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Weird Tales

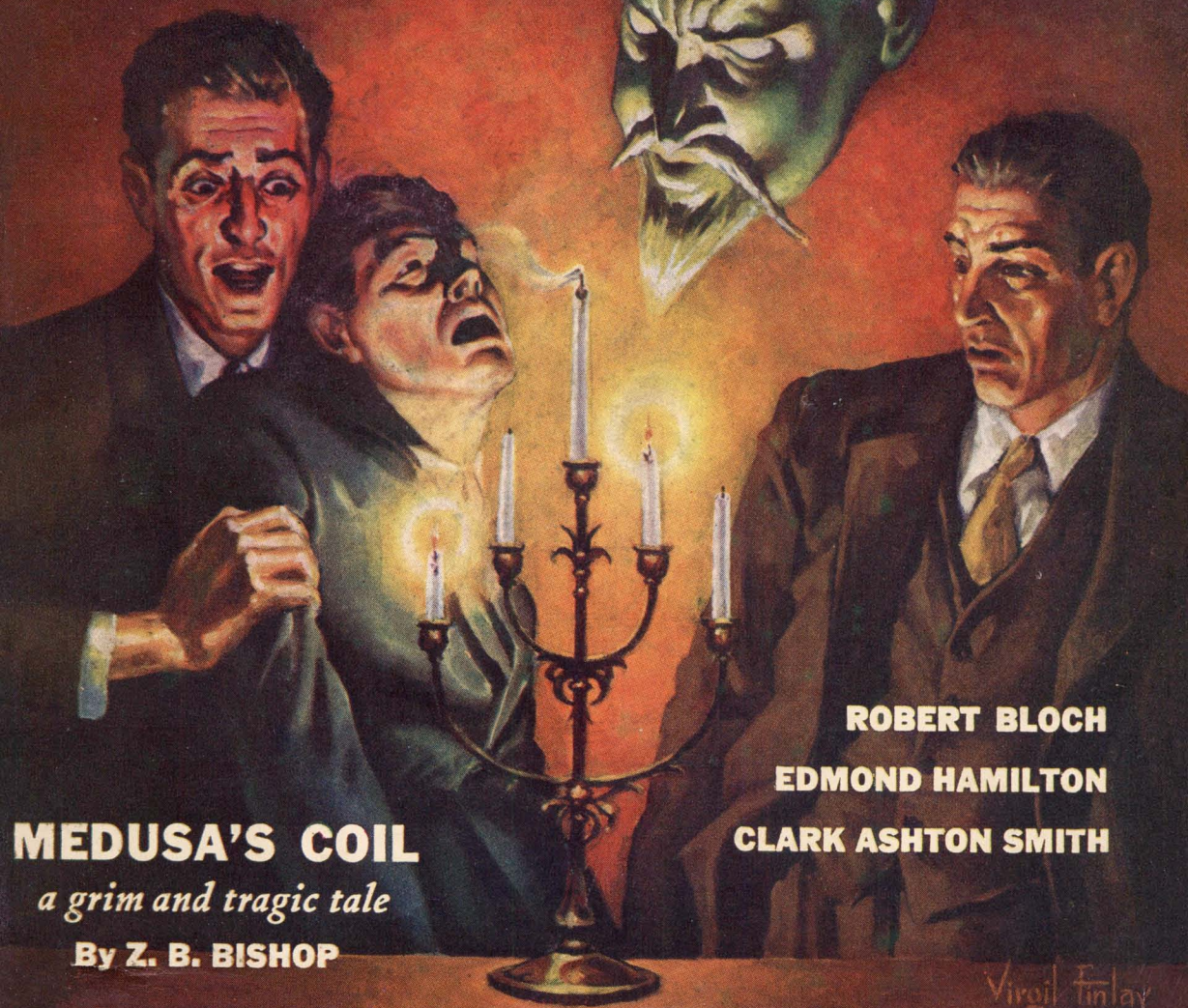
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JANUARY

THE FIFTH CANDLE

the story of a weird curse

By **CYRIL MAND**



ROBERT BLOCH

EDMOND HAMILTON

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

MEDUSA'S COIL

a grim and tragic tale

By **Z. B. BISHOP**

Virgil Finlay

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CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1938

