

The Dead Man's Hand

Manly Wade Wellman

Now open lock To the Dead Man's knock!
Fly bar and bolt and band!
Nor move nor swerve Joint, muscle or nerve
To the spell of the Dead Man's Hand!
Sleep, all who sleep! Wake, all who wake!
But be as the Dead for the Dead Man's sake!

—*Thomas Ingoldsby*, "The Hand of Glory."

The men in front of the store were all laughing in the sunset, but not one of them sounded cheerful. "Y'hear this, Sam?" someone asked a latecomer. "Stranger askin' the way to Old Monroe's. Must be the one who bought the place."

More laughter, in which the latecomer joined. Berna's father turned grim and dangerous enough to counterbalance all their mockery. He was hard and gaunt in his seersucker suit, with a long nose, a long chin, and a foxtrap mouth between them.

"I know the joke," he said, leaning over his steering wheel. "You think the place is haunted."

"No," cackled a dried little gaffer on an upturned nail-keg. "Haunted ain't the word. Curst, more like it. Me, I ain't got many more nights to live, and I wouldn't spend none of 'em at Old Monroe's."

"I know all about that silly story," announced Berna's father.

"All?" teased someone else. "Silly story?"

"And I'm thankful it's so well believed. That's how I was able to buy the farm so cheap."

"I wonder," mumbled the little old man, "if you bought it from who owns it rightful. 'Fter all, way I heard it, Old Monroe's deal was only for his lifetime—long enough in all conscience." He spat at a crack in the boardwalk. "When it comes to that, whoever bargained for Old Monroe's soul made a fool trade, for Old Monroe's soul was a sure shot anyway to go to—"

"If you're all through laughing," interrupted Berna's father savagely, "maybe someone will remember enough manners to direct us."

"Please, gentlemen," added Berna timidly from beside her father. She was slender where he was gaunt, appealing where he was grim. Her dark wide eyes sought a loiterer, who removed his palmleaf hat.

"If you're set on it," said this one, "you follow the street out, along the pavement. Miss the turn into Hanksville, then go left on a sand road. Watch for a little stone bridge over a run, with a big bunch of willows. Across the run, beyond them willows, is a private road. All grown up, and not even rabbit hunters go there. Well, at the other end is your new house, and I wish you luck." He fiddled with the hat. "You'll need it."

"Thank you kindly," said Berna's father. "My name's Ward Conley. I'll be your neighbor at the Old Monroe farm. And if you think you'll play any ghost jokes around there at night, remember I'm moving in with a shotgun, which I can use tolerably well."

He started the car. Berna heard the men start talking again, not laughing now.

"I didn't think," she ventured as they drove out of the little town in the last red sunglow, "that the story we heard was taken so seriously." She looked at her father. "I didn't even pay attention when the farm broker mentioned it. Tell me all of it."

"Nervous, Berna?" demanded Ward Conley.

"No. Just curious."

"It's the sort of yarn that's pinned on some house in every district where history's old enough, and ghost-believing gawks are plentiful enough. What I heard was that the farmer owner, the one they called Old Monroe, came here eighty years ago and took a piece of land that seemed worthless. By working and planning he made it pay richly. He never got married, never mixed with his neighbors, never spent much of what he took in, and he lived to be more than a hundred. Knowing so little about him, the corn-crackers hereabouts made up their own story. That Old Monroe made a sort of bargain with—well—"

"With the devil?"

"Maybe. Or anyway some old Indian spirit of evil. They said the bargain included a magic-built house, the richest of crops, and more money than anyone for miles around. Old Monroe got the last named, anyway. When he died, he died raving. Most hermits and misers are crazy. Since then nobody goes near the place. A second cousin up in Richmond inherited, and sold to us for a song."

"A bargain with devils," mused Berna. "It sounds like Hawthorne."

"It sounds like foolishness," snapped Conley. "Any devils come bargaining around, I'm enough of a businessman to give them the short end of the deal."

