Остаток дня / The Remains of the Day

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Билингва Bestseller

Кадзуо Исигуро – урожденный японец, выпускник литературного курса Малькольма Брэдбери, написавший самый английский роман конца XX века! Лауреат Нобелевской премии 2017 года.

«Остаток дня» – дневник дворецкого, жизнь с точки зрения Бэрримора. В основе его стилистики лежит сдержанность, выявляющая себя в самой механике речи. Герой не считает возможным проявлять свои чувства, и на лингвистическом уровне эта своеобразная аскеза приводит к замечательным результатам – перед нами этакая оборотная сторона Достоевского с его неуправляемым потоком эмоций.

В 1989 году за «Остаток дня» Исигуро единогласно получил Букера (и это было, пожалуй, единственное решение Букеровского комитета за всю историю премии, ни у кого не вызвавшее протеста). Одноименная экранизация Джеймса Айвори с Энтони Хопкинсом в главной роли пользовалась большим успехом.

А Борис Акунин написал своего рода римейк «Остатка дня» – роман «Коронация».

В формате a4-pdf сохранен издательский макет книги.

Kazuo Ishiguro / Кадзуо Исигуро

The remains of the day / Остаток дня

Kazuo Ishiguro

The remains of the day

In memory of Mrs Lenore Marshall

Prologue july 1956

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 portraits 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 toinform 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 put 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, get 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 at 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 that 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 this 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 this 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 as 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 corridor 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 this 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, my 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 to 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 at 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 in 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 that 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 that 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 I 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 on 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 windows, 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 that 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, it it 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 assignations.’

Naturally, I felt the temptation to deny immediately and unambiguously such motivations 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 these 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 Mauvis, remarking that a taxi driver in New York regularly addressed his fare in a manner which if 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 a 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 a 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 in 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 employee 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 most 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 not 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 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.

Day one evening

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 Mrs 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, thickets 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 on 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 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 on up 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 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 all 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 at 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, or 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 this 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 this 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 most 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, I 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 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 no 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 this 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 A Quarterly, the Society justified its stance by saying that while it accepted some 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 we agree 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 any 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 a 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 latters 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 gun shots. 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 or have heard concerning him, I can think of at

least several instances of his displaying in abundance that very quality he so admired in the butter 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, 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 their 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 next 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 seem 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 a most un-British attack on civilian Boer settlements, overwhelming evidence emerged that it had been irresponsibly commanded with several floutings of elementary military precautions, 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-martialling, 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 my father, and had thus called him in to offer him the option of taking several days’ leave for the duration of the General’s stay.

My father's feelings towards the General were, naturally, those of utmost loathing; but he realized too that his employer's present business aspirations hung on the smooth running of the house party – which with some eighteen or so people expected would be no trifling affair. My father thus replied to the effect that while he was most grateful that his feelings had been taken into account, Mr Silvers could be assured that service would be provided to the usual standards.

As things turned out, my father's ordeal proved even worse than might have been predicted. For one thing, any hopes my father may have had that to meet the General in person would arouse a sense of respect or sympathy to leaven his feelings against him proved without foundation. The General was a portly, ugly man, his manners were not refined, and his talk was conspicuous for an eagerness to apply military similes to a very wide variety of matters. Worse was to come with the news that the gentleman had brought no valet, his usual man having fallen ill. This presented a delicate problem, another of the house guests being also without his valet, raising the question as to which guest should be allocated the butler as valet and who the footman. My father, appreciating his employer's position, volunteered immediately to take the General, and thus was obliged to suffer intimate proximity for four days with the man he detested. Meanwhile, the General, having no idea of my father's feelings, took full opportunity to relate anecdotes of his military accomplishments – as of course many military gentlemen are wont to do to their valets in the privacy of their rooms. Yet so well did my father hide his feelings, so professionally did he carry out his duties, that on his departure the General had actually complimented Mr John Silvers on the excellence of his butler and had left an unusually large tip in appreciation – which my father without hesitation asked his employer to donate to a charity.

I hope you will agree that in these two instances I have cited from his career – both of which I have had corroborated and believe to be accurate – my father not only manifests, but comes close to being the personification itself, of what the Hayes Society terms 'dignity in keeping with his position'. If one considers the difference between my father at such moments and a figure such as Mr Jack Neighbours even with the best of his technical flourishes, I believe one may begin to distinguish what it is that separates a 'great' butler from a merely competent one. We may now understand better, too, why my father was so fond of the story of the butler who failed to panic on discovering a tiger under the dining table; it was because he knew instinctively that somewhere in this story lay the kernel of what true 'dignity' is. And let me now posit this: 'dignity' has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being

for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the fa?ade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of ‘dignity’.

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. Continentals – and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree – are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations. If I may return to my earlier metaphor – you will excuse my putting it so coarsely – they are like a man who will, at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and his shirt and run about screaming. In a word, ‘dignity’ is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman.

Of course, you may retort, as did Mr Graham whenever I expounded such a line during those enjoyable discussions by the fire, that if I am correct in what I am saying, one could recognize a great butler as such only after one had seen him perform under some severe test. And yet the truth is, we accept persons such as Mr Marshall or Mr Lane to be great, though most of us cannot claim to have ever scrutinized them under such conditions. I have to admit Mr Graham has a point here, but all I can say is that after one has been in the profession as long as one has, one is able to judge intuitively the depth of a man’s professionalism without having to see it under pressure. Indeed, on the occasion one is fortunate enough to meet a great butler, far from experiencing any sceptical urge to demand a ‘test’, one is at a loss to imagine any situation which could ever dislodge a professionalism borne with such authority. In fact, I am sure it was an apprehension of this sort, penetrating even the thick haze created by alcohol, which reduced my father’s passengers into a shamed silence that Sunday afternoon many years ago. It is with such men as it is with the English landscape seen at its best

as I did this morning: when one encounters them, one simply knows one is in the presence of greatness.

There will always be, I realize, those who would claim that any attempt to analyse greatness as I have been doing is quite futile.

‘You know when somebody’s got it and you know when somebody hasn’t,’ Mr Graham’s argument would always be. ‘Beyond that there’s nothing much you can say.’

But I believe we have a duty not to be so defeatist in this matter. It is surely a professional responsibility for all of us to think deeply about these things so that each of us may better strive towards attaining ‘dignity’ for ourselves.

Day two morning

Salisbury

Strange beds have rarely agreed with me, and after only a short spell of somewhat troubled slumber, I awoke an hour or so ago. It was then still dark, and knowing I had a full day’s motoring ahead of me, I made an attempt to return to sleep. This proved futile, and when I decided eventually to rise, it was still so dark that I was obliged to turn on the electric light in order to shave at the sink in the corner. But when having finished I switched it off again, I could see early daylight at the edges of the curtains.

When I parted them just a moment ago, the light outside was still very pale and something of a mist was affecting my view of the baker’s shop and chemist’s shop opposite. Indeed, following the street further along to where it runs over the little round-backed bridge, I could see the mist rising from the river, obscuring almost entirely one of the bridge-posts. There was not a soul to be seen, and apart from a hammering noise echoing from somewhere distant, and an occasional coughing in a room to the back of the house, there is still no sound to be heard. The landlady is clearly not yet up and about, suggesting there is little chance of her serving breakfast earlier than her declared time of seven thirty.

Now, in these quiet moments as I wait for the world about to awake, I find myself going over in my mind again passages from Miss Kenton's letter. Incidentally, I should before now have explained myself as regards my referring to 'Miss Kenton'. 'Miss Kenton' is properly speaking 'Mrs Benn' and has been for twenty years. However, because I knew her at close quarters only during her maiden years and have not seen her once since she went to the West Country to become 'Mrs Benn', you will perhaps excuse my impropriety in referring to her as I knew her, and in my mind have continued to call her throughout these years. Of course, her letter has given me extra cause to continue thinking of her as 'Miss Kenton', since it would seem, sadly, that her marriage is finally to come to an end. The letter does not make specific the details of the matter, as one would hardly expect it to do, but Miss Kenton states unambiguously that she has now, in fact, taken the step of moving out of Mr Benn's house in Helston and is presently lodging with an acquaintance in the nearby village of Little Compton.

It is of course tragic that her marriage is now ending in failure. At this very moment, no doubt, she is pondering with regret decisions made in the far-off past that have now left her, deep in middle age, so alone and desolate. And it is easy to see how in such a frame of mind, the thought of returning to Darlington Hall would be a great comfort to her. Admittedly, she does not at any point in her letter state explicitly her desire to return; but that is the unmistakable message conveyed by the general nuance of many of the passages, imbued as they are with a deep nostalgia for her days at Darlington Hall. Of course, Miss Kenton cannot hope by returning at this stage ever to retrieve those lost years, and it will be my first duty to impress this upon her when we meet. I will have to point out how different things are now – that the days of working with a grand staff at one's beck and call will probably never return within our lifetime. But then Miss Kenton is an intelligent woman and she will have already realized these things. Indeed, all in all, I cannot see why the option of her returning to Darlington Hall and seeing out her working years there should not offer a very genuine consolation to a life that has come to be so dominated by a sense of waste.

And of course, from my own professional viewpoint, it is clear that even after a break of so many years, Miss Kenton would prove the perfect solution to the problem at present besetting us at Darlington Hall. In fact, by terming it a 'problem', I perhaps overstate the matter. I am referring, after all, to a series of very minor errors on my part and the course I am now pursuing is merely a means of preempting any 'problems' before one arises. It is true, these same trivial errors did cause me some anxiety at first, but once I had had time to diagnose them correctly as symptoms of nothing more than a straightforward staff shortage, I have refrained from giving them much thought. Miss Kenton's arrival, as I say, will put a permanent end to them.

But to return to her letter. It does at times reveal a certain despair over her present situation – a fact that is rather concerning. She begins one sentence: ‘Although I have no idea how I shall usefully fill the remainder of my life…’ And again, elsewhere, she writes: ‘The rest of my life stretches out as an emptiness before me.’ For the most part, though, as I have said, the tone is one of nostalgia. At one point, for instance, she writes:

‘This whole incident put me in mind of Alice White. Do you remember her? In fact, I hardly imagine you could forget her. For myself, I am still haunted by those vowel sounds and those uniquely ungrammatical sentences only she could dream up! Have you any idea what became of her?’

I have not, as a matter of fact, though I must say it rather amused me to remember that exasperating housemaid – who in the end turned out to be one of our most devoted.

At another point in her letter, Miss Kenton writes:

‘I was so fond of that view from the second-floor bedrooms overlooking the lawn with the downs visible in the distance. Is it still like that? On summer evenings there was a sort of magical quality to that view and I will confess to you now I used to waste many precious minutes standing at one of those windows just enchanted by it.’

Then she goes on to add:

‘If this is a painful memory, forgive me. But I will never forget that time we both watched your father walking back and forth in front of the summerhouse, looking down at the ground as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there.’

It is something of a revelation that this memory from over thirty years ago should have remained with Miss Kenton as it has done with me. Indeed, it must have occurred on just one of those summer evenings she mentions, for I can recall distinctly climbing to the second landing and seeing before me a series of orange shafts from the sunset breaking the gloom of the corridor where each bedroom door stood ajar. And as I made my way past those bedrooms, I had seen through a doorway Miss Kenton’s

figure, silhouetted against a window, turn and call softly:

‘Mr Stevens, if you have a moment.’

As I entered, Miss Kenton had turned back to the window. Down below, the shadows of the poplars were falling across the lawn. To the right of our view, the lawn sloped up a gentle embankment to where the summerhouse stood, and it was there my father’s figure could be seen, pacing slowly with an air of preoccupation – indeed, as Miss Kenton puts it so well, ‘as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there’.

There are some very pertinent reasons why this memory has remained with me, as I wish to explain. Moreover, now that I come to think of it, it is perhaps not so surprising that it should also have made a deep impression on Miss Kenton given certain aspects of her relationship with my father during her early days at Darlington Hall.

Miss Kenton and my father had arrived at the house at more or less the same time – that is to say, the spring of 1922 – as a consequence of my losing at one stroke the previous housekeeper and under-butler. This had occurred due to these latter two persons deciding to marry one another and leave the profession. I have always found such liaisons a serious threat to the order in a house. Since that time, I have lost numerous more employees in such circumstances. Of course, one has to expect such things to occur amongst maids and footmen, and a good butler should always take this into account in his planning; but such marrying amongst more senior employees can have an extremely disruptive effect on work. Of course, if two members of staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry, it would be churlish to be apportioning blame; but what I find a major irritation are those persons – and housekeepers are particularly guilty here – who have no genuine commitment to their profession and who are essentially going from post to post looking for romance. This sort of person is a blight on good professionalism.

But let me say immediately I do not have Miss Kenton in mind at all when I say this. Of course, she too eventually left my staff to get married, but I can vouch that during the time she worked as housekeeper under me, she was nothing less than dedicated and never allowed her professional priorities to be distracted.

