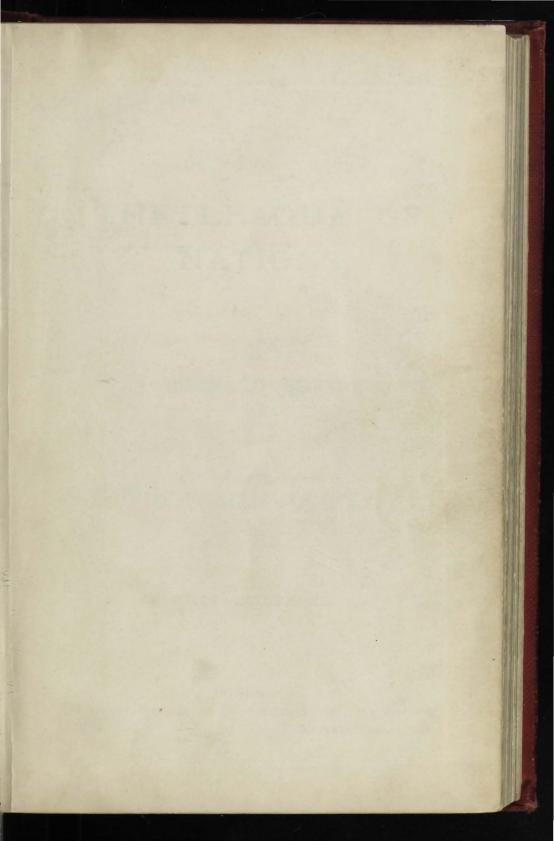
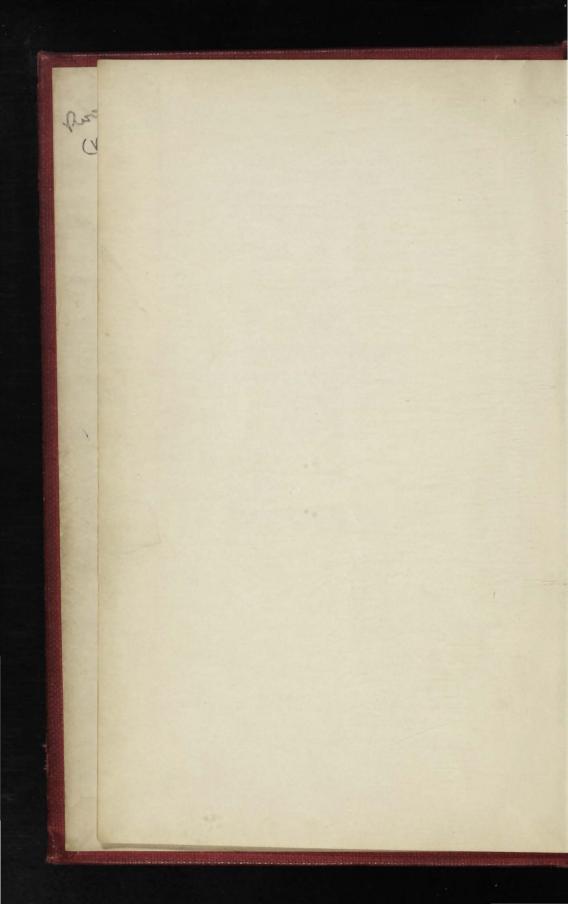


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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

BY

BERNARD SHAW

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The League of Nations*

By BERNARD SHAW

WHEN my presence at Geneva during the annual Assembly of the League of Nations in 1928 was mentioned in the Press, I received several letters, of which the following is a fair sample:—

I cannot help being rather surprised and shocked to read that you "sit on the bench of Mockers and Hypocrites."... In this country every little child knows that the League of Nations is only a bluff and nothing but an instrument for the policy of the Allied Forces.... I really am at a loss to understand why you don't feel your responsibility as a Mental Tutor of the World, when taking such a step as taking part in the comedy of Geneva, which is a tragedy for every country that does not find mercy in the eyes of the world's High Finance.

This letter is not a statesman's utterance. It is a crude expression of the popular impatience which sees no more in the League than an instrument for the instantaneous extirpation of war, and is ready to throw it on the scrap-heap the moment it becomes clear that no such operation is possible, and that the big Powers have not, and never have had, any intention of relinquishing any jot of their sovereignty, or depending on any sort of strength and security other than military. Roughly and generally it is a fact that the pacifist oratory at the Assembly is Christmas card platitude at best and humbug at worst. The permanent departments of the League have to fight hard to defeat the frequent attempts to sabotage it by the big Powers through their deciduous members.

