

MAG – 023 – Schwartzwald

Content Warnings

- Scopophobia
- Body horror
- **Discussions of:** death, paranormal encounter
- **SFX:** high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Twenty Schwartzwald

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement of Albrecht von Closen, regarding a discovered tomb near his estate in the Black Forest. Original statement given as part of a letter to Jonah Magnus, March 31st 1816. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read aloud from the archived witness statement of Albrecht Von Closen)

My Dearest Jonah.

Forgive my writing you this letter so soon after the last. You must think me dreadful for not even giving you a chance at a reply, but I recall that during your visit last spring you mentioned your fascination with the macabre and

strange, and pressed upon me as to whether there were any such lore or legends that I myself were familiar with. Wolfgang writes me that you are acquiring quite the collection, and I feel that I now have something that belongs with it, far more than any of the fairy stories or old maids' tales that I told you before. Put quite simply, I have had a most terrifying encounter. Two encounters, really, I suppose, and I pray to the Lord that I shall have no more. For I honestly believe I should die, from fear if not from violence, were I forced to meet the thing again.

I'm sure you must think me the most dreadful bore, speaking around the thing so, but I feel that to understand all I must begin my tale some time before the apparition itself appeared, with my travels down to Württemberg. My family has a small estate there, in the heart of the Schwarzwald, what you would call the Black Forest, near a small town by the name of Schramberg. This estate belonged to my brother, Henrik, and when he passed away it descended to my nephew Wilhelm. He was barely in his fourteenth year when Henrik died, and his mother had passed while birthing him, so myself and Clara have since made every effort to provide him with guidance and such affection as he may have lost. This felt especially keen as we have ourselves been unable to conceive a child, and so we felt it our duty to teach Wilhelm what we would have impressed upon a son of our own. The profligacy of youth is always a danger, and we felt it our duty to help guide him, where we could, along the path of virtue. We needn't have worried ourselves overly: I have never met so sober and prudent a soul as seems to exist within young Wilhelm. Nonetheless, because of this we have remained close with my nephew through the years, despite the distance. When he took ill this last winter, naturally we made arrangements to travel to his home in the Schwarzwald and offer what comfort we could.

The journey was difficult, as I suppose is to be expected when travelling in winter, but Wilhelm's condition brooked no delays. At first, the worst we had to contend with, coming from Bavaria, was the lack of provision in the inns where we took lodging, as we were told over and over again how rare guests were this time of year. Still, say what you will about the German Confederation – and I know you certainly have a lot of opinions on that, my friend – but it has made travelling a lot quicker and I was certainly grateful for that. When we entered Württemberg, however, our way was much harder. The snow fell thicker in the Schwarzwald, compelling us at last to trade the coach for a sleigh.

You have never known winter in the Black Forest, have you? I know that you will say you have snows and forests in England, but I have seen what you call forests and can tell you that there can be no comparison to the Schwarzwald, its trees covered in a dense canopy of untouched snow. There is such a silence there as I have never encountered anywhere else on earth, with every sound seeming to die the moment it touches that soft white blanket of virgin snow. By day, it is the most beautiful serenity, this calm stillness. But by night, oh my friend, by night it becomes something altogether else. The quiet of the forest, it becomes like the world is holding its breath, waiting to strike, and in those parts where the canopy clears enough that the moon shines down, it casts everything into the most ghostly shades. I lost count of the number of times I swore I saw figures in the shadows, briefly illuminated by the moonlit glow of that frozen land. At one point I even demanded the sleigh be stopped so I could make an examination of the area with a brace of pistols, but of course I found nothing. It was in such a state of mind that we arrived at Wilhelm's estate near Schramberg.

We were greeted by Wilhelm's servants and told of their master's condition. The doctor had, apparently, braved the roads from Schramberg some few days ago and had given what medicine he could. Since then, the servants told us, he had been steadily improving, but was still very weak. I will confess at this news to feeling slightly unnecessary, but upon entering Wilhelm's chamber, the happiness evident upon his face when he saw Clara and myself put all such thoughts to rest.