But I am digressing. I was explaining that we had fallen in need of a housekeeper and an under-butler at one and the same time and Miss Kenton had arrived – with unusually good references, I recall – to take up the former post. As it happened, my father had around this time come to the end of his distinguished service at Loughborough House with the death of his employer, Mr John Silvers, and had been at something of a loss for work and accommodation. Although he was still, of course, a professional of the highest class, he was now in his seventies and much ravaged by arthritis and other ailments. It was not at all certain, then, how he would fare against the younger breed of highly professionalized butlers looking for posts. In view of this, it seemed a reasonable solution to ask my father to bring his great experience and distinction to Darlington Hall.

As I remember, it was one morning a little while after my father and Miss Kenton had joined the staff, I had been in my pantry, sitting at the table going through my paperwork, when I heard a knock on my door. I recall I was a little taken aback when Miss Kenton opened the door and entered before I had bidden her to do so. She came in holding a large vase of flowers and said with a smile:

‘Mr Stevens, I thought these would brighten your parlour a little.’

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Kenton?’

‘It seemed such a pity your room should be so dark and cold, Mr Stevens, when it’s such bright sunshine outside. I thought these would enliven things a little.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Miss Kenton.’

‘It’s a shame more sun doesn’t get in here. The walls are even a little damp, are they not, Mr Stevens?’

I turned back to my accounts, saying:

‘Merely condensation, I believe, Miss Kenton.’

She put her vase down on the table in front of me, then glancing around my pantry again said:

‘If you wish, Mr Stevens, I might bring in some more cuttings for you.’

‘Miss Kenton, I appreciate your kindness. But this is not a room of entertainment. I am happy to have distractions kept to a minimum.’

‘But surely, Mr Stevens, there is no need to keep your room so stark and bereft of colour.’

‘It has served me perfectly well thus far as it is, Miss Kenton, though I appreciate your thoughts. In fact, since you are here, there was a certain matter I wished to raise with you.’

‘Oh, really, Mr Stevens.’

‘Yes, Miss Kenton, just a small matter. I happened to be walking past the kitchen yesterday when I heard you calling to someone named William.’

‘Is that so, Mr Stevens?’

‘Indeed, Miss Kenton. I did hear you call several times for “William”. May I ask who it was you were addressing by that name?’

‘Why, Mr Stevens, I should think I was addressing your father. There are no other Williams in this house, I take it.’

‘It’s an easy enough error to have made,’ I said with a small smile. ‘May I ask you in future, Miss Kenton, to address my father as “Mr Stevens”? If you are speaking of him to a third party, then you may wish to call him “Mr Stevens senior” to distinguish him from myself. I’m most grateful, Miss Kenton.’

With that I turned back to my papers. But to my surprise, Miss Kenton did not take her leave.

‘Excuse me, Mr Stevens,’ she said after a moment.

‘Yes, Miss Kenton.’

‘I am afraid I am not quite clear what you are saying. I have in the past been accustomed to addressing under-servants by their Christian names and saw no reason to do otherwise in this house.’

‘A most understandable error. Miss Kenton, However, if you will consider the situation for a moment, you may come to see the inappropriateness of someone such as yourself talking “down” to one such as my father.’

‘I am still not clear what you are getting at, Mr Stevens. You say someone such as myself, but I am as far as I understand the housekeeper of this house, while your father is the under-butler.’

‘He is of course in title the under-butler, as you say. But I am surprised your powers of observation have not already made it clear to you that he is in reality more than that. A great deal more.’

‘No doubt I have been extremely unobservant, Mr Stevens. I had only observed that your father was an able under-butler and addressed him accordingly. It must indeed have been most galling for him to be so addressed by one such as I.’

‘Miss Kenton, it is clear from your tone you simply have not observed my father. If you had done so, the inappropriateness of someone of your age and standing addressing him as ‘‘William” should have been self-evident to you.’

‘Mr Stevens, I may not have been a housekeeper for long, but I would say that in the time I have been, my abilities have attracted some very generous remarks.’

‘I do not doubt your competence for one moment, Miss Kenton. But a hundred things should have indicated to you that my father is a figure of unusual distinction from whom you may learn a wealth of things were you prepared to be more observant.’

‘I am most indebted to you for your advice, Mr Stevens. So do please tell me, just what marvellous things might I learn from observing your father?’

‘I would have thought it obvious to anyone with eyes, Miss Kenton.’

‘But we have already established, have we not, that I am particularly deficient in that respect.’

‘Miss Kenton, if you are under the impression you have already at your age perfected yourself, you will never rise to the heights you are no doubt capable of. I might point out, for instance, you are still often unsure of what goes where and which item is which.’

This seemed to take the wind out of Miss Kenton’s sails somewhat. Indeed, for a moment, she looked a little upset. Then she said:

‘I had a little difficulty on first arriving, but that is surely only normal.’

‘Ah, there you are, Miss Kenton. If you had observed my father who arrived in this house a week after you did, you will have seen that his house knowledge is perfect and was so almost from the time he set foot in Darlington Hall.’

Miss Kenton seemed to think about this before saying a little sulkily:

‘I am sure Mr Stevens senior is very good at his job, but I assure you, Mr Stevens, I am very good at mine. I will remember to address your father by his full title in future. Now, if you would please excuse me.’

After this encounter, Miss Kenton did not attempt to introduce further flowers into my pantry, and in general, I was pleased to observe, she went about settling in impressively. It was clear, furthermore, she was a housekeeper who took her work very seriously, and in spite of her youth she seemed to have no difficulty gaining the respect of her staff.

I noticed too that she was indeed proceeding to address my father as ‘Mr Stevens’. However, one afternoon perhaps two weeks after our conversation in my pantry, I was doing something in the library when Miss Kenton came in and said:

‘Excuse me, Mr Stevens. But if you are searching for your dust-pan, it is out in the hall.’

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Kenton?’

‘Your dust-pan, Mr Stevens. You’ve left it out here. Shall I bring it in for you?’

‘Miss Kenton, I have not been using a dust-pan.’

‘Ah, well, then forgive me, Mr Stevens. I naturally assumed you were using your dust-pan and had left it out in the hall. I am sorry to have disturbed you.’

She started to leave, but then turned at the doorway and said:

‘Oh, Mr Stevens. I would return it myself but I have to go upstairs just now. I wonder if you will remember it?’

‘Of course, Miss Kenton. Thank you for drawing attention to it.’

‘It is quite all right, Mr Stevens.’

I listened to her footsteps cross the hall and start up the great staircase, then proceeded to the doorway myself. From the library doors, one has an unbroken view right across the entrance hall to the main doors of th Most conspicuously, in virtually the central spot otherwise empty and highly polished floor, lay the a pan Miss Kenton had alluded to.

It struck me as a trivial, but irritating error; the dust-pan would have been conspicuous not only from the five ground-floor doorways opening on to the hall, but also from the staircase and the first-floor balconies. I crossed the hall and had actually picked up the offending item before realizing its full implication; my father, I recalled, had been brushing the entrance hall a half-hour or so earlier. At first, I found it hard to credit such an error to my father. But I soon reminded myself that such trivial slips are liable to befall anyone from time to time, and my irritation soon turned to Miss Kenton for attempting to create such unwarranted fuss over the incident.

Then, not more than a week later, I was coming down the back corridor from the kitchen when Miss Kenton came out of her parlour and uttered a statement she had clearly been rehearsing; this was something to the effect that although she felt most uncomfortable drawing my attention to errors made by my staff, she and I had to work as a team, and she hoped I would not feel inhibited to do similarly should I notice errors made by female staff. She then went on to point out that several pieces of silver had been laid out for the dining room which bore clear remains of polish. The end of one fork had been practically black. I thanked her and she withdrew back into her parlour. It had been unnecessary, of course, for her to mention that the silver was one of my father’s main responsibilities and one he took great pride in.

It is very possible there were a number of other instances of this sort which I have now forgotten. In any case, I recall things reaching something of a climax one grey and drizzly afternoon when I was in the billiard room attending to Lord Darlington’s sporting trophies. Miss Kenton had entered and said from the door:

‘Mr Stevens, I have just noticed something outside which puzzles me.’

‘What is that, Miss Kenton?’

‘Was it his lordship’s wish that the Chinaman on the upstairs landing should be exchanged with the one outside this door?’

‘The Chinaman, Miss Kenton?’

‘Yes, Mr Stevens. The Chinaman normally on the landing you will now find outside this door.’

‘I fear, Miss Kenton, that you are a little confused.’

‘I do not believe I am confused at all, Mr Stevens. I make it my business to acquaint myself with where objects properly belong in a house. The Chinamen, I would suppose, were polished by someone then replaced incorrectly. If you are sceptical, Mr Stevens, perhaps you will care to step out here and observe for yourself.’

‘Miss Kenton, I am occupied at present.’

‘But, Mr Stevens, you do not appear to believe what I am saying. I am thus asking you to step outside this door and see for yourself.’

‘Miss Kenton, I am busy just now and will attend to the matter shortly. It is hardly one of urgency.’

You accept then, Mr Stevens, that I am not in error on this point.’

‘I will accept nothing of the sort, Miss Kenton, until I have had a chance to deal with the matter. However, I am occupied at present.’

I turned back to my business, but Miss Kenton remained in the doorway observing me. Eventually, she said:

I can see you will be finished very shortly, Mr Stevens. I will await you outside so that this matter may be finalized when you come out.’

‘Miss Kenton, I believe you are according this matter an urgency it hardly merits.’

But Miss Kenton had departed, and sure enough, as I continued with my work, an occasional footstep or some other sound would serve to remind me she was still there outside the door. I decided therefore to occupy myself with some further tasks in the billiard room, assuming she would after a while see the ludicrousness of her position and leave. However, after some time had passed, and I had exhausted the tasks which could usefully be achieved with the implements I happened to have at hand, Miss Kenton was evidently still outside. Resolved not to waste further time on account of this childish affair, I contemplated departure via the french windows. A drawback to this plan was the weather – that is to say, several large puddles and patches of mud were in evidence – and the fact that one would need to return to the billiard room again at some point to bolt the french windows from the inside. Eventually, then, I decided the best strategy would be simply to stride out of the room very suddenly at a furious pace. I thus made my way as quietly as possible to a position from which I could execute such a march, and clutching my implements firmly about me, succeeded in propelling myself through the doorway and several paces down the corridor before a somewhat astonished Miss Kenton could recover her wits. This she did, however, rather rapidly and the next moment I found she had overtaken me and was standing before me, effectively barring my way.

‘Mr Stevens, that is the incorrect Chinaman, would you not agree?’

‘Miss Kenton, I am very busy. I am surprised you have nothing better to do than stand in corridors all day.’

‘Mr Stevens, is that the correct Chinaman or is it not?’

‘Miss Kenton, I would ask you to keep your voice down.’

‘And I would ask you, Mr Stevens, to turn around and look at that Chinaman.’

‘Miss Kenton, please keep your voice down. What would employees below think to hear us shouting at the top of our voices about what is and what is not the correct Chinaman?’

‘The fact is, Mr Stevens, all the Chinamen in this house have been dirty for some time! And now, they are in incorrect positions!’

‘Miss Kenton, you are being quite ridiculous. Now if you will be so good as to let me pass.’

‘Mr Stevens, will you kindly look at the Chinaman behind you?’

‘If it is so important to you, Miss Kenton, I will allow that the Chinaman behind me may well be incorrectly situated. But I must say I am at some loss as to why you should be so concerned with these most trivial of errors.’

‘These errors may be trivial in themselves, Mr Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance.’

‘Miss Kenton, I do not understand you. Now if you would kindly allow me to pass.’

The fact is, Mr Stevens, your father is entrusted with far more than a man of his age can cope with.’

‘Miss Kenton, you clearly have little idea of what you are suggesting.’

‘Whatever your father was once, Mr Stevens, his powers are now greatly diminished. This is what these “trivial errors” as you call them really signify and if you do not heed them, it will not be long before your father commits an error of major proportions.’

‘Miss Kenton, you are merely making yourself look foolish.’

‘I am sorry, Mr Stevens, but I must go on. I believe there are many duties your father should now be relieved of. He should not, for one, be asked to go on carrying heavily laden trays. The way his hands tremble as he carries them into dinner is nothing short of alarming. It is surely only a matter of time before a tray falls from his hands on to a lady or gentleman’s lap. And furthermore, Mr Stevens, and I am very sorry to say this, I have noticed your father’s nose.’

‘Have you indeed, Miss Kenton?’

‘I regret to say I have, Mr Stevens. The evening before last I watched your father proceeding very slowly towards the dining room with his tray, and I am afraid I observed clearly a large drop on the end of his nose dangling over the soup bowls. I would not have thought such a style of waiting a great stimulant to appetite.’

But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward. I am not sure she could actually have gone so far as to say things like: ‘these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realize their larger significance’. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall.

The study doors are those that face one as one comes down the great staircase. There is outside the study today a glass cabinet displaying various of Mr Farraday’s ornaments, but throughout Lord Darlington’s days, there stood at that spot a bookshelf containing many volumes of encyclopedia, including a complete set of the Britannica. It was a ploy of Lord Darlington’s to stand at this shelf studying the spines of the encyclopedias as I came down the staircase, and sometimes, to increase the effect of an accidental meeting, he would actually pull out a volume and pretend to be engrossed as I completed my descent. Then, as I passed him, he would say:

‘Oh, Stevens, there was something I meant to say to you.’

