

Chapter One

Outside Hollywood, What is a Butler?

For most people today, butlers are amusing mannequins on the screen, sometimes starchy, sometimes scathingly sarcastic, but forever symbolizing the discrete pleasures available to those who have arrived.

For me, a butler is a frame of mind rather than a status or a series of duties. It is a mindset that anyone can adopt in any situation in life to very satisfying results, because it is founded on the truths that it is better to serve than be served, and that life can be rational and serene when one assumes responsibility for all things. In almost every person, there is a penguin-suited figure dying to get out and bring order and happiness to the lives of those around him or her. This book may focus on the traditional duties of the British butler, but between the lines and chapters you will discover a mindset that anyone can apply in life—much along the lines of the movie, *Being There*—to bring a surprising level of equanimity and happiness to those in their vicinity.

Officially, according to dictionary consensus, the butler is “a male servant and head of the household.” The Oxford English Dictionary breathes some life into the word with the tidbit that two thousand years ago, “buticula” meant “bottle” to a Roman. Presumably, after enough bacchanalian orgies, the bottle became synonymous with the person bringing it around to the average reveler; and even though the word evolved from Latin, through French and into its current English form of “butler,” the idea has remained essentially the same: a butler is a person who caters to the needs and pleasures of the wealthy.

Like the huge vats and dusty bottles of claret and malmsey that he so lovingly looked after in the cobwebbed cellar, the butler has matured over the centuries into a richer, rarer and more complex figure in the household. This maturing process is best illustrated by reviewing the development of domestic work as a whole in England.

Two thousand years ago, a steward cared for the master’s animals. It took less than a thousand years for the master to realize that he could also use some attention himself. So by the Eleventh Century, the steward had been promoted to supervising the domestic affairs of his master’s castle, such as the service at the table, directing the staff and managing the finances. At that time, the butler, under the steward’s direction, was still only responsible for the wines.

During the Middle Ages in England, most domestic staff were men, usually themselves of “gentle” birth, working for the nobility as part of

their training for court and other activities. The only women who worked were washerwomen, nurses and “gentlewomen” who waited on the ladies of the castle.

By the Seventeenth Century, a major shift had occurred in domestic work with the emergence of a middle class. These merchants, officials and professionals had enough wealth to employ domestics, but were obviously not appropriate employers for gentry on their way up in the world. This middle class thus drew their household staff from the “lower classes” that they treated poorly, affording them little of the respect shown their more educated and refined predecessors.

This new middle class also began to employ more women in their households because they were cheaper and easier to control. The taxing of male servants from 1777 onward reinforced this trend away from male domestic employment: to raise money for the war against the American colonies, even the powder men used prodigiously in their hair was taxed!

Although unusual, women were also employed as “butleresses.” The first female butler on record appears to have been named “Bunch,” and employed in the vicarage of a Reverend Sydney Smith, who said of her, “I...put a napkin in her hand and made her my butler. The girls taught her to read, Mrs. Sydney to wait and I undertook her morals. She became the best butler in the county.”

According to E. S. Turner in *What the Butler Saw*, “In the Eighteenth Century, the duties of butler, *valet* and footman were not so sharply differentiated as they became in the Nineteenth Century. They also included some unusual responsibilities, such as in the story of “the eleventh Duke of Norfolk, known as ‘the dirty duke,’ who regularly drank himself insensible. This gave his servants their only chance to wash him, for he could not face soap and water when sober.”

“A manservant, whatever his nominal title, had to be ready for all sorts of informal duties which could not well be defined in a handbook: guarding his master’s clothes when he went swimming; bleeding his master; holding him down for the surgeon; dragging him from under the dinner table and putting him to bed; depriving him of the means of suicide during attacks of hypochondria; lifting gouty guests into, and out of, carriages; and so on. At election times, if filled full of liquor, he would be ready to bay (shout) at any candidate who held views in conflict with those of his master.”

During the Industrial Revolution in the Nineteenth Century, the middle class expanded still further. Whereas wives had worked in the house alongside the maids, a new expectation grew amongst the middle class: that the wives should not soil their hands with work. These housewives sought to prove they were ladies by acquiring and running the largest

staffs their husbands could or could not afford. At the same time, poorer women who had until then subsisted by cottage industries (e.g. making clothes at home), were undercut by the opening of factories and were thus forced to either work in those factories, or enter domestic service. The result was a burgeoning of the female domestic workforce, so that by the beginning of the Twentieth Century, fully one third (1.3 million) of all women were employed in households other than their own, where they out-numbered the men by 32 to 1.