In a city to the north, big John Thunstone listened earnestly as he leaned across a desk.

"You don't mean to tell me, Mr. Thunstone," said the professor opposite, "that you're really serious about the Shonokin myths?"

"I discount nothing until I know enough to judge," replied Thunstone. "The hint I picked up today is shadowy. And you're the only man who has made an intelligent

study of the subject."

"Only the better to finish my American folkways encyclopedia," deprecated the other. "Well the Shonokins are supposed to be a race of magicians that peopled America before the Red Indians migrated from—wherever they migrated from. One or two commentators insist that Shonokin wizardry and enmity is the basis for most of the Indian stories of supernatural evils, everything from the Wendigo to those nasty little tales about singing snakes and the Pukwitchee dwarfs. All mention we get of Shonokins today—and it's mighty slim—we get third or fourth hand. From old Indians to recent ones, through them by way of first settlers to musty students like me. There's an amusing suggestion that Shonokins, or their descendants, actually exist today here and there. Notably in the neighborhood of—"

"I wonder," broke in John Thunstone, rather mannerlessly for him, "if that isn't the neighborhood I'm so curious about."

In the dusk the Conley car passed the Hanksville turn, gained the sand road and crossed the stone bridge. Beyond the willows showed a dense-grown hedge of thorny trees, with a gap closed by a single hewn timber on forked stakes. The timber bore a signboard, and by the glow of the headlights Berna could read the word "PRIVATE." Conley got out, unshipped the barrier, then returned to drive them along a brush-lined road with ruts full of rank, squelchy grass.

A first journey over a strange trail always seems longer than it is. Berna felt that ages had passed before her father stepped on the brake. "There's our home," he said.

At almost the same moment the moon rose, pale and sheeny as a disk of clean, fresh bone.

The pale light showed them a house, built squarely like old plantation manors, but smaller. It had once been painted gray, and still looked well kept and clean. No windows were broken, the pillars of the porch were still sturdy. Around it clung dark, plump masses of shrubbery and, farther back, tall flourishing trees. A flagged path led up to the broad steps. Berna knew she should be pleased. But she was not.

From the rear seat Conley dug their suitcases and rolls of bedding. Berna rummaged for the hamper that held their supper.

She followed her father up the flagstone way, wondering why the night seemed so cool for this season. Conley set down his burdens, then mounted the porch to try the door.

"Locked," he grumbled. "The broker said there was never a key." He turned and studied a window. "We'll have to break the glass."

"May I help?" inquired a gentle voice, and into view, perhaps from the massed bushes at the porch-side, strolled a man.

He did not stand in the full moonlight, and later Berna would wonder how she knew he was handsome. Slim white-clad elegance, face of a healthy pallor under a

wide hat, clear-cut features, deep eyes and brows both heavy and graceful—these impressions she received. Conley came down off the porch.

"I'm Ward Conley, the new owner of this farm," he introduced himself briskly. "This is my daughter, Berna."

The stranger bowed. "I am a Shonokin."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Shannon."

"Shonokin," corrected the man.

"People in town said that nobody dared come here," went on Conley.

"They lied. They usually lie." The man's deep eyes studied Berna; they may have admired. She did not know whether to feel confused or resentful. "Mr. Conley," continued the gentle voice, "you are having difficulty?"

"Yes. The door's jammed or locked."

"Let me help." The graceful figure stepped up on the porch, bending over something. A light glared. He seemed to be holding a little sheaf of home-dipped tapers, such as Berna had seen in very old-fashioned farmhouses. They looked knobby and skimpy, but their light was almost blinding. He held it close to the lock as he stooped. He did not seem to move, but after a moment he turned.

"Now your door is open," he told them. And so it was, swinging gently inward.

"Thanks, Mr. Shonokin," said Conley, more warmly than he had spoken all evening. "Won't you step inside with us?"

