

The Cuthbert Conundrum

- June 1582

While Dr Avon had been occupied treating an outbreak of the “Sweating Sickness” in Bristol his friend Richard Blake had been busy in the service of Good Queen Bess, this time he had with the support of a select group of sailors from his crew intercepted Aurelia Perez de Lyon the mistress of one Bernard Guy and an intimate of the notorious sorcerer Romarez Esteban whose fiendish plots Keir Avon had foiled. Most notably when he had summoned up a strong wind to blow the Kestrel away from the maw of the monstrous white worm pursuing it.

In what Blake himself modestly described as a ‘masterful’ and even ‘sublime’ stroke of genius he had simply claimed to be her escort and the trusting French had simply handed her over. On the way home the Kestrel had been assaulted by what Blake described as “fish men”.

Avon’s attention was immediately drawn to the odd necklace the lady is wearing which she claims to be a family heirloom that was worn by her mother and her grandmother before her. Avon notes the inscriptions in something that is not quite ‘Persian’, a language in which he is fluent, but decipherable to him as meaning the concepts of ‘consequence’, ‘arrival’ and possibly ‘empire’ and something that could mean ‘existence’ or ‘country’. To his mind it is the sort of thing one might intend to be worn by those destined to be the line that give birth to a Messiah. Or an anti-Christ depending upon one’s perspective and the quantity of tentacles involved. It feels ‘odd’ to his touch.

Being at sea and far from any of the Invisible College, his extensive faction who would most certainly have an expert translator in their number, Avon decided to attempt some Divination. Retreating to his cabin he begins to compose a piece. The reaction of the sailors, clearly low born types of no taste, inspires the title of the work “Margarita ingrata porcos” which raises a wry smile from Jules who understands the Latin and blank incomprehension from Blake who does not.

Gazing into his small travelling divination orb set about with gold and mounted upon a stand carved from ash wood and decorated with a small topaz while he plays his latest masterpiece he feels that a solid effort has been achieved. The phrase “Thus gets in the world 1599” appears before his eyes. Exhausted by the effort Avon writes down the enigmatic phrase in the unlikely event that it ever turns out to mean anything to anyone anywhere before sinking into a troubled sleep.

The candle had burned down when Avon awoke violently with a start from a dream remembering only three things. First was Aurelia's voice saying "What time does it have?" Definitely phrased as a question. Secondly the symbol and Latin for St Cuthbert of Letters strongly associated with a feeling of safety, Lastly a vision of being Aurelia with a dark eyed Moorish boy staring intently at her and disappearing down a dark alley.

Avon deploys his most intimidating aspect, his famous and much sought-after "bedside manner", that terrifies the captive sufficiently that it is clear she is holding nothing back. She reveals that the Chapels of St Cuthbert in Bristol and in London are places of safety for 'Catholics' or at least Estafan's people.

Returning to Bristol they go their separate ways. Avon to his residence with Aurelia where his ward Caroline and he keep a careful watch upon their 'guest' who remains locked in at night and is clearly so petrified of Avon that she does not dare attempt escape. Blake to write to London and wait further instructions.

A gentleman calling himself "Williams" comes with sealed letters and instructions from Walsingham so Aurelia is released into his custody. The gentlemen repair to the tavern for a glass of wine as Williams heads off into town to look for a coach back to London, their part in the matter done. Or so they reasonably assumed.

Alas their plans for the day were much disrupted. In hindsight the first sign was a local bursting in to the inn and shouting about "A huge fight down at the square." Naturally this was of no interest to Avon, Blake or du Plessis and so long as the rioters did not threaten them, their ship or home saw no reason to take notice but some of Blake's sailors went off to watch the fun.

After much shouting, howling, cries of "Dogs! Dogs!" followed by something heavy hitting the door and reports that a coachman was dead and a woman had been abducted it became clear that their plans for a relaxing afternoon were not to be so all three went to investigate.

First into the fray was the ever eager Blake who was in time to witness exceptionally large dogs trotting back to the square hear a distant whistle then pick the pace. Interviewing a witness he is told "They set the dogs on him!" Stepping out into the street Blake turns to his friends. "Better bring the bang sticks!" he advises and heads off to find Williams.

Concurring with this assessment Avon loads his flintlocks in record time, his hands swift and sure, a quite remarkable feat of dexterity that goes unremarked and is of no consequence as it turns out.

Williams is barely alive when found by Blake and with his dying breath conveys his final message which is in equal parts superfluous and uninformative. "Must tell Walsingham!". It is the general consensus this means they must tell Walsingham to employ more competent people than the late Williams.

Avon is able to diagnose the cause of death as “Blood loss due to enormous dog bites”.

Blake slaps down money on the table to go to anyone who can find the abducted Aurelia and report back to him.

Jules chooses to interview the street urchin. A “Little Tommy” says the dogs weren’t that big. Other urchins disagree, arguments and scuffles ensue.

Avon seeks out one of his associates from the Invisible College. An old friend of his mother’s the Reverend Jim is lodging at the Golden Lamprey and knows all about St Cuthbert’s of The Letters. It is just off Agatha Street and Bitter Alley passes close by. It used to be run by a Fortescue but some new fellow recently took over called Hatter or Hutter or something. A Lutheran by all accounts and come under the Bath and Wells diocese.

This seems to be the most promising lead so all three follow the directions and on arriving at St Cuthbert’s the cunning Blake pounds on the door crying “Sanctuary!”

He pleads for admission claiming “Guy sent us!” and cries fearfully that “Walsingham’s men are after us!”.

It being dark and therefore ideal conditions for night the moon is out, taking advantage of this Jules du Plessis slips around the back while a light can be seen heading away from the door clearly to ask a superior before returning and looking either way suspiciously beckons Blake and Avon in to the church. They are led past the alter and into a back room.

