

# MICHAEL ARLEN IN RETIREMENT (PART II)

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## By Alec Waugh

(From "My Brother Evelyn & Other Profiles")

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He was always laughing, always on his way from something exciting, about to take off for something glamorous. Life seemed to have poured all his treasures into his lap, yet was he happy? Did not his restlessness conceal a loneliness of the heart? Had he not once, at the bidding of caprice, driven through the night to Southampton, caught the *Aquitania* to New York, and then on arrival at New York changed his mind and returned in the same cabin? Were not all these love affairs sign of a central dissatisfaction? His stories contained cryptic clues. "What is success but solitude made perfect." "Freedom is a very lonely thing. It means that no one can be troubled to enslave you." "The plotter shall be caught in his own plots." Was he unhappy in himself? There was a dark secret at his core. It made him the more romantic.

There are those who resented his success. The English are not particularly xenophobic, but certain hidebound Tories grumbled against "This damned foreigner who's persuaded a lot of silly women that he's marvelous". A jealous fellow novelist labelled him as Turkish propaganda sent over to justify the Armenian massacres. But Arlen had the last word always. He anticipated criticism. He described himself as a case of pernicious anemia. He said his success was not a fashion, but an international disease. A quarter of century later he was to say, "I was a flash in the pan in my twenties. I had a hell of a lot of fun being flashy and there was by the grace of God a good deal of gold dust in the pan."

Anything you could say, he could say quicker, I have seen many kinds of literary success over half a century, but never one that was quite like Arlen's, that was attended with such a flourish, one in which the author and the books were so identified. That is why his consequent story is fascinating. The plotter was caught in his own plot. He could never retire. He had to be Michael Arlen to the chapter's close.

During the period that 'the disease' was infectious, he made a great deal of money at a time when American income-tax was low. He dramatized *The Green Hat* and *These Charming People*; both had long runs and both were filmed. For *Lily Christine* he received \$50,000 from the *Cosmopolitan* magazine for the serial rights. \$20,000 advance from Hutchinson on account of the British Empire sales, and \$15,000 from Doubleday Doran on account of the American book sales.

Only Arlen himself knows exactly how much he made between 1924 and 1931. He was extremely prudent with it. He turned himself into a limited company which he had registered in South America, with that brother as chairman of the board. When Arlen visited New York he travelled as the company's representative on an expense account. The capital earned during his boom years survived the depreciation of currency to which English writers generally have been exposed.

*Lily Christine* was published in 1928. In the spring of that year Arlen married. In a recent interview, he said, "I married and lived happily ever after."

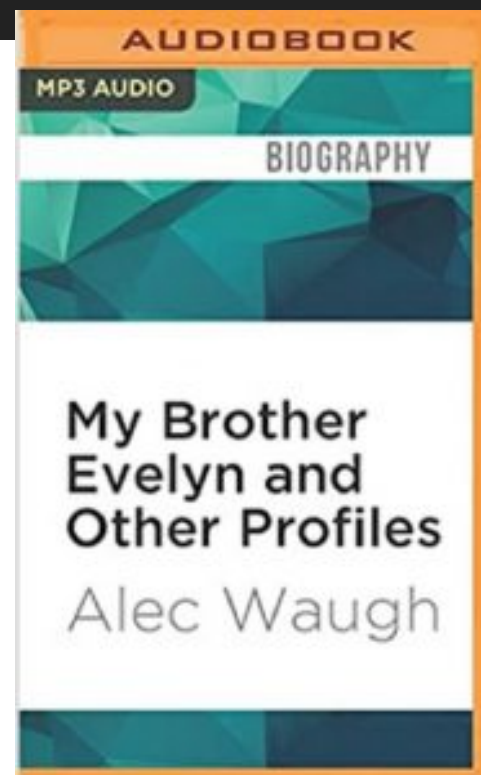
He was not exaggerating. Atalanta, the daughter of Count Mercate, half-Greek, half-American, was like Michael a kind of exile. He bought a villa outside Cannes. The French Riviera was then developing its summer season. It was a pleasant world, with its blue skies and blue seas, with its terraced olive groves and flowers, with its healthy, outdoor life of swimming and golf and tennis. Arlen was very happy there; happy in his marriage, in his son and daughter, in his way of life.

In 1931 the serial rights of *Men Dislike Women*—a delightful comedy of manners—were bought at a high price by *Cosmopolitan*. Short stories appeared at regular intervals. One of the stories—*The Golden Arrow*, was produced by Hollywood. He published two novels, *Man's Morality*, a story of wars of the future in 1932 and *The Flying Dutchman*, a political allegory in 1939. Both these novels were highly praised by responsible reviewers. "Does mankind improve? At any rate Mr. Arlen improves. He gets better and better as he gets more and more serious." That was the general tone. J. B. Priestly wrote of *Man's Morality*: "I did not think him to be a man of this mettle. Bravo."

