



WHEN I WAS KING

THE second time I lived on earth
Was several hundred years ago ;
And—royal by my second birth—
I know as much as most men know.
I was a king who held the reins
As never modern monarch can ;
I was a king, and I had brains,
And, what was more, I was a man !
Called to the throne in stormy times,
When things were at their very worst,
I had to fight—and not with rhymes—
My own self and my kindred first ;
And after that my friends and foes,
And great abuses born of greed ;
And when I'd fairly conquered those,
I ruled the land a king indeed.

WHEN I WAS KING

I found a deal of rottenness,
 Such as in modern towns we find ;
 I camped my poor in palaces
 And tents upon the plain behind.
 I marked the hovels, dens and drums
 In that fair city by the sea.
 And burnt the miles of wretched slums
 And built the homes as they should be.

 I stripped the baubles from the State,
 And on the land I spent the spoil ;
 I hunted off the sullen great,
 And to the farmers gave the soil.
 My people were their own police ;
 My courts were free to everyone.
 My priests were to preach love and peace ;
 My Judges to see justice done.

 I'd studied men and studied kings,
 No crawling cant would I allow ;
 I hated mean and paltry things,
 As I can hate them even now.
 A land of men I meant to see,
 A strong and clean and noble race—
 No subject dared kneel down to me,
 But looked his king straight in the face

WHEN I WAS KING

Had I not been a king in fact,
 A king in council-hall and tent,
 I might have let them crawl and act
 The courtier to their heart's content ;
 But when I called on other kings,
 And saw men kneel, I felt inclined
 To gently tip the abject things
 And kick them very hard behind.

 My subjects were not slaves, I guess,
 But though the women in one thing—
 A question 'twas of healthy dress—
 Would dare to argue with their king
 (I had to give in there, I own,
 Though none denied that I was strong),
 Yet they would hear my telephone
 If anything went very wrong.

 I also had some poets bright—
 Their songs were grand, I will allow—
 They were, if I remember right,
 About as bad as bards are now.
 I had to give them best at last,
 And let them booze and let them sing ;
 As it is now, so in the past,
 They'd small respect for gods or king.

WHEN I WAS KING

I loved to wander through the streets—

I carried neither sword nor dirk—

And watch the building of my fleets,

And watch my artisans at work.

At times I would take off my coat

And show them how to do a thing—

Till someone, clucking in his throat,

Would stare and gasp, 'It is the king!'

And I would say, 'Shut up, you fools!

Is it for this my towns I burn?

You don't know how to handle tools,

And by my faith you'll have to learn!'

I was a king, but what of that?

A king may warble in the spring

And carry eggs home in his hat,

Provided that he *is* a king.

I loved to stroll about the town

With chums at night, and talk of things,

And, though I chanced to wear the crown,

My friends, by intellect, were kings.

When I was doubtful, then I might

Discuss a matter quietly,

But when I felt that I was right

No power on earth could alter me!

WHEN I WAS KING

And now and then it was no sin

Nor folly to relax a bit—

I'd take my friends into an inn

And call for wine and pay for it.

And then of many things we'd clack

With loosened tongues and visions clear—

I often heard behind my back

The whispered 'Peace, the king is here!'

The women harped about a queen,

I knew they longed to have a court

And flaunt their feathers on the scene,

But hitherto I'd held the fort.

My subjects wanted me, no doubt,

To give the throne a son and heir—

(There were some little kings about,

But that was neither here nor there).

I'd no occasion for a wife—

A queen as yet was not my plan;

I'd seen a lot of married life—

My sire had been a married man.

'A son and heir be hanged!' I said—

'How dare you ask for such a thing,

'You fight it out when I am dead

'And let the best man be the king!'

WHEN I WAS KING

'Your Majesty, we love you well !'
A candid friend would say to me—

'But there be tales that people tell
'Unfitted to thy dignity'—

'My dignity be damned !' I'd say,

'Bring me no women's chattering !

'I'll be a man while yet I may—

'When trouble comes I'll be a king !

I'd kept my kingdom clean and strong

While other kingdoms were like ours—

I had no need to brook a wrong,

I feared not all the rotten Powers

I did not eat my heart out then,

Nor feebly fight in verse or prose

I'd take five hundred thousand men

To argue matters with my foes !

It thrilled me through, the mighty tramp

Of armed men, the thundering cheer—

The pregnant whisper through the camp

At dead of night : 'The King is here !'

And though we paid for victory

On some fields that were hard to hold,

The faith my soldiers had in me

Oft strengthened mine a hundredfold.

WHEN I WAS KING

I'd chat with soldiers by the fires

On rocky heights and river banks,

I'd seek the brains that war requires,

And take my captains from the ranks.

And so, until the storm was by,

And came the peace just war can bring,

I bore me so that men might cry

With all their hearts, 'God Save the King.'

When I was king the world was wide,

And I was strong and I was free.

I knew no hatred, knew no pride,

No envy and no treachery.

I feared no lies, I feared no truth,

Nor any storm that time might bring.

I had my love, I had my youth,

The world was mine when I was king.

Peace came at last—and strange is Fate—

The women begged just once alone

To see me robed in royal state

And seated on my father's throne.

I thought, 'Shall I this boon deny ?'

And said—and 'twas a paltry thing :

'I'll show the fools just once that I

'Can look, as well as be, a king.'

WHEN I WAS KING

They dusted out the castle old,
 And from the closet and the chest
 They dug the jewels set in gold—
 The crown and robes and all the rest.
 They came with eyes like stars of night,
 With diamonds set in raven hair,
 They came with arms and bosoms white—
 And, Oh my God! but one was fair!

They dressed me as the kings had been,
 The ancient royal purple spread,
 And one that was to be my queen,
 She placed the circlet on my head.
 They pressed their hearts and bowed to me,
 They knelt with arms uplifted all.
 I felt the rush of vanity—
 The pride that goes before the fall.

And then the banquet and the wine
 With Satan's music and the glance
 Of siren eyes. Those captains mine
 Were reeling in the maddening dance:
 A finger writing on the wall,
 While girls sang as the angels sing—
A drunken boaster in the hall,
The fool that used to be a king.

WHEN I WAS KING

I rose again—no matter how—
 A woman, and a deeper fall—
 I move amongst my people now
 The most degraded of them all.
 But, if in centuries to come,
 I live once more and claim my own,
 I'll see my subjects blind and dumb
 Before they set me on a throne.