

# FATE MAGAZINE

## September 1949

### Men of Mystery

Written by Hereward Carrington

**He was known as the most wicked man in the world!**

It was soon after World War I started that I received a visit from the most remarkable man I have ever known.

His eyes first attracted my attention, for, though he looked at one while talking, they appeared to remain parallel, instead of focusing, as most eyes do. The result was the unpleasant impression that he was looking right *through* you, and perhaps reading your innermost thoughts! For the rest, he was fairly tall and overly plump, with a low, quiet voice and a distinctly Oxonian accent.

My visitor brought with him a letter of introduction from the Hon. Everard Feilding, the Secretary of the Society for Physical Research. It read:

*This will introduce to you Aleister Crowley, poet, sage, mountain climber and general lunatic. I am sure you will have much in common.*

Despite the dubious compliment, I found that the prediction was correct. I *was* profoundly impressed by Crowley's knowledge and extraordinary versatility. He knew more about any subject you could mention than anyone you would ordinarily meet. He had traveled all over the world, spoke a number of languages, was the first man to ascend the second highest peak in the world, and possessed a profound knowledge of science, art, music and international affairs. He had mingled in the highest social circles, hobnobbed with royalty, and lived for months as a Yogi in Ceylon. He had written and published a number of books, while his Essays were for the most part critical, caustic and highly symbolic. His poetry undoubtedly ranks among the finest ever written. It remains virtually unknown to the general public owing to the fact that the bulk of it is highly erotic. He was an expert at chess, bridge, various sports, and was a crack shot. Needless to say, he had at one time been a big game hunter.

In appearance Crowley varied enormously from time to time. No two photographs of him—taken a few years apart—would be recognized as the same individual. In one he would be a handsome, debonair man-about-town; in another a naked yogi, seated cross-legged in the jungle; in yet another he was a Mage, clad in the robes of his magical regalia. On more than one occasion he shaved his head completely, and his face appeared fat, gross, flabby and terrifying. A few months later he had grown a luxurious beard. A photograph taken some five years after this depicted him as a young man, slim and spiritual—one who might well have posed for the original of Dorian Gray. These external changes were characteristic of the kaleidoscopic changes of the inner man.

I came to know Crowley well during his six month sojourn in America, and found that we did indeed have much in common, for he possessed an inexhaustible fund of knowledge concerning his particular life-interest—the occult sciences and magic. What I mean by magic here is real, ceremonial magic, involving invocational ceremonies. Publicly accused of being “the wickedest man in the world,” he was hated by many people, feared by most. He was a strange mixture of Cagliostro, Rasputin, Cellini and Baudelaire: a personality never to be forgotten.

In some ways Crowley was undoubtedly the most sinister character I have ever known. He was expelled from the university for sacrificing a goat on the campus in the course of one of his magical ceremonies. Many years later he was turned out of England and went to France. Turned out of France he went to Italy. Expelled from Italy he went to Sicily, where he founded his famous Monastery, near Cefalu—of which more anon. Ordered to leave Sicily he went to Tunis. The next thing we knew he was back in London again! For a time he shared a castle somewhere in Wales with Dr. Alexander Cannon.

One winter, in Paris, Crowley shared an apartment with Arnold Bennett and Somerset Maugham. The latter, however, used Crowley as “copy,” and in his book “The Magician” he gave many actual facts concerning Crowley’s life—such as how he obtained his first wife by means of doped incense, etc. An amusing incident comes to mind in connection with this book. It was subsequently made into a movie, directed by Rex Ingram. I saw it at the Capitol Theater in New York. two girls were seated behind me, and one of them remarked to the other, “I don’t like this picture. It’s so impossible.” Well, I happened to know that ninety per cent of it was absolutely true!

An anecdote will perhaps serve to illustrate Crowley's extraordinary character. When he was living in a Scotch castle, long ago, unearthly screams were heard to issue from it in the dead of night, as though someone were being murdered. The villagers were terrified, but finally summoned up enough courage to knock on the door and enquire the cause of the disturbance. Crowley opened the door and, in response to their enquiries, exclaimed petulantly, "Go away; I'm beating my wife!"

