

Even giving his business part-time attention, Johnson had done rather well. He had invented a grooved streetcar rail and he and his associates, including the du Ponts, had built a factory to manufacture curves, frogs, and switches out of the rail in Johnstown, Pennsylvania; he had bought a railway line in Brooklyn, New York, and in St. Louis. He had rescued the Detroit street railway, which his brother Albert had purchased. Further, he and his associates built the Lorain Steel Company in Lorain, Ohio, which became part of United States Steel Corporation.

Johnson, incidentally, played an important role in the popularization of Coney Island by putting it within reach of the masses through cheap transportation. He merged the Nassau Street railroad with the Atlantic Avenue system and established the first five-cent fare from Brooklyn Bridge to Coney Island. The fare previously had been about twenty-five cents.

One night an old millionaire friend, R. T. Wilson of New York, came to Johnson's hotel room and asked his help through a severe fit of depression that his millions could not relieve, and Johnson suddenly knew that he must escape the net that his many business activities had thrown over his dreams for public service. He began at that time a program of steady withdrawal from business.

On January 8, 1901, Johnson announced at a Jackson Day banquet in Cleveland's Kennard House that he was forsaking business forever and would devote the rest of his life to politics—not as a candidate for office, but as a worker in the ranks “for the principles of democracy.”

Less than a month later, on February 1, a delegation of fifty Democrats called on Johnson at home and asked him to be a candidate for mayor of Cleveland. They presented him with a petition with 15,682 signatures. Tom L. found the call irresistible. He was nominated at the Democratic primaries in mid-February.

He was a different kind of politician from the very outset. His use of a circus tent for his meetings—an emergency device at first—became a trademark.

He refused to spend a lot of money on his campaign, even though he was wealthy. He wouldn't even buy a lottery ticket or a ticket to a church gathering.

He wouldn't promise a delegation of City Hall employees that he would continue them in their jobs if elected. When they asked him to pledge the dismissal of all Republicans holding city jobs, he refused.

He declared against granting extensions of street railway franchises to lines charging any fare higher than three cents.

He went on record as a supporter of Henry George's single tax

philosophy and promised to try to right an unjust appraisal of real property made the year before.

Big Business took Johnson's nomination calmly, and some members of the Chamber of Commerce thought his election might even be a good thing. One of the most widely quoted reactions was that the election gave Cleveland "a chance to get good government and a hundred-thousand-dollar man for mayor at six thousand dollars a year."

Mark Hanna was not one of the complacent ones. He regarded Tom Johnson as a dangerous man and warned against his election.

The railroad interests also were fearful of Johnson achieving the mayoralty, and they put pressure on the existing city administration of Mayor John Farley and the City Council to reach a settlement on some disputed lakefront land. The land, claimed by the city and the railroads, was worth from ten to twenty million dollars at the time.

"As a citizen," said Johnson, "I had brought suit to prevent the mayor . . . from signing an ordinance passed by a crooked council settling the controversy and conveying the land in question to the railroads without compensation."

Johnson obtained an injunction preventing the city from executing the twenty-million-dollar giveaway ordinance. It was due to expire at eleven o'clock on the morning of April 4. Tom L. was elected mayor on April 1, 1901, defeating his Republican opponent, W. J. Akers, by some six thousand votes. He had three days to win certification of election by the Board of Elections if he was going to block the land gift to the railroads, but it normally took the board from two to three weeks to make its official count.

Johnson prodded the Board of Elections into working night and day to finish the count before the injunction expired. It was a miracle of sorts that they succeeded.

Just thirty-seven minutes before the injunction would die, Johnson took the official oath of office of the city clerk on the third floor of the City Hall, filed his bond, and went directly to the mayor's office.

"Mr. Farley looked up as I came in and mumbled ungraciously; 'Well, Tom, when are you going to take hold?'"

"I replied that I hoped he would take his time about moving his belongings, but that I had been mayor for several minutes."

No city ever got such a bargain! A saving of twenty million dollars' worth of precious lakefront land simply by substituting one mayor for another.

