IMPERIAL PALACE

By

ARNOLD BENNETT

CASSELL
& Company Limited
London, Toronto, Melbourne and Sydney

TO

GEORGE REEVES-SMITH

FROM ONE OF THE WARMEST
OF HIS ADMIRERS

NOTE

ALL the eighty-five speaking characters in this novel are entirely fictitious, except one, which is a very partial portrait of a man now dead. It is not possible to avoid occasional chance resemblances between fiction and life, but any living persons who imagine themselves to be depicted in the story are hereby authoritatively informed that they err.

A. B.

First Edition (first issue, limited, in 2 vols.)
October 1930; second issue at 10*s.* 6*d.*
Second Edition October 1930
Third Edition October 1930
Fourth Edition January 1931
Fifth Edition April 1931
Sixth Edition September 1931
Seventh Edition (first cheap edition) July 1932
Eighth Edition August 1933

Printed in Great Britain

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

IMPERIAL PALACE

Chapter I

4 A.M.

I

Evelyn came down by the lift into the great front-hall. One of the clocks there showed seven minutes to four; the other showed six minutes to four. He thought: "I should have had time to shave. This punctuality business is getting to be a mania with me." He smiled sympathetically, forgivingly, at his own weakness, which the smile transformed into a strength. He had bathed; he had drunk tea; he was correctly dressed, in the informal style which was his—lounge-suit, soft collar, soft hat, light walking-stick, no gloves; but he had not shaved. No matter. There are dark men who must shave every twelve hours; their chins are blue. Evelyn was neither dark nor fair; he might let thirty hours pass without a shave, and nobody but an inquisitive observer would notice the negligence.

The great front-hall was well lighted; but the lamps were islands in the vast dusky spaces; at 2 a.m. the chandeliers—sixteen lamps apiece—which hung in the squares of the panelled ceiling ceased to shower down their spendthrift electricity on the rugs and the concrete floor impressively patterned in huge lozenges of black and white. Behind the long counters to the right of the double revolving doors at the main entrance shone the two illuminated signs, "Reception" and "Enquiries," always at the same strength day and night. The foyer down the steps, back beyond the hall, had one light. The restaurant down the steps beyond the foyer had one light. The reading-room, cut out of the hall by glass partitions, had no light. The grill-room, which gave on a broad corridor opposite the counters, had several lights; in theory it opened for breakfasts at 6 a.m., but in fact it was never closed, nor its kitchen closed.

Reyer, the young night-manager, in stiff shirt and dinner-jacket, was sitting at the Reception counter, his fair, pale, bored, wistful face bent over a little pile of documents. An Englishman of French extraction, he was turning night into day and day into night in order to learn a job and something about human nature. He would lament, mildly, that he never knew what to call his meals; for with him dinner was breakfast and breakfast dinner; as for lunch, he knew it no more. He had been night-manager

for nearly a year; and Evelyn had an eye on him, had hopes of him—and he had hopes of Evelyn.

As Evelyn approached the counter Reyer respectfully rose.

"Morning, Reyer."

"Good morning, Mr. Orcham. You're up early."

"Anything on the night-report?" Evelyn asked, ignoring Reyer's remark.

"Nothing much, sir. A lady left suite 341 at three o'clock."

"Taxi or car?"

"Walked," said Reyer the laconic.

"Let me see the book."

Reyer opened a manuscript volume and pushed it across the counter. Evelyn read, without any comment except "Um!" At 10 a.m. the night-report would be placed before him, typewritten, in his private office. He moved away. Near the revolving doors stood Samuel Butcher (referred to, behind his back, as Long Sam), the head night-porter, and a couple of his janissaries, all in blue and gold.

"Well, Sam," Evelyn greeted the giant cheerfully.

"Morning, sir," Sam saluted.

The janissaries, not having been accosted, took care not to see Evelyn.

"I gather you haven't had to throw anyone out to-night?" Evelyn waved his cane.

"No, sir." Sam laughed, proud of the directorial attention.

Evelyn pulled out a cigarette. Instantly both the janissaries leapt to different small tables on which were matches. The winner struck a match and held it to Evelyn's cigarette.

"Thanks," Evelyn murmured, and, puffing, strolled towards the back of the hall, where he glanced at himself in a mighty square column faced with mirror.

