TOM: I reckon they would if asked.

BEN: (*sharply*) We don't need to ask 'em!

JOE: So what are you going to do about it?

BEN: (*wildly*) We'll burn her house down with her in it, that's what we'll do!

JOE: (*alarmed*) You're not serious are you?

BEN: Yes I am. We are!

ARTHUR: We were hoping you might help.

*TOM, DICK and JACK murmur agreement*

JACK: We'd help 'em wouldn't we Joe?

DICK: I know I would.

JOE: I'm not convinced she's a witch and burning her house is not the answer.

BEN: It is if she's in it, ay lads?

*TOM, DICK, ARTHUR and BART agree in unison.*

NAT: (*angrily*) Well, you won't have my help. It's not my place to take action, or any of you. You need to consult his Lordship or else see Ulrich the steward about it, otherwise you risk the hangman's rope.

BEN: (*bitterly*) His Lordship? And what will he do ay? If there's plague in the village, he'll board up his house and be off to his next property until it's all over. That's what he'll do for us, like his father before him did.

BART: Aye, Ben's right lads.

TOM: (*raising his staff*) Let's not waste any more time!

ARTHUR: Are you with us or not Joe?

JOE: I need time to think about it.

NAT: Joe's right.

BEN: (*grabbing JOE'S arm*) We 'aint got time to think about it! She might be up to all manner of curses. We should act now!

JOE: (*angrily*) Let go of my arm!

*BEN hesitates and then pushes away JOE'S arm.*

*At that moment ANNA and STEPHEN enter UL in a hurry. Both are in their teens. Anna has long fair hair which falls to the middle of her back. She wears a red and cream blouse, a black ankle length skirt and a woolen shawl. STEPHEN is tall and wears a brown shirt and an old leather waistcoat and brown trousers tied just below the knees.*

ANNA: (*beside herself*) Joe! Thank God I've found you. It's ma!

JOE: Ma? What about her?

ANNA: (*trying to control her sobbing*) I reckon she has the plague! She looks awful!

STEPHEN: And I don't think she's the only one.

JOE: But she's the only one that matters to us (*angrily*) and you've left her on her own?

STEPHEN: No Joe, I got Brother Michael to see her.

*ANNA breaks down and sobs. STEPHEN looks on helplessly and places an arm around ANNA.*

TOM: That witch took your ma Joe!

BEN: Well Joe, are you with us?

*JOE looks at him sharply and runs his hand through his hair*

*Lights down slowly*

## Scene 2: The Cottage at Crouch Rise

*The scene is simply set and is eerily lit. A series of shimmering colours are projected onto the back wall to depict fire, coupled with the sound of crackling and hissing fire. A smoke machine completes the picture..*

*C and D stage are BEN, TOM, ARTHUR, JACK and DICK brandishing cudgels and daggers are looking upstage at the fiery images. A group of 4 MALE VILLAGERS and 2 FEMALE VILLAGERS are DL. The females are clinging to each other, in fear of what is happening. The male villagers are completely entranced as they peer at the flames.*

BEN: (yelling) Plague bringer!

TOM: (yelling) Burn brightly in hell, witch!

DICK: A curse on you, you hell wife!

*The VILLAGERS join in with their own ranting and raving*

*The fire roars and suddenly there is a blood curdling scream from the back wall. THE 2 FEMALE VILLAGERS scream in fear and move back. The men shield their faces against the heat and groan.*

ARTHUR: (*yelling*) She's done for, lads!

JACK: (*yelling*) The Breenham witch is dead!

*BEN, DICK, TOM, Jack and the MALE VILLAGERS cheer.*

*At that moment GEOFFREY, a peasant boy of 13 years hurries through the centre aisle. He is dressed in a green shirt with rolled up sleeves, a grey jacket and green leggings, and has bare feet. He scrambles on to the stage and falls sobbing C.*

GEOFFREY: Where is she?

BEN: In there, roasting!

*TOM and ARTHUR snigger*

GEOFFREY: (*beside himself*) What have you done? Yer've killed me ma! Why? You Murderers!

BEN: It's her boy!

TOM: Let's throw him in the fire with her!

*At that moment JOE enters DR.*

*He stands back startled by the force of the fire. As ARTHUR grabs GEOFFREY, JOE draws his sword.*

JOE: Leave him be. You've had your sport! If you kill the boy you'll be in deeper trouble.

*Arthur pushes GEOFFREY who falls at Joe's feet. The boy continues to sob.*

GEOFFREY: They killed her! Why? She wouldn't have harmed a soul!

BEN: He's cursed, like his mother!

JOE: He's just a boy! (*to GEOFFREY*) Get up! (*GEOFFREY does so and Joe backs away holding Geoffrey by the arm*) There's nothing you can do for your mother, God rest her soul.

GEOFFREY: I need to be with her, but what can I do?

JOE: Nothing. She's dead, now go!

*JOE pushes him into centre aisle.*

BEN (*drawing his sword*) He ain't going anywhere.

JACK: Ben, what are you doing?

JOE (*to GEOFFREY*) Go! Run! (*turning on the MALE and FEMALE VILLAGERS*) And you too, it's all over!

*THE MALE and FEMALE VILLAGERS hesitate. JOE approaches them, sword raised.*

Go on! Get out of here!

*They scurry off L and through the centre aisle.*

*GEOFFREY hesitates and then flees through the centre aisle.*

JOE: (*to BEN*) You'll 'ave to get past me before you get to the boy. You've gone far enough (*raising his voice*) all of you!

BEN: The deed's done and for the good.

JOE: Not for you it 'aint. 'is Lordship ain't left his property and the steward has found out about this burning.

BEN: Well, I don't see any of his men, what can he do? He'll listen to us.

JOE: D'you really think so? Jack, you'd better get out here lad, before the soldiers find you, and you Dick.

DICK: We'd all be better off out of here!

*BEN crosses to JACK and DICK, brandishing his sword*

BEN: Nobody goes anywhere! We're in this together.

*JOE approaches BEN, but as he does so ARTHUR moves towards JOE and manages to get behind him without being seen.*

JOE: Then you'll answer to me!

JACK: (*pointing at ARTHUR*) Look out Joe!

*JOE turns but ARTHUR strikes him on the shoulder with his cudgel and JOE falls to the ground.*

*BEN crosses to JOE, who is lying on the ground breathing heavily and holding his shoulder.*

BEN: (*frantic*) I reckon Joe warned the steward, don't you?

ARTHUR: Aye, He must have done!

BEN: (*to JOE, who tries to get up*)) You never were a good fighter were you Joe? Traitor!

*BEN thrusts his sword into JOE'S side who cries out.*

DICK: (*shouting*) Joe!

