Nation

Oct 7

NATION—FIRST LETTER.

PEACE AND THE ENTENTE CORDIALE.

To the Editor of THE NATION.

SIR,—What do we mean by the *Entente Cordiale?* Is it a mere vague assurance of goodwill, such as a sensible and appreciative people should have with all its free neighbours; or is it a promise definitely registered, or ambiguously held out, that we English will back France in quarrels which do not concern us? This apparently insoluble question has kept recurring to me during these ten days in the French provinces, suggested by the amazing willingness for war, manifested by such of my French friends as I have happened to meet or to hear from during the Morocco discussion. These French friends of mine are *Intellectuals*, Liberals, old Dreyfusard stalwarts. When I saw them last they were passionate lovers of peace, anti-nationalists, anti-militarists, Goethians, Nietzschians, Wagnerians—in short, the type of that Oliver whom the greatest of French, and perhaps of all recent novels has shown us as the Jonathan of the German composer Jean Christophe. These same people I now find oddly changed. the habitual formulæ about peace and progress still on their lips, but in every allusion, every tone of voice, and every glance the willingness, the barely repressed longing for war. One who has himself written a splendid tribute to German genius now writes me these astounding words: "Germany wants to make us her vassals, not in politics only, *but in art, in literature, and in science.*" Another, the recent host of German writers, pointed to the poplared meadows around, and suddenly remarked: "You would not have these places given over to German junkers, would you?" I pretended not to understand (as I have done all along this time), and laughingly bid him beware of the tyrants, reactionary or syndicalist, whom France herself may be preparing for her use. But my heart was in reality very heavy, and when we took leave of one another, just as the post had brought tidings of some better agreements between Paris and Berlin, I saw and felt quite plainly that my words of congratulation on the escaped danger found no real echo in my friend, and that I was leaving him behind, and leaving hundreds like him, muttering the words he had spoken before the reassuring newspaper had arrived: "We

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had taken all our measures; if it does not come now, it will come in spring."

Now, why should a war between France and Germany come now or next spring more than at any other moment in these forty years which have elapsed since Germany, so often mutilated, and so continually threatened with mutilation by the Louis XIV., and Napoleon, the "Nous l'avons eu votre Rhin Allemand" habits of France, had imitated the lamentable example, and mutilated France in her turn? Why have the two-score years, the two generations, of wisdom and patience suddenly come to an end over a supposed national affront, which is of the same sort as that of Fashoda?

Surely if war between France and Germany come now, "or in the spring," we English, even we absent-minded English Liberals, will be largely responsible. I will not speak of those short-sighted English jingoes who may think it smart policy to egg on an excitable, sentimental France against a Germany whose chief offence is that we will not recognise her inevitable and legitimate economical expansion. And here comes in my question about the *Entente Cordiale*, and its unexplained, ambiguous, misleading, mischievous meaning. If England intended to pledge herself to fight for France whenever France got tired of peace, surely we English people ought to have been told of so monstrous an agreement and been given an opportunity of refusing to make it. If, as is more probable, no such agreement was ever come to, then surely all France ought to have fair warning that we are not going to espouse other folks' quarrels. Surely, in this case, we ought not, from indifference or self-seekingness, to allow a people towards whom we are supposed to feel *cordially* to rush to their ruin perhaps, or, at all events, to rush into becoming a danger to all civilisation and progress. Such using of one nation against another is old-fashioned and short-sighted, let alone ungenerous, policy, of the sort whose "divide and govern" has made England hated and suspected in the past. It leaves us open to the daily German reproach that our envy is surrounding a competitor who ought to be an equal with difficulties and disadvantages. And, at the same time, unless we allow ourselves to be dragged into war because we have fomented it by our misleading promises, we shall deserve even more the old reproach of "perfidy" from our French friends for allowing them to imagine that they can get their Revanche with our help.

Surely all this is, to say the least of it, rather humiliating to one's English sense of fair play; and surely this would be the moment—without letting ill-will and warlike preparations increase on both sides—when English Radicals ought to find out and so let their French neighbours know what is exactly meant by this mealy-mouthed ambiguity called the *Entente Cordiale*, and to begin ridding the world of such secret alliances, dual or triple, which have become a dangerous anachronism in these days of telegraphs and telephones, and, alas! of sensational and eavesdropping journalism.

Will you, Mr. Editor, lay these traveller's reflections before our Radical friends?—Yours, &c.,

VERNON LEE.

Autun, September 27.

Letters to the Editor.

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