

"SHONOKIN TOWN" a new horror novelette by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

WEIRD Tales

JULY

15¢



"CATSPAWS"—a Jules de Grandin—SEABURY QUINN

Weird Tales



JULY, 1946

Cover by Matt Fox

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LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

Shonokin Town

THE face of Dr. Munford Smollett had once been round, but now it looked fallen in and haggard, like a badly baked pie, and one taut cheek was furrowed with scratches. His thick gray hair, probably never well groomed, hung in a tussock over his seamed forehead. When John Thunstone, at the door of his hotel suite, held out a great hand, Dr. Smol-

lett seized and held it as though it were an anchorage in a reeling world.

"I came at once," he said hoarsely. "At once, as soon as I'd checked my bags at the station and crossed streets back and forth to make sure I wasn't followed. Sir, you won't believe what I am going to tell."

"I've believed many wonders in the past," Thunstone assured him, and drew

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE



BY MANLY WADE WELLMAN

him through the door to a comfortable chair. "Please sit down. I judge that you need a drink."

"Thanks," said the doctor, and when Thunstone mixed the highball he drank in just such a greedy fashion as he would deplore in a patient. The glass shook in his hand, but color came back into his drawn face, and he spoke more clearly. "It was at a town called Araby. Do you know of it?"

"Start somewhere near the beginning,"

Thunstone bade him. "So far I know only what you phoned—your name and that you're in trouble."

"Trouble—and not natural trouble, not trouble from normal nature—"

"You're safe here. Near the beginning, doctor."

Dr. Smollett drank again. Thunstone refilled his glass, and mixed a drink for himself.

"I was taking a special holiday," said Dr. Smollett slowly. "I'd been working

A town of unfathomable evil, an unhealthy and unholy place. . . .



hard and prescribed a complete change for myself. I'd heard there wasn't much of a tourist rush upstate. Somewhere or other I'd learned of nice remote hideaways in the neighborhood of Zoar Valley."

"Zoar, yes," nodded Thunstone, remembering the tale of how once children were born there under a curse, with two-toed hoofs for feet and two-fingered crab-claws for hands. "You went there?"

"By train, cross-country bus and again by a little spur of railroad." Dr. Smollett's throat twitched. "I was being completely careless. Wanted to drop casually into the quietest spot. The timetable said Araby, and a ticket-man in a little station said it was a flagstop only. So I asked to be let off, and dropped at a little stone shanty of a station, with a bag in each hand. And the impossible part began."

"There are no impossibilities," said Thunstone, speaking like an oracle to lighten his visitor. "What happened?"

Thunstone, immense and vital, knew how to study assurance into the great dark rectangle of his face. His eyes were steady, bright, interested, his mouth firm without tenseness below the trim black mustache. It was acting, but it served the purpose. Dr. Smollett borrowed some degree of composure from his host, and went on calmly.

"Maybe I've imagined things later, the way you imagine things to add into simple dreams. Now that I think, I guess the first men I saw in Araby—should I call them Arabians?—didn't frighten or even perplex me. One thin old fellow was lounging on the shady side of the shanty-station. His clothes were somehow peculiar; cut and worn right, even nattily—but their material was new to me. Not any fabric I knew, maybe not fabric at all. It was like skin, and not dressed skin, either, but suggested living integument, white and sheeny. Here, Thunstone, I may be piecing out with imagination."

"Perhaps," nodded Thunstone, who thought otherwise. "You spoke to the old man? How did he look?"

"A grand specimen. I'm a doctor, I appreciate good quality of body. He was old, but not decrepit. His hair was gray, not as gray as mine, and thick as a horse's mane. Worn mane-fashion, too, square-cut

behind and a big sweeping lock over the brow. Dark face, wrinkled, but not loosely. The body was thin and wiry strong. I held out my hand to introduce myself, and he took it—"

"Stop right there," commanded Thunstone. "How did his handclasp affect you? Don't worry about imagination. Tell me."

"It was as strong as a closing trap," said Dr. Smollett. "Dry and cool for the warm morning, yet no impression of ill health. Fingers long, tapering, hard as hard rubber—"

"Was there anything unusual about the fingers?"

SMOLLETT paused and his throat worked again. "Yes. I sensed it then, and made sure later. The third finger, the ring finger, was excessively long. I never saw its like before, longer than the middle finger. How do you know about it?"

"Go on," urged Thunstone, without making reply to the question.

"I said my name was Dr. Smollett, and the old fellow dropped my hand as if it had scorched him. I was looking past him at the scene. The town was little and old and pretty—a well-mended place, if you know what I mean. The houses were mostly white, with low roofs like hats pulled well down, and they were grouped curiously, as if the streets weren't straight or crossed at right angles. The effect was like a modernistic stage set. Beyond rose the slope of a big hill, almost a mountain, and on it were trees, belt on belt of them, rich and green and with that upward-marching effect you get with a wooded incline. I said I liked the place. I asked where I might lodge for a few days.

"The old man shook his head. His gray mane stirred. He said, deeply and gently, that Araby had no accommodations for strangers."

Thunstone, watching the doctor closely, offered a cigar.

"Thanks." Smollett lighted a match. "Well, he was strange, but not unfriendly. I still wanted to stay. It struck me that the local medico might extend hospitality to a colleague, so I asked where a doctor lived. The old man jumped back from me, staring. I saw that his eyes—his eyes—"

"Had perpendicular pupils?" prompted Thunstone.

"How did you know? Thunstone, you have been in Araby!"

"Never. Go on."

"He stared. His lips twitched. He had pointed teeth. He said, 'No doctors here. We have no doctors in Araby.'"

"That intrigued me. 'Then,' I said, 'I might consider opening an office here. It looks like a pleasant little town.'"

"He still glowered. 'Never have been doctors here,' he said. 'We heal things our own way. Don't want doctors.' And I thought he was going to spit at me, like an angry cat."

