

AN OPEN LETTER

TO

LORD BEAVERBROOK

To the Right Honourable Lord Beaverbrook :

My Lord,

I make this appeal to you as a Peer of the Realm—an appointed guardian of its public honour—and as proprietor of the *Sunday Express*, to redress a most grave and indefensible injury committed by that paper against the social honour, life, and work of an English gentleman and man of letters, and against the personal virtue of three very noble women who have renounced their private ambitions in order to help in his work.

I. The case is as follows :—

Between November 1922 and March 1923, the *Sunday Express* published a series of sensa-

tional articles in which it claimed, from a motive of public duty, to reveal the truth about the life and work of Aleister Crowley, explorer, dramatist, poet, philosopher and artist.

These articles were a mass of lies.

Not only were they wholly false in spirit—the essential truth, in every matter of importance, being simply suppressed—but, except for such statements as were harmless in themselves or trivial, they were wholly false in the letter also.

Two of these lies are so indefensible in point of fact, and so repugnant to every principle of decency and fair play. that they must, in the public interest and for the honour of the British Press, be destroyed once for all.

2. In the Sunday Express of November 26, 1922, the following appears :—

ALEISTER CROWLEY'S ORGIES IN SICILY

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WOMEN VICTIMS

Three women he keeps there permanently for his orgies. All of them he brought from America two or three years ago. One is a French-American governess, one is an ex-schoolmistress, and one a cinema actress from Los Angeles.

Whenever he needs money, and cannot get it from fresh victims, he sends them on the streets of Palermo or Naples to earn it for him.

He served once a prison sentence in America for procuring young girls for a similar purpose.

Both statements are absolute lies.

The first falsely and wantonly accuses identifiable women of being enslaved prostitutes.

The second falsely and wantonly accuses a well-known man of letters of being a proved felon.

Taken together, they show that anonymous scoundrels, backed by the resources of a great newspaper organisation, can—in fact, as distinct from legal fiction—freely direct, against any man or woman who happens to be socially ill-protected, an unscrupulously untrue and indecent campaign, which, judged by its effects, may be morally indistinguishable from murder.

3. This state of affairs constitutes a menace of unprecedented gravity against the life and work of every individual citizen, and against the very foundations of public morality.

The allegation that a man has been *imprisoned as a white slaver* is as vitally damaging as any that can be made.

Clearly, if that allegation is absolutely false, the offence to justice is grave almost beyond precedent. A lie so base and hurtful must be withdrawn at once, frankly and fully, with all possible publicity. To deny the absolute right of truth and justice to be instantly vindicated in the matter must be repugnant to your sense of honour.

Not only has Mr. Crowley not served a prison sentence in America as a white slaver, but he has never been even accused of any crime before any court in any country in the world.

The statement made in the Sunday Express is thus an absolute lie ; your editor knows that it is a lie ; and you, my Lord, are in a position to satisfy yourself conclusively that it is a lie.

I submit, that as proprietor of the Sunday Express—one of the greatest forces in the newspaper world, and in the public life of the nation—you are under a clear obligation to ascertain the truth in this matter, and to compel your editor to publish it in such a way as to redress the wrong wrought by his foul lie.

4. His plea that, unless his statements had all been correct, Mr. Crowley would have sued the paper for libel immediately, is a base and cynical attempt to ignore the evident disabilities of every kind which beset the absentee, the poor

man, or the man wrapped up in creative work, in taking legal action against a wealthy and powerful corporation. To him a libel suit, even if not actually impossible, means, at the very least, financial chaos and the indefinite paralysis of his work. More than this, the libel, however false in point of fact, may be so damaging in purport, and make so unscrupulous an appeal to violent popular passions, that it robs its victim, in advance, of any of the normal means of redress.

The man of letters is peculiarly ill-protected against sensational newspaper calumny. Every editor and publisher must reckon, nowadays almost exclusively, not with the real truth about an author, nor with the balanced judgment of the educated reader or man of the world, but with the prejudices and passions of the masses. Unless therefore a man of letters is wealthy enough to call his traducer to instant account in court of law, the absolute falsity of a newspaper calumny will not prevent it from working, right from the start, almost as much mischief as if it were proven truth. It may reduce its victim, at a stroke, from affluence to poverty, or from poverty to absolute destitution. It may destroy his credit, in every kind, for a critical initial period; and in the time that elapses before he can compel a hearing, the lie may have done its work, and wrought vital damage—both personally

to the man, and to the impersonal cause of art and letters—which can never by any possibility be remedied.

Your editor's lie has wrought the havoc, and more.

