

# SERVANTS IN AMERICA

Jan-Paul Malocsay

What? Servants in America? Isn't that a contradiction? Doesn't servant imply "master" and isn't every American by definition free, master of his or her own destiny? Worse yet, isn't the word master itself forever tainted by America's tragic long history of slavery?

All that is true, yet many American families could (if they were so inclined) trace their New World origins back to an indentured servant. Indenture is an old legal term for document, in this case a contract which paid some impoverished man or woman's passage to America. By signing the contract, they became the servant of their American master for a set number of years. Seven years was common.

Unlike a slave, an indentured servant had freedom to look forward to. The slave did have one unhappy advantage. Slaves were expensive to buy, so masters had that incentive to keep them alive and well for as long as possible. The master's concern for the health and well-being of an indentured servant had its legal limit. As a result, some masters worked their indentured servants harder, and treated them more harshly, than they did their slaves.

Not surprisingly, early American newspapers printed lots of notices from masters offering a reward for the capture of a runaway indentured servant. Notices described the fugitive's clothes in great detail, because a servant would likely be wearing all the clothes they owned. Some fled wearing the master's (or mistress's)

clothes. That fact would be noted, along with personal details like this one: "Irish in speech and manner, very persuasive." That last comment was clearly intended as a bitterly ironic warning. Translation: "This fellow fooled me. Don't let him fool you."

Indentured servitude died a natural death as the Industrial Revolution spread from England to America, giving poor immigrants the chance to become factory workers in a "Promised Land" that needed them. "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to be free," says the famous 19th century American poem inscribed on The Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. Translation: "Workers Needed. Truly Desperate May Apply."

Even though factory and farm labor brought millions to America, a good many immigrants did hire out as servants working for a wage on into the 20th century. A friend of mine is researching daily life on an estate created in the 19th century by one of the nation's wealthiest and best documented families. (I won't mention that family's name for reasons that will be obvious by and by.)

The estate archives contain thousands of letters written by one particular lady of the house and her husband from early in the 20th century to the 1960s. The husband spent millions enlarging the house and improving the grounds. The number of servants grew accordingly. The wife was from a wealthy, socially prominent family, though on a much

smaller scale. As a girl, she lived with maybe a dozen servants in the house. As a married woman, she finds herself living with ten times that many. For years, she writes her mother every day. Servant problems are a constant theme — hiring and firing and every workaday complexity arising from the master/servant relation.

Is that relation at odds with basic human nature? Certainly it would seem to be at odds with America's founding emphasis on individual liberty first and foremost. Trouble is, our founding fathers were prosperous gentlemen who employed lots of servants. Many also owned slaves — yes, even our beloved model of the quintessential self-made American man, practical Benjamin Franklin!

The family letters my friend is studying end with the deaths of that husband and wife in the 1960s. The couple's estate and manner of life passed into history, though their descendants and family fortune continue to be a force in American life. Their magnificent estate is now open to the public, one of our nation's national treasures.

The couple's vanished way of life is the property of historians like my friend. The archives she is studying are amazingly rich. Every detail of every dinner party is recorded there: where each guest sat; what courses were served; which sets of silver, crystal and china were used; how flowers were arranged. Some table talk also found its way into letters; but mostly it vanished, like conversation just naturally does. Some distant echoes do survive in the memories of people willing to be interviewed.

Lucky for my friend, a number of servants young at the time are still alive and happy to reminisce. Needless to say, their memories have everything in common with unchanging human frailty. The tendency is to remember the best and excuse the worst. Most of these

elderly people are still working class in circumstances and outlook, though a few are mightily changed. This is, after all, America.

My favorite example of American Transformation (call it) served as a footman in his youth. A footman, as the name suggests, was a kind of general-purpose servant inherited from Europe. A 20th century footman served as a kind of waiter at fancy dinner parties. On the estate my friend is studying, each footman stood ready to serve a pair of guests. Forty guests would be served by half that many footmen!

No wonder even the greatest estates found ways to economize. On this estate, a certain number of gardeners doubled as footmen. Of course they couldn't look like dirty outdoor drudges. White gloves hid their work-worn hands. They had to be reasonably good-looking men capable of learning the role assigned to them: the quietly efficient, deferential manner of a servant trained to serve his "betters."

