

GREAT CONTEMPORARIES

by

Winston S., Churchill



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HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH

ASQUITH WAS a man who knew where he stood on every question of life and affairs in an altogether unusual degree. Scholarship, politics, philosophy, law, religion, were all spheres in which at the time when I knew him best he seemed to have arrived at definite opinions. On all, when the need required it, his mind opened and shut smoothly and exactly, like the breech of a gun. He always gave me the impression, perhaps natural for a younger man in a subordinate station, of measuring all the changing, baffling situations of public and Parliamentary life according to settled standards and sure convictions; and there was also the sense of a scorn, lightly and not always completely veiled, for arguments, for personalities and even for events which did not conform to the pattern he had with so much profound knowledge and reflection decidedly adopted.

In some respects this was a limitation. The world, nature, human beings, do not move like machines. The edges are never clear-cut, but always frayed. Nature never draws a line without smudging it. Conditions are so variable, episodes so unexpected, experiences so conflicting, that flexibility of judgment and a willingness to assume a somewhat humbler attitude towards external phenomena may well play their part in the equipment of a modern Prime Minister. But Asquith's opinions in the prime of his life were cut in bronze. Vast knowledge, faithful industry, deep thought were embedded in his nature; and if, as was inevitable in the rough and tumble of life, he was forced to submit and bow to the opinions of others, to the force of events, to the passions of the hour, it was often with barely concealed repugnance and disdain. If one is to select his greatest characteristic, this massive finality stands forth, for good or ill, above and beyond all others.

He had the power to convey a remarkable proportion of the treasures of his intellect and the valour of his blood to the children of both his marriages. His second surviving son rose in the War from Sub-Lieutenant to Brigadier-General, gaining, with repeated wounds amid the worst fighting, the Distinguished Service Order with two clasps and the Military Cross. To Raymond, his eldest son, the

inheritance passed in extraordinary perfection. Everything seemed easy to Raymond. He repeated without apparent effort all his father's triumphs at Oxford. The son, like the father, was without question the finest scholar of his year and the most accomplished speaker in the University debates. Verse or prose, Greek, Latin or English, Law, history or philosophy, came easily to Raymond as they had come thirty years before to Henry Asquith. The brilliant epigram, the pungent satire, the sharp and not always painless rejoinder, a certain courtly but rather formal manner, distinguished in youth the son, as they had his father before him. Address and charm in conversation, the nice taste in words, the ready pen and readier tongue, the unmistakable air of probity and independence, and the unconscious sense of superiority that sprang from these, belonged as of native right to both. And now we have seen in the third generation Raymond's son, the present Earl of Oxford and Asquith, pursuing at the university the same triumphant academic career.

It seemed quite easy for Raymond Asquith, when the time came, to face death and to die. When I saw him at the Front in November and December of 1915 he seemed to move through the cold, squalor and peril of the winter trenches as if he were above and immune from the common ills of the flesh, a being clad in polished armour, entirely undisturbed, presumably invulnerable. The War, which found the measure of so many, never got to the bottom of him, and when the Grenadiers strode into the crash and thunder of the Somme, he went to his fate cool, poised, resolute, matter-of-fact, debonair. And well we know that his father, then bearing the supreme burden of the State, would proudly have marched at his side.

The political activities of Henry Asquith's daughter, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, are of course well known. Her father – old, supplanted in power, his Party broken up, his authority flouted, even his long-faithful constituency estranged – found in his daughter a champion redoubtable even in the first rank of Party orators. The Liberal masses in the weakness and disarray of the Coalition period saw with enthusiasm a gleaming figure, capable of dealing with the gravest questions and the largest issues with passion, eloquence and mordant wit. In the two or three years when her father's need required it, she displayed force and talent equalled by no woman in British politics. One wildfire sentence from a speech in 1922 will suffice. Lloyd George's Government, accused of disturbing and war-like tendencies, had fallen. Bonar Law appealed for a mandate of 'Tranquillity'. 'We have to choose', said the young lady to an immense audience, 'between one man suffering from St Vitus's Dance and another from Sleeping Sickness.' It must have been the

greatest of human joys for Henry Asquith in his dusk to find this wonderful being he had called into the world, armed; vigilant and active at his side. His children are his best memorial and their lives recount and revive his qualities.