In France, my Lord, as you are doubtless aware, any man attacked in a newspaper has the legal right to reply in its columns, and his reply must be printed in the same type and in the same place as the original attack. This law is admirably just and wise. Its effect has been to put a complete stop, in France, to this plague of anonymous defamation, whether used as the instrument of journalistic blackmail, or simply as a form of profitable sensationalism. The present case shows how a man of letters, unprotected by this right of reply, can be subjected by a newspaper editor to public foul-play of the most atrocious and murderous kind.

5. At the beginning of July 1922—while Mr. Crowley was still living in London, and months before this campaign of lies was mooted—he signed a contract with his publishers for the writing and production of his autobiography. This was commenced in London, and was well under way, when at the end of October, Mr. Crowley left England for his home in Sicily. A fortnight later the Sunday Express commenced its campaign of lies by printing a biography

of its own, giving, in something less than a column, “the full history and record of this sinister author”. Throughout the course of these attacks, and afterwards, Mr. Crowley worked steadily, writing 600,000 words, in circumstances of extreme difficulty and hardship, and completed the first draft of his autobiography in September 1923. It is Mr. Crowley’s *magnum opus*, and one of the most human and illuminating records ever written. It is that *independent statement of positive truth* which Newman rightly declared to be the only possible and proper defence against a vast mass of irresponsible and anonymous defamation. It is Mr. Crowley’s real vindication—his vindication for all time—against any serious attack on his personal honour, whether as artist, patriot or man.

The iniquity of the situation created by your editor’s abominable lies is glaringly shown by the fact that Mr. Crowley’s publishers, despite their complete sympathy and good will, feel unable, for the time being, to proceed with the publication of the work. They state that the book trade and the big libraries, in England and abroad, will boycott the book, from the start, unless the specific lies, here denounced, are first destroyed, once for all.

The whole event illustrates the absolute necessity for that right of reply which the law of France provides. In no other way can a private

individual obtain for his defence anything like the same order of publicity as the attack makes for itself.

It may even happen, as the present case shows, that if the liar chooses his opportunity with care, and is not hampered with a sense of decency or fair play, his victim may be cut off from any chance at making a public reply at all, or even allowing it to be known that his silence is enforced and not voluntary.

6. When the issue of the Sunday Express for November 26 reached Mr. Crowley in Sicily, he at once wrote to you himself. He pointed out that he was materially defenceless, at the time, against attacks in London, however false. He urged you, in your own interest no less than his, to insist on that measure of fair play which it was clearly in your power to give, and asked for an independent inquiry into the charges.

The letter was forwarded to you by his publishers, but neither acknowledgment nor reply was ever received by them or him. Instead on February 25 and March 4, the Sunday Express printed a grotesquely stupid narrative defaming his life at Cefalù, accompanied by insulting taunts to fill his purse by means of a libel suit. These new lies were reprinted, in part, by various Italian newspapers, though not by the Sicilian journals; and at the end of April Mr.

Crowley was expelled from Italian territory and deported to Tunis, despite a petition to Signor Mussolini, signed by all the leading citizens of Cefalù, protesting against such action. No reason was given for this expulsion, nor was any charge preferred, but your editor is doubtless correct in claiming the event as the reward of his lies.

The result was to reduce Mr. Crowley, who was convalescent at the time from a long and dangerous illness, to absolute destitution. At seven days' notice he was torn from his family, his library, and all the resources of his craft, and obligated to live in North Africa, from hand to mouth, with his life work indefinitely suspended and maimed. It was more than ever impossible for him to refute efficiently the lies of the Sunday Express.

7. Circumstances led to my undertaking the task of coping with the desperate position into which Mr. Crowley's family and dependants were thus suddenly thrown, a task which he himself—penniless, and broken in health—could not then even begin. Thus I obtained first-hand experience of the vile mischief that can be done to innocent and defenceless persons by such abuse of newspaper power as your editor has been guilty of. I decided in the end, to put aside my own scientific work in order to

come to England and compel full redress of this abominable injustice.

In June of this year, I placed a statement of the case before Mr. James Douglas, the literary editor of the Sunday Express, who had initiated this campaign of calumny by printing, under his own name, a grossly vituperative review of Mr. Crowley's novel "The Diary of a Drug Fiend". His article misrepresented the moral purpose of that work, as recognised in numerous reviews of it by men of letters in reputable journals : it was an orgie of salacity and, in essence, a lie.

I placed a copy of this statement before the editorial board of the Sunday Express, pointing out that the assertion that Mr. Crowley had served a prison sentence (in America or elsewhere, whether for the crime alleged or for any other offence) was demonstrably untrue, and asking simply for the full and frank withdrawal of that particular lie.

