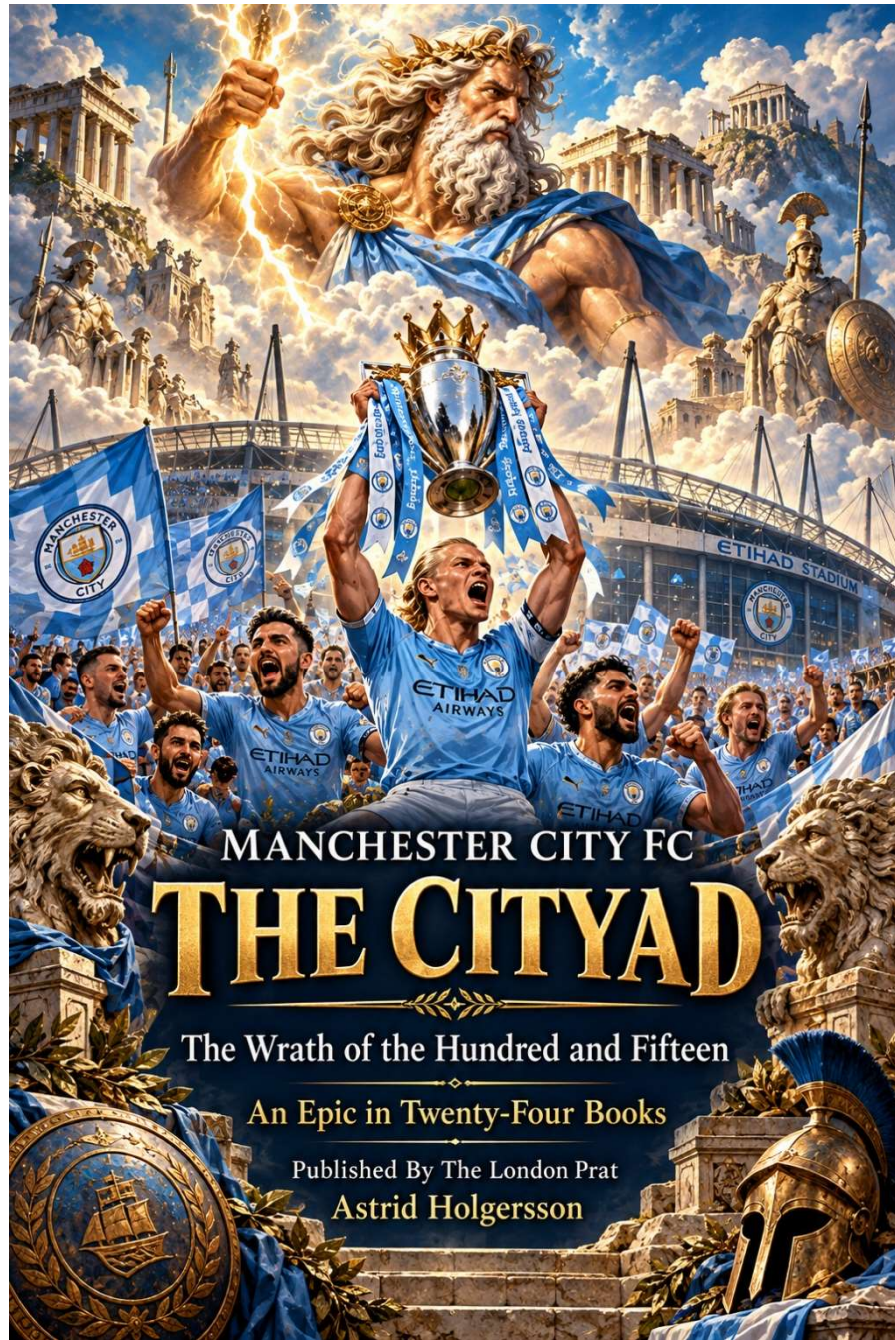




MANCHESTER CITY FC

THE CITYAD

The Wrath of the Hundred and Fifteen

An Epic in Twenty-Four Books

Published By The London Prat
Astrid Holgersson

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The Wrath of the Hundred and Fifteen

AN EPIC IN TWENTY-FOUR BOOKS

PUBLISHED BY [THE LONDON PRAT](#)

ASTRID HOLGERSSON

The Cityad: The Wrath of the Hundred and Fifteen
An Epic in Twenty-Four Books

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This is a work of satire. Real people, clubs and organisations appear in it for the purposes of comment, criticism and parody.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Poem's Principal Characters

Sheikh Mansour	<i>The Lord of the Golden Fleet</i>
Pep Guardiola.....	<i>The Master of a Thousand Passes</i>
Manchester City	<i>The Sky-Blue Citadel</i>
The Premier League	<i>The High Council of Twenty Kingdoms</i>
Financial Fair Play.....	<i>The Sacred Law of the Ledger</i>
Richard Masters.....	<i>The Herald of the League</i>
The Independent Commission.....	<i>The Three Judges of Fate</i>
City's Lawyers.....	<i>The Silver-Tongued Defenders</i>
Manchester United	<i>The Ancient Red Empire</i>
Liverpool	<i>The Warriors of the Mersey</i>
The City Supporters	<i>The Chorus of the Faithful</i>
The Accountants.....	<i>The Keepers of the Secret Scrolls</i>

THE VERSE

The poem is written in elevated, musical narrative verse, borrowing Homer's mighty speeches, memorable epithets, battlefield catalogues and interventions by the gods, alongside Longfellow's flowing rhythm.

The satirical trick is to describe modern financial regulation with the solemnity of the Trojan War. A lawyer submitting an appeal should sound like Hector defending Troy. A shareholder agreement should receive the attention Homer gives to Achilles' shield.

P A R T I

THE KINGDOM OF GOLD

BOOKS I–VI

The rise of Manchester City, 2008–2014

B O O K I

The City That Dreamed of Kings

T H E A R G U M E N T

Of Ancient Glory, the Red Empire, and the Long Suffering of the Sky-Blue Faithful

SING, MUSE, of Manchester, that rain-soaked land,
Where mighty football kingdoms rose and planned;
Where chimneys blackened heaven's patient face,
And men pursued a ball with solemn grace.

Where kings were made upon a field of grass,
And fortunes changed with every backward pass;
Where thousands gathered, faithful to the game,
To purchase hope and leave with much the same.

Two kingdoms stood beneath that northern sky,
Their banners raised, their rival standards high.
One clothed in red, whose trophies filled the hall,
One dressed in blue, whose fans had seen it all.

The Reds possessed the silver and the gold,
The Blues possessed the stories often told
Of afternoons when victory seemed near,
Until some fool conceded in the rear.

O mighty City! Kingdom of the Blue!
What cruel and curious fates descended you!
Your people dreamed of triumph, wealth, and fame,
Yet learned that hope was football's cruelest game.

For other clubs might lose and then recover,
But City found new ways to disappoint a lover.
And if the gods bestowed a blessed chance,
Some centre-half would stumble in advance.

The Reds, meanwhile, from Old Trafford's throne,
Declared the northern crown to be their own.
Their sovereign Ferguson, with fearsome brow,
Could make the bravest referee learn how
To find more minutes in a dying game
Than clocks themselves could reasonably claim.

His warriors marched through England, fierce and proud,
While conquered rivals murmured in the crowd.
Their banners shone, their silver trophies gleamed,
They won the very cups that City dreamed.

They crossed the seas, received the world's applause,
And gathered titles with the force of laws.
To them, success was something to expect;
To City, something briefly to suspect.

The Reds bought stars and set them on the field;
The Blues bought hope, which rarely paid a yield.
Yet once, before these melancholy days,
The Sky-Blue kingdom knew the victor's praise.

In sixty-eight, beneath a brighter sun,
They took the English crown, and fairly won.
Then Bell, whose feet seemed fashioned out of light,
And Lee, whose presence troubled every fight,
With Summerbee, whose courage none could doubt,
Made rival armies turn their banners about.

Great Mercer ruled with dignity and grace,
And Allison brought thunder to the place.
The FA Cup followed through the door,
Then European honours swelled the score.

And Wembley saw, in seventy-six, once more
The Blue procession crowned amid the roar.
The faithful raised their voices to the skies:
“At last! The gods have heard our ancient cries!”

Alas! The gods were busy, as gods are,
Attending other kingdoms from afar.
The silver faded, former heroes aged,
And football’s crueler chapters turned the page.

The glory left, though no one saw it go;
It slipped away discreetly, soft as snow.
And where great champions once had proudly trod,
There marched strange men whom none could name but God.

O Muse, recount the managers who came,
Who promised revolution, wealth, and fame!
One praised attack, another preached defence,
A third proposed a thing resembling sense.

Each brought a plan of such majestic scope
That loyal hearts discovered freshened hope.
Then came November, when the plan collapsed,
And all the learned speeches were perhaps
Best filed among the wisdom of the dead,
Beside the things the previous manager said.

The chairmen sat in offices of oak,
Where solemn men considered every stroke.
They counted losses, studied balance sheets,
And heard the distant groaning from the streets.

“Fear not,” they cried, “our future shall be bright!
We have a five-year vision, bold and right!”
But five years passed, and five years came anew,
And still the vision wore a darker blue.

Each summer brought the promise of a star,
A warrior summoned from a land afar.
His agent spoke of genius, skill, and speed;
The newspapers proclaimed him just the need.

The faithful rushed to see their saviour play,
Then watched him give the football straight away.
By Christmas he was seated on the bench,
While rumours blamed a hamstring, or the French.

And still they came, the thousands, through the rain,
To old Maine Road, to hope and hurt again.
The turnstiles clicked like ancient iron jaws,
Admitting men committed to the cause.

No victory guaranteed, no peace assured,
Yet every season faithfully endured.
Their fathers stood beside them, grey and wise,
With forty years of sorrow in their eyes.

“Now listen, lad,” an older soldier said,
And placed a blue wool scarf upon his head,
“To follow City takes a special breed,
A man of faith, but very little greed.
Expect no crown, demand no easy score,
And never trust a lead of two goals more.
For two goals up is where the danger starts;
The gods enjoy the breaking of our hearts.”

The boy regarded him with troubled eyes.
“But why support a club that never flies?”
His father sighed and watched the cloudy sky.
“Because my father did, and so must I.
We cannot choose the kingdom of our birth,
Nor measure love by what a crown is worth.
Besides, your grandad suffered sixty years;
It seems a shame to waste those bloody tears.”

So passed the ancient covenant of pain,
From father unto son, through wind and rain.
A sacred debt no triumph could discharge,
A love made all the stronger by its charge.

For kingdoms rich in glory never know
The strange rewards that endless losing show:
To love a thing that gives you little back,
And praise its virtues after each attack.

The neighbouring Reds considered this absurd.
“Why follow City?” was the question heard.
“We win the cups, we celebrate the score;
What satisfaction could you possibly want more?”

The Blues replied, with dignity and pride,
“We have tradition, history on our side.
And when we win, a rare and splendid sight,
We celebrate the whole succeeding night.”

“But we win often,” answered those in red.
“Precisely,” one exhausted Blue then said.
“Your triumph comes so frequently to pass
You’ve scarcely time to empty out your glass.
Our victories are rarer, but sublime;
We make them last a most impressive time.
One decent derby, properly recalled,
Can keep three generations quite enthralled.”

Thus were the rival philosophies explained,
While Manchester endured another day of rain.
For trophies, Reds pursued with ceaseless greed;
For hope, the Blues had cultivated need.

One kingdom counted honours on the wall,
The other counted years since winning all.
And every spring, when honours were bestowed,
The Reds held feasts. The Blues repaired the road.

Then came the year when fortune turned her back,
And City wandered down a darker track.
Not merely from the heights of England's game,
But deeper still, to places few could name.

The third division spread its humble ground,
Where ancient names and smaller clubs were found.
And City, once a champion of the land,
Must face opponents scarcely half as grand.

O cruel descent! O melancholy day!
When mighty City journeyed far away,
To fields where kings had never thought to tread,
And football programmes cost less than the bread.

Where dressing rooms were narrow, roofs were low,
And men who worked on Monday struck the blow.
Yet there, among the humble and the small,
The Blues discovered pride could still befall.

For little clubs fought fiercely for their name,
And welcomed City's armies to the game.
They cared not for the triumphs of the past,
Nor whether former glory long might last.

A famous crest was still a crest to beat,
A famous team could still concede defeat.
And many an afternoon the faithful learned
That reputation earned no points returned.

The City fans marched onward, thousands strong,
Through strange new towns, still singing the old song.
They filled the terraces, endured the cold,
And watched their heroes struggle, brave and bold.

No emperor possessed such loyal men,
Who suffered every Sunday, then again.
For even Rome, when stripped of wealth and crown,
Might reasonably have considered shutting down.

But City marched, and destiny drew near:
The famous Wembley day, the fateful year.
The final stood before their weary eyes,
Where Gillingham awaited as the prize.

Two goals behind, their hopes approaching death,
The Sky-Blue faithful scarce could draw a breath.
The minutes fled, the fatal hour had come,
And fate prepared to strike its final drum.

Then Horlock scored! A spark against the night,
A sudden flash of almost hopeless light.
And Dickov struck! The roaring heavens shook,
As all the gods abandoned every book.

The faithful screamed, their prayers became a storm,
And hope returned in wild, disorderly form.
From utter ruin City fought their way,
And claimed the victory at the end of day.

O Muse, what strange delight their hearts possessed!
What monstrous weight was lifted from each chest!
They danced as though the world itself were won,
Though third-tier football's battle had been done.

No emperor returning from the East
Had ever earned so loud or long a feast.
And strangers asked, observing all the glee,
"What wondrous championship can this one be?"

"Promotion!" cried the Blues, with streaming eyes,
As if they'd conquered earth and claimed the skies.
"Promotion from the third!" the strangers said.
The faithful proudly nodded every head.

"For lesser clubs, perhaps, a modest thing,
But we have rescued hope upon the wing.
We've reached the second tier! Now make some room!
And kindly let us celebrate our doom."

The kingdom rose, then rose another flight,
And found again the great league's dazzling light.
Their banners fluttered, and their spirits soared,
As City faced the clubs they'd long adored.

The Reds still ruled, their trophies still increased,
But City had returned to join the feast.
And even if the banquet held no crown,
At least the Blues could sit without looking down.

Old Maine Road heard its final loyal cheer,
A farewell soaked in memory and beer.
Its bricks had held the laughter and the cries,
The broken dreams, the everlasting lies
That next year surely everything would change,
That fortune's wheel would finally rearrange.

Then City crossed toward a grander home,
With spacious stands beneath a shining dome.
A stadium of splendour met their gaze,
Its modern arches caught the summer haze.

Great seats arose in ordered, sweeping tiers,
A palace built to house their ancient fears.
The faithful gazed upon the noble ground,
Where hope in splendid quantities was found.

One elder shook his head and gave a grin:
"A lovely place. But will the buggers win?"
The answer varied, as such answers do,
When destiny has little use for blue.

Some glorious days arose, some dreadful nights,
Some stirring wins, some truly wretched sights.
A derby victory restored their pride,
Then lesser clubs came marching from outside.

And once more City taught the ancient art
Of lifting hope before it breaks the heart.
In taverns round the city, old men spoke
Of ancient triumph, sorrow, pride, and smoke.

They praised the golden champions of their youth,
Whose every pass improved with time, in truth.
For memory, that kindly, generous friend,
Allows no missed attempt to spoil the end.

Each vanished striker, deadlier every year,
Could score from forty yards without a fear.
Meanwhile the Red Empire climbed anew,
And cast its mighty shadow on the Blue.

From Champions League to triumphs far and wide,
The neighbours swelled with monumental pride.
Their manager surveyed his crowded shelf,
A man who rarely doubted of himself.

The City faithful watched this splendid show,
And asked if suffering had further depths below.
Yet never did their loyalty decline;
They kept the ancient faith and held the line.

The boy became a man, his father old,
Their scarves grew thin, their winters sharper cold.
And still they stood together in the stand,
Two generations joined by heart and hand.

For football, in its deepest, truest part,
Is not a trophy, but a stubborn heart.
What wealth could purchase such enduring love?
What crown could bring that fellowship above?

What silver cup could equal one embrace,
When City scored and joy transformed a face?
For all the jokes their miseries inspired,
Their fierce devotion never once retired.

And there beneath the rain, the kingdom knew
That losing had not made its people few.
But far beyond the streets of Manchester,
Where warmer suns embraced the desert air,
Another kingdom watched the Western game,
And studied how its conquerors rose to fame.

Its palaces were rich, its coffers deep,
Its golden promises could trouble sleep.
And where the Blues saw sorrow, loss, and shame,
These distant princes saw a greater game.

Across the seas, where ancient merchants sailed,
Where caravans of wealth had once prevailed,
A whisper passed through corridors of gold,
Of northern clubs whose fortunes might be sold.

A throne stood waiting, humble in its pride,
Its loyal subjects faithful to its side.
A kingdom with a history of defeat,
But mighty crowds that never left their seat.

The gods of football gathered high above,
To weigh the strange arithmetic of love.
For what is greatness? Glory? Wealth? Or fame?
And who possesses honour in the game?

Can gold command what courage cannot buy?
Can mortal kings compel the gods on high?
And if a thousand treasures fill the chest,
Does victory then become a sacred quest?

Old Zeus looked down upon the northern rain,
And heard the City faithful sing again.
He watched their scarves, their weary, laughing faces,
Their journey through a thousand hopeless places.

Then turned to Hermes, messenger of fate,
Who stood beside the everlasting gate.
“What news,” asked Zeus, “of this peculiar clan,
Whose fortunes rise and fall beyond all plan?
They suffer much, yet never turn away.
What makes them come to worship every day?”

“Their fathers,” Hermes answered with a smile,
“Have taught them how to suffer all the while.
Their children shall inherit what they know:
A scarf, a seat, and nowhere else to go.”

Then Zeus, amused, surveyed the mortal scene,
The mighty Reds, the poorer Sky-Blue dream.
“Enough!” he cried. “These men have paid their due.
Perhaps the world has other plans for blue.
Let fortune send a sovereign rich and bold,
Whose ships shall bear a mountain-load of gold.
Let Manchester behold a wondrous sight,
And see its humble kingdom crowned with might.”

The thunder sounded over England’s shore,
And distant engines gave a muffled roar.
The people slept, unconscious of their fate,
While golden ships approached the kingdom’s gate.

No trumpet warned them what the dawn would bring,
No herald named the coming desert king.
But high above the sleeping city spread
A thousand stars, like coins above each head.

And somewhere in a quiet counting room,
Unnoticed by the Fates who guarded doom,
A ledger lay, its pages clean and white,
Awaiting hands to fill them in the night.

No battle yet, no accusation made,
No judgment cast, no final reckoning weighed.
The gods knew only this: that wealth would call,
And nothing quite so simple as a ball
Would ever rule this kingdom quite the same
When gold and glory entered football's game.

So ends the age of sorrow, mud, and rain,
Of broken hopes that blossomed once again.
The Blue had learned to lose, yet still believe,
To watch great triumphs others might achieve.

Now came an age of riches and renown,
When money's hand would reach to lift the crown.
And every man who prayed for victory
Would learn the price of making history.

HERE ENDETH BOOK I
The City That Dreamed of Kings

B O O K I I

The Golden Ships of Abu Dhabi

T H E A R G U M E N T

*Of the Coming of Sheikh Mansour, the Fall of Poverty, and the Discovery That Money
Could Buy Almost Everything Except a Clean Sheet*

SING, MUSE, of wealth, that most persuasive king,
Before whose throne the proudest nations sing;
Whose silent voice can move the hearts of men,
And make a pauper dream of crowns again.

Sing of the East, where golden fortunes rise,
Beneath the desert's vast and cloudless skies;
And of a northern kingdom, poor in fame,
Whose sons had long endured the losing game.

For Manchester, beneath its cloak of rain,
Had learned to wear its disappointments plain.
Its ancient Blue, though faithful to the last,
Still sought some consolation in the past.

The Reds possessed the trophies and the throne,
The Blues possessed a grievance of their own;
And while their neighbours conquered every foe,
The City faithful watched their fortunes grow.

O cruel gods, who govern sport and chance,
Who bid the mighty fall, the weak advance!
What strange arithmetic directs your hand,
That one club wins, while others merely stand?

Why should the Reds possess the lion's share,
While Blue must buy its hope and breathe despair?
For fifty years the faithful raised this plea,
And heaven answered, "Wait, and you shall see."

But waiting is a bitter kind of prayer,
Especially when rivals have the silverware.
The City fans had waited through the years,
Through grim defeats, through laughter, grief, and tears.

They'd seen their ancient heroes fade from sight,
Their glorious afternoons dissolve in night.
And every spring, when trophies left the ground,
The Red procession marched another round.

Yet far away, beyond the Western sea,
Beyond the lands of ancient chivalry,
Where desert winds across the dunes were blown,
There lived a prince whose wealth was widely known.

Not wealth of modest, mortal, measured kind,
That ordinary merchants hope to find;
But wealth so vast that counting seemed a crime,
And interest earned more interest all the time.

The sun arose upon his golden land,
Where towers of glass emerged from ancient sand;
Where fortunes slept beneath the desert floor,
And commerce sailed through every open door.

Where men discussed transactions after tea,
That might have purchased half of Lombardy;
And where the cost of one expensive yacht
Could make a football chairman lose his plot.

There Sheikh Mansour surveyed the distant West,
Where football ruled the hearts of rich and blessed.
He saw great kingdoms battling for renown,
And mighty clubs contending for a crown.

He saw the Reds triumphant in their pride,
And little City struggling at their side.
He studied how the football world was run,
And saw what generations had not done.

For here was sport, where wealth and fame combined,
Where glory fired the universal mind.
A kingdom might acquire a mighty name,
And carry it across the world through fame.

An ancient club could rise to heights untold,
Provided one possessed sufficient gold;
For history might be written by the brave,
But bankers liked to know what people gave.

High on Olympus, Zeus observed the scene,
And stroked his beard with philosophical mien.
He summoned Hermes from the heavenly gate,
To speak concerning Manchester and fate.

“Tell me,” said Zeus, “what makes this kingdom poor?
Its people seem devoted to the core.
Its stadium stands magnificent and grand,
Its loyal subjects fill the crowded stand.
Why do they suffer, year upon cruel year,
While red-clad neighbours celebrate with beer?”

Then Hermes, who had studied football’s laws,
Replied with unexpected sober pause:
“Great Zeus, the matter’s difficult to state,
For City’s troubles have a lengthy date.
Their managers have come and gone like rain,
Their finest plans have vanished down the drain.
They buy a striker hoping he will score,
Then buy another when he fails once more.
Their transfer policy, from what I see,
Resembles Greek domestic policy.”

The Father of the Gods looked rather grim.
“Explain this strange comparison to him.”
“They borrow hope against the coming year,
Then spend it all before the goal is near.
And when the treasury is running dry,
They promise greater fortunes by and by.
Their future triumphs pay for present pride,
Though future triumphs seldom coincide.”

Then Zeus declared, with thunder in his eyes,
“The answer must be written in the skies.
Let gold descend upon this northern shore,
And let them taste what richer kingdoms store.
Their faithful hearts have suffered quite enough;
Let’s see how men behave when rich in stuff.”

And so the wheel of destiny began
To turn according to a richer plan.
The Fates themselves, who measured mortal breath,
And sent proud heroes stumbling toward their death,
Put down their threads and wondered what was meant
By funds sufficient to acquire a continent.

For even gods, whose power exceeds the sun,
Had never seen a transfer window run.
Now came September, in the year of eight,
When history approached the City’s gate.

The summer sun had yielded to the rain,
And football’s armies mustered once again.
The players trained, the faithful bought their seats,
And Monday’s traffic choked the crowded streets.

No trumpet sounded from a lofty tower,
Yet Manchester approached its golden hour.
The former lord, whose reign was drawing near
Its final act, gave way before the year.

The distant buyers came with vast intent,
And formal words of acquisition went
Across the wires, through offices and halls,
Where businessmen conducted mighty calls.

And suddenly the humble City name
Was joined to riches almost past all fame.
The Abu Dhabi United Group appeared,
And what was once impossible was cleared.

The club whose fans had counted every pound
Now saw uncounted fortunes gather round.
The news swept quickly through the northern town,
And men forgot their troubles and their frown.

The papers cried that City would be great;
The bookies hastened to adjust the rate.
Old men who'd watched the Blues since sixty-eight
Looked up and questioned this astonishing fate.

A butcher closed his shop before the hour,
And hurried home to hear the tale of power.
A postman, weary from his morning round,
Declared the greatest miracle was found.

The local landlord raised a foaming glass:
"At last! We've found a millionaire with class!"
But one old Blue, whose hair was snowy white,
Regarded all this wonder with delight
That struggled hard against the ancient fear
He'd carried faithfully from year to year.

He'd watched too many saviours come and go,
Too many mighty plans dissolve in woe.
"Now tell me," said the veteran to his son,
"Does this great prince know what he's taking on?
Has someone told him City never win?
That every bright beginning ends in sin?
Has someone shown him all our former scores,
Our relegations, failures, and the wars

We fought against ourselves, with such success
That other teams had scarcely cause to press?"

His son replied, "The man possesses gold.
More than the world's accountants ever told.
He may restore our fortunes and our name,
And bring great warriors here to play the game."

The father smiled, then slowly shook his head:
"Son, money cannot score a goal," he said.
And somewhere in a distant office chair,
An agent smiled and felt a change of air.

For news of wealth can travel faster still
Than any winger running down the hill.
Before the ink upon the papers dried,
The football agents gathered far and wide.

From Spain, from France, from Italy they came,
Each bearing tidings of a wondrous name.
Each had a client, dazzling to behold,
Whose virtues grew in proportion to the gold.

One offered speed, another offered grace,
A third a forward blessed with perfect pace.
A fourth proposed a veteran of renown,
Whose knees had almost entirely broken down.

Yet still his representative declared,
"No finer athlete ever stood prepared.
His wages may appear a trifle high,
But surely immortality can't be bought on the cheap, can I?"

And those who once approached the City gate
With modest terms and promises to wait,
Now spoke of bonuses, and homes, and shares,
And private flights, and gentlemen's affairs.

Their clients needed gardens, gates, and space,
And cars befitting international grace.
A modest contract, signed the month before,
Now somehow cost approximately four times more.

The football world, which worshipped wealth and fame,
Discovered fresh affection for City's name.
Great agents praised the northern way of life,
Its noble people, excellent for a wife.

They loved its history, loyalty, and pride,
Its rain, its mills, the rivers at its side.
And several men who could not find the ground
Declared it was the finest club around.

The manager was Hughes, a man of steel,
Who knew the price of struggle, sweat, and zeal.
He'd played for great United in his day,
And understood the old, relentless way.

Now fate had placed him on the other shore,
With riches none had dreamed of years before.
He'd come to shape a football team with care;
Instead, the world's ambition filled the air.

What strange responsibility was this,
To turn bewilderment to promised bliss?
For every pound that fortune brought to light
Increased the weight of expectation's might.

The crowd that yesterday had prayed for eighth
Now contemplated trophies with new faith.
And men who once rejoiced at staying up
Were making early plans to win the Cup.

Before the golden news had reached the land,
Some sturdy warriors already joined the band.
Young Kompany, a giant out of Belgium's line,
Whose courage would through future battles shine;
And Zabaleta, resolute and brave,
Who'd never leave a comrade he could save.

Then Wright-Phillips returned, the little flame,
Whose darting feet brought thunder to the game.
These men would earn their honour through the years,
Through bruising trials and battle's sweat and tears.

For gold may purchase armour, swords, and shields,
But courage must be proven on the fields.
A warrior's worth is measured when he stands
Before the charging ranks of rival bands.

And though the treasury's bounty may be vast,
A tackle must be made, a ball be passed.
Yet greater madness waited in the wings,
For football's merchants dealt in stranger things.

The transfer deadline neared its final hour,
And City tasted sudden financial power.
The market trembled, agents lost their rest,
And every wealthy club revised its quest.

A player valued modestly at dawn
Might cost a king's inheritance by morn.
The papers spoke of Berbatov the bold,
Whose silky feet seemed fashioned out of gold.

A striker fit for empires, strong and fine,
Whose art could grace the grandest forward line.
But when the smoke of football battle cleared,
The ancient Red Empire had him secured.

Thus wealth discovered, on its opening day,
That rivals did not simply melt away.
The Blues looked east, then west, then east once more,
To see what stars the football heavens bore.

For if one prize was taken by the Red,
Another name must crown the news instead.
The hours ran down, the midnight bell drew near,
And every club in Europe seemed to hear
The ringing of a telephone that day,
As City's newfound fortunes cleared the way.

And there in Madrid, where ancient banners flew,
A Brazilian star prepared to wear the blue.
His name was Robinho, swift of foot and bright,
Whose dancing skill could turn a match to light.

He'd worn the famous white of Madrid's throne,
And made the crowded stadium his own.
Now destiny, which delights in changing plans,
Prepared a stranger triumph for the fans.

For Chelsea's wealthy kingdom sought his art,
And seemed well placed to capture hand and heart.
Their London court had offered him a place,
Among the stars who fought with strength and grace.

But City came, and London's hopes grew dim,
As fortune turned her golden face to him.
And when the final documents were sealed,
The Brazilian wore the blue upon the field.

The sum was thirty-two and half a million pounds,
A figure that sent thunder through the grounds.
A British record, mighty in its day,
For one whose feet could dance the ball away.

The press declared the football world transformed,
As headline after headline proudly stormed.
The City faithful greeted this great news
As men who'd won a fortune they could use.

The fathers shouted, children danced with pride,
And thousands wore their happiness outside.
The taverns filled with songs from wall to wall,
As though they'd won a trophy after all.

The Red supporters, watching from their throne,
Began to fear a challenge to their own.
Though some declared, with properly measured spite,
"A costly team is not a team that's right."

And thus a truth the gods had always known
Became the theme of every football throne:
When poorer rivals struggle year by year,
Their neighbours call it character sincere.

But when the poor grow wealthy overnight,
The prosperous discover moral fright.
A fortune long possessed seems fair and sound;
A fortune newly found must be profound.

O Wealth! Thou most convenient moral test!
Who measures sporting honour at thy best?
The rich proclaim that riches must be earned,
Until a richer rival's wealth is learned.

Then fairness rises, stern and bright and pure,
A principle the affluent endure
With deepest feeling when another's gold
May threaten all the trophies they now hold.

Upon Olympus, jealous gods debated
Whether this golden wind should be abated.
Ares, who loved the clash of swords and men,
Declared that war had just begun again.

Athena, mistress of the thoughtful mind,
Suggested wealth alone was far from kind.
“For kingdoms rise upon a golden tide,
Then learn what dangers lurk beneath their pride.
The treasury may swell, the stadium ring,
Yet riches do not guarantee a king.
A name may buy allegiance for a year,
But honour must be earned through pain and fear.”

Then Hermes laughed, and raised his silver rod:
“These football people scarcely need a god.
They worship twenty-two men chasing leather,
And blame the judge regardless of the weather.
Their priests wear tracksuits, swear at minor fouls,
And send the heavens increasingly loud howls.
If this is sacred, let the world beware;
I doubt Olympus has sufficient air.”

But Zeus remained enthralled by City’s fate,
And watched the growing crowds assemble at the gate.
He saw the scarves, the songs, the wild delight,
The dreams restored beneath September’s light.

He saw young children speaking of the crown,
And old men wandering gladly through the town.
And for a moment, touched by mortal cheer,
He almost shed a most immortal tear.

For though a god may reign a thousand years,
He cannot understand a fan’s long tears.
A lifetime spent in hoping for a day
When fortune finally turns one’s chosen way.

A lifetime when the Reds enjoyed the feast,
And City gathered comfort from the least.
Now suddenly the banquet doors were wide,
And City’s ragged hopes could step inside.

Then came the day when Robinho appeared,
And forty thousand voices rose and cheered.
The Chelsea warriors marched into the ground,
Where new ambition echoed all around.

The Blue supporters filled the stadium air,
And cast their former caution to despair.
For surely now the golden age had come,
And victory would sound its mighty drum.

Thirteen minutes passed, and fortune smiled,
As football's gods embraced their newest child.
A free kick stood before the Chelsea goal,
And through the crowd anticipation stole.

The Brazilian struck! The football curved in flight,
And struck the net amid a storm of light.
The faithful roared, the stadium shook with glee,
As City glimpsed what greatness yet might be.

One goal! One glorious goal! The golden age!
The crowd had found the first triumphant page.
The ancient sorrows seemed to melt away,
And Manchester believed it owned the day.

A record signing scored upon his bow;
What further proof of destiny than now?
The Blues proclaimed the dawning of their reign,
And Chelsea promptly equalised again.

Then came the visitors with hardened pride,
Who had no thought of stepping meekly aside.
They struck again, then once again they came,
And left three goals beside the Chelsea name.

The whistle sounded. London's warriors won.
The golden revolution had begun
With one bright goal, one afternoon of pride,
And three conceded at the other side.

The old man stood, and folded up his scarf,
Then gave a weary, philosophic laugh.
He watched the crowd depart into the rain,
And felt the ancient rhythm start again.

His son, astonished, struggled to explain
How all that money purchased so much pain.
“But Father, surely better days await?
Our prince has funds to challenge any state!”

The father smiled, and nodded toward the sky:
“My boy, we’ve wealth enough to make gods cry.
But listen well, for City’s ancient curse
Cannot be conquered by an open purse.
We bought a man for thirty million gold,
Yet still our defenders lost their bloody hold.
If fortune wishes City to be great,
She’ll first have to instruct us how to wait.”

And so the evening settled on the town,
As disappointed thousands wandered down.
Yet something strange remained within their breast,
A fire that no defeat could quite arrest.

For yesterday they had been poor and blue;
Today the world looked different, though they knew
That money could not lift them in one day,
Nor make the Chelsea warriors kneel and pray.

The golden age had entered through the door,
And Manchester would never be as before.
The faithful now could dream beyond their past,
And hope that future triumphs might hold fast.

The armies of the world had heard their name,
The grandest stars might join their rising fame.
And though the opening battle had been lost,
The kingdom could now contemplate the cost.

For gold is not a goal, nor victory,
Nor does it grant an end to misery.
It buys the chance to stand among the great,
But cannot strike the ball or conquer fate.

It summons warriors from distant shores,
And opens long-forbidden palace doors.
Yet those who hold the purse must learn in time
That greatness has a law beyond the climb.

And in a chamber far beyond the crowd,
Where no supporter sang his passion loud,
Where men in sober jackets counted sums,
And measured what the rich and mighty comes
To owe, to spend, to borrow, and to save,
There waited questions for the rich and brave.

For every mighty kingdom built on gold
Must one day hear its history retold.
A ledger lay upon an oaken stand,
Its empty pages waiting for a hand.

Beside it rested pens of deepest black,
And columns waiting patiently to track
The journey of each sovereign through the years,
The triumphs, disappointments, hopes, and fears.

As yet no judge had summoned City's name,
Nor turned its golden harvest into blame.
The seasons yet to come were cloaked from sight,
Their victories hidden in the depths of night.

The Fates alone could read the distant page,
Where crowns and controversies marked an age.
And Clotho, spinning threads of mortal days,
Observed the northern kingdom's changing ways.

She saw bright banners wave above the field,
And trophies that the years would slowly yield.
Yet deeper still, beneath the golden shine,
She saw the questions gathering in line.

She saw the courts where lawyers would contend,
And accusations seemingly without end.
She saw accountants marching into war,
With documents no man had seen before.

And judges seated high above the fray,
To weigh the deeds of many a bygone day.
But all of this belonged to years unborn,
Beyond the present brightness of the morn.

For now the kingdom lifted up its head,
And turned away from all the tears it shed.
The golden fleet had reached the northern shore,
And City's ancient poverty was no more.

Its people sang, their weary hearts renewed,
And welcomed wealth with proper gratitude.
So let the trumpets sound across the plain,
And let the Blues prepare to rise again.

Let rival kings look north with growing fear,
For greater battles surely now draw near.
Let every distant agent hear the call,
And seek his fortune in the game of ball.

Let kings and merchants ponder what it means
When gold transforms the destiny of teams.
For Manchester had dreamed of kings before,
And now a prince had entered through its door.

The reign of patient poverty was done;
A brighter, stranger kingdom had begun.
Its treasury was deep, its hopes were high,
Its banners reached toward the northern sky.

And somewhere, from the heavens far above,
The gods looked down on football, wealth, and love.
Then Zeus, amused by what he'd set in flight,
Looked once more toward the fading northern light.

He watched the crowded terraces grow still,
The lamps shine softly on the distant hill.
He saw the golden promise newly made,
And all the debts ambition might have paid.

He raised his cup, and spoke with solemn mirth:
"Behold the strangest kingdom upon Earth.
They once had little, yet their hopes were vast;
Now wealth has come, and peace may well be past.
For when a poor man longs to be a king,
He scarcely knows what troubles crowns may bring."

And Hermes answered from the heavenly stair:
"At least, great Zeus, they've money now to spare.
Their armies shall be mighty, brave, and bold,
Their warriors richly paid in English gold.
Their foes shall tremble, kingdoms fall apart,
And every agent play his golden part."

Then Zeus replied, his thunder rolling free:
"One thing remains a mystery to me.
If wealth can purchase glory, strength, and fame,
Why could it not have won that Chelsea game?"

The heavens shook with laughter at the jest,
As Manchester lay quiet in the west.
The golden ships had come, the die was cast,
The age of humble expectation passed.

A kingdom once accustomed to defeat
Now dreamed of laying trophies at its feet.
And though the gods foresaw a storm ahead,
Of judgments, laws, and words not yet said,
They left the mortals to their coming glory,
To write with gold the next tremendous story.

For men may conquer kingdoms, seas, and air,
And purchase half the world beyond compare;
But every sovereign, however rich his reign,
Must send eleven men into the rain.

HERE ENDETH BOOK II

The Golden Ships of Abu Dhabi

B O O K I I I

*The Gathering of the
Million-Dollar Warriors*

T H E A R G U M E N T

*Of the Summoning of Great Champions, the Treachery of Agents, the Crossing of Tévez,
and the Discovery That Eleven Millionaires Do Not Necessarily Make a Football Team*

SING, MUSE, of warriors summoned from afar,
Of golden contracts and the gods of war;
Of mighty men who crossed the restless sea,
To join the growing Blue of Man City.

Sing of the merchants gathered at the gate,
Who sold the feet of heroes to the great;
Of solemn oaths, of fortunes newly made,
And promises exchanged before they played.

For now the Golden Ships had reached the shore,
And City was the City known before
Only in name; its treasury had grown
Beyond the dreams that mortal men had known.

The Blue, once humble in its northern pride,
Now called the wealth of kingdoms to its side;
And where its fathers once had prayed for goals,
Its rulers now could purchase foreign souls.

Not souls, perhaps, for that would be a sin;
They merely bought the men the souls were in.
For football, having grown to grand estate,
Had learned to put a figure upon fate.

A hero's heart was noble, brave, and free;
His left foot cost a most impressive fee.
His right was dearer, so his agent said,
And both required a mansion and a bed.

Upon Olympus, where the gods surveyed
The mortal follies that their hands had made,
Great Zeus convened the council of the skies,
And summoned all the deities, stern and wise.

"Behold," he cried, "the northern kingdom's gold!
A richer football story shall be told.
Their king has wealth enough to arm a host;
Let every nation send its bravest boast."

Then Hermes, patron of the merchant's trade,
Arose and bowed before the throne of jade.
"Great Father, war has changed since Hector died;
The sword is gone, and agents now preside.
No longer must a hero fight for land;
He need but sign the parchment in his hand.
The bravest need not face a spear or shield;
They merely face a clause about the field.

"And should a warrior fail to earn his pay,
His agent finds another club straightway.
The hero takes his wages, bold and free;
The agent takes a most substantial fee."

Then Ares laughed, whose kingdom once was war:
"Such fighting I have never witnessed before!
When Hector fell, his widow wept in grief;
Now fallen players demand contractual relief.
Achilles fought for honour, rage, and fame;
These fellows want a bonus every game."

Athena, goddess of the thoughtful mind,
Declared that modern war was less refined.
“Great Zeus, the men who govern football’s fate
Have made the simple game a vast estate.
A club may own the finest men alive,
Yet struggle still to count from one to five.
And should its owners find their spending great,
They buy another striker and call it fate.”

So laughed the gods, while down upon the Earth,
The City faithful contemplated birth
Of that new age the golden ships had brought,
When fortune could be purchased, so they thought.

For hope was cheap when hope was all they knew;
Now hope wore silk, and drove a Bentley too.
The winter came with Manchester’s old rain,
That washed the streets and polished every pane.

The merchants gathered, eager for the gold,
With tales of warriors magnificent and bold.
They praised the men who waited to be signed,
Whose virtues grew with every sum assigned.

A defender once considered merely fair
Became a prince when City’s cash was there.
Young Bridge arrived from Chelsea’s wealthy court,
A seasoned man in football’s sternest sport.

His left foot promised order on the flank,
While City’s owners opened up the bank.
No longer would the Blues endure the pain
Of watching rivals gallop down the lane.

And should one man prove insufficient still,
Another might be purchased for the bill.
Then Bellamy, the Welshman, fierce and fleet,
Whose temper seldom suffered a retreat,
Came charging through the winter’s frozen air,
With courage in his boots and fire to spare.

No cautious soul was he, no gentle lamb,
But something close to bottled battering ram.
His enemies were wise to keep their ground;
His teammates learned to keep their distance round.

From Hamburg came De Jong, of iron frame,
Whose tackles earned a formidable name.
He guarded City's middle with such force
That rivals sometimes questioned their divorce
From both the earth and ordinary air,
When suddenly De Jong came flying there.

A midfield shield, a man of stern design,
Who drew his country's battle at the line.
And Given came, the guardian of the goal,
Whose hands were brave, whose purpose firm and whole.

From Newcastle's northern halls he strode,
To bear another city's heavy load.
He stood between the posts, prepared to save
Whatever foolish chances others gave;
For City's wealth had brought a splendid thing:
A goalkeeper who understood his spring.

The faithful cheered these champions newly won,
And dreamed of all the glories yet undone.
They saw the mighty future taking shape,
A fortress from which none could hope escape.

Yet football has a humour of its own,
And seldom leaves a dream entirely alone.
For every warrior brought to guard the wall
Could sometimes be surprised by one loose ball.

So passed the winter, and the summer came,
With brighter hopes and vastly greater fame.
The Golden Kingdom called from every shore,
And Europe's princes answered more and more.

A summer once devoted to one name
Now gathered many heroes to the game;
And agents, hearing City's growing call,
Found Manchester the loveliest town of all.

They loved its weather, so their letters said,
Its ancient mills, its noble streets of red;
They praised the people, generous and proud,
The terraces, the singing of the crowd.

They loved the rain that fell upon the green,
Though few had ever visited the scene.
And most of all, with gratitude sincere,
They loved the figures quoted every year.

O blessed agents, faithful to their trade,
Who never saw a contract poorly made!
Who never let affection cloud their view,
Unless a richer offer made it new.

They travelled Europe, restless as the wind,
And left a trail of transfer fees behind.
Where once a merchant dealt in cloth and grain,
These men could sell the same right-back again.

One agent claimed his man possessed the speed
To answer every manager's greatest need.
Another swore his striker never missed,
Except for chances journalists had listed.

A third declared his client, strong and tall,
Could dominate a match without the ball.
The City council listened, grave and wise,
Then asked the only question: "What's his price?"

The agent smiled, and looked toward the sky,
As though the angels fixed the figure high.
He named a sum that made the candles shake,
Then added what his client wished to take.

A house, a car, a bonus, private flights,
And several undisclosed commercial rights.
The council bowed, and duly took a note;
The agent asked for payment for the quote.

From Villa's fields came Barry, calm and sound,
A steady master of the middle ground.
He did not seek the flash of royal praise,
Nor decorate the field with needless plays.

He read the war before the war began,
And calmly placed the football to his man.
A general whose modest gifts were plain:
He kept possession, then he did again.

From distant Paraguay came Santa Cruz,
A striker whom the football world would choose
For strength and height, for courage in the air,
And handsome features flowing through his hair.

His figure graced the kingdom's proud parade,
His contract was magnificently made.
The faithful hoped his goals would swiftly flow;
The gods, as ever, had their doubts below.

From Arsenal came Adebayor, tall and grand,
A spearhead sought throughout the football land.
He strode like some great warrior of old,
Whose sword had never once been bought or sold.

Though in the modern game, as all men knew,
A transfer fee was always falling due.
His former master watched him leave the fold,
And learned what happens when a rival has gold.

Then Kolo Touré came, experienced and brave,
A captain whom the northern kingdom gave
A place of honour in its rising host,
To guard the city's newly treasured coast.

From Arsenal's famed defensive walls he came,
A seasoned soldier of distinguished name.
He'd seen the greatest battles, fierce and long,
And knew that strength was more than merely strong.

Then Lescott came from Everton's blue land,
A mighty defender, summoned to command.
And thus the battlements grew strong and wide,
With seasoned men assembled side by side.

The owners hoped their many walls would stand
Against the finest armies in the land.
But one old Blue, surveying this great host,
Observed, "We seem to have bought half the coast."

"How many men," he asked, "must guard our gate?
Have we acquired a team or conquered a state?
If every hero purchased comes to play,
Where shall the former heroes go each day?"

His grandson smiled. "The bench," he proudly said.
The old man slowly shook his weary head.
"In former days we had but one good lad.
Now leaving twenty out seems rather mad.
But times have changed, and riches rule the field;
Perhaps we'll buy the referee as well."

"No, Grandad! That would break the sacred code!"
"Then purchase roads on which the refs are towed."
Yet greater news awaited in the air,
A tale to make the Red Empire despair.

For Carlos Tévez, lion of the plain,
Who'd fought beneath United's proud campaign,
Now contemplated leaving Ferguson's fold,
And joining City's company of gold.

A warrior hardened in the fiercest fray,
Who knew the rival kingdom's secret way.
He'd battled for the Reds with fearless heart,
And played in many a victory his part.

He knew their triumphs, tasted their renown,
And helped their mighty empire wear the crown.
But now the roads divided, dark and wide,
And destiny drew Carlos to the Blue side.

The football world regarded this with awe:
A hero crossing what seemed sacred law.
For Manchester, though joined in name and rain,
Was split by something stronger than a chain.

The Reds and Blues, beneath the selfsame sky,
Could never see their neighbours passing by
Without recalling some contested score,
A stolen cup, a bitter derby war.

The city's roads were neutral, so men said,
But every pub remembered Blue and Red.
And now a champion of the Red had come
To join the Blues beneath their beating drum.

The news was carried swiftly through the town,
Where crimson brows began to gather frown.
The City faithful danced upon the street,
And hailed the coming of their newest fleet.

The Reds regarded all the celebration
As evidence of moral degradation.
Then came the banner, monumental, bright,
Displayed before the Manchester daylight.

A picture of the Argentine appeared,
And underneath, the words that thousands cheered:
WELCOME TO MANCHESTER, bold and plain,
A phrase that rolled through every street and lane.

No threat was made, no weapon raised in spite,
Yet all the Reds prepared themselves to fight.
For few great wars have ever been begun
By anything more innocent than fun.

O wondrous power of advertising art,
To plant a dagger in a rival's heart!
No army crossed a frontier, drawn for war;
A poster did what cannons did before.

Its letters were sufficient to inflame
An empire jealous of its ancient name.
The Reds had won the world, yet now they found
One billboard could disturb their hallowed ground.

Sir Alex, ruler of the crimson throne,
Looked on this insolence against his own.
He'd ruled through countless seasons, proud and wise,
And watched the young pretenders rise and rise.

He knew that money could acquire a team,
But thought that City's confidence a dream.
For nothing in the kingdom's former days
Suggested crowns would follow lavish praise.

The gods observed his gathering disdain,
And Hermes laughed above the northern rain.
"Great Zeus, behold the famous Red commander!
The City poster drives him to much anger.
He's fought the greatest warriors of the age,
Yet now a printed advertisement breeds his rage."

"Then football is a curious sort of war,"
Said Zeus, "more strange than any fought before.
For Hector needed weapons, shield, and spear;
These men require a billboard and some beer."

The summer passed, the squads assembled strong,
And City marched with optimism's song.
From many lands the purchased heroes came,
Each carrying his nation's proud acclaim.

Their accents mingled in the dressing room,
Their bright ambitions filled the growing gloom.
And Hughes, who led the new and mighty band,
Surveyed the finest warriors in the land.

He counted forwards, midfielders, and backs,
And placed their many names upon his tracks.
He studied how their talents might combine,
And which eleven ought to form his line.

The task was grand, yet troublesome to do;
For everyone believed himself first-choice Blue.
And every man who waited on the bench
Had someone paid to call him from the trench.

O Coach! What heavy burden wealth bestows,
When every star demands the place he chose!
For in a poorer army men obey,
And thank the gods for work upon the day.

But rich battalions entertain a doubt
Whenever their commander leaves them out.
Each substitute possesses, in his pride,
An agent with a telephone outside.

And so the football battles now began,
With City's fortune resting man on man.
They struck with speed, with courage, skill, and flame,
And rivals learned to fear the City's name.

Where once the Blue had travelled meek and small,
Now mighty warriors thundered toward the ball.
The faithful watched, delighted and amazed:
Their club, for once, deserved to be well praised.

Then Arsenal, the former home of two
Great soldiers newly clothed in royal blue,
Approached the fortress, ready for the fight,
And filled the ground with noise and fierce delight.

The visiting faithful greeted Adebayor
With words less kind than those he'd known before.
They questioned every motive, every deed,
And praised the virtues of his former creed.

The mighty striker heard the hostile cry,
And raised his eyes toward England's clouded sky.
He laboured fiercely through the burning game,
Resolved to justify his growing fame.

Then came the cross, as lovely as a prayer,
And Adebayor rose into the air.
He struck! The football flew beyond the line,
And City's warriors hailed the splendid sign.

Yet scoring was not all his heart desired;
A greater exhibition was required.
He turned, and like a chariot set aflame,
Ran down the pitch from whence the football came.

Past astonished players, past the open ground,
Past every friend who sought to slow him down,
He travelled nearly all the field's great length
Upon the fuel of outrage and of strength.

Then sliding on his knees before the crowd,
He offered them his feelings, clear and loud.
No speech was needed; every man could see
The language of triumphant mockery.

The visiting fans received his grand display
With rather less enthusiasm that day.
The gods declared the sprint beyond compare;
The referee produced a card for flair.

And Ares, watching from his heavenly seat,
Declared, "A glorious triumph of the feet!
Had Hector travelled thus across the field,
The Greeks themselves might very well have yielded."

Athena sighed. "His goal was brave and fine,
But running half a mile to draw a fine
Seems hardly wisdom worthy of his rank."
"Indeed," said Hermes, "though he owns the bank."

Four goals to two! The City banners flew,
And England saw what newly wealthy Blue could do.
The mighty Arsenal departed from the ground,
With wounded pride and indignation sound.

The faithful sang, and filled the evening air,
With confidence they seldom dared to share.
For once the great were humbled by the small,
Though City's new condition wasn't small at all.

But soon there came a greater, sterner test,
At Old Trafford, where the Red held sway in the west.
The mighty armies gathered for the fray,
And all of Manchester awaited judgment day.

The crimson kingdom stood with haughty pride,
Its ancient banners stretching far and wide.
The Blues approached, their warriors richly dressed,
To learn if wealth could conquer England's best.

The battle raged, the football flew like fire,
And both great kingdoms fought with fierce desire.
The Reds struck first, the Blues returned the blow,
The score rose higher, then refused to slow.

The Reds attacked, the Blues replied again,
And thunder rolled above the crowded plain.
Each time United seemed to claim the day,
A City warrior tore their hopes away.

Then Bellamy, with fire within his feet,
Brought City's challenge back from near defeat.
The score stood level, three to three at last,
And all the bitter moments seemed now past.

The City faithful roared, their banners raised,
Their stubborn, gallant warriors loudly praised.
A draw, perhaps, but what a noble fight!
A challenge hurled against United's might!

Yet football's clock, that instrument of fate,
Has sometimes found a most elastic state.
The seconds passed, the minutes seemed to grow,
And still the referee forbore to blow.

The ancient Reds assembled one last tide,
While City's warriors struggled to abide.
Then Owen struck, and City's hopes were slain,
As four to three lit up the score again.

O cruel minute! Bitter stroke of time!
What law permitted such a final crime?
Not crime in truth, for football's rules were clear,
Though City's people disagreed that year.

The whistle sounded, and United won,
While weary Blue supporters mourned the sun.
One elder, gazing darkly at the clock,
Declared that time itself deserved a knock.

"Had Athens owned a referee like this,"
He muttered through the dying stadium's hiss,
"The Trojan War would never have been done;
They'd still be playing till the Greeks had won.
And should the gods award us seven goals,
The clock would run till Manchester consoled
The Reds with eight, and Ferguson arose
To tell the time exactly when it goes."

Yet even sorrow had a different taste,
For City's challenge was no longer waste.
The Reds had needed all their strength and art
To keep the restless Blues a step apart.

The ancient order trembled, though it stood,
And Manchester could feel the changing mood.
The kingdom once dismissed with easy cheer
Had given greater empires cause for fear.

But now a stranger malady appeared,
A fate the City faithful most had feared.
Not cruel defeat, nor victory denied,
But draws, interminably multiplied.

The armies marched, the battles rose and fell,
Yet neither side could break the tedious spell.
Seven league draws came marching in a row,
A perfect monument to neither yes nor no.

Against the lesser kingdoms of the land,
The City warriors struggled to command.
Their costly boots crossed mud and frozen grass,
And passed the ball, and passed, and passed, and passed.

They pressed the foe, they searched for open space,
Then found themselves pursuing another chase.
The whistle blew, the mighty hosts withdrew,
And yet another stalemate greeted Blue.

The accountants found this strangely hard to bear,
For no amount of gold could settle there.
Each draw had cost a monumental fee,
Yet earned precisely one point, not three.

One clerk examined figures, pale with doubt:
"At this expense, perhaps we'd best stay out.
For every match our warriors fail to win,
We seem to pay a fortune to begin."

The agents, questioned on the matter's cause,
Declared themselves devoted to the laws.
Their clients were magnificent and brave;
They merely needed opportunities to save.

And should results continue to remain
Below the heights required by the campaign,
The answer was so simple, plain, and true:
The kingdom needed several players new.

O strange disease of riches and desire,
That treats each disappointment with more fire!
For when the poor have suffered a defeat,
They practise harder, then return to meet
The challenge of their rivals with resolve,
And hope that time their weaknesses may solve.

But when a wealthy kingdom loses ground,
A transfer list is instantly brought round.
Perhaps a striker! Perhaps a stronger back!
Perhaps another winger for attack!

Perhaps a coach from Italy or Spain!
Perhaps a roof to keep away the rain!
And if these measures fail to turn the tide,
Perhaps the stadium should be twice as wide.

For modern men, with fortunes in their hands,
Believe success is something gold commands.
Upon Olympus, Zeus regarded this
With growing wonder at the mortal bliss
That wealth was meant to bring the northern town,
Yet seemed to bring another worried frown.

"Why do they draw?" he asked, with deep concern.
"What further lesson must these mortals learn?
Their treasury could purchase half the land,
Yet still their warriors cannot take command."

Athena answered, thoughtful as before:
“Because, great Zeus, a team requires much more
Than heroes gathered from the distant world.
A banner must be earned before unfurled.
The men must learn to think with one accord,
And know that football cannot be outscored
By merely setting wages high as heaven,
Then placing on the field an expensive eleven.”

“But surely gold can hasten all their aims?”
“Gold purchases the pieces, not the games.”
Then Zeus, whose temper seldom bore delay,
Declared, “Then find a man who knows the way!
If warriors cannot fashion victory,
Their leader must accept responsibility.”

The winter approached, and City’s court grew cold,
Despite the overflowing stores of gold.
The council gathered, grave with solemn thought,
To measure what their great investment bought.

The names were famous, all the wages high,
Yet trophies had not fallen from the sky.
The faithful knew their kingdom had grown strong,
But felt its journey taking rather long.

And Hughes, who’d built this great and costly host,
Had laboured hard to justify its boast.
He gathered warriors from far and wide,
And stood before them with a soldier’s pride.

But football kings, when fortunes fill the chest,
Discover patience is the scarcest guest.
For wealth, that promises to purchase time,
Demands success before the final chime.

Then Sunderland arrived upon the plain,
To battle City in the winter rain.
The game was wild, the score a furious sight,
As seven goals disturbed the northern night.

The Blues prevailed, four goals against the three,
And claimed the precious points of victory.
The crowd rejoiced, their spirits lifted high,
Yet something darker gathered in the sky.

For when the final whistle crossed the field,
The City's ruling council would not yield
Its judgment on the future of the throne;
A different general soon would claim his own.

The kingdom praised the victory of the day,
Then quietly sent its manager away.
A most peculiar mercy wealth bestowed:
To win the match, then lose the job one owed.

Thus Hughes departed from the City court,
His service ended in the noble sport.
He'd gathered men whose deeds would yet be told,
And forged the first great instruments of gold.

The future kingdom stood upon his ground,
Though no triumphant crown his brow had found.
And football, seldom gentle to its own,
Prepared another ruler for the throne.

From Italy came Mancini, stern and fine,
A general schooled in discipline and line.
With scarf about his neck, composed and proud,
He stood before the expectant northern crowd.

He'd mastered armies on the Italian plain,
And now would face the Manchester rain.
His task was plain, though mighty in its scope:
To turn enormous wealth to lasting hope.

His warriors stood before him, strong and tall,
And every man desired to have the ball.
Their talents filled the kingdom's every place,
Their wages could have financed outer space.

He saw their gifts, their courage, and their pride,
And all the costly dangers at their side.
Then, with a soldier's vision, calm and clear,
Prepared to shape the coming football year.

The gods looked down upon the new command,
And watched the Italian raise his careful hand.
Athena smiled, for wisdom might at last
Bring order to the armies gathered fast.

Ares rejoiced, anticipating war,
And Hermes counted profits as before.
While Zeus, regarding all this grand display,
Declared that football worked a curious way.

"They buy the finest warriors of the Earth,
And pay them sums beyond a kingdom's worth.
They build a mighty army, strong and grand,
Then sack the man who placed them hand in hand.
If ancient Troy had followed such a plan,
King Priam would have fired his chieftest man
Before the Greeks had reached the city's wall,
And blamed him for the horse that caused it all."

So passed the age of gathering and gold,
When City's grand ambition first took hold.
The heroes came, the banners rose in pride,
And Europe's finest sought the northern side.

The City faithful, once resigned to tears,
Now spoke of crowns approaching through the years.
Their songs grew louder, stronger, filled with flame,
For Manchester had learned to dream of fame.

Yet far beyond the roar of match and crowd,
Beyond the celebrations fierce and loud,
There stood another army, still unseen,
Whose weapons were not forged upon the green.

No swords they carried, neither spear nor shield,
Nor sought their honours on the football field.
Their hands were pale, their collars stiff and white,
Their battles waged beneath the office light.

The accountants sat beside the growing books,
With sharpened pens and most attentive looks.
They counted every contract, pound, and fee,
And measured what the football world could see.

For warriors might be purchased in a day,
But someone had to reckon what to pay.
And when the treasury's golden rivers flowed,
The ancient question grew: how much was owed?

The agents came with contracts to be signed,
The merchants brought their fortunes close behind.
The sponsors came, whose names would soon appear
Upon the shirts the faithful held so dear.

And every promise, every future gain,
Was entered in the ledger's narrow lane.
For football's kingdoms, rich or poor in fame,
Must live with figures long beyond the game.

No battle yet had brought the court to flame,
No judge had issued judgment on a name.
The warriors fought, the managers took pride,
And fortune turned upon the football side.

