

THE BOLTONS
OF
THE LITTLE BOLTONS

By
Robert Philip Bolton

Also by Robert Philip Bolton
The Fine Art of Kindness
Six Murders?
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For Viktor. The story of Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition'

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Preview file information

This preview file of *The Boltons of The Little Boltons* contains the prologue and first six chapters. The complete book comprises twenty-nine chapters and 203 pages. This preview file and the complete text are protected by copyright owned by the author, Robert Philip Bolton.

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*Some of the source material used for this book
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THE BOLTONS OF THE LITTLE BOLTONS

Second impression June 2015

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ISBN: 978-0-473-19488-8

Cover design by Steve Bolton. steveboltoncartoons@gmail.com

For Kath

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Prologue

THIS IS A BOOK OF SMALL PORTRAITS OF SOME OF the many people my wife and I met in the course of a job we shared in a small corner of London for just a few months in nineteen ninety-two. There is no plot. There is nothing in it that is particularly dramatic or exciting. On the contrary it is concerned with the mundane; the daily routine of people who were interesting only because their way of life was strange, unsustainable and all but extinct. I could see that — surely any outsider could — but those concerned, the living subjects of my little portraits, clearly could not. To them everything in their world was perfectly normal. To me living there with them was like being in a dream based not in the present, nor even the past, but in some insubstantial, ethereal other-world that seemed to be fading away even as I lived in it.

Things in this curious other-world *appeared* perfectly normal. There were always plenty of normal people in busy streets lined with modern cars; red double-decker buses wove patiently through the thick traffic of the narrow Fulham Road and the King's Road, and black cabs rattled along the side streets taking clever shortcuts to Brompton Road and Cromwell Road. But to me, a visitor from distant and oh-so-different New Zealand, the busy streets felt empty and eerily haunted. Their tall, oversized black-brick houses, looking old, cold and damp, loomed and leaned

over their mossy undersized gardens, evoking only the Victorian past. Ordinary, everyday events seemed to move with a purpose now obsolete and meaningless towards a non-existent objective. Some of the little shops looked quaintly old-fashioned and even some of the people in the streets seemed to belong more to another time, another era, like ghosts somewhat bewildered to find themselves disconnected from the place and out of joint with time.

The real names of the people I met are inconsequential and so have not been used; what's important is that they existed at all and that I chanced to glimpse their ghostly images just as they were fading away. It seemed I was present at — and part of — a sad and somewhat surreal and shabby end of an era, unmarked by history; a metaphor for the demise of what was once the greatest and richest city in the world, the capital of the world's most powerful empire.

Chapter I

FIRST, THE BELL. THE HARSH JANGLE OF A SERVANT-summoning electric bell installed for emergencies above Kath's bed.

Then a shout.

'I say. Bolton! Bolton!'

It was the old man. His loud shout was full of fear, even panic.

Struggling out of the deep and dreamless sleep I so desperately needed — so long were our hours and so hard our work — and expecting the worst, I threw on my robe and went to our top floor landing. There, two landings below, was the old man in his white towelling robe now shading his eyes from the light I had just switched on.

'What is it? Is Mrs Beaumont all right?'

By now Kath was behind me.

'Mrs Bolton,' he said to Kath, ignoring me. 'I'm afraid the wife's had a bit of an accident.'

It was three o'clock in the morning.

It all started a year earlier when we — my wife Kath and I, then in our middle years — decided we needed a change. We had a successful little business in New Zealand that

kept us busy and gave us financial security. We were surrounded by friends and families in one of the world's happiest, least populated and most unspoiled lands. We were happy, relaxed, contented, comfortable. And bored.

We'll do something 'different', we said. We'll change. At least for a while. We knew people of our age who had gone to Britain and worked managing castles and estates in remote parts of Yorkshire, Cornwall, Scotland, even the Isle of Wight and the Channel Islands. Some had done house-minding. Others had worked in pubs or on farms. We knew one man who had run a salmon-fishing farm in Scotland while his wife managed the property's little tea shop. So we'll go to Britain and find some interesting but undemanding work. The simple life.

'Physical work will be good for us,' I said.

'Not too physical,' said Kath.

'You know what I mean. Rest the brain for a change.'

Rest the brain. Get physically active and so give ourselves the chance to think; and to really look and listen to better understand what we see and hear.

'But where are you actually going?' we were asked. 'And what are you actually going to do?'

Questions to which we could reply only that we '—have no idea'.

But we did have some ideas. We had the right stamps in our passports. We planned to find live-in domestic work in Britain — anywhere in Britain — that would provide us with a home, a modest wage, a simple life, and the time and opportunity to explore another place and experience another way of life.

'Something completely different,' we said.

Internet and email use was not then universal, and was in fact rare in England, so we had begun by writing away

for *The Lady* magazine, that odd and peculiarly English weekly publication which claims to have been 'in continuous publication since 1885' being 'widely respected as England's longest running weekly magazine for women'. It was an odd publication with a split personality: on the one hand its insubstantial articles — on life in town and country, dining, entertaining, overseas travel and the arts — appeared to be aimed at elderly women at, or aspiring to be at, the upper levels of 'society' while its many pages of tightly set classified advertisements — seeking au pairs, butlers, chauffeurs, companions, cooks, gardeners, housekeepers, lady's maids, mother's helps, nannies and more — were aimed directly at those standing on the bottom rung of the English social ladder seeking domestic positions 'at home and abroad'.

Obviously this flimsy little journal couldn't be sought and read by both markets; clearly its rather anaemic articles were there only to provide a genteel environment for the magazine's real purpose as a job market for servants.

We were interested in its advertisements for couples.

SOUTH OF WINCHESTER. — Experienced couple, suit semi-retired persons. One to do light household duties in morning, other look after cars, swimming pool, help in garden, some DIY and driving. Mostly mornings, some afternoons, Two bedroom house provided. References essential.

COUPLE NEEDED. — Caretaking small country house, Wiltshire. Part time duties, housekeeping, cooking, gardening, maintenance. Flexible arrangements considered. Own accommodation. References essential.

COUPLE REQUIRED. — Experienced housekeeper/cook, gardener/handyperson for large house in Berkshire. Own two b/room house. Excellent conditions and salary.

COUPLE REQUIRED. — Experienced cook/house-keeper and experienced gardener/handy person required for busy family in Dorset manor house. Must like animals. Own cottage provided. References essential.

As well as these tiny advertisements there were display advertisements from agents, some specialising in placing couples, offering a variety of positions.

OXON. Exp Butler/Chauff & HK/Cook for client with beautiful rural home. Drivers essen. Ideal cple will be drivers. 30s 40s with no pets or dependants. 2 bed house. 5 day wk.

LONDON. HK/Cook & Houseperson/Driver to run international families lovely home. Beautiful 1 bed self-contained flat.

GLOUCESTERSHIRE. Sought after position for top class Couple for large manor home catering for titled family + friends. Butlering, Driving, Managing, HK + Cook, etc (other staff). Own home, costs, etc.

