

English Snobbery, Aldous Huxley

ENGLISH SNOBBERY

After a holiday from periodical literature, I am always staggered, when I get back to a well-stocked reading-room, by the inordinate snobbery of the English press. In no other country do so many newspapers devote so large a proportion of their space to a chronicle of the activities of the merely rich or the merely ennobled. Nowhere else in Europe is gossip-writing a highly paid and creditable profession; nowhere else would such a headline as 'Peer's Cousin in Car Smash' be even imaginable.

And where else but in England can one find three expensive but flourishing weeklies devoted to absolutely nothing but the life of the rich and the titled? Not to mention the several other weeklies in which this absorbing theme occupies, not indeed an exclusive, but still an important place.

On whom, one wonders, do these expensive weeklies live? To some extent, of course, upon the elect whom they exhibit walking in the Park with friends, attending race-meetings, eating dinners for Incurables or dancing in fancy dress for Crippled Children. Upon those, in a word, whose photographs have actually been published in their pages and upon all such as may reasonably hope, one memorable day, to achieve the same distinction. The ranks of the snapshot-worthy have recently been swelled by a considerable mass of new recruits. In the past, only the really rich, the definitely titled, the unequivocally West End stars were ever photographed.

To-day, in search, no doubt, of new subscribers, the exploiters of snobbery go forth and fairly rake the County hedges and ditches for their material. Captain and Mrs. Knapweed-Knapweed with their daughter Angelica ('Peggy') are now portrayed, walking with friends at hunt steeplechases. A sad decline. But business is business. There are not enough earls or actresses. The Knapweed-Knapweeds must be called in to fill the void.

There are in England only one hundred thousand persons whose income exceeds two thousand pounds a year. Of these not more, I imagine, than ten thousand can even hope to qualify for a place in the snobbery-exploiting weeklies. Compared with the earls and the actresses, the Knapweed-Knapweeds are numerous; but they are not a circulation—and a circulation is precisely what the snobbery-exploiting weeklies possess. These weeklies must be read-disinterestedly, in a certain sense—by thousands for whom the possibility of personally figuring among the walkers-in-parks, or even among their anonymous friends, is simply unimaginable. There is a snobbery which, like virtue, is its own reward.

What precisely, one speculates, is the nature of that reward? For most of the readers of the gossip columns their wealthier contemporaries take rank with film stars and the heroes and heroines of novels. Reading of their activities, they enjoy vicariously the pleasures—those amazingly boring and unvariegated pleasures—of the rich. What is quotidian reality for earls, actresses and Knapweed-Knapweeds is for them a delightful, compensatory fiction.

There are others, no doubt, who read for the sake of sarcastically laughing. How many? It is impossible to say. They cannot constitute a majority of newspaper readers; for if they did there would very soon be no more society or gossip columns to laugh at. One is forced rather reluctantly to the conclusion that most readers either positively enjoy the snobbery columns of their newspapers, or else accept them with resignation, as part of the established order of things, like the income tax or rain in summer.

Why should the English public proclaim itself so much more keenly interested in the doings of the rich and the titled than the public in other countries? Attachment to tradition may be invoked as one of the causes. The habit, established in long-past days when a title really meant something, of regarding

a lord with a kind of awed curiosity still persists in a vestigial state, like the spiritual equivalent of the vermiform appendix. Elsewhere revolution has roughly excised this survival from the days of feudalism.

But the last English revolution, that of 1688, was itself made by the aristocracy; instead of being cut out, the appendix rooted itself more firmly in the national consciousness. Another point: the English standard of living is high. There is an immense sub-middle class with enough money to preserve it from rancorous envy of the rich, but not enough to preserve it from boredom; it needs vicarious compensations and manages to find them in the gossip columns.

So much for the snobbery of the people who can never hope to be caught by the camera walking in the Park or drinking champagne for charity. We have now to consider the snobbery of those who have actually enjoyed this privilege. It is, of course, among these last that the passion is most intense. The objects of snobbery are themselves the greatest snobs.

That which, for the vulgar, is no more than a survival of something which once was useful, takes rank in the interior economy of the elect as a vital organ—no mere appendix, but an essential part of the aristocratic intestine. For the rich and the titled, snobbery is not a superfluous luxury, but a necessity; their self-regarding instincts impose it upon them. They are snobs because, like the rest of us, they are egotists. They admire the rich and titled for the good reason that the rich and titled are themselves.

This kind of snobbery exists wherever there is a privileged class. In other countries, however, gestures of aristocratic and plutocratic self-admiration are not received with sympathy, therefore are not made, except in private. For reasons which I have tried to explain above, large numbers of the English derive from gossip column and society weekly a deep satisfaction. They are prepared to listen to the privileged class congratulating itself. Where ears are willing, talk tends to be loud and long. The snobbery of the ruling classes in England is allowed the freest possible expression. Daily it takes the offered opportunity.

The end