"Not now." Bowing again, the man swept his fingertips over the lights he held, snuffing them out. Descending the steps lithely, he walked along the stone flags. At the far end he paused and lifted his hat. Berna saw his hair, long, wavy and black as soot. He was gone.

"Seems like a nice fellow," grunted Conley. "How about some candles of our own, Berna?"

She gave him one from the hamper, and he lighted it and led her inside.

"I know that it's a considerable journey, and that the evidence is slim," John Thunstone was telephoning at Pennsylvania Station. "But I'll get the full story, on the exact spot. I'm sorry you and Dr. Trowbridge can't come. I'll report when I get back." He listened a moment, then chuckled in his trim mustache. "Haven't I always returned. Now, goodbye, or I'll miss my train."

Ward Conley lifted his wax candle overhead and grunted approvingly. "I was a little worried, Berna, about buying the place sight unseen, even at a figure that would make the worst land profitable." His eyes gleamed. "But this is worth coming home to, hah?"

The old furniture looked comfortable and in good shape. Berna wondered if the

rich carpet in the hall was not valuable. In the room beyond was a table of dark wood, with sturdy chairs around it, and farther on glass-doored closets with china and silver and the white of folded linen. Conley dragged down a hanging lamp.

"Oil in it, and the wick ready trimmed," he announced. With his candle he lighted the lamp and drew it up to the ceiling.

"Berna, someone's put this place in apple-pie order for us. Even swept and dusted. Might it have been Mr. Shonokin's family? Neighborly, I call it." His stern face was relaxing. They walked into a kitchen, well appointed but cool. There was firewood in the box. Berna set down her hamper. Then they mounted to the upper floor.

"The beds are made," Conley exulted. "This front room will be yours, Berna. I'll take the next one. Suppose we eat now, and poke around more tomorrow. I want to be up early, out at the barn and in the fields."

Returning to the kitchen, they brought out sandwiches and fruit and a jugful of coffee. "It's getting cold," pronounced Conley, peering into the jug. "Let's fire up the range and heat it."

Berna believed that the coffee was hot enough, but she was glad that her father had made an excuse for a fire. The kitchen was downright shuddery. Even while the kindling blazed up, she got a sweater from her suitcase and put it on. They ate in silence, for Conley disliked conversation while he was at the important business of eating. When Berna had brushed up the crumbs, he yawned.

"Bed now," he decreed, and again took up the candle. Walking through the front room, he drew down the lamp and blew it out. Berna kept close to his heels as they mounted the stairs. The little moving flame that Conley held up made a host of strange and stealthy shadows around them.

Alone in the room assigned her, Berna drew back the bedclothes. They were so chilly within as to seem damp, but she had brought up a blanket roll from the car. She made the bed afresh, and before creeping in she knelt down. Her prayer was the one taught her as a child, while her mother still lived:

*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,
Bless the bed I lie upon.
There are four corners to my bed,
There are four saints around my head—
One to watch and one to pray,
And two to bear my soul away.*

She remembered her flutter of dread at the last two lines. Though serious and thoughtful, Berna was young. She did not want her soul to be borne away yet. And

she felt a close silence about her, as of many lurking watchers.

Of a sudden, there popped into her mind a tag of another bedtime prayer, heard in the long ago from a plantation mammy. She repeated that, too:

*Keep me from hoodoo and witch,
And lead my path from the poor house gate...*

The tenseness seemed to evaporate around her. Berna got into bed, listened a while to the sighing of a breeze-shaken tree outside her window, and finally slept soundly until her father's fist on the door told her that it was dawn and time to be up.

They had fried eggs and bacon in the kitchen that remained cool despite the fire that had smouldered in the range all night.

Wiping his mouth at the end of the meal, Ward Conley tramped to the back door and tugged at the knob. It refused to budge, though he heaved and puffed.

"I wish that Shonokin man was back here to open this, too," he said at last. "Well, let's use the front door."

