

AMBASSADOR PAGE'S LETTERS

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HAD Walter H. Page, late American Ambassador at London, been other than he was, he might have appropriated to himself with reference to the United States the boastful line which Juvenal attributes to Cicero:

O fortunatam natam me consule Romam.

But he passed from the scene of his fruitful labours for the English-speaking world as unostentatiously as he had occupied his high place, much exalted by his occupancy of it. He died a few weeks later, outworn in comparatively early life by his excessive exertions during the War for the good of his country and of the world. No word even of formal gratitude came to gladden his last days from the President whom he served so wholeheartedly, and whom he would have saved from himself had it been possible, but whom he had embittered by interposing between him and utter folly. Neither his own nation nor the British world would ever have learned to appreciate Mr. Page aright, but for these records recently made public.

The story is told in his *Life and Letters*, written and edited by Burton J. Hendrick, and printed at Garden City, New York, in two worthy volumes by Doubleday, Page and Company,—the firm of which Walter H. Page was a founder, and which proudly retains his name. Narrative, editing and printing are all admirable, but it is Mr. Page's letters that really tell. The pathos of many of them, as well as their absorbing interest, is intense. They reveal a personality of transparent honesty and directness of purpose, inspired by devoted admiration and love of native land. To burning zeal in the service of the United States Mr. Page added enlightened and affectionate admiration of Great Britain. He saw in friendly understanding and rational co-operation between these English-speaking peoples the greatest of all hopes for the world, and devoted himself enthusiastically to the task of realizing it. The obstacles and difficulties with which he had to contend are presented in the letters, which all Britons and all Americans should read. A misplaced man in the Presidential chair at Washington was the main obstruction in his way, not because of the strength of the man, but

on account of his parochial prejudices, his overweening personal vanity, and his obdurate stubbornness.

Mr. Page was the highest type of individualist, and therefore the most thorough-going of democrats. He measured others by himself, and in consequence idealized mankind in the mass. His hope for them, particularly under American conditions and institutions, was boundless. It finds expression at every turn of his correspondence, both public and private. He saw in triumphant democracy the divine, if far off, event to which the whole creation moves; and nothing could shake his faith, founded on an intense belief in human perfectibility. It was a lovable faith, which no one can fail to admire as illustrated in Mr. Page's own life and conduct. He was not irrational enough to accept the silly shibboleth that "one person is as good as another", but he did hold that all are entitled to similar social and political opportunities. He was as courteous and considerate towards his office-boys and his family domestics as in his bearing towards those of the highest rank. Were all men and women in this respect such as he, the ideal democracy of his vision would be as good as realized.

Walter Hines Page was born in North Carolina on August 15th, 1855, the son of one of the best families of a State whose population is probably of as pure British descent as that of any part of this continent. The term "best families" is not intended to signify families of social distinction, but those of moral rectitude, physical energy, and mental power. He was ten years of age when the Civil War ended. Towards its end his father's plantation was overrun successively within a few weeks by the two contending armies. The family was reduced for a time to financial straits, and young Walter sold peaches from the home orchard in the streets of a neighbouring town to relieve their needs. The schools of North Carolina were then far from satisfactory, but he made such use of the opportunities afforded and such rapid progress in his favourite language studies that on the founding of John Hopkins University he was selected at the age of twenty-one as one of its initial twenty Fellows, nearly every one of whom afterwards attained high distinction in life. This fellowship was in Greek, a subject in which he had displayed special proficiency, and the teaching of which he intended at that time to make his profession. Although he achieved great success in this field, he had the good sense to perceive that his nature fitted him much better to deal with the living present than with the dead past. He became an excellent Greek scholar, and was a lifelong lover of the language, but he soon ceased to regard the teaching of it as his vocation, although it was his opinion then and afterwards

that "without a home feeling in Greek literature no one can lay claim to high culture".

