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ASCENSION

"So then after the Lord had spoken vnto them, he was receiued vp into heauen and sate on the right hand of God."

--Mark, XVI:19

Dawn broke that day on a new epoch, one that would carry the name of a man whose ideas and ideals would extend well into the next century.

Shortly after seven o'clock on Wednesday, December 4, 1918, the sun rose over Hoboken, just as the nine-car special train of the twenty-eighth President of the United States chugged its way through the New Jersey city that fronted the western piers of New York Harbor. One thousand soldiers and a Marine Corps guard of honor joined the local police in restraining the hundreds who stood in the chilly first light in hopes of catching a glimpse of the illustrious passenger. They wanted nothing more, wrote one observer, than "to cheer the president and to wish him God-speed on his momentous voyage." At last, the flag-draped locomotive sputtered to a halt so that its central car—named "Ideal"—stopped before a red carpet leading to Pier 4. A battalion of the 13th United States Infantry surrounded the train.

The passengers remained on board until eight o'clock, at which time President Woodrow Wilson and his second wife, Edith, stepped off the train, prompting a rousing rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" from an Army band. Brigadier General G. H. McManus, commander of the Port of Embarkation, stepped forward to welcome his Commander in Chief. In the last eighteen months, McManus's port had witnessed the deployment of two million "doughboys" (as American soldiers were called) who had gone off to fight "the Hun" and win the first truly global war in history. General John J. Pershing, who had led the American Expeditionary Force, had rallied his

armies from the outset with the vow that they would be in "Heaven, Hell or Hoboken" by Christmas of 1917.

A year later than Pershing had promised, President Wilson tipped his hat and greeted the surrounding soldiers and sailors before proceeding through a huge shed, which was lined with three hundred Army Transport Service girls in khaki and infantrymen bearing fixed bayonets. Hundreds of flags, those of the United States and the Allied nations—Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Italy most recognizable among them--hung from the ceiling of the great hall. Wilson walked beneath the glorious array and onto his home for the next ten days, the United States steamship *George Washington*. On December 4, 1917, that same ship had transported her first five thousand troops to fight in the war "over there." Now the great vessel was about to convey President Wilson and his team of aides and experts on a voyage of peace to Europe--not only to conclude what had been the greatest conflagration in the history of man but also to create a document that might guarantee that they had just fought "the war to end all wars."

As the President and Mrs. Wilson ascended the gangplank, the naval band on board struck up "Hail to the Chief," after which it reprised the National Anthem. Then the Wilsons settled into their flower-filled accommodations. The President's suite consisted of a green-curtained bedroom and bath and a large office, with a mahogany desk on which sat a white telephone for shipboard calls; attached to a wall was a wireless telephone by which the President could communicate with Washington or the *Pennsylvania,* the lead escort ship. Mrs. Wilson's bedroom was decorated in ivory with a pink bedspread, curtains, and plump cushions, connecting to a large bath, a dining room large enough to seat six comfortably, and a sitting room with writing desk, chairs, and table. It was all to her liking, except for the soldiers outside their staterooms and patrolling the decks.

Never in history had so much security surrounded an American president. In addition to the military presence, eight members of the Secret Service were aboard the *George Washington*, with two

more doing advance work in France. The ship, recalled agent Edmund Starling, "had been checked from bow to stern and from keel to masthead, and members of the Secret Service all over the United States had been busy investigating members of the crew….There was not a fireman or cabin boy whose family and background had not been thoroughly looked into." The hopes of the world were on board, and everything was being done to ensure the safety of the transport.

At 10:15 the twin-stacked ship--722 feet long and weighing 25,000 tons--backed into the Hudson River. Once its stern was sighted heading northward, a cacophony rent the air. All the vessels in the waters around the New York islands responded with bells and sirens and horns and whistles, as passengers on every craft jockeyed for rail position in order to wish Woodrow Wilson a bon voyage.

Wearing a bearskin coat, the President and his wife joined Captain Edward McCauley, Jr. on the bridge. Wilson waved his hands and raised his hat to the crowds again and again in appreciation of the most spectacular send-off in New York history. It was difficult to imagine in that moment of purely joyful noise, with thousands of flags and handkerchiefs waving in his honor, that he was one of the most polarizing Presidents in the nation's history. As one of his earliest supporters, Oklahoma Senator Thomas Pryor Gore, once said: "Wilson had no friends, only slaves and enemies."

British Parliamentarian Cecil Harmsworth would later observe that he did not know of "any historic personage…who so strangely attracts and repels" as Woodrow Wilson. This was possibly because—as another Wilson acquaintance observed—"probably in the history of the whole world there has been no great man, of whom so much has been written, but of whom personally so little has been correctly known." Yet another, who, as a college student, had first encountered him, never lost sight of the personal paradox that was the man: "Stern and impassive, yet emotional; calm and patient, yet quick-tempered and impulsive; forgetful of those who had served him, yet devoted to

many who had rendered but minor service…precise and business-like, and yet, upon occasion, illogical without more reason than intuition itself."