*DICK rushes towards BEN brandishing his cudgel. BEN turns and cuts him down. DICK screams and falls to his knees and begins to cough his life away.*

JACK: (*rooted to the spot*) Dick!

TOM: What did you do that for?

BEN: It was either him or me. Those two are as bad as each other!

*DICK reaches out for help, but he falls.*

*At that moment NAT enters L. He is startled by the sight.*

NAT: What the hell has been goin' on? You'd better get out of here. The steward and his men are coming! You'll never stand a chance.

*BEN looks at both bodies and backs away fearfully*

*Nat approaches the bodies*

NAT: (*turning on BEN and his cohorts*) You bloody fools!



BEN: Let's get out of here!

JACK: What about Joe and Dick?

TOM: They're gone Jack!

NAT: They were your friends, you vermin!

ARTHUR: Come on; let's go, while we can!

*BEN, TOM and ARTHUR scurry off DR. JACK crosses to JOE and falls at his side and sobs.*

*At that moment ULRICH, the Steward and SOLDIERS 1, 2 and 3 enter*  
*L*

*ULRICH is strongly built, in his late twenties and wears a metal studded jacket, white shirt, black leggings and boots and carries a sword in his belt.*

ULRICH: (to NAT) Are these the culprits?

NAT: (quickly and indicating DR) No, the ones you want have left - that way!

ULRICH: Come on!

*ULRICH and his men exit DR*

*NAT crosses to DICK, checks his wound, sighs deeply and then crosses to JACK.*

*JACK sobs. He cradles JOE'S head in his lap.*

NAT: Did Ben do this?

*JACK nods*

NAT: (looking out DR) By the hand of Christ I hope they catch 'em.

*JOE stirs and coughs. JACK looks wide eyed at NAT and then at JOE.*

JACK: He's...He's alive!

*The actors freeze.*

*Lights down*

### Scene 3: The Steward's Lodge

*The set is simple. There is a small table CL where ULRICH is seated in a high back chair, drinking wine from a goblet. On this occasion he is jacketless. There are two small flagons on the table. JOE is seated on a wooden chair R facing DL. He is also drinking wine from a goblet. NAT is standing DL drinking from a clay mug.*

JOE: *(surveying the room)* You've done well for yourself Ulrich.

ULRICH: His lordship looks after me.

NAT: So he should, you do a good job.

ULRICH: I'm glad you think so, Nat. Let's hope the village votes me in as steward again next year.

NAT: I see no reason why they won't.

ULRICH: You're flattering me in the hope of another mug of ale, ay Nat?

*ULRICH holds out a flagon.*

NAT: I wouldn't say no, would I now?

*He chuckles and crosses to the small table, takes the flagon and pours himself a drink. He replaces the flagon and crosses L.*

ULRICH: You buried your poor mother yesterday then Joe?

JOE: Aye, she's at peace, thank the Lord.

NAT: A great misfortune

*Joe hangs his head in thought. NAT and ULRICH exchange awkward glances.*

ULRICH: It's about time you were married lad. You can't go fending for yourself for the rest of your life.

JOE: Anna looks after me and Stephen does his best with the cooking too.

NAT: It's about time she were wedded Joe.

JOE: Aye, I reckon John Tibbs is her suitor at present. He's a nice lad.

NAT: Aye, he belongs to an honest family (*holding up his cup*) Here's to ye Joe.

*JOE and ULRICH respond to the toast*

ULRICH: Well Joe, what's on your mind? You didn't come here to talk socially, I'm sure.

JOE: I want your permission to seek out Ben and his men.

ULRICH: Why don't you leave it alone, Joe? They won't come back here in a hurry and if they do I'll arrest them.

*JOE rises from his chair painfully holding his right arm to his side. He crosses DR.*

ULRICH: And look at you. You're not fit for work let alone hunting villains or murderers.

JOE: Aye, I'm lucky to be alive, but they killed my friend Dick, the fool that he was.

ULRICH: It would be impossible to do it alone, Joe. I wish I could help you, but the Sheriff and his Lordship won't give me the manpower.

JOE: Aye, but I'm certain if Dick had been a nobleman or even a soldier, they'd do something.

ULRICH: Aye, that may be so, but I have no power to act otherwise.

JOE: Stephen will help me, he says, and he is most insistent. (*He chuckles a little incredulously*) He's been practising sword skills this past week.

ULRICH: You'll need more men, with experience.

JOE: That's what I want, just two of your men.

ULRICH: I've said I can't grant you any help when it comes to manpower, that's strictly his Lordship's decision. (*He rises and crosses to JOE*) And I know what his answer will be if I ask him. He's protective of his men and, (*He looks down at his mug of ale*) I'm not sure how you'll accept this...

JOE: (*interrupting*) What d'you mean?

ULRICH: His lordship is of the mind that after the witch was killed, the plague seemed to leave the village. He's come to the conclusion that perhaps her death was all for the good and the plague died with her.

NAT: Aye, many villagers think that way too, but they are angry about Dick's murder.

ULRICH: I know he was your closest friend Joe, but his Lordship feels he had himself to blame, being there when the woman was burnt. His Lordship says he wants the ringleader's head on a plate, but all in good time he says, all in good time.

*JOE shakes his head, crosses DC and looks out front*

ULRICH: Have you any idea where they might be presently?

JOE: Nat, tell him what you've heard.

NAT: Aye. They were seen at Limesdale, two days ago, but they didn't stay. They must've gone there for supplies, but chances are they're hiding out in the forest.

JOE: (*without turning*) So do I and that's where I'll go. Ulrich, I'll seek them out without the man power, and when I find them do I have your consent to kill them, if needs must?

ULRICH: How can I do that Joe? What I'm prepared to do is overlook what you have in mind.

JOE: (*he turns to him*) Do I go with your blessing?

ULRICH: Officially no, but you `ave my personal blessing, but don't you breathe a word of our discussion to a living soul. D'you hear me Nat?

NAT: What? Er, no, I haven't been here have I?

ULRICH: Good. I wish you well Joe.

*They raise their vessels in a toast.*

*Lights down*

#### Scene 4: The exterior of Joe's cottage

*The stage is bare except for a stool at DC.*

*The lights come up on JOE seated on the stool, cleaning a sword with a rag. JOHN TIBBS enters L. He is a quiet, fair-haired youth, aged about 16 years. He wears a brown shirt with full sleeves, a long green cloth waistcoat, brown leggings and soft, flat, dark brown shoes which have seen better days. He carries a bunch of wild flowers, which he quickly places behind his back on seeing Joe.*

JOHN: Er, good mornin' Joe.

*Joe looks up at him, smiles and returns to the cleaning of his sword.*

JOE: She's not here.

