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How Bad Was The Beast?

A 1951 View of the Man
Who Shocked the 'Thirties



Crowley

THE MAGIC OF MY YOUTH. By Arthur Calder-Marshall. Rupert Hart-Davis. 12s. 6d. 226 pages.

Beast 666 of the Apocalypse was born at Leamington Spa in 1875, son of a brewer who was a Plymouth Brother and in due course died, leaving £30,000.

The Beast was named Edward Alexander Crowley. It was not good enough.

"Edward Alexander" quickly disappeared and, as "Aleister" Crowley, The Beast embarked on his career of adventure. He soon had other names, e.g.:

In 1903, **Macgregor of Boleskine**, with kilt and strong Jacobite leanings.

In the '20s. **The Master of Thelema** in an "abbey" at Cefalu, Sicily, where rites of black (as his critics alleged) or white (his story) magic were performed.

Brother Therion, author of occult works, in style resembling Swinburne put through a mangle.

The Wickedest Man in the World—in British Sunday newspapers of the '30s.

An ex-zebra?

The Wickedest M. in the W. serves as a connecting link in Arthur Calder-Marshall's entertaining reminiscences of boyhood and Oxford, for, by chance, Crowley had a more or less disastrous influence on people who played a part in his life-story.

For example on "Vickybird," a quaint ex-poet who denied hotly that he was turned into a zebra by The Beast and sold to a zoo in Alexandria. *"Tell me, do I look as if I had been a zebra?"*

The Beast had contrived the suicide of "Vickybird's" mistress, a beautiful girl named Ione de Forrest.

Then there was "Auntie Helen," her tawny hair bound with python skin who asked Calder-Marshall to tea with her in Oxford one afternoon "because it is early closing day and the stars are right." She lived in a flat with a parrot, two mongooses and a stone marten. Thus, in spite of the incense, the flat smelled like a zoo. "Auntie," too, has been in the Crowley set.

Further, there is Raoul Loveday, who as an undergraduate put a chamber pot on the top of the Martyr's Memorial in Oxford. He became Crowley's slave—or slave of the drugs Crowley obtained for him—and died of influenza at the Abbey at Cefalu.

Loveday's death was followed by eerie rites—and later by Crowley's expulsion from Sicily.

Crowley began as a comic rather than a sinister rogue. After marrying a Mrs. Skerratt at Strathpeffer, he joined an expedition to climb Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas (four killed) and in 1910 appeared in London with an Irish accent and a "temple" at the top of some flats in Victoria Street. He sold tickets for magic "rites" in the Caxton Hall. Five guineas for seven rites; for the rite of Saturn worshippers to wear blue, for Venus, green, etc.

Angel Wilhelm

When World War I came, Crowley went to America and espoused the German side, writing in a Chicago magazine that "Wilhelm II seems the very angel of God, terrible and beautiful."

After the war, The Beast, putting on weight, repulsive in aspect, but retaining a hypnotic power especially over women with money, set up the abbey in Sicily. From the establishment, stories of orgies, drug-taking and even blood sacrifice spread. Crowley's description of the routine was rather different: "*We began the day at Cefalu with family prayers,*" he said.

But when he alleged libel against Nina Hamnett's book *Laughing Torso* Mr. Justice Swift, after an appalled glance at Crowley's writings, declared: "never have I seen such dreadful, horrible, blasphemous and abominable stuff." The jury stopped the case. Britain was now taking a more solemn view of Crowley's nonsense.

Scandalous!

It was hardly surprising then, that when Calder-Marshall proposed The Beast should address the Oxford Poetry Society—"A blow struck for Truth and Beauty," said Crowley—the University authorities imposed their veto. "*A scandalous violation of civil liberties,*" Crowley protested.

The Poetry Society had to look elsewhere. It looked to Wilhelmina Stitch, the poetess, who triumphed over the smart young men who had come to jeer at her.

As for Aleister Crowley, we are given a final macabre glimpse of him in his cottage at Knockholt, where he lived, a worn-out old fraud with a spectacular Brazilian wife. He made a last-minute attempt to hypnotise Calder-Marshall.

In 1947 The Beast died and was cremated at Brighton. A Hymn to Pan and Collects from the Gnostic Mass were recited by Louis Marlowe, the novelist, to a congregation of mourners murmuring "Pan, Pan." Mrs. Hilda Johnson of Leicester, placed a sheaf of pink carnations on the coffin. The reporters were warned, "*Be careful what you write. Crowley may strike at you from wherever he is.*"

Twenty-four hours later his doctor was found dead in his bath. Let us hope Mr. Calder-Marshall is in good health.

The funeral caused some talk in Brighton. The chairman of the crematorium committee said, "We have taken steps to prevent such an incident happening again."

Locking the stable door after The Beast had fled?