

The True Story Of Woodrow Wilson

By DAVID LAWRENCE

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Chapter XXXII

Wilson's Last Four Years

Can Storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the
fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the
silent dust,
Or Flattery's soothing the dull cold
ear of death?
—Thomas Gray.

On the plains of Kansas, the appeal of Woodrow Wilson to the American people to give their support to the League of Nations stopped suddenly. The Presidential train was turned homeward. The symptoms of a breakdown of the arteries—the inevitable collapse of an overburdened physique—cast their warning none too soon.

Nervously the President tossed in his bed in the private car, tormented mostly by the thought that his enemies would say he had quit the fight, that he was shamming illness. There were skeptics among the newspapermen but they were a minority. Most of us knew the break, long expected, had come at last. The train sped rapidly to Washington with hardly a stop. Arriving on a Sunday morning, the President walked briskly through the Union Station, was photographed as usual and the skeptics increased in number—for outwardly he showed no signs of change.

It was not until a few days later, in the White House, that a blood clot formed in the blood vessels of Mr. Wilson's brain, permanently impairing the use of his left arm and leg. After that he was never the same. To his physical condition with the accompanying lapses of memory, irritability, and excessive emotion, must be attributed many of the acts of Woodrow Wilson beginning in October 1919 and continuing until the day of his death, more than four years later. Every criticism, every coolness which old friends experienced, every expression on the part of Woodrow Wilson with reference to the few problems that he was permitted to consider or discuss cannot be appraised in retrospect without being mindful of the tired brain that once swayed the world and then feebly sought to retain its hold on the Presidency and public opinion.

There were days when Woodrow Wilson seemed to be mentally as keen as ever. Shutting one's eyes to the drooping figure and listening only to his fiery logic, the illusion of an unchanged personality would not have been difficult to maintain. Little by little as gradual improvement in his condition was evident, more executive work was undertaken; but always at his side stood the devoted wife and the physician, Admiral Cary T. Grayson. Together they carried the secrets of the sick room while Private Secretary Tumulty played the role of everything-as-usual in the Executive Offices, a mark of loyalty to his chief which alone should have earned him something better than the brusque treatment he later received.

But those were topsy turvy days and many an old friend who had served Mr. Wilson in the past was turned away. The tragic events that followed Mr. Wilson's breakdown cannot be explained by any theory of logic. Those who had it in their power to persuade President Wilson to permit advisers to reach him failed to realize the immensity of their responsibility in shutting him off so completely from the outside world.

Whether America would have benefited by entrance into the League of Nations it is not necessary to discuss, but the United States would today be in the League officially if the President had been able to get the advice he so much needed in his enfeebled condition. On his sick bed, he almost agreed to accept the Lodge reservations, but some one urged him to make it an issue in the 1920 campaign and in January 1920 he asked that a solemn referendum be taken. Was it the whispering voice of ambition that put into his mind the forlorn hope that he could recover and that a third term in the White House was possible? For himself, Mr. Wilson was not ambitious. Those around him—not all—felt the magic spell of power and inevitably longed for its continuance.

Early in 1919, the author had made a tour of the United States and had written for the London Times a cable stating that while sentiment for the League was preponderant, the cause would be strengthened if people were sure Mr. Wilson did not mean to use it as a vehicle for a third term. The President read that article and cabled to his private secretary to discover if the sentiment reported were correct and if he should issue a statement saying he would not run for a third term. He was advised that it was unnecessary. Nearly a year later when the author published a story about the President's cable and his apparent willingness to forgo a third nomination if it would help the cause of the League, there was evidence of displeasure that Mr. Wilson's position had been made public. Mrs. Wilson demanded to know of Secretary Tumulty if the

author had access to the President's cables from Paris. The information to the author had come not from Washington, however, but from Paris; yet the significance of the action lay in the apparent disinclination to give up the third term idea, especially at a time when other candidates were seeking the Democratic nomination.

The San Francisco convention was a disappointment to Woodrow Wilson in many ways. The convention failed to give Mr. Wilson even a complimentary nomination. Nor did his friends think it wise to announce that he had sent a light wine and beer plank to the convention for adoption. He had vetoed the Volstead Act and felt that its modification would not be a violation of the Eighteenth Amendment. Mr. Wilson bequeathed to his friends a complete platform for the 1924 campaign but at this writing it has not been made public.

