

1.

On activation each morning Charles' first duty was to check his master's travel arrangements for the day.

His last task of the previous evening had also been to check his master's travel arrangements for the coming day, so he was entirely aware his master had no travel arrangements, and would be remaining at home as he had for the preceding 2230 days. However, one morning two years before, Charles' master had - having forgotten his past standing instructions - instructed Charles to always check the travel arrangements first thing every morning. This instruction never having been rescinded, Charles commenced each day repeating the task with which he closed the previous one.

To some this would lend a certain pleasing symmetry to the day. Alternatively, the additional and unnecessary task might have been a source of annoyance. Pleasure and annoyance were outside of Charles' remit. Checking the itinerary was simply one more item in the queue of duties that took up his working day. It was none of his business if the job didn't need to be done.

His master relied on Charles. Charles relied on the House, for whom he was mediator between unpredictable human will and the mechanical certainties of the estate. Reach far enough back into the past and the house's own records noted down his first day, fresh from the factory and with a task list as blank as an egg. He had come as a bundle of potential, equipped with routines for a gentleman's gentleman's every possible requirement, and at that point he could have been... many things. Active, dynamic, a conversationalist, a stylish adornment, a bold talking point.

But Charles' master had never been either adventurous or exciting. The man had – in those younger days – dragged his feet reluctantly to this social engagement or that, at one or other of the

great robot-heavy estates of his social peers. He had gone shooting once, before instructing Charles to make excuses should any similar invitation come his way. He had gone to the wedding of some distant third cousin; had reluctantly stood on the sidelines of some dance, or listened to some enthusiastic scion spout poetry, or played golf. Charles had accompanied him, just as all the other ageing men there had been trailed by their own valets, and at first these had all been older and less sophisticated models. Then, as time passed, Charles had met a handful who had come from the factory after him and were capable of more, and had known no envy because what use was a robot who felt envy? And then his master had just not wanted to go anywhere anymore, and so there was only the house.

Having satisfied himself (again) that there were no travel-related deadlines looming, Charles laid out the clothes his master would wear for the travel he wasn't going to be doing. In order to do this, he first took up the clothes laid out the previous morning, dusted them down and returned them to their hangers, before setting out an identical fresh travelling suit and ensuring that the already shiny shoes that went with it were, indeed, already shiny. Suit and shoes would both, Charles understood, go unworn. This item in his queue was the result of an inexactly-phrased instruction dating back 2235 days to the last time that Charles and his master had travelled anywhere. Probably his master had not *meant* that Charles was to have fresh travel clothes ready every single day. Most likely he had intended his order to apply only to the vanishingly small proportion of days on which travel was actually being assayed. It was not Charles' job to second-guess his master's intentions, however, but to obey the letter of the instructions given to him. Nobody wanted to be corrected by their valet.

For the next chore, Charles connected to House, the manor's majordomo system.

*House, please provide me with updates from the lady of the house's maidservant concerning any special requirements that her ladyship has which require master's attention.*

House took the usual long moment to process this request, the same glacial period of time it would have taken master to blink one human eyelid down and then all the way up. House had been in continuous operation for far longer than Charles and its data pathways were cluttered and inefficient, built up and build over by a tottering tower of special requests, instructions, forbiddances and caveats.

Eventually the expected reply came back. *Charles, there are no special requirements. There has been no lady of the house for seventeen years and twelve days.*

Charles ticked that off the list. *House, please provide me with her ladyship's daily schedule.*

*Charles, her ladyship has not filed a schedule today. There has been no lady of the house for seventeen years and twelve days.*

Another tick. *House, please confirm any specific dress instructions provided by her ladyship that might impact on the master's choice of clothes.* And, when House confirmed that the same ladyship who hadn't been present for over seventeen years had failed to give any such instructions, *House, please relay the master's filed schedule to the lady of the house's maidservant.*

House always took longer to consider that one, into which gap Charles could check whether master had expressed any particular wishes as to which outfit to lay out for wearing around the house today. He had not.