And with that, he would wander back into his study, to all appearances still thoroughly engrossed in the volume held open in his hands. It was invariably embarrassment at what he was about to impart which made Lord Darlington adopt such an approach, and even once the study door was closed behind us, he would often stand by the window and make a show of consulting the encyclopedia throughout our conversation.

What I am now describing, incidentally, is one of many instances I could relate to you to underline Lord Darlington’s essentially shy and modest nature. A great deal of nonsense has been spoken and written in recent years concerning his lordship and the

prominent role he came to play in great affairs, and some utterly ignorant reports have had it that he was motivated by egotism or else arrogance. Let me say here that nothing could be further from the truth. It was completely contrary to Lord Darlington's natural tendencies to take such public stances as he came to do and I can say with conviction that his lordship was persuaded to overcome his more retiring side only through a deep sense of moral duty. Whatever may be said about his lordship these days – and the great majority of it is, as I say, utter nonsense – I can declare that he was a truly good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am today proud to have given my best years of service to.

On the particular afternoon to which I am referring, his lordship would still have been in his mid-fifties; but as I recall, his hair had greyed entirely and his tall slender figure already bore signs of the stoop that was to become so pronounced in his last years. He barely glanced up from his volume as he asked.

'Your father feeling better now, Stevens?'

'I'm glad to say he has made a full recovery, sir.

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'Jolly pleased to hear that. Jolly pleased.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Look here, Stevens, have there been any – well – signs at all? I mean signs to tell us your father may be wishing his burden lightened somewhat? Apart from this business of him falling, I mean.'

'As I say, sir, my father appears to have made a full recovery and I believe he is still a person of considerable dependability. It is true one or two errors have been noticeable recently in the discharging of his duties, but these are in every case very trivial in nature.'

‘But none of us wish to see anything of that sort happen ever again, do we? I mean, your father collapsing and all that.’

‘Indeed not, sir.’

‘And of course, if it can happen out on the lawn, it could happen anywhere. And at any time.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It could happen, say, during dinner while your father was waiting at table.’

‘It is possible, sir.’

‘Look here, Stevens, the first of the delegates will be arriving here in less than a fortnight.’

‘We are well prepared, sir.’

‘What happens within this house after that may have considerable repercussions.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I mean considerable repercussions. On the whole course Europe is taking. In view of the persons who will be present, I do not think I exaggerate.’

‘No, sir.’

‘Hardly the time for taking on avoidable hazards.’

‘Indeed not, sir.’

‘Look here, Stevens, there’s no question of your father leaving us. You’re simply being asked to reconsider his duties.’

And it was then, I believe, that his lordship said as he looked down again into his volume and awkwardly fingered an entry:

‘These errors may be trivial in themselves, Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance. Your father’s days of dependability are now passing. He must not be asked to perform tasks in any area where an error might jeopardize the success of our forthcoming conference.’

‘Indeed not, sir. I fully understand.’

‘Good. I’ll leave you to think about it then, Stevens.’

Lord Darlington, I should say, had actually witnessed my father’s fall of a week or so earlier. His lordship had been entertaining two guests, a young lady and gentleman, in the summerhouse, and had watched my father’s approach across the lawn bearing a much welcome tray of refreshments. The lawn climbs a slope several yards in front of the summerhouse, and in those days, as today, four flagstones embedded into the grass served as steps by which to negotiate this climb. It was in the vicinity of these steps that my father fell, scattering the load on his tray – teapot, cups, saucers, sandwiches, cakes – across the area of grass at the top of the steps. By the time I had received the alarm and gone out, his lordship and his guests had laid my father on his side, a cushion and a rug from the summerhouse serving as pillow and blanket. My father was unconscious and his face looked an oddly grey colour. Dr Meredith had already been sent for, but his lordship was of the view that my father should be moved out of the sun before the doctor’s arrival; consequently, a bath-chair arrived and with not a little difficulty, my father was transported into the house. By the time Dr Meredith arrived, he had revived considerably and the doctor soon left again, making only vague statements to the effect that my father had perhaps been ‘Over-working’.

The whole episode was clearly a great embarrassment to my father, and by the time of that conversation in Lord Darlington’s study, he had long since returned to busying himself as much as ever. The question of how one could broach the topic of reducing his responsibilities was not, then, an easy one. My difficulty was further compounded

by the fact that for some years my father and I had tended – for some reason I have never really fathomed – to converse less and less. So much so that after his arrival at Darlington Hall, even the brief exchanges necessary to communicate information relating to work took place in an atmosphere of mutual embarrassment.

In the end, I judged the best option to be to talk in the privacy of his room, thus giving him the opportunity to ponder his new situation in solitude once I took my leave. The only times my father could be found in his room were first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Choosing the former, I climbed up to his small attic room at the top of the servants' wing early one morning and knocked gently.

I had rarely had reason to enter my father's room prior to this occasion and I was newly struck by the smallness and starkness of it. Indeed, I recall my impression at the time was of having stepped into a prison cell, but then this might have had as much to do with the pale early light as with the size of the room or the bareness of its walls. For my father had opened his curtains and was sitting, shaved and in full uniform, on the edge of his bed from where evidently he had been watching the sky turn to dawn. At least one assumed he had been watching the sky, there being little else to view from his small window other than roof-tiles and guttering. The oil lamp beside his bed had been extinguished, and when I saw my father glance disapprovingly at the lamp I had brought to guide me up the rickety staircase, I quickly lowered the wick. Having done this, I noticed all the more the effect of the pale light coming into the room and the way it lit up the edges of my father's craggy, lined, still awesome features.

'Ah,' I said, and gave a short laugh, 'I might have known Father would be up and ready for the day.'

'I've been up for the past three hours,' he said, looking me up and down rather coldly.

'I hope Father is not being kept awake by his arthritic troubles.'

'I get all the sleep I need.'

My father reached forward to the only chair in the room, a small wooden one, and placing both hands on its back, brought himself to his feet. When I saw him stood

upright before me, I could not be sure to what extent he was hunched over due to infirmity and what extent due to the habit of accommodating the steeply sloped ceilings of the room.

‘I have come here to relate something to you, Father.’

Then relate it briefly and concisely. I haven’t all morning to listen to you chatter.’

‘In that case. Father, I will come straight to the point.’

‘Come to the point then and be done with it. Some of us have work to be getting on with.’

Very well. Since you wish me to be brief, I will do my best to comply. The fact is, Father has become increasingly infirm. So much so that even the duties of an under-butler are now beyond his capabilities. His lordship is of the view, as indeed I am myself, that while Father is allowed to continue with his present round of duties, he represents an ever-present threat to the smooth running of this household, and in particular to next week’s important international gathering.’

My father’s face, in the half-light, betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

‘Principally,’ I continued, ‘it has been felt that Father should no longer be asked to wait at table, whether or not guests are present.’

‘I have waited at table every day for the last fifty-four years,’ my father remarked, his voice perfectly unhurried.

‘Furthermore, it has been decided that Father should not carry laden trays of any sort for even the shortest distances. In view of these limitations, and knowing Father’s esteem for conciseness, I have listed here the revised round of duties he will from now on be expected to perform.’

I felt disinclined actually to hand to him the piece of paper I was holding, and so put it down on the end of his bed. My father glanced at it then returned his gaze to me. There was still no trace of emotion discernible in his expression, and his hands on the

back of the chair appeared perfectly relaxed. Hunched over or not, it was impossible not to be reminded of the sheer impact of his physical presence – the very same that had once reduced two drunken gentlemen to sobriety in the back of a car. Eventually, he said:

‘I only fell that time because of those steps. They’re crooked. Seamus should be told to put those right before someone else does the same thing.’

‘Indeed. In any case, may I be assured Father will study that sheet?’

‘Seamus should be told to put those steps right. Certainly before these gentlemen start arriving from Europe.’

‘Indeed. Well, Father, good morning.’

That summer evening referred to by Miss Kenton in her letter came very soon after that encounter – indeed, it may have been the evening of that same day. I cannot remember just what purpose had taken me up on to the top floor of the house to where the row of guest bedrooms line the corridor. But as I think I have said already, I can recall vividly the way the last of the daylight was coming through each open doorway and falling across the corridor in orange shafts. And as I walked on past those unused bedrooms, Miss Kenton’s figure, a silhouette against a window within one of them, had called to me.

When one thinks about it, when one remembers the way Miss Kenton had repeatedly spoken to me of my father during those early days of her time at Darlington Hall, it is little wonder that the memory of that evening should have stayed with her all of these years. No doubt, she was feeling a certain sense of guilt as the two of us watched from our window my father’s figure down below. The shadows of the poplar trees had fallen across much of the lawn, but the sun was still lighting up the far corner where the grass sloped up to the summerhouse. My father could be seen standing by those four stone steps, deep in thought. A breeze was slightly disturbing his hair. Then, as we watched, he walked very slowly up the steps. At the top, he turned and came back down, a little faster. Turning once more, my father became still again for several seconds, contemplating the steps before him. Eventually, he climbed them a second time, very deliberately. This time he continued on across the grass until he had almost

reached the summerhouse, then turned and came walking slowly back, his eyes never leaving the ground. In fact, I can describe his manner at that moment no better than the way Miss Kenton puts it in her letter; it was indeed ‘as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there’.

But I see I am becoming preoccupied with these memories and this is perhaps a little foolish. This present trip represents, after all, a rare opportunity for me to savour to the full the many splendours of the English countryside, and I know I shall greatly regret it later if I allow myself to become unduly diverted. In fact, I notice I have yet to record here anything of my journey to this city – aside from mentioning briefly that halt on the hillside road at the very start of it. This is an omission indeed, given how much I enjoyed yesterday’s motoring.

I had planned the journey here to Salisbury with considerable care, avoiding almost entirely the major roads; the route might have seemed unnecessarily circuitous to some, but then it was one that enabled me to take in a fair number of the sights recommended by Mrs J. Symons in her excellent volumes, and I must say I was well pleased with it. For much of the time it took me through farmland, amidst the pleasant aroma of meadows, and often I found myself slowing the Ford to a crawl to better appreciate a stream or a valley I was passing. But as I recall, I did not actually disembark again until I was quite near Salisbury.

On that occasion, I was moving down a long, straight road with wide meadows on either side of me. In fact, the land had become very open and flat at that point, enabling one to see a considerable distance in all directions, and the spire of Salisbury Cathedral had become visible on the skyline up ahead. A tranquil mood had come over me, and for this reason I believe I was again motoring very slowly – probably at no more than fifteen miles per hour. This was just as well, for I saw only just in time a hen crossing my path in the most leisurely manner. I brought the Ford to a halt only a foot or two from the fowl, which in turn ceased its journey, pausing there in the road in front of me. When after a moment it had not moved, I resorted to the car horn, but this had no effect other than to make the creature commence pecking at something on the ground. Rather exasperated, I began to get out and had one foot still on the running board when I heard a woman’s voice calclass=”underline”

‘Oh, I do beg your pardon, sir.’

Glancing round, I saw I had just passed on the roadside a farm cottage – from which a young woman in an apron, her attention no doubt aroused by the horn, had come running. Passing me, she swooped up the hen in her arms and proceeded to cradle it as she apologized to me again. When I assured her no harm had been done, she said:

‘I do thank you for stopping and not running poor Nellie over. She’s a good girl, provides us with the largest eggs you’ve ever seen. It’s so good of you to stop. And you were probably in a hurry too.’

‘Oh, I’m not in a hurry at all,’ I said with a smile. ‘For the first time in many a year, I’m able to take my time and I must say, it’s rather an enjoyable experience. I’m just motoring for the pleasure of it, you see.’

‘Oh, that’s nice, sir. And you’re on your way to Salisbury, I expect.’

‘I am indeed. In fact, that’s the cathedral we can see over there, isn’t it? I’m told it’s a splendid building.’

‘Oh, it is, sir, it’s very nice. Well, to tell you the truth, I hardly go into Salisbury myself, so I couldn’t really say what it’s like at close quarters. But I tell you, sir, day in day out we have a view of the steeple from here. Some days, it’s too misty and it’s like it’s vanished altogether. But you can see for yourself, on a fine day like this, it’s a nice sight.’

‘Delightful.’

‘I’m so grateful you didn’t run over our Nellie, sir. Three years ago a tortoise of ours got killed like that and on just about this very spot. We were all very upset over that.’

‘How very tragic,’ I said, sombrely.

‘Oh, it was, sir. Some people say we farm people get used to animals being hurt or killed, but that’s just not true. My little boy cried for days. It’s so good you stopped for Nellie, sir. If you’d care to come in for a cup of tea, now that you’ve got out and everything, you’d be most welcome. It would set you on your way.’

‘That’s most kind, but really, I feel I should continue. I’d like to reach Salisbury in good time to take a look at the city’s many charms.’

