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CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1936

Number 3

Cover Design	J. Allen St. John	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "Life of the Undead"</i>		
Isle of the Undead	Lloyd Arthur Eshbach	259
<i>An uncanny tale of the fate that befell a yachting party on the awful island of living dead men</i>		
The Lost Temples of Xantooos	Howell Calhoun	276
<i>Verse</i>		
The Opener of the Way	Robert Bloch	277
<i>A tremendous tale of dread doom in a forgotten tomb beneath the desert sands of Egypt</i>		
Witch-Burning	Mary Elizabeth Counselman	288
<i>Verse</i>		
The Lost Door	Dorothy Quick	289
<i>An alluring but deadly horror out of past centuries menaced the life of a young American</i>		
Doom of the House of Duryca	Earl Peirce, Jr.	304
<i>A powerful story of stark horror, and the dreadful thing that happened in a lone lodge in the Maine woods</i>		
The Tree of Life	C. L. Moore	315
<i>A tale of the planet Mars and a terrible monstrosity that called its victims to it from afar</i>		
Red Nails (end)	Robert E. Howard	334
<i>A three-part serial story of a weird roofed city and the strangest people ever spawned</i>		
R. E. H.	R. H. Barlow	353
<i>Verse, a tribute to the late Robert E. Howard</i>		
The Doors of Death	Arthur B. WALTERMIRE	354
<i>A strange and curious story about a banker whose only fear was that he might be buried alive</i>		
The Secret of Kralitz	Henry Kuttner	361
<i>A story of the shocking revelation that came to the twenty-first Baron Kralitz</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Great Keimplatz Experiment	Arthur Conan Doyle	366
<i>A weird-scientific story by a late British writer</i>		
The Eyrie		378
<i>Our readers exchange opinions about this magazine</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Doors of Death

By ARTHUR B. WALTERMIRE

A strange and curious story is this, about a banker whose only fear was that he might be buried alive, like his grandfather before him

A HEAVY stillness hung about the great halls and richly furnished rooms of Judson McMasters' residence, and even seemed to extend out over the velvet lawns, the shrub-lined walks and sun-blotched reaches under the lacy elms and somber maples.

Biggs glided about the sick-chamber like a specter, apparently striving to keep busy, while he cast countless furtive, uneasy glances at the heavy figure under the white sheets. An odor of drugs and fever tainted the air, and a small walnut table near the flushed sleeper was laden with the familiar prescription bottle, tumbler and box of powders. On the wall behind the table, near the head of the bed, hung a small oil-painting of Napoleon.

The sleeper stirred restlessly, raised himself painfully and slowly, and attempted to seek fleeting comfort in a new position. At the first movement Biggs was a shadow at the bedside, deftly manipulating the coverings and gently aiding the sick man with a tenderness born of long service and deep affection. As the massive gray head sank into the fluffed pillow the tired eyes opened, lighted by a faint glint of thankfulness. Then they closed again and the once powerful body relaxed.

With a pitiful, wistful expression on his aged face, the faithful Biggs stood helplessly peering at the sick man until hot tears began to course down his fur-

rowed cheeks, and he turned hastily away.

"Biggs!"

The voice, still strong and commanding, cut the semi-gloom like a knife.

Biggs, who was about to tuck the heavy curtains still more securely over the windows, whirled as though he had touched a live wire, and in a flash was across the great room and beside the bed.

"Did you call, sir?" His voice quavered.

"No"—a faint twinkle lighted the sick man's eyes—"I just spoke."

"Ah, now sir," cried the overjoyed Biggs, "you are better, sir."

"Biggs, I want some air and sunshine."

"But the doctor, sir——"

"Drat the doctor! If I'm going to pass out I want to see where I'm going."

"Oh, but sir," expostulated the old servant, as he parted the curtains and partially opened a casement window, "I wish you wouldn't say that, sir."

"I believe in facing a situation squarely, Biggs. My father and grandfather died from this family malady, and I guess I'm headed over the same route."

"Please, sir," entreated Biggs.

"Biggs, I want to ask you a question."

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you a Christian?"

"I try to be, sir."

"Do you believe in death?"

Biggs was thoroughly startled and confused.

"Why——we all have to die, some-

time, sir," he answered haltingly, not knowing what else to say.

