

TO THE MANOR BORN

Phil Lewis

History, crime, mystery, adventure

An atmospheric piece set in the early 1800s, where the downtrodden Butler gets his revenge on his mean and cruel Master.

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TO THE MANOR BORN

200 years ago there were no banks, no cheque books and bank notes weren't in use. A rich man hid his money in his home, or buried it in the ground. It would take a day or more to travel to London from the suburbs, when today it takes an hour. Today a man walking down the street in a shirt, and jeans, could buy that street from the plastic in his pocket. 200 years ago it would have taken a coach and horses, an armed guard and a great deal of organisation to carry that volume of money.

Here is a story about those bygone problems.

Sometime in the early 1800's

At four-thirty, long before first light, the first of the servants were stirring. Candles were lit and in their dim glow another Monday began. The chill in the small bedrooms made them dress quickly and warmly. In the main rooms of the house, the ashes of the last evening's fires were cleaned away, logs set and lit for the new day. In the kitchen the stoves and fires were re-ignited and large copper kettles began the all day process of boiling water.

As the mansion slowly came to life, the sun crept to the horizon and the first light of day entered the upper mullioned windows. The cook started preparation for breakfast and tasted her first cup of tea of the day. While the servants were busy, she slipped a small tot of rum into the mug and smiled at the inner glow that would provide.

In the stables, the Stable Master awoke his team and returned to his bed for another hour of disturbed rest. The stable boys began the never ending process of clearing out the stables, feeding the horses and lastly grooming them. Their breakfast was a hasty affair with just tea and some left over biscuits from the cook's pantry.

The butler awoke to the chimes of his grandfather's watch and eased himself out to bed. Slipping on a worn gown, he dreaded his master ever seeing, he pulled out the chamber from under the bed and took a moment of pleasure to relieve the pressure in his bladder. He made his way down the narrow hallway to the communal bathroom and took his place first in the queue as entitled by his position in the household.

The Stable Master rose to the aroma of brewed tea and a stable boy's smelly clothing. He thanked him with a nod and eased himself out of the hard bed. He stretched, yawned and quickly put on some warm clothing. These winter mornings would be the death of him. He took his time and eventually appeared in the courtyard fully dressed and started to get the carriage ready for his Lordship. He hustled the boys into getting the horses looking smart and ready for the ten o'clock scheduled departure. Still three hours away, he wanted everything to be correct and ready by then.

The butler was ready to start his day. Freshly shaved and groomed, he brushed the lapels of his coat and headed for the kitchen. A curtly nod to the cook, who placed a large plate in front of him. He smiled at the appetising mixture of fried eggs, bacon and bread. The smell of the freshly baked loaf made his mouth water and he ladled home churned butter onto the cut piece and munched into his first slice. The cook smiled and returned to her preparations for his Lordship.

The dining room table was being set by two downstairs maids, supervised by their superior. Everything had to be exact and in its place. The fire crackled as it bit into the logs and the supervisor turned to ensure nothing

was escaping its greedy embrace. The room was still cold, but it was getting warmer by the minute. She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and saw she had an hour before his Lordship wanted breakfast.

One of the stable boys was despatched to the nearest village and was given the oldest of the horses and told not to over exert the poor beast. Once out of sight of the Mansion, the lad kicked his heels to see what the old girl had left in her. He arrived at the village quickly and had to wait until the local store opened, before collecting the few items of post for the manor. He slipped them into a bag and smiled at the old woman behind the counter. She gave way as usual, giving him a small sweet, which he slipped into his mouth with a grin.

The journey back to the Manor was taken at a more leisurely pace. The cold air hurt the lad's lungs, but the sooner he got back, the sooner he would be given another job he didn't like. He took the back paths and at one stage crossed the main road, not much more than a wide muddy track. Frozen into small icy lakes now, but soon would thaw into a quagmire. The horse splashed through unhindered. The sweeping woodlands gave way to the pastures and the winding track up to the rear of the manor. The lad halted the horse and stroked her mane. Her breath clouding the air along with his. The sweet had gone and soon his escape for an hour would be gone also. Time to take measure of the day and the brief respite and freedom he was allowed. Was life always going to be like this?

The butler helped his Lordship through his ablutions and selected the appropriate clothes for the journey. The two trunks were already packed and in the carriage and he now made the finishing touches to his master's clothing. A scarf and gloves were necessity and several woollen rugs were already on the carriage seat. A final brush and his Lordship was ready for breakfast.

The table was lined with silver tureens, their domed tops closed. His Lordship sat and waited for the servant to make a selection and placed the plate in front of him. He slowly ate his way through the three courses and sipped at his water and tea. The butler stood to one side watching the waiter's every move. Ready to intervene should there be an error in this department, or level of service. He looked at the mantelpiece and noted the time was nine-thirty.

His Lordship pushed the plate away and it was removed instantly. He sat and picked at his teeth and appeared to be in deep thought. He slowly sifted through his small pile of letters and opened each one carefully. He read the contents, grunted or muttered a comment and placed them flat on the table for his secretary to handle later.

The staff waited for him to rise and they could clear away and get the room back into normal order. At long last his Lordship pushed the chair way from him and a servant helped ease it further back. With a look at the butler he was ready to begin his journey to London. He walked from the room and stood by the huge main double-doors. The butler helped him on with his overcoat and gloves. A silver topped cane was handed to him and the door finally opened. The servants lined up in the wall to wish him a good journey and he graciously acknowledged their best wishes.

The coach and four were waiting in the driveway. Their flanks shivering in the cool air. The coachman sat on top with his two whips and tall hat. He touched his hat in respect to the Lord and the butler opened the door to the carriage. His Lordship sat on the leather seats and waited as the Butler arranged the blankets around his legs and feet. Once satisfied the door was closed and the butler climbed up to join the driver. Once on the high perch, the butler pulled on his heavy coat and gloves and nodded for them to be on their way.

The first few roads were nothing more than village paths. The coach struggled to find a purchase in the mud and ice of the overgrown track. His Lordship was thrown around in his compartment and hung on with both hands to handles in the roof. As they turned onto the main road, the buffeting grew easier and his Lordship could relax a little more and looked out at the rolling green and white countryside. He bounced several times as they hit a rut and swerved to avoid a coach or cart coming into the opposite direction. An hour later they

reached the main London road and with a sigh of relief from all three of the coach's passengers, they began to make up time on the slightly smoother road.