At the time when I knew him best he was at the height of his power. Great majorities supported him in Parliament and the country. Against him were ranged all the stolid Conservative forces of England. Conflict unceasing grew year by year to a more dangerous intensity at home, while abroad there gathered sullenly the hurricane that was to wreck our generation. Our days were spent in the furious party battles which arose upon Home Rule and the Veto of the House of Lords, whilst always upon the horizon deadly shapes grew or faded, and even while the sun shone there was a curious whisper in the air.

He was always very kind to me, and thought well of my mental processes; was obviously moved to agreement by many of the State papers which I wrote. A carefully marshalled argument, cleanly printed, read by him at leisure, often won his approval and thereafter commanded his decisive support. His orderly, disciplined mind delighted in reason and design. It was always worth while spending many hours to state a case in the most concise and effective manner for the eye of the Prime Minister. In fact I believe I owed the repeated advancement to great offices which he accorded me more to my secret writings on Government business than to any impressions produced by conversation or by speeches on the platform or in Parliament. One felt that the case was submitted to a high tribunal, and that repetition, verbiage, rhetoric, false argument, would be impassively but inexorably put aside.

In Cabinet he was markedly silent. Indeed he never spoke a word in Council if he could get his way without it. He sat, like the great Judge he was, hearing with trained patience the case deployed on every side, now and then interjecting a question or brief comment, searching or pregnant, which gave matters a turn towards the goal he wished to reach; and when, at the end, amid all the perplexities and cross-currents of ably and vehemently expressed opinion, he summed up, it was very rarely that the silence he had observed till then did not fall on all.

He disliked talking 'shop' out of business hours, and would never encourage or join in desultory conversation on public matters. Most of the great Parliamentarians I have known were always ready to talk politics and let their fancy play over the swiftly moving scene —

Balfour, Chamberlain, Morley, Lloyd George, threw themselves with zest into the discussion of current events. With Asquith either the Court was open or it was shut. If it was open, his whole attention was focused on the case; if it was shut, there was no use knocking at the door. This also may have been in some respects a limitation. Many things are learnt by those who live their whole lives with their main work; and although it is a great gift at once to have an absorbing interest and to be able to throw it off in lighter hours, it seemed at times that Asquith threw it off too easily, too completely. He drew so strict a line between Work and Play that one might almost think work had ceased to attract him. The habit, formed in the life of a busy lawyer, persisted. The case was settled and put aside; judgment was formed, was delivered, and did not require review. The next case would be called in its turn and at the proper hour. Of course he must have communed deeply with himself, but less I believe than most men at the summit of a nation's affairs. His mind was so alert, so lucid, so well stored, so thoroughly trained that once he had heard the whole matter thrashed out, the conclusion came with a snap; and each conclusion, so far as lay with him, was final.

In affairs he had that ruthless side without which great matters cannot be handled. When offering me Cabinet office in his Government in 1908, he repeated to me Mr Gladstone's saying, 'The first essential for a Prime Minister is to be a good butcher,' and he added, 'there are several who must be pole-axed now.' They were. Loyal as he was to his colleagues, he never shrank, when the time came and public need required it, from putting them aside, once and for all. Personal friendship might survive if it would. Political association was finished. But how else can States be governed?

His letters to colleagues were like his conduct of Government business. They were the counterpart of his speeches. Innately conservative and old-fashioned, he disliked and disdained telephones and typewriters. He who spoke so easily in public had never learnt to dictate. All must be penned by him. A handwriting at once beautiful and serviceable, rapid, correct and clear, the fewest possible words and no possibility of misunderstanding; and if argument or epigram or humour found their place, it was because they slipped from the pen before they could be bridled. He wrote other letters in which no such compression was practised. They were addressed to brighter eyes than peer through politicians' spectacles.

When work was done, he played. He enjoyed life ardently; he delighted in feminine society; he was always interested to meet a new and charming personality. Women of every age were eager to be taken in to dinner by him. They were fascinated by his gaiety and

wit and by his evident interest in all their doings. He would play bridge for modest stakes for hours every evening, no matter what lightnings were flashing around the house or what ordeals the morrow would swiftly be thrusting upon him.

