

V A N I T Y F A I R

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THE BRITISH ARISTOCRACY AND THE WAR

The Doubtful Future of the House of Lords

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MAJOR-GENERAL SIR WILLIAM ROBERTSON,
K. C. V. O.
Chief of the Imperial Staff of the British Army, who
has risen from the ranks and from a humble place in
civil life to the highest place in the service

IF good conduct could save an institution which had outlasted its usefulness, the British aristocracy might argue, with some show of logic, that the House of Lords should be saved from the despoiling hands of Lloyd George and the Radicals. For not even in the Great Rebellion against Charles I did the nobility lose so many of its members as the list of casualties of the present war displays. In the first sixteen months of operations no less than eight hundred men of title were killed in action, or died of their wounds, and over a thousand more were serving with the land or sea forces.

The returns show that, if the proportionate losses continue—and there is no reason why they should not—a whole generation of the nobility will have been wiped out by the time peace is declared. The Upper House of the Parliament will consist of men who were too old to go to the front; of a few soldiers and sailors rewarded with titles for their services, and boys too young to take their seats. So, the defence of hereditary privilege will fall into weak hands, and it should be easy enough for those who are determined to mend—or end—the Lords to bring about the changes which had to be postponed on account of the struggle with Germany.

IT was natural that the first brunt of the fighting should fall on the aristocracy. It and its sons and heirs held commissions in the crack regiments, which were the first to be sent to the Continent as part of the first Expeditionary Force. In its original shape this soon entirely disappeared. Of course all the units did not fare so badly as the Gordon Highlanders, who were wiped out three times in succession, but the so-called Household Troops are at the present moment practically composed of new men, and regimental tradition is all that remains to link them to the remote past of 1913, or even the early months of 1914.

Nothing now counts but what is told in despatches. The heir to a dukedom,

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who is doing his duty to the best of his ability, in the Guards likely to go to France, cuts a very small figure of the public compared with a full private who gets his hundred hours of leave and appears in London wearing a Victoria Cross. All Cork turned out to see Sergeant O'Leary, V.C., now Lieutenant O'Leary. In the almost deserted colleges of Oxford and Cambridge the only honor lists of any consequence are those issued by the War Office. The same story comes from the thinly attended lecture rooms of Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast and Saint Andrews.

The Duke of Wellington's celebrated playgrounds of Eton have lived up to their reputation. That favorite school of the so-called "upper class" has had in the war more "old boys" and senior boys, has suffered more losses, and has figured more often in the records of distinguished services than any other civil institution in the Empire. Etonians who had not commissions got them if they could, and if they could not, enlisted and took their

THE democratizing of the army is proceeding apace. When one generation, or rather two generations of the nobility have disappeared, it will take a long time—if it is ever attempted—to bring the army back to its former condition of a rather ornamental profession. At the present moment any man from not been so much affected by the aristocracy as the other service. So the elimination of class influences there is not so necessary. Besides the loss of officers has been slight on account of the success of the bottling up operations.

THE most famous of living American diplomatists, Joseph H. Choate, has said that this is a war in defence of free institutions. In his striking interview with the London correspondent of the *Milan Secolo* at the end of February, Lloyd George went further. He said it was a "democratic war." He had opposed the Boer war because it involved the suppression of a democracy. On the present occasion he had no misgivings, for he was convinced that on the success of the Allies the future of democracy in the whole world depended. About the same time Lord Rosebery declared that it was not a war of kings, ministers, or generals, but a war of peoples.

The war is, in fact, much more democratic than the twenty year war with Napoleon. The Emperor, even when he had made himself a tyrant, was fighting to keep the Powers, led by England, from undoing the work done by the man who had brought about the French Revolution. There were many Liberals in Great Britain who did not wish to see this reactionary plan successful. But the aristocracy, to a man, was against the French as the upsetters of old traditions. So there is no true parallel between the Kaiser and the genius who got his quietus at Waterloo. For the German Emperor does stand for traditions which are as old as the period of Frederick William and Frederick the Great of Prussia.

THE men in the British Empire who have increased their reputation since the war began, through their direct or indirect connection with it, are not aristocrats, for the most part. The whole social fabric of Great Britain has been changed. Not only are women doing work formerly performed by men, but women of the aristocracy, who never worked before, have turned their hands to any job that they can perform, from serving in ammunition factories to serving in hospitals.

Just as the Archbishop of Armagh said that men who had fought side by side in the trenches were not likely to go home and fight each other with the old sectional or political bitterness, so it may be said that people who have been all in the same boat are not likely to fall back into the old class antagonisms when the war is over. By drawing closer the bonds uniting the democratic Dominions with Great Britain the war is, for this reason, decreasing the possible influence of what will remain of the aristocracy.

With the House of Lords reformed into a representative Senate, with titled persons conspicuous in the army by their absence, the few marriageable men of title in Great Britain, after the war, will not be so attractive to heiresses as they were formerly. Perhaps when the boy dukes and earls grow up they will find that their formerly important rank will be generally regarded as a quaint and curious survival of an ancient but outworn custom.