

THE DECADENCE OF FRANCE.

[Louis Dumur, editor of *L'Européen*, a Paris international weekly, has put to a number of celebrities the question: "Is France in its decadence?" The replies, as we are informed, are to be published in his periodical during the month of April, and having procured through Mr. Theodore Stanton of Paris some advance copies of these most interesting documents, we here publish them in *The Open Court*. It is noteworthy that they are unanimous in taking the negative side of the issue.—Ed.]

CARMEN SYLVA.

(Her Majesty the Queen of Roumania, Bucharest.)

"DECADENT FRANCE" has produced Leconte de Lisle, Ernest Renan, Sully Prudhomme, François Copée, Anatole France, Melchior de Vogüe, Édmond Rostand, Léon Dierx, Heredia, Théophile Gautier, Flaubert, Pierre Loti, Richepin, Jean Aicard, Édmond Harancourt, Épraim Michael, Louis Bouilhet, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Cesar Franck, Saint-Saens, Fauré, Leon Moreau, etc., and further, the sages, the painters, the sculptors, whom we all know. I did not mention Rodenbach and Maeterlinck because they are not born in France. Nevertheless, they write French. Accordingly it is well if the decadent sky still shows such stars.

BJÖRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSSON.

The French people who are always brimfull of life, in decadence? Can one at all put such a question? I do not understand how any one can believe it seriously. The boulevards and their debauches are not France!

CAMILLE LEMONNIER.

(A famous Belgian novelist)

In order to judge of a people from the view-point of the proposed question it would be necessary to put aside all preconceived ideas which the politics, the morals, the literary condition of the

arts, as they appear in isolation in their immediate manifestations, would render predominant.

If one keeps in mind the prodigious moral influence which France has not ceased to exercise upon the world and the reaction which always follows the oscillations in which it seems temporarily deprived of the high-souled spirit which characterizes the nation, it would not be proper to compare her to nations threatened with imminent decadence.

JOSEPH REINACH.

(Ex-member of the French legislature, author of *L'histoire de l'affaire Dreyfus*.)

The day after Sedan, the Duke of Aumale wrote before Claretie: "What a shame! What pain! Such a beautiful year! Such a grand country! A country which had an '89, which had an 1830,—and after a pause,—which had an 1848!"

Further this country was the one which stood the siege of Paris and made the national defence. It has founded the Republic; it has made public instruction accessible to all classes, and has given a magnificent start to all works of charity and solidarity as well as to all public labors. It has fully paid the debt of its colonies. It has rendered inefficient the factions of dictatorship, of anarchy, and of reaction. It has again taken its rank in the European Concert. It has made of the Dreyfus affair, more a moral reform than a political one.

Another proof of vitality and wisdom: France has renounced her dreams of leadership, but she has not renounced the grand reparations which, as said Gambetta, "can be derived from her right."

MAX NORDAU.

Whether France is in decadence? The question itself seems blasphemous. There are in France social groups, or classes if you please, which obviously are decadent, and that is good for your country, but France herself is moving rapidly upward, and witnesses at present one of the most brilliant eras of her history.

Economically, France enjoys a marvelous prosperity. She has overcome by her energy and tenacity the terrible danger of phylloxera, a danger which would have utterly ruined and perhaps unretrievably, any other country; she has understood how to adapt herself to a protectionism which could have strangled her; she has reconciled by her good taste the patronage which she was about to

lose in her market; she has increased in a few years, the average production of wheat, from 14 to 18 hectolitres per hectar.*

Politically she has regained the prestige of her most glorious days. If one no longer fears her because she is known to be peaceful, one respects her, one admires her and solicits her favor. Russia is happy to have her as an ally. Italy and England seek her friendship. Spain is approaching her. The United States treats her as a friend of first rate. Her position in the world is enviable indeed.

As to territorial expanse, her boundaries are wider and richer than during the time of Napoleon at the height of his power. Her flag flies over the most beautiful part of Asia. Her African empire, scarcely separated from the metropolis, cannot be compared in importance and accessibility to the Asiatic possessions of Russia.

Morally and intellectually, she takes first rank among the various peoples. Her science, her art, her literature, are superior to those of most of her rivals and she does not rank inferior to any one of them. She enjoys the great fortune once more to march in the van of mankind waging a struggle against obscurantism and reaction, and she seems to be bent, through an enormous effort of which any other nation would at present be incapable, on the completion of the work of the encyclopaedists and of the great Revolution.

France, a sovereign and noble nation and a powerful democracy, works for the emancipation of human thought and for the legal organization of a national solidarity. She is to-day what other peoples will be to-morrow, or much later, very much later.

The sole black point on her horizon might be the reduction of the increase of her birth rate, but even here she seems to be ahead of the times. This sociological phenomenon accompanies throughout the progress of civilisation, and France should perhaps here also lead other nations. When generalised, the phenomenon ceases to be a disturbing factor. It simply seems to be the expression of the fact that in-consequence of the nation's intellectual development, reason and foresight extend their influence upon a domain where in a lower stage of civilisation blind instinct alone holds sway.