Theodore Roosevelt, the greatest political personality of the day, took potshots at Wilson at every possible opportunity; and during the 1912 Presidential campaign—which he lost to Wilson—advisers urged Roosevelt to smear his opponent with the rumors of an extramarital affair with a mysterious woman known as "Mrs. Peck." TR refused, fearing that would only give Wilson some allure--as he looked like nothing more than "an apothecary's clerk." In this matter, however, TR's political assessment was mistaken. For all the dour photographs of the very proper President, society doyenne Evalyn Walsh McLean insisted that the women of America found him extremely attractive, which made him the subject of much giddy Washington gossip. For his part, Wilson admitted his susceptibility "to all feminine attractions," as "girls of all degrees of beauty and grace have a charm for me which almost amounts to a spell." He was, by his own admission, extremely sexual, always aware of "the riotous element in my blood." Beneath his stern ministerial appearance, churned a turbulent emotional life.

In wooing his first wife, he and the ethereal Ellen Axson of Rome, Georgia, indulged in one of the most expansive love correspondences in history--thousands of letters so passionate she said they kept her "in an almost constant state of intoxication." Cultured, well-read, and a talented artist, she abandoned any professional aspirations in order to serve her husband and raise their three daughters. She enabled his ambitions—all the way to the White House, in which she got to live only fourteen months before dying there. Bereft beyond words, he contemplated resignation.

But the war had just broken out in Europe, and what duty could not arouse in him, a friend did, by introducing him to a buxom, well-to-do, young Washington widow named Edith Bolling Galt. The President fell in love at first sight. Despite the political and practical difficulties of courting from the White House, the President romanced her, again through sheaves of letters and private

meetings. Less than eighteen months after burying the first Mrs. Wilson, he married the second. She worshipped him. And from that day forward—in health and unexpectedly grave sickness--she almost never left his side. Unwittingly, she would later enter into a conspiracy that ran the government and which would result in an amendment to the Constitution to prevent such an occurrence from happening again. Throughout their marriage, she monitored a twitch in his lower left eyelid and a throbbing in his cheek.

Despite numerous chronic ailments—and a bad cold as he boarded ship-- sixty-one-year-old Woodrow Wilson appeared remarkably fit. He stood five feet, ten and one-half inches and weighed a lean 170 pounds. Except for some youthful experimentation with mustaches and sideburns, he had always been clean-shaven, with strong cheekbones and a prominent chin; he had a fine straight nose, and ears large enough to make some look twice. His hair had thinned, but he always retained enough to cut close and part neatly on the left. Although his vision was weak—one eye virtually useless--his deep gray eyes were as understanding as they could be piercing. A pince-nez, which emphasized his erudition, became his trademark. That and a J-shaped jaw were all a caricaturist needed to conjure the man. He had a well-defined mouth, with full lips; and though the public mostly saw a solemn face, he had a toothy smile and deep laugh, one generally reserved for intimate occasions. He told corny jokes, could not resist a pun, and always had a limerick at the ready--the raciest of which was about "an old monk from Siberia" who "eloped with the Mother Superior." He loved to sing, showing off his silvery second tenor voice. One adviser wrote, "I never knew a man whose general appearance changed so much from hour to hour." His demeanor could change as well. "He seems to do his best to offend rather than to please, and yet when one gets access to him, there is no more charming man in all the world than Woodrow Wilson."

More than the elegant profile and courtly mien contributed to Wilson's authoritative stature. Diplomat and historian George F. Kennan—who closely observed public figures through most of

his 101 years--noted, "No man in modern times, to my mind, ever better looked or acted the part of an American president."

Twenty-six men had preceded Woodrow Wilson to the White House. Each generally pursued one of three well-worn paths, sometimes a combination thereof: the earliest presidents especially rose through the ranks of state legislatures until they leapt to the national level, either in Congress, the cabinet, or the diplomatic corps; a handful earned their stripes on the battlefield, where their leadership and heroism transformed them into national figures; several graduated from statehouses to the White House. Woodrow Wilson, it is true, did serve as governor of New Jersey--but so briefly that it barely distracts from his having blazed a trail to the Presidency that is utterly unique. Quite simply, he enjoyed the most meteoric rise in American history, one with a most unlikely origin—a college campus.

Woodrow Wilson loved his alma mater, Princeton, with religious zeal; and as a professor and then its president, he not only reformed a country club college into a top-tier university but also developed a pedagogical model that much of America's higher education would subsequently adopt. His efforts to alter Princeton's social structure, however, forced him to leave under a cloud and to consider a lesson he taught without fully grasping himself: "If you want to make enemies, try to change something."

A career intellectual, he was the only President of the United States to have spent the majority of his life cloistered in academia. Like most of his predecessors, he studied the law; and he became the first President to earn a doctorate degree as well. As one of the nation's leading historians and first political scientists, he had written a dozen books, numerous articles, and delivered countless lectures and speeches--often on matters that reached into the realm of public affairs. While advocating educational reforms at Princeton, he had fought against the injustices of

privilege wherever he could, championing meritocracy. Wilson distinguished himself as a public thinker.

