

THE SILVER SKULL

SWORDS OF ALBION

OTHER PYR TITLES BY
MARK CHADBOURN

THE AGE OF MISRULE

WORLD'S END

DARKEST HOUR

ALWAYS FOREVER

S THE ILVER SKULL SWORDS OF ALBION

MARK CHADBOURN



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Credit must go to four hundred and thirty years of authors responsible for the primary, secondary, and tertiary texts that provided the research and resources for this work.

On the matter of dates: at the time of this story, England still used the old Julian calendar while the rest of Europe had adopted the new Gregorian calendar, with which we are all familiar today. To avoid any confusion, I have used the Gregorian dates for all events.

*Spies are men of doubtful credit,
who make a show of one thing and speak another.*

—Mary, Queen of Scots

PROLOGUE

Far beneath the slow-moving Thames, a procession of flickering lights drew inexorably towards London from the east. The pace was funeral, the trajectory steady, purposeful. In that hour after midnight, the spectral glow under the black waters passed unseen by all but two observers.

“There! What are they, sir?” In the lantern light, the guard’s fear was apparent as he peered over the battlements of the White Tower, ninety feet above the river.

Matthew Mayhew, who had seen worse things in his thirty years than the guard could ever dream in his worst fever-sleep, replied with boredom, “I see the proud heart of the greatest nation on Earth. I see a city safe and secure within its walls, where the queen may sleep peacefully.”

“There!” The guard pointed urgently.

“A waterman has met with disaster.” Mayhew sighed. With a temper as short as his stature, the Tower guards had learned to handle him with care and always praised the fine court fashions he took delight in parading.

The guard gulped the cold air of the March night. “And his lantern still burns on the bottom? What of the other lights? And they move—”

“The current.”

The guard shook his head. “They are ghosts!”

Mayhew gave a dismissive snort.

“There are such things! Samuel Hale saw the queen’s mother walking with her head beneath her arm in the Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula. Why, the Tower is the most haunted place in England! The Two Princes, Margaret Pole, Lady Jane Grey . . . all seen here, Master Mayhew. Damned by God to walk this world after their deaths.”

Mayhew studied the slow-moving lights, imagining fish in the deep with their own candles to guide their way through the inky dark.

The guard's fear made his lantern swing so wildly the shadows flew across the Tower.

Steadying the lantern, Mayhew said, "When this great fortress was built five hundred years gone, King William had the mortar tempered with the blood of beasts. Do you know why that was?"

"No, no. I—"

"Suffice it to say," Mayhew interrupted wearily, "that you are safe here from all supernatural threat."

The guard calmed a little. "Safe, you say?"

"England's defences are built on more than the rock of its people."

The lights veered away from the centre of the river towards the Tower of London where it nestled inside the old Roman walls, guarding the eastern approach to the capital. Mayhew couldn't prevent a shiver running up his spine.

"Complete your rounds," he said sharply, overcompensating in case the guard had seen his weakness. "We must ensure that the White Tower remains secure against England's enemies."

"And the prisoner you are charged to guard?"

"I will attend to him." Mayhew pressed a scented handkerchief against his nose to block out the stink of the city's filth caught on the wind. Sometimes it was unbearable. He hated being away from the court where the virtues of life were more apparent, hated the boredom of his task, and at that moment hated that he was caught on the cold summit of the White Tower when he should have been inside by the fire.

He cast his eye around the fortress where pools of darkness were held back by the lanterns strung along the walkways among the wards. The only movement came from the slow circuit of the night watch.

The Tower of London was an unassailable symbol of England. Solid Kentish ragstone formed the bulk of the impregnable White Tower, protected by its own curtain wall and moat, with a further curtain wall and thirteen towers guarding the Inner Ward beyond. Finally, there was the Outer Ward, with another solid wall, five towers, and three bastions. Everything valuable to the nation lay within the walls—the Crown jewels, the treasury, the Royal Mint, the armoury, and England's most dangerous prisoners, including Mayhew's personal charge.

As he made his way down the stone steps, he was greeted by the clatter

of boots ascending and the light of another lantern. William Osborne appeared, his youthful face and intelligent grey eyes unsettled. Mayhew contemptuously wondered if he now regretted giving up his promising career in the law to join the Queen's Service out of love for his country, not realising what would be asked of him.

"What is it?" Mayhew demanded.

"A disturbance. At the Traitors' Gate."

Where the river lights were heading, Mayhew thought. "The gate remains secure, and well guarded?" he asked.

