

MAG – 105 – Total War

Content warnings:

- Warfare
- Drowning
- Cannibalism
- Undead

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and five.

Total War.

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

You're sure you don't mind?

XIAOLING

Of course not. Recording is what we are here for.

ARCHIVIST

And this is the same statement that Gertrude checked out?

XIAOLING

I will check again with my assistant, but it's the only one we have from 太平天国运动¹ written in English.

ARCHIVIST

The Taiping Rebellion? I assumed it would be about a circus or, uh...?

XIAOLING

I have not read it, but I would be surprised. I seriously doubt there were any circuses at the time. I believe it was like a, um, 见鬼².

ARCHIVIST

(Snorts) I-Isn't all war like a nightmare?

XIAOLING

Oh 你说中文³?

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't, why?

XIAOLING

How long did you say you have been Archivist?

ARCHIVIST

¹ “Tàipíngtiānguó yùndòng” or “Taiping Heavenly Kingdom”, Chinese ‘state’ from 1851-64 that staged a rebellion to overthrow the Qing Dynasty.

² “Jiàngui” or, literally, “Hell” or “hellscape”.

³ “Nǐ shuō zhōngwén” or “you speak Chinese”.

Uh, about two years now.

XIAOLING

Well, Elias made a good choice. I did offer him someone, but he thought the language might be too much for him.

ARCHIVIST

Huh.

XIAOLING

我相信没关系是不是⁴

ARCHIVIST

I-I suppose not.

XIAOLING

Anyway, I will leave you to your work. Let me know if you need anything.

ARCHIVIST

I will. Thank you.

XIAOLING

没关系⁵.

[Xiaoling leaves]

⁴ “Wǒ xiāngxìn méiguānxì shì bùshì” or, literally, “I believe it doesn’t matter, if it is not [too much/a problem]”.

⁵ “Méiguānxì” or “It’s okay / That’s nothing”.

(The Archivist sighs)

ARCHIVIST

The details I got from Gertrude's documents lead me to believe that, before she made her way to New Zealand, she paid a visit here, to the Pu Songling Research Centre, Beijing. The centre is something of a sister organisation to the Institute, and while that means I have some... reservations about their motives, it does mean gaining access to their collection is relatively simple. According to Zhang Xiaoling, the librarian here, this statement was the one that Gertrude checked out during her last visit. So...

Statement of Second Lieutenant Charles Fleming, regarding his experiences during the Taiping Rebellion. Original statement undated, but apparently written in early 1862. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Yellow reeds and white bones. Yellow reeds and white bones. I hear it said so often now it almost has the rhythm of a joke. How can one have poetic clichés for a massacre? How can unspeakable carnage become so tired and repetitive? Even the most trite and poorly written of the penny bloods would, at least, make some show of a plot, or a purpose to the horror and the suffering. But here, beyond those pages, it seems the dead simply pile higher and higher on both sides, and nothing changes but the number of ghosts. On one side atrocities in the name of one who claims to be brother of Christ; on the other, slaughter in the name of the supposedly sane men who would stop him and his

Heavenly Kingdom. And I find myself walking through the still and bloody landscape that has consumed all of China, scrawling my confessions on any paper I can find not yet saturated by mud and death. I am a stranger here, yet if you told me I were dead, and this place my just reward, I would not for one second doubt your honesty. I have seen no vision of hell that can compare.

Neither could I say I have not earned it. Not for nothing do these drowned and murdered faces pursue me. Nemesis was my ship, under Captain William Hall. I was so eager to serve my country, how could I question what they asked us to do? The trade in opium was a cornerstone of the Empire, and when called upon to defend it against those Chinese that would threaten Britain's rule of the waves, what could I do but answer? Was ever a man so eager to have his country beseech of him his violence?

And there was violence aplenty aboard Nemesis.

First of its kind. An iron warship. Small, lightly armed, but able to go where other British vessels never dared, far upriver to strike at the very heart of the Qing forces, where their defences were weakest, and the damage we could inflict most brutal. Captain Hall had a particular zeal for the work. He was a petty man, bitter, and never missing an opportunity to mention how long he had waited to command a ship of his own. Were I to judge solely based on the orders he gave, I would have been forced to conclude it was the Chinese who had slighted him, and now he exacted his vengeance. Truth be told, I simply believe he was possessed of a great cruelty. A cruelty I shared.

