

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1941

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D. MCILWRAITH, Editor.

H. AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

"When Hildur took the crucifixes from the grave she allowed it to escape."

"And so we have driven a stake into something as dead as a lump of earth."



The Graveyard Horror

By THORP McCLUSKY

A Goose-flesh tale of the Thing that had been Karl Maercklein, and the corpse of a once-lovely girl—and the fearful laughter that floated over the cemetery.

1. Two Strange Deaths

IT WAS in May that Karl Maercklein knotted a steel-yard weight to his ankles and jumped off the covered bridge three miles south of our village, to drown in the swift cold waters of the Little Stony, and it was still the month of May when they buried Jorma Nurmi in the Nurmi family plot, a scant score of feet from the white wooden fence that separates the Dutch Reformed section of our cemetery from the several other Protestant denominations. People whispered that Karl had taken his own life because of old

Sven Nurmi's oath that never would a daughter of his marry a Pennsylvania Dutchman. They said, too, that Jorma had died of a broken heart. And at the time I agreed with them—

I did not attend Jorma's funeral. No Dutchman did, for we all knew well Sven's hatred of us—a hatred whose genesis Sven himself, perhaps, had forgotten. But I called at the house in the morning, reasonably certain that Sven would retire to the kitchen through those hours, that Jorma's Dutch friends might pay her poor still body their last respects. And so it was: Sven had effaced himself.

Chris Petersen met me at the door and ushered me into the house with that stealthy unctuousness which undertakers seem able to put on and take off at will.

"For Lord's sake, Chris," I remember whispering to him as I stepped into the hallway, "don't be so sanctimonious. Sven hasn't any love for me; I feel jumpy enough as it is, coming here."

He looked at me, then. And in that instant an odd chill of bewilderment swept me. For stark horror was in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Chris?" I said, quickly.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Nothing." We were already at the living-room door. Abruptly his gloved hand dropped from my arm. "She's in there."

I went forward, alone, toward the flower-banked casket.

Even in death Jorma Nurmi was beautiful. I had not seen her since Karl Maercklein's funeral, and then only for a moment, and her face had been drawn and wan and her eyes red-rimmed from weeping. But now her girlish beauty was breath-taking. She lay as though lightly asleep, her slender hands crossed above her breasts, her fine-spun hair like gleaming gold upon the satin pillow.

I looked at her for a long moment while my mind thronged with recollections of her: as she had looked running to school, at husking-parties, or waving to me, starry-eyed, riding past my house in Karl Maercklein's decrepit old sedan. Then, with a lump in my throat and a dimness before my eyes, I stepped into the dining-room and spoke briefly, and I hope consolingly, to the distraught mother. My exact words have escaped my memory. I was too saddened by the double tragedy.

I HAD forgotten the horror I had seen lurking in Chris Petersen's eyes. But as I left the house he stopped me.

We were alone on the porch, he stand-

ing beside the rail, I, pausing on the top-most step.

"For God's sake, Chris," I said, then, "tell me what's wrong. You don't look yourself at all."

He licked his lips and nodded.

"It's them," he muttered, almost shamefully. His head jerked toward the living-room windows. "Karl Maercklein, in his grave these two weeks, and Jorma, following him so soon."

I looked into his eyes again, and checked an impulse to smile; for the realization had come to me sharply that whatever had put the fear in this stolid undertaker's soul and the quaver in his voice was a thing not idly to be pooh-poohed or laughed away.

"I don't understand, Chris," I said soberly, after a moment. "You're speaking in riddles."

His gloved fingers reached out and touched my arm. I could feel the tension and the trembling in them.

"There is a strangeness about Jorma's death; I have been talking with Doctor Strom——"

I listened carefully; Doctor Strom is a young and capable general practitioner. Sven Nurmi of course had not had in a Dutchman.

"Kurt, old friend, there is an ancient belief among our northern peoples that the soul of a suicide cannot rest until the evil that caused the unfortunate one to take his life in exorcised—a belief that the suicide's tormented soul must remain near its outraged body, dragging its loved ones into a death that is not death, but an unholy cessation of life and suspension of true death akin to its own."

I looked at him narrowly.

"You're an old fool," I said, after a moment.

He stared at me, his jaws taut.

"Yes?" he said quietly. "Kurt, it is not normal for a young girl to die of a broken heart. I doubt if anyone, anywhere, ever

really died of heartbreak—and I do not say this merely to be cynical. Heartbreak, of course, may cause a person to so neglect himself that death will ensue through secondary causes. But Jorma Nurmi did not die of starvation, or thirst, or infection. She merely died—within two weeks.”

“Oh, fiddle!” I said bluntly. “I’ve heard enough. I’ve got to get along.”

He put his hand on my arm.

“Listen, Kurt. Karl Maercklein’s body lay at the bottom of the Little Stony through a night and half a day before it was found. Yet, on that suicide night, when no one on earth could know that he was already dead, Jorma Nurmi dreamed that he came to her! That dream was so extraordinarily vivid that in the morning she told her mother. Kurt, how in heaven’s name did Jorma Nurmi know—*know* that Karl Maercklein was a suicide—hours before his body was found?”

Despite myself I was impressed. He spoke with such utter conviction. Uneasily, then, I shrugged.

“Telepathy, perhaps,” I suggested. “In the last supreme moment before extinction a man’s mind may perform incredibilities. We know that telepathic visions are recognized phenomena. What more natural than that Karl, in his last instant of life, should wish to communicate with Jorma?”

He shook his head.

“Jorma Nurmi’s dreams of her lover recurred again and again, night after night. Kurt, I have talked with her family and with Doctor Strom. In the last hours she lay like a living, emaciated thing from which the soul has already fled. The pupils of her eyes no longer reacted to light; her motor reflexes were gone. Yet Strom was filling her full of stimulants. Kurt, she was like a machine voluntarily deserted by its driver!”

