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**Luncheons with Beast 666**

**By Maurice Richardson**

I was gazing the other afternoon into the window of the Atlantis Bookshop, that Mecca of the London occultist, in Museum Street. I had just decided against buying either a Kilner Aura-scope, a set of Tibetan Yoga Exercises, or a copy of *Archery and Zen Buddhism*, but was still resisting an urge to invest in a planchette as an aid to freer composition when my eye was caught by a notice announcing that the Neptune Press would shortly publish a revised edition with new matter of 777, "the most important magical work" of the late Aleister Crowley, described as containing, among other things, "for the first time the correct order of the Trump cards in the Tarot," and "indispensable for that *rara avis* the practicing magus." I stepped inside and helped myself to a prospectus. It set me thinking, as I turned into Great Russell Street, about my encounter with the Mage.

Perhaps it is a sign of something deplorable in my character that to me Crowley, Beast 666, "the wickedest man in the world," and all that, should have appeared consistently in the guise of a most amiable, utterly un-sinister, though markedly picaresque, buffoon. Or was I lucky enough to bring out the best, the best of all that was worst in him? I first met him a good many years ago in the Fitzroy Tavern. The disciple, a small nervous man, who accompanied him asked: "What will you have, Aleister?" Crowley answered in his strange voice, high-pitched yet crackling; "a triple absinthe, please." They sat down at the next table and Miss Nina Hamnett introduced everybody. The Magician remained silent until someone mentioned America. Then he leaned forward, his gooseberry-like eyes protruding so far that you thought they were going to jump into his absinthe. "When I was in New York," he said, "what distressed me most were the sufferings of the roasted peanuts in the peanut-vendors' ovens on the sidewalks. Their screams used to ring in my ears. Horrible! Horrible! Horrible!"

The disciple hurried to the bar for another treble absinthe.

When, soon after, Crowley departed, Miss Hamnett—this was before their celebrated litigation—expressed relief: “A.C. always makes me feel queer, my dear.” I twitted her, ordinarily so staunch a rationalist. “All very well, my dear,” she said, “but he made flames come out of my studio floor, my dear. If that’s not sinister, my dear, I’d like to know what is.\*”

About ten years later, in 1939, in a review of a volume of reminiscences by some minor Shoo Coney-catcher, I wrote an injudicious sentence to the effect that the author reminded me rather of “a more agreeable Aleister Crowley in a lesser way of business.” Prompt on publication, a letter arrived from the Mage. “My dear Mr. Richardson,” it began, “perhaps in future before you animadvert publicity in print upon my character you will take the trouble to make my acquaintance . . .”

I telephoned my apologies and was invited to lunch. “Have no fear, Mr. Richardson,” said Crowley in that unforgettable, twanging crackle, “I shall not be too severe on you.”

The Mage was inhabiting a small furnished flat—lent, I suspect, rather than rented—in Belgravia. He received me in a suit of green checked plus fours and a huge tartan bow tie. In one hand he held a calabash pipe like a cornucopia, in the other a bottle of vodka: “the only really virile aperitif, my dear Mr. Richardson, with the possible exception of ether.”

Lunch was brought in by a Scots lady named Kathy, part housekeeper, part disciple. The first course was some sort of lobster soup. Crowley pointed to a scarlet crustacean appendage sticking up out of the rich beige bisque flood. “It looks like the limb of a devil (he pronounced it *dev-ill*) who has dived into a slough, does it not Mr. Richardson?” He turned to the housekeeper-disciple: “Kathy! Say Will with me!”

“O.K. Aleister, but make it snappy or the spuds will be burnt.”

“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law,” crackled Crowley, eyes closed. “Love is the law. Love under will.” Kathy followed in Scots accents.

We sat drinking brandy for a long time after lunch. Crowley made many more jokes about Dec-ills and Magick, quite silly little jokes but in that absurd crackling voice they sounded wonderfully funny. I asked if his plus fours had sporting significance. He assured me, and for the moment I believed him, that he once had a handicap of plus four at Holyoke.

