

*Mud Monster*

By Danny Cove

At a certain point in my life, I found myself wandering among the trees, marveling at the wondrous forest, a fine mist floating low after the recent rain. But as I walked, my gaze was held too lofty and I tripped into a pool of pitchy mud. I stood cautiously, looking myself over. I needed to get home, to my waiting father, but surely I couldn't return like this. I would sully his house and get my father dirty. I needed to find a way to get clean before I returned home.

Nearby I found a pond. At first, the water seemed clean, if a bit stagnant. But upon closer inspection, I found all manner of creatures within it, no doubt seeking the cleanliness I now sought. But in the creatured crowd, I could sense something dark and quiet, a tiny sickness spread among the creatures. No, this would not do.

Further on I found a man-made shower, complete with leaden pipes. "A dollar for a time" a sign read. But I could see it drew the water from the stagnant pond. I grew more anxious, but still this would not do.

Before me came a silent pool, hidden in the rocks. Its water was empty and crystal clear, certainly worthy to be my bath. But upon closer look, I saw the bottom of that pool, an unstable layer of dirt and sand. Any disruption of the water and it would stir and cloud the pool, turning it dark. I grew frightened, for darkness had begun to set and still this would not do, so I left that in my wake.

I chanced upon the swamp itself, a lake of endless waters, filled with half-submerged trees and dark depths. But out in the water, yellow eyes stared back. The scaly forms of ancient crocodilians floated silently. A cleaned limb here meant a chomp

and a snap, then a cold drag down into the depths from where I never would return. And as I watched, the gatorial ancients began to dare, and wander upon the land. I fled into the night.

I tried and tried to pull off the mud and grime, but a thin film always remained, and it always brought more grime and mud. The moonlight reflected off the sludge and I saw the dirty monster I appeared to be.

But before the moon, I saw a plume of white smoke, a signal from my father's furnace, a guide to get me home. Still covered in the filth of my fall, I stumbled past the fruit in my father's garden before falling on my knees at the door. I knocked, the door opened, I cried and screamed. "Father, I fell, I'm too dirty to come inside!"

But without a word, he placed his clean hand on my face, wiping away the filth that now stained his palm. He smiled. "There you are," he said softly, his smile never fading. "Now let's get you cleaned up." He lifted me from my knees and, with a trembling step and a warming heart, I followed him into our home.