I saw him most intimately in the most agreeable circumstances. He and his wife and elder daughter were our guests on the Admiralty yacht for a month at a time in the three summers before the War. Blue skies and shining seas, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, the Aegean, Venice, Syracuse, Malta, Athens, the Dalmatian coast, great fleets and dockyards – the superb setting of the King's Navy; serious work and a pleasure cruise filled these very happy breathing-spaces. In one whole month, with continuous agitation at home and growing apprehension abroad, he maintained towards me, who stood so near him in responsibility, a reserve on all serious matters which was unbreakable. Once and once only did he invite discussion. Important changes impended in the Government. He asked my opinion about men and offices, expressed agreement or difference in the most confiding manner. He weighed the persons concerned in nicely balanced scales, then closed and locked the subject, put the invisible key in his pocket, and resumed a careful study of a treatise on the monuments and inscriptions of Spalato before which the yacht had just dropped anchor. But some weeks later the appointments were made in the exact sense of the discussion.

For the rest, you would not have supposed he had a care in the world. He was the most painstaking tourist. He mastered Baedeker, examined the ladies upon it, explained and illuminated much, and evidently enjoyed every hour. He frequently set the whole party competing who could write down in five minutes the most Generals beginning with L, or Poets beginning with T, or Historians with some other initial. He had innumerable varieties of these games and always excelled in them. He talked a great deal to the Captain and the navigators about the ship and the course and the weather. His retort in Parliament, 'The Right Honourable Gentleman must wait and see', was then current. There was a cartoon in *Punch* in which he was depicted asking the young officer on the bridge, 'Why is she pitching so much this morning?' To which the response was alleged to have been, 'Well, you see, sir, it is all a question of Weight and Sea.' Although only an apocryphal pun, this deserves to survive.

For the rest he basked in the sunshine and read Greek. He fashioned with deep thought impeccable verses in complicated metre, and recast in terser form classical inscriptions which displeased him. I could

Secret



8 Apr. 09

by Mrs Wriston

with the King's
approval. I have the
great pleasure of being you
the first of President of the
Board of Trade in the
new administration.

It is my intention to
seek the consent of Parliament
to placing the office on the
same level, as regards salary

of status, while retaining its
present title, with the Secretary
ships of State. But I am
opined that the change cannot
come into effect during the
current year.

I shall hail with much
satisfaction your accession
to the Cabinet, both on public
and on personal grounds.

I return to England to-
morrow
Yours always
W. A. Washburn

not help much in this. But I followed with attention the cipher telegrams which we received each day, and of course we were always on the new wireless of the Fleet.

One afternoon we drove along a lovely road near Cattaro – a harbour in those days of peculiar interest, not merely for its scenery. We suddenly met endless strings of mules and farm horses. We asked where they were going and what for. We were told, 'They are dispersing. The manoeuvres are cancelled.' The Balkan and European crisis of 1913 was over!

I cannot deem Mr Spender's agreeable, competent biography* a complete or final memorial of one of the most important, solid and square-cut figures of our time. The author's judicial habit of mind and sweet reasonableness (apart from preconceived opinions) are well known. The picture which he has drawn upon this extensive canvas is so subdued in tone and so stinted in colour that it does not revive the image or personality of a stern, ambitious, intellectually proud man fighting his way with all necessary ruthlessness through some of the most rugged and terrible years our history has known. The day will be awaited when some far more vigorous and vital representation of this great statesman, jurist and tribune will be given to his fellow-countrymen. The course of Asquith's life was not all so smooth and cool, so easy and unruffled as Mr Spender's pages suggest. He should have drawn the picture of Asquith and his times with stronger strokes, with higher lights and darker shadows. It would have accorded more with reality, and his hero would have lost nothing in the process. The two main episodes of Asquith's public career – the struggle with the House of Lords about Home Rule, and the declaration and the waging of the war upon Germany – comprise many important pros and cons which have been either omitted from the narrative or so much softened as to become unnoticeable.

