

MAG029 – Case #9720406 – “Cheating Death”

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Nathaniel Thorp, regarding his own mortality. Original statement given June 4th 1972. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Are you interested in folktales at all? I know I'm here to provide a statement of my own experience, and I will, but there's something so revealing in the stories that grow up in a culture, wouldn't you say? And I promise it will be relevant by the end. I can guarantee it's not in your library, either, because as far as I know this story has never been written down. I'd do it myself, but there's a reason you're having to write this for me. One of these days I'll get around to learning my letters. Probably.

But I'll still wager, illiterate or not, that I can tell you a story you haven't heard before, though the themes are some that dance their way through many of the oldest folklore you can find: death. And games of chance. Well, if you want to win, anyway. Unless you fancy your chances of beating it at chess. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Once there was a soldier. A bold soldier. The sort you could find in any army, in any war, at any time. Fond of drink, fond of dice, fond of whatever nocturnal pleasures might be offered. He was bold as brass, yet bold is not the same as brave, and rarely did he take to the field of battle without somehow finding himself at the rear of the charge, where cannon and musket ball were less likely to find him. As I say, he could have been fighting anywhere, but this story is in New England, during the time of the Revolutionary War. Whether he was British or American or even French,

it means nothing. What matters, is that at the Battle of Bunker Hill he found himself alone.

The night before had been wasted hard carousing, and what money he had not lost betting on faro had quickly been spent on drinking and pleasant company. So it was that he took to the field of battle with his head already swimming and eyes a stinging red. He had neglected even to bring gunpowder enough to reload his rifle, having filled his pouch instead with playing cards, and with every boom of the cannon the soldier's head pulsed in such pain that he thought himself shot.

The smoke was coiled thick around him and the acrid stench of gunpowder and blood made him retch. He fired his one and only shot and it disappeared into the roiling fog of war. He tried to advance, but he did not know which way was towards the enemy, nor could he see any others amidst the chaos of battle, enemy or comrade. For all the muskets and cannons he could

hear, it seemed he was alone. As he stood there, the soldier saw that some of the blood that fell into the sodden soil was his own. When he had been shot, he had no idea, but the pain that surged through him as touched his wounded chest left no doubt.

The bold soldier considered returning to his lines, to find a doctor, but he remembered all too clearly the mouldering filth of the medical tents, the ranks of infected fools wailing out their last doomed cries. He would not die like that. He would not choke out some feeble plea for his mother in some grime-encrusted infirmary. He turned, threw down his rifle, and began to run. He did not know in which direction he was going, and simply prayed that it was not towards the enemy or the sea. Blood flowed freely from the ragged wound in his chest, and his breathing was laboured, yet he pushed on. He ran until the mud turned to soil and the soil turned to grass, until the smoke turned to fog and the fog turned to rain, and dusk came upon him.

Despite the balmy warmth of that June day, the night was bitterly cold. Perhaps it was the rain that pounded upon his tunic, or maybe it was the beginnings of a fever, but when the soldier finally stopped running, he was so chilled that it took all the energy he had left in him not to collapse. He was soaked through, shivering violently, and very aware that if he did not find somewhere to take shelter from the elements, he was going to die. And not a quick, clean death from a pistol or a sabre. A miserable, shivering death in some barren field near Boston. The soldier, whose boldness seemed to seep out with his blood, did not want to die.

And here there is something to be said on death. Everyone fears death. Of course they do. Even the most devout must have some apprehension, for however confident they are in a life everlasting with their deity of choice, the concept of eternity is one that the mortal mind recoils from. Be it bliss, torment

or the senseless void, none can actually imagine what it is to die, so it's only right that all should have a healthy fear of it. There are some, though, for whom it is an enduring terror. Who cannot even consider the inevitable termination of life without a deepest panic, and can think of nothing in life that could be worse than its end. The soldier was of this cloth, and upon feeling his time drawing to a close, he began to cast about in fear.

He spied a farmhouse, dark and uninviting. The fighting nearby had likely scared off whoever lived there. Desperate to get out of the pouring rain, the soldier tried the doors, and found them locked tight. He broke a window, but with his wound he did not have the strength to climb inside. In despair, he looked around himself for another entrance and spied the cellar door. It was not locked, and lifted with surprising ease, given how heavy the wood appeared. He collapsed inside, half-crawling, half-falling down

the rough earthen steps, until he found himself lying there in the dark, dry warmth of the basement.

The soldier lay there for some time, unmoving, eyes shut. Listening to the driving New England rain beating down outside. He breathed deeply, ignoring the pain from his wounded chest, and tried to gather his thoughts. What was important, he considered briefly, was that at that moment, he was not dead.

