
Opening Extract from...

The King's Speech

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CHAPTER ONE

God Save the King

The royal party on their way to the coronation of George VI

Albert Frederick Arthur George, King of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions and the last Emperor of India, woke up with a start. It was just after 3 a.m. The bedroom in Buckingham Palace he had occupied since becoming monarch five months earlier was normally a haven of peace and quiet in the heart of London, but on this particular morning his slumbers had been rudely interrupted by the crackle of loudspeakers being tested outside on Constitution Hill. 'One of them might have been in our room,' he wrote in his diary.[1] And then, just when he thought he might finally be able to go back to sleep, the marching bands and troops started up.

It was 12 May 1937, and the forty-one-year-old King was about to face one of the greatest – and most nerve-racking – days of his life: his coronation. Traditionally, the ceremony is held eighteen months after the monarch comes to the throne, leaving time not just for all the preparations but also for a decent period of mourning for the previous king or queen. This coronation was different: the date had already been chosen to crown his elder brother, who had become king on the death of their father, George V, in January 1936. Edward VIII had lasted less than a year on the throne, however, after succumbing to the charms of Wallis Simpson, an American divorcée, and it was his younger brother, Albert, Duke of York, who reluctantly succeeded him when he abdicated that December. Albert took the name George VI – as both a tribute to his late father and a sign of continuity with his reign after the upheavals of the previous year that had plunged the British monarchy into one of the greatest crises in its history.

At about the same time, in the considerably less grand setting of Sydenham Hill, in the suburbs of south-east London, a handsome man

in his late fifties, with a shock of brown hair and bright blue eyes, was also stirring. He, too, had a big day ahead of him. The Australian-born son of a publican, his name was Lionel Logue and since his first meeting with the future monarch just over a decade earlier, he had occupied a curious but increasingly influential role at the heart of the royal family.

Just to be on the safe side, Logue (who was a reluctant driver) had had a chauffeur sleep overnight at his house. With his statuesque wife Myrtle, who was to accompany him on that momentous day, he began to prepare himself for the journey into town. Myrtle, who was wearing £5,000 worth of jewellery, looked radiant. A meeting with a hairdresser whom they'd agreed to pick up along the way would add the final touch. Logue, in full court costume, was rather conscious of his silk-stockinged legs and had to keep taking care not to trip over his sword.

As the hours ticked by and the streets of London began to fill with crowds of well-wishers, many of whom had slept out on camp beds, both men's sense of apprehension grew. The King had a 'sinking feeling inside' and could eat no breakfast. 'I knew that I was to spend a most trying day & to go through the most important ceremony in my life,' he wrote in his diary that evening. 'The hours of waiting before leaving for Westminster Abbey were the most nerve racking.'[2]

With origins dating back almost a millennium, the coronation of a British monarch in Westminster Abbey is a piece of national pageantry unmatched anywhere in the world. At the centre of the ceremony is the anointing: while the monarch is seated in the medieval King Edward's Chair, a canopy over his head, the Archbishop of Canterbury touches his hands, breast and head with consecrated oil. A cocktail of orange, roses, cinnamon, musk and ambergris, it is dispensed from a filigreed spoon filled from an eagle-shaped ampulla. By that act, the monarch is consecrated before God to the service of his peoples to whom he has sworn a grave oath. For a man as deeply religious as King George VI, it was difficult to overestimate the significance of this avowal of his dependence on the Almighty for the spirit, strength and power needed to do right by his subjects.

To be at the centre of such a ceremony – all the while balancing an ancient 7lb crown on his head – would have been a huge ordeal for anyone, but the King had particular reason to view what was in store for him with trepidation: plagued since childhood with a series of medical ailments, he also suffered from a debilitating stammer. Embarrassing enough in small gatherings, it turned public speaking into a major ordeal. The King, in the words of America's *Time* magazine, was the 'most famed contemporary stammerer' in the world,[3] joining a roll call of prominent names stretching back to antiquity that included Aesop, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Virgil, Erasmus and Darwin.

Worse, in the weeks running up to the coronation, the King had been forced to endure a whispering campaign about his health, stirred up by supporters of his embittered elder brother, who was now living in exile in France. The new King, it was rumoured, was in such a poor physical state that he would not be able to endure the coronation ceremony, let alone discharge his functions as sovereign. Further fuel for the campaign had been provided by the King's decision not to go ahead with an Accession Durbar in Delhi that his predecessor had agreed should take place during the cold-weather season of 1937–8.

The invited congregation had to be in the Abbey by around 7 a.m. Crowds cheered them as they passed; a special Tube train running from Kensington High Street to Westminster was laid on for Members of the House of Commons and for peers and peeresses, who travelled in full robes and wearing their coronets.

