

Chat with Thomas Nelson Page in His Literary Workshop at Washington

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WASHINGTON—The selection of Thomas Nelson Page as our ambassador to Rome, a worthy addition to the long list of eminent literary men who have been chosen to represent us at the great courts of Europe. The fashion of such appointments began in the days of George Washington, when Joel Barlow, the author of "The Columbiad," was made our consul to Algiers, and it was continued during the Jefferson administration when Barlow was appointed minister to France. Even before that we had Benjamin Franklin, the newspaper man and the author of "Poor Richard's Almanac," to represent us in Paris and a little later on John Quincy Adams, the author of the longest diary known to literature, began his diplomatic work as secretary of our legation at the court of St. Petersburg.

Farther on down the list came Washington Irving, who got the materials for his "Life of Columbus" and other volumes while serving in a diplomatic capacity at Madrid, and Bayard Taylor, the traveler, who, with his many other volumes, wrote studies in German literature and a translation of "Faust" during the time he was minister to Germany. While John Hay was in Spain he penned his delightful "Castilian Days" and W. D. Howells wrote his beautiful Italian sketches while he was consul at Venice. As to Germany, another diplomat who was also a literary light was George Bancroft, the historian, and at the court of St. James we have had such men as John Bigelow, James Russell Lowell and Whitelaw Reid. Every one of these men has filled well the place to which he was appointed, and I predict the same for Thomas Nelson Page. Like the most of his predecessors of literary note, he is almost as well known in Europe as in the United States. His stories have been translated into many languages and they have delighted the English-speaking world.

I wish I could make you acquainted with our new ambassador to Rome. No, I do not mean that! It is not the ambassador that I wish you to know. It is the author of "Marse Chan," "Meh Lady," the stories of the Old Dominion, "Tommy Trot's Visit to Santa Clara," "John Marvel, Assistant," and that wonderful "Life of Robert E. Lee, Southerner." It is Thomas Nelson Page, the friend of the north and the beloved of the south, the man whose thorough Americanism and broad sympathy with the people and the country stand strikingly out among those who know him best. It is Mr. Page, your friend and my friend, as well as the friend and servant of the public in the highest sense of the word, and that notwithstanding the arduous literary work he has always in hand.

Mr. Page has always been a hard worker, and now, when he is approaching the age that Dr. Oester has fixed for the chloroforming process, he is doing more of actual literary composition and has more work on hand than when he left the practice of the law to devote himself to literature, almost a generation ago. If you will look on the book counters you will see a volume of delightful stories entitled "The Land of the Spirit," which has just been published by Scribner's. He has also a book of essays which is almost completed, a long novel which is well under way, and a history of Washington city, in which he has been working for several years, and one-third of which is yet to be done.

At the time of Mr. Page's marriage to Mrs. Florence Lathrop Field, now over twenty years ago, it was predicted that his labors as an author were ended, and that he would join the ranks of our gentlemen loafers. The truth is that his literary product has been twice as large since then as during the ten years preceding. His wife is a woman of broad culture and fine literary taste, and she has been an aid rather than a hindrance to his work. Since his marriage he has written fifteen different books and some of his best work has been the product of that period.

Thomas Nelson Page began his life as a worker. He comes of one of the oldest families of Virginia. His boyhood home, Oakland, in Henric county, was granted to one of his ancestors, the colonial magnate, Thomas Nelson; and his father, Major Page, owned a plantation and slaves and was well-to-do. The war came, however, when Thomas Nelson Page was a boy of 5, and at its end came poverty, with which the boy had to make a hand-to-hand fight, working in the fields, milking the cows and tending the cattle. The atmosphere in which he worked, however, was that of books. He was surrounded by the old Nelson and Page libraries, and some of his reading was done by the light of pine knots. Among the first of his book loves was Walter Scott, whom he read and re-read in that way, and the same is true of Dickens and Thackeray. Even as a boy he liked to imagine stories, and his little head was filled with battles and sieges, and with almost nightly tournaments in which love and fair ladies played their parts.

As the times grew better the boy was prepared for college and at 15 he entered the Washington and Lee university, where he stood high in the literary societies and was the editor of the college paper. After leaving school he became the tutor of a private school in Kentucky and with the money he made there started to study law at the University of Virginia. He began the practice of law in Richmond when he was 22 and kept at it for years, writing some of his best stories in the midst of the preparation of dry legal documents. He was made a

doctor of laws by Yale college in 1901 and he has received several degrees as doctor of literature.

