

CHAPTER 1

In the heart of the West End, there are many quiet pockets, unknown to almost all but taxi drivers who traverse them with expert knowledge, and arrive triumphantly thereby at Park Lane, Berkeley Square or South Audley Street.

If you turn off on an unpretentious street from the Park, and turn left and right once or twice, you will find yourself in a quiet street with Bertram's Hotel on the right hand side. Bertram's Hotel has been there a long time. During the war, houses were demolished on the right of it, and a little farther down on the left of it, but Bertram's itself remained unscathed. Naturally it could not escape being, as house agents would say, scratched, bruised and marked, but by the expenditure of only a reasonable amount of money it was restored to its original condition. By 1955 it looked precisely as it had looked in 1939—dignified, unostentatious, and quietly expensive.

Such was Bertram's, patronized over a long stretch of years by the higher *échelons* of the clergy, dowager ladies of the aristocracy up from the country, girls on their way home for the holidays from expensive finishing schools.

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(‘So few places where a girl can stay alone in London but of course it is *quite* all right at Bertram’s. We have stayed there for *years*.’)

There had, of course, been many other hotels on the model of Bertram’s. Some still existed, but nearly all had felt the wind of change. They had had necessarily to modernize themselves, to cater for a different clientele. Bertram’s, too, had had to change, but it had been done so cleverly that it was not at all apparent at the first casual glance.

Outside the steps that led up to the big swing doors stood what at first sight appeared to be no less than a Field-Marshal. Gold braid and medal ribbons adorned a broad and manly chest. His deportment was perfect. He received you with tender concern as you emerged with rheumatic difficulty from a taxi or a car, guided you carefully up the steps and piloted you through the silently swinging doorway.

Inside, if this was the first time you had visited Bertram’s, you felt, almost with alarm, that you had re-entered a vanished world. Time had gone back. You were in Edwardian England once more.

There was, of course, central heating, but it was not apparent. As there had always been, in the big central lounge, there were two magnificent coal fires; beside them big brass coal scuttles shone in the way they used to shine when Edwardian housemaids polished them, and they were filled with exactly the right sized lumps of coal. There was a general appearance of rich red velvet and plushy cosiness. The arm-chairs were not of this time and age. They were

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well above the level of the floor, so that rheumatic old ladies had not to struggle in an undignified manner in order to get to their feet. The seats of the chairs did not, as in so many modern high-priced arm-chairs, stop half-way between the thigh and the knee, thereby inflicting agony on those suffering from arthritis and sciatica; and they were not all of a pattern. There were straight backs and reclining backs, different widths to accommodate the slender and the obese. People of almost any dimension could find a comfortable chair at Bertram's.

Since it was now the tea hour, the lounge hall was full. Not that the lounge hall was the only place where you could have tea. There was a drawing-room (chintz), a smoking-room (by some hidden influence reserved for gentlemen only), where the vast chairs were of fine leather, two writing-rooms, where you could take a special friend and have a cosy little gossip in a quiet corner—and even write a letter as well if you wanted to. Besides these amenities of the Edwardian age, there were other retreats, not in any way publicized, but known to those who wanted them. There was a double bar, with two bar attendants, an American barman to make the Americans feel at home and to provide them with bourbon, rye, and every kind of cocktail, and an English one to deal with sherries and Pimm's No. 1, and to talk knowledgeably about the runners at Ascot and Newbury to the middle-aged men who stayed at Bertram's for the more serious race meetings. There was also, tucked down a passage, in a secretive way, a television-room for those who asked for it.

But the big entrance lounge was the favourite place for

the afternoon tea drinking. The elderly ladies enjoyed seeing who came in and out, recognizing old friends, and commenting unfavourably on how these had aged. There were also American visitors fascinated by seeing the titled English really getting down to their traditional afternoon tea. For afternoon tea was quite a feature of Bertram's.

It was nothing less than splendid. Presiding over the ritual was Henry, a large and magnificent figure, a ripe fifty, avuncular, sympathetic, and with the courtly manners of that long vanished species: the perfect butler. Slim youths performed the actual work under Henry's austere direction. There were large crested silver trays, and Georgian silver teapots. The china, if not actually Rockingham and Davenport, looked like it. The Blind Earl services were particular favourites. The tea was the best Indian, Ceylon, Darjeeling, Lapsang, etc. As for eatables, you could ask for anything you liked—and get it!

On this particular day, November the 17th, Lady Selina Hazy, sixty-five, up from Leicestershire, was eating delicious well-buttered muffins with all an elderly lady's relish.

Her absorption with muffins, however, was not so great that she failed to look up sharply every time the inner pair of swing doors opened to admit a newcomer.

