THE MAGICIAN
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by

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We think of the English author Somerset Maugham as being an uncompromising realist. Even when they are set in strange distant places, his stories are scarcely ever fanciful or romantic. The chief power of his work is that it seems like a transcript of actual life.

However, there is one of his novels which is unlike all the others. It is called *The Magician*. Its plot and several of its characters are quite different from the usual hard photographic Maugham tale and easily recognizable personages.

The principal character is a modern wizard, called Oliver Haddo. He is a rich young Englishman, well-born, and very tall and strong, with a remarkable reputation for courage. When we meet him first he is living in Paris, studying occult books in Hebrew and Arabic, but we learn that he has already distinguished himself as a big-game hunter, and is the only man alive who has killed three lions with three successive shots. Once handsome, he is now bald and immensely fat, although he had lost none of his colossal strength; he looks like a very bad Roman emperor.

Oliver Haddo is not the hero, although the book is named after him. The hero is an English surgeon called Arthur Burdon. He is in love with an English girl who is studying art in Paris; her name significantly, is Margaret. Oliver Haddo crosses their path once or twice, and then again. He performs several feats which, even to the surgeon, appear to be magical: for instance, he allows himself to be bitten by a poisonous viper, and heals the wound by saying some words over it and spitting on it. Eventually he hypnotizes Margaret, makes her see terrible visions of evil, dominates her and marries her. Some time passes. Margaret and Oliver Haddo are apparently happy, liv-

ing the life of wealthy expatriates in Rome and Monte Carlo, but the girl's character degenerates rapidly. Eventually Haddo takes her to his huge old house in the north of England, and there her death from heart disease is announces.

Arthur, who had continued to love her, does not believe that her death was natural. He follows Haddo to his home to investigate; and there, in a dark room of the local inn, he is attacked by Haddo, breaks his arm, and at last strangles him. But when he manages to find matches and light the lamp and turns to examine the body, he finds to his horror that the dead Haddo has completely disappeared. At this he knows what he must do. He goes up to Haddo's house and breaks in. It is richly furnished, but has no human inhabitants; yet he hears an extraordinary sound coming down from the top story00not a human voice, nor the cry of an animal, but an odious gibber, hoarse and rapid and wordless. On the top story he finds an enormous series of laboratories, fitted with the most modern equipment and heated to an overpowering temperature by a row of furnaces. And there, in a row of glass jars, he at last discovers the secret of Oliver Haddo, the secret for which he had dominated and at last sacrificed Margaret by using first her spirit and then her blood.

The jars contain his attempts to create life. In the first there is a mass of flesh about the size of a head, pulsating slowly and rhythmically; in another there is a thing like a large embryo, with its legs and arms not yet separated from the body; another contains an almost human trunk, with two heads which open their eyes slowly and separately as the light strikes them. In the last of all their dances and raves a furiously alive creature about four feet high, with a human shape, and an enormous human head; it is from this monster that the senseless gibbering comes. And then beside it, Arthur sees the body of Oliver Haddo the magician lying on the floor; its eyes are injected with blood, its throat dark with the marks of strangulation, and when Arthur feels the right arm, he finds that it is fractures. He turns away in horror and leaves the vast building which contains nothing but death and the caricatures of life. But before he goes, he uses the furnaces to set fire to it, so that in a single holocaust all that iniquity will be blotted from the face of the earth.

An extraordinary story, is it not? Quite unlike the rest of Somerset Maugham's work, and yet he published it in 1908, when he was 34 years old, and therefore in the prime of his life. It is not the product of an aberrant imagination, nor of a

decadent struggling with omnipresent sin. Maugham himself says that all his work blends fact and fiction so inextricably that ne even he himself can distinguish them. The fact that his hero is a doctor leads us to interpret the story as somehow connected with Maugham's own life and experiences, or at least as based on someone whom he had known.

It is true. Or at least its basis is true. There was such a magician. He was a year younger than Maugham, he was well known in Europe for many years, and he died as recently as 1947. I never saw him myself, but friends of mine met him and heard him talk. Not only Somerset Maugham, but W. B. Yeats and Arnold Bennett knew him quite well. He was called Aleister Crowley. A detailed biography of him was published in London a few years after his death, by the English firm of Rider; its author is John Symonds, and it is called by one of the titles the wizard loved to give himself, *The Great Beast*.