Yet Clotho, spinning threads of years to come,
Could hear another army's distant drum.
The Fates regarded what the years might bring,
And whispered of a war beyond the king.

For gold can raise a kingdom from the dust,
And fill its ancient followers with trust.
It buys the sword, the helmet, and the spear,
And summons distant champions to appear.

But when the battle ends, the victors stand
With trophies raised above the conquered land,
Another question waits beyond the song:
By what great means was all this power made strong?

Thus Manchester, its fortunes newly bright,
Prepared for greater battles, day and night.
The faithful dreamed, the great new warriors trained,
And all the hopes of generations gained
A shape more solid than the dreams before,
As City stood upon a richer shore.

The kingdom's strength was growing every day,
Though crowns remained a little way away.
And in a room, where quiet figures bent
Above the records of each sovereign spent,
The ledgers waited, patient, cold, and still,
For human hands to write their future will.

Not yet the thunder, nor the judgment's call,
But ink, and paper, figures, after all.
For when the gods themselves have ceased to cheer,
And every football hero disappears,
When banners fade, and stadiums grow old,
And legends turn to stories often told,
The numbers shall remain, beyond the grave,
To tell what men possessed, and what they gave.

And Hermes, gazing down upon the page,
Foretold another strange and costly age:
"The swords shall rust, the warriors shall depart,
The trophies find their place in football's heart.
But one great army never shall retire:
The men who audit all that men desire."

Then Zeus replied, as thunder shook the night:
“An army armed with pens? A curious sight!
No bloody sword, no horse, no battle cry,
Yet kings may tremble when these men draw nigh.
I understand the fate of mortal men,
But what god fears a clerk who holds a pen?”

And Hermes bowed, his face composed and grave:
“The god, great Zeus, who cannot find the page
That proves the sum he swore was fairly paid.”

HERE ENDETH BOOK III
The Gathering of the Million-Dollar Warriors

B O O K I V

The Sacred Scrolls of Sponsorship

T H E A R G U M E N T

Of the Golden Art of Naming Things, the Alchemy of Accounts, the Priests of Financial Fair Play, and the Discovery That a Football Shirt May Be Worth More Than the Kingdom Wearing It

I. THE INVOCATION OF THE GOLDEN MUSE

SING, MUSE, of gold disguised in silken thread,
Of mighty sums that left wise bankers dead;
Of contracts drawn beneath the desert sun,
And fortunes promised ere the games were won.

Sing not of swords, nor heroes laid in dust,
But sponsorship, that holiest of trusts;
Where merchants, armed with parchment, seal, and pen,
Acquired the power once reserved for men
Who conquered kingdoms, ravaged foreign shores,
And brought their enemies beneath their doors.

For war had changed. The spear was laid aside;
The modern monarch purchased sporting pride.
No longer must a king invade a state;
He bought a club, then raised the transfer rate.

Where Caesar marched his legions into Gaul,
The wealthy simply purchased men who'd ball;
And where great Alexander drew his sword,
A football chairman summoned forth his board.

O ancient gods! What marvels now appeared!
What strange new enterprise the nations feared!
A merchant might, by marking out a page,
Command more treasure than a kingly wage.

No golden mine, no conquered city's store,
Could match the sums that modern sponsors bore;
For men who once sold spices, silk, and grain,
Now sold the right to put a name on Spain.

And Manchester, that kingdom clad in blue,
Began to learn what ancient merchants knew:
That though a player scores upon the grass,
A greater miracle occurs in brass,
In polished offices of glass and stone,
Where figures multiply when left alone.

For one may work a lifetime, poor and bent,
While others make a fortune from consent.

II. THE COUNCIL OF THE COMMERCIAL GODS

UPON OLYMPUS, high above the clouds,
Where gods surveyed the earth and mortal crowds,
Great Zeus convened a council, stern and grave,
To learn how football's wealthy monarchs gave
Such vast and wondrous treasure to a game
Whose simple object ever stayed the same.

"Explain," he cried, "this strange commercial art!
Why does a shirt command a merchant's heart?
Why should a name upon a player's breast
Be worth more gold than all my heavenly guests?
My thunder strikes the nations with its might,
Yet no one pays to paint their name on lightning!"

Then Hermes rose, the patron of the trade,
And bowed before the throne his father made.
“Great Zeus, the mortal world has grown more wise;
It sells not merely products, but men’s eyes.
A million people watching from afar
May give more value than a golden star.
And should a footballer run about in blue,
The world must learn whose airline carried who.”

“But does the shirt,” asked Zeus, “possess the wings?
Can men take flight by wearing such fine things?”
“Not yet, my lord, though commerce may advance;
For now it merely sells the dream of France,
Of warmer shores and cities bright and grand,
To men who never leave their native land.”

Then Ares laughed, the ancient god of war:
“These merchants sell what men have sold before!
They take a common article of cloth,
Attach a name, and double what it’s worth.
At Troy we fought for honour, rage, and fame;
Today we’d sell the naming rights to shame.”

Athena spoke, with wisdom in her eyes:
“Let not the heavenly court despise
The honest trade by which great cities thrive;
Commerce may keep a thousand dreams alive.
A worthy partnership may profit both,
And bring new strength to enterprise and growth.
But gold must travel by an honest road,
And every treasure bear its rightful code.”

“How dull!” cried Ares. “Must the gods account
For every coin that leaves Olympus’ mount?
What next? Shall thunderbolts be audited?
Shall ancient wars require expenses read?”

“Indeed,” said Hermes, “and I greatly fear
Your pension contributions are in arrears.”
The heavens shook with laughter, long and loud,
While Manchester lay hidden by a cloud.

And down beneath that council of the skies,
The City’s golden age began to rise.

III. THE ARRIVAL OF THE WINGED MERCHANT

THE YEAR was two thousand and nine, when spring
Brought tidings worthy of a northern king.
From Abu Dhabi’s bright and distant shore
Came Etihad, whose silver engines bore
The hopes of travellers over land and sea,
And now sought fame through Manchester City.

The airline came with offers rich and bright,
To place its name where millions held their sight.
Upon the sacred shirt its letters shone,
Where once the crest had stood in pride alone.

A partnership was signed for three good years,
And City welcomed it with grateful cheers.
The merchants praised the union, East and West,
The Northern kingdom now superbly blessed.

The footballers would race across the ground,
While airline names were carried all around.
And every goal that City’s warriors scored
Might send new passengers to climb aboard.

At least, such was the dream the merchants sold,
Whose confidence was measured out in gold.
For one may watch a striker beat his man,
And suddenly desire to visit Japan.

A tackle in the rain of Manchester
Could make a traveller dream of Singapore;
And one missed penalty, beneath the lights,
Might cause a businessman to book two flights.

The faithful marvelled at the strange affair,
The transformation of their club by air.
One elderly supporter, stout and grey,
Who'd seen the Blues lose games in every way,
Looked down upon the writing on his vest
And wondered what new power his shirt possessed.

"Now tell me, son, what's Etihad?" he said.
"An airline, Dad. It flies above your head."
"An airline? Well, that seems a strange affair.
I've followed City forty years from here.
I've never needed wings to see them lose,
Nor travelled farther than a coach would choose.
And if they lose at home, as well they might,
I'd rather walk than purchase any flight."

His son replied, "It's commerce, don't you see?
The world now watches Manchester City.
Our name is carried far beyond these shores,
And money comes to open greater doors."

The father nodded, looking rather pleased.
"Then perhaps our ancient suffering has eased.
For if these fellows pay for every defeat,
We've found ourselves a revenue stream complete!"

IV. THE NAMING OF THE GREAT CITADEL

TWO SUMMERS passed. The merchants came once more,
With grander plans than those they'd brought before.
The kingdom had grown stronger in the field,
Its enemies more cautious, less inclined to yield.

Its banners travelled far beyond the town,
Its warriors now contested for the crown.
Then came a thought of such enormous worth
That all the bankers trembled on the earth:

Why advertise upon a shirt alone,
When one might buy the naming of a throne?
Why rest content with letters on the chest,
When naming all the stadium would be best?

The ancient ground, where City's thousands came,
Had stood for years beneath a civic name.
But names, like kingdoms, might be bought and sold,
Provided men possessed sufficient gold.

And so a mighty compact came to light,
A ten-year bond of splendour and delight.
The ground received the Etihad's proud name,
And Eastlands entered wider realms of fame.

The campus too would bear the airline's crest,
And every scheme proclaimed itself the best.
The shirts, the stands, the banners and the ground
Would sing the name wherever fans were found.

Four hundred million pounds, the heralds cried,
Might flow through this magnificent new tide.
The sum was spoken softly at the first,
Lest lesser bankers suffer something worse.

Then shouted from the rooftops of the land,
As though a second moon were close at hand.
The kingdom's treasurer surveyed the page,
And felt he'd entered commerce's golden age.

For bricks and seats, though costly to construct,
Could yield new wealth when properly introduced.
The stadium already stood in place;
The merchants merely changed its public face.

And thus was born a splendid enterprise:
To sell what stood before the buyer's eyes.
O wonderful invention! Noble trade!
A fortune from a thing already made!

The faithful knew the ground, its every stair,
Its concrete walls, its cold December air.
It looked the same, whatever name it bore,
Its turnstiles stood exactly as before.

Yet now the place, through commerce's mighty hand,
Commanded riches few could understand.
Old Arthur, who had occupied one seat
Through years of triumph, misery and defeat,
Was told the ground had undergone a change,
Although its shape remained within his range.

"Has someone built another tier?" he cried.
"Or made the pitch considerably wide?
Have they repaired the lavatories at last,
Or found a means to let the crowds move fast?"

"No, Arthur. We have changed the stadium's name."
"Then why's the place worth more? It looks the same."
"Because," his son explained, "the name brings gold."
"Then name my house Buckingham," Arthur told.

"I'll call my garden Windsor, grand and green,
And sell the naming rights to my latrine.
If labels make a pile of money grow,
I'll have a palace by tomorrow's show!"

He paused, then added, with a knowing grin,
"Perhaps I'll name the door and charge to enter in."

V. THE PRIESTS OF FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY

BUT WHILE the golden partnership was praised,
Another power its solemn head had raised.
For Europe's football kingdoms, rich and proud,
Had heard the swelling thunder of the crowd.

They feared that spending, left without a bound,
Might shake the ancient order of the ground.
Thus UEFA, in wisdom or alarm,
Prepared new rules to guard the game from harm.

The law of Financial Fair Play appeared,
By wealthy kings respected, doubted, feared.
Its priests proclaimed a principle sublime:
A club should spend within its means in time.

The words were plain, the doctrine nobly framed,
And every football kingdom heard them named.
Yet what were means? And who should set their size?
What revenue was fair in heaven's eyes?

Might owners freely open up their chest,
Or must commercial earnings stand the test?
The questions filled the council chamber's air,
Where clerks and lawyers gathered to declare
That football, once a game of skill and pace,
Now needed rules on money's rightful place.

And though the crowds had come to watch a score,
The sacred texts required considerably more.
There were exemptions, losses, costs and gains,
And rules that gave distinguished men migraines.

There were appendices to guide the wise,
And footnotes of astonishing disguise.
The learned priests explained the whole affair
With charts that left the audience in despair.

A humble clerk, who'd followed City long,
Declared the underlying principle was strong.
"A man who earns a pound should not spend ten;
The law is simple, gentlemen, but then
The trouble starts when someone must define
The value of a sponsorship design."

"Precisely!" cried the master of the scroll.
"And there begins our sacred football role.
We measure value, ownership and cost,
And separate investment gained from lost.
A sponsor's money may be counted fair,
Provided all the proper facts are there."

"And what if someone's uncle owns the firm
That pays the money?" asked a clerk concerned.
"Then further questions follow, quite a few,
Concerning what the parties really do.
The sum must have an honest market base,
Not merely suit the owner of the place."

"And if the sum is very large indeed?"
"Then evidence shall tell us what we need."
"And if the evidence is rather long?"
"We'll read it through, whatever may be wrong."

"And if it fills a thousand pages, sir?"
"We'll summon twice the scholars to confer."
"And if it fills ten thousand, may I ask?"
"Then football will become our lifelong task."

At this the youngest clerk, whose salary
Was barely worth a Premier League player's fee,
Looked round the chamber, solemn as a priest,
And wondered when their labours might have ceased.

"For if we're paid to study what they spend,
And every club can hire men to defend
The sums that other men are paid to earn,
How much of football's wealth will we return?"

The master smiled. "A most intelligent plea.
You've grasped the modern game's economy.
The clubs acquire the stars; the lawyers thrive;
The accountants keep the whole machine alive.
The footballers provide the spectacle and fame,
And we shall all be paid to watch the game."

VI. THE ALCHEMY OF THE GOLDEN LEDGER

NOW IN the kingdom's counting houses bright,
The golden figures occupied the night.
The ink was black, the parchment smooth and fair,
And men in sober garments gathered there.

Their task was not to tackle, run or score,
But reckon what came through the treasury door.
For gold has many names beneath the sun,
Though every coin resembles every one.

A gift, a loan, an owner's capital,
Commercial revenue, a sponsor's annual call;
Each enters by a different fiscal gate,
And each may find a different legal fate.

The novice treasurer, with trembling hand,
Requested that his master understand:
"If money reaches us, does it not stay
The same bright money, however it came our way?
If one pound enters through the northern door,
Is it less worthy than a pound before?"

The elder smiled, and leaned upon his chair.
"Young fool, the answer lies in what we declare.
A pound is still a pound, as men have known,
But law may care whose pocket was its home.
If owners invest, the books must tell us so;
If sponsors pay, the figures ought to show
The bargain truly made, the honest fee,
And what commercial value there may be."

“But master, may a merchant buy our name,
And pay a mighty fortune for its fame?”
“Of course, if that is truly what he pays,
And commerce justifies the bargain’s ways.”

“And if a patron helps to pay the price?”
“Then clarity, young clerk, would be most wise.”
“And should the patrons, merchants, clubs and kings
Agree to fund a host of splendid things?”

“Then let the contracts plainly show the parts;
The safest books have neither masks nor arts.”
The student frowned. “Such questions never rose
When football meant eleven muddy clothes.”

“Indeed,” replied the master, looking tired.
“But now a club has wealth enough to be admired
By men who once would never watch a kick,
Unless a transfer fee could make them rich.”

And there beneath the counting-house’s dome,
The figures travelled faithfully toward home.
Some bore the promise of commercial gain,
Some met the costly labour of the train
Of players, coaches, staff and men employed
To build the empire everyone enjoyed.

For glory has expenses, great and small,
From grass beneath the boots to salaries for all.
A mighty striker’s splendid left-foot strike
Requires a wage unlike a worker’s bike.

His agent needs his share, his lawyers theirs,
And somebody must purchase stadium chairs.
An army’s cost is more than sword and spear;
Its pay and provisions mount from year to year.

The man who wins the crown may take the praise;
The clerk must reconcile the working days.
And should a team grow greater every spring,
The wages tend to grow with everything.

Thus gold, that first had promised freedom sweet,
Brought subtler chains about ambition's feet.
A kingdom could not merely spend and smile;
It had to make the numbers reconcile.

And even mighty princes, rich in land,
Must find their enterprise could meet demand.

VII. THE RIVAL KINGS DISCOVER VIRTUE

ACROSS THE realm, the rival monarchs heard
Of City's rising wealth, and were disturbed.
They spoke of fairness, custom, law and right,
And gathered to discuss the coming fight.

For when a kingdom prospers from new gold,
Its older wealthy rivals soon grow bold.
At Arsenal, the guardians of the purse
Considered whether wealth might be a curse.

At Liverpool, the ancient banners flew,
And men debated what the rules should do.
At Chelsea, where another rich man reigned,
The argument grew wonderfully strained.

For every club had reason to declare
Its own prosperity entirely fair.
Its debts were prudent, wages justified,
Its sponsors pure, its owners dignified.

But when another kingdom spent the same,
Suspicion fell upon its sudden fame.
The gods regarded this with great delight,
And watched the nobles argue wrong and right.

Great Ares nearly fell from out his chair
To hear the wealthy lecture on what's fair.
"Behold," he cried, "the kings whose noble greed
Has brought the finest armies to their need!
They ask what sums a rival ought to spend,
While paying mighty fortunes without end.
They do not hate the making of great wealth;
They merely fear its arrival somewhere else."

Athena, ever careful, raised her hand:
"Yet equal rules must govern all the land.
A law that binds one kingdom must be true
For all the others, be they red or blue.
The rich may rightly prosper, trade and grow,
But none should hide what they are bound to show."

Then Hermes rose, with merchant's knowing smile:
"The market has its virtues and its guile.
A man may charge what others choose to pay,
But cannot change the facts along the way.
And where the books grow intricate and long,
The truth must still be clear, the numbers strong."

Then Zeus proclaimed, with thundering command,
"The gods shall send an auditor to land!
He'll study all the documents below,
And tell us where these mighty fortunes flow.
He'll read the schedules, payments, gains and fees,
And bring me back the answers, if you please."

The auditor descended through the clouds,
Past crowded grounds and singing football crowds.
He entered first the kingdom's counting hall,
Where ledgers rose like mountains by the wall.

He opened one, then two, then twenty-three,
And found a further hundred waiting free.
The seasons passed. The summers turned to snow.
The gods grew old, but still the books would grow.

At last the weary scholar reached the sky,
His back bent low, exhaustion in his eye.
“Great Zeus,” he said, “I’ve travelled far and wide,
And studied every figure I could find.
I’ve measured all the payments, large and small,
And traced the commerce round the football.”

“And what,” asked Zeus, “have you discovered, friend?”
“That every scroll has notes without an end.
I thought the whole affair was nearly done,
Until the footnotes yielded volume one.”

VIII. THE SHADOW OF THE FUTURE TRIBUNAL

BUT FATE, who sees beyond the mortal year,
Had other revelations drawing near.
For Clotho, spinner of the thread of life,
Could see a coming age of bitter strife.

The contests fought upon the football green
Were but one part of what the world had seen.
Far in the future, when the years had fled,
When heroes aged, and famous captains dead,
When trophies filled the galleries of kings,
And children sang of long-remembered things,
A council would examine ancient gold,
And question what the sacred ledgers told.

The contracts of those early golden days
Would meet a sterner, later generation’s gaze.
The nature of agreements would be tried,
The routes of funds examined, testified.

And what had once been celebrated trade
Would face the question: how were payments made?
A court would sit, its judgment grave and stern,
And study what the ancient books could learn.

Its findings would condemn disguised support,
And bring a mighty kingdom into court.
Yet City would dispute that judgment's claim,
Appealing still to vindicate its name.

The outcome lay beyond the prophet's eye,
Where final rulings wait for years to fly.
No sanction yet was written in the stone,
No future crown condemned or overthrown.

The laws would have their say, and City too,
While football waited for what might prove true.
For justice, when it moves through modern sport,
May take a longer road than men had thought.

The Trojan War consumed a decade's span;
A football case might well outlive a man.
At Troy, the Greeks at last contrived a horse;
The lawyers simply filed another course.

Yet all these distant matters slept unborn,
Beyond the promise of that golden morn.
The kingdom still was marching toward renown,
Its people dreamed of lifting England's crown.

The faithful gathered, hopeful as before,
And heard their mighty warriors promise more.

IX. THE SONG OF THE FAITHFUL

BACK IN the north, where Manchester's cold rain
Descended on the houses, streets and train,
Old Arthur stood beneath the stadium light,
And watched the Blue prepare another fight.

His grandson, standing close beside his knee,
Spoke softly of the kingdom's destiny.
"Grandfather, shall we conquer all the land?
Shall every mighty rival bow and stand
Before the Blue, whose warriors brave and strong
Have waited for their glory far too long?"

The elder smiled, and looked upon the field,
Where once his younger hopes had failed to yield.
"My lad, I've watched this kingdom since my youth,
And learned a few hard lessons of the truth.
I've seen fine managers arrive in spring,
Who promised they would change near everything.
I've watched great strikers brought from overseas,
Who found the English winter froze their knees.

"I've seen the Reds take glory year by year,
While all we took was comfort from our beer.
And now a prince has come from lands afar,
To raise our humble fortunes to a star.
We've money, players, sponsors, shirts and fame,
But still eleven men must win the game."

The grandson smiled. "And if we win the crown?"
"Then every pub shall hear it through the town."
"And if the mighty lawyers come one day?"
"We'll hear what both the warring parties say."

"And if they argue for a hundred years?"
"Then football shall be drowned in lawyers' tears."
"And if they find a kingdom's deeds were wrong?"
"Then let the law be fair, however long."

“But will the triumphs still be ours to feel?”
The old man watched the football on the field.
“My lad, no judge can change the joy we knew,
Though laws may judge the things that rulers do.
A goal remains a goal within the heart,
And tears of triumph never quite depart.
Yet crowns are not the private toys of kings,
And honour is the worth of honest things.

“The players run, the crowds rejoice and sing;
The owners bear the duties riches bring.
Let every mighty kingdom make its claim,
But let no man grow greater than the game.”

X. THE FINAL BLESSING OF THE GOLDEN SCROLLS

THEN ZEUS, who'd heard the old man's solemn speech,
Looked down upon the kingdom's northern reach.
He saw the shirts, the banners and the gold,
The promises of victories untold.

He saw the sponsors, merchants, lawyers, kings,
The grand importance given little things.
He summoned Hermes to his marble throne,
And spoke in tones that shook the heavens alone.

“Of all the wondrous customs mortals boast,
This naming art astonishes me most.
They build a field, then give it someone's name,
And charge a fortune for precisely the same.
No stone is moved, no extra grass is grown,
Yet riches flow because a word is shown.”

“Indeed,” said Hermes, “and the market thrives.
It sends men far beyond their common lives.
It takes a name, a symbol, and a dream,
And makes them merchandise upon a team.”

“Then I,” said Zeus, “shall sell Olympus’ crown!
And every god shall wear a merchant’s gown.
The thunderbolts shall bear an airline’s crest,
The lightning advertise the very best.
The clouds shall carry logos through the skies,
And every rainbow offer special buys.”

Athena rose. “My father, take some care;
A god should know the burdens he must bear.
For if the thunderbolts become a trade,
Someone must prove what every sponsor paid.”

Then Ares laughed, and drained his heavenly cup:
“Why trouble Zeus? The lawyers will turn up!
They’ll charge a fee for every thunderclap,
And place the whole of heaven on a map.”

But Hermes shook his head, with wry delight:
“You gods have never learned to count things right.
For mortals know, beneath their troubled skies,
A truth concealed from many wealthy eyes:
A crown may glitter brightly in the sun,
But gold and honour are not always one.”

And Zeus, reflecting on the world below,
Considered all the kings who’d come and go.
He saw that mighty treasures, vast and grand,
Could build a glorious kingdom in a land.

Yet every king, however rich his throne,
Must answer for the deeds that are his own.
The sacred scrolls were gathered, tied and sealed,
Their figures hidden from the football field.

The sponsors’ names shone brightly in the rain,
While City’s warriors gathered once again.
The golden kingdom prospered, proud and strong,
And thousands raised the old triumphant song.

But far beyond the terrace and the stand,
Beyond the reach of any mortal hand,
The Fates preserved one question, cold and clear,
For men to answer in a future year:

When gold has bought the sword, the shield, the spear,
When princes feast and conquered kings draw near,
When songs proclaim the mighty victory won,
And all the glorious battle deeds are done,
What shall the kingdom tell the judging eye
When asked from whence the treasures came, and why?

For heroes may be crowned by deeds of might,
And kingdoms raised by courage in the fight;
But when the songs grow silent in the hall,
The books remain to give account of all.

And Hermes, laying down his silver pen,
Spoke one last warning to the sons of men:
“Let warriors seek their victories in the sun,
And merchants profit fairly when they’ve won.
Let sponsors proudly give their names to things,
And fortunes serve the happiness of kings.
But mark this truth, which ages shall recall:
The costliest signing is not a man at all.

“For strikers age, and managers depart,
And even brilliant players lose their art.
The greatest wage may purchase fleeting fame,
But cannot buy an everlasting name.
And when the gods demand the final proof,
No sponsor’s logo makes a solid roof.”

Then Zeus, impatient with this thoughtful speech,
Cast one great thunderbolt beyond the beach.
It split the clouds, and shook the northern night,
And filled the golden stadium with light.

“Enough of scrolls!” the Father thundered down.
“Let City go and try to win the crown!
But when the mighty day of judgment nears,
And all the auditors assemble here,
Remember this, ye monarchs rich and bold:
A goal is worth a goal. A pound is worth a pound.
But who supplied the pound may yet be found.”

Thus ended the first great age of trade,
When golden partnerships and fortunes made
The Sky-Blue kingdom stronger in its pride,
And carried its ambitions far and wide.

The scrolls were sealed. The merchants took their fees.
The footballers prepared to cross the seas.
The crowds rejoiced. The ancient banners flew.
And still the rain came falling on the Blue.

For even gold, in quantities immense,
Could purchase neither sunshine nor defence.

HERE ENDETH BOOK IV
The Sacred Scrolls of Sponsorship

B O O K V

The Immortal Cry of Agüero

T H E A R G U M E N T

*Of the Siege of the Red Empire, the Fall of Eight Points, the Madness of Joey Barton, and
the Ninety-Third Minute When Time Itself Surrendered to Manchester City*

I. THE INVOCATION OF THE GODS OF VICTORY

SING, MUSE, of that immortal northern day,
When forty-four long years were swept away;
When City, standing on the brink of night,
Found heaven hidden in a football's flight.

Sing of the Argentine, whose mortal feet
Made time itself acknowledge its defeat;
Whose single stroke, beneath the English skies,
Brought kingdoms to their knees and tears to eyes.

Sing not of gold, nor princely wealth alone,
For gold cannot command a football throne.
Though kings may summon warriors from afar,
And fill their halls with every foreign star,
No king can purchase what the gods decree,
Nor bribe the final minute's destiny.

For Fate, who laughs at riches, rank, and fame,
Reserves her cruelest pleasures for the game.
And Manchester, that kingdom old and proud,
Lay trembling underneath a summer cloud.

Its ancient rivals, dressed in scarlet red,
Had worn the English crown upon their head.
For generations City watched them reign,
And learned the bitter poetry of pain;
While every spring United claimed its prize,
And City claimed that next year it would rise.

O faithful Blue! How patiently you bore
The countless years when glory passed your door!
The mighty Reds accumulated fame;
The Blues accumulated reasons to complain.

And every father told his weary son
Of championships before the boy was born.
Yet now the golden kingdom stood prepared,
Its fortunes changed, its ancient courage spared.

The warriors gathered, fierce in strength and pride,
With Mancini commanding from the side.
And somewhere in that gallant company
There walked a man whose name was destiny.

II. THE COMING OF THE LITTLE ARGENTINE

FROM ARGENTINA'S distant, sunlit shore
Came Sergio, whose feet were made for war.
No giant he, no towering man of might,
But swift as thought and sudden as the light.

Where others needed space to make their play,
He found a passage where there seemed no way.
And though his stature scarcely threatened heaven,
He frightened full-backs taller by eleven.

He came from Atlético's Spanish ground,
Where many a glorious triumph he had found.
His movement held the grace of running streams,
His finish carried all a striker's dreams.

And when he struck, the football took its flight
As though obedience were its sole delight.
The City's people greeted him with cheer,
And prayed his coming marked their greatest year.

For many strikers had been praised before,
Who subsequently struggled to find the score.
A handsome wage, a celebrated name,
Had sometimes brought no competence to the game.

Old Arthur, watching Sergio at his play,
Observed with satisfaction one bright day:
"At last they've bought a fellow who can score,
Instead of one who promises us more.
He's quick, he's clever, knows which way to run,
And seems to understand what must be done.
I've watched expensive men for fifty years
Who couldn't hit the goal with engineering peers."

His grandson smiled. "Then City's hour draws near!"
"Perhaps," the elder said, "but fetch a beer.
I've learned that when the future looks too bright,
A City player may get sent off tonight."

Yet Sergio was different from the rest,
A smaller warrior bearing greatness in his chest.
He feared no mighty champion, wall, or line,
And sought the net with purpose half divine.

The gods themselves looked down upon the grass,
And wondered how one man could always pass.

III. THE SLAUGHTER AT OLD TRAFFORD

NOW CAME October, when the kingdoms met,
And Manchester prepared to pay its debt.
The Red Empire, magnificent and grand,
Still held the sceptre of the English land.

Sir Alex ruled from Old Trafford's mighty throne,
Whose walls had witnessed victories unknown
To poorer kingdoms, humbled through the years,
Who left that famous fortress close to tears.

The Blues approached beneath a darkening sky,
Their banners raised, their hopes and courage high.
Mancini marched his warriors to the gate,
Determined now to challenge ancient fate.

And in their ranks young Balotelli stood,
Whose talent promised genius, when it could.
A strange Italian, brilliant, fierce, and bold,
Whose temper was less governable than gold.

He could strike a football with celestial grace,
Then argue with a corner flag about its place.
His genius flourished when the mood was right;
His judgment sometimes took the afternoon off outright.

And when he scored beneath the scarlet sky,
He lifted up his shirt for all to spy
A question written plainly on his chest,
Which seemed to leave the answer to the rest:

“WHY ALWAYS ME?”

The faithful roared, the Red supporters stared;
For Mario, it seemed, was quite prepared
To contemplate the burden of his fame,
While adding further misery to the game.
The City's warriors surged with growing might,
And drove United backward through the fight.

One goal became another, then a third;
The ancient Red Empire could scarce believe the word.
Their proud defenders stumbled in dismay,
As City's legions swept their lines away.

Then Džeko struck, and Silva joined the feast,
While Old Trafford's satisfaction fast decreased.
The final reckoning shone upon the wall,
A score that made the mighty Red look small:

Six goals to City! One to those in red!
A number that the wounded kingdom read
With such astonishment and such despair,
That even Ferguson seemed short of air.

O Muse! What laughter filled the northern night,
As thousands dressed in blue proclaimed delight!
They'd waited years to savour such a scene,
When Red was humbled by the Sky-Blue machine.

And every pub in Manchester that day
Found City fans with far too much to say.
Old Arthur raised his glass with shining eyes:
"Six goals! By God, that's twice our usual size!
For forty years I've dreamed of seeing this;
The score itself deserves a father's kiss.
Let's have it carved upon my gravestone, son,
So all may know what City once had done."

The boy replied, "But Grandad, we have won!
Why speak of graves before the race is run?"
"Because," the elder answered, grave and wise,
"I've seen too many City hopes arise.
And if the gods have granted six today,
They'll find a most unpleasant price to pay."

Above, Olympus shook with thunderous mirth,
As Ares watched the battle fought on Earth.
"Six goals!" he cried. "A massacre indeed!
These English have a most peculiar breed.
They settle feuds with leather and with feet,
Then count the wounded by the goals they meet."

But Zeus, surveying Ferguson's despair,
Observed that pride was suffering everywhere.
"For forty years the Reds have laughed at Blue;
I wonder what their loyal men shall do?"

Athena answered, smiling at the sight:
"They'll speak of history, privilege, and right.
For when a king has ruled a kingdom long,
He calls another monarch's triumph wrong."

Yet nothing was decided by that day,
Though six great goals would matter far away.
For football's gods, who love a final twist,
Had further cruelties waiting on their list.

IV. THE ABYSS OF EIGHT POINTS

THE WINTER came, and spring returned once more,
But fortune did not rush to City's door.
The Blues grew weary, dropped their precious ground,
And watched their ancient rivals gather round.

The mighty Reds recovered all their pride,
And pushed the Sky-Blue challengers aside.
At Arsenal, beneath an April sky,
A bitter loss made City's fortunes die.

Eight points behind! Six battles yet to fight!
The title vanished almost out of sight.
The football prophets gathered, grave and clear,
To tell the Blues their hopes were done that year.

The newspapers proclaimed the race complete,
The experts laid the trophy at Red feet.
Each solemn pundit offered learned proof
That City had no chance beneath the roof
Of mathematics, precedent, and fate,
All three of which were thought to close the gate.

Sir Alex stood triumphant in his hall,
His kingdom ready for another call
To lift the crown before the waiting crowd,
And hear United's name proclaimed aloud.

Eight points! A mountain rising in the way,
Too high for even gold to clear that day.
The faithful groaned, their ancient sorrows stirred,
And all their former tragedies were heard.

Old Arthur sat within his favourite pub,
And gave the table one despairing rub.
"Eight points," he said. "I've seen this thing before.
We climb toward the roof, then find no floor.
They give us hope, they give us skill and flair,
Then leave us standing halfway up the stair."

His grandson spoke: "But six more games remain!"
"And six more ways," the elder said, "for pain."
Yet Mancini, undismayed by grief,
Still held his stubborn warriors to belief.

Though critics mocked the dreams he would not yield,
He summoned forth his soldiers to the field.
The Red Empire, accustomed to its crown,
Could surely stumble, falter, tumble down.

And stumble it did, in strange and glorious ways,
As Wigan struck to trouble Red's proud days.
Then Everton, with courage in its breast,
Brought four goals to United's mighty nest.

Four goals each! The Reds had failed to win!
And suddenly the Blues were back within
The reach of glory, desperate and near,
Where every minute carried hope and fear.

Upon Olympus, Zeus arose in fright:
“Explain this change! The race was done outright!”
Athena smiled. “The pundits were quite sure.”
“Then surely their predictions must endure!”

“Great Zeus, the men who speak with greatest pride
Are seldom asked why certainty has died.
They simply offer judgments fresh and new,
And charge the same regardless what comes true.”

And Hermes laughed: “The experts never fail;
They merely change the ending of the tale.”

V. THE DUEL OF THE TWO MANCHESTER KINGS

THEN CAME the day when both great kingdoms stood
Prepared to spill, not blood, but neighbourhood
Affection, which had never flourished there,
Despite the common city, common air.

The Etihad awaited, packed and loud,
A rolling sea of blue beneath a cloud.
United came with all its ancient pride,
But knew the crown might turn upon this tide.

The City warriors marched beneath their chief,
Who offered neither mercy nor relief.
Sir Alex watched, his face composed and stern,
And knew that football's fortunes still could turn.

One point? No, City needed all the three,
Or Red would keep its cherished sovereignty.
The battle raged, the minutes hurried past,
And every heart believed each breath its last.

Then Silva raised the ball toward the sky,
A corner curved where mighty giants vie.
And Kompany, the captain, strong and tall,
Rose like a tower above them all.

He struck! The football thundered through the air,
Beyond the keeper's reach, beyond despair.
The net received it, and the crowd became
A living furnace roaring out his name.

One goal! A kingdom trembling in delight!
One header carrying years of bitter fight!
The Red defenders stared, their pride undone,
As City held the lead that must be won.

The battle ended, City's banner high,
And thunder seemed to answer from the sky.
The Blues had beaten Ferguson's great host,
And claimed the ground that mattered now the most.

On goal difference they held the higher place,
With two more battles in the final race.
And Ferguson, who'd ruled with iron command,
Now watched the crown approach another hand.

The gods surveyed the narrow victory,
And wondered what the final scene would be.
For though United's honours filled the land,
The Blue now held its destiny in hand.

VI. THE DOUBLE BLOW OF YAYA TOURÉ

BUT FIRST the north demanded further proof,
At Newcastle, beneath St James' roof.
There City faced a proud and stubborn foe,
Whose fierce resistance gave no room to go.

The minutes passed, the contest remained tight,
And fortune seemed reluctant to take flight.
Then Yaya Touré, titan of the field,
Refused to let the Blue advance be sealed.

A mighty man, whose stride devoured the ground,
Whose strength made lesser warriors stagger round.
Where others crossed the field in weary haste,
He seemed to find long journeys little waste.

He struck the first, with calm and deadly aim,
And placed the City's fortunes in the game.
Then struck again, as evening drew more near,
And filled the faithful thousands' hearts with cheer.

Two goals! The northern fortress yielded ground,
And City's final victory was found.
Now just one battle stood before the throne,
One final match to claim the crown as their own.

And what great enemy awaited there?
Not mighty Liverpool, nor Arsenal's flair.
Not Chelsea, with its glittering foreign host,
Nor any kingdom threatening the coast.

But Queens Park Rangers, fighting to survive,
Who hoped to leave the highest league alive.
A humble rival, troubled, near the fall,
Yet armed with eleven men and one small ball.

The faithful laughed, and saw the road ahead,
As though the title already had been read.
A home match! Against Rangers! Surely won!
What possible disaster could be done?

Old Arthur listened, then began to frown:
"That sentence brings a thousand kingdoms down.
The moment any City fan declares
That victory is ours, the devil prepares."

VII. THE SUNDAY OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

THEN DAWNED the thirteenth day of May, when Fate
Approached the Sky-Blue kingdom's crowded gate.
The English sun shone softly through the air,
But Manchester had little time to care.

For forty-four long years had passed away
Since City last had held the crown in May.
The fathers who remembered sixty-eight
Had watched their sons inherit loss and wait.

Now children stood beside those fathers old,
And heard the stories often, often told.
Of Summerbee, of Bell, of Mercer's reign,
Of glory lost and seasons spent in pain.

Yet now the future stood before their sight,
One single victory to end the night.
The faithful streamed toward the mighty ground,
While songs of hope arose from all around.

At Sunderland, the Red Empire prepared
To seize the crown if City failed or erred.
For Ferguson required his men to win,
And hope the Blue would falter once again.

Two battles, fought beneath the selfsame sun,
Would choose the English champion when done.
And Zeus, who loved the theatre of fate,
Declared the day a most magnificent date.

"Bring forth the thunder! Call the winds to play!
Let every god attend the field today!
For mortal men have never understood
How often Fate finds cruelty rather good."

Athena frowned. "A football match, great king,
Is hardly worth so monumental a thing."
Zeus laughed. "You speak of reason, law, and right;
Have you not watched the Premier League's last fight?
Their fans may praise their club through storm and rain,
Yet one poor pass can drive them half insane."

And so the gods assembled in the sky,
To watch the final minutes hurry by.

VIII. THE FIRST TRIUMPH AND THE FALLING SHADOW

THE BATTLE opened, City pressing hard,
While Rangers stood before them, guard on guard.
Their manager was Hughes, who'd once commanded Blue,
And knew the mighty kingdom through and through.

His London warriors needed points to stay
Among the greatest armies of the day.
They fought for life within the highest tier,
While City fought for glory long held dear.

Two kingdoms, different fortunes, different fears,
Yet both pursued the dreams of many years.
The first half passed, the tension grew more vast,
As City struggled to break through at last.

Then Yaya sent the football through the line,
And Zabaleta seized the chance divine.
The brave defender struck toward the goal;
The keeper reached, but could not gain control.

The ball struck wood and found the waiting net,
And all the faithful knew their greatest joy was yet.
One goal! The crown seemed almost in their hands!
The Blue rejoiced throughout the crowded stands.

Their banners rose, the mighty voices rang,
And forty thousand grateful people sang.
Old Arthur stood, his face a shade of red,
And turned toward his grandson as he said:

“One goal! By heaven, we’re halfway to the crown!
Now for the love of God, don’t settle down.
I’ve seen us lead by three and lose the day;
One goal is scarcely safe enough to pray.”

His grandson laughed. “The future surely shines!”
“Aye, lad. That’s what they said in forty-nine.”
The interval arrived, and City led,
While all across the town the news was spread.

United too were leading in their game,
But City’s victory would deny their claim.
The crown lay waiting, splendid, bright and near,
And every Blue had started tasting cheer.

Yet Fate was watching with a wicked eye,
And slowly turned her face toward the sky.

IX. THE WRATH OF JOEY BARTON

THE SECOND half had scarcely found its pace
When Rangers brought disaster to the place.
A moment’s weakness opened City’s line,
And Cissé struck with purpose fierce and fine.

The football flew beyond the keeper’s reach,
And all the Blues forgot the art of speech.
One goal apiece! The title torn away!
The Red Empire returned to claim the day.

A dreadful silence swept the crowded stand,
As though a plague had fallen on the land.
The faithful looked upon the score in fear,
And prayed the ancient gods might intervene here.

But now appeared a most peculiar knight,
Whose conduct turned the battlefield to spite.
Joey Barton, captain of the Rangers' band,
Possessed a temper few could understand.

He'd once worn City's blue in former days,
And knew their old, disorderly ways.
But now, amid the match's furious heat,
He found a novel way to suffer defeat.

An elbow struck at Tévez in the fray,
And Mike Dean summoned judgment without delay.
The scarlet card was raised before the crowd,
Its verdict unmistakable and loud.

Depart! The referee had made it plain;
But Barton had objections to explain.
With further angry gestures on his way,
He stretched his exit to a small one-act play.

Some soldiers leave the battlefield with grace,
And carry wounded honour from the place.
But Barton, marching toward the tunnel's gloom,
Seemed keen to fight the occupants of every room.

The gods regarded this astonishing sight,
And Ares rose in undisguised delight.
"At last!" he cried. "A warrior of my trade!
A mortal unafraid of what he's made!
He'll fight his enemies, his friends, the crowd,
And any passing cloud that looks too proud!"

Athena sighed. "The man has lost his sense.
A football captain ought to show defence."
Then Hermes spoke, with laughter in his tone:
"He's sent away, yet cannot leave alone.
It takes a mighty hero to depart
And make dismissal quite a separate art."

The City's faithful cheered the card with glee,
For now they faced a side reduced to ten.
Surely this gift from heaven would suffice,
And save their championship from Fate's device.

But Fate, delighted with the growing mess,
Had scarcely started offering distress.

X. THE TEN MEN WHO DEFIED AN EMPIRE

FOR THOUGH the Rangers lacked their captain's aid,
Their other men refused to be dismayed.
They fought with courage, stubborn, fierce and proud,
Before a vastly richer homeward crowd.

Then came the blow no City heart foresaw,
A strike that seemed to break all football law.
A Rangers charge swept down the open side,
And Mackie raced to meet the turning tide.

The cross was lifted, perfect in its flight,
And Mackie rose beneath the fading light.
He met the ball! It passed beyond Joe Hart,
And struck the City kingdom to its heart.

Two goals to Rangers! City had but one!
The championship seemed over, lost, undone.
Against ten men, with all their wealth and fame,
The Blues were losing their most precious game.

The crowd was stunned, the players pale with dread,
And every City supporter bowed his head.
The gods looked down upon the broken scene,
Where tears replaced the banners' brilliant sheen.

O bitter Fate! O most malicious jest!
To place a crown upon a kingdom's crest,
Then snatch it back when victory seemed clear,
And leave the faithful drowning in their fear!

Old Arthur sat, defeated, in his chair,
His fingers locked, his face consumed by care.
“I knew,” he whispered, “knew it from the start.
This club was built to break a mortal heart.
They’ve spent enough to purchase half of France,
Yet cannot stop a team with ten advancing.”

His grandson said, “There’s still some time to play.”
“Aye, son, and time can hurt us all the way.”
At Sunderland the Red supporters roared,
As Rooney’s earlier strike remained the score.

United led, their twentieth crown in sight,
And City drifted deeper into night.
Sir Alex watched the minutes tick away,
Convinced his warriors would seize the day.

For champions win when challengers despair,
And City seemed condemned to find it there.
The clock approached the ninetieth minute’s end,
And forty-four long years refused to bend.

No princely wealth could purchase one more hour,
No golden treasury command the power
To change the score upon the stadium wall,
Or make a weary football answer every call.

XI. THE PRAYER OF THE BROKEN KINGDOM

NOW CITY pressed, and pressed with frantic will,
While Rangers’ battered soldiers guarded still.
The crosses flew, the shots were turned away,
And all the precious minutes slipped astray.

A thousand voices pleaded with the skies,
A thousand prayers rose up from anguished eyes.
Some promised God a sober life ahead,
If only City scored before the dead
Could rise and tell the living of their grief,
For football had destroyed their last belief.

One man swore nevermore to drink on Sunday;
Another made the same vow until Monday.
Some bargained with the Virgin, saints, and stars,
While others prayed the clock might reach the bars.

An anxious father held his son's small hand,
And whispered things no child could understand.
A woman closed her eyes and faced away,
Unable now to watch another play.

And Arthur, eldest warrior of the Blue,
Looked up toward heaven, where the cold wind blew.
"O Lord," he murmured, "I've been patient long.
I've borne their failures, defended every wrong.
I've crossed the land through sleet and bitter rain,
And paid good money for my share of pain.
I've sat through matches scarcely fit to see,
And still believed that glory might find me.

"If there is justice in this world of men,
Don't make me watch United win again.
I've watched them raise more trophies than I can count;
Their silver fills a most impressive amount.
Give us one crown! One moment! One small joy!
Before I die, let this old heart employ
Its final strength to sing a victor's song,
And prove my loyalty was not entirely wrong."

Upon Olympus, Zeus heard Arthur's plea,
And gazed upon the struggling Man City.
"What strange devotion!" said the heavenly king.
"These mortals worship such a little thing!
A leather ball, a painted strip of grass,
And twenty-two exhausted men who pass
The object back and forth beneath the sun,
Yet somehow claim that worlds are lost or won."

Athena spoke: "Because, my lord, the game
Contains more than the hunger after fame.
These people bring their fathers to the ground,
And hear the dead in every rising sound.
Their victories unite the years gone by,
Their sorrows bind the living when they cry."

Then Zeus grew still upon his golden throne,
And looked toward Manchester once more alone.

XII. THE HEADER THAT RESURRECTED HOPE

FIVE MINUTES more! The referee declared,
And all the dying kingdom was prepared
To spend its final strength upon the ground,
Where forty-four lost years lay gathered round.

The corner came, with Silva standing near,
And Džeko moved, unburdened now by fear.
The little Spaniard curved the football high,
A silver arrow crossing through the sky.

Then Džeko rose, a giant dressed in blue,
And met the ball as mighty warriors do.
His forehead struck! The net received the blow!
And sudden thunder shook the world below.

Two goals apiece! The Blue had risen again!
A moment's hope returned to mortal men.
The faithful roared, their voices torn with pain,
And found the strength to dream of crowns again.

But still the scoreboard told a cruel truth:
A draw could never grant the City's youth
The trophy promised by their long campaign;
They needed one more goal to end the pain.

At Sunderland the final whistle blew,
And United's warriors thought their work was through.
They'd won their match, and City could not lead;
The crimson kingdom seemed assured its meed.

The Reds awaited news from Manchester,
Where time was disappearing everywhere.
Their title celebrations, almost begun,
Were waiting on the ending of one.

Three minutes? Two? A handful left to spend,
The final thread approaching its last end.
And every Blue, with fortune nearly gone,
Still watched eleven warriors struggling on.

XIII. THE NINETY-THIRD MINUTE

NOW LISTEN, Muse, and tell the world this tale,
Before all mortal languages grow frail.
For what occurred upon that sacred ground
Was more than any football match had found.

The minute hand approached its final place,
And desperation marked each player's face.
The title hung suspended in the air,
A breath away from triumph or despair.

Then Sergio received the rolling ball,
And heard, perhaps, no voice or crowd at all.
For mighty moments sometimes come in peace,
When all surrounding earthly noises cease.

He drove toward the Rangers' crowded line,
A little warrior with a great design.
Before him stood defenders, grim and strong,
Determined now to hold their ground for long.

He passed to Balotelli, fierce and bold,
Whose football genius could not be controlled.
The Italian stumbled, falling toward the grass,
Yet somehow found the strength to make the pass.

No grand manoeuvre, stately, pure and clean,
No polished play rehearsed upon a screen;
A desperate touch from one who lost his feet,
And still contrived to make the moment sweet.

The ball came back to Sergio once more,
And all creation waited for the score.
He moved beyond the challenge in his way,
As though the heavens had cleared the path that day.

One touch! One step! The narrow angle found!
The keeper stood before him on the ground.
Then Sergio struck, and football took its flight,
A shaft of thunder through the failing light.

The net received the ball.
And time stood still.
No trumpet sounded from the distant hill.
No god pronounced the judgment from above.

No mortal language measured grief or love.
For one brief instant, while the ages turned,
The world forgot the lessons it had learned.
Then came the roar.

A thousand thunders born in one great cry,
That shook the earth and stormed the summer sky.
The stadium became a living sea,
Its people swept beyond mortality.

AGÜERO!

The name rose higher than the clouds could go,
And every heart remembered what it owed
To fathers gone, to children standing near,
To forty-four long years of hope and fear.
AGÜERO!

The word rang out across the northern land,
From taverns packed with people hand in hand.
From houses where old men had ceased to pray,
To streets where children celebrated May.

The Argentine, consumed by wild delight,
Tore off his shirt beneath the glorious light.
And raced toward those who knew what he'd achieved,
While all the Blues who'd suffered now believed.

Three goals to City! Rangers still had two!
The golden dream had suddenly come true.
The scoreboard shone, the faithful lost their minds,
And left the laws of sober thought behind.

The goal was struck at ninety-three and twenty,
A moment worth more gold than kings had plenty.
And all the clocks that counted passing days
Could never measure what the City praise
Would carry through the generations yet,
When all the other football scores were set.

XIV. THE FALL OF THE RED EMPIRE

AT SUNDERLAND the crimson warriors stood,
And heard the news no champion thought they would.
United had secured the points required,
And for a moment all their hopes had fired.

Yet in the final seconds far away,
Their ancient neighbours stole the crown that day.
The mighty Red Empire had done its part,
But City's late-born thunder broke its heart.

Sir Alex, who had conquered countless wars,
Now found the gods had altered football's laws.
Not laws of ink, nor rules upon a page,
But those unwritten cruelties of age
That grant a monarch everything he needs,
Then snatch the final crown through sudden deeds.

The Reds had won. And yet the Reds had lost.
A crueler fate than any battle's cost.
For victory itself had proved too small
Against one final touch upon the ball.

The gods regarded this with solemn awe,
For Fate had shown the world her highest law:
That even when a kingdom wins its fight,
Another may claim glory in the night.

And Zeus, who ruled the heavens with his hand,
Looked down upon the singing northern land.
"Such strange arithmetic!" the Father cried.
"Both kingdoms won, yet one is cast aside!
Their points are equal, both their battles done;
Explain why City wears the crown they've won."

Athena answered, smiling at the scene:
“Goal difference crowns the warriors dressed in blue.
The six they scored at Old Trafford now renew
Their value in the sum of what was done;
Those goals helped crown the kingdom that has won.”
Then Hermes laughed, with merchant’s ready cheer:

“Thus even football’s numbers may be dear!
Six goals in autumn, thought a passing pleasure,
Have proved in spring a most decisive treasure.”
And Zeus declared, with thunder in his voice:

“Then mortal kings should learn to count each choice.
For victories, like gold, may multiply,
And numbers settle crowns when honours tie.”

XV. THE CELEBRATION OF THE FAITHFUL

THE FINAL whistle sounded through the ground,
And forty-four lost years collapsed in sound.
The City’s thousands surged in wild delight,
As though the world had entered into light.

The players fell upon the grass and wept,
Where years of bitter longing long had slept.
The captain raised his arms toward the sky,
While grown men found no reason not to cry.

And Mancini, whose patient plans had stood
Against the doubters who had never understood,
Now watched the kingdom’s ancient dream fulfilled,
His name among the conquerors enrolled.

The Blue had risen, crowned before the land,
Its long-expected title close at hand.
No longer need its people borrow fame
From legends bearing another city’s name.

And Arthur, standing in the crowded stand,
Held fast his grandson's trembling little hand.
His face was wet, his voice had almost gone,
Yet all his weary years were suddenly undone.

"Grandad," the boy cried, "look! We've won the crown!
The greatest team in all the northern town!"
The elder tried to answer, but instead
He shook with tears and slowly bowed his head.

At last he spoke, his voice a broken song:
"My boy, I knew we'd do it all along."
His grandson laughed. "You said we'd surely lose!"
"A man," said Arthur, "has the right to choose
The words he speaks when history is made;
Besides, my doubts were part of how we played."

Then raising up his scarf, the old man cried:
"I've lived through every sorrow at their side.
I've watched them lose to teams I scarcely knew,
And still I wore the battered, faithful blue.

"I've followed City through the darkest rain,
And never once considered it in vain.
For loyalty is measured through the years,
Not merely by the laughter and the cheers.

"And now, at last, beneath this blessed sky,
I've seen the day I feared I'd never spy.
The crown is ours! The ancient wait is done!
Now take me home, and tell me what we've won!"

"The Premier League!" his grandson proudly said.
"Then pour another pint before I'm dead!"

XVI. THE JUDGMENT OF OLYMPUS

UPON OLYMPUS, all the gods arose,
And laid aside their ancient mortal woes.
For even immortals, wise beyond all years,
Had seldom witnessed such a scene of tears.

Great Ares raised his sword toward the sky,
And cried, "Let mighty Sergio's name never die!
He found a kingdom standing near the grave,
And struck the single blow its honour gave."

Athena smiled, and praised the warrior's art,
The courage and the strength of mortal heart.
While Hermes, patron of the golden trade,
Considered what immortal fame was made.

"For years," he said, "the prince bestowed his gold,
And summoned warriors, glorious and bold.
He purchased talent, skill, experience, might,
And brought the finest champions to the fight.

"But all those fortunes, gathered from afar,
Would never score the final, saving star.
The gold could bring young Sergio to the field;
It could not tell him how that foot should wield
The ball beneath the weight of England's crown,
Nor make the Rangers' keeper tumble down."

Then Zeus spoke softly, most unlike his way,
As heaven watched the City's glorious day.
"The lesson, gods, is written plain and clear:
That wealth may purchase opportunity, not cheer.
It brings the warriors, but not the deed,
And cannot answer every mortal need.

"For gold can gather armies, build a throne,
And make a humble kingdom widely known.
Yet when the last great battle must be fought,
Its triumph cannot simply be bought.

“The moment comes when fortune leaves the king,
And asks one mortal man to do the thing.
No lawyers, sponsors, princes, courts, or fame
Can guide the ball that settles such a game.”

XVII. THE SHADOW BEYOND THE GLORY

AND SO the kingdom entered its new age,
Its first great crown upon the golden page.
The faithful sang, the victors proudly stood,
And all the streets of Manchester understood
That something long denied had come to pass,
Upon a common field of English grass.

The banners flew, the silver trophy gleamed,
And City was the City long had dreamed.
The ancient Reds had met a rival strong,
Whose rise might change the kingdom's future song.

But Fate, whose duties never truly cease,
Allowed the singing city little peace.
For glory, once achieved, creates desire
To climb beyond the summit, ever higher.

One crown demands another, then a third,
Until ambition is the only word.
The golden treasury would open wide,
And greater warriors gather at its side.

The sponsors' names would travel round the world,
And newer banners proudly be unfurled.
Yet far beyond the celebrations bright,
Beyond the stadium's overflowing light,
The ledgers rested, silent in their room,
Awaiting years that brought another gloom.

No court that day examined City's claim,
No judge descended to dispute the game.
The footballers had fought, the goal was scored,
And City's people hailed their just reward
Upon the field, where every pass and run
Had brought the final victory they'd won.

But future years would question ancient gold,
And ask what sponsorship agreements told.
The league would study books from bygone days,
And lawyers walk through unfamiliar ways.

A mighty sporting kingdom might prevail
Upon the grass, yet face another tale
Of contracts, revenue, and laws of trade,
And how the golden treasury was made.

Those questions slept beyond that summer sun,
For City had a championship to celebrate and won
The victory whose beauty none could steal
From hearts that knew exactly how it felt.

And in the heavens, Clotho spun her thread,
While Lachesis surveyed the path ahead.
Atropos, whose shears command the end,
Observed how football's future still might bend.

"The crown is won," she whispered to the sky,
"But greater controversies yet shall fly.
For kingdoms born from wealth must surely learn
That laws may ask how great their treasures earn."

Yet Zeus, impatient with her sombre word,
Declared the present triumph should be heard.
"Enough of future judgments, ancient Fate!
Tonight the victors celebrate their state.
Let no accountant interrupt their cheer,
Nor spoil the finest moment of the year.

“For every crown shall face the test of time,
And every kingdom answer for its climb.
But this one moment, written in the air,
Belongs to all the faithful gathered there.”

XVIII. THE IMMORTAL NAME

NOW LET the poets sing of Sergio's deed,
Of one great hour of courage and of speed.
Let future generations hear the tale
Of how the richest kingdom nearly failed.

Of how ten men, with stubborn hearts and pride,
Defied the greatest warriors at their side.
Of how a captain lost his temper, then
Reduced his brave companions to just ten.

Of how the City faithful almost died
From every passing minute's cruel tide.
Of how the mighty Reds believed they'd won,
And stood beneath the Sunderland sun.

Of how one Bosnian rose above them all,
And drove his forehead fiercely through the ball.
Of how a stumbling Italian, wild and bold,
Made one last pass worth more than earthly gold.

And of the Argentine whose foot at last
Released the kingdom from its haunted past.
One little man beneath the northern sky,
Who struck a ball and made a nation cry.

No marble statue, raised by royal hand,
Could tell the full emotion of that land.
No golden scroll, no poet's measured line,
Could hold the thunder of that moment's time.

For those who stood within the stadium's roar
Would carry it through life for evermore.
And those who watched from taverns, homes, and streets
Would hear that final shout whenever memory meets
The ancient dream of seeing City crowned,
And feel again the trembling of the ground.

O mighty Agüero! Let thy name endure
Beyond the lives of all who knew thee pure
In football's art, whose fleeting moment gave
A triumph even time itself could save.

For heroes perish, kingdoms fade away,
And even trophies lose their brightest day.
But still the faithful, when the years are gone,
Shall hear that final cry and carry on.

And somewhere, when the night is cold and long,
An ancient Blue shall raise the old club song.
He'll tell his grandson how the title came,
And whisper, reverently, the hero's name.

Then pause, and smile, and lift his head once more,
As though the ball were racing toward the score.
And in his heart the final moment grows,
Until the northern kingdom's thunder flows.

One touch. One strike. One kingdom born anew.
One shout that broke the heavens into blue.
AGÜERO!
And thus the ancient sorrow found its end,
And City's glory rose beyond the bend.
The kingdom's first great crown in years was won,
Beneath the setting of a northern sun.

And all the gods, from mighty Zeus to Fate,
Looked down upon the Etihad's great gate.
For forty-four long years the faithful prayed;
Now heaven answered with the goal he'd made.

Yet even Zeus, who ruled the sky and sea,
Had one last question for eternity.
He turned to Hermes, standing near the throne,
And spoke in wonder, softly and alone:

“Tell me, my son, with all the power I own,
With thunder, lightning, kingdoms, seas, and stone,
Why must I wait for ninety-three minutes and twenty
To see a goal worth more than all my plenty?”

And Hermes answered, smiling at the sight:
“Because, great Zeus, no god, however bright,
Can understand what men have always known:
You cannot purchase glory by the throne.
You may acquire the players, field, and fame,
But someone still must put the bloody ball into the game.”

And Zeus, conceding that the point was fair,
Returned his mighty thunder to the air.
The heavens closed. The faithful sang below.
And Manchester had one more tale to show.

For victory, however great its cheer,
Is but the opening chapter of a year.
The golden kingdom, proud beneath its crown,
Would nevermore consent to settle down.

Its warriors now demanded greater fame,
Its owners greater triumphs in the game.
And as the City’s fortunes grew more vast,
The gods would turn their eyes upon its past.

But those were battles for another day.
Tonight the blue had washed the red away.

HERE ENDETH BOOK V
The Immortal Cry of Agüero

B O O K V I

The Crowns of the Sky-Blue Kingdom

T H E A R G U M E N T

*Of the Fall of Mancini, the Humbling of the Golden Army, the Coming of Pellegrini, the
Crowning of Two Champions, and the Accountants Who Marched Against the Gods*

I. THE INVOCATION OF THE CROWNED AND THE DAMNED

SING, MUSE, of crowns that glitter in the rain,
Of kings who win, and find they must again;
Of golden thrones whose cushions offer thorns,
And triumph's child, from whom fresh trouble's born.