In all great controversies much depends on where the tale begins. Mr Asquith and the Liberal Party were sincerely faithful to the cause of Home Rule; but it must not be forgotten that their dependence for office upon eighty Irish votes was the spur which alone extorted action, and that in 1906, when an independent Liberal majority was hoped for, Home Rule was rigidly excluded from the platform and the programme. It was this sinister influence of eighty Irish votes – now happily for ever withdrawn from the House of Commons – making and unmaking Governments, swaying the fortunes of both great British political parties, which poisoned nearly

* *The Life of Lord Oxford and Asquith*, by J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, 1934.

forty years of our public life. The unconstitutional resistance of Ulster will be judged by history in relation to the fact that the Ulster Protestants believed that the Home Rule Bills were driven forward not as a result of British convictions but by the leverage of this Irish voting power. That the lawless demonstrations in Ulster were the parent of many grievous ills cannot be doubted; but if Ulster had confined herself simply to constitutional agitation it is extremely improbable that she would have escaped forcible inclusion in a Dublin Parliament.

These were hard facts. Mr Asquith fought for the Irish cause and the Liberal Party in the years before the War with dignity and resolution; but he could not himself have been unconscious that he fought for them upon a basis which was to some extent vitiated, first, by his dependence upon the Irish vote and, secondly, by the refusal of his followers to extend the same measure of freedom to Ulster as they proffered to Southern Ireland. When this is remembered, it will be seen that his career as leader in this bitter campaign was not such an example of long-suffering injured innocence as Mr Spender's pages would imply. There was hardihood and wrong doing on both sides. The conflict with the House of Lords which ended in the passage of the Parliament Act cannot be judged apart from the Irish quarrel with which it was interwoven. I shall certainly not cease to accuse the intolerable partisanship by which the House of Lords broke the credit of the great Liberal majority returned in 1906. But matters would have never come to the pass they did, and brother Englishmen would never have been brought, in appearance at least, to the verge of civil war, but for the baleful, extraneous influence of the Irish feud. It was in this very rough battle, with all its fierce and unfair fighting on both sides, that Asquith held by force and art the foremost place.

The vigour of his conduct at the outbreak of the Great War is not usually realized. That Asquith meant to carry the British Empire unitedly into the war against German aggression not only upon Belgium *but also upon France* is undoubted. Never for one moment did he waver in his support of Sir Edward Grey, and no one had in the eight preceding years more consistently guarded that naval supremacy which ensured alike our safety and our power of intervention. As a war-leader he showed on several notable occasions capacity for calculated or violent action. To him alone I confided the intention of moving the Fleet to its war station on 30 July. He looked at me with a hard stare and gave a sort of grunt. I did not require anything else. He overruled Lord Fisher's misgivings about the Dardanelles almost with a gesture. For nearly a month before the naval attempt to force

the Straits on 18 March, 1915, he did not call the Cabinet together. This was certainly not through forgetfulness. He meant to have the matter put to the proof. After the first repulse he was resolute to continue. Unhappily for himself and all others, he did not thrust to the full length of his convictions. When Lord Fisher resigned in May and the Opposition threatened controversial debate, Asquith did not hesitate to break his Cabinet up, demand the resignations of all Ministers, end the political lives of half his colleagues, throw Haldane to the wolves, leave me to bear the burden of the Dardanelles, and sail on victoriously at the head of a Coalition Government. Not 'all done by kindness'! Not all by rosewater! These were the convulsive struggles of a man of action and of ambition at death-grips with events.