After leaving Johns Hopkins he did teach, but his subject was English, not Greek, and he continued this work for only a few months at the University of his native State where he lectured on Shakespeare. While teaching, he wrote articles for the local press. When his engagement ended he was for a time at a loss, and advertised for a job—"any sort of a job"—in journalism. He was answered by the owner of the *St. Joseph, Missouri, Gazette*. On that somewhat obscure paper he served his apprenticeship to journalism of every description, and within a year he became its chief editor. Shortly afterwards he went south as a journalistic free lance. His articles on conditions there were so cordially received in the northern press that the foundations of his career were firmly laid. Never afterwards were engagements lacking for him with newspapers of the highest standing. Striking indeed was the rapidity and permanence of his rise. It led to his appointment as editor of *The Forum*, which under his control soared to unprecedented heights of success both literary and financial. From it he passed to *The Atlantic Monthly*, long the leading American Review, which he inspired with abounding new life. Returning to New York he took an important part in the founding of *The World's Work*, and the establishment of the publishing firm of Doubleday, Page and Company.

During his early free lance days in the south Mr. Page had met Mr. Woodrow Wilson, and they had maintained friendly relations for many years. He would appear to have idealized rather than studied Mr. Wilson's character, admiring him greatly and entertaining high expectations for the country from his political career. Mr. Page did his effective utmost to promote his friend's success. He had not been in the least disillusioned with regard to the new President prior to his own appointment and departure for London as Ambassador from the United States to Great Britain in the spring of 1913, shortly after Mr. Wilson's accession to office. On March 10th, 1913, immediately after the Presidential inauguration, he wrote to a friend: "I believe in Wilson very thoroughly. Men fool him yet. Men fool us all. He has already made some mistakes. But he is sound." Mr. Page was to learn much more during the following five years, not merely of Mr. Wilson's capacity for being fooled by "men", but for befooling himself.

The Page correspondence proper, whether official, semi-official, or private, as presented in the two volumes of *Life and Letters*, relates practically to just two main themes,—his English experiences, and the War. The first dated letter is of August 24th, 1913; the

last is of September 2nd, 1918, and the writer died at his home in North Carolina on December 21st of the same year. Thus the period covered by his letters was the year preceding the War and the four years of its duration. Of the state of mind with regard to the Home Rule Bill which he found on his arrival in London he writes privately in his first letter; "You can't imagine the intensity of party feeling here". He relates how at a dinner which he attended "the great lady who was my hostess told me with tears in her voice that she had suspended all social relations with the Liberal leaders." "Yet in the everyday life of the people you hear nothing about it."

The new Ambassador was much shocked by the wretched condition in which he found the American Embassy. Naturally he had conceived a fitting idea of the dignity and importance of the position he was to fill. The London Embassies of all other great nations occupied spacious and beautiful buildings, with large permanent staffs of secretaries and servants. A national Ambassador on his arrival had simply to take possession of such quarters, State-owned and State-supported, where he could start work. But the solitary official from the American Embassy who met the Pages at the station informed them that rooms had been taken for them at the Coburg Hotel. Their three months' residence at this place Mr. Page characterizes as "a crowded and uncomfortable nightmare". He exclaims with bitterness: "The indignity of an Ambassador beginning his career at a hotel, especially during the Court season, and a green Ambassador at that!" Much worse was in store for him when next morning he went to the American Chancery on Victoria Street. He had never before been in any Embassy except that of the British at Washington. He writes: "The moment I entered that dark and dingy hole at 123 Victoria Street, between two cheap stores—the same entrance that the dwellers in the cheap flats above used—I knew that Uncle Sam had no fit dwelling there". This tenement cost the United States Government \$1500 a year. The Ambassador's private room was worse than depressing—"dingy with twenty-nine years of dirt and darkness, and utterly undignified". It seems almost incredible that up to Mr. Page's time, less than ten years ago, the official representatives of the United States in London can have been so housed and so treated. The Ambassador's ever-ready wit and humour shone through these early trials, as it shone through all his letters. He was beset by newspaper reporters, one of whom told him how an American newspaper had asserted that he meant to be "very democratic" and would never wear "knee breeches". The Ambassador was asked about this statement. "I was foolish enough to reply,"

he confesses, "that the existence of an ass in the United States ought not necessarily to require the existence of a corresponding ass in London. He printed that".

