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The Remains of the Day

KAZUO ISHIGURO

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of the Day*

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In memory of

Mrs Lenore Marshall

Darlington Hall

It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr Farraday's Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out, from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portrait in the library. In fact, as I recall, I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he presumably wished returned to the shelves. On seeing my person, he took the opportunity to inform me that he had just that moment finalized plans to return to the United States for a period of five weeks between August and September. Having made this announcement, my employer placed his volumes down on a table, seated himself on the *chaise-longue*, and stretched out his legs. It was then, gazing up at me, that he said:

'You realize, Stevens, I don't expect you to be locked up here in this house all the time I'm away. Why don't you take the car and drive off somewhere for a few days? You look like you could make good use of a break.'

Coming out of the blue as it did, I did not quite know how to reply to such a suggestion. I recall thanking him for his consideration, but quite probably I said nothing very definite, for my employer went on:

'I'm serious, Stevens. I really think you should take a break. I'll foot the bill for the gas. You fellows, you're always locked up in these big houses helping out, how do you ever get to see around this beautiful country of yours?'

This was not the first time my employer had raised such a question; indeed, it seems to be something which genuinely troubles him. On this occasion, in fact, a reply of sorts did occur to me as I stood up there on the ladder; a reply to the effect that those of our profession, although we did not see a great deal of the country in the sense of touring the countryside and visiting picturesque sites, did actually 'see' more of England than most, placed as we were in houses where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered. Of course, I could not have expressed this view to Mr Farraday without embarking upon what might have seemed a presumptuous speech. I thus contented myself by saying simply:

'It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls.'

Mr Farraday did not seem to understand this statement, for he merely went on: 'I mean it, Stevens. It's wrong that a man can't get to see around his own country. Take my advice, go out of the house for a few days.'

As you might expect, I did not take Mr Farraday's suggestion at all seriously that afternoon, regarding it as just another instance of an American gentleman's unfamiliarity with what was

and what was not commonly done in England. The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days – indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts – is no doubt substantially attributable to – and why should I hide it? – the arrival of Miss Kenton’s letter, her first in almost seven years if one discounts the Christmas cards. But let me make it immediately clear what I mean by this; what I mean to say is that Miss Kenton’s letter set off a certain chain of ideas to do with professional matters here at Darlington Hall, and I would underline that it was a preoccupation with these very same professional matters that led me to consider anew my employer’s kindly meant suggestion. But let me explain further.

The fact is, over the past few months, I have been responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of my duties. I should say that these errors have all been without exception quite trivial in themselves. Nevertheless, I think you will understand that to one not accustomed to committing such errors, this development was rather disturbing, and I did in fact begin to entertain all sorts of alarmist theories as to their cause. As so often occurs in these situations, I had become blind to the obvious – that is, until my pondering over the implications of Miss Kenton’s letter finally opened my eyes to the simple truth: that these small errors of recent months have derived from nothing more sinister than a faulty staff plan.

It is, of course, the responsibility of every butler to devote his utmost care in the devising of a staff plan. Who knows how many quarrels, false accusations, unnecessary dismissals, how many promising careers cut short can be attributed to a butler’s slovenliness at the stage of drawing up the staff plan? Indeed, I can say I am in agreement with those who say that the ability to draw up a good staff plan is the cornerstone of any decent butler’s skills. I have myself devised many staff plans over the years, and I do not believe I am being unduly boastful if I say that very few ever needed amendment. And if in the present case the staff plan is at fault, blame can be laid at no one’s door but my own. At the same time, it is only fair to point out that my task in this instance had been of an unusually difficult order.

What had occurred was this. Once the transactions were over – transactions which had taken this house out of the hands of the Darlington family after two centuries – Mr Farraday let it be known that he would not be taking up immediate residence here, but would spend a further four months concluding matters in the United States. In the meantime, however, he was most keen that the staff of his predecessor – a staff of which he had heard high praise – be retained at Darlington Hall. This ‘staff’ he referred to was, of course, nothing more than the skeleton team of six kept on by Lord Darlington’s relatives to administer to the house up to and throughout the transactions; and I regret to report that once the purchase had been completed, there was little I could do for Mr Farraday to prevent all but Mrs Clements leaving for other employment. When I wrote to my new employer conveying my regrets over the situation, I received by reply from America instructions to recruit a new staff ‘worthy of a grand old English house’. I immediately set about trying to fulfil Mr Farraday’s wishes, but as you know, finding recruits of a satisfactory standard is no easy task nowadays, and although I was pleased to hire Rosemary and Agnes on Mrs Clements’s recommendation, I had got no further by the time I came to have my first business meeting with Mr Farraday during the short preliminary visit he made to our shores in the spring of last year. It was on this occasion – in the strangely bare study of Darlington Hall – that Mr Farraday shook my hand

for the first time, but by then we were hardly strangers to each other; quite aside from the matter of the staff, my new employer in several other instances had had occasion to call upon such qualities as it may be my good fortune to possess and found them to be, I would venture, dependable. So it was, I assume, that he felt immediately able to talk to me in a businesslike and trusting way, and by the end of our meeting, he had left me with the administration of a not inconsiderable sum to meet the costs of a wide range of preparations for his coming residency. In any case, my point is that it was during the course of the interview, when I raised the question of the difficulty of recruiting suitable staff in these times, that Mr Farraday, after a moment's reflection, made his request of me; that I do my best to draw up a staff plan – 'some sort of servants' rota' as he put it – by which this house might be run on the present staff of four – that is to say, Mrs Clements, the two young girls and myself. This might, he appreciated, mean putting sections of the house 'under wraps', but would I bring all my experience and expertise to bear to ensure such losses were kept to a minimum? Recalling a time when I had had a staff of seventeen under me, and knowing how not so long ago a staff of twenty-eight had been employed here at Darlington Hall, the idea of devising a staff plan by which the same house would be run on a staff of four seemed, to say the least, daunting. Although I did my best not to, something of my scepticism must have betrayed itself, for Mr Farraday then added, as though for reassurance, that were it to prove necessary, then an additional member of staff could be hired. But he would be much obliged, he repeated, if I could 'give it a go with four'.

