

BOOK II

CHAPTER I--The Charter of the Cities

Lambert was standing bewildered outside the door of the King's apartments amid the scurry of astonishment and ridicule. He was just passing out into the street, in a dazed manner, when James Barker dashed by him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To stop all this foolery, of course," replied Barker; and he disappeared into the room.

He entered it headlong, slamming the door, and slapping his incomparable silk hat on the table. His mouth opened, but before he could speak, the King said--

"Your hat, if you please."

Fidgetting with his fingers, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, the young politician held it out.

The King placed it on his own chair, and sat on it.

"A quaint old custom," he explained, smiling above the ruins. "When the King receives the representatives of the House of Barker, the hat of the latter is immediately destroyed in this manner. It represents the absolute finality of the act of homage expressed in the removal of it. It declares that never until that hat shall once more appear upon your head (a contingency which I firmly believe to be remote) shall the House of Barker rebel against the Crown of England."

Barker stood with clenched fist, and shaking lip.

"Your jokes," he began, "and my property--" and then exploded with an oath, and stopped again.

"Continue, continue," said the King, waving his hands.

"What does it all mean?" cried the other, with a gesture of passionate rationality. "Are you mad?"

"Not in the least," replied the King, pleasantly. "Madmen are always serious; they go mad from lack of humour. You are looking serious yourself, James."

"Why can't you keep it to your own private life?" expostulated the other. "You've got plenty of money, and plenty of houses now to play the fool in, but in the interests of the public--"

"Epigrammatic," said the King, shaking his finger sadly at him. "None of your daring scintillations here. As to why I don't do it in private, I rather fail to understand your question. The answer is of comparative limpidity. I don't do it in private, because it is funnier to do it in public. You appear to think that it would be amusing to be dignified in the banquet hall and in the street, and at my own fireside (I could procure a fireside) to keep the company in a roar. But that is what every one does. Every one is grave in public, and funny in private. My sense of humour suggests the reversal of this; it suggests that one should be funny in public, and solemn in private. I desire to make the State functions, parliaments, coronations, and so on, one roaring old-fashioned pantomime. But, on the other hand, I shut myself up alone in a small store-room for two hours a day, where I am so dignified that I come out quite ill."

By this time Barker was walking up and down the room, his frock coat flapping like the black wings of a bird.

"Well, you will ruin the country, that's all," he said shortly.

"It seems to me," said Auberon, "that the tradition of ten centuries is being broken, and the House of Barker is rebelling against the Crown of England. It would be with regret (for I admire your appearance) that I should be obliged forcibly to decorate your head with the remains of this hat, but--"

"What I can't understand," said Barker flinging up his fingers with a feverish American movement, "is why you don't care about anything else but your games."

The King stopped sharply in the act of lifting the silken remnants, dropped them, and walked up to Barker, looking at him steadily.

"I made a kind of vow," he said, "that I would not talk seriously, which always means answering silly questions. But the strong man will always be gentle with politicians.

'The shape my scornful looks deride
Required a God to form;'

if I may so theologically express myself. And for some reason I cannot in the least understand, I feel impelled to answer that question of yours, and to answer it as if there were really such a thing in the world as a serious subject. You ask me why I don't care for anything else. Can you tell me, in the name of all the gods you don't believe in, why I should care for anything else?"

"Don't you realise common public necessities?" cried Barker. "Is it possible that a man of your intelligence does not know that it is every one's interest--"

"Don't you believe in Zoroaster? Is it possible that you neglect Mumbo-Jumbo?" returned the King, with startling animation. "Does a man of your intelligence come to me with these damned early Victorian ethics? If, on studying my features and manner, you detect any particular resemblance to the Prince Consort, I assure you you are mistaken. Did Herbert Spencer ever convince you--did he ever convince anybody--did he ever for one mad moment convince himself--that it must be to the interest of the individual to feel a public spirit? Do you believe that, if you rule your department badly, you stand any more chance, or one half of the chance, of being guillotined, than an angler stands of being pulled into the river by a strong pike? Herbert Spencer refrained from theft for the same reason that he refrained from wearing feathers in his hair, because he was an English gentleman with different tastes. I am an English gentleman with different tastes. He liked philosophy. I like art. He liked writing ten books on the nature of human society. I like to see the Lord Chamberlain walking in front of me with a piece of paper pinned to his coat-tails. It is my humour. Are you answered? At any rate, I have said my last serious word to-day, and my last serious word I trust for the remainder of my life in this Paradise of Fools. The remainder of my conversation with you to-day, which I trust will be long and stimulating, I propose to conduct in a new language of my own by means of rapid and symbolic movements of the left leg." And he began to pirouette slowly round the room with a preoccupied expression.

Barker ran round the room after him, bombarding him with demands and entreaties. But he received no response except in the new language. He came out banging the door again, and sick like a man coming on shore. As he strode along the streets he found himself suddenly opposite Cicconani's restaurant, and for some reason there rose up before him the green fantastic figure of the Spanish General, standing, as he had seen him last, at the door, with the words on his lips, "You cannot argue with the choice of the soul."

The King came out from his dancing with the air of a man of business legitimately tired. He put on an overcoat, lit a cigar, and went out into the purple night.

"I will go," he said, "and mingle with the people."

He passed swiftly up a street in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill, when suddenly he felt a hard object driven into his waistcoat. He paused, put up his single eye-glass, and beheld a boy with a wooden sword and a paper cocked hat, wearing that expression of awed satisfaction with which a child contemplates his work when he has hit some one very hard. The King gazed thoughtfully for some time at his assailant, and slowly took a note-book from his breast-pocket.

"I have a few notes," he said, "for my dying speech;" and he turned over the leaves. "Dying speech for political assassination; ditto, if by former friend--h'm, h'm. Dying speech for death at hands of injured husband (repentant). Dying speech for same (cynical). I am not quite sure which meets the present...."

"I'm the King of the Castle," said the boy, truculently, and very pleased with nothing in particular.

The King was a kind-hearted man, and very fond of children, like all people who are fond of the ridiculous.

"Infant," he said, "I'm glad you are so stalwart a defender of your old inviolate Notting Hill. Look up nightly to that peak, my child, where it lifts itself among the stars so ancient, so lonely, so unutterably Notting. So long as you are ready to die for the sacred mountain, even if it were ringed with all the armies of Bayswater--"

The King stopped suddenly, and his eyes shone.