‘Indeed, sir. Well, thank you again.’

I set off again, maintaining for some reason – perhaps because I expected further farm creatures to wander across my path – my slow speed of before. I must say, something about this small encounter had put me in very good spirits; the simple kindness I had been thanked for, and the simple kindness I had been offered in return, caused me somehow to feel exceedingly uplifted about the whole enterprise facing me over these coming days. It was in such a mood, then, that I proceeded here to Salisbury.

But I feel I should return just a moment to the matter of my father; for it strikes me I may have given the impression earlier that I treated him rather bluntly over his declining abilities. The fact is, there was little choice but to approach the matter as I did – as I am sure you will agree once I have explained the full context of those days. That is to say, the important international conference to take place at Darlington Hall was by then looming ahead of us, leaving little room for indulgence or ‘beating about the bush’. It is important to be reminded, moreover, that although Darlington Hall was to witness many more events of equal gravity over the fifteen or so years that followed, that conference of March 1923 was the first of them; one was, one supposes, relatively inexperienced, and inclined to leave little to chance. In fact, I often look back to that conference and, for more than one reason, regard it as a turning point in my life. For one thing, I suppose I do regard it as the moment in my career when I truly came of age as a butler. That is not to say I consider I became, necessarily, a ‘great’ butler; it is hardly for me, in any case, to make judgements of this sort. But should it be that anyone ever wished to posit that I have attained at least a little of that crucial quality of ‘dignity’ in the course of my career, such a person may wish to be directed towards that conference of March 1923 as representing the moment when I first demonstrated I might have a capacity for such a quality. It was one of those events which at a crucial stage in one’s development arrive to challenge and stretch one to the limit of one’s ability and beyond, so that thereafter one has new standards by which to judge oneself. That conference was also memorable, of course, for other quite separate reasons, as I would like now to explain.

The conference of 1923 was the culmination of long planning on the part of Lord Darlington; indeed, in retrospect, one can see clearly how his lordship had been moving towards this point from some three years or so before. As I recall, he had not been initially so preoccupied with the peace treaty when it was drawn up at the end of the Great War, and I think it is fair to say that his interest was prompted not so much by an analysis of the treaty, but by his friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann.

Herr Bremann first visited Darlington Hall very shortly after the war while still in his officer's uniform, and it was evident to any observer that he and Lord Darlington had struck up a close friendship. This did not surprise me, since one could see at a glance that Herr Bremann was a gentleman of great decency. He returned again, having left the German army, at fairly regular intervals during the following two years, and one could not help noticing with some alarm the deterioration he underwent from one visit to the next. His clothes became increasingly impoverished, his frame thinner; a hunted look appeared in his eyes, and on his last visits, he would spend long periods staring into space, oblivious of his lordship's presence or, sometimes, even of having been addressed. I would have concluded Herr Bremann was suffering from some serious illness, but for certain remarks his lordship made at that time assuring me this was not so.

It must have been towards the end of 1920 that Lord Darlington made the first of a number of trips to Berlin himself, and I can remember the profound effect it had on him. A heavy air of preoccupation hung over him for days after his return, and I recall once, in reply to my inquiring how he had enjoyed his trip, his remarking:

'Disturbing, Stevens. Deeply disturbing. It does us great discredit to treat a defeated foe like this. A complete break with the traditions of this country.'

But there is another memory that has remained with me very vividly in relation to this matter. Today, the old banqueting hall no longer contains a table and that spacious room, with its high and magnificent ceiling, serves Mr Farraday well as a sort of gallery. But in his lordship's day, that room was regularly required, as was the long table that occupied it, to seat thirty or more guests for dinner; in fact, the banqueting hall is so spacious that when necessity demanded it, further tables were added to the existing one to enable almost fifty to be seated. On normal days, of course, Lord Darlington took his meals, as does Mr Farraday today, in the more intimate atmosphere of the dining room, which is ideal for accommodating up to a dozen. But

on that particular winter's night I am recollecting the dining room was for some reason out of use, and Lord Darlington was dining with a solitary guest – I believe it was Sir Richard Fox, a colleague from his lordship's Foreign Office days – in the vastness of the banqueting hall. You will no doubt agree that the hardest of situations as regards dinner-waiting is when there are just two diners present. I would myself much prefer to wait on just one diner, even if he were a total stranger. It is when there are two diners present, even when one of them is one's own employer, that one finds it most difficult to achieve that balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence that is essential to good waiting; it is in this situation that one is rarely free of the suspicion that one's presence is inhibiting the conversation.

On that occasion, much of the room was in darkness, and the two gentlemen were sitting side by side midway down the table – it being much too broad to allow them to sit facing one another – within the pool of light cast by the candles on the table and the crackling hearth opposite. I decided to minimize my presence by standing in the shadows much further away from table than I might usually have done. Of course, this strategy had a distinct disadvantage in that each time I moved towards the light to serve the gentlemen, my advancing footsteps would echo long and loud before I reached the table, drawing attention to my impending arrival in the most ostentatious manner; but it did have the great merit of making my person only partially visible while I remained stationary. And it was as I was standing like that, in the shadows some distance from where the two gentlemen sat amidst those rows of empty chairs, that I heard Lord Darlington talk about Herr Bremann, his voice as calm and gentle as usual, somehow resounding with intensity around those great walls.

'He was my enemy,' he was saying, 'but he always behaved like a gentleman. We treated each other decently over six months of shelling each other. He was a gentleman doing his job and I bore him no malice. I said to him: "Look here, we're enemies now and I'll fight you with all I've got. But when this wretched business is over, we shan't have to be enemies any more and we'll have a drink together." Wretched thing is, this treaty is making a liar out of me. I mean to say, I told him we wouldn't be enemies once it was all over. But how can I look him in the face and tell him that's turned out to be true?'

And it was a little later that same night that his lordship said with some gravity, shaking his head:

‘I fought that war to preserve justice in this world. As far as I understood, I wasn’t taking part in a vendetta against the German race.’

And when today one hears talk about his lordship, when one hears the sort of foolish speculations concerning his motives as one does all too frequently these days, I am pleased to recall the memory of that moment as he spoke those heartfelt words in the near-empty banqueting hall. Whatever complications arose in his lordship’s course over subsequent years, I for one will never doubt that a desire to see ‘justice in this world’ lay at the heart of all his actions.

It was not long after that evening there came the sad news that Herr Bremann had shot himself in a train between Hamburg and Berlin. Naturally, his lordship was greatly distressed and immediately made plans to dispatch funds and commiserations to Frau Bremann. However, after several days of endeavour, in which I myself did my best to assist, his lordship was not able to discover the whereabouts of any of Herr Bremann’s family. He had, it seemed, been homeless for some time and his family dispersed.

It is my belief that even without this tragic news, Lord Darlington would have set upon the course he took; his desire to see an end to injustice and suffering was too deeply ingrained in his nature for him to have done otherwise. As it was, in the weeks that followed Herr Bremann’s death, his lordship began to devote more and more hours to the matter of the crisis in Germany. Powerful and famous gentlemen became regular visitors to the house – including, I remember, figures such as Lord Daniels, Professor Maynard Keynes, and Mr H. G. Wells, the renowned author, as well as others who, because they came ‘off the record’, I should not name here – and they and his lordship were often to be found locked in discussion for hours on end.

Some of the visitors were, in fact, so ‘off the record’ that I was instructed to make sure the staff did not learn their identities, or in some cases, even glimpse them. However – and I say this with some pride and gratitude – Lord Darlington never made any efforts to conceal things from my own eyes and ears; I can recall on numerous occasions, some personage breaking off in mid-sentence to glance warily towards my person, only for his lordship to say:

‘Oh, that’s all right. You can say anything in front of Stevens, I can assure you.’

Steadily, then, over the two years or so following Herr Bremann's death, his lordship, together with Sir David Cardinal, who became his closest ally during that time, succeeded in gathering together a broad alliance of figures who shared the conviction that the situation in Germany should not be allowed to persist. These were not only Britons and Germans, but also Belgians, French, Italians, Swiss; they were diplomats and political persons of high rank; distinguished clergymen; retired military gentlemen; writers and thinkers. Some were gentlemen who felt strongly, like his lordship himself, that fair play had not been done at Versailles and that it was immoral to go on punishing a nation for a war that was now over. Others, evidently, showed less concern for Germany or her inhabitants, but were of the opinion that the economic chaos of that country, if not halted, might spread with alarming rapidity to the world at large.

By the turn of 1922, his lordship was working with a clear goal in mind. This was to gather under the very roof of Darlington Hall the most influential of the gentlemen whose support had been won with a view to conducting an 'unofficial' international conference – a conference that would discuss the means by which the harshest terms of the Versailles treaty could be revised. To be worthwhile, any such conference would have to be of sufficient weight so that it could have a decisive effect on the 'official' international conferences – several of which had already taken place with the express purpose of reviewing the treaty, but which had succeeded in producing only confusion and bitterness. Our Prime Minister of that time, Mr Lloyd George, had called for another great conference to be held in Italy in the spring of 1922, and initially his lordship's aim was to organize a gathering at Darlington Hall with a view to ensuring a satisfactory outcome to this event. For all the hard work on his and Sir David's part, however, this proved too harsh a deadline; but then with Mr George's conference ending yet again in indecision, his lordship set his sights on a further great conference scheduled to take place in Switzerland the following year.

I can remember one morning around this time bringing Lord Darlington coffee in the breakfast room, and his saying to me as he folded The Times with some disgust:

'Frenchmen. Really, I mean to say, Stevens. Frenchmen.'

'Yes, sir.'

‘And to think we have to be seen by the world to be arm in arm with them. One wishes for a good bath at the mere reminder.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Last time I was in Berlin, Stevens, Baron Overath, old friend of my father, came up and said: “Why do you do this to us? Don’t you see we can’t go on like this?” I was jolly well tempted to tell him it’s those wretched Frenchmen. It’s not the English way of carrying on, I wanted to say. But I suppose one can’t do things like that. Mustn’t speak ill of our dear allies.’

But the very fact that the French were the most intransigent as regards releasing Germany from the cruelties of the Versailles treaty made all the more imperative the need to bring to the gathering at Darlington Hall at least one French gentleman with unambiguous influence over his country’s foreign policy. Indeed, I heard several times his lordship express the view that without the participation of such a personage, any discussion on the topic of Germany would be little more than an indulgence. He and Sir David accordingly set upon this final crucial lap of their preparations and to witness the unswerving determination with which they persevered in the face of repeated frustrations was a humbling experience; countless letters and telegrams were dispatched and his lordship himself made three separate trips to Paris within the space of two months. Finally, having secured the agreement of a certain extremely illustrious Frenchman – I will merely call him ‘M. Dupont’ – to attend the gathering on a very strict ‘off the record’ basis, the date for the conference was set. That is to say, for that memorable March of 1923.

As this date grew ever nearer, the pressures on myself, though of an altogether more humble nature than those mounting on his lordship, were nevertheless not inconsequential. I was only too aware of the possibility that if any guest were to find his stay at Darlington Hall less than comfortable, this might have repercussions of unimaginable largeness. Moreover, my planning for the event was complicated by the uncertainty as to the numbers involved. The conference being of a very high level, the participants had been limited to just eighteen very distinguished gentlemen and two ladies – a German countess and the formidable Mrs Eleanor Austin, at that time still resident in Berlin; but each of these might reasonably bring secretaries, valets and interpreters, and there proved no way of ascertaining the precise number of such persons to expect. Furthermore, it became clear that a number of the parties would be arriving some time before the three days set aside for the conference, thus giving

themselves time to prepare their ground and gauge the mood of fellow guests, though their exact arrival dates were, again, uncertain. It was clear then that the staff would not only have to work extremely hard, and be at their most alert, they would also have to be, unusually flexible. In fact, I was for some time of the opinion that this huge challenge ahead of us could not be surmounted without my bringing in additional staff from outside. However, this option, quite aside from the misgivings his lordship was bound to have as regards gossip travelling, entailed my having to rely on unknown quantities just when a mistake could prove most costly. I thus set about preparing for the days ahead as, I imagine, a general might prepare for a battle: I devised with utmost care a special staff plan anticipating all sorts of eventualities; I analysed where our weakest points lay and set about making contingency plans to fall back upon in the event of these points giving way; I even gave the staff a military-style ‘pep-talk’, impressing upon them that, for all their having to work at an exhausting rate, they could feel great pride in discharging their duties over the days that lay ahead. ‘History could well be made under this roof,’ I told them. And they, knowing me to be one not prone to exaggerated statements, well understood that something of an extraordinary nature was impending.

