

Mary Coleridge

The King is Dead, Long Live the King

5 It was not very quiet in the room where the king lay dying. People were coming and going, rustling in and out with hushed footsteps, whispering eagerly to each other; and where a great many people are all busy making as little noise as possible, the result is apt to be a kind of bustle, that weakened nerves can scarcely endure.

10 But what did that matter? The doctors said he could hear nothing now. He gave no sign that he could. Surely the sobs of his beautiful young wife, as she knelt by the bedside, must else have moved him.

For days the light had been carefully shaded. Now, in the hurry, confusion, and distress, no one remembered to draw the curtains close, so that the dim eyes might not be dazzled. But what did that
15 matter? The doctors said he could see nothing now.

For days no one but his attendants had been allowed to come near him. Now the room was free for all who chose to enter. What did it matter? The doctors said he knew no one.

20 So he lay for a long time, one hand flung out upon the counterpane, as if in search of something. The queen took it softly in hers, but there was no answering pressure.

At length the eyes and mouth closed, and the heart ceased to beat.

25 'How beautiful he looks,' they whispered one to another.

When the king came to himself it was all very still wonderfully and delightfully still, as he thought, wonderfully and delightfully dark. It was a strange, unspeakable relief to him he lay as if in heaven. The room was full of the scent of flowers, and the cool night air came pleasantly through an open window. A
30 row of wax tapers burned with soft radiance at the foot of the bed on which he was lying, covered with a velvet pall, only his head and face exposed. Four or five men were keeping guard around him, but they had fallen fast asleep.

35 So deep was the feeling of content which he experienced that he was loth to stir. Not till the great clock of the palace struck eleven, did he so much as move. Then he sat up with a light laugh.

He remembered how, when his mind was failing him, and he had rallied all his powers in one last passionate appeal against the injustice which was taking him away from the world just when the world most needed him, he had heard a voice saying, "I will give thee yet one hour after death. If, in that time,
40 thou canst find three that desire thy life, live!"

This was his hour, his hour that he had snatched away from death. How much of it had he lost already? He had been a good king; he had worked night and day for his subjects; he had nothing to fear, and he knew that it was very pleasant to live, how pleasant he had never known before, for, to do him justice, he was
45 not selfish; it was his unfinished work that he grieved about when the decree went forth against him. Yet, as he passed out of the room where the watchers sat heavily sleeping, things were changed to him somehow. The burning sense of injustice was gone. Now that he came to think of it, he had done very little. True that it was his utmost, but there were many better men in the world, and the world was large, very

50 large it seemed to him now. Everything had grown larger. He loved his country and his home as well as ever, but in the night it had seemed as if they must perish with him, and now he knew that they were still unchanged.

55 Outside the door he paused a moment, hesitating whither to go first. Not to the queen. The very thought of her grief unnerved him. He would not see her till he could once more clasp her in his arms, and bid her weep tears of joy only because he was come again. After all, he had but an hour to wait. Before the castle clock struck twelve, he would be back again in life, remembering these things only as a dream. He sighed a little to think of it.

60 "All that to do over again some day," he said, as he recalled his last moments.

Almost he turned again to the couch he had so lately left.

"But I have never yet done anything through fear," said the king.

65 And he smiled as he thought of the terms of the compact. His city lay before him in the moonlight.

"I could find three thousand as easily as three," he said. "Are they not all my friends?"

70 As he passed out of the gate, he saw a child sitting on the steps, crying bitterly.

"What is the matter, little one?" said the sentinel on guard, stopping a moment.

75 "Father and mother have gone to the castle, because the king's dead," sobbed the child, "and they've never come back again; and I'm so tired and so hungry! And I've had no supper, and my doll's broken. Oh! I do wish the king were alive again!"

And she burst into a fresh storm of weeping. It amused the king not a little.

80 "So this is the first of my subjects that wants me back!" he said.

He had no child of his own. He would have liked to try and comfort the little maiden, but there were other calls upon him just then. He was on his way to the house of his great friend, the man whom he loved more than all others. A kind of malicious delight possessed him, as he pictured to himself the deep dejection he should find him in.