Crowley's dietetic habits were as odd as the man himself. At times he was extraordinarily frugal, living only on a scant vegetarian diet and drinking only milk-and-cream. At other times he indulged in neat brandy and inordinate quantities of beefsteak. Yet no one ever saw him drunk. On occasions he would insist on ordering the meal backward, beginning with the dessert and ending with soup. Maugham noted this peculiarity in his book.

Crowley's mental and moral life were as erratic as his diet. At times he lived the saintly life of a recluse, undergoing stringent spiritual exercises. Then he would suddenly disappear for a week or two, and be found in the lowest dives of underground Paris. Needless to say, his sex life was as sophisticated and as variegated as his general character. His experiences in this direction, all over the world, were amazing.

Yet it must not be deduced from all this that Crowley was merely a degenerate roué. The amount of literary work he did was almost unbelievable. His writings on magic alone fill many volumes. He published a dozen tremendous tomes called "The Equinox," filled with invaluable reference material. His magical dictionary, "777" is classic. Volume after volume of poems flowed from his pen. He edited the "Ritual of the Golden Dawn," staged a series of spiritual dramas in London, "The Rites of Eleusis," and wrote innumerable book reviews and essays. Many of his book reviews are typical: "Paganism and Christianity," by Edward Carpenter. "This is a good book, which makes me wish I had been born before Christ." "Poems," by Mrs. Boole, "The title of this book is a misnomer." On the other hand, he published many fine literary essays and reviews which rank with those of Edgar Allan Poe.

I have spoken of Crowley's poetry. Typical of this unforgettable man's attitude is the following incident. He published a book of verse of such spiritual quality that many of his poems were set to music and sung in a certain church. Then someone pointed out that all these poems represented merely veiled sex-symbolism. Horrified, they were rejected and his books publicly

burned. Crowley was delighted at this, and the title-page of his next book bore the legend, "Published by the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge!"

Crowley greeted every acquaintance and began every letter with the same phrase: "Do What Thou Wilt Shall be the Whole of the Law." Naturally this brought a storm of criticism from many quarters, people accusing him of promulgating unlimited license. Crowley's reply was that his critics couldn't even understand the English language; that "do *what* thou wilt" did not mean "do *as* thou wilt," and that the inner significance of his remark was that, when once you have determined your ideal course of action in life, you should let nothing and no one stand in the way of its fulfillment. Another favorite dictum of his was "every individual is a star," meaning that every human being is an individualized spiritual entity, differing *in toto* from every other individual in the world today.

When sauntering along the street with him, Crowley might occasionally stop in the middle of the bustling sidewalk, and his lips would move in silent utterance. He was saying a prayer to the sun, or some god in his magical hierarchy.

That Crowley possessed real magical power of some sort I have no doubt. I have attended invocational ceremonies of his, at which strange and fantastic things happened. I well remember one of these—when William Seabrook was also present—which lasted the greater part of the night. Crowley, Seabrook, Waddell and I were in the Magic Circle; the young man who was the subject of the experiment sat cross-legged in a Triangle, drawn on the floor, some little distance away. The room was filled with the fumes of incense, and the chanting of the ceremony—in English and "Angelic"—went on hour after hour . . . Under such circumstances one could not be sure that his senses were not deceiving him.

All the same, we all saw (or thought we saw) a strange phenomenon occur at the same time, and for approximately the same length of time. It was then about 3 A.M. The god Taurus was being invoked. As I looked, the young man in the magic Triangle seemed to slowly resolve into an amorphous mass—a sort of brownish-gray mud-pie. I glanced at the others, and saw that they too were observing something phenomenal. The droning of the chant grew louder; then after an interval of time hard to calculate but probably only some seconds, the mud-pie again resolved itself into our entranced young man.

Had my senses deceived me, in that smoke-filled room? Undoubtedly they had. But we afterward compared notes, and

found that we had all seen something most unusual happen—though our descriptions of it varied.

After a session of this character, strangers who called the next day often noted a peculiar trembling of the nervous system when they approached Crowley. I noted this myself on more than one occasion, and commented upon it to him.