You will understand then something of the climate prevailing around Darlington Hall by the time of my father’s fall in front of the summerhouse – this occurring as it did just two weeks before the first of the conference guests were likely to arrive – and what I mean when I say there was little room for any ‘beating about the bush’. My father did, in any case, rapidly discover a way to circumvent the limitations on his effectiveness implied by the stricture that he should carry no laden trays. The sight of his figure pushing a trolley loaded with cleaning utensils, mops, brushes arranged incongruously, though always tidily, around teapots, cups and saucers, so that it at times resembled a street-hawker’s barrow, became a familiar one around the house. Obviously he still could not avoid relinquishing his waiting duties in the dining room, but otherwise the trolley enabled him to accomplish a surprising amount. In fact, as the great challenge of the conference drew nearer, an astonishing change seemed to come over my father. It was almost as though some supernatural force possessed him, causing him to shed twenty years; his face lost much of the sunken look of recent times, and he went about his work with such youthful vigour that a stranger might have believed there were not one but several such figures pushing trolleys about the corridors of Darlington Hall.

As for Miss Kenton, I seem to remember the mounting tension of those days having a noticeable effect upon her. I recall, for instance, the occasion around that time I happened to encounter her in the back corridor. The back corridor, which serves as a sort of backbone to the staff's quarters of Darlington Hall, was always a rather cheerless affair due to the lack of daylight penetrating its considerable length. Even on a fine day, the corridor could be so dark that the effect was like walking through a tunnel. On that particular occasion, had I not recognized Miss Kenton's footsteps on the boards as she came towards me, I would have been able to identify her only from her outline. I paused at one of the few spots where a bright streak of light fell across the boards and, as she approached, said:

'Ah, Miss Kenton.'

'Yes, Mr Stevens?'

'Miss Kenton, I wonder if I may draw your attention to the fact that the bed linen for the upper floor will need to be ready by the day after tomorrow.'

'The matter is perfectly under control, Mr Stevens.'

'Ah, I'm very glad to hear it. It just struck me as a thought, that's all.'

I was about to continue on my way, but Miss Kenton did not move. Then she took one step more towards me so that a bar of light fell across her face and I could see the angry expression on it.

'Unfortunately, Mr Stevens, I am extremely busy now and I am finding I have barely a single moment to spare. If only I had as much spare time as you evidently do, then I would happily reciprocate by wandering about this house reminding you of tasks you have perfectly well in hand.'

'Now, Miss Kenton, there is no need to become so bad-tempered. I merely felt the need to satisfy myself that it had not escaped your attention…'

'Mr Stevens, this is the fourth or fifth time in the past two days you have felt such a need. It is most curious to see that you have so much time on your hands that you are able to simply wander about this house bothering others with gratuitous comments.'

‘Miss Kenton, if you for one moment believe I have time on my hands, that displays more clearly than ever your great inexperience. I trust that in years to come, you will gain a clearer picture of what occurs in a house like this.’

‘You are perpetually talking of my “great inexperience,” Mr Stevens, and yet you appear quite unable to point out any defect in my work. Otherwise I have no doubt you would have done so long ago and at some length. Now, I have much to be getting on with and would appreciate your not following me about and interrupting me like this. If you have so much time to spare, I suggest it might be more profitably spent taking some fresh air.’

She stamped past me and on down the corridor. Deciding it best to let the matter go no further, I continued on my way. I had almost reached the kitchen doorway when I heard the furious sounds of her footsteps coming back towards me again.

‘In fact, Mr Stevens,’ she called, ‘I would ask you from now on not to speak to me directly at all.’

‘Miss Kenton, whatever are you talking about?’

‘If it is necessary to convey a message, I would ask you to do so through a messenger. Or else you may like to write a note and have it sent to me. Our working relationship, I am sure, would be made a great deal easier.’

‘Miss Kenton…’

‘I am extremely busy, Mr Stevens. A written note if the message is at all complicated. Otherwise you may like to speak to Martha or Dorothy, or any members of the male staff you deem sufficiently trustworthy. Now I must return to my work and leave you to your wanderings.’

Irritating as Miss Kenton’s behaviour was, I could not afford to give it much thought, for by then the first of the guests had arrived. The representatives from abroad were not

expected for a further two or three days, but the three gentlemen referred to by his lordship as his ‘home team’ – two Foreign Office ministers attending very much Off the record’ and Sir David Cardinal – had come early to prepare the ground as thoroughly as possible. As ever, little was done to conceal anything from me as I went in and out of the various rooms in which these gentlemen sat deep in discussion, and I thus could not avoid gaining a certain impression of the general mood at this stage of the proceedings. Of course, his lordship and his colleagues were concerned to brief each other as accurately as possible on each one of the expected participants; but overwhelmingly, their concerns centred on a single figure – that of M. Dupont, the French gentleman – and on his likely sympathies and antipathies. Indeed, at one point, I believe I came into the smoking room and heard one of the gentlemen saying:

‘The fate of Europe could actually hang on our ability to bring Dupont round on this point.’

It was in the midst of these preliminary discussions that his lordship entrusted me with a mission sufficiently unusual for it to have remained in my memory to this day, alongside those other more obviously unforgettable occurrences that were to take place during that remarkable week. Lord Darlington called me into his study, and I could see at once that he was in a state of some agitation. He seated himself at his desk and, as usual, resorted to holding open a book – this time it was Who’s Who – turning a page to and fro.

‘Oh, Stevens,’ he began with a false air of nonchalance, but then seemed at a loss how to continue.

I remained standing there ready to relieve his discomfort at the first opportunity. His lordship went on fingering his page for a moment, leaned forward to scrutinize an entry, then said:

‘Stevens, I realize this is a somewhat irregular thing to ask you to do.’

‘Sir?’

‘It’s just that one has so much of importance on one’s mind just now.’

‘I would be very glad to be of assistance, sir.’

‘I’m sorry to bring up a thing like this, Stevens. I know you must be awfully busy yourself. But I can’t see how on earth to make it go away.’

I waited a moment while Lord Darlington returned his attention to Who’s Who. Then he said, without looking up:

‘You are familiar, I take it, with the facts of life.’

‘Sir?’

The facts of life, Stevens. Birds, bees. You are familiar, aren’t you?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you, sir.’

‘Let me put my cards on the table, Stevens. Sir David is a very old friend. And he’s been invaluable in organizing the present conference. Without him, I dare say, we’d not have secured M. Dupont’s agreement to come.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘However, Stevens, Sir David has his funny side. You may have noticed it yourself. He’s brought his son, Reginald, with him. To act as secretary. The point is, he’s engaged to be married. Young Reginald, I mean.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Sir David has been attempting to tell his son the facts of life for the last five years. The young man is now twenty-three.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘I’ll get to the point, Stevens. I happen to be the young man’s godfather. Accordingly, Sir David has requested that I convey to young Reginald the facts of life.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘Sir David himself finds the task rather daunting and suspects he will not accomplish it before Reginald’s wedding day.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘The point is, Stevens, I’m terribly busy. Sir David should know that, but he’s asked me none the less.’

His lordship paused and went on studying his page.

‘Do I understand, sir,’ I said, ‘that you wish me to convey the information to the young gentleman?’

‘If you don’t mind, Stevens. Be an awful lot off my mind. Sir David continues to ask me every couple of hours if I’ve done it yet.’

‘I see, sir. It must be most trying under the present pressures.’

‘Of course, this is far beyond the call of duty, Stevens.’

‘I will do my best, sir. I may, however, have difficulty finding the appropriate moment to convey such information.’

‘I’d be very grateful if you’d even try, Stevens. Awfully decent of you. Look here, there’s no need to make a song and dance of it. Just convey the basic facts and be done with it. Simple approach is the best, that’s my advice, Stevens.’

‘Yes, sir. I shall do my best.’

‘Jolly grateful to you, Stevens. Let me know how you get on.’

I was, as you might imagine, a little taken aback by this request and ordinarily the matter might have been one I would have spent some time pondering. Coming upon me as it did, however, in the midst of such a busy period, I could not afford to let it preoccupy me unduly, and I thus decided I should resolve it at the earliest opportunity. As I recall, then, it was only an hour or so after being first entrusted with the mission that I noticed the young Mr Cardinal alone in the library, sitting at one of the writing tables, absorbed in some documents. On studying the young gentleman closely, one could, as it were, appreciate the difficulty experienced by his lordship – and indeed, by the young gentleman’s father. My employer’s godson looked an earnest, scholarly young man, and one could see many fine qualities in his features; yet given the topic one wished to raise, one would have certainly preferred a lighter-hearted, even a more frivolous sort of young gentleman. In any case, resolved to bring the whole matter to a satisfactory conclusion as quickly as possible, I proceeded further into the library, and stopping a little way from Mr Cardinal’s writing desk, gave a cough.

‘Excuse me, sir, but I have a message to convey to you.’

‘Oh, really?’ Mr Cardinal said eagerly, looking up from his papers. ‘From Father?’

‘Yes, sir. That is, effectively.’

‘Just a minute.’

The young gentleman reached down into the attache case at his feet and brought out a notebook and pencil.

‘Tire away, Stevens.’

I coughed again and set my voice into as impersonal a tone as I could manage.

‘Sir David wishes you to know, sir, that ladies and gentlemen differ in several key respects.’

I must have paused a little to form my next phrase, for Mr Cardinal gave a sigh and said:

‘I’m only too aware of that, Stevens. Would you mind coming to the point?’

‘You are aware, sir?’

‘Father is perpetually underestimating me. I’ve done extensive reading and background work on this whole area.’

‘Is that so, sir?’

‘I’ve thought about virtually nothing else for the past month.’

‘Really, sir. In that case, perhaps my message is rather redundant.’

‘You can assure Father I’m very well briefed indeed. This attache case’ – he nudged it with his foot – ‘is chock-full of notes on every possible angle one can imagine.’

‘Is that so, sir?’

‘I really think I’ve thought through every permutation the human mind is capable of. I wish you’d reassure Father of that.’

‘I will, sir.’

Mr Cardinal seemed to relax a little. He prodded once more his attache case – which I felt inclined to keep my eyes averted from – and said:

‘I suppose you’ve been wondering why I never let go of this case. Well, now you know. Imagine if the wrong person opened it.’

‘That would be most awkward, sir.’

‘That is, of course,’ he said, sitting up again suddenly, ‘unless Father has come up with an entirely new factor he wants me to think about.’

‘I cannot imagine he has, sir.’

‘No? Nothing more on this Dupont fellow?’

‘I fear not, sir.’

I did my best not to give away anything of my exasperation on discovering that a task I had thought all but behind me was in fact still there unassaulted before me. I believe I was collecting my thoughts for a renewed effort when the young gentleman suddenly rose to his feet, and clutching his attache case to his person, said:

‘Well, I think I’ll go and take a little fresh air. Thanks for your help, Stevens.’

It had been my intention to seek out a further interview with Mr Cardinal with minimum delay, but this proved to be impossible, owing largely to the arrival that same afternoon – some two days earlier than expected – of Mr Lewis, the American senator. I had been down in my pantry working through the supplies sheets, when I had heard somewhere above my head the unmistakable sounds of motor cars pulling up in the courtyard. As I hastened to go upstairs, I happened to encounter Miss Kenton in the back corridor – the scene, of course, of our last disagreement – and it was perhaps this unhappy coincidence that encouraged her to maintain the childish behaviour she had adopted on that previous occasion. For when I inquired who it was that had arrived, Miss Kenton continued past me, stating simply:

‘A message if it is urgent, Mr Stevens.’

This was extremely annoying, but, of course, I had no choice but to hurry on upstairs.

My recollection of Mr Lewis is that of a gentleman of generous dimensions with a genial smile that rarely left his face. His early arrival was clearly something of an inconvenience to his lordship and his colleagues who had reckoned on a day or two more of privacy for their preparations. However, Mr Lewis's engagingly informal manner, and his statement at dinner that the United States 'would always stand on the side of justice and didn't mind admitting mistakes had been made at Versailles' seemed to do much to win the confidence of his lordship's 'home team'; as dinner progressed, the conversation had slowly but surely turned from topics such as the merits of Mr Lewis's native Pennsylvania back to the conference ahead, and by the time the gentlemen were lighting their cigars, some of the speculations being offered appeared to be as intimate as those exchanged prior to Mr Lewis's arrival. At one point, Mr Lewis said to the company:

'I agree with you, gentlemen, our M. Dupont can be very unpredictable. But let me tell you, there's one thing you can bet on about him. One thing you can bet on for sure.' He leaned forward and waved his cigar for emphasis. 'Dupont hates Germans. He hated them before the war and he hates them now with a depth you gentlemen here would find hard to understand.' With that, Mr Lewis sat back in his chair again, the genial smile returning fully to his face. 'But tell me, gentlemen,' he continued, 'you can hardly blame a Frenchman for hating the Germans, can you? After all, a Frenchman has good cause to do so, hasn't he?'

There was a moment of slight awkwardness as Mr Lewis glanced around the table. Then Lord Darlington said:

'Naturally, some bitterness is inevitable. But then, of course, we English also fought the Germans long and hard.'

'But the difference with you Englishmen,' Mr Lewis said, 'seems to be that you don't really hate the Germans any more. But the way the French see it, the Germans destroyed civilization here in Europe and no punishment is too bad for them. Of course, that looks an impractical kind of position to us in the United States, but what's always puzzled me is how you English don't seem to share the view of the French. After all, like you say, Britain lost a lot in that war too.'

