

ARLENESQUE

By David Martin

WHEN interviewed, they said thus and thus, that Michael Arlen was an inhabitant of Mayfair. That was a fellow, said they, who knew how to write! "The London Venture" constituted the confessions of a very young man who, however, had little to confess except poverty and loneliness. "The Romantic Lady" brought into existence the lady Shelmerdene—Aphrodite rising from the young man's imagination—and "'Piracy'", of the troublesome quotation marks, really made a stir. Visitors in London always have the best time identifying the sights, but Londoners take their fun in identifying each other in each other's books. The number of personal portraits in "'Piracy'" was sufficient to increase greatly the author's enemies. "One must have enemies or one would have no time for writing", murmured Michael Arlen.

The fact that he was an Armenian turned in his favor upon the publication of "These Charming People",

with its story of the pseudo-Armenian and George Tarlyon's innocent remark: "But no one would say he was an Armenian if he wasn't, would he?" To the discomfiture of Tarlyon and his friend it became apparent that one would. In gracefully abandoning the name Dikran Kouyoumdjian (French spelling) for Michael Arlen, the crescent writer had not reckoned with the American librarian and his conscientious file cards. On these little squares "Kuyumjian, Dikran (Michael Arlen, pseud.)"—American spelling this time—will doubtless be preserved forever.

He really was born, you may as well know, in a village on the Danube. His parents moved to England when he was small. He went to public school and a university and then, as he admits, journeyed to Switzerland or thereabouts to get an education. Summoned home, he got as far as London. When it became unmistakable that he wouldn't go on to Birmingham (or was it Manchester?) his parents cut him off, quite.

On beginning the literary life, he made it a rule never to meet an editor in his office but always to ask him out to discuss a proposal over a cocktail. He had, indeed, many rules, such as allowing the best London tailors the privilege of waiting for their money, playing excellent lawn tennis, accepting dinner invitations, dancing all night, and going to Deauville, the Riviera, Venice (in April), Biskra and a few other places at the precise season. The only thing about which he had no rules was how he should write.

The first reviews accused him of being George Moore. Although he loathed giving Mr. Moore pain, Mr. Arlen felt constrained to deny the allegation. When it was very clear that he wasn't somebody else, the

critics' favorite indulgence was a comparison with de Maupassant. It was their way, Mr. Arlen comprehended, of speaking *de mortuo nil nisi bonum*. And he did not really mind, for, as he said, he had only been practising scales in public. After "Piracy" had been published he would, when pressed, admit: "I shall, of course, write." He repeated it after the topping success of "These Charming People"; but with "The Green Hat" he allows himself to say: "I have begun. . . ."

There is one book that no one really knows about. If you will glance in the front of your English first edition of "These Charming People" you will see an announcement of a novel by Michael Arlen to be published in the "near future" and to be called "The Dark Angel". And that is all you ever will descry of "The Dark Angel" except the fact following: Mr. Arlen commenced writing it. The novel was to have followed "These Charming People". Mr. Arlen completed "The Dark Angel". But then Mr. Arlen, on some examination, decided that "The Dark Angel" did not constitute the advance upon his earlier work which the public would expect from him. And so "The Dark Angel" was destroyed utterly, and no man can know what it was written about, or how well or less well. Now how shall we reckon with a novelist like that?

And Mr. Arlen likes Iris as a name for a woman; there is Iris Poole in "The Romantic Lady" and there's Iris Storm in "The Green Hat". The incomparable group of persons assembled in "These Charming People" are to reappear, so it is said to us by Mr. Cherry-Marvel, in a book that will follow "The Green Hat" and which may very probably be called "May Fair" (yes, two words). But

that is not quite all. There is a subtitle of the true Arlen descriptiveness, something about on this order —

Being a Tapestry of sincere, if unskilled, Workmanship attempting to shew certain Aspects of life in these Islands during the reign of His Majesty King George the Fifth: dealing with love and other domestic matters such as death, divorce, insanity, blackmail and murder: giving also certain inside information as to the proper cultivation of Green Carnations, the peculiar urbanities of Ghouls and lounge-lizards and the homely habits of Dukes. The book deals, in short, with the further adventures of These Charming People.

And — as they say officially at Eton — *crescat! floreat!*