

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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TWO HOURS OF DEATH

A Ghost Story

By E. THAYLES EMMONS

A FEW weeks ago, while looking over some old papers which I found in the desk of my deceased father, I chanced upon the following manuscript. Whether it is a true record of some adventure in my father's life, or a bit of fiction which he had at some time prepared for publication, I do not know; but I am inclined to believe that it is indeed a true narrative. I have ascertained that such a man as Felix Sayres actually did exist; that he was an intimate friend of my father, and that he died in the strange manner described in the manuscript; but further than that I know nothing. However, I submit the whole thing as I found it, without change.

AS I picked up my morning paper, the first item to catch my eye was the following:

DIES IN MADHOUSE

INMATE FOR THIRTY-FIVE YEARS DIES SUDDENLY.

Felix Sayres, aged 69 years, who has been an inmate of the Eastwood Asylum for the Insane for the past thirty-five years, was found dead in his cell yesterday morning. At one time he was a well-known scientist of this city, but at the age of thirty-four became hopelessly insane, and has since been confined in the asylum, of which he was, at the time of his death, the oldest inmate.

Felix Sayres was my college chum, and in later years my closest friend, and now that he is dead I am at liberty to reveal the remarkable story concerning him, a part of which not even he has ever known, though a principal actor in the awful scene which has been indelibly stamped on my memory, haunting my waking hours and recurring to me in oft-repeated dreams.

My friend was a man of genius and ability, and had it not been for the terrible misfortune which came upon him, he would have become famous in the scientific world. Nearly all of his time, day and night, was given over to scientific research, in finding and working upon new hypotheses and bringing to light discoveries in that strange world into which he had evidently been born.

I was at that time his most intimate friend, and to me a great many of his hopes and secrets were confided. Many nights have I passed in his laboratory, listening to his explanation of some new

theory, or aiding him in his experiments.

It was always a source of great pleasure to me thus to pass a portion of my time, although my mind was not of the same scientific trend as that of my friend. His theories were always so lucidly elaborated and so strong fundamentally that the most abstract of them seemed, even in the embryo, capable of actual demonstration, and so great was my confidence in him that I always stood ready to assist in any experiment or test.

At one point, however, I drew the line. Sayres, while none the less engaged with material subjects, was constantly dabbling in various psychical experiments with which I refused absolutely to have anything to do. The occult, I argued, should remain occult. Had it been intended that we should see beyond the things of this world the power would have been given us ages ago, I maintained, and the less one dealt with such unsolvable problems as vexed my friend the happier would be his life. Having no desire for knowledge of the supernatural, I studiously avoided all dealing with it, and it was tacitly understood, between Sayres and myself, that beyond the line of ordinary conversation the subject was forbidden. I knew, however, that for him the thing had great fascination and that my opinion did nothing to banish it from his mind.

At the time of which I write I had not seen Sayres for several weeks, as was often the case when he was deepest in his books and experiments. I had called at his laboratory, but his servant had said that no one was to be admitted, and I knew that it was useless to attempt to see him. At length I received a letter from him, saying that he had something of interest to disclose and urging me to "come tonight!"

When I arrived at my friend's laboratory I found him in a high state of ner-

vous excitement, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. He greeted me effusively, and with his usual directness, plunged at once into the matter at hand, which was evidently uppermost in his mind. Seating himself at the opposite side of the table and directly facing me, he began:

"Thornton, I want you to prepare yourself to hear of something that is to be entirely different from anything I have heretofore shown you. It is something that to mankind has always been vague, uncertain, unfathomable—something, in fact, that has existed only in imagination and in theory, but never in demonstration. I will show it to you tonight, and to the world tomorrow, in such a manner as entirely to revolutionize life and living, death and dying.

"As you very well know, my religious beliefs have always been skeptical; but my skepticism has arisen rather from insufficiency of faith with which to overcome the lack of direct evidence which mortals have concerning spiritual things than from stubborn unbelief. That there is a Supreme Being I have never doubted. His many works are too manifest, and it is impossible to conceive of such a creation as this earth and all its delicate mechanisms, and of the rest of the universe with all its unknown wonders, without some vast Supernatural oversight.

"Although I have never discussed the subject to any great extent, I have nursed it as a pet and secret hobby, and have spent many hours in work along certain lines in connection with it. In the beginning, I put finiteness aside from the question. The human mind, or soul, with its unlimited powers, has always been regarded by me as the most wonderful of all creations. I have been able to find no entirely satisfactory definition of this 'mind' from a purely physical standpoint, and therefore sought to obtain

one. Nobody will say that the soul is material; it belongs to the body and develops with it, but is no part of it.

