

MAG – 068 – The Tale of a Field Hospital

Content Warnings

- Hospitals
- Graphic injury
- Death

Discussions of: self injury, warfare, infestation, infection

Mentions of: funerals, epidemic, gunshots, tunnels & underground

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone, static, electrical distortion, scream

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode sixty-eight. The Tale of a Field Hospital.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Joseph Russo regarding a book allegedly authored by Sir Frederick Treeves. Original statement given June 3rd 2003. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Thanks for letting me do this. I mean, I know you let anyone record a statement. That's why you're the Magnus Institute! So I could have just made something up, I guess. But I don't want to waste your time or irritate you guys. I mean, I'm a big fan of your work. Never had the academic chops to get access to your library or anything, but when all those statements were leaked back in '99... I know all the letters pages called you crackpots, but I know. Yeah? I get it. I read them all, start to finish, and sure there's a lot of nonsense in there, a lot of bad acid trips and liars, but in the middle, at the core of them, there was something there. There are things that go bump in the night and now I think I've got one to share with you.

So I'm kind of an artist. I like to use the detritus of mankind's time on this planet to craft its own reflection back at itself, yeah? So I take what others consider garbage and use it to send a message to the puppetmasters and fat cats who hold our lives in the palm of their hand and play with our society like a chess game. A message of art. You know what I'm talking about. I bet you have a ton in your archive about the Illuminati. That's why they smeared you so hard. I'm not asking to look at them or anything; I'm just letting you know that I get it. Yeah? I get it.

So, anyway, I spend a lot of time at the dump. Not so much those huge iron skips or the bottle bank – I mean, like I don't have enough bottles in my studio already - but you know the bit in the middle where they sell stuff. All the stuff that really skirts the line between trash and treasure. Mirrors that are tarnished but still good. Old furniture just a bit too scuffed for the charity shop. You can get amazing things there for almost nothing if you look hard and aren't too picky. And when you're making art you don't need to be picky. If something's not perfect, you can make it perfect. You use the beauty inside of

you to reach in and pull the beauty out of the object. Sometimes by breaking it more; sometimes by repairing it just enough. And, once, by setting it on fire. So the people at the dump around my area they know me and generally when I turn up they key me in to any of the good stuff that's come in.

So, I was checking out the tip near Wood Green two days ago and they don't usually have a lot of good stuff. I mean, I've been there sometimes when there's literally no stuff out for sale but this time they had a few furniture pieces and a cutlery set, but nothing I could use. But one of the guys who works there, I think his name's Gus. Or Al. He looks like a Gus or an Al. Anyway, he pointed me to the only thing that really caught my attention. It was a wicker basket full of old books. Now this I was interested in. I'm working on a piece at the moment, it's called 'Pageviews' and it's about the death of print media at the dawn of the digital age. Point is, I'm filling a bunch of computer monitors with shredded books, so cheap books, especially a bit old and a bit yellowed, were exactly what I needed. I discarded a few of them as the texture or page tone wasn't quite right but there were plenty in there I could use. Then I spotted a book that looked a bit older than the others, right at the bottom. It was large, and the pages looked thick and loose. It was titled *The Tale of a Field Hospital* by Frederick Treeves. So clearly I'm buying it, right? I mean, obviously you know Frederick Treeves, the surgeon who was best friends with Joseph Merrick, AKA the Elephant Man, AKA my all-time favourite Victorian medical curiosity. And not just because he shares my name though I guess that doesn't hurt.

I mean, I knew about the book; Treeves' account of his time working in a field hospital during the Second Boer War. I'd read it before, of course, but my copy

had gone missing about the time Sandra moved out. She wasn't exactly a fan and I think she threw away a whole bunch of my stuff out of spite.

Thing is, this one looked old. Like, 19th century old, which, since that's when he was writing meant there was a good chance it was a first edition and that sort of thing can be very valuable. Meaning I get a good read and a payday. Win win, right?

So I buy it, for like 50p and head off, but it's weird. Don't know who owned it before, might have even been a library copy but the sticker was mostly torn off. It didn't have a frontispiece, though, and a lot of the pages had different ink weights or layouts, and it kind of looks like they were printed at different times. It's only when I get home that I remember *The Tale of a Field Hospital* was actually based on a series of short columns he wrote for the British Medical Journal during the war itself. So I reckon what I've got here might just be some kind of proofing or draft copy, or maybe some custom-bound collection of those articles, and I get really excited.