High up on the driver's seat, the butler huddled into his coat and tried to stop thinking about the freezing weather. The horses were steaming up and the driver muttered he needed to rest them soon. The butler pulled out his fob watch and noted the time to be eleven-thirty and nodded to the driver.

"Next coaching station. We all need a rest."

They rounded a bend in the mist and the warm yellow lights shone from the small windows of the coaching station. The horses were pulled up at the front door and the butler jumped down to help out his master. His Lordship was stiff and cold and hurried into the warmth of the Inn. The butler opened the door for him then moved quickly past to arrange for a private booth. The landlord looked at the Gentlemen's clothing and increased his house charges accordingly. Two large brandies were ordered and the butler led his Lordship to the dimly lit table in a small booth near the rear of the room.

A fire shed light and warmth across the room and soon his Lordship was able to remove his gloves and drink his brandy. The velvet fire slipped down his throat and warmed him from within. The butler sipped at his drink and was instantly grateful. They sat in silence until his Lordship spoke.

"Better order something to eat. See to it Gibson."

Gibson nodded and left the table. Choosing quality food was always difficult on the road, but his Lordship understood and made do with whatever they had that was their best. Gibson argued with the landlord and came to an agreement and a price. He returned to the table and sat by the fire again.

"It will not be long in coming, my Lord."

His Lordship nodded and blew on his hands.

"Damned cold."

Gibson agreed.

The Coachman had taken the carriage around the rear of the Inn to the stables. Here he unhitched the horses and put them into warm stables. He threw piles of hay and made sure they had plenty of water. He entered the Inn by the rear door and ordered some food and a tankard of strong ale. The first he downed in one swig. The other two took a little longer.

Two hours later Master and Butler felt ready to face the cold again. Gibson went around to the stable to get the coach and team ready. Half an hour later he was helping an unsteady Lordship back into his coach. With a jerk they were back on the road again, heading once more for London. They had a few hours of daylight left and would need to find an overnight Inn by the time it was dark. The roads were too hazardous at night.

His Lordship slept fitfully, rolling around on the back seat. The brandy and wine helping him overcome the rigours of travelling. In the driver's seat a bottle of brandy was shared by the two cold men. Purely for medicinal purposes – and to keep them from freezing to death.

The sun dipped below the horizon and the sunset was beautiful. Gibson smiled at its beauty and hoped an Inn was not too far away. The driver seemed confident he knew a suitable refuge and stated it would be less than half-an-hour distant. As darkness gathered, the lights of a hostelry could be seen in the distance. The horses saw it too and increased their efforts to get somewhere warm and dry to eat.

The coach swung off the road and into the courtyard. Gibson jumped down and saw his master asleep. He nodded to the driver and hurried into the Inn to ensure a decent room for his Lordship. Ten minutes later he returned and had the difficult duty of awakening his master and getting him into the Inn. Once seated by the roaring fire, his Lordship became aware of his surroundings and began to take notice. Gibson slipped his coat onto a peg and began to ease the cold outer clothes off his Lordship.

The landlord, primed by the loyal servant, arrived with hot toddies and a welcoming smile. The Lord drained the glass quickly and ordered a bottle. Pleased with the richer business than his normal patrons, the landlord hurried to his cellar to find the best brandy he could find. In the kitchen, the cook and her assistant were near panicking. They had never cooked for a Lord before, what did they eat? A visit by Gibson ten minutes later settled their fears and a meal was agreed, based on what they had and how well they felt they could cook it. Local game and vegetables were the fare and Gibson's stomach growled in expectation.

Asleep in his small room, his Lordship snored on into the night. In the next room, Gibson listened and smiled. His Lordship would sleep well into the dawn now. He had over indulged in the brandy and had eaten enough to make a normal man satisfied for days. The night was turning cold, but the hot bottle in Gibson's bed would keep him warm. The movement beside him made him turn his head. The young barmaid needed the money and both needed to be warm at night.

Below in the tap room the last stragglers were nursing their tankards and did not want to return to their frozen bedrooms sober. At some time in the morning the last of the customers was assisted out of the door and it was barred and bolted after him. With a last look around, the landlord took a lit candle with him as he climbed the stairs to bed. In a few hours another day would start and his life could continue. Was it always going to be this way? He thought.

Another day dawned to a clear cold sky. In the distance a cockerel wanted everyone to know it was awake. Cows moved restlessly in the nearby field. Gibson eased himself away from the warm body beside him and knew he had to get on with his duties. He patted the girl's adequate rear and left her to turn over for more sleep. He took his few belongings and clothes to the washroom down the hall. His feet cold on the bare floorboards.

In the barn, the coachman turned over on the rustling hay and felt it stick into various parts of his body. He became aware of the daylight and knew he would be needed shortly. His headache was just starting and he knew he had drunk too much the night before. His stiff body was forced vertical and he looked for somewhere to pee.

His Lordship's headache had been developing through the night, but Gibson had an herbal remedy, which he would deliver with the breakfast. His visit to the kitchen proved to be a lonely one. No one else was about, so he rekindled the fire and began to prepare the breakfast for his master.

The sun sparkled on the trees and the hillside. Where it touched, the frost retreated, revealing the green and pleasant land beneath. Slowly the countryside was coming awake on this frozen Tuesday morning. The horses were restless and the coachman fed them more hay. He checked the coach and made sure it was clean and tidy, before hitching his steeds to the shafts. He was ready and waiting at his Lordship's pleasure.

His Lordship sat up in bed and struggled to eat his food. The calming draught had not worked on his headache yet and he was not going to be receptive towards food until it had. He was going to be in bed a while longer.

Gibson agreed with his master and suggested a rest until the head demons disappeared. With a wry smile his Lordship agreed to take the advice.

Gibson returned to the kitchen to find the cook puzzled over the remnants of the breakfast preparations. Gibson explained and paid the woman some coins for her inconvenience. The woman was delighted. He produced another few coins and they began to discuss what victuals he could take with him on his journey. He flirted with the rather plain woman and she responded in a coy manner. He suggested perhaps a bottle of brandy would be good accompaniment to her excellent cooking and she sidled off to find one from the locked storeroom.