Now naturally, like many of us, I have a reluctance to change too much of the old ways. But there is no virtue at all in clinging as some do to tradition merely for its own sake. In the age of electricity and modern heating systems, there is no need at all to employ the sorts of numbers necessary even a generation ago. Indeed, it has actually been an idea of mine for some time that the retaining of unnecessary numbers simply for tradition's sake – resulting in employees having an unhealthy amount of time on their hands – has been an important factor in the sharp decline in professional standards. Furthermore, Mr Farraday had made it clear that he planned to hold only very rarely the sort of large social occasions Darlington Hall had seen frequently in the past. I did then go about the task Mr Farraday had set me with some dedication; I spent many hours working on the staff plan, and at least as many hours again thinking about it as I went about other duties or as I lay awake after retiring. Whenever I believed I had come up with something, I probed it for every sort of oversight, tested it through from all angles. Finally, I came up with a plan which, while perhaps not exactly what Mr Farraday had requested, was the best, I felt sure, that was humanly possible. Almost all the attractive parts of the house could remain operative: the extensive servants' quarters including the back corridor, the two still rooms and the old laundry – and the guest corridors up on the second floor would be dust-sheeted, leaving all the main ground-floor rooms and a generous number of guest rooms. Admittedly, our present team of four would manage the programme only with reinforcement from some daily workers; my staff plan therefore took in the services of a gardener, to visit once a week, twice in the summer, and two cleaners each to visit twice a week. The staff plan would, furthermore, for each of the four resident employees mean a radical altering of our respective customary duties. The two young girls, I predicted, would not find such changes so difficult to accommodate, but I did all I could to see that Mrs Clements suffered the least adjustments, to the extent that I undertook for

myself a number of duties which you may consider most broad-minded of a butler to do.

Even now, I would not go so far as to say it is a bad staff plan; after all, it enables a staff of four to cover an unexpected amount of ground. But you will no doubt agree that the very best staff plans are those which give clear margins of error to allow for those days when an employee is ill or for one reason or another below par. In this particular case, of course, I had been set a slightly extraordinary task, but I had nevertheless not been neglectful to incorporate 'margins' wherever possible. I was especially conscious that any resistance there may be on the part of Mrs Clements, or the two girls, to the taking on of duties beyond their traditional boundaries would be compounded by any notion that their workloads had greatly increased. I had then, over those days of struggling with the staff plan, expended a significant amount of thought to ensuring that Mrs Clements and the girls, once they had got over their aversion to adopting these more 'eclectic' roles, would find the division of duties stimulating and unburdensome.

I fear, however, that in my anxiety to win the support of Mrs Clements and the girls, I did not perhaps assess quite as stringently my own limitations; and although my experience and customary caution in such matters prevented my giving myself more than I could actually carry out, I was perhaps negligent over this question of allowing myself a margin. It is not surprising then, if over several months, this oversight should reveal itself in these small but telling ways. In the end, I believe the matter to be no more complicated than this: I had given myself too much to do.

You may be amazed that such an obvious shortcoming to a staff plan should have continued to escape my notice, but then you will agree that such is often the way with matters one has given abiding thought to over a period of time; one is not struck by the truth until prompted quite accidentally by some external event. So it was in this instance; that is to say, on receiving the letter from Miss Kenton, containing as it did, along with its long, rather unrevealing passages, an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall, and – I am quite sure of this – distinct hints of her desire to return here, obliged me to see my staff plan afresh. Only then did it strike me that there was indeed a role that a further staff member could crucially play here; that it was, in fact, this very shortage that had been at the heart of all my recent troubles. And the more I considered it, the more obvious it became that Miss Kenton, with her great affection for this house, with her exemplary professionalism – the sort almost impossible to find nowadays – was just the factor needed to enable me to complete a fully satisfactory staff plan for Darlington Hall.

Having made such an analysis of the situation, it was not long before I found myself reconsidering Mr Farraday's kind suggestion of some days ago. For it had occurred to me that the proposed trip in the car could be put to good professional use; that is to say, I could drive to the West Country and call on Miss Kenton in passing, thus exploring at first hand the substance of her wish to return to employment here at Darlington Hall. I have, I should make clear, reread Miss Kenton's recent letter several times, and there is no possibility I am merely imagining the presence of these hints on her part.

For all that, I could not for some days quite bring myself to raise the matter again with Mr Farraday. There were, in any case, various aspects to the matter I felt I needed to clarify for myself before proceeding further. There was, for instance, the question of cost. For even

taking into account my employer's generous offer to 'foot the bill for the gas', the costs of such a trip might still come to a surprising amount considering such matters as accommodation, meals, and any small snacks I might partake of on my way. Then there was the question of what sorts of costume were appropriate on such a journey, and whether or not it was worth my while to invest in a new set of clothes. I am in the possession of a number of splendid suits, kindly passed on to me over the years by Lord Darlington himself and by various guests who have stayed in this house and had reason to be pleased with the standard of service here. Many of these suits are, perhaps, too formal for the purposes of the proposed trip, or else rather old-fashioned these days. But then there is one lounge suit passed on to me in 1931 or 1932 by Sir Edward Blair – practically brand new at the time and almost a perfect fit – which might well be appropriate for evenings in the lounge or dining room of any guest houses where I might lodge. What I do not possess, however, is any suitable travelling clothes – that is to say, clothes in which I might be seen driving the car, unless I were to don the suit passed on by the young Lord Chalmers during the war, which despite being clearly too small for me, might be considered ideal in terms of tone. I calculated finally that my savings would be able to meet all the costs I might incur, and in addition, might stretch to the purchase of a new costume. I hope you do not think me unduly vain with regard to this last matter; it is just that one never knows when one might be obliged to give out that one is from Darlington Hall, and it is important that one be attired on such times in a manner worthy of one's position.

During this time, I also spent many minutes examining the road atlas, and perusing also the relevant volumes of Mrs Jane Symons's *The Wonder of England*. If you are not familiar with Mrs Symons's books – a series running to seven volumes, each one concentrating on one region of the British Isles – I heartily recommend them. They were written during the thirties, but much of it would still be up to date – after all, I do not imagine German bombs have altered our countryside so significantly. Mrs Symons was, as a matter of fact, a frequent visitor to this house before the war; indeed, she was among the most popular as far as the staff were concerned due to the kind appreciation she never shied from showing. It was on those days, then, prompted by my natural admiration for the lady, that I had first taken to perusing her volumes in the library whenever I had an odd moment. Indeed, I recall this shortly after Miss Kenton's departure to Cornwall in 1936, myself never having been to that part of the country, I would often glance through Volume III of Mrs Symons's work, the volume which describes to readers the delights of Devon and Cornwall, complete with photographs and – to my mind even more evocative – a variety of artists' sketches of the region. It was thus that I had been able to gain some sense of the sort of place Miss Kenton had gone to live her married life. But this was, as I say, back in the thirties, when as you understand, Mrs Symons's books were being admired in houses up and down the country. I had not looked through those volumes for many years, until these recent developments led me to get down from the shelf the Devon and Cornwall volume once more. I studied all over again those marvellous descriptions and illustrations, and you can perhaps understand my growing excitement at the notion that I might now actually undertake a motoring trip myself around that same part of the country.

