Twenty-Five Years A King

The Story of a Splendid Era

1910 By The Hon. Mrs. Francis Lascelles 1935

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SUMMARY AND THE FUTURE

"He lookes an old man before his time", was the remark made by a foreign diplomat after seeing King George V being crowned at Westminster Abbey on the 22nd June 1911. Only forty-five years of age, with his dark beard and serious face, the King undoubtedly did look older than his age. What is more, he probably felt older.

I wonder if King George followed the example of his father and ventured forth into the streets to see the illumination. King Edward did so on an historic occasion, and afterwards said to Lord Farquhar and Lord Knollys, who accompanied him, that he had never enjoyed anything so much in his life. He got rather a bad jostling, but I doubt if one of those who pushed into him and trod on his corns, had the least idea of his proximity. In the end the trio got into Pall Mall and literally fought their way through to the Marlborough Club, where, from the top of the steps, they watched the crowds surging along. The hall porter, full of importance, bustled out and ordered them in no uncertain terms to "push off", and not get in the members way as they sought to enter or leave the premises. From all accounts, his face was a perfect study when the Prince of Wales, as he then was, turned and offered a humble apology.

One of the duties of King George prior to the coronation was to try on his robes, and a truly regal figure he looked in them . He regarded the train very dubiously, and then remarked to those about him: "I suppose it is all right, but if I trip over it there will be some fun and no mistake." All present were compelled to laugh as they thought of the sight he had conjured up of the newly-crowned monarch measuring his length upon the floor of the Abbey.

Up to the death of the Duke of Clarence in 1892, His Majesty was a care-free, happy-go-lucky naval officer, but with the passing of his brother, not only his life but his very outlook underwent a radical change. From his childhood the King had a veneration for the Throne—a deep-seated feeling that the august and regal personality of his grandmother, Queen Victoria, did nothing to lessen. The sudden realization that he was in direct succession to the Throne aged the King appreciably in that critical twenty-seventh year of his life, and his marriage the following year to Princess Mary made him realize more than ever the responsibilities of his new position. His bride, young as she was, had not the gay, light-hearted personality of his mother the late, Queen Alexandra, who did so much to lighten King Edward's burdens.

King George now found to his great satisfaction that his wife took public duties and responsibilities as seriously as he himself was beginning to do. The death of the venerable Queen, the accession of his father and his creation as Prince off Wales and his young and growing family, were all matters which profoundly affected the King during his thirties ,and made him realize that his youth was over; the future would be one of duties and cares. With a revered grandmother, who in her later days became a world-renowned figure and a gifted father who commanded tremendous popularity, the man who was destined to become King George V remained doubtful of his own ability, adequately to take their place when the time came. Exceptional modesty has always been a characteristic of the King, just as hyness has been that of the Queen, and in His Majesty's case this feeling at one time tended to become what is now known as an inferiority complex. This in turn was responsible for the excessive caution and reserve in public which some people bluntly called lack of personality.

But those who made this assertion that the few who still think it, little know the real man. It must be conceded that in 1910 the King looked prematurely aged, but no one can say in 1935 that His Majesty looks his seventy years. The secret of his health and vitality and the lightness with which he carried himself, lies in the fact that today, the King realizes he has made a success of the work on which he entered with so much misgiving and inward doubts, twenty-fivey ears ago. For nearly six decades he has served his country as sailor, heir-apparent and Sovereign. At seventy, he looks back on a life without blemish or blunder, filled with unforgettable memories. Born in the middle of the stable and prosperous Victorian era the King has witnessed its passing and has seen the birth of a new world which has not yet emerged from insecurity and economic chaos. No man has been in closer touch with events than he, nor has any man played so important a part through the most critical period of this great world change. Were it not for his exalted rank and its constitutional restrictions of freedom of speech, there is not the slightest doubt that His Majesty would not be averse to expressing his views in public on the present condition and the future of the nation.

