

Alfred Tennyson (1809-92)

4 *King Charles's Vision*

King Charles was sitting all alone,
In his lonely palace-tower,
When there came on his ears a heavy groan,
At the silent midnight hour.

He turned him round where he heard the sound, 5
But nothing might he see;
And he only heard the nightly bird
That shrieked right fearfully.

He turned him round where he heard the sound,
To his casement's archèd frame; 10
'And he was aware of a light that was there,'
But he wist not whence it came.

He lookèd forth into the night,
'Twas calm as night might be;
But broad and bright the flashing light 15
Streamed red and radiantly.

From ivory sheath his trusty brand
Of stalwart steel he drew;
And he raised the lamp in his better hand,
But its flame was dim and blue. 20

And he opened the door of that palace-tower,
But harsh turned the jarring key:
'By the virgin's might,' cried the king that night,
'All is not as it should be!'

Slow turned the door of the crazy tower, 25
And slowly again did it close;
And within and without, and all about,
A sound of voices rose.

The king he stood in dreamy mood,
For the voices his name did call; 30
Then on he past, till he came at last
To the pillared audience-hall.

Eight and forty columns wide,
Many and carved and tall,
(Four and twenty on each side) 35
Stand in that lordly hall.

The king had been pight in the mortal fight,
And struck the deadly blow;
The king he had strode in the red red blood,
Often, afore, and now: 40

Yet his heart had ne'er been so harrowed with fear
As it was this fearful hour;
For his eyes were not dry, and his hair stood on high,
And his soul had lost its power.

For a blue livid flame, round the hall where he came, 45
In fiery circles ran;
And sounds of death, and chattering teeth,
And gibbering tongues began.

He saw four and twenty statesmen old
Round a lofty table sit; 50
And each in his hand did a volume hold,
Wherein mighty things were writ.

In burning steel were their limbs all cased;
On their cheeks was the flush of ire:
Their armour was braced, and their helmets were laced, 55
And their hollow eyes darted fire.

With sceptre of might, and with gold crown bright,
And locks like the raven's wing,
And in regal state at that board there sate
The likeness of a king. 60

With crimson tinged, and with ermine fringed,

And with jewels spangled o'er,
And rich as the beam of the sun on the stream,
A sparkling robe he wore.

Yet though fair shone the gem on his proud diadem, 65
Though his robe was jewelled o'er,
Though brilliant the vest on his mailèd breast,
Yet they all were stained with gore!

And his eye darted ire, and his glance shot fire,
And his look was high command; 70
And each, when he spoke, struck his mighty book,
And raised his shadowy hand.

And a headman stood by, with his axe on high,
And quick was his ceaseless stroke;
And loud was the shock on the echoing block, 75
As the steel shook the solid oak.

While short and thick came the mingled shriek
Of the wretches who died by his blow;
And fast fell each head on the pavement red,
And warm did the life-blood flow. 80

Said the earthly king to the ghostly king,
'What fearful sights are those?'
Said the ghostly king to the earthly king,
'They are signs of future woes!'

Said the earthly king to the ghostly king, 85
'By St Peter, who art thou?'
Said the ghostly king to the earthly king,
'I shall be, but I am not now.'

Said the earthly king to the ghostly king,
'But when will thy time draw nigh?' 90
'Oh! the sixth after thee will a warrior be,
'And that warrior am I.

'And the lords of the earth shall be pale at my birth,
'And conquest shall hover o'er me;

‘And the kingdoms shall shake, and the nations shall quake, 95
‘And the thrones fall down before me.

‘And Cracow shall bend to my majesty,
‘And the haughty Dane shall bow;
‘And the Pole shall fly from my piercing eye,
‘And the scowl of my clouded brow. 100

‘And around my way shall the hot balls play,
‘And the red-tongued flames arise;
‘And my pathway shall be on the midnight sea,
‘Neath the frown of the wintry skies.

‘Through narrow pass, over dark morass, 105
‘And the waste of the weary plain,
‘Over ice and snow, where the dark streams flow,
‘Through the woods of the wild Ukraine.

‘And though sad be the close of my life and my woes,
‘And the hand that shall slay me unshown; 110
‘Yet in every clime, through the lapse of all time,
‘Shall my glorious conquests be known.

‘And blood shall be shed, and the earth shall be red
‘With the gore of misery;
‘And swift as this flame shall the light of my fame 115
‘O’er the world as brightly fly.’

As the monarch spoke, crew the morning cock,
When all that pageant bright,
And the glitter of gold, and the statesmen old,
Fled into the gloom of night! 120

1827

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