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HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE

KING'S BENCH DIVISION
"BLACK MAGIC": LIBEL ACTION
AGAINST AUTHORESS

Crowley v. Constable and Co., Limited,
and Others

Before Mr. Justice Swift and a Special Jury

The hearing was begun of an action by Mr. Edward Alexander (Aleister) Crowley, an author, of Carlos Place, Grosvenor Square, E., against Constable and Co., Limited, of Orange Street, W.C., Charles Whittingham and Griggs (Printers), Limited, of Brunswick Park Road, London, and Miss Nina Hamnett in respect of an alleged libel in a book entitled *Laughing Torso*, published, printed, and written by the defendants respectively.

The defendants deny that the words complained of were defamatory and further plead that, if they were, they were true in substance and fact.

Mr. J. P. Eddy, Mr. Constantine Gallop, and Mr. E. A. Lewis appeared for the plaintiff; Mr. Malcolm Hilbery, K.C., and Mr. W. Lilley for the publishers and printers of the book; and Mr. Martin O'Connor for Miss Hamnett. Mr. Arthur Reade held a watching brief for an interested party.

Mr. Eddy, in opening the case, said that *Laughing Torso* purported to be an account of the authoress's own life, with intimate studies of her friends and acquaintances. Mr. Crowley complained that in that book he was charged with having practised that loathsome thing known as Black Magic. There was another passage in the book to which Mr. Crowley objected. It was a mere piece of vulgarity, and he (counsel) did not propose to embarrass the jury with it.

Mr. Crowley's activities had covered many fields. It might

be said that at times he had shown want of restraint and a passion for the unconventional. That might be due to the fact that he had been brought up in the strict environment of the Plymouth Brethren and he had taken the first opportunity of manifesting the spirit of revolt.

During his undergraduate days at Cambridge he wrote poetry and afterwards was interested in art, travel, exploration, and mountaineering. He had climbed the Alps and the Himalayas and the Italian volcanoes. He had walked across China and the Sahara and had lived in Indian villages. He had studied the religions of the world and since 1897 had been interested in the subject of magic.

Magic was of two kinds. There was White Magic, which was on the side of the angels and rested on faith in the order and uniformity of Nature. Black Magic was a degrading thing, associated with the degradation of religion, the invocation of devils, evil in its blackest form, and even the sacrifices of children.

“FIGHTING IT FOR YEARS”

So far from it being true that Mr. Crowley had ever practised Black Magic, he had been fighting it for years. The magic on which he placed stress was connected with the importance of the will. He thought that no one could achieve anything in the world unless he ascertained what he was fitted for, and then followed his true purpose.

In 1920 Mr. Crowley started a little community or order at Cefalù, in Sicily, to study that form of White Magic. He took an old farmhouse on a hillside remote from the town, and there he was joined by a little band of people—men and women, and occasionally two or three children.

Mr. Crowley's bedroom at the farmhouse was called “the room of nightmares,” because he had covered the walls with fantastic frescoes. It had nothing in the world to do with Black Magic. The community did nothing remotely resembling Black Magic.

In June, 1932, Miss Hamnett published her book. Mr. Crowley had met her originally in London in 1912 or 1913. She was then a student of painting and Mr. Crowley employed her in his studio. In her book the following passage occurred:—

Crowley had a temple in Cefalù in Sicily. He was supposed to practice Black Magic there, and one day a baby was said to have disappeared mysteriously. There was also a goat there. This all pointed to Black Magic, the people said, and the inhabi-

tants of the village were frightened of him.

That was quite inaccurate. No child disappeared mysteriously, and the only goat on the premises was kept for its milk.

Mr. Crowley, giving evidence, said that the principle of his belief was embodied in the words: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will." On those general principles, he maintained, all mankind should base their conduct. No man had a right to waste his time in doing things which resulted from mere wishes or desires. He should devote himself wholly to his true work in the world. He must first discover by self-examination and by seeking advice of wise men for what he was best fitted. He should then discover how best to apply the means at his disposal to the thing which was set before him.

Mr. Eddy.—Has that anything to do with Black Magic?—My principles would forbid it, because Black Magic is suicidal.

Describing the decoration of his room at the farmhouse at Cefalù, Mr. Crowley said: I decorated it with frescoes similar to religious paintings in Notre Dame. There were fantastic gargoyles—any odd thing that came into my mind. People said they looked like nightmares, and the room was inscribed as such.

Mr. Crowley said that there were different forms of magic. "In boxing," he said, "you can fight according to Queensberry rules or you can do the other thing."

Mr. Hilbery.—Does that mean that his definition of Black Magic is the same as all-in wrestling? (Laughter)

Mr. Crowley, continuing, said that the basis of all Black Magic was that "utter stupidity of selfishness" which cared nothing for the rights of others. People so constituted were naturally quite unscrupulous. In many cases Black Magic was an attempt to commit crime without incurring the penalties of the law. The almost main instrument of Black Magic was murder, either for inheritance or for some other purpose.

