

# KANZŌ UCHIMURA

— Founder of the Non-Church Movement —

Condensed by the editor from  
an unpublished manuscript by  
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## V

### SOJOURN IN THE UNITED STATES

The immediate result of the Také affair was Uchimura's only visit to America. "The reaction of all the pressures was the determination to leave the country for a few years," he wrote his friend Fujita.<sup>19</sup> A much deeper reason was his perplexity about how he was to fulfil his vocation in a profession. He had resigned from his government position. He had no clue as to what he was to do next. In his autobiography he attributes his desire for study abroad to the Christianity he had known in Japan.

Uchimura says that after he reached the United States he first understood the force of the Third Commandment. "Is this the civilization that we were taught by missionaries to accept as an evidence of the superiority of the Christian religion over other religions?" he asked. "If it was Christianity that made the so-called Christendom of today, let Heaven's eternal curse rest upon it."<sup>20</sup>

### First Employment

Uchimura was fortunate in the quality of many of the staff members of the Pennsylvania Institution for Feeble-Minded Children where he found employment. The superintendent, Dr. Isaac Kerlin, maybe not quite orthodox by 19th century standards of Christianity, was a man of character with a deep faith in God and an extensive knowledge of the Bible. All through this year of 1885 he was to wrestle with periods of doubt, depression and despair. How much, we wonder, was this brooding over the past connected with the marriage to Také? . . . . Finally the distress became intolerable and he left the hospital with problems of his future unsolved. But he had been reading busily. He names the following books or authors he had read during seven months: Frances Havergal, Phillips Brooks, Fernald, Henry Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, but judging from his frequent references to other writers the list must have been much longer.

### Amherst College

In August he left Elwyn for New England. Puritanism appealed strongly to him all his life — there is a pagan puritanism of a sort in Bushido — and he felt drawn to the homeland of American Puritanism. Since June he had been in communication with Nijjima, who was then in the United States. Uchimura was seeking both spiritual and practical counsel; what was his profession to be, and how should he prepare for it?

Nijjima, one of the great Protestant pioneers of Japanese Christianity, the founder of Dōshisha University, was a graduate

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of Amherst College. He strongly recommended his *alma mater* to Uchimura and wrote to its president, Dr. Julius K. Seelye, to inquire about the possibilities of financial assistance for his compatriot. Uchimura's letters to Niijima at this time are long webs of confused doubts. Once he seriously considered immediate return to Japan: "May it not be God's will that I should engage in intellectual culture no further . . . There is no new thing under the sun, and were I to master all the human knowledge, they cannot save one human soul."<sup>21</sup>

Niijima wrote a brisk reply of practical admonition and good commonsense. He advised Uchimura to stop reading Job and Jeremiah and read the book of Acts. "I fear you are a regular utopian dreamer. You dream too much at once . . . Don't let your blessing — your creative spirit take hold of you and drag you down. Shake it off . . . When you are ill, wait patiently till you recover your strength. Don't try to go home just yet . . . As you are ill try to get well first. Then your duty may be much clearer in the future."<sup>22</sup>

Though Uchimura says that he liked all his professors at Amherst, he was again fortunate in having as the head of the institution a Christian who commanded his respect. "None influenced and changed me more than the worthy president himself." He says that he did not miss a single chapel service; it was enough for him to see Seelye, to hear him announce a hymn, read the scripture and pray. "He believed in God, in the Bible and in the power of prayer."<sup>23</sup>

He lived very simply in an attic furnished with brokendown furniture, earning a few fees by writing for magazines and speaking at missionary meetings. But Uchimura resented the

element of exhibitionism in the latter. Some missionary meetings are like a circus, he says, and the Kaffirs and Hottentots are the prize exhibits, "the tamed rhinoceroses." However, rather shame-facedly Uchimura confesses that he played the part of the "tamed rhinoceros" half a dozen times. He needed the money, but surely he had a genuine story to tell.