OXFORDSHIRE. Young and energetic Housekeeper/Cook and Butler/House Manager couple required for large country house. 2 bedroom cottage on estate. Generous package.

Evidently plenty of work for couples.

From home we wrote only to the agents seeking advice in advance but receiving only one reply. We weren't discouraged especially when we were told, by the many people whose example we were following, that the sort of work we were seeking was rarely arranged by post and that it would be easy once we were there in person to make our applications directly to the advertisers.

We had assembled a file of references to take with us but it wasn't easy. Our aptitude and adaptability — and a confidence in our ability to learn quickly and do anything

— were not qualities easy to prove. Who would care to hire middle-aged, inexperienced domestic servants whose only credentials were based on their business experience at the other end of the world? So we sought references that referred, especially, to our personal qualities: our ability to work hard, to get on with people, to bring up children, to run a home. I knew, as all New Zealand men of my generation do, how to drive, repair machinery, work with wood and tools, maintain a house, run a garden and more; furthermore, and unlike most men of my generation, I was a confident cook and thoroughly enjoyed working in the kitchen. And as someone who had been an employer for many years I also knew what was expected of a good and loyal employee. For her part Kath had tried nursing as a student before qualifying as a school teacher; since then she had published children's books all over the world, managed a newspaper, been creative director in an advertising agency, and was a stepmother to that most difficult of species: teenaged boys.

Would it be enough? There was only one way to find out. And so, on a balmy summer's evening in February, nineteen-ninety-two, a year after making the decision to go, we said goodbye to our friends and family in the garden bar of the Northcote Tavern in Auckland.

And then, suddenly, from the bright light, warmth and clear summer skies of our southern hemisphere home in New Zealand we found ourselves in the grimy grey chill of a damp London winter. Our London-based niece was there to meet us and we bear-hugged each other through the unfamiliar thickness of our coats. The rest of our limited wardrobe was in the two backpacks and one small suitcase that lay on the cold wet concrete beside us outside the Heathrow terminal.

‘Is this *all* your luggage?’ Lisa asked. She had, foolishly perhaps, agreed to let us stay with her until we found a ‘position’.

‘That’s it.’

We based ourselves in Lisa’s flat in Wetherby Gardens and immediately began the work of looking for work. We started with the only letter we had received from a London domestic employment agency. Signed by the inevitable ‘Miss’, it sounded warm and encouraging, promising plenty of work and asking only that we made contact as soon as we arrived in London. And so that particular Miss was our first call but we discovered that she was missing and her little enterprise was no longer in business.

We bought the latest copy of *The Lady*, full of fresh new advertisements but sitting in the London gloom of Lisa’s basement flat we found that there were now few opportunities for couples. To those few which sounded promising we hand-wrote formal letters of application but it was difficult and time-consuming to dash off to interviews all over England. And so, after a few fruitless days of wading through *The Lady*, and futile letter writing, we decided to start again by visiting only London agents — in person — and so get our names listed.

Our meetings with these agents marked our introduction to the people of this ‘other’ London and the beginning of our strange adventures.

I have no record of the number of agents we visited but they merge into one memory: a dingy, shabby office near but not quite within a fashionable West End, Knightsbridge or South Kensington neighbourhood. A sign, on or near the door, that was hard to find and, once found, was faded and hard to read. A narrow, crooked staircase rising to a couple of rooms of threadbare carpet, grubby paint, peeling wallpaper, and dust; flowers that were plastic and faded,

calendars that were out of date, coffee instant, lights unshaded, desks ugly, chairs bursting their horsehair, and files — if that's what they were — lying randomly about the room.

The owner was almost always an overweight, badly dressed woman of late middle age. She was rarely pleasant to us but her tone and, intriguingly, her accent changed immediately when she made a phone call to, or received one from, a lady client. The clients, too, were always women; it seemed that the employment of servants was women's work.

Establishing a good agency name seemed important. Inherited Victorian or Edwardian beginnings were assumed whenever possible. Or humble origins, perhaps a little spinsterish or widowed hardship, were implied by the use of the founder's name with a title no grander than Miss or Mrs. The idea was to suggest that this was a small, simple business — rendered as a service to her betters, more from a sense of duty and respect than for money — founded by a retired plain-looking lady's maid of experience, refinement, impeccable credentials and an outmoded wardrobe; a woman so experienced that she, better than anyone else, would understand madam's needs and would, of course, have just the right contacts at the lower levels of society to find the perfect butler, valet, chauffeur, gardener, cook, maid, house parlour maid, nanny or companion.

Furthermore it all seemed based on a mutual delusion — mutual to the agency lady and her clients — that there actually existed a surplus of well-trained, honest and honourable men and women, preferably of the English race, whose only desire was to find a noble and benevolent employer to whom they could willingly dedicate the rest of their lives in decent and loyal servitude. The reality was that while such people did exist there was no surplus of

them, and wise employers kept them happy, well paid and off the market. But, as I soon discovered, there were always the poor, the simple, the uneducated, the foreigners with little English — and even less understanding of English ways which are even more mysterious than the English language — who, together, constitute the largest resource of people prepared to do menial work for low wages in other people's houses.

The dynamics of these domestic employment agencies were quite simple and Miss Hart's *Staff Solutions Bureau* in Kensington was typical. To the side of the proprietor's desk was a narrow wooden box within which were arranged — presumably in some order — a line of white cards ruled in light blue and printed by hand or antique typewriter. At that time the New Zealand I had just left was highly computerised but not once in these dreary, depressing, grubby little offices did I see a computer or any suggestion of data-based logic or order. Whether Miss Hart's lidded box contained the records of employers or employees or both I couldn't decide but it was into it that she plunged a podgy, bejewelled hand. It was a random process and it seemed to me, as we waited, watched and listened, that it worked on the remarkable principle that at some fantastically lucky moment in the day the needs of a fabulously rich, generous, kind and desperate employer would happily and miraculously coincide with a poor, clever, experienced, desperate and very English employee meaning Miss Hart's benevolent little bureau would earn a commission.

I was astonished by this inefficient reliance on luck and coincidence. I felt that given but a couple of days I could have reorganised this tiny business, taught Miss Hart how to better care for her employer and employee resources, bought a cheap computer and a simple data-base programme, and started earning enough money to at least

paint the walls, lay some carpet, and buy a decent coffee maker.

In the service of the little box of index cards, and in the absence of a computerised data base, there was an application questionnaire: a form that was badly laid out, with typed-in afterthoughts, twinks and deletions, all blurred and spotted by over-photocopying; a form that seemed to have been designed in Edwardian days, accurately reflecting the needs of Edwardian employers, turn-of-the-century employment conditions and the form-filling abilities of footmen, scullery maids and under-house parlour maids only briefly educated in rustic nineteenth century schools. We did our best, within the limited compass of this dreadful form, to suggest our talents and potential, submitting copies of references that may or may not have been ever read, and furnishing passport-size photographs.