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps the noblest of all my conceptions. A revival of the arrogance of the old mediæval cities applied to our glorious suburbs. Clapham with a city guard. Wimbledon with a city wall. Surbiton tolling a bell to raise its citizens. West Hampstead going into battle with its own banner. It shall be done. I, the King, have said it." And, hastily presenting the boy with half a crown, remarking, "For the war-chest of Notting Hill," he ran violently home at such a rate of speed that crowds followed him for miles. On reaching his study, he ordered a cup of coffee, and plunged into profound meditation upon the project. At length he called his favourite Equerry, Captain Bowler, for whom he had a deep affection, founded principally upon the shape of his whiskers.

"Bowler," he said, "isn't there some society of historical research, or something of which I am an honorary member?"

"Yes, sir," said Captain Bowler, rubbing his nose, "you are a member of 'The Encouragers of Egyptian Renaissance,' and 'The Teutonic Tombs Club,' and 'The

Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities,' and--"

"That is admirable," said the King. "The London Antiquities does my trick. Go to the Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities and speak to their secretary, and their sub-secretary, and their president, and their vice-president, saying, 'The King of England is proud, but the honorary member of the Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities is prouder than kings. I should like to tell you of certain discoveries I have made touching the neglected traditions of the London boroughs. The revelations may cause some excitement, stirring burning memories and touching old wounds in Shepherd's Bush and Bayswater, in Pimlico and South Kensington. The King hesitates, but the honorary member is firm. I approach you invoking the vows of my initiation, the Sacred Seven Cats, the Poker of Perfection, and the Ordeal of the Indescribable Instant (forgive me if I mix you up with the Clan-na-Gael or some other club I belong to), and ask you to permit me to read a paper at your next meeting on the "Wars of the London Boroughs." Say all this to the Society, Bowler. Remember it very carefully, for it is most important, and I have forgotten it altogether, and send me another cup of coffee and some of the cigars that we keep for vulgar and successful people. I am going to write my paper."

The Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities met a month after in a corrugated iron hall on the outskirts of one of the southern suburbs of London. A large number of people had collected there under the coarse and flaring gas-jets when the King arrived, perspiring and genial. On taking off his great-coat, he was perceived to be in evening dress, wearing the Garter. His appearance at the small table, adorned only with a glass of water, was received with respectful cheering.

The chairman (Mr. Huggins) said that he was sure that they had all been pleased to listen to such distinguished lecturers as they had heard for some time past (hear, hear). Mr. Burton (hear, hear), Mr. Cambridge, Professor King (loud and continued cheers), our old friend Peter Jessop, Sir William White (loud laughter), and other eminent men, had done honour to their little venture (cheers). But there were other circumstances which lent a certain unique quality to the present occasion (hear, hear). So far as his recollection went, and in connection with the Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities it went very far (loud cheers), he did not remember that any of their lecturers had borne the title of King. He would therefore call upon King Auberon briefly to address the meeting.

The King began by saying that this speech might be regarded as the first declaration of his new policy for the nation. "At this supreme hour of my life I feel that to no one but the members of the Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities can I open my heart (cheers). If the world turns upon my policy, and the storms of popular hostility begin to rise (no, no), I feel that it is here, with my

brave Recoverers around me, that I can best meet them, sword in hand" (loud cheers).

His Majesty then went on to explain that, now old age was creeping upon him, he proposed to devote his remaining strength to bringing about a keener sense of local patriotism in the various municipalities of London. How few of them knew the legends of their own boroughs! How many there were who had never heard of the true origin of the Wink of Wandsworth! What a large proportion of the younger generation in Chelsea neglected to perform the old Chelsea Chuff! Pimlico no longer pumped the Pimlies. Battersea had forgotten the name of Blick.

There was a short silence, and then a voice said "Shame!"

The King continued: "Being called, however unworthily, to this high estate, I have resolved that, so far as possible, this neglect shall cease. I desire no military glory. I lay claim to no constitutional equality with Justinian or Alfred. If I can go down to history as the man who saved from extinction a few old English customs, if our descendants can say it was through this man, humble as he was, that the Ten Turnips are still eaten in Fulham, and the Putney parish councillor still shaves one half of his head, I shall look my great fathers reverently but not fearfully in the face when I go down to the last house of Kings."

The King paused, visibly affected, but collecting himself, resumed once more.

"I trust that to very few of you, at least, I need dwell on the sublime origins of these legends. The very names of your boroughs bear witness to them. So long as Hammersmith is called Hammersmith, its people will live in the shadow of that primal hero, the Blacksmith, who led the democracy of the Broadway into battle till he drove the chivalry of Kensington before him and overthrew them at that place which in honour of the best blood of the defeated aristocracy is still called Kensington Gore. Men of Hammersmith will not fail to remember that the very name of Kensington originated from the lips of their hero. For at the great banquet of reconciliation held after the war, when the disdainful oligarchs declined to join in the songs of the men of the Broadway (which are to this day of a rude and popular character), the great Republican leader, with his rough humour, said the words which are written in gold upon his monument, 'Little birds that can sing and won't sing, must be made to sing.' So that the Eastern Knights were called Cansings or Kensings ever afterwards. But you also have great memories, O men of Kensington! You showed that you could sing, and sing great war-songs. Even after the dark day of Kensington Gore, history will not forget those three Knights who guarded your disordered retreat from Hyde Park (so called from your hiding there), those three Knights after whom Knightsbridge is named. Nor will it forget the day of your re-emergence, purged in the fire of

calamity, cleansed of your oligarchic corruptions, when, sword in hand, you drove the Empire of Hammersmith back mile by mile, swept it past its own Broadway, and broke it at last in a battle so long and bloody that the birds of prey have left their name upon it. Men have called it, with austere irony, the Ravenscourt. I shall not, I trust, wound the patriotism of Bayswater, or the lonelier pride of Brompton, or that of any other historic township, by taking these two special examples. I select them, not because they are more glorious than the rest, but partly from personal association (I am myself descended from one of the three heroes of Knightsbridge), and partly from the consciousness that I am an amateur antiquarian, and cannot presume to deal with times and places more remote and more mysterious. It is not for me to settle the question between two such men as Professor Hugg and Sir William Whisky as to whether Notting Hill means Nutting Hill (in allusion to the rich woods which no longer cover it), or whether it is a corruption of Nothing-ill, referring to its reputation among the ancients as an Earthly Paradise. When a Podkins and a Jossy confess themselves doubtful about the boundaries of West Kensington (said to have been traced in the blood of Oxen), I need not be ashamed to confess a similar doubt. I will ask you to excuse me from further history, and to assist me with your encouragement in dealing with the problem which faces us to-day. Is this ancient spirit of the London townships to die out? Are our omnibus conductors and policemen to lose altogether that light which we see so often in their eyes, the dreamy light of

'Old unhappy far-off things
And battles long ago'

--to quote the words of a little-known poet who was a friend of my youth? I have resolved, as I have said, so far as possible, to preserve the eyes of policemen and omnibus conductors in their present dreamy state. For what is a state without dreams? And the remedy I propose is as follows:--

"To-morrow morning at twenty-five minutes past ten, if Heaven spares my life, I purpose to issue a Proclamation. It has been the work of my life, and is about half finished. With the assistance of a whisky and soda, I shall conclude the other half to-night, and my people will receive it to-morrow. All these boroughs where you were born, and hope to lay your bones, shall be reinstated in their ancient magnificence,--Hammersmith, Kensington, Bayswater, Chelsea, Battersea, Clapham, Balham, and a hundred others. Each shall immediately build a city wall with gates to be closed at sunset. Each shall have a city guard, armed to the teeth. Each shall have a banner, a coat-of-arms, and, if convenient, a gathering cry. I will not enter into the details now, my heart is too full. They will be found in the proclamation itself. You will all, however, be subject to enrolment in the local city guards, to be summoned together by a thing called the Tocsin, the meaning of which I am studying in my researches into history. Personally, I believe a tocsin to be some kind of highly paid official. If, therefore, any of you happen to

have such a thing as a halberd in the house, I should advise you to practise with it in the garden."

Here the King buried his face in his handkerchief and hurriedly left the platform, overcome by emotions.

The members of the Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities rose in an indescribable state of vagueness. Some were purple with indignation; an intellectual few were purple with laughter; the great majority found their minds a blank. There remains a tradition that one pale face with burning blue eyes remained fixed upon the lecturer, and after the lecture a red-haired boy ran out of the room.

CHAPTER II--The Council of the Provosts

The King got up early next morning and came down three steps at a time like a schoolboy. Having eaten his breakfast hurriedly, but with an appetite, he summoned one of the highest officials of the Palace, and presented him with a shilling. "Go and buy me," he said, "a shilling paint-box, which you will get, unless the mists of time mislead me, in a shop at the corner of the second and dirtier street that leads out of Rochester Row. I have already requested the Master of the Buckhounds to provide me with cardboard. It seemed to me (I know not why) that it fell within his department."

The King was happy all that morning with his cardboard and his paint-box. He was engaged in designing the uniforms and coats-of-arms for the various municipalities of London. They gave him deep and no inconsiderable thought. He felt the responsibility.

"I cannot think," he said, "why people should think the names of places in the country more poetical than those in London. Shallow romanticists go away in trains and stop in places called Hugmy-in-the-Hole, or Bumps-on-the-Puddle. And all the time they could, if they liked, go and live at a place with the dim, divine name of St. John's Wood. I have never been to St. John's Wood. I dare not. I should be afraid of the innumerable night of fir trees, afraid to come upon a blood-red cup and the beating of the wings of the Eagle. But all these things can be imagined by remaining reverently in the Harrow train."

And he thoughtfully retouched his design for the head-dress of the halberdier of St. John's Wood, a design in black and red, compounded of a pine tree and the plumage of an eagle. Then he turned to another card. "Let us think of milder matters," he said. "Lavender Hill! Could any of your glebes and combes and all the rest of it produce so fragrant an idea? Think of a mountain of lavender lifting itself in purple poignancy into the silver skies and filling men's nostrils with a new breath of life--a purple hill of incense. It is true that upon my few excursions of discovery on a halfpenny tram I have failed to hit the precise spot. But it must be there; some poet called it by its name. There is at least warrant enough for the solemn purple plumes (following the botanical formation of lavender) which I have required people to wear in the neighbourhood of Clapham Junction. It is so everywhere, after all. I have never been actually to Southfields, but I suppose a scheme of lemons and olives represent their austral instincts. I have never visited Parson's Green, or seen either the Green or the Parson, but surely the pale-green shovel-hats I have designed must be more or less in the spirit. I must work in the dark and let my instincts guide me. The great love I bear to my people will

certainly save me from distressing their noble spirit or violating their great traditions."

As he was reflecting in this vein, the door was flung open, and an official announced Mr. Barker and Mr. Lambert.

Mr. Barker and Mr. Lambert were not particularly surprised to find the King sitting on the floor amid a litter of water-colour sketches. They were not particularly surprised because the last time they had called on him they had found him sitting on the floor, surrounded by a litter of children's bricks, and the time before surrounded by a litter of wholly unsuccessful attempts to make paper darts. But the trend of the royal infant's remarks, uttered from amid this infantile chaos, was not quite the same affair.

For some time they let him babble on, conscious that his remarks meant nothing. And then a horrible thought began to steal over the mind of James Barker. He began to think that the King's remarks did not mean nothing.

"In God's name, Auberon," he suddenly volleyed out, startling the quiet hall, "you don't mean that you are really going to have these city guards and city walls and things?"

"I am, indeed," said the infant, in a quiet voice. "Why shouldn't I have them? I have modelled them precisely on your political principles. Do you know what I've done, Barker? I've behaved like a true Barkerian. I've ... but perhaps it won't interest you, the account of my Barkerian conduct."

"Oh, go on, go on," cried Barker.

"The account of my Barkerian conduct," said Auberon, calmly, "seems not only to interest, but to alarm you. Yet it is very simple. It merely consists in choosing all the provosts under any new scheme by the same principle by which you have caused the central despot to be appointed. Each provost, of each city, under my charter, is to be appointed by rotation. Sleep, therefore, my Barker, a rosy sleep."

Barker's wild eyes flared.

