

Swamp Terror, Truman Capote

Swamp Terror

"Well, I'm shore tellin' you, Jep, you just ain't got the sense you wuz born with if you gonna go on in these woods lookin' for that convict." The boy who spoke was small, with a nut-brown face covered with freckles. He looked eagerly at his companion.

"Listen here," Jep said. "I know very well whut I'm doin'—an' I don't need none of yo' advice or none of yo' sassy mouth."

"Boy, I do believe you is crazy. Whut would yo' ma say if she was to know you was out here in these spooky ol' woods lookin' fo' some ol' convict?" "Lemmie, I'm not askin' fo' none of yo' mouth, an' I sho' ain't askin' fo' you to be taggin' along here with me. Now you can go on back—Pete an' I will go on and find that ol' buzzard—then we two, just us two, will go down an' tell those searchin' parties where he be. Won't we, Pete, ol' boy?" He patted a brown-and-tan dog trotting along by his side.

They walked on a little farther in silence. The boy called Lemmie was undecided what to do. The woods were dark and so quiet. Occasionally a bird would flutter or sing in the trees, and when their path ran near the stream they could hear it moving swiftly along over the rocks and tiny waterfalls. Yes, indeed, it was too quiet. Lemmie hated the thought of walking back to the edge of the woods alone, but he hated the idea of going on with Jep even worse.

"Well, Jep," he said finally, "I guess I'll just mosey on back. I'm shore not goin' on into this place any farther, not with all these trees an' bushes every place that ol' convict could hide behind, an' jump on you, an' kill you deader'n an ol' doorknob."

"Aw, go on back, you big sissy. I hope he gits you while you is goin' back thru' the ol' woods by yuhself."

"Well, so long—I guess I'll be seein' you in school tomorrow."

"Maybe. So long."

Jep could hear Lemmie running back through the underbrush, his feet scurrying like a scared rabbit. "That's what he is," thought Jep, "just a scared rabbit. What a baby Lemmie is. We never should have brought him along with us, should we've, Pete?"

He demanded the last vocally, and the old brown-and-tan dog, perhaps frightened by the silence being too suddenly interrupted, let out a quick, scared, little bark.

They walked on in silence. Every now and then Jep would stop and stand listening attentively into the forest. But he heard not the slightest sound to indicate a presence trespassing here, other than his own. Sometimes they would come to a cleared place carpeted with soft green moss and shaded by big magnolia trees covered with large white blossoms—smelling of death.

"I guess maybe I should've listened to Lemmie. It shore 'nuff is spooky down in here." He stared up into the tops of the trees, every now and then seeing patches of blue. It was so dark here in this part of the woods—almost like night. Suddenly he heard a whirring sound. Almost in that second he recognized it; he stood paralyzed with fear—then Pete let out a short, horrible, little yelp. It broke the spell.

He turned around, and there was a big rattlesnake poised to strike a second time. Jep jumped as far as he could, tripped, and fell flat on his face. Oh God! This was the end! He forced his eyes to look around, expecting to see the snake whirling through the air at him, but when his eyes finally came into focus, nothing was there. Then he saw the tip of a tail and a long cord of singing buttons crawling into the undergrowth.

For several minutes he couldn't move, he was so dazed by shock, and his body was numb with terror. Finally he raised up on his elbow and looked for Pete, but Pete wasn't anywhere in sight. He jumped up and began to search frantically for the dog. When he found him, Pete had rolled down a red gulley and was lying dead at the bottom, all stiff and swollen. Jep didn't cry; he was too frightened for that.

Now what would he do? He didn't know where he was. He began to run and then to tear madly through the forest, but he couldn't find the path. Oh, what was the use? He was lost. Then he remembered the stream, but that was useless. It ran through the swamp, and in parts it was too deep to wade; and in the summer it was sure to be infested with moccasins. Darkness was coming on, and the trees began to throw grotesque shadows about him.

"How does that ol' convict stand it in here?" he thought. "Oh, my God, the convict! I forget all 'bout him. I've got to get out of this place."

He ran on and on. Finally he came to one of the cleared spots. The moon was shining right in the center. It looked like a cathedral.

"Maybe if I climb a tree," he thought, "I can see the field an' figger out a way to get there."

He looked around for the tallest of the trees. It was a straight, slick sycamore, with no branches near the bottom. But he was a good climber. Maybe he could make it.

He clasped the trunk of the tree with his strong, little legs and began to pull himself upward, inch by inch. He would climb two feet and slip down one. He kept his head strained back, looking up at the nearest branch he could clasp. When he reached it, he grabbed it and let his legs dangle free from the tree trunk.

