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New Light on Crowley the Beast—Part 2

DEATH AT THE ABBEY

The Abbey at Cefalu, in Sicily, where Aleister Crowley practised his new 'religion of Thelema, has just been rediscovered. JENNY NICHOLSON describes this monstrous legacy of a man whose magical rites shocked the world.



It has been popularly assumed that Aleister Crowley's black magical Abbey of Cefalu was destroyed by the Italian police when they expelled him from Sicily, following the death of his disciple, Loveday. This man, the newspapers of the world insinuated, died after drinking the blood of a cat, ritually killed.



DEATH AT THE ABBEY. *The hearse which bore Raoul Loveday, one of Crowley's disciples to the village cemetery at Cefalu thirty-seven years ago. His death caused a world scandal. It was alleged that he died from drinking the blood of a cat, ritually killed.*

But a few weeks ago Kenneth Anger, a young American who had already made one film about *"The Beast of the Apocalypse,*

whose number is 666—the number of man" (it was called 'The Dome of Pleasure,' and was shown at the festival of Britain), appeared in this ancient Sicilian fishing town of Cefalu. He was looking for locations for another film he was planning which would deal with Crowley's Cefalu period.

From Crowley's description of the Abbey in his diaries Anger at once located it in an olive grove, a mile or more outside the town. It was a one-story building, abandoned and dilapidated—not at all the sort of place you would associate with the headquarters of the magical "religion" which was intended to succeed Christianity!



THE ABBEY OF THELEMA, mother house of the 'magical religion' which Crowley had founded to succeed Christianity. In the background is the rock to which he banished erring disciples.

Anger managed to get into the villa. As he hesitated in the half-light of one of the empty rooms, he was aware of being stared at from the walls by many eyes. He did not run. He simply stood there, waiting for something to happen. Was magic still alive here? Was Crowley playing some posthumous

joke? But nothing happened. The eyes went on staring steadily, eerily, until he suddenly realized that these must be the magical, and pornographic, paintings with which Crowley had covered the doors and walls of the Abbey. The police had merely whitewashed them, and now, after thirty-seven years, it was flaking off. In order to reconstruct for his film the most publicised episodes in the history of magic all he would have to do would be to rent the place, and remove the whitewash.



RAOUL LOVEDAY, just down from Oxford, became an earnest disciple. "I dedicate myself . . . body and soul, to the Great Work," he swore. Above: the registration of his death in the Cefalu cemetery.

It may be superstition or prejudice, or a lot of nonsense; but it turns out that nothing connected with Crowley, dead or alive, is as easy as that. It was typical that Crowley's original landlord should have left the house to his two daughters, and

that the daughters had died, and left it to their husbands—a retired Colonel living in Palermo and a local lawyer. They had disliked each other, and had divided the villa with a wall which cleaves the main room in two.



BETTY MAY, an Epstein model, chief cook and baby-watcher at the Abbey. She was the only non-co-operative Thelemite. She accused Crowley of killing her husband, Raoul Loveday.

While Kenneth Anger was treating with the kindly lawyer to rent his half for a pittance, a band of workmen came singing through the olive grove, to make the Colonel's half of the house habitable for summer visitors. This was bad luck; since the villa, aside from a few months the landlord had spent there himself, had been uninhabited since twelve years before Anger was born. It was locally called "The House of Ghosts", and even with the extreme housing shortage in Cefalu, no local had been

persuaded to live in it. In a few minutes the workmen had destroyed a large area of the walls. To have the work stopped Anger was forced to disclose his discovery. "These murals are scientifically interesting—they should be preserved." In the minds of the owners, their troublesome little villa without light or water—or even the most primitive convenience—had suddenly become a valuable property. At the price they would now ask, Anger couldn't afford to rent it. While keeping the cooperative lawyer and avaricious Colonel waiting for his decision, Anger began to work day and night scraping the walls, cleaning them with hydrochloric acid. It was a slow job. When Anger uncovered the demons, the Colonel was so furiously disgusted, that he threw Anger out, and locked the door. The lawyer still allowed him to work in the other half of the house.



'THE COLLEGIUM AD SPIRITUM SANCTUM'. *Family group at the Abbey. With Crowley is Leah and his three children. The baby in arms died shortly after this picture was taken.*

This was the situation when we arrived in Cefalu to record the discovery. This is still the uneasy situation today. We had to begin work at once. There was no time to be lost.