It seemed in the end there was little else to do but actually to raise the matter again with Mr Farraday. There was always the possibility, of course, that his suggestion of a fortnight

ago may have been a whim of the moment, and he would no longer be approving of the idea. But from my observation of Mr Farraday over these months, he is not one of those gentlemen prone to that most irritating of traits in an employer – inconsistency. There was no reason to believe he would not be as enthusiastic as before about my proposed motoring trip – indeed that he would not repeat his most kind offer to ‘foot the bill for the gas’. Nevertheless, I considered most carefully what might be the most opportune occasion to bring the matter up with him; for although I would not for one moment, as I say, suspect Mr Farraday of inconsistency, it nevertheless made sense not to broach the topic when he was preoccupied or distracted. A refusal in such circumstances may well not reflect my employer’s true feelings on the matter, but once having sustained such a dismissal, I could not easily bring it up again. It was clear, then, that I had to choose my moment wisely.

In the end, I decided the most prudent moment in the day would be as I served afternoon tea in the drawing room. Mr Farraday will usually have just returned from his short walk of the downs at that point, so he is rarely engrossed in his reading or writing as he tends to be in the evenings. In fact, when I bring in the afternoon tea, Mr Farraday is inclined to close any book or periodical he has been reading, rise and stretch out his arms in front of the window as though in anticipation of conversation with me.

As it was, I believe my judgement proved quite sound on the question of timing; the fact that things turned out as they did is entirely attributable to an error of judgement in another direction altogether. That is to say, I did not take sufficient account of the fact that at this time of the day, what Mr Farraday enjoys is a conversation of a light-hearted, humorous sort. Knowing this to be his likely mood when I brought in the tea yesterday afternoon, and being aware of his general propensity to talk with me in a bantering tone at such moments, I would certainly have been wiser not to have mentioned Miss Kenton at all. But you will perhaps understand that there was a natural tendency on my part, in asking what was after all a generous favour from my employer, to hint that there was a good professional motive behind my request. So it was that in indicating my reasons for preferring the West Country for my motoring, instead of leaving it at mentioning several of the alluring details as conveyed by Mrs Symons’s volume, I made the error of declaring that a former housekeeper of Darlington Hall was resident in that region. I suppose I must have been intending to explain to Mr Farraday how I would thus be able to explore an option which might prove the ideal solution to our present small problems here in this house. It was only after I had mentioned Miss Kenton that I suddenly realized how entirely inappropriate it would be for me to continue. Not only was I unable to be certain of Miss Kenton’s desire to rejoin the staff here, I had not, of course, even discussed the question of additional staff with Mr Farraday since that first preliminary meeting over a year ago. To have continued pronouncing aloud my thoughts on the future of Darlington Hall would have been, to say the very least, presumptuous. I suspect, then, that I paused rather abruptly and looked a little awkward. In any case, Mr Farraday seized the opportunity to grin broadly at me and say with some deliberation:

‘My, my, Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age.’

This was a most embarrassing situation, one in which Lord Darlington would never have placed an employee. But then I do not mean to imply anything derogatory about Mr

Farraday; he is, after all, an American gentleman and his ways are often very different. There is no question at all that he meant any harm; but you will no doubt appreciate how uncomfortable a situation this was for me.

‘I’d never have figured you for such a lady’s man, Stevens,’ he went on. ‘Keeps the spirit young, I guess. But then I really don’t know it’s right for me to be helping you with such dubious assignments.’

Naturally, I felt the temptation to deny immediately and unambiguously such motivation as my employer was imputing to me, but saw in time that to do so would be to rise to Mr Farraday’s bait, and the situation would only become increasingly embarrassing. I therefore continued to stand there awkwardly, waiting for my employer to give me permission to undertake the motoring trip.

Embarrassing as those moments were for me, I would not wish to imply that I in any way blame Mr Farraday, who is in no sense an unkind person; he was, I am sure, merely enjoying the sort of bantering which in the United States, no doubt, is a sign of a good, friendly understanding between employer and employee, indulged in as a kind of affectionate sport. Indeed, to put things into a proper perspective, I should point out that just such bantering on my new employer’s part has characterized much of our relationship over these months though I must confess, I remain rather unsure as to how I should respond. In fact, during my first days under Mr Farraday, I was once or twice quite astounded by some of the things he would say to me. For instance, I once had occasion to ask him if a certain gentleman expected at the house was likely to be accompanied by his wife.

‘God help us if she does come,’ Mr Farraday replied. ‘Maybe you could keep her off our hands, Stevens. Maybe you could take her out to one of those stables around Mr Morgan’s farm. Keep her entertained in all that hay. She may be just your type.’

For a moment or two, I had not an idea what my employer was saying. Then I realized he was making some sort of joke and endeavoured to smile appropriately, though I suspect some residue of my bewilderment, not to say shock, remained detectable in my expression.

Over the following days, however, I came to learn not to be surprised by such remarks from my employer, and would smile in the correct manner whenever I detected the bantering tone in his voice. Nevertheless, I could never be sure exactly what was required of me on these occasions. Perhaps I was expected to laugh heartily; or indeed, reciprocate with some remark of my own. This last possibility is one that has given me some concern over the months, and is something about which I still feel undecided. For it may well be that in America, it is all part of what is considered good professional service that an employee provide entertaining banter. In fact, I remember Mr Simpson, the landlord of the Ploughman’s Arms, saying once that were he an American bartender, he would not be chatting to us in that friendly, but ever-courteous manner of his, but instead would be assaulting us with crude references to our vices and failings, calling us drunks and all manner of such names, in his attempt to fulfil the role expected of him by his customers. And I recall also some years ago, Mr Rayne, who travelled to America as valet to Sir Reginald Mauville, remarking that a taxi driver in New York regularly addressed his fare in a manner which repeated in London would end in some sort of fracas, if not in the fellow being frogmarched to the nearest police station.

It is quite possible, then, that my employer fully expects me to respond to his bantering in a like manner, and considers my failure to do so a form of negligence. This is, as I say, a matter which has given me much concern. But I must say this business of bantering is not a duty I feel I can ever discharge with enthusiasm. It is all very well, in these changing times, to adapt one's work to take in duties not traditionally within one's realm; but bantering is of another dimension altogether. For one thing, how would one know for sure that at any given moment a response of the bantering sort is truly what is expected? One need hardly dwell on the catastrophic possibility of uttering a bantering remark only to discover it wholly inappropriate.