Smollett sighed and went on: "I figured him for a crank, and walked on past him with my luggage. I was looking for a place to pause, a store or tavern. Several men lounged together in front of a big square house. They all wore those white skin-stuff suits, they all seemed dark and spare and lithe, and they all were looking my way. I paused, gazing up and down, a little worried. Then the old man strode quickly past me. I wish I had energy like that—no, I don't. It wasn't human energy."

He was nervous again. Thunstone put a mighty hand on his shoulder. "I said you were safe here," he reminded. "I want the whole story."

"Things happened so fast they're hard to tell," said Dr. Smollett. "I may leave something out, or imagine something in. The old man spoke to the others—short words, in a language I don't know, and they jumped at me, fast and fierce as mad dogs."

"One hit me in the face, slapping and scratching." Dr. Smollett lifted his hand and touched the marks on his cheek. "He had long nails, and a long thied finger. I felt disgusted and sick. I tried to back away, but they were all over me, grabbing at my arms and shoulders. They would have dragged me down, but I swung one of my heavy bags, with all my strength, at the head of the biggest. You should have seen him fall. Like a wet coat with nothing inside it. He lay still. The others all screamed and yelled and shrank back. I got myself and my bags into the little station-shanty, and slammed the heavy door

shut. There was a big latch, and I put it into place.

"I thought quietly. There wouldn't be a train for hours, perhaps not until next day. I knew I hadn't any friend, or anyone willing to be a friend, in the whole town of Araby. I wondered if I could stand siege against these men who for no reason seemed anxious to kill me. They were talking outside, in undertones. Then one scratched outside the door, like a dog wanting to come in. It was the old man. He said there had been a mistake, and they wanted to apologize."

"You believed that?" demanded Thunstone sharply.

"I was only too glad to. I opened the door, and they swarmed all around me again. They grabbed me, and held me. One of them pointed to where something lay. The man I had hit. He said I was a murderer."

"I got my nerve together, and argued that I had struck in self-defense. Then the old man reminded me that I had said I was a doctor. He told me that I must treat the fellow I'd hit, and make him well. I was glad to do that, and I took one of my bags, the one with my medicines and instrument. I went to the side of the fallen man. None of them followed me. They seemed to strain away, in absolute horror."

"Of course, of course," muttered Thunstone, more to himself than to Smollett. "The one thing that—but don't let me interrupt."

"I knelt by the man. His face was a sort of dusky, bloodless, buckskin color now. Blood showed at his ears and nostrils, and his eyes were open, and one of those slit-shaped pupils was wider than the other. Skull fracture, I knew, and even before I touched him I felt that he was dead. I made sure in a few seconds. The metal fittings on my bag must have struck his temple and smashed it in. I turned around and said to the others, 'He's dead. Help me carry him to the station.'"

"**T**HEY all shrank away from me. They looked even more bloodless than their dead friend. I said, 'He can't just lie here. Help me,' and I stooped and got him into my arms somehow. He wasn't

small or light, but I managed alone. I carried him to the station, and inside, and laid him on a stone bench there. When I came back to the door, they had all retired to the houses, in a horrified knot. They stared at me, and whispered toward each other out of the sides of their mouths. When I came into the open, they scuttled clear away, and gazed at me from a distance, like frightened puppies.

"I'd had enough then. I took my cases and started to walk along the track. Two of them followed me far off, but once when I stopped and turned around, they stopped, too. They seemed set as if to fight or run, but they didn't move after me until I started along. We came through a narrow pass in the hills, and the railroad paralleled a highway. A truck came along, and I hurried to the highway and thumbed a ride.

"I talked to the truck driver. Told him almost everything except about the man's death. He said, 'Araby? Oh, those ducks.' He seemed to know that they were queer, and he seemed not to want to know anything else. The way people are about convict labor camps or insane asylums near their homes. He took me to where I could catch my bus, and from the bus I caught a train to New York. On the train were two of those Araby men, in their strange suits, with their intent faces peering after me. They'd followed. I sat in a crowded smoking car all night. I got here, telephoned you, and I hope I shook them off my trail when I came here. Mr. Thunstone, people say you know more than almost anyone else about the strangest things of life. What is Araby, and what are its citizens?"

"Do you remember hearing anything about the Shonokins?" asked Thunstone in turn.

"Shonokins? Shonokins? Oh, the legend—"

"Don't you know now that they aren't a legend? That's a Shonokin community. I've barely heard of it, and you've done me a favor by telling me about it."

"But Shonokins are a nature myth, an Indian story like Hiawatha."

"Hiawatha was a real man, and the Shonokins are real—real almost-men. I've seen several. I've examined them. What you tell matches what I know about them.

Those long third fingers, those strange clothes. Their peculiar knowledges and sciences, that make them distrust our medicine and other skills. And they fear only their own dead. Because, so far as I can learn, nobody ever saw a Shonokin die except accidentally or violently."

"How does science explain that?" demanded Dr. Smollett.

"Science doesn't recognize the existence of Shonokins, let alone try to explain them. Would science take seriously the report of a race that had no females as far as anyone knows?"

"I didn't see any women, at that," mused Smollett.

"Creatures with eyes and hands like that? Creatures that, for all they look like human beings, aren't human beings? Aren't descended from the same original beasts as ourselves, but were a different stock, branching off in ages we cannot define? Who say that they've lain in hiding enough centuries, and want to start quietly and deliberately to possess the world they insist was always theirs?"

"How do you know that's their way?" asked Smollett. "Or do you really know, are you doing more than guessing?"

"I know some things, and guess others. Dr. Smollett, I want your promise of silence for the time being. You need rest now, and pleasant companions, and safety. I want you to spend two or three days as the guest of some friends of mine."

They went in a taxi to the home of a man who came to the door in a robe like that of a priest, but dark green instead of black. He greeted Thunstone as one brother will greet another with whom he is on excellent terms. He was eager, but not surprised, when Thunstone introduced Dr. Smollett and asked if he might stay. The three had dinner, drinks and considerable pleasant talk. Thunstone went away, alone, to the office of a railroad executive. He introduced himself by mentioning the name of a man known and admired by both himself and the railroader.