“Oh, tush,” I said impatiently. “You’re imagining things.”

He stared at me, and there was no more

expression in his blue eyes than in a china doll’s. He laughed, then, harshly.

“If you’ll come to the cemetery with me tonight, Kurt,” he said with macabre significance, “I’ll show you proof!”

Sharply, then, he paused; for two mourners, a middle-aged husband and wife, were slowly coming up the walk. Instantaneously, as an actor clothes body and soul in the spirit of the part he plays, he straightened, became again the mortician. Only the horror in his eyes remained.

“Very well, Chris. I’ll come with you.”

I turned slowly away, bowing to the husband and wife as I passed them on the sun-bathed walk.

2. Karl Maercklein’s Grave

“CHRIS, I think we’re acting like a couple of doddering old fools!”

Our muscles protesting against the chill night air, Chris Petersen and I stood on the narrow gravel road that wanders through the Dutch Reformed section of the cemetery. It was abysmally dark, for there was no moon; all about us we sensed, rather than saw, the slender-shafted tombstones and the grassy mounds beneath which slept the dead. Then the yellow beam from Chris’s flashlight split the gloom, revealed a small, new headstone and a grave which still showed the crude rectangular pattern in which the slabs of grassy topsoil had been carefully removed and replaced. Karl Maercklein’s grave. . . .

Almost resentfully I looked down at the high-shouldered, new grave. Half a dozen moss-filled wire frames and the withered shreds of dead flowers still littered the mound, and I saw that some one had recently placed at the gravehead a small cornucopia of zinnias, asters, and foxglove. The unpleasant thought occurred to me that within a score of years at most I, too, would become a permanent inhabitant of this cemetery. . . .

Chris had turned the flashlight beam down upon the grave and was searching, with careful, painstaking slowness, every inch of the turf. At last he dropped to his knees and commenced parting the withered grass with his left hand.

"Kurt!"

Crouching at his shoulder, I intently scrutinized the circle of turf, located at about the middle of the grave mound, upon which he had focussed the light. But I could see nothing worthy of interest—only a hump of withered grass and the dead, desiccated remnant of the funeral flowers. And—yes—two small holes, close together, barely visible between the blades of grass—holes that looked as if they might have been made by the fat night-crawlers boys use for bait.

Chris had put his left hand on my arm.

"See there, Kurt?" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Those little holes? I noticed them days ago. And the old legends say——"

I straightened stiffly.

"You're an idiot," I said impatiently. "Those holes were made by earthworms, and you know it. Come—it's getting chilly."

Abruptly he snapped off the flashlight, and the sudden, swooping rush of darkness affected me far more unpleasantly than all his vague, wild allusions. In the black gloom I heard him breathing heavily. Then, after a moment, as we turned slowly from the grave, his words came to me.

"Kurt, I can feel it: before many days have passed you will wish with all your heart that you had helped me cleanse Karl Maercklein's grave—tonight."

3. *The Wings of Death*

DURING the days immediately ensuing, I found it oddly difficult to efface from my mind the memory of Chris's vague hints. He had seemed so con-

vinced, and withal so sane, that I caught myself, more frequently than I would have believed, wondering if it were not barely within the realm of possibility that obscure phenomena, such as that at which he hinted, phenomena of a half-occult, half-physical nature, might not really be. Un- easily I recalled the legends, some of which were even affirmed by the mediæval church, legends which denied heaven, hell, and even limbo—that shadowy realm many students of the occult believe really exists—to the soul of a suicide. And yet I confess that I thought of these things indulgently, and, as the days passed, with greater and greater infrequency.

And then, early one evening, Wilfrid Andersen called me to his home. Hildur, his wife, was ill. And as I climbed into my car and threw my bag on the seat beside me I abruptly remembered, with an odd, uncomfortable start, that Jorma Nurmi and Hildur Andersen had been sisters—Hildur only a little more than a year older than the dead girl.

Wilfrid met me at his front door and ushered me into his house. We shook hands pleasantly; he had none of old Sven Nurmi's prejudices against the Dutch. I found Hildur lying on a couch in the parlor. She smiled at me faintly when I entered the room. After a few unimportant words Wilfrid left us alone.

Hildur's appearance was a distinct shock to me. The Nurmi's are normally a healthy family; until Jorma's illness the girls—tall, straight-limbed, high-breasted blonds—had known very little sickness. But Hildur! When last I had seen her she had weighed a little over one hundred and twenty pounds, every ounce of her firm, radiant flesh. And now she looked little more than a bag of bones. The skin was drawn so tightly over her temples that it looked almost transparent; the contours of her skull and cheekbones were knife-sharp.

I examined her thoroughly, questioned

her with particular care about her diet. At the conclusion of my examination I was completely puzzled. For the girl was organically sound, and there was no trace of disease in her. Her eyes were slightly glazed.

I attempted my most jovial attitude.

"There, there, Hildur!" I said reproachfully. "A big girl like you lying about the house! You should get a grip on yourself. Try and forget what has happened and put your thoughts on more pleasant things. You've had a bad time, I know, but there's nothing really wrong with you."

She smiled at me, a smile of sheer amusement.

"No, Doctor Kurt," she said quietly. "There is nothing really wrong with me. Within a few days I shall be dead; but you are right, there is nothing really wrong with me——"

"Dead?" I ejaculated stupidly.

For an instant the glaze seemed to lift from her eyes as she looked at me. The amused smile on her lips deepened.

"Dead," she repeated softly. "And unutterably happy. And it will not be long before Wilfrid follows me. Jorma was my favorite sister. . . ."

She turned her face to the wall.

"Practical people like you, Doctor Kurt, are sometimes so terribly stupid. Go away now, and let me sleep and dream——"

Her voice trailed off in silence.

