



1924



# The Little Hotel

"ONE OF THE CENTURY'S  
OUTSTANDING NOVELISTS."

THE TIMES

# CHRISTINA STEAD

# THE LITTLE HOTEL

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*Part of The Little Hotel has been published as a short story entitled "The Woman in the Bed" in Meanjin Quarterly, University of Melbourne, to which due acknowledgement is made.*

*All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and no reference is intended to any living person.*

**ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS**

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Christina Stead was born at Rockdale, New South Wales, in 1902, and was educated at Sydney High School and at the Teachers' Training College at Sydney University. She left Australia in 1928 and lived in London and Paris, working as a secretary in a Paris bank between 1930-35. She went to live in Spain but on the outbreak of war left for the USA with her husband, the novelist and political economist William Blake. From 1943-44, she was an instructor at the Workshop in the Novel at New York University and in 1943 she was senior writer for M.G.M. in Hollywood.

Her first work, a collection of stories, *The Salzburg Tales*, was published in 1934. Thereafter she published ten novels: *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), *The Beauties and Furies* (1936), *House of all Nations* (1938), *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), *For Love Alone* (1945), *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946), *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948), *The People With The Dogs* (1952), *Cotters' England* (1967), *The Little Hotel* (1947) and *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* (1976). She contributed many short stories to the *New Yorker*, and in 1968 she published a collection of four novellas, *The Puzzleheaded Girl*.

The chill winds of the McCarthy era prompted her departure from America in 1947, and she eventually settled in England in 1953, where she remained until her return to Australia in 1974. Christina Stead died in 1983.

*By the same author*

The Salzburg Tales\*

Seven Poor Men of Sydney\*

The Beauties and Furies

House of All Nations\*

The Man Who Loved Children\*

Letty Fox: Her Luck\*

A Little Tea, A Little Chat

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**For Gunnvor and Oliver Stallybrass**







If you knew what happens in the hotel every day! Not a day passes but something happens. Yesterday afternoon a woman rang me up from Geneva and told me her daughter-in-law died. The woman stayed here twice. We became very friendly, though I always felt there was something she was keeping to herself. I never knew whether she was divorced, widowed or separated. The first time, she talked about her son Gerard. Later, Gerard married. There was something; for she used to telephone from Geneva, crying and saying she had to talk to a friend. I was looking for a friend too. I am always looking for one; for I never had one since I lost my girlhood friend Edith, who married a German exile and after the peace went to live in East Berlin with him. But I can't say I felt really friendly with this woman in Geneva; I didn't know enough about her. My girl friend Edith and I never had any secrets from each other. We lived in neighbouring streets. We would telephone each other as soon as we got up in the morning. On Saturdays we rushed through our household jobs to see each other; we rang up all day long and wrote letters to each other when we were separated by the holidays. Oh, I was so happy in those days. When you grow up and marry, there is a shadow over everything; you can never really be happy again, it seems to me. Besides, with the servants to manage, the menus to type out, the marketing to do, the guests to control and keep in good humour, the accounts, I haven't the time to spend half an hour on the telephone, as I used to. I used to dread this telephone call from Geneva. Still, if a person needs me I must talk to her, mustn't I? You never know. People live year after year in a hotel like this. We have their police papers, we know



their sicknesses and family troubles; people come to confide in you. They tell you things they would not tell their own parents and friends, not even their lawyers and doctors.

This woman used to telephone me every day, while her son was engaged and making his wedding arrangements and when he left her house with his bride. I knew everything that was going on.

Then for a few months I almost forgot about them. One day she telephoned and said that her son and daughter-in-law, Nicole, had moved in with her. She was laughing and crying; nothing so tragic and yet so beautiful had ever happened to her, she said; and then again, she began to telephone me nearly every day about the young couple. I don't know what went on. It was never clear, except that she talked so much about happiness and unhappiness, love and misunderstanding, that I began to dread hearing the phone ring. I had not the time; you know I have headaches, I am worried about my husband Roger; and also I felt that there was something weighing on her which she could not tell me.

Yesterday afternoon, when I heard her voice, my heart nearly stopped. She was actually crying and said something terrible had just happened. She was sobbing into the phone and said she had to tell me before she called the police. She cried and exclaimed and said, 'It had to come.' I think she said Nicole was dead and Gerard her son had gone away and left her; but it may have been that her son was dead, too. Or that Gerard was dead because her daughter-in-law had hung herself. And at one moment I thought she said that Gerard had killed Nicole. But would she tell me a thing of that sort? You see, she speaks French very fast to me and as I am from German Switzerland originally, my French is bad. I have not had time to look in the paper this morning. Besides, I



always fancied that I did not know her full name. Of course, she filled in her police papers; but though I keep in with the police, who are good friends of ours, I, on principle, do not inquire too far. The police are there for that; and then when, in the business, you are obliged to know so much about so many people, it is as well not to know too much.

The police are our friends, we need each other. My husband Roger sometimes meets them in cellarings in the evenings; and we can always manage when any irregularities occur. Irregularities are a nuisance with the staff; but they matter hardly at all with the guests, who are here merely to amuse themselves and spend money.

Just when this telephone call came from Geneva, I was having trouble with a man who came here last week and asked to look at rooms. I quoted him the usual price, which is put up outside the gate, four-fifty a day for the room; and he said that was all right. He had breakfast in his room, ate two full meals in the dining-room and for a whole week amused himself by walking around the town, and taking a bottle of beer to bed with him late at night. Yesterday, that made a week you see, he came down forty minutes before his train time and refused to pay his bill because he said I had given him an all-in rate of four-fifty a day. He had calculated to the last franc and had just the money for his train fare. I said: 'I don't care about that. You must pay for your meals and wine and beer, not to mention service. Besides, I know you have more money than you say.'

You may have noticed him in the dining-room; a dark thickset man with a well-fed look, a businessman, probably—he said he came from Berne. No doubt he did. I don't like Berne people. They can never forget that once they were our overlords. He was coarse and stiffnecked in manner. He called me a thief and said he would send for



the police. However, Clara the housekeeper had already gone for the police and they appeared much sooner than he wished to see them. They said, 'Lets have no more trouble with you; or we'll put it into the record.' They made him empty his wallet and there was not only enough to pay but nearly two hundred francs over. He paid all in the end and the police saw him to the station.

But in other instances the police leave the guests alone. There was the Mayor of B. Oh, what fun he was! He came about two months ago when Roger was away doing his yearly military service. He is a reservist. A limousine with a Belgian number and a liveried chauffeur let a man down at our gate, with a few pieces of baggage, and drove straight off. The man brought his own bags into the hotel and in a very pleasant way asked for the best room. He said he had stopped at our gates, because of our name, Hotel Swiss-Touring; he was in Switzerland and on a tour and he laughed. I gave him the only large room vacant. He filled in his police papers and it was then that he told me that he was the Mayor of B., the Belgian city, and had come here for treatment. He had had a nervous breakdown because of drinking and eating too much; and too many beautiful girls, he said, and too many Germans. He not only filled in the police papers but made several notes on them.

At first the Mayor of B. took his meals in the dining-room and before the meal went from table to table shaking hands, talking about the weather and other things. On the second day he began to complain about Germans in the dining-room, though there was no one there resembling a German but Clara the housekeeper who was doing dining-room service that day. One evening soon after, he started his meal, but after the soup came to me with his napkin in his hand, saying he must eat upstairs; he would not sit down with Germans.



I said Clara the housekeeper came from near Zurich and was a Swiss; and Madame Blaise, who I admit had been making a great scene over dinner, was no more German than he was. She was from Basel and the Basel people had resisted the Germans always. As for the other two guests,—a mother and daughter, Dutch from Leyden. The little girl had eaten cooked roots and gone without milk during the German occupation and was on her way to Villars, a health resort not far from us which is chiefly for the tubercular, though we do not use that word.

The Mayor of B. was very pleasant, but said he would not risk the germ contact with Germans; and he was ever after served in his room. He twitted me, harped on Germans. He several times came upon me speaking German to Clara the housekeeper; he asked me, Who is this German woman? I said, She is not German but Swiss and she is my housekeeper. She won't like you calling her German. There are no Germans here. During the war we had Germans but now there are none.

'Ha-ha,' he said, 'but every day I see cars outside with German numbers. I see them from my balcony.' Those are Americans, I said: there are no Germans here. Then he began doing such funny things. We all had a good laugh. Luisa the chambermaid brought me down a hand-towel marked with the hotel name. He had written in ink round the border—I can show you. I was so amused, I kept it; one should always keep certain things. He wrote:

*If this is a sample of the towel you give guests in the Hotel Swiss-Touring (and his writing was arranged to take in the woven name, you see) it is no wonder that guests who are short of writing-paper use it; for there is no writing paper supplied in the Hotel Swiss-Touring; so that if guests want to write letters or complain about*



*the GERMANS in the place, they will be sure to look for materials and to write on towels and tablecloths, so take notice. Signed, the Mayor of B.*

And he sent this towel down to the office and marked it *Document 116*; he had marked his police paper *Document 101*. The other documents in between had been some messages on old envelopes and a bundle of view-cards provided in the writing-room, which he had sent out to be posted. We had posted them, including the price of the cards and postage on his bill. He always paid his bills without question and promptly. As far as that went, he was a pleasure to know, openhanded and honest. He even sent one of the cards to me with the following words:

*Document 112: To Madame Bonnard at the Hotel Swiss-Touring. Certificate from the Mayor of B. Madame Bonnard, bonart, bonnarr, (that means good fool), Anyone who wants to visit your hotel can apply to me, Hotel Swiss-Touring. I am the Mayor of B. and I am well satisfied with this hotel. I like all the Germans it contains, down with Germans, why do you have Germans in your nothell? Down with Germans, down with hotelism, Madam Bonnarr is a very good German, a b c d e f, ach-german, boo-german, cousin-german, down-with-german, eat-with-german, fooey-german, germ-german. Heil, Madame Bonnar! Get out the Germans and I will come and drink champagne with you. Signed, the Mayor of B. Document 112.*

Then the maids began to bring me towels and pieces of paper he had written upon. He himself brought me a bundle of papers to put in the office safe. 'Top secret,' he said, 'top secret.' He winked and held up his finger. 'I have brought all the incriminating papers away. I have come here to get cured and those left behind will have a headache!'



Every day there was something new with the Mayor. It kept the guests amused. They did not complain so much. Every day he went out and bought four bottles of champagne. After a few days he bought a season ticket to Zurich which is our largest business city. They say it has the same amount of traffic as New York; and what a lot of big cars! There he had important business. He is a trustee, he says, and is buying large properties there: he's putting Belgian money into them. But he went to Zurich only a few times and then he started to take the boat to Evian, in France. At first I thought he went for the casino; but he only went there to get champagne which is cheaper in France than here. Every day he brought back a dozen of champagne.

He invited all the hotel servants to drink with him and everyone had his health drunk; but he never invited the guests. He gave me four bottles for ourselves. Roger and I accepted one bottle in the beginning and drank it with him. He gave the toast of Down with all Germans and Swiss-Germans, which was difficult for me since I am German-Swiss as he knows; but he made us laugh so much that I did not really mind. Then the next day he said: 'I have a whole crate of champagne for you. I must go upstairs and bring it down. Send up two of your servants to help me.' It turned out that it was a miniature crate of liqueur chocolates shaped like champagne bottles. But up in the room, meanwhile, he drank the healths of the two servants, Clara the housekeeper and Arnold the porter's boy.

Most days he also went up the hill to the clinic. There he received his injections and shock treatments. When he came back, he always came first into my office and said: 'Too much of a good thing! Any more of it and I'd fall down dead at his feet, on the floor of the clinic.' But he said he was feeling better.



He had arrived dressed in a style some people think right for Switzerland, tartan shirt, open neck, soiled pair of trousers, of good make, leather jacket, muffler, cap and beach shoes.

He paid his bill regularly and without any objections; but he always wrote underneath something like this: *Bill paid to the Germans, seen and approved, the Mayor of B. Document 127* or whatever it was.

I was uneasy about him, especially as the weather was still wintry, sharp, and he kept crossing the lake to Evian without an overcoat. After I mentioned it to him, he wore his wool muffler; he even wore it to the w.c. And then he began going to the w.c. without a dressing-gown or slippers, but in his pyjamas, hat and muffler. He told me not to worry: the mountain wind was good for his headache. 'I have a headache every night all night; it comes from the fever.'

The Mayor became a nuisance, ringing the bells all day for the staff, insisting upon attendance. He would have two or three of them at a time in his room, haranguing them about business, explaining how they must wait upon him; and next, amusing them, doing balancing tricks and forcing them to drink champagne. He would close the door and I would hear shouting and shrieks of laughter. I had to forbid them to stay in the room when the door was closed; and said there was to be no more than one of them in the room at any time. For the next thing might be that he would get angry with them, very high-and-mighty, he would chase them out saying that he must have better service or he would leave. Then he would storm down to me, only half dressed, asking for clean linen or pen and ink, or saying the food tasted bad.

To begin with we had very little linen and we were just starting to build up our supply; and then our laundress was good but slow. She has a little laundry business of