I remember we sank a Qing ship off First Bar Island. Cambridge it was named, an old East Indiaman sold to the Chinese some years before. When she sank, a few crew made it aboard Nemesis, half-dead and utterly defeated. I cannot

honestly recall whether Captain Hall ordered them drowned or whether I took it upon myself, confident in the Captain's approval. Either way, it was certainly forthcoming. Theirs were the first faces that began to follow me. I would never have admitted that was why I paled when I passed by a

looking-glass. Or why I shook my bunkmates awake, demanding that they stop singing. Truth be told, no one knows how Nemesis sank. I certainly have my own beliefs, my own dreams of what may have reached up towards us and taken its price, dragging that dreadful iron curse to the bottom of the Canton River. All I remember is waking up to the screaming of buckling metal, the louder screaming of doomed men in the decks below, and that third, deeper set of screams, that sounded for all the world like a cry of triumph. I managed to get to the deck, and leap from the bow into the waters of the river. When I plunged below the surface and watched the hulk of Nemesis twisted and disappearing into the deep, deeper than the Canton River should have been, I saw the water around me full of corpses, but when I finally broke the surface, I was alone.

These corpses follow me still, though I am hardpressed to see them now, surrounded as I am by death in all its myriad forms. If you ever wish to escape your pursuing guilt, there are few places so apt to hide it as a land devastated by unimaginable war. At least I shall not go hungry. I lost that particular moral qualm in Anqing. I believe thirty-eight fen was the going price for a pound of human meat by the end of the siege. Such a profound will to survive. In the end, it did no good. Zeng Guofan's army breached the gates, and they put everyone inside to death. Sixteen thousand more corpses, soldier and civilian alike.

There's no difference anymore. Hide your hair braid beneath your hat, proclaim your allegiance until you have no breath left, compared to the danger of enemy spies or saboteurs, one more cadaver is nothing.

I'm lucky I still had my British uniform. Almost twenty years lost and abandoned in this country, a prisoner of the very opium I helped to force upon its people; I barely recognised myself putting it on. I'm lucky I never thought to sell it. It was an old design, a long way from the uniforms I see among my old comrades today, but it served well enough to get me through the Qing forces as they stormed through the streets. I am lucky, I suppose, that the only ghosts that chose to follow me were the ones I had to kill as I fled the city. I know there are others that see those behind me, and sixteen thousand lonely souls would be too much for them, I'm sure. They would be too much for me, but I'm not sure what that means anymore.

After the fall of Anqing, I wandered this desolate country, though for how long I do not know. Days went by with not a single living creature to be seen, and only the dead for company. Yellow reeds and white bones. It struck me then how few of the fallen had died by the hand of another. War kills just as surely with hunger and sickness, and for every one bloodied and murdered, there were ten wasted to nothing or black with disease and rot. I suppose there must have been a terrible smell, but there is nowhere here the wind does not chase me with that scent, and I can no longer tell the stench of decay from the air itself. They are one and the same.

Some months ago, I was captured. Not by the Taiping or the Imperial forces, at least they weren't anymore. I believe they were once peasants, they had clearly never owned the building in which they kept me. There were three of them; one tall, who clearly spoke for his companions, one walking with a

noticeable limp and an eye that refused to stop watering, and a third, whose right arm was so discoloured from a spreading infection, that he looked at me with a mixture of hate and helpless terror, as though I could do something to fix it. I did not fight when they barred my way with crude weapons levelled, and demanded my surrender. I have not fought since I left Anqing, and saw the true scale of the devastation.