One would imagine from Mr Spender's description of the break-up of the Coalition in December, 1916, that Mr Asquith was a kind of Saint Sebastian standing unresisting with a beatific smile, pierced by the arrows of his persecutors. As a matter of fact, he defended his authority by every resource in his powerful arsenal. The Prime Minister's position of eminence and authority and the air of detachment arising therefrom enabled him to use the potent instrument of Time with frequent advantage in domestic affairs. Repeatedly he prevented the break-up of his Government or the resignation of important Ministers by refusing to allow a decision to be taken. 'What we have heard today leaves much food for thought; let us all reflect before we meet again how we can bring ourselves together.' In times of Peace, dealing with frothy, superficial party and personal bickerings, this was often successful. War, untameable, remorseless, soon snapped this tackle. The phrase 'Wait and see', which he had used in Peace, not indeed in a dilatory but in a minatory sense, reflected with injustice, but with just enough truth to be dangerous, upon his name and policy. Although he took every critical decision without hesitation at the moment when he judged it ripe, the agonized nation was not content. It demanded a frenzied energy at the summit, an effort to compel events rather than to adjudicate wisely and deliberately upon them. 'The Generals and Admirals have given their expert advice, and on that evidence the following conclusions must be drawn' – not his words but his mode – proved a policy inadequate to the supreme convulsion. More was demanded. The impossible was demanded. Speedy victory was demanded, and the statesman was judged by the merciless test of results. The vehement, contriving, resourceful, nimble-leaping Lloyd George seemed to offer a brighter hope, or at any rate a more savage effort.

The fullest and most authoritative account of the fall of Asquith's

Government is found in Lord Beaverbrook's revealing pages.* This is one of the most valuable historical documents of our day, and in the main its assertions remain unchallenged. Here we see Mr Lloyd George advancing to his goal, now with smooth and dexterous artifice, now with headlong charge. We see Mr Asquith at bay. A new light is thrown upon his conduct at this juncture. He was certainly not the helpless victim which his enemies have believed and his biographer has depicted. Misunderstanding the account given to him by Mr Bonar Law of the attitude of the Conservative Ministers, he committed a fatal blunder, and made a virtual accommodation with Mr Lloyd George. Reassured the next morning that he had overwhelming Liberal and Conservative support in the Cabinet, he set out to try conclusions with him in good earnest. When he found himself weak, he temporized and retreated; when he felt himself strong, he struck back with all his might; and at the end, when he resolved to put his rival to the test of forming a Government or being utterly discredited, he was at once adamant and jocular. He played the tremendous stake with iron composure. He bore defeat with fortitude and patriotism.

I shall never cease to wonder why Mr Asquith, with a large Liberal majority at his back, did not in the crisis of the 1916 winter invoke the expedient of a Secret Session and seek the succour of the House of Commons. There is the final citadel of a Prime Minister in distress. No one can deny him his right in peace or war to appeal from the intrigues of Cabinets, caucuses, clubs and newspapers to that great assembly and take his dismissal only at their hands. Yet the Liberal Government which fell in 1915, the Asquith Coalition which fell in 1916, the Lloyd George Coalition which fell in 1922 – all were overthrown by secret, obscure, internal processes of which the public only now know the main story. I am of opinion that in every one of these cases the result of confident resort to Parliament would have been the victory of the Prime Minister of the day.

It was not to be. Parliament listened bewildered to the muffled sounds of conflict proceeding behind closed doors, and dutifully acclaimed the victor who emerged. Thus did Lloyd George gain the truncheon of State. High Constable of the British Empire, he set out upon his march.

Mr Asquith was probably one of the greatest peacetime Prime

* *Politicians and the War, 1914-1916, Vol. 2.*

Ministers we have ever had. His intellect, his sagacity, his broad outlook and civic courage maintained him at the highest eminence in public life. But in war he had not those qualities of resource and energy, of prevision and assiduous management, which ought to reside in the executive. Mr Lloyd George had all the qualities which he lacked. The nation, by some instinctive, almost occult process, had found this out. Mr Bonar Law was the instrument which put Mr Asquith aside and set another in his stead. Asquith fell when the enormous task was but half completed. He fell with dignity. He bore adversity with composure. In or out of power, disinterested patriotism and inflexible integrity were his only guides. Let it never be forgotten that he was always on his country's side in all her perils, and that he never hesitated to sacrifice his personal or political interests to the national cause. In the Boer War, in the Great War, whether as Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition, in the constitutional outrage of the General Strike, in every one of these great crises, he stood firm and unflinching for King and Country. The glittering honours, his Earldom and his Garter, which the Sovereign conferred upon him in his closing years, were but the fitting recognition of his life's work, and the lustre and respect with which the whole nation lighted his evening path were a measure of the services he had rendered, and still more of the character he had borne.