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CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1935

Number 4

Cover Design	M. Brundage
<i>"The Six Sleepers"</i>	
The Six Sleepers	Edmond Hamilton 402
<i>A gripping tale of a super-civilization of the distant future</i>	
The Elder Gods	W. L. Hasty, Jr. 421
<i>Verse</i>	
Hollywood Horror	Paul Ernst 422
<i>Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal, spreads terror in Hollywood</i>	
The Cold Gray God	C. L. Moore 441
<i>The fate of the solar system hung on a weird duel between Northwest Smith and a nameless being in a room on Mars</i>	
The Dead-alive Mummy	Seabury Quinn 461
<i>An amazing story about an ancient Egyptian mummy and a beautiful American girl— a tale of Jules de Grandin</i>	
In the Shadows	Lea Bodine Drake 476
<i>Verse</i>	
The Mystery of the Last Guest	John Flanders 477
<i>Out of the black night came a grisly horror—a tale of stark terror</i>	
The Carnival of Death (part 2)	Arlton Eadie 485
<i>A ghastly adventure with a Golden Mummy, and the death that walked by night</i>	
Song of Autumn	Charles Baudelaire 506
<i>Verse, translated by Clark Ashton Smith from the French</i>	
In a Graveyard	Eando Binder 507
<i>A ghastly doom overwhelmed an author who typed his story in a cemetery</i>	
The Amulet of Hell	Robert Leonard Russell 512
<i>What horrid creature was he that called himself G. Kodopolis?</i>	
Weird Story Reprint:	
The Lost Club	Arthur Machen 518
<i>A strange, eery story by a British master of weird fiction</i>	
The Eyrie	524
<i>The readers express their opinions</i>	

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

In a Graveyard

By EANDO BINDER

A ghastly doom sought out an author who tried to capture a weird atmosphere by writing his story in a cemetery

FEELING a bit foolish, Kent Dawson opened his portable case, set the lid down on the thick sward, and placed the typewriter on a low, flat tombstone, squarely over its epitaph. This was the oldest section of the dilapidated Rosedale Cemetery, its many graves marked with every conceivable type of gravestone. For a moment it seemed almost sacrilegious to invade this solemn place, gloomy with the long shadows of approaching sunset. Yet it was the ideal spot, deserted and quiet, rife with the feeling of death and eternal peace.

He next unfolded his campstool, and adjusted it in a position for typing. Then he extracted his writing-paper from a big brown envelope, and from his coat pocket he took a package of cigarettes. Now he was ready.

Kent Dawson sat down and began his work. It progressed rapidly, for the plot had all been worked out previously, and the characters were quite clear in his mind. Of course, it was the "atmosphere" of the place that he needed: an "atmosphere" of death and other-worldly resurrection, for he was writing a tale of the supernatural. This story of the Undead, of vampires—he had tried to write it in his stuffy room at home, without success. A friend of his had suggested, in a joking way, that he write it in a cemetery. Kent had taken the suggestion literally.

Now, with the very breath of the grave in his nostrils, he found it absurdly easy to achieve his all-important "atmos-

phere." The long, creeping shadows, the ghostly outlines of the tombstones, the plaintive note of the whippoorwill, the subtle essence of charnel death—they all found their way into the story.

He kept his keys going at a furious rate. Now and then, at a break in the steady flow of his thoughts, he would glance up and let his eyes wander around. As the light of day died, the white marble pieces about him stood out sharply in the gathering gloom. The tall sad Christ at his right, rising above dwarf evergreens, shone with the last rays of a setting sun.

When the light grew too dim for him to see the sentences as he wrote them out, Kent Dawson fumbled in his topcoat, which he had thrown on the grass at his feet, and drew a flashlight from the pocket. He had come determined to finish his work; for a story to Kent Dawson was like a gnawing worm, giving him no peace until he had extracted it from his mind in its completeness.