“Bristol is not a safe place.” they are told.

Meanwhile Jules has discovered that the gate to the back yard is open. Clearly horses were here only minutes ago. Spotting a flickering light at one window he slips in through a darkened window. There is a strong smell of wet dog there but it hasn’t been raining and he can hear a whispered conversation from the other room.

The situation becomes somewhat fast moving and fluid at this point with dogs barking, priests running away, pistols being drawn. There is confusion as to whose dogs these are and concern they will draw attention. The priest has a sword which Blake takes off him. Hearing the ring of steel against steel Avon opens suspicious doors to discover store rooms.

Meanwhile a busy Jules is throwing horse shit around to confuse the dogs and provokes one into jumping out leaving it vulnerable to being stabbed. Deeper growling ensues so he throws the corpse of the first dog in to distract the second. A huge dog jumps out so Jules wisely jumps in and to his delight discovers a man with a sword and uses La Destreza followed by a magisterial Coup de Jamec both disarming and critically wounding his

opponent. The Priest gives final unction conspicuously in the Catholic tradition. Certainly not a Lutheran really.

Learning that Aurelia has been taken to Muchelney Abbey, an old ruin out on the levels near Langport there is one final attempt to sow confusion made by Blake claiming that the satanic dogs are in fact sent by Walsingham before the three set off to find horses and give pursuit.

Riding through the night the three reached Langport by the first hints of dawn, the recent rains had flooded the fields. Stopping at the Goose Foot tavern the consensus was that we couldn't get to Muchelney now because of the floods which had closed the old road. Clearly we will need a boat. Breakfasting upon excellent eel pie the answer is obvious and the local eel fishermen agree to the loan of a boat. The old fellow with the boat tells us that three riders with two dogs came through an hour ago and took a boat to the abbey.

Blake expertly navigates the eel fisher's boat towards the ruins visible on a slight rise of the land where one large building still stands. There are not many windows on the intact building but footprint lead to a small door which appears to be locked so the brave gentlemen try the big doors are the front instead which creek open ominously to reveal signs of a fire and two men standing by keeping guard. Avon detects that Blake and du Plessis require his assistance so draws his own sword and runs a guard through the chest to general surprise, not least Avon himself who is no great swordsman.

The surviving guard wisely blames it all on 'Hooter' who gave them the dogs. Sensing a conflict is imminent Avon invokes the "Stink of War" using the name of Babalel without any precautions, rituals or preparation which is a bold and risky move. His heightened senses now detect chanting in Enochian and he leads the way confidently having made a perception test that there is no significant threat, no more than a few people and maybe a dog or two to worry about.

Emboldened by the certainty they are not to face overwhelming odds the gentlemen burst in through the big old carved doors to discover the room is packed with hooded chanting figures that Avon's magically enhanced senses had completely failed to detect. At least a dozen of them with their backs turned to the door all calling for a spirit of some kind. A name not then familiar to Avon. Clearly a complex ritual of invocation involving alteration and creation using the sphere of Mercury. "Thus gets in the world" they chant which was what Avon recalled from his prophetic dream.

There are also four dogs with glowing eyes and standing at the back of the room is none other than the fake Lutheran priest from St Cuthberts. How did he get here so quickly? The dogs double in size on release and breathe fire! Jules cleverly uses one of the hooded chanters as a shield against the demon dog's fiery breath.

Alarmed by the growing tension in the air Avon discharges his pistol at the master to at

least distract him while Blake and du Plessis battle valiantly against the overwhelming odds.

Something drastic needs to be done so Avon does something very drastic. He directly invokes Kantagorus's Rejection of Spirits using the name of Graphiel calling upon the heptarchic principles primarily of the Sun, secondarily of Venus, and desperately inefficiently also Jupiter and Saturn. It is not enough he knows. The Alchemical principles of light and fire from torches, the discharge of his pistol, the geometric alignment of the room. He needs an area effect to be sure to stop the spirit from coming through into the world. He draws upon the sanctity of the Abbey for further assistance. Still it is not enough. He needs more! Avon slashes wildly at his own wrists using his life blood and takes the biggest gamble of all opening his own mind to the madness of magic, the dimensions no human brain can safely comprehend, risking his precious reason. His sanity is at stake.

But it works. And it works spectacularly well which is fortunate to the somewhat toasted Blake and the singed du Plessis in particular whose burns and wounds are so serious he collapses. Not only is the summoning dispelled but everywhere monks in hooded robes are collapsing and dissolving into smoking liquids reminiscent of the gypsy camp incident. The four hell hounds also collapse as the spirits inhabiting them are dispelled, their bodies instantly start to rot.

Avon slumps to the floor utterly exhausted but triumphant. Once again he has been tested and bested his enemy.

Only Blake is left standing to face the two monks who were just outside the area of the effect. Happily they are not inclined to fight dropping their swords and surrendering. Blake interrogates them as to the whereabouts of the lady and they point at a dark sarcophagus from which faint cries of distress can be heard. Inside he discovers Aurelia in pools of blood looking pale but alive.

The two remaining monks or priests or whatever they are speak in archaic French affected Old English, they are clearly suffering and when Blake asks them if they want to live they decline bitterly saying "If you can call this living." Out of kindness he puts them out of their misery, they seem to be victims themselves. The survivors last memory is of attending a service at St Cuthbert's last Sunday.

Blake recovers Aurelia's necklace which he gallantly restores to her, possibly more out of concern that Walsingham might blame him if the lady is missing jewellery while Avon's interest is drawn to a peculiar statuette of Anubis the master was using.

Everything about this relates to Egypt it seems.