

Insanitarium

I had been working for some time at the Dyavol Asylum when the patient was brought in. I was working my way through a local school in order to be a gunsmith - a valued position in the woodlands of Russia. I had chosen to work at the asylum for three reasons. Firstly, it was an excellent paying job, for the work I did; I could easily live comfortably within my limits. Secondly, it was an interesting place for me to study the workings of the human mind, an interest of mine. I had wished to be an alienist eventually, but the teaching is far too impractical for me to partake. Finally, the institute was a mere twenty minutes walk from my lodgings, and only ten minutes from my teacher's house. Thus, I found myself in a marriage of convenience with my job at the institute. It was not that I did not like the job, rather it was more that none of my acquaintances liked the job, and thus shunned me somewhat - quite unconsciously, I'm sure. Often times, I would return to my hostel room to the complaints of my roommate about how I smelled. Some nights it was cleaners, some vomit, some blood, and some nights much, much worse. Eventually, I moved out of the hostel to a rental house across the street that I had all to myself, although it did put a rather increased strain on my pocketbook, and restricted me from indulging in my sweet tooth. Nevertheless, I felt bound to the employ of the asylum; it seemed safe and stable.

It was in the January of the turbulent year of nineteen hundred and seventeen. The Great War was raging in the west, although it did not seem to permeate into our little hamlet. Nor did the political discomfort penetrate our backward backwater, so all was good. I was some six months short of finishing my apprenticeship and starting off on my own. The hour was somewhere around six in the evening, and the sun was quite finished setting at that latitude. Snow fell, or at least rain that wanted to be snow fell, and created what would have been a beautiful layer of white all over the places where the eye met the world. As it was, the precipitate made a thin layer of slushy water and discomforted the bones. My duties were slack and, being in the habit, I had stepped outside onto the regal stone steps of the structure for a slim cigarette rolled out of the last of the tobacco in my pocket.

The sound of the carriage came to me well before the actual sight of the black buggy came around the protruding west corner of the building. I knew immediately that something was amiss as the wheels bounced and skidded on the ground, well out of control. Mist burst out of the flared nostrils of the wide-eyed horses. Something or someone had scared the poor beasts out of their dim wits. Atop the driver's seat were two men; one frantically trying to regain control of the maddened stallions and the other desperately grabbing at the frame of the vehicle in order to stay on. As the carriage passed by me, the driver yelled out for help, his cries barely audible over the clattering of hooves and wheels and the terrified screams of the man riding shotgun, to use an Americanism.

In order for one to understand what happened next, one would have to know the general layout of the asylum. From above, it would appear similar to an 'H' or capital 'I' in the Roman alphabet. The end bars run north south from the main body of the structure. The horse-stable is located on the north end of the east bar. Nestled betwixt both end segments is the entrance, and where I was stood. Across the road from Dyavol is a shallow ditch perhaps six feet across and two and a half feet shallow. Over the ditch is a large field which lies fallow and barren during the harsh winter months, but in the summer and spring is used to grow potatoes and other such roots and tubers. If, early in the morning, one waits patiently near this ground, foxes and other woodland animals can be seen creeping around along the boundaries of the forest that sits beyond the ice field.

Anyway, the horses - with carriage in tow - were headed eastward past me when they caught sight of the stables, and home. Driven by purest fear of some unknown source they strove for home, and turned violently towards the stable. Unfortunately, the slick slush on the road provided no purchase for either the hooves of the horses or the wheels of the vehicle behind. The animals slid, stumbling and falling over in the ice. The calash however was not so fortunate. The vehicle lost its grip when the horses turned, being that it was tall, and possessed of a high center of gravity. With absolutely no control where the control should have been, the vehicle rolled onto one side, and tumbled twice in the icy slush. Both men on the seat were killed we later found out; their necks broken and heads crushed. I was already running for the tumbling vehicle before it had finished its first roll, concerned for the well-being of the conductors, whom I had the gut feeling were already dead. Any person or persons within the carriage would also need my help, as I could see when the cab stopped rolling that the black roof had completely collapsed and splintered due to the force exerted upon it by the cavorting frame.

When I arrived at the scene of the wreck, I could see already that the coachmen were dead; their blood and brains staining the slushy snow red and pink and various shades between, the redness spreading out to meet my feet. It took all of my willpower and experience to keep from retching most horribly. Instead, I turned my attention to the main portion of the accident, and half-crushed carriage, lying upside-down in the shallow, frozen ditch. One of the axles had been severely snapped and rammed through the bottom of the chassis, creating quite a large puncture. From inside the black box came a whimpering and labored breathing. Obviously, someone inside was scared half to death, not that I would blame them having been through the accident that had just occurred.

By now, two orderlies from the hospital were with me at the site of the wreckage; one had possessed the prudence to bring a fire ax and the other a first-aid kit. Although it would have been of no use to most of the people injured. Forthwith, he beset the side of the heavy vehicle with his tool, and I did what I could around the hole punched by the axle with my bare and numbing hands. A little over ten minutes passed before we had a sufficient opening in the side of the carriage, my hole having been of no use except to shout encouragement to the man within and to be able to smell that he had let his bowels loose with the fear of it all. In the confusion and excitement, we had all forgotten that the man in the carriage was, in fact, a man that was to be committed to the aid of the alienists at the hospital.

