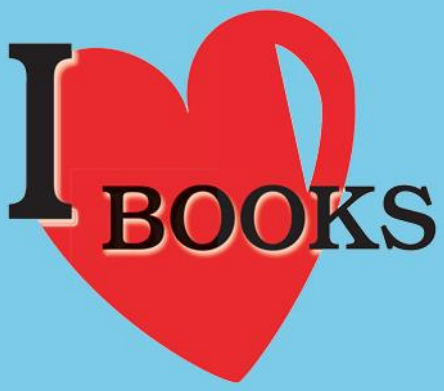


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Opening extract from

The Last Duchess

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A Short Guide to Domestic Servants
J. Bulcock, *The Duties of a Lady's Maid*

The Butler
The butler is the principal male servant. His duties include arranging the dining table, carving the meat, serving the wine and attending to the needs of the family and their guests in the dining and drawing rooms. The silverware, cellars and pantries are in his charge.

The Housekeeper
The housekeeper is the principal female servant, and second in command to the butler. She is in charge of the accounts, the tradesmen's bills, the orderly running of the house and the provision of general supplies. She is also responsible for the servants' quarters.

The Valet
The valet attends the master of the household. His duties include keeping his master's wardrobe in order, preparing his bath, shaving him and tidying his dressing room.

The Lady's Maid
The lady's maid waits on the mistress of the household, assisting with her dress and toilette, washing the most delicate items of her wardrobe and using her dressmaking skills to create and repair clothes. In addition, the lady's maid prepares beauty lotions and styles her mistress's hair.

The Footman
The footman sets the table for meals and assists the butler,

answers the door and attends to various other tasks in the house, such as lighting candles and lamps, polishing silver and cleaning shoes and boots.

The Housemaids
There are several housemaid positions, including parlour maids, chambermaids and laundry maids. Each has their own set of duties, such as lighting fires, bringing up hot water for washing, emptying and cleaning chamber pots, cleaning all the public rooms of the house, making beds, brushing carpets and beating rugs, and washing clothes and linen.

The Cook
The cook is responsible for the kitchen and the provision of meals. She will not do any general cleaning, and her ingredients will mostly be prepared for her by her staff.

The Kitchen Maids
The duties of the kitchen and scullery maids include lighting the kitchen fires early in the morning and cleaning the kitchen and its utensils for the cook's use throughout the day.

Additional Servants
If there are children in the house, they will be attended to by a **nurse** and **nursery maids**. The **hall-boy** waits on the other servants, runs errands and – if there is no **bootboy** – cleans the shoes of the household. The **coachman** supervises the stables and drives the coach, while the **groom** and **stable boy** look after the horses. Other outdoor servants are **groundsmen** and **gardeners.**



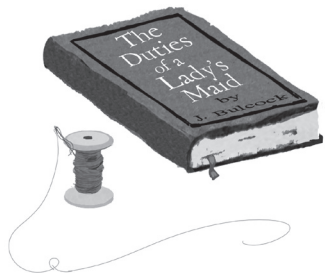
A Warning

I must caution you against taking up such books as would not only take up your time unprofitably, but might also tend to corrupt your principles, and make you dissatisfied with your condition. I mean novels, tales and romances, which have led many a girl to ruin . . .

J. Bulcock, *The Duties of a Lady's Maid*
(London: C. Smith, 1825)



Chapter One



You should obey directions with alacrity and cheerfulness.

J. Bulcock, *The Duties of a Lady's Maid*

The perfect servant is an invisible one.

Pattern was one of these. She was so quiet, so small and shadowy, that it was easy to forget she was even in the room. Her quick hands would go about their business – tending and mending, polishing and pinning – apparently with no effort at all. And when she was done, she would melt into the background like a well-trained ghost.



Pattern had only just turned thirteen, but she was going to go far.

