

# A Trail of Breadcrumbs

*A Tale from the pen of Mr Ben Jaffa*

Recounting the events of the last few days in its true chronology as if it were a play would be long, tedious and probably take me the rest of my life. A poor play it would make too for it were neither Tragedy, being shot through with comedic moments, nor Comedy for the number of corpses. I present instead a series of Tableaux with commentary.



## The Fuck-up

*"Don't fuck it up," says Burbage, owner and "Manager" of The Theatre in Shoreditch. It is the first night of our new play by Nathaniel Horton. "There's an important person in today. The Lord Chamberlain wants him happy and entertained."*

Why Burbage should burden me with his concerns, I cannot say. My role at The Theatre (and indeed The Curtain and various other playhouses around London) is to provide "Special Effects" - especially those requiring black powder – flashes, bangs and atmospheric or coloured smoke. It can be tricky stuff, but I'm a professional; that's why they employ me. I don't fuck up. I considered telling him this but he'd passed on his way. Of course everything did fuck up and I spent the next three days trying to un-fuck it (and to prove that it wasn't I that fucked it up in the first place).

That's not how it seemed on the night in question. Even I thought I might have fucked up when my smoke pots, designed to impart a delicate, atmospheric haze, started to belch a thick dark, choking and obscuring miasma. Armed men wearing remarkably realistic rat masks burst into the Theatre under its cover. This was no fuck-up; this was a Plot.

## The Toff

*The Toff lies wounded, being attended by some sword-wearing Ruffian who smells strongly of horse. It seems he is genuinely trying to assist, however ineptly, not picking his pockets. I gently pushed him aside to attend the Toff myself. The Ruffian goes back to belabouring a captive who appears to have been one of the rat-faced mob. The Toff is most concerned about the fate of the Emissary (presumably the foreign cove), of whom there is no sign. He is insistent that we send word to Mr Bligh at the Palace. I give one of the theatre lads a groat to take his message.*

Obviously, when Burbage told me about the visiting bigwig I had made it my business to scan the crowd for him. He wasn't hard to spot - a foreign cove with some kind of palace toff in attendance. Thus when the trouble started I immediately shouldered my way through panicked crowds to where I had last seen them.

I was pushed aside in turn from my bandaging by some fellow who claimed to be an apothecary and felt he could make a better job (to be fair he could). So I joined the Ruffian in wringing information out of the rat-faced fellow. We got the name of a petty gang leader called Edmund Buckley who'd hired him, and an indication of the doorway through which he said the others had gone. I left him in the charge of some stage hands and set off in pursuit with the Ruffian, who seemed to be some sort of Scotsman – though he was keen to deny it – and was muttering something about a hot trod.

## Hot Trod

*Myself and the Not-Scotsman burst up through the trap door to confront three swordsmen. The Not-Scotsman, armed with sword and dagger takes the fellow on the left, while I with my work knife am left with the other two. Fortunately, they are inept and I was born lucky. I knife the one to the front while back-kicking (Old School style) the one manoeuvring behind me. My boot staggers him back and he falls down the trap, breaking his neck. This becomes a bit of a theme.*

We had arrived here via the door indicated by the captured rat-man. There was no-one there but we found a trap door leading to a tunnel. The apothecary, whose name seemed to be Ned, had finished patching up the Toff to his satisfaction, and initially made to come with us but the young lady on his arm refused to let go. She was not keen to go down a tunnel in her best dress and said so in a manner that brooked no denial.

So the Not-Scotsman and I followed this tunnel some way with naught for light but a couple of scavenged candle stubs, until we came upon what appeared to be a secret shrine of the Catholic persuasion. There was a ladder to a trapdoor above.

The three sword-armed bravos had been holding a terrified family. There had been more men and a captive, they said, but they had left via the front door. We advised them to dismantle their shrine – since others might come this way who were less understanding. Apart from their weapons and a few coins, the only things of interest on the bodies were a rat mask and a gold crucifix found in the pocket of the one with a broken neck. I took a sword – it wasn't a very good one – but better than a work knife.

## Vespers

*"My name is Sandy Bell," says the Not-Scotsman as he shakes the priest's hand. I stand a pace behind and make like his faithful black servant. The priest does not immediately offer his own name. When pressed by Bell he simply gives it as Nicholas.*

Our trail of breadcrumbs had led us to infiltrate a Catholic prayer meeting in a disused chapel. The genuine celebrants seem literally enthralled by the Mass. Even I can feel the charismatic glamour that attends the ceremony and the words of the priest. We lurk behind the departing faithful and return to ransack the joint. There's not much but we do turn up a scrap of paper that mentions a meeting at St. Leonards Church in Shoreditch. That would be the long-derelict "Actors' Church", just up the road from The Theatre.

## The Tavern

*The night is yet young and there are Players still carousing in the tavern opposite The Theatre, where I lay my head and keep my old sea-chest. I'm informed with some glee that Burbage is ranting and raving and after my blood. Apparently he'd been hauled down to the Palace for a wiggling and told his licence is on the line.*

Discussing the excitement of the night with my colleagues, one of them reminds me of a forgotten detail. My cue to light the fuses was not as rehearsed. It wasn't the usual garbled line, it was actually quite elegantly formed but definitely a change to the script. I thought nothing of it at the time, but now it intrigued. I looked around for John Laneham who delivered the line but was told he'd sloped off earlier in the evening with a doxy.