While keen to see and laugh good-humouredly at what he thought English faults and foibles, Mr. Page found his Old Country surroundings and the Old Country people very much to his taste. Happily they understood him, and found him on the whole equally acceptable. His Ambassadorship gave promise of being an un-mixed pleasure until the War came to mar. He did not, he declared roundly, believe a word of what he had heard about English "decadence": "The world never saw a finer lot of men than the best of their ruling class. You may search the world and you may search history for finer men than Lord Morley, Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Harcourt and other members of the present Cabinet." He instances the comparative purity of political morals, and the sweetness of Court life. He recognized overflowing material prosperity. Better still, "when they make their money, they stop money-making and cultivate their minds and their gardens and entertain their friends and do all the high arts of living—to perfection." England, he thought, never had a finer lot of folk than these. "And you see them everywhere. The art of living sanely they have developed to as high a level, I think, as you will find at any time in any land. . . . Yes, they are dull in a way,—not dull so much as steady; and yet they have more solid sense than any other people."

In such a frame of mind and with such feelings, it is not surprising that so extremely keen a diplomatist succeeded—notwithstanding his lack of experience—in keeping the United States out of war against Britain and for Germany. He had to counteract the persistent, wilful, or blundering efforts of President Wilson and his Secretary of State, Bryan the Awful, whom not even Mr. Page's kindly mind could tolerate, to embroil the two countries until Germany at last came to his relief and literally kicked President Wilson into hostilities against her and in favour of the Allies. All the facts come out naturally, however dramatically, in the letters, and fill one with alternate feelings of anger and sympathy.

The constant and main aim of Ambassador Page's official career was the establishment and maintenance of cordial relations between the two great English-speaking countries. He understood fully and preached steadily the doctrine that Britain and the United States by joining friendly hands could rule the world for peace and for its own good. One of his earliest discoveries in London was that while the American people were liked and respected by the British, the United States Government was held in no such esteem,

but was on the contrary neither trusted nor regarded with respectful eyes. He set himself to find the cause of this, and reached the conclusion that it was due largely to the way in which the foreign business of the United States was conducted. The state of the American Embassy in London was one piece of evidence to his mind in support of his hypothesis. He soon found more glaring and more convincing proof in the tone and contents of the despatches sent out from the office of the United States Secretary of State—virtually the American Foreign Secretary—to European Foreign Offices, and especially to Great Britain. These had been, he learned, historically unpleasant. Under Secretary Bryan this had become intolerable, to the verge of impossibility. Mr. Page tried to effect a measure of improvement by hints conveyed in personal letters to President Wilson. Very diplomatically he veiled his real purposes in a cloud of general friendly information, but this striking passage was cunningly inserted in one of his early communications:—

If I make out right, two causes (in addition to their ignorance of their dislike of our Government are (1) its lack of manners in the past, and (2) its indiscretions of publicity about foreign affairs. We ostentatiously stand aloof from their polite ways and courteous manners in many of the everyday, ordinary, unimportant dealings with them,—aloof from the common amenities of long organized political life. Not one of these things is worth mentioning or remembering. But generations of them have caused our Government to be regarded as thoughtless of the fine little acts of life,—as rude. The more I find out about diplomatic customs, and the more I hear of the little-big troubles of others, the more need I find to be careful about the details of courtesy.

Mr. Page imbedded this in several humorous revelations concerning his own alleged errors, no doubt imaginary. He might as well have spared his pains in the matter. The President not only did not accept, but apparently resented hints or information from anybody. Secretary Bryan was permitted to continue unchecked in his "wild west" diplomatic career. The more practically useful the information or suggestions offered by his London Ambassador the more resentful and unresponsive did Mr. Wilson become. Before long, direct personal correspondence between him and Mr. Page almost ceased. Mr. Page's private opinion of Mr. Bryan was recorded in a letter written a little later to Mr. Edward M. House in which, with reference to a threatened lecturing tour by the Secretary of State among the European capitals, he wrote:—

Now, God restrain me from saying, much more from doing anything rash. But, if I've got to go home at all, I'd rather go before he comes. It will take years for the American Ambassador to recover what they'll lose if he carries out his plan.

