

I Do Not Like Burghley

Notes made by Ben Jaffa on the pursuit of Petrov and some sensitive correspondence.

Three Men in a Boat (including the Boatman)

"I do not like Burghley," says Petrov. We are sitting in a boat in the middle of the Thames, heading for the north bank. I find this hard to argue with – I don't like him much either – but for all I know the boatman is a spy, though I picked him at random. I try a slight tangent.

"Listen old chap, Burghley is quite beyond the likes and dislikes of fellows such as us. That's just the way it is. You have his cypher." "It's not his cypher", says Petrov. "No, but he wants it to be his, and it's hardly yours either," I reply. "If you give it to him then he'll be happy and he'll let you leave London. Then you'll be happy too."

"I do not trust, Burghley," he says. Well he had me there again. "Do you trust me?" I ask. He looks at me appraisingly. "Come on. I have just saved your life. For the second time, I might add. That's twice Alexei and Karl might have had you but for my intervention." He concedes that perhaps he does. His intonation suggests that perhaps there is some doubt in his mind. Nevertheless, I do eventually persuade him of the wisdom of accompanying me to St. James.

However, I've jumped in somewhat into the middle of my tale. I must go back.

Petrov's Pants

During our earlier searches for Petrov, Blythman had become quite obsessed with a pair of prostitutes who had recently taken up residence in what were believed previously to have been the Russian's private quarters. Blythman went there to transact with these ladies of pleasure. No doubt they were professionally pleased by his visit – though perhaps even more so when he also gave them the price of their lunch and told them to get lost for an hour or two while he rummaged around in their squalid flophouse. He emerged some time later, brandishing in triumph a soiled undergarment. No doubt the ladies were delighted to have satisfied another customer.

He bore his prize off to show to Mr Plumswood, another gentleman of discernment, it transpired, when it came to used nether garments. Between them they convinced themselves that this sordid breech-clout could only possibly belong to the missing Russian (despite the profession of the current occupants). To be fair, subsequent events did prove their surmise to be correct.

After a torrid night poring over these pants, Plumyswood pronounced a connection to the Orthodox Church of St. Volkov on St. Martin's Lane. This was scarcely surprising as we already knew that this was the supposed place of Petrov's burial. However, there was also an apparent connection to the South Bank. This correlation was moving albeit slowly in a fashion not normally associated with the dead.

Having considerably less interest in undergarments than the two gentlemen, I'd been lurking around the docks and returned with the intelligence that there was a large Muscovy Company merchantman called the Poltava currently docked on the Thames and unloading a cargo. On the other side of the river, moored away from the bank was the Akula, a swift looking schooner that was also said to hail from the Russias.

Meanwhile Ned was taking a professional interest in a glass flask that he'd purloined from Petrov's place of work. He tracked its manufacture back to a gypsy called Duriken Winkle whose dwelling (I use the term loosely) was nearby to where the Akula was moored. He turned out to be truculent and unhelpful.

We stake out the Akula for a while together, sitting in an alehouse for this purpose, and spot some of its crew taking a boat up the river. We follow. They have a high old time at the bear-baiting pits and then take up with some girls. We leave them to it, having established by this time that none of them is Petrov.

A Priest and a Prostitute

We all visit St. Volkov's together. Of course we arrive at the spooky old church after dark. Of course we see a ghost as we sneak around looking at the freshly dug grave we assume to be Petrov's. We wake up the drunken Russian priest (are there any other kind), who is quite helpful once we convince him that we are not here to rob him. He's pretty convinced that he buried Petrov, though admits that the corpse was so badly burnt that he couldn't recognise him. He did mention that we were not the first visitors to enquire whether Petrov was really dead. Apparently Petrov was a regular client of a couple of ladies of the night on the South Bank called Lettice and Tilberry who regularly serviced the Russian. It seemed that one of them was certain she'd seen him, albeit at a distance, after his funeral.

Prostitutes are not called "ladies of the night" for nothing. To avoid a busy time, I wait to well into the following morning to call. I go by myself across the Thames (there are some lines of enquiry I prefer to follow up on my own). I find Lettice at breakfast and by some of her time. Unlike Blythman, I do not squander the opportunity thus afforded on searching her bed for soiled underwear. In between explorations of a quite different sort, I introduced myself as a friend of Petrov's. It seems that Petrov was quite a special and valued customer and she was quite open with me as to what she knew.

