CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE ENDING OF WAR

Section 1

On the mountain-side above the town of Brissago and commanding two long stretches of Lake Maggiore, looking eastward to Bellinzona, and southward to Luino, there is a shelf of grass meadows which is very beautiful in springtime with a great multitude of wild flowers. More particularly is this so in early June, when the slender asphodel Saint Bruno's lily, with its spike of white blossom, is in flower. To the westward of this delightful shelf there is a deep and densely wooded trench, a great gulf of blue some mile or so in width out of which arise great precipices very high and wild. Above the asphodel fields the mountains climb in rocky slopes to solitudes of stone and sunlight that curve round and join that wall of cliffs in one common skyline. This desolate and austere background contrasts very vividly with the glowing serenity of the great lake below, with the spacious view of fertile hills and roads and villages and islands to south and east, and with the hotly golden rice flats of the Val Maggia to the north. And because it was a remote and insignificant place, far away out of the crowding tragedies of that year of disaster, away from burning cities and starving multitudes, bracing and tranquillising and hidden, it was here that there gathered the conference of rulers that was to arrest, if possible, before it was too late, the debacle of civilisation. Here,

brought together by the indefatigable energy of that impassioned humanitarian, Leblanc, the French ambassador at Washington, the chief Powers of the world were to meet in a last desperate conference to 'save humanity.'

Leblanc was one of those ingenuous men whose lot would have been insignificant in any period of security, but who have been caught up to an immortal role in history by the sudden simplification of human affairs through some tragical crisis, to the measure of their simplicity. Such a man was Abraham Lincoln, and such was Garibaldi. And Leblanc, with his transparent childish innocence, his entire self-forgetfulness, came into this confusion of distrust and intricate disaster with an invincible appeal for the manifest sanities of the situation. His voice, when he spoke, was 'full of remonstrance.' He was a little bald, spectacled man, inspired by that intellectual idealism which has been one of the peculiar gifts of France to humanity. He was possessed of one clear persuasion, that war must end, and that the only way to end war was to have but one government for mankind. He brushed aside all other considerations. At the very outbreak of the war, so soon as the two capitals of the belligerents had been wrecked, he went to the president in the White House with this proposal. He made it as if it was a matter of course. He was fortunate to be in Washington and in touch with that gigantic childishness which was the characteristic of the American imagination. For the Americans also were among the simple peoples by whom the world was saved. He won over the American president and the American government to his general ideas; at any rate they

supported him sufficiently to give him a standing with the more sceptical European governments, and with this backing he set to work--it seemed the most fantastic of enterprises--to bring together all the rulers of the world and unify them. He wrote innumerable letters, he sent messages, he went desperate journeys, he enlisted whatever support he could find; no one was too humble for an ally or too obstinate for his advances; through the terrible autumn of the last wars this persistent little visionary in spectacles must have seemed rather like a hopeful canary twittering during a thunderstorm. And no accumulation of disasters daunted his conviction that they could be ended.

For the whole world was flaring then into a monstrous phase of destruction. Power after Power about the armed globe sought to anticipate attack by aggression. They went to war in a delirium of panic, in order to use their bombs first. China and Japan had assailed Russia and destroyed Moscow, the United States had attacked Japan, India was in anarchistic revolt with Delhi a pit of fire spouting death and flame; the redoubtable King of the Balkans was mobilising. It must have seemed plain at last to every one in those days that the world was slipping headlong to anarchy. By the spring of 1959 from nearly two hundred centres, and every week added to their number, roared the unquenchable crimson conflagrations of the atomic bombs, the flimsy fabric of the world's credit had vanished, industry was completely disorganised and every city, every thickly populated area was starving or trembled on the verge of starvation. Most of the capital cities of the world were burning; millions of people had already perished, and

over great areas government was at an end. Humanity has been compared by one contemporary writer to a sleeper who handles matches in his sleep and wakes to find himself in flames.

For many months it was an open question whether there was to be found throughout all the race the will and intelligence to face these new conditions and make even an attempt to arrest the downfall of the social order. For a time the war spirit defeated every effort to rally the forces of preservation and construction. Leblanc seemed to be protesting against earthquakes, and as likely to find a spirit of reason in the crater of Etna. Even though the shattered official governments now clamoured for peace, bands of irreconcilables and invincible patriots, usurpers, adventurers, and political desperadoes, were everywhere in possession of the simple apparatus for the disengagement of atomic energy and the initiation of new centres of destruction. The stuff exercised an irresistible fascination upon a certain type of mind. Why should any one give in while he can still destroy his enemies? Surrender? While there is still a chance of blowing them to dust? The power of destruction which had once been the ultimate privilege of government was now the only power left in the world--and it was everywhere. There were few thoughtful men during that phase of blazing waste who did not pass through such moods of despair as Barnet describes, and declare with him: 'This is the end....'

And all the while Leblanc was going to and fro with glittering glasses and an inexhaustible persuasiveness, urging the manifest reasonableness

of his view upon ears that ceased presently to be inattentive. Never at any time did he betray a doubt that all this chaotic conflict would end. No nurse during a nursery uproar was ever so certain of the inevitable ultimate peace. From being treated as an amiable dreamer he came by insensible degrees to be regarded as an extravagant possibility. Then he began to seem even practicable. The people who listened to him in 1958 with a smiling impatience, were eager before 1959 was four months old to know just exactly what he thought might be done. He answered with the patience of a philosopher and the lucidity of a Frenchman. He began to receive responses of a more and more hopeful type. He came across the Atlantic to Italy, and there he gathered in the promises for this congress. He chose those high meadows above Brissago for the reasons we have stated. 'We must get away,' he said, 'from old associations.' He set to work requisitioning material for his conference with an assurance that was justified by the replies. With a slight incredulity the conference which was to begin a new order in the world, gathered itself together. Leblanc summoned it without arrogance, he controlled it by virtue of an infinite humility. Men appeared upon those upland slopes with the apparatus for wireless telegraphy; others followed with tents and provisions; a little cable was flung down to a convenient point upon the Locarno road below. Leblanc arrived, sedulously directing every detail that would affect the tone of the assembly. He might have been a courier in advance rather than the originator of the gathering. And then there arrived, some by the cable, most by aeroplane, a few in other fashions, the men who had been called together to confer upon the state of the world. It was to be a conference without a name. Nine monarchs,

the presidents of four republics, a number of ministers and ambassadors, powerful journalists, and such-like prominent and influential men, took part in it. There were even scientific men; and that world-famous old man, Holsten, came with the others to contribute his amateur statecraft to the desperate problem of the age. Only Leblanc would have dared so to summon figure heads and powers and intelligence, or have had the courage to hope for their agreement....

Section 2

And one at least of those who were called to this conference of governments came to it on foot. This was King Egbert, the young king of the most venerable kingdom in Europe. He was a rebel, and had always been of deliberate choice a rebel against the magnificence of his position. He affected long pedestrian tours and a disposition to sleep in the open air. He came now over the Pass of Sta Maria Maggiore and by boat up the lake to Brissago; thence he walked up the mountain, a pleasant path set with oaks and sweet chestnut. For provision on the walk, for he did not want to hurry, he carried with him a pocketful of bread and cheese. A certain small retinue that was necessary to his comfort and dignity upon occasions of state he sent on by the cable car, and with him walked his private secretary, Firmin, a man who had thrown up the Professorship of World Politics in the London School of Sociology, Economics, and Political Science, to take up these duties. Firmin was a man of strong rather than rapid thought, he had anticipated great influence in this new position, and after some years he was still

only beginning to apprehend how largely his function was to listen. Originally he had been something of a thinker upon international politics, an authority upon tariffs and strategy, and a valued contributor to various of the higher organs of public opinion, but the atomic bombs had taken him by surprise, and he had still to recover completely from his pre-atomic opinions and the silencing effect of those sustained explosives.