4. *To Drive a Stake*

"AND that's the gist of it, Chris. I've left medicines with Wilfrid, and Hildur seems vaguely amused but perfectly willing to take them, and in my heart I know that they won't do her any good. The girl wants to die, Chris. And God knows what ails her."

I had gone straight from the Andersen's

to Chris Petersen's house, and now we were seated in the undertaker's office-parlor, with its rubber plants and marble-topped table and straight-backed, formal chairs.

Chris put his hands on his bony knees and stared at me.

"I warned you, Kurt," he said gravely. "Something damnable is beginning here in our village, or, rather, began with Karl Maercklein's suicide. What it is we know only vaguely; we have no precedent to study, only legend. But we do know that this phenomenon must be stopped, and as speedily as possible. Obviously, Karl Maercklein's soul is not at rest. Obviously, too, Karl Maercklein's soul must be freed from the bonds which force it to remain near the living before we can hope to end this chain of death."

There was humility in me now, as I listened to the middle-aged mortician. For with the failure of my medical knowledge had come bewilderment.

"Yes," I asked uncertainly, "and how are we to know of what those bonds consist?"

He shook his head impatiently.

"They can consist only of flesh and blood—of the flesh and blood from which his soul was separated before the proper time. Karl Maercklein's suicide was, in one way, distinctly peculiar. His body was unmutilated. The old legends speak of stakes through the heart, and of burnings. We must render Karl Maercklein's body uninhabitable."

"And Jorma Nurmi's——" I whispered.

"Yes. And Jorma Nurmi's."

An oppressive silence fell between us. My gaze was fixed, with a kind of dull fascination, on a worn spot at a corner of the rug. I spoke, then, uneasily.

"Neither the Maercklein's nor Sven Nurmi would permit any tampering with those graves. There is the possibility that

we may be caught. I have no desire to be sentenced to state's prison as a ghoul!"

He looked at me for a moment. A curious stubborn opacity was deepening in his blue eyes.

"Gustav Wendt, the caretaker, lives in the small lodge behind the cemetery chapel. To the best of my knowledge he has never in his life refused a free drink of whiskey. And I doubt if any spooners would wish to visit the cemetery late at night—at this time of year. The graves are new graves; we could restore them to their present appearance without difficulty."

I stared at the worn spot in the rug.

"We would require another man."

"Yes. I have talked with Wilfrid Andersen. He is willing to help."

That calm statement completely surprised me.

"Wilfrid said nothing to me today," I observed, puzzled.

Chris nodded. "I told him of your—doubt. But he believes as I believe. He has kept me informed, each day, of Hildur's condition. We have only waited as long as we have in order to be sure."

Suddenly, then, he stood up, went to his small spinet desk, and extracted a long flat envelope which apparently contained several angular metallic objects.

"Come," he said, quietly.

Without comment he slipped the envelope into his breast pocket.

5. Hatching a Conspiracy

AS WE left the house and walked down the driveway toward the garden I could not refrain from asking Chris what was in the envelope he had just placed in his pocket. His answer was laconic.

"Crucifixes."

"Crucifixes!" I exclaimed. "But—we aren't Roman Catholics, Chris; neither were Jorma and Karl."

He put his hand earnestly on my arm.

"We're going into this thing almost blindly, Kurt. And it is possible, as you imply, that these crucifixes may have no efficacy. But we would be fools indeed if we left any weapons untested. And as for our not being Roman Catholics—the significance of the Cross extends far beyond the confines of Catholicism. Sometimes I wonder, Kurt, if we Protestants are not unwise in attaching so little importance to the great symbols of religion. But—here we are."

The toolhouse loomed before us, a blacker blotch against the night. Chris disappeared within. I heard the sodden clanking of metal against wood, and then he reappeared, his arms burdened with a folded tarpaulin, a spade, a shovel, a crowbar, and two short stakes, each about ten inches long and sharpened at one end to a rapier point; stakes that had apparently been sawed from a hardwood shovel handle.

Methodically, then, he distributed those grim tools between us, and we walked down the driveway to his car, where we put them on the floor in the rear. Climbing into the car, we drove to Wilfrid Andersen's.

Wilfrid seemed unsurprised to see me. He gripped my hand for a moment, hard, as we entered the house, but he said nothing. We went into the parlor and sat down. The couch upon which Hildur had lain, earlier in the evening, was unoccupied.

"I carried her upstairs and put her to bed," Wilfrid said, in answer to our unspoken question.

"You gave her the sedative tablets?" I asked.

Chris was standing beside the parlor table, his lean hands sharply outlined in the bright light from the table lamp. He had ripped open the envelope, and on the table top lay a motley assortment of small

crucifixes. I was wondering, idly, how and where he had obtained them.

"Wilfrid," he said then, slowly, "take these crucifixes upstairs and fasten them on the window-shades. Pin one on Hildur's nightdress, and tie one to the door-knob. See that the windows are securely closed, and the door locked."

With a curious, childish reverence Wilfrid Andersen took up the crucifixes and left the room. We waited, standing in silence in the center of that old-fashioned parlor.

From overhead we heard the soft thud of a closing window, then the creaking of the stairs beneath Wilfrid's descending footsteps.

"She is sound asleep."

Together we three left the house. Outside we paused on the board walk for a moment while Chris tersely outlined what we should do.

"Wilfrid, in the side pocket of my car are three pints of whiskey. Take that whiskey, spill some of it on your clothes and rinse your mouth with an ounce or so. Doctor Kurt will give you something to put in Gustav's drink; be very careful that he doesn't detect you. We will wait an hour before we follow, and we will not drive into the cemetery; your job is merely to keep Gustav occupied. If possible, drug him, but if you cannot give him the drug do the next best thing: get him full of liquor. When we have—finished—we will walk to my car and sound the horn, very briefly, at five-minute intervals. Do you understand?"

Very gravely, then, Wilfrid looked at us.

"Yes, I understand," he said, in a low, firm voice. "I will do exactly as you say."

