

The Green Hat Foreword

What kind of a hat was it? Well 'It was bright green, of a sort of felt, and bravely worn; being, no doubt, one of those that women who have many hats affect pour le sport.' So begins the extraordinary tale of *The Green Hat*, 'A romance for a few people' and one of the most deliciously exquisite representations of nineteen twenties London that I know. 'I saw it for the first time (writes the Author) on the eve of my removal from one residence in London to another...' and from those opening lines we are drawn into the era of cigarette cases and cocktails and jazz at the Ritz, long lean dresses and Hispano Suiza cars... All rendered in prose so sculpted and mannered the book is like a beautifully wrought box of a thing – with its own particular edges and smoothnesses, its own particular cut glass precision of voice, of metaphor and allusion that shows us that a story can be as much about its words and how its words can be fashioned as the story itself: Of a hat and the woman who wore it, the delectable and the damned Iris Storm and the men who loved her.

I read it for the first time (writes this author) when I was a young woman and running around London doing nothing in particular and having a whole lot of fun. The city felt like my plaything then. The galleries and tea shops and parks and bars were like baubles on a string, shining and spinning in the soft spring sunlight of a morning in Bond Street and though I had no money, of course, (I was a student and ate very little, all the living costs were going on diamante earrings from Harvey Nichols and bottles of Chanel No 19), still I have a sense that what so many of us were doing then, in the early eighties, was extravagant, acting in extravagant little ways because we couldn't really believe we were ever going to have to grow up and get proper jobs and be sensible. So there we were, going to see The Leopard at midnight at the Curzon, or phoning up friends and organising the evening ahead from the wonderful little telephone booth at the Connaught Hotel... And though the mood of the time, that kind of bright hopelessness, a gorgeously affecting sense of time wasting diversion and the witty catholic pleasures of life, must come from the sheer fact of youth, well so it must be due also to the sort of bright green felt of a certain 'Hat'.

For I had been told about *The Green Hat*. It had been quoted to me in large portions by young men I loved, and, on one of those Mayfair spring mornings, I was given my own copy – the 1926 Collins edition from 'Hayward's Hill Bookshop' in Shepherd's Market – life and art come together in a brown hardback with hand cut pages and a gold embossed title. 'Hayward's Hill' was the exactly right shop to get it from too – for so much of *The Green Hat* takes place in Shepherd's Market. It is where the author first meets his heroine, it is where he and her brother lives – and it is also where we first spy the low yellow car that is to course through this novel's pages...

'Like a huge yellow insect that had dropped to earth from a butterfly civilisation, this car, gallant and suave, rested in the lowly silence of the Shepherd's Market night. Open as a yacht, it wore a great shining bonnet, and flying over the crest of this great bonnet, as though in proud flight over the heads of scores of phantom horses, was that silver stork by which the gentle may be pleased to know that they have just escaped death beneath the wheels of a Hispano-Suiza car, as supplied to His Most Catholic Majesty.'

What a paragraph is there! And a fine example of the craftsmanship of this book, of its words and cadences, the rise and fall of a kind of English no one speaks nowadays and probably never did. For *The Green Hat*, a most English novel and runaway best seller when it was first published in 1924 (mine was a seventeenth reprint hardback edition) was written by a man who was able to render the London of his age in a way no one else could manage, could even come close.

That's because Michael Arlen was not Michael Arlen at all but an immigrant Armenian recently removed to London and so in love with all he writes about in this book – with its easy pleasure and sense of fun, its fondness for the amateur and quiet sense of decorum – because he himself is a man who left his own darkened past to come and be among the bright and the living, to move among the inheritors of privilege and class as though he might belong there. No wonder then, the English, the Englishness, of *The Green Hat* is more

English than English... No wonder the words have all the polish and sheen of a treasured family heirloom he himself now owns. For Michael Arlen needs this story, you see, in order to live anew, in order to be the writer he wants to be... He needs Iris Storm and her set way, way more than Iris Storm and her set need him.

This kind of writing has its fellows, of course – in this era, in the twenties, in particular – a time, following on from the losses and depredations of the Great War, when so many may have had to reinvent themselves through words and art. There is Charles Ryder in the early sections of *Brideshead Revisited*, creating himself in the shadows of the Marchmain family. There is Nick Carraway in F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Ernest Hemingway's poor narrator to his glamorous Brett. But *The Green Hat* seems to delineate the imperative for this kind of literary stance more than any other. For the narrator reveals standing behind him not a Hemingway or a Fitzgerald but only another narrator, Michael Arlen himself as much a fiction as the 'author' he has created and not a crack anywhere upon the glittering surface of words for the immigrant Armenian to peep through.

Though it may seem strange, that books of this age may be so obviously artificial, that it's so necessary, somehow, for them to divert, to delight... Still I pick up *The Green Hat* again, this diversion, this 'Romance for a few people' and it all comes back – that time of my life spent doing nothing but seeing as many beautiful things as I could, seeing beauty, actually, all around me... And it doesn't seem a waste of time at all, to read my life reflected that way, in these particular pages. For what also comes back, in the end, is a literary experience that actually surpasses all the teas at the Ritz and the dances and the champagne... A collection of words that celebrate the wonder of prose – that, in the end is what *The Green Hat* is all about. Like its synecdoche counterpart in the story: As the hat is to the woman, so those words of the tile are to an entire developed and extraordinary literary style.

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