

# THE DECLINE OF ARISTOCRACY

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**S**CIENTIFICALLY speaking, it must be the ambition of every nation to be governed by an aristocracy — that is to say, by the best of its citizens. But as there are no means of discovering with any certainty who the best are, this purely abstract interpretation of aristocracy must be set aside and the popular meaning of the word substituted. Aristocracy has come to mean a titled class of nobility with their descendants, distinguished not by ability, moral superiority, or intellectual eminence, but by their birth — which is not always synonymous with what is loosely known as superior breeding.

Although titles may be conferred originally for merit and achievement and are a form of public recognition of special capacity, as time passes their hereditary character enlists into the ranks of the aristocracy people whose sole claim to distinction is that they are descended from the original holder of the title. When titles are conferred, as they have been increasingly in the last hundred and fifty years in Great Britain, for exclusively political considerations or frankly as an exchange for a lump sum of money, the claim of the recipient to a specially privileged position in the machine of government becomes very difficult to defend.

Nowhere in the world, except in England and perhaps in Spain and Roumania, is any claim made by a titled aristocracy for class privileges and constitutional prerogatives. In France the aristocracy of the royalist and empire periods have long disappeared and the remnant lurks only in the backwaters of society. In Germany they vanished with the monarchies. In Russia they have fled the country. Elsewhere they have ceased to exist except as isolated units, clinging to ancient titles.

The rise of democracy — that is to say, the gradual participation of the people, directly and indirectly, in the business of government, and the breaking down of the barriers which hitherto have prevented individual men and women from reaching the highest posts in legislation or administration — must necessarily involve the decline of a privileged class. It may be brought about by a revolution, the establishment of a republic, or some other national upheaval. It may be brought about by a natural

evolution through which the rapid strengthening of democratic elements leads to the deterioration and gradual exclusion of all interests inimical to their full development. Great Britain affords an interesting illustration of the latter method. The change began as far back as 1832, when, by the Reform Bill, the House of Commons was freed from its abject dependence on the House of Lords — the stronghold of British aristocracy.

At the end of the eighteenth century, more than three hundred members of the House of Commons were virtually returned by the influence of a hundred and sixty persons — landowners and borough-mongers, most of them members of the House of Lords. A table drawn up in 1816 states that out of a House of six hundred and fifty-eight members, three hundred were nominated by peers, and one hundred and seventy-one by commoners. In 1827 the number of members nominated by the borough-mongers was close on three hundred. By the provisions of the Reform Bill not only was the franchise extended, but fifty-six rotten boroughs were swept away.

Outside Parliament the Reform Bill had inaugurated the political enfranchisement and emancipation of the people, and this, once begun, was destined to proceed further. The introduction of free education served more than anything, and is still serving, to create a self-conscious democracy fully alive to its great responsibilities, for knowledge means self-confidence and strength.

To some extent, the House of Commons, which had become free and independent, reflected in its membership the changes in social and industrial development; with the result that there was a decline in aristocratic membership and a corresponding increase in middle-class and working-class representation.

Meanwhile the middle-class members constituted a formidable acquisition to the House. Their training and equipment were of a far more serious kind than that to which the House had hitherto been accustomed. Soon they captured the majority of posts in the Government itself, and even in the Conservative Party, with its aristocratic traditions, their services were found to be indispensable. Lastly, the working class gradually gained a foothold in the House. At first a few trade unionists came in as Liberals; but a Labor movement was formed, gained ground rapidly, and ultimately in 1906 an independent party of Labor representatives found a place in the new House of Commons, and came into existence as an organized political force.

But while these extremely significant changes were taking place in the Commons, the House of Lords, unlike any other institution in the whole country, remained unchanged and quite unaffected by outside circumstances. Its stagnation and immobility naturally made it increasingly hostile to democratic advance. The number of Liberal peers, or peers who could remain Liberal under social pressure, gradually diminished. Since the Reform Bill two hundred and fifty-three peers were created by Liberal Prime Ministers alone, and yet in 1911 a bare seventy could be found who, as Liberals, would support a Liberal Government.

The House of Lords, which continued primarily to be a great agrarian institution, increased its Tory majority and the number of Liberals dwindled. Consequently the friction between the two Chambers, caused by an ever-widening diversity of aim and interest, became more frequent. As early as 1846 Peel admitted that it was "no easy task to ensure the harmonious and united action of an ancient monarchy, a proud aristocracy, and a reformed House of Commons."

