

OF THE NEW REIGN

(June, 1911.)

The bunting and the crimson vanish from the streets. Already the vast army of improvised carpenters that the Coronation has created set themselves to the work of demolition, and soon every road that converges upon Central London will be choked again with great loads of timber--but this time going outward--as our capital emerges from this unprecedented inundation of loyalty. The most elaborately conceived, the most stately of all recorded British Coronations is past.

What new phase in the life of our nation and our Empire does this tremendous ceremony inaugurate? The question is inevitable. There is nothing in all the social existence of men so full of challenge as the crowning of a king. It is the end of the overture; the curtain rises. This is a new beginning-place for histories.

To us, the great mass of common Englishmen, who have no place in the hierarchy of our land, who do not attend Courts nor encounter uniforms, whose function is at most spectacular, who stand in the street and watch the dignitaries and the liveries pass by, this sense of critical expectation is perhaps greater than it is for those more immediately concerned in the spectacle. They have had their parts to play, their symbolic acts to perform, they have sat in their privileged places, and

we have waited at the barriers until their comfort and dignity was assured. I can conceive many of them, a little fatigued, preparing now for social dispersal, relaxing comfortably into gossip, discussing the detail of these events with an air of things accomplished. They will decide whether the Coronation has been a success and whether everything has or has not passed off very well. For us in the great crowd nothing has as yet succeeded or passed off well or ill. We are intent upon a King newly anointed and crowned, a King of whom we know as yet very little, but who has, nevertheless, roused such expectation as no King before him has done since Tudor times, in the presence of gigantic opportunities.

There is a conviction widespread among us--his own words, perhaps, have done most to create it--that King George is inspired, as no recent predecessor has been inspired, by the conception of kingship, that his is to be no rôle of almost indifferent abstinence from the broad processes of our national and imperial development. That greater public life which is above party and above creed and sect has, we are told, taken hold of his imagination; he is to be no crowned image of unity and correlation, a layer of foundation-stones and a signature to documents, but an actor in our drama, a living Prince.

Time will test these hopes, but certainly we, the innumerable democracy of individually unimportant men, have felt the need for such a Prince. Our consciousness of defects, of fields of effort untilled, of vast possibilities neglected and slipping away from us for ever, has never

really slumbered again since the chastening experiences of the Boer War. Since then the national spirit, hampered though it is by the traditions of party government and a legacy of intellectual and social heaviness, has been in uneasy and ineffectual revolt against deadness, against stupidity and slackness, against waste and hypocrisy in every department of life. We have come to see more and more clearly how little we can hope for from politicians, societies and organised movements in these essential things. It is this that has invested the energy and manhood, the untried possibilities of the new King with so radiant a light of hope for us.

Think what it may mean for us all--I write as one of that great ill-informed multitude, sincerely and gravely patriotic, outside the echoes of Court gossip and the easy knowledge of exalted society--if our King does indeed care for these wider and profounder things! Suppose we have a King at last who cares for the advancement of science, who is willing to do the hundred things that are so easy in his position to increase research, to honour and to share in scientific thought. Suppose we have a King whose head rises above the level of the Court artist, and who not only can but will appeal to the latent and discouraged power of artistic creation in our race. Suppose we have a King who understands the need for incessant, acute criticism to keep our collective activities intelligent and efficient, and for a flow of bold, unhampered thought through every department of the national life, a King liberal without laxity and patriotic without pettiness or vulgarity. Such, it seems to us who wait at present almost inexpressively outside the

immediate clamours of a mere artificial loyalty, are the splendid possibilities of the time.

For England is no exhausted or decaying country. It is rich with an unmeasured capacity for generous responses. It is a country burthened indeed, but not overwhelmed, by the gigantic responsibilities of Empire, a little relaxed by wealth, and hampered rather than enslaved by a certain shyness of temperament, a certain habitual timidity, slovenliness and insincerity of mind. It is a little distrustful of intellectual power and enterprise, a little awkward and ungracious to brave and beautiful things, a little too tolerant of dull, well-meaning and industrious men and arrogant old women. It suffers hypocrites gladly, because its criticism is poor, and it is wastefully harsh to frank unorthodoxy. But its heart is sound if its judgments fall short of acuteness and if its standards of achievement are low. It needs but a quickening spirit upon the throne, always the traditional centre of its respect, to rise from even the appearance of decadence. There is a new quality seeking expression in England like the rising of sap in the spring, a new generation asking only for such leadership and such emancipation from restricted scope and ungenerous hostility as a King alone can give it....

