

ANTON  
DU BEKE

*A Christmas  
to Remember*

ZAFFRE

First published in the UK in 2020 by

ZAFFRE

An imprint of Bonnier Books UK  
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE

Owned by Bonnier Books  
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978–1–83877–192–8

Special edition ISBN: 978–1–83877–416–5

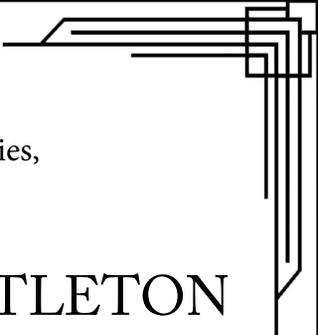
*Also available as an ebook*

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Zaffre is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK  
[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)



Together with our families,

MISS NANCY NETTLETON

and

MR RAYMOND DE GUISE

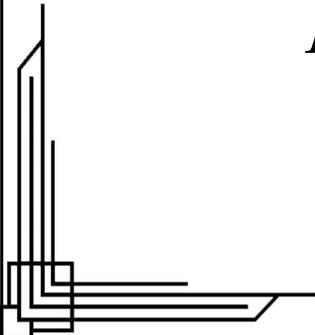
are pleased to invite you to join us for our wedding ceremony

Saturday 10th December 1938  
Marylebone Town Hall  
London

followed by dinner and dancing at

The Grand Ballroom  
Buckingham Hotel  
Berkeley Square

*Let's dance . . .*



Prologue

September 1938

## *The Housekeeping Lounge, the Buckingham Hotel*



**T**HE KNOCK AT THE DOOR is not unexpected.

But the face behind it is.

Mrs Emmeline Moffatt, Head of Housekeeping at the Buckingham Hotel – the most prestigious of London’s luxurious hotels, a place that lords and ladies, dukes and duchesses, dignitaries from near and far away, have always called home – opens the door to the housekeeping lounge, and the surprise that blossoms on her face is swiftly swept away by a matronly concern. She cuts a forlorn figure, this unexpected guest. It is late at night, the very last day of September, but that does not account for the weariness in the girl’s eyes.

‘My dear,’ Mrs Moffatt begins. ‘Oh, my dear.’ She steps back, inviting the visitor in. ‘Quickly now, before anybody sees.’

The girl says little as Mrs Moffatt arranges one of the house chairs with cushions and sits her down. She says even less as Mrs Moffatt busies herself with a pot of tea. Whether you are lord or lady or chambermaid, nothing helps you face disaster better than a cup of Mrs Moffatt’s finest tea.

‘Now, my dear, shall we begin?’ Mrs Moffatt is approaching sixty years old, though you wouldn’t know it by the rigour with

which she whips her legion of loyal chambermaids into shape. She settles herself in the chair beside her guest and takes her hand. The fact is, she's had the most life-changing day herself; it's knocked all the wind out of her sails – and, if nothing else, she would like to hear about somebody else's woes. It might help her let go of some of her own. 'You'll have to tell me what's wrong, dear. I can't see inside that head of yours. But whatever it is, we'll put it right. You can count on me for that.'

'I'm going to have a baby.'

There is a stillness in the housekeeping lounge. Mrs Moffatt has a rule: in times of consternation, in times of distress or surprise, take a deep breath, take a sip of tea, and do absolutely nothing. The stillness centres her.

She sets her tea down, reaches for the girl and takes her hand. With the other hand, she brushes the hair away from her eyes. This girl is, and always has been, beautiful – though there have been times when she wouldn't know it. Now, though, her face begins to crumple. She's held it in for so long. The wall is finally crumbling and the girl has started to cry.

'You're not the first, my dear. Believe me. I've sat here with girls just like you, more than I care to remember, and told them what I'm going to tell you right now: everything is going to be all right.'

'How can you know that? Look at me. I'm three months down. It's going to start showing soon. How can I possibly . . . ?'

Mrs Moffatt shuffles the chair closer. This time, she puts an arm around the girl.

'First things first,' she says. 'Have you seen a doctor?'

'How can I? If people were to find out . . . And my work, Mrs Moffatt, the hotel, my home.'

