

Black Shadows on the Fleet

A Tale Told by Mr Ben Jaffa

A Reprise of the Protagonists:

Mr Valentine Plumbswood – Topiarist, Architecture Bore, Gentleman of Philosophy

Mr Edward Culpable – Physician, Surgeon, Apothecary, Pistoleer

Mr Alexander (Sandy) Bell – Vicious, murdering Scotsman, Entrepreneur

Mr Thomas Bythswood – Gentleman, Theatrical Scribbler (aspiring)

Mr Ben Jaffa – Theatrical Artist, Pirate (reformed), Alchemist (improving), Blackamoor

and introducing:

Mr Den Clayworker – Intelligencer, Thief Catcher, Denizen of the Mean Streets of London

Return to London

We return to London stinking of marsh. It is a Tuesday in early October. We stow the boat and bid au revoir to Burt the Boatman. Mrs Prudence Warner is still in the grip of a strange lethargy that Culpable ascribes more to shock than to any physical malaise. We must report in to Walsingham forthwith, but we are all reluctant to simply hand the lady over to his tender care. Luckily I have a solution.

Lady Trumpington

Lady Trumpington might best be described as a Merry Widow – a lady who considers herself very much in her prime. The untimely death of Lord Trumpington has left her in possession of a title, a comfortable income from a thriving portfolio of dockside warehouses, a competent steward, a well-appointed dwelling conveniently nearby, and a great deal of time in which to indulge her passions. A keen patron of the theatre, she particularly delights in my brilliant flashes and gasps at my bangs. At heart she is a kind soul and I'm sure she will take a damsel in distress under her wing – especially if she comes with a whiff of mystery and intrigue.

As we wheel our borrowed cart through the streets of London, we are struck by emptiness of the streets. There are few people to be seen. Those we do spy hurry about their business, casting a wary eye, hand on cudgel, blade, or pistol butt. At Lady Trumpington's dwelling I am surprised to find it guarded, a man outside and another inside. However, I state my name and business and after a short hiatus we are welcomed inside.

Much as I had imagined, Lady Trumpington immediately assumes the role of mother hen to Prudence's dazed heroine. She is packed off to bed with a posset and we are invited to sit down to breakfast. Conversation soon turns to "The Madness".

It seems that all over London, previously sane and sober citizens are suddenly consumed by murderous rage, throwing themselves upon others in frenzy. Many have been killed, often by their nearest and dearest. Strangely, when the fit passes, none can recall what they have done nor why they have done it. This has put London into a terror. Any who can afford it have guards upon their houses. Most now go about armed if they must leave their houses. In many ways this has made matters worse, for now when the madness strikes its victims have weapons and are all the more dangerous.

Bishopsgate

Our company is soon to see a vivid exemplar of the madness.

After a hearty breakfast, we thank Lady Trumpington for her help and hospitality, make our excuses and leave. Our intention is to first pass by our common haunt of the Theatre and the Bell Inn, and from thence to the Palace of St James. As we pass through Bishopsgate we hear screams and shouts from a nearby church. A man staggers out. He has a sword in his hand, a pistol in his belt and an empty dagger sheath. His hands drip with blood. He makes no resistance as we rush towards him but looks at us in confusion. Ned and I push past into the church. There lies a woman. She is dead, her body covered in fresh stab wounds. She was many months with child. Nearby lies a groaning priest. He is at death's door, a dagger protrudes from his belly.

He is a lucky man for kneeling at his side is Master Culpable, one of the foremost surgeon-physicians in London. I bid Ned draw forth the blade and hand it to me, all the while doing his utmost to keep the breath of life in the priest's body. I have been experimenting with new Alchemical Materia and have in my pocket a weapon salve of Lunar Caustic. I anoint the blade with the salve (which may seem counter-intuitive to the uninitiated but it is based upon sound alchemical principles). The priest's wound heals as if it had never been. Indeed, the priest assumes that the blood must belong to the woman and that he had but briefly fainted. It seems pointless to attempt to disabuse him of this notion. Sandy leads the distraught husband to the body of his wife and we leave the priest to tend to his flock.

