

“WAR BEFORE CHRISTMAS”

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A LONG procession of boats goes unending by my window beside the Thames. Summer England is in them. There is the big new 1500-ton pleasure steamer that plies between Westminster and Hampton Court; rowing eights, their crews volubly encouraged by a cycling coach on the Barnes towing path; dinghies from the London Corinthian Sailing Club on their weekly race. Now and again comes a Dutch barge, grotesquely high in the water, as much at home as the rest.

Looking at these peaceful passages, listening to the dance-music from a gramophone on board the pleasure-steamer, it is as difficult as it was in August 1914 to think of this carefree mankind at war again. Yet “War before Christmas” is a phrase on many lips.

Nobody in England, it appears, wants war. To gain a hearing, even the jingo must nowadays proclaim the peacefulness of his ultimate aim. But a remote incident in a remote spot in a wild and uncivilised province of Ethiopia has aroused in a formidable cross-section of Englishmen a willingness—that is near desire—to put their fidelity to the principles of the League of Nations to a practical test.

The Continent is, as ever, sceptical. It sees in the autumn cruising route of the British Mediterranean fleet and in the strengthening of the garrisons at Malta and Aden a concern primarily for communications with India; in troop movements in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan a concern lest the waters of Ethiopian Lake Tana, which irrigates the Sudan, be brought under the stronger-than-Abyssinian control.

Since an Englishman obtained from the Ethiopian Emperor an oil and mineral concession covering half the kingdom for seventy-five years, the Continent is even more than sceptical. Albion’s traditional “perfidy” is scarified, in press and on platform, from Berlin to Rome, from Warsaw to Madrid. What matter that Mr. F. W. Rickett was acting on behalf of a subsidiary of *Standard Oil*, and that no British capital was involved? (Besides, not everyone believes that; not everyone can see a difference between the denials of the British Government and the other denials that are one of the greatest exports of the post-War Succession States).

What matter that many Englishmen would rejoice if their Government could confer on Mr. Rickett some degree of contempt corresponding to a dukedom in the opposite scale? What matter that the oil and mineral resources of Ethiopia are still a subject of speculation among mining engineers as well as Wall Street financiers? Albion, the Continent reasons, has been perfidious in the past. Albion cannot but be perfidious now.

The Continent is wrong, this time anyhow, at least so far as the people of Britain are concerned. Of the eight million Englishmen and Englishwomen who answered "Yes" to every question in a now famous Peace Ballot, the great majority would answer "Yes" again were the Government to ask them whether, in case the League should agree to sanctions, and sanctions should mean war, they would be willing to fight. Nor is it for the sake of imperial aggrandisement or imperial salvation that they would answer thus. Their motive is pure idealism, their attitude to the Empire their ancestors built not ineptly summed up in an acid phrase of that acid diehard the *Morning Post*: "Stop me and take one." Mr. Anthony Eden, coming pitifully white and worn from a Three-Power Conference in Paris or a League Council meeting in Geneva, is fortified in his conviction that abstract justice must be done by a "fan mail" reaching the proportions of that of a minor film star.

The "fan mail" comes from all manner of men—navvies, university undergraduates, ex-soldiers, business men, not least from the clergy, for the Churches of England have regained in this present crisis a moral leadership lost in the war. Some of the "fans" are moral cowards who fear to fail twice. They know that the League of Nations failed once when it declined to check Japan's march into China; neglecting the history of the species, they fear that to fail again would be to fail for ever in the attempt to establish between the nations the same régime of justice as prevails within the nations.

Others are, as they would say, "realists". Remembering, as Signor Mussolini remembers, how the Roman Empire spread in ancient times over the then known world; forgetting, as Signor Mussolini forgets, how the Roman Empire overreached itself and fell, they would prefer the known risks of war now to the unknown risks of a Hundred Years War of conquest that might spread over the whole of the now known world.

The majority of the Englishmen who support Mr. Eden are, however, neither moral cowards nor self-styled realists. They are pure idealists, nurtured on the enchantment that followed war's disenchantment, as ready to fight for an idea now as some of their

fathers in 1914—the fact has been forgotten in the disillusionment of later and fuller knowledge—were ready to fight for "gallant little Belgium".

These idealists for the moment hold the field. They do not hold it undisputed, nor is there any certainty that they will hold it long. Against them are the realists who, with frank cynicism, refuse to see the mote in Italy's eye while there is the beam of imperial expansion in their grandfather's eye; the other and rather contemptible realists who ask with Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?"; the other idealists who would rather that injustice were done to one small country than that the whole of Europe should be plunged, as they believe it would be were Signor Mussolini to be checked, into the horrors of another war.

All three have powerful support. Lord Hardinge, ex-Viceroy of India, ex-Ambassador to France, is the type of the first kind of realist; Lord Rothermere and his chain of press gramophones the type of the second. The third, idealistic, type unites in strange companionship such men as Lord Ponsonby, leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords, and Lord Beaverbrook, leader of a campaign, already of respectable age, for isolation of the British Empire from disputes that, as he says, "do not concern the British people."