A while later, in the stables, Gibson sat with the driver and sipped at the brandy. It warmed them instantly. The food was shared and they breakfasted in style. As his Lordship suffered the pain in his room, they sat and discussed the remains of the journey and possible arrival time in London. The driver knew the address his Lordship wanted to visit and was confident he could find it through the maze of the city's streets and alleyways. The winter sun shone through the open stable door and for a few minutes, there was peace and tranquillity for the two servants.

Once his Lordship was feeling up to the journey, the coach was brought round to the front door and its revered passenger ensconced inside. The driver was instructed to take it easy, as his Lordship was of a delicate disposition. The landlord waved them off from the front door and the barmaid from the upper window. Gibson waved back, his Lordship was too busy hanging on to the meagre contents of his stomach.

The first hour was laborious, with several stops for his Lordship to relieve himself at the side of the road. It was undignified for a Gentleman, but necessary. He complained about the bad food and poor wine at the hostelry and threatened never to return. Gibson was a little saddened at this, but his master's word was law. Every time they stopped the horses became cold and the driver was getting fretful about their health. He conveyed this to Gibson, but it could not be told to his Lordship.

As they passed the milestone which indicated ten miles to London, the driver was feeling a little better about the journey. The roads were improving and they were making up time. His Lordship was feeling ill less often and they could see the end of their journey in sight. They crested a rise and the smoky view partly revealed larger buildings and busier roads. They were nearly there. As they crossed the first of many bridges, they were trapped between a hay wagon and another carriage. The driver used his whip and foul language, but edged his vehicle passed the potential blockage. He muttered under his breath as he guided the difficult four-hander through the narrowing streets.

Gibson bent over at a dangerous angle to see if his Lordship was all right. The elderly man was half asleep on the seat, gently rolling with the motion of the carriage. They headed deeper into the city. Several times they were blocked by broken vehicles, or their contents spilt onto the street. It took a while to clear up the mess and free the paths, but slowly and surely they were heading in the right direction. The solid looking buildings of the city centre rose tall all around them. The driver had seen them many times and his attention was on the horses and the road ahead. But Gibson rarely travelled to London and admired the architecture and wished he had the spare time to see more. As butler to his Lordship he was expected to devote all his time to the Gentleman's needs.

Chimneys belched black smoke and Gibson could smell it in the air. Other smells assailed his nostril and he'd rather not try to imagine what they were. People crowded the pavements and roadways to the point where traffic came to a halt. The driver skilfully manoeuvred his way through all the obstacles and eventually turned into a small street, lined with an impressive frontage. It was discrete and classy. Gibson felt relieved. They had arrived.

The coach stopped outside of a narrow fronted building with leaded windows. Inside a feeble light was shining and Gibson jumped down from his high perch. He opened the door and his Lordship stepped unsteadily from the carriage.

“About bloody time!” was his remark.

Gibson said quietly, “I agree your Lordship.”

The offices of Jacoby, Smythe and Trundle were small but comfortable. Catering to the discerning client, they offered a personal service they advertised as second to none. His Lordship was an infrequent visitor, but an important one. His Lordship sat in a comfortable leather chair and sipped at his tea. As all three major partners sat around him. This show of his importance impressed Lord Hurlock and he smiled as he thanked them for their hospitality.

“We have booked you into the De Vere Cavendish Hotel, if that’s agreeable with you, my Lord.”

Hurlock nodded and looked puzzled, “I am not familiar with that hotel?”

“It is run by Rosa Lewis. Perhaps you may have heard of her. She is better-known as ‘The Duchess of Duke Street’?” Hurlock nodded as recognition dawned. “It is one of the more ‘acceptable’ hotels for your Lordship’s status. It’s just around the corner in Jermyn Street and is very central for London entertainment should you require it.”

“I’m most grateful.” His Lordship nodded.

“Your manservant has already taken your belongings to the hotel and we can meet him there later. But perhaps lunch at my club, then a view of the proposed property?” His Lordship agreed readily.

The small suite of rooms was satisfactory for the single night occupancy of the Lord. Gibson viewed it through the eyes of his master and could find many faults. But it would have to do. He began to unpack the two portmanteaus. The master bedroom was comfortable and relatively warm, once he’d lit the fire. The maid had offered to do the room preparation, but he preferred to do some things himself. She was a very pretty girl and he had spent some time speaking with her. She managed to get a few hours off from work after main dinner was served and they had agreed perhaps she could show him the sights of London for a few hours. He smiled at the thought.

He opened the door to his own small bedroom and began to arrange his clothing and prepare the bed for his eventual sleep much later. It would be difficult to bring the girl back here, with his Lordship sleeping two rooms away. But Gibson was sure his Lordship would be well into his cups by then and wouldn’t hear a gunshot.

A last look around to ensure everything was ready for his Lordship’s first impression and then he straightened his clothing and moved to the foyer, where he would await the eventual return of his master.

Lunch was a leisurely affair, leaving just his Lordship and Trundle seated at the table. The cigars were near their end and the brandy was finished. Hurlock sat back contented. He squinted through the cigar smoke, studied his long time solicitor and smiled. He felt mellow and considerably better than he had first thing that

morning. He dreaded the tiresome return journey the next day, but for now he could relax and enjoy being entertained.

The property to view was a short walk away from the Gentleman's club. The cool air helped sober up the two gentlemen and as they turned the corner, Trundle pointed with pride to the tall terraced house before them. Lord Hurlock looked up at its tall exterior, noting the delicacy of architecture and imagining his visitors' first impression of his new town house. It looked fine. He looked up and down the narrow street and realised how quiet it seemed and that suited him.

"Stables?" asked Lord Hurlock.

"Around to the rear, a small alleyway at the end of this street. Good access and communal paddock behind." Answered Trundle. "Shall we go inside?"

They looked into every nook and cranny of the three-story home. Hurlock imagined how it would look when he had furnished it and how many servants it could comfortably hold. It suited almost every criteria of his search. Even the price was not too abortive. Three hours later they stood on the steps outside and shook hands on the deal.

