

The Coronation :

A Piece of Antiquated Foolery.

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THE CORONATION :

A PIECE OF ANTIQUATED FOOLERY.

IN this year of grace, 1902, the English people have been called to suffer from the prevalence of various epidemics. Influenza, which has been an annual and most unwelcome visitor for the last dozen years, has appeared once more, and many have been its victims. Smallpox has manifested its loathsome presence in various parts of the country, has caused much alarm to the public, and provided much work for the doctors. Now a third epidemic is threatening us, and the visitation seems likely to be severe. Premonitory symptoms have been visible for some time. The malady, however, has not risen to its full height. It will continue to spread and increase for some months, and will rage with greatest severity in the month of June, reaching its climax about midsummer. This epidemic is Coronation fever.

Every week the marks of its progress increase. We see them in the newspapers, and personal observation makes it plain that many people in different classes are getting into an excited and feverish condition, which will, probably, develop into a sort of frenzy.

The coming event, then, is casting its shadows before. For some weeks the public Press has been recording the proceedings of the Court of Claims, wherein the highest dignitaries of the land have been sitting for many days in solemn conclave, and the most eminent counsel at the Bar have been arguing on such momentous questions as these :
" Who shall strew herbs before the King on the eventful

day? Who shall carry the royal spittoon? What nobleman shall enjoy the distinguished honour of acting as gentleman's gentleman to our most religious and gracious King on the 26th of June, and help to encase his graceful figure in white silk tights?"

These reports are said by some sentimentally inclined persons to be very quaint and interesting. One would believe, however, that they can be interesting only to those who have lost all sense of the dignity of human nature, viz., the grovelling toady tribe who delight in abasing themselves before royalty and aristocracy, and of whom it was prophesied, "On thy belly shalt thou go, and dirt shalt thou eat all the days of thy life."

The nobility are preparing for the show, hard pressed though many of them be to find the wherewithal to meet the expense and cut a figure worthy of their family and their idolised position. Wealthy American, as well as English snobs, are scheming and intriguing, ready to move heaven and earth (if they could) in order to get tickets of admission. Tourist agents are speculating in window seats and stands. Lodging-house proprietors and shop-keepers are hoping for increased profits. Coronation novelties are already advertised. I have read of Coronation medals and neckties. Soon we shall be offered Coronation "objects of bigotry and virtue," Coronation braces and Coronation boots, Coronation pots and Coronation pans, Coronation brooms and Coronation bedsteads. The tailoring trade, too, is in a hopeful condition. If the tailor be taunted (as he has been) with being only the ninth fraction of a man, he can truthfully retort that nine-tenths of the Coronation effectiveness will be due to his labours, and that, therefore, he is at present an exceedingly important, nay, indispensable personage. For what, indeed, would a Coronation be without tailoring? Why the thing is simply inconceivable. So tradespeople of different classes are hoping to profit by the performance. Others in a different

position are thinking about their gains in the way of social advancement. Mayors of the larger towns are dreaming of Knighthoods. M.P.'s and officials of the higher ranks are hoping that in the shower of Coronation honours some portions of royal favour may descend upon themselves. There are Orders to be given away, and baronetcies to be bestowed, and, most delightful of all, peerages to be created which will admit the delighted recipients into the snob's seventh-heaven—that is, the House of Lords.

Furthermore, all who belong to the Diotrephesian clan with their hangers-on are beginning to assert themselves both in town and country, whilst the unreasoning mob looks forward to holidays and large opportunities for guzzling at other people's expense.

It is plain that the Coronation fever has taken hold of many. The contagion is sure to spread. This will be a great and wonderful year. No doubt—great and wonderful and glorious, too, in the eyes of toadies and sycophants and social parasites and all the flunkey tribe.

