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CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY, 1936

Number 2

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene from "Coils of the Silver Serpent"</i>		
Coils of the Silver Serpent	Forbes Parkhill	130
<i>A story of chills and thrills—a huge anaconda loose in a New York street</i>		
Ballad of the Gods	Henry Kuttner	147
<i>Verse</i>		
Yvala	C. L. Moore	148
<i>The story of a gloriously beautiful woman, as cruel and dangerous as a flame from Hell</i>		
Salvage	Alfred I. Tooke	168
<i>Verse</i>		
Wife of the Dragon-fly	Paul Ernst	169
<i>An unusual tale of a man who used his will-power over insects to spy on his wife</i>		
The Man Who Would Not Die	Frank Owen	178
<i>A story of a twice-murdered sea-captain, and the curious fate that befell his murderer</i>		
Jorgas	Robert Nelson	187
<i>Verse</i>		
The Hour of the Dragon (part 3)	Robert E. Howard	188
<i>A vivid weird novel of a thousand eery thrills—a tale of Conan the barbarian</i>		
Norn	Lireve Monet	211
<i>A tale of stark horror—a powerful and gripping story of dark forces</i>		
Fear: a Fantasy	Wilma Dorothy Vermilyea	227
<i>Verse</i>		
A Visitor from Far Away	Loretta Burrough	228
<i>A dreadful doom hung over Mrs. Bowen for twenty years before the horror struck</i>		
The Man on the Platform	Theodore Tinsley	232
<i>A brief weird tale about a curious dream that foretold death</i>		
A Dream of Death	Andrew Daw	235
<i>Strange was the vision that haunted Raymond, and stranger still was its weird denouement</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Temple	H. P. Lovecraft	239
<i>An eldritch tale of a German submarine during the Great War</i>		
The Eyrie		250
<i>A forum wherein the readers of this magazine express their opinions</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

A Dream of Death

By ANDREW DAW

Strange was the vision that haunted Raymond in his sleep, and stranger still was its weird denouement

A PIERCING flow of light which caused fantastic shadows to dance grotesquely within his slumber-burdened mind roused Blaine from his sleep. The reading-lamp beside his bed had been switched on and in the outer rim of its glow he saw the pale, haggard face of his nephew.

"What is it, Raymond?" he asked. "Is anything wrong?"

At the sound of Blaine's voice Raymond's lips moved nervously.

"I didn't know you were awake," he mumbled. "I was thinking, trying to decide . . . that is, perhaps I should tell you."

Raymond ceased speaking for a moment. He was sitting in a chair near the bed, making nervous, clawing motions with his hands. His strained face showed clearly how strenuously he was trying to become calm. Gradually he gained control over his agitation. At last he said quite composedly, "I want to tell you about a dream I had."

"So that's your reason for awakening me in the middle of the night!" exclaimed Blaine irately. "Get back to your bed. You can tell me about your dream in the morning."

"But I can't wait until tomorrow," insisted Raymond as he leaned forward and thrust his pale face closer to Blaine's. "This dream," he said. "I have dreamt it often lately. It is hideous. Always the same. I am looking at a room, in the center of which I see a man and woman seated at a table. On the table stands a

burning oil lamp. Frequently the man and woman look toward me, and whenever that happens the woman's eyes are filled with a soft and glorious light. She smiles at the man; he at her. Behind the man is a curtained window. The curtain moves slightly as if blown by a breeze. Evidently the window is open. It is upon this curtained window that I am compelled to focus my attention. I say 'compelled' because somehow I am horribly afraid of that window. I feel—I know—that something ghastly, something gruesome is about to happen and that the window is connected with the horror to come.

"While I stare at the wavering curtain, I am aware that the woman has left the room. My terror increases. Then something black and slender stealthily thrusts the curtain aside. It is a rifle. I want to shout a warning to the man at the table, but before I can do so the gun is fired.

"Slowly the man gets up from his chair. There is a surprized expression on his face, and he paws with blood-spattered hands at the wound the bullet has ripped in his neck. A second shot is fired, and this time the man sinks to the floor beneath the window. There he lies writhing in a spreading pool of blood.

