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**Opening Extract from...**

# The West End Front

The Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels

Written by Matthew Sweet

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# The West End Front

## *The Wartime Secrets of London's Grand Hotels*

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*faber and faber*

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Arthur Lewis MP throws himself in front of oil-tankers at the Savoy. (Getty Images)

To Connie

# Victor of the Ritz

A bird's been flapping in the chimney
All the day long.
Smoked salmon instead of eggs for breakfast
Something must be wrong.
An Egyptian waiter has kissed a girl
In room number four–two–three
(Why the hell did she make such a fuss
Instead of calling for me?)
The Ritz may be falling like London Bridge
And I be a bloody fool
But in a hotel where Victor ceased to rule
I would not wish to be.

It's hot as hell and the windows won't open,
All the day long.
It's freezing cold and the heating's off.
Something must be wrong.
A Yank's been phoning all night to New York
In room number four–two–three.
Why the hell won't he wait till morning
Instead of awakening me?
The Ritz is falling like London Bridge
And I am a bloody fool
But in a hotel where Victor ceased to rule
I would not wish to be.

I wait for the breakfast I ordered at seven

All the day long.
Though the tea will be black and the toast will be soggy
Something must be wrong.
They've chilled the claret and heated the Perrier
Ordered by room four–two–three.
And I quite forget what I asked them to bring.
It's a far-off dream to me.
The Ritz has fallen like London Bridge
And I'll weep like a bloody fool
But in a hotel where Victor ceased to rule
I would not wish to be.

Graham Greene

# Introduction

## Ritzkrieg

The night before the lights went out, Victor Legg was the loneliest man in London. He clocked off in the early hours of the first day of September 1939, but he did not go home. Instead, he walked. He went east, past Fortnum & Mason, where the windows were already crossed with sticky tape and the walls banked with sandbags. He struck out across Piccadilly Circus, through the insomniac streets of Soho and into Covent Garden, where he found an all-night Italian café; one of those places where signs on the walls warned customers that they were not permitted to sleep on the premises. He sat. He smoked. He ordered bacon sandwiches and coffee. And he waited for the world to know what he knew.

The West End was brighter that night than it would be for a decade. On the canyon wall of hoardings above Piccadilly Circus, the vanishing pleasures of peacetime were described in light. A neon Austin Morris motored on an open road of glowing lines. A burning sign proclaimed the superiority of the Ekco television set – the best receiver for a service that was doomed to go dark the following lunchtime. Above them all, the Guinness clock measured out its last few illuminated hours. And on the grand Edwardian building from which Victor had begun this solitary journey the bulbs also glowed, picking out its name in blackout blue.

Victor Legg joined the nocturnal population of the Ritz in late 1935. He turned up at the back door of the hotel in search of work and, much to his surprise, was ushered into the presence of the assistant manager, a hard-headed Swiss named

Edouard Schwenter. Schwenter asked him if he had any experience of hotels. Victor replied that he had worked behind the reception desk of the Berkeley, a smaller, older establishment on the other side of Piccadilly – but omitted to mention that he had been given the sack. Schwenter enquired whether he could operate a telephone switchboard. Victor confirmed that he could, which was not quite a lie. Schwenter then asked if he could speak French. Here, the truth was unavoidable. The assistant manager made a show of disappointment, then gave him the job on the spot. It was only when he began his first shift that Victor understood the nature of this generosity. Schwenter had a lover who often called the hotel. French was the language of their adultery. The new telephonist was quite unable to understand its breathless details.

Every evening at seven o'clock, Victor went to the topmost floor of the hotel and took his place in a hot little room a few doors down from the resident hairdresser. Here, lights pulsed insistently, operators demanded attention and, with a Bakelite headset clamped to his ear, he slotted jacks into sockets and connected the callers to the called. At ten o'clock on the last night of August 1939, a brisk military voice asked to be put through to the Grill Room. Victor obeyed, transferring the call to Kaneledis, the basement cloakroom attendant – but kept the switchboard key in the forward position, allowing him to eavesdrop on the conversation. The caller asked if Randolph Churchill was in the building. Kaneledis had little trouble confirming his presence. Churchill was the son of one of Britain's most prominent politicians – and so notorious for his foul-mouthed intolerance of hotel staff that waiters bribed each other in order to avoid serving him.[1] 'He's in the bar,' replied the attendant. 'May I ask who is calling?' The voice on the end of the line gave a sharp response: 'You may not.' A few moments later, Churchill had the receiver in his hand.

'Randy?' asked the caller.

'Yes?'

'The Germans bomb Warsaw tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock.'