By this time, the lower rung of the middle class had been redefined in London to include anyone who could afford only three servants. The butler had risen to prominence as the male servant, acting increasingly as the go-between for the employers and the rest of the staff. His phlegmatic approach to resolving the various crises generated by staff and employers alike earned him increasing value in the household.

Working as a domestic at this time varied from the huge households of the aristocracy, with three or four hundred staff, down to those able to afford only one domestic (who had to do everything from scrubbing the floors to cooking the meals).

On large estates, there existed an elaborate hierarchy amongst the servants and an opportunity to advance oneself up the ranks. An errand boy, over time, could become a butler or house steward. A scullery maid (dishwasher) could work her way up to cook. And a chambermaid could rise, in time, to the post of head housekeeper. Those at the bottom of the domestic servant hierarchy often served those at the top.

The butler was responsible for the hiring, firing and the organization of the rest of the household staff. His duties included organizing special functions like dinner parties or receptions. He would manage the household accounts and deal with contractors or any other outside personnel, supervising their work. And he would, of course, also be responsible for buying wine and organizing the wine cellar. The butler would deal with all vendors of goods to be delivered to and used by the household. These butlers acquired their expertise by apprenticeship and learning on the job.

The fixed ideas about classes of people, combined with the lack of real understanding of how to manage people or what made them tick, resulted in repressive and petty treatment of staff. Maids in some households, for instance, could be fired (resulting in no references and thus being forced into prostitution) for being seen after midday—the time by which all their cleaning should be done, and the family free to enjoy the house without hint of servants.

This state of affairs was frequently exacerbated in middle class households by the restricted lifestyles of the ladies of the house, who

were able to find little worthwhile to do with their leisure time other than sitting on top of their servants. Having recently arrived, they maybe felt the need to assert their superiority over their servants. The very wealthy, who already *knew* they were superior, had different problems, developing the usual stable of peccadilloes and eccentricities that characterize those who do nothing worthwhile in life, even having their hair parted by others. The aristocracy and church had a tradition to draw on, and in the case of the gentry, sufficient wealth; so they were more likely to treat their servants with some small dignity and give them some measure of primitive comforts (providing a bed, for instance). Although humanitarian employers certainly existed, the net culture that arose was one of harsh and unrewarding drudgery and petty tyranny that was pleasant for neither the servants nor, ultimately, the employers.

When laborsaving devices were invented in the Nineteenth Century (mainly in the United States), the British middle-class employers retarded household modernization by between fifty and one hundred years with the attitude that these devices were not needed when servants existed to do all the drudgery. They were cheap, after all—a month's wages for a scullery maid in 1900 was little more than ten shillings, the cost of a good dinner at the best hotel. So, it's not surprising that many of the staff they retained were the ones who were willing to be drudges. When domestic robots (metal ones like the two made famous in the *Star Wars* movies) were envisioned in a space-age fantasy in the early Twentieth Century, they were seen as the solution to the lack of intelligent and reliable domestic help.

A number of factors acted to reduce household employment after the First World War, significant among which were the increase in the legal minimum wage for most domestic workers and social security and worker's compensation programs, all of which conspired to raise the cost of employing domestics. After the Second World War, households of forty or more staff—with butlers, valets, first, second and third footmen, steward's room boy, hall boys, chauffeurs, stable staff, gardeners and a full complement of housekeeper and kitchen staffs—all but disappeared in England, together with some of the families and fortunes they had served. Education had improved the employment prospects of men and women alike, and the war had forced them out of the household into other occupations. The end of the war saw few returning to a life of underpaid drudgery.

The many middle-class employers who had created the huge demand for a domestic workforce a century before were anyway no longer able to afford the higher wages and so finally resorted to doing the work themselves, using labor-saving devices. The wealthier employers, who had let their large staffs go to war, had been forced at the same time to curtail their life style by the rationing of such as fuel and food, thus reducing their need for so many staff. Buckingham Palace, with over

three hundred and fifty staff, is one of the few surviving examples of what was once the status quo in wealthy Europe.

