

**LIFE, JOURNALISM
AND POLITICS.
VOLUME II**

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Life, Journalism and Politics. Volume II by J. A. Spender

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J. A. SPENDER

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AND POLITICS.
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By
J. A. SPENDER
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CHAPTER XX

ON THE EVE OF WAR

Liberal Social Policy—A Stubborn Fight—Increasing Bitterness—
The Immunity of Carson—Attempts at Bridge-Building—
Anglo-German Relations—A Lunch with von Kühlmann
—The Warnings of a German Professor—The Crime of Serajevo
—Two Warnings—The Last Stage—A Telegram from
Bethmann-Hollweg—Reasons for Publishing It—The Belgian
Issue—A Determining Fact—The German View.

I

FOREIGN affairs were less in the public mind in the two years before the war than at any time since 1906. The country was absorbed in its domestic politics, which were both complicated and tumultuous. The Irish question threatened something like civil war, and Parliament was struggling with a mass of legislation, some of which seemed to be very unpopular, and all of which was hotly contested by the Opposition. The main Liberal idea in social policy at this time was to cover the chief emergencies of the working life—sickness, accident, unemployment, old age—with insurance, but this encountered mountains of prejudice and was said to be an unwarranted interference with individual liberty. Doctors were up in arms; popular newspapers denounced the “stamp-licking” conspiracy and called upon domestic servants and their mistresses to fight against the new tyranny. Undoubtedly the public was shaken. By-elections were lost, and timid Liberals said that Lloyd George was ruining the Party for a fad. There were weeks in 1911 and 1912 when the Government seemed to be staggering to its grave under the double burden of Insurance and Home Rule. On top of this came Welsh Disestablishment, like Home Rule, a debt of honour which Liberals could not have shirked without disgracing

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themselves, but scarcely attractive or popular fare for the electorate. The future seemed very obscure, and few of us dared look a day beyond the date in 1914 when the Parliament Act would operate to make the Home Rule Bill law. After that we expected a speedy dissolution and a swing of the pendulum which would probably end the Liberal movement for the time being.

It was a time of extraordinary bitterness, and there were moments when the most venerable institutions seemed to be tottering. The suffragettes were breaking windows and burning churches, and no one knew how to deal with them. Carson was at large arming and drilling a force ostentatiously proclaimed as a challenge to the Executive, which seemed either unwilling or unable to restrain him. The racial and religious feuds of North and South Ireland seemed more to resemble a Balkan blood-quarrel than the political contention to which Englishmen were accustomed, and they threatened to spread from Ireland to England. I was well aware of the reasons alleged for leaving Carson alone, but they seemed to me bad reasons, and I found myself in trouble with many old friends, and not least my Irish Nationalist friends, for saying so. The Irish hung together on this issue; they might fight among themselves, but all of them were against English interference in what they regarded as a domestic quarrel. Redmond saw himself fatally compromised in Irish eyes if he supported the coercion of other Irishmen, even though they were his bitterest opponents. To leave Carson alone, not to make a martyr of him, to let his movement peter out, as the Nationalists were convinced it would if it were not taken too seriously, were the prevailing counsels, and no one foresaw that a Republican army, to say nothing of Labour and Capitalist blackshirts, would presently claim the precedent for themselves. It seemed to me that this was one of the occasions on which a Government was bound to assert its authority, regardless of all arguments for expediency, and for once I saw Asquith unequal to the occasion—until at last he turned and faced it and took control of the War Office, after the inexcusable blunder which put a question about obedience to orders to the officers on duty at the Curragh. What might have happened next will be a conjecture to the