"Bettors" here of course means social superiors. The old-fashioned, Old World notion of deference owed to one's betters would be used ironically today, even though its premise of richer=better is in no danger of dying out.

And so it is that my favorite example of American Transformation is a former gardener/footman interviewed by my friend. That same gardener/footman is now a wealthy gentleman with homes in California and Spain. He was that good-looking in his youth. That charming. So charming that one of his betters married him.

And yes, this happened in the 1960s not the 1930s. What interests me about this man is that he came to America as an immigrant from Europe, complete with Old World ideas about class distinctions. He admits that America changed all that. Not only did he switch from footman to gentleman; he isn't ashamed to talk about it.

I only wish my friend had thought to ask

this footman/gentleman how he treats the servants in his house in Spain. My friend didn't ask that question because she is studying servant life from the outside in. I would ask that question because I have studied servant life from the inside out — as a servant myself.

It happened like this. I had turned my back on the indoor academic life. I wanted to work out under the open sky, away from the publish-or-perish rat-race. I was one of the slower rats anyway. And so, at forty, I started gardening for money. I did real hard labor gardening, not clean-handed designing on paper. I worked freelance for seven years then three for a non-profit botanical garden. At fifty, I was sick with exhaustion. I had worked too hard for too long for very little money — a familiar non-profit story. That's how I came to be "resting up" over winter, working on my mother's house and garden.

Then, in early spring, I got a phone call offer of a job a thousand miles away. Someone who knew my work in New England had recommended me. Did I want to garden for X and Y? Let's call them Jim and Jane. They were a couple known to most Americans, media celebrities, Jim in the movies, Jane on television.

They lived mostly in New York City but I was hired to do the garden at their New England estate. Jim had owned The Farm (let's call it) since he was young, so it had considerable sentimental value now that he was in his sixties. He and Jane were recently married and much too busy to visit The Farm more than four or five times a year.

Another disincentive was the fact that Jim's previous wife still lived on the place and would for another two years. My job, I was told, was to please Annette. She was a lovely woman, very much a lady, but easygoing too — a writer in ill health, somewhat depressed

and seeking refuge in her work. I could tell right away that what she needed from me was respect for her privacy and a garden she could love. She was entirely undemanding but had one clear dislike: the color orange. Apart from that, I was free to garden any way I pleased.

Annette did mention that her family had lost its fortune, so she grew up on a country estate in a run-down house surrounded by gardens wild and overgrown. She clearly had fond memories of that place so I took the hint and gardened in a style half wild half tame — the style I happen to like best myself. I broke up the previous gardener's rigid scheme of blocks of single plants and did what nature does: mix and interweave all manner of things.

There was plenty to do in any case, since the previous gardener had taken full and unfair advantage of Annette's easygoing attitude. Jim was the one who wanted to see results — "something for his money," Nick the estate manager told me.

I had never been paid so much in my life so I took that hint too. I worked steadily and happily all day long, taking almost no time off. I was that glad to be working alone in peace in such a beautiful place. I rarely saw Annette, who said she enjoyed the garden most from the windows of the house.

It was a fine old New England farmhouse in a state of surprising disrepair. That, and the over-arching shade of massive ancient trees gave it a look of house in mourning for a marriage that was dead. A kitchen window was left open day and night so the family's old tomcat could come and go as he pleased. So did various raccoons who had learned to steal in and take food from the cat's dish. Tomcat and raccoons together gave the house a peculiar strong wild animal smell.

Sometimes, thanks to a passing breeze, the smell of the house wandered out into the garden. Its bitter taint, mingling with springtime's

sweet perfumes, suggested the obvious to me: the plot of a novel, a sadly ironic, romantic one. In it —

Lucky for me, I had no time to write a bad novel.

I kept a journal of my work instead. It started as a way to document the work I was doing day by day alone — work the previous gardener was accused of doing badly or not at all. Along with workaday details of weather and what I planted and why, I added bits of good-humored, tactful reporting on life at The Farm in general. I say tactful because it seemed a good idea, for example, not to mention Annette or any mishap that might reflect on Nick's management of the place. Each week, when I drove to the nearest town to shop for supplies, I xeroxed a copy of my journal for Nick to send to Jim's office in New York City.

