

MAG – 098 – Lights Out

Content Warnings:

- Body horror
- Poisoning
- Reporting violence to children
- Self-harm

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode ninety-eight. Lights Out.

[Tape clicks on. There's the sound of shuffling papers.]

(A long exhalation.)

[A door opens.]

TIM

Oh.

MARTIN

Oh, er...

TIM

Sorry, didn't know you were here.

MARTIN

No, it's-it's-it's alright. Kind of glad, to be honest. Need a distraction. Got another statement to record.

TIM

Still doing those?

MARTIN

Yeah. Yeah. I did ask Elias if I could stop.

TIM

And he said no for a mysterious reason?

MARTIN

I don't know. I mean, he kind of explained. I think? John's "too inconsistent" at the moment. He needs to make up for the shortfall. Which, I guess means me. Unless...

TIM

No.

MARTIN

He did suggest I try to get you involved and—

TIM

And I suggest he not be a scary, magic psychopath. Whoops! Too late.

MARTIN

Yeah.

TIM

(Sighs) Sorry.

MARTIN

No, I- I get it. Heh. They're not exactly much fun.

TIM

Look, it's not that. I... (Sighs) This place is evil, Martin. And I think doing what It wants, probably makes us evil. And It wants those things to be read. I mean, I'm not going to stop you, but at the same time...

MARTIN

I- I get it.

TIM

(Sigh) Look, have you talked to John about them?

MARTIN

(Flustered) Erm... not.... I don't know, he always gets so weird about the statements, and I... I guess I... I didn't want to make him jealous?

TIM

Jealous.

MARTIN

I don't know! Sort of? I mean... Look, it didn't come up, alright? Have you seen him since...?

TIM

(Grunts) Kind of. We tried to talk, but he, he reached for that— Ah, he, he wanted to turn on his recorder. I freaked out a bit, and I said some stuff: if he wanted to talk, no tapes, I just, I just hate that thing.

You?

MARTIN

Yeah, we talked. Not long, he— Y'know, I think he thinks that the distance keeps us safe, you know? Like, like, if he just makes sure that we're not involved, we're somehow fine.

TIM

He's an idiot. Look, we didn't know what that door was, and it still trapped us. Ignorance isn't going to save anyone.

MARTIN

No, I mean, you're right, I guess. He was... Y'know, we know about Sasha now, and... he said he doesn't want to lose anyone else. Like, y'know, it's his fault.

TIM

Isn't it?

MARTIN

No! No, it isn't! I mean, you heard Elias... We never really stood a chance.

TIM

Yeah. Maybe. But Elias wasn't actually the one who offered me the job down here.

MARTIN

No, I— Sure.

TIM

L-Listen, I, I've gotta go. I've got... stuff to do.

MARTIN

Sure.

[Door closes]

(Martin sighs, gathers papers. There's a pause as he notices a tape recorder.)

Huh. Yeah, y'know, y'know what? A little privacy would be nice sometimes, okay? Not everything's for you! You don't need to listen to everything that we—

Alright, you know what? Y'know what... If you're that eager, fine.

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 8640514. Statement of Doctor Algernon Moss, given May 14th 1864.

(Clears throat)

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

My story, such as is, should not be long in the telling, though there is much you could understand of the circumstances surrounding it. I come to you not to wallow in my condition, or pour out my soul like a papist in the confessional,

but to request your assistance. I believe that Maxwell Rayner has at his disposal some unholy power that he has used to curse me and cause my blindness. Or, more precisely, to cause me to blind myself, for I shall not deny I did so willingly. For obvious reasons my accusations have had me laughed out of most polite society.

