



THE WORLD OF BLANDINGS

'CLOSE TO
PERFECTION'
SPECTATOR



P. G. Wodehouse

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE
WORLD
OF
BLANDINGS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. G. Wodehouse (1881–1975) is widely regarded as the greatest comic writer of the twentieth century. Wodehouse wrote more than 70 novels and 200 short stories, creating numerous much-loved characters – the inimitable Jeeves and Wooster, Lord Emsworth and his beloved Empress of Blandings, Mr Mulliner, Ukridge, and Psmith. His humorous articles were published in more than 80 magazines, including *Punch*, over six decades. He was also a highly successful music lyricist, once with over five musicals running on Broadway simultaneously. P. G. Wodehouse was awarded the Mark Twain Prize for ‘an outstanding and lasting contribution to the happiness of the world’.

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‘The purest kind of comedy’

Independent

‘You’d have to have a heart of stone not to be amused’

Adrian McKinty

‘Sublime comic genius’

Ben Elton

‘Pure pleasure’

The Times

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Hugh Laurie

‘I’m a huge fan. Wodehouse writes proper jokes’

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Joy in the Morning

The Mating Season

Ring for Jeeves

Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit

Jeeves in the Offing

Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves

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The Girl in Blue

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Something Fresh

Chapter I

I

The sunshine of a fair spring morning fell graciously upon London town. Out in Piccadilly its heartening warmth seemed to infuse into traffic and pedestrians alike a novel jauntiness, so that bus drivers jested and even the lips of chauffeurs uncurred into not unkindly smiles. Policemen whistled at their posts, clerks on their way to work, beggars approached the task of trying to persuade perfect strangers to bear the burden of their maintenance with that optimistic vim which makes all the difference. It was one of those happy mornings.

At nine o'clock precisely the door of No. 7A, Arundell Street, Leicester Square, opened, and a young man stepped out.

Of all the spots in London which may fairly be described as backwaters, there is none that answers so completely to the description as Arundell Street, Leicester Square. Passing along the north pavement of the Square, just where it joins Piccadilly, you hardly notice the bottleneck opening of the tiny *cul-de-sac*.

Day and night the human flood roars past, ignoring it. Arundell Street is less than forty yards in length, and, though there are two hotels in it, they are not fashionable hotels. It is just a backwater.

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In shape Arundell Street is exactly like one of those flat stone jars in which Italian wine of the cheaper sort is stored. The narrow neck which leads off Leicester Square opens abruptly into a small court. Two sides of this hotels occupy; the third is at present given up to furnished lodgings for the impecunious. These are always just going to be pulled down in the name of Progress, to make room for another hotel, but they never do meet with that fate, and as they stand now so will they in all probability stand for generations to come.

They provide single rooms of moderate size, the bed modestly hidden during the day behind a tattered screen. They contain a table, an easy-chair, a hard chair, a bureau, and a round tin bath, which, like the bed, goes into hiding after its useful work is performed. And you may rent one of these rooms, with breakfast thrown in, for five dollars a week.

Ashe Marson had done so. He had rented the second-floor front of No. 7A.

Twenty-six years before this story opens there had been born to the Reverend Joseph Marson, minister, and Sarah his wife, of Much Middlefold, Salop, a son. This son, christened Ashe after a wealthy uncle who subsequently double-crossed them by leaving his money to charities, in due course proceeded to Oxford to read for the Church. So far as can be ascertained from contemporary records, he did not read a great deal for the Church, but he did succeed in running the mile in four and a half minutes and the half-mile at a correspondingly rapid speed, and his researches in the art of long jumping won him the respect of all.

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He secured his Blue for Athletics, and gladdened thousands by winning the mile and the half-mile two years in succession against Cambridge at Queen's Club. But, owing to the pressure of other engagements, he unfortunately omitted to do any work, and, when the hour of parting arrived, he was peculiarly unfitted for any of the learned professions. Having, however, managed to obtain a sort of degree, enough to enable him to call himself a Bachelor of Arts, and realising that you can fool some of the people some of the time, he applied for and secured a series of private tutorships.

Having saved a little money at this dreadful trade, Ashe came to London and tried newspaper work. After two years of moderate success, he got in touch with the Mammoth Publishing Company.

The Mammoth Publishing Company, which controls several important newspapers, a few weekly journals, and a number of other things, does not disdain the pennies of the office boy and the junior clerk. One of its many profitable ventures is a series of paper-covered tales of crime and adventure. It was here that Ashe found his niche. Those *Adventures of Gridley Quayle, Investigator*, which are so popular with a certain section of the reading public, were his work. Until the advent of Ashe and Mr Quayle, the 'British Pluck Library' had been written by many hands and had included the adventures of many heroes; but in Gridley Quayle the proprietors held that the ideal had been reached, and Ashe received a commission to conduct the entire 'British Pluck Library' (monthly) himself. On the meagre salary paid him for these labours he had been supporting himself ever since.

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That was how Ashe came to be in Arundell Street, Leicester Square, on this May morning.

He was a tall, well-built, fit-looking young man, with a clear eye and a strong chin; and he was dressed, as he closed the front door behind him, in a sweater, flannel trousers, and rubber-soled gymnasium shoes. In one hand he bore a pair of Indian clubs, in the other a skipping rope.

Having drawn in and expelled the morning air in a measured and solemn fashion which the initiated observer would have recognised as that 'scientific deep breathing' which is so popular nowadays, he laid down his clubs, adjusted his rope, and began to skip.

When one considers how keenly London, like all large cities, resents physical exercise, unless taken with some practical and immediately utilitarian object in view, this young man's calm, as he did this peculiar thing, was amazing. The rules governing exercise in London are clearly defined. You may run, if you are running after a hat or an omnibus; you may jump, if you do so with the idea of avoiding a taxi-cab or because you have stepped on a banana skin. But, if you run because you wish to develop your lungs or jump because jumping is good for the liver, London punishes you with its mockery. It rallies round and points the finger of scorn.

Yet this morning, Arundell Street bore the spectacle absolutely unmoved. Due west, the proprietor of the Hotel Previtali leaned against his hostelry, his mind an obvious blank; due north, the proprietor of the Hotel Mathis propped up his caravanseraï, manifestly thinking of nothing. In various windows of the two hotels the

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upper portions of employees appeared, and not a single employee ceased his task for a moment to fling a jibe. Even the little children who infested the court forbore to scoff, and the customary cat rubbing itself against the railings rubbed on without a glance.

The whole thing affords a remarkable object-lesson of what a young man can achieve with patience and perseverance.

When he had taken the second-floor front of No. 7A three months before, Ashe Marson had realised that he must forgo those morning exercises which had become a second nature to him, or else defy London's unwritten law and brave London's mockery. He had not hesitated long. Physical fitness was his gospel. On the subject of exercise he was confessedly a crank. He decided to defy London.

The first time he appeared in Arundell Street in his sweater and flannels, he had barely whirled his Indian clubs once round his head before he had attracted the following audience:

- (a) Two cabmen (one intoxicated),
- (b) Four waiters from the Hotel Mathis,
- (c) Six waiters from the Hotel Previtali,
- (d) Six chambermaids from the Hotel Mathis,
- (e) Five chambermaids from the Hotel Previtali,
- (f) The proprietor of the Hotel Mathis,
- (g) The proprietor of the Hotel Previtali,
- (h) A street cleaner,
- (i) Eleven nondescript loafers,
- (j) Twenty-seven children,
- (k) A cat.

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They all laughed, even the cat, and kept on laughing. The intoxicated cabman called Ashe 'Bill Bailey!' And Ashe kept on swinging his clubs.

A month later, such is the magic of perseverance, his audience had narrowed down to the twenty-seven children. They still laughed, but without that ringing conviction which the sympathetic support of their elders had lent them.

And now, after three months, the neighbourhood, having accepted Ashe and his morning exercises as a natural phenomenon, paid him no further attention.

On this particular morning, Ashe Marson skipped with even more than his usual vigour. This was because he wished to expel by means of physical fatigue a small devil of discontent of whose presence within him he had been aware ever since getting out of bed. It is in the spring that the ache for the Larger Life comes upon us, and this was a particularly mellow spring morning. It was the sort of morning when the air gives us a feeling of anticipation, a feeling that, on a day like this, things surely cannot go joggling along in the same dull old groove, a premonition that something romantic and exciting is about to happen to us. On such a morning you will see stout old gentlemen make sudden rollicking swings with their umbrellas; and a note of shrill optimism thrills in the errand boy's whistle, as he sees life opening before him, large and splendid.

But the south-west wind of spring brings also remorse. We catch the vague spirit of unrest in the air, and we regret our misspent youth.

Ashe was doing this. Even as he skipped, he was

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conscious of a wish that he had worked harder at Oxford, and was now in a position to be doing something better than hack-work for a soulless publishing company. Never before had he been so completely certain that he was sick to death of the rut into which he had fallen. The thought that after breakfast he must sit down and hammer out another Gridley Quayle adventure numbed him like a blow from what the papers always call 'some blunt instrument'. The mere thought of Gridley Quayle was loathsome on a morning like this, with all creation shouting at him that summer was on its way and that there were brave doings afoot just round the corner.

Skippping brought no balm. He threw down his rope, and took up the Indian clubs.

Indian clubs left him still unsatisfied. The thought came to him that it was a long time since he had done his Larsen Exercises. Perhaps they would heal him.

A gentleman named Lieutenant Larsen, of the Danish Army, as the result of much study of the human anatomy, some time ago evolved a series of Exercises. All over the world at the present moment his apostles are twisting themselves into knots in accordance with the dotted lines in the illustrative plates of his admirable book. From Peebles to Baffin's Bay, arms and legs are being swung in daily thousands from point A to point B, and flaccid muscles are gaining the consistency of india-rubber. Larsen's Exercises are the last word in exercises. They bring into play every sinew of the body. They promote a brisk circulation. They enable you, if you persevere, to fell oxen, if desired, with a single blow.

