

Foreword

“Of all the company, only an intimate few stayed on at Malmanor after the Monday morning. Of the women, Mrs Loyalty, the Lady Fay Paradise, Esther Carlyle (who kept house for her brother), Mrs Avalon, and Shelmerdene. Of the men, Ralph Loyalty, George Tarlyon, John Avalon, myself, our host, and young Raymond Paris, the novelist, who spent his mornings in a secluded room, writing ...”

This opening to the first story in *These Charming People* had an instant effect on me. At first, as I looked through the small collection, saw that the nightingale singing in Berkeley Square had come from him – along with the fancy names of Arlen’s cast of characters and the geographical strictures imposed by his limiting of the action to Mayfair – I found myself recognising a world I had never known; the between-wars of the 1920s. Here was my Aunt Clare, who had married three times and divorced an equal number of *decree nisis* until her fabled beauty disappeared and she was left only with a rejection slip from her last admirer, known as “the General” stating “let’s face it, we’ve had it”. (Modern language for its time.) And here were the houses with ball-rooms where she had danced the night through, probably accompanied by the nightingale. This was the world of Gosford Park, of valets and maids and spiteful chit-chat: I had sensed her loyalty to the outworn values represented (so I imagined) by the Tarlyons and the Avalons and the lovely Shelmerdene – and I had secretly thanked my lucky stars that the world my father and his siblings had been reared in had been removed by the second world war and could never return. I giggled – as who wouldn’t – at the remoteness of the men as described by Arlen: like a jigsaw puzzle of Empire, they were representative of the vast possessions in the Colonies and could be slotted together all over the Globe, returning on occasion to

their old haunts in Mayfair: Davies Street and Grosvenor Square and the nightingale's favourite haunt (as I imagined it) in the leafy trees of Berkeley Square. The hawk-nosed men fell in and out of love with white-throated women in flowing, diaphanous gowns – and then left them, to serve the ruling deity, Empire.

So far so good. But as I read on, through these extraordinary stories – *The Smell In the Library* where a practical joke guides the action, *The Hunter After Wild Beasts* (“Listen, Gloria,” he whispered. “When I found you had gone, my life cracked like an earthenware cup... and now,” he said, “you have mended it again.”) I began to realise that the author of *The Green Hat*, the Armenian-born Michael Arlen, had succeeded in producing something quite unlike the melodrama that can be laughed at like an old movie. He was producing satire, yes, but a satire which transcended the normal rules of the game – for the tragic-comic effect he set down on the page delineated exactly an era of transformation. The strangled emotions of his hawk-nosed men, and the cool sarcasm expressed by his well-born heroines show the beginning of the end of Empire: Arlen is laughing along with us but he is also deadly serious.

Enjoy these stories for what they are – a record of a world escaping the nobility of sadness after the horrors of the First World War and heading for the 30s, the age of cynicism and anxiety. The beautiful Shelmerdene will laugh with you – but she is aware of the world she has entered – much more aware than my Aunt Clare.

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London, September 2009