But he had spent most of his life in private frustration, half-fulfilled, as he long harbored hidden aspirations he seldom voiced. His intellectual vigor masked a lifelong ambition to hold high political office—to make history more than teach it. With Princeton's trustees thwarting his educational revolution, the impeccable Wilson accepted an offer to run for governor of New Jersey. In so doing, he disabled the "machine" of the most corrupt state in the union, defying the very bosses who had selected him to be their puppet. Wilson would later say he left Princeton for government service in order to get out of politics.

No American statesman ever had a shorter second act. As late as October, 1910, at age 55 and never having run for public office, Woodrow Wilson headed a small, all-male college in a quiet town in New Jersey; in November, 1912, he was elected President of the United States. He swiftly went from near obscurity to global prominence, becoming the most powerful man on earth. He would contend that it had all been choreographed--not by himself, but by Himself.

"No man in supreme power in any nation's life," wrote university president Edwin A. Alderman, "…was so profoundly penetrated by the Christian faith. He was sturdily and mystically Christian." Born in a church manse, the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, Wilson did not often preach Christianity from his bully pulpit, but he ardently practiced it, infusing all his decisions with a piety and morality that were never lost on his constituents. His devotion was genuine. Twice a day he genuflected in prayer, he said grace before each meal, and he read a chapter of the Bible every night. He referred to Sunday as the Sabbath. And he appointed the first Jew to the Supreme Court.

Beholden to nobody, he had risen to his position through brain power. Wedding the complexity of his intellect with the simplicity of his faith, placing principles before politics, he

followed his conscience, never first checking public opinion. Speaking only for himself, he found much of a nation listening and agreeing with what he had to say. Arguably the least experienced person to hold the highest political office in the land, he was the Presidency's most accomplished student of American history and politics. As such, he proved to be an unexpectedly evolved political animal, with a tough hide and sharp claws. In 1912 he entered one of the most thrilling races in the nation's history and beat two worthy adversaries--a Republican incumbent, William Howard Taft, and the even more popular third-party candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive from the Bull Moose Party.

Ambrose Bierce had recently defined politics in his *Devil's Dictionary* as "The conduct of public affairs for private advantage." But Wilson defied such thinking. In the middle of a period of great economic inequality--when the nation's richest one per cent owned half its wealth--he unveiled his presidential program. His "New Freedom" worked honestly to protect the less favored ninety-nine per cent of his countrymen. In order to actualize his slate of progressive reforms, he brought a bold new approach to his office, one in which the executive and legislative branches co-operated the government. He literally walked the walk, violating a century-old tradition by appearing regularly before Congress--not just to deliver his State of the Union messages but whenever he had an important measure he wanted passed.

"What I am interested in is having the government of the United States more concerned about human rights than about property rights," he insisted. Toward that end, he lost no time in creating the Federal Reserve Board, reducing excessive tariffs, reforming taxation, strengthening anti-trust laws, inaugurating the eight-hour workday, establishing the Federal Trade Commission, developing agricultural programs, improving rural life, and making corporate officers liable for the actions of their companies. He even offered the first government bailout of a private industry in distress--cotton. Without so much as a breath of scandal, his New Freedom served as the

foundation for the New Deal and Fair Deal and New Frontier and Great Society to come. Future President Harry Truman said, "In many ways, Woodrow Wilson was the greatest of the greats."

Wilson's re-election in 1916 was an even more electrifying contest than his first, a legendary squeaker. He ran on his strong legislative record and the powerful message that "He kept us out of war." He became the first Democratic President elected to two consecutive terms since Andrew Jackson in 1832.

And within weeks of his second inauguration, Woodrow Wilson returned to Congress to announce the most consequential shift in the history of American foreign policy, before or since. On April 2, 1917, he addressed a joint session of the legislature, with the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, and the diplomatic Corps present as witnesses, in what one prominent journalist called "the most dramatic event that the National Capitol had ever known." In speaking to an isolationist nation, one that had long adhered to a policy of avoiding foreign entanglements, Wilson summoned the nation less to a war than a crusade, declaring that the United States must help make the world "safe for democracy."

In urging his countrymen to join in a war being fought an ocean away, to fight pre-emptively for principles instead of retaliating for attacks against them, to wed idealism with interventionism, Woodrow Wilson initiated one of the most far-reaching precepts of American foreign policy. Democracy had long been America's watchword. Wilson now added such terms as "self-determination" and "collective security" to the battle cry.

A dynamic Commander in Chief, Wilson transformed an introverted country with minor defense into a competitive military nation. "Perhaps the greatest foreign army that ever crossed a sea in the history of the world prior to the present war was the Persian army of a million men, which bridged and crossed the Hellespont," wrote the Secretary of War, Newton Baker. Wilson instituted a

program of selective service that would provide the potential to raise an army many times the size of that of Xerxes and sent millions of men across an ocean.

Throughout the war, Wilson's mightiest weapon was his oratory. With a resonant voice and precise diction, honeyed with a drop of Southern gentility, he became one of the most celebrated speakers of his time. He could extemporize for an hour or longer without a pause or misplaced word. He thought in metaphors, spoke in perfect sentences, and composed entire paragraphs in his head, relying on a superior vocabulary. When speaking formally, he resorted to prepared texts and proved even more eloquent. Muckraker Ida Tarbell said, "I doubt if there is any man in America that can talk…with such precision and at the same time so like a human being." He was the last President to compose all his own speeches.

