

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 8, No. 4

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 8, No. 4, Whole No. 47, April, 1955. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and Possessions; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1955, by Fantasy House Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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*The theme of *The Man Without a Shadow* goes back at least 142 years, to Adelbert von Chamisso's THE WONDROUS TALE OF PETER SCHLEMIHL; but, like all the great themes of fantasy, it remains inexhaustible. Now Marc Brandel brings to it the insight of a skilled novelist (whose THE TIME OF THE FIRE was last year's most successful fusion of murder mystery with penetrating study of character) to create this sensitive and moving story.*

Cast the First Shadow

by MARC BRANDEL

IN EVERY WAY BUT ONE ERNIE COMBS was a very ordinary young man. His single difference from other people came to light on his fifth birthday and, though it seemed trifling enough to him at the time, its discovery cut his life as sharply into two parts as a crippling accident.

It was a sunny day at the beginning of June and Ernie's father, who was a clerk in a chemical supply company, had promised to take him rowing on the lake in Central Park. They were walking through the zoo. Ernie, an affectionate child, holding on to his father's hand was trotting to keep up, when it happened. For some time he had been watching his father's shadow moving smoothly without effort over the rough path in front of them. It puzzled him.

"Dad," he asked presently, "what

makes that black thing move like that? Why doesn't it bump into things?"

"That's my shadow," his father told him. And then because he was a man of an exact practical nature: "When the sun hits something solid," he explained, "the light can't get through. So that makes a dark patch on the ground. It's called a shadow."

Ernie nodded wisely, not understanding, and trotted on for a while in silence. Then: "why don't I have a . . . a whatyousaid?" he asked casually.

"Shadow. Of course you do. Everybody has a shadow." His father stopped suddenly, looking at the ground, at his own shadow spreading like a dark pool of oil away from his feet. Then he moved a little to one side. He stepped away from his son altogether. He walked around

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in front of him and stared at the ground again.

"Move," he said at last in an odd, coated voice.

Ernie obediently moved.

"Again," his father almost shouted. "Jump up and down. Wave your arms."

Ernie did. People stopped to watch. His father seized him by the hand, dragging him away.

"We're going home," he said. Ernie could feel his father's distress seeping into his own hand like a painful current. He began to cry.

"You promised we'd go on the lake."

"We're going home," his father repeated.

Ernie's mother was surprised to see them home so soon. His father explained. She frowned in disbelief. He made Ernie show her. And then they tried everything. They stood him in front of every window in the house. They banked whole batteries of lighted bulbs behind him. They made him stand in every position they could think of. They made him move around and they made him keep still.

None of it did any good. The fact remained: in every other way a perfectly ordinary child, Ernie cast no shadow.

They thumped and prodded him. In his experimental zeal his father stuck a pin into Ernie's arm. Ernie cried. He was solid enough, at least to the touch, though he cried less from pain than because he couldn't

understand what he had done to frighten and anger his parents this way: he didn't understand what he was being punished for.

Ernie's mother and father were never able to decide on the cause of their son's peculiarity, or on a possible cure for it. But on one thing they were in perfect agreement. They were determined to keep it dark. They both felt it was an unnatural and shameful thing, a dreadful family stigma they must bear in secret. If they had been asked why they felt that way they would have replied indignantly, as something too obvious to need explaining: "Because everybody else has a shadow, of course!"

But they couldn't really expect to keep it a secret for ever. They could make Ernie stay indoors on sunny days. They could keep him away from lighted places where strangers might notice his awful difference. But the law compelled them to send him to school.

Ernie's school days were a repetitious ordeal. At each new school there would be a fresh beginning, the other children accepting him as one of themselves. Timidly, fearfully he would try to make friends: he would forget sometimes for a whole hour at a time that he was any different from them. But sooner or later the end would always come. They always found out. Their first fear and awe would turn quickly to hate and derision. Ernie would arrive home one day with a split lip or a

black eye. There would be the familiar scene: his mother holding him against her — “My poor baby. What have we done to deserve this?” — his father regarding him with resentful pity.

Ernie's parents would move to a different neighborhood. Ernie would be sent to yet another school.

But until he was twelve Ernie himself never quite gave up hope. Every morning as soon as he awoke he would feel his way out of bed and with his eyes still closed plant himself in front of the window in his room. Then, willing the improbable with all his strength, he would slowly open his eyes. An unbroken string of failures depressed but did not totally dishearten him. The morning of his twelfth birthday was his final hope. He had heard that every seven years you changed completely. It was exactly seven years since the first discovery of his difference. That morning he willed harder and longer than ever. One thing at least about him still hadn't changed. He never tried again: from then on Ernie accepted his affliction as permanent.

