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### 666 AND ALL THAT

**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.

"On the evening of the day when the death was announced of Aleister Crowley, the self-styled Knight Elect of the Sangrail, Master of Thelema and *το Μεγαθηριον*, the Beast 666 of the Apocalypse, Tom Driberg was dining at a house in Kensington. . ."

As an opening sentence this could hardly be bettered, and I can't imagine myself not wanting to read a book which begins with such a resounding bang; my only doubt was that Mr. Calder-Marshall, having started so explosively, might continue (and still more probably end) with a whimper. Let me say at once, therefore, that he does nothing of the kind: bang follows bang like a Brock's benefit, and I can honestly say that I haven't enjoyed a book so much for years.

That first sentence I've quoted should dispel any illusions created by the (ironically) Godfrey Winn-some title; the "Magic," of course, is Black, and the book is incidentally an account of the author's relationship—brief and unrewarding—with that most bogus and seedy of Messiahs, Aleister Crowley. Only incidentally; for Crowley is really a mere peg upon which Mr. Calder-Marshall hangs a series of reminiscences about his boyhood and early youth. Some of these have only the slightest connection with Crowley himself, but Mr. Calder-Marshall's divagations are less casual than they seem, and the whole book, apparently so loosely thrown together, is really constructed with extreme care. Each section is built up round a central "character"—people known to the writer, and connected, in one way or another, with Crowley: "Vickybird" the poetaster, "Auntie Helen," Raoul Loveday, Betty ("Tiger Woman") May, etc., etc. In addition, there is the only too effable "Hugh" (many will remember him), founder of the Oxford Balloon Club; and a host of minor characters pop up here and there—Mr. Stephen Spender ("dil-

ettanteing with his typewriter, as usual"); Miss Wilhelmina Stitch (who addressed the Oxford Poetry Society—"Don't you love it when the chestnut trees in spring take off their woolly gloves and stretch their baby fingers?"); Miss Nina Hamnett ("with her long thin legs and her cloche hat, streaking like a busy emu from the Fitzroy to the Marquis of Granby"). And finally Crowley himself, whom Mr. Calder-Marshall meets at last at the *Tour Eiffel* in Percy Street, and mistakes for a stockbroker—but I will not reveal the climax (or rather the anti-climax) to this hilarious Quest for Crowley: it is enough to say that Mr. Calder-Marshall declined the honour of being ritually sacrificed (in the role of Adonis) at Cefalu—and one can hardly blame him. (My only criticism, by the way, is that in the chapter about Crowley's Sicilian goings-on, Mr. Calder-Marshall employs a rather unhappy blend of fact and fiction—though it must, as I can see, have been a difficult chapter to write, for Black Magicians are not, after all, much given to talking about their activities.)

From what I have said, it should be evident that this book is really about Mr. Calder-Marshall himself; and I'm inclined to think that it's the best he has so far written. I have followed his literary career with considerable interest, but have sometimes regretted his rather too solemn attitude to writing, and his preoccupation (as a novelist) with politics. I suspect that he would have been happier, as a writer, in the Twenties, and that he didn't really find the climate of the subsequent decade very favourable to his talent. In *The Magic of My Youth* he evokes admirably the intellectual atmosphere of 1928:

"Earnest" was an adjective heavy with social disapproval ("Of course, Pamela is a charming girl, but isn't she just a wee bit earnest?") and the highest term of praise was "amusing. . . ."

Very much of its period, too, is the account of the Black Mass (or Black Mattins, rather) which so worried the Dean of Mr. Calder-Marshall's College:

"What I want to know is, did you have the Consecrated Host and a defrocked priest?"

"No, sir. The only defrocked priest I know lives in Hove, and he's too old to get about much. We had tinned spider-crab from Kamchatka and a dry Amontillado. Actually, there is some left, if you'd like to come up. . . ."

As for the ex-Master of Thelema, he has found, in Mr. Symonds, the biographer he deserves, and *The Great Beast* is hardly less shoddy and ill-written than the works of the Mage himself. Mr. Symonds is Crowley's literary executor, and as such has had access to a number of unpublished (and unpublishable) documents. In his account of the Beast's career he has relied very largely on Crowley's own account of himself, rather than on any less biased evidence; there is no attempt at exegesis, the material is churned out in the clumsiest of Sunday-paper journalese; and all that emerges from this book is a clumsily drawn portrait of a particularly nasty psychopath who, though he may have been the "wickedest man in the world," a "king of depravity," etc. (see jacket), must also, one feels, have been a crashing bore. An intelligent study of Crowley as a pathological specimen might have been of some value (though not, I think, much); one would like to know, for instance, to what extent he really believed in his own "Magick," and whether he did, in fact, possess the remarkable hypnotic powers attributed to him by his disciples. Mr. Symonds, however, does nothing to enlighten us on these points; his approach to his subject is muddled and uncritical, and the result is a turgid, overloaded book which serves up Crowley's lurid reputation for the benefit of a public who should know better.

Mr. Cammell's short study of the Mage is written in a spirit of almost untampered adulation: he has been, as he confesses, "amazed, enchanted, bewildered" by Crowley's literary genius. Most people, I'm afraid, will remain merely bewildered—as much by Mr. Cammell as by the Beast himself. Crowley, the poet (according to Mr. Cammell), was second only to Shelley "for sheer rhapsody of language and music"; his *Confessions* are comparable to those of Rousseau and Cellini—"here surely," remarks Mr. Cammell, in an outburst of girlish enthusiasm, "was food for thought, wine to intoxicate the fancy!"

I should just think so, indeed; and one can only be grateful to Mr. Calder-Marshall for remaining, in the circumstances, so commendably sober. In conclusion, it may be added (for the benefit of Scotland Yard) that the mystery of Jack-the-Ripper has been solved at last: we have Crowley's word for it that the crimes were, in fact, committed by none other than Madame Blavatsky.

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