

The Bull Moose at Bay

by Mike Resnick

I don't care what may be his politics, I don't care what may be his religion, I don't care what may be his color. I don't care who he is. So long as he is honest, he shall be served by me.

-- Theodore Roosevelt

Speech at Cooper Union Hall,

New York, N.Y., October 15, 1886

Personally I feel that it is exactly as much a "right" of women as of men to vote. I always favored woman's suffrage, but only tepidly, until my association with women like Jane Addams and Frances Kellor changed me into a zealous instead of a lukewarm adherent to the cause.

-- Theodore Roosevelt

AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1913)

* * * *

The date was October 27, 1916.

It was a birthday party, but it resembled a wake.

The President had invited only his family and a few close friends to his retreat at Sagamore Hill on this, his 58th birthday. He walked from room to room in the huge old mansion, greeting them, trying to joke with them, but unable to keep a dark scowl from periodically crossing his face. Even Alice, his oldest daughter, who had distracted her share of cabinet meetings and press conferences, seemed unable to distract him tonight.

"Well?" demanded the President at last.

"Well, what, Theodore?" asked his wife.

"Why is everyone tiptoeing around me?" he demanded. "I'm not dead yet. There are worse things than taking an enforced vacation." He paused. "Maybe I'll go back to Africa again, or explore that river the Brazilian government has been asking me to map for them."

"What are you talking about, Mr. President?" said Elihu Root. "You're going to spend the next four years in the White House."

"This isn't a political rally, Elihu," answered Roosevelt. "It's a quiet party, and you're among friends." He sighed deeply. "You've seen the papers, you've heard what the pundits say: I'll be lucky to win six states."

"I believe in you, Mr. President," insisted Root.

"You're my Secretary of War," said Roosevelt, managing one of his famous grins. "You're _supposed_ to believe in me." The grin vanished, to be replaced by a frown. "I wish I could say the same of the Republican Party."

"They're still angry at you for running and winning as a Bull Moose four years ago," said Edith, standing in front of her husband and stroking his hair lovingly. "Some of them probably wish that fanatic who tried to

shoot you in Milwaukee had been a better shot. But when they're faced with a choice between you and Mr. Wilson, they'll do what's right."

Roosevelt shook his head. "If I can't win the Congress to my cause, how can I expect to win the people?" He strode restlessly across the parlor. "The choice isn't between me and Mr. Wilson; if it was that simple, I'd have no fear of the outcome. It's a choice between their principles and their prejudices, and given the splendid example of the Congress" -- he spat out the word -- "it would appear that their prejudices are going to win, hands down."

"I just can't believe it," said Gifford Pinchot.

"Gifford, you're a good man and a loyal man," said Roosevelt, "and I thank you for the sentiment." He paused. "But you're my Director of National Parks, and trees don't vote. What do you know about it?"

"I know that you came into office as the most popular American since Abraham Lincoln -- probably since Jefferson, in fact -- and that you managed to win the war with Germany in less than a year. We've become a true world power, the economy's never been stronger, and there aren't any more trusts left to bust. How in God's name can they vote you out of office? I simply refuse to believe the polls."

"Believe them, Gifford," said Roosevelt. "You've got less than three months to find employment elsewhere."

"I've spoken to Hughes, and he thinks you're going to win," persisted Pinchot.

"Charlie Hughes is my running mate. It's in his best interest to believe we're going to win." Roosevelt paused. "That's one thing I'm especially sorry about. Charlie is a good man, and he would have made an excellent President in 1920. A lot better than that fat fool from Ohio," he added, grimacing at the thought of William Howard Taft, who had succeeded him the first time he had left office.

"Speaking of Charlie," said Root, surveying the room, "I don't see him here tonight."

"This is a birthday party, for my friends and my family," answered Roosevelt. "I'm sick of politicians."

"_I'm_ a politician, Theodore," said Root.

"And if that's all you were, you wouldn't be here," answered the President.

"What about him?" asked Root, nodding toward a tall, well-dressed young man who seemed uncomfortable in his surroundings, and viewed the world through an elegant pince-nez.

