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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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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Silver Coffin

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

*A brief weird story about the frightful thing that was imprisoned
in that strange metal coffin*

“CAREFUL, sir!” the old man warned me. “Tread cautiously, for these old stairs are worn away and slippery here. And the tunnel itself is very low and narrow. ’Tis better so, of course, for ’tis less conspicuous. Only a couple of the cemetery men know that it’s down here at all, sir, below the other vaults. And neither of them knows where it leads to, nor what lies down here in the old crypt.”

He lifted his lantern. I saw a vast stone chamber ahead, the walls dank with moisture and covered with strange lichens that were like a pale leprosy over everything. The silence of death was about us as we stood there.

“Here we are, sir,” the old man said. “Here’s the spot where I’ve kept vigil all these years. How’ve I stood it? ’Tis a question I’ve often asked myself, sir. But I guess what we must do we’ll find the strength to do, hard though it be. And then, ye see, I’m what ye might call *bred* to the thing. ’Twas me father’s task before me, and he did it well! It makes a sort of tradition in the family, ye see, a legacy we daren’t relinquish.

“There’s my own son, sir. Paul (he’s just turned twenty this year), he’ll have to take me place down here in the crypt when I’m too old to carry on. He knows about it already, and he’s resigned. But sometimes I can see the

shadow of the future on his young face, and it troubles me, sir, troubles me more than I can say. But then he could be worse off, ye know. He’ll have a sure job and good wages throughout his life, just as I’ve had, and all just for watchin’ down here at night. In these evil times a man could be much worse off. The Holt trust fund takes care of the pay, guarantees it through all time. And as for a raise—why, bless ye, sir, I could ask for ten times the money I’m getting now, and there’d never be a question. Why don’t I, then? Well, it’s like I said, sir. I feel that this thing is a duty and not a job. Somehow even talking about more money for doing it seems—ye know, sir, I was about to say ‘sacrilege’! Funny, isn’t it? For the good Lord knows there’s nothing sacred about this business. It savors more of the Other Place, if ye take my meaning!”

The shadows crawled like crippled rats about us.

“Ye see, sir,” the croaking voice went on, “there must be always a guard down here. Someone has to watch, night after night, someone who has discretion and patience and—courage, if I do say it meself as shouldn’t! Those were me father’s virtues before me, and I’ve copied them as best I could. And ye know, sir, a man just wouldn’t *last* down here unless he was fairly steady! Ye get the strangest thoughts

sometimes in the long hours before dawn, when there's no sound but the drip, drip of moisture from the old arches and that other sound that ye'll be hearing in just a moment, sir, that sound that hasn't ceased in half a century, and that may never cease until Judgment's trumpet sounds to end the horror along with all else.

"You understand, of course, that the Holts aren't just another family. They are the best, if ye know what I mean, sir. They're proud, and they've a right to be proud. They were nobility back in England, sir, and they've been noble folk here too, since Virginia was still a royal fief. There was General Ebenezer Holt, who fought beside Washington all through the Revolution, and Abijah Holt, him as was with Perry on Lake Erie, and—oh, a lot of others just as distinguished. The Holts are a mighty line, sir. Stiff-necked, some call them, but 'tis their blood that makes them so.

"And so, of course, this stain has to be kept a secret, at all costs. There's even some of the family that don't know; they have just heard that something queer was amiss. Only the 'Head' of each generation ever comes down in the vault, and then only on occasional inspection tours to be sure that all's well. Young Mr. Gerald Holt—though he's not so young by now, I reckon; time gets away from ye down here—Mr. Gerald had his hair turn gray at the temples the first time he saw the vault! So I guess I've naught to complain of, at that. I'm not touched personally by the thing, ye see. It's only objective horror to me, of course, just as 'twill be only objective to my son when I'm gone. But the horror that waits for each young Holt when he comes of age—why, it turns ye sick just thinking about it, sir!