Chris rested his hand for a moment on the young man's arm.

"Wilfrid, if any spooners drive up to the chapel gate, keep them from entering the cemetery. Only God and we three must ever know what happens tonight."

6. *A Corpse Exhumed*

MIDNIGHT was near when Chris, after a wait that had seemed an eternity, started the motor of his car and sent us gliding quietly through the streets of the sleeping village. The distance was not great; presently we were passing the long wrought-iron fence behind which the closely packed tombstones nestled amid somber, conventionally trimmed evergreens. We drove past the arched gateway, past the small sandstone chapel and the caretaker's lodge. Two rectangles of yellow light stared at us through drawn shades, and Wilfrid Andersen's five-year-old sedan stood black and still beside the road, close against the tall iron fence.

Softly Chris's car slipped along the narrow gravel road, one hundred, two hundred yards. Carefully, then, Chris drove the car off the road and into the underbrush, shut off the motor and lights. In the thick gloom we climbed from the car and fumbled in the tonneau for the grisly implements we had brought. Silently, cautiously, we felt our way across the road and along the wrought-iron fence until we came to the square sandstone pillar that marked its termination. Here, running back from the road, began a three-strand barbed-wire fence that bounded this side of the cemetery. Stooping between the strands, we found ourselves on hallowed ground. †

Here darkness, palpable, almost opaque, lay like a fluid blanket on the smoothly cropped grass and the unpleasantly suggestive little mounds across which we stumbled. The night was chill, yet there was no tang in the air; I knew that before many hours had passed there would be dank, drizzling rain. We dared not use Chris's flashlight.

It was not far to the inner, picket fence that encloses the Dutch Reformed section of the cemetery. Sliding our macabre tools

under the fence, we climbed over the breast-high barrier.

Abruptly, Chris stopped. I sensed that he was feeling about for the bits of wire and moss that would mark Karl Maercklein's grave. Presently he grunted.

"All right, Kurt. We'll spread the tarpaulin out here. We'll have to be careful about taking up the sod—the grave must look untouched. I think that it will be safe to risk the light when we replace the sod; it will be very late by then."

We began to dig—

It was slow, grisly toil. By the sense of touch alone we cut away the top sod and piled it carefully on a corner of the tarpaulin.

Then with spade and shovel we attacked the still loosely packed earth and sand beneath. But although we worked doggedly, without pause, while the sweat ran down our backs and the pile of loose earth on the tarpaulin grew waist-high, two hours had passed before Chris's shovel grated against the steel vault enclosing the coffin. Then black moments elapsed while we scraped the smooth metal clean.

A small circle of ruby light, hardly more than the dullest glow, touched the earth-encrusted steel. We were now six feet beneath the lip of the grave, and that dim light could not be seen except by someone in the immediate vicinity. Chris had covered the flashlight lens with crimson tissue paper. He was on his knees, fumbling with the clamps that sealed the vault—

Six clamps, and the lid of the vault lay loosely above the coffin. Using crowbar and spade we pried it up, lifted it from the grave and stood it beside the mound of earth. The gray, cloth-covered coffin, as yet untouched by water seepage, lay revealed, pallidly red beneath the flashlight's glow.

With professional skill, though with hands that violently trembled, Chris released the silver clamps that locked the

coffin lid in place. Carefully he tilted it back. . . . We were kneeling precariously on the edges of the coffin and the vault, at opposite ends of the grave. Between us, beneath our eyes, lay the body of Karl Maercklein.

The body lay exactly as it had lain after Chris had prepared it for burial. The hands were folded on the breast, the eyes were closed. There was a quarter-inch growth of beard on the face, and the nails had grown considerably. The cheeks were sunken, but the throat was bloated, and on the forehead the flesh had turned dark. The clothing about the torso was tight-stretched, and the corpse exuded a noticeable odor of disinfectant, mingled with the unmistakable miasma of decay.

I looked at Karl Maercklein's body, barely visible in the reddish glow from Chris's darkened flashlight, and felt my flesh crawl.

"Chris," I whispered, then, "we've made a terrible, terrible mistake! That body is completely dead; it has already begun to decompose. We've let our crazy thoughts run away with us; we've tried to inject the supernatural into normal, human death! God! let's refill the grave and leave him in peace!"

Through minutes that dragged leadenly Chris crouched there above the head of the casket, while the dank night silence sent chill after chill of fear and horror sweeping my body. Then his voice came to me in a strange, hoarse whisper.

"Yes—yes! But I must first be sure—"

I saw his right hand fumble within his coat, emerge clutching a small scalpel. The hand moved downward, the scalpel sheared through the flesh above a rotting artery. Then Chris's fingers pressed gently against the dead flesh.

From the small incision oozed a thin trickle of embalming fluid.

"Dead," he whispered, then. "Utterly dead. I must have been mad."

7. *Hildur*

FORTY minutes later, our muscles stiff and sore, our nerves shrieking from the strain they had undergone, we tamped the last square of sod down on Karl Maercklein's grave and replaced the wire frames that had once held floral wreaths and the cornucopia of withering flowers. Dead tired, moving like automatons, we folded the tarpaulin and stood for a long moment in the darkness, listening intently. Then, for an instant, Chris flashed the beam from the light, brilliant now that he had removed the obscuring red paper, across the grave, snapped off the torch.

"It will rain before many hours," he muttered. "Thank God for that!"

Stumbling wearily, we turned away. Minutes that seemed years later we climbed into Chris's car and returned over the gravel road past the caretaker's lodge. The twin lights still gleamed from the windows, and Wilfrid Andersen's car still stood unobtrusively beside the road. We drove on a hundred yards and sounded the horn. In a few minutes we heard the whir of Wilfrid's starter and the clashing of gears. We drove on, then, and Wilfrid followed us to his house.

Without speaking we three entered. Within the house Wilfrid left us. "Hildur," he had said, thickly. . . .

