



THE KING OF SUNLIGHT

ADAM MACQUEEN

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

One of the most extraordinary men ever to leave his mark on Britain was William Hesketh Lever - soap-boiler, social reformer, MP, tribal chieftain, multi millionaire and Lord of the Western Isles. He held beliefs far ahead of their times - the welfare state, votes for women, workers' rights - but he also believed the world's problems could be solved by moving populations from country to country, that ballroom dancing could save the soul and that the only healthy way to sleep was outdoors in the wind and the rain.

Adam Macqueen traces Lever's footsteps from his humble Bolton boyhood to a business empire that straddled the world, and shines a penetrating spotlight on a world and a set of beliefs long gone.

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The King of Sunlight

How William Lever Cleaned Up the World

Adam Macqueen

For Aunt Helen, for giving us all a space to think

Prologue

THE BALLROOM ON THE MOOR

HOWEVER FIT YOU are, Rivington Pike is the sort of climb that makes you realize you're not as fit as you used to be. The coach-trippers are content to mill around at the bottom, taking advantage of the tea-rooms and maybe stretching their legs on one of the formal avenues that criss-cross Lever Park and lead you down to the reservoir. Only the hard-core ramblers press on past Rivington Hall and the headquarters of the local Rotary Club, and follow the grass-pocked macadam road across the fields behind, a stumbling parabola up into the woods that cling to the side of the hill.

It's only when you reach the shade of the trees that you realize they are not what they seem; though the branches are as gnarled and intertwined as the spookiest of fairy-tale forests, this woodland is barely a century old. It's the rhododendrons that give it away. Nineteenth-century British landowners planted them like tom-cats laying down scent: you are now entering our territory, beware, Big House ahead. But money comes and money goes, while plants that were built to survive the snowstorms of the Himalayas prosper, and these rich green bushes have long since spread and multiplied across the hillside, swamping paths and bridges and summerhouses on their way. For beneath the rhododendrons, the leaf-mould and bracken and the detritus of eighty years of neglect, there is a formal garden

here. A series of terraces is etched into the sandstone like the levels of Dante's inferno, their once formal planting sprawling out and spilling between levels in the darkness beneath the trees. A flight of 365 steps snakes steeply between them; one for each day of the year, bisected by four paths which were built to represent the seasons but have long since mulched down into a year-long autumn twilight. The upward path is treacherous; the steps irregular and slippery underfoot. You're exhausted before you've even made it up the first month's worth.

A hundred years ago, there were lions round here. And zebras, and emus, and buffalo and yak in specially built paddocks, not to mention the flock of flamingos that lived on the Japanese pond further up the hill, laid out with ornamental lamps and pagodas as a living copy of the willow-pattern plate. There was every intention of stocking the caves that had been specially bored into the hillside with bears, too, but somehow it never quite happened. The man behind this fantasy made real, this other Eden in Lancashire, had moved on to another project by then – reading a book about the history of Liverpool Castle and its ruination by Cromwell's armies, he had been seized by the similarity between its site and the banks of the reservoir below, and decided to build a full-size, pre-ruined replica of it instead. Like you do.

At the top of the steps there is a bridge. It spans a narrow gorge above a road, a distance of perhaps forty feet. It could quite easily be traversed by a single arch, but the man whose estate this was wanted seven. Three hundred and sixty-five steps, four paths – so, obviously, seven arches, as he patiently explained to his chief stonemason. But it's too narrow, the man objected. Right, pack a suitcase, he was told. We're going on a trip. As the legend tells it, the next morning the stonemason found himself on board an Imperial Airways flight to Nigeria; a short drive through Lagos left them standing beneath an extraordinary bridge with one

central arch and six smaller, decorative ones above it. Like that, his boss said, and handed him a sketchbook.

The bridge rises at a steep angle and leads on to the lawns – the terracing here is wider, with great flat spaces created by simply slicing off great chunks of the hillside. A vast rock has been left in the middle of the largest lawn to show the original height of the ground: it stands some seven feet high, though now even this is all but lost in a riot of brambles which have swamped the immaculate turf, once specially imported from the mountains of Scotland. A flight of semi-circular stairs leads up from the great lawn to another plateau, this one at 1,000 feet above sea-level, almost the very pinnacle of Rivington Pike. From here you can see for ever. And in the grass, amid the bracken and brambles, you can make out the ghost of a house, its foundations protruding from the thick vegetation. An extraordinary house, one that stood low but long, laid out in the shape of two interlocked capital Ls: LL, for the man who created all this, the man whose home it was, William Lever, Lord Leverhulme.