I did though on one occasion not long ago pluck up the courage to attempt the required sort of reply. I was serving Mr Farraday morning coffee in the breakfast room when he had said to me:

'I suppose it wasn't you making that crowing noise this morning, Stevens?'

My employer was referring, I realized, to a pair of gypsies gathering unwanted iron who had passed by earlier making their customary calls. As it happened, I had that same morning been giving thought to the dilemma of whether or not I was expected to reciprocate my employer's bantering, and had been seriously worried at how he might be viewing my repeated failure to respond to such openings. I therefore set about thinking of some witty reply; some statement which would still be safely inoffensive in the event of my having misjudged the situation. After a moment or two, I said:

'More like swallows than crows, I would have said, sir. From the migratory aspect.' And I followed this with a suitably modest smile to indicate without ambiguity that I had made a witticism, since I did not wish Mr Farraday to restrain any spontaneous mirth he felt out of misplaced respectfulness.

Mr Farraday, however, simply looked up at me and said: 'I beg your pardon, Stevens?'

Only then did it occur to me that, of course, my witticism would not be easily appreciated by someone who was not aware that it was gypsies who had passed by. I could not see, then, how I might press on with this bantering; in fact, I decided it best to call a halt to the matter, and, pretending to remember something I had urgently to attend to, excused myself, leaving my employer looking rather bemused.

It was, then, a most discouraging start to what may in fact be an entirely new sort of duty required of me; so discouraging that I must admit I have not really made further attempts along these lines. But at the same time, I cannot escape the feeling that Mr Farraday is not satisfied with my responses to his various banterings. Indeed, his increased persistence of late may even be my employer's way of urging me all the more to respond in a like-minded spirit. Be that as it may, since that first witticism concerning the gypsies, I have not been able to think of other such witticisms quickly enough.

Such difficulties as these tend to be all the more preoccupying nowadays because one does not have the means to discuss and corroborate views with one's fellow professionals in the way one once did. Not so long ago, if any such points of ambiguity arose regarding one's duties, one had the comfort of knowing that before long some fellow professional whose opinion one respected would be accompanying his employer to the house, and there would be

ample opportunity to discuss the matter. And of course, in Lord Darlington's days, when ladies and gentlemen would often visit for many days on end, it was possible to develop good understanding with visiting colleagues. Indeed, in those busy days, our servants' hall would often witness a gathering of some of the finest professionals in England talking late into the night by the warmth of the fire. And let me tell you, if you were to have come into our servants' hall on any of those evenings, you would not have heard mere gossip; more likely, you would have witnessed debates over the great affairs preoccupying our employers upstairs, or else over matters of import reported in the newspapers; and of course, as fellow professionals from all walks of life are wont to do when gathered together, we could be found discussing every aspect of our vocation. Sometimes, naturally, there would be strong disagreements, but more often than not, the atmosphere was dominated by a feeling of mutual respect. Perhaps I will convey a better idea of the tone of those evenings if I say that regular visitors included the likes of Mr Harry Graham, valet-butler to Sir James Chambers and Mr John Donalds, valet to Mr Sydney Dickenson. And there were others less distinguished, perhaps, but whose lively presence made any visit memorable; for instance, Mr Wilkinson, valet-butler to Mr John Campbell, with his well-known repertoire of impersonations of prominent gentlemen; Mr Davidson from Easterly House, whose passion for debating a point could at times be as alarming to a stranger as his simple kindness at all other times was endearing; Mr Herman, valet to Mr John Henry Peters, whose extreme views no one could listen to passively, but whose distinctive belly-laugh and Yorkshire charm made him impossible to dislike. I could go on. There existed in those days a true camaraderie in our profession, whatever the small differences in our approach. We were all essentially cut from the same cloth, so to speak. Not the way it is today, when on the rare occasion an employer accompanies a guest here, he is likely to be some newcomer who has little to say about anything other than Association Football, and who prefers to pass the evening not by the fire of the servants' hall, but drinking at the Ploughman's Arms – or indeed, as seems increasingly likely nowadays, at the Star Inn.

I mentioned a moment ago Mr Graham, the valet-butler to Sir James Chambers. In fact some two months ago, I was most happy to learn that Sir James was to visit Darlington Hall. I looked forward to the visit not only because visitors from Lord Darlington's days are more rare now – Mr Farraday's circle, naturally, being quite different from his lordship's – but also because I presumed Mr Graham would accompany Sir James as of old, and I would thus be able to get his opinion on this question of bantering. I was, then, both surprised and disappointed to discover a day before the visit that Sir James would be coming alone. Furthermore, during Sir James's subsequent stay, I gathered that Mr Graham was no longer in Sir James's employ; indeed that Sir James no longer employed any full-time staff at all. I would like to have discovered what had become of Mr Graham, for although we had never known each other well, I would say we had got on on those occasions we had met. As it was however, no suitable opportunity arose for me to gain such information. I must say, I was rather disappointed, for I would like to have discussed the bantering question with him.

However, let me return to my original thread. I was obliged, as I was saying, to spend some uncomfortable minutes standing in the drawing room yesterday afternoon while Mr Farraday went about his bantering. I responded as usual by smiling slightly – sufficient at least to indicate that I was participating in some way with the good-humouredness with

which he was carrying on – and waited to see if my employer's permission regarding the trip would be forthcoming. As I had anticipated, he gave his kind permission after not too great a delay, and furthermore, Mr Farraday was good enough to remember and reiterate his generous offer to 'foot the bill for the gas'.

So then, there seems little reason why I should not undertake my motoring trip to the West Country. I would of course have to write to Miss Kenton to tell her I might be passing by; I would also need to see to the matter of the costumes. Various other questions concerning my arrangements here in the house during my absence will need to be settled. But all in all, I can see no genuine reason why I should not undertake this trip.

Salisbury

Tonight, I find myself here in a guest house in the city of Salisbury. The first day of my trip is now completed, and all in all, I must say I am quite satisfied. This expedition began this morning almost an hour later than I had planned, despite my having completed my packing and loaded the Ford with all necessary items well before eight o'clock. What with Mr. Clements and the girls also gone for the week, I suppose I was very conscious of the fact that once I departed, Darlington Hall would stand empty for probably the first time this century perhaps for the first time since the day it was built. It was an odd feeling and perhaps accounts for why I delayed my departure so long, wandering around the house many times over, checking one last time that all was in order.