Not quite so polite when you're accusing someone of witchcraft, it would seem. I now ask the assistance of your Institute in the hopes that you may be able to furnish some evidence or legal precedent that may assist me in taking action against my assailant, though I will admit my expectations for the latter are limited. Maxwell Rayner is an oddity. He claims to be an antiquities dealer from Africa, and has, of late, become something of a darling in certain circles of Cambridge, though I have never heard him discuss either antiquities or his supposed homeland in any real detail. His passion appears to be polar expeditions, and it's rare to attend any social gathering with him where the subject does not eventually come up. In particular he seems to share that peculiarly specific mania regarding the fate John Franklin and his lost expedition. I would assume he was intending to accompany such a party himself, were it not for the fact of his own blindness. Indeed, the spectacle of his milky white eyes staring behind the weathered black skin of his face is an image so striking that, were I to be uncharitable, I might suggest had something to do with the readiness with which he acquires invitations and calling cards. He is led around by a young Arabian lad of ten or eleven, though the ease with which he carries himself makes me suspect this assistance is an affectation rather than necessity. Both speak perfect English, with no accent I can recognise, though the boy rarely opens his mouth other than to alert Rayner of nearby goings-on.

The circumstances of our dispute are, by some margin, the least interesting part of my tale. I outbid him at an auction. It was nothing of note, so I assumed, though perhaps I should have considered his particular obsession. It was an oilskin packet of documents, supposedly from the log-books of Franklin's lost ship, the HMS Terror. I will admit a small amount of interest in the matter myself, and my inclination turned to resolve when I saw how insistently Rayner was bidding on it, and I prevailed. He approached me afterwards to discuss the matter and, perhaps if his tone had been less sharp, I

might have allowed him to observe the documents himself, but as it was I took some issue with his manner of address and curtly denied him. He was almost shaking with rage at this point, and I was momentarily concerned that the situation might descend into violence when, instead, he leaned forward and whispered with an intensity I had never before heard in a human voice: “Pray the Sandman only brings you sleep.”

Now, the fact that these words filled me with a stark terror that all but overcame my senses probably needs some explanation. My father was not a kindly man, you see. He came from a stern Christian tradition that would curdle the smiles of the simpering vicars you encounter these days. As a boy, I soon learned that the key to avoiding his ire was to avoid his attention altogether, and never more so than after I had been put to bed. The nursery, you see, had its door in the middle of the passage between the drawing room and my father’s study and, as such, he would pass by it several times a night. When I heard that heavy tread outside the door and the shadow passing over the threshold, I would lie there and pray that I was quiet enough not to disturb his passage. If I was ever foolish enough to leave my candle burning that I might read a few minutes more, I would hear the door open and my father’s voice intone, “Lights out.” He had been a military man in his youth, had my father, and he prided himself on handing down that discipline to me.

Eventually I was sent off to board at Repton School, up near Manchester. The Headmaster there, one John Heyrick Macaulay, was apparently an old friend of my father’s. It was a miserable place: over two centuries old and very much showing it. When I attended there must have been barely fifty boys there, and no cricket pitch, racquet court, or any of the sort of facilities one might have expected, nor even a chapel. The few masters there taught Latin and Greek readily enough, but no French or music or natural science. Were it not for the relative freedom we had to rove around the nearby land and towns, I would have had a solidly miserable time there. Even when we managed to play football, it was between crumbling arches, loomed over by the jagged shadows of broken pillars. For all the life and vitality of the boys there, the place itself was decrepit, and sometimes I feel it resented our presence.

I had one great friend during my time at Repton, a lad named George Denman. I’m sure you recognise the name, given the recent speeches he’s been giving

on capital punishment. Well, I bet it never comes up in his Parliamentary goings-on that he has the word “Fly 1835” inscribed on his left arm with India ink. “Fly” was the nickname the hound master at Repton gave him, you see, on account of his propensity for running, and he insisted on getting hold of a needle and tattooing it upon himself. This may give you an idea of the impetuous soul that possessed Denman as a youth. He was always going out of bounds or running off after curfew, and if the masters caught him he’d be dragged back to bed. He slept in the bedroom adjoining my own, and whenever I heard the approaching footsteps of whichever master caught him, I would instinctively blow out my candle, the old dread of my father returning in a rush.