At The Bell

Most of the usual crew are at the Bell, but the atmosphere is somewhat subdued. There is a fellow there by the name of Den Clayworker, an acquaintance of Ned, who calls himself an Intelligencer. He has been studying the outbreaks of mad violence and is most keen to share his findings. According to his researches, though there have been attacks all over London (even, it is rumoured, at the Palace of St James) the greatest frequency of incidents seem to have occurred be roughly in the vicinity of the course of the Fleet River.

Much is made by the Theatre folk at the Bell that Burbage is on the warpath about his missing designer. I was not overly concerned – we'd been here before. However, I did feel it incumbent upon me to cross the road to The Theatre and call upon him. As I make my way through the auditorium, I can see that everything is in complete chaos. There are tools everywhere. Nothing is in the correct place. Several shoddily constructed, half-finished flats, along with other pieces of scenery lie scattered around. It all bears the unmistakable signs of Burbage's hapless handiwork. Evidently I have been missed.

Burbage is in his office. As usual I cut him off in mid-rant, before he's worked up a proper head of steam. I remind him of my "other employer" and bid him take the matter up with the Palace of St James should he feel that the needs of his production trump the safety of the Realm. Of course, this leaves him floundering and he swiftly moderates his tone.

In truth I do feel a twinge of guilt at having left him in the lurch for a fortnight (though that there was nothing I could have done about it). For all his bluster and pomposity, Burbage is a decent enough fellow and a genuine pillar of the theatrical community in London. He has kept me in constant employment despite my frequent absences. He even pays me when he has money to do so (which is more than can be said of Walsingham). The new production was due to open on Monday, so I could forgive him for being anxious. I promise that if I can be spared by "you know who", I will return later to put things in order.

Walsingham

The company, now augmented by Clayworker, proceeds westward to the Palace of St. James. We are met by a secretary who takes us with considerable dispatch to meet the great man in person. Walsingham accepts our report of events in Rainham Marshes without great comment. I consider playing out my entertainment that was so popular at the Roundhouse, but decide that it is neither the time nor the audience for it. We show him the souvenirs of our experience in the form of the preserved heads of the snake woman and the lizard man. We present him with the Hand of St Olga. He thanks us for our efforts but expresses mild disappointment that we did not manage to apprehend the Jesuit.

We introduce Clayworker to him and have him repeat his deductions regarding the Madness. Walsingham confirms the rumour that the Earl of Essex was struck down by it and had to be slain to avoid risk to Her Royal Highness.

Throughout the meeting we are periodically disturbed by a servitor giving a countdown. This, we are given to understand, illustrates the proximity of Burghley, who it seems Walsingham does not wish to encounter. When the count gets down to two, Walsingham moves aside a bookcase to reveal a passage. He ushers us in and closes it behind him.

Walsingham leads us through winding tunnels beneath the Palace. As we progress the temperature drops significantly and we surmise that we are in an icehouse deep underground. That which Walsingham shows us there has Ned retching in a corner. Laid out on pallets, in more or less the configuration in which we had last seen them under Waltham Abbey, are the bodies of seven young women. Each is in the advanced stages of pregnancy. Each has had her throat neatly cut with a single stab wound to the belly – all but the seventh who has multiple stab wounds to the abdomen, which has also been opened to reveal a baby. The baby is a lizard. Despite the cold, they smell pretty bad. They have been dead for about three weeks.

“Burghley is not happy,” says Walsingham. “It was his men who cleared-up under Waltham Abbey. He wants to talk to you. I think it best that he doesn’t.”

Privately, I think that if Burghley had a better idea as to how that unfortunate situation should have been resolved, I would like to hear it, but I hold my peace. Instead I enquire as to what had been found at 7 Fleet Hill. We had passed on intelligence to him that it was being used as a safe house by Dacre.

“Ah, yes,” says Walsingham, “Unfortunately, we’ve sent in two teams, the first an experienced second-storeyman, the second a more martial party. Neither have returned. I think it time I sent in the experts.” He is looking at us. We look suitably modest, but feel gratified to be acknowledged as such.

As we wind our way back to the relative warmth of the ground floor levels of The Palace of St James, Walsingham tells us that after two efforts to access the property directly, he has commissioned some research into the wider neighbourhood. It seems that there is a wine merchant called Nathaniel Courtney who lives in an adjacent property. Courtney is most certainly heavily involved in smuggling activities, but as he supplies to the court Walsingham has been inclined to let him alone. Perhaps he is a useful card to be played.