For a minute he thought he was going to fall, dangling there in space. Then he swung his leg over the next limb and sat astraddle it, panting for breath. After awhile he continued on up, climbing, limb after limb. The ground got farther and farther away. When he reached the top, he stuck his head up over the tree top and looked around, but he could see nothing except trees, trees everywhere.

He descended to the broadest and the strongest of the tree limbs. He felt safe up here, with the ground so far away. Up here no one could see him. He would have to spend the night in the tree. If only he could stay awake and not fall asleep. But he was so tired that everything seemed to be whirling around and around. He shut his eyes for a minute and almost lost his balance. He came out of his trance with a start and slapped his cheeks.

It was so quiet, he couldn't even hear the crickets nor the bull frogs' nightly serenade. No, everything was quiet and frightening and mysterious. What was that? He jumped with a start; he heard voices; they were coming close; they were almost upon him! He looked down to the earth and he could see two figures moving in the underbrush. They were coming

towards the clearing. Oh, oh, thank God! It must be some of the searchers.

But then he heard one of the voices, tiny and frightened, scream: "Stop! Oh please, please lemme go! I want to go home!" Where had Jep heard that voice before? Of course, it was Lemmie's voice! But what was Lemmie doing way down here in these woods? He had gone home. Who had him? All these thoughts ran through Jep's mind; then suddenly the realization of what was happening dawned on him. The escaped convict had Lemmie!

A voice, deep and threatening, split the air: "Shut up, you brat!" He could hear Lemmie's scared sobbing. Their voices were quite clear now; they were almost directly under the tree. Jep held his breath with fear. He could hear his heart pound, and he could feel the ache of his stomach's knotted muscles.

"Sit down here, kid," the convict commanded, "and stop that damn cryin'!" Jep could see that Lemmie fell helplessly to the ground and rolled over on the soft moss, trying desperately to stifle his sobs. The convict was still standing. He was big and bulged with muscles. Jep could not see his hair; it was covered with a massive straw hat—the kind the convicts wear when they are working on the chain gang.

"Now tell me, kid," he demanded of Lemmie by shoving him, "how many people are there out lookin' for me?" Lemmie didn't say a thing. "Answer me!" "I don't know," Lemmie answered faintly.

"All right. O.K. But tell me—what parts of the woods have they already covered?" "I don't know." "Aw, damn you." The convict slapped Lemmie across the cheek. Lemmie broke into renewed hysterics. "Oh, no! No! This can't be happening to me," Jep thought. "It's all a dream, a nightmare. I'll wake up and find out that it ain't so."

He shut his eyes and opened them, in a physical attempt to prove that it was all just a nightmare. But there they were, the convict and Lemmie; and here he was, perched in the tree, scared even to breathe. If only he had something heavy, he could drop it on top of the convict's head and knock him cold. But he didn't have anything. He stopped his thoughts in mid-passage, for the convict was speaking again.

"Well, come on, kid; we can't stay here all night. The moon's goin' out, too—must be goin' to rain." He scanned the sky through the tree tops. Jep's blood froze with terror; it seemed as if he was looking right at him; he was looking right at the branch he was sitting on. Any minute he would see him. Jep closed his eyes. The seconds pounded past like hours. When he finally got up the courage to look again, he saw that the convict was trying to pick Lemmie up off the ground. He hadn't seen him, thank God!

The convict said: "Come on, kid, before I cuff yuh a good one." He was holding Lemmie half way up, like a sack of potatoes. Then suddenly he dropped him. "Shut up that cryin'!" he screamed at him. So electrifying was the tone of his voice that Lemmie stopped dead still. Something was the matter. The convict was standing by the tree, listening attentively into the forest.

Then Jep heard it, too. Something was coming through the undergrowth. He heard twigs snapping and bushes being scraped past. From where he was sitting he could see what it was. There were ten men closing in a circle around the clearing. But the convict could only hear the noise. He wasn't sure what it was; he became panicky.

Lemmie yelled, "Here we are! Here—Over he—!" But the convict had grabbed him; he was furtively pressing Lemmie's face into the ground. The little body was squirming and kicking, and then, all of a sudden, it went limp and lay very still. Jep saw the convict take his hand off the back of the boy's head. Something was the matter with Lemmie. Then Jep saw it in a flash; it was like something he just knew—Lemmie was dead! The convict had smothered him to death!

The men were no longer creeping in; they broke through the underbrush furiously. The convict saw he was trapped; he backed up against the trunk of Jep's tree and began to whine. And then it was all over. Jep yelled and the men held their arms to catch him. He jumped and landed, unharmed, in the arms of one of the men. The convict was handcuffed and crying. "That damned kid! It was all his fault!"

Jep looked over at Lemmie. One of the men was bending over him. Jep heard him turn to a man by his side and say, "Yep, he's dead all right." It was then that Jep began to laugh; he laughed hysterically, and hot salty tears ran down his cheeks.

The End