

The Man Without a Shadow

A New Version

By Fitz-James O'Brien

Fortunate fellow that I am! I have lost my shadow!

But do not imagine that, like the poor Peter Schlemihl, I have sold it to the Devil! Heaven forbid that any Devil should be stupid or extravagant enough to buy such a Shadow!

No; as it came, so it has departed, a thing of mystery, an awful bore.

It is not my natural shadow I speak of; but an unnatural, an impertinent Shadow, which of late attached itself to my person, and could not be shaken off whether in the glare of sunshine or the pale moonlight, in the rays of volatile gas or of explosive camphine.

I first observed it about six weeks ago. I knew it was a shadow, for I never could detect anything real or true about it; nevertheless, to look at it, one would have taken it for a man, or, at the least, a monkey. I have had my doubts in the latter point. But no! I will not insult monkeydom by the suspicion. I was only a Shadow—no more.

When I first observed it at a friend's house, I tried to find out what it was; but my friend knew as little as myself. It had followed him from another friend's, and that friend said it had followed him from somewhere else. Of its origin nothing was known. Like all Shadows, its nature was involved in obscurity. At any attempt to throw light upon it, it disappeared entirely—like other Shadows.

Still it was a very troublesome Shadow, and very different from my own dear aboriginal Shadow which so closely resembled me in outline, that no one would fail to detect my relationship; but this new strange Shadow was not a bit like me. It was my opposite in every respect—even at dinner. And it was not only a troublesome, but an expensive Shadow; for when I dined, it dined with me, and when the bill came, the waiter charged for the Shadow as if for a human being—and truly it had a most astonishing semblance of eating and drinking about it! Whatever I took it took, when I drank wine it drank wine-nay, it drank even more than I drank myself, for Shadows are generally larger than the objects which shun them. I should almost have questioned whether it was a Shadow, had it not in all respects aped my movements and reflections. If I said it was a hot day, the Shadow said it was a hot day, or I fancied it said so. If I wiped my forehead, the Shadow seemed to do the same. If I put my hand in my pocket to pay for cigars, the Shadow did the same—only being a Shadow, it never brought out any money to pay for them, which is a peculiarity of Shadows.

When I praised anything the Shadow praised, and when I condemned the Shadow condemned—at least so its attitude seemed to imply. When I was going up town the Shadow was going up town, and when I inclined towards the Battery the Shadow was likewise attracted thither. Wherever I went, the Shadow went too. What I did, the Shadow did. What I thought the Shadow thought, and what I swore the Shadow swore. Of its Shadowy nature, there could surely be no question.

It is now a whole week since it left me. When I last saw it I was dressing to go out, and the Shadow of course had precisely at that epoch occasion to dress too; so it put on one of my clean shirts (as I did myself), and went out with me. At the door it borrowed a five dollar bill, and—vanished. It is the nature of Shadows to vanish. I have since heard that the same Shadow has vanished from more than one boarding house in the most shadowy manner.

May the reader never be haunted by Shadows!

I have a scientific theory, by the way, with reference to these visitors from Shadow-land. It is, that they are the spiritual manifestations of departed (i.e. emigrated) Do—dos. I mean to suggest the idea at the next meeting of the Royal Society, in London.