Whilst I was there the Press was keeping the public amused, not to say gulled, by gossip about the Assembly meetings, at which nothing happens but pious speeches which might have been delivered fifty years ago. It was so impossible to listen to them, or to keep awake during the subsequent inevitable translations, that the audience had to be kept in its place by a regulation, physically enforced, that no visitor should be allowed to leave the hall except during the five minutes set apart for that purpose between speech and translation. Fortunately, the young ladies of the Secretariat, who have plenty of dramatic sense, arrange the platform in such a way that the president, the speakers, and the bureau are packed low down before a broad tableau curtain which, being in three pieces, provides most effective dramatic entrances right and

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left of the centre. When a young lady secretary has a new dress, or for any other reason feels that she is looking her best, she waits until the speaker—possibly a Chinese gentleman carefully plodding through a paper written in his best French—has reduced half the public galleries to listless distraction and the other half to stertorous slumber. Then she suddenly, but gracefully, snatches the curtains apart and stands revealed, a captivating mannequin, whilst she pretends to look round with a pair of sparkling eyes for her principal on the bureau. The effect is electric: the audience wakes up and passes with a flash from listless desperation to tense fascination, to the great encouragement of the speaker, who, with his back to the vision beautiful, believes he has won over the meeting at last.

But for these vamping episodes, and such occasional sensations as the possibility of a great platform artist like M. Briand intervening and shaking the League to its foundations by getting his feet on the ground with an allusion to real things as they really are, nobody would face the task of acting as spectator, least of all in the distinguished visitors' gallery, in which there is little distinction and absolutely no ventilation. A very able administrative official, whose heart and soul are in the League, told me that he has been at Geneva eight

years, and never attended an Assembly meeting yet.

Whilst this was going on at the Victoria Hotel, and being daily foisted on the public as the real thing, a battle royal, on the upshot of which the very existence of the League as an effective international organ depended, was raging at the other side of the lake in the National Hotel, between Sir Eric Drummond, the permanent British Secretary-General appointed by the Treaty, and Mr. Locker-Lampson, an Assembly member sent for the month by the British Conservative Cabinet. These deciduous members arrive mostly in scandalous ignorance of the obligations already contracted by their Governments to the permanent governing bodies of the League. As party men they are at the opposite pole to the "good Europeans" of Geneva. As patriots they conceive themselves to be advocates of British national interests (not to say nationalist spies in the internationalist camp), and expect to be supported devotedly by their distinguished fellow-countrymen on the permanent They are rudely undeceived the moment they begin their crude attempts at sabotage.

Thus the British Jingo Imperialist finds himself writhing in the grip of Sir Eric Drummond whilst the French Poincarist-Militarist takes the full count in the first round from M. Albert Thomas. In 1028. Mr. Locker-Lampson, a novice in Geneva like myself, had to deal with the League's Budget, and tried starvation tactics. Parading the poverty of England, he opposed every increase in the necessarily growing estimates.

The difference at stake to his country was about £4,000! When he was informed that the British representative on the governing body of the International Labor Office had, with tull instructions from his Government, pledged the British realm to the increases, he desperately declared that the British Government could not be bound by the action of its own instructed representative at the International Labor Office. He was backed by the countries which were losing no opportunity to reduce the League to impotence, and, in particular, to cripple the Labor Office. How could a gentleman and a Conservative tolerate a Labor Office? What has Labor to do

with Diplomacy?

His efforts were as unsuccessful as they were unedifying. Sir Eric jumped on him with all the weight of his authority and his splendid record as the first creator of the international staff. M. Albert Thomas, director of the International Labor Office, a first-rate administrator and a devastating debater, wiped the floor with what Sir Eric had left, all the more effectively because he represented France, the most bellicose of the Powers, but also presumably the poorest, as she had just repudiated 80 per cent. of her national debt, and had therefore the best excuse for meanness. In the end Sir Eric, M. Thomas, and the League won with a completeness that made their victory a disgrace to the vanquished; but the public outside Geneva, gaping at the Assembly camouflage, missed it all. Judging the League, like my vituperative correspondent, by the Assembly, the more hardheaded of our taxpayers see nothing in it but a futile hypocrisy, and cannot understand why they should be mulcted to support it. And they are so ignorant of its constitution that a victory by Sir Eric Drummond would be taken by them, if it ever came to their knowledge, as a British victory to be credited to the British Government.