In many ways this acceptance made things easier for him: he entered less resentfully into his parents' sad conspiracy to keep his stigma a secret. He became adept at avoiding bright open spaces, at staying in the shadows where his own lack of one didn't matter because it was unnoticeable. He managed to stay at one school for a whole three years.

At eighteen Ernie Combs was a pale, rather tall young man with a pleasant ordinary face and no remarkable aptitudes or intelligence. His parents had never dared to have other children. The series of furnished apartments in which they lived had never been more than shamed hiding places. His father had long ceased to be either practical or exact: he avoided his son in convenient saloons. His mother had taken to vague good works. Ernie understood he had ruined their lives. He left home without regret to make his own furtive place in the world.

He had put in a lot of thought about his choice of a career, tending at first towards coal mining or dark room work in photography. But he had later abandoned them both as unrealistic. It was in just such places that a sudden beam of light could most easily betray him. He had come to see that his best hope lay not in total darkness, but in indirect lighting. The job's only other essentials were: it must be in a tall building on the south side of the street so he could enter and leave without risk, and there must always be plenty of people about in the lobby and elevators. There was safety for Ernie in crowds and confusion.

He found what he wanted without much trouble and was taken on at a dim little salary in the stock room of a warehouse just off Fourth Avenue. The fluorescent lights all

over the ceiling, the racks and boxes of merchandise all over the floor cast such a profusion of shadows that his would never be missed.

He rented a furnished room nearby and settled into a cautious routine. For the first time in thirteen years Ernie felt safe.

At first that was all he asked. It was more than enough for him. But then after a surprisingly short time it wasn't. After only a few weeks Ernie began to feel there must be more to living — or should be — than safety. He was lonely; he wanted friends; he longed for the same things other, ordinary people had.

And gradually out of this desire hope came back into his life. It was no longer the hope of losing his own peculiarity. It was a truer, braver hope of finding someone who shared it. It was impossible, Ernie felt, that he should be unique. Somewhere there must be another like himself.

He began to search for that other, and at once lost his sense of aimlessness. He was no longer lonely: wandering all over the city, peering into corners, following each stealthy figure who kept to the shadows, as he did, for fear of being found out.

He was astounded how many there were to follow, how many people there were in New York alone who seemed afraid of showing themselves in the light for one reason or another. But Ernie had no further interest in them once he was sure their reasons were different from

his. He was far too ordinary a young man to feel any kinship with the otherwise afflicted. He felt no pity for them even. He abandoned them without a qualm, in fact with a certain contempt, and pressed on in his search.

As part of it he had taken to walking up and down Fourth Avenue during his lunch hour. There were always a good many people around at that time and something about the neighborhood, perhaps the same thing that had first attracted him to it, made him feel particularly hopeful there.

The first time he saw her it was little more than a glimpse. He had become expert by then at spotting stealth in others and his attention was drawn to the girl twenty yards away. She was about his age, tall and slight, with a pale scared face and disheveled hair. He hurried after her at once, but she was hurrying too, dodging in and out of the crowd without ever getting separated from it and avoiding the fronts of buildings in a familiar way. Though he threw aside all caution as he pursued her up the avenue she was too quick for him. He lost her outside the Armory and was late getting back for work.

From then on it was her he was searching for. But it was almost a month before he saw her again, in the same place, and this time she was coming towards him. She was hurrying as before, her white face lowered, her eyes intently watching

the ground in front of her. Ernie watched it too. She reached an intersection a few yards away and was forced to stop at the curb. The sun shone on her soft brown hair, so carelessly parted at the side. A stream of cars momentarily blocked her from sight. There was a sudden gap between a Buick and a Ford. Ernie's glance swept the street in front of her graceful feet. He almost fainted with joy. It was true: his search was over: he was no longer alone.

She cast no shadow.

He started to run towards her and then checked himself. He had caught that look of shamed fear in her eyes which he had so often felt in his own. She thought herself discovered. He stopped and turned and started back up the avenue, walking now beside her. She glanced at him in panic: she had brown eyes and wore no makeup and was beautiful, he noticed. They walked along a foot apart until they reached the next intersection. The light was against them. It was Ernie's moment to reveal himself to her.

"Look," he whispered. "Look," and pointed to the sunlit ground in front of them.

He had to wait perhaps a second. It seemed like an hour. Then she turned her face to his and her eyes brimmed with tears. He grasped the cold hand hanging by her side.

"You," they both said at once. There was no need for either of them to say more.

It is an adage that opposites attract each other. But there is a kind of love that flowers between the mutually afflicted that is different, gentler, in a way less selfish than any love the more fortunate can know. When one of the disparaged finds another and they fall in love there is a quality to their tenderness, a recognition, a shared gratitude that sets their love apart too.

