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Astounding Secrets of the Devil Worshippers' Mystic Love Cult

Revealing the Intimate Details of Aleister Crowley's Unholy Rites, His Power Over Women Whom He Branded and Enslaved, His Drug Orgies, His Poetry and Mysticisms, His Startling Adventures Around the Globe as "the Beast of the Apocalypse"

By W. B. Seabrook

Chapter IV.

"I hear you're doing a series of articles on Aleister Crowley," said Captain Achmed Abdullah in the card room of the Lafayette.

There were several of us at the table, having coffee—an Englishman, an Irish Poet, a French art critic and two Americans.

I assented.

The Oriental tale-writer exploded. "Again that scoundrel—that cousin of pigs!"

"But I say!" interrupted the Englishman. "He's by way of being a wonderful poet, you know, and he's written a very remarkable novel."

"Just the same," cut in one of the Americans, "I think Abdullah's right—a torturer of women, after all, that fellow Crowley, and a thoroughly wicked man."

"How very curious," said the other American, who is a professor at Columbia. "I knew him only as a quiet and able scholar—a brilliant authority on religious history."

Then it was the Frenchman's turn. "Aleister Crowley?" he said. "That's the man whose work I saw on exhibit in Paris last Spring. I didn't know he wrote at all. I thought he only painted—the weirdest and most astonishing pictures you ever saw."

Aleister Crowley, the painter! That, too, was one of the sides of this amazing, many-sided character—and with the Frenchman's words a crowd of recollections came—of how Crowley first began painting in America, without ever having touched a brush before in his life—and of the wild scandal and riot his pictures caused when they were put on exhibition at the Liberal Club in New York.

It was an astonishing episode, as you shall see.

By that time Crowley had lived for some months in America and his work as a writer and mystic was beginning to be known. Lea, "The Dead Soul," was reigning with him as a sort of "queen and slave" in a bigger studio, magnificently appointed, into which they had moved, at 63 Washington Square South, with enormous windows overlooking the beautiful square and showing a long vista of lower Fifth avenue. She was a cultured woman and a charming hostess and they entertained a great deal—many distinguished people—in a more or less conventional way.

But Crowley was working, enormously hard, sometimes from midnight steadily to noon of the next day, writing the new volume of his "Equinox," which was destined later to start the big Ryerson scandal in Detroit.

One day Crowley came home with a great hamper filled with blank canvasses stretched on frames, his pockets full of tubes of paint, and carrying in his hands an array of brushes that would have been amply sufficient for Raphael and Titian combined.

"My familiar spirit visited me in the night," he explained, "and commanded me to paint. I have been under the misapprehension that I was a great poet. Clearly, I was mistaken. Paint is my real medium. I am destined to become one of the outstanding artists of my age."

Whereupon, with the utmost solemnity, and with an industry that would have won praise from the professional optimists, he began to paint.

And, mind you, he knew nothing whatever about it. He didn't know how to mix the paints. He lacked the most rudimentary training in drawing. And he disdained to learn in any ordinary way. He was afraid it would "cramp his originality."

He painted, at first, like a child, or an industrious baboon, which had by accident acquired oils and brushed—and which was working like an automaton.

I still have some of those first canvasses. I have kept them as a curiosity. They are the most awful smears you can imagine. The figures, arms, legs, torsos, faces are all "out of drawing" and the primary colors laid on with an inconceivable crudity and glare.

After some weeks of this, he said to me one day, "I began to be discouraged. I think my familiar spirits, my daemons, have something important to express through this new medium—but they don't know a thing about technique—they don't even know the mechanics of painting. It's very unfair to me. And, if you don't mind, I think we had better run up to the Metropolitan Museum and take a look at Rembrandt's 'old woman.' "

So we climbed atop a Fifth avenue bus and presently stood in front of the greatest art treasure in America—and one of the greatest oil paintings in the world.

Aleister Crowley, Photographed at His Easel in His Studio on Washington Square, New York City, Where Many of His Mystic Rites Are Alleged to Have Been Conducted.

Crowley looked at it for a long time. He walked back to the opposite wall and studied the picture from a distance. He got so close that his nose pressed against the glass. He cursed the glass because it didn't permit him to touch the painting with his fingers. He considered the possibility of visiting the museum at night and stealing it. And he came away silent.

After this visit he began "mixing" his paints, a thing it hadn't occurred to him to do before, and to practice line drawing with crayons and charcoal.

