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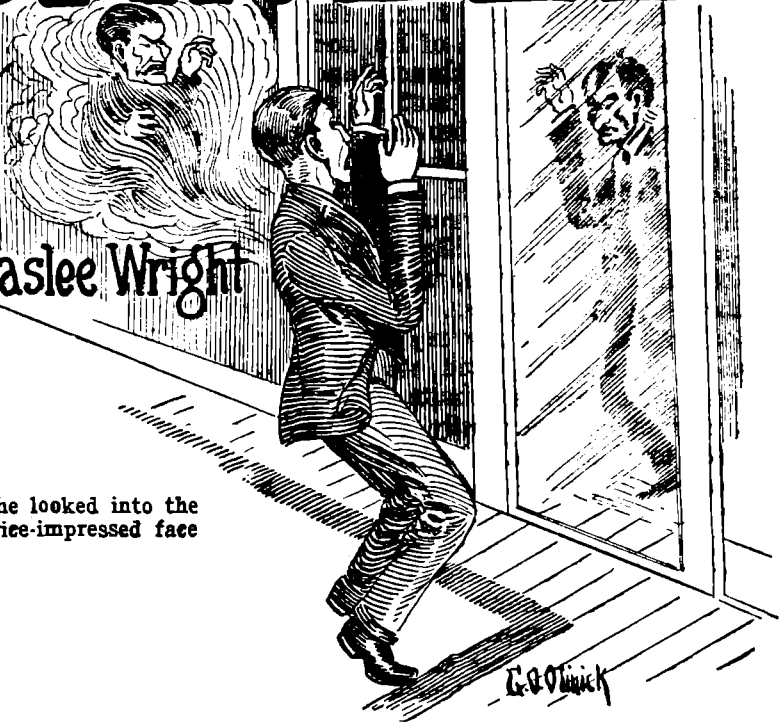
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# GUARDED

by  
Sewell Peaslee Wright

"In the pier-glass he looked into the sneering, cynical, vice-impressed face of his brother."



**T**HE house was an ancient, rambling affair, set well back from the road, and hidden from the view of the casual passer-by by a tall and moldering brick wall, overrun with dank vines and covered, on the shady sides, with a patina of moss and obscene lichens that seemed to emit a sickly, musty odor of decay.

The beautiful lawn that had at one time been the pride of some gardener's heart was now a rank and grotesque jungle of noxious weeds. What had once been a beautiful white-pebbled drive, but was now little more than a weed-grown path, swung through the grounds in a sweeping, graceful curve to the porte-cochère and hence to the cupolaed stable, which was now but a vine-covered shell of decay that hesitated on the very brink of utter ruin.

But it was the occupant of the ancient country estate, rather than the place itself, that interested me most. In my strolls along the lonely road that led by the place, I not infrequently saw him walking moodily along the grassy and desolate drive, or sitting in solitary and contemplative grandeur on the great circular porch, now warped and wavering, that nearly encircled the massive, rambling pile.

Once, as I had passed, he had been standing close to the rusted, grilled iron gates that sagged from two weary pillars, guarding the entrance to the grounds, and I was struck most exceedingly with the power of the old man's personality.

His skin was rather dark, and his face in shape was reminiscent of some portraits of Shakespeare: wide across the forehead, which bulged

slightly, tapering down to a long and extremely pointed chin. The eyes were set deeply in their sockets, and were cold and piercing blue. His mouth was large and thin of lip, and he seemed to smile a continuous and sardonic smile that had nothing of mirth and very little of humanity in it. It was like the smile one sees on masks; carved, impersonal, sneering.

He studied me as I approached, returned my salutation civilly enough, and rather to my surprize, made some comment on the weather. Willing indeed to chat with my mysterious neighbor, I stopped, and we conversed idly for several minutes.

It was evident instantly that he was well bred and well educated, and his voice, while possessed of a peculiarly dry and unmusical quality, held the subtle inflection that is a characteristic of the voice of those who speak with authority.

"Since we are nearly neighbors, then," he concluded our chat, "you must drop in and see me some evening. You must be lonesome, up there in your big house"—and he nodded toward my country place, the roofs of which were just barely visible in the distance as they glimmered in the level rays of the downing sun—"and I am sure it is very lonely here. I shall look forward to a visit, sir!"

