

**THE OBSERVER
LONDON, ENGLAND
2 DECEMBER 1951**

Meeting the Magician

By Maurice Richardson

The Magic of My Youth. By Arthur Calder Marshall. (Hart-Davis. 12s. 6d.)

The Great Beast. By John Symonds. (Rider. 21s.)

Aleister Crowley. By Charles Richard Cammell. (Richards Press. 15s.)

I too met the Beast. It was in 1939. I had made some mildly derisive reference to him in print and he wrote to suggest "that in future, before passing judgement on my personal character, you take the trouble to make my acquaintance. I challenge you to lunch."

He received me in a small flat—borrowed—in Belgravia. He wore green plus-fours and a huge tartan bow tie. He told me, as he brandished a bottle of vodka, that he had been plus four at Hoylake; in fact he had never touched a golf club in his life, not even in anger. Throughout an enormous lunch and far into the afternoon, he quacked on, rolling his alarmingly parboiled eyes, making little jokes about magic at his own expense. Except for one surrealistic digression on the sufferings of the roasted peanut, he said nothing that was not fit for the ears of one's great-grandmother. I formed the impression of a harmless, quasi-benevolent old party and wondered how even the half-baked could have taken him seriously. Afterwards, I was told his real purpose was to get me to write a letter of apology which he could use as ammunition in a libel action.

I remain convinced that the most remarkable thing about Crowley was his absolutely limitless capacity for rich food, alcohol, dangerous drugs, and strong tobacco. To reach the age of seventy-three on his regime was a great physiological feat. In other respects, Crowley's was one of those unfortunate, overloaded temperaments which lack the concentration of talent necessary to make a real go of anything. The Bohemian underworld provides many examples; they often manage to make infernal nuisances of themselves.

First-class mountaineer, second-class chess player, fourth-rate poet, expert confidence man, and roaring psychopath, he might make an interesting subject for a study of a twentieth-century mountebank, or for a case-history or pathography. Mr. Symonds, his literary executor, has written a painstakingly detailed biography which hovers between taking him much too seriously as a magician and treating him as a vast bad joke. He makes no attempt to decide how much Crowley's infantile and often repulsive mumbo jumbo was a product of paranoia and how much of pure charlatanism.

Mr. Calder Marshall merely uses him as the heavy motif for a piece of very nicely and sensitively written autobiography about his own Oxford and Bloomsbury days in the early thirties, when he dabbled, light-heartedly, for a week-end, in magic. Crowley makes two brief appearances, each at his dullest. The principal characters are a medley of undergraduates and middle-aged members of Grub Street and the nut-band. There is a delightfully sympathetic portrait of "Vickybird," a poet of real distinction who was one of Crowley's most abominably treated disciples, another of Auntie Helen, a pathetically romantic lunatic, a camp-follower who inhabited Oxford and was dogged by the bailiffs and fate.

Mr. Cammell seems to have stepped straight out of the nineties, which was Crowley's background and of which he was one of the many left-overs. His appreciation of the magician as poet, occultist, and thaumaturge is qualified only, if often, by sincerely expressed disapproval of the occasions when Crowley was led astray by demons and went too far. It makes an odd and significant little pendant.