

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW

JANUARY, 1946

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The Mirror

By CHARLES KING

IT . . . IT'S impossible." His concentration was so great that he didn't know he had spoken aloud. He closed one eye entirely, then opened it, slowly. Hoping against hope, he then worked his tongue into a corner of his cheek and rotated it about. He watched. Stared. A pulse was drumming fiercely in his forehead as he backed away from the mirror.

He had first noticed it a short time ago; seven days to be exact. It is logical to suppose that he would have known of it sooner if he had been a vainer man. Most certainly, then, he would have looked into mirrors a great deal oftener.

But Jay Swarz was a mild man; a meek man; a man completely devoid of ego. He wore his habits the way he wore his clothes . . . soberly. He did not sin; he would not. He did not cheat; he could not. Three drinks before dinner and his reactions unmistakably informed him that he'd had enough. He was like that.

Once again he shot a covert glance at the mirror. There it was . . . plain to see . . .

Jay Swarz had been brought up properly. But that is an expression that has lost its true meaning. To speak with exactitude, it is better to say that he had been brought up *primly*.

In an era where modesty was considerably more than a fetish; an era where the most innocuous words called down condemnation upon the luckless user, Jay Swarz' family proudly outdid themselves in righteous self-effacement.

Completely cloaked with the mantle of selflessness . . . or so they insisted . . . they balanced themselves with practiced step upon the tightrope of virtue. No matter the season, their bodies were swathed in layer upon layer of raiment. Indoors, their comportment was such as to assure them frontrow seats in the heavenly orchestra of harpists . . . or so they insisted.

Jay had never been one to rebel. He was the sort born to accept orders unquestioningly. If, even in the privacy of one's room, it was immodest and wrong to undress before dousing the lights, he carefully put out the lights before removing his breeches. His parents had instructed him. He obeyed them. If he had to go to the lavatory it would never do to say so. That would have been grievously shocking. Any simple excuse to leave the room was acceptable under those conditions . . . but never the immodest truth.

But all these bugaboos paled before the one strict immutable rule that pervaded the Swarz household. Serving the

It was only a week ago that his reflection had abruptly rebelled.

interests of virtue, one might do everything in one's power . . . and then fail. How? By looking, smiling at, daring to admire one's reflected form in a mirror. The human form was a debased thing of evil that only served to lead its owner off the garden path. Thus, logically, it was a thing to remain unseen; avoided. Jay's Father used it for shaving. That was its purpose.

ONE of Jay's most memorable recollections was the time that he had been caught. He'd lost a tooth, as boys will, and was entirely engrossed in exploring the bloody cavity with an inquisitive finger. The mirror helped a great deal as he probed and poked . . . until . . .

"Jay!"

He swerved, nearly upsetting himself, and paled. "Yes, Father?"

"Ungodly brat! You were lasciviously admiring yourself!"

"I . . . I don't understand, Father."

"Do not trifle with me. I have explained the sin often enough."

"It was the big word I didn't understand. And, honest, I was just fooling . . ."

Which is as far as Jay got. His gasp was cut off as a gnarled hand jerked at the back of his collar. The shaving strop was seized, raised aloft, then brought down with a singing swish. Jay's cry of pain suffered the same brief span that his gasp had lasted. The steadily flailing strip of leather effectively stifled everything but an agonized wish for death. Again and again it rose and fell. The regularity was monotonous. The pain eventually indescribable.

Things, after a while, resolved into a whirling world of unbelievably

Again and again rose the leather flail . . . down and down it beat against the semi-conscious jerking form that was Jay Swarz. Jay finally fainted . . .

A graphic experience is forever etched upon the consciousness of a child. Jay never forgot that beating. It had the constant impact of a sledge-hammer swung against a huge brazen gong. The reverberations went on and on and on . . .

Jay grew older and finally left home to establish his own way in the world. He trod in minor paths. Luckier than most men, he never was troubled by an all-consuming ambition. The highways for others—the byways for him. A small job; a small room; these quite comfortably fitted his small desires.

