

CHAPTER LV

PEACE TALK IN THE CABINET—LLOYD GEORGE OUSTS ASQUITH

THOUGH the Secret Treaties¹ between the Entente Powers were secret still, vast annexationist war aims were gradually being disclosed.

Asquith at the Lord Mayor's Banquet declared the War must continue till Turkey was expelled from Europe, an objective remote indeed from the vindication of "poor little Belgium" and the protection of "the sacred soil of our ally France!" of which we had heard so much when war began! Since the time of Disraeli the Great Powers had intended the despoliation of Turkey. Only their mutual rivalries had deferred the matter so long.

The German Chancellor now alleged that in 1915 England, France, and Russia had entered into a secret agreement, guaranteeing to Russia territorial rule over Constantinople, the Bosphorus, the western shores of the Dardenelles and its hinterland, whilst Asia Minor was to be divided between Britain, France, and Russia, and France was to have Alsace-Lorraine; the International Peace Union now talked of in Britain and the United States was not for international justice but to guarantee the annexations to be made by the Entente in the present war—a grim charge the future was to justify but too well.

David Mason² asked the Prime Minister for time to discuss a motion that in view of von Bethmann Hollweg's repeated statements that Germany was prepared to negotiate for the termination of the War, a commission should be appointed with that object. Bonar Law contemptuously refused. The Commons cheered. If Members experienced regret that the slaughter should continue, they did not show it. Next day Mason raised the same question on the Adjournment, but Members declined to listen: the House was counted out. Philip Snowden posed the direct question whether the secret agreement alleged by the German Chancellor had actually been concluded. The British Government refused a reply; but the Russian Minister, Trepoff, presently confirmed a substantial part of the German allegation, by announcing that the Allies had "established in most definite fashion the right of Russia to the Straits and to Constantinople." He blurted out that it was Russia's intention to hold the Allies to fight with her until German and Austrian Poland had been

¹ Later published by the Russian Bolsheviks when they seized power.

² For his championship of the Suffragettes before the War the Liberal Association which had sponsored him had warned Mason it would seek another candidate at the next election.

wrested from the Central Empires and "united in inseparable union with Russia."¹

People might wonder whether the tyranny of the Russian Czardom might, or might not, be less terrible than that of the Sultan of Turkey. All the world knew the sufferings of Poland in the autocratic grip of Russia. The Socialists in the Russian Duma rose in their places to protest and impeded the proceedings till a dozen of them had been removed. Philip Snowden declared that henceforth he would vote against the war credits, as Karl Liebknecht and his group had done in Germany; but he did not carry out the intention. He explained to the I.L.P. conference that his Parliamentary colleagues considered the step inadvisable.

The selling by auction of the German properties seized in Nigeria was discussed in Parliament. Carson, the Tory, Josiah Wedgwood, the future Labour man, demanded the exclusion of neutral bidders. The Government spokesman, probably in deference to powerful America, answered that it was desired to throw the bidding open to all save enemy subjects, because, since the Germans had been ousted, the British companies had formed a ring, and had driven prices up threefold, whilst paying the native producer less than before. Sir Alfred Moritz Mond, son of a German chemist, whose home would assuredly have been raided had he chanced to be poor, replied with the fervour of a true patriot: "I should have thought it was the British Empire first, the British trader second, and all other considerations afterwards; and the native (an after-thought) in his right place."

Like many another, I was stung to wrathful misery by knowledge that the acquisitive aims of the vast struggle for power were steadily enlarging. One preached, one knew, that the War was being fought for materialistic ends; yet one could scarcely endure the concrete realisation of the fact. Peace, and the popular government of the world to end this capitalist system of ruthless materialism, stood out for me as the two great needs of the hour.

It was announced that certain members of the Government would tour the country to revivify the flagging fires of war enthusiasm. I wrote to the Ministers and to the Press that every week at great provincial meetings, attended by thousands of people, I was putting, and carrying with few dissentients, two resolutions:

"This meeting calls on the Government to introduce a Bill to enfranchise every man and woman of adult age."

"This meeting calls on the Government to stop the War."

I asserted that the campaign of the Ministers must fail to arouse enthusiasm, unless the Government would publish its terms of peace, and give definite assurances that aims of conquest and secret agreements would be abandoned, the War brought to a speedy end, and the whole people enabled, as voters, to pronounce their judgment upon the War at the next General Election.

¹ If the Czardom had not been overthrown, there is no doubt the victorious Entente would have given Russia a free hand to effect the conquests her government desired.