This, at least, was the general opinion within Mrs Minchin's Academy of Domestic Servitude. For Pattern had other talents too: a knack for getting even the toughest stains out of linen; darning that was almost as invisible as the rest of her. No button or hairpin had ever gone missing in her care. Her bonnet-trimming was a joy to behold, and having progressed to Advanced Hair-Dressing, she had perfected the art of curling ringlets with hardly any trouble at all.

Even so, Mrs Minchin was somewhat taken aback to be informed that Pattern's services were required by Her Royal Highness Arianwen Eleri Charlotte Louise, Grand Duchess of Elffinberg.

'But . . . forgive me . . . are there no suitable lady's maids in Elffinberg?' she enquired of the noble personage in her parlour. If it were not for the difference in dress, Mrs Minchin looked the more likely aristocrat, with her prim, thin face and haughty eyebrows, whereas Baroness von Bliven had the stoutness and redness

of a no-nonsense cook. But the Baroness's eyes were watery, and her hands trembled, and Mrs Minchin had to strain to hear her voice.

'Her Royal Highness has rejected the most likely candidates. It is therefore time to look further afield. As her godmama, I have taken it upon myself to pursue the matter, as a personal favour to the Grand Duchess.'

'I quite understand, Your Ladyship,' said Mrs Minchin, even though none of this made a particle of sense. 'My only concern is that Pattern is a little, ahem, *young* for such an elevated role. Surely one of this year's graduates, a grown girl of sixteen—'

'None of your other girls is of Elffish blood.'

This, Mrs Minchin had to admit, was true.

'Pattern may be young for her position,' said the Baroness, in between painful coughs, 'but then so is the Grand Duchess. In any case, I would be most grateful for your assistance. I need hardly say I expect your utmost discretion in the matter.'

'Naturally,' said Mrs Minchin, with her most ingratiating smile. In fact, this came as a bitter blow.



She had already been picturing *By Royal Appointment* written in gold letters above her door. 'I will tell Pattern the good news directly.'

Pattern did not know which was the more shocking part of the announcement: that she was to be a lady's maid a good seven years ahead of time, or that she was travelling overseas to work for foreign royalty, or that she wasn't a true Englishwoman, after all.

Pattern was chiefly a 'waif and stray'. Her parents had been drowned at sea. A mere baby, Pattern had been found floating in her cradle not far from the wreckage of their boat. She and a couple of the surviving crew members were picked up by a passing cargo ship, whose owner raised enough funds for the child to be sent to one of the more respectable London orphanages, and from there placed in Mrs Minchin's Academy.

Now, however, she learned that the drowned boat had been full of Elffish immigrants, though which of these were her mother and father was unknown. So was her real name. She had been given the surname Pattern

by the matron of the orphanage, who had neglected to provide anything else to go with it. It hardly mattered. On entering service, it was customary for a maid to exchange her original name for something plain and easy to remember, like Sarah or Ellen or Prue. So although some might celebrate the title 'Royal Highness' above all things, what Pattern truly envied was the poetry of 'Arianwen Eleri Charlotte Louise'. What luxury, to have not one Christian name, but four!

No hint of such outlandish thoughts was visible during her interview in Mrs Minchin's parlour. 'Yes, ma'am', 'No, ma'am', and 'Thank you, ma'am' was all that meekly passed her lips.

'You are an extraordinarily lucky girl,' said Mrs Minchin in conclusion. Even she was surprised by how quietly Pattern had taken the news. 'I hope you are sensible of your good fortune, and that you will work very hard to be worthy of it.'

'Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am.'

As she closed the parlour door behind her, however, Pattern was not entirely sure of how lucky she felt. She



would not miss the Academy, with its scratchy brown uniforms and draughty dormitory, or the jostling, jealous girls. But London's soot-stained skyline was the only horizon she knew. The idea of a world beyond it seemed almost as fanciful as her sudden promotion to Royal Servitude.

It was now nearly time for supper, and most of her fellow students were trying to warm themselves before the feeble fire in the refectory. Pattern picked up her work basket and went to join a group of three winding wool by the door.

'I am to travel abroad,' Pattern told them, only a little breathlessly. 'I am to work in a great house. I am to leave tomorrow.'