Now let us think for a moment about this word Coronation. What does it mean? The putting of a crown upon a monarch's head. And what is a crown? A glittering bauble, the sign of one man's dominion over many others, a head-piece that has been worn by the silliest, vainest, weakest, basest, and vilest of the human race. Such is the plain irrefutable testimony of history. The crowning is a public function accompanied by various other actions, all more or less silly, especially the anointing of the monarch's person with oil, which is declared by those who have studied the history of the ceremony to be the most important of all. It has a Biblical origin. In Old Testament times kings and priests were anointed. And ritualistic pundits hold that by the sacred unction, the King, who at the time is arrayed in certain priestly vestments, such as the alb and stole, becomes what is called "persona mixta"—that he assumes a sacerdotal character, becomes a du-

plex personage, partly lay and partly clerical, or, in other words, a sort of ecclesiastical hermaphrodite. Leaving this mysterious doctrine to learned liturgists and antiquaries, and turning to the Old Testament scriptures, it becomes quite certain to us that monarchy was contrary to the will of God, and that the chosen people were allowed to have their way in altering their government to a kingly rule as a punishment for their sins. Samuel, that grand old republican, foretold the evils that would follow. And the people confessed their wickedness when it was too late. Though the Kings of Israel and Judah were anointed with oil in the name of the Lord no good result was seen in their subsequent careers. The record concerning the great majority of them was, "he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." Secular history tells the same story. In the case of our own country we know that in the space of nearly a thousand years there have been many bad kings, and only very few good ones. There has not been a really wise and good king of England since William III. The House of Hanover has reigned for nearly two centuries, and out of six monarchs of that dynasty only one could be truthfully described as both good and wise. I mean, of course, Queen Victoria. For the most part the history of monarchy has been a history of folly and vice, of arrogance and luxury, of tyranny, despotism, and barbarous cruelty. Happily, it is true that kings do not now possess the power to do mischief and to cause suffering which their predecessors had. Nevertheless, I cannot see what reason there can possibly exist for people supposed to possess commonsense throwing themselves into a frenzy of delight over the inauguration of a new monarch.

We will try to look at the Coronation ceremony in the light of history and of actual facts. Even if we grant that a Coronation and the various acts which accompanied it had a meaning, a use, and a salutary influence in earlier times, that is no reason why we should get wild with de-

light, and spend a huge sum of the nation's money on such a function at this time of day, when the conditions of national life are entirely changed. In olden times, in barbarous and ignorant ages, when the sword was omnipotent, the wisest and bravest general was elected by the chiefs of the army and the leaders of the nation, was elevated on a shield in the camp, and arrayed in the royal purple. The King was then an elected ruler, chosen for his bravery, his wisdom, and virtue. At a later period, when monarchy had become hereditary, it often happened that the succession was disputed by rival claimants, whose hostility tended to the ruin of the State. To put an end to such dangers it might have been desirable that a prince should be publicly recognised, crowned, and invested with the habiliments and ensigns of royalty, and that he should receive the homage of the nobles. But to reproduce the relics of feudalism, and to revive the mummeries of mediæval times at the beginning of the twentieth century is most egregious folly. A coronation in England at the present time is an empty, unmeaning, useless, out of date, and absurd performance. And this for the following reasons:—

(1) It is said that at the Coronation the King will be recognised by the people as their sovereign. But he has been so recognised ever since his mother's death. He is as much King now as he will be after the 26th of June. He would be King in exactly the same sense if there were no Coronation at all. There is no need whatever of any special act of crowning. No dispute has arisen concerning the succession. No rival claimants have appeared or will appear. The succession was settled more than two hundred years ago by the Act of the nation's representatives, and that Act has not been repealed. It follows that a Coronation is unnecessary.

(2) The absurdity of the thing is seen when we remember that on the day fixed for the so-called solemnity the King will have reigned seventeen months. The few functions

that remain within the province of an English monarch will have been regularly discharged during that period. His Majesty has opened Parliament, held levées, and supervised the Army Tailoring Department. If there were anything in the crowning and anointing it ought to have been done in January last year. But it was not. The limited powers now vested in the crown have been exercised by the King from the date of the late Queen's decease. Since this is the case what benefit is the Coronation going to confer on the country or on the monarch? Will he go any better after he is oiled?