The way in which Tom L. Johnson's election as mayor of Cleveland upset the balance of power in the city and shattered the social and political complacency of the entire community is suggested in a recol-

lection by one of Johnson's followers, a former Cleveland city councilman named Frederic C. Howe, who, as a Republican, was one of the new chief executive's opponents in the beginning.

"For the greater part of nine years [Johnson's reign as mayor]," wrote Howe, "Cleveland was an armed camp. There was but one line of division. It was between those who would crucify Mr. Johnson and all of his friends, and those who believed in him. I doubt if any of the border cities like Washington and Covington during the Civil War were more completely rent asunder than was Cleveland during those years. It is doubtful if the wars of the Guelphs and Ghibellines in the Italian cities were more bitter, more remorseless, more cruel than this contention in Cleveland.

"If any kind of cruelty, any kind of coercion, any kind of social, political or financial power was left untried in those years to break the heart of Mr. Johnson, I do not know what or when it was."

Life in Cleveland changed when the stout (260 pounds), curly-haired mayor took office. Cleveland voters had sown the wind and they reaped a whirlwind. Not many of the people in the street had understood him during his campaign as he inveighed against Privilege and hammered words of criticism at monopolistic practices, especially the public utility companies that provided the city's electricity, artificial gas, and street railway service, but they had deep faith in this man who had turned his back on money and privilege to serve them.

The city delighted in the spectacle of the new mayor at work. The people chuckled and applauded when he ordered the parks department to pull up the "Don't Walk on the Grass" signs and invited the citizens to go out of their way to walk on the public greens wherever they found them. They watched admiringly as he ordered new playgrounds, instituted reforms in the city's penal policy, bought farmlands for the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents, ordered the city to take over garbage collection and disposal (saving the city money in the process), began a new policy of law enforcement, warred on billboards, put whitewings to work cleaning up the city streets, and hammered at county tax policies.

Among those who stood by and watched the new mayor in amazement was Lincoln Steffens, the nation's leading exposé of municipal corruption, who described Johnson's debut in office in these words:

"It was like seeing a captain of industry on the stage. He listened, all attention, till he understood. Then he would smile or laugh, give a decision, and 'Next!' No asking time to 'think it over' or to 'consult his colleagues,' no talk of 'commissions to investigate,' no 'come again next week.' It was no or yes, genial, jolly, but final."

Vice was a prominent part of the Cleveland way of life when Johnson took over; most of it concentrated along the northern edge of

the downtown section. The new mayor certainly was no prude, but his sense of civic propriety was offended by what he saw, especially as he recognized that a large degree of police cooperation was an essential element wherever wickedness was able to flourish. He reached deep into the back ranks of the police department and pulled out an arrogant officer named Fred Kohler against whom a number of complaints had been lodged. At first he answered the complaints by sending Kohler to the sticks, but now he decided he had been unfair and that Kohler could be, in fact, a real asset to his administration.

"How would you like to be chief?" he asked the stiff-necked Teuton.

"I haven't asked for it," replied Kohler rudely. He added gratuitously: "I'm a Republican."

"I don't care anything about your politics," said the mayor, "and I know you haven't asked for anything."

Kohler became his police chief. In later years he was to become mayor himself.

There were other appointments like that one, as Johnson crossed over party lines without any hesitation in search of the right men, causing Democratic party regulars to wax wistful. But the bipartisan approach gave him a strong staff of executive assistants, even though his choices seemed to be unlikely—and unwise—to the professional politicians. For example, he named as city solicitor a young man just beginning the practice of law, and he had to withstand loud criticism for his selection. The man was Newton D. Baker, and he turned out to be brilliant in the city's service as law director. Later he also would be an outstanding mayor, a leading world figure as Secretary of War in the cabinet of Woodrow Wilson, and a contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in the 1920s.

Johnson's welfare director was his own minister, Rev. Harris R. Cooley, a great humanitarian with the conviction that society was at least partly responsible for delinquency through its imposition of a life of poverty on so many of the wrongdoers. He believed that society had an obligation to help rehabilitate these people, not as an act of charity but as a matter of justice. The city purchased twenty-five farms with two thousand acres of land during the Johnson administration for the establishment in the country of farm colonies for the care of all city charges—the old, the sick, the young, and the delinquent. This humane experiment in the salvation of unfortunates drew international attention and widespread praise for the progressive new Cleveland city government.