It was then he caught the scent of damp. Not the damp of wet earth after a hot day, but the cold damp of vaults and catacombs, slick with mould and glimmering nitre. You would have expected Death to smell of decay, of rotting flesh and maggot meat, but it did not. And the soldier knew what it was immediately. Even before his eyes adjusted to the dark and looked to the table. Before he saw the figure that sat there in a moth-eaten monk's robe. There was no reason to assume that what he saw was Death, and not simply some forgotten corpse, but

there was no doubt in the soldier's mind when he gazed upon it that he saw his doom embodied. Then it turned to look at the soldier, and what little resolve remained fled from his heart. He tried to run, but he got barely two steps before he collapsed again. Death waited patiently.

To describe it as a skeleton would be to do Death a disservice. For though the robe that sat in that chair contained only bones, it was not the skeleton that moved. It was Death. The bones were old, so ancient and brittle that the slightest pressure or movement would have rendered them down to dust. They did move; Death was no more a skeleton than you are a woollen suit. Above all it was old. Older than you could possibly dream.

And the soldier began to weep. He cried and begged Death not to take him, but Death was silent.

Now, as long as there have been people and games, there have been tales of those who gambled with Death. Some as metaphor, some as myth, but the soldier had heard enough of these tales to make his own last, desperate gamble, and he challenged Death to a game. There was silence for several long minutes before it nodded its head.

Reaching into its robe, Death pulled out three things: a chess knight, a domino and a pair of dice, each scrimshawed out of old bone. The choice presented was clear, but the soldier had enough wit about him to shake his head and reach into his pouch. He laid the cards upon the table, and asked Death if he knew how to play faro. Death paused, as though considering, before it nodded. "Very well," it said, "and if you win, you shall not die."

He replaced his totems within the mouldering robe, and pulled out instead a small hexagonal faro token, likewise made of bone. The soldier, starting to feel

bold again as the wood of the table warped and decayed into the thirteen cards of a faro board, pushed it to the side and told Death, with the faintest hint of a smile, that he had brought his own. From somewhere, Death produced a dealing box and, placing the playing cards within it, it began to deal.

Faro, or 'Bucking the Tiger' as the carnival hawkers would have it, is not a complicated game. Bets are placed upon the cards and the dealer draws one card for the players and one for themselves. Bets matching the player's card are doubled, bets matching the dealer's cards are lost. There are a few other rules, of course, but if played honestly, then there is no betting game with fairer odds. The soldier had never before encountered an honest game.

He had before him a small pile of ivory sticks, not unlike those used for betting in mah-jongg, though the soldier had no knowledge of such a game. He

knew that if his pile was gone, then his life was forfeit.

The game was slow and deliberate, and the soldier could not have said if they played for hours, for days or for months. The night outside showed no sign of ending, nor did the rain cease its drumming out a rhythm on the still open cellar door. The cards were placed slowly and deliberately by Death, and the soldier became more and more amazed with the revelation that this was least crooked game of faro he had ever played. Still, there was little scope to cheat, as there was none of the shouting or crowds that served as a distraction in every gambling parlour. The relentless hollow gaze of the collapsing holes of Death's skull were enough to keep the soldier almost from pushing his luck too far.

Then at last it reached what looked to be the final play. The deck was almost exhausted, and all the soldier had was piled upon the number three. As his

reserve had dwindled, the soldier felt the wound in his chest begin to pulse with a dull ache, as thick beads of sweat rolled down his shivering face. If the final three came up for the dealer, he had lost, but if it came up for him, then he would finish the game with a higher stack than Death. Perhaps that would be enough for him to win? The rules of the wager had not been clearly explained, but as the shivering began to overtake him, the soldier clutched to this faint hope. And as Death reached its hand for the final cards, he placed his copper upon his pile, the six-sided token that reversed the bet. Now it was, if Death drew the three as the dealer's card, he would win.

Death turned the card to reveal... a King, and reached for the next one.

The soldier knew that he had made a mistake. When the three was turned, his would lose his bet and lose everything. He had only one chance, one thin sliver of

hope, and even that would no doubt simply damn him further. But what else could he do? As Death turned its head towards the faro box to draw the next card, the soldier, in one practiced move, took the thin length of twine wrapped around his thumb and through the tiny, drilled hole in his copper, and pulled it taut. With an almost imperceptible flick of the wrist he pulled it back and into his hand, removing it from the board and leaving his bet to win when the three was drawn.

The terror that gripped him when Death returned its gaze to the board was deeper than any he had ever known. Every other time he had attempted that trick, the baying of the crowd and the heaving mass of patrons placing bets afforded him ample cover, yet in the stillness and dark, with just him and his endless opponent playing their game, there was surely no way such a move could go unnoticed. Death turned the card over: the Three of Spades.

It gazed at the card, then at the small pile of ivory in front of the soldier. It made no sound, and the soldier could not tell if what he heard was the rain falling outside or the beating of his own heart. Finally, Death nodded its head, and pushed its own pile of bone sticks towards the soldier.

