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### THE ELUSIVENESS OF ALEISTER CROWLEY.

By  
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We are living in an anemic age. The spirit of high adventure has left us. And we are too easily contented with the mere breaking of records. Let us build a boat this year, the biggest in the world. And next year someone will build one a few inches bigger, or a trifle heavier. And the crowd will gape and crow. In a few days it will all be forgotten. And in a few months the same crowd will gape and crow over another boat still a little bigger and heavier. Let a man run or walk or swim or fly a few seconds faster than ever before his fame is assured—for the length of a vaudeville tour. And in a few months someone else has done just what he has done in just a little less time. We have had variation—but within bounds. We have had something new—but not original.

We admire the daring of those who perform the obvious. We applaud the boldness of those who have the intrepidity to step in the footsteps of those who have gone before. A man can stand out in the crowd. But he must be of the crowd. He must be recognizably of a certain type. He must be able to be fitted, if with a little squeezing, into one of the readymade pigeon-holes.

Let us take a man who is oftenest known as Aleister Crowley. Where can we place him? Surely under Poet. but hold! What manner of poet is this who spoils his best lines with marginal clowning and footnotes which mock the manner and matter of the poem. We will try, then under Mountebank. But if we squeeze him into the form of a mountebank, what become of his profound studies in religion and his attempt to found a religion for today with at once a high ethic and a naturalistic beauty and also an appeal to the mind of a rationalist. But how explain a mystic who uses the methods of frauds and is enough of a sensationalist to furnish food for the Sunday supplements of the Yellow Press?

By this time the man has so thoroughly eluded us that the only way to punish him is to push him into obscurity. This we

have proceeded to do. And when for some reason or other he emerges and comes once more within our ken we howl with rage and beat him with whatever we find at hand, be it brickbat or mud. And if it be mud, the muckier the better.

If this be the attitude today toward one who is, regardless of his character and personal life, one of the finest poets writing in English, it must be admitted that he has not done much to assuage it. It seems to have been his chief delight to alienate even those who fell under the magnetism of his intellect or felt the sway of his charm. The most charitable view of any of his former friends is that he is brilliant and unpredictable. And from there the descriptions range from "charlatan, through extraordinary" through "unreliable" and "vicious" to, finally, "slimy, thoroughly obscene, though keenly intellectual".

He is, you see, an instinctive psychologist—a tremendous egotist who knows through years of experience how to catch the attention of, and feed the egos of, those in whom he is at the moment interested. But having impressed one with his sincerity and profundity his natural perversity cannot resist pulling a leg or two. In this way many people who would otherwise have been friendly and helpful to him are completely estranged. And one can understand the resentment which follows upon what they cannot help but regard as a betrayal not only of themselves but of those high ideals which he held out to them.

While this peculiar sense of fun contributes not a little to the evil rumors which seem to breed around his personality, his own attitude toward the attacks upon his character has not been very helpful. He has, until only a few years ago, made no definite attempt to defend himself. Indeed his explanations were usually as extravagant and irritating as the thing they were supposed to explain. One is never entirely certain just what Crowley wants you to think.

It was in fact not until 1934 that Crowley sought to correct the impression of him as a Satanist. It was then that he sued Nina Hamnett, the English artist, for libel. Unfortunately, he came out of the trial blacker, if that be possible, than before. Indeed, Justice Swift, before whom the case was heard, declared that Crowley was a monstrous, unclean person who nauseated him. And the jury, proclaiming themselves as so thoroughly revolted by the nature of the evidence that they would hear no more, brought the trial to a sudden halt after only four days' procedure. Crowley, himself, sat in the courtroom glaring at the witnesses with the stolid, magnetic gaze which had formerly won him such fervent adherents to his doctrines.

It is, however, the same Nina Hamnett who gives an amusing illustration of Crowley's wickedness. When Miss Hamnett was a budding young art student of twenty-one, she had heard many tales told of him. She had been warned that his reputation was so questionable that it were wiser not to allow herself to be alone with him. It so happened that one day she was at his studio and was painting. He was lying on a hearth rug in front of the fire, asleep. His secretary found it necessary to go out of the room, thus leaving her alone with Crowley. After a time he stirred, woke up, and stared at her. Finally he said, "Are we alone, here?"—she answered, "Yes," Whereupon he lay down again and resumed his nap.