I expected that Nick would read my journal before sending it on, and in fact I asked him to. Nick was delighted to see himself and his work cast in such a positive light. I was greatly relieved, since the last thing I wanted was to cause any trouble between him and Jim. I had seen right away that Nick lived in fear of Jim, and for good reason too. Jim was a very wealthy man and owned other far more expensive and impressive properties, but The Farm was special. Jim told me that himself, the first time we spoke on the phone and again the first time we met.

Then too, Nick was unsure of himself, also for good reason. He was a rough tough cowboy doing a job that called for someone more like an office manager, someone educated, self-disciplined, and well-organized. Nick was bright enough, but grew up poor "out in the middle of nowhere" (as the old saying goes) in New Mexico.

Nick wasn't your usual slim, slow-moving, soft-talking cowboy type. In his youth he had

been a heavyweight boxer. He was built like a bull and was a dreadful bully too, at least where humans were concerned. All his soft talk was for horses. The rest of us he shouted at. The stables were uphill out of sight of the house but I could hear Nick shouting as I worked.

Nick shouted at me mostly at supper, which he cooked and served in the house he shared with horse trainer Karen, his young, long-suffering wife. The tiny apartment that came with my job was in the stables, across the aisle from larger quarters shared by the Mexican stable hands Juan and Jose. They spoke no English and I spoke no Spanish, yet the three of us soon found subtle ways to communicate resistance to Nick's bullying. I actually liked Nick but felt obliged to counter his violent and ignorant opinions on any number of topics. His views on race and nationality were entirely odious, especially with respect to Mexicans.

I'm not the shouting type, but found myself raising my voice on that and other topics, among them our place in a world we shared with the likes of Jim and Jane. It was sadly obvious that Nick's need to feel superior to Mexicans arose out of a painful sense of being himself inferior to anyone with money. Add fame to fortune, as with Jim and Jane, and there it was: that old-fashioned servant recipe for knowing who your "betters" are and how you, the servant, must behave accordingly.

Soon after I arrived, Jim and Annette's college-age son Jack brought some friends to party on a Friday night. Early Saturday morning I found various bits of party trash thrown into flowerbeds by the swimming pool. I bagged this trash neatly and left it outside the guest quarters door with a note: "Dear Jack, please do be a prince and pick up your party scatter. Your mom will appreciate it and so will I. Thanks so much. JP"

Nick was horrified. "He's Jim's son. He can do anything he wants."

"Well I don't care whose son he is," I said. "He can't throw trash around for other people to pick up. That's no way for a rich young man to learn to look at life."

That led to a long and heated argument on the best way to raise a rich young son. I have no idea what young Jack thought about my note. He never mentioned it and neither did I. He seemed perfectly friendly. And I found no more trash in the garden.

Still, Nick and I argued constantly about questions of wealth and privilege. One day I said to him: "The trouble with you, is you want to be like Jim."

I remember that moment perfectly well, though I can't remember just what provoked my comment. We were alone in the shadowy stable, looking at a horse. Nick grabbed my arm and spun me around to face him. His dark eyes glittered in that bulldog face. I was suddenly afraid. Was this tough guy finally going to punch me out? In the same split second that obvious fear was replaced by another more subtle and strange. I had this odd sensation that Nick was on the verge of tears!

He actually lowered his voice to say: "I don't want to be like Jim. I want to be Jim."

I'm afraid I said something as crudely commonplace as: "Well you better start saving your money pal, because you're gonna need a helluva lot of it." That would have been especially bad, since Nick was the gambling, hard-drinking type who never gets out of debt. Worse yet, I see now that he was telling me something important about himself; and that however disgusted I was by it, I should have reacted with more compassion.

As it was, that moment returned to haunt me that year and the next as I learned more sad lessons about what it means to be a ser-

vant — to earn money by spending every waking hour, mind and body, doing your best to please your wealthy "betters."

