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‘Wickedest Man in World’ Provides Unique Study of a Psychopath and Mountebank

Reviewed by
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THE GREAT BEAST, by John Symonds; Roy Publishers, N.Y.; $4.50.

A London magistrate called him “the wickedest man in the world”—an appellation he was quite willing to accept, between bouts of protesting high high-minded motives, grossly misunderstood.

He would go to any lengths for publicity—he once staged an elaborate fake suicide when the press seemed to have been letting him alone for too long—yet made himself a Man of Mystery.

He claimed supernatural powers aver demons and angels, but would write whining letters to cadge “hand-outs.”

He honored the women in his life with such titles as the Ape of Thoth, the Scarlet Woman and the Whore of the Stars—a good many of them went crazy or committed suicide, which may not have been altogether his fault, as their mental balance was probably precarious in the first place.

VARIED TALENTS

He was a mountaineer and a chess player of genuine attainment, a disease-wracked drug addict, a charlatan, a psychopath, and a practitioner of black magic (which he spelled “magick” to distinguish it from mere stage performances) whose exploits puzzled the experts.

His friends and companions included men as resolutely mundane as Arnold Bennett and Somerset Maugham (who wrote a novel about him), as well as the great Irish poet and sincere mystic William Butler Yeats. He was expelled from Italy and France, dodged his creditors across four continents, and strewed scandal from Long Island to Tunis, from Paris to Detroit.

The name of Aleister Crowley bobbed up with fair frequency in the British press and every now and then crossed the Atlantic to our shores. He died in December, 1947, at the ripe age of 72 (a tribute to his constitution, not to his care of it) in an obscure boarding house from which he wrote “threatening, insane letters to tradespeople and friends” and lived on a daily dosage of heroin large enough “to kill a roomful of people.”

LIFE RECONSTRUCTED

John Symonds, who met him in this period of final eclipse and has had access to all his diaries and other writings, has reconstructed Crowley’s phantasmagoric life from the clouds of obfuscation and rubble of confusion which obscured it.

He is, quite understandably, fascinated by his subject, but keeps his wits about him. The question that inevitably rises, is was such a long, painstaking and detailed job worth doing? Messiahs of one occult doctrine or another, diabolic or celestial, populate our mental institutions, with enough left over for street corners and the meeting halls of Southern California.

The case of Aleister Crowley is worthy of special attention on two counts. First, he is fairly sure of a place in the long backward reaching historic line of authentic delvers into Black Magic. Second, his original complement of good looks, wealth, great personal magnetism, almost unwreckable physical constitution, and considerable mental endowment lifted him to the “ne plus ultra” of his type. Even Symonds, who analyses him ruthlessly, is sometimes a bit overawed. The persevering reader is likely to share these mixed sentiments.