

Life at the Top

NEW YORK'S GRAND HOTELS

BY

WARD MOREHOUSE III

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PROLOGUE

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, this quaint ad appeared in the December, 1922, issue of *Theatre Magazine*:

DeSoto Hotel
Savannah, GA.

The Premier Tourist Hotel of the South

Open January 1st to May 1st

Modern and Luxurious in its Appointments, it Offers an Environment of Quiet and Refinement, Large Rooms, with Roomy Baths and Closets. Very Spacious Verandas. A Real Home for the Discriminating Tourist.

American Plan	Unequaled	Reduced Rates
Moderate Terms	Winter Climate	During January

Superior Roads for Automobilists. On the Scenic Routes of the South. Golf-Tennis-Hunting-Fishing. All Winter Sports. Booklets and terms sent on request.

J.B. POUND, President
SHERMAN DENNIS, Manager

Associate Hotels:

Hotel Seminole
Jacksonville Fla.

Hotel Savannah
Savannah, Ga.

Hotel Patten
Chattanooga, Tenn.

The Annex
Chattanooga, Tenn.

Summer Resort:

Monterey Hotel, Asbury Park, N.J.
Under the Same Management

My father was the renowned New York drama critic and Broadway columnist Ward Morehouse. His outlandish affection for hotels first started here, a long way from 42nd Street, at Savannah's old Victorian DeSoto Hotel, upon its spacious verandas and high in its castle-like tower. In his book, *Matinee Tomorrow*, my father wrote, "I don't know that taking to living in New York hotels and taking to prohibition gin contributed greatly to the Manhattanizing in my own case, but I do know that I had undergone, by 1925, something of a transformation: Some of my deep South politeness had vanished; I wasn't any quicker in movement...I had acquired something of the look-out-for-yourself-because-God-won't-do-it-for-you attitude." His outlook on life may have changed in the long hard journey from the Genteel South to Central Park South, but his fondness for hotel living never wavered.

Although I recollect accompanying my father to Savannah as a boy, by that time the DeSoto must have either been torn down or my memory of it fails me. I would, however, in the years to come more than make up for that lost time and that lost hotel. My own fascination with hotels may have started as a simple contagious reaction to my father's but soon I would be so in love with my own favorite hotels, namely The Plaza and The Waldorf-Astoria, that I suspect the poor DeSoto would have paled in my estimation.

My father, in fact, is the only person I know who might have given me a run for my money in love for hotels. He loved them so much he wanted to have "Room Service, Please!" inscribed on his tombstone. In his lifetime as an author, drama critic and playwright he stayed in hundreds of hotels around the world and lived in 29 in New York City alone. He kept a bear (a live one) at The Plaza and a raccoon at The Algonquin. I had a lion cub from South Africa at the old Seymour Hotel, next door to The Algonquin.

I got so used to hotels as a child that even now "home" is really a hotel room for me—despite my nice house in Connecticut, my cozy apart-

ment in New York and my rustic Thousand Islands island up in Canada. My other “home” is the theatre. (I suppose it’s fair to say my father’s tastes had a big effect on me.) I remember on Saturdays as a kid sometimes seeing three and four shows—for a half hour each—then having a hard time telling friends why I’d seen so many. Hard at work making the rounds of the seemingly countless new shows back then, my father would deposit me in one and return in a half hour or so and we’d go to another. Of course, theatre life does run pretty deep in my family; ten other members have partaken in the theatre as producers, playwrights, actors and directors. My stepmother, the late Jean Dalrymple, ran the New York City Center for 25 years when it was indeed America’s first and only national theatre company.

“Our business is similiar to theater,” Gary Schweikert, general manager of the Plaza, once told me. “It’s setting the stage for people.” So maybe my combined love for theater and hotels isn’t so strange after all.

Some fathers boast to their sons of their war exploits or success in business or in sports. My father would tell me of the time he almost shot the hands off the Paramount Building clock from the window of his room at the Hotel Manhattan. At The Plaza, we’d light gunpowder in the sink and play a game in which he’d get into bed fully clothed wearing a wolf mask and then jump out growling when I came into the bedroom.

As a matter of record, I was *nearly* born at The Plaza, where my father and stepmother lived for eleven years. I say nearly because my parents resided there just *before* I was born. Then, *after* I was born, they moved to the Waldorf.

