

RECOLLECTIONS OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

By J. L. PAYNE

Early Newspaper Days and Men—Sir James Edgar's Trained Political Choir—The Private Secretary, His Duties, Painful and Otherwise—Civil Service and Patronage.

ARTICLE XI. I became private secretary to Hon. A. G. Blair under somewhat peculiar circumstances. Sir Wilfrid Laurier had asked me to be his English secretary, and for a week or two it seemed that I was to serve the third prime minister of Canada in succession. But eighteen years in the poor pastorage of opposition had made the Liberals suspicious. No one could blame them for feeling that way about one who had spent ten years living in the tents of their political enemy. It looked like a risky thing, and risks at that stage of the new order at Ottawa were regarded as impolitic. Sir Wilfrid himself—big, trusting, and knowing his needs—had no misgivings. "I will keep you in the background for a short time," he explained to me, "and the apprehensions of my friends will disappear."

working day, but I spent at least four nights out of seven with him in his library until midnight or later. A Home Man. He was a home man. His domesticity was so strong that he had no place for clubs of any sort. He loved his family and his library. During my more than six years with him he bought a great many books. He was fond of pictures, too, and when he died his books and art gallery constituted an important part in his estate. Incidentally, I may say that he had nine children. A son died in 1897, and on 6th Dec., 1902, he lost a beautiful daughter in a drowning accident on the Ottawa river. Mrs. Blair, a sweet and true companion, survived him for about eight years. Mr. Blair had about as nearly a perfect judicial mind as it was ever my privilege to know. When called upon to make a decision, he seemed able to divest himself of every trace of personal feeling or prejudice—and that must be a rare gift. He had a broad mind, any way. His training in the law had led him to adopt certain principles of reasoning, and from those principles he never departed. Back of that there was a tremendous strength of character. I am confident that he despised politics, which he often told me led to humiliating compromises. Yet he was a politician, in even the narrow sense. As he explained: "One must play the game in the only way it can be played, or give it up."

conclusion of the intercolonial to Montreal. The terms on which he carried out the latter project will always stand as testimony to his astuteness and prudence. Having done that line stroke of business for Canada, and reorganized the Government railway system in all its departments, he turned to wider aspects of the transportation problem. The Railway Act of 1903, which brought into existence the Railway Commission, was as far as he got when he found himself out of touch with his chief and colleagues on the policy of assisting the Grand Trunk Pacific and building the National Transcontinental Railways. However ready Mr. Blair might have been to engage in the compromises which even the late Lord Morley has assured us are the very warp and woof of successful politics, he could not be a party to a thing which his judgment told him was from every point of view a colossal blunder. We may now all afford to be frank with ourselves, and admit that Mr. Blair was right, and that out of the madness in railway building of that period has grown a problem more serious than that which at this moment confronts any other nation on earth. If anyone doubts that Mr. Blair clearly foresaw the situation as it has developed, let him read his speech as delivered in the House of Commons when explaining his resignation. I should like to quote from it; but it would take up too much space.

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Affection for Laurier How far above his fellows Mr. Blair towers in the retrospect? Yet, clearly as he fore-aw what would happen, he never for a moment wavered in his affection for Sir Wilfrid Laurier; nor did he doubt the Prime Minister's sincerity.

For Sir Wilfrid has been hypnotized by Senator Cox," he always said; and Senator Cox was merely the large central figure in a large group, both in and out of Parliament. Of several of his colleagues he spoke less indulgently. He was usually cloaked in such matters. A year later, however, he said to me one afternoon when I met him: "I cannot hold in much longer. There are some things that have got to be told." But he died with the seal of silence unbroken, and I shall never cease to believe that the strain had much to do with his sudden end.