The reviewers were no less enthusiastic over *The Flying Dutchman*. Humbert Wolf wrote: "Michael Arlen runs a serious risk of acclaiming himself on the way to becoming a genius. For many years in point of sheer diabolical talent he has been unapproachable." But in spite of its reviews, this book attracted little public interest... Myself I was unaware of its existence, till I found it in a friend's library several years after the war. The reading of it was a curious experience. It was a good novel, but without the name upon the cover I should never have guessed its authorship.

I realized then that a strange thing had happened during the 1930s. A divorce had taken place between the Michael Arlen whom the world saw and the Michael Arlen who put his name on covers.

In 1924 Michael Arlen was a composite production, the writer and the man were one, in 1939 the Michael Arlen who played golf at Cannes and drank martinis in the Carlton Bar was the author of *The Green Hat* fifteen years farther down the course—but the man who sat at a desk in a study looking out over the Mediterranean had ceased to be that Michael Arlen.



*The Flying Dutchman* was published six months before the outbreak of the Second World War. That second war, like the first, made Arlen because of his Bulgarian birthplace an odd man out. He was now a British subject but at forty-five he was too old for the armed services. He returned with Atalanta to London in the autumn to look for war work, but it was not easy to find war work during the period of the 'phony war.' Lord Dudley appointed him Civil Defence Public Relations officer for the East Midlands. Arlen was in Coventry when it was bombed. But with the end of the phony war, there was a return of xenophobia. Arlen might be a British subject, but he had been born in Bulgaria. Could he be trusted? Might he not be a Fifth columnist?

Questions were asked in the house and once again Michael Arlen found himself, if not a man without a country, a man without a country that would let him help defend it. He shrugged. It was a situation that amused him. With a domicile in France, he was not normally exposed to British income-tax, but since he was a British subject, the British Treasury considered itself entitled to sequester of all of his and his wife's American possessions with the exception of Michael Arlen Inc., which was registered in South America. He shrugged again. Another Armenian atrocity, he said, and continued to play poker at the Savage.

Early in 1941 his son's school was moved to Canada and Atalanta went with it. Later in the year her husband followed her.

*I often thought of him during the next four years. In 1943 I was posted as an intelligence officer to*

*Baghdad, and one of my duties was to keep watch over the Armenian minorities, whose subterranean activities the Germans might endeavor to exploit. I many times wished that Arlen were at my elbow to explain to me who stood for what. He at the time ironically enough was working in Hollywood on the film version of a novel of mine that M.G.M. had bought the story never reached the screen and my report on the Dashnaks remained a draft. If we could have exchanged desks, if I could have worked on my own story, while he interpreted the national aspirations of his compatriots, practical results might have been obtained.*

As soon as the war was over, I hurried back to New York and Arlen was one of the first people that I saw. He looked very much as he had quarter of a century earlier. The Arlens were anxious to revisit London but once again there were problems of nationality. In the eyes of Washington he was a Bulgarian and his wife a Greek; the quotas for those countries were filled till the year 2010. He was afraid that if he once left America, he might find it difficult to return. A typical Arlen situation.

He shook his head when I asked him what he was working on. Since he had arrived in America had had spent two years in Hollywood, on a contract with M.G.M. but he had written nothing. He had never liked writing, he said. He didn't need to write. Why should he? He preferred reading; all lazy men like to read, he said.

It was now nine year since I had met him on Fifth Avenue and in a certain sense not much had happened to him since the relaxation of currency restrictions had made it possible for him to move into a large and pleasant Park Avenue apartment. The family immigration problem had at last been settled by means no less august than an Act of Congress.

Sometimes I felt it was a pity that so considerable gift should have been allowed to wither, but when I read *The Flying Dutchman* I understood why he had let it do so. In the 1930s the following quatrain appeared in a fashionable London weekly:

*Mr. Arlen  
was formerly Mayfair's darling  
But she raised a plucked and supercilious eyebrow  
When he went all highbrow.*

He was always a man of gesture, and though the young Armenian who changed his name from Kouyoumdjian could not have foreseen this final chapter of his story, he would have recognized it as being in keeping with the plan of campaign he drew up in the *New Age* offices. He said then of his future and of the novel that he would write, "The quality I shall desire in it will be fastidiousness." He showed that quality as consistently in his life as in his writing. He would have been content, while he corrected the proofs of *The London Venture* in 1919, to have foreseen that in 1949 he would be reading the following description of himself the: "Slender of waist, bushy of eyebrow, neatly side-burned, elegantly moustached, poised, urbane, resplendent in pin-striped blue suit, the flourisher of a gold-banded Malacca cane, possessed by no demon whatever and apparently the world's best

adjusted writer."

It had been a long haul from Dvornok, Bulgaria, to that side table in the King Cole room: a long and a romantic road. Michael Arlen had fulfilled the destiny he chose.

Arlen died in 1956. He was 61.

**There are no comments yet.**