

THE ACOLYTE

AN AMATEUR MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND THE SUPERNATURAL
(An Outsider Publication)

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THIS ISSUE OF THE ACOLYTE IS DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF PAUL FREEHAFFER

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FRANCIS T. LANEY
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MORTE JAMBE

T. BRUCE YERKE

Monsieur Foucheraux was exceedingly careless one afternoon. The Rue de Marcassant is known as a most unpleasant crossing at the very least; leading in from the river, it opens into the Place de la Cresus, a narrow square, a blind box of rambling, eroded flats.

The Place de la Cresus lies at the top of a narrow, inclined curve, the continuation of a bridge crossing the river from the modern city. The bridge is old and lime-encrusted; the road, a cobblestoned atrocity.

M. Foucheraux paused in front of the apothecarie and exchanged a word or two with the loiterers outside. Then the pinched old bachelor cast a careless glance across the square, pulled nervously at the lapel of his black frock-coat, and, grasping his walking stick in hand, forged out across the cobblestones.

He seemed quite oblivious to the roar of the omnibus which was at that moment clattering up the road from the bridge. The coachman was undoubtedly a reckless fellow, or one unfamiliar with the route, for he burst into the Place de la Cresus with four horses blowing froth and whip flaying furiously.

Too late he saw the blind crossing. He shrieked an unintelligible oath and threw the brake, drawing rein desperately. The omnibus lurched and oscillated on its skidding, heavy wheels. Trunks and boxes on the roof teetered and bounded off, scattering intimate contents.

M. Foucheraux seemed only gradually to become aware of this catastrophe bearing down upon him. The four horses bucked and were thrown in their whipple-trees. The coachman stood on his stepboard and threw his weight on the brake.

The shrieking, rumbling cauldron of confusion staggered onto M. Foucheraux. The black figure was lost in the swirling dust and flying hoofs. The left front wheel passed over his thigh. Then the omnibus tottered in a cloud of dust and crashed to its side. The horses came down en masse and the coachman arched through the air and landed, most fortunately, in a bale of cotton goods by Madam Moullin-court's factory.

"What a mess! What a mess!" mumbled and exclaimed the crowd that poured out of the formerly blank white-washed buildings.

"Did you see that fool coachman?" the apothecarie attendant demanded as he stood on his counter to see over the milling throng outside. "He charged through the court like a corps of cassions running the Marne."

In the midst of this confusion, M. Foucheraux lay prostrate, writhing in agony with his right leg turned almost upon itself. He shook his walking stick in the air and his sharply pointed face was contorted in anger and shock.

"Pig! Pig! Pig!" he kept shrieking. "Ignorant pig! Dunder-headed pig! Bloated, drunken lout of a pig! Because of the stupid pig I shall probably lose my leg!"

"Damme! Sacre Dieu! Where is a doctor? Am I to bleed in the streets like an ignominious slut?" He coughed and lapsed into a delirium, muttering "Pig! Pig! Pig!"

The doctor fought his way to the felled figure in its pool of blood and commenced to attend to him. M. Foucheraux was removed to his apartment as soon as the doctor had tied the major arteries. An amputation was performed. The severed member was sent to the crematorie.

The good inhabitants were ready in assisting to extract the tangled passengers from the interior of the coach and to soothe the badly scared driver, who was, of course, summarily discharged. Two of the horses had been shot, as their legs were broken. The trundling omnibus needed a new side.

Such a major spectacle in a dreary part of town like the Place de la Crésus is in itself enough to keep tongues wagging for some time. But then Marie, a nurse delegated to attend the recuperation of M. Foucheraux, of whom nobody cared much if he recovered or not, burst forth with the wildest story.

"Do you know what the crazy old man demanded?" she told the girls who worked for Madame Moullincourt. "That old man demanded that Doctor Fortinescu bring back his leg!

"That is my leg!" he raved. "Insufferable stupidity of it all! People aren't going to take away my leg because of that ignorant pig! Now listen, Doctor, you simply must let me have my leg, whether or not it is attached to my stump. Do you understand, you drooling guillotiner? I must have my leg!"

