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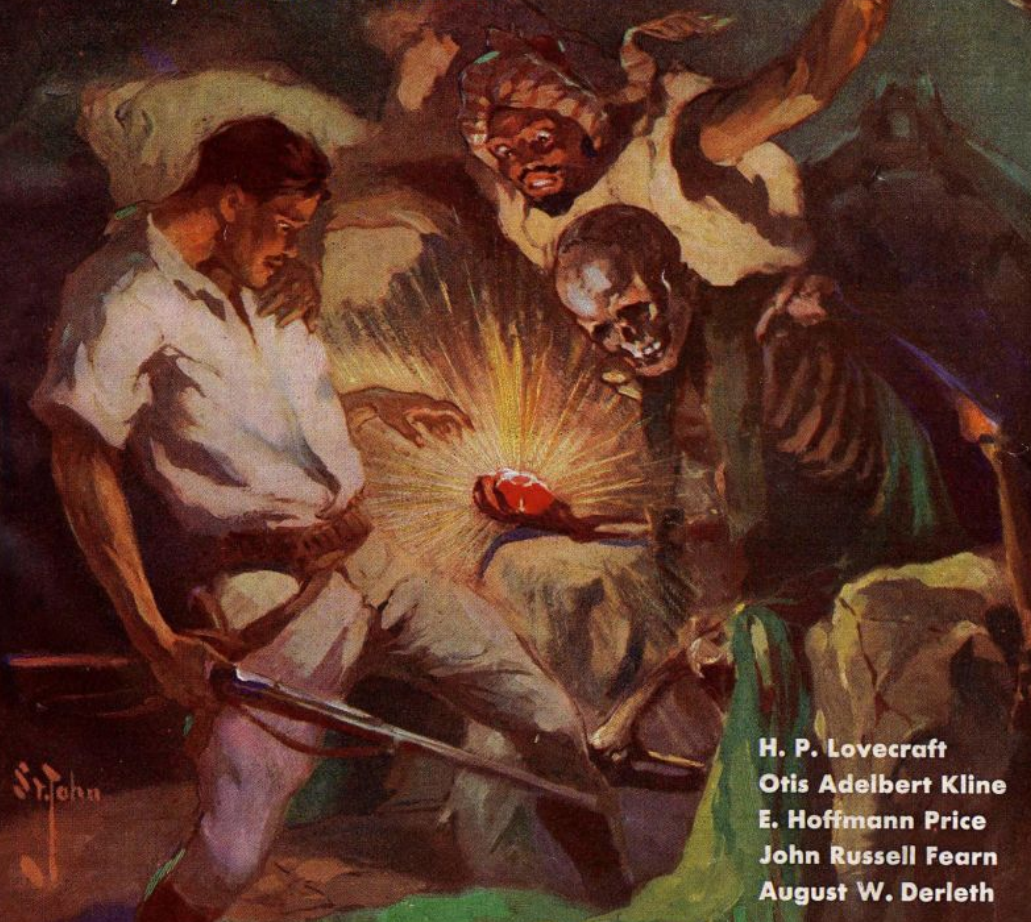
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It Walks by Night

By

HENRY KUTTNER

A blood-chilling narrative of a ghastly horror that stalked through the crypts beneath the old graveyard

Johann leaned heavily against a tall obelisk of discolored marble, his fever-weakened body trembling with exhaustion. The graveyard was a dim black sea, with pale slabs and monoliths standing in irregular ranks all about him. He fumbled with the slide of his lantern and a white beam sprang out vividly, etching the man's gaunt figure in sharp detail.

Deep shadows lay in the hollows of his cheeks and beneath his dilated, smoldering eyes. His face had an angry flush which betrayed the fever blazing in his brain—fever that had burned away lifelong barriers of fear and driven him to this ancient burying-ground where few would have ventured after sundown. For, as all men knew, a horror dwelt among these tombs, an ancient horror that had come down through the generations. There were tales of a thing that walked by night among the graves; so that sometimes when men came searching in broad daylight they found new graves opened, coffins ruthlessly torn apart, and the bodies gone.

