

CHAPTER 5



A Meeting of Titans

Robert La Follette and W.D. Connor

A busy, clever useful man, who has been at work all his life, finds that his own progress towards success demands from him that he shall be a politician.

—ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Helen was fifteen when politics began to dominate life in the Connor home. During the 1890s, W.D. had been a minor and “safe” member of the Republican Party led by business-oriented stalwarts Charles F. Pfister, John Coit Spooner, and Henry Clay Payne. He attended state conventions, and as chairman of the enormous Eighth Congressional district, which spanned almost all of central and northeastern Wisconsin,¹ he supplied the Republican Central Committee with lists of “the doubtful, the careless and the stay at home voters” and lists of superintendents of lumber and mining camps, who could instruct the men on how to vote. Following the depression and panic of 1893, when public outrage over the appalling treatment of labor was running high, he organized the distribution “to workers who could read” of *Milwaukee Sentinel* articles exposing “the hypocrisy of democratic concern for the wage earners.” In 1896, hoping to sway “doubtful Germans” to the Republican camp, his agents distributed German-language copies of the eloquent speeches calling for reform written by the well-known German American Republican Carl Schurz. An impressive orator himself, W.D. assisted on the stump in that campaign and again in 1898.

Until 1903 he took no side in the increasingly heated battle between the two competing factions of the Republican Party: the conservative stalwarts bent on maintaining entrenched privileges and the insurgent Half-Breeds bent on reforms. When, in his third run for governor, Robert La Follette picked up the popular issue of railroad reform and led a well-publicized regulation crusade,² W.D.’s interests and La Follette’s merged. He was at his most eloquent

as he explained to his family why he was going to Neillsville to meet with La Follette and offer his services to the reformers.

As a newcomer in the state's millionaire club, and as yet having insufficient political pull, his bid for regular rail service into Laona had been rejected. As he explained to La Follette and his family, he could not develop his business in Forest County with "one irregular train a day with inexact number of cars." He had been "extremely fortunate" in being able to secure credit with which to build the seventeen miles of his own road at a cost of \$10,000 per mile, "enabling us to retain our manufacturing business and remain free and independent citizens without submitting to any arbitrary dictation from any source or be driven from the field by deplorable service furnished by railroad companies which administer their service often in very peculiar economy regardless of the wishes or the success or failure of the people who are so absolutely dependent on railroad transportation." (He did not explain that his good fortune in securing credit came about because he controlled three banks.)

The high-handedness of the Chicago and Northwestern galled W.D., who was not one "to lie down to be walked over by the crushing combination."³ In the railroad's response to him he perceived a personal affront and an outrageous social injustice. The thirty-four hours it took him to cover the two hundred rail miles from Marshfield to Laona gave him "time for reflection." He studied the issue and learned that the company had received a grant of every odd numbered section from the government "way back in 1864," that the road had not been built until 1899, that the grant was "of sufficient value today to build and equip at least one double-track road between Laona and Milwaukee," that "the company sold millions of feet of the choicest kind of timber off this immense tract of land long before they ever thought of building a railroad through the grant, [and that] they were not compelled to construct the road until they got ready." Moreover, with the Chicago and Northwestern owning "so large a proportion of land and timber, no other railroad would care to enter the territory and independent land owners were obliged to let their lands lay idle and the development of all that portion of the state wait the pleasure of the railroad holding the grant."⁴

Enthralled by the history her father recounted, and his determination to undo the railroad's tyrannical control, Helen saw him as a hero, a challenger of the status quo, a spokesman for democratic progress. W. H. Chynoweth, a former member of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents and La Follette's "undaunted, immovable, legal adviser and heavy hitter,"⁵ saw the slender, quiet, soft-spoken man with the piercing blue eyes, the bowler hat, and mysterious air as someone who could be useful.⁶ Recognized for his phenomenal success in

large business enterprises, Connor could give the lie to the charge that La Follette was antibusiness. On May 17, 1904, the *Wisconsin State Journal* announced: "W.D. Connor, the Marshfield millionaire, is the choice of the Governor for the position of chairman of the Republican State Central Committee."

