# PREPARING to Read



## The King Is Dead, Long Live the King

Short Story by MARY E. COLERIDGE

### Connect to Your Life

Know Thyself How do you think you are perceived by others? Do you think other people's perceptions generally coincide with your own opinion of yourself? Get together with a classmate. While you list words and phrases to describe your partner, your partner should do the same for you. Then trade your lists. Do you think the description is accurate?

### **Build Background**

In the Shadow of Greatness A moderately successful writer during the late 19th century, Mary E. Coleridge is probably better known as the great-grandniece of the romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In several of her works—including this story—she, like her more famous relation, touches upon themes of fantasy and the supernatural. Both shared a love for the strange and the unearthly. This similarity once inspired a critic to call Mary Coleridge "the tail of the comet S. T. C."

Although Mary Coleridge was a prolific poet, she never aspired to the great literary world which she believed Samuel Coleridge inhabited. Resigned to live in his shadow, she once wrote: "I have no fairy godmother but lay claim to a fairy great-great-uncle, which is perhaps the reason that I am condemned to wander restlessly around the Gates of Fairyland, although I have never yet passed them."

Royal Rule In a monarchy, the laws of succession attempt to maintain stability: If people know that a monarch will automatically be succeeded by the next family member in line for the throne, they can feel reasonably sure that the transition will be a smooth one. The proclamation "The king is dead, long live the king!" reflects the desire for an orderly succession. The first part announces that one monarch has died; the

second honors the new monarch, underscoring the continuity of the monarchy despite the passing of one individual.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview malicious reprieve malignant sentiment presently

### **Focus Your Reading**

LITERARY ANALYSIS SITUATIONAL IRONY Irony is a contrast between expectation and reality. Situational irony occurs when what happens is not what a character or the reader expects. Suppose, for example, that the detective in a murder mystery turns out to be the murderer. This incongruity is a case of situational irony. Look for examples of situational irony as you read "The King Is Dead, Long Live the King."

ACTIVE READING PREDICTING When you read, you often make predictions about what will happen next. The following can help you make predictions:

- details about characters, setting, and events in the story
- foreshadowing, or hints about what is going to happen
- your personal knowledge of human behavior and experiences

Coleridge's story, jot down predictions about what is going to happen each time the king is about to go see a particular person or group of people. In making your predictions, you might use a chart like the one shown.

Person or Group King Is About to See	Your Prediction	Basis of Your Prediction

# KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING

Mary E. Coleridge



t was not very quiet in the room where the king lay dying. People were coming and going, rustling in and out with hushed footsteps,

whispering eagerly to each other; and where a great many people are all busy making as little noise as possible, the result is apt to be a kind of bustle, that weakened nerves can scarcely endure.

But what did that matter? The doctors said he could hear nothing now. He gave no sign that he could. Surely the sobs of his beautiful young wife, as she knelt by the bedside, must else have moved him.

For days the light had been carefully shaded. Now, in the hurry, confusion, and distress, no one remembered to draw the curtains close, so that the dim eyes might not be dazzled. But what did that matter? The doctors said he could see nothing now.

For days no one but his attendants had been allowed to come near him. Now the room was free for all who chose to enter. What did it matter? The doctors said he knew no one.

So he lay for a long time, one hand flung out upon the counterpane, as if it search of something. The queen took it softly in hers, but there was no answering pressure. At length the eyes and mouth closed, and the heart ceased to beat.

"How beautiful he looks," they whispered one to another.



hen the king came to himself it was all very still—wonderfully and delightfully still, as he thought, wonderfully and

delightfully dark. It was a strange, unspeakable relief to him—he lay as if in heaven. The room was full of the scent of flowers, and the cool night air came pleasantly through an open window. A row of wax tapers burned with soft

radiance at the foot of the bed on which he was lying, covered with a velvet pall, only his head and face exposed. Four or five men were keeping guard around him, but they had fallen fast asleep.

So deep was the feeling of content which he experienced that he was loth<sup>2</sup> to stir. Not till the great clock of the palace struck eleven, did he so much as move. Then he sat up with a light laugh.