Occasionally one of the villagers would bury his kin in the cemetery at Kruschen, twenty miles to the north. But this was seldom done, since the horror had dwelt in the graveyard longer than the oldest graybeard, and a kind of hopeless apathy hung, like a somber pall, over the village. Moreover, there was a tale that, long ago, in the year of the great plague when all bodies were burned for fear of spreading the pestilence, something had come forth from among the tombs and had burst nightly into the houses on the outskirts of the village. A dozen people had vanished without a trace, and at last in desperation the plague-infected corpses had been interred in the old burying-ground. Thereafter the village slept in peace, although now and then a lone traveler or itinerant peddler would disappear, never to be seen again. Still, as the older men whispered among themselves, it was lucky that worse things did not befall.

But now Johann was driven by a fierce urge that made him disregard the ancient menace that lurked among the tombs. He had come for his wife.

Elsa, his bride for scarcely a year, had been buried while Johann lay delirious, raving with the same fever that had proved fatal to his wife. Believing him asleep, his cousin's wife had talked too freely, and Johann had learned that Elsa had been interred in the devil-haunted graveyard beyond the outskirts of the village. His beloved Elsa, daughter of the ancient Auber clan that could trace their fathers back through Thurn and Taxis—the prey of the ghoul!

Horror had lent Johann strength to leave his bed and slip unnoticed from his cousin's house, pausing only to snatch his pistol and a lantern. Now he drew the weapon from his shirt as footsteps sounded suddenly near by.

A man came into view in the starlight, gingerly picking his way among the graves. As Johann recognized Karl, his cousin, he thrust the pistol back into his shirt and let the light from his lantern flare out. The newcomer gave a startled cry, quickly muffled.

Karl stepped into the wan splotch of light, relief plain in his pale face. "Johann! I thought—what are you doing here? You can't help Elsa now."

Johann looked away abruptly, his mouth working. Karl put a hand on his cousin's shoulder, but Johann shook it off impatiently. "It's your fault, Karl," he accused, his eyes dark with anger. "You let them bury Elsa here—in this devil-ridden place."

Karl made a placating gesture. "What could I do? I told them you would not——"

"I know." The resentment was gone from Johann's voice. It was very bitter now. "Our heads have been bowed beneath the yoke for a long time. Too long, Karl. Elsa shall not——"

"She has been buried a week now. You—you have no shovel."

It was true. Johann had had no time to procure one during his flight. He said slowly, "I can guard her grave, at any rate. You can go back to the village and get shovels."

Karl was silent. After a moment Johann laughed mirthlessly.

“Bring the shovels tomorrow, then,” he jeered. “You won’t be afraid to come here in daylight.”

Stung, Karl responded, “It’s not daylight now. Come home, Johann. We can get Elsa tomorrow. One more night won’t—it’s dangerous, Johann! They say the—they say it’s been walking again.”

Johann shrugged with a nonchalance he did not feel. He was shivering in the chill wind that blew over the neglected graves. His fears, forgotten in his delirium, were slowly creeping back to torment him; but he pushed them resolutely aside.

“I’m not afraid,” he growled, and moved forward among the graves, his lantern sending out a beam of yellow light that rested on lichen-stained stone and the worm-eaten and weathered surface of wooden slabs and crosses. Once he tripped over a fallen tombstone, half buried in the ground, and would have fallen had not Karl caught him. Karl began a frantic protest which his cousin did not hear. Johann was staring intently into the gloom; he took a few hasty steps, and at his feet loomed the black gulf of an open grave.

He sent the beam of the lantern darting down into it and saw that the coffin-lid was broken and shattered, and that the sarcophagus itself was empty. Even before the light searched out the inscription upon the wooden slab at the head of the violated grave he knew what would be painted there.

Beside him Karl caught his breath in a gasp of fear. But Johann merely stood silent, swaying a little, the dank wind blowing coldly across his wet face, and his thoughts were a chaotic swirl in which horror and grief and anger were mingled. Out of his poignant grief and his horror, fierce anger racked his feverish brain with surges of red rage that shook him with their intensity. Under his shirt he felt the bulk of the pistol, and he gripped it fiercely. Elsa! Her slim white body the prey of the ghoul! Suddenly all Johann’s fear was forgotten in his blinding, overwhelming anger.

Karl was tugging at his arm. He turned to meet his cousin’s frightened gaze. “Johann! What are you waiting for? We can’t stay here. It . . . it has walked again!”