So it was that she smiled and nodded to welcome Colonel Luscombe—erect, soldierly, race glasses hanging round his neck. Like the old autocrat that she was, she beckoned imperiously and, in a minute or two, Luscombe came over to her.

'Hallo, Selina, what brings you up to Town?'

'Dentist,' said Lady Selina, rather indistinctly, owing to

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muffin. 'And I thought as I *was* up, I might as well go and see that man in Harley Street about my arthritis. You know who I mean.'

Although Harley Street contained several hundreds of fashionable practitioners for all and every ailment, Luscombe did know whom she meant.

'Do you any good?' he asked.

'I rather think he did,' said Lady Selina grudgingly. 'Extraordinary fellow. Took me by the neck when I wasn't expecting it, and wrung it like a chicken.' She moved her neck gingerly.

'Hurt you?'

'It must have done, twisting it like that, but really I hadn't time to know.' She continued to move her neck gingerly. 'Feels all right. Can look over my right shoulder for the first time in years.'

She put this to a practical test and exclaimed, 'Why I do believe that's old Jane Marple. Thought she was dead years ago. Looks a hundred.'

Colonel Luscombe threw a glance in the direction of Jane Marple thus resurrected, but without much interest: Bertram's always had a sprinkling of what he called fluffy old dears.

Lady Selina was continuing.

'Only place in London you can still get muffins. Real muffins. Do you know when I went to America last year they had something *called* muffins on the breakfast menu. Not real muffins at all. Kind of teacake with raisins in them. I mean, why call them muffins?'

She pushed in the last buttery morsel and looked round

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vaguely. Henry materialized immediately. Not quickly or hurriedly. It seemed that, just suddenly, he was there.

‘Anything further I can get you, my lady? Cake of any kind?’

‘Cake?’ Lady Selina thought about it, was doubtful.

‘We are serving very good seed cake, my lady. I can recommend it.’

‘Seed cake? I haven’t eaten seed cake for *years*. It is *real* seed cake?’

‘Oh, yes, my lady. The cook has had the recipe for years. You’ll enjoy it, I’m sure.’

Henry gave a glance at one of his retinue, and the lad departed in search of seed cake.

‘I suppose you’ve been at Newbury, Derek?’

‘Yes. Darned cold, I didn’t wait for the last two races. Disastrous day. That filly of Harry’s was no good at all.’

‘Didn’t think she would be. What about Swanhilda?’

‘Finished fourth.’ Luscombe rose. ‘Got to see about my room.’

He walked across the lounge to the reception desk. As he went he noted the tables and their occupants. Astonishing number of people having tea here. Quite like old days. Tea as a meal had rather gone out of fashion since the war. But evidently not at Bertram’s. Who *were* all these people? Two Canons and the Dean of Chislehampton. Yes, and another pair of gaitered legs over in the corner, a Bishop, no less! Mere Vicars were scarce. ‘Have to be at least a Canon to afford Bertram’s,’ he thought. The rank and file of the clergy certainly couldn’t, poor devils. As far as that went, he wondered how on earth people like old Selina

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Hazy could. She'd only got twopence or so a year to bless herself with. And there was old Lady Berry, and Mrs Posselthwaite from Somerset, and Sybil Kerr—all poor as church mice.

Still thinking about this he arrived at the desk and was pleasantly greeted by Miss Gorringer the receptionist. Miss Gorringer was an old friend. She knew every one of the clientele and, like Royalty, never forgot a face. She looked frumpy but respectable. Frizzled yellowish hair (old-fashioned tongs, it suggested), black silk dress, a high bosom on which reposed a large gold locket and a cameo brooch.

'Number fourteen,' said Miss Gorringer. 'I think you had fourteen last time, Colonel Luscombe, and liked it. It's quiet.'

'How you always manage to remember these things, I can't imagine, Miss Gorringer.'

'We like to make our old friends comfortable.'

'Takes me back a long way, coming in here. Nothing seems to have changed.'

He broke off as Mr Humfries came out from an inner sanctum to greet him.

Mr Humfries was often taken by the uninitiated to be Mr Bertram in person. Who the actual Mr Bertram was, or indeed, if there ever *had* been a Mr Bertram was now lost in the mists of antiquity. Bertram's had existed since about 1840, but nobody had taken any interest in tracing its past history. It was just there, solid, in fact. When addressed as Mr Bertram, Mr Humfries never corrected the impression. If they wanted him to be Mr Bertram he would be Mr Bertram. Colonel Luscombe knew his name,

though he didn't know if Humfries was the manager or the owner. He rather fancied the latter.