The honourable course recommended by President Wilson and adopted by Congress with regard to the Panama Canal tolls greatly heartened Mr. Page, and he continued buoyantly triumphant until the War came. He was full of plans for a closer drawing together of Britain and America in the peace-interests of the world. He wanted President Wilson to visit England, and believed that his doing so "would exercise a mighty influence in preventing a threatening European war". This suggestion was made long before there was any outward prospect of war. Mr. Wilson would have none of it. He wrote to Mr. Page:—

The case against the President's leaving the country, particularly now that he is expected to exercise a constant leadership in all parts of the business of the government, is very strong and—I am afraid—overwhelming. It might be the beginning of a practice of visiting foreign countries which would lead Presidents rather far afield.

This cannot but be regarded as an amusing letter in view of Mr. Wilson's subsequent wanderings "afield" in spite of the protests of the whole American nation. Mr. Page was of the opinion that if Great Britain and the United States could let it be known that they were in friendly agreement, the threatened outbreak of Germany would be averted. Mr. Wilson's idea was that the same end could be attained by himself through negotiations with the European capitals conducted by correspondence, and through the agency of his Colonel House.

After the "Grand Smash" in August, 1914, Mr. Page was so busy with the affairs of his own Embassy and the Embassies of Germany, Austria and Turkey—the management of which he had to take over in turn—that at first he had little time for thought of other things. The attitude assumed by President Wilson and the fresh outbreaks of the Secretariat at Washington soon overwhelmed him with humiliation which sometimes became shame and almost despair. The President assumed, and even formally proclaimed in official despatches, that Germany—the deliberate aggressor—and the Allied Powers which she assailed and at first threatened to destroy stood in respect of the War upon the same moral footing. This was gall and wormwood to Mr. Page in private, although in public he stood loyally by his Government. The British Government was continuously vexed with all sorts of petty, querulous American complaints and demands which the Ambassador had to transmit. Most fortunately, the strong personal friendship which had sprung up between him and the British Foreign Secretary—Sir Edward Grey—made his task a good deal easier and less unendur-

able than it would otherwise have been. But it is not hard to read between the lines of his public letters as well as in the direct words of his private correspondence how he, a proud man and an especially proud American, suffered while President Wilson continued not only "too proud to fight" but so intensely "neutral" as to insist that the American people—like his Government—must *think* no less than *act* "neutrally"! In a moment of irrepressible irritation Mr. Page once exclaimed "There's nothing in the world so neutral as this Embassy. Neutrality takes up all our time." Again he remarked, "A Government can be neutral, but no *man* can be."

Very seldom did Mr. Page yield to rebellious impatience during all his sore tribulations with Washington. Once he did, after the British Government had repeatedly, but always politely, refused to accept the Declaration of London for Germany's benefit. This is what he wrote to Mr. House, practically to the President:—

I have begun to get despondent over the outlook since the President telegraphed me that Lansing's proposal would settle the matter. I still believe he (the President) did not understand it; he couldn't have done so. Else he would not have approved it. But that ties my hands. If Lansing again brings up the Declaration of London—after four flat and reasonable rejections—I shall resign. I will not be the instrument of a perfectly gratuitous and ineffective insult to this patient and fair and friendly Government and people.

Mr. Page's shame over the *Lusitania* incident and Mr. Wilson's subsequent attitude and ridiculous "Notes" was intense and pathetic. It was aggravated by the President's persistent proposals to bring the War to a close by his own personal intervention in spite of the Ambassador's repeated warnings that he was playing Germany's game, and that she would offer no terms which the Allies or any of them could accept or think of accepting.