She was not permitted to say more. Really, she should have said nothing at all. But she had to tell somebody *something* of what was about to happen. Perhaps then she would actually believe it.

There was a short pause. Then:

'Well, *I* don't envy you a jot,' sniffed snub-nosed Pol. 'Abroad is full of dirty foreigners, and I

wouldn't wish to go there at all.'

'Oh, I don't know. Things happen Abroad that never happen here,' said kind, stupid Jane, whose accomplishments would never progress much beyond potato peeling. 'Battles and revolutions and scandal! I think it must be very exciting.'

'Pattern,' yawned bony Sue, 'is not the kind of person that exciting things happen to. Pattern is as dull and correct as her needlework.'

The other girls tittered. Pattern's expression stayed fixed. She contemplated jabbing Sue's knuckles with a knitting needle, all the while wondering if what she said was true.

Pattern's start in life had certainly been striking – a baby plucked from the towering waves of storm and shipwreck. And here she was, seized by the hand of destiny once more, this time in service to foreign royalty. But perhaps Sue was right, in that it would be better if such dramas befell somebody better suited to them. Someone passionate and picturesque, like the heroines of those romances of which Mrs Minchin



so disapproved. (They gave girls Ideas; and Ideas were very much frowned upon in the Academy of Domestic Servitude.)

A quiet and orderly person could only hope to prosper in a quiet and orderly life. This was what Pattern should work towards. *Then* she would find herself entirely satisfied with her lot.

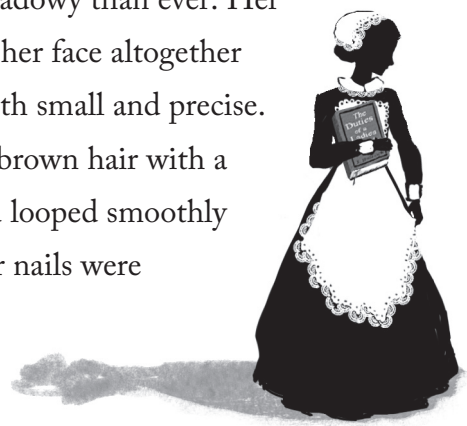
But having come to this sensible resolution, why did she still have a fiery urge to stab at something with her needles and pins?

On the morning of Pattern's departure, Mrs Minchin offered a great deal of advice, very little of which was to the point, and chiefly related to her own glory days in service to the Countess of Arkminster. Just before parting, she presented Pattern with J. Bulcock's *The Duties of a Lady's Maid: With Directions for Conduct, and Numerous Receipts for the Toilette*.

'I have no doubt,' said Mrs Minchin, in her stateliest manner, 'that you will be a credit to the school.'

Pattern curtsied. In her grey twill travelling dress,

she looked more shadowy than ever. Her eyes were grey too; her face altogether colourless, her mouth small and precise. She wore her light brown hair with a central parting, and looped smoothly above each ear. Her nails were trim, her collar immaculately starched. The very picture, Mrs Minchin thought approvingly, of Attention to Duty.



Pompous old trout, thought Pattern.

The novelty of travel did not last beyond the first day spent in a rattling carriage, squashed up next to the Baroness's own maid, a glum-faced woman with a permanent sniff. At night, she and Pattern shared a bed in a coaching inn, where the woman's sharp elbows and snuffling made rest impossible.

Pattern would have found sleep elusive in any event. The Great Unknown stretched out before her, as



seemingly endless as the dusty road they jolted along. Her only information on their destination came from the encyclopaedia in the Academy's schoolroom. From this, she had learned that the Duchy lay in the rolling forest that the mountains of central Germany thrust out northward to the great European plain. It had been founded by a medieval Welsh Prince, Elffin Pendraig, who had spent several years in exile in Europe before settling there with his followers. The native tongue – Elffish – was consequently derived from German and Welsh, though English had supplanted it in all but the most remote rural communities. There were three principal settlements: the capital city of Elffinheim, the spa-town of Brecon-Baden, and the university town of Myrddinsbruck, high in the mountain ranges of the north. The country was 4,300 square miles, with a population of 390,000. The principal manufacture was porcelain.