Her name was Christine. They walked together all that afternoon, still holding hands, uncaring, delighting in the blankness of the sidewalk that stretched before them. They hardly spoke, but by nightfall, when they made their way back to her room, they had interchanged all those secret intimacies that only they — even more than most lovers — could have understood about each other.

They went to her room because it was larger than his, with a wash basin and a four-burner stove, and because Christine seemed to have an even greater fear of public places than Ernie did. That room soon became the only home Ernie had ever known. He was, for a while, marvelously happy there. Christine was a strange shy girl, but he accepted her strangeness as a reflection of his own. It seemed, at first, perfectly natural to him.

He could understand, for instance, her hunger for reassurance. "Do you really think I'm beautiful?" she was forever asking.

"Of course!" Ernie did.

"Why? I mean, how do I look? To you."

Ernie would tell her, describing her mouth, her nose, her dark and lovely eyes. She never seemed to get tired of having him do this.

"Why don't you look in the mirror?" he teased her once.

But there was no mirror in the room. "It got broken," Christine told him.

"Seven years' bad luck."

She trembled and he put his arms contritely around her. "I didn't mean that. Ah, Christine, you are so beautiful."

She loved, too, to have him comb her hair. It was long and soft and silky and badly cut. She cut it herself. "But I'm terribly clumsy at it," she said. "I never seem to be able to get the parting straight. And I can't bear going to the hairdresser."

He could understand that. He hated it too. With the bright lights overhead and the white sheet around him, his own visits to the barber were a recurrent risk. The trouble was Christine hated going anywhere. She didn't have to work: her mother sent her a check every month on the condition that she stay out of the state of Virginia. She even hated going to the bank to cash it.

It began to get on his nerves a little. Since his discovery that he wasn't unique a change had taken place in Ernie. He was no longer quite so ashamed of his peculiarity. He thought of all the ordinary things he had always longed to do, and now

that he had someone like himself to do them with, he longed for them all the more. Besides he was proud of Christine: he wanted to show her off.

They argued about it for hours. It was the cause of their first near quarrel. They made it up at once, but the dissension remained. Until at last one Saturday night when they had been cooped up in the room all day Ernie put his foot down.

"I've had enough of it" he said. "I'm fed up with this never going anywhere. You'd think we were freaks or something. I mean. . . . You know, like midgets. Look, we'll go to one of those dance places where they have flickering lights." He had seen them in the movies. "We'll be perfectly safe there."

"Oh, no, please, darling."

"And put some lipstick on." She still never wore makeup.

"Couldn't we just stay here? Please!"

"Come on."

Finally, reluctantly she was forced to give in. She found an old lipstick at the bottom of a trunk and smeared it ineptly on her mouth. She had no compact. Ernie fetched a towel and helped her.

Outside the house they had another near quarrel. This time because Ernie insisted on taking a taxi. He won again. Christine huddled miserably in a corner and when they reached the dance hall peered once with panic stricken eyes up the stairs and refused to go any farther.

Ernie shrugged and stubbornly led the way. She followed him at a distance like an Arab's wife.

They had neither of them ever learnt to dance. They sat at a table holding hands and watching the couples on the floor. Ernie loved it. He was delighted by the loud bad music and the tawdry glamor. It was just what he had longed for all his life: "to be out with a beautiful girl" — "having a good time" — "just like anyone else." The cliches ran through his mind like an endorsement, adding to his pleasure.

Christine sat tensely by his side and had several drinks to relax her. Unaccustomed to them she began after a while to enjoy herself too. When they left at midnight she felt quite reckless and almost gay.

Ernie joined her in the lobby and helped her on with her coat. She was smiling as they started down the stairs. Several people craned to look at her. Ernie felt a sudden overpowering pride. He noticed that the walls of the stairwell were amber mirrors, deliberately flattering to the dance hall's customers. He caught Christine excitedly by the hand.

"Look, darling," he said. "See for yourself what a handsome couple we make. How beautiful you

are." And turned her to face the glass beside them.

She drew quickly back, but not quickly enough. He felt her trying to tear her hand from his and looking in the mirror saw his own pleasantly reflected face, his sharp blue suit and loosely knotted tie.

He dropped her hand as if it had bitten him and watched her run sobbing from him down the stairs. But he didn't go after her.

Ernie suddenly understood! He understood what others had felt about him all his life, his parents' distress and why his schoolmates had first feared and then hated and despised him. He not only understood. In his ordinary way he agreed with them. He saw it all now, for the first time, through their eyes.

When he reached the street he didn't try to find Christine. He walked off towards his own room whistling a superior little tune he had picked up in the dance hall. *How dared she have lied to him like that!* he thought. He and Christine were not commonly different, equally outcast, as she had pretended, at all. And no wonder she had always made such a mess of cutting her own hair.

She not only cast no shadow.

The monstrous, the unnatural girl had no reflection.

