

THE ACOLYTE

AN AMATEUR MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND THE SUPERNATURAL

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THE ACOLYTE IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF THE LATE
H. P. LOVECRAFT BY A SINCERE ACOLYTE.

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ways welcome. FTL

EDITORIALLY SPEAKING.

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THE ACOLYTE STARTS ITS SECOND YEAR with this issue, but aside from a few
extra pages, I'm making no particular effort to celebrate. Fancy anni-
versary issues are all right for fanzines which come out more frequent-
ly, but it would be silly to make a great to-do over a mere four issues.
However, if The Acolyte is able to continue for that long, I guarantee

LITTLE-KNOWN FANTASISTES

by Harold Wakefield

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3. VILLIERS DE L'ISLE ADAM

---ooOoo---

In European fantasy there are few higher names than that of the Comte de Villiers de l'Isle Adam, a writer whose singular personality and work render him perhaps one of the most extraordinary figures in all literature. The descendant of a Breton house of fabulous antiquity, his life, like his work, was a paradox and an enigma. He was born in 1840 of an eccentric father who had inherited estates that had been hurriedly deserted by the Adam family during the Revolution. This strange parent believed that vast treasures had been hidden by his fleeing ancestors, and for years squandered the remains of the family fortune in turning over the grounds of the estate.

The son inherited all the romantic fancies of the father, at one time even putting forward a fantastic claim to the Greek throne. On going to Paris, Villiers took up literature for a living, and for the rest of his days endured the seamiest side of Bohemia. Save for a kind servant who stole into his attic in the early hours of every morning to leave a bowl of soup and some bread, and a retired midwife who mended his worn clothing, Villiers would have starved or died from neglect. He was greatly influenced by Baudelaire, and had a profound contempt for any writer who would cater to the tastes of the general public. Thus his works never achieved a wide popularity.

Late in life, Villiers married a woman so far beneath him in the social scale that at the ceremony she was unable even to sign her name in the register. A son was born, and not long afterwards, Villiers died in 1889, lost to the last in dreams of aristocratic splendor.

Although his output was considerable, Villiers is largely known in America through one book, Contes Cruels, translated into English under the title Sardonic Tales, an omnibus volume of twenty-seven tales, not all of which are fantastic. In the bizarre story Vera, Villiers approaches the supernatural romances of Poe, the hero going into total seclusion surrounded only by memories and mementoes of his lost one until for one brief moment he does actually summon up her presence. Inter-signum makes very effective use of events first seen in dream and hallucination taking place at last in reality. A strange and terrible change coming over such things as the aspect of a house or the appearance of a friend's face presents a nightmarish quality seldom found in French literature. The Duke of Portland tells of the tragic secret that led the wealthy and brilliant young nobleman to isolate himself in his gloomy old castle, where he entertained his former friends with sombre eccentricity in the vaults beneath the building--festivities from which the Duke himself was always absent, his chair at the head of the table draped in black.

In Torture By Hope, a new element enters, that of cruelty, which reaches its peak in Queen Ysabeau. The latter is regarded by many as one of Villiers' greatest, the ingenious way in which the Queen works out her monstrous vengeance against her faithless lover being handled with extraordinary skill.

Very different is the strange tale The Foreboding Guest, the finest of Villiers' tales of enigmatical horror. Of this story, Arthur Symons says, "It holds us as the Ancient Mariner held the wedding guest. It is with a positive physical sensation that we read it, an instinctive shiver of fascinated and terrified suspense. In these thirty pages we have a whole romance, definitely outlined characters, all touched

with the same bizarrerie, and the wizard who has raised these ghosts seems to stand aside and regard them with a sarcastic smile."

Closely allied to the prose poems of Baudelaire, both in style and subject, is the gruesome little piece, Flowers of Darkness. Passing into the realm of pure fantasy are Occult Memories and The Annunciator. In yet another type of story, Villiers delights in poking fun at the advances of science in his time: Celestial Advertising, The Glory Machine, Doctor Tristan's Treatment, and The Apparatus for Chemical Analysis of the Last Breath. This satire reaches its zenith in the long novel L'Eve Future (apparently not translated into English), which tells of the manufacture, under the direction of the "celebrated American inventor Thomas Edison" of an artificial woman!

The novel, Claire Lenoir, would be a very fine piece of horror writing were it not marred considerably by an excess of obscure philosophical speculations. This work exists in an English translation.

Another novel available only in the original French, Isis, would also probably interest the lover of strange and unusual books. According to Huyamans, the heroine of this book was supposed to have assimilated the "Chaldean learning of Poe's women" and had into the bargain "put on the enigmatic air of a Bradamante added to an antique Circe". Through the obscurity of these incompatible mixtures loom and jostle a peculiar melange of philosophical and literary influences.