II

No! The nascent beard was completely invisible. Suit correct, stylish. Handkerchief peeping correctly out of the pocket. Necktie—he adjusted the necktie ever so little. Shoes correct—not a crease in them. Well, perhaps the features lacked distinction; the angle of the nose was a bit too acute; the lower lip heavy, somewhat sensual. But what friendly keen brown eyes! What delicate ears! And the chin—how enigmatic! The chin would puzzle any reader of the human countenance. Forty-seven. Did he feel forty-seven? Could he even believe that he was forty-seven? He felt thirty—thirty-one. And the simpleton thought that he looked at most thirty-five. In two and a half years

however, he would be fifty. God! What a prospect! Well, he didn't care one damn how old he was, or looked, so long as he felt. . . . On the whole, quite a presentable creature. But nobody would glance twice at him in the street. Nobody could possibly guess that he was anyone out of the ordinary. A pity, possibly. Yet what is, is, and must be accepted with philosophy. Nevertheless, he was acquainted with idiots, asses, greenhorns and charlatans whose appearance was so distinguished that they could not enter a restaurant without arousing respectful curiosity. Funny world.

The séance at the mirror lasted three seconds—time to adjust the necktie, no more. He moved off. The clock over the counter showed five minutes to four. Clocks had their moods; they raced, they stood still, in discordance with the mood of the beholder, maliciously intent on exasperating him.

Within recent months Evelyn had hung the walls of the great hall with large, old coloured prints of antique, sunk or broken-up Atlantic liners, and underneath each a smaller photograph of a modern vessel. He glanced at an American print of a French liner of the sixties, paddle and sail. He read the quaint legend beneath: " Length 375 feet. Breadth of beam 46. Depth of hold 33. Burthen 3,500 tons. Horse-power, 1,250." *Burthen.* Comic! Yet in her time this ship had been a crack. Under the print was a photograph of the " Ile-de-France." Yes, this idea of his of marine prints in the hall had been extremely successful. It was aimed at American visitors, who constituted sixty per cent. of the clientèle, and it hit them all day and every day. Difficult at certain hours to pass through the great hall without seeing an American gazing entranced at a marine print.

That contrarious clock still showed five minutes to four. Long Sam stood moveless; his janissaries stood moveless; young Reyer sat moveless. The electric lamps burned with the stoical endurance of organisms which have passed beyond time into eternity. The great hall seemed to lie under an enchantment. Its darkened extensions, the foyer and the immeasurable restaurant, seemed to lie under an enchantment. The brighter corridor and grill-room seemed to lie under an enchantment. Diminished men awaited with exhaustless patience the birth of day, as they might have awaited the birth of a child.

Chapter II

ARRIVALS

I

Sound and lights of a big car, heard and seen through the glazed frontage of the hall! Revolution of the doors! Long Sam was already outside; his janissaries were outside; the doors were whizzing with the speed of the men's exit. Reyer came round the counter. The enchantment was smashed to bits: phenomenon as swift and unexpected as a street-accident. Evelyn wondered who could be arriving with such a grandiose pother at four o'clock in the morning. But his chief concern was the clock, which now showed three minutes to four. If Jack Cradock did not appear within three minutes the stout, faithful little man would be late for his rendezvous. And it was Jack's business to be not merely on time but before time. Evelyn was uneasy. Uneasily he glanced down the dim vista of the foyer and the restaurant, his back to the doors through which Jack ought to enter. He heard voices: Long Sam's, Reyer's and another's.

He turned, in spite of himself, at the tones of that third voice, polite, but curt, assured, authoritative. Between a felt hat and a huge overcoat he saw a face with which he was not unacquainted, Sir Henry Savott's (baronet). Then he remembered that Sir Henry, passenger by the "Caractacus"—45,000 tons—from New York, had reserved two suites overlooking the Park. A small, spry, rather desiccated face, with small, searching eyes, a clipped, iron-grey military moustache, and a bony, imperious chin. Staring curiously about as he talked to Reyer, Sir Henry descried Evelyn, and, unceremoniously leaving Reyer, stepped spryly towards the Director, who advanced to meet him in the middle of the hall. False youthfulness, thought Evelyn, proud of his own comparative youthfulness. The fellow must be fifty-seven, and pretending to be forty-seven—unsuccessfully! The two shook hands with mutual smiles.

"Hope you haven't got up specially to meet us," said Sir Henry. "Too bad!"

"No," said Evelyn quietly and carelessly.

