

The Trail Continues

Notes made by Ben Jaffa on the righteous pursuit of the Sodality of St Benedict and on another related matter.

Please forgive the cursory nature of the following account. I have had little time to devote to writing these past few days and there are urgent matters still to attend. However, I thought it mete to lay out a brief account of what has recently befallen for those of our company who have not been active in these matters. As you will see there are two (almost) separate threads to this narrative. For simplicity's sake I will deal with them serially, though in chronology they occur broadly within the same period.



Carlisle or Carluccio

One dark night, Mr Plumswode receives a visitor. By the light of candles he is studying the Book and Artefacts taken in our encounter with the Sodality of St Benedict in the Crypt of St Leonards. He hears the approach of horses followed by an urgent knocking on the door. He hesitates to open the door, but the knocking is followed by threats of violence should he not open. He opens the door. There is a large man finely dressed but all in black. He has two others at his back. "You have something of mine", says the stranger, "I've come to take it back". The long and the short of it is that this fellow wants the objects of Plumswode's study and he takes them. There is but one clue as to his identity, when one of his henchmen inadvertently drops a name: Carlisle.

The following day, after some fruitless attempts to discover more about this fellow, we decide to escalate the matter. We obtain an audience with Mr Blythe, Walsingham's factotum who previously congratulated us on the rescue of the Turkish emissary. He immediately identified Plumyswood's late night visitor as Adamo Carluccio, an Italian spy who often goes by the name of Carlisle when in England. Blythe believes him to be the leader of the Sodality of St. Benedict. He is one of the most wanted men in England but Blythe had believed him to be abroad. If he has just returned and found that many of his henchmen have been slaughtered and his congregation scattered, Blythe believes he will be at his most vulnerable. He urges us to seek him out at the Church of St Leonard's, where he thinks he will try to rally his network and wreak whatever devilry that Trenningham planned before he was thwarted.

While we had his attention we also shared our concerns about the *Other Matter* to which I will return shortly. Blyth said he would look into it.

Action Against the Sodality

This time we were only three, Blithwood being out of town and Bell being indisposed. Despite the ravages of excess drink – or a dodgy prawn as he would have it – Bell did at least come along to render what assistance he might in his weakened state. However, it was left to Plimeswode, Culpable and myself to repeat our assault upon St. Leonard's Church. We soon found ourselves in the fight of our lives for Carluccio was the very devil of a swordsman and, it turned out was magickally protected. He also had half a dozen henchmen with him some of whom were quite competent and well-armed. All we had was surprise.

This time I had donned my full armour. I had also prepared a couple of Spanish Grenadoes in place of my theatrical flash-bangs. As before, we crept to the church using the broken ground. I tossed in a grenado and we charged up the steps.

Although the grenado caused some hurts and bought us some time, we found ourselves seriously outnumbered. Matters became worse when Ned unfortunately tumbled over a low parapet, putting him out of the fight for a spell. Luckily Carluccio's arrogance worked to our favour for he plainly wanted to finish me himself. He was a trained fighter of the Italian School – all acrobatics and cunning manoeuvres - and plainly my master with a blade. Only my fine harness – loot from the taking of Spanish galleon in my privateer days - saved me from his blows. Matters worse, whenever I did contrive to land a blow upon him, it left no apparent mark upon his doublet. He taunted me with this and played with me as a cat does a mouse.

However, the Old School is not without its own tricks. I surprised him with a grapple and throw, pitching him over the same parapet whence Master Culpable had disappeared. He landed heavily. As chance would have it Ned was just climbing up to rejoin the fray at this point and Signore Carluccio fell more or less at his feet. Ned swiftly applied the coup de grace before he could deploy any more of his Italian trickery and so England's most wanted met his end. We swiftly mopped up the rest of the Sodality taking but one prisoner. Checking Carluccio's body we discovered him to be wearing not one but two of the gold crosses we had previously found on members of the Sodality. As with Trenningham's cross, they were both twisted and misshapen.

Repairing once more to the crypt, we re-secured the tome and the skull. We also retrieved some items we had missed the last time - physical components to the spells in the Book. They were well hidden but this time Master Plumswoode knew what it was we sought.

We then turned our attention to our prisoner, who was none other than Nathaniel Horton, the playwright.

Horton's End

Horton made some small effort to resist our questioning, but he crumbled in the face of my menacing demeanour. In truth I was genuinely exceeding wroth at him so I did not need to feign my anger. He had tried his best to frame me for creating the smoke at the Theatre and had betrayed Babbage's Players with his plotting on behalf of the vile Sodality. Ere long he began to babble everything he knew. In truth there was little in what he said that we did not already know or could surmise. However, it became abundantly clear during the interrogation that Horton was a true believer in the Sodality of St Benedict, Carluccio and his mission.