"But do we actually die?" insisted the sufferer.

"Well, I hope—not yet," ventured the old servant. "The doctor said——"

"Forget the doctor," interposed McMasters. "Biggs, you have been in our service since I was a lad, haven't you?"

Tears welled into the servant's eyes, and his voice faltered.

"Fifty-six years, come next November," he answered.

"Well, let me tell you something, that even in those fifty-six years you never learned, Biggs. My grandfather was buried alive!"

"Oh, sir! Impossible!" cried Biggs, in horror.

"Absolutely," asserted the banker.

"Why—are you—how do you know, sir?" in a hoarse whisper.

"My father built a family mausoleum in the far corner of this estate, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir—he hated burial in the earth, sir, after reading a poem of Edgar Allan Poe's, sir!"

"What poem was that, Biggs?"

"I don't recall the name of it, but I remember the line," faltered Biggs.

"What was it?"

"Oh, sir," cried the old man, "let's talk about something cheerful."

"Not until we're through with this discussion, Hiram."

THE SOUND of his given name restored Biggs somewhat, for the banker resorted to it only on occasions when he shared his deepest confidences with his old houseman.

"Well, the line goes, 'Soft may the worms about him creep,' sir."

A slight shudder seemed to run through McMasters' body. Then after a

tomb-like silence, "Good reason for building the mausoleum."

"Yes, sir, I think so, sir."

"Well," with an apparent effort, "when they exhumed my grandfather's remains to place them in the new vault, the casket was opened, and——"

"Oh, sir," cried Biggs, throwing out a trembling, expostulating hand, but the banker went on, relentlessly.

"——the body was turned over, on its side, with the left knee drawn up part-way."

"That's the way he always slept—in life." Biggs' voice was a hollow whisper.

"And that's the reason my father, after building himself a mausoleum, insisted that his body be cremated," said McMasters. "He took no chances."

Biggs' horrified eyes traveled dully to the massive urn over the great fireplace and rested there, fascinated.

"Hiram, where is heaven?"

Biggs' eyes flitted back to rest in surprise upon the questioner.

"Why, up there, sir," pointing toward the ceiling.

"Do you believe that the earth rotates on its axis?"

"That's what I was taught in school, sir."

"If that hypothesis is true, we are rolling through space at the rate of about sixteen miles a minute," figured the banker. "Now you say heaven is up there."

"Yes, sir."

"Biggs, what time is it?"

The servant glanced at the great clock in the corner.

"Ah, it's twelve o'clock, sir, and time for your medicine," in a voice full of relief.

"Never mind the drugs," commanded McMasters, "until we finish our problem in higher mathematics. Now, if I ask you where heaven is at midnight,

which will be twelve hours from now, where will you point," triumphantly.

"Why, up there," replied the bewildered servant, again indicating the ceiling.

"Then," cried McMasters, "you will be pointing directly opposite from the place you indicated a moment ago; for by midnight the earth will have turned approximately upside down. Do you get my point?"

"Yes, sir," replied poor Biggs, thoroughly befuddled.

"Then where will heaven be at six o'clock this evening?" fairly shouted the sick man.

"Out there," replied the servant, hopelessly, pointing toward the window.

"And where will heaven be at six o'clock in the morning?"

"Over there." And Biggs pointed a trembling finger at the fireplace. Then, "Oh, sir, let's not—the doctor——"

"Hang the doctor," interrupted McMasters testily. "I've been thinking this thing over, and I've got to talk about it to someone."

"But don't you believe in a hereafter?" queried Biggs, a horrible note of fear in his pitiful voice.

For a moment the banker was silent; the massive clock ticked solemnly on. A coal toppled with a sputter and flare in the fireplace.

"Yes, Hiram," in a thoughtful voice, "I suppose I do."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," cried Biggs in very evident relief.

"Ah, if you could but tell me," continued the banker, "from whence we come, and whither we go?"

"If I knew, sir, I'd be equal with the Creator," answered Biggs with reverence.

"That's well said, Hiram, but it doesn't satisfy me. I've made my place in the world by getting to the root of things. Ah, if I could only get a peek behind the

curtain, before I go—back-stage, you know—mayhap I would not be afraid to die," and his voice fell almost to a whisper.