The infernal impudence of these spoilt millionaires! To imagine that he, Evelyn, would get up specially to meet anybody on earth!

"I'm glad," said Sir Henry, who was sorry, hiding all consciousness of a rebuff.

"See. You've come by the 'Caractacus'?"

"Yes. My daughter has driven me and her maid and some of the light stuff up from Southampton. She's the devil's own

driver, Gracie is, particularly at night. There are two or three cars behind us. But most of the passengers preferred to have their sleep out on the ship and wait for the boat-train."

"You're three days late," said Evelyn.

"Yes," Sir Henry admitted.

"Funny rumours about that ship," said Evelyn.

"Yes," said Sir Henry darkly, in a manner definitely to close the subject of rumours. He was a large shareholder in the company which owned the line.

Evelyn perceived two girls in conversation with an assiduous and impressed Reyer. The young man's deportment was quite good, if a trifle too subservient. One of the girls wore a magnificent leather coat. Doubtless Gracie, celebrated in the illustrated press for her thrilling performances at the wheel at Brooklands. The other, less warmly clad, must be the maid.

Gracie looked suddenly round, and Evelyn saw her face, which however he hardly recognised from the photographs of it in illustrated papers. At a distance of twenty feet he felt the charm of it—vivacious, agreeable, aware of its own power. Perhaps very beautiful, but he could not be sure. Anyhow, the face—and the gestures—of an individuality. Evelyn at once imagined her as a mistress; and as he fenced amiably with the amiable Sir Henry, who he had some reason to believe would one day soon be trying to engage him in high finance, his mind dwelt upon the idea of her as a mistress. He was not an over-sensual man; he was certainly not lascivious. He was guilty of no bad taste in conceiving this girl, whom he now saw for the first time, as a mistress in the privacy of his heart. What goes on in a man's heart is his own affair. And similar thoughts, on meeting young and attractive women, wander in and out of the hearts of the most staid and serious persons, unsuspected by a world of beholders apt to reason too conventionally. Evelyn's was an entirely serious soul, but it had a mortal envelope. He was starved of women. For years women had been his secret preoccupation. He desired intimacy with some entrancing, perfect woman. Not the marital intimacy. No. Never again the marital intimacy. He would make sacrifices for the desired intimacy. But not the supreme sacrifice. Work first, career first, woman second, even were she another Helen.

For nearly twenty years Evelyn had been a widower. Six weeks after his marriage a daily series of inescapable facts had compelled him to admit to himself that his wife was a furiously self-centred neurotic who demanded as a natural right everything in exchange for nothing. An incurable. He had excused her on the ground that she was not to be blamed for her own mental

constitution. He had tolerated her because he was of those who will chew whatever they may have bitten off. He had protected himself by the application of the theory that all that happens to a man happens in his own mind and nowhere else, and therefore that he who is master of his own mind is fortified against fate. A dogma; but it suited his case. At the end of three years Adela had died, an unwilling mother with a terrific grievance, in childbed; and the child had not survived her. The whole experience was horrible. Evelyn mourned. His sorrow was also a sigh of transcendent relief. Agonising relief, but relief. Not till the episode was finished did he confess to his mind how frightfully he had suffered and how imperfectly he had been master of his mind. He had never satisfactorily answered the great, humiliating question: "How could I have been such a colossal fool, so blind, so deaf, so utterly mistaken in my estimate of a woman?" He was left with a quiet but tremendous prejudice against marriage. I have had luck this time, he thought. Once is enough. Never again! Never again! He divided wives into those who were an asset and those who were a liability; and his strong inclination was to conclude, in the final judgment, that of all the wives he knew not one was an asset. One or two of them might have the appearance of an asset, yet if you could penetrate to essentials, if you could learn the inner conjugal secrets, was there one who was not a liability? He tried to stand away from himself and see that he was prejudiced, but he could never honestly convict himself of a prejudice in this matter.

He saw the maid and Reyer pass towards the lift like apparitions. He noticed that the pretty but tired maid was well-dressed, probably in clothes that a few months earlier her mistress had been wearing; but that nevertheless every nervous movement and glance of the girl divulged her station. He heard Sir Henry's voice and his own like faint echoes. He saw the janissaries pass towards the lift like apparitions carrying ghostly suit-cases. He saw Miss Savott herself go towards the doors like an apparition, then hesitate and glide towards her father like an apparition. And in those brief seconds the sole reality of his mind was the three years of marriage with Adela, years whose thousand days and a day swept in detail through his memory with the miraculous rapidity of a life re-lived by a drowning man.