The northernmost wing of this house – ‘The Bungalow’, he called it, though it had its own ballroom, domestic staff, gatehouses and forty-five acres of grounds – was left unglazed, the winds rushing in unimpeded across the Lancashire moors and whistling through the pillared cloisters, the rain crashing down into the inner rooms which were left unroofed. These were the conditions in which Lord Leverhulme, a millionaire with four luxurious homes, one of them a castle, liked to sleep. He would lie in bed beneath a few blankets and a thin counterpane, and let nature do its worst. He slept like a baby. Neither shower nor storm could stir him. It was not unknown for him to wake up beneath a covering of snow, which he would shake off before plunging with vigour into a freezing cold bath at dawn. It was, he insisted, the only possible way to rest.

I took out a plan of the house from the 1920s, and smoothed it out flat on the ground, trying to protect it from the biting wind. Here were the winter gardens, a glazed walkway where flowers, vines and tropical ferns thrived in the heat pumped out by the bungalow's boilers, and tank after tank of goldfish gazed myopically out at the moors beyond. This must have been the inner hall, where once a tiger-skin rug had lain guard over Lord Leverhulme's priceless collection of art and antiques. And here was the dining-room, where once you could lean back and study the constellations of the northern hemisphere picked out in gold on the panelled ceiling.

Here and there were patches of black and white tiles, their incongruous chequerboard pattern peeping through a covering of green. I knelt and began to pull away handfuls of moss: it came away clean, exposing more and more of the ornate floor beneath, perfectly preserved. Before long a whole room was visible: a triangular alcove, its curved hypotenuse following the edge of the ballroom that Leverhulme had installed when he discovered a passion for dancing in his seventies. 'I like to have a few young friends about me against whom I can chaff; it keeps my mind young and prevents me from becoming dull and heavy,' declared the old man. The dance-floor was forty-five feet in diameter, and the room had its own minstrels' gallery above the door, designed to amplify the sound of a band already instructed to play uncomfortably loud. He was deaf as a post, and couldn't even hear the music. Sometimes he carried on dancing after everyone else had stopped, twirling an embarrassed partner round the floor as the others were busy applauding the orchestra. But he found an ingenious solution to this problem too: one instrumentalist was employed to switch on a blue light in the ceiling as each tune came to an end, and Lever caught the reflection in his specially polished patent leather shoes.

This was not a man who let such trifling things as disability, the weather or mountains stand in his way. As one baffled interviewer put it in 1910, 'Mr Lever seldom does anything like other people.'

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BOLTON BOYS

LATER IN LIFE, when his name was known and praised throughout the British empire, when workmen from the Mersey to the Congo called him Chief, when he counted kings and prime ministers among his personal acquaintance, had a seat in the House of Lords and owned four stately homes scattered the length of the country, William Lever was fond of telling anyone who would listen that he had come from poor beginnings.

He was born on 19 September 1851 in Bolton, a town described seven years earlier as 'one of the worst' in Britain by no less an authority than Friedrich Engels. Bolton was 'badly and irregularly built, with foul courts, lanes and back-alleys', he wrote in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, a scientific inquiry into whether it really was Grim Up North which the mill-owner's son penned a year before teaming up with Karl Marx to try to change the world. Engels found that Bolton had 'but one main street, Deansgate, a very dirty one, which serves as a market and is even in the finest weather a dark, unattractive hole'. Smoke belched from the dozens of chimneys that stabbed into the sky above the town, and settled on the ramshackle homes, dank cellars and jerry-built terraces that housed the town's 60,000 inhabitants. Through the daylight hours men, women and children alike toiled in the deafening racket of

the cotton mills, the heat and fug of the steel forges, or the shifting, crumbling darkness of the fifty or so mines that wound beneath the surface of the city. And by night they drank themselves into lairy oblivion in the hundreds of beer-houses and illegal spirit shops that sprawled through every street and made certain quarters no-go areas even for the town's newly formed police force.

But William Lever wasn't part of this. His family home at 16 Wood Street may have only been 100 yards from the 'dark hole' of Deansgate, but it was like another world, an enclave of middle-class sobriety and professionalism where every house came with at least one servant attached. It's almost unchanged today: head up Bradshawgate from the station past World of Leather, the pawnbrokers and the pay-and-display car parks that always seem to proliferate in the less salubrious parts of town, turn right just before the Yates' Wine Lodge and you step back 150 years. A little-used cul-de-sac which terminates at a pretty private garden, Wood Street had already fallen behind on the council's road replacement programme before they noticed in 1970 that the cobbles looked quite nice after all and designated it as a conservation area. The Georgian terraces on either side are occupied by brass-plated solicitors and chartered accountants: it's so posh Pizza Express have opened a branch in the old bank three doors up from number 16.