It is hard to explain my feelings once I did finally set off. For the first twenty minutes or so of motoring, I cannot say I was seized by any excitement or anticipation at all. This was due, no doubt, to the fact that though I motored further and further from the house, I continued to find myself in surroundings with which I had at least a passing acquaintance. Now I had always supposed I had travelled very little, restricted as I am by my responsibilities in the house, but of course, over time, one does make various excursions for one professional reason or another, and it would seem I have become much more acquainted with those neighbouring districts than I had realized. For as I say, as I motored on in the sunshine towards the Berkshire border, I continued to be surprised by the familiarity of the country around me.

But then eventually the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. I have heard people describe the moment, when setting sail in a ship when one finally loses sight of the land. I imagine the experience of unease mixed with exhilaration often described in connection with this moment is very similar to what I felt in the Ford as the surroundings grew strange around me. This occurred just after I took a turning and found myself on a road curving around the edge of a hill. I could sense the steep drop to my left, though I could not see it due to the trees and thick foliage that lined the roadside. The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm – a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into a wilderness. It was only the feeling of a moment, but it caused me to slow down. And even when I had assured myself I was on the right road, I felt compelled to stop the car a moment to take stock, as it were.

I decided to step out and stretch my legs a little and when I did so, I received a stronger impression than ever of being perched on the side of a hill. On one side of the road, thicker and small trees rose steeply, while on the other I could now glimpse through the foliage the distant countryside.

I believe I had walked a little way along the roadside, peering through the foliage hoping to get a better view, when I heard a voice behind me. Until this point, of course, I had believed myself quite alone and I turned in some surprise. A little way further up the road

the opposite side, I could see the start of a footpath, which disappeared steeply up into the thickets. Sitting on the large stone that marked this spot was a thin, white-haired man in a cloth cap, smoking his pipe. He called to me again and though I could not quite make out his words, I could see him gesturing for me to join him. For a moment, I took him for a vagrant, but then I saw he was just some local fellow enjoying the fresh air and summer sunshine, and I saw no reason not to comply.

‘Just wondering, sir,’ he said, as I approached, ‘how fit your legs were.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

The fellow gestured up the footpath. ‘You got to have a good pair of legs and a good pair of lungs to go up there. Me, I haven’t got neither, so I stay down here. But if I was in better shape, I’d be sitting up there. There’s a nice little spot up there, a bench and everything. And you won’t get a better view anywhere in the whole of England.’

‘If what you say is true,’ I said, ‘I think I’d rather stay here. I happen to be embarking on a motoring trip during the course of which I hope to see many splendid views. To see the best before I have properly begun would be somewhat premature.’

The fellow did not seem to understand me, for he simply said again: ‘You won’t see a better view in the whole of England. But I tell you, you need a good pair of legs and a good pair of lungs.’ Then he added: ‘I can see you’re in good shape for your age, sir. I’d say you could make your way up there, no trouble. I mean, even I can manage on a good day.’

I glanced up the path, which did look steep and rather rough.

‘I’m telling you, sir, you’ll be sorry if you don’t take a walk up there. And you never know. A couple more years and it might be too late’ – he gave a rather vulgar laugh – ‘Better go now while you still can.’

It occurs to me now that the man might just possibly have meant this in a humorous sort of way; that is to say, he intended it as a bantering remark. But this morning, I must say, I found it quite offensive and it may well have been the urge to demonstrate just how foolish his insinuation had been that caused me to set off up the footpath.

In any case, I am very glad I did so. Certainly, it was quite a strenuous walk – though I can say it failed to cause me any real difficulty – the path rising in zigzags up the hillside for a hundred yards or so. I then reached a small clearing, undoubtedly the spot the man had referred to. Here one was met by a bench – and indeed, by a most marvellous view over many miles of the surrounding countryside.

What I saw was principally field upon field rolling off into the far distance. The land rose and fell gently, and the fields were bordered by hedges and trees. There were dots in some of the distant fields which I assumed to be sheep. To my right, almost on the horizon, I thought I could see the square tower of a church.

It was a fine feeling indeed to be standing up there like that, with the sound of summer air around one and a light breeze on one’s face. And I believe it was then, looking on that view, that I began for the first time to adopt a frame of mind appropriate for the journey before me. For it was then that I felt the first healthy flush of anticipation for the many interesting experiences I know these days ahead hold in store for me. And indeed, it was then that I felt a new resolve not to be daunted in respect to the one professional task I have entrusted

myself with on this trip; that is to say, regarding Miss Kenton and our present staffing problems.

But that was this morning. This evening I find myself settled here in this comfortable guest house in a street not far from the centre of Salisbury. It is, I suppose, a relatively modest establishment, but very clean and perfectly adequate for my needs. The landlady, a woman of around forty or so, appears to regard me as a rather grand visitor on account of Mr. Farraday's Ford and the high quality of my suit. This afternoon – I arrived in Salisbury around three thirty – when I entered my address in her register as 'Darlington Hall', I could see her look at me with some trepidation, assuming no doubt that I was some gentleman used to such places as the Ritz or the Dorchester and that I would storm out of her guest house on being shown my room. She informed me that a double room at the front was available, though I was welcome to it for the price of a single.

I was then brought up to this room, in which, at that point of the day, the sun was lighting up the floral patterns of the wallpaper quite agreeably. There were twin beds and a pair of good-sized windows overlooking the street. On inquiring where the bathroom was, the woman told me in a timid voice that although it was the door facing mine, there would be no hot water available until after supper. I asked her to bring me up a pot of tea, and when she had gone, inspected the room further. The beds were perfectly clean and had been well made. The basin in the corner was also very clean. On looking out of the windows, one saw on the opposite side of the street a bakery displaying a variety of pastries, a chemist's shop and a barber's. Further along, one could see where the street passed over a round-backed bridge and on into more rural surroundings. I refreshed my face and hands with cold water at the basin, then seated myself on a hard-backed chair left near one of the windows to await my tea.

I would suppose it was shortly after four o'clock that I left the guest house and ventured out into the streets of Salisbury. The wide, airy nature of the streets here give the city a marvellously spacious feel, so that I found it most easy to spend some hours just strolling in the gently warm sunshine. Moreover, I discovered the city to be one of many charms; time and again, I found myself wandering past delightful rows of old timber-fronted houses, crossing some little stone footbridge over one of the many streams that flow through the city. And of course, I did not fail to visit the fine cathedral, much praised by Mrs Symons in her volume. This august building was hardly difficult for me to locate, its looming spire being ever-visible wherever one goes in Salisbury. Indeed, as I was making my way back to the guest house this evening, I glanced back over my shoulder on a number of occasions and was met each time by a view of the sun setting behind that great spire.