Like dream sounds I heard his footsteps ascending the stairs. And then, splitting the quiet, came his agonized scream!

For an instant Chris and I stared at each other. Then we plunged up the narrow stairs.

The door to Hildur's room stood open, and from that gaping portal streamed a rectangle of brilliant light. Like men amok we burst into the room.

Wilfrid Andersen stood in the center of the hooked rug beside the bed, his young figure tense, his haggard eyes riveted on the lax, still body of his wife,

crumpled there among the disheveled bed-coverings like a bit of incredible wax-works.

God! When I had visited her earlier in the evening she had been thin, emaciated almost beyond belief, but now she was literally unrecognizable. She was a skeleton over which thin parchment had been stretched; her right hand, hanging limply over the side of the bed, seemed almost transparent. I have seen tubercular patients hovering at death's very door, but never before nor since have I seen a body so emaciated that still held life.

For she was alive. There was still pulse in her, though faint as the flickering of a guttering candle, and I knew that only an immediate transfusion would save her life.

8. *The Three Crucifixes*

GRAY dawn was in the room before I dared, even for a moment, to turn from Hildur's side. I was dog-tired, and my nerves were like old rubber—the resilience had gone from them. I had the feeling that if someone were to fire off a revolver beside my car, or if Satan himself were to step into the room, I would not start.

The room was still with a ghastly quietude. Wilfrid, his face pale from loss of blood, had not uttered a word since I drew the tubing from his arm and banded the incision. Chris Petersen stood before the window, his back to the room, gazing out into the lightening grayness. He was pondering, I knew; he had been pondering thus for a long time. . . .

And then he turned, and his brows narrowed as he gazed about the room.

"I was right, Kurt," he muttered slowly. "We should have done to Karl Maercklein's body as the old legends say; we should have severed the links that still enchain his soul. I was deceived by the fact

that his body had begun to decompose. It was contrary to the tales I had heard. But now we have additional proof. This—this death that reached for Hildur last night was no ailment you will find in your medical books, Kurt. We have it all to do over again.”

I lifted my right hand and stared for a moment at the unfamiliar blisters that had formed at the base of my fingers, then let the hand drop to my side again.

“Yes, Chris,” I said tonelessly. “We have it all to do over again.”

He took a step toward me. The puzzled frown still creased his forehead.

“I had hoped—the crucifixes——” he said uncertainly. Then he glanced at Hildur’s thin, exhausted form.

A small, triangular rent showed in the pale yellow of her nightdress. She had torn the crucifix from her breast in the night—

My eyes followed Chris’s to the door. The crucifix that Wilfrid had tied to the door-knob still hung there at the end of its bit of string. And then I heard Chris’s hoarse exclamation as he swiftly stooped at the foot of the bed and retrieved a second crucifix, attached to a tattered fragment of cloth.

“She threw it from her!” he whispered. “Even in her drugged slumber, she threw it from her! But there was a crucifix at the window!”

He peered for an instant uncomprehendingly at the shade. Then his gaze lifted, focussed on the roller at the top of the window. Swiftly he strode over, grasped the ringed cord and drew the shade down. Still pinned to the shade was the third crucifix.

“I understand,” he muttered, then. “I understand——”

I, too, understood. Hildur had risen from her bed and gone to the window, perhaps with the hell-induced impulse of ripping away the crucifix. But the shade

had pulled away from her weakened hands, winding up on the roller.

And then Chris jerked the cord, releasing the shade. It ran half up and stopped abruptly. The crucifix, winding around the roller, had increased the bulk of the shade so that it would roll up no further.

I could see the shape of the crucifix plainly, where it had stopped the roller—a small, angular, *inverted* bulge within the shade!

Silently, then, Chris gathered together the crucifixes and went out of the house. And I knew that he was going to put them on the graves.

9. *The Thing in the Grave*

THE long day was gone, and again it was close upon midnight when, for the second time, we stood in the blackness beside Karl Maercklein’s grave and arranged our grisly tools. The chill rain that we had been expecting had already begun—occasional flurries of fine, sleet-like moisture struck into our faces and settled mistily upon our clothing. Small chance, we told ourselves, that spooners would come near the cemetery tonight.

Swiftly Chris removed the two crucifixes from the head and foot of Karl Maercklein’s grave and put them carefully within his coat.

Despite the unaccustomed lameness in our muscles we worked much faster, once we began to dig, than we had labored twenty-four hours ago. For we were in less fear of interruption, and, too, the earth through which we had already dug was now broken up and easier to handle. In less than an hour Karl Maercklein’s casket lay open, and Karl Maercklein’s face stared upward at us, ghastly beneath the dull reddish beam from Chris’s shaded flashlight.

And ghastly, too, for another reason—a reason that sent the ice coursing through

my veins like needles of fire, a reason that sucked the strength from my crouching legs and clutching hands and swirled my brain with a temporary vertigo that almost plunged me, a gibbering madman, head foremost upon the corpse!

For Karl Maercklein's face had changed! The reddened cheeks were no longer sunken, and the bloating had gone from the throat. And the beard was only slightly noticeable, about as it had been, Chris told me afterward, when first he saw the body. The discoloration was no longer apparent on the forehead. The torso was normal, and the nails were once more short!

And, although the odor of disinfectant remained, striking upward at us from the coffin, that other, horrible miasma of decay had disappeared!

And then I heard Chris's voice, wheezing, whispering:

"Dear God, Kurt, it is as though tonight those crucifixes kept the hellish life that inhabits this corpse from escaping—the hellish life that was elsewhere last night! For the thing has come back, and driven from itself all trace of decomposition! God, Kurt—by day it rots and by night it roams about and rejuvenates itself!"

For an instant his hand touched the pocket in which rested the small crucifixes he had picked up from the grave before we began to dig. And I knew that the thing was alive. The crucifixes had bound it to its tomb!