Pattern liked facts and figures. She liked to arrange them, tidily, in her head. It made her feel that some of the world's chaos could be put in order after all, in

the manner of a well-appointed linen cupboard. Yet what she really wanted was a personal account of the place. Mrs Minchin had impressed upon her that the thirteen-year-old Grand Duchess was also a princess in her own right by virtue of her Welsh ancestry, so she must be very grand indeed. How did Her Royal Highness wear her hair? What colours did she favour in her dress? What were her particular tastes in art, music, pastries, pets?

Would her mistress be kind to Pattern, or pull her hair and pinch her arm, as the older girls did at the Academy?

Would the other servants welcome her, or resent her?

Would she find herself even more alone?

Beware of self-pity, Pattern told herself. Self-pity was a luxury the likes of her could not afford.

The Baroness's maid disapproved of Pattern and so pretended not to understand English whenever she ventured a question. Besides, most of her energies were engaged in nursing her mistress and preparing balms



and syrups for her cough. The Baroness had come to London to visit a famous Harley Street physician, but his treatment had not had the desired healing effect. Her wheezing worsened with each hour on the road.

They reached Elffinberg late on Sunday, after travelling several miles through dense forest. The border was manned by guards in green livery, who sprang out of their sentry-box and presented arms at the carriage's approach. Close by was a small inn, whose landlady sold souvenirs as well as providing lodging. Her wares included Elffish flags, marzipan sweets, and china plates painted with the Grand Duchess's portrait. It depicted a simpering girl-child with pink cheeks and black curls, of the kind found on any chocolate box.

The next morning, Pattern was summoned to the Baroness's bed chamber. There she was informed that the Baroness was too ill to travel on to the royal residence. Pattern must go alone. The Baroness had prepared a letter of introduction for her to give to the Master of the Royal Household, and another for the Grand Duchess. Also, documents attesting to Pattern's

parentage, which the Baroness had obtained from the Elffinberg consul in London.

'It was he who advised me of your placement in Mrs Minchin's establishment. This is a small country, and a sheltered one. Secretive, one might say. Very few people visit; even fewer leave. If you were not a compatriot, you would not be permitted to seek employment here.'

The Baroness was still stout and red, but her skin had a sunken, waxy look, and her wheezing was so pronounced that Pattern had to lean close to hear her.

'The Grand Duchess is young – no older than you. Her position means that she has led an isolated life, with few companions her own age and few engagements other than official ones. She is, I regret, not on friendly terms with her uncle and guardian, Prince Leopold. So although my dear Arianwen is the sweetest creature in the world, she is of a somewhat nervous disposition, and prone to strange flights of fancy. In truth, she has taken it into her head that all her servants are spies, in the pay of the Prince, and that her last lady's maid was attempting to poison her.'



Pattern swallowed, and murmured she was very sorry to hear that.

'Do not alarm yourself. As a stranger to the land, Her Royal Highness can hardly suspect *you* of conspiring against her. It may be, too, that your closeness in age will help win her confidence.'

Here the Baroness had to take pause for a prolonged coughing fit. The handkerchief she pressed to her mouth was spotted in blood. 'I was very fond of the Grand Duchess's mother,' she said, once she was somewhat recovered. 'Very fond. I have tried to look out for her child as best I could. My health, however, means I have not been as great a friend as I could wish. Or for as long as I would hope.'

She sighed, and her breath rattled painfully. 'So I ask you to attend to Her Royal Highness's comfort in every way. Not just in the particulars of her toilette, but in promoting her peace of mind.'

Pattern stuttered an attempt at assurance. But the Baroness placed a hand on hers. Her flesh was cold and heavy.

'One does not have to be unduly fanciful,' the Baroness said, 'to know that royal courts are chancy places. So this is my advice to you. Stay aloof from intrigue, attend to your mistress, keep your counsel. *And trust no one*.'