(3) Yet again, the absurdity of the whole business is apparent to every one who remembers that the powers of Government in this country are no longer exercised by the monarch personally. In former times it was different. Then the King was in reality and not merely in name the Ruler and Governor of the land. He himself was the Commander-in-Chief. He led his army to battle. He presided in his courts of justice. He freely chose his ministers, and deposed them at his will. He directed all the affairs of Government. The same is the case in other lands still. If Edward VII possessed the autocratic powers of the Czar or personally supervised all Governmental action, like his omniscient and ubiquitous nephew, the Kaiser, then the Coronation functions might not be so ridiculous. But as everyone knows the powers of government in England are discharged by the Executive Ministers, who are the leaders of the party which, by the votes of the people, has a majority in the Commons House of Parliament, and the King is merely an ornamental figurehead.

The whole of the ceremonies, however, presuppose, and are adapted to, a state of things which has long ceased to exist. The order of the Coronation service is, in the main, what was used at the crowning of the Plantagenets and Tudors. And this is to be solemnly gone through in a democratic age, when nothing more than the shadow of

royalty's former power remains. How great the absurdity is one can see by glancing at the published reports of coronations in the last century. Here are the main points taken from an account of the crowning of that truly estimable character, George IV.

After his most exceedingly excellent Majesty had been oiled, the oil was wiped off with cotton wool by the Dean of Westminster.

Now, if there were any virtue in the unguent it ought to have been allowed to dry in. Anciently, I believe, it was used in lavish abundance. The kingly person was covered to a large extent, and no wiping off followed. The oil soaked into the royal system. If there were any sacred virtue or sanctifying influence attached, then it had room and scope and time to work. If the ancient custom were followed next June: if his gracious Majesty were liberally supplied with the consecrated oil, and it were allowed to penetrate into and permeate through his body, then perchance we might be able to hope for some salutary effect in the subsequent life and reign.

After this portion of the ceremony has been performed a pair of spurs is presented to the King. Then he is girt with a sword, over which a prayer has been said by the Archbishop. The weapon is delivered to his Majesty with divers scriptural allusions: "Receive this kingly sword, and remember Him of whom the royal psalmist did prophesy: Gird thee with thy sword upon thy thigh, O thou most mighty." Are these spurs and this sword to be used by King Edward? Is he going with them to hunt the nimble Boer on the South African veldt? Oh dear no. All that is left to Lord Kitchener and Tommy Atkins. It is only a bit of acting, a make-believe, like children's games. "You pretend, you know." The spurs and sword are taken away and deposited on the altar. Then the armill, whatever that may be, is fastened on the royal neck and arms. "Receive this," says the Archbishop, "as a token of the Divine mercy embracing thee on every side." Next a ring is given and received, the purple robe put on, the orb and the sceptre delivered, and the rod with the dove. "Receive this, following His great and holy example of whom the prophet David said thou lovest righteousness and hatest

iniquity. The sceptre of thy Kingdom is a right sceptre." Then the crown is taken to the altar, prayed over, brought back, and deposited on the royal cranium. Whereupon the peers put on their gaudy head-pieces, and the choir begins to warble: "The King shall rejoice in thy strength, O Lord: Exceeding glad shall he be of Thy salvation. Thou hast prevented him with the blessings of Goodness, and set a crown of pure gold upon his head. Hallelujah." The idea of Albert Edward rejoicing in the strength of the Lord sounds strangely in our case. If this anthem be taken as a prophecy, why, then, those who live longest will see most. It will certainly involve a great change, for the sources of princely delight have hitherto been of quite a different kind. Next the Bible is presented to the King, and commended to his study and obedience, and then it is carried away. Then follows the homage of the peers, who kneel down and repeat an abject feudal oath. Is it not obvious to every sensible person that the repetition of these forms in the present age, when feudalism has long since vanished, and the royal prerogative is reduced within extremely narrow limits—that all this oiling, and crowning, and robing, and girding, and giving, and receiving, and then taking back, is nothing more than so much pantomime? How intelligent men and women can bring themselves to take part in such an unmeaning performance, unless indeed there is something thereby to be gained for themselves, passes one's comprehension. It is to be hoped that the various functionaries who will be present in the Abbey will be able to keep strict control over their risible faculties. Sure I am that they will be strongly tempted to exercise them.