This man about whom it is so easy to believe the worst and so difficult to find any good, was born in 1875. He was christened Edward Alexander. And the name Alexander, he declares, suits him very well, it meaning "Helper of Men." That, he believes, is what he has been for sixty years, still giving himself fervently to the task in spite of that intellectual cynicism which is bound to come with experience. However, he did not like the nickname of Alick: the name itself was too long: and he loathed the diminutives of his other name. He chose the name Aleister because apart from being the Gaelic form of Alexander, it also consisted of a dactyl followed by a spondee as at the end of a hexameter. This, he read, is the most favorable combination for being famous. He will admit, however, that he would have become famous no matter what name he chose.

He claims a sort of hermaphroditism in his physical structure, which does not affect his masculinity, this being above normal. It is probably owing to this that he is so thoroughly able to understand feminine psychology. So too would be explained his unstable vacillations, and his purely opportunistic code of honor, which permits him to shift his point of view or modus operandi with no regard for the obligations he has incurred.

It can be seen, too, in his attitude toward his mother, who he always disliked and despised. He confesses indeed to a physical repulsion and intellectual scorn of her. His father, on the other hand, was a sort of hero to him, although there does not seem to have been any intimacy between them. It may have been through a desire to hurt his mother and outrage her religious feeling that he decided, after his father's death, that evil was his good, and that only through sin could he win his way to spirituality. It was she who first called him the Beast 666.

It is true, though, that his intense dislike of the Plymouth brethren, to which sect his parents belonged, turned him against the current notions of good and evil. At any rate he never found himself at home with any European religion or philosophy. It was only in the Yi King and the writings of Lao Tze that he found something sympathetic, although, strangely enough, the symbolism and magical practice of early Egypt held equal appeal.

Even in early childhood the two major preoccupations of his life were apparent. He wrote his first poetry, modeled after the "Hymns for the little Flock" compiled by the Plymouth Brethren, at the age of ten. And he climbed rocks almost as soon as he could walk. He did his first extensive climbing in 1894, when he scaled the Alps.

A year later he was at Cambridge, studying for the Diplomatic Service, the subtlety of intrigue even then fascinating him. Oddly enough, he had no aptitude for languages, being able to master the grammar but becoming impatient with the vocabulary. A short time after he had entered he was invited to meet Gladstone, but refused to go. Instead he sent a poem to Gladstone explaining that he did not care to meet a liar or shake hands with a traitor. There are, perhaps, more tactful entrances to diplomacy.

It was while he was at Cambridge that he first became interested in occultism through the reading of "The Book of Black Magic and Pacts" by A.E. Waite, whom he later described as "a pompous, ignorant and affected dipsomaniac who treated his subject with the vulgarity of Jerome K. Jerome." Nevertheless he wrote to him and asked for further light. Waite recommended to him "The Cloud on the Sanctuary" by Councillor von Eckhartshausen, which seemed to him more authentic.

He now began the issuing of those sumptuous volumes which are veritable masterpieces of modern printing. Since they were issued in editions limited to one hundred or one hundred and fifty copies they will probably remain as they are now, almost unobtainable and almost mythical. It is fairly certain that no one today possesses a complete set. At least, even Crowley lacks many of them. In paper, type and binding they are a joy to the eye. Even when for awhile he seemed to prefer the original Caxton type, with its heavy black face, he turned out some beautiful jobs. This lettering, incidentally, aroused one critic to remark that since the type was as incomprehensible as the text he could conscientiously forego reading it.

Although "Aceldama" was the first of the line, it was with "White Stains" that he laid the foundations for his reputation as an addict to every kind of unmentionable vice. It is, I suppose, technically an obscene book. It is, however, far less pornographic than many of the novels which thrill stenographers or some of the scenes of our censored talking pictures. In intent it is as serious as any scientific work by Ellis, Freud or Stekel. It is, in fact, an attempt to use the form of poetry to criticize a theory of Krafft-Ebing. The latter, it will be remembered, believes that sexual aberrations are the result of disease. Crowley, with his interest in occultism still fresh, tried to prove that the acts involved were merely magical affirmations of intelligent points of view. To show this he invented a poet with normal and innocent enthusiasms. Gradually developing various vices, he ends by being stricken with disease and madness. The whole finally leads to murder. He has the poet himself, in a series of poems, describe his progressive degeneration, always explaining the psychology of each act.