Friction between the two houses continued throughout the nineteenth century, arising, as Mr. Gladstone put it, from "differences of conviction, differences of prepossession, differences of mental habits, and differences of fundamental tendency." When, in 1909, the House of Lords went so far as to reject a budget, the movement which had been gathering headway for almost a century crystallized in a bill which passed the following year, abolishing the absolute veto of the Lords while reserving to them their powers of revision and delay.

#### EXIT THE ARISTOCRAT

The Great War suspended all domestic controversies. But in 1923 Labor representation in the House of Commons rose to an unprecedented number, and with the gradual disappearance of the Liberal Party, the Labor Party has become the second largest political party in the state. Even in the Conservative ranks the percentage of aristocrats has grown smaller, and in the more specialized business of politics very few of the old nobility have been found competent to distinguish themselves in the arena.

The old method by which the great public schools furnished the statesmen of Great Britain and held the administration of government as their special preserve has disappeared. The busi-

ness man, the local administrator, the specialist in social and economic problems have competed successfully and ousted the aristocrat. Even in the House of Lords the lawyers, business magnates, and retired officials take a greater share in debate than the representatives of the old aristocratic families. The House of Lords nevertheless has swollen in numbers and comprises over seven hundred members, only a small proportion of whom attend to parliamentary business.

While from the point of view of legislation and administration the aristocracy have lost much of their power and influence, and while they themselves resent being swamped by the influx of newly created peers who have no claim whatever to distinction of birth, they are able to continue to exercise a subtle but nevertheless distinct pressure by means of social influence. Their share in making and administering laws may be small, but their capacity to influence those in authority and to guide and deflect the trend of opinion is by no means negligible. As a caste fighting for privilege and power, their day is over. As a corporate body detaching themselves from the common herd, there is no place for them in a growing democracy.

Individually, however, they may retain a sense of obligation for public service and may be distinguished by characteristics of high-minded and disinterested altruism, which will always be valuable assets in public life. The tendency to specialize and professionalize politics may produce a greater percentage of place hunters and demagogues, and the aristocrat's readiness to serve and reluctance to profit are qualities which we can ill afford to lose. Moreover the true-born aristocrat, titled or untitled, has as healthy a hatred of the plutocrat as any exploited working man could wish to have. While the latter regards the plutocrat as an enemy, the aristocrat regards him as a usurper.

If then the aristocrat, abandoning all claim to special privileges and renouncing the traditional prerogatives of his order, will take his place on an equal footing with others and share in the corporate effort for an improved society — not as an aristocrat but as a citizen — his assistance will be welcomed and his qualities appreciated. But so long as an attempt is made to restore power and erect pedestals for a special class, they are bound to be washed by the growing wave of democracy into a backwater. The absurdity of hereditary titles is likely to be felt more strongly as time passes. Their continued existence keeps up the

delusion that there are specially distinguished people to whom reverence is due and privileges should be accorded, and makes a centre of attraction for snobbish adulation and flattery.

Any reform of the House of Lords would certainly discard the hereditary principle as the sole basis of membership. Hereditary titles would then become honors still more meaningless than they are at present. But any administration which undertakes the reform of the second chamber will find it a formidable task. The consent of the Lords themselves must be obtained for it and there is still a lack of general agreement, even in the Conservative Party, as to the best way of proceeding, because, from the electoral point of view, any change which strengthens the powers of the second chamber will be very unpopular. So hereditary titles are likely to remain for the present. Nevertheless, their abolition would be a benefit to the aristocrat as well as to everyone else.

The day of labels is past. Proved merit must take the place of inherited distinctions so that the best, the fittest, the most competent may be chosen from the mass who can all secure equal opportunities for proving their merit. By this means, a real aristocracy in the strict sense of the word may one day be discovered. But even in countries where the aristocracy of birth has been dethroned, this ideal has not been reached by any means. The complete rise of a true democracy is not dependent alone on the decline and fall of the aristocracy.

But as democratic ideas advance, the aristocratic tradition must necessarily fade away — not the personal tradition which a few still hold, of disinterested public service and scrupulously honorable dealing — but the class tradition which accords special advantages to a titled herd of nondescript, undistinguished people who have no claim whatever to the respect and subservience of the common people.

