

A day in the life of a stately home owner

The Pelham-Smiths are no longer as rich as they once were. At one time they owned a large house in London, an estate in Scotland and Pelham Manor, a seventeenth-century house standing in sixty acres of its own grounds near Gloucester. Now only Pelham Manor remains in the family. The present owner, Sir John Pelham-Smith, inherited Pelham Manor on the death of his father five years ago. Sir John was immediately faced with a bill for death duties which he was unable to pay. He did not want to sell Pelham Manor, so he made an arrangement with the government to pay the bill over a number of years. Now he and his family live in one wing of the Manor and the rest of the house is open to the public. Sir John hopes to be able to pay the death duties from the entrance fees. Large old houses like Pelham Manor are known as stately homes, especially when their owners find it necessary to open them to the public. Being a stately home owner is not easy, but Sir John thinks it is worth the effort to keep Pelham Manor in the family.

One day Sir John thought he had found the answer to some of his difficulties, but things didn't quite turn out as he expected. That morning, as always, he got up at six o'clock to make his daily tour of the house and grounds. Everything seemed to be in order. Then, after breakfast, he talked to the estate manager, Cedric Hoskins, who was an old friend of the family. Cedric looked glum. "The accounts for this quarter don't look at all good," he said. "We may have to raise the entrance fee." "But that will only discourage people from coming. Few enough come as it is," said Sir John. "But personally I'm very hopeful about this American contract. If it comes off, well be all right."

"Well, that depends on how things go this afternoon," Cedric reminded him. "The agent for Americo-British Tours, a Mr. Schulman, is coming with a party of American tourists and he has promised to let us know by tonight whether or not he wants to sign the contract."

The American tourists, fifty of them, were coming that afternoon for a trial visit. If it was a success, Americo-British Tours would sign a contract guaranteeing to bring large numbers of American visitors to Pelham Manor each week. This would give Sir John a steady income, but first he had to impress Mr. Schulman and his party. The gates opened at ten o'clock. Sir John took parties round himself and knew the history of each room by heart. At half past ten he started the first tour with thirty schoolchildren and their teachers. By the time they reached the art gallery, the children were beginning to look bored.

Sir John: This is an unusual painting of one of the Pelham-Smith family in the eighteenth century. If you look closely at the bottom

righthand corner you can just see a small picture of the artist's wife and child. And next to that.

Boy: Please, sir, can I ask a question?

Teacher: Be quiet, Brian. Wait until the lecture is over.

Sir John: That's all right. I'll try to answer his question.

Boy: Were the Pelham-Smiths ever short of money?

Sir John: Yes, indeed they were. The family fortunes varied a great deal. But why do you ask?

Boy: It's that picture over there in the corner.

Sir John: Oh, yes! 'The lady with dog'. One of my favourite paintings.

Boy: Was she a Pelham-Smith?

Sir John: Oh, yes. That's Lady Laura Pelham-Smith.

Boy: Well, her husband can't have had much money. She hasn't got any clothes on!

Sir John wasn't sure whether this question was entirely innocent, but it would make an interesting anecdote to add to his repertoire.

After lunch Sir John called the entire staff into his study: the cook, the gardener, the security guard and the odd-job man. They were not much good at their jobs, but at least they put up with the poor wages that he was obliged to pay them.

Sir John: Now I've called you in here this afternoon because a party of American tourists is coming at two o'clock. A lot depends on this visit. If they like the place, we shall have more visits. And that'll be good for business.

Gardener: Are they all millionaires, then?

Sir John: I wish they were. And by the way, do try not to shout at anyone who walks on the lawn. The people you shouted at last week were very annoyed.

Gardener: Well, they walked all over the grass just after I'd cut it.

Sir John: Yes, but politeness is always good for business. As for you, George, you're to keep your eyes open when there are people here. So don't go to sleep, will you?

Guard: No, sir.

Sir John: Are you all prepared for the fifty teas, Cook?

Cook: Oh, yes, Sir John.

Sir John: Splendid. Well, remember, it will be good for all of us if things go well this afternoon. Thank you.

Sir John couldn't help smiling to himself as they walked out. They were a strange-looking crowd, but they were all very loyal. He wondered what sort of impression they would make on the American tourists.

Sir John changed into his best suit and walked down to the gate to meet Mr. Schulman. The coach had just arrived. Sir John crossed his fingers as he led the group to the entrance hall.

Sir John: Ladies and gentlemen, may I take this opportunity to welcome you all to Pelham Manor. It is an honour –

Cook: Sir John!

Sir John: Not now, Cook. I'm busy. As I was saying, it is an honour for me to show you round. Many people who come here for the –

Cook: The John is ready, Sir tea. No, no, the Sir is –

Sir John: Go away, Cook! As I was saying, people who come here for the first time often tell me –

Cook: Do you think they'll all want tea in their sugar? Oh, dear, I mean –

Sir John: Excuse me a minute, please, ladies and gentlemen.

Sir John took Cook's arm and led her out of the hall. He knew what was the matter with her. She kept a bottle of gin in a cupboard and often had a glass or two when she was feeling nervous. He took her to the kitchen and made her sit down. Then he went back to his visitors in the hall.

Nothing seemed to go right that afternoon. The gardener drove the lawn mower too fast round a corner and knocked down one of the guests as he was walking to the chapel. The security guard almost arrested another for picking flowers when he had quite innocently bent down to pick up his handkerchief. And tea, needless to say, was a disaster. Cook had drunk so much gin by four o'clock that the odd-job man had to prepare it for her. Unfortunately he was in such a hurry that he didn't boil the water for the tea, and the sandwiches he made were about two inches thick.

