

The Convention of 1896

BY FRANCIS E. LEUPP in the Outlook

The democratic national convention of 1912 meets at Baltimore on the 25th of June. The fact that up to the present writing no one of the several candidates whose names will be presented for the first place on the ticket has enough delegates pledged to his support to assure his nomination lends a special reminiscent interest to the proceedings of the democratic national convention of 1896, which likewise opened as "everybody's race."

Grover Cleveland was president, serving out his second term. Nominated and elected in 1892 by a genuine popular uprising, and in spite of the opposition of the democratic machine in his own state, he had entered office with freer hands than any predecessor in many years. For the same reason he was also an object of more vindictive hatred among the sordid and self-seeking element in his party. These gentry could not endure the thought that he felt independent of them, and in their resentment they were willing to wreck the party for the sake of damaging its titular head. He had called to the chief seat in his cabinet a man who had been a republican until recently, and filled most of the other chairs with non-bourbon democrats, two of his selections being, besides, New Yorkers of the "silk-stocking" variety.

As soon as he had got his first string of executive appointments off his hands, Mr. Cleveland found himself faced with a country-wide currency panic. The ingenuity and energies of the administration were taxed to the utmost to weather this storm at all, and before it was over the president convened congress in extra session to consider legislation for the repeal of the Sherman silver purchase law, which, in his judgment, had proved the most serious menace to the public credit. The repeal was put through only after a long, hard fight, the leaders of the hostile force and most of its rank and file being democrats, while not a few of the republicans were unpatriotic enough to treat the whole matter as a mere democratic family quarrel, in which they were not morally bound to give the president more than a grudging support. A struggle of that sort can not fail to stir up a lot of bad blood; and before Christmas of 1893 the party supposed to be behind Mr. Cleveland had broken in two, only the smaller fragment clinging to his fortunes, while the members of the other faction were hardly on speaking terms with him and had cut the White House off their visiting lists.

A tariff controversy came in at this juncture to help widen the breach. A fairly good reform bill having passed the house of representatives, the democratic leaders in the senate proceeded to rip it to pieces and make it over into something which was neither flesh nor fish, and was foul only in that spelling of the word. By his fight for decency in tariff-making, concluding with his refusal to sign the act as it finally emerged from the hurly-burly, President Cleveland alienated the strongest of the senators in his remnant of a following. Meanwhile the people's party, which had been organized just before the close of President Harrison's term, had grown and waxed truculent, and a large contingent of southern and western democrats had struck hands with it as allies, claiming its support in exchange for votes in congress for every sort of fad and wildcat scheme on the legislative calendar. To make matters worse, a treasury depleted of its gold reserves had to be strengthened by extraordinary means; and President Cleveland, having exhausted every resource of appeal for an act of congress which would enable him to recoup at less expense, was at last compelled, on his own initiative and responsibility, to purchase gold with a special issue of interest-bearing bonds, depending for his authority upon an almost forgotten statute, on whose language his advisers were willing to put a liberal construction.

This was the story of the derelict bearing the name of the democratic party, and consisting of only a few broken timbers held together by a historical tradition, which was drifting helpless on the sea of American politics at the beginning of 1896, having neither a captain to command nor a rudder to guide it, and at the mercy of all the winds and waves of popular caprice. Every one who was keeping track of current events knew that the national convention called to meet in July was going to be the scene of a memorable battle. The south,

once the stronghold of blue-blooded conservatism, had passed under control of a Jacobin element. In the west there was a condition of social and economic unrest due largely to the premature settlement of vast stretches of raw prairie country by migrant farmers from the east, unequipped for coping with refractory conditions of soil and climate, and infected with the then prevalent mania for falling back upon the government for relief from the consequences of private mistakes.

Mr. Cleveland cherished no ambition for a third term, and the split in the party was already so complete that it was obvious that no democrat of his school could command a majority vote in convention, to say nothing of the two-thirds required by ancient usage to secure a nomination. But the fact that sixteen names of one sort or another figured in the first ballot taken for a presidential candidate shows that, even after this exclusion, there still remained a large amount of "receptive" material within easy call.

The first test of strength between the factions occurred on July 8, the second day of the convention. The question was on the admission of sundry delegates whose right to seats was contested. Among these was the delegation from Nebraska headed by William Jennings Bryan; and one is tempted to wonder how the course of history might have been changed if that decision had gone against these men. The roll-call was dispensed with in the Nebraska case, and reserved for a contest in Michigan which involved clearer technical considerations. The footing of the totals revealed a geographical alignment with the upper Atlantic slope, and a few states most closely allied with it in commercial interest, on one side, and the west and south on the other. The former group, representing the moderate wing of the party, fell 190 votes below the radical group, settling in advance the commitment of the party to the free coinage of silver, which was the chief hobby all the radicals could unite upon. The next morning the news spread that the platform was ready, and that it contained an unequivocal pledge to this heresy. Within five minutes of the opening of the session I wrote the following dispatch:

"New York Evening Post: Put on your bulletin board that William J. Bryan, of Nebraska, is looming up as a candidate for president."

The telegraph messenger in front of my desk reached for the sheet of copy, when two detaining hands were laid upon it. They were those of my neighbors on either side, who asked permission to see what I was sending. One was Henry George, the father of the single tax movement in the United States; the other was John Russell Young, the veteran journalist. Both were there to write their impressions of the convention for New York papers. When they had finished reading my dispatch, the messenger made off with it. A half-hour later, as I have since learned, my announcement was blazoned forth in front of the "Evening Post" office. Up to that time, as far as I know, no suggestion of Bryan's candidacy had been published.

My neighbors made no comment at the moment, but exchanged significant glances which I interpreted as reflecting a trifle on my sanity. Mr. Young was first to break the silence. He was not sure that he knew Bryan, and wanted to learn something about him. Mr. George supplied the desired information as to Bryan's antecedents, and I pointed him out to Mr. Young.

"Follow the direction of my finger back to the Nebraska delegation," said I, "and you will see in the aisle chair in front a youngish man with a smooth face, high forehead, and pronounced jaw, not so very unlike Samuel J. Randall in his best days. He has on a short black alpaca coat, and is sucking a lemon."

"I see him," said Mr. Young, quickly, "but why on earth should you pick him for a winner?"

"Oh," I answered, "what you would call a Sherlock Holmes guess. He's evidently going to speak. He wears that coat when he is about to address a popular gathering; he is sucking that lemon to clear his voice, which is a sign that his speech is going to be one of some length, probably prepared with care and committed to memory. This convention is deadlocked. Of the dozen candidates or so there isn't one who can draw any considerable number of delegates away from his rivals. Feel-

ing is already running high, and the whole crowd are in a more or less hysterical state. They are looking for a Moses to lead them out of Egypt. If Bryan gets before them while they're in this condition, they're gone."

Mr. George reminded me that Bryan had not stirred the house of representatives greatly with his one notable effort at a free-trade speech, although the speech itself was eloquent. Mr. Young nodded. "I remember that," said he, "now you mention it."

"The difference between that occasion and this," I explained, "is twofold. First, I need not remind either of you that it is the fort of one orator to speak on a floor with his audience surrounding him, and of another to speak from a platform looking down at them. Few speakers can do equally well in both places. Bryan is essentially a pulpiteer, not a floor wrangler."

"In the second place, his audience is quite another thing here from what it was there. In congress he was addressing a body of shrewd debaters, mostly lawyers, in an unemotional atmosphere. Circulate about in this crowd, and you will find that it is made up in great part of men to whom politics is not an occupation in itself. The element he is going to appeal to especially are farmers or village oracles—men of meager education, who learned what they know of books at the little cross-roads school-house, where they did their spelling and ciphering on week days and gathered on Sundays to listen to an exhorter. Their home libraries may consist of a family Bible, a one-volume history of America, and some agricultural publication."

"Bryan has history and the scriptures at his tongue's end. He has also a positive genius for picturesque gesture—that is, the illustrative kind which lures you almost into imagining that you see before you a person or scene described. You'll discover what happens when he turns his gifts loose on this assemblage."

The silence with which this conclusion was received made it seem a bit lame; my companions obviously were too courteous to risk wounding my feelings by unflattering comment, and I was piqued into playing my trump card. "Now," said I, "I will go down and see what the candidate himself has to say about it."

Proceeding to the Nebraska seats, I greeted Mr. Bryan with the remark: "I have bulletined you at the corner of Broadway and Fulton street, New York, as the coming man of this convention."

He looked up sidewise with a half-smile which seemed to me to mean that this was not the first occurrence of the possibility to his mind. But he only made a little deprecatory gesture with the hand nearest me, as if he were waving away any such idea.

"You're premature, you're premature," he protested, with a mingling of modesty and humor.

"It may be," I replied; "but I'm right, nevertheless."

"What makes you think so?"

"You are going to make a set speech—"

"Yes; Senator Jones was slated to speak in support of the resolutions, but he has a sore throat, and has asked me to take his place."

"And that will settle it. If you talk a half-hour to this convention in the condition in which it is now, nothing less than a miracle can prevent your nomination!"

With another wave of the hand, a slightly broader smile, and a wag of the head demure rather than negative, Mr. Bryan gave me my dismissal by bending forward to listen more attentively to an announcement from the chair that Mr. Jones, of Arkansas, would now present the report of the committee on resolutions. By the time I had got back to my desk and given my neighbors the benefit of my errand the senator, who was so hoarse that it was painful to watch the effort he was making, was deep in the opening passages of the platform. The historical review of the money question in this country excited a continually growing interest, reaching a sort of climax with the denunciation of gold monometallism as a "British policy," which could be "fastened on the United States only by the stifling of that spirit of love of liberty which proclaimed our political independence in 1776, and won it in the war of the revolution."

There was a stir in the hall at this point, as if his hearers were all ready to burst into cheers; but the senator held up an appealing hand, made another attempt to clear his throat, paused a moment to sweep the gathering with his eye, and, slowly and with great impressiveness, read on:

"We demand the free and unlimited coinage
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