



The Story of William Wilson

Part One

LET ME CALL MYSELF, FOR THE PRESENT, WILLIAM WILSON. THAT IS not my real name. That name has already been the cause of the horror — of the anger of my family. Have not the winds carried my name, with my loss of honor, to the ends of the earth? Am I not forever dead to the world? — to its honors, to its flowers, to its golden hopes? And a cloud, heavy and endless — does it not hang forever between my hopes and heaven?

Men usually become bad by degrees. But I let all goodness fall from me in a single moment, as if I had dropped a coat. From small acts of darkness I passed, in one great step, into the blackest evil ever known. Listen while I tell of the one cause that made this happen. Death is near, and its coming has softened my spirit. I desire, in passing through this dark valley, the understanding of other men. I wish them to believe that I have been, in some ways, in the power of forces beyond human control. I wish them to find for me, in the story I am about to tell, some small fact that proves I could have done only what I did. I would have them agree that what happened to me never happened to other men. Is it not true that no one has ever suffered as I do? Have I not indeed been living in a dream? And am I not now dying from the horror and the unanswered question — the mystery of the wildest dream ever dreamed on earth?

I am one of a family well known for their busy minds. As a small child I showed clearly that I too had the family character. As I became older it grew more powerful in me. For many reasons it became a cause of talk among friends, and the hurt it did me was great. I wanted people always to do things my way; I acted like a wild fool; I let my desires control me.

My father and mother, weak in body and mind, could do little to hold me back. When their efforts failed, of course my will grew stronger. From then on my voice in the house was law. At an age when few children are allowed to be free, I was left to be guided by my own desires. I became the master of my own actions.

I remember my first school. It was in a large house about three hundred years old, in a small town in England, among a great number of big trees. All of the houses there were very old. In truth, it was a dream-like and **spirit-quieting** place, that old town. At this moment I seem to feel the pleasant coolness under the shade of the trees, I remember the **sweetness** of the flowers, I hear again with **delight** I cannot explain the deep sound of the church bell each hour breaking the **stillness** of the day.

It gives me pleasure to think about this school — as much pleasure, perhaps, as I am now able to experience. Deep in suffering as I am — suffering only too real — perhaps no one will object if for a short time I forget my troubles and tell a little about this period. Moreover, the period and place are important. It was then and there that I first saw, hanging over me, the terrible promise of things to come. Let me remember.

The house where we boys lived and went to school was, as I have said, old and wide. The grounds about it were large, and there was a high wall around the outside of the whole school. Beyond this wall we went three times in each week, on one day to take short walks in the **neighboring** fields, and two times on Sunday to go to church. This was the one church in the village, and the head-teacher of our school was also the head of the church. With a spirit of deep wonder and of doubt I used to watch him there! This man, with slow step and quiet, **thoughtful** face, in clothes so different and **shining** clean — could this be the same man who with a hard face and clothes far from clean stood ready to strike us if we did not follow the rules of the school? Oh, great and terrible question, beyond my small power to answer!

I well remember our **playground**, which was behind the house. There were no trees, and the ground was as hard as stone. In front of the house there was a small garden, but we stepped into this garden only at very special times, such as when we first arrived at school, or when we left it for the last time, or perhaps when father or mother or a friend came to take us away for a few days.



But the house! — what a **delightful** old building it was — to me truly a **palace**! There was really no end to it. I was not always able to say certainly which of its two floors I happened to be on. From each room to every other there were always three or four steps either up or down. Then the rooms branched into each other, and these branches were too many to count, and often turned and came back upon themselves! Our ideas about the whole great house were not very far different from the thoughts we had about time without end. During the five years I was there, I could never have told anyone how to

find the little room where I and some eighteen or twenty other boys slept. The schoolroom was the largest room in the house — and I couldn't help thinking it was the largest in the world. It was long and low, with pointed windows and heavy wood overhead. In a far corner was the office of our head-teacher, Mr. Bransby. This office had a thick door, and we would rather have died than open it when he was not there.