Some little time after his resignation Mr. Blair was asked to take the chairmanship of the new Railway Commission and he accepted. No better choice could have been made by the Government; for no other man available knew so well the Act which that important tribunal was to administer. No other man could bring such judicial fitness and accurate knowledge of Canada's transportation needs to bear on the situation. He knew the railways, and the railway executives knew him. It was an augury of success that the creator of the Commission should be its first head.

all this plain to understand what his earnings from his law practice in Fredericton had never exceeded \$5,000 a year, and his domestic responsibilities practically absorbed all of that sum. Two years before coming to Ottawa he had returned to St. John, and there had quickly got together a business of \$10,000 per annum. His family was growing up, and, quite naturally, his children were drawn into the best society. When he came to Ottawa, Mr. Blair's rank and means enabled his family to take a prominent place in the social life of the Capital. As for himself, Mr. Blair, cared nothing whatever for the functions and gaieties which modern society so much affects. We must now visualize Mr. Blair as a prosperous man, with the domestic aspects of his life forming an important background. In 1902-3 came a series of stunning setbacks. The golden stream was suddenly dried at its source. Investments in stocks on a large scale were followed by a money panic, and within a few months a very large sum of money was lost. I know, because I was associated with him in the ventures and let every dollar I had in the world, including all that David Russell had put me in the way of making or had given to me. Therefore, when Mr. Blair was at the head of the Railway Commission in 1904 he could no longer call himself a rich man.

Borden and Russell. When the general election was brought on in the latter part of 1904, David Russell was very much in the foreground of the political situation in Quebec and New Brunswick. Just what he was aiming to do he never told me; but he was clearly at the head of some big movement. I met him as he was going to St. John soon after the campaign had begun. He was travelling in a leased private car and in circumstances of great luxury. At Fredericton Junction, Sir Robert Borden came aboard, and for the next two hours he and Russell were closeted together. What transpired at that meeting I have not the faintest notion; but I always regarded it as significant that the next day an announcement appeared in all the leading Conservative papers that Sir Robert Borden would not be responsible for any promises made by anybody other than himself.

About that time David Russell announced that Mr. Blair had resigned from the chairmanship of the Railway Commission, and would take the political platform on a certain date. The resignation had actually taken place; but Mr. Blair did not take any part in the campaign, nor did he ever give any explanation of the use made of his name in connection with the vivid events of that period. David Russell remained equally secretive. I was at that time serving as private secretary to Hon. H. R. Emmerson, Mr. Blair's successor, and did not meet Mr. Blair until the campaign was over. What he then told me I cannot disclose.

A Pathetic Collapse. To me this collapse and eclipse of a really great man was poignantly pathetic. He was naturally masterful and independent. His presence was remarkable. Yet, big as he was, and clear as was his judgment and vision, in the end he was the victim of men and forces which I know he would despise. Of David Russell he often said to me, "He will be either a great millionaire or a pauper in ten years. What has become of this generous and clever organizer I do not know. In my judgment—and I certainly had good reasons for knowing him—he tried to operate in a orbit for which by education, experience and genius he was utterly untrained; and he paid the penalty for his folly. Yet I shall always remember him as a genius at money-making and a man who loved to be liberal."

How David Russell came into possession of the St. John Daily Telegraph would be a good story if I were free to give all the details. It can at least be said, however, that this organ of Liberal thought was capitalized by a syndicate of Mr. Blair's friends. One day Russell wired Mr. Blair that he had taken over the paper. Mr. Blair showed me the telegram and remarked that "Dave is getting to be quite a joker." It wasn't any joke, however. Russell became the owner of the paper by right of seizure, and there was no one to protest. Politics is a funny game when you see it from the inside.

Heroic Silence. In the thick of political affairs for a generation, a natural leader, and a really big man, it must have been agonizing to Mr. Blair to find his light suddenly gone out and his himself unable to tell his thousands of friends why. In the long silence which followed he showed heroism. Only a strong and proud man could have kept his peace. What he disclosed to me must remain forever sealed. He never told me all. I always fancied that he took it for granted I would be able to supply some of the missing information. Given two sides of an equilateral triangle and there need be no speculation about the third. The experience my position; but it would be followed in the sequence of events. It is equally necessary to turn back a little in the history of this eminent man.

A Humble Beginning. Mr. Blair had a humble beginning. He rose to be a successful lawyer on his merits, and for many years was the Prime Minister of New Brunswick. He told me that

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