There was another awkward pause before Sir David said, rather uncertainly:

‘We English have often had a different way of looking at such things from the French, Mr Lewis.’

‘Ah. A kind of temperamental difference, you might say.’

Mr Lewis’s smile seemed to broaden slightly as he said this. He nodded to himself, as though many things had now become clear to him, and drew on his cigar. It is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory, but I have a distinct feeling that it was at that moment I first sensed something odd, something duplicitous perhaps, about this apparently charming American gentleman. But if my own suspicions were aroused at that moment, Lord Darlington evidently did not share them. For after another second or two of awkward silence, his lordship seemed to come to a decision.

‘Mr Lewis,’ he said, ‘let me put it frankly. Most of us in England find the present French attitude despicable. You may indeed call it a temperamental difference, but I venture we are talking about something rather more. It is unbecoming to go on hating an enemy like this once a conflict is over. Once you’ve got a man on the canvas, that ought to be the end of it. You don’t then proceed to kick him. To us, the French behaviour has become increasingly barbarous.’

This utterance seemed to give Mr Lewis some satisfaction. He muttered something in sympathy and smiled with contentment at his fellow diners through the clouds of tobacco smoke by now hanging thickly across the table.

The next morning brought more early arrivals; namely, the two ladies from Germany – who had travelled together despite what one would have imagined to have been the great contrast in their backgrounds – bringing with them a large team of ladies-in-waiting and footmen, as well as a great many trunks. Then in the afternoon, an Italian gentleman arrived accompanied by a valet, a secretary, an ‘expert’ and two bodyguards. I cannot imagine what sort of place this gentleman imagined he was coming to in bringing the latter, but I must say it struck something of an odd note to see in Darlington Hall these two large silent men staring suspiciously in all directions a few yards from wherever the Italian gentleman happened to be. Incidentally, the working pattern of these bodyguards, so it transpired over the following days, entailed

one or the other of them going up to sleep at unusual hours so as to ensure at least one was on duty throughout the night. But when on first hearing of this arrangement I tried to inform Miss Kenton of it, she once again refused to converse with me, and in order to accomplish matters as quickly as possible I was actually obliged to write a note and put it under the door of her parlour.

The following day brought several more guests and with two days yet to go to the start of the conference, Darlington Hall was filled with people of all nationalities, talking in rooms, or else standing around, apparently aimlessly, in the hall, in corridors and on landings, examining pictures or objects. The guests were never less than courteous to one another, but for all that, a rather tense atmosphere, characterized largely by distrust, seemed to prevail at this stage. And reflecting this unease, the visiting valets and footmen appeared to regard one another with marked coldness and my own staff were rather glad to be too busy to spend much time with them.

It was around this point, in the midst of dealing with the many demands being made on my attention, that I happened to glance out of a window and spotted the figure of the young Mr Cardinal taking some fresh air around the grounds. He was clutching his attache case as usual and I could see he was strolling slowly along the path that runs the outer perimeter of the lawn, deeply absorbed in thought. I was of course reminded of my mission regarding the young gentleman and it occurred to me that an outdoor setting, with the general proximity of nature, and in particular the example of the geese close at hand, would not be an unsuitable setting at all in which to convey the sort of message I was bearing. I could see, moreover, that if I were quickly to go outside and conceal my person behind the large rhododendron bush beside the path, it would not be long before Mr Cardinal came by. I would then be able to emerge and convey my message to him. It was not, admittedly, the most subtle of strategies, but you will appreciate that this particular task, though no doubt important in its way, hardly took the highest priority at that moment.

There was a light frost covering the ground and much of the foliage, but it was a mild day for that time of the year. I crossed the grass quickly, placed my person behind the bush, and before long heard Mr Cardinal’s footsteps approaching. Unfortunately, I misjudged slightly the timing of my emergence. I had intended to emerge while Mr Cardinal was still a reasonable distance away, so that he would see me in good time and suppose I was on my way to the summerhouse, or perhaps to the gardener’s lodge. I could then have pretended to notice him for the first time and have engaged him in conversation in an impromptu manner. As it happened, I emerged a little late

and I fear I rather startled the young gentleman, who immediately pulled his attache case away from me and clutched it to his chest with both arms.

‘I’m very sorry, sir.’

‘My goodness, Stevens. You gave me a shock. I thought things were hotting up a bit there.’

‘I’m very sorry, sir. But as it happens, I have something to convey to you.’

‘My goodness, yes, you gave me quite a fright.’

‘If I may come straight to the point, sir. You will notice the geese not far from us.’

‘Geese?’ He looked around a little bewildered. ‘Oh yes. That’s what they are.’

‘And likewise the flowers and shrubs. This is not, in fact, the best time of year to see them in their full glory, but you will appreciate, sir, that with the arrival of spring, we will see a change – a very special sort of change – in these surroundings.’

‘Yes, I’m sure the grounds are not at their best just now. But to be perfectly frank, Stevens, I wasn’t paying much attention to the glories of nature. It’s all rather worrying. That M. Dupont’s arrived in the foulest mood imaginable. Last thing we wanted really.’

‘M. Dupont has arrived here at this house, sir?’

‘About half an hour ago. He’s in the most foul temper.’

‘Excuse me, sir. I must attend to him straight away.’

‘Of course, Stevens. Well, kind of you to have come out to talk to me.’

‘Please excuse me, sir. As it happened, I had a word or two more to say on the topic of – as you put it yourself – the glories of nature. If you will indulge me by listening, I

would be most grateful. But I am afraid this will have to wait for another occasion.'

'Well, I shall look forward to it, Stevens. Though I'm more of a fish man myself. I know all about fish, fresh water and salt.'

'All living creatures will be relevant to our forthcoming discussion, sir. However, you must now please excuse me. I had no idea M. Dupont had arrived.'

I hurried back to the house to be met immediately by the first footman saying:

'We've been looking all over for you, sir. The French gentleman's arrived.'

M. Dupont was a tall, elegant gentleman with a grey beard and a monocle. He had arrived in the sort of clothes one often sees continental gentlemen wearing on their holidays, and indeed, throughout his stay, he was to maintain diligently the appearance of having come to Darlington Hall entirely for pleasure and friendship. As Mr Cardinal had indicated, M. Dupont had not arrived in a good temper; I cannot recall now all the various things that had upset him since his arrival in England a few days previously, but in particular he had obtained some painful sores on his feet while sightseeing around London and these, he feared, were growing septic. I referred his valet to Miss Kenton, but this did not prevent M. Dupont snapping his fingers at me every few hours to say:

'Butler! I am in need of more bandages.'

His mood seemed much lifted on seeing Mr Lewis. He and the American senator greeted each other as old colleagues and they were to be seen together for much of the remainder of that day, laughing over reminiscences. In fact, one could see that Mr Lewis's almost constant proximity to M. Dupont was proving a serious inconvenience to Lord Darlington, who was naturally keen to make close personal contact with this distinguished gentleman before the discussions began. On several occasions I witnessed his lordship make attempts to draw M. Dupont aside for some private conversation, only for Mr Lewis smilingly to impose himself upon them with some remark like: 'Pardon me, gentlemen, but there's something that's been greatly puzzling me,' so that his lordship soon found himself having to listen to some more of Mr Lewis's jovial anecdotes. Mr Lewis apart, however, the other guests, perhaps through awe, perhaps through a sense of antagonism, kept a wary distance from M.

Dupont, a fact that was conspicuous even in that generally guarded atmosphere, and which seemed to underline all the more the feeling that it was M. Dupont who somehow held the key to the outcome of the following days.

The conference began on a rainy morning during the last week of March 1923 in the somewhat unlikely setting of the drawing room – a venue chosen to accommodate the 'off the record' nature of many of the attendances. In fact, to my eyes, the appearance of informality had been taken to a faintly ludicrous degree. It was odd enough to see that rather feminine room crammed full with so many stern, dark-jacketed gentlemen, sometimes sitting three or four abreast upon a sofa; but such was the determination on the part of some persons to maintain the appearance that this was nothing more than a social event that they had actually gone to the lengths of having journals and newspapers open on their knees.

I was obliged during the course of that first morning to go constantly in and out of the room, and so was unable to follow the proceedings at all fully. But I recall Lord Darlington opening the discussions by formally welcoming the guests, before going on to outline the strong moral case for a relaxing of various aspects of the Versailles treaty, emphasizing the great suffering he had himself witnessed in Germany. Of course, I had heard these same sentiments expressed by his lordship on many occasions before, but such was the depth of conviction with which he spoke in this august setting that I could not help but be moved afresh. Sir David Cardinal spoke next, and though I missed much of his speech, it seemed to be more technical in substance, and quite frankly, rather above my head. But his general gist seemed to be close to his lordship's, concluding with a call for a freezing of German reparation payments and the withdrawal of French troops from the Ruhr region. The German countess then began to speak, but I was at this point, for some reason I do not recollect, obliged to leave the drawing room for an extended period. By the time I reentered, the guests were in open debate, and the discussion – with much talk of commerce and interest rates – was quite beyond me.

M. Dupont, so far as I could observe, was not contributing to the discussions, and it was hard to tell from his sullen demeanour if he was attending carefully to what was being said or else deeply engrossed in other thoughts. At one stage, when I happened to depart the room in the midst of an address by one of the German gentlemen, M. Dupont suddenly rose and followed me out.

‘Butler,’ he said, once we were in the hall, ‘I wonder if I could have my feet changed. They are giving me so much discomfort now, I can hardly listen to these gentlemen.’

As I recall, I had conveyed a plea to Miss Kenton for assistance – via a messenger, naturally – and had left M. Dupont sitting in the billiard room awaiting his nurse, when the first footman had come hurrying down the staircase in some distress to inform me that my father had been taken ill upstairs.

I hurried up to the first floor and on turning at the landing was met by a strange sight. At the far end of the corridor, almost in front of the large window, at that moment filled with grey light and rain, my father’s figure could be seen frozen in a posture that suggested he was taking part in some ceremonial ritual. He had dropped down on to one knee and with head bowed seemed to be pushing at the trolley before him, which for some reason had taken on an obstinate immobility. Two chambermaids were standing at a respectful distance, watching his efforts in some awe. I went to my father and releasing his hands from their grip on the edge of the trolley, eased him down on to the carpet. His eyes were closed, his face was an ashen colour, and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. Further assistance was called, a bath-chair arrived in due course, and my father was transported up to his room.

Once my father had been laid in his bed, I was a little uncertain as to how to proceed; for while it seemed undesirable that I leave my father in such a condition, I did not really have a moment more to spare. As I stood hesitating in the doorway, Miss Kenton appeared at my side and said:

‘Mr Stevens, I have a little more time than you at the moment. I shall, if you wish, attend to your father. I shall show Dr Meredith up and notify you if he has anything noteworthy to say.’

‘Thank you, Miss Kenton,’ I said, and took my leave.

When I returned to the drawing room, a clergyman was talking about the hardships being suffered by children in Berlin. I immediately found myself more than occupied replenishing the guests with tea and coffee. A few of the gentlemen, I noticed, were drinking spirits, and one or two, despite the presence of the two ladies, had started to smoke. I was, I recall, leaving the drawing room with an empty teapot in my hand when Miss Kenton stopped me and said:

‘Mr Stevens, Dr Meredith is just leaving now.’

As she said this, I could see the doctor putting on his mackintosh and hat in the hall and so went to him, the teapot still in my hand. The doctor looked at me with a disgruntled expression.

‘Your father’s not so good,’ he said. ‘If he deteriorates, call me again immediately.’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘How old is your father, Stevens?’

‘Seventy-two, sir.’

Dr Meredith thought about this, then said again:

‘If he deteriorates, call me immediately.’

I thanked the doctor again and showed him out.

It was that evening, shortly before dinner, that I overheard the conversation between Mr Lewis and M Dupont. I had for some reason gone up to M. Dupont’s room and was about to knock, but before doing so, as is my custom, I paused for a second to listen at the door. You may not yourself be in the habit of taking this small precaution to avoid knocking at some highly inappropriate moment, but I always have been and can vouch that it is common practice amongst many professionals. That is to say, there is no subterfuge implied in such an action, and I for one had no intention of overhearing to the extent I did that evening. However, as fortune would have it, when I put my ear to M. Dupont’s door, I happened to hear Mr Lewis’s voice, and though I cannot recall precisely the actual words I first heard, it was the tone of his voice that raised my suspicions. I was listening to the same genial, slow voice with which the American gentleman had charmed many since his arrival and yet it now contained something unmistakably covert. It was this realization, along with the fact that he was in M.

Duponf’s room, presumably addressing this most crucial personage, that caused me to stop my hand from knocking, and continue to listen instead.

The bedroom doors of Darlington Hall are of a certain thickness and I could by no means hear complete exchanges; consequently, it is hard for me now to recall precisely what I overheard, just as, indeed, it was for me later that same evening when I reported to his lordship on the matter. Nevertheless, this is not to say I did not gain a fairly clear impression of what was taking place within the room. In effect, the American gentleman was putting forward the view that M. Dupont was being manipulated by his lordship and other participants at the conference; that M. Dupont had been deliberately invited late to enable the others to discuss important topics in his absence; that even after his arrival, it was to be observed that his lordship was conducting small private discussions with the most important delegates without inviting M. Dupont. Then Mr Lewis began to report certain remarks his lordship and others had made at dinner on that first evening after his arrival.

