

# THE CURSE OF MARVIN, THE DEAD SWAMP-MAN-HEAP-THING?

OR  
SLIME MARCHES ON!  
BY DOUG MURRAY



This romantically inclined, rural blonde doesn't know it yet but her boyfriend's eyes have just seen the glory of the Spectre of the Swamp on this cover from DC's PHANTOM STRANGER #14, 1971. While said Spectre doesn't look bad as far as swamp things go, he doesn't appear in this form inside the book in the strip written by Len Wein and drawn by Tony De Zuziga. Not only is his appearance much nastier, but it turns out he's not "really" a swamp monster after all. You can't trust nobody no more.

Slimy, amorphous, anti-social creatures bent on revenge abound in today's comic industry. And we're not talking only about the people who write, draw and publish the stuff, but the characters featured in the books as well. Comics moguls have discovered a frightening formula: ugly creatures = handsome profits—and have capitalized on this discovery by turning out such slimy super-heroes as Swamp Thing, Man-Thing, The Heap, Marvin the Dead Thing and other awesome embodiments of adolescent body-hate. Here to tell the terrifying tale of these shapeless superstars' rise from the swamps to the top of the comic book industry is TMT comic ace Doug Murray.

"You rise now out of the muck and slime, feeling the tension of new muscles under your scaly flesh..."

"From murky, polluted waters a corpse rises..."

"He surveyed the sagging layers of tumorous flesh, the rippling, seemingly melted body that would some day be known as the Heap!"

"The misshapen monstrosity presses deeper into the shadows surrounding the single wooden structure that rises from the bog..."

All of these quotes could be from the same story... but they're not. Each is from a different publisher, each serves to identify that company's version of the newest phenomenon in the "inhuman-monster/superehero" market... the Swamp Creatures.

Perhaps the first of the swamp creatures was the Heap, not the Heap of Skywald's "horror-mood" line, but the Heap of the '40s and AIR BOY comics. This was a different sort of Heap, this Heap was an Allied pilot who, following a fatal crash, found himself resurrected as a

The original Heap, on whom future muck models were more or less based, found a home in the patriotic AIRBOY Comics of the '40s, fighting Nazis and Commies with equal aplomb.



shaggy, totally horrible, misshapen creature. Determined to continue his fight against the forces of evil despite this unsightly transformation, the Heap joined forces with Airboy and battled the Nazis and, later, the red saboteurs of the '40s comics. With the end of Airboy came the apparent end of the Heap.

National was the next outfit to get into the act. HOUSE OF SECRETS #92 introduced a new twist to the swamp creature. "Swamp Thing" was originally conceived as a one-shot mystery story—after all, how could a horribly misshapen and ghoulishly ugly creature ever be accepted by the public as the "hero" of a comic book? The story of Alex and Linda Olsen was to be a rather straightforward "revenge from the grave" sort of thing, the kind of tale that would give young Berni Wrightson a chance to use his considerable talents in drawing moody, macabre scenes in a looser-than-usual format.

Wrightson did just that. Using his neighbors, Weezy Jones (wife of artist Jeff Jones) and an evily posturing Mike Kahuta, for inspiration, Wrightson proceeded to give Len Wein's literate script a life of its own. Alex Olsen, young research scientist, is murdered by his partner Damien Ridge so that Ridge can get the things he covets—namely, the wife of Alex's labors and Alex's beautiful wife Linda.

But Alex is not dead! Through some freak of nature, his body, caught in a chemical explosion, has not been destroyed. Rather, it has been transformed into a misshapen "Swamp Thing." This Swamp Thing has some rudimentary memories of

its earlier life. Most of all it remembers the need for revenge and eventually shows up at the home of Damien Ridge and his new bride (the former Linda Olsen) to gain it. After killing Ridge, the swamp creature turns to its love, expecting welcome arms and loving warmth. Instead it finds only repulsion. Seeing its reflection in a nearby glass, the Swamp Thing realizes why and retreats into the swamp, there to remain until the end of its days.