85 "Poor Amyas!" he said. "I know what I should be feeling in his place. I am glad he was not taken. I could not have borne his loss."

90 As he entered the courtyard of his friend's house, lights were being carried to and fro, horses were being saddled, an air of bustle and excitement pervaded the place. Look where he might, he could not see the face he knew so well. He entered at the open door. His friend was not in the hall. Room after room he vainly traversed they were all empty. A sudden horror took him. Surely Amyas was not dead of grief?

95 He came at length to a small private apartment, in which they had spent many a happy, busy hour together; but his friend was not here either, though, to judge by appearances, he could only just have left it. Books and papers were tumbled all about in strange confusion, and bits of broken glass strewed the floor.

100 A little picture was lying on the ground. The king picked it up, and recognised a miniature of himself, the
frame of which had been broken in the fall. He let it drop again, as if it had burnt him. The fire was blazing
brightly, and the fragments of a half-destroyed letter lay, unconsumed as yet, in the fender. It was in his
own writing. He snatched it up, and saw it was the last he had written, containing the details of an
105 elaborate scheme which he had much at heart. He had only just thrown it back into the flames when two
people entered the room, talking together, one a lady, the other a man, booted and spurred as though he
came from a long distance.

“Where is Amyas?” he asked.

110 “Gone to proffer his services to the new king, of course,” said the lady. “We are, as you may think, in great
anxiety. He has none of the ridiculous notions of his predecessor, who, indeed, hated him cordially. The
very favour Amyas has hitherto enjoyed will stand in his way at the new court. I only hope he may be in
time to make his peace. He can, with truth, say that he utterly disapproved of the foolish reforms which his
late master was bent on making. Of course, he was fond of him in a way; but we must think of ourselves,
115 you know. People in our position have no time for sentiment. He started almost immediately after the
king’s death. I am sending his retinue after him.”

120 “Quite right,” said the gentleman, whom the king now knew as one of his ambassadors. “I shall follow him
at once. Between you and me, it is no bad thing for the country. That poor boy had no notion of
statesmanship. He forced me to conclude a peace which would have been disastrous to all our best
interests. Happily, we shall have war directly now. Promotions in the army would have been at a standstill if
he had had his way.”

The king did not stay to hear more.

125 “I will go to my people,” he said. “They at least have no interest to make peace with my successor. He will
but take from them what I gave.”

130 He heard the clock strike the first quarter as he went. He was, indeed, a very remarkable king, for he knew
his way to the poorest part of his dominions. He had been there before, often and often, unknown to any
one; and the misery which he had there beheld had stirred and steeled him to attempt what had never
before been attempted.

135 No one about the palace knew where he had caught the malignant fever which carried him off. He had a
shrewd suspicion himself, and he went straight to that quarter.

140 “Fevers won’t hurt me now,” he said laughing. The houses were as wretched, the people looked as sickly
and squalid as ever. They were standing about in knots in the streets, late though it was, talking together
about him. His name was in every mouth. The details of his illness, and the probable day of his funeral,
seemed to interest them more than anything else.

Five or six men were sitting drinking round a table in a disreputable-looking public-house, and he stopped
to overhear their conversation.

145 “And a good riddance, too!” said one of them, whom he knew well, “What’s the use of a king as never
spends a farthing more than he can help? It gives no impetus to trade, it don’t. The new fellow’s a very
different sort. We shall have fine doings soon.”

150 “Ay!” struck in another, “a meddlesome, priggish sort of chap, he was, always aworritting us about clean houses, and such like. What right’s he got to interfere, I’d like to know?”

“Down with all kings! says I,” put in a third; “but if we’re to have ’em, let ’em behave as sich. I like a young fellow as isn’t afraid of his missus, and knows port wine from sherry.”

