

Franklin K. Lane: Man and Statesman

A Review By LAWRENCE F. ABBOTT.

AS I turn the pages of Franklin K. Lane's self-revealing letters my feeling is one of regret for what might have been and was not. I might perhaps have been one of that group of friends who gathered about him, to whom he wrote and to whom he talked in the frankest and most delightful fashion about men and books and politics, and the everlasting riddle of the mysterious vastness of the universe.

I was thrown with him rather intimately for a few months in the summer of 1888, when he was about 24 years of age and I was four years older. We were fellow reporters on a San Francisco daily newspaper, and in my mind's eye I can see him now as I looked up to him then. In years he was younger, but in experience, and I think in maturity of purpose, older than I. I find as I read this book that he was already at that time a member of the bar, but I did not know it then. I

this letter—rather an unusual one for a boy of 23. At all events I admired and liked him and I think he did not dislike me. But I soon returned to New York and the pleasant acquaintanceship had no chance to ripen into an intimate friendship. What makes the "might have been" still sharper is that as I turn over his letters I find that in '89 Lane was living in New York, where I was also living. He was correspondent of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, and he soon gathered about him a group of men of very diverse types who "came together," as one of the group says, "to discuss plays, poetry, politics, anything and everything—the great actors, comic operas, the songs of the street, science, politics." One of this little coterie was Brydon Lamb, "of Scotch descent, but born in America; a delightful combination of strength, sweetness and light; the simple grace of his manner, his unhurried speech, his urbanity, captivated us; we

port me for Supreme Court Justice? I see that I am mentioned. Between us, I am entirely ineligible, having a sense of humor."

II.

The volume before us is in no sense a biography, but out of these letters, admirably arranged and knit together by an appropriate word of comment here and there, the main facts of Lane's life and the main thoughts of his mind can be easily gleaned. Returning to the Pacific Coast from New York, he established a newspaper in Tacoma, which, through no fault of his own, was not a commercial success. He next went to San Francisco, opened a law office with his brother, threw himself into the work of municipal reform, was elected City and County Attorney and was the pioneer leader in that movement of reform which in six or eight years changed California from a veritable sink of political corruption into one of the best governed States in the Union. His success in this work led to his nomination as Democratic candidate for Governor. With that singular malignity with which William Randolph Hearst has perverted or tainted every American political movement that he has touched, he threw the influence of his paper, the San Francisco *Examiner*, covertly and cunningly against Lane's candidacy, and was undoubtedly the deciding factor in the defeat of Lane, who lost the Governorship by a narrow margin. Lane describes the incident thus:

On the morning of election day he (Hearst) sent a special train throughout the whole of Northern California containing an issue of his paper appealing to the saloon keepers and wine growers for my defeat. . . . Later, when Hearst budded as a candidate for President in 1904, he sought an interview with me, and said that he was not to blame for the policy that had been pursued. Our interview closed with this dialogue:

"Mr. Lane, if you ever wish anything that I can do, all you will have to do will be to send me a telegram asking and it will be done."

To which I responded, "Mr. Hearst, if you ever get a telegram from me asking you to do anything, you can put that telegram down as a forgery." Lane's upright, vigorous and open course in this election gave him national prestige, and Hearst, who has never yet succeeded in getting an elective office (except that of Congressman from a district controlled by an unsavory political machine), instead of destroying Lane's political fortunes, as he wished to do, really advanced them. For President Roosevelt, attracted by Lane's courageous and unequal fight against a sinister and hypocritical political antagonist, appointed him to a place on the Interstate Commerce Commission. There was opposition to his confirmation, because Lane was a Democrat. His letters show that he declined to take any part in wire pulling in the Senate, which strengthened Roosevelt's confidence in him. And Roosevelt, who rejoiced in this kind of a fight, overcame the opposition, as he knew so well how to do.

Lane's record as Commerce Commissioner led to his being chosen by President Wilson as the Secretary of the Interior in his Cabinet. Lane's letters, like Walter Page's letters, disclose the moral struggle which went on in Washington during the European war between President Wilson, who thought all the belligerents in Europe were tarred with the same stick, and the 100 per cent. Americans who had the conviction which my father thus expressed in 1918:

We speak of a war in Europe. In strictness of speech there is no war in Europe. There is an international *posse comitatus*, representing more than twenty civilized nations, summoned to preserve the peace and protect the peaceable nations of Europe from the worst, most highly organized and most efficient band of brigands the modern world has ever known. This is not rhetoric. It is an accurate and scientific statement of the facts.

Mr. Wilson's obsession about the war was such, for example, that he did not regard our comrades in arms as allies. This singular fact comes out in Lane's diary under date of March 1, 1918: "We had difficulty in providing for our men in France

and for our allies (the President never uses this word, saying that we are not "allies")."

