PELHAM GRENVILLE WODEHOUSE

THE IDLE KING

There was once a King of Aldebaran, and he was probably the very idlest man in the world. He would sit on his throne and do nothing from morning till night. And then he would go to bed, and the next day it would be just the same. He did nothing but sit still. And he was not even nice to look at. It was not quite his fault that he was so lazy. His people would never let him do anything for himself. Sometimes he would say, "It is a fine day. I will make a law." And then the Vizier would come bustling up, murmuring, "Excuse me, your Majesty, one moment." And he would call Parliament together and take the law out of the King's hands and make it for him. And sometimes the King would say, "It is a fine day. I will go a-hunting." And then the Lord Chief Huntsman would jump on his horse, shouting, "Don't you trouble yourself, your Majesty. Allow me." And then he would blow his horn, and ride off, and not come back for the whole day. And the King began to grow very tired of doing nothing. He could not enjoy his meals or the sunshine, or his dogs, or cats, or anything. So one day when the Vizier was busy making a law which he had specially wanted to make himself, and the Lord Chief Huntsman had gone off with his hawk and his hound to save his Majesty the trouble of hunting, he took off his crown and his beautiful clothes, dressed himself up in a very old suit and a very old cap, and started out by the back door of the Palace to see the world.

It was nearly his tea-time when he had started, and he soon began to grow hungry. It was about this time that the Lord Chief Butler always brought him a pot of tea (which, of course, he was never allowed to pour out for himself, though he wanted to dreadfully), and a plate of hot buttered toast, and little cakes with chocolate on them. So he went to the nearest cottage, and knocked at the door. It was quite a treat for him to knock at a door all by himself. Generally the Lord Chief Footman did it for him.

"Come in," said a voice. "And mind the step."

The King went in. Round the table were seated the cottager, his wife, and his children.

"Please, I want some tea," said the King.

"You will have to work for it," said the cottager.

"What is work, please? Is it what everybody else does for me?"

"It's not what everybody else does for me, at any rate," said the cottager, with a jolly laugh, "and thank goodness they don't. What I should do if everybody did my work for

me, I do not know. I should be so dull that I should have no appetite for tea. Whereas now," he added, taking a huge bite out of a piece of bread-and-jam, "my appetite is exceedingly good, thanks very much, and so forth."

And swallowing his bread-and-jam, he sang the following verse, to which the whole family beat time with their teaspoons.

Oh, I think a man's crazy who's idle and lazy,

I pity the people who shirk.

It's a pound to a shilling, you'll smile if you're willing

To work! work! work!

If you don't see the beauty of doing your duty,

Your happiness stops with a jerk.

So I counsel you, dunce, to start learning at once,

And work! work! work!

It was rather a pretty song.

"That sounds very sensible indeed," said the King, when he had finished. "I should like to begin now, if I may. What shall I do?"

"In yonder yard," replied the cottager, "is some wood. Chop it. Will somebody kindly be good enough to oblige me by passing the jam?"

So the King went out into the yard, and though he did not know very much about chopping wood (for the Lord Chief Woodman always did that for him), he somehow managed to finish it in time. And then be went back, and settled down to a really good tea.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, as be finished the jam, "there is no denying it. This work is a wonderful thing. I have never enjoyed my tea so much in all my life. Thank you very much."

"Not at all," said the polite cottager. I beg you will not mention it." He opened the door, and the King went out again upon his travels.

He wandered some miles, until night began to come on, and he began to think about

finding somewhere to sleep. At last he came to a castle, and rang the visitors' bell.

"Could you please tell me," he said, as the servant opened the door, "if I might sleep here for the night? I have come a long way, and I am tired."

The servant said he would make inquiries within. He went through a door at the side of the hall, and soon came back with his master's compliments, and he could certainly sleep there if he was willing to do some work in return.

"It certainly is a most wonderful thing, this work," thought the King. "When I remember how little of it there was in my palace, and see what a great deal there is everywhere else, it surprises me. I will certainly do the work he wants me to," he added aloud.

"That's right," said the footman. "Come to think of it, there's nothing like work."

And fixing his eyes dreamily on the ceiling, he sang the following verse:

"Oh, work it is a gentle thing,

Beloved from pole to pole.

It suits the fancy of a king —

"Ah," interrupted his Majesty, "you're right there."

"And," went on the footman,

"It satisfies his soul.

"In idleness, though sweet at first,

Dull care is apt to lurk.

But happier he, it seems to me,

Who spends his time in work."

It was rather a nice song.

"Excellent!" said the King. "Now show me the work, and I will do it."

The footman led the way to a cellar, and there were two heaps of great stones, and beside them lay a hammer.

"There," he said. "If you could kindly make it convenient to break those stones up small, we should esteem it a personal favour, and in the meantime I will be getting your room ready. I'll make you a nice cup of bread-and-milk to eat in bed. That's the hammer by the stones. You grasp it firmly in the two hands by the handle — that's this end here — and hit a stone with it. And by a curious process which it would take too long to explain, the stone will break into smaller stones. You then hit each of the smaller stones in the same manner, and in time you will find that the heap has become a lot of very small stones indeed. Then you come upstairs. Good-bye."

The King knew nothing whatever about breaking stones, for the Lord Chief Roadmender always did the work of that kind in the palace, but he set to, and in quite a short time all the stones were broken up so small that he could hardly see them. Then he put his hammer down, and went upstairs. And there, as the footman had promised, was the bread-and-milk steaming at the side of the bed on a chair. He enjoyed it more than he would have believed it possible that any one could enjoy bread-and-milk.

"Really," he said to himself, "it's a wonderful thing. Here am I, the King of Aldebaran, who usually find myself unable to eat anything more than a little wing of chicken, enjoying my bread-and-milk like a baby. It is really a fine invention, is work! When I get back to my palace, I must practise it more. Now I'll go to sleep." He went to sleep at once. He had never slept so well in his life before.

And when he got up in the morning. he felt so well that he danced twice round his room before coming down to breakfast.

To earn his breakfast he had to pump water from a well. It was quite a new experience. At the palace the Lord Chief Ostler had always done it for him. He quite enjoyed it, and when he had finished he enjoyed his breakfast still more.

After breakfast he thanked his host kindly, and went away.

After stopping to wish the cottager, whom he found working in his garden, good morning, he made his way back to the palace.

The Vizier and the other courtiers welcomed him joyfully. They thought he had been lost.

"Well" said the Vizier, when he had heard the story of the King's adventures, "if your Majesty had thought of mentioning that your Majesty intended to take a walk, the Lord Chief Tramp might have taken it instead, and saved your Majesty the trouble."

"Then I'm very glad I didn't mention the fact," said the King. "In future I intend to do

everything I possibly can for myself. You do your work, and I'll do mine."

"Your Majesty is surely joking," said the startled Vizier. "No King of Aldebaran has ever worked."

"This King of Aldebaran is going to. And he is going to begin at once. Bring me the Law Book."

"Cannot I —" began the Vizier.

"Bring me the Law Book," repeated the King. "In future I mean to make all the laws myself, And this is the first of them."

And in a beautifully clear voice he sang the following verse:

"You may do whatever sort of work you please.

You may do whatever task you're most inclined to.

You may do it on the earth or on the seas.

You may do it in the air, if you've a mind to.

You may choose to work at sums or plough your lands.

You may choose an ordinary or a rum thing.

You may do it with your head or with your hands.

But every one in future must do something!"

And they did. And they all in consequence lived very happily ever afterwards.