

## Public Opinion Something of a Steam Roller

Richard Washburn Child writes the following for Collier's Weekly:

Wilson!

After all, public opinion is something of a steam roller itself.

Day after day, sitting in the press stands at the republican convention in Chicago, Mr. Bryan turned this idea over in his mind; day by day his smile grew a little less doubtful, a little more the smile of a sphinx.

Mr. Bryan was not in power: he was a private citizen. He smiled and packed his bag and went down to Baltimore. He knew that the rank and file of his party had announced themselves progressives just as the rank and file of republicans had announced themselves progressives.

In Chicago Mr. Bryan planned the simplest 1912 rank and file model of steam rollers. There was nothing very elaborate about his idea.

Its simplicity showed that Mr. Bryan was a great man.

Its sincerity showed that Mr. Bryan was a good man.

Some one has pointed out that the moment to be great is when other men are small.

Wilson without a promise won a democratic nomination.

Bryan without a trade was master of a party.

The fight was tedious to all of us there in Baltimore.

The full round moon had paled as dawn stripped the black velvet from the sky; but the moon still seemed to wear a cynical smile upon its broad, flat countenance.

From the crouching, sullen granite armory in Baltimore came the roar of a democratic convention finishing, after a week of tortured striving, another solemn and fruitless ballot to nominate a president. The wind blew with a flourish of its trumpets, a warm blast of welcome another noise-mad, wilting day. Out of the great hall, like stokers from the hold of a ship, staggered the first few groups of delegates, whose voices had been used in "demonstrations" until they sounded like putting in coal, and red-eyed spectators from the galleries trying to remember after this second all-night session whether the gray of the sky was that of dusk or dawn, whether the next meal was breakfast or dinner. Cabmen and chauffeurs stirred from their cramps of sleep, doormen aching with the toxins of fatigue, washed their stubbled, unshaven faces with imaginary water held in the palms of hands, policemen leaned against the walls and slept, posed like figures in the catacombs. The moon still smiled.

Some time there had been—when was it, a year or an hour ago?—the evening rabble of the Baltimore streets, swaying with the black and white of male and female nimbus of their own steam. The mind pictures of badges, flags, banners, display boards of souvenirs, women's bare shoulders in one of the hotel dining rooms, the purple of an enthusiast's face as he frothed the name of his candidate between his teeth, the crowded hotel lobbies, all haunted the memory of satiated sensations. The ears still heard the bark of an orator, the shrieks of mechanical noise makers—"We want Wilson!"—a band passing below the window, the murmur of thick voices from barrooms, the name of Clark, and the Houn Dawg song propelled through the muddy basso of megaphones, the clinking of dishes somewhere, and the little gasp of a girl in the crowd who had read love in the eyes of the young man and forgot for the moment all about democracy. And now there was to be another ballot. Day had broken. Men in the dirty, white apparel of street-cleaning departments, and with a boa constrictor of a hose, played water on the pavements. Clark 549! Wilson 354! Harmon 39! Marshall 30! Underwood 123!

"You don't say! Mean there is a deadlock?" asks a man with a dinner pail on his way to work.

You have to shut your teeth in a determination to go back again into the hot pale-blue fog of the armory. Your voice is unfamiliar, even to yourself; you are certain some one else speaks. Why, it was some one else!—a delegate rolling a cold bottle of ginger ale around his forehead and still chewing a cigar. They would not let him smoke it inside. He is no longer dignitary. Sweat has humanized him.

"Yep!" he said, "and my money is about run out. If they don't nominate tomorrow—I mean today, confound it!—I'll beat it back home where I can sit on the porch and listen to the

mosquitoes. Belmont and Ryan and Hearst and Charlie Murphy can take the party and go hang! Look at them rings under my eyes!"

Within the hall the last ballot in a course of ballots had meant nothing, and this course of ballots, in grim, dull procession, was destined to be interrupted by the Sabbath after twenty-six of them had been taken. This one was followed by a sincere, composite, and mighty sigh. So many persons so long together develop a oneness: the armory still held its sea of individuals, but it held something else—the convention creature.

Under a roof of cheesecloth, yellow and white, and stretched over an arched frame for reasons acoustic, this exhausted convention sprawled across a field of varnished chairs.

'Way back, on Tuesday, Bryan—the sardonic jove of the convention, with a concealed fistful of thunderbolts—had leaped up at the first rap of the gavel and roared the obvious truth that Judge Alton Parker, as temporary chairman, would stamp the convention as reactionary; the delegates were then a carefully brushed, be-coated, stiff-backed, and for the moment dignified lot, as they had stood to listen to the prayer of Cardinal Gibbons. Their faces, like sprouts from bulbs planted in the ground of their dark clothes, were fresh and pink as if they reflected the dominating center of color—the robes of a cardinal. But the prayer finished suddenly as by magic—or the trapdoor of the stage—the great commoner stood before them! He had waved his hand, summoned the storm, and, satisfied with his work, watched the lightning play about, while the prince of the church, like one in an unholy place, gathered his red robes about him, and, with the spirit of harmony at his heels, was gone.

And now, after four days, that body of sitting delegates through which he had passed had become a confused, exhausted mass of coatless, collarless, wet, sleep-short, gray-faced, sullen men. Each one having come with singleness of purpose not to change his vote, and with confident trust that every other man would, now knew that determination was a far more dependable sentiment than hope. A half dozen, awakened from nomination nightmares, or in neurotic frenzy, had jumped a mental fence; firm rocks flew not. It was the moment of another roll call; the deadlock stood!