His position with a large insurance company was safe and steady. Nobody resents a man who doesn't covet positions that aren't better than his; nobody wields an economic knife against a man who is supremely satisfied to trudge a timeless treadmill.

He was accepted with the same careless complacency that is usually associated with a slightly worn piece of office furniture; and he was considered very much as devoid of personality or hidden depth.

But they would have been surprised. He *did* have a secret.

Jay Swarz was still afraid of mirrors.

Psychologically conditioned by the ultra-stern conditions of his youth, his fear never diminished. To the contrary, it fed upon itself and grew constantly. Morbidly. A man incapable of making living enemies, he found himself in the anomalous position of having an inanimate foe. He used mirrors as sparingly as it was humanly possible. Brushing

his teeth and washing his face were easy. No ordeal there. But shaving was a shuddering time of terror that had to be agonized through every morning.

And now . . .

"It's impossible!"

But it *was* possible.

It was there . . . plain to see . . . plain to see.

Even as his eyes clung to the mirror, and his mouth was drawn thin with horror, his reflection was laughing at him. His hand stole to his face . . . his reflected hand didn't. There were new lines in his face, but his mirrored face was full and untroubled. His eyelids twitched uncontrollably, but not so in the likeness that was flung back at him. Horribly, *silently*, the face in the mirror kept laughing and laughing.

It had been a week ago that he had first noticed. A week ago that his reflection had rebelled. A week ago that his mirrored personality had begun defying him. It might have begun sooner. He hadn't noticed . . . until . . .

Until one morning it had winked obscenely at him. And, ever since . . .

HE REMEMBERED, now, the ancient Germanic legend of the man who had met his double. It had been wringing its hands. Death. He fought himself, but his eyes shot toward his reflection. It was grinning . . . wringing its hands. . . .

The psychiatrist wielded his pen with sure, broad strokes. A man untroubled by personal ghosts. A man who slew the morbid fancies and terrorizing thoughts of others. He scratched a last notation, his lips forming the inaudible words "psychosis . . . auto-suggestion. . . ."

Jay squirmed forward in his chair as

the psychiatrist leaned back and studied him.

"Does . . . does it mean I am crazy?"

The other's full, rich carefully practiced tones fell upon Jay Swarz like a protective benediction: "No. Absolutely not. You are as sane as . . . well, as I am." This last accompanied by a resonant chuckle.

"Then the thing I see can't hurt me?"

"It is impossible for it to hurt you. Impossible, because you do *not* see it."

"But Doctor—"

"Please. A moment." Well-manicured fingers interlaced themselves across a well-padded stomach. "From what you have told me, you are a man pursued by phantoms. It is not your fault, Mr. Swarz. You have related how your boyhood was completely dominated by a thorough abnegation of healthy emotion. No outlets. No outlets at all. Well, sir, what is the result?"

"What?"

"As you grew older, Mr. Swarz, you cast off the narrow outlook with which you were most effectively swaddled. You didn't know it, but you did. And, due to the inexorable law of nature, you began to think for yourself. That, of course, brought its . . . er . . . problems.

I . . . don't understand."

"Let us put it this way. A man who has been perishing of thirst will not allow logic to stand in his way when he is confronted with plenteous water. He will drink and drink until he is uncomfortably sated. If undeterred he will become rather sick. You, Mr. Swarz, are that thirsty man."

"I . . . see. . . ."

"Exactly. You had a thirst for normalcy. It was, during your childhood, consistently denied to you. You left

home and found yourself with an all-consuming thirst for being a healthy ego . . . for being natural. You follow me."

It wasn't a question, but Jay Swarz felt constrained to answer "Yess." It was getting so clear now, so normally explainable, that he had to show his improvement by joining in, and approving of, the logical explanation.

