



# Afraid of His Shadow

By DOROTHY DONNELL CALHOUN

It was impossible, against nature, reason, belief,  
yet he had seen it — the Thing on the grass!

THE smoking-room of the club was gray with twilight, and nearly deserted. In one corner an elderly man, showing perhaps sixty-five years in his lined, thoughtful face, sat buried in the "Révue Philosophique." Behind him a group of young members stretched their long legs around the dying fire, in desultory chat of one thing and another. Presently, led perhaps by a chance remark on the waning light, the talk touched, strangely enough, on fear.

"I wonder how many of us, if we were quite truthful, would not confess to some sort of fear," mused the young novelist. His glance about the group was whimsical. "Don't worry, I'm not thinking of third-degreeing any of you for copy, but it just occurred to me. I'll wager there isn't a man among us or anywhere else who hasn't some pet, private dread locked away in his own soul where even his wife doesn't know of its presence."

"What do you mean by fear?" objected his neighbor. "The bravest man I ever knew was an army captain, with a V. C. for gallantry in ten engagements, who confessed to me once that he had a deadly horror of cats!"

"That proves my point." The novelist puffed his brier complacently. "Cats, the toothache, death, ridicule—it doesn't matter what. That poor devil of a policeman who was stripped of his shield the other day for failing to follow an armed thief into a dark cellarway was probably no worse a coward at heart than you or I. We're luckier in never having come up against our own particular phobia, that's all."

"Do you remember the verse of Coleridge's about a man walking along a lonely road?" hesitated a third voice. The young physician leaned forward to light his cigar on his neighbor's. "Let's see, how does it run?"

'And having once looked round, walks on,  
and no more turns his head  
Because he knows a frightful fiend doth  
close behind him tread.'

"Do you know, I've thought of that sometimes when I was driving through the country at midnight? And, well, you couldn't hire me to look around for love or money at that moment!"

"Fear of the darkness seems to be born in us," nodded the novelist. "I suppose there wasn't a night when I was a child that I felt really safe going upstairs to bed."

"But did you ever hear of a man who was afraid of the light?" asked a deep voice unexpectedly from behind them. The gray-haired man stood on the outskirts of the group, dimly sketched against the grayness.

"I TRUST you will pardon my intrusion," he went on, almost shyly. "I am a stranger here—an old member. I happened to overhear your conversation, and it singularly interests me."

"No apologies, sir; draw up your chair and welcome," the physician assured him heartily. "We'll be everlastingly grateful if you can spin us a new yarn. We're stale on each other's stories. Have a cigar."

"No, thanks, I don't smoke." The

stranger settled back in the leather arm-chair, and gazed steadily into the glowing coals. It was almost as though the light hurt his eyes, yet he forced himself to look at it. The unusual in his attitude whetted the appetite of the group for strange disclosures. Finally, without taking his gaze from the fire, he began to talk in a level, colorless voice.

"The man I was thinking about when I spoke just now used to live in this town." He glanced an instant about the circle. "I wonder—perhaps you may have heard of him. He left before your times, I suppose; almost thirty years ago. The name was Peter Van Dorn."

"Van Dorn?" The novelist leaned forward interestedly. "There was a Van Dorn I've heard my father speak of; a wealthy young rake who left his gay life suddenly without any explanation and became a hermit. People said it was the fault of the girl he was in love with."

"People were wrong," said the stranger slowly. "Peter Van Dorn suffered from no one's fault but his own. You will wonder how I know this story. You see, I was a friend and schoolmate of the man, and he told me the truth that the world only guessed and gossiped about. The real reason Peter became a recluse was because he was afraid. I said when I joined you that he was afraid of the light, but that is not quite accurate. He was afraid of what the light might show him, and that was his own shadow!"

A stir ran around the group. On the tips of half a dozen cigars the ashes gathered. Only the stranger seemed unmoved by his own words.

"You were right when you summed up the man's character, just now—'young rake.' Yet, the Van Dorns belonged to one of the oldest families in the State. There were governors among them before the line dwindled down to Peter. And up to the time he went to college, and then to a foreign university, the lad was harmless enough; a slight, pretty youngster, with girl's hair and eyes. Even then, Eleanor Hammond, daughter of the old judge, was his sweetheart in a childish fashion, and everyone supposed that Peter

would come home in a few years, marry her, and settle down.

"But five years went by, six, and seven, and all of Peter that returned were sly rumors and shreds of gossip that drift in the wake of a careless young blackguard; gossip of gambling, drinking, and gay companions, though nothing worse. Then, one day, on the heels of the tales, appeared Peter himself, broadened and thickened into a fine figure of a man, with no hint of evil in his frank ways.

**"BY** THAT time Eleanor Hammond was a lovely woman of twenty-five, with more suitors than you could count, but none of them favored. She could have married well a dozen times, but she hadn't, and as soon as Peter came upon the scene it was plain that she had kept the thankless young scoundrel's image in her pure heart all these years.

"It was on a moonlight evening, a month later, that he asked her to marry him; one of those white, unstirring nights when every twig is doubled by its shadow, like a cameo on the grass. For a moment after the question had left his lips she did not answer, then she raised her head and looked him straight in the eyes.

"'Are you coming to me quite free, Peter?' she asked him slowly.

"'There is nothing or no one else in the wide world with a claim on me,' he told her. 'Not a shadow even, sweetheart, between you and me.'