Believing me to still be a British officer, they intended, it seemed, to ransom me, but they knew of no British forces in the area, so were arguing as to whether to offer me to the Qing army or the nearest rebels. The tall one was adamant that the Imperial Army, now allied with the British, would pay them for my safe return, while the limping man was horrified at the thought. He had cut off his braid, he kept saying, and they would think he was loyal to the Taiping. The third man just watched me, listening to his companions arguing, and laughing softly whenever they mentioned money. I believe that he was the only one who truly understood. When the dead that follow caught up with me, they broke those poor fools apart like twigs, and dragged all three of them below the ground. And they were gone. I found water among their possessions and a small bag of rotten rice, and relishing the chance to wash the taste of blood from my mouth, I ate. I could still hear my would-be captors' voices, and I wondered how long it would be that I still had to wait for death.

Some choose not to wait, of course. I passed by the city of Hangzhou after it had fallen to the Taiping. The gate still stood open, as they were unable to close it for the dead. When the city was taken, the people had rushed out and thrown themselves bodily into the West Lake. It was solid with them. For three hundred yards you could have walked along their still bodies into the middle of the waters. I did, hoping against all hope that an arm might reach out and

finally pull me down into that great mass of quiet death. But the waters of the lake were still and dark, and as I left, some who lay upon it rose to join me.

I have no idea where to go now. I have walked so long my feet are bleeding, and I see nothing upon the horizon but more slaughter. More days without the living. So I write this, that some small record of what I have done and what I have seen may continue on. I sit here upon the steps of a Manifest Loyalty Shrine, a small provincial one, erected by a local governor who wished to cement his power now the more central shines can no longer keep up with the number of the dead. But this one is mine. I look at the names of the fallen engraved on the walls, the long and storied lists, and I know that each name is borne by one of those that follow me. It is the list of those that wait for me at the bottom of these steps, though whether they wait to follow me further or to finally descend upon me, I do not know. But my name will never be carved upon this stone.

Though war and death have found me in this land, I have no place here. I came for no cause but violence and greed, and have been humbled by the unimaginable brutality of true and total war. I have nothing left, except to hope that what remains of my own life is neither long nor memorable.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Good Lord. I had heard that the Taiping Rebellion was... but that... I wonder how much of what Lieutenant Fleming says is true and how much is, uh...

I almost hope it's all supernatural. Some hideous hallucination or otherworldly hellscape. Part of me really doesn't want to look it up.

It looks like Xiaoling was right though. No Circus.

Nothing even that resembles the working of The Stranger. It... it seems to be purely war and violence, whatever power that might be. So why did Gertrude want it? I feel like... I've chased dead end to dead end until I finally give up. I-I mean, what am I actually looking for? Gerard Keay, after he faked his death? Some long confession he left tucked away in a library somewhere, telling me the ancient chant I need to stop the Unknowing from coming to pass?

(Sigh) Maybe this is pointless. I should head home, help the others in their research. If I knew Mandarin or Cantonese, maybe I could look here for more answers, but as it is these files... Hang on, I think... I think this says 2004. Yes, 1992... 1997... 2004. If I'm reading this right, this file hasn't been accessed for... wait. Ohhhh...

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

So it's been a waste of time then, has it?

XIAOLING

It was a very simple mistake. She did read that statement.

ARCHIVIST

I mean, in 2004, yes, but I-I need information about her visit three years ago. Did, did your assistant find anything about that?

XIAOLING

Yes. There were two accounts that Gertrude took out in 2014.

ARCHIVIST

A-And can I read them?

XIAOLING

According to our records, we don't have them anymore.

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) Well, Wh-what happened to them? Where are they?

XIAOLING

Apparently, they were sent on at the request of the Magnus Institute.

ARCHIVIST

Gertrude asked for them t-to, to be sent to her?

XIAOLING

I believe so.

ARCHIVIST

To the Institute or...?

XIAOLING

No, we have other channels of delivery for that.

ARCHIVIST

Then where?

XIAOLING

I believe it was an American destination.

ARCHIVIST

Oh. Oh, would you still have a-a copy of the address?

XIAOLING

I think we do.

ARCHIVIST

Thank you, Xiaoling.

XIAOLING

Not a problem 建筑师⁶.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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⁶ “Jiànnzhú shī” or, literally, “Architect”, used here as best translation for Archivist.

The Magnus Archives – Episode 105 – Total War

the forum via the website on reddit at r/themagnusarchives. Thanks for listening.