

MAG – 046 – Literary Heights

Content Warnings

- Heights & vertigo
- Dizziness
- **Discussions of:** Paranormal encounter, suicide
- **Mentions of:** Death, mass suicide, acrophobia, tunnels & underground, spiders, worms
- **SFX:** Low drone, high pitched electrical interference

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Forty Six Literary Heights

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

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Statement of Herbert Knox regarding a repeat customer to his book shop in Chichester. Original statement given December 21st, 1998. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read aloud from the archived witness statement of Herbert Knox)

It's hard to know exactly where to begin when explaining to you what exactly it was that I experienced. There were many things that happened, each strange and inexplicable in and of itself, but I'll be damned if I can see how they

connect to each other, except that they all ended up involving the same student from the university.

His name was Michael Crew, though he normally went by Mike, at least to me. I'm not usually one to pay much attention to the students who come into my shop, especially during the start of a new school year. I have something of a soft spot for the antique when it comes to my furnishings and that, combined with the age of my stock, means that when new students arrive at the university, they generally regard the discovery of Lion Street Books as something of a curiosity. I've heard more than one comparison to that shop in Stephen King's, "Needful Things", or whatever it was called.

Anyway, as I deal mostly in rare books and antiquities, they generally get one look of the prices and suddenly their interest dries up. Of course, there are always a couple of rich kids whose parents weren't able to buy their way into Oxbridge, so it's not a complete waste.

So, it's rare that I have any cause to remember the face of my student customers, but Mike struck me the moment he walked into my shop. This would have been last September – I don't remember the exact date, though I'm sure if I looked up my receipts I could tell you. He was short, barely over five feet, and very thin, underfed, I remember thinking. It hadn't yet turned cold, but he wore a high collared coat and a thick scarf wrapped around his neck.

Now I'm getting on in years and, much as I love my shop, the building can get a bit drafty come autumn, so I generally have the heating up quite high. It was clearly enough for him to become uncomfortable wrapped up like that and he removed the scarf to reveal a branching pattern of white scar tissue arcing up the side of his neck. That was interesting, certainly, but it wasn't what actually

caught my eye. No, what struck me most was that rather than wonder or curiosity, as I would see in the faces of the other students who found their way into Lion Street Books, this young man began scanning the shelves with an expression that seemed more like impatience.

He was clearly looking for something specific, so after a few minutes I asked him if I could help. Without looking up, he said he was after a copy of de Plancy's *Dictionnaire Infernal*, the older the better. I only had a 1908 translation in stock, but I said I would make enquiries if he wished for an older edition. He didn't reply to this, nor to my casual enquiry as to whether he was studying demonology or the occult. He took it to my desk to buy it and I started rooting around for the credit card machine, when I smelt the strangest thing.

It was like just before a storm breaks, that sharp smell in the air, but looking outside the sky was clear and the sun was shining. Mike seemed to smell it too and he went very still. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a wad of cash. He quickly counted it out, grabbed the book and was through the door before I even had a chance to ring him up a receipt. The smell faded as soon as he was out of sight.

I didn't know his name at that point, but it was far from the last time I saw him. He became something of a regular. Maybe once every three weeks or so he'd come in and check any new stock I had. He was interested in spiritualism, history of witchcraft, anything mystical, especially from before 1850. He also bought a few books on meteorology, especially pre-enlightenment, and once a book on the work of Gottfried Leibniz, though I don't remember the title.

I have no idea where he was getting his money, but he had a lot of it. He was able to pay five figures for a copy of a 1559 printing of the *Malleus*

Maleficarum without breaking a sweat. At some point I learned his name. I mean, I certainly wouldn't have described him as a friend or even close, but over the last year he'd easily been my most regular customer. That wasn't the only time I smelled that acrid tang in the air though. Sometimes when he was in there it would come again all at once. It never seemed to be coming from Mike exactly, but when he was around the smell would just suddenly be there. It was the only time I would ever smell it inside and, when I did, Mike would just stop whatever he was doing and leave immediately. He wouldn't run; he'd just leave.

There was another thing too. Whenever he was in, the light bulbs in my shop would burn brighter. I didn't even realise this until he had been coming for several months, as it was usually in daylight when he went shopping. But when winter made its presence known, his late afternoon visits began to take place after dark and I noticed that, whenever he came in, the shop got brighter. The bulbs would start to buzz very softly and the elements within them would glow with a surprising intensity. There was this strange electric crackling and once I even got a shock when I turned a lamp on. I never brought it up with Mike though. I don't even know how I would have gone about bringing it up.

It was February when I got the Leitner book. I'd heard of him before, of course, though I'd never met the man. The rare book trade is a comparatively small world, at least within the UK, and his name would often come up whenever I was gossiping with my peers. Sometimes it was about which valuable piece he'd snatched for a fraction of its true value, or the ridiculous amounts he'd paid for a book that everyone else was sure was a fake. Occasionally there were more unsavoury rumours about his personal life.

