

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

THE SMALL, DARK THING

by Duane W. Rimel

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"Come down to earth, man. Corpses don't go about stabbing people to death, least of all with needles."

I coughed and rustled the sheets of manuscript. When Russel Sanders observed that I was serious, his smile faded. He took out his pipe and loaded it.

We were seated in my study that cool spring evening. The table between us displayed several sheets of yellow paper covered with long-hand, and two newspaper clippings.

"I didn't mean precisely that, Sanders. But I do think Carver had his revenge on Bullit, even though Carver was buried two weeks before Bullit died. And I think Carver was there himself...."

"I don't believe in ghosts, Andy."

"Perhaps you won't have to when you read this diary. I found it among Carver's belongings (which went to me according to his will) in his lake-side cabin at Waha, where he was discovered the twentieth of May. His body had a large, unhealed scar on its right side, below the ribs. The first clipping tells about that.

"Incidentally, the doctors weren't sure what he died of. The second clipping gives an account of Bullit's death. Both have curious aspects, as you will notice when you read them. Doctor Bullit was found in his garage about two a. m., barely a week ago. He had been stabbed all over, as if by a long needle or hat-pin.

"Now I want you to read Carver's diary and see if you think the way I do. Perhaps I'm prejudiced because he and I were such fast friends. I want to get your candid opinion."

Sanders gathered up the yellow sheets and began to read.

May 2, 1940---Clara has announced our engagement, and I am as happy as any mortal ever was, save for that one shadow which hovers between us--that thing with which I am accursed. I am afraid to tell her about it. Of all my friends, Anderson is the only one who knows. My parents did, of course, but they're gone forever. It is fortunate they never saw me grow up....

I must have an operation before we are married--that is vital. But I am afraid of that, too. The conflict is giving me the jitters. It must be done. Bullit says the removal will be simple. The mechanics of the operation should be easy for a surgeon of his remarkable ability, but he doesn't understand the psychological phases of the situation. He doesn't realize how attached I've become to it these long years, how much a part of my very being it really is. For all I know the thing may contain a segment of my very soul. I cannot say; I am no doctor or magician.

Have an appointment with Bullit tomorrow. I am afraid he will insist on an operation immediately, if I am to be completely well by the last of June.

May 3---Went to Bullit's office, and he gave me the ultimatum. It has to be done very soon. Tomorrow it will be over, and with the grace of God, I'll begin the first instalment in my book of future happiness.

It will seem strange living without that thing. And I am afraid the removal will leave a scar, perhaps more psychic than physical. It is worth the risk, however. Bullit should know if anyone does. He says it isn't really alive; merely an abnormal growth. He says there is no secret or mysterious bond between the thing and me. I

hope and pray that he is right....

Out with Clara all evening. We saw "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", and later we sat in my car talking and planning until the small hours. She's knocked me for a loop, all right! Plans to keep her job for a while, at least. I wasn't wild about that, but I suppose it's quite the proper arrangement these days. My income is irregular, and my apartment isn't large enough for two.

May 4---Well, it's done! I'm not sick or giddy, as I expected. Bullit gave me a local, and had the job finished within twenty minutes. He's good. I told him to throw the thing in the furnace, and he promised me he would. True, I lost some blood, but less than I anticipated. I must be careful for a week or so, until the wound begins to heal.. Finished the first draft of my long African novel, and retouched a short story. I'm very pleased with my friend's surgery...perhaps I exaggerated the dire consequences of my situation. I shall know more about that a month from now.

Heavy date with Clara again tomorrow night. I told her I wasn't feeling well today. Bullit says I can go about as usual, provided I don't wrench or twist my abdomen. Now, thank God! I shan't have to tell Clara; she will never know there was a thing wrong with me. I feel five years younger! Best frame of mind for months. When she called tonight, I had to lie about my health, but Doc says I'd better stay home and rest. He admires Clara, tells me I'm getting a swell girl. He doesn't know the half of it!

May 5---Worked hard all morning. Went out with Clara in the evening. I didn't feel well, so we came home early. Twinges of pain in my right side. Healing reaction, I suppose. First operation I ever had, barring tonsils, and the relapse isn't pleasant. Two o'clock a. m. and still no sleep....

