

MAG – 050 – Foundations

Content Warnings

- Prisons
- Claustrophobia
- Altered reality
- **Discussions of:** Human remains
- **Mentions of:** Blood, parental death, character death
- **SFX:** Low drone, high pitched tone, shouting

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Fifty Foundations

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement of Sampson Kempthorne, regarding the workhouse architecture of George Gilbert Scott. Original statement given June 12th 1841. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read aloud from the archived witness statement of Sampson Kempthorne)

Dear Jonah,

It is my fondest wish that this message should find you in good health, as I have heard more than one mutual acquaintance remark on your current state of overwork. While I earnestly hope it is merely idle gossip, my knowledge of

your character leads me to entreat that you allow yourself some respite. Or at the very least, take some further secretarial staff into your employ. Certain uncharitable quarters would have it that your life consists of little but rattling around an Edinburgh townhouse, surrounded by piles of ghostly accounts and lunatic documentation. Piles, I am afraid to say, to which I am about to make an addition.

I would suggest you come visit with myself and Marianne as a diversion, but if you were of a mind to do so, you must travel swiftly. You see, we are shortly to depart for New Zealand, there to start a new life, far from London and its workhouses, and it is this imminent departure that has such a freeing effect upon my pen. For there are things I have seen which I feel deserve a place among your asylum of letters. They regard the works of my former assistant, George Gilbert Scott, whose own architectural practice is now most respected. I have been fearful that accusations of slander might dog me were my tale to be set down, but with a boat to the new world beckoning and your sterling reputation for discretion, I feel it may at last be time to divest myself of the disquieting scenes I have witnessed.

George came to me in 1834 from his engagement with the office of Henry Roberts, where he was completing his training. Henry himself I have the greatest respect for, as he trained under Sir Robert Smirke, who had received his knighthood not two years previous. Henry was very effusive about the talents and prospects of young Mr Scott and was at great pains to inform me that his young protege had also received certain architectural tutelages from Sir Robert himself. He said this with the oddest of looks, as though there was some jolly secret between us. I rather just nodded as if to say I took his meaning and he left well enough alone. He even showed me George's work on

draughting his plans for the Fishmongers' Hall near London Bridge, which had opened to great acclaim. It certainly seemed clear to me that he would make a fine assistant, at least for as long as I were to be able to keep him.

And so, we began our brief collaboration, the subject of which was the workhouse, a topic, as I'm sure you recall, very close to my heart. The plight of the poor and destitute has been a national disgrace for far too long and, when I was handed the task of designing them by the Poor Law Commissioners, it was an undertaking I embarked on with no small amount of zeal. My original designs were intended to assist in the easy segregation of inmates by sex, age or infirmity, with capacity and utility foremost in my mind.

I know many look on the workhouse with disdain, calling it the 'Paupers' Bastille' and seeing very little distinction between the workhouse and the prison. But this is a deeply myopic view to take. The prison keeps its population for the safety and improvement of society at large, while the workhouse exists for the improvement of the inmates themselves. To criticise the conditions as harsh is to overlook the basic moral imperative of work itself and I firmly believe that to dismiss the punitive as a valid form of moral improvement is to consign many a poor soul to perdition. But I digress, Jonah, I am so used to penning defences of my designs that it seems I can write little which does not do so.

It was in his assistance with these designs that George first began to show those peculiarities of character that I would become so ill at ease with. His process redrafting was deeply unsettling. He would spend hours in the office simply staring at the drawings, saying nothing, taking no food or drink and ignoring any enquiry or interruption. Then, in a single move, he would gather up all the papers and retire to his private office, locking the door behind him.

Then, from the other side of that firm oak door, I would hear the strangest sounds, muttering and shouting.

It was always in George's voice alone and I could never quite discern the words. It often sounded as though he were in some great distress and, on more than one occasion, I was within minutes of summoning a constable to assist in breaking through the door, when he would emerge, glistening from exertion and holding completely re-done drawings. I'm sure I even saw blood on his collar once.

The designs themselves were little better. He would take the solid functionality of my original plans and re-make them in all sorts of odd symmetries, which while architecturally intriguing, generally sacrificed many practical considerations. He also, without fail, made everything closer. Passageways would be narrowed and sleeping quarters shrunk, until a building designed to hold 300 paupers would be re-made to house almost twice that number.

As I mentioned before, I have no objection to harsh conditions within the workhouse to dissuade the idle from taking residence there, but the cramped plans that George would present me bordered upon the claustrophobic and I was generally unable to use them. Each time I told him so, his face would tighten in momentary anger and his lips would go white. Then I would watch as he took that rage and discarded it, once again becoming the genial, if somewhat serious, young man I had first met. It was an odd sight.