Uncertainly Chris stood up on the metal edge of the vault, fumbled with his right hand about the lip of the grave. When again he crouched down he held in that hand one of the thick hardwood stakes—a stake that he had sharpened to a needle point.

"All right, Kurt," he said then, his voice grim. "Hold this over his heart, and hold it steadily."

He handed me the stake. And in that hideous moment I was conscious of myself as two entities—I was myself living a nightmare, and I was myself looking on, watching my own dream as one watches a play. But I placed the stake against the breast of the corpse, moving it about until it was between the false ribs, tilting it so that it would strike upward into the heart. I had to lean forward, had to place my left hand on the edge of the vault to retain my balance. The smooth steel was cold against my flesh.

Chris lifted the crowbar. He had jammed the flashlight into a corner of the grave; beneath its red rays we looked like demons from one of Doré's hells.

And then, like lightning searing into my brain, I heard the soundless pleadings of the thing! And the words that seemed to spring alive within my brain—thought-words that never passed mortal lips—were in the voice of Karl Maercklein!

I saw the crowbar tremble, saw Chris's lips twist momentarily, and I knew that he had heard the thing. And then the crowbar swung downward through a clumsy arc, and the stake sank half its length into the corpse, and bright, red blood, mingled with a quantity of embalming-fluid, jetted upon my hands from the wound. And again the crowbar lifted and fell, and now the stake had sunk its length into the corpse, to grate against the floor of the casket.

I looked at the thing, at the blood that spurted from the great wound. And I looked at its face, and a cry burst from my lips—a cry that I would not have recognized as any human sound.

The discoloration had once again overspread its face. Once again the cheeks were sunken, and the bloating had returned to the throat. The nails, springing from hands now bathed with fresh blood, had abruptly grown long, and the torso was swollen. A quarter-inch growth of

beard showed on the jaws; the sickening odor of decay struck into my nostrils.

And yet, crouching there six feet beneath the surface of the earth, surrounded by and bathed in horror, I felt suddenly at peace. For as though from an incredible distance I seemed to hear Karl Maercklein's voice returning to me, thanking me for what I had done, and urging me on—to do more. . . .

10. *The Voices in the Cemetery*

WORKING with painstaking care beneath brief, eerie gleams from Chris's flashlight, we restored Karl Maercklein's grave as perfectly as we could to a semblance of undisturbed naturalness. The brief gusts of rain were coming with increasing frequency, and our hearts were almost light as we replaced the rectangles of sod and the shriveled remnants of floral wreaths and sprays and the cornucopia of fresh flowers. And yet we knew that the more terrible portion of our task remained undone. We must perform for Jorma Nurmi that which we had already accomplished for her sweetheart, and the time was short. Dawn was but two hours away.

Hurriedly we gathered together our soil-encrusted tools, paused for a last brief inspection of the grave. Then, stumbling uncertainly, dragging our leaden limbs across the acres of billowing grave mounds, we made our way from the Dutch Reformed portion of the cemetery to the Nurmi plot. Here, in the utter darkness, we halted.

I could hear Chris's breathing as he moved about, trying to locate Jorma's grave. And then, with unexpected, nerve-shriveling abruptness, came his startled oath! Simultaneously the light sprang on, illuminating redly the ground at his feet.

The body of Hildur Andersen lay there across Jorma Nurmi's flower-strewn grave!

I exclaimed something, hoarsely. And then I moved forward, dropped to my knees beside that quiet form. Mechanically, my hands went about their work. Vaguely I realized that there was no discernible pulse, that Hildur's body was cold—

"She is dead, Chris."

He sucked in his breath, sharply. When he spoke, his words were grim and bleak.

"The thing that Karl Maercklein had made of Jorma called—and with her last strength she came. But why? Ah—to remove the crucifixes from the grave!"

He loomed over the grave, and I saw that no crucifix remained upon the flower-strewn mound. Hildur Andersen had hurled them into the dark.

Chris was looking down at the grave.

"It has left Jorma's body," he muttered. "But I think that it is near. It must know of what we are doing, and it must be afraid."

He broke off abruptly, seemed almost to be listening. And I, too, listened, though for what tangible sound I had not the slightest conception. And yet I heard it, or, rather, sensed it, there in the night about us, steeping the night with unclean, unhuman, macabre exultation. And the horror was that the thing was Jorma, a hellish distortion of the Jorma I had known. And it was as though a second, vaguer individuality shadowed the invisible presence that was Jorma; I also seemed to know that Hildur was there, anxiously questioning.

"God, Chris!" I mumbled, then. "I can feel things—watching us!"

For what seemed an eternity he stood there. . . .

"Yes," he said at last, slowly. "Jorma is watching. And Hildur. And I can feel the strength and the uncleanliness in Jorma, but Hildur seems somehow anxious—and lost. I wonder—"

I peered into the blackness, as though by straining my eyes I could glimpse the intangible, the invisible. I sensed, then, that in the darkness he had stooped, had lifted, gently, Hildur Andersen's body from Jorma's grave and put it as gently down. For time flew, that night, on sable wings, and there was much that remained undone.

We began to dig, first putting aside the scarcely wilted floral pieces and removing the blocks of sod with meticulous care. The sandy soil beneath the thin blanket of grass was still loose, and we dug now with gruesome, mindless efficiency—it was as though our muscles had gradually learned, of themselves, how to dig in the dark.

I have a fragmentary recollection of removing my jacket and placing it over Hildur's still form. The intermittent mistiness had turned into a chill, fine rain.

And as we worked, the odd conviction returned to me, again and again, that Jorma Nurmi's spirit, somehow no longer the sweet clean soul I had known, but a soul distorted as though seen in reflection in some enchanted mirror that left it a gargoylish thing of alien evil, hovered above us both and laughed as we dug.