Odd people came and went as we filled out the forms and waited. We spoke to one well-dressed and reasonably well-spoken elderly man. He appeared healthy and well, was tall and upright — he might once have been a guardsman — but looked close to seventy. And despite his proud bearing his eyes looked vacant and somewhat sad; I guessed he was disillusioned by a life that had not turned out quite as expected. No doubt it hurt and embarrassed him to have to visit these shabby offices and grovel to Miss Hart and other supercilious agency women like her.

‘Barnes,’ he said. ‘Butler to Lord Corbury at Carstairs Manor.’ The names meant nothing to me. ‘Forty years man and boy.’

‘What happened?’

‘Died,’ he said flatly. ‘Found him meself. In the stables. On the floor. Covered in straw and muck he was.’

‘Oh dear.’

What could I say?

‘Nobody else,’ he said. ‘No family. No heirs.’

‘So what about you?’

‘Revenue got the money, National Trust got the house, hunt got the horses and hounds, club got the wine, and yours truly got the order of the boot.’

‘Oh dear,’ I said again.

‘Need another gentleman now,’ he said.

At that he lit up a cigarette — smoking inside was common and acceptable in England at that time — and never said another word.

Barnes was one of the few men we encountered. But there was a constant parade of women, of all ages and nationalities, willing to take anything Miss Hart had to offer. Generally large of body, and wrapped in cheap woollen coats, they gave these little places the steamy air of a war-time refugee camp; they struggled with language and form-filling, and tried — hopelessly I thought — to ‘sell’ themselves to the haughty proprietors. They looked miserable and depressed — altogether a miserable and depressing sight — and it was an altogether miserable and depressing experience to realise that we were in no more demand than they.

They were ripe for exploitation, and I felt sorry for them, but there was nothing I could do. It was probably just another day in the business life of the agency owners who must have been watching this parade of the hopeless for as long as they had been in business.

Back in the chill of Kensington High Street, knotting our scarves, pulling our woolly beanies down over our ears, drawing on our gloves, looking about for somewhere warm to have a cup of tea, it was obvious that despite all the advertisements in *The Lady* there was little if any demand

for a couple like us; evidently we had managed to arrive at just the wrong time.

Suddenly we were sick of looking for work, sick of dealing with these silly agency women who lived lives of lies, deluding themselves and their poor exploited clients, and sick of the cold and the damp and the grime and the high cost of everything in London.

'It's not working is it?' I said.

'No, said Kath. 'It's not working. And neither are we.'

'No.'

And then we met Prudence.

Chapter II

PRUDENCE'S LITTLE BUSINESS WASN'T ESPECIALLY different from the others but she was younger than the other owners, more natural, less stuffy, nicer to us, and certainly better dressed. She seemed also to run a secretarial employment agency which meant she was more in touch with the nature and needs of people in the real world outside domestic service. Kath deduced, somehow, from something framed on the wall, that she had once placed a teenaged Lady Diana Spencer as an ironer of shirts for a young aristocrat in Colherne Court. It didn't make any difference to our prospects but Kath the Royalist was immensely impressed.

We liked Prudence at once and she liked us in return. And despite the fact that she also had a little wooden index box I did see a computer at work and felt encouraged enough to believe that, at last, we might be in the right place at the right time. And I was right; Prudence did have a client whose needs, by the sound of it, happily coincided with ours.

'But they don't really need a married couple,' she said.

Good start I thought.

'Actually I don't think they know what they need.'

Eh?

‘It’s awfully complicated.’

That didn’t sound promising either.

She went on to explain that she had never met the actual clients; she was really working for the family, or at least for two daughters of the family.

‘They’re at their wit’s end,’ she said, somewhat mysteriously.

She went on to describe the situation as discreetly as she could, as she understood it from the daughters. Evidently the parents were old; in their late eighties, nearly ninety. The mother was infirm and needed help; not necessarily professional nursing help but assistance with bathing and dressing, and getting into and out of bed. She didn’t get outdoors enough and needed to be taken for walks in her wheelchair. And, as much as anything, she needed a companion who could speak English, was pleasant, intelligent and mature.

‘You speak English,’ I said to Kath. ‘One out of four.’

Prudence looked at Kath, then at me, and smiled indulgently. Patiently. Kath kicked me in the shins.

According to the family she — the lady client — was a dear, sweet old thing, no more crotchety and unreasonable than might be expected from someone of her age and infirmity.

But how infirm? We didn’t ask. We listened; tried to look serious and interested.

Prudence then told us as much as she could about the old man which was very little. He was difficult — I wondered what ‘difficult’ meant — of that she was sure, but she was unable (or unwilling?) to provide details. Evidently he had driven other staff to tears and away with his rudeness. And that, she implied grimly, was part of the

problem: she was simply running out of people she could place there.

‘I thought you liked us,’ I said. The patient Prudence merely smiled indulgently. Again. Kath kicked me in the shins. Again.

‘I’ve just got nobody who will suit them,’ she said.

They were rich and old — she was certain of that — and they lived, she told us with a smile, and a glance at our name on the application form, in The Little Boltons, one of the smartest and most expensive streets in Kensington.

‘What a coincidence,’ I said.

‘It’s an omen,’ said Kath.

‘It’s so handy to everything,’ said Prudence. ‘You’d love it there. Really.’

Prudence had taken a liking to Kath. She could see that Kath was friendly and capable, and wiser than the young nurses who had previously occupied the position, and would therefore be perfect for the lady client.

‘But what can we get *you* to do?’ she asked me. ‘I don’t suppose you can cook.’

‘I can cook,’ I said brightly.

Evidently she didn’t hear me. Or it didn’t register.

‘You see they need someone who can cook good old-fashioned English food.’

‘That’s right up my alley,’ I said.

But again she seemed not to hear me.

‘That’s what they like. Plain old-fashioned English food. They had a Filipino cook but...’

Poor Prudence’s voice trailed off at that point implying, oh dear, that surely we must know all about Filipino cooks. So we nodded sagely. It was expected. But we knew nothing about Filipino or any other kind of cooks.

'I can do it,' I said. Insisted.

'Really? Cook?'

She sounded astonished. Was it really *that* unusual that a man should be a cook?

'Yes, really.'

She looked at Kath for confirmation.

'He can. Really,' said Kath.

'Old fashioned English food? Nothing fancy.'

'Yes. Exactly. Not fancy at all.'

Prudence looked thoroughly pleased. But cautious. Thoughtful. She put her elbows on the desk, clasped her hands together, rested her chin on them, and then, as if having made an important decision, looked directly and seriously at me. I leaned forward expectantly.

'That's brilliant,' she said. 'In more ways than one.'

I was puzzled by that. It must have shown.

'Well, you see, they, the daughters — there's another daughter, in the country, and a son too — they'd all love to have a man in the house but they never imagined — I mean, there's no need for a gardener, they have a lady come in every week, and no car to be driven, fixed or cleaned — a man cook. Imagine it.'