"Well, sir, you overdid yourself. The abrupt change to a normal way of living, and acting, stirred up half-forgotten vistas of your unfortunate youth. Subconsciously, that is. Once again you were being threatened with unfair punishment. Inwardly, of course. You probably never even perceived . . . suspected. The first sign was the product of an overworked—though, to you, unsuspected—imagination. The fear complex. The worry over being hideously punished—as you told me you were—because you were doing something that is unalterably natural."

"But, Doctor, my remaining fear of mirrors . . ."

"You are *not* afraid."

"I . . ."

"Mr. Swarz. Believe me. You only *think* you are afraid. That is why you have been avoiding mirrors with such careful conscientiousness these past few years. As the snake struggles to shed its skin, so are you struggling. And—forgive the comparison—as the reptile finally emerges in new, shining armor, so are you emerging."

"Then, what shall I do?"

"Face your phantom, Mr. Swarz. Defy it. Gaze into your mirror steadily—without fear. Your clouded imagination will be cleared by the calm, cooling breezes of reason."

"L-look into my mirror steadily?"

"Precisely. Drive out the false visions that have been plaguing you so unfairly. Once gone they will never return. On that I stake my reputation."

IT WAS a new Jay Swarz who turned the key of his small apartment. It was a new Jay Swarz that tossed his coat onto his bed. It was something he had wanted to do all his life, a life given to circumspectly genuflecting to all the hallowed proprieties. That was over. Done. He was a snake shedding its dull skin for a brighter one . . . a butterfly emerging in innocent glory from its dull chrysalis . . . *a man*.

He turned toward the bathroom. He couldn't help the feeling of aversion . . . of fear . . .

But wasn't he now a man? He was. Incontestably.

Hand upon the door . . . fear . . . twist the knob . . . no . . . think . . . psychiatrist's advice . . . a learned man . . . helps people who need guidance . . . twist the knob . . . try . . . sweat forming on a corrugated forehead . . . twist the knob . . . everything explained . . . logically . . . exactly . . . mathematically . . . truthfully . . . that last very important . . . *twist the knob* . . .

And he was inside.

Walk up to the mirror . . . boldly . . . stare steadily . . . unafraid . . . blot out the false phantoms . . . *do it*. It's easy . . . one leg before the other . . . go ahead . . . hesitation only hurts . . . makes things harder . . . foolish . . . nothing to be worried about . . . all carefully explained . . . habits of a lifetime . . . lurking . . . unfair . . . no substance . . . all explained . . . figments . . . palpably worthy of derision . . . go ahead . . .

And he was before the mirror.

Open your eyes . . . stare . . . steadily
 . . . open your eyes . . . nothing can
 hurt you . . . it will help . . . teach you
 the truth . . . help you . . . open broad
 lanes . . . to happiness . . . wipe out the
 past . . . the gray past . . . the punishing
 past . . . open your eyes . . . see the new
 world . . . *your* world . . . *open your*
eyes. . . .

And he opened his eyes.

His reflection . . . nothing to worry
 about . . . it looked at him . . . as he
 looked at it . . . calm . . . both calm . . .
 as it should be . . . expressions the same
 . . . as they should be . . . psychiatrist
 right . . . as he should be . . . learned
 man . . . wise man . . . helpful man . . .
 good advice . . . best advice . . . go ahead
 . . . stare at it . . . staring . . . pride . . .
 strength . . . new feeling of . . . of . . .
not Can't be! Impossible. Psychiatrist
 said no . . . learned man . . . wise man
 . . . look again . . . *NO!* Reflection . . .
 laughing . . . silently . . . utterly impos-
 sible . . . wise man said so . . . wealth
 of experience . . . can't be wrong . . .
 good advice . . . best advice . . . heed it
 . . . heed it . . . stare at reflection . . .
 glare at reflection . . . don't give up . . .
 must win . . . must win . . . don't give up
 . . . stare . . . gl— . . .

And he screamed And he screamed.