Osborne's face loomed white in the lamplight. "There are six men upon it, as our Lord Walsingham demanded."

"And yet?"

Osborne's voice quavered with uncertainty. "The guards say the restraining beam moves of its own accord. Bolts draw without the help of human hand. Is this what we always feared?"

Pushing past him with irritation, Mayhew snapped, "You know as well as I that the Tower is protected. These guards are frightened like maidens." For all his contempt at his colleague's words, Mayhew's chest tightened in apprehension.

Walsingham said it could never happen, he reminded himself. *He told the queen . . . Burghley . . .*

Trying to maintain his decorum, he descended to the ground floor with studied nonchalance and stepped out into the Inmost Ward. The white-washed walls of the Tower glowed in the lantern light.

"Listen!" Osborne's features flared in the gloom as he raised his lantern to illuminate the way ahead.

The steady silence of the Tower was shattered by a cacophony of roars and howls, barks, shrieks, and high-pitched chattering. In the Royal Menagerie, the lions, leopards, and lynxes threw themselves around their pens, while the other exotic beasts tore at the mud of their enclosures in a frenzy.

"What do they sense?" There was a querulous tremble in Osborne's voice.

Scanning the Inmost Ward for any sign of movement, Mayhew relented. "You know."

Osborne winced at his words. "Are you not afraid?"

"This is the work we were charged to do, for queen and country. Raise the alarm. Then we must take ourselves to the prisoner."

Within moments, guards raced to their positions under Osborne's direc-

tion. Venturing to the gate, they peered beyond the curtain wall to where the string of lanterns kept the dark at bay.

“Nothing,” Osborne said with relief, his voice almost lost beneath the screams of the animals.

Mayhew kept his attention on Saint Thomas’s Tower in the outer curtain wall. Beyond it was the river, and beneath it lay the water entrance that had become known as Traitors’ Gate, after the enemies of the Crown who had been transported through it to imprisonment or death. The guards had disappeared inside, but there was no clamour.

After five minutes, Osborne’s relief was palpable. “A false alarm, then. Perhaps it was only Spanish spies. With the country on the brink of war, they must be operating everywhere. Yes?”

A guard emerged from Saint Thomas’s Tower, pausing for a moment on the threshold. Mayhew and Osborne watched him curiously. With an odd, lurching gait, he picked a winding path towards them.

“Is he drunk?” Mayhew growled. “His head will be on the block by noon if he has deserted his post.”

“I . . . I do not . . .” The words died in Osborne’s throat as the guard’s path became more erratic. His jerky movements were deeply upsetting, as if he had been afflicted by a palsy.

Mayhew cursed under his breath. “I gave up a life at court for this.”

As the guard neared, they saw his hands continually went to his head as if searching for a missing hat. Despite himself, Mayhew reached for the knife hidden in the folds of his cloak.

“I am afraid,” Osborne whispered.

“Do you hear music?” Mayhew cocked his head. “Like pipes playing, caught on the breeze?” As he breathed deeply of the night air, he realised the foul odour of the city had been replaced by sweet, seductive scents that took him back to his childhood. A tear stung his eye. “That aroma,” he noted, “like cornfields beneath the summer moon.” He inhaled. “Honey, from the hive my grandfather kept.”

“What is wrong with you?” Osborne demanded. “This is no time for dreams!”

Mayhew’s attention snapped back to the approaching guard. As he entered a circle of torchlight, Mayhew saw for the first time that something was wrong with the guard’s face. Revolted yet fascinated, he tried to see the

detail behind the guard's pawing hands. The skin was unduly white and had the texture of sackcloth. When the hands came away, Mayhew was sickened to glimpse large dark eyes that resembled nothing so much as buttons, and a row of stitches where the mouth had been. An illusion, he tried to tell himself, but he was left with an impression of the dollies the old women sold in Cheapside at Christmastime.

"God's wounds!" Osbourne exclaimed. "What has happened to him?"

Before Mayhew could answer, a blur of ochre and brown burst from the shadows with a terrible roar, slamming the guard onto the turf. Claws revealed bones and organs, and tearing jaws sprayed viscera around the convulsing form. But the most chilling thing was that the guard did not utter a sound.

He could not, Mayhew thought.

The lion's triumphant roar jolted Mayhew and Osborne from their shock.

"The beasts have escaped the Menagerie!" Mayhew thrust Osborne back towards the White Tower, where they ordered the guards who remained within to bar the door and defend it with their lives.