'I don't have to,' I said. 'I am one.'

'Yes,' she said, smiling again. She looked relieved. 'A comedian too, I see.'

'I can be very serious,' I said seriously. Prudence laughed.

'Yes. Well, you see, the old man — Mr Beaumont's his name — seems to hate foreigners and young girls so you can imagine how young foreign girls have done there. I've had my girls here in tears from his bullying.'

'Sounds awful,' said Kath.

'It was. But I don't think he'd do that to a man.'

He'd better bloody not, I thought.

'Or to you,' she was looking at Kath, 'or anyone else, if there was a man in the house.

'He'd better not,' I said.

'No. Quite,' said Prudence.

So, despite being a little puzzled, Prudence followed her good instincts. She knew, probably from experience with the daughters, that Kath was ideal. Perhaps she hoped that if the daughters and the clients themselves liked Kath then surely they would accept the strange and unusual idea of a man cook.

And so the meeting ended. Prudence promised to talk to the daughters about us and our potential to solve their problem. She said that she'd get back to us within a week.

There was only one other opportunity: a wealthy American couple, with a flat in London, an estate in the country, homes all over America, and a beach house in the Florida Keys, wanted us to work for them. We were to spend half the year in their country house in England and the other half in their house in Florida. It sounded idyllic but they also wanted us to be less than honest when we entered the United States, saying we were there on vacation, to avoid immigration complications. From people who demanded absolute honesty from their staff it seemed an unusual request.

We declined that post and waited patiently for a meeting with Prudence's clients' daughters. We were getting desperate but we sensed from Prudence that they were too.

Chapter III

‘THEY’RE NOT QUITE SURE,’ PRUDENCE SAID ON THE phone, ‘but I told them about you both, and when I showed them your references they decided they should at least meet you.’

We were to meet Hermione and Alice, the daughters of the lady client Mrs Beaumont, at Hermione’s house. We received our instructions concerning streets, bus numbers and stops, and two evenings later found ourselves across the river near Putney bridge. It was dark and cold. Hermione’s house was on a corner, the first, or last, of a long brick row.

We were still fascinated by the density of London’s population, and the compact size of the houses and gardens. But although appearing small from the outside, in the dark, Hermione’s house was roomy and the atmosphere warm and friendly.

Hermione was also warm and friendly, interesting and full of fun. Small and round, she bubbled over with energy and enthusiasm. I guessed that she was a little older than I, with a smooth skin free of creases but those at the eyes made by laughing, and a broad smile that was so cheerful it made me smile in return. As she spoke her hands were busy touching her fair hair or twisting a button at the neck of her dress. And her eyes widened occasionally, to

emphasise a point, and I noticed that they really did sparkle. She was a delight.

She introduced her quiet sister, Alice, and we all moved into the living room. Alice was small, too, but slight. She appeared light, dainty and delicate, like a retired ballerina — perhaps now a ballet teacher — and her manner was gentle and more reserved than that of her sister. Her face, too, had an unlined look but was more tranquil, less animated; and its whiteness was framed by wavy black hair streaked with steel grey. Her eyes were penetrating and serious but not unkind, and when she spoke her voice was gentle and sweet.

We sat on a luxuriously soft couch near an electric fire, had coffee and nursed a fat cat, while Hermione and Alice took turns telling us about the ‘position’ and asking us more about ourselves. Of the position we learned much more than Prudence had been able to tell us but not — as we discovered later — all that was to be told. Their mother and her husband had each been widowed in their early sixties. They had met through a friend and had married in what they — their various children — still considered too much haste. Now, in their late eighties and approaching their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, they had had plenty of time in which to repent, if necessary, at leisure. But apparently, despite their children’s opinion, they were still perfectly happy.

They had lived in The Little Boltons these twenty-five years without incident even though Hermione and Alice worried that Mr Beaumont may not have been the husband their mother deserved. Now, while generally well, she was slightly incapacitated as a result of an fall — suffered, as I later learned, while holidaying in New Zealand — and so needed more help than she used to. But it seemed she carried on as normally as possible and was fiercely but not foolishly independent.

We listened and realised that underlying Hermione and Alice's explanations was the frustration that, because of their mother's desire for independence, and her husband's jealous resentment of outside interference, there was little they could do to help either of them in their declining years. Staff, they said, were a constant problem. Now, with the departure — they looked at each other and rolled their eyes as they said 'departure' — of the Filipino cook, (we nodded knowingly but in fact knew nothing of the Filipino cook nor of her 'departure'), there was the opportunity to 'plant' someone of their own choosing in the house; someone who could and would do more, with more intelligence and more care, than just another servant hired from just another agency; someone who could and would watch and listen while working, and accurately report to them on Mr and Mrs Beaumont's health and welfare.

According to Hermione and Alice Mr Beaumont's only family, a daughter called Celia, had her own concerns about her father: his failing memory, his increasing irritability, the way he was becoming careless about his appearance, and, more than anything, the way he kept her at a distance. Apparently he had always been a difficult father but nevertheless her concern for his welfare was steadfast.

Clearly we were being asked to engage in a conspiracy. It seemed that because we were mature, intelligent and English-speaking we might provide the means — a rare chance — by which family members could discover what went on within a home where staff spent more time with their parents than they ever could; a chance to discover how well, or unwell, the old pair were, and how they really coped with daily life; a chance granted by Mrs Beaumont only because now, so late in life, the idea of interviewing staff and making decisions was too tiresome. She had agreed that if Hermione and Alice could find someone

suitable she would conduct her own interview to satisfy herself about their choice. And, because hiring staff was women's work, Mr Beaumont would naturally agree with her decision. And that would be that.

But where to find such a person or persons willing to join in this conspiracy? Could we do it? Would we do it? We assured them that we had no doubt we *could* do it. And *would* do it. Absolutely. Except it seemed very vague. What exactly *were* we to do?

So we listened. Hermione and Alice's idea of what had to be done was naturally coloured by their desire to look after their mother's welfare. But they were also aware, and made it plain, that Mr Beaumont had needs too but they, and even his own daughter Celia, were uncertain of quite what they were

The basic idea seemed to be to 'keep an eye on him'; hardly a satisfactory job description when the conspiracy required that we did our eye-keeping while appearing to do useful and necessary work within the house. If we — or more especially I — were to keep an eye on Mr Beaumont without his realising it, we — and especially I — would have to have some meaningful work.

Hermione and Alice obviously trusted Kath. Clinically qualified nurses had been 'too professional' and had lacked the simple kindness, understanding, empathy and flexibility Mrs Beaumont needed. They could see that Kath, with her experience, common sense and maturity, would be fine for Mrs Beaumont. But could I *really* run the kitchen and do the cooking and shopping?

'Of course I could,' I said.

'Of course he could,' said Kath.

'Could you?' they asked, surprised. 'Good old-fashioned English cooking?'