"But before the words were out of his mouth, the sudden horror in her eyes warned him, and, following their shrinking gaze he saw it—the Thing on the grass where his shadow should have been, black and distinct in the white pools of the moon. He did not know, he told me, how long he stood there staring—staring, or just when she went. It was the sound of a door closing that broke the spell at last, for he knew that with that door he was shut out from her, from love and happiness, he and the Thing on the grass, in a world where the darkness that hides sin and horrors is kinder than the day.

"Like a lost soul, Peter Van Dorn fled from the tell-tale moon, plunging into the

grove, over tree-stumps, through close-growing bushes, panting like a hounded animal, moaning, muttering, beating his breast. In a close covert of evergreens—as the spicy smell told him—he stopped and cast a hunted look behind; but the shadows of the woods had erased the Thing he feared.

“He drew long, sobbing breaths and tried to think the matter over calmly. It was impossible, against nature, reason, belief—yet it was true! He had seen it—she had seen.

“There had been no mistaking the slender figure, the fragile, piquant profile, every line the same. Yet she was dead; she and the child that had shamed her.

“‘It is a bad dream!’ cried Peter aloud. ‘Why, such things cannot happen in this world!’

“But when later he had to cross a field of white, pure moonlight, he did it on a run, hands clasped across his eyes.

“She wrote the next day. My friend showed me the letter, kissed almost illegible. ‘I do not pretend to judge you,’ she wrote sadly, ‘I do not even question. Yet, with that between us, Peter, I can never marry you. If it were an illusion, some strange freak of the leaves! But, Peter, Peter, where was your own shadow on the grass?’

“At the end there was a hint of hope. ‘If it goes away—that black woman-shadow, Peter, come to me, for I have waited a long time for you, and I will wait longer. And, dear, if you can make any reparation, do so.’

“But Peter Van Dorn sat in his darkened room, and knew without hope that the shadow of his old sin would never let him go to her.

“Tongues clacked, of course. People said he was crazy to shut himself up in his darkened house, and one of his chums who had gone to expostulate with him, ratified this belief.

“‘Peter, old man,’ he had begun, jovially, ‘what are you doing, shut up with the shadows—’

“He had not finished his sentence, he said, for Peter had sprung to him, gripping his arm with frenzied fingers like

claws. ‘Shadows—where?’ he had gasped. ‘What light?’ And then, with a wild cry of despair, ‘What would you do if you had lost your shadow?’

“After that, you may believe, no one was anxious to visit Peter. His servants left, telling strange tales of how their master refused to have a lamp, or so much as a candle, lighted in the room with him. Soon there was fresher gossip to occupy people’s tongues, and they left off wondering about poor Peter. Sometimes a man, coming home late on a clouded night, would see a shadowy figure slipping along furtively in the covert of the buildings; but for ten years Peter Van Dorn lived, the ghost of himself, hidden from the eyes of mankind and the revelation of the sun. Always, he told me, he felt the Thing with him, ready to spring out in the place of his shadow whenever he dared the light, but he never saw it during that time. Then, one day, he heard somehow that Eleanor Hammond was dying. Well—he went to her.

The old judge met him at the door, as naturally as though he had seen him yesterday.

“‘She has been calling for you, Peter,’ he told him, ‘come in.’

“The sick-room was darkened. On the pillow was a whiter blur that Peter knew for her face. Kneeling by the bedside, he cried like a child. He thought, you see, that she was dead, she lay so still; but it was not so. The door behind opened suddenly to admit the physician, also the father carrying an oil-lamp in his shaking, veined old hands.

The room sprang into lights and shadows, and the dying woman opened her eyes with a great cry.

“‘Your shadow has come back, Peter!’ she said. ‘The other one is gone. There is nothing between us now, my dear, my dear!’

“Even as she spoke she fell back, dead. And Peter saw the old lost shadow of himself rise up and stagger before him from the room. From that hour, the shadow of the woman he had wronged never returned, for she, dead, had had her triumph, and had kept what was hers.”

THE stranger's voice sank to a whisper. The coals in the grate fell apart with a hiss and flared into a brief glow. In the circle several men started up and cast furtive looks over their shoulders. The stranger laughed grimly.

"It never fails," he mused aloud, as though to himself. "I have told that story many times, and at the end there is always some one who looks hurriedly over his shoulder for his own shadow! Strange how conscience makes us cowards."

"You had not finished," interposed the novelist hastily. "What became of Peter afterward?"

"He went to foreign lands in search of forgetfulness," said the deep voice tonelessly; "then gave up the search and came home. But always he preferred the darkness to the light, for he was afraid of his own shadow the rest of his days."

The novelist knocked his pipe against

the chimney-piece with a hand that was not quite steady.

"That's quite a good yarn, friend," he yawned carelessly. "But altogether too strained to be true. Of course, you admit it is only a yarn?"

The stranger rose and faced him. In the fire-flicker they saw the lines in his face and the infinite sadness in his tired eyes.

"Yes, yes, of course it is fiction," he assented wearily. "As you say, it is too strained to be true."

The soft-footed butler of the club had entered as they were speaking, and now, suddenly, without warning, the room sprang into warm light from the two great chandeliers.

With a sharp cry the gray-haired stranger covered his eyes with his hands.

"Turn off the light!" he cried. "I am afraid!"