Sing of the Blue, whose forty years of prayer
Had ended in a shout that shook the air;
Whose little prince of Argentina's plain
Had struck one ball and conquered ancient pain.

But sing as well of glory's cruel demand,
Which gives a crown, then asks for all the land;
For victory, that brief and splendid guest,
Will never let the conqueror take his rest.

The pauper dreams of wealth, the wealthy power,
The prince of kingdoms, and the king a tower
That overlooks the towers he held before,
From which he spies another distant shore.

So Manchester, its ancient longing stilled,
Discovered that its cup was scarcely filled.
One title, wrested from the scarlet foe,
Was but the seed from which new wants would grow.

The faithful, who had once desired a win,
Now spoke of years of triumph yet to begin;
And men who'd gladly taken seventeenth
Demanded crowns, with little time between.

The gods looked down upon this strange desire,
And watched ambition feed its growing fire.
For mortal joys, though gloriously won,
Grow strangely small beneath tomorrow's sun;
And what was once the summit of a dream
Becomes the bank of some more distant stream.

Great Zeus, observing City's newborn pride,
Called Hermes to his thunderous chair beside.
"These men," he cried, "have gained their heart's delight!
Why do they still demand another fight?
For forty years they prayed to wear the crown,
And now they've won it, will they not sit down?"

Then Hermes, laughing, bowed before the throne:
"Great Father, wealth has habits of its own.
A poor man prays for bread, a rich man cake;
A football king demands the whole world take
His royal name for ever as its own,
And counts each season lost without a throne."

"Then what," asked Zeus, "would satisfy their greed?"
"A trophy, sire, for every man who'd need
A place to put one on his mantel shelf,
And several more to flatter royal self."

"But that's absurd!"
"Of course, my lord," said he.
"That's why it's called football's economy."

II. THE CURSE OF THE SECOND CROWN

THE SUMMER passed, the banners proudly flew,
And England learned to bow before the Blue.
The silver cup was polished day and night;
The champions wore their honours with delight.

The City faithful filled the northern streets,
And sang of Agüero's immortal feats.
But Fate, who keeps no calendar of rest,
Had prepared another most exacting test.

The Red Empire, though wounded in its pride,
Had not consented to be cast aside.
Its ancient lord, Sir Alex, stern and keen,
Would not be twice dishonoured on the green.

His brows grew dark; he summoned every man,
And set before his generals a plan.
The scarlet warriors heard his thunder roll,
And knew the price of failing in their goal.

For Ferguson had little use for men
Who told him they would try their best again.
A noble sentiment, no doubt, to some;
To him, it meant the work had not been done.

His kingdom rallied, fierce in its distress,
And turned defeat to merciless success.
The Blues, meanwhile, discovered crowns have weight,
And champions meet a most peculiar fate:

Their rivals no longer greet them as a team,
But as the obstacle to every dream.
A draw against the king becomes a feast;
A victory makes the smallest club a beast.

And every warrior battling City now
Would fight as though the Pope had blessed his brow.
The wealthy legions struggled through the year,
While Red advanced with confidence severe.

At times the champions played with splendid grace,
Then lost the points that held the foremost place.
Their strikers found the posts instead of goals,
Their passing moved with strange and doubtful souls.

And Arthur, watching from his ancient seat,
Observed the kingdom's latest great defeat.
"There's one advantage wealth has brought," he said,
As rain descended on his thinning head.

"We used to lose with men nobody knew;
Now famous millionaires can lose there too.
The score remains unpleasant, as before,
But every disappointment costs us more."

His grandson spoke: "Yet surely we are great?"
"Then greatness has a curious way with fate.
We conquered England only months ago;
Now every Tuesday seems an uphill row."

The scarlet legions gathered point on point,
And set the kingdom's confidence out of joint.
The gap grew wide; the title drifted far,
Beyond the reach of City's finest star.

And Ferguson, with triumph drawing near,
Prepared to end his final glorious year.
Eleven points divided Red from Blue,
When all the final reckonings came due.

The champions, once so mighty in their fame,
Had learned how quickly fortune changes name.
Their first great crown was scarcely laid away
Before the Reds came marching back in May.

Thus City found that gold could buy a sword,
But not the destiny its owner ordered.
And though great fortunes waited to be spent,
The league bestowed its crown where points were sent.

For England's game, despite its lavish show,
Still counts the goals that lesser mortals know.
A treasury may stretch from shore to shore,
But cannot count a goal that none has scored.

III. THE LITTLE KINGDOM OF WIGAN

YET ONE last cup remained within their sight,
A silver prize to crown the fading fight.
The Wembley road lay open, broad and fair,
And City marched with banners through the air.

Across the field another kingdom stood,
Of humbler means but most determined mood.
The little warriors of Wigan's northern plain
Had come to face the giants and their train.

No desert treasury supplied their needs,
No wealthy monarch praised their battlefield deeds.
Their manager, Martínez, calm and wise,
Could see no virtue in surrender's guise.

His men had struggled hard throughout the year,
With relegation drawing grimly near;
Yet here they stood, beneath the Wembley sky,
Resolved to fight, or fighting bravely die.

The City court surveyed the lesser foe,
And wondered how the battle might best go.
Their champions cost a fortune, man for man;
The Latics possessed courage and a plan.

And when the faithful studied every name,
They thought the cup the easiest of the game.
But somewhere high upon Olympus' height,
Athena smiled to see the coming fight.

"Behold," she said, "the folly of the rich,
Who think the poor may never cross the pitch.
The sword that costs a thousand pieces more
May yet be beaten by a kitchen door.
And men who fight with all they have to lose
Are not the weaker merely for their shoes."

Ares, impatient, raised his mighty spear:
"Then let them fight! The hour of proof is here!"
The battle opened, stubborn, close and stern,
And City found no easy way to turn
The lesser kingdom's soldiers from their line,
Though wealth and talent stood on City's side.

The minutes passed; the golden army pressed,
But Wigan's brave resistance met the test.
Then Zabaleta, faithful Argentine,
Was sent away from City's battered line.

And Wigan, scenting glory near at hand,
Prepared one final assault against the grand.
From Maloney's corner rose the football high,
A little planet crossing Wembley's sky.

And Watson, lately healed from broken bone,
Leapt toward a destiny before unknown.
He met the ball! It flew beyond the guard,
And struck the net with thunder fierce and hard.

One goal to Wigan! Nothing to the Blue!
A world of football gasped at what was true.
The little kingdom, threatened with the fall,
Had won the greatest cup of all.

The mighty warriors bowed their heads in pain,
While Wigan's faithful danced beneath the rain.
And Zeus, who watched the battle from above,
Declared it proof that football still knew love.

"For here," he cried, "are men with lesser gold
Who've won what richer nations sought to hold!
Let monarchs learn that courage must be weighed,
Not merely by the wages warriors are paid."

Then Hermes, smiling, took his silver pen:
"A useful lesson, sire, for wealthy men.
The City king may pay ten times the price,
But Wigan's men have won the cup quite nice."

And Arthur, from the disappointed stand,
Held fast his weather-beaten grandson's hand.
"I told you, lad, when Agüero struck that day,
The gods would find a most inventive way
To show that City, though it wears a crown,
Can still be brought most beautifully down."

He paused, surveyed the celebrating foe,
And watched the little Wigan banners glow.
"Still, fair's fair. They fought and earned their right.
The better men have taken it tonight.
And if you cannot laugh when giants fall,
You never understood this game at all."

IV. THE FALL OF THE CROWNED COMMANDER

NOW MANCINI, whose courage once had brought
The crown for which a thousand heroes fought,
Stood silent where the Wigan banners rose,
A victor newly burdened by his woes.

He'd conquered Ferguson upon the plain,
And broken forty years of City's pain;
Yet football kings, though glorious in their hour,
Discover gratitude has little power.

The mighty council gathered in the night,
To judge the captain of the conquered fight.
The golden kingdom's patience had grown thin;
A crown once won was not enough to win.

They spoke of progress, purpose, future fame,
And all the polished words that mean the same.
They thanked their general for his noble past,
Then told him that his services were past.

O Fortune! What a cruel, ungrateful art,
To give a man a crown, then bid him part!
He'd brought them glory, raised their name on high,
Yet now the kingdom wished its king goodbye.

The gods themselves regarded this with awe,
For even Zeus respected ancient law.
"If Hector had defended Troy so well,
Would Priam have dismissed him ere it fell?"

"No, Father," Hermes said, "but times have changed.
The managers are constantly exchanged.
A king who brings one title to the town
Must bring another, or surrender crown."

"And what reward awaits a faithful chief?"
"A handsome cheque, and comparatively brief grief."
Thus Mancini departed from the throne,
His victories written in the City stone.

The faithful mourned the man who'd made them kings,
Though football seldom lingers over things.
For soon another general drew near,
Whose manner promised calm instead of fear.

From Chile's distant mountains came a lord,
Who carried neither thunderbolt nor sword.

V. THE COMING OF THE QUIET ENGINEER

HIS NAME was Pellegrini, grave and wise,
With silver hair and thoughtful, patient eyes.
No furious monarch, shouting at the storm,
He trusted reason, balance, shape and form.

The Engineer, as football named the man,
Surveyed the golden kingdom and its plan.
He studied all the warriors gathered there,
Their splendid skills, their weaknesses laid bare.

Where others thundered threats before the fight,
He spoke as though discussing morning light.
And where great managers displayed their rage,
He seemed a scholar stepping on a stage.

The faithful wondered if this gentle air
Could conquer England's fiercest football lair.
Old Arthur watched him, thoughtful, from the stand,
And raised a pint within his trembling hand.

"He seems a decent fellow, calm and bright,
Who might get through a match without a fight.
The last one shouted till the windows shook;
This chap appears more suited to a book.

"But if he wins, I'll praise his quiet grace.
If not, I'll ask why anger left the place."
Yet Pellegrini worked with patient care,
And brought new warriors through the northern air.

Fernandinho, from the distant eastern plain,
Would guard the middle ground through sun and rain.
And Negredo, fierce and powerful in attack,
Would drive the opposing legions stumbling back.

Beside them stood the heroes of the Blue,
Whose greatness all the northern kingdom knew.
There Silva moved, whose passing found a seam
Where other men perceived no earthly scheme.

There Yaya strode, a giant on the grass,
Who crossed whole kingdoms in a single pass.
And Sergio, that small immortal flame,
Still carried England's terror in his name.

There Kompany, the captain, stood alone,
A wall of courage stronger than a throne.
Thus were the warriors placed within the field,
Their separate gifts united in one shield.

And through the autumn, winter, spring and rain,
The City army learned to rise again.

VI. THE BATTLE FOR THE LESSER CROWN

NOW SUNDERLAND, a kingdom fierce and small,
Came marching forth to challenge one and all.
Their banners reached the sacred Wembley ground,
Where eighty thousand voices shook the sound.

The prize was England's League Cup, silver-bright,
A modest crown, yet worthy of a fight.
And Pellegrini, newly come to fame,
Resolved to place his honour on the game.

But Sunderland, whose warriors feared no lord,
Advanced and struck before the Blue had scored.
Young Borini, with courage in his stride,
Brought sudden thunder to the northern side.

One goal to Sunderland! The mighty Blue
Discovered that the gods remembered how to do
Their favourite trick of making rich men stare
At little kingdoms dancing in the air.

The first half passed; the City army trailed,
And every costly argument had failed.
The faithful watched, their old suspicions stirred,
And muttered many an ancient, bitter word.

Then Yaya Touré, mighty in his pride,
Looked toward the goal from many yards outside.
He struck! The ball went soaring through the light,
And curled beyond the keeper's mortal sight.

A splendid arc, a curve beyond compare,
As though the gods had drawn it through the air.
The net embraced it; Wembley shook with sound,
And City's hope came roaring from the ground.

Before the foe could gather breath once more,
Young Nasri struck and doubled up the score.
One goal became another in a breath;
The Blue had turned apparent loss to death
For Sunderland's ambitions on the day,
As all their brave resistance fell away.

Then Navas, racing through the open plain,
Completed City's triumph once again.
Three goals to one! The silver crown was won,
And Pellegrini's reign had well begun.

The Engineer, whose face was calm as stone,
Received his first great trophy for the throne.
The gods, observing this composed delight,
Declared his manner quite unlike the fight.

"Does this man ever shout?" asked mighty Zeus.
"Or curse the ref for some imagined abuse?"
"He scarcely needs to," Hermes made reply.
"His men have learned to score, and that is why."

And Arthur, watching City's triumph, said:
"At least the new man keeps a level head.
I'd like to know what makes him quite so calm.
Perhaps he has a chemist for his balm.

"Or maybe, after many years of pain,
We've found a man who understands the game.
For I have watched enough of football's rage
To know that shouting cannot turn the page."

VII. THE RED KINGDOM OF THE MERSEY

YET GREATER struggles waited through the spring,
For Liverpool now dreamed of being king.
The ancient Mersey kingdom, fierce and proud,
Had raised its scarlet banners to the crowd.

Its warriors marched with thunder in their feet,
And made the English league their hunting street.
There Suárez prowled, a predator of skill,
Who made defenders question their free will.

There Sturridge struck, whose dancing steps could mock
The strongest wall, the firmest defensive rock.
And Gerrard, captain of the ancient Red,
Bore all his city's dreams above his head.

For Liverpool had waited many years
To claim the crown that once was held so dear.
Their people sang with longing in their breast,
And thought their noble army England's best.

The City army watched this crimson tide,
And fought to keep its own ambitions wide.
But Liverpool advanced with fearsome pace,
And threatened now to seize the foremost place.

Then came the springtime battle at Anfield,
Where City's warriors struggled but would not yield.
The Mersey army took the narrow day,
And sent the Blue in troubled thought away.

Three goals to Liverpool, and City two;
The crown seemed marching toward the other Blue
Of heaven, where the gods surveyed the field,
And wondered whether City now must yield.

The faithful murmured, doubtful of their fate,
As Liverpool approached the golden gate.
Their title seemed to wait beyond the shore,
And City found itself behind once more.

But Fate, who likes a dramatic complication,
Had little use for public expectation.
She'd watched the experts publish, bold and wise,
Their certain judgments underneath the skies.

"The race is finished!" cried the learned men.
"There's nothing left to calculate again!"
The gods exchanged a most suspicious glance,
For Fate was standing ready for her dance.

Then Chelsea came to Liverpool's great hall,
And placed its stubborn warriors round the ball.
Mourinho's men defended with such pride
That time itself appeared to be denied.

The minutes passed, the Mersey crowd grew loud,
And expectation gathered like a cloud.
Then Gerrard, faithful captain of the Red,
Received the ball where danger softly tread.

A simple touch, a moment's fleeting slip,
And destiny escaped his captainship.
The ball ran loose, where Demba Ba lay near,
And suddenly the kingdom tasted fear.

The Chelsea striker raced upon his way,
And struck the blow that changed the title day.
The net received it; Liverpool stood still,
As fortune crossed the Mersey against its will.

O cruel grass! O treacherous piece of earth!
That made one stumble of tremendous worth!
The English crown, for which great armies fight,
Had slipped upon a footstep in the light.

Upon Olympus, Zeus arose and cried:
“What mortal hand has turned the flowing tide?
A whole campaign of toil and sweat and fame,
Undone by one brief moment in the game!”

Athena answered, thoughtful as before:
“The gods need neither thunderbolt nor war.
A blade of grass, a misplaced step, a fall,
May turn the fortunes of the greatest hall.”

“But surely,” Zeus declared, “the war remains!”
“Indeed, great Father. Greater trouble reigns.”
For Liverpool, whose dreams were sorely pressed,
Approached the southern palace of the west.

At Crystal Palace, where the Eagles soared,
The Mersey warriors three great goals had scored.
Three goals! The crown appeared within their sight,
And all the faithful dreamed of sweet delight.

But then the Eagles rose upon the field,
And Liverpool’s great army ceased to shield.
One goal returned, and then another came,
And suddenly the palace burst in flame.

The third went in, and Liverpool’s bright day
Dissolved in disbelief and slipped away.
Three goals apiece! The warriors stood aghast,
As all their golden visions hurried past.

The men who thought they'd conquered England's throne
Now feared the crown would never be their own.
And Hermes, counting points upon his page,
Declared the gods had entered football's strangest age.

"Great Zeus, the Mersey men were three ahead,
Yet now their title hopes are nearly dead."
"Then why," asked Zeus, "did they not guard their three?"
"Because, my lord, they sought a greater victory.
They wanted goals enough to change the sum,
And found the Eagles most unwilling to succumb."

Ares laughed until the heavens shook:
"The surest win was there for them to take,
Yet chasing more, they watched their fortunes break!"
And Zeus, reflecting on the bitter scene,
Observed how little certainty could mean.
"The wise proclaim that men must take their chance,
Yet often fortune leads them such a dance.
To seize the crown a kingdom must be bold,
But sometimes wisdom knows when it should hold."

VIII. THE SECOND CROWNING OF MANCHESTER

NOW CITY stood with destiny restored,
Its golden warriors gathered round their lord.
The final road lay open, clear and wide,
And Pellegrini's men advanced with pride.

Against Aston Villa, in the northern rain,
The Sky-Blue army struck again and again.
Four goals were written on the stadium wall,
And Villa's warriors answered none at all.

Then came West Ham, the final waiting foe,
Whose ancient hammers marched to meet the Blue.
The Etihad was filled from end to end,
With faithful hearts that feared the final bend.

For City needed but a single point,
Yet none could trust a fate so out of joint.
The memory of QPR remained,
When victory seemed lost before it came.

Old Arthur watched the opening minutes pass,
And felt the ancient dread beneath the grass.
“One point,” he said, “a simple thing to gain.
But football never leaves us free from pain.
We need a draw, and yet I cannot rest;
I’ve seen this club transform a simple test
Into a tale of sorrow, shame and dread,
That makes a grown man wish he’d stayed in bed.”

But Nasri struck, and City’s voices rose,
As West Ham’s men confronted further woes.
Then Kompany, whose courage none could doubt,
Made certain there was little left to shout.

Two goals to City, none against their name,
And thus was sealed their second Premier League fame.
The final whistle swept across the ground,
And all the years of longing turned to sound.

The captain raised the silver crown on high,
Its ribbons bright beneath the northern sky.
The people sang, the mighty warriors cheered,
And Pellegrini’s gentle smile appeared.

Two trophies in a single glorious spring,
Had crowned the Engineer a worthy king.
And Manchester, whose ancient hopes were few,
Beheld a dynasty arising dressed in blue.

But Arthur, watching through his joyful tears,
Remembered all the former, humbler years.
“Two league crowns in three,” he softly said.
“Just think what words those are inside my head.
For half my life I prayed we’d merely stay
Among the finest clubs and live to play.

“And now the captain raises silver twice!
The world has turned. I scarcely know the price.
But all I ask, before I leave this place,
Is one good summer without a legal case.”

At which, beyond the stadium’s crowded wall,
The sound of distant clerks disturbed the hall.

IX. THE JUDGMENT OF THE SILVER LEDGERS

FOR WHILE the golden kingdom raised its crown,
The guardians of the books had journeyed down.
From UEFA’s European council came
A reckoning concerned with football’s game.

Their laws, called Financial Fair Play, were made
To keep the clubs within the rules of trade.
And now the City’s figures faced review,
To judge what revenues and costs were due.

The council studied all the sums supplied,
And found the break-even requirements unsatisfied.
The findings brought a settlement severe,
With financial penalties the club must bear.

The sum was sixty million euros named,
Though forty might return if targets claimed
Were duly met, and future books displayed
The progress that the settlement had made.

The European squad was to be small,
With limits placed upon its players all.
Restrictions on expenditure were set,
And wages, registrations faced a net
Of carefully prescribed conditions, made
To bring the club within the rules of trade.

Yet City disputed how the rules were read,
And held that different judgments might be said.
The settlement was signed, the terms agreed,
Though disagreement lingered with the deed.

The faithful listened, puzzled and distressed,
As every paper offered its own test.
For they had come to watch their heroes score,
And now must learn what accounting ratios were for.

Old Arthur, with the patience of a saint,
Declared the whole affair beyond complaint.
“These UEFA fellows have peculiar views.
They say we’ve spent too much to win the Blues.
They let us buy expensive men to play,
Then tell us what we’re allowed to pay.

“I’ve no objection to an honest rule,
Though let it govern every wealthy fool.
But why must football’s finest pastime be
A quarrel over profitability?”

His grandson spoke, “The rules are meant to show
That clubs should know from where their riches flow.”
“A worthy thought,” the elder made reply,
“And one the wise should never set aside.
But if their rules require a book this tall,
How shall a fan find time to watch the ball?”

Upon Olympus, Hermes heard the plea,
And smiled at football’s new complexity.
“The ancient Greeks had lawyers, gods and kings,
But never such elaborate financial things.
We sent our heroes marching forth to Troy;
These men send auditors to spoil their joy.”

Athena spoke, with patient, steady gaze:
“Yet laws preserve the order of our days.
A kingdom’s power must answer to the rule,
For wealth without restraint may play the fool.

“The strongest should not have a separate right,
Nor weaker clubs be punished without light.
Let each be judged by evidence made clear,
And fairness govern all who gather here.”

Then Zeus, examining the scrolls with dread,
Declared the regulations hurt his head.
“I’ve governed heaven, earth and sea and storm,
Yet cannot comprehend this lengthy form.
I’ve settled wars with thunderbolts and flame;
These clerks demand a spreadsheet for a game.”

And Hermes answered with a knowing grin:
“The gods may rule the world, but cannot win
An argument with UEFA’s learned men,
Who’ve seventeen appendices and a pen.”

X. THE YEARS OF RICHES AND UNEASY REST

NOW SEASONS followed seasons, quick as rain,
And City’s warriors marched through joy and pain.
The golden kingdom flourished in its pride,
Yet found that fortune would not always side
With those whose halls were rich, whose names were great,
Whose every match attracted costly fate.

The league crown passed to Chelsea’s waiting hand,
And City watched another victor stand.
Though Sergio scored with brilliance undiminished,
The season left their grand ambition unfinished.

For football’s ancient monarchs, red or blue,
Discovered other kingdoms sought crowns too.
And when the City armies seemed supreme,
A lesser rival sometimes wrecked the dream.

Yet greater warriors crossed the northern sea,
To join the ranks of wealthy Man City.
Young Sterling came from Liverpool's proud shore,
Where once he'd thrilled the Mersey crowds before.

His pace was lightning, sudden in its flight,
And filled defenders with a wholesome fright.
Then Kevin De Bruyne, with discerning eye,
Could see a pass before the ball drew nigh.

A craftsman whose precision knew no peer,
He made the distant goal seem strangely near.
And while the new men gathered in the land,
The trophies still required a steady hand.

The City faithful watched the costly host,
And heard the growing arguments of boast.
The kingdom's wealth had bought a splendid team,
But not the certainty within the dream.

For every rival brought its own desire,
And football's crown required more than fire.
The Engineer remained, composed and still,
Despite the fickle turning of the wheel.

His reign had brought two cups and England's crown,
Yet murmurs of succession filled the town.
For kings, however gracious, learned one law:
Their successors might be chosen long before
The final battle ended on the plain,
And victory might not secure their reign.

XI. THE THREE MIRACLES OF CABALLERO

NOW LIVERPOOL returned to Wembley ground,
Where City hoped another cup be found.
The Mersey warriors, fierce beneath their red,
Had come with Klopp's great thunder at their head.

Their manager, a man of boundless fire,
Whose every gesture carried fierce desire,
Could make a minor throw-in seem a war,
And celebrate a tackle with a roar.

The City's general, calm in his command,
Prepared his warriors to make their stand.
But one decision troubled all the crowd,
And made the sporting prophets speak aloud.

For Hart, the keeper known through all the land,
Would watch as Caballero took his stand.
The second guardian, faithful to his role,
Was trusted now to guard the City's goal.

"Why choose," cried many, "this less famous man?
Is that the wise conclusion of the plan?"
But Pellegrini stood beside his choice,
And answered doubt with no excessive voice.

The goalkeeper had served the cup campaign;
His rightful place would not be lost through fame.
The battle came, and Fernandinho scored,
As City pressed the Mersey's stubborn board.

But Coutinho, when hope seemed nearly done,
Returned the blow and brought the Reds to one.
One goal apiece! The minutes passed in pain,
And extra time could not divide the twain.

Thus Wembley, weary of the flowing fight,
Prepared to judge by penalties that night.
The faithful trembled at the dreadful sight,
For fortune favours neither wealth nor might
When one poor man must face another's aim,
And all his kingdom's honour bears his name.

Then Fernandinho struck against the frame,
And City's faithful whispered words of shame.
The Mersey army thought its chance had come,
While Blue supporters feared the final drum.

But Caballero stood before the goal,
And summoned courage from his deepest soul.
From Lucas came the strike, and Willy flew,
His hands deflecting what the foe had drew.

Then Coutinho approached, resolved to score,
Yet Caballero barred the fatal door.
A second save! The City's banners rose,
While Liverpool confronted mounting woes.

Then Lallana stepped forward, fierce and brave,
And met the keeper's third astonishing save.
Three penalties denied! Three hopes destroyed!
The Mersey army's valour came to naught.

Then Yaya Touré, calm beneath the sky,
Prepared to let the deciding football fly.
He struck! The net received it, sweet and clean,
And City claimed the cup upon the green.

The faithful roared; the silver trophy shone,
And Caballero found his legend born.
The keeper, whom so many men had doubted,
Was now the name the crowds and heralds shouted.

Upon Olympus, Zeus surveyed the scene,
And wondered what such judgment ought to mean.
"Three saves!" he cried. "By heaven, what a day!
The fellow's hands have swept their hopes away!
He stood where many thought he should not stand,
And won the cup by force of his own hand."

Athena smiled. "A lesson for the proud,
Who judge by reputation and the crowd.
The man who serves in silence through the year
May rise when greater names retreat in fear."

And Arthur, looking down upon the grass,
Declared the keeper worthy of a glass.
"I've often thought that City might best try
A second keeper when the first goes awry.
But this good fellow saves three shots in one!
He's nearly made the whole expense seem fun.

"If every penalty could end this way,
I'd gladly watch a shoot-out every day.
Although," he added, after brief reflection,
"I'd rather win through ordinary selection."

XII. THE GATES OF THE EUROPEAN EMPIRE

YET ONE great prize lay far beyond the land,
Where Europe's royal kingdoms made their stand.
The Champions League, whose glittering crown was known
To those who held the continent's proud throne,
Remained beyond the northern kingdom's reach,
Its glory tempting those who dared beseech.

The City warriors journeyed far from home,
Through Europe's ancient capitals and Rome.
They met the mighty princes of the field,
Who seldom to another's power would yield.

At last they faced the Parisian golden court,
Whose wealth had built a host of equal sort.
The French possessed their own magnificent pay,
And had no wish to let the Blue pass by.

But City fought with purpose, strength and grace,
And claimed the right to leave the Parisian place.
The quarter-final victory was secured;
The semi-final, long beyond them, now endured.

Then mighty Madrid arose against the Blue,
Whose ancient banners half the football world knew.
The Spanish kings, in splendour, stood prepared,
And asked what challenge Manchester now dared.

The first great battle ended without score,
And left the kingdoms waiting for one more.
Then City travelled to the Spanish throne,
Where Madrid's vast cathedral stands alone.

The Bernabéu shook with royal pride,
As Real's white warriors gathered side by side.
The City captain, Kompany, strong and brave,
Was forced away, and left his men to save
The slender hopes that lingered through the game,
Where each small error might destroy their claim.

Then Bale advanced, and sent the football high,
A crossing arrow through the Spanish sky.
It glanced from Fernando, cruelly struck,
And turned the night upon a thread of luck.

One goal to Madrid, none returned by Blue;
The final dream receded from their view.
The City warriors pressed but could not score,
And Europe closed its great cathedral door.

For all their wealth, their champions and renown,
The continent had kept its final crown.
The Engineer, who'd led them far and high,
Must leave with Europe's glory passing by.

And Zeus, who watched the Spanish battle's end,
Declared that football had no faithful friend.
"These men have spent such treasure on their host,
Yet still they cannot conquer Europe's coast!
What further offering can a monarch make,
Before the gods shall let his kingdom take
The greatest trophy known throughout the game,
And set its crown beside the City's name?"

Athena answered: "Gold has limits, sire;
A great commander must direct the fire.
And even then, the smallest twist of chance
May break the finest warrior's advance.

"For kingdoms are not measured by their gold,
Nor all their battles won by men well sold.
The field remains the judge of skill and deed,
Where courage, fortune, judgment all must lead."

XIII. THE LAST DAYS OF THE ENGINEER

THE ENGINEER stood quietly at the gate,
And faced the coming season's changing fate.
His silver hair was bright beneath the sky,
His manner calm, although the end drew nigh.

He'd brought the League Cup twice to City's hall,
And once the greatest English crown of all.
He'd led the northern warriors far abroad,
Where Madrid's mighty kingdom barred the road.

Yet now the golden kingdom sought a change,
A bolder vision, greater in its range.
For football's powerful monarchs seldom rest
Upon the laurels won in some past quest.

Before his final months had reached their end,
The council named the man it would commend
To lead the mighty kingdom through the years,
And turn its distant European hopes to cheers.

From Munich's throne, where German champions reigned,
A thinker of uncommon art was named.
A master of possession, shape and space,
Whose armies moved with mathematical grace.

His name was Guardiola, known afar,
Who'd conquered Barcelona with his star
Of passing art, where football seemed to flow
Through channels lesser minds could never know.

And Pellegrini, faithful to the last,
Prepared to leave the kingdom he had passed
Through triumph, disappointment, hope and pain,
To give another ruler his domain.

The faithful praised the Engineer's great name,
And thanked him for the silver cups and fame.
Yet questions stirred beneath the northern sky:
Could even greater victories draw nigh?

Old Arthur watched the final days depart,
And felt a curious stirring in his heart.
"Another manager," he softly said,
"And more new schemes to put inside my head.
This fellow talks of passing all the day;
I hope he also lets our strikers play.

"They tell me he can make a team so fine
That every man will know the perfect line.
Well, I have watched our lot for fifty years,
And any plan that lessens my old fears
Would make him worth the wages he is paid,
Though I should like to see one goal first made."

His grandson laughed. "You'll like this Spanish king!"
"I shall," said Arthur, "if he wins the thing."

XIV. THE PROPHECY OF THE THOUSAND PASSES

NOW HIGH upon Olympus, Zeus arose,
And watched the golden kingdom's future close
Around the coming of a master new,
Whose name would carry far beyond the Blue.

The gods assembled, curious and keen,
To learn what future battles might be seen.
And Clotho, mistress of the woven thread,
Revealed the coming years that lay ahead.

She saw the City warriors sweeping wide,
Their passing moving with a restless tide.
She saw defenders charging into space,
And midfielders occupying every place.

She saw a hundred points upon the board,
And countless goals by City's legions scored.
She saw the ancient Reds grow pale with fear,
As Blue proclaimed its triumph year by year.

But deeper in the fabric of the night,
Beyond the glory and the stadium light,
She saw the ledgers waiting in their hall,
And heard the distant judges' solemn call.

For every kingdom raised by golden trade
Must answer for the bargains it has made.
And every victory, however grand,
Leaves questions that may one day be at hand.

Yet Clotho would not render final fate,
Nor name a judgment that must still await
The law's own course, its evidence and claim,
Its right to hear the answer of the named.

Instead she turned toward Zeus, and softly said:
“The mortal kings are by ambition led.
They conquer England, then desire the earth,
And judge their glory by its growing worth.

“But all their crowns, their triumphs and their fame,
Are subject to the frailties of the game.
A pass may fail, a mighty striker fall,
And empires tremble at a bouncing ball.”

Then Hermes spoke, with cheerful irony:
“The golden kingdom’s greatest destiny
May lie not only in the cups it wins,
But in the cost of all its former sins,
Should judgment one day find the laws were crossed,
And reckon what those victories may have cost.”

Athena raised her hand. “The case must hear
Both sides, and weigh its evidence made clear.
Let judgment rest upon what can be proved,
Not on the rival kingdoms’ wishes moved.”

And Zeus, impatient with the endless talk,
Rose from his throne and took a thunderous walk.
“Enough!” he cried. “The football field awaits!
The golden kingdom stands before new gates.
Let Pep arrive, and let his warriors learn
What victories their passing art may earn.

“For if the game is now a scholar’s sport,
Where every movement has its own report,
Then perhaps the gods shall finally understand
Why wealthy kings pay fortunes for command.”

XV. THE FINAL SONG OF THE GOLDEN KINGDOM

THUS ENDED Pellegrini's noble reign,
With three bright trophies earned through toil and pain.
The City kingdom, once so poor in fame,
Had risen to a height beyond its name.

The fathers who remembered ancient loss
Now watched their children count the trophies' gloss.
The faithful who had followed through despair
Could scarcely find sufficient room for cheer.

The ancient Red Empire still possessed
Its glorious history, widely praised and blessed.
Yet City now had crowns enough to show
That northern fortunes change as seasons go.

And Arthur, in his final evening's song,
Recalled the years of waiting, bitter, long.
He'd seen the club fall low, then rise again,
And watched its golden legions cross the plain.

He'd seen the little Argentine bring light,
And Wigan turn a triumph into night.
He'd watched the Engineer restore the crown,
And Liverpool's ambitions tumble down.

He'd seen the guardians of the sacred books
Approach the kingdom with their solemn looks.
He'd heard the laws of commerce loudly praised,
And watched the questions that their figures raised.

And now a greater master crossed the sea,
To lead the growing realm of Man City.
The future stood before them, vast and bright,
A field of endless victories and fight.

“My son,” he said, “we’ve lived to see a change
That once appeared impossible and strange.
The club that used to struggle just to stay
Among the finest teams that came to play
Now boasts of cups and kingdoms conquered far,
And signs the greatest warriors, star by star.

“But one great lesson football still must teach,
No matter what new heights a king may reach:
A man may buy the finest sword in war,
But cannot know what Fate may have in store.

“The game belongs to those who take the field,
To men who fight, and sometimes fail to yield.
The players bring the courage and the skill;
The owners bring the means to serve their will.

“And laws, though often tedious to read,
Must govern all, whatever be their creed.
For if the richest simply make their rule,
The poor shall soon depart the common school.”

The grandson nodded, though his youthful eyes
Were fixed upon the stadium’s glowing skies.
“But Grandad, shall we conquer Europe too?
Shall all the kingdoms bow before the Blue?”

The elder smiled, and gave a weary sigh.
“We may, my boy, before I come to die.
But I have learned that fortune, rich or poor,
Will always find another open door.

“Perhaps this Guardiola knows the art
Of placing every player in his part.
Perhaps he’ll win the trophies we desire,
And set the whole of Manchester on fire.”

He paused, then raised his glass with one last grin.
“Provided first he teaches them to win.
For all his famous passing, skill and wit,
Some bugger still must shoot, and make it hit.”

And far above, upon Olympus’ height,
The gods regarded Manchester that night.
The crowns were shining in the City’s hall,
Its future promised triumph over all.

But in the shadows, silent, old and deep,
The sacred ledgers held their patient sleep.
Their figures waited for a distant day,
When kings and lawyers might have more to say.

The golden kingdom’s finest years lay near,
Its grandest battles yet were to appear.
And as the northern clouds began to clear,
A new commander’s footsteps sounded near.

For glory’s hunger never knows its end,
And every conquered height reveals a bend.
The City warriors raised their banners high,
While thunder rolled across the northern sky.

Then Zeus, surveying every silver cup,
Commanded Hermes, “Let the curtain up!
The kingdom has its gold, its men, its fame;
Now send the scholar who shall change the game.”

And Hermes, with a smile, replied once more:
“Great Zeus, prepare for tactics never known before.
The ball shall move through every field and lane,
Then back, then forth, then backwards once again.

“The full-back shall appear where midfielders belong,
And centre-halves shall pass the whole day long.
The goalkeeper shall join the passing art,
And every man shall play a double part.”

Zeus stared, astonished by this strange decree.
“But who,” he cried, “shall actually score for me?”
And Hermes bowed beneath the heavenly dome:
“That, Father, is the question Pep shall bring home.”

The thunder faded. Manchester slept below.
The City banners waited for their show.
The golden crowns were polished, bright and grand,
While stranger glories beckoned through the land.

And from the distant continent there came
A man whose genius carried mighty fame.
The age of kings had flourished and was done.
The age of Guardiola had begun.

HERE ENDETH BOOK VI
The Crowns of the Sky-Blue Kingdom

PART II

THE AGE
OF HIDDEN LEDGERS

BOOKS VII–XII

Triumph and revelation, 2016–2018

B O O K V I I

*The Coming of Pep, Master
of a Thousand Passes*

T H E A R G U M E N T

*Of the philosopher who descended from Catalonia, the goalkeeper who learned to tremble,
the ball that became a religion, and the curious discovery that possession of the world is not
necessarily possession of its crown.*

I. INVOCATION TO THE MUSE OF THE ETERNAL BALL

SING, MUSE, of Pep, whose restless, scheming brain
Could make eleven men bewilder Spain;
Who taught the leather sphere to fear the grass,
And made a sacred mystery of the pass.

Sing of the man who ruled with stern decree,
That none should kick where none could clearly see;
Who held that football's highest, noblest art
Was passing back to where the passes start.

O daughter of Olympus, lend thy tongue,
For stranger deeds than ancient bards have sung
Shall fill these leaves, where mighty warriors fall
While trying to retain a harmless ball.

No Trojan horse approached these northern shores,
No Spartan fleet assailed their iron doors;
A bald philosopher, with thoughtful eyes,
Arrived to reorganise the skies.

He bore no sword, no armour forged in flame,
But diagrams that put the gods to shame;
And where Achilles thundered toward his foes,
Pep marked a space where no one ever goes.

He spoke of triangles, of width and height,
Of moving left whenever moving right;
Of pressing high, of keeping passing lanes,
And teaching centre-backs to use their brains.

The ancient world had known no such campaign,
Not Troy, nor Rome, nor Macedonian plain;
For Alexander conquered land and sea,
But never asked his troops to play three-three.

And high above, where deathless gods convened,
Great Zeus regarded Earth's enormous screen;
He saw the coming of a stranger king,
And wondered what fresh madness he would bring.

II. THE COUNCIL ON OLYMPUS

UPON HIS throne of clouds and gilded stone,
Great Zeus addressed the immortals round his throne:
"Who comes to Manchester, that northern land
Where rain obeys no god's commanding hand?
What mortal bears such confidence and pride
That he would teach the football how to glide?"

Then Hermes rose, with wingéd feet and grin,
And drew a tablet from his tunic thin.
"Tis Guardiola, ruler once of Spain,
Who made Barcelona's glory reign;
At Bayern Munich next he held the crown,
And now the Sky-Blue House has called him down.

“In February came the news from far,
That Manchester had summoned such a star;
And when July upon the kingdom shone,
He took the helm, and made the realm his own.”

“How many soldiers?” Zeus demanded. “Ten?
Ten thousand horse? A hundred thousand men?”
“Just twenty-something players,” Hermes said,
“And several hundred notions in his head.”

Then Ares, god of battle, slapped his thigh:
“A weakling’s game! True warriors charge and die!
Let English football thunder through the mud,
With broken shins and noble sprays of blood!”

But Athena, wise in stratagem and play,
Replied, “There may be wisdom in his way.
The strongest army need not charge the wall;
It first persuades the foe to chase the ball.

“Let ten exhausted enemies pursue
A sphere that travels faster than they do;
And when their lungs surrender to the strain,
Advance between them like a summer rain.”

Ares exclaimed, “But where’s the splendid fight?”
“Inside their heads,” she said, “from left to right.”
Then Zeus considered this mysterious creed:
“Does victory not depend on strength and speed?”

“It does,” said Hermes, “yet there’s something more:
The wealth required to purchase both in store.”
The Fates, who sat beyond the golden hall,
Spun silver threads around a leather ball;
And Clotho whispered, smiling at the sight,
“Some threads lead straight to triumph, some to spite.”

Lachesis measured triumph, loss, and fame,
And Atropos reserved the final name;
But none disclosed what future scrolls might say,
For that was work appointed to another day.

III. THE PARTING OF THE ENGINEER

BEFORE THIS Catalonian lord appeared,
Another worthy ruler was revered:
Pellegrini, gentle in command,
Who steered the wealth and glory of the land.

He bore the calm of architects who know
That towers rise while seasons come and go;
A league had crowned him, silver cups had gleamed,
And European heights were newly dreamed.

Yet dynasties, however richly fed,
Must sometimes crown a different royal head;
And City's lords, who measured time in gold,
Declared a brighter future would unfold.

The Engineer departed from the scene,
His features calm, his history serene;
The coming master studied every stone,
And planned to build a temple of his own.

No longer would the ball be merely kicked,
No longer would the forward just be picked;
Each blade of grass would have a measured role,
Each movement serve the geometry of goal.

The changing age arrived without a drum,
But every full-back sensed what was to come;
For under Pep, the ancient football trade
Would find its simpler customs disobeyed.

A thousand instructions filled the summer air,
And players learned to occupy a square;
They learned the square had other squares inside,
And every square possessed a proper side.

The old men watched with wonder and dismay,
For none had seen eleven men this way;
And one grey servant, having heard the plan,
Remarked, "He'll need a mathematician, man."

IV. OLD ARTHUR AND THE GOSPEL OF THE PASS

NOW DOWN in Manchester, where chimneys rose,
And bitter northern winter winds still froze,
Old Arthur sat beside his grandson Joe,
And spoke of football fifty years ago.

"I've watched this club through mud and wind and hail,
Through glorious wins and seasons pale and frail;
I've seen us rise, I've seen us tumble down,
I've seen us lose to nearly every town.

"I've stood in crowds where every freezing soul
Would give his Sunday dinner for a goal;
I've watched a ball go sailing through the rain,
And prayed some bugger kicked it back again.

"But now," said Arthur, "look what Pep has done:
He wants the ball to visit everyone.
He sends it east, he sends it west and back,
Then gives the goalkeeper a heart attack."

Young Joe replied, "Granddad, it's positional play.
We move the opposition out the way.
We overload the centre, split the lines,
And manufacture space through strict designs."

“Manufacture space?” Old Arthur cried.
“We’ve got a bloody pitch! It’s ninety wide!*

What further space can any football need?
Just kick the thing to Sergio at speed!”

“But Pep believes that movement is the key.”
“So does my bladder after cups of tea.”
“The object is to dominate the match.”
“By giving every full-back room to scratch?”

“By keeping hold of every inch of play.”
“Then why,” asked Arthur, “don’t we win all day?”
The grandson smiled. “It’s harder than it seems.”
“Most things are, lad, except for charging fees.”

For Arthur knew the modern football’s ways,
Its endless contracts and its transfer days;
And every time a player signed his name,
The price of pies went climbing all the same.

“One truth,” he said, “survives both young and old:
The price of hope goes up with every gold.
And though a king may purchase half the earth,
He can’t buy sense in those who judge its worth.”

Then Joe, who had a smartphone in his hand,
Explained the pressing systems Pep had planned;
And Arthur, listening with patient dread,
Put down his pint and slowly shook his head.

“When I was young, we called it chasing men.
You scholars call it pressing now, and then
You give it six new names, and twice the cost,
And still the ball goes out when it is lost.”

The metre gave Arthur temporary authority to exaggerate the dimensions of
the pitch.

V. THE NEW OLYMPIANS OF MANCHESTER

THEN CAME the men whose names would fill the songs,
Whose fortunes rose amid the chanting throngs.
There stood De Bruyne, fiery-haired and keen,
The finest cartographer the grass had seen;
He saw through ranks of defenders drawn in line,
And made a passing lane by grand design.

A ball from Kevin crossed the field in flight,
As sharp as Athena's arrow through the night;
The forward ran, believing none could see,
Yet Kevin knew where he was meant to be.

There Silva stood, whose feet were made of air,
Who found a yard where none had thought it there;
The little Spaniard, quiet as the snow,
Made mighty armies stumble, turn, and slow.

Fernandinho guarded midfield's gate,
A veteran priest of well-considered fate;
He broke the counterattack before it grew,
And sometimes broke the counterattacker too.

There Agüero, he of deathless fame,
Whose final-minute thunder shook the game;
He still possessed the striker's ancient art,
To break the net and break the rival heart.

But Pep surveyed the hero of the goal,
And questioned his position in the whole.
"Great Sergio, thou art feared in every land,
Yet pressing, too, must serve my firm command."

The warrior frowned. "I score. Is that not best?"
"First chase their centre-half, and do the rest."
"And if I score three goals?" the striker cried.
"Then press," said Pep, "and score a fourth beside."

Young Sterling, swift as Hermes through the sky,
Would race where mortal feet could hardly fly;
And Sané, newly summoned from the Rhine,
Would tear apart the enemy's defensive line.

Then Gündogan, of Dortmund's disciplined school,
Arrived to serve the Catalonian rule;
And Stones, young builder of the passing wall,
Was told to trust his boots upon the ball.

A different age began in every zone;
No warrior fought entirely on his own.
For Pep declared that individual might
Must bow before the movement of the fight.

"Eleven minds," he cried, "must think as one,
Or all our costly labour comes undone;
The pass, the press, the pivot and the run,
Must join like planets circling round the sun."

Old Arthur heard, and whispered, "Lord above,
They'll need a union just to learn to shove."

VI. THE GOALKEEPER AND THE TERRIBLE COMMAND

BUT GREATEST was the tumult near the goal,
Where Pep proclaimed a new and strange control;
For where the keeper once had stood to save,
He now must be a scholar and a knave.

Joe Hart, long guardian of the City gate,
Discovered changing winds could alter fate;
The hands that once had kept the Kingdom sound
Could not alone secure his hallowed ground.

For Pep demanded boots of rarest skill,
A keeper calm when foes approached to kill;
A man who, while surrounded in his keep,
Could thread a pass before the crowd could weep.

And Hart departed, bound for Turin's plain,
Where Torino welcomed him to their domain;
While Bravo came from Barcelona's shore,
To show what passing from the back was for.

His name meant courage, confidence, and flair,
Three things a keeper sometimes needs in prayer;
He stood behind a high defensive line,
And heard the grand commands of Pep's design.

"Receive the ball," the master firmly said,
"And do not kick it blindly overhead.
Draw forth their forwards, calmly turn about,
Then play between them as they rush you out."

"But sir," said Bravo, "what if they attack?"
"Then find the space behind the pressing pack."
"And if their striker stands between the two?"
"Then calculate the angle passing through."

"And if the angle closes at the last?"
"Remember what we learned about the past."
"And if the crowd begins to scream and shout?"
"Then pass it shorter. That will sort them out."

Thus did the goalkeeper, where giants dwell,
Discover that philosophy was hell;
For in the ancient days a sturdy boot
Could send impending danger on its route.

But now the ball must circulate with grace,
While forty thousand hearts increased their pace;
And where a simple clearance once had flown,
A five-pass tragedy was slowly grown.

Old Arthur watched, his fingers turning white,
As Bravo tried to play through men in flight.
"He's going to lose it!" Arthur loudly swore.
"He's got three men upon him! Kick! No more!"

"The principle," young Joe explained, "is sound."
"The principle," said Arthur, "should be drowned."
And when a pass went neatly through the press,
Young Joe proclaimed the genius of success;
But Arthur, who'd survived the older school,
Replied, "A lucky pass can save a fool."

The gods were similarly split in thought:
Athena praised the courage Pep had taught;
But Ares, seeing danger near the line,
Demanded that the keeper show his spine.

"Why not," he cried, "just kick the bloody ball?"
"Because," Athena said, "that isn't all."
"It seemed enough for Greece at Marathon!"
"At Marathon," she said, "the Greeks ran on."

"And won!"
"They did."
"Then why not charge the foe?"
"Because their centre-backs would never know."

Thus reason wrestled fury in the sky,
While every keeper wondered how to die;
And mortal fans discovered, to their cost,
That football could be frightening when not lost.

VII. THE FIRST TEN VICTORIES

THEN AUGUST came, with trumpets through the land,
And Pep assembled warriors at command;
Against Sunderland the opening contest came,
And City's men began their master's game.

Two goals to one proclaimed their first success,
Although the faithful suffered some distress;
For even victories obtained by art
Could place considerable strain upon the heart.

Then one by one their enemies were felled,
As City's new dominion was beheld;
In league and cup, ten victories they won,
Ten battles fought, ten conquests neatly done.

At Old Trafford stood Mourinho's guarded throne,
A fortress where resentment long had grown;
There United's red battalions came to fight,
Convinced that history would defend their right.

But Kevin struck, and Kelechi followed soon,
And City's banners climbed that afternoon;
Though Ibrahimović answered with a blow,
The Blues prevailed, two goals to one, below.

And Pep, whose triumph made the headlines ring,
Was hailed by many as a wondrous king;
The prophets cried, "This reign shall never end!"
A statement fate was shortly to amend.

For England has a curious native art,
Of crowning men before the season's start;
A manager wins three, and all agree
He's greater than the gods of land and sea.

But should he lose, the very same proclaim
That foreign methods are entirely to blame;
The papers that had praised his splendid brain
Would soon prescribe a wet December rain.

High on Olympus, Hermes spread the news:
"Ten straight victories now adorn the Blues!"
Great Zeus arose, delighted by the score:
"Then surely they shall triumph evermore!"

Athena lowered slowly both her eyes.
"One autumn's victories do not win the prize."
"But ten!" cried Zeus. "The number is divine!"
"So's twelve," she said, "and neither guarantees a line."

Then Atropos, who seldom spoke in haste,
Declared that confidence is often waste;
And from her sleeve she drew a sombre thread,
That stretched to Barcelona, flaming red.

VIII. THE FALL BEFORE BARCELONA

O MUSE, recall the autumn's bitter hour,
When Catalonia demonstrated power;
For Pep returned to where his fame was born,
And found his former kingdom richly sworn.

Barcelona rose in royal blue and red,
With Messi at the point where others bled;
And City marched upon that sacred ground,
Where passing skill was everywhere renowned.

The master met the mighty school he'd known,
And saw its greatest pupil claim the throne;
For Messi, who could make defenders stray,
Turned football into poetry that day.

One goal he struck, then two, and finally three,
As helpless City learned humility;
And when Neymar added one before the end,
Four goals to nil had left no boast to spend.

Bravo, whose feet were meant to serve the plan,
Was sent from play, dismissed before the span
Of ninety minutes finished their cruel run,
And many wondered what the plan had done.

Old Arthur watched the scoreboard's savage glow,
Then slowly turned to his grandson Joe.
"Four-nil," he said. "That's rather hard to hide.
Could someone tell the passing men we tried?"

“Barcelona played exceptionally well.”

“Aye, lad. The scoreboard has the facts to tell.”

“Pep needs more time to build his perfect side.”

“Then why’s our goalkeeper taking such a ride?”

“The system takes a season to mature.”

“And what,” said Arthur, “makes the bloody thing secure?”

Yet fortunes swing, as ancient poets know,
And humbled warriors sometimes strike a blow;
For when Barcelona came to Manchester’s ground,
A second, very different tale was found.

Though Messi scored, and clouds descended low,
Gündogan answered with a brilliant blow;
De Bruyne bent a free kick through the air,
And Gündogan struck twice to seal the affair.

Three goals to one! The northern heavens rang,
And every ancient City ballad sang;
For Pep had beaten those whose art he knew,
And shown his fledgling kingdom what it grew.

Then Arthur rose, his pessimism undone,
And said, “Now that, my lad, is how it’s done.”
“But Granddad, didn’t you condemn the plan?”
“I’ve always backed the manager, young man.”

“The other night you called him rather mad.”
“That’s football, son. Your memory’s bloody bad.”
Thus did the ancient football wisdom stand:
Success proves every coach’s firm command;
Defeat reveals a thousand fatal flaws,
And no one ever checks the changing laws.

IX. THE WINTER OF DISCONTENT

BUT ENGLAND'S winter bears an iron crown,
And foreign dreams are often frozen down;
The wind came howling through the northern gate,
And City found that beauty could not dictate.

For Leicester struck a heavy, bitter blow,
Four goals to two, beneath December snow;
And Vardy, darting through the City ranks,
Collected three without a word of thanks.

Then January brought a darker day,
When Everton swept City's pride away;
Four goals unanswered shook the royal seat,
And turned the passing gospel to defeat.

At Goodison the warriors stood aghast,
As every brilliant theory met its past;
The hosts attacked with cruel, decisive speed,
And demonstrated what a score might need.

A thousand passes, one mistake, one fall;
A single forward galloping with ball;
The gods themselves began to comprehend
That all possession has an awkward end.

For what is wealth, if not a means to buy?
And what is passing, if the minutes fly?
And what is beauty, if the scoreboard's face
Displays defeat with mathematical grace?

Upon Olympus, Ares roared with glee:
"Behold! The game requires simplicity!
Just get the ball, advance, and strike the net;
What nobler doctrine has the world found yet?"

Athena answered, "Patience, god of war.
One battle cannot settle what they're for.
The master builds a system meant to last,
Not merely one to flatter every blast."

But Zeus, whose temper rose with every loss,
Demanded, "Who, precisely, is the boss?
If all these warriors follow Pep's design,
Then who takes blame when all the plans decline?"

Hermes replied, "The English have a way
Of solving such a question every day:
They praise the coach whenever goals are scored,
And blame the coach whenever fans are bored."

"An elegant arrangement," Zeus declared,
"And one in which no player need be scared."
Then Clotho held a tangled skein of thread,
And counted all the rumours that were spread;
While Lachesis, surveying every claim,
Observed how quickly worship turns to blame.

For those who called Pep football's greatest sage
Now wrote his methods belonged to another age;
And those who praised the wealth that brought him fame
Now asked if money might have spoiled the game.

Old Arthur heard a pundit loudly say,
"Pep's style won't work in England anyway."
"A curious verdict," Arthur muttered low,
"Considering what we saw two months ago.
Last week he was a genius without peer;
This week he's not adapted to the year.

"If pundits earned their wages from the truth,
They'd all be out of work before their youth."

X. THE KINGDOM OF MONACO

NOW SPRING approached, and Europe's trumpets blew,
And City faced a kingdom bright and new;
Monaco came, with youthful blades arrayed,
Whose fearless football left the old afraid.

From France they marched with speed and flashing feet,
And vowed no wealthy giant was too great to beat;
Among them Mbappé, a rising star,
Whose future fame already shone afar.

At Manchester their wild encounter roared,
As five for City and three for Monaco scored;
Eight goals erupted in a single night,
And reason fled before the glorious fight.

Agüero struck with veteran fire and pride,
And Sterling flashed along the battle's side;
Stones rose amid the thunder of the game,
And Sané sealed the score beneath his name.

Five-three! A triumph worthy of the bards,
Though neither camp had much regard for guards;
For every time a striker found the net,
Some poor defender found new cause to sweat.

"Behold!" cried Zeus. "A victory most grand!"
Athena merely raised a cautious hand.
"Five scored," she said, "but three allowed as well.
There may be more to this than songs can tell."

"Nonsense!" shouted Ares, flush with cheer.
"Eight goals! A splendid way to spend the year!"
Then came the second contest overseas,
Where Monaco advanced with savage ease;
Two goals they struck before the interval bell,
And City's dreams descended toward the well.

But Sané scored, and hope returned once more,
Till Bakayoko headed in their third to score;
Three-one the night, six-six the totals stood,
Yet away goals favoured Monaco, as they would.

Thus City fell, though equal in the sum,
And all their passing could not overcome
The regulation written long before,
That counted where one scored as well as score.

Old Arthur stared upon the cruel decree:
“Six each? Then how the devil can’t it be
A draw? Have Europeans changed the laws
To punish us for playing to applause?”

Young Joe explained the away-goals calculation,
Its history, intent, and application;
But Arthur, quite unmoved by his reply,
Declared, “That’s why the game’s gone bloody dry.

“Six each! You’d think a sensible old judge
Could settle this without a continental grudge.”
And Hermes, ever fond of written rules,
Replied to Zeus, “There is no lack of fools;
Yet here the regulation stands quite clear,
And none may change it merely out of fear.”

Athena bowed, acknowledging the blow:
“The cleverest systems sometimes fail to show
How swiftly fortune chooses whom to crown,
And sends the greatest reputation down.”

The Fates recorded what the battle taught:
That glory cannot always be bought;
And though the wealthiest army may advance,
Its brightest stars remain exposed to chance.

XI. THE LAST BATTLE AT WEMBLEY

YET ONE more road to glory stood ahead,
Where Wembley called the living and the dead;
The English Cup, that ancient silver prize,
Still shone like moonlight in the warriors' eyes.

There Arsenal waited, old and proud of name,
Whose cannons once had thundered into fame;
And Wenger, learned master of the art,
Prepared to pierce the Sky-Blue Kingdom's heart.

The battle opened underneath the sun,
And Agüero, swift and deadly, struck for one;
His goal put City briefly in command,
And triumph seemed already close at hand.

But Monreal restored the balance soon,
And Wembley heard a different battle tune;
Then Sánchez, in the added time of war,
Struck home the goal that closed the final door.

Two goals to one! The Gunners seized the day,
And City's silver dreams were swept away;
The Cup advanced without the Sky-Blue host,
And Pep confronted failure's bitter ghost.

For once the master, worshipped far and wide,
Had passed a season with no trophy by his side;
In Barcelona, crowns had come like rain,
At Bayern, titles followed his campaign.

But England offered neither cup nor crown,
And told the visiting philosopher to sit down;
A lesson ancient sovereigns often learn:
Not every foreign conquest takes its turn.

“He’s finished!” cried the prophets of the press.
“His passing’s just a complicated mess!
The English game has found his fatal flaw:
Our winter weather doesn’t care for law!”

But Athena, hearing all the grand debate,
Observed the usual arrogance of fate.
“They mock a man for failing in his year,
Though greater failures daily flourish here;
And those who have accomplished half as much
Now claim his methods lack the English touch.”

“Perhaps,” said Hermes, “there’s a simpler cause:
The ball goes where it goes, despite applause.”
Meanwhile, deep within the City hall,
Pep stood before a diagrammed football;
He looked upon its circles, lines, and space,
And drew another arrow into place.

“No,” spoke the master softly to the night,
“The principles are sound; the aim is right.
If foes have broken through our fragile wall,
We must improve the men who move the ball.”

He marked the flanks, the centre, and the rear,
And summoned scouts from countries far and near;
For where philosophers encounter doubt,
The wealthy have a means of working out.

XII. THE ACCOUNTANT’S PHILOSOPHY OF DEFEAT

NOW DEEP beneath the grand Etihad stand,
Where ledgers governed half the football land,
There sat a man with figures in his head,
Who counted every shilling City shed.

No bard has sung his mighty calculator,
No priest proclaimed a balance-sheet creator;
Yet kingdoms rise, and royal banners wave,
Because such quiet scholars count and save.

His desk was piled with parchment to the roof,
Each scroll demanding signatures and proof;
For in the modern world of glorious sport,
The smallest number sometimes summons court.

The scribes maintained their records through the years,
Amid the victories, invoices, and cheers;
While City's rising fortune drew the eye
Of those who questioned how the sums ran high.

The club maintained its conduct met the law,
While other kingdoms watched with growing awe;
And though no future verdict yet was known,
The seeds of coming battles had been sown.

For financial rules, those creatures strange and stern,
Are easier to announce than to discern;
They speak of fairness, limits, cost, and gain,
Then need a thousand pages to explain.

The scribe addressed a messenger one day:
"What is a football club allowed to pay?"
"For excellence," the messenger replied,
"Whatever law permits, with truth applied."

"And who decides which revenues are sound?"
"The proper bodies, when the facts are found."
"And what if every club disputes the sum?"
"Then legal gentlemen are sure to come."

The scribe looked down upon a spreading chart:
“Thus jurisprudence joins the sporting art.”
He pondered all the figures yet to be,
And wondered what the future world would see;
For players could be measured by a goal,
But sponsorship required another scroll.