One day, Denman pulled me to one side, eyes alive with mischief, and told me that he had returned from his holidays in possession of a “positively ghoulish” book. It was a German tome titled *Die Nachtstücke*, and contained several morbid tales by a man named Hoffman. I spoke little German, but Denman had enough of a grasp for us to puzzle through the stories together. The candles would burn low as, sentence by sentence, we would decode that delightful unease that can be elicited by a properly macabre tale.

The first of the collection was titled *Der Sandmann*, and was what I believe would these days be referred to as psychological story, dealing with the madness, trauma and hallucinations of the protagonist, including the eponymous Sandman. What stuck with me, however, was a description given of a particularly horrific interpretation of the Sandman. Far from the comforting friend of children he is so often portrayed as, he was rendered as quite the monster.

I remember how the old maid of the story describes him quite keenly, as well as I remember my own dread at the passage Denman translated:

“He comes to children who don’t go to bed, and throws his sand all into their eyes, and they start to bleed. He takes those fallen eyes up in his bag, and carries them up into the crescent moon, to his nest, where his own children feast upon them. They have crooked beaks like owls, all the better to pick the eyes of naughty human children.”

Dear lord, just remembering it, even now, blind as I am, it still makes me shake. You can imagine the effect it had on me as a lad. Denman read us through the rest of the stories, but I could barely pay attention, my mind fixated on that figure with its razor-sharp sand and long, hooked beak. Now, when I heard my masters walk past my room at night, I had no doubt as to the terrible shape they had taken. I had the most awful nightmares of the Sandman, stood in my doorway, motionless, intoning in the voice of my father: “Lights out”.

I had never told anyone of this childhood terror, not even my wife. So, you may imagine the shock and confusion when I heard the words spoken by Maxwell Rayner. He actually looked almost surprised at my expression when I pulled back from him, clearly sensing he had struck a nerve. Perhaps he didn’t know, and I was simply a victim of the most grotesque coincidence.

Whatever the situation, I mumbled my excuses and fled. I swear I could still feel those unseeing eyes follow me as I left the room, a grin of victory playing upon his lips.

Perhaps you can guess what happened next. I don’t know how vivid or nightmarish the other accounts you collect here might be. Certainly nobody else believes me when I speak of it. But... the Sandman came for me that very night.

He was nothing like the story. He was tall, yes, and thin, but the edges of him were impossible to see against the darkness he was a part of. He had no beak, but coarse black sand trickled from his open mouth and hit the floor with a steady hiss. His legs were long, but he crossed the room slowly, every one of his joints moving and twisting as he took step after torturous step. There was no sound at all. I looked to my wife, but she was locked in a peaceful sleep.

A thin beam of moonlight was clearly marked upon the floor, where a gap in the curtains let it shine through. As the long dark foot touched it, I watched that moonlight curdle like rancid milk. Wherever the Sandman touched, the world dissolved into a choking darkness. First my door. Then creeping along the distance of our bedroom. Then the bed itself. Then my Agatha.

Until all that was left was me, the darkness, and the dreadful thing that brought it.

I do not know how I had come to the conviction that I was in the Sandman's sack. The idea simply arrived in my head fully formed. I had been taken, and would remain here, trapped forever in this lightless place, without even the faintest hint to taunt me. The darkness pressed in, and seemed to fill my mouth, my nose. But it did not touch my eyes. And then I made a choice. I still knew where the Sandman was, though I couldn't tell you how, and I decided that sightlessness was preferable to darkness. If you had asked me before, I would have told you that there was no difference, but I know better now. There is far more to the darkness than simply being unable to see.

I reached out to where I knew the thing's pouch would be, and seized a handful of sand. It was already slick with my blood as I lifted it and cast it into my face. I do not suppose I need to dwell upon the pain, but please know that I would sooner die than endure it again.

It worked, though. Inasmuch as I have remained solidly within this world. In some ways I left my sight behind in that awful place, but I am well rid of it, if it kept the rest of me here. I only wish the last thing I saw, the final vision burned into my mind, had been anything other than that awful, shifting face.

So, there is my story. I'm sure you'll agree that Maxwell Rayner is the clear architect of my misfortune. Now, how do you suppose I revenge myself upon him?