These many shades of opinion are represented in the Cabinet as fully as in the British people, though not with anything like the same precision. Lord Hailsham, warlike former Minister of War and present Lord Chancellor, is whole-hearted "sanctionist", as much for imperial as for juristic reasons; and has in that the strong support of military, naval and air chiefs. Lord Halifax, gentle and pacifying present Minister of War, is "sanctionist" for the same idealistic reasons as Mr. Eden, and has almost as large a "fan" following. Mr. Neville Chamberlain is "isolationist", and, through the extremely friendly relations he has of late developed with the press of all parties, is sure that his views will be indirectly made known. The other eighteen members of the Cabinet range in opinion between the two extremes. Which of their views prevails, whether any prevails in the pure state, will depend now not on them, nor on the British people, but on the course of events which they may perhaps slightly deflect, but cannot hope fully to control.

That, indeed, seems to many of us in England the present tragedy of Europe. An Englishman may talk to Nazis like Rudolf Hess and to Communists like Maxim Litvinoff and believe each to be, in no vague sense but in the very truth of strong volition, a man

of goodwill. But he knows that a trivial incident anywhere in Europe or Africa may set in motion behind these men a people brought to a pitch of hysterical feeling by injustice, war, post-war, and merely human. Knowing that, he envies the happy geography of those peoples of the American Continent who can distinguish with the certainty of three thousand miles of separating ocean between the disputes that concern them and the disputes that do not.

Whatever the immediate outcome of League of Nations Councils, whether there is peace for Britain or whether there is war, one unconsidered effect of the Italian-Abyssinian dispute seems likely to be a profound change in British political alignments; and with that change an intensification of European rearming. With all good faith on both sides, Opposition and Government—or, to fix the party labels, Labour and Conservative—have worked together throughout the foreign troubles of this year in harmonious agreement that the League should prevail. The result will be that in the coming election (decided upon before the Italian-Abyssinian dispute arose) the Labour Party will have lost its loudest battle-cry. Even were the British Government now to abandon the League, the Labour Party could not but admit that the Government had given the League a fair trial first. Nor will the Labour Party be able to raise strong opposition to a Conservative campaign of rearmament (likewise decided upon before the Italian-Abyssinian dispute seemed menacing) when that rearmament has been pledged by Mr. Baldwin to the cause of collective security.

If war should come, the Conservative Party would be able to point to the false prosperity of armament for a conflict which the Labour Party certainly has not opposed. If war should be deferred, it seems probable that a normal revival of world trade will deprive the Labour Party of the economic argument that was its second strongest battle-cry. Either way, there seems likely to be a still further weakening of an Opposition which has not yet recovered from the blow it sustained in 1931.

That is a result which Conservative as well as Socialist Englishmen contemplate with some anxiety. For the virtual death of one of the chief components of a two-party system would offer an opportunity they do not deserve both to the Communists subsidised by a Muscovite Third International and to the Fascists subsidised by British manufacturers. Communism and Fascism alike are at the moment in the nature of comic opera movements in Britain. Mr. Harry Politt commands good-humoured sym-

pathy, and little more; Sir Oswald Mosley some grudging admiration for his intelligence, and little respect. But we are near enough to Continental revolutions to remember how an accident, well exploited, can put an apparently inconsiderable minority into power; and we have seen, in recent Continental revolutions, how easily power can be used with every semblance of national constitutionality to party ends.

As for the repercussions of British rearmament on Continental policy, that—whether inevitable or not—arouses the kind of fear which causes the Englishman to think not of war avoided, but of war deferred; if not of "war before Christmas" then of "war before 1950". In the negative way at any rate, he believes that Britain has come nearer than any other nation to fulfilling the obligation of universal disarmament that was laid on the world by the League of Nations Covenant and the Versailles Treaty of which the Covenant is a part. If Britain is to go the way of armament too, he sees small hope indeed of an armaments race being stopped.

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Yet of that, too, it is difficult to take serious account in the Indian Summer of this apparently fortunate isle. The Trades Union Congress, met to discuss League sanctions and British plans of economic reconstruction, meets neither in the smoky Black Country nor in the smokeless Tyneside, but in Margate by the sea. The man-in-the-street—that abstraction more certainly exists in England than did Rousseau's "natural man" in his native Switzerland or his adopted France—is likewise for the moment beside the seaside, in spirit or in the flesh. His thoughts are of piers and pierrots, of the All Blacks just arrived from New Zealand for a Rugby football tour, of the other kind of football that has just begun, of a Cowes Week that has just passed. His newspaper, with an uncanny knack of judging his interests to the inch of space, treats these things as of at least equal importance with the more sinister happenings of the world outside. It would be comforting to be able to think that the newspaper and the man-in-the-street were both right.