Mr. Wilson's last days in the White House were in seclusion. He never came to his offices. He sat in a wheel chair on the south portico or in the grounds and received few callers. One of the unexplained incidents of the last year was his failure to receive Lord Grey, Britain's distinguished statesman who had been secretary for foreign affairs in 1914 and who was in Washington as a special ambassador in the hope of reaching some understanding with the United States about her entry into the League of Nations. Mr. Wilson never gave him an audience. He resented the fact that Lord Grey had received at the British Embassy, several Republican members of the United States Senate, including Mr. Wilson's chief opponent, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and discussed the situation with them. Lord Grey was of the opinion that the Lodge reservations would in the main satisfy the allied powers. When he returned to Great Britain, he wrote a letter, made public in the London Times, giving his views in detail; but the President was not made any friendlier to a compromise by that action.

Some of those who had Mr. Wilson's ear during the seclusion insist that they urged him to accept the Lodge reservations. There is no way to determine the strength of their persuasiveness. Mr. Wilson accepted the 1920 defeat with stoicism. He could have revived the Versailles treaty and released the members of his party to accept the Lodge reservations after the election, but though a few newspapers argued editorially for such a step the advice went unheeded and the new President, Mr. Harding, declared unequivocally against the League of

Nations with or without reservations.

Not a word of criticism came publicly from Mr. Wilson of the acts of President Harding or President Coolidge. It was Woodrow Wilson's pointed way of showing the world, as he phrased it, "how an ex-president could behave," for he did not forget the shafts aimed at him by Theodore Roosevelt in the trying days of the war. Except for a few implied references to American foreign policy, Mr. Wilson was singularly silent after leaving the White House and not until November 11, 1923, on the anniversary of the armistice just a few months before he died, did he make any extended criticism of America's failure to join the League of Nations. Here again he mentioned no individuals but based his speech on a broad principle of international cooperation.

The last few months were happier for Woodrow Wilson than the preceding years of silence. He sensed a turn in public opinion in his direction. He talked hopefully with his chosen visitors on the prospects for the 1924 campaign. He made no commitment as to candidates. He was eager to gossip with the few who came to see him. Norman H. Davis, Undersecretary of State during the last year of Mr. Wilson's administration, was a frequent visitor at the "S" street home, as was Bernard M. Baruch, who perhaps was as close if not closer than anyone to Mr. Wilson in his final days, with the possible exception of Admiral Grayson and members of the family. Both Mr. Baruch and Mr. Davis were experts on reparations and European problems generally and brought authentic information or expert analysis of the trend of world affairs in which, of course, Mr. Wilson retained an undiminished interest to the end.

Occasionally old Princeton friends came to see the broken statesman. Some of them together with political associates gave Mr. Wilson a new automobile on his last birthday, December 26, 1923. A group of friends also had purchased for him the mortgage on the "S" street home, as Mr. Wilson did not leave the White House a rich man in the usual sense of the word.

On the few occasions when Mr. Wilson was visible to the public he showed he was falling in health. When the members of the Democratic National Committee were received a month before he died, he looked withered and exhausted. An attack of indigestion contributed the fatal impetus and he died on February 3, 1924.

Woodrow Wilson will stand in all history as a great man. His Napoleonic struggle for a triumph of idealism over materialism and provincialism met defeat on a field which counted him in its casualty list.

Petty intrigues constantly surrounded him and at times misled him. Selfish, jealous-minded, and of-

ten childish persons poured into his ears the prejudices of scorn and the insidious poison of hate. Above it all, Woodrow Wilson's own record stands untarnished—he fought for vital principles. He led a victorious Nation in the greatest war of all history. He never wantonly hurt his fellow-man, though the stern paths of duty led him to part with so many who failed to grasp the impersonality of his battles.

Greater by far than those who basked in his halo was Woodrow Wilson—a paradox in personality, a genius of lofty expression, an indefatigable statesman. Years before he was thought of for the Presidency by his party, the romantic soul within him seemed by prophetic instinct to be lifted to a higher destiny. On the seashore gazing wistfully into the unknown deep, Woodrow Wilson repeated aloud to a companion an anonymous poem—the last in the Oxford Book of English Verse—and, concluding, he talked of the Presidency of the United States as the office, which, if he ever attained, would mean for him the supreme sacrifice. He spoke his own elegy.

In the hour of death, after this life's whim,
When the heart beats low and the eyes grow dim,
And pain has exhausted every limb—
The lover of the Lord shall trust in Him.

When the will has forgotten the lifelong aim,
And the mind can only disgrace its fame,
And a man is uncertain of his own name—
The power of the Lord shall fill this frame.

When the last sigh is heaved, and the last tear is shed,
And the coffin is waiting beside the bed,
And the widow and child forsake the dead—
The angel of the Lord shall lift this head.

For even the purest delight may pall,
And power must fall and pride must fall,
And the love of the dearest friends grow small—
But the glory of the Lord is all in all.
The End

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