I could write another ironic, distinctly unromantic bad novel about my servant education. It's all there in my journal, a day by day account of steady promotion matched by increasingly weary critique of life as it is known to servants of the rich and famous.

That's servants in the plural because servants learn far more from other servants than they ever do from their "masters." I started meeting other servants later that year when I was moved from The Farm to garden for Jim and Jane themselves at a smaller but far more ambitiously lovely estate near the city.

A British butler handed me a gem of insight in relation to the worst aspect of my job: the deep humiliation I felt at having to invade all of Jim and Jane's most private spaces. I tended plants or bouquets all through their country house and penthouse in the city. Even though I took care not to look at or touch anything not related to my business in those spaces, I still felt —

The English butler smiled and interrupted with the just-right image: "You feel like a ghost must feel in the land of the living. You are there in the room, but you don't exist there. You do visible work. You yourself are invisible. That's your job."

He went on to explain that his family had been servants for generations and that they always talked about this "ghost business."

He said things like: "Relax. It never gets any easier. You just get better at it. Getting paid more helps — more than you may think."

Also this: "Don't you realize, the one thing these grand ones don't have and can't have is really private space? They don't even consider it. They're too addicted to having things done for them. People like us have private space. It's where ghosts go when they want

to come alive, right?"

Right. My ghost promotion took me out of a stable to a quiet little cottage with its own bit of a garden. Private too. Jim and Jane would never come here. But I did have to buy my first-ever answering machine. Jim liked to be in touch that way.

Before I say another word about the privilege it is to be in touch with the rich and famous every day and sometimes many times a day, let me issue what savvy businesspersons call A Disclaimer. Mine goes like this: Jim and Jane were never anything but perfectly decent to me. They were in fact uncommonly nice and wonderfully unpretentious, especially considering who they were.

Still, my working relationship with Jim grew increasingly vexed. Read all about it in my next bad novel. Meantime, let me say it was my fault, really. I was a ghost who just couldn't reconcile the costs and benefits of a perfectly workable virtual reality. I wanted these privileged people to have a better garden than they wanted. Jane didn't care enough to fuss but Jim was in the business of fussing over every detail of virtual reality in theater and film. His notions of a garden were correspondingly artificial. So here was this upstart gardener trying to connect him with a real-live, in-ground garden.

Jim's personal assistant called one day to give me this bit of advice: "Don't talk to Jim about process. Talk to him about results. This is a man who makes movies. He can make it snow in July."

I got along pretty well with The Dragon Lady (we called her), though I blush to recall having said on that occasion: "Well this is a gardener who gardens for real..."

The issue at hand was masses of lilies Jim wanted blooming in deep shade where lilies just naturally refuse to do any such thing. Money was never an issue so I offered a com-

promise: pots of blooming lilies shifted to that spot. The handsome boxwood shrubbery would hide the pots — shrubs bound to be injured by digging there in any case. But no. I had made the fatal mistake of discussing process, not results. Doing that put Jim on the defensive by appearing to threaten his right to total control.

There must be Japanese equivalents of this in business and academic life.

I do wish I had bought a box of answering machine tapes and saved the sound of that famously beautiful voice speaking to a ghost I happen to know was me.

I do hope I copied some of Jim's messages into my journal. Early in my second year on the job it became far too seditious to share. Jim gave no sign of missing it, though I heard that some of his office staff did. I guess that journal became the one bit of privacy left to me. No wonder I haven't gone back to read it in all these years. I'm that afraid of the monster bad novel lurking there.

Some of Jim's messages are, however, etched in memory. Let them speak for the outcome of a job I had to leave when my mother fell ill and needed me at home.

My favorite had to do with two dogs whose privilege was to do any damage they pleased to garden and greenhouse. Jim's message began: "You can criticize me but you can't criticize my dogs."

I offered any number of times to help Jim find a gardener more suited to his needs. And I meant it too. In spite of all I was a ghost that trustworthy, that idiotically sincere. Jim shocked the daylights out of me by responding once: "Stop talking about quitting. This is a lifetime job."

I wasn't flattered, I was appalled. Did he think this was all I wanted out of life?

