

THE DAILY EXPRESS

3 NOVEMBER 1951

Boswell to Britain's Wickedest Man

For years Arthur Calder-Marshall wanted to sup with the devil. But when he did, manipulating not a long spoon but an invitation to the Oxford University Poetry Society, he was disappointed.

His supper companion was Aleister Crowley, self-styled The Beast 666 of the Apocalypse. Calder-Marshall had expected to meet the last of the graven images, an obsidian and reassuring devil.

In the old Eiffel Tower Restaurant, only one man was alone; a bald, elderly stock-broker by the look of him. It was Crowley.

"The Beast's reputation so overawed me," says Calder-Marshall in his role of Boswell to Crowley, "that I refused to accept the evidence of my eyes. He had the same dewlaps as actors who play corrupt senators in American films, a skin as rough as a calf's tongue, a tired, used face, sagging with satiation."

There was one more meeting. At Knockholt he found The Beast in a rented cottage of ghastly good taste: copper warming-pans, ships-in-bottles, comfy cretonne-covered armchairs. He promptly noted that the Beast's abdominal muscles were sagging worse than ever.

The devil incarnate of his young dreams had collapsed into an old party with a cockney accent, and a taste for brandy.

Readers who are indifferent to the occult, or have forgotten the headlines that marked the late Crowley's activities, may have a grouse against Arthur Calder-Marshall's slice of autobiography, *MAGIC OF MY YOUTH* (Rupert Hart-Davis, 12s. 6d.).

Crowley's aura is sensed in every page, but Calder-Marshall might have told the laity more of the unpleasant occultist, his Sicilian "Abbey", his braziers, and sacrificial knives.

Yet here is an absorbing book. The author, now in his 40's, has successfully managed to preserve the naked and callow brashness of an amusing adolescence.

Naturally, the undergraduate impression of the tragedies that followed The Beast's course, like the wake behind a ship, is sensational rather than sensitive.

In the 'twenties the latest ill report of The Beast's influence was something to rush to an inter-college party: not to mourn over.

And writing over a gap of 20 years Arthur Calder-Marshall relies on memory and conjecture, which are not the same as facts. He admits this, and, anyway, it produces some rich characters, whether or not they are larger than the life they lived in the 'twenties.

There is the extraordinary Vickybird a spindly, Norfolk-jacketed poet, who delighted the young Calder-Marshalls when they lived in Steyning.

He was litter-conscious, and would bury every spent match. He spoke in initial-language—"M.E.G.H.!" (Most Extraordinary Food Health!), "T.A.P." (Take a Pew), "W.O.G." (Will of God), and he was impious. The Low Church vicar's wife regarded him as Anti-Christ.

Up at Oxford, Calder-Marshall's brother reported that once Crowley had turned Vickybird into a zebra, in which incarnation he had done two years at the Alexandria Zoo,

It was all rather sad.

Once for example, between drinks, Crowley tried to hypnotise Calder-Marshall. But his eyes were weak and rheumy, reminding him of a torch whose battery is failing.