So, even though I'd never personally made his acquaintance, I was well aware of Jurgen Leitner and his collection and, when he disappeared in 1994, I was one of the many that heard whispers on the grapevine that a few of his books were back in circulation. I never thought I'd actually get my hands on one though, not until I heard about Kirsten's death.

Kirsten Baumann was a book dealer friend of mine down in Salisbury. I suppose you could call her a rival in some ways, but we'd always been very friendly. In fact, there were a few years back in the '80s when we were very friendly indeed. But we hadn't spoken much in the last year or two.

Well, in January of this year she passed away. Lost balance on the stairs and broke her neck. To be honest, I wasn't as surprised by her death as I might have been, though it was rather alarming. Over the last few years the landscape of the UK rare books trade has changed significantly. A lot of the big names in the old guard have gone missing or retired or sometimes even been found dead. The police even got involved for a while as there was talk of maybe someone out there targeting booksellers, but they never found anything to indicate it was anything other than a coincidence. I suppose it's just an example of how one generation inevitably makes way for the next, but Kirsten was the first time it had affected someone I knew well. What surprised me more than her death, however, was that she had made me her literary executor and left me the vast majority of her stock.

So it was I came into the possession of a Leitner. It was a strange one, all right. *Ex Altiora* or *From the Heights* was the name. It was custom bound in the late 1800s from what I could see, though the pages looked to be significantly older than that, 17th century, I would have said. It was written in Latin and seemed

to be a long poem in the style of Virgil, illustrated with some quite striking woodcuts.

It told the tale of a small, unnamed town, high on a cliff top that sees a monstrous creature begin to approach. The poem is unclear whether it is a beast, a demon or a god, as it uses the word interchangeably, but it is seen far off, its head and body lost among the clouds. The majority of the story details the villagers' attempts to prepare to do battle against this creature. But each time they devise a counter-measure, the thing gets closer and is shown to be far larger than previously suspected, rendering their preparations insignificant. At last, when it's almost upon them, its impossible vastness undeniable, the villagers surrender to despair and hurl themselves from the cliff top onto the rocks far below.

It was a strange book and made all the stranger by the fact that it appeared to be utterly unique. I could find no record of it in any catalogue I had available and, after a few calls to a couple of museums and archives I knew dealt with similar texts, I was convinced that this may well have been a completely unique book. This didn't please me as much as you might imagine, because what it meant was that I had an artifact on my hands, one that belonged far more in a museum than it did in a library. I'd only had a museum worthy book come once before and the process of authentication and the work involved in selling it had, quite frankly, not been worth the amount that I sold it for. Museums are ... not as well funded as private collectors.

Beyond that, there was something about the book itself that unsettled me. Reading it was disorientating in a way that I can't easily put into words, especially the wood cuts, although they were just the village or the cliffs or empty forests or mountains. They were quite crude in many ways, but

certainly not unsettling, and yet twice when reading it and observing the woodcuts, I fell off my chair. Over the week I possessed it, I had enough dizzy spells that I had to book an appointment with my doctor, although at the time I didn't make any direct connection between them and the book. I had bad dreams as well. I don't recall them with any clarity, but I'm rather sure they were dreams of falling.

Mike came in at the end of that week. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was expecting him, but I put a half-dozen books to one side for his consideration as I assumed he'd be in at some point soon. As was his habit, he said almost nothing and the cold February air was enough that he didn't even feel the need to remove his scarf, so only the faintest hints of that branching scar could be seen creeping out from below it. The bulbs crackled and brightened in his presence and I presented the books I had chosen to him.

He spent some minutes looking through them before pushing them back with a shake of the head. This was not unusual for him and I took it as no insult. I turned to put them back on the shelf, when I was almost overcome by a wavy of dizziness. I gripped the back of my chair and steadied myself. When I looked back at Mike, he was staring at the Leitner book with a wild expression I had never seen on his face before. He pointed at *Ex Altiora* and asked me how much it was. I started to tell him it wasn't for sale, but he had this look in his eyes, this furious desperation.

It scared me, to be honest, and I had a sudden sense that this man was willing to kill me for that book. All this, combined with the discomfort I felt with the thing anyway, was just a bit too much for me. I named a figure that I thought was maybe double what it was actually worth and Mike wrote me out a cheque so fast that I thought his pen would go clean through the paper. For

this I insisted on ringing him up a receipt and without another word he was out into the rainy February afternoon. And that would have been it.

Given what happened next, I don't think I would ever have seen Michael Crew again if it wasn't for the simple fact that his cheque bounced. I didn't quite believe it at first. He'd always been so willing to drop huge amounts of money on books that the idea of him not being able to afford something had never quite registered. But there was no mistake. After no small amount of consideration, I decided that the only decent thing to do was to actually go to him and discuss the matter. Maybe I could get the book back. Maybe I could make alternate arrangements. Either way, I felt like I owed it to Mike.

I had his address on file from a delivery he had requested a couple of months back, so it was a simple matter to close up the shop early and make the short walk across Chichester to his flat, rather lavish by student standards, but easy enough to find. The sky was a bruised grey as I walked across town and I was glad I'd thought to bring my umbrella as it was promising to be a storm.