Within the last fifty years, the domestic scene has contracted further to the occasional housekeeper or cleaning lady, a driver or more often, gardener. Domestic staff still refers to those who perform the more menial tasks and who continue to be drawn from the poorer and (relatively) less well-educated segments of society. Their numbers have dropped as most wealthy people live in smaller mansions and their staff use modern, laborsaving appliances. Those who choose to afford a traditional butler or his modern American equivalent, the household manager, are generally employing well-educated and increasingly trained service experts.

More than economics, however, the major problems with household work around the world have been inadequate or no training and an incorrect frame of mind—both issues applying to employer and household staff alike.

From Slave to Servant to Staff—Changing Perceptions and Attitudes

Perceptions and expectations of the wealthy and staff alike have changed. No longer is it acceptable to work twenty-hour days, seven-day weeks, and all for \$200 a year. The vestiges of feudalism have disappeared.

Additionally in the last fifty years, media attention on the rich and famous, together with increased education levels and exposure to more cultures, has deflated the mystique the common man held toward those with the power to employ him or her. The British royal family, once the bastion of the upper class and its philosophy of master/servant, has been secularized in the public eye by the media. Ever salivating for a story, which the royals are by definition, the media have barraged every drawing room with familial scandals and financial revelations that have shown the royals to suffer from problems quite the same in essence as any of their subjects, but on a grander scale.

The Christian ethic, that all men are born equal before God, has an important corollary: that some are born more equal than others before they get to meet God—and there is nothing new in this condition. What is new is the understanding that we are all mortals playing out different and transient games on a blob of rock somewhere in a vast universe. Where there is respect for the royal family by the British, it is not based on peasant-like awe at the family's innate superiority, but on their good deeds over the years toward the people they serve, as well as the continuity they provide to those things that the British consider to be their essence. For domestics in particular, wealth, power and status of employers may impress, but ultimately it's only because the wages are

paid and they personally can get along with their employer, that they agree to serve.

Mention “domestic service” to most people today, and a negative response usually follows. As described earlier in this chapter, domestic work has developed a reputation for poorly remunerated drudgery and tyranny. The reasons are simple, as is the cure. There was a time when domestic work was an honored profession, and there is no reason it cannot again be so.

The rich and powerful have had others take care of their domestic chores for centuries. While the Romans used slaves for domestic work (their word for servant actually meant “slave” and the word “free” meant anyone in the household who was related to the head of the household), this perception of servants persisted among the less bright of employers in later centuries. They were plagued with staff problems, naturally, because no slave ever willingly volunteered anything, nor really cared for his or her owner’s welfare, nor stayed longer than he had to.

Such slaves were purchased either on the open market, captured during battle, sold by their families or “bred” from existing stock. Slavery of Moorish and Asiatic boys still existed in the British Isles up until the end of the Seventeenth Century. During the Eighteenth Century, it became quite fashionable for the wealthy to be served by young, black boys or Blackamoors, dressed in fine silk costumes with turbans and plumes. They were often sent to school, instructed in the Christian religion and baptized. This was quite different from the treatment of black slaves in America. It was another 150 years before black slavery was discontinued in the United States.

Looking further at the roots of the culture of bondage in US households, one finds the system of indentured servants first appearing in Virginia during the Seventeenth Century. Penniless Europeans sold themselves to ships’ captains in return for a sea passage to the New World. The captain would then sell them to settlers as indentured, all-purpose servants. These men and women were bound by strict indentures for a fixed term of years (depending upon the size of the debt to be repaid) and could be compelled to do any and every job indoors or outdoors. During their term of indentureship, they were forbidden to enter taverns, marry without permission, stay out at nights, traffic in goods or seek another place of work.

The system had most of the stigmata of slavery, and indeed many Negro slaves were treated more humanely than indentured whites. And not all indentured servants went into this service willingly. If a child’s parents died on the voyage to the New World, he or she was indentured until the age of twenty-one. Some were unwary individuals in seaport towns who were either seduced, knocked senseless, drugged or kidnapped and then

sold to ships' captains bound for the New World. But, if such a servant were tough and resolute, the system offered him a road to independence. By the 1870s, domestic servants became wage earners in the United States and in most European countries. Domestic service had finally evolved from slavery into paid household staff—albeit poorly paid—but still with the lowly status established by its heritage. It is no surprise, therefore, that the most common refrain to be heard among household employers was: “It’s so hard to find good help these days.”