He caught himself. Lurched out of
 the bathroom.

This was no time to give way to dis-
 ordered, mental stabs. More than evi-
 dent that his ancient enemy was weaken-
 ing; employing last hopeless trickery.
 This was triumph . . . triumph.

Get a bit of help. Nothing shameful
 about using all the means at one's dis-
 posal to rid one's self of a dying enemy.

Nothing to do with one's manliness. The
 enemy must be destroyed.

That is the only important thing.

ANSWERING the telephone call, the
 psychiatrist finally arrived. A bit
 put out because he'd been disturbed at his
 meal; but cloaking his irritation and im-
 patience with the thought of adding a
 substantial amount to an already padded
 bill.

"Look, Doctor . . . the mirror."

"What about it?"

"Can't you see?"

"No."

"You *can't!*"

"All I see is that you have a reflec-
 tion . . . which is as it should be."

"But it reacts differently. That is why
 I called you. . ."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you see? It—my enemy—is
 still there. However, I am not afraid.
 It is a figment. I know it. You told me
 so. But it is there . . . to be destroyed.
 Isn't that progress?"

The psychiatrist backing up . . . pro-
 fessionally polite . . . words . . . words
 that have no meaning . . . professional
 . . . backing to the door . . . understand-
 ing . . . *understanding.*

"I'm sorry I troubled you, sir. It was
 nothing. Nothing at all."

"Quite all right, Mr. Swarz. Just take
 my advice. Don't be afraid . . . don't be
 afraid . . ." and he was gone.

Failure! The psychiatrist had lied.
 Evident. He had seen it too. Wouldn't
 admit it. Have to help one's self. The
 only way . . . use any means. . .

Any means.

Out with logic. Forswear what is fal-
 laciouly taught. Seek that which can
really help. Seek that which is ridiculed

and mocked . . . but secretly feared. Seek the strange powers that all gibe at . . . because the *true* answer is there . . . for the asking. . . .

Many libraries . . . many . . . many bookstores . . . laughing faces . . . incredulous faces . . . sneering faces . . . he knows! *He knows!* They sneer and mock because they are afraid . . . cannot seek truth as *he does* . . . tirelessly . . . and then . . . then . . .

And old bookshop . . . and old man . . . incredibly . . . nodding . . . understanding . . . tottering to an inner room . . . a book . . . musty . . . ancient . . . refusal of payment . . . smiling. . . .

JAY SWARZ entered his apartment. He opened the book and studied. He smiled. It was all so easy. How much simpler if he had done this first. He read on. . . .

There was the diagram to chalk upon the floor. He drew it. There were the multi-syllabled invocations to intone. He intoned them. There were the careful passes through the air . . . the repetition of certain odd phrases . . . the lit match that must scorch his fingertips. . . .

And, as it must be, the crouching shape was there. Motionless. The shape

that would rid him of the rebellious reflection in the mirror. The shape that would take the horror out of his life. It would exact a tribute. That was to be expected.

Jay Swarz was happy. Truly happy. He cast a sidelong glance at his mirrored reflection. *Could it be?* Yes. It was already losing its shape . . . becoming tenuous . . . transparent . . . wearing a look that Jay knew . . . *knew* . . . was one of helpless pleading. No time for mercy . . . too many years of subjugation . . . destroy . . . without conscience destroy . . . the reflection of him was wavering . . . almost gone . . . fighting . . . hopelessly . . . going . . . *gone*. . . .

And the crouched figure stirred itself. Slowly unbent. Looked up for the first time.

Jay Swarz threw a frantic look at his mirror. No reflection. No reflection at all. Blank. *Blank*.

The figure straightened and stepped over the chalked lines. It was going to exact its tribute. Jay Swarz knew this.

He also knew that he had incarnated his double . . . brought it to life . . . it was wringing its hands . . . hands which suddenly swooped to Jay Swarz' throat.

He knew so many things . . . too late.

