

The Long Way Round – Part 1

A Tale Told by Mr Ben Jaffa

A Reprise of the Protagonists:

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

Dr Edward Culpable – Physician, Surgeon, Apothecary, Pistoleer

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

Mr Thomas Blythswood – Gentleman, Theatrical Scribbler (aspiring)

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

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

and introducing:

Mrs Prudence Walker – Businesswoman of Norwich, Vengeful Witch, Fugitive

An Illuminating Conversation

For the first time in months our time is our own. No instruction has arrived from Walsingham or our handler Master Culverwell. It is the beginning of October. The Terror that beset the city but a week past, has receded (thanks to our entirely unsung efforts expunging the Black Shadows) and ordinary citizens are no longer murdering their neighbours and loved ones for no apparent reason upon the streets of London. From a personal perspective, the new production at the The Theatre is underway, and Burbage won't really need me until it's time to plan the next one. It is time for us to reflect and think on some of the loose ends dangling from our previous adventures.

For me, that means returning to Lady Trumpington's abode to check upon the well-being of Prudence Warner and to ask her some questions. Physically she is much improved, under the care of Lady Trumpington with regular visits from Dr. Culpable. Under my questioning she at first took refuge in claims of forgetfulness and confusion. However, as I persisted in my questioning she abandoned her evasions and revealed herself, as I had long suspected, to be a Witch. Her tone became firmer, almost minatory, and as I in turn became more direct in my questioning, she revealed the following:

- She was a witch of the coven we had encountered in Waltham Abbey;
- The coven had been allied with Dacre and through him the lizard folk;
- She thought Dacre to be human but incredibly ancient;
- She had genuinely been on a business trip from Norwich via Waltham when we encountered each other on the road earlier in the summer;
- She had known her two companions and servitors since she was a girl, but they had suddenly turned into lizards en route and overpowered her;
- She woke to find herself in the hands of the lizards of Rainham Marshes;
- She understood the Lizards of Rainham to be a different clan/tribe/nation to those of Waltham Abbey and their rivals/enemies.
- The crow outside the window, taking an uncommon interest in proceedings was in her thrall.

For my part I revealed the following to Prudence:

- Her "sisters" of the Waltham Abbey coven were all dead;

- Dacre was responsible (I heard him give the order: “kill them all” - I was careful to speak only the truth, but gave no hint of my own role);
- They had been impregnated and were on the point of giving birth to lizard spawn. Either they had remarkably short gestation periods or the sisters with whom she had recently met were lizard impostors. She found this hard to accept but the logic inassailable;
- I thought that from our hand-to-hand struggle that Dacre was a lizard disguised as a human;
- Dacre had left Waltham Abbey by some arcane method involving an inscribed stone;
- I posited that Dacre had substituted lizard men for her servitors and must have intended fate in Rainham Marshes;
- I speculated that she was some sort of diplomatic gift to the Rainham Marsh lizards; or represented an acknowledgement of a common interest in keeping the Thing out of our world.

Though she sought to hide it from me, she was visibly shaken and consumed with rage against Dacre. She openly revealed that her next order of business was to find Dacre and enact her revenge upon him, and thought that Waltham Abbey was the place to seek for him. I suggested that we might find a common cause in this matter.

Later that day when Dr Culpable did his rounds, he found that Prudence had fled.

Cloak but No Dagger with Walsingham

The following day we received a message from Walsingham. Blytheman and I attended a rendezvous with the man himself upon the banks of the Thames. All precautions were taken by Walsingham (and a few by ourselves – Ned was nearby in another boat). Such was his insistence upon utter secrecy, I rather feared for our boatman, who on command rowed us out midstream for our conversation. There were two matters he wished to raise.

The first was that the Hand of St Olga that we had seized from the Roundhouse in Rainham Marshes had disappeared from a secure storeroom in St James’ Palace. We assured him that we had nothing to with it and he seemed to accept that.

The second matter was that Burghley still wanted to interview us and that he still did not want that to happen. He said that he had no immediate requirements of us. A nod being as good as a wink to a blind blackamoor, I took it that he was suggesting that it might be a good time to absent ourselves from the City.

I took the opportunity to tell him I had spoken with Prudence but was somewhat parsimonious with the detail. He said it was time that he sent someone round to pick her up. I did not tell him that she had already fled. I hoped that I had not visited trouble upon Lady Trumpington.