"The favor I want," said Thunstone, "is to ride on a little spur line your railroad operates in the Zoar Valley region. I'm going up there tonight by airplane. I want to approach Araby, but not to stop there.

Let your train slow down at a point I'll designate, so that I can drop off just outside the town."

THEY granted Thunstone's request of course. He never makes requests without reason, and without knowing those requests will be granted. He flew to the Zoar Valley country without hand luggage, though his pockets were stuffed with various things, and was in plenty of time for the train that left a small division point in the evening to travel the spur toward Araby.

It was a mixed train, with an ancient passenger coach, a milk car, two freight cars and a caboose. The wise-looking old conductor had on his sleeve four gold stripes for twenty years of service. He shook hands with Thunstone and sat beside him in the passenger coach, talking. Thunstone asked him no questions, but what the conductor told him might have been a series of helpful answers.

"Araby's an old town. I never get off there, never have. Somebody has a deal with the line to act as station master, though it's only a flagstop. Sometimes they take off freight, though they never put any on. Once in months, one or two of them will get on or off. Peculiar, yes, but the world's full of peculiar people. Never pass the time of day. Pay their passage in money, not tickets. Mostly in old coins, dollars and half dollars; once in a while in bills. The bills look new. I was worried a couple of times and had a bank check the bills for counterfeit. They were good, though."

"Naturally," said Thunstone.

"Unnaturally," rejoined the old conductor. "Araby's an unnatural place. Nobody goes there. Maybe the sheriff would, but there's never any trouble to call him. No telegraph, no phone, no newspaper I ever heard of. They have a deal with the government, too, like the deals Indian tribes have, to be let alone. Don't know how they worked it. They aren't Indians."

"No, they aren't," agreed Thunstone.

The conductor squinted through his spectacles at the scenery going past. It was after sundown, and to Thunstone the night looked black; but, like all railroaders on familiar routes, the conductor knew where he was.

"We'll be there in five minutes," he said. "Usually we highball through, but we'll take it at about thirty miles an hour. Two miles past, there's a little cut-through, full of trees. We slow to about fifteen there, and out you can go. Good-bye, Mister. You know what you're doing."

"I know," Thunstone assured him.

The conductor got up. Thunstone followed him up the aisle and paused in the entry of the car. He watched as the train rolled to the edge of Araby and through. There were houses against a night-gloomy slope, as Dr. Smollett had described. They had lights, very few and dim and reddish, as if shining through colored glass. Thunstone walked down the steps of the car, his huge hand on the cleat at one side. The train cleared Araby and cut its speed. It came to a curve, plunged in between close heights. That would be the cut-through. Thunstone poised himself on the bottom step, waited for his instinct to speak, and sprang into the darkness.

For all his size and weight, he landed lightly on his feet, like a cat. Quickly he knelt on mossy ground among bushes, and waited for the train to gather speed and vanish with its lights that might disclose him. Then he flexed his muscles to rise, but at once he crouched lower. The ground under his knee gave a tiny vibration—something was coming, cautiously and slowly.

Thunstone waited motionlessly. A bush rustled. His eyes, growing accustomed to the darkness of the cut-through, made out a moving silhouette, upright and smaller than himself. It was pausing, then moving ahead, its head turning this way and that as if peering in the night. Not five yards from Thunstone the figure stopped. He heard it clear its throat, and then a match flared to light a cigarette.

HE SAW a hatless head of brown hair, an aggressive young face, an open-collared blue shirt with sleeves rolled almost to the shoulders over arms that were sinewy but not bulky. This was no Shonokin.

Thunstone crept forward at a crouch, then pounced with massive speed. His two mighty hands fell on the youngster's biceps

and closed like manacles, holding his captive helpless.

Match and cigarette fell and went out. Towering above the young man, Thunstone spoke quickly.

"Don't move, or I'll pull your arms out at the shoulders. Where did you come from, and who are you?"

In the dark sounded a little chuckle, from nervousness or ordinary good humor. A gentle young voice made reply:

"I dropped off that train, just like you. And my name's Kent Collins. You can call me Crash, Mr. Thunstone."

"Crash?"

"A nickname I got when I played football. You'll find it tattooed on my left arm. I came because I wanted to help you."

The youth who called himself Kent Collins was well grown—perhaps five feet ten inches tall, and all of a hundred and sixty-five pounds in weight—but plainly he realized that he would have no chance against the giant Thunstone. He did not move in Thunstone's grip, did not even tense his imprisoned biceps. "I was hoping," he said, "that you'd see my match light and come over. I don't blame you for not trusting me."

"Lighting a match hereabouts is foolish," Thunstone told him sententiously. "And why should I trust you?"

"You shouldn't until I prove myself. I'll try that. I know a little about you, and a little less about why you're here. But I do know something about both. I'm a friend of Dr. Smollett."

"So you say," said Thunstone.

"Several of his friends knew how tired he was, and were a little afraid he might collapse. When he went on that vacation, I agreed with some of the others to go along—not where he'd see, but in sight of him if he needed help."

"Didn't you think he needed help in Araby, Collins?"

"Call me Crash, Mr. Thunstone. I dozed through Araby, and when I woke up he was gone and the train pulling away. I jumped off at just about this point, and headed back toward town. I was in time to see him in trouble—out of it again—and running."

"What did you do?"

"Shivered." Crash Collins suited action to word. "So would you, Mr. Thunstone—no, they say you never shiver. They say you'd look the devil himself in the eye and call him a liar. But I shivered. I crouched down in some bushes by the track, until another train came along. I saw two of the Shonokins flag it down and get on. I made a run and caught the rear rail. They didn't pay attention to me, they were busy whispering together. I got off and followed them when they made a change to a New York train. Dr. Smollett was on that train, and they watched him so closely that they didn't notice me. He shook them off his trail and came to you, and I was right behind him. I heard everything the two of you said, at your hotel and later at—"

"You heard?" repeated Thunstone.