The significance of this exchange was not lost on Victor. It was as good as a declaration of war; confirmation that Neville Chamberlain's policy of Appeasement had reached its endgame; a signal that history had clicked back round to 1914. As soon as Churchill had rung off, Victor put through a call to a friend who worked at the BBC. Before he could communicate the news, however, he heard another voice on the line. 'Operator,' it said, 'I'd be careful what you repeat.' The line fell silent. Victor followed suit. He spent an uneasy night in that hot little room at the top of the Ritz, reflecting on this unfriendly warning and wondering when the security services had begun tapping the phones. At the end of his shift, he was relieved to step out into Piccadilly, walk through the quiet West End streets, settle himself at his favourite table at Elena Giacopazzi's café near the Theatre Royal and work his way through several pots of coffee and a packet of Craven 'A'. At 10.30 he walked out to the newspaper stand by Covent Garden tube station and bought a copy of the morning edition of the *Star*. The headlines carried no news of any bombardment. He flipped to the back page, which bore a gloomy announcement about the cancellation of Saturday's races at Northolt Park, and scanned the list of the runners and riders scheduled to churn the turf in Manchester that afternoon. Two, he noted, were the property of the Aga Khan, the millionaire Imam, diplomat and Ritz resident, on whose horses the hotel staff placed loyal bets. The *Star* kept the right-hand column of the page blank to list the names of last-minute withdrawals from the field. But the international crisis had obliged its editor to stop the press in acknowledgement of something graver than a waterlogged course or a bruised fetlock: a line cabled by a reporter from the British United Press agency, confirming that at nine o'clock that morning, ninety minutes before the *Star* hit the stands, the outskirts of Warsaw had felt the impact of a rain of Luftwaffe incendiaries. Half an

hour later, the story had already migrated to the front page: 'Danzig proclaims return to the Reich,' boomed the paper. 'Germans bomb Polish town.'

By the time I met Victor Legg, two years before his death in 2007, his name had become synonymous with the Ritz. It was an institution to which he had given half a century of his life – three years on the switchboard, the rest behind the desk in the circular vestibule, mostly in the revered position of head hall porter. His devotion to the place was so profound that his wife, on several occasions, had advised him to take his bed and sleep there. ('It was like a drug,' he conceded. 'A disease.') He had retired in 1976, but his conversation remained thickly populated with plutocrats and earls and novelists and monarchs. He showed me a letter from Jackie Onassis, thanking him for rescuing her son from a makeshift bed on a bench in Green Park, and lending him the money for an air ticket to Amsterdam. He produced three typewritten pages by Graham Greene – one a three-stanza elegy commemorating Victor's long service to the hotel, the other a letter complaining about the quality of the sausages. He spoke of nights spent gambling in the casino with a prominent Israeli arms dealer; singing nonsense songs with the economist J. K. Galbraith; gassing with the Queen Mother. The story of this sleepless night in 1939 was one of his stock anecdotes. He had probably told it a thousand times. And yet, almost seven decades after the event, his beady blue eyes still betrayed the impact of that triple shock: a prediction of war, a mysterious reprimand and a prophecy fulfilled beside a list of the runners in the 2.30 at Castle Irwell. 'It frightened the life out of me,' he admitted. 'How could the War Office have known it all in advance, so precisely?' Two days later, Chamberlain sat in front of a BBC microphone and issued the news that most people had been anticipating for months: Britain was at war with Germany. 'When we heard the announcement, we thought that was that,' recalled Victor. 'What use is the Ritz in the middle of a war?'

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By 1939, London's grand hotels had evolved their own distinctive culture of luxury. The pattern had been established in 1889, when the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte opened the Savoy, a seven-storey, all-electric, glazed-brick pleasure palace on the Thames Embankment. Seventy of its 268 rooms had en suite baths; all had hot and cold running water. (George Holloway, the builder assigned to the project, asked Carte if the hotel was intended to house amphibians.) Speaking-tubes could be used to summon room service at any hour of the day or night. ('Please command anything from a cup of tea to a cocktail,' enthused the brochure, 'and it will come up in the twinkling of an Embankment lamp.'[2]) Six hydraulic lifts made the building's height a source of interest rather than exhaustion. A subterranean power-plant and a 500-foot artesian well gave the hotel an independent source of energy and water. These systems were triumphs of British engineering, but the ethos of the Savoy was a foreign import. Two men were responsible for ensuring that it survived the journey. The first was the general manager, César Ritz, the thirteenth child of a Swiss shepherd and a veteran of the 1870 siege of Paris – during which he learned to cook with rat-meat and made blood pudding from the elephants in the city zoo. As head of kitchen services, Ritz appointed the Frenchman Georges Auguste Escoffier, a blacksmith's son who wore high heels to enable him to see into the pans at the back of the ranges. Ritz flattered his guests with subdued lighting and roseate tablecloths, gave them wine in Baccarat crystal glasses, and filled the restaurant with music to give diners a reason to linger. Escoffier reorganised the preparation of food along military lines, drilled his brigades of cooks in the preparation of ortolans, terrapin and snipe, and refused to learn English on the grounds that it might have an adverse effect on the quality of his cooking. Together, these men created the ambience that persuaded the plutocracy and the aristocracy to do something