He said the intellectual results of his study in America were small as compared with the spiritual benefits. But by this time we must beware of accepting at face value everything he says; it is apparent he was given to overstatement. He failed in his philosophy course, a unique experience for him. He certainly profited from his biblical studies, German and Hebrew. That English literature and church history were useful to him is obvious from his frequent quotations or references from these fields. He was grateful to Amherst and says that "college-spirit outside of baseball grounds is a noble and Christian sentiment." He could not have been unpopular with the other students for they gave him three cheers when he received his degree. Dr. Seelye gave him his blessing and \$100 when he left. He was one of the several church Christians whom the impetuous Japanese would remember with gratitude all his life.

### **Hartford**

As early as August 1885 we find Uchimura telling Niijima that though he did not wish to be a theologian "to meddle with those speculations which profit nothing," he would like to be an evangelist and "fight with Satan himself."<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Seelye had advised Hartford Theological Seminary as a

place for further study and there Uchimura betook himself in the fall of 1887. Though he had decided to be an evangelist, the thought of being a paid minister of the gospel was extremely repugnant to him. However, when he was writing his autobiography in 1894, his determination to be an independent evangelist did not blind him to the necessity for the professional clergy.

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Uchimura was not happy at Hartford. Though he was preparing himself to be an evangelist, there was more of the prophet in him than the shepherd of souls. He was a perfectionist and an idealist; religion was all or nothing, loyalty to Jesus Christ must be absolute; justice must be without accommodation or compromise. He left Hartford in January, 1888, with his course uncompleted, and after visits with friends in Elwyn and elsewhere, he sailed for Japan in March.

In the concluding chapter of his autobiography Uchimura devotes several pages to a description of American life as he saw it. Hypocrisy, corruption, social disorders and crimes are stressed and receive most of the space — it is a prophet's bird's eye view. But his final word is a reminder of the great religious and political leaders that Christianity has produced in Europe and America, and of the countless lives which have been transformed by Christ. Benevolent millionaires can be found in the East, but not George Peabodys or Stephen Girards who make money in order to "*give it away*". Indeed I can say with all truthfulness that I saw good men only in Christendom. Brave men, honest men, righteous men are not wanting in Heathendom, but I doubt whether *good men*, —

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by that I mean those men summed up in that one English word which has no equivalent in any other language : Gentleman, — I doubt whether such is possible without the religion of Jesus Christ to mould us.”<sup>25</sup>

It is pleasant to know that in spite of disappointments and disillusionment, Uchimura parted from his American friends on terms of warm cordiality. He was able to appreciate integrity when he saw it, and those he loved he loved with all his heart. The United States had not been very generous to Uchimura in the matter of scholarship — part of this was his own fault, of course. He had to borrow the price of his fare back to Japan. But it gave him what he valued most — friends, the memory of whom he would cherish to the end of life.

## VI

### SEARCH FOR A PROFESSION

When Uchimura returned to Japan he was twenty-seven years old. He was now ready to start work as an unpaid evangelist ; there was no doubt in his mind that this was his vocation. Niijima offered him a position in Dōshisha University in Kyoto, but Uchimura turned it down because the university was supported by missionary funds. Shortly after this he was given a chance to participate in work where he believed he could conscientiously cooperate — a boys' school in Niigata founded by non-Christian Japanese who had enlisted missionaries' assistance as teachers. Thus it was independent of foreign grants and Uchimura believed that he would have

freedom to teach as his conscience dictated. After a short period of teaching, however, the missionaries became convinced that Uchimura was not sufficiently orthodox and accused him of being a Unitarian. ("Is there any *Unitarian* who *worships* and *adores* Jesus as I do?" Uchimura wrote Bell bitterly.)<sup>26</sup>

In August, 1889, Uchimura married for a second time; his bride was a Miss Kazuko Yokohama, who had been a childhood playmate.

### The Lese Majesty Affair

The third school Uchimura taught in after his return from America was a government institution, the First Higher School, in Tokyo. Though he taught only six months here, an event which had repercussions through the whole of Japan occurred while he was on the staff and made his connection with the school memorable. His first weeks were happy; as usual when he engaged in a new task, his idealism soared and he wrote glowing reports of the possibilities.

