



THE THING IN THE BOX

The madness. Where did it begin?

For madness it is, surely, that has me in its claws, that rips through my mind and makes this night a torture. Madness makes me want to slip away from this room. To slip away and dig.

Chalmers is sleeping quietly across the room. The inn is silent. How did Chalmers escape it? Why doesn't he feel the pull of that lonely old grave?

Where did it begin, the madness?

When we met, three years ago, at university, was it the mutual recognition

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of disturbed minds that drew us together? Were we already at the mouth of a long, black tunnel that led here, to this feverish bed, unbearable to me, that led me to the thoughts of the graveyard and that one particular grave, the old grave, the one dug apart from all the others? Was it madness, or was it the weariness we felt with the world as reality? We shared a hunger for darkness, mystery, and taboo that drew us, at first, to certain philosophies and speculations, then into the investigation of symbolists and Egyptian secrets, books of the dead and the forbidden writings of men burned at the stake for what they found.

That was the world we chose to inhabit, Chalmers and I, those were our pursuits, which increasingly claimed our time and energy, until we were considered oddities, shut up in dark rooms. No one was quite sure of what it was we knew. They feared us, a little, I think.

At last, our speculations were exhausted to the point of staleness, and we began to feel a different need: the need for experience of what we had only read. This unholy craving led us to haunt embalming parlors, graveyards, and medical collections of oddities and malformed fetuses. We saw things born so appallingly misshapen as to make one wonder how they could have drawn breath for even an instant and what the world was to these tortured beings-perhaps a single, never-ending scream.

Yet, the hunger was not stilled by these encounters. Instead, as philosophy had led us to experience, experience now created a new desire, which became ever more ravenous: the desire for possession. We wanted to become part of what we saw, to stand in the moonlight and live unspeakable things, to feel the horror and, moreover, to be the cause of that horror ourselves. We spent hours talking of a perfect night with a cold, pale moon, of finding a perfect grave in a cold and barren place and there committing what the human mind shrinks from in an ancient terror. We meant to rob a grave.

Where did the madness begin?

It seemed prudent to us to plan our first such expedition in a foreign country, not only for reasons of security, but out of the aesthetic concern of finding the correct setting for our ghoulish purpose. We longed for churchyards with old trees, roots deeply embedded in cold, dark earth, places sacred since the dawn of time, first to

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pagan, then to Roman, then to Christian. Places sacred through the ages, the better to be defiled and plundered of grotesque trophies.

We took passage to the continent, Chalmers and I, and made our way from Holland through Germany, passing ever southward, from the clear, airy reformed world to the lands of the ancient Roman church, to harsh, massive stone walls holding carvings of sinners in the pits of hell, pitifully depicted in the agony of the flames. This progression appeared to mirror what was in our souls, as if a vortex were drawing us ever closer to the darkness we craved, ever promising deeper terrors, dreams more unsound, an abyss unimagined and bottomless. And we followed, speaking less and less to each other as the miles passed outside the windows of trains and coaches, absorbed in contemplation of what awaited somewhere not yet seen, the promise of a nightmare.

By slow stages, and still delaying the consummation of our godless purpose, we arrived at the borders of Austria and, at last, two days ago, at the top of a lonely hill that gave us a startling view of the walls of Maria Saal, a church built on a temple, built on a shrine, built on a fire, built on a mist of legend. The wind that greeted us as we stood on that hill made a sound like the moaning of a spirit.

The twin steeples of the church were of rough stone, grayish and withered. There were faces in the outer walls, knights and long dead men, women, and children, among them Roman families long since turned to dust and consigned to the flames of hell. Looking at their stony eyes, I wondered where they were at that moment, what tortures they endured. For there was no peace in these figures, no rest promised in the grim aspect of this church. It was not a church that had made peace with the living, it promised nothing to the dead. It was an outpost of an afterlife threatening and unknown, an endless fall into blackness. A Latin inscription on one of the towers said: Who knows what hour will be the last.

A graveyard surrounded the ancient building, and as I turned, I saw the moon, still pale and unassuming in the daylight, but full and promising for the coming night. I looked at Chalmers, and we both knew at once that this was the place.

Chalmers was silent as we walked among the graves. Did he discern in me a madness? I cannot tell. How did I appear to him as I flitted between the gravestones? Was I disturbing, unkempt and untidy from the road, a light in my eyes, a triumphant smile on my face? Perhaps, I laughed. I touched the headstones as I passed, caressing them, and there must have been a greedy hunger in my surveying of the place. I must have appeared to him, I think, a nightmare. I was happy.

