

After a Shadow

by T.S. Arthur (/author/ts-arthur)

"Arty! Arty!" called Mrs. Mayflower, from the window, one bright June morning. "Arty, darling! What is the child after? Just look at him, Mr. Mayflower!"

I leaned from the window, in pleasant excitement, to see what new and wonderful performance had been attempted by my little prodigy--my first born--my year old bud of beauty, the folded leaves in whose bosom were just beginning to loosen themselves, and send out upon the air sweet intimations of an abounding fragrance. He had escaped from his nurse, and was running off in the clear sunshine, the slant rays of which threw a long shadow before him.

"Arty, darling!" His mother's voice flew along and past his ear, kissing it in gentle remonstrance as it went by. But baby was in eager pursuit of something, and the call, if heard, was unheeded. His eyes were opening world-ward, and every new phenomenon--commonplace and unheeded by us--that addressed itself to his senses, became a wonder and a delight. Some new object was drawing him away from the loving heart and protecting arm.

"Run after him, Mr. Mayflower!" said my wife, with a touch of anxiety in her voice. "He might fall and hurt himself."

I did not require a second intimation as to my duty in the case. Only a moment or two elapsed before I was on the pavement, and making rapid approaches towards my truant boy.

"What is it, darling? What is Arty running after?" I said, as I laid my hand on his arm, and checked his eager speed. He struggled a moment, and then stood still, stooping forward for something on the ground.

"O, papa see!" There was a disappointed and puzzled look in his face as he lifted his eyes to mine. He failed to secure the object of his pursuit.

"What is it, sweet?" My eyes followed his as they turned upon the ground.

He stooped again, and caught at something; and again looked up in a perplexed, half-wondering way.

"Why, Arty!" I exclaimed, catching him up in my arms. "It's only your shadow! Foolish child!" And I ran back to Mrs. Mayflower, with my baby-boy held close against my heart.

"After a shadow!" said I, shaking my head, a little soberly, as I resigned Arty to his mother. "So life begins--and so it ends! Poor Arty!"

Mrs. Mayflower laughed out right merrily.

"After a shadow! Why, darling!" And she kissed and hugged him in overflowing tenderness.

"So life begins--so it ends," I repeated to myself, as I left the house, and walked towards my store. "Always in pursuit of shadows! We lose to-day's substantial good for shadowy phantoms that keep our eyes ever in advance, and our feet ever hurrying forward. No pause--no ease--no full enjoyment of *now*. O, deluded heart!--ever bartering away substance for shadow!"

I grow philosophic sometimes. Thought will, now and then, take up a passing incident, and extract the moral. But how little the wiser are we for moralizing! we look into the mirror of truth, and see ourselves--then turn away, and forget what manner of men we are. Better for us if it were not so; if we remembered the image that held our vision.

The shadow lesson was forgotten by the time I reached my store, and thought entered into business with its usual ardor. I buried myself, amid letters, invoices, accounts, samples, schemes for gain, and calculations of profit. The regular, orderly progression of a fair and well-established business was too slow for my outreaching desires. I must drive onward at a higher speed, and reach the goal of wealth by a quicker way. So my daily routine was disturbed by impatient aspirations. Instead of entering, in a calm self-possession of every faculty, into the day's appropriate work, and finding, in its right performance, the tranquil state that ever comes as the reward of right-doing in the right place, I spent the larger part of this day in the perpetration of a plan for increasing my gains beyond, anything heretofore achieved.

"Mr. Mayflower," said one of the clerks, coming back to where I sat at my private desk, busy over my plan, "we have a new man in from the West; a Mr. B----, from Alton. He wants to make a bill of a thousand dollars. Do you know anything about him?"

Now, even this interruption annoyed me. What was a new customer and a bill of a thousand dollars to me just at that moment of time? I saw tens of thousands in prospective.

"Mr. B----, of Alton?" said I, affecting an effort of memory. "Does he look like a fair man?"

"I don't recall him. Mr. B----? Hum-m-m. He impresses you favorably, Edward?"

"Yes, sir; but it may be prudent to send and get a report."