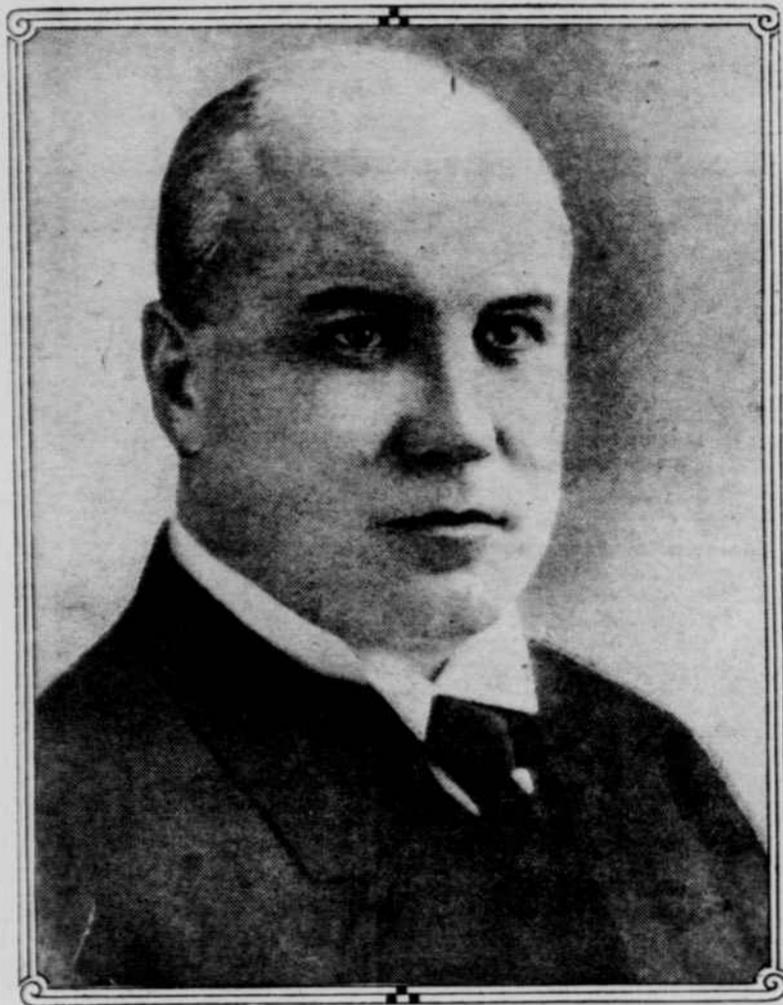
There was much about President Wilson for which Lane had a great regard, and he was wholly and always loyal to his chief, but it is clear from his letters that he must have had some trying moments and experiences. Four days before his death he wrote to his old colleague, ex-Secretary Lansing:

I am disturbed because you may be disturbed. As I lie in bed I read and am read to, and some of the papers do not treat you decently. The very ones that were loudest in their declarations against W. W. at every stage, now suggest that you might have quit his service if you didn't like it. I hope it will not get under your skin. . . .

What comfort you would have given the enemy if you had resigned! Have they thought of that? I came to the brink when the President blew up my coal agreement to save three or four hundred million dollars for the people. But I was stopped by the thought, "Give no comfort to Berlin." . . . Good night and good luck.

In 1920 Lane resigned from the Cabinet, "literally forced out of public life," as he said, "by my lack of resources." He went into administrative industry, for he was a remarkable executive. But his health had been broken by his arduous, faithful and self-sacrificing services to the public. In 1921 he died at the hospital of the Mayos in Rochester, Minn., after a major operation, which he described in a vivid letter sent in manifold to several friends who had telegraphed and written urgently for news—a letter that I rather think is unique in personal literature. With this extraordinary letter (which by an unfortunate typographical error in the book is dated May 11, 1912, instead of May 11, 1921) the volume, as well as his life, closes.

The chief impression which I carry away from my reading of these letters is that here was a man of strength and vigorous convictions who at the same time was tolerant and could see the good in every man. Lane was singularly free from partisanship. Perhaps this was because he was passionately an American.



Franklin K. Lane.

recall, however, one day when we were sent to make a report, or an abstract, of some important Supreme Court decisions, how clearly and skillfully he did the work. In the winter of 1888, just before I met him, he wrote to a friend, as this book records:

I desire to see the world, to rub off some of my provincialisms, to broaden a little before I settle down to a prosaic existence. So, as I say, I want to live in Boston a while, and my only possibility of so doing is to get a position on some Boston paper, something that will afford me a living and allow some little time for social and literary life. However, I don't much care what the billet is. I can bring letters of recommendation from all the good newspaper men in San Francisco, both as to my ability at editorial work (I have done considerable for the San Francisco *News Letter* and *Examiner*), and at all kinds of reportorial work. . . . I passed the law examination before the Supreme Court last month, so I am now a full fledged—but not a flying attorney. I have not determined definitely on going into law.

I think I subconsciously felt the qualities in Lane which enabled him to write

THE LETTERS OF FRANKLIN K. LANE. Edited by Anne Wintermute Lane and Louise Herrick Wall. Houghton Mifflin Company.

loved him for what he was, and we considered him our *arbiter elegantiarum*."

Now I knew Brydon Lamb very well at that very time, and have known him ever since, although he has now returned to and is living in Scotland. Is it not a striking illustration of what may be called the divisibility of life in New York that my friend, Brydon Lamb should have been the close associate of my admired acquaintance, Franklin Lane, and that no one of us should have had the faintest intimation of the fact? The friends whom Lane attracted must have been a pleasant group. "Lane was," says one of these associates, "interested in human beings, not problems, excepting as their solution might be made serviceable to the needs of individuals. He had great tolerance for the most unusual opinions. I don't think that Lane ever had much interest in the dogmas of science, religion, or philosophy; he lived by the spirit of them, that cannot be expressed in formulae. He had the peculiar sensitiveness of a poet for words, colors and sounds, and for moral beauty, and blended with it the statesman's observant awareness of conditions in the world of affairs."

But Lane was not a pedant by any means. He had a lively sense of humor. In a letter written to "Sam" Blythe while Lane was a member of the Interstate Commerce Commission, he said: "Will you sup-

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