Black Magic was never practiced at Cefalù. The visitors did not give any undertaking to obey him in everything.

Mr. Eddy.—Were drugs displayed in your room which were available to the inmates?—I had an ordinary medicine chest containing bottles of medicine.

"A FOOLISH FABRICATION"

Did you supply the inmates with razors, commanding them to gash themselves whenever they used the word "I"?—That is

a foolish fabrication

Is it true that privacy was not allowed and that ablutions had to be done in public in the courtyard?—No.

Mr. Crowley said that it was not correct that he made the men shave their heads, except for a symbolic curl in front, not that he made the women wear their hair short and dye it red for six months.

He also denied that he ever performed at Cefalù the “Ceremony of the Pentagram” in a room decorated with cabalistic signs and sacrificial knives, intoning incantations, and finally performing ecstatic dances and lashing himself into a frenzy. Nor, on Fridays, did he conduct an obscene invocation to Pan.

He did not sacrifice animals and invite the inmates to drink their blood.

Mt. Hilbery (cross-examining):--For a number of years you have been publicly denounced as the worst man in the world?—Only by the lowest type of newspaper.

Did one newspaper call you a monster of wickedness?—I do not know. There were only about two of them altogether.

From the time of your adolescence have you openly defied all moral conventions?—No.

Have you proclaimed your contempt for all the doctrines of Christianity?—That is quite wrong.

Have you said that Judaism is a savage, and Christianity a fiendish, superstition?—I do not remember anything about it.

Does it represent your view?—No. I am a student of religions, and my views have altered continuously in the course of my studies.

Mr. Crowley agreed that he had practiced magic since the days when he had come down from Cambridge, and that he had taken the motto of “Frater Perdurabo.”

Did you take to yourself the designation of “The Beast, 666”?—Yes.

Do you call yourself the “Master Therium”?—Yes.

What does “Therium” mean?—Great wild beast.

Do these titles convey a fair expression practice and outlook on life?—“The Beast 666” only means “sunlight.” You can call me “Little Sunshine.” (Laughter)

“You have written a number of books and many poems. Have nearly all of your poems been privately printed?—Certainly not.

Would it be true to say that practically all your poems are erotic in tendency and grossly indecent in expression?—It would be entirely untrue. I have written a volume of hymns

which have been highly praised.

Have you published material too indescribably filthy to be read in public?—No. I have contributed to certain pathological works which were only for circulation among students.

Is it true that in more than one country you have acquired an evil reputation?—No sensible person thinks anything bad about me. It is only a small group of persons quite unworthy of contempt.

Mr. Crowley admitted that the police at Cefalù asked him to leave, but said that the same thing occurred to a great many other distinguished Englishmen.

In 1929 did the authorities in Paris refuse to renew your identification card so that you had to get out of France?—Yes. A discharged employee was blackmailing me, and he used his "pull" with the Stavisky gang, or whatever it was, and got my card refused.

Asked whether he knew that in France, Italy, England, and the United States he had been openly attacked as a professor of Black Magic, Mr. Crowley said: "I do not remember reading them. I am a busy man. I do not waste my time on garbage." He claimed to be a master magician and had taken a degree that conferred that title.

Your magic, like your poetry, involves a mixture of eroticism and sexual indulgence?—It does nothing of the kind.

Mr. Crowley denied that in his published works he had advocated unrestricted sexual freedom. He had protested against the sexual oppression that existed in England.

Have you made a sonnet about unspeakable things?—Yes. I have described in sonnet form certain pathological aberrations.

Mr. Hilbery quoted from certain poems written by Mr. Crowley and asked:—Have you not built a reputation on books which are indecent?

The witness:—It has long been laid down that art has nothing to do with morals.

We may assume that you have followed that in your practice of writing?—I have always endeavoured to use the gift of writing which has been vouchsafed to me for the benefit of my readers.

Decency and indecency have nothing to do with it?—I do not think they have. You can find indecency in Shakespeare, Stern, Swift, and every other English writer you try.

Mr. Crowley agreed that he wrote a preface to another book in the name of a clergyman. That preface referred to the "dis-

gusting blasphemies and revolting obscenities which defile these pages." The preface was not intended as a mockery of the Christian point of view, but as an exposition of the view of a certain type of clergyman.

Do you agree that there is much in that book which any ordinary, earnest Christian would call disgusting blasphemy?—No.

It contains a succession of sonnets entitled "Black Mass"?—There is one series with that title.

That is certainly, all of it, blasphemous?—The Black Mass is blasphemy and I am exposing and denouncing it.

The hearing was adjourned.

Solicitors.—Messrs. Forsyte Kerman and Phillips; Messrs. Waterhouse and Co.; Messrs. Edmund O'Connor and Co.; Messrs. Osborn-Jenkyn and Son.