


THE KING WHO WENT ON STRIKE

BY
PEARSON CHOATE

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CHAPTER I

 HE King leant against the stone balustrade, which runs round the roof of Buckingham Palace, and looked about him. All around him, above him, and below him, the night was ablaze with a myriad lights. Loyal Londoners, in accordance with their custom, were closing their Coronation celebrations with illuminations, with fireworks, and with good-humoured horse-play in the crowded streets. In spite of gloomy predictions to the contrary, the proverbial Coronation weather of the last day or two had not failed. A radiant June day had given place to a wonderful June night. Here, on the palace roof, high up above the tumult and the shouting the night air was cool and fragrant. The King rested his elbows on the broad top of the carved stone balustrade. He was very weary. But he was glad to be out in the open air once again. And he was gladder still, at last, to be alone—

"A tall, fair, goodlooking young man, still in the early twenties, with an open, almost boyish face": "A young man of athletic build, clean-shaven, and very like his dead brother, the Prince, but lacking, perhaps, something of the Prince's personal distinction, and charm": "Thick, fair, curly hair, blue eyes, and a happy, smiling mouth": "A typical young English naval officer, with an eager, boyish face, unclouded, as yet, by any shadow of his high destiny"—it was in phrases such as these that the descriptive writers in the newspapers had described, more or

less adequately, the new King's outward appearance. What he was inwardly, what the inner man thought, and felt, and suffered, was not within their province, or their knowledge. At the moment, his outward appearance was completed by an easy fitting, black, smoking jacket, plain evening dress trousers, and a pair of shabby dancing pumps, into which he had changed immediately after the state banquet, which had been the final ordeal of his long and exhausting official day. It was characteristic of the inner man, about whom so little was known, that he should have been thus impatient to throw off the gorgeous uniform, and the many unearned decorations, which the banquet had necessitated. It was characteristic of him, too, that he should be bareheaded, now, and drawing absently at a pipe, which he had forgotten to fill—

All the crowded events of the long, tense, and exhausting Coronation Day which was, at last, happily at an end had seemed strangely unreal to the King. The slow and stately progress to the Abbey in the morning, the huge gilt state coach, the team of cream horses, the gold-coated powdered footmen, the bodyguard of plumed Household Cavalry, the decorated streets, the crowds, the wild cheering, the thousand faces, the thousand eyes, his own mechanical bowing, his own mechanical smile; the protracted, exhausting ceremony in the Abbey, the ermine-caped peers and peeresses, the grotesque gorgeously clad officers of state, the tall figure of the venerable Archbishop with his hands raised in benediction, his own heavy royal robes, the Crown, the bursts of music and of song, the pealing bells, the brilliant uniforms of the soldiery; the streets once again, the crowds and the wild cheering, his own mechanical bowing, his own mechanical smile, the heat, the

glitter and the glare, the tension, the thousand flushed curious faces, the thousand eyes, the slow movement of the coach, the secret, hidden, inward fear; the all too short rest in the afternoon, with its few minutes of troubled, nightmare sleep; the interminable state banquet in the evening, the gold plate, the uniforms, the colours, and the lights, the Family, strangely subservient, the congratulations, the speeches, the homage; the dense crowd round the palace after the banquet, his own repeated appearance at the huge, open window above the main entrance, the night air, the thousand eyes yet once again, the cheering, and the lights—all these things had been unreal, unbelievable, the bewildering phantasmagoria of a fevered dream—

Now, as he leant against the roof balustrade, the same sense of unreality which had haunted him all day was still with him.

But he compelled himself to look at the blazing illuminations, none the less.

A man could not afford to live, indefinitely, in a fevered dream.

The trees in the densely thronged Mall were hung with innumerable, coloured electric lights. A blaze of yellow, smokeless flambeaux, on the left, marked the line of Carlton House Terrace. "God Save the King," and "God Save King Alfred the Second"—house after house, in the terrace, repeated the loyal prayers in glittering letters of fire. The same devices were reproduced, in a picturesque setting of crowns and flags, on the lavishly illuminated Admiralty Arch. Beyond was the glare of Trafalgar Square, where the Nelson Column, pricked out in red, white, and blue lamps, soared aloft, a shaft of vivid colours

against the dark blue of the night sky. Further away, on the right, the familiar, luminous clock face of Big Ben, which showed that it was already nearing midnight, shone out, brightly, above the golden brilliance of Whitehall. Westminster Abbey towers were touched with fire. Queen Anne's Mansion was a broad, solid wedge of blazing, various colour. Up and down the square tower of the Westminster Cathedral ran a hand of flame, writing a loyal motto, in crabbed, monkish Latin, difficult to translate. On the left, beyond the Green Park, shone the lights of Piccadilly, where the fronts of the clubs vied in patriotic radiance. From the Green Park itself, and from Hyde Park, in the distance, soared rockets, which burst into clusters of red, white, and blue stars, and showers of multi-coloured rain. The cheers of the crowds, in the parks, and in the streets, rose with the rockets, in a regular, muffled roar. Overhead, above the lights, above the rockets, a score or more of illuminated aeroplanes hummed, diving, nose-spinning, side-slipping, and looping the loop, with the agility, the grace, and the breathless swiftness of the aerial acrobats who know not fear.