Out they went together. The early morning was bright and dry, and Berna saw flowers on the shrubs, blue, red and yellow, that were beyond her knowledge of garden botany. They walked around the side of the house and saw a quiet barnyard, with a great red barn and smaller sheds. Beyond these extended rich-seeming fields.

"Something's been planted there," said Conley, shading his eyes with his hand. "If anybody thinks he can use my fields— well, he'll lose the crop he put in. Berna, go back to the house and make a list of the things we need. I'll drive into town later, either Hanksville or that little superstition-ridden rookery we passed through yesterday."

He strolled off, hands in pockets, toward the land beyond the barnyard. Berna again walked around the house and in through the front door. For the first time she was alone in her new home, and fancied that her footsteps echoed loudly, even on the rug in the hall. Back in the kitchen she washed the dishes—there was a sink, with running water from somewhere or other—then sat at the kitchen table to list needed articles as her father had directed.

There was a slight sound at the door, as if a bird had fluttered against it. Berna glanced up, wide-eyed.

That was all. She sat where she was, pencil in fingers, eyes starting and unwinking. She did not move. There was no feeling of stiffness or confinement or weight. Trying, in the back of her amazed and terrified mind, to diagnose, she decided it was like the familiar grammar-school experiment—you clasp your hands and say "I cannot, I cannot," until you find yourself unable to move your fingers from each other. Berna may have breathed, her heart may have beaten. She could not be sure, then or later.

The door, that had not budged for her father's struggles, was gently swaying open. In stepped Mr. Shonokin, smiling over the glow of his peculiar little sheaf of tapers. He snuffed them, slid the sheaf into his pocket. And Berna could move again.

Only her eyes moved at first, quartering him over. He wore the white suit, beautifully cut, and of a fabric Berna could not identify—if it were fabric and not some sort of skin, delicately thin and soft and perfectly bleached. His hands, which hung gracefully at his sides, were long and a little strange; perhaps the ring fingers were unnaturally long, longer than the middle fingers. One of them held his wide hat, and the uncovered locks of dead black hair fell in soft waves over Mr. Shonokin's broad brow. As Berna's eyes came to his, he smiled.

"I've been talking to your father," he said, "and now I want to talk to you."

She got to her feet, grateful for the restored power to do so. "Talk?" she echoed. "Talk of what?"

"This place of yours," he told her, laying his hat on the table. "You see, the title isn't exactly clear."

She shook her head at once. She knew her father better than that.

"It's completely clear, Mr. Shonokin. All in order, back to the original grant from the Indians."

"Ah," said Shonokin, still gently. "But where did the Indians get their title? Where? I'll tell you. From us, the Shonokins."

Berna was still trembling, from that strange moment of tranced inaction. She had been hypnotized, she told herself, like Trilby in the book. It must not happen again. She would face this stranger with resolution and defiance.

"You don't mean to claim," she replied, with an attempt at loftiness, "that your family was in this part of the country before the Indians."

"We were everywhere before the Indians," he assured her, and smiled. His teeth were white, perfect, and ever so slightly pointed, even the front teeth that should be square-edged like chisels.

"Then you're Indian yourself," she suggested, but he shook his head.

"Shonokins are not Indians. They are not—" He paused, as if choosing his words. "We are not like any race you know. We are old, even when we are young. We took this country from creatures too terrible for you to imagine, even though they are dead and leave only their fossil bones. We ruled well, in ways you can't understand." That sounded both sad and superior. "For reasons that you can't understand, either, we were once tired of ruling. That is when we allowed the Indians to come, retaining only limited domains. This is one of them."

"This farm?" prompted Berna. She still held the pencil, so tightly that her fingers were bruising against it.

"This farm," said her visitor. "The Indians never had any right to it. It is ground sacred to the Shonokins, where their wisdom and rule will continue forever. And so

any deed dating back to Indians is not lawful. I told your father that, and it's the truth, however stupid and furious he may be."

"Suppose," said Berna, "that you say to my father that you think he's stupid. Tell him to his face. I'd like to see what he does to you then."

