

Reflections on a Shadowless Man

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 18 Dec 1998

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Nigel Price — 18 Dec 1998, 19:31

In the first volume of Lexicon Urthus "Additions, Errata, &cetera", Mantis refers to a "Tale of a Man Who Sold His Shadow", and comments:

"Master Ash seems to be talking about a German fairy tale."

How about Adalbert von Chamisso's famous romance "Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte" ("Peter Schlemihl's Remarkable Story", or as it was called in the translation that I read, "Peter Schlemihl, the Shadowless Man"). Published in 1814, this short novel tells the story of the eponymous Peter Schlemihl, a young man who sells his shadow to the Devil in exchange for the Purse of Fortunatus. If I remember correctly, he hopes to use this legendary source of limitless wealth to make himself eligible in the eyes of his beloved. Unfortunately, she notices that he no longer has a shadow, and refuses to marry him. Spurned by society, he flees into the wilderness, where he meets the Devil once more and unsuccessfully attempts to buy back his shadow. In the end, he finds a pair of Seven League Boots, and uses them to travel the world, devoting his life to scientific research.

Lacking Severian's memory, I can't be absolutely sure, but I seem to recall that von Chamisso was himself a research scientist of some kind - a botanist, I think - and took part in various travels to far off lands (Antarctica?) in search of specimens. (Yes, I checked this out. He was a botanist. He travelled on a research trip around the world on a Russian ship, and published a diary of the expedition. Apparently he was also custodian of the botanical gardens in Berlin.)

The other locus classicus for the Shadow motif is Hans Christian Anderson's short story "The Shadow". But while Peter Schlemihl barter his shadow, the Shadow in Hans Anderson's story takes on a life of his own and rebels against his master, eventually stealing his beloved and taking over his life.

Don't know whether any of the above is any help at all, but I offer it as further grist to the lexicographer's mill...

Mantis' comment on the above was as follows:

Maybe the one you mention is the right one (it certainly sounds like the one I saw). But there's also that detail of "for a time he traveled with a man who had no reflection," would that match up to the Devil?

To the best of my understanding, it is a traditional attribute of vampires that they have no reflection, and thus keep away from mirrors in order to avoid detection. Whether a similar tradition adheres to devils and demons, I do not know.

Generally in these tales, the reflection or shadow is taken to represent the soul, and thus Peter

Schlemihl, although he appears at first to be trading away something relatively insignificant, is actually losing something far more precious. As damned and demonic creatures, vampires have no reflection because, unlike humans, they have no soul to save.

Or something like that!

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