And yet tonight, in the quiet of this room, I find that what really remains with me from this first day's travel is not Salisbury Cathedral, nor any of the other charming sights of the city, but rather that marvellous view encountered this morning of the rolling English countryside. Now I am quite prepared to believe that other countries can offer more obviously spectacular scenery. Indeed, I have seen in encyclopedias and the *National Geographic Magazine* breathtaking photographs of sights from various corners of the globe: magnificent canyons and waterfalls, raggedly beautiful mountains. It has never, of course

been my privilege to have seen such things at first hand, but I will nevertheless hazard this with some confidence: the English landscape at its finest – such as I saw it this morning – possesses a quality that the landscapes of other nations, however more superficially dramatic, inevitably fail to possess. It is, I believe, a quality that will mark out the English landscape to any objective observer as the most deeply satisfying in the world, and this quality is probably best summed up by the term ‘greatness’. For it is true, when I stood on that high ledge this morning and viewed the land before me, I distinctly felt that rare, yet unmistakable feeling – the feeling that one is in the presence of greatness. We call this land of ours *Great Britain*, and there may be those who believe this a somewhat immodest practice. Yet I would venture that the landscape of our country alone would justify the use of this lofty adjective.

And yet what precisely is this ‘greatness’? Just where, or in what, does it lie? I am quite aware it would take a far wiser head than mine to answer such a question, but if I were forced to hazard a guess, I would say that it is the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. It is as though the land knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to shout it. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness.

This whole question is very akin to the question that has caused much debate in our profession over the years: what is a ‘great’ butler? I can recall many hours of enjoyable discussion on this topic around the fire of the servants’ hall at the end of a day. You will notice I say ‘what’ rather than ‘who’ is a great butler; for there was actually no serious dispute as to the identity of the men who set the standards amongst our generation. That is to say, I am talking of the likes of Mr Marshall of Charleville House, or Mr Lane of Bridewood. If you have ever had the privilege of meeting such men, you will no doubt know of the quality they possess to which I refer. But you will no doubt also understand what I mean when I say it is not at all easy to define just what this quality is.

Incidentally, now that I come to think further about it, it is not quite true to say there was no dispute as to *who* were the great butlers. What I should have said was that there was no serious dispute among professionals of quality who had any discernment in such matters. Of course, the servants’ hall at Darlington Hall, like any servants’ hall anywhere, was obliged to receive employees of varying degrees of intellect and perception, and I recall many a time having to bite my lip while some employee – and at times, I regret to say, members of my own staff – excitedly eulogized the likes of, say, Mr Jack Neighbours.

I have nothing against Mr Jack Neighbours, who sadly, I understand, was killed in the war. I mention him simply because his was a typical case. For two or three years in the mid-thirties, Mr Neighbours’s name seemed to dominate conversations in every servants’ hall in the land. As I say, at Darlington Hall too, many a visiting employee would bring the latest tales of Mr Neighbours’s achievements, so that I and the likes of Mr Graham would have to share the frustrating experience of hearing anecdote after anecdote relating to him. And more frustrating of all would be having to witness at the conclusion of each such anecdote otherwise decent employees shaking their heads in wonder and uttering phrases like: ‘That Mr Neighbours, he really is the best.’

Now I do not doubt that Mr Neighbours had good organizational skills; he did, understand, mastermind a number of large occasions with conspicuous style. But at no stage did he ever approach the status of a great butler. I could have told you this at the height of his reputation, just as I could have predicted his downfall after a few short years in the limelight.

How often have you known it for the butler who is on everyone's lips one day as the greatest of his generation to be proved demonstrably within a few years to have been nothing of the sort? And yet those very same employees who once heaped praise on him will be too busy eulogizing some new figure to stop and examine their sense of judgement. The object of this sort of servants' hall talk is invariably some butler who has come to the fore quite suddenly through having been appointed by a prominent house, and who has perhaps managed to pull off two or three large occasions with some success. There will then be all sorts of rumours buzzing through servants' halls up and down the country to the effect that he has been approached by this or that personage or that several of the highest houses are competing for his services with wildly high wages. And what has happened before a few years have passed? This same invincible figure has been held responsible for some blunder, or has for some other reason fallen out of favour with his employers, leaves the house where he came to fame and is never heard of again. Meanwhile, those same gossipers will have found yet some other newcomer about whom to enthuse. Visiting valets, I have found, are often the worst offenders, aspiring as they usually do to the position of butler with some urgency. They are it is who tend to be always insisting this or that figure is the one to emulate, or repeating what some particular hero is said to have pronounced upon professional matters.

But then, of course, I hasten to add, there are many valets who would never dream of indulging in this sort of folly – who are, in fact, professionals of the highest discernment. When two or three such persons were gathered together at our servants' hall – I mean of the calibre of, say, Mr Graham, with whom now, sadly, I seem to have lost touch – we would have some of the most stimulating and intelligent debates on every aspect of our vocation. Indeed, today, those evenings rank amongst my fondest memories from those times.

But let me return to the question that is of genuine interest, this question we so enjoyed debating when our evenings were not spoilt by chatter from those who lacked any fundamental understanding of the profession; that is to say, the question 'what is a great butler?'

To the best of my knowledge, for all the talk this question has engendered over the years there have been very few attempts within the profession to formulate an official answer. The only instance that comes to mind is the attempt of the Hayes Society to devise criteria for membership. You may not be aware of the Hayes Society, for few talk of it these days. But in the twenties and the early thirties, it exerted a considerable influence over much of London and the Home Counties. In fact, many felt its power had become too great and thought it a bad thing when it was forced to close, I believe in 1932 or 1933.

The Hayes Society claimed to admit butlers of 'only the very first rank'. Much of the power and prestige it went on to gain derived from the fact that unlike other such organizations which have come and gone, it managed to keep its numbers extremely low, thus giving the

claim some credibility. Membership, it was said, never at any point rose above thirty and much of the time remained closer to nine or ten. This, and the fact that the Hayes Society tended to be a rather secretive body, lent it much mystique for a time, ensuring that the pronouncements it occasionally issued on professional matters were received as though hewn on tablets of stone.