The real magician's story is nearly as extraordinary as Somerset Maugham's romantic novel about him. Some of the facts are almost the same. Crowley was not a hunter, but he was a daring mountaineer who made expeditions to the dangerous peaks K-2 and Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas. He had strong hypnotic powers; and he had an extraordinary capacity for dominating women, using them in magical rites and driving them at last to drink, insanity and death. On the other hand, his chief interest was not the artificial creation of something resembling human life, but the establishment of a new world religion of which he would be both the apostle and the deity—a religion based on the controlled use of emotion raised to its greatest intensities, and on the abandonment of reason and the evocation of unconscious powers by every possible mystical release, including sex and drug taking. And throughout his life, instead of studying (as Oliver Haddo did), he poured forth an interminable torrent of bad poetry, meaningless prose and amateurish drawings and paintings. If he had not had such a deliberately destructive effect on so many men and women (even though they were weaklings), he would have been an essentially comic figure, like the adherents of those small absurd sects who have private gospels written by one of their own number—they usually talk much about the Egyptian pyramids, wear sandals and weave their own clothes.

The facts in Aleister Crowley's life (the external facts) are these. He was born in the English midlands in 1875, from a rich, prosaic, middle-class family. His father had made a decent fortune out of brewing beer. Both his parents belonged to

the small new sect called Plymouth Brethren. His father died young, leaving him lots of money; his mother tried to dominate him, and then gave up, saying that he was the Beast 666 of the Book of Revelation—a description which apparently molded his career for the rest of his life. He tried for the first years of his adult life to become a poet and mystic like Yeats, but was not taken seriously. He spent the First World War in America, writing anti-British propaganda for the German agent George Sylvester Viereck—not from any admiration for the Germans, but, like many such propagandists, from a profound and irrepressible mother-hatred.

After the war, he returned to Europe and started to publish again; but once again he failed to make his mark, because his writing was so poor and his doctrines were so incoherent. In 1920 he founded what he called an abbey in northern Sicily, where he gathered a group of disciples with whom he engaged in fantastic rites of asceticism and debauchery alternating in the way that only a very strong man or woman can endure. One of his pupils died. He was expelled from Italy in 1923 and from France in 1929. During the '30s he enjoyed an odd reputation, partly because he had published a book *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*, which had had a scandalous success, and partly because he had a certain personal impressiveness through which he dominated many groups and many goofy individuals. Also, although he was obviously a very wicked man, blasphemous and perverted and fundamentally cruel, a hater of the world, many mixed-up intellectuals felt it their duty to defend him not because they liked him and his doctrines, but because he was attacked by the cheap newspapers and magazines and the old-fashioned English officials who had been condemning the paintings of D. H. Lawrence. This helped to give him a reputation which his own thought and work had done nothing to deserve. Gradually, in the face of a more real diabolism, it faded away. Aleister Crowley survived the Second World War, constantly repeating the slogan, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law," and taking as much as 11 grains of heroin a day, which is sufficient to kill a roomful of people. He died in 1947, lamented only be a few loonies, and at his funeral service his own pseudo-Swinburnian *Hymn to Pan* was read. It gave serious offense to the authorities of the Brighton Crematorium.

He was not a fake, Aleister Crowley. He was a failure. As a magician, he was far less successful than many wizards—for instance, Saint-Germain. As a mystical writer, he was miserably inferior even to his own contemporaries; if you want proof,

see Yeats' *Vision*. As a teacher, he was not to be compared with Gurdjieff. He remained a boy all his life. He never lacked courage, but he lacked taste, and he lacked knowledge, qualities which come with maturity. He would not study, but preferred to evoke visions and oracles from his own subconscious, which anyone can do.

To the ordinary spectator Aleister Crowley must seem a wicked and foolish man. True; but he has some importance beyond his individual character. He was a symptom. He was a channel of the same forces which appear in the later music of Scriabin and the poetry of Lautréamont and Rimbaud and the novels of Huysmans, and in much Dadaist and Surrealist art—the forces which first found voice in the writings of Nietzsche, the forces which contributed to making the mind, and the power, of Adolf Hitler and others of the modern barbarians. The new gospel announced in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathrustra* belongs to the same family as its weaker and more derivative successor, Aleister Crowley's "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." These are the gospels of the chthonic gods, the gods of the lowest and most dangerous parts of the human soul. We all know the strength which these powers can exercise; those who can evoke them are truly magicians and witches; and as in the old fables, such emanations always threaten and often destroy those who call them into the upper world of light and reason.