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A Novel of Weird Enslavement

By **VINCENT CORNIER**

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TALES OF
THE UNCANNY

STRANGE
STORIES

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THE FROG

By

HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Lord of the Lions," "The Unresting Dead," etc.

First published *Strange Stories*, February 1939.

Ghosting Out of the Dismal North Swamp, a Batrachian Horror Howls Through Monk's Hollow in a Witch's Holocaust!

Norman Hartley knew little about the black legends which clustered about Monk's Hollow, and cared less. Hidden in a secluded valley in the eastern hills, the ancient town had lain dreaming for generations, and a quaint and unpleasantly morbid folklore had sprung up from the tales the oldsters whispered about the days when witches had worked detestable sorceries in the festering North Swamp, a region which even yet was shunned by the villagers.

Monstrous things had dwelt in that stagnant morass long ago, they said, and the Indians had had good cause to name it the Forbidden Place. The witches had passed, and their terrible books had been burnt, their curious implements destroyed.

But the dark lore had come down furtively through the generations, and there were still some who could remember the night when, summoned by agonized shrieks, men had broken into half-witted old Betsy Codman's cottage and found her still-quivering body dangling in a Witch's Cradle.

Norman Hartley, however, saw in Monk's Hollow only a quiet, lonely little village where he might find the privacy which had been impossible in New York. Convivial friends were continually bursting into his studio, and instead of working on his canvases Hartley would find himself visiting the night clubs.

His work had suffered. In the ancient, gambreled house he had rented, two miles from the village, he felt that he could recapture the inspiration that had made his paintings famous.

But the Witch Stone bothered him.

It was a roughly chiseled block of gray stone, perhaps three feet high and two feet square, which stood in the flower garden behind the house. Hartley's sense of artistic values was outraged every time he looked out of his window at the stone.

Dobson, the caretaker, had tried to train the flowers so as to shield it from sight; he had planted creepers about it, but the ground was apparently sterile. There was a little clearing of bare brown soil about the Witch Stone where nothing grew—not even weeds.

Dobson said it was because of Persis Winthorp, but Dobson was superstitious and a fool.

Whether Persis Winthorp actually lay buried beneath the stone or not, the fact remained that the block was an eyesore. One's gaze passed casually over the gay colors of the garden, drawn irresistibly by the little barren clearing where the stone stood. Hartley, to whom beauty was almost a religion, found himself becoming irritated whenever his eyes rested on the Witch Stone.

Finally he told Dobson to move it. The old caretaker, his seamed brown face puckered with apprehension, scraped his wooden leg across the floor and demurred.

“It don’t do no harm,” he said, giving Hartley a sideways glance out of watery blue eyes. “Besides, it’s a sort of landmark.”

“Look here,” Hartley said, unreasonably annoyed. “If I’m renting this house I’ve a right to move the stone out of the way if I don’t like it. And I don’t—it’s like a great ugly splotch of green in a sunset. It throws the garden out of symmetry. I can’t understand you, Dobson. One would think you were afraid to touch it.” Hartley’s thin, studious face was flushed.

Dobson shifted uneasily. “Well, sir, they do say—my granddad told me they put the stone there for a reason.”

Hartley snorted, but the caretaker went on seriously. “I mind he told me once old Persis cursed Monk’s Hollow when they were ducking her in the pond. And they couldn’t drown her, either—not with the father she had, that came out of the North Swamp one night to—”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Hartley said disgustedly. “So if the stone is moved she’ll pop up, eh?”

Dobson caught his breath. “You shouldn’t say things like that, Mr. Hartley. Persis Winthorp was a witch—everybody knows that. There used to be awful things going on in this house when she lived here.”

Hartley turned away. They were standing in the garden and he moved aside to examine the stone.

There were curious marks upon it, seemingly chiseled by inexpert hands. The rough figures had a vague resemblance to Arabic, but Hartley could make nothing of them. He heard Dobson stump up beside him.

“He said—my granddad—that when they were ducking her they had to get the women folks away. She came up out of the water all green and slimy, with her great mouth croaking out spells to nobody knows what heathen gods—”

Hartley looked up quickly at the sound of a motor. A truck was chugging into view around the bend of the road. He glanced at the Witch Stone, and then, making up his mind, hastily sprinted for the road. Behind him he heard Dobson muttering some obscure reference to Persis Winthorp’s mysterious father.