Emily Post couldn't have said it better in 1922, in response to complaints about servants, when she wrote, “Perhaps a servant problem is more often an employer problem. I’m sure it is.” ⁽¹⁾

In 1949, Dorothy Marshall researched the subject thoroughly and brought a sigh of relief to all maligned domestics with the following:

“Every generation considered itself badly served...each generation of employers was convinced that its particular griefs were peculiar to itself, and that the golden age, when servants were everything that they ought to be, was only just beyond its own memory.... It is a pure myth that the majority of servants in the past stayed for years in the same place; most of them were as fond of change as their Twentieth Century counterparts. In practice, also, good servants were rare and their employers terrified that they might leave...thus...the very dependence which most people have upon their servants gave them a bargaining power.” ⁽²⁾

Increasing democracy, free markets, legislation and education have given domestic staff even more opportunity to avoid oppressive employers. But in some undemocratic cultures, no such freedoms exist for some servants who are locked in, abused and even raped without recourse. This kind of employer can count on little staff loyalty while holding the lowest opinion of staff.

You reap what you sow, as the saying goes, and the few employers who treat their staff well are (and were) generally rewarded with loyalty and good service.

It is an interesting question, of course; what is the proper way to treat staff and keep them?

For the last several hundred years, employers have wanted to regiment and control their servants, while treating them with needless humiliations, giving them unnecessary tasks and capricious management, providing poor living and working conditions and low pay. Small wonder that their servant turnover has been high and that domestics developed a culture of unexpressed resentment, finding ways to covertly repay in kind unpleasant guests or employers for indignities and meanness.

Employers have generally wanted robots as domestics because they failed to make the servants and their operating climate sufficiently intelligent to function sensibly. A Lady H., whom I was visiting to determine if we were suitable for each other, presented me one day with a mind-numbing list of actions to do at a precise time each day, such as when to draw which curtain. She had obviously compiled the list in an effort to counteract the omissions she had experienced with former employees. As she showed me round her estate, we came across examples of obvious negligence, such as her own bed unmade at 5.30 p.m. Only two bedrooms and beds needed to be serviced in the house, yet she had several maids scurrying around the house looking worried and busy. She spent the entire interview bemoaning the lack of quality staff and their inability to do the simple actions they were paid to execute.

When I spoke to Lord H, whose businesses employed 75,000 people, he felt I would be unlocking the secret of handling personnel if I could find out why they did not perform the duties they had been instructed to perform. The Lord and Lady in question were so convinced all servants were robots that they were unable to see their own attitude and approach to handling their staff had created that very robot culture. The tradition that the butler is haughty and aloof with inferiors is born of the same out-dated mindset that actually prevents a household from running efficiently and smoothly.

If staff members were properly instructed in the requirements of the house, given principles and rules that they could think with, as well as checklists of actions to undertake, they would undoubtedly fulfill their duties. They would be able to observe and evaluate different situations as they cropped up, and resolve them intelligently. If employers expected the staff to take pride in their work and left them free to do so without continual interruption and recriminations, then the staff would grow gradually into a happy, caring and efficient workforce. They would show initiative within the boundaries set by the employer, and provide the employer with real assistance.

It comes down to the difference between owning a slave, controlling a servant, and employing a staff member.

This attitude problem is not limited to the English; the Americans have their fair share of it, ably described by Desmond Atholl in his book, "At Your Service."

The Butler Today

In response to shifting demands in the marketplace, several different types of butler job-descriptions exist today, each one as valid as the other

when the butler understands and adopts the “mindset” that is unique to the butler.

The very wealthy will always want a formal butler figure, if only for the status symbol he represents. But people of more modest means can also make excellent use of a “butler-combination” to enhance their lifestyles. Any professional family could afford one, as in the television series, “Who’s the Boss?” and “Mr. Belvedere.” He might be called a houseman, a butler or even a house manager, depending upon his duties. Whatever those duties, if he understood the purpose and ethic of the British butler and the standards required in the household, he would be a butler rather than a glorified cook or maid.

The classic concept of the butler is one who answers the phone and door, introducing or screening callers; he looks after the wine cellar, serves the drinks and sometimes lays the table and serves the food. This is a formal and limited role.