It was her friend Tillberry who had spotted Petrov at the bear-baiting – the same establishment that we had seen the crewmen from the Akula visit the previous day. She had only seen him from the back – but he was a distinctive looking fellow – and she knew his profile well - from a variety of angles. She had waved and called but he did not turn and was soon lost from view in the press of bodies around the pit. However, Tillberry was quite certain that it was him. Lettice looks a little pensive and says that she hasn't seen her friend for a few nights. She speculates that she might be at another brothel or on the North Bank somewhere, but looks unconvinced by her own reasoning.

I return to my friends with this intelligence and though it is still the middle of the day, we determine to pay the Bear-baiting Pit a visit. Ned, Sandy and I are the ones who have actually met Petrov so we leave the gentlemen to their study of his smalls and cross the River.

At the Bear Pit

Despite the hour, it is busy at the Pit. We split up and secrete ourselves around the small arena to give ourselves collectively the best chance to spot Petrov, should he chance to be there. It felt a long shot but it was the only shot we felt we had at the time. Well, I've always been a lucky beggar and almost as soon as I took up my place I spot the unmistakable bushy silhouette that was Petrov on the other side of the Pit. I signal my companions and work my way through the crowd towards him.

At first it seems that despite my best efforts he has made me, for almost immediately he too begins to wade through the crowd toward the exit. However, when he looks nervously over his shoulder it is not in my direction he glances. For there, pushing through the throng and larger than life (yes, much larger than life and covered in strange tattoos) is Alexei the discourteous Russian bravo, who I had most definitely killed a few weeks ago. If it were not him it was certainly his twin. *[As an aside it is a strongly held belief of my folk that when twins are born, one of them is the devil. Because it is impossible to tell which one it is, our solution is invariably to kill both by leaving them in the jungle to starve or be eaten by beasts. I offer this up as proof positive of the wisdom of the Igbo people compared to uncivilized and foolish Europeans, who take no such precautions. The twin following Petrov was most certainly the devil].*

I reach the exit just after Petrov and fortunately somewhat before Alexei. Leaving Bell and Culpable to handle the big guy I pursue Petrov. Fortunately I was considerably fitter and quicker than Petrov and more familiar with the byways of that part of the city than either he or his pursuers. He eventually accepts that I am trying to help him, not kill him, he proffers the information that Alexei and his brother Karl were some sort of conjured being with few weaknesses, other than a difficulty in crossing water. I half carry him up the street to a clapper bridge over a ditch flowing into the Thames and from there to the nearest jetty. Luckily (did I say, I've always been lucky) there is a boat.

An Interview with Burghley

When we reach St James's Palace I try my luck getting an audience with Burghley. I find myself arguing the toss with some stuffed codpiece who has plainly decided that I am not the sort of person in whom Burghley would have the slightest interest. I try name-dropping Blyth and to my slight surprise he immediately changes his tune and indeed looks a little alarmed. I've never found Blyth to be a particularly scary fellow, but perhaps "Stuffed Codpiece" knows something I don't, or perhaps it's Blyth's undoubted connection to Walsingham that spooks him. Anyway, once Blyth is involved, everything is immediately expedited and the three of us are soon sitting before the Lord High Treasurer of England.

I have to say that I was quite impressed with the way that Petrov refused to be overawed by the great man and fought his corner with great tenacity. For my part I said little and listened a lot.

It seems that Petrov is the possessor of the key to a cypher that could unlock the contents of some very sensitive correspondence between Her Majesty the Queen and the Russian Tsar, Ivan (commonly known as the Terrible). Petrov is being pursued Ivan the Younger (commonly thought to have been killed by his father's own hand – but apparently not), a malign sorcerer working for him called Grigori and his unnatural servitors (who should be dead but were not), Karl and Alexei, described by him as "vila". All these people want the cypher too. It seems Karl and Alexei cannot be killed or even harmed by normal means. Petrov is in principle willing to turn over the codex to Burghley but he wants guarantees – principally that he would escape with his life and freedom intact.

He doesn't trust Burghley or Blyth – and says so. However, it turns out that he is prepared to trust me. Thus I am appointed "honest broker" to see him back to his ship – the Akula – and collect the codex from him to give to Burghley. We leave St. James's Palace on hired horses and ride to Shoreditch, where we find my companions. Sandy and Ned are able to attest to the truth of the invincibility of Alexei and Karl. There ensues a conversation about what exactly could be done about them.

