

# **ALCHEMY'S DAUGHTER**

**By Jerold London**

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jlondon@deepweaversfaith.com**

# ALCHEMY'S DAUGHTER



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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**LYDIA**, 20's. Unbelievably beautiful, from being so ugly in Scene 1.

**ANNA**, 20's. Friend to Lydia.

**SIR LUCRE TRIVIUS ("Luke")**, a Knight.

**JOHNSON ("Jay")**, the alchemist. Friend to Sir Trivius.

## PLACE AND TIME

Covent Garden, London, 17<sup>th</sup> century.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

## Apology:

There is no evidence that Lucrezia Borgia ever poisoned anyone; yet men did disappear mysteriously in her life. It was believed, or rumored, that she had a hollow ring she could open at the right moment, to pour its poisonous contents into an unsuspecting drink. What *is known* is that she had brilliantly white teeth, golden hair down to her knees, a beautiful complexion, hazel eyes, a “walk on air” natural grace, and was the acknowledged daughter of a Pope. Love letters of hers and poet Pietro Bembo were romanticized by Lord Byron (when he saw them in the Ambrosian Library of Milan in 1816) as “the prettiest love letters in the world.”

Isabel Sinclair, of Dunbeath Scotland, daughter of the Laird of Dunbeath, in a family intrigue involving succession to the Earldom of Sutherland, poisoned the 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sutherland, his pregnant wife, and inadvertently, her very own son. After their deaths Isabel was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. But before the sentence could be carried out, she took her own life with poison.

Elizabeth Ridgway was burned at the stake at Leicester, England, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 1684, for poisoning her husband three weeks after marriage; and the morning of her execution she also admitted to killing her mother, a fellow servant, and her lover, John King. In addition to those four murders, Elizabeth also attempted to poison two apprentices when they expressed suspicion as to Elizabeth’s husband’s sudden death. All by arsenic. Rumor had it that many other suspicious deaths in the neighborhood should be laid at her doorstep.

Mary Ann Cotton, a woman born into a poor mining family in Durham, England, worked hard her whole life to rise through the ranks of society. According to reliable sources Cotton was believed to have killed three husbands, ten children, a lover, and possibly her own mother, all by poisoning. Arsenic poisoning. Most in hot tea. If true, her series of murders lasted for an incredible twenty years.

The Frankenstein monster and Faust combined took a total of only ten lives.

Sudden wealth, like knowledge and beauty ... drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring.

## ALCHEMY'S DAUGHTER

### SCENE 1

**LYDIA stands in a pillory, center stage, facing the audience – a placard hanging below her head reads: Ugly Conjures The Devil.**

**ANNA is standing beside her.**

**SIR TRIVIUS and JOHNSON enter, walking across the stage (Covent Garden). They stop to look at LYDIA. SIR TRIVIUS makes a face at her.**

#### SIR TRIVIUS

What causa finalis is she stood there for?  
Defiling this, our peace and view. What say?  
She farted here, perhaps? Before some lord?  
Abusing Covent Garden air anew?

#### JOHNSON

She conjured Satan, I would aim. Or whored.

#### SIR TRIVIUS

That thing a callet, Jay? You've lost your wits.  
No dog, nay rat would near an ugly toad like that.

#### ANNA

Why gentlemen, the sum of it:  
Without a mask she left from her abode.

#### JOHNSON

That's all? The cruelty of law these days.

#### SIR TRIVIUS

What cruelty? To mask a fulsome face?  
You jest, my friend, or else your judgment's gummed.  
Too many hours aside your fumes and fires.

#### ANNA

You want a fire within your walls awhile?  
To set your fancy and your hair ablaze?

**SIR TRIVIUS**

*[indicating himself]* A degradation this shall never bear.

**LYDIA**

A pity how adversity is wasted on  
The rich and selfish. Sad, the wisdom lost.

**JOHNSON**

A point she makes. There is a mind in there.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

You think you have a salve to bring it forth?

**JOHNSON**

Much more than that.... Go flee, you doubting Luke.  
A potion that bewrays her comeliness.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

With all your alchemy, and algebra,  
Your minerals, vegetals, and animals,  
You've gained but little to abate the kibes  
That plague your very feet. Thou art a quack, Jay, Heaven knows.

**JOHNSON**

Baboons know more than thou, Sir Trivius, of charms and alchemy.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Tut. Say not what you will regret anon.

**LYDIA**

I'll drink what drink you'll have me drink, Kind Sir,  
An it repels the contours of my face.

**JOHNSON**

She has a faith in me your worship lacks.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Advise the plain and vulgar one she is.  
And say again the same to me straight-eyed.

**JOHNSON**

One never slanders friend nor foe who owns  
A working knowledge of the ancient crafts.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

You dare, O rare! to threaten me? A knight?

**JOHNSON**

No threat intended, only sage advice.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

A challenge, then?

**JOHNSON**

A test, if you should care  
To call it so.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

A “test” .... And what’s the set?

**JOHNSON**

If I can make a maid of her so fair  
That she doth briefly catch your eye, what then?

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Much! Then. An hundred fifty marks.

**JOHNSON**

And if,  
So fair you wish to walk with her awhile?

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Why, double the amount. Three hundred marks.

**JOHNSON**

And if you have desire to be her servant?

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Your game is gone absurd, my friend. Absurd.  
No common lace could tempt me as a lover.

**JOHNSON**

Five hundred marks? As peevish as it sounds?

**LYDIA**

[to JOHNSON] Powerful men make powerful judgments, yes?  
I could forgive the likes of such a man.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

So what are yours, the stakes you have in this?