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Where did it begin?

I knelt at the edge of the graveyard, peering over the final headstone, the stone of a girl of fifteen years dead for seventy-three. I knelt, peering over her stone, and I saw, by the fading light, a single grave beyond the churchyard, almost in the brush that marked the boundaries of the surrounding forest. It was at once clear to me that this was a shunned grave, perhaps a suicide. The stone looked old and crudely made, the grave itself covered with thistles. Its very simplicity gave it an irresistible power. Set apart not by ostentatious adornments but by distance alone, it was, clearly, an uneasy thing.

Upon discovering it, two words came to my lips, the meaning of which I did not know:

“Von Stumm.”

And then I was on my feet and scrambling across the open land towards the dark woods and the lonely grave, which I was determined to enter, which was mine, my splendid setting, my perfect place.

I am burning in this bed. I will suffocate, I will die if I don't move. Chalmers is asleep. Exhausted and overwrought after dragging me, against my will, away from the church. For he has lost his taste, his nerves have faltered, he has abandoned our plan. The graves and the dead have made him shrink back in horror. Was it my aspect as I found the graveyard? Was it the feeling of the place, ancient and desolate, that made him find a fear for his immortal soul, dark and stained though it may be? Or was it the croaking of the ravens from the towers? It was a simple thing, really. It was the two words I said upon discovering the lonely grave. Having heard my utterance, a terror seized him when, upon approaching the headstone, he found written on it, in letters so small I could not have discerned them when I spoke, the name: Von Stumm.

It was this inexplicable coincidence that spoke of an intrusion into my thoughts, the name given to me as clearly as by a voice calling out from the grave, a sentient entity reaching into my brain from God knows what dark corner. It was that revelation given to me, and me alone, as if in acknowledgement of my spirit and as a reward for my years spent in the shadows and in darkness and the chasms beyond reason; it was this message that made Chalmers tremble and look at me like a man

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waking from opium dreams and to utter the words, "Too far—we've gone too far," as he pulled me away with him.

"Von Stumm," I replied, and I felt him shiver as he held me and I looked back at the grave, saw it, smaller and smaller, and the lengthening shadows of the woods creeping towards it, embracing it, saw the ravens, disturbed, fly in circles around the towers and call to each other in excitement.

I'm up. I'm sitting in the bed, and there isn't a sound but the bellows of my breath. I creep to the window and the streets of the village are deserted. But there, there is an old woman, her face hidden by a cloak. She slowly glides along the street, carrying a lighted candle, and I feel that she is there in fulfillment of some unknown vow. She glides, glides towards the church.

I must. This is the hour. The old woman will pray; I will undo what she is calling down in blessings by what I shall do in the churchyard. I will be the unholy in her faith. I must possess that grave. I must embrace the dark.

Chalmers is asleep. It was I that was given the name. It was I who was recognized. I shall be part of the horror tonight; I shall be bad dreams. The moon is full. I am in an old place in an unknown land. I'm burning and feverish and the night is cool because I'm in the street, and there is a spade in my hand and a bell somewhere chimes midnight. I move down the street, my tread sounding heavy, and under the pale moon I know how I appear and how a boy, looking down from a window as I did but moments before, beholding me instead of a gliding old woman, will, for weeks, suffer inexplicable night terrors and wake the house screaming: "The man! The man!"

There are colors dancing before my eyes: reds, deep, dark reds, jugular blood. I breathe and savor the moment. I'm in the maelstrom now, whirling into the abyss—this is a night of horrors, the moon half-hidden by fast-moving clouds, their borders bright, the rest black wings. I reach the edge of town and the bell chimes again, blessed sound, a blessed sound soon turned upside down, blasphemed.

A monstrous growl makes me stop: The howl of a dog, sounding like a devil-dark, huge, and wild. I stand and see the beast, a large, muscled hound held back by a chain, ferocious and malevolent. It lunges once, as if in hope, but the chain holds and as the beast barks again the voice reaches far into the dark, surely as far as my grave. I move on. It was nothing but a dog, yet—its eyes were red, fiery red, its eyes, trained on me, its eyes were not of this world.

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The moon is high above the two towers of the church, my beacon. I stand and watch and even now, past the midnight hour, the ravens are circling, an army of small, fast black shadows against the moon. I stand and curse Chalmers for a coward. To miss this. The culmination of years of darkness, the escape from a world of shallowness and vanity. The church calls to me, the grave calls to me and I run, I stumble, sweat running down my face, the cold sweat of a fever. I hear the words "Von Stumm," and feel doomed and lost beyond redemption, and I savor it, relish the fall, the fall of man. As I discern the edge of the clearing, as I pass through the shadows of the towers, there is the thought: Where did it begin? The madness. And I laugh.

