

THE HELP

THE TRADITIONAL WHITE-GLOVED BUTLER
MORPHS INTO AN ULTRA-MODERN MANAGER.

BY MARGUERITE HAPPE



PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY BESPOKE BUREAU AND THE BRITISH BUTLER ACADEMY



An invisible world underlies the manicured lazes and spotless manses of the ultra-wealthy. From oil magnates and corporate moguls to royals and oligarchs, ultra-high-net-worth individuals often find themselves laden with multiple homes, yachts, private aircraft and acreage. As such, today's rapidly flourishing industry of household staffing produces a flurry of employees who pull strings and coordinate schedules to ensure that properties and people remain immaculately arranged — for those whose lifestyles warrant it, of course. At the very heart of this often-massive effort remains one of the most poignant figures: the butler.

The identity of the modern-day butler is in flux, caught between traditional expectations and modern managerial requirements, explains Steven Ferry, chairman of the

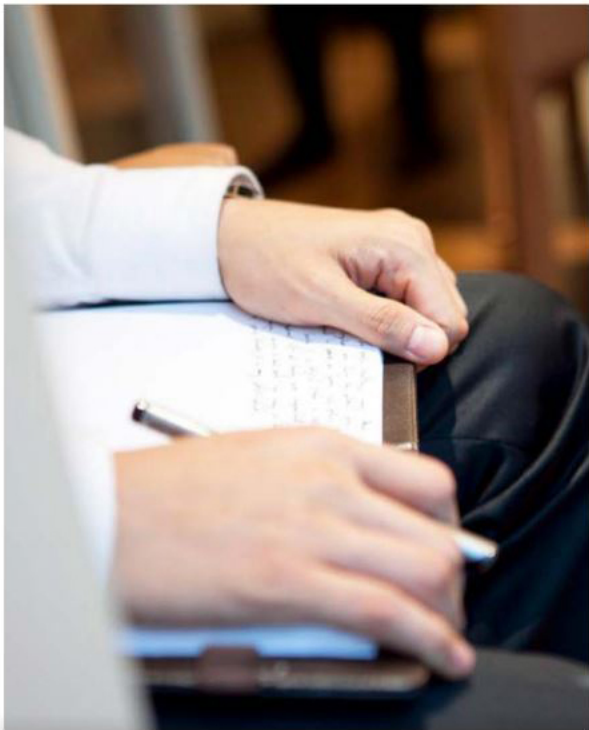
International Institute of Modern Butlers. "There is passion today — an emotional connection instead of the stiff upper lip," he says. "But none of this could work without the centuries of expertise developed by butlers on how to provide service in the closeness of the employer's home." Ferry himself served as a private estate manager before training as a butler under famed household professional Ivor Spencer in the late eighties — something akin to an investment banker cutting his teeth with Warren Buffett.

When I first ask him about the labyrinthine industry of the modern-day butler, Ferry instantly corrects me: "I believe you mean estate or household manager." Indeed, a butler in today's world must possess a skill set that would utterly bemuse the Jeeves of yore. Competence in mixology as well as food and beverage

service are essential, notes Ferry, as are fine art and furnishings selection and care; cigar selection, care and service; crystal, silver and jewelry selection and care; use of in-home entertainment, control and security systems and modern communication devices; care of fine automobiles and chauffeuring; management of flight and nautical staff and equipment; and more.

Training in this specialized industry is no low-budget affair. The eight-week program at the Netherlands' International Butler Academy, for example, runs some \$15,000. Ferry tells me that television shows such as *Downton Abbey* have likely contributed to the strength of the job market. According to Sara Vestin Rahmani, owner of British household-staffing agency Bespoke Bureau and the British Butler Academy, international demand for a traditional butler is growing. "For the new super-rich, an English butler is a status symbol," she explains. "They bring sophistication and Old World charm to the halls of otherwise ostentatious homes, a touch of class alongside the gold taps and garish chandeliers."

The market for household staff is exploding even in the North. Rahmani has placed several butlers throughout the region and hopes to further develop the market in years to come. "We find that our Midwestern clients are keen to experience some old-age British charm in their lives and homes," she notes. She adds that Northerners tend to be fair, straightforward and generous employers. And across the region, more luxury hotels than ever before are offering butler services as an amenity. The Langham, Chicago, for instance, employs a rotating staff of eight butlers specializing in scheduling, unpacking and pressing clothing, watching after children, and even drawing baths.



The household-staffing industry is a competitive if lucrative field. Today's butler might find work at luxury hotels, in palaces, on super yachts or in the cabins of private jets. The pay scale varies depending on position, experience and placement. A beginning salary might start around \$40,000, while someone managing multiple estates, a budget in the hundreds of millions, or tens or hundreds of staffers can bring in \$600,000 a year.

And while the duties of a household manager have certainly evolved, Rahmani says that the most important aspect of the job remains the intimate relationship between employer and employee. "As the relationship grows, the butler gets to observe his master's quirks, his weaknesses and his vices, some of which are not always palatable," she explains. "Once the butler has earned his boss's trust, the lines between master and servant begin to blur. A butler will never expect to be treated equally, nor would he want to be, but the hope is that one day the master will come to rely upon having the butler by his side. This is the unspoken understanding: that one day the balance of power will shift and the butler will know more about what his master wants than the master himself." ●