"God, Chris," I remember saying, as we neared the lid of the vault, "I don't think that whatever—whatever is hovering above us, watching us—has the least fear of what we're going to do. It seems—*amused!*"

Chris did not reply. For at that moment the spade and shovel grated against the smooth steel lid of the vault, and there was the work of unclamping the lid and lifting it aside, of releasing the silver clamps within the vault and opening the white satin coffin—

ONCE again I gazed upon the sweet young face I had known and loved, weird now beneath the reddish glow from Chris's shrouded flashlight, quietly calm

and serene amid the awful accouterments of death. I was grateful, in that moment, that the grave had not yet had time to progress far in its terrible task of dissolution; Jorma's face, except for a slight puffiness beneath the eyes and the jawbone, was as beautiful as in life. And yet—her fine blond hair lay upon a small satin pillow, and I steadied my precariously poised body against a six-foot wall of cold, damp earth. And already a thin film of rain covered her face, her virgin-white dress, her folded hands—

"The stake," Chris said, his voice horribly calm, and as calmly my right hand reached out, grasped the thick section of shovel handle he had sharpened to a rapier-point. I saw the crowbar swing up.

The crowbar fell heavily, lifted again, and beneath my hand the stake had settled three inches into the still young breast. And as I felt it move downward between my fingers I shuddered, for it had met with more resistance than had that other, driven into Karl Maercklein's rotting body. And yet no spurt of blood welled through the torn, indented dress!

Again and again the crowbar fell, and with the third blow I could feel the tip of the stake root itself firmly against the bed of the casket.

Yet about the wound had appeared no blood—only a slight oozing of embalming-fluid. No fantastic change had taken place in the corpse; it lay there stilly beneath our eyes, unchanged, the body of one dead. I wiped my brow.

Chris was looking down at the corpse.

"Strange!" he muttered. I had thought—and yet—we have done what we did to Karl, and it is nearly dawn—"

He commenced tilting the satin-lined lid over the corpse.

And then, out of the darkness, it struck at us—the thing's laughter, fiendish, triumphant, exultant—the soundless laughter of an entity we could neither see nor feel

nor hear, yet laughter none the less real. And sharply Chris paused, and his words came across the casket lid to me—deliberate, measured, assured.

"It laughed too soon, Kurt," he said quietly. "It believed that the danger had passed, and it could not longer restrain itself—"

"It was not in the corpse, Kurt. When Hildur took the crucifixes from the grave she allowed it to escape. And so we have driven a stake into something as dead as a lump of earth. But—we freed Karl Maercklein because the thing was in him when we struck. Very well; we will wait until dawn!"

For an instant there was silence. More than silence, for even the soundless laughter of the evil that had warped and wound itself about and amid the soul of Jorma Nurmi had suddenly ceased. And I caught myself looking upward at the black sky, wondering when would come the dawn.

"It will not be long," Chris muttered grimly. "Perhaps an hour. We must wait; it is the only chance left to us. We know less about this horror than little children know about metaphysics. Yet we know that dimly, vaguely, the legends follow the truth."

Prosaically, in that moment I felt pitifully grateful that the rain was coming down with greater and greater violence, and that the Nurmi plot lay behind a thin blanketing of spruces. And we would be watchful—after the dawn—

WE climbed from the open grave, then, and settled down grimly to waiting, to waiting that seemed endless. The presences—Jorma's vindictive, and Hildur's vague and bewildered—had seemingly gone. And yet I was apprehensive.

And then, suddenly, I felt Chris, huddled close beside me on a corner of the drenched tarpaulin, tense.

"Shh!"

A moment passed. And then I heard the sounds, the sodden, stumbling hurrying sounds. Someone was running toward us, through the blackness amid the graves.

"God!" My fist tightened around the shovel handle as I stood erect. If that person came closer—if we were discovered! I clubbed the shovel handle between my hands, with the iron bit toward me and the smooth wood extended. Perhaps, if the man stumbled upon us, one sharp blow would stun him before he recognized us. I must not strike too hard—

And then my hands loosed their grip, and the shovel dropped unheeded to the dank earth. For the man was mumbling, babbling crazily to himself, and I had recognized his voice.

The man was Wilfrid Andersen!

He was stumbling his way to the body of his wife, crouching above her.

"Wilfrid!" The dull red glow of Chris's flashlight stabbed down into the upturned face. He was stroking her brow, her temples!

"Wilfrid!" It was Chris speaking, soothingly, trying to calm the man. "She's dead, Wilfrid."

"Dead?"

He turned toward us slowly.

"Dead?"

Beads of moisture gleamed redly on his haggard face.

"She is not dead!"

His voice was full of a wild, insane conviction.

"Jorma came to me, there in Gustav's lodge, and told me that she was here, and what I must do in order to regain her!"

His lips curled back from his teeth, and his muscles, as he crouched there, tightened.

"Fill up that grave, you damned ghouls! Fill up that grave, or I'll kill you both, here and now, with my bare hands!"

He was crouching like an animal at bay, crouching above the still body of his wife. Young, powerful, maddened with grief, facing us two old men.

"Listen, you damned ghouls! Can't you hear her speaking to me—speaking to us all? Can't you hear Jorma—and Hildur?"

Dear God! As though from deep within our own minds we heard those soundless voices speaking to us, speaking to us by some ghastly telepathy the occultists may be able to explain, but which I cannot.

"Doctor Kurt! Doctor!" It was Jorma's voice—I would swear that it was Jorma Nurmi's voice; recognizable beyond any doubt, and yet horribly, horribly changed, as though a curtain of evil partly obscured a soul that had once been beautiful. I cannot describe—no man could describe—the crawling intensity of that moment. For before there had been only the conviction of those presences, watching. But now—

Why Jorma seemed to speak to me I do not know; perhaps because I had always been like fatuous old putty in her hands.