to which they were unaccustomed – eat, drink, smoke and dance in public. For this, the Savoy's board celebrated Ritz and Escoffier as artists and heroes, until the day they discovered that these star employees were defrauding the company to the tune of £19,137. A private detective was hired to investigate allegations of bribery, profiteering, embezzlement and the mysterious disappearance of enormous quantities of cigars, wines, spirits and eggs. In March 1898, both men were dismissed.

The Savoy suppressed the truth of the affair, which left Ritz and Escoffier free to profit from a boom in the construction of luxury hotels that lasted until the beginning of the Great War. By 1897 D'Oyly Carte had rebuilt Claridge's, a collection of discreet townhouses on Brook Street, in the seven-storey image of the Savoy. The Hotel Russell rose the following year – a heap of Gothic terracotta with sculpture queens and prime ministers on sentry duty. The Carlton, a vast confection of mansard roofs and domed cupolas, was raised at the corner of Haymarket and Pall Mall in 1899: Ritz supplied managerial advice and Escoffier took charge of the kitchens, where, it is claimed, he employed a young Vietnamese *entremettier* who later led a Communist revolution under the name of Ho Chi Minh.[3] Ritz's revolution, however, went on without him: in 1901 he suffered a devastating mental breakdown, brought on, it seems, by logistical headaches caused by the postponement of Edward VII's coronation. The investiture was rescheduled, but Ritz's melancholia failed to lift. He was utterly disengaged from the process of planning and building the hotel on Piccadilly that bore his name, and failed to attend the opening in May 1906. (Today, the wall of the general manager's office bears the note of congratulation Ritz sent in his place – a desultory, almost illegible thing.) César Ritz died just before Armistice Day in an asylum near Lucerne, by which time London had gained a battalion of grand hotels, and his name had become an adjective – one that stood for wealth, superiority, luxury and extravagance.

A certain kind of behaviour went with that word. You could

have observed it on the June night in 1905 when the American financier George Kessler arranged to flood the courtyard of the Savoy, fill it with swans, surround it with twelve thousand fresh carnations, four thousand lamps and a canvas simulacrum of Venice – and dine with his guests on a large silk-lined gondola moored at its centre. (The blue dye in the water killed the swans, but there was compensation in the form of a performance by Caruso, a phalanx of Gaiety Girls bearing bottles of Moët & Chandon, and the appearance of a baby elephant with a five-foot birthday cake strapped to its back.) You could have seen it in 1906, when the fountain at the Savoy gushed with champagne in honour of the German arms manufacturer Gustav Krupp – or on one of those lunchtimes in the 1930s when Viscount Castlerosse, the aristocratic gossip columnist of the *Daily Express*, pulled off his sable-lined overcoat and settled himself down in the Savoy Grill to consume three chump chops, an entire ham and six lobsters. George Hayim, a plutocrat's son who knew the bars and restaurants of London in the late 1930s, recalls roaring up to the Grosvenor House Hotel in the sleek car of an equally privileged young friend, who pressed a half-chewed stick of American gum into the white-gloved hand of the valet.[4] 'People of a certain class did things like that and it didn't occur to them to be ashamed or embarrassed,' he told me. 'It makes me shudder now to think of it.'

It took a deep economic recession and another war, however, to produce a British electorate ready for the state to nationalise the industries that had created the individuals who enjoyed such amusements – and, in effect, to abolish the glittering world that had been their playground.

*

When war checked in on the morning of 3 September 1939, the guests of London's grand hotels began to check out, in anticipation of some species of Apocalypse. Since the 1920s,

government departments had been crunching numbers for a putative Second World War, attempting to estimate the likely death-toll and the repairs bill from data on the Zeppelin raids of the Great War, from new advances in German aviation technology and – latterly – from casualty statistics from General Franco's bombing raids on Barcelona. The strategists predicted that Hitler would launch a 'knock-out blow' against London, that the first fortnight of bombardment might produce half a million deaths and serious injuries, and that the next casualties would be public order and public health. 'We must expect that, under the pressure of continuous air attack upon London, at least 3,000,000 or 4,000,000 people would be driven out into the open country around the metropolis,' theorised Winston Churchill in 1934. 'This vast mass of human beings, numerically far larger than any armies which have been fed and moved in war, without shelter and without food, without sanitation and without special provision for the maintenance of order, would confront the Government of the day with an administrative problem of the first magnitude, and would certainly absorb the energies of our small Army and our Territorial Force.'[5]

