

## I

On this day, which is the Ninth day of November in the year 1683, a most singular thing has occurred.

I was taking my habitual midday dinner (of boiled chicken with carrots and small ale) when my Manservant, Will, came into my Dining Room at Bidnold Manor, bearing in his gnarled old hands a package, wrapped in torn paper and bound with faded ribbon. He placed this object at my right hand, thus causing a cloud of dust to puff onto my plate of food.

‘Take care, Will,’ said I, feeling all my breath drawn in and then expelled in such an almighty sneeze that it flecked the tablecloth with tiny morsels of carrot. ‘What is this Relic?’

‘I do not know, Sir Robert,’ said Will, attempting a dispersal of the dust, by waving his misshapen fingers back and forth.

‘You do not know? But how has it arrived in the house?’

‘Chambermaid, Sir.’

‘You got it from one of the maids?’

‘Found under your mattress.’

I wiped my mouth and blew my nose (with a striped, very faded dinner napkin once given to me by the King) and laid my hands upon the parcel, which, in truth, appeared like a thing purloined from some Pharaoh’s Tomb, far down in the dry earth. I would have questioned Will further about its unlikely provenance and the reason of its sudden discovery on this particular day, but Will had already turned and was embarked on his slow and limping return journey from the dining table to the door, and to have called him back might well have occasioned some physical Catastrophe, which I had no heart to risk.

Alone once more, I tugged at the ribbon, noting some stains upon it, as of Mouse or Fly droppings, and the notion that some creature might have had its whole lowly existence beneath my mattress caused me a brief moment of amusement.

Then I had the package open and saw before me a thing so long forgotten by me, I think it would never have come back into my mind of its own accord by any means.

It was a Book. Rather, it had once aspired to the immortal status of a Book, but never did acquire any such immortality, but only remained a collation of pages, written in my inky, looping hand. Long ago, in the year 1668, when I returned here at last to Bidnold Manor, I contemplated destroying this Book, but I did not. I gave it to Will – with the instruction to consign it in some hiding-place of his own choosing and to contrive to forget where that hiding-place might be.

The pages contained the story of my Former Life. I had set down this story at a time of great confusion in the last years of my fourth decade, when I felt for the first time the radiance of King Charles II fall upon my insignificant shoulders.

I had hoped the writing of it would enable me to understand what role I might play in my profession as a Physician, in my country and in the world. But though in all my frenzied Scribblings I believed myself to be moving towards some kind of Wisdom, I cannot now recall that I ever arrived there. I was driven from place to place like a hungry dog. It was a time of marvels and glories, crammed with sorrows. And now, to read my own words and see this Life again unfold before me, brought to my heart an almost unbearable overload of Feeling.

I take up the Book and go to my Library. I lay the Book on my escritoire and attend to the feebly burning fire, placing more logs upon it and exhorting it to remember why it was lit – and that reason was to warm me. But I am still shivering. I wonder whether I shall send again for Will who, from long and weary habit, has a knack for coaxing flames into life. But in these late times of the 1680s, when I am approaching my fifty-seventh birthday, I am more and more reluctant to assign to Will any task whatsoever, owing to his extreme age (seventy-four years) and his many Infirmities.

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Indeed, the whole Question of Will is one which hugely vexes me, for I do clearly see that, in regard to this faithful Servant of mine, I am caught in a very painful Trap.

I have known William Gates (ever and always called 'Will' by me) since the year 1664 when the King gifted to me the Order of the Garter, together with my Norfolk Estates. These Rewards I got for an important service I had rendered His Majesty, which changed utterly the course of my life.

Will came into my household, along with my cook, Cattlebury, in that same year and, in all my many joys and tribulations, never for one moment showed me anything but loyalty and consideration of the most touching order.

Though my interior Decorations were, at one time, very loud and vulgar, Will pretended his admiration for them. Though I myself behaved towards my young wife Celia in ways loathsome to her and to the world, never at any moment did Will throw me the least glance of sorrow or reproach. And when I and my beloved house had, for some years, to part company, on account of my innumerable follies, Will became its de facto guardian, faithfully writing to me with News of the comings and goings within it, and of the changing colours in the park, as some several seasons passed. In short, no man could have had by his side for almost twenty years a more admirable, loyal, honest and hard-working Servant.

Now, however, Will's body and mind are much decayed. Though I pay him handsomely, he is no longer able to perform to any satisfactory degree the Tasks about my house and person for which he receives his money. He cannot walk without his knees bend outwards and his spine curves over, like the spine of a little rat, so that his progress across any room is most painful and slow. When attempting to carry any Article, whether a tureen of soup or a tankard of ale, he is like to let it fall and smash or spill, for that his hands have some Disease of Curvature and cannot fasten themselves securely round an object.

Other afflictions are come upon him, viz. Forgetfulness, near-Blindness and a Deafness, which I fancy may be dictated more by Whim than by any true loss of hearing. For if I give Will an order that he does not relish, such as that of accompanying me on one of

my visits to my Patients, he affects not to hear a word that I have uttered, whereas any command that is to his liking he obeys without question or hesitation.

He has become very fearful of the world beyond the gates of Bidnold. Where, once upon a memorable time, he came with me by fast coach to London and waited patiently in the gardens at Whitehall while I endured an encounter with the King which almost broke my heart, and Will's too, now he keeps close within the house and is barely to be seen taking the air of the park, 'lest,' he says to me one day, 'it give me a bitter Winter Ague, Sir Robert, or that I might trip upon a grassy tussock and break my Shin and fall, and be not able to raise myself up and lie undiscovered till night come, or morning, when frost or snow obliterate me quite.'

'Ah, is that what you think of me, Will,' say I to this, 'that I would leave you lying alone and wounded under the stars or out in the snow?'

'Well, I do, Sir,' says he, 'for the reason that you would not *know* of my falling, for I am a Servant, Sir Robert, and have practised the Art of Invisibility for these twenty years, so that the sight of me, whether upright or lying down, be never troubling to you.'

I wanted to remark that, in recent years, the Sight of Will causes me *nothing but trouble*, but I did not. For to say anything wounding to Will appears to be quite beyond my powers. And when I think of what I should rightly do, which is to dismiss him from my service, I feel in my heart a terrible Ache. For the truth is that I feel for Will a most profound affection, as though he might be a sort of Father to me, a Father who, in his goodness, has chosen to overlook my many imperfections and to see me as an Honourable Man.

What am I do, then?

If I take from Will his seniority in the Servants' Hierarchy at Bidnold Manor and assign to him lighter duties, such as those a mere Footman might easily perform, I know that he will feel the pain of this demotion through to his heart's core. He will deduce that I no longer value him. The sweetness of his nature will turn sour towards those who would now be above him in rank.

If I call him to me and tell him that I wish him to Take his Ease henceforth and do no more work, but live in honourable Retirement

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here in my house, with all his pecuniary needs accommodated by me, it is possible that – such being the intensity of the bodily pain he suffers – he might fall at my feet and bless me and shed tears of gratitude and tell me that no kinder being than I, Sir Robert Merivel, lives and breathes in the world.

But though I admit I do like to imagine this scene, with my poor old Servant prostrate at my feet as though I were the King Himself, with all his inestimable power, I do also foresee, alas, great perturbation coming from another source, namely the rest of my Household, including Cattlebury, who is not far behind Will in age and Mental Confusion, and who has alarmed me with his occasional bouts of violent, seditious Agitation, during which he is fond of blaspheming against the Monarch and the Stuart dynasty and all their works.

Indeed, I dread that I might find myself the butt of a jealous Mutiny, upbraided for my unfairness and for my lack of consideration towards Cattlebury, but also towards the housemaids, footmen, washerwomen, woodcutters, grooms, and kitchen maids et cetera et cetera. And then I see in my mind a terrible Cavalcade of all my servants (without whose presence this household would soon enough fall into chaos) disappearing down the drive, and I left alone but for Will, to whom, in time, I would become a Nurse . . . thus performing a neat but vexing turn upon the Wheel of Fortune.

Better, say I to myself, to harden my heart and let Will perform his solitary Exit, with the destination ‘Workhouse’ writ upon his retreating back. But a Trap closes even upon this notion. For I have seen the Workhouses. Indeed I have. Not only are they cold and inhospitable places, and full of vermin and noise and stench, they must also, by law, live up to their name and so demand of their inhabitants that they *work*. Thus we return by a dread circle to the one thing of which Will Gates is well-nigh incapable: labour.

I ask again, what am I to do?

I cannot put Will out, to beg in the lanes and fields of Norfolk. He has no Family anywhere (nor ever has had, as far as I can ascertain) to take him in.

And so I conclude that – as with very many vexing things in this