

THE ACOLYTE

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

Co-edited and published by
Francis T. Laney
1104 South Georgia St.
Los Angeles 15, Calif.
Samuel D. Russell
1810 North Harvard Ave.
Hollywood 27, Calif.

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Art Director: R. A. Hoffman

Contributing Editors: Duane W. Rimel, F. Lee Baldwin, Harold Wakefield

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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

THE HARPER * ALLAN R ROBERTS

Slowly and with painful steps the long chain of bound captives filed along the rough stones, and ever and again the whips of the victorious soldiers flickered out to hasten their gait. And ever and again the King shifted in his palanquin of samite and gold, and turned to urge on his bearers, so that the prisoners stumbled and fell as the pace increased; and the people howled their delight, for by strength and blood had the King won his throne, and by strength and blood would he keep it.

At dusk, when the last shuddering gasp from tongues without lips, and the last horrible gurgle from lips without tongues, had faded away down the narrow staircase leading to that dark, cold room under the palace--at dusk, then, the King summoned his courtiers and proclaimed a royal feast. Then did those skilled in such matters repair to the palace hall, and soon the air was redolent of bergamot and vervain, and the sweetly cloying essence of the suna bush; and from the glittering walls and the crystal chandeliers shone studded sapphires, and the pale green peridot, and the tiny cymophane that seems to burst with light, and the strange tyano whose colour no man is able to name; and the dancers donned their draperies of brocade and exquisitely fine gold plate, and their tiny slippers of doeskin set with beryls, and their fans of peacock's down; and the floor was cunningly prepared for the corantos and sarabands they would dance that night. Thus in celebration would men honour the conqueror.

So at the appointed time that night the lamps were lit and the alcove braziers fired, and the multicoloured light flickered and danced over the precious stones; and first of all the company the King entered the great hall and mounted his throne of ebony and scarlet. With haughty pride he gazed out over his glory, and his hand was raised to summon the first entertainers, when suddenly the silken hangings in the outer doorway parted, and a figure bore its way through the crowd of sycophants to the very base of the throne, carrying a silver harp. And before the King could call servants to remove this impudent fellow in shabby velvet, the man plucked at his harp, and the King was still.

As the pliant fingers caressed sweet music from the silver strings, the King's thoughts turned to other days; for the chords sang of lost joys and sweet longings, and of the fresh fragrance of a green field in spring and the lone cry of a linnet at dawning. And the King remembered days when he had not known the wine of grandeur, days ere the savagery of battle had become part of him; and he forgot his dreams of conquest and power, and remembered only the dreams of long ago, dreams so little and yet so infinitely dear. Thus the King mused, and his memories were sweet and strangely sad.

The harper paused, and while the soft echoes of the last mellow note crept slowly away, and for long moments after, the King moved not and his features were as one who dreams; and as one who awakens from a dream the King suddenly shook himself and gazed up. Then with a firm hand he pointed to the harper and said:

"Seize him and bind him with strong cords. By strength and blood I gained my throne, and by strength and blood shall I keep it. Yea, bind him, and that all may see that the strength of the King has not failed, bring him with me where such things may best be proven."

But the harper spoke not a word, neither did he speak nor groan during the long hours in that dank, dark room beneath the palace,

despite that the King and his helpers were well versed in modes of stimulating loquacity, and it was generally agreed that the King had proved what he set out to prove. So the man died, and the King reflected that never again could the harpist's skill serve to unman him; never again could his own youthful innocence return from the graveyard of the years to undermine his resolution. And at the thought the King's satisfaction was tempered by strange regret, and by that he knew that he had not killed the music's echoes lingering in his heart.

Furiously and with something of panic the King sought forgetfulness, and by their very nature his attempts but intensified his pain. His stallion's hooves dripped scarlet as he rode over dead and dying alike on field after field, but the sadistic joy such actions formerly evoked was gone, and he could only remember a sweeter dew he had seen on primrose and poppy long ago. In war after war, conquest after conquest, the King drove his fame abroad and bitter regret deep into his soul. Through far fields of savagery the King rode madly, filling his nostrils with the sickening scent of the ghastly asphodels that bloomed there; but ever there would come drifting over the bloody ground a note of music, a sweet, trembling note from a silver harp; and the King would pause in his mad gallop and remember the years that were dead and the flowers that had faded, and ever those subtle notes served to dethrone the mighty King and to place in his stead a youth with untidy hair, who had thought with eagerness and dreamed a little.

Until finally there came the day when those vagrant chords conquered, and he could no longer contravene his thoughts by his actions. So he rested, and his armies came home from their glory, and his sword hung useless in its sheath, and in the little room beneath the palace the brazen door was shut and sealed.

And his rule became easier and more tolerant, and slow deaths gradually decreased in number...and vaguely men whispered, and the whispers passed with ever-growing volume and slowly swelled and crystallized into actions, as weeds grow unchecked. And one morning the King awoke to find a sharp blade at his throat and a cord awaiting his hands, and he realized that he was King no longer. For by strength and blood had he gained his throne, and by strength and blood must he keep it.

But the New King was merciful in his greatness and graciously consented to spare his life--though first the brazen door had to be opened, for the New King had lost several relatives in that dark, cold room. So, when he had been fully satisfied, and after allowing the Old King appropriate time to recover, the New King chained the dumb, handless piece of burnt and flayed flesh that now was the Old King, and stationed him to serve in the stables, that his guests might glance over the balcony and be amused by the shuffling monstrosity that once had been a tyrant and a king.

But at noon did the Old King know the limits of degradation and realize that his former torments were as nothing. For at noon every day the Court Musician came out onto the balcony to play, and the Old King saw with unbelieving horror that his instrument was a monstrously familiar silver harp, and remembered too late that though that disturbing harpist of old had indeed died, his harp had been thrown negligently into a bone-filled pit in the dark, cold room and forgotten. But now when the fiery golden chords leaped out in another tune, the air resounded with glory and the clash of arms and the steady tread of men

marching abreast mingled with the intoxicant shrilling of the trumpets of victory; and the Old King's scarred shoulders stiffened, and in his eyes gleamed the sparks of the years that were; once more in his ears rang the frenzied shouts of his people as he rode in state down that jewel-paved road; once more, once more, three times ten thousand men knelt in homage at his feet, and thrice ten thousand sword-blades flashed at his word of command; once more he was a conqueror, once more he was a King!...till the music stopped...and he slowly looked down at the rags on his body and the chains on his feet, and tried to close a fist that he did not have, and to speak without a tongue; and as he sobbed in unthinkable shame and sank to his knees in the muck and slime of the stables, amid mocking tinkles from the balcony the King knew, fully and completely, the vengeance of the harp.