W.D. was not offering himself free of charge. For his money and his service he anticipated a reward, the same reward sought by his fellow Scotsman, the aged multimillionaire lumber king from Marinette, Isaac Stephenson: a seat in the U.S. Senate, a prize granted at that time not by popular vote but by vote of the legislature, whose members could be expected to follow the directions of the majority party's leader. If La Follette won, he would make W.D. a senator. He had La Follette's word for it, and told family and friends that he would be heading for Washington, D.C.⁷

From May until December 1904, Connor, "an expert manipulator of men and measures,"⁸ worked tirelessly on behalf of Governor La Follette and his programs: to provide for direct primary elections of candidates, to regulate the railroads, to reform taxes. Helen enlisted in the cause, carrying La Follette posters across town and putting them up everywhere, even on the tree in Fanny Cole's front yard, in spite of the fact that (or perhaps because) the Coles were active Stalwarts. The ideals and goals were noble, but the campaign of 1904 was "the most villainous and disgraceful political campaign on record in the State of Wisconsin."⁹

The party split. It held two conventions, presented two slates of delegates to the national convention, two slates of candidates for state office. Connor spent his money, set up "the most careful organization of the state ever known in its history,"¹⁰ and secured an unprecedented publicity campaign for the Half-Breed cause. In the pamphlets he distributed, written in English, Italian, Polish, German, and Norwegian, and in the speeches he made throughout the state, W.D. hammered through La Follette's message: this was the most important campaign that had yet taken place in Wisconsin; the future of the party of Lincoln, Grant, McKinley, and Roosevelt was at stake; issues in Wisconsin had become national issues, and Wisconsin was leading the way. "The rest of the country is awaiting the outcome," claimed the *Eureka Californian*.¹¹

He traveled to Washington, D.C., to plead, unsuccessfully, the legitimacy of the Half-Breed cause to President Roosevelt,¹² and he caused a sensation at the party's national convention in Chicago when, observing the impossibility of getting the Half-Breed delegation recognized in the face of intransigent Stalwarts, he dramatically withdrew without a challenge.¹³ He set up Half-Breed offices in Madison and Milwaukee, wrote and distributed a two-thousand-word "Statement of Facts" describing the events of the national convention, the Stalwart falsification of facts. He fought the Stalwart faction on his home

turf by initiating legal proceedings “to prevent the fostering upon the municipality [of Marshfield]—at a munificent price of \$150,000—of a water works and an electric light plant considered to be worth about \$40,000.” The whole plant, including the land, had been on the assessment rolls valued at less than five thousand dollars. He charged that the deal had been “worked through the city council largely through the aid of E. E. Finney, former Governor Upham’s son-in-law, a member of the city council and the board of works.”¹⁴ (The allegation of corruption against the old Stalwart Upham, a good friend of Charles Pfister, owner and publisher of the Stalwarts’ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, probably caused the liver attack and cold the former governor suffered in the summer of 1904. Mary Upham attributed her husband’s six weeks of illness to “business worries . . . and the sinfulness of it all evidenced.”¹⁵) In September, W.D. made a sensational appearance, pleading the Half-Breed case before the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Quietly, firmly, holding the delegate count, he convincingly presented the legitimacy of the Half-Breed claim that they represented the majority interests of the Republican Party of Wisconsin.

The Stalwarts withdrew their candidates.¹⁶ On October 12, W.D. received a telegram from the National Committee affirming “the La Follette organization as the regular one in Wisconsin” and requesting him to prepare for the reception of Vice President Charles W. Fairbanks.¹⁷

In November, when La Follette won the governorship and control of the legislature, he guardedly acknowledged his debt to W.D. “You have conducted a clean, able campaign, remarkable for thoroughness and freedom from error. You successfully applied your wide experience in business to the field of politics. I congratulate you most heartily and express without reserve my profound obligation to you for the great personal sacrifices you have made to our cause.”¹⁸

Chynoweth gave Connor greater credit for his “great victory over overwhelming odds.”

I do not think that it is or will be thoroughly understood as to the fullness of the conquest. I know that your best efforts have been directed toward the election of the governor, and when you understand that the money and every influence of not only the railroad companies but the insurance, and other wealthy corporations have been sent out to encompass his defeat, it is indeed almost beyond belief that you should have carried him through with 60,000 plurality. I don’t believe that any such campaign has heretofore been carried on in this state, or that anywhere near such results have been accomplished by anyone else. We all owe you a debt of lasting gratitude.

