

**DENIS VOIGNIER**

**MARY CHELTENHAM**

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Translated from French by Cecily A. Norris

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It was an autumn morning, one typical of our region. Milky mist covered the countryside, and through the dew-covered carriage door, I could barely see the roadside. The clip-clop of hooves on the ground, hardened by the cold weather, filled the air, and my uncle, sitting in front of me, had not yet uttered a word since our departure.

*Now and then, the coachman, in a loud and raucous voice, emitted a shout to the horses. The whip, sometimes, cracked hard and made me jump.*

Finally, the pace slowed, the road followed a long curve and as the layers of mist thinned and frayed in places, I made out the massive shape of a building, grey and sombre in the blinding landscape.

The rolling of wheels on the ground was replaced by the crunching of gravel on a walkway and the carriage came to a halt.

“We are here, Jeremy. Get out.”

As my uncle had the right to the services of the coachman, who having reached the door, invited him to get out, I came out by myself on the other side, jumping out of the vehicle. The air was cool and I turned up my coat collar.

The sun finally broke through, the mist quickly thinned out and I could see the residence looming in front of me like a gigantic ship.

It was a yellow stone structure, with a roof of bluish slates. Three tall chimneys rose to the sky, like sentinels on watch. The two levels each had a long line of high mullioned

windows. At the centre, a staircase with a few steps gave access to a wide landing. The entire picture was very symmetrical, rather cold, and indeed austere.

While I was losing myself in this reverie, my uncle grabbed me by the arm.

“Stop dreaming, will you. They’re waiting for us.”

His voice was monotone, almost without expression. In my memory, I had never, over the last ten years, seen him smile, at least with me. Emotions seemed to slide over his face and he often looked expressionless. He handed me a canvas bag that the coachman had taken from the trunk of the vehicle. It was my meagre luggage.

The whip cracked again, the team made a half-turn and came to a halt. The coachman had instructions to wait. As we moved forward, my uncle looked frequently at the heavy silver watch that he pulled from his coat pocket.

We were still a few yards from the stairs when the door overlooking the landing opened. A man in a yellow and gold uniform with black trousers appeared. He walked stiffly like an automaton, came down the few steps and stood in front of us. That was both to welcome us, as well as to warn us not to go any further.

“Sir Jenkins, I believe?”

The major-domo — or simply valet — had a strong, funny accent which I had never heard before. His dark eyes were rather suspicious and he stared at us in turn as though we were some strange beasts.

“Osmond Alexander Matthew Jenkins, indeed. And this is my nephew Jeremy. Jeremy Page.”

My uncle had spoken in a dry voice, leaving no room for

comment.

“Very well. Follow me.”

The servant led us up the stairs, pulled open the heavy, solid wooden door and let us into a white marble vestibule. Antique statues decorated the place, and the majestic busts seemed to be staring at us. The man directed us to a small sitting-room at the side of this entrance hall. There were three garnet-red velvet chairs, along with a polished table. The room smelled of beeswax.

“Have a seat. I will let Lady Cheltenham know you are here.”

My uncle did not seem to like these ponderous formalities. As a businessman and formidable shopkeeper, he could not bear having to wait. He liked situations that were quickly settled or negotiated. But, this time, he had little choice and had to be patient.

Luckily for his temper, the wait was not long.

Rhythmic footsteps sounded and approached rapidly. Finally, Lady Cheltenham appeared in the doorframe.

My uncle got up, taking off his top hat. A rough tap on my shoulder made me understand that I, too, should stand up.

She was a beautiful woman, about thirty years old. She was fairly tall, slender, and rather svelte in her overall appearance. Two big bright eyes shone in her pleasant smiling face. Her fine blonde hair was drawn into a sort of bun at the back of her head.

“Sir Jenkins.”

“My Lady.”

And my uncle bowed somewhat reverently.

“Did you have a good trip from Gloucester?”

“Yes, My Lady. An excellent trip.”

“Very well. This is the young man you spoke to me about in your correspondence...”

“Yes, My Lady. Jeremy Page, the only son of my deceased sister, Joan. If our agreement still holds....”

“Of course. We need staff and to me, this young man already has a very robust appearance for his age.”

“That is so, you can be sure of it, My Lady. He does not shirk his duties.”

“Well, in that case we will put him to the test very soon. There is no shortage of work here, such a large building...”

“I am really grateful to you, My Lady. It is also reassuring to know that he will be in good hands and safe from want. You know with my never ending business, I can’t manage to...”

“I understand, Sir Jenkins. I understand perfectly.”