'The only kind I know,' I said, which was true.

They looked at each other somewhat doubtfully.

'It sounds to me that taking care of your mother is a full time job,' I said.

'Oh, it is,' they said together, with a groan, obviously recalling personal experience. They and Celia had been sharing the responsibilities of looking after the old pair since the departure of the mysterious Filipino cook.

'Well then,' I went on, 'Kath can take care of your mother and I'll cook and run the kitchen.'

'Splendid,' said Hermione. 'But first you must meet mummy.'

Chapter IV

TWO DAYS LATER, A SATURDAY, WE MADE OUR WAY TO meet 'mummy' at The Little Boltons. We caught one of those old-fashioned London double-decker buses, the Routemaster model, which even then was being phased out. Short, squat and shabby, and painted a darker red than its newer cousins, it had a sealed half-cabin for the driver and a wooden platform at the back upon which the conductor swayed on spread legs. He nodded to us inside, sitting anxiously in our sideways seat, when we reached our stop on the Fulham Road.

The air was icy cold and a nasty wind stung our ears and nipped at our toes through our lightweight sneakers. We pressed woollen-gloved hands more deeply into our New Zealand sheepskin coat pockets and walked briskly up Hollywood Road. There were a few small restaurants there but the street mostly comprised little joined-up terrace houses that at home would be considered merely adequate as somewhere to live. But these, we knew, were desirable and expensive; the sort of little Kensington and Chelsea town houses from which we had seen emerging — on television at least — famous people, the Princess of Wales perhaps, closing a brightly-coloured door and dashing, head down, to a waiting car. Film stars, we were told, lived

there, as did various members of western- and eastern Europe's obscure and forgotten royal families.

A car stopped, a dark BMW, and a well-spoken, well-dressed young man leaned out the window and tried to sell us an expensive-looking watch.

'Salesman's samples,' he said. 'Don't need them anymore.'

Did we really look that naive? We declined, politely, and moved on. A pub, The Hollywood Arms, looked closed and unwelcoming. A small wine shop which was later part of a rather unpleasant experience I had with Mr Beaumont. A little corner shop, with trays of limp vegetables and stale fruit set outside, lit up the wintry gloom with a yellowness reflected on the wet street. In Tregunter Road the houses were suddenly bigger, taller, grander. White-painted or plain brick, with heavy, varnished doors and large blank windows, they presented a stern face to the passer-by. Both sides of these streets, like most streets in the area, were lined with parked cars there being no room for car garages on these small plots of land whose houses were built before Henry Ford was even born.

And then, suddenly, we saw it: a large, white, reflective sign attached to the corner wall and embossed in black and red. 'The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea', it said in Gothic type, and, below but larger, 'The Little Boltons SW10'. Knowing that the time was right we turned into the street with our name and made our way to the number we were seeking.

We stopped for a moment at the tall gatepost which was surmounted by an ornate lamp. The house was large — three stories above ground, one below — but it wasn't a mansion. It was a strange sight to us. Our house at home was not as tall but was otherwise as large if not larger than this, standing on its own, on land more open and broad,

with a sweeping driveway to a double garage, and friendly neighbours at a distance of more than the entire width of this little parcel of London land. But this house was attached to its neighbour on the right while a neighbouring house rose hard on its left. Altogether it looked cramped for space and a little shabby and stooped; the white paint was flaking from the concrete and the door varnish was dulled. I notice that the garden seemed but half-cared for, that dead leaves had collected in the corners and on the steps, and that the path tiles were cracked and broken.

There was a short narrow path on the left boundary at the end of which I could see a cramped, dark, wet, descending staircase of mossy bricks. It was down there — where the drains entered the buried pipes, a place which Londoners call ‘the area’ — and up again that I was destined to go often in my duties.

But on this day it was at the front door we had to stand. We climbed the broad stairs to the varnished door with its dull brass furniture. The knocker or the bell? We chose the bell. We heard it ring inside. We heard murmuring; soft footfalls. We stood in the cold, removing our gloves, loosening our scarves, and arranging our papers in the plastic shopping bag that Kath carried at her side.

I wondered who would come to the door, Hermione or Alice. At last the heavy door opened. We were touched by a waft of warm air. A strange woman was there. Middle-aged. Smiling. A hushed greeting. A warm handshake across the threshold. Silence and darkness beyond.

‘Hello, I’m Celia. Do come in out of the cold.’

We entered the entrance hall and stood while Celia took our coats and scarves, introduced herself as Mr Beaumont’s daughter, and took the time, without embarrassment, to look us up and down. She was small and thin and seemed to do everything with tiny, nervous

movements. But she had a kind, pleasant face, a nice smile and a quiet voice.

We had been told that she lived somewhere in the country but that she made frequent trips to London and normally took every opportunity she had to visit The Little Boltons. But with the departure of the mysterious Filipino cook it had been necessary for her to establish herself in the house, in a servant-like role, until new staff could be employed. Perhaps for that reason she looked worn, as if under stress, and seemed glad to meet us, perhaps relieved that we were neither young nor Filipino.

Standing in the hall talking I had time to notice only that the furniture — a large table and an elaborate coat-stand — was dark and old, and that the staircase disappearing upwards in front of us was fitted with a electric-powered elevator chair. The chair's seat was up, like a cinema chair, and a control arm was raised beside it as if in salute. I also sensed that the parquet flooring was over-polished — I learned later that dear Mariana, the daily housekeeper, took a lot of pride in that polished floor — making the soft old rug, that lay loosely in the centre of the hall, slippery and dangerous, and I wondered how a disabled old lady could manage it.

'In here,' said Celia.

She opened a door to the right of the staircase and we entered the living room. It was a large, bright room, carpeted in a faded *eau de nil* that went the entire depth of the house, from front to back. The back, looking out through the French doors and into the garden, was taken up by the dining suite and various cabinets. And I noticed an odd square, like a trapdoor, set into the carpeted floor close to the wall; somehow I knew that square of carpet was important, and so it turned out to be.

A large bookcase with glass doors was built into the wall marking the notional division between the dining and lounge areas. At the front of the room were two large windows, with full length green drapes and concealed shutters, which looked out onto the street. Below these a large, pale green and soft-looking couch and matching armchairs were loosely arranged around a low table; a small television set on a wheeled base looked high-tech and out of place.

Mr Beaumont was seated in one of the low chairs, and the coffee table in front of him was littered with newspapers. The comfortable chairs were evidently too low for Mrs Beaumont as she was sitting in her own firm, straight-backed armchair. A Zimmer — the English name for a light, four-legged walking frame with rubber hand-grips — stood within reach.

Mrs Beaumont looked like an older Hermione. Small and round, with a round face, she had a clear complexion, strong blue eyes, generous lips, and pure white hair brushed back naturally in a short unfussy style. As we came in she tried to stand but then, as if only then remembering how difficult and unnecessary it was, she relaxed back into her chair and extended her hand, limp and palm downwards. Her smile was broad, sincere and a little shy, but she looked up at each of us directly as we shook hands and then waited, not altogether patiently, as we were introduced to her husband. I noticed at once that she was slightly deaf and this, and her reduced mobility, obviously irritated her.

