

LONDON

ON MAY 12th

*displays its ancient and modern splendors as
a background for the coronation of King George VI*

By REBECCA WEST

I shall not be in London for the Coronation. I shall be, I sincerely trust, in the opposite corner of Europe, the lower right-hand, where the Balkans are. I am drawn thither because, in my opinion, any Easter in an Orthodox Church country is better than any show an Occidental country can put on, what with bearded priests with throats like golden trumpets and peasants in fourteenth-century costume; but I am also influenced by the fact that I believe I am the only person who knows what is going to happen in London on Coronation Day, and I am certain I shall be the only person to tell.

It is going to be the rummest occasion on record. London is going to be the strangest place in the world for the first few weeks this May, if only for the reason that so many people are going away for the Coronation and are letting their houses.

This is not because they are disloyal to the present King. The mass of people are convinced that they are better off with George than they would have been with Edward, partly by tactful propaganda, partly by the amazing power of the human animal to secrete and excrete scandal. Since the Abdication it has been proved again and again that truth is not stranger than fiction. I have not yet heard that Edward pawned the Crown Jewels in order to bribe the officials to let him dance naked round the Albert Memorial and celebrate the Black Mass on its steps, but I am quite sure that if I started it a great many of my poor, dumb fellow creatures would believe me.

So much for the vast majority; and as for the minority, the simple, legally minded beings like myself, who strongly objected to the Abdication, we did so only because we felt that if a people chooses to have a King instead of a President, it must respect his hereditary title and never reject him unless he commits certain definite offenses against his country (which do not include anything to do with his marriage) laid down in the Constitution. The totem pole must be treated as a totem pole and not as firewood, if you want it to work good ju-ju. But that involves respect for any monarch, so people like myself are committed to being as loyal to King George as we were to King Edward.

Our hearts are all turned to King George and Queen Elizabeth, but somehow simultaneously the backs of many of us are turned to them. We are letting our houses and apartments to the hundreds and thousands of American and Colonial visitors, and retiring to the country or over the seas. This is really not so inconsistent as it seems. The English are tired. Very easily one can have an excess of Drama. Also it is difficult to take an interest in pageantry where there is, black across the sky, the threat of war. Also we know that we are going to be poor again pretty soon; this little boom will not quite compensate for the effects of the defense loan.

OldMagazineArticles.com

LONDON

London, therefore, will be full of people living in other people's houses this May, to an extent that can never have happened before in the history of the world. Letting one's house furnished is not a custom that is prevalent outside the English-speaking countries and in France; and it is fairly recent here. It began with the practice of renting shoots, but it spread slowly to the towns. Even in my childhood my mother was hardly excused by her relations for letting her house furnished, though she had become bitterly poor; and she was warned that in any case she would never get her money, since only the raffish would take a furnished house.

This attitude was still fairly common in the days of the last Coronation and though it has now entirely disappeared, it has never been so possible to let houses as now. I know a crescent not far from my house where six houses in a row will be tenanted by strangers. Odd that, because a man called George died, because his son George is to be inducted into a painful and laborious way of living, thousands of cats will be popped into baskets and taken off by their owners, that thousands of men and women will utter sentences beginning 'I wonder where these people keep—' Odd, and charming, for while the cats will be disagreeable for a few days, such is not the habit of human beings in a new venue.

They, on the contrary, become tender and lyrical poets. These invaders of London are Americans and Colonials of whom a vast proportion are on their first visit to England. They will build a new country as they look around them, in the way that we all do in a strange land we visit at leisure. They will see England green and innocent, lacking all the clues to her crimes and failures that are held by us, her natives; even as I see America and Canada as smiling places, devoid of regret, magnificently unacquainted with grief. They will not love beautiful old London more warmly than we do. We, too, walk in the Temple, or look at the white pillars of Cumberland Terrace and York Terrace across the treetops of Regent's Park, and stop before the façade of Boodle's Club in St. James', and know that there is something as perfect as any capital has ever done.

But we know, as our visitors will not, that time is as much London's enemy as if she were an aging beauty. The apartment house in which I live was built on the site of some very beautiful eighteenth-century houses. That, however, was no result of vandalism on the part of builders; the houses were practically falling apart because the traffic was causing a heavier vibration than their foundations would stand. One of the owners only sold when his drawing-room chandelier smashed down into his basement. These visitors will be able to look at our past without consciousness of the frantic efforts we are going to have to make to preserve some of it and replace the rest worthily. That goes for other things than architecture.