"God Save the King," and "God Save King Alfred the Second."

The mere repetition of the blazing words impressed them upon the King's notice.

Their irony was his second thought.

Did the people know, the cheering people, far down below there, in the crowded parks, and illuminated streets, that, stereotyped formulae as they were, there was real need, now, for those prayers?

And, if they did know, would they care?

Save him from his enemies?

Perhaps. Almost certainly.

But from himself—an unwilling King?

A light, night breeze from the west, blew softly across the palace roof, rustling the silken folds of the Royal Standard, as it hung limply against the fifty-foot flagstaff, immediately above the King's head. With the quick, subconscious instinct of the trained sailor, he looked up to see if the flag was in order. To be "a sailor, not a Prince" had been, for years, his publicly avowed ambition, an ambition which had only recently been thwarted. His interest in this, no doubt, trivial matter of a flag was typical of the lasting impression which his long and happy years of naval service had left upon his character. In most things, small and great, the Navy had taught him, the Navy had formed him.

The flag was correct. The very knots in the rope left no loophole for criticism.

The small, gilt Royal Crown, which normally surmounted the flagstaff had been removed. In its place a large crown of coloured, electric lamps had been erected, as a finishing touch to the palace illuminations. Above the lights of this crown, the pointed shaft of the lightning conductor, which ran up the flagstaff, protruded, clearly visible against the night sky.

The lightning conductor had been left in position.

A slow smile lit up the King's face, and something of his weariness fell from him, as he saw the pointed shaft of the lightning conductor.

Here, at last, was reality, presented, paradoxically enough, in the form of an allegory, a symbol.

The words of the old Duke of Northborough came back to the King.

At the close of one of the earliest of the many, long, informal talks, in the course of which the old Duke had set himself to explain to the young and inexperienced Prince, who had been called, so unexpectedly, to the throne, a few of the more urgent problems of Government, the King had brought the veteran Prime Minister up on to the palace roof, to see the new roof garden, which was the only innovation he had made, so far, in the palace arrangements, an innovation due to his pleasant recollection of nights of shore leave spent in the roof gardens of New York, during his service with the Atlantic Fleet. The old Duke had admired the flowers, and approved the tubbed trees; then he had looked up at the flagstaff, where the Royal Standard had been flying in a noble breeze; the juxtaposition of the pointed shaft of the lightning conductor, and the Royal Crown, at the top of the flagstaff, had caught his eye; and he had called the King's attention to it, at once, with an arresting gesture.

"It is an allegory, a symbol, sir," he had said, in his vivid, forceful way. "You wear the Crown. I am the lightning conductor. It will be my duty, and the honour of my life, when

the storm breaks, to take the full shock of the lightning flash, so that the Crown may remain on your head, unshaken."

There had been no need for the King to ask of what impending storm the old Duke spoke. From the first, in all his talk, the increasing menace of the world-wide revolutionary conspiracy had been the veteran statesman's most constant theme.

"In your grandfather's time revolution in England was impossible, sir. In your father's time it was possible, but unthinkable. If your brother had lived, it might have remained unthinkable for years, perhaps for the whole of his reign." "Like your father, your brother had the secret of arousing personal loyalty. The Prince smiled, and men and women loved him. For years he had been preparing himself, and consolidating his hold on the people, making ready for the struggle which he saw he must come." "It is not for me to disguise from you, sir, that your brother's death has given a new impetus to the revolutionary movement in this country. A younger son, a Prince who never expected, who was never expected, to reign—against you, sir, the international revolutionary forces feel that they have their first real chance in England. The Internationalists, and the Communists, on the Continent, and the extremists amongst our own Labour leaders, are likely to effect a working agreement. It is necessary that we should remember, that it has been by such agreements, that Europe has been swept almost clear of Kings, from end to end." "We must be prepared. We are prepared. But it is of vital importance that you, sir, should understand the position. Make no mistake, sir. They would haul down your Royal Standard,

from the flagstaff here, sir, and run up their pitiable rag of a Red Flag, in its place."

