

Mr. Marshall's Doppelgänger

by H.G. Wells

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Chapter I.

Among the curious cases which I, as a once active member of the Society for the Rehabilitation of Abnormal Phenomena, have been called upon to investigate, that of Mr Marshall's apparition to the Rev Philip Burwash, of Sussexville, and to the Rev Philip Wendover, his curate, is certainly by no means the least curious. It was communicated to the Society by the Rev George Burwash himself, with a mass of authenticating evidence quite in excess of the ordinary case of this description.

The Rev George Burwash is one of that little army of honest and worthy amateur investigators scattered throughout the country, clergymen, retired officers, professors keeping holiday, and ladies of every description, who, in spite of certain inexperience in the handling of human evidence, are doing such excellent work in reviving the erst decadent belief in spiritual entities. He was already favourably known to the Society by his experiments in thought transference.

The apparition occurred on Christmas Eve, 1895, and his communication was read before the Society in the subsequent January. My inquiries in Sussexville were prosecuted during the April and May following.

A doppelgänger, I need scarcely remind the reader, is the neo-English for a double; you are here, and yet you appear suddenly to a friend or acquaintance elsewhere. In other words, a doppelgänger is a phantasm of a living person. Such phantasms are believed by many quite reputable people nowadays to be of frequent occurrence, and, as in the case I had to examine, are often curiously purposeless. Here we had Mr Marshall appearing suddenly and with a disturbed countenance before Mr Burwash and his curate, uttering horrible imprecations, threatening him and the suddenly disappearing. He cursed and threatened without rhyme or reason; his procedure was totally without symbolic value. But so vivid and so sonorous was the phantasm that at the time it did not enter into the head of Mr Burwash to regard him as anything but a real person, albeit the figure moved with a curious gliding motion, markedly different from walking. Until it vanished, indeed, the thought of ghosts did not occur to him. The manner of disappearance and the subsequent silence, as the reverend gentleman described them, were, however, quite sufficiently ghost-like for any reasonable person.

My first proceeding in elucidating this interesting case was, of course, to visit the scene of the appearance, and courteously but exhaustively, to cross-examine Mr Burwash and Mr Wendover on the particulars of the incident.

Mr Burwash occupies a house on the hillside above the church, and in consequence of the growth of his family he has, for the sake of quiet, built himself a small but convenient study of pine up the hill. A path crosses over the crest of the hill, and descends steeply from a little gate near the study be-

tween the vicarage hedge and the churchyard wall to the lych gate in the main road below.

On Christmas Eve Mr Burwash had been writing late at his Christmas sermon, having been delayed during the day by a parcel of spookical literature, and it was after midnight that he finished. His curate, with whom he is, for a vicar, on exceptionally friendly terms, came into the study and sat smoking, while the vicar alternately talked to him and punctuated his discourse for the morrow. It adds to the interest of the case that this curate, Mr Wendover, was a declared skeptic.

When the punctuation was completed the vicar got up, stretched, and opened his study door to look out at the weather. He saw by the glare from the door that a few flakes of snow were falling, and he was preparing to turn and remark upon this to the curate when suddenly, and abruptly, Mr Marshall appeared outside the gate, and stood for a moment, swaying exactly like a drunken man, and apparently struggling with violent internal emotions. Then finding his voice, he poured forth with dramatic unexpectedness a volley of curses, so gross and personal that I had the greatest difficulty in persuading Mr Burwash, in the interests of science, to repeat them.

The curate became aware of Mr Marshall's presence for the first time when he heard this outbreak. He sprang to his feet, and saw Marshall distinctly over his superior's shoulder. Then as abruptly, the man staggered and vanished into the night. As he did so a gust of wind whirled the snowflakes about, and the study door behind Mr Burwash slammed violently. Mr Burwash was shut out and the curate in.

In his communication to the Society Mr Burwash laid great stress upon this fact of the slamming door, because he inclines to the belief that it shows a quasi-material nature in phantasms; for, as he very pertinently asks, how

otherwise could the disappearance of a ghost cause a gust of wind? That, however, is a side issue. As soon as they had recovered from their surprise, Mr Burwash went to the gate, expecting to find Marshall lying there—but up the hill and down, the pathway was deserted.

