

The Tale of Albert the Eelman and the White Worms of Rainham Marshes

A Unfinished Play in several Acts written by Mr Ben Jaffa

Prologue

Walsingham's Men (as they now know themselves to be), that is Bell, Plymeswode, Culpable and Jaffa, meet at the Bell Inn opposite the Theatre to make plans for a venture into Rainham Marshes. There has landed or is about to land, according to Mendoza, the erstwhile Spanish Ambassador, an Italian Jesuit carrying something of which Mendoza disapproves but can say little about – though he hinted that it might have to do with the New World. Walsingham insists that this must be their priority (though they still have a concern about lizardmen in North London).

To Jaffa's delight it is apparent that dirty, smelly horses will not be appropriate to the terrain of Rainham Marshes. He sets about obtaining a boat. And a cannon. Of course a cannon – though admittedly a small one. He also looks up his old mate Bert from the Minion, in the sure knowledge that his comrades will prove to be the merest band of lubbers and it will be useful to have someone competent to help handle the barky.

Act 1; Scene 1 Albert the Eelman

Our protagonists sail and row their boat to Rainham Marshes on the Essex bank of the Thames Estuary. They enter the marsh at random and find a dwelling place – a well built hut on sticks. It is empty but its owner soon returns. His name is Albert and he's an Eelman. Not unreasonably he wants to know: "*What you doin' in my 'ouse*". They claim to be fowlers on a hunting trip from the city. They suggest that they might be in the market for a few eels – they've heard there's a shortage of them in Wapping. They offer him ale; he offers them eels and a roof over their heads for the night. He knows nothing of foreigners in the marsh. He doesn't hold with the sort of services they hold over at the Roundhouse but is unwilling to say much about them. He does tell them why there's a shortage of eels. "*It's these vicious white worms. There's little ones that'll jump out of the water and take a chunk out of your leg*". He shows them his scars – white, puckered circular bite marks. "*Then there's the big ones that'll take you and eat you*". It seems that several eelers have gone missing. "*If you want to know owt about owt you should go talk to Thaddeus, that ye should.*"

Act 1; Scene 2 Thaddeus

They find Thaddeus. He is a shifty cove who wants to tell them as little as possible. He denies the existence of the white worms. However, Ned Culpable is a professionally observant fellow and with his Physician's Eye he notes a certain discomfort about the man. He cajoles Thaddeus into letting him examine him. There upon his thigh is a fresh bite, identical to those upon Albert. Thaddeus too is disapproving but unspecific about the prayer meetings at the Roundhouse.

Act 1; Scene 3 The Roundhouse

The Roundhouse proves to be a depot where eels and other marsh produce is sold to city merchants or exchanged for domestic goods. It is run by Margaret, a very capable woman of middle years, assisted by her son, Jacob, said (by his mother) to be "*good with a sword*". He is large but plainly somewhat lacking in wits. It is a busy enough place on the day they visit, but due to be busier on Saturday. Ned arranges with Margaret to run a free

clinic there on that day. On Sunday it seems there is to be a meeting with a visiting preacher. Only Marsh Folks are welcome that day.

A Bucolic Interlude

They cross the causeway to the village Avely, which decidedly isn't in the Marsh. They take lunch at the inn, where they are served excellent provender by Annette and visit the local church. They speak to the vicar (Young) Mr Simmons. He knows nothing of the prayer meeting at the Roundhouse. It isn't part of his parish, you see. They return to the Roundhouse where the boat is moored, bringing beer for Bert who stayed with the boat.

