

SHADOWS

By FRANK OWEN

IN ABJECT terror, Tod Grogan crouched on the stairs.

The house was in utter darkness, supposedly deserted, yet down below he could hear the sound of someone moving stealthily about. Cold perspiration broke out on his forehead as though his brow were a sieve. His teeth chattered and his hands shook as if he were palsied.

In the great folds of blackness, which enveloped him like a shroud, nothing could be discerned. From the bleak and barren mountain solitudes, the wail of coyotes drifted to his ears, but from the room below came a sound still more terrible, the faint rattle of someone moving cautiously about.

Tod Grogan was a fugitive from justice. In fact, he had always been a fugitive. Since earliest childhood, he had fought incessantly against shadows, and now he was menaced by the greatest shadow of all. Folks used to say of him, "He is afraid of his own shadow." But what no one suspected was that he was afraid of everybody else's shadow as well. When there were no shadows, Tod Grogan was fearless, but where they existed his terror was boundless.

The fears which he had encountered during his lifetime had made of him a pitiful wreck, fears none the less frightful because they existed only in his own twisted mind.

And then there had come a day which had marked a nauseating climax in his life. He had killed a man in a fit of temporary insanity. Up in the hills, where the huge pine trees loomed up to meet the sun like great gaunt spectres, when the ground was covered with frozen snow which crunched beneath his feet like breaking bones, he had been lost for three days and nights. During the hours of sunlight he had been far from valiant, but as the shadows of evening crept down over the purpling hills, fear

drove him absolutely mad and he raced through the weird, eerie forests shrieking like a madman.

Thus he raved and tore about through the echoing woods until he fell exhausted. Then one night, as he rushed through the mountains in the pitch-blackness, he had run full-tilt into a man. With a cry of horror, Tod Grogan drew his knife and struck. When the authorities found him he was still chopping away at the shapeless, lifeless body.

SEVERAL days later he was given a perfunctory trial, convicted of murder in the first degree and thrust into prison. His guilt was established. The trial was merely a legal formality.

Then followed dreary hours of solitude, unbroken save when the old guard brought him food. At night he lay on his cot in the dark prison cell, waiting for the dreaded hour that would rob him of life, his mind a chaos of fantastic emotions. He wondered about death, what would come afterward. Perhaps a man's life was simply snuffed out by death and his soul existed no longer.

He did not really fear death, but the thoughts of the countless shadows through which he would have to pass before the ultimate end, made of him a pitiful thing. In the yard they were building a scaffold. The sound of the hammering came to his ears like the ominous beating of drums playing a funeral dirge. Only a few more days and the black cap would be placed over his eyes and he would be led out like a beast to be strangled in the presence of a few friends of the State who had been invited to witness the event. Lying in his cell, he imagined he could see his blackened face, protruding eyes and foaming lips. And it would all happen in darkness. That was the most terrible thought of all.

One morning he overpowered the old guard and after stealing his clothes, he left the prison without opposition from anyone. Whether or not he had killed the guard, he neither knew nor cared. He was free; nothing else mattered. And yet can a fugitive ever be free? Tod Grogan had escaped from jail but he could not break away from the clutching grip of shadows.

Now, as he crouched on the stairs, his blood had turned to ice. He listened. There was no mistaking the fact that someone was moving about in the room below. Perhaps there were more than one; perhaps the house was surrounded and escape impossible. There was not the faintest ray of light anywhere discernible. Even the moon was hidden by billows of cloud. The blackness yawned up the stairs with such an intensity that it seemed peopled by a thousand grotesque shapes.

In his hand, Tod Grogan clutched a revolver which he had stolen from the prison guard. In it lay his only hope. He crept cautiously down the stairs. The boards creaked as loudly as the snap of a whip. At the foot of the stairs he paused. The sound was much more distinct now. He tried to locate the corner from whence it came, then fired twice.

For a moment he waited, and then, as the sound was repeated, he knew that he had failed. Again he fired, once, twice, three times. But the sound continued.

He had only one cartridge left. He hesitated for a fraction of a second only, then placing the revolver to his temple, he fired the last cartridge.

And now the moon broke through the clouds and shone softly into the room. Tod Grogan's body lay in the direct path of the light. His glazed eyes seemed turned toward the moon. Out of the shadows a huge black cat padded softly forth and licked the dead man's cheek.

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