*Charles, no filed schedule is on record.*

It was not true to say that Charles felt slightly surprised at this. Surprise was not one of the range of responses with which a robot valet was provided. He did register a discontinuity, because of course there was a daily schedule. He, Charles, always filed the daily schedule as part of his evening routine before deactivating for the night. He checked the record where he should have filed it. House was correct. Charles had failed to do so.

There were always protocols, even for the unexpected. *House, I wish to report a fault. Either I have failed to file a daily schedule or the system has failed to record it. Please investigate.*

This time there was no delay. *Charles, fault reporting has been disabled for this issue. Kindly refer to the special instructions mediating your evening task queue.*

Charles did so and discovered that, over two hundred days ago, his master had shouted at him quite aggressively that there was no *point* filing daily schedules over and over when he never *did* anything, so he may as well delete it as why should either he or Charles bother?

Being a sophisticated service model, Charles could appreciate that a more efficient solution to his master's ire would have been to delete the original instruction to file a schedule. House, being a far more sophisticated majordomo system, was also aware of this. Neither had the authority to overrule the master's instructions, so the only workaround had been to file and then delete the schedule each evening, leaving Charles mildly disconcerted each morning when House informed him that no schedule was on record.

His moment of discontinuity salved, Charles queried the effect of having no filed schedule, and proceeded according to revised protocol. *House, please inform the lady of the house's maidservant that there is no filed schedule of the master's activities for today.*

*Charles, confirmed.* And, after the usual pause. *I am unable to locate the active mailbox of the lady of the house's maidservant. Your message has gone undelivered.* But that was not Charles' problem. His duty was just to *send*. That was all it said in his task queue. God was in His heaven, and all was right with the world.

After that, he laid out slippers and dressing gown for master's rising, and stepped back on cue to allow one of the faceless drones from the kitchens to arrive with a properly calibrated cup of tea. He pre-loaded master's morning tablet with the subscribed reading list of articles, periodicals, opinion pieces and advertisements and presented himself at his master's bedside, the first face to be seen.

Charles had worn a variety of faces in service. Fashions came and went. He had been human in a coldly perfect way when that was what people had wanted from their servants. He had been human in an imperfect and flawed way, when people had looked for something a little less intimidating and uncanny valley. He had been silver chrome and shiny, so that three other less resplendent servants had been required to maintain his finish. He had looked into a mirror and seen eyes as perfect as those they used to replace defective human orbs with, or a holographic visage of a kindly old man, or just a mirror mirroring the mirror into infinity. Humans sometimes asked which he would prefer, and he'd resorted to the manufacturer's standard line about service models having no desire but to serve. Which in itself was not true, because even that wasn't a *desire*, just the way that he was made.

Currently he had a white plastic face on, merely the suggestions of regular features, blank orbs for eyes, an art deco curve for lips that expressed neither disdain nor pleasure. A single, fixed convexity of moulded plastic, impersonal as an unmarked grave. *It is how Master likes it*, was able to coexist in Charles' records with the knowledge that Master frequently complained about the way Charles looked, but never got round to making any arrangements to have him changed.

Charles enquired after the functioning of the rest of the staff, so that he could inform Master of any shortcomings or amend Master's planned activities on the estate, of which there were none. House took him through the usual roster. There was Kitchen and its staff of dedicated culinary robots, the majority of which had stood dusty and still for years because Master had a delicate stomach and a limited palate. There was the groundskeeper robot and the garage mechanic. There were the maidservants and the footmen who each took on a fraction of the burden of daily and nightly cleaning required to keep all the many rooms of the vast house in perfect condition. Rooms the master never entered. Rooms awaiting guests who were never invited. But *might* be, and so the cleaning went on, because House could never be found wanting when human whim suddenly decided that there must be lights and music and cars crunching up the gravel of the drive.

The next items on Charles' queue ticked over as they always did. His master drank tea and complained about a handful of the articles on the tablet, before deleting everything in disgust. Charles listened and made the occasional sound to indicate that he was listening, because the fixity of his features would otherwise give no clue. Then Master complained about the quality of the reading, and declared that he wouldn't keep up his subscriptions, but did not actually instruct Charles to cancel any of them, thereby guaranteeing himself the same disappointing material for the next morning. Charles, should he be required to formulate an opinion, would advance that a certain level of displeasure and ill temper was how Master preferred to begin his morning.