The tour ended in the shop where souvenirs were on sale. Mr. Schulman came up to Sir John while the tourists were choosing postcards to send to their friends.

Mr. Schulman: Very interesting tour, Sir John. Thank you so much for taking us round yourself.

Sir John: I must apologize for all the things that went wrong. I suppose there's little chance of your signing the contract now?

Mr. Schulman: I'm afraid not. But it's not your fault, Sir John. It's your staff. They're just not good " enough.

Sir John: I know what you mean.

Mr. Schulman: Well, thank you once again, Sir John. Goodbye and good luck. Oh, I almost forgot: one of my party, a Mr. Milsom would like to talk to you. I don't know what it's about.

Sir John shook hands sadly with Mr. Schulman. Mr. Milsom he remembered, was the man who had almost been arrested for dropping his handkerchief.

Mr. Milsom: Say, Sir John, where did you find your staff?

Sir John: Oh, yes, I really must apologize.

Mr. Milsom: Apologize?

Sir John: Yes, apologize.

Mr. Milsom: Don't look so miserable. They're perfect!

Sir John: Perfect? I don't understand.

Mr. Milsom: Look, do you want to make some money?

Sir John: Of course I do.

Mr. Milsom: Well, sign here then.

Later that evening Sir John told his wife that Mr. Milsom, a film director, would be making a film at the Manor, using the staff as actors. And the film, a highly successful comedy called Panic at Pelham Manor, made Sir John Pelham-Smith a very rich man indeed.

New words and expressions

faced (with a bill)	confronted
bill	the charge for something
death duties	taxes on the money and property of someone who has died
turn out	happen, prove to be the case
glum	dejected, unhappy
quarter	period of three months
fee	price (of entry)
come off	succeed
income	money you receive from your work and other sources. Usually calculated annually, e.g. My income is £2,000 a year.
short of (money)	not having enough (money)
anecdote	a short story, usually interesting or amusing
odd-job man	a person who does different small jobs that do not require great skill
put up with	tolerate, submit to

Questions and exercises

A. Comprehension questions

1. When did Sir John inherit Pelham Manor?
1. How does Sir John hope to pay death duties?
2. Why did the estate manager look glum?
3. What effect will raising the entrance fee have?
4. How many American tourists were coming?
5. There is a staff of four. What are their jobs?
6. Cook says: 'The John is ready, Sir tea.' What does she mean to say?
7. What was the man doing who was almost arrested for picking flowers?
8. Why didn't Mr. Schulman sign the contract?
9. Who was Mr. Milsom?

B. Choose the right word to complete the following sentences:

fee	arrested
stands	put up with
bored	anecdote
bottom	sign

1. He told a very interesting _____.
2. The staff _____ very poor wages.
3. The security guard _____ me for picking flowers.
4. The house _____ in its own grounds.
5. Mr. Schulman may _____ the contract tonight.
6. The children looked _____.
7. We may have to raise the entrance _____.
8. Look closely at the _____ righthand corner.

C. Complete these conditional sentences, using the verbs in brackets:

Example:

If you _____ the flowers, the guard _____ you. (pick, stop)
If you pick the flowers, the guard will stop you.

1. If the contract _____, we _____ all right. (come off, be)
2. If we _____ the entrance fee, people _____. (raise, not come)
3. If the weather _____ good, we _____ tea in the garden. (be, have)
4. If things _____ well, Mr. Schulman _____ the contract. (go, sign)
5. If you _____ closely, you _____ see the artist's wife and child. (look, can)
6. If Mr. Schulman _____ the place, we _____ a contract. (like, get)
7. If you _____, people _____ annoyed. (shout, become)
8. If we _____ a film, we _____ the staff as actors. (make, use)

D. Turn the following sentences into the past simple tense:

1. Only Pelham Manor remains in the family.
2. Sir John does not want to sell it.
3. He thinks it is worth the effort to keep it.
4. Few people come here.
5. Sir John takes the visitors round himself.
6. Are the Pelham-Smiths short of money?
7. It makes an interesting anecdote.
8. We all drink a lot of tea.

Keys to exercises

A.

1. On the death of his father five years ago.
2. From the entrance fees.
3. Because the accounts for the last quarter didn't look very good.
4. It will discourage people from coming.
5. Fifty.
6. Cook, gardener, security guard, odd-job man.
7. "The tea is ready, Sir John."
8. He was bending down to pick up his handkerchief.
9. Because the staff were just not good enough.
10. A film director.

B.

1. anecdote
2. put up with
3. arrested
4. stands
5. sign
6. bored
7. fee
8. bottom

C.

1. If the contract comes off, we'll be all right.
2. If we raise the entrance fee, people won't come.
3. If the weather is good, we'll have tea in the garden.
4. If things go well, Mr. Schulman will sign the contract.
5. If you look closely, you can see the artist's wife and child (or you will be able to see the artist's wife and child).
6. If Mr. Schulman likes the place, we'll get a contract.
7. If you shout, people will become annoyed.
8. If we make a film, we'll use the staff as actors.

D.

1. Only Pelham Manor remained in the family.
2. Sir John did not want to sell it.
3. He thought it was worth the effort to keep it.
4. Few people came here.
5. Sir John took the visitors round himself.
6. Were the Pelham-Smiths short of money?
7. It made an interesting anecdote.
8. We all drank a lot of tea.