

The Shadow of the God

Charles Newman Hall, 1900

THE SHADOW OF THE GOD

WHITMAN sat on the veranda and looked vacantly off toward the dull glow in the west. Twilight in Yucatan is no time to discuss mathematics, and, with a young lady in a great arm-chair only a few feet away, it is sacrilege. Still, that was the subject of the conversation.

“How absurd! So you really think women are poor mathematicians?”

It was a hard question, but Whitman was not the man to flinch. He had sedulously avoided girls ever since he could remember, and could speak to them with a frankness which the average person might envy.

If he was sitting only four yards away from one now, the Fates knew it was n't his fault. Two months before, at the invitation of Señor Cortez, he had come down to gather data for his father's great work on “The Ancient Ruins of Yucatan,” and no one had been more surprised than he to find that the hospitable household already entertained Tom Wakely, of college memories, and Tom's uncle and fair cousin. Tom was gunning, his uncle was entomologizing, and Miss Ethel — girls seem to have no serious purpose in life anyway.

All this explains how he could say bravely that mathematics seemed to be for men and poetry for women.

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This was too much, and Miss Ethel spoke out impatiently: "Poetry! pshaw! Some day I think I can show you that it's just the other way round."

Just then Tom, who sat off in a corner, with his chair tilted at a most remarkable angle, broke in with: "Oh, let up on this;" — the mathematics had never been kind to him — "day after to-morrow we are going to leave Will here, digging around in the ruins, and you'll probably never see him again; don't get him all worked up. By the way, I've made all the arrangements for our visit to the temple of Huetzilopochtli to-morrow —"

"Mercy!" interrupted Miss Ethel, hands at ears. "—and also," he continued, "I have learned all about it from the Don. You wanted to know about those Edgar Allan Poe human sacrifices they used to have. Here's the story. People from all around the country used to go there, and a good many of course were of the very pious kind, who hung around in the temple, worshipping like sixty till all of a sudden they found that the water was beginning to rise. This used to take place about supper-time, and by that time a big obelisk outside had thrown a shadow clear across the doorway. Well, this shadow was a consecrated shadow — some sun-god business — and to cross it was a horrible sacrilege. But the people inside did n't know anything about the shadow, ten to one; and if they did, it was n't any use; they had stayed so late. Out they would rush, and the priests tended to the rest. In that way they satisfied Maya scruples and Aztec requirements. About a hundred years ago the Don lost an ancestor that way, and the old place has since been sacked,

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and gone to rack and ruin; but no one has been down there for a century, and it would be nineteenth-century enterprise to go down, count skeletons, and bring away the temple in our pockets, with some good lies and kodak-pictures."

The old Spanish clock downstairs was striking eleven when Whitman retired that night; but the incessant clatter of the countless insects which make hideous a tropic night, was more conducive to reverie than to sleep. Airy visions floated in through the window, and he was annoyed to see that every one contained the graceful, girlish form he knew so well. Probably it was because she was going away so soon, but he felt that it was unworthy of his manly heart. Still, she was a remarkable girl and had sailed through Vassar in a halo of mathematical glory, with the special commendation of Maria Mitchell; and he had a soft place in his heart for any one who courted the mathematics. On the whole, he was ashamed of such weakness and tried to imagine the phantom forms less fair; and, failing in this, began to long for potassium bromide, and ended up by counting sheep jumping over a stile. It was no use; it was n't possible to get to sleep that way; and, besides, there was a sheep who proved to be Montezuma, last emperor of the Aztecs; and he wished to extract his young friend's heart in the good old Aztec fashion; for as far as he — Montezuma — could see, he had no use for it. Then Miss Ethel — for it was she — said the square on the hypothenuse was a circle — It was six when he awoke, and the horses were ready. It was a fine cold winter day, with prospect of the thermometer stop-

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ping at seventy-six degrees Fahrenheit. The old Spaniard was to escort them the first mile, and he rode off ahead with Miss Ethel.

The dew sent tiny javelins of light hither and thither, and the perfume of the forest was a whole Arabia and Cathay. If there is one thing rarer than a day in June, it is a day in Yucatan.