The eye traveling over this discordant scene saw the hands of sergeant-at-arms still playing on imaginary pianos, or making the motions of those who, treating noise as a drunken disturber, would lay their hands upon his shoulders, trying in vain to keep him down. It saw also that the faces on the scene-painters' portraits of Wilson and Champ Clark, smiling at each other cynically through their muddy daubs, seemed possessed of intelligence. They expressed weariness of demonstrations, and boredom of the fruitless frenzies, and impatience of the men of flesh and blood who pranced along the narrow aisles with open umbrellas, megaphones, hats on sticks, portraits on fish poles, and gilded banners, their features strained to the absurd, hydrophobic, apoplectic ecstasy of whirling dervishes, voodoos, and the zealots of Mumbo Jumbo and the Bomba-Bomba.

From the excited mass of struggling delegates the eye also saw rise one old and knotted hand. It was brown with the sun, hardened with toil, but not made inexpressive by uninspired labor. Something in the fleeting glance one had of it left the suggestion that it symbolized America. For the moment the eye had picked out this insignificant trifle as the center of attention, and it seemed much more important than a nominee, or a platform; for a moment it spoke of character, of home life, of the national spirit; for a moment before it was drawn down into the seethe it held aloft an assurance!

The eye saw, too, the same array of heads upon which it had rested for a week, the same field of tonsorialities—bald heads and dull finish, the statesman's shag, the Oklahoma rump, the north-wind pompadour, the merino fuzz, the angora swirl, the thistle-down sprinkle, the oiled part, the Cochín-China toupee, and the Tammany bristle. It saw emissaries of the opposing factions moving like whispering Ciceros among the various delegations, still trying to gain promises of votes, and showing by every ingratiating smile, by hands upon shoulders, and by moving lips breathing "patriotisms" into unreceptive, partisan ears that

love, tenderness, and regard (with a condition precedent) have their place in politics. Wistful expressions, however, had begun to bloom here and there in the bed of faces as some very human, very tired delegate looked up through the carbon-dioxide haze at the wicked, unblushing glare of arc lights and meditated upon ice water, upon Sunday at home, upon some old familiar bed with its cool, clean sheets, upon the feel of the early morning wind from "the meadow," or the touch of "ma's" hand. Men started from dozing to the unwelcome recollection that they had come to nominate a democrat, that they were "making history" or "saving the democracy." And yet the bucket of inquiry always came up out of the well of result as dry as the announcer's husky throat.

The band played in the balcony again; once more the eternal hisses and cheers, meaning nothing and accomplishing less. Once more the roar of Ollie James, the colossus among chairmen, who had taken Parker's place; once more a flutter of excitement, because it was none less than Arthur Brisbane, writer of engaging editorials on children's nightshirts and other matters, who, bursting with a strong Hearst-Murphy sentiment in the press stand, and brawl with a Wilson enthusiast in the press stand, and had been made to "shake hands" by a woman who no doubt was Nellie Bly, because a reporter with a pink striped shirt said to a telegraph boy, who walked over the bench in front of him: "Just step on my hand instead of my watch—it's softer." Once more the composite convention creature gives forth the whistle, the sigh, and the click of its prodigious yawn; once more in a momentary hush the worrying noise of gum chewing rises like the sound of a school of mackerel at play, and peppermint flavor comes up from a sea of democracy.

Again an orator under cover of a "point of order" opens his mouth, ejects words and beats them with his fists. Cries of "Cut it out!" and "Take another vote!" drown his voice. A man on a moving-picture film is heard much more than he.

He is only a signal to an impatient, baffled tired mob to produce all its "parlor tricks"—the whistles, hoots, catcalls, Wyoming yowls, and Yukon whoops, imitations of the eagle in song and the crow uttering its melody.

Adjournment had come! One of the ten-hour, all-night sessions was at an end. The sun peeped in, the crowd swayed out. Behind them they left a chaos of chairs, tin pails, and pans; behind them they left dailies, sandwich wrappers, torn telegrams—a wilderness of paper, stirred now and then by a breath of fresh morning wind. And a white pigeon—a burlesque symbol of peace—flew long flights from one end to the other of the vast interior.

Such was the external picture of the deadlocked democracy.

What was behind it? A man whose name will not appear in history had predicted that the party within reach of victory would make blunders. It did! Its leaders did not, as those in Chicago, with light-fingered arrogance, invite the rank and file to pick up their direct primaries and their candidate and their principles and go to grass! But they allowed Mr. Bryan to throw bomb after bomb; they set the scenery for Mr. Bryan to drag out the skeleton in the family closet—Murphy, Hearst, Ryan, Belmont, and the rest—and dance them on the stage of publicity. When they allowed a group of these men to gather in the manner of mighty intriguers at a club in Baltimore they assisted Mr. Bryan's vividly painted genre picture of Tammany hall and Wall street reaching for the democratic party with fingers not only unclean but also awkward.

In Chicago the "gang" needed a majority and they took it; in Baltimore the "gang" needed control of a third of the convention, and they supposed that they had it. In Chicago the "gang" could say who could be nominated; in Baltimore they were prepared to say who should not be nominated. In Chicago Mr. Roosevelt showed the game to the country and invited the players to put it through; they did, with almost admirable nerve. In Baltimore Mr. Bryan, who, whether sitting like a sphinx in his delegate's seat or hurling an explosive at an unexpected moment on to the convention floor, was the dominant figure of the lot, also wished the players to put their game through; they hesitated, they squirmed, they cursed him as a wrecker of democracy.

The difference may be explained persuasively. In republican Chicago a third party seemed visionary; in democratic Baltimore it had become something more tangible than a fear. The