The story spread about. Marie told with horror how Dr. Fortinescu drove down to the crematorie and rescued the severed limb. The attendant at the apothecarie verified the woman's tale.

"Mon Dieu!" he breathed to a crowd of rapt listeners who hung over the chemically stained and eaten counter board. "In comes Dr. Fortinescu with this gruesome package.

"Say there, Robin," he bellows at me, all red and furious to himself, "I want about five gallons of alcohol and the biggest bell-tube in the shop!"

"So I say to him: 'And what can you want with that, Doctor? An orgy maybe?' You know how Fortinescu drinks.

"Bah!" he says, "mind your wit. Just come in back with me and I'll teach you more about your business in five minutes than you learn in five years talking to those oafs at the counter."

"So we go to the back room, and I find a three-foot bell-tube which he makes me clean out. And then, nom de Jésus... he unwraps that bloody package! Oh! The stink... and there is that filthy leg!

"I don't eat for two days. He sews up the top and puts it in the jar, all the time swearing to himself. He even takes a drink then.

"So we tap a barrel of alcohol and even empty six or seven bottles to fill up that unholy tube. Then he puts on a cap and seals it with paraphine.

"Alors!" he says to me, wiping his forehead and looking sick and disgusted, "Not a word of this tupidity, Robin, and here is a sovereign to seal your mouth."

"He looks at the leg and swears some more. 'Now, you obscene old man,' he says to himself, 'you can have your leg all the time. Hah! Take a bath in it.....'"

II.

When M. Foucheraux recuperated sufficiently to make use of a crutch, he testily dismissed the nurse Marie, who was quite glad to be relieved of her post. Dr. Fortinescu called and presented a bill. Foucheraux, who lived his solitary life on funds coming from several minor properties in Alsace, went to his desk, a hideous survival of the "period of bad taste", and withdrew a worn money bag.

"I must thank you again and again, monsieur le docteur," he said, counting out the gold coins, "for what you have done to my leg. A thousand----"

"Oh God! I don't want to hear any more about it," Fortinescu exploded. "Here is your bill and you are paying me, which is more than lots of my clients do and I'm glad of it.....Hector, you will make an obsession out of that filthy thing."

M. Foucheraux bowed politely and nodded his head, grinning broadly. "My leg," he muttered. And louder: "You may call it my, er, companion," he smiled, his narrow brown eyes looking intently at the doctor. A little wildly, the other thought.

The doctor took his coins and hurried out of the dark apartment and down the narrow, flimsy stairs. He barged across to the apothecary. "Robin," he bellowed, pushing his way through the counter leaners. "I will have some alcohol...but not for our client."

M. Foucheraux's apartment consisted of one room, and a sort of alcove where he would eat his solitary meal. The two windows on the west wall were cloudy with dust and the cheap curtains entirely neglected. Most often the shutters were drawn. Aside from a couch along the north wall by the door, and sundry dry-looking bookshelves, pictures, and common furnishings; the primary piece of furniture was an Alsatian taberette placed beside the hearth--an heirloom, incongruously out of place in the shabby surroundings.

Standing upon this piece was the bell-tube, and in it, suspended in all its stark grotesqueness, was M. Foucheraux's leg. It was in almost a standing position, though occasionally it would rotate slowly--say once a week--owing to reasons unknown and uncared about.

It wasn't much of a leg, but it belonged to M. Foucheraux. The toes were cramped, and had not been cleaned before the sad parting. The calf was hard and white, the muscles taut as they had been when the last message from the brain had reached them. The thigh was rather lean and the flesh slightly flabby. M. Foucheraux noted with disappointment that the short black hairs had ceased to grow, contrary to the popular belief.

Ah, Monsieur Foucheraux! The hours he sits and contemplates that crude anatomical exhibition! At night he draws the shutters, and after he finishes his few dishes he pulls up his chair and lights the fireplace.

And then what does he do? A rational person would light his pipe and read, follow La Petite Journal, or catch up on that lovably overdone old cynic La Rouchefoucauld, or scan a novel. But he? Ne jamais! Like a hypnotic he sits and contemplates his leg. That ugly old unwholesome limb that probably stank with sweat and dirt before the omnibus did its work.