The truck was loaded with gravel. He flagged it, and as it ground to a halt swung himself on the running board.

“I wonder if you’d do a little job for me,” he said to the two men in the truck. “I want to get a good-sized rock out of my garden, and it’s a bit too heavy for me to handle. It’ll only take a minute.” He pulled out his wallet.

The driver, an unshaved, bull-necked Irishman, turned inquiringly to his companion, exchanged glances with him, and then grinned at Hartley. “Sure, buddy. Glad to oblige.”

“Good,” Hartley said, and, half to himself: “We can dump it under a bush, out of sight.”

Later, Hartley stood by his window, frowning. The moon was rising beyond the ridge, but the garden was still in shadow. Somehow he had the impression that something had moved in that dim black sea of gloom. Crickets were shrilling monotonously, and he felt unreasonably nervous. From below came a recurrent tap and shuffle as Dobson pattered about the kitchen.

Dobson would have to do something about that barren spot in the garden. It was even more noticeable now that the stone had been removed, and even in the gloom Hartley fancied he could see a deeper shadow where the Witch Stone had stood.

What was the old legend? Dobson had hysterically poured it out as the truck-drivers were lifting the stone, pleading with them to replace it, begging Hartley to relent. It was full of

monstrous hints of the obscure traffic Persis Winthrop had had with the abnormal beings that dwelt in the North Swamp, and in particular her dealings with the batrachoid creature who had sired her—a demon whom the Indians had worshiped ages ago, Dobson said.

The villagers could not kill her, but there were spells which could nullify her evil magic, and there were words of power that could keep her fettered in her grave—words such as those which were chiseled upon the Witch Stone, the caretaker protested, fear contorting his face into a brown, wrinkled mask.

In Monk's Hollow they said—and his voice sank to a tremulous whisper—that in the grave, Persis had grown more like her unknown father. And now that Hartley was moving the Witch Stone—

Hartley lit a cigarette, frowning down into the enigmatic gloom of the garden. Either Dobson was mentally unbalanced, or—there was some logical reason for his interest in that particular spot in the garden. Perhaps—

The thought flashed into Hartley's mind, and he chuckled suddenly. Of course! He should have known! Dobson must be something of a miser—indeed, Hartley had already encountered more than one instance of his penury—and his hoard must have been buried beneath the Witch Stone.

What more logical place to hide it—the grave of the ill-famed old witch, shunned by the superstitious country folk?

Well, it served the old fellow right, Hartley thought unkindly. Trying to frighten his employer with a cock-and-bull story about a witch-woman who was supposed still to be alive

With a sharp exclamation Hartley bent forward, peered out of the window. There *was* something moving in the garden—a blacker shadow in the gloom. He could not make out its form, but it seemed to be moving very slowly in the direction of the house.

Suddenly he realized that the sound of Dobson's movements below had ceased. The wooden leg was no longer thumping on the kitchen floor. With the realization Hartley grinned, half minded to throw up the window and shout at the caretaker. Good Lord! Did the fellow think Hartley was trying to steal his few pennies?

Hartley told himself that Dobson was old, crochety, but nevertheless Hartley felt a little surge of irritation mount within him.

The black shadow was coming closer to the house. Hartley strained his eyes, but could make out no more than a dim, oddly squat outline. For a moment he wondered whether Dobson, for some insane reason, was crawling on his hands and knees.

The shadow scuttled swiftly for the house, was hidden from Hartley by the window-sill. He shrugged, crushed out his cigarette, and turned back to the book he had been reading.

Subconsciously he must have been waiting for some sounds for when the knock came he started, almost dropping the book. Someone had lifted and let fall the knocker on the front door.

He waited. The sound was not repeated, but after a time he heard a furtive shuffling below, together with the tap-tapping of Dobson's wooden leg.

The book lay forgotten in his lap. To his straining ears came a preliminary scratching, then the tinkle of breaking glass. There was a faint rustling sound.

Hartley got up quickly. Had Dobson inadvertently locked himself out—and had he, after knocking at the door, broken a window to crawl back into the house? Somehow Hartley could

not picture the rheumatic, crippled Dobson forcing himself through a window. Also, he had heard Dobson's footsteps *inside the house* just now.

Had the black shadow in the garden really been Dobson? Could it have been some prowler seeking entry? The two truck-drivers had eyed his fat wallet greedily when he had paid them. . . .