“You win.”

Its tone was almost... happy. The soldier didn't notice, as at these words a thrill went through his heart. He had beaten Death. He was going to live. He stood up, still giddy and feverish, but with such joy that he might have collapsed from the laughter that exploded from his lips. He staggered to the cellar door, expecting to see the sunrise after so long waiting in the dark, but the sky was still black. Behind him, Death waited.

The soldier noticed the pain in his chest was gone, and took in a lungful of air. It was cold, damp, and

tinged with a faint whiff of something metallic. It was only then he really noticed the low, rumbling laugh that came from Death. He turned to see the figure still sat at the table, but now the old monk's robes were soaked with blood. The bones of the figure were red and dripping, with patches of muscle appearing over them.

Then he felt it in himself. Something was very wrong. An itching, burning deep within him, then a flash of intense pain in his arm. He grabbed it instinctively, but where he touched it, the skin and flesh beneath it came away in his hand, like chunks of wet bread. Beneath it, he could see the yellow-white of bone. His bone. Old bone.

And the soldier began to scream.

As more of his body sloughed off of him into crimson piles upon the floor, he looked up at where Death had sat. In its place he saw an old monk, bloody but

whole, smiling at him. The soldier held out a now bony hand towards him in supplication: "You said that if I won, then I'd live!"

The monk shook his head. "No, I didn't."

The end, I suppose. Thank you for indulging me, you've been very patient. I'm well aware I came in to tell you my own story, and instead have rattled off some old folktale, which you've dutifully taken down. I do feel now, though, that I'm at a place where I can tell you of myself. But for one final bit of context, I need you to watch this. Pay attention.

ARCHIVIST

Archivist's note: After this point the rest of the page is covered in what appears to be a large bloodstain. The statement resumes on the page afterwards, in a somewhat shakier hand.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

Apologies for that. A bit dramatic I know, but I always feel a demonstration is best in these situations. Are you feeling better now? Well, regardless, I think I should continue; best get this down before someone comes to check on your scream. I've no interest in being becoming a resident medical marvel.

So yes, this is not a trick knife. You can check yourself if you want. Hell, stab me yourself if you care to. No? Fine. Perhaps I underestimated your curiosity.

After I won my game of faro, I spent almost two centuries in that unhallowed state. I remember little of that time. I was not the only one, nor was I the sole embodiment of Death. There were others, I think, in a similar state to me. I don't know how many, but we didn't come for everyone. I don't know how we chose our victims, or whether we were at the

whims of a higher power. I call them victims, as while we visited many a terminal or doomed soul, we did not only visit those whose time had come. Some of them we killed ourselves. I remember my bone-sharp hands reaching into the throats of the old, the young, those who deserved it, and those who brought nothing but love to the world.

Some would choose to gamble, of course. The foolish ones chose chess. I was a master of every game, knew every rule. To select the one game with no luck in it at all was always folly. In the end, it was roulette that released me. Luck bended in my favour when I played with victims, but with a game so pure in random chance as roulette, well, eventually, luck comes around, though I had to wait damn near two centuries for it to do so. I'll never forget the look on that old man's face when he won, and began to feel the change overtake him.

So now I'm here, and I cannot die. I can barely live, either. Food and drink make me sick, and I cannot sleep. There is an aching inside of me. A craving for something, but I don't know what. I don't seem to age, but I've only been flesh again for a few years, so can't be sure of this. I have often wondered about whether I'm the only one like me in the world. I can't be. It doesn't make sense. I know there were others. But I don't know where.

I can't decide whether this existence I find myself in is better than the death I feared so long ago. I sometimes wonder, but have decided that it is. A living hell is, after all, still living.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

I've had the blood checked, and it appears to be real. O Negative. And that's about as far as I can confirm anything about this statement, forty-four years after

the fact. The details Mr Thorp provided on his residence, occupation, et cetera, appear to have been accurate for the time, but we've been unable to track down any up-to-date information on him, if he even still lives.

Fiona Law, the research assistant who took the statement, passed away in 2003 from complications following a liver transplant, and with two exceptions no-one else working for the Institute at the time is still employed here. Gertrude Robinson was there, of course, but we can't exactly ask her, and Elias was working as a filing clerk at the time. I followed up with him, and he does remember there being something of a commotion around that time about someone self-harming while giving a statement – rumours said they'd cut off their finger or something – but he wasn't directly involved and didn't know much more about it.

Aside from that it's almost a complete dead end. The only other thing in the file can't really be considered a lead, especially as it's now gone. It was a small, hexagonal token, about an inch in diameter. There were no markings on it, but it appeared to be made of very old bone. I was unable to determine anything further, as when I picked it up, it simply crumbled to dust in my hand. Perhaps that's fitting.

End recording.