"The Great Director does not permit the audience behind the footlights, unless he calls them," answered Biggs whimsically, the ghost of a smile lighting up his troubled features.

"Another thing, Biggs, do you believe those stories about Jonah, and Lazarus, and the fellow they let down through a hole in the roof to be healed?"

"I do, sir," with conviction.

"Do you understand how it was done?" testily.

"Of course not, sir, being only a human."

"Then tell me, Hiram, when you cannot see through it, how can you swallow all this theology?"

"My faith, sir," answered Biggs, simply, raising his eyes with reverence.

At this, a quizzical smile came over the sick man's face.

"In looking up, Hiram, don't forget, since it is twelve-thirty, that we have swung around four hundred and eighty miles from the spot you originally designated as the location of the Pearly Gates."

"Oh, sir, I beg of you," remonstrated the servant, "I cannot bear to have you jest on such a—why, master!" he broke off with a little cry, rushing to his bedside.

The quizzical smile on the banker's face had suddenly faded, and his head had fallen feebly back upon the pillow.

"Oh, why did he waste his strength so?" cried Biggs, piteously, as with trembling hands and tear-blurred eyes he searched the little table for the smelling-salts.

After a few breaths, the patient sighed and opened his eyes wearily.

"My medicine, Hiram, and then I must rest."

AT MIDNIGHT, Biggs, dozing in a big chair by the fire, was aroused by a voice from the sick bed.

"Hiram."

"Yes, sir," scurrying to turn on a subdued light.

"Where is heaven now?"

Noting the wan flicker of a smile, the old servant pointed solemnly downward.

"You are a bright pupil," came in a scarcely audible voice.

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you know, Biggs, I wish I had led a different—a better life."

"You have been a good master, sir. You have been kind, you have given liberally to charity," Biggs defended him.

"Yes," cynically, "I have given liberally to charity. But it has been no sacrifice."

"You have been a pillar in the church," ventured Biggs.

"Yes," bitterly, "a stone pillar. I have paid handsomely for my pew, and slept peacefully through the sermons. I have bought baskets of food for the poor at Thanksgiving and Christmas time, only to let others reap the happiness of giving them away. I could have had so much joy out of Christmas, if I would. I could have been a jolly, rosy-cheeked Santa Claus and gone to a hundred homes, my arms loaded with gifts."

"True, sir, but you made that joy possible for others."

"When I should have known the thrill of it myself. I have not really lived, Hiram. To draw the sweets truly out of life, one must humble himself and serve his fellow men. Yes, the scales have fallen from my eyes, Hiram. But it is too late, 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.'"

"It doesn't seem right, sir," said Biggs after a pause.

"What's that, Hiram?"

"Why, sir, that you should be stricken

down in the prime of life, just at a time when you could mean so much to others, while I, old and useless, am permitted to live on. But I am not finding fault with Providence, sir," Biggs hastened to say; "I just can't find the meaning of the riddle, sir."

"Probably I've had my chance and fumbled it, Biggs."

"Even so, sir, God is not vindictive, according to my ideas. There surely is some other solution. I'm still going to pray that He will take me in your stead, even if a miracle must be performed."

"So you have faith in your prayers, do you, Biggs?"

"Yes, sir, if they are unselfish prayers."

"That brand is rather scarce, I take it," answered McMasters, but his tone was reflective rather than sarcastic.

"Oh, sir, I wish you would pray as I do. God would surely understand."

"Rather a queer request, Hiram. If my life depends upon your death no prayer shall ever pass my lips."

"But, sir, I'm an old——"

"However," interrupted McMasters, "I shall pray that if my life is spared in any other fashion, I will make full amends for my years of indifference and neglect. And, Hiram, no one knows how much I truly seek this divine dispensation. But I have always scoffed at death-bed confessions, and so my heart grows cold, for I have no right to ask—now." Again, wearily, "No right—now."

"Ah, master, God is plenteous in mercy. If you but have the faith, sir, it shall make you whole."

"Very good, had I lived as you have lived, Biggs." Then, after a pause, "Still, the cause is worthy, my heart is right and I shall approach the Throne. May God be merciful unto me, a sinner."

"I hope it is not too late yet," faltered Biggs. "Oh, if God would only call me

in your stead, that you might still do the good work that you find it in your heart to do, how gladly would I go."