May 6---Felt tired and listless all morning, and in the afternoon went to see Bullit, although I wasn't scheduled to return so soon. He changed the bandage, and said the place is healing nicely, and there's no occasion for worry. He gave me some Nembutal tablets, and I hope I can sleep tonight. Called off going over to Clara's; she was disappointed. Can't help it if I don't feel right.... Should get busy on that short story about Mesmerism. Note: look up information at the library.

May 8---Stayed home Tuesday, napping and reading and walking the floor. Very little sleep the last two nights. And very strange dreams. I know it's silly, but I dreamed I was seeing through the eyes of a very small creature, like a rat or gopher. Must forget these morbid fancies and take a walk. Have shelved the Mesmeric story, which I'm afraid was the cause of the odd visions.

Clara was over a while this evening and wanted to take me for a drive; said the night air would do me good. I refused. We had an argument.... It was my fault, curse the luck! I was in an ugly mood--quite out of character with me. Told her about my dreams, and she said I'd better quit writing those wild, macabre stories. I flared up and told her I'd write whatever I damn well pleased. She flounced out of the apartment, calling back that she didn't intend to marry a pale-faced dreamer....

How utterly insane one becomes in an argument! I can't explain my sudden temper. I'll try to see her tomorrow and smooth out the wrinkles, if possible. I'm really not myself these days, and often I feel as if my mind were partly unhinged. Of course, I know better than that. I must see Bullit tomorrow. I hope those accursed dreams won't haunt me again. I can scarcely sleep at all.

May 9---At noon I 'phoned Clara's favorite lunch counter, but she wasn't there. I headed for Bullit's hospital, and met Clara coming out

of the same building. She stared at me queerly and kept on walking. I seized her arm and turned her around. I caused a scene, but I wasn't going to be put off any longer. It was either one thing or the other. I asked her, in a polite manner, to forgive me. She quibbled and side-stepped. She gave me no direct answer. Then I accused her of hitting Bullit. She flared back so hotly I knew I had struck the truth. She said she could go to a doctor any time she pleased, and that as far as she was concerned our engagement was off. I told her that was jake with me. She snatched off the ring and slammed it on the pavement. The diamond broke from its setting and rolled, like a mocking eye of Satan, across the sidewalk. I watched it splash in the gutter, and, turning my back on Clara and the curious long-necked mob, staggered into the hospital, so enraged I could scarcely see.

I didn't visit Bullit. Went to the Idle-Hour bar and drank myself into a stupor. Larson brought me home and dumped me in bed. I slept well--the first time since that damned operation. I'm beginning to think it was all a huge mistake. I shall see Bullit tomorrow....

May 10---More wild dreams last night--they're driving me wild. Bullit says I'm just upset because Clara and I had a little falling out. The gossip seems to have floated around very swiftly. Bullit was quite smug and pleased with himself as he dressed my wound and tried to soothe my nerves. I wonder just how well Clara and Alfred Bullit know one another.... Not that it matters any more. Curse her scheming little soul! I love her and hate her at the same time. Is that possible? I don't know. We're through--that is final.

Bullit says the wound isn't healing as it should, but predicts that another week will see me in good health and spirits. He reminded me again about exercise and fresh air. Rings under my eyes aren't encouraging.

Something Bullit said reminded me of my story, and I told him I had been unable to find any reliable reference books on Mesmerism and telepathy, and asked him where I might obtain some. The question rather startled him. He said he possessed a few, and offered to let me use them. I accepted gladly. Perhaps I can settle down and write a few pages tonight.

During the course of our conversation I told Bullit about my dreams. He laughed and said I worried too much, adding that they were probably due to some obscure psychological attackment I'd had for the missing protuberance.

May 12---Mother's Day. Went to church wearing my usual white carnation.... I can't bear this town life any longer. I'm going up to my cabin at Lake Waha, where I may get some rest and peace of mind. Now I'm dreaming about Clara day and night. Can't write a thing. Seem to have lost all powers of concentration. Mind needs a rest. Too many emotional upheavals lately. Must get away for a while. Making arrangements and doing necessary packing today.

May 16---Established in my cabin at last. Told the postmaster at the resort to hold all mail and communications for a week. I need complete isolation. Must battle this out alone. Went for a long walk today and visited many old picnic spots and swimming holes. More poignant memories of Clara, who used to share with me these scenic delights. Very few tourists about, owing to cold weather. Early yet for the main flock.

