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The Death of King George VI

WHEN death comes suddenly the shock is heavier for people who suffer the loss, and when the blow is felt in a realm as well as in a family it seems for a moment to bring all the life of a nation to a check and a pause. A king is not greater than a man, but he stands on high ground. The grief now felt in British countries is for a sovereign whose personal qualities, above all his goodness and fortitude, shone through the royal occasions. King George VI came to the throne at a time of national crisis and personal distress, knowing that his task was not merely to rule, but also to lift the monarchy from the shadow of abdication. These alone were great responsibilities. But the new King, a man of quiet mind and habits, was to be confronted with difficulties so sharp and numerous that it has become proper to describe the next fifteen years as a reign of crises.

The years of war revealed his stature. His character was formed by nature and training for the part he played when unity and endurance were conditions of survival. He had the gifts of quietness, an inner steadfastness which supported the weight of work and strain. Moreover, his character gave the monarchy new strength through a sense of intimate communion with the people. The King was the head of a great family of nations; but in performing his royal and public duties, always with dignity, he never ceased to be himself. Much has been written of the symbolism of the British Crown. It is true that the King stands for the unity of his subjects: the Throne is above politics and is the true centre of the Empire. But there is another symbolism which George VI made peculiarly his own. He was an English-

man doing his duty, upholding the old and simple virtues by quiet example, and never failing. It was because we could not separate the King from the man that we knew him so well. This closer knowledge was aided by radio, but the microphone gives no help unless the message which comes through it is from the heart and mind. The King reached us when he spoke; he became not a remote personage, but a man who could be known in New Zealand homes, silent for a royal broadcast, as well as in the streets of London when the crowds turned out to watch him pass.

The King's illness, from which it was hoped he had made a good recovery, taught us what he had come to mean to millions throughout the world. It was then, too, that most of us realised the intolerable burden that had been carried for nearly fifteen years. The King's work was done, without complaint, until his strength failed him. He devoted himself to greatness in a humble way, lifting his service beyond the demands of duty. In ancient times, in some parts of the world, it was a tribal custom that after a king had ruled for a certain period he should be killed. We have come a long way from that sort of barbarism; and yet it is still true that in one sense a ruler is sacrificed by his people. He gives himself to a life in public and to official duties which drain his strength. The love of his subjects may be support and consolation, but it cannot save him. In a time of mourning there is no need to ask what the British Crown means to us. Its symbolism enters our hearts and is translated there into a simple feeling of loss for a good man who was also a King. And this will be a strong element in the loyalty that must now be transferred to the young Queen who succeeds him.



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