That was the beginning of the odd friendship that for several months existed between Joseph Morton and myself. I found that he lived utterly alone, using but three or four of the many rooms in the monstrous old house, doing his own cooking and housekeeping, and doing it with a meticulous and painstaking niceness that bespoke years of bachelor experience.

I could never induce him to allow me to play the host; so far as I know, he never left the grounds of his ancient and festering estate.

"I am here for a reason, Clarke," he would say when I pressed him to

allow me to return his many courtesies. "It gives me pleasure to have you here, and I trust that pleasure is reciprocated. Some day I may tell you more; for the present I know you will excuse me if I decline."

There was a constant air of mystery about the man. His almost revolting appearance was so utterly at variance with the splendid breadth and beauty of his words and thoughts.

He would gaze at me with his hard, almost malignant eyes, his lips curling in that eternal sneering smile, and give voice to the most splendid of sentiments. We discussed art, history and literature, but never in their modern aspects. He seemed to know nothing of the living artists and writers, and nothing of modern history or politics. Religion, a prolific subject for discussion always in such talks as ours, Morton invariably sidestepped, and once when I deliberately put a question to him on this subject, in such a way that he could not avoid an answer, he said merely, "You will have to pardon me if I do not discuss that," and passed smoothly on to some other subject.

I was sorry I could not inveigle the old man into an argument on the subject of religion, for it is one in which I have been long interested. Finally, in order to see if I could not in some way open up such a discussion, I one evening voiced the sentiment that I was an utter atheist, believing in neither God nor devil, heaven nor hell.

"When you're dead, you're dead, and there's an end to it!" I stated flatly.

I had rather expected my host to take instant exception to my statement. Instead, he merely studied me carefully, his lids half closed, and in his hard and oddly baleful eyes a thoughtful light, as though he weighed a momentous problem in his mind.

"What time is it?" he asked abruptly.

I looked at my watch. "Three after 10," I said.

"I thought it was later than that; I am glad it isn't, for I want to tell you a story, Clarke. A long story, that I think will interest you, who believe that after life there are the worms—and nothing more. A true story, too, Clarke!"

THE old man leaned back comfortably, as though tired, in his chair. His head rested against the faded, worn velvet back, and his eyes were closed, almost as though he slept.

"Once upon a time, as all stories begin, there were two brothers. Let us call them George and Harry. George was the older; a serious, studious, rather silent lad, the exact opposite of his brother. Harry, even as a child, took an inhuman delight in torturing his pets, and in performing various small acts of vandalism. He grew up into a licentious, cruel, roistering bully of a man, who even in his teens had a reputation such as few men would care to bear.

"The mother of the two boys had died in giving birth to Harry, and on her death-bed the mother had given the baby in charge of George, although at the time he was only a lad himself, barely old enough to remember. The father was but the mold in which Harry's evil personality had been cast; that he died a few years later was but a blessing.

"Harry was constantly on the mind of the older brother. The dying mother's charge rested heavily on the lad's studious shoulders, but despite all he could say or do, his evil-living, drunken brother went hell-bent on his way. It almost drove George insane, but his every effort proved fruitless.

"George was twenty-seven, and

Harry nineteen, when the older brother, coming down-stairs one night in the dark, in search of a forgotten book, slipped and crashed to the bottom of the polished oaken stairs. They found him the next morning, his head bent back under his body—dead.

"That is, the body was dead. George himself was not dead. He felt the crashing impact of his body on the stairs, felt a flaming wave sear his body as he struck the floor below. For an instant his brain seemed bathed in a flashing, kaleidoscopic flood of colors; new colors, out of the eye's range of sensitivity; odd, weird colors that blazed with unearthly and terrifying beauty. Then he——"

"But my dear Morton!" I interrupted. "You speak of things of which you can not know. You expect me to believe all this?"

He opened his eyes, but did not move his head.

"Let me finish my little story, Clarke; then you can decide for yourself," he said evenly. "Surely you find the tale interesting?"

I nodded; something in the blazing intentness of the man's eyes subduing the mocking, jeering words that were just behind my lips. "Go on, please," I said. "I'll not interrupt again."