A new understanding of the difficulties that his father had faced, of the heavy burden that he had borne, for so many years, without complaint, had come to the King, in recent weeks. More poignant still was the new understanding of, and the new sympathy with, his dead brother, the Prince, that the last few weeks had brought him. His father had always been remote. Between him, and his brother, the Prince, there had been real friendship, and familiar, easy intercourse, in spite of the Prince's splendid future, in spite of his own frequent absences at sea. But he had not known. He had not understood. With a sailor's contemptuous impatience in such matters, he had always turned an almost deaf ear to the Prince's talk of politics and parties. The Prince's splendid future! And he stood now, in the Prince's place.

It was the Prince who had urged him to trust, and to listen to, the old Duke.

Once again, the King stood by the bed, in his brother's room, late in the afternoon of the day, when the disease, which had stricken the Prince so inexplicably, within a few weeks of their father's death, had done its worst, and it was known that he, too, must die, die, after all, uncrowned.

Deathly white the Prince lay there, propped up in bed, with his eyes closed.

Outside the sun was setting, and the London sparrows were twittering their vesper hymn.

The blue uniformed nurse bent down over the bed, and spoke in the Prince's ear.

The Prince opened his eyes, saw him, recognized him, and smiled.

"They tell me that I have got 'the route' Alfred," he whispered painfully. "I am not afraid to die. But I would live if I could. I know, no one knows as I know, what this will mean to you. They tell me I mustn't talk. I can't talk.

"The Duke is your man. Trust the Duke! He will not fail you. He will be your sheet anchor. With the Duke to steady the ship, you will ride out the storm."

An hour later, the Prince lay dead.

The King flung up his head.

The Duke had not failed him.

Many men had mourned the Prince's death, but no man had mourned it, as had the veteran Prime Minister. Between the Duke and the Prince, it was notorious, there had been a friendship, a constant association, personal and political, closer than that between many a father and son. Politically, the Prince's death must have been a staggering blow to the Duke. And yet the wonderful old man had never faltered. Early and late, he had laboured, with inexhaustible patience, at times with a surprising freedom, and yet always with a tact which made his freedom possible, to place his unrivalled knowledge, and his ripe wisdom, untouched by party spirit, at the service of a new, a young, and an inexperienced King.

The King was not ungrateful.

Still leaning wearily as he was against the roof balustrade, he turned now, as he thought of the old Duke, and looked across the shadowed darkness of St. James's Park, at the golden glare thrown up by the illuminations in Whitehall. There, in the silent, rather comfortless, and closed in house, in Downing Street, where he had lived, with hardly a break, for so many years, his father's minister, his brother's friend, the old Duke, even now, as likely as not, was hard at work, indomitable, tireless, resourceful, sparing neither himself, nor his subordinates, so that he, the King, "a sailor, not a Prince," might reign.

Yes. The lightning conductor was in position.

He, the man who wore the Crown, must not fail.

He must not fail the Duke.

It was odd, but the thought that he might fail to support the Duke, that he might not come up to the standard which the Duke might set for him, had more weight with him, than any thought of the people, of the nation. It was an instance of the Duke's personal magnetism, of course. His personal magnetism, his dominance, had been talked about for years. Did the Duke dominate him? No. But the Duke was a living, forceful personality, a man, a strong man. The people, the nation—well, they were only phantoms; they were the thousand, flushed, curious faces; the thousand eyes; the cheering crowds, far away down there, in the darkness, in the crowded parks and illuminated streets below.

It was, in a sense, a triumph, or at least, a notable success, for the Duke, that he, the King, had been crowned; that the day had passed without hostile demonstrations, without a single regrettable incident. What reward could he give, what return could he make, to the old statesman, for his ungrudging, tireless service? The Duke was his servant. In intimate, familiar talk, he never failed to call him "sir." The Duke must be his friend. His friend? A King could have no friends. A man apart, isolated, lonely, and remote, as his father had always been, a King was condemned to live alone.

A sudden, unbearable sense of loneliness, a terror of himself, a terror of this new, isolated, remote life, in which he was to be denied even the poor palliative of friendship, swept over the King. He had longed to be alone. He had come up, out here, on to the palace roof, to be alone. He had been eager to escape from the curious faces, from the thousand eyes. But now he longed for human companionship, for human sympathy, for human hands.

"Judith!"

The name rose to the King's lips, unsought, unbidden.

Judith, tall and slender, with her deep, dark, mysterious eyes, and her crown of jet black hair; Judith, with her cheeks flushed with pleasure, her eyes aglow, and her hand stretched out to him in joyous welcome—the King saw, and felt, her bodily presence, as in a vision, and his loneliness, and his terror, his weariness, and his fever, fell from him.

He must go to Judith.

It would be dangerous. It was always dangerous. It would be more dangerous, tonight, than ever before. But he would go. He must go. All day he had smiled, and bowed, and posed, for the multitude, playing his part in the gorgeous, public pageantry, which the multitude loved, an actor playing his part, an actor, the servant of the public. Surely, now, he might wrest a few brief hours, from the night, for himself?