"Of course, the whole secret has been well kept all these years. The Holts themselves own this cemetery. I'm supposed to be just one of the regular guards. I wear the uniform and I help out a bit at grave-digging and funerals now and then, so that there'll be no suspicion of me. 'Tis generally believed that I'm watching this place because of the silver casket. *That* would be a prize to robbers—now wouldn't it, sir?—although of course there's no danger of robbery now. 'Tis for quite a different purpose I watch down here from dusk till dawn, sir—not to keep something out, but to keep something *in*, if ye take my meaning!

"**Y**E DIDN'T know about the silver coffin? Why, yes sir! It's the only one ever made, so far's I know. The old man ordered it made himself, in his will. He'd great faith in it, they say. Ye see, silver has always figured strong in the legends about Them, sir. Silver bullets was the only things potent against their unholy lives. And this, sir—this was a silver bullet seven feet long, welded into a solid mass! I've never seen a sight so amazing as that coffin was. I used to raise the pall sometimes at night and look at it. It'd make me feel safer to see that gleaming surface between me and the horror through long night watches. . . .

"They say, sir, 'twas old Andrew Holt himself who collected the silver that went into it. He was abroad for many years on his smuggling trips, and he picked up a lot of foreign stuff, candlesticks and vases and even silver crucifixes, they say, that he melted down into ingots. But thousands and thousands of silver dollars went into the ingots, too. They found a fortune in metal bricks in the old man's room when he died, hidden under a cloth.

That's how they knew the curse was on him, you see—by that and by the will he left, providing for the making of the coffin and for the preparation of this crypt and for the trust fund for perpetual care—which is me now, sir, and which was my father—Old Andrew's butler he was in his youth, you see—and which will be my son who comes after me. And his son, too, I suppose, unless the blight be lifted by then. . . .

" 'I shall rest quietly in a silver coffin,' my father told me Old Holt said in his will. 'There will be no need to fear, so long as there be no chink or rift in the metal. I have conned well the lore of these things, and I know. So it is my final prayer that no stake through the heart, no mutilation or ceremonial wounding shall desecrate my body after it be interred. So let my unnatural enduring go on until the taint that is in me shall perish through lack of nourishment for its unholy life. For without the blood there surely must be eventually a death even for the Undying.'

"The Holts carried out his wishes to the letter. They built this vault for him and set my father to watch over him in his silver casket. And the years went by without incident of any kind. Throughout my father's lifetime Old Andrew's grave was just another grave by day; though God alone knows what went on down here during the long night watches. My father's hair turned white long before his time. But he lived to be more than seventy, sir, and died at last peacefully in his bed. The Holts had him buried in their own plot, and put a headstone at his grave that reads: 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant!' I shall sleep there beside him when my turn comes to go, Mr. Gerald tells me, 'for the debt my

family owes to you and yours,' he says, 'can never be repaid.'

"He was referring, of course, to that business of a few years ago, when the horror sort of boiled over, you know. And it was me alone that first found out about it. Of course that's my job to watch for just such things. That's why I'm down here in the night. But strangely enough, 'twas not by being on duty in the vault that I learned about it. 'Twas by reading local newspapers at my home uptown, during the day!

"I DON'T know yet why I should have been so interested in those children and their mysterious 'disease.' Just a presentiment, I suppose. All my life I'd been fearful that such a thing might happen, even though the coffin seemed a safeguard. And after all those long years of safety! But I realized at once the significance of that epidemic that broke out among the poor wretched little brats in the Minsport tenements scarcely a mile away from here. 'Pernicious anemia' the doctors insisted it was. Child after child sickened and wasted away, their little bodies growing each day more pallid and bloodless and wan until finally death ended their sufferings. One—two—three—a dozen of them all taken the same way in so many days, or rather nights, crying out to their parents of queer, wild dreams, complaining of pains in their little throats each morning on awakening from troubled sleep; but dying, sir, slowly dying despite everything that science could do to save them! Wasting away to little cold corpses that were dumped like sacks into the Potter's Field in this very cemetery.

"God knows how long it had been going on before it came to my notice.

But when at last I knew, I went at once to Mr. Gerald with the story. 'It's come at last,' I told him 'The horror that we've been dreading all these years.' I showed him the items in the papers. 'You recognize the symptoms, sir?' I asked.