JOHN: (*disappointed*) Oh?

JOE: (*smiling*) Nice flowers.

JOHN: (*surprised*) Oh. I .....

JOE: (*quickly interrupting*) I can smell them. Gilly flowers from the meadow, they've a lovely scent.

*JOHN takes the flowers from behind his back and holds them in front of him.*

JOHN: (*embarrassed*) I know nothin' about flowers. They looked pretty, so I picked them for her.

JOE: Good lad, she'll like 'em. Shall I tell her you asked after her?

*JOHN nods*

JOE: (*looking up at him*) You're a fine lad John; I'm pleased you and Anna are ... well, good friends.

JOHN: She's a handsome young woman.

JOE: (*smiling broadly*) She is that.

*JOE continues cleaning the sword, JOHN watches him. After a short while JOE looks up at him.*

JOE: Shall I take the flowers?

JOHN: What? Oh, no, it's alright.

*JOE smiles*

JOHN: That's a fine sword.

JOE: It belonged to my pa. He brought it back with him from Agincourt.

JOHN: My, that were some years past.

JOE: Aye, must be thirty odd years ago.

JOHN: (*suddenly*) Can I come with you?

*JOE rises from the stool and crosses R in thought. He turns pointing the sword at John.*

JOE: Why?

JOHN: (*enthusiastically*) To bring Ben and the others to justice.

*JOE lowers the sword and crosses DR.*

JOE: It won't be a May Day jaunt yer know.

JOHN: Oh, I know that. I can use a bow. I've often been hunting with my pa.

JOE: Not on his Lordship's land I hope.

JOHN: No, in other places in the forest. I know it well.

JOE: It's a large forest, John.

JOHN: Well, I know most of it.

JOE: What would your pa say?

JOHN: Not much I don't think. I'd be one less mouth to feed.

JOE: And what about Anna, wouldn't she be worried?

JOHN: I'm sure she'd understand.

*JOE laughs knowingly.*

JOE: Then you must know her better than I do.

*At that point MARGARET, Jack's mother and JACK enter through the centre aisle. MARGARET is a buxom woman in her thirties. She wears a long, faded blue dress which is fitted under her bust. Her hair is loose and falls about her shoulders. She pushes JACK in front of her with a birch broom.*

MARGARET: Go on, hurry up you stupid lump!

JACK: (*complaining loudly*) Ooh ma!

MARGARET: (*prodding him*) I'll give you ooh ma!

*They enter stage at front.*

Forgive me for bothering you Joe (acknowledging JOHN) I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I must say John; I'm pleased you have leanings towards Anna.

*John smiles awkwardly*

JOE: (*chuckling*) As long as he don't lean too close, ay John?

JOHN: (*awkwardly*) You can trust me Joe.

JOE: I know I can lad. I was teasing. (*turning to Margaret*) And what brings you here in a huff and a puff?

MARGARET: I've told my Jack here, to apologise to you Joe, for his foolishness. How he got involved in the witch's burnin' I'll never know.

JOE: He don't need to apologise to me Margaret and you should keep that wagging tongue of yours still. You don't want Jack facing a hanging, do you?

MARGARET: Lord no, of course not! But he must thank you for not handin' him over to Ulrich.

JOE: And I don't need thanking neither.

JACK: (*pitifully*) I thought I was doing the right thing. I did Joe, honest.

JOE: I understand Jack. You're going to have to learn to forget it boy.

MARGARET: You're too soft Joe, like your ma, God rest her soul.

*JOE runs a hand through his hair and crosses slowly DR.*

MARGARET: Oh, there goes my big mouth. I'm sorry Joe. I didn't mean to....

*JOE raises his hand to stop her continuing*

JOE: That's alright Margaret. I thank you for your concern.

MARGARET: (*quickly taking a different tack*) Would you let him do a job for you? It would get him out from under my feet.



JACK: *(sulkily)* Oh ma.

JOE: A job, ay? Well he could clean and sharpen this sword.

MARGARET: As long as he don't cut his hands off.

JACK: Oh ma, I wouldn't do that! I'm not as stupid as you think!

MARGARET: *(hitting him hard with the broom and raising her voice above his complaints)* Make sure you listen to Joe and do as he asks, d'you hear?

JACK: *(miserably)* I hear!

*JACK moves L muttering, collides with JOHN, who pushes him L. JACK, looks back at MARGARET like a wounded animal.*

MARGARET: *(threatening him with the broom)* Don't you look at me like that and mutter foul things under your breath, my lad! *(to JOE)* If he causes trouble let me be the first to hear about it.

*JOE chuckles and he acknowledges her request by raising his hand.*

MARGARET: I'd better get back to me chores.

*She motions threateningly at JACK with the broom again and then exits through the centre aisle.*

*JACK shakes his fist at her.*

JOE: *(admonishingly)* Don't you do that to your ma, lad.

JACK: I'm covered in bruises. She's always hitting me.

JOE: Don't be soft. Come on you've got work to do.

*JOE crosses to exit DR and JACK follows. JOE turns.*

JOE: *(to JOHN)* I'll have a word with Anna, but you must talk to her, and kindly.

JOHN: Thank you Joe. I will speak with her as you say.

JOE: Good. Come on Jack!

*JOE exits and JACK scurries after him. JOHN considers the flowers and leaves them on the stool and exits R.*

*Lights down and up on the same scene to depict the passing of time.*

*ANNA is sitting on the stool holding the flowers, which she places to her nose. JOHN is standing L and close.*

ANNA: (*coldly*) And I suppose these were to make me feel better, ay?

JOHN: I would've given them to you anyhow.

ANNA: Have you told your ma and pa?

JOHN: Not yet.

ANNA: Who's going to help them on the land while you're away on this... manhunt?

JOHN: They'll manage.

ANNA: (*rising and crossing R, her voice wavering*) You could be killed.

JOHN: I can look after myself.

*ANNA shakes her head and turns to him*

ANNA: You've never fought before! Not proper anyhow.

JOHN: I'm not going into battle Anna. Don't you think I haven't thought about it?

ANNA: (*raising her voice*) But you haven't thought about me, have you?

*JOHN, exasperated turns away from her and crosses L*

JOHN: (*quietly*) I think about you all the time.

ANNA: (*she begins to sob*) Do you?

JOHN: You know I do

*He crosses to her but she moves L quietly sobbing.*

JOHN: *(quietly, pleading)* Anna.

*She turns on him*

ANNA: You're a bigger fool than I thought you were, John Tibbs! You can go and get yourself killed for all I care!

*She throws the flowers at him and hurries off L*

JOHN: Anna!