"There's a fire escape outside your window, Mr. Thunstone."

Thunstone relaxed his grip. "I heard a noise there, but I ignored it."

"Should you have ignored it?" inquired the gentle voice.

"I could afford to. The room where I live has—various devices." Thunstone decided not to enter into descriptions. "They would warn me of any danger or spying close at hand by supernatural enemies."

"Like the Shonokins," suggested Crash Collins.

"Exactly. What you tell me is enough to show that you're not in with them, at least. You may be honest about the rest of it, and you may not. But you're a normal human being, and no more than that."

"You make me sound run-of-the-mill," sighed Crash Collins. "I really want to help you. I haven't anything else to do in life. No family, no job of any importance—"

"My advice to you is to get out of here," Thunstone cut him off. "Head up the track and away from Araby. Now and then men find themselves idle and bored, and mix into adventures like this. They're a thousand times more in peril than the business man who fired ten shots at a mark and goes into the African wilds to hunt man-eating lions."

"Please," begged Crash Collins. "I'll do anything you say—"

"What I say is for you to get away from here," Thunstone interrupted again. "I

need all my eyes and thoughts for the Shonokins, without protecting you. If you're honest in wanting to help, I'm honest in telling you that you may be more trouble than good. Sorry, I can't be more polite than that. Leave me alone."

Crash Collins shrugged and turned away. Thunstone moved in the direction of the Shonokin town.

THERE was noise from the town, not loud or definite. Perhaps he would not have heard it so far off if he had not expected to hear it.

It was not singing, though instruments of some sort played, and voices sounded in rhythm. They chanted and kept time, without musical tones. Thunstone had heard performances like that, once or twice, in concerts peculiarly planned and sponsored, that claimed to forecast the music of the future. His musical education was as good as the next layman's, but he had always felt baffled, repelled and in some sort dismayed. Now he wondered if the concerts were given by persons who knew something about Shonokin pseudo-music.

He thrust his hands into one pair of pockets, then another, to check the things he had brought along. Two talismans in particular he made sure of—a round gold case smaller than a coin, in which was sealed something said to be the eye of a bat, pierced and embalmed. The other was a dark leather thumb stall, which he now produced and slid upon his huge right thumb. It had been made, the giver had told him, from the ear of a black cat that had been boiled in the milk of a black cow and otherwise treated. Both talismans were credited with the power to make their bearer invisible. Thunstone did not wholly accept this claim, at least he did not think it could be done without the recital of words and the making of gestures he did not care to try; but they could and would baffle counter-charms that might betray his whereabouts and motives to watchers in Araby.

The street he came to was as smooth and level as a dance floor, but not slippery. The Shonokins had strange materials and tools, for paving and other things. To one side grew a sort of hedge, of tall tufted reeds, and Thunstone hugged it, stealing quietly

along. He came to a point opposite one of the houses with reddish lights inside, and paused, but could see nothing through the clouded panes. He moved on toward another, then dropped to his knee. He parted his lips to relax pressure on his ear-drums, listening.

Movement. There was a rush of movement behind him. He swivelled around, still kneeling, and drove a hand under his coat for one of several weapons he had chosen as probably effective against such enemies. But they were not coming toward him. They swirled and struggled in a group yards away on his back track. He saw their pallid garments, their flourishing arms.

"Take that, you damned—"

There was a dull *chock* of a blow, and the voice stopped. But the four words were enough for Thunstone, and the voice. It was Crash Collins, who had brushed aside his warning and had followed. Knowing nothing of Shonokin methods, he had been detected and attacked.

Even now it was too late for Thunstone to charge to his rescue. Thunstone slipped silently through the hedge, and peered between stems. They came along the street, padding quietly like two-legged leopards, five or six of them. In their midst they hustled the staggering, half-stunned figure of Crash Collins. Moving past Thunstone, they walked toward the thicker jumble of houses just beyond. Voices called to them, in the language that Dr. Smollett had been unable to identify, and that Thunstone could identify but not understand.

They had captured the young man, kept him alive. Why?

HE CAME from his hiding and moved quietly in the wake of the group, keeping their pale garments barely in sight. He himself was dressed in dark clothes, could hardly be seen, even by the feline eyes of the Shonokins. Up ahead he heard voices, questioning and answering, as though some sort of a guard challenged the group. Then more Shonokins were joining. They chattered together, all at once and briefly. Falling silent, they turned at a corner and he hurried after them in time to see them toiling up-hill.

He followed again, thankful that this path or trail led away from the houses. The Shonokins, up ahead, were marching their prisoner toward the top of the slope. The way was longish and more than a little steep, so that Thunstone found himself on all fours more than once. But the creatures he followed were sure and quick in the dark and on the slope, and he had to exert himself to keep them in sight.

So hard did he work to climb that he did not watch well enough. A pale-clad figure appeared almost immediately above him, its foot within touch of his hand. It spoke to him, a question in the Shonokin language.

Thunstone, crouching to climb, shot out his hand and grasped an ankle that writhed as if boneless in his grip. The Shonokin might have opened its mouth to cry, but he was too quick and grim. A mighty heave upward, and its feet came out from under it and its head struck dully on the hard paving of the trail. A moment later Thunstone's weight was upon it, and his hands were at its neck. He felt the cords of that neck crawl and writhe under his fingers, like a handful of captive snakes, and hands flashed upward to flesh sharp nails in his cheeks. He did not flinch nor move his head, except to writhe it clear of a groping of those ill-assorted fingers toward his eyes. Into his own hands and forearms he poured his muscular strength, deliberately and knowledgably. He felt his thumbs sink into the relaxing flesh, as into putty, and the struggles beneath him weakened. The claws slipped down from his face and dabbled ineffectually at his wrists, scraping the skin but not fastening. The Shonokin went slack under him, but it might be a trick. Thunstone clung to his throttle-hold while he counted under his breath, very slowly, up to forty.

