

## SOCIETY DIES HARD

By K. H. ABSHAGEN

*Modern wars have the tendency to beget revolutions. The birth of the Third French Republic in 1870 and its collapse seventy years later; the tottering and fall of the Romanov dynasty in 1905 and 1917; the end of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918; the German revolution of 1918 and 1933; the "March on Rome" in 1922—all these important political changes were intimately linked with wars. When the people have been asked to give their lives for the "Patrie," "Vaterland," or "Rodina," those who survive the wars cannot go on as they did before. Amidst trenches and bombs their outlook and sense of values have changed, and many things they had accepted before have become intolerable.*

*Great Britain, a victor of the last war and a nation of deeply rooted traditions, has changed its mode of life very little as a result of the Great War. Too little, it now seems. Essentially everything remained the same. But in the present war things are different. This time it is not a war fought on the distant battlefields of France: it is a war in which, for the first time, every English man and woman is a participant. In a recent article in "Harper's Magazine," Mr. Harold J. Laski, well-known English author, said: "There is a greater chance today of what may be termed a revolution by consent in Britain than at any time in history." And indeed, apart from military developments, the inner transformation of Great Britain is one of the major problems of this war. Mr. Abshagen writes about it with the keen eye of a trained observer, with sympathy for the British people, and humorous sarcasm for their ruling class.*

*Mr. Abshagen has made a special study of British society. His book "King, Lords, and Gentlemen" was published by Heinemann's in London a few weeks before the outbreak of the present war. An army officer in the Great War, Mr. Abshagen went into journalism in 1926. "From that moment," he says, "I never looked back." During the last fifteen years he has lived and worked in many European capitals. At present he is covering the Orient. K.M.*

### MR. BRYANT MAKES A DISCOVERY

A startling discovery was recently made by Arthur Bryant, that distinguished British author, historian, and biographer (of Samuel Pepys fame). In his weekly column in the *Illustrated London News*, a few months ago, he surprised his well-to-do British readers by the blunt statement that the greatest change in the civilized world during the last two hundred years had not been the coming of railways, electricity, gas-cookers, or even the daily press, but the emergence of class consciousness. Truth to tell, Mr. Bryant's elucidating article makes it clear that

he himself has for some time been aware of this phenomenon; but quite obviously he is under the impression that he conveys something absolutely new and surprising to the particular class of reader the *Illustrated London News* caters for.

### THE GOOD OLD DAYS OF QUEEN ANNE

Speaking of the times of Queen Anne and George II, Mr. Bryant says that class barriers were at that time probably even more rigid and clearly defined than they are today. They were, on the other hand, no more of a problem to either rich or poor than is, say, the weather. Class division

and distinction, Mr. Bryant thinks, were to the people of England in those not very remote times a natural phenomenon like a shower or a smell. The class system with its gross inequalities and human limitations was as universally accepted as the South Downs or the Bristol Channel. He thinks that in recent years a great change has taken place, so that the awareness and resentment of class have become "part of the air the moderns have breathed." Mr. Bryant thinks that, as a result, the members of the "upper" classes or those who believe they belong there, though socially proud of the fact, politically have become ashamed of it; while what the Victorians used to call the "lower orders" are inclined to be troubled by the feeling—Mr. Bryant does not say whether it is justified or not—of not getting a square deal.

All this—according to Mr. Bryant—produces "a kind of permanent acid stomach-ache in the body politic." And, perhaps not too surprisingly, Mr. Bryant ends up with a sally against Hitler, whom he accuses of deliberately attempting to administer to the British people the poisonous drug of class consciousness. Mr. Bryant thinks that class consciousness, like other poisons, if given in moderate doses, may be useful for the abolition of abuses and oppressions. If taken indiscriminately, however, it would threaten to evoke "two of the most destructive passions in the world—envy in the poor and fear in the rich."

### THE "UPPER" CLASSES

Class consciousness and even class hatred may, in 1941, appear to most people outside of Great Britain to be a rather hackneyed subject, particularly for discussion, not by a soap-box orator but by a writer of Mr. Arthur Bryant's standing and reputation. If, however, we take into consideration the political and social scene in England, we might even conclude that Mr. Bryant has understated rather than exaggerated the startling nature of the belated emergence of class consciousness in that country. Startling, at least, from

the viewpoint of the average reader of the *Illustrated London News*, that is, of those "who belong or think they belong to a 'higher' class."

Up to the outbreak of the present war, class consciousness in England was almost as rare among the poor as among the rich and noble. The social upheavals which followed the Great War and reached their climax at the time of the General Strike in 1926 had receded into the past and were almost forgotten.

Labor ministers, on the occasion of their appointment, had kissed the hand of the King and had submitted to Court ceremonial; Labor politicians had accepted peerages and Trade Unionists had become knights. The privileged position of Society—with a capital S—seemed to be as secure as ever. The "National Government," supported by an enormous Tory majority in the House of Commons, was made up in the main of the "right" people. At any rate, it was managed by the "right" people, who, in the well-known manner, met at week ends in the country, at race meetings, and at the "right" sort of clubs, etc. The "lower orders" did not seem seriously to object to this state of affairs, as evidenced among other things by the presence of only one rather tame Communist in the House of Commons. Hence, in the summer of 1939, things did not seem so very different from what they must have been under Queen Anne or George II.

### WHAT THIS WAR MEANS

For any careful, unbiased observer, however, who had the opportunity of living in England during the last few years preceding the present war, it was not difficult to realize that this state of affairs could not go on indefinitely. One felt that, if Britain were involved in a major war for the second time within a generation, this might mean the end of the rule of that curious mixture of feudal aristocracy and plutocracy that has passed for so long as British Democracy. Whatever the outcome of the war might be, the

people of Britain would, once the struggle were over, no longer endure the rule of those who had led them into this second conflict—and had led them into it with shockingly inadequate armor.