Ares, hearing talk of rules and fees,
Declared, “I’d settle matters with more ease.
Let every kingdom gather in a field,
And he who wins shall make the others yield!”

Athena answered, “Money has its laws,
And claims require evidence and cause;
A charge is not a verdict carved in stone,
Nor does denial settle facts alone.”

“Then how,” cried Ares, “shall the battle end?”
“When judges weigh the proof that parties send.”
“That sounds less glorious than a battlefield!”
“Perhaps, but law is not a sword to wield.”

Great Zeus was bored beyond his ancient years:
“Bring back the football, goals, and victory cheers!
These endless scrolls are worse than Trojan war;
At least the Greeks knew what they fought it for.”

But Hermes smiled, for Hermes understood
That legal storms could yield a livelihood;
And barristers, like warriors, seek renown,
Though rarely must they tackle for a crown.

Thus future shadows lengthened on the wall,
While none yet knew how far those shades would fall;
The gods could sense approaching strife and strain,
But left the coming trials to their own domain.

XIII. THE THIRD PLACE CROWN

AT LAST the weary season reached its close,
And City's final northern banner rose;
The warriors rode to Watford's distant gate,
Determined not to leave their place to fate.

There Kompany, captain, stalwart of the field,
Advanced beneath his battle-hardened shield;
And with a header set the first bright score,
Then Agüero struck, and struck the net once more.

Fernandinho added to the growing flame,
And Gabriel Jesus signed the fifth in name;
Five goals to nil! A worthy final stand,
Though no great league crown waited for their hand.

For Chelsea's kingdom wore the season's gold,
While Tottenham's silver story had been told;
And City, third, with seventy-eight to show,
Had risen one place from the year before.

They'd scored four-score in league encounters played,
And thirty-nine against their name were laid;
With twenty-three league victories to their name,
They'd shown both promise and imperfect fame.

Six defeats, nine draws, a mixed campaign,
Had yielded neither coronet nor chain;
But third secured their European place,
And offered Pep another year of grace.

Then Zeus, surveying all the final sums,
Declared, "A third-place crown? Who beats the drums?
For kings who do not finish at the top
Should hear their trumpets immediately stop!"

“Yet growth,” Athena said, “is seldom straight.
The skilful learn from errors, small and great;
One season’s trials may shape another’s might,
As dawn prepares its colours through the night.”

Old Arthur studied tables, scores, and charts,
The dreadful arithmetic of football hearts.
“Third place,” he said. “I’ve known far worse than that.
I’ve seen us nearly buried, cold and flat.
A lad who’d watched us back in Division Three
Would find this present crisis hard to see.”

“But Pep expects to win,” young Joe replied.
“Well, so do I,” the ancient man replied.
“He needs new players, faster at the back.”
“Then fetch some lads who know a good attack.”

“He’ll want a keeper better with his feet.”
“I’d settle for one hard enough to beat.”
“He might require more width upon the wing.”
“Then buy a wider pitch. He buys everything.”

Young Joe laughed hard, and Arthur raised his glass,
To seasons gone, and seasons yet to pass;
For though the old man questioned every scheme,
He still believed the City could redeem
The years of sorrow, ridicule, and pain,
And bring the thunder rolling back again.

XIV. THE SECOND SUMMONING OF GOLD

THEN SUMMER climbed across the northern sky,
And agents heard the golden trumpets cry;
The marketplace of Europe’s finest men
Prepared to sell its wonders once again.

For Pep had learned what all great builders know:
A palace needs foundations laid below;
And though a master may design the hall,
He still requires good stone to build the wall.

So from Monaco came Bernardo's art,
A nimble mind, a fiercely beating heart;
From Benfica's gate came Ederson,
Whose mighty kicking range amazed each one.

From Tottenham marched Kyle Walker, swift and strong,
Whose pace could right what passing made go wrong;
Danilo travelled from Madrid's proud throne,
And Mendy came from Monaco's domain.

Such costly reinforcements filled the train,
That northern merchants thought it gold would rain;
And rival lords, regarding City's trade,
Complained of every princely purchase made.

"Unfair!" they cried. "This wealth distorts the sport!"
While asking agents what their clubs had bought;
For every kingdom loves a level ground,
Provided its own treasury is sound.

The football market has a curious creed:
One club's excess is another club's need;
A price is wicked when your rival pays,
But prudent when your own team earns the praise.

Pep looked upon the names upon his slate,
And felt the stirrings of a changing fate;
For now the shapes he'd traced upon the board
Might move with greater speed across the sward.

He summoned coaches, captains, scouts, and men,
And placed his sacred triangles again;
Then spoke beneath the summer evening light,
As stars prepared their stations for the night:

“The world has seen our passing, swift and neat,
But now our passing must command our feet;
Possession is no prize for us to hoard,
It is the bridge by which the goal is scored.

“Let Walker race where opposition breaks,
Let Kevin find the opening each step makes;
Let Silva turn where mortal eyes see none,
And Sterling pierce the channel with his run.

“Let Ederson look calmly toward the press,
And turn their rage to tactical distress;
Let every player know the space he needs,
And trust the moving pattern as it leads.

“We shall not merely pass for passing’s sake,
But move until opposing kingdoms shake;
And should the foes withdraw behind their wall,
We’ll find a thousand ways to move the ball.”

Then thunder shook the Etihad’s great dome,
And Zeus looked down upon the master’s home.
“A thousand ways?” the mighty father cried.
“Why not just put the ball the net inside?”

Athena answered, “That is still the aim.”
“Then why,” said Zeus, “make such a fuss of the game?”
“Because the road to victory can be art.”
“Then may the art at least provide a start.”

XV. THE PROPHECY OF THE HUNDRED

NOW ON Olympus, where the Fates reside,
A silver curtain slowly moved aside;
Beyond its folds, the threads of future years
Were bright with triumph, tangled deep with fears.

Clotho drew forth a shining strand of blue,
And whispered, "There are deeds this man shall do
That few before have dared to contemplate,
And none shall think his greatest triumph late."

Lachesis measured every match to come,
Each victory, each draw, each beating drum;
And in her book she wrote a number round,
A number never yet in England crowned.

One hundred stood upon the sacred page,
A figure fit to trouble every age;
Yet Atropos concealed it from the king,
For fate has little pleasure in revealing everything.

Great Zeus demanded, "What is written there?
Why does the golden parchment light the air?"
"Some numbers," Clotho answered, "bear a name
That men shall sing across the fields of fame."

"And what of those dark threads beyond the gold,
Those sombre knots the other sisters hold?"
Then Atropos regarded him with care:
"Not every crown brings peace to those who wear.
A realm may conquer leagues and gather praise,
Yet face the questions born in earlier days."

"Will football settle all?" the Thunderer said.
"Some battles live in documents instead."
"Will truth be known?"
"When proof has had its day."

"And until then?"
"Let neither side have all its way."
Thus spoke the Fates, whose measures none could bend,
And left the golden prophecy without an end;
For victories would come, and questions too,
And both would write the story of the Blue.

Far down below, the city breathed at night,
Its stadium crowned with pale electric light;
The training pitches slept beneath the moon,
Awaiting warriors who would gather soon.

And Pep, alone beside a chalk-marked board,
Prepared another footballing accord;
A little arrow, curved across the page,
Became the seed of some approaching age.

He moved a counter left, another right,
And saw an opening in the quiet night;
Then smiled, erased, and drew the thing once more,
As if he heard the future's distant roar.

XVI. THE BALL THAT WOULD NOT REST

BUT HERE, O Muse, before the book is done,
Recall the strange religion he begun;
For once a football entered Pep's command,
It rarely lingered long in any hand.

It passed from boot to boot, from man to man,
According to a vast, relentless plan;
It journeyed from the left toward the right,
Then back again beneath the stadium light.

It visited the centre and the wing,
It circled every opposition king;
It crossed the grass with confidence supreme,
As though the ball itself possessed a dream.

The ancient football gods could scarce believe
The cunning shapes such passing could achieve;
Ares grew dizzy watching from his seat,
And wished the sphere would stay beneath one foot.

At last he cried, "Enough of this display!
How long must one small leather object stray?
In Troy, we fought ten years and brought it down;
These men take twenty passes through the town!"

Athena said, "Observe their patient art.
They pull the enemy's formation wide apart."
"But must they send it backward seven times?"
"To build the forward movement by designs."

"Then why not start where they intend to go?"
"Because the foe would stand there, as you know."
"Your wisdom," Ares said, "is hard to bear."
"Then watch the space."

"What space?"
"The empty square."
Ares glanced down, and saw, to his surprise,
A channel open under mortal eyes;
De Bruyne perceived the breach before it grew,
And sent a curling pass that travelled through.

The ball arrived where Sterling made his run,
And all the patient labour now was done;
One touch, one strike, one sudden burst of sound,
And forty thousand voices shook the ground.

Great Zeus rose up, delighted by the sight:
"At last! The fellow's passed the thing all right!"
Then Athena, with a quiet, knowing grin,
Declared, "The thousand passes let him in."

And far below, Old Arthur gave a cheer,
The sweetest sound his grandson loved to hear.
"Now that's a goal! A beauty! What a sight!
Perhaps the little bald one's got it right."

Joe smiled. "So now you understand his way?"

"I understand we've won the match today."

"And what about the passing?"

"Very fine."

"The pressing?"

"Splendid."

"And the high defensive line?"

Old Arthur paused, and wiped his foaming chin,

Then watched the ball go backward once again.

"There's just one thing I cannot comprehend:

Why start another passing tour, my friend?

We've scored the goal! The crowd has had its thrill!

Could someone tell the buggers to stand still?"

But football does not rest because men cheer,

Nor pause because the final hour is near;

And fortunes, once awakened from their sleep,

Roll onward through the valleys dark and deep.

So Manchester awaited what would be,

Its banners stirring in the evening breeze;

The master had not conquered every foe,

But planted seeds whose mighty roots would grow.

The club possessed its wealth, its men, its dream,

Its architect, its passing, and its scheme;

Yet hidden in the future's crowded halls,

Were solemn questions no one solved with balls.

The gods withdrew behind their purple cloud,

The last supporters wandered from the crowd;

And in the empty stadium's vast embrace,

One final football rolled across the place.

It struck the post, rebounded toward the wall,

And seemed unwilling yet to end its call;

For this was City's strange, ambitious creed:

The ball must always move, the men must lead.

And Pep, who'd come with nothing but a plan,
Would soon remake the measure of the man;
Not yet the conqueror of a hundred points,
But one who set the future's moving joints.

O Muse, let now the northern trumpets rest,
And leave the coming season to its test;
For while the master studied how to win,
A greater golden page was drawing in.

The merchant princes gathered round their gold,
The sponsors prepared new wonders to unfold;
And Hermes, scenting contracts in the air,
Declared that commerce, too, deserved a prayer.

Thus ends the seventh book, where Pep first came,
And found that England offered sterner game;
He won no crown, yet taught the realm to see
A different road toward supremacy.

The ball had found its prophet and its priest,
But money's empire had not held its feast;
And on Olympus, as the daylight died,
The Fates set one more golden scroll aside.

For next the merchant kings shall spread their stores,
And sponsorship shall thunder through the doors;
The gods shall feast, the accountants shall attend,
And no one shall agree where profits end.

HERE ENDETH BOOK VII
The Coming of Pep, Master of a Thousand Passes

B O O K V I I I

The Banquet of a Thousand Sponsors

T H E A R G U M E N T

Of the golden banquet beneath the Etihad, the merchants who purchased immortality by the inch, the sacred difference between investment and income, and the first whispers of a reckoning that would trouble gods and accountants alike.

I. INVOCATION TO THE MUSE OF COMMERCE

SING, MUSE, of wealth, that most persuasive king,
Before whose throne the lesser monarchs sing;
Whose golden sceptre makes the mighty bow,
And purchases tomorrow's glory now.

Sing not alone of warriors swift and bold,
But merchants bearing caravans of gold;
Of solemn men whose signatures could buy
A thousand banners floating in the sky.

For in the age when football crowned its lords,
No kingdom lived by goals and flashing swords;
The modern game required a richer art,
To place a merchant's emblem near the heart.

The Greeks had fought for Helen's lovely face,
The Romans conquered kingdoms, land, and space;
But City's princes found a nobler quest:
To put a corporate symbol on a vest.

O Muse, who watched the Phoenicians trade,
And saw the fortunes ancient merchants made,
Declare what strange enchantments now prevailed,
When football's every inch could be retailed.

For once a shirt was merely cloth to wear,
A humble garment fashioned without care;
But now its surface yielded princely sums,
And every seam announced that commerce comes.

The breast belonged to airlines of renown,
The sleeve acquired a separate merchant crown;
The boots, the boards, the tunnel, and the ground
Were territories waiting to be found.

And where the ancient temples sought the gods,
The modern football temples sought the odds;
For men might doubt Olympus in the sky,
But never doubted what a brand could buy.

Thus Manchester, whose chimneys once had poured
The smoke of labour toward the heavens broad,
Became a realm where new ambitions shone,
And sponsorship ascended to the throne.

II. THE SUMMONING OF THE GOLDEN MERCHANTS

BENEATH THE stadium's great steel embrace,
Where City proudly held its honoured place,
The merchant princes gathered for a feast,
From western kingdoms to the distant East.

They came with contracts sealed in scarlet wax,
And lawyers bearing leather document sacks;
They came with charts that promised endless gain,
And forecasts stretching outward into Spain.

From far Abu Dhabi's shining shore,
The Etihad's great eagle seemed to soar;
Its letters, bold upon the City breast,
Proclaimed a partnership before the rest.

An older pact had joined the club and flight,
And later brought the stadium naming right;
A grand arrangement, splendid in its scale,
That gave the merchants quite a lengthy tale.

Then Nike came, with sandals fit for gods,
Though modern boots required more curious odds;
And Nissan's envoys praised the motor car,
Which carried football's fame both near and far.

From Korea Nexen's heralds made their way,
To claim the sleeve where future warriors play;
From German SAP came scholars skilled in charts,
Who promised data might improve the arts.

Etisalat's great messengers appeared,
And many other names the princes cheered;
While Carlsberg's envoys raised a foaming glass,
To toast the men who made the football pass.

And each proclaimed, in voices grave and clear,
That City was the world's most splendid sphere;
For commerce has a most convenient sight:
The customer is invariably right.

A hundred scrolls were carried through the door,
Then hundreds more were laid upon the floor;
And every parchment bore a noble claim,
To share the rising splendour of the name.

The master of the banquet raised his hand:
"Let every merchant here throughout the land
Discover what this partnership shall mean:
A place beside the conquering Sky-Blue team!"

The trumpets sounded, tables trembled then,
And lawyers briefly looked like happy men.

III. THE FEAST OF THE NAMING RIGHTS

THE BANQUET hall was decked with silk and gold,
Its silver goblets glorious to behold;
And from the ceiling hung a giant sign,
Inviting every guest to come and dine.

The sign itself bore yet another crest,
For someone had sponsored the noble feast;
Its letters shone with such excessive light,
They almost made the banquet guests take flight.

At one great table sat the men of air,
Who purchased space upon the football wear;
At another, those who traded wheels and tyres,
Beside the vendors of electric wires.

The master rose: "Our guests shall now be shown
The countless opportunities we own;
The naming rights to corridors and doors,
To stadium seats, to ceilings and to floors."

A merchant asked, "What price to name the gate?"

"That shall depend upon the going rate."

"And what about the western tunnel wall?"

"A most distinguished property, withal."

"And can a merchant name the centre spot?"

"In principle, we'd rather that he not."

"Then what about the referee's left shoe?"

“We’ll see what regulations let us do.”

The bankers nodded gravely at each word,
As though a wiser plan they’d never heard;
For once the merchants caught the selling fever,
They’d gladly sponsor half a player’s liver.

A splendid scribe produced a chart of fees,
And spoke of markets overseas in threes;
He named the value of a single glance,
A camera close-up, or a player’s dance.

“If ten million viewers watch the final game,
Ten million eyes may recognise your name;
And every eye is worth a certain sum,
Provided all the television figures come.”

A merchant cried, “Can we purchase the cheers?”

“Not yet, but we are studying that for years.”

“And can the crowd be told what songs to sing?”

“We’d need permission for a corporate ring.”

“What if we sponsor every corner kick?”

“An excellent commercial marketing trick.”

“And if the corner fails to find a head?”

“Then advertise our corner-taking spread.”

Thus football’s sacred moments, one by one,
Became new assets underneath the sun;
And every cheer that shook the stadium wall
Was measured as a marketable call.

IV. THE GODS DISCOVER SPONSORSHIP

UPON OLYMPUS, Zeus regarded all,
And watched the merchants crowd the banquet hall;
He saw their contracts, seals, and golden rings,
And wondered why the gods had purchased things.

“What sorcery is this?” the Thunderer cried.
“These merchants pay to stand at heroes’ side!
They conquer not, they strike no glorious blow,
Yet make their names wherever warriors go!”

Then Hermes, god of commerce and of thieves,
Rose smiling from his throne of laurel leaves.

“O Father, here the modern genius lies:
The hero wins, the merchant advertises.
The greater grows the football warrior’s fame,
The more the merchant pays to share his name.”

Great Zeus considered this with thoughtful awe:
“Then thunder, too, might prosper by such law.”

He seized his bolt, whose fire could split the sea,
And cried, “Who’ll sponsor this? Come bid for me!”

Athena frowned. “The heavens are not for sale.”

“Then why,” said Zeus, “does every mortal hail
A merchant’s name embroidered on his breast,
While mighty Zeus must thunder for the rest?”

Hermes replied, “Your Majesty might start
By selling naming rights to every part.
The Olympus Lightning Partnership could be
The finest marketing arrangement men shall see.”

Ares leapt up, delighted by the plan:
“I’ll sell my shield to any wealthy man!
My sword shall bear the emblem of a bank,
And every battle march shall have a rank.”

Athena shook her head in grave dismay:
“You’ve sold your martial dignity away.”

“My dignity,” said Ares, “never paid
For all the spears and armour I have made.”

Then Hermes introduced a scroll so wide
That even mighty Zeus could not decide
Where all its complicated clauses ended,
Or how the terms might later be amended.

“The naming rights to Olympus,” Hermes said,
“Could yield us endless gold till we are dead.”

“But gods cannot be killed,” Athena cried.

“Then endless revenue!” the rogue replied.

The Fates, observing from a distant seat,
Refused to place their destinies for sale;
For Clotho held a thread no gold could meet,
And knew that even sponsors sometimes fail.

V. OLD ARTHUR AND THE PRICE OF A SLEEVE

DOWN MANCHESTER’S familiar cobbled way,
Old Arthur met his grandson Joe one day;
They walked beneath the grey and misty sky,
Past shops where football merchandise stood high.

Young Joe displayed the latest City shirt,
Its colours bright, untouched by mud or dirt;
And Arthur peered upon the shining sleeve,
Then stared as though he could not quite believe.

“What’s that?” he asked. “Have they been making wheels?”

“It’s Nexen Tire, Granddad. A brand with deals.”

“A tyre company? Upon a shirt?”

“Yes, Granddad.”

“Has the football suffered hurt?”

“They sponsor City. It’s a brilliant trade.”

“And how much cash has this new emblem made?”

“The details aren’t all public,” Joe replied.

“Well, that’s convenient,” Arthur said, and sighed.

“Every club can sell a sleeve, you know.”

“Then what,” said Arthur, “will they sell below?”

“The shirt has space for sponsors, if allowed.”

“Then charge the lads for standing in the crowd.”

“That’s what the ticket office does.”

“Precisely!

And does it every season rather nicely.”

Arthur examined one more patch of blue,
And wondered what the football world might do.

“When I was young, a football shirt was plain;
We wore it through the sunshine and the rain.
No airline travelled over my left breast,
No tyre company disturbed my Sunday rest.

“We bought the shirt because we loved the side,
And wore its colours with a Northern pride;
But now the lad who wears his City’s blue
Advertises half the world for free, too.”

Young Joe replied, “It helps the club compete.
The sponsorship pays wages every week.”

“Aye, lad. And when the wages climb once more,
We’ll need to rent the players’ boots for more.”

He folded up the shirt and paid the price,
Though not before complaining once or twice;
For Arthur’s principles were strong and grand,
Until a City shirt was in his hand.

VI. THE DOCTRINE OF THE SACRED REVENUE

NOW IN the halls where financial scholars dwell,
The scribes recited what the numbers tell;
They spoke of income, equity, and cost,
Of profits won and opportunities lost.

One elder, bearded like a prophet old,
Unrolled a scroll inscribed in lines of gold:

“Hear now the difference every club must heed,
When princes give the treasury what it needs.
An owner’s capital, however vast,
Is not the selfsame thing as revenue amassed.

“A commercial payment, duly earned and shown,
Must not be confused with funds the owners loan;
The rules may place restrictions on the sums,
Depending on the source from which it comes.”

The younger scribes repeated every word,
Although the principles seemed most absurd
To men who thought the simple act of paying
Was surely less demanding than explaining.

A messenger addressed the elder sage:
“Why should the origin of gold engage
The football gods, if gold is gold throughout,
And both kinds pay the striker running out?”

The elder lifted slowly both his eyes:
“Because the rules distinguish enterprise.
What sponsors pay and what the owners give
May face distinct conditions under which clubs live.”

“And who determines if a price is fair?”

“The governing authorities take care.”

“And what if clubs object to their decree?”

“Then arguments proceed expensively.”

“And what if all the learned judges fight?”

“Then everyone may argue through the night.”

The messenger regarded this with dread:
“Could we not simply play the games instead?”

The elder sighed. “The world has travelled far.
One cannot govern football from a bar.”

Yet Arthur, hearing later of the creed,
Declared it had a most peculiar need:

“When Manchester was built on coal and steel,
A business bought a thing because it was real;
But football’s made a market out of fame,
And who can fix the value of a name?”

“If someone pays a fortune for a sign,
And signs a proper contract on the line,
Who says that sum is far too great to pay?
Some fellow drawing wages by the day?”

Joe answered, “Rules can guard against abuse,
And stop accounts from serving as a ruse.”

“Then prove the abuse,” old Arthur firmly said.
“Don’t count suspicion as a thing that’s read.”

Thus spoke the veteran from his ancient chair,
Demanding facts and evidence be fair;
And though he loved the City to the bone,
He knew that truth must stand upon its own.

VII. THE LEAGUE OF NINETEEN JEALOUS KINGDOMS

NOW WORD of City’s swelling wealth was borne
To rival courts, where kings grew pale and worn;
To Liverpool, where ancient banners flew,
To London, where the capital’s kingdoms grew.

To Manchester’s red fortress came the tale,
That City’s merchants prospered without fail;
And in the chambers of the rival lords,
Men counted trophies, transfer fees, and swords.

One ruler cried, “Their wealth is quite obscene!”

Another asked, “And what does obscene mean?”

“It means,” the first replied, “that they have more.”

“Then buy more players. Open up the store.”

“We cannot simply purchase whom we please!”

“Then sell another thousand seats and keys.”

The rival courts assembled through the night,
And argued what was wrong and what was right;
For every kingdom sought a sporting law
That none of its own noblemen would flaw.

The ancient houses spoke of pedigree,
Of history, of former majesty;
And lesser kingdoms answered from the rear,
“Your history does not pay our bills this year.”

One lord proclaimed, “Tradition makes us great!”

Another said, “Then can it buy a gate?”

“A glorious past deserves a proper share!”

“Then let the past arrive and pay the fare.”

For football’s noble kingdoms, high and low,
Had differing accounts of how to grow;
The mighty prized their long-established name,
The wealthy newcomers their ambitious claim.

And where the old aristocrats once ruled,
The golden marketplace had often fooled
Their comfortable assumption, grand and wide,
That only ancient kings deserved such pride.

But fair competition, stern and wise,
Could neither simply crown the richest prize
Nor grant the oldest kingdoms endless sway,
And tell the newly wealthy not to play.

The question travelled through the royal hall:
What makes a lawful competition fair to all?

Athena heard the question from above,
And recognised the ancient cause thereof;
For justice, once invoked by rival kings,
Is often pulled by very earthly strings.

THE BANQUET OF A THOUSAND SPONSORS
VIII. THE MARKET VALUE OF IMMORTALITY

THERE DWELT within the banquet's marble dome
A learned scribe from far beyond the home;
His task was measuring the value of a name,
A difficult pursuit in football's game.

He carried tables, surveys, charts, and scales,
And estimates of merchandising sales;
He studied viewers watching overseas,
And advertising value by degrees.

"If Kevin makes a forward pass," he said,
"And twenty million viewers turn their head,
The brand upon his chest receives a sight,
Whose value can be measured, if not quite."

"Not quite?" demanded one impatient lord.

"The numbers seldom speak with one accord.
We estimate impressions, reach, and share,
But value lives in markets everywhere."

"And what is one impression truly worth?"

"That varies by its country on the earth."

"And how shall we establish fair return?"

"By contracts, comparisons, and what we learn."

"And if two experts disagree?"

"They may."

"Then who decides which one has had his day?"

"The rules appoint authorities to hear,
And sometimes courts must make the matter clear."

The lord grew weary of the endless charts:
“I’d rather watch the players practise darts.”

For football’s mighty commercial domain
Could make an economist question his brain;
A shirt displayed before the watching masses
Might cost more than a hundred working classes.

But no one knew precisely what should be
The perfect price of football’s majesty;
For one man’s bargain was another’s waste,
And markets seldom bowed to common taste.

A merchant proudly paid to share the fame,
And hoped that glory would enhance his name;
While those who doubted where the value lay
Demanded every ledger have its say.

And somewhere near the banquet’s farther door,
A scribe began to count the sums once more.

IX. THE GREAT BANQUET OF INFINITE HOSPITALITY

THE TABLES now were groaning beneath food,
As wealthy merchants gathered in good mood;
There stood a roasted ox upon a plate,
Whose very horns proclaimed a sponsoring state.

A silver dish bore pheasants dressed in gold,
With sauces whose ingredients none were told;
And every goblet, polished till it shone,
Had someone’s little corporate emblem on.

The master raised a glass: “To partnerships!”

The guests replied with speeches from their lips;
One praised the team’s international reach,
Another launched a forty-minute speech.

An airline lord declared, "Our wings shall spread
Where City warriors bravely march ahead;
The skies shall hear the football anthem sound,
And every continent become our ground."

A motor merchant rose with solemn pride:
"Our vehicles shall carry fame worldwide."

A data merchant answered from his chair:
"Our numbers shall reveal what happens there."

Then one small guest, whose business made a snack,
Approached the golden table from the back:

"I wish to sponsor City's half-time pie,
And place my humble emblem in the sky."

The master listened, dignified and grave:
"A splendid opportunity to have.
But if your name should decorate the pie,
What shall the pastry merchants advertise?"

"My pie," the modest merchant answered plain,
"And perhaps a little football on the grain."

The master shook his head. "Your vision's small.
We seek a global partner for the ball."

Thus every little venture at the feast
Was urged to grow its empire in the East;
And every modest merchant learned the rule:
In football, thinking small could make one fool.

The banquet's closing course was brought at last,
A pudding representing future and past;
Its icing bore an Etihad-blue hue,
And every slice contained a contract too.

Old Arthur, having somehow gained a chair,
Regarded all the luxury laid there.

“My grandson says this banquet pays the bills,
Yet I could feed half Manchester from these grills.”

Joe whispered, “Granddad, lower down your voice.
These people have invested by their choice.”

“Well, tell the pastry chef, when he is done,
His pudding costs more than my house, my son.”

X. THE WARNING OF THE GREY-ROBED AUDITORS

BUT WHILE the merchants laughed beneath the light,
A colder wind disturbed the summer night;
And from the corridors beyond the hall,
Three grey-robed scholars heard the revels call.

Their names were Ledger, Balance, and Review,
And each maintained his calculations true;
Their beards were white, their faces grim and lean,
Their instruments the sternest ever seen.

No spear they carried, no resplendent shield,
Yet mighty kings had trembled in their field;
For where Achilles slew with flashing steel,
These men required a document and seal.

The eldest spoke: “Let every merchant know
That riches must be represented so
That governing authorities can see
The figures furnished with integrity.

“The price declared, the source from which it came,
The honest presentation of the name,
The obligations and the ownership shown,
Must each be judged according to the law.”

A merchant rose, indignant at the speech:
“Must every contract stand within your reach?”

“Where regulations govern what is filed,
The records must be accurate,” he smiled.

“And should a wealthy kingdom disagree?”

“Then let the evidence determine what shall be.”

A silence fell upon the golden feast,
And even Hermes’ appetite decreased;
For Hermes loved a profitable trade,
But seldom liked the paperwork it made.

The youngest auditor produced a scroll,
And read the duties of financial control;
He spoke of Europe’s regulations then,
And prior settlements agreed by men.

For years before, in twenty-fourteen’s light,
UEFA and City settled a dispute;
A financial-control agreement followed there,
With restrictions, sanctions, and requirements to bear.

The contract merchants listened with surprise,
While numbers danced before their weary eyes;
And though the banquet celebrated gain,
The auditors reminded them of strain.

The grey-robed elder lifted up his pen,
And warned the glittering assembly then:

“A partnership may prosper and be sound;
A lawful contract merits no rebuke.
But if a claim of breach should e’er be found,
Then evidence, not rumour, must be duke.”

Thus did the auditors, without a sword,
Remind the feast that money has its board;
And long before the greatest storms appeared,
The language of financial judgment stirred.

XI. THE QUARREL OF HERMES AND ATHENA

NOW HERMES, god of markets, turned to speak,
His golden winglets flashing from his feet:

“Why should the jealous kingdoms make complaint
When some grow rich and others merely faint?
The world rewards the merchant’s willing hand;
Let enterprise bring fortune to the land!”

Athena, thoughtful, answered from her chair:
“Free trade requires that contracts shall be fair.
If every kingdom plays beneath one code,
Then none should secretly employ another road.”

“But who shall say what sponsorship is worth?”

“The rules and evidence must test its birth.”

“Yet markets give each bargain its own price!”

“Indeed,” she said, “but form alone won’t suffice.”

Ares, who had been listening with dismay,
Demanded that the scholars go away:

“In all the battles Troy and Sparta fought,
No champion cared what sponsorship had bought.
The strongest seized the glory and the field,
And cowards fled before the victor’s shield.”

Athena smiled. “And yet those ancient wars
Destroyed great cities, families, and stores.
Perhaps a set of rules, however dry,
Might spare the football world a bloody sky.”

Then Zeus arose, his mighty beard aflame:
“Enough of all this arguing over fame!
A game is won by goals, that much is clear,
Yet gold determines who shall gather here.

“If laws exist, then let those laws be kept;
If claims arise, let proof be duly weighed;
But none shall call a charge a verdict yet,
Nor treat denial as a judgment made.”

The Fates looked up, their silver needles still,
And pondered what would come by fortune’s will;
For some great battles start with sudden blows,
And others with an email no one knows.

XII. THE SPONSOR WHO WISHED TO PURCHASE TIME

AMONG THE guests there sat a merchant king
Who wished to buy a most peculiar thing;
He’d bought the banners, sponsored boots and seats,
And purchased hospitality at feasts.

But still his endless appetite remained,
For some commercial territory unclaimed;
He summoned forth the banquet’s master then,
And spoke before the gathered noblemen:

“I wish to sponsor time itself,” he said.
“The match shall bear my name from start to end.
The first eleven minutes shall be mine,
The next shall carry my commercial sign.”

The master paused. “But football time is shared,
And certain advertising rules are declared.”

“Then name the stoppage time in honour of me!”

“A bold proposal. We shall have to see.”

“And if a match should reach a final hour,
My name shall give the referee his power.”

“But time is not a thing that clubs can own.”

“Then make an offer to the referee’s throne.”

The merchants laughed, the lawyers shook their heads,
And several scribes retired toward their beds;
For once a man believed that all could sell,
He’d gladly seek the naming rights to hell.

Old Arthur, overhearing from the door,
Declared, “I’ve heard enough. I want no more.
If that old merchant wishes time to buy,
I’ll sell him all the years I’ve spent asking why.

“I’d give him forty winters in the cold,
And every football programme I’ve been sold;
I’d sell the times we lost to mighty Crewe,
And throw in York away for good measure too.”

Young Joe remarked, “Some memories have no price.”

“Exactly, lad. Though twice might still be nice.”

XIII. THE PROPHECY OF THE HIDDEN FIGURES

THE BANQUET ended near the midnight hour,
And darkness settled over City’s tower;
The goblets stood abandoned on the board,
The final merchant gathered up his hoard.

The golden banners fluttered in the hall,
But no one heard the distant raven call;
For from Olympus came a sombre breeze,
That stirred the threads of future mysteries.

The Fates assembled where the stars burned white,
And drew their sacred parchments into light;
Upon one scroll lay victories untold,
Upon another, questions wrapped in gold.

Clotho began to weave a darker strand,
That travelled far beyond the English land;
Through foreign newsrooms, continental halls,
And chambers lined with old financial walls.

Lachesis spoke: "The merchant's banquet ends,
But every contract has its foes and friends;
And every claim, though written fair and bold,
May one day face the questions others hold."

Atropos, grim keeper of the shears,
Considered what would stir in coming years;
She saw the distant press, the lawyers' art,
And countless ancient ledgers pulled apart.

But nothing yet was settled in her sight,
For judgments have their proper day and right;
A charge requires its hearing and its proof,
Not thunder from a distant banquet roof.

And in the deeper shadow of the loom,
A hundred threads descended through the gloom;
Then fifteen more, with strangely sharpened ends,
Lay waiting where the distant darkness bends.

Yet none were counted as conclusions made,
Nor were their meanings wholly yet displayed;
For future allegations, findings, and appeals
Would turn on what the evidence reveals.

Great Zeus leaned forward, trembling with delight:
"What war approaches through that distant night?"

The Fates replied, "A conflict not of spears,
But records gathered over many years;
And both the victors and the vanquished side
Shall argue what the documents provide."

Then Hermes whispered, trembling at the sound:
"Will any sponsor still be safe and sound?"

Athena answered, "Commerce need not fear
The lawful scrutiny that makes things clear."

But Zeus, remembering his naming rights,
Demanded, "Must they audit thunderbolts at night?"

XIV. THE LAST TOAST OF THE GOLDEN HOUSE

FAR BELOW, within the stadium's great keep,
The City warriors lay in peaceful sleep;
Their dreams were filled with titles yet to win,
And glorious campaigns about to begin.

Pep stood beside the empty training ground,
And listened to the quiet evening sound;
For though the merchants gathered wealth and fame,
His thoughts returned to football and the game.

He saw De Bruyne's passes split the air,
And Silva glide through places none saw there;
He saw the swift advancement of his men,
And drew the sacred triangles again.

His masterpiece was not a merchant's art,
But finding how eleven minds might start
To think and move with one collective will,
And turn a football pitch to higher skill.

The golden house could purchase many things,
Its wealth could summon captains, knights, and kings;
Yet still the final victory had to come
From boots upon the grass before the drum.

And Arthur, walking home beneath the rain,
Declared to Joe, "They've made their fortunes plain.
We've got the sponsors, players, wealth, and ground,
And enough fine lawyers to surround the town.

“But here’s a thing those merchant kings forget:
A contract never put a ball in net.
I’ve seen us spend a fortune on a name,
Then lose to some poor beggars just the same.

“I care not who has bought the stadium sign,
Nor whose grand emblem runs across the line;
If City win, I’ll cheer until I’m dead,
If City lose, I’ll wish I’d stayed in bed.”

Young Joe replied, “The money makes us strong.”

“Aye, son, but wealth can’t prove a pass was wrong.
The game’s still played by men who sometimes fall,
And all the gold on Earth can’t move the ball.”

They reached the little house beside the square,
Where Arthur put his scarf upon a chair;
And from the kitchen window, pale and blue,
The City’s distant stadium came in view.

The old man raised his cup toward the light,
And blessed the team before retiring for the night:

“To City, then, whatever fortunes flow;
To those who stayed when there was naught to show;
To those who came with riches from afar,
And those who loved the club before a star.

“Let mighty merchants purchase all they can,
But never let them purchase every fan;
For some of us were City long before
The golden ships came sailing to our shore.”

XV. THE FINAL SONG OF THE GOLDEN BANQUET

O MUSE, behold the banquet's closing scene,
The empty tables where the lords had been;
The candles fading, contracts put away,
The weary scribes awaiting coming day.

The merchants now had pledged their golden share,
Their symbols glittered on the players' wear;
The club had gathered wealth from every shore,
And hoped that triumph would increase it more.

But in the modern age of sport and gain,
The coin that builds a kingdom brings a chain;
For every golden stream must find its place
Within the rules that govern football's race.

And though no song can put a price on pride,
Nor measure all the hearts upon one side,
The ledgers still demand their proper due,
And auditors must ask if sums are true.

Great Zeus, who'd hoped to sell the heavens whole,
Sat brooding with an unpaid thunder toll;
While Hermes, busy counting prospective gold,
Declared that sponsorship would never grow old.

Athena watched the merchant's flags depart,
And saw the laws preparing for their part;
For laws, like warriors, may be weak or strong,
And justice must distinguish right from wrong.

Then Atropos, whose scissors never sleep,
Drew one dark thread from out the golden heap;
It bore no verdict, yet foretold a fight,
Of records, lawyers, evidence, and right.

The gods looked down on Manchester once more,
Where blue flags fluttered near the stadium door;
And through the city, where the chimneys stood,
The old supporters dreamed of something good.

For glory waited on the training plain,
And Pep would march his warriors forth again;
A century of points beyond their sight
Was waiting to be conquered in the fight.

But while the coach prepared his glorious plan,
And merchants praised the fortunes of the clan,
The scholars of account began to peer
Through older figures, intricate and unclear.

Not yet the battle, not yet judgment's hour,
Not yet the thunderbolt of Europe's power;
But somewhere in the labyrinth ahead,
The books lay waiting to be opened and read.

And thus the golden banquet passed away,
Its brilliant banners folded with the day;
The silver plates were carried from the hall,
The final servant swept beneath the wall.

He found a small accountant's fallen pen,
And placed it carefully beside his men;
Not knowing that this humble instrument
Could trouble kings more than a regiment.

For swords may rust, and armies lose their fame,
And ancient warriors vanish with their name;
But figures once recorded on a page
May summon forth the battles of an age.

So hush the trumpets, let the merchants sleep,
And let the grey-robed scribes their vigil keep;
For soon the books shall open, page by page,
And ledgers take the place of martial rage.

No sword shall draw the blood of ancient kings,
No arrow fly on bronze and feathered wings;
But questions written in an accountant's hand
Shall shake the richest houses in the land.

HERE ENDETH BOOK VIII
The Banquet of a Thousand Sponsors

B O O K I X

*The Labyrinth of the
Invisible Accountants*

T H E A R G U M E N T

*Of the subterranean kingdom of ledgers, the Minotaur of Financial Fair Play, the quarrel
between honest profit and golden patronage, and the terrible discovery that a football club
may defeat eleven men but struggle against one man holding a calculator.*

I. INVOCATION TO THE MUSE OF THE HIDDEN LEDGER

SING, MUSE, of chambers buried far below,
Where neither summer sun nor winter snow
Could penetrate the vaults of gold and stone,
Where numbers lived and multiplied alone.

Sing of the men whose weapons were their pens,
Whose battlefield was ruled in pounds and pence;
Whose victories brought neither cups nor fame,
Yet might disturb the triumphs of the game.

For mighty Agüero could pierce a wall,
And Kevin send a golden, curving ball;
But neither knew what darkness might befall
A kingdom summoned to an audit hall.

O Muse, who sang of labyrinths of Crete,
Where Theseus brought the Minotaur defeat,
Descend beneath the City of the Blue,
And tell what accountants secretly must do.

There lay a maze no mortal foot could chart,
Where every corridor possessed a part
Of some vast regulation, clause, or fee,
And every door required Appendix B.

A man might enter young, with raven hair,
And leave an ancient scholar bent with care;
For time, which makes the mightiest kingdoms fall,
Moved very slowly in an audit hall.

The corridors were numbered, east and west,
Each leading to another legal test;
And every test produced a further clause,
Whose meaning depended on preceding laws.

There stood the Temple of Commercial Gain,
The Hall of Loss, the Gallery of Pain;
The Chamber of Related Parties lay
Beyond the Gate of What Did Someone Pay?

And at the centre, breathing fiscal fire,
There waited something dreadful in the mire:
A creature neither human, beast, nor god,
That fed upon the balance sheets it trod.

Its horns were formed of regulations old,
Its eyes were burning columns marked in gold;
Its name was FFP, and ancient fear
Had caused the football kingdoms to draw near.

II. THE MINOTAUR OF FINANCIAL FAIR PLAY

DEEP IN the vault the dreadful monster stirred,
And issued forth a bureaucratic word:

“COMPLIANCE!”

The cavern shook beneath the sound,
And frightened little fractions fled the ground;
The percentages trembled on their page,
As figures felt the monster's ancient rage.

Its left horn bore the sacred word Expense,
Its right proclaimed Financial Prudence;
Across its mighty breast, in letters bright,
Were written, "Spend According to Your Right."

The beast arose and gave a dreadful roar:
"Let every merchant justify his store!
Let no false statement prosper in my sight,
And let accounts be accurate and right!"

A little clerk, whose trembling hands were pale,
Approached the creature with a revenue tale.

"O Lord of Ledgers, hear a humble plea:
What counts as lawful sponsorship revenue?"

The Minotaur replied in accents grave,
"The answer lies in what the parties gave,
Their rights, their obligations, and the rule,
Not merely what was written by a fool."

"But if the sponsors choose a handsome price?"

"Commercial bargains may be fair and wise."

"And if the patron stands beside the throne?"

"Examine facts; a name proves naught alone."

"And if the owners help provide the gold?"

"Then how and what was paid must first be told."

The little clerk withdrew in deep despair:
“The beast has answered everything with care,
Yet now I’ve twice the questions that I had,
And seven further schedules to be clad.”

The Minotaur returned into the gloom,
And left a thousand forms inside the room;
For every mortal seeking easy gain
Must learn that bookkeeping produces pain.

III. THE SETTLEMENT OF FOURTEEN

NOW ONCE, when City’s towers still were young,
And newer songs of victory were sung,
A trial of accounts had crossed their way,
Before the darker controversies of later day.

In fourteen, UEFA’s financial court
Had called for explanations and report;
And City’s losses, judged against its scheme,
Had troubled those who watched the fiscal stream.

A settlement was reached, its terms severe,
With sporting limits made expressly clear;
A conditional financial sanction stood,
And squad restrictions formed part of the good.

The kingdom did not vanish from the land,
Nor did the players cast aside their band;
But City’s rulers learned that European law
Could regulate what wealthy owners saw.

The ancient scribes recorded every line,
As lawyers solemnly pronounced the fine;
And Hermes, watching silver leave the chest,
Declared that compromise was sometimes best.

“To settle means,” the wingéd god explained,
“That certain obligations are maintained;
The parties undertake the agreed decree,
Although their understandings may not agree.”

Ares exclaimed, “I cannot comprehend
A battle where both armies sign to end!
In Troy, we settled questions with a spear,
And nobody employed an engineer.”

Athena answered, “Yet the Trojan plain
Was littered with the dead your wars had slain.
Perhaps a negotiated fiscal peace
Is better than a decade without cease.”

But Zeus, regarding all the fees involved,
Observed, “No problem seems entirely solved
When those appointed to explain the rule
Require three palaces, a pen, and school.”

The Fates recorded fourteen’s ancient scroll,
And put its parchment in the sacred roll;
For what had once been settled in the past
Would later face new questions being asked.

IV. THE TOURNAMENT OF THE ACCOUNTANTS

NOW FROM the football kingdoms, near and far,
Came scribes who knew the cost of every star;
They gathered for a tournament of minds,
To see which man could calculate most kinds.

The first, Sir Debit, stout and rather grim,
Had ninety-seven calculators with him;
His armour bore the emblem of a bank,
And compound interest determined rank.

The second, Credit, lean and pale of face,
Could find a missing penny in a place
Where seven auditors had searched for years,
And six accountants drowned themselves in tears.

The third, Depreciation, old and wise,
Could watch the value of a palace rise
Or fall, according to the rules applied,
And make the same old figures seem to slide.

The fourth was Amortisation, lord of time,
Who spread a transfer cost across a line;
And though his art lacked poetry and grace,
He held a most important fiscal place.

The fifth, called Disclosure, fierce and tall,
Would demand documents from one and all;
He carried neither sword nor burning spear,
But asked the question every lord might fear:

“Where is the supporting evidence?”

And then,
“Who signed the letter, where, and when?”

The contest opened on a marble floor,
With parchment stacked beside the chamber door;
And each accountant, solemn in his pride,
Prepared his figures for the judging side.

Sir Debit thundered, “I shall win this war!
My calculations are without a flaw!”

But Credit smiled, and answered, “Check once more.
You’ve counted someone’s revenue before.”

Amortisation drew a lengthy chart,
And traced the transfer value part by part;
Depreciation laughed, “You know full well
That players aren’t machinery you sell.”

“They are not,” cried Amortisation, “true,
But registration rights have values too!”

The crowd looked on with growing consternation,
As fiscal warriors battled valuation;
And Zeus, whose eyes were closing in his seat,
Declared the contest worse than Greek defeat.

“Bring forth a lion! Bring forth savage war!
I cannot bear another decimal more!”

But Hermes, grinning, whispered to the king,
“Each decimal may cost a princely thing.”

V. OLD ARTHUR ENTERS THE FISCAL MAZE

NOW ARTHUR, City servant through the years,
Had followed all the triumphs and the tears;
But when his grandson spoke of fiscal codes,
The ancient man grew weary of the loads.

“Financial Fair Play?” Arthur loudly said.
“There’s something deeply wrong inside its head.
I’ve seen the richest clubs for decades reign,
And suddenly new wealth becomes a stain.”

Young Joe replied, “The rules are meant to stop
A reckless owner spending till clubs drop;
They’re meant to make the football world more sound,
And keep financial ruin from the ground.”

“A noble aim,” the veteran replied,
“But who decides where spending should be tied?
If one club earned its wealth a hundred years
Before another, who should shed the tears?”

“A rich club’s shirt can earn an awful lot,
Because its fathers won what ours had not;
And if a younger kingdom climbs the wall,
The older kingdoms fear that they might fall.”

Young Joe considered this and shook his head:
“But different kinds of money must be read.
A sponsor’s payment can’t be counted right
If other funding wears a false disguise.”

“Then prove the disguise!” the veteran replied.
“Let facts, not rival jealousy, decide.
If City cheated, let the evidence stand;
If not, let every scolding lord disband.”

He raised his cup and spoke with solemn pride:
“I’ll back the Blues, but truth shall be my guide;
For being born a City fan does not confer
The right to make the facts whatever we prefer.”

Young Joe stared, astonished at the sound.
“Granddad, that’s wisdom seldom to be found.”

“Don’t spread it, lad. I’ve got a reputation
For blaming every referee in the nation.”

VI. THE HALL OF RELATED PARTIES

BEYOND THE Minotaur’s tremendous gate,
There lay a room where merchants met their fate;
And carved upon a high and gilded wall,
A question faced the proudest of them all:

Who truly stands behind the contract signed?
And what relationship may bind each mind?

There sat an elder judge with spectacles,
Whose voice was full of fiscal obstacles;
He summoned forth the merchants one by one,
And asked how every bargain had been done.

A messenger from Etihad drew near,
And stood before the judge without a fear;
The judge addressed him, quietly and slow:

“What benefits does this arrangement show?”

“The name is seen where football banners fly,
Across the world, beneath the watching sky;
Our business gains a mighty sporting name,
And joins its fortunes to the City’s fame.”

“And who shall pay according to the deed?”

“The contracting parties, as the terms proceed.”

“And are the sums recorded as they ought?”

“The answer must be shown by proper report.”

The judge arose. “Then documents must speak,
For claims without their proof are frail and weak;
A bargain cannot be condemned by guess,
Nor proved by confidence and loud success.”

The merchants nodded, some with grave relief,
And some because their lawyers counselled brief;
For every man possessed an equal right
To have the record scrutinised in light.

Thus did the labyrinth demand its due,
A test of what was said and what was true;
And from that chamber, though no final storm
Had broken, questions took a solemn form.

VII. THE DREADFUL CHAMBER OF IMAGE RIGHTS

NOW IN a distant wing of City's keep,
There lay a chamber dark and strangely deep;
Where portraits of the football warriors stood,
And lawyers studied what their likeness could.

For modern champions possess a second face,
That travels far beyond the sporting place;
Their names upon a thousand posters shine,
Their photographs can form a revenue line.

A clerk cried, "Surely every player owns
The image that the world upon him throws!"

"Not quite," replied an elder of the law,
"For rights and contracts have their proper draw.
A player may agree to grant a right,
Whose value must be handled in the light."

"And could a club transfer such rights for gold?"

"Depending on the contracts that they hold."

"And can the wage expense be made to fall?"

"Not merely by declaring so to all.
The substance and the regulations count,
And determine the treatment of the amount."

Then Hermes, catching word of this affair,
Declared his sandals had a market share;
And Ares wished to sell his warlike face,
To decorate a thousand shields in space.

Zeus asked, "What price my portrait, carved in stone?"

Athena said, "Your vanity's already known."

"Then let the merchants pay for what they see!"

“They’ve witnessed thunder free eternally.”

The gods laughed loud, but in the fiscal halls,
The scribes continued studying their scrolls;
For contracts, wages, rights, and revenues
Would later occupy investigative views.

VIII. THE THREE DOORS OF JUDGMENT

AT LAST young Joe, in Arthur’s dream that night,
Beheld a maze illuminated bright;
Three mighty doors arose before his eyes,
And each proclaimed a different legal prize.

Upon the first was written Allegation,
The second bore the word Investigation;
The third, beyond an iron port of steel,
Was marked Decision, Subject to Appeal.

The youth approached the first, and from within
A herald cried, “Here questions first begin!”

He turned toward the second, where the sound
Of searching footsteps echoed underground.

The third was guarded by a solemn knight,
Who held the scales of evidence upright;
And spoke with wisdom worthy of a sage,
As though he’d studied justice from his age:

“Young traveller, confuse not these three doors,
Though rumour from the battlements may pour;
A charge declares what someone seeks to prove,
An inquiry gathers facts before they move.

“A ruling must distinguish what is shown,
From all that speculation makes its own;
And where a lawful right of appeal remains,
That further process may review the claims.”

The youth exclaimed, "Then why the public roar?"

"Because men love conclusions before law."

"And why do journalists delight in claims?"

"They earn their bread from names and burning flames."

"Then what of evidence?"

"It matters most."

"And what of rumour?"

"It makes a splendid post."

The knight stepped back, his solemn lesson taught,
And Joe awoke with one disturbing thought:
That even when the fiercest clubs collide,
The truth is not established by the side.

IX. THE GOLDEN THREAD OF ATHENA

NOW ATHENA, seeing how the maze had grown,
Descended from Olympus' marble throne;
She bore a thread of wisdom, bright and fine,
And traced it through the passages of time.

Her thread ran past the Chamber of Receipts,
And through the Vault where Old Accounts were kept;
It crossed the Hall of Wages Paid by Year,
And turned beside the Taxman's Gallery of Fear.

She found a thousand scholars bent in prayer,
To find a missing ledger hidden there;
And every time they thought the problem done,
Another complicated clause begun.

At last she stood before the Minotaur,
Who raised its horns and uttered fiscal law.

“Who comes,” it cried, “without an audit fee?”

“Athena, daughter of divinity.”

“Then state your purpose, goddess, and be brief.”

“To ask whether thy laws bring true relief.”

“I guard the game from dangerous expense,
And make financial planning common sense.”

“Then do thy rules preserve a kingdom’s life,
Or sharpen old competitors’ ancient strife?”

The monster paused, its mighty nostrils flared,
And all the little accountants stopped and stared.

“My purpose may be prudent,” said the beast,
“But men may quarrel over every feast;
No written law can make each heart agree,
Nor stop the kings demanding victory.”

Athena nodded, pleased by this reply,
And lifted up her thread toward the sky.

“Then justice needs both reason and restraint,
To separate the evidence from complaint.
Let neither wealth nor jealousy prevail,
And let the strongest proof determine the tale.”

The Minotaur bowed low before her face,
And lumbered back into its sacred place;
For even monsters, when they govern men,
Must have their own decisions checked again.

X. THE PROPHECY OF THE UNOPENED SCROLLS

FAR IN the deepest chamber, cold and still,
Where neither force nor gold could bend the will,
The Fates assembled round a chest of stone,
Its keys to mortal scholars yet unknown.

Within lay copies, correspondence, notes,
And figures carried on commercial boats;
The papers bore the marks of passing years,
Yet none had heard the future's trumpet cheers.

Clotho approached the chest with silver thread,
And saw the years that waited far ahead;
Lachesis measured slowly every claim,
And Atropos withheld the final name.

In time, she knew, a German paper's light
Would shine upon these questions in the night;
And men would argue whether records showed
A breach of duties football's rulers owed.

Yet here, within the earlier years of play,
Those later controversies slept away;
The press had not yet launched its famous charge,
Nor had the coming storm appeared at large.

But Fate, who does not need a calendar,
Could see the shadow of the coming war;
And Zeus, who peered into the distant gloom,
Demanded what dark battle filled the room.

"Are these the weapons destined to be thrown?
Why not a spear, a sword, a thunderstone?"

Athena answered, "Words can wound a king,
And figures on a page can change a thing.
When laws are written, records have their part,
As much as men with courage in the heart."

Then Hermes, always watchful for a fee,
Suggested arbitration overseas;
And Zeus declared, "Then let the lawyers come,
And may the gods have mercy on the sum!"

XI. THE LAUGHTER OF THE INVISIBLE ACCOUNTANTS

BEFORE THE dawn, the scribes returned below,
To chambers where fluorescent candles glow;
They carried boxes, tables, pens, and files,
And made a little progress after miles.

One accountant said, "I've reconciled the year!"

Another cried, "Then why is that sum here?"

A third declared, "The revenue is sound!"

A fourth replied, "This note was never found!"

The fifth exclaimed, "I've made the totals match!"

The sixth discovered an omitted batch.

The seventh wept beside a balance sheet,
And wished he'd opened up a shop for meat;
The eighth was studying a contract signed,
And wondered who had lost their human mind.

The ninth, a veteran of the ancient trade,
Had spent his life pursuing what was paid;
He stared upon the rows of figures small,
And finally addressed the crowded hall:

"Great kingdoms rise and mighty kingdoms fall,
But spreadsheets shall outlive the lot of all.
A player signs a contract, wins a crown,
And leaves for richer pastures farther down.

“The manager receives the fans’ acclaim,
Until defeat has blackened his good name;
But we remain, beneath the stadium stone,
To make the fiscal mysteries our own.

“They’ll cheer the striker when the winning goal
Has sent the ball beyond the keeper’s control;
They’ll never sing the name of one poor clerk
Who kept the pension figures fit for work.”

Then one young scribe, emboldened by the speech,
Declared, “Our art deserves a wider reach!
Let thousands gather chanting at the gate,
‘We want the balance sheet before it’s late!’”

The elders laughed, their weary faces bright,
And briefly made a festival of night;
For even in the labyrinth’s deepest gloom,
Some wit may bring a little light to bloom.

XII. OLD ARTHUR’S JUDGMENT

WHEN MORNING came, young Joe recalled his dream,
And told Old Arthur of the fiscal scheme;
The grandfather listened, nodded, stirred his tea,
Then answered with surprising dignity.

“Let judges judge, and let the lawyers talk,
And let the accountants round their ledgers walk;
But keep the ball upon the grass, my son,
For there is football still to be won.

“I’ve followed City when we had no gold,
When every promise seemed already old;
And should the richest princes disappear,
I’d still be standing with my scarf right here.

“The club is more than those who hold the shares,
More than the men who sit in gilded chairs;
Its soul belongs to those who came before,
And those who’ll love it when we’re here no more.

“But neither love nor loyalty can change
What documents may show, however strange;
So let the proper evidence be heard,
And never hang a kingdom on a word.”

He took a final biscuit from the plate,
Then asked his grandson for the next game’s date;
For nothing in the world could fully stop
An old supporter counting points on top.

XIII. THE THREAD LEADS TOWARD GLORY

NOW FAR above, Olympus glowed with fire,
And all the gods surveyed the City’s spire;
The maze beneath lay sleeping in the stone,
Its questions waiting for a later throne.

But on the training ground, the morning came,
And Guardiola studied once again;
His warriors ran beneath the rising sun,
And every footstep served the pattern spun.

Ederson sent a mighty pass through air,
And Walker thundered down the flank from there;
De Bruyne struck a ball with golden grace,
And Silva turned within a crowded space.

The kingdom stood upon a brighter shore,
With richer weapons than the year before;
The master, chastened by his first campaign,
Prepared to make the English league his gain.

And Clotho, looking down, began to weave
The brightest strand her fingers could conceive;
A hundred little golden sparks she spun,
And whispered, "Now the greater work's begun."

Then Zeus rose up and shouted to the sky:
"Let goals replace these ledgers by and by!
I've had enough of fiscal misery;
Give me a football match with victory!"

Athena smiled. "The next great war shall show
What happens when a master comes to know
The measure of his warriors and their might,
And sends them forth to conquer in the light."

Thus closed the labyrinth beneath the ground,
Though all its questions lingered without sound;
And high above, a hundred stars appeared,
As City's greatest season now drew near.

The pens were laid aside, the scrolls were bound,
The clang of football armour shook the ground;
For now the master, wise from former pain,
Would march to claim the whole of England's plain.

HERE ENDETH BOOK IX
The Labyrinth of the Invisible Accountants

B O O K X

The Hundred-Point Conquest

T H E A R G U M E N T

Of the eighteen victories, the fall at Anfield, the red fortress humbled by West Bromwich Albion, and the last miraculous stroke of Gabriel Jesus that carried Manchester City beyond the century's gate.

I. INVOCATION TO THE MUSE OF THE CENTURIONS

SING NOW, O Muse, of triumph without peer,
Of thunder heard throughout a golden year;
Of thirty-eight great battles, sternly fought,
And one immortal number dearly bought.

Sing of the season when the Sky-Blue host
Advanced from England's northern, rainy coast;
When Guardiola's patient, passing art
Became a sword that pierced the rival heart.

No Alexander marching toward the east,
No Roman general crowned at victory's feast,
Had witnessed what the football gods would see:
A hundred points in one supremacy.

Not merely trophies gathered at the end,
Nor merely enemies compelled to bend;
But records shattered like a temple wall,
And ancient kings astonished by it all.

For thirty-two great victories were won,
Four battles drawn beneath the setting sun;
And twice alone did City's warriors fall,
Though every rival sought to break them all.

A hundred six times did the net embrace
The leather messenger of City's grace;
And twenty-seven times their own gates shook,
As every scribe inscribed them in the book.

A difference of seventy-nine was made,
A figure that left rival kings dismayed;
Nineteen clear points divided first from two,
The widest gulf the Premier League yet knew.

But none of this was written at the start,
When hope was bright and doubt within each heart;
For even destiny must earn its place,
And warriors still must run the earthly race.

II. THE COUNCIL OF THE NEW WARRIORS

THE SUMMER sun had hardly left the sky,
When City's mighty captains gathered nigh;
Before them stood the master, stern and lean,
Who studied every weakness he had seen.

"Last year," said Pep, "we learned what failure costs;
Our crowns were dreams, our opportunities lost.
The passing's not enough, however fine,
If foes break cleanly through our final line.

"This year our movement must be sharp and fast,
Our victories won by lessons of the past;
No triumph shall be given us for grace,
But earned by how we occupy the space."

Then Walker rose, his mighty thighs aflame:
“Give me the wing, and let me prove my name.
I’ll chase their swiftest forwards to the end,
And race from halfway when the gods command.”

Next Ederson, the guardian from Brazil,
Declared, “My feet shall serve the master’s will;
Where others fear to pass beneath the press,
I’ll send the ball through danger to success.”