Wilson codified his war aims—his terms for peace--into "Fourteen Points." Walter Lippmann, who drafted some of them, said they "merely voiced the common aspiration of liberal men for a better world order. It was assumed that they would create an environment in which a decent and orderly settlement could be made." The empires of four great dynasties had just toppled--the Hohenzollerns in Germany, the Habsburgs in Austria, the Romanovs in Russia, and the Ottomans in Turkey: no longer did divine right rule in Europe or across most of the world. It now fell upon the American President to reconfigure the pieces of those fallen empires.

More than a crowning touch, Woodrow Wilson's fourteenth point became his raison d'être, what he believed would be his sacred legacy. It was a concept under which all countries of the world might congregate, to avert war by settling disputes through pre-emptive peace talks. Others before him had championed similar organizations, but Woodrow Wilson was the first to stake his life on the idea, forever affixing his name to that vision of a League of Nations.

Wilson was especially sensitive to all sides in the impending negotiations because he was the only president in the history of the United States to have been raised in a country that had suffered

a defeat in war. Born in Virginia and raised during the Civil War and Reconstruction in the Confederacy, Wilson grasped the tragedy that overcame the South after the Civil War, in which the aftermath proved worse than the defeat. He comprehended the feelings of guilt, even shame, the lingering anger, and the contrition; he saw why Southern eloquence turned toward euphemism, especially when it came to talking about "the recent unpleasantness." He had seen how racism stained the region; and he spent a lifetime sorting out his own feelings on that subject. His administration instituted segregation--"Jim Crow" laws--in Washington, D. C.

In asking his countrymen to engage in this first World War, he had insisted that Americans were fighting for what he called a "peace without victory." Feeling as right as he was righteous, he hoped to show the world that foreign policy might have a moral component as well as the political or economic objectives. "Never before in the history of mankind," Edwin Alderman noted, "has a statesman of the first order made the humble doctrine of service to humanity a cardinal and guiding principle of world politics." Nor had any President ever suppressed free speech to so great an extent in order to realize his principles.

The first sitting President to leave the territorial United States, "he enjoyed a prestige and moral influence throughout the world unequaled in history," said John Maynard Keynes, a young economist who was part of the British delegation to the peace talks. Indeed, concurred his colleague Harold Nicolson, Wilson came "armed with power such as no man in history had possessed: he had come fired with high ideals such as have inspired no autocrat of the past."

Nobody could predict the quality of his mercy. He had, after all, spoken of fairness and severity in the same sentence, as well as penalties without being punitive. The world could but wonder whether those who sought *revanche* and retribution could sign the same document required of those who believed Wilson was the "one man who would see that Germany was not looted and destroyed; that she would get justice at his hands." To his longtime secretary, Wilson had confessed

before embarking, "this trip will either be the greatest success or the supremest tragedy in all history; but I believe in a Divine Providence….it is my faith that no body of men however they concert their power or their influence can defeat this great world enterprise, which after all is the enterprise of Divine mercy, peace and good will." In the end--properly applied or misappropriated--Henry Kissinger has noted, "Wilson's principles have remained the bedrock of American foreign-policy thinking."

For all his towering intellect and abiding faith, Woodrow Wilson was superstitious—especially about the number thirteen, which he considered talismanic. Thirteen letters comprised his first and last names. In his thirteenth year of service at Princeton he became the college's thirteenth president. In 1913 he became President of the United States, whose thirteen original colonies received tribute everywhere in the symbols of the nation, from the number of stripes on its flag to the number of arrows in the eagle's sinister talon on its national seal. Those close to the President knew that he had selected the date of the *George Washington*'s departure so that it would dock in France on December thirteenth.

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Five destroyers of the Atlantic Torpedo Flotilla escorted the ship through New York harbor until it met the dreadnought *Pennsylvania*, her convoy across the mine-littered Atlantic. Once the *George Washington* was on its course, the President's flag was hoisted on its mainmast. The sight of it snapping in the breeze signaled a salute from the destroyers, and twenty-one gunshots cracked the air. And then, two airplanes shot out overhead and performed aerial acrobatics to everybody's astonishment and delight.

Anybody in Manhattan with a river view could catch a glimpse of the farewell, and every shoreline window, doorway, and rooftop was filled with cheering citizens and a kaleidoscope of stars and stripes. Down in the Battery, ten thousand New Yorkers huddled along the seawall to pay their respects; at Governors Island, soldiers gathered on the western shore to shout their goodbyes; all of Staten Island seemed to have turned out as well. And there, the Presidential ship passed the *Minnehaha*, which was bringing home a boatload of soldiers who had fought "over there." The President was moved by this signal that the war was really over. Indeed, he had made it known that he already believed "the history of mankind will be put into two grand divisions only, that before, and that after, this great world conflict."