On the steps, Osborne rested one hand on the stone and bowed his head, fighting the waves of panic that threatened to consume him.

Mayhew eyed him contemptuously. "When you volunteered to become one of Walsingham's men, you vowed to deal with the great affairs of state with courage and fortitude. Now look at you."

"How can you be so hardened to this terror?" Osborne blinked away tears of dread. "When I stepped away from my quiet halls of study, it was to give my life in service to England and our queen, and to protect her from the great Catholic conspiracy . . . and the . . . the Spanish . . ." He swallowed. "The threats on her life from those who wish to turn us back to the terrible rule of Rome. Not this! I never foresaw that my soul would be placed at risk, until it was too late."

"Of course not," Mayhew sneered. "If the common herd knew the real reason why England has established a network of spies the envy of all other nations, they would never rest in their beds. Do not fail me. Or the queen."

Osborne steadied himself. "You are right, Mayhew. I act like a child. I must be strong."

Mayhew clapped him on the shoulder with little affection. "Come, then. We have work to do."

They had only climbed a few steps when a tremendous crash resounded

from the great oak door through which they had entered the Tower. Flashing a wide-eyed stare at Mayhew, Osborne took the steps two at a time. As they raced along the ringing corridors, Osborne asked breathlessly, “What is coming, Mayhew?”

“Best not to think of that now.”

“What did they do to the guard? I knew him. Carter, a good man, with a wife and two girls.”

“Stop asking foolish questions!”

The scream of one of the guards at the door below echoed through the Tower, cut short mercifully soon.

“Let nothing slow your step,” Mayhew urged.

In the most secure area of the White Tower, they came to a heavy oak door studded with iron. The walls were thicker than a man’s height. After Mayhew gave three sharp bursts of a coded knock, a hatch opened to reveal a pair of glowering eyes.

“Who goes?” came the voice from within.

“Mayhew and Osborne, your Lord Walsingham’s men.”

While Osborne twitched and glanced anxiously over his shoulder, the guard searched their faces, until, satisfied, he began to draw the fourteen bolts that the queen herself had personally insisted be installed.

“Hurry,” Osborne whined. Mayhew cuffed him across his arm.

Once inside, Osborne pressed his back against the resealed door and let out a juddering sigh of relief. “Finally. We are safe.”

Mayhew didn’t hide his contempt. Osborne was too weak to survive in their business; he would not be long for the world and there was little point in tormenting him further by explaining the obvious.

Six guards waited by the door, and another twenty in the chambers within. Handpicked by Walsingham himself for their brutality and their lack of human compassion, their faces were uniformly hard, their hands rarely more than an inch from their weapons. At any other time they would have been slitting the throats of rich sots in the stews of Bankside, yet here they were in the queen’s most trusted employ.

“The cell remains secure?” Mayhew asked the captain of the guard. His face boasted the scars of numerous fights.

“It is. It was examined ‘pon the hour, as it is every hour.”

“Take us to it.”

“Who attempts to breach our defences?” the captain asked. “Surely the Spanish would not risk an attack.”

When Mayhew did not respond, the captain nodded and ordered two of the guards to accompany the spies. A moment later they were marching past rooms stacked high with the riches of England, gold seized from the New World or looted from ships from the Spanish Main to the Channel.

Beyond the bullion rooms, one of the guards unlocked a stout door and led them down a steep flight of steps to another locked door. Inside was a low-ceilinged chamber warmed by a brazier in one corner and lit by sputtering torches on opposite walls. Two guards played cards at a heavy, scarred table. On the far side of the room was a single door with a small barred window.

“I do not see why he could not have been kept with the other prisoners,” Osborne said.

“No, of course you do not,” Mayhew replied.

“The Tower’s main rooms have held two kings of Scotland and a king of France, our own King Henry VI, Thomas More, and our own good queen. What is so special about this one that he deserves more secure premises than those great personages?” Osborne persisted.

“You have only been assigned to this task for two days,” Mayhew replied. “When you have been here as long as I, you will understand.”

Crossing the room, Mayhew peered through the bars in the door. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom within, he made out the form of the cell’s occupant hunched on a rough wooden bench, the hood of his cloak, as always, pulled over his head so his features were hidden. He was allowed no naked flame for illumination, no drink in a bowl or goblet, only in a bottle, and he was never allowed to leave the secure area of the White Tower where he had been imprisoned for twenty years.

“Still nothing to say?” Mayhew murmured, and then laughed at his own joke. He passed the comment every day, in full knowledge that the prisoner had never been known to speak in all his time in the Tower.