But they are not dignified. Indeed, to one seeing them

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suddenly and without warning for the first time, they are markedly humorous. The only reason why King Henry of England, whose son sank with the *White Ship*, never smiled again, was because Lieutenant Larsen had not then invented his admirable Exercises.

So complacent, so insolently unselfconscious had Ashe become in the course of three months, owing to his success in inducing the populace to look on anything he did with the indulgent eye of understanding, that it simply did not occur to him, when he abruptly twisted his body into the shape of a corkscrew in accordance with the directions in the Lieutenant's book for the consummation of Exercise One, that he was doing anything funny. And the behaviour of those present seemed to justify his confidence. The proprietor of the Hotel Mathis regarded him without a smile. The proprietor of the Hotel Previtali might have been in a trance for all the interest he displayed. The hotel employees continued their tasks impassively. The children were blind and dumb. The cat across the way stropped its backbone against the railings unheeding.

But, even as he unscrambled himself and resumed a normal posture, from his immediate rear there rent the quiet morning air a clear and musical laugh. It floated out upon the breeze, and hit him like a bullet.

Three months ago Ashe would have accepted the laugh as inevitable, and would have refused to allow it to embarrass him. But long immunity from ridicule had sapped his resolution. He spun round with a jump, flushed and self-conscious.

From the window of the first-floor front of No. 7A a girl was leaning. The spring sunshine played on her golden

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hair and lit up her bright blue eyes, fixed on his flannelled and sweated person with a fascinated amusement. Even as he turned, the laugh smote him afresh.

For the space of perhaps two seconds they stared at each other, eye to eye. Then she vanished into the room.

Ashe was beaten. Three months ago a million girls could have laughed at his morning exercises without turning him from his purpose. Today this one scoffer, alone and unaided, was sufficient for his undoing. The depression which exercise had begun to dispel surged back upon him. He had no heart to continue. Sadly gathering up his belongings, he returned to his room, and found a cold bath tame and uninspiring.

The breakfasts (included in rent), provided by Mrs Bell, the landlady of No. 7A, were not exhilarating feasts. By the time Ashe had done his best with the dishevelled fried egg, the chicory blasphemously called coffee, and the charred bacon, Misery had him firmly in its grip. And when he forced himself to the table, and began to try to concoct the latest of the adventures of Gridley Quayle, Investigator, his spirit groaned within him.

With that musical laugh ringing in his ears, he found himself wishing that he had never thought of Gridley Quayle, that the baser elements of the British reading public had never taken him for their hero, and that he personally was dead.

The unholy alliance had been in progress now for more than two years, and it seemed to Ashe that Gridley grew less human each month. He was so complacent and so maddeningly blind to the fact that only the most amazing luck enabled him to detect anything. To depend on Gridley

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Quayle for one's income was like being chained to some horrible monster.

This morning, as he sat and chewed his pen, his loathing for Gridley seemed to have reached its climax. It was his habit, in writing these stories, to think of a good title first, and then fit an adventure to it. And overnight, in a moment of inspiration, he had jotted down on an envelope the words:

THE ADVENTURE OF THE WAND OF DEATH.

It was with the sullen repulsion of a vegetarian who finds a caterpillar in his salad that he now sat glaring at them.

The title had seemed so promising overnight, so full of strenuous possibilities. It was still speciously attractive, but, now that the moment had arrived for writing the story, its flaws became manifest.

What was a Wand of Death? It sounded good, but, coming down to hard facts, what *was* it? You cannot write a story about a wand of death without knowing what a wand of death is; and, conversely, if you have thought of such a splendid title, you cannot jettison it offhand.

Ashe rumbled his hair, and gnawed his pen.

There came a knock at the door.

Ashe spun round in his chair. This was the last straw. If he had told Mrs Bell once that he was never to be disturbed in the morning on any pretext whatsoever, he had told her twenty times. It was simply too infernal to be endured if his work time was to be cut into like this. He ran over in his mind a few opening remarks.

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‘Come in,’ he shouted, and braced himself for battle.

A girl walked in, the girl of the first-floor front, the girl with the blue eyes who had laughed at his Larsen Exercises.

II

Various circumstances contributed to the poorness of the figure which Ashe cut in the opening moments of this interview. In the first place, he was expecting to see his landlady, whose height was about four feet six, and the sudden entry of someone who was about five feet seven threw the universe temporarily out of focus. In the second place, in anticipation of Mrs Bell’s entry, he had twisted his face into a forbidding scowl, and it was no slight matter to change this on the spur of the moment into a pleasant smile. Finally, a man who has been sitting for half an hour in front of a sheet of paper bearing the words:

THE ADVENTURE OF THE WAND OF DEATH,

and trying to decide what a wand of death may be, has not his mind under proper control.

The net result of these things was that, for perhaps half a minute, Ashe behaved absurdly. He goggled and he yammered. A lunacy commissioner, had one been present, would have made up his mind about him without further investigation. It was not for an appreciable time that he thought of rising from his seat. When he did, the

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combined leap and twist which he executed practically amounted to a Larsen Exercise.

Nor was the girl unembarrassed. If Ashe had been calmer, he would have observed upon her cheek the flush that told that she too was finding the situation trying. But, woman being ever better equipped with poise than man, it was she who spoke first.

‘I’m afraid I’m disturbing you.’

‘No, no,’ said Ashe. ‘Oh, no, not at all, not at all, no, oh no, not at all, no,’ and would have continued to play upon the theme indefinitely, had not the girl spoken again.

‘I wanted to apologise,’ she said, ‘for my abominable rudeness in laughing at you just now. It was idiotic of me, and I don’t know why I did it. I’m sorry.’

Science, with a thousand triumphs to her credit, has not yet succeeded in discovering the correct reply for a young man to make who finds himself in the appalling position of being apologised to by a pretty girl. If he says nothing, he seems sullen and unforgiving. If he says anything, he makes a fool of himself. Ashe, hesitating between these two courses, suddenly caught sight of the sheet of paper over which he had been poring so long.

‘What is a wand of death?’ he asked.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘A wand of death.’

‘I don’t understand.’

The delirium of the conversation was too much for Ashe. He burst out laughing. A moment later the girl did the same. And simultaneously embarrassment ceased to be.

‘I suppose you think I’m mad?’ said Ashe.

‘Certainly,’ said the girl.

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'Well, I should have been if you hadn't come in.'

'Why was that?'

'I was trying to write a detective story.'

'I was wondering if you were a writer.'

'Do *you* write?'

'Yes. Do you ever read *Home Gossip*?'

'Never.'

'I congratulate you. It's a horrid little paper, all brown-paper patterns and advice to the lovelorn. I do a short story for it every week, under various names. A duke or an earl goes with each story. I loathe it intensely.'

'I am sorry for your troubles,' said Ashe firmly, 'but we are wandering from the point. What is a wand of death?'

'A wand of death?'

'A wand of death.'

The girl frowned reflectively.

'Why, of course it's the sacred ebony stick stolen from the Indian temple which is supposed to bring death to whoever possesses it. The hero gets hold of it, and the priests dog him and send him threatening messages. What else could it be?'

Ashe could not restrain his admiration.

'This is genius!'

'Oh, no.'

'Absolute genius. I see it all. The hero calls in Gridley Quayle, and that patronising ass, by the aid of a series of wicked coincidences, solves the mystery, and there am I with another month's work done.'

She looked at him with interest.

'Are you the author of *Gridley Quayle*?'

'Don't tell me you read him!'

'I do *not* read him. But he is published by the same firm

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that publishes *Home Gossip*, and I can't help seeing his cover sometimes while I am waiting in the waiting-room to see the editress.'

Ashe felt like one who meets a boyhood's chum on a desert island. Here was a real bond between them.

'Do the Mammoth publish you too? Why, we are comrades in misfortune – fellow-serfs. We should be friends. Shall we be friends?'

'I should be delighted.'

'Shall we shake hands, sit down, and talk about ourselves a little?'

'But I am keeping you from your work.'

'An errand of mercy.'

She sat down. It is a simple act, this of sitting down, but like everything else it may be an index to character. There was something wholly satisfactory to Ashe in the manner in which this girl did it. She neither seated herself on the extreme edge of the easy-chair, as one braced for instant flight; nor did she wallow in the easy-chair, as one come to stay for the weekend. She carried herself in an unconventional situation with an unstudied self-confidence which he could not sufficiently admire. Etiquette is not rigid in Arundell Street, but, nevertheless, a girl in a first-floor front may be excused for showing surprise and hesitation when invited to a confidential chat with a second-floor front young man whom she has only known five minutes. But there is a Free Masonry among those who live in large cities on small earnings.

'Shall we introduce ourselves?' said Ashe. 'Or did Mrs Bell tell you my name? By the way, you have not been here long, have you?'

'I took my room the day before yesterday. But your

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name, if you are the author of *Gridley Quayle*, is Felix Clovelly, isn't it?'

'Good Heavens, no! Surely you don't think anyone's name could really be Felix Clovelly? That is only the cloak under which I hide my shame. My real name is Marson. Ashe Marson. And yours?'

'Valentine. Joan Valentine.'

'Will you tell me the story of your life, or shall I tell mine first?'

'I don't know that I have any particular story.'

'Come, come!'

'Well, I haven't.'

'Think again. Let us thrash this thing out. You were born?'

'I was.'

'Where?'

'In London.'

'Now we seem to be started. I was born in Much Middlefold.'

'I'm afraid I never heard of it.'

'Strange! I know your birthplace quite well. But I have not yet made Much Middlefold famous. In fact, I doubt if I ever shall. I am beginning to realise that I am one of the failures.'