Logue and his wife set off from their home at 6.40, travelling through deserted streets, northwards through Denmark Hill and Camberwell Green and then westwards towards the newly rebuilt Chelsea Bridge, which had been opened less than a week earlier by William Lyon Mackenzie King, the Canadian prime minister who was in town for the coronation. One by one, the police constables spotted the 'P' in green lettering on the windscreen of their car and waved them through, until, just before the Tate Gallery, they ran into a jam of cars from all over London converging on the Abbey. They got out as they reached the covered way opposite the statue of Richard the Lionheart

in Parliament Square and had squeezed into their seats by 7.30.

The King and Queen travelled to the Abbey in the Gold State Coach, a magnificent enclosed carriage drawn by eight horses that had been first used by King George III to open parliament in 1762. For the present King, the presence of his wife, Queen Elizabeth, was an enormous reassurance. During their fourteen years of marriage, she had been a hugely calming influence on him; whenever he faltered in the middle of a speech, she would squeeze his arm affectionately, willing him to go on – usually with success.

Seated in the royal box were the King's mother, Queen Mary, and his two young daughters. The smaller one, Princess Margaret Rose, now aged six and naughty at the best of times, was bored and squirming. As the interminably long service continued, she stuck her finger in her eye, pulled her ears, swung her legs, rested her head on her elbow and tickled her rather more serious elder sister, Elizabeth, who had recently celebrated her eleventh birthday. As was so often the case, the elder girl found herself urging her sister to be good. Queen Mary finally quietened Margaret Rose by giving her a pair of opera glasses to peek through.

Reassurance of another kind was provided by Logue, whose presence in a box overlooking the ceremony was a sign of his importance to the King. A self-described 'common colonial', who despite a career devoted to elocution had never quite succeeded in shaking off his Australian accent, Logue seemed strangely out of place among the upper echelons of the British aristocracy given pride of place in the Abbey.

Yet it would be difficult to exaggerate the contribution to the day's momentous events that had been made by a man whom the newspapers called the King's 'speech doctor' or 'speech specialist'. Such was Logue's status that he had just been made a member of the Royal Victorian Order, an appointment entirely in the gift of the sovereign. The award was front-page news: his was, declared the *Daily Express*, 'one of the most interesting of the names in the Coronation Honours List'. Logue wore the medal proudly on his chest in the Abbey.

In the eleven years since his arrival on the boat from Australia, Logue, from his rented room in Harley Street, in the heart of the British medical establishment, had become one of the most prominent figures in the emerging field of speech therapy. For much of that time he had been helping the then Duke of York tackle his speech impediment.

For the past month they had been preparing for the great day, rehearsing over and over again the time-honoured responses that the King would have to give in the Abbey. In the years they had worked together, whether at Logue's little surgery, at Sandringham, Windsor or Buckingham Palace, they had developed a system. First Logue would study the text, spotting any words that might trip the King up, such as those that began with a hard 'k' or 'g' sound or perhaps with repeated consonants, and wherever possible, replace them with something else. Logue would then mark up the text with suggested breathing points, and the King would start practising, again and again, until he got it right – often becoming extremely frustrated in the process.

But there could be no tampering with the words of the coronation service. This was the real test – and it was about to begin.

The various princes and princesses, both British and foreign, had started to be shown to their places at 10.15 a.m. Then came the King's mother, walking to the stately music of the official Coronation March, followed by the various state representations and then the Queen, her marvellous train carried by her six ladies-in-waiting.

'A fanfare of trumpets, and the King's procession was soon advancing, a blaze of gold and crimson,' wrote Logue in the diary in which he was to record much of his life in Britain. 'And at the end the man whom I had served for 10 years, with all my heart and soul comes, as he advances slowly towards us, looking rather pale, but every inch a King. My heart creeps up into my throat, as I realise that this man whom I serve, is to be made King of England.'

As Cosmo Lang, the Archbishop of Canterbury, led the coronation service, Logue was listening probably more intently than anyone else

present in the Abbey, even though the toothache from which he was suffering kept threatening to distract him. The King seemed nervous to him at the beginning, and Logue's heart missed a beat when he started the oath, but on the whole he spoke well. When it was all over, Logue was jubilant: 'The King spoke with a beautiful inflexion,' he told a journalist.

In fact, given the pressure the King was under, it was a wonder he had spoken his words so clearly: while holding the book with the form of service for him to read, the Archbishop had inadvertently covered the words of the Oath with his thumb. Nor was that the only mishap: when the Lord Great Chamberlain started to dress the King in his robes, his hands were shaking so much he nearly put the hilt of the sword under the King's chin rather attaching it to the belt, where it should have been. And then, as the King sat up from the Coronation Chair, a bishop trod on his robe, almost causing him to fall over until the King ordered him pretty sharply to get off it.

Such hitches were an inevitable accompaniment to a British coronation; one of the King's main preoccupations was that Lang wouldn't put the crown on back to front, as had happened in the past, and so he had arranged that a small line of thin red cotton be inserted under one of the principal jewels at the front. Some over-zealous person had obviously removed it in the meantime, and the King was never quite sure it was the right way round. Coronations of earlier monarchs had bordered on farce: George III's in 1761 was held up for three hours after the sword of state went missing, while his son and successor George IV's was overshadowed by his row with his estranged and hated wife, Caroline of Brunswick, who had to be forcibly prevented from entering the Abbey.