The king's freedom from the trammels of etiquette was very complete. In theory--and he abounded in theory--his manners were purely democratic. It was by sheer habit and inadvertency that he permitted Firmin, who had discovered a rucksack in a small shop in the town below, to carry both bottles of beer. The king had never, as a matter of fact, carried anything for himself in his life, and he had never noted that he did not do so.

'We will have nobody with us,' he said, 'at all. We will be perfectly simple.'

So Firmin carried the beer.

As they walked up--it was the king made the pace rather than Firmin--they talked of the conference before them, and Firmin, with a certain want of assurance that would have surprised him in himself in the days of his Professorship, sought to define the policy of his companion. 'In its broader form, sir,' said Firmin; 'I admit a certain

plausibility in this project of Leblanc's, but I feel that although it may be advisable to set up some sort of general control for International affairs--a sort of Hague Court with extended powers--that is no reason whatever for losing sight of the principles of national and imperial autonomy.'

'Firmin,' said the king, 'I am going to set my brother kings a good example.'

Firmin intimated a curiosity that veiled a dread.

'By chucking all that nonsense,' said the king.

He quickened his pace as Firmin, who was already a little out of breath, betrayed a disposition to reply.

'I am going to chuck all that nonsense,' said the king, as Firmin prepared to speak. 'I am going to fling my royalty and empire on the table--and declare at once I don't mean to haggle. It's haggling--about rights--has been the devil in human affairs, for--always. I am going to stop this nonsense.'

Firmin halted abruptly. 'But, sir!' he cried.

The king stopped six yards ahead of him and looked back at his adviser's perspiring visage.

'Do you really think, Firmin, that I am here as--as an infernal politician to put my crown and my flag and my claims and so forth in the way of peace? That little Frenchman is right. You know he is right as well as I do. Those things are over. We--we kings and rulers and representatives have been at the very heart of the mischief. Of course we imply separation, and of course separation means the threat of war, and of course the threat of war means the accumulation of more and more atomic bombs. The old game's up. But, I say, we mustn't stand here, you know. The world waits. Don't you think the old game's up, Firmin?'

Firmin adjusted a strap, passed a hand over his wet forehead, and followed earnestly. 'I admit, sir,' he said to a receding back, 'that there has to be some sort of hegemony, some sort of Amphictyonic council----'

'There's got to be one simple government for all the world,' said the king over his shoulder.

'But as for a reckless, unqualified abandonment, sir----'

'BANG!' cried the king.

Firmin made no answer to this interruption. But a faint shadow of annoyance passed across his heated features.

'Yesterday,' said the king, by way of explanation, 'the Japanese very nearly got San Francisco.'

'I hadn't heard, sir.'

'The Americans ran the Japanese aeroplane down into the sea and there the bomb got busted.'

'Under the sea, sir?'

'Yes. Submarine volcano. The steam is in sight of the Californian coast. It was as near as that. And with things like this happening, you want me to go up this hill and haggle. Consider the effect of that upon my imperial cousin--and all the others!'

'HE will haggle, sir.'

'Not a bit of it,' said the king.

'But, sir.'

'Leblanc won't let him.'

Firmin halted abruptly and gave a vicious pull at the offending strap. 'Sir, he will listen to his advisers,' he said, in a tone that in some subtle way seemed to implicate his master with the trouble of the

knapsack.

The king considered him.

'We will go just a little higher,' he said. 'I want to find this unoccupied village they spoke of, and then we will drink that beer. It can't be far. We will drink the beer and throw away the bottles. And then, Firmin, I shall ask you to look at things in a more generous light.... Because, you know, you must....'

He turned about and for some time the only sound they made was the noise of their boots upon the loose stones of the way and the irregular breathing of Firmin.

At length, as it seemed to Firmin, or quite soon, as it seemed to the king, the gradient of the path diminished, the way widened out, and they found themselves in a very beautiful place indeed. It was one of those upland clusters of sheds and houses that are still to be found in the mountains of North Italy, buildings that were used only in the high summer, and which it was the custom to leave locked up and deserted through all the winter and spring, and up to the middle of June. The buildings were of a soft-toned gray stone, buried in rich green grass, shadowed by chestnut trees and lit by an extraordinary blaze of yellow broom. Never had the king seen broom so glorious; he shouted at the light of it, for it seemed to give out more sunlight even than it received; he sat down impulsively on a lichenous stone, tugged out his

bread and cheese, and bade Firmin thrust the beer into the shaded weeds to cool.

'The things people miss, Firmin,' he said, 'who go up into the air in ships!'

Firmin looked around him with an ungenial eye. 'You see it at its best, sir,' he said, 'before the peasants come here again and make it filthy.'

'It would be beautiful anyhow,' said the king.

'Superficially, sir,' said Firmin. 'But it stands for a social order that is fast vanishing away. Indeed, judging by the grass between the stones and in the huts, I am inclined to doubt if it is in use even now.'

'I suppose,' said the king, 'they would come up immediately the hay on this flower meadow is cut. It would be those slow, creamy-coloured beasts, I expect, one sees on the roads below, and swarthy girls with red handkerchiefs over their black hair.... It is wonderful to think how long that beautiful old life lasted. In the Roman times and long ages before ever the rumour of the Romans had come into these parts, men drove their cattle up into these places as the summer came on.... How haunted is this place! There have been quarrels here, hopes, children have played here and lived to be old crones and old gaffers, and died, and so it has gone on for thousands of lives. Lovers, innumerable

lovers, have caressed amidst this golden broom....'

He meditated over a busy mouthful of bread and cheese.

'We ought to have brought a tankard for that beer,' he said.

Firmin produced a folding aluminium cup, and the king was pleased to drink.

'I wish, sir,' said Firmin suddenly, 'I could induce you at least to delay your decision----'

'It's no good talking, Firmin,' said the king. 'My mind's as clear as daylight.'

'Sire,' protested Firmin, with his voice full of bread and cheese and genuine emotion, 'have you no respect for your kingship?'

The king paused before he answered with unwonted gravity. 'It's just because I have, Firmin, that I won't be a puppet in this game of international politics.' He regarded his companion for a moment and then remarked: 'Kingship!--what do YOU know of kingship, Firmin?

'Yes,' cried the king to his astonished counsellor. 'For the first time in my life I am going to be a king. I am going to lead, and lead by my own authority. For a dozen generations my family has been a set of

dummies in the hands of their advisers. Advisers! Now I am going to be a real king--and I am going to--to abolish, dispose of, finish, the crown to which I have been a slave. But what a world of paralysing shams this roaring stuff has ended! The rigid old world is in the melting-pot again, and I, who seemed to be no more than the stuffing inside a regal robe, I am a king among kings. I have to play my part at the head of things and put an end to blood and fire and idiot disorder.'

'But, sir,' protested Firmin.