"Doctor Kurt! Doctor Kurt! It's Jorma—little Jorma—don't you recognize me?—don't you remember me? Go away and leave me in peace, and I will let Hildur go——"

"There, you hear?" Wilfrid Andersen said suddenly. His voice was a rising snarl. "You hear?"

And then, weakly, and with a strange wondering plaintiveness, as though she did not quite understand, I seemed to hear a second voice—Hildur's voice:

"Make them do as Jorma says, Wilfrid Jorma knows best."

And I knew that the evil that had been Jorma Nurmi was laughing in exultation as it heard.

Suddenly Chris Petersen spoke. The sound of his voice startled me—it was so different from those incredible thought-

images that seemed to originate within my own brain, and so quiet and sane after Wilfrid's tormented babblings.

"You should be with Karl, Jorma," he said slowly, and my flesh shriveled, watching him speak as though to empty space. "This—this interlude should never be. There is evil in you now, Jorma, through no fault of your own. You should let us set you free."

The thing laughed.

"When I lived among you I loved your form of life. Now that I live as I do I would not change."

Abruptly, then, its words grew faint. Hurriedly it addressed Wilfrid:

"Now I must go. Wilfrid, do not let them touch my grave. And in return I will restore Hildur to you——"

Like a vanishing dream the voice was gone. For a moment I stood there in the rain bewilderedly. And then, as though through eyes that had been for long moments blinded by some strange hypnosis, I saw that the blackness of night had changed to gray. I saw the tombstones stretching into the mist, and the long, rain-drenched row of spruces.

In the east the dawn hovered on the brink of the world.

11. Release

A HALF-SIMIAN growl aroused me. Wilfrid Andersen had towered to his feet, stood above Hildur's body, his shoulders slightly hunched, slowly clasping and unclasping his strong hands. He took a step toward us.

"Fill the grave!"

Chris, facing the man, shook his head. I could see the grizzled stubble of beard on his mist-drenched jaws.

"No."

And then, powerful fists swinging, blue eyes mad with implacable resolve, Wilfrid Andersen charged—charged like some

wounded beast. Chris, meeting that first rush, went down beneath a blow that would have dropped an ox. As though by instinct, I dropped to my knees, groped for the shovel.

Only vaguely do I remember stumbling to my feet, swinging the shovel handle through a short, choppy arc. Bewildered, I heard the crunch of wood against bone, saw Wilfrid fall grotesquely.

I know that I leaped into the grave, illumined now by the grayness that overspread the earth—I know that for a moment I was aghast as I looked upon the moisture that had collected in small pools on Jorma's dress, on her white satin pillow. I remember the choked scream that burst, then, from my suddenly nerveless lips—

A mist had seemed to collect at the bottom of the grave and within the casket, a mist so elusive and vague that in that first moment I had been unaware of its presence. And that mist was pouring, as though drawn by some internal suction, into the nostrils of the corpse!

And that two-inch-thick stake that Chris Petersen had sledged through Jorma Nurmi's breastbone and spine was slowly rising upward from her shattered breast! With a slow, inexorable motion, smooth and irresistible as the rising of the plunger of a hydraulic ram, it was being forced out of her still body. Inch by inch it was emerging from its flesh-sheath. And a spattering of embalming-fluid was welling from the lips of the wound and spreading over the white satin dress.

Faster, now, the twin ropes of grayish smoke were pouring into Jorma Nurmi's nostrils. . . .

The stake had protruded nearly its entire length. It had begun to waver, to oscillate. Wet with rain, glistening with embalming-fluid, it slowly tilted over and fell from the wound, rolled to the side of the casket and lay there.

And—God!—the wound had vanished! Beneath the jagged round hole in the white satin dress I saw new flesh—the *unmarred*, faintly roseate flesh of a young girl!

The last wisps of smoke had curled into Jorma Nurmi's nostrils. And then, in that final instant of cumulative horror, I sensed the thing's triumphant laughter, slumberous, utterly evil—

With that hellish laughter came abrupt release from the ecstasy of horror that had enchained me. The life that had hung suspended in my veins suddenly moved; almost without volition my arm swept outward across the casket, grasped the grim, slippery stake.

It was done in an instant. Huddled on my heels on the casket edge like some ungainly old gargoyle, my back pressed against the dripping earth, I lifted the heavy crowbar in my right hand.

It swung uncertainly, erratically, as with short weak blows I drove the stake through Jorma Nurmi's body. How many times the bar of iron rose and fell before the thick stake ground against the solid wood of the casket I will never know; perhaps three strokes, perhaps six. I remember only the clean red blood that welled from the wound and thickened and spread over the white satin dress, and the pleading mist that seemed to clutch at my hands, and the swift returning puffiness at Jorma Nurmi's throat. And, as I finished, Jorma's voice, no longer evil, but clean and sweet again—the voice of the little girl I had known, thanking me. And the overwhelming conviction, as that voice dwindled into the infinite, that she had gone to that place where Karl Maercklein waited—

I did not look at the corpse, then. I did not dare. But stiffly I clambered from the grave.

Now that it was over, my body had begun to shake.

And then I passed my right hand uncer-

tainly across my eyes and stared through the misty rain in utter astonishment. For Hildur Andersen was stumbling to her feet, tall, strong, beautiful, fair, with a look of dazed, uncomprehending horror growing on her face. And I knew that she had awakened from nightmare into nightmare, and that if I were to save her for Wilfrid I must comfort her now—

WE PAUSED beside Gustav Wendt's lodge and looked back over the sea of graves into the silence and the peace we

had left behind us. For a moment we were still. Then Wilfrid, passing his left hand tenderly over the goose-egg lump at the side of his skull, his right arm was about Hildur's shoulders, looked toward the open lodge door and made a wry face. For the door stood half open, and within the light still burned. And the unmistakable odor of whiskey struck outward into the rain-washed dawn.

Quickly, then, we turned our backs upon the lodge and walked toward our waiting cars.