## A CHRISTMAS TO REMEMBER

‘All in good time, my dear.’ Mrs Moffatt smiles. It’s one of her sincere, soft smiles, and something in it begins to put the girl at ease. This, after all, is why she came. Mrs Moffatt, Head of Housekeeping, is mother to them all, here in this hotel. ‘But before we go any further . . .’ She crosses to her desk, where she opens a drawer and returns to the table with her hands full of little candies wrapped in colourful wax paper. ‘My barley sugars. Well, they’ll keep our spirits up as we work this out, won’t they? You and me, my girl. We’ll work out a plan together. You might think Mr Charles, our esteemed hotel director, is the only one adept at tidying up the little dramas of our fine establishment – but you’d be wrong. I’m a dab hand at sorting out our little mysteries myself. Well, I might even have one or two of my own!’ Mrs Moffatt beams. ‘So let’s begin at the beginning, shall we? That’s the only way to get to the end, you see. Why don’t you tell me where it all began?’

Five Months Earlier . . .

April 1938

## Chapter One



‘**S**HOW HIM IN, BILLY.’

Billy Brogan gave an ostentatious bow and backed out of Maynard Charles’s office, leaving the door ajar as he scurried back to the mahogany reception desks of the Buckingham Hotel. Sitting at his desk, where his morning had so far been spent immersed in the hotel accountants’ forecast of the year ahead, Maynard Charles rolled his eyes. He’d been telling young Brogan, the Buckingham’s most junior – and most ambitious – concierge, that he didn’t need to bow for nearly a year, but the boy never listened. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the pomp with which he inhabited his role. Deference like that could help a boy go places, especially in an establishment like the Buckingham Hotel – there was nothing the European gentry liked more than to be assured of their superiority – so Maynard had never been too insistent with the boy. He might have looked foolish, but his heart was in the right place.

A few moments later, Billy Brogan’s knuckles rapped at the door again.

‘Come in, Mr Brogan,’ Maynard intoned – and, when the door drew back, there stood the gangly, red-headed Brogan at the side of a much older and more esteemed gentleman, his face framed

in coils of grey hair and a neatly trimmed silvery moustache poised delicately on top of his red lips.

‘Mr Charles,’ Billy began, ‘may I introduce Mr Tobias Bauer.’

Tobias Bauer was a small man, slight in stature, and walked with the aid of a cane, whose head was carved into the shape of an otter. As he came forward – oblivious of Billy giving another flowery bow at his side – he teetered slightly on his heels. Maynard, already on his feet, stepped around the edge of his desk and pulled out the seat. With whispered thanks, Tobias Bauer sank down.

‘That will be all, Billy.’

‘At your service, Mr Charles.’

Then, with another well-practised bow, Billy retreated.

After he had gone, Bauer ventured, ‘Your young man is a credit to you all.’

Tobias Bauer was a regular visitor to English shores, but he had never lost the cadences of his Austrian homeland. He was softly spoken, but there was a quavering in his voice as well. As Maynard already knew, it was born of real fear.

‘I’m given to understand you have a problem, Herr Bauer.’

‘Well, quite,’ Bauer began. Maynard saw how he caressed the head of his walking cane, as though it might help him find the confidence to say what he had to say next. ‘It all began with that damn vote, you see. From that moment on, I knew I would never be able to go home. All the lies and counter-lies of those damned politicians! Well, it’s a story as old as time, isn’t it? And here I am – stranded. Yes, quite stranded!’

Maynard knew a little of Bauer’s story already. As hotel director, his job was not only the management of the twelve hundred staff who made up his retinue at the Buckingham

Hotel. His days and nights might have been filled with the affairs of concierges and chambermaids, desk clerks and seamstresses, kitchen porters and pages, and all the musicians and dancers who lent the Buckingham their glamour. That was all the work of an expert at management and organisation. But there was an artistry to Maynard's role as well, and part of this involved knowing the daily comings and goings of all his manifold guests, being able to foresee pitfalls and disasters and head them off. Tobias Bauer had taken up residence at the Buckingham at the end of February – and now, six weeks later, here he remained. There was a reason for that, and its name was *Anschluss*.

‘Yes,’ Bauer went on, ‘I’m afraid Herr Hitler has had his sights on my homeland for all his days on this good green Earth. And now it’s his – a part of his Reich, for now and ever more.’