That, substantially, was the story of the vision of Mr Burwash, and by itself it would, of course, have had little or no interest. As I immediately pointed out, Marshall himself may have passed that way in an intoxicated condition, and his sudden and gliding disappearance may have been due to his feet slipping on the frozen snow that veneered the pathway. The closing door, too, by cutting off the light, may have aided that effect. And the path is so steep that one can reasonably imagine a man who had lost his footing going down the entire slope of the hill in a second or so; in the time, that is, that it took Mr Burwash to reopen his door. That, indeed, was the view Mr Burwash himself at first took of the matter, and it is, I suppose, the explanation that would recommend itself to any sane person.

Mr Wendover, of course, agreed with him. But having a scarcely explicable doubt about the business lurking in his mind, the vicar took the very first opportunity of taxing Marshall, who is usually a sober and steady man, with the almost unpardonable insults he had uttered overnight. In any case, and without the faintest suspicion that anything psychic had happened, the vicar would have done so, though not perhaps so promptly.

This opportunity of reproof he made in the afternoon of Christmas Day. He found Mr and Mrs Marshall drinking strong tea together, and it carried out the common-sense theory of the affair that Marshall should have a headache still, and have been quite unable to participate with any enjoyment in their simple but of course extremely bilious Christmas meal. And he freely and contritely admitted he had been drunk overnight.

But when Mr Burwash proceeded with some heat to charge him with the filthy blasphemies of the previous evening, Mrs Marshall fired up indignantly. And then it was that the extraordinary side of this incident came to light. There was the clearest evidence—evidence strong enough to hang a man, indeed, if need had been—that Marshall had never been near the vicar’s study at all on Christmas Eve; that the thing was an absolute impossibility; that, in fact, about half-past eleven, half an hour before the apparition that is, he had been picked up helplessly drunk by some charitable neighbours about a couple of hundred yards from the Seven Thorns, carried the whole mile and half to his own home, carried into his own kitchen and dumped down there at the very moment when his almost equally inebriated doppelgänger was insulting the vicar three-quarters of a mile away.

I test every link in the chain of evidence, as I thought, and not a link failed. Mrs Marshall told me how she had gone to bed, being tired, and how when the good man failed to appear after half-past ten, she had grown anxious, and at last, hearing voices outside, had shivered out of bed and gone to the window. A Mr Ted Apps, two brothers named Durgan, one a blacksmith and the other a watchmaker, and a Mr Hetherington, a baker, were walking in a leisurely and voluminous manner along the road, singing as they walked. She knew Mr Apps, and opened the window and called to him. She asked him whether he had seen Marshall.

At that the little party stopped and interrogated one another. They all distinctly remembered Marshall being at the Seven Thorns, and until she called their attention to the matter had had a vague impression that he was still, convivially, with them. Her wifely anxiety being only too evident, and they full of that feeling of mutual helpfulness that still, thank Heaven, distinguishes our

homely country Christmastide, it was natural they should offer to return for him.

“Aw ri, Miz Marshall,” they cried one after the other, in a reassuring voice, and turned, and making the night cheerful with Marshall’s name, returned round the long winding road towards the Seven Thorns. All were seasonably inebriated, and no doubt they were now scattered distantly and now in an amiable knot together as they reeled along calling after Marshall; but all distinctly remember what was happening at the time.

I have elaborately verified the story from all four of them. Everything was as explicit as evidence could be. “‘Twarn’t nart hun’ yards orf Sen Thorns,” said the blacksmith Durgan, “that us found en. There ’e was with ’is ’ed agenst the old fence and his blessed owd white legs—” it was Mr Marshall’s weakness invariably to wear a peculiarly light variety of corduroy trousers—“a stickin’ art—jes’ ’elpless ’e was. ’Ad to carry en every blessed yard, us did. ’E wuz bad, I tell ’ee.”

The others corroborated exactly. Marshall’s speech, they agreed, was incoherent—shapeless, in fact. Had he been able to surmount one impossibility and get up to the vicar’s study, it would have been equally impossible for him to have articulated a curse. Of that they were all convinced. And I imagine that the process of carrying him home along the dark road must have been a pretty severe test of insensibility.

“Didn’t you drop him?” I asked of the elder Durgan.