Inside the thick walls of this old school I passed my years from ten to fifteen. Yet I always found it interesting. A child's mind does not need the outside world. In the quiet school I found more bright pleasure than I found later, as a young man, in **riches**, or, as an older man, in **wrongdoing**.

Yet I must have been different indeed from most boys. Few men remember much of their early life. My early days stand out as clear and **plain** as if they had been cut in gold. In truth the **hotness** of my character and my desire to lead and command soon separated me from the others. Slowly I gained control over all who were not greatly

older than myself — over all except one. This exception was a boy who, though not of my family, had the same name as my own, William Wilson. This boy was the only one who ever **dared** to say he did not believe all I told him, and who would not follow my commands.

This **troubled** me greatly. I tried to make the others think that I didn't care. The truth was that I felt afraid of him. I had to fight to appear equal with him, but he easily kept himself equal with me. Yet no one else felt, as I did, that this proved him the better of the two.

Indeed, no one else saw the battle going on between us. All his attempts to stop me in what I wanted to do were made when no one else could see or hear us. He did not desire, as I did, to lead the other boys. He seemed only to want to hold me back. Sometimes with wonder, and always without pleasure, I saw that his manner seemed to show a kind of love for me. I did not feel thankful for this; I thought it meant only that he thought himself to be very fine indeed, better than me. Perhaps it was this love he showed for me, added to the fact that we had the same name, and also that we had entered the school on the same day, which made people say that we were brothers. Wilson did not belong to my family, even very **distantly**. But if we had been brothers we would have been near to each other indeed, for I learned that we were both born on the nineteenth of January, eighteen hundred and nine. This seemed a strange and wonderful thing.



The Story of William Wilson

Part Two

IN THE FIRST PART OF MY STORY I SPOKE ABOUT MY LIFE AT MY FIRST school, and about the other boys — over whom I gained firm control. But there was one boy who would not follow my commands, who would not do what I told him to, as the other boys did. His name was the same as mine — William Wilson — although he did not belong to my family in any way. He seemed to feel some love for me, and had entered the school the same day as I had. Many of the boys thought we were brothers. I soon discovered that we had been born on the same day: January nineteenth, eighteen hundred and nine.

Wilson continued his attempts to command me, while I continued my attempts to rule him. The strange thing is that, although I did not like him, I could not hate him. We had a battle nearly every day, it is true. In public it would seem that I had been proved the stronger; but he seemed somehow able to make me feel that this was not true, and that he himself was stronger. Nevertheless, we continued to talk to each other in a more or less friendly way. On a number of subjects we agreed very well. I sometimes thought that if we had met at another time and place we might have become friends.

It is not easy to explain my real feelings toward him. There was no love, and there was no fear. Yet I saw something to honor in him, and I wanted to learn more about him. Anyone experienced in human nature will not need to be told that Wilson and I were always together.

This strange appearance of friendship — although we were not friends — caused, no doubt, the **strangeness** of the battle between us. I tried to make the others laugh at him; I tried to give him pain while seeming to play a **lighthearted** game. My attempts were not always

successful, even though my plans were well made. There was much about his character that simply could not be laughed at.

I could find, indeed, but one weakness. Perhaps he had been born with it, or perhaps it had come from some illness. No one but me would have made any use of it against him. He was able to speak only in a very, very soft, low voice. This weakness I never failed to use in any way that was in my power.

Wilson could fight back, and he did. There was one way he had of troubling me beyond measure. I had never liked my name. Too many other people had the same name; I would rather have had a name that was not so often heard. The words **sickened** me. When, on the day I arrived at the school, a second William Wilson came also, I felt angry with him for having the name. I knew I would have to hear the name each day a double number of times. The other William Wilson would always be near. The other boys often thought that my actions and my **belongings** were his, and his were mine.