Number 1

Cover Design	Virgil Finlay	
<i>Illustrating "The Fifth Candle"</i>		
Waxworks	Robert Bloch	9
<i>The story of a wax statue that was instinct with evil allure—a fascinating tale of a weird crime</i>		
"Hence, Loathed Melancholy!"	Virgil Finlay	25
<i>Pictorial interpretation of Milton's poem, "L'Allegro"</i>		
Medusa's Coil	Z. B. Bishop	26
<i>A powerful and compelling tale of brooding horror that deepens and broadens to the final catastrophe</i>		
The Fifth Candle	Cyril Mand	54
<i>The Old Man reached back from the grave each year to bring doom to his faithless sons</i>		
The Warrior	Emil Petaja	60
<i>A tribute in verse to the late Robert E. Howard</i>		
Bride of the Lightning	Edmond Hamilton	61
<i>What was that coiling thing of dazzling brilliance that reached for Sheila with its arms of living light?</i>		
Othello Time	Vincent Starrett	70
<i>Verse</i>		
I Found Cleopatra (Part 3)	Thomas P. Kelley	71
<i>A 4-part tale of the startling adventure that befell a young American who went to meet the Midnight Lady</i>		
And Thus I Knew	Dorothy Agard Ansley	98
<i>Verse</i>		
The Silver Coffin	Robert Barbour Johnson	99
<i>A short weird story about the frightful thing imprisoned in a metal coffin</i>		
These Doth the Lord Hate	Gans T. Field	105
<i>A weird fragment from the Dark Ages</i>		
Date in the City Room	Talbot Johns	109
<i>Two old friends keep an eerie rendezvous</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
A Rendezvous in Averoine	Clark Ashton Smith	112
<i>One of the finest vampire stories ever written</i>		
The Eyrie		123
<i>The readers express their opinions</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Fifth Candle

By CYRIL MAND

The Old Man reached back from his grave each year to light one candle in a weird candelabrum, and strange was the doom that came to the brothers when that candle expired

I fled, and cried out Death;
Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed
From all her caves, and back resounded Death.
—MILTON: *Paradise Lost*.

LAUGHABLE—isn't it?—that one so cynical and unbelieving as I should sit here, quivering and shaking in fear of a specter; that I should cower in dread, listening to the inexorable ticking of the remorseless clock. Amusing, indeed, that I should know terror.

And yet five years ago when we sat at this table, we five Brunof brothers, the way we laughed! The pall of stale, blue cigarette smoke that hung over us was an exotic mask for the strident laughter that echoed and re-echoed through it. The dim electric light filtered through its mistiness, centering upon the figure of the Old Man at the head of the table, frothing in fury. We were taunting him—perhaps a little too much, for of a sudden he calmed. His face became grim, almost imposing in spite of the tracks of illness and age. His thin falsetto voice took on tone.

"So be it then! You, my evil sons—you who instead of filial love and respect have given me affront and irreverence—you who have repeatedly brought disgrace upon my name—you who have been profligates, who through your squandering have nearly ruined me—you who have brought me to death's door—you shall now pay for your flagrancancy.

"I was born in Russia—not the gay, carefree Russia of Moscow or Saint Petersburg but the silent, frigid Russia of the Kirghiz levels. The knowledge that for centuries has been the lore of these steppes was born into me. Jeer if you want to. My years of study in the occult have not caused you alarm thus far. Let them not trouble you now.

"Look at that candelabrum with its five candles. I die tonight. But every year on this day, March 21, at this hour, eight o'clock, I shall return to this room to light a candle in that candelabrum. And as each candle burns itself down and flickers and dies, so shall one of you weaken and die. May this be my legacy to you, my evil sons!"

He retired beyond the scope of the haze-diffused light into the black yawn of the hallway, leaving us laughing and hurling gibes at his retreating figure. Later, we did not laugh so much, when we went into his somber walnut-paneled room and found his shriveled body at the desk, his lifeless head with beady eyes glazed in death, pillowed on the crumpled pages of one of his evil Russian volumes.

THE Old Man left the house to all of us, together. Because of this, and also of our lack of money, March 21 of the next year found us all, but one, Sergei, seated at the table at dinner. The odors and harsh clatter of dinner-

time jarred against the calm placidity of approaching spring. We were laughing again. Ivan, who always did seem like a younger and more droll edition of myself, had remembered the anniversary of the curse. With mock ceremony he had abstained from lighting one of the candles in the candelabrum and had made us leave the chair at the head of the table vacant. Now we sat listening to his ribald jests at the Old Man's expense.