‘To be quite frank, sir,’ I heard Mr Lewis say, ‘I was appalled at their attitude towards your countrymen. They actually used words like ‘‘barbarous” and “despicable”. In fact, I noted them in my diary only a few hours afterwards.’

M. Dupont said something briefly which I did not catch, then Mr Lewis said again:

‘Let me tell you, sir, I was appalled. Are these words to use about an ally you stood shoulder to shoulder with only a few years back?’

I am not sure now if I ever proceeded to knock; it is quite possible, given the alarming nature of what I heard, that I judged it best to withdraw altogether. In any case, I did not linger long enough – as I was obliged to explain to his lordship shortly afterwards – to hear anything that would give a clue as to M. Dupont’s attitude to Mr Lewis’s

remarks.

The next day, the discussions in the drawing room appeared to reach a new level of intensity and by lunch-time, the exchanges were becoming rather heated. My impression was that utterances were being directed accusingly, and with increasing boldness, towards the armchair where M. Dupont sat fingering his beard, saying little. Whenever the conference adjourned, I noticed, as no doubt his lordship did with some concern, that Mr Lewis would quickly take M. Dupont away to some corner or other where they could confer quietly. Indeed, once, shortly after lunch, I recall I came upon the two gentlemen talking rather furtively just inside the library doorway, and it was my distinct impression they broke off their discussion upon my approach.

In the meantime, my father's condition had grown neither better nor worse. As I understood, he was asleep for much of the time, and indeed, I found him so on the few occasions I had a spare moment to ascend to that little attic room. I did not then have a chance actually to converse with him until that second evening after the return of his illness.

On that occasion, too, my father was sleeping when I entered. But the chambermaid Miss Kenton had left in attendance stood up upon seeing me and began to shake my father's shoulder.

'Foolish girl!' I exclaimed. 'What do you think you are doing?'

'Mr Stevens said to wake him if you returned, sir.'

'Let him sleep. It's exhaustion that's made him ill.'

'He said I had to, sir,' the girl said, and again shook my father's shoulder.

My father opened his eyes, turned his head a little on the pillow, and looked at me.

'I hope Father is feeling better now,' I said.

He went on gazing at me for a moment, then asked:

'Everything in hand downstairs?'

The situation is rather volatile. It is just after six o’clock, so Father can well imagine the atmosphere in the kitchen at this moment.’

An impatient look crossed my father’s face.

‘But is everything in hand?’ he said again.

‘Yes, I dare say you can rest assured on that. I’m very glad Father is feeling better.’

With some deliberation, he withdrew his arms from under the bedclothes and gazed tiredly at the backs of his hands. He continued to do this for some time.

‘I’m glad Father is feeling so much better,’ I said again eventually. ‘Now really, I’d best be getting back. As I say, the situation is rather volatile.’

He went on looking at his hands for a moment. Then he said slowly:

‘I hope I’ve been a good father to you.’

I laughed a little and said:

‘I’m so glad you’re feeling better now.’

‘I’m proud of you. A good son. I hope I’ve been a good father to you. I suppose I haven’t.’

‘I’m afraid we’re extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning.’

My father was still looking at his hands as though he were faintly irritated by them.

‘I’m so glad you’re feeling better now,’ I said again and took my leave.

On descending, I found the kitchen on the brink of pandemonium, and in general, an extremely tense atmosphere amongst all levels of staff. However, I am pleased to

recall that by the time dinner was served an hour or so later, nothing but efficiency and professional calm was exhibited on the part of my team.

It is always something of a memorable sight to see that magnificent banqueting hall employed to its full capacity and that evening was no exception. Of course, the effect produced by unbroken lines of gentlemen in evening suits, so outnumbering representatives of the fairer sex, was a rather severe one; but then again, in those days, the two large chandeliers that hang over the table still ran on gas – resulting in a subtle, quite soft light pervading the room – and did not produce the dazzling brightness they have done ever since their electrification. On that second and final dinner of the conference – most guests were expected to disperse after lunch the following day – the company had lost much of the reserve that had been noticeable throughout the previous days. Not only was the conversation flowing more freely and loudly, we found ourselves serving out wine at a conspicuously increased rate. At the close of dinner, which from a professional viewpoint had been executed without any significant difficulties, his lordship rose to address his guests.

He opened by expressing his gratitude to all present that the discussions during the previous two days, ‘though at times exhilaratingly frank’, had been conducted in a spirit of friendship and the desire to see good prevail. The unity witnessed over the two days had been greater than he could ever have hoped for, and the remaining morning’s session of ‘rounding up’ would, he trusted, be rich in commitments on the part of participants concerning action each would be taking before the important international conference in Switzerland. It was around this point – and I have no idea if he had planned to do so beforehand – that his lordship began to reminisce about his late friend, Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann. This was a little unfortunate, the topic being one close to his lordship’s heart and one he was inclined to explicate at some length. It should also be said, perhaps, that Lord Darlington was never what might be called a natural public speaker, and soon all those small sounds of restlessness that betray that an audience’s attention has been lost grew steadily around the room. Indeed, by the time Lord Darlington had finally come round to bidding his guests rise and drink to ‘peace and justice in Europe’, the level of such noises – perhaps on account of the liberal amounts of wine that had been consumed – struck me as bordering on the ill-mannered.

The company had seated themselves again, and conversation was just beginning to resume, when there came an authoritative rapping of knuckles upon wood and M.

Dupont had risen to his feet. At once, a hush fell over the room. The distinguished gentleman glanced around the table with a look almost of severity. Then he said:

‘I hope I am not trespassing over a duty ascribed to someone else present here, but then I had heard no proposals for anyone to give a toast in thanks to our host, the most honourable and kind Lord Darlington.’

There was a murmur of approval. M. Dupont went on:

‘Many things of interest have been said in this house over the past days. Many important things.’

He paused, and there was now utter stillness in the room.

‘There has been much,’ he continued, ‘which has implicitly or otherwise criticized – it is not so strong a word – criticized the foreign policy of my country.’ He paused again, looking rather stern. One might even have thought him to be angry. ‘We have heard in these two days several thorough and intelligent analyses of the present very complex situation in Europe. But none of them, may I say, has fully comprehended the reasons for the attitude France has adopted towards her neighbour. However’ – he raised a finger – ‘this is not the time to enter into such debates.

In fact, I deliberately refrained from entering into such debates during these past days because I came principally to listen. And let me say now that I have been impressed by certain of the arguments I have heard here. But how impressed, you may be asking.’ M. Dupont took another pause during which his gaze travelled in an almost leisurely manner around all the faces fixed upon him. Then at last he said: ‘Gentlemen – and ladies, pardon me – I have given much thought to these matters and I wish to say here in confidence to you, that while there remain between myself and many of those present differences of interpretation as to what is really occurring in Europe at this moment, despite this, as to the main points that have been raised in this house, I am convinced, gentlemen, convinced both of their justice and their practicality.’

A murmur which seemed to contain both relief and triumph went around the table, but this time M. Dupont raised his voice slightly and pronounced over it:

‘I am happy to assure you all here that I will bring what modest influence I have to encourage certain changes of emphasis in French policy in accordance with much of what has been said here. And I will endeavour to do so in good time for the Swiss conference.’

There was a ripple of applause, and I saw his lordship exchange a look with Sir David. M. Dupont held up his hand, though whether to acknowledge the applause or to stem it was not clear.

‘But before I go on to thank our host, Lord Darlington, I have some small thing I would wish to remove from my chest. Some of you may say it is not good manners to be removing such things from one’s chest at the dinner table.’ This brought enthusiastic laughter. ‘However, I am for frankness in these matters. Just as there is an imperative to express gratitude formally and publicly to Lord Darlington, who has brought us here and made possible this present spirit of unity and goodwill, there is, I believe, an imperative to openly condemn any who come here to abuse the hospitality of the host, and to spend his energies solely in trying to sow discontent and suspicion. Such persons are not only socially repugnant, in the climate of our present day they are extremely dangerous.’

He paused again and once more there was utter stillness. M. Dupont went on in a calm, deliberate voice:

‘My only question concerning Mr Lewis is this. To what extent does his abominable behaviour exemplify the attitude of the present American administration? Ladies and gentlemen, let me myself hazard a guess as to the answer, for such a gentleman capable of the levels of deceit he has displayed over these past days should not be relied upon to provide a truthful reply. So, I will hazard my guess. Of course, America is concerned about our debt payments to her in the event of a freeze in German reparations. But I have over the last six months had occasion to discuss this very matter with a number of very highly placed Americans, and it seems to me that thinking in that country is much more far-sighted than that represented by their countryman here. All those of us who care for the future well-being of Europe will take comfort from the fact that Mr Lewis is now – how shall we put it? – hardly the influence he once was. Perhaps you think me unduly harsh to express these things so openly. But the reality is, ladies and gentlemen, I am being merciful. You see, I refrain from outlining just what this gentleman has been saying to me – about you all. And with a most clumsy technique, the audacity and crudeness of which I could hardly believe.

But enough of condemnations. It is time for us to thank. Join me then, please, ladies and gentlemen, in raising your glasses to Lord Darlington.'

M. Dupont had not once looked over in Mr Lewis's direction during the course of this speech, and indeed, once the company had toasted his lordship and were seated again, all those present seemed to be studiously avoiding looking towards the American gentleman. An uneasy silence reigned for a moment, and then finally Mr Lewis rose to his feet. He was smiling pleasantly in his customary manner.

'Well, since everyone's giving speeches, I may as well take a turn,' he said, and it was at once apparent from his voice that he had had a good deal to drink. 'I don't have anything to say to the nonsense our French friend has been uttering. I just dismiss that sort of talk. I've had people try to put one over on me many times, and let me tell you, gentlemen, few people succeed. Few people succeed.' Mr Lewis came to a halt and for a moment seemed at a loss as to how he should go on. Eventually he smiled again and said: 'As I say, I'm not going to waste my time on our French friend over there. But as it happens, I do have something to say. Now we're all being so frank, I'll be frank too. You gentlemen here, forgive me, but you are just a bunch of na?ve dreamers. And if you didn't insist on meddling in large affairs that affect the globe, you would actually be charming. Let's take our good host here. What is he? He is a gentleman. No one here, I trust, would care to disagree. A classic English gentleman. Decent, honest, well-meaning. But his lordship here is an amateur.' He paused at the word and looked around the table. 'He is an amateur and international affairs today are no longer for gentlemen amateurs. The sooner you here in Europe realize that the better. All you decent, well-meaning gentlemen, let me ask you, have you any idea what sort of place the world is becoming all around you? The days when you could act out of your noble instincts are over. Except of course, you here in Europe don't yet seem to know it. Gentlemen like our good host still believe it's their business to meddle in matters they don't understand. So much hog-wash has been spoken here these past two days. Well-meaning, na?ve hog-wash. You here in Europe need professionals to run your affairs. If you don't realize that soon you're headed for disaster. A toast, gentlemen. Let me make a toast. To professionalism.'

There was a stunned silence and no one moved. Mr Lewis shrugged, raised his glass to all the company, drank and sat back down. Almost immediately, Lord Darlington stood up.

‘I have no wish,’ his lordship said, ‘to enter into a quarrel on this our last evening together which we all deserve to enjoy as a happy and triumphant occasion. But it is out of respect for your views, Mr Lewis, that I feel one should not simply cast them to one side as though they were uttered by some soap-box eccentric. Let me say this. What you describe as “amateurism,” sir, is what I think most of us here still prefer to call “honour”.’

This brought a loud murmur of assent with several ‘hear, hear’s’ and some applause.

‘What is more, sir,’ his lordship went on, ‘I believe I have a good idea of what you mean by “professionalism.” It appears to mean getting one’s way by cheating and manipulating. It appears to mean serving the dictates of greed and advantage rather than those of goodness and the desire to see justice prevail in the world. If that is the “professionalism” you refer to, sir, I don’t much care for it and have no wish to acquire it.’

This was met by the loudest burst of approval yet, followed by warm and sustained applause. I could see Mr Lewis smiling at his wine glass and shaking his head wearily. It was just around this stage that I became aware of the first footman beside me, who whispered:

‘Miss Kenton would like a word with you, sir. She’s just outside the door.’

I made my exit as discreetly as possible just as his lordship, still on his feet, was embarking on a further point.

Miss Kenton looked rather upset.

‘Your father has become very ill, Mr Stevens,’ she said. ‘I’ve called for Dr Meredith, but I understand he may be a little delayed.’

I must have looked a little confused, for Miss Kenton then said:

‘Mr Stevens, he really is in a poor state. You had better come and see him.’

‘I only have a moment. The gentlemen are liable to retire to the smoking room at any moment.’

‘Of course. But you must come now, Mr Stevens, or else you may deeply regret it later.’