"I did tell him," replied the man they knew as Mr. Shonokin. "And he did nothing. He was frozen into silence, as you were just now, when I held up—" His strange-shaped hand moved toward his side pocket, where he had put that strange sheaf of tapers.

"Suppose," went on Berna, "that you get out of this house and off this property."

It was bold, fierce talk for a quiet girl like Berna, but she felt she was managing it splendidly. She took a step toward him. "Yes, right now."

His pointed teeth smiled at her again. He backed smoothly toward the open door and paused on the sill. "You're hasty," he protested gently. "We want only to be fair. You may enjoy this place—enjoy it very much, as Old Monroe did—if you simply and courteously make the same agreement."

"Sell our souls?" Berna snapped, as she had never snapped at anyone before in all her life.

"The Shonokins," he said, "do not recognize the existence of any such thing as a soul."

He was gone, as abruptly as he had gone from the end of the path last night.

Berna sat down, her heart stuttering inside her. After a minute, her father came in. He, too, sat down. Berna wondered if she were as pale as he.

"That—that—that trick-playing, sneering skunk," he panted. "No man can try things like that on Ward Conley." He looked around. "Did he come in here? Is he still here? If he is, I'm going to get the shotgun."

"He's gone," Berna replied. "I made him go. But who is he? Did he tell you that preposterous story?"

As she spoke, she knew she had believed it all, about the Shonokins who had ruled before the Indians, who wanted to rule again, and who claimed this land, on which nobody could live except as their tenant and vassal.

"He put some sort of a trance or spell on me," said Conley, still breathing hard. "If he hadn't been able to do it, I'd have killed him—there's a hayfork out there in the barn. And he wanted me to believe I'd do some hokus-pokus for him, to be allowed to live here on my own land. Berna," said Conley suddenly, "I think he'll be sneaking back here again. And I'm going to be ready for him."

"Let me go to town when you go," she began, but Conley waved the words aside.

"You'll drive in alone and shop for whatever we need. Because I'll stay right here, waiting for Mr. Smart Aleck Shonokin." Rising, he walked into the front room, where much of the luggage was still stacked. He returned with his shotgun, fitting it together. It was a well-kept repeater. Ponderously he pumped a shell into the barrel.

"We'll see," promised Conley balefully, "how much lead he can carry away with him."

And so Berna drove the car to the village. At the general store in front of which loiterers had mocked the evening before, she bought flour, potatoes, meat, lard, tinned goods. Her father had stipulated nails and a few household tools, and on inspiration Berna bought two heavy new locks. When she returned, Conley approved this last purchase and installed the locks, one at the front door and one at the back.

"The windows can all be latched, too," he reported. "Let him jimmy his way inside now. I'll give a lot to have him try it." When he had finished his work, Conley picked up the shotgun again, cradling it across his knees. "Now we're all ready for a call from Mr. Shonokin."

But he was tense, nervous, jumpy. Berna cut herself peeling vegetables for supper, and dreaded the dropping of the sun toward the western horizon.

At Hanksville, several townsfolk had ambled out to see the afternoon train arrive. They stared amiably at the one disembarking passenger, a broad giant of a man with a small mustache, who addressed them in a voice that sounded purposeful and authoritative.

"Old Monroe's," they echoed his first question. "Lookee, mister, nobody ever goes there."

"Well, I'm going there at once. A matter of life and death. Will anybody let me rent his automobile?"

Nobody answered that at all.

"How do you get there?" he demanded next, and someone told about the crossing, the sanded road, the stone bridge, the clump of willows, the side trail.

"And how far?"

Ten miles, opined one. A companion thought it might be nearer twelve.

John Thunstone looked up at the sinking sun. "Then I have no time to waste," he said, "for I'll have to walk it."

He strode off through Hanksville. Those who had spoken with him now watched him go. Then they turned to each other, shook their heads, and made clicking sounds with their tongues.