*He goes to follow her, but stops, drops his arms against his sides in complete frustration, turns on his heels and exits R*

*ULRICH in his studded jacket and JOE enter DR. Immediately JOE notices the flowers on the ground.*

JOE: Oh dear. *(he picks up a flower)*

ULRICH: What is it?

JOE: *(smiles)* It's nothing to worry about.

ULRICH: How are you feeling?

JOE: *(smiling wryly)* I'm a good healer. The wound's well bound and I'm able look after myself in a fight.

ULRICH: But have you given the matter further thought Joe, since I last saw you?

JOE: My mind is made up, we're going.

ULRICH: You and Stephen?

JOE: *(looking at the flower)* And John Tibbs, I 'spect.

ULRICH: *(shaking his head)* They're so inexperienced, Joe. They could be a liability.

JOE: I'll keep an eye on them.

ULRICH: You'd better keep your wits about you. I want you back in one piece.

JOE: (*scoffs*) In one piece? That sounds good, ay?

ULRICH: You know what I mean. You'll need to keep to the forest track; it runs west to east. The King owns deer north and south of the track. Under the ancient laws you're allowed to hunt for any game, but leave the deer well alone.

JOE: I'll make it clear to the lads.

*ANNA enters L. She looks coldly at JOE and picks up the flowers and the stool.*

ULRICH: Anna, you grow taller every time I see you. How are you my dear?

ANNA: (*ignoring the compliment, she addresses JOE off handedly*) There's food on the table. (*to ULRICH*) Will you be eating with us?

JOE: (*sharply*) I expect you to change your mood, my girl.

ANNA: Don't my girl me, I have a name!

*She throws the stool and the flowers UL*

JOE: You'll have the back of my hand if you carry on like that.

ANNA: (*to ULRICH*) Why can't you stop him from going?

ULRICH: I wish I could Anna.

ANNA: And Stephen and John?

ULRICH: They're old enough to know their own minds.

ANNA: (*trying to control her sobbing*) My ma's dead. (*She trembles as she loses control*) By the end of this week I could have no one.

JOE: That's enough Anna!

ANNA: (*fiercely*) I've always looked up to you Joe, but now I can see you're just a fool, like the others!

JOE: (*angrily, approaching her*) I said that's enough!

*ULRICH senses imminent violence and crosses to them*

ANNA: Ma always said you were somewhat of a hot head.

*JOE raises his hand to strike her, but ULRICH quickly grabs JOE'S raised arm.*

ULRICH: Don't make matters worse, Joe. You'll regret it. (*to ANNA*) I'll stay for a bite to eat, Anna.

*ANNA looks up at him and nods her head vigorously. She looks at JOE helplessly. He takes her in his arms.*

ANNA: Oh Joe, (*she looks up at him*) I love you too much.

*JOE hugs her.*

JOE: Aye and John no doubt.

ANNA: (*nodding*) Aye I do.

*ULRICH smiles and opens his arms to them.*

ULRICH: I'm starvin'! I could do with some lunch and I hope you've some ale. We all need a drink, ay?

*ANNA looks up at JOE*

JOE: (*stroking her hair*) That's better. I 'ate seeing you like this. Come on let's give this man some food.

*JOE kisses ANNA lightly on her forehead and they exit L, arm in arm. ULRICH follows as the lights go down.*

Scene 5: In the Forest

*It is daytime. The stage is empty. On the back wall is a projected image of a forest and the lighting is such that it throws dappled images of light and foliage.*

*We hear the sound of distant birdsong.*

*The lights come up on JOE, STEPHEN and JOHN as they enter the stage through the centre aisle. Under a short black hooded cape, JOE is wearing a worn brown waistcoat over a green long sleeved shirt. He also wears brown leggings and old shin high leather boots. He has a sword and a dagger in his waist belt.*

*STEPHEN wears a black hooded cape over a grey jacket, a cream, long sleeved shirt and black leggings. He also wears short leather boots and has a sword in his waist belt.*

*JOHN wears a grey hooded cape over a faded green jacket, a grey long sleeved shirt and green leggings. He carries a bow over one shoulder, a quiver of arrows over the other, and a sword in his waist belt.*

*JOE and JOHN also carry canvas back packs. STEPHEN carries a large leather water bottle on his back.*

JOE: Henceforth lads the forest becomes thicker. We must stay together at all times. Remember, safety in numbers. Keep a good look out and if you see anything untoward, let me know, no matter what, understand?

*JOHN and STEPHEN mutter in agreement.*

STEPHEN: Joe, how big is the forest?

JOE: It'll take us three days to get from west to east along this track and in parts we need to get through some thick bush.

STEPHEN: How far is Limedale from the eastern end of the forest?

JOHN: About three miles.

JOE: John, we rely on you for game. It'll soon be time to eat so keep your eyes skinned for food. Remember, forget about deer, unless you want to end up on an hangman's rope. The wardens will be on the look out, so take care!

JOHN: Alright, If we don't find any game we'll eat what we have and any berries we find.

JOE: Bear in mind there are others that know this forest better than we do and they may not be so friendly.

STEPHEN: Outlaws?

JOE: Aye lad.

JOHN: (*sinisterly*) And others.

STEPHEN: What others?

JOE: (*firmly*) I don't want any talk of ghouls and things like that. I don't want you two runnin' out on me with the fear of the devil in you. Now let's get on. Keep to the track and stay together.

*They cross R when suddenly STEPHEN stops and turns.*

STEPHEN: What was that?

JOE: (*to JOHN, sharply*) Now look what yer've put into his mind.

STEPHEN: No, I 'eard somethin'. Listen!

*They become silent and look about them. JOE draws his sword.*

JOE: (*relaxing and sheathing his sword*) Your imagination is running wild Stephen. We must move on.

STEPHEN: P'raps your right. I'm sorry Joe.

*JOE smiles and gives him a brotherly slap on the back.*

*They are about to exit R when JACK hurtles through the centre aisle, which causes the three men to turn and brandish their swords.*

STEPHEN: It's Jack!

*JACK scrambles onto the stage and approaches them out of breath. He is dressed in his normal clothes and wears an old long sleeve-less*

*overcoat over them. He also has a long dagger in his trouser belt and carries a small pack on his back.*

JOE: *(angrily)* What in hell d'you think your doing, following us?

JACK: *(controlling his breathing)* Ma thought you might be needing some help, Joe, so here I am.

JOE: *(amazed)* Your ma? This is not akin to a child's game Jack. It's serious, dangerous work. Yer shouldn't be here!

JACK: *(concerned)* I said you wouldn't be pleased, but she was keen on me helpin you.

JOE: I'm not your keeper, lad.

JACK: Ma says she's sick of me mopin' about.

JOE: She says that about yer pa, He's not comin' is he?

JACK: *(agitated)* D'you think he might then, Joe?