When William Lever's son visited his father's birthplace in 1927, he was amused to find it had become the headquarters of the Bolton Socialist Club: 'Strange indeed are the chances and changes in the whirligig of time,' he mused. Time, it would seem, is still whirligigging today, because despite New Labour's best efforts to stamp their kind out, the Socialists are still in residence, and, like most socialists, they've not got much cash for home improvements, which means the building is virtually unchanged. A smart bow window and pedimented door were added to the front not long after the Levers moved out, but

head through the ginnel at the side of the house to stand among the bins and you can see a scene that could have come straight out of Dickens. A dank yard is overlooked by the one remaining original window, now half bricked up, its frame rotting away, covered by thick iron bars. Perhaps this is the family nursery where little James Lever, unwatched by the maid and playing too close to the fire, went up in flames and had to be saved by seven-year-old William. He rolled the toddler up in the hearthrug, earning praise from his parents for his 'great promptitude' and eternal gratitude from his younger brother.

Despite James's flammable tendencies, the Levers only lost one of their ten children, their eldest daughter, who died at the age of nine. This was no mean feat in Bolton in the 1850s: the high rate of infant mortality dragged the average life expectancy among the working classes down to a pathetic eighteen, and the tradesman class to which the Levers belonged fared little better with an average of just twenty-three. Eight out of their ten were girls, which according to their cheerful father James was 'all right to me', but his wife Eliza admitted to a sense of relief when William and the younger James turned up as numbers seven and eight.

Ever mindful of the business that had provided for this amount of Leverage, James paid a double tribute with the name he gave to his firstborn son. William's middle name, Hesketh, served as a dual tribute to his mother's family and the (unrelated) wholesale grocers Stones and Hesketh who had taken on his father as a partner in 1841. Little James did even better: proud of a family title that resonated throughout the place names of the area and which could be traced back to the fifteenth century, his father saddled him with the middle name Darcy after the village of Darcy Lever a few miles south of Bolton. It could have been worse - the villages on either side were called Great and Little Lever. And they weren't all that far from Nob End.

James senior looked exactly like Victorian patriarchs ought to, his long face framed by two great mutton-chops that stretched from temple to jowl but failed to meet at either the top or the bottom. A devout Congregationalist churchman, he frowned on smoking and drinking, but having converted late in life from the less strict C of E, he got his kicks vicariously by permitting his children to play cards in the house as long as they a) didn't play for money, and b) let him watch. Unlike many of Bolton's religious men, he didn't condemn the theatre, and while the family avoided the boozy music halls favoured by the drinking and fighting classes, they were quite happy to take in the pantomimes at the Theatre Royal, which stretched the traditional storylines to include the very latest in spectacular special effects - 1859's *Babes in the Wood* managed to shoehorn in a scene onboard 'the deck of a man of war, manned by sixty children' as well as a cameo from the 'original man monkey'. Just as spectacular was the New Year Fair, which featured presentations such as 'the most wonderful and vastly astonishing views of the battle of Vaterloo' and 'Guy Faux a-goin' to blow up the Houses of Parliament' as well as pasty-eating competitions, fortune-telling, stalls selling ice cream, oysters or hot potatoes, and the music of competing barrel organs and fiddlers ringing out till the small hours across the Market Square. For the most part, however, the Lever children spent their evenings 'at home in quiet occupation', something at which William excelled.

He was a precocious child. Before he could even walk, let alone read, William had rearranged the family's library by height order, a 'systematizing' which he later recalled 'used to give me such intense delight when I could only crawl to the bookshelf'. With his family's own shelves ordered to his satisfaction, he became an enthusiastic patron of the Bolton lending library, opened in 1853 to, as the mayor put it, 'turn a man's habits from being of a degraded and sensual nature to being of an educated and intellectual character', though

he preferred the factual works in the reference section to the classics of children's literature that suddenly started popping up like mushrooms in the 1850s (*The Rose and the Ring*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *The Water Babies* and *Alice in Wonderland* were all published during the first fourteen years of William's life). While some children might have regarded the rabbits his parents kept in the back yard as pets, William saw them as a chance to design a self-sufficient ecosystem, growing trays of grass on the roofs of the hutches to serve both as insulation and food, fattening the beasts up effectively for the household pot. With the family dog, a black and white collie by the name of Guess, he roamed the moors above Bolton. Boy and dog wandered as far afield as Rivington Pike and the model factory communities north of the town at Barrow Bridge and Eagley, which Quaker boss Henry Ashworth had provided with schools, reading rooms and gardens, luxuries unheard of back in town. He would return home with samples of plants and insects he had found on the moors and study them through his microscope, a gift from his father, making careful notes of his findings.

