

The Prospects of an Irish Peace

A suspension of hostilities between the Crown and the Republican forces has been the first happy result of the Mansion House Conference last week to which General Macready was called in (writes an Irish correspondent to the *Nation* and the *Athenaeum*, for July 16). The terms of the truce are wide and honorable, and this will assist the conversations now entered upon. Mr. de Valera then left for London to discuss "the basis of a conference," accompanied by Messrs. Arthur Griffith, Austin Stack, and Robert Barton. Before his departure he stated the spirit in which these negotiations are taken up. It accurately reflects the mind and desires of the country, and its deprecation of undue optimism, and its appeal for fortitude and equanimity, will not fall on deaf ears.

"In the negotiations," he writes, "now initiated your representatives will do their utmost to secure a just and peaceful termination of this struggle, but history, particularly our own history, and the character of the issue to be decided are a warning against undue confidence."

The character of the issue to be decided is as much a warning against precipitate forecasts as against "undue confidence." Because Mr. de Valera and an authoritative delegation are discussing the basis of a conference the deduction has been drawn that Sinn Fein must have modified its claim for Irish independence. Speculation has ranged between (1) the pure Republican idea; (2) a neutralised, guaranteed State, with powers limited by some equivalent of a Monroe doctrine, and again (3) between such a State and the existing Dominion status. Into such speculations I do not propose to enter. It is safer to go back to some observations of Mr. de Valera published last spring in the *Manchester Guardian*. He there suggested the proper approach to peace to lie in (a) the acknowledgement of Ireland's right to independence as a preliminary, for England's sake as well as for Ireland's: for this is necessary if any subsequent agreement is not to be vitiated by duress; (b) in then negotiating such a partnership or alliance as the common interests of both islands may suggest—common interests which the Irish people have freely admitted. As to Dominion Home Rule he finds it, like Lord Derby, to be a phrase of indefinite meaning. But he has noted Mr. Bonar Law's definition of essence to the House of Commons in March, 1920, as including the control of a Dominion's whole destinies, the right to secede, to control its armed forces, to determine the amount of its imperial contribution, and to decide questions of neutrality. In choosing such a status, in revising or accepting its proposal, General Smuts might well argue that South Africa did not abandon, but rather exercised, a sovereign right.

This is the central issue to be decided. It may be left at that, recalling Mr. de Valera's words that "to end the centuries of conflict between the people of these two islands and to establish relations of neighborly harmony is the genuine desire of the Irish people."

There is a general desire in Ireland for honorable peace and Irish union. This is a natural birth. The military issue has not been decided. The Republican forces are in a state of high efficiency; but, on the other hand, no one pretends that the Crown is at the end of its military resources. Only it must be remembered that the civil administration of the country has passed out of English control, and it is not certain that it can be restored, even if England were in a position to push through an intensified war. Three Acts of Parliament of the first importance have been torn up in Ireland—the Home Rule Act of 1914, the Military Service Act, and the Government of Ireland Act, 1920. In another field the British Government can only collect or hold a fraction of its taxes, great Government departments, like the Local Government Board, have been put clean out of action, and the Lord Chief Justice is obliged in the present month to go the Munster Circuit in a torpedo boat destroyer. All this follows and, if there is no peace, will continue because England must make war, not merely upon an army but upon a people. It is growing more difficult to make war upon a people. An accommodation with Sinn Fein will pay England.

Meanwhile, the desire for Irish unity introduces the

Ulster difficulty. Where that difficulty is not of English creation and control it is susceptible of friendly arrangement in Ireland. But in its political character, as in its ugliest phases, it still remains an English creation. We are accustomed to ridicule and revile such obsolete bigotries, but, in fact, the ignorant Belfast mob is not wholly or even mainly to blame. These feuds were maintained, not in our interest, but in that of the British Government. The function of Dublin Castle has been to keep the fight going: Protestant and Catholic enclaves must be built up at all costs. Now Sinn Fein will have none of these enclaves, and rejects the diplomacy of the Thirty Years' War. Its Ulster policy is fairly plain. Ulster asks for autonomy. Sinn Fein is anxious to concede it in just measure, but not so as to break up the essential unity of Ireland. It is not opposed to a Parliament in Belfast: only it prefers to level up the other provinces to the level of Ulster autonomy rather than depreciate Ulster. This, we gather, is implicit in Mr. de Valera's approval in the interview already referred to, of the general idea of a federal Ireland, and Professor O'Rahilly's scheme of devolution. Ulster can certainly control its own affairs, and also have a fair voice in the business of Ireland. But vetoes and artificial ascendancies belong to a bygone age.

There are three classes in the Belfast majority: the declining landowning aristocracy, Big Business, and the Orange mob. In recent years the second class supplied the programme, and the leaders did the rest. It added Southern *condottieri* like Lord Carson, whose action it controlled in the fashion of Venetian oligarchs. Lord Londonderry, representing the first-class, is in favor of an accommodation for Ireland. Sir James Craig may well be similarly disposed. But having been vehemently reproved for meeting Mr. de Valera without consulting his masters, he will not lightly offend again. The third class is powerless by itself. It is not a true democracy, and can throw up leaders no higher than the Custom House steps. Big Business, chastened by trade depression and the boycott, and wholly dependent on the Empire, holds the key. It probably entertains a higher opinion of the practical business capacity of the South than it once had. But it still, no doubt, has real apprehensions, which must be stated clearly and, once stated, must be fairly met. Its interests demand free trade; an agreement on this point is quite feasible. If it has a soul which has cultural misgivings, these too should and can be reassured. But it is plain from imperial considerations that Ulster's purely negative attitude can no longer be maintained, and that Belfast cannot block a decision on the wide imperial and international issues which have produced Mr. Lloyd George's invitation to Sinn Fein.

Christ has not complained about the lips being far from Him, but of the heart being far from Him. If prayer is begun with the earnest desire to please God, the mere wandering of the thought from the words or acts will not make them insincere. To have insincerity the wish itself must wander; the desire of pleasing God must be given up. If the thought flies off in any direction the words will still ring true; the acts will not be mere acting as long as the heart turns to God.

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