Ned Culpable, the uxorious apothecary, this time without lady-friend, was drinking in a corner. We re-acquainted ourselves and recounted our adventure. I wanted to go to The Theatre to check on the captive rat-man and examine the smoke-pots. Ned came with us.

We got nothing useful from the Rat-man so we left him imprisoned under the stage where we found him. I could immediately see that the pots were none of my manufacture. I could only assume they had been exchanged for my originals. Ned could tell us that the originator of these pots was a Russian apothecary he vaguely knew. I noted that one pot was missing and Ned said that two philosophical gentlemen by the names of Plumswode and Blythman had taken one for study.

Though the hour was now late, we made our way to the tavern where Ned thought we might find them. They had little to add to our sum of knowledge, but the hypothesis that magic had been involved. Plumswode in particular thought that the change of wording in the cue might have been the trigger that conjured the effect. He suggested that by his Arts he might be able to tell us more but he would need a turn of the sun to prepare. (He and Blythman were thoroughly shifty about talking of “magic”. However, if one sees the hull of a Spanish galleon from afar, sporting a great white sail with a red cross thereupon, one can generally be sure it ain’t a fishing smack.)

We agreed to meet them on the morrow in the evening. In the meantime Bell, Culpable and I would meet at dawn and pay the Russian a visit.

### **The Muskovites**

*An apothecary shop in the backstreets of London. A brawny bravo is beating the shit out of a small man and shouting at him in what I take to be Russian. Another is standing by, a snaphaunce pistol held nonchalantly in his hand. As we enter he shouts imprecations in badly accented English at us the gist of which is that we should “Fuck off”. When we do not immediately comply, he shoots at me. Luckily he misses. I return the favour and even more luckily – for I am no great shot – I hit. I charge the second bravo, backsword in hand. Bell takes the pistol-shot one. Ned keeps watch in the street. In a trice all is silent but for the whimpering of the Muskovite apothecary. There are lingering tendrils of smoke and a whiff of spent powder.*

I met up with Sandy and Ned in the morning. In view of the events of the previous day I took a rummage in my old sea chest. Full armour seemed a bit ostentatious for walking the streets of London so I left my Spanish-wrought harness where it lay in favour of just the buff coat and bucket-topped boots. I picked up my backsword and dagger along with one out of a brace of wheel-lock pistols. I’m glad I did.

Now you’d think the apothecary might be grateful for being rescued him from a beating. Not a bit of it. He continued with the pistol waving bravo’s advice for us to fuck-off – along with a constant refrain that we had no idea what we were doing. Fair comment. He seemed to think we had something to do with Walsingham – reputed to be ER’s spy master. Beyond an acknowledgement that he had indeed supplied the pots and a cursory description of the recipient, we came away with little but the sense that we had managed to stumble upon something entirely else.

### **John Laneham**

*A bleary-eyed leading man opens the door to his rooms (Laneham lives in better style, I note, than I). “Oh, it’s you, Ben. What the deuce are you doing calling so early?” A doxy is packed off and I am invited in for a chat and some hair of the dog.*

John was quite straightforward in his account of the night in question. Yes, the cue was changed. Horton had handed him an amended script at the last minute. He gave me the

script so I could see the changes in Horton's hand. He assumed Burbage knew but didn't discuss it with him.

Noting that Horton fitted the description the apothecary gave us of his customer for the pots, we repaired to his lodgings. Horton was not at home. He has few possessions there but a careful check of his writing desk reveals a secret compartment containing a gold crucifix – the twin of the one we found in the pocket of the broken-necked rat-man.

### **Burbage**

*"Just shut up, Burbage. I've killed three men so far over this affair and I'm not in the mood." Burbage's mouth shuts like a trap, mid-rant, as he gapes at me in shock. "Sit down and listen."*

It was evening and we were back at The Theatre. The scholarly gentlemen were convinced that the ritual had taken place in the theatre itself. I was dubious. They were describing an event that simply could not have been hidden in a packed theatre. They suggested that there must be some sort of secret compartment or room. I thought it was about time I spoke to Burbage – who to be honest I'd been avoiding. So I left Bell and Culpable with the fixated Sages and went up to Burbage's office to beard him in his den.

Having got Burbage's attention, I updated him on the events of the last few days. Now you might wonder why I bothered. Well, at the end of the day he is my boss and one of only a handful of potential employers for my skills in London. It was not in my interests for him to lose his licence. In any case, for all his ranting and raging he isn't a bad sort really. Anyway someone outside our group needed to know what was going on – in case things went sideways. Just passing on the knowledge might save his licence.

When I let him speak, Burbage told me that the important person was a Turkish Emissary and that it had been impressed upon him that it was an important Matter of State for him to be retrieved. I asked him about the possibility of hidden secrets below The Theatre but he confirmed what I already knew: it had been built from scratch but a few years ago by his own brother. He thought it highly unlikely that there were any secret hiding places.