"Fine old fellow," quoth Thomas, nodding ahead at the old Spaniard. "So she is," answered Whitman, showing that his thoughts were not on temples, which in most languages are of anything but feminine gender. "You'd better drop the 's,' old man. You know you once said the nineteenth letter of the English alphabet was a barbarous superfluity. *She* is n't old, you know; why, only — well, log 2.301030, which is the same as not telling you."

"The characteristic is characteristic of you; make it 3."

"She won't thank you for that, and I'll tell."

"'She' be hanged!"

"Hope not, William. She likes you immensely, only you're such an old mathematical fossil. To be grave, here's a piece of sound advice. Be a fossil all you want, only, when the time comes to act don't stand like a stump as most fossils do. Otherwise — good-by to the ladies. Really, unless you sober down from your sines and cosines, she can never —"

Here the old Spaniard came riding back, and a tournament was prevented. They had now turned into a by-path, remarkably well defined considering that it led only to a disused temple and had been barely saved from complete erasion by the nature of

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the ground. Great bars of sunlight streamed through the trees here and there, and stood out against the woodland shadows like veins of silver in a coal-measure. Hither and thither darted humming-birds and orioles, and once a magnificent trogon swept across the sunlight, trailing its gorgeous rainbow behind it.

A mottled snake writhed across the path, and everywhere were abundant life and the glory of early morning.

It was well on in the day when they trotted out on the plateau where the temple lay, sleeping in the sun; for it is not wise to hurry in latitude twenty degrees, even in winter. At the end of a long street, lined on either side by great rough monoliths, was the temple, a conical hill, hewn into terraces, and overgrown with the radiant leaves of the yucca. All underneath was the great cavern, with carved and painted walls, and mighty altars long since cold. A broad stone porch, high as a man's shoulders, and furnished at both sides with a parapet, stood out from the front of the temple; and on the western parapet to their right stood a short pillar like an inverted Egyptian obelisk minus its apex. The whole west face of the structure rose straight from the sombre waters of a little lake, in whose depths the pillar was mirrored clear and bright.

The doorway opened out on the great porch, and was so low that it scarce gave passage for a man on hands and knees. Grotesque sculptures appeared on every hand; one being especially noticeable where a king wearing a crown which would have floored such men as live in our days, poured holy water over a

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dead cat, — an occult ceremony which must have stirred the holy enthusiasm of many a pious heart.

“Well,” said Whitman, “it’s easy to believe Tom’s story now. That lake is plainly an intermittent spring, and any one can see that the shadow from that pillar will lie almost directly across the doorway to-night. The man who tarried too long in there tarried till the vultures were satisfied out here;” and he looked at a great bird soaring a thousand feet above them.

Miss Ethel shivered, and would not sit in the shade of the eastern pylon; so, as soon as they had looked around, and had ascertained that the entrance passage plunged steeply down into the hill, they went off to sit by the lake-side.

It was a weird spot in that hoary sepulchre of an ancient faith, but Tom was irrepensible. “Great old building; humph! Eleven o’clock; at three I am going to explore the whole thing inside. It’s as big as all creation, and will take the afternoon; besides, I have n’t seen any skeletons.”

“You’ll get lost, sir; it’s a regular labyrinth inside,” objected Ethel.

“There are hands cut in the rock at every cross-roads to show the way, and look at all these candles.”

“But the old priests —”

“Dead and gone a century.”

“But some of them might —”

“None of them do. You’re nervous, miss.”

She flushed, and said something about intuition of women.

“Stops up at the Rio Grande.”

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Such logic was invincible, and yet she seemed dissatisfied. At length she got him to promise to come out before the shadow reached the door; and as she seemed very worried and anxious, the concession was made — and Tom was careful to keep his promises. But here a difficulty arose. Little was known of the temple interior, but by common report it was a small edition of the Mammoth Cave. How could one inside know when the shadow reached the door? It had been taken for granted that Whitman should stay out with Miss Ethel, for she would never consent to enter, even if it were feasible. He might go in and give warning, but the chances of his finding Tom were ridiculously small, and Tom could n't keep running back to the entrance to find out.

“I'll tell you,” said Tom, “work it out by mathematics; that will be sport. Make Ethel do it. There, my dear, is a chance to show that men are poets, and women mathematicians.”

She started at having her words thrown up at her so soon, and colored deeply, but she felt that the reputation of her sex rested upon her. She threw her head back and a little to one side, defiantly, as women will when combative, and accepted the challenge.

