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The World's Wickedest Man.

By Leon Gellert

If it is inconvenient to go on vacation at this time of the year the next best thing is to take one vicariously.

The last day or so I have been flopping around Sicily and the Aeolian Islands in the person of Mr. Denis Clark who makes a practice, and apparently a livelihood of holidaying in somewhat out-of-the-way places.

His last little jaunt, described if you remember, in his "Sea Kingdom of Corsica," was so profitable that it called for a sequel. In the Sicilian adventure that followed, and is now recorded in "Swordfish and Stromboli," he took a canoe, a tent, some under-water-spearfishing gear and a companionable wife with a lust for the Mediterranean sun.

The Clarks, who had originally planned for nothing more than a pleasant period of island vagrancy, had no sooner crossed the straights of Messina than they were seized with the ambition to interview the bandit, Salvatore Giuliano.

A rambling excursion began to assume the shape of a passionate quest—the quest of the comely Robin Hood of Palermo, who, for five years, had ruled over the western part of the island and accounted for seventy-two carbinieri.

The Clarks' itinerary covered many of the old stamping grounds of such creatures of the Odyssey as Scylla and Charybdis, the Cyclops, Circe and the Laestryfons. But these fabulous beings have become so shadowy over the centuries that it was something of an excitement to come upon traces of a "monster" of more recent times.

At Cefalu, on the north coast of the island, the Clarks encountered the deserted remains of Villa Santa Barbara, the ill-famed "Abbey" of Aleister Crowley, the licentious lad from Leamington, the self-styled "Wickedest Man in the World."

The poet-magician's proud motto "Do What Thou Wilt" was still to be seen crudely inscribed on the door, now overgrown with weeds.

Crowley's villa at Cefalu.

Thirty years ago the pale young poets and poetesses spoke of Aleister Crowley with bated breath. Little icicles of horror and awe gathered in their bloodstreams as they surreptitiously read such tempestuous verses as:—

With hoofs of steel I race on the rocks
Through solstice stubborn to equinox.
And I rave and I rape and I rip and I rend
Everlasting, world without end—

To some people he was the living spirit of all the evil on the earth. To some he was a genius gone astray and a poet of considerable stature.

To others he was just plain nuts.

Mr. Clark recalls for us some of the forgotten data of the poet's life.

Crowley was born in 1875. His father was a wealthy Plymouth Brother of Warwickshire, and his mother, who painted tastefully in watercolour was, according to her son, "a brainless bigot of the most narrow, logical and inhuman type."

In later life he claimed to have been born with all the stigmata of Buddha including four hairs curled in the shape of a swastika over his heart.

His boyhood seems to have been uneventful, except perhaps for a disgraceful incident involving the destruction of a cat.

Like Byron, Shelley, Swinburne and Tennyson, he came

down from the university without taking a degree. He disdained accepting honours from an institution that owed him so much!

Having completed his university career he devoted his time to writing poetry and climbing mountains. His "Sword of Song" was written at 22,000 feet on the Baltoro Glacier in the Himalayas. Later on, he installed two temples in Chancery Lane for the practice of magic. One of these was white and lined with huge mirrors. The other was black with an altar supported by a negro standing on his hands. Here he kept a human skeleton which he attempted to vitalize with blood and small birds. The result of the experiment was more unhygienic than mystic.

Some experiments in demonology, which followed, are alleged to have met with more success.

He then tackled the problem of rendering himself invisible, explaining that the secret of invisibility was the power to go about without people noticing one. "He became adept at this," says Mr. Clark, "and could walk in the street in a gold crown and scarlet robe without attracting attention, or at any rate without letting it worry him. Public notice was the very last thing that did that."

Crowley's next step was to get married and go to Ceylon to hunt flying-foxes.

One night in the jungle, on being awakened by the squeal of a dying bat, he was pleasantly surprised to discover his wife, stark naked, hanging by her heels. Checking any unsportsmanlike impulse to take a sitting shot he immediately became the conscientious scientist. "It was," he wrote, "the finest case of obsession I have ever had the good fortune to observe."

His poetry, which was presented in magnificent volumes that made other writers mad with envy, was pregnant with dark ecstasies. He grudgingly admitted an indebtedness to Swinburne.

In 1922, the "Sunday Express" demanded the suppression of his book, "The Diary of A Drug Fiend":—"At the bases and more bestial horrors of the book it is impossible to hint," wrote Mr. James Douglas.

The paper published a list of Crowley's misdemeanours:—(1) He had dubbed himself Earl of Middlesex, Count von Zonaref, King of Ireland, and MacGregor of Boleskine.

(2) He had torn up his passport before the Statue of Liberty and declared a one-man war against England.

(3) He had founded the order of the "Atlantean Adepts" and an immoral society for the worship of Pan.

(4) He had celebrated the rites of the Black Mass and the Cult of the Beetle.

(5) He had performed Isis worship in Egypt.

(6) He and his adherents had practiced unbridled licentiousness at Villa Santa Barbara "where the place reeked of incense made out of goats' blood and honey, and where the Master Therion reclined smoking opium surrounded by obscene pictures gathered from all over the world."

Strangely enough Crowley was a sort of idealist. His motto "Do What Thou Wilt" was based on the idea that the individual should examine his nature as though it were a machine and allow it to work without obstruction in order that latent aptitudes be liberated.

He enjoined his followers to conceal nothing from each other—a philosophy that had something in common with the "Oxford Group Movement." Out of this unrestricted state man lifted himself to the status of a demi-god!

From Cefalu to California his orders and lodges were founded.

Nevertheless it is difficult to assess how much was deliberate ballyhoo and how much was serious belief, for Master Crowley was not without a keen sense of humour.

Mr. Clark, by a coincidence, had met in his youth a woman whose husband, Raoul Loveday, was one of Crowley's disciples at the Villa.

From Mrs. Loveday he learned much about the goings-on at the "Abbey" as it was called.

The male devotees were required to shave off their hair except for a small curl in front in the mode of the Master. The women dyed theirs red or black in alternate periods of six months.

The children conducted their own pretty little pagan rites each evening punctually at five o'clock.

Drugs were always to hand for those who fancied them. Cocaine, heroin, and opium were available in abundance.

At the adult ceremonial, which took place at 8 p.m., the Arch Thelemite, richly clad in scarlet robes, would rise from his throne and rest the point of his sword on Raoul Loveday's head, saying: "Artay I was a Malcooth Vegabular, vegadura, ee-ar-la ah moon!" And there is no reason to believe that "eeny meeny miney mo" would not have been equally effective.

Crowley wrote two volumes of autobiography which he dedicated to Augustus John who painted his portrait. The second volume ended abruptly suggesting that a third was to follow.

Much of what he wrote evokes laughter and some of it arouses pity.

He still remains an enigma but at least he can be classed as the Arch Exhibitionist of his day. He just loved to “dress up.” Under strict surveillance he would have made an admirable Santa Claus at a city store!

Mr. Clark found the famous “Abbey” something of a disappointment. It was little larger than a farmhouse. The door was blistered and the shutters were cracked. Nothing of splendour remained in that unholy place save the glorious vista over the Tyrrhenian Sea. He camped beside its walls for one night and moved on.

And, by the way, The Clarks were unsuccessful in their quest of Giuliano, the bandit.

They had to be satisfied with a brief glimpse of Rosselini who, with his newly-one prize, Ingrid Berman, happened to be pottering about on the slopes of Stromboli when they called at the island.

After all, one bandit is little different from another.