A deep sigh was his only answer.

A LONG silence was finally broken by the sick man. But when he spoke, his voice was so strange and uncanny that the servant hastened close and peered anxiously into the fever-flushed face of the sufferer.

"Hiram—I must tell you—a secret," came in a laborious, almost sepulchral, whisper.

Biggs came closer.

"Bring a chair and sit down. I must talk to you."

As the old servant again leaned forward, the sufferer hesitated; then with an obvious effort he began.

"Hiram, I am going to give you some instructions which you must obey to the letter. Will you promise to keep them?"

"I swear it, sir," with great earnestness.

"Good! Now, if this fever seals my lips and the doctor pronounces me dead——"

"Please, sir," Biggs broke in, tears streaming down his furrowed cheeks, but his master continued in the same subdued voice, "Whatever happens, I am not to be embalmed—do you hear me?—not embalmed, but just laid away as I am now."

"Yes, sir," in a choked voice, which fully betrayed the breaking heart behind it.

"And now, Hiram, the rest of the secret." He paused and beckoned Biggs to lean closer.

"In my vault—in the mausoleum, I have had an electric button installed. That button connects with a silver bell. Lift up that small picture of Napoleon, there upon the wall."

His hands trembling as with the palsy,

Biggs reached out and lifted aside the picture hanging near the head of the bed, and there revealed the silver bell, fitted into a small aperture in the wall. Then, with a sob, he fell back into his chair.

"Hiram"—in a whisper—"after they bury me, you are to sleep in this bed."

With a cry, the old man threw out a horrified, expostulating hand. Catching it feverishly, the banker half raised himself in bed.

"Don't you understand?" he cried fiercely. "I may not be dead after all. Remember grandfather! And Biggs—if that bell rings, get help—quick!"

Suddenly releasing his hold, McMasters fell back limply among the pillows.

ALL through the long night the faithful Biggs maintained a sleepless vigil, but the banker lay as immovable as a stone. When the rosy-checked dawn came peeping audaciously through the casements, Biggs drew the heavy curtains tightly shut once more.

Not until the doctor's motor whirled away did the patient rouse from his lethargy.

Apparently strengthened by his deep stupor he spoke, and Biggs stood instantly beside him.

"What did the doctor say?"

Biggs hesitated.

"Out with it, I'm no chicken-hearted weakling."

"Nothing much," admitted Biggs, sadly. "He only shook his head very gravely."

"He doesn't understand this family malady any more than the old quack who allowed my grandfather to be buried alive," said McMasters almost fiercely.

Biggs shuddered and put a trembling hand to his eyes.

"What ails me, Biggs?" almost plaintively. "No one knows. This fever has

baffled the scientists for years. When you fall into a comatose condition they call it suspended animation. That's the best thing they do—find names for diseases. My family doctor doesn't have any more of an idea about this malady than you or I. The average physician is just a guesser. He guesses you have a fever and prescribes a remedy, hoping that it will hit the spot. If it doesn't he looks wise, wags his head—and tries something else on you. Maybe it works and maybe it doesn't. The only thing my guesser is absolutely sure of is that if I live or if I die, he will collect a princely fee for his services."

Biggs remained statuesque during the pause.

"Gad," McMasters broke out again testily, "if I fiddled around in my business like that I'd be a pauper in a month."

"But the doctor says you're coming on," ventured Biggs.

"Sure he does," answered the banker with a sneer. "That's his stock in trade. I know that line of palaver. Secretly, he knows I am as liable to be dead as alive when he comes again."

"Oh, sir, you aren't going to die!"

"That's what I'm afraid of, Biggs. But they'll call me dead and go ahead and embalm me and make sure of it."

"Oh, sir, I wish——"

"Now remember, Biggs," broke in the slick man, "shoot the first undertaker that tries to put that mummy stuff in my veins."

"I understand perfectly, sir," answered Biggs, fearful lest the other's excitement might again give him a turn for the worse.

"I know I'm apparently going to pass away. My father and grandfather both had this cussed virus in their veins, and

I don't believe either of them was dead when he was pronounced so!"

"Well, if by any chance—that is, if you," began Biggs desperately, "if you are apparently—dead—why not have them keep your body here in the house for a time?"

