

George C. Boldt's Life a Continuous Romance

Reminiscences of Waldorf-Astoria's Proprietor, Who Rose from the Kitchen to be the Most Famous Hotel Man in the World

By A. S. Crockett.

ELOQUENT tribute to the late George C. Boldt has been paid by high and low. Stress has been laid upon his services, not only as a great hotel keeper and business man, but as citizen. It may be permitted one who enjoyed his friendship over a dozen years, and association for more than a year while working with him in a confidential capacity, to tell of the man that his intimate friends and associates knew.

Picture an office, small, but well furnished; more like a tiny library than a place of business. A dignified, gray-bearded man, slight of build, sits at a desk.

He wears a black suit and black tie, and everything about him is immaculate. There is no jewelry. The clothes are, perhaps, an exact duplicate of the last suit he had.

One has often heard it said by those who knew Mr. Boldt well that he would have been successful as an engineer, lawyer, artist, architect, or musician. His favorite occupation was to build. During the last four years he was always tearing down or building something at the Waldorf-Astoria, and was never so happy as when he was leading his chief engineer around discussing plans, or pottering away at some new construction work on his place in the Thousand Islands.

His knowledge of music was often a subject of wonder. Just before a recent concert there was a rehearsal in the Grand Ballroom and Mr. Boldt was present to criticize. At a point in the rendition of a selection from "Die Meistersinger" Mr. Boldt suddenly frowned and shook his head. When the number was over he summoned the director, Joseph Knecht.

"You should not have paused at such-and-such a point," he said.

And Mr. Knecht explained that the pause had resulted unintentionally.

Mr. Boldt played the piano, and would often improvise melodies for his grandchildren. Infrequently some of the members of his staff have heard him sing, and they testify that he had really a good lyric tenor voice.

His favorite diversion was solitaire, of which he knew many varieties. He used to play it mechanically, without thought of the cards, while he revolved important problems in his mind. Of reading he was intensely fond, and that was the secret of his command of the English language.

He was open to suggestions about books. Much of his reading, done late at night, was in the nature of study. Before his last illness he was on the point of again taking up French irregular verbs.

The extent of his vocabulary and nice sense of discrimination in the use of English words have frequently made one marvel.

It is said that during many years only one man called Mr. Boldt by his first name—Dr. Graeme Hammond, the well-known physician and a lifelong friend. To him Mr. Boldt sometimes felt the need of telling his troubles and plans with a frankness that was almost startling. He was always sure of his confidant. At times he used to talk with employes and get their viewpoint. He used to say that sometimes he learned something from his bellboys. Such conversations had the effect of crystallizing his views.

Mr. Boldt was the first to use flowers on a large scale in hotel decoration. Each year he spent a fortune putting roses on tables and scattering them profusely through the house.

He had no superstitions, so far as I know. He always asserted that Friday was a lucky day with him, and he never minded a "13," no matter what form it took. He had cultivated a philosophical humor, and if some unexpected business demand caused him to cancel an engagement to which he was looking forward, he would calmly accept the situation. "I have learned not to give a disappointment a second thought," he used to say.



George C. Boldt.

(Photo Campbell Studio.)

When dancing became popular Mr. Boldt tried to dodge it. He did not at first realize the force of the craze. He yielded gracefully and introduced dancing in the Grill Room when he found that elder patrons of the hotel wanted a place near at hand where their sons and daughters could enjoy dancing amid proper surroundings.

He had no regular hours for working. He worked when in the humor for it—usually the first thing in the morning. He was always tremendously interested in his morning mail. Then, if nothing interrupted, he would dictate rapidly for an hour or two.

When the Mayor's Committee wished to give the dinner to President Wilson at the recent illumination of the Statue of Liberty it was found that the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria had been rented by a charitable organization that for many years had held its bazaar on the same date. The women in charge did not wish to cancel their lease. Oscar appealed to them. They had rented boxes and collected the money for them.

The situation was put up to Mr. Boldt. Some of the women were asked to talk over the matter. Mr. Boldt led them to the Grill Room and the Oak Room, and in my presence offered them the two big rooms free if they would care to give up the ballroom, which they had at the usual big rental fee.

"Of course I would not think of urging you to give up the Grand Ballroom. It is a matter I leave entirely in your hands," said Mr. Boldt, after deftly painting the advantages the other location might have in attracting patrons.