*STEPHEN and JOHN stifle their laughter*

JOE: *(waving his question away with his hand)* Never mind.

JACK: I've got some food and a blanket *(He takes off his pack and holds it out to them)* and I'm well armed. *(He draws his dagger and shows them)*

JOE: I should send you back home.

JACK: I don't want to go back Joe.

STEPHEN: *(concerned)* Joe, he's not goin' to help us at all.

JOE: It'll be dark before he gets back. I can't do that to him.

JOHN: Even I wouldn't want to make me way back in the dark.

JOE: Jack, look, if you come with us, you must stay close.

*STEPHEN shrugs and shakes his head.*



JACK: (*nodding vigorously*) I'll do as you say, Joe.

JOE: (*sharply*) If we expect no noise you'll make no noise, understood?

JACK: I promise, Joe.

JOE: And if I tell yer to do something, you'll do it without question, won't you?

JACK: (*eagerly*) Anythin' Joe, anythin' at all.

JOE: And you'll listen and take heed of what Stephen and John say.

JACK: (*to Stephen and John*) Oh I will, I will.

STEPHEN: This is not a good idea, Joe.

JOE: (*turning to STEPHEN, firmly*) Stephen, if you're goin' to complain and make my headache, you can go back. Being in charge of this quest, I make the final decisions, is that understood?

STEPHEN: (*sourly*) As you wish.

JOE: (*firmly*) Are you with me or not

STEPHEN: Yes, of course I am.

*JOE holds out his hand and Stephen shakes it.*

STEPHEN: Forgive me Joe.

*JOE hugs him briefly.*

JOE: What about you John?

JOHN: Me? I've no problem, Joe.

JOE: Good lad. (*to JACK*) And I don't want you telling me you're afraid of the dark.

JACK: No Joe.

*JACK hurriedly shoulders his pack and sheaths his dagger.*

JOE: Stay close. Come on.

JACK: (*following*) Thank you Joe, lads.

*STEPHEN and JOHN look at each other and shake their heads.*

JACK: (*eagerly*) I'm ready!

JOHN: (*firmly*) You need to be quiet.

JACK: (*reassuringly and nodding vigorously*) As the grave.

*They approach exit R. JACK is at the end of the line. He looks warily behind him and turns, drawing his dagger. The others exit. JACK looks about him.*

JOE: (*off, annoyed*) Jack, I said stay close! Do it now!

*JACK immediately hurries off R*

*Lights down*

Scene 6: Deeper in the forest. Early the next morning

*The same setting, as in the previous scene and the lighting suggests an early morning just after sunrise. The lights come up on JOE and company seated and lounging C with blankets spread to suggest they have been sleeping in this location. They are eating from cloths – bread and the remains of game.*

JOE: D'you know John, I'd never tried squirrel before. Not a great deal of meat on it, but very tasty.

JOHN: It's amazing what you eat when you're hungry.

JACK: Is there any more?

STEPHEN: Yes, if you're prepared to catch it.

JOE: Already you have shown how useful yer are, John.

*JOE and JOHN roll up the blankets and cloths and put them in their packs. JOHN throws JACK'S blanket at JACK and he stuffs it into his own pack.*

STEPHEN: I hope I prove my worth to you some day.

JOE: You did that years ago Stephen. You're a good lad and I'm proud of you.

*STEPHEN'S face beams and he eats.*

JACK: What about me?

STEPHEN: What about you?

*STEPHEN and the others laugh, JACK looks at all three men and shakes his head, He hurriedly finishes his meal and STEPHEN assists JACK in folding his blanket and placing it in JACK'S backpack.*

JOE: *(wiping his mouth on his sleeve)* Right, we need to be moving.

JOHN: *(rolling up cloth and blanket and placing it in his backpack)* I just hope Ben and his men are still in the forest.

JOE: I'm sure they are. Unless they've stolen money, how else would they survive? I don't think they have enough for a mug of porter.

JOHN: I hope you're right.

*There is a sound of movement in the forest, from off L*

*JOE draws his sword.*

JOE: Stay back.

*The four men back away R*

*Two tinkers, EDMUND and SAM enter L. EDMUND and SAM both in their early twenties, are dirty, unshaven, wearing soiled shirts, covered with old jackets. They also wear baggy trousers, EDMUND with a cloth hat with a wide brim and SAM hatless. They both have dirty coloured cravats at their throats. They carry cloth back packs.*  
EDMUND: *(on seeing the four men)* What have we here then?

SAM: Don't seem like forest people to me.

JOE: What d'you want?

EDMUND: D'you know Sam I was about to ask 'em the same.

*SAM chuckles*

JOE: We don't want no score with you, get on your way!

SAM: Friendly, aint he Edmund?

EDMUND: Those are good weapons you 'ave there boys.

*He chuckles*

JOE: *(to the others)* Come on lads we'll not waste our time with them.  
*(to EDMUND and SAM)* Move aside or you'll feel the sharpness of our weapons.

*As they approach EDMUND and SAM with weapons drawn, their progress is halted by the entrance L of AMBROSE and GERT. AMBROSE portly and is in his thirties was a monk until he was banished and met up with the present group. His speech indicates that he is well educated. He wears an old sheepskin jacket over a grey woollen shirt and tight dark trousers which have been patched often and calf length soft boots. He brandishes a knife which he holds against JOHN'S back. GERT who is in her thirties has bushy dark unkempt hair and is dressed in a long ankle length black coat over a long purple dress and black calf length boots. She holds a spear against JOE'S back.*

GERT: Your first lesson in the forest dears' is to watch your backs. Drop your weapons otherwise your friend here sees the forest for the last time.

*The captives hesitate.*

GERT: *(fiercely)* I mean what I say!

*They drop their weapons and GERT motions them to C.*

*SAM and EDMUND collect the weapons and place them in a pile UC, except for two daggers which they brandish,*

SAM: Some nice steel here ma.

EDMUND: A worthy bow and a full quiver of arrers, an' all.

AMBROSE: A good morning's sport lads. The forest's been very busy these past few days. Perhaps you could explain your reasons for being here.

JOE: We're passing through, that's all.

AMBROSE: Not a convincing response, my friend.

JOE: (*scoffs*) Friend?

STEPHEN: And that's all you're going to know.

GERT: (*wildly at JACK*) Why are you here ?

*JACK recoils fearfully.*

JACK: She aint a witch is she Joe?

*AMBROSE and the captors laugh*

AMBROSE: She can be at times. We're tinkers, or we were, until we were forced to make ourselves scarce. We've been nomadic for the past few months.

JOE: Nomadic?

GERT: What he means is we don't have a permanent home.

JOE: So, you're outlaws.