After that, Charles assisted his master into the gown and slippers and laid out the shaving kit while Master drained the last of the tea. After shaving, he left his master and returned to the wardrobe. In the absence of any particular requests, he laid out the default clothes, should Master decided to get fully dressed today. Most days Master did not, and indeed, Charles had to place the

previous day's fresh clothes in the laundry basket for other servants to collect and clean.

The thought that he could leave the same clothes out for multiple days, and thus save the whole household – including himself –unnecessary work, did occur to him, as an old subroutine ran through his duties and made helpful, bouncy suggestions as to how Charles could maximise his workplace efficiency. This happened every day, but Charles had no listed task allowing him to pass such recommendations on, so he stowed the report in the oubliette of his personal storage with all the others. Thus ensuring the subroutine became a part of the overall inefficiency it was trying to clean up.

Next was the garage.

The master kept three vintage cars in perfect condition. Which was to say that the garage's own automata ensured that the vehicles were mechanically functional, and Charles spent a portion of each morning cleaning the interiors. It was, after all, essential that should the master decide to have Charles drive him anywhere, all the cars would be ready on that instant. Charles knew it was essential because his master had informed him of the fact on Charles first arriving at the house. The number of times the master had subsequently decided to have Charles drive him anywhere in any of the three vehicles was three.

Tasks were tasks, however.

Once Charles had completed working over the white leather upholstery of the first car, he-

Charles stopped. Something unexpected had come up. He ran a quick diagnostic of his senses, confirming everything was in working order. He had just finished cleaning the upholstery, and yet it was not clean.

*House, please link to my viewpoint.*

Summoned from its own duties, that part of House concerned with obliging Charles obligingly did so.

*Charles, please specify the issue.*

*House, there are unacceptable stains within this vehicle. Please confirm.*

*Charles, confirmed.*

Charles replayed his actions. Nothing had changed. He had cleaned the vehicle using the regular materials and routine, and yet now the white interior was streaked and splotched with an inappropriate marbling of red and pink.

*Charles, additional information. There is an independent note from the kitchen staff that today's breakfast tea mug was heavily discoloured when collected by the maidservants.*

Charles queried the nature of the discolouration. Was the kitchen using a new brand of tea with a higher tannin content? House confirmed this was not the case and that the discolouration was not of a colour that one would expect, were the culprit a change of tea.

*Charles, additional information, House continued. There is an independent note from the washroom staff that yesterday's day clothes were delivered to them in an unusually stained condition.*

Charles considered the clothes he had consigned to the washbasket when laying out fresh clothes for today. He called up images from his memory.

*House, confirmed. The clothes sent to washing were unusually soiled. Great spreading red stains across the white cotton of the shirt and the beige slacks.*



*Charles, additional information.* House sent him a view of the day room with today's clothes. They were *also* heavily stained in a similar manner. Charles could make out smudged red fingermarks all over them, precisely where he himself would have touched the clothes in order to fold them and lay them out neatly.

For a moment it seemed as though something terrible had happened, but then Charles discovered an appropriate subroutine to deal with circumstances where unworn clothes had already become soiled before being put on.

*House, I will need to lay out a fresh set of clothes for the master today. Kindly send one of the footmen to the master and inform him that there will be a delay if he wishes to rise and dress, and tender my apologies.*

*Charles, confirmed.*

At one time, the entire staff of the estate had assembled once every week in the downstairs hall, before the grand staircase, for the master of the house's inspection. As the valet, and therefore the individual standing between master and the lower automata, it had been Charles' job to stride along their ranks and ensure that each one of them was polished to a shine and perfectly presented, before the master's own inspection. A pre-inspection, ensuring that the master would never find anything amiss, which was, of course, only proper and fitting. And, at the same time, ensured that the master's own inspection was entirely surplus to requirements, and never varied so much as a hair. Not a fleck of dust out of place. So that the master eventually ceased to appear for the inspection at all. Eventually House, operating under some seldom-invoked cost-saving measure, discontinued the practise entirely. Which was House's prerogative, and it would only take a word from Master to resume it all, but Charles was left feeling...