His administration included, as city clerk, a rough-talking former steel puddler from Newburgh named Peter Witt, who first thrust himself into Tom Johnson's awareness by heckling him loudly at a campaign tent rally; a Republican named William Stinchcomb, who put together

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the city's magnificent Metropolitan Park System and devoted his life to its administration; and Alfred Benesch, a scholarly lawyer who went on to serve as safety director under Mayor Baker and as a member of the city's Board of Education for several decades.

Among the wide-eyed newspapermen covering the Johnson administration was a *Plain Dealer* reporter named W. B. ("Burr") Gongwer. The mayor liked him and persuaded him to forsake his career in journalism to become his secretary. After Johnson's death, Gongwer became the party boss and reigned into the 1930s.

The Johnson administration, in brief, was a breeding ground from which issued most of the city's leaders during the next twenty years, and all of them seemed to be imbued with something of the spirit and drive of the man who was their political mentor. Lincoln Steffens called them "the happiest gang of reformers in America."

Lined up in opposition to those Johnson-led reformers, however, was a strong lineup of those who favored the old Hanna policy of standing pat. They were, in Johnson's eyes, the Princes of Privilege.

Even as mayor, Tom L. did not turn his attention away from his favorite field of battle, the street railway system. All through his four terms of office he fought for the three-cent fare, and it became the rallying cry of all his followers. Eventually it did come about, but not until he had left office, and it lasted only a short while.

He fought monopolism as only an old monopolist would know how to fight it. He fought fire with fire. Instead of engaging in futile denunciations of the monopoly enjoyed by the artificial gas and coal interests, Johnson invited the backers of John D. Rockefeller's East Ohio Gas Company to bid for a franchise in Cleveland. This group had hesitated to try for the prize because its members knew that Mayor Johnson was aware Standard Oil Company, the biggest trust of them all, owned the natural gas wells. They assumed he would oppose their bid, but he disarmed them with his hearty welcome instead. The reason was that he knew the natural gas would be cheaper and that the public would benefit.

The coal and artificial gas interests, meanwhile, had raised a hefty fund to buy the support of the City Council members. This legislative approach, while admittedly crude and dishonest, nevertheless could be impressively effective. One of the council members, a man named Charlie Kohl, had qualms of conscience, though, and confided in Mayor Johnson that a man named Dr. Daykin had offered him five thousand dollars to vote against the natural gas interests.

The mayor interrupted his dinner—a real indication that he thought the information important.

"Charlie," he said, shrewdly, "if you were a really game man, I would

suggest a line of action. But I don't think you would carry it out, so there is no use in my advising you."

The councilman pleaded for the chance to prove that he was game and honest. The mayor nodded approvingly and recommended that the councilman return to Dr. Daykin and take as big a bribe as he could coax out of him.

At the City Council meeting that night, the mayor took the floor and made a sweeping accusation of dishonesty against the artificial gas and coal interests. He noted as he talked that Dr. Daykin was among the interested spectators in the council chamber. When he reached the key point in his speech, Councilman Kohl dramatically stepped forward and slapped two thousand dollars in bribe money on the table.

In the pandemonium that ensued, Dr. Daykin hurried toward the nearest exit, but Johnson's booming voice halted him in his tracks.

"You won't get very far, Doctor. Some of my friends are waiting for you outside!"

The East Ohio Gas Company's franchise then was approved and without a dissenting vote—a notable triumph for the mayor. The hapless Dr. Daykin was arrested, tried, and acquitted.

Mayor Johnson also fought fiercely the monopoly enjoyed by the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company. He tried, unsuccessfully, to get voter approval of bond issues to finance a competitive municipal light plant in 1903. Failing in this, he called for annexation of a small suburb, South Brooklyn, which, fortuitously, already had a small light plant. His campaign to annex the town was fiercely resisted; so much so that the mayor openly charged fifteen Republican members of the City Council with misfeasance and two Democrat councilmen with bribery. Annexation was approved, and the city expanded the municipal plant into a formidable, effective regulator of electric rates charged by the private utility. The latter company, by way of illustration, had charged the city \$87.60 annually for each street light in 1900. By the time Tom Johnson left office, the competition of the municipal plant had reduced that cost to \$54.96 a year for each light. C.E.I. rates, generally, dropped 20 per cent in three years. The municipal operation has served as an efficient yardstick for some sixty years, saving Clevelanders many millions of dollars over that time, as Tom L. foresaw it would.