In the thirty volumes that followed he poured forth what seemed a ceaseless stream of poetry in which was some of the finest verse appearing during those ten years. In the wealth and voluptuousness of his imagery he very closely rivalled Swinburne. And while his lyric powers were not inferior to Yeats, his mysticism was often purer. There is, however, no doubt that the vein of skepticism and roisterous humor that runs through many of his interpolations and footnotes often detract from the enjoyment of the verse. In his fear of seriousness he resembles somewhat the later poet, T.S. Eliot, who can, for example, stop the action, and break up the unity of his work, in such a play as "Murder in the Cathedral" while he permits his four assassins to clown through an explanation of their act. But whereas in Eliot's work there is some internal reason for his buffoonery, in Crowley's there is none. All that is really satisfied is his own penchant for laughing unkindly at everything, including himself. At any rate this is so seriously militated against him that so late as 1912 with the bulk of his work behind him, the critics were still hard put to find the proper place for him. Admitting his talent and his powers they still could not take him as important. And at least one of them, Harold Munro, confessed that he was baffled in the attempt to make any decision whatever. They could not help but become excited over his exquisitely carved lines, but his perverseness left them with a sense of frustration—of which irritation was born. And there they left it.

By the time he had left Cambridge he had made quite extensive researches into occultism for which he preferred the term Magick. Once convinced of the truth of it, he soon believed that he had powers of a special order, and soon after joined the Hermetic Order of the G.D., of which W.B. Yeats was a member. It was then that, in order to prevent his family from interfering with his studies in Magic, he took lodgings in London under the first of many aliases—Count Vladimir Svareff. A wiser man, he admitted later, would have taken the name of Smith. Here, finding himself entangled with the wife of an Indian Colonel, he was unable to devote as much time as he had hoped to his studies. Whereupon he bought a manor in Boleskine, from which under the imprint of The Society for the Propagation of Religious Truth, he issued in limited edition the successive volumes of his poetry.

"The Mother's Tragedy," which he wrote about this time, seems to have been influenced, according to his evaluation, by Ibsen with a touch of Bulwer Lytton. By this time, too, he and Eckenstein held all the world's records, but one, for mountain climbing. In spite of this the Alpine Club made so many difficulties about his joining that he finally withdrew his application. For one thing he did his climbing alone, whereas they always went under the care of a guide.

In 1900, squabbles broke out in the Order and it finally broke up. Crowley thereupon set out around the world. For several months he stayed in Mexico. Here he became a Mason, and under the tutelage of Don Jesus Medina, was speedily pushed through and admitted to the 33rd degree. Here also he made his first attempt at establishing an Order of his own. This was the L.I.L., The Lamp of the Invisible Light, the general idea of which was to have an ever-burning lamp in a temple furnished with talismans. Daily light would radiate and enlighten such minds as were ready to receive it. His further experiments in Magick finally resulted in his acquiring the ability to make himself invisible. He was able, for instance, to walk through the streets of Mexico City in a scarlet robe and a golden crown upon his head without attracting attention. We have his own word for it.

While he was here he became engaged to an American prima donna. Unfortunately, the marriage could not take place until she had first gotten rid of her husband. Later, leaving her, he wrote his own version of the Tannhauser story. His "Tannhauser" is as dissatisfied with the pure love of Elizabeth as with the profane love of Venus. He discards all earthly ties at the call

of the idea of the divine principle of love which cannot be satisfied by any person, however noble.

Eckenstein arrived, told him that his Magick was rubbish, freed him from his opera singer, and took him off mountain climbing. After which he continued his tour, stopping off at Honolulu. From here he eloped with the wife of some officer. By the time they had reached Japan he was quite tired of her and sent her back. But he had another collection of poems out of the experience, a retailing of their day to day love and disillusionment. He concludes, in moralist fashion, that he could thank God that he was through with that foolishness. He published these verses under the title of "Alice, an adultery," antagonizing reviewers who were moved to ire by the act but did not see the moral of the act.

When he came back to England he stayed with his friend Gerald Kelly, where he met the latter's sister Rose. She was being forced through circumstance into a marriage she did not wish. Crowley helped her out of her difficulty by carrying her off one morning and marrying her himself. Having married her he didn't know quite what to do with her, so he took her for a trip around the world, going first to Cairo. From here he revisited Ceylon for big game shooting. The following year he went with the expedition to Kang Chen Unga, having already had to his credit six months exploration of the Chogo Ri in the Himalayas, after his "Alice" experience. This still not consuming all of his energy he walked across China with his wife and daughter. The walk being to his liking, he also tried the Sahara Desert, winding up with several months at Morocco.