“Oh, we dropped en,” said Durgan reassuringly. “We dropped en right ’nough. And lord! what a job we did ’ave a picking of en up to be sure—” And he proceeded to give me a detailed narrative, as he remembered it, of the entire journey.

Consequent upon Mr Marshall's incapacity to walk, Mrs Marshall had to come down and open the door in order that they might carry him in. But being in a déshabille that she considered unbecoming, she stipulated that they should not enter until she had had time to retire upstairs again. As they came in, she held a candle over the banisters, and directed them where to deposit their burden. Mr Apps, being in a festive mood, then demanded drinks round, but the others being soberer, overruled him, and after they had retired, she descended and locked the front door. Afterwards it would seem that Mr Apps returned, hammered at the door, and demanded drinks again. Twice or three times she said she was alarmed in this way, and then Mr Apps apparently abandoned his quest.

She laid great stress on the aggressive behavior of Mr Apps, on account of the trouble about the missing sausages and mince pie to which I shall presently allude. As Marshall rarely drank, and as Mrs Marshall was a person of refined tastes, with a womanly horror of an intoxicated man, she did not go down to him in the kitchen until the early morning, and then she found him, still in a drink-sodden sleep, upon the hearthrug, with a pool of melted snow about him. And there, what one may call the case of the *alibi* ends. Strong that case indisputably is, the reader must admit.

Now here we have an extraordinary contradiction between two perfectly credible stories. On the one hand two clergymen, and one a sceptic, and even a scoffer at psychic experts, witness that Marshall was in one place, and on the other, four indisputably honest villagers and the man's own wife testify as emphatically that he was in quite another place. I sifted and weighed every scrap of evidence, and could see no way to reconcile the two except by taking the view Mr Burwash took and admitting a belief in doppelgängers. To that

effect I finally reported to the society. Altogether I gave the business a clear seven days.

Only one alternative to that acquiescence seemed possible to me, and that was that the vicar and his curate, in spite of the almost vehement assurance of Mr Burwash, had not seen Marshall at all. I spent three days seeking a colourable substitute for Marshall, a person who, seen casually, might have been mistaken for him, and not one could I find. He had a noticeably long nose, a fresh complexion and a large mouth. Even in his dress he was distinctive. In view of the fact that the light of the vicar's study fell fully on the face of the apparition, the mistaken identity notion failed hopelessly as an explanation. It was doppelgänger or nother. Doppelgänger, to my mind, seemed the more credible climax. In the whole course of my career as a psychic inquirer I had certainly never come upon any occult phenomenon so absolutely a tried and proven thing.

I ask the reader to stop at this stage to recapitulate the case as I have stated it, and to consider whether the proof does not seem to be practically complete. No one at all familiar with modern psychical research will find any discredit to the story in the absolute carelessness and purposelessness of the appearance.

I need scarcely say what a hearty welcome the society, which was naturally glad to find its existence justified, accorded to my personal conclusions. People who have committed themselves to psychical research, who have been called knaves and fools for their curiosity, cannot be expected to judge to skeptically such a well-authenticated case as mine. The case was, if I may use a vulgar but vivid expression, flapped vigorously in the faces of our detractors all over the world, and my own appearance at the May meeting of the society

was, in its way, an ovation. And every inducement was held out to Mr Marshall to “doppelgäng” again.

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Chapter II.

Mention has already been made of the Rev Philip Wendover in connection with this story. Mr Wendover belonged to that large, and, I fear I must write prejudiced, class, who will not have psychic phenomena at any price. He was a fair athletic young man; and he had formerly been an assistant master at Dinchester. To that I must ascribe his extraordinary facility with slang, which occasionally even affected his pulpit deliverances. From first to last, while I was unraveling this story, he had nothing but derision for me, in spite of his being my most important witness. Indeed, I quite sickened of his pet phrase of “Tommy rot.”

“What Tommy rot it all is!” he would say in his riotous amiable way. “A grown man, presumably sane and educated, spending days and days hunting the ghost of a dead superstition for a lot of piffling old fools in London. Why the deuce don’t you dig, man—do something useful? You’re strong enough.”

“Well,” I would say, “here are my facts—”

“Oh! facts be jiggered!” we would say. “Facts that prove doppelgänging are facts I have no respect for.”

“But I have,” I would say.

