

Creating the Ritz

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CREATING THE RITZ

By HARRY J. GREENWALL

(The following article is reprinted from an issue of the "Lady" with due acknowledgment.)

Lord Brougham gave his name to a carriage, the Earl of Sandwich his to a snack, but it was a Swiss cowherdsman who not only created what was for his period a new type of hotel, but who also added a new adjective to the English and perhaps more emphatically to the American language. The foregoing is simply a world traveller's tribute to César Ritz, born in the Swiss Niederwald and who lived literally to "put on the Ritz".

César Ritz's creation, the Ritz Hotel, Paris, the father and mother of all Ritzes, celebrated the 61st anniversary of the opening a few months back. It first opened its doors to the *beau monde* — and the world by all accounts went pretty well then — in June 1898; forty-eight years previously Ritz was born, the youngest of thirteen children. His father had a few cows and it was César's job to look after them. According to Mrs. Langtry, that is how he learned his exemplary tact and patience. At the age of seventeen César Ritz, like Joan of Arc, said: "Lebt wohl ihr Berge", and ran away to Paris, where he became a waiter. His path was one of poverty for many years, but he served his time, acquired polish and became a waiter at the famous Voisin, which used to stand at the corner of the Rue Cambon and the Faubourg St. Honoré.

From then onwards Ritz's career was the classic one. He learned his trade, a knowledge of fine wines (he had served as a wine waiter), how to carve, how the best French dishes should be prepared and served. Then he learned, too, the other branches which appertained to all branches of hotel service, which is in itself a science. When César was thirty-seven he married an Alsatian lady from Molsheim, near Strasbourg, who, seventeen years younger than her husband, was his help and inspiration until his mental powers failed him, and then she stayed with him, until his health failed him, and then she stayed with him, until his life slowly faded away.

César Ritz might have been an hotel manager all his life and never established on his own account if it had not been for a very bitter vendetta with a house-keeper at the Savoy Hotel, London, where he was Managing-Director. It would need the pen of an Arnold Bennett to relate the story, but the house-keeper put the crumbled rose leaves in the soft Savoy bed of César Ritz. With an imperial gesture which suited his Christian name, César Ritz bade farewell to his London past. Maybe it was her husband's experiences in London which embittered his wife's feelings towards English people and English institutions — unconscious feelings perhaps, but although she retained likings for English people in particular, in general she never did wholly approve of them.

It was in Marie Ritz's garden in Golders Green, London, that *Toast Melba* was invented. The famous *chef de cuisine* Escoffier, then at the Savoy, was taking a dish of tea with the Ritz family one Sunday afternoon when Marie Ritz complained that the toast was never thin enough for her liking. She suggested that a slice of bread should be toasted, then cut longways and re-toasted. Escoffier immediately went to the Ritz kitchen and experimented. He came out beaming: "le voilà". Escoffier said he would name it *Toast*

Marie, but Madame Ritz thought that didn't sound grand enough, so as Melba had just returned from a triumphant tour and was a faithful patron of the Savoy, Madame Ritz suggested *Toast Melba*.

Well, Ritz went off in a huff to Paris after his quarrel, and began to think of new pastures. He founded, with a number of English Society people as "backers", a Ritz Hotel Development Co. Ltd. The idea was to found Ritz hotels in many parts of the world. Nothing came of this, but Ritz saw a property that was coming into the market in Paris and wanted to secure an option on it. It was a bank, next door to the Ministry of Justice. He approached his "backers", but they thought the premises too small. He approached the French Rothschilds, but they put on their *pince-nez* glanced at his figures and handed back the balance-sheet, which they considered to be without merit; the anticipated profits, they believed, bore less relation to the outlay than they liked. Then Ritz thought of Marnier Lapostolle, a very wealthy but a very vain man who had invented a liqueur. Ritz sardonically perhaps, had "baptised" it: "Le Grand Marnier". Lapostolle was delighted and lent Ritz the money to obtain a week's option on the Paris property. Ritz dashed to London and enlisted the co-operation of some South African millionaires. Incidentally, the suicide of Barney Barnato at this time was a great blow to him. Ritz formed a company with a capital of six million francs (£240,000 in those days), and with his wife began to work on the blue-print of the first Ritz Hotel. The premises fronted on the Place Vendôme only; the Rue Cambon quarters were added at a much later date.

No detail was too small, Ritz spent hours showing valets and chambermaids how beds should be made. When the bedroom wardrobes were being made, Madame Ritz insisted on an extra drawer being added to hold false curls, the *chignons* and *ratiers* worn by ladies of the period.

Success attend the Ritz Hotel from the very beginning, and most of the Ritz staff became famous. Elles, a Swiss, rose from a reception clerk to be Manager. His brother-in-law, Jacques Kramer, a German, and once *maître d'hôtel* at the Ritz, was interned at Alexandra Park during the first World War, while he was at the Carlton Hotel, London. Agostini, the cashier who had handled hundreds of millions of other people's francs, shot himself on the outbreak of the first World War because he had no money and saw the breaking up of his world.

César Ritz suffered from acute melancholia, and gradually lost all his mental powers. For a long time Madame Ritz carried on a brisk business career, but she had the great gift of growing old gracefully. A prominent American novelist brought her into a war-time novel and figured her in imaginary scenes and killed her off in the first edition of his novel. She actually died at a very old age in Switzerland.

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