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**W. S. Maugham Portrays
A Forgotten 'Magician.'**

One of the strangest figures of English literary society during the first half of the present century was a bad poet and good showman named Aleister Crowley.

I only met Crowley shortly before his death in the 1940s, when he was already sunk in rather pathetic senility. But the Crowley of earlier decades had been an unusually flamboyant individual even for the Bohemian world, a self-styled black magician who, by means of a sinister manner and an exhaustive knowledge of occult literature, managed to convince some people at least of the authenticity of his pretensions.

Crowley's own writings are already almost forgotten, except among the people who haunt the little esoteric bookshops around the British Museum, but he survives as a character in the literary memoirs of the period which he ornamented so eccentrically. He was also the model for the villain in Somerset Maugham's early novel, *The Magician*, which appeared in 1908 and which has recently been republished, after having been out of print for a quarter of a century, with a preface by Maugham explaining its origin (Heinemann, \$3.25).

"The Magician" is something more than a bit of ironic fun at the expense of Crowley, for Maugham's magician really can do what he claims, and the novel develops into a neatly contrived suspense story of conflict between evil and good.

Some aspects—the Parisian background and the theme of the domination of an innocent girl by an evil man—remind one of George du Maurier's *Trilby*, but Maugham is a more polished literary craftsman than du Maurier, and, quite apart from the interest of the melodramatic happenings in *The Magician*, he presents a picture of Montparnasse in the days before the great tourist wave of the 1920s which has a very authentic feeling.

The Magician has one major flaw—a flaw which seems to be present in almost all of Maugham's novels and which perhaps explains why, in spite of his excellent literary craftsmanship

ship, Maugham has failed to gain a secure place among the important writers of our time. It is the failure of the characters to measure up to the conflicts in which they act. Haddo (the magician) has a convincing inhumanity, but the young doctor who strives with him for the soul of the girl does not seem to have the inner fire commensurate with his effort, and the girl herself is too malleable to impress us with the reality of her moral agony.