The threat of poison gas was uppermost in the minds of those who remembered the Western Front – though this time, the shells were expected to burst over civilian areas. Newspapers printed cut-out-and-keep guides to help their readers differentiate between flavours of chemical weapons, exhorting them to remember that phosgene smelled like musty hay; lewisite like geraniums; mustard gas like garlic. A decontamination centre for the West End was set up at the Marshall Street baths in Soho, where nurses in respirators and oilskins practised procedures involving bleach powder, petrol and hot soapy water. The Ministry of Health issued one million burial forms. London Zoo executed its venomous snakes. The capital was emptied of its children. Scrubbed and ticketed, they assembled at railway stations and war memorials to begin their journey to billets in areas unlikely to be seen through a Stuka bombsight. Herbert

Morrison, the leader of the London County Council, jollied them into exile: 'Keep a cheerful British smile on your face . . . as many of your fathers used to do, sing "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag".'[6] It is hard to imagine that they found this particularly encouraging.

Hoteliers, too, were in need of comfort. Waiters stood idly in deserted restaurants and grills. Desk clerks spiked room reservations. Banqueting managers placed newspaper advertisements announcing the cancellation of formal functions. Bandleaders and musicians went to bed early. Glamorous architecture disappeared under banks of sandbags, disfiguring buildings and creating a magnet for rough sleepers. (One unfortunate man was found dead underneath the sandbags behind the Strand Palace Hotel, having crawled into a gap to warm himself at an air-vent.[7]) The day after Chamberlain's declaration of war, the Savoy concluded that the risk of bombardment had transformed the atrium of the restaurant from an asset into a deathtrap. The doors were shut. Two days later, the Ritz management elected to close the Grill Room for lunch and the restaurant for dinner. Along with the Savoy and the Dorchester, they also locked their uppermost floors and draped the furniture in dustsheets. (Conversely, the Charing Cross Hotel simply reduced the price of its top-floor rooms, allowing fearless guests to acquire a place in the middle of town at peppercorn prices.) At the Savoy, John Hansen, the mountainous Danish doorman, walked into the front hall of the hotel to discover that the glass in the revolving doors had been painted a dark blue and that the desk in his cubby-hole office had lost the board displaying the arrival and departure times of the great passenger liners – a sign that the hotel had abandoned the established practice of despatching porters to the docks to collect new arrivals and their luggage. A concrete observation post was sunk into the roof of the Savoy: seventy employees who had trained as ARP wardens took turns watching for enemy aircraft scudding above the Thames. (The oldest volunteer, William Lawes of the Works Department, pro-

tected himself from the cold with a 200-guinea raccoon-fur coat from Lost Property.)

But the most potent indicator of change, as far as the staff was concerned, was the relaxation of the strict sartorial laws, signalled in the moment that Sir George Reeves-Smith, managing director of the Savoy, exchanged his silk top-hat and frock coat for a bowler and a lounge suit. A year later, such revisions of protocol were identified as a significant cultural shift: 'I have a feeling', pronounced the novelist W. Somerset Maugham, 'that in the England of the future evening dress will be less important than it has been in the past. I think it will be a more democratic England. I think there will be no more rich people and I hope there will be no more poor people.'[8] The Savoy's official historian recorded the shock of Reeves-Smith's initiative: 'The reception clerks followed him with looks of dismay and returned incredulously to their books.'[9]

More dismay followed. September 1939 was the blackest month in the history of the hotel business. George Cross, the owner of a number of small residential hotels in London, augured the collapse of the entire sector. 'I warn the faint-hearted and the powers that be', he declared, 'that unless immediate steps are taken scarcely an hotel will be available to accommodate naval and military officers and others whose business will sooner or later take them to the Metropolis.'[10] Cross chose to close his establishment in Marble Arch, but others were simply obliged to hand over their keys to the authorities. The War Office claimed the Hotel Victoria and the Metropole on Northumberland Avenue. The Army requisitioned the Great Central at Marylebone. (One floor soon became the domain of MI9, the secret department charged with aiding Allied troops trapped behind enemy lines.) Across the country, the pattern was repeated. The managing director of the Buxton Palace Hotel protested that his workplace had been 'invaded by a horde of arrogant officials ruthlessly marking with a label everything they thought they might possibly need, from beds to