Early in 1891 the government took a step which was to have bitter consequences for Uchimura, a step towards the inflated and aggressive nationalism which led to Pearl Harbour. This was the introduction of the Imperial Rescript on Education to all the national schools in Japan. The document itself is innocuous enough. In sonorous periods the Emperor bids his subjects to be dutiful and moral; the ideology is, if anything, Confucian. It was the treatment the Rescript was to receive, however, which gave it its importance.

Anyone who has been present at the reading of the Rescript in a Japanese school will not soon forget it. Once a year the

whole school, staff and students, were gathered in the assembly hall. They stood at attention in rigid silence as the vice principal, bearing the sacred scroll on a tray, entered the hall and advanced to the platform. All heads were bowed. The principal, gloved, so that his naked hands would not defile the scroll, unrolled it; a command was barked, the heads bowed deeper and the Rescript was solemnly intoned. Certainly this was the high mass of emperor worship; but for fifty years it was denied that there was any religious significance to the ceremony, and till the end in 1945 few if any Christian teachers refused to participate.

January 9, 1891, was the first occasion when the Rescript appeared at the school and Uchimura was caught unprepared. The Rescript was read; one by one professors and students were called to advance to the platform and bow. "As I was third in turn to go up and bow, I had scarcely time to think upon the matter. So, hesitating in doubt, I took a safer course for my Christian conscience, and in the august presence of sixty professors (all non-Christians, the two other Xtian professors beside myself having absented themselves) and over one thousand students, I took my stand and did *not* bow."<sup>27</sup>

Uchimura later explained his conduct to his friends by saying that he had been teaching the boys, among whom he had won admirers, that God only was to be worshipped; and how could he betray his teaching by bowing in the same way he had been accustomed to bow "*before our ancestral relics as prescribed in Buddhist and Shinto ceremonies.*"<sup>28</sup> This defiance of national authority enraged students and staff. Moreover, as Uchimura's principal, anxious to provide an escape for the latter's conscience



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and keep a good teacher on his staff, explained to him, the bow did not mean worship of the emperor as a god; it was only a gesture of respect and loyalty. Could he not come to the school, apologize for his discourtesy and make the bow?

Uchimura consulted his conscience and his Christian friends. He felt himself to be as patriotic as the best Japanese and finally decided that he could make the gesture. But he was unable to do so. A cold which he had caught developed into pneumonia and he could not leave his bed. Already he had antagonized some members of the staff by his outspoken Christianity and these with the students forced the principal's hand. Uchimura was discharged.

Uchimura was never strong physically and his illness was aggravated by the turmoil of his mind over the issue and the numerous visitors who came to consult, to advise, or to threaten; he became critically ill. Kazuko nursed him devotedly. When he recovered she in her turn, exhausted by the strain and harrassed by anxiety and poverty, fell; she died in April, 1891. They had been married less than two years. Five days before her death Uchimura requested a Congregational pastor to baptize her. Kazuko had been as great a joy to Uchimura as Také had been a tragedy; he was prostrate with grief. With good reason he was convinced that she had given her life for him.

Other troubles followed. By this time the Lese Majesty Affair, as it was known, had become a *cause celebre* in Japan. Enemies of Christianity regarded Uchimura's action as a prime example of the disloyalty of Christian Japanese; Christians regarded Uchimura as stupid in refusing to behave discreetly;

after all the bow did not really mean worship of the emperor.

During the next few years no less than 128 articles and 30 books were written about the affair and its implications. Dr. Tetsujiro Inoue, professor of philosophy at the Imperial University of Tokyo, launched the most formidable attack in three articles in the *Kyōiku Jiron* ("Review of Education") which were re-published throughout the country. Uchimura was not daunted. His reply was published in the same journal.<sup>29</sup> "I believe I have never used more forcible language," he wrote Bell. "This is not a religious controversy which you often see in America, and which I really believe is of the devil. But this is the defence of Christianity against the heartless attack of a philosopher in the land where Christianity is despised."<sup>30</sup>

The incident had come at an unfortunate time for Christianity in Japan. The tremendous expansion of the eighties had been followed by a period of reaction, not only against Christianity but the Westernization of Japan which had undoubtedly gone to extremes. Just two years before the Affair, Mori, Minister of Education, had been assassinated on his way to a ceremony at the imperial palace by a nationalistic fanatic. This, and the imperial rescript itself, were symbols that both right-wing movements and the government felt the need to build dikes.

