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KING GEORGE VI

The Intimate Story of His Life

By Francis Moore

On an unforgettable December day in 1906 a Prince well-liked, but not well known, ascended the Throne in circumstances so staggering that for a time they completely overshadowed his own personality. In the two-and-a-half years since then the people of the United Kingdom and the countries of the Empire, directly and indirectly, have been getting to know their new King.

Reading of his daily duties, hearing once or twice his voice on the radio, they have built up a picture of the man himself; a man steadfast and thoughtful, quick to sympathy, and quick also to laughter. People who have thus been forming their own idea of King George VI. from day to day often think of him as one of those men who develop their full powers and personality only in mature years. It may well seem to them that he has "found himself" only since he assumed the responsibilities of Kingship.

But those who know him best realize that the key to his character is its continuity. He is not a man who rises to the occasion when circumstances called him to the Throne. He was equal to that occasion because he had it in him from the beginning. The young naval cadet who visited Canada 26 years ago was already laying the foundations for the character of the man who now revisits the Dominion as its King.

Father And Son

"How like his father!" Those words, which sprang to many lips in the first months after King George VI's accession, were perhaps most often a stop-gap description, used by people who warmly wished the new King well, but could find no other phrase to cover their ignorance of his personality.

And yet the parallel is striking. Like his father, he was a younger son called unexpectedly to kingship. Just as King George V's early manhood had been, in a sense, overshadowed by the long reign of Queen Victoria and the brilliant career of Edward VII, so our new King's public activities came second to the doings of his popular and world-travelled elder brother.

The similarity between father and son extends also to character. This is only natural, because of the four Royal brothers Prince Albert (as he was before becoming Duke of York) stood closest to their father. Partly this was due to natural sympathy and affinity; partly it was the result of the young Prince's delicate health, which kept him at home for long periods.

Forged His Own Career

To those who know him best it seemed at first that this likeness to his father might do the new King a grave injustice at the very outset of his reign. They feared lest people should see in his accession a mere "jutting back of the clock" after an interlude unprecedented in the history of the Crown. They feared especially that the nations of the Empire, who as yet know comparatively little of the new monarch, might regard him merely as a shadow of his father, without personality or character of his own.

Those fears, happily, were short-lived. King George VI soon gave proof that he was a man of independent thought, of ideas which he had hammered out for himself, of clear-cut and individual personality. The record of his life is the story of a man who mapped out a career of himself and pursued

it with courage and tenacity. It has given him a steadfastness which he might not have possessed had he received the wider but less thorough training of Heir to the Throne.

He was born on December 14, 1895, at York Cottage, Sandringham. "I have heaps of names; do you want 'Laem' all?" he once said to an autograph hunter in Barbados. The "heaps of names" with which he was christened were actually only four; Albert Frederick Arthur George. All members of the Royal Family born in Queen Victoria's lifetime were christened Albert in honour of her beloved Prince Consort; but our present King is the only one who has used the name officially. In the family circle he is known as "Bertie".

Boyhood Franks

In boyhood his constant companion was his elder brother, the Prince of Wales, who was only eighteen months his senior. They shared the same governess, tutor, and French master; they learnt to swim at the Bath Club; they were taught to wait under the approving eye of their grandfather, King Edward; and they were drilled in sterner kinds of exercises by a sergeant of the Coldstream Guards.

But even for Prince Bertie is not all study and drill. Tales are still told at Court of the many un-royal pranks played by the brothers. On one occasion guests at a Palace reception were startled by a sudden downpour in a corner of the ballroom. Scandalised footmen hastened up to the balcony to discover the boys squeezing soaked sponges on the dignified courtiers below, while their sister Mary held a bowl of water.

Out of doors the Princes' favourite diversion was cycling. Roping in Princess Mary to make a "field", they organised the "Ascot Bicycle Stakes"—an oft-repeated race, which, frequently ended in a disastrous spill among their father's flower-beds.

"Bertie Is So Clever"

"Bertie is so clever," King Edward once remarked. And, indeed, Prince Albert showed more fondness for lessons than the others. He is still the most bookish member of the Royal Family. But whatever his preferences, he was soon thrust into a more active life.

Like his father, he was destined for the sea, and at the tender age of thirteen he was sent to Osborne as a naval cadet. Life at Osborne was hard—doubly hard for a Prince who had to learn other professions besides that of the Navy. Rising each morning at 6.30 he had to attend classes in mathematics, navigation and all the normal school subjects; he learned seamanship and gunnery with the rest; but when the time came for play, Prince Albert often had to stay behind. His special studies in languages and history, designed to fit him for a public career, could not be neglected, and his own tutor accompanied him to Osborne.

An Affliction Conquered

It is here, perhaps, that mention should be made of a painful physical trouble, which has left an indelible mark on the King's character. From boyhood he was afflicted by a stutter, not very pronounced, but sufficient to cause the utmost distress to his sensitive spirit. Certain consonants, notably the sound "k", he found it impossible to utter.

Once in the Osborne classroom his arithmetic master, ignorant of this affliction, suddenly fired at him the question: "What is the half of a half?" Prince Albert remained dumb, drawing upon him-

self a shower of schoolmasterly sarcasm. He knew, of course, the answer to so simple a question, but he could not bring his lips to utter the word "quarter".