I have known Mr. Page for years and have had many chats with him about his literary methods and literary work. He does not like to discuss such things for publication and it has been only by asking many questions that I am able to derive the information contained in this letter. There is nothing of the literary egotist about him, and as to his own writings he is as backward and bashful as any girl in his stories.

My last call upon him was just after he had been chosen as our ambassador to Rome. He lives, you know, here at the capital. His home is a reproduction of the ideal southern mansion of the old-time plantation. It is built of the same rough brick as was imported for the Virginia homes in the days of the cavaliers. It has the roof balustrade and quaint dormer windows of colonial days and its broad entrance porch and old-fashioned doorway are among the artistic features of the capital city.

Entering the house you come into a wide hall hung with paintings, etchings and engraving each of which has its story. An easy flight of stairs leads to the second floor, where is the library, a room as big as the hall of a colonial church. This is walled with rare editions of the classics and of history and fiction in beautiful bindings. The cases are of cedar and they extend from the floor almost to the ceiling. The furniture is old mahogany, beautifully inlaid. There are soft divans and easy chairs, and all the surroundings of the dilettante book lover and cultured, easy-going soul. As you look about you see no signs of work, and the average caller or visitor leaves without imagining that such a thing as work is connected with Mr. Page's life.

It is different in the real workshop. This is two stories higher, a little room which is almost under the roof. Here the books are of many kinds and most of them are in ordinary bindings. There are scores of old biographies, odd volumes of history and historical collections, shelves filled with American and volume after volume of biographies and stories relating to the old south. There are reference books, religious works, a well thumbed Bible or so and a full equipment for literary labor. The easy chairs and luxurious furniture of the library below are absent. At one side is a typewriter, at which Mr. Page's secretary sits, and in the center of the room is a flat-topped desk, such as you can buy anywhere for thirty or forty dollars, and a plain office chair.

The desk is covered with proofs, manuscripts and papers. A half dozen pencils lie within easy reach of the chair, and besides them are several gull pens, made from eagles' feathers. The only easy chair in the room is one with an old-fashioned wooden frame, covered with a wide sheet of leather, so arranged that a screw at the top makes it tight or loose, enabling one to rest his back as he sits. The framework of the chair is of black walnut and it is wonderfully comfortable. It was made for Henry Clay and was used by him while he was in Washington. After Clay died, it came into the hands of Alsworth B. Spofford, the librarian, and then to Mr. Page.

As I looked at this chair, I asked Mr. Page something as to the other furniture and found that much of it had historic memories. "This camp," said he, as he pointed to a box covered with books, "was carried by my father throughout the whole civil war, and here," pointing to a great steel bit, which hung at its side, "is the battle bit with which he rode through all his campaigns. He got the bit at the first battle of Bull Run, taking it from the horse of a Yankee, and making it serve for the south."

Turning to the other end of the room, I asked Mr. Page as to the tiling which surrounded the fireplace. "It looks like the electro-plates of some manuscript," said I.

"Ah, that is just what it is," was the reply. "Those plates meant a great deal to me when the books from which they were printed appeared. They are the electros of my first stories. The pages on this side are from 'Marse Chan,' and those on top are 'Meh Lady,' while here at the left are some from 'In Old Virginia,' and the 'Two Little Confederates.'"

I here asked Mr. Page when he began to write and whether it had been easy to get his "stuff" published. "As to my first writing, I cannot remember when I did not want to write. I made up stories in my head when I was a boy and wrote them out upon slates when we were too poor to afford the paper and pencils. I kept on writing at school and at college, where my short essays in the paper gave me the nick name of the 'Short-Article Editor.' I sent some things to the Courier-Journal, while I was a tutor near Louisville, Ky., but they were not accepted and the same is true of many of the first things I sent to the magazines."

"What was your first real story?" "I don't know what you mean by real," said Mr. Page, "but the first thing of any merit which I can remember was a sketch entitled 'A Soldier of the Empire.' This was written before 'Marse Chan' or 'Meh Lady,' although it was not published until after they had appeared."