Then he let go and rose upward and backward, fumbling for a handkerchief to mop his bleeding face. He listened and peered. The Shonokin made no move and no sound, did not even breathe. He knelt again and fumbled for where its heart might be, then for its pulse. There was no hint of life.

John Thunstone, who had never rejoiced to kill or injure any of the men he had been forced to fight, smiled to himself in

the dark. It was a hard smile, that would have frightened many excellent men and women who thought of John Thunstone as an oversized but gentle scholar. He dragged the body a little down-hill and stretched it full across the trail. No Shonokin would follow him up past the dead carcass of one of its own race. And plainly this one had lingered as a sentry, he could advance without too great fear of rearward watchers above.

He continued his upward climb.

THERE was light above, pallid rather than the sort of strange red glow that had showed at the windows in the town. Thunstone left the trail to move cautiously in bush-clumps. He came close, as close as he dared, and pulled aside some leafy twigs for a look at what might be on the brow of the slope.

The glow showed him a building, at first glance like a castle, at second like those battlemented structures which set off the dam of a reservoir. It was square, with a tower at each corner, and each tower topped with a pointed roof like a nightcap. There were no windows, only a single arched doorway closed with a massive portal that seemed to have neither lock nor latch. From inside, as through an open space where the main roof should be, rose the pallid light, enough to show him everything. Over the building fluttered dark winged creatures—big bats, judged Thunstone.

Close to him, and all facing toward the door of the castle-like structure, were grouped the Shonokins. Among their pale-clad figures, lithe and triumphant, stood the darker, taller figure of Crash Collins. He was bound around the arms with something like a strip of pale, flexible metal.

One of the gathering, gray and consequential, spoke in a deep and authoritative voice.

One of the Shonokins near Collins addressed him:

"He asks your name."

"Kent Collins," was the steady reply. "This is war, I guess, and I'm your prisoner. Conventions of war allow you to ask my name, and say that I can answer."

"And what are you doing here?"

Collins laughed a single syllable. "Con-

ventions of war don't oblige me to answer that. Keep it fair, Shonokin."

The interpreter spoke to his companions in their own language, and they chorused a soft, snarling noise that might have been laughter. The gray Shonokin spoke again, and the interpreter addressed Collins as before:

"He wonders if you are satisfied with what has happened to you."

"Nothing's happened to me yet that I can't stand," replied Collins. "I'm wondering at a lot of things, but I'm not hurt or scared yet."

The boy was a magnificent liar, Thunstone told himself. If Crash Collins was not frightened, then he was a bigger fool than Thunstone took him for. The interpreter translated into Shonokin, listened to yet another query from the gray chief, and turned back to Collins with a new question.

"He asks if you have any prayers to offer to the god you worship."

"Not here and now," replied Collins at once. "I've always thought I should pray more; but since I haven't, it's a poor time to begin when I'm in trouble. Nobody who listens to prayers is going to respect me if I do. And any help I deserve will come my way, pray or not."

"A sophistication," said the interpreter. "You may become less glib as time goes on, Collins. But if you decline to pray in your manner, you will let us pray in ours."

"If I don't have to enter into it."

"But you do have to enter into it, Collins. We'll show you how and when. But watch. It will be the last experience of your life."

DESPITE his own danger, and his apprehension for the youngster who had blundered into the hands of the creatures, Thunstone was fascinated. Worship—the Shonokin had said they would pray to their deity. Thunstone turned over in his mind the suggestion, made to him once by a professor of psychology, that religion was an instinct as deep as any, and not confined to humanity. The vanished race of the Stone Age, the Neanderthal folk that—like the Shonokins—stood erect, used fire and tools and language, but were—like the Shonokins—another breed than man, had

worshipped. Scholars knew that, for they found the ill-shapen bones of Neanderthals in graves, and beside them their weapons and possessions, laid there for use in an after-life. Someone not a psychologist had offered the fancy that the god of the Neanderthals was the being men knew at Satan. . . . However that might be, dogs worship their masters as gods, wild things fear men as devils. Did not the ancient writers about animals credit them with devotion—in the Arabian Nights the beasts swore by Allah, and there were the old stories from Africa about ape-peoples who served at abominable altars. Thunstone himself had visited the cave in Southern France that was maintained as a chapel, because inside it an ox had been found on his four knees before a natural marking in the shape of a cross.

The Shonokins, who are not human, were going to pray.

Collins, bound as he was, did not move or speak until two of his captors led him to a rock and shoved him down to sit upon it. Then he spoke, and in deadly insult. One of the group laughed back, unpleasantly and felinely. Around the gray chief several Shonokins were grouped, helping him into a costume. It included a scarf and what appeared to be an ancient, shabby opera hat. In his hand the chief took a staff, that was adorned at the end with a carven skull from the pate of which sprouted sparse hair, like faded grass. His costuming done, the creature looked like a coarse caricature drawn by a bitter radical artist of a penny-pinching man of wealth—Scrooge, or David Balfour's miserly uncle, or the rich squire who forecloses the mortgage in an old-fashioned melodrama.

Another Shonokin had pulled on a dark robe with a hood, like that of a monk. A third was strapping a belt with an old sword around his waist, and setting on his head a visored cap. And yet another put on something like a mortar-board.

The interpreter lounged by the rock where Collins sat. "Do you feel better?" he asked gently. "More at home, now that you see your friends, the powers that men best admire and trust?"

"I see no friends," replied Collins stoutly, "and none of you see a friend in me."

"Let me introduce you." The interpreter made a truly graceful gesture toward the chief in the top hat. "Here is the man of riches and position in your society, probably the most envied person of your race. Here," and he waved toward the one in the robe, "is your man of religion, your priest. In the sword-belt you see the soldier, your man of might, on whom you depend when force—the final argument—must settle differences. And in the flat hat comes the professor, your man of education."