Oh, yes, they will enjoy it. I do not know how they will do for restaurants; there are hardly enough to provide for normal times. I do not know how they will do for theatres. We have far fewer theatres than New York, and everybody cannot go to see Charles Laughton and John Gielgud and Edith Evans and Flora Robson, who are the present proofs that we in England can still produce, as we did in the days of Henry

LONDON

Irving and Ellen Terry, players that are more alive than life. Because a man called George died and his son is to be inducted into his splendid servitude, the meaner type of box-office man is going to have the supremest enjoyment of his life in saying, "No, not a thing."

Everybody of that type, I fancy, is going to have a superb time at the Coronation. I do not resent it. I have always rejoiced at the thought of the good time the people who like opening other people's letters had during the war when they got into the Censor's office. Since it is not the fault of this type that it was born so, it ought to have its pleasure sometimes.

And the visitors will not really mind; particularly the women, because they will have the intoxicating experience, denied to us Englishwomen, of getting the smooth of Englishmen without the rough. The upper-class Englishman is, at his best at public ceremonials. He looks superb, he has the power of precision of a trained ballet-dancer, he is not ashamed of forming a part of ancient pageantry. Nothing is more characteristic of the males of this island than that we can still find Englishmen to be heralds on these great state occasions, to wear scarlet and gold and carry adequately such official names as Bluemantle and Norroy King of Arms, Rouge Dragon and Rouge Croix, Portcullis and Clarenceux. But it illustrates the lot of Englishwomen that people whose official names make one think of tapestry and stained-glass windows are in private life called names like Toppin and Butler and Wagner.

We native females might feel sour as we watched our males parading superbly in the Coronation procession, remembering that this is pretty nearly all they can do, and that Coronations do not come often enough to compensate us for the flat conversation of our dinner partners. But the visitors will be able to believe that the public splendor of Englishmen is not their sole achievement, but just a sample part of a romantic whole. No harm will be done if someone tells them in time not to marry upper-class Englishmen, but to come over once a year to see the Naval and Military Tournament.

That male gift, of course, will be superbly exercised that day. It will be marvelous ritual, beginning in Westminster Abbey, where there is no drama like it; on no stage can there be a more spectacular moment than when the king stands before his nobles before his throne before the altar and the Archbishop says, "I here present unto you George, the undoubted King of this realm." The words are good, too. "Oh God, the Crown of the faithful, bless we beseech Thee and sanctify this Thy servant George our King; and as Thou dost this day set a Crown of pure gold upon his head, so enrich his royal heart with Thine abundant grace; and crown him with all princely virtues, through the King eternal, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." It is then they turn on all the lights, so that the jewels on the crown give out their fire; and all the Peers put on their coronets, and the trumpets blare, and everybody cheers.

It is good then, in the grandest way; and there is a splendid simple pomp in the words that the Princes of the Blood say when they pay their homage. "I, Henry, Duke of Gloucester, do become your liege man of life and limb, and of earthly worship; and faith and truth I will bear unto you, to live and die against all manner of folks, so help me God."

LONDON

It is a glorious ceremony, for the King has bound himself to his subjects—"to govern according to the Statutes in Parliament agreed on"—and they have bound themselves to him. The nation is then and there remade once more as a living body, an effective organism, ready to contend with the universe.

But one would enjoy the thought of it more if one had not a sense of humanity of the being who is crowned. This is a crucifixion as well as a coronation. The best Kings we have ever had have been Queens, and every year Kingship becomes less and less suitable for a man. A constitutional monarch has constantly to behave as if he were a mindless puppet in circumstances which would prove fatal to everybody, including himself, if he really were a mindless puppet.

This is precisely the situation of women, and women are bred to cope with it from the day they are born; but men find it difficult. Apart from this difficulty inherent in the idea of monarchy is the special curse which has been laid on our Royal Family by the insane ideal of public service which has been forced on it in the last century. It runs like a rabbit to open any new hospital, school, university, or railway station, in whatsoever part of the Kingdom that may be. It receives, till it drops, endless relays of offices from all the civil and naval and military services, and all its distinguished citizens from all its provinces and dominions. (And at that putting the line of distinction generously low.) This means that, though the King is anointed and crowned at Westminster according to the ancient rite for making monarchs, he is actually being made into a State official the like of which the world has never contemplated till now, and which is only contemplated because it is fatuously unimaginative.