Some people think “living” at a hotel is strange. Or, at best, inconvenient. Like the proverbial child born in the theater trunk, it never bothered me. I’ve had, believe me, far rougher accommodations in my life. As a ten-year correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor* I once lived with a tribe of Indians in the Amazon in order to produce a series of stories. I’ve also spent time in the upper reaches of the Canadian Arctic writing about Eskimos. As a Broadway columnist for the New York *Post* and later the “Broadway After Dark” columnist for the New York *Sun*, I saw my share of exciting times. I also had a lot of fun researching and writing my earlier books (both on New York hotels, naturally), *The Waldorf-Astoria: America’s Gilded Dream* and *Inside The Plaza*.

But my peripatetic hotel-room childhood in New York City is almost certainly what set the stage for my own adventures later. Even my

father's postcards were filled with the magic of the city, often reading like something out of *Peter Pan*.

"Dear Wardie," one began. "Do you remember those wild dogs and that engineer waving at you, and all the time Anna saying, 'No, Wardie, Don't Wardie?'"

Anna was my nanny, "from Hunger," as she used to say.

"I'll be back soon and will bring you a baby wolf," another letter began. "I also have your bat and ball and the gum bank, full of pennies. Here's some money for ice cream and stuff. With love, Daddy W."

There were thrilling telegrams, too: "Dear Wardie—Just a few more of these August anniversaries and you can have a bicycle and gun and ball and bat and you'll get into trouble with all of them as I always did. W.M."

One Christmas there was this telegram, "There's an island waiting for you and that belongs to you in the St. Lawrence whenever you're big enough to play in it. W.M."

The Island, and thankfully not the wolf, was literally true. It was one of the Thousand Islands and given to my mother at an American Theatre Wing benefit at the Waldorf-Astoria. (You knew there had to be a hotel connection in there someplace.) I've often thought of hotels as islands, self-contained but somehow never-ending cities of their own. Hotels have shops and restaurants and ballrooms and Broadway actors in the next room. Islands have coves and docks and outdoor fireplaces for cooking and entertaining. And when I became old enough and filled with enough curiosity to become a journalist myself, I became especially intrigued by Heart Island and its "Boldt Castle" because it was built by the man, George Boldt, who ran the Waldorf in New York, the old Waldorf on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street. How he got the island, whether he actually built it as a present for his wife or as a hotel on the St. Lawrence, was no matter. It was the mad adventure of the whole thing. That old musty northern castle was alive with New York, Fifth Avenue, trains, stations, glorious suites.

From their earliest days hotels have been pretty crucial as well as accommodating. We're told, after all, in the King James version of the Bible that since there was "no room at the inn," Joseph and Mary had to stay in a manger where the Lord Jesus was born. Of course, in those ancient days, the manger was really the bottom floor of a barn, where most guests stayed on tiers or balconies with the animals not far below. As inns

evolved into full-fledged hotels, rooms at the top, farthest from the erstwhile manger level, would become the most sought after.

The idea for this book about hotels grew out of my two previous books on the Waldorf and the Plaza. I had accumulated many entertaining stories that dealt with neither establishment. These random stories then began to assume a pattern, a portrait, if you will, of New York hotel celebrity and gossip. Certainly not the ultimate portrait but a colorful mosaic of hotel life leading up to and through the Twentieth Century nonetheless. Celebrity and gossip are the life's blood of hotels, it's what gives them their mystique, their legends. It's almost as impossible to separate the Astors and Vanderbilts and Boldts and Bemelmans from their hotels as it is to separate Liz Taylor or even modern day stars like Julia Roberts and Hugh Jackman from their movies. Moreover, at what point does a star's life end and the life of a hotel begin? In reality, there's no telling. The Carlyle, for example, is Woody Allen, who plays there on Monday nights with his Dixie Land Jazz Band, and Woody Allen is the Carlyle just as he is his movies.

