

Grotesque Fantasy

MONTAGUE LIBRARY

Marshall College

I cannot tell you why I stopped at the edge of the Everglades. I could be very trite and call it a quirk of fate, or say that I was picking a date with destiny. But it was—my date with destiny, by quirk of fate—in that hell there on the edge of the swamps.

The light inside the hut was dark with darkness, and the deep, hoarse voice startled me: "You got somethin'?"

I was about to explain to the Indian who had spoken that I was, when I saw the other man. I saw only an oddly-twisted form curled in a greasy blanket, but it sickening horror slithering through my brain. I touched the Indian standing there beside me, and my whisper was loud and ringing in the dark silence, "Who are you?"

The question did not surprise the Indian; with a wave of his hand toward a chair, he told me to sit down, and then began to talk as if he had known all along that I would ask him.

His voice was a liquid, minor melody sliding about me like water—dark, sticky, stagnant swamp water, and words and phrases crawled into my brain like slimy, swamp creatures. A gelid panic bound me, and I could only sit there—and listen. Maybe the Indian told the story; I know that he began it, but it seemed that the eerie sound drifted up and out from that hump in the corner, flinging swirling gusts of terror against my face.

"Crazy? Maybe so, maybe not—what if I was an old fool. 'Not dangerous,' they said, 'just a little confused.' They could not understand that I had to try, that the haunted me with sinister dog-giveness until I came to these infernal, fermenting swamps with my rifle—with her help set up my equipment—and looked for life. I knew it was there; I was obsessed with a raw awareness of its closeness—under a leaf, in a rotting press stump, caught in thread-

like hanging moss—always just beyond my fingers, shrouded in flimsy, drifting vapor.

"But days and nights and years of endless work and failure killed something inside me; a tight look of defeat and fear in Carla's eyes showed her disbelief; the sullen loneliness of the swamps fogged my mind, and finally, in self-disgust, I flung my damned concoction of elements into the swamp and got ready to leave. A week passed, or maybe two; I was making a final check on the apparatus the morning that I heard Carla screaming. I cursed my worthless, shriveled legs and dragged myself to the door; and in the green haze of the swamp's dawn, I saw it.

As I watched, a turgid, grayish mass swallowed up two terrified natives and their tiny canoe; and then with amoeboid movement, it

Alma Altman

settled back under the slime of the swamp water. I was sickened by fear, but a flaming triumph scorched my body. It was as if Hell had laid her egg and hatched it there in the rotting stench and the stagnant slime of the fermenting water; the impossible had happened, and there was life in the mass I had created.

"Centuries of weird, triumphant thought careened across my brain, but triumph dulled before a blast of fear; Carla's screaming was more than just frightened cries; it was choking, retching shrieks of terror. I glanced around, and icy horror thickened my blood; she was struggling with a tentacle-like part of the mass flowing around

her feet. The curse and the accusation that I saw in her eyes clipped a thread in my mind, and I was horribly aware of insanity oozing over me as I watched her. Crazed by fear, she fought with the frenzied strength of a mad-woman; when she finally tore herself loose, I was near enough to see a foot and a hand sucked into the retreating ooze. Before I could move, Carla had disappeared—crawling off into the murky swamplands in a loose, disjointed way, more animal than woman. I was alone with that hellish mass and the echoes of my own terrified screams.

"Then were the horror-riddled days of warning men who came into the swamp—only to have deriding laughter thrown at me—of watching them become part of that Hell beneath the slime, of the uncontrollable retching at the sickening sound of their gurgling shrieks. How long? An eternity of hours, days, or maybe years before one called Joe, pitying a bundle of desolate madness, brought me out—and then went back. I watched him struggle too, and I heard his shrill cries just as if I had been there; even now, I can see him—stinking slime, sliding on and on—never stopping, never dying."

Was there a change in the voice? Deep-pitched tones—the Indian's voice—pierced the thick mist inside my head: "Jest sets—eats sometimes. He's dead—dead as he knows how to git—thinks he's living elements—won't never die—."

Blood was a red-hot throbbing in my forehead, and a scream gurgled up through my throat and coiled against my lips. There was a heavy ache in my stomach, and for a minute, I felt very tired and very old. After endless, agonized effort, I stood up and started toward the rectangle of light that was the door. I heard, or maybe I just sensed a sluggish movement that drew my eyes toward the

(Continued on Page 18)

HILLTOP—PAGE THREE