AMBROSE: Yes, I suppose we are outside the law. The forest has a number of outlaws as residents.

GERT: Ambrose here was a monk, a man of letters. Very learned he was.

AMBROSE: (*with mock annoyance*) I still am my dear.

GERT: He also kept the accounts for a monastery some miles from here. The trouble was Ambrose liked the feel of coins in his pocket and he was banished.

*She cackles*

AMBROSE: *(smiling)* Such was my fate *(he bows mockingly)* My lady here *(SAM and EDMUND laugh and GERT throws them a severe look)*, her name is Gert. She is The Queen of the family, our Queen Boudicca, if you wish.

*GERT cackles*

JACK: *(scoffs)* She don't look like a queen to me?

JOE: *(sharply)* Hold your tongue Jack!

AMBROSE: *(motioning to EDMUND and SAM)* Gentlemen, these are her two sons *(sardonically)* Princes they are not.

*EDMUND and SAM mutter their disapproval*

GERT: *(to JACK)* Now, where're ye from?

*JACK looks at JOE for permission to reply. JOE nods.*

JACK: We're from Breenham.

AMBROSE: That's not far from here. Our young guest lives, or rather, lived in Breenham.

JOHN: Guest, what guest?

AMBROSE: Sam, where did yer leave the lad?

SAM *(thumbing the direction over his shoulder)* Back there, tied to a tree.

GERT: Well get him!

SAM: Why me?

GERT: *(harshly)* Do as I say, get him!

*Sam mutters disapprovingly*

GERT: Edmund, go with him.

*SAM and EDMUND reluctantly exit R*

JOE: Who is 'e?

GERT: We're not sure what to do with him. I thought we might leave him to the animals.

*SAM enters right and roughly pulls GEOFFREY who is tied by the waist to a length of rope. His hands are also tied in front of him. EDMUND follows.*

*GEOFFREY is unkempt, face dirty and he still wears the clothes he wore earlier, but they are muddy and torn. He hangs his head. EDMUND holds up his head by grasping his hair. JACK recognizes him immediately.*

AMBROSE: He answers to the name of Geoffrey.

JACK: It's the witch's boy!

*JOHN and STEPHEN give him a sharp look. JOE appears surprised. EDMUND lets go of the boy's hair and his head falls forward.*

GERT: *(harshly to JACK)* Witch? What's this about a witch?

JACK: *(nervously)* Er, he just reminds me of someone in Breen'am, that's all.

GERT: *(almost face to face with JACK)* You know this boy well don't you?

JACK: *(fearfully)* No!

JOE: *(firmly)* I do.

AMBROSE: *(calmly)* Then please explain.

GERT: And it better be good 'an all.

JOE: His ma was burnt as a witch in her own cottage and the lad ran away into the forest. He can be no threat to you? We'll take him off yer hands.

STEPHEN: Is that wise Joe? Look at the state of him.

JOHN: Stephen's right and we're not responsible for him.

JOE: (*sharply*) He's from our village. We can't reject him.

GERT: (*to AMBROSE*) Well, what shall we do with him?

EDMUND: (*interjecting and addressing GERT*) Ma, aint we gotta say in the matter?

GERT: (*sharply*) If you had a brain, you might!

SAM: We can't let 'im go!

GERT: (*She turns on him and threatens him with the spear*) Keep your mouth shut you useless lump!

*AMBROSE is taken aback by these events and he approaches GERT.*

AMBROSE: Hold your noise! Do you want the whole forest to hear you?

*JOE and JOHN take advantage of their captors' lack of attention and grab their weapons from the pile. JOE grabs AMBROSE from behind. STEPHEN takes his own weapon and confronts EDMUND and SAM. JACK regains his weapons, but is uncertain what to do. GERT wheels round and threatens them all with her spear. JACK backs away.*

GERT: (*angrily*) You fool Ambrose (*threateningly*) Come on, I'll take on the lot of you!

JOE: If you try, the monk here will be the first to go.

JOHN: And your lads will be next.

STEPHEN: Drop the spear and you can go on your way.

AMBROSE: (*trying to be calm*) The lad's right Gert, we could be out of here. Let them keep the boy. He's far from being a prize.

*GERT hesitates and she looks at her captors wondering how she can overcome them.*



JOE: (*addressing SAM and EDMUND*) Untie the boy, now!

*SAM and EDMUND look at each other*

STEPHEN: Do as he says or today will be your last day alive.

*They immediately untie GEOFFREY, who falls to the ground on his knees.*

JOE: Well Gert?

*She throws the spear to the ground and falls to her knees in utter frustration*

JOE: John, get the spear.

*JOHN approaches it and GERT makes a lunge at him but he pushes her away with his foot. SAM and EDMUND react angrily, but STEPHEN threatens them with dagger and sword. They back away. GERT tries to regain her breath.*

GERT: (*beside herself*) I should never have wasted my days with ye!

EDMUND: If you'd listened to us instead of the monk we'd be far away by now.

AMBROSE: And what would you have done, killed the boy?

SAM: He was in the way right from the start!

JOE: You can sort out your differences after we've gone. Gert, get up!

GERT: I can't!

JOE: I said get up!

*GERT struggles to her feet*

JOE: (*to SAM and EDMUND*) Take yer packs off, slowly!

STEPHEN: Go on, do as he says, take 'em off!

*SAM and EDMUND look at each other and remove their packs.*

JOE: Jack, search the packs for rope of any kind.

*Jack does so and pulls out a coil of rope.*

*JOE takes the rope*

JOE: Now get the rope they tied up the boy with.

JACK: I'll do that Joe!

*He crosses U and returns with the length of rope*

STEPHEN: What do we do now?

AMBROSE: Surely you don't need to bind us and leave us here?

JOE: Perhaps the next group of travellers will free you.

AMBROSE: I'm thinking the worst.

JOE: We've no option.

JOHN: What if they get free and come after us?

JOE: They won't be in any fit state and if they did get free, as poachers they'd want get out of the forest as soon as possible. We'll tie them to trees off the main track.

STEPHEN: *(impatiently)* They're a threat Joe, why don't we just get rid of them now, for good?

JOE: *(sharply)* I'm surprised at you Stephen; you sound like the rats we're looking for. We're not cold blooded murderers!

STEPHEN: I'm thinking of us. I don't want to be lookin' over my shoulder and worrying about whether they've got free.

JOE: Hold your noise Stephen. I won't be party to getting rid of them. If you agree with him John, then I'll take Jack and we'll go on our own and leave you two to do what you like. Think about it!

JOHN looks across at STEPHEN.

STEPHEN: We wouldn't want to be parted from yer Joe.

JOHN: No, we'll stick with you.

JOE: Right then, now Jack you look after the boy. *(to JOHN and STEPHEN)* Come on let's go.