What my uncle was not saying openly was that his business was somewhat limping along. This arrangement with Lady Cheltenham would allow him, temporarily, to boost back up his finances. However, the young lady called her major-domo.

“Wickney! Wickney!”

“My Lady?” responded a voice quite close by.

“Bring me what’s necessary, please.”

Wickney — I could now put a name to this character — reappeared, with a little brown leather satchel in his hand.

“Here it is, My Lady.”

The bag passed from Wickney’s hands to those of the young woman and finally into my uncle’s. I believed I could discern this time the semblance of a smile and his eyes

gleamed, for a fleeting moment, with a little spark of joy. The business was settled; my uncle, as usual, had no reason to linger.

“Thank you, My Lady. I do not wish to inconvenience you any longer. Moreover, my business...”

“Of course, Sir Jenkins. Of course. Wickney will see you out.”

My uncle turned towards me and, for a brief moment, rested his large hand on my shoulder. He stared at me with that look, which had become expressionless again.

“Goodbye, my boy. Behave yourself.”

“Goodbye, uncle.”

He turned on his heels, after having bowed respectfully to the mistress of the house. Wickney preceded him and they both disappeared from my view.

I remained alone with the beautiful lady.

“Very well, young man. Welcome to Cheltenham. As soon as Wickney returns, he will show you around, take you to your lodgings and let you know what duties will be yours from tomorrow.”

“Very well, Madam.”

She wore a little smile. Was it a smile of tenderness, of benevolence, or that smile used by people in high places? At that moment I could not tell.

Some footsteps sounded, but they certainly were not Wickney’s. These were a lot lighter, dancing and youthful. One could say carefreeness pervading the house.

“Mary, what are you doing there?”

This time the voice was stern, harsh, cutting like a Toledo blade.

“Mother...”

“Mary, how many times do I have to tell you not to turn up like that, in front of strangers, especially when they are servants?”

“Yes, mother.”

I leaned forward a bit, as the doorframe was blocking the view. And I saw her... She was my age, without a doubt, about sixteen or seventeen years old. Her oval shaped face, pale like a November moon, was all smiles. Her eyes, bright like her mother's, shone with life and mischievousness. Her blond hair hung in curls around her alabaster cheeks.

“Go back upstairs at once. You will come out when I say so.”

And the young girl, throwing me a brief glance, disappeared rather quickly, without waiting for anything more. I kept in my memory her fleeting, but enchanting image.

Wickney reappeared during this time.

“My Lady?”

“Take this young man to the outbuildings. Let him look around and give him his instructions. I'm depending on you.”

“Of course, My Lady.”

And I followed in the footsteps of this sinister character, who, all the same, was giving me the shivers.

I followed the major-domo, who was moving straight ahead with a determined gait. On my right, I saw a wide staircase, leading upstairs. It was probably from there Mary had come.

The corridor was endless, and after making a turn to our right, Wickney pushed a wide door with the back of his hand. The decor changed quickly. This was certainly the servants' quarters. Several rooms followed. They were obviously dedicated to storage, maintenance, housekeeping, stores or the kitchen. Moreover, I glimpsed several persons, men and women, busy at various tasks.

As I had slowed down, Wickney announced:

“Useless to linger here. You will be working in the stables, perhaps, and in the upkeep of the grounds.”

Horses. I had always loved horses. In Gloucester, I often used to go and visit my uncle's neighbour, Sir Ladington. He had three fine animals that he rode on Sundays to go on trips in the surrounding countryside. I had easy access to the stalls and used to observe the animals for long periods of time. Sir Ladington, a very likeable gentleman, had allowed me several times to mount one of the horses, Cesarus, and I then taught myself to ride. According to Sir Ladington, I managed it rather well. But these escapades did not last long, as my uncle did not like to see me having fun. He thought that it was wasted time and systematically put me back to work.

A little door gave access to outside, probably an entrance for staff who did not have at their disposal use of the main



door located above the landing. This time, I was at the back of the building and I came across the outbuildings that I was unable to see when I had arrived. A long wooden building very likely housed the horses, at least about ten, from my estimation. Nearby were other huts, which perhaps were the lodgings Lady Cheltenham had mentioned. Located there, also, were sheds for feed, carts, tools for gardening and upkeep of the huge grounds now before my eyes.

Wickney stopped for a moment and turned to me. His unemotional expression was hardly reassuring. But perhaps it was a mere demeanour that the man adopted. If he was the major-domo and consequently the head of all these servants, he had to, permanently, seek respect.