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-six.'

'You are twenty-six, and you call yourself a failure? I think that is a shameful thing to say.'

'What would you call a man of twenty-six whose only means of making a living was the writing of Gridley Quayle stories? An empire builder?'

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‘How do you know it’s your only means of making a living? Why don’t you try something new?’

‘Such as—?’

‘How should I know? Anything that comes along. Good gracious, Mr Marson, here you are in the biggest city in the world, with chances of adventure simply shrieking to you on every side—’

‘I must be deaf. The only thing I have heard shrieking to me on every side has been Mrs Bell – for the week’s rent.’

‘Read the papers. Read the advertisement columns. I’m sure you will find something sooner or later. Don’t get into a groove. Be an adventurer. Snatch at the next chance, whatever it is.’

Ashe nodded.

‘Continue,’ he said. ‘Proceed. You are stimulating me.’

‘But why should you want a girl like me to stimulate you? Surely London is enough to do it without my help? You can always find *something* new, surely? Listen, Mr Marson. I was thrown on my own resources about five years ago. Never mind how. Since then I have worked in a shop, done typewriting, been on the stage, had a position as governess, been a lady’s maid—’

‘A *what*? A lady’s maid?’

‘Why not? It was all experience, and I can assure you I would much rather be a lady’s maid than a governess.’

‘I think I know what you mean. I was a private tutor once. I suppose a governess is the female equivalent. I have often wondered what General Sherman would have said about private tutoring, if he expressed himself so breezily about mere War. Was it fun being a lady’s maid?’

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‘It was pretty good fun, and it gave me an opportunity of studying the aristocracy in its native haunts, which has made me *Home Gossip’s* established authority on dukes and earls.’

Ashe drew a deep breath – not a scientific deep breath, but one of admiration.

‘You are perfectly splendid!’

‘Splendid?’

‘I mean, you have such pluck!’

‘Oh, well, I keep on trying. I’m twenty-three, and I haven’t achieved anything much yet, but I certainly don’t feel like sitting back and calling myself a failure.’

Ashe made a grimace.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I got it!’

‘I meant you to,’ said Joan placidly. ‘I hope I haven’t bored you with my autobiography, Mr Marson? I’m not setting myself up as a shining example, but I do like action and hate stagnation.’

‘You are absolutely wonderful,’ said Ashe. ‘You are a human correspondence course in Efficiency – one of the ones you see in the back pages of the magazines, beginning, “Young man, are you earning enough?” with a picture showing the deadbeat gazing wistfully at the boss’s chair. You would galvanise a jelly-fish.’

‘If I have really stimulated you—’

‘I think,’ said Ashe pensively, ‘that that was another insult. Well, I deserve it. Yes, you *have* stimulated me. I feel a new man. It’s queer that you should have come to me right on top of everything else. I don’t remember when I have felt so restless and discontented as this morning.’

‘It’s the spring.’

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'I suppose it is. I feel like doing something big and adventurous.'

'Well, do it then. You have a *Morning Post* on the table. Have you read it yet?'

'I glanced at it.'

'But you haven't read the advertisement pages? Read them. They may contain just the opening you want.'

'Well, I'll do it, but my experience of advertisement pages is that they are monopolised by philanthropists who want to lend you any sum from ten to a hundred thousand pounds on your note of hand only. However, I will scan them.'

Joan rose, and held out her hand.

'Goodbye, Mr Marson. You've got your detective story to write, and I have to think out something with a duke in it by tonight, so I must be going.' She smiled. 'We have travelled a good way from the point we started at, but I may as well go back to it before I leave you. I'm sorry I laughed at you this morning.'

Ashe clasped her hand in a fervent grip.

'I'm not. Come and laugh at me whenever you feel like it. I like being laughed at. Why, when I started my morning exercises, half London used to come and roll about the pavements in convulsions. I'm not an attraction any longer, and it makes me feel lonely. There are twenty-nine of those Larsen Exercises, and you only saw part of the first. You have done so much for me that, if I can be of any use to you in helping you to greet the day with a smile, I shall be only too proud. Exercise Six is funny without being vulgar. I'll start with it tomorrow morning. I can also recommend Exercise Eleven. Don't miss it.'

'Very well. Well, goodbye for the present.'

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‘Goodbye.’

She was gone; and Ashe, thrilling with new emotions, stared at the door which had closed behind her. He felt as if he had been awakened from sleep by a powerful electric shock.

A wonderful girl . . . An astounding girl . . . An amazing girl . . .

Close beside the sheet of paper on which he had inscribed the now luminous and suggestive title of his new Gridley Quayle story lay the *Morning Post*, whose advertisement columns he had promised her to explore. The least he could do was to begin at once.

His spirits sank as he did so. It was the same old game. A Mr Brian MacNeill, though doing no business with minors, was willing, even anxious, to part with his vast fortune to anyone over the age of twenty-one whose means happened to be a trifle straitened. This good man required no security whatever. Nor did his rivals in generosity, the Messrs Angus Bruce, Duncan Macfarlane, Wallace Mackintosh, and Donald McNab. They, too, showed a curious distaste for dealing with minors, but anyone of maturer years could simply come round to the office and help himself.

Beneath these was the heart-cry of Young Man (Christian) who wanted a thousand pounds at once to enable him to complete his education with the Grand Tour.

Ashe threw the paper down wearily. He had known all along that it was no good. Romance was dead, and the Unexpected no longer happened.

He picked up his pen, and began to write the Adventure of the Wand of Death.

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Chapter 2

I

In a bedroom on the fourth floor of the Hotel Guelph in Piccadilly, the Hon. Frederick Threepwood sat in bed with his knees drawn up to his chin and glared at the day with a glare of mental anguish. He had very little mind, but what he had was suffering.

He had just remembered.

It is like that in this life. You wake up, feeling as fit as a fiddle; you look at the window and see the sun and thank Heaven for a fine day; you begin to plan a perfectly corking luncheon party with some of the chappies you met last night at the National Sporting Club, and then – you remember.

‘Oh, dash it!’ said the Hon. Freddie. And after a moment’s pause, ‘And I was feeling so dashed happy!’

For the space of some minutes he remained plunged in sad meditation. Then, picking up the telephone on the table at his side, he asked for a number.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello?’ responded a rich voice at the other end of the wire.

‘Oh, I say, is that you, Dickie?’

‘Who is that?’

‘This is Freddie Threepwood. I say, Dickie, old top, I

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want to see you about something devilish important. Will you be in at twelve?’

‘Certainly. What’s the trouble?’

‘I can’t explain over the wire, but it’s deuced serious.’

‘Very well. By the way, Freddie, congratulations on the engagement.’

‘Thanks, old man. Thanks very much, and so forth, but you won’t forget to be in at twelve, will you? Goodbye.’

He replaced the receiver quickly, and sprang out of bed, for he had heard the door-handle turn. When the door opened he was giving a correct representation of a young man wasting no time in beginning his toilet for the day.

An elderly, thin-faced, bald-headed, amiably vacant man entered. He regarded the Hon. Freddie with a certain disfavour.

‘Are you only just getting up, Frederick?’

‘Hullo, guv’nor. Good morning. I shan’t be two ticks now.’

‘You should have been out and about two hours ago. The day is glorious.’

‘Shan’t be more than a minute, guv’nor, now. Just got to have a tub and chuck on a few clothes.’

He disappeared into the bathroom. His father, taking a chair, placed the tips of his fingers together and in this attitude remained motionless, a figure of disapproval and suppressed annoyance.

Like many fathers in his rank of life, the Earl of Emsworth had suffered much through that problem which – with the exception of Mr Lloyd George – is practically the only fly in the British aristocratic amber – the problem of

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What To Do With The Younger Sons. It is useless to try to gloss over the fact, the Younger Son is not required. You might reason with a British peer by the hour – you might point out to him how, on the one hand, he is far better off than the male codfish, who may at any moment find itself in the distressing position of being called on to provide for a family of over a million; and remind him, on the other, that every additional child he acquires means a corresponding rise for him in the estimation of ex-President Roosevelt; but you would not cheer him up in the least. He does not want the Younger Son.

Apart, however, from the fact that he was a younger son and, as such, a nuisance in any case, the Honourable Freddie had always annoyed his father in a variety of ways. The Earl of Emsworth was so constituted that no man or thing really had the power to trouble him deeply, but Freddie had come nearer to doing it than anybody else in the world. There had been a consistency, a perseverance, about his irritating performances which had acted on the placid peer as dripping water on a stone. Isolated acts of annoyance would have been powerless to ruffle his calm; but Freddie had been exploding bombs under his nose since he went to Eton.

He had been expelled from Eton for breaking out at night and roaming the streets of Windsor in a false moustache. He had been sent down from Oxford for pouring ink from a second-storey window on to the Junior Dean of his college. He had spent two years at an expensive London crammer's and failed to pass into the Army. He had also accumulated an almost record series of racing debts, besides as shady a gang of friends, for the most part

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vaguely connected with the turf, as any young man of his age ever contrived to collect.

These things try the most placid of parents, and finally Lord Emsworth had put his foot down. It was the only occasion in his life when he had acted with decision, and he did it with the accumulated energy of years. He stopped his son's allowance, haled him home to Blandings Castle, and kept him there so relentlessly that, until the previous night, when they had come up together by an afternoon train, Freddie had not seen London for nearly a year.

It was possibly the reflection that, whatever his secret troubles, he was at any rate once more in his beloved metropolis that caused Freddie at this point to burst into discordant song. He splashed and warbled simultaneously.

Lord Emsworth's frown deepened, and he began to tap his fingers together irritably. Then his brow cleared, and a pleased smile flickered over his face. He, too, had remembered.