In his babbling Horton began to name all those families from the "choir" that we chose to let go with a warning to mend their ways. Horton had already said quite enough to hang himself, if we handed him over to Blyth. However, before death there would be a long and agonising session with professional torturers, not just an angry and intimidating blackamoor. I took my comrades aside and suggested that I just slit his throat. It would be a kindness.

To be clear, by this time my anger towards Horton had subsided – he was just a pathetic, deluded worm in the thrall of much stronger characters than he. I was motivated more by pity. Pity, yes, for Horton, but pity more for the families that his testimony would condemn to a horrible death. My thoughts kept going back to the Templemans, the family Bell and I

found cowering in a back room while the Ratmen took over their house. We had previously considered them harmless dupes. Now we had more information from the Book that confirmed the choir as likely victims, robbed of their wills by sorcery. I saw no reason to change my view on this but it was a viewpoint I would not wish to elucidate before Walsingham's men.

Ned saw it differently. His arguments were moral ones against the slaying of prisoners and the taking of life in cold blood. The casting vote went to Plumyswood. He was chiefly concerned that Horton knew too much about us – in particular that he, Plumiswode, had a knowledge of the arcane that went beyond the philosophical to the practical. He certainly did not want this to be brought to the attention of the authorities. It transpired that there was a certain irony that would emerge in the end regarding this argument. His vote was for slaying Horton.

Ned left the company rather than witness what he viewed as cold-blooded murder. For my part, I considered it a kindness. I would do the same for a wounded animal or a comrade in agony and beyond saving. I swiftly drew my blade across Horton's unsuspecting weasand from behind.

Plumswode and I took Carluccio's body to Blyth who was delighted and invited us in for further discussion.

Black Tom and the Spirit of the Skull

Now for the Other Matter. During the days both before and after Carluccio's visit to Plumyswode's abode, Ned and I had been investigating a new gang that seemed to have sprung up from nowhere and were terrorising Fillpot Lane where Ned lived. They had already turned over his master's apothecary shop. They demanded a pay-off and said they'd be back. Other businesses were also attacked, people had gone missing and the local enforcers had been chased off.

Initial investigations came up with the name Black Tom. He was, by reputation, a small-time gang leader operating out of the Town Wall area by the Docks. Filpot Lane was a long way off his normal patch. Ned and I went down to the docks to see what more we could discover.

We spoke to a number of witnesses – mostly tavern-keepers – and to cut a long story short we discovered the following:

- Black Tom had been a small-time operator with a gang of about half a dozen footpads working for him.
- He'd suddenly acquired a new gang of much tougher, harder men and his old crew had all disappeared.
- He had strange eyes that no-one had noticed before and he had suddenly become ruthless, violent and very scary.
- He and his gang had burned down one dockside inn and several more had been abandoned due to his threats.
- He had entirely taken over one of the wharfs – Browns – and his crew were occupying the only remaining operating inn, called Cutts Tavern.
- All this had taken place in the space of but a couple of weeks.

So a sudden change in character, strange eyes and a meteoric rise to power starting but two weeks ago. Making an intuitive leap, our thoughts immediately turned to the evil spirit from the skull. I had last seen it fleeing through the passages of the Crypt of St Leonards

at just the time that Black Tom had become ambitious and sinister. Had it found refuge in a small time crook in the Tower Wall district? Was Black Tom possessed?

We discuss the matter with Plumyswood who concurs with our surmise. He points out that if we could only retrieve the Book and Skull from Carluccio, then he should be able to summon the spirit and imprison it in the Skull once more. We do not share this information with Blythe at our initial meeting, but do draw his attention to the activities of Black Tom as a threat to the peace of the capital.

When Plymeswode and I meet him again after the dispatch of Carluccio, Blythe has commissioned some intelligence on the matter. He agrees that Black Tom does appear to represent a threat. At this point I apprise him both of our surmise about the spirit and our proposed solution.

It is only once the words are out that I realise I have told him precisely the secret that Plumyswood was prepared to kill (or have me kill) to protect – namely that he was a practising sorcerer. As it happens this did not turn out as badly as it might. Blythe felt himself caught upon the horns of a dilemma. While he clearly abhorred magic, and its practitioners, from the very fundament of his being, at the same time he could see the utility of our plan and allowed himself to be swayed by arguments of expediency. In the end he gave our plan his sanction.

Blythe provided us with a couple of his agents, a pair of suave ruffians named Bodie and Doyle to assist us in our moves against Black Tom's gang. Unfortunately, our plan fell at the first hurdle, for when I return with these fellows the following day to pick up Plumyswood from his dwelling place, he comes to the door glum-faced. It seems he had been at it all night, but try as he might he just couldn't perform. The spell is beyond him.

I turn to Bodie and Doyle. "Lads, it looks like we are going to have to do this the hard way." They just shrug. "Whatever."