An expansion of duties can be found in the butler who acts as the manager of the house and the staff: supervising staff, including hiring and firing; purchasing, and supervising suppliers and contractors. He looks after the needs of the family, from serving morning tea in bed to organizing dinners and events, and acting as a valet.

“Major domo,” literally “chief of the house,” is the Sixteenth Century Spanish and Italian term for the equivalent of this butler administrator. The English used “major domo” to describe butlers or house stewards in wealthy homes abroad, and this term is the one often used in California, with its strong Spanish heritage. The house steward used to perform these same functions in larger estates in England, while the more-lowly butler was assigned them in smaller homes. As the number of large households declined, the steward disappeared and the butler-administrator gradually became the senior male servant. Mr. Hudson, as seen in the TV series, “Upstairs, Downstairs,” approximates this kind of position. As the profession has developed in response to changing social and technological conditions, the term “butler administrator” is being replaced gradually by the term “household manager.”

A butler might also take on the duties of a *valet* or *personal assistant*, organizing his employer’s personal and social life, traveling with him or her, acting both as a business secretary and social secretary—in other words, the “gentleman’s gentleman.” In the Sixteenth Century in England, factotums (literally, “does everything”) managed all personal and household matters for their masters, and were perhaps the precursor of the Twentieth Century personal assistant. The famous Jeeves would be such a character. In America, “personal assistant” is the term generally used for the female equivalent of the gentleman’s gentleman, and

certainly describes in more modern terms the functions of the job, no matter the gender of the holder of the title.

A houseman is a modern day synthesis of the factotum and the Victorian “single-handed manservant.” A jack of all trades, he emerged in the 1930’s as the answer to general domestic needs in private houses and hotels: he would cook, clean, drive, serve at table, look after the children and generally perform all the work that the staff of forty used to perform in England. Such a Man-Friday butler, or houseman, might have a housekeeper, chauffeur and contractors to share in some of the work.

All of the above functions can be mixed, according to the needs of the employer, but it would be impossible for one person to cover them all consistently. If one is busy all day cooking, it is hard to also handle the driving, or the arrangements for the champagne cocktail party for two hundred that weekend.

Some corporations employ butlers, mainly to manage conventions, banquets and meals, but also to run private hotels for their executives and clientele. Along the same line, some hotels have butlers who tend to be a cross between their waiters, the concierge and room service. Butlers are even appearing in catering services to add a touch of class to an otherwise pedestrian occasion. A critical element for butlers in “public service” is that they do not serve one or a few individuals, but a series of guests. The subject of tips is strong in their minds, therefore, because they are usually not well remunerated but are expected to make a good portion of their income from tips. Such butlers are therefore not able to enter entirely into the spirit of selfless service to an individual or family. Those who do their best, of course, understanding the true nature and value of a butler, will probably make the most tips for the very reason that they focus on providing stellar service, not collecting tips.

Another phenomenon that comes with such “commercial” versions of the butler is the degrading of the image and service by calling anything that offers superior service in some small area, “a butler.” Some hotels have launched forth with “bath butlers,” “fireplace butlers,” “technology butlers,” “baby butlers” (who provide rocking chairs and watch children), “dog butlers,” “ski butlers,” and “beach butlers.”

At least when the term valet was extended to “dumb valet,” that furniture item upon which one lays out clothing for the following day, there was no pretence that this was the real item. Fortunately for the profession, the public were not fooled or taken in by these “butlers” and the practice has faded relatively rapidly—before it could sour the public mind on the concept of butlers. Fortunately so for the many butlers working in top hotels around the world, who do justice to the profession.

There is another category of butler: the freelance butler, who hires himself out to families and corporations and provides any of the services listed above. Apart from the work performed, he also provides the cachet and mystique of a butler to help create a special occasion or event.

And lastly, there is the butler who works as a consultant to families who have recently acquired great wealth and need to be shown how to spend it in establishing themselves and their household, while avoiding both miserliness and ostentation. With ninety percent of the millionaires in America being “new money,” there is quite a need for such a service. He or she also consults businesses and corporations on matters concerning quality of staff performance, such as at restaurants, hotels and cruise ships; the presentation of a corporate image; or the production of an event, such as a convention or conference.