Since he was fourteen the King has not only seen every country in the world and its peoples, but he has read very widely on many subjects. He has met and conversed with every person who has mattered and still matters in world affairs. It is now accepted that Queen Victoria throughout her life was a "true-blue" Conservative, while her son King Edward, could fairly be decribed as a progressive Tory. It was a Labor-Cabinet Minister who once told a friend that the present King was a Conservative by tradition, a Liberal in his ways, but a Christian Socialist at heart. It is certain that no previous British monarch ever possesed such knowledge and understanding of the people, their ways and outlook, as our present King. When talking to soldiers, sailors or workmen, His Majesty is invariably at ease and never seems at a loss for an appropriate word or phrase. He feels really at home with people that have to work for a living but he finds it more difficult to talk naturally with the "idle rich" or poseurs of any kind.

"Wilson is an elected President who acts and speaks as if he were an hereditary King," remarked an American diplomat at the Armistice. "But King George is an hereditary King who acts and speaks like an elected President."

The King's interest in social and economic questions is very real and he is frankly impatient and puzzled at the long time the world is taking to "get on its feet." He made his own attitude plain in the speech he made when he opened the Economic Conference in London in 1933.

"It cannot be beyond the power of man so to use the vast resources of the world as to secure the material prosperity of civilization", was a phrase betraying an unmistakable note of impatience, and when His Majesty went on to refer to "an abundance of production" with the new problems it was creating, the assembled delegates gathered the distinct impression that the British King did not think much of world statesmanship if it could not solve the tangle before it was to late. The King composed practically the whole of the speach himself and naturally was greatly disappointed when the Conference ended in failure. But the recovery of his own country has greatly cheered him and the restoration of the economy "cuts" gave him immense satisfaction. His Majesty does not believe that poverty and hard work are the lot appointed by Providence for millions of people and he is a convinced supporter of social services and public well-being. Like his eldest son, the King holds strong views on the housing question. He has never forgotten an experience he once had in a Glasgow slum. When passing a particularly bad area during a visit, he noticed a placard outside one of the tenement houses on which was sprawled wth black chalk,

"Instead of passing come up and see this dirty hole they call a house. Eight persons in two rooms and about eighty rats."

The invitation was not accepted but certain municipal dignitaries in the evening were pointedly asked by the King about the housing progress in "the second City in the Empire". "It is not too much to say that an adequate solution of the housing question is the foundation of all social progress", His Majesty once declared in a speech on the subject. "If a healthy nation is to be reared it can be reared only in healthy homes; if drink and crime are to be successfully combatted, decent sanitary houses must be provided.

Could a more ringing and explicit declaration come from any Socialist? The King is an intense patriot but he is also a true International-ist. What he saw of the last War convinced him of War's futility and insanity, and his extensive travels and meetings with people of all races and creeds have destroyed any insularity he may have ever possessed. The type of Briton who regards all foreigners as "inferior" and to be secretly pitied for not being "English" is obnoxious to the King. He knows it is largely owing to his influence that it is not now nearly so prevalent among British officials as it used to be. One of the King's favorite stories however, is the one about the superior British couple who arrived with cinsiderable luggage at a hotel in Spain.

"Look after these foreigners first," the hotel manager shouted to a porter. The English lady was indignant as she understood Spanish.

"Who are you calling foreigners?" she exclaimed. "We are English. It's you who are the foreigners."

That the world should live in peace and harmony is the ardent wish of the King. While in a sick bed recovering from his serious illness in 1928 the thousands of kindly letters and gifts which arrived from "foreigners" touched the King deeply. The effect of this was shown in his message to the nations which he penned from Bognor some weeks later. After thanking his own people for their affection and sympathy the King went on to say that he hoped the day was near "when the national anxieties of all the peoples of the world shall be felt as a common source of human sympathy and a common claim on human friendship."

Friendship and humanity have been the keynotes of His Majesty's life and this explains the high pedestal of loyalty and love he occupies today, not only as a sovereign but as a father and a man. The devotion of his family to the King is intensely real and each one of his four grown-up sons idolizes him as does the Princess Royal, his married daughter.