With the sun shining upon the torch-bearing statue in the middle of the harbor, one could not help feeling as the President's confidant and doctor, Rear Admiral Cary T. Grayson, did--that "no person could have wished for a more auspicious commencement of an eventful trip." Despite the capriciousness of the American people, *The New York Times* said the American public admired Mr. Wilson and considered him an "ambassador going beyond the seas not only to conclude a peace, but to establish relations of amity that will endure through all the coming years." Nobody realized he would be away from home for six months.

One young diplomat, Raymond Fosdick, wrote that watching the nation's farewell to the President "almost made the tears come to my eyes to realize what a tremendous grip on the hopes and affections, not only of America but of the world, this one man has." That very morning, on his way to the boat, Fosdick had observed hundreds of young men and women leaving the ferry, sweatshop workers commuting in the dark. A few minutes later, Fosdick asked one of the laborers how many hours a day he worked. Fourteen, the man replied; and then, pointing to the *George Washington*, he added, "But do you see that boat…there's a man aboard her that is going to Europe

to change all that." When Fosdick related the story to the President, Wilson suddenly looked strained under the burden of impossible expectations.

When the *George Washington* reached the open water, the Wilsons lunched in their private dining room, after which the President napped. "The long strain of war was lifting," remembered Edith Wilson. "For three hours he slept without stirring, and got up looking refreshed and renewed." Some afternoons, the weary leader slept four hours—"storing up energy for the trials ahead." After these siestas, the Wilsons took long walks around the deck.

By the third day at sea, the *George Washington* had entered the Gulf Stream, and the weather turned summery. The President spent his mornings attending his paperwork and holding meetings with members of the American Peace Commission. Several journalists had been invited on the voyage, and he always found time to speak to them, having enjoyed a cordial relationship with the press corps since his earliest days in office, when he became the first President to schedule regular White House press conferences.

Most nights, after a small dinner in their suite, the Wilsons attended the movies. There were two theaters on board equipped with motion picture projectors—the "Old Salt" Theatre for the troops below decks and the Martha Washington Theatre for the officers and Peace Commission on an upper deck. The President preferred to watch with the enlisted men, thoroughly enjoying the latest from Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, William S. Hart, and Fatty Arbuckle. While he normally would not have attended a motion picture on a Sunday night, noted the ship's newsletter, "in true democratic fashion he always fits his personal convenience to the circumstances of the occasion, and he enjoyed the motion picture as much as anybody." When it ended, the President held an impromptu reception shaking hands with all the men present, who gave him three rousing cheers.

On the morning of Tuesday, December tenth, the hilly green fields and white-washed towns of the Azores came into view, signaling the end of Wilson's holiday. He came on deck for a few breaths of air and then buckled down to business. The night before, a young, hot-headed attaché to the Commission, William C. Bullitt, had taken a seat next to him in the "Old Salt" Theatre and boldly explained that the team of advisers on board "was in a thoroughly skeptical and cynical mood" and that "it would have a fatal effect" if they reached Paris and met their British and French counterparts without knowing the President's precise intentions. Indeed, even Wilson's chief information officer, George Creel, complained that he "did not know a Goddam thing about what the President was thinking." Bullitt's chat made Wilson realize it was time to gather his advisers, each with his own specialty. Most of them, in fact, had been working in private under a nascent government program called "The Inquiry." This secret council on foreign affairs had, as the times suddenly demanded, become the nation's first central intelligence agency.

The Azores behind them, the President summoned ten members of the Inquiry to his office that Tuesday. For an hour, he articulated his vision on such topics as indemnities, borders, colonies, and—above all—the League of Nations, which would be essential to resolving all the other problems. If the forthcoming peace was based on "anything but justice and comprehension of opinion of masses," he said, the next "catastrophe would not be a war but a cataclysm."

"I have never seen the President in a franker or more engaging mood," Bullitt wrote in his diary. "He was overflowing with warmth and good nature." His charm revived everybody's morale for the work ahead. Before the group dispersed, he asked them to remember one story--that not five months prior, General Pershing's AEF had joined the French at Chateau-Thierry, where they were ordered to retreat with the French army. The American commander tore up the orders and commanded his divisions to advance instead, thereby saving Paris and gaining momentum to win the war. "It is not too much to say that at Chateau-Thierry we saved the world," Wilson told his

advisers, “and I do not intend to let those Europeans forget it. They were beaten when we came in and they know it….They all acknowledged that our men at Chateau-Thierry saved them. Now they are trying to forget it.” Wilson spent most of his last day at sea in his quarters, quietly preparing for the Peace Conference. “He goes to face the lions, if ever a man did," noted Raymond Fosdick.

The Wilsons watched the final movie of their voyage in the Martha Washington Theatre that night. Before the lights came up, fifty sailors--known as Bluejackets--quietly gathered in the corner of the hall and, to the accompaniment of the orchestra that had supplied music during the film, softly sang “God be with you till we meet again.” Everybody stood, and all eyes turned to the President, whose head was bowed, tears rolling down his cheeks. Then they all sang “Auld Lang Syne.”