"Gracie, this is my friend, Mr. Orcham, the king of his world —I've told you. My daughter."

And now Gracie was the reality. Instinctively he put one hand to his chin as he raised his hat with the other. Why had he not shaved? The hair on his enigmatic chin seemed half an inch long.

"I do hope you haven't got up specially to meet us," said Gracie.

Her father's words, but spoken differently! What a rich, low, emotional, sympathetic voice, full of modulations! A voice like shot silk, changing at every syllable!

"No, I didn't," he replied. "But if I'd known you'd be here so early I certainly might have done. The fact is, I've got up to go with my meat-buyer to Smithfield Market."

He looked and saw the faithful Cradock standing meekly expectant at the entrance. The dilatory clock at last showed four.

"I must just lock up the car," said Gracie. "Shan't be two minutes." She ran off.

"I'm going to bed," Sir Henry called after her.

"All right, daddy," she called back, not stopping.

"I'm fortunate enough to be able to sleep whenever I want to!" said Sir Henry to Evelyn. "Useful, eh?"

"Very," Evelyn agreed.

Wonderful with what naïve satisfaction these millionaires attributed to themselves the characteristics of Napoleon! He accompanied Napoleon to the lift, and stayed for a moment chatting about the hotel. It was as if they were manœuvring for places before crossing the line in a yacht race.

II

When Evelyn returned to the hall Gracie Savott also was returning. She now carried the leather coat on her arm, revealing a beige frock.

"No, no," she said when he offered to take the coat. "But have you got a gasper?"

"I never smoke anything else," said Evelyn.

"Neither do I," said Gracie. "Thanks."

He thought: "What next?"

The next was that Gracie moved a few feet to a table, Evelyn following, and put the newly lighted cigarette on an ash-tray, opened her bag, and began to titivate her face. She was absorbed in this task, earnest over it; yet she could talk the while. He somehow could not examine her features in detail; but he could see that she had a beautiful figure. What slim ankles! What wrists! *Les attaches fines.* She had a serious expression, as one engaged on a matter of grave importance. She dabbed; she critically judged the effect of each dab, gazing closely at her face in the hand-mirror. And Evelyn unshaved!

"Has daddy really gone to bed?" she asked, not taking her eyes off the mirror.

"He has."

"He's a great sleeper before the Lord. I suppose he told you about our cockleshell the 'Caractacus.'"

"Not a word. What about it? We did hear she'd been rolling a bit."

"Rolling a bit! When we were a day out from New York, she rolled the dining-room windows under water. The fiddles were on the tables, but she threw all the crockery right over the fiddles. I was the only woman at dinner, and there wasn't absolutely a legion of men either. They said that roll smashed seventeen thousand pounds' worth of stuff. I thought she'd never come up again. The second officer told daddy next day that *he* never thought she'd come up again. It was perfectly thrilling. But she did come up. Everyone says she's the worst roller that ever sailed the seas."

During this narration Gracie's attention to the mirror did not relax.

"Well," said Evelyn calmly. "Of course it must have been pretty bad weather to make a big ship like that three days late."

"Weather!" said Gracie. "The weather was awful, perfectly dreadful. But it wasn't the weather that made her three days late. She split right across. Yes, split right across. The observation-deck. A three-inch split. Anyhow I could put my foot into it. Of course it was roped off. But they showed it to daddy. They had to. And I saw it with him."

"Do you mean to say——" Evelyn began, incredulous.

"Yes, I do mean to say," Gracie stopped him. "You ask daddy. Ask anyone who was on board. That's why she's going to be laid up for three months. They talk about 're-conditioning.' But it's the split."

"But how on earth——?" Evelyn was astounded more than he had ever been astounded.

"Oh! Strain, or something. They *said* it was something to do with them putting two new lifts in, and removing a steel cross-beam or whatever they call it. But daddy says don't you believe it. She's too long for her strength, and she won't stand it in any weather worth talking about. Of course she was German built, and the Germans can't build like us. Don't you agree?"

"No. I don't," said Evelyn, with a smile to soften the contradiction, slightly lifting his shoulders.

"Oh, you don't? That's interesting now."

Evelyn raised his cane a few inches to greet Jack Cradock, who replied by raising his greenish hard hat.