Act 1; Scene 4 Infiltration

They are permitted to sleep upon the floor of the Roundhouse. It is partitioned inside with Margaret and Jacob sleeping in the rear part, while the company sleep in the front. They are reminded by Margaret of Jacob's alleged prowess with the sword. However, the partition is no barrier to the likes of Bell and Jaffa. They sneak into the back for a look around. They soon find a hidden basement. In the basement, imprisoned in a cage, is none other than Lucien Rafael, the Jesuit Priest they seek. They gain his trust by hinting that they too are adherents of the Old Religion. He tells of kidnap by devil worshippers with the faces of lizards. They persuade him that they should not rescue him now, but later when they bring him forth for "prayer meeting" on Sunday. He, in any case, refuses to countenance leaving without his satchel. It contains a precious artefact – he cannot say what it is – and it is nowhere in evidence in the basement. Jaffa and Bell creep back to where their companions are billeted.

Act 2; Scene 1 The White Worms Attack

They return the next day to Albert's place – and it is well they do. For they are not long there when they hear cries for help. Young Leonard, Albert's son, poles his marsh boat in haste up to the stilted house. He is distraught but they understand that Albert is in dire straits and that great worms have taken him. They leap upon their boat – Leonard's punt is in poor repair with what appear to be great bites taken out of its planking. Bert takes the helm, Leonard organises the gentlemen to pole while Ben takes the covers off the swivel gun in the bow and checks the priming.

They come to the stretch where Leonard says his Da was taken. There is no sign of Albert but the water is roiling with great white worms. Ben takes aim and fires – he will only get one shot. The cannon blasts one of the mighty eels. Some of the others turn upon its thrashing remains and begin to feed upon them but the others – half a dozen and more - turn towards the boat. The fighting is fierce as the slithering marsh wights launch themselves upon the barky, seeking to latch upon human flesh and pull their prey into their watery realm. However, the company stand fast and with blade and pistol shot they carry the day. The waters are quiet once more.

Act 2; Scene 2 Albert's Fate and Fortune

Of Albert there is no sign. However, they note the presence of large holes dug into the muddy bank: holes that might accommodate the body of a large worm, and its prey. They all look at the Blackamoor. Jaffa sighs and strips off – buff coat, cuirass and morion will serve him naught in there. He thinks to coat himself in some of the ichor, slime and mud of the bank. Bell hands him a dark lantern and he slithers head first into the largest of the holes. It stinks in there but he stinks of that stink himself.

Ben comes to a hollowing in the mud – a chamber - and there amidst a writhing mass of small worms he can see the form of Albert. Every now and then a worm will bite upon Albert, but it is not a feeding frenzy, it is more as if they are taking small sips and savouring

the taste of a fine wine. The worms do not react to Ben's presence or to the light he has brought. He deduces that they cannot see but are sensitive only to smell and to the vibrations of movement. He has no expectations at this point that he will bring forth anything other than a corpse, but he leaves the light where it is, secures a grip on Albert and begins to slither slowly – so that the worms are not alerted - out of the wormhole. As he does so he notes that each of Albert's many bite wounds are oozing blood.

Once out of the hole Ned quickly confirms that Albert is alive and indeed conscious. He is afflicted with some paralytic venom, no doubt from the bite of the worm, doubtless in order to keep the "meat" fresh. Culpable and Plumswode, swiftly bring Albert around and tend to his wounds. Albert, it seems, was in full awareness throughout his ordeal and had believed that it was his fate to be eaten alive bit by bit, perhaps over days. He is very grateful for his rescue and feels most fortunate.

They return to Albert's house, having gaffed one of the largest worms as both trophy and proof of the encounter.

Act 2; Scene 2 Market Day at the Roundhouse

On the morrow they take a day's rest from their exertions. The next day being a Saturday they make their way to the Roundhouse, where Ned Culpable is to perform a charitable surgery for all to attend gratis. Albert insists that he will come too, despite his many half-healed injuries. As they arrive at the Roundhouse, they hoist the white worm to the yardarm on the boat and prepare to tell their tell.

Albert stands upon the jetty and points to the worm as proof that the tales they had scoffed at were indeed true. He displays his wounds and proclaims that he is only here today because the Blackamoor saved him.