"Now a man's head appears in the window. The murderer is making sure that his victim is dead. He is looking down, and I can't see his face. In fact, not once during the events that follow directly do I see his face. At this point the woman returns to the room. When

she sees the corpse, her face becomes a mask of heart-rending despair. The killer has not noticed her entrance and continues to look down upon the dead.

"Cautiously the woman moves toward the window. Fury and deathly hatred contort her beautiful face. She crouches as she steals forward, holding in her right hand a heavy glass bowl. At last only a few feet separate her from the murderer. She tenses herself, raises the bowl, at the same time taking a quick step forward to get within reach of the killer. But her foot loses its grip on the slippery floor and she falls across the dead man she was trying to avenge. She looks up toward the face of the killer, screams, and makes a vain attempt to get up from the bloody floor before the killer can lunge through the window. But before she can get to her feet, the killer has entered the room. He stands with his back toward me, staring down at the woman, who is kneeling on the floor, looking at him with a pitiful expression on her madonna-like face. Tears glisten on her cheeks as she pleads, making futile gestures toward him with her hands. The killer stretches his hands toward her white throat as if to choke her, is hesitant, and finally allows his hands to drop, while he stands irresolute. Then as the woman again begins to scream, a frenzy grips the killer. He reaches for a chair, swings it savagely down upon her head and shoulders, and stands back looking at her.

"Apparently the chair has not struck her squarely on the head, for slowly, with stiff, mechanical movements, the woman rises from the floor. One of her shoulders sags. Down the left side of her anguish-twisted face, blood is streaming. Her eyes stare fixedly into space as she fumbles about for something to support herself with. Once she stumbles and almost falls. While moving about un-

steadily, trying to regain her balance, she strikes against the table. For a moment she steadies herself against it, all the while staring with distended, unseeing eyes into the flickering flame of the lamp upon the table. From her lips come guttural, moaning sounds.

"Once more the murderer strikes. Uttering a hoarse cry, he leaps forward and grasps the woman by the throat. I seem to hear him screaming, 'Die, damn you! Die!' The force of his attack drags the woman to the floor. As they fall, her arm is flung against the lamp, which topples and crashes on the floor. There is a flash of flames. Swirls of smoke eddy about the room, and while I am trying to see through the haze, I awaken."

NOT once while speaking had Raymond taken his eyes off Blaine. And now, as silence cast its spell over the room, Blaine found it difficult to endure the youth's unwavering stare. He shuddered faintly as he seemed to sense that while Raymond was speaking the shadows from the distant corners of the room had crept nearer to his bed. Presently, unable to endure the stillness, he asked lamely: "Well, is that all?"

There was a catch in Raymond's voice when he answered. "The man and woman who were killed were my father and mother."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Blaine. "You were barely more than three years old when your parents died. At that age it would hardly be possible for you to form a concept of what they looked like which would serve you to identify them years later."

"But I know," persisted Raymond. "Listen. When I first experienced the dream, I could not identify the characters in it, although they seemed familiar to me. One day I happened to look at a

picture of my father and mother. The instant I saw it, I recognized my parents as the people in the dream. You do know my parents were murdered. That much the police did find out when they examined their charred bodies. And somebody—a somebody cruel enough to kill them but not a baby—carried me out of the burning house, away from danger. You yourself have told me that.”

“Yes, you are right about that,” assented Blaine.

He felt strangely weak. With his hands he wiped away the perspiration that had gathered on his forehead—a pale, blanched forehead whose only trace of color was a dark red birthmark the size of a quarter.

