

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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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 anniversary issues are all right for fanzines which come out more frequently, 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

THE TREE

by John Hollis Mason

-oOo-

The voice said: "What is it you desire, Adam Orne?"

There was a deep chuckle from the old man. "Prompt, aren't you?"

"I find promptitude good for business."

"Ah, yes. Well, I too am a good business man. I won't waste your valuable time."

"Thank you."

Shrewdly eyeing the dark cloud that hung in the center of the room, Adam Orne chose his words with deliberation.

"There is a tree out in the yard — a big oak. I know this tree is at least a century old because I've looked up its history. But to all appearances, it's a lusty youth in the spring of life."

He paused momentarily, and there was a stirring of the dark cloud. "Yes?" it prompted.

The old man resumed. "I too am old. I am reaching the end of my life. But I haven't kept my youth like the tree. And the tree is always there, always the perpetual reminder that I'm old" — his voice rose to a sudden scream — "and I won't have it! The damned thing's got to age, be as old and limp and weary as I am. I won't have it mocking me with my departed youth!"

There was a silence after the outburst. Then the old man chuckled throatily, again the self-contained business man.

"I tried to have the tree cut down, but the fools hereabouts won't go near it. They told me it was...your tree."

"I tried myself. Remember how the axe would never quite hit the roots?...how the gasoline I sprinkled it with was mysteriously watered?...how the acid was spilt when I tripped coming out of the house?"

"I never thought of my neighbors' stories as anything but twiddle up with the proper party. But I'm not a fool. I realised this must be taken up with the proper party. Thus I come to you."

"And you want me to do — what?"

"Make your tree as old and withered as I am. Take that lusty youth away from it as mine was taken from me."

The Presence was silent for a moment. Then the cloud shimmered.
"And when this is done....?"

"Of course! There is a little matter of payment. I must bargain my immortal soul"...there was an ironic accent on the words..."for your service. That's according to tradition, isn't it? Well, whatever it is that you want from me you can have as soon as I've fully savored this triumph."

"That is agreeable. I will fill my part of the bargain." The presence stirred, about to leave.

"Wait! Isn't it customary that the one served sign a Book?"

The old man got an impression of soundless mirth from the Presence. "Mere symbolism, Adam Orne. An exaggeration of writers. Your verbal agreement is sufficient." And before Orne had a chance to say more, the Presence disappeared.

---ooOoo---

Adam Orne looked out at the tree. His wrinkled features were malignant in the fading rays of the sun, malignant and...triumphant.

The oak was drooping in the weariness of extreme age. Last night this tree had been the proud and arrogant youth of a century that mocked him with its greenery and sturdy boughs. Now, bare skeletal branches stretched beseechingly to the sky. The tree was old.

It had been worth it. Whatever the Presence took from him now was worth the intense, deep-lying satisfaction as he gazed out at that tree, drooping in near-death.

Now it was like him. No longer could it mock him, make him feel the horror of loneliness as he withered and became old. For Adam Orne hated age.

---ooOoo---

That night the old man dreamed. He dreamed of the tree, the young giant that had become old overnight. It seemed almost like his life. He'd wanted to stay young, but he'd aged, grown old so quickly, it seemed.

Old like the tree. Old and desiccated, with skeletal boughs that reached beseechingly towards the light, whose sap ran thin and--- This damned nightmare was too vivid! Suddenly he was struggling, a curious horror growing upon him. He couldn't wake up; he.....

"Yes, Adam Orne," the Presence said, "you are correct. I made the tree old as you desired. Now you must fulfill your part of the bargain.

"You are the tree."