"Life is but a taper, which a slight breath may easily puff out, but this indeterminate thing called 'mind,' I reasoned, must be governed by different laws. Is it possible that the Creator ruled that the greatest of all His works should be blotted out with the cessation of life in that sordid mass of clay, the body? Or did He arrange to reclaim it, together with its spiritual complement, to a world of its own, as men have for ages believed?"

"Skeptic as I have been, I have always been willing to concede that the idea of a spiritual existence, while vague, seems no more wonderful than thousands of other things which we see about us daily, and for the reason that they are manifest, give them no thought whatever.

"As a basis for the theory which I set myself to formulate, I took what I shall term 'mind atoms.' As I have before said, we cannot regard the mind force as a material thing; but, as a contradictory fact, we know that it is *something*, and further than that generality we are ignorant. Then, as the mind force governs alike every portion of the body, this indeterminate something of which it is composed, I reasoned, must be in one portion as in another.

"I then placed these mind atoms as being diffused in the space occupied by the body and lying even between the atoms of its material composition. If, at death, this mind is merely withdrawn from the body—all of which I worked upon as already determined—would it not occupy in the spirit world the same space and retain the same shape of the human form from which it had fled?"

"Then the idea suggested itself that if some powerful and undiscovered action could be produced (by the use of drugs, probably), causing an instantaneous and simultaneous separation of every mind atom from the physical atoms, the effect would be a spiritual death, while at the same time physical vitality would not be in the least impaired. I then went one step further and added the supposition that as the effects of the action wore away it would be possible for the soul to re-enter the body, even as it had been driven out, and creation would again be complete.

"I have worked untiringly, and wrought experiment after experiment, until at last I have succeeded in producing a drug that will accomplish all that I have explained to you. I have used it on various animals and have seen them recover from the effects of it, and thus

have ascertained that it is harmless. I ventured to try it on myself, and I know that *I have certainly solved the mystery of the future*, although during the brief period in which my soul was in the spirit world I could make but few observations, and those of minor importance.

"I saw no other spiritual beings, but remained, for the most, close by my soulless body, waiting for the proper moment to return to my physical life, if it were indeed to be possible; but I am confident that what I have accomplished renders the unrevealed capable of being revealed and robs the hereafter of all its secrets."

HE PAUSED, and for a moment, so bewildered was I by the strangeness of it all, that I sat speechless, my brain in a whirl.

Thinking to overcome my amazement, I reached for the wine decanter, which was on the table before me, and into the glass nearest me I poured some of the strong wine which Sayres always kept at hand. After draining it, I looked up to see a gleam of satisfaction flit across his countenance.

"Thornton," said he, "in that glass of wine there was enough of the drug to render you temporarily dead for two hours, as I can best calculate. In five minutes you will be unconscious. I want you to undergo the same experience which I have safely passed through, so that we may later exchange ideas on the subject."

In spite of his assurance, a deadly fear took possession of me, and I swore and expostulated at his unfair treatment. With undisturbed calm, he again spoke to me, endeavoring to dispel my fears, and assuring me that he would be conversing with me again at the end of the two hours.

Even as he was speaking his words became indistinct, and an overpowering dizziness seized me. Then came a moment of which I have no recollection, after which, by the fact that I stood, or *seemed* to stand, within a few feet of the chair in which I had been seated, *gazing at myself*, even now in the same position, I knew that my body was without a soul, even as Sayres had said, and that I was the soul standing there!

I looked about me, and in place of the invisible atmosphere which I was accustomed to, the room seemed filled with a constantly moving, pulsating vapor, dense, gray and foglike, but through which I could discern objects with as much ease as ordinarily.

I saw my friend lift my body from the chair, lay it on a bench and place a cushion under the head. Then he be-

gan pacing to and fro, up and down, back and forth, and I found that I could move about at will and follow him.

I attempted to speak to him, but now there was no sound; I reached forth my hand to grasp a chair, but it offered no resistance, and I realized that I indeed occupied no space, but was nevertheless in space and a part of space. I saw my friend's lips move as though he were speaking. I heard no sound, but was able to understand his words, although he did not address me.

The glare of the lamps gave me a sensation which, had I been in my physical form, I should have termed pain, and I much preferred to keep in a dark corner. By a direct mental communication, of which I was not at the time aware, I was able to signify this fact to Sayres, and he at once turned out all the lights, leaving the laboratory lighted only by a low fire in the grate at the end of the room. I was then astonished to find that the absence of light had no effect upon my visual powers, and that I could see in the dark as well as before.