"Then he rose from the floor, and, impelled by some strange instinct, looked down at his feet. *He stood looking down at his own still figure on the floor.*

"It took him some seconds to realize the truth, and then it came in a flash that sent him reeling back into the shadows of the room. *He was dead!*

"The death that was his I shall not speak of. It is not well to prematurely prepare those who must follow in the way of all flesh. It is a journey one best takes without charts or guides, for no man travels the same trail.

"George remained there in his home. In life he had worried continually about his brother and his wild, dissolute ways, and this same solicitude seemed to tie him to Harry even after he had passed out of this world.

"For a long time, George could discover no way to help. He saw his father die, a few months after his own death, but, strange as it may seem, he never saw him after he passed over. Harry, coming into possession of the family estate, went rapidly from bad to worse. On several occasions he nearly killed companions with whom he went fighting, for Harry in those days had the strength of an ox, and a fiery and evil temper that rode him haglike.

"George had learned that the sins of the earth are punished when the earthly body is discarded, and he knew his brother Harry was jeopardizing his very soul. Some day he would commit murder, the unforgivable sin, and then—. Knowing what he knew, things too horrible to pour into human ears, he tried frantically to find some way to check the mad and evil activity of his brother. And at last he found a way.

"One night as Harry was sleeping, George concentrated all the power that was in him on an idea that he wished to penetrate Harry's consciousness. He had read something of thought transference, the power of suggestion, and other kindred subjects, and he was trying, in a crude way, to put his meager knowledge to a good purpose.

"Instead of doing what he had intended, he found himself drawn, somehow, to the sleeping figure of his brother. He never knew just what force guided him in his actions. He came close to the restless, tossing figure on the bed, bent over it. Something seemed to be pressing from above; he felt strangely heavy and a

smothery feeling overcame him. He seemed engaged in a sort of nightmare struggle with somebody or something that he could not see nor feel, and then he seemed to sink into a warm and yielding blackness.

"For a moment he rested, and then he opened his eyes. He found himself gazing up at the ceiling, barely discernible in the faint gray light that was filtering in from the east windows of the room.

"Startled, he leaped up. He struck the floor with a resounding thud of bare feet, and gazed around wildly, down at his body, his hands, his feet. He rushed to a great pier-glass that stood at one end of the room, and peered eagerly into its shining depths. Out at him stared, not the nothingness that would have greeted him a few minutes before, not the pale and ascetic features of his own earthly body, but the sneering, cynical, vice-impressed face of his brother! Somehow, he had driven out the vital part of Harry's own personality, and supplanted it with his own! He had switched souls!

"For months George held possession of his brother's body. The change was the wonder of all who knew him. The servants grew afraid of him; they thought he must be crazed. His boon companions, neglected now, sought him and grew angry when he—or George, as you choose!—would have none of them.

"George was conscious, at times, of an intangible outside influence beating in the air around him, as a bat flutters at the shutters of a closed window. But he was resolved that his brother's evil personality should never again invade his body. George would shut out his brother's wicked soul and leave it disembodied, so that it could harm no one, no longer foul the family name, and at last might pass to the testing without at least the black spot of murder upon it.

"**B**UT George figured without the evil forces of the world that surrounds us here on earth, invisible and intangible, yet powerful and very real. He awoke one night in the midst of a terrible and ghastly nightmare, gasping for breath and with a deathly chill creeping over him. He knew what was happening, and he fought with all the energy that was in him, but it was useless. There was a sensation of sudden expansion, of great cold, and he was beside the bed looking down at his brother. Harry was sitting up, looking wildly about the room, and the house rang with his shoutings and cursings. He knew what had happened, and he was afraid.

"I will not weary you, nor tax your belief by telling you the struggle that George waged. Suffice to say that at last he won out; he could enter the body of his brother at will. All save the body became George, not Harry.

"There was only one thing that he found had to be considered. He could not remain in permanent possession of the body. If he tried to, his own ego, worn down by the cares of the body, grew weak, while the ego of his brother, waxing angry and powerful in the outer darkness, could come in for a time and drive George out for a few hours, until he had regained his strength.