Bernardo Silva stepped before the throne,
A subtle craftsman scarcely fully known;
He bowed and said, “Where gaps are thin as air,
I’ll find a way to place the football there.”

Then Kevin, lord of vision, fire, and flight,
Addressed the men assembled for the fight:

“The enemy may gather in a line,
But walls are built for warriors to undermine;
Give me a runner, and an open field,
And I shall make their last defenders yield.”

David Silva, quiet master of the art,
Who carried England’s wonder in his heart,
Replied, “The finest spaces cannot show
Until the men who make them learn to go.”

And Agüero, whose goals were carved in stone,
Declared, “Then leave the shooting to my own.”

Pep smiled upon his warriors gathered there,
And pointed to a diagram in air:

“Remember, men, the principle is one:
The goal begins before the shot is done.”

Old Arthur, watching training through a fence,
Declared, “That sounds expensive common sense.”

III. THE FIRST GREAT ASSAULTS

THE BANNERS rose in Brighton by the sea,
Where City opened with a victory;
Two goals to nil, a quiet northern sign
That Pep's new army moved by grand design.

Then Everton came marching to the ground,
And one-all left the honours shared around;
A draw, that ancient inconvenience, showed
That even kings must sometimes share the road.

But from that day, a mighty storm began,
As Pep unfolded his perfected plan;
The blue battalions, suddenly set free,
Swept through the kingdoms like an angry sea.

Bournemouth fell, two goals against their one,
As Sterling struck when added time was run;
And Liverpool arrived with banner red,
But left with five unanswered goals instead.

Five-nil! The Etihad resounded loud,
As City's warriors thundered through the crowd;
And though a sending-off had shaped the day,
The scoreboard gave the vanquished little say.

At Watford, six bright arrows found the net,
A score their trembling walls would not forget;
Crystal Palace suffered five to none,
And Stoke received a seven-goal cannon.

Seven-two! The northern trumpets rang,
And every City tavern loudly sang;
For England's seasoned defenders learned with dread
That Pep had put some rather fierce thoughts in his head.

At Chelsea, De Bruyne struck the winning blow,
One-nil, against the champions of a year ago;
And victory followed victory through the land,
As none could stop the master's measured hand.

Great Zeus arose upon his clouded throne:
"These men are conquering everything they've known!
Who now shall halt this terrifying tide?"

Athena answered, "War is never tried
By counting those already struck and gone;
The question is how long the march goes on."

Then Ares, watching City's passing game,
Declared, "At last! They put their art to shame!
They pass, they strike, they tear apart the wall;
Perhaps there's something in this passing ball."

Athena smiled, triumphant at his word:
"The sweetest wisdom I have ever heard."

IV. THE EIGHTEEN VICTORIES

NOW HEAR, O Muse, the wonder of the run,
The eighteen league engagements City won;
From August's hopeful journey through the rain,
To Newcastle's December northern plain.

The champions marched through cities old and new,
Through London, through the Midlands, skies of blue;
And every fortress found the selfsame fate,
As City stormed its carefully guarded gate.

Huddersfield fought and briefly held the lead,
But Sterling brought the victory they would need;
Southampton stood until the dying breath,
When Sterling's curling strike decreed their death.

West Ham were beaten, though they took the lead,
As Silva answered City's urgent need;
At Old Trafford, where the ancient Red Kings reigned,
The Blues advanced, and victory was gained.

Two-one! United's proud defensive line
Was broken by the master's new design;
And Manchester, the city of the rain,
Saw power shift across its great domain.

At Swansea, four unanswered goals were scored,
And Tottenham's warriors faced the same great sword;
Four-one the score when Spurs had lost their way,
And City seemed invincible that day.

Then Bournemouth fell before the Christmas bell,
And Newcastle resisted, but fell as well;
One-nil, the eighteenth victory in line,
A record fit for some immortal shrine.

The scribes were startled by the sheer extent,
Of triumph following triumph without relent;
And Clotho, looking down upon the sight,
Began to weave her hundred stars of light.

Old Arthur watched the latest league report,
And laughed until he nearly choked and snorted.

"Eighteen in a row! That's quite a feat.
When I was young, we couldn't win a street.
I've seen this club defeated by the rain,
By men who scarcely had a football brain.

"And now we're marching through the English league,
While every rival complains of fatigue!"

Young Joe replied, "It's tactical precision,
The product of collective team decision."

“Aye,” said Arthur, “and some fairly costly boots.
But I won’t spoil it, lad. Long live the troops!”

V. THE LAST DAY OF THE UNBEATEN YEAR

THEN CAME December’s final, bitter day,
When City’s warriors marched to Palace away;
The winter wind was cold, the sky was grey,
And fate prepared to take a prize away.

At Selhurst Park the Eagles held their ground,
And City’s clever passes circled round;
No shining goal could break the stubborn wall,
Though Pep’s battalions fought to claim them all.

At last, deep in the added minutes there,
A sudden penalty disturbed the air;
Milivojević placed the ball with care,
While City waited, almost in despair.

The strike came low, but Ederson stood fast,
And saved the shot that might have been their last;
The whistle blew, the scoreboard stood at nought,
And City’s winning streak was finally caught.

Eighteen had ended, though defeat was stayed,
And still no league opponent had prevailed;
But Hermes, counting victories above,
Declared, “The record’s ended, by my glove!”

Zeus struck the armrest of his golden chair:
“A draw? What kind of victory is there?”

Athena answered, “Sometimes holding fast
Preserves the unbeaten story of the past.”

Ares complained, “A scoreless draw’s a crime!
It should be banned for wasting mortal time!”

Then Arthur, listening on his battered chair,
Declared, "At least our keeper's worth his share.
They wanted him to pass and play with feet,
But saving penalties is rather sweet."

VI. THE FALL AT ANFIELD

NOW LIVERPOOL, whose ancient banners glowed,
Prepared to guard their proud and sacred road;
At Anfield, Klopp assembled men of fire,
And summoned all their speed and fierce desire.

The Reds were led by Salah, swift and keen,
By Firmino, whose cunning seldom seen;
By Mané, whose feet could make the heavens ring,
And press the City's warriors from the wing.

The contest rose beneath a stormy sky,
As Liverpool determined none should fly;
Oxlade-Chamberlain struck the opening blow,
And Liverpool's mighty terraces did glow.

Sané replied before the first half's end,
And City's warriors thought the fight might bend;
But then a devastating storm arose,
And three red arrows pierced their startled foes.

Firmino struck, then Mané's thunder came,
Then Salah added fire to the flame;
Within a few brief minutes, City's pride
Lay battered by the force of Liverpool's tide.

Four-one! The mighty champions-to-be
Had found their first defeat upon the sea;
Yet Bernardo scored, and Gündogan again,
To leave the final tally four to three.

At Anfield, City's unbeaten league campaign
Was ended on that fierce January plain;
And Klopp, the rival warlord, stood in pride,
His pressing storm had torn the sky-blue side.

On Olympus, Zeus exclaimed, "They're mortal still!
No man escapes the turning of fate's will!"

Athena nodded. "Here is wisdom found:
Even a mighty army may be downed."

But Ares laughed until his helmet shook:
"The Reds have torn the philosopher's book!
They pressed the pressers, struck the striking men,
And now the master must begin again!"

Old Arthur watched, then shook his weary head:
"I've heard we're finished, ruined, nearly dead.
We've lost one match, and all the critics say
The kingdom's crashing down before the day.

"I've watched us lose most weekends of a year;
One little defeat can scarcely bring me fear."

Young Joe observed, "But four goals were conceded."

"Aye, lad. And three we scored, as we needed.
I'll worry when we've lost a dozen more;
Till then, I'll leave the journalists to roar."

VII. THE SILVER CUP OF WEMBLEY

THEN FEBRUARY brought another prize,
A silver cup beneath the London skies;
At Wembley, Arsenal raised their cannon high,
Determined that the blues should not pass by.

But Agüero, whose instincts never slept,
Advanced upon the Arsenal and swept
The opening goal beyond the keeper's hand,
As City's banners thundered through the stand.

Kompany rose, the captain proud and strong,
And sent the second soaring with the song;
Then David Silva added one more blow,
And Arsenal's final hopes were laid below.

Three-nil! The silver trophy stood revealed,
And Pep had claimed his first great English shield;
The League Cup glittered in the London light,
And City's men rejoiced throughout the night.

Old Arthur lifted high his faithful scarf,
And cried, "That's one! We'll have another half!
Last year they said the master's reign was done,
And now the bald philosopher has won!"

Young Joe corrected, "Granddad, it's a cup."

"Aye, son. And that's a very handsome start."

Great Zeus declared the victory sublime,
And ordered all Olympus to keep time;
Ares demanded wine in silver bowls,
And Hermes sold commemorative scrolls.

Athena watched the celebrating crowd,
And heard the singing thunderous and loud;
For this was not a ledger's measured gain,
But ninety minutes battled through the strain.

The trophy stood before them, bright and clear,
A triumph earned upon the football sphere;
And whatever storms might gather through the years,
The evening belonged to City and its cheers.

THE HUNDRED-POINT CONQUEST
VIII. THE CROWN WON BY THE ENEMY

NOW APRIL came, when titles find their king,
And Manchester prepared to dance and sing;
For City stood so far above the rest,
That glory seemed a bird upon their crest.

United came to visit City's ground,
Where Sky-Blue banners fluttered all around;
A victory there would crown the northern throne,
Before the neighbours City once had known.

Kompany struck, as captains sometimes do,
Then Gündogan made City's tally two;
The crowd prepared to celebrate the day,
While red defenders stood in disarray.

But Pogba, whom the gods had almost missed,
Arose and suddenly began to twist
The course of battle, striking once, then twice,
And turning City's banquet into ice.

Then Smalling added one more bitter blow,
And City's celebrations fell below;
Three-two! United stole the splendid feast,
And left the City's triumph unreleased.

Old Arthur stared, his face a thundercloud,
And cursed the football gods both long and loud.

"We had them beaten! Two to bloody nil!
Then let them climb across the blasted hill!
I've never seen such idiocy, my boy!"

Young Joe replied, "There's still the league to enjoy."

"I know there's still the league! I know we're first!
But losing that particular match is worst!"

The following weekend, City's warriors won
At Tottenham, three goals against their one;
And then came news from Old Trafford's famed domain,
That shook the whole of Manchester again.

For West Bromwich Albion, fighting near the foot,
Had travelled north and delivered one sharp boot;
Jay Rodriguez had headed home the blow,
And United fell, one-nil, to Albion below.

Thus City won the crown while resting still,
As West Brom did what Manchester's men could not fulfil;
And Guardiola, hearing the result,
Received the title through a rival's fault.

Great Zeus burst out with laughter on his throne:
"An empire crowned while sitting home alone!
What ancient conqueror ever won this way,
By watching other armies lose the day?"

Athena smiled. "Their earlier victories made
The certainty that this result displayed."

"But still," cried Ares, "what a splendid jest!
The weakest near the bottom beats the rest!
The champions celebrate a stranger's deed,
And football has delivered what they need!"

Old Arthur raised his glass toward the sky:
"To West Bromwich Albion! I'll tell you why.
They've given us the championship today,
Though goodness knows they're travelling the other way."

His grandson asked, "Do you feel any shame?"

"None, lad! Their victory counts all the same!"

And so the crown was Manchester City's own,
The third Premier League title they had known;
Five matches still remained to play that year,
But none could take the championship from here.

IX. THE NINETY-SEVEN-POINT KINGDOM

YET PEP, though champion of the English field,
Refused to let his warriors drop the shield;
For champions sometimes stumble once they're crowned,
And leave their final victories unfound.

But he desired a monument to time,
A summit no past champion yet could climb;
And told his men, "The title's ours, that's true,
But something greater still awaits from you."

At home to Swansea, five unanswered came,
And every strike proclaimed the City's name;
At West Ham, four against the hosts' lone one,
And still the great procession was not done.

Huddersfield, stubborn, held the champions fast,
A scoreless draw that made ambition last;
But Brighton came, and City's men prevailed,
Three-one, while records old were now assailed.

Ninety-seven points the scholars wrote,
The greatest English Premier League points total yet to note;
But Pep, surveying numbers on the wall,
Declared, "We have not reached the end of all."

"What further glory?" asked the weary men.
"We've won the league, we've broken records ten!"

The master answered, "One more match remains,
And one more number calls across the plains;
A hundred is a summit none have won,
And we shall strive until the task is done."

Old Arthur heard and scratched his silver hair:
“He’s won the title! Why’s he still in despair?”

Young Joe replied, “A hundred points would be
A mark unmatched in English history.”

“A hundred?” Arthur muttered. “That’s a lot.
I’ve seen us finish with much less than that.”

“And think of what the record could become!”

“A hundred shirts, a hundred songs, a drum?”

“A hundred points!”

“Aye, lad, I understand.
Let’s hope the lads don’t kick it in the stand.”

X. THE LAST BATTLE AT SOUTHAMPTON

NOW MAY the thirteenth dawned upon the land,
And City marched toward Southampton’s stand;
The final battle of the season lay
Upon a field beneath the southern day.

A hundred points! The distant number shone,
A sacred prize no earlier king had won;
And ninety-seven stood already made,
But victory alone would raise the blade.

Southampton fought with desperate purpose there,
Their own survival still a matter of care;
Their warriors held the champions at bay,
And would not let the hundred come their way.

The minutes passed, the final whistle neared,
And City’s great ambition almost disappeared;
The score remained unbroken, nought to nought,
And every passing movement came to naught.

At Olympus, Zeus grew restless in his chair:
“Is this the grand conclusion? Empty air?
Where are the goals? The victories? The flame?
Have we endured a hundred passes for a tame
And dreary scoreless ending to the day?
I wish these men would find another way!”

Athena answered, “Patience, Father, wait.
The finest victories sometimes come quite late.”

“But ninety minutes now are nearly done!”

“The race,” she said, “is over when it’s won.”

On City’s bench sat Gabriel Jesus, bright,
A youthful warrior eager for the fight;
The master called him forth into the field,
And hoped the final fortress soon would yield.

The clock advanced into the added time,
And hope grew faint upon the hundred’s climb;
Then Kevin, master of the golden pass,
Received the sphere upon the southern grass.

He looked beyond the crowded battle line,
And saw the slightest opening of design;
His vision pierced the ranks of weary men,
And all his ancient artistry returned again.

He sent a long and wondrous ball through air,
A passing stroke of beauty beyond compare;
It travelled over Southampton’s guarded wall,
And Gabriel Jesus raced to meet its fall.

The young Brazilian watched the leather fly,
And saw the keeper rushing from nearby;
One touch, one delicate and lifted blow,
And over Alex McCarthy it did go.

The ball descended, graceful as a dove,
And found the net beneath the heavens above;
The stadium erupted in delight and pain,
As City's hundred-point ambition found its gain.

One-nil! The final moment had arrived,
And City's great immortal dream survived;
A hundred points! The number stood complete,
A record laid beneath the champions' feet.

Then Zeus leapt high upon his throne of fire,
And shook Olympus with a mighty choir:

“A HUNDRED! LET THE HEAVENS HEAR THE SOUND!
A HUNDRED POINTS! A KINGDOM NOW IS CROWNED!
NO ENGLISH HOST HAS EVER CLIMBED SO HIGH,
LET THUNDER WRITE THE NUMBER IN THE SKY!”

Ares seized his spear and struck the ground,
And sent a hundred battle echoes round;
Athena smiled, her wisdom vindicated,
For all the passing now was celebrated.

Hermes brought a golden book of scores,
And laid it down before Olympus' doors;
While Clotho tied the hundredth thread in place,
And Lachesis recorded City's grace.

Atropos, who knew the years ahead,
Spoke softly while the others celebrated:

“The records live, the titles have been won,
But history's questions have not yet begun.”

XI. THE TRIUMPH OF THE CENTURIONS

NOW HEAR the numbers, carved in marble white,
That tell the measure of this season's might:

One hundred points, the greatest total known,
The highest summit any league had shown;
One hundred six times City's forwards scored,
While twenty-seven breached their own defence aboard.

Thirty-two victories filled the sacred page,
The most in one top-flight Premier League age;
And sixteen victories came on foreign ground,
With fifty away points the scribes had found.

Eighteen consecutive league victories shone,
A mighty marching record City's own;
And nineteen points divided them from two,
The widest Premier League margin men then knew.

Thus did the numbers rise, as records fell,
And every rival kingdom heard the bell;
The Sky-Blue host had reached a wondrous height,
And made the football heavens burn with light.

The champions gathered in their glorious blue,
While crowds proclaimed the wonders they had knew;
Kompany raised the trophy to the sky,
And tears of joy shone brightly in each eye.

Old Arthur watched with Joe beside his chair,
His ancient scarf held proudly in the air;
And when the hundred-point achievement came,
He spoke of all the years before the fame.

"I've seen this club in places far below,
Where neither crown nor glory seemed to grow;
I've watched the mighty laugh at City's fall,
And heard their mockery above it all.

"I've seen us stumble through the darkest day,
And hoped that something better came our way;
But never in my seventy-odd years
Had I imagined triumph such as this appears.

“A hundred points! Good Lord, that’s quite a thing!
A number fit to make the angels sing;
Though if they’d scored one fewer at the end,
I’d still have loved the lads, my lifelong friend.”

Joe smiled and answered, “Now you understand
Why Pep has worked to build this football land.”

“Aye,” Arthur said, “the master’s earned his praise.
He’s taught them how to win in wondrous ways.
I mocked his passing, all those little squares,
His goalkeeper’s adventures and his prayers.

“But now I see the wisdom of the plan:
Give clever football to a clever man.
And if the money helps the whole thing run,
At least we’ve seen what all that gold has done.”

He paused, then added with a wicked grin,
“But next year I expect the lot again!”

XII. THE SHADOW BEYOND THE HUNDRED

YET HIGH Olympus held a darker room,
Where Fate preserved the questions yet to bloom;
The hundred stars were bright upon the thread,
But other marks lay waiting far ahead.

The Minotaur of fiscal law still slept,
And in the maze the old accounts were kept;
The merchants rested, and the banners flew,
While distant scribes prepared their work anew.

For glory written on the football field
Does not determine what accounts reveal;
And neither financial doubts nor fervent praise
Can alter goals legitimately scored on matchdays.

The ball had crossed the line beneath the sun,
The trophies lifted, and the matches won;
The question of the records' legal fate
Belonged to rulings coming much more late.

Athena watched the City's celebrations pass,
And saw the empty stadium, silent grass;
She knew that sport and law must each proceed
By evidence appropriate to its need.

Then Hermes, peering toward the western sky,
Beheld a distant German eagle fly;
Beyond the continent a printing press
Prepared to stir a formidable mess.

He cried, "O Zeus! Another realm shall rise,
With secret correspondence for its prize!
A German journal seeks a story vast,
And ancient documents may trouble the past!"

Zeus groaned and covered both his weary eyes:
"Can we not celebrate before new cries?
They've won a hundred! Let the heavens sing!
Must every conquest bring another thing?"

But Atropos, whose knowledge none could shake,
Declared, "The past may have its claims to make;
And though the future cannot change the score,
It may yet ask what happened years before."

The gods grew silent, watching from their throne,
As City's celebrations carried on;
For every empire, mighty in its prime,
Must live within the judgment halls of time.

XIII. THE HUNDREDTH STAR

NOW CLOTHO, weaver of the mortal thread,
Approached the sacred book the Fates had read;
A hundred golden stars upon it gleamed,
The brightest sight the City gods had dreamed.

She touched the final star with gentle hand,
And all the records shone across the land;
Then Lachesis recorded in her scroll
The full arithmetic of City's goal.

Atropos, however, held apart
One darkened thread, concealed against her heart;
Not severed yet, nor woven into place,
But waiting for a later judgment's face.

"Why keep that thread?" asked Clotho, filled with fear.
"Because," replied the Fate, "the hour draws near
When newspapers shall publish what they claim,
And men shall argue fiercely over fame."

"But is the hundred not a thing complete?"

"The record stands within its sporting sheet.
What others later rule is theirs to weigh;
We shall not prejudge their distant day."

Thus spoke the Fates, and closed the golden book,
While Zeus cast one more satisfied old look;
And far below, the City banners waved,
As all the hundred victories were engraved.

XIV. THE LAST WORD OF THE MASTER

NOW PEP stood silent at the training ground,
Where evening settled without any sound;
The season's battles rested in the past,
The hundred-point achievement came at last.

He thought of every pass, each careful run,
Of all the victories patiently begun;
Of goals, defeats, and lessons harshly learned,
And every trophy that his players earned.

No longer merely architect of dreams,
He'd made a kingdom conquer mighty teams;
And though the football gods had watched with awe,
His finest weapon still was football law:

The pitch, the movement, space, and measured time,
The pressing that could make defenders climb;
The passing patterns, patient, strong, and swift,
That turned the simplest ball into a gift.

He placed a solitary football on the grass,
And thought of every long and measured pass;
Then smiled, remembering the final goal,
When Kevin's vision found the hundred's soul.

"The ball," he whispered, "never tells a lie.
It travels where the players make it fly;
And those who see the space before it grows
Shall find the path that victory bestows."

The northern breeze passed gently through the ground,
And City's empty stadium heard no sound;
But somewhere far beyond the quiet field,
A printing press prepared its own sharp shield.

For triumph had been written, bright and bold,
In goals, in records, and in banners gold;
Yet other stories waited to be told,
Of contracts, correspondence, wealth, and old
Financial questions whose approaching light
Would draw the football gods toward another fight.

And so, O Muse, conclude the glorious song,
Of City's hundred-point procession long;
Let trumpets sound, let mighty banners wave,
For English football witnessed something brave.

But turn thy gaze beyond the golden sky,
Where German journalists prepare to pry;
For when the printing presses start to roll,
The game shall face a very different goal.

The hundred-point conquest now is done,
The brightest English league record won;
Yet where the golden banners proudly fly,
The shadows of the coming storm draw nigh.

The players sleep, the weary trumpets cease,
The accountants stir beneath their fragile peace;
And from the Rhine the distant thunder calls,
To shake the marble of the City's halls.

HERE ENDETH BOOK X
The Hundred-Point Conquest

B O O K X I

The Stolen Scrolls of Der Spiegel

T H E A R G U M E N T

Of the German scribes who opened the treasury's correspondence, the mysterious herald called John, the anger of the Golden House, and the terrible discovery that an email thought forgotten may return with an army of journalists.

I. INVOCATION TO THE MUSE OF UNWELCOME TRUTHS

SING, MUSE, of scrolls concealed from mortal sight,
That burst upon the world one autumn night;
Of secrets carried over land and foam,
And letters fleeing from their ancient home.

Sing not of warriors charging toward the foe,
Nor arrows raining on the ranks below;
But of a weapon sharper than a spear,
A document that makes a prince feel fear.

For Troy was conquered by a wooden horse,
And Rome was broken by its own remorse;
But in the modern age, a kingdom's fate
May hang upon an email sent too late.

No sword was drawn, no mighty horsemen rode,
No siege machine approached the northern road;
Yet from the German lands a tempest came,
To question Manchester's ascending fame.

The year was eighteen, and November's sky
Hung cold above the towers rising high;
The City had achieved its hundred points,
And set the football world's enormous joints.

Its champions marched beneath a golden crown,
Its rivals watched their banners falling down;
And Pep, whose warriors passed with matchless grace,
Had made a hundred points their resting place.

But now, beyond the glorious football field,
Another sort of battle stood revealed;
For while the crowd admired the winning goal,
The journalists were opening a scroll.

O Muse, descend upon the printing press,
Where ink and doubt disturb a king's success;
And tell how merchants, scribes, and lawyers fought
Over the meaning of what papers taught.

II. THE STRANGER KNOWN AS JOHN

BEYOND THE stadiums, distant from the cheers,
A shadow moved among the football years;
A source the public knew by one brief name,
Who carried documents toward a wider flame.

They called him John, and little more was shown
Of how the gathered papers came to be known;
The Football Leaks collection crossed the land,
And reached the journalists' examining hand.

What road it travelled, what door gave it birth,
Became a controversy across the earth;
For City said the documents were stolen,
And incomplete extracts had wrongly spoken.

The source disputed how the files were gained,
And journalists examined what remained;
No final judgment followed from the claim,
But Europe's newspapers were drawn into the game.

Upon Olympus, Hermes leaned to see
Who dared compete with his velocity.

"What mortal messenger," the god exclaimed,
"Has crossed the world without my wings being named?
I carry news with supernatural speed,
Yet now a man called John performs the deed!"

Athena answered, "Technology has grown.
A message now may travel on its own."

"Impossible! What power could this be?"

"A little wire, a password, electricity."

"Then where," cried Hermes, "is the noble horse?"

"Replaced," she said, "by something called a source."

Ares demanded, "Who has seized the scroll?
And does he mean to take the champion's goal?"

"No goal," Athena answered, "is at stake
Until some proper ruling may it make;
The issue now concerns the papers' worth,
Their meaning, provenance, and facts of birth."

Zeus rose, displeased by such uncertain things:
"Why must the modern world torment its kings?
In ancient times we settled royal claims
By setting half the countryside in flames!"

III. THE GERMAN FORTRESS OF MIRRORS

IN HAMBURG'S halls, where northern waters flow,
The German scribes prepared the world to know;
Der Spiegel, mirror of the public age,
Placed City's correspondence on the page.

Its journalists examined names and sums,
And traced what correspondence might become;
They studied sponsorship and payments made,
And how financial figures were displayed.

They asked if princely funds, through channels drawn,
Had entered where a sponsor's name was worn;
They questioned whether commercial income shown
Was partly financed by the owner's own.

They spoke of Etihad, whose airline name
Had travelled with the City into fame;
And of arrangements spanning earlier years,
Which stirred the football world's competing fears.

They questioned payments linked to Mancini's time,
And whether separate earnings crossed a line;
They examined image rights and what was paid,
And how the wages might have been displayed.

The charges then were journalists' claims,
Not judgments written in the law's great names;
And City challenged what the papers said,
Rejecting their conclusions as they spread.

But England heard the thunder from afar,
As every newsroom sounded for the war;
And suddenly, where football stories stood,
The language of accounting ruled the flood.

One editor addressed his gathered band:
"Here is a tale to trouble all the land!"

Another asked, "How many pages lie
Behind the claims that through the headlines fly?"

"Enough," the editor replied with pride,
"To keep a dozen barristers employed outside."

"And have we checked the meaning of each line?"

"We must," he said, "if truth is to be mine."

For journalism, when it serves its nobler part,
Must test the evidence with patient heart;
Yet headlines, restless creatures bred for speed,
Are often faster than the facts they need.

IV. THE GOLDEN HOUSE RESPONDS

NOW WORD of Germany's disclosures flew
Across the continent toward the Blue;
Within the Golden House, the princes heard
The troubling reach of every printed word.

The club rejected publication's claim,
And spoke of damage intended to its name;
The material, it said, was out of frame,
Selected from a wider body none could claim.

A herald stood before the crowded hall,
And read the club's response before them all:

"These papers, taken without rightful leave,
Are not the full account one should believe;
We shall not try these matters in the press,
Nor bless their partial versions with success."

The lawyers nodded, grave in their defence,
And warned that context had significance;
For fragments gathered from a larger whole
May fail to tell the meaning of the scroll.

But in the journal's chambers, writers said
The documents deserved to be read;
Their task was asking questions where they found
An evidential trail on troubling ground.

Thus two great powers faced the public square,
Each certain that its arguments were fair;
One challenged how the evidence was shown,
The other asked what financial truth was known.

Upon Olympus, Zeus grew quite confused:
"Are we to judge the scrolls, or how they're used?"

Athena answered, "Both deserve review;
The method matters, and the substance too.
A document's arrival may be wrong,
Yet truth may still reside within its song;
And though its journey may deserve a trial,
That does not prove the writing false by style."

Ares declared, "Then strike the journalists dead!"

"No," said Athena, "read the pages instead."

"Read?" the war god cried. "A thousand leaves?"

"At least," she said, "before thy mind believes."

Then Hermes, ever agile in the air,
Proposed an enterprise beyond compare:

"I'll sell a helmet called the Email Guard,
To shield the princes when their letters are barred;
A golden lock, a most secure device,
With annual fees at an attractive price."

THE STOLEN SCROLLS OF DER SPIEGEL
V. OLD ARTHUR READS THE HEADLINES

DOWN MANCHESTER, beneath a rainy sky,
Old Arthur heard the newspaper boy cry;
The papers bore the City's name once more,
But not the kind of glory known before.

He bought a copy, folded it in two,
And summoned Joe to see the dreadful view.

"Come here, my lad. The Germans have arrived!
I thought we'd finished them when Kompany survived!"

Joe studied carefully the printed page:
"This isn't football from an earlier age.
They're asking where the sponsorship was paid,
And what financial arrangements had been made."

Old Arthur frowned. "That sounds a dreadful bore.
Why can't they argue whether Sterling scored?"

"Because the matter could be serious, Granddad."

"Aye, so could pies, if all the bakers went mad."

"The reports concern the club's financial affairs."

"And who," asked Arthur, "knows what happens there?
I buy my season ticket, cheer the team,
And leave the owner to his golden dream."

Joe answered, "Yet if rules have been defied,
That matters, whether City wins or not."

The old man paused, considering the thought,
Then spoke with more good sense than Joe had sought:

“Aye, rules are rules, though half are rather daft;
If someone broke them, let the law be staffed.
But don’t decide a case because a page
Has put a thousand people in a rage.

“I’ve seen the newspapers pronounce us dead,
Then crown us kings before we’ve left our bed;
One week our club’s a miracle of grace,
The next a continental disgrace.

“Let’s see the proof, whatever it may show,
Before we send the players down below.”

Young Joe looked up and gave a quiet grin:
“You’re taking this more calmly than a win.”

“Aye, son. The journalists can’t spoil my tea;
And none of them can score a goal past me.”

He opened up the sports page with a sigh,
And asked if Sunday’s tickets were too high.

VI. THE TRIAL OF THE GOLDEN SPONSORSHIP

WITHIN THE labyrinth of ancient books,
The auditors assembled with grave looks;
Their task was not to praise or blame the game,
But ask what stood behind a merchant’s name.

An elder clerk addressed the gathered hall:
“The truth of sponsorship concerns us all.
A payment openly agreed and made
May rightly count as commerce in the trade.

“But if a sum is given another face,
Its financial treatment may depend on place;
One must examine substance, source, and right,
And not decide by rumours in the night.”

A younger scribe approached the marble stand:
“Must every commercial payment now be scanned?”

“According to the rules that governed then,
And evidence available to men.”

“But can a sponsor’s price be very high?”

“Of course. Great audiences may explain why.”

“Then can we tell its value from a guess?”

“No prudent scholar would defend that mess.”

“And if a contract shows the rightful name?”

“One still may test the conduct and the claim.”

“And if a journal publishes an email?”

“Examine all the context, lest we fail.”

The younger scribe, exhausted by the law,
Regretted that he’d ever learned to draw
A column down a balance sheet at school,
Or thought accountancy a peaceful rule.

“Could we not judge this simply by the score?”

“Then football would not need accountants anymore.”

The elder spoke with sadness in his eye,
As though this was a world he’d gladly try.

VII. THE SCROLL OF MANCINI

NOW FROM the German chambers came a tale,
Of contracts from an earlier royal trail;
Of Mancini, the Italian lord who led
The City through the years of hope and dread.

The published claims concerned an additional fee,
For consultancy across the Arabian Sea;
A contract with Al Jazira formed the theme,
And raised new questions for the City team.

The journalists alleged the arrangement bore
A link to compensation paid before;
Whether sums and duties were properly displayed
Became a question in the claims they made.

The lawyers read, the commentators swore,
And football fans demanded to know more;
Yet allegations, though they fill the sky,
Require a testing before conclusions fly.

On Olympus, Ares seized his mighty sword:
“A second wage? Then double his reward!
A warrior fighting battles in two lands
Should have two purses placed within his hands!”

Athena frowned. “That’s not the matter here.
The question is what obligations appear,
What duties actually the contract made,
And whether proper disclosures were displayed.”

Ares replied, “You make the matter dull.
I’d rather face a charging Minotaur bull.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “because a charging beast
Requires less thought than records at a feast.”

Then Zeus considered Mancini’s older fame,
And remembered how Agüero won the game.

“Whatever these old contracts now may say,
That final goal still happened on that day;
The matter of accounts must find its proof,
But memories do not vanish from the roof.”

VIII. THE FOOTBALL KINGDOMS AWAKEN

THE NEWS spread out through England’s ancient halls,
Past northern mills and London’s marble walls;
To Liverpool, where banners proudly flew,
And Manchester’s great fortress dressed in red and blue.

The rival kings regarded every page,
And found new fuel for their familiar rage;
Some called for swift examination there,
And others feared the game’s financial share.

One herald cried, “The richest must obey!”

Another said, “Then judge them lawfully, I pray!”

A third proclaimed, “A headline is enough!”

The fourth replied, “That sort of proof is rough.”

A fifth demanded records to be shown,
And all the payments properly made known;
A sixth, whose club was seventh in the league,
Suggested titles should be lost by intrigue.

The other kings applauded him with cheer,
Until his own accounts were mentioned near;
Then suddenly the nobleman withdrew,
And claimed the questions were irrelevant too.

For football kings, as Homer might have found,
Are rarely consistent when gold is around;
They worship law when rivals must obey,
Yet seek exemptions when it blocks their way.

Athena watched the kingdoms' growing storm,
And hoped fair procedure might keep its form;
For sporting justice, to deserve its name,
Must judge alike the victors of the game.

IX. THE NIGHT OF A THOUSAND JOURNALISTS

ACROSS THE globe the printed columns shone,
And every newsroom claimed the tale its own;
A thousand commentators seized the chance
To join the solemn fiscal battle dance.

Some studied papers, dates, and evidence,
And weighed the meaning of the club's defence;
While others merely raised their voices high,
And let the finer points of proof go by.

A television oracle proclaimed:
"The whole of football may be changed!"

"And what is known?" his learned partner said.

"Not everything."

"Then why pronounce it dead?"

"Because," the oracle declared with pride,
"We've thirty minutes left to fill tonight!"

Another expert, summoned to the screen,
Explained that breaches would be grave if seen;
He spoke of standards and financial rule,
Then wisely left their application to the tribunal.

But one impatient man, of louder style,
Declared the matter settled in a while;
Until a lawyer asked him to explain
Precisely which conclusions he could sustain.

The expert paused, and shifted in his seat,
Then blamed the lighting and the studio heat.

From high Olympus Hermes watched the sight,
And nearly died of laughter in delight:

“A thousand voices! Every one a sage!
The modern prophet needs a camera stage.
In ancient Greece the oracle would wait;
Today he simply speculates at eight!”

Athena answered, “Some report with care;
The diligent deserve their honest share.
But where opinion races past the facts,
The truth is buried underneath the acts.”

X. THE MASTER AND THE PASSING BALL

WHILE EUROPE quarrelled over printed claims,
Pep Guardiola prepared for games;
The training ground remained his daily home,
His football diagrams his sacred tome.

He gathered Kevin, Sterling, Silva too,
And spoke of what their next opponents do;
For though the world examined City’s past,
The league demanded football still be passed.

“Here,” said the master, “press upon the wing;
And when they turn, our midfield men shall spring.”

A player asked, “Have you seen the papers, sir?”

“I have. But what occurs must now occur
Through proper channels, with the club’s reply;
Our task is football underneath the sky.”

“And if they challenge all the cups we’ve won?”

“Then do the work that must be done.”

For Pep could teach the ball to find its place,
But could not dribble through an old database;
He knew the methods of a pressing line,
Not every corporate sponsorship design.

He drew another arrow on the board,
And summoned all the warriors forward;
For when the clouds around a kingdom grow,
The players still must face the waiting foe.

The trainer blew his whistle, loud and clear,
And City’s army answered without fear;
While miles away, the journalists prepared
Another revelation to be aired.

XI. ZEUS ATTEMPTS TO DELETE THE PAST

ON OLYMPUS, Zeus sat staring at a screen,
The strangest object he had ever seen;
He’d purchased it from Hermes for a fee,
And claimed to understand technology.

“Observe,” he cried, “this message I have sent!
Where has it gone? And what was its intent?”

Hermes replied, “Your thunderbolt invoice
Has reached Poseidon, who will have no choice.”

“Then I shall take it back!” the father roared.

“You cannot, Father. It has been restored.”

“Restored from what?”

“A little place called cloud.”

“I OWN THE CLOUD!” great Zeus replied aloud.

Athena smiled. "Not every cloud is thine.
The modern kind preserves a different line."

"Then strike it down!"

"It has no mortal shape."

"Then let my sacred thunder find escape!"

The god grew furious, beard and eyebrows aflame,
And cursed the men who gave the cloud its name.

"If every letter lives beyond its year,
No mighty ruler can speak without fear!"

"Then choose thy words," Athena answered slow,
"As wiser kings have learned they ought to do."

Ares muttered, "War was easier in Troy.
A spear once thrown did not retain a copy."

XII. THE WARNING OF THE FATES

THE FATES assembled where the starlight fell,
And watched the golden City kingdom dwell;
The scrolls had crossed the sea, the tales were told,
And questions gathered round the house of gold.

Clotho held a thread from Germany's shore,
And wove it through a distant judgment door;
Lachesis measured years of legal strife,
And all the troubled seasons of club life.

Atropos looked toward the days ahead,
Where different bodies would their judgments spread;
Where some conclusions might be overturned,
And other questions differently discerned.

“The path,” she said, “is neither short nor plain,
And each tribunal has its own domain;
Let none confuse one judgment with the rest,
For separate rules demand a separate test.”

Then Zeus demanded, “When shall all be known?”

“Not yet,” she said, “nor from one source alone.”

“Then what is certain?”

“That the scrolls were read,
That allegations through the world were spread;
That City challenged how the tale was told,
And proper bodies might examine old
Accounts and correspondence, payment streams,
And claims that troubled football’s golden dreams.”

“And what,” asked Zeus, “of all the titles won?”

“Those questions need their legal journeys run.”

The gods grew silent as the threads were laid,
While far below the City warriors played;
For truth and fame had entered different halls,
One governed law, the other governed balls.

XIII. THE FINAL MIRROR

THE GERMAN presses thundered through the night,
Their columns filled with questions sharp and bright;
And in the Golden House the lawyers stayed,
Preparing answers to the claims being made.

The football kingdom watched with gathering dread,
While every newspaper repeated what was said;
And deep below the stadium’s great stone,
The hidden accountants worked alone.

One ancient scribe surveyed the crowded shelf,
And muttered softly, almost to himself:

“I’ve spent my life recording what men paid,
What revenues were earned, what bargains made;
I never thought these columns, dry and small,
Would one day make the greatest kingdoms fall.

“Yet numbers, when they’re called to public view,
Must stand or tumble by what proves them true;
And neither love nor hate shall alter one
When all the careful reckoning is done.”

Above the stadium the autumn rain
Descended on the silent northern plain;
And somewhere in a pub, Old Arthur swore
That City needed just one victory more.

“The Germans may examine all they please,
The lawyers may collect enormous fees;
But Saturday, against the waiting foe,
I’d rather see the football forwards go.”

Young Joe replied, “The story will not end.”

“I know,” said Arthur. “Neither will we, friend.”

He lifted high his weather-beaten glass,
As clouds and years and accusations passed;
And spoke the creed that carried through his life,
Through triumph, failure, disappointment, strife:

“Whatever kings may own the club today,
Whatever scholars yet may have to say,
The City that I loved when we were poor
Is more than any merchant’s golden store.”

The grandson nodded, and together they
Watched autumn’s darkened evening fade away.

But far beyond the stadium's northern wall,
A league of watchmen heard the distant call;
And soon the men who guarded England's game
Would turn their eyes upon the City's name.

The mirrored pages scattered through the air,
The Golden House prepared its legal care;
The scrolls had stirred the kingdoms from their sleep,
And now the League would summon men to keep.

No trumpet marked the coming of that day,
No cavalry advanced in grand array;
But from the quiet chambers of the League,
There came the sound of gathering intrigue.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XI

The Stolen Scrolls of Der Spiegel

B O O K X I I

*The Awakening of the
League's Watchmen*

T H E A R G U M E N T

Of the nineteen rival kingdoms, the summoning of the Premier League's guardians, the questions that travelled through the ledgers, and the beginning of a struggle in which time itself would become the most expensive witness.

I. INVOCATION TO THE MUSE OF JUDGMENT

SING NOW, O Muse, of watchmen old and grey,
Who guarded English football night and day;
Whose chambers lay beyond the shouting crowd,
Where mighty men were rarely speaking loud.

For there, beyond the painted football lines,
A different kingdom measured deeds and signs;
Its banners bore no striker's famous face,
But regulations governing the race.

No chanting armies gathered at its door,
No cannon sounded from the battlefield floor;
Its soldiers carried folders, not a spear,
And made the wealthiest princes reappear.

O Muse, recall the spring of nineteen's year,
When football's governors began to hear
The questions raised by Germany's reports,
And turned toward accounts instead of sports.

For UEFA's continental guards had stirred,
And England's League had likewise heard the word;
In March, the Premier League confirmed its quest,
To scrutinise the matters needing test.

No verdict yet had issued from the hall,
No judgment then had settled one and all;
But now the wheels of formal inquiry turned,
And clubs and commentators watched, concerned.

The hundred points still glittered in the past,
And City's warriors travelled fierce and fast;
Yet while Pep planned another glorious spring,
The watchmen turned toward a different thing.

II. THE FORTRESS OF THE PREMIER LEAGUE

BEYOND THE fields where England's champions played,
A solemn fortress stood beneath the shade;
Within its walls were regulations bound,
And twenty royal names inscribed around.

There sat the guardians of the modern game,
Whose task was neither fortune nor great fame;
They watched the markets, fixtures, rules, and pay,
And kept the competition underway.

Their leader rose before the council board,
And laid a weighty volume on the floor:

"The German reports have raised a grave concern,
And many questions now demand we learn
What documents and records may disclose,
And where their factual evidence may go.

"Let City answer matters properly raised;
Let every relevant record be appraised;
Let no conclusion race ahead of proof,
Nor public anger stand beneath our roof."

A junior watchman raised his trembling hand:
"But how much paper must we now demand?"

The elder pointed toward a distant door,
Beyond which shelves extended by the score.

"Enough to understand the matters here,
However long the documents appear."

"And if the papers grow beyond control?"

"Then add another chamber for the scroll."

"And if a lawyer challenges the rule?"

"Then let the proper process be our tool."

"And if the arguments consume ten years?"

"Then we shall purchase stronger chandeliers."

The watchmen nodded, with professional gloom,
And ordered sixteen cabinets for the room;
Their work began without a battle cry,
While football carried on beneath the sky.

III. THE LEAGUE'S TWENTY KINGDOMS

THE KINGDOM'S council, broad in wealth and fame,
Contained the clubs that played the English game;
Some wore the crowns of past imperial years,
And some had grown through labour, hopes, and tears.

There Liverpool, of Mersey's storied shore,
Had sung of kings and European war;
There United, with its legendary name,
Still treasured its inheritance of fame.

There Arsenal, whose ancient cannon stood,
And Chelsea, strengthened by a wealthy flood;
There Tottenham, proud upon the London plain,
And Leicester, dreaming glory once again.

And City, newest giant of the north,
Had brought enormous spending power forth;
A kingdom with the trophies to proclaim
Its place among the masters of the game.

The rival houses watched the League's inquiry,
Each with its separate hopes and anxious theory;
Some thought the rules essential to be kept,
While others privately considered what they'd swept
Beneath the carpets of their noble halls,
Behind the trophies and the marble walls.

One lord declared, "Let justice now be done!"

Another cried, "Unless it hurts my son!"

A third demanded, "Publish every fee!"

A fourth replied, "Except those paid by me!"

Then Athena, hearing England's ancient cry,
Descended from Olympus through the sky.

"O kings, who love the sound of justice sung,
Remember that the scales are never hung
To serve the preference of the strongest crown,
Nor merely pull a prosperous rival down.

"The law must neither worship ancient gold,
Nor shelter newer wealth from rules of old;
For what is lawful must be fairly tried,
Whatever colours warriors wear with pride."

The kings fell silent at the goddess' speech,
Then sent their advocates within her reach;
For while all praised impartiality,
Each wished it worked particularly well for thee.

IV. THE SUMMONING OF THE GOLDEN HOUSE

NOW TO the City came the League's request,
That matters raised should undergo a test;
The club, in turn, maintained its proper ground,
And challenged claims that had been passed around.

Within the Golden House, the lawyers met,
Their tables covered in a parchment net;
The princes listened while the elders spoke,
And weighed the weight of every legal stroke.

The senior advocate addressed the throne:

"An inquiry is not a judgment shown.
The League may ask what documents reveal;
The club may challenge claims and seek appeal
Where legal procedures give that right,
And contest what it considers wrong outright.

"We must examine every relevant rule,
And let the record be the measure's tool;
We cannot substitute our fervent claim
For evidence, however great our name."

One younger lawyer, eager for the war,
Demanded seventeen new shelves or more;
Another called for experts from abroad,
Whose hourly fees could make a prince applaud.

A third proposed a legal working group,
A fourth demanded counsel for the group;
A fifth requested meetings to decide
Which meetings should be held on either side.

At last the chairman of the legal host
Regarded what the meetings all would cost:

“Could this be managed in a simpler way?”

“Perhaps,” the lawyers said, “but not today.”

Then Hermes, leaning from Olympus’ gate,
Declared, “I know a most attractive rate!
A thousand drachmas for a consultation,
And twice that sum for further explanation.”

Zeus replied, “You’d bankrupt heaven in a day!”

“And yet,” said Hermes, “people gladly pay.”

V. THE SILENCE OF THE LEDGERS

DEEP IN the City’s subterranean keep,
Where fiscal scrolls had lain in ordered sleep,
The invisible accountants heard the call,
And lit their candles in the vaulted hall.

Sir Debit summoned Credit to the board,
Where rows of figures covered every sword;
Depreciation brought his ancient chart,
And Amortisation took the larger part.

Disclosure strode before the gathered men,
And raised his mighty document-demanding pen.

“Let nothing relevant escape the light,
And every answer be prepared aright;
For questions now concern what sums were shown,
What rules required, and what the records own.”

A tiny clerk, no older than a boy,
Had entered accountancy seeking joy;
He hoped for steady work, a modest wage,
And quiet calculations page by page.

But now the League's inquiry had begun,
And quiet labour seemed forever done;
He faced a thousand folders marked by year,
And twenty more that simply said "See Here."

He asked, "How far must all these searches go?"

The elder answered, "Farther than you know."

"How many emails must we now retrieve?"

"As many as the questions may conceive."

"And if the meaning of an email's unclear?"

"Then gather context from the surrounding year."

"And if that context raises further doubt?"

"Another search must surely sort it out."

The young clerk staggered, pale as winter snow,
And wished his life had taken another road.

"I should have been a baker," he declared.
"At least a pie is usually prepared;
It has a top, a bottom, and an end,
And nobody requires a legal friend."

The elders nodded at his sad lament,
Then sent him back to find an old attachment.

VI. THE WAR BETWEEN MONEY AND MATHEMATICS

NOW IN the League's great chamber stood a scale,
By which financial rules might stand or fail;
And around it sat the scholars of the game,
To ask what constituted lawful gain.

One elder spoke: "The question must be framed
By specific duties properly named;
What revenue was stated for each year,
And whether obligations then were clear."

Another said, "The source of funds may matter,
And documents may clarify the latter;
Yet every payment needs its legal place,
According to its substance and its case."

A third remarked, "The salary costs as shown
May raise distinct questions of their own;
But let no claim be counted as established,
Unless the proof can properly be marshalled."

A messenger from a rival court exclaimed:
"The City must be punished! It is named!"

The elder judge regarded him with care:
"Your anger is not evidence we share."

"But everyone on Merseyside agrees!"

"Then bring us facts, not football rivalries."

"And what if all the northern clubs demand?"

"A hearing does not bow to every stand."

The messenger retired in disappointment,
And sought a television pundit's appointment;
For there his certainty was better prized,
And seldom subjected to cross-examined eyes.

Ares, observing, could not quite endure
This preference for evidence over fury.

“Why not let rivals vote upon the blame?
That seems a democratic sort of game!”

Athena answered, “If thy enemies decide
What law is broken by a hated side,
Then every league shall punish those who win,
And competition perish from within.”

Ares considered this, then gave a grin:
“At least my army would be guaranteed to win.”

VII. THE GUARDIAN OF TIME

BEYOND THE chamber of disputed sums,
There stood a gate where ancient judgment comes;
Its keeper wore a robe of faded grey,
And measured every year and passing day.

They called him Chronos, master of the hour,
Whose jurisdiction lent proceedings power;
He held a sandglass fashioned out of stone,
And counted all the ages that had flown.

A clerk approached and laid before his feet
A question concerning years long since complete.

“O Keeper, tell us how the time may bear
Upon the different rules and claims of care.”

Then Chronos answered, solemn as the grave:
“Each legal code its proper limits gave;
One system's time restrictions may apply,
Another's rules may different answers supply.

“Do not presume because one case is barred
That every other forum must discard
A matter brought according to its code,
For separate regulations mark the road.”

The clerk grew pale. “Then time itself has laws?”

“And lawyers may dispute their scope and cause.”

“Is nothing simple in this dreadful place?”

“Only the sand that falls at constant pace.”

The guardian turned his hourglass round again,
And watched the years descend like autumn rain;
While somewhere far away in Switzerland,
A different court awaited what was planned.

The Fates looked on, their threads within their hands,
And knew that courts possessed distinct commands;
For what might later fall beyond one rule
Could yet be tested by another legal tool.

VIII. OLD ARTHUR AND THE PRICE OF JUSTICE

DOWN MANCHESTER’S old streets, where rain descended,
Old Arthur heard the inquiry extended;
And every newspaper, throughout the day,
Found some new reason for a grave display.

He sat with Joe beside the public bar,
Where football conversation travelled far;
And heard two rival supporters loudly claim
That all the kingdom’s glory bore a stain.

One cried, “The League will take your titles back!”

Another said, “You’re finished! That’s a fact!”

Old Arthur placed his glass upon the wood,
And answered with the patience that he could.

"Have they decided anything as yet?"

"No," said the man, "but everybody bets."

"Then keep your wages safe," old Arthur said.
"There's quite enough uncertainty ahead."

"But City's rich!"

"So is your favourite team."

"But City's owner bought a golden dream!"

"And what," said Arthur, "does a dream disclose
About the regulations someone chose?"

The rival scratched his head, then raised his glass:
"Well, everyone knows money bought your class."

Old Arthur smiled. "Aye, money buys the best,
At least when luck and judgment do the rest;
Your club has spent a tidy fortune too,
And somehow seems to lose more games than we do."

The crowd erupted, glasses shook with cheer,
And even rival fans were forced to hear;
But Arthur raised his hand before they fought,
And added one more rather sober thought.

"If wrongdoing's proved, then consequences follow;
No honest fan should find that hard to swallow.
But if a claim is wrong, then let it fall,
And never make the rumour judge of all.

"That's not defending money, rich or poor,
It's how the law should work, for evermore."

Young Joe replied, "You sound a learned judge."

"No, lad. A judge would charge you for a nudge."

IX. THE CHAMPIONS MARCH WHILE WATCHMEN READ

NOW NINETEEN'S spring brought battles fierce and bright,
As City fought for England's royal right;
For Liverpool, beneath Klopp's burning star,
Had pushed the champions very hard and far.

Each week the leaders battled for the throne,
Each knew one loss might leave the crown alone;
And City, though inquiries filled the news,
Had little room for any league-day blues.

At Palace, two from Sterling helped the cause,
Before Jesus completed their applause;
At United, Bernardo struck with flame,
And Sané added victory to the game.

Two-nil! The derby thundered through the north,
As City's league ambitions gathered forth;
And Leicester next defended with their might,
Until the captain changed the course of night.

Kompany, mighty captain, stern and tall,
Advanced and struck a most unlikely ball;
From distance flew a thunderbolt of blue,
That broke the stubborn deadlock clean in two.

One-nil! The Etihad erupted wild,
And Arthur leapt as though he were a child.

"I've told the lads for years," the veteran cried,
"To put their football boots upon the side
And shoot when opportunity is shown,
Instead of passing back toward their own!"

Young Joe exclaimed, "That strike was quite sublime!"

"Aye, son! He's only practised it since time!"

Then Brighton stood upon the final day,
And briefly threatened City's royal way;
Murray headed first, and nervous hearts were torn,
But Agüero answered almost as soon as born.

Laporte then scored, Mahrez made it three,
And Gündogan completed victory;
Four-one! Another league campaign was won,
And ninety-eight great points stood in the sun.

Liverpool's ninety-seven came so near,
A total worthy of a champion's year;
Yet City held them off by just one point,
And set another golden year in joint.

Great Zeus declared, "This is a proper fight!
Two mighty kingdoms battling for the right!"

Athena nodded. "Glory finds its worth
When opposition tests the strongest on the earth."

Yet while the mighty champions raised their crown,
The League's investigators settled down
To read the questions growing from the past,
And seek what evidence the records cast.

X. THE CONTINENTAL THUNDER GATHERS

NOW FROM the west of Europe's mountain wall,
The UEFA guardians heard the papers call;
And in March nineteen had their own inquiry begun,
A separate road beneath the selfsame sun.

The continental investigators sought to know
What certain earlier sponsorship records show;
The laws were Europe's, with their different reach,
And different regulations guiding each.

In England, League officials searched as well,
But none could yet pronounce what time would tell;
For one inquiry was not another's twin,
And each possessed its jurisdiction within.

Zeus looked upon the two proceedings there,
And cried, "Two sets of judges? Is that fair?"

Athena answered, "Different rules may bind
The matters each authority may find.
A continental football licence claim
Is not the whole of England's league-rule game."

"Then may they reach conclusions not the same?"

"They may, depending on the rules and claim."

"Then what becomes of common sense?" he cried.

"It needs a lawyer standing at its side."

Hermes, whose fortune grew with every writ,
Declared the modern age a splendid fit:

"Two jurisdictions! Twice the paper sold!
A golden age for those who handle gold!
If ancient kings had learned this noble trade,
The Trojan War might still be being paid!"

XI. THE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN SHADOWS

NOW IN the halls where Fate's old sisters spun,
The golden thread of football glory shone;
Beside it lay the darkened strands of years,
Of future charges, arguments, and fears.

Clotho drew forth a thread of twenty-three,
And laid it where the gods could scarcely see;
For years would pass before a formal charge
Would bring the League's old investigation large
Before the world in documents and claim,
And give a number to the football name.

Atropos regarded what lay there,
And whispered to the still and starry air:

"Not yet shall every count be brought to light;
The watchmen only start their work tonight.
But years hence, when their formal charges come,
The world shall hear a far more fearful drum.

"And long beyond that summons shall proceed
The arguments on what the laws decreed;
A commission's findings and the right of appeal
Shall make the final tale more hard to seal."

The Fates understood that history's road
Was never merely one accusing code;
For one tribunal's ruling might be changed,
And another's judgments later rearranged.

So none of them declared a final fate,
Nor dared to close the future's judgment gate;
They wove the threads of what was yet to be,
And left the legal outcome to its proper decree.

XII. THE SIEGE WITHOUT A BATTLEFIELD

NOW MARK, O Muse, this most peculiar war,
 Unlike the ones the ancient bards had sung before;
 No soldier marched upon a fortress wall,
 No sword was raised to make a rival fall.

Instead there came a question, then a file,
 Then lawyers reading patiently awhile;
 Then letters answering letters every day,
 And further arguments about the way.

A parchment travelled down a corridor,
 And soon required a dozen parchments more;
 A question about sponsorship was sent,
 And back arrived a lengthy document.

An argument concerning what was due
 Required an expert and an expert's view;
 That expert's view was challenged by a peer,
 Who charged a rather princely fee per year.

The warriors of the law advanced with care,
 Their weapons sharpened by professional prayer;
 They fought on definitions, dates, and scope,
 And made the battle last beyond all hope.

Ares, who watched the war with growing grief,
 Declared, "I'd rather fight a Trojan chief!
 These fellows kill no man, destroy no town,
 Yet somehow bring an empire's temper down."

Athena said, "A country ruled by law
 Must test its claims without a warrior's claw."

"But must it take so long?" he cried in pain.

"That question," she replied, "shall rise again."

XIII. THE GREAT DISPUTE OF THE MISSING SHORTCUT

AT LAST a tired investigator cried,
"Could not a simpler process be supplied?
If every matter needs a thousand sheets,
We'll still be here when all the football ends."

His elder answered, "Speed is not the same
As justice properly applied to claim;
And fairness cannot merely mean a race
To reach the finish of a difficult case."

"But delay may make the evidence grow old."

"Then work with diligence, and let it all be told."

"And can we guarantee the perfect rule?"

"No, but we cannot make impatience school."

The youngest clerk stood silent for a while,
Then placed another folder on the pile;
Its label bore the year two thousand ten,
And sent him searching through the shelves again.

He sighed, "I thought the hardest thing I'd see
Would be dividing seven into three;
But now my life is dates and definitions,
And endless arguments on submissions."

From deep below the Minotaur replied,
"Welcome to the labyrinth, child; abide!"

The clerk exclaimed, "How long must I remain?"

The monster answered, "Ask the courts again."

XIV. ZEUS DEMANDS AN ENDING

UPON OLYMPUS, great Zeus lost his calm,
And struck the heavens with his thundered palm:

“Enough! This war has scarcely even started,
Yet half my gods have fallen or departed!
Where are the champions? Where the glorious goals?
Why must a football war be fought with scrolls?”

Hermes replied, “The world has grown complex,
And all its grand transactions now have checks.”

“Then check them once, and let the matter rest!”

“But parties have the right their claims be tested.”

Zeus shook his head, disheartened by the law:
“I never saw such paperwork before!
When I condemned Prometheus to pain,
I did not need an expert to explain.”

Athena answered, “That is why thy reign
Was not distinguished for its lack of pain.
A lightning bolt can settle argument,
But rarely makes a judgment competent.”

The gods looked down upon the City ground,
Where footballs rolled and training shouts resound;
And all agreed, in spite of fiscal strife,
That actual football still possessed some life.

XV. ARTHUR’S PRAYER FOR THE LAWYERS

OLD ARTHUR stood beneath the northern rain,
And watched another City game again;
The crowd was roaring, scarves were held on high,
And blue confetti scattered through the sky.

Young Joe addressed him as the players passed:
“Granddad, how long do you suppose this lasts?”

“The football?”

“No, the whole inquiry.”

Old Arthur pondered with uncertainty.

“I’ve seen a referee take half a year
To make a call that everyone saw clear;
I’ve seen the council mend a little road
With seventeen committees and a code.

“I’ve watched the government debate a bridge,
Then buy three hills to build upon the ridge;
But football lawyers, son, are quite a breed,
And none appears in any urgent need.”

Joe laughed. “Yet justice matters, does it not?”

“Of course,” said Arthur. “Every single jot.
I’d rather have a fair and lawful hearing
Than any hasty verdict disappearing.

“But if they take another dozen years,
They’ll need to interview our children’s peers;
And I’ll be sitting somewhere up above,
Still shouting for the bloody club I love.”

The grandson smiled, and Arthur raised his beer,
As distant thunder echoed through the year.

“Let every charge be tested in its time,
And every breach established as a crime
Against the rules, if evidence so shows;
But never let the loudest rival choose.”

Young Joe replied, “That seems an honest view.”

“Aye, lad. Now pass the pies. The match is due.”

XVI. THE WATCHMEN LIGHT THEIR LAMPS

NOW EVENING fell upon the League’s great hall,
And watchmen gathered for their solemn call;
The city streets were quiet in the rain,
And lawyers studied documents again.

Their lamps were lit across the shadowed room,
Their tables bore the weight of matters to come;
And though no verdict had yet crossed the floor,
The inquiry had opened its great door.

The chief of watchmen stood before the rest,
And spoke of duties that must meet the test:

“Our task is neither vengeance nor reward,
Nor service to a jealous rival lord;
We must examine what the records say,
And whether rules were broken in their day.

“Let every allegation find its place,
And give each answer its appropriate space;
For justice cannot live where fury reigns,
Nor stand without the evidence it gains.”

The watchmen nodded, pale beneath the light,
And settled to their labours through the night;
While outside, City’s banners stirred above,
And thousands sang their songs of football love.

For the two worlds, the stadium and the court,
Would travel on distinct roads through the sport;
The players chasing titles, goals, and fame,
The lawyers asking questions of the game.

XVII. THE LOOM OF THE COMING STORM

NOW CLOTHO lifted one long strand of blue,
And wove the City's victories shining through;
Beside it lay a silver thread of law,
Whose winding path no mortal fully saw.

Lachesis measured seasons still to pass,
While Atropos surveyed the distant grass;
And in the gloom beyond the mortal years,
She glimpsed the later judgment, doubts, and fears.

A continental thunderbolt would fall,
And lawyers would contest its mighty call;
A Swiss tribunal later would proclaim
Its ruling under Europe's separate frame.

Still later, England's League would press its case,
Before a commission in a different place;
And when conclusions finally appeared,
An appeal would test the findings then declared.

Yet those were battles waiting far ahead,
Their legal details not yet fully read;
And here, in nineteen, only one thing shone:
The watchmen's long investigation had begun.

Then Athena closed the future's distant door,
And bade the gods disturb the threads no more.

"Let every court its proper questions weigh,
And history unfold in its own day;
We sing what happened, not what we desire,
And let the proof distinguish smoke from fire."

Zeus lowered slowly his tremendous hand,
And spread a peaceful darkness over land;
The football kingdom slept beneath the stars,
Not knowing yet the length of coming wars.

XVIII. THE LAST VIGIL

NOW THROUGH the halls where City's fortunes grew,
The midnight wind approached the towers of blue;
The accountants gathered all their books with care,
And placed their records on the tables there.

Far off, within the League's appointed place,
The watchmen studied each disputed case;
While UEFA's guardians, across the sea,
Prepared proceedings of their own decree.

No title vanished in the autumn rain,
No trophy left its glorious display;
The football matches continued to be played,
And no great judgment yet had been conveyed.

But something changed within the realm that night,
For questions once confined to public sight
Had entered formal chambers of review,
Where evidence, not merely noise, was due.

And Old Arthur, dreaming in his little bed,
Heard distant voices speaking overhead;
They sang of kings, of football, and of gold,
Of famous goals and controversies old.

He dreamed the Minotaur approached his door,
Demanding forty-seven forms or more;
And Arthur, armed with slippers and a broom,
Chased the dreadful fiscal creature from the room.

"Be off!" he cried. "I've had enough of thee!
I'm City till the end, whatever be!"

The monster fled, its ledgers falling wide,
While Arthur thundered fiercely at its side;
And when he woke at dawn, his grandson heard
The old man muttering a single word:

"Accountants!"

Then he groaned and went downstairs,
And thanked the gods that football still was theirs.

For though the League's great watchmen had awakened,
And future kings and lawyers might be shaken,
The northern club would march another day,
And Pep's eleven still knew how to play.

The golden house stood mighty in its pride,
Yet legal storms were gathering outside;
And far beyond the League's great eastern wall,
A different thunder was preparing now to fall.

For Europe's ancient judges stirred at last,
And searched the financial records of the past;
The watchmen lit their lamps against the night,
And UEFA's thunder gathered for the fight.

Soon mighty Zeus would hear a judgment read,
And see a European ban spread dread;
While far in Switzerland, beyond the plain,
Another court would weigh the case again.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XII

The Awakening of the League's Watchmen

PART III

THE WAR OF THE
HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN

BOOKS XIII–XVIII

The courts, the charges and the long siege, 2020–2026

B O O K X I I I

The Thunderbolts of UEFA

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Terrible History of the European Decree, the Two-Year Exile, the Thirty Million Pieces of Gold, and the Astonishing Discovery That Even the Gods Must Sometimes Appeal to Switzerland.

I. THE MUSE INVOKES THE GODS OF FINANCIAL RUIN

SING, MUSE, of thunder forged in distant halls,
Of mighty clubs and bureaucratic walls;
Of kings who ruled the green and sacred field,
Yet found before the books they had to yield.

Sing not of warriors slain by spear or blade,
But fortunes counted, sponsorships displayed;
Of victories won beneath the floodlit skies,
And solemn men who questioned their supplies.

For once the Greeks at Troy had fought for fame,
And gods descended wrapped in sacred flame;
But now Olympus watched a stranger war,
Where accountants guarded every temple door.

No Hector stood upon the battlement,
No Achilles roared his furious discontent;
Instead came clerks with folders bound in blue,
Demanding what the sponsors really knew.

And Manchester, whose banners touched the sun,
Whose glittering conquests seemed but just begun,
Beheld approaching from the continental night
A host equipped with spreadsheets for the fight.

Their general bore no sword of sharpened steel,
But regulations stamped with Europe's seal;
And where the ancient warriors marched to drums,
These conquerors announced, "The audit comes!"

High over Etihad's resplendent towers,
Where mortals worshipped football's passing powers,
A gathering darkness swallowed half the day,
And golden banners shivered in dismay.

For wealth might purchase warriors, ships, and land,
But could it purchase judgment close at hand?
The Muse replied, "That question shall remain
Until the lawyers gather on the plain."

II. THE COUNCIL OF OLYMPUS

UPON OLYMPUS, Zeus awoke in rage,
And hurled his coffee at the sporting page;
For there, beneath a headline black and bold,
He read a tale that made his thunder cold.

"By all the storms that shake the mortal sphere!
What fresh abomination have we here?
Two seasons banished from the European game?
Who dares pronounce so terrible a shame?"

Then Hermes, sleek in robes of sponsor gold,
Approached the throne and bowed with courage bold:
"My Lord, the matter concerns financial play,
And whether certain funds arrived the proper way."

“What way?” cried Zeus. “Does silver need a road?
Must gold present a passport with its load?
When kings bestow their treasure on a team,
Is that not every mortal owner’s dream?”

Athena rose, her eyes of reason bright,
And brought a sheaf of documents to light:
“The rules concern the origin of pay,
And how accounts report it on the day.

“An owner’s wealth and commercial revenue
Are different things when regulations view;
The charge is grave, though charges do not prove
That judgment must the careful mind approve.”

Then Ares struck his shield against the floor,
And made the columns tremble with his roar:
“Bring forth the guilty! Set them on the grass!
I’ll settle all disputes in one fierce pass!”

“That,” said Athena, “might amuse the crowd,
But justice cannot simply shout aloud.”
And Zeus declared, amid the thunder’s din,
“Why must these lawyers make the lawyers win?”

III. THE DECREE OF THE EUROPEAN THRONE

IN FEBRUARY’S cold and iron year,
When Twenty-Twenty brought its season drear,
A proclamation crossed the sporting sea,
And shook the halls of Manchester City.

From UEFA’s chamber came the solemn word,
More terrible than any trumpet heard;
Its judges spoke of sponsorship and gain,
And money passing through a hidden chain.

They judged that revenues had been overstated,
That financial rules were gravely violated;
And further charged the club had failed to aid
The searching inquiry their agents made.

Two seasons from the European stage,
The ban descended like a captive's cage;
And thirty million euros formed the fine,
A costly punctuation to the line.

Across the world the sporting heralds cried,
And rival kingdoms danced with swelling pride;
From Merseyside to Madrid's ancient seat,
They heard the tidings whispered through the street.

Some called it justice, overdue and fair,
Some waved triumphant banners in the air;
Some said the mighty finally had to bow
Before the rules applied to others now.

Yet City answered, resolute and stern,
"The judgment shall be challenged in its turn;
These accusations we dispute outright,
And through the courts shall take our lawful fight."

Thus thunder split the European sky,
And rival kings looked heavenward on high;
But deep within the storm, beyond their sight,
The first appeal was gathering its might.

IV. THE LAMENT OF OLD ARTHUR

IN MANCHESTER, beside a public-house,
Where every televised debate could rouse
An argument more fierce than ancient war,
Old Arthur watched the news and cursed once more.

“I’ve watched this bloody football club descend
To depths where even hope refused to bend;
I’ve seen us lose to teams whose only fame
Was having eleven fellows for the game.

“I’ve stood in rain that soaked me to the bone,
And heard opponents laugh from every zone;
I’ve seen the Third Division’s gloomy shore,
And thought we’d never leave the place once more.

“And now we’ve got the finest squad in sight,
With passing football played by gods of light,
Some fellow in an office, dressed in grey,
Has found a way to take the games away!”

His grandson spoke, with wisdom newly gained,
“But Grandad, shouldn’t wrongdoing be restrained?
If rules exist, should clubs not have to show
That all their revenues are what we know?”

Old Arthur stopped and scratched his silver head,
Then placed his battered drinking glass and said:
“Aye, lad, the rules must bind the rich and small;
But first make certain whom they blame, and why at all.

“I’ve seen a referee condemn a man
Before he’d worked out where the foul began;
I’ve seen a linesman raise his flag with pride
Against a striker standing well onside.

“So let them bring their evidence to light,
And let the judges weigh the wrong and right;
For if a man is guilty, prove the claim,
And if he isn’t, spare him from the shame.”

V. THE HERALDS OF THE RIVAL KINGDOMS

THEN FORTH from rival castles, old and grand,
 Came heralds bearing judgments through the land;
 For nothing warms a football noble's heart
 Like watching wealthy rivals fall apart.

At Anfield's gates the crimson banners flew,
 At Old Trafford hope discovered something new;
 In Spain the ancient kings observed the fray,
 And wondered who might take City's place away.

The pundits mounted platforms made of air,
 And waved their hands with magisterial flair;
 Each claimed an insight hidden from the rest,
 Although the judgment had not faced its test.

One cried, "The case is closed! The matter's done!"
 Another said, "Their trophies weigh a ton!"
 A third declared, with intellectual grace,
 "The punishment itself must prove the case."

Athena, watching from her mountain chair,
 Declared, "Such reasoning cannot lead us anywhere;
 An allegation is not proof of guilt,
 Nor every judgment on sound footing built."

Yet Hermes heard the shouting with delight,
 And signed six commentators overnight;
 He sold their outrage, carefully prepared,
 To every broadcast channel unimpaired.

"For anger," said the merchant god, "is gold,
 And certainty grows dearer when it's sold;
 A measured judgment rarely pays its way,
 But righteous fury sells throughout the day."

Then Zeus, who watched the endless shouting spread,
Placed both his mighty hands upon his head:
“When men know nothing, why this mighty sound?”
“Because,” said Hermes, “advertisers have been found.”

VI. THE GUARDIOLA BEFORE THE STORM

WITHIN THE City fortress, calm and bright,
Stood Pep, the master of the passing fight;
His brow was furrowed, yet his vision clear,
For neither ban nor rumour conquered fear.

Around him waited warriors of renown,
Who long had fought to wear the English crown;
Their boots were sharpened, minds prepared for play,
Yet Europe’s gates seemed barred along the way.

Then Pep addressed them in the changing room,
Beneath the shadow of impending doom:
“My friends, a battle rages out of sight,
Beyond the line where footballers unite.

“We cannot settle ledgers with a pass,
Nor tackle legal arguments on grass;
We cannot press an audit into flight,
Or score against a regulatory rite.

“But while the jurists argue night and day,
There still remains a beautiful game to play;
Let every movement answer with its art,
And every player give his honest heart.”

Then Ares, hearing from the cloudy dome,
Declared, “At last, a speech that brings me home!”
He gripped his spear and shouted with delight,
“Now send these accountants out to fight!”

But Pep continued, patient in his place,
 “The ball must travel quicker through the space;
 When pressure comes, create another line,
 And let the rhythm of our play define.”

Thus spoke the master, steady in the storm,
 While lawyers gathered in another form;
 And Zeus observed, with grudging admiration,
 “He coaches better than my whole administration.”

VII. HERMES DISCOVERS THE PROFIT OF DISASTER

THEN HERMES flew beyond the Alps of snow,
 Where wealthy men and arbitration go;
 And found in Lausanne, beside a peaceful lake,
 A thriving market controversy could make.

He opened there a merchant’s shining stall,
 With legal robes and fountain pens for all;
 He sold objections, arguments, and writs,
 And pocket handkerchiefs for anxious fits.

“Appeals!” he cried. “The finest in the land!
 Prepared by scholars with a steady hand!
 We offer hope, though guarantees are few,
 And charge by every document we review!”

He sold a bronze appeal to poorer kings,
 With extra fees for notarising things;
 A silver tier included expert views,
 And golden clients got more comfortable shoes.

His platinum package came with three degrees,
 Four counsels and unlimited hotel fees;
 And should the judges ask a question twice,
 The second answer bore a separate price.

Athena found him counting piles of gold,
And watched his little business plan unfold:
“Is justice merely merchandise to thee,
A market serving wealth instead of plea?”

“Not so,” he said, “for every client may
Obtain the finest counsel, should he pay;
And equal justice is my sacred creed,
Provided equal funds are guaranteed.”

Then Zeus looked down upon the thriving trade,
And asked what fortune Hermes there had made;
“Enough,” he said, “to sponsor half the sky,
And buy the thunderbolts you throw awry.”

VIII. THE JOURNEY TO THE COURT BESIDE THE LAKE

BEYOND THE mountains capped with ancient snow,
Where secret rivers through the valleys flow,
There stood the court whose judgment all would seek,
More feared than oracles of ancient Greek.

No marble giant guarded its retreat,
No bronze-clad hoplites thundered through the street;
Its solemn guardians bore a quieter art,
And measured every clause and every part.

There City brought its challenge to the ban,
Its lawyers bearing every argument they can;
And UEFA came, its earlier judgment sealed,
To see what weight the evidence revealed.

For three June days the mighty causes met,
With claims and counterclaims before them set;
No chariots crushed the enemy in dust,
But witnesses faced questions of their trust.

The lawyers marched with documents in ranks,
And cited rules concerning corporate banks;
They drew their daggers fashioned out of law,
And found exceptions hidden in a clause.

One warrior cried, "Objection to that page!"
Another answered, "See the previous stage!"
And Zeus, who followed from Olympus high,
Declared, "I'd rather watch an eagle die."

Athena smiled. "The questions may be dry,
But careful minds must ask the how and why;
For justice neither yields to wealth nor hate,
And complicated truths require debate."

The sun descended on the Alpine crest,
And neither army claimed the final test;
While Hermes counted every legal hour,
And Ares begged for someone to use power.

IX. THE ARGUMENT OF ATHENA AND ARES

THEN ARES paced the halls of cloud and stone,
Disgusted with a war whose blades were none;
He challenged wise Athena to declare
How such a battle could be fought as fair.

"No warrior bleeds! No citadel is stormed!
No champion by a fatal blow transformed!
Where are the shields, the trumpets, and the dead?
I see a mountain made of paper instead!"

Athena raised her spear of silver light,
And spoke as one who understood the fight:
"Not every war is won with iron force,
Nor every quarrel needs a bloody course.

“A rule without enforcement is a jest,
But judgment without proof corrupts the test;
The rich deserve no privilege to deceive,
Yet must not suffer simply through belief.

“Consider Troy, whose tragic towers burned,
And all the mighty lessons mortals learned;
Had Menelaus filed an early plea,
Perhaps his soldiers might have lived to see

“The olive groves, their children, and their wives,
Instead of wasting ten disastrous lives
Of harvests in a war across the sea,
Because no arbitration court was free.”

Then Ares roared, “You’d make Achilles wait,
While clerks considered Helen’s marital state!
A thousand ships assembled on the shore,
And all required to sign in triplicate before!”

“Perhaps,” she said, “yet justice has its cost,
And fewer kingdoms might thereby be lost.”
But Zeus declared, “Enough! I want the score!”
And Hermes answered, “That requires one document more.”

X. THE THREE FATES AND THE FIVE-YEAR THREAD

BEYOND THE stars, where time itself grows thin,
The Fates resumed their ancient task of spin;
And Clotho drew a golden football thread,
While Lachesis measured all the years ahead.

Atropos held her shears against the light,
And watched the legal armies through the night;
Her fingers rested on a darker strand,
That wound through statutes neither god had planned.

“Behold,” said Clotho, “what these mortals make:
A limitation running through the stake;
For allegations, ancient in their date,
May pass beyond the time allowed by fate.”

Then Lachesis, whose measuring never ceased,
Replied, “A vanished deadline is not peace;
For time may bar a judgment’s legal way,
Without deciding what occurred that day.”

Atropos laughed, her silver scissors raised,
And saw the baffled gods completely dazed:
“To mortals I have always given breath,
But now their paperwork is stronger than death!

“A hero once could flee the Trojan plain,
Yet not escape the years allotted to his reign;
Now allegations meet a stranger doom:
They reach their date and cannot leave the room.”

The Fates looked down on Etihad’s bright home,
Then turned their gaze to England’s greater dome;
And in the loom appeared a darker line,
Whose number glimmered like a dreadful sign.

One hundred, and fifteen more? No, count them well,
One hundred fifteen charges formed the spell;
But none of those three sisters dared declare
What later judges might establish there.

For future threads remained beneath the veil,
And fate itself withheld the final tale;
The shears were still, the golden fabric spread,
While all the gods awaited what was read.

THE THUNDERBOLTS OF UEFA
XI. THE JUDGMENT FROM LAUSANNE

THEN CAME July, when summer clothed the land,
And judgment travelled from the Alpine strand;
The thirteenth day unveiled the court's decree,
And stirred the hearts of Manchester City.

The European ban was swept away,
Its two long seasons vanished in a day;
The thirty-million-euro fine declined,
To ten, by written arbitration signed.

The court found most alleged financial wrongs
Not proved, or barred by time's enduring songs;
The charge of hidden equity disguised
As sponsorship was not there substantiated as surmised.

Yet one offence remained upon the page:
The failure to cooperate through that stage;
For this the reduced fine remained in place,
A wound, though not a ban, upon the case.

Thus neither simple cry could tell it all,
No spotless angel and no total fall;
The judgment answered questions, one by one,
And left a narrower sanction when 'twas done.

The heralds raced to publish what they knew,
Each choosing which conclusion should be true;
Some cried, "Acquittal! Every claim is dead!"
Some cried, "Condemned! Read nothing else!" instead.

Athena seized the document and sighed,
"Can no one read the reasons courts provide?
A legal finding speaks with measured breath,
And seldom grants the world its final death."

But Zeus, delighted by the ban's retreat,
Declared, "At last, an ending neat and sweet!"
The goddess answered, "No, great lord, beware:
The English league has questions of its share."

XII. THE RETURN OF THE BLUE BANNERS

IN MANCHESTER the summer breezes blew,
And streets awoke beneath their banners blue;
Old Arthur rose before the morning sun,
And heard the European exile had been undone.

He placed his glasses on his weathered face,
And read the ruling at a careful pace;
Then called his grandson, standing by the door,
"Well, lad, it seems we're travelling once more!"

The grandson asked, "And what about the fine?"
"Ten million euros, so the papers opine;
It's dearer than a pie and season seat,
But less than missing Europe's grand elite."

"Did City win on every point?" he said.
Old Arthur frowned and slowly shook his head:
"No, lad, the judgment isn't quite that clean;
There's more to any ruling than the scene.

"They've lifted up the ban and cut the sum,
But found their cooperation rather glum;
Some charges lacked the evidence required,
While other matters legally expired.

"That's neither quite the story fans will tell,
Nor quite the tale the rival fans will sell;
For football men enjoy a simple shout,
And hate a paragraph that sorts things out."

The grandson grinned. "You've read the whole appeal?"
"Enough to know what headlines don't reveal;
And if I read another hundred pages more,
I'll miss the match and fall asleep by four."

Then Arthur raised his old blue scarf on high,
And watched a bank of summer clouds drift by;
"For better days or worse, I'll stand my ground,
Where City shirts and honest hopes are found."

XIII. THE WRATH OF THE KING OF THUNDER

THEN ZEUS assembled all Olympus' court,
To hear the strange conclusion of the sport;
And when Athena gave the case its due,
His wrath erupted through the heavens blue.

"Explain," he cried, "how such a mighty blow
Could strike, then disappear like melting snow!
If thunderbolts may be appealed this way,
My enemies will sue me every day!"

"Great Lord," replied the wisdom-bearing maid,
"An appeal exists to test the judgment made;
Its object is not merely to reverse,
But guard against a sentence that is worse."

"Then who," he cried, "shall arbitrate my storm?
What court can make a thunderbolt conform?
Must lightning give its reasons when it strikes,
And seek permission from the mountain pikes?"

Then Hermes bowed and gave a cheerful smile,
"I've drafted your compliance forms meanwhile;
For every bolt launched from the heavenly dome,
We charge a fee for verifying where it roams."

“And what,” asked Zeus, “is this proposed expense?”
“A trifling sum for legal self-defence;
With premium protection, mighty sire,
You’re covered even when you set the clouds on fire.”

Ares exclaimed, “By all the blood of Mars,
I’ve watched men battle underneath the stars;
Yet never have I seen a crueller fate
Than warriors waiting while their lawyers litigate!”

And Zeus, exhausted by the endless plea,
Declared, “From now, no clerk shall govern me!
Let thunder fall, let mighty oceans rise,
I’ll not submit my storms to compromise!”

Yet when his bolt began its downward flight,
Athena raised one finger in the light:
“That cloud lies over Switzerland, my king.”
Zeus stopped. “Then best not risk another thing.”

XIV. THE SHADOW OF THE HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN

BUT HIGH beyond the mortal courts and kings,
The Fates had fastened darker, heavier strings;
For though the European storm withdrew,
Another thunderhead was growing blue.

Not from the Alpine courts would this one rise,
But England’s league beneath familiar skies;
There waited ledgers, questions, years of claim,
And accusations bearing City’s name.

The whispers travelled slowly through the land,
Like distant armies gathering on the sand;
No mortal yet could tell what proof might stand,
Or what conclusions judgment might command.

For charges do not write their own decree,
Nor does an accusation make a plea;
Yet nor does one tribunal's earlier word
Determine every matter yet unheard.

The Fates beheld the number through their veil,
A dreadful sum within the coming tale;
One hundred fifteen, written dark and plain,
Would summon countless arguments again.

And Clotho whispered, "See the threads increase."
While Lachesis replied, "There comes no peace."
Atropos held her scissors in the air,
And said, "The ending is not written there."

Far down below, the football world resumed,
Its floodlit stages glittered and perfumed;
The champions trained, the rival kingdoms planned,
And Pep again drew passing routes by hand.

Old Arthur watched the evening shadows fall,
And heard his grandson kicking at a ball;
"Whatever happens, lad, remember this:
A verdict is not something you can wish."

The boy replied, "Then what is left to do?"
"Watch City play, and let the facts come through;
For trophies aren't a substitute for truth,
Though I should have preferred that in my youth."

And high Olympus heard his simple creed,
While Athena marked the wisdom of his deed;
For neither golden treasure, fame, nor might
Could make a wrongful judgment turn to right.

Then Zeus arose, his ancient sceptre raised,
And through the darkened firmament he gazed;
"No final word? No ending to this war?
Then what in heaven have we gathered for?"

The answer came from Fate's mysterious loom,
Across the chambers of the gathering gloom:
"The gods may quarrel, mortal kingdoms fall,
But every reckoning must answer to its call."

So let the trumpets sound through field and sky,
Let rival empires lift their standards high;
The European thunder had rolled away,
Yet England's storm prepared another day.

And where the golden threads and shadows met,
The Cityad's greater trial awaited yet;
For wealth had built a kingdom vast and strong,
And now the world would ask what had gone wrong.

The Muse grew silent; all Olympus stirred,
And through the storm a darker drum was heard;
The thirteenth book descended into night,
As England's gathering legions came in sight.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XIII
The Thunderbolts of UEFA

B O O K X I V

*The Mustering of the
Hundred and Fifteen*

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Dreadful History of the Premier League's Great Accusation, the Awakening of the Accountants, the Summoning of One Hundred and Fifteen Charges, and the Discovery That the Trojan War Might Have Been Settled More Quickly Had Both Armies Employed Chartered Accountants.

I. THE MUSE SUMMONS THE ARMIES OF THE LEDGER

SING, MUSE, of England's long and gathering storm,
Of laws that took a fearful, martial form;
Of gilded kingdoms, crowned with football fame,
And parchment armies marching in their name.

Sing of the men whose weapons were not steel,
But balance sheets that made the wealthy kneel;
Whose trumpets were the clacking of the keys,
Whose battle cries were legal guarantees.

For Troy had known the clash of bronze and shield,
And Agincourt the blood upon the field;
But England now prepared a stranger fight,
Where auditors advanced by candlelight.

No Trojan horse approached the City's gate,
No Persian fleet conveyed the hand of fate;
Instead arrived, beneath a leaden heaven,
The documents of Twenty-Twenty-Seven.

Yet backward must our solemn story go,
To trace the roots from which these troubles grow;
For long before the gathering judgment came,
The League had questioned Manchester's great name.

Through seasons nine the allegations ran,
From when the wealthy City's rise began;
From Two Thousand Nine to Eighteen's final day,
They sought the source of gold that came its way.

And after years of argument and doubt,
The mighty League at last sent heralds out;
A scroll appeared, more feared than Hector's lance,
And left the nation's commentators in a trance.

One hundred fifteen accusations stood,
Like soldiers drawn from parchment, ink, and wood;
And every paragraph, in orderly array,
Prepared to march against the men in blue that day.

Then from Olympus Zeus surveyed the sight,
And called the immortals to behold the fight:
"A hundred fifteen! What extraordinary zeal!
Why not a thousand, if they love appeal?"

The Muse replied, with solemn, measured tone,
"Great kings may raise a charge, but proof must still be shown;
And though the multitude may cause alarm,
A number is not evidence of harm."

II. THE SIXTH DAY OF FEBRUARY

UPON THE sixth of February's frost,
When winter ruled and summer seemed long lost,
In Twenty-Twenty-Three the League proclaimed
The breaches that it said the club had framed.

Its statement crossed the kingdom like a flame,
And summoned every rival by his name;
The heralds read the catalogue aloud,
While thunder gathered over every crowd.

They spoke of revenue and sponsored gold,
Of information accurately told;
Of contracts, costs, and duties to report,
And whether truth had reached the league's own court.

They spoke of payments made to those who led,
And what the books recorded, showed, or said;
Of European rules and English law,
And duties owed to those who sought to draw

From countless ledgers answers to their plea,
And whether City gave them faithfully;
The charges ranged across the changing years,
And shook the hearts of rivals, fans, and peers.

Then Hermes counted charges on his hand,
And found his fingers quite unequal to demand;
He borrowed those of Ares, ten times more,
And still required an abacus to score.

"One hundred fifteen!" cried the merchant god,
"Such numbers make the common mortal nod;
But should they all require a lawyer's fee,
The legal profession shall own the land and sea!"

Athena stood before the gathered throne,
And spoke with calm that wisdom calls its own:
"These charges are assertions to be tried,
Not truths by mere announcement certified.

"The details matter, every rule and year,
And what the documents establish must be clear;
For justice cannot count upon applause,
But weighs the evidence beneath the laws."

Then Zeus, who hated speeches overlong,
Declared, "Must every charge possess its own sad song?
I only wished to know who won the match,
And now they're questioning the sponsorship of the patch!"

III. THE GRAND MUSTER OF THE ACCOUNTANTS

FROM LONDON marched the League's imposing host,
Its auditors arranged from coast to coast;
They wore no helmets forged in ancient flame,
But spectacles engraved with company name.

Their armour shone with regulation grey,
Their polished briefcases concealed the fray;
Each carried sharpened pencils at his side,
And spreadsheets wide enough to cross the Clyde.

The first battalion marched beneath a sign:
"ACCURATE REPORTING OF THE REVENUE LINE."
The second bore a banner trimmed in red:
"DISCLOSE THE CONTRACTS AND THE SUMS YOU'VE SPREAD."

The third advanced with measured, solemn tread,
And asked what coaches earned and who had paid;
The fourth, a fierce battalion armed with files,
Had marched through five investigations' worth of miles.

Behind them came the mighty legal train,
With carts of documents across the plain;
So great their stores, so vast their solemn load,
They clogged the kingdom's ancient southern road.

Ares observed this bureaucratic parade,
And watched the warriors bearing no sharp blade;
"Where are the horses? Where the shields of brass?
Why do these men require a printer pass?"

Then Hermes laughed and pointed to the rear,
“Behold the fiercest regiment marching here!
The senior counsel, worth a king’s estate,
Who charges even when obliged to wait.”

Their general wore a tie of deepest blue,
And carried legislation worn right through;
He raised a finger, solemn as a priest,
And called the motion of the army east.

“Forward! Let every exhibit be displayed!
Let no unnumbered appendix invade!
Maintain the chain of custody throughout,
And stamp each photocopy beyond doubt!”

Thus marched the host, precise in every part,
A war conducted through the filing art;
And Zeus declared, disgusted at the scene,
“The dead at Troy had never looked so keen.”

IV. THE CITY FORTRESS RECEIVES THE NEWS

WITHIN THE Etihad’s resplendent wall,
The herald’s voice resounded through the hall;
The club’s defenders gathered, rank on rank,
While lawyers opened folders from the bank.

No player stood accused of scoring wrong,
No referee disputed City’s song;
Yet victories gained beneath the floodlit sky
Now faced a controversy none could simply pass by.

The charges touched the running of the crown,
The sums that built the mighty football town;
And City answered with a firm denial,
Prepared to take its arguments to trial.

Its champions stood beneath the banners bright,
And heard the gathering rumours of the fight;
For on the grass they knew their proper foe,
But could not mark an audit moving slow.

Then Pep, whose football mind had conquered space,
Looked on the papers with a puzzled face:
“I understand the movement of the ball,
And how eleven men can press a wall.

“But tell me how to press a legal clause,
Or turn possession into written laws;
For if I pass a document around,
It does not open spaces on the ground.”

The lawyers answered, bowing at his feet,
“Your passing game, great master, is complete;
But ours requires a rather different art,
Where every motion has a numbered counterpart.”

Thus stood two armies, far apart in skill,
One trained to score, the other to contest a bill;
And over all the Etihad’s bright dome,
The storm advanced upon the champions’ home.

V. OLD ARTHUR AND THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

WITHIN HIS usual public-house retreat,
Old Arthur took his customary seat;
His grandson placed the latest news beside
The battered scarf he wore with lifelong pride.

“Grandad,” he said, “the number’s very high.
Does that establish what they’re guilty by?”
Old Arthur frowned and stirred his morning tea,
“Not unless counting makes a fact of what you see.”

“I once saw City lose by eight to one,
And still maintain the afternoon was fun;
But even I could see the goals were scored,
Without an expert’s affidavit stored.”

“Then shouldn’t City answer what was charged?”
“Aye, lad, and let the evidence be enlarged;
But accusations must be tested in the light,
Or else the loudest voice decides what’s right.”

A commentator flickered on the screen,
Declaring what a judgment ought to mean;
He’d scarcely read the rules of football play,
Yet knew the whole financial case that day.

Old Arthur pointed sharply with his spoon,
“That fellow’s reached his verdict rather soon;
Last Sunday he confused a corner kick
With something done by goalkeepers to waste a tick.”

The grandson laughed, “And what would you decree?”
“I’d put the truth before the rivalry;
And give the lawyers time to have their say,
Though preferably before my dying day.”

“Could you accept a judgment against blue?”
“If evidence establishes it true;
A faithful fan may love his team outright,
Without insisting every act was right.”

Thus spoke old Arthur, weathered by the years,
Who knew that love could coexist with fears;
And in that little tavern, dim and small,
There lived more wisdom than in half the pundits’ hall.

VI. THE ASSEMBLY OF RIVAL KINGS

AT ANFIELD, crimson lords surveyed the sky,
At Old Trafford the banners rose on high;
At Stamford Bridge the silver trumpets rang,
At Arsenal the gathered armour sang.

The rival kingdoms met in crowded state,
And argued what should be the City's fate;
Some called for mighty fines of royal gold,
And others wished the ancient titles sold.

One herald cried, "Remove their every crown!"
Another shouted, "Send their kingdom down!"
A third proposed, in rhetoric sublime,
"Relegate them backwards through the depths of time!"

"To where?" a puzzled minister replied,
"The football leagues have limits to their side."
"Then build another league beneath the ground,
And keep demoting till the lowest one is found!"

A merchant lord from distant kingdoms came,
And spoke of sporting justice without shame;
He'd spent a fortune on his private team,
But called another owner's wealth extreme.

Athena watched the grand hypocrisy,
And wondered at this strange aristocracy;
For when a wealthy rival grows too strong,
His riches suddenly become a moral wrong.

Yet others spoke with greater care and thought,
"The rules must govern every club that's bought;
A competition cannot long remain
If wealth alone determines every gain."

Thus fair objections mingled with the spite,
As rival kingdoms gathered for the fight;
And Zeus declared, observing all the scene,
“There’s less goodwill here than in ancient Mycenae’s queen.”

VII. HERMES SELLS THE COMING CATASTROPHE

NOW HERMES saw a market newly made,
And spread his glittering merchandise for trade;
He offered crisis maps and legal charts,
And shirts proclaiming what the judgment starts.

He printed banners for the rival crowd,
With every accusation written large and loud;
He printed City’s answers, blue and clear,
And sold both sets throughout the football year.

“For every charge,” he said, “there’s merchandise,
And every possible decision has its price;
The wealthy buy protection from the storm,
The angry buy a slogan in good form.”

He sold subscriptions promising the date
On which the great commission might dictate;
But when the promised hour had passed away,
He charged subscribers for another day.

Ares approached with purse and battle spear,
And asked, “When shall the contest first appear?”
“Some years,” said Hermes, “may be occupied,
Before the fullest evidence is tried.”

“Some years!” cried Ares, almost sick with dread,
“At Troy, in ten, we’d filled the earth with dead!
A man might conquer Babylon and Rome,
Before these lawyers find their way back home!”

“Precisely!” Hermes answered, full of cheer,
 “And that’s why counsel bills increase each year;
 An army fights until its swords are spent,
 But legal wars continue while there’s rent.”

The merchant god then launched a weekly show,
 Explaining things no mortal claimed to know;
 Its title, Judgment Guaranteed by Noon,
 Was changed to Judgment Possibly Quite Soon.

And though no one could tell the final day,
 The revenues increased along the way;
 For in the market of impending doom,
 Uncertainty is what gives profit room.

VIII. THE PHILOSOPHY OF MONEY AND GLORY

THEN WISE Athena summoned Hermes near,
 And spoke of sporting justice, calm and clear:
 “Tell me, what makes a victory rightly won,
 When mighty wealth has purchased everyone?”

Hermes replied, “The finest players cost,
 And those who cannot pay are simply lost;
 A wealthy team may conquer through its skill,
 But silver helps to pay the training bill.”

“And if the rule restrains the owner’s gold?”
 “Then clever sponsors must be bought and sold;
 For football is a market, vast and wide,
 Where competition flourishes with pride.”

“But markets need agreements fairly kept,
 Or trust beneath their transactions shall have slept;
 A league where no one’s bound by common law
 Will soon discover what its riches draw.”

Then Ares interrupted with a shout,
“What earthly business is this talk about?
I’ve watched eleven warriors win with ten,
And seen the poorer army conquer men!”

Athena smiled. “That is the game’s delight,
That weaker sides may triumph in the fight;
Yet rules about accounts are made to keep
The debts from reaching mountains broad and steep.”

Then Zeus declared, “You argue without end!
May I propose a simpler way, my friend?
Let every club be given equal gold,
Then watch their owners hide it from the fold!”

The gods considered Zeus’s bright design,
And Hermes quickly drew a dotted line;
“An admirable thought, supreme and wise,
Provided I distribute the supplies.”

IX. THE TRIAL OF THE TROJAN ACCOUNTANTS

TO MOCK the mortal quarrel, Ares rose,
And staged a scene from ancient martial woes;
He summoned Hector, dressed in shining mail,
And set Achilles opposite the rail.

“Now let us try,” the war god proudly said,
“How lawyers might have changed the Trojan dead;
We charge Achilles with excessive force,
And Hector with an unregistered horse.”

Achilles cried, “My spear has conquered kings!”
The judge replied, “Please document these things.”
And Hector raised his sword with martial pride,
But found the court required it certified.

Then Agamemnon, lord of mighty Greece,
Declared his fleet entitled to release;
The clerk demanded proof of every ship,
And who had authorised the outward trip.

Odysseus stood and spoke of cunning Troy,
And called his wooden horse a clever ploy;
But Hermes found the beast had not declared
The soldiers and the cargo it had shared.

Athena ruled, "The horse cannot proceed,
Until its manifests record the need;
And all concealed personnel must state
The purpose of their journey through the gate."

The Trojans cheered; Achilles cursed his fate,
While Ares hurled his spear against the grate;
And Zeus, amused despite the legal pain,
Declared, "The Greeks might yet go home again!"

Thus ended Homer's war in half a day,
Except the court adjourned the case till May;
And though no warrior fell upon the plain,
The lawyers sent their invoices again.

X. THE THREADS OF THE IMPENDING JUDGMENT

FAR IN the chamber where the Fates reside,
The darker strands were stretching far and wide;
And Clotho turned the spindle in her hand,
And wove the fortunes of the football land.

The charges stood like sentries in a row,
Each with its different duty to bestow;
And Lachesis, who measures mortal years,
Observed how long the legal road appears.

“One hundred fifteen,” whispered Clotho then,
“A dreadful army drawn from ink and pen;
But numbers neither sanctify nor shame,
Until each allegation meets its claim.”

Atropos drew her silver shears apart,
And felt the tightening fibres of the heart;
“Some threads shall break and others may endure,
Yet only judgment finds what courts make sure.”

“But when?” cried Zeus across the silent dome,
“Must generations rise before they’re home?
Shall Arthur’s grandson, old and bent with age,
Still hear an expert arguing page by page?”

The Fates returned no answer to his plea,
For even gods must wait on history;
And through their woven darkness came a sight,
A chamber closed against the public light.

Within, the evidence would rise and fall,
And advocates debate before them all;
But no divine permission could disclose
What every confidential hearing chose.

Thus silence guarded what the world desired,
While rumours multiplied and patience tired;
And Fate resumed the slow, remorseless thread,
Beneath a sky of mingled blue and red.

XI. THE OATH OF THE FOOTBALL WARRIORS

BENEATH THE training ground’s autumnal skies,
Where modern heroes sought immortal prize,
The warriors gathered as the daylight waned,
And listened while the winter clouds complained.

Their labour was the game, their field the stage,
Not every item in a ledger's page;
And still they carried trophies in their dreams,
While doubt flowed round them in a hundred streams.

Then spoke a captain of the City host,
Whose heart belonged to victory above most:
"The crowd may judge before the judges speak,
And every rival may pronounce us weak;

"But none may say the goals were never struck,
Or that a passing move was merely luck;
Whatever comes in courts beyond our sight,
Our work remains to play the game outright."

And from Olympus Ares gave a cheer,
The sound of bronze resounding far and near;
For though the legal war was not his own,
He loved the courage footballers had shown.

Athena answered, "Keep their deeds distinct,
From what the club's accounts may have linked;
The players' skill can coexist with blame,
If later findings warrant such a name."

Thus neither false defence nor eager hate
Could settle what remained for courts of state;
And all the warriors turned toward the field,
Where boots, not documents, must be their shield.

XII. THE NIGHT BEFORE THE LONG CAMPAIGN

AS EVENING gathered round the City's towers,
The League prepared for months of legal hours;
Its counsel studied exhibits by lamplight,
Its rivals dreamed of judgment in the night.

Old Arthur walked beside his grandson home,
Beneath the stars that shone above the dome;
The boy looked toward the Etihad and said,
“Will all our football glory now be dead?”

“Nay, lad,” replied the veteran of the stand,
“Not every trophy melts at one command;
But neither must we turn away our eyes
If evidence should contradict our cries.

“The law must judge what law can truly show,
And we must live with what we come to know;
Yet while a ball can roll upon the green,
There’s football still to love in every scene.”

Above them Zeus raised up his mighty hand,
And thunder marched across the English land;
But wise Athena stayed his furious blow,
And bade him let the mortal judgment grow.

For ancient Troy had fallen through deceit,
And kings had cast their crowns before defeat;
But here no fate could yet be fully read,
No final sentence on the kingdom said.

The accountants shut their ledgers for the night,
The lawyers banked their fires against the light;
And through the land, from Anfield to the Tyne,
Men waited for the judgment’s promised sign.

Then Clotho drew one final thread of gold,
And Lachesis measured stories still untold;
While Atropos, beneath the starry height,
Prepared her shears but did not close them tight.

And thus the Hundred Fifteen took the field,
With neither final victory nor yield;
The courtroom gates stood waiting in the rain,
And all the world prepared to hear the strain.

The Muse descended from Olympus' throne,
And whispered what the ancient years have shown:
"The strongest fortress built of wealth and fame
Must one day answer questions in its name."

Yet truth is not the servant of the crowd,
Nor justice merely thunder spoken loud;
And so the Cityad advanced once more,
Toward England's greatest bureaucratic war.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XIV
The Mustering of the Hundred and Fifteen

B O O K X V

The Tribunal of the Hidden Scrolls

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Solemn Account of the Secret Hearings, the Great Battle of Evidence, the Lamentations of the Pundits, the Commission's Terrible Judgment, and the Appeal That Threatened to Outlive the Gods Themselves.

I. THE MUSE DESCENDS INTO THE COURT OF SHADOWS

SING, MUSE, of chambers guarded from the day,
Where football's golden empire stood at bay;
Where neither crowd nor trumpet found a place,
And learned advocates prepared their case.

Sing of the hearings sealed from mortal sight,
Of ancient contracts summoned to the light;
Of witnesses whose memories were weighed,
And claims against the records carefully laid.

For once the oracle at Delphi spoke,
And kings discerned their destinies in smoke;
But now the secrets of the sporting earth
Required accountants to determine worth.

The warriors marched without a shield or sword,
Their only weapon was the written word;
And captains who commanded mighty fees
Advanced behind their leather briefcases.

The court stood silent, solemn as a tomb,
And no reporter entered in the room;
For justice sometimes works beyond the crowd,
Though rumour grows more confident and loud.

Then Zeus descended from the heavenly sphere,
And asked that all the evidence appear;
But at the entrance stood a clerk who said,
“Your Majesty, your name is not accredited.”

“Not accredited!” roared the mighty king,
“Who taught these mortals such a monstrous thing?
I am the lord of thunder, storm, and rain!”
“Then kindly join the queue,” replied the plain

And unimpressed official by the door,
Who’d heard a thousand claims of power before;
Thus Zeus, whose thunder shook the seas apart,
Received a numbered ticket and a chart.

II. THE LAWYERS TAKE THEIR BATTLE STATIONS

WITHIN THE chamber stood the learned array,
Whose armour shone beneath the legal day;
Their weapons were citations, sharp and long,
Their banners bore the statutes of the strong.

The League advanced with allegations grave,
And City marshalled arguments to save
Its honour from the judgment being sought,
Contesting what the other army brought.

One counsel rose, commanding every ear,
And bade the court examine every year;
The other answered, calm before the test,
That claims require the evidence at best.

The witnesses were questioned, one by one,
Beneath a light more searching than the sun;
And documents of sponsorship and pay
Were gathered for the tribunal to weigh.

No armour rang, no soldier breathed his last,
But pages from the complicated past
Were lifted like the banners of a state,
And placed upon the scales of mortal fate.

Athena watched the battle with delight,
For here the combatants employed their might
Not simply to proclaim what they believed,
But argue what the evidence achieved.

Yet Hermes looked upon the swelling pile,
And gave a satisfied, commercial smile:
“Each page is worth a little golden fee,
And every question brings a charge to me.”

III. THE MIGHTY HEARING OF TWO THOUSAND TWENTY-FOUR

WHEN AUTUMN’S mist descended on the plain,
And summer’s triumphs yielded to the rain,
The long-awaited hearing came at last,
To reckon with the questions of the past.

The advocates assembled for the fight,
Their documents prepared through many a night;
And England held its breath beneath the dome,
While countless sports reporters worked from home.

No trumpet announced the evidence complete,
No herald broadcast judgments to the street;
The hearings passed behind the guarded wall,
And silence answered journalists who’d call.

Then Zeus demanded, "What have they revealed?
What victories were scored upon that field?"
Athena answered, "Nothing public yet;
The panel must consider what was set."

"But surely," thundered Zeus, "the gods should know!"
"The law," she said, "does not require it so;
And speculation, loud though it may sound,
Cannot replace the facts a court has found."

So Zeus returned, dissatisfied, to heaven,
And asked for bulletins at half past seven;
But Hermes sold him updates by the hour,
Each one containing roughly equal power

To tell the king what he had known before,
Which was considerably little, nothing more;
And as the months continued on their way,
The merchant's subscription profits grew each day.

IV. THE WAR OF THE TELEVISION ORACLES

ACROSS THE kingdom rose a mighty cry,
From pundits who could never tell a lie;
Or so their advertisements seemed to claim,
As rival experts argued over blame.

One oracle declared the club was lost,
Another calculated every future cost;
A third predicted exile from the game,
And published fourteen different dates for shame.

A fourth foretold complete and swift release,
And promised English football lasting peace;
The fifth, who had predicted both before,
Returned to say the question needed more.

Their knowledge flowed like rivers to the sea,
Though none could see the evidence or plea;
Their confidence increased with every hour,
And ignorance appeared their greatest power.

Old Arthur watched their faces on the screen,
And muttered words of discontent between
The advertisements selling lager, cars,
And dreams of football ownership on Mars.

“That fellow said the judgment came last June,
Then Christmas, then the middle of the moon;
If he could score predictions like a goal,
He’d miss an empty net from six feet whole.”

His grandson laughed and asked what Arthur knew,
“Less than I want, and more than pundits do;
For I can tell when ignorance is plain,
And don’t demand a salary to explain.”

Thus spoke the old man, seasoned in defeat,
Who’d watched more football from his battered seat
Than all the polished television sages,
Whose expertise was chiefly changing pages.

V. THE GOLDEN AGE OF LEGAL CONSULTATION

THEN HERMES summoned bankers from the West,
And legal scholars wearing robes of best;
He built a mighty temple near the court,
Where wealthy men could purchase expert thought.

Above its doors a golden notice shone:
“THE CLIENT PAYS UNTIL THE CASE IS GONE.”
And underneath, in smaller letters, stood:
“AN APPEAL MAY MAKE THE BUSINESS EXTRA GOOD.”

He offered packages of expert skill,
With every consultation adding to the bill;
And should the judgment prove the client wrong,
A second set of fees would come along.

An anxious lord approached the gilded gate,
And asked how long a case might litigate;
“How many years?” he whispered, filled with dread,
“That depends upon your funding,” Hermes said.

Ares stormed into the merchant’s hall,
And shook its painted portraits from the wall:
“I’ve never seen so cowardly a war!
No fighting, just expenses evermore!”

Then Hermes bowed before the martial god,
And answered with a courteous little nod:
“The ancient warrior conquered with his steel;
The modern one discovers how to appeal.”

“At Troy,” cried Ares, “we could conquer land!”
“At law,” said Hermes, “you can countermand;
And where your soldiers perish in the dust,
Our lawyers carry on until they must.”

Then Zeus, observing from the upper sky,
Declared, “At last I understand the why!
The gods once made the world with thunderous force;
But lawyers bill the world for its divorce.”

VI. THE PASSAGE OF THE WEARY YEARS

THE SEASONS passed; the turning heavens spun,
And countless football victories were won;
Yet still the question haunted every crown,
And cast its legal shadow on the town.

The City faithful gathered through the years,
And rivals alternated hope with jeers;
While newspapers, with solemn words of dread,
Predicted every judgment yet unread.

Then Clotho watched the calendar grow old,
And wove the passing months in threads of gold;
While Lachesis, who measured mortal time,
Declared the wait itself approached a crime.

Atropos laughed and polished silver shears,
“I’ve closed the lives of kings in fewer years;
And yet these lawyers, undisturbed by fate,
Can make a single judgment hibernate.”

Then Zeus addressed the gods with righteous fear,
“Will I be living when the end is here?”
Athena answered, “You are deathless, sire.”
“Then I,” said Zeus, “must suffer and perspire!”

Old Arthur, meanwhile, watched another game,
And spoke of City’s complicated fame;
“Some men have spent their lives on this affair,
And half the nation thinks it holds a chair.”

His grandson asked, “Could judgment ever end?”
“It must, unless the lawyers recommend
A further hearing on the meaning of the word
‘Conclusion,’ which I’ve heard is often heard.”

So time itself became a weary guest,
While football’s mighty kingdom knew no rest;
And all the world awaited that great day
When judges finally had something firm to say.

VII. THE COMMISSION'S THUNDEROUS FINDINGS

AT LENGTH, in Twenty-Twenty-Six's autumn air,
A dreadful message travelled everywhere;
The independent commission's findings came,
And shook the foundations of the City's fame.

Its lengthy judgment found substantial wrong,
In records running through the seasons long;
Of financial information falsely shown,
And commercial revenue not rightly known.

The commission found concealed support and pay,
And breaches stretching through a long array;
The number of its findings, vast and grave,
Sent fresh commotion through the sporting wave.

The club rejected what the panel found,
And vowed to challenge the decision's ground;
No final sanction yet defined the fall,
And still an appeal could test the matter all.

But from the realm of football came the roar,
A greater uproar than the year before;
The newspapers proclaimed the judgment's weight,
While rivals speculated on City's fate.

Then Zeus, who heard the devastating cry,
Sent rolling thunder through the autumn sky;
"At last!" he shouted, "Something has been said!
And yet the final sentence lies ahead?"

Athena answered, "There remain the ways
By which a judgment may be tested in its days;
The finding matters, serious and clear,
But finality has not arrived just here."

And Ares, nearly fainting on his shield,
Cried, "Must the court return to the battlefield?
A Trojan siege could finish and renew,
Before these people settle what is due!"

VIII. THE COUNCIL OF THE BLUE KINGDOM

WITHIN THE City's halls the leaders met,
While darker clouds upon the towers were set;
Their lawyers gathered, grave before the board,
And laid the written judgment on the board.

"We shall contest these findings," came the cry,
"And seek an appeal before the matter's by;
The record must be tested and reviewed,
And legal arguments again pursued."

The club maintained its case against the charge,
And summoned advocates and counsel large;
For though the ruling shook its mighty name,
The right to challenge judgment still remained.

Outside, the supporters watched and heard,
And tried to understand the dreadful word;
For none could say what punishment might fall,
Or how the reckoning would touch them all.

Then Old Arthur looked upon the sky,
And saw his grandson standing sadly by:
"I'll not pretend that news is pleasing, lad,
Nor say the findings aren't exceedingly bad.

"But let the case proceed through every stage,
And let no anger substitute for page;
For though I wear my colours every day,
The truth is not a thing that fans can sway."

The grandson asked, "Can we still love the side?"
"Aye, lad, and keep your conscience open wide;
For men may cherish what the players do,
And still demand the club's accounts be true."

IX. THE ARGUMENT OF THE IMMORTALS

UPON OLYMPUS rose a furious debate,
Concerning wealth and justice, law and fate;
And Ares, champion of the martial field,
Declared no champion ought to yield.

"These footballers have battled through the rain,
And conquered every kingdom on the plain;
No spreadsheet dribbled past a guarding line,
Nor scored a goal with movement so divine!"

Athena rose and answered, calm and stern,
"Yet sports are governed by the rules they learn;
And what is proved beyond the playing ground
May bear upon the honours that are crowned.

"The deeds upon the grass remain their deeds,
The tackles, goals, and extraordinary speeds;
But institutions must account for gold,
And how the competition's rules were told."

Then Hermes raised a gold-encrusted scroll,
And spoke of revenue's eternal role:
"Without commercial wealth, what heroes rise?
Who purchases the boots and merchandise?"

Athena answered, "Commerce has its place,
But rules give competition lawful grace;
A kingdom cannot simply claim exemption,
Because its wealth has earned the world's attention."

Then Zeus declared, "The case has grown so vast,
Its future has devoured half the past;
And if the gods themselves cannot agree,
What hope remains for mortal punditry?"

X. THE GREAT DEBATE ABOUT THE TROPHIES

NOW RUMOURS travelled through the football land,
Of penalties that judgment might command;
Of points that could be taken from the score,
Of fines and sanctions, possibly much more.

Some spoke of titles stripped from mighty years,
And others called for exile, loss, and tears;
Yet none could say what final doom would stand,
While judgment and appeal remained at hand.

Then Hermes, ever watchful for a sale,
Produced commemorative cups without fail;
One bore the words, "THE TROPHY SHALL REMAIN,"
Another, "PLEASE RETURN IT ON THE TRAIN."

He sold the first to Manchester's proud crowd,
The second to the rival kingdoms loud;
And when Athena asked which claim was right,
He answered, "Both are selling well tonight."

Old Arthur watched the market's cheerful trade,
And wondered how such fortunes could be made;
"Apparently," he said, "you needn't score,
To make a profit out of football anymore."

The grandson grinned. "But what becomes of history?"
"That's something still wrapped up in mystery;
We cannot unkick goals or unsing songs,
But courts may weigh the clubs' financial wrongs."

Thus glory and accountability stood
In uneasy company, as often mortal good;
For trophies shine, yet records must be fair,
And judgment cannot rest on loyal prayer.

XI. THE APPEAL ASCENDS THE MOUNTAIN

THEN CITY took the road of legal right,
And challenged the commission's findings in the fight;
Its advocates prepared the next great plea,
And sought another judgment yet to be.

The heralds carried news across the land,
As fresh battalions gathered close at hand;
And Hermes opened new consulting rooms,
And sold fresh forecasts of impending dooms.

Athena watched the appeal's approaching day,
And bade the other gods refrain from sway:
"Let evidence and law determine all,
And no immortal thunder influence the call."

Zeus frowned and clasped his sceptre to his breast,
"Must I remain impartial through this test?"
"Indeed," she said, "for justice has no crown
That bends according to which club is down."

"But I have always ruled with mighty force!"
"And that," she said, "is not a legal source."
Then Hermes smiled and whispered to the king,
"I could arrange a consultation on the thing."

The Fates stood silent at their ancient loom,
And watched the threads extend beyond the room;
For where the commission's judgment met appeal,
No final destiny was theirs to seal.

XII. THE LAMENT OF THE AGING SUPPORTER

AT MANCHESTER the evening bells were heard,
And through the streets a cold October stirred;
Old Arthur sat before a fading fire,
While rain beat softly on the rooftop spire.

His grandson brought the latest printed news,
With charges, rulings, sanctions, and reviews;
And placed the pages gently by his chair,
Beside the old blue scarf he treasured there.

“I’ve lived,” said Arthur, “through the darkest years,
Through bitter defeats and almost endless tears;
I watched us fall where smaller kingdoms dwell,
And thought I’d seen the deepest sporting hell.

“Then came the money, talent, joy, and fame,
And suddenly the world respected City’s name;
We climbed from misery to the stars above,
And gave a million reasons for our love.

“But now the history of all those years
Is argued through a thousand legal fears;
And I must hear some polished fellow say
That nothing good was genuine in our play.”

The grandson answered, “Surely that’s not true,
That every pass was purchased through and through?”
“Of course not, lad; those footballers had skill,
Their feet obeyed a mighty human will.

“But if the club has broken what it owed,
The judges must determine where that road
May lead, according to the rules and proof;
No honest man can call himself aloof.”

“And will you still be City till the end?”
“Aye, lad, for football’s been my lifelong friend;
But loyalty that cannot face a fact
Is something other than a noble act.”

The old man raised his glass toward the night,
And watched the streetlamps trembling in the light;
“No matter what the mighty lawyers say,
I’ll love the game when I can watch them play.”

XIII. THE FATES REVEAL THE UNFINISHED TAPESTRY

ABOVE THE world the three immortal Fates
Resumed their vigil over sporting states;
And Clotho drew a silver thread of law,
While Lachesis surveyed what judgment saw.

Atropos, who held the final shears,
Beheld the tangled story of the years;
The trophies glittered, bright as morning gold,
While darker threads of questions still unrolled.

“Behold,” said Clotho, “what ambition brings,
When mortal football clubs grow rich as kings;
The brighter grows the crown beneath the sun,
The longer grows the shadow it has spun.”

Lachesis answered, “Yet the shadow’s length
Is not itself a measure of its strength;
For allegations, findings, and appeal
Are stages of the law’s enduring wheel.”

And Atropos, her ancient shears held high,
Observed the rival banners in the sky:
“Not yet shall I divide the final thread,
Nor grant the future to the words already said.

“For justice must complete the road it takes,
And bear the weight of whatever ruling wakes;
The city waits, the football kingdoms call,
But final judgment has not answered all.”

Then Zeus looked upward from his marble throne,
And heard the distant thunder of the unknown;
And though his soul delighted in a fight,
He dreaded yet another legal night.

“Will nothing end?” the mighty monarch cried.
“The path remains,” the solemn Fates replied;
“And though the world grows weary of the wait,
The next appeal must travel toward its fate.”

XIV. THE EPIC CLOSE: THE LAW ABOVE THE CROWN

SO PASSED the night across the English plain,
And cold stars glittered through the autumn rain;
The league’s great scrolls lay bound beneath their seals,
While justice turned upon its ancient wheels.

No sword could cut the tangled legal knot,
No goal erase the questions time had brought;
No wealthy king could make the findings fade,
Nor crowd determine how the law was weighed.

The mighty clubs stood watch from tower and wall,
Their fortunes bound to outcomes not yet all
Determined by the tribunals of the land,
Where careful evidence must take its stand.

And Arthur slept beside his faded scarf,
Remembering football’s joys, its tears, its laugh;
While in his dreams the younger City rose,
And faced the future, whatever fate bestows.

Then from the heavens came the Muse's song,
Of kingdoms glorious, fallible, and strong;
Of wealth that purchased splendour beyond measure,
And law that questioned how they gathered treasure.

For glory is a flame that burns the night,
But no bright flame alone determines right;
And justice, when it walks its patient way,
Must answer more than what the crowds will say.

Thus let the legal trumpets sound once more,
And summon counsel to the chamber door;
Let Zeus contain the lightning in his hand,
And Ares learn that documents may stand.

For greater arguments awaited still,
And rival kingdoms gathered on the hill;
The darkest chapter had not closed its page,
And football entered yet another age.

The silver shears of Atropos remained
Above the tapestry, their edges unstained;
For Fate would neither hurry nor decree
The outcome of the last appeal to be.

And in the far horizon's crimson light,
The armies saw another gathering fight;
Their banners lifted on the autumn breeze,
As thunder rolled across the northern seas.

Then spoke Athena, voice of wisdom clear,
"The next great battle's hour is drawing near;
Let neither gold nor hatred rule the day,
But let the law complete its rightful way."

And Zeus, at last subdued, surveyed the plain,
And heard the lawyers gathering again;
"At Troy," he sighed, "we slaughtered half the Greek,
Yet no one asked to adjourn until next week."

So ended this great book of legal strife,
Where football's glory met the law of life;
But still the Cityad's great song endured,
Its final destiny not yet secured.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XV

The Tribunal of the Hidden Scrolls

B O O K X V I

The Siege of the Etihad

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Terrible History of the Encirclement of Manchester, the March of the Rival Kingdoms, the Return of the Ancient War God, the Commercial Genius of Hermes, and the Discovery That a Football Fortress May Withstand a Thousand Strikers Yet Tremble Before One Chartered Accountant.