Blaine looked at his hands and silently cursed his weakness when he saw how his fingers trembled. He clenched his jaw, tried to say something, but failed to speak. Raymond’s precise description of that crimson nightmare of long ago had ripped asunder time’s veil of forgetfulness and upset his nerves. Blaine felt as he had that night when, upon returning to his home after the killing, he had washed his gory hands, and, while looking down into the basin where ripples of bloody water formed shifting patterns, he had glimpsed the blood-smearred, pain-racked face of Raymond’s mother surrounded by leaping flames. He had screamed then, as for an insane moment his mind had wavered perilously on the brink of that horror-infested chasm in which dwells madness. Ever since he had been trying to forget. At times it was not difficult. During the day the affairs of a prosperous business held his attention. The life insurance for which he had killed Raymond’s father had been the foundation of his fortune. The pleasures of power which his wealth gave him usually sufficed to overcome any feeling

of regret concerning the means by which the power had been acquired. Even the fact that Raymond’s father had been his own brother did not bother him. It was only when the image of Raymond’s mother obtruded itself before his eyes that remorse touched him. There was that about killing a woman . . . too bad his gun had jammed . . . it was easier just to shoot . . . he had been forced to choke her . . . there had been blood on her neck and her flesh had seemed to squirm between his hands . . . at least he had spared Raymond. But what was Raymond staying for? He had told his dream. Odd fellow, Raymond. Just like his father. The emotional type. No head for business. But he was not sorry he had taken care of him. That was one of the things which had made it easier to forget.

BLAINÉ had carried his chain of thoughts to that point when he was interrupted as Raymond began to talk.

“I would have forgotten about the dream,” said Raymond, “if it hadn’t been for the fact that it kept on repeating itself. Night after night during the last month it has haunted me. Always I woke up possessed with a feeling of abysmal horror. Episodes of the dream persecuted me daily. I became nervous, and lost interest in my studies. Finally, just before returning here for vacation from college, I asked a professor of psychology what might be the cause of the dream. It was his opinion that the dream represents an actual experience, long ago forgotten, which has lain dormant in the recesses of my subconscious mind. Some chance thought or event has caused a reflex to function. As a result, the forgotten experience is asserting itself upon my conscious mind. This, he pointed out, would naturally occur during the period of sleep, as only at that time, or when the

conscious mind is in a hypnotic state, does the subconscious mind have a chance to assert itself. He told me of persons who, while under the influence of hypnotism, were able to recognize their kindergarten teacher, whom they had not seen since childhood, although previous to their being hypnotized they had failed to recognize the same person. The professor's reason for stating that the dream represents an actual experience was that it recurred. This, he pointed out, is true only of dreams representing actual incidents from the dreamer's life. Does that sound logical to you?"

"Yes, I don't doubt that such is the case," assented Blaine.

"I am glad you understand," said Raymond. He stood up, raised his right hand.

Blaine noticed the movement. The next moment his eyes bulged with fear, and a gasp of terror escaped him as he looked at the revolver in Raymond's hand. Hoarsely he muttered, "No. No. Don't. Don't shoot."

Raymond's hand did not falter. The revolver drew closer to Blaine, pointed directly at his heart. In the eyes behind the gun there was no sign of mercy; only hatred—and irrevocable doom.

Fear spurred Blaine's tongue. "Are you crazy?" he shouted. "What are you pointing that gun at me for?"

"You killed my father and mother!"

"I didn't. I swear it." Blaine's eyes narrowed. He felt certain he was confronted by a madman. There was no other way of explaining the situation. Raymond had no proof. His voice became coaxing.

"Put the gun down, Raymond. I don't see why you should want to kill me. You can't prove I killed your father and mother. You didn't see the face of the killer in your dream. You said so yourself."

For a while Raymond said nothing. During the pause Blaine again wiped the perspiration from his forehead—that pale forehead with its ugly crimson stain.

Raymond eyed the mark, and a crafty look came into his burning eyes. He bent forward and hissed softly at Blaine:

"But I didn't tell you all about what happened tonight. Tonight the dream was different. You see, tonight I didn't wake up so soon—the dream lasted longer. I saw a face. A pale face. It hovered over me as I felt myself being carried out of a burning house. I shall never forget that face. Those haunted eyes! Such ghastly pallor! Ah, but the forehead was different. The whiteness of the forehead was marred by a dark red blotch. . . . Why are you so pale? . . . it will be over in a second . . . you should be glad I am not choking you to death. . . ."