Presently the conversation took a serious turn. I found myself becoming entangled in a discussion of the origins of love

and hate. The magician's opinions were exemplary in their Christian benevolence: "Hatred, my dear Mr. Richardson, is a secondary phenomenon, a regrettable by-product of fear, the great Enemy. St. Paul . . . But let me give you some more brandy."

It was after five. I rose a little unsteadily to go. There was just one thing said Crowley. Would I—we had passed such an agreeable afternoon—would I mind writing him a letter, not, of course, of apology, but just some expression of my revised opinion of his character? I said that, of course, I would, as soon as I had recovered from his overwhelming hospitality. In that case, said Crowley, I must come to lunch again to-morrow.

I had every intention of writing an apology but a prudent friend dissuaded me. Crowley, he said, was madly litigious and cunning as a fox. The moment he got my letter he would try to use it as a lever to get damages.

The second luncheon was remarkable for the presence of a gentleman who is generally supposed to have been the model for "Mr. Norris" in Isherwood's delicious novel. He was an old friend of the Magician's from Berlin days. We all said "Will" together in chorus. The Mage's hospitality was lavish as ever, but the "Mr. Norris" situation became extremely complicated. I had not met him before but I knew him by name, sight, and reputation. Neither he nor Crowley, however, was aware of this. As soon as possible Crowley turned the conversation to Berlin. He asked me if I had read *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, told me that the original was an old friend of his, and added, with crackling relish: "If I were a real magician, my dear Mr. Richardson, I would be able to produce him for you at this table, would I not?" His inner merriment became so intense that I thought he was going to burst. "Mr. Norris" who was in one of his diffident moods, twittered: "Really Aleister, I think there has been too much fuss made about this mythical character. The whole thing is very *vieux jeu*."

Crowley asked, rather wistfully, about my letter. I made some evasive reply, but we parted on the best of terms. However, I still felt a twinge of guilt; after all, plot or no plot, the old warlock had made himself infernally agreeable. A month later, when I had saved up a few pounds, I telephoned him to ask him to lunch with me.

I was appraised of the Mage's arrival at the bar which was our rendezvous by a powerfully volatile smell, like an operating theatre. I deduced that he had been indulging in the other really virile aperitif. He was wearing a tail-coat and sponge-bag

trousers and looked like the duke in a musical comedy of the early 'twenties. He was greeted by a senior naval officer—war was close and uniforms were appearing—with a cheerful gin-pink complexion: "Aleister, old top!" O forgot precisely what we ate but it included pate and wild duck, and for a man who had started the forenoon on half a pint of ether with two treble absinthes as chasers, the Magician made a very fair lunch; he topped off with Armagnac and black Mexican cigars, strong as thunder. I found myself marveling at his almost simultaneous capacity unique surely, for dangerous drugs, rich food and the strongest tobacco, all in vast quantities. His conversation was genial as before and you could have repeated every word of it to your great-aunt. We discussed what form of war-work he was best suited to and made up an elaborate fantasy about training witches for anti-aircraft operations. (I learned later that during and after the London blitz he co-operated with an occultist house-agent to put spells on premises to render them bomb-proof.)

That was the last I saw of him, though I remained on his mailing list and received from time to time doggerel patriotic verses and notices of the impending publications of some esoteric fragment or other, always inscribed with a strikingly hearty phrase that smacked of the previous world war: "Toodleoo, pip-pip, Aleister . . ."

\* In the interests of truth I feel compelled to report this testimony, albeit reluctantly, for it may seem to conflict with my thesis of Crowley, the buffoon. I must add that, to this day, Miss Hamnett rejects the obvious practical joke hypothesis and refuses to be shaken by references to similar feats such as the "miracle" of the Holy Fire, which the Patriarchs of the Greek and Armenian Churches perform in Jerusalem every Easter. She is not the first rationalist to have been impressed by Crowley's capers; witness Mr. Somerset Maugham, who withdrew *The Magician*, his early novel about Crowley, from his collected works.