Ben Jaffa, the Blackamoor, recounts the whole tale in a play: "*Albert the Eelman and the Great White Worms of Rainham Marshes.*" All parts are performed by Mr Ben Jaffa. Few have seen a genuine London Theatreman at his work and the crowd is enthralled. Ben is called to reprise his performance several times over the day and becomes something of a local celebrity.

Meanwhile, Ned Culpable is also enhancing his reputation. The denizens of the marshes form long queues to hear his prognostications upon their ailments and obtain small quantities of physick. It is plain that should Mr Culpable set up a practice in Rainham Marshes he should make a good living there – if content to be paid in eels.

A Bucolic Interlude

It being apparent that strangers are not welcome on the morrow on account of the prayer meeting being for marsh folks, the company leave the boat moored at the Roundhouse and make their way across the causeway to Avely. There they spend a comfortable night in the care of Annette in the local inn. After a thorough investigation of the Reverend Simmonds breakfast arrangements, they attend the morning mass there and sign the register – as must all good Protestants in England before returning surreptitiously across the ill-maintained causeway to the Roundhouse

Act 2; Scene 2 The Prayer Meeting

The Roundhouse is busy, but none take particular note as they quietly secrete themselves upon their boat under a canvas awning. They watch as at least two score folk file into the

Roundhouse for their prayer meeting, leaving two sentries patrolling outside. They have the look of lizardmen. There is a chanting coming from the Roundhouse.

The plan is for Bell and Jaffa to sneak up on the sentries and dispatch them; then to rush in and disrupt the prayer meeting as if it were a coven of witches – though they note that there seem to be two or three score in the congregation and they but four (Bert will guard the boat). Ben has some flash grenades in his sea chest to sow confusion. He rummages further in his chest and comes up with a small pot of ointment. *“Aha! I knocked this up in my laboratory. I knew I had some with me. This decoction of Vitriol will render our steps soundless.”* He applies the paste to the soles of his shoes and passes the remainder to Bell who does likewise.

Their feet are indeed soundless as they creep along the jetty and up behind their respective targets as they make their patrol around the Roundhouse. Ben realizes before he strikes that his man is not lizardmen at all – just an eelman. He chooses simply to biff him over the noggin with the butt of a pistol. He goes down like a sack of turnips. The more sanguinary Scotsman, having not the finer feelings of the African, simply slits the weasand of his unsuspecting victim and dumps him in the water. Culpable and Plemyswode join them at the Roundhouse and they peep in.

The congregation appear to be lizardmen, though now all have their doubts about this seeming. They are chanting. There is a robed and hooded figure who brandishes a blade. Before him, held by his arms and on his knees, is the Jesuit. Things seem timely for their intervention. Jaffa tosses in his grenades, which have the desired effect and in charge Plummeswode and Bell, while Ned and Ben run round the outside to arrive at the back door.

By the time Ben and Ned arrive, folk are already streaming out of the back door. They look like ordinary marsh folk. There is Father Lucien on his knees. They can hear the sounds of strife inside the roundhouse. Ben bids Ned secure the Jesuit as he plunges into the back of the Roundhouse to assist Plemysewode and Bell. All is confusion, however, and Ned is distracted by other matters.

In the Roundhouse Bell and Plumswood are facing a horror from hell that seems resistant to blade and pistol ball. Nevertheless, much as Jaffa arrives Bell finally plunges his broadsword into it and it collapses in a heap. Bell is starting to have that faraway look in his eyes again. They return all three to back of the Roundhouse. Ned joins them. There is no sign of the Jesuit. Bell begins to pursue the fugitives across the causeway. He is a strong, athletic man and they cannot evade him, but by throwing themselves off the causeway into the marsh. He overhauls them all but there is no sign of the Jesuit. The others search the Roundhouse and its environs with a fine tooth comb. They find plenty of eels but no sign of Lucien Raphael. Curiously there is also no sign of Margaret or her son Jacob. They do, however, find a satchel with something in it that Plymswood declares to be of Great Power.

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