“From here, you have a rather precise view of the Cheltenham estate. These large grounds, the main building and its outbuildings. The grounds are no less than 25,000 acres, so there is much to keep one busy, between the lawns, the paths, the ornamental trees, the lake and the riding stables. Milady owns also several miles of forest north of the town, but that does not concern us. I am now going to show you your lodgings, which you will share with Cadell.”

“Cadell?”

He did not respond, but led me to a hut, at a considerable distance from the main building. This shack, of moderate size, was wooden. The walls were made of squared logs and the roof of long, flat, greyish stones. There was one door at the front and at that moment I could see only one window.

“This is it. You see it’s rather rustic, but you will only be there to sleep and for your meals, if you wish. To get water,

there is a pump by the wall, behind the stables.”

Wickney went to the window pane, removed a spider web with his hand and looked inside.

“Cadell is not there. He must be still at the far end of the grounds. He had some trimming to do over there. I advise you not to go in if he isn’t there. Sit on the steps and wait for him here; I have things to do. Oh, I forgot, midday meal with the others. You will find it.”

And Wickney, briskly turning on his heels, took the path to the manor.

I put down my canvas bag and sat on the steps leading to the entrance of the shack. In fact, it was raised, placed on several solid logs. This, surely, was for protection from rodents and the prevalent dampness.

While observing the grounds, I wondered what this Cadell, with whom, if I had understood it correctly, I was going to share the lodgings, looked like. Perhaps a boy, also taken on here, and with whom I could make friends. That reassured me; so I was not alone in this world, which for me was totally new.

I did not wait long. At the end of the path which led to the lake, a figure appeared. The man, tall, with broad shoulders, approached at a brisk pace. His boots crunched the gravel. When he was just a few feet away, I could finally make out his features.

He was a man of about forty years old, with an emaciated face. His features were drawn, his sparkling black eyes were circled with purple lines. His hair, curly and unkempt, fell over his wide forehead. A thin beard covered his hollow cheeks. At first sight, his general appearance was one of

distrust and fear. He put down the long, curved saw that he was carrying on his shoulder and wiped his hands on his thick overalls.

“What are you doing here?” he grunted in a hoarse voice.

“I am Jeremy, the new worker...”

“Hmm... the new worker. I heard about that, in fact. Well, here you are.”

“Yes, I...”

“You didn’t go in?”

“No, I was waiting for you.”

“You did well. This is my home. You must not disturb me. You will have to be discreet. But don’t stand there like a scarecrow.”

He went up the three steps and opened the door. He turned his head and beckoned me to follow him.

Inside, it was rather dark. Another window overlooked the back, but it was hidden by a thick brown-coloured curtain. From the threshold I made out a table and three poorly built chairs, two basic beds, one of which was immediately at the left of the door. The other one was at the back, under the second window. On the right were some shelves which supported quite a collection of curios, but now, I would not be able to say what they were.

A musty odour hit my throat. On the table were two bottles of cheap alcohol.

“Please come in. No need to be difficult.”

“Yes, sir, of course.”

“Sir... Oh! Oh!”

And Cadell gave a loud laugh which chilled my bones.

“Get yourself settled and don’t worry about me. We are

just here to work hard.”

“Yes, sir”

“The slave-driver told you about getting a bite?”

In light of my dumbfounded expression, he thought it best to rephrase.

“Wickney explained how you get your meals?”

“Er...yes...no...”

“On the stroke of midday and seven o’clock in the evening. If you don’t have a watch, you will hear the bell.”

“Understood.”

“And in the morning, six thirty on the dot. You will get your food at the manor house with the servants. Try to be early, if not you will get nothing at all. Regarding work, Wickney will give you the plan. If you want to go to the toilet, the hut is at the back. That’s okay with you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, now leave me; it’s time for my break.”

Cadell placed his tool along the wall, grabbed a bottle from the shelf and gulped a long mouthful. He clicked his tongue as a sign of deep satisfaction. He took off his overalls and threw them over the back of one of the chairs. Then, reaching the bed on the left, he stretched out, turning his back to me.

I understood that I should not disturb him. It was better to be in his good graces. On tiptoe, I reached the back of the shack. The bed seemed comfortable enough and a large woollen blanket covered it. A sort of rack allowed me to put away my bag. I had to be satisfied with this very rough furniture, nonetheless. Cadell began to snore noisily. Work must have worn him out greatly for him to fall asleep so

quickly.

The alcohol, which he seemed to be accustomed to imbibing, without a doubt also had something to do with it. Having nothing particular to do at the moment — my work did not officially begin until the next day — I decided to go and take a walk around the stables.