At seventy a man's thoughts are mainly of the past, but at that age, a King must also think of the future. Fortunately the succession to the Throne is secure, but it must be admitted that His Majesty would be an even happier man if the Prince of Wales were married. This is a somewhat delicate topic and is a notoriously distasteful subject to the Prince. But in this, as in most matters, the King has displayed sound common sense. He realizes that the days of state marriages are over and to attempt to force his eldest son to marry before he feels inclined would be little short of a serious blunder. In every possible way, however, the King has done and still does his utmost, to help in the training of the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York so that when either of them is called upon to wear the crown, he will carry on the same traditions of dignity and constitutional sovereignity.

His Majesty makes a point of discussing the affairs of the day at home and abroad with his two eldest sons and these talks generally take place on Sundays. Sate documents are being increasingly shown to both the Prince and the Duke and to make the young men appreciate the procedure the King tells them that their grandfather, King Edward VII, had to wait until he was nearly fifty before he was permitted to see any state papers.

If the Prince of Wales decides to remain a bachelor (and rumor has it that he does) the next in succession is the Duke of York. Some foreign papers have made great play over the "worry of King George" because as yet there is no male grandson in the direct line, as heir to the Throne, but His Majesty smiles when he reads or hears such reports. If the contigency eventually arises that Princess Elizabeth comes to the Throne, The King knows perfectly well that neither the nation nor the Empire will regret the fact. For some reason or other female Sovereigns have always brought prestige and prosperity to the country during their reigns. The periods for instance, of Queen Elizabeth, Queen Anne and Queen Victoria were the most brilliant and glorious in English history. The disappearance from the European regal stage of the Czar, the Kaiser, the Austrian Emperor and the King of Spain—all victims of popular discontent — gives King George at times many sad reflections on the insecurity of crowned heads and the vicissitudes of their lives, although, on the other hand, it lends added joy and pride to the contemplation of his own rock-like stability in the affections of his world-wide subjects.

"It is a very bad time for monarchs", blandly remarked the late Lord Oxford in 1919 when chatting with the King.

"At any rate they seem to last longer than politicians," retorted His Majesty aptly, and the veteran statesman was forced to laugh and agree.

The fate of the Sovereigns who have tried to rule in a more or less aristocratic manner has deepened the King's life-long conviction that if the occupants of a Throne wish to make it secure, they must first of all consider their subjects, and within constitutional limits work to secure the greatest good for the greatest number. Extremists, whether of the right or left, meet with short shift from the King. His twenty-five years' reign has, among many other things, taught him that extremes of any kind carried into practice in any sphere invariably end in chaos and disaster. The ruthless policy adopted by the Coalition Government in Ireland, in the "Black and Tan" period, for instance, never met with the approval of the King. Against the wishes of the Cabinet, as has already been related, he boldly appealed to all Irishmen to "forgive and forget" when he opened the first Northen Parliament in Belfast. It was an appeal of which the subsequent treaty amply indicated the wisdom.

In his attitude to the Empire the King in enlightened and understanding. As a result of his world-wide travels, especially in the Dominions, he is thoroughly familiar with the mixture of loyalty and independance which prevails among our cousins overseas. "There seems to be nothing to prevent any Dominion from seceding", said the late Lord Curzon once to the King, when discussing a recently concluded Imperial Conference.

"Nothing but common sense and sentiment," replied His Majesty rather dryly, "and that is the most dependable and secure [illegible] signatures."

People who were standing beside the King when he witnessed a march pas of Diminion troops in London in 1916 saw tears glistening in his eyes as he saw this visible manifestation of the loyalty of an Empire. Gladly and willingly has the King always given his support to every step which will enhance the prestige and independance of each of the great Dominions; and even when the Canadian Parliament declared that they did not desire any more titles to be conferred on native Canadians, the King was not at all offended.