"For a moment I thought he was going to faint. It's no joke, sir, seeing a healthy man's face go white as marble and his breath cut off by sheer, overwhelming shock.

"'But—but,' he stammered at last, 'it can't be true! It can't be! You've been there watching every night! You would have seen——'

"I shook my head. 'You don't see Them if they will it otherwise, sir!' I told him. 'That's what all the books I've ever read agree on. They come and go like ghosts; only They aren't ghosts, but something far, far worse! The silver in that casket must have cracked, Mr. Gerald. Some flaw has come in it. You'll see!'

"He didn't want to believe me, of course. But I finally persuaded him to go and look at one of the poor little victims laid out for burial in the local morgue. And there could be no doubting the truth then. No doubt at all! Blind or mad the doctors must have been to prate of 'anemia' and to overlook those marks that were so plain on the dead babe's white throat; the swollen livid marks where needle-sharp teeth had pressed home to drain away the life-blood and leave the little form so wasted and thin that it might almost have been some grotesque rag-doll that lay there before us on the slab.

"'Nosferatu!' the master muttered as he turned away. 'Nosferatu, the undying! Somehow I never really believed it until now. I've carried out Grandfather's wishes because it was his will that I do so. But my sanity al-

ways clung to the hope that it was all only the madness of a childish old man, out of his head with the wild tales and superstitions he'd picked up in his Balkan wanderings. I read in his will of the Thing he said had bitten him in the night, had sucked his blood and made him into—well, into what he said he was! But I never really believed.'

"I shook my head sadly. 'Ye'd believe,' I told him, 'if ye could be down here in the vault with me at night, sir—if ye could hear what I've heard and see what I've seen. But until now I believed that no harm could come to anyone, that the casket was proof—but now, don't ye see, sir? We daren't trust it longer. We must act, at once! The Thing gains strength and cunning with each little life it takes. We must lay it once and for all. I know how 'tis done; I've read the olden rituals for laying them a thousand times over. And I've had all the needful things ready for just such an emergency.'

"But poor Mr. Gerald held back. 'No stake through the heart,' he quoted to me, 'no mutilation or ceremonial wounding shall desecrate my body after it be interred. Our pledge to poor Grandfather has been carried out all these years. Your family as well as mine has served in it. Must all our efforts go for nothing now, just because of one little rift in the coffin? Surely we can find that crack, seal it up——'

"'But in time there'd be another, sir,' I reminded him. 'And another! Even the silver is not strong enough to hold against the eternal struggling of that which never dies, which never ceases in its blind efforts to escape and find its unholy nourishment!'

"And then suddenly Mr. Gerald's face lit up. 'Strength!' he gasped.

'That's it! More strength! The silver's potency is unimpaired. All it needs is support, the reinforcement of something harder! Man alive, there are other metals harder than silver nowadays! We've the resources of modern science to pit against this horror out of the past. I tell you, we may yet be able to seal it up for all eternity. Wait and see!

"The very next day the workmen came, sir, from Bessemer—came with their weird apparatus and their scaffoldings and blow-torches. For days this old vault was lit with hissing blue flame like a spot in Hell, sir, and resounded with such hammering and pounding as quite to drown out—well, whatever other sounds there might have been. And when the men had done their job and gone away again—look, sir! That's what they left behind!"

HE HELD the lantern high. What was that vast black shape its rays lit lambently at the vault's far end?—that monstrous gleaming shape on stone trestles? A coffin? But surely it was larger than any coffin ever shaped by the hand of man.

"They tell me it's a new alloy they use for battleships, sir!" the old man said proudly. "An outer casing of stainless steel welded solidly to the silver coffin itself. Soldered, the outer and the inner layers, so that the magic power of the white metal, whatever queer potency it has to hold evil at bay, will be eternally supported by the strongest steel on earth! I doubt that a bolt of lightning could so much as dent that shining surface, sir. Seamless and air-tight, it'll endure a thousand years, even with what still struggles inside it.