From the age of six, William attended a private school conducted by two spinsters by the splendid name of the Misses Aspinwall. Here he received the peculiarly unbalanced basics of Victorian education; children were expected to be able to add and subtract four-figure sums by the age of six, but only to master single-syllable words, which enabled them to read primers that told them 'Ben has a nag and a gig, the nag is fat and big', but nothing that actually meant anything. If they were good, after that they were allowed to tackle 'words of two syllables accented on the first', which in one 1872 textbook included such everyday kiddiespeak as 'doom-ed', 'e-dict', 'eth-ic', and 'fu-tile'.

He didn't have far to go - the school was in a house on the opposite side of Wood Street. Two of his classmates were to

play a huge part in his life – a boy called Jonathan Simpson, who shared Lever’s voracious appetite for reading, and a girl called Elizabeth Ellen Hulme, the daughter of a local draper, who was best friends with his sister Alice and whom he admired during games of tig for being ‘the best runner away of any of us’. The children at the Misses Aspinwalls were a privileged lot: primary schooling did not become compulsory until the 1870s, when the under-nines were officially banned from employment in factories, though in reality children risked life and limb crawling between the spinning-mules in the factories that surrounded the genteel oasis of Wood Street for years after that. At thirteen both William and Jonathan Simpson were enrolled at the local Church Institute, just a couple of streets away. This gothic pile is now a church hall, surrounded by other more modern buildings and stranded in the middle of a car park, but contemporary photographs show it standing splendidly aloof in the midst of a vast, scorched-earth playground patrolled by a bearded schoolmaster complete with mortar-board and gown. The pupils wore long breeches and boaters; they worked at long communal desks beneath vast windows, but their light never seemed to penetrate the dingy classrooms.

A long room, with three long rows of desks, and six of forms, and bristling all around with pegs for hats and slates. Scraps of old copybooks and exercises litter the dirty floor. Some silkworms’ houses, made of the same materials, are scattered over the desks . . . There is a strange unwholesome smell upon the room, like mildewed corduroys, sweet apples wanting air, and rotten books. There could not well be more ink splashed about, if it had been roofless from its first construction, and the skies had rained, snowed, hailed, and blown ink through the varying seasons of the year.

William would have recognized that schoolroom from the novel that remained his favourite throughout his life, Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, published in 1850. While he never, like the unfortunate David, had to wear a placard warning of his evil behaviour (‘Take care of him! He bites!’),

he was an unexceptional pupil, plodding through his studies competently, learning by rote such vital information as the names and order of the capes and bays round the coastline of Britain, the dates of England's kings and queens, and vast swathes of the King James Bible which was the standard text in all schools. While he failed to excel on the sports field, he was a good swimmer, maintaining his *mens sana in corpore sano* with obsessively measured-out lengths in the town's chilly swimming baths.

Why did James Lever, a firm Congregationalist, send his sons to a school run by the rival Church of England? Partly it was down to the reputation of the master, Mr Mason, as a man who brooked no nonsense from the boys in his care and could beat Latin grammar into even the most recalcitrant mind. But some of it must have been down to pride in the family tree: the Church Institute existed largely thanks to the generosity of Robert Lever, a philanthropically minded Boltonian who died the year before the Civil War broke out, and to whom the Wood Street Levers claimed a direct link.

Naturally, his school studies were not enough to keep William busy, and he fitted lessons in French and shorthand into his spare time. His son put it this way: 'he cultivated the habit of reckoning out almost each hour of the day and spending it to advantage, making his life a voyage westward with those extra minutes gained each day which are nonexistent to him who stands still'. His extra-curricular activities would put even the pushiest of today's parents to shame. He and Simpson started up their own reading circle, with works by Shakespeare and Dickens on a cycle alongside the Bible, which William dipped into daily and regarded as 'a book of practical advice'. Subscribers to Dickens's *Household Words* magazine, they heard the man himself read from *The Pickwick Papers* when one of his endless public reading tours stopped off in Bolton, and travelled to Manchester to see various Shakespearean

productions at the Princes' Theatre on the cheap, standing in the pit with, as the thrifty William put it, 'an excellent view for a shilling'. He was less keen on the sort of entertainments his sisters dragged him along to - 'Mary, Jane, Alice and I went to Mrs Tillotson's party and enjoyed it very much but I should have liked it better if they had not danced all night,' he moaned to a friend at thirteen, though, he was chuffed to admit, 'we did not come home till 3 o'clock in the morning!' For Mary, the night was more of a success, since she ended up marrying Mrs Tillotson's eldest son. A family holiday the same year was met with more enthusiasm - 'The day before Good Friday Mamma, James and I went to Blackpool and Papa came on Friday morning. On Friday we had a sail on a steamer, and I thought that it would be very nice sailing to Egypt if there were not such a thing as sea-sickness!' In 1865 he solemnly noted the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in another letter: 'these events have caused a great sensation in Bolton'.