This situation, in which the permanent nominees of the constituent governments are thrown into resolute opposition to their deciduous representatives, is chronic at Geneva. One of M. Albert Thomas' greatest victories there was won over the French Government when he defeated its attempt to exclude agricultural workers from the scope of the Labor Office on the ground that they are not "industrials." The really great thing that is happening at Geneva is the growth of a genuinely international public service, the chiefs of which are ministers in a coalition which is, in effect, an incipient international Government. In the atmosphere of Geneva patriotism perishes: a patriot there is simply a spy who cannot be shot. Even Sir Austen Chamberlain, with his naïve assurances that he is an Englishman first and last, and that the British Empire comes before everything with him, must be aware by this

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time that in saying this he has only exhilarated the young lions of the secretariat by a standing joke so outrageous that only a man with a single eyeglass could have got away with it.

I am fully aware of the tendency, lately exposed by Señor Madariaga in the columns of The Times, to fill the posts in the secretariat as well as the benches of the Assembly by diplomats sent to uphold the national interests of their country contra mundum, and thus to undo the excellent beginning made by Sir Eric Drummond in building up his staff of Internationalists from the ground. The system of appointment, which, being frank jobbery, is the best of all systems in good hands and the worst in bad, makes such a substitution feasible enough. Fortunately, diplomats have to be bred in-and-in in Foreign Offices and Embassies: ventilation is fatal to them. Now Geneva is a veritable temple of the winds. I will not say that the sort of young gentleman who, being paid to allow his mind to play on the problems of European history with a view to inventing foreign policies, does, in fact, allow it to play on the adventures of ambassadors and their valets with a view to inventing funny stories and making himself socially agreeable (a praiseworthy ambition), is not to be met with in Geneva; but he is an anachronism there, and, being trained to keep himself susceptible to varying social influences and conceptions of good form, soon suffers a Lake change, if not into something rich and strange, at least into an anecdotist whose subjects are the relations between the League's constituent States to one another instead of the relations between the kitchens and drawing-rooms at the Embassies.

In short, the League is a school for the new international statesmanship as against the old Foreign Office diplomacy. This appears more clearly on the spot than at home, where the League is thought of as a single institution under a single roof. In Geneva it is seen as three institutions in three separate and not even adjacent buildings. Two of them are only converted hotels, the quondam Victoria Hotel housing the Assembly or Hot Air Exchange, which I have already described, and the quondam National Hotel, now the Secretariat or Palace of the Nations, where Sir Eric Drummond presides over an international civil service staffed with a free variety of the upper division Whitehall type. In contrast to these survivals is the International Labor Office building, brand-new, designed ad hoc, a hive, a Charterhouse, with labor glorified in muscular statues and splendid stained glass windows designed in the latest manner of half-human, half-Robotesque drawing, and with every board room panelled and furnished and chandeliered with the gift of some State doing its artistic best, and succeeding to an extraordinary degree

in avoiding trade commonplaces and achieving distinction without grotesqueness. I have never been in a modern business building more handsomely equipped. Here M. Albert Thomas reigns, not as a king, which would immediately suggest a French king, but as a Pope; for this is the true International of which Moscow only dreams; and M. Thomas, though a Frenchman to the last hair of his black beard, and a meridional at that, is the most genuinely Catholic potentate in the world. And here the air is quite fresh: no flavor of Whitehall leather and prunella can be sniffed anywhere. These neo-Carthusians are of a new order, in whose eyes the agreeable gentlemen who have been shoved into the hotel down the road with Sir Eric are the merest relics of a species already extinct, though too far behind the time to know that it is dead. Nevertheless, the neo-Carthusians know the value of those happy accidents of the old order who run the commissions at the Secretariat, and whose work necessarily overlaps their own at many points. And the Secretariat, though not always quite clear as to why this Labor Office is there or what it is for*, and only dimly and rather sceptically conscious of the new proletarian politics (not having found any mention of them in Thucydides, Grote,

^{*}The Secretariat has some excuse for its bewilderment on this point. There is not on the face of it any reason why there should be two estates of the international realm at Geneva instead of one. The explanation is so absurd that nobody guesses it. When President Wilson was planning the League he asked Mr. Gompertz what Labor expected from the League. (Mr. Gompertz was the secretary to the American Federation of Labor and therefore the figure-head of American Trade Unionism.) Mr. Gompertz could think of nothing more definite to say than that labor must not be bought and sold as a commodity in the markets of the millenium at which the League aimed. As Mr. Gompertz opposes Socialism strenuously in the interest of the conservative Trade Unionism which confines itself to the organization of the sale of labor as a commodity in the market to-day, he was evidently in the position of Balaam, blessing where he intended to curse. However, there was nothing for it but to give Mr. Gompertz a pledge that his stipulation should have due consideration; and it was in fulfilment of this pledge that the Labor Office was established as part of the constitution of the League. A less lucid transaction can hardly be imagined; but the Labor Office is none the less an invaluable asset of the proletarian cause. That it is a nuisance and a mistake from the capitalist point of view makes it necessary for Fabians and other sympathizers with public international regulation of labor to be on their guard against possible attempts to merge it in the Secretariat in the name of Unification, or some such pious word. The effect of unification would depend on whether the constitution of the unified body would be that of the Labor Office, which is modern and fairly proof against class manipulation, or that of the Secretariat, which makes such manipulation dangerously easy. As the Labor Office and its friends are quite willing to let the Secretariat die a natural death, it may safely be assumed for the present that no proposal affecting the independ