He snapped on the flashlight and set it in a niche between two angels in the headpiece at the end of the large flat tombstone. After a bit of adjusting he had arranged both typewriter and torch so that the white cone of light centered on the words as he wrote them out.

Now it had become quite dark and he went on, absorbing the "atmosphere" of the scene through his feelings rather than through his senses. The white granite and alabaster of the scattered grave-markers assumed all sorts of macabre

shapes in his dim vision. In his mind's eye he pictured himself surrounded by a troop of spirits and creatures of the night.

KENT started and broke off in the middle of a sentence as the beam of light suddenly swung away. He lunged forward just in time to catch the flashlight as it tumbled from its perch. He tried to set it again in the niche formed by two angelic elbows, but it refused to stay in place.

He thought for a minute on the problem. Then he stooped for a bunch of grass, formed a little tee with it at his side on the flat stone, and rested the flashlight on this with its lens tilted upward. The light sprayed partly over the inscription, revealing a portion of the chiseled wording, and centered blindly on the paper before his eyes. He went on.

"The Vampire's fiery eyes, coal-hot in a dead white face, bored through the bushes——"

At this moment Kent Dawson felt his first tremor of real fear, in all the imaginings he had gone through feeling the synthetic fears of his terrorized characters. For as he wrote those words of fiery eyes peering from concealment, *he saw those eyes!* They were two glowing orbs, exactly like those he visioned for the story, staring at him from a thicket of bushes which encircled the nearest grave.

Kent sat for a frozen instant, then leaped from his stool, swinging the flashlight beam into the bushes. Nothing was there, nothing—just the transparent tangle of small-leaved branches. Kent mopped a perspiring brow, told himself he was a fool, and replaced the flashlight. But his copy after that was full of typographical errors and cross-outs.

Was the eeriness of the place getting him? Was it now no longer an inspiration for his story, but a horrifying

stimulus to his secret fears? What secret fears? Surely he, hard-headed writer of fantasy tales, could have no secret beliefs in things beyond the mundane. Or had his fictionings rooted themselves so deeply in his sensitive mind that he was beginning to believe in them?

Kent Dawson went on in a dogged way. It was some time later, when the distant hoot of an owl involuntarily set his blood tingling, that he came to the grand denouement of his story. He was about to have his hero oppose and vanquish the Vampire that threatened to unloose upon the countryside a horde of elementals in bodies stolen from graveyards.

"The very blood in his veins congealing, he roused himself with titanic effort of mind——"

As though animated, the flashlight rolled from its bed of grass, and Kent was forced to break away from the exciting passage to make a grab for it. He caught it as it rolled toward the edge of the tombstone, set it back in place after tamping the grass mound, and placed his fingers back on the keys.

"——flung his iron cross before his face, and plunged——"

Again the flashlight inexplicably rolled away. With a curse at the thing's unwitting perversity, Kent grabbed it and made a mound with new grass, molding it carefully with a hollow in its center. He went back to his keys.

"——straight for the mocking, leering visage of the Undead——"

In utter exasperation, as the electric torch again moved out of position, Kent Dawson flung the grass wide, and stood up both to ponder the matter and to stretch his cramped muscles. He lit a cigarette. It would not take long now to finish, for the hero was about to hurl in the Vampire's face the Holy Philtre,

destroying him as strong acid destroys a metal. It would not take long if only he could set that flashlight to stay. . . .

"PERHAPS I could help you?"

Kent Dawson whirled, dropping his cigarette, with a crawling sensation in his throat. The reflection of the flashlight, beating back from the headpiece toward which it was aimed, revealed a tall and shadowy figure. Kent's first frightened impulse was to grab up the light and train it on the figure, but he saw then, with a sense of relief, that the figure was that of a human being, rather shabbily dressed.

"You—you startled me!" said Kent tremulously. "I——"

"I beg your pardon," said the other. "I did not mean——"

"Sall right," Kent interrupted quickly, ashamed of his display of nerves. "You see, I had no idea there was anybody—here. I thought I was quite alone."