Mr Beaumont raised himself from the depth and comfort of his armchair to make his handshakes. He had a large hand and it grasped mine in a firm grip as, for the first time since my school days, I found myself addressed by only my surname although he pronounced it 'beau', as he would his own, rather than the 'bowl' which was the usual

New Zealand pronunciation of Bolton. He called Kath Mrs Bolton and then seemed to dismiss her as not worthy of his interest. But he was intrigued by me, perhaps only because I was a man, and I was certainly intrigued by him. Once we had shaken hands he slouched back into his chair, throwing his right arm over its back in a casual pose, crossed his legs and peered over his bifocals at me with a look between condescension and impolite amusement, all obviously contrived for effect.

Tea and cakes appeared — I didn't notice how nor from where — and the talk was small. Mrs Beaumont seemed genuinely interested in us, where we came from, why we were now in England, how we liked London, how we liked the street and the house. Unlike most even slightly deaf people she spoke with a soft voice and I noticed that she always smiled slightly as she spoke, her head to one side, as if waiting to be amused, ready to laugh, wanting to discover something entertaining or amusing. She had a natural shyness that was perfectly charming.

Aware of both her deafness and our accents we tried to speak slowly and carefully; still she strained forward, always smiling, the better to catch whatever we might say. Yet sometimes, I could tell from her puzzled look, she couldn't really understand the way we said our words or framed our sentences. But she nodded and smiled anyway, closing her eyes briefly, either too polite or too tired to pursue the subject.

'You must see the kitchen?' she said.

'Oh, yes,' I said, uncertain of how I was expected to respond.

'It's lovely,' she said seriously. 'I used to spend a lot of time there. Harold and I used to entertain an awful lot you know.'

Harold? I guessed Mr Beaumont was Harold.

‘We used to have such a lovely time you know. We knew everyone in the street. Such a lovely street. And such a pleasant part of London don’t you think?’

‘I like it here very much,’ I said. And I did.

‘Do you like to cook?’

‘Oh, yes.’ And I meant that, too.

‘Harold and I like plain English food you know.’

‘I understand,’ I said, reassuringly I hoped.

‘How did you learn? You’re not a chef?’

‘No,’ I smiled. ‘I’m not a chef. I learned by doing it. I enjoy it. Cooking for my family.’

‘You have children?’ She was genuinely interested. ‘How many? Where are they now?’

Obviously she hadn’t read our carefully-prepared notes. I didn’t feel like telling her my life story. It was complicated, and she was deaf, so I evaded the question as best I could.

‘There are three of them,’ I replied. ‘One in Australia, two in New Zealand. Living their own lives now. They don’t need us anymore.’

‘No. I see.’ She smiled, as if understanding, and then turned to Kath.

And that was it. I was expecting more. Perhaps some hard-nosed negotiation. But Mrs Beaumont seemed perfectly satisfied, at least with me, and was now concentrating on Kath.

Chapter V

THE WOMEN'S CONVERSATION WAS OF NO INTEREST to Mr Beaumont so when it appeared Mrs Beaumont had finished with me, even before I had finished my tea, he stood up and steered me cleverly to the other end of the room where we stood together at the French doors looking out into the back garden.

'The garden,' he said.

'Nice,' I said, nodding.

It looked bleak and thoroughly un-nice to me but I could see, through the gloom, that it would probably be pleasant and attractive on a warm sunny day. It was divided in half down its length by a wide, straight path and was surrounded by a high, mossy walls overhung with leafless trees. Their winter branches looked like thin, black ink lines scratched on grey cardboard.

'Bought the freehold after the war,' he said. 'Good show. Best thing I ever did.'

He was a large but not especially tall man; the sort that was big in presence, like an overbearing village policeman, a comparison I realised he would not appreciate. He had a large head, not entirely bald, with wisps of white hair growing long over his collar, and he habitually ran his open hand over it from brow to neck. He was smartly dressed in

a blue three-piece suit, properly buttoned, with what I thought was a gold watch-chain across his portliness, a tie set just-so, and black shoes.

‘Second wife,’ he said, not quietly. I glanced quickly to the front of the room but the women were still talking. ‘First one died you know.’ His eyes darted to the ceiling. ‘Upstairs.’

He looked down at his shoes suddenly. I thought there was something on the floor but there was nothing. He shook his lowered head slowly. Then raised it slowly and heavily, like a old rhinoceros, and turned it towards the garden again.

He was standing beside me, legs apart, slightly hunched. One hand was in his trouser pocket and the other gripped the lapel of his coat in the manner of a stage barrister. It was a pose, carefully rehearsed, which went, I realised, with the small talk. Accordingly, I knew it would take its course and soon run out. And then what?

‘Australia was it?’

‘No. New Zealand.’

‘Ah. New Zealand. Been there. Twice I think. With the wife. Canberra.’

‘That’s Australia.’

‘No. Bally ship. Liner. Canberra. Round the world. Auckland. Spent some time there, you know.’

‘Did you?’

‘Dashed nuisance. Wife, this one, did her hip in on the ship. Hasn’t been the same since. Hospital. Good place. Bones.’

‘Ah,’ I said, getting the drift. ‘Middlemore hospital. It’s an orthopaedic hospital.’

‘Don’t know. Ask the wife. She’ll remember. It’s going you know. Bally nuisance.’

'Is it?' I asked.

'Oh, yes. Can't remember a damned thing.'

He pushed his large head forward, towards me, and raised his eyebrows as if surprised.

'I was bright boy at school though, you know. Jolly bright little chap. In the cabinet. Prizes.'

'Really?' I couldn't have cared less.

'Oh, yes. Books. Never read them. Engraved. Show you some time. Ministry of Food.'

'Oh?' I said.

'The war, you know. Wales. Under—' and he mentioned a hyphenated name which meant nothing to me.

'Bally fool he was,' he said emphatically. He stood there beside me, hunched over again, shaking his head slowly with assumed disgust. 'Complete ass.'

Close to him now I could understand the family's concern. His shirt was frayed at the collar and sleeves, and his tie and waistcoat were spotted with food and grease. I even noticed that his shoes needed a polish. He obviously had a mental image of himself looking dapper, like the 'City Gent' he once was, but the smartness of his dress was an illusion that did not stand close inspection. Across the room I could hear the women — Mrs Beaumont, Celia and Kath — talking about the work, the conditions, the wages, the time off, when we might start. These were subjects of vital interest to me. I wanted to be part of the discussion.

Suddenly the old man raised his head and said: 'Don't sound it.'

He was staring at me intently.

'What?'

'Australian. I can understand you. Pretty decent.'

Pretty damn decent of you to say so, I thought.