When his father died in 1834, it came as no great surprise to me that he chose to resign from my service. He told me he considered it necessary to become the provider for his family, though I have my suspicions he was also eager to no longer have his designs subject to my scrutiny. I wished him well, naturally, but could not honestly say I was not somewhat relieved by his departure.

It was shortly after this I received an invitation to a small social gathering hosted by Henry Roberts. It was there that I met Sir Robert Smirke. He was a tall man, with sharp, almost saturnine features and eyes that seemed to regard you in ratios and pounds of raw material. He was polite and gregarious, but I found him difficult to talk to at length, as he seemed to be forever further ahead in the conversation than I was, and I could never be sure whether or not I was boring him. When I realised that George was not present and there was no sign of his imminent arrival, I resolved to raise the matter with Sir Robert, regarding what exactly his tutelage had entailed.

At the mention of the name 'George Gilbert Scott', Sir Robert's face flushed suddenly with anger in a manner not entirely unlike that of his protege. He asked me what my interest was in Mr Scott and I told him that he had, until recently, been engaged as my assistant. At this, Sir Robert gave a small laugh of satisfaction and told me I did not realise exactly how lucky an escape I may have had. I asked again what exactly his training had entailed, and Sir Robert stared at me for a silent minute, before he finally nodded his head. 'Balance,' he told me. 'Equilibrium – the hardest thing for an architect to achieve. Symmetry is easy, but does not in and of itself result in balance. To stir the feelings of man, to create a small place of being, divorced from the rest of the world, while still retaining that balance is the true goal of the architect.'

I had never heard my profession talked of with such conviction and fire before and I will not lie to you, Jonah, the look in his eyes when he spoke scared me. Without prompting, his tirade continued and he began to talk about George, about shortcuts and symmetry and a patron that the young fool did not understand. I could follow very little of it and it seemed to be decidedly removed from anything that I would consider architecture, but whatever it was

that Sir Robert had been teaching George, it appeared that the lessons had been put to less noble use than he had intended.

It was at this point that Henry noticed Sir Robert's agitation from across the room and came over to gently usher him away to the smoking room. He sent me a glance of mild reproach as he led his mentor away and I was left standing there in the middle of the room, utterly confused and rather shaken.

I resolved to avoid, where possible, having anything further to do with George and continued with my own works. I heard he had set himself up with the construction of workhouses according to his own designs. He had taken on a partner by the name of William Bonython Moffatt, a builder's son with no moral character to recommend him of any sort. They vigorously canvassed several district guardians and managed to acquire several commissions that had previously been mine. Needless to say, I was rather taken aback by this utter lack of professional etiquette, but I was not without other projects, so I endeavoured to ignore it and leave him to whatever squalid internments he cared to build.

It was in September of '36 that it happened, shortly after George and Moffatt had finally opened the first of their workhouses. I didn't realise that was what had happened until afterwards, ensconced as I had been in my own work. Darkness had fallen and still I was busy, lit by the reassuring glow of a dozen candles. There was no clock in the workshop, a deliberate choice to stop the lateness of the hour disturbing me, but I suspect it to have been somewhere past midnight when I heard them. Footsteps. Heavy, thudding footsteps and the *click clack* of a sturdy cane. My assistants had locked all the doors when they left for the evening and, through the silence of my study, I could not have

missed the sound of them opening again. To my dying day, Jonah, I will aver that no one entered the building before I heard the footsteps approach.

As their heavy tread grew closer and the *clack* of the cane struck louder, with a quiet malice, I heard another sound beneath them. The jangle of keys. I have never in all of my life been possessed by such a fear as I was then. The walls and floor seemed to rise towards me, stealing the air from my lungs until I swear that I could feel the splinters from the ceiling digging into the soft skin of my face. I couldn't move as the thudding boot tread came to a halt outside the door and the cane came to rest with a final *clack*.

I waited. I waited to have the last vestiges of life squeezed from me by whatever this was.

I don't know how much time passed. And then, as though suddenly sloughing off a heavy cloak, the weight fell from me; the room returned to its natural proportions, which is to say it never truly changed, I think. It is hard to describe exactly, Jonah, so you will forgive my vagaries. I rose to my feet and in a moment of foolhardy bravery that I doubt I shall ever truly understand, I grabbed a candle and ran to the door, flinging it open. I saw a figure walking away, through the door to one of the clerk's offices. It was short and wide and I could see the wood of the floor bow beneath its huge boots. It wore a tall, black hat and only the thinnest wisps of grey hair were visible below. In its coarse, ruddy hand, it held a hard-worn black cane tipped with iron. Then the door closed behind it and it was gone.