Uchimura deemed it advisable, after a protracted convalescence, to leave Tokyo. It is this bleak period in his life, probably the gloomiest and most discouraging, which is described in the pages of "The Consolations of a Christian." He had lost his wife, whom he loved with all the passionate yearning of a man who is very dependent on those close to him. His

mother could not understand her son ; “ my very mother was on the point of denying her faith.”<sup>31</sup> Though many of his acquaintances turned against him, he was to write Bell that he had not lost “ a single friend ” because of the affair. “ My friends were extremely kind and in various ways tried to check the disaster.”<sup>32</sup> Before he had recovered his health his old foe insomnia again beset him. There was still the unpaid debt of \$ 400 on his return fare from America and now, unemployed, he was unable to support his parents. The country he loved regarded him as a traitor and with few exceptions the spokesmen of the churches rebuked him. For the third time now, in the most serious crisis of his life, Uchimura was convinced that the churches had not only failed him but had not been faithful in the witness they should have made.

## VII

### JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR

Though Uchimura was to continue his attempts to be a teacher for seven more years after 1891, it was apparent to his friends that he was not suited to this profession. They advised him to abandon it ; “ they say I am a little Carlyle and too erratic to go on with others.”<sup>33</sup> If by “ go on with ” he meant “ cooperate,” the phrase is apt.

He married for the third time in December, 1892; his bride this time also was not a Christian. He told Bell that she was “ a purely ‘ heathen ’ woman except her religion, which is Christianity in its simplest form,” by which he presumably meant *anima naturaliter christiana*.<sup>34</sup>

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Long before his last venture of teaching in other men's schools Uchimura had begun to write, and the next few years saw him busy in an occupation that was to engage him to his death. His first book was the little *Con olations of a Christian* which is still sold in paperbacks in Japan. The success of this volume was not matched by a life of Christopher Columbus with which Uchimura followed it. Though most of his writing was done for the propagation of Christianity in some form or other, he had to earn his living and he quotes half-grudgingly Samuel Johnson's dictum, "Who ever wrote except for money." His third book, *Kyūanroku* (" *Search after Peace Record of Real Experience* "), like the first, was a semi-autobiographical volume. His first book written in English, "Japan and the Japanese, or Representative Men of Japan" appeared in 1894. His aim in writing this book is indicated in a letter he wrote to Bell: "I have been reading these days the lives of the worthies of my country. Indeed some of them are grand, grander than many called Christians, — heroic, merciful, true, sincere. I have long since ceased to call them heathens and reprobates. I believe those Christians who 'pity' heathens ought to learn more about 'heathen' worthies that they might pity themselves a little. Yet after all Christ is grander than all."<sup>35</sup>

Of the many books that Uchimura published in his lifetime, most of them collections of lectures or articles, one more should be mentioned here, *How I Became a Christian*, the vivid story of the first twenty-seven years of his life. Published in the United States in 1895 under the title "The Diary of a Japanese Convert," it did not sell well in spite of some

favourable reviews. No doubt its frank criticisms of Americans and American Christianity did not please its readers there. However the German, published in 1904, was a remarkable success. It ran through an edition of 3,000 and was reprinted; within two years it had run through ten editions. The German version was to forge a curious link; Emil Brunner was at the time a theological student in Switzerland, and one of his professors introduced Uchimura to his classes with high praise. Brunner remembered it forty years later when he lectured in Japan. Finnish, Danish, French, and Swedish translations followed the the German edition. Curiously enough a Japanese translation did not appear till after Uchimura's death in 1930. Today it is one of the paperbacks of Uchimura's works that still sell well in Japan. In 1893 Uchimura published the first commentary on a book of the Bible ever written by a Japanese, his commentary on Ruth. Until this time Japanese Christians had depended on commentaries in the original languages, commentaries written by missionaries, or translations.