'This man Leblanc is right. The whole world has got to be a Republic, one and indivisible. You know that, and my duty is to make that easy. A king should lead his people; you want me to stick on their backs like some Old Man of the Sea. To-day must be a sacrament of kings. Our trust for mankind is done with and ended. We must part our robes among them, we must part our kingship among them, and say to them all, now the king in every one must rule the world.... Have you no sense of the magnificence of this occasion? You want me, Firmin, you want me to go up there and haggle like a damned little solicitor for some price, some compensation, some qualification....'

Firmin shrugged his shoulders and assumed an expression of despair. Meanwhile, he conveyed, one must eat.

For a time neither spoke, and the king ate and turned over in his mind the phrases of the speech he intended to make to the conference. By

virtue of the antiquity of his crown he was to preside, and he intended to make his presidency memorable. Reassured of his eloquence, he considered the despondent and sulky Firmin for a space.

'Firmin,' he said, 'you have idealised kingship.' 'It has been my dream, sir,' said Firmin sorrowfully, 'to serve.'

'At the levers, Firmin,' said the king.

'You are pleased to be unjust,' said Firmin, deeply hurt.

'I am pleased to be getting out of it,' said the king.

'Oh, Firmin,' he went on, 'have you no thought for me? Will you never realise that I am not only flesh and blood but an imagination--with its rights. I am a king in revolt against that fetter they put upon my head. I am a king awake. My reverend grandparents never in all their august lives had a waking moment. They loved the job that you, you advisers, gave them; they never had a doubt of it. It was like giving a doll to a woman who ought to have a child. They delighted in processions and opening things and being read addresses to, and visiting triplets and nonagenarians and all that sort of thing. Incredibly. They used to keep albums of cuttings from all the illustrated papers showing them at it, and if the press-cutting parcels grew thin they were worried. It was all that ever worried them. But there is something atavistic in me; I hark back to unconstitutional monarchs. They christened me too

retrogressively, I think. I wanted to get things done. I was bored. I might have fallen into vice, most intelligent and energetic princes do, but the palace precautions were unusually thorough. I was brought up in the purest court the world has ever seen. . . . Alertly pure.... So I read books, Firmin, and went about asking questions. The thing was bound to happen to one of us sooner or later. Perhaps, too, very likely I'm not vicious. I don't think I am.'

He reflected. 'No,' he said.

Firmin cleared his throat. 'I don't think you are, sir,' he said. 'You prefer----'

He stopped short. He had been going to say 'talking.' He substituted 'ideas.'

'That world of royalty!' the king went on. 'In a little while no one will understand it any more. It will become a riddle....

'Among other things, it was a world of perpetual best clothes. Everything was in its best clothes for us, and usually wearing bunting. With a cinema watching to see we took it properly. If you are a king, Firmin, and you go and look at a regiment, it instantly stops whatever it is doing, changes into full uniform and presents arms. When my august parents went in a train the coal in the tender used to be whitened. It did, Firmin, and if coal had been white instead of black I have no doubt

the authorities would have blackened it. That was the spirit of our treatment. People were always walking about with their faces to us. One never saw anything in profile. One got an impression of a world that was insanely focused on ourselves. And when I began to poke my little questions into the Lord Chancellor and the archbishop and all the rest of them, about what I should see if people turned round, the general effect I produced was that I wasn't by any means displaying the Royal Tact they had expected of me....'

He meditated for a time.

'And yet, you know, there is something in the kingship, Firmin. It stiffened up my august little grandfather. It gave my grandmother a kind of awkward dignity even when she was cross--and she was very often cross. They both had a profound sense of responsibility. My poor father's health was wretched during his brief career; nobody outside the circle knows just how he screwed himself up to things. "My people expect it," he used to say of this tiresome duty or that. Most of the things they made him do were silly--it was part of a bad tradition, but there was nothing silly in the way he set about them.... The spirit of kingship is a fine thing, Firmin; I feel it in my bones; I do not know what I might not be if I were not a king. I could die for my people, Firmin, and you couldn't. No, don't say you could die for me, because I know better. Don't think I forget my kingship, Firmin, don't imagine that. I am a king, a kingly king, by right divine. The fact that I am also a chattering young man makes not the slightest difference to that.

But the proper text-book for kings, Firmin, is none of the court memoirs and Welt-Politik books you would have me read; it is old Fraser's Golden Bough. Have you read that, Firmin?'

Firmin had. 'Those were the authentic kings. In the end they were cut up and a bit given to everybody. They sprinkled the nations--with Kingship.'

Firmin turned himself round and faced his royal master.

'What do you intend to do, sir?' he asked. 'If you will not listen to me, what do you propose to do this afternoon?'

The king flicked crumbs from his coat.

'Manifestly war has to stop for ever, Firmin. Manifestly this can only be done by putting all the world under one government. Our crowns and flags are in the way. Manifestly they must go.'

'Yes, sir,' interrupted Firmin, 'but WHAT government? I don't see what government you get by a universal abdication!'

'Well,' said the king, with his hands about his knees, 'WE shall be the government.'

'The conference?' exclaimed Firmin.

'Who else?' asked the king simply.

'It's perfectly simple,' he added to Firmin's tremendous silence.

'But,' cried Firmin, 'you must have sanctions! Will there be no form of election, for example?'

'Why should there be?' asked the king, with intelligent curiosity.

'The consent of the governed.'

'Firmin, we are just going to lay down our differences and take over government. Without any election at all. Without any sanction. The governed will show their consent by silence. If any effective opposition arises we shall ask it to come in and help. The true sanction of kingship is the grip upon the sceptre. We aren't going to worry people to vote for us. I'm certain the mass of men does not want to be bothered with such things.... We'll contrive a way for any one interested to join in. That's quite enough in the way of democracy. Perhaps later--when things don't matter.... We shall govern all right, Firmin. Government only becomes difficult when the lawyers get hold of it, and since these troubles began the lawyers are shy. Indeed, come to think of it, I wonder where all the lawyers are.... Where are they? A lot, of course, were bagged, some of the worst ones, when they blew up my legislature. You never knew the late Lord Chancellor. . . .

'Necessities bury rights. And create them. Lawyers live on dead rights disinterred.... We've done with that way of living. We won't have more law than a code can cover and beyond that government will be free....

'Before the sun sets to-day, Firmin, trust me, we shall have made our abdications, all of us, and declared the World Republic, supreme and indivisible. I wonder what my august grandmother would have made of it! All my rights! . . . And then we shall go on governing. What else is there to do? All over the world we shall declare that there is no longer mine or thine, but ours. China, the United States, two-thirds of Europe, will certainly fall in and obey. They will have to do so. What else can they do? Their official rulers are here with us. They won't be able to get together any sort of idea of not obeying us.... Then we shall declare that every sort of property is held in trust for the Republic....'

'But, sir!' cried Firmin, suddenly enlightened. 'Has this been arranged already?'

'My dear Firmin, do you think we have come here, all of us, to talk at large? The talking has been done for half a century. Talking and writing. We are here to set the new thing, the simple, obvious, necessary thing, going.'

He stood up.

Firmin, forgetting the habits of a score of years, remained seated.

'WELL,' he said at last. 'And I have known nothing!'

The king smiled very cheerfully. He liked these talks with Firmin.