According to Petrov the sovereign remedy for Alexei and Karl is a length of “star iron” in the gut. Unfortunately, this material, borne to Earth from the Heavens by a falling star, is hard to come by and no-one in the group happened to have any about their person. An adequate alternative, however, is alchemically pure iron. As it happens, the glass of that fancy flask that Ned took as a souvenir from Petrov’s shop does contain small quantities of the substance. Talk falls to grinding it up and using it as a charge for a fowling piece or a Spanish grenado (now they were talking my language). Moreover, there was more of the stuff in the shop, along with a flask of something that Petrov had devised that ought to have some effect on the “Vili”.

Petrov is unwilling to return to his shop because he thinks it likely that it is watched and possibly guarded. I was not going anywhere that Petrov wasn’t and Plumwoodye was off into one of his digressions about planets and conjunctions and something about hazel twigs (we paid him no mind). The others went to the shop.

Petrov was right and the place was guarded. However, they returned after a while, Ned muttering darkly about useless poltroons, Bell loudly proclaiming Ned a crazed loon. However, Ned is carrying more of the fancy glasswork and a big well-padded wallet containing Petrov’s nasty surprise.

A Cunning Plan.....

Petrov needs a wagon to collect some important stuff from a couple of places on the South Bank and load it upon the Akula. I fee that the safest method for getting Peskov to the South Bank is by boat. It is by now Sunday so everything is more expensive but I hire a boat and a couple of boatmen. Meanwhile Bell secures a wagon.

We had spent the previous night grinding up glass to make charges for fowling pieces and I packed the remainder into two grenadoes. Plumyswoode arrives in the morning and proudly presents each of us with a hazel rod sharpened to a point. We humour him.

I set off with Petrov by boat. The others meet us at Battle Bridge with the wagon. I send the boat off to meet us at the Akula. We all set off under Petrov’s direction with the wagon heading south for a short while before turning east along the Kent Road.

Makes Contact with the Enemy

Walking up the street towards us is the unmistakable figure of Karl. Ned, Blytheman and I move to engage. I empty my fowling piece into him. I could convince myself that it caused him to grimace – slightly. I light the fuse on a grenado. Ned lobs the glass bulb prepared by Petrov. It smashes and from it roils a thick, black, oily cloud of smoke. He throws slightly long but we are up wind and it soon envelopes the figure of Karl. I toss my grenado into the cloud – roughly where I judge Karl to be – and back off. I have no intention of being caught in that unnatural miasma.

Thomas Blythman sees it differently. He plunges right into the black cloud – and towards my grenado. There is a muffled bang as it goes off but it is impossible to see anything in that swirling black mass. Anyway, Ned and I have other things on our minds. For behind us we hear cries of alarm as Alexei approaches the wagon from the other end of the street. It grabs Petrov and throws him from the wagon to the ground. Bell shoots it with his fowling piece. Again, we might convince ourselves that it felt something, but it pays him little heed as it turns its attention to Petrov. Petrov rips off his shirt and doublet to reveal a chest full of strange swirling tattoos. He seems to be preparing to throw himself physically upon the Alexei-creature. However, Bell steps smartly up behind and stabs it

with – a hazel twig. The behemoth cries out and like a punctured bladder it crumples in on itself and crumbles to dust. Plemmyeswode looks smug. Everyone else looks surprised.

Tidying Up

When the smoke clears there is no sign Karl. Blytheman is there but unconscious and when we try to move him we find he is stuck to the ground. While some help Petrov collect his things, others of us endeavour to peel Thomas away from the cobbles of the Kent Road. We succeed but only by cutting away most of his clothing and much skin. We sling him on the cart atop Petrov's belongings and make our way to the tavern where Ned and I had spied upon the Akula. We realise that we might have saved ourselves a lot of trouble and shoe leather had we enquired within after Petrov, for this was his lodging – and the place he kept his books.

The boatmen are there as arranged and Petrov and I row out with his stuff to the Akula. There on the quarterdeck he gives me the codex. He also presses another book into my hand (it turned out to be in Russian) and says I can keep it. We shake hands and I bid him a safe voyage. As I turn to leave, he gives me all his other books in a bundle and bids me throw them into the Thames. My surmise is that he is somehow constrained, perhaps by oath not to do this himself. Anyway I do as he asks.

As we are enjoying a well deserved ale in the tavern a figure on horseback rides up. It is Blyth. "Have you got it?" he asks. I said we had. "I'll take that then," says he. "Burghley will be well pleased." It is only after he's trotted off that I think that I should have required a receipt of him.