Return to Waltham

We returned to the Bell and updated our comrades. There was a general consensus that now was an apposite moment to return to Waltham and see if we could pick up the thread on Dacre.

This time, in the interests of speed we took horses. I had reluctantly spent a little of my leisure time in reacquainting myself with the vile and malodorous creatures and could sit

upon one without too much difficulty at modest rates of progress. Unfortunately the same could not be said of Plumswode, who had to sit behind Bell for most of the journey.

On arrival in Waltham we repaired to the house of the affable Edward Dennty who was delighted to see us and more so the bottles of wine and the jug of ale we brought with us. He had little to report, other to mention the rather officious company who had arrived at Waltham a couple of weeks previously, carrying a warrant from Burghley. They had arrived with a wagon and had left with it fully laden. He was planning a trip back to Cambridge on the morrow. He put us up in Dacre's empty cottage.

We set a watch that night, as is our custom. The third watch reported a light bobbing its way up the hill in the pre-dawn. We went to investigate.

Different Face Same Prudence

To our surprise the woman who awaited us at Waltham Abbey did not possess the visage of Prudence Warner though she conformed to her general physique. However, when she spoke we were left in no doubt that it was she. "You took your time," she said, sharply.

We found the lower levels sealed. Burghley's men had clearly used local stone and local craftsman to block the archway with dressed stone. As in Courtney's basement, I mixed an alkahest to dissolve the mortar. We used Bell's pry-bar to remove enough stones to allow a man-sized breach.

We worked our way round the complex, through the "birthing room" where Prudence lingered, doubtless thinking of her witchy sisters, while Ned hurried on through, and came at last to the strange chambers from whence Dacre had vanished. The second of the two chests was still there – Bell and I had hauled the first to the surface. It was filled with the detritus – mostly half burnt writings - that we had deemed of less importance than the treasures with which we'd filled the first. Prudence confirmed that the writing was in the language and script of the lizard folk. Her grasp of this tongue was at best imperfect, but she knew enough to recognise it. Examining the dolmen embedded in the rock of the upper level she declared the script upon it written in the same. Though she could only surmise its purpose as a transport device, she was confident that with Plymswode's help she could trigger the spell. She hoped that it would take the company to wherever Dacre had gone.

We queued up along the stairs leading up to the stone with Plummyswood and Prudence at the front chanting and waving their hands. There was a moment of disorientation and we found ourselves.....

Dacre's Bolt Hole

..... in what appeared to be a well appointed dining room. It was lined with carved wood panelling. The table was set for dinner. There were no diners in evidence. Exploring further, we found a well appointed kitchen (no stores, but a water source) and a sitting room with a half-finished game of chess laid out. There were no windows anywhere. We thought the general ambience and design felt European but not English, but none of us had the experience to postulate further. Such was the oddness of the place that even Plomyswode could not find the words to disparage it in his normal tedious fashion.

In a drawing room we discovered three beautiful ladies exquisitely bedecked in silks and satins in the European style. They smiled and nodded at each of us as we entered – apart from Prudence, towards whom they maintained stony expressions. They said nothing but

approached us, arms outstretched as if inviting us to dance. The sanguinary Scotsman, displaying an even lesser level of social grace than is his general custom, whipped out a dagger and stabbed the lady who approached him. It was not his most accomplished blow, but she collapsed like marionette whose string had been cut. I simply reversed my metal rod to gently ward off another. At its merest touch, she too collapsed, as did the third. We noted the warmth and softness of their skins and wondered what we had wrought here, but Prudence roughly stripped one and those without the delicacy to look away (most of us) could see that they had neither nipples nor genitalia. They were each bedecked in a dazzling array of rings and jewellery. These we took with us.

Moving on we found a room with an altar and a pentagram. On the far side there was a bas relief of some vile tentacled creature. Those whose eyes lingered upon it were put in mind of the horror we had confronted in the lizard lair beneath Rainham Marshes. As we looked around the room, five entities appeared – one at each corner of the pentagram – and attacked us. They appeared as nothing more than bloated animated skins. Dacre had conjured similar to thwart pursuit under Waltham Abbey. Prudence later referred to them as “Skin Hazers”. I leapt upon the altar to belabour them from a vantage point with my metal rod. Cold steel in the hands of my companions seemed equally effective. Eventually we put them all down, each in turn expiring like a pierced bladder.