‘I’m from New Zealand,’ I said. ‘Perhaps we have a more English accent.’

He set his jaw and glared at me again over his glasses.

‘Still colonials though.’

Colonials?

‘Don’t mind New Zealanders. It’s a good street.’

‘It has our name.’ I was getting used to this way of talking.

‘What’s that?’

‘Our name. Bolton.’

‘Knew a Bolton once. Cliff Bolton. At school. Naughty chap as I recall. Always in trouble.’ He chuckled to himself and then, apparently concerned, added suddenly: ‘You’re not related to him are you?’

He was staring at me again. Accusingly.

‘I doubt it.’

He didn’t seem interested in what was happening at the other end of the room, nor that I might soon be his employee. I’m not even sure if he knew who we were and why we were there. And then I was rescued by a call from Kath and I returned to the conference. Mr Beaumont followed me and returned to his place on the couch.

‘Mrs Beaumont and I have agreed—’ said Kath, speaking slowly and carefully, restating the proposed terms of employment, more for Mrs Beaumont and Celia’s benefit than mine, and watching as Mrs Beaumont, straining forward to hear, nodded her agreement at each point. Celia was also nodding, and smiling broadly, probably with relief that she would soon be able to return to her own home.

‘But what about—’ I began but stopped when I received the wifely signal all men recognise as meaning: shut up; we’ll talk about it later.

Mr Beaumont's participation was limited to dealing with the wages, the records, the taxes. He had been a career accountant but his contribution to the present discussion seemed rehearsed — rather like our discussion at the French doors — and he was not really interested in the financial or any other details at all. He seemed more interested in making an impression about his financial skills and his long-standing relationship with what he called 'the revenue'. He was leafing through our papers, glancing briefly at each, one of which was a character reference from our accountant, the partner of a large international firm. He recognised the stationery.

'Know this firm,' he said, waving the letter. 'Different name then.'

'They're a big firm all over the world,' I said.

He looked at me over his glasses, puzzled, slowly moving his jaw from side to side, wondering how a colonial manservant should know about large chartered accounting firms.

'I was in The City, you know,' he continued suddenly. 'Chartered accountant. Partner. Big firm. Bigger than this.'

I nodded to show that I was interested which I was not.

'Barton Mayhew, Alderman's House, Bishopgate, EC2,' he said. 'Director of internal audit and accounting procedure. That's why I run a tight ship here. Tight ship.'

Aye, aye, sir.

I was longing to formalise the terms and conditions referred to so vaguely by Kath. And I remembered the advice we had received from Prudence. 'You must get a contract,' she had said. 'You must have everything — your duties, your wages, your arrangements for time off, everything — in writing. Otherwise, believe me, you'll get taken advantage of. It happens all the time.'

So this was my chance. I raised the subject.

The old man's face immediately clouded over and he set his jaw in a way that I was becoming used to.

'Never had a contract. Never heard of such a thing.'

In The City. Chartered accountant. Partner. Big firm. Never had a contract. Never heard of such a thing.

I dropped the subject at once. We'd have to sort this out later.

So, were we employed? Did we have the job? I still didn't know.

Chapter VI

‘NOW,’ SAID CELIA, STANDING UP AND CLASPING HER hands in front in an impatient ‘well, that’s that’ attitude. ‘I’ll show you around the house. Is that all right, Milly?’

Mr Beaumont’s family called her by a diminutive of her first name, Millicent.

‘Oh, yes, dear,’ said Mrs Beaumont. ‘Splendid.’

So we followed Celia out of the room, she turned and shut the door, and we were back in the dark hallway.

‘I’ll show you the room first,’ she said going up the stairs ahead of us past the parked electric chair.

The room? What room? I looked at Kath — puzzled — but she just smiled and shrugged. We reached the top of the stairs, turned and climbed another flight.

‘This was the family home, you know,’ Celia said over her shoulder when we were out of hearing of the people below. ‘Father’s lived here continuously since he and my mother got married. He leased it at first, of course, but managed to buy the freehold after the war.’

She stopped and looked down at me frankly.

‘He told you that didn’t he.’

It wasn’t a question and she sounded hurt and resigned.

‘Yes. He told me that.’

‘He repeats himself a lot,’ she said.

Really? I hadn’t noticed.

More closed doors.

‘The guest-room,’ said Celia indicating the door on the left. ‘This is where I’ve been sleeping. Mariana stays here sometimes. She’s the daily. Various nurses have slept here too. It used to be my room as a child.’

She opened another door.

‘The main bedroom,’ she said. ‘My mother was always ill you know. She died here. He told you that, too, didn’t he.’

We were allowed only a quick peep into the room and saw nothing but more large windows which I knew must look over The Little Boltons.

‘Yes,’ I said, solemnly, mildly embarrassed.

But it wasn’t my fault. He just told me.

She looked at me for a moment, thinking. Thinking what? Then, indicating casually to this door and that, said: ‘That’s Milly’s bathroom and that’s father’s study.’

At the next landing, another closed door.

‘Father’s bathroom.’

More stairs ahead of us but Celia stopped.

‘Father’s a very odd and difficult man you know,’ she said, seriously. ‘But perhaps it would be different—’ she was looking at me again, ‘—with you.’

Me?

‘Would it?’

‘Yes. I think so. He doesn’t dare bully men, you see,’ she said. ‘Milly needs help but father’s been so intolerant of the people we’ve had before. He just drives them away. He can’t help himself. It’s an awful worry.’

‘He needs help himself,’ she continued. ‘But he won’t accept any help or advice from anyone. Including us. The

only person he tolerates is Mariana. She can say anything to him and he just laughs. You'll meet Mariana. She's been here for, oh, I don't know, absolutely ages.'

And then: 'You must make him get a haircut.'

A haircut. I made a mental note.

'You see, I don't want him to turn into a grubby, dribbling old man.'

Well, I thought, neither do I.

'And see if you can make him change his shirt. He has dozens of new shirts in his drawers. Never opened.'

Change shirts.

'What about Mrs Beaumont?' asked Kath.

Celia stopped. We were on another landing.

'It's funny, you know,' she Celia, turning to Kath, and resting her open right hand in her open left hand in front of her. 'She needs so much help. But she won't let me do it and I'd be so willing.'

I sensed that Celia cared for her father's wife more than she could say.

'It's not just me,' she said. 'She won't let Hermione or Alice help either; her own daughters. A generation thing I suppose. But she lets the nurses do anything.'

She sounded a little resentful. Or disappointed. Sad, maybe. Or hurt.

We climbed another staircase — the only one without an electric chair — and so to the top floor, our floor. At last. Here there was another bathroom lined with the white tiles and heavy porcelain equipment of the nineteen-forties. And two bedrooms. If the job were ours — and I still didn't know if it was — the bathroom and larger bedroom would be ours.