“No!” Johann barked out the word fiercely, his eyes blazing. “Elsa——”

“It’s too late, Johann! Elsa is gone.”

“Is it too late for vengeance?” Johann asked quietly, and at his words Karl shrank back, stark amazement in his face.

“Vengeance?” He whispered the word fearfully, and a shudder racked him. He shot an apprehensive glance into the dimness about them. Then he said, still whispering, “You *are* mad, Johann.”

Deliberately Johann drew out his pistol. “Very well, I am mad. But . . . Karl, if it were your wife——” He broke off, his lips twitching, and when he resumed, his voice was chill with inflexible purpose. “Listen to me, Karl; I’m going to make someone—god, man or devil!—suffer for this crime!” He glanced at the black gulf of the violated grave. “So go home, Karl. You can’t help me now.”

Karl opened his mouth, but the words died in his throat. His eyes flashed past Johann’s shoulder, and into them sprang a look of panic fear. With a strangled scream he spun about and went racing off, his footsteps disquietingly loud in the chill, empty silence.

Johann turned quickly. At first he saw nothing in the dim starlight. Then, far away, he saw a faint movement among the tombs. There was a flicker of motion in the distance where an

ancient mausoleum stood all alone on the side of a little hillock. He waited, scarcely breathing, for a time, but there was no further movement at the distant tomb.

Karl's footsteps had died away, and there was not a sound to be heard. Johann fingered the pistol irresolutely. Then he thrust it back in his shirt and hurriedly made his way among the graves to where the mausoleum stood on the knoll pale and ominous in the starlight. The tomb was incredibly ancient and weathered, overgrown with a thick coating of lichen that draped it like gray spider-webs. There was an inscription above the door, but save for the single word *maranatha* it was illegible. Johann did not pause to examine it after he saw that the great stone portal was open. With cold rage surging within him he stepped over the threshold and sent the light darting about the tomb.

It was empty. Bare, granite walls met his gaze, but there was a door of rusted metal set in the further wall, and this was ajar. Johann squeezed through the gap and held the lantern high.

He was in an empty passage, paved with great stone slabs, sloping down into the side of the little hill. A faint whispering sound, like the slithering of water over jagged rocks, was audible, and Johann cautiously advanced. The passage turned and twisted in the rock, but it continued to descend steeply, and twice Johann passed the black mouths of side tunnels. Now the faint whispering was louder. He recognized the sound of voices, but there was a curious squeaking and snarling that puzzled him—a sound such as might originate in a nest of rats.

The cold tide of sanity was slowly rising in Johann's brain, and misgivings were beginning to assail him; but the thought of Elsa's looted grave enabled him to force them out of his mind. He replaced the slide on the lantern and moved forward in utter darkness, feeling his way and straining to distinguish an intelligible word from the babble of chatterings and whisperings that he heard. Slowly he advanced, sliding his hand along the wall. And suddenly a voice sounded distinct and clear above the sly mutterings.

It was harsh and grating, possessing a curious quality of depth, as though it came from far underground. And it said distinctly, “. . . has been gone long.”

A wave of fear came rushing up to overwhelm Johann, and he clung desperately to the thought of Elsa and his vengeance. Fighting back his horror, he edged forward. And as though at a signal a sudden silence fell.

Johann caught a whisper. “. . . will be back. To bring us food.”

Behind him there was a rustling, swiftly growing louder! In the blackness nothing was visible, but Johann flung himself flat against the wall. The rustling swept past him, and for a moment an overpowering stench filled his nostrils. He was conscious that something had passed close to him, something he could not see for the darkness, although he felt sick and giddy with its passing. He leaned against the wall, grateful for its support, and the whisperings and shrillings broke out afresh, this time with an eery note of disappointment.

A new voice spoke, a quiet, emotionless voice with a dreadful feline purr in it. “No food could I find, my ancestors. No food or drink.”

“Must we go hungry?” another voice whined, and a plaintive series of cries burst from the grim darkness that pulsed with unseen, horrific life. “You must feed us!” “It is your duty!” “We are unable.”

A deeper voice spoke. “You must fulfill your trust! Each of us fed our ancestors who could not feed themselves. And it is your duty to find us food. When in time you, too, become like us, unable to go forth to search out the new graves, you will expect the next heir to fulfill his duty.”