"But, in God's name, don't you see, Quin, that the thing is quite different? In the centre it doesn't matter so much, just because the whole object of despotism is to get some sort of unity. But if any damned parish can go to any damned man--"

"I see your difficulty," said King Auberon, calmly. "You feel that your talents may be neglected. Listen!" And he rose with immense magnificence. "I solemnly give to

my liege subject, James Barker, my special and splendid favour, the right to override the obvious text of the Charter of the Cities, and to be, in his own right, Lord High Provost of South Kensington. And now, my dear James, you are all right. Good day."

"But--" began Barker.

"The audience is at an end, Provost," said the King, smiling.

How far his confidence was justified, it would require a somewhat complicated description to explain. "The Great Proclamation of the Charter of the Free Cities" appeared in due course that morning, and was posted by bill-stickers all over the front of the Palace, the King assisting them with animated directions, and standing in the middle of the road, with his head on one side, contemplating the result. It was also carried up and down the main thoroughfares by sandwichmen, and the King was, with difficulty, restrained from going out in that capacity himself, being, in fact, found by the Groom of the Stole and Captain Bowler, struggling between two boards. His excitement had positively to be quieted like that of a child.

The reception which the Charter of the Cities met at the hands of the public may mildly be described as mixed. In one sense it was popular enough. In many happy homes that remarkable legal document was read aloud on winter evenings amid uproarious appreciation, when everything had been learnt by heart from that quaint but immortal old classic, Mr. W. W. Jacobs. But when it was discovered that the King had every intention of seriously requiring the provisions to be carried out, of insisting that the grotesque cities, with their tocsins and city guards, should really come into existence, things were thrown into a far angrier confusion. Londoners had no particular objection to the King making a fool of himself, but they became indignant when it became evident that he wished to make fools of them; and protests began to come in.

The Lord High Provost of the Good and Valiant City of West Kensington wrote a respectful letter to the King, explaining that upon State occasions it would, of course, be his duty to observe what formalities the King thought proper, but that it was really awkward for a decent householder not to be allowed to go out and put a post-card in a pillar-box without being escorted by five heralds, who announced, with formal cries and blasts of a trumpet, that the Lord High Provost desired to catch the post.

The Lord High Provost of North Kensington, who was a prosperous draper, wrote a curt business note, like a man complaining of a railway company, stating that definite inconvenience had been caused him by the presence of the halberdiers,

whom he had to take with him everywhere. When attempting to catch an omnibus to the City, he had found that while room could have been found for himself, the halberdiers had a difficulty in getting in to the vehicle--believe him, theirs faithfully.

The Lord High Provost of Shepherd's Bush said his wife did not like men hanging round the kitchen.

The King was always delighted to listen to these grievances, delivering lenient and kingly answers, but as he always insisted, as the absolute sine qua non, that verbal complaints should be presented to him with the fullest pomp of trumpets, plumes, and halberds, only a few resolute spirits were prepared to run the gauntlet of the little boys in the street.

Among these, however, was prominent the abrupt and business-like gentleman who ruled North Kensington. And he had before long, occasion to interview the King about a matter wider and even more urgent than the problem of the halberdiers and the omnibus. This was the great question which then and for long afterwards brought a stir to the blood and a flush to the cheek of all the speculative builders and house agents from Shepherd's Bush to the Marble Arch, and from Westbourne Grove to High Street, Kensington. I refer to the great affair of the improvements in Notting Hill. The scheme was conducted chiefly by Mr. Buck, the abrupt North Kensington magnate, and by Mr. Wilson, the Provost of Bayswater. A great thoroughfare was to be driven through three boroughs, through West Kensington, North Kensington and Notting Hill, opening at one end into Hammersmith Broadway, and at the other into Westbourne Grove. The negotiations, buyings, sellings, bullying and bribing took ten years, and by the end of it Buck, who had conducted them almost single-handed, had proved himself a man of the strongest type of material energy and material diplomacy. And just as his splendid patience and more splendid impatience had finally brought him victory, when workmen were already demolishing houses and walls along the great line from Hammersmith, a sudden obstacle appeared that had neither been reckoned with nor dreamed of, a small and strange obstacle, which, like a speck of grit in a great machine, jarred the whole vast scheme and brought it to a stand-still, and Mr. Buck, the draper, getting with great impatience into his robes of office and summoning with indescribable disgust his halberdiers, hurried over to speak to the King.

Ten years had not tired the King of his joke. There were still new faces to be seen looking out from the symbolic head-gears he had designed, gazing at him from amid the pastoral ribbons of Shepherd's Bush or from under the sombre hoods of the Blackfriars Road. And the interview which was promised him with the Provost of North Kensington he anticipated with a particular pleasure, for "he never really

enjoyed," he said, "the full richness of the mediæval garments unless the people compelled to wear them were very angry and business-like."

Mr. Buck was both. At the King's command the door of the audience-chamber was thrown open and a herald appeared in the purple colours of Mr. Buck's commonwealth emblazoned with the Great Eagle which the King had attributed to North Kensington, in vague reminiscence of Russia, for he always insisted on regarding North Kensington as some kind of semi-arctic neighbourhood. The herald announced that the Provost of that city desired audience of the King.

"From North Kensington?" said the King, rising graciously. "What news does he bring from that land of high hills and fair women? He is welcome."

The herald advanced into the room, and was immediately followed by twelve guards clad in purple, who were followed by an attendant bearing the banner of the Eagle, who was followed by another attendant bearing the keys of the city upon a cushion, who was followed by Mr. Buck in a great hurry. When the King saw his strong animal face and steady eyes, he knew that he was in the presence of a great man of business, and consciously braced himself.

"Well, well," he said, cheerily coming down two or three steps from a daïs, and striking his hands lightly together, "I am glad to see you. Never mind, never mind. Ceremony is not everything."

"I don't understand your Majesty," said the Provost, stolidly.

"Never mind, never mind," said the King, gaily. "A knowledge of Courts is by no means an unmixed merit; you will do it next time, no doubt."

The man of business looked at him sulkily from under his black brows and said again without show of civility--

"I don't follow you."

"Well, well," replied the King, good-naturedly, "if you ask me I don't mind telling you, not because I myself attach any importance to these forms in comparison with the Honest Heart. But it is usual--it is usual--that is all, for a man when entering the presence of Royalty to lie down on his back on the floor and elevating his feet towards heaven (as the source of Royal power) to say three times 'Monarchical institutions improve the manners.' But there, there--such pomp is far less truly dignified than your simple kindness."

The Provost's face was red with anger, and he maintained silence.

"And now," said the King, lightly, and with the exasperating air of a man softening a snub; "what delightful weather we are having! You must find your official robes warm, my Lord. I designed them for your own snow-bound land."

"They're as hot as hell," said Buck, briefly. "I came here on business."

"Right," said the King, nodding a great number of times with quite unmeaning solemnity; "right, right, right. Business, as the sad glad old Persian said, is business. Be punctual. Rise early. Point the pen to the shoulder. Point the pen to the shoulder, for you know not whence you come nor why. Point the pen to the shoulder, for you know not when you go nor where."

The Provost pulled a number of papers from his pocket and savagely flapped them open.

"Your Majesty may have heard," he began, sarcastically, "of Hammersmith and a thing called a road. We have been at work ten years buying property and getting compulsory powers and fixing compensation and squaring vested interests, and now at the very end, the thing is stopped by a fool. Old Prout, who was Provost of Notting Hill, was a business man, and we dealt with him quite satisfactorily. But he's dead, and the cursed lot has fallen on a young man named Wayne, who's up to some game that's perfectly incomprehensible to me. We offer him a better price than any one ever dreamt of, but he won't let the road go through. And his Council seems to be backing him up. It's midsummer madness."

The King, who was rather inattentively engaged in drawing the Provost's nose with his finger on the window-pane, heard the last two words.

"What a perfect phrase that is!" he said. "'Midsummer madness!'"

"The chief point is," continued Buck, doggedly, "that the only part that is really in question is one dirty little street--Pump Street--a street with nothing in it but a public-house and a penny toy-shop, and that sort of thing. All the respectable people of Notting Hill have accepted our compensation. But the ineffable Wayne sticks out over Pump Street. Says he's Provost of Notting Hill. He's only Provost of Pump Street."

"A good thought," replied Auberon. "I like the idea of a Provost of Pump Street. Why not let him alone?"

"And drop the whole scheme!" cried out Buck, with a burst of brutal spirit. "I'll be damned if we do. No. I'm for sending in workmen to pull down without more ado."

"Strike for the purple Eagle!" cried the King, hot with historical associations.

"I'll tell you what it is," said Buck, losing his temper altogether. "If your Majesty would spend less time in insulting respectable people with your silly coats-of-arms, and more time over the business of the nation--"

The King's brow wrinkled thoughtfully.

"The situation is not bad," he said; "the haughty burgher defying the King in his own Palace. The burgher's head should be thrown back and the right arm extended; the left may be lifted towards Heaven, but that I leave to your private religious sentiment. I have sunk back in this chair, stricken with baffled fury. Now again, please."

Buck's mouth opened like a dog's, but before he could speak another herald appeared at the door.

"The Lord High Provost of Bayswater," he said, "desires an audience."

"Admit him," said Auberon. "This is a jolly day."

The halberdiers of Bayswater wore a prevailing uniform of green, and the banner which was borne after them was emblazoned with a green bay-wreath on a silver ground, which the King, in the course of his researches into a bottle of champagne, had discovered to be the quaint old punning cognisance of the city of Bayswater.

"It is a fit symbol," said the King, "your immortal bay-wreath. Fulham may seek for wealth, and Kensington for art, but when did the men of Bayswater care for anything but glory?"

Immediately behind the banner, and almost completely hidden by it, came the Provost of the city, clad in splendid robes of green and silver with white fur and crowned with bay. He was an anxious little man with red whiskers, originally the owner of a small sweet-stuff shop.

"Our cousin of Bayswater," said the King, with delight; "what can we get for you?" The King was heard also distinctly to mutter, "Cold beef, cold 'am, cold chicken," his voice dying into silence.

"I came to see your Majesty," said the Provost of Bayswater, whose name was Wilson, "about that Pump Street affair."

"I have just been explaining the situation to his Majesty," said Buck, curtly, but recovering his civility. "I am not sure, however, whether his Majesty knows how much the matter affects you also."

"It affects both of us, yer see, yer Majesty, as this scheme was started for the benefit of the 'ole neighbourhood. So Mr. Buck and me we put our 'eads together--"

The King clasped his hands.

"Perfect!" he cried in ecstasy. "Your heads together! I can see it! Can't you do it now? Oh, do do it now!"

A smothered sound of amusement appeared to come from the halberdiers, but Mr. Wilson looked merely bewildered, and Mr. Buck merely diabolical.

"I suppose," he began bitterly, but the King stopped him with a gesture of listening.

"Hush," he said, "I think I hear some one else coming. I seem to hear another herald, a herald whose boots creak."

As he spoke another voice cried from the doorway--

"The Lord High Provost of South Kensington desires an audience."

"The Lord High Provost of South Kensington!" cried the King. "Why, that is my old friend James Barker! What does he want, I wonder? If the tender memories of friendship have not grown misty, I fancy he wants something for himself, probably money. How are you, James?"

Mr. James Barker, whose guard was attired in a splendid blue, and whose blue banner bore three gold birds singing, rushed, in his blue and gold robes, into the room. Despite the absurdity of all the dresses, it was worth noticing that he carried his better than the rest, though he loathed it as much as any of them. He was a gentleman, and a very handsome man, and could not help unconsciously wearing even his preposterous robe as it should be worn. He spoke quickly, but with the slight initial hesitation he always showed in addressing the King, due to suppressing an impulse to address his old acquaintance in the old way.

"Your Majesty--pray forgive my intrusion. It is about this man in Pump Street. I see you have Buck here, so you have probably heard what is necessary. I--"

The King swept his eyes anxiously round the room, which now blazed with the trappings of three cities.

"There is one thing necessary," he said.

"Yes, your Majesty," said Mr. Wilson of Bayswater, a little eagerly. "What does yer Majesty think necessary?"

"A little yellow," said the King, firmly. "Send for the Provost of West Kensington."

Amid some materialistic protests he was sent for, and arrived with his yellow halberdiers in his saffron robes, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. After all, placed as he was, he had a good deal to say on the matter.

"Welcome, West Kensington," said the King. "I have long wished to see you touching that matter of the Hammersmith land to the south of the Rowton House. Will you hold it feudally from the Provost of Hammersmith? You have only to do him homage by putting his left arm in his overcoat and then marching home in state."

"No, your Majesty; I'd rather not," said the Provost of West Kensington, who was a pale young man with a fair moustache and whiskers, who kept a successful dairy.

The King struck him heartily on the shoulder.

"The fierce old West Kensington blood," he said; "they are not wise who ask it to do homage."

Then he glanced again round the room. It was full of a roaring sunset of colour, and he enjoyed the sight, possible to so few artists--the sight of his own dreams moving and blazing before him. In the foreground the yellow of the West Kensington liveries outlined itself against the dark blue draperies of South Kensington. The crests of these again brightened suddenly into green as the almost woodland colours of Bayswater rose behind them. And over and behind all, the great purple plumes of North Kensington showed almost funereal and black.

"There is something lacking," said the King--"something lacking. What can--Ah, there it is! there it is!"

In the doorway had appeared a new figure, a herald in flaming red. He cried in a

loud but unemotional voice--

"The Lord High Provost of Notting Hill desires an audience."

CHAPTER III--Enter a Lunatic

The King of the Fairies, who was, it is to be presumed, the godfather of King Auberon, must have been very favourable on this particular day to his fantastic godchild, for with the entrance of the guard of the Provost of Notting Hill there was a certain more or less inexplicable addition to his delight. The wretched navvies and sandwich-men who carried the colours of Bayswater or South Kensington, engaged merely for the day to satisfy the Royal hobby, slouched into the room with a comparatively hang-dog air, and a great part of the King's intellectual pleasure consisted in the contrast between the arrogance of their swords and feathers and the meek misery of their faces. But these Notting Hill halberdiers in their red tunics belted with gold had the air rather of an absurd gravity. They seemed, so to speak, to be taking part in the joke. They marched and wheeled into position with an almost startling dignity and discipline.

They carried a yellow banner with a great red lion, named by the King as the Notting Hill emblem, after a small public-house in the neighbourhood, which he once frequented.

Between the two lines of his followers there advanced towards the King a tall, red-haired young man, with high features and bold blue eyes. He would have been called handsome, but that a certain indefinable air of his nose being too big for his face, and his feet for his legs, gave him a look of awkwardness and extreme youth. His robes were red, according to the King's heraldry, and, alone among the Provosts, he was girt with a great sword. This was Adam Wayne, the intractable Provost of Notting Hill.

The King flung himself back in his chair, and rubbed his hands.

"What a day, what a day!" he said to himself. "Now there'll be a row. I'd no idea it would be such fun as it is. These Provosts are so very indignant, so very reasonable, so very right. This fellow, by the look in his eyes, is even more indignant than the rest. No sign in those large blue eyes, at any rate, of ever having heard of a joke. He'll remonstrate with the others, and they'll remonstrate with him, and they'll all make themselves sumptuously happy remonstrating with me."

"Welcome, my Lord," he said aloud. "What news from the Hill of a Hundred Legends? What have you for the ear of your King? I know that troubles have arisen between you and these others, our cousins, but these troubles it shall be our pride to compose. And I doubt not, and cannot doubt, that your love for me is

not less tender, no less ardent, than theirs."

Mr. Buck made a bitter face, and James Barker's nostrils curled; Wilson began to giggle faintly, and the Provost of West Kensington followed in a smothered way. But the big blue eyes of Adam Wayne never changed, and he called out in an odd, boyish voice down the hall--

"I bring homage to my King. I bring him the only thing I have--my sword."

And with a great gesture he flung it down on the ground, and knelt on one knee behind it.

There was a dead silence.

"I beg your pardon," said the King, blankly.

"You speak well, sire," said Adam Wayne, "as you ever speak, when you say that my love is not less than the love of these. Small would it be if it were not more. For I am the heir of your scheme--the child of the great Charter. I stand here for the rights the Charter gave me, and I swear, by your sacred crown, that where I stand, I stand fast."

The eyes of all five men stood out of their heads.

Then Buck said, in his jolly, jarring voice: "Is the whole world mad?"

The King sprang to his feet, and his eyes blazed.

"Yes," he cried, in a voice of exultation, "the whole world is mad, but Adam Wayne and me. It is true as death what I told you long ago, James Barker, seriousness sends men mad. You are mad, because you care for politics, as mad as a man who collects tram tickets. Buck is mad, because he cares for money, as mad as a man who lives on opium. Wilson is mad, because he thinks himself right, as mad as a man who thinks himself God Almighty. The Provost of West Kensington is mad, because he thinks he is respectable, as mad as a man who thinks he is a chicken. All men are mad but the humorist, who cares for nothing and possesses everything. I thought that there was only one humorist in England. Fools!--dolts!--open your cows' eyes; there are two! In Notting Hill--in that unpromising elevation--there has been born an artist! You thought to spoil my joke, and bully me out of it, by becoming more and more modern, more and more practical, more and more bustling and rational. Oh, what a feast it was to answer you by becoming more and more august, more and more gracious, more and more ancient and mellow! But this lad has seen how to bowl me out. He has answered

me back, vaunt for vaunt, rhetoric for rhetoric. He has lifted the only shield I cannot break, the shield of an impenetrable pomposity. Listen to him. You have come, my Lord, about Pump Street?"

"About the city of Notting Hill," answered Wayne, proudly, "of which Pump Street is a living and rejoicing part."

"Not a very large part," said Barker, contemptuously.

"That which is large enough for the rich to covet," said Wayne, drawing up his head, "is large enough for the poor to defend."

The King slapped both his legs, and waved his feet for a second in the air.

"Every respectable person in Notting Hill," cut in Buck, with his cold, coarse voice, "is for us and against you. I have plenty of friends in Notting Hill."

"Your friends are those who have taken your gold for other men's hearthstones, my Lord Buck," said Provost Wayne. "I can well believe they are your friends."

"They've never sold dirty toys, anyhow," said Buck, laughing shortly.

"They've sold dirtier things," said Wayne, calmly: "they have sold themselves."

"It's no good, my Buckling," said the King, rolling about on his chair. "You can't cope with this chivalrous eloquence. You can't cope with an artist. You can't cope with the humorist of Notting Hill. Oh, Nunc dimittis--that I have lived to see this day! Provost Wayne, you stand firm?"

"Let them wait and see," said Wayne. "If I stood firm before, do you think I shall weaken now that I have seen the face of the King? For I fight for something greater, if greater there can be, than the hearthstones of my people and the Lordship of the Lion. I fight for your royal vision, for the great dream you dreamt of the League of the Free Cities. You have given me this liberty. If I had been a beggar and you had flung me a coin, if I had been a peasant in a dance and you had flung me a favour, do you think I would have let it be taken by any ruffians on the road? This leadership and liberty of Notting Hill is a gift from your Majesty, and if it is taken from me, by God! it shall be taken in battle, and the noise of that battle shall be heard in the flats of Chelsea and in the studios of St. John's Wood."

"It is too much--it is too much," said the King. "Nature is weak. I must speak to you, brother artist, without further disguise. Let me ask you a solemn question."

Adam Wayne, Lord High Provost of Notting Hill, don't you think it splendid?"

"Splendid!" cried Adam Wayne. "It has the splendour of God."

"Bowled out again," said the King. "You will keep up the pose. Funnily, of course, it is serious. But seriously, isn't it funny?"

"What?" asked Wayne, with the eyes of a baby.

"Hang it all, don't play any more. The whole business--the Charter of the Cities. Isn't it immense?"

"Immense is no unworthy word for that glorious design."

"Oh, hang you! But, of course, I see. You want me to clear the room of these reasonable sows. You want the two humorists alone together. Leave us, gentlemen."

Buck threw a sour look at Barker, and at a sullen signal the whole pageant of blue and green, of red, gold, and purple, rolled out of the room, leaving only two in the great hall, the King sitting in his seat on the daïs, and the red-clad figure still kneeling on the floor before his fallen sword.

The King bounded down the steps and smacked Provost Wayne on the back.

"Before the stars were made," he cried, "we were made for each other. It is too beautiful. Think of the valiant independence of Pump Street. That is the real thing. It is the deification of the ludicrous."

The kneeling figure sprang to his feet with a fierce stagger.

"Ludicrous!" he cried, with a fiery face.

"Oh, come, come," said the King, impatiently, "you needn't keep it up with me. The augurs must wink sometimes from sheer fatigue of the eyelids. Let us enjoy this for half an hour, not as actors, but as dramatic critics. Isn't it a joke?"

Adam Wayne looked down like a boy, and answered in a constrained voice--

"I do not understand your Majesty. I cannot believe that while I fight for your royal charter your Majesty deserts me for these dogs of the gold hunt."

"Oh, damn your--But what's this? What the devil's this?"

The King stared into the young Provost's face, and in the twilight of the room began to see that his face was quite white and his lip shaking.

"What in God's name is the matter?" cried Auberon, holding his wrist.

Wayne flung back his face, and the tears were shining on it.

"I am only a boy," he said, "but it's true. I would paint the Red Lion on my shield if I had only my blood."

King Auberon dropped the hand and stood without stirring, thunderstruck.

"My God in Heaven!" he said; "is it possible that there is within the four seas of Britain a man who takes Notting Hill seriously?"

"And my God in Heaven!" said Wayne passionately; "is it possible that there is within the four seas of Britain a man who does not take it seriously?"

The King said nothing, but merely went back up the steps of the daïs, like a man dazed. He fell back in his chair again and kicked his heels.

"If this sort of thing is to go on," he said weakly, "I shall begin to doubt the superiority of art to life. In Heaven's name, do not play with me. Do you really mean that you are--God help me!--a Notting Hill patriot; that you are--?"

Wayne made a violent gesture, and the King soothed him wildly.

"All right--all right--I see you are; but let me take it in. You do really propose to fight these modern improvers with their boards and inspectors and surveyors and all the rest of it?"

"Are they so terrible?" asked Wayne, scornfully.

The King continued to stare at him as if he were a human curiosity.

"And I suppose," he said, "that you think that the dentists and small tradesmen and maiden ladies who inhabit Notting Hill, will rally with war-hymns to your standard?"

"If they have blood they will," said the Provost.

"And I suppose," said the King, with his head back among the cushions, "that it

never crossed your mind that"--his voice seemed to lose itself luxuriantly--"never crossed your mind that any one ever thought that the idea of a Notting Hill idealism was--er--slightly--slightly ridiculous?"

"Of course they think so," said Wayne.

"What was the meaning of mocking the prophets?"

"Where," asked the King, leaning forward--"where in Heaven's name did you get this miraculously inane idea?"

"You have been my tutor, Sire," said the Provost, "in all that is high and honourable."

"Eh?" said the King.

"It was your Majesty who first stirred my dim patriotism into flame. Ten years ago, when I was a boy (I am only nineteen), I was playing on the slope of Pump Street, with a wooden sword and a paper helmet, dreaming of great wars. In an angry trance I struck out with my sword, and stood petrified, for I saw that I had struck you, Sire, my King, as you wandered in a noble secrecy, watching over your people's welfare. But I need have had no fear. Then was I taught to understand Kingliness. You neither shrank nor frowned. You summoned no guards. You invoked no punishments. But in august and burning words, which are written in my soul, never to be erased, you told me ever to turn my sword against the enemies of my inviolate city. Like a priest pointing to the altar, you pointed to the hill of Notting. 'So long,' you said, 'as you are ready to die for the sacred mountain, even if it were ringed with all the armies of Bayswater.' I have not forgotten the words, and I have reason now to remember them, for the hour is come and the crown of your prophecy. The sacred hill is ringed with the armies of Bayswater, and I am ready to die."

The King was lying back in his chair, a kind of wreck.

"Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord," he murmured, "what a life! what a life! All my work! I seem to have done it all. So you're the red-haired boy that hit me in the waistcoat. What have I done? God, what have I done? I thought I would have a joke, and I have created a passion. I tried to compose a burlesque, and it seems to be turning halfway through into an epic. What is to be done with such a world? In the Lord's name, wasn't the joke broad and bold enough? I abandoned my subtle humour to amuse you, and I seem to have brought tears to your eyes. What's to be done with people when you write a pantomime for them--call the sausages classic festoons, and the policeman cut in two a tragedy of public duty? But why am I talking?"

Why am I asking questions of a nice young gentleman who is totally mad? What is the good of it? What is the good of anything? Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!"

Suddenly he pulled himself upright.

"Don't you really think the sacred Notting Hill at all absurd?"

"Absurd?" asked Wayne, blankly. "Why should I?"