Wilhelm was in recovery, but I had no intention of travelling back through that silent, icy stillness unless absolutely necessary, and Clara agreed. We made plans to winter there with Wilhelm. There was room enough for us, though our chamber was more modest than what we would have been accustomed to. I will admit that I didn't entirely relish the thought of staying in the Schwarzwald until the spring thaw, but of the courses of action we had at our disposal, it was the one I found to be the most agreeable.

And so began what was to be lengthy sojourn near Schramberg, and truly have I never wished more keenly that I had been able to bring my library with me. I had but a few books with me and Wilhelm, despite his not-inconsiderable intelligence, had even fewer. In the end, we played a lot of cribbage and listened to Clara play many a tune on the pianoforte. My wife has never had a singular voice, but her skills upon the keys more than make up for it. I myself would often take long walks through the surrounding woods during the early afternoon, when the cold was tolerable. Sometimes I would make my way the two miles to neighbouring Schramberg, but more often I would simply choose a direction and stroll into the trees for as long as my fancy held me and then simply follow my own trail of footprints back to what was, for the moment, my home.

It was on one of these walks, some months into our stay, that I came upon that ancient graveyard. It must have been sunken slightly into the ground itself, as all I could see of the grave markers themselves were the merest tip of worn and crumbled granite above the snow. I could not guess at the size of the place, as every few seconds, whichever way I walked, I would spot another small bud of memorial stone blossoming through the frosted earth. I dug some snow from in front of one of the headstones – it had a broken angel atop it, both wings snapped and fallen – but the inscription was far too worn to make out any of the words. I had all but made up my mind to leave, as I knew I had little over an hour before the light began to fail me. As I turned to do so, however, I spied something not far removed among the trees, far larger and more intriguing than the graves I had found thus far.

It stood about five feet proud above the snow, and the stone was far better quality than what I had seen so far. A small mausoleum. The door, once a sturdy iron grate, had long since rusted off of its hinges, leaving only a gaping black aperture that seemed to lead deeper than the dimensions of the mausoleum would allow. Over the top, barely readable, but still most definitely there, was the name ‘Johann von Württemberg’. I was fascinated – I knew my local history well enough and certainly was not aware of any noble of the Württemberg line named Johann. I was sure he had never been a count or a prince. More than that, there had never been, as far as I could recall, any town or settlement near this spot that could have supported a cemetery of such size. So who was Johann von Württemberg, and why had he built a mausoleum here, in the middle of the Schwarzwald, six miles or more from Schramberg?

I had no time to investigate any further, for I realised that I needed to leave immediately if I was to return to my wife and nephew before sundown. I

turned away and followed my path back as quickly as I dared. While I would normally be satisfied forging a new path the next day, something in the thought of that silent tomb drew me back, and I found myself marking trees with my pocket knife, to make my finding my way back the following day that much easier.

I asked Wilhelm that evening over dinner whether he had ever heard of Johann von Württemberg, or was aware of the mausoleum a few north miles from his home. He told me no to both – he rarely spent time in the forest around save for hunting, and the hunting was usually poor in the north, as the trees were too close together to easily navigate with a horse. And he had never heard of this ‘Johann’. I made some inquiries as to where I could look further into the history of the area, but there was no library of a decent size within near distance of Schramberg, and as I mentioned, Wilhelm had little in the way of books, so I let the matter drop.

Nothing else of note occurred that night, and so, making my apologies the next morning, I headed out early towards the old cemetery. I made no secret of my destination, and even offered the opportunity to accompany me to both Wilhelm and Carla, but neither saw the trip as worth the cold hours it would take to reach. So it was alone that I once again made my way to that forgotten place. My marking the trees had proven unnecessary, as there had been no fresh snowfall the previous night, and my footprints from the day before were still clear and very easy to follow.

