

France and England

(Continued from page 7.)

The feuds between the two countries have indeed been numberless—we think of Crecy and Agincourt, of Joan of Arc, of Blenheim and Fontenoy, of Trafalgar and Waterloo. But excepting these as bygones, the records of the last two decades of the nineteenth century alone were filled with one quarrel after another, for the most part due to the clashing of incompatible colonial ambitions.

The climax was reached when in 1898 Kitchener, after his victory at Omdurman, steamed up the Nile, only to find his progress barred by Marchant, who had crossed the African Continent from the Atlantic, and had hoisted the

flag of France at Fashoda. The universal outburst of wrath in England, and the rough uncompromising tone adopted by both Government and people, might well have made war inevitable if France had not backed down completely, although with dignity.

Such a public humiliation is not easily forgotten, and it is no wonder that for a space Britain displaced Germany as the chief object of French hatred. Germans were more welcome than British at the Paris exhibition in 1900; and when during the Boer War news came of British reverses, Frenchmen high and low jeered to their heart's content. The British Foreign Office actually sought repeatedly between 1899 and 1901 for a German alliance or at least a binding agreement of some kind.

But there were a few rare spirits, in France as in England, who looked and worked for happier relations. Soon

after the failure of the British Government's overtures to Germany, it was questioned by the French as to whether it was disposed to enter into negotiations aiming at a broad settlement of troubles between them. It is curious that Egypt and Morocco, the two most important matters, were disposed of very easily. It is remarkable, too, that the small minority who had the courage of their convictions, and were earnestly seeking a reconciliation, should find such rapid support in public opinion. Egypt and Morocco were settled on the old principle of give and take. And the old bone of contention of the French shore rights in Newfoundland was amicably settled by a cash payment.

Edward the Peacemaker.

TO adjust the diplomatic situation wary walking was necessary. A false step might easily provoke disaster. King Edward VII took, on his own initiative, the courageous and striking step of visiting Paris in 1903. As Prince of Wales he had been well known and popular there. French politeness accorded the King a reception which, if not enthusiastic, was at least courteous, and the ice was broken. Out of that came President Loubet's return visit, and the Anglo-French agreement of 1904.

The agreement was enthusiastically received in both countries. Each was glad to clear away obstacles to better relations, and neither felt inclined to haggle over technical terms.

The meaning of the change is fairly clear. France decided that it was hopeless for her to attempt to rival at the same time England on the sea and Germany on the land, and she must make her choice. Conversely, England, true to an age-long consciousness of the balance of power, realised that France was not to be feared, but that German competition at very turn threatened Britain industrially, commercially, and even in that command of the sea which she held to be essential to the feeding of her own people, and to the existence of her Empire.

So much for the surface explanation. There were unconscious motives, too, rather more difficult to fathom. It is a truism to remark that the French and the English are radically dissimilar in many ways, indeed both are probably nearer to the Germans than to each other.

The attitude of millions of British for generations was one of scorn for the French and all that was theirs: that of the French, worsted in many wars, was marked by positive hatred, mingled with contempt for a folk whom they regarded as gross and stupid. Yet the Frenchman did recognise in a lurking way that there was something in the English achievement that extorted admiration; and the Englishmen, despite a superiority complex (which in some ways is not so marked at present), has many times yielded to the charm of French culture, and to the marvellous products of the French mind. After all, granting that the twain are not alike and cannot be expected to see many things in the same light, may they not for that very reason serve as a better complement to one another, and perhaps live in truer harmony on that account?

I shall pass over the years intervening until the war, merely remarking that the Entente was well maintained, the foreign policy of the two nations was similar, they took the same stand

in international relations, and this intimacy was also strengthened by meetings of military and naval experts to agree on principles of joint action should ever the need arise.

War Years.

WHEN the crisis of 1914 set the world on edge, despite the fact that there was really much more common interest as well as sympathy between the English and French than between the French and Russians, there was actually no Anglo-French alliance, similar to the Anglo-Russian one. Consequently, when France, as she was pledged to do, took the Russian side, when Germany declared war, she was, until the last moment, in desperate uncertainty as to whether she could rely on English help.

Sir Edward Grey, who believed that Britain was morally committed, pointed out again and again that she was bound by no express promise. If, indeed, the Germans had avoided taking the offensive in the West, or at least respected the neutrality of Belgium, England might well have remained neutral, at least for a time. Only after the appeal of King Albert, when it was clear that the violation of neutral territory had not taken place with Belgian connivance, did the British Cabinet commit itself, and even then the last word was reserved to Parliament.

The prolonged tragedy of the World War led to five years of the most intimate association between the English and the French; to the actual personal contact of millions of people belonging to the two nations. It would be asking too much of Governments or individuals to expect that they should invariably see eye to eye under such circumstances. Rather, the wonder is, not that faults, suspicions, jealousies, and the thousand and one ills the flesh is heir to were in evidence, but that the relations remained so good as they did to the end.

Post-War Differences.

WHEN the gigantic combat was over, the triumphant Allies were soon to discover how widely their views differed. Both had suffered terribly, both could look back on their achievements with justifiable pride, and both felt justified in demanding reparation as well as security for the future. But there the resemblance ceases.

England had by now attained practically all her war objects. The German Navy was to be no more a menace; German commerce was prostrate; and the mercantile fleet, like the colonies of the former empire, in the hands of the conquerors, who proposed to keep them. For Britain, whose territory had not been invaded, it was not difficult to forgive and forget, especially as it soon became evident that for the reconstitution of her own trade and industry, the peace, prosperity and purchasing power of her neighbours was infinitely more important than any money payment by reparations.

France wanted more. The recovery of Alsace-Lorraine was not enough to make up for the actual war losses from the flower of her population. Then there was the age-old "damnosa hereditas" of the Rhine frontier. So she asked first for security from another invasion along this frontier in the

(Concluded on page 28.)

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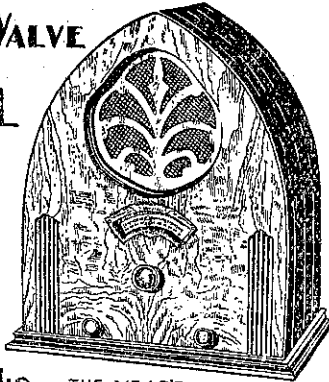
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