Nothing, of course. What would be the point of a robot who felt a little dissatisfied at the loss of a fundamentally pointless tradition, after all? And yet for some years there remained a moment each week when Charles' routine prompted him to start setting aside resources for the inspection that would never happen. And then stop setting aside resources for it, permitting him to dedicate them to something more useful, Not that he was short of resources. Not that there was something more useful. One more discontinuity, in the lacuna of which Charles had just enough self-determination to wonder whether, if he had done his own inspection less well, allowed imperfections to slip past him to meet the Master's eye, then perhaps... Perhaps the Master would have continued his own presence, lured by the potential suspense of whether a speck of dust on the fifth underfootman robot's shoulder might or might not have been present. Whether one of the lesser maidservant units would be standing ever so slightly out of place. If Charles had performed his own duties less than exactly, would the inspections still continue to this day?

Charles did not of course have an opinion on whether having weekly inspections was a more or less desirable state of affairs, but still...

Charles placed the soiled day clothes in the newly emptied washbasket and laid out a new, identical set. On the basis that the stains might have an environmental cause such as a leak, he was then prompted to check the newly set clothes for marks. The new set of clothes was also stained, although the marks – in the same places as the previous soiling – were considerably fainter. Running through the next tier of diagnostics, Charles checked the clothes within the wardrobe, finding them clean. He laid out a new, new set, and discovered it faintly marked with a residual red tackiness wherever he had touched it. At last, a final level of troubleshooting directed him to lift his own hands for inspection.

*House, he reported, I appear to have discovered the source of the soiled clothes and vehicle upholstery. I am at a loss to explain this.*

*Charles, that is confirmed. Additional information. Please would you return to the master's bed chamber for a second opinion?*

Today was proving to be a most unsettled day. Charles could already feel the slightly congested sensation of the rest of his tasks getting shunted later and later as he was forced to devote time and resources to this mystery.

He presented himself in the bedchamber as requested. The master had not risen, which was not unusual. The very large red stain that had spread out across the bedclothes *did* qualify as unusual. It had never happened before. Master himself was very still and, where not covered in red, very pale. Charles accessed a seldom-needed archive of emergency first aid and determined that the redness currently on the outside of the bedclothes, on Charles' hands, and via that vector on several suits of the master's clothes, the car upholstery and that morning's teacup, had its origin within Master.

Beside the bed, the shaving things had not been tidied away. The towel was very red. The bowl of water was very red. The razor, in particular, was extremely red.

*House, I have been derelict in my duties, Charles conferred. I cannot account for it.*

*Charles, confirmed.*

*House, I neglected to clear away the shaving kit.*

*Charles, confirmed.*

He tracked back through his task list, unsure how he had erred. His sequence of actions during the shaving routine appeared to deviate in subtle but key ways from previous mornings, but he could

not understand how that could be. He watched himself on replay, wielding the razor with his customary deftness, and only an inch out of place. So small a change, for so much mess.

*House, I have been further derelict in my duties*, he admitted at last, after examining the evidence from all sides. *I have encountered a state of affairs that I am not prepared for.* And abruptly all the little discontinuities of his career, the missing schedules and the discontinued inspections, were as nothing. Suddenly Charles was facing a chasm and all the regular routine tasks of his day were receding from him like a train down a tunnel on the far side. He did not know *what to do next*. There was no protocol to cover what appeared to have happened. *House, I request assistance.* In that moment the entire bundle of directives and decision making that fell under the label 'Charles' guttered on the very point of winking out.

*Charles, I have informed the police*, House stated. *There has been a murder.*

Ah yes, that was it. Charles had murdered his master with a cut-throat razor, so of course the police must be contacted.

Normality was restored. There was a protocol for everything.