What Lord Emsworth had remembered was this. Late in the previous autumn, the next estate to Blandings had been rented by an American, a Mr Peters, a man with many millions, chronic dyspepsia, and one fair daughter, Aline. The two families had met. Freddie and Aline had been thrown together. And, only a few days before, the engagement had been announced, and for Lord Emsworth the only flaw in this best of all possible worlds had been removed.

The singing in the bathroom was increasing in volume, but Lord Emsworth heard it now without wincing. It was amazing what a difference it made to a man's comfort, this fair prospect of getting his younger son off his hands. For nearly a year Freddie, a prisoner at Blandings, had afflicted

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his father's nerves with a never-failing discomfort. Blandings was a large house, but not so large that father and son did not occasionally meet; and on these occasions it had maddened Lord Emsworth to perceive the martyred aspect of the young man. To Lord Emsworth the park and gardens of Blandings were the nearest earthly approach to Paradise. Freddie, chafing at captivity, had mooned about them with an air of crushed gloom which would have caused comment in Siberia.

Yes, he was glad Freddie was engaged to be married to Aline Peters. He liked Aline. He liked Mr Peters. Such was the relief he experienced that he found himself feeling almost affectionate towards Freddie, who emerged from the bathroom at this moment, clad in a pink bathrobe, to find the paternal wrath evaporated and all, so to speak, right with the world.

Nevertheless, he wasted no time about his dressing. He was always ill at ease in his father's presence, and he wished to be elsewhere with all possible speed. He sprang into his trousers with such energy that he nearly tripped himself up.

As he disentangled himself, he recollected something which had slipped his memory.

'By the way, guv'nor, I met an old pal of mine last night, and asked him down to Blandings this week. That's all right, isn't it, what?'

For a moment Lord Emsworth's geniality faltered. He had had experience of Freddie's old pals.

'Who is he? Kindly remember that Mr Peters and Aline and nearly all your relations will be at Blandings this week. If he is one of—'

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‘Oh, no, that’s all right. Honour bright. He isn’t one of the old crowd. He’s a man named Emerson. Most respectable chap. Policeman or something in Hong Kong. He knows Aline quite well, he says. Met her on the boat coming over.’

‘I do not remember any friend of yours named Emerson.’

‘Well, as a matter of fact, I met him last night for the first time. But it’s all right. He’s a good chap, don’t you know, and all that sort of rot.’

Lord Emsworth was feeling too benevolent to raise the objections which he would certainly have raised, had his mood been less sunny.

‘Certainly let him come, if he wishes.’

‘Thanks, guv’nor.’

Freddie completed his toilet.

‘Doing anything special this morning, guv’nor? I rather thought of getting a bit of breakfast and then strolling round a bit. Have you had breakfast?’

‘Two hours ago. I trust that, in the course of your strolling, you will find time to call at Mr Peters’ and see Aline. I shall be going there directly after lunch. Mr Peters wishes to show me his collection of – I think scarabs was the word he used.’

‘Oh, I’ll look in all right. Don’t you worry. Or, if I don’t, I’ll call the old boy up on the phone and pass the time of day. Well, I rather think I’ll be popping off now and getting that bit of breakfast, what?’

Several comments on this speech suggested themselves to Lord Emsworth. In the first place, he did not approve of Freddie’s allusion to one of America’s merchant-princes as ‘the old boy’. Secondly, his son’s attitude did not strike him

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as the ideal attitude of a young man towards his betrothed. There seemed a lack of warmth. But, he reflected, possibly this was simply another manifestation of the Modern Spirit, and in any case it was not worth bothering about, so he offered no criticism; and presently, Freddie having given his shoes a flick with a silk handkerchief and thrust the latter carefully up his sleeve, they passed out and down into the main lobby of the hotel, where they parted, Freddie to his bit of breakfast, his father to potter about the streets and kill time till lunch. London was always a trial to the Earl of Emsworth. His heart was in the country, and the city held no fascinations for him.

II

On one of the floors in one of the buildings in one of the streets which slope precipitously from the Strand to the Thames Embankment, there is a door, which would be all the better for a lick of paint, which bears what is perhaps the most modest and unostentatious announcement of its kind in London.

The grimy ground-glass displays the words:

R. JONES,

simply that, and nothing more.

Situated between a door profusely illustrated with the legend 'Sarawak and New Guinea Rubber Estates Exploitation Company. General Manager, Jno. Bradbury-Eggleston' and a door belonging to the Bhangaloo Ruby

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Mines Incorporated, it has a touch of the woodland violet nestling among orchids.

R. JONES.

It is rugged in its simplicity. You wonder, as you look at it, if you have time to look at and wonder about these things, who this Jones may be and what is the business which he conducts with such a coy reticence.

As a matter of fact, these speculations had passed through suspicious minds at Scotland Yard, which had for some time taken not a little interest in R. Jones. But, beyond ascertaining that he bought and sold curios, did a certain amount of bookmaking during the flat-racing season, and had been known to lend money, Scotland Yard did not find out much about Mr Jones, and presently dismissed him from its thoughts. Not that Scotland Yard was satisfied. To a certain extent, baffled would be a better description of its attitude. The suspicion that R. Jones was, among other things, a receiver of stolen goods still lingered, but proof was not forthcoming.

R. Jones saw to that. He did a great many things, for he was one of the busiest men in London; but what he did best was seeing to it that proof was not forthcoming.

On the theory, given to the world by my brother-author, William Shakespeare, that it is the lean and hungry-looking men who are dangerous and that the fat, the sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights, are harmless, R. Jones should have been above suspicion. He was infinitely the fattest man in the west-central postal district of London. He was a round ball of a man, who wheezed when he

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walked upstairs, which was seldom, and shook like a jelly if some tactless friend, wishing to attract his attention, tapped him unexpectedly on the shoulder. But this occurred still less frequently than his walking upstairs, for in R. Jones' circle it was recognised that nothing is a greater breach of etiquette and worse form than to tap people unexpectedly on the shoulder. That, it was felt, should be left to those who are paid by the Government to do it.

R. Jones was about fifty years old, grey-haired, of a mauve complexion, jovial among his friends, and perhaps even more jovial with chance acquaintances. It was estimated by envious intimates that his joviality with chance acquaintances, especially with young men of the upper classes with large purses and small foreheads, was worth hundreds of pounds a year to him. There was something about his comfortable appearance and his jolly manner which irresistibly attracted a certain type of young man. It was his good fortune that this type of young man should be the type, financially, most worth attracting.

Freddie Threepwood had fallen under his spell during his short but crowded life in London. They had met for the first time at the Derby, and ever since R. Jones had held, in Freddie's estimation, that position of guide, philosopher, and friend, which he held in the estimation of so many young men of Freddie's type.

That was why, at twelve o'clock punctually on this spring morning, he tapped with his cane on R. Jones' ground-glass, and showed such satisfaction and relief when the door was opened by the proprietor in person.

'Well, well, well!' said R. Jones, rollickingly. 'Whom have we here? The dashing bridegroom-to-be, and no other!'

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R. Jones, like Lord Emsworth, was delighted that Freddie was about to marry a nice girl with plenty of money. The sudden turning-off of the tap from which Freddie's allowance had flowed had hit him hard. He had other sources of income, of course, but few so easy and unfailing as Freddie had been in the days of his prosperity.

'The prodigal son, by George! Creeping back into the fold after all this weary time! It seems years since I saw you, Freddie. The old guv'nor put his foot down, didn't he, and stopped the funds? Damned shame! I take it that things have loosened up a bit since the engagement was announced, eh?'

Freddie sat down, and chewed the knob of his cane unhappily.

'Well, as a matter of fact, Dickie, old top,' he said, 'not so that you could notice it, don't you know. Things are still pretty much the same. I managed to get away from Blandings for a night, because the governor had to come to London, but I've got to go back with him on the three o'clock train. And, as for money, I can't get a quid out of him. As a matter of fact, I'm in the deuce of a hole, and that's why I've come to you.'

Even fat, jovial men have their moments of depression. R. Jones' face clouded, and jerky remarks about the hardness of times and losses on the Stock Exchange began to proceed from him. As Scotland Yard had discovered, he lent money on occasion, but he did not lend it to youths in Freddie's unfortunate position.

'Oh, I don't want to make a touch, you know,' Freddie hastened to explain. 'It isn't that. As a matter of fact, I

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managed to raise five hundred of the best this morning. That ought to be enough.'

'Depends what you want it for,' said R. Jones, magically genial once more. The thought entered his mind, as it had so often done, that the world was full of easy marks. He wished he could meet the moneylender who had been rash enough to advance the Honourable Freddie five hundred pounds. These philanthropists cross our path too seldom.

Freddie felt in his pocket, produced a cigarette-case, and from it extracted a newspaper clipping.

'Did you read about poor old Percy in the papers? The case, you know?'

'Percy?'

'Lord Stockheath, you know.'

'Oh, the Stockheath breach-of-promise case? I did more than that. I was in court all three days.' R. Jones emitted a cosy chuckle. 'Is he a pal of yours? A cousin, eh? I wish you had seen him in the witness box, with Jellicoe-Smith cross-examining him! The funniest thing I ever heard. And his letters to the girl! They read them out in court, and of all the—'

'Don't, old man! Dickie, old top, please! I know all about it. I read the reports. They made poor old Percy look an absolute ass.'

'Well, Nature had done that already, but I'm bound to say they improved on Nature's work. I should think your cousin Percy must have felt like a plucked chicken.'

A spasm of pain passed over the Honourable Freddie's vacant face. He wriggled in his chair.

'Dickie, old man, I wish you wouldn't talk like that. It makes me feel ill.'

'Why, is he such a pal of yours as all that?'

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‘It’s not that. It’s – the fact is, Dickie, old top, I’m in exactly the same bally hole as poor old Percy was, myself!’