"They look like a hard times party," sniffed Collins.

HE WAS right. Thunstone knew it, and the interpreter knew it, too, for he emitted a Shonokin laugh.

"I say they are your friends, Collins. You are bound and helpless, and we, the Shonokins, will raise upon you those whom we worship. But these, your own people, the best of your own people, will stand by you to protect you. Can they avail you against our deities? Money, pride, religion, the soldier's sword, the professor's wisdom?"

"Just set my hands free—" began Collins.

"Oh, that stupidity!" cut in the interpreter. "You could not even win free from us, simple Shonokins. How can you oppose the deities? No human being can."

"I can think of one," Collins told him.

"And I can read your mind. Is his name—Thunstone?"

Collins was silent.

"I can read your mind," repeated the interpreter. "We know Thunstone. We have competed with him before this. I will say that you have something of a point—his part of the competition has not been wholly unsuccessful. But he is not here. Nobody is here. Your hopes are—what is your expression?—wishful thinking."

"Maybe," said Collins, and shut his mouth tight.

The interpreter was turning to speak to the other Shonokins. Their language was utterly incomprehensible, full of amazingly complex accentings, perhaps too much for a mouth shaped as a human being's mouth is shaped. Undoubtedly it had its complexity of syntax, too. But here and there was a syllable or an inflection that struck

Thunstone as familiar. He wished that Lovecraft were alive to see and hear—Lovecraft knew so much about the legend of Other-People, from before human times, and how their behaviors and speech had trickled a little into the ken of the civilization known to the wakeaday world. De Grandin, too—a Frenchman, a scientist, and with the double practicality of his race and education. De Grandin would be interested to hear of all this later. Thunstone had no doubt that he would survive to tell de Grandin about it, over a bottle of wine at Huntington, New Jersey.

The Shonokins who were in costume moved away from the others, who squatted expectantly to watch. The priest-mocker lifted a hand and made a sign in the air, not the sign of the cross, but nearly. The other three, the travesties of soldier, scholar and squire dropped to their knees. The priest-Shonokin said something that made the watchers snicker. Plainly a travesty of human religious rites. . . .

Thunstone could have groaned in contempt. He kept silent, but he smiled and his lips made the motion of spitting.

As little of originality and wit as this! The Shonokins had taught it to ancient devil-worshippers, or the ancient devil-worshippers had taught it to the Shonokins. No way of telling, and no particular value in being able to tell. The important thing was that what they called worship was only a reversal, a burlesque, a stupid fatuous rebellion. He had known addled old women who recited the Lord's Prayer backward, a conceited and stuffy pseudo-poet who had hashed together garblings of many ceremonies and called them a new cult of wisdom. These Shonokins were doing the same thing, and not doing it very well. Thunstone debated for a moment the policy of walking right in among them, knocking them down with his boulder-like fists, conquering them at the very door of their strange light-giving temple. Then he stayed right where he was.

WHILE the mock-ceremony went on with the four costumed ones, another Shonokin walked slowly and stiffly toward the four-towered building. His arms were lifted, his fingers trembled and twitched.

As he came close, he raised his voice, not in speech or in song, but in a cry. It was musical, prolonged and steady, like a blast from a bugle.

The bat-things in the upwash of light fluttered, swirled, and sailed away as if carried by a blast of wind. Something darker than the material of the walls rose into sight, midway between the towers.

It was a head, with horns upon it. A moment more, and it was joined by another horned head.

"You see?" the interpreter prompted Collins. "Other human beings have seen, too, but have not gone away to describe the sight. They come for you, that pair, but why should you be afraid? The greatest powers of the human race stand between you and them."

And indeed the five burlesque-makers had ceased their travesty on religious service, and were drifting toward Collins. They formed around him in a purposeful-seeming group, facing toward the building. Their bodies seemed tense and hostile inside their ridiculous costumes. They looked now like a bodyguard, hastily gathered but determined, for the prisoner.

Now Thunstone took a quarter of a second for self-congratulation. He had felt the impulse to show himself and give battle, and had he done so it would have been poorly timed. As things were turning out, he had three points, well separated, to watch—the group around Collins, the larger group of Shonokin spectators, and the building, from which the horned heads were emerging.

Each of the horned heads was set upon shoulders, bony and high, like the shoulders of an Egyptian statue. Bodies came into view, a long leg apiece came over the top of the wall, and the beings slithered and swung to the ground outside. They were tall and dusky, at the same time faintly glossy, like reptiles. They moved erect toward the two groups. It seemed to Thunstone that they were slightly transparent, like painted figures on glass.

The Shonokin whose bugle-like call had summoned the pair of things gave another cry, wilder and shriller, and threw himself on his face. So did the other Shonokins who watched. But those by Collins—the

five in costume and the interpreter—drew themselves more tense. One of them made a noise like a menacing growl.

"Don't you think they'll protect you, Collins?" murmured the interpreter. "No, don't get up from that rock. You'll only attract attention to yourself the more quickly."

"You ought at least to tell me what it's all about," came the voice of Collins, and his teeth were set to keep the words steady. "You may not worry about rights and wrongs, but I do. I have all my rights and wrongs to mind. I've earned an explanation."

"You shall have it," the interpreter agreed smoothly. "Not that we recognize any claims of yours, Collins, but your knowing the truth is part of—of what happens here. In the simplest terms, let me say that we Shonokins and you men are enemies. You are usurpers, thieves, impostors on the throne of the world's rule. You've ruled badly, let it be said in passing. We are the rightful heirs, the true owners. We don't want you in our way. To be specific, we don't want you."

THUNSTONE listened, but his eyes were on the horned things that moved slowly out from the building. Their feet did not stir, they seemed to float . . . their feet? They had no feet. Thunstone remembered the tales of the Jumbee, of Sasabonsam and Tulia Viega and other devils of many lands. These beings stopped at the ankles. They floated nearer and nearer, just above the ground.