He instituted other improvements, among them enforcement of honest weights and measures, the building of grade crossings, construction of public bathhouses, reduction of water bills, adoption of a model building code, inspection of meat and dairy products, creation of a forestry department, a crusade against gambling, the washing of city streets, band concerts in the parks in summer, and skating carnivals in winter.

Cleveland sparkled and danced with the excitement of the Johnson administration. Lincoln Steffens called Tom L. "the best mayor of the

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best-governed city in the United States." That was the headiest kind of praise, coming from the great muckraker who once had been openly skeptical of Johnson.

In one of his volumes of random reminiscences, *Lincoln Steffens Speaking*, it was written of the Cleveland reformer:

"Tom Johnson, the big businessman who became mayor of Cleveland for an economic purpose, set the precedent for all businessmen and engineers in politics. The ministers and their followers, the good people, called on him to enforce the laws against the saloons, bawdy houses, and petty vice. He refused openly, explicitly, absolutely.

"He said that he had gone into politics to tackle the economic conditions which produced the evils the clergy complained of; he would deal with the causes of riches, poverty, and crime. He would not waste time on the symptoms which engaged the moralists.

"I will not be diverted," he declared to their faces, 'from my larger purposes to your petty purposes. I would rather not be mayor; I would rather stick to the big crooked business you approve than go chasing the miserable men and women you want punished. I shall do the job I was elected to do, leaving your dirty work to you, and, if I have any trouble from you, I will turn aside long enough to show up you and your congregations and your churches and trace your roots to the grafts you are sharing in and living on.'

"They did not know they were in on any graft, so he showed them a little, just enough to frighten them, and they quit. Tom Johnson had no trouble from the churches."

Not everybody in Cleveland agreed with Steffens that Johnson was a great mayor. The man, after all, was a radical; a traitor to his class. He seemed to be intent on upsetting the status quo, and such a man was dangerous.

Men of great influence in the city stirred uneasily as they watched the new mayor. Mark Hanna had no doubts at all about the nature of the threat posed by his old foe. Whenever he could take his eyes off the national scene, he looked worriedly in the direction of Johnson. And when Tom L. made a bid for the governorship of Ohio in 1903, the tired old senator found new strength to fight him around the state.

Johnson was a picturesque campaigner. He took his circus tent everywhere in Ohio, and it was a more efficient auditorium than ever before, giving him the mobility he needed. He roared up and down the dusty Ohio roads and through towns and hamlets in his Winton motorcar, the Red Devil, the long curls that crept out from beneath the back of his black derby blowing in the wind. Ohioans enjoyed the spectacle. And close behind Tom L. came Senator Mark Hanna, the most famous man in the nation outside of Theodore Roosevelt, and he tried to top every

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argument that Tom L. presented to the voters. He even topped his tent, coming out with one that was bigger than Johnson's.

This was one time that Mark Hanna won over Tom L. Johnson. The voters elected as governor Myron T. Herrick, a fellow Clevelander. It also was the last battle between Johnson and the Boss of Bosses because Senator Hanna died at the beginning of the following year.

Opposition to Mayor Johnson did not die, however. It persisted throughout the four terms he served in office, rising to its highest, shrillest crescendo in 1907 when the alarmed Republican Party waged its most spectacular campaign against his re-election. Representative Theodore E. Burton, the man whom he had engaged in battle over the seat in Congress years before, was selected by the party as the strongest candidate who could be put against the troublesome mayor.

Burton was reluctant to forsake his congressional job, but the party pressured him into accepting the mayoralty nomination. Even President Theodore Roosevelt urged Burton to make the sacrifice, and he agreed.