None of these current minor hitches was noticed by the congregation, let alone by the thousands of people who were still lining the streets of London despite the worsening weather. When the service was over, the King and Queen took the Gold Coach by the long route back to Buckingham Palace. By now it was pouring with rain, but this did not seem to deter the crowd who cheered them enthusiastically as they

drove past. Logue and Myrtle were relaxing, eating sandwiches and the chocolate they had brought with them when, at 3.30, an amplified voice announced: 'Those in block J can proceed to the cars.' They then passed down to the entrance and another thirty minutes later their car was called and they fell into it, Logue almost tripping over that sword. They crossed back over Westminster Bridge, past the now deserted viewing stands, and reached home by 4.30. Now suffering from a headache as well as toothache, Logue took to his bed for a nap.

However momentous, the coronation was only part of what the King faced that day. At eight that evening he was to face an even greater ordeal: a live radio address to be broadcast to the people of the United Kingdom and her vast Empire – and again Logue was to be at his side. The speech was due to last only a few minutes, but it was no less nerve-racking for that. Over the years, the King had developed a particular terror of the microphone, which made a radio address seem even more of a challenge than a speech to a live audience. Nor was Sir John Reith, the director-general of the British Broadcasting Corporation, which had been created by Royal Charter a decade earlier, making things easier for him: he insisted that the King should broadcast live.

For weeks running up to the broadcast, Logue had been working with the King on the text. After decidedly mixed rehearsals, the two men seemed confident enough – but they were not taking any chances. Over the previous few days, Robert Wood, one of the BBC's most experienced sound engineers and an expert at the emerging art of the outside broadcast, had made recordings of their various practice sessions on gramophone records, including a specially edited one that combined all the best passages in one. Even so, Logue was still feeling nervous as a car brought him back to the Palace at 7 p.m.

When he arrived he joined Alexander Hardinge, the King's private secretary, and Reith for a whisky and soda. As the three men stood drinking, word came down from upstairs that the King was ready for Logue. To the Australian's eye, the King looked in good shape, despite

what had already been an extremely emotional day. They went through the speech once at the microphone and then returned to his room, where they were joined by the Queen, who looked tired but happy.

Logue could sense the King's nerves, however, and to take his mind off the ordeal ahead, Logue kept him chatting about the events of the day right up until the moment just after eight o'clock when the opening notes of the National Anthem came through the loudspeakers.

'Good Luck, Bertie,' said the Queen as her husband walked up to the microphone.

'It is with a very full heart I speak to you tonight,' the King began, his words relayed by the BBC not just to his subjects in Britain but to those in the farflung Empire, including Logue's homeland. 'Never before has a newly crowned King been able to talk to all his peoples in their own homes on the day of his coronation . . .'

Perspiration was running down Logue's back.

'The Queen and I wish health and happiness to you all, and we do not forget at this time of celebration those who are living under the shadow of sickness,' the King continued, 'beautifully', as Logue thought.

'I cannot find words with which to thank you for your love and loyalty to the Queen and myself . . . I will only say this: that if in the coming years I can show my gratitude in service to you, that is the way above all others that I should choose . . . The Queen and I will always keep in our hearts the inspiration of this day. May we ever be worthy of the goodwill which I am proud to think surrounds us at the outset of my reign. I thank you from my heart, and may God bless you all.'

By the time the speech was over, Logue was so worked up he couldn't talk. The King handed Wood his Coronation Medal and, shortly afterwards, the Queen joined them. 'It was wonderful, Bertie, much better than the record,' she told him.

The King bade farewell to Wood and, turning to Logue, pressed his hand as he said, 'Good night, Logue, I thank you very much.' The Queen did the same, her blue eyes shining as, overcome by the occasion, he replied, 'The greatest thing in my life, your Majesty, is being able to serve you.'

'Good night. Thank you,' she repeated, before adding softly, 'God bless you.'

Tears began to well in Logue's eyes, and he felt like a fool as he went downstairs to Hardinge's room, where he had another whisky and soda and immediately regretted it. It was, he reflected later, a silly thing to do on an empty stomach, as the whole world began to spin around and his speech to slur. He nevertheless set off with Hardinge in the car, dropping him off at St James's before turning south-east towards home. As he looked back over the momentous events of the day, Logue's mind kept turning to the moment when the Queen had said to him 'God bless you' – that, and how he really ought to get his tooth fixed.

Logue spent the next day almost entirely in bed, ignoring the insistent ring of the telephone as his friends called to pass on their congratulations. The newspapers' verdict on the speech was overwhelmingly positive. 'The King's voice last night was strong and deep, resembling to a startling degree the voice of his father,' reported the *Star*. 'His words came through firmly, clearly – and without hesitation.' Both men couldn't have wished for a better accolade.