

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1946

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Frogfather



BY MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Strange beings dwell in that part of the swamp that is deepest and darkest

NO, I never liked frogs' legs very much, not even before what happened. And I wouldn't eat them now if I was starving. This is why.

Though I'd known and worked for Ran-

son Cuff for two years, all of each day and part of most nights, I remember him clearly only in the dark of that particular night we went frog-hunting. Ranson Cuff was the sort of man who shoved himself into your

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

mind, like a snake crawling into a gopher hole. I defy anyone to find anyone else who liked Ranson Cuff—maybe his wife liked him, but she didn't live with him for more than three weeks. Nobody around the Swamps liked him, though he was the best off in money. He ran a string of hunting camps for strangers from up North, who came to hunt deer or fish for bass, once in a while to chase bear with dogs. He did his end of that job well, and if he was rude the strangers figured him for a picturesque character. I've heard them call him that. The Swamps people called him other things, to his face if he didn't have mortgages on their houseboats, cabins and trapping outfits.

This night we were paddling, he and I and an old, old Indian whose name I never knew, in a really beautiful boat he'd taken for a bad debt. Cuff was going to get a mess of frogs' legs, which he loved, and which he'd love three times as much because he'd killed the frogs for them. Cuff would have killed people if he'd dared, just for fun. I know he would. I'd gone to work for him when I was fifteen—my old maid aunt, who raised me, owed him money she could never pay. When he told her to, she gave me to him, and I suppose what I earned went into settling the debt. Slavery—and he was the quickest and oftenest to remind me of it.

That night was clear and dark, not a speck of moon and all the stars anyone ever saw at once. They sheened the swamp-water, up to where the great fat clumps of trees cuddled it in at the edges. I paddled, the old Indian paddled, and Cuff sat like a fat toad—not a frog—in the bow with his lantern and his gig. The lantern-light gave his face the kind of shadows that showed us what he was. His face was as round as a lemon, and as yellow and as sour. His mouth was small, and his eyes couldn't have been closer together without mixing into each other, and his little nose was the only bony thing about him.

"Head for that neck of water northeast," he said. "I haven't ever been in there, but I hear frogs singing. And none of them are out along these banks."

HE CURSED the frogs for not being there to kill. I began to scoop with my paddle to turn the boat the way he said, but the

old Indian pulled his paddle out with a little dripping slop.

"We don't go there," said the old Indian. He spoke wonderful English, better than Cuff or myself.

"Don't go where?" snarled Cuff. He always snarled, at people who had to take it. The old Indian had come to work for him, hungry and ragged, and wasn't exactly fat or well-dressed now.

"I'm speaking for your good, Mr. Cuff," said the old Indian. "That's no place to stick frogs."

"I can hear them singing!" Cuff said. "Listen, there must be a whole nation of them."

"They're there because they're safe," said the old Indian.

"Khaa!" Cuff spit into the water. "Safe! That's what they think. We're going in there to stick a double mess."

"I'm of the first people here, and I can tell you the truth of it, Mr. Cuff," went on the old Indian, with Indian quiet and Indian stubbornness. "I'm surprised you don't know about that neck of water and what's beyond. It's the home of Khongabassi."

"Don't know him," growled Cuff.

"Khongabassi," repeated the old Indian. "The Frogfather. He's lived there since the world was made. The oldest ones say he dug the waterways and planted the trees along them. And the frogs are his children."

"Oh, heaven deliver me!" Cuff screwed his fat face into the sourest frown I had ever seen, even on him. "Indian talk I came out to hear. You make me sick. Get going northwest."

"No," and the old Indian laid his paddle inside the boat.

"You're fired, you old—" and Cuff cursed the Indian every way he knew. He knew a great many ways, including the Indian's ancestry back to Adam and his children down to the last generation. "You're fired," he said again. "Get out of this boat."

"Yes, Mr. Cuff," said the old Indian gently. "Put in to the shore—"

"Get out right here," blustered Cuff, "I'm not taking you to the shore."

"Yes," said the old Indian again, and slipped overboard sidewise, like a muskrat. He barely rippled the water as he swam

away. Cuff spit after him, and cocked his head.

"Hark at those frogs singing!" he said. "Frogfather—I'll frogfather them! Right in their pappy's dooryard. Johnny," he said to me, "get us going there."

I did all the paddling, and we came to the neck of water. Trees were close on both sides, shutting out the little, little gleam of starlight, but there seemed to be a sort of green brightness beyond. Cuff swore at me to make me ship my paddle.

"Look at the glow from under the surface," said Cuff. He reached right down into his half-knowledge for a cozy explanation. "Must be full of those little shiny bugs like the ones in the sea. Makes it easy for us to find the frogs."