Out came Whitman's long lead-pencil and mathematical tables, and Tom brought forth a dilapidated note-book. Whitman's omnipresent tape-measure on the end of a stick showed the height of the pillar above the terrace to be fifteen feet. How long would it take the shadow to block a doorway forty-nine feet distant? This was child's play for a

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Vassar girl. Find the angle which the sun made with the summit of the pillar; divide by ninety degrees, and multiply the number of hours between noon and sunset by this proper fraction. Now the sun was setting at forty minutes past five to-night; so there were all the data.

“Don’t forget the refraction,” said Whitman, with a laugh. Now refraction would have altered the result some three minutes, but Miss Ethel was thrown into consternation; for all she knew, it might make the difference of an hour. She bit thoughtfully at the pencil, and the point broke. Whitman sharpened it for her. Just then she saw a table of refraction coefficients; thank Heaven, she knew how to use them! It was all on page twenty-seven; she remembered it all by heart. The amount of mathematics a young lady can get by rote is amazing. She uttered a sigh of relief; she realized now how frightened she had been, for the figures gyrated in all directions, and ciphers and decimal points kept disappearing; she must be careful, or she would get something down wrong. Whitman should never know how near he had come to catching her, and the mathematical reputation of her sex was preserved in its integrity, so far as she was concerned.

There, the problem was done; at 5.01 P. M., precisely, the shadow would reach the doorway. Tom was to allow five minutes lee-way, and come out at 4.56.

As it came on toward three o’clock, they strolled up to the terrace. The sun did not strike the rock so blindingly now, and they started, as they saw on the lintel of the door, the bloody imprint of a human

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hand. But it was only that strange symbol puzzle of the antiquarian, which peers out from tangled underbrush and yawning cavern throughout the land of the ancient Aztec.

"I shall stay my whole time," declared Tom, as he went down on his hands and knees at the entrance; and they could hear him remonstrating with the narrow passage till his voice was lost in the distance.

Two hours to while away in that graveyard of the centuries. It was very quiet, and even the lapping of the lake against the stones was no longer discernible. The silence was oppressive, and Whitman proposed a ride in the woods. A pink haze rose from a neighboring swamp, and, as the sun sank lower and lower, the profound silence, as of a tomb, grew more and more depressing. At last, to break the spell, Whitman ventured to recite the first lines of Shelley's "Naples," —

"I stood within the city disinterred,
And heard the autumnal leaves like light foot-falls
Of spirits, passing through the streets."

Ethel looked at him queerly, as if; perhaps, he were something more than a calculating machine, after all.

It was her turn, now, to relieve the monotony: "By the way, what do you think of that for trigonometry?" and she gayly handed him the paper containing her computations of the afternoon. He thought she seemed a little ill at ease, as if she began to doubt her work, in the awesome quiet of the woods.

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He smiled, and glanced at the figures carelessly, then started, and began to figure rapidly. Silence, deep and unbroken.

“Well, what’s the matter, sir?” she broke in, impatiently.

“Why, the refraction coefficient of vacuum to air is 1.00029, not 1.0294, and you bring the answer out twenty-six minutes too high. Taking out the five minutes, Tom will come out twenty-one minutes too late.”

They turned their horses’ heads, he with knitted brow, she with ashen face, and the rapid hoof-beats were not too quick to be a threnody in their ears.

Suddenly he reined up with a loud laugh. “Fools — er — excuse me, I am — what harm will it do if he does cross the shadow? There we were taking it for granted that the priesthood still existed; it must have been this devilish silence.”

The color came back to her face, and she laughed a little.

They rode out upon the plateau; it was 4.40, and the shadow must be well across the opening. And then Whitman leaped half out of his saddle, and gave a choking cry; while his companion drooped forward on the horse’s neck, and the world swam round and round and round.

On the summit of the temple, clad in Aztec garb, stood a white-haired priest, and six others, armed with the iztli knife, clustered around the doorway.

The girl clapped her hands to her face and burst into tears, crying that she had killed her cousin, and all for pride, and that she knew nothing about mathe-

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matics at all. She seemed scarcely able to sit on her horse.

Whitman only stared blankly before him. So the old priesthood was not all gone. After all, it was not so strange in that great unknown peninsula.