He remembered how, when his mind was failing him, and he had rallied all his powers in one last passionate appeal against the injustice which was taking him away from the world just when the world most needed him, he had heard a voice saying, "I will give thee yet one hour after death. If, in that time, thou canst find three that desire thy life, live!"

This was his hour, his hour that he had snatched away from death. How much of it had he lost already? He had been a good king; he had worked night and day for his subjects: he had nothing to fear, and he knew that it was very pleasant to live, how pleasant he had never known before, for, to do him justice, he was not selfish; it was his unfinished work that he grieved about when the decree went forth against him. Yet, as he passed out of the room where the watchers sat heavily sleeping, things were changed to him somehow. The burning sense of injustice was gone. Now that he came to think of it, he had done very little. True that it was his utmost, but there were many better men in the world, and the world was large, very large it seemed to him now. Everything had grown larger. He loved his country and his home as well as ever, but in the night it had seemed as if they must perish with him, and now he knew that they were still unchanged.

<sup>1.</sup> counterpane: bedspread.

<sup>2.</sup> loth (loth): unwilling.



utside the door he paused a moment, hesitating

whither to go first. Not to the queen. The very thought of her grief unnerved him. He would not see her till he could once more clasp her in his arms, and bid her weep tears of joy only because he was come again. After all, he had but an hour to wait. Before the castle clock struck twelve, he would be

back again in life, remembering these things only as a dream. He sighed a little to think of it.

"All that to do over again some day," he said, as he recalled his last moments.

Almost he turned again to the couch he had so lately left.

"But I have never yet done anything through fear," said the king.

And he smiled as he thought of the terms of the compact. His city lay before him in the moonlight.

"I could find three thousand as easily as three," he said. "Are they not all my friends?"

As he passed out of the gate, he saw a child sitting on the steps, crying bitterly.

"What is the matter, little one?" said the sentinel on guard, stopping a moment.

"Father and mother have gone to the castle, because the king's dead," sobbed the child, "and they've never come back again; anc I'm so tired and so hungry! And I've had no supper, and my doll's broken. Oh! I do wish the king were alive again!"

And she burst into a fresh storm of weeping. It amused the king not a little.

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"So this is the first of my subjects that wants me back!" he said.

He had no child of his own. He would have liked to try and comfort the little maiden, but there were other calls upon him just then. He was on his way to the house of his great friend, the man whom he loved more than all others. A kind of malicious delight possessed him, as he pictured to himself the deep dejection he should

find him in.

"Poor Amyas!" he said. "I know what I should be feeling in his place. I am glad he was not taken. I could not have borne his loss."

As he entered the courtyard of his friend's house, lights were being carried to and fro, horses were being saddled, an air of bustle and excitement pervaded the place. Look where he might, he could not see the face he knew so well. He entered at the open door. His friend was not in the hall. Room after room he vainly traversed—they were all empty. A sudden horror took him. Surely Amyas was not dead of grief?



e came at length to a small private apartment, in which they had spent many a happy, busy hour together; but his friend was

not here either, though, to judge by appearances, he could only just have left it. Books and papers were tumbled all about in strange confusion, and bits of broken glass strewed the floor.

A little picture was lying on the ground. The king picked it up, and recognized a miniature of himself, the frame of which had been broken in the fall. He let it drop again, as if it had burnt him. The fire was blazing brightly, and the fragments of a half-destroyed letter lay, unconsumed as yet, in the fender.<sup>3</sup> It was in his own writing. He snatched it up, and saw it was the last he had written, containing the details of an elaborate scheme which he had much at heart. He had only just thrown it back into the flames when two people entered the room, talking together, one a lady, the other a man, beoted and spurred as though he came from a long distance.

"Where is Amyas?" he asked.

"Gone to proffer\* his services to the new king, of course," said the lady. "We are, as you may think, in great anxiety. He has none of the ridiculous notions of his predecessor, who, indeed, hated him cordially. The very favor Amyas has hitherto enjoyed will stand in his way at the new court. I only hope he may be in time to make his peace. He can, with trust, say that he utterly disapproved of the foolish reforms which his late master was bent on making. Of course, he was fond of him in a way; but we must think of ourselves, you know. People in our position have no time for sentiment. He started almost immediately after the king's death. I am sending his retinue after him."

