

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
SAMUEL D. RUSSELL

SUMMER'S CLOUD ANTHONY BOUCHER

Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder?

Walter Hancock was not superstitious. He said so to his wife when they walked on either side of a post on their way from the little Italian pension to the railway station. And he said so to his table companion at dinner that evening, when he had drunk a glass more than usual to prove that he was a bachelor for the night. This of course was why he had spilled the salt, or perhaps it was because his table companion spoke with a strange accent and wore a low-necked gown. He could not decide which intrigued him the more, and took another glass of wine to find out. He decided upon the gown, or at least... Well, yes - the gown.

Giuseppe, proprietor of the pension, looked surprised and not altogether pleased when Mr. Hancock danced with his table companion after dinner. He was talking excitedly with his wife Maria when the two came off the balcony out of the Italian moonlight. Maria passed near to them and looked at Mr. Hancock very closely. Especially at his throat.

Giuseppe was still displeased when Mr. Hancock ordered brandy. But Mr. Hancock was very well pleased indeed when the brandy came. The growth of his familiarity with his companion's accent kept even pace with the alcoholic dulling of his perceptions, so that her speech still remained vague but fascinating. The movements of the dance had made her other fascination much more clear to him.

It was in the dark hall that she told him she would leave her door open. He was not quite sure of what she said, but the welcome which his lips and hands received reassured him. Nor was his assurance shaken when he met Maria at the head of the stairs. But he was puzzled. Even his slight knowledge of Italian sufficed to make clear that she was delivering a physical warning, not a moral reprimand. The morals of her lodgers were none of her affair, she kept saying; or were the repetitions within his brain? That was nonsense, but it was what she said. At least he thought so; la morta was Death, wasn't it? He was still puzzled when she went away, and looked curiously at the little gold cross which she had pressed into his hand with such urgent instructions.

Giuseppe and Maria were not puzzled when Mr. Hancock's companion was not in her room the next morning. She was, in fact, nowhere in the pension; and Giuseppe advanced the theory, with which Maria agreed, that she was nowhere in Italy. They were only slightly puzzled when they found Mr. Hancock's body on her bed. There were no clothes outside his flesh, and no blood inside. Nor was there a trace of blood anywhere in the room.

Although they jointly resolved that even her liberal payments could not induce them to accept Mr. Hancock's companion as a guest again, Maria's conscience felt clear when she found the small gold cross in the hall where Mr. Hancock had obviously tossed it in scorn.

You see, he was not superstitious.