

# Weird Tales

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# The CHURCH STOVE at RAEBRUDAFISK

by  
G. APPLEBY TERRILL

"We pressed Sturl against the pipe and bound him tightly to it."



I THREW a piece of string into the grate, where presently it began to smolder.

Kobyssu stopped talking and sniffed. Although in appearance he is ferocious, with his little simian forehead, his black bushes of eyebrows, and his big, bristling mustache, he is in reality a fellow of most pleasant, even temperament. But it was plain that the string had disturbed him greatly. His cheek had paled, and I got a glimpse of his eyes as he bent forward swiftly in his chair and leveled them at the hearth. The expression in them was twofold. There was deep anger; there was equally deep horror.

He saw the string, snatched at it, and cast it into the heart of the fire, so that it flamed instantly.

"Pouf!" he said, waving his hands in front of his nose, and now exceedingly white.

I was amazed, but all I said was: "Sorry, I didn't think the smell would worry you."

Kobyssu looked round his café, deserted at this hour of the afternoon. He looked at the neat tables, at the walls, at his desk, rather with the air of a man who wished to assure himself that he was indeed in Wardour Street, London, and nowhere else. Then he faced the fire again, his eyes more normal but very somber.

"That smell of slow-burning hemp—it reminded me of something in Czergona."

"But," said I, "you often tell me that every memory of your native country is dear to you. Only yesterday you quoted some absurd proverb—"

"'To a Czerg the howl of a wolf in his homeland is more comforting than the lowing of his cattle in a foreign land.' It is a true proverb. My

country may be merely what your newspapers say, 'a barren mountain range in mid-Europe,' but I love every memory of it—except one. That is a memory of dreadful things."

There was a table with coffee between our chairs. He filled my cup.

"From any country, however great and refined, one may get a memory of dreadful things," he said, defending Czergona.

I nodded.

"Yet these were strangely dreadful." He drew in his breath with a long hiss, staring broodingly at the sugar-bowl. "The odor of that string recalled to me the church stove at Raebudafisk—so suddenly, so without warning, that I believed I was back in the past, and I felt the feelings of twelve years ago. Ah-h, I had a shock."

"What about this stove? But pardon, Kobysu; perhaps it would pain you to tell me? Perhaps the matter is personal?"

He shook his head.

"I was not directly concerned, I am thankful to say. But the story is too fearful a thing to relate idly over coffee. And you would be sorry if I put it in your mind. You would strive to forget it, and never forget it—no, no, I do not want to tell it."

But my curiosity had risen high. I urged Kobysu and he yielded.

I am punished. I wish I had not heard a word of the tale of the church stove at Raebudafisk, which Kobysu narrated in the fluent English that he has acquired so praiseworthy during recent years.

"**R**AEBRUDAFISK," he said, "is the village I was born in. It is on a hillside, in a fir wood. The church, which is of stone, is a quarter of a mile from it, up the hill. When, as a little boy, I was taken to church by my parents, the stove used to interest me very much. It was not far from where we sat, near the north

wall. It was an upright iron cylinder, about three feet high and two feet in diameter, having a flat top, with a flap at the edge of this, which opened so that coal and wood could be poured in. A stout pipe went from the stove right up to the roof and through it.

"In summer, of course, the stove was not lit. In winter it was attended to by old Ufio Vaang. He would start the fire some two hours before the morning service—and why the stove interested me was this: by the time I entered the church the flat top would be a glowing red, with dazzling sparks appearing suddenly on it when specks of stuff fell there from the ceiling; and the pipe would be red, half-way to the roof, brilliant red at the base, duller the higher you looked—yet hot, you can imagine.

"I was extremely fond of that stove, especially at evening service, when snow and darkness and wolves were outside the church. I yearned to spend the night by it, and thought pastor and people would be much more sensible to do so instead of faring down the hill, all in a bunch for fear of the wolves.

"And I was a young rascal! I got into the habit of flicking bits of string on to the stove, to see them smoke and burst into flame. But a thrashing from my father and another from the pastor cured me of that.

"There was a good draft to that stove—it had some bars low down in front. And old Ufio, though everybody warned him not to, drenched the fuel with oil before lighting it. Stove and pipe were red long before church-time."

Kobysu drank some coffee, and made a considerable pause. I knew he was hoping that some customer would arrive and give him a pretext for breaking off altogether. None came, however, so he shrugged his shoulders and proceeded.

"Old Ufio Vaang was wonderful. He was completely blind. He had

been blind since early manhood. With no difficulty he would find his own way to the church, place his hand on anything he required, and set the stove going. Dangerous work for a blind man, you will think, eh? Yet he was known to be so careful that, despite the matter of oil, people did not fear an accident. Uflio's perception was uncanny. I have noticed the stove fail a trifle toward the end of morning service, the top go from yellow-scarlet to crimson; and Uflio, sensing the change, has risen from his chair and tiptoed down the church, and picked up a small tongs and opened the flap, gripping it at the first attempt; and, lump by lump, not to make a loud noise, he has dropped coal into the red-hot thing, running no more peril of burning himself than would a man with two healthy eyes.