A Frenchman who would not be proud and happy of the actual condition of his country appears to me singularly odd and ungrateful.

* 1 hectolitre = 100 cubic decimetres = 2.838 bushels (dry). 1 hectar = 10,000 square metres = 2.471 acres.

EMILE VERHAEREN.

(A famous Belgian poet.)

The word decadence is irritating. It has been so much misused by mediocre pedagogues and publicists that it should no longer be mentioned when one speaks of things great and noble.

The supremacy of France is centered since several years in her art. There she reigns in all her greatness. All other nations submit to her leadership. Her authors, her painters, her sculptors, show themselves the artistic masters of the world and see how in spite of all, musical geniuses arise! The light of French art shines at present in its purest radiance. I do not believe in the abatement of the vital forces of a country when it produces great men in such abundance! In politics a mode of bold and well-directed thinking gains the ascendancy. All other countries still rely on the solemn feebleness of dogmas and the venerable but antiquated sentiment of faith. France frees herself from this hollow power. She was the first to make for truth. Man becomes the master of his laws and institutions in the place of God. In this struggle against secular illusion, France has again become the incarnation of the hope of the world. To speak of decadence would indeed be more than ever to indulge in twaddle.

CH. GIDE.

(Famous economist and professor at the University of Paris.)

It seems to me that foreigners alone are qualified to reply to the question which you propose and to me the French ought to be excused. Indeed in this international consultation it would certainly not behoove them, either to affirm or to deny that their country is in decadence.

Nevertheless, if we limit ourselves to statements of fact, we have the right according to statistics to affirm that no part of France is on the path of retrogression. The curve of her evolution remains ascending. It neither declines or halts, nor does it even noticeably change from the angle of inclination except in its movement of population where after all the line still feebly ascending tends to become horizontal.

The last third of the 19th century is marked by an extraordinary advance in population, wealth, and economic activity of almost all nations, and in this advance France has not strongly participated.

It is not impossible that this general advance is only temporary. It is only a billow that will pass by, and the time will come when the other countries will retard their steps, but if that moment would not come soon, France would be easily outdistanced.

J. NOVICOW.

(A famous Russian sociologist, Odessa.)

One can speak of the decadence of France by a perversity of the human mind that would attach all the most complex social phenomena to one single cause. In agriculture, industry, science, the arts, and belles lettres, France is not inferior to any of her rivals. Her only inferiority manifests itself in war. I understand better than any one else how false this phrase sounds and how it contradicts the most obvious facts. Let me explain.

France during the last two centuries has come out vanquished from her great campaigns against her neighbors. The fight of the 18th century against England ended in defeat and cost her India and Canada. The fight against the European coalition during the Revolution and the Empire ended in another defeat and cost her not alone all the acquisitions of the time of the directory and of Napoleon, but also a piece of territory which had belonged to her kings. The fight against Germany was ended by the treaty of Frankfurt and involved the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. One is therefore justified in saying definitively that France has shown herself inferior in these struggles, but on the other hand it would be ridiculous to use such an expression with regard to one of the most warlike nations of the entire world, which counts hundreds of most decisive victories, of which we will only mention a few: Rivoli, Marengo, Hohenlinden, Ulm, Austerlitz, Jena, Eylau, Friedland, Wagram, Borodino, L'Alma, Inkermann, Magenta, and Solferino.

Whatever it may be, France of to-day has acquiesced in a defeat, and for this reason alone she is said to be in decadence.

It is true, however, that one should appreciate still another reason, her feeble birth-rate, but this phenomenon appears also in the race that is generally proclaimed as the most flourishing one, the Anglo-Saxons of the United States; consequently if the Americans should *not* be regarded as degenerating on account of their feeble birth-rate, why should the French for the same reason? There is a lack of logical consistency which proves that we have to deal with a preconceived notion, and it leads us back again to the military defeat. Indeed if the French had not been vanquished on the

battlefields, her reduced birth-rate would be considered no more as an evidence of decadence with them as with the Americans. Otherwise the small birth-rate is a phenomenon which seems to make its appearance in proper season in all civilised countries, and France is presumably in this respect only in advance of other nations. I have said that in the midst of her defeats France has gained the most dashing victories, but if her inferiority in the art of war should be irreparable and definite, would that prove her decadence? By no means! War is one of those numerous forms of activity which develops a nation. It is a profound error to consider it as a resumé of the entire national life. France has as the first one rid herself of her mediaeval swaddling clothes. Both in political institutions and as to religious ideas France marches at the head of the nations and in numerous respects by far surpasses them. To speak of her decadence under these conditions is only evidence of an astonishing frivolity, or a still more astonishing hypocrisy.