“I found food for you two nights ago,” the other voice purred, and Johann caught his breath and shuddered in the shielding darkness.

“It is your trust and your privilege!” the deep voice cut in, brittle and harsh. “This is the curse and the blessing of our blood, that knows no other life after—death.”

“But there are so many!” cried the other, and a stifled gasp of fear came from Johann’s stiff lips. A taut silence fell, and the man turned to ice.

Past him went a soft rustling, almost brushing his numb body, swiftly dying away. Then there was no sound, only the charnel darkness that pressed silently upon him. And behind him he heard a heavy thud.

Stung into life, Johann spun about and in an agony of fear went racing back through the twisted corridor, back to the open air and the clean starlight.

He felt a heavy blow on his chest, and staggered back, almost falling, the lantern slipping from his grasp and thudding to the ground. As he tottered there in the blackness he heard the abominable rustling go past him again and fade into silence. Gasping, uttering little moans, he fell on his hands and knees and groped frantically for the lantern.

For a moment it eluded his clutching fingers, and Johann felt the skin of his back crawling with the expectation of an attack. Then with a sob of relief he found the lantern and snatched off the slide, praying that it had not gone out.

It had not. A yellow beam of light pitilessly illuminated the thing that had halted Johann’s flight—the great door in the tomb, the door by which he had entered this Cimmerian cave of night and horror. But now it was no longer ajar.

He realized what had happened. The rustling that had passed him, the heavy thud! The creature—Johann dared not give it a name—had slipped past him and closed the door to prevent his escape.

Breathing heavily, Johann put down the lantern and examined the door. There were no handles or knobs; it was a bare, rivet-studded plate of rusty metal. He braced his shoulder against it and strained until his head swam, but he could not move the door.

Again swift anger mounted within him, and the thought of Elsa supplied the spark to the tinder-box of his fury. With rage and fear battling within him he drew out his pistol, examined it to see if the moisture of the vault had damped the charge, and slowly began to retrace his steps. He paused occasionally to flash the light behind him, but nothing lurked at his heels—nothing but the black tunnel-mouths that seemed to watch him ominously. And presently he saw that he was on the threshold of an archway that led into silent, unstimulating darkness.

Twice Johann went forward, and twice he retreated in fear. At last he raised the pistol and stepped over the threshold, swiftly flashing the light about the great vault in which he stood.

For a moment he thought he was confronting an array of mummies, withered and dry. They were lying against the walls in grotesque postures, a dozen brown wrinkled bodies, some of them merely skeletons with wrinkled dark skin stretched over their bones. The floor was buried beneath a carpet of bones, ranging in color from crumbled black to shining white bones on which the marks of gnawing were dreadfully evident. At Johann’s feet a skull grinned up at him in a grim mockery of mirth.

As the light gleamed through the tomb a frightful rustling and a stir went over the withered bodies. There was a monstrous shifting and squirming, and Johann saw moving what should never move, what should always lie silent and still and dead under the coffin-lid. The things crawled about like maggots blindly creeping away from the light, and Johann still stood there,

the lantern in one hand and his pistol in the other, without moving a muscle or turning his eyes from the charnel horror before him. The light gleamed on cold, shiny eyes staring at him speculatively.

Behind him came the rustling, and Johann swung about, his light stabbing out through the blackness. Far down the passage a vague figure was moving toward him, slowly, implacably. Behind him came an outburst of abominable squeakings and whistlings.

Johann jerked up his pistol, the thought of Elsa steadying his hand. He would wait until the thing was almost upon him, and then . . . but his fear betrayed him. The crash of the explosion sent sharp echoes rolling through the vault.

The dreadful form did not pause. It glided onward, silently save for the faint rustling of garments, and Johann took a step back. Something clutched at his ankle, and in a frenzy of fear he kicked free. For a second he had turned his back on the half-seen figure that was inexorably drawing nearer, and when he swung about, it was almost upon him. There was no time to reload the pistol; Johann flung up his arm as though the lantern had been a weapon.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. A purring, gloating voice came from the dim form, and it said triumphantly, "We shall *not* go hungry!" And the light revealed the face of the approaching horror, and Johann dropped the lantern and began to scream, over and over, "*Elsa! Elsa!*"

[The end of *It Walks By Night* by Henry Kuttner]