We are alone, the grave and I. I look at it in silence. The perfect stillness. With the first stab of the spade, I hear a sigh as the earth opens. I pause and look at the headstone, and there is a year: 1649. Now the ravens are laughing. They've been waiting for centuries. I work fast.

Up to my knees in the shunned grave. The image must be splendid: the church behind me, the clouds chasing across a moon now red and large. For the past ten minutes there has been a rustling in the forest, the glimmer of eyes. Animals observing my work, but then, there was a whispering, a chatter. It sounded like a language, but it was airy and impossible to catch, dissolving like mist, a dark thought dissipating. Once, I look up and see a pair of eyes, red. Peering at me from the brush, their steadiness is thinking. I look behind me and there, in the earth I tossed behind me as I worked, are the hoof prints of a pig. What stood behind me as I dug?

I find a cross. Heavy, made of stone, buried on top of whatever lies beneath. The face of Christ is agony, not gentle but distorted and forbidding. My mind seizes on the question of the purpose of this cross: Christ's face lying downward, in the earth, confronting not me, digging, but something other, coming up.

My face is covered with dirt, and I doubt not that my eyes stand out large and white. I smell the grave, dead leaves and earth. There is a clap of thunder, then a wind cooling my brow, my face now only just above the rim of the grave. It is the same wind that welcomed us to this place and again it mourns and cries. What lies down there is buried deep.

The cross is mine now. I shall have a house of ghoulish, unspeakable trophies. This cross from the grave shall be the first. The second shall be the skull. I want the skull; the skull is what I want.

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Time is short. There is no light, but a graying in the night. I hear a dog howling, far away—I know the dog, know its red eyes. It howls in desperation. Straining against a chain, it fills the night.

Wood.

I sink to my knees. There is something, not a coffin, too small, a large box, a wooden box, its dimensions about half of what would be required for an adult corpse. I have found it. I kneel on the earth-covered box and look up, and the moon is above me and something circles in dark shadows, and all I see is the segment of sky visible from the grave, a dead man's vision. I'm in the grave, we have embraced, I see ravens, more and more of them, more than the towers could possibly account for, a wild flutter of wings.

I wipe the earth from the box with my bare hands. There is blood under my nails. The box is as wide as a coffin, and as deep, but short. A child? A child's skull. Splendid, splendid.

And in a flash, I know where madness begins. I know. It begins with the sound of nails scratching across wood, answering my own, the sound of nails scratching across wood from inside the box.

I jump to my feet, and there are voices calling, and with a last flash of reason I look and see Chalmers and the landlord, running towards me, too far, too far away. They are shouting and waving their lanterns, too late, too late, for the box is open, and I behold a brown, wrinkled face, a small, nearly round head covered in a few stringy long hairs, my God, the face of a dried-up thing, a pair of yellow eyes. I hear a sound as from a bird, a falcon, and long, bony arms reach for me, and what is this thing that I've brought up, what's been unleashed upon the world, what is this thing, this strong thing that sounds like a bird and pulls me down and sinks its fangs into my arm for a first, greedy drink? I can feel the blood draining from my arm, feel it shrivel and wither, and the thing now has a shine in its eyes, blood around its mouth, a terrible shine in those yellow eyes firmly fixed upon my throat.

I hear Chalmers' voice, calling for me, and the thing turns its hideous face at the sound, and then it smiles at me, and I scream. It leers at me with horrid, blood-stained teeth, secure of its possession, evil consciousness in its face, and then it leaps from the grave, dragging behind it the rags of a shroud, leaps into the dark with its falcon-scream, and I hear shouts, I know they're running. I know I'm alone, and lost, damned for eternity. I see the marks on my withered arm, I feel a foul infection, the diseased secretion of that thing, I feel it in my body and I pray: My God, what am

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I becoming, what is coursing through my veins? I pray that this is madness, I pray for that hope, nothing but madness, but I feel the change, I feel the vile rot taking hold of me, and it is silent now, so silent. I know that they have run away, that I'm alone. I listen, and there is the sound of the thing crawling back from the dark towards the grave. I hear it come closer, closer, for me, who is praying uselessly, who is lost, praying for nothing but oblivion, only that, nothingness, an end. The thing is coming back for me. I can close my eyes and see its smile again, those bloodstained fangs, I can hear it crawling, out there in the dark, and I know oblivion is not what is coming my way.

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