Finally, once more in a regular office, we are introduced to Mr Culverwell. He is to be their primary handler – the new Mr Blythe as it were.

A Night at The Theatre

As we walk back through London we put together the bare bones of a plan. We determine that it is now too late in the day to put it into action, since it seems unwise to assay the strange house in Fleet Hill, whence several agents have disappeared, in the hours of darkness. I am keen to return to The Theatre to put a shift in and start the work I had promised Burbage. I prevail upon the others to join me and together we make light work of first undoing Burbage's horrible mess and then completing all that was needful.

In the afternoon, I send over to the Bell for pies and ale. While we take a break in our labours, Culpable, Plymeswood and myself examine the iron bar that I had taken from the Serpent Man beneath Rainham Marshes. In truth we can determine little about it except that it is surprisingly heavy and is not made of iron. We work late into the night and rather than disperse to our various abodes we simply lay out pallets in The Theatre – as I have oft-times done before.

That night I am woken by Ned. He whispers that he can see a strange shadow flitting around one of the private boxes on the upper tier. I express my doubts, for we are in flickering candle light. I reluctantly follow him up the stairway that circles around behind the balconies to arrive at the box. "There!" cries Ned. "I told you so!" I remain none the wiser. He lunges with his blade in a dark corner. At last I see it, an inky creature that is mostly tentacle - like a demonic squid (where had I seen one of those of late?). Unperturbed by Ned's blade it appeared to be climbing up it towards Ned's hand and arm.

I fumble in my pouch for another experimental vial - a concoction of Quicksilver. I spill it into the palm of my left hand which thereupon emits a bright, intense, white light. I shine it upon the shadow, now climbing up Ned's arm, resisting his efforts to shake it off. I play the light over it and it shrinks away, seeking the darkest corners of the box.

I play hide and seek with the creature and as I do so I shout down to the groundlings to fetch up my mystery-metal bar for it is plain that the Black Shadow holds cold steel in contempt. Suddenly as I chase it from under a bench, it scuttles to the balcony and over. Downwards it flits, beyond the range of the alchemical beam. In its more diffuse light we can see Den and Sandy rousing themselves and rubbing the sands of sleep from their eyes. All of a sudden Dan gives a cry and launches himself at Bell, dagger in hand. He is yelling imprecations regarding Bell's appearance, character and motivation (some of which might in fairness have been perfectly true).

I follow Ned, running pell-mell down the stairs. En route we encounter Blythman gamely trying to haul my metal bar up the stairs. He is making rather heavy weather of it and appears relieved when I snatch it from his grip. It is indeed rather heavy. At ground level we can see Bell and Clayworker still contending. For all Clayworker's frenzy, Bell has the skill to keep him at bay but is plainly reluctant to strike back with his customary savagery.

I arrive and play the bright alchemical light in my palm upon Den's face. His eyes reflect blackly back. He ceases in his attacks upon Bell and tries to evade the piercing beam. Suddenly, the shadow leaps from Dan in the direction of Ned. I whirl up my metal bar, which all of a sudden weighs nought greater than a handy staff. I crack the shadow amidships. It collapses like a burst bladder and dissolves into nothingness.

Thus we learned a number of useful things that night:

1. The "Madness" afflicting London is plainly caused by these Black Shadows.
2. The cannot abide alchemical light.

3. They fear not iron, but the mysterious metal bar seems deadly to them.
4. The bar is heavy to carry but becomes light and handy when wielded with intent.

We further speculate about possible links to events in Rainham Marshes and the vile tentacled demon thing we banished, but inevitably decide we know too little as yet.

Nathaniel Courtney

The following day a troupe of players and a cart laden with armaments set off up Fleet Hill to knock upon the door of number 11.