The mausoleum looked exactly as I had left it, its door still yawning, and the sunlight seemed to make it very little distance over the threshold before darkness once again swallowed it. I had foreseen this, and packed a lantern for the purpose of exploring the place. I was about to light it, when I noticed a

figure watching me from the treeline. Perhaps this place was not so forgotten after all. I had heard tales of brigands using places such as this for assignations, and was suddenly glad I had also thought to pack a pistol and shot. I approached the man, but he didn't move to flee. As I got closer, I saw him in more detail. He was short and squat, wearing an old-fashioned, black frock coat and knee breeches, though his head was shadowed by a wide-brimmed black hat. By his costume, I assumed him to be an old man, perhaps a groundskeeper for this place, or simply a recluse that lived nearby. When I greeted him, though, the voice that answered held no quiver of age within it. He asked me, in low, peasant German whether I was planning to explore the tomb. I said I was, and asked if he was the keeper of this place. He laughed at that, a sharp, guttural exclamation that surprised me, and told me that the crypt I sought was a dangerous place. I asked him what I had to fear from the dead, and he stared at me. I could not see his eyes beneath the brim of his hat, but I could still feel his gaze upon me. He laughed again, and told me, "No, sir, you have nothing to fear from the dead."

At these words I began to back away, ensuring my hand was on my pistol, not taking my eyes off this strange man until I reached the edge of the mausoleum. Only then did I look down to make sure my lantern was where I left it, and when I returned my gaze to the trees, he was gone. To speak plainly I was rather shaken by my encounter, and considered turning back and trying my luck another day, but something within me balked at having all my work and preparation be for naught because of a single farmer who couldn't mind his business. I lit my lantern, and...

JONATHAN SIMS

Martin! Good lord man, if you're going to be staying in the Archives, at least have the decency to put some trousers on!

MARTIN

Oh god, sorry, sorry! I didn't think you were in until later; it's not even seven yet.

JONATHAN SIMS

I've been coming in early in the hopes of leaving this place before dark.

MARTIN

It's been a week and we've seen nothing. Do you really think she's still out there? **JONATHAN SIMS** I have no idea, but I don't intend to take any chances.

MARTIN

(sighs) No, I suppose not...

JONATHAN SIMS

Now, if you'll excuse me.

MARTIN

Righto.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement continues.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read aloud from the archived witness statement of Albrecht Von Closen)

At first I was confused, inside appeared to empty. No monuments or coffins stood inside, and no plaques or sigils adorned the wall. Just a single slab of marble stood in the centre, like an altar. At first I thought that perhaps that was where the coffin should have sat, and someone had simply taken it, but as I walked around I saw what it was concealing. Behind the sharp-angled block was a staircase, descending deep into some unknown subterranean vault.

You will scoff at me, Jonah, when next we meet, I am sure of it. You will laugh at my bravado and call an unthinking adventurer, but the plain fact of it is that I descended those stairs with hardly a qualm. Any fear I may have had was solely focused on the man I had met outside, and I foresaw no danger within the vault itself. So I hoisted my lantern and I descended the stairs.

They were old, of that there is no doubt, but they were not worn, and I would wager that I was the first soul to go down there in at least a century. They descended for some time, until I was quite certain that I was deep within the frozen earth of the Schwarzwald. At last, the steps ended in a short corridor, and I could see the bricks that formed the walls and arched ceiling had crumbled and shifted in places, allowing ingress to the thick roots of the trees above, which coiled and splayed across those parts of the passage in most need of repair. After about a minute of walking, the passage opened out into a large chamber. In the centre stood another block of marble, almost identical to

the one I had seen upstairs, but atop this one was a sealed, stone coffin. The name ‘Johann von Württemberg’ was carved here too, though preserved in much clearer detail without the elements to wear it away.

As I gazed at it, I noticed that the walls of the room did not appear to be stone, as the passage or the mausoleum had been. I walked cautiously closer, until my lantern illuminated it clearly. The walls were covered with bookshelves. Packed in with such a density that it was impossible to tell if there was a real wall behind them or if the books themselves formed the only bulwark against the soil. They were, unfortunately, terribly rotten. The centuries had not been kind to them, and as I tried to move one of them I realised that the damp had, over time, caused them to merge into a single mass of paper and bookcloth. Predictable as this may have been, I still felt the most acute pang of loss. To see such a volume of knowledge, possibly unique in all the world, utterly destroyed, was incredibly painful to me. The actual shelves were formed of the same marble as the two blocks, and seemed to have fared better. As I looked at them, I noticed a small engraving, carved at regular intervals along the edge of each one. It was a small eye, open and staring.