Suddenly he turned to me and grabbed

at my arm, and I felt his whole weight. It was the first intimation I had that Mr. Boldt was not up to his usual form. He excused himself and said his back was paining him.

The women apparently had not detected that he was hardly able to stand. They were turning over his proposition. In a short time they assured him that they would get hold of the other members of their committee as soon as possible and they thought that, under the circumstances, they would be willing to make the exchange. He knew how to make such an exchange attractive.

It is not violating confidence now to mention that there is more than one young man in the United States who, struggling for the means of obtaining a college education, found the way open through Mr. Boldt. Often he has provided such with funds directly. But more frequently he has preferred to render his aid indirectly, supplying a third person with funds to lend a deserving young man, with the proviso that the recipient of the loan might not know where it originated. Many he has assisted to obtain a musical education.

Mr. Boldt was devoted to his family, and some of his happiest hours were those when he had his three grandchildren about him in his library and there was some festivity on.

It might be illustrative of the human side of the man, too, were one to mention "Buster Brown." Buster was a water spaniel that had been much liked by the late Mrs. Boldt, and when she died he attached himself to her husband. The man and the dog were inseparable when they were in the Thousand Islands or when the two were in New York, and Buster

always slept on the foot of Mr. Boldt's bed.

He lived to the ripe age of 83, did Buster, and when sight had gone he would follow his master by scent and sound all about up "on the river," where, during the day, Mr. Boldt would frequently walk eight or ten miles directing the gangs of men who were either turning land into water or water into land, when Mr. Boldt wanted an island here or a canal there. When Mr. Boldt made a trip to New York Buster would be inconsolable until his return.

Mr. Boldt was never a man for the past. He lived in the present and dreamed of the future. The story of his having started his career in New York as a waiter I have in mind. It has been repeated so widely that it should make the little incident I have to tell of more than momentary interest.

Several months ago I first saw the waiter story in a magazine. I brought it to Mr. Boldt's attention. He laughed.

"Well," he said, "I have been almost everything else but a waiter, but that I never was."

"Shall I correct it?" I inquired.

"No, no; what's the use?"

And the incident was apparently closed.

Then a more recent article appeared, containing the same mistake. It was on a Saturday, three weeks ago. I did not see Mr. Boldt until the next night, at the supper given by the Waldorf orchestra, at which he was the principal guest. With him were Fritz Kreisler, the violinist, and Henry K. Hadley, the composer. I met Mr. Boldt at the foot of the stairway in the foyer, and we went up in the elevator together. I was hesitant about mentioning the story, but as it gave a picture so much at variance with Mr. Boldt I had come to know it had annoyed me.

"Have you seen that article in the magazine?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, laughing, "and I see they insist upon it that I was a waiter."

"Why not tell me the real story of your life, some time?" I asked.

"What's the use? They would still make me a waiter when I am dead and gone. My dear boy," he went on, "when some people get an idea firmly fixed in their heads, it is futile to attempt to correct them. It doesn't hurt me. It's like that story about my giving up my bed to William Waldorf Astor. Mr. Astor's name sounds better, or at least more familiar to the public, apparently, than the name of the actual person in the case. Don't worry over such matters."

In a conversation not long ago with a personal friend Mr. Boldt told of his early life on the little Island of Reugen, in the Baltic Sea, where he was born. It was a rare subject with him. But apparently his father was the big man of the island, a man of considerable local consequence, who for his second wife chose a woman of lower social standing. They were so poor that, in order to keep up the pretensions her husband's rank in the community demanded—for did he not walk with a gold-headed cane?—the two would work in their fields after dark, reasoning that thus the neighbors would not know that the Hochundwohlgeboren Herr Boldt had to work for a living!

His friend, it seems, had asked George C. Boldt how he accounted for certain qualities that he must realize he possessed. After narrating the foregoing, Mr. Boldt said:

"For what 'savoir faire' I have I am no doubt indebted to my father, an aristocrat in his little island. My mother was a wonderful executive and a woman of tremendous energy. Perhaps the answer is there for you."

And one thing more. While it is not true, according to Mr. Boldt's own statement, that he was ever a waiter in Parker's hotel during his early days in New York, he did occupy a much lower position, in a sense. He helped in the kitchen, and he was not ashamed to admit it!