During these years he made brief visits to England, where he arranged the publication of those works he had written while resting from his travels. Among these was the "Sword of Song" which was probably the outcome of his first stay in Ceylon, before his marriage, when he had made a study of Hindu Yoga and the Buddhist religion. This interesting *mélange* of poetry, exposition and criticism is probably the greatest of Crowley's work. No previous work of his showed his rhyming ability so fully. In the richness and variety of his harmonies he showed himself a master equal to Gilbert. Interwoven with the beautiful imagery are the profound observations which show the extent of wide reading. Also, alas, it is full of his provocative remarks. His marginal notes are constantly breaking in with, "How clever I am." Or, "Bard checkmates himself." Or, "Some poetry." Needless to say, it was, in physical appearance, as interesting as the matter it contained, and as startling.

Between whiles he also busied himself with the translation of early mystical works such as the "Ambrosii Magi Horus Rosarum" and the "Goetia of Solomon the King." He also published a series of essays under the title "Konx Om Pax," which with its kaleidoscopically changing humor was one of the most exquisite things he did, and the "Liber 777" which is a sort of dictionary of comparative religion. The Occult Review, which ought to know, declared that it was as good as many years' intelligent study at the London Museum.

By the time he was ready to startle the professional occultists with the violence with which he exposed their inadequacies in the successive numbers of *The Equinox* he was convinced that the world needed some new form of religion which would be at once satisfactory to his aesthetic sense without at the same time straining his historical and scientific credulity. He was inclined to believe that he could formulate just such a creed and he considered himself a natural religious leader. To these ends he founded the A.A. or Atlantean Adepts, which later branched out into the O.T.O. or Ordo Templi Orientis. *The Equinox* was the official organ of these groups.

Those forces which had been smarting with the sting of Crowley's merciless satire soon organized, and in the person of S.L. Mathers brought suit against Crowley. The legal excuse was to restrain Crowley from publishing the secrets of the Rosicrucian Order in his magazine. Crowley appealed and won. And *The Equinox* duly appeared each Equinox for five years. Then he informed his readers that the second volume would consist of five years of silence. The third volume was begun, but the venture was dropped after the issuing of one number. Into *The Equinox* Crowley poured an enormous amount of beauty, wit and criticism. His series on "My Crapulous Contemporaries" and "The Big Stick" lashed right and left and made him many enemies. But besides these he also wrote stories, poems, fantasies and rituals under a dozen different names.

It was, however, with the performance of the Rites of Eleusis in Caxton Hall that the newspapers first decided that he had decided possibilities as a circulation builder. From then on it was usually the sensational aspects of his career that were offered to the public. Although the performances were limited to one hundred persons and the tickets high priced, some prurency-sniffing reporters did manage to gain admittance. Needless to say, the impressiveness of the ceremony and the beauty of the lines read left them unmoved. What did set their imaginations to work were the long periods in which the room was



plunged in darkness and only the violin was heard. The descriptions gave hints, in a veiled innuendo, of unbridled lust and license. Crowley paid small attention to the storm he had raised and aside from printing the ceremony on *The Equinox* left his defense in other hands. He took his second wife, Leila Waddell, the violinist, to Spain with him.

In 1912 he wrote those chaste and lyrical poems which make up his "Hail Mary." The book was first published by Catholic publishers as the devotional verse of a famous actress under the title *Amphora*. Crowley permitted the legend to go the rounds, even Wilfred Meynal accepting it as authentic Catholic verse, and then revealed his own connection with the work and reissued it under his own name with the new title.

The following year after revisiting Moscow he issued "The Book of Lies," one of his fantastic and elaborate jokes which always leaves the reader uncertain of what Crowley is laughing at or even wondering if he has caught the point of it all. He also published the result of his arduous researches in Yoga under the title of "Book Four."

When the war broke out he resented the hysteria which followed—the atrocity stories and the stampeding of the nation into an extreme patriotic fever. Soon after he came to America.

Here he became the subject of an amusing newspaper article when he, Leila Waddell, and several others set out one morning and before the Statue of Liberty declared the independence of the Irish Nation, proclaimed it a republic, and as the head of the Revolutionary Committee of Public Safety of the Provisional Government declared was on England. His action, if it amused the Americans, brought forth the applause of those Germans who were living here, and their sympathizers. Before long he was writing for George Sylvester Viereck in *The International*, and soon after was contributing most of the stories, the series which he did as by Mark Wells, "Golden Twigs," and the "Scrutinies of Simon Iff" under the name of Edward Kelly are good, but not up to his own exceptional standards. But some of the articles are really noteworthy pleas for tolerance and intelligence. Others are savagely ironic. In these violent times, however, the irony was entirely lost and made his more sober statement suspect. At any rate, the Germanic groups were convinced that Crowley was sincerely on their side. The English were convinced of the same thing. And Crowley, who could not resist hoaxing the Germans in his usual fashion and at the same time sought to recapture the favor of his countrymen, soon found himself not wanted by either side. Viereck, as

a matter of fact, soon received information that Crowley was definitely trying to sell him and the German propaganda out. When America entered the war Crowley somehow became associated with the Department of Justice.