"Quite right," said the gentleman, whom the king now knew as one of his ambassadors. "I shall follow him at once. Between you and me, it is no bad thing for the country. That poor boy had no notion of statesmanship. He forced me to conclude a peace which would have been disastrous to all our best interests. Happily, we shall have war directly now. Promotions in the army would have been at a standstill if he had had his way."

The king did not stay to hear more.

"I will go to my people," he said. "They at least have no interest to make peace with my successor. He will but take from them what I gave."



e heard the clock strike the first quarter as he went. He was, indeed, a very remarkable king, for he knew his way to the

poorest part of his dominions. He had been there before, often and often, unknown to any one; and the misery which he had there beheld had stirred and steeled him to attempt what had never before been attempted.

No one about the palace knew where he had caught the malignant fever which carried him off. He had a shrewd suspicion himself, and he went straight to that quarter.

"Fevers won't hurt me now," he said laughing. The houses were as wretched, the people looked as sickly and squalid as ever. They were standing about in knots in the streets, late though it was, talking together about him. His name was in every mouth. The details of his illness, and the probable day of his funeral, seemed to interest them more than anything else.

Five or six men were sitting drinking round a table in a disreputable-looking public-house,<sup>8</sup> and he stopped to overhear their conversation.

"And a good riddance, too!" said one of

<sup>3.</sup> fender: a short metal screen in front of a fireplace.

<sup>4.</sup> proffer (prof'ar): to offer for acceptance.

<sup>5.</sup> predecessor: the former holder of an office or position.

<sup>6.</sup> retinue (ret'noo'): a group of attendants; entourage.

squalid (skwbl\*id): dirty and wretched from poverty or lack of care.

<sup>8.</sup> public-house: tavern.



Romance (about 1924), Maxfield Parrish. Coverlining for The Knave of Hearts by Louise Saunders, oil on panel, courtesy of New York Graphic Society Ltd. Photo by Allen Photography.

them, whom he knew well. "What's the use of a king as never spends a farthing more than he can help? It gives no impetus to trade, it don't. The new fellow's a very different sort. We shall have fine doings soon."

"Ay!" struck in another, "a meddlesome, priggish<sup>10</sup> sort of chap, he was, always aworritting us about clean houses, and such like. What right's he got to interfere, I'd like to know?"

"Down with all kings! says I," out in a third: "but if we're to have 'em, let 'em behave as sich. I like a young fellow as isn't afraid of his missus, and knows port wine from sherry."

"Wanted to abolish capital punishment, he did!" cried a fourth. "Thought he'd get more work out of the poor fellows in prison, I suppose? Depend on it, there's some reason like that at the bottom of it. We ain't so very perticular about the lives of our subjects for nothing, we ain't"; an expression of opinion in which all the rest heartily concurred. The clock struck again as the king turned away; he felt as if a storm of abuse from some one he had always hated would be a precious balm" just then. He entered the state prison, and made for the condemned cell. Capital punishment was not abolished yet, and in this particular instance he had certainly felt glad of it.

<sup>9.</sup> impetus (ĭm'p ĭ-təs): incentive; stimulus.

<sup>10.</sup> priggish: irritatingly concerned with proper behavior.

<sup>11.</sup> balm: something that soothes, heals, or comforts.

The cell was tenanted only by a little haggard<sup>12</sup> looking man, who was writing busily on his knee. The king had only seen him once before, and he looked at him curiously.

Presently, the jailer entered, and with him the first councillor, a man whom his late master had greatly loved and esteemed. The convict looked up quickly.

"It was not to be till tomorrow," he said. Then, as if

afraid he had betrayed some cowardice, "but I am ready at any moment. May I ask you to give this paper to my wife?"

"The king is dead," said the first councillor gravely. "You are reprieved. His present majesty has other views. You will, in all probability, be set at large to-morrow."

