

# Strange STORIES

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# THE SLANTING SHADOW

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Author of "Man In The Dark," "Eyes Of The Serpent," etc.



*Abner Follansbee, Psychic Investigator, Finds a New Brand of Magic in a Haunted Inn!*

**M**R. ABNER FOLLANSBEE, investigator for the Society for Psychic Research, stopped the car and peered out into the Wisconsin woods.

"This is apparently the place, Fred," he said to his companion.

"Yes, it is." Fred Tenney, who had looked fleetingly about him, added, "There's a sign off to one side. Pretty well shot. 'Kroll's Inn'."

"Now let's see that young lady's letter again, Fred," said the older man.

Tenney took a letter from his inner coat pocket and thrust it toward Follansbee, who opened it and regarded the scrawled writing dubiously.

"Hm," he murmured presently. "Probably just another wild goose chase. Looks to me more like a mat-

*There, in the moonlight, was a tiny moving shadow*

ter for the police than for the society. The girl's guardian, old Uriah

Kroll, disappeared over a year ago. Since then his rooms been *funny*. That's all it amounts to. I suppose the young lady thinks she's got a ghost on her hands."

"Isn't there something about a shadow?" The younger man smiled.

"Oh, yes, 'There's a queer shadow on the bed in his room when the moon shines', she writes. 'I can't understand it. It shouldn't be there'. That's all."

"Very lucid," commented Fred laconically.

Follansbee sniffed.

"Whenever there's anything to upset a young woman, nothing will do until she's written the society. I think they're all born ghost hunters."

"Old curmudgeon," murmured Fred. "Anyway, we aren't getting anywhere here in the car."

The older man looked dubiously about.

"Will the machine be safe on the road?"

"Nothing would find its way into these God-forsaken woods in a week of Sundays." The younger man leaped from the car and stood looking around him. "An inn here," he said over his shoulder. "What an optimist old Kroll must have been!"

The inn itself was a quiet little house of stone. It hugged the ground in the middle of a clearing not very far from the heavily wooded roadside. A flagstone walk led up to a low stone porch, and the key to the front door lay under the mat, just where Miss Harriet Sears had said it would be in her letter to Follansbee.

"At least we can thank what kind spirits there are that we're alone," Follansbee said, as he bent to unlock the door. "Miss Sears isn't likely to come bursting in on us at all hours of the night. She vowed she'd never set foot inside the building again until we'd settled that shadow business."

He threw the door open on a short hallway leading directly into a low, raftered sitting room. The room was comfortably and well furnished, with comparatively antique pieces. The chairs were curiously carved and obviously handmade. Follansbee, however, wasted no time in the sitting

room. He led the way into another, smaller room, and around into a large bedroom in the southeast corner of the building.

This was the room which had been occupied by Uriah Kroll, prior to his disappearance. Off in the walls they heard a scurry of rats, alarmed by the human footfalls. It was a large, oddly furnished room, with a bed against the south wall, and a single chair next to it. The north wall of the room next the door was occupied by what appeared to be a work-bench. Follansbee glanced at the bed, went over to the work-bench and bent above it. He moved it, and leaped backwards with a gasp. From underneath, a large gray rat went hissing into a shadowy hole. Follansbee turned back to the work-bench.

"Seems to have been kept pretty much as it was when the old man was alive."

**T**ENNEY came over and stood at his side.

"What do you make of it?" Follansbee asked.

"Queer outfit," Tenney murmured. "Looks as if he might have been blowing glass, doesn't it?"

Follansbee bent and took up a book. "Well, look at this," he said in surprise, "Arbatel's 'Treatise on Magic'."

"Yes," supplemented Tenney excitedly, "and see here! He's got a trident, and incense, and oils. Why, Kroll dabbled in magic."

"No doubt of it," assented Follansbee.

He put the book down and examined the instruments on the bench. He chuckled oddly to himself, held up a magical diagram made on a sheet of stiff paper, and smiled at it with Tenney. Then he turned away, looked once more about the room.

"Did you bring the lunch kit?" he asked.

Tenney nodded.

"Good. We'll eat, then. The sun'll go down in about three-quarters of an hour, and the moon'll be up shortly after. We might as well be ready."

"What's the procedure?" asked Tenney.

"We sleep here. Nice, comfortable

double bed, as far as I can see," replied Follansbee.

"Very well."

Lunch eaten, the two investigators returned to the bedroom where they were to sleep. The moon had already risen, so long had they sat in the kitchen, but it was not yet throwing its light through the single window to the south. Follansbee and Tenney sat talking for the better part of an hour.

It was Follansbee who first noticed that the moonlight had reached the counterpane of the bed.

"There we are," he said. "Now for the shadow."

They sat for a few minutes in silence, while the light of the moon crept in a parallelogram across the counterpane. But there was no shadow save the shadow of a tree, a few branches of which dipped into the moonlight.

Presently Follansbee rose with obvious irritation, went over to the bed and stood looking down at the patch of moonlight.