"Convention, formality, custom, hide-bound law!" the banker fairly frothed. "The health authorities would come here with an army and see that I was buried. No, Biggs, I've got a fine crypt out there, all quiet and secure, good ventilation, electric lights, like a pullman berth—and a push-button. That precludes all notoriety. It's secret and safe. The electrician who installed the apparatus died four years ago. So you and I, alone, possess this knowledge."

"Don't you think someone else should know of it too? Your attorney, or——"

"No, Biggs. If I really am dead I don't want anyone to write up my eccentricities for some Sunday magazine sheet. And if I do come back, then it will be time to tell the gaping public about my cleverness."

"I wish you weren't so—so cold-blooded about it all, sir."

"I have always hit straight from the shoulder, Hiram, and I'm facing this death business as I'd face any other proposition. I'm not ready to cash in, and if I can cheat the doctors, undertakers, lawyers, heirs, and chief mourners for a few more years, I'm going to do it. And don't forget poor old granddad. He might have been up and about yet had he but used my scheme."

BIGGS turned away, sick at heart. It was too terrible beyond words. To him his religion was as essential as daily bread. Death was the culmination of cherished belief and constant prayer. As his years declined he had faced the inevitable day with simple faith that when the

summons came he would go gladly, like him "who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams." With throbbing heart he listened for another torrent of words that would still further stab his sensitive soul; for he had loved and revered his master from his youth up.

But no words came. He wheeled about. The massive head had fallen limply among the pillows. Pallid lips were trying to form sentences without result. Then the great body seemed to subside immeasurably deeper into the covers and a death-like stillness fell upon the room.

Intuitively feeling that his master was worse than at any previous relapse, Biggs made every effort to revive him, gently at first, and then by vigorously shaking and calling to him in a heart-broken, piteous voice. But to no avail. The heavy figure looked pallid and corpse-like under the snowy sheets.

Long hours dragged by, and still the lonely old servant sat mutely beside the bed, only aroused, at last, by the peremptory, measured call of the telephone bell.

"Yes," said Biggs in a quavering voice. "Oh yes, Doctor Meredith, Master's resting easy. Don't think you'll need to come until tomorrow."

"I'll keep them away as long as I can," he muttered, as he slipped back to his vigil. "God grant—maybe he'll come back—and take up the work of the Master, so long delayed. Oh God! If Thou wouldst only take me in his stead!"

Sleeping fitfully, Biggs sat dumbly through an interminable night, but the new day brought no reassuring sign from the inert form. The stillness was appalling. The other servants were quartered in a distant part of the mansion and only came when summoned. Again Biggs assured the physician that he could gain nothing by calling, and another awful

night found him, ashen and distraught, at the bedside. Sometime in the still watches he swooned and kindly nature patched up his shredded nerves, before consciousness once more aroused him. But the strain was more than he could bear. So when the anxious specialist came, unbidden, he found a shattered old watchman who broke down completely and babbled forth the whole mysterious tale, concealing nothing but the secret of the tomb.

In a coffin previously made to order, they laid the unembalmed remains of Judson McMasters in the family mausoleum, and the world which had felt his masterful presence for so many years paused long enough to lay a costly tribute on his bier and then went smoothly on its way.

Not so with the faithful Biggs. Enconced in his master's bedroom, he nightly tossed in troubled sleep, filled with the jangling of innumerable electric bells. And when—on the tenth night, after he had been somewhat reassured that all was well—he was suddenly awakened by a mad, incessant ringing from the hidden alarm, a deathly weakness overcame him and it was some time before he was able to drag his palsied body from the bed. With fumbling, clumsy fingers he tried to hasten, but it was many minutes before he tottered, half dressed, out of the room. And as he did so, his heart almost stood still, then mounted to his throat as if to choke him.

"Biggs!"—a voice—McMaster's voice was calling.

He staggered to the head of the wide, massive stairway and looked down. There stood the banker, pale, emaciated, but smiling.

And then, as from an endless distance, came more words:

"I forgot to tell you that I had a trap-

door in the end of the casket. When you didn't answer the bell, I found I could come alone."

With an inarticulate cry, Biggs stretched out his trembling arms.

"My Master, I am coming now."

Then he swayed, stumbled, clutched feebly at the rail and plunged headlong to the foot of the stairs, a crumpled, lifeless form.