“What beastly rot! You’ve got a flaw somewhere. You know you have. If facts prove arrant nonsense, it shows that there’s something wrong.”

Then I would begin to state my case. “Show me the flaw,” I would say.

And directly I begin to marshal my evidence, he would lose his brief temper and begin to shout me down. Did I think he had the time to go over every

leaky tinpot ghost story in the country before he had a right to disbelieve? And I would raise my voice to avoid be shouted down.

“If Marshall has a doppelgänger let him bring him up here in the daylight,” he would say, and similar illogical nonsense; offering to board and clothe the two of them for a year out of his own meagre income, shouting extravagant promissory notes at the doppelgänger, and so forth. And then suddenly, at the height of our shouting, he would leave off quite abruptly, stare savagely at his pipe, and ask me for a match.

“Have you a match?” he used to say, as though that was the thing that had driven him to revolt. That, by a tacit understanding, suspended the quarrel. I would hand him a match to re-light his pipe. He would make some indifferent remark at a tangent, and we would go on talking and smoking together like a pair of brothers. The row, when it must have seemed to an eavesdropper on the point of blows, would vanish before one could snap one’s fingers. For his choleric outbreaks, like my own, were as brief as they were violent, like tropical thunderstorms more than anything else in the world.

Now, after I had returned to my chambers in Museum Street, I was surprised one afternoon in May by a visit from Wendover. I was collecting some new and interesting evidence upon crystal-gazing that had recently come to hand, when I heard him noisily ascend the stairs.

He came in with all the tumultuous violence of triumphant common-sense shouting and blowing, flung his umbrella on a haunted sofa I had on loan under observation, slapped down his hat on the planchette, and sat in my easy chair.

“Give me some tea, my good man,” he bawled. “And then I’ll tell you an eye-opener. Your doppelgänger! He’s hoist!”

I tried to be as cool and acrid as possible, though this irruption was certainly something of a shock, and I begged him to let me know how the hoisting was accomplished. And waving his bread and butter at me to accentuate his story, and ever and anon drinking his tea noisily and eagerly, he told me the true story of the Marshall doppelgänger.

“You know there was a thundering row blowing up about Mrs Marshall’s sausages and mince pie?” he said. “Libel actions and all that?”

I remembered the trouble quite distinctly—too distinctly indeed, for it was a side issue into which Mrs Marshall was always running, and which made Apps suspicious and reluctant under examination. The disappearance of the dainties on Christmas Eve from her kitchen I had always regarded as a troublesome irrelevance.

So far as I had formed a judgment in that matter at all I had gone with the general sentiment of the village, and suspected Apps and his friends. For clownish thieving of that kind was just the sort of thing that would commend itself to the rustic mind as a very good Christmas joke indeed.

“What has the mice pie got to do with the story?” I said.

“Everything,” said Wendover, and he drank, winking at me over his teacup.

“Old Franks!” said Wendover, putting his cup aside and leaning forward as he spoke to touch my knee.

“What of Franks?” I said, for I had never suspected that elderly sinner had any connection with the case.

“Drunk!” said Wendover. “Drowsy tipsy in the Seven Thorns a week ago; discussion running high on the great mince pie and sausage question. Did Apps take ’em or didn’t he? Friend of Apps indignant, tried running down Mrs Marshall. ‘Everybody knows Mrs Marmince pies are worse than her sausages,

not worth stealing; wouldn't have 'em at a gift.' 'Ain't they' says old Franks, hiccupping and winking. 'That's all you know,' said old Franks."

Wendover paused, looked at me, took up two slices of bread and butter, laid them face to face, bit them enormously, and looked at me again.

"My good man," I said, "have you come all the way from Sussexville to tell me that?"

"That and some other things," said Wendover, disposing of the bread and butter.

"'How do you know,' says Apps' friend. 'Never you mind,' says old Franks, appearing to realise he'd made a slip, and there, in spite of a few leading questions to the old man, his criticisms on Mrs Marshall's mincemeat came to an end."

"Well," I began.

