

Britain's Achilles' Heel

Manchuria, Ethiopia, Spain, Munich and China have progressively made the British Lion seem rather mangy. Why is it that this symbol of empire, once highly regarded, has lost its prestige? Because, being a predatory beast, it is expected by other denizens of the jungle to protect its pillage from their depredations. What it has taken by force it should, to retain its prestige and power, be willing to fight for. Else it is not a lion.

* * *

Why has the lion lost its willingness to protect its pillage? Because it is a sick lion. It has become fat and lazy from too much gorging. It is suffering from the same malady that overtook the once powerful empire of Rome: that moral degeneracy which comes both from living without working and from working without living.

* * *

How can it live without working? The Roman technique was to take (or tax) what it wanted from the peoples it conquered. That was the direct method. The British technique is less direct. It consists in controlling the production of its subject peoples through titles to their property. The London Stock Exchange lists foreign securities totalling about twenty billion dollars, from which the English owners derive an annual income of approximately a billion dollars.

* * *

These securities in the main represent mortgages on the natural resources of the countries which issued them. In nearly all these countries (including the United States, in which considerably over a billion dollars of securities are held by Englishmen) local collection laws and agencies see to it that the English get their rent regularly. But in other countries there are ravaging wolves who see no reason for sharing this loot with said lion; they want all of it for themselves.

* * *

In Germany Hitler has in effect confiscated

some three hundred million dollars' worth of securities held by English. Latin American political disturbances have made rent collection there uncertain. Now the Japanese are questioning Britain's right to collect rent on its three-quarter billion dollar investment in China, to say nothing of the quarter billion dollar investment in Japan itself.

* * *

The English security-owners have not unleashed their defending lion because of his very apparent lethargic condition. To drop the metaphor, the English people, who have no interest in these securities, and who have been robbed of their own labor products by these same mortgagees at home, are a little dubious of the wisdom of going to war. Nor have the people in the dominions shown any deep concern for these harassed security-owners. Somehow, the ruling classes seem no longer able to win mass obedience by incantations to British national feeling.

* * *

Besides, war these days is a rather costly piece of business, involving expenses to which even these classes may have to contribute from the income from special privileges at home and abroad on which they have lived so luxuriously these many years. Once this rent is taken from them for war purposes the practice may continue into peace-time; perhaps the weary workers, now well-armed, may demand that these exactions be abolished or used for the social needs of Englishmen.

* * *

And so it is a retired circus lion, docile and complacent, that reigns over the jungle today. But the savage heart still beats beneath the shabby skin and when some over-ambitious beast snatches at some defensible kill—that is, some privilege in a part of the empire itself—the pulse-quickenning roar will ring out again and the blood-stained paw will rise and strike—to protect privilege.