Then, blasting up from below, came a scream, knife-edged with terror, shrilling out harshly through the house. Hartley swore, leaped for the door. As he opened it he heard a hurried rush of footsteps—Dobson's, for the tapping of the wooden leg was plainly audible.

But mingling with that sound was a puzzling scratching noise, as though of a dog's claws scraping across the floor. Hartley heard the back door open; the footsteps and the scraping ceased.

He took the stairway in three leaps.

As he burst into the kitchen the screaming began again, was cut off abruptly. There was a faint gurgling proceeding from beyond the open doorway that led into the garden. Hartley hesitated, snatched up a heavy carving-knife that lay on the table, and stepped quietly into the night.

The moon had risen higher, and in its wan light the garden looked ghostly, unearthly, save where the light from the doorway streamed out in a narrow path of yellow illumination. The night air was cool on his face. From his left, in the direction of the barren clearing where the Witch Stone had stood, came a faint rustling.

Hartley stepped quietly aside, vague apprehension mounting within him. Remembrance of Dobson's warning came flooding back, the caretaker's ominous insistence that the old witch had never died, that she lay waiting in her grave for someone to move the stone that held her fettered.

"Dobson," he called softly, and again: "Dobson!"

Something was moving toward him, very quietly, very stealthily.

The moonlight revealed a lumpy patch of shadow dragging itself forward. It was too bulky for a human being; besides, men do not emit harsh whistling sounds as they breathe, *and their backs are not fat and green and slimy*. . . .

Good God! What was this thing—this nightmare spawn of ancient horror that came leaping at Hartley out of the night? What blasphemous creature had been buried beneath the Witch Stone—and what dark forces had Hartley unknowingly unleashed?

They said that in the grave she had grown more like her unknown father.

Hartley reeled back against the house, mad horror battling with the rational beliefs of a lifetime. Such things could not exist—but it *did* exist! It was coming at him in great leaps, a misshapen shadow that glistened faintly in the moonlight. And dreadful menace was in its swift approach.

Already he had delayed too long. The thing was almost upon him as he turned to flee. His legs buckled, and for a frightful instant he thought that they would not support him, that he would sink helpless to the ground beneath the creature's onslaught. He staggered a few steps, heard the slobbering breathing almost on his neck, then gathered his strength and sprinted along the wall of the house.

The thing came after him. He doubled around the corner of the building and made for the road. As he gained it he chanced a swift look over his shoulder, and cold horror trailed icy fingers over his heart. It was still pursuing him.

Monk's Hollow! At the thought he turned and fled along the road toward the town, still clutching the carving-knife. He had forgotten it, but now, glancing down, he tightened his grip on the weapon and sprinted a bit faster. If he could only reach the village—

It was two miles away—two endless miles of empty road, lonely and unfrequented, with little chance of an automobile passing. Few drivers chose this road; it was rutted and in disrepair; the new state highway was more direct.

But the highway lay beyond a ridge, and Hartley knew that he would stand no chance on rocky or uneven ground. Even on the road he had to watch carefully for the black shadows that betokened gaps and ruts in the surface. Behind him something came leaping, and there was a sound of rasping, heavy breathing.

The night was cold, but sweat burst out on Hartley's face in great beads. His shirt was sodden. His lounging-robe impeded his running, and he slipped out of it. Behind him came a harsh, thick cry. There was a little scuffle, and then the rhythmic thuds were resumed.

"When they were ducking her they had to get the women folks away . . . she came up out of the water all green and slimy. . . ."

Hartley gritted his teeth, fought back an impulse to shriek his terror. Behind him came the steady *thud-thud*; and the stertorous breathing. The thing was gaining!

If he could only reach the village! He increased his pace, straining until the blood pounded in his temples. His efforts were useless. The thing behind him matched his pace; the thudding grew louder. Once he fancied he felt the creature's foul, hot breath on his neck. His chest was a raw flame; a knife-edge of agony burned his lungs; his breath whooped in and out.

He caught his foot in a rut and almost went headlong. With a wrenching effort he recovered his balance and fled on.

But the sounds of pursuit had grown loud—dreadfully loud. He wondered whether he might elude his pursuer by a quick dash into the thickets that lined the road—black blotches in the moonlight. No—the creature was too close. Hartley's mouth was gaping as he fought for breath.