During the fighting Prudence fled. Exactly why she did so we never quite fathomed. Certainly she was no fighter herself, and perhaps had not quite understood the manner of men we were. She might have felt this was her only course when the hazers appeared. In any case we were all rather surprised when she reappeared in the room we were in via the only apparent exit other than the one by which we had entered. It seemed that the rooms we had explored were all that there were and they were laid out in a circuit. There appeared to be no exit.

We searched feverishly for a hidden door, but none was found. Nor could we find another carved stone similar to the one by which we had arrived. Eventually, Ploomswood tried a ritual to reveal the hidden in the pentagram room. There in the centre of the figure, for a brief moment we could all see another carved dolmen. Plainly, this was both our exit and the means of egress for Dacre.

There ensued a long and exceedingly technical discussion between Valentine and Prudence about the arcane details of the appropriate ritual. Upon the altar we had found a bowl, a goblet and a dagger. When tapped with the dagger the bowl and the goblet both gave out amazingly pure and sustained notes. It turned out, too that Clayworker and Culpable amateur choristers, and could sing in harmony. (As a professional performer, I can hold a tune, but a drunken chorus or a bawdy ditty is more my mark.) Thus the magicians built their ritual around a chord that encompassed the notes of the bowl and the goblet and the voices of Ned and Den.

The magicians performed their ritual; Ned tinged the bowl and goblet; he and Den added their voices in a chord. We lined up behind them within the pentagram. A series of brief scenes, each of a different place, flashed before our eyes and we found ourselves.....

The Grey Desert

.....in a bleak, featureless landscape of grey sand, meeting grey skies at a distant grey horizon. The only landmark in evidence was another inscribed stone pillar some hundred yards distance. We set off towards it.

We had not gone above a few paces when there was a rustling in the sands. There were small scorpions, bigger scorpions, huge scorpions and there were very many of them. We each adopted our own strategy to reach the far dolmen. Some just tried to plot a course that avoided them, but as they could burrow up from the sand, this had limited success. Others deduced that they were drawn to the vibrations of our steps in the sands to locate their prey and so chose to creep slowly to their destination. For my part, I decided that speed was the essence and relied upon my staff and quick feet to keep me from harm.

I reached the dolmen first, untouched. I stood quietly then while I lit the fuse upon a grenado. This I tossed into the vicinity of one of the larger ones. It landed more or less as I had intended and exploded with a distinct thump in the sand, rendering the large scorpion into bite-sized morsels. Other scorpions rushed to the site of the explosion, attracted, no doubt, by the vibration. Once there, however, they began to gorge themselves upon gobbets of their blasted comrade. The resultant cluster of scorpions was too tempting to ignore and I tossed a second device in amongst them. More scorpions scuttled to the spot. I had a third but thought it useless to deploy – the number of scorpions was effectively inexhaustible.

Looking around the scene I could see that Prudence and Ned were in trouble. Ned was one of those who had sought to creep his way across. It might have worked but he was also shepherding Prudence. She either did not understand the strategy or had panicked. She had now been stung several times in the legs and Ned was attempting to carry her. Prudence was our only ticket out of here so I ran across to them at full speed. Bell ran interference, stomping around off my flank and attracting scorpions to him. Reaching Ned, I took Prudence from him and slung her over my shoulder (I have been working on my strength). I ran back to the dolmen, leaving Ned to gather some of his dropped possessions, including the bowl and his medical kit.

Prudence was in a poor way. She revived a little when I bound her wounds as best I could - Ned or even Bell would have made a better job. I could see that she had been poisoned so I set about mixing a potion to purify her blood. I was aware of some plaintive whining from the hapless Blythman, who had also managed to get himself stung and had gone into a decline. However, Prudence was clearly my priority. She drank the potion and immediately rallied as the venom in her blood dispersed. Bell patched up Blythman and Ned arrived to improve the condition of both patients and any other who needed succour.