‘What! You have been sued for breach of promise?’

‘Not absolutely that – yet. Look here, I’ll tell you the whole thing. Do you remember a show at the Piccadilly about a year ago, called *The Girl from Dublin*? There was a girl in the chorus.’

‘Several. I remember noticing.’

‘No, I mean one particular girl – a girl called Joan Valentine. The rotten part is that I never met her.’

‘Pull yourself together, Freddie. What exactly is the trouble?’

‘Well, don’t you see, I used to go to the show every other night, and I fell frightfully in love with this girl—’

‘Without having met her?’

‘Yes. You see, I was rather an ass in those days.’

‘No, no,’ said R. Jones, handsomely.

‘I must have been, or I wouldn’t have been such an ass, don’t you know. Well, as I was saying, I used to write this girl letters, saying how much I was in love with her, and – and—’

‘Specifically proposing marriage?’

‘Eh?’

‘I say, specifically proposing marriage?’

‘I can’t remember. I expect I did. I was awfully in love.’

‘How was it that you never met her?’

‘She wouldn’t meet me. She wouldn’t even come out to lunch. She didn’t even answer my letters – just sent word down by the Johnnie at the stage-door. And then—’

Freddie’s voice died away. He thrust the knob of his cane into his mouth in a sort of frenzy.

‘What then?’ inquired R. Jones.

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A scarlet blush manifested itself on Freddie's young face. His eyes wandered sideways. After a long pause a single word escaped him, almost inaudible.

'Poetry!'

R. Jones trembled as if an electric current had been passed through his plump frame. His little eyes sparkled with merriment.

'You wrote her poetry!'

'Yards of it, old boy, yards of it!' groaned Freddie.

Panic filled him with speech.

'You see the frightful hole I'm in? This girl is bound to have kept the letters. I don't remember if I actually proposed to her or not, but anyway she's got enough material to make it worth while to have a dash at an action, especially after poor old Percy has just got soaked for such a pile of money, and made breach-of-promise cases the fashion, so to speak. And now that the announcement of my engagement is out, she's certain to get busy. Probably she has been waiting for something of the sort. Don't you see that all the cards are in her hands? We couldn't afford to let the thing come into court. That poetry would dish my marriage for a certainty. I'd have to emigrate or something! Goodness knows what would happen at home. My old governor would murder me. So you see what a frightful hole I'm in, don't you, Dickie, old man?'

'And what do you want me to do?'

'Why, to get hold of this girl and get back the letters, don't you see? I can't do it myself, cooped up miles away in the country. And besides I shouldn't know how to handle a thing like that. It wants a chappie with a lot of sense and a persuasive sort of way with him.'

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‘Thanks for the compliment, Freddie, but I should imagine that something a little more solid than a persuasive way would be required in a case like this. You said something a while ago about five hundred pounds?’

‘Here it is, old man, in notes. I brought it on purpose. Will you really take the thing on? Do you think you can work it for five hundred?’

‘I can have a try.’

Freddie rose with an expression approximating to happiness on his face. Some men have the power of inspiring confidence in some of their fellows, while filling others with distrust. Scotland Yard might look askance at R. Jones, but to Freddie he was all that was helpful and reliable. He shook R. Jones’ hand several times in his emotion.

‘That’s absolutely topping of you, old man,’ he said. ‘Then I’ll leave the whole thing to you. Write me the moment you have done anything, won’t you. Goodbye, old top, and thanks ever so much.’

The door closed. R. Jones remained where he sat, his fingers straying luxuriously among the crackling paper. A feeling of complete happiness warmed R. Jones’ bosom. He was not certain whether or not his mission would be successful, and, to be truthful, he was not letting this worry him much. What he was certain of, was the fact that the Heavens had opened unexpectedly and dropped five hundred pounds into his lap.

Chapter 3

I

The Earl of Emsworth stood in the doorway of the Senior Conservative Club's vast dining room, and beamed with a vague sweetness upon the two hundred or so Senior Conservatives who, with much clattering of knife and fork, were keeping body and soul together by means of the coffee-room luncheon. He might have been posing for a Statue of Amiability. His pale blue eyes shone with a friendly light through their protecting glasses; the smile of a man at peace with all men curved his weak mouth; his bald head, reflecting the sunlight, seemed almost to wear a halo.

Nobody appeared to notice him. He so seldom came to London these days that he was practically a stranger in the club; and in any case your Senior Conservative, when at lunch, has little leisure for observing anything not immediately on the table in front of him. To attract attention in the dining room of the Senior Conservative Club between the hours of one and two-thirty, you have to be a mutton chop, not an earl.

It is possible that, lacking the initiative to make his way down the long aisle and find a table for himself, he might have stood there indefinitely, but for the restless activity of Adams, the head steward. It was Adams' mission in life to flit to and fro, hauling would-be lunchers to their

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destinations, as a St Bernard dog hauls travellers out of Alpine snowdrifts.

He sighted Lord Emsworth, and secured him with a genteel pounce.

‘A table, your lordship? This way, your lordship.’

Adams remembered him, of course. Adams remembered everybody.

Lord Emsworth followed him beamingly, and presently came to anchor at a table at the further end of the room. Adams handed him the bill of fare, and stood brooding over him like a Providence.

‘Don’t often see your lordship in the club,’ he opened chattily. It was his business to know the tastes and dispositions of all the five thousand or so members of the Senior Conservative Club and to suit his demeanour to them. To some he would hand the bill of fare swiftly, silently, almost brusquely, as one who realises that there are moments in life too serious for talk. Others, he knew, liked conversation, and to these he introduced the subject of food almost as a sub-motive.

Lord Emsworth, having examined the bill of fare with a mild curiosity, laid it down and became conversational.

‘No, Adams, I seldom visit London nowadays. London does not attract me. The country . . . the fields . . . the woods . . . the birds . . .’

Something across the room seemed to attract his attention, and his voice trailed off. He inspected this for some time with bland interest, then turned to Adams once more.

‘What was I saying, Adams?’

‘The birds, your lordship.’

‘Birds? What birds? What about birds?’

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‘You were speaking of the attractions of life in the country, your lordship. You included the birds in your remarks.’

‘Oh, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes, yes. Oh, yes, to be sure. Do you ever go to the country, Adams?’

‘Generally to the seashore, your lordship, when I take my annual vacation.’

Whatever was the attraction across the room once more exercised its spell. His lordship concentrated himself upon it to the exclusion of all other mundane affairs. Presently he came out of his trance again.

‘What were you saying, Adams?’

‘I said that I generally went to the seashore, your lordship.’

‘Eh? When?’

‘For my annual vacation, your lordship.’

‘Your what?’

‘My annual vacation, your lordship.’

‘What about it?’

Adams never smiled during business hours, unless professionally, as it were, when a member made a joke, but he was storing up in the recesses of his highly respectable body a large laugh, to be shared with his wife when he reached home that night. Mrs Adams never wearied of hearing of the eccentricities of the members of the club. It occurred to Adams that he was in luck today. He was expecting a little party of friends to supper that night, and he was a man who loved an audience. You would never have thought it, to look at him when engaged on his professional duties, but Adams had built up a substantial reputation as a humorist in his circle by his imitations of certain members of the club, and it was a matter of regret to him

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that he got so few opportunities nowadays, of studying the absent-minded Lord Emsworth. It was rare luck, his lordship coming in today evidently in his best form.

‘Adams, who is the gentleman over by the window? The gentleman in the brown suit?’

‘That is a Mr Simmonds, your lordship. He joined us last year.’

‘I never saw a man take such large mouthfuls. Did *you* ever see a man take such large mouthfuls, Adams?’

Adams refrained from expressing an opinion, but inwardly he was thrilling with artistic fervour. Mr Simmonds, eating, was one of his best imitations, though Mrs Adams was inclined to object to it on the score that it was a bad example for the children. To be privileged to witness Lord Emsworth watching and criticising Mr Simmonds was to collect material for a double-barrelled character study which would assuredly make the hit of the evening.

‘That man,’ went on Lord Emsworth, ‘is digging his grave with his teeth. Digging his grave with his teeth, Adams. Do *you* take large mouthfuls, Adams?’

‘No, your lordship.’

‘Quite right. Very sensible of you, Adams. Very sensible of you. Very sen . . . What was I saying, Adams?’

‘About my not taking large mouthfuls, your lordship.’

‘Quite right. Quite right. Never take large mouthfuls, Adams. Never gobble. Have you any children, Adams?’

‘Two, your lordship.’

‘I hope you teach them not to gobble. They pay for it in later life. Americans gobble when young, and ruin their digestions. My American friend, Mr Peters, suffers terribly from his digestion.’

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Adams lowered his voice to a confidential murmur.

‘If you will pardon the liberty, your lordship – I saw it in the paper—’

‘About Mr Peters’ digestion?’

‘About Miss Peters, your lordship, and the Honourable Frederick. May I be permitted to offer my congratulations?’

‘Eh? Oh, yes, the engagement. Yes, yes, yes. Yes, to be sure. Yes, very satisfactory in every respect. High time he settled down and got a little sense. I put it to him straight. I cut off his allowance and made him stay at home. That made him think, lazy young devil. I—’

Lord Emsworth had his lucid moments, and in the one that occurred now it came home to him that he was not talking to himself, as he had imagined, but confiding intimate family secrets to the head steward of his club’s dining room. He checked himself abruptly, and with a slight decrease of amiability fixed his gaze on the bill of fare, and ordered clear soup. For an instant he felt resentful against Adams for luring him on to soliloquise, but the next moment his whole mind was gripped by the fascinating spectacle of Mr Simmonds dealing with a wedge of Stilton cheese, and Adams was forgotten.

The clear soup had the effect of restoring his lordship to complete amiability, and, when Adams, in the course of his wanderings again found himself at the table, he was once more disposed for light conversation.