Then he saw the light. Yellow squares that were windows in an oblong patch of blackness—but far, far distant. No—in the darkness he had misjudged—the house not fifty feet away. It loomed up suddenly before him.

He shrieked from a raw and throbbing throat as he raced for the porch.

But before he reached it he felt a heavy weight upon his back, bearing him to the ground; great talons were ripping at his shirt, raking his flesh with needle-sharp claws. His eyes and mouth were clogged with dirt, but he realized that he was still gripping the carving-knife.

Somehow he managed to reverse it, stabbed up blindly over his shoulder. The slobbering, harsh breathing gave place to a frightful croaking yell, and then the knife was torn from his grasp. He struggled frantically to squirm free, but the great weight pinned him down inexorably.

A confused shouting came to his ears. He heard the crunching of quick footsteps, and the roar of a gun. Abruptly the weight was gone from his back; he heard something go thudding off into the darkness as he rolled over, scraping at the earth that encrusted his face. Out of smarting eyes he saw a man's pale face staring at him, a man who wore dusty overalls and held an old-fashioned musket in trembling hands.

Hartley discovered that he was sobbing.

The other man stared off into the shadows, looked back at Hartley with wide eyes. “Wh-what was it?” he asked shakily. “In God’s name—what was it?”

Anam Pickering, whose tiny farm lay on the outskirts of Monk’s Hollow, awoke with a start. He sat up in bed, fumbling on the bedside table for his glasses, his wrinkled face creased in puzzled lines. What had awakened him? Some unusual noise—

It came again—a furtive scratching beneath the window. The farmer, taken by surprise, started violently, and the glasses dropped to the carpet.

“Who’s there?” he called sharply. There was no answer, but the scratching sound was repeated. There was another noise, too, a sound of thick, gasping breathing. Suddenly frightened, Anam cried, “Martha! Is that you, Martha?”

A bed creaked in the adjoining room. “Anam?” a thin voice called. “What’s wrong?”

Anam got out of bed quickly and dropped to his knees beside the bed, fumbling for his spectacles. A sudden shattering of glass made him catch his breath sharply.

He looked up, but his dim eyes made out only a hazy rectangle—the window—against which a vague black bulk loomed. An insidious odor came to his nostrils, and belatedly he straightened, his rheumatic limbs sending protesting twinges through him.

He heard a pattering of feet, and his sister’s voice. “Anam? What—” The voice broke off, and there was a pause, frightful in its implication. Then above the scrambling and wheezing of the intruder the woman’s scream skirled out, shrill and insane with utter terror.

A little moan of bewilderment came from Anam as he hesitated, peering around blindly. He made a tentative step and caromed into the bed, fell across it. He sensed rather than saw something, huge and black and shapeless, leap entirely over him and there was a heavy thud that shook the flimsy little farmhouse.

Martha had stopped screaming. She was making hoarse little rasping sounds deep in her throat, as though she were trying to cry out and couldn’t. “Martha!” Anam shrieked. “Martha! For God’s sake—”

There was a scurry of swift movement, and a low, oddly muzzled cry from the woman. Thereafter the only sound within the room was the thick, gulping breathing, and presently, as Anam lay half fainting across the bed, another sound, monstrous in the mad thoughts it called to the man’s mind—a faint rending and tearing, as of flesh being ribboned by sharp talons.

Whimpering, Anam got to his feet. As he moved slowly across the room he repeated Martha’s name under his breath, and his head swung from side to side as his dimmed vision tried to pierce the cryptic gloom. The tearing sound stopped abruptly.

Anam walked on. The harsh fabric of the carpet scratched his bare feet, and he was shivering violently. Still whispering Martha’s name, he sensed a black bulk looming up before him. . . .

He touched something cold, slimy, with a sickening feel of loathsome fatness. He heard a frightful guttural snarl of bestial ferocity, something moved swiftly in the darkness—and death took Anam Pickering.

Thus horror came to Monk’s Hollow. Like a foul breath of corruption from the generations of decadence in which the witch-town had brooded, a miasmic exhalation from the grave of Persis Winthorp lay like an ominous pall over the town.

When Hartley, accompanied by a dozen villagers, returned to his house in the morning, he found the flower garden trampled and ruined. The barren spot in the center of the garden had given place to a deep pit, in which, as though in ghastly mockery, lay a shocking conglomeration, the mutilated and partially devoured cadaver of old Dobson, recognizable only by the splintered remnant of the wooden leg.