"I will process all the papers and legal actions and send them to you at your home, Lord Hurlock. As for now, let me show you to your hotel."

By ten-thirty his Lordship was tucked up in bed and almost asleep. Gibson eased the door shut, his duties for the day complete. He crept down the corridor and down the stairs to the foyer. The doorman saluted him as a guest, Gibson responded as he walked through the front door and out into Jermyn Street. He strolled around the corner and into a public house where he had arranged to meet Mary at eleven. He pulled his overcoat tighter around him to keep out the chill and relished the taste of a tankard of ale. He wondered what her tipples would be?

The ale house was smoky and dark and not the place women wanted to be seen in. Gibson looked around and found a resting place near the door. The first draught slipped down easily, but he was smarting about the price. In his local drinking house, the beer was much cheaper. He didn't really mind, he was using the money from his Lordship's travelling purse.

The door opened, letting in a gust of night air. A timid face appeared around the door and Gibson moved quickly towards her. He invited Mary in and asked if she wanted a drink. She shook her head.

"I don't drink liquor. It's against the Lord's will."

"Right, I'll finish this and we'll go somewhere else. Where do you suggest?"

"Well, I have to be back in my room before midnight, so that doesn't leave us much time."

He drained his tankard and left it on the shelf. He opened the door and allowed her to go first. "Perhaps we can sit in the hotel lobby?"

She shook her head, "The 'Duchess' doesn't agree with us staff fraternising with the guests. What does she know, the old cow!"

"Ahh. Well, that does rather limit us. Perhaps another hotel?"

A look of puzzlement came over her face. "Why?"

"Well.....you know....."

"I don't know. What are you suggesting!"

Gibson saw the look of anger building up in her pretty face and smiled. "I.....just wanted to spend some time alone with you. To talk. To get to know you. But clearly you're heavily restricted. Perhaps, next time I'm in London and you get a day off?"

She smiled. "I like you, Mr. Gibson. I really do. You're a realGentlemen."

"A Gentleman's Gentleman, actually."

"You certainly are. I've enjoyed our few moments together, Mr. Gibson. So I would be delighted to meet with you again should you visit London. My day off is Tuesday."

Gibson entered his room and quietly closed the door. He was disappointed that he was alone for the evening, but there was something about that young lady that excited him. He slowly undressed and felt the cold sheets in the bed. He hurried under them and wrapped them quickly around him, shivering until he warmed. He lay thinking about her face, her eyes and her voice. Yes, he would like to see her again.

The coachman shifted in the hay as he heard the horse break wind next to him. He rolled over and tried to get back to sleep. It would be a long and uncomfortable night, but a few nights more and he would be home in his own bed. He hated these long trips as much as anyone else. Was life always going to be like this?

The morning revealed a haze hanging over the city. As Gibson looked out of his small window he shivered in the cold, damp air. The sooner they got back to the relative comfort of his Lordship's mansion, the better. He closed the window and felt the draught whistle through the gap in the frame. He pulled his coat over his nightwear and began to get ready for the day.

His Lordship breakfasted in the restaurant which allowed Gibson to search for Mary the maid. He found her on the second floor and managed to quickly say his goodbye, but promised to keep in touch. She flushed and smiled. He was bold and give her a light kiss on the cheek, which made her redden even more so.

He smiled as she waved goodbye. She stood in the corridor long after he was gone, just thinking about him. Gibson had a spring in his step as he helped his Lordship into the carriage. His Lordship didn't notice, nor should he, but the driver grinned at Gibson's' new air of contentment.

The coach lurched forward at ten o'clock and headed through the sprawling streets of London. Gibson hung on as best he could, while the driver weaved his erratic route through some of the smallest and busiest streets in England. His Lordship sat inside, gripping both handles to cushion the sometime violent movement of the carriage. As the streets thinned and the countryside opened up, all three could relax more and the journey speed increased. By two o'clock they were pulling into a wayside inn.

Gibson noticed it was not the same as the one they stayed in on the way down and was disappointed. That barmaid was particularly welcoming and accommodating. He sighed, at least his Lordship would be able to get

some mind numbing wine into his stomach and perhaps eat something too. They all needed a break from the bouncing ride. The sky was overcast and felt damp. It was not so cold, but travelling in shaky wooden coach, pulled by indifferent horses made the day seem much gloomier and depressing. What was needed was the sight of a warm fire and some warming victuals.

His Lordship sat by the fire and stared into its depths. He let Gibson provide him with a flask of brandy and allowed him to decide what he should eat. Gibson recognised these signs in his master. He had something on his mind and was trying to make a decision. Gibson sat in a separate booth with the driver and they drank ale from large tankards. The horses were being cared for by a stable lad, whom Gibson would pay for when they left. Gibson looked at the travelling purse and realised there was a great deal of money still left. He moved to the bar and ordered two bottles of brandy. One he slipped into the driver's coat, the other he would keep for his Lordship's afternoon journey.

They ate a thin soup and chewed at a carcass that might have been mutton. His lordship had the last of the pheasant the establishment could offer. They were not too used to people with high culinary standards stopping there. The bread was fresh and enjoyable, while the beer was acceptable – in quantity.

After two hours his Lordship indicated he wanted to resume his journey and the driver went to the stable to prepare the horses and carriage. Gibson paid the bill and left an appropriate tip. He helped Lord Hurlock to the carriage and settled him in. He wrapped the blanket around his knees and pushed it around him for warmth. He pulled the bottle of brandy from his coat pocket and pushed it under the blanket to warm during the journey. His Lordship looked at Gibson directly, something he rarely did and almost smiled.

“Thank you Gibson.”

“My pleasure, your Lordship.”

The door was closed and locked and Gibson hauled himself onto the seat, high above the road. With a light snap of the whip, they were off on their next leg of the journey. Gibson pondered over his Lordship's look and expression of gratitude. A master rarely spoke to his servants other than to express his wishes. There was something in his Lordship's eyes that Gibson had not seen before. Genuine gratitude?

The coach hit a rut and bounced into the air. Gibson lowered himself over the edge of the seat to see if his Lordship was all right. He was asleep, the bottle still in his hand. Gibson smiled and sat upright. He opened the other bottle and took a long swig. He passed it to the driver who did the same. Both men smiled.