My anger grew stronger with every happening that showed that William Wilson and I were **alike**, in body or in mind. I had not then discovered the surprising fact that we were of the same age; but I saw that we were of the same height, and I saw that in form and in face we were also much the same. Nothing could trouble me more deeply (although I carefully tried to keep everyone from seeing it) than to hear anyone say anything about the **likeness** between us of mind, or of body, or of anything else. But, in truth, I had no reason to believe that this likeness was ever noticed by our **schoolfellows**. He saw it, and as clearly as I; that, I knew well. He discovered that in this likeness he could always find a way of troubling me. This proved the more than usual **sharpness** of his mind.

His method, which was to increase the likeness between us, lay both in words and in actions; and he followed his plan very well indeed. It was easy enough to have clothes like mine. He easily learned to walk and move as I did. His voice, of course, could not be as loud as mine, but he made his manner of speaking the same.

How greatly this most careful picture of myself troubled me, I will not now attempt to tell. It seemed that I was the only one who noticed it. I was the only one who saw Wilson's strange and knowing smiles. Pleased with having produced in my heart the desired result,

he seemed to laugh within himself and cared nothing that no one laughed with him.

I have already spoken of how he seemed to think he was better and wiser than I. He would try to guide me; he would often try to stop me from doing things I had planned. He would tell me what I should and should not do; and he would do this not **openly**, but in a word or two in which I had to look for the meaning. As I grew older I wanted less and less to listen to him.

As it was, I could not be happy under his eyes, that always watched me. Every day I showed more and more openly that I did not want to listen to anything he told me. I have said that, in the first years when we were in school together, my feelings might easily have been turned into friendship; but in the later months, although he talked to me less often than, I almost hated him.

Yet, let me be fair to him. I can remember no time when what he told me was not wiser than would be expected from one of his years. His sense of what was good or bad was sharper than my own. I might, today, be a better and happier man if I had more often done what he said.

It was about the same period, if I remember **rightly**, that by chance he acted more openly than usual and I discovered in his manner something that deeply interested me. Somehow he brought to mind pictures of my earliest years — I remembered, it seemed, things I could not have remembered. These pictures were wild, half-lighted, and not clear, but I felt that very long ago I must have known this person standing before me. This idea, however, passed as quickly as it had come.

It was on this same day that I had my last meeting at the school with this other, strange William Wilson. That night, when everyone was sleeping, I got out of bed, and with a light in my hand, I went quietly through the house to Wilson's room. I had long been thinking of another of those plans to hurt him, with which I had until then had little success. It was my purpose now to begin to act according to this new plan.

Having reached his room, I entered without a sound, leaving the light outside. I advanced a step, and listened. He was asleep. I turned, took the light, and again went to the bed. I looked down upon his face.

The **coldness** of ice filled my whole body. My knees **trembled**, my whole spirit was filled with horror. I moved the light nearer to his face. Was this — this the face of William Wilson? I saw indeed that it was, but I trembled as if with sickness as I imagined that it was not. What was there in his face to trouble me so? I looked, and my mind seemed to turn in circles in the rush of my thoughts. It was not like this — surely not like this — that he appeared in the daytime. The same name, the same body; the same day that we came to school! And then there was his use of my way of walking, my manner of speaking! Was it, in truth, **humanly** possible that what I now saw was the result — and the result only — of his continued efforts to be like me? Filled with wonder and fear, cold and trembling, I put out the light. In the quiet darkness I went from his room and, without waiting one minute, I left that old school and never entered it again.



The Story of William Wilson

Part Three

YOU WILL REMEMBER THAT IN THE LAST PART OF MY STORY I TOLD of my experiences in my first school; I spoke of my early meetings with a boy who looked and behaved as I did — whose name was even the same as mine: William Wilson. I told of the night when I went to Wilson's room, with a plan to hurt him. What I saw that night so **frightened** me that I left the room and the school forever. As I stood looking down at his sleeping form and face I might have been looking at myself in a looking glass.