When in its turn this latest reign comes at last to its reckoning, what will the sum of its achievement be? What will it leave of things visible? Will it leave a London preserved and beautified, or will it but add abundantly to the lumps of dishonest statuary, the scars and masses

of ill-conceived rebuilding which testify to the aesthetic degradation of the Victorian period? Will a great constellation of artists redeem the ambitious sentimentalities and genteel skilfulness that find their fitting mausoleum in the Tate Gallery? Will our literature escape at last from pretentiousness and timidity, our philosophy from the foolish cerebrations of university "characters" and eminent politicians at leisure, and our starved science find scope and resources adequate to its gigantic needs? Will our universities, our teaching, our national training, our public services, gain a new health from the reviving vigour of the national brain? Or is all this a mere wild hope, and shall we, after perhaps some small flutterings of effort, the foundation of some ridiculous little academy of literary busybodies and hangers-on, the public recognition of this or that sociological pretender or financial "scientist," and a little polite jobbery with picture-buying, relapse into lassitude and a contented acquiescence in the rivalry of Germany and the United States for the moral, intellectual and material leadership of the world?

The deaths and accessions of Kings, the changing of names and coins and symbols and persons, a little force our minds in the marking off of epochs. We are brought to weigh one generation against another, to reckon up our position and note the characteristics of a new phase. What lies before us in the next decades? Is England going on to fresh achievements, to a renewed and increased predominance, or is she falling into a secondary position among the peoples of the world?

The answer to that depends upon ourselves. Have we pride enough to attempt still to lead mankind, and if we have, have we the wisdom and the quality? Or are we just the children of Good Luck, who are being found out?

Some years ago our present King exhorted this island to "wake up" in one of the most remarkable of British royal utterances, and Mr. Owen Seaman assures him in verse of an altogether laureate quality that we are now

"Free of the snare of slumber's silken bands,"

though I have not myself observed it. It is interesting to ask, Is England really waking up? and if she is, what sort of awakening is she likely to have?

It is possible, of course, to wake up in various different ways. There is the clear and beautiful dawn of new and balanced effort, easy, unresting, planned, assured, and there is also the blundering-up of a still half-somnolent man, irascible, clumsy, quarrelsome, who stubs his toe in his first walk across the room, smashes his too persistent alarm clock in a fit of nerves, and cuts his throat while shaving. All patriotic vehemence does not serve one's country. Exertion is a more critical and dangerous thing than inaction, and the essence of success is in the ability to develop those qualities which make action effective, and without which strenuousness is merely a clumsy and noisy protest against inevitable defeat. These necessary qualities, without

which no community may hope for pre-eminence to-day, are a passion for fine and brilliant achievement, relentless veracity of thought and method, and richly imaginative fearlessness of enterprise. Have we English those qualities, and are we doing our utmost to select and develop them?

I doubt very much if we are. Let me give some of the impressions that qualify my assurance in the future of our race.

I have watched a great deal of patriotic effort during the last decade, I have seen enormous expenditures of will, emotion and material for the sake of our future, and I am deeply impressed, not indeed by any effect of lethargy, but by the second-rate quality and the shortness and weakness of aim in very much that has been done. I miss continually that sharply critical imaginativeness which distinguishes all excellent work, which shines out supremely in Cromwell's creation of the New Model, or Nelson's plan of action at Trafalgar, as brightly as it does in Newton's investigation of gravitation, Turner's rendering of landscape, or Shakespeare's choice of words, but which cannot be absent altogether if any achievement is to endure. We seem to have busy, energetic people, no doubt, in abundance, patient and industrious administrators and legislators; but have we any adequate supply of really creative ability?

Let me apply this question to one matter upon which England has certainly been profoundly in earnest during the last decade. We have

been almost frantically resolved to keep the empire of the sea. But have we really done all that could have been done? I ask it with all diffidence, but has our naval preparation been free from a sort of noisy violence, a certain massive dullness of conception? Have we really made anything like a sane use of our resources? I do not mean of our resources in money or stuff. It is manifest that the next naval war will be beyond all precedent a war of mechanisms, giving such scope for invention and scientifically equipped wit and courage as the world has never had before. Now, have we really developed any considerable proportion of the potential human quality available to meet the demand for wits? What are we doing to discover, encourage and develop those supreme qualities of personal genius that become more and more decisive with every new weapon and every new complication and unsuspected possibility it introduces? Suppose, for example, there was among us to-day a one-eyed, one-armed adulterer, rather fragile, prone to sea-sickness, and with just that one supreme quality of imaginative courage which made Nelson our starry admiral. Would he be given the ghost of a chance now of putting that gift at his country's disposal? I do not think he would, and I do not think he would because we underrate gifts and exceptional qualities, because there is no quickening appreciation for the exceptional best in a man, and because we overvalue the good behaviour, the sound physique, the commonplace virtues of mediocrity.