To indicate the sort of statesmanship at Washington with which Mr. Page had to contend, and whose consequences no one less diplomatic or less acceptable to the British Government could have averted, two or three characteristic incidents may be specially quoted from this *Life*. During the Mexican crisis in the autumn of 1913 Sir Edward Grey's private secretary, Sir William Tyrrell, was going to Washington. Mr. Page hoped much from his visit, and sent a very warm letter of introduction. Sir William went to call officially upon Secretary of State Bryan, who harangued him at great length on the wickedness of the British Empire, particularly in Egypt, India, and Mexico. The British oil men, he declared, were "the paymasters of the British Cabinet". Sir William smiled

blandly, and replied that Mr. Bryan must be mistaken. He said he himself knew personally that—through a long experience with corruption—the Cabinet had grown so greedy as to fix their price beyond anything that the oil men could reach. Mr. Bryan took Sir William's bantering answer seriously. "Ah!", said he in triumph, "then you admit the charge".

Another incident was of such deadly seriousness that but for Mr. Page's stand and threat of resignation it would probably have resulted in war between Great Britain and the United States. President Wilson was quite as much to blame as his Secretary of State in connection with it. Mr. Bryan blandly *demand*ed that Great Britain should accept the Declaration of London as her code of maritime warfare, although she had repudiated it in peace-time, and its acceptance would probably have meant the loss of the War. The language used by Mr. Bryan was even worse than the demand itself. "A tragedy", says Mr. Page's biographer, "was only averted by the intervention of Colonel House". By accident Colonel House was in Washington when the note was submitted to the President for approval. He and Mr. Wilson went over it together. The President was persuaded not to forward the note until Colonel House should have conferred with the British Ambassador, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice. In a letter to Mr. Page, Colonel House wrote: "Sir Cecil told me that if the despatch had gone to you as written, and you had shown it to Sir Edward Grey, it would almost have been a declaration of war." The Note was somewhat modified, but was sent with explicit Administrative instructions to the Ambassador as to what he was to say in presenting it. These, if not so bellicose as Mr. Bryan's draft would appear to have been, were at least—with the inferential reference to the war of 1812—sufficiently insulting. The instructions were:—

You will not fail to impress upon His Excellency (Sir Edward Grey) the gravity of the issues which enforcement of the (British) Order-in-Council seems to presage, and say to him in substance as follows: It is a matter of grave concern to this Government that the particular conditions of this unfortunate war should be considered by His Britannic Majesty's Government to be such as to justify them in advancing doctrines and advocating practices which in the past aroused strong resentment on the part of the Government of the United States and bitter feeling among the American people. This Government feels bound to express the fear, though it does so reluctantly, that the publicity which must be given to the rules which His Majesty's Government announce that they intend to enforce will awaken memories of controversies which it is the earnest desire of the United States to forget or over in silence.

The thinly veiled threat of this message does not tend to minimize its gross insolence. One other incident may be cited to illumine the character of the President who was responsible for the foregoing. When Sir William Tyrrell called to take leave of Mr. Wilson before returning to England, he made a final attempt to obtain a definite statement of the President's Mexican policy. "I shall be asked to explain", he said; "Can you tell me what it is?" Mr. Wilson looked at him earnestly, and replied in his most decisive manner: "I am going to teach the South American Republics to elect good men." Well may Mr. Page's biographer remark that in its attitude and phraseology this reply "holds the key of much Wilson history."

It would be vain to attempt by quotation within the limits of a *Review* article or by means of summaries to give any adequate idea of the monumental work which is *Life and Letters of Walter H. Page*. It is a storehouse of inner diplomatic and national history for the months preceding the Great War and the period of more than four years through which the War lasted. It is a mirror of London's social and political life during that time, as seen from the advantageous point of view of a great journalist and a great Ambassador. We have secret diplomatic details of the most absorbing interest, while the incidents with which they are associated are still fresh in memory. It is a human and a national document, interesting beyond compare, intensified by the lovable personality of its central figure, whose death—due to excessive toil and cruel worry—so soon after his last official words were penned, makes of it a tragedy as pathetic as ever dramatist conceived. With reference to it a London journal—*The Daily Telegraph*—truly says: "Anglo-American friendship in the opinion of many of us is the best hope of the world. No man did more than Mr. Page to widen its horizon and to strengthen and eternize its bonds."