"What is the story of 'Meh Lady,'" "I don't know that it was worth publishing," was the reply. "It was written during my first practice of the law at Richmond. I was always writing at something or other, and while studying law, I remember I would read about two pages of Blackstone or Coke, and then try my hand at fiction. I kept this up after I began to practice, and although the greater part of my income for years came from the law, the greater part of my work went to fiction. It was at the beginning of that time that I conceived the plot of 'Meh Lady.' It seemed to me good and I decided to bank my literary future upon it. I wrote and rewrote it. I cut it and pruned it, and at last when it seemed I could not in any way better it, I sent it off to Scribner's Magazine, saying to myself, 'This is the very best I can do. If the story is accepted, I shall choose a literary career and if not, I shall keep to the practice of the law.'"

At this point Mr. Page stopped for a moment and I said: "I suppose the story was accepted at once?" "No, it was not. It was more than a year before I could find out what had been done with it. I wrote again and again, but my letters were evasively answered or not answered at all, and in the meantime 'Meh Lady' was neither printed nor returned. I concluded that I had been mistaken in my ability to write, and I put all my force on the law. In the meantime the old Scribner Magazine



Dr. Page's Washington Home

changed hands and became the Century, and one of the new editors in clearing up the papers found among them a bulky roll of manuscript which had been jammed into a pigeonhole so tightly that it would hardly come out. He opened it and began to glance through. It interested him, and 'Meh Lady' was printed. It attracted favorable attention, and I have been writing, more or less, from that time to this.

"What was the origin of 'Marse Chan,' Mr. Page?" asked I.

"It was written before 'Meh Lady,' but was not published until afterward. It may have been held back on account of the feeling which still existed between the north and the south at the close of the civil war. The story dealt largely with the southern side. As to its origin, it came from an old letter which a friend of mine showed me. The letter was written to a Confederate soldier by his illiterate sweetheart in Georgia.

"It was poorly spelled and poorly spelled, but the sentiment in it attracted me. The girl had, it seemed, tried with the man, and it was only after he had left for the war that she realized how she loved him. In her letter she wrote: 'I know I have treated you mean. I ain't never done right with you all my life, and I loved you all the time. When you asked me to marry you I laughed and said I wouldn't have you. It makes me cry now to think you are gone away to the war. But I want you to know I love you. I want you to sit a furlough and come home and I'll marry you.'"

"The letter closed with this postscript: 'Don't come home without a furlough, for unless you come home honorably I won't marry you.'"

"This letter was found in the breast pocket of the soldier when he lay dying on the battlefield of Seven Pines. The girl which killed him had gone through it as it lay there in his breast pocket just over his heart. The pathos of the incident were such that it made me write 'Marse Chan.'"

During my stay in this workshop of Thomas Nelson Page I asked many questions as to his literary methods, and in reply was shown some of his copy in its various stages of its preparation for the press. I wish I could lay it before you. Genius has been said to be the capacity of infinite labor. If this is so, Thomas Nelson Page has it. His writing is done slowly and the manuscript is worked over and over and over again. The first draft is made with a pencil and is his own hand. This is often one mass of corrections and revisions before it goes to the typewriter and comes back to him. The typewritten manuscript is revised in the same way, and a second and third copy often meets the same fate. When the work is satisfactory it is sent to the publishers.

It comes back to him again in the galley proof and this is revised, not only as to words and sentences, but often as to whole paragraphs and sections, the old copy being cut out and new copy inserted.

I was especially interested in the first manuscript of "The Stable of the Inn," one of his stories of "The Land of the Spirit," which has just been published. This is written with a pen, but it is so crossed out and peppered with insertions and revisions that it looks more like the hieroglyphics in some Egyptian tomb than the penmanship of the ordinary author. Nevertheless, it has well paid for the labor, for the story is a gem, and some of the churches have thought so much of its moral that they have asked the permission of Dr. Page to publish for tract distribution editions of 50,000 and more.

Another manuscript over which I looked was that of "Life of Robert E. Lee," which as you may know, contains 300 pages and promises to be one of the most lasting and best works relating to the civil war and the great southern hero thereof. Mr. Page might almost be called a worshiper of Robert E. Lee. He thinks him among the greatest of military geniuses, saying he was great as Napoleon was great, and as Washington was great, and also that he was as great as a man as he was as a soldier. His first work on Lee was entitled "Robert E. Lee, Southerner." It was a 12mo of 200 pages. This book formed a part of the revised manuscript.