the safe in the office'. He was particularly galled by the seizure of his entire canteen of cutlery, commandeered by the occupiers for use in their snack bar: 'Expensive lobster forks', he raged, 'do not seem suitable for cheap sandwiches!'[11] Words like 'ruthlessness' and 'tyranny' echo through these complaints. 'I ask despairingly', exclaimed one manager, 'whether nothing can be done to prevent our homes and businesses being ransacked and destroyed, as though we, and not the Nazis, were the enemy.'[12] By the end of the first month of the war, twenty thousand hotel workers had been dismissed from their posts, and George Reeves-Smith, in his capacity as vice-chairman of the Hotels and Restaurants Association, issued a public warning about the 'paralysis of a great industry'.[13] It was a paralysis that seemed to presage something more terminal.

Slowly, however, the guests and the diners returned. After eleven days of darkness and silence, the Dorchester ballroom regained its dancers. 'Night-life', reported the diarist of the *Daily Express*, 'is just beginning to glisten faintly again behind our dark doors.'[14] The following week, the band struck up again at the Berkeley. ('After all,' said a representative of the hotel, 'what is the use of sitting looking at each other during dinner?'[15]) By December, the shiny papers were reporting a phenomenon. 'Most of the big hotels have discovered, and smartened up, some previously unconsidered place lurking somewhere in their depths,' reported the *Tatler*, merged, for the sake of the war economy, with the *Bystander*. 'Here their night life flourishes, while the grand grills, restaurants and lounges preserve an eerie emptiness. But everyone knows that something pretty purposeful is going on somewhere. Long, deserted passages – perhaps a sinister hotel servant directing you along them – stairs down, sudden bits of naked brick wall, and grubby little doors giving on to goodness knows what. Then, suddenly, there is a burst of music, and there everybody is, making merry just as usual in the new quarters where, perhaps, provisions used to be stored.'[16]

The Savoy restaurant was reincarnated in the form of a sub-

terranean banqueting room, reinforced with scaffolding. The Ritz reopened its underground spaces: a notice on the ground floor advertised 'a seasonable novelty – a snack or full meal in an air-raid shelter'.[17] As the war approached its second month, 'Chips' Channon, Conservative MP for Southend, informed his diary that the Ritz had become 'fantastically fashionable', concluding confidently, 'Ritzes always thrive in wartime.'[18] The following year, he made a similar report from the Dorchester: 'London lives well. I've never seen more lavishness, more money spent or more food consumed than tonight; and the dance floor was packed. There must have been a thousand people.' Before he departed for Belfast, where he was stationed with the Royal Signals Corps, Victor Legg watched the visitors return to the gilded spaces of the Ritz. 'We thought the war would kill the place,' he recalled. 'But once people got comfortable with the blackout and all the restrictions, they came back. And it seemed more lively than it had been for years.'

Instead of vanishing into history, London's grand hotels became more prominent in the cultural and political life of this country than ever before. They were the homes of Cabinet ministers and military leaders, plutocrats and aristocrats. At lunch tables and in smoking rooms, decisions were made that affected the progress of the war. Hotel apartments became the retreats of governments-in-exile, diplomatic missions and the deposed monarchies of occupied Europe. Journalists filed articles from makeshift offices carved from the carcasses of once-expensive suites. Con-artists and swindlers, invigorated by the opportunities brought by war, hunted for victims among the potted palms. Illegal abortionists, profiting from the wartime increase in unwanted pregnancies, conducted their business behind locked hotel-room doors. Writers, poets, artists, musicians and prostitutes haunted bars and lobbies. Below the pavement of Piccadilly, a flourishing homosexual subculture worked its way through the Ritz's stock of gin and Angostura bitters. Cooks tested the limits of the rationing law and their own ingenuity,

confecting dishes from acorns and turnips and eels, and cooking on electric radiators when the bombs deprived them of gas: it was their recipes that the nation followed. Spies and spymasters made rooms above Park Lane, Piccadilly, Brook Street and the Strand into thriving centres of espionage, using quiet suites for debriefings and interrogations, picking at the plasterwork for hidden microphones, and despatching agents of the secret state to loiter in the coffee lounges and listen for treachery. The Dorchester, the Savoy, the Ritz and Claridge's: each was a kind of Casablanca.