A series of articles by Uchimura that appeared between December 19 and 30, 1901, in the pages of the *Yorozu Chōhō*, one of the largest newspapers of the day, vividly illustrate Uchimura's mood at this period. The first article opens by saying that had the author been born seven hundred years earlier he would have been a Kamakura samurai, (that is, a loyalist), or would have travelled a thousand leagues to stand beside Nichiren, the militant Buddhist priest, when he stood alone against the nation. But since he was born in the nineteenth century Japan, he must tell lies and call a horse a deer, in order to be regarded as a loyal citizen.

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“I dislike the Japanese people, their government, their nobility, their parliament and politicians, educationalists, doctors of literature, their Shinto and Buddhist priests, ministers and missionaries, their culture, techniques, religions and business enterprises. There are few things to love in Japan now and many things to hate.”<sup>36</sup>

The second article, entitled “The Meiji Government and Its Servants” continues in similar strain. First he declares that he was born a Japanese and would not wish to live anywhere else. “I love the mountains and rivers of Japan . . . . I love the common people of Japan, her farmers and fishermen, her old men and women, her strong young men and pure young women; I want to kiss the farmers when I see them in their fields.” Then he sharply changes his tune: “I want to spit on the noblemen when I see them in their carriages”—and laments that the common folk of Japan have been bewitched by the nobility and corrupted by their government.<sup>37</sup>

The third article, “How Can I help this Country,” expresses scorn at the very idea of receiving a government position. “I would rather wear a pair of straw sandals than receive any rank that is bestowed by the government, even though from my boyhood the thought of how to do something for Japan has really troubled and burdened me.”<sup>38</sup>

In the fourth article, “I will Have Nothing To Do with Politics,” the writer really warms to his task and delivers himself of an invective that he never again matched for bitterness and coarseness.

For years the pollution caused by the Ashio Copper Mines had been a national scandal. Uchimura, his longsword flashing,

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had already joined the fight. He visited the afflicted countryside and saw the destruction with his own eyes; he called one of the many public meetings held; he assisted in raising funds and in copy after copy of the *Yorozu Chōhō* he thundered against the outrage.<sup>39</sup> On August 26, 1900, he wrote Miyabe: "to establish Christian churches in this land that have nothing to do with missionaries looks like a dream; but that dream has haunted me through the last twenty years; I am not free from it yet."<sup>40</sup> That fall he was busy preaching in Nagano prefecture. A year later he told Bell that he had covered 2,000 miles in preaching trips through the autumn. "The ideal of my youth is now partially realized."<sup>41</sup>

## VIII

### EVANGELIST AND BIBLE TEACHER

The first year of the twentieth century marked a milestone in Uchimura's life. In this year the first number of *Seieho no Kenkyū* ("The Bible Studies") was published in an edition of 3,000 copies. He had started a Bible class in his own home in Tokyo, and his summer schools, planned and conducted by himself, were beginning to be an annual feature of the Japanese Christian world. With the publication of the little pamphlet *Mukyōkai* ("Non-church") in 1901, the pattern of his remaining thirty years of busy life was established. That is, most of his time and energy were to be devoted to preaching, teaching and lecturing on the Bible or on great figures from the Christian West either by invitation in churches, his home or public halls; in building up his own bands of followers or in assisting the

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founding of "independent" churches.

Hard work, his courage, and the articles in newspapers and periodicals had made his name known to hundreds of thousands of Japanese. His evangelistic meetings needed little more advertisement than the name "Uchimura Kanzo." In the summer of 1902 he preached and lectured in several cities of northern Japan. "Everywhere on the route," he wrote, "I met warmest of receptions. It was like a daimyo travel."<sup>43</sup> A year later he was to write: "My work is prospering more than I ever imagined. In some sense I am the happiest man in Japan."<sup>43</sup> The number of subscribers to *The Bible Studies* was steadily increasing; his fame had spread to the Japanese immigrants in California, and among those were supporters who sent regular donations to his work.