But one matter the Society resisted pronouncing on for some time was the question of its own criteria for membership. Pressure to have these announced steadily mounted, and in response to a series of letters published in *A Quarterly for the Gentleman's Gentleman*, the Society admitted that a prerequisite for membership was that 'an applicant be attached to a distinguished household'. 'Though of course,' the Society went on, 'this by itself is far from sufficient to satisfy requirements.' It was made clear, furthermore, that the Society did not regard the houses of businessmen or the 'newly rich' as 'distinguished', and in my opinion this piece of out-dated thinking crucially undermined any serious authority the Society may have achieved to arbitrate on standards in our profession. In response to further letters in *Quarterly*, the Society justified its stance by saying that while it accepted some of its correspondents' views that certain butlers of excellent quality were to be found in the houses of businessmen, 'the assumption had to be that the houses of *true* ladies and gentlemen would not refrain long from acquiring the services of any such persons'. One had to be guided by the judgement of 'the true ladies and gentlemen', argued the Society, or else 'we may as well adopt the proprieties of Bolshevik Russia'. This provoked further controversy, and the pressure of letters continued to build up urging the Society to declare more fully its membership criteria. In the end, it was revealed in a brief letter to *A Quarterly* that in the view of the Society – and I will try and quote accurately from memory – 'the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position. No applicant will satisfy requirements, whatever his level of accomplishments otherwise, if seen to fall short in this respect.'

For all my lack of enthusiasm for the Hayes Society, it is my belief that this particular pronouncement at least was founded on a significant truth. If one looks at these persons who are 'great' butlers, if one looks at, say, Mr Marshall or Mr Lane, it does seem to me that the factor which distinguishes them from those butlers who are merely extremely competent is most closely captured by this word 'dignity'.

Of course, this merely begs the further question: of what is 'dignity' comprised? And it was on this point that the likes of Mr Graham and I had some of our most interesting debates. Mr Graham would always take the view that this 'dignity' was something like a woman's beauty and it was thus pointless to attempt to analyse it. I, on the other hand, held the opinion that to draw such a parallel tended to demean the 'dignity' of the likes of Mr Marshall. Moreover, my main objection to Mr Graham's analogy was the implication that this 'dignity' was something one possessed or did not by a fluke of nature; and if one did not self-evidently have it, to strive after it would be as futile as an ugly woman trying to make herself beautiful. Now while I would accept that the majority of butlers may well discover ultimately that they do not have the capacity for it, I believe strongly that this 'dignity' is something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one's career. Those 'great' butlers like Mr Marshall who have it, I am sure, acquired it over many years of self-training and the careful absorbing of experience. In my view, then, it was rather defeatist from a vocational standpoint to adopt

a stance like Mr Graham's.

In any case, for all Mr Graham's scepticism, I can remember he and I spending many evenings trying to put our fingers on the constitution of this 'dignity'. We never came to an agreement, but I can say for my part that I developed fairly firm ideas of my own on the matter during the course of such discussions, and they are by and large the beliefs I still hold today. I would like, if I may, to try and say here what I think this 'dignity' to be.

You will not dispute, I presume, that Mr Marshall of Charleville House and Mr Lane of Bridewood have been the two great butlers of recent times. Perhaps you might be persuaded that Mr Henderson of Branbury Castle also falls into this rare category. But you may think me merely biased if I say that my own father could in many ways be considered to rank with such men, and that his career is the one I have always scrutinized for a definition of 'dignity'. Yet it is my firm conviction that at the peak of his career at Loughborough House, my father was indeed the embodiment of 'dignity'.

I realize that if one looks at the matter objectively, one has to concede my father lacked various attributes one may normally expect in a great butler. But those same absent attributes, I would argue, are every time those of a superficial and decorative order – attributes that are attractive, no doubt, as icing on the cake, but are not pertaining to what is really essential. I refer to things such as good accent and command of language, general knowledge on wide-ranging topics such as falconing or newt-mating – attributes none of which my father could have boasted. Furthermore, it must be remembered that my father was a butler of an earlier generation who began his career at a time when such attributes were not considered proper, let alone desirable in a butler. The obsessions with eloquence and general knowledge would appear to be ones that emerged with our generation, probably in the wake of Mr Marshall, when lesser men trying to emulate his greatness mistook the superficial for the essence. It is my view that our generation has been much too preoccupied with the 'trimmings'; goodness knows how much time and energy has gone into the practising of accent and command of language, how many hours spent studying encyclopedias and volumes of 'Test Your Knowledge', when the time should have been spent mastering the basic fundamentals.

Though we must be careful not to attempt to deny the responsibility which ultimately lies with ourselves, it has to be said that certain employers have done much to encourage these sorts of trends. I am sorry to say this, but there would appear to have been a number of houses in recent times, some of the highest pedigree, which have tended to take a competitive attitude towards each other and have not been above 'showing off' to guests the butler's mastery of such trivial accomplishments. I have heard of various instances of a butler being displayed as a kind of performing monkey at a house party. In one regrettable case which I myself witnessed, it had become an established sport in the house for guests to ring for the butler and put to him random questions of the order of, say, who had won the Derby in such and such a year, rather as one might to a Memory Man at the music hall.

My father, as I say, came of a generation mercifully free of such confusions of our professional values. And I would maintain that for all his limited command of English and his limited general knowledge, he not only knew all there was to know about how to run a house, he did in his prime come to acquire that 'dignity in keeping with his position', as the

Hayes Society puts it. If I try, then, to describe to you what I believe made my father thus distinguished, I may in this way convey my idea of what 'dignity' is.

There was a certain story my father was fond of repeating over the years. I recall listening to him tell it to visitors when I was a child, and then later, when I was starting out as a footman under his supervision. I remember him relating it again the first time I returned to see him after gaining my first post as butler – to a Mr and Mrs Muggeridge in their relatively modest house in Allshot, Oxfordshire. Clearly the story meant much to him. My father's generation was not one accustomed to discussing and analysing in the way ours is and I believe the telling and retelling of this story was as close as my father ever came to reflecting critically on the profession he practised. As such, it gives a vital clue to his thinking.

The story was an apparently true one concerning a certain butler who had travelled with his employer to India and served there for many years maintaining amongst the native staff the same high standards he had commanded in England. One afternoon, evidently, this butler had entered the dining room to make sure all was well for dinner, when he noticed a tiger languishing beneath the dining table. The butler had left the dining room quietly, taking care to close the doors behind him, and proceeded calmly to the drawing room where his employer was taking tea with a number of visitors. There he attracted his employer's attention with a polite cough, then whispered in the latter's ear: 'I'm very sorry, sir, but there appears to be a tiger in the dining room. Perhaps you will permit the twelve-bores to be used?'

And according to legend, a few minutes later, the employer and his guests heard three gunshot. When the butler reappeared in the drawing room some time afterwards to refresh the teapots, the employer had inquired if all was well.

'Perfectly fine, thank you, sir,' had come the reply. 'Dinner will be served at the usual time and I am pleased to say there will be no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time.'