It was not like this — surely not like this — that he appeared in the daytime. The same name, the same face, the same body, the same day of coming to school! And then his use of my way of walking, my manner of speaking! Was it, in truth, humanly possible that what I now saw was the result and the result only — of his continued efforts to be like me? Afraid, I left the old school and never entered it again.

After some months at home, doing nothing, I went to study at the famous school called Eton. I had partly forgotten my days at the other school, or at least my feelings about those days had changed. The truth — the terrible truth — of what had happened there was gone. Now I doubted what I remembered. Now I called the subject into my mind only to smile at the strength of the strange ideas and thoughts I had once had.

My life at Eton did not change this view. The fool's life into which I carelessly threw myself washed away everything that was valuable in my past. I do not wish, however, to tell here the story of my wrongdoing — wrongdoing which went against every law of the school and escaped the **watchful** eyes of all the teachers. Three years of this

had passed and I had grown much larger in body and smaller in soul. Three years of wrongdoing had made me evil.

One night I asked a group of friends who were as evil as I to come to a **secret** meeting in my room. We met at a late hour. There was strong drink, and there were games of cards and loud talking until the new day began appearing in the east. Warm with the wine and with the games of chance, I was raising my glass to drink in honor of some especially evil idea, when I heard the voice of a **servant** outside the room. He said that someone had asked to speak with me in another room.

I was **delighted**. A few steps brought me into the hall of the building. In this room no light was hanging. But I could see the form of a young man about my own height, wearing clothes like those I myself was wearing. His face I could not see. When I had entered he came quickly up to me, and, taking me by the arm, he said softly in my ear: "William Wilson!"

There was something in the manner of the stranger, and in the **trembling** of his **uplifted** finger, which made my eyes open wide; but it was not this which had so strongly touched my mind and heart. It was the sound of those two, simple, **well-known** words, William Wilson, which reached into my soul. Before I could think again and speak, he was gone.

For some weeks I thought about this happening. Who and what was this Wilson? — where did he come from? — and what were his purposes? I learned that for family reasons he had suddenly left the other school on the afternoon of the day I myself had left it. But in a short time I stopped thinking about the subject; I gave all my thought to plans for study at Oxford University.

There I soon went. My father and mother sent me enough money to live like the sons of the richest families in England. Now my nature showed itself with double force. I threw aside all honor. Among those who spent too much money, I spent more; and I added new forms of wrongdoing to the older ones already well-known at the university.

And I fell still lower. Although it may not be easily believed, it is a fact that I forgot my position as a gentleman. I learned and used all the evil ways of those men who live by playing cards. Like such skilled **gamblers**, I played to make money.

My friends trusted me, however. To them I was the laughing but honorable William Wilson, who freely gave gifts to anyone and everyone, who was young and who had some strange ideas, but who never did anything really bad.

For two years I was successful in this way. Then a young man came to the university, a young man named Glendinning, who, people said, had quickly and easily become very rich. I soon found him of weak mind. This, of course, made it easy for me to get his money by playing cards. I played with him often.

At first, with the gambler's usual skill, I let him take money from me. Then my plans were ready. I met him one night in the room of another friend, Mr. Preston. A group of eight or ten persons were there. By my careful planning I made it seem that it was chance that started us playing cards. In fact, it was Glendinning himself who first spoke of a card game.

We sat and played far into the night, and at last the others stopped playing. Glendinning and I played by ourselves, while the others watched. The game was the one I liked best, a game called "écarté." Glendinning played with a wild **nervousness** that I could not understand, though it was caused partly, I thought, by all the wine he had been drinking. In a very short time he had lost a great amount of money to me.

Now he wanted to double the amount for which we played. This was as I had planned, but I made it seem that I did not want to agree. At last I said yes. In an hour he had lost four times as much money as before.