Scarcely a season passed in an establishment as finely tuned as the Buckingham without its director needing to manage some scandal, or contain some everyday disaster. But that did not mean Maynard Charles had neglected to follow the news of the outer world – and, in particular, the mounting dramas on the Continent. Soon after Bauer's arrival at the Buckingham, news had reached London of Nazi Germany's intention to annex Austria. They might claim it was to reunite its German citizenry with the mother country they had lost, but Maynard knew it for what it was: the march of a conqueror, pure and simple. Europe had seen enough of those before.

‘So Herr Schuschnigg – our Chancellor, you understand – declared a vote would be held, to support our independence. That was a grave mistake, Mr Charles. Hitler could never allow that to happen. And that, sir, is why there are Nazi thugs marching

through the streets of old Vienna, my home town. That, sir, is why my nation no longer exists.'

Bauer was shaking, and in the silence that followed he struggled to regain his composure.

'In my home country,' he went on, 'I have something of a reputation for speaking my mind. It has always served me well in business, but in this age it has become my curse. You see, I have not been silent about my loathing of Mr Hitler and all that he stands for. It has seen me branded as many things across the years – I have even been accused of being a Soviet, which I assure you I am not. I am simply a decent man who enjoys and respects the freedoms of the world. And now my reputation – well, it undoes me. Six weeks ago, I received word that Nazi soldiers had arrived at my country residence, asking after me.' At this, Bauer's emotions seemed to get the better of him. In his face was such a mixture of rage and terror and helplessness that even Maynard Charles, famed up and down the Buckingham halls for a cool head in a crisis, felt his heart begin to thunder. 'I'm sorry, Mr Charles, but perhaps now you understand the predicament in which I find myself. My country house has been requisitioned and, I understand, has become a regional base for the very same thugs who are turning my country to ruin. My brother is trying to flee. He warns me that I must not – that I *cannot* – go home.'

Throughout, Maynard had listened intently. Now that Tobias Bauer's words had petered into silence, he found himself staring out of the window, into the darkness of the courtyard at the rear of the Buckingham. In his mind's eye he could see the military transports that must have brought the Nazi soldiery into Vienna, their open backs packed with storm troopers. He'd known too

many soldiers in his lifetime. The Great War was twenty years in the past, but there were still moments when, if his concentration lapsed for a second, he was back there, listening to the shrill whistles as he and his fellows piled over the top and marched directly into the Kaiser's guns.

War was coming again. He'd known it for long months. Tried to pretend he was wrong. Tried to pretend there was hope. But hope was dying every day in Europe. Maynard's faith was gone.

Coming back to the present, he reached for the brandy decanter on his desk, beside his Olympia Elite typewriter, and poured two stiff measures. The first was for Tobias Bauer, and was received with a look of sincere gratitude. The second was for Maynard himself. It warmed him through and through.

'Herr Bauer,' he said, 'what's happening in your country is a stain that besmirches humanity, and I am glad that you came to me in your hour of need. The Buckingham Hotel has been grateful for your custom these past weeks. We have always taken pride in making our longer term guests feel most at home – and I hope, in this, we have succeeded.'

'Oh, but you have, Mr Charles. You most certainly have.'

'Am I given to understand that you would like to extend your stay?'

'Indeed.'

'And that you do not know how long you might need to stay with us?'

Bauer nodded. 'Well, if this year has taught me anything, it's that not one of us can tell which way the world is going to turn next.'

'Then we come to the thorny question, Herr Bauer.'

'Were I able to continue in my current suite, I should do so, Mr Charles. But my funds are limited on English shores, and I

was today informed, by my man at Lloyds, that the funds I have in my bank at home are . . . no longer at my disposal. Well, I suppose I should be thankful. A frozen bank account is, perhaps, the least of the evils being perpetrated on my countrymen, even now.' He hesitated, exchanging a knowing look with Maynard Charles. It was ungentlemanly to speak so brazenly of money, but there were darker things in the world this year. 'I am not a penny-pinching man, Mr Charles, but I have limited resources and know not how long I must make them last. So I come to you to ask if we might come to some arrangement that might suit both of us? Long-lasting residency in one of your lesser suites might be profitable for the Buckingham Hotel, perhaps?'

Maynard was finishing his brandy when inspiration seemed to strike him.