A thin, almost dead shaft of sunlight passed through the hole we had made and threw itself across the man's face, illuminating his listless gray eyes. I looked in and was startled by the fury behind the dull orbs, and yet, despite all the anger and passion that was more implied than stated, the eyes held no life, no spirit. I look into the man's eyes for a mere instant before he began a slow and rising scream that ended in a piercing shriek that stung the ears and impacted the head. Swiftly, the man leapt up from the place where he had been sitting and hurled himself bodily out of the hole, knocking me backwards and off the carriage.

The man was not at all overly tall, but still somewhat lankier than the average man. His hair was frizzy and stuck out at all angles and the slush caught in the gray fibers did nothing to cause it to droop. The skin on his face and arms was a sickly shade of bluish-gray as if he were severely affected by the cold, although his motions and manner soon dispelled any and all thoughts of sickness. Hanging off his thin frame was a ragged, holed shirt and flopping, outsized trousers. Barefoot, the man set off, leaping over the ditch in one glib motion that was neither wholly a jump nor wholly a stride, but some form of floating dance. Away he fled, across the fields and towards the woods. Within a matter of two minutes or so, he had disappeared into the trees, having covered the distance with alarming speed, especially considering the bitter, bitter, cold. Throughout the whole event, the horses had never taken their eyes off of him and brayed in terror as he passed them.

After three days, we managed to find the man, hiding in the woods and surrounded by the half-eaten cadaver of some animal or another. Upon his return to the facilities at Dyavol, the doctors were baffled at his seeming perfect health, despite having been outside in the harsh cold for several days. Soon thereafter, he was tied up in a strait waistcoat and locked in a cell on the third floor of the hospital, west wing. I finally learned his name to be Adrik Mirov. Adrik, as I was told, had been found some indiscriminate amount of time earlier wandering the streets of a nearby village, quite drunk and carrying a heavy revolver and screaming about needing 'her'. The 'her' in question was never actually discovered, but was later conjectured to be Adrik's wife whom had died nary a day before his being found. I thought no more of Adrik after we had him safely in a padded cell, as was my custom with all new patients; it helps to prevent my becoming attached, should the situation arise. I would most certainly have forgotten about Adrik had he not begun to act bizarrely some time later.

The next full moon after Adrik's commitment, perhaps a week or so, his condition (whilst generally believed to be improving since) took a massive downward spiral. As it was, I had been mopping the hall a mere few meters from his room and was about to leave when there came a dull thumping and whining from the newcomer's chamber. Cautiously, I investigated and peeked in through the bars. The scene within caused me to reel back and bite my tongue to stop from screaming. Adrik was sat by the wall of his room, one hand clawing at his chest, near where about his heart should be. The other hand held the gaunt head by the twisted hair and was driving his head against the wall, again and again and again. The thumping occurred whenever the skull was slammed against the wall; no tears came from his furiously dull eyes, and only hoarse croaks and mutterings about needing her escaped from his throat. His face seemed horrifically gaunt and drawn beyond even the disfiguration of death. Shocked and horrified, I ran downstairs, half-falling and half-walking down the inclines. It took ten minutes for the head doctor of the hospital to come to me, and together we hurried back to Adrik's room. We arrived just in time to hear the sickening crunch of his nose breaking against the wall of the cell. Blood coursed down his weather-beaten face from his nose and an impact cut that ran across one side of his forehead. Slowly, a screech of pain entered Adrik's mutterings and cursing, building in intensity and volume until it chilled the marrow and rattled the bones. By some insane cue, many of the adjacent lunatics joined in his screaming and howling. Nothing is as frightening as the sound of two dozen men with fractured minds wailing to their own demented gods and the moon. The professor stood, dumbstruck by the disturbing event.

"This-this is simply . . . *unnatural*."

A few guttural grunts and gestures sent me to fetch a medical doctor and another orderly. Thankfully, neither was busy and both came quickly, the doctor having examined Adrik after his being found and the orderly having helped me open the carriage to let the frenzied man out of the oblong box of the carriage. No matter. We were quite speedy, but I doubt that we could have been speedy enough. Upon our return, we found Adrik dead and the chief doctor a gibbering, quivering mass of nerves on the floor opposite the poor unfortunate's chamber. The scene inside was monstrous, and we could gain no coherency from the shattered doctor. Adrik lay spread-eagle in the middle of the white floor. Gouts of blood and gobbets of nameless gore were flung all over the wall and roof, as if by some necromantic explosion. He bled from a dozen wounds in his intact skin and far more blood than could have come from his nose stained his garb.

The head doctor of the asylum was later committed, only to beat himself to death within three months. An autopsy was performed on Adrik's body as to determine the cause of his most queer and grotesque death. I myself, rather overly disturbed by what had happened, left my job at the asylum and ended my teachings under the employ of a local baker. There are, however, still nights when I think of what they found in Adrik's body, although no more official records exist, having been destroyed as fakes by the new government who, I fear, was afraid of what such an event might do to their doctrine of godlessness. For when they cut open Adrik's chest and looked upon his insides, they found that his heart was missing.