"Now," thought Evelyn, somewhere in the midst of the brain-disturbance due to Gracie's amazing news. "This is all very

well, but what about Smithfield? She isn't quite a young girl. She must be twenty-five, and she knows that I haven't got up at four o'clock for small-talk with women. Yet she behaves as if I hadn't anything to do except listen to her. She may stay chattering here for half an hour."

He resented this egotistical thoughtlessness so characteristic of the very rich. At the same time he was keenly enjoying her presence. And he liked her expensive stylishness. The sight of a really smart woman always gave him pleasure. In his restaurant, when he occasionally inspected it as a spy from a corner behind a screen, he always looked first for the fashionable, costly frocks, and the more there were the better he was pleased. He relished, too, the piquancy of the contrast between Gracie's clothes and the rough masculinity of her achievements on Brooklands track in the monstrous cars which Sir Henry had had specially built for her, and her night-driving on the road from Southampton. Only half an hour ago she had probably been steering a big car at a mile a minute on a dark curving road. And here with delicate hands she was finishing the minute renewal of her delicate face. Her finger-nails were stained a bright red.

So the roll from which nobody hoped that the ship would recover, the roll which had broken seventeen thousand pounds' worth of stuff, was merely 'thrilling' to her. And she had put her little foot into the split across the deck. What a sensation that affair ought to cause! What unique copy for the press! Nevertheless, would it cause a sensation? Would the press exploit it? He fancied not. The press would give descriptive columns to the marvels and luxuries of a new giant liner. But did anybody ever read in any paper—even in any anti-capitalistic paper—that a famous vessel rolled, or vibrated, or shook? Never! Never a word in derogation! As for the incredible cross-split, result of incorrect calculations of the designer, no editor would dare to refer to it in print. To do so would damage Atlantic traffic for a whole season—and incidentally damage the hotel business. The four-million-pound crack was protected by the devoted adherence of the press to the dogma that transatlantic liners are perfect. And let no one breathe a word concerning the relation between editors and advertisement-managers.

Miss Savott had kept the leather coat on her arm while doing her face. The face done, and her bag shut again, she dropped the cloak on the small table by her side. Womanish! Proof of a disordered and inconsequent mind. She resumed the cigarette, which had been steadily sending up a vertical wavering wisp of smoke.

"Mr. Orcham," she said ingratiatingly, intimately, stepping

near to him. "Will you do something for me? . . . I simply daren't ask you."

"If I can," he smiled. (Had experience taught her that she was irresistible?)

"Oh, you *can*! I've been dying for years to see Smithfield Market in the middle of the night. Would you mind very much taking me with you? I would drive you there. The car's all ready. I didn't lock it up after all."

Here was his second amazement. These people were incredible —as incredible as the split in the 'Caractacus.' How did she suppose he could transact his business at Smithfield with a smart young woman hanging on to him?

She added, like an imploring child:

"I won't be in the way. I'd be as small as a mouse."

They read your thoughts.

Not 'as quiet as a mouse.' 'As small as a mouse.' Better. She had a gift for making her own phrases.

"But surely you must be terribly tired. I've had four and a half hours' sleep."

"Me! Tired! I'm like father—and you—I'm never tired. Besides, I slept my head off on the ship."

She looked appealingly up at him. Yes, irresistible! And she well knew it!

"Well, if you really aren't too tired, I shall be delighted. And the market is very interesting."

And in fact he was delighted. There were grave disadvantages, naturally; but he dismissed them from his mind, to make room for the anticipation of being driven by her through the night-streets of London. Sitting by her! He was curious to see one of these expert racing drivers, and especially the fastest woman-driver in the world, at the wheel.

"You're frightfully kind," said she. "I'll just——"

"How did you know I'm never tired?" he interrupted her.

"I could see it in your shoulders," she answered. "You aren't, are you?"

"Not often," he said, proud, thrilled, feverish.

"See it in my shoulders," he thought. "Odd little creature. Her brain's impish. That's what it is. Well, perhaps she can see it in my shoulders." Indeed he was proud.

"I'll just fly upstairs one moment. Shan't keep you. Where's the lift?" But she had descried the lift and was gone.

"Reyer," he called. "Just see Miss Savott to her suite."

Reyer ran. The lift-man judiciously waited for him.

And Evelyn, Nizam of the immense organism of the hotel, reflected like an ingenuous youth: