

**CHARLES I, A  
TRAGEDY IN  
FIVE ACTS**

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Charles I, a tragedy in five acts by Arthur Gray Butler

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**ARTHUR GRAY BUTLER**

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# CHARLES I.

*A TRAGEDY in FIVE ACTS*

BY

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LONDON

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1874

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'He nothing common did or mean  
Upon that memorable scene,  
But with his keener eye  
The axe's edge did try;  
Nor called the gods, with vulgar spite,  
To vindicate his helpless right;  
But bowed his comely head  
Down, as upon a bed.'

A. MARVELL.

## PREFACE.

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THE SCENE of this play is laid at first at Hampton Court, where Charles, with the consent of the generals of the victorious army, was living in the month of August, 1647. All seemed at last to shine upon him. His old courtiers, Richmond, Hertford, Southampton, Ormond, Berkeley, Ashburnham, and others, had been permitted to rejoin him; and there, amid the pomp and splendour of a court, he soon regained the confidence which had been only for a moment shaken by defeat. Yet his difficulties, could he have really apprehended them, were never greater. It is true that the dissensions of the Army and Parliament had reached their height. It is true that each of them was bidding separately for his acceptance of their terms: the Parliament to secure the triumph of the Presbyterian cause; the Army, filled with zealots of every kind, both in politics and religion, to maintain themselves in arms, to secure full liberty of worship, and to prevent the establishment of a system which they hated only less bitterly than Episcopacy. But had Charles possessed any insight, he would have been alarmed

rather than flattered at this competition for his favour. The rivalry of two such antagonists ensured him a bitter enemy in the one whom he did not choose for his ally. If, siding with the Army, he returned to power by their aid, and on their terms, he would have alienated all that was moderate and order-loving in the kingdom. Most of all he would have alienated his own devoted followers, who would have considered such an alliance as Apostasy, and the obligations thus incurred to Cromwell as more humiliating than even exile or imprisonment. But if, on the other hand, he had heartily and unreservedly accepted the proposals made to him by the Parliament, how would he have been enabled to overcome the opposition of the Army, and its ambitious leaders? He was at that time a prisoner in their hands, violently seized, though honourably detained by them. How could he expect to go forth from that captivity without the full consent of the unscrupulous men who had brought him there; who, even amid the state with which they had surrounded him, never allowed him to forget for long that they were his masters, not he theirs?

This dangerous position of the King has not been sufficiently attended to. It has been assumed that he had only to embrace the proposals made to him by one or other of the two great victorious parties in the State; and that then all his difficulties would have vanished. On the contrary, it seems to me, they would have been increased tenfold. The great majority of Charles's opponents belonged to the Presbyterian party, who wished to



enforce their religious system upon all. The Army represented a small minority in the nation, only rendered formidable by its valour, its fanaticism, the proud consciousness of its services, and, above all, by the genius of Cromwell. What hope, then, of peace and settlement in the presence of parties so embittered, so intolerant, so irreconcilable? The Sects hated the Presbyterians: the Presbyterians the Sects: both equally hated, and were hated by, the Episcopalians. It was one of those critical periods of history, when great principles come into the sharpest conflict, and when, compromise and toleration not being understood, bitter and endless warfare is inevitable. It was Charles's misfortune to have been born at such a time. It was his fault that by his weakness, his insincerity, his inability to understand the times, and his incapacity either to guide or to control them, he aggravated to the uttermost difficulties which would have severely tasked the powers of any king, however wise and patriotic.

But I am not writing a life of Charles, much less an essay on the Rebellion. Merely I wish it to be understood how perplexing even to a great statesman was the position in which the King found himself after the defeat of Naseby; and how perplexing no less was that of the other great parties in the State. Where compromise is not admitted into the councils of a nation, peace and harmony are impossible. We have to thank the great Rebellion, among other things, for one priceless

lesson in politics which will never be forgotten—of the necessity and wisdom of compromise.

But still admitting the great perplexity of Charles's circumstances, we must insist strongly on the extreme folly and blindness of his conduct. He was by nature very undecided, and, like all undecided men, greatly under the influence of advisers and events. He was also of a buoyant and sanguine disposition, ever ready to expect the best for himself; while his high notions of prerogative, and belief in his Divine Right, made him at once averse to all concession, and unwilling to believe that a power resting on supernatural foundations could ever fall.

And so he allowed his Court to become a centre for every kind of negotiation and intrigue. Lauderdale and Lanark besought him to join the Presbyterians, and even promised the support of a strong Scottish force. Cromwell and Ireton urged him to join them and the Army openly; declaring that they would in that case force their conditions upon the Parliament, conditions more favourable to the King than any others hitherto proposed to him. Charles listened to both parties, and wavered between them. He listened also to his own courtiers and flatterers, who were reckless and arrogant as ever; and secretly fomented insurrections among the northern Cavaliers, ordering them to be ready to fly to arms at the fitting moment, and take advantage of the dissensions now raging amid their enemies.

In the general disturbance then impending Charles thought that something must turn up favourable to

himself and to his cause. He never dreamt of any danger that could befall his own sacred person.

How blind, how insensate such conduct was, we now see most clearly. In all the intrigues, in all the plottings and schemings, in all the calculations of the King, one most important consideration was forgotten. He was in the power of the Army. He was in the power of men, who had bought success dearly with their blood, and were little disposed to see its fruits stolen from them by the intrigues of the enemy whom they had conquered. Already they had been taught to regard him as a wicked and idolatrous king, who was striving to corrupt their simple faith, and lead them back again to the false worship which their forefathers had abjured. Already, too, they were murmuring at him as the cause of all the miseries which had befallen the unhappy nation. But now, when there seemed a danger of all these miseries being renewed, they believed themselves to have reached one of those periods recorded in Sacred History, when punishment has to be inflicted on selfish and wilful kings, whom for their sins God has visited with blindness; and there began to arise among them a stern cry for vengeance, with muttered denunciations against the generals who, forgetting their higher calling, were stooping to the fear of man, and making themselves the instruments of a carnal and crooked policy. The King did not, or would not, hear these mutterings, indications of the coming storm. Cromwell and Ireton heard them, and were once more most urgent with him, and apparently in good faith,