

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 uncurled 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.

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.

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.

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 caravanserai, manifestly thinking of nothing. In various windows of the two hotels the

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.

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

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.

Skipping 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

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

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

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 rumped 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.

‘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

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.

‘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

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

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?'

‘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?’

‘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.’

‘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.’

‘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.

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

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, gov’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, gov’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