## SWAMP OF LONELINESS

The scene where the Swamp Thing returns to the swamp is one of melancholy beauty. The idea that this hideous being is torn by loneliness and cannot (because of its new physical construction) shed a tear is a sensitive and poignant one, and there is no doubt that the reader's sympathy is with this creature rather than with the "humans" it has left behind. Indeed, reader sympathy was so much with the creature, and reader mail so heavy in its favor, that National took the risk of giving Swamp Thing its own magazine.

Wisely, National left the newly-spawned title in the hands of its original creators, Len Wein and Berni Wrightson. They decided to start off with a new origin story rather than refer back to the (now) two-year-old HOUSE OF SECRETS story. Besides, they wanted to change the Swamp Thing's motivations somewhat and add new characters. And so "Dark Genesis" was born. Here we see two young research scientists, Alex and Linda Holland (not Olsen) moving into a home in the swamps, there to live and carry out their experiments in bio-creation, the technique of regenerating lost tissue. Although they are working for the government, other forces are interested in the results of their work, and one of these groups, led by a man called Ferretti, attempts to get the young scientist to sell out. When Holland refuses, Ferretti plants a bomb that blows up his lab and, apparently, kills Holland. Continuing in his efforts to get the formula, Ferretti now goes to Holland's widow, Linda, and threatens to kill her if she doesn't cooper-



... appearing in a one-shot strip in National's HOUSE OF SECRETS, the Swamp Thing was such a hit that he took up a good chunk of his own. In the original origin story the Swamp Thing began life as a scientist named Alex with a wife named Linda; in the revamped origin story he became a scientist named "Alex" with a wife named Linda. Got that? We hope so... it's important. You never know when someone might sprout a serpentine quill on you.

ate. When she too refuses, he shoots her in cold blood.

But Alex Holland is not dead. Saturated by chemicals in the explosion, blown into a swampy repleat with organic material, Alex Holland is reborn—in the misshapen body of the Swamp Thing. Shuffling toward his home, intent on protecting his beloved wife, Holland bears a shot and, finding his dead on the floor, goes berserk. Finding Ferretti and his men attempting





This neat, nifty and more than a little bit snazzy Heap was drawn by the late Bill Everett, creator of THE SUB-MARINER, and appeared on the back cover of PSYCHO #4, 1967. A wild Heap like this is worth a dozen of their other kinds of Heaps, by our lights at least.

to get away in an auto, the Swamp Thing stops them short, and, with his newfound strength, makes short work of them.

In the following tales, Wrightson and Wein explored the full range of macabre story lines, having Swamp Thing tangle with a warlock, a witch, a werewolf, a Frankenstein-like creature, and a blob-like monster.

But in SWAMP THING #7 they outdid themselves. Here, Swamp Thing meets Batman, or rather, in this version, Bat-Thing. Wrightson's Batman is the Neal Adams version taken to the nth degree. It is a real creature of the night, strangely inhuman and clad in a cloak that

it's easy enough being a big heap in a little pond, but Marvel's Man-Thing is one much monster who has to constantly combat coming contenders. In this case, the would-be liberator of the swamp throne is a thing named GLOB. Discerning TM readers will notice that GLOB is WOLG spelled backwards.



appears, in some parts, to be at least 30 feet long. In any case, Batman, like every other human in Gotham City, thinks Swamp Thing is a dangerous monster. Actually, Swamp Thing is attempting to save government agent Matt Cable (an old friend and regular character) from a man named Arcane, a man who is the head of the ring that made Holland what he is (and killed his wife). Fighting the Batman off with his superhuman strength, Swamp Thing accomplishes his mission and moves back into the night, his revenge complete.