"Yes," said Crowley, "that's very curious; many people have noted that after a Ceremony."

During the last months of his stay in the United States, Crowley suddenly branched forth—without any previously impulse or training—as a painter in oils! The number of canvasses he turned out within a few weeks was prodigious. Most of them were highly erotic, but several of them were symbolic and beautiful. His color-effects were startling. The subject-matter was indescribable.

Perhaps this strange urge—and his weird painting—resulted from the drugs he was taking in considerable quantities during the latter part of his stay here. At the last meal I had with him, I remember we had only soup, entrée and salad (he was alternately rolling in money and completely impoverished). He shook a capsule from a small box and swallowed it.

"Ah," he said, "some heroin and a cup of coffee; a delicious dessert."

I did not indulge in the dessert!

When Crowley arrived in Sicily he founded near Cefalu his famous (or rather infamous) Monastery. Thither went a number of curious and exotic characters. While it was supposedly an occult headquarters, drink, drugs and sex were rampant. One visitor—an actress from London—died there, and this incident precipitated a tremendous uproar. Crowley was compelled to close his establishment, and it was then that he was forced to move to Tunis.

Yet, paradoxically enough, there is evidence that many benefited enormously from their visit to this weird monastery. They underwent a prolonged and rigid course of Yoga training, renunciation and self-discipline. Of course there was nothing to do there, in the ordinary sense of the word; no theaters, no shops, no people, nothing but wild, mountainous, uninhabited country. After a few days there, neophytes would often go to Crowley and ask him what there was to do. "So what thou wilt," he replied. After thinking this over for a few moments, they sometimes intimated that they did not know what they really willed—or wanted. To which Crowley would brutally reply, "Find out!" They had to be content with this, and many of

them did indeed discover their own inner resources and "magical will" in consequence. The Monastery would either make or break them. Those who were broken, or fell by the wayside, were not worth saving in any event, according to Crowleyean philosophy.

Crowley himself became a drug addict while in Cefalu, but such was the man's remarkable power he largely cured himself of the habit, used himself as "copy," and published a book entitled "The Diary of a Drug Fiend," dealing with his own psychological experiences under various drugs, and his final emancipation from them. To a scientific man, it is a document of extraordinary interest and importance.

While fully realizing the sinister and dangerous character of the man, I was nevertheless profoundly interested in him as a personality, and in the store of knowledge which he undoubtedly possessed. While steadfastly refusing to take the Magical Oath, which bound his students to unquestioning obedience, and while never falling under his spell—being in fact alternately amazed and amused at his incredible career—I was nevertheless profoundly impressed by him, and I believe that Crowley genuinely liked me in turn, as much as he could like anybody. Realizing that he could not get me under his thumb, he respected my genuine and deep interest in his extraordinary powers. I never ceased to marvel at the man's versatility and many-sided genius. Nowhere could you ever meet another like him. I have ever known, he was the most bizarre and the most unforgettable.

How much of all that was said and written about Crowley was truth, and how much fiction? I often asked myself that question. Almost every crime in the calendar had been attributed to him, and, as I have said, he was publicly denounced as "the wickedest man that ever lived." That he was a sinister, feared, dangerous character I have no doubt. As opposed to this, there was his scientific knowledge, his industry, his profundity of occult knowledge (like Cagliostro), his exotic artistic and universal genius (like Cellini), his extraordinary influence over people (like Rasputin), and his mystically beautiful poetry (like Baudelaire). That is why I have characterized him as a compound of these four men.

My own estimate of him is that it would have been impossible for any one human being to have crowded into one life all the activities which had been attributed to him. Hatred and fear combined to manufacture many charges and create many myths. Discounting all this, however, he undoubtedly remains

a fabulous character—one which indelibly impressed itself upon the memory of everyone who encountered him.

I saw Crowley off on the boat when he sailed. He had not been a “success” in this country, as he had in Europe, and while expressing my regret at this, I also reminded him that this was largely his own fault. His parting words—his last shot as he went down the gang-plank—were “Well, what can you expect of a country which accepts Ella Wheeler Wilcox as its greatest poet!”