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'THE BEAST' DROVE WOMEN TO SUICIDE

A Story of Depravity

UNDER REVIEW:
The Great Beast. The life of Aleister Crowley, by John Symonds (Rider 21s.)
The Magic of My Youth, by Arthur Calder-Marshall. (Rupert Hart-Davis. 12s. 6d.)

A youngish, round-faced man in the costume of an Alpinist; a paunchy, middle-aged person in vaguely Eastern garments uttering invocations to the sun at dawn: a plump passer-by "clad in a sky-blue knicker-bocker suit, with beret to match, and a walking-stick of the identical colour"; a bogus Scot with a bottle of Rhine wine tucked into his sporran; a sham peer; an unwarranted prince; finally, a shrunken and shuffling dotard in a Sussex guest house, only kept alive by daily injections of heroin large enough to kill a roomful of ordinary human beings—these were a few of the fantastic shapes that Aleister Crowley, self-proclaimed black magician. "The Beast 666" (whom a Sunday newspaper once obligingly labelled "The Wickedest Man in the World"), assumed during the 70 years of his adventurous mortal progress.

Everything about him was more or less false—the peerage he had assumed in Scotland and the princedom he had acquired in Egypt, as well as the system of "magick" that he seems to have patched together from other people's writings. His verses were deplorable; his pictures appallingly bad.

What he did possess was a certain hypnotic gift and the knack of attracting hysterical women, whom he exploited and ill-treated and often drove to death or madness. One loses count of the cases of suicide to which Crowley lent a helping hand.

If he deserves to be remembered—which I am inclined to doubt, in spite of the biography, nearly 300 pages long, that John Symonds has devoted to keeping Crowley's memory

green—it is as an exhibitionist and clever parasite rather than as a diabolical dabbler in forbidden occult sciences.

The Great Beast, nevertheless, contains many interesting, and even entertaining chapters. For Crowley was a sinister buffoon, a playboy of the realms of darkness; and when he invoked the Powers of Evil, I suspect that the Cosmic Spirit stood sometimes at his elbow. Whenever they were not merely disgusting, the pranks in which he indulged reveal a perverted sense of fun.

He would astonish a respectable Swiss hotel by arriving to play chess, wearing silken kneebritches and a velvet coat with ermine lapels; or he would exert his supernatural prestige in a crowded German cafe: "Arose in my might (he recorded) and stopped the gramophone in the Terminus by threatening all present with immediate death." He must often have laughed up the sleeve of his capacious and gaudy magician's robe.

Interesting, too, is the account of the underworld in which he lived and prospered. We read, for example of MacGregor Mathers, self-styled Comte de Glenstrae, who called up demons in a London back-room and worshipped Isis in a Paris music-hall. of a mysterious stranger named Theodor Reuss, with prim pince-nez and handle-bar moustaches, who one night appeared in Victoria-street bearing the salutations of a powerful society of German seekers after occult truth, and who turned out to be in his spare time, an agent of the German Secret Service.

We are told of mad American women arriving from nowhere, pleading to be allowed to serve as the Beast's "Scarlet Woman"; and of a slightly demented professor of mathematics, appropriately entitled Norman Mudd, who about 1909 decided to descend upon the magician's doorstep.

Poor Mudd! his was a terrible career. In the cause of "Crowleyanity" (which he had embraced as a religion) he endured the sufferings of a mediaeval galley-slave. Eventually he was found drowned, a broken-down pauper, his pockets weighted with lumps of rock.

John Symonds has treated his strange and grotesque subject in an unusually painstaking but somewhat excessively solemn manner; as if he could never quite make up his mind whether Crowley was a complete fraud.

Arthur Calder-Marshall has no doubts and proves consequently far more flippant. **The Magic of My Youth** is an engaging and rightly written collection of autobiographical studies in which he conveys the charm of his own youth—eager, impet-

uous, inquisitive—while describing some of the men and women who delighted or amused him; a pretentious but penniless feminine eccentric who lived, barricaded against duns in an atmosphere of Eastern scents and strong-smelling exotic animals, and a flighty courageous minor poet whom his friends believed that Crowley, a former associate, had once changed into a zebra.

Eventually Crowley himself emerges, like the Demon King of pantomime. But by this stage of his existence, the red of the Bengal lights had began to fade. With his shaven head, his heavy deep lips, and "skin. . . rough as a calf's tongue," he resembled a "bald and elderly stockbroker" who had taken to dissipated living. Life had been treating him ill: he badly needed a new disciple: and he set to work to hypnotise Calder-Marshall, but was careful to supplement his efforts by plying him with brandy. "I am perplexed. . ." were the last words he muttered on his deathbed.

When one has finished reading his biography the impression that remains is not so much of moral evil as of overpowering mental squalor. Even as a sinner, Crowley was somehow second-rate. The Devil is said to be a gentleman. If that is true, his association with "The Great Beast" can never have been more than a nodding acquaintance.