"Something—happened to one of us, down in the town," the interpreter was telling Collins. "One of your people struck one of ours. He fell. He did not move. We don't like that, Collins. We do things about it, or we aren't worthy in our lives. That is why we are exchanging you for our lost brother. Not a fair exchange, but it may satisfy Those."

Thunstone could sense the capital letter. As the interpreter said "Those," he gestured gracefully toward the approaching horned things.

It made sense to Thunstone. Shonokins feared their own dead, and for reasons he wished he understood fully. This ceremony

was a sacrifice of some sort. But the interpreter had also said that the costumed Shonokins would protect Collins, in their roles of human leaders. Mockery was there, but mockery of what?

"Here Those come," said the interpreter.

The horned beings had floated as near as the main group of Shonokins, every one of which lay flat and limp, as though unconscious. They were close enough for Thunstone to see in detail. One wore a loose robe or gown, the other was naked and scaly. They had enormous ears, their eyes were deepset and glowing under heavy ridges, they seemed to have bestial teeth. Through them Thunstone could see the ground and the horizon beyond.

They skimmed, at ankle height, over the prone worshippers, just clearing them. There was a flash of light in the sky, as though a bolt of lightning had fallen, but no thunder.

"Now!" cried the interpreter, stooping almost to Collins's ear. "Trust in your friends to save you from Those!"

For the beings were swooping toward the group around the prisoner.

The four costumed Shonokins, who had poised themselves tensely motionless for so long, now closed in around Collins. To the fore was the gray chief in his ridiculous top hat. He lifted the skull-nobbed staff. The others set themselves as for battle. Their hands lifted menacingly, crooked claw fashion. The interpreter walked swiftly backward, his eyes on the scene. He backed toward the spot where Thunstone hid. He made a chuckling sound in his throat, though it may not have been laughter.

"I wish you joy of what is going to happen to you," he called to Collins.

Thunstone moved quickly into the open and got his hands on the interpreter.

He acted more decisively and violently than in his struggle with the sentry on the slope trail. One hand closed on the slim neck, the other caught at a band that held the garments at the waist. With a quick and complete gathering of his strength, Thunstone swung the Shonokin from the ground, then muscled him at arm's length overhead, as an athlete at an exhibition lifts a bar bell. Up came one of Thunstone's knees, and down came the Shonokin, spine

downward, upon and across it. The spine broke like a dry stick. Still clutching and carrying the limp body, Thunstone ran forward.

The four Shonokins had faced the horned ones as they approached, and at the last moment they, too, had fallen face downward, cowering and scrabbling. That was the crown of the ceremony, the finale of the mockery. A human prisoner, around whom representatives of human strength had gathered, and then a falling away to denote the powerlessness of man's devices—somebody could and should write a definitive essay on Shonokin humor as manifested in Shonokin malice.

But before the horned pair could move in over the prone figures, Thunstone had tramped to the rock and braced himself before it. He held out his victim, second of the night, at the full length of his strong arms.

"I give you this," he said.

THEY screamed. Everything screamed the air full of noise. The shrill high chorused note drove into the ears like a needle, shook the flesh like a current of electricity. Any man but Thunstone, perhaps, would have dropped what he held. Undoubtedly that is what the scream was for. Since Thunstone did not drop the corpse of the Shonokin, he will never know exactly.

The noise died. The two horned ones were floating back, as curtains sag when the wind dies. Around Thunstone the Shonokins in their costumes were scrambling erect, and moving away. Their fear of a dead Shonokin was greater than their fear of Those they worshipped.

"You don't want it?" Thunstone inquired. "But you'll take it."

He raised the limp form shoulder high, and threw it sprawling through the air toward the horned ones. At the same time he ran toward them. One put out a talon-hand, and it touched Thunstone's sleeve. He felt his flesh burn as if from a blow with a red hot iron, and part of his coat blazed up and fell away. But the thing was only trying to ward him off, not grasp him. The two retreated. And the Shonokins, for saken and in terror, were running.

They yelled and jabbered as they ran, all in a scrambling turmoil for the trail and down the slope. Thunstone gazed after them, and tore away his burnt sleeve. The shirt beneath it bore a jagged black print, like a brand in the shape of a claw-fringed hand. He had time at last to speak to Collins.

"Are you all right?"

Collins did not answer. Thunstone took a step nearer, bent and tugged at the metal band. Its fastening gave way as he pulled, and Collins, free, stood up.

"Would you believe it, sir," he said, "I knew all the time you'd be here."

"You'll forgive me for finding that a little hard to believe," replied Thunstone, his eyes still fixed on the two horned shapes. They had drifted a little backward toward their castle-lair. Between them and himself lay the corpse of the Shonokin interpreter, its head lolling and its back interestingly broken. Apparently they were as furtive of it as were the Shonokins themselves.

"Without knowing you were there, and that you'd come at the right time," went on Collins, "how do you think I could stand to—"

"Thanks for trusting me," said Thunstone. He put away the thought that he himself had not known the right time to show himself, and that more through chance than otherwise he had seized upon the right time at last. "Stay close behind me when I—wait, listen!"

THERE were wails and jabberings down the trail. The fleeing Shonokins had come to the point where Thunstone had slain and left his first victim of the evening. The sight and sense of their dead companion drove the living Shonokins into an ecstasy of unreasoning terror. In terror, too, were the horned things they said their prayers to, in frank terror of a Shonokin corpse.

"I get the angle," said Crash Collins suddenly, as though he had been reading Thunstone's mind.

"Angle?" repeated Thunstone dully. Again he stooped, took hold of the dead interpreter, and lifted the limp body. Carrying it, he moved cautiously toward the

horned pair, saw them retreat before him. They wanted none of that corpse's nearness.

"It's like this," went on Collins rapidly. "Simple when you realize it. The Shonokins hate their own dead—well, so do we, though maybe we don't go quite as crazy from fear and disgust. But their—their gods, if they are gods. Those." Collins faced toward the two figures that dangled clear of the ground. They can't stand dead Shonokins, either. Don't you see why?"