The remains lay embedded in a foul-smelling pool of thick, greenish slime, and, although no one cared to approach that dreadful pit closely, the marks of gnawing on what was left of the peg leg were all too evident.

Hartley had recovered somewhat from his experience of the preceding night. Hours of nightmarish conjecture had led him through incredible labyrinths of fantasy to one inescapable conclusion, the stubborn belief that there was some logical, natural explanation of the horror.

To this view he clung, in spite of what he had seen the night before creeping toward him in the moonlit garden. The villagers could not know that Hartley dared not accept the monstrous theories which they had advanced during the trip to the witch-house, nor that Hartley held to his skepticism as the last bulwark of his sanity.

"I dare not believe," the artist told himself desperately. "Such things are impossible."

"An animal of some sort," he insisted, in answer to a comment by Byram Liggett, the stocky, bronze-faced farmer who had rescued him. "I'm sure of that. Some carnivorous animal —"

Liggett shook his head dubiously, his gun—for all the men had come fully armed—held in readiness as his eyes furtively searched the surrounding vegetation. "No, sir," he said firmly. "Don't forget, I saw it. That thing wasn't like nothin' God ever created. It was—*her*—come up out of her grave."

Involuntarily the group shrank back from the charnel pit.

"All right, a—a hybrid, then," Hartley argued. "A sport—a freak. The product of a union between two different kind of animals. That's possible. It's simply a dangerous wild animal of unusual type—it must be!"

Liggett looked at him oddly, and was about to speak when there came an interruption in the person of a youth who ran panting up, white-faced and gasping.

A premonition of disaster came to Hartley. "What's happened?" he snapped, and the boy tried to control his hurried breathing until he could speak coherently.

"Ol' Anam—an' Miss Pickering," he gasped out at last. "Suthin's killed 'em! All—all tore to pieces they was—I saw 'em—"

At the memory a shudder shook the boy, and he began to cry from sheer terror.

The men looked at one another with blanched faces, and a little murmur began, grew louder. Liggett raised his arms, quieted them. There were little beads of moisture on his brown face.

"We got to get back to town," he said tensely. "An' in a hurry, too. Our women-folks an' kids—"

As a thought came to him he turned again to the boy. "Jem," he asked sharply. "Did you notice—were there any tracks at Anam's place?"

The boy choked back his sobs. "There—yes, there was. Great big things, like frog tracks, only big as my head. They—"

The harsh, urgent voice of Liggett interrupted. "Back to town, everybody. Quick! Git your women an' younkens indoors, an' keep 'em there."

At his words the group broke and scattered, moving hastily away until Liggett and Hartley were left. Hartley was very pale as he stared at the farmer.

“Surely this—this is unnecessary,” he said. “A few men—with guns—”

“You damn fool!” Liggett snapped, his voice rough with restrained anger. “Movin’ the Witch Stone—you shouldn’t been ’lowed to rent the place anyway. Oh, you city folks are smart, I guess, with your talk o’ freaks an’—an’ *sports*—but what do you know ’bout what used to happen in Monk’s Hollow hundreds o’ years ago?”

“I’ve heard ’bout those times, when devils like Persis Winthorp had their conjurs an’ pagan books here, an’ I’ve heard tell o’ the awful things that used to live in the North Swamp. You’ve done enough harm. You better come with me—you can’t stay here. Nobody’s safe till we do something ’bout—*that!*”

Hartley made no answer, but silently followed Liggett back to the road.

On their way they passed men hurrying townward, bent oldsters hobbling along, casting frightened glances about them, women with wide-eyed children whom they kept close about their skirts. A few automobiles drove slowly past, and a number of old-fashioned buggies. The telephones had been busy. Occasionally Hartley caught furtive whispers, and as they drew nearer town the number of fugitives increased, and the whispers grew and swelled into low, terror-laden mutterings, drumming into Hartley’s ears like the doom-laden pounding of a great drum.

“The Frog! *The Frog!*”

Night came. Monk’s Hollow lay sleeping in the moonlight. A number of grim, armed men patrolled the streets. Garage doors were left open, in instant readiness to rush aid in answer to a telephoned appeal for help. There must be no more tragedies like that of last night.