"I'll see to that, Edward," said I. "Sell him what he wants. If everything is not on the square, I'll give you the word in time. It's all right, I've no doubt."

"He's made a bill at Kline & Co.'s, and wants his goods sent there to be packed," said my clerk.

"Ah, indeed! Let him have what he wants, Edward. If Kline & Co. sell him, we needn't hesitate."

And turning to my desk, my plans, and my calculations, I forgot all about Mr. B----, and the trifling bill of a thousand dollars that he proposed buying. How clear the way looked ahead! As thought created the means of successful adventure, and I saw myself moving forward and grasping results, the whole circle of life took a quicker motion, and my mind rose into a pleasant enthusiasm. Then I grew impatient for the initiatory steps that were to come, and felt as if the to-morrow, in which they must be taken, would never appear. A day seemed like a week or a month.

Six o'clock found me in not a very satisfactory state of mind. The ardor of my calculations had commenced abating. Certain elements, not seen and considered in the outset, were beginning to assume shape and consequence, and to modify, in many essential particulars, the grand result towards which I had been looking with so much pleasure. Shadowy and indistinct became the landscape, which seemed a little while before so fair and inviting. A cloud settled down upon it here, and a cloud there, breaking up its unity, and destroying much of its fair proportion. I was no longer mounting up, and moving forwards on the light wing of a castle-building imagination, but down upon the hard, rough ground, coming back into the consciousness that all progression, to be sure, must be slow and toilsome.

I had the afternoon paper in my hands, and was running my eyes up and down the columns, not reading, but, in a half-absent way, trying to find something of sufficient interest to claim attention, when, among the money and business items, I came upon

a paragraph that sent the declining thermometer of my feelings away down towards the chill of zero. It touched, in the most vital part, my scheme of gain; and the shrinking bubble burst.

"Have the goods sold to that new customer from Alton been delivered?" I asked, as the real interest of my wasted day loomed up into sudden importance.

"Yes, sir," was answered by one of my clerks; "they were sent to Kline & Co.'s immediately. Mr. B----said they were packing up his goods, which were to be shipped to-day."

"He's a safe man, I should think. Kline & Co. sell him." My voice betrayed the doubt that came stealing over me like a chilly air.

"They sell him only for cash," said my clerk. "I saw one of their young men this afternoon, and asked after Mr. B----'s standing. He didn't know anything about him; said B----was a new man, who bought a moderate cash bill, but was sending in large quantities of goods to be packed--five or six times beyond the amount of his purchases with them."

"Is that so!" I exclaimed, rising to my feet, all awake now to the real things which I had permitted a shadow to obscure.

"Just what he told me," answered my clerk.

"It has a bad look," said I. "How large a bill did he make with us?"

The sales book was referred to. "Seventeen hundred dollars," replied the clerk.

"What! I thought he was to buy only to the amount of a thousand dollars?" I returned, in surprise and dismay.

"You seemed so easy about him, sir," replied the clerk, "that I encouraged him to buy; and the bill ran up more heavily than I was aware until the footing gave exact figures."

I drew out my watch. It was close on to half past six.

"I think, Edward," said I, "that you'd better step round to Kline & Co.'s, and ask if they've shipped B----'s goods yet. If not, we'll request them to delay long enough in the morning to give us time to sift the matter. If B----'s after a swindling game, we'll take a short course, and save our goods."

"It's too late," answered my clerk. "B----called a little after one o'clock, and gave notes for the amount of his bill. He was to leave in the five o'clock line for Boston."

I turned my face a little aside, so that Edward might not see all the anxiety that was pictured there.

"You look very sober, Mr. Mayflower," said my good wife, gazing at me with eyes a little shaded by concern, as I sat with Arty's head leaning against my bosom that evening; "as sober as baby looked this morning, after his fruitless shadow chase."

"And for the same reason," said I, endeavoring to speak calmly and firmly.

"Why, Mr. Mayflower!" Her face betrayed a rising anxiety. My assumed calmness and firmness did not wholly disguise the troubled feelings that lay, oppressively, about my heart.