We arrived from Palermo in the witching hours. The only Cefalun who were not asleep were the sardine fishermen, fishing with lights on the deathly calm sea. The moon was rising reluctantly. Owls called from the heights of the rock which dominates Cefalu. Bats were whimpering above the ornate tombs in the cemetery where Loveday had been buried. The Abbey appeared unexpectedly before us in the feeble moonlight—almost as if it had some down to meet us.



IS THIS THE SCARLET WOMAN? *This painting, believed to be a portrait of Leah, the woman who was Aleister Crowley's favourite 'magical mistress', has just been uncovered in the bedroom of the Abbey of Cefalu.*

We shone the torch on the floor. On the step was a dead cat, paws splayed—its head smashed in. It was beastly and inexplicable. In Italy to kill a cat is evil luck.

The torchlight revealed an exaggeratedly cobwebbed kitchen. Cobwebs of every design and texture festooned the pestles and mortars, and the rusted implements of Alchemy which Crowley used for mixing magic potions and preparing drugs, and they shrouded the ancient charcoal stove where Betty May (Loveday's wife and Epstein's model) cooked unwillingly for Crowley and his disciples.



THE BEAST, whose number was 666. This picture was taken shortly after he had been expelled from Sicily, for practising Black Magic. The police ordered the Abbey to be whitewashed and exorcised.

The torch beam fell on a face from the past—Leah, the Beast's favourite Scarlet Woman, painted naked by Crowley in thick, brilliantly-coloured oils.

Kenneth held the oil lamp to the other revelations of his patient scraping—portraits of naked disciples performing nameless things with each other, with symbols of sex magic, with a goat.

Kenneth was saying "Yes. There are elementals who keep me company when I work here at night. And between 1.30 and 4.00 in the morning there are heavy footsteps on the roof."

"They confine themselves to pelting me every now and then with tiny pieces of plaster. So long as they don't upset my hydrochloric acid, I don't mind."

Next morning was one of those autumn days in Sicily when all things are bright and beautiful. The new oranges on the trees shone like lamps. Hawks wheeled round the classic ruins of the Temple of Diana on the crest of the great rock.

We were giving the cat a decent burial below the Scarlet Woman's bedroom window while Domenico, son of a local farmer, was describing to us: "It was a day such as this. A fine, beautiful day. The middle of the morning. I was sixteen at the time when I saw it—a white beast the size of a donkey, cropping the grass right here."

"Did you see anything else, Domenico?" Anger asked.

"Yes. Later I saw a man leaning on a gate down there by the main road. He was wearing a black coat and a black hat, and in his hand he carried a flower, and in his other hand he carried a sword. 'Come here! Come here!' he called to me. Of course I didn't answer. If you talk to an apparition you die."

During the day we met several people who were old enough to remember Crowley as "a fine gentleman." Although local belief was that he had murdered Loveday, for some obscure reason of his own, and that when he left he had abandoned one of his women (who was forced to prostitute herself), and his children (who begged in the streets of Cefalu), this did not diminish their respect for him. "By Bacchus!" said old Galluazzi, admiringly. "You have to be a man to content so many women."

Franco, as a little boy, had played with Crowley's children, Dionysus and Hermes. Lurking in the olive grove, he had watched the sacrifice of the cat. "They were all wearing clothes. The Englishman was wearing a robe and a turban. There was a scarlet cover on the altar . . ."

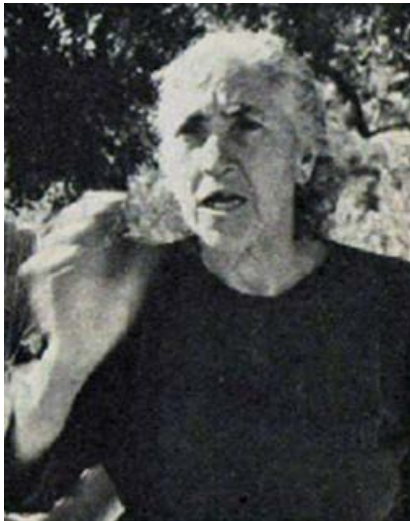
Galluazzi had seen evening and morning prayers carried out by Crowley and his disciples. But aside from these, the pictures on the doors and walls, Crowley's passion for dressing up, what was there to see?

Crowley had cast the Chinese sticks, and interpreted their message as advice to found his Abbey of Thelema, at Cefalu.

He had expected a stream of eager disciples. Few came. The greatest living authority on Crowley, and incidentally one of the few authorities on magic in England, an admirer but non-disciple of Crowley's, explains the murals. "His pictures were half joke—but were also to show new disciples. If they were shocked, they were no good and he would explode them."