The other reason why this rule of a socially privileged minority was bound to come to an end, once a new war started, was obvious to anyone with even superficial insight into the workings of the complicated, delicately balanced machinery of the British Government: the actual method of government was based on the existence of an abnormally high standard of living for the ruling few, and the war was bound to consume the wealth on which this standard of living depended.

Sir John Simon's speech, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, introducing the first War Budget on September 27, 1939, was in fact the death knell of that system which hitherto had ruled England. With income tax plus sur-tax taking as much as 83% of the large incomes, with death duties claiming one half and more of really big estates, the aristocracy and landed gentry must before long be driven from their country manors. Even if this rule of the aristocracy and landed gentry had for some considerable time been watered down by the influx of the new rich, it still depended for its acceptance by the masses on its facade of feudalism. These masses, which were willing to be governed by "real gentlemen," would never, in the long run, submit to the undisguised predominance of mere material wealth.

### *INNOCENTS AT HOME*

The only people who did not grasp this inescapable logic were those whom it most concerned. They went to war to prevent the spread of National Socialism, a threat to their own predominance, but they failed to realize that the very fact of war would hasten their own disintegration as a ruling class. In the years before the war, they and their representatives in Government and in diplomatic positions abroad had

signally misjudged the strength and direction of the new political movements which, with varying methods and varying success, were striving for a solution of the very class problems which had as yet scarcely cropped up in Britain.

In the same way they now misjudged the patience of their own people. This became evident quite early after the outbreak of this war. An unprecedented wave of public discontent swept the country when the "brass hats" of the War Office tried to enforce the old rule that privates must not visit restaurants frequented by officers for their meals or amusement. After long discussions in the press and in Parliament the rule was dropped; but the damage had been done.

### *THE FATE OF THE CHILDREN*

What contributed more than anything else to the stirring up of class consciousness was the mass exodus of children of the privileged classes to the United States and Canada, while the children of the rest of the population had to remain in Britain. These could either stay with their parents in the bombed industrial areas or be evacuated to the country.

The reaction of the masses was so violent that, for a while, it gave quite a shock to many of those who until then had felt it to be the most natural thing in the world to send their own offspring to safety, even if, unfortunately, the same privilege could not be extended to other children. After all, they had never felt any qualms about carrying on their own way of living even in war time. In an only slightly modified form, adapted to the inevitable change caused by German bombers, they continued their rounds of social events and amusements, at a time when in the East End of London tens of thousands of fellow Britons for weeks on end had neither a roof over their heads nor a decently cooked meal.

### *CHARITIES*

Of course it would be wrong to think that society people in Britain are doing



nothing at all but continue to have a good time. Many thousands of the men are serving in the armed forces or in the many special services which modern warfare has created. Women, too, are doing their bit as nurses, with the WRENS and WAAFS, etc. And then there are the many charities. But it is just in these charities, the way they are run—which is exactly the same way that has prevailed since the times of Queen Anne and which has now become such an appalling anachronism—that the futility of society's effort to hold its own becomes most manifest.

### SOCIETY CARRIES ON

Meanwhile, to all outward appearances society carries on. If one looks at one of the fashionable illustrated weeklies, be it the *Illustrated London News*, the *Sphere* or the *Tatler*, one sees all the usual pictures of debutantes, of young brides and mothers—of course only of the "right" people. We see the same pictures of race meetings, hunt balls, and garden parties, with the one difference that these social events are nowadays mostly held not in Great Britain, but in the safety of Eire—one advantage in Mr. De Valera's policy of strict neutrality—or in India, or, most important of all, in the United States. It is really astounding, the number of socialites who have found ways and means—and the necessary permit to take out exchange—to serve their country in America, be it as propagandists, be it by transferring their anachronistic charity business to the western shore of the Atlantic.

It carries on, too, in the field of Government. With all the reshuffles in the Cabinet since the war began, Mr. Churchill's "equipe" has changed very little. The few newcomers, with the exception of two or three Labor politicians who were taken into the Government for the main purpose of silencing potential opposition, are all of the "right" people. Even patent misfits have not been got rid of, because they belong to one's good friends.

Important departments of state are practically exempt from Parliamentary control by the system of appointing ministers from outside Parliament, who do not even bother to undergo the formality of being returned uncontested to the House of Commons but prefer to accept a peerage. At scarcely any time during the last twenty years have there been more ministers of the Crown sitting in the Upper House than at present. The most determined die-hard could have little to complain of if outward appearances mean anything.

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And yet the system under which social position combined with wealth has been ruling England is dying. The people of England are tired of it, and it is only due to the patriotism and perfect discipline shown by the British people during the first two years of the war, in spite of all their disappointments and discontent, that Mr. Churchill can continue to govern Great Britain with the old crowd of politicians who were responsible not only for the pre-war period but for all the blunders committed since the war began.

But one has only to look closely at the British press, particularly at the provincial papers, to learn from any number of articles, reports, and thousands of "Letters to the Editor" how deep is the concern with which the best citizens of Great Britain are following the record of their rulers. Moreover one can also perceive a growing determination that, when the war is over, great changes must be effected.

In the meantime, as we have said, society carries on. Judging from Mr. Bryant's article, it is only just beginning to discover that class distinctions can create serious problems—problems, indeed, of life and death for the individual as well as for whole classes and systems of government. English society, without knowing it, is already doomed. But no doubt it will fight on with its die-hard stubbornness to the very end.