

The Magic Shadow

By Quiller-Couch

One upon a time there was born a man-child with a magic shadow.

His case was so rare that a number of doctors have been disputing over it ever since and picking his parents' histories and genealogies to bits, to find the cause. Their inquiries do not help us much. The father drove a cab; the mother was a charwoman and came of a consumptive family. But these facts will not quite account for a magic shadow. The birth took place on the night of a new moon, down a narrow alley into which neither moon nor sun ever penetrated beyond the third-storey windows—and that is why the parents were so long in discovering their child's miraculous gift. The hospital-student who attended merely remarked that the babe was small and sickly, and advised the mother to drink sound port-wine while nursing him,—which she could not afford.

Nevertheless, the boy struggled somehow through five years of life, and was put into small-clothes. Two weeks after this promotion his mother started off to scrub out a big house in the fashionable quarter, and took him with her: for the house possessed a wide garden, laid with turf and lined with espaliers, sunflowers, and hollyhocks, and as the month was August, and the family away in Scotland, there seemed no harm in letting the child run about in this paradise while she worked. A flight of steps descended from the drawing-room to the garden, and as she knelt on her mat in the cool room it was easy to keep an eye on him. Now and then she gazed out into the sunshine and called; and the boy stopped running about and nodded back, or shouted the report of some fresh discovery.

By-and-by a sulphur butterfly excited him so that he must run up the broad stone steps with the news. The woman laughed, looking at his flushed face, then down at his shoe-strings, which were untied: and then she jumped up, crying out sharply—"Stand still, child—stand still a moment!"

She might well stare. Her boy stood and smiled in the sun, and his shadow lay on the whitened steps. Only the silhouette was not that of a little breeched boy at all, but of a little girl in petticoats; and it wore long curls, whereas the charwoman's son was close-cropped.

The woman stepped out on the terrace to look closer. She twirled her son round and walked him down into the garden, and backwards and forwards, and stood him in all manner of positions and attitudes, and rubbed her eyes. But there was no mistake: the shadow was that of a little girl.

She hurried over her charing, and took the boy home for his father to see before sunset. As the matter seemed important, and she did not wish people in the street to notice anything strange, they rode back in an omnibus. They might have spared their haste, however, as the cab-driver did not reach home till supper-time, and then it was found that in the light of a candle, even when stuck inside a carriage-lamp, their son cast just an ordinary shadow. But next morning at sunrise they woke him up and carried him to the house-top, where the sunlight slanted between the chimney-stacks: and the shadow was that of a little girl.

The father scratched his head. "There's money in this, wife. We'll keep the thing close; and in a year or two he'll be fit to go round in a show and earn money to support our declining years."

With that the poor little one's misfortunes began. For they shut him in his room, nor allowed him to play with the other children in the alley—there was no knowing what harm might come to his

precious shadow. On dark nights his father walked him out along the streets; and the boy saw many curious things under the gas-lamps, but never the little girl who inhabited his shadow. So that by degrees he forgot all about her. And his father kept silence.

Yet all the while she grew side by side with him, keeping pace with his years. And on his fifteenth birthday, when his parents took him out into the country and, in the sunshine there, revealed his secret, she was indeed a companion to be proud of—neat of figure, trim of ankle, with masses of waving hair; but whether blonde or brunette could not be told; and, alas I she had no eyes to look into.

“My son,” said they, “the world lies before you. Only do not forget your parents, who conferred on you this remarkable shadow.”

The youth promised, and went off to a showman. The showman gladly hired him; for, of course, a magic shadow was a rarity, though not so well paying as the Strong Man or the Fat Woman, for these were worth seeing every day, whereas for weeks at a time, in dull weather or foggy, our hero had no shadow at all. But he earned enough to keep himself and help the parents at home; and was considered a success.

One day, after five years of this, he sought the Strong Man, and sighed. For they had become close friends.

“I am in love,” he confessed.

“With your shadow?”

“No.”

“Not with the Fat Woman!” the Strong Man exclaimed, with a start of jealousy.

“No. I have seen her that I mean these three days in the Square, on her way to music lesson. She has dark brown eyes and wears yellow ribbons. I love her.”

“You don’t say so! She has never come to our performance, I hope.”

“It has been foggy ever since we came to this town.”

“Ah, to be sure. Then there’s a chance: for, you see, she would never look at you if she knew of—of that other. Take my advice—go into society, always at night, when there is no danger; get introduced; dance with her; sing serenades under her window; then marry her. Afterwards—well, that’s your affair.”

So the youth went into society and met the girl he loved, and danced with her so vivaciously and sang serenades with such feeling beneath her window, that at last she felt he was all in all to her. Then the youth asked to be allowed to see her father, who was a Retired Colonel; and professed himself a man of Substance. He said nothing of the Shadow: but it is true he had saved a certain amount. “Then to all intents and purposes you are a gentleman,” said the Retired Colonel; and the wedding-day was fixed.

They were married in dull weather, and spent a delightful honeymoon. But when spring came and brighter days, the young wife began to feel lonely; for her husband locked himself, all the day long, in his study—to work, as he said. He seemed to be always at work; and whenever he consented to a holiday, it was sure to fall on the bleakest and dimmest day in the week.

“You are never so gay now as you were last Autumn. I am jealous of that work of yours. At least,” she pleaded, “let me sit with you and share your affection with it.”

But he laughed and denied her: and next day she peered in through the keyhole of his study.

That same evening she ran away from him: having seen the shadow of another woman by his side.

Then the poor man—for he had loved his wife—cursed the day of his birth and led an evil life. This lasted for ten years, and his wife died in her father’s house, unforgiving.

On the day of her funeral, the man said to his shadow—"I see it all. We were made for each other, so let us marry. You have wrecked my life and now must save it. Only it is rather hard to marry a wife whom one can only see by sunlight and moonlight."

So they were married; and spent all their life in the open air, looking on the naked world and learning its secrets. And his shadow bore him children, in stony ways and on the bare mountain-side. And for every child that was born the man felt the pangs of it.

And at last he died and was judged: and being interrogated concerning his good deeds, began—

"We two—"

—and looked around for his shadow. A great light shone all about; but she was nowhere to be seen. In fact, she had passed before him; and his children remained on earth, where men already were heaping them with flowers and calling them divine.

Then the man folded his arms and lifted his chin.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I am simply a sinner."

There are in this world certain men who create. The children of such are poems, and the half of their soul is female. For it is written that without woman no new thing shall come into the world.