Yet on this occasion the light leaking through the grille revealed a subtle shift in the dark shape, as though the prisoner was listening to what Mayhew said, perhaps even considering a response.

Mayhew’s deliberations were interrupted by muffled bangs and clatters in the Mint above their heads, the sound of raised voices, and then a low, chilling cry.

"They are in," he said flatly, turning back to the room.

Osborne had pressed himself against one wall like a hunted animal. The four guards looked to Mayhew hesitantly.

"Help your friends," he said. "Do whatever is in your power to protect this place. Lock the door as you leave. I will bolt it."

Once they had gone, he slammed the bolts into place with a flick of his wrist that showed his disdain for their security.

"You know it will do no good," Osborne said. "If they have gained access to the Mint, there is no door that will keep them out."

"What do you suggest? That we beg for mercy, or run screaming, like girls?"

"Pray," Osborne replied, "for that is surely the only thing that can save us. These are not men that we face, not Spaniards, or French, not the Catholic traitors from within our own realm. These are the Devil's own agents, and they come for our immortal souls."

Mayhew snorted. "Forget God, Osborne. If He even exists, He has scant regard for this vale of misery."

Osborne recoiled as if he had been struck. "You do not believe in the Lord?"

"If you want atheism, talk to Marlowe. He makes clear his views with every action he takes. But I learn from the evidence of my own eyes, Osborne. We face a threat that stands to wipe us away as though we had never been, and if there is to be salvation, it will not come from above. It will be achieved by our own hand."

"Then help me barricade the door," Osborne pleaded.

With a sigh and a shrug, Mayhew set his weight against the great oak table, and with Osborne puffing and blowing beside him, they pushed it solidly against the door.

When they stood back, Mayhew paused as the faint strains of the haunting pipe music reached him again, plucking at his emotions, turning him in an instant from despair to such ecstasy that he wanted to dance with wild abandon. "That music," he said, closing his eyes in awe.

"I hear no music!" Osborne shouted. "You are imagining it."

"It sounds," Mayhew said with a faint smile, "like the end of all things." He turned back to the cell door where the prisoner now waited, the torch-light catching a metallic glint beneath his hood.

"Damn your eyes!" Osborne raged. "Return to your bench! They shall not free you!"

Unmoving, the prisoner watched them through the grille. Mayhew did not sense any triumphalism in his body language, no sign that he was assured of his freedom, merely a faint curiosity at the change to the pattern that had dominated his life for so many years.

"Sit down!" Osborne bellowed.

"Leave him," Mayhew responded as calmly as he could manage. "We have a more pressing matter."

Above their heads, the distant clamour of battle was punctuated by a muffled boom that shook the heavy door and brought a shower of dust from the cracks in the stone. Silence followed, accompanied by the cloying scent of honeysuckle growing stronger by the moment.

Drawing their swords, Mayhew and Osborne focused their attention on the door.

A random scream, becoming a sound like the wind through the trees on a lonely moor. More noises, fragments of events that painted no comprehensive picture.

Breath tight in their chests, knuckles aching from gripping their swords, Mayhew and Osborne waited.

Something bouncing down the stone steps, coming to rest against the door with a thud.

A soft tread, then gone like a whisper in the night, followed by a long silence that felt like it would never end.

Finally the unbearable quiet was broken by a rough grating as the top bolt drew back of its own accord. His eyes frozen wide, Osborne watched its inexorable progress.

As soon as the bolt had clicked open, the one at the foot of the door followed, and when that had been drawn the great tumblers of the iron lock turned until they fell into place with a shattering *clack*.

"I . . . I think I can hear the music now, Mayhew, and there are voices in it," Osborne said. He began to recite the Lord's Prayer quietly.

The door creaked open a notch and then stopped. Light flickered through the gap, not torchlight or candlelight, but with some troubling quality that Mayhew could not identify, but which reminded him of moonlight on the Downs. The music was louder now, and he too could hear the voices.

A sound at his back disrupted his thoughts. The prisoner's hands were on the bars of the grille and he had removed his hood for the first time that Mayhew could recall. In the ethereal light, there was an echo of the moon within the cell. The prisoner's head was encompassed by a silver skull of the finest workmanship, gleaming so brightly Mayhew could barely look at it. Etched on it with almost invisible black filigree were ritual marks and symbols. Through the silver orbits, the prisoner's eyes hung heavily upon Mayhew, steady and unblinking, the whites marred by a tracing of burst capillaries.

The door opened.