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## CONFIRM THY SOUL IN SELF-CONTROL (1913–21)

*What began as a fin de siècle ended with another that was just beginning. America's worship of itself had developed into a fully blown Christ complex and now they wanted to save the world. Woodrow Wilson<sup>1</sup> took his place behind the President's Desk just before the Great War; he was a progressive Democrat and an early advocate for women's suffrage. If America was God, then Woodrow Wilson was the finger of His right hand that could shoot lightning.*

President Wilson hated Germans almost as much as William Taft loved them. Since 1914 he had watched war ravage Europe. Intelligence he'd just received had the Kaiser planning to ally his country with Mexico to help the latter regain her lost territories of Arizona and Texas. US merchant ships in the Atlantic were yielding to German torpedo attacks. People were scared. Wilson had his secretary woken and brought to his office. It was time to draft a Declaration of War. She was also told to bring some sandwiches.

‘But, Mr President – don’t you need the assent of Congress to declare war?’

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1. Woodrow Octavius Wilson (1913–21). Democrat.

‘Congress be hanged,’ said Wilson, who knew his mind, though only in passing. He grabbed his coat and umbrella and stormed from the White House, hailed a passing cab and made for the College Park Airport. In his pyjamas or not – he would have his way.



Wilson bounced about in Air Force One, a Wright Brothers’ F-Pusher, both hands keeping his top hat firmly in place. He realised war was inevitable but feared what it might do to the nation’s zeitgeist. It might change America forever. ‘They’ll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance,’ he muttered to himself as the sea slipped by beneath him, ‘and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fibre of our national life.’

‘What was that, Mr President?’ yelled his pilot over the sheeting wind and his shoulder.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ yelled back Wilson. He looked out towards the horizon, where the first reddened tentacles of the sun were unfurling across the vanishing point, shocking the bashful sky into a blush and warming the distant cheeks of England.

Merrie Old England. Wilson loved everything about that magical place. From its greenness and pleasantness to its weather and risible accents; from its ancient and crumbling castles to the original Harry Ramsden’s at Guiseley – but in particular he loved the beautiful Lake District in Carlisle. His mother, Norma, had been born there when she was only a baby and whenever the President’s busy schedule would allow, he would visit his mother’s birthplace and walk o’er its hills and dales, through its

verdant meadows, across the little wooden bridge and past the incessantly babbling Eden Brook, to the picture-postcard house she grew up in; there to look out across the Cumbrian valley from what was once her bedroom window. He would close his eyes and imagine what it would have been like to be his mother, waking to the early-morning call of the bullfinch. When no one was about, he would sometimes even dress up as her and wander about the house, talking to himself in her voice.

All harmless fun, he told himself. Mother knew best. Of course, as the Commander and Chief of the United States of America, it became increasingly difficult to steal himself away from his duties to visit that small cottage across the sea to impersonate his dead mother, but when the desire became uncontrollable, he *made* the time, travelling under a *nom de voyage* and ensuring the utmost secrecy from those who aided his passage courtesy of generous tax-free gratuities. But even these well-remunerated few, select and trusted though they were, were not aware how far the President would go to sate his dark obsessions.

Given vent on these clandestine trips was a naughtiness so unmentionable that to speak of it aloud would be a remarkability words could not even begin to describe. And it was this: whenever Woodrow Wilson, twenty-eighth President of the United States, found himself in England, he'd be secretly measured up for a new range of Georgian *haute couture* by a local crone named Mrs Frog, whose discretion was assured not by the crass monetary payments that so silenced Wilson's other confederates but by the inadvertent virtue of her extreme cretinism. Those who knew Mrs Frog assumed that she was mad as she hobbled

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through town, dragging her left leg and mewing horribly. Her claims that she was making, say, a new petticoat for President Wilson, merely reduced those who could make sense of her inhuman caterwauling to a piteous shake of the head.

‘Ah, Mrs Frog,’ they would say, not without kindness, ‘what an old lunatic you are,’ and then they would pelt her with fruit until she was on her way. But Mrs Frog carried with her not only a great secret but also the garments themselves, which she carefully hid under a loose stone in the cellar of the Wilson cottage.

Some nights in Washington, when the affairs of state weighed heavily on the President, he would lie awake and think of the beautiful dresses under that stone and it would give him comfort. His most memorable visit to his mother’s cottage was as a Congressman some five years earlier. He’d wanted to see what it would be like to promenade around Carlisle as his mother used to, and had asked old Mrs Frog to whip up something in a pastoral scenery print with a slightly dropped waist, trimmed with a grosgrain ribbon and netting. On that sojourn, he recalled, he wore button-up shoes, lilac spats and a little make-up; lace gloves, a hat with a veil, and a bustle he had flown in from Paris at great expense.

No one recognised him, of course. He wandered about here and there, trilling a girlish laugh to the butterflies and wrens he came across in the wood. He even loitered on the bridge over Eden Brook for over an hour in the hope of engaging someone in conversation. Maybe he would be invited for scones at a local tea house; perhaps they would visit the local music hall and mix with the hoi polloi. They would laugh roughly at the

rude comedians and perhaps spill lemonade over each other, then need to daub each other with napkins and, who knows, maybe steal a kiss under the village clock – but no, it was Bank Holiday and everybody in the Lake District had gone to Cornwall for eel-on-a-stick or to watch the marionettes perform stunts on motorbikes carved from turnips – or so he imagined. Wilson didn't really know much about England.



1873



Panic of 1873