The story is a classic both in scope and artwork. Wrightson's use of both Swamp Thing and Batman is superb and there is no doubt the story will sweep all comic-oriented awards in the next year. Swamp Thing, however, is about to change. Wrightson has decided to drop the series, feeling he has done all he can with the material at hand. National, knowing they have a winner on their hands, doesn't want to cease publication and so will place a new artist, probably one of the young talents, on the job. Whatever the result will be Swamp Thing as we know him is impossible to say at present.

#### MARVEL'S MUCK-MONSTER

Marvel's entry into the Swamp Creature sweepstakes took place soon after the popularity of Wrightson's HOUSE OF SECRETS story became apparent. Marvel, not wanting to be caught unprepared, produced a swamp character of their own. Man-Thing premiered in SAVAGE TALES #1. In the origin story (reprinted in MONSTERS UNLEASHED #6, with an Adams cover), young scientist (what else?) Ted Sallis is working on a formula that will turn an ordinary man into a super-soldier, capable of incredible feats of strength and

stamina. Sallis, having finished this formula, is attempting to turn it over to the government when he is betrayed by his old friend into the hands of enemy spies in agents. Breaking away, Sallis nearly car and, in an attempt to save all, injects himself with the serum. But the car crashes and Sallis is thrown into a swamp where, with the formula reacting upon his body and his body reacting with the polluted water of the swamp around him, Ted is turned into a hideous Man-Thing, a thing that has very little of his human personality and intelligence left... A thing that senses fear and acts to suppress it... a thing bent, for the moment, on vengeance.

Finding those who have caused its creation, the Man-Thing crushes them all like insects, leaving only the girl, his former paramour, alive. But she is not unchanged—insane with fear, she is touched by the Man-Thing and that touch brings a burning agony, a scar that will never heal either physically or mentally. His mission accomplished, the Man-Thing returns to the swamp.

The first Man-Thing story was stylishly done, well-written by Gerry Conway and Roy Thomas and brilliantly drawn by Gray Morrow. Working for the black and white reproduction of SAVAGE TALES, Morrow was able to use all the tricks of wash and shading which artists of his calibre are capable of. The result is page after page of almost three-dimensional beauty. The Man-Thing stands as a tribute to Morrow's ability to do quality material.

Marvel, however, now had a problem. Man-Thing was a hit, but SAVAGE TALES no longer existed, and the non-distribution of SAVAGE TALES meant that many had never seen that fine origin story. They decided to take a chance and make the Man-Thing the lead character in ADVENTURE INTO FEAR with a cover by Gray Morrow and a short, introductory segment filling in details of the Man-Thing's origin. The story concerned a rather unimportant adventure with bad



Gray Morrow's magic pen didn't fail him when he drew this for SAVAGE TALES. Though that particular title faded, Man-Thing lived on in ADVENTURE INTO FEAR.

father and abandoned baby, but it served to set the tone for further adventures. The Man-Thing's powers were defined, and humanity's fear of the ugly and deformed was effectively conveyed. The following stories served to lead the Man-Thing down a different path than that of Swamp Thing. Rather than a reasoning creature seeking out those who hurt him, Man-Thing wants only peace. As something neither human nor beast, however, he becomes the focus of strange forces, forces which can be described only as occult. With the introduction of young Jennifer Kale, a witch with a strange affinity for the creature, Man-Thing delved fully into the black-magic vein started by Doctor Strange. We discover that Man-Thing's swamp—which he needs to live—in the focal point between our dimension and another, a focal point that may be destroyed by the construction of a

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Skywald's PSYCHO #13 proved to be an unlucky number for dead-in-the-swamp Heap fans. In it was in that comic that the "Old Heap" was replaced by a "New Heap." And the New Heap was reunited with his parents—simple farm folks—and retired to a life of low-key contentment down on the farm. While Heap fans may have been disappointed by this disturbingly tender turn of events, we at TMT still think that the strip was one of the best and funniest ever to appear in an overground comic.





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JOHN BECK PRESENTS

# KING KONG VS. GODZILLA

ALL NEW! GODZILLA IN COLOR

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The Battle of the Century! Well, the Battle of 1958, at least.