It was not uncommon for Maynard to contort the movements of the entire hotel to suit its guests. A hotel was, after all, nothing without its residents. But rarely had he felt that he wanted to bend the rules of the hotel more than now.

'We do have a suite, Herr Bauer. It has been out of service for many long years, but in the past month we have been dusting it down, ready for service once again. You would find it a little stark, at present. A little out of the way, as well – being hidden around a corner on our uppermost storey. But it has its charms. A little privacy. A homely atmosphere. And one of the better views of Berkeley Square that the hotel frontage allows. It's called the Park Suite – and, if you like, I could have our young friend Billy Brogan show you there right now.'

After Billy had taken Tobias Bauer through the doors of the hotel's golden lift, Maynard Charles poured himself another stiff measure

of brandy. This one he savoured as a just reward for helping a man in his hour of need. Such things were good for the soul, but Maynard knew he would have to do it a thousand times over if he was to guide the Buckingham through the months and years ahead. The copy of the *Daily Mail* lying open on his desk – among all the other newspapers delivered daily to the tradesman’s door – was just another in a long litany of reminders that Europe teetered on the brink of something calamitous – and that Great Britain, though she stood alone, was separated by a mere sliver of water from the Continent’s unrest.

GERMAN JEWS POURING INTO THIS COUNTRY

‘The way stateless Jews and Germans are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage. I intend to enforce the law to its fullest!’ In these words, Mr Herbert Metcalfe, the Old Street Magistrate, yesterday referred to the number of aliens entering this country through the ‘back door’ – a problem to which the *Daily Mail* has repeatedly pointed . . .

Less of a problem, thought Maynard Charles, for this mighty island nation than for the poor wretches forced out of the only homes and lives they’d ever known. Were it up to him, he’d take the whole damn lot of them – and to hell with the British Union of Fascists and their like, who had marched through London only two years ago, demonstrating against kindness and generosity. To hell, too, with Lord Edgerton and the various other members of the hotel board, who proudly stood shoulder to shoulder with those fascists at their garden parties or moonlit Mayfair soireés. To hell, thought Maynard, with every last one of

them who courted the murderers and demagogues rising to the top in Nazi Germany.

Then he stopped and stared into his glass. With a wry smile, he set it down – and, though there was no denying the hunger he felt for another measure, he delicately patted his lips dry on his crimson silk handkerchief and told himself that enough was enough. A drunken hotel director speaking his mind was a scandal Maynard Charles could not afford.

With this in mind, he left the office behind and ventured out, past the gleaming mahogany reception desks, across the black and white chequers of the reception hall, beyond the tall black obelisk, down which water coursed in a constant cascade. He headed along the arched hallway that sloped towards the doors of the Buckingham's most feted attraction: the Grand Ballroom itself.

As he stepped in, he heard the sounds of the legion of carpenters, joiners and other tradesmen who were, even now, finessing the ballroom's features for reopening night. Standing on the threshold, he surveyed the entirety of the ballroom, from the dance floor doors from which the hotel dancers and musicians would proudly announce themselves, to the sweeping curved bar that, after two months of hard work, was almost ready to accept paying customers again.

For a whole season, now, the Grand Ballroom had heard neither the music of its resident Archie Adams Orchestra, nor the applause that ordinarily resounded whenever the hotel's elite dancers took to the floor, led by the enigmatic Raymond de Guise and his partner H el ene Marchmont. Christmas had been and gone, one year had rolled into the next, and the Buckingham ballroom's lordly patrons had been seeking their entertainment

elsewhere while Maynard's phalanx of loyal tradesmen worked, day and night, to refit and prepare the ballroom for reopening. The inferno that had torn through here last year had laid the place to ruin, but by good grace – and thanks to the leadership and investment of the newest board member, the American industrialist John Hastings – Maynard was sure that the Grand would quickly recapture its reputation as the jewel in London's crown. But in the pit of his stomach the fear remained: lords and ladies were a notoriously fickle species; if their loyalties had gone to the ballroom at the Savoy – or even, God forbid, the Imperial – then the Buckingham's fortunes would surely falter. And with war on the horizon, this was something Maynard would rather avoid at all costs.