#### ENTER THE PLUTOCRAT

In the United States, where aristocratic titles have never been established, they consequently excite more interest and curiosity than if they had existed and been discarded. But Americans, relieved of an aristocracy, are finding themselves confronted with the growing power of an untitled plutocracy which may cause more trouble than a titled aristocracy, whose power — in the natural course of events — must inevitably wane. Thus, while the aristocracy is losing its hold, the plutocracy is gaining ground.

When they can, rich business men marry aristocrats so that they may acquire social prestige, and in other ways they endeavor to make their way into high society. Extravagance, ostentation, and the manufacture of luxuries have increased. The new plutocrats constitute a far more vulnerable target for attack than ever the aristocrats did. Socialists are not the only ones who recognize that the very rich man is an anomaly in any properly constituted society. Expenditure of vast sums on personal luxuries and individual aggrandizement at other people's expense are antisocial acts, and they cannot be defended against the attack of people who merely demand a decent life.

In the modern world, where the spread of education has made the masses conscious of their rights and responsibilities, there is less room for plutocrats than for aristocrats. The money standard as the basis of a social system is repudiated. Keen conflict must eventually arise. Sympathy for the millionaire will hardly be found in any quarter. Neither birth nor money can justify domination. If supermen are to be thrown up, they must justify their claim on intellectual or moral grounds. The press and the mob are capricious in their preferences, but the common sense of the people in the more democratically governed countries is suspicious of the superman, mistrustful of the demagogue, and intolerant of the dictator. At the same time it is ready to recognize genius, although even here fashion may vitiate the standard.

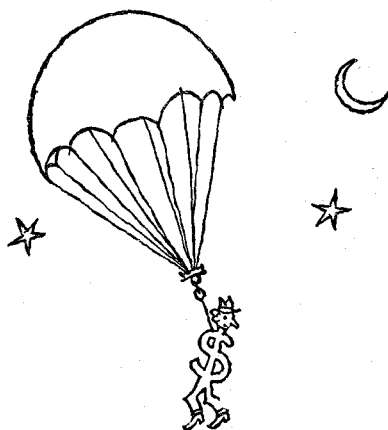
Privileges of any kind are not in harmony with the spirit of democracy. This does not mean a repudiation of the idea of individual preëminence, but rather a conviction that greater equality of opportunity will allow a finer and more respected type of preëminence to emerge. We are beginning to suspect that many of our "great men" of the past reached their pedestals through privileges; we want our leaders of the future to be revered on account of their qualities. Kings and Emperors, Lords, Barons, and Conquerors were all very well in a world peopled by ignorant, servile, unself-conscious masses. The serfs and slaves, the mob and rabble are giving place to disciplined workers and enlightened people. Science is making the change more sudden. But it is a change — a vast change — of which we who are participating in it can only detect and appreciate a few of the symptoms.



## NERVOUS LIQUIDATION

FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN

*Forum Table Talk*



**T**HERE are various sorts of careers among the wizards of finance. Some of them work their way up by slow and painful degrees from the bottom, others attain fortune at a single bound. My career has been the quick kind. Only a few months ago I knew nothing about the stock market. In fact, I knew even less than I do now. I never read the financial pages of the newspapers. Whenever the men about me dropped into conversation about the remarkable rise in American Bread or the pressure exerted by the bears upon the leading rails, I seized the opportunity to be alone with my thoughts. This sort of talk meant nothing to me. I hadn't the slightest notion of how a bear exerts pressure upon a rail or of what happens to the rail when he does it. I could distinguish between stocks and bonds, but debentures were beyond me; and at the mention of amortization and sinking funds and time money I felt myself plunged into a fog.

But that was before I began commuting from New Canaan. It's a long ride from New Canaan to the Grand Central: long enough to read clear through the latest torso murder, to arrive at the items beginning, "Speculation for the advance was resumed yesterday on a broad scale, and the bulls, encouraged by the increased exports of steel filings, pushed several favorites to new highs," and to sit and wonder what a favorite thinks about when a bull is pushing it to a new high. I began to enjoy puzzling out the dramas of this strange new world into which the financial pages led me. "SHORTS ARE SQUEEZED AS MOTORS CLIMB STEADILY": what was this, I would ask myself, if not a naughty romance of the open road, depicting the temptations of the limousine and the moral perils faced by the younger generation?