"Dead?" said the man with a stunned look.

"Dead!" said the first councillor, with the impressiveness of a whole board.

The man stood up, passing his hand across his brow.

"Sir," he said earnestly, "I respected him. For all he was a king, he treated me like a gentleman. He, too, had a young wife. Poor fellow, I wish he were alive again!"

There were tears in the man's eyes as he spoke.



he third quarter struck as the king left the prison. He felt unutterably humiliated. The pity of his foe was harder to bear

than the scorn of his friends. Fe would rather have died a thousand deaths than owe his life to

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such a man. And yet, because he was himself noble, he could not but rejoice to find nobility in another. He said to himself sternly that it was not worth what he had gone through. He reviewed his position in no very self-complacent<sup>13</sup> mood. The affection he had so confidently relied upon was but a dream. The people he was fain<sup>14</sup> to work for were not ripe for their own improvement. A foolish little child, a generous

enemy, these were his only friends. After all, was it worth while to live? Had he not better go back quietly and submit, making no further effort? He had learnt his lesson; he could "lie down in peace, and sleep, and take his rest." The eternal powers had justified themselves. What matter though every man had proved a liar? The bitterness had passed away, and he seemed to see clearly.

Thick clouds had gathered over the moon, and the cold struck through him. All at once a sense of loneliness that cannot be described rushed over him, and his heart sank. Was there really no one who cared—no one? He would have given anything at that moment for a look, a single word of real sympathy. He longed with sick longing for the assurance of love.

There were yet a few moments left. How had he borne to wait so long? This, at least, he was sure of, and this was all the world to him. He began to find comfort and consolation in the thought; he forgave—indeed he almost forgot—

<sup>12.</sup> haggard: worn and exhausted in appearance.

<sup>13.</sup> self-complacent; self-satisfied; smug.

<sup>14.</sup> fain: ready and willing.

the rest. Yet he had fallen very low, for, as he stood at the door of his wife's room, he hesitated whether to go in. What if this, too, were an illusion? Had he not best go back before he knew?

"But I have never yet done any:hing through fear," said the king.

His wife was sitting by the fire alone, her face hidden, her long hair falling round her like a veil. At the first sight of her, a pang of selfreproach shot through him. How could he ever have doubted?

She was wearing a ring that he had given her—a ring she wore always, and the light sparkled and flashed from the jewel. Except for this, there was nothing bright in the room.

He ardently desired to comfort her. He wondered why all her ladies had left her. Surely one might have stayed with her on this first night of her bereavement? She seemed to be lost in thought. If she would only speak, or call his name! But she was quite silent.

A slight noise made the king start. A secret door in the wall opened, the existence of which he had thought was known only to himself and his queen, and a man stood before her.

She put her finger to her lips, as though to counsel silence, and then threw herself into his arms.

"You have come," she said— "Oh, I am so glad! I had to hold his hand when he was dying. I was frightened sitting here by myself. I thought his ghost would come back, but he will never come back any more. We may be happy always now," and drawing the ring from her finger, she kissed it, weeping, and gave it to him.



hen midnight struck, the watchers wakened with a start, to find the king lying stark and stiff, as before, but a great change had

come over his countenance.16

"We must not let the queen see him again," they said. \$



<sup>15.</sup> bereavement: the loss of a loved one to death.

<sup>16.</sup> countenance: face.

# Thinking LITERATURE

### Connect to the Literature

 What Do You Think? What did you like best about this story? What did you like least?

### Comprehension Check

- What must the king find in the one hour after his death?
- Which two people want him to live?
- What startling discovery does the king make about the queen?

### **Think Critically**

- 2. ACTIVE READING PREDICTING Look over the predictions you made about the story in your READER'S NOTEBOOK. How accurate were they? What evidence was most important in making accurate predictions?
- 3. In your opinion, what kind of person was the king?



- his view of himself and others
- · the reason he wants to live
- . the reforms he tried to promote during his life
  - · what others say about him
- 4. The narrator does not describe the expression on the king's face at the end of the story. How do you think he looks? Give reasons for your response.
- What view of human nature does the story convey? Do you think this view is overly pessimistic or simply realistic? Cite evidence to support your opinion.

