

## At Bertram's Hotel

1965

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

*At Bertram's Hotel* is an adventure story from an armchair. It has more in common with Christie's early novels of derring-do than with her *whodunnits*, although compared with those early novels, everybody, and everything, have aged. The novel is set in the early 1960s and much of the action takes place in the reception area of a comfortable Mayfair hotel that retains an Edwardian charm, principally in order to attract American tourists.

The novel was written shortly after the 'Great Train Robbery' of August 1963 in which £2.6 million was stolen from a mail train on its way from Glasgow to London. Most of that money has never been recovered. The central plot of Christie's novel involves a series of high-profile robberies that are troubling Scotland Yard: 'Bank hold-ups, snatches of pay-rolls, thefts of consignments of jewels sent through the mail, train robberies'. The police believe that all these robberies are being carried out by the same gang. They know some of the 'small fry' but not the major criminals. 'We're up against some good brains. We haven't got near them yet'. For reasons that are not altogether clear the police decide that there must be a 'very clever little Board of Directors behind this. Centrally planned, with a Chairman' and that there is an operational headquarters. And soon the police alight on Bertram's Hotel as a place of interest. It so happens, for reasons quite unconnected with crime, that one of the guests at the hotel is a certain Miss Jane Marple. 'I wish we could do something for poor old Aunt Jane' says Joan West, to which her husband, Raymond, the wealthy writer and nephew of Miss Marple replies: 'Good idea ... She enjoyed her trip to the West Indies, I think, though it was a pity that she had to get mixed up in a murder case.' (see *A Caribbean Mystery*). The outcome is that Raymond pays for Miss Marple to stay at Bertram's Hotel, just off Piccadilly, where her Uncle Thomas, Canon of Ely Cathedral, had once taken her when she was fourteen years old.

Much of the novel revolves around the gang's final great train robbery, and with Chief-Inspector Davy of Scotland Yard gradually closing in on 'the clever little Board of Directors'. Although the question of who is on this Board of gangsters and, in particular, who is the 'Chairman', is one of the mysteries this is not a *whodunnit*. The main driving force of the novel is provided by more general questions: what exactly is going on; what is the role of Bertram's Hotel; how does the hotel make a profit when it subsidises so many of its guests; and, what is the absent-minded Canon Pennyfather up to?

In Christie's adventure stories of the 1920s there is usually a feisty young woman who is the adventurer and the heroine and who, in the end, defeats the baddies. In this novel there is a feisty woman, Bess Sedgwick, although she is not so young as the early heroines and already has a grown-up daughter. She was in the French Resistance, has flown solo across the Atlantic, rode on horseback across Europe to Turkey, driven racing cars, saved children from burning houses, has had several marriage 'to her credit and discredit', and has the eyes that Christie loves: deep set and grey. She is also said to be the *second* best dressed woman in Europe (we never learn who it is that dresses better) but Christie's description of her

sartorial elegance as she sweeps into Bertram's Hotel seems somewhat ambivalent: 'her dress was of such simplicity that it puzzled most men. It looked like the coarsest kind of sacking, had no ornamentation of any kind, and no apparent fastening or seams. But women knew better. Even the provincial old dears in Bertram's knew, quite certainly, that it had cost the earth!'. Bess Sedgwick, although the most lively character in the book, is not at its narrative centre. It is not she who is trying to unravel the puzzles but Chief-Inspector Davy of Scotland Yard who 'had a comfortable spreading presence, and such a benign and kindly manner that many criminals had been disagreeably surprised to find him a less genial and gullible man than he had seemed to be'. He is, in effect, a reincarnation of Superintendent Battle (from *The Secret of Chimneys* and several other Christie novels), and perhaps a cousin to Inspector Maigret, the French detective of the Belgian author, Simenon.

In one of the most interesting chapters (chapter 4) the top brass at Scotland Yard are discussing the spate of high-level robberies. The Assistant Commissioner, Sir Ronald Graves, suggests that it might be profitable to have a look around for some small things, 'things that don't matter much, that are just a bit out of the usual run. ... like that business some years ago in the Culver case. ... An ink stain round a mouse-hole. Now why on earth should a man empty a bottle of ink into a mouse-hole? It didn't seem important. ... But when we did hit on the answer, it led somewhere.' Christie never explains the significance of this ink-stain. Perhaps she has thrown down the gauntlet for the reader to devise a scenario in which ink around a mouse-hole can be an important clue. It is in any case a very Holmesian type of clue. Christie in her first detective novel published in 1920 (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*) drew heavily on the stories of Sherlock Holmes. Over the years she developed her own, quite different, *genre* of novel. In *At Bertram's Hotel* however, she seems to be in part back in her mindset of the 1920s: the writings of Conan Doyle once again working within her imagination.