As I started reading through it, though, there was something kind of weird. Bits of some of the chapters that I really don't remember from the version I read before. The book's old and dirty and kind of tricky to just read, so I copied down a few passages for you.

So, almost halfway through, Chapter Thirteen, he talks about "The Men with the Spades" - the soldiers who came up every day to dig the graves for those who had died in the hospital. He describes them as "unkempt and uncaring, their devil-may-care attitude hiding the deep sadness within them at their solemn duty". Except, in the version I have, it goes like this:

Archivist's note: attached to this statement at various points are handwritten versions of passages allegedly from the book in question.

"The graves at Frere were dug by our own men, or rather, by a small fatigue party from a regiment nearby. Nearly every morning they came, the men with the spades. There were seven of them, with a corporal, and they came up jauntily, with their spades on their shoulders and their pipes in their mouths. They were in their shirt-sleeves and there was much display of belt and of unbuttoned neck.

Their helmets were apt to be stuck on their heads in informal attitudes. They were inexpressibly untidy, and they made in their march a loose, shambling suggestion of a procession.

There was only one man who kept in his conduct a sense of decorum, yet I cannot recall it with any fondness. He wore his uniform precisely about him, and though perspiration assailed his face as he worked on his maudlin task not a drop of it ever touched his jacket. He would gaze at me levelly when I watched him work. I fancied the flies flew thicker over whatever grave he worked upon. I asked the corporal for his name, and was told that that was Private Amherst. Fitting enough, I remarked, that he should be named for a dealer in smallpox when he himself seemed almost taken by fever. I regretted my remark the following day, as he stood in his open grave, saluted me, and died on the spot of typhoid."

Weird, right? That's not in the original. Well, the first bit is, I think, but the bit about the guy dying of fever while digging a grave, definitely not. So, I reckon it must be a version with all the bits they cut out for publishing in the book or the BMJ. Still, not specifically supernatural, right? Well, later in the book there's

Chapter Nineteen, “The Story of the Restless Man”. In the version I read before, it’s a nice little story about a soldier with a wounded leg who’s given a bed, but keeps giving up his bed for other soldiers he reckons need it more. But it keeps damaging his leg more and in the end they have to fully order him to stay in the bed. It’s meant to illustrate the unselfishness of a soldier to his comrades. Well, in this weird edition, it goes a bit differently.

“Among the wounded who came down from Spion Kop was a private whom I recognised, though I scarce can bring myself to believe it. Private Amherst, who was two months buried in the grave he himself had dug, was carried in on a stretcher. The thigh-bone was broken and the fracture had been much disturbed by the journey to the hospital. He did not respond to my questions about his supposed death, save a sly smile, and he was given a bedstead in one of the marquees. The limb was adjusted temporarily, and he was told to keep very quiet and not to move off his back. Next morning, however, he was found lying upon his face, with his limb out of position and his splints, as he said, staring me again in the eye, ‘all anyhow.’ I asked him why he had moved. He told me, with flies buzzing around his fevered head, ‘You see, doctor, I am such a restless man.’

The limb was more elaborately adjusted and everything was left in excellent position. Next morning, however, the restless man was found lying upon the floor of the marquee, and in his bed was a man who had been shot through the chest. The marquee was crowded and the number of beds were few; those who could not be accommodated on beds had to lie on stretchers on the ground. The man who was shot in the chest had come in during the night, and had been placed on the only available stretcher.

Amherst proceeded to tell me that he was happy to share what little he had with those in need. I... I will grant I was uncertain of how to proceed, when the man who was shot in the chest died unexpectedly, his wound turning septic with great rapidity, and in due course the restless man was back in his own bed once more.

It was not, however, for long, for on another morning visit Amherst was found on the floor again, and again beamed forth an explanation that one of the wounded on the ground, who had come in late, seemed to be very bad and so he had changed over. The present occupant also died of an infected wound within hours of my noticing. I was deeply shaken by this odd harbinger of sickness and fatality, but could think of no immediate redress for the matter.

However, the moving of a man with a broken thigh from bed to ground and back again means not only such disordering of splints and bandages but no little danger to the damaged limb. So I felt almost a relief when the wound turned gangrenous with such alarming speed that amputation was simply impossible. As he passed away, the second time, I implored him to stay that way. He just looked at me:

‘But you see, doctor, I am such a restless man.’”