During the voyage, the President had made a point of acquainting himself with all parts of the ship and its personnel. He posed for pictures with everyone, from the enlisted apprentice boys to the “black gang” in the boiler rooms. For the first time, motion pictures documented the history of the nation as much as the words of any reporter, as the Signal Corps had captured on film as much of the last year's events as possible. Captain Victor Fleming, a twenty-eight-year-old Californian who had launched a promising career in Hollywood as a cameraman before he was drafted, chronicled every interesting moment of the crossing. After his military service, he would return to Hollywood, where he would direct the biggest film stars in the world in such classic feature films as “The Wizard of Oz” and “Gone With the Wind." But no cast would ever come close to rivaling the one that was about to assemble in Paris.

December is the gloomiest month in Brittany, where it rains more days than not. It had poured in Brest for weeks. So the President’s entourage buzzed that morning that his lucky number had paid off, as that Friday the thirteenth burst with sunlight as the *George Washington* swung into her anchorage outside the breakwater in the harbor. President and Mrs. Wilson went on deck at nine

o'clock to witness the reception--a fleet of nine battleships and forty destroyers and cruisers. The gun salutes were deafening. Planes soared overhead, and a large dirigible scudded across the clear skies. After an early lunch, a tender pulled to the side of the ship, and five American admirals boarded, followed by a delegation of French dignitaries who were accompanied by Wilson's daughter Margaret, a singer, who had been in Europe entertaining the troops.

The tender carried the Presidential party to the pier, which had been elaborately decorated with flowers and flags. And for the first time in history, a President of the United States set foot on European soil, muddy at that. The acting mayor of Brest stepped forward to pay tribute to the President, with gratitude from the people of France for seeing "fit to personally aid in restoring peace to the world." After the President's reply, the French Foreign Minister Stéphen Pichon thanked Wilson for coming over "to give us the right kind of peace." The President graciously corrected him: "I think you mean that we all will cooperate to bring about a just peace."

A procession of motor cars transported the guests through the city streets—festooned with laurel wreaths and banners--past the largest crowd ever amassed in the old picturesque city. At the railroad station, a crimson carpet ran the entire length of the platform, leading the American dignitaries to the special train normally reserved for the French President. It was furnished with big easy chairs, footstools, and cushions, in rose brocade, all arranged to maximize the view outside the oversized windows. Beyond this parlor were sleeping cars for the entourage and the French President's private carriage, which had been given to the Wilsons. The train left Brest at four, and stopped at seven so that Wilson could enjoy a five-course meal in the dining car, followed by a walk in the French countryside before he and his wife retired at ten o'clock.

The train rolled through the night. During the entire length of the journey--even at three o'clock in the morning, when Dr. Grayson looked outside his drawing room window—men, women, and children gathered alongside the tracks, standing in the dark, cheering the train's passage.

But nothing, not even those advance welcomes, could have prepared the President for what awaited him in Paris.

Under brilliant skies, the train arrived precisely at ten o'clock at the private station in the Bois de Bologne, a terminal reserved for visiting dignitaries of royal blood. The building's walls and pillars were draped in red, white, and blue, and, high above, from a pair of staffs, waved a huge Star-Spangled Banner and a Tricolore. President Raymond Poincaré, Premier Georges Clemenceau, and all the leadership of the French government, along with members of the American Embassy, greeted the Wilsons as they stepped off the train onto a crimson carpet. Bands played as the dignitaries entered a magnificent reception room fragrant from profusions of roses and carnations. After a few speeches of welcome, the two presidents led the procession outside, where eight horse-drawn carriages, each attended by coachmen and footmen in national livery, awaited. On the roadway above the station and on nearby rooftops and windows, thousands of admirers cheered wildly as they entered the first open Victoria. The presidents' wives and Margaret Wilson entered the second carriage, followed by Clemenceau and the rest of the party, in hierarchical order. The Garde Républicaine, on horseback and wearing shimmering brass helmets with long black horsetails down the back, led the cavalcade along a four-mile route to the Wilsons' Paris lodgings.

"The cheering had a note of welcome in it," observed Admiral Grayson, "and it required the best efforts of the troops to prevent some of the over-enthusiastic breaking through and overwhelming the Presidential party." Irwin Hood "Ike" Hoover, the Chief Usher of the White House, said that behind the soldiers from many countries who lined the streets, "as far as the eye could see was one writhing, milling mass of humanity. They did not applaud; they screamed, yelled, laughed, and even cried." Sixty-eight-year-old diplomat Henry White, the lone Republican member of the American negotiating committee, said he had witnessed every important coronation or official

greeting in Europe for fifty years and had never seen anything like it. Reporters claimed the crowds were ten times those that had recently assembled for the visiting monarchs of England and Belgium.

Reaching the Étoile, Wilson received an historic honor: the chains encircling the Arc de Triomphe had been removed, thus granting him the passage that had not been allowed to anybody since the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, and only to Napoleon before that. Down the broad Champs-Élysées they rode, the crowds thickening. As Edith Wilson observed, "Every inch was covered with cheering, shouting humanity. The sidewalks, the buildings, even the stately horse-chestnut trees were peopled with men and boys perched like sparrows in their very tops. Roofs were filled, windows overflowed until one grew giddy trying to greet the bursts of welcome that came like the surging of untamed waters. Flowers rained upon us until we were nearly buried." More than an expression of gratitude from one nation to another, the demonstration grew personal.