The King stared back equally blankly.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Notting Hill," said the Provost, simply, "is a rise or high ground of the common earth, on which men have built houses to live, in which they are born, fall in love, pray, marry, and die. Why should I think it absurd?"

The King smiled.

"Because, my Leonidas--" he began, then suddenly, he knew not how, found his mind was a total blank. After all, why was it absurd? Why was it absurd? He felt as if the floor of his mind had given way. He felt as all men feel when their first principles are hit hard with a question. Barker always felt so when the King said, "Why trouble about politics?"

The King's thoughts were in a kind of rout; he could not collect them.

"It is generally felt to be a little funny," he said vaguely.

"I suppose," said Adam, turning on him with a fierce suddenness--"I suppose you fancy crucifixion was a serious affair?"

"Well, I--" began Auberon--"I admit I have generally thought it had its graver side."

"Then you are wrong," said Wayne, with incredible violence. "Crucifixion is comic. It is exquisitely diverting. It was an absurd and obscene kind of impaling reserved for people who were made to be laughed at--for slaves and provincials, for dentists and small tradesmen, as you would say. I have seen the grotesque gallows-shape, which the little Roman gutter-boys scribbled on walls as a vulgar joke, blazing on the pinnacles of the temples of the world. And shall I turn back?"

The King made no answer.

Adam went on, his voice ringing in the roof.

"This laughter with which men tyrannise is not the great power you think it. Peter was crucified, and crucified head downwards. What could be funnier than the idea of a respectable old Apostle upside down? What could be more in the style of your modern humour? But what was the good of it? Upside down or right side up, Peter was Peter to mankind. Upside down he stills hangs over Europe, and millions move and breathe only in the life of his Church."

King Auberon got up absently.

"There is something in what you say," he said. "You seem to have been thinking, young man."

"Only feeling, sire," answered the Provost. "I was born, like other men, in a spot of the earth which I loved because I had played boys' games there, and fallen in love, and talked with my friends through nights that were nights of the gods. And I feel the riddle. These little gardens where we told our loves. These streets where we brought out our dead. Why should they be commonplace? Why should they be absurd? Why should it be grotesque to say that a pillar-box is poetic when for a year I could not see a red pillar-box against the yellow evening in a certain street without being wracked with something of which God keeps the secret, but which is stronger than sorrow or joy? Why should any one be able to raise a laugh by saying 'the Cause of Notting Hill'?--Notting Hill where thousands of immortal spirits blaze with alternate hope and fear."

Auberon was flicking dust off his sleeve with quite a new seriousness on his face, distinct from the owlish solemnity which was the pose of his humour.

"It is very difficult," he said at last. "It is a damned difficult thing. I see what you mean; I agree with you even up to a point--or I should like to agree with you, if I were young enough to be a prophet and poet. I feel a truth in everything you say until you come to the words 'Notting Hill.' And then I regret to say that the old Adam awakes roaring with laughter and makes short work of the new Adam, whose name is Wayne."

For the first time Provost Wayne was silent, and stood gazing dreamily at the floor. Evening was closing in, and the room had grown darker.

"I know," he said, in a strange, almost sleepy voice, "there is truth in what you say, too. It is hard not to laugh at the common names--I only say we should not. I have thought of a remedy; but such thoughts are rather terrible."

"What thoughts?" asked Auberon.

The Provost of Notting Hill seemed to have fallen into a kind of trance; in his eyes was an elvish light.

"I know of a magic wand, but it is a wand that only one or two may rightly use, and only seldom. It is a fairy wand of great fear, stronger than those who use it--often frightful, often wicked to use. But whatever is touched with it is never again wholly common; whatever is touched with it takes a magic from outside the world. If I touch, with this fairy wand, the railways and the roads of Notting Hill, men will love them, and be afraid of them for ever."

"What the devil are you talking about?" asked the King.

"It has made mean landscapes magnificent, and hovels outlast cathedrals," went on the madman. "Why should it not make lamp-posts fairer than Greek lamps; and an omnibus-ride like a painted ship? The touch of it is the finger of a strange perfection."

"What is your wand?" cried the King, impatiently.

"There it is," said Wayne; and pointed to the floor, where his sword lay flat and shining.

"The sword!" cried the King; and sprang up straight on the daïs.

"Yes, yes," cried Wayne, hoarsely. "The things touched by that are not vulgar; the things touched by that--"

King Auberon made a gesture of horror.

"You will shed blood for that!" he cried. "For a cursed point of view--"

"Oh, you kings, you kings!" cried out Adam, in a burst of scorn. "How humane you are, how tender, how considerate! You will make war for a frontier, or the imports of a foreign harbour; you will shed blood for the precise duty on lace, or the salute to an admiral. But for the things that make life itself worthy or miserable--how humane you are! I say here, and I know well what I speak of, there were never any necessary wars but the religious wars. There were never any just wars but the religious wars. There were never any humane wars but the religious wars. For these men were fighting for something that claimed, at least, to be the happiness of a man, the virtue of a man. A Crusader thought, at least,

that Islam hurt the soul of every man, king or tinker, that it could really capture. I think Buck and Barker and these rich vultures hurt the soul of every man, hurt every inch of the ground, hurt every brick of the houses, that they can really capture. Do you think I have no right to fight for Notting Hill, you whose English Government has so often fought for tomfooleries? If, as your rich friends say, there are no gods, and the skies are dark above us, what should a man fight for, but the place where he had the Eden of childhood and the short heaven of first love? If no temples and no scriptures are sacred, what is sacred if a man's own youth is not sacred?"

The King walked a little restlessly up and down the daïs.

"It is hard," he said, biting his lips, "to assent to a view so desperate--so responsible...."

As he spoke, the door of the audience chamber fell ajar, and through the aperture came, like the sudden chatter of a bird, the high, nasal, but well-bred voice of Barker.

"I said to him quite plainly--the public interests--"

Auberon turned on Wayne with violence.

"What the devil is all this? What am I saying? What are you saying? Have you hypnotised me? Curse your uncanny blue eyes! Let me go. Give me back my sense of humour. Give it me back--give it me back, I say!"

"I solemnly assure you," said Wayne, uneasily, with a gesture, as if feeling all over himself, "that I haven't got it."

The King fell back in his chair, and went into a roar of Rabelaisian laughter.

"I don't think you have," he cried.