Cleveland probably had the most interesting mayoralty campaign in its history that summer and autumn of 1907. Burton was known as "the old Roman," and his method of campaigning was directly opposite to the style of Johnson. Burton spoke in long, reverberating, rolling phrases with a classical grandeur to every syllable. He was the statesman and the orator; dignity personified; a visitor from Greek mythology come down to walk among the mortals.

It was at a tent meeting of Republicans in an Irish ward that the congressman made the momentous announcement of his decision to run for mayor.

"*Jacta alea est!*" he cried out, flinging his arm dramatically.

The Irish weren't too sure if that was good, but they applauded dutifully anyway while interpreters rushed around the audience with the translation of the congressman's Latin: "The die is cast!"

Tom Johnson was not the man to let that opportunity slip past. At his next tent meeting, he recalled Burton's Latin quotation and came up with his own interpretation. He said he thought the words meant, "Let 'er go, Gallagher!"

Clevelanders howled with delight.

Congressman Burton doggedly stayed with his formal style of speech, however, opening one evening of campaign oratory with the following preamble:

"I have spoken within the halls of Parliament in London, and in London's Crystal Palace; in Berlin and in the south of France; within the confines of the Arctic Circle, in the valley of the Yukon, Alaska—but kind friends, I am glad to be here with you tonight!"

Peter Witt liked that opening so much that a few nights later he opened a Johnson rally with:

"I have spoken in the corn fields of Ashtabula, in the stone quarries of Berea, and at the town hall in Chardon . . . but kind friends, I am glad to be here with you tonight!"

There was no doubt who won that exchange.

There were a few low punches thrown against Johnson in that campaign, including stories that he was a drunkard, consorted with women of questionable repute, frequented low dives, and encouraged debauches everywhere he went.

The Republicans imported the acid pen of Cartoonist Homer Davenport from New York, and he concentrated all his undeniable talent for violent caricature against Johnson in the pages of the *Cleveland Leader*. Before undertaking the assignment, Davenport, himself a believer in the single tax, came to Johnson and apologized in advance. Johnson told him he understood his position and to go ahead and do his best. "I'll forgive you," he told the cartoonist. Davenport nodded his thanks. "You will," he said, "but my father never will."

Johnson never deviated in his career from a policy of shunning personal abuse.

"There is very great danger," he said, "of having the best of movements sidetracked by the calling of hard names and the personal abuse of individuals. Tactics of that kind will never get anywhere. Throughout the whole of our fight we adhered to our first plan, which was to attack institutions—Privilege, and not men."

Tom L. beat Theodore Burton handily, sending the congressman fleeing back to Washington, and Peter Witt sent President Roosevelt a needling telegram which said: "Cleveland as usual went moral again. The next time you tell Theodore to run, tell him which way."

The campaign had taken a lot out of Tom Johnson, however. His health was beginning to fail, and he had worries. His wife was ill. His daughter had made an unfortunate marriage with a man posing as an Italian "nobleman." His fortune had dwindled steadily away.

His only recreation was an invention he had been working on in his basement during the busy political years—a new system of transporting people in cars suspended from an overhead rail and powered by electromagnetic impulse. His working model was successful and he confidently estimated that his novel railway system would be able to propel people from New York to Chicago in two hours' time—at an average speed of five hundred miles an hour! While the claim still sounds fantastic, engineers of the General Electric Company came to Cleveland from Schenectady at Johnson's invitation to inspect his brainchild, and their judgment was that it was a magnificent concept, basically sound. The G.E. management signed an agreement with Johnson to build a

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test project, but considerable expense was involved and the idea fell by the wayside of a busy life.

Tom L. had other things to think about.

In 1909, to everybody's astonishment, he was defeated in his bid for a fifth term as mayor. It was an upset that made national headlines, a stunning surprise even to the winner, a former West Side brewer named Herman C. Baehr, who served out his two years and was retired from office. From that day on, though, he signed his name "Former Mayor Herman C. Baehr."

At the end of his term, Tom L. told the new mayor:

"I have served the people for nearly nine years. I have had more of misfortune in those nine years than in any other period of my life. As that is true, it is also true that I have had more of joy.

"In those nine years I have given the biggest and the best part of me. I have served the people of Cleveland the best I knew how."