I followed into the room behind it, but it was empty. There was no sign of the man, or whatever it was, that had gone in before me. The window was sealed and there was nowhere for someone of that size to hide. Still I searched. I wasn't sure what else to do. Even the heavy boot prints seemed to have

vanished. What I did manage to find, however, fallen behind one of the writing desks, was one of George Gilbert Scott's workhouse designs.

There is, of course, no way to be certain of any connection between the two events, but that did little to quell the scalding rage in my breast as I strode out of my door the next morning. I took a cab to George's office, where I was informed that he was at his workhouse site with Moffatt, and took another cab. I found the site in a state of some commotion, with my former assistant standing next to a high stone wall, arguing with a labourer who seemed quite distraught. He was gesturing wildly at an area of the wall, while another man, who I assumed to be Moffatt, tried to calm him down.

As I approached, I began to make out what the labourer was saying. He was asking after someone he referred to as 'The Governor', while Moffatt was trying very patiently to explain that no governor had yet been appointed to the workhouse. The labourer didn't seem to be paying this point much mind, however. He kept repeating that the Governor had come to see Harry. He did not say who Harry was, but I assume an acquaintance of his. He said he knew it was the Governor because of the jangle of his keys. He said that the Governor had called Harry idle.

It was at this point I was finally close enough to see the wall he was pointing at with such excitement. As first I thought they were worms, small and pale against the brickwork. But as I got closer, I saw them clearly. Extending from the unblemished, solid stone of the workhouse wall, were four fingertips.

The labourer repeated it again. The Governor had called Harry idle. I returned George's documents and left.

I trust you will understand now, Jonah, why I have been avoiding the company of my fellows these last few years. I have always been reluctant to make any notation of my story, but now that I finally have everything prepared for my move to New Zealand, I would feel like I had slighted you had I left without sharing my tale. Do with it as you will. I am done with it.

Sincerely yours, Sampson Kempthorne.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

Obviously trying to trace disappearances and deaths in Victorian workhouses is an exercise in futility, so I'm loathe to even try. More importantly, who is Robert Smirke? I have read every book I can find on the man, which is admittedly not many, and none of them show any sign of this other side to him, apparently at the heart of strange buildings and architecture all over London. And now what? Students? Apprentices?

If Henry Roberts was a student of some sort of paranormal construction methods, it doesn't appear to show up in any of his buildings, save perhaps for Fishmongers' Hall, which he designed along with Sir George Gilbert Scott for the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers in 1834. It is reportedly a hotbed for low key hauntings, but nothing of the magnitude we've heard from others.

Scott is concerning, however. While Smirke seems to have built a handful of notable buildings around London, Sir George Gilbert Scott is responsible for landmarks such as St Pancras Station, the Albert Memorial and the restoration of Westminster Abbey. If his buildings have similar quirks, then... well, to be honest, I don't know what that would mean, but I doubt it would be good. That said, there have been no reports of any sort of paranormal or supernatural

disturbance in any still-standing building designed by Scott. That should make me feel better, but somehow it doesn't.

End recording.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

JONATHAN SIMS

I'm sorry?

TIM

Are you in trouble?

JONATHAN SIMS

I'm not sure what you mean.

TIM

Well, there was a policewoman asking after you. You know, the one who came to look into Gertrude.

JONATHAN SIMS

Basira? Where is... when was this?

TIM

Uh, uh, yesterday. You were at physical therapy.

JONATHAN SIMS

Did she say why?

TIM

No. It was a bit weird really. I've seen her round here a few times before actually. I, um... I don't trust her.

JONATHAN SIMS

Sorry, what?

TIM

Well, I asked her if she had anything new to report on Gertrude and she just said no and then mumbled a question about when you'd be back. Then she left. It was weird. She's weird.

JONATHAN SIMS

You don't have a problem with the police, do you, Tim?

TIM

Well, you do know I'm the finest cat burglar in all of Bromley.

JONATHAN SIMS

Tim.

TIM

Okay, so, seriously, I don't get why she keeps coming back round here outside of the investigation.

JONATHAN SIMS

She's... I'm... I'm helping her with some of the investigation. Off the record.

TIM

Oh... Ohhhhhhhh, say no more.

JONATHAN SIMS

Tim, what are you ...?

TIM

Don't worry, I'm cool. Good work, boss.

JONATHAN SIMS

Oh, no, Tim that's... not what I...

TIM

I'll go see if I can dig anything else out on Scott...

JONATHAN SIMS

It's really not like...

TIM

...and I'll let you know if she comes back.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Shouting) That really isn't ...

[DOOR SHUTS]

JONATHAN SIMS

(sighs)

End supplemental.

[CLICK]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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