It was a long time, a week or more, since he had seen Judith.

A few brief hours with Judith, a few brief hours of rest, of rural peace, and quiet talk; a romp with the Imps, who would be fast asleep now, tucked up in their cots, each clutching some cherished toy, some strange, woolly animal, or some dearly prized, deadly instrument of mimic war, but who would awake, with their prattle, like the birds, at dawn; a few minutes of Uncle Bond's diverting nonsense, about the next instalment of his forthcoming serial, and the dire distresses he had invented for his latest business girl heroine—a few brief hours, so spent, would bring him back to the palace, refreshed and strengthened, ready to shoulder, once again, the heavy burden of his isolation, the heavy burden which seemed now too heavy to be borne.

Yes. Late as it was, he would go to Judith. A night visit? It would be after one o'clock in the morning, when he arrived. Would Judith mind? Surely not! Judith and he were outside conventions.

With the quick, impulsive movement of the man who puts an end to hesitation, the King swung round from the stone balustrade, crossed the roof, and so passed, without another

glance at the blazing Coronation illuminations, or at the night sky, down the broad, wrought-iron staircase which led from the roof into the palace.

CHAPTER II

IN the anteroom to his own newly decorated suite of rooms, the King found two of his valets still on duty. One of them was Smith, the rubicund, grizzled old sailor, who had been his servant in the Navy. Dismissing the other man with a gesture, the King beckoned to Smith, and entered his dressing room.

"I do not want to be disturbed, in the morning, until I ring my bell, Smith," he announced. "I shall probably go out into the garden for a breath of fresh air, last thing. See that the door into the garden is left open. That is all now. Good-night."

Smith withdrew, at once, with the bob of his bullet-shaped head, which was the nearest approach he could make to the bow required by etiquette.

Left alone, the King glanced round the dressing room.

Of all the rooms in the palace which he used habitually, this room had become the most distasteful to the King. The massive, old-fashioned, mahogany furniture, the heavy curtains drawn right across the windows, the thick-piled carpet, and the softly shaded lights, in the room, oppressed him, not so much because of what they were in themselves, as because of what they were associated with, already, in his own mind. It was here that he dressed for Court functions. It was here that he dressed, three or four times a day, not for his own pleasure and convenience, but "suitably for the occasion."

A masculine doll. A male mannequin. A popinjay.

But he was going to dress to please himself, now, anyway.

Moving swiftly about the room, he proceeded to ransack drawers, and to fling open wardrobe doors, as he searched for a particular blue serge suit, of which the Royal staff of valets strongly disapproved.

At last he found the suit he sought.

A few minutes later, he had effected, unaided, a complete change of toilet.

The blue serge suit, instinct with the Navy style that was so much to his mind, together with the grey felt hat, and the light dust coat, which he selected, made an odd, and subtle, difference in his appearance. Before, even in the easy undress of his smoking jacket, he had been—the King. Now he was, in every detail, merely a young naval officer in mufti, rejoicing in shore leave.

Looking at himself in the huge, full-length mirror which stood immediately in front of the heavily curtained windows, the King approved this result.

The young naval officer in mufti, who looked back at the King out of the cunningly lighted mirror, tall, fair, and clean-shaven, had retained much of the unconscious pride of youth. The face was, as yet, only lightly marked by the lines, the thoughtful frown, and the dark shadows, which are the insignia of a heavier burden, of a greater responsibility, and of a more constant anxiety, and care, than any known at sea. The mouth

and chin were pronounced and firm, moulded by the habit of command. The lips were a trifle full, and not untouched by passion. A student of that facial character, which all men, princes and peasants alike, must carry about with them, wherever they go, would have said that this young man had a will of his own, which might be expressed by rash and impetuous action. The brow was broad and high. This was a young man capable of thought, and of emotion. Something of the healthy tan, which long exposure to wind and weather leaves, still lingered on the cheeks, but a slight puffiness under the tired blue eyes, told of weariness, and of flagging physical condition.

"A breath of Judith's country air will certainly do me good. It will freshen me up," the King muttered.

Swinging round from the mirror, he crossed the room, to the door, and switched off all the lights. Then he opened the door. The long corridor outside, which led from his suite of rooms to the central landing, and so to the main staircase in the palace, was still brilliantly lit. Closing the dressing room door behind him, the King slipped quickly down the corridor. Avoiding the central landing, and the main staircase, which lay to his right, he turned to the left, up a short passage, which brought him to the head of a private staircase, which was strictly reserved for his personal use. This staircase led down to the ground floor of the palace, and ended in a small, palm and orange tree decorated lounge, half vestibule, and half conservatory, which had been a favourite retreat of his father. A glass door opened out of the lounge into the palace garden. This door, as he had directed, had been left open. Quickly descending the staircase,

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