Now that the King, by tireless effort and practice, has conquered his stammer, he often tells stories such as this against himself. But his affliction persisted well into manhood, and it was responsible for the shyness which still marks his character. Some may know from personal experience what such a defect means in private life. But who can guess what it means to a young man who must spend half his life in the public eye? And who can gauge the strength of purpose and personality in a man who, despite his trouble, shirked none of the duties which fell to his lot as a King's son.

"Dr. Johnson" At Sea

Two years at Osborne were followed by two at Dartmouth to complete his naval training, and in 1913 the eighteen-year-old Prince Albert joined his first ship. He set out in H.M.S. Cumberland for a cruise to the West Indies and Canada. His ship called at Halifax, Quebec, St. George's Bay and St. John's, Newfoundland. While in Canadian waters he eagerly took the opportunity of visiting also Montreal, Ottawa and the Niagara Falls.

Perhaps because of his natural gravity and his love of study, he had received at Osborne the nickname of "Dr. Johnson" and it stuck to him throughout his naval career. To his superior officers he was Midshipman Prince Albert, but in the wardroom always "Dr. Johnson".

Prince Albert was never very robust, and illness twice interrupted his naval career, and finally made him, to his lasting regret, a landsman altogether. At Ottawa he caught measles—not a very serious complaint, but one which may have laid him open to more serious trouble which was to come.

In August, 1915, he was well enough to go to sea again, this time in H.M.S. Collingwood. When war broke out he rejected with scorn a suggestion that he should be given a post of safety at home, and he proceeded on active service with the Grand Fleet. But illness soon claimed him again, and he was invalided ashore for an appendicitis operation. Slow months of convalescence followed, but to his great delight and pride the Prince was well enough to rejoin his ship and to serve in the greatest naval engagement of the war—the Battle of Jutland.

Under Fire At Jutland

He was the only one of the King's sons to serve actually under fire during the war. His ship, the Collingwood, engaged a German light cruiser, and throughout the battle Prince Albert was at his post in the turret of a 12-inch gun. For his courage and coolness he was praised in Jellicoe's despatches. His brother officers still remember how, at the height of the engagement, he brewed cocoa for the exhausted gun crew.

But his first naval engagement was to be his last. Persistent ill-health soon made it apparent that he could not remain at sea, and he returned home to another sphere of military service. He joined the Royal Naval Air Service, and later the Royal Air Force. In this new career he showed the same thoroughness and enthusiasm and to-day he is the only member of the Royal Family and the only ruler in the world who holds a pilot's certificate.

Peace brought new problems for Britain, the Empire and the world; and the Duke of York (as he became in 1920) was quick to see that they were chiefly problems of economics and the organisation of industry. He saw here a new field of service, one in which no Royal Prince had ever ventured before.

Work For Industry

His training in engineering as a

naval cadet had given him the basis for understanding some of industry's everyday problems, and during a short but concentrated period of study at Cambridge University he read deeply in economics. Thus prepared, he began to familiarise himself with every aspect of industrial life. He went down mines and hewed coal; he visited shipyards and drove rivets; he toured countless factories and workshops.

He wanted to learn and know. He asked questions; and the questions he asked were not the glib but meaningless inquiries of the traditional Royal visitor. Workmen at the bench were astonished to find that he was familiar even with the jargon of their trade; and instead of replying in shy monosyllables they found themselves talking to him as though he were a sympathetic foreman.

He shirked nothing. One of his visits was to a London glue factory. Glue in the making has an odour best left undescribed, and the factory chiefs suggested that the Duke would be well advised to inspect the factory from outside. "People work here, don't they?" was his quiet reply as he went to the door.

Love And Marriage


In the midst of work came romance. In 1921 the Duke had met and admired the vivacious dark-haired Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, daughter of the Earl of Strathmore, in whose Scottish home he was a holiday guest. Attraction grew, and the couple found many other opportunities of meeting. But the Duke was shy, and Lady Elizabeth was diffident in

receiving the attentions of a young admirer. Rumour whispered that the Duke proposed three times before he was accepted, but after two years' courtship, their engagement was announced in January, 1923.

They were married in Westminster Abbey the following April. Among the thousands who cheered the smiling, care-free couple as they drove through the streets of London that day could have been counted that fourteen years later the Duke and Duchess made an informal tour in East Africa, and the warmth of their reception at the stopping-place showed that the popularity was as great in the Empire as it was at home. The Duke's interest in Dominion and Colonial affairs, sharpened by this tour, was shown again in the leading part played in the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925.

In the following year the Duke and Duchess's first daughter was born, Princess Elizabeth, now the Presumptive to the Throne. Before she was a year old another Empire visit—the long tour in Australia and New Zealand—parted the little Princess from her parents.

Queens are always free to select their own colours for their coronation. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth has chosen one of her favorite shades—a soft, deep powder blue. Sealing wax is no longer used for these seals. They are embossed on the paper and the arms are printed on to them. Queen Mary's choice was rather dark blue.



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