The most significant event in William's teenage years, however, came on his sixteenth birthday, when his father presented him with a copy of *Self Help* by Samuel Smiles. 'It is impossible for me to say how much I owe to the fact that in my early youth I obtained a copy,' he repeated endlessly when asked the secret of his success, and he almost single-handedly kept the book on the best-seller lists for fifty years by presenting an inscribed copy of it to any adolescent who happened to cross his path. A kind of nineteenth-century *Men Are from Mars, Women Are Best Not Thought About at All*, Smiles's best-seller was a series of brief lives of Great Men who had tugged themselves up by their own bootstraps. It chimed perfectly with the mood of the times - Andrew Johnson had risen from humble tailor all the way to US president, and countless British boys made good on the back of the industrial revolution were busy blowing the dust from the ancient ranks of the peerage. But Smiles's book resonates beyond the 1850s: this is the book that other

grocer's child, Margaret Thatcher, had in mind when she banged on about Victorian Values. Its pages of practical advice remain relevant: you can easily imagine advice addict Bridget Jones agonizing over such homilies as 'we must be satisfied to advance in life as we walk, step by step', or vowing to follow his instructions about 'writing down thoughts and facts for the purpose of holding them fast and preventing their escape into the dim region of forgetfulness'. To William, of course, all this came as second nature. 'With perseverance, the very odds and ends of time may be worked up into results of the greatest value - an hour in every day withdrawn from frivolous pursuits would, if profitably employed, enable a person of ordinary capacity to go far towards mastering a science,' wrote Smiles, in a single stroke validating the last sixteen years of the boy's spare time.

Lever would have read with particular interest Smiles's potted biographies of Shakespeare, Michael Faraday and Cardinal Wolsey, three figures who he claimed had started out in life behind the counters of shops. For in 1867, not long after his sixteenth birthday, William started work. His mother had always hoped he would train as a doctor, like their most respectable neighbours in Wood Street. But his father never had any doubt that his eldest son would follow in his own footsteps. 'I was never asked if I wanted to go into the grocery business,' recalled Lever, 'and it was perhaps a good thing that I was not. My father told me, one day, that I had better get ready to come into the family grocery business, and as the holidays were nearly over, I thought I might as well begin next morning, and I did.'

TODAY WIGAN, TOMORROW THE WORLD

MRS HESKETH WAS A merry widow who brought John Stones in to help her run her wholesale grocery business in Bolton's Manor Street after her husband dropped dead, and wasted no time in letting him have a share of her home life as well. Despite an age-gap of some twenty years, they married, and James Lever, William's father, was brought into partnership to look after the retail side of the business while the odd couple ran the warehouse next door and dealt with the orders that came in from grocers throughout the local area. Known as the Lower Blackamoor after the sign James Lever displayed in the window for the benefit of illiterate customers, the shop was popular, but when his partners retired in 1864 and James took over the whole of the business, he shut it down to concentrate on the more profitable wholesale side of the company. It was a shrewd move. Small grocery shops always teetered on the edge of bankruptcy: customers tended to abandon them in favour of the markets with their more negotiable prices when times were hard, while the richer patrons took everything on account and needed much prompting before settling up, a privilege that was not extended by the suppliers at the other end of the food chain. Within a decade the independents would start to be forced off the streets by

'multiples' like Liptons, Boots and J. Sainsbury: shops like the Lower Blackamoor would soon be a thing of the past.