The King works rather harder than Eleanor Roosevelt; and probably even Eleanor Roosevelt could not carry out her program if she did not know that she had to do it for only a few years. This man has to do it for life. The cats that are popped into baskets when their owners take them away for the Coronation will be set free at the end of their journey. The living creature that is popped into a basket at the Abbey will never get free except through death or revolution.

That is possibly why one goes away from the Coronation. In this matter of monarchy the problem of adjusting the past and the present seems to have come to a peculiarly hopeless impasse. Everything is getting too big, and the human animal is asking too much of itself, and it works out badly all 'round. That is why I believe that I know what is going to happen in London on Coronation Day, and that nobody else will ever tell.

Already the wooden stands are up all along the Coronation route where it goes through the parks. Through the railings of Hyde Park and the Green Park we see the gaunt behinds of these stands, underpinned with rows and rows of lavatories, where we are accustomed at this time of the year to see daffodils. This is not, at the moment, very gratifying. I am not against lavatories as a general rule; but you must admit that to expect to see a daffodil and see instead a lavatory that somebody else is going to use in a few weeks' time is not altogether satisfactory. Thousands and thousands of people are going to sit in these stands, and that should be very nice for them.

5
LONDON

The Royal Family, with an admirable sense of the fitness of things, still uses the State Coach, which is a delicious piece of work. It cost nearly eight thousand pounds when it was built in the eighteenth century and it is a pleasing golden confusion of tritons, the female bosom, naked small boys, and (I do not see why, but no harm is done) palm trees. It is drawn, moreover, by eight cream-colored horses.

But really the plight of the people in the stands is not going to be enjoyable. Some hundreds of thousands of other people, who are not going to have seats in the stands, are going to wait in the streets to see the procession. The project is so obviously competitive that they will take up their positions during the previous night. As they will form a dense crowd the people with seats in the stands have been warned by the authorities that, if they hope to get to their seats at all, they must make their way to them at the hours of three, four, and five in the morning.

That will be fun. All flowering things are the best before the sun is high, and I hope the visitors who hurry through the streets at dawn will pause in our squares and parks, and look at the reasons why they should come to London any May, whether there is a Coronation or not; our lilac, which is the best there is after Vienna's, and our red and white hawthorn, which is lovely as anything in the world except your dogwood. They may reflect also on the extremely small amount of time that King George and Queen Elizabeth will ever have free again for looking at such things as lilac and hawthorn, because of the greedy snobbery that wants to come close and curtsy to royalty instead of cheering it as it rides by in the street, a splendid symbol of the union of the people in this land. They may reflect also that our people have some right to be pleased with their land, as they see the sun rise over the treetops of Hyde Park, which at such unfamiliar hours discloses itself as a patch of English countryside that has been surrounded by the city but has never been conquered by it.



But after that I fear that tedium may set in. They must leave their houses at three, four, or five in the morning; but the Coronation procession will not pass until between two and four in the afternoon. It is a long time to wait for anybody except one's true love, and even then a shade of irritation might creep in. The people will have to sit in the stands

LONDON

for from eleven to thirteen hours, looking at absolutely nothing. They will none of them have had more than four or five hours sleep. My firm conviction is that when their Majesties emerge from Westminster Abbey they will drive past row upon row of soundly sleeping subjects.

The cool of the evening will, no doubt, awaken them. They will come to with a start; and in view of the time and money and energy they have expended on getting seats for the Coronation, they will never confess what happened to them, but will avow The Procession was fine. Nor will the embarrassed Royalties ever mention it. But there I am probably wrong. Little Princess Elizabeth, that entrancing mixture of Shirley Temple and James Cagney, will, I feel, constantly allude to it at unseasonable moments. When I think, indeed, of what she will be saying in any case about the Coronation I realize what makes it a better show for the visitors than for the natives. You cannot ever justly treat a human being as a dummy. You cannot treat it as if it were a machine to grind out profits in factories; you cannot treat it as if it were a machine to wear a crown for the sake of the country. It shames you by developing character, by showing that it has wit, intelligence, the capacity for joy and pain, and that to restrict it to the performance of a function is plain cruelty.



STAGE

May, 1937

P. 22