"Be patient, brothers. But four and one-half minutes more," he said, glanc-

ing at the huge, gold-handed Peter the First clock at the side of the room, "and we shall be again honored by the presence of our esteemed father. And who shall be the first he takes back with him? Certainly not me—the youngest. Probably you, Alexei," he grinned at me. "He always did hate you most. Ever fleeing him in your nice quiet way. Sneering. Laughing up your sleeve at him and his distemper. And then, too, you are the oldest of us. You're first in line. Boris, why don't you pray for him a bit? A religious cove



"He decided that the best protection against the Old Man would be to fight him with his own weapon—the occult."

like you ought to be able to really go to town on his black soul.

"Ah, it's time for our phantom. It's eight o'clock. Hello, Old Man." He rose, bowing to an imaginary figure at the door. "How are you? How's it back there in Hades? You *did* go there. Sit right down——" His speech died off.

The chamber darkened. A queer, spectral haze filled the room. It swished and swirled, yet ever contracted toward a single point—the chair at the head of the table. We gazed, stupefied. It became a shape. The shape became—a man. There could be no mistake. The shriveled figure; the wolfish head with its piercing, beady eyes, hawk-like nose, bulging forehead, and parchment cheeks—it was the Old Man!

We stared aghast. Ivan staggered back. Boris crossed himself. Dmitri and I just sat, unnerved, frozen into impotency. The Old Man stood up. He slowly extended his fleshless hand toward the malefically scintillating candelabrum on the table. The unlit candle flared into life! His well-remembered falsetto came as of old, seeming strangely melancholy.

"Even as this candle burns down and flickers and dies, so shall you weaken and die, Ivan."

Ivan gasped. Dmitri's oath shattered the silence as he leaped up and reached for the fowling-piece over the mantel. He grasped it and fired blindly as he turned. The detonation echoed back and forth in the narrow confines of the room. The air was polluted by gun smoke and the bitter tang of exploded powder. The candle sputtered, undulated, and flamed on. The smoke cleared slowly. The misty figure of the Old Man was gone. And on the floor, thrashing frantically, lay Ivan, blood spurting from a wound in his chest.

We rushed to him, all except Boris,

who stood, devoutly blind eyes fixed on the ceiling, muttering monotonous prayer. Dmitri cursed himself violently. It was a mortal wound. We bandaged him in vain. His life ebbed out with his blood. And as he breathed out his last, the lone candle flickered and went out.

THE trial was a nightmare. Of course, we three brothers stood firmly behind Dmitri. Sergei was the real mainstay, though. He saw to the selecting and the hiring of the lawyers, and the various other matters of Dmitri's defense. As a prosperous business man his influence and money aided us immeasurably. Throughout Dmitri's successive convictions for first degree murder, it was always Sergei who secured another appeal and carried the case to a still higher court while the months dragged along. But it was all futile. Dmitri and Ivan had always been utter opposites in character. As a result, they had had violent and frequent quarrels. It was these clashes of opposing wills—in reality unimportant, but to the world highly significant — that were now continually flaunted before the jury. At each trial we repeated the story of the Old Man's curse and the part it had played in Ivan's death—and were laughed down as liars, lunatics, or both. We only succeeded in making our case ridiculous and in tying tighter the noose around Dmitri's neck. We fought on in vain.

In the heat of litigation we almost forgot the shadow that hung over us too. And yet the sands were running low.

Finally, the inevitable occurred. On January 30, the highest court of the state set the date of execution by hanging for the week of March 17. The governor refused a reprieve. We could

do no more. We gave up the fight and went home.

On the night of March 21, a few minutes after eight o'clock, at the same time that three brothers sitting at dinner watched a lone candle flicker and burn out, Dmitri Brunof at the state penitentiary was executed for murder in the first degree.

BORIS was really frightened now. According to age he was next to go after Dmitri. He lived in a mortal funk of terror. For a time he turned to religion as a means of escape. The pageantry and ceremonies of the Church imparted to him an illusion of power and protection. However, religion was not the thing for him now. It had an undue influence on his mind, battered as it was by repeated shock and terror; and his inherent mysticism was intensified by it to a stark fanaticism.