For some reason, it was only at that moment that I began to feel afraid. Of what, I couldn’t tell you, but those small eyes filled me with a dread that I have trouble describing to you now. Certainly I backed away from the bookshelves, and was all set to depart, when my lantern caught on something in the corner of the room. Or more precisely, two things: the first was a small gold coin that glinted on the floor. The second was a book, perhaps fallen from the shelves long ago. It was in far better condition than the others, perhaps due to where it had lain, and I was able to very carefully open it. I was disappointed to see that was not written in German, or even French or Latin, but appeared to be in

Arabic. It seemed to be an illuminated manuscript of sorts, produced by hand and utterly beautiful, though I could not for the life of me have told you what it concerned.

I took the book and the coin to study later, and hastily left the vault, the lingering fear making me feel as though some unseen pursuer might come upon me if I hesitated. I drew my pistol as I left the mausoleum, just in case the strange short man from earlier were waiting to accost me, but there was no sign of anyone outside in that clear daylight.

I hurried back, though I still had many hours before dusk. As I went I noticed that the snow on the trees was beginning to thaw, and took comfort in the knowledge that Clara and myself would likely be able to return to Closen soon. Wilhelm was fully recovered from his fever, and by the time I was at dinner, all traces of my earlier fear had disappeared and I was in excellent spirits.

I retired afterwards to smoke a pipe or two and examine my finds at greater length. The book, though beautiful, stubbornly refused to offer up any clues to its contents. With your permission, I'll bring it over for your expert eyes next time I have the pleasure of your company. The coin, on the other hand, was more interesting. On one side, it had an engraved profile of a sharp-faced young man with long, flowing hair. Over the top ran the letters JW, and at the bottom was the number 1279. If this was the date the coin was produced, then I don't need to tell you how exciting a find this might be. The other side was blank, save for three words, very small and worn, but I could just about read them. They read "Für die Stille".

I was about to retire to bed, when one of the serving girls, Hilda – or was it Helga, I forget – asked me for a moment of my time. I obliged and she said had I been asking about the old graveyard out in the forest? I told yes I had, and

she paled ever so slightly. She told me that she never went near the place, that no-one in the town did.

You see Jonah, apparently there was an old man in Schramberg by the name of Tobias Kohler. He had lived nearly eighty years, and told tales of when he was a child and he his friends would play a game they called “Johann’s Steps”. It was a game of bravery, where you had to creep down as many steps as you could into the tomb of Johann von Württemberg until you were seen, and then run back out as fast as you could. Tobias would never say who or what you were seen by, and always ignored the question. Well, apparently, the parents of these children found out about this game and one of them, the mother of Tobias’ friend Hans Winkler, decided to put an end it. She stormed into the cemetery and, seeing Hans entering the mausoleum for his turn, she ran inside after him and down the steps. None of the children saw what happened, but they all heard the scream. They fled back to town, and when they told of what had happened, the town priest, whose name Tobias does not remember, simply nodded and, gathering up six strong, though deeply fearful, men, they headed out toward the cemetery. None of that party ever spoke of what they saw or found there, but Hans went to live with the Becker family out on their small farm. No-one played “Johann’s Steps” again, and the cemetery was once again left deserted.

The only other thing Tobias remembered was that he had once heard a great uncle refer to Johann von Württemberg as “Ulrich’s bastard”, which, if the date on the coin was correct, may be referring to Ulrich I or Ulrich II, but either way that place’s history must stretch back almost six hundred years.

But now, I feel I have talked around it long enough. I could fill a dozen more pages with preamble and research, yet none of that is why I have written to

you as I have. No, I am writing to you to describe what I saw the last night I stayed at Wilhelm's, the event that led to my and Carla leaving a week earlier than we had planned.