I remembered how my grandfather had once said you're better off knowing a few things than to know so many things that aren't so. My hunch was that maybe there was rotten wood somewhere around, what old-timers call foxfire. Cuff, at the bow, knelt with his lantern in one hand and his gig in the other. The gig had a hand-forged fork for its head, three sharp barbed spikes. The shaft was a piece of hickory, about four feet long and as thick as your hand could hold comfortably.

"Snake us along the bank, Johnny," he said. "Now hold her. I see one."

I SAW it too, in the light of his lantern, a nice fat green frog on a rock set in some roots. It squatted with its knees high

and its hands together in front of it, like a boy waiting his turn at a marble game. Its head was lifted, its eyes fixed by the dazzling glare of the lantern, and those eyes were like precious jewels. Cuff stabbed down, and brought it up, squirming and kicking, its mouth gaped open, all three tines of his gig in it. He smacked it on the inside of the boat to quiet it, and shoved it off at my feet.

"Got your knife?" he growled. "Then slice off its legs—no, snake me along again, I see a bigger one yonder."

"You're tipping me away," he said. "Balance me back, or I'll put a knot on your head with this gig-handle."

"It's not me, Mr. Cuff," I argued, but not with any heart in it, because he always frightened me. "You must be tipping us—"

"My weight's here next the frog, you fool," he said. "And you're tipping us toward the water. You'll have us over in a minute!"

The boat was tipping, and I shifted to bring her back on an even keel, but she tipped more, and I looked around to see what snag might have hooked us.

Over the thwart lay something like a long, smooth piece of wood, darkish and dampish in the dim light. Yes, a snag, I thought. But Cuff turned and lifted the lantern, and I saw it was no snag.

It was a long green arm!

From elbow to fingertip it was visible above the thwart, weighting down that side of the boat and tipping us in the direction of the open water. The ordinary human arm is eighteen inches long, I hear, the length of the old-fashioned Bible cubit. This was longer than that. Two feet at least, and probably more. It was muscled smoothly and trimly from the neat point of the elbow to the slender, supple wrist, and beyond this stretched slim, pointed fingers, but not enough. The hand spread, and it had three fingers and a thumb, with no gap where the other finger had been lost. Between them was a shiny wet web, and it was dead gray, where the arm was covered with sleek green skin blotched twice or three times with brown-black spots as big as saucers.

What Cuff said I wouldn't want written down as my own last words. He said it loudly, and at the noise another arm came

up across the other, and hooked there. Then a head came into view and looked at us.

THE lantern-light caught the eyes first, great popped-out eyes of every jewel-flashing color known to the vainest woman that lives. They looked at Cuff. They were set in a heavy blunt head the size of a fish-basket, and in some ways the head was like Cuff's. But it had no bony nose, no nose at all, and the mouth was a long curved slit like a tight-closed Gladstone bag. Under the mouth, where the chin ought to be, the white throat dipped in and out, in and out, breathing calmly.

The creature lifted a hand, quicker than Cuff could stab. It took hold of the gig just below the head. That hickory was as strong as a hoe-handle, but the big green webbed hand snapped off the iron fork just like picking a daisy, and tossed it away with a splash. At that splash every frog stopped singing. And the big elbows heaved a little, shoulders came into view, and I saw what there was to see of the creature, down to where its waist came out of the water.

All blotchy green and brown, with a white belly and a wet smoothness, it was a frog. But it was bigger than a man by twice, I suppose. Our boat went over, and I flew through the air and splashed in. That moment in the air was enough to see Cuff caught by neck and shoulder in those two green hands. And he went down under water, lantern and all. He hadn't time for another curse.

As I sank, I got my arms and legs working. I was more anxious to swim away than swim up. My eyes were open, and I saw under the water by the green light that was there. That part of the Swamps must have been the deepest, and many times my length below I could make out old drowned tree-trunks, a lost forest from some ancient time of storm and washaway. They were mixed up together as if something had tried to make a hut or nest of them, and I suppose something had. There was a hole among them like a door, with the green light coming from it, and down toward that hole swam a long green shape, nine feet at least from its blunt head to the heels of its flipping webbed feet. Under-one arm it carried

Cuff, tucked like a stolen baby, and the other hand helped swim it along.

Then I broke surface and churned away, sick and faint and ready to burst with my pounding heart, but making for the little channel by which we had come into the place.

I MADE it, and when I swam out, I heard a long, soft whistle. It made me almost jump out of the water. Another whistle, and something dark and swift and silent came toward me. I tried to turn away, but my strength was gone. The dark shape bore close, and it was a canoe. The old Indian put down his hand and helped me get in. Then I lay there and came to life, while he paddled the canoe idly around and around, here and there, on the peaceful starlit water.

He did not seem surprised or even curious. He asked me nothing. When I was able, I told him what had happened.