The sky darkened and the driver stopped to light the oil lamps on the coach. His Lordship awoke and looked out to see what was happening. Gibson opened the door and made sure the Lord was still comfortable and assured him they'd stop at the next overnight inn.

He pulled a face and said, “Make it better than the last one.”

The road grew dark and their speed dropped accordingly. The driver thought there was a stop over somewhere ahead, but couldn't be sure of the distance. Gibson looked at the half empty bottle and knew why the driver wasn't so sure any more. They rounded a bend and lights were shining up ahead. A large wooden sign swung in the light breeze, lit by torches. It was an inn. It would have to do.

The rooms were better than the main bar of the inn indicated. His Lordship's accommodation was spacious and he even seemed agreeable to it. All he wanted to do was get to bed and sleep. Gibson sought out the inn keeper and gave his list of demands and followed them up with a small down payment for his trouble. The inn

keeper seemed impressed by the tip and hurried to get the food and beverages prepared. Gibson headed for the tap room and to look for accommodating barmaids.

The food was average, but edible and his Lordship ate what he wanted and prepared to sleep. Gibson ensured he was relaxed and had everything he needed. The fire was banked up and would last until well after his Lordship was asleep. Gibson said his goodnights and eased the door shut. He went to his own room and made sure the candle was lit and safe from draughts and would last until he went to bed. He had asked for a heated brick for his bed and there was a timid knock on the door. He opened it to a young and pretty maid. A smile lit up his face as he ushered her in. Between them they laid the wrapped brick in the cold sheets and Gibson made casual conversation with her.

By the time she had left he had arranged for her to visit his room after the inn had closed and he would reward her handsomely for her time. With a smile on his face he returned to the main drinking area of the inn and sought out the company of the driver, who was already several tankards ahead of him. The effects of the brandy earlier in the day were causing the driver problems. His speech was slurred and he could hardly hold his tankard. Gibson started the long task of persuading him to go to bed. With the help of the pretty barmaid, they carried the semi-conscious man to the stables.

As they rested the gently complaining driver on the straw, Gibson looked at his partner for the night. She smiled back and he moved towards her. It was dark and quiet in the stables, and both felt secure they wouldn't be disturbed. They kissed briefly.

She said, "I can't be too long. He'll miss me."

"So would I."

Their time was limited, but both had a foretaste of the pleasures to come.

The sun fought its way over the horizon, obscured by mist and light drizzle. Gibson looked out of his window and smiled. He hadn't had much sleep, but he would try and get some rest on the coach. He closed the window and looked at the sleeping woman in his bed. She did not look quiet so pretty in the harsher light of dawn, but she was certainly an accomplished lover. Gibson stretched and prepared himself for another day in his Lordship's service.

The last part of the journey was made in good time, arriving at the mansion early afternoon. It was raining, but the thought of dry clothing and warm fires was alluring. Gibson helped his Lordship out of the carriage and the house servants were waiting to help him the rest of the way. Gibson shook hands with the driver and passed a few coins in gratitude for his efforts. With a sharp crack of the whip, the coach and horses were driven round to the stables for a well earned rest.

His Lordship was seated in front of his fire in his favourite place, the Library. Candles flickered and helped to push the gloom away. He sat and rested his head on the padded cushion. He was grateful for a floor that didn't move. He slipped into a sleep that refreshed his tired body.

Gibson was delighted to be home again. The familiar surroundings and the comfort of his own room. He organised his Lordship's laundry and unpacked all the cases. He organised the staff to attend to the various functions and by early evening he felt he had completed the last of his tasks for the journey. His Lordship had requested an early night, so after a light supper he retired and bade Gibson goodnight. Gibson was free to do as he wished with the rest of the evening. Gibson wished to visit his lady friend in the nearby village. He

changed into less formal clothing and told the house matron where he was going and he would be back late. He tipped his cap jauntily at her and whistled as he walked into the stables.

In one stall he petted his own horse. An expensive luxury recently purchased, but one he felt necessary. He led the aging animal out of the warm stall and hitched her to a small buggy. Another recent and extravagant purchase, but it was all part of Gibson's master plan. With a click of the tongue and a slap of the reins, the horse trotted off down the long drive and headed into the small hamlet a mile away.

Amelia was the daughter of a farmer and as such she lived off the land and lived very well. She worked hard and played hard. She had several suitors, but none so exciting as her James Gibson. He had a status. He was butler to a Lord. She always found time for him. She would mention him if her other suitors became too unruly, or demanding. The threat of a better catch for Amelia was always a deterrent to errant behaviour.

She was in the milking shed when Gibson knocked on the rough wooden door. She flew into his arms and kissed him hard on the mouth. She smelt of cows and milk and a few other farmyard smells, but she was big, buxom and willing. They fell into the hay and both laughed. She made him tell of his adventures in the big city. Some items he elaborated on, some areas he omitted entirely. As they talked they kissed some more and the petting got heavier and he became more amorous. She stopped him and moved to the upper level of the barn, where they were least likely to be disturbed. She wanted to give him her utmost attention.

Some time later they lay in the hay and talked quietly. He was aware of time slipping past but he wanted to be with this girl. He had plans to make and she could be vital to his future happiness.

A week later the first of many letters arrived from Jacoby, Smythe and Trundle, solicitors to Gentlefolk. Gibson saw the seal and knew it was connected with their visit to London. The upstairs maid had seen the original correspondence and some of the replies and the whole house knew that Lord Hurlock was looking for another property in London. They also knew he would need to staff it and rumours were rife if any of them would be asked to live in the big city. It was a constant subject of debate. Gibson's advice was to remain silent about the master's business. He would reveal all that needed to be known, in good time and as appropriate.

In his own mind he was more curious than the entire household put together. Naturally, his Lordship did not discuss his business with the servants. But Gibson was observant and knew more than he would ever let on to his master. He knew enough to be anxious as to his future and also the fate of the staff. If his Lordship decided to live in London and sell the estate, then there would be fewer household required and several would be redundant. Work was difficult to find and he felt sorry for those that would have to leave. On the other hand, why would Lord Hurlock sell the family estate? Granted, he'd no living relatives remaining. What was the point? Just how important was this letter?