I. THE MUSE INVOKES THE SIEGE

SING, MUSE, of towers beneath a northern sky,
Where silver trophies caught the morning's eye;
Of Manchester, whose banners blue and bright
Had conquered kingdoms in the football fight.

Sing of the Etihad, that golden throne,
Where princes spent what kings had never known;
Where football moved with geometric grace,
And riches flowed through every gilded place.

Yet now no foreign striker led the charge,
No hostile fleet approached the kingdom large;
The armies gathering round the City's wall
Bore not a spear, but summonses for all.

For England's mighty League had brought its claim,
And found the champion kingdom much to blame;
Its independent judges had declared
That grave financial breaches had appeared.

The judgment stood, but City would appeal,
And challenge what the earlier court did seal;
No final sentence settled every score,
And rival kings demanded something more.

The gods beheld the gathering of the host,
From Merseyside to London's southern coast;
And Zeus, whose thunder crowned the heavens high,
Looked down upon the siege with anxious eye.

"By Hera's temper and Poseidon's foam!
They've brought a war to Manchester's own home!
At last," he cried, "a proper battle starts,
With shields and spears instead of legal charts!"

But wise Athena answered from her chair,
"These armies fight with arguments, beware;
The battlefield is not the sacred grass,
And no decree is won by shouting 'Pass!'"

Then Ares rose, his helmet flashing red,
And struck the marble columns with his tread;
"If football's highest kingdom must be tried,
Then let the finest warriors take a side!"

II. THE ARMIES OF THE RIVAL KINGDOMS

FROM ANFIELD marched the scarlet host of fame,
Whose ancient banners bore a glorious name;
Their songs recalled a thousand European nights,
And generations of magnificent fights.

From Old Trafford came an army stern and proud,
Though recent years had tested its great crowd;
Its veterans spoke of dynasties long gone,
And vowed that brighter victories would dawn.

From Arsenal the cannon banners flew,
Their soldiers marched in red, their officers in blue;
They spoke of discipline and patient play,
And dreamed of lifting City's crown away.

From Chelsea came a host in royal dress,
With purchased champions beyond all guess;
Their accountants carried ledgers thick and wide,
And hoped that no one asked to look inside.

From Newcastle's northern walls there came a band,
With wealthy patrons from a distant land;
And Hermes laughed to see their golden train,
For everyone approved of wealth when they might gain.

From Tottenham came a host of hopeful men,
Who promised they would surely rise again;
They carried maps of all the roads to fame,
Though none could find the final trophy game.

From Nottingham the forest banners rose,
Where older champions knew both highs and lows;
From Birmingham the Villa heralds cried,
That rules must bind the weakest and the pride.

Thus every kingdom took its proper place,
With solemn words of justice and disgrace;
Though some desired a fair and lawful trial,
And others simply hoped for City's exile.

Then Ares counted armies on the plain,
And found the scene magnificent again;
But when he asked who first would storm the gate,
They answered, "We are waiting for the date."

III. THE FIRST ASSAULT UPON THE WALLS

AT DAWN the rival trumpets shook the air,
And crimson standards fluttered everywhere;
The Etihad stood silent through the mist,
Its walls by northern autumn rain were kissed.

A thousand pundits gathered at the moat,
Each armed with an opinion and a quote;
Their voices rose in glorious disarray,
Proclaiming what the law was bound to say.

One shouted, "Strip the trophies from the hall!"
Another cried, "Relegate them one and all!"
A third demanded, waving high his hand,
"Send them to leagues beyond the sporting land!"

Then forth there came a learned advocate,
Who warned the crowd the matter must await
The hearing of the club's appeal in law,
And what its judges might conclude they saw.

The angry multitude began to groan,
For caution was a language scarcely known;
They'd come for thunder, fury, flame, and blood,
Not careful explanations of what stood.

Ares roared, "Then storm the sacred gate!
Why must your quarrels perpetually wait?"
Athena answered, "Because an appeal
Must test the evidence before it's made the seal."

"But what of all these banners?" Ares cried.
"They may remain," the goddess calm replied.
"And what of all the hostile battle chants?"
"They cannot alter facts by circumstance."

Then Zeus, who watched the fruitless martial sight,
Declared the siege a most peculiar fight;
For never had an army gathered there
To demand a ruling while refusing to prepare.

IV. THE GREAT COMMERCIAL SIEGE OF HERMES

NOW HERMES came upon the battleground,
And saw a fortune waiting to be found;
He raised a tent of purple, silk, and gold,
And offered every item that he sold.

“Approach!” he cried. “My splendid football friends!
The finest siege equipment never ends!
I’ve scarves announcing City’s certain fall,
And scarves predicting they shall beat you all!”

He sold supporters ceremonial spears,
And subscriptions to the latest legal fears;
He sold a map of every possible decree,
With premium forecasts at an extra fee.

His siege machinery was grand and new,
A catapult that hurled a legal view;
Its stones were made of tightly printed sheets,
And rolled beneath the rival armies’ feet.

He built a mighty wooden Trojan horse,
Then charged admission for a guided course;
But when the beast approached the City’s wall,
An officer required a source-of-funding call.

The wooden horse was stopped upon the road,
And asked to document its cargo load;
Its passengers were ordered to declare
Their beneficial ownership and share.

Thus all the ancient warriors trapped inside
Became involved in compliance far and wide;
And Odysseus, mighty master of deceit,
Was fined for failing to produce a receipt.

Then Hermes introduced his latest plan,
“A siege is not a single-payment span!
Why purchase victory at an enormous price,
When monthly instalments make the burden nice?”

Ares, who heard this terrible design,
Declared, “You’ve made a subscription of the line!
The ancient gods could conquer sea and shore,
But now you charge us just to enter war!”

V. THE BLUE DEFENDERS

WITHIN THE walls the City banners waved,
And every gate remained securely paved;
The players gathered for their morning drill,
While law and rumour climbed the neighbouring hill.

Their modern general, Maresca, stood
Before the squad and spoke of football’s good:
“Let others argue where the judgment lies;
Our task is what the football pitch supplies.

“Press high, move swiftly, keep the passing true,
And wear the weight of battle dressed in blue;
We cannot kick a legal charge away,
But we can show the world that we can play.”

Then Haaland, northern giant of the field,
Advanced with strength no mortal guard could yield;
And Doku, fleet as Hermes in his flight,
Prepared to turn a crowded wing to light.

Young Cherki, blessed with artistry and flair,
Could thread a pass through narrow corridors of air;
While all the host, though controversy grew,
Resolved to meet their sporting duties true.

Above the stadium Ares gave a shout,
“At last! Some warriors know what war’s about!”
But Athena raised a finger toward the ground,
“And let their football not obscure what’s found.”

For one great question concerned the club’s own books,
Not whether strikers finished splendid looks;
And sporting excellence, however grand,
Could not dissolve what lawful findings stand.

Yet neither could a verdict on accounts
Erase the skill through which a striker mounts
The heights of football, where a moment’s grace
Can send a hundred thousand hearts to space.

Thus two great struggles ran beside the wall,
The courtroom’s papers and the rolling ball;
And though the same blue kingdom faced them both,
They required different standards, proof, and oath.

VI. THE BATTLE OF ANFIELD

THEN CAME the clash beneath the Anfield sky,
Where crimson banners proudly floated high;
The hostile songs descended like the rain,
And City faced the ancient foe again.

For Liverpool, whose storied walls had seen
The greatest champions ever dressed in green
Or scarlet armour, gathered for the fight,
Determined to defend their native might.

The home crowd thundered accusation's name,
And called upon the visitors to shame;
But City answered not with legal cries,
They moved the ball beneath the autumn skies.

The contest burned through tackles, speed, and skill,
As rival legions sought to bend the will;
Then came the moment when a red card shone,
And one of Liverpool's fierce guards was gone.

The City host advanced against the ten,
And opened all the crimson gates again;
Then Haaland, like a thunderbolt of Thor,
Advanced and struck the first triumphant score.

The mighty northern striker raised his hand,
As thunder rolled across the football land;
Then Doku, swift as arrows through the air,
Completed City's second conquest there.

And Cherki, with a final stroke of art,
Drove one more dagger through the Anfield heart;
Three goals to none, the scoreboard proudly told,
A victory bright as newly burnished gold.

Yet Athena watched and gave a warning clear:
"This triumph settles nothing pending here;
Three goals establish who has won the day,
Not where disputed sponsorships should lay."

And Zeus replied, with understandable pain,
"Must every celebration end in vain?
I watch three goals and wish to shout with glee,
And someone mentions financial probity!"

VII. OLD ARTHUR CELEBRATES

IN MANCHESTER Old Arthur left his chair,
And sent his battered cap into the air;
“Three bloody goals! At Anfield! What a sight!
I’ve waited all these years for such delight!”

His grandson laughed and caught the flying hat,
“Grandad, you’ve frightened half the sleeping cat!”
“Then wake the other half and let him know
We’ve beaten Liverpool by three to zero!”

The television pundits solemnly discussed
The broader implications of financial trust;
Old Arthur turned the volume down and said,
“Can’t they discuss a football match instead?”

His grandson smiled. “But what about the case?”
“That legal storm has still its proper place;
Yet must each goal receive an audit’s frown,
Before a happy football fan may sit back down?”

“Then do you think we’re wholly free of blame?”
“I know we’ve won a mighty football game;
The legal questions travel different tracks,
And goals don’t prove the accuracy of facts.”

He raised his glass beneath the fading light,
And toasted every warrior in the fight;
“For all the years we suffered, poor and small,
A three-nil win still means a great deal after all.”

And high Olympus heard the veteran’s cheer,
And Zeus declared the sentiment sincere;
For gods and mortals understood at last
That joy may rise despite a troubled past.

VIII. ATHENA DEFENDS THE LAW

THEN ON Olympus rose a sharper cry,
As Ares pointed toward the crimson sky:
“Behold the mighty City army’s worth!
What greater proof is needed on this earth?”

Athena answered, “Goals are not receipts,
Nor tackles proof of truthful balance sheets;
The question here concerns a different claim,
And football skill cannot decide the same.”

“But justice,” Ares roared, “must surely praise
The warriors who have conquered all these days!”
“It may,” she said, “without confusing worth
With how the club accounted for its birth.”

Then Hermes entered with a golden scroll,
And claimed that wealth was football’s driving soul:
“Without immense investment, mighty teams
Would never rise beyond their modest dreams.”

Athena spoke, “Investment has its place,
And markets bring abundance, skill, and grace;
But all must understand the rules they sign,
Or competition loses its design.”

Zeus frowned. “And who designs these dreadful laws?
Why must a sponsorship require a cause?
In ancient times a king could give a chest
Of gold to any warrior he liked best!”

“The difference,” said Athena, “lies in rules,
And agreements made by grown men, not by fools;
A league may set conditions for its play,
But must enforce them fairly all the way.”

Then Zeus declared, "I've heard sufficient reason!
I'll think about it during next week's season."
And Hermes quickly wrote a treatise long
On why the god was simultaneously right and wrong.

IX. THE RIVAL KINGS DISPUTE THE PUNISHMENT

THE SIEGE continued through the northern rain,
And rival kings assembled once again;
They disputed what the eventual judgment ought
To do if City's lawful challenge came to naught.

One monarch demanded points be swept away,
Another spoke of trophies earned through play;
A third proposed the ultimate disgrace,
To drive the blue kingdom from its lofty place.

Yet some maintained that sanctions should be fair,
Proportionate to what the findings bear;
For punishment imposed without a scale
May turn the rule of law into a tale.

Then from the northern ramparts came a cry,
"Whatever happens, let the reasons satisfy!
The smaller clubs have suffered penalties before,
And justice must not guard the wealthy more."

Athena heard and nodded her assent,
For equal rules demand an equal intent;
Yet equal treatment also must allow
The differences that facts and statutes show.

Ares grew weary of the rival court,
And cried, "Is no one interested in sport?"
Then Zeus replied, "My friend, behold the age:
The league table is now the legal page."

X. THE THREE FATES WEAVE THE CITY'S FUTURE

BEYOND THE stars the ancient sisters spun,
And watched the football kingdom's course outrun
The victories and arguments of men,
Whose words would shape the story yet again.

Clotho drew a shining thread of blue,
And wove the mighty football triumphs through;
Lachesis measured years of wealth and pride,
With darker strands descending at its side.

Atropos held her silver shears above,
And watched the crowds who sang of loyalty and love;
For neither fierce devotion nor disdain
Could tell what final judgment would remain.

"A kingdom built upon a golden tower,"
Said Clotho, "knows the majesty of power;
Yet every height invites a searching eye,
And storms are fiercest in the upper sky."

Lachesis answered, "Truth must stand its ground,
And lawful appeals must fairly test what's found;
But neither time nor fortune can erase
The duty to consider every case."

Then Atropos, whose shears had ended kings,
Observed the intertwining silver strings:
"The ending has not yet received its seal,
While England waits upon the great appeal."

XI. THE LAST NIGHT OF THE SIEGE

AT LAST the evening shadows crossed the plain,
And soldiers sheltered from the autumn rain;
The rival standards bent beneath the gale,
And tired commentators finished their latest tale.

The City fortress glimmered in the night,
Its thousand windows filled with amber light;
And beyond the walls the armies watched and slept,
While law its silent, solemn vigil kept.

Old Arthur, looking from his window high,
Beheld the heavy clouds against the sky;
And whispered to his grandson near the fire,
“There’s more to football than a rich man’s empire.

“I loved the club when hardly anyone cared,
When all we had was hope and what we shared;
And whatever judgments fall upon our name,
The ordinary people aren’t a game.”

The boy replied, “Then what survives the storm?”
“The songs, the scarves, the loyal human form;
The fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, and friends,
Whose love of football never truly ends.”

So spoke the veteran of the lower leagues,
Who’d lived through years of sporting tragedies;
And there beneath the lamplight, worn and blue,
He found a hope that neither side could sue.

XII. THE THUNDERBOLT THAT DID NOT FALL

THEN ZEUS arose upon his cloudy throne,
And raised a bolt whose fire was all his own;
Below, the armies waited by the gate,
And every banner trembled under Fate.

“Enough!” he cried. “I’ll settle all this strife,
And put these endless hearings out of life!
One thunderbolt upon the legal hall,
And none shall need another writ at all!”

Athena seized his mighty outstretched hand,
And spoke so all Olympus understood the stand:
“Not even gods may substitute their will
For truth established by a judgment still

“Subject to challenge under lawful right;
Let proof and reason finish this great fight.
A sentence forced by thunder is a stain,
And leaves the deepest questions to remain.”

The king lowered his lightning with a sigh,
And watched the clouds drift slowly through the sky;
Then turned to Hermes, weary of the law,
And asked what further trouble he foresaw.

The merchant smiled, his golden tablets bright,
“Another hearing comes, my lord, in sight;
And should the City’s arguments prevail,
A hundred rival kings may start to wail.”

“And if the League should triumph?” Zeus replied.
“Then lawyers must debate the penalty applied.”
The king collapsed upon his marble chair,
And begged for one more thunderbolt to spare.

Thus ended neither siege nor legal war,
Though mighty football battles shook the shore;
And all the kingdoms waited to discover
What fate would bring when the next hearing was over.

The Muse withdrew beyond the northern sea,
And watched the countless banners blowing free;
For City’s greatest contest still remained,
And no final victory had yet been gained.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XVI
The Siege of the Etihad

B O O K X V I I

*The Curse of the Nine
Hundred Million*

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Astonishing Account of the Mountain of Disputed Gold, the Ghosts of Ancient Sponsorships, the Wrath of the Treasury, the Debate Between Commerce and Justice, and the Discovery That Nine Hundred Million Pounds Is a Considerable Sum Even to Zeus.

I. THE INVOCATION OF THE GOLDEN MOUNTAIN

SING, MUSE, of gold beyond the dreams of kings,
Of wealth that gave the football kingdom wings;
Of contracts written in the years of old,
And mighty questions over streams of gold.

Sing not of Croesus, wealthy beyond measure,
Nor Midas, cursed by his insatiate treasure;
For modern football fashioned richer thrones,
And bought its heroes without borrowing bones.

In Manchester there rose a dazzling sight,
A mountain made of numbers, vast and bright;
Nine hundred million pounds, the heralds claimed,
Lay in the calculations courts had named.

Not coins beneath a palace floor concealed,
But disputed transactions now revealed;
The commission's conclusions bore their weight,
While City challenged both their facts and state.

And from Olympus Zeus beheld the pile,
And stood astonished, silent for a while;
“Nine hundred million!” cried the thunder king,
“That’s more than all my temples’ offerings bring!”

Then Hermes raised his golden merchant’s scale,
And measured every portion of the tale;
“At football’s present rate,” he said with pride,
“That might obtain a useful full-back for each side.”

Ares demanded, “What could such gold buy?
A thousand ships? A kingdom? Half the sky?”
Athena answered, “First determine what
The numbers mean, and which conclusions ought

“To follow from the evidence supplied;
For findings may be challenged, verified;
And no amount, however large and grand,
Relieves the court of judging what can stand.”

Then Zeus, whose patience dwindled by the day,
Declared, “Why must you spoil the grand display?
I only wished to know if I could spend
The mountain on a palace for a friend!”

II. THE GOLDEN YEARS OF ASCENT

THE MUSE looked backward through the veil of time,
To where the City’s fortunes rose sublime;
When mighty patrons crossed the desert sand,
And wealth transformed the football northern land.

The ancient stadiums remembered cold,
Before the age of vast commercial gold;
When faithful Arthur stood beneath the rain,
And watched another season end in pain.

But fortunes changed, as mortal fortunes do,
And countless brilliant players dressed in blue;
The club grew mighty, sponsors gathered near,
And silver trophies followed year by year.

The first great title came with thunder's roar,
When Agüero broke the heavens with his score;
And City, long imprisoned in despair,
Discovered what immortal triumph meant to share.

The dynasty expanded through the years,
With artistry that silenced ancient fears;
And Pep, the master architect of play,
Would build his passing empire day by day.

Yet underneath the celebrations bright,
The records raised the questions brought to light;
And Europe's earlier war had found an end,
But England's different rules had more to send.

For English regulators brought a claim
Concerning how the sponsors fed the flame;
And whether some commercial streams of pay
Concealed another source along the way.

The commission found serious breaches there,
And City challenged whether findings were fair;
Thus every ledger gained a martial face,
And every contract entered into the case.

III. THE VALLEY OF THE SPONSORSHIP KINGS

BEYOND THE stadium's brilliant royal gates,
The Muse imagined commerce's vast estates;
Where merchants gathered beneath banners green,
And contracts shone with unfamiliar sheen.

Each sponsorship became a golden knight,
Equipped with signatures to guard its right;
One bore the naming of a splendid ground,
Another carried logos all around.

A third supplied the kingdom's training wear,
A fourth placed advertisements everywhere;
And Hermes, wearing boots of polished gold,
Explained the splendid art of being sold.

"Behold the sponsor!" cried the merchant god,
"Who pays to have his precious name abroad;
For when a million football followers stare,
The right commercial message must be there.

"The world has learned what ancient kings forgot:
A hero's shirt possesses sacred spot;
A merchant's emblem on a champion's breast
May sell more goods than all the gods have blessed."

Athena answered, "Sponsorship is trade,
And lawful bargains fairly may be made;
But revenues must be recorded true,
According to the rules the parties knew."

Then Hermes smiled. "And value is a thing
That changes with the fortunes of a king;
A champion's name may reach the distant moon,
And sponsorships grow dearer very soon."

"But value isn't all that courts inspect;
They ask what funds were paid, and from what sect
Of ownership or commerce they arose,
And what the documentation truly shows."

Then Ares, growing weary of the talk,
Declared he much preferred a warrior's walk;
"For when I bought a sword in ancient Greece,
The merchant handed it to me in peace.

“He never asked a hundred questions why,
Or made me prove my funding from the sky;
But should I buy a striker in this age,
I’d need a hundred lawyers and a page!”

IV. THE GHOSTS OF THE OLD ACCOUNTS

THEN THROUGH the halls a colder wind arose,
And stirred the records of forgotten woes;
For ancient transactions, summoned from their rest,
Returned before the tribunal’s great test.

A contract whispered from a dusty shelf,
“I have a history greater than myself;
I served the kingdom through its rising days,
And now my figures fill the court’s displays.”

Another document, with seals of red,
Declared, “The sums recorded must be read;
And should the lawyers question what I show,
Let witnesses explain what they may know.”

Then ghosts of invoices wandered through the night,
Their numerals illuminated white;
And every payment, dated, stamped, and filed,
Rose like a long-forgotten ancient child.

The auditors advanced with sharpened quills,
And questioned all the records and the bills;
While City marshalled arguments anew,
Contesting what the commission claimed was true.

The ghosts grew numerous beneath the moon,
And Hermes offered exorcisms soon;
“To banish ancient financial regret,
Subscribe and settle every unpaid debt!”

Athena watched the spectral papers glide,
And ordered every document supplied
With dates and context, origins and cause,
Before it entered judgment under laws.

Then Zeus, who feared the endless legal train,
Demanded all the ghosts return again
To their forgotten filing cabinets deep,
And let the troubled sporting kingdom sleep.

But from the farthest chamber came a cry,
“Great lord, accountancy can never die!”
And all Olympus shuddered at the thought,
That even death might find its books still sought.

V. THE GREAT OLYMPIAN DEBATE ON WEALTH

ATHENA GATHERED every god to hear
A question that had haunted every year:
“When money shapes the fortunes of the game,
What ought the leagues to regulate or claim?”

Then Hermes rose, a merchant through and through,
And pointed to the wealth that City knew:
“Investment builds the stadium and street,
Employs a thousand workers, swift and fleet.

“It pays the coaches, trains the youth,
And turns ambitious sporting dreams to truth;
A wealthy patron willing to invest
May lift a club from failure to its best.”

Athena answered, “Wealth can nourish play,
But must be governed by agreements made;
If every mighty owner may conceal
What smaller clubs must openly reveal,

“Then sporting trust becomes a hollow shell,
And honest competition fares not well;
Yet rules should not protect established kings
From challengers whose fresh investment brings

“New talent, energy, and enterprise,
And bids that make the older powers rise;
For justice also guards the smaller team
That dares to build its own ambitious dream.”

Then Zeus exclaimed, “So both of you are right?
What sort of argument is this tonight?
I summoned gods to quarrel until dawn,
Not find a compromise before they’re gone!”

Ares rose. “Let all the owners fight,
And grant the richest man a sword of might!”
But Hermes whispered, “Rich men rarely wield
The swords their money purchases for the field.”

VI. OLD ARTHUR REMEMBERS THE PRICE OF GLORY

WITHIN HIS house Old Arthur found a book,
Of ancient football records that he took
From shelves where every season’s faded page
Recorded City’s passage through the age.

He showed his grandson photographs of men
Who played before the golden empire then;
Their wages modest, boots of leather black,
Their jerseys heavy as a miner’s sack.

“Those fellows earned what modern stars receive
Before their chauffeurs tell them they must leave;
They travelled north by bus through freezing rain,
And sometimes lost to teams they should have slain.”

The grandson asked, "Was football better then?"
"In some respects, perhaps; but modern men
Can play a game those ancient boys would prize,
And build a thousand wonders for our eyes."

"Then money made the football better, Grandad?"
"It helped, but never taught a boy the knack
Of judging space or putting spin upon the ball,
Or lifting fallen teammates after all."

He lifted up an ancient programme blue,
Its price so small it scarcely seemed true;
"And while the clubs grow richer every year,
The common fan must pay an awful dear

"Amount to watch his heroes in the flesh,
While sponsors sell him everything afresh;
The game belongs to millions in the stands,
Not solely to the wealthiest of hands."

The grandson asked, "And what if City lose?"
"Then let the lawful judgment tell the news;
But no one can erase the years I spent
Upon those terraces, however money went."

VII. THE GREAT MOUNTAIN OF GOLD IS WEIGHED

THE GODS assembled where the golden mound
Rose higher than Olympus from the ground;
Its shadow crossed the stadium's bright wall,
And made the smallest mortal feel quite small.

Zeus brought a scale of sacred marble stone,
And placed the mighty mountain on his own;
The instrument collapsed beneath the weight,
And Hermes called the damage "rather great."

Then Athena ordered calculation done,
To understand the figures one by one;
For sums of money, even vast and bright,
Must be considered with a scholar's sight.

"What portion comes from years of sponsorship?
What costs and revenues form each disputed strip?
What findings did the commission make?
And what objections does the challenger take?"

The mountain shimmered in the golden air,
And none could answer merely by a stare;
For quantities, however vast they grow,
Do not determine all a court must know.

Then Ares struck the mountain with his spear,
And sent a thousand golden echoes near;
"At last," he cried, "a mountain worth the fight!
Let every warrior take his share tonight!"

But Hermes swiftly barred the mountain gate,
And placed a sign declaring opening late;
"Admission requires a documented fee,
And all withdrawals incur a penalty."

VIII. THE WRATH OF THE BRITISH TREASURY

NOW WORD of wealth had travelled through the land,
And found the Treasury with outstretched hand;
Its ministers, whose calculations never slept,
Beheld the sum and privately they wept.

"Nine hundred million!" cried a clerk of state,
"Such wealth might briefly ease the public rate!
Or fund a grand inquiry into why
Our previous grand inquiries cost so high!"

The Chancellor called the learned ministers near,
And asked if taxes might be lurking here;
The officials turned their books and searched the page,
And contemplated revenues of age.

Athena warned them from Olympus' height,
"A commission finding is not tax law outright;
Whatever duties lawfully arise
Must first be tested by the proper eyes."

But Hermes found a splendid chance for gain,
And opened tax advisory offices again;
He sold two contradictory guides by noon,
And promised legislation coming soon.

One guide explained the art of paying less,
The other warned of fiscal great distress;
Together they were sold with solemn care,
As comprehensive advice for millionaires.

Then Zeus exclaimed, "My kingdom taxes none!"
Athena answered, "That is easily done;
Your temples live on offerings freely paid,
And mortals fund the marble you displayed."

Zeus stared upon his palace, white and wide,
And wondered if the goddess had implied
That even immortals lived upon the purse
Of worshippers who feared a heavenly curse.

IX. THE PHILOSOPHER OF THE NORTHERN GATE

BESIDE THE Etihad there lived a sage,
Who read the works of every ancient age;
He studied Plato, Aristotle, law,
And every football incident he saw.

He told the crowds assembled by the wall,
“The question is not simply who can kick a ball;
It’s whether rules adopted by the league
Can withstand wealth and partisan intrigue.”

A citizen demanded, “What is fairness, then?”
The sage replied, “A rule that binds all men;
But also hearings where a man may show
Why accusations fail or judgments owe

“A closer examination than a shout,
For justice isn’t settled by a rout;
And whoever wins must answer what was tried,
Not what their loudest followers implied.”

A second man declared, “But riches rule the earth!”
The sage replied, “Then question what they’re worth;
For money, properly employed, may build,
But need not make the wealthy’s wish fulfilled.”

A third cried, “You’re avoiding taking sides!”
“Perhaps,” the sage replied, “because it guides
No search for truth to choose the answer first,
And force the facts to satisfy your thirst.”

The crowd dispersed, dissatisfied and sore,
For wisdom seldom sells outside the door;
And Hermes, watching from a neighbouring stall,
Sold louder answers and outsold them all.

X. THE GOLDEN CURSE OF KING MIDAS

THEN FROM the underworld came Midas’ shade,
Whose touch once turned the living world to trade;
He gazed upon the City’s mountain bright,
And wept to see such riches in his sight.

“Great gods,” he cried, “I once possessed the skill
To turn each humble object to my will;
Yet golden bread could never feed my need,
And golden wine was poor support indeed.”

Athena answered, “Football’s wealth may grow,
And bring great beauty mortals come to know;
But when the gold itself becomes the crown,
It threatens all the trust that holds it down.”

Then Midas touched a football on the grass,
And turned its leather into shining brass;
The players tried to kick the dreadful thing,
But found their feet could barely make it spring.

Ares attempted one tremendous shot,
And struck the golden sphere with all he’d got;
It smashed the marble pillars of the hall,
And Zeus demanded someone change the ball.

Thus Midas learned the lesson once again,
That gold alone cannot sustain the game;
For football needs the freedom of its flight,
And not a treasury’s enormous weight.

XI. THE THREE FATES EXAMINE THE PRICE

THE SISTERS gathered round the mountain tall,
And watched the changing shadows of its fall;
Clotho wove the City’s splendid years,
And Lachesis measured wealth beside its fears.

Atropos raised her shining silver shears,
And listened to the murmuring of the spheres;
“For kings have fought for treasure since the dawn,
And countless mighty dynasties have gone.”

“Yet gold,” said Clotho, “can build a splendid place,
Where young men learn the art of football grace;
And all its worth is not dissolved by doubt,
Though justice may demand the truth come out.”

Lachesis spoke, “The scale must weigh the claim,
Without becoming servant to the name;
The richest club deserves a lawful view,
And poorer clubs deserve enforcement too.”

Then Atropos beheld the golden stream,
And smiled upon the mortal sporting dream;
“The coming judgment may confirm or change
The findings now disputed in their range.”

No final sanction crossed the woven page,
No title vanished from the sporting age;
And still the sister’s silver scissors shone,
Above the fate that had not yet been drawn.

XII. THE MOUNTAIN CASTS ITS SHADOW

NIGHT FELL upon the City and its gold,
And autumn winds across the rooftops rolled;
The Etihad stood proud beneath the moon,
While distant crowds continued their old tune.

Old Arthur watched the floodlights burning bright,
And thought of all the years of joy and fight;
He had no mountain, no commercial throne,
But treasured football memories of his own.

The grandson asked, “How much is glory worth?”
“The finest things aren’t priced upon the earth;
A goal in injury time, a father’s cheer,
A grandchild singing songs he loves to hear.”

“And if the kingdom loses all its gold?”
“We’ll still have tales of football to be told;
But clubs must live within the lawful frame,
Or risk the trust that makes a sporting game.”

Then Zeus surveyed the gleaming mountain vast,
And thought of empires from the distant past;
“How strange,” he said, “that wealth should bring such fear,
When every mortal seeks to draw it near.”

Athena answered, “Gold is neither vice
Nor virtue purchased at a market price;
Its origins, its use, its honest name,
May matter greatly to the rules of any game.”

And Hermes, standing at the mountain’s crest,
Declared, “Of all the treasures, this is best;
For whether City triumphs or must fall,
The lawyers earn their golden fees through all.”

Then thunder rolled across the northern sky,
And Zeus prepared to let the mountain lie;
For further judgments waited in the land,
And darker questions gathered close at hand.

The Muse withdrew, her golden lyre now still,
While distant banners fluttered on the hill;
And through the night another rumour grew,
That politics had entered football too.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XVII

The Curse of the Nine Hundred Million

B O O K X V I I I

*The King of Westminster
Enters the War*

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Remarkable History of the Prime Minister's Intervention, the Great Embassy from Abu Dhabi, the Rage of the Rival Lords, the Cabinet of Conflicting Interests, and the Discovery That British Politicians Can Complicate a Football Scandal Without Ever Touching a Football.

I. THE MUSE INVOKES THE POLITICAL STORM

SING, MUSE, of Westminster's towering hall,
Where lords pronounce upon the fate of all;
Where mighty kings exchange their solemn vows,
And ministers debate what heaven allows.

For England's football quarrel, fierce and long,
Had grown beyond the limits of a song;
No longer merely sporting clubs at war,
It reached the halls where princes make the law.

There reigned King Burnham of the Commons' throne,
Whose northern roots to every lord were known;
Once Manchester's great mayor, proud and bold,
He'd seen the City's kingdom rise in gold.

Now from the Etihad there came a cry,
And rival monarchs watched with jealous eye;
For great investment crossed the desert sea,
And touched the realm's prosperity.

The kingdom's wealth, its buildings, and its trade,
Were linked to mighty ventures patrons made;
And every question of the football crown
Sent ripples through the halls of London town.

Then Zeus, upon Olympus, laughed aloud,
To see a politician join the crowd:
"At last a man who'll settle all this strife,
With something more than promises for life!"

Athena answered, "Politics may speak,
But legal independence must not weaken;
The judgments of the sporting courts must stand
Beyond the wishes of a ruling hand."

Then Hermes smiled and polished up his wings,
"For every football scandal brings new things;
But when a prime minister enters the scene,
The market for advisers turns green."

II. THE KING REMEMBERS MANCHESTER

WITHIN THE palace by the Thames's shore,
King Burnham pondered matters evermore;
He thought of northern factories and rain,
And cities struggling to grow rich again.

He thought of investments, buildings, jobs, and trade,
And partnerships whose benefits were made;
For every city's leader longs to see
New wealth arrive and industry run free.

Yet now the City's troubles filled the page,
And rival politicians burned with rage;
They questioned meetings, friendships, records old,
And whether political judgment had been sold.

The king declared his dealings should be shown,
That public questions might be fairly known;
And promised to disclose what records bore,
Concerning interactions held before.

Then from the opposition came a call,
“Reveal the meetings! Let us see them all!”
And every television camera turned,
While political reputations slowly burned.

The ministers assembled round their king,
To ask what the disclosure might yet bring;
One counsel warned of conflicts to avoid,
Another asked which records were employed.

A third proposed a committee of twelve,
To place each ancient meeting on a shelf;
A fourth demanded all committees cease,
Unless their membership might first increase.

Then Zeus observed the Westminster debate,
And marvelled at the business of the state:
“The gods can make an earthquake in a day,
But ministers need forms to say they’ve found a way.”

III. THE ENVOYS FROM THE DESERT

ACROSS THE seas, where ancient deserts gleam,
And cities rise beyond a merchant’s dream,
There stood the wealthy patrons of the game,
Whose fortunes helped transform the City’s name.

For Abu Dhabi’s investments, vast and wide,
Extended far beyond the football side;
In buildings, commerce, transport, land, and trade,
Their international partnerships were made.

And from this world of commerce came concern,
That football's judgment might a friendship turn;
For governments must weigh the wider ties,
While sporting law must face its own replies.

Then Hermes, patron of the merchant's road,
Surveyed the diplomatic golden load;
And offered every capital a plan,
Explaining how to please the businessman.

"Keep trade and football separate," he said,
"And do not let a scoreline turn your head;
For if a court must judge a club's accounts,
The treaty should not tremble when it counts."

Athena smiled. "For once your counsel's wise,
And does not come with ten disguised supplies."
But Hermes answered, "Do not praise too soon;
The bill arrives this afternoon."

Then Ares demanded, "Where's the war?
I see ambassadors and little more!"
And Zeus replied, "You foolish god of strife,
Diplomacy is war with better life."

IV. THE OPPOSITION RAISES ITS BANNERS

ACROSS THE Commons' ancient marble floor,
The opposition leaders called for more;
They questioned whom the northern monarch knew,
And what his earlier public office drew.

One lord declared, "A prime minister should be
Beyond all doubt of partiality;
If private meetings bear upon this strife,
Disclose the records of his public life."

Another cried, "A football club's great worth
Must never place the laws beneath the earth;
Nor should a wealthy patron's distant throne
Determine how an English league is run."

Then Burnham's loyal ministers replied,
"Investment brought new wealth to Manchester's side;
To meet with investors was part of his role,
And no such meeting proves an improper goal."

Athena nodded from Olympus high,
For allegations need more than a cry;
"A record should be judged by what it shows,
Not every motive that a rival chose."

But Zeus, delighted by the grand debate,
Declared the Commons worthy of his state:
"At last a hall where everyone may shout,
And none need know what they're shouting about!"

Then Hermes offered microphones for rent,
And charged each member for the words he spent;
Within a week he found the scheme had made
More gold than football's sponsorships had paid.

V. THE CABINET OF CONTRADICTIONS

THE MINISTERS assembled, stern and grave,
To find a course the kingdom's honour might save;
One sought to guard investment and its flow,
Another said the sporting laws must show

That no political favour could be sought,
And every verdict must be fairly brought;
A third insisted nothing must be done,
Until a lengthy study had begun.

The Chancellor declared, "Protect the trade!"
The Justice Minister called for judgment made;
The Foreign Office wanted careful words,
While sporting officials feared diplomatic swords.

Then forth there came the Minister of Delay,
Who offered an entirely splendid way:
"We'll form a group to study what we know,
Then ask another group where it should go."

Ares drew his blade with furious cries,
And threatened all the ministers' replies;
But Athena stayed his sword and shook her head,
"Such threats are not how policy is led."

Hermes meanwhile devised a government scheme,
To fund the country's new advisory dream;
And named it, in a flash of marketing art,
"The Independent Office of the Impartial Football Chart."

Zeus read the title, suffered momentary pain,
And ordered that they shorten it again;
But by the time the acronyms were through,
Three more committees had been formed anew.

VI. THE MANCHESTER QUESTION

OLD ARTHUR sat beneath his local light,
And watched Westminster arguing through the night;
His grandson asked, "Why do these politicians care?
They hardly ever come to football there."

"Because, my lad, the country's full of men
Who find a headline and climb aboard again;
And when a football club becomes a cause,
You'll soon discover politics has claws."

“But shouldn’t public dealings see the day?”
“Of course, and all the records fairly weighed;
If something’s wrong, let proper questions rise,
But don’t turn every handshake into lies.”

The grandson asked, “And what of City then?”
“The club must face the case like other men;
No favour from the powerful should come,
No secret whisper make the law go numb.”

“And do you trust the politicians, Grandad?”
“Well, lad, I’ve watched the football that we’ve had;
At least when referees make dreadful calls,
They’re somewhere close to seeing where the ball falls.”

The grandson laughed; the old man took his tea,
And watched the Commons roaring on TV;
“Now there’s a match with every player fouling,
And not a single referee who’s smiling.”

VII. THE GODS DEBATE THE RULE OF LAW

THEN ZEUS convened the high Olympian court,
To hear what justice owed the world of sport;
And called Athena, Hermes, Ares near,
To settle what no minister made clear.

“If wealth improves a kingdom, shall the king
Defend the patron who has brought the thing?
Or leave the sporting judges on their own,
Though commerce trembles at the unknown?”

Athena spoke, “A statesman may defend
The lawful value of an investor’s end;
But not demand a favoured legal fate,
Nor threaten courts on behalf of wealth or state.

“Each institution has its proper sphere,
And none should bend because another’s near;
To guard the courts against political might
Is not hostility to commerce, but a right.”

Hermes replied, “The markets need to trust
That governments are wise, not merely just;
For diplomatic panic, poorly done,
May drive investment from the rising sun.”

“And yet,” Athena said, “true confidence
Requires decisions free from influence;
An honest commercial order cannot thrive
If judgments bend to keep investors alive.”

Then Ares lifted up his brazen spear,
And cried, “You argue as the gods appear
To have forgotten all the glories won
When armies marched beneath the rising sun!”

Zeus shook his head. “You’re thinking still of war.
We’ve got the lawyers doing that and more.”

VIII. THE PARADE OF THE POLITICAL PUNDITS

NOW FROM the television kingdoms came
A thousand commentators seeking fame;
They filled the evening broadcasts with debate,
And offered guesses on the nation’s fate.

One claimed the government would surely fall,
Another said the case meant nothing at all;
A third foresaw an international row,
And promised all its details before now.

A fourth predicted every club would flee,
And form a rival league across the sea;
A fifth proposed that Parliament should vote
On every club’s next transfer and its coat.

Hermes sold them polls of public thought,
And carefully selected what he sought;
The questions asked, in language firm and stern,
“How deeply should all honest Britons burn?”

The rival poll declared the opposite view,
And asked, “Do you support the noble blue?”
Thus both surveys returned with great acclaim,
And every faction claimed to own the game.

Athena watched the spectacle with care,
And warned that statistics require a fair
And representative design and test,
Not questions worded to support the best.

Zeus laughed. “A poll that flatters those who pay!
Why, Hermes, you have found a splendid way!”
The merchant answered with delighted eyes,
“My lord, the customers prefer a pleasant surprise.”

IX. THE GREAT FOOTBALL EMBASSY

IN WESTMINSTER the football envoys met,
And brought complaints the kingdom won’t forget;
They asked the league to guard its independence,
And sought assurance free from interference.

Then came another embassy in blue,
Defending City’s right to a review;
For appeals must proceed through lawful ways,
Not merely satisfy what rivalry says.

The king received reports from each estate,
And called for patience while the courts debate;
Yet still the Commons echoed day and night,
With rivals claiming different visions right.

Then Hermes proposed a summit grand,
Where every football owner shook a hand;
They'd promise fairness, honesty, and grace,
While smiling for the cameras in the place.

The conference concluded by decree,
That all concerned desired integrity;
But when the parties asked precisely how,
The chairman said, "We'll form a working group now."

And Ares, groaning at the dreadful news,
Declared that even Hades wouldn't choose
A punishment so long and full of air,
As being permanently trapped in a chair.

X. THE FATES CONSIDER A KINGDOM'S HONOUR

BEYOND THE mortal palaces and towers,
The sisters spun the passing of the hours;
Clotho wove the ties of trade and state,
While Lachesis measured what men called fate.

Atropos beheld the gleaming crown,
And watched the fortunes of the northern town;
For cities grow through enterprise and toil,
And must not have their honour sold for spoil.

"Let football's judges weigh the facts," she said,
"And let the politicians guard instead
The country's broader interests and its laws,
Without becoming parties to the cause."

The other sisters nodded in the night,
And watched the tapestry's uncertain light;
For when the powerful and wealthy meet,
The independent court must keep its seat.

XI. THE KING'S FINAL PROCLAMATION

THEN BURNHAM spoke before the gathered state,
And sought to answer questions in debate;
He promised public records from the past,
That doubts concerning meetings might be cast

Into the daylight where they could be read,
And judged by what was done, not merely said;
For no one should pronounce another's blame,
From rumour gathered round a football name.

The opposition vowed to scrutinise
The records with unflinching, watchful eyes;
And Britain's parliament resumed its song,
Where every speech was twice as loud as long.

Then Zeus, exhausted, gave a weary sigh,
And watched the ministers depart nearby;
"At least the football court may one day end.
But politics," he groaned, "is without end, my friend."

XII. THE STORM RETURNS TO MANCHESTER

AND SO the world turned northward once again,
To Manchester beneath October rain;
Where all the wealth and politics combined
Could not determine what the court might find.

The legal arguments awaited their next day,
And rival kings prepared what they would say;
The journalists sharpened every pen,
And Hermes sold his forecasts once again.

Old Arthur raised his scarf against the sky,
And saw the passing autumn clouds drift by;
"Let Parliament discuss its grand affair,
But leave the football judges room and air."

The grandson smiled. "And should the judges fail?"
"Then let the lawful avenues prevail;
But never make a politician's whim
The measure of the football world's great hymn."

The Muse rose softly from the northern ground,
And heard the coming battle's distant sound;
For beyond Westminster's imposing stone,
Another chamber waited, cold and lone.

There evidence would face the final test,
And every legal argument be pressed;
And though no mortal yet could tell the end,
The City's fate approached another bend.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XVIII

The King of Westminster Enters the War

P A R T I V

THE WRATH OF THE
FOOTBALL GODS

BOOKS XIX–XXIV

Judgment, rebellion and the uncertain fate of City, 2026 onward

B O O K X I X

The Trial of the Last Appeal

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Great Account of the Three Judges, the Battle of the Rival Advocates, the Wrath of Zeus Against Legal Delay, the Prophecy of the Three Fates, and the Hour When the Football Kingdoms Discover That Even the Mighty Must Await Judgment.

I. THE MUSE INVOKES THE COURT OF DESTINY

SING, MUSE, of judgment poised above the land,
Of kings who waited for the court's command;
Of mortal glory, wealth, ambition, pride,
And accusations law must fairly try.

Sing of the chamber where the advocates meet,
And no great army marches through the street;
Where neither crowd nor thunder may decide
What facts and legal arguments provide.

For City now pursued its solemn plea,
Against the findings of the first decree;
And England watched the challenge taking shape,
While rivals dreamed of triumph or escape.

The commission's ruling stood beneath appeal,
And serious financial findings bore its seal;
Yet City maintained the judgment had been wrong,
And marshalled arguments both fierce and strong.

The matter waited for a further hearing,
Its hour approaching, distant yet and nearing;
And all the kingdoms, weary of delay,
Demanded that the courts pronounce the day.

But no final appeal had been decided,
No final punishment formally provided;
And though the rumours multiplied like rain,
The destination of the case remained.

Then Zeus arose from his Olympian throne,
And heard the storm across the kingdom blown:
“I’ve seen a thousand sieges come and go,
Yet never watched a battle move so slow!”

Athena answered, “Patience, lord of skies;
The law must listen before its judgment flies;
For justice carried by a hurried hand
May wound the very truth it ought to stand.”

II. THE THREE JUDGES TAKE THEIR SEATS

WITHIN THE court three solemn seats were raised,
And all the waiting advocates were gazed
Upon by those who’d hear the arguments anew,
And test the legal questions coming through.

The chamber held no glittering royal crown,
No mighty sword that struck a monarch down;
Its power arose from duty under law,
And reasons given for conclusions that it saw.

The first imagined guardian of the scales
Demanded reason stronger than the tales;
The second sought the statutes’ proper frame,
And would not bend to either club’s great name.

The third, in solemn contemplation deep,
Would guard the standards that the courts must keep;
Together they would hear what counsel brought,
And weigh the legal errors each side thought.

No ancient oracle could supersede
The documents and law the judges need;
Nor Zeus's thunder, though it shook the dome,
Could tell them what conclusion should come home.

Athena stood beyond the chamber door,
And warned Olympus of the coming war:
"No judge is simply ordered to agree
With what the earlier tribunal decreed;

"Yet neither does an appeal begin anew
By granting every claim a fresh review;
Its scope and grounds shall govern what is heard,
And law, not public clamour, have the word."

Then Ares groaned, "A battle over scope!
Is there no end to bureaucratic hope?
At Troy, when Hector challenged to a fight,
He never asked whose jurisdiction gave the right!"

III. THE TWO ARMIES OF ADVOCATES

THEN CAME the lawyers, solemn rank on rank,
With volumes piled like treasure in a bank;
Their robes were dark, their arguments prepared,
And each advanced as though the world had stared.

The League's defenders bore the judgment old,
With findings grave and carefully retold;
They sought to guard the reasoning first supplied,
And show where law and evidence allied.

But City's counsel came with equal force,
To challenge what they saw as errors in the course;
They questioned fact, interpretation, law,
And weaknesses they said the judges saw.

The swords were made of precedents and text,
The shields of legal arguments perplexed;
And every sentence, sharpened for the fray,
Might turn a disputed question either way.

One advocate arose and spoke at length,
With all the confidence of practiced strength;
The other answered, measured and precise,
And questioned whether reasoning would suffice.

No mortal spectator could know the whole,
For private proceedings guarded their own role;
And public declarations, loud and grand,
Could not replace the hearing close at hand.

Then Zeus demanded, "Where is the attack?
Why do they never strike their enemies back?"
Athena answered, "They are striking, sire,
With words that test what judgments may require."

"Then give me warriors with a brazen spear!"
"These weapons," she replied, "may cost more dear."
And Hermes, standing close, began to smile,
For every spoken argument increased the file.

IV. THE SIEGE OF THE LEGAL DICTIONARY

THE LAWYERS opened books of ancient lore,
And filled the chamber with a thousand more;
They summoned statutes written years before,
And meanings that had travelled through the law.

One spoke of duties owed in sporting trade,
Another of the promises the parties made;
They argued how the rules should be construed,
And what the tribunal rightly had reviewed.

They questioned proof, the burden and the test,
And whether findings had been well expressed;
They examined how disputed records bore
Upon the claims the earlier hearing saw.

Atropos watched the arguments descend,
And wondered if such language had an end;
For every legal phrase appeared to breed
Three further phrases only scholars need.

Then Hermes issued dictionaries for sale,
With explanations printed in fine detail;
He sold a volume called *The Simple Law*,
Whose table of contents filled the entire floor.

Ares seized the book and tried to read,
But found that every page referred with speed
To seven other chapters, neatly bound,
Whose relevant paragraphs could not be found.

He hurled the mighty volume from the sky,
And watched it cross the mortal heavens high;
It struck the earth and made a fearful din,
And lawyers sued the god for littering.

V. ZEUS DEMANDS A SWIFTER JUDGMENT

AT LAST the ruler of Olympus cried,
“Why must the court deliberate and hide?
I’m god of lightning, thunder, wrath, and rain,
Yet cannot make a football judgment plain!”

Then summoned he the gods into his hall,
And bade them answer to his urgent call;
“What punishment should follow if they fail?
And what if City triumphs in appeal?”

Ares declared, “If wrongdoing is sustained,
Let proper sporting penalties be gained;
But spare the footballers who gave their all,
And never falsified a passing ball.”

Hermes replied, “Whatever courts decide,
Let compensation questions be supplied;
For every disappointed rival king
Will wish to calculate a missing thing.”

Athena spoke, “No outcome must be guessed,
Before the court has finished every test;
The sanction, if required, must follow law,
And not whatever angry crowds foresaw.”

Then Zeus exclaimed, “So nothing can be done,
Until the final arguments are run?”
“Indeed,” she said, “that is the proper way.”
And Zeus replied, “Then cancel Judgment Day!”

VI. THE NIGHT OF THE RIVAL PROPHECIES

ACROSS THE kingdom, from the Tyne to Thames,
The pundits raised their furious diadems;
Each spoke as though the verdict had been heard,
Though not a judge had published such a word.

One oracle predicted City’s fall,
With losses stretching over trophies all;
Another cried the appeal would surely win,
And wash away the judgment and its sin.

A third foresaw a compromise of sorts,
A fourth predicted war in foreign courts;
A fifth announced that every crown would stay,
Then contradicted everything next day.

Old Arthur heard their forecasts over tea,
And switched the television off at three;
For having listened through a lengthy night,
He found the silence infinitely right.

His grandson asked, "And what will happen, then?"
"When courts have spoken, ask me that again;
Till then I'll not be joining those who boast
They know the verdict better than the host."

"Do you fear the club may suffer, Grandad?"
"I fear the truth may bring us news that's bad;
But hope is not dishonest when we wait,
Provided we acknowledge what is at stake."

The boy sat quietly beside his chair,
While autumn rain descended through the air;
And Arthur added, "There are worse defeats
Than football loss beneath the stadium seats.

"The worst is when a man abandons truth,
And teaches blind denial to his youth;
So wear your City colours, proudly blue,
But never let them think instead of you."

VII. THE FATES OPEN THE BOOK OF POSSIBILITIES

BEYOND OLYMPUS, where the stars are born,
The sisters gathered at the edge of morn;
And Clotho brought a tapestry of gold,
Whose ending had not yet been fully told.

One thread imagined City's challenge won,
And legal findings altered or undone;
Another showed the earlier judgment held,
With sanctions that the league's own rules compelled.

A third foresaw a mixture of the two,
Where some conclusions fell and some held true;
Yet none became the final woven scene,
For judgment lay beyond the sisters' screen.

Then Lachesis examined every strand,
And measured all the futures close at hand;
"The law may uphold, reverse, or partly change,
According to the questions in its range."

Atropos lifted up her sacred blade,
But did not cut the threads the others laid;
"For even Fate must wait till facts are weighed,
And judgment by the proper court is made."

Then Zeus demanded from the clouds above,
"Can nothing hasten what the mortals love?"
The sisters answered, "No, the future lies
Beyond the reach of thunder in the skies."

VIII. THE GHOST OF THE TROJAN WAR RETURNS

THEN FROM the underworld Achilles came,
His golden armour shining like a flame;
And Hector joined him on the mountain's height,
Where ancient enemies recalled their fight.

Achilles looked upon the football war,
And asked, "What conquest do these armies score?"
Hector replied, "They seek a lawful end,
And ask the courts to settle what they contend."

“How long?” Achilles asked, his anger stirred.
“Long years,” replied the Trojan, at the word;
The Greek hero groaned and struck his shield,
And cursed the absence of a proper field.

“In Troy,” he cried, “we fought for honour, fame,
And left our bodies scattered in the game;
But these men quarrel over what was paid,
And summon armies through a legal trade.”

Hector replied, “Perhaps the modern age
Has found a wiser weapon than our rage;
For where we settled differences with blood,
They summon witnesses to say what stood.”

Achilles pondered, silent for a while,
Then gave the Trojan prince a rueful smile:
“Perhaps. Yet I would rather meet thy spear
Than read another legal document this year.”

IX. THE LAST GREAT SPEECH OF ATHENA

THEN WISE Athena stood beneath the stars,
And spoke to gods who worshipped ancient wars;
Her silver armour shone against the night,
And in her hand she held the spear of right.

“Remember, mighty kings, the lesson here:
The law must neither favour wealth nor fear;
The strongest club must answer what is proved,
And unjust findings, if established, must be moved.

“Let no one think that glory purchased grace,
Or that a champion stands beyond his place;
Yet let no rival’s hatred turn a claim
Into a verdict before proof sustains the blame.

“The sport is greater than a single throne,
And owes its strength to rules that all have known;
The crowds must trust that when the season’s done,
The crown reflects the competition won.

“But justice has no rightful place for spite,
And fair appeals are part of doing right;
The answer must be reasoned, clear, and true,
And not the punishment the loudest crowd would choose.”

Then Zeus arose, and bowed his mighty head,
For wisdom had a power beyond the dead;
And even Ares, champion of the spear,
Allowed the goddess’ reasoning to appear

A nobler conquest than a warrior’s boast,
Or all the trophies raised from coast to coast;
For empires rise and fall beneath the sky,
But justice gives their histories a why.

X. THE MORTAL HEART OF MANCHESTER

WITHIN THE northern city Arthur rose,
And wrapped his scarf against the evening snows;
He walked with grandson toward the stadium bright,
Where football still could summon pure delight.

They passed the shops where generations stood,
Where matchday songs were understood as good;
They saw the children wearing City’s blue,
Who knew the club as everything they knew.

The grandson asked, “What if the judgment falls,
And all our victories echo through empty halls?”
Old Arthur paused and gently took his hand,
And looked across the faithful football land.

“The trophies stand for games that people saw,
Though clubs are not exempt from sporting law;
And if the club must answer for its wrong,
The fans need not surrender every song.

“We may be hurt, we may be made to grieve,
And find some things much harder to believe;
But truth is worth a deeper loyalty,
Than pretending only what we wish to see.”

Then came the roar of crowds beyond the gate,
Where sport still flourished underneath its fate;
And Arthur smiled, his weathered face aglow,
For football had another game to show.

XI. THE HOUR BEFORE THE UNKNOWN

THE RIVAL kingdoms gathered on the hill,
Their flags and trumpets for a moment still;
The advocates prepared their final words,
And quiet settled over all the lords.

The judges' work remained beyond the sight,
And no one knew how they would judge the fight;
The players trained, the sponsors watched the sky,
And politics continued passing by.

Hermes counted profits from the years,
And sold more subscriptions to the fears;
Ares sharpened spears that none would need,
And Zeus prepared to argue at great speed.

Athena kept her vigil by the scale,
Determined neither pressure should prevail;
And all the Fates stood silent at their loom,
Their scissors catching light within the gloom.

XII. THE EPIC CONCLUSION: THE DOOR OF JUDGMENT

AT LAST the Muse ascended to the skies,
And spread the Cityad before their eyes;
Nineteen great books of battle, wealth, and law,
Had brought the kingdom to the final door.

The earlier judgment stood beneath appeal,
And no final tribunal had affixed its seal;
The legal process still had work to do,
And all the world awaited what was true.

No thunderbolt could force the judges' hand,
No rival banner alter what would stand;
The mighty City waited in its hall,
As judgment's unseen shadow touched them all.

Then Zeus declared, his voice a mighty roar,
"Five books remain before this war is o'er!
Let every god prepare the final fight,
And bring the football kingdom into light!"

The Muse responded, singing through the air,
"Great king, the truth must still receive its share;
And where the future lies beyond our sight,
The poem must not call uncertainty right."

Thus stood the gods, the kingdom, and the law,
Before a door no mortal hand could draw
Wide open simply by demanding fate,
For judgment chooses neither love nor hate.

Old Arthur raised his scarf beneath the stars,
And heard the echo of a thousand wars;
His grandson watched the great floodlights glow,
And asked, "What happens next?" He answered, "We shall know."

Then from the heavens rang a final sound,
A solemn thunder rolling underground;
And every crown beneath the moonlit sky
Awaited what the coming days might signify.

For football's greatest empire, vast and grand,
Had reached a trial beyond the playing land;
And even gods, before the judgment's call,
Could only watch the shadows rise and fall.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XIX

The Trial of the Last Appeal

B O O K X X

The Doom of the Golden Crown

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Terrible Vision of the Punishments of Manchester City, the Council of the Rival Kings, the Battle for the Trophies of England, and the Discovery That a Crown May Be Removed More Easily Than the Memories of Those Who Watched It Won.

I. THE MUSE INVOKES THE CROWNS OF KINGS

SING, MUSE, of crowns that glitter in the sun,
Of mighty battles lost and victories won;
Of kingdoms built on passion, toil, and gold,
Whose glorious deeds through generations told.

Sing of the silver cups that champions raise,
And faithful crowds who sing their heroes' praise;
Of titles carved upon the scrolls of fame,
And laws that question how those glories came.

For England's football empire stood in doubt,
While rival monarchs gathered round about;
The City's case had entered its appeal,
And no last judgment bore the final seal.

Yet rumours stormed across the northern plain,
Of crowns that might be taken back again;
Of penalties that might descend like snow,
And leagues to which the champions might be sent below.

No fate was fixed; no final word was known,
No sentence had yet toppled any throne;
But in the dreams of Zeus there rose a sight,
Of golden trophies trembling in the night.

“Awake!” he cried. “Behold this dreadful scene!
A hundred crowns are rolling through the green!
Who dares to seize the silver from the shelf,
And make a champion question even himself?”

Athena rose and gathered up her spear,
And spoke with wisdom all the gods could hear:
“Distinguish, sire, what law may yet decree,
From what excited rivals wish to see.

“The future stands behind a guarded door,
And none may rightly claim to know its score;
Let us examine what the sanctions mean,
Before declaring what has never been.”

Then Hermes smiled beneath his golden hat,
“I’ll sell predictions. There is profit in that.”
And Ares raised his spear against the sky,
Demanding that the strongest armies try.

II. THE HALL OF THE THREATENED TROPHIES

BENEATH THE Etihad’s resplendent dome,
There stood the silver treasures of its home;
Great trophies shining in their glassy case,
Each one recalling triumph, sweat, and grace.

The Premier League crowns gleamed with royal pride,
And other cups stood glittering beside;
The European prize of highest fame
Recalled the night the continent knew City’s name.

And there the ghost of Agüero appeared,
Not dead, but summoned as a legend revered;
His famous strike rang out through memory's hall,
When time itself seemed balanced on a ball.

The final minute, breathless, fierce, and wild,
Had turned a weeping supporter to a child;
And all the world remembered that great cry,
Which seemed to tear the roof from England's sky.

Then came the shades of title-winning days,
The champions marching through triumphant praise;
The centurions of Pep's astonishing reign,
Whose football danced like sunlight after rain.

The trophies whispered softly in the night,
"Can written judgments dim reflected light?
Can any court reverse a goal once scored,
Or silence all the crowds that once had roared?"

Athena entered with her silver shield,
And spoke of sport beyond the playing field:
"The acts occurred; the memories remain,
Though sporting records may be changed again.

"A sanction cannot make a witnessed pass
Unhappen on the sacred football grass;
Yet leagues determine how their crowns are held,
If breaches proven warrant titles felled."

And Zeus declared, with evident distress,
"What makes a football championship a mess?
You win the league, you lift the cup, you cheer,
And ten years later someone says, 'Not here!'"

III. THE COUNCIL OF THE DISAPPOINTED KINGS

FROM RIVAL castles came the lords of old,
With ancient banners trimmed in crimson gold;
They crowded round a massive marble table,
And argued until none was wholly able

To hear the voice of any fellow king,
Or understand the evidence of anything;
For every monarch entered with a view,
Concerning what the courts ought now to do.

