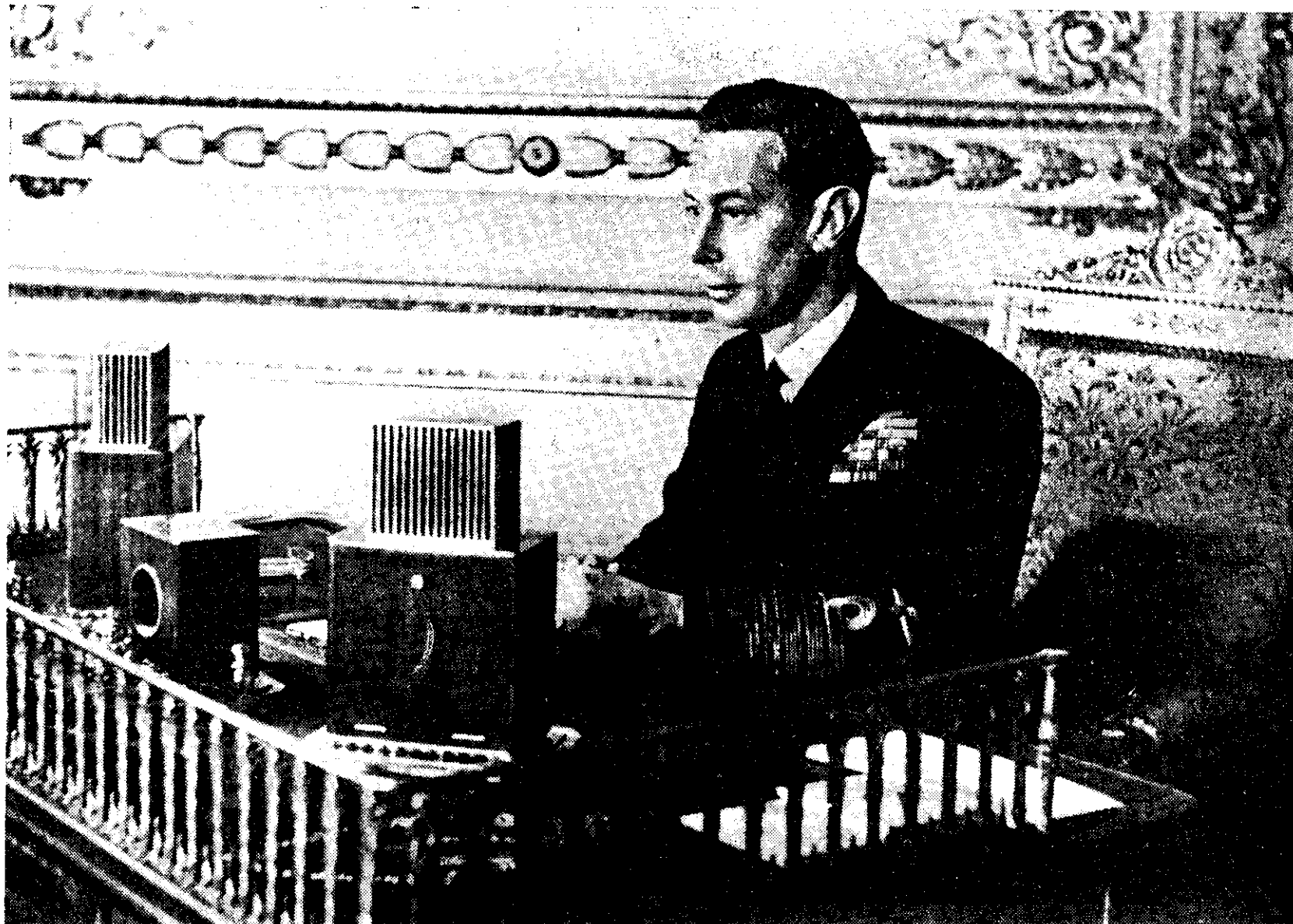




WHATEVER place history accords to George VI. in the pageant of English Kings, it will be remembered of him that he found the monarchy in crisis and left it more strongly and more broadly established than ever before in the affections of his people. There are many other ways in which he will be remembered. He saw more of his Dominions and his people than any other English sovereign, with the exception of his elder brother. Through the magic of radio his voice became known on every continent as he spoke in simple and direct terms to the people of the Commonwealth—and to all men of good will—throughout the fifteen years of his reign. In the world crisis which those fifteen years enclosed, he shared, not only the anxieties and strain of war, but also the immediate physical danger of enemy attack, and that not merely in his journeys to the various fighting fronts, but also within the walls of his own home in London.

His life as King was ringed with crisis and strain. The drama of the constitutional crisis was played out to the accompaniment of growing tension in Europe as Nazi Germany tested its strength by anschluss and occupation, and peaceful people marked the portents of the gathering storm. Throughout

The Commoners' King

his reign George VI., with his peoples, surmounted one difficulty only to be confronted with another.

Something of the spirit needed for such times was to be found in the King's message broadcast to the people of the Commonwealth and Empire on Christmas Day of 1950:

"It is thirteen years since I first spoke to you at this season," he said. "During that time we have been through many vicissitudes together. There have been vast alternations of good fortune and of bad. Together we have travelled a hard road, with many ups and downs. It would be foolish to pretend that it has yet become smooth and easy. . . . It seems to me that *The Pilgrim's Progress* still offers a vivid picture of our life in this troubled world. Like the Pilgrim we have gone forward, only to fall back. Like him we have fallen back, only to press forward once more. We have passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but always, with the determination natural to our race and training, we have had our eyes fixed on the far-off Delectable Mountains of peace and goodwill. And like the Pilgrim every one of us has had his own individual burden to shoulder, too. Often

we have laid it down for a brief respite only to be obliged to pick it up again and find it even heavier.

"In a world of widespread and stupendous happenings it is not surprising that the individual pilgrim should feel conscious of his own insignificance, bewildered by continual blows of fate, and finally tempted to take Faintheart as his friend and his guide. But that must never be. His motto must be 'Whatever comes or does not come, I will not be afraid.' What counts is the spirit in which each one of us fulfils his appointed task."

It could have been as easy for George VI. to write those words as it is to quote them, but the passage was, in fact, both a report on experience and a statement of faith. His own model was not simply Pilgrim. There was something of Faithful in his character, something, too, of Mr. Standfast. From his early years he had lacked a robust physique. He had three illnesses as a youth during the First World War—though he achieved the distinction of serving at Jutland and finished the war with the Royal Air Force in France. In fact, we have it on the authority of Hector Bolitho that when George VI.'s

biography comes to be written, "the reports of his doctors should be treated as important documents. They alone will reveal the secret of his fight during these early years against influenza, pneumonia, and almost continuous gastric pains. He was not equipped for the rigours of training, but the training went on." Another officer who taught him at Osborne said of the Prince some years ago: "His courage during this time was amazing."

It is certain that the reports of the Royal physicians of the last few years will tell the same story. In the same way as he disciplined his speech difficulty he set aside his illnesses, covered his private anxieties, and bore resolutely the tribulations of high office.

"What counts is the spirit," he said in that Christmas message of 1950, and of that spirit he was perhaps the leading public example.

But though he was resolute by nature, and stoic in his self-discipline, his most characteristic attribute was perhaps a native humbleness: "I'm afraid I may be rather an amateur at first," he told his Prime Minister in 1936. It may have been the amateur in him that gave him the common touch, but no British ruler in modern times was more truly the Commoners' King, and that humbleness which was his special grace must have helped towards that end.