I have but the knowledge of the man in the street in these things, though once or twice I have chanced on prophecy, and I am uneasily

apprehensive of the quality of all our naval preparations. We go on launching these lumping great Dreadnoughts, and I cannot bring myself to believe in them. They seem vulnerable from the air above and the deep below, vulnerable in a shallow channel and in a fog (and the North Sea is both foggy and shallow), and immensely costly. If I were Lord High Admiral of England at war I would not fight the things. I would as soon put to sea in St. Paul's Cathedral. If I were fighting Germany, I would stow half of them away in the Clyde and half in the Bristol Channel, and take the good men out of them and fight with mines and torpedoes and destroyers and airships and submarines.

And when I come to military matters my persuasion that things are not all right, that our current hostility to imaginative activity and our dull acceptance of established methods and traditions is leading us towards grave dangers, intensifies. In South Africa the Boers taught us in blood and bitterness the obvious fact that barbed wire had its military uses, and over the high passes on the way to Lhasa (though, luckily, it led to no disaster) there was not a rifle in condition to use because we had not thought to take glycerine. The perpetual novelty of modern conditions demands an imaginative alertness we eliminate. I do not believe that the Army Council or anyone in authority has worked out a tithe of the essential problems of contemporary war. If they have, then it does not show. Our military imagination is half-way back to bows and arrows. The other day I saw a detachment of the Legion of Frontiersmen disporting itself at Totteridge. I presume these young heroes consider they are preparing for a possible conflict in England or

Western Europe, and I presume the authorities are satisfied with them. It is at any rate the only serious war of which there is any manifest probability. Western Europe is now a network of railways, tramways, high roads, wires of all sorts; its chief beasts of burthen are the railway train and the motor car and the bicycle; towns and hypertrophied villages are often practically continuous over large areas; there is abundant water and food, and the commonest form of cover is the house. But the Legion of Frontiersmen is equipped for war, oh!--in Arizona in 1890, and so far as I am able to judge the most modern sections of the army extant are organised for a colonial war in (say) 1899 or 1900. There is, of course, a considerable amount of vague energy demanding conscription and urging our youth towards a familiarity with arms and the backwoodsman's life, but of any thought-out purpose in our arming widely understood, of any realisation of what would have to be done and where it would have to be done, and of any attempts to create an instrument for that novel unprecedented undertaking, I discover no trace.

In my capacity of devil's advocate pleading against national over-confidence, I might go on to the quality of our social and political movements. One hears nowadays a vast amount of chatter about efficiency--that magic word--and social organisation, and there is no doubt a huge expenditure of energy upon these things and a widespread desire to rush about and make showy and startling changes. But it does not follow that this involves progress if the enterprise itself is dully conceived and most of it does seem to me to be dully conceived. In the

absence of penetrating criticism, any impudent industrious person may set up as an "expert," organise and direct the confused good intentions at large, and muddle disastrously with the problem in hand. The "expert" quack and the bureaucratic intriguer increase and multiply in a dull-minded, uncritical, strenuous period as disease germs multiply in darkness and heat.

I find the same doubts of our quality assail me when I turn to the supreme business of education. It is true we all seem alive nowadays to the need of education, are all prepared for more expenditure upon it and more, but it does not follow necessarily in a period of stagnating imagination that we shall get what we pay for. The other day I discovered my little boy doing a subtraction sum, and I found he was doing it in a slower, clumsier, less businesslike way than the one I was taught in an old-fashioned "Commercial Academy" thirty odd years ago. The educational "expert," it seems, has been at work substituting a bad method for a good one in our schools because it is easier of exposition. The educational "expert," in the lack of a lively public intelligence, develops all the vices of the second-rate energetic, and he is, I am only too disposed to believe, making a terrible mess of a great deal of our science teaching and of the teaching of mathematics and English....

I have written enough to make clear the quality of my doubts. I think the English mind cuts at life with a dulled edge, and that its energy may be worse than its somnolence. I think it undervalues gifts and fine achievement, and overvalues the commonplace virtues of mediocre men. One

of the greatest Liberal statesmen in the time of Queen Victoria never held office because he was associated with a divorce case a quarter of a century ago. For him to have taken office would have been regarded as a scandal. But it is not regarded as a scandal that our Government includes men of no more ability than any average assistant behind a grocer's counter. These are your gods, O England!--and with every desire to be optimistic I find it hard under the circumstances to anticipate that the New Epoch is likely to be a blindingly brilliant time for our Empire and our race.