I recognised the smell from Mike's previous visits, though even then I didn't realise what it meant. I reached his door and knocked. I was careful to be firm, but not aggressive in my knocking as I had an odd conviction that an overly confrontational knock would have made it much harder to retrieve the book. I needn't have given it any thought at all. The door opened before I'd even finished knocking and I had the oddest feeling in my stomach, as though I was standing on the edge of a great drop, and I took an instinctive step back. Mike stood there, looking terrible.

From inside came the odour of a man who has not left the room or opened a window for some days. Strewn across the floor were pages and pages of scrawled Latin text, which alarmed me until I saw the unharmed and whole

book clutched in his arms. I started to explain what had happened and why I was there, but he didn't seem to be registering my words, just staring blankly at the space I occupied, as though he didn't notice I was standing there. I remember I'd just about reached the point of repeating the word "cheque" over and over in the hopes he acknowledged it, when the first droplets of rain began to hit his window.

Without warning, Mike's eyes went wide in what might have been realisation or maybe just fear and his face got so pale his branching scar seemed almost to vanish. Then the first peal of thunder rolled over us and that smell hit me with such an intensity I could barely breathe. I was on the floor before I knew what was happening and turned to see Mike running full pelt down the corridor, clutching the Leitner book. I must have hit my head and my thinking was very muddled, but I was convinced he was trying to escape with the book. With a determination that, quite frankly, I never would have expected from myself, I decided that I had to stop it. I had to stop Michael Crew from stealing my Leitner.

So I got up, umbrella forgotten, and chased him out into the pouring rain. We weaved our way through Chichester, lightning arcing through the sky in a way I'd only seen a handful of times in the 40 years I lived there. I could just about make out the fleeing figure of Mike in front of me and sometimes, when the lightning lit the sky, I could have sworn I saw someone else chasing him. It was hard to make out as it only seemed to appear for those momentary flashes, but it seemed tall, thin, its limbs angular and branching, like Mike's scar.

I don't know how he got into the bell tower for Chichester cathedral. It stands separate from the main building, tall, imposing and square, starkly illuminated by the flashing sky. One of the doors at the base stood open and I didn't stop

to think how it had been opened before dashing inside and starting up the stairs. The smell was so thick inside I gagged on the acrid stench. In my determination to chase a young man stealing a book, I had apparently completely forgotten my age, which returned all at once and I collapsed slightly on the stairs. I began to climb then, slowly, towards the top of the bell tower. I have never been afraid of heights, but as I got higher and higher up those stairs, my head started to swim and my heart was beating so fast I was honestly worried that I was in danger of a heart attack.

Finally, I reached the top flight of stairs. I could hear shouting from the bell room. It was Mike, he was screaming something that sounded like a chant or a prayer. Most of it was in languages I didn't know, but I could make out the words "*Altiora*", "vertigo" and "the vast". I reached the top and there I saw Mike standing before an open window. He held the book before him like a protective ward and in front of him was a strange, branching figure. It crackled and fizzed, lit by a strobing white light, as though the lightning was within the room itself. It was just standing there like it couldn't approach, as Mike reached the crescendo of his invocation and with a cry of "I am yours" he leapt through the open window and presumably to his death.

The strange figure cried out, a sound like tearing sandpaper, and seemed to be dragged through the window with him. The sharp smell vanished instantly and I was alone in the dark. I say presumably about his jumping almost 100 feet to his death, because when I went out I could find no body at the base of the tower and neither could the police who obviously treated me like a lunatic. When the sky cleared shortly afterwards, it became apparent that all the windows to the bell chamber were closed and sealed. I never saw Michael Crew or the Leitner book again.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

Michael Crew, another name that seems to crop up more than once in relation to Leitners and twice regarding this particular volume. The events here seem to have taken place a couple of years after those of statement 9991006. Could his exposure to *The Boneturner's Tale* have catalysed an interest in Jurgen Leitner? Or perhaps an early experiment?

It seems as though he was attempting to use the book as protection against whatever was chasing him. Did *The Boneturner's Tale* not work in that regard? And what was it that chased him, bringing that smell with it? It is a shame that *Ex Altiora* was burned in the end. I would have been fascinated to read it, especially as there is one feature that I'm surprised Mr Knox did not mention, comparing his statement to that of Dominic Swain in 0132806. The book Mr Knox received did not seem to have a woodcut of the dark night sky with the branching, arching design of the Lichtenburg figure.

End recording.

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Supplemental.

Someone else has been going down into the tunnels. When I came in yesterday, I noticed the trapdoor appeared to have been disturbed. It was unlocked. I confronted the others, but they all deny it, of course. Someone must think there is more down there of value, unless they're trying to hide something. Searching or hiding – it could be either.

I might try to set up a camera to watch the trapdoor, if I can find somewhere effective to hide it. I did go down there to see if I could find anything, but it

seems much as it did last time. The only difference now is all the spiderwebs; they seem to have spread down there. I think I saw some of the larger specimens actually eating the remains of the worms. It was a... disconcerting sight and I left almost immediately.

End supplemental.

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[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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