*

It was engineering that made all this possible, though it did its work discreetly. Walk into the Ritz today and you feel as if you have entered some alternative universe in which the guillotine has never been invented, where rococo remains fashionable, and where liberty, equality and fraternity have never quite caught on. Through its revolving doors, beyond the fumy air of Piccadilly, might be a world full of pomaded types in periwigs. This is the trick of the Ritz: it appears to have existed for ever. Since its opening night in 1906, the hotel has been seducing wealthy patrons with the same illusion. The Palm Court might be the personal arboretum of Louis XVI. Beyond the glass ceiling, however, is nothing but a rack of low-watt light bulbs and the floorboards of the first-floor rooms. And these are not the only feats of legerdemain performed by the architects, Charles Mewes and Arthur Davis. Every way you look in the Ritz, the view recedes into the distance. You feel as if you could drive around the place in a carriage without scuffing so much as an architrave. But this is a conjuring trick performed with paint, plaster and mirrored glass. Despite the eye's insistence, the Ritz is a little strip of a building; a piffling place compared with most grand hotels. The exterior is just as much a sham. The façade appears to be carved from stone, but some smart work with a

pickaxe would soon expose the steel skeleton of a skyscraper, something more like the innards of the Flatiron Building than the Palace of Versailles.[19] This is the reason why war did not silence the Ritz.

The details had already been reported at great length in Edwardian engineering and architectural journals: glowing paragraphs about rafts of reinforced concrete and two-layer grillages of steel beams that complied with 'the latest standards for steel-framed office buildings in America'.[20] In October 1939, the *Réunion des Gastronomes*, a body representing hotel and restaurant proprietors, urged its members to report them again, and woo back lost patrons with reassuring words about sturdy joists and girders. The Ritz reminded the public of the existence of its metal frame – omitting to mention that the steel had been imported from Germany. The Dorchester boasted of the sturdy concrete roots that it had put down deep under Park Lane. The Waldorf ballyhooed its alloy bones. The structures of the Savoy and Claridge's were rather less resilient, but that did not stop the publicity manager from using the hotel's official New Year cards to celebrate the impregnability of the Savoy's reinforced restaurant. 'This room is provided with special protection from blasts and splinters,' she declared. 'The inner wall is fourteen inches thick. The outer wall, five feet distant, is nine inches thick. The brick joints in each wall are strengthened with steel mesh, and the two walls support each other by sixteen connecting steel rods.' Looking back on these days from the vantage point of the 1950s, the woman who supplied this copy claimed to have believed her own propaganda: 'I felt a warm pride steal over me that I was part of this world,' wrote Jean Nicol, 'a world as self-contained as a walled city of bygone days, where perfection of service was the rule whether the chandeliers glinted on the sheen of satin, or, like tonight, an oil-lamp swayed above the khaki and blue serge of uniforms.'[21]

Here is the ambivalence upon which this book turns. The nature of a reinforced luxury fortress in the West End is depend-

ent on the position of the observer. For many, the indestructibility of the social life of London's grand hotels was evidence of Britain's indomitable nature, proof that Hitler was not sufficiently powerful to disrupt the rituals of cocktail hour. 'People must eat some time or other even if there is a war on,' wrote the gossip columnist of the *Tatler*, 'and thank goodness "we hae meat and can eat – and so the Laird be thankit". It is not so in another country which is involved in this conflict, whatever the Liar-in-Chief may want us to believe.' For Society magazines, made skinny by war but still printed on glossy rotogravure pages, this was 'the West End Front', where socialites defied Hitler by lunching for England.[22]

More radical opinion saw something else entirely – and the satirist Michael Barsley had a word for it. *Ritzkrieg*, a counter-attack by the wealthy in defence of their pre-war privileges – and in hope of turning the conflict into a crusade against Communism: 'stale-mate, followed by Stalin-mate, and an attack on the USSR'. In a series of sketches for the *Tribune* and the *New Statesman*, Barsley used deft cartoons and diabolical puns to summon up the leaders of this assault: Colonel Bogus, a military man 'of the type who formed an alliance between the Nouveau Riche and the Nouveau Reich'; Lucy Rolls-Voyce, who owes her appointment to the Intelligence Department to string-pulling by her father, Lord Damson. ('P'raps', she trills, 'that's why I get the plum jobs.') Barsley imagined these articles as a stack of secret documents stashed inside a hollow volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* – an upper-class relation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. 'The Ritzkrieg,' he wrote, 'unlike its more famous predecessor, the *Blitzkrieg*, was a plan of Inaction and Reaction. It was, in a word, the Old Guards' Private War, fought by private means.'[23] Today, Barsley's book makes a somewhat tiresome read, but his point is clear: the inhabitants of the Ritz were fighting the war for themselves.

