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The Great Charlatans.

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The combination of magic with salesmanship begets that formidable hybrid, charlatanry: an ancient and windy trade that has given birth to some of the most colorful rascals of history.

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Cagliostro started the fad for pseudo-Egyptian occultism that flourished throughout the earlier half of the nineteenth century. Since his time there have been many contenders for his mantle, such as "Eliphas Levy", (the French occultist, Alphonse Louis Constant) and Theosophy's founder, Helena P. Blavatsky.

Perhaps the strongest candidate is the English poet, mountaineer, and magician Aleister Crowley (rhymes with "holy").

Born in 1875, Crowley early rebelled against the sternly puritanical religion of his parents, who belonged to the sect of the Plymouth Brethren. At Cambridge, he began to publish volumes of verse—of which he produced about thirty in his first ten years—most of them privately printed in small and expensive editions. Much of his Swinburnesque verse is quite effective as poetry, but very erotic, and with a strong flavor of perversion.

Crowley came to London in the late 1890's with 40,000 pounds sterling and a fanatical determination to make a splash. For a time he lived as "Count Svaroff" in a flat fitted up as a magician's sanctum; then he bought an estate in Scotland, sported kilts, and called himself "Laird of Boleskine". He was a big, powerful, and—before fat claimed him—rather handsome man, though nearly all his early photographs show his eyelids screwed up to simulate a hypnotic glare.

He spent the years 1899-1900 travelling; he studied Yoga in Ceylon, took part in two Himalayan expeditions and shot tigers and other fauna. On his return from one Himalayan climb he spread the word that he's eaten two of his porters. Though probably false, the story helped to promote the Crowley legend.

His books became more and more eccentric and costly with time. For instance, in 1904 appeared *The Sword of Songs* a large volume printed in red and black, with "666" (the number of the Beast of Revelation) on the front cover, and Crowley's name in Hebrew letters on the back. The book consisted of one-third verse, and the rest notes, comprising an exposition of Buddhism and an attack on Christianity and materialism. The book bulged with difficult rhymes, a parade of Crowley's erudition, and joking marginal notes such as: "Jesus dismissed with a jest" and "How clever I am!" Five hundred copies were printed and were mailed to such personages as the King, the Pope, and Mrs. Eddy.

Crowley soon moved his headquarters to Paris, where he continued his japes. When the police forbade the unveiling of Epstein's monument to Oscar Wilde, because of its too-literal nudity, Crowley contrived to unveil the statue by a ruse. Then, when the *gendarmierie* concealed the offending parts with a metal butterfly, Crowley stole the butterfly and entered the Café Royal wearing the object in the appropriate place over evening dress.

From 1909 to 1913 Crowley issued a fantastic semiannual magazine, *The Equinox*, *The Official Organ of the A.:A.:.* Each *Equinox* was a volume of around four hundred thick pages. "A.:A.:" stands for "Atlantean Adepts", an occult society which Crowley was promoting, and to which he soon added the O.T.O., meaning *Ordo Templi Orientis*, or Order of the Oriental Templars. *The Equinox*, mostly written by Crowley himself, was full of poetry; articles on magic and hashish; pictures of Crowley looking cosmic, and of a naked man doing Yogic exercises; and of erotic ritual texts.

Crowley infuriated other occultists by printing their "secrets" in his magazine and ridiculing them with his deadly and perverse humor. When he published the rituals of the "Golden Dawn" society of MacGregor Mathers, a Kabbalist and a friend of the Irish poet Yeats, Mathers got an injunction against further disclosures. But Crowley successfully appealed the injunction, and the rituals appeared in due course.

In 1910, Crowley arranged a series of "Rites of Eleusis" in London. A reporter was welcomed to one by a white-robed man with a sword, who ushered him into a room that was dark except for a dull-red light on an altar. Through air thick with incense, the journalist saw men standing about in robes, and a little white statue illumined by a small lamp. Somebody "purified the temple with water" and consecrated it with fire. Crow-

ley, in black, led the "mystic circumambulation" of the altar, and ordered a Brother to "bear the cup of Libation", a big gilded mug from which everybody had a swig of some fragrant liquid. They evoked the goddess Artemis with the greater ritual of the Hexagram; Crowley recited poems; Leila Waddell, the second of his wives, played her violin; and Frater Omnia Vincam, a well-known young poet, danced the dance of Syrx and Pan in honor of Artemis, until he fell in a heap from exhaustion.