At two in the morning Liggett had been jerked from an uneasy sleep by the frantic ringing of the telephone. It was the proprietor of a gasoline station on the highway several miles beyond the town. Something had attacked him, he shrieked into the instrument. He had locked himself within the station, but its glass walls would offer little protection against the thing that was even then creeping closer.

But help had arrived too late. The station was an inferno of flame that fed on the underground gasoline reservoirs, and the men had only a glimpse of a great misshapen thing that bounded from the holocaust to escape apparently unscathed amid the hail of hasty bullets that greeted its appearance.

But the proprietor of the station had, at least, died a clean death; he had been cremated, for some of his bones, unmarked by gnawing fangs, were later found among the ruins.

And that night Hartley had found monstrous tracks beneath the window of his room in Liggett’s house. When he showed them to Liggett, the farmer had stared at him with a curious light in his eyes, but had said little.

The next attack came the following night. Hartley had fled from his bedroom and slammed the door just in time to escape the thing that clawed and slobbered and bellowed at the thin panel. But before Hartley and the aroused Liggett could return with their guns it had taken fright and escaped through the shattered window.

Its tracks led into a patch of thick underbrush nearby, but to enter that tangled wilderness of shadow at night would have been sheer suicide. Liggett had spent half an hour at the telephone, arranging for the villagers to meet at his house at dawn to begin the pursuit. Then,

since they could not sleep, the two men returned to Hartley's bedroom and talked until nearly dawn.

"It's marked you down," Liggett said. "It's after you, like I thought. I figured—" He hesitated, scratching the stubble on his chin. "I figured that maybe we could trap it—"

Hartley caught his meaning. "Using me for bait? No!"

"What else can we do? We've tried to track it, but it hides in the North Swamp by day. It's the only way, unless you want it to kill more people. You can't keep kids indoors all the time, Hartley."

"The National Guard—" Hartley began, but Liggett interrupted him.

"How can they get it there in the swamp? If the thing could be got by ordinary means we'd have done it. We'll track it, come dawn, but it won't do any good. Don't you see, man, every minute counts? Even while we're talking here the thing may be butcherin' somebody. Don't forget—" He broke off, eyeing Hartley.

"I know. You think I started it. But—God! I've told myself over and over that the thing's a freak, some hellish outcome of an unnatural mating. But—"

"But you know that's not so," Liggett said quietly. "You know what it is."

"No." Hartley shook his head dully. "It can't—"

He stopped, staring at Liggett's face. The farmer was glaring past Hartley's shoulder, incredulous horror in his eyes. He cried out a startled warning, sent Hartley spinning with a sudden push. The artist had a glimpse of a shining hideous countenance protruding through the window; a dreadful mask that was neither batrachoid nor human, but partook monstrously of the attributes of both. A great slit-like mouth worked loosely, and yellow, glazed eyes glared into Hartley's; there was a choking stench of foul corruption, and the thing was in the room. Liggett's gun blasted.

The creature seemed to twist in midair, and the farmer went down beneath the onslaught. An agonized shriek welled out, broke off abruptly. The monster, crouching over Liggett's body, lifted a muzzle wet with fresh blood and made a gobbling sound, dreadfully reminiscent of a chuckle, deep in its throat. Sick and shaking, Hartley felt the doorknob beneath his fingers, and he flung the door open as the creature leaped.

He slammed it just in time, but a panel splintered under a terrific impact. Hartley fled along the hall as the door crashed.

Outside the house he hesitated momentarily, glancing around in an agony of indecision. In the cold grayness that precedes the dawn he saw the nearest house perhaps two hundred feet away, but as he started to race toward it the thing came bounding into view, intercepting him. It had apparently crept out through the window by which it had entered.

Hartley suddenly remembered his automatic and clawed it out, fired point-blank at the creature as it came at him. There was a croaking snarl of rage, and the loose slit-mouth worked hideously; a little stream of foul black ichor began to trickle slowly from a wound on the wattled, pouchy throat of the thing.

But it did not halt, and Hartley, realizing that a creature of such monstrous size must possess tremendous vitality, turned to flee. It was between him and the village, and as though realizing its advantage the thing kept at Hartley's heels, giving him no chance to double back. The thought flashed unbidden into Hartley's mind: the monster was herding him!

He heard a window creak up, heard a shout. Then he was running for his life back along the road over which he had fled on the first night of the horror.

At the thought, and at sight of a small lane—a rutted cart-path—joining the road at right angles, he twisted aside and raced along it. His only hope lay in somehow getting back to the village. Behind him came the gasping and slobbering, the rhythmic pounding that betokened the grim pursuit.

