

# The Empire Hotel

David Wheldon

It was the same person, without a doubt. I recognized her immediately: by no one particular cast of feature; but, within a second, I was sure of her identity. Her name was Rosaline. She stared at me without any noticeable expression, unblinkingly, as she had done all those years before. Her eyes were very dark grey: it was difficult to distinguish pupil from iris.

‘You might be good enough to help me with my bags,’ she said, somewhat distantly. ‘I have taken the room next to yours.’

In this run-down residential hotel there were no porters: in fact, you had to do most things for yourself. It was basic, and primitive, and, accordingly, inexpensive. Only the communal areas were cleaned, which meant that you had to manage your own room and make your own bed. Clean sheets were set out on the passage window ledges every week. Most of the furniture was ex-services or Government Utility. I liked it here. It was, in fact, a club owned by the members and managed by a dedicated committee. Prospective members were interviewed. A quiet conservatism ruled.

Rosaline must have just come from her interview, for she held the slender blue rule-book in her hand.

‘Certainly,’ I said, ‘I’ll be pleased to.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, unsmilingly. She looked at me carefully. ‘I’m curious. You seem to find my face familiar. Though I don’t know you.’ She had a very steady stare.

‘I may be quite mistaken,’ I said. ‘It was many years ago: we were children, and children change as they grow. I’m sorry if I stared at you.’

‘That’s all right,’ she said, simply.

We walked down the corridor together. She had a long stride, like her mother, covering a lot of ground while never appearing to be in haste.

Well, I thought back to our previous meeting. My recall had been immediate. I had met this person when we were both aged nine. She was several months older than me. I had met her only on that one occasion, for less than an hour, but I shall remember that meeting every single day of my life. As I write I remember it with an emotion approaching terror even now. I’ll pass no judgement, though. I’ll never pass judgement. I’ll just set out the story as it happened, from my viewpoint, one bright, sunny afternoon in the summer of 1959.

My mother and I were visiting a woman she somehow knew in North Oxford — I forget the name of the road: it was very near the Parks; her house was a vast Victorian pile (a style not so very dissimilar to the *Empire Hotel* where I now reside) and our hostess, a tall, powerful, severe-looking woman, said to me: “what is your name?” “David,” I replied, looking up at her large, unsmiling face. “Well, Davy —” “David,” I said, correcting her. “What?” she asked. “My name is David,” I said, with what must have been a child’s emphasis. She looked down at me in sudden anger, and drew back her hand, as if to administer a sound slap. I recall I flinched. I put my own arm defensively in front of my face. I recall the long, many-buttoned cuff of her sleeve. The woman slowly lowered her hand. Her cheeks were flushed and her face was angry. It

was clear that she had had to struggle to restrain herself. She was breathing hard. “I will not be corrected by a boy,” she said, softly, almost under her breath. She emanated a sense of personal antipathy, even hate. Where my mother was I do not know; but this woman and I were alone in a vast, old-fashioned drawing-room in semi-darkness. The heavy velvet curtains were nearly drawn against the summer light. Motes of dust hung in the ray of sunlight which came in through the crack between the curtains. On the walls were prints of religious themes, including what I now know to be Cranach’s deeply unpleasant *Samson and Delilah*, where impoverished, uprooted Delilah knows exactly what she’s doing with her shears, her face impassive. The silence was profound, the atmosphere intimidating. Then the woman lost her scowl, converting it into a smile. I found the sudden change of expression alarming. She put her large and capable hands together secretively. “Come with me, Davy,” she said, and began to walk through the house, with me following. Her footfall was sharp, her paces long. I did not dare correct her again. “You can make friends with my darling Rosaline — my Rosie — and you may play together. She knows you’re coming, and she’s really looking forward to meeting you.” We entered a long, dark, stone-floored passage which led to what had been the servants’ area: kitchens, cellar-steps, cloakrooms, pantries and the like. The air was cavernous and damp. She opened a door. There was a faint smell of town gas. The room, evidently a scullery, had a high window and a skylight, an iron cooking-range, obviously disused, a cast-iron fire-surround, a large vitreous sink with big, brass three-quarter-inch taps, a confusion of lead plumbing, and a long, scrubbed deal table with kitchen chairs around it — I think they are called Chiltern chairs — and they are made of beech-wood. On one of these chairs was seated a well-built and watchful girl of my own age, swinging her legs to and fro. She had been looking at a picture book. Now she was looking directly into my eyes. Her stare was powerful but without expression.

“Oh, my darling Rosebud!” said the woman in an access of motherly sentiment, her face now radiant with smiles. “This is Davy, whose mother is visiting me. He is a little late, but he has arrived at last. You can make friends with each other and play together. Rosie, you can show him the garden.” She smiled at her daughter (who did not return her smile), left the room and quietly closed the door. I could hear her footfall on the flagstones of the passage.

“Hello,” I said, a little timidly. I put my hand diffidently on the surface of the table. Rosaline was staring at me. She was a big girl. There was something about the intensity of her vigilant stare that made me very uneasy. She swallowed once; otherwise she remained quite unmoving. She did not blink. She had stopped swinging her legs. A minute passed. “What do you like doing best, Rosaline?” I asked in my best drawing-room tones. “This,” she said, getting off her chair and slowly walking round the table towards me. She was a big girl, as I say, much taller and heavier than I. Her manner seemed to broadcast a terrible strength.

*[This is a preview. The full text contains 12,000 words]*