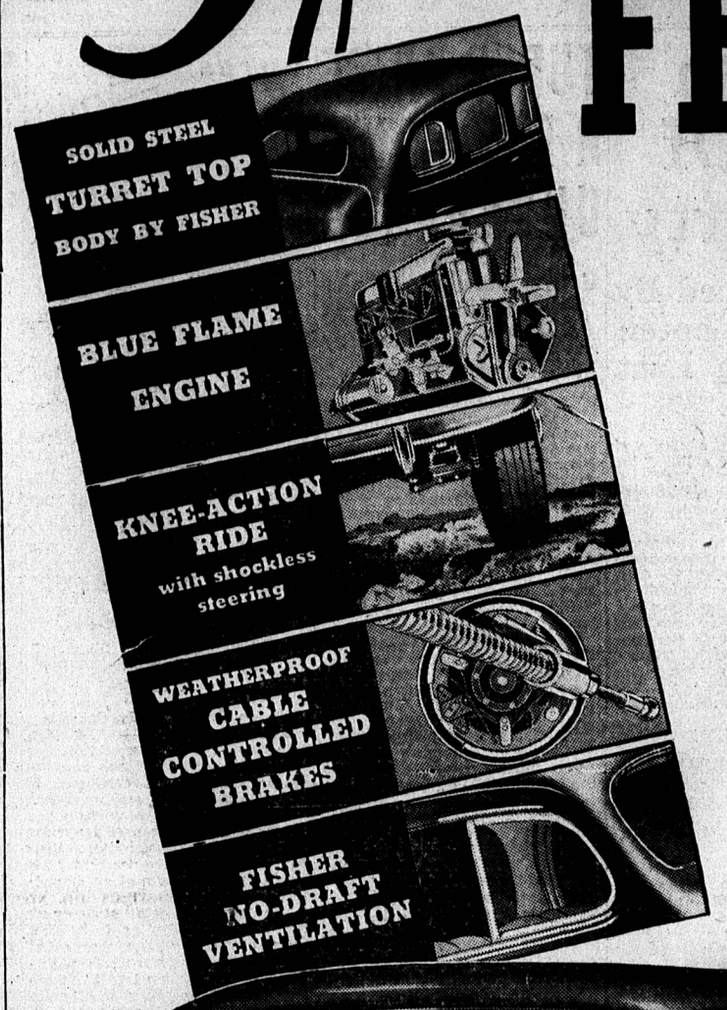
"It will be all the more titles available for people at home", was the humorous comment.

The interest His Majesty takes in Dominion affairs is an object lesson to many stay-at-home Britons. He is particularly interested in reading overseas newspapers, for he has fresh and lively [illegible] of nearly all the cities and [illegible] Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Newfoundland. That he has given much anxious thought to the future of the British Commonwealth of Nations is apparent to everyone who has ever conversed with him on Empire topics. it is a matter of immense satisfaction to the King that the Prince of Wales holds identical views on the subject as he does himself. To strengthen the bonds of tradition and sentiment between the Motherland and her children overseas, while at the same time to refrain from forging or demanding any irksome legislative or other chain, it is the policy which commends itself to the practical-minded crowned head of the commonwealth. This is the policy which has been steadily pursued by successive British Governments, during his reign, and the King's influence in this has not been negligible. In good health, yet still taking care of himself, His Majesty should still have many years before him. After all, his grandmother lived to be over eighty—alert in mind to the last.

The Prince of Wales is quite familiar with the American "wise-cracking" and one of his Yankee acquaintances was responsible for a story which is current on the other side of the Atlantic. The report spread that the Prince of Wales was so averse to becoming a King that he had already decided not to accept the crown when the time came and had even gone so far as to sign a formal renunciation in favor of the Duke of York. This fantastic yarn is still believed by thousands on both sides of the Atlantic and has now become a matter of chaff between the two brothers. The brilliant success which King George has made of his unique and unprecedented twenty-five years' reign is an achievement to which history will give more justice than any contemporary record. When the full story of this reign is revealed the personality of King George V will stand out clearly in that stirring record.