Role	Player
Under Secretary of Sack at the Court of St James	Mr. Thomas Blytheman
His Flunky	Mr. Valentine Plumyswode
His Man of Business	Mr. Den Clayworker
Villainous-looking Guard	Mr. Sandy Bell
Blackamoor Guard	Mr. Ben Jaffa
Carter and Rude Mechanical	Mr Ned Culpable

They are admitted by the staff, amidst some confusion which they do not discourage. They are offered refreshment (wine, delicious beyond the experience of those assembled) while they wait upon the attendance of Nathaniel Courtney himself. The merchant duly arrives all smiles and emollient for the courtier customers. He is most disconcerted to find himself spoken to with considerable assertion by the Blackamoor Guard, who has stationed between himself and the only exit to the room. The Blackamoor informs him that his smuggling activities have come to official notice. The intimidating Blackamoor predicts his immediate future and presents him with two potential versions. Given the choice between immediate arrest and a relocation to the Tower (or so he infers) and the opportunity to serve Her Royal Highness by offering complete co-operation and subsequent discretion, he chooses the latter path.

He tells them all he knows about next door (which is little) and shows them around his house with special attention given to party walls with No.7. He leaves them in the cellar to be about their business.

Beneath Number 7 Fleet Hill

I happen to have about my person the makings of a Universal Solvent, that I am confident will make short work of, if not the actual bricks themselves, at least the mortar that surrounds them. I pass a flask to Sandy who has wormed a way through the clutter of barrels and bottles to the bare brick separating us from No. 7 Fleet Hill. Sure enough, the solvent burns its way through the mortar to allow his pry-bar to open a crawlway wide enough for us all to make our way through to the neighbouring cellar.

We find ourselves in a bare room with a latched door on the far side. There is little in the room and it is damp, especially on the wall that we judge to be towards the Fleet. On the other side of the latched door is another similar room. There is a pile of detritus, of the sort normally found in an abandoned cellar. There appears to be just one exit from it, but Den looks at the proportions of the room and notices something odd about them. Of course, talk of room proportions gets Plumyswood all excited. His interest is further piqued by his discovery of a scrap of parchment. "Ah ha!" he cries, "A ritual of Protection and Obfuscation!"

At his urging our initial cursory examination of the room becomes a more painstaking search. Plomswode discovers three more such parchments and eventually Bell finds a mechanism that opens a hitherto secret door.

Beyond it is a stream, that runs along what appears to be a fashioned conduit. Downstream we find a cistern. The water in it is sweet but we guess its outflow must run into the Fleet. Upstream we come to a grill. Bell's pry-bar comes in handy once more. On the other side we discover that we have come out at the Horse Pool near Smithfields. We return to the room with the secret door and take the second unobfuscated door. There are stairs going up.

As we reach the ground floor, Bell, who is in the lead, suddenly pivots around and executes an almost perfect Old School Whirlwind Attack upon the person following. That happens to be me. There must have been some slight tell, for I was not taken completely by surprise. I manage to intercept his blade with the metal bar and so retain my head. Being unwilling to assay a full-blooded attack against my friend, I reverse the bar and poke him in the chest with it. This seems to dislodge the Black Shadow that possesses him. I smite it – the heavy bar responsive in my hand once more – and it disperses. Three more shadows attack but again they are discomfited by alchemical light and expunged by blows from the bar.

Exploring the house we find nothing else living, but do find six corpses:

- There is a man of mature years with a sword and dagger - Walsingham's experienced second-storey man we guess. Disturbingly, he seems to have stabbed himself repeatedly in the face and gouged his own eyes out - apparently a known response to "The Madness".
- In separate room we find three bravos who seem to have perished fighting each other. This, we surmise, was Walsingham's second team, sent in to establish the fate of the first.
- Upstairs in a bedroom we discover the corpses of a middle-aged couple. We see no obvious signs violence upon them, nor any identifying features. Like the others, they have been dead about a week.

Further searches reveal that the front door is locked and there is no sign of a key. We do find a back door key. Den whips out a block of wax and makes an impression of it. We put the key back in its place.

The day is wearing on so we return to the Palace of St. James to make our report. We seek out Master Culverwell, presenting ourselves at a new entrance that we had been shown. He takes our report with little comment. He questions us about the Black Shadows and how we combatted them. I mention the Quicksilver Light and am slightly dismayed when he seems to equate the science of Alchemy with what he vulgarly describes as "Magic". In view of his attitude I say nothing of the metal staff. When he asks whether we think we have dispatched all the Black Shadows causing this plague of madness, we reply that only time will tell. We have "killed" five of them. It is plausible but far from certain.