It was not easy for Conley to explain to Berna all that had passed between him and Shonokin. In the first place, Conley had been both furious and alarmed, and was still so. In the second, there was much he could not understand.

It seemed that the visitor had bobbed up at Conley's elbow, with that talent he had for appearing and disappearing so quickly. He had courteously admired the growing

fields of corn and beans, and when Conley had repeated his complaint that someone was making free with the ground, had assured Conley that these things had been planted and were growing for the Conleys alone. He, Shonokin, took credit for the putting in and advancement of what looked like a prize crop.

"And then," Conley told Berna, "he took up the question of payment. I said, of course, that I'd be glad to give him something for his trouble. Whatever was fair, I said. And he came out with an idea you'd never believe—not even though I swear to every word he said."

Shonokin wanted the Conleys to live comfortably, pleasantly, even richly. He was willing to give assurance that there would never be anything to limit or endanger their material prosperity. But, here and now, Conley must admit by signed paper his indebtedness and dependency.

"Dependency!" Conley fairly exploded, describing the scene to his daughter. "Dependency—on that young buck I never even saw before last night! I just stood there, wondering which word to say first, and he went on with the idea that he and his bunch—whoever the Shonokins might be—would make themselves responsible for the crops and the profits of this place, deciding what would be raised and see that it succeeded. Then I blew up."

He paused, and his face went a shade whiter. He looked old.

"I told you what came after that. I grabbed for the hayfork. But he held up his hand, that hand he carries that gives off light."

"The little candles?" prompted Berna.

"It's a hand, I tell you, a sort of skinny hand. It has lights on the fingers. I froze like a wooden Indian in front of a cigar store. And he grinned that ugly way he has, and told me that I now had time to think it over quietly; that I'd better be a good tenant, and that he and we could be a wonderful help to each other if we didn't lose any energy by quarreling. I couldn't move until he walked away out of sight."

Conley shuddered. "What," he demanded savagely, "is he driving at? Why does he want to run our affairs?"

That question, reflected Berna to herself, had been asked countless times in the world's history by people who could not understand tyranny. Tyrants alone could understand, for they lived tormented by the urge and appetite and insistence to dominate others.

"He won't come back," she said, trying to be confident and not succeeding.

"Yes, he will," replied Conley balefully, "and I'll be ready for him." He patted the shotgun in his lap. "Is supper about done?"

It was, but they had little appetite. Afterwards Berna washed the dishes. She thought she had never felt such cold water as gushed from the faucet. Conley went into the front room, and when Berna joined him he sat in a solid old rocking chair, still holding the shotgun.

"The furniture's nice," said Berna lamely.

"Reminds me of another thing that skunk said," rejoined Conley. "That his Shonokins had made all the furniture, as well as the house. That it—the furniture—was really theirs and would do what they said. What did he mean?"

Berna did not know, and did not reply.

"Those new locks weren't made by him," Conley went on. "They won't obey him. Let him try to get in."

When Conley repeated himself thus aimlessly, it meant that he was harassed and daunted. They sat in the gathering gloom that the hanging lamp could not dispel successfully. Berna wished for a radio. There was one in the car, and this was a night for good programs. But she would not have ventured into the open to meet the entire galaxy of her radio favorites in person. Later on perhaps they'd buy a cabinet radio for this room, she mused; if they lasted out the evening, and the next day and the days and nights to follow, if they could successfully avoid or defeat the slender dark man who menaced them.

Conley had unpacked their few books. One lay on the sideboard near Berna's chair, a huge showy volume of Shakespeare's works that a book agent had sold to Berna's mother years ago. Berna loved Shakespeare no more and no less than most girls of limited education and experience. But she remembered the words of a neighbor, spoken when the book was bought; Shakespeare could be used, like the Bible, for "casting sortes." It was an old-country custom, still followed here and there in rural America. You opened the book at random and hastily clapped your finger on a passage, which answered whatever troubled you. Hadn't the wife of Enoch Arden done something like that, or did she remember her high school English course rightly?