Therefore, this book is not so much a narrative of progressive boarding-house luxury in New York as it is an attempt to capture the personality of the city's hotels through the eyes, ears and actions of its guests, its owners and its managers, some of them very famous, others not very. And all of them have one thing in common no matter which side of Park Avenue they are from. Whether it's Salvador Dali hosting a private dinner in the wine cellar of the St. Regis or Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones sneaking into The Plaza to plan their wedding, people in hotels almost always—at least the interesting people—have a heightened sense of life and fun and, perhaps, although few want to face it, of their own mortality.

From John Jacob Astor IV, who built the St. Regis and the Astoria addition of the original Waldorf, to Ludwig Bemelmans, the flamboyant writer-artist and ex-banquet waiter who wrote about his exploits under fictional colors, the people who built, ran and lived in New York's hotels during the first half of the 20th Century were characters only George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart or perhaps Neil Simon could do justice to. I came to realize, to my astonishment, that there were few if any real chronicles of these fabulous hotels, all of which boast a social history as varied and as exciting, in my estimation, as the lore accompanying, say, The Palace Theatre or Winter Garden. And in New York during the 20th

Century, the theatre folk are the hotel people. The two are as inseparable as gin and tonic.

One extremely famous New York theater personality, Walter Winchell, lived in the penthouse of the St. Moritz (now the Ritz-Carlton) for many years. For those neophytes unfamiliar with Mr. Winchell, it will suffice to say that, during his heyday, a word in Winchell's column would help keep a play from closing even after the critics had murdered it. If he *really* liked something that had been panned it might even go on to become a hit. His St. Moritz penthouse was a duplex and afforded a priceless view of the most glamorous part of New York—Central Park and Fifth Avenue and Central Park West. This was the same apartment that *Hello Dolly!* composer Jerry Herman lived in and which he famously decorated all in white.

In his biography of Winchell, Neal Gabler relates that the uber-columnist kept a photo of a bloodied Barry Gray, the radio talk show host, on the wall of his St. Moritz penthouse. Despite his legendary run-ins with rivals like Gray or Lyle Stuart, who wrote an unauthorized biography of Winchell, Winchell had a high degree of respect for my father. As competing newspapermen they should have been rivals, but they got along swell. Maybe it was their mutual love of hotel life.

Over and over again, I've found that hotels make people dream again. Jerry Lewis was staying at the Waldorf Towers when I interviewed him in the Bull and Bear restaurant in December 2002. He said he was considering a return to Broadway even though he had serious health problems.

"I went to see *The Producers* last night," Mr. Lewis told me. "Such a wonderful show. My attorney called me and said there's a rumble in New York that Mel Brooks is looking for you to replace Nathan Lane. I said, 'I'm 76 years old, you schmuck! I can't do what they have in that show eight times a week!'"

Actors must be going soft. During the early part of the last century, the legendary Sarah Bernhardt lived at the fashionable Hoffman House on Broadway between 24th and 25th Streets, where she had a large suite. It was during the time she played "Hamlet" at the Palace Theater—with only one leg.

For New York City newspaper columnist Pete Hamill the legends surrounding some of the grand hotels, even those that have been razed, somehow survive. "There have been these figures (and hotels) which epitomized the era," he told me. "You know, Al Capone, Rosy Rosenthal and all the boring guys disappear. You know, no one gets nostalgic late at night

about Robert F. Wagner. But they'll talk about Fiorello LaGuardia. Parts of New York are always dying. If you look at the turn of the century when all the big mansions were on Fifth Avenue, they're all gone. Ebbetts Field is not there... We're good at losing stuff. We know how to do that. I saw Penn Station go down. I don't mean by terrorism. That's unforgivable. But the sense of loss—life goes on. The best thing about us was September 12, 2001. People got up and went to work and had their kids... They didn't need politicians to tell them what to do. The hardhats came down the first night and said, 'We cut steel, you're going to need us.'... They had to come down to see if there was anybody beneath the broken steel."

"The loss of Penn Station was actually the impetus for the entire preservation movement in New York," famed artist and designer Milton Glaser told me. "It's a complex question in terms of planning, what you tear down and what you leave and it's attached to all kinds of emotional issues which have nothing to do with the health of the city."

For his part, Mr. Glaser doesn't have a favorite hotel per se. "It's funny, my nature is to be so eclectic. I don't have a favorite color or favorite food. I don't have anything. Everything is sort of contextual... The question of 'compared to what' always crops up."

Not all the changes have been bad. In Times Square, for instance, The Astor, a number of legitimate theaters, and many of the famous jazz hot spots disappeared with the square's rebirth which began slowly, agonizingly in the 1960s and has continued right up to the present day. One of the first positive changes in the area, though it wasn't a new office building or hotel, was Paley Park, named after former CBS Chairman William Paley.

"It really changed my life and it's very much a part of the family I come from," Amanda Burden told me. "When my stepfather, Bill Paley, built Paley Park (which boasted a mini-waterfall and clusters of tables for those who brown-bagged their lunch) I saw how that could really transform a street and give, in a small way, enormous pleasure to people. It was just a vacant lot before that."

As he turned 80 and could look back on 60 years in the hospitality industry, George Land offered this assessment of New York's grand hotels as of June 2004:

"Some of the hotels, for example The Plaza, still deliver a wonderful quality. Restaurants in European hotels used to offer the best the cities could offer. And they have some of the finest, finest restaurants in hotels. The Savoy Grill in the Savoy in London and so forth. In the United States,

it was just the opposite. There was no way to find a really good restaurant in a hotel. But that has changed drastically. I think that in the last ten years you have some wonderful restaurants in many of the hotels. The hotel restaurants, especially the new ones, they really care about quality.”

Although he’s much more of a restaurateur than a hotelier, Lang, who worked in both The Plaza and The Waldorf-Astoria, says guests “should feel the comforts and pleasures of their home without its problems.” But he is quick to qualify this, saying, “If you want to please someone you must please them in their own way.”

New York hotels have often become flash points for technical innovation in the country, from the St. Regis having primitive air-conditioning to the installation of the city’s first passenger elevator in the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

Joseph E. Spinnato, President and CEO of the Hotel Association of New York City, is rightly proud of his association’s 180 hotel members, including many of New York City’s grandest hotels. Apart from the innovation of its members, The Association, founded in 1878, has received more than 15 communication awards.

But celebrity and humor, not dry statistics, will be the hallmarks of these pages. Hotels are full of people; and people, especially when they’re far from home, are full of mischief. To wit, a couple of saucy appetizers before the main course:

Most elegant hotels proudly proclaim they cater to their guests’ every whim. This is fine; however, when a guest’s whim consists of a young blonde female knocking on his door late at night, problems can arise. Room Service is supposed to take care of guests’ food and beverage wishes, with companionship not à la carte!

A clever concierge in one of New York’s finest hotels had the bright idea of sending the requested lady to the guest’s room bearing a chilled bottle of excellent champagne. For his work above and beyond the call of duty the concierge was richly rewarded by the guest, and then received a “gratuity” from the lady. When this procedure was discovered by the management, however, he was also rewarded with a pink slip, although he claimed the hotel always wanted to please its guests and he was just doing his job.

It has also been noticed generally that since a coin has two sides, an incorrect guess can cause quite a bit of trouble. Here’s another example of a hotelier regrettably taking the wrong side:

In the lobby of a famous New York hotel for many years a number of chairs and couches were spread around for its guests and their friends. One evening a beautiful young lady entered the hotel and placed herself on a couch where she could observe everyone coming and going. When a security employee noticed the lady smiling at male hotel guests, he approached her and inquired if she was staying at the hotel. When her reply was “yes,” he asked to see her room key. This infuriated lady refused and haughtily proclaimed she was Princess So-and-so. The security man, guessing she was a lady of the night, snapped at her saying: “Well, I’m the Duke of Windsor and you have to leave.” The young woman rushed to the reception desk, insisting upon seeing the night manager. He came and confirmed that indeed she was Princess So-and-so as well as a guest in the hotel. The princess sued. The hotel lost the case, paying a substantial settlement. “The Duke of Windsor” was dethroned from his position at the hotel.

Royalty has caused more than its fair share of conundrums in New York’s hotel lobbies. One day a gentleman approached the concierge of the St. Regis Hotel. In a loud voice he proclaimed: “Tell the princess, Count So-and-so is here.” The concierge coolly—and earnestly—replied: “Which princess?”

That’s New York hotels for you. You never know who you’re going to run into, or get run over by, in the lobby. But now it’s time to take our leave of the front desk to go up and inspect all those marvelous rooms.