Section 3

That conference upon the Brissago meadows was one of the most heterogeneous collections of prominent people that has ever met together. Principalities and powers, stripped and shattered until all their pride and mystery were gone, met in a marvellous new humility. Here were kings and emperors whose capitals were lakes of flaming destruction, statesmen whose countries had become chaos, scared politicians and financial potentates. Here were leaders of thought and learned investigators dragged reluctantly to the control of affairs. Altogether there were ninety-three of them, Leblanc's conception of the head men of the world. They had all come to the realisation of the simple truths that the indefatigable Leblanc had hammered into them; and, drawing his resources from the King of Italy, he had provisioned his conference with a generous simplicity quite in accordance with the rest of his character, and so at last was able to make his astonishing and entirely rational appeal. He had appointed King Egbert the president, he believed in this young man so firmly that he completely dominated him, and he spoke himself as a secretary might speak from the

president's left hand, and evidently did not realise himself that he was telling them all exactly what they had to do. He imagined he was merely recapitulating the obvious features of the situation for their convenience. He was dressed in ill-fitting white silk clothes, and he consulted a dingy little packet of notes as he spoke. They put him out. He explained that he had never spoken from notes before, but that this occasion was exceptional.

And then King Egbert spoke as he was expected to speak, and Leblanc's spectacles moistened at that flow of generous sentiment, most amiably and lightly expressed. 'We haven't to stand on ceremony,' said the king, 'we have to govern the world. We have always pretended to govern the world and here is our opportunity.'

'Of course,' whispered Leblanc, nodding his head rapidly, 'of course.'

'The world has been smashed up, and we have to put it on its wheels again,' said King Egbert. 'And it is the simple common sense of this crisis for all to help and none to seek advantage. Is that our tone or not?'

The gathering was too old and seasoned and miscellaneous for any great displays of enthusiasm, but that was its tone, and with an astonishment that somehow became exhilarating it began to resign, repudiate, and declare its intentions. Firmin, taking notes behind his master, heard everything that had been foretold among the yellow broom, come

true. With a queer feeling that he was dreaming, he assisted at the proclamation of the World State, and saw the message taken out to the wireless operators to be throbbed all round the habitable globe. 'And next,' said King Egbert, with a cheerful excitement in his voice, 'we have to get every atom of Carolinum and all the plant for making it, into our control....'

Firman was not alone in his incredulity. Not a man there who was not a very amiable, reasonable, benevolent creature at bottom; some had been born to power and some had happened upon it, some had struggled to get it, not clearly knowing what it was and what it implied, but none was irreconcilably set upon its retention at the price of cosmic disaster. Their minds had been prepared by circumstances and sedulously cultivated by Leblanc; and now they took the broad obvious road along which King Egbert was leading them, with a mingled conviction of strangeness and necessity. Things went very smoothly; the King of Italy explained the arrangements that had been made for the protection of the camp from any fantastic attack; a couple of thousand of aeroplanes, each carrying a sharpshooter, guarded them, and there was an excellent system of relays, and at night all the sky would be searched by scores of lights, and the admirable Leblanc gave luminous reasons for their camping just where they were and going on with their administrative duties forthwith. He knew of this place, because he had happened upon it when holiday-making with Madame Leblanc twenty years and more ago. 'There is very simple fare at present,' he explained, 'on account of the disturbed state of the countries about us. But we have excellent fresh milk, good red wine,

beef, bread, salad, and lemons. . . . In a few days I hope to place things in the hands of a more efficient caterer....'

The members of the new world government dined at three long tables on trestles, and down the middle of these tables Leblanc, in spite of the barrenness of his menu, had contrived to have a great multitude of beautiful roses. There was similar accommodation for the secretaries and attendants at a lower level down the mountain. The assembly dined as it had debated, in the open air, and over the dark crags to the west the glowing June sunset shone upon the banquet. There was no precedency now among the ninety-three, and King Egbert found himself between a pleasant little Japanese stranger in spectacles and his cousin of Central Europe, and opposite a great Bengali leader and the President of the United States of America. Beyond the Japanese was Holsten, the old chemist, and Leblanc was a little way down the other side.

The king was still cheerfully talkative and abounded in ideas. He fell presently into an amiable controversy with the American, who seemed to feel a lack of impressiveness in the occasion.

It was ever the Transatlantic tendency, due, no doubt, to the necessity of handling public questions in a bulky and striking manner, to over-emphasise and over-accentuate, and the president was touched by his national failing. He suggested now that there should be a new era, starting from that day as the first day of the first year.

The king demurred.

'From this day forth, sir, man enters upon his heritage,' said the American.

'Man,' said the king, 'is always entering upon his heritage. You Americans have a peculiar weakness for anniversaries--if you will forgive me saying so. Yes--I accuse you of a lust for dramatic effect. Everything is happening always, but you want to say this or this is the real instant in time and subordinate all the others to it.'

The American said something about an epoch-making day.

'But surely,' said the king, 'you don't want us to condemn all humanity to a world-wide annual Fourth of July for ever and ever more. On account of this harmless necessary day of declarations. No conceivable day could ever deserve that. Ah! you do not know, as I do, the devastations of the memorable. My poor grandparents were--RUBRICATED. The worst of these huge celebrations is that they break up the dignified succession of one's contemporary emotions. They interrupt. They set back. Suddenly out come the flags and fireworks, and the old enthusiasms are furbished up--and it's sheer destruction of the proper thing that ought to be going on. Sufficient unto the day is the celebration thereof. Let the dead past bury its dead. You see, in regard to the calendar, I am for democracy and you are for aristocracy. All things I hold, are august, and have a right to be lived through on their merits. No day should be

sacrificed on the grave of departed events. What do you think of it, Wilhelm?'

'For the noble, yes, all days should be noble.'

'Exactly my position,' said the king, and felt pleased at what he had been saying.

And then, since the American pressed his idea, the king contrived to shift the talk from the question of celebrating the epoch they were making to the question of the probabilities that lay ahead. Here every one became diffident. They could see the world unified and at peace, but what detail was to follow from that unification they seemed indisposed to discuss. This diffidence struck the king as remarkable. He plunged upon the possibilities of science. All the huge expenditure that had hitherto gone into unproductive naval and military preparations, must now, he declared, place research upon a new footing. 'Where one man worked we will have a thousand.' He appealed to Holsten. 'We have only begun to peep into these possibilities,' he said. 'You at any rate have sounded the vaults of the treasure house.'

'They are unfathomable,' smiled Holsten.

'Man,' said the American, with a manifest resolve to justify and reinstate himself after the flickering contradictions of the king, 'Man, I say, is only beginning to enter upon his heritage.'

'Tell us some of the things you believe we shall presently learn, give us an idea of the things we may presently do,' said the king to Holsten.

Holsten opened out the vistas....

'Science,' the king cried presently, 'is the new king of the world.'

'OUR view,' said the president, 'is that sovereignty resides with the people.'

'No!' said the king, 'the sovereign is a being more subtle than that. And less arithmetical. Neither my family nor your emancipated people. It is something that floats about us, and above us, and through us. It is that common impersonal will and sense of necessity of which Science is the best understood and most typical aspect. It is the mind of the race. It is that which has brought us here, which has bowed us all to its demands....'

He paused and glanced down the table at Leblanc, and then re-opened at his former antagonist.

'There is a disposition,' said the king, 'to regard this gathering as if it were actually doing what it appears to be doing, as if we ninety-odd men of our own free will and wisdom were unifying the world. There is a temptation to consider ourselves exceptionally fine fellows, and

masterful men, and all the rest of it. We are not. I doubt if we should average out as anything abler than any other casually selected body of ninety-odd men. We are no creators, we are consequences, we are salvagers--or salvagees. The thing to-day is not ourselves but the wind of conviction that has blown us hither....'

The American had to confess he could hardly agree with the king's estimate of their average.