The crimson lord of Liverpool arose,
And spoke of seasons filled with sporting woes:
“If crowns were wrongly won, let justice say
What honours must be altered or conveyed.”

The lord of Manchester’s red kingdom cried,
“Remember all the mighty years denied!
If points are changed, establish who was first,
And settle every rival’s ancient thirst.”

The Arsenal prince, in shining armour red,
Demanded that the legal scroll be read;
Yet another lord declared, “Why read at all?
The proper judgment surely is their fall!”

Then from the southern kingdom came a knight,
Who questioned whether hindsight could make right:
“If history’s tables alter with each case,
What rules determine every club’s new place?”

The council roared with passionate complaint,
Until their arguments grew terribly faint;
For not a single rival had the power
To determine what the courts might do that hour.

Athena entered through the chamber gate,
And warned the lords against deciding fate:
“Your hopes are not the judgment of the law,
And every sanction must have proper cause.”

But Hermes, who had followed close behind,
Discovered something pleasing to his mind:
“I offer retroactive title shirts for sale,
In every colour, should your wishes prevail!”

IV. THE GREAT PARADE OF POSSIBLE PUNISHMENTS

THEN ARES summoned all the punishments to stand,
As armoured giants on the judgment land;
Each represented what the rules might bear,
Should future law determine sanctions there.

First marched the Fine, in robes of golden thread,
With countless sums embroidered on his head;
He carried heavy sacks upon his back,
And promised every treasury no lack.

Next came the Deduction, grim and tall,
Who stole the points from columns on the wall;
He carried neither dagger, bow, nor spear,
But made the league table disappear.

Behind him strode the Exclusion, stern,
Whose presence made the hopeful kingdom turn;
He pointed toward the lower football floor,
And asked who'd like to take the downward door.

Then came the Crown Reviser, dressed in grey,
Whose solemn occupation was to weigh
Whether historical honours might be touched,
If lawful powers justified as much.

Yet none of these had been selected there,
And none could claim a sentence from the air;
They marched as possibilities alone,
Not punishments imposed upon the throne.

Then Zeus demanded, "Which is truly due?"
Athena answered, "What the law makes true;
And if the appeal should alter what was found,
The basis of a sanction changes ground."

Ares surveyed the regiment with pride,
Then asked where all the football warriors hide;
"Your army fights with negative arithmetic!
The sight alone is making me quite sick!"

V. HERMES OPENS THE RETROACTIVE TROPHY SHOP

NOW HERMES purchased premises in town,
And named his shop The Second-Hand Crown;
Its windows glittered underneath the light,
With every rival's hoped-for prize in sight.

"Come claim your championship!" he cried,
"Provided later judgments take your side!
We've shirts prepared for every possible decree,
And banners sold with conditional guarantee!"

He offered medals cast in shining gold,
With winners' names intentionally untold;
The medals bore a space where names could go,
Once lawyers told the merchants what to show.

His finest cup had handles made of brass,
And changed its winner when an hour would pass;
The customers could twist a little screw,
And make the name upon the trophy new.

A rival fan declared, "I'll take three crowns!"
Another shouted, "I'll reclaim whole towns!"
The merchant took their money with delight,
And promised never to determine who was right.

Athena visited his flourishing store,
And asked what all the empty medals were for;
"For judgments!" Hermes cried. "The finest trade!
A profit guaranteed before they're made."

"And if the final ruling finds no cause
To alter titles under sporting laws?"
"Then every unsold trophy will become
A collector's item for a handsome sum."

Then Zeus proclaimed, "This fellow has no shame!"
"Indeed," said Hermes, "that's the secret of the game."

VI. OLD ARTHUR AND THE CUP THAT CANNOT SPEAK

IN MANCHESTER Old Arthur sat alone,
Beside a mantel made of weathered stone;
Upon it stood a little silver cup,
Which once his grandson proudly lifted up.

It came from schoolboy football years before,
When boys played barefoot by the kitchen door;
Its tarnished handles bore a humble name,
But Arthur prized it more than wealth or fame.

His grandson entered with the evening news,
And asked what punishment the courts might choose;
The old man sighed and rested in his chair,
As rain drifted through the northern air.

"When I was young, we often lost our way,
And found humiliation every Saturday;
But every Sunday, win or lose or draw,
We loved the club without a lawyer's law."

“Would losing titles hurt you very badly?”
“Aye, lad, and I’d receive such news quite sadly;
But if a competent court makes the call,
We cannot say the rules mean nought at all.”

“Then what becomes of all the games we saw?”
“The memory lives beyond the written law;
A scoreboard may be changed within a book,
But not the sight that filled the eyes which looked.”

His grandson held the schoolboy trophy high,
And watched its little handles catch his eye;
“Could anyone take this away?” he said.
“Only if you drop it on your head.”

And Arthur laughed, though storms remained outside,
For football still possessed its human side;
And through the dark, beyond the distant hall,
A child ran after one more bouncing ball.

VII. THE STRANGE CONSCIENCE OF THE TROPHY

THE MUSE descended into silver night,
And gave the Premier League crown speech and sight;
It looked upon its polished, golden face,
And thought of every champion’s embrace.

“I have been lifted high by mighty men,
And placed upon my shining stand again;
I’ve tasted champagne, glory, songs, and tears,
And watched ambition flower through the years.

“But now I hear the distant lawyers’ cry,
And wonder what these questions signify;
For every trophy holds a nation’s dream,
Yet nothing is precisely what it seems.

“I know the players’ hands that held me high,
The roaring crowds beneath the open sky;
I know the sweat that fell upon my crown,
But cannot judge the ledgers of the town.”

Then Athena stood beside the silver prize,
And answered with her ever-watchful eyes:
“A trophy is a symbol, not a judge,
And cannot from a lawful question budge;

“But neither should its glory be condemned
Before the appeal has reached its lawful end;
Until the courts have finished what they must,
Leave verdict to the law and memory to trust.”

Thus spoke the goddess, guardian of the right,
And silver gleamed beneath the quiet night.

VIII. THE FATES WEAVE FIVE DIFFERENT DESTINIES

WITHIN THEIR starry chamber, far away,
The sisters wove the fortunes of the day;
Five threads emerged, each shining differently,
Beneath the loom of possibility.

One showed the challenged findings swept aside,
And City walking with its ancient pride;
Another showed the ruling standing fast,
With grave consequences from the troubled past.

A third displayed some findings overturned,
While others stood as lessons gravely learned;
A fourth foresaw a sanction fiercely tried,
And further legal quarrels multiplied.

The fifth remained a shadow without form,
A future hidden in the greater storm;
No sister claimed to know which thread would stay,
Or what the coming judgment’s words would say.

Then Clotho spoke, "The golden crown may stand,
Or face the lawful power of the land;
But Fate shall not usurp the judges' place,
Nor put a final sentence on this case."

Lachesis measured all the threads once more,
And looked toward England's undecided shore;
Atropos raised her shears against the light,
But left their cutting edges closed that night.

IX. THE THUNDEROUS DISPUTE ABOUT HISTORY

THEN ZEUS assembled scholars from the earth,
And asked what championship records were worth;
One answered, "History is the tale we tell,
Of victories, defeats, and those who fell."

Another spoke, "The official record stands
Within the proper sporting body's hands;
And if its lawful powers alter fame,
The record may be changed, though not the game."

A third declared, "A victory truly played
Cannot be turned to mist by legal trade;
Yet if the rules have suffered proven wrong,
The honours may not simply carry on."

Zeus scratched his beard and gave a mighty sigh,
"How many different truths beneath the sky?
Can history be altered by a pen,
When thousands watched the game with mortal men?"

Athena answered, "History has a face
Of fact, of memory, and recorded place;
The result once played remains an earthly deed,
While lawful titles answer rules agreed."

Then Ares thundered, "Let them play once more!
 Replay the seasons, every goal and score!"
 Hermes looked up with sudden, greedy eyes,
 "Replay subscriptions! What a splendid prize!"

X. THE NIGHT OF THE UNCERTAIN CROWN

THE CITY fortress slept beneath the rain,
 And lightning flickered on the northern plain;
 The trophies stood within their shining hall,
 And listened to the distant raindrops fall.

The rival kingdoms settled for the night,
 Their armies wearied by the endless fight;
 And Hermes counted every coin he'd made,
 From forecasts that the law had yet delayed.

Old Arthur closed his book of football years,
 And thought of triumph mixed with older tears;
 For whatever fate awaited City's name,
 A child would still discover love of game.

Above the clouds, where silver planets gleamed,
 The Fates resumed the story mortals dreamed;
 And Zeus, his mighty thunderbolt in hand,
 Looked down upon the still-unsettled land.

Then spoke Athena, wise beyond the rest,
 "The law must finish what the law has pressed;
 And neither crown nor anger, fear nor gold,
 May make the future prematurely told."

The Muse arose above the City's wall,
 And sang of pride before the possible fall;
 For every empire crowned beneath the sun
 Must answer for the means by which it won.

And from the twilight came a solemn sound,
As distant legal armies gathered round;
The golden crown remained upon its stand,
While judgment waited for the final hand.

So ended not the City, nor its claim,
Nor all the questions shadowing its fame;
But darker visions entered through the door,
And called the gods to witness one war more.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XX

The Doom of the Golden Crown

B O O K X X I

*The Rebellion of the
Football Kingdoms*

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Great Account of the Revolt Against the Football Establishment, the Gathering of the Lesser Kings, the Argument Between Wealth and Competition, and the Astonishing Proposal That Every Club Be Allowed to Win the League Provided Nobody Else Objects.

I. THE MUSE CALLS THE KINGDOMS TO REVOLT

SING, MUSE, of kingdoms wearied by the crown,
Of lesser lords who watched the giants frown;
Of ancient clubs whose glories turned to dust,
And new-born powers who questioned sporting trust.

For England's league, that proud and ancient field,
Had long seen mighty kingdoms rise and yield;
And now the City's legal thunder rolled,
While rival princes dreamed of silver gold.

The charges, findings, judgments, and appeal
Had made the football nations keenly feel
That all their destinies were intertwined,
By rules that wealthy patrons had designed.

From smaller towns the heralds came in haste,
And spoke of fortunes recklessly displaced;
Of transfer markets burning like the sun,
Where richer clubs acquired everyone.

Some called for stronger limits on the gold,
That ancient dynasties might keep their hold;
Some cried that all investment must be free,
And competition left to enterprise and sea.

Others replied, "The mighty have their way,
While smaller kingdoms struggle every day;
If rules apply, then let them bind the great,
And not merely the weakest in the state."

Thus England's football kingdoms filled the plain,
And Zeus rejoiced to hear a war again;
"At last!" he cried. "The little kings arise!
Their fury shakes the pillars of the skies!"

Athena answered, "Listen to their cause;
They speak of opportunity and laws.
But neither wealth nor anger makes them right,
Until we understand the grounds of fight."

II. THE ASSEMBLY OF THE SMALLER LORDS

FROM BRIGHTON came a merchant prince of skill,
Who built through scouting and a patient will;
From Brentford came a calculating sage,
Who made statistics champions of the age.

From Bournemouth's shores another banner rose,
Where smaller clubs confronted richer foes;
And from the Midlands came the Wolves of old,
Who knew that pride cannot be bought with gold.

The lords assembled near a wooded hill,
And listened while their heralds spoke their will;
Each claimed a right to prosper and ascend,
And not remain a giant's humble friend.

A northern prince declared, "What hope have we,
If only wealthy kings may cross the sea
To purchase every champion on the land,
While smaller clubs must sell their finest hand?"

Another answered, "Wealth may enter here,
And give the lesser clubs a chance to cheer;
Why must the giants guard their ancient place,
And close the gates against a newer face?"

Then rose the sage of Brighton's southern shore,
Who'd learned that wisdom could achieve much more
Than merely writing cheques of mighty size,
And buying talent at inflated price.

"The transfer market is a curious beast,
It feeds the richest, but it helps the least;
For when a giant buys a youngster's skill,
The smaller club may finance half a hill.

"But if we ban investment from the game,
The established kings will keep their ancient fame;
And if we let all spending know no bound,
The smaller kingdoms may be crushed into the ground."

The lords grew silent at this subtle speech,
For simple answers lay beyond their reach;
And Hermes, disappointed by restraint,
Declared the man's commercial views too quaint.

III. THE COUNCIL OF THE ANCIENT DYNASTIES

UPON A marble terrace, grand and wide,
The ancient sporting monarchs sat in pride;
Their histories stretched through generations long,
Of victories won and legendary song.

Their lords remembered European nights,
And celebrated famous, desperate fights;
They spoke of loyalty, tradition, fame,
And all the virtues of the ancient game.

Yet Hermes whispered, hovering overhead,
“Tradition has a curious golden thread;
A king whose fortune came in yesterday
Would rather new investors stayed away.”

Athena smiled and answered with delight,
“Established strength may hide behind what’s right;
But rules may also serve a genuine need,
To limit ruin from the urge to overspend.”

A prince in crimson armour made a plea,
“Let every club obey the same decree!”
Another lord replied with equal fire,
“But rules must not forbid our right to aspire!”

Then Zeus descended to the council floor,
And shook the ancient windows with his roar:
“What foolish kings, who all demand fair play,
Provided they remain the best each day!”

The monarchs frowned, unwilling to concede
That self-interest might accompany their creed;
And Hermes wrote a memorandum there,
Explaining how to sell competitive despair.

IV. THE FOOTBALL GODS DIVIDE

THEN ARES challenged Hermes to a fight,
Declaring money had corrupted might;
“The warriors once prevailed through skill and nerve,
Not merely what commercial men could serve!”

Hermes replied, "And who supplied their swords?
Who fed the armies of those noble lords?
The soldiers whom you celebrate in song
Required a merchant's bread to march along."

Athena stood between the gods and said,
"Both arguments require a cooler head;
For wealth can lift the humble from the dust,
Yet rules require transparency and trust."

Zeus thundered, "Must each question split in two?
Can no one simply tell me what is true?"
Athena answered, "Truth has many parts,
And cannot always fit your battle charts."

Then Ares raised a mighty iron shield,
And offered every club an equal field;
"Let all eleven warriors battle free,
And victory reward ability!"

Hermes answered, "Equal fields sound fine,
But who shall pay to draw the boundary line?"
The war god paused, then lowered down his head,
For someone had to purchase grass instead.

V. THE MERCHANT'S GREAT EQUALITY MACHINE

TO SATISFY the kingdoms, Hermes made
A wondrous engine for the football trade;
Its gears were cast from contracts, gold, and brass,
Its wheels revolved beneath a dome of glass.

He named it the Great Equalising Wheel,
And claimed it would transform the football deal;
Each club would place its fortune in a pot,
And draw a spending limit from a lot.

But ancient kings demanded greater shares,
And newer owners questioned their affairs;
The smaller clubs complained their sums were thin,
While every giant thought its share too mean.

Then Hermes introduced an extra fee,
For those who sought financial parity;
And when the clubs complained about the cost,
He charged them for the minutes they had lost.

Ares struck the engine with his lance,
And sent its golden wheels into a dance;
The machine began distributing its gold,
To all the people Hermes wished to hold.

Athena cried, "Your mechanism's flawed!"
While Zeus exclaimed, "The merchant should be clawed!"
But Hermes calmly counted up his gain,
And promised to redesign the thing again.

VI. THE REBELLION OF THE SUPPORTERS

ACROSS THE land the football faithful rose,
In coats and scarves against November snows;
They carried banners through the crowded streets,
And challenged those who ruled their club's great seats.

Some protested ticket prices climbing high,
While owners watched the balance sheets nearby;
Some asked for greater voice within the game,
And questioned why their loyalty fed fame.

At Manchester Old Arthur joined a crowd,
Whose voices rose above the traffic loud;
His grandson carried one great painted sign,
"FOOTBALL BELONGS TO PEOPLE, NOT THE BOTTOM LINE."

A passer-by declared, "But owners pay!"
Old Arthur answered, "Yes, and fans each day;
A football club is more than shares and stock,
It lives in every ordinary city block."

Another cried, "Without the wealthy few,
The stadiums would crumble into blue!"
"Aye," Arthur said, "investment has its use,
But fan devotion should not face abuse."

The grandson asked, "And what about the law?"
"Enforce it fairly, that is what it's for;
And if the rulings find what courts sustain,
Then follow them, however great the pain."

Thus Manchester's old supporter stood
For sporting truth and common human good;
And Athena, watching from the heavens high,
Declared him wiser than a king nearby.

VII. THE RETURN OF THE TROJAN HORSE

NOW HERMES fashioned one more wooden horse,
And sent it toward the football kingdom's course;
Upon its flank, in letters large and bright,
He wrote, "COMPETITIVE FAIRNESS DONE RIGHT."

Inside concealed a hundred lawyers sat,
With invoices and contracts underneath each hat;
And when the kingdoms welcomed in the beast,
The legal army opened up its feast.

They charged the clubs for every consultation,
Then charged again for regulatory preparation;
They sold a rulebook thicker than a wall,
And an explanatory supplement for all.

The smaller kings demanded to be heard,
But every question cost another word;
And Zeus, surveying from his stormy seat,
Declared this Trojan horse a greater feat

Than any cunning Odysseus had conceived,
For all the football kingdoms were deceived;
The wooden horse had conquered without blood,
And buried every castle in a legal flood.

Then Ares took his spear and split the frame,
And drove the lawyers scattering in shame;
But Hermes smiled, despite his broken trade,
“The insurance claim shall see the losses paid.”

VIII. THE REBELLION REACHES OLYMPUS

AT LAST the smaller kingdoms sought the gods,
And marched against Olympus’ mighty odds;
They demanded that Zeus make justice plain,
And free the football world from constant strain.

Zeus listened with an irritable face,
And asked them each to state their proper case;
But fifty heralds rose at once to speak,
And turned the throne room into utter shriek.

“Silence!” roared Zeus, and thunder split the air,
As frightened lords collapsed beneath their chair;
“Let Athena hear these questions one by one,
Before the patience of the gods is done!”

The goddess rose and listened to their plea,
Of lawful fairness and equality;
Then told the kingdoms standing in the hall,
“No scheme can guarantee success to all.

“The strongest teams may win through skill and care,
The weakest have a right to treatment fair;
A soundly governed league must make its rules
Transparent, not instruments for favoured fools.”

The smaller lords accepted what she said,
And bowed before the wisdom of her head;
Yet as they left the hall, each privately
Demanded special treatment for his own decree.

IX. THE FATES OBSERVE THE REBELLION

BEYOND OLYMPUS Clotho spun a thread,
Of smaller clubs whose hopes were never dead;
Lachesis wove the proud old kingdoms through,
And watched their ancient banners, red and blue.

Atropos raised her silver shears and smiled,
“The history of sport is ever wild;
One empire falls, another climbs the throne,
And no great victory lasts forever on its own.”

The threads of wealth and regulation grew,
Entangled with the dreams of teams anew;
And somewhere in the pattern, dark and deep,
The Hundred Fifteen waited in its sleep.

Yet neither rising rebellion nor desire
Could turn the law into a hurried fire;
And every club, both powerful and weak,
Must let the court complete the truth they seek.

X. THE EPIC CLOSE: THE KINGDOMS RETURN

THEN TWILIGHT fell upon the football plain,
And rival armies marched toward home again;
Their standards fluttered in the setting light,
While lawyers studied documents through night.

Old Arthur watched his grandson kick a ball,
Against the fading shadow of a wall;
And smiled to see the youngster rise and run,
Where football remained beautiful and fun.

“One day,” he said, “the mighty kings shall fade,
And new great football kingdoms shall be made;
But let them rise by talent, skill, and trust,
And keep their records honest, as they must.”

Then Zeus descended from his mountain chair,
And heard the distant crowds upon the air;
“The smaller kings have made a noble cry,
Though every one demands a larger slice of pie.”

Athena answered, “Such is mortal need,
Where noble principles encounter greed;
Yet still the rules may guide the sporting art,
If justice lives within the human heart.”

Thus ended England’s great rebellious day,
While clubs returned to train and work and play;
But from the north another thunder came,
And summoned all the gods to City’s name.

For what had seemed a battle over gold,
Had grown into a question years untold;
And soon the Muse would sing of all the cost,
When football’s greatest kingdom feared what might be lost.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XXI

The Rebellion of the Football Kingdoms

B O O K X X I I

The Judgment of the Immortals

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Extraordinary Trial Conducted Upon Olympus, in Which Zeus Attempts to Judge Manchester City, Hermes Defends the Sacred Rights of the Invoice, Ares Demands Trial by Penalty Shootout, and Athena Discovers That the Supreme Ruler of Heaven Has Never Read the Premier League Handbook.

I. THE INVOCATION OF THE HEAVENLY COURT

SING, MUSE, of judgments higher than the sky,
Where even stars must answer how and why;
Of Olympian thrones and marble halls,
Where thunder shakes the everlasting walls.

Sing of a king impatient with delay,
Who thought to settle every case one day;
Of gods who found that mortal laws endure,
Though heaven's own procedures seem obscure.

For Zeus had watched the football kingdoms fight,
And quarrel through the day and half the night;
He'd heard the rival monarchs make their claim,
And seen the Blue Empire defend its name.

At last the thunderer struck his royal seat,
And made the stars recoil before his feet;
"No more!" he cried. "I'll call a court divine,
And make the final football judgment mine!"

Then all Olympus answered to his call,
And crowded into judgment's marble hall;
But wise Athena, guardian of the law,
Beheld a dangerous mistake in what she saw.

"Great sire, your court has neither power nor place
To settle this particular mortal case;
The legal process must proceed below,
And what its judges find is theirs to show."

Zeus waved his mighty sceptre in the air,
And cried, "Then what on earth am I doing here?
I rule the thunder, oceans, sun, and rain,
But cannot even give a football ruling plain!"

II. THE COURT OF SUPREME CONFUSION

THE GODS assembled on their marble chairs,
While Hermes sold them ceremonial wares;
Each witness found a laurel wreath to wear,
And learned the wreath required a rental share.

The court's great doors were opened to the sky,
And golden eagles circled overhead on high;
Ares appointed himself the royal guard,
And made the entrance unnecessarily hard.

Zeus raised his sceptre, solemn and severe,
And called for every football charge to appear;
But when the first great catalogue was read,
The thunderer slumped and slowly shook his head.

"One hundred fifteen! Must we read them all?"
Athena answered, "Each deserves its proper call;
Though many may concern a shared event,
They must be judged by evidence and intent."

“Then summon all the sponsors to the stand!”
Zeus shouted, waving one enormous hand;
But Hermes quietly explained the cost,
And Zeus lamented all the gold he’d lost.

Then Ares stepped before the throne and cried,
“Let football settle football’s wounded pride!
Eleven penalties from either side,
And let the sharper strikers then decide!”

Athena sighed. “A contest on the grass
Cannot determine whether claims should pass;
A goalkeeper may stop a speeding shot,
But cannot say what sponsorship was not.”

III. HERMES DEFENDS THE GOLDEN KINGDOM

THEN HERMES rose, his sandals glittering bright,
And made his opening argument with delight;
“Great lords, behold the splendour wealth has made,
The trophies, stadiums, and flourishing trade!”

He spoke of talented young men employed,
And all the football wonders crowds enjoyed;
Of cities lifted through commercial gain,
And football played magnificently in the rain.

“Would you condemn the merchants of the earth,
Whose contracts bring such wealth and sporting worth?
Shall commerce tremble every time a clerk
Discovers one more document at work?”

Athena answered, “No one here condemns
All enterprise, or every merchant’s gems;
The law distinguishes the honest trade,
From breaches where the rules were disobeyed.

“The challenge concerns what the judges found,
And City’s objections to their legal ground;
The scale of wealth, however great its worth,
Cannot decide what happened on the earth.”

Then Hermes bowed and smiled his sweetest smile,
And quietly changed his argument meanwhile;
“Great goddess, I accept your wise decree,
And offer legal services for a fee.”

IV. ARES SUMMONS ACHILLES AND HECTOR

THEN ARES, wearied by commercial talk,
Sent heralds down the underworld’s dark walk;
And summoned ancient heroes of renown,
To settle football’s quarrel for the crown.

Achilles came with armour burning gold,
His mighty story through the ages told;
And Hector, proud defender of his wall,
Approached the court and watched a rolling ball.

“Explain,” said Ares, “what makes a warrior great,
And whether gold determines mortal fate.”
Achilles answered, “Courage, strength, and fire,
And deeds that lift a soldier ever higher.”

Hector replied, “And duty to the land,
And honour in the keeping of command;
Yet even heroes must obey the right,
Or strength becomes a tyrant in the fight.”

Zeus nodded at the ancient Trojan’s word,
The wisest thing the court had lately heard;
But Ares shouted, “Football isn’t law!
It’s triumph, struggle, skill, and bloody war!”

Athena spoke, "The hero's deeds are grand,
Yet sporting institutions also stand
Upon agreements all the members make,
And duties that their wealthy leaders take."

Achilles frowned and stared upon the floor,
"Then what became of fighting as a war?"
Hector smiled. "The modern world has grown;
They wound with paragraphs instead of stone."

V. THE GREAT EXAMINATION OF ZEUS

THEN ATHENA, smiling, made a daring claim,
That Zeus should know the rules before the game;
She placed a mighty handbook at his feet,
And bade him take the examination seat.

"Explain, great king, what reporting rules demand,
And why commercial revenues must stand
Within the framework that the members chose,
With records proving what the figures show."

Zeus looked upon the book in deep despair,
And scratched his beard beneath his silver hair;
"These rules are longer than the Titan war,
And twice as dull as anything before!"

"Then tell us how a lawful appeal proceeds."
Zeus answered, "Surely thunder meets its needs?"
Athena marked his answer with a sigh,
And gave the thunder god no passing grade nearby.

Ares tried the examination next,
But found the questions hopelessly complex;
And Hermes offered Zeus a book to buy,
Containing model answers from on high.

The goddess seized the merchant's golden scroll,
And asked why every answer served his goal;
"Because," he said, "my customers prefer
An answer matching what they hoped to hear."

Then Zeus proclaimed the test a monstrous crime,
And called for recess until another time;
Athena smiled. "Now understand, great sire,
Why proper judgment takes more than desire."

VI. THE MORTAL WITNESS

AT LAST the gods summoned Old Arthur near,
Who came without a tremor or a fear;
His grandson walked beside him through the sky,
And stared at marble palaces on high.

The old man bowed politely to the throne,
Then spoke with confidence entirely his own:
"I've followed City since my youngest days,
Through Third Division rain and brighter praise.

"I've seen the club when hope was nearly gone,
And watched the new magnificent era dawn;
The players brought us triumph, joy, and fame,
And gave us reasons to adore the game."

Then Zeus declared, "You love the kingdom blue;
Therefore you surely think all charges untrue?"
Old Arthur shook his weather-beaten head,
And looked the thunder monarch in the face and said:

"No, love and truth are different things, my lord,
And loyalty is not a legal sword;
I want the judgment tested fairly through,
And what the evidence establishes held true.

“If City’s challenge shows the ruling wrong,
Then let the correction stand before the throng;
But if the lawful findings are sustained,
The penalties the rules allow must be maintained.”

Athena nodded, pleased with Arthur’s view,
While Zeus admitted what the old man knew;
And Hermes offered to retain him there,
As Football’s Independent Consultant of the Chair.

Arthur declined. “I have a match at three,
And that’s a better use of time for me.”

VII. THE GODS DISCOVER THEIR OWN FINANCIAL SCANDAL

THEN CLOTHO brought a scroll from ancient days,
Concerning how Olympus earned its praise;
For centuries the gods had taken gifts,
From kings who sought to heal their mortal rifts.

The temples overflowed with precious gold,
And offerings whose origins were untold;
But when Athena studied what was paid,
A most astonishing discovery was made.

“The gods,” she said, “have never filed accounts!
No ledger lists the sacrificial amounts!
What revenue supports this mighty place,
And why does Hermes hold a golden trace?”

The merchant god turned pale beneath his crown,
And watched the other gods begin to frown;
“Such offerings,” he said, “are wholly free,
And come through ancient hospitality.”

Zeus thundered, “Are you accusing me of fraud?”
“No, sire, I’m asking how the temples are stored;
An audit asks for records, not a crime,
And ancient customs may require review in time.”

Then Ares cried, "By all the stars above,
I knew this financial language lacked all love!"
And Hermes whispered, "Should the gods be tried,
I'll offer representation on each side."

The gods considered what an audit meant,
And found themselves surprisingly discontent;
For regulations viewed from heaven's chair
Seemed quite unlike regulations applied there.

VIII. THE JUDGMENT ZEUS CANNOT GIVE

AT LENGTH the thunder king prepared to rise,
And summon judgment from the vaulted skies;
His sceptre flashed; the marble chamber shook,
And every god upon his neighbour looked.

"Manchester City!" roared the mighty king,
"I shall determine this disputed thing!
My ruling is..." He paused amid the glare,
As Athena raised her shield into the air.

"Great sire, the earthly process must proceed,
And mortal courts must judge what they shall read;
You cannot grant a verdict from above,
Or make a ruling merely out of love."

Zeus lowered his great sceptre, visibly in pain,
And watched the lightning vanish into rain;
"Then what," he cried, "is all my power for,
If I cannot finish this infernal war?"

Athena answered, "Govern storms and skies,
And leave the facts to those whose duty lies
Within the law their institutions made,
And see that proper principles are obeyed."

Then Zeus declared, "I find this most unfair!
What good's Olympus if I cannot interfere?"
And Hermes bowed. "I know a remedy,
A constitutional amendment, for a fee."

IX. THE VERDICT UPON OLYMPUS ITSELF

THE GODS withdrew to ponder what they'd learned,
And every one to his dominion turned;
For even immortals had to recognise
That self-interest can cloud the sharpest eyes.

Ares saw that strength alone was not the test,
And Hermes learned that gold was not the best
Foundation for a judgment just and clear,
Though he continued sending invoices every year.

Zeus understood, however much he chafed,
That lawful procedure made the judgment safe;
And Athena watched the chamber's final light,
As stars emerged across the silver night.

Then Clotho spoke, "The court of gods is done,
But England's legal path must still be run;
We do not know what final facts shall stand,
Nor what the lawful judges shall command."

Atropos raised her shears, but left them still,
And gazed toward Manchester's distant hill;
For destiny remained beyond their grasp,
Though every god desired the final clasp.

X. THE EPIC CLOSE: THE HUMILITY OF THUNDER

THUS ZEUS returned to his Olympian chair,
And listened to the cold, immortal air;
For all his strength, his lightning, and his fame,
He could not grant an earthly football claim.

The rival kingdoms slept beneath the moon,
And hoped the end of war would follow soon;
The City's faithful waited in the night,
And dreamed of football played beneath the light.

Old Arthur left Olympus with a smile,
And took his grandson home across the mile;
"Those gods," he said, "are much like men below,
They talk a lot about what they don't know."

His grandson laughed. "But Zeus can shake the ground!"
"Aye, and still can't get a ruling properly found;
There's many a fellow with tremendous power,
Who couldn't run a chip shop for an hour."

The Muse descended through the midnight air,
And sang of truth and judgment everywhere;
For even kings must recognise the line
Between a mortal verdict and design.

And somewhere far beneath the northern stars,
The Hundred Fifteen kept their ancient scars;
The final tale remained beyond the veil,
As City continued its contested legal trail.

The gods had rendered wisdom, not decree,
And left the human judges wholly free;
So thunder settled, and the stars grew bright,
While football waited for another night.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XXII

The Judgment of the Immortals

B O O K X X I I I

*The Last Night
Before the Reckoning*

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Solemn History of the Night When All the Football Kingdoms Fell Silent, the Visit of the Ghosts of Maine Road, the Farewell Between Old Arthur and the Age of Innocence, and the Three Fates' Final Preparation for Manchester City's Unwritten Destiny.

I. THE MUSE SINGS OF THE LONGEST NIGHT

SING, MUSE, of darkness falling on the plain,
Of northern streets beneath the autumn rain;
Of kingdoms waiting for a future hour,
When words of judgment might decide their power.

Sing of the city where the Irwell flows,
And where the chill November evening grows;
Where football lives within the common heart,
And every generation plays its part.

For years the case had crossed the sporting land,
And raised the question every club must stand;
The mighty and the humble knew the fear,
That justice may demand an answer clear.

The commission's findings carried serious weight,
While City's challenge sought a different fate;
The final appellate judgment was not known,
And no last sanction marked the gilded throne.

Yet in the Cityad the Muse now stood
Before the final book, as poets should;
And looked upon the characters grown old,
Whose destinies remained to be told.

Ares laid down his spear beside the fire,
And watched the gathering clouds grow higher;
Hermes counted all his gold alone,
While Zeus sat silent on his marble throne.

And wise Athena held the scales of law,
And contemplated all the gods had saw;
The three great Fates prepared their final thread,
While mortals wondered what remained ahead.

II. THE GHOSTS OF MAINE ROAD

WITHIN THE northern city came a sound,
Of football chants from long-forgotten ground;
And through the mist there rose an ancient sight,
The ghost of Maine Road shining in the night.

Its terraces returned from vanished years,
Its stands were filled with laughter, hope, and tears;
The crowds of generations long since passed,
Came singing through the memory of the past.

The players wore the shirts of olden days,
And walked beneath the cold floodlights' rays;
Their boots were heavy, their ambitions high,
Their wages scarcely kept the winter dry.

Then Old Arthur stood before the gate,
And heard the voices calling from his fate;
He saw himself, a young and hopeful man,
Before the wealthy transformation began.

A shadow from the terraces drew near,
And spoke with friendly laughter in his ear:
“Remember when we lost another game,
And still returned the Saturday the same?”

Old Arthur smiled and wiped his weathered eye,
“Aye, mate, and wished those miserable years goodbye;
But now I find the memories strangely sweet,
Of standing every fortnight on my feet.”

The ghost replied, “A club is more than gold,
Its soul belongs to stories still untold;
No wealth can purchase back a vanished day,
Or turn the joy of youth another way.”

Then Arthur bowed his old and silver head,
And listened to the words the spirit said;
For through the years of triumph, wealth, and fame,
He still remembered why he loved the game.

III. THE GRANDSON CONFRONTS THE FUTURE

HIS GRANDSON walked beside him through the mist,
And watched the ancient terraces persist;
He heard the songs his grandfather had known,
And felt the history in their voices shown.

“Grandad,” he asked, “what made you stay so long,
When every season seemed to end in wrong?”
Old Arthur smiled and touched his shoulder there,
“Because the club was something we could share.

“My father brought me through those gates of old,
And showed me football in the bitter cold;
He taught me not to leave when fortunes turned,
Nor measure only silver cups we’d earned.”

“But what if City’s future is severe,
And all our brightest dreams should disappear?”
“Then we must face what judgments rightly find,
And not surrender heart or honest mind.

“For if the legal challenge shall prevail,
The truth will show what findings could not scale;
And if the judgment’s substance shall remain,
We’ll face the consequences and the pain.”

The boy fell silent, looking at the ground,
While distant ghostly cheering rolled around;
And Arthur added, “You can love a team,
Without believing everything a dream.”

Thus wisdom passed from age to youthful years,
Beyond the glamour and the football cheers;
And when the ancient stadium faded slow,
The boy held tighter to the hand he’d know.

IV. THE NIGHT WATCH OF THE RIVAL KINGS

FAR OFF, within their castles proud and bright,
The rival monarchs held their watch that night;
Each wondered what the coming legal day
Might bring to football’s complicated way.

At Anfield, ancient champions recalled
The seasons when their hopes had been forestalled;
At Old Trafford, memories of a mighty reign
Returned like summer sunlight after rain.

The Arsenal lords remembered all the years,
Of championship ambitions, hopes, and fears;
While Chelsea’s gilded kingdom watched the sky,
And wondered how the laws should now apply.

Yet even rivals weary of the wait
Could not command the final hand of fate;
And some began to question whether hate
Was fit to guide the judgment of a state.

For football is a rivalry of dreams,
Not simply power purchased through its schemes;
And when a mighty kingdom faces trial,
Justice must stand beyond a partisan smile.

Then a small northern herald raised his hand,
And spoke what every club should understand:
“Let verdicts rest upon the evidence heard,
And let the rules, not rivalry, have the word.”

The council sat in silence for a space,
An unfamiliar calm upon each face;
Then one great lord declared, “Agreed, of course,
Provided our own team receives no worse.”

V. HERMES PREPARES HIS FINAL INVOICE

NOW HERMES sat beside his golden chest,
And counted all the profits of his quest;
For years he'd sold the judgments yet to come,
And found uncertainty a splendid sum.

He'd sponsored programmes, merchandise, and fear,
And billed the anxious for each passing year;
His forecasts filled a thousand paper reams,
And never quite extinguished mortal dreams.

Yet now he wondered what would happen when
The arguments should find their lawful end;
For where a settled verdict might appear,
The market for predictions could disappear.

“An ending,” Hermes whispered in despair,
“Would be a tragedy beyond compare;
For nothing frightens commerce more than peace,
When controversy makes its profits cease.”

He summoned all his legal friends that night,
And spoke beneath the candle’s gentle light:
“Prepare a plan for every future turn,
For one last way our business may earn.

“If City triumphs, print the vindication,
With commemorative explanatory publication;
If findings stand, sell every rival king
A souvenir of judgment’s solemn sting.

“If mixed conclusions follow from the day,
Produce a chart explaining all the way;
And if the case continues, better still,
For endless expectation pays the bill.”

Thus Hermes smiled, his spirit reassured,
That business might remain securely cured;
And Zeus, who heard his cunning plan unfold,
Declared, “You’d sell the sunrise if it came in gold!”

VI. THE LAMENT OF THE WAR GOD

THEN ARES stood upon a mountain high,
And watched the dark clouds crossing through the sky;
His spear lay heavy in his mighty hand,
As football’s legal armies filled the land.

“I’ve watched the Greeks at Troy for ten long years,
And heard the dying warriors’ anguished cheers;
I’ve seen the mighty kingdoms rise and fall,
And conquered cities crumble at the call.

“Yet never have I seen a stranger war,
Where nobody can tell what victory’s for;
Where lawyers charge the kings for every day,
And all the soldiers merely wait and pray.”

Athena rose beside him on the hill,
And watched the shadowed Etihad stand still;
“The modern struggle is not wholly vain,
Though patience brings a different kind of pain.

“For rules give meaning to the contest’s worth,
And guard the fragile fairness of the earth;
A stronger warrior does not gain the right
To disregard the laws that govern fight.”

Then Ares sighed and lowered down his spear,
And listened to the football crowd’s distant cheer;
“Perhaps the world has found another way,
To settle battles without blood to pay.”

Athena smiled. “That is a worthy thought,
Though lawyers’ fees remain exceedingly sought.”
And Ares answered with a rueful grin,
“At least the dead at Troy were billed for nothing.”

VII. ZEUS WALKS AMONG THE MORTALS

THEN ZEUS descended from Olympus’ height,
Disguised as an old supporter in the night;
He walked through Manchester beneath the rain,
And listened to the traffic on the lane.

He saw the football scarves in window glass,
And watched the hurried matchday people pass;
He heard young children arguing about fame,
And older men recalling every game.

He stopped beside a tavern warm and bright,
Where Old Arthur rested in the evening light;
And sat beside him, looking worn and grim,
As though the endless hearings troubled him.

“What think you,” Zeus began, “of all this war,
And all the legal battles yet in store?”
Old Arthur shrugged and raised his drinking glass,
“Nothing I think will make the verdict pass.”

“But surely wealth and glory must prevail?”
“Not if the lawful findings stand the scale;
And surely not because the fans demand
That justice make a special place for their own land.”

Zeus frowned. “And what of all those splendid goals?”
“They live in hearts and records, minds and souls;
But glory cannot answer every claim,
Nor make the club’s financial duties tame.”

Then Zeus revealed his thunder in his eyes,
And Arthur laughed at the peculiar surprise;
“If you’re the god of thunder, buy a round,
And stop pretending you can shake the ground.”

The king obeyed, astonished by the man,
And purchased ale according to his plan;
For Zeus had conquered Titans in his day,
Yet never met a football fan quite this way.

VIII. THE THREE FATES’ FAREWELL TO CERTAINTY

WITHIN THE chamber of eternal night,
The sisters gathered round the loom of light;
Clotho drew the story toward its close,
While Lachesis measured all the years and woes.

The golden threads of victories remained,
Beside the darker records still maintained;
And Atropos considered what to cut,
Yet found the future's final chamber shut.

"The poem approaches its appointed end,"
Said Clotho, "but history has more to send;
The laws of mortal time do not obey
The singer's wish to finish in a day."

Lachesis answered, "Then the Muse must sing
A truth beyond the final ruling's ring;
For if the outcome still remains unknown,
We cannot place a certainty on the throne."

Atropos raised her shining silver blade,
And watched the threads the ancient sisters made;
"Let not the poet counterfeit the seal,
Or claim the judges' findings beyond appeal."

Thus Fate herself refused to make a claim,
On judgments not yet written in the game;
And where the future waited in the mist,
The silver shears lay open and unknissed.

IX. THE LAST CONVERSATION BEFORE DAWN

THE NORTHERN night was deep and calm and cold,
As Arthur told his grandson tales of old;
They spoke of relegation, glory, pain,
And all the matches played beneath the rain.

The grandson asked, "Will you see how it ends?"
Old Arthur smiled. "That depends, my friend;
I've lived through football's strange and splendid years,
And watched the club grow mighty through my tears."

“But surely there must come a final day,
When all the lawyers put their books away?”
“Aye, lad, though don’t expect their bills to cease;
They’re rather more persistent than the Greeks.”

“And what if there’s another long appeal?”
“Then you shall learn what patient people feel;
Perhaps you’ll have your own young son by then,
And explain these hundred charges once again.”

The grandson laughed and looked toward the sky,
Where faint stars glittered through the clouds on high;
“And what would you want him most to know?”
“That truth matters, wherever people go.

“That money makes great wonders possible,
But not all deeds of wealth are honourable;
That sport is built on rules and human trust,
And faithful love must sometimes still be just.”

X. THE MUSE PREPARES THE FINAL SONG

THEN MORNING’S earliest light appeared afar,
And touched the city’s last retiring star;
The stadium stood beside the waking town,
Its towers catching heaven’s silver crown.

The mighty gods assembled in the sky,
And watched the fading darkness passing by;
Zeus held his thunderbolt against his breast,
While Ares laid his weary spear to rest.

Hermes closed his ledger for the night,
And Athena kept the scales of justice bright;
The sisters stood beside their woven art,
And watched the Cityad approach its final part.

The Muse proclaimed, in tones of solemn fire,
“One final book remains upon the lyre;
The football kingdom’s fate shall meet the dawn,
Though history’s living road continues on.

“No poet should pronounce what courts have not,
Nor turn the future into settled plot;
Yet through the story of the mighty Blue,
A greater human lesson rises true.”

The golden banners lifted with the sun,
And all the football kingdoms stood as one
In waiting for the law’s eventual word,
And all the voices that might yet be heard.

Thus closed the final night of anxious breath,
With neither victory, exile, crown, nor death
Decreed beyond the judgments law may bear,
And human hearts still hoping everywhere.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XXIII
The Last Night Before the Reckoning

B O O K X X I V

The Last Song of the Cityad

T H E A R G U M E N T

Being the Final Book of the Great Epic, in Which Zeus Demands the End of the Hundred and Fifteen, Athena Defends the Eternal Scales of Justice, Hermes Counts the Profits of Twenty-Four Books of Controversy, and Old Arthur Discovers That the Greatest Victory in Football Cannot Be Entered in a Balance Sheet.

I. THE LAST INVOCATION OF THE MUSE

SING, MUSE, one final song of northern fame,
Of Manchester, its glory and its shame;
Of mighty kings who gathered wealth and power,
And raised a football kingdom like a tower.

Sing of the days when blue was worn in pain,
When Maine Road's faithful stood beneath the rain;
Of humiliations suffered, hopes denied,
And generations bound by stubborn pride.

Sing of the sudden dawn of golden years,
When triumph washed away a thousand tears;
When Agüero's immortal strike rang clear,
And shook the football heavens far and near.

Sing of the genius who transformed the game,
Whose passing armies marched to lasting fame;
Of Guardiola's geometric art,
That gave possession movement, soul, and heart.

Sing of the players who through seasons fought,
And made the football beautiful they taught;
Of silver cups and European light,
And mighty victories beneath the night.

But sing as well of questions unresolved,
Of financial claims through many years evolved;
Of UEFA's thunder, Switzerland's decree,
And England's far more tangled history.

For glory cast a shadow through the land,
And law approached with evidence in hand;
Its court had found financial breaches grave,
While City's appeal sought the findings to stave.

No final appellate answer yet appeared,
Though many hoped, predicted, praised, or feared;
And thus the poet, standing at the gate,
Must leave the unwritten verdict unto fate.

Yet this great epic need not lack an end,
For wisdom has a destiny to send;
And though no lawful ruling can be guessed,
The Muse may still pronounce the human test.

II. THE GODS GATHER FOR THE FINAL COUNCIL

UPON OLYMPUS Zeus assembled all,
And summoned every god into his hall;
His throne was bright with thunder, fire, and gold,
His face betrayed a king grown rather old.

"Twenty-four books!" he thundered through the sky,
"And still no final judgment meets my eye!
I've watched these lawyers fight from year to year,
And now I find the end is nowhere near!"

Then Hermes bowed, his golden sandals shone,
And offered Zeus a very costly loan;
“My lord, the legal markets still are strong,
And controversy may continue long.”

Ares struck his shield and shook the floor,
“I’ve had enough of all this paperwork war!
At Troy we slaughtered half the warriors there,
And still the legal bill was rather fair!”

Athena stood and raised her silver spear,
And spoke so all Olympus had to hear:
“The greatest victories are not always swift,
And justice is no arbitrary gift.

“The league must prove the claims its charges make,
And judgments face whatever tests they take;
An appeal may leave a finding standing fast,
Or change what earlier courts concluded past.

“The proper outcome isn’t what we choose,
Because we love a team or wish it lose;
The truth must stand beyond the reach of gold,
And cannot merely be whatever kings have told.”

Then Zeus, who had expected final war,
Declared, “You’ve said all that twelve times before!”
Athena answered, “Wisdom bears repeating,
When kings mistake impatience for defeating.”

III. THE CITY THAT REFUSED TO DIE

THE MUSE descended to the northern plain,
Where Manchester stood shining after rain;
Its towers rose beneath the breaking cloud,
And streets awoke with voices strong and proud.

For City had survived the darkest years,
Through poverty, defeat, and endless fears;
Its history was not a single age,
Nor all its meaning held upon one page.

The club had known the lower league's cold field,
And watched its ancient hopes refuse to yield;
Yet every year the faithful gathered still,
To cheer their team beneath the northern chill.

Then came the wealth that lifted all its might,
And filled the Etihad with dazzling light;
The passing game grew splendid to behold,
And football history wrote its lines in gold.

But underneath the victories and acclaim,
The league's financial rules sustained their claim;
And public arguments grew fierce and long,
Concerning where the club had acted wrong.

The commission's findings raised the stakes of fate,
And City's challenge placed them in debate;
Thus football's fairest artistry remained
Beside the question of what law sustained.

Yet Manchester was larger than a score,
And greater than the argument at its door;
Its people lived beyond the club's great name,
Though many gave their hearts to football's flame.

IV. THE LAST DEBATE OF ATHENA AND HERMES

ATHENA STOOD beside the stadium wall,
And watched the workers passing to their call;
Then Hermes came, his ledger bound in gold,
And spoke of all the merchandise he'd sold.

“Behold,” he said, “what wealth and trade have done,
The great commercial kingdoms they have spun;
A football club is now a mighty brand,
Whose influence stretches over sea and land.”

Athena answered, “Commerce lifts the game,
But cannot place itself beyond all blame;
The rules must apply with clarity and care,
And judges weigh the evidence that’s there.”

“But surely,” Hermes said, “a wealthy club
Can build the stadium, the shop, the pub;
And when investment makes a kingdom grow,
Why should the regulators trouble so?”

“Because,” Athena said, “agreements matter,
And rules prevent the competition’s shatter;
If obligations freely undertaken
May simply by the strongest be forsaken,

“Then smaller clubs will have no cause to trust
The sporting laws that bind them, as they must;
Yet neither should the old established few
Use regulations to exclude the new.”

Then Hermes paused, his golden tablet still,
And looked beyond the city’s northern hill;
“Perhaps,” he said, “the market needs a law,
Provided every law contains no flaw.”

Athena laughed. “Then mortal kings shall wait,
For no such perfect statute governs fate;
But fairness, reason, candour, and review
May make imperfect rules more nearly true.”

V. THE LAST BATTLE OF ARES

THEN ARES called the warriors to the field,
And ordered every champion to wield
The weapons of the sporting contest bright,
To stage one final, glorious football fight.

The gods assembled in their ancient bands,
With silver shields and banners in their hands;
Achilles stood beside the wing of Mars,
And Hector marched beneath the morning stars.

Odysseus came with cunning in his eyes,
And brought a tactical surprise;
He'd placed eleven warriors near the goal,
And hoped to keep possession of the whole.

Then Zeus commanded, "Let the game begin!"
And thunder shook the stadium within;
But when the ball was passed across the ground,
Athena cried, "Offside!" with solemn sound.

Ares protested, "Let the battle flow!"
And Hector answered, "Rules are rules, you know!"
Then Hermes hurried toward the referee,
And offered instant sponsorship for a fee.

The game resumed with every god at pace,
And turned to chaos in the crowded space;
Achilles took the ball upon his heel,
And drove through half Olympus with his steel.

But when the mighty warrior went to score,
Athena blew her whistle with a roar;
For Ares had assaulted three defenders,
And threatened all the stadium's attendants.

Zeus summoned VAR from heaven's height,
And asked the ancient oracle to sight
The questionable contact near the line,
And make the proper judgment by design.

The oracle reviewed the incident at length,
And tested every angle for its strength;
Then spoke, "The evidence is not quite clear,
And further review may be required next year."

Zeus roared so loudly all the heavens shook,
And hurled his sceptre at the rulebook's book;
"Even the gods cannot escape this curse!
The modern football world is getting worse!"

VI. THE LAST ACCOUNT OF THE MERCHANT GOD

THEN HERMES opened up his golden chest,
And counted what his business had possessed;
The profits from the scandal had grown vast,
And every year surpassed the year before it passed.

He'd sold a thousand books explaining law,
And forecasts of the judgments none yet saw;
He'd sponsored pundits speaking without end,
And billed the courts for every expert friend.

He'd sold the possibility of shame,
And then the possibility of fame;
He'd marketed vindication and disgrace,
And charged both sides for occupying space.

But as he counted up his golden store,
He heard the northern crowd outside his door;
Their songs were filled with memories and pride,
That no commercial contract could provide.

He watched Old Arthur in the gathering crowd,
And heard the old man's voice, sincere and loud;
Then wondered what it meant to own a thing,
That countless ordinary people loved to sing.

For all his gold, his treaties, and his fees,
He'd never known such simple joy and ease;
And suddenly the merchant god could see,
A treasure quite beyond accountancy.

VII. THE FINAL PROPHECY OF THE THREE FATES

BEYOND THE stars the sisters came once more,
And brought their loom toward the closing door;
Clotho held the threads of City blue,
And Lachesis measured all the seasons through.

The golden strands of football glory shone,
Beside the shadows that the law had drawn;
And Atropos, with silver shears in hand,
Beheld the undetermined future of the land.

"The poet's task," said Clotho, "now is done,
Though history's struggle has not yet been won;
The final judges still possess their role,
And no immortal sister knows the whole."

Lachesis answered, "Let the record show,
The difference between what mortals know
And what they merely wish the world would be,
For hope and fact are never quite the same decree."

Atropos looked upon the mighty team,
And all the people living in its dream;
Then closed her silver scissors, not to sever,
But put them down beside the loom forever.

“For football shall endure beyond this war,
And future generations shall explore
The glory, pride, and errors of the past,
And build new sporting kingdoms that may last.”

Thus Fate refused to counterfeit the end,
And left the lawful process to descend
Upon the questions still awaiting light,
Beyond the poet’s final verse tonight.

VIII. OLD ARTHUR RETURNS TO MAINE ROAD

THEN ARTHUR dreamed that he was young once more,
And stood again beside the ancient door;
The crowds of Maine Road filled the winter air,
And all his vanished friends were gathered there.

He saw his father standing by the rail,
His scarf uplifted in the northern gale;
And heard him say, as fathers often do,
“Remember, lad, whatever comes, stay true.”

The young Arthur laughed and held his hand,
And watched the players marching on the land;
He knew not then what triumph lay ahead,
Nor all the tears that football’s path would shed.

And through the years the memories began
To gather like a mighty caravan;
The relegations, victories, and defeats,
The years of joy and sadness in the streets.

He saw the City’s rise beyond compare,
And heard the Etihad’s tremendous air;
The mighty goals, the trophies, and the cheers,
The dream fulfilled through countless patient years.

Then came the legal battles like a storm,
And all the papers taking martial form;
But Arthur's father looked upon the scene,
And asked what all those arguments could mean.

Old Arthur answered, "Football's changed, Dad,
And much of what we've gained has not been bad;
But wealth and law have made the game so grand,
That sometimes fans can scarcely understand."

His father smiled and placed upon his head
The same old cap he'd worn when Arthur wed;
"Then never lose the simple reason why
You loved the ball beneath the northern sky."

And Arthur woke, with morning in his room,
And sunlight shining through the fading gloom;
He found his grandson waiting by the door,
Prepared to hear another tale once more.

IX. THE LAST MATCH OF OLD ARTHUR

THE ETIHAD was shining in the light,
And crowds assembled for another fight;
The players warmed beneath the morning sun,
While all the world anticipated football fun.

Old Arthur walked beside his grandson there,
With battered scarf and silver-whitened hair;
His steps were slower than in younger days,
But still his heart responded to the praise.

The grandson asked, "Have we reached the end?"
"Of poems, lad, perhaps; but not of friends;
The game goes on, whatever lawyers do,
And men shall always gather dressed in blue."

They reached their seats beneath the stadium roof,
Where once again the ball would offer proof
Of football's strange capacity to bring
A common joy no wealthy monarch can sing.

The crowd arose; the players took the field,
And every ancient worry seemed to yield;
The whistle sounded, and the ball began
Its journey from the boot of mortal man.

And Arthur watched the passing with delight,
The movement, touch, and struggle of the fight;
For here the arguments of law grew still,
And football showed its own enduring skill.

His grandson whispered, "Grandad, watch that pass!"
As City moved the ball across the grass;
And Arthur rose, forgetting all his age,
To see the drama on the sporting stage.

The striker turned, and suddenly there came
A flash of beauty like an ancient flame;
The ball flew toward the goal beneath the sky,
And every watching supporter raised his cry.

Then, just before the ball could find the net,
The Muse suspended everything she'd set;
For no final score was needed in her song,
To show where football's deepest joys belong.

Old Arthur stood, his grandson by his side,
And felt the generations in their pride;
For whatever history might reveal,
The love of football was a living thing to feel.

X. THE FINAL JUDGMENT OF THE HUMAN HEART

UPON OLYMPUS Zeus observed the scene,
And watched the ball hang in the space between
The striker's foot and goalkeeper's hand,
As time grew still across the football land.

"What happens next?" the mighty monarch cried.
Athena answered, standing by his side:
"The ball must fall according to its flight,
And courts must judge according to the right."

"But where's the ending of this mighty tale?
Must every epic end behind a veil?"
The goddess smiled and raised her silver spear,
And made her final teaching sharp and clear.

"The ending lies not solely in a crown,
Nor whether judgments lift a kingdom down;
It lies in what the world may come to know,
When laws are tested and the facts can show.

"A champion's worth requires more than fame,
And truth must guard the honour of the game;
But neither should a false or doubtful claim
Be treated as established merely through a name.

"Let wealth create, and honest markets grow,
Let sporting excellence its splendours show;
Let equal rules give every club its due,
And lawful judgments answer what is true."

Then Ares bowed his helmet to the ground,
And Hermes closed his ledger at the sound;
For even gods, accustomed to their might,
Could recognise the dignity of right.

THE LAST SONG OF THE CITYAD
XI. ZEUS SPEAKS THE LAST WORD

THEN ZEUS arose upon his marble throne,
And spoke in thunder with a final tone:
“I’ve watched this football kingdom rise from pain,
And seen its silver trophies, loss, and gain.

“I’ve watched the gods dispute its mighty worth,
And lawyers claim dominion over earth;
I’ve seen the smallest supporters show more sense
Than all the kings with fortunes so immense.

“I’ve seen a striker conquer with his feet,
And accountants find the champions incomplete;
I’ve watched a hundred accusations grow,
Until their very numbers made me slow.

“And now, before the final curtain falls,
Let no great thunder shatter football’s walls;
Let judgment travel on its lawful road,
And let the honest record bear its load.

“For even I, the monarch of the sky,
Must sometimes leave the answer to the why;
And if the gods have learned a single thing,
It’s that an appeal can humble any king.”

Then Zeus raised high his final thunderbolt,
And sent it through the heavens with a jolt;
Not toward the court, nor any club below,
But out across the stars in golden glow.

And all Olympus answered with a cheer,
For wisdom had survived another year;
And even Hermes, calculating cost,
Admitted that not every war was lost.

XII. THE FAREWELL OF THE CITYAD

NOW LET the golden Muse lay down her lyre,
And see the last bright embers of the fire;
For twenty-four great books have told the tale,
Of football's rising glory and its travail.

From Maine Road's rain to Europe's golden light,
From ancient suffering to supreme delight;
From wealthy patrons crossing desert sands,
To legal scrolls in England's solemn hands.

We've watched Guardiola's armies play,
And seen the rival monarchs stand at bay;
We've heard the mighty gods of war proclaim
Their anger at the bureaucracy of the game.

We've watched Athena guard the scales of law,
And Zeus despair at everything he saw;
We've seen how Hermes made an empire grow,
By selling forecasts that he could not know.

We've watched the sisters weave the strands of fate,
And leave the uncompleted future to its date;
We've watched Old Arthur teach his grandson true,
That honour matters more than wearing blue.

For clubs are made of more than wealth and steel,
More than the titles that their owners feel;
They're made of childhood, memory, hope, and song,
Of faithful generations marching on.

Yet clubs must answer for the deeds they do,
And honour laws that make the contest true;
The strongest champion is not above the rule,
Nor should the weakest be its helpless fool.

And when the final appellate word is heard,
Let facts, not noisy prejudice, be stirred;
For what the judges lawfully decide
Must stand beyond the clamour of each side.

The Cityad has sung of power and pride,
Of justice walking steadily beside;
And though the future has another page,
The Muse may close the curtain on the stage.

But football lives, and every Saturday
The ball begins another splendid play;
And somewhere in the crowd, beneath the sun,
A little boy discovers what is fun.

His grandfather will tell of former years,
Of triumphs born from suffering and tears;
And when the younger asks what truth may be,
The older answers, "Something more than victory."

So let the silver trophies catch the light,
And let the courts pursue the lawful right;
Let rival kingdoms prosper, rise, and fall,
And let the common people keep the ball.

For crowns are passing, empires turn to dust,
And gold grows cold unless it earns our trust;
But hope returns whenever whistles blow,
And new generations learn the game we know.

And now the gods withdraw beyond the sky,
Their thunder fading as the years pass by;
The Muse lays down her lyre upon the shore,
And Manchester prepares to play once more.

The final ball hangs shining in the air,
While all the football kingdoms watch it there;
No god can tell the courts what must be true,
Nor take the faithful's love of royal blue.

Let glory face the judgment of the years,
Let honest truth survive the rival cheers;
For gold may build the grandest earthly throne,
But football's heart belongs to fans alone.

HERE ENDETH BOOK XXIV

The Last Song of the Cityad

T H E E N D