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Thomas Nelson Page

script for the greater work. I looked over it. The printed pages are covered with penciled lines along the margins and between the type, and in addition is perhaps a half bushel of manuscript, written word by word in Mr. Page's own hand. The galley proofs are likewise covered with penmanship, and the whole contains enough writing for three or four books of equal size. This manuscript is to be sent to the Washington and Lee

university, which wishes to preserve it as a relic of its greatest literary student. As we looked over the copy Mr. Page told me how the greatness of Lee's character grew upon him, and how, after writing the short biography, he felt that he could not help making the larger work. This remark led to the evolution of his longer stories, and he told me that many had started as sketches, which, as

he developed the characters and came to know and feel them, had grown into novels. Mr. Page believes that a novel should not be entirely devoted to one star performer. He thinks it should be a picture of real life, and says that in real life you seldom find one character who stands alone. As we talked I asked him if his characters were real to him, and if he could feel and see them as though they were alive. He replied:

"Yes. The people in my stories are very real to me. I know them not only physically, but intellectually and psychically, and I have to make them act and talk as they naturally would do if they were alive. This does not mean that the real villain will always act in a villainous way, but he must act in accordance with his nature, as I know him."

During the conversation the names of some of the world's greatest novelists came up and I asked whether, if Thackeray and Dickens were now writing, their books would be among the "best sellers."

"Most assuredly they would," was the emphatic reply. "Those men would set the pace in fiction now just as they did when they wrote their greatest novels. I do not mean that their writings would be the same, but their natural ability would be as prominent in their pictures of the present as they are in those of the past. The setting would be different but the stories would be as fully appreciated."

The conversation here turned to purity of thought in literature and I asked Dr. Page his opinion of the novels of today, which verge so closely upon forbidden ground in dealing with the characters popularly known as "the white slave."

He replied: "I suppose you refer to stories dealing with the sex problem and marriage. That problem has always been a feature of fiction and it is one of the live elements of human life. I do not see how you can present life without dealing more or less with it. We find it in the literature of the past. Dickens touched upon it in the person of Steerforth in 'David Copperfield.' Thackeray gives us the temptations of Pemmison in his novel of that name, and Oliver Goldsmith presents such situations in the 'Vicar of Wakefield.' I have dealt somewhat with the social outcast question in 'John Marvel, Assistant,' and also in one of my stories, 'The Land of the Spirit,' just published. Such things depend entirely upon how they are treated. They may be handled with perfect purity. I hardly know how to describe it. It is the difference between nakedness and suggestive sensuality. Nakedness has nothing vicious or revolting about it. It is a part of nature and should be treated as such. On the other hand I do not approve at all of catering to the vicious instincts along such lines."

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

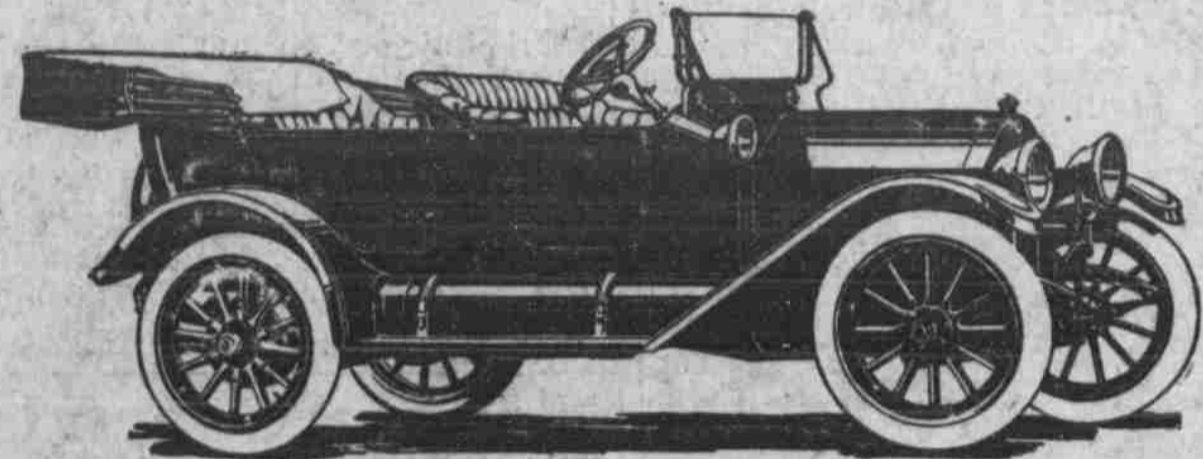
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