As an apprentice William was shown few favours by his father. James had inherited a long-serving and loyal staff along with the business, and he had continued to cultivate them - in William's words, 'the methods he had always adopted of taking a personal interest in all his staff, in their health and family circles, established a relationship between them that was outside the usual limitations of business'. He always recalled one of his father's assistants, a man with a wife and children to support, offering to take a pay cut when the business was going through a bad patch. The last thing James needed was to put their noses out of joint by over-promoting his son in their midst. William's apprenticeship was under the same terms as anyone else's. His day began at seven; first in, he took down the shutters and swept and tidied the warehouse ready for the arrival of his father half an hour later. At least he did not have far to go - the family had moved 'over the shop' when James took over the business, and in the absence of Eliza, Mary and Jane, who had all been successfully married off, they had just as much room as they had been used to in Wood Street. The day was spent preparing orders for the various shops the business supplied. The salesmen returned from their rounds with orders for the products Lever's specialized in - potted meat, mustard, soap, starch, black lead, milk, butter and eggs - and gave them to the clerks, who totted them up and passed them down to the warehousemen to be made up. One of the last links in the chain was William, who was put in charge of preparing sugar and soap. Both products arrived in large, solid bars more than a foot long, which had to be sliced down into manageable quantities and individually wrapped in greaseproof paper. It was tedious and tiring work, and William, ever the improver, couldn't help thinking there had to be a better way.

He stuck at it, however, and before too long his father had moved him to a department that better suited his talents. Enconced in the office, his soap duties taken over by a younger apprentice, William set about sorting out the company's accounts. The company relied on a haphazard system left over from the days of Widow Hesketh: William put his mind to creating an alternative, more efficient method of book-keeping. Knowing his father's natural conservatism all too well, William wisely got his fellow clerks on-side before attempting to sell the idea to the old man, but the success of his modernized system granted the son new respect and an increased voice in the company.

Business was good, and James Lever was soon able to swap the Manor Street warehouse for bigger and better premises on Victoria Square, slap-bang in the centre of town. The square had recently become one of the city's most desirable addresses thanks to the sweeping away of the market stalls that had filled it for centuries to make way for the brand-new Town Hall. One of those extraordinary explosions of municipal grandeur that the Victorians specialized in, the building mingles bits and pieces of church, palace and Greek temple in a glorious mish-mash of which William would have definitely approved. It was opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1873: 150,000 people turned out to line the streets and were soaked by the rain that poured down throughout the ceremony. The Levers and their staff, however, remained dry, with a prime view from the upper windows of the new warehouse as Prince Edward climbed the steps of the new building and unlocked the great doors with a ceremonial silver key.

The Town Hall is all that remains of the square from Lever's time. The building where the Levers worked is long gone, swept away along with all its neighbours in the early 1960s and replaced with a featureless shopping arcade which glories in the title of the Concrete Society's Best

Concrete Landscape in the Country 1977. It's just as depressing as it sounds.

William had no desire to hang around in Victoria Square. When a vacancy came up on the sales staff, all his persuasive powers were called into play. James was at first unwilling to let his son take the job, claiming he needed him on the premises, but simple economics won out. William pointed out that good salesmen got £4 a week in salary: he would do the job on the same terms as he had taken his apprenticeship, bed and board plus pocket money of a shilling a week and a little extra for special occasions - even with the thirty shillings that would be needed to pay the clerk brought in to do his current job, that meant savings by any accounting system. Besides, his younger brother James had turned sixteen and was ready to come into the warehouse, so his father would actually be getting two sons for the price of one.

Years later, William would remember the time he spent driving his one-horse gig through the countryside around Bolton as some of the most enjoyable work he had ever done. He was a natural salesman, never happier than when setting targets for himself and then striving to exceed them, unfailingly charming, and willing to venture into even the roughest neighbourhoods, sighing to himself that 'there are men like this, but they have to buy goods'. 'To be an ideal commercial a man must have all the qualities of a Prime Minister, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, a French Ambassador and a leading King's Counsel,' he lectured his own sales force forty years later. He didn't often find himself lacking the necessary skills, though one incident stuck in his mind.

I remember on one occasion, I was travelling in that part of the world somewhere between Upholland and Skelmersdale, and I pulled up in my gig at a customer's as usual one morning about eleven o'clock and jumped out. The lady who was usually in the shop was absent on this occasion, and the strange lady who was in the shop and whom I had

never seen before, said, 'Will you come this way?' When I got through the shop the lady began leading the way upstairs, and I said, 'I think you must be mistaken, madam', whereupon she said, 'You are the doctor aren't you?' 'No,' I replied, 'I am the grocery traveller, and I have come for the grocery order.' 'Oh,' said the lady, 'my sister is upstairs expecting a baby, and I thought you were the doctor.' You see what a narrow escape I had?