Tried a new story, but gave it up. Restless; cursed with insomnia and bad dreams. Last night (first evening here) I had more disturbing visions and woke several times in a cold sweat. Wound is healing slowly. It throbs and burns whenever I move. However, I think another week here will see me entirely well. Mountains are beautiful this time of year. More Lilies of the Valley than I ever saw before so early in

the season. If I can believe the store-keeper, the bass fishing is good. Need a drink. Lucky I brought a case of bourbon.

May 17---Drank myself asleep last night and felt terrible all day. Dreams are becoming more gruesome. I really can't explain them. I haven't touched those books Bullit gave me. And I've left the story alone. First I dreamed of floating through the air, far above the ground, a disembodied spirit. But the Universe was not mine---I was fettered and trapped; moved utterly by forces from without. Later came that odd second sight: seeing through the eyes of some tiny creature. The recurrence of this particular dream is arousing a hideous fear and suspicion. There must be a definite reason for these dreams, and I think I know what it is....

My theory is fantastic. I must forget it and take a walk. Sunlight is fading, but I have plenty of time. bit of fresh air may revive me.

I've been thinking about Doctor Bullit. Why has he been so interested in Mesmerism and telepathy? Among his books I have seen, too, a few pamphlets on hypnotism.

I suppose he and Clara are keeping company now. Curse them both! When I get well, I'll go back and tell them off.

May 18---Had a terrible night. Didn't walk far yesterday evening, because dark came too quickly. A strange phenomenon--I was never afraid of the dark before. Childish nonsense. The cool mountain air refreshed me somewhat, but a few hours later I felt as bad as ever.

Went to bed about midnight. Rolled and tossed for ages. Took some sleeping tablets and eventually fell into a half-coma. Dreamed again, and this time the vision was shocking indeed. I hesitate to write all of it.... My original suspicion is strengthened, and I am afraid that my days are numbered--

I dreamed again of seeing through the eyes of another; and where before I had simply been aware of my predicament, this time I actually beheld objects that were horribly familiar. When I opened my eyes in that unfamiliar dream-world, within that small body, I had a glimpse of a shiny operating room in Bullit's hospital, and I saw his round, fat face leering down at me. Then I thought I saw him laugh. And God help me!--beyond him stood Clara, dark and lovely as ever. I saw him move toward her. That image is seared upon my brain forever. Clara in Bullit's arms, returning his fervent kisses and caresses....

And it seemed that I crouched on a low table, within a body that was small and dark and hideous....

I awoke screaming and clawing the air. I haven't slept since. I'm afraid that what I dreamed may possess a shadow of reality! The wonders of the mind are as yet unexplored, and time and space seem to mean very little.... If what I fear is happening, I may not live very long.

I cannot go to sleep now; must not. The morning of another day has come, and I feel weary and giddy and estranged from my surroundings: the small room, camp-chairs, and narrow cot. More whiskey...but even that will not dim the horror or let me forget.

Must go out and breathe fresh air. I wish Anderson were here--he might be able to help. I hope he hasn't gone to Seattle. Thoughts are chaotic; mind wanders incessantly.

One thing is certain--if ever I get on my feet again, I shall kill that fiend...kill him no matter what the price. He promised to burn that thing...he snatched my dearest possession, and now I think he has yoked me with a singular and hideous curse that I despair of escaping. But I shall have revenge: Damn his black heart....

Sanders dropped the last sheet of manuscript and fumbled in his jacket for his pipe. A sudden thought seemed to strike him, and he

seized the clipping which gave the detailed account of Bullit's death. He read it twice and dropped it as if the entire episode had an unpleasant odor.

He cleared his throat. "You know, Anderson, it's very strange. The newspaper says that Bullit didn't die immediately. He was taken to a hospital, where he screamed and raved about some thing coming to life and chasing him, haunting his every footstep. Some small, dark thing....

"And by the way, you say you knew Carver well. Did you ever see that--thing on his side? What did it look like?"

I didn't answer right away. I lit another cigaret. "Yes, and it wasn't a nice sight. I saw it one time, as he guessed, when he passed out, and I had to undress him and put him to bed. I'd say it was a sort of deformed 'Siamese twin' that just never developed normally."

Our eyes met across the table. We never mentioned the subject again.