At the note of interrogation in his voice, the stranger raised a thin arm. "I shall explain, of course. I noticed you here quite some time before, and finally decided to approach. I did not realize you would be so startled."

Kent wondered if the eyes he had seen before had been those of this man, watching him in curiosity. After all, it came to him, the other man must have been just as surprized to find him—here in a cemetery. He looked the stranger over closely. In the poor light not much was revealed except that he was amazingly tall and thin, his face haggard and white.

"I might say," went on the stranger, "that it is a habit with me—to walk through this cemetery after dark. You see, it is dear to me. I mean that it holds for me certain memories. That particular tombstone, underneath it lies——"

Kent Dawson saw the stranger's finger pointing to the very tombstone on which his typewriter rested, and a sudden sense of guilt brought stammering apologies to the writer's lips.

"You must forgive me. Really, I didn't realize. I shall leave immediately." And Kent Dawson turned to begin putting his things away. Writing a story over the grave of this poor man's mother, or wife perhaps!

"Do not leave," said the stranger in tones that were queerly flat. "I've noticed that your flashlight seems unwilling to stay in place. I will hold it for you so that you may finish your story."

"It is almost done," said Kent, hardly knowing what to make of the strange situation, "and I can do the rest tomorrow, at home. I have been able to get into the story the atmosphere this place inspires. The ending is purely mechanical. I can do that under the electric lights with nothing more inspiring to look at than wall-paper."

The stranger suddenly stepped a pace closer. "If you will pardon my saying so, I think you are wrong about the ending being purely mechanical. It is your denouement that should have the full quality of . . . reality!"

Kent, with his hand on the typewriter roll, turned his head. What could this shabby man know of denouement?—of anything about stories?

"Look!" continued the stranger. "Around you is the home of the dead. But *are* they the dead? May they not have a life of their own? How can light-loving man know of the things that happen in the dark? Light is only half of life; twelve hours of every day are darkness! And it is in the cloak of darkness that the after-world has its being, a world of spirits that mankind knows little of, and at which he scoffs, although his innermost heart tells him it exists!"

The stranger's tones had been emphatic, yet not loud, as though the speaker were sure of his knowledge. Kent stared in surprize, with a suppressed desire to point the electric torch full upon this mysterious man.

"Sit down," said the stranger quietly, yet with a quality of imperiousness. "Sit down and write. Finish your story and remember that there lies around you the strange night-world of the Undead!"

KENT DAWSON sat down and put his hands to the keys. No doubt the man was half mad, walking after dark through cemeteries till he believed in ghosts. Perhaps the loss of the dear one who lay quiet beneath this tombstone had deranged his mind. And at that, the man was right—it would be better to finish the story here and now. As the stranger silently reached forth a hand, Kent handed him the flashlight with a mumbled thanks.

Then he went to work. It was so easy now; the words fell in a rich torrent of fluency, subtly saturated with the ultra-natural and macabre. His denouement would be a masterpiece in itself. Then, at a pause for thought, he noticed that the air had grown chilly. A cold wind that seemed to come from his back struck through his light summer coat. He turned for his topcoat, to find the stranger holding it forth to him.

"Oh, thank you," said Kent, slipping into it without rising. "Rather chilly, don't you think?"

There was no answer as Kent Dawson went on. The words flew from his mind, and transposed themselves to his fingers and the paper with uncanny rapidity. Kent began dimly to realize that he had here a marvelous tale, spawned, as it were, directly from the graveyard around him. It was a curious sensation, like

being prodded—it was inspiration *par excellence!* He made a mental note to write all his stories thereafter in graveyards. . . .

Kent Dawson picked at the period key, set his typewriter for the last paragraph, and leaned back, lighting a cigarette. It was always his custom to do this—relax for a moment or two, smoke, and then dash off the final paragraph. He had a passion for turning out that last paragraph—on which sometimes the entire "tone" of a story could be made or destroyed—as a work of supreme art.