William's work was not his only reason for travelling. Following the death of her father when she was eleven, his young playmate Elizabeth Hulme had moved to Southport to be nearer her mother's family. She and Alice Lever had remained friends, and William often offered to chaperon his sister during her visits. It was not an entirely disinterested gesture. The boy who had found girls tiresome and dancing-fixated at thirteen had decided he quite liked them after all, and Elizabeth in particular. Fortunately she was less inclined to run away from him by this time, and agreed to join him on a series of picnics on the moors above Bolton. Their favourite spot was a remote and steep hillside with extraordinary views across the surrounding areas, 1,000 feet above sea level on Rivington Pike.

In 1872, when William and Elizabeth were twenty-one, they announced their engagement. His best friend, Jonathan Simpson, who had been articled to an architect at sixteen, announced his own betrothal to one of Elizabeth's best friends, Mary Lomax, at the same time. So delighted were the Levers with the match that James announced he was taking his son into partnership in the family business, with a consequent jump in his earnings to the princely sum of £800 a year.

William and Elizabeth were married two years later at the Congregational Church on St George's Road, Bolton. These days it shares its name with another Saint (Andrew shackled up with George in 1979) and its building with a new-agey charity shop, but it is doing better than the C of E across the road, which is now a craft market, and the Methodist chapel

further along, which has become a casino, which neither John Wesley nor God would be too chuffed about.

Elizabeth was no beauty – there is a wonderful portrait of her in her fifties where she looks almost identical to the pet bulldog sitting by her chair – but then William, a short man whose eyes stuck out and gave him a permanently startled look, was hardly a catch either. She had a kind face and an infectious smile, and, more to the point, she loved William and supported him to the point of indulgence. According to their son, ‘her contribution was sympathy and understanding – an unquestioning belief in the rightness of all that her husband undertook. She never asked for any altered mode of life which might have distracted him from the work he had in hand,’ but he also conceded that ‘my mother influenced his life’s achievements in a way not easily to be explained to those who did not know her intimately’. Certainly her mark was upon many of Lever’s subsequent schemes, a homely practicality that served to fill in the blind spots in his grand visions and ensure they survived the addition of real living people to the equation. And the couple were utterly devoted to one another. As their son put it years later, ‘my parents used to say that they never remembered a world without each other in it’.

William’s pay rise enabled the young couple to move up in the world. Their first married home, number 2 Park Street, was a distinct shift towards the posh end of town. The Chorley New Road stretched out from Bolton through the suburbs of Heaton and Victory, and on into open countryside, flanked by the vast villas of the mill-owners, built on cotton and stinking of cash. Park Street was at the town end, but number 2 was a solid hulk of semi-detached respectability, complete with a set of bay windows meant as much for looking at as out of. The dingy yard at the back was transformed into a mini-rain forest: ‘I have always been a lover of ferns, and at Park Street I built a fernery out of old

bacon boxes in the back-yard, covered the inside with virgin cork and had ferns growing luxuriously.'

Lever got to indulge another hobby in the new house too: his passion for amateur architecture, as cultivated vicariously through Jonathan Simpson's training. Park Street didn't have much in the way of features, but it did have plenty of doors and fireplaces, which Lever quickly ripped out and replaced with fancier versions that were more to his taste. He mixed and matched periods in a way that irritated both Simpson, who thought he should choose a style and stick to it, and his parents, who disapproved of his 'needless extravagance'. However, since it was the cash William had brought into the business that was paying for both his and their little luxuries, they didn't complain too loudly.

For William had transformed his father's company. Not by introducing anything revolutionary, but simply by carrying on doing what was being done anyway - only better. 'There is a general impression that in making money you have to do something very wonderful, but believe me, there is much more money made in doing something better than ever it was done before than in doing something new - far more,' he said in a 'secrets of my success' speech in 1915. Certainly he was a better salesman than those that had done the job before him - he realized early on that women were more inclined to try new products than their husbands, and from that point on, he never forgot the name of a child on his rounds, so that he could impress their mothers by asking after their progress and segue neatly into a special offer on butter. So effective was his patter that he found himself in the village of Hindley, the end of his round, by half-past three one spring afternoon, with a bulging order book, and nothing but a long ride back into town ahead of him. Where others would have sloped off for a crafty pint in the sun, Lever directed his horse towards Wigan, stopped at the first grocery shop he came to in a village called Ince, and introduced himself.

I can still see the shop. I can still see four or five baskets of French butter in it, I can still see where they had the cheese on the counter, and I can still see where they had the sugar wrapped up on the shelves . . . I got an order for three-quarters of a hundredweight of sugar wrapped up in pounds. I went to another man and got an order from him. Then I went to another and got an order from him. Altogether I did five or six calls in that hour-and-a-half, in addition to the driving.