I rejoined the party and conveyed this news to them. Bell and Culpable had already reached the same conclusion. Only Plumyswode remained convinced of the rightness of his arcane conclusions. We agreed to turn our attention to our only outstanding lead – the derelict church of St Leonards, just up the road from The Theatre. A brief night reconnaissance confirmed that it was occupied by at least a handful of armed men. We determined upon a dawn raid and returned to our respective lodgings to prepare.

### **St Leonards**

*We creep towards the derelict church. There are guards but they do not appear alert. I toss up a flash-bang to greet the dawn and we charge up the steps to engage the disoriented guards. One of them makes a run for it into the ruins. I catch him at the top of a flight of stairs and put my boot in his back. He pitches forward into the darkness. I find him at the bottom of the steps, neck broken, in a spacious crypt. There is the distant sound of chanting in Latin.*

Before our pre-dawn rendezvous, I had returned to my sea-chest to add a breast and back to the buff coat and bucket-topped boots. The rest of my fine Spanish harness I left in the chest, lest the tassets and pauldrons rattle too much for a quiet approach and the morion muffle my hearing. I did pick up a second pistol and a satchel with a few flash-bangs.

After a few minutes accustoming my eyes to the gloom of the crypt I was joined by my comrades who had dealt with those above. Lighting lanterns (though there were lights here already) we set off to explore the crypt. Before long we encountered resistance.

### **The Crypt**

*Looming out of the gloom comes – horror! A Skeletal form with rags of flesh lurches towards me, weapon raised and teeth bared in a terrible rictus. I discharge my last pistol. I am relieved to see the bone and dessicated flesh fly and the creature halted briefly in its tracks. Nevertheless, I must strike it several more times with my sword before it falls to the ground and moves no more.*

The first sentries we encountered as we traversed the vast crypt, seeking the source of the chanting, were armed men - not particularly skilled. It was not until the walking dead appeared that fighting became hot. We pressed our way up a set of stairs – the chanting growing louder as we progressed. At last Bell and I burst through the last of the animated corpses. Though aware that our comrades were still engaged in combat with more attackers that had come from the rear, regardless we pressed on upwards to the top of the stairs and the chamber beyond.

### **A Black Mass**

*A choir is gathered. The choristers are blank-eyed. Bell and I recognise many from the prayer meeting in the derelict chapel. Leading the choir is the priest, Nicholas. He is flanked by a man holding a chest and another. All three seem focused but aware. Before them on the ground lies a man – in the garb of the Turkish Emissary. Above him is a spectral figure that appears to be feeding upon him. They pay us no heed until I toss in a flash-bang. The chanting falters. Bell and I charge. We pass our blades through the spectre, en passant, but it pays our steel no heed. We leap past into the midst of the choir – our blades whirling*

It is plain that Bell and I studied in the same weapons school as we lay about ourselves. The blows we landed upon the priest in particular should have felled him but he turned and fled. Our other comrades were starting to arrive so I left Bell to mop up resistance in the chamber and set off in pursuit. I caught him at the head of steep stairs going down – his arse a perfect target for my boot. He pitched forwards and crashed down a short flight of stairs lying injured but apparently still alive.

### **A Well-earned Fate**

*An icy blast comes from behind me and a shudder runs down my spine as the spectre flies past and down the stairs. It latches upon its summoner and begins to feed. I do not try to interfere as it finishes its repast and flies off into the dark. Only then do I approach the priest. I find only a dessicated corpse devoid of life.*

I returned to the chamber, to find us masters of the field. The Turkish Emissary was alive but very weak, being attended to by Ned. All the ringleaders were dead.

We questioned the enthralled choristers who seemed quite bewildered and could not recall how they came to be there. We let them go but not before they told us that the priest was called Nicholas Trenningham and his henchmen Androw Towley and Gabriel Thorpe. All were members of a papist group that called itself the “Sodality of St. Benedict”.

I confess that I had hitherto taken little note of the theological differences between the English and the Catholic Churches. However, if these Sods are anything to go by I can see why so many in England have such a down on Papists.

### **The Aftermath**

*"You see," exclaims Plymswood with an air of triumph, "This place must be right below The Theatre. I was correct all along." Bell, Culpable and I roll our eyes.*

We gathered up anything that looked useful or valuable. We let the Philosophers take charge of the chest, which apparently contained a skull with writing upon it, and a book in Latin that Trenningham had about his person. Apart from some decent armour and weapons, the only other thing of note was a gold crucifix round the Priest's neck which seemed identical to the two others we had taken, only this one was twisted and distorted from its original shape.

We gathered up our loot and combined between us to carry the Turkish Emissary out into the sunlight. There we were met by a carriage. It was escorted by a bunch of fierce-looking men – janissaries I guessed – who immediately took charge of the Emissary.

Out of the carriage came a man who introduced himself as Bligh. He said that we had all done very well and that Walsingham was aware of our work and approved. He failed to express his gratitude with large bags of gold, but climbed aboard his carriage once more and set off with the Turks in the direction of the Palace.