I went into the bedroom. The carpet was worn, the furniture was old and the paint was tired, faded, stained and flaking. The twin beds, with horsehair mattresses and feather pillows, had been freshly made and covered with fringed candlewick spreads; unmatched reading lights had been placed on the side tables, and the two pieces of large antique furniture — a walnut chest of drawers and a dark wardrobe — were thirsty for polish.

There was only one window, much smaller than those on the other floors, but it looked down over the back garden — the same garden I had been looking at from the ground floor — from a great height providing a long view across the neighbouring gardens, through a forest of leafless trees, to the sharp needle steeple of Saint Mary The Boltons. I paused there: it was a beautiful and tranquil scene. Beside the window stood a porcelain sink, with old brass taps and exposed plumbing below. But the room was spacious and yet had an intimate and friendly atmosphere, quite different from the other rooms in the house; I felt comfortable in it at once.

But Celia began to apologise.

‘This floor hasn’t been renovated for such a long time,’ she said. ‘Father never comes up here — he can’t without the chair — so he doesn’t really know its condition.’

He never comes up here.

‘It’s just fine,’ I said. ‘We’ll be very comfortable here.’

I said it. And I meant it. Thanks to the absence of the electric chair we would have the privacy of our own floor. Two bedrooms including ours overlooking the garden, and a bathroom overlooking The Little Boltons. We would have somewhere to live, a goodly wage (I hoped), and the prospect of an interesting experience with interesting people. In London.

It seemed better that we had hoped when we started dreaming and planning a full year earlier. Sitting on our deck at home. Watching the southern hemisphere sun go down on another summer's day.

The summer sun will be coming up at home right now, I thought as I looked out into the chilly London garden and felt the warmth rising from an ancient skeletal radiator fixed below the window.

We left the room and trailed off downstairs again, past the electric chairs, to the ground floor. Opposite the front door was Mrs Beaumont's study — I hadn't noticed that room before — and a narrow hall leading to the back of the house and a door which opened onto a concrete landing and thence down to the garden. But there was yet another landing, and another staircase — this one enclosed in frosted glass, with its own glazed door — going down to the servants' hall below ground. These stairs were steel-edged and uncarpeted and we followed Celia down them noisily past yet another electric chair.

'It's very old-fashioned I know,' Celia was saying, 'but they have a routine and they like to stick to it. They both get very upset if things go wrong.'

They get upset if things go wrong.

We were standing in the kitchen. In nineteen-fifty it would have been a model kitchen worthy of a photo-spread in a decorating magazine. Its once fashionable cream and pale blue — almost everything below stairs was the same cream — were now faded, stained with smoke and dirty with grease. A caterer's gas cooker stood against one wall while a long stainless-steel bench with double sinks, a broken waste-disposer and a rusty dishwasher were lined up opposite. There were cupboards everywhere. A small refrigerator and freezer, bright and white and sharp-cornered, stood under a counter. Two high racks above the

sink were loaded with restaurant-sized pots and pans. There was a large casement window at the end of the room — the only unbarred window on the floor — which opened into a small sunken area of cracked and broken concrete, littered with paper scraps and small stones — in the centre of which stood an ailing bay tree. An old but newly-white-painted table stood in front of the window.

In the corner of the room rested a monstrous dumb waiter with its motor, wheels, cables, gears, chains and counterweights on open display. Obviously it went up to the room above and explained the trapdoor I had noticed earlier.

‘They rise at seven,’ Celia was saying, ‘and you’ll have to help Mrs Beaumont. Then they come down to breakfast which has to be served at eight-thirty. That’s followed by coffee in the lounge. There’s a light luncheon at one, tea at four and supper at seven-thirty.’

What? All they do is eat. And they call the evening meal ‘supper’. How will I remember all this? And they get upset if things go wrong.

‘And, oh,’ she added. ‘Milly can’t stand waste. You mustn’t waste the food.’

Mustn’t waste the food.

On we went, behind Celia, trying to take it all in. A large servants’ living room was comfortably furnished and theoretically would be ours in the evening although, as it turned out, it never was. There was a concrete-floored laundry, a walk-in pantry, a cavernous but redundant coal cellar, a cooling room, various steel cabinets stacked with expensive but dusty china and crystal, and a tall, lockable steel cupboard full of wine, spirits and mixers.

‘Don’t *ever* go in there,’ Celia said darkly. ‘Father’s always been obsessed with the idea that servants steal his wine.’

Don’t steal his wine.

I noticed a door which opened to the side of the house below ground level; it was the entrance for servants and tradesmen which Londoners refer to as 'the area'. Another door opened to a garden courtyard and the downstairs toilet that was there for servants. Outside.

And that was it.

We weren't invited to return to the living room to farewell our potential employers but stood with Celia in the front hall collecting our coats and preparing to leave.

'There's so much more to tell you,' said Celia nervously as we stood together.

'Don't worry,' Kath said reassuringly. 'We'll learn our own way. They'll be all right. We'll look after them. And we can start as soon as you like.'

Celia's expression changed at once. She looked shocked.

'Oh, we'll see about that later,' she said, rather coolly. 'I have to get back home — I have my own family to look after, too — but I'll be talking to Hermione and Alice tonight and no doubt they'll be talking to Milly and someone will get back to the agent soon.'

Outside in the cold Kath said she felt deflated by Celia's parting words.

'I thought we had it for sure,' she said.

'We haven't got a contract or anything,' I said.

'We haven't got a job yet. Let's wait and see what happens next.'

We waited. But what happened next was nothing. We phoned Prudence and she promised to phone back but didn't. Accustomed to action, and used to making decisions for ourselves, we were frustrated by English slowness and inefficiency.

We discovered later that the family had taken the time to verify our references, waiting for the middle of the English night to phone during the New Zealand day to check that the chief accountants and mayors who had commended us so highly were real people who meant what they had said. Not knowing that at the time, but confident that the job would eventually be ours, and anxious not to outstay our welcome with our niece Lisa, we took a trip to the west of England, phoning Prudence whenever we could. Finally, one freezing Wednesday in February, standing at an open phone booth in Bristol, we received the news we wanted.

We had the job. When could we start? They needed us urgently.

‘But we still haven’t got a contract,’ I whispered to Kath who was on the phone. She ignored me.

‘We’ll start on Monday,’ she said into the phone. ‘We’ll move in our things on Sunday afternoon and we’ll start on Monday morning.’

She hung up.

‘What’s happening?’

‘She said Celia will be there on Sunday afternoon to show us the ropes,’ said Kath, pulling on her gloves. ‘But she’ll be leaving after that.’

‘And?’

‘Well, come Monday morning we’ll be on our own.’

‘But we still don’t have a contract. Prudence said—’

‘She didn’t mention it just now. I don’t think we’ll ever have a contract. Honestly. Do you?’

This is the end of the preview file of *The Boltons of The Little Boltons*. Thank you for your interest and support. For complete buying information go to www.bolton.co.nz. For any questions, comments or feedback don’t hesitate to email me at robert@bolton.co.nz. Thank you.