Next to the King the leading figure will be the Archbishop of Canterbury. I am sorry that it will fall to his lot to take such a prominent part in the performance, for he is a real man. He, with his stern uprightness and his massive commonsense, is not fit for this sort of business. It would have suited his predecessor admirably. He was a person of courtly ways, with histrionic predilections. Dr. Temple is cast in a different mould, as everybody knows. If some temporary indisposition should confine him to Lambeth Palace during the last week in June—that would be a

merciful interposition of Providence. What would be better than any episcopal substitute would be to get Mr. Tree to take the rôle of Archbishop and Mr. Charles Wyndham that of Dean of Westminster. This arrangement would add immensely to the effectiveness of the spectacle.

(4) One other fact adds to the proof of my contention. The Queen is to be crowned at the same time as the King. It may be true enough that her gracious Majesty is deserving of all possible honour; but it is also true that she has nothing to do with the government of the country. She has no political relationship whatever with the nation. And, therefore, her ceremonial crowning is an additional piece of evidence showing the emptiness and unreality of the whole affair.

By the foregoing considerations I have made it plain that the Coronation is an unnecessary, useless, out-of-date performance, and that at this time of day, and under the present conditions of national life, it is absurd and ridiculous.

But this is not all that is to be said. If it were merely a royal rarée show, a great court display, an elaborate and widely advertised pageant, the thing would be simply worthy of contempt, provided that those who enjoyed the sight and gratified their vanity by taking part in the show paid all expenses. When, however, the sacred name of God is brought into it, and the honour of religion is involved, it assumes a much more serious aspect. All this pantomime, let us remember, is to be performed in a Christian temple. It is for this that the daily worship of God is to be suspended for four months, and the venerable Abbey Church transformed into a theatre, with boxes, and galleries, and staging. And after the farce of receiving things never to be used, and putting them away again, has been gone through, there will follow the great central act of Christian worship, the celebration of the Holy Sacrament, and the partaking thereof by the King—Albert Edward: formerly Prince of Wales. For the reception of the Sacrament we all know that solemn preparation is necessary. Granting, then, that a due and thorough preparation will have been made by the monarch—supposing that King

Edward will have closely examined his past life as in the sight of the Great Searcher of Hearts—supposing that he will have truly repented of all his sins, and made a general confession of them, and expressed his contrition and his resolve to lead a godly, righteous, and sober life in the future, and that he has obtained absolution from one of his chaplains—supposing (and it is a large supposition) that he will have humbled himself by penitence, and prepared himself by earnest prayer and fasting, for the reception of the Holy Sacrament, what can we say about the circumstances and surroundings amidst which the sacred rite is to be enacted?

According to the rule of the Church Universal the Sacrament is to be celebrated only in the presence of her true and faithful members. What a profanation will it be to “do this in remembrance of” Christ before a congregation composed of such elements as will be assembled in Westminster Abbey on the day of the Coronation—before a multitude, of whom many do not believe in Christ at all, and amidst all the pomp and show of a great histrionic pageant. Doubtless some true Christians will be there. How will they feel? What will be the thoughts and sentiments of such a man as Lord Halifax or the Bishop of Durham? Think for a moment who will be there. The whole peerage will be there, including all the roués, gamblers, and scamps that belong to that illustrious order. I wonder how many years will have elapsed since the majority of them was present at the Holy Communion. The peeresses will be there, too, in all their gauds and gewgaws: many of them women of irreproachable character, but others quite the reverse—the fast women of smart society, who gamble and frequent the turf and desecrate the Sabbath, and have achieved in other ways a most unenviable notoriety. There will be Jews present, possibly Hindoos: certainly agnostics, and probably atheists. The royal box will be filled with the favoured friends of the King, none of them remarkable for godliness: the ladies who have had the honour of attracting royal admiration, and who have successively been the recipients of princely favour; numbers of the wealthy parvenu class whom Albert Edward, for good and sufficient reasons of his own, has

dignified with his patronage and friendship, such as the Sassoons, the Cassels, the Rothschilds, the representatives of the late Baron Hirsch, and others belonging to the South African gang, who pitch their luxurious tents in the neighbourhood of Park Lane; and, of course, the eminent grocer and bacon dealer, who spends hundreds of thousands in the cause of so-called International sport, in order to gain a footing in society, whilst the drudges in his employment are paid at a rate as miserably low as those occupied in any similar concern.

The representatives of Nonconformity, too, have applied for admission, and their request is granted. Their ancestors fought against a King, and chopped off his head a few hundred yards away from the Abbey, but they are coming to do homage to royalty. The Union of Church and State has been for many years the chief object of their hostility. Now they are going to throw over their principles and attend a function in which the Union of Church and State is most emphatically declared. They are teetotallers most of them, and they are going to pay honour to a prince who has recently taken an active personal share in the brewing trade. They are anti-gamblers, and the King has been, and still is, the chief patron of the turf. They are deeply concerned in the observance of the Lord's Day, and the King by his attendance at a Sunday secular concert has driven not one but many nails into the coffin of English Sunday keeping—a coffin, by the way, which is rapidly approaching completion. These degenerate successors of the Puritans may fancy that their presence will add to the prestige of Nonconformity, as it certainly will gratify their own self-importance; but I rather fancy that their sacrifice of principle will only make them contemptible in the eyes of sensible Englishmen.

The assemblage will, undoubtedly, be very much mixed: Roman Catholics, Churchmen, Dissenters, and Jews—Mohammedans and Buddhists possibly—people of all religions and none, bedizened women striving to out-vie one another in magnificence, men of all sorts of moral worth—the world, the flesh, and the devil fully represented—flunkeys of all degrees, reporters and artists, photographers intent on snapshots—everybody staring and stretching and

straining to see the show. And is this scene of pomp and vanity and excitement a fitting one in which to celebrate the Holy Supper of the Lord?

No—a thousand times No. The whole thing will be an atrocious profanation, a blasphemous outrage on the name of Christ and the honour of his Church.

Finally, as regards the circumstances in which we, as a nation, find ourselves at present, nothing could be more outrageously unseasonable than the display of vain glory and the general rejoicings which are intended to take place next June. The present condition of this nation, whether looked at from a political or a moral, from a commercial or a religious, point of view, affords no ground for indulgence in festivity. We are engaged in a horrible and disastrous war, which has caused the death of twenty thousand gallant British youths, whilst thousands more are maimed and crippled and broken for life. It has cost the country more than two hundred millions in money, and many humiliating blows to our prestige. After lasting two years and a half it still goes on, and nobody can tell how long it may continue, or how much more blood and treasure it will cost us. At any rate the effects will long remain—the wounds unhealed, the gaps unfilled. Taxes are increasing. Trade is declining. The condition of the poor in the great urban centres is horrible in the extreme. The prospect is blacker and gloomier than at any time since the days of Bonaparte's triumphs. Is this, then, a time, when twenty thousand British homes have been darkened by the shadow of death—is this a time for feasting, and fireworks, and flag-flying, and rejoicing, and bawling all over the land the wretched doggerel that is known as the National Anthem? Is it not rather a time for serious reflection, for national humiliation, for a stern endeavour to purge ourselves of our pride and self-sufficiency, and to cast out the devils of luxury and frivolity which have cursed the nation with an increasing power of possession for so many years?