### **Extend Interpretations**

- 6. Comparing Texts Compare and contrast the quest in this story with the knight's quest in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer (page 154). In what ways are the circumstances of the two cuests similar and different? How do the outcomes of the quests compare?
- 7. What If? Suppose the king found three people who wanted him to live—and then visited his wife. Do you think he would have chosen to live? Why or why not?
- 8. Connect to Life How do you think people today regard their leaders? Do you think people generally support their elected officials, or do people tend to be cynically suspicious of the leaders' motivations?

### Literary Analysis

SITUATIONAL IRONY In

situational irony, the character or the reader expects one thing to happen, but something else actually occurs. Coleridge's story is filled with situational irony. For example, the king expects Amyas, his closest friend, to be saddened by his death. Instead he finds that Amyas is already busy trying to win favor with the new monarch. On the other

hand, the king expects his jailed enemy to be gleeful about his

enemy expressing regret.

death, but instead he overhears his

Cooperative Learning Activity With a small group of classmates, create a chart like the one below and list the ironic situations in the story. Then discuss the following questions: What do the king's overturned expectations suggest about his relationship with other characters? How does the title help underscore the irony?

Actual Situation
Amyas is preoccupied wit flattering new monarch.

plot in a narrative usually includes the following stages: exposition, rising action, climax, and falling action. Create a graph in which you identify these stages in "The King Is Dead, Long Live the King."

# Choices CHALLENGES

### **Writing Options**

- Letter from Amyas Write a letter in which Amyas declares his allegiance to the new king and denounces the dead king.
- Obituaries for the King Compose three obituaries for the king. Write each ore from the standpoint of a different character in the story.

### **Activities & Explorations**

Dramatic Scene With a group of classmates, dramatize a scene from the story. Rehearse your scene and then present it to the class. ~ PERFORMING

### **Inquiry & Research**

Long Live the Queen Research the laws of succession for English monarchs, and then study Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne. Use an abbreviated family tree or another graphic to demonstrate how Queen Victoria came to succeed her uncle, William IV.



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### Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE: MEANING CLUES For each boldfaced word, choose the topic in which the word might be used in a discussion

1. malicious

a. the king's enemy c. a small child

b. the king's friend

2. sentiment

a. the moat of a castle c. admiration for b. building a castle the king

3. malignant

a. the queen's maid
 c. a deadly disease

b. the king's advisers

4. presently

a. winning a war c. an ancient law

b. waiting for a doctor's arrival

5. reprieve

a. a prisoner facing execution c. a royal banner

b. a newly appointed minister



Mary E. Coleridge

Other Works Gathered Leaves The Collected Poems of Mary Coleridge

A Literary Life Although she never achieved the fame of her ancestor, Mary Coleridge was a talented writer in a variety of literary forms, including novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. Born in London, Coleridge received an excellent education at home and, according to one of her friends, could read French, Italian, German, and Hebrew by the time she was 19 years old. Her father was a well-read lawyer who often entertained noted authors, including the poets Tennyson and Browning. Coleridge herself studied both literature and philosophy. eventually obtaining a job as an instructor of English literature at the Working Women's College, a position she held for the last 12 years of her life. She never married and lived with her family until her death at age 45.

A Retiring Writer Coleridge did not publish her first major work until she was in her 30s. Although her first novel, The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, was not generally well received, it was praised by Robert Louis Stevenson, and several of Coleridge's subsequent novels became quite popular. In addition, she regularly contributed stories and essays to various journals, including Cornbill Magazine and the Times Literary Supplement. As a poet, she was reluctant to publish, or even talk about, her own work. At the urging of a family friend—the poet Robert Bridges—she eventually allowed two small collections of her poems to be published under the pseudonym Anodos. The rest were not made public until after her death. Bridges said of her poems, "They are both beautiful and original, and often exhibit imagination of a very rare kind, conveyed by the identical expression of true feeling and artistic insight."