The scorpions were now mostly concerned with eating each other – which no doubt is what they do when tasty morsels like us are unavailable. Plemmyswood and the now revived Prudence laboured to prepare another ritual to transport us elsewhere. The singers were left somewhat out of voice after their exertions but they still had the use of the artefacts from the altar. At length Prudence declared herself ready to perform her ritual, warning that she probably only had one attempt in her. Plummyswode in support she made that attempt. Once more there was a swirl of scenes before our eyes and

The Anvil of the Sun

.....we found ourselves in a place of blinding light and terrible heat. We were in a deserted ruin, surrounded once more by sand, but of a more golden colour. The mid-day sun beat mercilessly down from a clear and cloudless sky. Even I found it oppressive. In mere minutes my companions would take on the complexion of a cooked lobster. We hurriedly made an awning of our cloaks in a more shaded corner of the ruined building and prayed that there would be a dusk. Our rest that afternoon was disturbed by a couple of

large snakes. These we slew and cooked. I did not in truth know what manner of snake they were – no doubt Ned could have told me – but I was already eating them when I recalled that the python is sacred to my people. I have been away from home for a very long time.

Eventually, the heat lessened sufficiently for Bell to make a circuit of our base. He found two things of particular interest: a lick of muddy water; a trail made by some quadruped in the sand. That night Blythman and I studied the stars. We were quickly able to determine that this was the sky of our own world. Blythman could identify all the constellations and even give them names in Latin or Greek. For my part I could not say what longitude we had, but *if* it were Africa (and not the New World or some other unknown land), I could estimate that we were less than a hundred miles south of the Mediterranean littoral.

We determined that our only viable route was to follow the tracks that Bell had found, though I mis-liked that they were taking us away from the sea. By my alchemical arts I was able to purify enough water from the rancid pool to fill all our bottles and bellies. We trudged into the cool night, for we determined that this was the best time for us to travel. Almost as dawn arrived, we topped a rise and could see below a small encampment. Men in voluminous black robes were saddling camels and getting set for the day.

Nasir and his Sons

We approached openly and hailed them from a distance. Fortunately, Ned had a good command of Arabic and equally fortunately so did they. We were received with cautious courtesy by the eldest of their number, who was called Nasir, and introduced to each of his six sons. We offered gifts in the form of a couple of pieces of jewellery stripped from the dancing manikins in Dacre's bolt hole, which they accepted. They asked our business and Ned answered with a version of the truth saying that we had been on the trail of an evil sorceror but had met with misfortune. They were a bit wary at the mention of the evil sorceror but somewhat reassured that we were on his tail and not the other way round. They were plainly curious about Prudence who Ned described as a "wise woman".

It seemed that their culture demanded that they should assist those in need in the desert, So despite a certain reluctance on their part, and we were invited to join their caravan. They gave us some room on their camels for our belongings – Bell and I were particularly glad of this since we were carrying our armour.

Then one of them spotted the torcs that some of us were wearing, presents from the Turkish Emissary we had rescued, and inscribed with verses in Arabic. All of a sudden attitudes changed, more room was found on their camels and we were offered some of their black robes to wear. These were particularly welcome for we faced a long walk in the hot sun after trudging all night. Indeed we had none of us had had much rest since we had followed Prudence up to the Abbey before dawn the previous day.

That night our hosts slaughtered a goat. We sat around their fire and told them more of ourselves – or rather Ned did, translating to and forth. Apparently, the verses on the torcs were well known to Nasir and held great weight for him. He was heading for a market town called Assimir roughly to the east. He realised that this was not a helpful direction for us if we wished to reach the sea and thence the Christian lands but he was confident that he would be able to find a guide in Assimir who would be able to take us onwards in whatever direction seemed best to us.

We travelled in their company for about a week in all. In the only incident of note, we were waylaid by a large band of robbers. Ned's first instinct was to negotiate but he was pre-empted by Bell. A master only in the language of extreme violence, he drew his sword and charged a man who was pointing a crossbow at him. We all followed suit. They clearly had not expected resistance, certainly not of this ferocity. Several were cut down in very short order. Clayworker shot their leader and they fled. We pursued and took a couple of prisoners. Nasir gave them a very stern lecture, promising that their families would hear of their disgrace. He then cut their throats after letting them know their bodies would be left for carrion. Highwaymen can expect little mercy from travelling merchants in those parts.