He chanced a snap shot over his shoulder, but the hazy light of the false dawn was deceptive, and he missed. He dared waste no more bullets.

The thing was herding him! Twice he saw paths that led back to the village, and each time the pursuing monster blocked his escape, circling with great leaps to his right until the paths had been passed. And presently the fields grew wilder, and the vegetation took on a lush, unhealthy greenness. He might have attempted to scale a tree, but there was none near enough to the road, and the pursuer was too close. With a dreadful shock of realization Hartley saw that the North Swamp lay before him—the ill-omened morass about which all the ghastly legends had centered.

The ridge to the east was silhouetted against pale grayness. From far away Hartley heard a sound that sent a thrill of hope through him. The sound of an automobile motor—no, two of them! He remembered his neighbor's shout as he had fled from Liggett's house. The man must have gone for help, roused the village. But the snarling breathing was dreadfully close.

Once the monster paused, and Hartley glanced over his shoulder to see it clawing in hideous rage at its wounded throat. The bullet must have handicapped it in the pursuit, else Hartley would long before have fallen beneath ripping talons. He brought up his gun, but the thing, as though realizing his purpose, sprang forward, and Hartley had to sprint in order to escape the great leaps. The sound of motors grew louder in the dawn-stillness.

The path wound through the swamp. It was overgrown with weeds, rutted and pitted deeply, and at times the encroaching ooze had crept up until only a narrow ribbon of dry land was left. On all sides the lush greenness of the morass spread, with occasional open spaces of repellently black water. Over all lay a curious stillness, an utter lack of motion. No wind ruffled the tops of the grass-fronds, no ripples spread over the waters. The sounds of the pursuit, the roaring of the motors, seemed an incongruous invasion of this land of deathly stillness.

The end came suddenly, without warning. Green slime covered the road for a distance of a dozen yards; Hartley, splashing through the icy, ankle-deep water, felt his foot go down into a hole, and fell heavily, wrenching his ankle. Even as he fell he rolled aside desperately felt a wind brush him as the monster's impetus carried it beyond him.

Hartley's arms, outthrust, were abruptly embedded in something soft and clinging, something that sucked and pulled them down inexorably. With a rasping cry he wrenched them free from the quicksand, fell back to the firmer ground of the road. He heard the sound of a shot, and, flat on his back in the ooze, saw a monstrous mask of horror incarnate looming above him. The sound of motors had increased to a roar, and a shout of encouragement came to his ears.

The monster hesitated, drew back, and Hartley, remembering his gun, jerked it from his belt. He fired point-blank at the creature, and coincidentally with the report of his own gun came a volley from the cars. Lead whined above him, and he felt a stinging pain in his shoulder.

Suddenly it seemed as though the monster were a huge bladder, punctured in a dozen places, pouring out black and nauseous ichor. With a hoarse gasping cry it flopped aside, made

a crippled, one-sided leap, and came down in the bog beside the road. Then, swiftly, it began to sink.

The quicksand took it. Its huge hind-quarters, black and glistening, corded with muscle, disappeared almost immediately, and then the distended, leprously white belly. Hartley, sick and fainting, felt hands lifting him to his feet, heard questioning voices that seemed to come from a great distance.

But he had eyes only for the abysmal horror that was being engulfed a dozen yards from him, the webbed and spurred flail-like talons that were desperately beating the slime, the misshapen, hideous head that rolled from side to side in agony. From the gaping mouth of the thing came a ghastly outpouring of croaking shrieks, a monstrous bellowing that suddenly grew horribly familiar, articulate, thick and guttural; a frenzied outcry of blasphemy such as might come from the rotting tongue of a long-dead corpse.

All the men fell back, white with loathing; and Hartley dropped to his knees, retching and moaning in an agony of horror, as the *thing*, its mouth half-choked with the hungry quicksand, bellowed:

“Awrrgh—ugh—ye—blast ye! Blast ye all! May the curse o’ Persis Winthorp rot yer flesh an’ send ye down to—”

The frightful outburst of sound gave place to a terrible gargling shriek that was abruptly choked off. There was a brief commotion in the ooze; a great bubble formed and burst . . . and age-old stillness brooded once more over the North Swamp.

[The end of *The Frog* by Henry Kuttner]