

GROVER CLEVELAND AND THE COAL STRIKE BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Oyster Bay, N. Y., August 6, 1908.

To the Editor of The Outlook :

A friend has just called my attention to a clipping from the New York Sun, seemingly of about a fortnight ago, containing what purports to be an extract from a private letter of the late Mr. Henry Loomis Nelson to Mr. George Harvey, written in April, 1906, and printed in Harper's Weekly on the day of the issue of the Sun. This clipping runs in part as follows :

The truth about the letter of Mr. Cleveland accepting a place on Mr. Roosevelt's commission has never appeared. When in 1904 Mr. Cleveland was spoken of as a possible candidate, certain Republican leaders, especially one editor, announced that there existed a letter from Mr. Cleveland, intimating that it was an acceptance of an appointment on the coal arbitration committee, which would be published if Mr. Cleveland were nominated by the Democrats. The truth is that Mr. Cleveland was never offered a position on this commission, and therefore never accepted it. There seems to have been some confusion in Mr. Roosevelt's own mind about it, and the idea that Mr. Cleveland had consented to be a member of the commission was studiously encouraged and spread abroad by interested Republicans.

Mr. Cleveland gave me an account of the whole affair, so far as his own connection with it was concerned. Moved by the suffering, especially of people of moderate means who were living about him in Princeton, he wrote to Mr. Roosevelt a letter which apparently he regrets now to have sent him. In this letter Mr. Cleveland told the President that he thought that the two opposing bodies should be asked, in the interest of the public, to agree to a truce, and that during this truce some investigation should be made of the situation. It was a letter that he wrote under

the strong feeling that the suffering of the people about him had aroused. Shortly afterward, when Mr. Roosevelt determined to take some action, he wrote to Mr. Cleveland asking him to be a member of a commission to investigate conditions. As Mr. Cleveland had written the first letter, he felt that he had put himself in the power of the President, or had given the President a right to call upon him, and, saying so, told Mr. Roosevelt that he would accept. His letter had hardly reached Washington when he received a telegram from Mr. Roosevelt saying that it would not be necessary to call upon him. This pleased Mr. Cleveland very much.

Then Mr. Roosevelt decided upon another course, and, upon the appointment of a committee of arbitration—the composition of which and the purpose of which and the result of the deliberation of which we are all familiar with—it appeared to have got into Mr. Roosevelt's mind that he had offered Mr. Cleveland a place on this commission. Subsequently, when the two met at some function, Mr. Roosevelt said to Mr. Cleveland that he had tried very hard to have him appointed one of the commissioners, but that the labor unions or the coal operators, one or the other or both, desired representatives of certain professions or branches of government appointed. Upon hearing this Mr. Cleveland said to Mr. Roosevelt that he had never accepted a position on such a commission; he added that he would never have taken such a place, and that under no circumstances would he have consented to be a member of such a commission. Not long afterward the two met somewhere else and Mr. Roosevelt repeated his remark about his desiring to appoint Mr. Cleveland a member of the arbitration commission. Then Mr. Cleveland said to him, "Why, Roosevelt, I have already told you that I never would have accepted a place on such a commission; it was an entirely different commission that you proposed to me, and it was on that differ-

ent commission that I reluctantly consented to act, but I never could have been induced to be one of the arbitrators."

Mr. Cleveland was offered a position on the commission as I originally intended to form it, and accepted it, and he never had any such conversations with me as those quoted in the latter part of the article, and never said to me anything remotely resembling what he is there alleged to have said. As a matter of fact, I do not for a moment believe that there is any truth in the allegation that he told Mr. Nelson that he had made such statements; for the following letters show that Mr. Nelson's allegation simply amounts to an attack on Mr. Cleveland's good faith. The facts of the case are as follows:

On October 3, 1902, I held a meeting in Washington between the coal operators and the strikers to endeavor to get them to come to an agreement or to submit their differences to some outside body of men. The strikers were willing to do as I suggested, provided the operators would also consent; but the operators refused to consent, and on the whole showed much more violence in the interview with me than the strikers did; and these facts were made public in the papers next day, by some of the operators themselves. Immediately on seeing them Mr. Cleveland wrote me the following letter:

Princeton, October 4, 1902.