During Tom Johnson's years as mayor, his personal fortune had dwindled away. An indication of his financial plight was seen in his disposition of the big mansion on Millionaire's Row right after the election. He and his wife moved into an apartment hotel, and he went to New York for medical treatment. In 1910, against the advice of doctors and friends, he made a tour of Europe, where he was hailed everywhere he went—in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Ireland. The climax of his reception was a dinner in his honor in the House of Parliament.

Upon his return to the United States, he was given a public reception and dinner in the Hotel Astor in New York by his admirers on May 31, 1910. He died in Cleveland less than a year later, April 10, 1911.

The *Cleveland Leader*, describing the passage of the simple funeral cortege of six automobiles through the city streets leading to the Union Station, said:

"Two hundred thousand persons saw Tom L. Johnson's last journey through Cleveland. The heart of the city stopped for two hours . . ."

They took Tom Johnson's body to Brooklyn and buried him where he wanted to rest in death—alongside the grave of Henry George in Greenwood Cemetery.

The way Cleveland sorrowed, it was as if a President of the United States had died. There was an instant awareness among the people that a great man had passed their way and paused long enough to brush away the cobwebs of disillusionment that had almost covered the bright, idealistic American dream.

". . . Honesty is not enough," wrote Lincoln Steffens, one of those who sorrowed; "it takes intelligence, some knowledge or theory of economics, courage, strength, will power, humor, leadership—it takes intel-

lectual integrity to solve our political problems. And these Tom Johnson had above all the politicians of my day.

"His courage was the laughing sort; his humor was the kind that saved him tears. He had the instinct and the habit of experimentation, and he had the training of a big successful man of business on the other side of politics. A practical business man, he was a practical politician, too. He knew the game. He could pick and lead a team; men loved to follow him; he made it fun . . .

"He cleared my head of a lot of rubbish, left there from my academic education and reform associations. I asked him one day why he had thought I would not understand him if he told me what he was up to in Cleveland.

"'Oh, I could see,' he said, 'that you did not know what it was that corrupted politics. First you thought it was bad politicians, who turned out to be pretty good fellows. Then you blamed the bad business men who bribed the good fellows, till you discovered that not all business men bribed and those who did were pretty good business men. The little business men didn't bribe; so you settled upon, you invented, the phrase "big business," and that's as far as you and your kind have got; that it is big business that does all the harm.

"'Hell! Can't you see that it's privileged business that does it? Whether it's a big steam railroad that wants a franchise or a little gambling-house that wants not to be raided, a temperance society that wants a law passed, a poor little prostitute, or a big merchant occupying an alley for storage—it's those who seek privileges who corrupt, it's those who possess privileges that defend our corrupt politics. Can't you see that?"

"This was more like a flash of light than a speech, and as I took it in and shed it around in my head, he added: 'It is privilege that causes evil in the world, not wickedness, and not men.'

"And I remembered then something I heard him say one day to a group of business men he was fighting, something neither they nor I understood at the time. To a remonstrance of theirs that I do not recall, he blurted out: 'It's fun, running the business of the city of Cleveland; it's the biggest, most complicated, most difficult, and most satisfying business in Cleveland. A street railway is child's play compared with it; a coal mine is a snap; a bank?—bah! There's something that blinds you fellows, and I know what it is. It's what fooled me so long when I was running public service corporations. And I'll tell you something you want to know: How to beat me.

"'If I could take away from you the things you have, the franchises, the privileges, that make you enemies of your city, you would see what I see and run for my job yourselves, and you'd beat me for mayor and manage the city of Cleveland better than I do.'

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"Tom Johnson struck at the sources of the evils, not at the individuals and classes usually blamed, with all his fine intelligence and all the powers of an unusually powerful mayor. . . . He explained his acts with patience, care and eloquence to the whole town; he held the votes of the common people . . ."

There was a mystique to this mayor, as there is around all great men. Those who fell under his spell lived dreamily and fanatically for his cause; they were not so much his supporters as they were his followers. They believed in him and they loved him as few statesmen in the history of the United States have been privileged to receive the faith and affection of the people.

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