‘So you saw the news of the engagement in the paper, did you, Adams?’

‘Yes, your lordship, in the *Mail*. It had quite a long piece about it. And the Honourable Frederick’s photograph and

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the young lady's were in the *Mirror*. Mrs Adams clipped them out and put them in an album, knowing that your lordship was a member of ours. If I may say so, your lordship, a beautiful young lady.'

'Devilish attractive, Adams, and devilish rich. Mr Peters is a millionaire, Adams.'

'So I read in the paper, your lordship.'

'Damme, they all seem millionaires in America. Wish I knew how they managed it. Honestly, I hope. Mr Peters is an honest man, but his digestion is bad. He used to bolt his food. *You* don't bolt your food, I hope, Adams?'

'No, your lordship, I am most careful.'

'The late Mr Gladstone used to chew each mouthful thirty-three times. Deuced good notion, if you aren't in a hurry. What cheese would you recommend, Adams?'

'The gentlemen are speaking well of the gorgonzola.'

'All right, bring me some. You know, Adams, what I admire about Americans is their resource. Mr Peters tells me that, as a boy of eleven, he earned twenty dollars a week selling mint to saloon-keepers, as they call publicans over there. Why they wanted mint I cannot recollect. Mr Peters explained the reason to me, and it seemed highly plausible at the time, but I have forgotten it. Possibly for mint sauce. It impressed me, Adams. Twenty dollars is four pounds. *I* never earned four pounds a week when I was a boy of eleven. In fact, I don't think I ever earned four pounds a week. His story impressed me, Adams. Every man ought to have an earning capacity . . . Tell me, Adams, have I eaten my cheese?'

'Not yet, your lordship. I was about to send the waiter for it.'

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‘Never mind. Tell him to bring the bill instead. I remember that I have an appointment. I must not be late.’

‘Shall I take the fork, your lordship?’

‘The fork?’

‘Your lordship has inadvertently put a fork in your coat-pocket.’

Lord Emsworth felt in the pocket indicated, and, with the air of an inexpert conjuror whose trick has succeeded contrary to his expectations, produced a silver-plated fork. He regarded it with surprise, then he looked wonderingly at Adams.

‘Adams, I’m getting absent-minded. Have you ever noticed any traces of absent-mindedness in me before?’

‘Oh, no, your lordship.’

‘Well, it’s deuced peculiar. I have no recollection whatsoever of placing that fork in my pocket . . . Adams, I want a taxi-cab.’

He glanced round the room, as if expecting to locate one by the fireplace.

‘The hall porter will whistle one for you, your lordship.’

‘So he will, by George, so he will. Good day, Adams.’

‘Good day, your lordship.’

The Earl of Emsworth ambled benevolently to the door, leaving Adams with the feeling that his day had not been ill-spent. He gazed almost with reverence after the slow-moving figure.

‘What a nut!’ said Adams to his immortal soul.

Wafted through the sunlit streets in his taxi-cab, the Earl of Emsworth smiled benevolently upon London’s teeming millions. He was as completely happy as only a

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fluffy-minded old man with excellent health and a large income can be. Other people worried about all sorts of things – strikes, wars, suffragettes, diminishing birth rates, the growing materialism of the age, and a score of similar subjects. Worrying, indeed, seemed to be the twentieth century's speciality. Lord Emsworth never worried. Nature had equipped him with a mind so admirably constructed for withstanding the disagreeablenesses of life that, if an unpleasant thought entered it, it passed out again a moment later. Except for a few of Life's fundamental facts, such as that his cheque-book was in the right-hand top drawer of his desk, that the Honourable Freddie Threepwood was a young idiot who required perpetual restraint, and that, when in doubt about anything, he had merely to apply to his secretary, Rupert Baxter – except for these basic things, he never remembered anything for more than a few minutes.

At Eton, in the sixties, they had called him Fat-head.

His was a life which lacked, perhaps, the sublimer emotions which raised Man to the level of the gods, but it was undeniably an extremely happy one. He never experienced the thrill of ambition fulfilled, but, on the other hand, he never knew the agony of ambition frustrated. His name, when he died, would not live for ever in England's annals; he was spared the pain of worrying about this by the fact that he had no desire to live for ever in England's annals. He was possibly as nearly contented as a human being can be in this century of alarms and excursions. Indeed, as he bowled along in his cab, and reflected that a really charming girl, not in the chorus of any West End theatre, a girl with plenty of money and excellent breeding had – in a moment,

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doubtless of mental aberration – become engaged to be married to the Honourable Freddie, he told himself that life was at last absolutely without a crumpled rose-leaf.

The cab drew up before a house gay with flowered window-boxes. Lord Emsworth paid the driver, and stood on the sidewalk looking up at this cheerful house, trying to remember why on earth he had told the man to drive there.

A few moments' steady thought gave him the answer to the riddle. This was Mr Peters' town house, and he had come to it by invitation to look at Mr Peters' collection of scarabs.

To be sure. He remembered now. His collection of scarabs.

Or was it Arabs?

He smiled. Scarabs, of course. You couldn't collect Arabs. He wondered idly, as he rang the bell, what scarabs might be. But he was interested in a fluffy kind of way in all forms of collecting, and he was very pleased to have the opportunity of examining these objects, whatever they were.

He rather thought they were a kind of fish.

II

There are men in this world who cannot rest, who are so constituted that they can only take their leisure in the shape of a change of work. To this fairly numerous class belonged Mr J. Preston Peters, father of Freddie's Aline. And to this merit – or defect – is to be attributed his almost

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maniacal devotion to that rather unattractive species of curio – the Egyptian scarab.

Five years before, a nervous breakdown had sent Mr Peters to a New York specialist.

The specialist had grown rich on similar cases, and his advice was always the same. He insisted on Mr Peters taking up a hobby.

‘What sort of a hobby?’ inquired Mr Peters irritably. His digestion had just begun to trouble him at the time, and his temper was not of the best.

The very word hobby seemed futile and ridiculous to him. His hobby was avoiding hobbies and attending to business. Which, the specialist pointed out, was precisely the reason why he had just written a hundred-dollar cheque for his advice. This impressed Mr Peters. He disliked writing unnecessary cheques, and, if the only way to avoid doing so was to have a hobby, a hobby he must have.

‘Any sort of hobby,’ said the specialist. ‘There must be something outside of business in which you are interested?’

Mr Peters could not think of anything. Even his meals were beginning to interest him less.

‘Now my hobby,’ said the specialist, ‘is the collecting of scarabs. Why should you not collect scarabs?’

‘Because,’ said Mr Peters, ‘I shouldn’t know one if you brought it to me on a plate. What *are* scarabs?’

‘Scarabs,’ said the specialist, warming to his subject, ‘are Egyptian hieroglyphs.’

‘And what,’ inquired Mr Peters, ‘are Egyptian hieroglyphs?’

The specialist began to wonder whether it would not

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have been better to advise Mr Peters to collect postage stamps.

‘A scarab,’ he said, ‘derived from the Latin *scarabeus*, is literally a beetle.’

‘I will *not* collect beetles,’ said Mr Peters definitely. ‘I despise beetles. Beetles give me that pain.’

‘Scarabs are Egyptian symbols in the form of beetles,’ the specialist hurried on. ‘The most common form of scarab is in the shape of a ring. Scarabs were used for seals. They were also employed as beads or ornaments. Some scarabei bear inscriptions having reference to places, as, for instance, “Memphis is mighty for ever.”’

Mr Peters’ scorn changed suddenly to active interest.

‘Have you got one like that?’

‘Like—?’

‘A scarab boasting Memphis. It’s my home town.’

‘I think it possible that some other Memphis was alluded to.’

‘There isn’t any other except the one in Tennessee,’ said Mr Peters patriotically.

The specialist owed the fact that he was a nerve doctor instead of a nerve patient to his habit of never arguing with his visitors.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘you would care to glance at my collection? It is in the next room.’

That was the beginning of Mr Peters’ devotion to scarabs. At first he did his collecting without any love of it, partly because he had to collect something or suffer, but principally because of a remark the specialist made as he was leaving the room.

‘How long would it take me to get together that number of the things?’ he inquired, when, having looked

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his fill upon the dullest assortment of objects which he remembered ever to have seen, he was preparing to take his leave.

The specialist was proud of his collection.

‘How long? To make a collection as large as mine? Many years, Mr Peters. Oh, many, many years.’

‘I’ll bet you a hundred dollars I do it in six months.’

And from that moment Mr Peters had brought to the collecting of scarabs the same furious energy which had given him so many dollars and so much indigestion. He went after scarabs like a dog after rats. He scooped in scarabs from all the four corners of the earth, until, at the end of a year, he found himself possessed of what, purely as regarded quantity, was a record collection.

This marked the end of the first phase of, so to speak, the scarabean side of his life. Collecting had become a habit with him, but he was not yet a real enthusiast. It occurred to him that the time had arrived for a certain amount of pruning and elimination. He called in an expert, and bade him go through the collection and weed out what he felicitously termed the ‘dead ones’. The expert did his job thoroughly. When he had finished, the collection was reduced to a mere dozen specimens.

‘The rest,’ he explained, ‘are practically valueless. If you are thinking of making a collection that will have any value in the eyes of archaeologists, I should advise you to throw them away. The remaining twelve are good.’

‘How do you mean “good”? Why is one of these things valuable and another so much junk? They all look alike to me.’

And then the expert had talked to Mr Peters for nearly

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two hours about the New Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, Osiris, Ammon, Mut, Bubastis, Dynasties, Cheops, the Hyksos kings, cylinders, bezels, Amenophis III, Queen Taia, the Princess Gilukhipa of Mitanni, the Lake of Zarukhe, Naucratis, and the Book of the Dead. He did it with a relish. He liked doing it.