My dear Mr. President:

I read in the paper this morning on my way home from Buzzards Bay, the newspaper account of what took place yesterday between you and the parties directly concerned in the coal strike.

I am so surprised and "stirred up" by the position taken by the contestants that I cannot refrain from making a suggestion which perhaps I would not presume to make if I gave the subject more thought. I am especially disturbed and vexed by the tone and substance of the operators' deliverances.

It cannot be that either side, after your admonition to them, cares to stand in their present plight, if any sort of an avenue, even for temporary escape, is suggested to them.

Has it ever been proposed to them that the indignation and dangerous condemnation now being cannonaded against both their houses might be allayed by the production of coal in an amount, or for a length of time, sufficient to serve the purposes of consumers, leaving the parties to the quarrel, after such necessities are met, to take up the fight

again where they left off "without prejudice" if they desire?

This would eliminate the troublesome consumer and public; and perhaps both operators and miners would see enough advantage in that, to induce them to listen to such a proposition as I have suggested.

I know there would be nothing philosophical or consistent in all this; but my observation leads me to think that when quarreling parties are both in the wrong, and are assailed with blame so nearly universal, they will do strange things to save their faces.

If you pardon my presumption in thus writing you, I promise never to do it again. At any rate it may serve as an indication of the anxiety felt by millions of our citizens on the subject.

I have been quite impressed by a pamphlet I have lately read, by a Mr. Champlin of Boston, entitled I believe "The Coal Mines and the People." I suppose you have seen it.¹

Very respectfully,
Your obedient servant,
GROVER CLEVELAND.

To the President.

I immediately answered him describing among other things the attitude of the operators at the conference and their refusal to consider what I regarded as Mr. Mitchell's entirely fair proposition, and continued:

I think I shall now tell Mitchell that if the miners will go back to work I will appoint a commission to investigate the whole situation, and will do whatever in my power lies to have the findings of such commission favorably acted upon. This seems to be . . . the best step at the moment to take. I feel the gravest apprehension concerning the misery pending over so many people this winter and the consequent rioting which may, and probably will, ensue.

Immediately afterwards Mr. Cleveland wrote me asking me to be his guest when I came on to Princeton, which I was then intending to do. I answered on October 10 explaining that because of an injury from which I had not recovered I would not be able to go to Princeton; and I then continued, stating that I was about to ask him to render a service which I knew he would be reluctant to undertake, and which I only asked because I felt we were in the midst of so serious a crisis and one so deeply affecting the welfare of our people. I continued:

My efforts to get the operators and miners to agree failed, chiefly through the fault of

¹This was a pamphlet recommending exceedingly radical action against the operators; far more radical action than I took.

the operators. I then asked the miners to go back to work so that the pressing necessities of the public might be met, promising at once to appoint such a commission as Mr. Mitchell had suggested, and stating that I would do all in my power to have the recommendations of that commission adopted, of course meaning that I should do all in my power to have whatever legislation they advocated enacted, as well as backing up their recommendations in all other ways. But Mitchell refused on behalf of the miners to entertain this proposition. . . . I shall now direct Carroll D. Wright to make a full and careful investigation. . . . I wish to join with him two eminent men—men of such character that save in a crisis like this I would not dream of appealing to them to render any Government service. In all the country there is no man whose name would add such weight to this inquiry as would yours. I earnestly beg you to say that you will accept.

To this Mr. Cleveland wrote on October 12 as follows:

Princeton, October 12, 1902.

My dear Mr. President:

Since the receipt of your letter yesterday I have given its subject matter serious consideration.

You rightly appreciate my reluctance to assume any public service. I am also quite certain that if my advice was asked as to the expediency of naming me in the connection you mention, I should, as a matter of judgment, not favor it.

I cannot, however, with proper deference to your opinion, consider this phase of the question as open to discussion. I have therefore felt that I had only to determine whether your request involved a duty which I ought not to avoid, and whether my engagements and the present demands upon my time would permit me to undertake it.