They crossed the Seine at the Alexandre III Bridge to the Quai d'Orsay and then re-crossed to the Place de la Concorde, into which 100,000 people had jammed, hoping for a glimpse of "Meester Veelson." The noise grew deafening, as the carriages proceeded through the rue Royale, and the crowd kept roaring the phrase posted overhead in electric lights on a sign that spanned the street--"VIVE WILSON." President Poincaré declared that the reception "stood alone among the welcome given any previous visitor to Paris."

The wartime population of central Paris was a little over one million citizens, and newspapers estimated that two million people filled just the handful of arrondissements along President Wilson's route. Forgetting neither Alexander nor Caesar, not even Napoleon, France offered that day the most massive display of acclamation and affection ever heaped upon a single human being--sheer numbers alone making it the greatest march of triumph the world had ever known. To those who had just endured an apocalypse, observed future President Herbert Hoover--then in Europe to supervise the feeding of the hungry--"no such man of moral and political power

and no such an evangel of peace had appeared since Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount. Everywhere men believed that a new era had come to all mankind. It was the star of Bethlehem rising again." Wilson gloried in the reception.

At 28 rue de Monceau--behind a wall with two gatehouses—stood the three-story, 300-year-old Murat Palace. The prince who lived there had offered it to the French government for the President's stay. The Wilsons hardly had enough time in which to bathe and change clothes for a luncheon for 250 that the Poincarés were hosting at the Élysée Palace, the first of a staggering number of public functions that would consume the next two weeks. "An American can have anything he wants in Paris to-day," wrote Raymond Fosdick in his diary, "—he owns the city….I wonder…what will be the greeting of the French when the Peace is finished and Wilson comes to go home. I wish it would be guaranteed that their affection for America and the Americans would be as real and as enthusiastic as it is to-day. Poor Wilson! A man with his responsibilities is to be pitied. The French think that with almost a magic touch he will bring about the day of political and industrial justice. Will he? Can he?"

While Edith took a drive through the city that afternoon, her husband got to work, conferring with his chief adviser, a singular figure in his life and that of the Presidency. Colonel Edward Mandell House was President Wilson's most trusted confidant. In access and influence, he outranked everybody in Wilsons' cabinet, including the Secretary of State; and he quietly headed the Inquiry, reporting only to the President. In matters of diplomacy, he had carte blanche to speak for him, and he became America's first modern national security adviser. As representatives of virtually every population in the world gravitated to Paris, each seeking a private audience with the President, House came to consider himself indispensable. He quietly took pride in one ambassador's having referred to him as the "Super-Secretary of State."

But the eyes of the world remained fixed on one man, examining his every gesture and analyzing every nuance. On his first Sunday in Paris, after attending services at the American Presbyterian Church, Wilson and his wife visited the tomb of Lafayette, where he left a wreath and his personal card, on the back of which he had written, "In memory of the great Lafayette, from a fellow-servant of liberty." After lunch that day, Wilson received his first diplomatic caller, Premier Clemenceau. Colonel House noted that he had "never seen an initial meeting a greater success." At a subsequent meeting with Clemenceau days later, the Premier expressed his feeling that the League of Nations should be attempted, but he was not confident of its success. For Wilson, failure was not an option. The American Ambassador in Rome would report just that week that the Italians regarded Wilson as a "Messiah sent to save them from all the ills that the war has brought on the world."

Weeks of formalities preceded the peace talks. Wilson took advantage of this time to explain his mission whenever he could, in interviews and at festivities in his honor. The ceremony that resonated most for him occurred on Saturday, December 21, when the University of Paris—the Sorbonne—conferred its first honorary degree in seven centuries and referred to its recipient as "Wilson the Just." He told the four thousand academicians, all robed in red, "There is a great wind of moral force moving through the world, and every man who opposes himself to that wind will go down in disgrace."

The Great War had taken the lives of 16.5 million people, roughly a third in civilian deaths, and another 21 million soldiers suffered wounds. Compared to the European statistics, the United States—entering late and battling at distant barricades--escaped relatively unscathed. But 116,000 brave Americans would not see Hoboken, and another 200,000 would return to the United States wounded.

Twelve hundred doughboys lay in beds at the American Hospital at Neuilly, which the President and Mrs. Wilson visited that day. For more than four hours, they walked the wards and

shook hands. Mrs. Wilson could barely contain herself as a doctor led them into the "facial ward," filled as it was with "human forms with faces so distorted and mutilated that the place seemed an inferno." Later that day, they called upon the wounded at the castle-like Val de Grâce, the largest French military hospital. Wilson's presence alone stirred the patients, many of whom had gathered in a parlor for a Christmas celebration. A slender soldier with one leg sat at a cheap upright piano, while others with bandaged faces gathered around, including one comrade with empty sockets for eyes and a Croix de Guerre on his chest. The pianist banged out the "Marseillaise," and the blind soldier sang along. Decades later, Edith Wilson would recall the song as "one of the most dramatic moments of my life," for the rendition had "tears in it—tears which had dropped from those sockets where eyes should have been."