*They move their captives UL. Jack assists the boy and collects the rest of any possessions from the pile and staggers to the exit.*

JACK: What about their packs, Joe?

JOE: Leave them there.

AMBROSE: We'll never leave the forest alive!

GERT: Stop snivellin' *(to JOE)* you haven't heard the last of us!

JOE: The monk here has a strong voice. A few calls for help should be heard by passers by.

AMBROSE: *(sardonically and miserably)* Thank you, for nothing.

JOE: *(sharply)* Move!

*They exit UL in a line as the Lights Fade*

## Scene 7: In the Forest, later the same day

*The same setting, yet the lighting should display a more dappled effect.*

*Lights up on JOE sitting on a log polishing his sword and STEPHEN, JACK and GEOFFREY seated on the ground, all at C. JACK chews on a strand of grass, GEOFFREY drinks from a small drinking horn. STEPHEN chews on a piece of bread. Their packs are stacked LC, except JOHN'S.*

GEOFFREY: I didn't know what to do, I was sure they'd come after me. I hid for a while and then I saw three men running eastwards along the main track. I recognized one of them and I kept low.

JOE: Did you see them again?

GEOFFREY: No, they disappeared.

JOE: Who was the one yer recognised?

GEOFFREY: He was the one I saw at the burnin' of my mother. He seemed to be in charge.

STEPHEN: What did you do then Geoffrey?

GEOFFREY: I went deeper into the forest, in case they came back. That's when I saw Gert and the others. The boys were dragging along a deer. Then a man turned up and there was an argument. I don't know who he was. Alas, I didn't see what happened after that. As I moved forward to get a better look the boys saw me and came after me.

JOE: You're lucky to be alive.

GEOFFREY: They questioned me a number of times about what I'd seen or heard. I told them over and over again that I'd only seen the boys draggin' the deer.

STEPHEN: How long were you their captive?

GEOFFREY: Two or three days, I think. I'm not really sure.

*JOHN enters R carrying his pack which appears heavy.*

JOHN: Here's a couple of pheasants and a stoat for dinner.

JACK: I've never eaten stoat before, what's it like?

JOHN: It's food. We can't afford to be fussy.

JACK: No, of course not John.

JOE: (*decisively*) We'll eat and stay 'til the morning and then move on.

STEPHEN: Do we go east?

JOE: Aye.

JACK: I'm starvin'; I could eat a horse as well as a stoat. Anything!

*JOHN and STEPHEN look at each other and smile broadly*

*Lights down*

End of Act One

Act Two

Scene 1: In the depths of the forest, the next morning.

*Same dappled effect, but a gnarled black oak tree, depleted of leaves is projected onto the back wall which, even though it is morning, throws an eerie effect onto the setting. At the base of the tree and on stage are a group of low bushes.*

*The lights come up on BEN, TOM and ARTHUR as they stumble through the centre aisle. They wear the same clothes as they wore in Act One, but they are all dishevelled and grimy.*

TOM: I'm starving.

BEN: We're all hungry Tom.

TOM: We could go to Limesdale.

BEN: What with?

ARTHUR: We need money. It's time we went hunting again.

TOM: I'm sick of eatin' birds and squirrels.

BEN: They keep us alive, don't they?

ARTHUR: We can't stay on the run forever Ben.

BEN: What 'ave you in mind, d'you wanna return to Breenham?

ARTHUR: We could get out of this forest and find work somewhere.

BEN: Where are we goin' to find work?

TOM: You're dreamin' Arthur.

ARTHUR: We could find somethin'.

TOM: And how would we survive in the meantime?

ARTHUR: *(irritably)* I didn't get us into this mess did I?

BEN: *(approaching him threateningly)* What's that supposed to mean?

*BEN grabs ARTHUR by the neck of his shirt.*

TOM: *(alarmed)* Calm down Ben!

BEN: *(aggressively and staring straight into ARTHUR'S face)* If you've got somethin' more to say, say it!

*He pushes ARTHUR away. Arthur shrugs.*

BEN: Well?

ARTHUR: Nothing, except I don't wanna stay in this hole forever.

BEN: I'm sick of hearin' your complaints.

TOM: Well, we don't seem to be getting' anywhere do we?

ARTHUR: We need earnings if we're to make fresh start in life!

BEN: We need to lie low for a while longer. No more trips to Limesdale. If someone is after us they might ask questions there.

ARTHUR: How much longer then?

BEN: Just a few more days.

ARTHUR: Days? What if they're looking for us?

BEN: They won't find us here. I know this part of the forest well.

TOM: And they don't?

BEN: Not many people do, especially in Breenham.

ARTHUR: Well I hope you're right.

BEN: If the worst comes to the worst, I'm prepared to go down fightin'.

ARTHUR: Aye, very brave ain't you?

BEN: (*shaking his fist at him*) Don't you start again!

TOM: We only have a sword and two daggers?

BEN: You have cudgels as well.

TOM: (*scoffing*) Very handy against steel, Ben.

BEN: If you were up against it you'd be amazed what you'd do.  
(*Drawing his sword*) I'd fight to the end. I'd kill death if I had to.

*TOM and ARTHUR look at each other momentarily and Arthur explodes into laughter.*

ARTHUR: How would you kill death then, Ben?

*BEN shakes his head, but suddenly realises what he has said. He laughs, but TOM expresses concern.*

TOM: Why did you say that for Ben?

ARTHUR: (*to Ben*) If I didn't know you, I'd think you'd been at the ale too long!

*A rustling in the forest DR*

TOM: W-What's that?

ARTHUR: I didn't hear anythin'.

TOM: (*Pointing to DR*) It came from over there.

BEN: You're imaginin' things.

TOM: No I ain't, I heard somethin'.

*A rustling sound from DR*

TOM: There it is again!

ARTHUR: Aye, I heard it 'an all.

BEN: It's probably an animal (*quietly and smiling*) dinner pr'aps?

*The OLD MAN, A figure dressed in a hooded black long tunic enters DR, leaning on a staff. The others back away.*

TOM: You shouldn't 'ave said that earlier Ben!

BEN: What?

TOM: About killing death.

BEN: What's the matter with you? Anyway, he's just an old man.

ARTHUR: He's old and feeble. (*to the OLD MAN*) Who are yer?

TOM: He could be a spy for death.

BEN: A spy for death? What a thing to say!

*OLD MAN coughs and splutters.*

TOM: He might have the plague.



BEN: (*drawing his sword*) I'll run you through if you have the plague old man!

OLD MAN: I'm no plague victim. I live in the depths of the forest. This is my home. The plague will never find its way here. I've been keeping a good eye on the three of you over the past two days. You must be on the run from somethin' or someone, ay?