When he had finished, Mr Peters thanked him, and went to the bathroom, where he bathed his temples with eau de Cologne.

That talk changed J. Preston Peters from a supercilious scooper-up of random scarabs to a genuine scarab maniac. It does not matter what a man collects; if Nature has given him the collector's mind, he will become a fanatic on the subject of whatever collection he sets out to make. Mr Peters had collected dollars; he began to collect scarabs with precisely the same enthusiasm. He would have become just as enthusiastic about butterflies or old china, if he had turned his thoughts to them, but it chanced that what he had taken up was the collecting of the scarab, and it gripped him more and more as the years went on. Gradually he came to love his scarabs with that love passing the love of women which only collectors know. He became an expert on these curious relics of a dead civilisation. For a time they ran neck and neck in his thoughts with business. When he retired from business, he was free to make them the master passion of his life. He treasured each individual scarab in his collection as a miser treasures gold.

Collecting, as Mr Peters did it, resembles the drink habit. It begins as an amusement, and ends as an obsession.

He was gloating over his treasures when the maid announced Lord Emsworth.

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A curious species of mutual toleration – it could hardly be dignified by the title of friendship – had sprung up between these two men, so opposite in practically every respect. Each regarded the other with that feeling of perpetual amazement with which we encounter those whose whole viewpoint and mode of life is foreign to our own. The American's force and nervous energy fascinated Lord Emsworth. In a purely detached way Lord Emsworth liked force and nervous energy. They interested him. He was glad he did not possess them himself, but he enjoyed them as a spectacle, just as a man who would not like to be a purple cow may have no objection to seeing one. As for Mr Peters, nothing like the earl had ever happened to him before in a long and varied life. He had seen men and cities, but Lord Emsworth was something new. Each, in fact, was to the other a perpetual freak-show with no charge for admission. And, if anything had been needed to cement the alliance, it would have been supplied by the fact that they were both collectors.

They differed in collecting as they did in everything else. Mr Peters' collecting, as has been shown, was keen, furious, concentrated; Lord Emsworth's had the amiable dodderingness which marked every branch of his life. In the museum at Blandings Castle you might find every manner of valuable and valueless curio. There was no central motive, the place was simply an amateur junk-shop. Side by side with a Gutenberg Bible for which rival collectors would have bidden without a limit, you would come upon a bullet from the field of Waterloo, one of a consignment of ten thousand shipped there for the use of tourists by a Birmingham firm. Each was equally attractive to its owner.

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‘My dear Mr Peters,’ said Lord Emsworth sunnily, advancing into the room, ‘I trust I am not unpunctual. I have been lunching at my club.’

‘I’d have asked you to lunch here,’ said Mr Peters, ‘but you know how it is with me. I’ve promised the doctor I’ll give those nuts and grasses of his a fair trial, and I can do it pretty well when I’m alone or with Aline. But to have to sit by and see someone else eating real food would be trying me too high.’

Lord Emsworth murmured sympathetically. The other’s digestive tribulations touched a ready chord. An excellent trencherman himself, he understood what Mr Peters must suffer.

‘Too bad,’ he said.

Mr Peters turned the conversation into other channels.

‘These are my scarabs,’ he said.

Lord Emsworth adjusted his glasses, and the mild smile disappeared from his face, to be succeeded by a set look. A stage-director of a moving-picture firm would have recognised the look; Lord Emsworth was ‘registering’ interest – interest which, he perceived from the first instant, would have to be completely simulated; for instinct told him, as Mr Peters began to talk, that he was about to be bored as he had seldom been bored in his life.

We may say what we will against the aristocracy of England; we may wear red ties and attend Socialist meetings; but we cannot deny that in certain crises blood will tell. An English peer of the right sort can be bored nearer to the point where mortification sets in, without showing it, than anyone else in the world. From early youth he has been accustomed to staying at English country houses, where,

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though horses bored him intensely, he has had to accompany his host round the stables every morning and pretend to enjoy it, and this Spartan upbringing stands him in good stead in after years.

It was pleasant, then, to see the resolute, if painful, politeness with which Lord Emsworth accepted the trying role of the man who listens to a monomaniac discoursing on his pet subject. His mind was elsewhere, but early in the proceedings he began to make use of a musical ‘Ah!’ which, emitted at regular intervals, seemed to be all that Mr Peters demanded of him.

Mr Peters, in his character of showman, threw himself into his work with even more than his customary energy. He was both exhaustive and exhausting. His flow of speech never faltered. He spoke of the New Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, Osiris, and Ammon; waxed eloquent concerning Mut, Bubastis, Cheops, the Hyksos kings, cylinders, bezels, and Amenophis III; and became at times almost lyrical when touching on Queen Taia, the Princess Gilukhipa of Mitanni, the Lake of Zarukhe, and the Book of the Dead.

Time slid by . . .

‘Take a look at this, Lord Emsworth.’

As one who, brooding on love or running over business projects in his mind, walks briskly into a lamp post and comes back to the realities of life with a sense of jarring shock, Lord Emsworth started, blinked, and returned to consciousness. Far away his mind had been, seventy miles away, in the pleasant hothouses and shady garden walks of Blandings Castle. He came back to London to find that his host, with a mingled air of

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pride and reverence, was extending towards him a small, dingy-looking something.

He took it and looked at it. That, apparently, was what he was meant to do. So far, all was well.

‘Ah!’ he said.

That blessed word, covering everything. He repeated it, pleased at his ready resource.

‘A Cheops of the Fourth Dynasty,’ said Mr Peters fervently.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘A Cheops! Of the Fourth Dynasty!’

Lord Emsworth began to feel like a hunted stag. He could not go on saying ‘Ah!’ indefinitely, yet what else was there to say to this curious little beastly sort of a beetle kind of thing?

‘Dear me! A Cheops!’

‘Of the Fourth Dynasty!’

‘Bless my soul! The Fourth Dynasty!’

‘What do you think of that, eh?’

Strictly speaking, Lord Emsworth thought nothing of it, and he was wondering how to veil this opinion in diplomatic words, when the providence which looks after all good men saved him by causing a knock at the door to occur.

In response to Mr Peters’ irritated cry, a maid entered.

‘If you please, sir, Mr Threepwood wishes to speak to you on the telephone.’

Mr Peters turned to his guest.

‘Excuse me for one moment.’

‘Certainly,’ said Lord Emsworth gratefully. ‘Certainly, certainly, certainly. By all means.’

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The door closed behind Mr Peters. Lord Emsworth was alone.

For some moments he stood where he had been left, a figure with small signs of alertness about it. But Mr Peters did not return immediately. The booming of his voice came faintly from some distant region. Lord Emsworth strolled to the window and looked out.

The sun still shone brightly on the quiet street. Across the road were trees. Lord Emsworth was fond of trees, he looked at these approvingly. Then round the corner came a vagrant man, wheeling flowers in a barrow.

Flowers! Lord Emsworth's mind shot back to Blandings like a homing pigeon. Flowers! Had he or had he not given head gardener Thorne adequate instructions as to what to do with those hydrangeas? Assuming that he had not, was Thorne to be depended on to do the right thing by them by the light of his own intelligence?

Lord Emsworth began to brood upon head gardener Thorne.

He was aware of some curious little object in his hand; he accorded it a momentary inspection. It had no message for him. It was probably something, but he couldn't remember what.

He put it in his pocket, and returned to his meditations.

III

At about the hour when the Earl of Emsworth was driving to keep his appointment with Mr Peters, a party of two sat

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at a corner table at Simpson's Restaurant in the Strand. One of the two was a small, pretty, good-natured-looking girl of about twenty, the other a sturdy young man with a small moustache, a wiry crop of red-brown hair and an expression of mingled devotion and determination. The girl was Aline Peters, the young man's name was George Emerson. He was, as Freddie had said, a policeman or something in Hong Kong. That is to say, he was second-in-command of the police force in that distant spot. At present, he was home on leave. He had a strong, square face, with a dogged and persevering chin.

There is every kind of restaurant in London, from the restaurant which makes you fancy you are in Paris to the restaurant which makes you wish you were. There are palaces in Piccadilly, quaint lethal chambers in Soho, and strange food factories in Oxford Street and the Tottenham Court Road. There are restaurants which specialise in ptomaine, and restaurants which specialise in sinister vegetable messes. But there is only one Simpson's.

Simpson's in the Strand is unique. Here, if he wishes, the Briton may, for the small sum of half a dollar, stupefy himself with food. The God of Fatted Plenty has the place under his protection. Its keynote is solid comfort. Country clergymen, visiting London for the annual Clerical Congress, come here to get the one square meal which will last them till next year's Clerical Congress. Fathers and uncles with sons or nephews on their hands rally to Simpson's with silent blessings on the head of the genius who founded the place, for here only can the young boa-constrictor really fill himself at moderate expense. Militant suffragettes come to it to make up leeway after their last hunger strike.

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A pleasant, soothing, hearty place. A restful Temple of Food. No strident orchestra forces the diner to bolt beef in rag-time. No long central aisle distracts his attention with its stream of new arrivals. There he sits, alone with his food, while white-robed priests, wheeling their smoking trucks, move to and fro, ever ready with fresh supplies.

All round the room, some at small tables, some at large tables, the worshippers sit, in their eyes that resolute, concentrated look which is the peculiar property of the British luncher, ex-President Roosevelt's man-eating fish, and the American army-worm.

Conversation does not flourish at Simpson's. Only two of all those present on this occasion showed any disposition towards chattiness. They were Aline Peters and her escort.

'The girl you ought to marry,' Aline was saying, 'is Joan Valentine.'

'The girl I am going to marry,' said George Emerson, 'is Aline Peters.'