After spending Christmas Day at General Pershing's headquarters outside Chaumont, dining with several units of the American Expeditionary Forces, the Wilsons re-boarded their special train for Calais, which they reached at nine the next morning.

Sir Charles Cust, King George V's Personal Equerry, had been sent from England to accompany the President on the hospital ship *Brighton* as it crossed the Channel. A squadron of British aeroplanes in battle formation buzzed overhead while two French dirigibles and a half dozen French aeroplanes followed the boat. Midway, the French destroyers circled back toward home, dipping their flags in salute. A frosty mist enshrouded much of the crossing, but by noon, the fog had evanesced, revealing the legendary chalk cliffs. They glowed as the *Brighton* pulled into port, and the big guns in Dover Castle—the same that once welcomed Sir Francis Drake—boomed a Presidential salute.

The Duke of Connaught, King George's uncle, stood at the gangplank, as Wilson became the first President ever to visit Great Britain. His party passed into the railway station, as girls in white dresses with small American flags as aprons strewed flowers along their path to the King's

private train. By 2:30, they had reached Charing Cross Station, where the King and Queen, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and His Majesty's entire Government stood at the far end of the palm-lined red carpet, and an unlikely December sun shone.

Forewarned of the English reserve, the Americans were prepared for nothing like the extreme enthusiasm of the French. But Londoners were not to be outdone. The soldiers who lined the entire route from the station to Buckingham Palace held back the hundreds of thousands who amassed along the streets, crowded the rooftops, and leaned out of windows. Around the great Victoria Statue, wounded veterans—many limbless young men--joined in the welcome, paying respects on behalf of the nearly one million people who had journeyed "a long way from Tipperary" and did not live to return. Several times along the route, the crowd burst into chants of "We want Wilson!"

In Pall Mall they enjoyed the most striking sight of the day: an elderly woman in front of Marlborough House, wearing no hat, a shawl around her shoulders, standing on the sidewalk, holding her own amid the masses and waving an American flag. When Edith Wilson's carriage was about to pass, her fellow passenger, a startled Princess Mary, saw the old woman and uttered, "Why it's Grandmama." In the first carriage, President Wilson stood and waved his hat to her--the Dowager Queen Alexandra, widow of Edward VII and mother of the King--and she threw kisses in return.

Shortly after the Wilsons arrived at the Palace and settled into their apartments, King George V and Queen Mary informed the guests that the crowd was calling for them. And so, they joined the Royal Family on the Palace Balcony. "I never saw such a crowd," Edith Wilson wrote her family back in America. The rest of the day was spent visiting various royals and touring the Palace, and the Wilsons dined privately with the King and Queen that night. But diplomatic meetings and more accolades filled the next few days, including Buckingham Palace's first state dinner in four years,

with the Archbishop of Canterbury, classicist Gilbert Murray, painter John Singer Sargent, and Rudyard Kipling in attendance. At the end of another day of adulation, the Wilsons left in the Royal Train on an unofficial excursion for what promised to be the most emotional leg of his journey.

Carlisle, England, in the northwesternmost corner of England, not ten miles from the Scottish border, was the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson's mother, Janet—the daughter of the Reverend Thomas Woodrow. After the surfeit of adoration, this "peacemaker" yearned for a quiet retreat, and he arranged for what the press called "a pilgrimage of the heart."

British authorities had agreed to help the President keep his visit as "democratic" as possible, with a minimum of pageantry; but even in remote Carlisle, people insisted upon honoring Wilson. He and his wife awoke while the Royal Train was on a siding on the outskirts of town, after a night of torrential rain, and when Edith looked out the window of her stateroom, she saw "a mass of dripping umbrellas manoeuvring for places nearer the train. The whole population had turned out, and a sturdy-looking lot they were."

The Lord Mayor of Carlisle and other local leaders greeted the President and Mrs. Wilson at the Citadel Station and escorted them to the Crown and Mitre Hotel for a public reception. There Wilson met a nonagenarian, the only surviving student from the Reverend Woodrow's Sunday School class. The Wilsons pressed on through the steady rain, stopping at the modest but sturdy two-story house in the middle of a red-brick row in Cavendish Place, the home the reverend had built for his family. Although suffering from influenza, the current residents welcomed them into what had been Janet Woodrow's small bedroom. Without tarrying, the President and his wife proceeded to the Lowther Street Congregational Church, where his grandfather had preached.

After delivering his sermon, the minister called Wilson to the high pulpit. He expressed reluctance, as he said his grandfather would have disapproved of a layman such as himself addressing a congregation. But he did speak emotionally of the memories that had washed over him

that day--"of the mother who was born here…and her quiet character, her sense of duty and dislike of ostentation." And just as "the worst war ever"--as George Kennan would call it--had drawn nations together in physical force, now he believed they should be joined in "a combination of moral force."

Upon concluding the service, the minister invited the Wilsons into the vestry to sign the guestbook. After the constant din of the last month--the greatest ovations that "had ever come before to a mortal man," said Herbert Hoover--Edith cherished this moment of seclusion. She welcomed the opportunity it provided her husband to consider his heritage and to contemplate where this rise had begun. In that moment, she turned and watched as he inhaled the silence; and, she observed, "he was profoundly moved."