Miss Kenton was already leading the way, and we hurried through the house up to my father’s small attic room. Mrs Mortimer, the cook, was standing over my father’s bed, still in her apron.

‘Oh, Mr Stevens,’ she said upon our entry, ‘he’s gone very poorly.’

Indeed, my father’s face had gone a dull reddish colour, like no colour I had seen on a living being. I heard Miss Kenton say softly behind me:

‘His pulse is very weak.’

I gazed at my father for a moment, touched his forehead slightly, then withdrew my hand.

‘In my opinion,’ Mrs Mortimer said, ‘he’s suffered a stroke. I’ve seen two in my time and I think he’s suffered a stroke.’

With that, she began to cry. I noticed she reeked powerfully of fat and roast cooking. I turned away and said to Miss Kenton:

‘This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs.’

‘Of course, Mr Stevens. I will tell you when the doctor arrives. Or else when there are any changes.’

‘Thank you, Miss Kenton.’

I hurried down the stairs and was in time to see the gentlemen proceeding into the smoking room. The footmen looked relieved to see me, and I immediately signalled

them to get to their positions.

Whatever had taken place in the banqueting hall after my departure, there was now a genuinely celebratory atmosphere amongst the guests. All around the smoking room, gentlemen seemed to be standing in clusters laughing and clapping each other on the shoulder. Mr Lewis, so far as I could ascertain, had already retired. I found myself making my way through the guests, a bottle of port upon my tray. I had just finished serving a glass to a gentleman when a voice behind me said:

‘Ah, Stevens, you’re interested in fish, you say.’

I turned to find the young Mr Cardinal beaming happily at me. I smiled also and said:

‘Fish, sir?’

‘When I was young, I used to keep all sorts of tropical fish in a tank. Quite a little aquarium it was. I say, Stevens, are you all right?’

I smiled again.

‘Quite all right, thank you, sir.’

‘As you so rightly pointed out, I really should come back here in the spring. Darlington Hall must be rather lovely then. The last time I was here, I think it was winter then too. I say, Stevens, are you sure you’re all right there?’

Perfectly all right, thank you, sir.’

‘Not feeling unwell, are you?’

‘Not at all, sir. Please excuse me.’

I proceeded to serve port to some other of the guests. There was a loud burst of laughter behind me and I heard the Belgian clergyman exclaim:

‘That is really heretical! Positively heretical!’ then laugh loudly himself.

I felt something touch my elbow and turned to find Lord Darlington.

‘Stevens, are you all right?’

‘Yes, sir. Perfectly.’

‘You look as though you’re crying.’

I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face.

‘I’m very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day.’

‘Yes, it’s been hard work.’

Someone addressed his lordship and he turned away to reply. I was about to continue further around the room when I caught sight of Miss Kenton through the open doorway, signalling to me. I began to make my way towards the doors, but before I could reach them, M. Dupont touched my arm.

‘Butler,’ he said, ‘I wonder if you would find me some fresh bandages. My feet are unbearable again.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As I proceeded towards the doors, I realized M. Dupont was following me. I turned and said:

‘I will come and find you, sir, just as soon as I have what is required.’

‘Please hurry, butler. I am in some pain.’

‘Yes, sir. I’m very sorry, sir.’

Miss Kenton was still standing out in the hall where I had first spotted her. As I emerged, she walked silently towards the staircase, a curious lack of urgency in her manner. Then she turned and said:

‘Mr Stevens, I’m very sorry. Your father passed away about four minutes ago.’

‘I see.’

She looked at her hands, then up at my face.

‘Mr Stevens, I’m very sorry,’ she said. Then she added: ‘I wish there was something I could say.’

‘There’s no need, Miss Kenton.’

‘Dr Meredith has not yet arrived.’

Then for a moment she bowed her head and a sob escaped her. But almost immediately, she resumed her composure and asked in a steady voice:

‘Will you come up and see him?’

‘I’m very busy just now, Miss Kenton. In a little while perhaps.’

‘In that case, Mr Stevens, will you permit me to close his eyes?’

‘I would be most grateful if you would, Miss Kenton.’

She began to climb the staircase, but I stopped her, saying:

‘Miss Kenton, please don’t think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now.’

Of course, Mr Stevens.’

‘To do otherwise, I feel, would be to let him down.’

‘Of course, Mr Stevens.’

I turned away, the bottle of port still on my tray, and reentered the smoking room. That relatively small room appeared to be a forest of black dinner jackets, grey hair and cigar smoke. I wended my way past the gentlemen, searching for glasses to replenish. M. Dupont tapped my shoulder and said:

‘Butler, have you seen to my arrangements?’

‘I am very sorry, sir, but assistance is not immediately available at this precise moment.’

‘What do you mean, butler? You’ve run out of basic medical supplies?’

‘As it happens, sir, a doctor is on his way.’

‘Ah, very good! You called a doctor.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good, good.’

M. Dupont resumed his conversation and I continued my way around the room for some moments. At one point, the German countess emerged from the midst of the gentlemen and before I had had a chance to serve her, began helping herself to some port from my tray.

‘You will compliment the cook for me, Stevens,’ she said.

‘Of course, madam. Thank you, madam.’

‘And you and your staff did well also.’

‘Thank you most kindly, madam.’

‘At one point during dinner, Stevens, I would have sworn you were at least three people,’ she said and laughed.

I laughed quickly and said:

‘I’m delighted to be of service, madam.’

A moment later, I spotted the young Mr Cardinal not far away, still standing on his own, and it struck me the young gentleman might be feeling somewhat overawed in the present company. His glass, in any case, was empty and so I started towards him. He seemed greatly cheered at the prospect of my arrival and held out his glass.

‘I think it’s admirable that you’re a nature-lover, Stevens,’ he said, as I served him. ‘And I dare say it’s a great advantage to Lord Darlington to have someone to keep an expert eye on the activities of the gardener.’

‘I’m sorry, sir?’

‘Nature, Stevens. We were talking the other day about the wonders of the natural world. And I quite agree with you, we are all much too complacent about the great wonders that surround us.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I mean, all this we’ve been talking about. Treaties and boundaries and reparations and occupations. But Mother Nature just carries on her own sweet way. Funny to think of it like that, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, indeed it is, sir.’

‘I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better if the Almighty had created us all as – well – as sort of plants. You know, firmly embedded in the soil. Then none of this rot about wars and boundaries would have come up in the first place.’

The young gentleman seemed to find this an amusing thought. He gave a laugh, then on further thought laughed some more. I joined him in his laughter. Then he nudged me and said:

‘Can you imagine it, Stevens?’ and laughed again.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said, laughing also, ‘it would have been a most curious alternative.’

‘But we could still have chaps like you taking messages back and forth, bringing tea, that sort of thing. Otherwise, how would we ever get anything done? Can you imagine it, Stevens? All of us rooted in the soil? Just imagine it!’

Just then a footman emerged behind me.

‘Miss Kenton is wishing to have a word with you, sir,’ he said.

I excused myself from Mr Cardinal and moved towards the doors.

I noticed M. Dupont apparently guarding them and as I approached, he said:

‘Butler, is the doctor here?’

‘I am just going to find out, sir. I won’t be a moment.’

‘I am in some pain.’

‘I’m very sorry, sir. The doctor should not be long now.’

On this occasion, M. Dupont followed me out of the door. Miss Kenton was once more standing out in the hall.

‘Mr Stevens,’ she said, ‘Dr Meredith has arrived and gone upstairs.’

She had spoken in a low voice, but M. Dupont behind me exclaimed immediately:

‘Ah, good!’

I turned to him and said:

‘If you will perhaps follow me, sir.’

I led him into the billiard room where I stoked the fire while he sat down in one of the leather chairs and began to remove his shoes.

‘I’m sorry it is rather cold in here, sir. The doctor will not be long now.’

‘Thank you, butler. You’ve done well.’

Miss Kenton was still waiting for me in the hallway and we ascended through the house in silence. Up in my father’s room, Dr Meredith was making some notes and Mrs Mortimer weeping bitterly. She was still wearing her apron which, evidently, she had been using to wipe away her tears; as a result there were grease marks all over her face, giving her the appearance of a participant in a minstrel show. I had expected the room to smell of death, but on account of Mrs Mortimer – or else her apron – the room was dominated by the smell of roasting.

Dr Meredith rose and said:

‘My condolences, Stevens. He suffered a severe stroke. If it’s any comfort to you, he wouldn’t have suffered much pain. There was nothing in the world you could have done to save him.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I’ll be on my way now. You’ll see to arrangements?’

‘Yes, sir. However, if I may, there is a most distinguished gentleman downstairs in need of your attention.’

‘Urgent?’

‘He expressed a keen desire to see you, sir.’

I led Dr Meredith downstairs, showed him into the billiard room, then returned quickly to the smoking room where the atmosphere, if anything, had grown even more convivial.

Of course, it is not for me to suggest that I am worthy of ever being placed alongside the likes of the ‘great’ butlers of our generation, such as Mr Marshall or Mr Lane – though it should be said there are those who, perhaps out of misguided generosity, tend to do just this. Let me make clear that when I say the conference of 1923, and that night in particular, constituted a turning point in my professional development, I am speaking very much in terms of my own more humble standards. Even so, if you consider the pressures contingent on me that night, you may not think I delude myself unduly if I go so far as to suggest that I did perhaps display, in the face of everything, at least in some modest degree a ‘dignity’ worthy of someone like Mr Marshall – or come to that, my father. Indeed, why should I deny it? For all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph.

Day two afternoon

Mortimer’s Pond, Dorset

It would seem there is a whole dimension to the question ‘what is a “great” butler?’ I have hitherto not properly considered. It is, I must say, a rather unsettling experience to realize this about a matter so close to my heart, particularly one I have given much thought to over the years. But it strikes me I may have been a little hasty before in dismissing certain aspects of the Hayes Society’s criteria for membership. I have no wish, let me make clear, to retract any of my ideas on ‘dignity’ and its crucial link with ‘greatness’. But I have been thinking a little more about that other pronouncement made by the Hayes Society – namely the admission that it was a prerequisite for membership of the Society that ‘an applicant be attached to a distinguished household.’ My feeling remains, no less than before, that this represents a piece of unthinking snobbery on the part of the Society. However, it occurs to me that perhaps what one takes objection to is, specifically, the outmoded understanding of what a ‘distinguished household’ is, rather than to the general principle being expressed. Indeed, now that I think further on the matter, I believe it may well be true to say it is a prerequisite of greatness that one ‘be attached to a distinguished household’ – so long as one takes ‘distinguished’ here to have a meaning deeper than that understood by the Hayes Society.

In fact, a comparison of how I might interpret ‘a distinguished household’ with what the Hayes Society understood by that term illuminates sharply, I believe, the fundamental difference between the values of our generation of butlers and those of the previous generation. When I say this, I am not merely drawing attention to the fact that our generation had a less snobbish attitude as regards which employers were landed gentry and which were ‘business.’ What I am trying to say – and I do not think this an unfair comment – is that we were a much more idealistic generation. Where our elders might have been concerned with whether or not an employer was titled, or otherwise from one of the ‘old’ families, we tended to concern ourselves much more with the moral status of an employer. I do not mean by this that we were preoccupied with our employers’ private behaviour. What I mean is that we were ambitious, in a way that would have been unusual a generation before, to serve gentlemen who were, so to speak, furthering the progress of humanity. It would have been seen as a far worthier calling, for instance, to serve a gentleman such as Mr George Ketteridge, who, however humble his beginnings, has made an undeniable contribution to the future well-being of the empire, than any gentleman however aristocratic his origin, who idled away his time in clubs or on golf courses.

In practice, of course, many gentlemen from the noblest families have tended to devote themselves to alleviating the great problems of the day, and so, at a glance, it may have appeared that the ambitions of our generation differed little from those of our predecessors. But I can vouch there was a crucial distinction in attitude, reflected not only in the sorts of things you would hear fellow professionals express to each other, but in the way many of the most able persons of our generation chose to leave one position for another. Such decisions were no longer a matter simply of wages, the size of staff at one’s disposal or the splendour of a family name; for our generation, I think it fair to say, professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of one’s employer.

I believe I can best highlight the difference between the generations by expressing myself figuratively. Butlers of my father’s generation, I would say, tended to see the world in terms of a ladder – the houses of royalty, dukes and the lords from the oldest families placed at the top, those of ‘new money’ lower down and so on, until one reached a point below which the hierarchy was determined simply by wealth – or the lack of it. Any butler with ambition simply did his best to climb as high up this ladder as possible, and by and large, the higher he went, the greater was his professional prestige. Such are, of course, precisely the values embodied in the Hayes Society’s idea of a ‘distinguished household’, and the fact that it was confidently making such pronouncements as late as 1929 shows clearly why the demise of that society was inevitable, if not long overdue. For by that time, such thinking was quite out of step with that of the finest men emerging to the forefront of our profession. For our generation, I believe it is accurate to say, viewed the world not as a ladder, but more as a wheel. Perhaps I might explain this further.