After the war he did some painting, advertising for models who were to be exceptionally ugly or deformed. He also gave a benzene jag when Prohibition was declared, the guests finding themselves on the streets some hours later with not the slightest recollection of what had taken place. His formula was simple enough. He passed around capsules of which contained twenty drops of benzene. Around this time, too, he began living with a woman who passed as his third wife—a school teacher from New York, who acted as the High Priestess of his cult.

In 1919 he returned to Europe—his fortune finally gone. Finding it necessary to replenish his purse he wrote "The Diary of a Drug Fiend." It instantly created a terrific uproar, one review being headed, "A Book for Burning." Crowley's past was raked up and spiced up and as in the case of "White Stains" the book was used as evidence of his degeneracy. That the book, in spite of its rhapsodical passages was really one with a moral to it, was entirely slurred over and forgotten. It is supposed to show that the habit may be cured through self-discipline and training of the will. The handling of the psychological situations is quite masterly, and his toxicology has the ring of authority. In construction it is often careless, showing signs of haste, but the quality of his work is easily evident, verging at times to the poetical.

In this book he gave hints of the actual existence of the Abbey of Theleme, where his characters go to be cured. And the furore over this book had not yet died down, before Crowley was again in trouble over the discovery that he was operating such a place in Cefalu. This was the result of the lurid disclosures either made by Betty May Loveday, or ascribed to her by the press which again saw in Crowley's actions good circulation material.

Betty May had gone to Cefalu with her husband, Raoul Loveday, who was a fervent believer in Crowley and in Crowley's mysticism. At Cefalu he was warned by Crowley to be careful of the water and to drink none that had not been distilled and filtered. Loveday, however, disregarded this warning and drank from a nearby spring. He was seized with enteric fever and died in spite of expert medical care and attention. The press immediately devoted long articles to the case, protesting that he had really died as a result of the excesses which were part of the

life of the colony. And they gave hints of weird and lustful ceremonies going on there. Only in a final sentence would they admit that fever was the cause of death. And nowhere did they mention the manner in which he was cared for. Betty May told the truth of the matter years after when she published her autobiography and gave a rather milder picture of the life at the Abbey than she did to the papers, but the number of persons who read her book was far fewer than those who had read the newspapers, and the impression had already grown up in people's minds of Crowley as the monster described by the Sunday Express under the flare head "A Man We'd Like to Hang."

The whole thing came to the attention of Mussolini, who ordered an investigation. The police thereupon visited the place but discovered nothing. In spite of this, however, and despite the fact that the citizens of Cefalu, who apparently liked Crowley well enough, petitioned that he be allowed to stay, he was expelled from the country. Mussolini was at that time waging a war against all secret societies and Crowley had to go with the rest.

He went to Tunis, where he wrote "The Spirit of Solitude," which was, as he called it, an autohagiography, running to over 600,000 words. However, the notoriety he had evoked made the publisher who had contracted for it unwilling to proceed and it was not until 1930 that the Mandrake Press finally brought it out in six large volumes. It is generally a sober piece of work but his comments on his contemporaries are in the main as caustic as anything of his. In spite of its length it is an unusually interesting book. Possible because Crowley is not afflicted with a sense of modesty. He knew that he had an exciting life to tell about and he told it with a keen eye for all its values.

He then tried to live in Paris, where he published his "Magick, in Theory and Practice." However, for some obscure reason the police were set on him and paid him a visit. They finally discovered a machine which they viewed with suspicion. It turned out to be a coffee roaster. However, his presence made them feel uneasy and on the technicality that his passport was out of date refused him permission to remain in France. At the present time, it is said, he is on an island in the Mediterranean forming another cult.

There then is the man, and his work. As for the man, he was at the mildest indiscreet. At worst? Well, I suppose that where there is so much smoke, one may suspect some fire. And the man himself never pretended to be an angel. Perhaps it will

never be possible to pick one's way carefully through the violent depreciations of his enemies and the equally violent defenses of those who believe in him to anything resembling the true picture of the man. However, take him as you will, he is at least extraordinary and rare.

As for his work, there can be no question of its value. As a poet, critic, novelist, or editor, he has taken a place in the literature of this century. And it should be a high place.