This last phrase – 'no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time' – my father would repeat with a laugh and shake his head admiringly. He neither claimed to know the butler's name, nor anyone who had known him, but he would always insist the event occurred just as he told it. In any case, it is of little importance whether or not this story is true; the significant thing is, of course, what it reveals concerning my father's ideals. For when I look back over his career, I can see with hindsight that he must have striven throughout his years somehow to *become* that butler of his story. And in my view, at the peak of his career, my father achieved his ambition. For although I am sure he never had the chance to encounter a tiger beneath the dining table, when I think over all that I know of him, I have heard concerning him, I can think of at least several instances of his displaying an abundance of that very quality he so admired in the butler of his story.

One such instance was related to me by Mr David Charles, of the Charles and Redding Company, who visited Darlington Hall from time to time during Lord Darlington's days. It was one evening when I happened to be valeting him, Mr Charles told me he had come across my father some years earlier while a guest at Loughborough House – the home of Mr John Silvers, the industrialist, where my father served for fifteen years at the height of his career. He had never been quite able to forget my father, Mr Charles told me, owing to an incident

that occurred during that visit.

One afternoon, Mr Charles to his shame and regret had allowed himself to become inebriated in the company of two fellow guests – gentlemen I shall merely call Mr Smith and Mr Jones since they are likely to be still remembered in certain circles. After an hour or so of drinking, these two gentlemen decided they wished to go for an afternoon drive around the local villages – a motor car around this time still being something of a novelty. They persuaded Mr Charles to accompany them, and since the chauffeur was on leave at that point I enlisted my father to drive the car.

Once they had set off, Mr Smith and Mr Jones, for all their being well into their middle years, proceeded to behave like schoolboys, singing coarse songs and making even coarser comments on all they saw from the window. Furthermore, these gentlemen had noticed on the local map three villages in the vicinity called Morphy, Saltash and Brigoon. Now I am not entirely sure these were the exact names, but the point was they reminded Mr Smith and Mr Jones of the music hall act, Murphy, Saltman and Brigid the Cat, of which you may have heard. Upon noticing this curious coincidence, the gentlemen then gained an ambition to visit the three villages in question –in honour, as it were, of the music hall artistes. According to Mr Charles, my father had duly driven to one village and was on the point of entering a second when either Mr Smith or Mr Jones noticed the village was Brigoon – that is to say the third, not the second, name of the sequence. They demanded angrily that my father turn the car immediately so that the villages could be visited ‘in the correct order’. It so happened that this entailed doubling back a considerable way of the route, but, so Mr Charles assures me, my father accepted the request as though it were a perfectly reasonable one, and in general continued to behave with immaculate courtesy.

But Mr Smith’s and Mr Jones’s attention had now been drawn to my father and no doubt rather bored with what the view outside had to offer, they proceeded to amuse themselves by shouting out unflattering remarks concerning my father’s ‘mistake’. Mr Charles remembered marvelling at how my father showed not one hint of discomfort or anger, but continued to drive with an expression balanced perfectly between personal dignity and readiness to oblige. My father’s equanimity was not, however, allowed to last. For when they had wearied of hurling insults at my father’s back, the two gentlemen began to discuss the host – that is to say, my father’s employer, Mr John Silvers. The remarks grew ever more debased and treacherous so that Mr Charles – at least so he claimed – was obliged to intervene with the suggestion that such talk was bad form. This view was contradicted with such energy that Mr Charles, quite aside from worrying whether he would become the new focus of the gentlemen’s attention, actually thought himself in danger of physical assault. But then suddenly, following a particularly heinous insinuation against his employer, my father brought the car to an abrupt halt. It was what happened next that had made such an indelible impression upon Mr Charles.

The rear door of the car opened and my father was observed to be standing there, a few steps back from the vehicle, gazing steadily into the interior. As Mr Charles described it, all three passengers seemed to be overcome as one by the realization of what an imposing physical force my father was. Indeed, he was a man of some six feet three inches, and his countenance, though reassuring while one knew he was intent on obliging, could see

extremely forbidding viewed in certain other contexts. According to Mr Charles, my father did not display any obvious anger. He had, it seemed, merely opened the door. And yet there was something so powerfully rebuking and at the same time so unassailable about his figure looming over them that Mr Charles's two drunken companions seemed to cower back like small boys caught by the farmer in the act of stealing apples.

My father had proceeded to stand there for some moments, saying nothing, merely holding open the door. Eventually, either Mr Smith or Mr Jones had remarked: 'Are we not going on with the journey?'

My father did not reply, but continued to stand there silently, neither demanding disembarkation nor offering any clue as to his desires or intentions. I can well imagine how he must have looked that day, framed by the doorway of the vehicle, his dark, severe presence quite blotting out the effect of the gentle Hertfordshire scenery behind him. Those were, Mr Charles recalls, strangely unnerving moments during which he too, despite not having participated in the preceding behaviour, felt engulfed with guilt. The silence seemed to go on interminably, before either Mr Smith or Mr Jones found it in him to mutter: 'I suppose we were talking a little out of turn there. It won't happen again.'

A moment to consider this, then my father had closed the door gently, returned to the wheel and had proceeded to continue the tour of the three villages – a tour, Mr Charles assured me, that was completed thereafter in near-silence.

Now that I have recalled this episode, another event from around that time in my father's career comes to mind which demonstrates perhaps even more impressively this special quality he came to possess. I should explain here that I am one of two brothers – and that my elder brother, Leonard, was killed during the Southern African War while I was still a boy. Naturally, my father would have felt this loss keenly; but to make matters worse, the usual comfort a father has in these situations – that is, the notion that his son gave his life gloriously for king and country – was sullied by the fact that my brother had perished in a particularly infamous manoeuvre. Not only was it alleged that the manoeuvre had been the most un-British attack on civilian Boer settlements, overwhelming evidence emerged that it had been irresponsibly commanded with several floutings of elementary military precaution so that the men who had died – my brother among them – had died quite needlessly. In view of what I am about to relate, it would not be proper of me to identify the manoeuvre any more precisely, though you may well guess which one I am alluding to if I say that it caused something of an uproar at the time, adding significantly to the controversy the conflict as a whole was attracting. There had been calls for the removal, even the court-martialing, of the general concerned, but the army had defended the latter and he had been allowed to complete the campaign. What is less known is that at the close of the Southern African conflict, this same general had been discreetly retired, and he had then entered business dealing in shipments from Southern Africa. I relate this because some ten years after the conflict, that is to say when the wounds of bereavement had only superficially healed, my father was called into Mr John Silvers's study to be told that this very same personage – I will call him simply 'the General' – was due to visit for a number of days to attend a house party, during which my father's employer hoped to lay the foundations of a lucrative business transaction. Mr Silvers, however, had remembered the significance the visit would have for

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