These mystical gymnastics did not sit well with British respectability. When a hostile weekly, *The Looking Glass*, hinted at homosexual relations between Crowley and the two friends with whom he was living, one of the friends, a chemist named Jones, sued for libel. True to its name, the case of *Jones v. The Looking Glass* was Mathers, called as a witness, was cross-examined as follows:

Counsel: Is it not a fact that your name is Samuel Liddell Mathers?

Mathers: Yes, or MacGregor Mathers.

Counsel: Your original name was Samuel Liddell Mathers?

Mathers: Undoubtedly.

Counsel: Did you subsequently assume the name of MacGregor?

Mathers: The name of MacGregor dates from 1603.

Counsel: Your name was MacGregor in 1603? (Much laughter.)

Mathers: Yes; if you like to put it that way.

Counsel: You have called yourself Count MacGregor of Glenstrae?

Mathers: Oh yes.

Counsel: You have also called yourself the Chevalier Macgregor?

Mathers: No. You are confusing me with some of Crowley's aliases.

Next came a lengthy wrangle as to whether Mathers or Crowley claimed to be the reincarnation of James IV of Scotland. The jury found that the statements in *The Looking Glass* were indeed defamatory, but substantially true, and that Jones had not been injured thereby. In other words, anybody rash enough to live with Crowley should expect nothing better.

Crowley's fortune had meanwhile evaporated, under the demands of his extravagant way of life, so that to continue eating he was forced to become a common commercial occultist. When World War I broke out, he went to America, where he posed as a champion of Irish freedom, dramatically proclaiming

Irish independence from the base of the Statue of Liberty throwing his "British passport" (an old envelope) into the New York Bay.

Next he got in touch with Viereck and Munsterberg, the German propagandists, and wrote for their papers. Afterwards, he claimed that he did so as a patriotic Englishman to destroy the reputation of these periodicals as reasonable and truthful organs. I am inclined to believe this otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative; at least, it is the kind of bizarre thing he would do, and it is hard to imagine his writing of the Kaiser, except as a joke: "Hail, Savior of the world, that clad in golden armor with the helm of holiness, wieldest the sword!"

Now dependent for income upon his writings and admirers, Crowley traveled about the United States planting branches of his A.:A.: and his O.T.O., and having a brush with the police in Detroit. He spent forty days in mystic retreat on Esopus Island in the Hudson, painting on the cliffs south of Kingston the mottoes:

EVERY MAN AND EVERY WOMEN A STAR!
DO WHAT THOU WILT SHALL THE WHOLE OF LAW.

He shaved his head, and later grew a long scalp-lock like a blond Amerind. In New York, he lived with the current priestess of his cults, the Bronx schoolteacher Leah Hersig, who received callers naked save for a star which Crowley had branded on her breast with the point of a red-hot sword, during a magical rite.

In 1919, Crowley took Leah to Sicily, where he bought a house at Cefalu and set up his College of the Holy Ghost, otherwise called the Abbey of Thelema (from Rabelais). Disciples gathered. Unfortunately one young follower, Raoul Loveday, died of drinking unboiled Sicilian water. His widow, an experienced young lady who described herself as a reformed drug-addict and former member of a mob of Parisian gangsters, sold British papers a sensational story of goings-on at Cefalu, which seem to have consisted largely of magical rites in which the now portly Crowley bounded around a pentacle (magical diagram) waving a sword and chanting"

"Thrill with lesson lust of the light.
O Man, my Man;
Come careening out of the night
To me, To me . . ."

The animal-loving British were especially shocked by the assertion that Loveday had once been required to cut the throat of a kitten and drink its blood. The *Sunday Express* denounced Crowley's "bestial horrors" and "degraded lusts", and Mussolini—who was persecuting secret societies, anyway—ordered Crowley out.