And then, gradually, he began to paint the amazing pictures that have come to be the despair of art critics here and abroad. Some of them are grotesques which surpass in horror the worst nightmare you have ever dreamed. Others have a touch of primitive beauty that suggests the earliest Chinese paintings. They are "all wrong" by any academic standards, yet they are unique, and when you see them you can't forget them. "He can't paint at all," said one critic. "He's the worst painter who ever lived." Another declared, "Art is in a transitional stage. This man is crude. But who knows? It may be the crudity of a genius."

Leaders of the ultra-modernist school in America began to be greatly interested, though they didn't entirely approve. Crowley's notoriety was beginning to spread, and with it whispers of "devil worship," black magic, love cults and hasheesh orgies. Naturally, people were a little afraid of anything he did.

An effort was made to stage an exhibit in a big Fifth avenue gallery. It failed. "This fellow is dangerous and disreputable," it was said. The Liberal Club, that stronghold of the real, first Greenwich Village "intellectuals," was approached. The members were interested, but afraid of Crowley's reputation.

It was at this moment, it so chanced, that Frank Crowninshield, a magazine editor, wrote and published an article about Crowley that put him in a different light. If Crowninshield, an established authority, a man of power and standing and taste, said that Aleister Crowley was "important," that settled it. He was.

The Liberal Club read Crowninshield's article with hungry interest. According to this tribute, Crowley was "one of the most extraordinary of our British guests—a poet, explorer, mountain climber, an adept in esoteric philosophy—in short, a person of so many sides and interests that it is no wonder a legend had been built up around his name in his own lifetime.

"He has published more volumes of poetry than he has lived years," the writer continued, "and has climbed more mountains than he has lived months. The 'Equinox,' his work on occultism, is only a part of the gigantic literary structure which he has built up in the past five years; yet the work contains the stupendous number of two and a half million words.

"In 1900 he explored Mexico without guides. Two years later he spent many months in China. In 1906 he crossed China on foot. The success of his drama, 'The Rites of Eleusis,' in London in 1910, did not tempt him to settle there for long, as he was next heard of in the heart of the Sahara.

"As a naked yogi he has sat for days under the Indian sun, begging his rice. Like every true magician, he has experimented with hundreds of strange poisons, in order to discover the Elixir of Life. He has devoted much time to the art of materializing divine influences, and of rituals inherited from the Gnostics and Rosicrucians. He shocked the orthodox by his book, "'The Sword of Song'—which was virtually an attack on everything established—but soon compelled them to forgive him because of the religious fervor of his next volume—a book of devotional hymns.

"He has hitherto lived in Paris when not on his travels. One of his friends is Augustus John, the painter, who has done some wonderful sketches of him."

The Liberal Club was impressed. "So," said its members, "this Crowley is evidently a great man. Poe and Baudelaire and a lot of other great men were not what they should have been morally, but what's that got to do with art? Let us, by all means, exhibit Crowley's pictures."

One of Crowley's Paintings, Which He Actually Exhibited as a Work of Art in New York City Shortly After He Announced That He Was Destined to Become a Great Artist.

You would have imagined that Crowley, who had the simple vanity of a child, would have been pleased with Crowninshield's article. Not at all. "Alas," said he sadly, "this man has entirely mistaken me; my only claim to distinction is as a painter!" And I honestly believe that at that moment he believed it.

So Crowley's paintings were hung on the walls of the main salon of the Liberal Club, and cards were sent out announcing the exhibit. All Greenwich Village came afoot and the uptowners came in their limousines.

An astounding array of pictures it was—witches, goblins, giants, devils, grotesques, "holy men," misshapen nymphs dancing in such landscapes as never before were seen on land or sea—but the staid and soberest members of the Liberal Club looked in vain for anything "wicked" or "immoral."

Crowley's Impressionistic Portrait of a French Nursemaid. He Painted the Face Green, Hair Flaming Red, Dress Pale Yellow, Sea Deep Blue, Sky Green and Background Black.

The truth was, that any young girl could have looked at all of Crowley's pictures without seeing a thing to shock her moral sense. A child could have looked at them. It might have been frightened, but it wouldn't have seen anything "naughty."

Why, then, you are wondering, did the affair end in a raging scandal and the stripping of the pictures from the walls?