"It was Khongabassi," he said quietly when I had finished. "Khongabassi, the Frogfather. When a stranger comes to kill children in their very home, will not their father help them?"

That was something new to think about. I got strength to sit up.

"We'll have to get help," I said, "and go back and—"

"And challenge Khongabassi?" he finished for me. "Why? He saved his children. He took only Mr. Cuff and let you go. Khongabassi never takes any more prey than he needs. But if many men go there, with grappling hooks and weapons—then Khongabassi will have a way to deal with them, and I do not want to see it."

I didn't want to see it, either. I asked a question. "You knew all about Khongabassi, didn't you? You knew what he would do?"

I saw the old Indian's head nod against the stars. "Of course. He has done that to others who came to his home without permission. We first people learned many lives ago to keep to our ways and leave him to his. Khongabassi is not terrible, he is only Khongabassi. You think of him as what we call a *djibaw*, an evil spirit. We think of him as a part of nature, that defends nature's weak things. Men should be a part

of nature, too, and perhaps they would escape what Mr. Cuff has not escaped."

"What shall we do, though?" I persisted.

"Oh," said the old Indian, "we shall think of a story, you and I, that explains Mr. Cuff's death. A story that white men will believe."



WEIRD TALES at Bikini

WE CAME across an interesting International News Service report a while back. It told of the doing of the atom-bomb plane crew just before they came in on their target.

It seems that the "doings" of the pilot and the co-pilot on this deadly serious mission, consisted of poring over a copy of WEIRD TALES while "George," the automatic pilot, flew the plane.

Naturally we were mightily interested and pleased.

Now we'd very much like to know which issue of WEIRD TALES was along with Major Woodrow Swancutt's plane on this historic bombing operation. Perhaps he or his co-pilot, Captain Bill Hartison, Jr., or navigator Major William Adams would tell us what stories they liked best.

A free subscription is waiting for any of them if they have a chance to write us.

P. S.—We'll even welcome hearing from "George" the automatic pilot!

Here Come the Shonokins

WHEN first I wrote of John Thunstone and the Shonokins (Manly Wade Wellman confides) I referred to the rumor of a legend; well, it seems to be more than a rumor, and more than a legend.

I have said before that John Thunstone exists—perhaps not by that name—and that, though I've romanticized him and his adventures, there exists a sound basis of factual report. But the whisper of a humanoid race of baleful magicians, who claim to have ruled America before the earliest Indian, whose external difference from man is only in the peculiar eye and the extra-long third finger, seemed fantastic enough—until the outlying readers were heard from.

On the showing of a large and lively correspondence, there are Shonokins. There must be Shonokins. Maybe more of them than I thought, or Thunstone thought. And maybe I've given them too much publicity!

Scholarly is the report of Stuart Morton Boland, San Francisco librarian and adventurer in many lands. His studies reveal that many Indian tribes, North and South America, knew and feared the Shonokins—"being like men who walk the earth as men but leave wherever they walk a place accursed."

Murray G. Thompson, of Bath, Maine, further contributes a report of his examination of pre-colonial carvings on a ledge near his home—carvings that must be likenesses of the Shonokins and may be the work of Shonokin artists.

J. Edmond Marsengill, of Lineville, Iowa, has seen tracks in the Ozark Mountains of feet that might be human feet—except that the toe next to the little toe, analogous to the third finger of the hand, is *excessively long*, and of the makers of such tracks the Ozarkians do not care even to talk for fear of retribution."

Those Ozarkians are, perhaps, to be imitated. I don't want to encourage Russell Finger, Jr., of Camden, N. J., and others who ask how they can meet Shonokins face to face. Few, outside of Thunstone himself and his aide Kent (Crash) Collins, of Tampa, Florida, have done that and come back with a tale to tell. But let me answer some of the most frequent questions:

Shonokin is pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, to rhyme with the Scots pronunciation of "manakin." Only one settlement of Shonokins has ever been noted, the town of Araby near Zoar Valley in upstate New York, and it exists no longer.

There seem to be no female Shonokins, and very few males. If you see one at all, you're looking at a very rare creature. Mr. Marsengill, quoted above, suggests that they reproduce by budding, like certain sea creatures. A more interesting theory, into which I won't go here, is offered by Alan Dittes.

As for Thunstone himself, I have forwarded several letters to him from readers of WEIRD TALES, but I must sadly say that he never answers letters, except to his immediate and trusted friends. The nature of his work is such as to demand the utmost care in correspondence and indeed in all other behavior. But here is a last quotation, from a recent letter to him, signed Mary McFall, of Westcliffe, Colo.:

"Can you or Mr. Wellman show me a Shonokin? I think they are relatives of mine."

"Mr. Thunstone desires me to say to you, Miss McFall, that if you're even distantly related to the Shonokins he's afraid to hear so much as your name again. Thunstone fears few things, and Shonokins are among them!