His superstitions, too, were magnified and stimulated. He grew into an unreasoning dread of the dark. He became the victim of charlatans and fakes. He spent his money on occult remedies and charms. Any exhibition of seemingly supernatural power awed and frightened him.

And then at a stage show of Edward Rentmore, the English wizard, he went into hysterics. This and the notoriety we had achieved through our evidence at Dmitri's trial were enough to gain us Rentmore's attention. Besides being an illusionist, he had gained quite a degree of fame as a medium. To Boris, whom he now befriended, he was another bulwark against the power of the Old Man. Under his influence Boris became an adherent of spiritualism. He developed into an actual disciple of Rentmore. And finally Rentmore brought his mind to bear upon his un-

derling's problem. As was natural to him, considering his vocation, he decided that the best protection against the Old Man would be to fight him with his own weapon—the occult. And so, during the time remaining till March 21 Boris and Rentmore were engaged in preparing for the destruction of the Old Man on the night of his appearance. They sat up far into the night poring over the Old Man's malefic Russian volumes. It was in that dimly-lit library that they learned to develop their innate mind-forces. Sergei and I just waited, watching skeptically, grimly amused.

On March 21 at dinner, Rentmore, Boris, Sergei and I were seated at the table. It was almost eight o'clock. The dim, inadequate light illuminated us feebly: Sergei, white face twisted into a cynical smile; Boris, nervously confident; and Rentmore, his sallow, yellow face frozen into a featureless impenetrability.

We were hardly surprised when that unearthly mist came and condensed, forming the shape of the Old Man. Sergei and I sat as if drugged, detachedly curious as spectators, conscious of the seething ferment of battle around us. We *felt* that struggle—mind against mind, will against will, knowledge against knowledge.

Then, as the beat of the hostile wills fell upon it, the form of the Old Man seemed to blur, diffuse, go queerly out of focus. We were winning! My detachedness vanished. I felt jubilant. The shadow that hung over us was lifting. But no! The figure of the Old Man once more took on its sharp, well-defined lines. Inexorably his arm reached out. Slowly, almost as if reluctantly, the candle in the candelabrum flamed up in response to that outstretched, withered hand. That thin

statement of doom once more shrilled through the air.

"Even as this candle burns down and flickers and dies, so shall you weaken and die, Boris."

We stared at the candle, fascinated—not even noticing in what manner the Old Man went. The Peter the First clock ticked on, its golden hands slicing time and life, slowly and deliberately. The candle burned with a steady, even flame. Minutes passed. Rentmore lay in an exhausted stupor. The flame flickered, danced wildly as some slight current of air twisted it askew. It steadied, then flickered again. For a moment it writhed fitfully, sputtering.

Boris screamed—a long, agonized shriek. He started up, with one hand sweeping the candelabrum from the table, with the other fumbling at the insecurely mounted light-button. Then, suddenly, he choked, gasped, as if suffocating. The candelabrum seemed to cling to his hand. His twisted face mimicked our horror.

He slumped to the floor, breaking that lethal current of electricity, a grotesque heap of death. The candelabrum slipped from his hand, its clatter muffled by the exotic thickness of the Khivan rug.

SERGEI had always been the cleverest one of us. He was practical, and besides his native cunning he possessed a good amount of real intelligence. Therefore, to him, of all the brothers, had passed the administration of our affairs. And certainly he had always done well in this capacity.

Whenever he had a problem, either personal or of business, he sat down alone in a half-dark room and there analyzed, speculated, and made and discarded schemes until he was sure he had the correct solution. It was this

that he did now. The day after Boris' death he sat for a long time in the huge, half-lit dining-room, staring with perplexed eyes and knit brows at the candelabrum. It was long after I had gone to a sleepless bed that I heard him tread heavily up to his room.

The next morning he gave me his solution as I knew he would. "It seems that just two things are menacing us—the Old Man and the candelabrum. It is these two things that we must fight against if we want to survive. The Old Man is, of course, beyond our reach. However, the candelabrum——" His hand had knocked over a glass of water. He regarded the weaving track of the spilled liquid. "It is of solid gold and valuable. This afternoon when I go to the city I shall take it with me. At the Government mint I shall sell it as old gold. Within a week, probably, it will be melted down and stamped into coins. The coins will circulate and by March 21 the candelabrum will be scattered all over the country. Then let us see how our esteemed father will take the loss of his precious candelabrum. In his present state he can hardly curse another of the things. Yes, I think we are safe. . . ."