So far as the latter are concerned this is my situation: I am to take part and say something at President Wilson's inauguration on the 25th inst., and I have agreed to do the same at the opening of the new building of the Chamber of Commerce in New York on the 11th of November. My preparation for the inaugural exercises is complete; but for the other occasion it is hardly begun. I am absurdly slow in such work.

I have no idea of the time which would be exacted by a compliance with your request, nor how early you would expect a result from the Commission.

I feel so deeply the gravity of the situation, and I so fully sympathize with you in your efforts to remedy present sad conditions, that I believe it is my duty to undertake the service if I can do so and keep the engagements I have already made.

This I will leave for your decision—only suggesting that I ought to have the next week at least for preparation to keep my New York engagement.

If after reading this you shall notify me that you still think I can undertake the duty you suggest, will you deem it amiss if I hint that I should be glad to know who the third member of the Commission will be?

Your obedient servant,
GROVER CLEVELAND.

The President,
Washington, D. C.

In this letter I call attention to the fact that he expressly alludes to the body on which he was to serve as a "Commission," which does away with any quibble as to the terminology. I received this letter on the 13th. I immediately wrote to a certain Federal judge asking him to be the third member of the commission; but during the next two days I finally got both the operators and the miners to consent to the appointment of the commission, which relieved me from the necessity of appointing it without their consent. The operators, however, wished the commission to be of five men instead of three, and each side insisted upon having certain categories or types of men represented on the commission; and in order to get all these types on I finally had to increase the commission to a membership of seven; and even then my efforts to get both sides to agree to abide by the decision of the commission, and meanwhile to resume work, nearly failed, for the strikers insisted upon having a labor man on the commission, and the operators positively refused to consent to such an appointment. After hours of patient negotiation I finally found that the operators really objected to the labor man being appointed *as such*; and as they wished some one of the commission to be what they called a "sociologist," I finally appointed a labor man and called him a sociologist, which, rather to my amusement, and greatly to my relief, gave entire satisfaction to both sides. I endeavored to get the consent of both sides to appoint Mr. Cleveland in place of one of the men who actually was appointed, but as he did not come under any of the categories which they had named, and as they declined to permit me to appoint him in place of one of the men included in these categories, I had to abandon the effort. Of course it would have been not merely silly, but wicked, for me to have insisted upon the appointment of

any one man, at the risk of jeopardizing the agreement of the two sides to resume work and to submit the whole question to the judgment of the commission which I was about to appoint. I therefore appointed the commission, and telegraphed and wrote to Mr. Cleveland as follows :

The White House,
Washington, October 16, 1902.

Strictly personal.

Hon. Grover Cleveland, Princeton, N. J. :

Deeply grateful for your letter. Propositions that have been made since have totally changed situation so that I will not have to make the demand upon you which three days ago it seemed I would have to for the interest of the nation. I thank you most deeply and shall write you at length.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

The White House,
Washington, October 16, 1902.

Personal.

My dear Mr. Cleveland :

I appreciated so deeply your being willing to accept that it was very hard for me to forego the chance of putting you on the commission. But in order to get the vitally necessary agreement between the operators and miners I found I had to consult their

wishes as to the types of men. Of course I knew that it was the greatest relief to you not to be obliged to serve, but I did wish to have you on, in the first place, because of the weight your name would have lent the commission, and in the next place, because of the effect upon our people, and especially upon our young men, of such an example of genuine self-denying patriotism—for, my dear sir, your service would have meant all this. I do not know whether you understand how heartily I thank you and appreciate what you have done.

Faithfully yours,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

Hon. Grover Cleveland,
Princeton, N. J.

The above correspondence shows not only that Mr. Cleveland accepted my offer to put him on the commission, but that he actually accepted it at a time when the appointment of this commission was not acquiesced in by either operators or miners, and when, therefore, every argument made by the ultra-conservatives against the appointment of the commission applied with a hundred-fold greater force than when the commission was actually appointed.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