At the same time I sent you privately a full statement, supported by documents, not only refuting your editor's calumnies, but containing sufficient positive truth concerning Mr. Crowley's life and work to prove that the case put forward by the Sunday Express was as false in the spirit as in the letter.

I did everything I could to ensure that these representations should come to your personal

notice. Here again, I have received neither acknowledgment nor reply.

8. Such persistent silence, whatever its explanation, compels me to bring the essential issue to your notice in this more public matter.

Your editor asserts that Mr. Crowley has served a prison sentence in America for procuring young girls for infamous purposes.

The truth is that Mr. Crowley has never been so much as accused of any crime before any court in any country in the world.

Now no honest person can pretend for a moment that any legal process is needed in order to expose the absoluteness of this particular lie.

A criminal conviction is a matter of public record, and such an allegation as your editor has made is capable of rigorous proof or disproof, like any other matter of officially recorded public history.

It is this obvious fact, instantly felt by every reader, that makes this lie so dastardly. Every reader instinctively assumes that neither carelessness nor malice could print a downright lie in a matter which is so vital, and which can, from its very nature, be so conclusively ascertained. Every reader assumes that no editor could

be so criminally or suicidally unscrupulous as to publish such a damaging defamation without being able to prove its truth immediately, by specifying the time and place of the alleged conviction and appealing to the official records of the courts. Every reader assumes, therefore, without hesitation, that such an allegation, deliberately published, by a well-known paper, *as an indictment*, must be true.

9. Now you, my Lord, as proprietor of the Sunday Express, can satisfy yourself, by a few minutes' inquiry, that your editor is unable to specify the date or place of any such conviction.

You can compel him to admit to you that he printed this, the most damaging libel conceivable, either without trying to verify it, or after failing to do so.

You can satisfy yourself that he has not now, and never has had, one shred of evidence in support of his allegation.

10. I do not doubt that you will attribute to these facts the same moral significance as every honest man will ; namely, that your editor is utterly irresponsible and unscrupulous, devoid of any proper regard for truth, fair play, or public morality.

Considering the circumstances in which Mr. Crowley was placed at the time—circumstances

well-known to your editor—this infamous lie was quite strictly murderous : for a man may be done to death by venomous libels far less mercifully than by cruder poisons.

11. My Lord, you cannot escape the gravest personal responsibility in this matter.

Your editor could not, with any private resources of his own, undertake a protracted newspaper campaign of libel. It is your wealth, in particular, that he relies on when he challenges Mr. Crowley to fill his pockets by means of an action at law. It is your capital, in various kinds, that he uses in order to collect anonymous gossip, purchase slanderous interviews, and give to his calumnies a world-wide publicity. You cannot avoid moral responsibility for his dishonourable abuse of the power which you have put into his hands. If you could not prevent his infamous libels, you are bound to redress the wrong as soon as it is pointed out to you.

In putting into the hands of unscrupulous scoundrels the power to bring innocent persons, virtually defenceless, to starvation, you—a Peer of the Realm, one of the chosen guardians of its public honour, a representative of the illustrious traditions of English chivalry—are helping to degrade the standards of public morality and honour.

12. Your editor—merely for the purpose of striking a foul blow at Mr. Crowley—has singled out from among his colleagues three ladies who have been noble and unselfish enough to renounce their professional careers in order to help in his work.

These ladies are not British subjects, but your editor has identified them quite clearly to their professional, family, and private circles in England and America.

He has been vile enough to accuse them, without one conceivable atom of justification, of practising public prostitution in foreign cities.

“Whenever he needs money, and cannot get it from fresh victims, he sends them on the streets of Palermo or Naples to earn it for him.

“He served once a prison sentence in America for procuring young girls for a similar purpose.”

The last of these statements is a demonstrable lie, but it serves to make the first statement the more hurtful, gross and abominable.

13. In publishing that lie in the first instance—well knowing that he could not justify it—and in silently maintaining it under challenge, your

editor has proved himself as great a coward as he is a liar.

It is an intolerable outrage on the decency of English public life that this cad, backed by your wealth, should have the licence to publish to the whole world filthy libels against the personal virtue of noble women.

A Baron of England, accessory after the fact to so foul and mean a crime ?

I have the honour to be,

Your Lordship's obedient servant,

Norman MUDD,

M.A., Cambridge : sometime Scholar of Trinity College. Late Lecturer in Applied Mathematics, Grey University College, South Africa.

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August, 1924.

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