“Why don’t you save him?” cried Ethel; and there was a fine light in her eyes, and her hands were clenched now. Whitman felt that any other girl would have fainted long ago, and a wave of admiration swept over him.

“Oh, if you were only a man, and not a fossil” — it sounded ludicrous at such a time — “I am going up myself. Poor old Tom!”

He had the presence of mind to seize her bridle-rein. Parabolas, hyperbolas, — what not darted through his head, poor aids at such a time. After all, calculus was a small thing to know when human life hung in the balance and quick wit might tip the scale. He knew now that the good opinion of this young lady was not so undesirable. He would give a good deal for it at this moment.

“And can’t you save him?” she cried in piteous tones.

He was thinking clearly now, at any rate: the water, the priests, and the shadow; the shadow, the priests, and the water; which could be eliminated from that network of death?

He leaped with delight as a thought dawned on him, and he was never prouder in his life than when he wheeled on the shivering girl. “I can!” he said, while his eyes danced with that battle-fire which lurks in every true man, — “but you must go home.”

She looked at him with rebellious eyes; but he

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gazed steadily back, and it was the man now and not the mathematician. She turned her horse, with never a word, and rode off, looking back only once with wistful glance — subdued, yet perhaps subduer.

Silence again, and the dreamy air ; fleeting shadows and the peace of the sleeping woods ! But it was a time for most vigorous action. That shadow could be lifted in just one way. The stone must go. The shadow gone, the scrupulous priests could no longer claim their victim. It would be a complete rescue. In a few minutes Tom would be out and the work must be fast. The pillar was larger at top than bottom, and the centre of gravity high. A sharp blow well up would overthrow it ; for the ancient builders used no cement. He was off his horse immediately and running toward the terrace. The priests looked on with patient, wondering eyes. They had naught to do with him. He sprang upon the parapet and thus gained four out of the fifteen feet ; eight feet high can a tall man strike with effect, and it would fall out just right here. The two-foot coping seemed narrower than the dread Al Sirât, but it was wide enough for one blow of a desperate man ; there could not be another. Eight feet up he struck, and in a glance he caught the faint markings on the pillar. Then stone and sky and all flashed out of sight ; and the water flew up and smote him, and seethed and bubbled over his head. He saw where the great foundations of the temple-wall sank into the bright sand ; and then the whole calm water-world green and waving, rose before his eyes, with startled fish and long-bending water-grasses.

He gained the shore at last, with his left wrist all

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bent in a Collie's fracture, and dashed away the water which dripped from his hair into his eyes. Then he sat down, sick to vomiting, and looked around. The temple was pillarless now as the great black Kaaba of Mecca; but he hardly noticed that. There, strung along the water-terrace and looking down into the silent lake, stood the seven priests of the great war-god; and, as they stood, they chanted the Maya-death-song. Death and the Yucatan Indian are brethren, and the latter lives only to long for some excuse for entering into that last fraternal embrace. These seven, standing over the total wreck of the crumbling faith, looking down into the depths whither the light of their eyes had gone, had nothing to live for, and it was a joyful farewell to those long desolate halls. The Maya-death-song is the weirdest strain which ever touched human ear; and the hushed voices of legions of departed spirits breathe in the not inharmonious notes. Lengthening shadows, and the cool of approaching evening, and never a cry! The water whitened with foam, and the bubbles rose, and the circles eddied to the lily-pads off in the woods; but the brown hands clung in tiger-grip and water grasses are tenacious.

Whitman and Tom rode home in the dark, and lights were twinkling all about the house as they came up. Some one said, as they passed through the door, "You're not a fossil;" and perhaps it was meant for Tom.

There were two who walked by the brook-side at evening. The departure, which had been postponed a day, was set for to-morrow.

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It was Whitman who spoke, and the width of the path was between them. He was earnest enough now.

“Miss Ethel,” — they always called her that, — “do you mean, can you mean that I may have any hope of — er — well, solving your problems for you — er — all the rest of your life?”

He waited a long time.

“I suppose you think I need some one after yesterday,” she said faintly.

“And may I be that one?”

The universe stood still to hear the answer, but only a final letter was audible.

After all, the nineteenth letter of the English alphabet has its uses.