

SWAMP KILLER

The first two pages of the first short story in this Sci Fi collection

It came up out of the dark swamp and before it returned to its home of stagnate slime, twelve people had been unmercifully disembowel and partially devoured. No one knew for sure what it was that dragged itself from that mist-hidden swamp. Only those slaughtered could have described the hideous thing which left its slimy home to crawl over a mile to feast itself on the total population of the Crawford and Fletcher households. Men, women and children had been fair game.

It was close to noon before the tragedy was discovered, for the two farms lay seven miles out of town. It was Luke Brown, the local farm supply dealer, who first saw the sickening sight of mutilated bodies. He had driven out to the farm to deliver four rolls of barbed wire to Dan Fletcher. On seeing the fate of the Fletcher family, he drove to the Crawford farm for help. Discovering the Crawfords had suffered the same fate, he drove into town and slid to a stop in front of the sheriff's office. Half an hour later the area around the two farms was blocked off by the state police who had been called in to help. When this failed to hold back the curious town folks, three companies of national guardsmen lined up shoulder to shoulder to keep out all unauthorized people.

After an hour of combing the area for possible clues, Sheriff Steele sat down on a large rock and scratched his balding head. Two whole families had been wiped out overnight by something beyond comprehension. Sheriff Steele had held his position in the department for twelve and a half years, and had never in that time had to cope with anything worse than drunken drivers or barroom fights. Now the unexpected had happened and he was genuinely worried. "Sheriff," young Deputy Wilson broke into the older officer's thoughts. "I've discovered a trail leading away from the swamp. It looks like something big has dragged itself out of the muck, across that field," he said pointing out behind the farm house, "and through the back gate." Up until now, it had not entered anyone's mind that the devilish thing which brought destruction and death to the peaceful community might have come from the swamp. Sheriff Steele jumped from where he had been sitting and walked with the deputy to the rear of the Fletcher home. "I don't see the trail you mentioned."

"It's not too evident here, Sheriff, but across the field, where the ground's softer, the trail is as clear as day. Do you want to follow it back to the swamp?" Deputy Wilson asked.

"Sergeant Hunt," the sheriff called to the state trooper who was leaning against his cruiser. "My deputy has found a trail leading to the swamp. How'd you like to follow it with us?"

"I'll be right with you, Sheriff," the patrol sergeant responded. He turned and reached into his cruiser and grabbed a short-barreled twelve gauge shotgun. Cradling this weapon in the crook of his arm he hurried over to where the sheriff and his deputy were waiting. "Ready when you are."

The three men lifted the yellow crime scene tape and walked out into the field and through a small patch of scrubby willows. The trail they followed led down to the edge of the quiet swamp. It was just as the deputy had reported. There was evidence something had crawled from the mucky water, across the freshly plowed field and into the back pasture of the

Fletcher farm. "The swamp sure looks peaceful now," Sergeant Hunt said after lighting a cigarette.

"A swamp never looks peaceful to me," the sheriff said as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a large red handkerchief. "There are more ways to die out there than most people could imagine." He nodded toward the dirty brown water. "Snakes and gators are one thing, but nobody would have suspected something even more evil would be living under this muck."

"More than just evil," the deputy added. "Whatever's hiding out there is a master at mayhem and murder. I'd rather tangle with a mountain lion and grizzly at the same time than come face to face with this swamp killer."

The three men walked back toward the Fletcher farm in silence. Once back the sheriff walked to the pump in front of the small farmhouse as the state trooper returned his shotgun to his patrol car. "Good water, plenty cold," the sheriff remarked as he joined the Deputy Wilson and Sergeant Hunt.

"Well, Sheriff, we now know where the creature is, but how do we get rid of it?" the national guardsman asked as he tapped a cigarette out of the pack.

"That's a mighty big question," the deputy responded, "especially since we have no idea what it is. I can't even begin to image how to capture it, let alone kill it. I'm sure as heck not going to go wading into the swamp looking for it."

"Well," the sheriff said in response to the sergeant's question, "the first thing is to get the soldiers around the swamp to keep that thing from crawling out and eating more folks. Wilson, go into town and see if you can get some dynamite from the mining company. I'm going to call the Water Conservation office and get an expert out here to show us how to drain this swamp."