*

The germ of this book grew from an encounter with the son of the most notorious wartime resident of the Ritz. I met him in Tirana in May 1997, while reporting on his campaign to restore the Albanian monarchy. King Leka of the Albanians, as he styled himself, was a white-haired, bespectacled, six-foot-eight arms dealer who chain-smoked Rothman's cigarettes. His father had been Albania's first and last royal ruler: Ahmet Muhtar Zogolli, who led a 1924 *coup d'état* against the government from which he emerged as President. In September 1928, Zogolli went one better and crowned himself King Zog I of the Albanians, swearing an oath of allegiance on the Bible and the Koran, and presiding over celebrations in which sheep were ritually slaughtered outside the royal palace, Italian planes bombed Tirana with confetti and the letter 'Z' was scorched into hillsides. A Zogist salute was incorporated into the business of civic life: a chop to the heart from the right forearm, highly influential upon the directors of low-budget science fiction.[24] Observers of the royal court of Albania compared what they saw to the kind of preposterous Balkan states often seen in musical comedies.[25] When Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish nation, asked if there was an operetta going on in Tirana, Zog is said to have abandoned his most Ziegfeldish official uniform – a white-and-gold number with a plumed fur hat.

The reign of Zog was brief. The King funded electrification and road-building projects with financial assistance from Italy. In April 1939, however, Mussolini called in the debt, and sent troops marching down the asphalt roads for which his government had paid. The royal family fled the country: Zog, his wife Queen Geraldine, their three-day-old baby Prince Leka, the King's six sisters, three nephews and two nieces, and a twenty-strong party of advisers, courtiers and bodyguards. Their flight across Europe ended at the Ritz, where the Albanian party occupied much of the third floor of the hotel and immediately became the subject of newspaper gossip and official suspicion. The Foreign Office kept Zog at arm's length. They declined

formal diplomatic contact and expressed private disgust at his attempt to claim compensation for some items of luggage lost at Dover. Journalists, however, were more interested in the dozens of suitcases that did make it to Piccadilly. ('They do say', noted Rex North of the *Sunday Pictorial*, 'that a van drew up outside the Ritz Hotel loaded up with two million pounds' worth of gold bars.') Press and politicians, however, were united in their belief that Zog had arrived in London with a large amount of dirty money. Special Branch detectives monitored his financial transactions, and observed his sister, Princess Seneji Abid, exchanging thousands of dollar bills at a branch of the Westminster Bank. 'He is understood to have a bill for some $80,000', they reported, 'and cases of bullion at the Ritz Hotel.'[26]

In the spring of 1997 Albania declared a state of emergency, instituted when two-thirds of the population lost its savings in government-backed pyramid investment schemes. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was enforced. UN tanks rumbled along the roads. Guns, looted from the state armouries by an angry population, were everywhere. In a modest villa on the outskirts of Tirana, King Leka reminisced about his father's years of exile. 'We'd eat dinner at eight and he'd go to bed immediately after, and I'd join him in the bedroom. The conversation would last until midnight or one in the morning, and we'd cover the Balkans, naturally, and Albania in particular – in every aspect of politics, history, geography and human nature.' Zog had his only son memorise population figures, geographical statistics and the GDPs of every country in the world. 'It was a tremendous education,' he recalled, glowing with pedagogic nostalgia. 'I've met a lot of great men in my life, and he was the greatest.' I asked him whether it was true that his father had paid his hotel bills with gold bullion. 'Certainly not,' he said, drily.

I joined Leka and his entourage of seedy-looking foreign mercenaries as they took their campaign to Vlora, an Adriatic port under the control of a rebel committee headed by a former

cigarette-smuggler named Albert Shite. An unruly crowd of five thousand was waiting for us. Perched on the edge of a massive marble monument commemorating Albania's 1912 declaration of independence, Zog's son took up his megaphone and attempted to make a speech about 'brotherhood, peace and unity'. Nobody wanted to listen. 'Where's the money?' demanded one man. 'Has he brought any money with him?' Leka's royal guard began to look sweaty and nervous. Leka, drowned out by hecklers, cut his losses and struggled back to his limousine. A gang attempted to hijack one of the royal cars with a stick of dynamite – but was obliged to be content with its hub caps. Peals of gunfire rang out above our heads. Then, with a screech of brakes, we were off down the pitted backstreets of Vlora. The royal visit had lasted twenty minutes. After half an hour, the cars drew up at a roadside café. 'That was . . . interesting,' reflected the King, settling down in a white plastic chair and splitting the seal on a new packet of Rothmans. 'My presence seems to ignite the spark. I just hope I'll work out as a stabilising factor.' I asked him about the anger of the crowd; their demands for financial compensation for the collapse of the pyramid schemes. 'I'm not sure that was what they meant,' said Leka. 'I think they were talking about my father's luggage. The communists loved that story.' Everybody laughed. The bodyguards handed out cans of fizzy drink. We toasted the house of Zog with blood-warm Fanta. The back-slapping, the laughter and the automatic weapons put me in mind of wartime press reports about Zog's bodyguards, their all-night poker games, their habit of patrolling the third floor of the Ritz with sawn-off shotguns. I tried to imagine Leka and his cronies on the Palm Court of the Ritz.