Roosevelt sighed. "He's family."

"He's also a Democrat."

"At least he's still speaking to me," said Roosevelt. "That's more than I can say for a lot of Republicans."

"He's too busy looking down his nose to speak to anyone," commented Pinchot.

"He's young," answered Roosevelt. "He'll learn. And he's got a good wife to teach him."

A tall, grizzled man clad in buckskins entered the room. Everyone stared at him for a moment, then went back to their drinks and conversations, and he walked across the parlor to where the President was standing.

"Evening, Teddy," said Frank McCoy.

"Good evening, Frank," said Roosevelt. "I'm glad you could come."

"Brought some of the stuff you asked me to hunt up," said McCoy.

"Oh?"

McCoy nodded, and pulled a wrinkled folder out of his rumpled jacket. "Two hundred thousand acres adjoining the Yellowstone, a couple of lakes, nice little river flowing through it, even got some buf and grizzly left, and yours for the asking."

"You don't say?" replied Roosevelt, his eyes alight with interest.

"And I found another one, out by Medora in the Dakota Bad Lands, right near where you used to own a ranch."

"Medora," repeated Roosevelt, a wistful smile crossing his face. "It's been a long time since I've thought of Medora." He paused. "Stick around when the party is over, Frank. I'd like to go over these brochures with you."

"I won't hear of it!" snapped Pinchot. "You're going to be the President of the United States for four more years!"

"So who says the President can't own a ranch out near the Yellowstone?" asked McCoy.

"You should be out campaigning for him, not finding retirement homes," continued Pinchot angrily.

"Gifford, I've always been a realist," said Roosevelt. "I'm going to lose. It's time to start planning the next phase of my life."

"I won't hear of it!" said Pinchot.

"I admire your loyalty, but I question your grasp of politics," said Roosevelt gently. "The people will speak one week from today, and neither you nor I are going to like what they have to say -- but we're going to have to abide by it, and I'm going to have to find something to do with myself."

"But you're right!" said Pinchot. "Can't they see it?"

"Evidently not," answered Roosevelt.

"If it wasn't for that bastard Morgan..." began Root.

"It isn't J. P. Morgan's fault," said Roosevelt. "He's opposed me for years, and I've always beaten him. No, you can lay the blame for this at the doorstep of the Republican Party. They're still bitter than I ran as a Bull Moose and beat Bill Taft -- but they're slitting their own throats to have their revenge on me, and I can't seem to make them understand it." He sighed again. "Or maybe it's my own fault."

"You're not backing off what you've been fighting for, are you, Teddy?" asked McCoy, arching a bushy eyebrow.

"No, of course not," answered Roosevelt. "But obviously I didn't get my message across to the people who count -- to the voters."

"How could you?" asked Root, taking a drink from a liveried servant as he passed through the room with a large tray. "The Republicans own three-quarters of the newspapers, and the rest think that God speaks directly to Woodrow Wilson."

"I should have realized that it was in their best interest to oppose me and gone out on the stump and spoken to the people directly. I've done it often enough before." The President shook his head. "What I can't understand is why the Democrats didn't grab this issue and wave it like a flag once the Republicans wouldn't have anything to do with it."

Root snorted contemptuously. "Because they're Democrats."

"And maybe they were afraid if they took it, they'd have to take you, too," added McCoy with an amused grin.

"It could turn their party around," said Roosevelt seriously. He looked across the room at the tall, well-dressed young man who was carefully inserting a cigarette into its holder. "Look at my cousin," he said, lowering his voice. "An effete blue-blooded snob, who dabbles in politics the way some men dabble in stamps and coins. Yet if he came down on the right side of this single issue, he could be in the White House fifteen or twenty years from now."

"God forbid!" laughed Pinchot in mock horror.

"Mark my words," said Roosevelt. "This is an issue that isn't going to go away. You and I may wind up in history's ashcan, but not what we fought for. It's an inevitable as the stars in their courses, and I can't seem to make a single Republican Senator or Congressman see it!"