155 “Wanted to abolish capital punishment, he did!” cried a fourth. “Thought he’d get more work out of the poor fellows in prison, I suppose? Depend on it, there’s some reason like that at the bottom of it. We ain’t so very perticular about the lives of our subjects for nothing, we ain’t”; an expression of opinion in which all the rest heartily concurred. The clock struck again as the king turned away; he felt as if a storm of abuse from someone he had always hated would be a precious balm just then. He entered the state prison, and made for the condemned cell. Capital punishment was not abolished yet, and in this particular instance he
160 had certainly felt glad of it.

The cell was tenanted only by a little haggard-looking man, who was writing busily on his knee. The king had only seen him once before, and he looked at him curiously.

165 Presently the gaoler entered, and with him the first councillor, a man whom his late master had greatly loved and esteemed. The convict looked up quickly.

“It was not to be till tomorrow,” he said. Then, as if afraid he had betrayed some cowardice, “but I am ready at any moment. May I ask you to give this paper to my wife?”

170 “The king is dead,” said the first councillor gravely. “You are reprieved. His present majesty has other views. You will, in all probability, be set at large to-morrow.”

“Dead?” said the man with a stunned look.

175 “Dead!” said the first councillor, with the impressiveness of a whole board.

The man stood up, passing his hand across his brow.

180 “Sir,” he said earnestly, “I respected him. For all he was a king, he treated me like a gentleman. He, too, had a young wife. Poor fellow, I wish he were alive again!”

There were tears in the man’s eyes as he spoke.

185 The third quarter struck as the king left the prison. He felt unutterably humiliated. The pity of his foe was harder to bear than the scorn of his friends. He would rather have died a thousand deaths than owe his life to such a man. And yet, because he was himself noble, he could not but rejoice to find nobility in another. He said to himself sternly that it was not worth what he had gone through. He reviewed his position in no very self-complacent mood. The affection he had so confidently relied upon was but a dream. The people
190 he was fain to work for were not ripe for their own improvement. A foolish little child, a generous enemy, these were his only friends. After all, was it worthwhile to live? Had he not better go back quietly and submit, making no further effort? He had learnt his lesson; he could “lie down in peace, and sleep, and take his rest.” The eternal powers had justified themselves. What matter though every man had proved a liar? The bitterness had passed away, and he seemed to see clearly.

195 Thick clouds had gathered over the moon, and the cold struck through him. All at once a sense of loneliness that cannot be described rushed over him, and his heart sank. Was there really no one who cared no one?

He would have given anything at that moment for a look, a single word of real sympathy. He longed with sick longing for the assurance of love.

200

There were yet a few moments left. How had he borne to wait so long? This, at least, he was sure of, and this was all the world to him. He began to find comfort and consolation in the thought; he forgave – indeed he almost forgot – the rest. Yet he had fallen very low, for, as he stood at the door of his wife’s room, he hesitated whether to go in. What if this, too, were an illusion? Had he not best go back before he knew?

205

“But I have never yet done anything through fear,” said the king.

His wife was sitting by the fire alone, her face hidden, her long hair falling round her like a veil. At the first sight of her, a pang of self-reproach shot through him. How could he ever have doubted?

210

She was wearing a ring that he had given her – a ring she wore always, and the light sparkled and flashed from the jewel. Except for this, there was nothing bright in the room.

215

He ardently desired to comfort her. He wondered why all her ladies had left her. Surely one might have stayed with her on this first night of her bereavement? She seemed to be lost in thought. If she would only speak, or call his name! But she was quite silent.

A slight noise made the king start. A secret door in the wall opened, the existence of which he had thought was known only to himself and his queen, and a man stood before her.

220

She put her finger to her lips, as though to counsel silence, and then threw herself into his arms.

225

“You have come,” she said – “Oh, I am so glad! I had to hold his hand when he was dying. I was frightened sitting here by myself. I thought his ghost would come back, but he will never come back any more. We may be happy always now,” and drawing the ring from her finger, she kissed it, weeping, and gave it to him.

When midnight struck, the watchers wakened with a start, to find the king lying stark and stiff, as before, but a great change had come over his countenance.

230

“We must not let the queen see him again,” they said.

(1928)