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Most social histories of the Home Front have dealt with the experiences of 'ordinary' people – the Land Girls, the Tommies,

the evacuees, the diligent correspondents who filled out their Mass Observation diaries each night before they went to bed. Their emphasis is on collective suffering, pleasure and struggle: how Britons endured separations from husbands, wives, families, lovers; how they strove to make edible food from swedes and offal and desiccated egg; how they survived the physical and emotional shocks of total war. As 1939 edges closer to the limits of living memory, our appetite is for accounts of the Second World War that emphasise the shared experiences of the conflict. This is why so many books about the war have the words *We* and *Our* in their titles, though they deal with events that are beyond the experience of anyone under the age of eighty. This is why, since 2000, when one of the few surviving originals was put on display in the window of a second-hand bookshop in Alnwick, a little-known wartime propaganda poster that exhorted Britons to 'Keep Calm and Carry On' has been reproduced on thousands of postcards, mouse mats, coasters, tea towels, duffle bags, deck-chairs, notebooks, cufflinks and hoodies. In the space of a decade, the phrase has gone from archival obscurity to a mantra of middle-class self-pity. In 2010, a British tabloid gave it away on prints and mugs, as if it believed that enduring the final months of Gordon Brown's government were an equivalent experience to being firebombed by the Luftwaffe. It is a peculiar cultural shift: the same generation that tried not to look bored when their grandparents started banging on about coupons and rocket-bombs and blackout blinds is now putting up wartime propaganda posters in its kitchens and office cubicles, in sentimental solidarity with the people of Churchill's Britain.

Observing the Second World War through the experiences of those who stayed and worked at the Savoy and the Ritz might seem an eccentric way of disrupting the customary narratives of the Home Front. Hotels are not home – indeed, they are sometimes used for doing the things we dare not do at home, and would rather remained unseen by those who know us best.

But the public and private worlds underwent many strange and sudden revisions in the rooms and corridors of the wartime grand hotel – as did the social structures that shaped them. In these years, chambermaids nudged aristocrats awake for snoring in the air-raid shelter; Communists disguised as lunching ladies ripped off their fur-wraps to reveal banners that declared, 'Ration the rich!'; revered head waiters were marched from restaurant floors and into prisons and internment camps; crownless kings sat mournfully in their suites and contemplated lives of exile and despair; Trotskyist agitators exhorted chefs and chambermaids to join the revolution.

I have spent much of the last few years talking with those who were part of these events: Joe Gilmore, the Savoy barman who mixed fruit cocktails for George Bernard Shaw and kept Churchill's secret bottle of whisky under the bar; Crown Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia, born in an illusory patch of his homeland conjured into being in Suite 212 at Claridge's; Joyce Stone, who spent each midnight of the Blitz in the marbled halls of the Dorchester, while her husband conducted the band; Gilbert Bradley, for whom the Lower Bar of the Ritz was the place he was picked up by a sourly beautiful Tory MP with an artificial leg and wife and son in Sussex; Max Levitas, the last known survivor of a brigade of Communist protestors who, as London burned, marched into the air-raid shelter of the Savoy and ordered tea and bread and butter. I have pursued others, too, who have lived with the consequences of scenes played out in suites and lounges seventy years ago: the sons of a celebrated writer who left his lover to die in a room at the Mount Royal Hotel above Oxford Street; the family of a con-man who preyed on impressionable young men in the bar of the Charing Cross Hotel; the friends and relations of a suspected Nazi agent who was installed at the Waldorf by her handlers from MI5, who proved quite unable to cope with her frank attitude to sex. ('Much of Mrs Lonsdale's conversation', asserted one informer, 'cannot possibly be submitted in a report owing to its indescrib-

ably filthy nature.') All are gathered here, under the roof of this book, assembled because their stories have obsessed me for the last five years – and because most of those stories refuse to fit the version of the life on the Home Front upon which we seem, as a culture, to have agreed.

I have said that Michael Barsley's *Ritzkrieg* is not a very funny book. Perhaps it never was. But it is a book that imagines looking back on the war from a future Britain transformed by the experience of that conflict – the country that we now occupy. 'It will be seen', he wrote, 'that as far as rations are concerned, the Old Guard scarcely altered their lives or their eating capacity. As far as luxurious living is concerned, we leave the reader to judge for himself. It may be that social historians of the future will cast a not very friendly eye on this peculiarly wasteful and decadent activity of society.'[27] Let us put that assertion to the test.