But of course I was wrong. Jim had never been a servant. How could he possibly know

about the real-life difference between the virtual life of a ghost in his service and the really real life every human feels entitled to? True, literature and art, even the art of cinema, might have taught him that. He was, after all, a kind of artist himself, a master of virtual insight into the human condition. Maybe the thing to say is that it's easy and natural to overlook the claims of ghosts around the homeplace.

Quickly then. I haven't really been a servant since, though work on a number of other estates has kept the ghostly threat alive. In fact I have a whole series of work journals now, each with its complaining ghost, its own peculiar relation to a wealthy client, its own monster bad novel lurking in pages I never find time to read.

Even as I rush to finish this in the lovely month of May, I look out at a garden I must lose in mid-July, thanks to the easy-come-easy-go attitude that goes with owning "trophy" estates. A trophy estate has no family allegiance, no tradition of ownership worth talking about. Like the "trophy homes" of millionaire athletes, a trophy estate changes hands like any other commodity bought and sold for money.

I have lived in the gardener's cottage on this one for seven years, so my own small garden, built from scratch, has the loveliness only time can buy. So does the garden I've worked to expand and improve around the owner's mansion downhill. Gardens and gardener survived a sale several years back. This time it will be different. This little house will be bulldozed to make room for what Americans call, with no trace of irony whatever, "development." The gardens around the mansion downhill will be left with no one to water in the hottest, driest time of year.

But so it is and so I must apologize for rushing to round out my ghostly account of ser-

vant life. One day a week I work on another estate far grander than this. The owner belongs to the family my friend has been studying and which, for obvious reasons, I will not name. I am their only gardener and only part-time because, for all their great wealth and status, they live pretty much like upper-middle-class Americans. Husband and wife are both working professionals, careful of expense.

The wife is proud of coming from a family with no inherited wealth. Her father was a college professor. A dollar bill of 1933 in a frame on the wall was the first he earned for eight hours of work in a Woolworth "five-and-dime" store in Tennessee that year. She does fancy consulting work herself and dresses "like a million" in that role. At home she's a down-and-dirty gardener and dresses accordingly.

As it turns out, I am peculiarly well suited to be this couple's gardener. Wife and husband both have a keen sense of family history, so they value my working journal almost as much as the actual garden work I do. Even more remarkably, these highly-cultivated people accept and even relish the complex blend of fact and fiction in my account of life on their estate from the eccentric gardener's point of view. The wife and I have what Americans like to call "an embattled relationship." Translation: we disagree on just about everything having to do with gardens.

And because a gardener who works in a garden he cannot love just naturally becomes a fearsome vengeful ghost, I have to be a bit careful too. Unlike Jim and Jane, this couple would never allow our journal to lapse. And so they get their copy week by week, an account whose critical balance owes much to a device borrowed from the monster bad novel hidden in the text. There are two protagonists: the stingy, vulgarly ostentatious and perversely destructive lady of the house; and her entirely horrible old man gardener, the

one she would gladly kill if only a working replacement could be found.

Even though this couple consider me a friend and treat me accordingly, the facts are the facts. I may not be their servant but I am enough like one to consider myself a descendant of the gardener/footman my friend interviewed. Not that I hope to marry well and end life as a gentleman. I would be satisfied with much much less. Say a haiku-size house and garden of my own. That's what I'm looking for now.

Meantime, let me banish the complaining servant ghost by explaining why I set out to write this piece. The idea came to me this spring as I got ready to attend the opening of our nation's largest flower show. I was going as the guest of the couple just mentioned above. I have been their guest on a number of such grand occasions. I am heartily bored by such events and try to beg off but never get my way. And because I resolutely refuse to own formal attire, and because they are

equally resolved to have me attend these things, I wear the husband's clothes

This spring was different because just the day before my friend had told me about her gardener/footman interview. So there I was in this analogous situation: the gardener called upon to serve indoors, for a splendid evening affair. The difference was that the wealthy host was dressing his servant to play the role of guest. My hands were clean, but too cracked and swollen from cold weather garden work to maneuver the always difficult cufflinks and tiny shirt-front studs that go with the "white tie and tails" of fancy dress. So there he was doing that for me and tying my tie, not minding at all. Because of course he was getting his way, still the master after all.

END

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