'Holster, perhaps, and one or two others, might lift us a little,' the king conceded. 'But the rest of us?'

His eyes flitted once more towards Leblanc.

'Look at Leblanc,' he said. 'He's just a simple soul. There are hundreds and thousands like him. I admit, a certain dexterity, a certain lucidity, but there is not a country town in France where there is not a Leblanc or so to be found about two o'clock in its principal cafe. It's just that he isn't complicated or Super-Mannish, or any of those things that has made all he has done possible. But in happier times, don't you think, Wilhelm, he would have remained just what his father was, a successful epicier, very clean, very accurate, very honest. And on holidays he would have gone out with Madame Leblanc and her knitting in a punt with a jar of something gentle and have sat under a large reasonable green-lined umbrella and fished very neatly and successfully for gudgeon....'

The president and the Japanese prince in spectacles protested together.

'If I do him an injustice,' said the king, 'it is only because I want to elucidate my argument. I want to make it clear how small are men and days, and how great is man in comparison....'

Section 4

So it was King Egbert talked at Brissago after they had proclaimed the unity of the world. Every evening after that the assembly dined together and talked at their ease and grew accustomed to each other and sharpened each other's ideas, and every day they worked together, and really for a time believed that they were inventing a new government for the world. They discussed a constitution. But there were matters needing attention too urgently to wait for any constitution. They attended to these incidentally. The constitution it was that waited. It was presently found convenient to keep the constitution waiting indefinitely as King Egbert had foreseen, and meanwhile, with an increasing self-confidence, that council went on governing....

On this first evening of all the council's gatherings, after King Egbert had talked for a long time and drunken and praised very abundantly the simple red wine of the country that Leblanc had procured for them, he fathered about him a group of congenial spirits and fell into a discourse upon simplicity, praising it above all things and declaring

that the ultimate aim of art, religion, philosophy, and science alike was to simplify. He instanced himself as a devotee to simplicity. And Leblanc he instanced as a crowning instance of the splendour of this quality. Upon that they all agreed.

When at last the company about the tables broke up, the king found himself brimming over with a peculiar affection and admiration for Leblanc, he made his way to him and drew him aside and broached what he declared was a small matter. There was, he said, a certain order in his gift that, unlike all other orders and decorations in the world, had never been corrupted. It was reserved for elderly men of supreme distinction, the acuteness of whose gifts was already touched to mellowness, and it had included the greatest names of every age so far as the advisers of his family had been able to ascertain them. At present, the king admitted, these matters of stars and badges were rather obscured by more urgent affairs, for his own part he had never set any value upon them at all, but a time might come when they would be at least interesting, and in short he wished to confer the Order of Merit upon Leblanc. His sole motive in doing so, he added, was his strong desire to signalise his personal esteem. He laid his hand upon the Frenchman's shoulder as he said these things, with an almost brotherly affection. Leblanc received this proposal with a modest confusion that greatly enhanced the king's opinion of his admirable simplicity. He pointed out that eager as he was to snatch at the proffered distinction, it might at the present stage appear invidious, and he therefore suggested that the conferring of it should be postponed

until it could be made the crown and conclusion of his services. The king was unable to shake this resolution, and the two men parted with expressions of mutual esteem.

The king then summoned Firmin in order to make a short note of a number of things that he had said during the day. But after about twenty minutes' work the sweet sleepiness of the mountain air overcame him, and he dismissed Firmin and went to bed and fell asleep at once, and slept with extreme satisfaction. He had had an active, agreeable day.

Section 5

The establishment of the new order that was thus so humanly begun, was, if one measures it by the standard of any preceding age, a rapid progress. The fighting spirit of the world was exhausted. Only here or there did fierceness linger. For long decades the combative side in human affairs had been monstrously exaggerated by the accidents of political separation. This now became luminously plain. An enormous proportion of the force that sustained armaments had been nothing more aggressive than the fear of war and warlike neighbours. It is doubtful if any large section of the men actually enlisted for fighting ever at any time really hungered and thirsted for bloodshed and danger. That kind of appetite was probably never very strong in the species after the savage stage was past. The army was a profession, in which killing had become a disagreeable possibility rather than an eventful certainty. If one reads the old newspapers and periodicals of that time, which did

so much to keep militarism alive, one finds very little about glory and adventure and a constant harping on the disagreeableness of invasion and subjugation. In one word, militarism was funk. The belligerent resolution of the armed Europe of the twentieth century was the resolution of a fiercely frightened sheep to plunge. And now that its weapons were exploding in its hands, Europe was only too eager to drop them, and abandon this fancied refuge of violence.

For a time the whole world had been shocked into frankness; nearly all the clever people who had hitherto sustained the ancient belligerent separations had now been brought to realise the need for simplicity of attitude and openness of mind; and in this atmosphere of moral renascence, there was little attempt to get negotiable advantages out of resistance to the new order. Human beings are foolish enough no doubt, but few have stopped to haggle in a fire-escape. The council had its way with them. The band of 'patriots' who seized the laboratories and arsenal just outside Osaka and tried to rouse Japan to revolt against inclusion in the Republic of Mankind, found they had miscalculated the national pride and met the swift vengeance of their own countrymen. That fight in the arsenal was a vivid incident in this closing chapter of the history of war. To the last the 'patriots' were undecided whether, in the event of a defeat, they would explode their supply of atomic bombs or not. They were fighting with swords outside the iridium doors, and the moderates of their number were at bay and on the verge of destruction, only ten, indeed, remained unwounded, when the republicans burst in to the rescue....

Section 6

One single monarch held out against the general acquiescence in the new rule, and that was that strange survival of mediaevalism, the 'Slavic Fox,' the King of the Balkans. He debated and delayed his submissions. He showed an extraordinary combination of cunning and temerity in his evasion of the repeated summonses from Brissago. He affected ill-health and a great preoccupation with his new official mistress, for his semi-barbaric court was arranged on the best romantic models. His tactics were ably seconded by Doctor Pestovitch, his chief minister. Failing to establish his claims to complete independence, King Ferdinand Charles annoyed the conference by a proposal to be treated as a protected state. Finally he professed an unconvincing submission, and put a mass of obstacles in the way of the transfer of his national officials to the new government. In these things he was enthusiastically supported by his subjects, still for the most part an illiterate peasantry, passionately if confusedly patriotic, and so far with no practical knowledge of the effect of atomic bombs. More particularly he retained control of all the Balkan aeroplanes.

For once the extreme naivete of Leblanc seems to have been mitigated by duplicity. He went on with the general pacification of the world as if the Balkan submission was made in absolute good faith, and he announced the disbandment of the force of aeroplanes that hitherto guarded the council at Brissago upon the approaching fifteenth of July. But instead

he doubled the number upon duty on that eventful day, and made various arrangements for their disposition. He consulted certain experts, and when he took King Egbert into his confidence there was something in his neat and explicit foresight that brought back to that ex-monarch's mind his half-forgotten fantasy of Leblanc as a fisherman under a green umbrella.

About five o'clock in the morning of the seventeenth of July one of the outer sentinels of the Brissago fleet, which was soaring unobtrusively over the lower end of the lake of Garda, sighted and hailed a strange aeroplane that was flying westward, and, failing to get a satisfactory reply, set its wireless apparatus talking and gave chase. A swarm of consorts appeared very promptly over the westward mountains, and before the unknown aeroplane had sighted Como, it had a dozen eager attendants closing in upon it. Its driver seems to have hesitated, dropped down among the mountains, and then turned southward in flight, only to find an intercepting biplane sweeping across his bows. He then went round into the eye of the rising sun, and passed within a hundred yards of his original pursuer.