Marvel's MAN-THING takes time out to catch a falling baby in this strip written by Gerry Conway and drawn by TMT contributor Gray Morrow, whose mighty brush-strokes have helped make this character one of the most popular of Comicon's shapless swamp creatures.

### CURSE OF THE SWAMP CREATURES! Continued from page 13

proposed airport on the site. Man-Thing and Jennifer combat this construction and succeed in saving the earth from possible takeover from these other-worldly beings.

Finally, the popularity of the Man-Thing led to his own comic and a continuation of the kind of stories that made him popular. Stories comic in scope in which the Man-Thing is but a pawn, though a powerful pawn, one who can win and lose games on his own initiative. The MAN-THING comic is one of Marvel's most successful. As Roy Thomas says: "MAN-THING does very well."

#### MALODOROUS MONSTER

Swampd, meanwhile, had been in the Skyward Creature field for some time. They introduced their new version of the Heap in the second issue of PSYCHO. Like the original Heap of "Airboy" days, this one was the result of an airplane accident. Young pilot Jim Roberts' plane is sabotaged by his "friend" Bill Ryan in order to get Roberts' girl friend, Audrey, and the \$100,000 insurance policy Roberts has left to her. But when Roberts' plane crashes into a container of Army nerve gas, he is not killed, but changed into a slag heap monster which eats garbage and smells awful. Of course, the monster gets revenge and fades into the night.

In later issues the Heap goes on to battle the Horror-Master (a mad scientist-type who resurrects corpses and uses them for evil purposes), Dr. Frankenstein, and others too numerous to mention. Finally, as Skyward switched to the "horror-mood" format (which certainly is horrible), the Heap went completely insane, did evil things like squashing innocent babes, and, ultimately, fell many thousands of feet of a high-flying aircraft to land in a farmyard. But not just any farmyard... the farmyard of his mother and father! They, of course, recognize him immediately and nurse him back to health. Now sane again, the Heap presumably lives a happy life among the old folks doing the farm chores.

The Heap suffered from one major difficulty that none of his fellow Swamp Creatures had to endure. He was always done by second-rate or sometimes third- and fourth-rate artists, men who did not have

the power to get something transcendent out of a cliché-ridden story. As a result, the Heap lacked the power of a Swamp Thing or Man-Thing. Perhaps that is why he no longer exists.

#### MELANCHOLY MONSTER

So far, Warren has not gotten too deeply into the swamp creature format. Their sole effort has been MARVIN THE DEAD THING. Nicely drawn by Esteban Maroto, Marvin's story line tells of a klutzy clerk whose attempt at suicide results in his being changed into a deformed monster. Unlike the rest of the swamp ilk, Marvin does not want revenge... he just wants death. But when he awakens to find himself alive (not realizing the changes that have taken place), Marvin, klutz to the end, attempts to go to work at his old job. The city folk are naturally upset at his appearance, and, after a couple of police gunbats and some general pandemonium, Marvin realizes that he has changed. Retreating to the swamp, where he's befriended by a little girl, he finds contentment for the first time in his life. And when the girl is killed by hunters, Marvin doesn't go after revenge, but takes the body of his friend and tosses it into the same waters that gave him birth. Miraculously, she too is reborn, and Marvin now has a permanent friend and playmate. And an opportunity for happiness. (Bring up violins and lower curtains, please!)

Unlike the other Swamp Creature tales, MARVIN THE DEAD THING is both non-violent and somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Al Milgrim's script is a gentle one, treating human loneliness and man's inhumanity toward man. MARVIN THE DEAD THING stands as the only swamp creature to have an idyllic existence. He's also the only one (so far) without a sequel (although a series is planned).

So the swamp creature is here to stay. That ungainly, hideously misshapen being formed by science and swamp ooze seems to have taken a firm hold on the comic-reading public. With National's SWAMP THING the big success of 1972-3 and MAN-THING raking in great profits, it seems the era of the Swamp Creature will continue a while longer.