"For the same reason," I repeated, steadying my voice, and trying to speak bravely. "I have been chasing a shadow all day; a mere phantom scheme of profit; and at night-fall I not only lose my shadow, but find my feet far off from the right path, and bemired. I called Arty a foolish child this morning. I laughed at his mistake. But, instead of accepting the lesson it should have conveyed, I went forth and wearied myself with shadow-hunting all day."

Mrs. Mayflower sighed gently. Her soft eyes drooped away from my face, and rested for some moments on the floor.

"I am afraid we are all, more or less, in pursuit of shadows," she said,--"of the unreal things, projected by thought on the canvas of a too creative imagination. It is so with me; and I sigh, daily, over some disappointment. Alas! if this were all. Too often both

the shadow-good and the real-good of to-day are lost. When night falls our phantom good is dispersed, and we sigh for the real good we might have enjoyed."

"Shall we never grow wiser?" I asked.

"We shall never grow happier unless we do," answered Mrs. Mayflower.

"Happiness!" I returned, as thought began to rise into clearer perception; "is it not the shadow after which we are all chasing, with such a blind and headlong speed?"

"Happiness is no shadow. It is a real thing," said Mrs. Mayflower. "It does not project itself in advance of us; but exists in the actual and the now, if it exists at all. We cannot catch it by pursuit; that is only a cheating counterfeit, in guilt and tinsel, which dazzles our eyes in the ever receding future. No; happiness is a state of life; and it comes only to those who do each day's work peaceful self-forgetfulness, and a calm trust in the Giver of all good for the blessing that lies stored for each one prepared to receive it in every hour of the coming time."

"Who so does each day's work in a peaceful self-forgetfulness and patient trust in God?" I said, turning my eyes away from the now tranquil face of Mrs. Mayflower.

"Few, if any, I fear," she answered; "and few, if any, are happy. The common duties and common things of our to-days look so plain and homely in their ungilded actualities, that we turn our thought and interest away from them, and create ideal forms of use and beauty, into which we can never enter with conscious life. We are always losing the happiness of our to-days; and our to-morrows never come."

I sighed my response, and sat for a long time silent. When the tea bell interrupted me from my reverie, Arty lay fast asleep on my bosom. As I kissed him on his way to his mother's arms, I said,--

"Dear baby! may it be your first and last pursuit of a shadow."

"No--no! Not yet, my sweet one!" answered Mrs. Mayflower, hugging him to her heart. "Not yet. We cannot spare you from our world of shadows."



10

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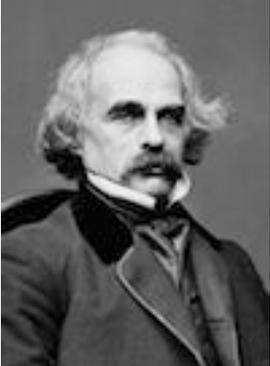
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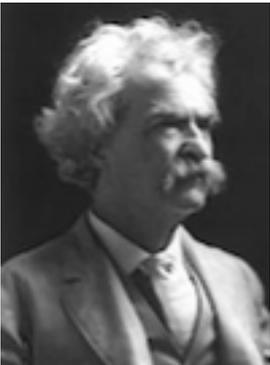
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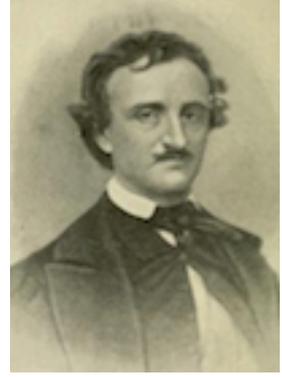
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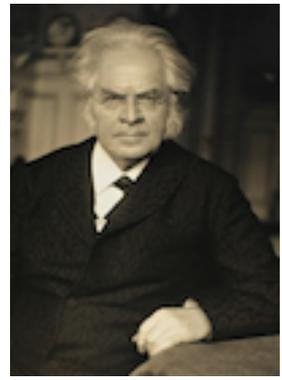
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