Most of the newspaper accounts which I have read do less than justice to the remarkable personality of Edwin Montagu. He was one of those who suffer violent fluctuations of mood, quickly passing from reckless courage and self-assertion to abject panic and dejection—always dramatising life and his part in it, and seeing himself and his own instincts either in the most favourable or in the most unfavourable light, but seldom with a calm and steady view. Thus it was easy for the spiteful to convict him out of his own mouth, and to belittle his name by remembering him only when his face was turned towards the earth. At one moment he would be Emperor of the East riding upon an elephant, clothed in rhetoric and glory, but at the next a beggar in the dust of the road, crying for alms but murmuring under his breath cynical and outrageous wit which pricked into dustier dust the rhetoric and the glory.

That he was an Oriental, equipped, nevertheless, with the intellectual technique and atmosphere of the West, drew him naturally to the political problems of India, and allowed an instinctive, mutual sympathy between him and its peoples. But he was interested in all political problems and not least in the personal side of politics, and was most intensely a politician. Almost everything else bored him. Some memoir-writers have suggested that he was really a scientist, because with nature he could sometimes find escape from the footlights. Others, judging from his parentage and from his entering the City in the last two years of his life, make out that he was, naturally, a financier. This also is far from the truth. I saw him intimately in the Treasury and in the financial negotiations of the Peace Conference, and, whilst his general judgment was good, I do not think
that he cared, or had great aptitude, for the problems of pure finance. Nor—though he loved money for what it could buy—was he interested in the details of money-making.

Mr Lloyd George was, of course, the undoing of his political career—as, indeed, Montagu always said that he would be. He could not keep away from that bright candle. But he knew, poor moth, that he would burn his wings. It was from his tongue that I, and many others, have heard the most brilliant, true, and witty descriptions of that (in his prime) undescrivable. But whilst, behind the scenes, Montagu’s tongue was master, his weaknesses made him, in action, the natural tool and victim; for, of all men, he was one of the easiest to use and throw on one side. It used to be alleged that a certain very Noble Lord had two footmen, of whom one was lame and the other swift of foot, so that letters of resignation carried by the one could be intercepted by the other before their fatal delivery at No. 10. Edwin Montagu’s letters were not intercepted; but the subtle intelligencer of human weakness, who opened them, knew that by then the hot fit was over and the cold was blowing strong. They could be ignored or used against the writer—at choice.

I never knew a male person of big mind like his who was more addicted to gossip than Edwin Montagu. Perhaps this was the chief reason why he could not bear to be out of things. He was an inveterate gossip in the servants’ hall of secretaries and officials. It was his delight to debate, at the Cabinet, affairs of State, and then to come out and deliver, to a little group, a brilliant and exposing parody, aided by mimicry, of what each of the great ones, himself included, had said. But he loved it better when he could push gossip over into intimacy. He never went for long without an intense desire to unbosom himself, even to exhibit himself, and to squeeze out of his confidant a drop of—perhaps reluctant—affection. And then again he would be silent and reserved beyond bearing, sitting stonily with his great hand across his mouth and a staring monocle.

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