It was three days after I had heard Tobias' story that it happened. I had packed the coin and the book away in a fit of superstition and had decided to take a short stroll as the sun was setting. It was beautiful, the crimsons of the darkening sky danced upon what snow was left, staining it deepest red. I walked around the house, smoking my pipe, until I came upon the tracks I had left when heading towards the old graveyard. As the snow melted it had formed my footprints into packed dirt and ice that almost seemed to glow in the waning daylight. I gazed at them, and froze. I had made two trips to the mausoleum that winter, and sure enough there were two stark sets of footprints heading north. But coming back towards the house, there were three sets of footprints. I felt the presence behind me, and I turned around.

It was the man from the cemetery. His wide brimmed hat was removed and he stared at me. His head was completely bald, and his eyes were missing. They were just empty sockets but they stared at me. He saw me. Believe or dismiss anything else in my letter as you wish Jonah, but I swear to you that I stood face to face with a man with no eyes and he saw me.

I backed away too quickly and slipped, falling hard upon the ground. In a second he was above me, and he smiled. He said something to me, but my mind was aflame with panic and I didn't hear what it was. He reached towards me slowly, insolently, as though he sought to savour this moment but would not be rushed. Then, quite without warning, he stopped. His head snapped up to stare at something, like a gundog that hears a shot. He stood there, hand poised as though in indecision. And then... And then, he vanished, as though he had never been there, and I simply lay upon the ground, winded and afraid.

Night had fallen by the time I finally pulled myself together enough to run back into the house and begin packing. I told Carla we had to leave as soon as possible, though was vague as to the reasons. I still haven't told her why. How do you tell your wife something like that happened to you?

We took the first coach the following morning and haven't stopped. I didn't even realise the coin was missing until I checked my luggage later. Whether to a light-fingered servant or just my own carelessness, it is gone, so I must apologise that I will not be able to share that particular piece of history with you. I must also apologise for the handwriting; I have been committing this to paper as well as can be done on a long coach-journey. Still, I look forward to showing you the book I have acquired, and the revelations you will no doubt glean from it.

Yours in trust, Albrecht

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

Always a treat to find a piece of history tucked into the wrong section of the archive. Still, I can't say I know much about Jonah Magnus or the origins of the Institute, so this is a rather pleasing discovery in some ways. Obviously there isn't much follow-up to be done here, but to slake my own interest I have done a little bit of digging myself, which I include here for completeness sake

I've only found one reference to any 'Johann von Württemberg' in any of the German history reference material we have available. Jan Moira's *Cradle of Germany – Württemberg through the Centuries* mentions rumours that Ulrich I, Count of Württemberg had a second son out of wedlock in 1255. No name is listed, but certain enemies of the count were known to spread rumours that this exiled son was "keeping the company of witches". 1279 was also the year that Ulrich I's successor, Ulrich II, died. This may simply have been coincidence, however, as he was succeeded by his half-brother Eberhard I.

Something else I stumbled across quite by accident during my research was in *Grim Tales*, H.T. Moncreef's exploration of unexplained and macabre deaths in early 19th century Europe. It mentions a death that took place in Schramberg in 1816. The man, one Rudolph Ziegler, was found dead at his home on the outskirts of town. What is interesting is that it says he worked in service on an estate nearby. Shortly after his death, one Wilhelm von Closen was investigated for the crime, as it was discovered the dead man had been stealing jewellery from the estate. It was eventually dropped however, after four doctors attested that the ferocity of the wounds inflicted on Herr Ziegler were, and I quote, "beyond the capability of human violence". It was ruled an animal attack.

I did try to find out what happened to Albrecht von Closen and his book, but I can find no mention of him in any volume of history nor anywhere online.

Perhaps I might find out more if I spent months sifting through the historical statements in the Archives' back rooms, but I simply don't have time to indulge my own curiosity like that.

I have located a genealogy for Wilhelm von Closen, though. He married and had children, and the family remained located in and around Schramberg for almost another century, before one branch emigrated to England in 1908. They had a daughter, Elsa, who went on to marry a man by the name of Michael Keay in 1920. In 1924, they had one daughter, whose name was Mary Keay. This may be simple coincidence, but... it concerns me.

End recording.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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