But the world centers about it, for it is his limb! That sets it apart from all the other limbs in the world.

M. Foucheraux thought precisely that. As time went on, it did become the center of his world. Religiously every night he sat down with his pipe, and contemplated his leg in the bell-tube.

His leg! That inanimate mass of protein and calcium and protoplasm--he used to walk on it. It used to fit right there on the end of his stump.

His sharp, pointed face grew sharper and furrowed. His narrow eyes would focus on the leg as he probed the depths of his memory. Once, when he had been very young, he had been in a fight, and kicked a bully with that very same thing.

And he used to throw it over the branch of the cherry tree on that estate in Alsace and hoist himself up with it.

And now here he could sit, quite removed from it, and look at it abstractedly over his pipe, and realize that it was his leg there. His leg, the leg that used to fit right on his stump and that was concealed there by his trousers. And now the stupid thing was up there in a jar like a rare Mediterranean fish or fossil.

The horribleness of the conception grew upon M. Foucheraux one night as he sat contemplating his leg over a cup of coffee. He had an

irresistable urge to flex the now missing tendons. He looked at the space on the stool where the limb should be resting. Once, for about three feet beyond his stump there had been attached that leg, and the blood that now coursed through his vessels pumped through there, and there were numerous muscles which he could control at the slightest whim.

And now they were gone.

His nerves ended in a vast, aching void.

Frustration!

He sent a now-forgotten impulse down to his stump. Once it would have made that leg in the jar stir slightly, or flex, or---

M. Foucheraux suddenly grew rigid. His brown eyes were dangerously wide and intent. Sucking in his breath carefully, he sent that impulse again.

Sacré diable! He would swear that the large toe on the sealed limb had quivered and twitched slightly.

Clutching the arms of the chair tightly, he leaned forward, and strained all his will and nerves in a mighty command.

The limb in the bell-tube--an eerie thing half-lighted from the flickering fireplace--slowly, slowly began to flex.

M. Foucheraux's mouth dropped open. His eyes stared at the fearsome sight. Blood rushing to his temples, he continued to will himself, half hypnotised, half frozen with fear.

What outre manifestation was this? What loathsome, incredible thing was he doing?

"My leg, my leg," he panted. His mouth slowly curled into a contorted smile. "It's still mine! It lives!"

He stood up, his heart beating wildly. The leg in the bell-tube was flexing itself, and the toes were twitching, just as Foucheraux was willing them to do.

He forgot he had but one leg. His balance tottered. Then, with an agony of cramp in his stump, his feverish blood, driven by an overtaxed heart, ruptured the stitchings.

The helpless figure fell onto the alcohol-filled bell-tube, the livid blood spurting out in great throbs from the open artery.. The glass cylinder, reflecting starkly the red lights from the hearth, tottered under the impact and crashed to the floor.

The torrent of alcohol within burst out across the writhing figure. The cadaverous leg, now suddenly bloated from its contact with air, caught the paralysed man in the neck.

"Marie! Fortinescu!" he screamed. "God of heaven...someone save me!"

The blood and the alcohol flowed together and into the fireplace. With a burst of flame, the fiery tongues blossomed out and caught first on the curtains.

"Marie! Fortinescu!" Foucheraux screamed and sobbed.

He turned and twisted, his throbbing, pumping stump vomiting a spurting wash of blood into the holocaust. A moment, and the entire room was an inferno. Foucheraux buried his face in the crook of his leg. He was shrieking, but he had ceased to shriek words.

The Place de la Cresus was full of fire-fighting apparatus, and it was broad noon before the final sparks of the devastated flat had been quenched. People crowded the square and chattered endlessly to each other.

"Poor M. Foucheraux! Caught helpless in that horrible trap, and with only one leg!"

Dr. Fortinescu leaned across the counter-board in the apothecary, and stared into the blackened remains, "You know, Robin,"

MORTE JAMBE. (Concluded)

he said to the attendant, "I believe that I am an arsonist."

"Fah!" Robin grunted. "La crématorie doesn't like to get cheated from her due. Have some alcohol?"