"Well, twelve years ago, when I was a swineherd of twenty, and had not commenced to think of London or even of Warsaw, old Uflio was still tending the stove. Naturally, I had lost my boyish interest in it. I never supposed that I should be interested in it again."

Kobyssu paused once more. When he resumed, such a note of sadness was in his voice that I experienced a chill—a dread, and the first of my regrets at having importuned him for the story. I had not reckoned on a tragedy to a young girl, which I perceived looming.

"Uflio Vaang had a daughter," said he; "Djira. She was sixteen, pretty, bright-natured—oh, delightful. She was the old man's only child, and, as his wife was dead, all in the world he had to care for. I was not in love with Djira. I was thinking of a girl in the next village. But the other young men of Raebudafisk were in love with her, as, unhappily, was a man not young. That was Olk Sturl, whose age was forty, and who was often in prison for stealing or

violence. He was a sullen blackguard ordinarily; when enraged he was the vilest of brutes.

"Of course, his chance to win Djira, the sweet, fresh bud, was hopeless. But I suppose he did not believe this until he waylaid her one afternoon far from our village. Then she must have convinced him. Would she had not, poor child! poor little innocent! The truth infuriated him. He cut her throat—there and then."

"Kobyssu!"

"He did—there and then," said Kobyssu, the deep anger in his eyes again, and his teeth glinting under his mustache. He clenched his fist, and shook it at the floor. "He did," he repeated, "and he did more. That the scent of much blood might bring the wolves, who would hide his crime, he stabbed, he hacked her little pure body—ah-h!" Kobyssu blew out his breath and drummed his fingers agitatedly on his knees.

So this was what the stove, that Djira's father tended, reminded Kobyssu of. As it was fact, not fiction, I did not want to hear anything further. And yet I felt I must know what happened to the villain Sturl. I said so, and added in dismay: "Kobyssu! you don't have capital punishment in Czergona, do you!"

"No," he answered, with a peculiar inflection of his voice. "The wolves did not get Djira," he went on. "We young men of Raebudafisk reached her first. For a boy saw what Sturl did and ran to tell us. He ran for his life, since Sturl had caught sight of him and was chasing him. Sturl could not overtake him, and turned in another direction when he perceived the lad would gain the village.

"Yes, we went to Djira; and then we and the men of the whole countryside sought Sturl. Many among us vowed to slay him when we came upon him, but the pastor and Schoolmaster Wiec, who was the magistrate

of the district, sternly forbade this.

"For over two weeks, in wild weather of sleet and bitter winds, we hunted vainly, scouring woods, climbing to the niches in the mountaintops, and even searching our coal mine, to which we thought the piercing cold might have driven Sturl. We wondered how he obtained food, and at every step we took amid the trees or up the rocks we expected to discover him dead from exposure.

"You can conceive and pity Uflio this while. I consider that his lot was worse than Djira's. She, the one earthly gladness of his blind life; she, the bright, the gentle, whose lips and hands caressed him so lovingly, whose greeting woke him in the morning, whose voice told him the hues of the sky and the promise of the garden; she—held by a foul hand, and slaughtered! That is what he had to think of. Small wonder that for days the torment made him almost insane, and that our womenfolk could give him no consolation.

"The Sunday after the murder he did not go to the church, being too ill and weak. On the following Thursday, however, when there was an evening service, he took up his routine, and the stove was glowing when we entered the church. It was sad indeed to look at Uflio, in his usual seat, but bent and tremulous, with his cheeks so sunken and ghastly that he was scarcely to be recognized. Perhaps it was saddest to notice the coal smears and a tiny gleam of oil on his hands when he raised them. Little Djira had always been most careful to wipe them for him ere service began.

"As I said, for over two weeks we searched for Sturl; and we found not a trace of him. Then, at dawn one morning, our village was roused by a new alarm. The village of Phyamu, four miles away, where they find and store oil, was on fire.

Schoolmaster Wicc wanted every man of us to hurry across and aid the Phyamu people. I had broken my arm two days previously—seeking Sturl. To witness the blaze, however, I set out with the rest. My chum, Vavik Rista, I, and a dozen others, took a path which went by the church. Although it rose steeply we began to cover it at a trot. We had gone a hundred yards past the church when a man, his clothes fluttering in rags, sprang out into the way in front of us, sprang as if from his sleep; and, trying to run before either of his feet was well back on the ground, he seemed to wrench one, and fell.

"He was Sturl. Vavik and several more, darting forward instantly, reached him as he came to his knees, and held him.

"'Lend me a knife,' said Vavik, whom Djira had shown many indications of loving.

"'But two or three cried, 'No, no; what will the pastor and Schoolmaster Wicc say?'

"'Yet there were others who agreed with Vavik, and it was a long time before we could quiet them.

"'And all this while Phyamu is burning, and we are needed!' cried someone. He pointed to the thin, strong ropes many were carrying to the scene of the fire. 'Tie the beast to a tree until we come back.'