For answer Aline picked up from the floor beside her an illustrated paper, and, having opened it at a page towards the end, handed it across the table.

George Emerson glanced at it disdainfully. There were two photographs on the page. One was of Aline, the other of a heavy, loutish-looking youth, who wore that peculiar expression of pained glassiness which Young England always adopts in the face of a camera.

Under one photograph were printed the words, 'Miss Aline Peters, who is to marry the Hon. Frederick Threepwood in June.' Under the other, 'The Hon. Frederick Threepwood, who is to marry Miss Aline Peters in June.'

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Above the photographs was the legend, 'Forthcoming International Wedding. Son of the Earl of Emsworth to marry American heiress.' In one corner of the picture a Cupid draped in the Stars and Stripes aimed his bow at the gentleman; in the other, another Cupid, clad in a natty Union Jack, was drawing a bead on the lady.

The subeditor had done his work well. He had not been ambiguous. What he intended to convey to the reader was that Miss Aline Peters, of America, was going to marry the Hon. Frederick Threepwood, son of the Earl of Emsworth; and that was exactly the impression the average reader got.

George Emerson, however, was not an average reader. The subeditor's work did not impress him.

'You mustn't believe everything you see in the papers,' he said. 'What are the stout children in the bathing suits supposed to be doing?'

'Those are Cupids, George, aiming at us with their little bows – a pretty and original idea.'

'Why Cupids?'

'Cupid is the God of Love. I can see that *you* never went to night-school.'

'What has the God of Love got to do with it?'

Aline placidly devoured a fried potato.

'You're simply trying to make me angry,' she said, 'and I call it very mean of you. You know perfectly well how fatal it is to get angry at meals. It was eating while he was in a bad temper that ruined father's digestion. George, that nice, fat carver is wheeling his truck this way. Flag him, and make him give me some more of that mutton.'

George looked round him morosely.

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‘Why is it,’ he said, ‘that everyone in London looks exactly the same as everyone else? They used to tell me that I should find that all Chinamen looked alike. There isn’t a Chinaman in Hong Kong that I would have the least difficulty in recognising. But these blighters—’ His eye roamed about the room. It returned to a stout young man at a neighbouring table, who had been the original cause of this homily, owing to the fact that he had reminded him of the Hon. Freddie Threepwood. He scowled at this harmless youth, who was browsing contentedly on fish pie. ‘Do you see the fellow in the grey suit?’ he said. ‘Look at the stodgy face. Mark the glassy eye. If that man sand-bagged your Freddie and tied him up somewhere and turned up at the church instead of him, can you honestly tell me that you would know the difference? Come now, wouldn’t you simply say, “Why, Freddie, how natural you look,” and go through the ceremony without a suspicion?’

‘He isn’t a bit like Freddie. And you oughtn’t to speak of him as Freddie. You don’t know him.’

‘Yes, I do. And what is more, he expressly asked me to call him Freddie. “Oh, dash it, old top, don’t keep on calling me Threepwood. Freddie to pals.” Those were his very words.’

‘George, you’re making this up.’

‘Not at all. We met last night at the National Sporting Club. Porky Jones was going twenty rounds with Eddie Flynn. I offered to give three to one on Eddie. Freddie, who was sitting next to me, took me in fivers. And if you want any further proof of your young man’s fat-headedness, mark that. A child could have seen that Eddie had him going. Afterwards Threepwood chummed up with me, and

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told me that to real pals like me, he was Freddie. I was a real pal, as I understood it, because I would have to wait for my money. The fact was, he explained, that his old governor had cut off his bally allowance.'

'You're simply trying to poison my mind against him, and I don't think it's very nice of you, George.'

'What do you mean, poison your mind? I'm not poisoning your mind, I'm simply telling you a few things about him. You know perfectly well that you don't love him, and that you aren't going to marry him, and that you are going to marry me.'

'How do you know I don't love my Freddie?'

'If you can look me straight in the eyes and tell me that you do, I will drop the whole thing and put on a little page's dress and carry your train up the aisle. Now then!'

'And all the while you're talking you're letting my carver get away,' said Aline.

George signalled to the willing priest, who steered his truck towards them. Aline directed his dissection of the shoulder of mutton with word and gesture.

'Enjoy yourself,' said Emerson coldly.

'So I do, George, so I do. What excellent meat they have in England.'

'I wish you would be a bit more spiritual. I don't want to sit here discussing food products.'

'If you were in my position, George, you wouldn't want to talk about anything else. It's doing him a world of good, poor dear, but there are times when I'm sorry father ever started this food-reform thing. You don't know what it means for a healthy young girl to try and support life on nuts and grasses.'

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‘And why should you?’ broke out Emerson. ‘I’ll tell you what it is, Aline, you are perfectly absurd about your father. I don’t want to say anything against him to you, naturally, but—’

‘Go ahead, George. Why this diffidence? Say what you like.’

‘Very well, then, I will. I’ll give it to you straight. You know quite well that you let your father bully you. I don’t say it is your fault or his fault or anybody’s fault, I just state it as a fact. It’s temperament, I suppose. You are yielding and he is aggressive, and he has taken advantage of it. Take this food business, for a start. Your father’s digestion has gone wrong, and as a result he has to live on nuts and bananas and things. Why should you let him make you do the same?’

‘It isn’t a question of making. He doesn’t make me, I do it to encourage him, to show him that it can be done. If I weakened he would lose all his resolution in a moment, and rush out and start a regular debauch of *pâté de fois gras* and lobster. And then he would suffer agonies. What a terrible thing it is, George, that father should combine a schoolboy appetite with a Rockefeller digestion. Either by itself wouldn’t be so bad, but the combination is awful.’

George, baffled but determined, resumed the attack.

‘All right, then, if you really are starving yourself of your own free will, there is no more to say.’

‘But you are going to say it, aren’t you, George?’

‘We now come to this idiotic Freddie-marriage business. Your father has forced you into that. It’s all very well to say that you are a free agent, and that fathers don’t coerce their daughters nowadays. The trouble is that your father

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does. You let him do what he likes with you. And you won't break away from this Freddie foolishness because you can't find the pluck. I'm going to help you find it. I'm coming down to Blandings Castle when you go there on Friday.'

'Coming to Blandings!'

'Freddie invited me last night. I think it was done by way of interest on the money he owed me, but he did it, and I accepted.'

'But, George, my dear, dear boy, do you *never* read the Etiquette Books and the hints in the papers on how to be the perfect Gentleman? Don't you know that you can't be a man's guest and take advantage of his hospitality to try to steal his fiancée away from him?'

'Watch me!'

A dreamy look came into Aline's eyes.

'I wonder what it feels like being a countess,' she said.

'You will never know.' George looked at her pityingly. 'My poor girl,' he said, 'have you been lured into this engagement in the belief that Freddie, the Idiot Child, is going to be an earl some day? They were ragging you. Freddie is not the heir. His elder brother, Lord Bosham, is as fit as a prizefighter and has three healthy sons. Freddie has about as much chance of getting the title as I have.'

'George, your education has been sadly neglected. Don't you know that the heir to the title always goes for a yachting cruise with his whole family and gets drowned and the children too? It happens in every English novel you read.'

'Listen, Aline, let us get this thing straight. I have been in love with you ever since we met on the *Olympic*. I proposed to you twice on the voyage and once in the train on the way to London. That was eight months ago, and I have been

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proposing to you at intervals ever since. I go to Scotland for a few weeks to see my people, and when I come back, what do I find? I find you engaged to be married to this Freddie excrescence.'

'I like your chivalrous attitude towards Freddie. So many men in your position might say horrid things about him.'

'Oh, I've nothing against Freddie. He is practically an imbecile and I don't like his face, but apart from that he's all right. But you will be glad later that you did not marry him. You are much too real a person. What a wife you will make for a hard-working man!'

'What does Freddie work hard at?'

'I am alluding at the moment not to Freddie but to myself. I shall come home tired out. Things will have gone wrong at my office. I shall be fagged, disheartened. And then you will come with your cool, white hands, and placing them gently on my forehead—'

Aline shook her head.

'It's no good, George. Really, you had better realise it. I'm very fond of you, but we are not suited.'

'Why not?'

'You are too overwhelming, too much like a bomb. I think you must be one of these Supermen one reads about. You would want your own way and nothing but your own way. I expect it's through having to be constantly moving people on, out in Hong Kong, and all that sort of thing. Now Freddie will roll through hoops and sham dead, and we shall be the happiest pair in the world. I am much too placid and mild to make you happy. You want someone who would stand up to you. Somebody like Joan Valentine.'

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‘That’s the second time you have mentioned this Joan Valentine. Who *is* she?’

‘She is a girl who was at school with me. I was at school in England, you know – mother wanted me to get the tone or something. We were the greatest chums. At least, I worshipped her and would have done anything for her, and I think she liked me. Then I went back to America and we lost touch with one another. I met her on the street yesterday, and she is just the same. She has been through the most awful times. Her father was quite rich, and he died suddenly, and she found that he hadn’t left a penny. He had been living right up to his income all the time. His life wasn’t even insured. She came to London, and, as far as I could make out from the short talk we had, she had done pretty nearly everything since we last met. She worked in a shop and went on the stage, and all sorts of things. Isn’t it awful, George?’

‘Frightful,’ said Emerson. He was but faintly interested in Miss Valentine.

‘She is so plucky and full of life. She would stand up to you.’

‘Thanks. My idea of marriage is not a perpetual fight. My notion of a wife is something cosy and sympathetic and soothing. That is why I love you. We shall be the happiest—’

Aline laughed.

‘Dear old George! And now pay the bill, and get me a taxi. I’ve endless things to do at home. If Freddie is in town, I suppose he will be calling to see me. Who is Freddie, do you ask? Freddie is my fiancé, George. My betrothed. The young man I’m going to marry.’

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