

FLIGHT

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Mediterranean Amity

THE signing of an agreement between Britain and Italy on the situation in the Mediterranean is a further step towards the preservation of European peace. It must also be a great relief to the naval and air staffs of both countries. Fraught with danger as is the attitude of Italy (as well as Germany) towards the struggle in Spain, the Italian Government must in its serious moments be intensely anxious for peace. Victory in Ethiopia has brought to Italy great possibilities in the future, but it has also brought liabilities. The conquered country must still be occupied by an army, and the communications between this force and its homeland lie through the Suez Canal. It is the most fragile line of communications which could well be imagined, and if the worst came to the worst the few and not very adequate harbours in Italian East Africa would come under fire from air squadrons in Aden and British Somaliland, to say nothing of the British Fleet. The harbour of Massawa is of more vital importance to Italy than are any of the neighbouring British ports to the British Empire, and so Italy would stand to lose far more than she could possibly gain by a conflict with Britain. To both Powers the Suez Canal is of vital importance, but it is not too much to say that its blocking would be more immediately disastrous to Italy than it would be to the British Empire. Count Ciano, must, therefore, be well pleased with himself at having negotiated an agreement with Britain.

Welcome Relief

On the other hand, we British are intensely desirous of peace, not because we fear defeat if we were obliged to fight, but from an innate hatred of war as a disaster, and from an intense longing to pursue our steady progress towards economic prosperity and a happier and fuller life for our peoples. We continue to arm ourselves with all speed, having realised, what our rulers

ought never to have forgotten, the truth of the old maxim, *si vis pacem, para bellum*, and as each month shows us more formidable and less liable to fall victims to a sudden onslaught we breathe deeper sighs of relief. But tranquillity of mind was not possible so long as the Mediterranean was full of rancour. Unpleasant possibilities were discussed in the case of a victorious General Franco ceding some Spanish islands, either the Balearics or the Canaries, to Italy. In the hands of a hostile Italy either of those groups could have formed air bases which would have lain beside our sea routes to other British lands. The assurance that Italy is not seeking the acquisition of Spanish possessions is unquestionably a considerable relief.

Still Necessary

The removal of the chance of trouble to the dim future does not make it possible to neglect precautions. There can be no doubt that the measures already decided upon, such as the refortification of Malta and the establishment of Air Force and naval bases in Cyprus, will be carried out. The East African Colonies will still need air garrisons of some strength, and probably General Purpose squadrons will not be thought adequate for the purpose. It would not be surprising to see the single bomber squadron at Aden reinforced by one or more units. The R.A.F. strength in Egypt may be doubled under the new treaty, and this will probably be done. All these measures can now be carried out at leisure and can more or less wait until the Metropolitan Air Force has achieved its 1,750 first-line machines. This must lift a considerable load off the shoulders of Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Edward Ellington, the Chief of the Air Staff. Things are going very well under his direction, but any relief from anxiety must be most welcome.

The signing of this agreement is a very good start to the new year. If only the Spanish civil war could be brought to an end. . . .