Chief-Inspector Davy understands what Sir Ronald Graves is getting at and remembers that in at least two of the robberies, pillars of the establishment (in one case a judge, in another an old Admiral) were spotted near the robberies at around the time that these crimes took place. In both cases the establishment figures had cast-iron alibis that they were elsewhere. In each case, Davy remembers, they had been staying in London at Bertram's Hotel. Davy decides to visit the hotel and it is there that he gets talking to one of the guests: Miss Marple. Between them, Davy and Marple solve the puzzles of the robberies and identify the 'Chairman' and at least some of the 'Board'. What is strange, for a Miss Marple novel, is that all the deductions, all the clever ideas and insights, are made by Davy. Miss Marple's only role is as a witness – a witness to overheard conversations and to the comings and goings in the hotel.

The perpetrators of the real *Great Train Robbery* – a gang of about fifteen people – were not armed, and the intention, it has been widely assumed, was that there should have been no significant violence. In fact the train driver was seriously injured with a blow to the head. In this novel the gang of robbers is against violence. One person is hit on the head but he is not seriously injured. No one is murdered. This novel is, very nearly, the only Christie in which there are no murders, and I think it might have been a better book had there not been one. But perhaps Christie herself, or her agent, thought that her reading public would demand a murder. And so Christie creates a second plot which is minor compared with the

plot about robberies – it is more like a red-herring. Although there are some connections between the people involved in the major and the minor plots they are, in terms of story and structure, independent of each other. The minor plot involves one murder which occurs towards the end of the novel and, of course, the issue arises as to who committed it, but unlike in most Christie novels there is little attempt to give clues, misdirections or red-herrings. It remains the minor plot and drives very little of the narrative.

The main character in this novel is not a person but Bertram's Hotel itself. It is the epitome of English Edwardian Establishment manners. It has a smoking room reserved for gentlemen, serves proper English muffins, and old-fashioned seed cake. The eggs are poached in the proper way, 'not little round hard bullets shaped in tin cups.' The breakfasts served can be cereals and orange juice, but such a possibility would not even be mentioned to a guest like Miss Marple who might shudder at the thought. They can, alternatively, be an English breakfast. 'Eggs and bacon?' asks Colonel Luscombe. The manager, Mr Humfries replies: 'As you say – but a good deal more than that if you want it. Kippers, kidneys and bacon, cold grouse, York ham. Oxford marmalade.'

The afternoon tea is served by Henry who is a large and portly man but whose presence is discreet. When you want him he appears 'as it were, like some vast travesty of Ariel who could materialize and vanish at will.' The receptionist, Miss Gorringer, treats each guest as special, remembers their previous visits, and has all the necessary tourist facts of London at her fingertips. Christie may have taken her name from Gorringer's Department Store – a major shop in London until it closed in 1968 – and not far from the flagship Army and Navy Store where Miss Marple does some shopping.

In Chapter 1 Colonel Luscombe notices that many of the guests, although very respectable, are elderly ladies who are unlikely to be able to afford to stay at such an expensive hotel. He asks the manager how that can be. The manager, surprisingly, tells Luscombe, who seems to be paying the full price, that he gives these elderly respectable ladies a special cheap rate. They provide the *mise en scene* – ensuring that the hotel feels old-fashioned and British so that the American visitors can enjoy the impression that they are seeing the 'old England' of a century ago. This is not convincing. Miss Marple senses something more sinister: she feels that many of the guests are not 'real'. The hotel is like a stage set, and the reader quickly realises that it is being used as a front for the gang of thieves.

The dedication to this novel is: *For Harry Smith 'because I appreciate the scientific way he reads my novels.'* If by 'scientific way' Christie means taking a precise and logical approach to sorting out and understanding the clues and red herrings then this is the wrong book for such a dedication. Many of her novels will repay such a 'scientific' approach, and a reader who approaches them in this way will greatly admire the exquisite mechanics of her plots, but this is not one of those novels. *At Bertram's Hotel* is a surprisingly good read given the rather absurd nature of the gang of outstanding robbers and the lack of *whodunnit* mystery. It is best approached by leaving aside any analytic tendencies and enjoying the novel for its atmosphere, its old world charm and its sense of theatre.

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