Gibson awoke his Lordship with the morning tray and set it down on the bed pane. He looked perkier after a night's sleep in his own bed and wished his butler a very good morning. Gibson found small chores to do while his Lordship handled the letter. Eventually opening it and scrutinising its contents. Some tantalising huffs and sighs came from the Lord, but no clue as to the message. Hurlock placed it to one side on the tray and Gibson edged his way forward, adjusting the bed sheets, trying to read the neat handwriting.

Lord Hurlock dismissed Gibson and concentrated on his boiled egg. In frustration, Gibson left the room and retired to his small office, where he would wait to be summoned by his Lordship to help him arise for the day. He sat and thought through the recent events. The trip to London was certainly to view some property. But would the old duffer part with the money? Gibson had no idea what the Lord's estate was worth, but the purchase of a house in London probably wouldn't dent the old fool's fortune. Indeed, what would he spend the money on anyway? He certainly didn't spend much on himself, or his servants!

Although Gibson was a loyal and devoted butler to his Lordship, he was not privy to the hiding place of his Lordship's money. It could be in a secret compartment somewhere in the house, or buried in the vast expanse of grounds surrounding the house and out buildings. Only his Lordship knew and perhaps a trusted advisor, or legal employee. The next foreseeable problem was that of transporting the funds to pay for the property. It would certainly be several thousand pounds of coin and if Gibson knew his Lordship well enough, his Lordship would want to be with the money every second it was still his. This would mean another visit to London.

Gibson and the rest of the household would just have to wait for the news. It was up to his Lordship when he thought fit to inform them of their futures. In the meantime, life went on as usual.

Amelia was getting very near to expecting an important question to be asked of her. Her suitor had been particularly amorous over the last week and was very eager to see her most evenings. Her other suitors were losing interest, so Amelia decided to turn up the pressure a little and often included the words 'marriage' and 'honest woman' into her conversations with James Gibson.

James knew what he was doing with Amelia. She was good British farm stock and knew her place in life and would not have illusions of grandeur. His pay was meagre, but better than a farm hand's. He could offer her a great deal more than any of the local village boys. His age was his only doubt. At forty, he was past his prime as a man and lover. But so far he'd no complaints. If he was to make the move into marriage and fatherhood, it had to be soon.

His lifestyle was not one he wished to last forever. He was working from dawn to dusk for a Lord, waiting literally hand and foot on him. His spare time came only after his Lordship had retired to bed. All that left time for was a few drinks in the local inn and some time with Amelia. He liked Amelia, she was passionate and insatiable. But he also liked some time on his own with a few pints. He was getting to know the locals who used the drinking establishment and he was becoming a regular himself.

This evening saw Gibson alone in a corner booth. He was deep in thought and making his own plans. His Lordship had finally discussed his dealings with Jacoby, Smythe and Trundle and announced he was buying a property in the heart of London, where he would spend a few months of the year and would use the home to entertain. He was getting lonely out in the country. Without a wife, or strong circle of friends, he wanted to be more sociable. Gibson made all the right noises of encouragement and praised the Lord for his wit to change his life for the better. As tactfully as he could, he broached the subject of staffing the new property. Hurlock dismissed the problem with a wave of his hand.

"We won't need so many here if I'm there, so they can come with me." Gibson nodded wisely. Typical penny pinching approach of a wealthy man. "We'll be going to London in a few weeks time, when all this blasted paperwork has been settled. I keep getting letters to sign. Back and forth, back and forth. It's interminable. Even after I've paid for the blasted place, it'll be three months before I can move in. It'll be the spring!"

"At least the journey won't be so cold, your Lordship." Gibson offered.

"I'll need another blasted coach. For the servants. They'll have to go ahead and make it liveable. It's all so....complicated. You'll have to arrange all that side of things. Anyway, a few weeks time we'll be going to London. Make sure the coach is ready and we have a decent driver. Not that drunken fellow. I felt every rut in the road last time."

The day dawned cold and clear. Gibson felt excited and was looking forward to the journey. The new driver was a surly soul and talked little, but he would play his part, thought Gibson. His Lordship summoned Gibson to his room a few hours before they were due to leave and Gibson was surprised to see a small chest on the floor. It was padlocked and covered with a cheap piece of cloth.

“You must guard this with your life, Gibson. Understand?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“We must never let it out of our sight. Understand?”

“Of course, your Lordship. What’s in it?”

Lord Hurlock stared at his manservant and said quietly. “More money than you’ve ever seen in your life, Gibson. It’s payment for my new house. This must not leave our sight.”

“I understand, my Lord.” Gibson moved towards the box and tested its weight. “I’ll need help to lift this, sir.”

“No. We’ll do it together. I don’t want anyone else to know we’re travelling with this amount of money. No one.”

Gibson held his tongue and nodded. “If that’s your wish, my Lord. Perhaps we can test our strength on this. I lift this end, you the other?”

His Lordship bent over and grabbed the handle and tried to lift the box. It did not move. They tried again and it still moved little. “May I get the driver to help us, sir?”

“Perhaps you had. No word of what’s in it, though.”

“Of course, your Lordship.”

They manhandled the heavy box into the carriage and placed it on the floor. Lord Hurlock sat on the bench seat, with his feet resting on the box. Gibson wrapped the blankets round him and made sure he was comfortable.

“As fast as you can, Gibson. Don’t stop for anyone on the way.”

“You’ll need a lunch break sir, surely?”

“We’ll see, Gibson. We’ll see. Off with you now.”

Gibson climbed into the seat and nodded to the driver who whipped up the horses and they set off over the first few miles of very rough road. Once on the main road they moved quicker, but the carriage bounced and swayed. Gibson smiled to himself, the old fool would want a lunch break all right. They all would want a break from the roughness of the ride.

“That box is taxing the horses.” Said the driver. Gibson nodded and said nothing. “T’is the weight of two men.” The driver added.

Gibson nodded again and said, “It contains mineral samples for his Lordship’s London professors. It would be heavy. Worthless, but heavy.” It was the driver’s turn to nod and remain silent.

The cold began to creep into their warm clothing. The air was frosted by their breath. The wind against their faces froze their noses and ears and their breath was cold in their chests. After two hours it was becoming unbearable. Gibson leaned down to speak to his Lordship.

“Would you like to take a break, your Lordship?”

“No. Carry on.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Gibson hauled himself back into the seat, a bounce nearly throwing him off the carriage. He shook his head at the driver and they went past an inn that looked invitingly warm. A look came into the driver’s eyes and he almost smiled at Gibson. With a slight flick of the whip he made the horses increased speed. Grasping the reins more firmly he began to weave the carriage slowly from side to side across the rutted road. The coach lurched badly several times and he straightened it up again. A few minutes later he did the same thing again.

After half an hour they heard a tapping on the roof of the carriage. Gibson swung down to see what his Lordship wanted.

“Next inn. We take a short stop.”

This time the expression on the driver’s face was unmistakably a smile.

The inn was just off the main road, down a narrow lane. The carriage made a last few sudden lurches, reinforcing his Lordship’s decision to take a break from the perpetual motion. The driver hauled the horses round outside of the inn and Gibson jumped down and opened the door. Lord Hurlock eased himself to the ground and waved Gibson into the coach.

“Stay with the...box.” Hurlock walked into the inn to get warm.

Gibson saw the driver watching him and shrugged. He got into the carriage and it set off round the rear of the inn to the stables. The driver unhitched the horses and led them into a warm and dry stable area and made sure they had food and water. He paid the stable boy to watch over them and returned to carriage and looked in on Gibson.

“I’ll bring you out some food. Anything to drink?”

Gibson smiled. “Thank you. Some ale. Their best, please.” He gave the driver some coins. “Get yours out of that as well.”

Gibson sat back on the seat and put his feet on the box, trying to rock it. It was solid and appeared anchored to the floor.

His Lordship was in heated discussions with the landlord, who seemed to be disinterested how important his customer was and how much of a hurry he was in. The landlord had other customers who were also waiting for food and they were there first. In frustration Lord Hurlock sat down by the fire, almost pushing an old woman out of the way. He needed Gibson, but he was guarding his treasure. Damn it!

The driver walked into the room and leaned on the rough bar top. He smiled at the landlord and ordered some ale and some food. Hurlock watched in frustration and summoned the driver over to him. He gave his order and told him to hurry the landlord up. The driver touched his forelock and returned to the bar. He sipped his ale first and waited until the landlord was free again before giving him his Lordship’s order.

The driver, Robert, had finished his ale and was on the second tankard by the time his food arrived. It was a large piece of bread and some strong flavoured cheese. He took the second portion and a tankard of ale and returned to the carriage to give Gibson his lunch. The rickety old door surrendered to his shoulder as he walked out into the stable yard and towards his Lordship's carriage. Robert's heart went cold. Lying on the frosty ground was Gibson. The carriage door wide open. He hurried forward and put the food and drink on the ground. He slowly turned Gibson over. Blood flowed from a cut in his head.

With relief, Robert realised Gibson was still breathing and his eyes flickered open. There was a look of confusion and sudden realisation of where he was. Gibson struggled to sit up and looked in dismay at the open box on the floor of the carriage. The box was empty.

Lord Hurlock was furious. He berated Gibson for deserting his duty and seemed oblivious to the blood still flowing from his butler's forehead. Robert held his tongue and tried to staunch the flow with a handkerchief that had seen better days. He lifted the tankard to Gibson's lips for him to drink and Hurlock dashed it away, spilling it onto the ground.

"What happened, man!"

"I'm not really sure. Someone opened the door, I thought it was Robert. And they must have hit me with something. I just remember waking up on the ground."

"I told you to protect this box with your life. You've let me down, Gibson."

"Sir...I couldn't..."

"You should've put up a fight, man!"

"I can only say I'm sorry, sir."

"Out of my way." Hurlock pushed his stricken servant aside and climbed into the carriage. He searched every corner of the compartment and kicked at the empty box, knocking it over onto its side.

Robert leaned forwards and spoke quietly in Gibson's ear, "A lot of fuss over some samples, eh?"

The Lord's temper was rising. "Get the landlord out here now. He must be held responsible for this."

It was two hours later that the carriage was bouncing its way back to the mansion. Gibson felt relieved that common sense had prevailed in his Lordship and the return home would be the most practical action to take. The landlord had stood his ground with the irate Lord and claimed that although the stables were on his property, the security of his customer's possessions was their own affair. He could not, and would not, be held responsible. His Lordship had a fit of exasperation and the landlord left him spluttering in the cold air of the stables. The stable boy found it amusing and was the final straw for his Lordship who climbed into the carriage and demanded to be taken home.

Hurlock fumed and shouted while the horses were hitched and continued until the driver was finally happy to take the carriage onto the road. The two men seated on the top could hear the man berating everything in living sight for his misfortunes. Robert had a half smile all the way back to the stately home of the Hurlocks, while Gibson's head began to throb.

Some hours later they were pulling into the drive and as the carriage rolled to a standstill his Lordship was out of the compartment and shouting at Gibson.

"Get that box up to my bedroom, Gibson. Driver. We return to London in a few minutes."

“But, sir....the horses....!”

“Bugger the horses. We will not be thwarted by a few ruffians. This time, Gibson. You will carry a pistol and shoot anyone who pokes their nose through that door. Understand?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Hurlock hurried up to his bedroom, while Gibson struggled with the empty, but still heavy box. He placed the box on the carpet and Hurlock ushered him out of the room, shutting and locking the door behind him. Gibson waited, ear pressed to the door panels. There was some movement and sliding noises. There was the chink of coin. His Lordship was assembling another small fortune for his new house. Gibson went to fetch the driver. It would need the two of them to move it again.

An hour later the carriage was once again bumping its way along the track. Gibson sat on one side of the compartment, while his Lordship sat on the other. Both held pistols in their hands and Hurlock glared at his servant. The driver had instructions not to stop until it was dark and he could find an inn that looked respectable and would provide the maximum security. He promised he would, though he'd never seen an inn of that description ever before.

It had been dark for over an hour before the coach pulled into a large inn on the main road. Hurlock looked out of the window, scrutinising every aspect of the building's structure. He was not satisfied, but realised he needed to stop somewhere to sleep for the night. He sent the driver ahead to book the best room in the house and waited his return, pistol held firmly and pointing out of the window. Gibson adopted a similar pose, pointing his weapon out of the other window.