and Macaulay) finds that M. Thomas is a tower of strength to it when the League's existence is threatened by the big

Powers whose moral standards it is forcing up.

An example will illustrate this moral pressure, and answer. the question: "What do all these people do besides pretending that the League can prevent war?" Take the case of the mandates. The Powers have not only their own dominions to govern, but countries which are placed under their tutelage until the inhabitants are able to govern themselves. Let us suppose that Ruritania is given a mandate to govern Lilliput provisionally for Lilliput's good. Ruritania, neither knowing nor caring what a mandate means, but seeing a chance of extending its territory, grabs Lilliput eagerly, and proceeds to exercise all the irresponsible powers of a sovereign conqueror there without regard to the native point of view. This goes on until the representative of Ruritania at Geneva is called on to give an account of Ruritania's stewardship. The representative has a very natural impulse to say haughtily: "Ask no questions and you will be told no lies"; but he finds that this is out of order, as a mandate is, after all, a mandate. Being unable to give answers which are at once satisfactory and truthful, he does what every gentleman does for the credit of his country: that is, lies like a Pauline Cretan. But, being a gentleman, he does not enjoy this method of saving face. When he goes back to Ruritania, he angrily asks what on earth the officials meant by putting him into such a fix, and insists that it shall not occur again, as it must unless the government of Lilliput is brought up to mandate level. This may not be immediately possible; but at all events enough gets done to enable the League to be faced next year with no more than a reasonable resort to prevarication.

The Howard Society, heartbroken by the atrocities to which not only convicted felons but untried prisoners are subject in many lands, is striving for a humane international agreement in the matter. If the League of Nations did not exist, such an object would be unattainable. Without the Labor Office an international agreement by the nations not to compete industrially by sweating their workers would be equally impossible. As it is, there is an agreement limiting the permissible duration of the working day which England is shirking, but which Geneva will shame her into presently: an important psychological operation which would not be practicable without the Labor Office. Even were there no such question as that of war and peace, the League would be able to justify its existence ten times over: indeed this question is now rather the main drawback to the League than its raison d'être. Take into account the incipient international court of

justice at The Hague, with the body of international law which will grow from it, and the case for maintaining the League becomes irresistible, and the attempts to starve it disgracefully stupid, even if the Kellogg Pact be nothing but humbug. stress this because, as a matter of fact, Mr. Kellogg was duped into taking a step backward towards war under the impression that he was driving the Powers to make a giant stride towards peace. By the original covenant of the League, the Powers are bound not to make war until they have first submitted their case to the League: that is, without a considerable delay. Since then the big fighting Powers have been trying to extricate themselves from this obligation and be once more free to make war without notice whenever they want to. Their first success in this direction was the Locarno agreement, the second the Kellogg Pact. Both of them established conditions under which the covenant might be violated; and the Kellogg Pact put the finishing touch by providing that the Powers might go to war at any time "in self-defence." What this means is plain in the light of the fact that the German attack in 1914 was, perhaps, the most complete technical case of self-defence in military history, Germany's avowed enemy, Russia, having mobilized against her. But, indeed, since such excuses for war became conventional there has never been a war which lacked them. Of all the wars which Commander Kenworthy, in his significant book, "Will Civilisation Crash?" has shewn to be on the diplomatic cards, including, especially, a war between the British Empire and the United States, there is not one that could not be, and, if it breaks out, will not be, represented as a war of self-defence on both sides. Mr. Kellogg had better have privileged wars of aggrandisement or revenge, because any Power claiming the privilege would at least have been in an indefensible moral position. As it is, the League must steadfastly ignore all the much-advertised proceedings at Locarno and Paris exactly as it was itself ignored on both occasions, and insist on the Covenant as still binding.