She lifted the volume into her lap. It fell open of itself. Without looking at the fine double-columned type, she put out her forefinger quickly. She had opened to *Macbeth*. At the head of the page was printed: "Act I, Scene 3." She stooped to read in the lamplight:

*Were such things here as we do speak about,
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That takes the reason prisoner?*

That was close enough to what fretted her and her father. Shakespeare, what she knew of him, was full of creepy things about prophecies, witches, phantoms and such. The "insane root"—what was that? It had a frightening sound to it. Anyway, Shonokin had momentarily imprisoned their minds with his dirty tricks of hypnotism. Again she swore to herself not to be caught another time. She had heard that a strong effort of will could resist such things. She took hold of the book to replace it on the sideboard.

She could not.

As before, her eyes could not blink, her muscles could not stir. She could only watch as, visible through the hallway beyond, the front door slowly moved open and showed the dead pale light that Shonokin could evoke.

He glided in, white-clad, elegantly slender, grinning. He held his light aloft, and Conley had been right. It was shaped like a hand. What had seemed to be a joined bunch of tapers were the five fingers, each sprouting a clear flame. Berna saw how shriveled and shrunken those fingers were, and how bones and tendons showed through the coarse skin of their backs. Shonokin set the thing carefully on a stand by the door to the hallway. It was flat at the wrist end, it stayed upright like the ugliest of little candlesticks.

Shonokin walked closer, gazing in hushed triumph from the paralyzed Conley to the paralyzed Berna.

"Now we can settle everything," he said in his gentle voice, and stuck a terrible little laugh on the end of the words. He paused just in front of Berna's fixed eyes. She could study that white suit now, could see the tiny pore-openings in the strange integument from which it was tailored. His slender hands, too, with their abnormally long ring fingers—they did not have human nails but talons, narrow and curved and trimmed most carefully to cruel points, as if for better rending.

"Mr. Conley is beyond any reasonable discussion," the creature was saying. "He is an aging man, harsh and boastful and narrow from his youth upwards. But Miss Berna—" His eyes slid around to her. Their pupils had a lean perpendicularity, like the pupils of a cat. "Miss Berna is young," he went on. "She is not reckless or greedy or violent. She will listen and obey, even if she does not fully understand, the wise advice of the Shonokins."

He rested his hands, fingers spread, on the heavy table. It seemed to stir at his touch, like a board on ripply water.

"She will obey the better," said their captor, "when she sees how simply we go about removing her father, with his foolish opposition. Conley," and the eyes shifted to the helpless man, "you were so mannerless today as to doubt many of the things I told you. Most of all you seemed to scorn the suggestion that this furniture can move at my bidding. But watch."

The slender hand was barely touching the table-top. Shonokin drew together his spread fingertips, the sharp horny talons scraping softly on the wood. Again the table creaked, quivered and moved.

Spiritualism, Berna insisted to herself. Mediums did that sort of illusion for customers at paid seances. Men like Dr. Dunninger and John Mulholland wrote articles in the newspapers, explaining the trickery. This Shonokin person must be a professional sleight-of-hand performer. He made as if to lift the hand. The table shifted again, actually rising with the gesture, as if it were of no weight and gummed to his fingers,

"You see that it does obey," the gentle voice pointed out. "It obeys, and now I

give you the full measure of proof, Conley. This table is going to kill you."

Shonokin stepped toward Conley's rocking chair, and the table stepped with him.

"It is heavy, Conley, though I make it seem light. Its wood is dark and ancient, and almost as solid and hard as metal. This table can kill you, and nobody can sensibly call the death murder. How could your law convict or punish an insensible piece of furniture, however weighty?"

Again he stepped toward Conley. Again the table kept pace. It was like some squat, obedient farm beast, urged along by its master's touch on its flank.