MARTIN

(Out of breath) End of statement. (Deep breath) I, um, I think I might need to sit down. Oh. Yeah, I am. Right. I don't, uh, I'm not really sure if these are actually getting easier or harder. I mean I don't feel—

Y-You know what, that's not important. (Sigh) I wish John kept better organised notes because I know he's mentioned someone called Maxwell Rayner, but I cannot find much in the way of any info—

[Door opens]

MELANIE

Uh, Martin, have you seen Elias?

MARTIN

Oh, uh... No, but Tuesday lunch he normally meets with the Library staff, I think. He'll... He'll probably be back in his office in an hour or so?

MELANIE

Ah, thanks. Er... Are you alright?

MARTIN

Hm? Oh, I, yeah, I've... ah. Yeah, I'm fine.

MELANIE

You just look really pale.

MARTIN

I... (**Sigh**) I was just recording one of the statements, and they are...

MELANIE

Ah, right! Yes. They, um... they're a lot, aren't they?

MARTIN

Sorry?

MELANIE

I mean they... they really take it out of you. I must have slept, er, twenty hours after I did one.

MARTIN

Hang on. You recorded a statement?

MELANIE

Yes. It was about a bed, funnily enough.

MARTIN

I... I don't suppose you'd mind doing some more? Elias wants to make up the shortfall while John's away and what with Tim...

MELANIE

Sure, no problem. Al-Although I was just going to have a talk with Elias, so, uh, maybe I can convince him to cut you some slack.

MARTIN

I wouldn't hold my breath.

MELANIE

Right. Fair. Listen, you really look like you could use a drink. Um, me and Basira were just about to pop out. So... do you want to join us?

MARTIN

It's like one in the afternoon.

MELANIE

Are you afraid of getting fired?

MARTIN

Huh. I'll get my coat.

MELANIE

Great. Just, um, gimme, gimme an hour or so. I, I just have a few things to take care of... first.

[Door opens]

MARTIN

Huh. (**Deep sigh**) Oh, um, er, end recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

MELANIE

Knock, knock.

ELIAS

Ah, Melanie. Can I help you?

MELANIE

Oh, not really. I, I just went out for some coffees, and, and thought I'd get you one.

ELIAS

How very thoughtful.

MELANIE

I don't know how you take it, but John likes his black, so... I, I thought that was a fair assumption.

ELIAS

It was. However, I think I'd rather you drink it.

MELANIE

Oh... er, what?

ELIAS

The coffee you brought me.

[The sound of the cup being slid across a table.]

Drink it.

MELANIE

N...N...No. Y-You're okay. I've, I've got my own actually. It's a... a decaf one...
(Nervously chuckles).

ELIAS

I assume you don't believe me, then? That murdering me would also kill you?

MELANIE

I- I- I don't know what you're...

ELIAS

Coffee is not as good for disguising tastes as you might think. And it's even worse at disguising texture. Dissolved pills always leave such a, um, chalky residue.

MELANIE

Look, Elias, I never—

ELIAS

I assume this is your first time attempting to poison someone? Do you actually know how many painkillers it takes to kill someone, or were you just hoping I'd take enough to get sick, and you could finish the job... manually?

[A clock ticks]

MELANIE

(Deep breath) Why...? Why bother asking then? Why bother if you know everything?

ELIAS

(Chuckles slightly) I don't know everything, Melanie. Do know how exhausting that would be? I'll tell you one thing I don't know, and that's how to convince you that I'm trying to help. Honestly, you're one of the lucky ones. But not if we're all dead thanks to an... overzealous attempt at independence.

MELANIE

I don't need you to—

ELIAS

Let's have no more clumsy assassination attempts, alright? And we'll say no more about it. Consider this your first warning. Next time I shall have to escalate matters, and that won't be a pleasant process for anybody.

Understood? Melanie?

MELANIE

Yes.

ELIAS

Good.

MELANIE

Did...? Did you turn that on?

ELIAS

Hmm? Oh. You get used to it.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

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