It was a surprising climax, not without its element of savage, Rabelaisian humor. The affair hasn't yet died down. Only a day or so ago I was able to get from a member of the club some of the memorandum records, which I shall presently quote. It was generally understood that Crowley's paintings were "symbolic." Near-highbrows and dilettante old ladies, adjusting their monocles and lorgnettes, gazed in astonishment at the canvasses. Finding ordi-

nary adjectives inadequate, they would end by exclaiming knowingly, "Oh, how symbolic!" But what they were symbolic of no one ventured to suggest, for nobody knew.

One afternoon Crowley himself was there, vastly delighted with the sensation he was creating—all tricked out in a lemon-colored waistcoat with agate buttons, English knickers, tasseled brogues, and a shaven head that made him look, aside from his clothes, like a Buddhist priest or a Bayswater convict—whichever you pleased.

Another of the Paintings Exhibited by Crowley as a Work of Art and Judged by Critics as "Absurd and Meaningless."

A group had gathered around one of his canvasses which bore the seemingly innocent title of "May Morn." It was like many of his pictures, a sort of nightmare in vivid colors.

Crowley's "May Morn" abounded in the most violent of contrasts. Look at it today, if you can locate the canvas, and study its peculiarities. The weird painting shows a background of bleak, Chinese mountain landscape. In the foreground looms a dead tree, and hanging from it by the neck is the body of a witch or hag. From behind the tree a bearded face, whimsically like that of Bernard Shaw, peers out. It might be the face of a devil, or of a philosopher. In the back distance, by a stream, a man is playing on a flute, and a golden-haired, half-clad girl is dancing in joyous abandon. In the foreground are enormous misshapen mushrooms and toadstools.

Several persons were discussing it aloud and puzzling over the painting's incongruous title. "Dear Mr. Crowley, won't you please explain to us, in your own words, the meaning of this picture?" asked a kindly old lady of the group, who was "so interested," she said, "in all modern movements."

"Certainly, madam," responded Crowley in his most suave and punctilious English manner. "The subject is very simple. The artist represents the dawn of the fay, following a witches' celebration, like that described in the Brocken scene of 'Faust.' The witch is hanged, as she deserves, and the satyr looks out from behind a tree. In the background all is beautiful Spring and the nymph dances joyfully to the piping of the shepherd."

"How very charming," beamed the old lady, "and so delightfully simple, now that you have explained it. How can anyone say that your pictures are immoral?"

But it wasn't so "delightfully simple" as the old lady thought. The next afternoon one of the governors of the club visited the exhibit, I am told, in a state of violent excitement.

"This man, Aleister Crowley," he began, "is a monster, a blasphemer, an abomination. He is trying to destroy everything that is sacred and holy—and these pictures of his, apparently innocent, are in reality, the hideous, veiled propaganda of his wicked cult. You heard the glib, lying explanation he gave of the picture called 'May Morn.' Now listen to the real interpretation of that picture, written by this man himself, for his equally depraved initiates."

And, unfolding a paper which he had taken from his pocket, he read:

> "This picture is symbolic of the New Aeon. From the blasted stump of dogma, the poison oak of Original Sin, is hanged the hag with dyed and bloody hair, Christianity. The satyr, a portrait of Brother D. D. S., one of the teachers of the Master Therion, represents the Soul of the New Aeon, whose word is, 'Do What Thou Wilt.'
>
> "The shepherd and the nymph in the background represent the spontaneous outburst of the music of sound and motion, caused by the release of the Children of the New Aeon."

The storm that followed is still talked about by Liberal Club members. A violent discussion immediately broke out. Some of the more vehement participants were for burning the pictures or calling in the police. But others took the stand that if the pictures were worth looking at they should be allowed to remain.

The first faction prevailed, but not unanimously, and amid a storm of violent disputing, which nearly led to physical violence, the pictures were stripped from the walls, and word was rushed to Crowley to have them taken off the premises immediately.

In the next chapter I shall tell how I became acquainted in New York with the beautiful violinist, Leila Waddell, who had been the "high priestess" of Crowley's "O. T. O." cult in England, and how I learned more of its mystic séances and practices, including a rev-

elation of the astounding alleged "crucifixions" which were participated in by members of the "sect."

Leila Waddell, the Talented Young English Violinist Whom Crowley Made a "High Priestess" in His Mystic "O. T. O." Love Cult.

(To Be Continued)