

## NEW STATESMAN AND NATION 22 SEPTEMBER 1956

### Willie and the Beast

**The Magician.** By. W. Somerset Maugham. *Heinemann*. 15s.

You might have thought Aleister Crowley would have been a gift to Mr. Maugham. The Beast, you feel, should have impressed him as the Hairless Mexican impressed Ashenden, like "a purple patch on two legs". For Crowley, however ludicrous his mumbo-jumbo, however nasty some of his tricks, was a person of very varied attainments.

His physique alone deserves to be celebrated by a congress of typologists. He was almost certainly an example of one of Sheldon's cases of physical over-endowment with a correspondingly overloaded temperament. The combination of athleticism and degeneracy which he displays must be unique. In youth he was a brilliant mountain-climber who could dash up a perpendicular rock face like a human fly. In middle-age his capacity for the absorption of huge quantities of the strongest liquor and tobacco, the richest food on the menu, and the most dangerous drugs in the pharmacopoeia, was almost unlimited. He lived to the age of seventy-three on a regime that would have killed many people in a few days. Mentally, too, he was versatile: magic apart, he was a fine chess player, a very minor poet, a humorist with a strong line in the grotesque. He could be a thundering bore, but right up to the end of his life he could also be very agreeable company if he were in the mood, and had been able to stoke up with enough ether, heroin, oysters, steak tartare, cognac and latakia. Then there is the question of his fascination for women—and not all his consorts were demented or ill-favoured—and the final problem of how to classify him: how much was he psychopath, and how much charlatan? Surely there would have been rich material here.

Unfortunately Mr. Maugham met Crowley too early, when he himself was still under some of the sillier Ninetyish influences, before maturing into the genial humanist of *The Circle*, *The Out-station*, and *Cakes and Ale*. *The Magician*, which is the novel he wrote in 1907 about Crowley under the name of Oliver Haddo, is an unabashed occult thriller, a genre for which there was a distinct Edwardian vogue. It ends in a ludicrous psychic

free-for-all in the mage's lab, where Haddo has been making homunculi. How could the staunch young materialist so recently qualified from St. Thomas's have brought himself to pen such a farrago? One can only suppose there was some powerful unconscious symbolism at work. The book, however, remains quite readable in spite of the absurdity, and quite undistinguished. The plot turns on how Haddo, in revenge for a verbal slight from a prim surgeon, captivates, marries, debauches and finally destroys, his artist fiancée. It might have been written by Robert Hichens or any one of half a dozen Mudies library novelists of the period. Mr. Maugham is under no illusions about its merits today. In the brief account of his meeting Crowley with Gerald Kelly, Arnold Bennett, and Clive Bell in Montparnasse, and shows perfectly clear insight into the true nature of Crowley, who later tried to touch him with a telegram: "Please send twenty-five pounds at once. Mother of God and I starving. Aleister Crowley." But it is slightly distressing to find that even now Mr. Maugham is still harping on having "never regained" his membership of the intelligentsia since he became "a popular writer of light comedies". For his services to literature, as an *amende* for the very unfair treatment given him not so long ago by Edmund Wilson, and in spite of *The Nagician* and one or two other lapses from the highest cerebral plane, let us agree to nominate him the literary intellectual of the month.

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