Forty years on, his recollections were so clear because he traced all his subsequent success to that moment. 'If I had not had an insatiable thirst for expansion and for the trial of novel methods, if I had felt at 3.30 that merely because the usual day's work was completed I could return home and do nothing more for the remainder of the day, the present business could never have been built up.' If he had been able to consult his father, he would have undoubtedly been told not to bother. The next town was another world, with its own ways and wholesalers, unknown territory. The wise businessman should stick to what and where he knew best. But then that was why James Lever never became a millionaire, and his son did.

Before long the shopkeepers of Ince had been permanently added to his rounds.

I found that on each successive journey I was doing a little more and a little more, getting away for Hindley earlier and earlier, and getting more customers - in fact, I made a regular journey of it and had to alter the arrangements and take a whole day for Ince. Then, when I took a whole day for Ince, I began travelling beyond Ince into Wigan, and I gradually got some customers at Wigan, until I thought, 'well, this is very foolish - here we are paying three-quarters of a ton extra railway carriage from Liverpool to Bolton through Wigan, then having to cart it back again to Wigan at five shillings more. We had better have a place in Wigan.'

Even his cautious father could see the sense in this. They bought up Ormerod and Company, a wholesale business charitably described as 'ailing' (partly because the Levers had taken all their trade away), and the eldest son was installed as manager. Just three years into their marriage, Elizabeth and William were separated. The idea of spending

several hours a day simply commuting back and forth when he could be doing something useful was more than William could bear. Instead he rented a house in Upper Dicconson Street in which he lived during the week, returning to his young bride each weekend. He made some home improvements here as well, and it was soon the only house in the 'plain, monotonous' road to feature a Robert Adam-style moulded ceiling and decorative frieze. Even more spectacular was the couple's new Bolton home, way up the Chorley New Road, which Jonathan Simpson designed for them complete with fancy parquetry, ornamental ceilings and a plethora of differently shaped windows. His parents, meanwhile, went even more upmarket, with a move to Harwood Lodge, a Jacobean pile two miles outside town. Always respectable, the Lever family had finally made the jump into the big-money league.

With his sixty-six-year-old father in semi-retirement, William was allowed more of a free rein in the running of the company. His brother and co-partner James was as cautious as their father, but infinitely more persuadable. The brothers could not have been more different. James junior was a timid man who agonized over every possible outcome of each decision; William thought only in straight lines and simply forged boldly forwards through anything that came up in his path. William took to his position as boss as if it was divinely ordained; James was so worried about upsetting staff that he would often do a job himself rather than order someone else to do it.

Nevertheless, both brothers put their all into the family business. Their father had had to rely on local suppliers for his fresh produce: these days the railways could bring anything from anywhere in under a day. The best butter and eggs came from Ireland, so William and James went there with a sheaf of blank contracts and came back with a new supply. Too many of the eggs arrived broken from Dublin, so they designed a special kind of crate that would hold them

separately and stop them cracking in transit. Pleased with their new idea, William headed down to the patent office to safeguard it; while he was there he registered the name 'Lever's Pure Honey' and started stamping it on bars of yellow soap which he sold for a higher price than usual. Orders went up, so he tried the same trick with their butter, christening it 'Ulster Fresh Lumps' and placing advertisements in the *Bolton Evening News* and the *Weekly Journal* to announce just how fresh and lumpy it was. They got the ads at a knock-down rate, courtesy of publisher W. F. Tillotson, who happened to be their brother-in-law, that same boy who had danced with Mary at the ball all those years ago. In return, Tillotson gave them cut rates on articles from the syndication service he ran between Britain and America, which were printed in the *Lancashire Grocer*, a monthly 'house organ' which the Levers supplied to all their clients. The American material helped liven up what was otherwise a fairly dull read, consisting of 'price lists, principal brands, and items of interest to the trade, as well as articles of an educational nature for retail grocers and their assistants'. It was typical William - not just making sure his clients got their money's worth, but trying to make their lives just a little more worthwhile at the same time.

Every single experiment paid off. In less than twenty years, William had gone from a shilling-a-week apprentice to the dominant partner in a thriving business, with a turnover of tens of thousands every year. He had done so with barely a break, but in 1884 Jonathan Simpson managed to persuade him to take a few weeks off and bring Elizabeth to join him and his wife on a cruise round the Scottish islands.

As the boat chugged up the west coast past Islay and the Mull of Kintyre, some of Lever's characteristic intensity seemed to ebb away. His shoulders dropped, his gait on his daily perambulations around the deck slowed, and he turned his face to the August sun that shone strongly down on the holidaymakers. At Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis