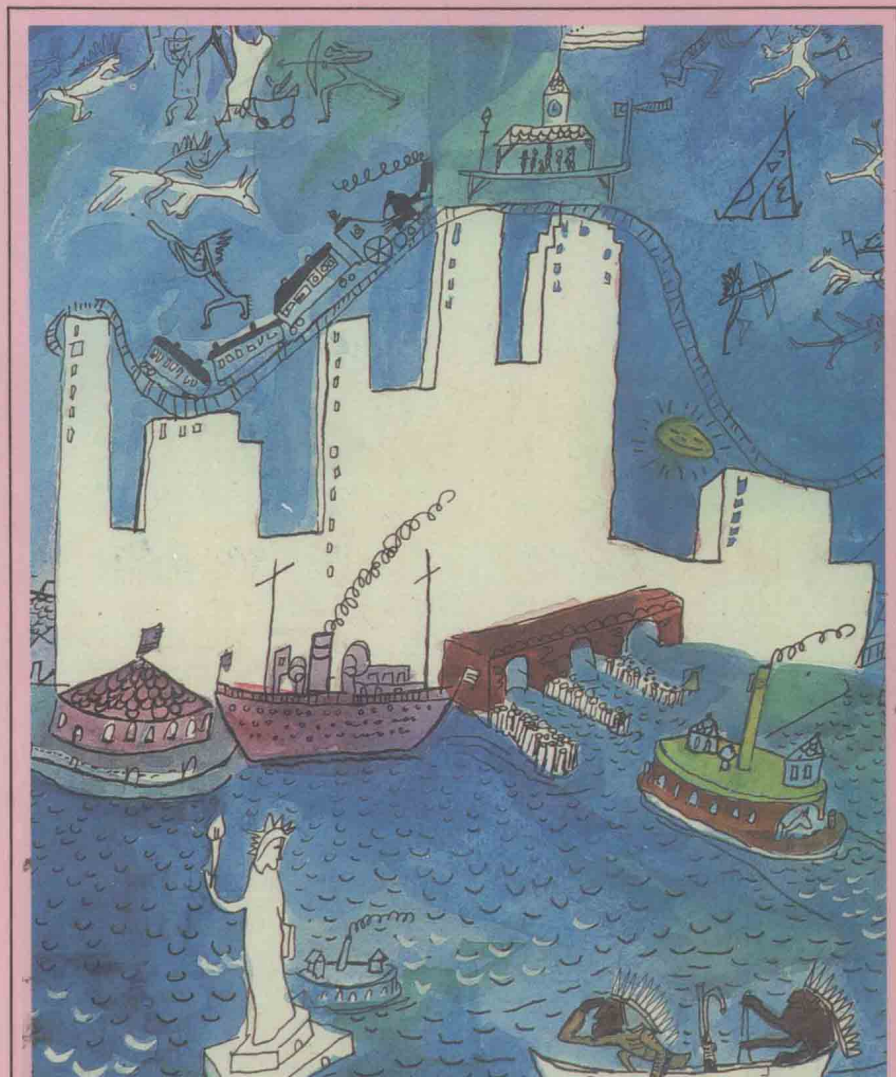


# Tell Them It Was Wonderful

Selected writings by

# Ludwig Bemelmans

Foreword by Norman Cousins



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Tell Them  
It Was  
Wonderful  
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*Selected Writings by*

Ludwig Bemelmans

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Designed by Robin Hessel

*For Paul, James, and John, the grandchildren  
he so greatly desired but never knew.*

## Foreword

. . .

During the forties and fifties, the *Saturday Review* ran a weekly editorial lunch, generally on Wednesdays, at the old Seymour Hotel, to which we would invite authors and publishers, less for an exchange of lofty literary views than the enjoyment of their company. I can think of no one who fulfilled this latter purpose as well as Ludwig Bemelmans. No guest needed less prodding to express himself. He was the only author whose very presence could intimidate Bennett Cerf, then a regular SR columnist, into the melancholy status of silent observer or, worse still, nonperformer.

Bemelmans was the least inarticulate and most delightful personality I ever encountered. When he walked into a restaurant, his unsurpassed knowledge of menus and manners struck terror into the hearts of head waiters and chefs. The snap of his fingers was like a thunderclap or the soft pluck of a harp string, depending on his pique or pleasure. The slightest arch of his eyebrows across a crowded dining room was a mandate from Olympus. He was elegant, ebullient, expansive. He could discourse on writing, painting, food, wine, hotels, and great cities with a combination of overview and minute detail that was the envy of essayists and encyclopedists. He was less tortured by self-doubt (as least visibly) than any writer I know. He was not only the supreme man-about-

town but the man at the center of the town, the compleat continental and cosmopolitan, the person for whom the keys to large and beautiful cities were originally invented.

Such a person would have had to be a product of Viennese culture. (You didn't have to be born in Vienna to reflect its cultivated reach.) Such a person would also have had a wide-ranging family tradition of catering to highly developed tastes.

Ludwig Bemelmans, in short, was born and raised to be a cultivated entrepreneur of upper-class fancies, a talent eminently suited to the operation of world-class restaurants or hotels. He could move at ease among the aristocracy, whether represented by cultured achievement or wealth. He had an unabashed aversion to middle-class culture. He was attuned to the elite, and he became its tireless depicter and its gatekeeper. He was also a master of the incongruous; he would convert the slightest implausibility into outrageous merriment.

Such a man, inevitably, would be the toast of the town—whether New York, Paris, Vienna, London, or any cosmopolitan center that had first-rate art galleries, fine hotels, good music, and caviar. Whether he was drawing bright and irreverent covers for *The New Yorker* magazine, or exhibiting his paintings at a Madison Avenue gallery, or writing fey stories or books, he was a prime divertissement and one of the best conversation pieces New York had known in some time. As an author, he turned out more than three dozen books; he was close friends with the editors of The Viking Press, who tried manfully to populate their catalogue with his titles. Their appetite was stimulated by the public response. People loved his droll accounts of life in the great hotels, of improbable characters, of ridiculous conversations and unimaginable predicaments, of high jinks and low life, of dogs that could do everything except card tricks, of mad kitchen battles between waiters and chefs, of plot-and-counterplot in the art galleries, of perennial absurdities in the human situation.

An entire generation has come of age since Ludwig Bemelmans held his readers at bay with his delightful, oddball reminiscences. I have no doubt that current readers will find him as engaging and appealing as did his contemporaries. As I say, anyone who could make Bennett Cerf seem tentative was a phenomenon beyond compare.

I have many favorites in Bemelmania—"The Old Ritz," "Paris" (retitled "La Colombe"), "The Dog of the World" among them. And they are all here, ready for savoring and instant delight. I commend them unequivocally to today's readers.

Norman Cousins

## Introduction

. . .

Shortly after Ludwig's death in 1962, his editors at The Viking Press, Pascal Covici and Marshall Best, tried to persuade me to do a Bemelmans biography, but I felt that a recent widow was not the best choice for this assignment. Might she not tend to idealize the deceased or to glorify the role she'd played in his life? Besides, Ludwig had written so extensively of his own experiences that I thought the record was fairly complete.

The *Madeline* books have long been classics and have been translated into many languages. However, as the years passed, the Bemelmans books for adults became more and more difficult to find. Yet I continued to hear from ardent fans, some of whom had an almost cultlike devotion to the author. A woman wrote from California that every word was like "apricot nectar." A man living in Flemington, New Jersey, quoted verbatim passages that I had forgotten.

I began to feel an obligation to these people and to a new generation of readers to make at least some of the material available again. Just about this time I received a letter from Barbara Burn of The Viking Press, urging me to put together a Bemelmans book filled with pictures as well as text. With this encouragement



I started to organize an anthology composed of excerpts from as many of the books as possible. However, when I had finished, the selections seemed too fragmentary and would probably not have been appreciated by readers who did not already have some familiarity with the original works. Almost everything Ludwig wrote was a blend of fact and fiction, and much of it was autobiographical. So in an effort to give the book more structure and more substance, I decided to concentrate on the major segments of his life, as he lived it in those parts of the world with which he was most closely identified. The result, though essentially true, is in no way an exhaustive or accurate autobiography; rather, it is an account of his life and a study of his character, insofar as he chose to reveal himself to his readers.

Ludwig was born on April 30, 1898, in a part of Tirol now known as Merano. However, his earliest memories were of Gmunden, where his father owned a hotel called the Golden Ship, into which the family moved sometime after Ludwig's birth. In "Swan Country," he describes the gracious life he lived there until the age of six.

Though the occasions on which he saw his father had not been particularly happy, and sometimes were disastrous, Ludwig suffered from his father's absence after he abandoned the family. In a letter dated May 31, 1962, Ludwig wrote to his friend Alma Mahler Werfel, "I have forgotten so much of youth and much of it was not experienced. In me a whole portion of it is missing—it is like a floor in a house where there is no furniture." Much as he missed a conventional family life, or perhaps because he never had one, he was quite unsuited to domesticity.

The transition from the elegance of the hotel to the earthy atmosphere of a Bavarian brewery offended his sensibilities. In contrast to his brother Oscar, who was the model for "The Homesick Bus Boy" of the Splendide, Ludwig developed a lasting dislike for Regensburg. On the other hand, his love for Tirol never left him.

When he arrived in New York in December 1914, his father, by then a jewelry designer on Maiden Lane, failed to meet him at the boat. So Ludwig was obliged to spend Christmas on Ellis Island, where he received a necktie as a gift. Eventually, Ludwig went to live with his father in an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but they never did get along. After he got a job as a bus boy, Ludwig moved into a furnished room.

Despite his loneliness, he appreciated the freedom, informality, and goodwill he found in America. Though he gave other reasons, unpublished letters show that it was out of a sense of loyalty and in the spirit of idealism that he joined the Army. He was disappointed in his hope of going abroad with the Ambulance Corps, but he served proudly with the Medical Corps at Fort Ontario and Fort Porter. According to a letter written to me by one of his fellow soldiers, Ludwig's reception upon his arrival at camp in a Boy Scout uniform, was unforgettable. "Soon, however," this soldier wrote, "because he was such a regular fellow, he was accepted as one of the guys." Based on a diary he kept at the time, *My War With the United States* (the book in which all the pieces in the "Army" section appear) is Ludwig's own account of Army life and of the misunderstandings created by his German accent and his views on military discipline.

Much as he hated the hotel business, both before and after his Army experience, the patrons and employees were a never-ending source of subject matter for his drawings and stories. Years later, whenever he had an exhibition at the Hammer Galleries, his sketches of chefs and restaurant scenes were great favorites with the collectors.

The early thirties were years of intense hardship, deep depression, and bitter disappointments. However, when I met Ludwig, the future was beginning to look a little brighter. He had just completed his first children's book, *Hansi*, and was decorating the walls of a restaurant that was being financed by a group of advertising men. By the time we got married, I was a freshman at Barnard. Before this, having left the Novitiate of the Sisters of Charity at Mount St. Vincent, I had pursued a brief career as a model. It must have been the incongruity that appealed to Ludwig.

It was great living at the Hapsburg, which Ludwig was managing, but he entertained so lavishly that the other stockholders rebelled and voted to buy him out. With the money from his share of the stock we were able to afford passage on a one-class ship that docked in Antwerp and to spend some time in Bruges, where Ludwig found the inspiration for his second children's book, *The Golden Basket*.

When Barbara was born the following year, the financial situation was precarious. But somehow the means were always found

to satisfy Ludwig's wanderlust. One day while waiting his turn in a dentist's office, he read in *National Geographic* that in Ecuador orchids grow on trees. Within a week, we were on the S.S. *Santa Clara*, a Grace Liner, bound for Guayaquil. It was the first of several trips to South America.

In 1943 Ludwig went to Hollywood to work on a screenplay based on one of the stories he had sold to MGM. His experiences as a Hollywood writer inspired the novel *Dirty Eddie*. The character Ludlow Mumm is a composite of himself and a friend with a social conscience and Communist sympathies. The hero, Dirty Eddie, is a talented pig, who has an important part in the movie on which Mumm and a collaborator are working. Moses Fable, the head of Olympia Pictures, is really Louis B. Mayer. After the book came out, he issued the following order: "Never hire that guy [euphemism] again—unless we absolutely need him."

During World War II, Hollywood and Beverly Hills were havens for British and European notables—novelists, poets, musicians, and the wealthy—with or without titles, and an invitation to Lady Mendl's was a special mark of social approval. The rapport between Ludwig and his indefatigable hostess was instantaneous. *To the One I Love the Best* (in which appeared "Invitation," "The Footstool of Madame Pompadour," and "The Visit to San Simeon") celebrates their friendship. The title is taken from the inscriptions on the tombstones of each of Lady Mendl's favorite poodles. Ludwig was on as good terms with Lady Mendl's husband as he was with her. Sir Charles Mendl did not resent being portrayed as a comic character in Ludwig's work; in fact, after publication he sent a cable from Paris that read: MUCH PLEASED WITH BOOK AND WHAT YOU WROTE ABOUT ME. DON'T BELIEVE ANYTHING TO THE CONTRARY. MUCH LOVE, CHARLES.

Ludwig's love affair with Paris began in 1946 when Ted Patrick, the editor of *Holiday* magazine, asked him to do a series of articles on postwar Europe. From that time until his death, Ludwig was a regular contributor to the magazine. In 1947 we all sailed together on the S.S. *America*, but after a summer abroad Barbara decided that her horse was more interesting than grand hotels. When a suitable person to stay with her could be found, Ludwig and I would start off from New York together, or I would meet him later at some convenient airport. As Ludwig spent more and more time in Europe, it seemed sensible to have a pied-à-terre

in Paris, which would be a repository for his personal effects and art paraphernalia when he took off for England, Ireland, and various spots on the Continent. And since he loved to entertain, what better solution than a bistro with living quarters overhead? Of course, he never anticipated the headache La Colombe would become. Fortunately, disasters sometimes make good stories.

Ludwig's fondness for boats dated from his early days in New York, when he traveled around Manhattan Island in a motorboat owned by his friend Willy. One ambition he never fulfilled was to take a boat down to Florida via the Inland Waterway, but his dream of becoming a ship-owner was finally realized. With the Riviera so overrun by tourists that even the residents of the most luxurious villas could not enjoy peace and privacy, Ludwig reasoned that a sailboat would be the logical solution to the problem of overcrowded beaches. "Ship-Owner" is the story of his Riviera cruise.

Ludwig died in his sleep on October 1, 1962. He had been ill for more than a year with a number of ailments, and it was painful to witness the physical deterioration of someone who had always been so full of energy and impatient of weakness. Though he felt miserable most of the time, he continued his normal activities—painting, writing, traveling, and planning for the future.

Ludwig hated militarism but loved the circumstance attending it. That is why we buried him at Arlington. I am sure he would have enjoyed the folding of the flag draped over the casket, the playing of taps, and the shots fired over the grave.

Ludwig had closed one of his last letters to Pat Covici with the words, "One more thing—I would like to have on my tombstone, 'Tell Them It Was Wonderful.'" (It was and it wasn't.)

Madeleine Bemelmans

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# Childhood

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