For some reason his face had become white. I had thought him so rich that losing money would not trouble him, and I believed this whiteness, this paleness, was the result of drinking too much wine. Now, fearing what my friends might say about me, I was about to stop the game when his broken cry and the wild look in his eyes made me understand that he had lost everything he owned. Weak of mind and made weaker by wine, he should never have been allowed to play that night. But I had not stopped him; I had used his condition to destroy him.

The room was very quiet. I could feel the **icy** coldness in my friends. What I would have done I cannot say, for at that moment the wide heavy doors of the room were suddenly opened. Every light in the room went out, but I had seen that a man had entered; he was about my own height, and he was wearing a very fine, long coat. The darkness, however, was now complete, and we could only feel that he was standing among us. Then we heard his voice. In a soft, low, **never-to-be-forgotten** voice, which I felt deep in my bones, he said:

“Gentlemen, I am here only to do my duty. You cannot know the true character of the man who has tonight taken a large amount of money from Mr. Glendinning. Please have him take off his coat, and then, look in it very carefully.”

While he was speaking there was not another sound in the room. And as he ended, he was gone!



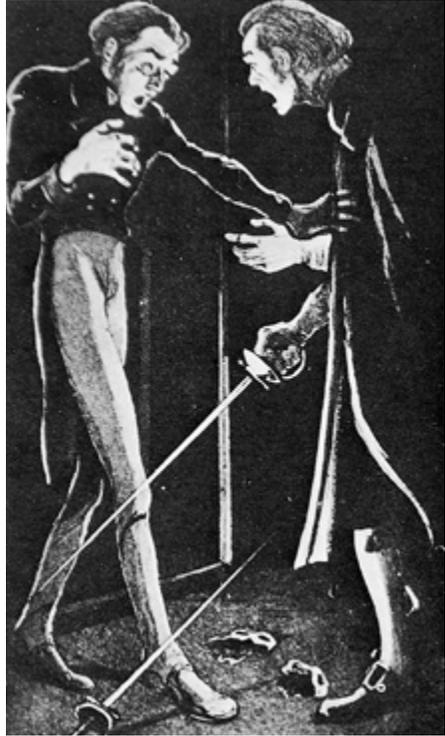
The Story of William Wilson

Part Four

AS I ENDED THE LAST PART OF my story, I was speaking of that terrible evening when I played cards with a young gentleman called Glendinning. We were in the room of one of my friends at Oxford University. I had just realized that the young man, weak of mind and **weakened** by wine, had allowed me to win from him everything he owned. I was still trying to decide what I should do, when, as I said...

The wide, heavy doors of the room were suddenly opened. Every light in the room went out; but I had seen that a stranger had entered; he was about my own height, and he was wearing a very fine, long coat. The darkness, however, was now complete; and we could only feel that he was standing among us. Then we heard him speak. In a soft, low, and never-to-be-forgotten voice, which I felt deep in my heart, he said: "Gentlemen, I am here only to do my duty. You cannot know the true character of the man who has tonight taken a large amount of money from Mr. Glendinning. Please have him take off his coat, and then look in it very carefully."

While he was speaking there was not another sound in the room. As he ended, he was gone.



Can I — shall I — tell what I felt? Need I say that I was afraid, that I felt the sick fear of those who are judged forever **wrong**? Many hands held me. Lights were brought. My friends looked in my coat. In it they found all the high cards, the valuable cards needed to win in the game we had been playing. **Secretly** using these cards, I could have taken the money of anyone who played the game with me. Mr. Preston, in whose room we were, then said: “Mr. Wilson, this is yours.” He lifted from the floor a fine, warm coat, and said, “We shall not look in this to prove again what we have proved already. We have seen enough. You will understand, I hope, the need for you to leave the University. At the very least, you must leave my room, and leave it now.”