One would think that the spectators in Westminster Abbey on the 25th of June could not possibly, in the midst of all the pomp and pageantry, escape from sombre reflections. The classes and the masses alike have had to suffer and sorrow during the past two years.

From the group of King's relatives there will be one missing—a nephew whose life ended in a South African hospital. Near the King, bearing an old cap poised on a stick, will be one who, but for the war, in all human possibility would not have been present. His elder brother lies on the fatal field of Magersfontein. There will be another marquis present to whom has fallen the honours won and nobly worn by his esteemed and beloved father. His elder brother was a victim at Ladysmith. The gallant Scotch earl who sailed with his regiment from these shores more than two years since will not be there. Lord Methuen, in all probability, will not be there. Lord Kitchener will not be in his place among the barons. Many of those who will be in the Abbey have had to mourn for near and dear friends. Others again will be filled with anxiety for the fate of the absent living. And their sentiments will be shared by multitudes of all classes through the length and breadth of the land. Under the sad and humiliating circumstances of our national condition, could anything, I ask, be more inopportune and incongruous than such a display as the Coronation, and the rejoicings which are intended to accompany it? Why the whole business seems to thoughtful people positively indecent. Nero fiddled whilst Rome was burning. Kings and emperors may reckon little of their people's wants and sufferings. But if the people themselves madly give way to levity and folly then there is no hope left. Methinks if the eyes of the multitude were opened to see the real seriousness, the tremendous gravity of the political and military position in South Africa and the consequences thereof to this country and the Empire, they would have no heart for jubilation. So, at least, do I believe who am not a pro-Boer.

It is not by theatric shows, by displays of gold lace, and tailoring, and jewellery, by brass bands and circus processions through the streets of London, that this nation is to be kept strong and great. The present king hardly seems to have taken the true bearings of England's condition. It may be that by long and careful practice he has elevated popularity-hunting to the level of a fine art. We seem, indeed, to have commenced an era of pageants. An ominous sign is this. These sort of things may please the giddy

mob, as of old, in the days of Rome's degeneracy. But sooner, perhaps, than we think they will be found wanting. They will not save us from the inevitable consequences of the growth of luxury, the increase of frivolity, and the accompanying spread of vice which has marked the nation's history during the last quarter of a century. Where the carcase of national moral corruption is, there will the eagles of judgment and retribution be gathered.

This Coronation business will cost money. The taxpayers of the country will have to pay the bill. That bill will amount to seventy or eighty, or it may be a hundred thousand pounds. Why should those who, like myself, look upon the entire procedure as useless, out-of-date, absurd, and inopportune, be forced to contribute to the cost? We have felt bound to subscribe to various voluntary war funds. We have done it cheerfully, notwithstanding the increase of taxation and the rise in the cost of living caused by the war. And now when much remains to be done for our invalided soldiers, and for the families of the absentees, we have to pay in taxes for the great show, and we are also asked to provide funds for the purpose of decorations and feasting in our several localities—all this to commemorate an event which, however effective it may be from a stage manager's point of view, is, as we have seen, of no benefit to the people at large, of no political value, of no didactic worth. Its chief result will be the idolatry of royalty, the glorification of the peerage, and the gratification of toadies and flunkies. That surely is not an object for which it is worth our while to part with our cash.

We have all heard of the remark made years ago by one Thomas Carlyle, to the effect that the population of this island numbered so many millions, *mostly fools*. If the people do indeed, the circumstances of our national life being what they are, work themselves into a feverish condition and give way to ill-timed jollity, and find the money to pay for local festivities in connection with the Coronation, then it will be seen and known that the famous remark of the Chelsea sage was not the utterance of contemptuous cynicism but the statement of a real, positive, undeniable truth.