"Batty as can be," he murmured, obviously intending his remark for the ears of Miss Harriet Sears.

**T**ENNEY, who drifted to his side, said suddenly:

"What a funny angle those branches have!"

Follansbee bent abruptly closer.

"Just as if they were coming from above," he murmured. "But, look here. They're not just branches, they're like a forest of little trees, and what odd spines for leaves."

Suddenly he whirled to the window.

"Oh," he said harshly, "now I see. There's no tree beyond the window!"

"Nor anything to make that shadow," added Tenney, looking past the older man.

They stood for a few moments scrutinizing the glass and looking through it into the clearing outside. The line of trees to the south was too far for any shadow to reach the house. The trees were shadowed in an uneven line across the clearing below. Then they returned to the bed and stood looking down at the counterpane.

"Well, there's some explanation,"

murmured Tenney. "There has to be."

Follansbee nodded.

"But I don't understand," he began. Then he stopped abruptly, staring down at the parallelogram of moonlight with widening eyes.

Tenney followed the older man's startled gaze.

There, in the moonlight, was a tiny, moving shadow. Only slightly over two inches in height, moving with incredible rapidity of limb, it achieved no distance in the parallelogram of moonlight. It was the diminutive figure of a man!

Back and forth it ran within a space so small that it might have been covered by the extended palm of a hand. The two men stared in growing amazement. Then Follansbee turned to the window again.

There was nothing there—nothing on the glass, nothing against the glass outside, nothing flying against the moonlight high in the sky.

He turned back to the bed. The shadow was still there. He bent, peering intently. The incredible shadow was running wildly, this way and that, its tiny arms outflung, its spindle legs moving rapidly upon the counterpane, a thing alive, yet without substance to seize upon.

"Good God!" muttered Tenney at last. "It's a man—a live man. But where in God's name is he?"

"I don't know," Follansbee jerked out.

He stood for a few moments more, his fascination for the unbelievable shadow holding him there. Then he swung away and went over to the workbench, where he lit a lamp and began to thumb swiftly through a quartet of old books lying carelessly abandoned on the bench.

"Can I help?" Tenney asked.

Follansbee nodded.

"Check up on all references to magical designs in these books," he said. "I've got an idea. I don't know what's in it, but it's worth trying."

Following the example of the older man, Tenney bent over one of the ancient volumes on the bench.

It was Follansbee who found what they sought.

"Here it is," he said suddenly.

"Magical designs on glass. It's been marked up by someone, too. Kroll, most likely. Parts of it are illegible, but the sense of it can be made out. The third paragraph down in the second column."

Tenney bent to read the printed lines on the yellow page:

"Certain images have brought into being worlds of glass, invisible in glass. The objects are of such consistency that though they cannot be seen in the light of the sun, they are shadowed by the moon. . . . The glass is of no ordinary kind, but must be especially made. And the creatures to be placed there may be drawn from the mind or from life."

"You see?" cut in Follansbee, drawing the book away. "That's what Kroll was doing—but something happened. He tried it on himself, and vanished."

Tenney turned astonished eyes on the glass in the window. He shuddered as it slowly dawned on him that the figure he saw there was Kroll.

Follansbee abruptly left the work-bench and, going over to the window, raised it.

"It's the upper pane we want," he murmured. "It must be broken. There's no other way. But be careful that all the pieces fall into the room."

**A**S HE spoke, Follansbee pulled down the upper half of the window. Then he drew the curtain down outside the glass, and into the room again below.

"All right," he said. "Break it, Fred."

Tenny rapped sharply against the glass of the upper pane. It did not

break. He struck it harder with the trident from the work-bench. Still it did not break. Then he smashed into it with all his strength. The glass broke into incredibly small fragments that slithered down the drawn curtain to the floor.

Follansbee left the curtain snap up. Looking down, he and Tenney exclaimed simultaneously. The window lay in silver fragments on the carpet in the moonlight that stretched to the bed—but beyond the fragments ran a tiny dark shadow, of substance.

"Good God!" breathed Follansbee hoarsely. "The dimensions didn't change!"

"It's Kroll," said Tenney. He swooped to seize hold of the figure on the carpet, but at that moment it disappeared under the bed.

"Kroll!" shouted Follansbee suddenly. "Uriah Kroll, come out!"

There was a vague scuttering noise beneath the bed.

Follansbee sank to his knees and peered into the moonlight dusk.

"Kroll," he whispered softly. Turning abruptly, he said to his companion, "Get over on the other side. He's skirting the wall toward the door."

Tenney moved to obey.

Then suddenly there came a quick rustle, a dark shadow launched itself from the wall upon the two-inch figure that crept toward the door, there was a shrill squeal, a tiny human scream, an abrupt, unnatural silence.

"A rat," whispered Follansbee shakily. "Oh, my God!"

He got up shakily and looked down at the bed.

The moonlight lay unbroken on the counterpane.