The 60,000 plurality of votes “means the absolute control of the state.”¹⁹

La Follette was now in the position to determine Senator V. Quarles's successor. Newspaper reports, perhaps leaked by Connor, that La Follette favored him immediately began circulating.²⁰ People in Marshfield "firmly believed that Mr. Connor is a candidate for the Senate." In December, an article published in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* struck the only cautious note: "Up to this time in the senatorial campaign now progressing . . . in their Sphinx-like attitude, Chairman Connor can be compared to Governor La Follette. These two master politicians, either from design or because of a possible conflict in ambitions, coupled with the uncertainty of their power to accomplish their purposes, distrust political conjecture. . . . While discussing Connor as a senatorial possibility, it may as well be said here, that he is the enigma of Wisconsin politics."²¹

On December 15, 1904, Connor dined with La Follette's private secretary, Colonel John Hannon, at the Plankinton house in Milwaukee. On January 2, 1905, Mr. and Mrs. Connor attended the victory celebration at the inaugural ball. "The crush in the rear of the hall was so great that W.D. Connor was heard to mutter that he was more than ever impressed with the advantages of a good wire fence."²² On January 6, Mrs. Connor assisted Mrs. La Follette at an informal reception held at the executive mansion in Madison.

Mrs. La Follette "would not claim that in meeting the exigencies of politics, Bob was always consistent."²³ In pursuing his personal ambitions, however, he was. On January 25, the friendship between the Connors and the La Follettes and the spirit of unity in the Half-Breed camp came to an abrupt end. Less than a month into his new administration, La Follette accepted the appointment to the United States Senate. Although he declared that he would not leave the state before seeing his legislative program through to a successful conclusion, Connor and Stephenson, rejected suitors for the same seat, were not impressed. La Follette, in his "all consuming ambition to rise as high as he possibly could,"²⁴ had betrayed them both. The elderly lumberman turned to words: "the bitter experience cost me many an illusion—perhaps the greatest loss I had sustained—and shook my faith in human kind."²⁵ Connor, in the full flower of a vibrant middle age, returned to his many business responsibilities as president of the R. Connor Company, the Connor Lumber and Land Company, and the American National Bank of Marshfield and as director of the First National Bank of Stevens Point and director and vice-president of the Consolidated Water and Power Company.²⁶ He resumed his civic responsibilities as president of the Marshfield Free Library, member of the Marshfield School Board, trustee and treasurer of the Wood County training school for teachers, and trustee of Carroll College, a Presbyterian institution. And he plotted his revenge.

A junior in high school in 1905, and trained by her parents to think clearly and speak well, to anticipate the day, which was surely coming, when women would vote, Helen followed her father's triumph and his loss. Dressed in the costume of the day—the highly starched, cinch-waist ankle-length dresses with hand-crocheted collars and layers of petticoats and sporting fine gold rings on her small hands, with her thick, naturally wavy hair tied behind with a wide satin bow—she was both a model of ideal, privileged femininity and an earnest, questioning person whose firm jaw belied her identification with the gentler sex. Like her father, who liked to confide in her, her mind held many chambers.

Her school compositions anticipated her lifelong interests in women's role, politics, civic responsibility, religion, and nature. Her lyrical essay "Spring in Wisconsin" reflects every Wisconsinite's love of spring. Two other essays, one on women and the other on religion, reflect her belief in social progress. She celebrated traditional feminine virtues but also women who found their way into a man's world: Joan of Arc, the "quiet, unassuming maiden," who led an army and suffered martyrdom; the women during the American revolution who installed "lofty ideals in manly beings" and took the part of men when occasion demanded, hoeing the fields, driving the herds, arming themselves with guns and ammunition, pitchforks and shovels. When she grappled with a dominant turn-of-the-century issue, religion, she again took a historical perspective, noting that while Thomas Jefferson's age was one of "narrowness in religious matters," Jefferson was determined to say nothing of his religion, declaring it a matter between himself and God. "The evidence of a person's religion should be found in his or her life," Helen declared.

Her oration against trusts, "the greatest evil of the day," reflects not only her mastery of the cadences of her father's speeches but her absorption and identification with his present goals. She quoted from Washington's farewell address: "However combinations may now and then answer popular ends they are likely in the course of time and things to become patent engines by which cunning ambitious and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp the reins of government for themselves." People had to act against the trusts, or the day would soon come when "the very basis of our government will be swept away and the power in this country in the hands of a few to wield it as they wish." At the time Helen was waxing eloquent about the danger of ambitious men usurping power from the people, the Chicago and Northwestern, acknowledging that W.D. had become a significant political power in Wisconsin, quietly granted him an impressive 25 percent rebate on his shipping out of his Wabeno mill in Forest County to Chicago.²⁷ While Helen had no knowledge of this development, she learned

from La Follette's broken promise to her father that some politicians, as well as some businessmen, might act unscrupulously.