From this I drew the conclusion that in reality I possessed no visuality, as it seemed. My senses I had left behind with my physical self, and here they were replaced by a strange comprehension of everything about me. I still had the abilities which the senses convey, but their actual presence was lacking.

I could flit through the air with as much ease as I could walk on the floor, and could even have sunk through that same floor had I desired, for the most solid substance offered no resistance to my form. I was able to pass directly through anything.

The success of the experiment, up to this point, served to restore my confidence in Sayres and I entertained no doubt but that at the end of the stated time I could return to my body again. I therefore determined to lose no time in making all the observations possible.

Sayres was still pacing the room, and it was evident from his actions that in a large degree fear was the cause of his restlessness. He knew that in all probability I was constantly near him, and he would have avoided coming in contact with me had he been able to do so. Felix Sayres possessed courage beyond that of many men, but few mortals can be brought face to face with the supernatural without experiencing fear.

All of us have at various times—sometimes by day, but more often at night—undergone the feeling of the proximity of some ghostly presence, giving rise to a sensation of coldness and choking horror. This was clearly demonstrated to me now, for whenever myself

and Sayres came within a few feet of each other I could easily see that he felt my presence. He made no attempt to communicate with me and paid no heed to the various things I did to attract his attention.

After a little, he seemed to recover himself and calmly walked across the room to where my soulless body lay, and stood looking down at it. By the gleam in his eyes, and by my wonderful supernatural power of comprehension, I knew in an instant that overwork and nervous strain had at last done their work, that the cord of reason had snapped and that my friend was a madman!

His lips moved and I heard him, or rather *felt* him, address my body:

"At last I have you in my power! I have waited long for this moment, and at last my waiting is to be rewarded. I have driven the soul from the body, and the body lives; but now I will take away life itself, and you will be dead!"

The word seemed to please him, and he murmured slowly:

"Dead, *dead!*"

I HEARD him continue in his madness:

"It is you who have stolen the honors due me; it is you who would prevent me from becoming famous; it is you, curse you, who will marry the only woman I can ever love—and then you ask me to let you live! No, damn you!"

He then took from a drawer nearby a large and peculiarly-shaped dissecting knife which I had often seen him use,

and, with the deliberation of the insane, he proceeded to sharpen it on a steel, testing it from time to time with his thumb.

In my overpowering fear for the safety of my physical self, I know not all that I did, but I do know that it was all in vain. How I longed for the power of speech! And what would I not have given for the use of my own strong body with which to cope with him!

But I was utterly in his power and at his mercy, and the sickening thought came to me that I, the spirit, must stand passive by his side and see my body, still living, hacked and mutilated by the knife he held. I called for help, but knew there was no sound, and in despair I waited.

I heard the madman that was once my friend mutter: "That will do," and, with the gleaming blade in his hand, he started across the room, and I knew that the awful moment was at hand.

I attempted to grapple with him, but my hands felt nothing. Another step and he would be at the bench and it would all be over. Instinctively, I threw myself between the madman and my body, with my arms stretched forth as if to keep him away. How it was accomplished I cannot tell, but by the look of mortal terror that came in the face before me, such as I have never since seen drawn in any countenance, I knew that I had *become visible* and that he saw me!

I can imagine the picture at this moment—the spirit guarding the helpless

counterpart of itself—and indeed it must have been a tableau to have struck fear to the stoutest heart. My friend's eyes dilated with horror; the knife dropped from his hand.

One moment thus he stood. Then his lips parted, and I knew that he had uttered a shriek. He then fell at my feet, blood flowing from his mouth and nostrils, his eyes rolling in terror.

I remained chained to the spot by the fear that he would recover from his fit and carry out his fiendish intention.

At length the same feeling of dizziness, which I had before experienced, returned to me, and almost before I could realize what was taking place I found myself sitting upright on the bench, body and soul again united, and the form of Sayres at my feet, to convince me that all was not a hideous dream.

I placed my poor friend on the bench, and finally I succeeded in bringing him back to consciousness, but in a very weak condition.

He passed through a very severe illness, but never regained his sanity. He remained hopelessly insane.

Of this awful story I have related he never recollected any part. I was unable to find any of the wonderful drug in his laboratory, and am as ignorant of its composition now as I was on that terrible night. I have been silent on the matter, hoping that some day Sayres would again regain his reason, but now that he is dead I have been impelled to write this narrative.