"You will be crushed, Conley. Berna, do you hear all this? Make careful note of it, and tell it to yourself often; for when things are all over, you will realize that you cannot tell it to others. Nobody will believe the real nature of your father's death. It cannot appear otherwise than a freak accident—a heavy table tipped over upon him, crushing him. What narrow-brained sheriff or town marshal would listen if you told the truth?"

Even if she had been able to speak, Berna could not have denied his logic.

"And after your father is dead, you will be recognized as mistress here. You will have learned to obey my people and me, recognize our leadership and guidance. This farm is both remote and rich. It will form our gathering point for what we wish to do in the world again. But first—"

Once more his hand shifted. The table began slowly to rear its end that was closest to where Conley sat.

It was long and massive, and it creaked ominously, like an ancient drawbridge going up. The thick legs that rose in air seemed to move, like the forefeet of a rearing, pawing horse. Or was that a flicker of pale light from the candle-hand yonder?

"Nearer," said Shonokin, and the table pranced forward, its upper legs quivering. They would fall in a moment like two pile-drivers. "Nearer. Now—"

Something moved, large and broad but noiseless, in at the front door. An arm darted out, more like a snake than an arm. The candle-hand flew from where it had been placed, struck the floor, and a foot trod on it. All five of its flames went out at once.

Shonokin whirled, his hand leaving the table. It fell over side-wise, with a crash that shook the windows. One second later came a crash still louder.

Conley had risen from his chair, jammed the muzzle of the shotgun against Shonokin's ribs, and touched the trigger. The charge almost blew the slender man in two.

It took all of John Thunstone's straining thews to set the table right again. Then he sat on its edge, speaking to Conley and Berna, who sagged in their chairs too exhausted for anything but gratitude.

"The magic used was very familiar," Thunstone was saying. "The 'hand of glory' is known in Europe and in old Mexico, too." He glanced at the grisly trodden-out thing, still lying on the floor. "You'll find it described in Spence's *Encyclopedia of Occultism*, and a rhymed tale about it in Ingoldsby's *Legends*. The hand of a dead murderer—and trust people like the Shonokins to be able to secure that—is treated with saltpeter and oils to make it inflammable. We needn't go into the words that are said over it to give it the power. Lighted by the proper sorcerer, it makes locks open, and all inside the house remain silent as death."

"You were able to move," reminded Conley.

"Because I came in after the hand had laid the spell. I wasn't involved, any more than your visitor himself," and Thunstone glanced at the silent, slender body covered by a blanket on the floor.

"Is the hand of glory also Shonokin magic?" asked Berna. "Did they perhaps learn it first, and teach it to those other peoples?"

"About the Shonokins I know very little more than you yourselves seem to have heard. It seems evident that they do exist, and that they plan to be active in the world, and that they do feel a claim on this land of yours, and so on. But the death of one of them may deter the others."

"How?" asked Conley.

"You and I will bury him, under the flagstones at the far end of your walk. His body will keep other Shonokins from your door. They are a magic-minded lot, and a dangerous one, but they fear very few things more than they fear their own dead."

"What will the law say?" quavered Berna.

"Nothing, if you do not speak, and how can you speak? From outside I heard this one say, very truthfully, that the real story would never be believed, even in this superstitious district. Let it go with what I suggest. Justice has certainly been done. I doubt if you will be bothered by more Shonokins, though they may be heard from elsewhere."

"But what are they?" cried Berna. "What?"

Thunstone shook his great head. "My studies are anything but complete. All I know is that they are an old people and clever, very sure of their superiority, and that the ways they hope to follow are not our ways. Mr. Conley, are you ready?"

Conley departed to fetch spade and pick. Alone with Thunstone and the body under the blanket, Berna spoke:

"I don't know how to say how thankful I am—"

"Then don't try," he smiled. Berna laid her little hand on his huge arm.

"I will pray for you always," she promised.

"Prayers are what I greatly need," replied Thunstone, very thankfully on his own part.

For he remembered how, at the moment of his leaving New York, he had heard that one Rowley Thome had been discharged as cured from an insane asylum.