"Yes, sir! I heard it too, sir. Of

course I heard it. 'Tis no novelty to me, ye know. All these long dragging years I've been hearing it, down here in the night's hush. But I was wondering when *you'd* first notice it, sir. 'Tis plain enough when your attention is called to it, for all 'tis so muffled it might be coming from miles off. But it's right here in the crypt with us, that sound, only filtered through the silver and the steel.

"There's really nothing at all human about it, is there, sir? It might be the howling of a wolf, or almost anything savage and bestial. And yet sometimes there's such a note of human misery and despair in it as to fair bring tears to your eyes, sir. Only tonight there's more of menace in it somehow, sir, more than I've ever heard in all these years. You know, sir, I'm wondering if—good God, sir! Look! Look there!

"The coffin! It moved! I know ye think me mad—that thing weighs a score of tons. Your strength and mine united could not as much as tip it. And yet I saw it move a bit. There! Again! Ye see, sir? 'Tis not just the wavering of the lanternlight. Can't ye feel the vibrations of it in the very walls about us, in the very stones about us as it shakes? Oh God, sir! It's all my fault. I should never have fetched ye down here. I never thought—it's your blood, of course, that maddens him—the smell of your blood! He's used to mine, from all these years of familiarity. But you, young and strong—he'd burst himself to bits to get at you, sir. All these long years he's had no slaking for his hideous thirst. He's dying, sir, of a starvation so slow and so hideous it don't bear even thinking about. And now, fresh blood . . . your blood . . .

"No, sir, we daren't flee from him. There's no running from things quicker than light, swifter than an adder's

pounce. We must fight him, sir! Here, take this. I know 'tis but an aspen stake, well sharpened, but a better weapon ye'll find it than any gun against what no gun could ever hit, sir! And here! Wind this string of garlic about your throat. Now stand, sir, and we'll defy him together! We'll fight all Hell, if need be. . . . Oh heavens, sir! how that coffin does shake! How it rocks and lurches on its stone trestles! All those tons of weight quivering like a jelly—I tell you, sir, I never saw the like of it before. The blind fury and malignity—can he break out? Oh, God, sir! I don't know! I don't know! I never saw him like this before. We can only pray. . . .

“Crash! And that awful sound of rocks splintering to powder, those clouds of dust arising to choke us—that was the coffin falling, sir. I saw it teetering just at the very edge of the trestles. Then it toppled—but now you can't see anything, sir, not even your hand before your eyes! And this dust gets in a man's nostrils, cuts off his breath. And all the while that howling and screeching rises to a very devil's pæan of triumph in our ears. Stand firm, sir! Pray to whatever God ye believe in, and be ready. We've our stakes here, and we'll strike with them at the heart of anything we see in the dust-cloud—the evil heart that only an aspen stake can pierce; that an aspen stake should have pierced long ago. . . . We'll defy him together. D'ye hear. Hell-thing that was once old Andrew Holt? *We defy ye!* . . .

“TAKE it easy, sir. Don't try to get up yet. Just rest there for a moment. I guess ye must have fainted, sir. I caught ye as ye fell!

“Ye must forgive an old man's nerves, sir! It's these long years of solitude and long night vigils. I'm not the man I was once, and the shock of the thing—but of course there never was any actual *danger!* How could there be? Did I not say that nothing could possibly damage that coffin, sir? See, there it lies, still there on the floor's cracked old slabs, safe and sound, for all its battering; though the Lord knows how we'll ever get it back on those trestles, sir. It may be that it will have to stay always half propped like that, for I doubt that twenty men could lift it. Sure, the struggle with it exhausted even him, sir. There's been no sound from him, no movement since that last frenzied effort. I wonder, sir. . . . Of course there must be natural laws governing these things, just as governs ourselves, sir. And too much effort may be—well, fatal to them, as to us!

“Perhaps ye've seen the last dying struggle of That which should never have lived at all, sir. Perhaps ye've seen peace come at last to the soul of old Andrew Holt!

“And if not now, surely it must come at last, sir, mayhap not in my time, or even in my son's time. But in the end—steady, sir. We'll go this way.”

He helped me stagger toward the old stairs, through the leprous dark.