Assimir to Al Badi

Assimir proved to be a collection of ancient, dilapidated buildings surrounded by a city of tents. There was water, some signs of agricultural endeavour and a huge market where all manner of goods might be obtained. Nasir was as good as his word and in a series of transactions that began with some of the jewellery from Dacre's manikins (we were briefly the owners of some magnificent carpets) we obtained pack camels and supplies. As part of the deal Bell obtained himself an expensive riding camel, that as a practised horse rider he could just about cling to. For the rest of us we were back to footslogging what we were told was a roughly eighty mile journey to the coast.

Nasir found us a guide. Mahdi Omar appeared to be constructed entirely of old leather and withies. His age was unguessable but he was not a young man. He came with his own camel, which when he was riding it seemed part of his own body. He said little but responded readily enough to direct questioning. Obviously all verbal interactions came through the medium of Ned's translations, but I suspected a wry and dry sense of humour behind his impassive features. He made it clear from the outset that he could not abide crowds and towns, and found even the tent city of Assimir uncomfortable. Indeed, it seemed that even the seven of us were close to a crowd for him. He would take us to Al Badi but would not enter the city. We bade a fond farewell to Nasir and his sons and set off into the desert with Omar, heading in a northerly direction..

The journey had proceeded without incident for a couple of days, with the party making good progress under the expert eye of our guide. On the third day Mahdi Omar sniffed the air. He said that a sand storm was on its way and that we needed to take shelter. We found a cleft in some rocks big enough for us all and our camels. We spent half a day and an uncomfortable night listening to the wind whip up the desert sands, depositing them from time to time into our refuge. For all that we were grateful for our shelter. A little before dawn we awoke to the sound of voices. Ned and Omar were shouting to be heard above the howling of the wind and in converse with a strange winged creature – no doubt one of the legendary djinn that we knew of from the campfire stories of Nasir and his sons. I had been sleeping deep in the cleft and could make nothing of the conversation, but Mahdi Omar had abased himself and appeared to be advocating for the party while the djinn was also speaking in turn. I stood in anticipation of trouble and gripped my metal staff all the more tightly when another figure, this one larger and more solid, appeared out of the whipping sands at the mouth of our refuge. Then the first djinn appeared to notice Ned's Turkish torc. As with our meeting with Nasir, the tenor of the discussion changed immediately. Shortly afterwards the apparitions flew off and were not seen again. Over the next hour or so the storm abated and we continued our journey.

Al Badi, Tom Tapnall and What Next

As we continued northwards I could smell the salt in the air. In the distance I spied seabirds. Mahdi Omar led us to a small stand of date palms on a hill from which we could

not only see the sea, but also the town of Al Badi. He bade us farewell and we headed on down the slope to a caravanserai on the outskirts of town.

While the others rested up, Ned and I explored the town. In many ways it was similar to Assimir, but there were more buildings, both occupied and ruined, while the harbour offered an important extra dimension.

The main event of the day was a slave market. There were slaves of all shapes and sizes on sale here, including beautiful girls and even some I suspected of belonging to my own folk or at least one of the neighbouring peoples. However, the one who drew my eye was a broad chested fellow with fair hair and tattoos and the telltale angry pink skin upon his face and shoulders. He might have been a Dutchman or a Dane but I thought it likely he was an English sailor. I inspected a few slaves for show, acting the foreign merchant while Ned assumed the role of my steward and interpreter. When I reached the fellow I spoke to him quietly in English but bade him not react. A brief flash of surprise played across his blunt, but he had the wit to play along.

He was so cheap, we just bought him. Ironically, Ned and I had enough good English silver about our person to cover the transaction. As we walked back to our camp he told us that his name was Tom Tapnall and he hailed from Bristol. I confess that my motives in freeing him were somewhat confused. In part I was simply motivated by pity – I knew what it was to be a slave alone amongst foreigners. However, I assumed that having sought the sea, our intention must be to buy or steal a boat to take us home. My companions were but the merest land-lubbers. We would need at least one other prime seaman apart from myself to handle even the smallest sailing boat.

However, when we reached the camp, there was talk, mostly led by Bell, of retracing our footsteps through the desert to find the ruin whence we arrived from the scorpion desert and retracing our magical footsteps back to Waltham Abbey. I confess that I was full of doubts about even finding the place again, and we had seen no sign of a stone there. Clearly there was much to discuss about our next move.