"'Wolves,' objected someone else.

"'So much the better!' shouted Vavik.

"'But a voice suggested leaving Sturl in the church, and thither we dragged him.

"'We bound him, meaning to let him lie on the floor. Seeing him gnash with his teeth at the ropes about him, and knowing him to be so supple that he might stretch to, and gnaw through, some, we gagged him very firmly; so that, though he was raging at us, the sounds he made were but as the hiss of the wind

about the church. Then he began to roll and to knock his head against the floor.

"We must make him fast to something," said one of us.

"We stared around the church. There were no pillars, there seemed nothing to lash Sturl to. And then Hrok Nalti, the chairmaker, pointed to the stove.

"Stand him on that. Tie him to the pipe."

"We did so, fetching a ladder and a high bench from the vestry. We pressed Sturl against the pipe and bound him tightly to it; and, in a hard spirit, for which we might be forgiven, we bound him more than was necessary. We swathed and swathed him with rope until nearly all was used. With the last length, since he made an attempt to beat his head against the pipe, we bound that also, passing the rope thrice across his brow and round the pipe, thus forcing the back of his skull immovably against the iron.

"Then we hastened to Phyamu.

"You will have observed that I have said 'we' in all this. It is right that I should, as I was of the party. But the work was not the sort for a man with a fractured arm, so that throughout I was an onlooker. Justifiably or not, I find relief in the knowledge of this.

"We hastened, I said, to Phyamu.

"Keeping together, for no particular reason except that we arrived together late, and telling none that we had captured Sturl, because we were jeered at for our tardiness, we started to roll casks of oil into safety. I helped with one hand, and time was passing, when suddenly Hrok straightened his back and flung out his arms stiffly, uttering a queer, gurgling groan.

"It is Sunday morning!" he said.

"It took us not a second to realize his meaning. We saw Sturl, a figure

of rope, stiff and upright like some strange soldier, on the stove in the church at Ræbrudafisk—Sturl incapable of movement, incapable of sound save such as the wind was making. We saw the church door slowly open and Ufljo, stone-blind Ufljo, appear. We saw him go to the vestry, and emerge with fagots, paper, and coal. We saw him arrange the fuel in the stove, utterly unconscious of Sturl, although his fingers would approach to within a few inches of the wretch's feet whenever he manipulated the flap at the top. We saw him bring a bottle of oil from his pocket, soak the fuel, and light it.

"And then we felt the sensations of Sturl, the terror which seized him as soon as he perceived what was to come, the leap of hope which his heart would give when Ufljo's hand came near him, the frenzy of awful despair which beset him as he strained and strained to loosen a limb or to shift the gag with his tongue. We felt the first slight warmth to the soles of the feet. We felt the pipe against the back of the head, and the slow, sure heating of the pipe. . . We saw and felt all these things instantaneously, as it were; and, far faster than we had run to Phyamu, we ran from it toward our church, all except Vavik, who continued his work."

"No more!" I said, standing up. But Kobysu really was in the past now. He did not hear me; and, instead of walking out of earshot, I remained, dazed.

"I was speedy of leg," said Kobysu, "and, though I could swing only one arm, I led the way with Hrok. We were not certain what time it was; we believed there was no chance of saving Sturl; yet, in case there might be, we tore along. Our earliest glimpse of the church showed us smoke blowing from the chimney. As to Sturl having been discovered—well, presently we made out Ufljo

sitting quietly by Djira's grave, and the pastor and some of the women-folk coming up through the firs from the village with no sign of excitement. Still we ran, ran through the churchyard, ran to the church door. Hrok opened it, and the hot air from inside met me. There was a reek of smoldering hemp, just like that of the string you allowed to smolder, only much more powerful; and following it was another reek——"

"Stop!" I yelled; and I shook Kobyssu roughly by the shoulder. Then I sat down, feeling indubitably faint. "You'd better give me drink, Kobyssu," I said. "I might have stood it in print, but to hear you tell it, you who were a witness——"

"And yet," I said, when I was recovering, "I can't help referring to the matter once—once only, though. Something strikes me as curious. You said that Uffio's perception was uncanny. In that case I consider it strange that a palpitating human being should have been within six

inches and he have no inkling of the fact."

KOBYSSU, who had gone white again toward the finish of the tale, had brought a measure of brandy for himself, and this he drained before replying.

"I will tell you," he said, "a detail that was seen only by Hrok and another, who cut down the—the remains, and by me; for Hrok wiped the face very quickly. . . . For a number of years Sturl had borne on his left cheek a scar, a large, puckered scar that stood out from the rest of the flesh. Sturl's face, when Hrok lowered him, was wrought on by the heat, yet some peculiar marks were still visible on the left cheek. They were little stripes, apparently a mingling of oil and coal dust, such as might have been made by the fingers of, let us say, a blind person who sought, by feeling for the scar, to satisfy himself as to the identity of the man he had discovered on the stove."

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