"He got into the habit, therefore, of relinquishing his hold on this poor body every night at 12 o'clock, turning it over to his brother's own ego until the dawn. It was safe to do so, because when he was outside his body, Harry was in utter darkness, and he was horribly afraid of darkness when in the body. He slept only in a brilliantly lighted room, and since George flouted Harry's friends during the daylight hours, they never sought him out at night, and he dared not brave the black night to go to them. George dismissed all the

servants, so that Harry could not wreak his vengeance upon them, and so while Harry's evil and malignant soul for a few hours every night held full possession of his own gross body, he could do none of the evil that was in his mind.

"And so it was, Clarke, that a dead man kept the pledge he had made his dying mother. Yet you say that after this life there is naught but the worms!"

There was a ring of sincerity, a deep undertone of conviction, in my host's voice that could not be ignored, yet the weird and impossible story he had related failed to make an impression on me. It simply transcended belief.

"Your story is interesting, my dear Morton, but you could hardly expect me to accept it as proof of your own ideas regarding life after death," I shrugged smilingly. "It is too far-fetched; it deals with material you could not by any chance know about; it——"

My host leaped from his chair, his eyes blazing.

"You fool!" he shouted, and his dry, harsh voice rang like the screech of a carrion bird. "You utter fool! The real names were not George and Harry, but Thaddeus and Joseph—and the last name was Morton! This evil body you see before you is that of Joseph Morton, but the mind that directs it is that of——"

He stopped short as the mellow voice of a church bell in the distant village came stealing through the air. The blood drained suddenly from his face, and he made a quick gesture of despair.

"*God!* Your watch was slow, Clarke; it's midnight! Go! Go, man, before it is too late. It is *his* hour, and I can not resist him! Oh, you fool, go! Can't you see——"

His voice died in a harsh rattle, and he swayed, staring at me with glassy, lifeless eyes.

Terror-stricken, I had leaped away from my crazed host, but seeing his present condition, I paused for an instant. Would to God I had gone, and never seen what next greeted my eyes!

A sudden and horrible change came over the man's face; it was as though all the evil lineaments of his features were subtly deepened, accented, made more hellishly repulsive. His glassy eyes lit up with the light of an accursed intelligence, and his voice, raised but an instant before in desperate warning, now sank to a throaty murmur.

"My dear Clarke," he said fawningly, "I am sorry I startled you so. It is a—a little weakness of mine, this fear of midnight!" He chuckled evilly, and came slowly closer to me, his eyes alight with a hungry and menacing gleam that caused me to shrink from him, speechless with surprise and fright.

I had the distinct impression that this was not the man I knew at all. He wore the same clothes, had the same face and figure, and the transition, if transition there had been, had occurred before my very eyes, yet I could not force my senses to accept this gloating, leering figure as the kindly old man who had, four or five hours ago, so courteously bidden me welcome.

My God! Could it be possible that the story was true? It was unbelievable, but—*God!* He was coming closer, his arms dangling like a gorilla's, and his bestial head thrust forward ominously. And for the instant, my nerveless legs refused to obey my commands.

"Sit down! What are you afraid of?" he commanded gruffly.

Instead of doing as he ordered, I bolted for the door. Morton leaped after me, curses showering from his slavering mouth.

I flung the door open just in time, slammed it in the face of my pursuer, and spurning the gravel of the drive with flying feet, fairly flew toward the outer gate.

As I swung the rusty and creaking halves of the ancient gate together, I paused for a moment with beating heart to look back at the gloomy old pile I had just quitted.

Morton was standing in the doorway, his figure clearly silhouetted by the streaming yellow light. He had his hands on his hips, and he was shouting and roaring with obscene mirth, like some malicious demon standing on the edge of hell's yawning pit and laughing at the anguish of the damned.

SO FAR as I am concerned, this is the end of the story. I have never called on Morton since that night. At times, when I drive by his place, I see him wandering aimlessly, a pitiful figure, along the desolate and weed-choked drive, or sitting, motionless and alone, on the sagging, rotting porch.

Probably you will not believe the story Morton told me. I do not blame you. Sometimes, I doubt whether I believe it myself.

But when I recall the hideous metamorphosis that changed a friend into a demon seeking my very life, and all in less than the time it takes a church bell to toll the hour of 12—when I live that moment over again, I tell you, friend, *I know!*