By 1919 Uchimura was preaching to over 600 regularly every Sunday and was able to maintain this congregation for almost a decade. It was the largest "congregation" in Japan. "Old statesman, members of former cabinets, university professors with their families and ladies of the nobility attended by their maids are among the audience."<sup>44</sup> Some of the most brilliant students in the capital sat at his feet.

His books were selling well; substantial royalties for the German edition of *How I Became a Christian* were remitted to him. In his letters to Bell from time to time he mentions donations of ¥500 or ¥1,000 (\$250 and \$500) from people who wished him well.

One type of literature that during the early years of this period he did not pay much heed to was premillenarian treatises. Bell was a fervent believer in the Second Coming



and the verbal inspiraton of the Bible. For years he had prayed earnestly that Uchimura would share his belief in the Second Coming.<sup>45</sup> Nine years later, in acknowledging a copy of a religious journal with a passage marked at an article on the Second Coming, Uchimura writes: "I now see that *parousia* is the key to the Holy Scriptures; that without it the Bible is a great enigma from beginning to end."<sup>46</sup> He dug out some of the adventist books which a Minneapolis banker had been sending him over the years,<sup>47</sup> read them over again and late in 1917 launched a preaching crusade on the Second Coming. For almost two years he visited the largest cities of the country, speaking on this new subject which he felt he had neglected in his public ministry. It was as though he had received a fresh revelation which drove him to proclaim the message with all the powers he commanded.

Partly no doubt because of the times, partly because of the note of urgency in the preaching of a famous Christian and compelling speaker, the adventist meetings were more successful than any popular meetings Uchimura had hitherto addressed. Outstanding spokesmen of the churches mounted their pulpits to demonstrate that Uchimura was mistaken, while on the other hand Japanese churchmen and a few missionaries who shared his belief assisted him. By early 1920, however, Uchimura had stopped addressing popular meetings on adventism though he did not abandon his belief in it. He found that the most zealous millenarians, both Japanese and missionary, were even less congenial to him than other churchmen and missionaries he had known. "Some of the most zealous believers in the Second Coming and Plenary Inspiration of the

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Bible I know of are mean, unveracious men."<sup>48</sup> Moreover he could not stomach their unscientific bias and antagonism to the theory of evolution.

— To be continued —

NOTES

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|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 19—Letter of November 3, 1884.<br>DW., XX, p. 129. | 22—Ibid. p. 14.     |
| 20—CW., XV, pp. 77, 78, 61.                        | 23—CW., XV, p. 113. |
| 21—Nijijima, p. 12.                                | 24—Nijijima, p. 19. |
|                                                    | 25—CW., XV, p. 157. |

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|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 26—Letter of September 26, 1890.<br>CW., XX, p. 245.     | pp. 30—33.                                            |
| 27—Letter of March 9, 1891 to Bell.<br>CW., XX, pp. 207. | 30—Letter of March 29, 1893. CW.,<br>XX, p. 243.      |
| 28—Ibid.                                                 | 31—Letter of August 9, 1891 to<br>Bell. Ibid. p. 214. |
| 29—Masaike, pp. 94—100. H & C.                           | 32—Ibid.                                              |

VII

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|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 33—Letter of March 29, 1893 to<br>Bell.               | 37—Ibid. pp. 355—356                       |
| 34—Letter of January 11, 1893.                        | 38—Ibid: pp. 357—358                       |
| 35—Letter of January 27, 1894.<br>CW., XX, pp. 279—3. | 39—Masaike, pp. 186—188                    |
| 36—SW., I, pp. 354—355                                | 40—Letter of September 4, 1896 to<br>Bell. |
|                                                       | 41—Letter of November 1901.                |

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VIII

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|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 42—Letter of September 23 to Bell.<br>CW., XX, p. 386. | 45—Masaike, p. 266                        |
| 43—Letter of July 22, 1903 to<br>Miyabe.               | 46—Letter of August 24, 1916.             |
| 44—Letter of November 3, 1919 to<br>Bell.              | 47—Letter of January 30, 1918.            |
|                                                        | 48—Letter of August 29, 1922. to<br>Bell. |