"Wait a bit," said Wendover. "When old Franks had gone, as he did rather quick after that, the peculiar way in which he had spoken was remarked upon. Could it be that he had stolen the mince pie in question? Occasionally he did odd jobs for Marshall, as everyone knew, and it might be that sometime on Christmas Eve he had ventured—"

"Really, this pothouse gossip—"

"You wait. It wasn't long before this little suspicion came to my ears, and I must confess I didn't think very much of it at the time, nor did I connect it with your well-authenticated case. Who would? But going past Marshall's, who should I see, as I thought, but Marshall planting beans. He was stooping down with his back to me, so that his nether garments formed most of the view.

I went to the wall and shouted, intending to have a quiet word with him about this missing pie and sausage. He looked up and then I saw the mistake

I'd made at once. It wasn't Marshall at all, but the excellent Franks, doing a bit of a job in a pair of Marshall's cast-off breeks. Ah!—now you sit up! No men could be less alike about the head and face and complexion, I'll admit; but seen—that way—well, there was really an astonishing resemblance. Easily be mistaken."

"But the vicar—you—both of you said you saw his face!"

"So we did, and heard his voice. But the other gents in the case—drunk—dark night—"

That staggered me for a moment. I'd never thought of a mistake in the identity creeping into the case on that side. I could quite imagine four drunken men making such a mistake, but the point was that even if Mrs Marshall didn't see her husband's face overnight, she did the next morning.

"Now don't you think that I've come up here with a story half told," said Wendover, replying to this objection, "because I haven't. I've simply settled the whole blessed question. It's a concession to your weakness, I know, but directly the possible resemblance of old Franks to Marshall dawned on me, I determined I would clear up the muddle from end to end. I went to Franks and began to talk parochialism to him, and suddenly I hit him on the knee.

"I know all about it, Franks, my man,' I said. 'Own up!' He knew me pretty well, and he looked at me for half a minute over those old glasses of his. 'I won't tell a soul in Sussexville,' I said. 'I promise on my honour. But how the deuce did you get out of Marshall's kitchen and him in?' I suppose he saw the twinkle in my eye."

"'He was in the little tool shed hard by the water butt, Muster Wendover,' he said, 'an' his boots took off an' put under the currant bushes as tidy as cud be. Couldn't wake him nohow. And the snow a-fallin'—it wuzn't common charity not to leave en theer.'"

“You see?” said Wendover.

I saw only too plainly. “They carried home old Franks, thinking it was Marshall—”

“While Marshall was swearing and cursing his way home by the footpath over the hill.”

“And when Marshall did get home—”

“Mrs Marshall, firm in her faith that he was already safely, if swinishly, deposited in the kitchen, let him hammer and swear at his own sweet will, putting it down to Apps and pulling the clothes over her head to deaden the sounds.”

“Unhappy Marshall,” I said.

“Still more unhappy investigator,” said the curate, tauntingly.

“Franks, when he came to in the small hours,” he added, “thought at first that he was in Heaven—it shows what a conscience void of offence will do for you—his last thought before losing consciousness having been that he was dying (such being the effect of the cheaper spirits at the Seven Thorns), and his first on resuming consciousness was that he was dead. The moonlight was shining in through the frosty window, and it was cold and spacious and clean, as he’d been led to expect heaven would be. And close to hand, as he fumbled about, were sausages and a mince pie.

“Old Franks showed the usual Sussex literalness. ‘My feyther’s ’ouse ’eth many mansions, says I, and I’m darned if I ain’t in a darn good un, says I,’ was the way old Franks expressed it. It was only when he’d felt about and got the back door open, with the idea of findin’ the rest of en, and came upon Marshall, that his muddled brain began to grasp the realities of the case. He recognised the outside of the house, of course, better than the in. The rest you infer.”

“Humph!” I said, trying to find a flaw in his explanation. It was atrociously exasperating, after I’d published that report, and when the society was just making so much of me. He sat watching my conflict, so far as my face revealed it. “Doppelgängers!” he remarked unendurably.

I rose from my seat. I caught his hat and flung it violently across the room, among the spirit photographs. Possibly I said this and that. I pitched the planchette board into the fireplace, and then I attacked the available sheets of the report on crystal-gazing that lay upon my desk. When I had torn and crumpled several very violently, I was abruptly calmed. I turned and found the curate had his pipe out. “Have you a match old chap?” he said, with the utmost tranquility.

I felt in my pockets and then handed him the matches from the mantel. Then, sitting down in the armchair by the fire, I took a pipe from the rack and followed his example.