THE
PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

BY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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CHAPTER XII

REPORT OF COMMISSION ON LEAGUE OF NATIONS

The Commission on the League of Nations, over which President Wilson presided, held ten meetings between February 3 and February 14, on which latter day it submitted a report at a plenary session of the Conference on the Preliminaries of Peace. The report was presented by the President in an address of exceptional excellence which made a deep impression on his hearers. His dignity of manner, his earnestness, and his logical presentation of the subject, clothed as it was in well-chosen phrases, unquestionably won the admiration of all, even of those who could not reconcile their personal views with the Covenant as reported by the Commission. It was a masterly effort, an example of literary rather than emotional oratory, peculiarly fitting to the occasion and to the temper and intellectual character of the audience.

Considering the brief time given to its discussion in the Commission and the necessary haste required to complete the document before the President's departure, the Covenant as reported to the Conference was a creditable piece of work. Many of the more glaring errors of expression and some of the especially objectionable features of the President's revised draft were eliminated. There were

A MEETING AT THE QUAI D'ORSAY AFTER PRESIDENT WILSON'S DEPARTURE FROM PARIS

others which persisted, but the improvement was so marked that the gross defects in word and phrase largely disappeared. If one accepted the President's theory of organization, there was little to criticize in the report, except a certain inexactness of expression which indicated a lack of technical knowledge on the part of those who put the Covenant into final form. But these crudities and ambiguities of language would, it was fair to presume, disappear if the articles passed through the hands of drafting experts.

Fundamentally, however, the Covenant as reported was as wrong as the President's original draft, since it contained the affirmative guaranty of political independence and territorial integrity, the primacy of the Five Great Powers on the Executive Council, and the perplexing and seemingly unsound system of mandates. In this I could not willingly follow President Wilson, but I felt that I had done all that I could properly do in opposition to his theory. The responsibility of decision rested with him and he had made his decision. There was nothing more to be said.

On the evening of the day of the plenary session, at which the report of the League of Nations was submitted, the President left Paris for Brest where the George Washington was waiting to convey him to the United States. He carried with him the report of the Commission, whose deliberations and decisions he had so manifestly dominated. He went prepared to meet his political antagonists and the enemies of the League, confidently believing that

he could win a popular support that would silence the opposition which had been increasingly manifest in the Halls of Congress and in some of the Republican newspapers which declined to follow Mr. Taft, Mr. Wickersham, Mr. Straus, and other influential Republican members of the League to Enforce Peace.

During the ten days preceding February 14, when the Commission on the League of Nations held daily sessions, the President had no conferences with the American Commissioners except, of course, with Colonel House, his American colleague on the Commission on the League. On the morning of the 14th, however, he called a meeting of the Commissioners and delivered to them the printed report which was to be presented that afternoon to the plenary session. As the meetings of the Commission on the League of Nations had been secret, the American Commissioners, other than Colonel House, were almost entirely ignorant of the proceedings and of the progress being made. Colonel House's office staff knew far more about it than did Mr. White, General Bliss, or I. When the President delivered the report to the Commissioners they were, therefore, in no position to express an opinion concerning it. The only remarks were expressions of congratulation that he had been able to complete the work before his departure. They were merely complimentary. As to the merits of the document nothing was or could be said by the three Commissioners, since no opportunity had been given them to study it, and without a critical ex-

amination any comment concerning its provisions would have been worthless. I felt and I presume that my two colleagues, who had not been consulted as to the work of the Commission on the League, felt, that it was, in any event, too late to offer suggestions or make criticisms. The report was in print; it was that afternoon to be laid before the Conference; in twelve hours the President would be on his way to the United States. Clearly it would have been useless to find fault with the report, especially if the objections related to the fundamental ideas of the organization which it was intended to create. The President having in the report declared the American policy, his commissioned representatives were bound to acquiesce in his decision whatever their personal views were. Acquiescence or resignation was the choice, and resignation would have undoubtedly caused an unfortunate, if not a critical, situation. In the circumstances acquiescence seemed the only practical and proper course.

The fact that in ten meetings and in a week and a half a Commission composed of fifteen members, ten of whom represented the Five Great Powers and five of whom represented the lesser powers (to which were later added four others), completed the drafting of a detailed plan of a League of Nations, is sufficient in itself to raise doubts as to the thoroughness with which the work was done and as to the care with which the various plans and numerous provisions proposed were studied, compared, and discussed. It gives the impression that many clauses were

accepted under the pressing necessity of ending the Commission's labors within a fixed time. The document itself bears evidence of the haste with which it was prepared, and is almost conclusive proof in itself that it was adopted through personal influence rather than because of belief in the wisdom of all its provisions.

The Covenant of the League of Nations was intended to be the greatest international compact that had ever been written. It was to be the *Maxima Charta* of mankind securing to the nations their rights and liberties and uniting them for the preservation of universal peace. To harmonize the conflicting views of the members of the Commission — and it was well known that they were conflicting — and to produce in eleven days a world charter, which would contain the elements of greatness or even of perpetuity, was on the face of it an undertaking impossible of accomplishment. The document which was produced sufficiently establishes the truth of this assertion.

It required a dominant personality on the Commission to force through a detailed plan of a League in so short a time. President Wilson was such a personality. By adopting the scheme of an oligarchy of the Great Powers he silenced the dangerous opposition of the French and British members of the Commission who willingly passed over minor defects in the plan provided this Concert of Powers, this Quintuple Alliance, was incorporated in the Covenant. And for the same reason it may be assumed the Japanese and Italians found the President's plan ac-