"I see why," nodded Thunstone, and he did.

There must be only so many Shonokins alive. Men knew things about them—not many things, but some things. It was said that a Shonokin could die only by accident or violence. There were no females. No young. At least no human being had ever seen or heard of female Shonokins or young Shonokins. The Shonokins who wanted to possess the world again could not bring into that world any new Shonokins.

That must be why they dreaded death among them. When a Shonokin died, he was gone. Nothing was born to take his place. The cowering of Those made it possible, even plain. Because gods or devils or spirits can exist only if they are served and believed in. If Shonokins were to be killed, Those would be worshipped less. If all the Shonokins died, what would become of Those?

Thunstone approached again. The horned shapes were fleeing to their lair, climbing its wall like monkeys, dropping out of sight into its coldly flaming interior.

Thunstone walked almost up to the wall. There was silence beyond it.

"Throw the body in after them," suggested Collins, at his elbow.

It was hard to do, but they managed it. Thunstone seized an arm and a leg. Collins took similar holds on the other side. They swung the sagging form backward and forward, backward and forward, while Thunstone counted to get them into rhythm. "Three," he said, and they heaved it with all the strength in both their bodies.

The dead thing soared upward, seemed to catch at the very top of the wall, then slid inside.

A howl went up and, it seemed to Thun-

stone, a paler, stronger blaze of light. A moment later the door swung outward, and Thunstone had just time and wit to catch Collins by the shoulder and hustle him bodily back and up, upon higher ground to one side.

Liquid gushed out of the door. It was gleaming liquid, with something of the deadish light that shines in and upon the sea, in certain tropical latitudes where myriads of tiny phosphorescent animals fill the waves with the seeming of cold fire. It made a torrent on the slope, and downward. Again Thunstone heard the Shonokins yell from below. They had something practical to fear now, for that flood was following the trail they had taken, like the bed of a stream. They yelled, and then their yells blurred and bubbled, as if overteemed with the flow.

"What kind of stuff is that?" demanded Collins. He sniffed in the night. "I don't exactly smell it, but my nose feels it, somehow."

"Let's get away from here."

The two of them retreated along the slope. They came to a high rock. Climbing to its top, they were able to see. A moon was coming up at last, and the valley where the Shonokin town had been built also sent up light, the light of the strange liquid, like a reflection of the moon glow.

"What's become of Those?" asked Collins.

"Perhaps nothing," replied Thunstone. "We won't know for a while. We won't ever know, unless we come back, very carefully and very intelligently, to find out. What I think is that they have been partially defeated and badly frightened. They wanted certain things tonight—yourself, for one. They didn't get you. Instead, they got the cold meat of one of their followers. It caused an explosion and overflowing of—"

"Probably," put in Collins, "they've had that stuff pent up here for a threat to the town below."

"Probably," agreed Thunstone. "It got out of hand, and it must have killed more Shonokins. Fewer worshippers by far than this time last night. It can't be pleasing to Those."

"Licked on their home grounds, huh?" said Collins, and his voice was savagely triumphant. "Let's strike out across the heights here. We don't know the country, but by morning we ought to reach some sort of a settlement—" He broke off and permitted himself a shudder, such a shudder as he had scorned to allow himself when Shonokins were all around him, exultant and sure of his doom. "A human settlement," he amplified.

"All right, let's start," Thunstone told him. "There's moon enough for us to see the country and remember it. For we'll want to know a way back, when we return to Araby."

THEY came back a week later, Thunstone and Crash Collins and three other men, carefully selected by Thunstone. The day they chose was a fortunate day, they had been assured. They came prepared in a variety of ways, for any sort of trouble they could imagine waiting.

There was no trouble. There was nothing. The town of Araby had been on that slope, and was there no more, nor even a trace to show where it had been. Not a house, nor a hole to show the basement-position of a house, nor one of the pavements that had been strange underfoot in the night, nor even the station house by the railroad track.

"Licked on their home grounds." Thunstone remembered that Collins had so described what had happened to the Shonokins.

Naturally the spot would be distasteful, unendurable. They were gone.

He tried to find the place where the castle had crowned the slope. He could not even be sure of where it had stood. Had he been sure he might have found there, at least, a trace of the Shonokins and of Those they prayed to.

"I know I wasn't dreaming," said Crash Collins at length. "But maybe these gentlemen think both of us were dreaming."

The three others shook their heads, and the oldest said courteously that he knew Thunstone would never have brought them so far just for the sake of an idle dream.



Shoo, Shoo, Shonokins!

HERE is what Manly Wade Wellman has to say about the Shonokins in general and the infamous Shonokins of "Shonokin Town" in particular. These not quite human beings pose a problem even to the resourceful Thunstone and we suspect that he was not too reluctant to have the reinforcing influence of Crash Collins—as explained below—in this latest adventure.

That I couldn't have made up the Shonokins wholemeal from my imagination is proven, I think, from the letters I get now and again telling me things about them—readers of Thunstone's adventures say enthusiastically that they've heard about Shonokins for years and are glad to see that something is being done about them.

It is idle to locate the town of Araby more definitely than in the accompanying account, for Araby does not exist any longer, and has left practically no trace of its being. Yet there is a John Thunstone, as scores of people will tell you, and there most definitely is a Kent (Crash) Collins. If anybody doubts the existence of Crash, he may be found at the naval air station at Norfolk, Virginia, complete even to the tattooed "Crash" on his arm. In my files are letters from him, including his written permission to tell this story about him. Who knows? He may bob up again.

He and Thunstone both are puzzled about the seeming non-existence of female Shonokins. Yet it may be suggested that the mere absence of record of this much-needed gender in that race does not make them

necessarily non-existent. Perhaps the male Shonokins keep their mates undercover. Has anybody a clue or a theory? Thunstone would like to hear of it.

Manly Wade Wellman