The sharpshooter therein opened fire at once, and showed an intelligent grasp of the situation by disabling the passenger first. The man at the wheel must have heard his companion cry out behind him, but he was too intent on getting away to waste even a glance behind. Twice after that he must have heard shots. He let his engine go, he crouched down, and for twenty minutes he must have steered in the continual expectation of

a bullet. It never came, and when at last he glanced round, three great planes were close upon him, and his companion, thrice hit, lay dead across his bombs. His followers manifestly did not mean either to upset or shoot him, but inexorably they drove him down, down. At last he was curving and flying a hundred yards or less over the level fields of rice and maize. Ahead of him and dark against the morning sunrise was a village with a very tall and slender campanile and a line of cable bearing metal standards that he could not clear. He stopped his engine abruptly and dropped flat. He may have hoped to get at the bombs when he came down, but his pitiless pursuers drove right over him and shot him as he fell.

Three other aeroplanes curved down and came to rest amidst grass close by the smashed machine. Their passengers descended, and ran, holding their light rifles in their hands towards the debris and the two dead men. The coffin-shaped box that had occupied the centre of the machine had broken, and three black objects, each with two handles like the ears of a pitcher, lay peacefully amidst the litter.

These objects were so tremendously important in the eyes of their captors that they disregarded the two dead men who lay bloody and broken amidst the wreckage as they might have disregarded dead frogs by a country pathway.

'By God,' cried the first. 'Here they are!'

'And unbroken!' said the second.

'I've never seen the things before,' said the first.

'Bigger than I thought,' said the second.

The third comer arrived. He stared for a moment at the bombs and then turned his eyes to the dead man with a crushed chest who lay in a muddy place among the green stems under the centre of the machine.

'One can take no risks,' he said, with a faint suggestion of apology.

The other two now also turned to the victims. 'We must signal,' said the first man. A shadow passed between them and the sun, and they looked up to see the aeroplane that had fired the last shot. 'Shall we signal?' came a megaphone hail.

'Three bombs,' they answered together.

'Where do they come from?' asked the megaphone.

The three sharpshooters looked at each other and then moved towards the dead men. One of them had an idea. 'Signal that first,' he said, 'while we look.' They were joined by their aviators for the search, and all six men began a hunt that was necessarily brutal in its haste, for some indication of identity. They examined the men's pockets, their

bloodstained clothes, the machine, the framework. They turned the bodies over and flung them aside. There was not a tattoo mark. . . . Everything was elaborately free of any indication of its origin.

'We can't find out!' they called at last.

'Not a sign?'

'Not a sign.'

'I'm coming down,' said the man overhead....

Section 7

The Slavic fox stood upon a metal balcony in his picturesque Art Nouveau palace that gave upon the precipice that overhung his bright little capital, and beside him stood Pestovitch, grizzled and cunning, and now full of an ill-suppressed excitement. Behind them the window opened into a large room, richly decorated in aluminium and crimson enamel, across which the king, as he glanced ever and again over his shoulder with a gesture of inquiry, could see through the two open doors of a little azure walled antechamber the wireless operator in the turret working at his incessant transcription. Two pompously uniformed messengers waited listlessly in this apartment. The room was furnished with a stately dignity, and had in the middle of it a big green baize-covered table with the massive white metal inkpots and antiquated sandboxes natural to

a new but romantic monarchy. It was the king's council chamber and about it now, in attitudes of suspended intrigue, stood the half-dozen ministers who constituted his cabinet. They had been summoned for twelve o'clock, but still at half-past twelve the king loitered in the balcony and seemed to be waiting for some news that did not come.

The king and his minister had talked at first in whispers; they had fallen silent, for they found little now to express except a vague anxiety. Away there on the mountain side were the white metal roofs of the long farm buildings beneath which the bomb factory and the bombs were hidden. (The chemist who had made all these for the king had died suddenly after the declaration of Brissago.) Nobody knew of that store of mischief now but the king and his adviser and three heavily faithful attendants; the aviators who waited now in the midday blaze with their bomb-carrying machines and their passenger bomb-throwers in the exercising grounds of the motor-cyclist barracks below were still in ignorance of the position of the ammunition they were presently to take up. It was time they started if the scheme was to work as Pestovitch had planned it. It was a magnificent plan. It aimed at no less than the Empire of the World. The government of idealists and professors away there at Brissago was to be blown to fragments, and then east, west, north, and south those aeroplanes would go swarming over a world that had disarmed itself, to proclaim Ferdinand Charles, the new Caesar, the Master, Lord of the Earth. It was a magnificent plan. But the tension of this waiting for news of the success of the first blow was--considerable.

The Slavic fox was of a pallid fairness, he had a remarkably long nose, a thick, short moustache, and small blue eyes that were a little too near together to be pleasant. It was his habit to worry his moustache with short, nervous tugs whenever his restless mind troubled him, and now this motion was becoming so incessant that it irked Pestovitch beyond the limits of endurance.

'I will go,' said the minister, 'and see what the trouble is with the wireless. They give us nothing, good or bad.'

Left to himself, the king could worry his moustache without stint; he leant his elbows forward on the balcony and gave both of his long white hands to the work, so that he looked like a pale dog gnawing a bone. Suppose they caught his men, what should he do? Suppose they caught his men?

The clocks in the light gold-capped belfries of the town below presently intimated the half-hour after midday.

Of course, he and Pestovitch had thought it out. Even if they had caught those men, they were pledged to secrecy.... Probably they would be killed in the catching.... One could deny anyhow, deny and deny.

And then he became aware of half a dozen little shining specks very high in the blue.... Pestovitch came out to him presently. 'The government

messages, sire, have all dropped into cipher,' he said. 'I have set a man----'

'LOOK!' interrupted the king, and pointed upward with a long, lean finger.

Pestovitch followed that indication and then glanced for one questioning moment at the white face before him.

'We have to face it out, sire,' he said.

For some moments they watched the steep spirals of the descending messengers, and then they began a hasty consultation....

They decided that to be holding a council upon the details of an ultimate surrender to Brissago was as innocent-looking a thing as the king could well be doing, and so, when at last the ex-king Egbert, whom the council had sent as its envoy, arrived upon the scene, he discovered the king almost theatrically posed at the head of his councillors in the midst of his court. The door upon the wireless operators was shut.

The ex-king from Brissago came like a draught through the curtains and attendants that gave a wide margin to King Ferdinand's state, and the familiar confidence of his manner belied a certain hardness in his eye. Firmin trotted behind him, and no one else was with him. And as Ferdinand Charles rose to greet him, there came into the heart of the

Balkan king again that same chilly feeling that he had felt upon the balcony--and it passed at the careless gestures of his guest. For surely any one might outwit this foolish talker who, for a mere idea and at the command of a little French rationalist in spectacles, had thrown away the most ancient crown in all the world.

One must deny, deny....

And then slowly and quite tiresomely he realised that there was nothing to deny. His visitor, with an amiable ease, went on talking about everything in debate between himself and Brissago except----.

Could it be that they had been delayed? Could it be that they had had to drop for repairs and were still uncaptured? Could it be that even now while this fool babbled, they were over there among the mountains heaving their deadly charge over the side of the aeroplane?

Strange hopes began to lift the tail of the Slavic fox again.

What was the man saying? One must talk to him anyhow until one knew. At any moment the little brass door behind him might open with the news of Brissago blown to atoms. Then it would be a delightful relief to the present tension to arrest this chatterer forthwith. He might be killed perhaps. What?

The king was repeating his observation. 'They have a ridiculous fancy

that your confidence is based on the possession of atomic bombs.'

King Ferdinand Charles pulled himself together. He protested.

'Oh, quite so,' said the ex-king, 'quite so.'

'What grounds?' The ex-king permitted himself a gesture and the ghost of a chuckle--why the devil should he chuckle? 'Practically none,' he said. 'But of course with these things one has to be so careful.'

And then again for an instant something--like the faintest shadow of derision--gleamed out of the envoy's eyes and recalled that chilly feeling to King Ferdinand's spine.

Some kindred depression had come to Pestovitch, who had been watching the drawn intensity of Firmin's face. He came to the help of his master, who, he feared, might protest too much.

'A search!' cried the king. 'An embargo on our aeroplanes.'

'Only a temporary expedient,' said the ex-king Egbert, 'while the search is going on.'

The king appealed to his council.

'The people will never permit it, sire,' said a bustling little man in a

gorgeous uniform.

'You'll have to make 'em,' said the ex-king, genially addressing all the councillors.

King Ferdinand glanced at the closed brass door through which no news would come.

'When would you want to have this search?'

The ex-king was radiant. 'We couldn't possibly do it until the day after to-morrow,' he said.

'Just the capital?'

'Where else?' asked the ex-king, still more cheerfully.

'For my own part,' said the ex-king confidentially, 'I think the whole business ridiculous. Who would be such a fool as to hide atomic bombs? Nobody. Certain hanging if he's caught--certain, and almost certain blowing up if he isn't. But nowadays I have to take orders like the rest of the world. And here I am.'

The king thought he had never met such detestable geniality. He glanced at Pestovitch, who nodded almost imperceptibly. It was well, anyhow, to have a fool to deal with. They might have sent a diplomatist. 'Of

course,' said the king, 'I recognise the overpowering force--and a kind of logic--in these orders from Brissago.'

'I knew you would,' said the ex-king, with an air of relief, 'and so let us arrange----'

They arranged with a certain informality. No Balkan aeroplane was to adventure into the air until the search was concluded, and meanwhile the fleets of the world government would soar and circle in the sky. The towns were to be placarded with offers of reward to any one who would help in the discovery of atomic bombs....

'You will sign that,' said the ex-king.

'Why?'

'To show that we aren't in any way hostile to you.'

Pestovitch nodded 'yes' to his master.

'And then, you see,' said the ex-king in that easy way of his, 'we'll have a lot of men here, borrow help from your police, and run through all your things. And then everything will be over. Meanwhile, if I may be your guest....' When presently Pestovitch was alone with the king again, he found him in a state of jangling emotions. His spirit was tossing like a wind-whipped sea. One moment he was exalted and full of

contempt for 'that ass' and his search; the next he was down in a pit of dread. 'They will find them, Pestovitch, and then he'll hang us.'

'Hang us?'

The king put his long nose into his councillor's face. 'That grinning brute WANTS to hang us,' he said. 'And hang us he will, if we give him a shadow of a chance.'

'But all their Modern State Civilisation!'

'Do you think there's any pity in that crew of Godless, Vivisecting Prigs?' cried this last king of romance. 'Do you think, Pestovitch, they understand anything of a high ambition or a splendid dream? Do you think that our gallant and sublime adventure has any appeal to them? Here am I, the last and greatest and most romantic of the Caesars, and do you think they will miss the chance of hanging me like a dog if they can, killing me like a rat in a hole? And that renegade! He who was once an anointed king! . . .

'I hate that sort of eye that laughs and keeps hard,' said the king.

'I won't sit still here and be caught like a fascinated rabbit,' said the king in conclusion. 'We must shift those bombs.'

'Risk it,' said Pestovitch. 'Leave them alone.'

'No,' said the king. 'Shift them near the frontier. Then while they watch us here--they will always watch us here now--we can buy an aeroplane abroad, and pick them up....'

The king was in a feverish, irritable mood all that evening, but he made his plans nevertheless with infinite cunning. They must get the bombs away; there must be a couple of atomic hay lorries, the bombs could be hidden under the hay.... Pestovitch went and came, instructing trusty servants, planning and replanning.... The king and the ex-king talked very pleasantly of a number of subjects. All the while at the back of King Ferdinand Charles's mind fretted the mystery of his vanished aeroplane. There came no news of its capture, and no news of its success. At any moment all that power at the back of his visitor might crumble away and vanish....

It was past midnight, when the king, in a cloak and slouch hat that might equally have served a small farmer, or any respectable middle-class man, slipped out from an inconspicuous service gate on the eastward side of his palace into the thickly wooded gardens that sloped in a series of terraces down to the town. Pestovitch and his guard-valet Peter, both wrapped about in a similar disguise, came out among the laurels that bordered the pathway and joined him. It was a clear, warm night, but the stars seemed unusually little and remote because of the aeroplanes, each trailing a searchlight, that drove hither and thither across the blue. One great beam seemed to rest on the king for a moment

as he came out of the palace; then instantly and reassuringly it had swept away. But while they were still in the palace gardens another found them and looked at them.

'They see us,' cried the king.

'They make nothing of us,' said Pestovitch.

The king glanced up and met a calm, round eye of light, that seemed to wink at him and vanish, leaving him blinded....

The three men went on their way. Near the little gate in the garden railings that Pestovitch had caused to be unlocked, the king paused under the shadow of an flex and looked back at the place. It was very high and narrow, a twentieth-century rendering of mediaevalism, mediaevalism in steel and bronze and sham stone and opaque glass. Against the sky it splashed a confusion of pinnacles. High up in the eastward wing were the windows of the apartments of the ex-king Egbert. One of them was brightly lit now, and against the light a little black figure stood very still and looked out upon the night.

The king snarled.

'He little knows how we slip through his fingers,' said Pestovitch.

And as he spoke they saw the ex-king stretch out his arms slowly, like

one who yawns, knuckle his eyes and turn inward--no doubt to his bed.

Down through the ancient winding back streets of his capital hurried the king, and at an appointed corner a shabby atomic-automobile waited for the three. It was a hackney carriage of the lowest grade, with dinted metal panels and deflated cushions. The driver was one of the ordinary drivers of the capital, but beside him sat the young secretary of Pestovitch, who knew the way to the farm where the bombs were hidden.

The automobile made its way through the narrow streets of the old town, which were still lit and uneasy--for the fleet of airships overhead had kept the cafes open and people abroad--over the great new bridge, and so by straggling outskirts to the country. And all through his capital the king who hoped to outdo Caesar, sat back and was very still, and no one spoke. And as they got out into the dark country they became aware of the searchlights wandering over the country-side like the uneasy ghosts of giants. The king sat forward and looked at these flitting whitenesses, and every now and then peered up to see the flying ships overhead.

'I don't like them,' said the king.

Presently one of these patches of moonlight came to rest about them and seemed to be following their automobile. The king drew back.

'The things are confoundedly noiseless,' said the king. 'It's like being

stalked by lean white cats.'

He peered again. 'That fellow is watching us,' he said.

And then suddenly he gave way to panic. 'Pestovitch,' he said, clutching his minister's arm, 'they are watching us. I'm not going through with this. They are watching us. I'm going back.'