The butler can take on additional duties, such as those of toastmaster at large functions, and more recently, as a bodyguard.

How can one claim these widely differing roles are all butlers? Formal butlers of the old school would probably have a discrete apoplectic fit at the idea, while asserting that they were, and are, the only true butlers!

There is a middle ground, however, which is very easy to walk as soon as one defines the essence of butling. Those old-style butlers will go the way of dinosaurs and troglodytes, and the cardboard butlers in the catering businesses will go the way of all cheap imitations, unless they grasp the essential points that make a butler, and apply those to today’s (and tomorrow’s) markets.

A butler exists essentially to smooth the lives of his or her employer and/or family by taking over many household and personal functions they would otherwise have to perform themselves, thus freeing them up for more worthwhile pursuits. But a butler is more than an extra pair of arms and legs. He commits himself to his employers and cares enough to exceed their expectations and create extra-special moments. Good service is only the starting point: it is the creativity in bringing about the moments of exquisite pleasure and happiness that is the butler’s true mission.

A thousand years ago, butlers had to know how to make and care for alcoholic drinks. A hundred years ago, not only did they have to know how to serve the wine and food, but also how to care for the silver, how to valet if required, and even how to run the whole household.

The simple matters that we take for granted, such as packaged products, did not exist back then; they had to be made, grown or raised on site. Toothpaste didn’t arrive in tubes, nor did other cleaning supplies. Wine did not arrive in bottles ready to serve. Refrigerators did not exist. Ice

cream wasn't provided but took hours to churn. Clean-burning, self-cleaning ovens were something a cook could only dream about as she stoked the fire and sweated over the soufflés at the start of an eight-course meal for thirty guests. These large estates achieved the conveniences of modern day, pre-packaged luxuries that many people now enjoy, by employing large numbers of staff who made the products themselves and learnt their trades by apprenticeship and working their way up from the bottom.

In time, changing household needs resulted in the butler taking on more and more duties, so that he might be called upon to do what all the other staff used to do. Today, butlers are used according to the perceptions and needs of their employers. In every case, the idea is that they perform household and personal duties that free up the employer.

Today, living is a technological and bureaucratic tour de force that has resulted in heavy specialization. We hire someone to fix the TV, but he can't or won't clean the swimming pool nor do our taxes. One way to combat such a phenomenon is to hire and train technocrat butlers, who combine the character and personal service of the traditional butler with sufficient skills in the myriad systems we use in society. Such a flexible yet well-grounded individual could relieve employers of the burdens of the day-to-day running of the house. The tray-wielding butler, specialist in decanting fine wines and serving at table, is an anachronism—a figurehead of past glories who can find employment in but a few households today.

But he has a modern counterpart who can be a real asset, not just in the private home or mansion, but even in corporations. There is a market for the tradition and cachet that a butler represents, especially when combined with the technological butler who acts as the right-hand man or woman in the household. The ethic and rationale of a butler stand on their own and have value in modern society, quite apart from the traditions he keeps alive.

And to highlight the main theme of this book, there is nothing a butler does that anyone cannot pick out and do just as well, given the information contained in this book and the opportunity to practice. Whether a housewife or a bachelor, you can use these techniques for entertaining, or handling guests smoothly, or looking after the wardrobe or any number of things. For the husband, there are some pointers for improving the security of the family, or for making a smooth move to another state, or even as simple an idea as a ritual morning tea with the papers for your wife and yourself to start off the day smiling. Even if a person cannot afford a butler or domestic staff, they can always have a hint of the luxuries of the rich and famous if they will do that time-honored of American traditions: improvise and do it themselves!

For the several hundred thousand Americans and many others around the world who have invested in one or more large properties, the smart and only thing to do is hire a trained butler/household manager and let him or her take the weight off your shoulders. You wouldn't try to run your business on your own or take on unskilled employees, so maybe the same principles should apply to "Home, Inc."

As a side-note about the British royal family, it would be a mistake for anyone to think that a book on butling would ever malign the British royal family; maligning anyone, especially an employer, would be a most un-butler-ish thing to do. As a butler is not part of the family yet lives and works intimately with one, he sees members of the family with their hair down and social graces turned off. The attitudes and characteristics required to deal with this phenomenon successfully are in part what make the butler so unique and so prized, and are covered in the next chapter.

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