Once the arrangements had been made, Gibson and Robert carried the heavy chest into his Lordship's room. Covered by a blanket, it looked innocent enough, if obviously heavy. Few people saw their journey and his Lordship felt he'd accomplished the subterfuge very well. He dismissed the driver and kept Gibson in the room until he was ready to retire. Gibson helped his Lordship with his ablutions and waited until the old man was ready to sleep.

“Sleep outside the door, Gibson. Keep the gun with you and I shall have mine ready too.”

“As you wish, my Lord.” He closed the door and heard his Lordship get up from his bed to lock it from the inside.

His head was pounding and he hadn't eaten or drunk anything all day. He stood in the corridor and waited a suitable length of time for his Lordship to fall asleep before going down to the tap room to get a well earned drink. Robert was seated in a corner and smiled as Gibson entered. They sat together and drank for a while. Gibson told Robert of his fate for the night and Robert smiled.

“I'll take turns with you if you wish. The mean bastard only ordered the one room for the night. It's the stables or the corridor floor for both of us.”

Gibson drank a few tankards and ate a large meal. He felt more relaxed as the evening wore on. Finally he stood and said, “Better go do my duty.”

“What time shall I take over from you, James?”

Gibson shook his head, “Don't worry. I'll be fine. I'll have a word with the landlord, get some blankets and pillows. Thank you all the same.” He threw some coins on the table. “Have a drink on me.”

Gibson settled in the draughty corridor and wrapped several blankets around himself. He punched the smelly pillows until they supported his head and he closed his eyes. A voice came from behind the door.

“Are you there, Gibson?”

“Yes, my Lord. I’m here.”

Lord Hurlock was up and about early, anxious to be on his way. He opened his bedroom door and kicked the sleeping form outside of it. Gibson grunted.

“I’ll have my breakfast and then we’re on our way. Quickly, man!”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The door slammed and Gibson struggled to his feet. His head was swollen and ached as he rolled up his blankets and pillows and took them down to the main room. The landlord had not arisen as yet, but the cook and a few maids were beginning their day. She took one look at Gibson’s head and tutted. She went to the pantry and returned with a large piece of fresh meat. She laid it gently on his head and told him to sit for a while.

“That’ll draw out the bruise, my dear. Rest for a while.”

She gave him a beaker of tea and he sipped it appreciatively. “I must get his Lordship’s breakfast. He’s in a hurry to get to London.”

“We’ll do it, my dear. Don’t you worry.”

By the time the breakfast tray was ready, Gibson felt a little better. The cook had also given him some Laudanum and he felt a little light headed, but the pain had reduced. She gave him the rest of the bottle for the trip. They helped carry the tray to his Lordship’s bedroom and disappeared as he knocked on the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Gibson, my Lord.”

The lock was turned and the door wrenched open. Before Gibson could step inside, his Lordship had taken the tray and closed the door again. There was the sound of the bolt being locked.

“Wait there until I’m ready.” Was the muffled comment from within.

An hour later they were on the road with instructions not to stop until they were at their destination. Robert was still concerned about pushing the horses too hard, the carriage seemed even heavier than before. On the slight inclines the poor beasts were really struggling. Once, Gibson had to get out and lead the horses by the reins out of a particularly muddy patch of road. By mid-afternoon London was in sight.

Robert didn’t know his way around the city as well as the original driver and so had to ask his way from the locals through the thoroughfares. By late afternoon they were pulling to a halt outside of Jacoby, Smythe and Trundle, with horses and men exhausted. Despite the roughness of the journey, his Lordship was first onto the ground and hurrying into the offices. Gibson dropped to the pavement and waited by the carriage, hand resting on the pistol handle.

A few minutes later Lord Hurlock emerged from the solicitor's office with three men and brushed Gibson aside. They lifted the chest and hurried inside the building with it.

Hurlock turned to Gibson and said, "Same hotel a last time. Meet me there later." He turned and followed his money.

Gibson climbed up to sit next to Robert and said, "Jermyn Street. I'll show you the way."

Gibson assumed that Lord Hurlock would be entertained by his solicitors and engaged for most of the evening. However, he had to remain on duty until he returned to butle for his master. In the meanwhile he prowled the hotel looking for Mary. He eventually found her, sorting out the linen cupboard on the first floor. She smiled in delight as she saw him and he bowed in a gentlemanly fashion and invited her for late supper if she was free. She acquiesced with a curtsey and both laughed.

Gibson then had several hours until his master returned, but had to remain in the hotel. He asked the receptionist to inform him the moment Lord Hurlock arrived and departed to the smoke room to enjoy a tankard of ale. Although relegated to the stables, Robert sat in a booth with a tankard, trying to make it last. He smiled as Gibson joined him and pointed to the nearly empty flask.

"I can't afford to drink in here, James. The price they charge!"

James smiled and pulled out a drawstring purse. "This is the travelling fund. I think we both deserve a little of his Lordship's generosity. Don't you?"

His Lordship arrived at the hotel after ten. He was very much the worse for wear and was unaware of where he was and what he was doing. Gibson smiled. With the help of the porter he had Hurlock in bed and asleep in half an hour. The rest of the night was his. He met Mary in the same hostelry as before and he downed his drink and led her outside. A previous investigation had established a small inn that provided a quiet and charming atmosphere and announced top quality victuals.

They sat in a booth near the rear of the small room and looked at each other over two flickering candles. Both thought the night to be romantic, but once again Mary dashed any hopes of him sharing his bed for the night. He felt a strange sense of pride for her. Here was a woman of stout virtues and despite temptation, remained true to her beliefs. He liked this woman more with every passing minute. He reached across for her hand and she gently withdrew it.

"I have something to tell you, Mary."

Her eyes sparkled. "Is it something exciting?"

"I hope you'll think so."

"Then tell me!"

James looked around the room and realised it was nearly empty, the hour being late and their time would soon be over. "If I was to call in on you....one day....would you consider....I don't know how to put this.....moving away from here? With me?"

She pulled back and looked serious. "What are you suggesting, Mr Gibson?"

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