BEN: Just mind your business!

TOM: Well, are you a spy for death then old man?

ARTHUR: Shut up will you Tom!

*OLD MAN chuckles and then has a coughing fit.*

ARTHUR: He's in a bad way ain't he?

OLD MAN: You might be right son, but I shan't be departin' this life today (*to TOM*) You mentioned death, tell me, what d'you know about death?

TOM: (*nervously*) Aye, we've seen death, old man.

BEN: (*harshly*) Hold your noise Tom!

OLD MAN: Maybe so, but you ain't found it here have you?

ARTHUR: What's he mean Ben?

OLD MAN: I'll tell you this, if you want to find death....

TOM: (*interjecting*) We don't wanna find death! What would we wanna do that for?

BEN: Let him speak Tom!

OLD MAN: As I was sayin', if you want to find death, (*Pointing up stage to the gnarled oak tree*) go to the old oak tree over there, search and you're bound to find death. (*wagging a finger in the direction of the tree*) Go on.

TOM: What's he mean?

BEN: (to OLD MAN) If you're playin' games old man, I'll cut you to pieces!

*The OLD MAN has another bout of coughing.*

ARTHUR: I'm not sure about it this.

TOM: Me neither.

BEN: Come on, it's only a tree. (*he sheaths his sword*)

*The three men cross U, TOM and ARTHUR albeit reluctantly, to the tree. The OLD MAN exits DR silently, without being seen. When the three men reach the tree, BEN turns to speak to the OLD MAN.*

BEN: What do we do now old man? He's gone!

TOM: He was a spy for death or a demon I reckon!

BEN: (*scoffing*) A demon?

ARTHUR: If he were a demon, we'd be dead by now.

TOM: We might be when he returns (*gulping loudly*) He'll be back for his dinner!

BEN: He said search and that's what we'll do.

TOM: I don't think we should search for death Ben, it don't seem right.

ARTHUR: Let's search anyway.

TOM: I don't like it.

*They search behind the bushes and around the base of the tree when suddenly BEN picks up a cloth bag*

ARTHUR: What is it Ben?

*BEN thrusts a hand into the bag and draws out some gold coins.*

*BEN: (holding up and inspecting a coin) This is gold! (he looks into the bag) It's a fortune! The old man's a fool, there's no death here, and this'll keep us alive forever!*

ARTHUR: How d'you know it's gold?

*BEN bites into a coin and inspects it*

BEN: It's gold alright!

TOM: Do we share it out?

ARTHUR: Course we do, three ways, ay Ben?

BEN: Aye, three ways.

TOM: Is there enough to make us rich?

BEN: *(chuckling)* Aye Tom, we won't go without nothin' for the rest of our days.

*He laughs which encourages the others to do likewise.*

TOM: I must be dreamin'!

BEN: No, this is real alright, Tom!

ARTHUR: It ain't some kind of trick is it?

BEN: Trick? Course it ain't. What can an old man do to us?

TOM: He could be back though.

BEN: If he does come back, what could he do, demand a share?

*They laugh and BEN slaps TOM'S back*

ARTHUR: *(eagerly)* Well come on, let's count it out then.

BEN: Not so fast, we've plenty of time for that.

ARTHUR: I reckon we should celebrate our good fortune!

BEN: Why not, with the finest ale, ay?

TOM: We can afford the best wine now, can't we?

ARTHUR: Tom's right, the best wine!

*They mime a toast with their cupped hands.*

BEN: To a long life!

TOM and ARTHUR: A long life!

TOM: Where do we get the wine?

BEN: We'll go to the inn at the edge of the forest.

ARTHUR: What the Hangin' Tree'?

BEN: If that's what the inn's called, aye.

TOM: Let's go then!

BEN: Wait a minute we need to take things slowly. If we barge into the inn, demandin' the best wine, the innkeeper's goin' to wonder how we suddenly came into money. And you know what it's like when we've had a few drinks, our tongues will wag, especially yours Tom.

TOM: What? I can hold my drink, and I can hold me tongue 'an all.

ARTHUR: We've only been there twice, d'you think the innkeeper'll remember us?

BEN: Course he would.

ARTHUR: So whatcha got in mind?

BEN: One of us should take enough money to buy a flagon and some bread to soak it up and come back here. After we've celebrated we can then make plans.

TOM: How long will you be then Ben?

ARTHUR: Wait, why should Ben go?

BEN: Whoever goes Arthur, he should be back within the hour, if he goes east along the main track.

TOM: So who goes then?

ARTHUR: *(to TOM)* I don't want you to go. Like Ben said, you'll spend most of the time drinkin' and talkin'.

TOM: No I won't!

BEN: Here you go again, the two of yer arguin' and complainin'!

ARTHUR: I'll go, if you like.

BEN: Would you trust us with the money then Arthur?

ARTHUR: I trust you Ben. I'm a faster runner than the pair of you. When I get on the track you won't see me for dust.

BEN: That's right; you're fleet of foot alright. What d'you think Tom, should he go?

TOM: Aye, why not, I don't fancy going, having thought about it more.

ARTHUR: Aye, you'd be scared of you're own shadow.

TOM: *(sharply)* Don't you start!

BEN: P'raps it'd be wise to separate the pair of you for a while. Arthur, don't you spend any more time than you have to in the inn.

ARTHUR: Have no fear on that score, I'll be back before you know it.

BEN: *(he opens the sack of coins and pulls out two coins which he hands to ARTHUR)* This should be enough for the wine and any bread. *(he draws his sword and hands it to ARTHUR)* Here take this, in case yer have any strife, but bring it back.

ARTHUR: Are you sure?

BEN: We've got daggers. We'll keep ourselves out of harms way.

ARTHUR: Guard the coins with your lives.

BEN: Don't worry, we will, won't we Tom?

TOM: Aye. Go on Arthur, I'm getting thirsty thinkin' about that wine

*Arthur hesitates and looks at BEN and then at TOM*

BEN: What's stoppin' you? Make haste, we'll be here waitin' for you.

ARTHUR: Don't you get any wild ideas.

BEN: You've no worries on that score Arthur, has he Tom?

TOM: Ben's right Arthur.

*ARTHUR backs away R, holds up a hand in farewell and then exits R in a hurry. The others watch him go.*

*BEN looks inside the bag, smiles and then chuckles.*

TOM: Somethin' amusin' you Ben?

BEN: Not really, but I've got an idea to make us even richer.

TOM: What's that then?

BEN: I've thought of a plan which could give us a two way share of the gold.

TOM: Two way share? *(Suddenly realising)* You mean just the two of us?

BEN: Aye.

TOM: What've you in mind then Ben?

*The actors freeze*

*Lights Down*

