His eyes turned to the dance floor, and its newly laid tiles of interlocking ebony and oak. There, in the space where tradesmen were not on their knees, polishing the boards to a dazzling shine, Hélène Marchmont waltzed in the arms of Raymond de Guise.

This was the reason the ballroom was the beating heart of the Buckingham Hotel. The music came only from a tinny gramophone, but the way Raymond and Hélène danced was enough to make Maynard look upon them alone. There was a time, not too far gone, when he had not truly understood the magic of the ballroom. How strange that seemed, looking out upon it now.

He was not the only one watching. As he approached the oak balustrade that ran around the dance floor, he saw that the hotel page, Frank Nettleton, was tapping his feet along to the music with his sweetheart, the chambermaid Rosa, at his side. Frank was small and wiry, his tousled hazel curls in desperate need of a visit to the hotel barber, but Maynard knew he had a good

heart. As he watched, Frank took Rosa in his arms and, laughing uproariously, began to imitate Raymond de Guise. Rosa was no match for the elegant Hélène Marchmont, but Frank held himself with the grace of an accomplished dancer. Music was in the boy's veins; even an old curmudgeon like Maynard, more concerned with books and balance sheets than the intricacies of the Viennese waltz, could see that.

Even so, Maynard barked out, 'Nettleton, you know the ballroom's closed until further notice,' as he passed – and Frank, startled as if out of a dream, quickly ceased his dance, rambled an incoherent apology, and scurried with Rosa out through the ballroom doors.

'Go easy on the boy, Mr Charles.' Raymond stepped out of Hélène's arms and grinned as he approached. 'He's just starting out. Rough around the edges, yes, but you've a diamond there, if you encourage him. If only we were all as passionate as young Frank Nettleton.'

Maynard took Hélène by the hand in greeting.

'Miss Marchmont, four months away from the ballroom floor hasn't dulled your instincts, nor your artistry, I see. Are you ready for opening night?'

'We'll be ready, Mr Charles.' Hélène might have looked demure and coquettish to some – at least, that was the way the photographers had tried to capture her, back in the days when she'd graced the covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* – but the way she spoke now betrayed the aspect of her character that all those close to her understood: her steeliness, and inner strength. 'I've been rehearsing with Mathilde daily. She'll second Raymond and me, along with Gene Sheldon. She's got everything, Mr Charles. She's your future star.'

Maynard nodded, sagely. This was good news indeed.

‘And the dance floor – how does it feel?’

‘Freshly sprung,’ Raymond replied. At over six feet in height, he stood a head taller than Maynard, and his crest of windswept black hair made him seem taller still. He was the hotel’s Hercules of the ballroom, and Maynard trusted him above all else. ‘She’s still settling in, Mr Charles, but we’ll have the troupe out here as soon as the finishing touches are done. We still have two weeks. By then, we’ll know the floor again – all its little kinks and nuances.’ He leaned forward, gripped the balustrade, and looked directly into Maynard’s eyes. ‘Mr Charles, we’re in this together. All of us in the dance troupe. Archie Adams and all his orchestra. Oh, they might be scattered across London town, moonlighting in the clubs while they wait for the ballroom to open again. But don’t think for a second that their hearts don’t remain with us, right here.’

‘And it’s not just the ballroom,’ Hélène interjected. Her crystalline eyes, too, had settled on Maynard. He might have read them each the Riot Act on occasion, but there was no one – outside this hotel or within it – that either of them would rather have followed into war. ‘You hear it up and down the halls. Concierges and kitchen hands, chambermaids and pages and waiting staff. Even Mrs Farrier, down in the hotel post room! Every last one of us, here at the Buckingham, we’re all in it together. We’re going to make the Grand’s reopening the talk of the society pages. We’ll be back on top, Mr Charles. I know we will.’

There was something about Hélène’s conviction that stilled Maynard’s nerves. He turned again to survey the ballroom. *Yes*, he thought, *here is a place to be proud of*. A place of magic and enchantment. A place where love stories could unfold and guests

could, for a few fleeting hours, pretend that the world outside was not going to touch them, that a place where war was brewing, where politicians fought daily, where dark clouds gathered and grew yet darker, did not exist at all.

*We'll be ready*, Hélène Marchmont had said.

And Maynard Charles thought: *yes, I believe it at last.*