Mr Humfries was a man of about fifty. He had very good manners, and the presence of a Junior Minister. He could, at any moment, be all things to all people. He could talk racing shop, cricket, foreign politics, tell anecdotes of Royalty, give Motor Show information, knew the most interesting plays on at present—advise on places Americans ought really to see in England however short their stay. He had knowledgeable information about where it would suit persons of all incomes and tastes to dine. With all this, he did not make himself too cheap. He was not on tap all the time. Miss Gorringer had all the same facts at her fingertips and could retail them efficiently. At brief intervals Mr Humfries, like the sun, made his appearance above the horizon and flattered someone by his personal attention.

This time it was Colonel Luscombe who was so honoured. They exchanged a few racing platitudes, but Colonel Luscombe was absorbed by his problem. And here was the man who could give him the answer.

'Tell me, Humfries, how do all these old dears manage to come and stay here?'

'Oh you've been wondering about that?' Mr Humfries seemed amused. 'Well, the answer's simple. They couldn't afford it. Unless—'

He paused.

'Unless you make special prices for them? Is that it?'

'More or less. They don't know, usually, that they *are* special prices, or if they do realize it, they think it's because they're old customers.'

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‘And it isn’t just that?’

‘Well, Colonel Luscombe, I *am* running a hotel. I couldn’t afford actually to lose money.’

‘But how can that pay you?’

‘It’s a question of atmosphere . . . Strangers coming to this country (Americans, in particular, because they are the ones who have the money) have their own rather queer ideas of what England is like. I’m not talking, you understand, of the rich business tycoons who are always crossing the Atlantic. They usually go to the Savoy or the Dorchester. They want modern décor, American food, all the things that will make them feel at home. But there are a lot of people who come abroad at rare intervals and who expect this country to be—well, I won’t go back as far as Dickens, but they’ve read *Cranford* and Henry James, and they don’t want to find this country just the same as their own! So they go back home afterwards and say: “There’s a wonderful place in London; Bertram’s Hotel, it’s called. It’s just like stepping back a hundred years. It just *is* old England! And the people who stay there! People you’d never come across anywhere else. Wonderful old Duchesses. They serve all the old English dishes, there’s a marvellous old-fashioned beef-steak pudding! You’ve never tasted anything like it; and great sirloins of beef and saddles of mutton, and an old-fashioned English tea and a wonderful English breakfast. And of course all the usual things as well. And it’s wonderfully comfortable. *And* warm. Great log fires.”’

Mr Humfries ceased his impersonation and permitted himself something nearly approaching a grin.

‘I see,’ said Luscombe thoughtfully. ‘These people;

decayed aristocrats, impoverished members of the old County families, they are all so much *mise en scène*?’

Mr Humfries nodded agreement.

‘I really wonder no one else has thought of it. Of course I found Bertram’s ready made, so to speak. All it needed was some rather expensive restoration. All the people who come here think it’s something that they’ve discovered for themselves, that no one else knows about.’

‘I suppose,’ said Luscombe, ‘that the restoration *was* quite expensive?’

‘Oh yes. The place has got to *look* Edwardian, but it’s got to have the modern comforts that we take for granted in these days. Our old dears—if you will forgive me referring to them as that—have got to feel that nothing has changed since the turn of the century, and our travelling clients have got to feel they can have period surroundings, and still have what they are used to having at home, and can’t really live without!’

‘Bit difficult sometimes?’ suggested Luscombe.

‘Not really. Take central heating for instance. Americans require—need, I should say—at least ten degrees Fahrenheit higher than English people do. We actually have two quite different sets of bedrooms. The English we put in one lot, the Americans in the other. The rooms all look alike, but they are full of actual differences—electric razors, and showers as well as tubs in some of the bathrooms, and if you want an American breakfast, it’s there—cereals and iced orange juice and all—or if you prefer you can have the English breakfast.’

‘Eggs and bacon?’

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‘As you say—but a good deal more than that if you want it. Kippers, kidneys and bacon, cold grouse, York ham. Oxford marmalade.’

‘I must remember all that tomorrow morning. Don’t get that sort of thing any more at home.’

Humfries smiled.

‘Most gentlemen only ask for eggs and bacon. They’ve—well, they’ve got out of the way of thinking about the things there used to be.’

‘Yes, yes . . . I remember when I was a child . . . Sideboards groaning with hot dishes. Yes, it was a luxurious way of life.’

‘We endeavour to give people anything they ask for.’

‘Including seed cake and muffins—yes, I see. To each according to his need—I see . . . Quite Marxian.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Just a thought, Humfries. Extremes meet.’

Colonel Luscombe turned away, taking the key Miss Gorringe offered him. A page-boy sprang to attention and conducted him to the lift. He saw in passing that Lady Selina Hazy was now sitting with her friend Jane Something or other.

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