Pretty spooky, right? You can see why I wanted to bring this to you guys. I mean, I know it's not exactly having my own statement, my own brush with the darkness that lurks behind the shadowy veil and preys on the unwary mankind, but it's the next best thing, right? I'll be honest, I didn't really read it fully before bringing it over here, I thought you're probably in a better position to do that, with your researchers and that, but there was one other bit I wrote out. It was in a worse state than the others, but it was the final chapter,

Chapter Thirty. In the original it recounts the rather miserable death of a soldier as contrasted with battlefield heroics, and is titled “Sic Transit Gloria Mundi”. In this version it doesn’t have a title, and it goes like this:

“I remember at Chieveley one morning before breakfast, watching a solitary man approach the hospital lines. I knew it was him long before my vision became clear. He was now staggering towards the hospital, a ragged, broken-down, khaki-coloured spectre of a man. He dragged his rifle along with him, his belt was gone, his helmet was poised at the back of his head, his tunic was thrown over his shoulders; he was literally black with flies.

He told me he had come from the concentration camps, that there were many among the Boers that shared his state, and that he longed to touch me with all that we had visited upon them. He talked of disease, putrefaction, and the writhing creatures of filth. He breathlessly talked of his revelation. Then he died, as did the man who came to bury him.”

So yeah, I reckoned it might be right up your street. Consider the book a donation. It’s not quite as cool as having a real close encounter of my own but it’s the next best thing. Be careful carrying it, though, those old pages are kind of sharp.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Mr Russo was found dead in his home on June 5th 2003, two days after his statement. Cause of death was found to be blood poisoning from a wound in his hand. Given that the medical records Sasha dug up seem to indicate the putrefaction was far more advanced than the timeframe would reasonably

allow, I have a suspicion that Mr Russo may have gotten a far closer encounter than he realised with a very dangerous book. A Leitner, I would guess, though some slight charring around the edges of this statement leads me to believe that Gertrude may have made a somewhat unilateral decision about disposing of it, rather than committing it to storage.

Beyond that all the details seem more or less accurate. Sir Frederick Treeves did indeed work in a field hospital during the Second Boer War, and did write a book about it titled *The Tale of a Field Hospital*, published in 1900. Tim hunted down an online version of the text, and it certainly doesn't match up with what Mr Russo reproduced here. Interestingly, the official text makes no mention whatsoever of the concentration camps used to imprison Boer civilians during the conflict, where sickness and hunger killed tens of thousands and, indeed, it is perfectly possible it was not part of the war Treeves encountered or engaged with. Odd, then, that whatever thing it was that haunted him would choose that as its final message.

Amherst is rapidly becoming one of an uncomfortably long list of names that I dread seeing in a statement. Could this be an ancestor of John Amherst? Or, given the many apparent deaths of the soldier in the book, might it be the same being, well over a hundred years old? If so, I wonder how many times it has died of sickness and disease. Another point is a link that Treeves brings up which I had not considered, that of Jeffrey Amherst, an 18th century baronet who is most remembered for deliberately providing blankets infected with smallpox to Native American tribes during the so-called French & Indian Wars, leading to a devastating epidemic. A connection to a very different sort of monster, but still one that has the trappings of disease. I had assumed that Amherst was something similar to Prentiss in his connection to insects, but

that may not be all. Insects and disease. No clear connection, other than the fact that they somehow feel similar. They both make one feel distinctly unclean.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off.]

Supplemental.

I'm in the tunnels. I was exploring and I got lost. I haven't gone down any of the stairs and I- I think I'm still under the Institute. There were a couple of spiders, so I changed routes and found, I think it's a gas main. Must be for the whole building. But there's someone coming and I- I don't know who else would be down here, except... I mean, whatever's down here. It was... it was just checking on the upper levels, I didn't prepare for-

NOT!SASHA

Jon?

(The Archivist makes a startled noise.)

Jon is that you?

ARCHIVIST

Oh, Sasha, thank god. I thought you- I thought you were a... I don't know. What are you doing down here?

NOT!SASHA

Forgot my coat. I noticed the trap door was open and wanted to make sure you were ok. Did Elias give you the key?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, he... he thought it might help put a stop to some of my “wilder imaginings”. Are you ok?

NOT!SASHA

Yes, I’m ok... I don’t really like it down here. Hard to focus.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Sasha managed to successfully navigate us out of the tunnels. Might defer future exploration for a while, at least until my heart rate settles down sometime in about a year. The place plays odd tricks with your mind. When I saw Sasha down there, for a moment it was like I didn’t recognise her. She seemed... far too tall somehow. I’ve locked it back up for now. I think I need some fresh air.

End supplemental.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

The Magnus Archives is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.