"I have always tried to do my best," said the King once, and this modest remark conveys a great deal to those who know what that best is. No one can foretell the future of King or commoner any more than that of a nation, but it is to be sincerely hoped that the great and good King who sits on the British Throne today will long be spared to adorn it. When in the course of time he has to vacate it, may the spirit of service and pacificism, his gifts of wisdom and understanding pass to his "heirs and successors", If that takes place the British Throne will never lose its hold on the nation and the Empire.

As a Frenchman once said, "The King of England has never promised to make the world 'safe for democracy' as President Wilson did, but he has certainly made England safe for monarchy." King George has achieved this by his honesty, sincerity and patriotism, and his place in history is as sure as his hold on the hearts of his millions of subjects. Their love and loyalty mean far more to the King than all the fame of history and posterity. George V has little to regret in his long life and he has certainly less to fear from the future. He is a King who has done his duty well and wisely and it is inconceivable that anything should happen now to dim the lustre or lessen the triumph of his great achievement.



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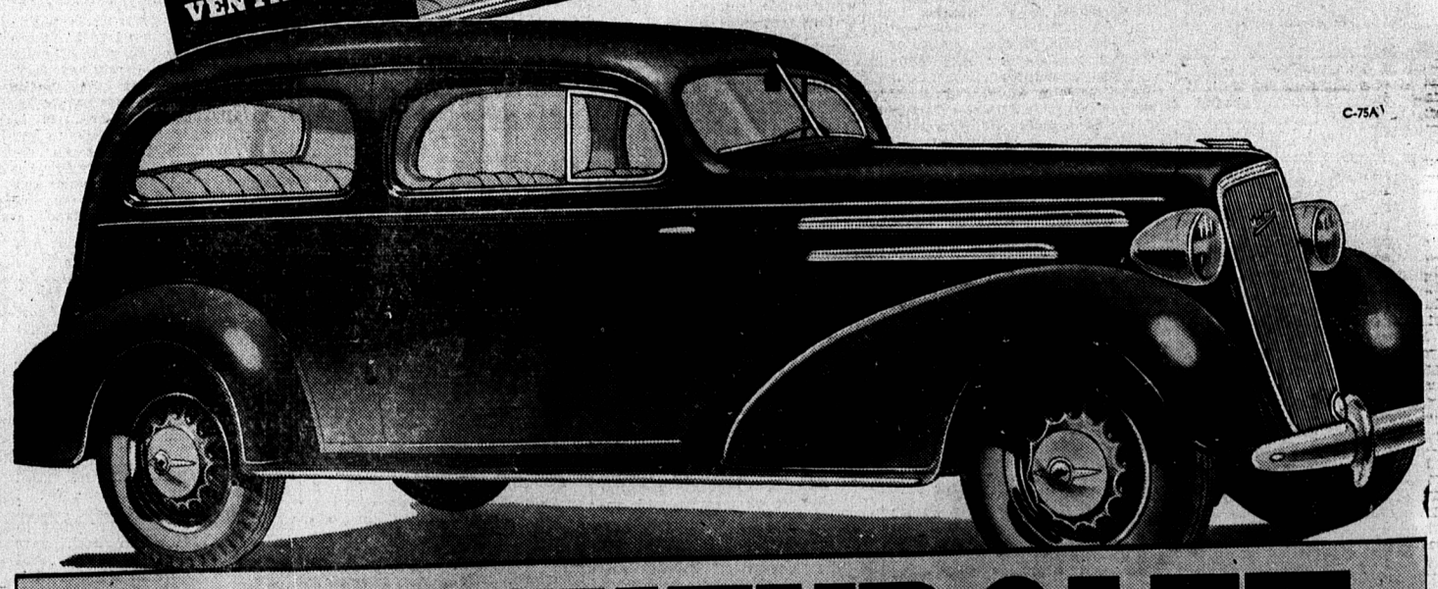

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