THIS PEASANT remembers the Thelemites (including the children) at morning sunworship. "Il Signore prayed like this in front of a tripod."



"THERE WERE MANY TEARS, much weeping from Il Signore's women. Sometimes they ran away. But they always returned."

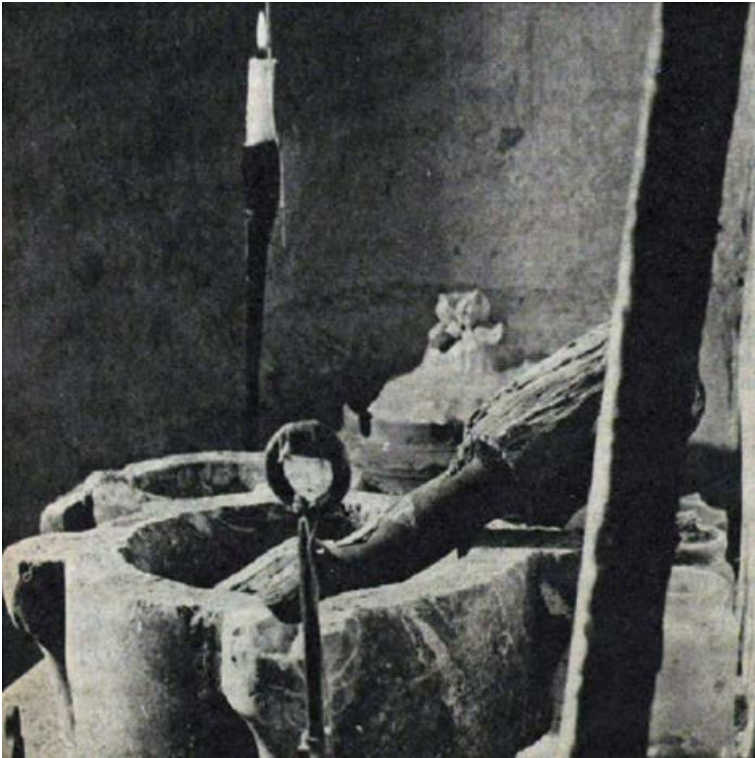
With nine or ten Thelemites living at close quarters, in magical competition on an income of only £3 a week (all that was left of Crowley's fortune) relations were often strained. Crowley worked at Magic, experimented with drugs, and wrote poetry against terrible domestic odds.

He often had to banish his women to the top of the rock, for quarrelling with each other. And from the doorstep, now overgrown with wild mint, he would signal them with a mirror when they were forgiven, and could come down.



KENNETH ANGER, a young American film-maker who rediscovered the Abbey, had to scrape off a thick covering of cement to reveal the Magic Circle on the floor of the Sanctum Sanctorum—Crowley's Temple. In the centre of the circle stood the six-sided altar on which was kept, among many magic symbols, the Record of the Abbey, in which were kept such entries as: "Yesterday I resolved to use no heroin after 11 a.m. . . ." He prepared his drugs in the kitchen (see below).

When he needed to escape from the cries of the children and the sulks of his disciples, he climbed to meditate in the Temple of Diana. He had a macabre sense of humour. He meant to shock when he jokingly summed up Loveday's death: "He lit my cigar and then he went out." But so far as anyone knows, he never did human sacrifice. He sacrificed living things only five times in his life. Five sparrows in connection with an invocation of Mercury. A pigeon in North Africa, to invoke a demon. He crucified, and consumed, a toad in the United States. At Cefalu the sacrifice of the cat (which had been carefully anaesthetized first), and the goat on the stomach of the Scarlet Woman were both done to amuse visitors.



THE ABBEY KITCHEN.

Things went from dreary to disastrous. Sister Cyris got ulcers. The Beast got boils. Poupee, the Scarlet Woman's child, died. And then, to finish them all off, Raoul Loveday drank bad water, and died of enteritis.

Crowley had been notorious for so long that newspaper readers found it easy to believe he had murdered Loveday. The

Cefalu period ended in the ignominious expulsion from Italy of the Beast 666.

P.S. *At a small stationers in Cefalu I bought a pencil. Printed in it in gold was the number 666. Kenneth Anger was not at all surprised.*



"THE SCARLET WOMAN" in the fantasy film THE DOME OF PLEASURE, by Kenneth Anger. It was shown at the Festival of Britain five years ago.