**JOHNSON**

Marry! 'Tis I to do the mixture and  
The magic here. And yet, if I should fail,  
Your arse I'll kiss and tell the world it is:  
The finest arse in all the land.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

What more?

**JOHNSON**

And sing your praises to the hills.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Agreed.

**The two shake on it and exit.**

**SCENE 2**

**The sun has just set, and LYDIA is standing with ANNA, center stage (Covent Garden), next to the empty pillory. JOHNSON enters with a vial, approaches LYDIA, who takes the vial from him and drinks down the contents.**

**JOHNSON exits; but in the brief moments before he's left the stage, it becomes apparent that Lydia's face has begun to change.**



### SCENE 3

**LYDIA, now breathtakingly beautiful, is standing center stage with ANNA. SIR TRIVIUS and JOHNSON enter, in conversation.**

#### **SIR TRIVIUS**

Come on, Jay. Now you set your foot on shore  
In Novo Orbe. In rich Peru it is,  
Where there within, Sir, are the golden mines.

#### **JOHNSON**

What is it you will have me picture there,  
In such a place?

#### **SIR TRIVIUS**

Why gold, Sir. Gold! BE RICH!  
It wants but months to reach the place, say ten.  
When once the voyage took three years or more.

#### **JOHNSON**

The purpose being?

#### **SIR TRIVIUS**

Gold, Sir. Gold! BE RICH!  
We may imply we hold the Magnum Opus  
Here. In London. The philosopher's stone.  
And leave a clever proven chest of it.  
Secured, of course. As pledged, and under oath.  
You know enough to baffle kings and guards.  
And they will fall upon their knees for it.  
And on returning home, I shall pronounce  
The happy words: BE RICH, my friends. BE RICH!  
No more you'll thirst for silk, nor feed your fires.

**SIR TRIVIUS first catches sight of  
LYDIA.**

#### **SIR TRIVIUS**

'Zounds! Sir. What marvel stands across the way?  
I'd eat a piece of bloodied Spanish steel  
If ever once I saw a damsel's face  
More beautiful than hers.... Who can she be?

**JOHNSON**

Your leave, I'll go to her for you, and ask.

**JOHNSON walks over to the two women.**

**SIR TRIVIUS**

[*aside*] What lady's this whose light is bright as sun?  
O she doth teach new purity to gold.  
New beauty to a London life grown old.  
New meaning to complexion, Venus rising.

**JOHNSON**

[*to LYDIA*] Pray, let me speak with you awhile, apart.

**LYDIA**

Forgive me, Anna, for a moment's word.

**JOHNSON and LYDIA stand apart  
from the others.**

**SIR TRIVIUS**

[*aside*] Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, pray!  
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this day.

**JOHNSON**

He's smitten by your charms. I knew he would.  
Five hundred marks will soon be ours to part.  
Forbare awhile. His courtship's out of Shakespeare.

**LYDIA**

His courtship's out of arsenic to me.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

[*aside*] Come what may come of it, she must be mine.  
Like precious Guinevere, Sir Lancelot's.  
The way Zeus knew how Leda need be won.  
With Helen, Paris, burning Troy entwined.  
The night Isolde, Tristan cut the knots.  
As Pyramus and Thisbe ought have done.  
If rape instead of love, it must be rape.

**JOHNSON brings LYDIA to SIR  
TRIVIUS.**

**JOHNSON**

Sir Lucre Trivius? May I present a Venus risen, called by Lydia.

**SIR TRIVIUS takes Lydia's hand.**

**SIR TRIVIUS**

If I profane with my unworthiest hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this –  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

**LYDIA**

Thou art a fraud, Sir Thinks-a-lot-of-self.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

Who gave you pluck to say a thing like that?  
To me. A knight. O monstrous arrogance!

**LYDIA**

I was not born like this two fortnights past....  
Thou recollect a wager with your friend?

**SIR TRIVIUS**

To kiss my arse?

**JOHNSON**

To pay five hundred marks.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

[*beat*] She's not the one.

**JOHNSON**

She is.

**LYDIA**

I am.... And proof.

**LYDIA picks up from the ground the placard (on which is written: "Ugly Conjures The Devil"), hands it to SIR TRIVIUS, and walks off to a spot away.**

**LYDIA**

[*aside*] Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made spring by alchemy and arsenic.

**SIR TRIVIUS**

**Moves to a spot away, by himself.**

[*aside*] Five hundred marks? So dear a price for  
Any bird. But I? I have to have her. Now!  
I'll do what I must do. Give stakes unto  
My soul. And God, take heed to hear my vow.

**LYDIA**

[*aside*] I hate men. Those. The ones who scorned and who  
Abused me. Hell hath burned a fury in  
My heart I'll not forget, and *will* revenge.  
Let them be rot. And I be guilty in my beauty.

**ANNA**

[*aside*] Her looks have fled into her heart, I fear.

**LYDIA**

[*aside*] The curing of my face was alchemy.  
Narcissus needs be cured with arsenic.

**ANNA**

[*aside*] She was ill-favored and more innocent.  
Oh ugly conjures devils, yes indeed!  
In others in the world as in ourselves.

**JOHNSON**

[*aside*] What have I done? I've let my work be me.  
Although I owe my sight to alchemy,  
What compensation is there for a deed  
That conjures common metals into greed?

**ANNA**

[*aside*] O smile and smile and be a villainess.  
The gold is fouled that's made from wickedness.  
'Tis evil magic, poison to the touch.

**LYDIA**

[*aside*] O fair is foul and foul is fair.  
And I am one, the both, the pair, in history.

**END**



Image from [Wikimedia](#)