Down in the dust though my spirit was, I might have tried to strike him for those words if at that moment I had not noticed something very surprising. My coat had cost more money than most men could spend, and it had been made especially for me. It was different, I thought, from every other coat in the world. When, therefore, Mr. Preston gave me the coat which he had picked up from the floor, I saw with terror that my own was already hanging on my arm, and that the two were alike in every way. I remembered that the strange being who had so **mysteriously** entered and left the room had had a coat. No one else in the group had been wearing one. I placed the coat offered by Preston over my own, and left his room.

The next morning I began a **hurried** journey away from Oxford University. I ran, but I could not escape. I went from city to city, and in each one Wilson appeared. Paris, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow — he followed me everywhere. Years passed. I went to the very ends of the earth. I ran in fear, as if running from a terrible sickness, and still he followed. Again and again I asked myself, “Who is he? — where did he come from? — and what is his purpose?” But no answer was found. And then I looked with the greatest care at the methods of his watch over me. I learned little. It was **noticeable**, indeed, that when he appeared now, it was only to stop me in those actions from which evil might result. But what right did he have to try to control me?

I also noticed that although he always wore clothes the same as mine, he no longer let me see his face. Did he think I would not know him? He destroyed my honor at Oxford, he stopped me in my plans

for getting a high position in Rome, in my love in Naples, in what he called my desire for too much money in Egypt. Did he think I could fail to see that he was the William Wilson of my schoolboy days, the hated and feared William Wilson? But let me **hurry** to the last scene in my story.

Until now I had not tried to strike back. He was honorable and wise, he could be everywhere, and he knew everything. I felt such wonder and fear of him that I believed myself to be weak and helpless. Though it made me angry, I had done as he desired. But now I wanted more and more to escape his control. As I began to grow stronger, it seemed to me that he began to grow weaker. I felt a burning hope; in my **deepest** thoughts I decided that I was going to be free.

It was at Rome, during the Carnival of 1835, that I went to a dance in the great house of the Duke Di Broglio. I had been drinking more wine than is usual, and the rooms seemed very crowded and hot. I became angry as I pushed through the people. I was looking (Let me not say why)...I was looking for the young, the laughing, the beautiful wife of old Di Broglio. Suddenly I saw her; but as I was trying to get through the crowd to join her, I felt a hand placed upon my shoulder, and that **ever-remembered** quiet voice within my ear.

In a wild anger I took him in a strong hold. Wilson was dressed, as I had expected, like myself, in a rich coat of blue. Around his body was a band of red cloth from which hung a long sharp **sword**. A mask of black cloth completely covered his face.

“You again!” I cried, my anger growing hotter with each word. “Always you again! You shall not — you shall not hunt me like this until I die! Come with me now or I will kill you where you stand.” I pulled him after me into a small room nearby. I threw him against the wall and closed the door. I commanded him to take his sword in his hand. After a moment, he took it and stood waiting, ready to fight.

The fight was short indeed. I was wild with hate and anger; in my arm I felt the strength of a thousand men. In a few moments I had forced him back against the wall, and he was in my power. Quickly, **wildly**, I put my sword’s point again and again into his heart.

At that moment I heard that someone was trying to open the door. I hurried to close it **firmly**, and then turned back to my dying enemy. But what human words can tell the surprise, the horror which

filled me at the scene I then saw?! The moment in which I had turned to close the door had been long enough, it seemed, for a great change to come at the far end of the room. A large mirror — a looking glass — or so it seemed to me — now stood where it had not been before. As I walked toward it in terror I saw my own form, all spotted with blood, its face white, advancing to meet me with a weak and uncertain step.

So it appeared, I say, but was not. It was my enemy — it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the pangs of death. His mask and coat lay upon the floor. In his dress and in his face there was nothing which was not my own!

It was Wilson; but now it was my own voice I heard, as he said: “I have lost. Yet from now on you are also dead — dead to the World, dead to Heaven, dead to Hope! In me you lived — and, in my death — see by this face, which is your own, how **wholly**, how completely, you have killed — yourself!”