But the Pact made the pacifist ice so thin in 1928 that the Assembly skaters hardly dared to move on it; and this was why M. Briand made such a sensation when he cut a figure or two on the outside edge as if there were nothing the matter. The panic-stricken journalists accused him of all sorts of malicious intentions; but he really said only two things, both of which needed saying. The first was that Germany's pose as a disarmed State was only a reductio ad absurdum of disarmament, as Germany, with her convertible commercial aircraft, was just as able as any of the Allies to make the only sort of surprise attack that is now really dreaded. The second was that the next war may not be a war of conquest or

self-defence or revenge, but a crusade: a crusade for Internationalism against Nationalism and Imperialism, for Socialism against Capitalism, for Bolshevism against Liberal democracy: in short, a war for ideals, in which case the present alliance between M. Briand and M. Poincaré would hardly hold. M. Briand did not give these instances. I am crossing his t's and dotting his i's very freely; but that is what it came to. If it were not for such occasional interventions as this of M. Briand, the Assembly might be dismissed as mere windowdressing in an otherwise empty shop. But window-dressing has its importance. If the big Powers neglect it as part of their habit of ignoring it and making pacts and "naval arrangements" and the like behind its back whenever they are really interested, and slighting it when they are not, whilst at the same time the little States are clinging to it and sending the best men they can spare to represent them at it, it may end in the League being dominated at some important crisis by the superior ability of the envoy of some hardly perceptible South American Republic, and the big Powers being reduced to insignificance by the incapacity for international affairs of second-rate party careerists who have no business to be at Geneva at all. The Genevan prestige of England stood high in the days when the Labor Government sent Ramsay Mac-Donald and Arthur Henderson to discuss the protocol. 1928 we had novices with absurd instructions writhing helplessly in the grip, not only of first-rate officials who are also in effect ministers, but of representatives of baby States whose armaments, when they have any, are comparatively negligible.

Even if the Cabinets of the big Powers are still so shortsighted and narrow-minded as to wish to reduce the League to insignificance, they will certainly not do it by sending half-tried lightweights there when the smaller States are sending their heaviest champions. Neither, however, must they send what are called representative persons. M. Briand never received a deeper insult than when the French Press, imagining that he had merely made a vulgar attack on the Germans, congratulated him on having been the spokesman of French opinion. His real achievement was to have held the fort for sane internationalism for some years in the teeth of Poincarism. Geneva is not the place for the man in the street. The street is full of persons with parochial minds: ingo minds, imperial minds, foreigner-hating minds, senselessly pugnacious minds, and senselessly terrified minds. League representing such people would wreck civilization in ten vears if they could by any miracle be induced to combine against it. Our salvation in these days depends on the small and unrepresentative percentage of persons who can see further

than the end of their noses; and of such must the League be

if its enormous potential values are to be realized.

The League is not, as many of its friends fear, in any danger of dissolution. Its roots had struck deep before it appeared above ground in 1919; and in spite of its apparent impotence in the matter of war and peace all the serious statesmen of the big Powers now know that they cannot do without it. It may be said of it, as Voltaire and Robespierre said of God, that if there were no League, it would be necessary to invent one. But it may not always be the League, one and indivisible. Already there are two Leagues of Nations: one so-called at Geneva, and the other called the United States of America. The Geneva League is not psychologically homogeneous; and in 1928 it received an alarming shock in consequence. The most considerable British statesman at Geneva then was Lord Lytton, who was representing, not the British Western, but the British Eastern Empire. And his contribution to the proceedings of the Assembly shewed how very unreal a League of Nations—even one which virtually comprises two great Leagues stretching from the Urals to the Rockies—may become east of Suez.

Speaking as the member for India, Lord Lytton said that the Geneva League was not worth to India what it was costing her. Then he struck at the Achilles heel of the League. He reminded the Assembly that the decisions of the League must be unanimous, and left it to infer that if its proceedings continued to lack all interest for India, no more unanimous decisions would be forthcoming. And at that he left it.

Now it is clear that if Asia uses the League to deadlock Europe and America, Europe and America must admit that East and West cannot work in double harness, and that the East must have Leagues of its own, working with Geneva just as America does. This seems likely, now that Lord Lytton has fired his warning maroon, to be the first fission; but it may not be the only one; for psychological homogeneity is strained at Geneva longitudinally as well as latitudinally. The Nordic race beloved of North American and German "blonde beasts" may be a romantic fiction; but when we speak of a Nordic temperament and a Latin temperament we are indicating facts which distinguish the north from the south of Europe as they distinguish the north from the south of America; and these facts may deadlock or greatly hamper Geneva until it recognises that the Federation of the World will come before the Parliament of Man, which can hardly be realized until Man becomes a much less miscellaneous lot than he is at present.

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