In Paris, Crowley continued his cult activity. Here he was accused of being involved in the dope-trade, and was finally expelled by the French police in 1929. In 1932 he visited Berlin to show his paintings, one of which was characteristically named *Three Men Carrying a Black Goat Across the Snow to Nowhere*. Two years later, he sued Nina Hamnett for libel because in her novel *Laughing Torso* she described him as a black magician. A magician he was, but, he wanted it understood, a pure white one. The defence brought out the "sex-cult rites" in Sicily; the judge denounced Crowley's writings as "dreadful, horrible, blasphemous, and abominable"; and the jury found for the defendant.

Crowley made his last public appearance in 1937, when, early one morning, he read a prophecy from the foot of Cleopatra's Needle in London, and warned the world that the impending war could be averted only if everybody did as Crowley told them. He continued to publish occasional volumes of prose and verse, almost up to his death in 1947.

During the 1930's a branch of O.T.O. operated in Los Angeles. The members assembled in the mansion of a magnate and entered a secret room by a trapdoor and a ladder. There a gauze-clad priestess of the cult climbed out of a coffin to perform the mystic rites. Jack Williamson and Tony Boucher, who attended a session, tell me that it was a pretty dull and respectable business unless you took the cult's painstaking blasphemies seriously.

As I understand it, the theory of the leader of this group—an Englishman named Wilfred Smith—was that the world was too much run by extroverts. Therefore Smith proposed to get all the introverts together and organize them (as if introverts could be gotten together and organized) into a vast conspiracy to seize control from the extroverts.

However, the priestess died, and the cult became inactive around the beginning of World War II. One of Smith's closest associates was John W. Parsons, a distinguished rocket engineer who was later associated in a brief (and, I am told, stormy) business partnership with L. Ron Hubbard—equally distinguished science-fiction author and discoverer of Dianetics, and

its successor Scientology. One source of the club's breakdown seems to have personal differences between Smith and Parsons—I believe that Smith eloped with one of Parsons' wives or something. After Smith's death in 1944 the cult was revived by Parsons with headquarters at an old mansion in Pasadena.

Parsons, a big floridly handsome fellow of about Hubbard's age continued his magical activities but on a small scale because the neighbors complained to the police about the sacerdotal strip-tease acts being staged on Millionaires' Row.

In the heroes (or villains) of this piece you see the impudence affectations, arrogance, garrulity, daring, charm, and immense egotism of the first-class charlatan. The mainspring of such a man seems to be neither love of truth nor mere vulgar avarice, but a consuming egomania and a fanatical vanity.

True to form, Crowley described himself in the last *Equinox* as "Most Holy, Most Illustrious, Most Illuminated, and Most Puissant Baphomet X° Rex Summus Sanctissimus 33, 90°, 96°, Past Grand Master of the United States of America, Grand Master of Ireland, Iona, and All the Britains, Grand Master of the Knights of the Holy Ghost, Sovereign Grand Commander of the Order of the Temple, Most Wise Sovereign of the Order of the Rosy Cross, Grand Zerubbabel of the Order of the Holy Royal Arch of Enoch, etc. etc. etc., National Grand Commander *ad vitam* of the O.T.O." Crowley knew perfectly well that these fine titles existed only in his head, but he printed the stuff anyway. *Somebody* might be impressed. And, while he did many unconventional things, he was probably not so wicked as he liked people to think.

Although the great charlatans may be "sincere"—in the sense that they can convince themselves as well as others of their own greatness, the human talent for self-justification being unlimited—more important is the fact that they do exploit and influence people of all kinds and classes. Such victims pay in all sorts of ways—in time, money, family relationships, loss of touch with reality, spiritual independence, and self-respect. They do this because the magician offers dreams, hopes, and fictitious cures for sale, and some people can no more resist buying these than others can pass up the tender of liquor, bets, or antiques.

All in all, such men as Cagliostro and Crowley are colorful individuals, without whom history would be less interesting. Like tigers they are even admirable in their own sinister way. But, like tigers, you can appreciate their virtues best when they are behind strong bars. So when you meet one, don't hesitate

to put him there; or, if that is not possible, run, do not walk, to the nearest exit. Otherwise yours may be the fate of the young lady from Niger. He'll steal your money, your wife, if he can your health, or your sanity, any of which would be a high price to pay for the excitement of his company.