To relax quite completely, Kent turned his head partly to the stranger behind him, whose hand held the flashlight steadily, and asked: "By the way, as long as we've met, we may as well introduce ourselves. I'm Kent Dawson."

He sensed a nod of the other's head as he heard him say: "My name? Well, meaningless as names are . . . John Allen Kilarney."

"Pleased to know you," said Kent. "You can't imagine how grateful I am that you are holding the light for me. Perhaps, if the time is convenient, you may accompany me back to my rooms. Return favor, you know; we could break a bottle of vintage."

"Thank you, but I do not drink—wine," said the man whose name was John Allen Kilarney.

Kent thought he detected a sudden note of maliciousness in the other's voice. He might have inquired further, except that the last paragraph leaped into his mind with the astonishing clearness of a printed page. It was the perfect ending for this story of terror and witchery. Kent set it down with hands that trembled in eagerness. Then, having completed it, he thought over the story for a moment, exulting in its masterful quality. It had everything it needed to bring the acclaim

of the fantasy fiction public. Kent almost felt, having written of the sinister Vampire, that he could believe in his existence.

"Well, sir," said Kent, unrolling the last sheet from the machine and waving it, "this is the finale of a damned good story, if I do say so myself. The plot alone is unique and realistic, but the atmosphere—the setting, one might say—is superb, thanks to this place."

"You have written of a—Vampire?" asked the stranger in curiously muffled tones. "And you have made it convincing?"

"Convincing?" repeated Kent with a touch of boastfulness. "Why, it's almost as though I had come across one." He began putting his typewritten sheets together.

"You do not believe in—Vampires?"

"Well, do you?" countered Kent, extracting a paper clip from his vest and fastening the sheets together.

A sort of hoarse chuckle from behind him caused Kent Dawson to turn around. Then he choked and started back in fright, for the stranger's cadaverous face was not more than six inches away, revealing eyes that burned with a greedy lust. The hideous face gaped open to reveal fang-like teeth, and his stomach was revolted by a stench that somehow made him think of blood.

Kent Dawson stood with his back to the gravestone, rooted in a paralysis of fear. "Who—who are you?" he gasped.

Again that hoarse chuckle came from the other, and his eyes gleamed exactly as had those peering from the bushes before—exactly as those of the Vampire in the story!

"I am what you deny the existence of," said the tall stranger. "I am of this night-world around you: I am one of the Undead. I am a—*vampire!*"

KENT DAWSON screamed once and leaped erect to run away from this horror, but long thin arms of crushing power encircled him. He shrieked again, this time in utter terror, as he felt sharp teeth sink into his throat. Some instinct greater than the instinct of self-preservation lent him a sudden strength, and he almost broke free of the steel-strong arms, wrenching his throat away from the closing jaws. He felt the tearing of his own tender flesh and the spurt of warm blood.

Struggling maniacally, with his spine pressed against the sharp edge of the tombstone, Kent Dawson felt the creature's pitiless arms tighten. He heard an obscene licking of lips, and then felt them clamp slobberingly to his bleeding throat again.

The taste of fresh blood seemed to increase the monster's strength tenfold, and Kent Dawson knew he was lost. But he continued his useless struggles, tearing at the vampire's head with futile hands. As Kent's strength weakened with the outpouring of his life's blood, the creature bore him backward over the edge of the tombstone, twisting his head downward.

Kent Dawson made one last desperate effort to save himself, clawing at the gravestone for a grip to wrench himself away. His flailing hands caught at the typewriter and jerked it to the ground. The flashlight, which lay there so as to light the epitaph over which the machine had stood, revealed to the doomed man's eyes these words, chiseled out of the stone:

"Born 1882, Died Anno Domini 1924. Here Lie the Mortal Remains of John Allen Kilarney. May His Soul Rest in Peace."