While W.D.'s split with La Follette was whispered about in inner Republican circles (much to the delight of the Stalwart camp), he continued to deny it publicly. His family, however, saw that his anger had shifted from his former desire to wreck revenge on the railroad to a desire to thwart La Follette's ambitions.

With La Follette heading for the U.S. Senate, the governorship would be open in 1906. Irvine Lenroot, a young Swedish lawyer from Superior, and La Follette's choice to succeed him, approached W.D. in July asking for a meeting with him and "our friends." W.D. replied in a four-page letter that was at once cordial and subtly threatening, touching on the possibility that he might be ready to break with the Half-Breeds and letting Lenroot know that he could count on the support in his district should Lenroot decide to run for Congress. There was, W.D. pointed out, "considerable talk over the state regarding the future of our organization. The problem is . . . to hold our forces together in common understanding in order that no chance may be offered the opposition to get a new foot-hold in the state." He then touched on the most sensitive area. Having been told by "many of our friends" that they were for him, and that he should be candidate for governor, W.D. had just about concluded that he indeed should be, but he wanted to have a conference with Lenroot and the governor before deciding. He knew, he added pointedly, that "the governor is out of the state much of the time," but W.D.'s "aim for the party will be that which will strengthen and make more lasting and complete, if that is possible, the results of the work that has been originated and carried to such success up to the present time by the governor and friends."²⁸ It was a brilliant, foxy letter and was bound to trouble La Follette.

The relationship between Connor and La Follette, who in more congenial times recited Robert Burns's poetry to one another,²⁹ remained publicly unclear until December. Then, during a special session called by the governor, Connor succeeded in blocking La Follette's desired legislation to amend the newly passed Primary Law to allow for an alternate choice. Pulling on all the opponents of the administration—Stalwarts, Democrats, and Social Democrats—and gaining defections by senators La Follette had counted on,³⁰ W.D. succeeded in killing the measure.

On December 15, 1905, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* headlined Connor's victory and La Follette's defeat: "Connor Wins First Fight. Is The New Leader. Becomes Head of Opposition to Dictatorship and Scores Big Victory." The

defeat of the “Mary Ann” bill (a derisive label hung on the measure to suggest it allowed men to behave like women who couldn’t make up their minds) was “the first blood for Chairman Connor.” On that date *Fond du Lac Reporter* printed a “special” from Madison: “The defeat of the ‘Mary Ann’ bill . . . points out clearly that Chairman W.D. Connor of the Republican State Central Committee is no longer an instrument in the political movement of Governor and Senator Robert M. La Follette. . . . It is evident that he does not like the treatment he has received at the hands of the governor.” The *Milwaukee Wisconsin* broke a front-page story the next day: “Connor declares war personally upon the chief executive—says he was treated unfairly.”

Reporters had overheard an angry conversation in the governor’s office. Wagging fingers at one another, the outraged La Follette claimed that he did not think it right or fair of Connor to use the means at his command as state chairman to defeat a measure desired by the administration while an equally enraged Connor indignantly replied that he had as much right as a citizen to work and use his influence to protect his interests as La Follette as governor had to work and advance his. Connor claimed that the bill was an attempt on La Follette’s part “to shuffle him out of the cut” so that he would be ruled out of the game. “You told me six years ago, Governor La Follette, and you repeated it four years ago, that I was the shrewdest political observer in the state of Wisconsin. Do you remember? Well, I am just as shrewd now as I was then and I have learned a great many things since that time. I told you then and I have repeated it since, that unless you treated me fairly, you would rue it. Now perhaps you realize what I meant.”

If he wanted an elective office himself—and he did—W.D. could not be seen as the enemy of the governor he had helped to elect. His break with La Follette was final, but again he denied allegations of a split. He had not, he told reporters, been in Madison to defeat the governor’s primary amendment; he had not gone to see the governor for any other reason than to pay his respects.³¹

Helen’s father was famous. Journalists hung on his words. He might be devious, but he was always quotable. Christmas at the Connors was more festive than usual in 1905, not only because of W.D.’s victory over La Follette but because Mame had delivered another son, Gordon Robert Phelps. Born on December 12, in the midst of W.D.’s intense preoccupation with Madison politics, child and mother were thriving. The family’s oldest daughter observed her parents’ disparate roles, listened to her father, helped her mother, and felt enormously proud of them both.