I rather agreed with him. I rejoiced now as in the old days Ivan, Dmitri, Boris and I had rejoiced together in having a brother gifted with that elusive thing—common sense. I was confident that Sergei's canniness had saved us. The candelabrum was duly sold and, as our inquiries a few months later proved, melted down. Thus with the material threat of the curse removed, our fears vanished. We joked again, if rather grimly, of the Old Man. We mocked once more—mimicking the Old Man's falsetto voice. We speculated endlessly as to what the Old Man would do when he

failed to find the candelabrum when he came to light it—or did he know already? We laughed again. . . . The days and weeks and months passed quickly, unclouded.

March 21 found me at a friend's house. Sergei was traveling again on one of his business trips, and I had no desire to be present alone when the Old Man came to light the candle in the vanished candelabrum. The day, the evening, and even the eighth hour passed easily. My friend and I chatted, supped, and played chess. Finally we went to bed.

I dropped off to sleep almost immediately. And then—out of the forefront of oblivion, as if he had been waiting for me, came the Old Man. The black nothingness behind him became a swirling mist that advanced and settled down around us. I was seated at the table. I looked wildly about me. There at the side of the Peter the First clock marked eight o'clock. The candelabrum occupied the center of the table. And as the candle in it flared into life, the Old Man's words came to me.

"Even as this candle burns down and flickers out, so shall you weaken and die, Sergei."

I awoke shrieking at the gray dawn.

I dressed hurriedly, rushed downstairs, and seized the newspaper. The front page was smeared with a flamboyantly written and detailed account of a railway wreck. I read it through carefully. Among the killed was—Sergei Brunof. I looked for the time of the crash, strangely calm now. Yes, it had happened just after eight.

FOR two weeks I could not bring myself to go to the mansion. Not only was it the fear of that lonely old building with its charnel atmosphere,

but also melancholy that kept me away. I knew how sad it would be to live there with the shades of vanished lives and muted laughter. The phantoms of my four brothers and the Old Man still peopled those silent rooms and empty halls.

Finally I did again venture into the dark oppressiveness of the house. And then in the dining-room I received another shock. There on the table where it had always stood before, and where I had seen it in the dream, was the candelabrum. Ridiculous, fantastic, impossible! And yet there it was, its dull golden glitter mocking me! I was stricken, bemazed—and yet really I knew that I had expected some such thing. So I just left it there.

And so it stood there throughout the year. Every day I sat at the table and ate my lonely meals, watching it cautiously, as if it were a live, malevolent being. I think I went a little mad watching it. It seemed to hypnotize me, too. It possessed an eery power over my mind. It drew me from whatever I was doing at times. I sat and gazed at it for hours. I mused endlessly as to what strange hands had hammered it again to its old shape, what weird tools had again formed its graceful branches. And all the time it seemed to be possessed of that same unearthly sentience. I could hardly bear even to dust it. I tried a few times to escape its evil spell. I went away—only to leave abruptly wherever I was, lured back to the dank old house and the glittering candelabrum. I lost contact with all humans. My supplies were sent out from the city by a boy who seemed to fear me as if I were the devil himself. I hardly ate. I just watched it. It seemed the only real thing in a house of mist and indistinctness. Vague and unrelated thoughts

crept into my mind. I felt strangely confused and bewildered. It inspired me with an irrational and insatiable longing for something—I don't know what. I took to stalking the long, gloomy corridors in a frenzied search for the non-existent.

Today, cold fear jelled my panic into a sort of blunt insensibility when I realized that it was March 21. I sat all day at the table in a dull stupor, staring with dead, vacant eyes at the golden candelabrum.

Suddenly the desire to set this tale on paper came to me. The reaction to my

apathy set in. Of a sudden I was full of a nervous, driving energy. For the past hour I have been sitting here writing. I am glad that I have been able to finish in time. The hour for the fifth candle draws near.

Ivan, Dmitri, Sergei, Boris—they are all gone. The Old Man took them. And certainly he will take me, too. Perhaps it will be just as well if I join them. I'll be back among my own. Dust to dust. . . .

It is after eight already. The candelabrum is empty of candles. I wonder, will he bring one. . . .