Pestovitch remonstrated. 'Tell him to go back,' said the king, and tried to open the window. For a few moments there was a grim struggle in the automobile; a gripping of wrists and a blow. 'I can't go through with it,' repeated the king, 'I can't go through with it.'

'But they'll hang us,' said Pestovitch.

'Not if we were to give up now. Not if we were to surrender the bombs. It is you who brought me into this....'

At last Pestovitch compromised. There was an inn perhaps half a mile from the farm. They could alight there and the king could get brandy, and rest his nerves for a time. And if he still thought fit to go back he could go back.

'See,' said Pestovitch, 'the light has gone again.'

The king peered up. 'I believe he's following us without a light,' said

the king.

In the little old dirty inn the king hung doubtful for a time, and was for going back and throwing himself on the mercy of the council. 'If there is a council,' said Pestovitch. 'By this time your bombs may have settled it.

'But if so, these infernal aeroplanes would go.'

'They may not know yet.'

'But, Pestovitch, why couldn't you do all this without me?'

Pestovitch made no answer for a moment. 'I was for leaving the bombs in their place,' he said at last, and went to the window. About their conveyance shone a circle of bright light. Pestovitch had a brilliant idea. 'I will send my secretary out to make a kind of dispute with the driver. Something that will make them watch up above there. Meanwhile you and I and Peter will go out by the back way and up by the hedges to the farm....'

It was worthy of his subtle reputation and it answered passing well.

In ten minutes they were tumbling over the wall of the farm-yard, wet, muddy, and breathless, but unobserved. But as they ran towards the barns the king gave vent to something between a groan and a curse, and all

about them shone the light--and passed.

But had it passed at once or lingered for just a second?

'They didn't see us,' said Peter.

'I don't think they saw us,' said the king, and stared as the light went swooping up the mountain side, hung for a second about a hayrick, and then came pouring back.

'In the barn!' cried the king.

He bruised his shin against something, and then all three men were inside the huge steel-girdered barn in which stood the two motor hay lorries that were to take the bombs away. Kurt and Abel, the two brothers of Peter, had brought the lorries thither in daylight. They had the upper half of the loads of hay thrown off, ready to cover the bombs, so soon as the king should show the hiding-place. 'There's a sort of pit here,' said the king. 'Don't light another lantern. This key of mine releases a ring....'

For a time scarcely a word was spoken in the darkness of the barn. There was the sound of a slab being lifted and then of feet descending a ladder into a pit. Then whispering and then heavy breathing as Kurt came struggling up with the first of the hidden bombs.

'We shall do it yet,' said the king. And then he gasped. 'Curse that light. Why in the name of Heaven didn't we shut the barn door?' For the great door stood wide open and all the empty, lifeless yard outside and the door and six feet of the floor of the barn were in the blue glare of an inquiring searchlight.

'Shut the door, Peter,' said Pestovitch.

'No,' cried the king, too late, as Peter went forward into the light. 'Don't show yourself!' cried the king. Kurt made a step forward and plucked his brother back. For a time all five men stood still. It seemed that light would never go and then abruptly it was turned off, leaving them blinded. 'Now,' said the king uneasily, 'now shut the door.'

'Not completely,' cried Pestovitch. 'Leave a chink for us to go out by....'

It was hot work shifting those bombs, and the king worked for a time like a common man. Kurt and Abel carried the great things up and Peter brought them to the carts, and the king and Pestovitch helped him to place them among the hay. They made as little noise as they could....

'Ssh!' cried the king. 'What's that?'

But Kurt and Abel did not hear, and came blundering up the ladder with the last of the load.

'Ssh!' Peter ran forward to them with a whispered remonstrance. Now they were still.

The barn door opened a little wider, and against the dim blue light outside they saw the black shape of a man.

'Any one here?' he asked, speaking with an Italian accent.

The king broke into a cold perspiration. Then Pestovitch answered: 'Only a poor farmer loading hay,' he said, and picked up a huge hay fork and went forward softly.

'You load your hay at a very bad time and in a very bad light,' said the man at the door, peering in. 'Have you no electric light here?'

Then suddenly he turned on an electric torch, and as he did so Pestovitch sprang forward. 'Get out of my barn!' he cried, and drove the fork full at the intruder's chest. He had a vague idea that so he might stab the man to silence. But the man shouted loudly as the prongs pierced him and drove him backward, and instantly there was a sound of feet running across the yard.

'Bombs,' cried the man upon the ground, struggling with the prongs in his hand, and as Pestovitch staggered forward into view with the force of his own thrust, he was shot through the body by one of the two

new-comers.

The man on the ground was badly hurt but plucky. 'Bombs,' he repeated, and struggled up into a kneeling position and held his electric torch full upon the face of the king. 'Shoot them,' he cried, coughing and spitting blood, so that the halo of light round the king's head danced about.

For a moment in that shivering circle of light the two men saw the king kneeling up in the cart and Peter on the barn floor beside him. The old fox looked at them sideways--snared, a white-faced evil thing. And then, as with a faltering suicidal heroism, he leant forward over the bomb before him, they fired together and shot him through the head.

The upper part of his face seemed to vanish.

'Shoot them,' cried the man who had been stabbed. 'Shoot them all!'

And then his light went out, and he rolled over with a groan at the feet of his comrades.

But each carried a light of his own, and in another moment everything in the barn was visible again. They shot Peter even as he held up his hands in sign of surrender.

Kurt and Abel at the head of the ladder hesitated for a moment, and then

plunged backward into the pit. 'If we don't kill them,' said one of the sharpshooters, 'they'll blow us to rags. They've gone down that hatchway. Come! . . .

'Here they are. Hands up! I say. Hold your light while I shoot....'

Section 8

It was still quite dark when his valet and Firmin came together and told the ex-king Egbert that the business was settled.

He started up into a sitting position on the side of his bed.

'Did he go out?' asked the ex-king.

'He is dead,' said Firmin. 'He was shot.'

The ex-king reflected. 'That's about the best thing that could have happened,' he said. 'Where are the bombs? In that farm-house on the opposite hill-side! Why! the place is in sight! Let us go. I'll dress. Is there any one in the place, Firmin, to get us a cup of coffee?'

Through the hungry twilight of the dawn the ex-king's automobile carried him to the farm-house where the last rebel king was lying among his bombs. The rim of the sky flashed, the east grew bright, and the sun was just rising over the hills when King Egbert reached the farm-yard. There

he found the hay lorries drawn out from the barn with the dreadful bombs still packed upon them. A couple of score of aviators held the yard, and outside a few peasants stood in a little group and stared, ignorant as yet of what had happened. Against the stone wall of the farm-yard five bodies were lying neatly side by side, and Pestovitch had an expression of surprise on his face and the king was chiefly identifiable by his long white hands and his blonde moustache. The wounded aeronaut had been carried down to the inn. And after the ex-king had given directions in what manner the bombs were to be taken to the new special laboratories above Zurich, where they could be unpacked in an atmosphere of chlorine, he turned to these five still shapes.

Their five pairs of feet stuck out with a curious stiff unanimity....

'What else was there to do?' he said in answer to some internal protest.

'I wonder, Firmin, if there are any more of them?'

'Bombs, sir?' asked Firmin.

'No, such kings....

'The pitiful folly of it!' said the ex-king, following his thoughts. 'Firmin,' as an ex-professor of International Politics, I think it falls to you to bury them. There? . . . No, don't put them near the well. People will have to drink from that well. Bury them over there, some way

off in the field.'