An almost animal growl of anger came forth from the President's lips, and Edith immediately approached him, bringing him a soft drink, straightening his tie, smoothing his hair.

"You must try to control yourself, my dear," she said soothingly.

"What for?" demanded Roosevelt. "I thought I was supposed to be among friends tonight, not politicians. If a man can't express disgust for the Congress to his friends, then who can he express it to?"

"Please, Theodore," said Edith. "You don't want to make a scene."

"Why not?" he said irritably. "A President has the right to make a scene if he wants to."

Edith shrugged. "He's all yours, gentlemen," she said to Root, McCoy and Pinchot. "I can't do a thing with him when he's like this."

She walked off to supervise the butler and servants.

"What is everyone staring at?" demanded Roosevelt, for all talk had stopped when Edith had approached him. "Isn't a beaten candidate allowed his tantrums?"

"You're not beaten yet, Father," said Alice.

Roosevelt shook his head impatiently. "Of course I am," he said, addressing the room at large. "But that's not the issue. I'm not important. I've put in eleven years at this job. It's time I moved on to other things: I've still got books to write and distant lands to see. The important thing is what's going to happen to the country." The President's voice rose in anger. "You can't simply disfranchise sixty percent of it and expect things to run as they've always run."

"My cousin, the Samaritan," muttered the tall man with the pince-nez and the cigarette holder, and a number of people around him chuckled in amusement.

"Laugh all you want!" thundered Roosevelt. "That's what the Congress did, too. You want to vote me out

of office? Go ahead, that's your right -- if you happen to be a male of the Caucasian race." He glared at them. "Doesn't it bother you that more than half the people in this room can't vote me out of office no matter how much they disagree with me?"

"It bothers me, Cousin Theodore," said a plain-looking woman, who had been standing unobtrusively in a corner, reading some of the framed letters from other heads of state that were displayed on the wall.

"Well, it ought to bother all of you," said Roosevelt. "How can we build a country based on the principle that all men are created equal, and then refuse to give women the vote? We freed the slaves more than half a century ago -- and we've erected so many barriers that more Negroes voted before the Civil War than vote now!" He paused. "How can I be President of all the people when six out of every ten of them can't vote for me or against me?"

"I believe we've heard this song before," said one of the guests, a one-time hunting companion from the Rockies.

"Well, I don't believe you've heard a word of it!" snapped Roosevelt. "What makes someone an American, anyway?"

"I don't think I understand you," said the hunter.

"You heard me -- what makes you an American?"

"I ... ah..."

"You were born here and you're breathing!" said Roosevelt. "Does anyone know of any other qualification?" He glared pugnaciously around the room. "All right, now. What do you think makes you better than any other American?"

"I consider that an insulting question, Mr. President."

"You'd consider it a lot more insulting if you were a woman, or a Negro, or an immigrant who received his citizenship papers but can't pass a literacy test at the polls -- a test that nine out of ten college graduates couldn't pass!"

Roosevelt paused for breath. "Don't any of you understand? We're not living in a Utopia here. We haven't reached a plateau of excellence from which we will never budge. America is a living, growing experiment in democracy, and sooner or later, whether you like it or not, women are going to get the vote, and Negroes are not going to be harassed at the polls, and immigrants are going to be welcomed into a political party."

"If it's inevitable, why are you so worked up about it?" asked a distant relative. "Why did you let it cost you the presidency?"

"He hasn't lost anything!" snarled a younger man. "Those are fighting words! Step outside and -- "

"He's right," interrupted Roosevelt. "It did cost me the election."

"But Mr. President -- "

"That's a fact," continued Roosevelt. "And facts can be many things, pleasant and unpleasant, but the one thing they always are is true."

"Then I repeat -- why did you let it cost you the presidency?"

"Because I believe in the principles of the Republican Party," answered Roosevelt.

"The Republicans voted almost ten-to-one against your proposals, and it took you six ballots to win the nomination once you decided to merge your Bull Moosers party with them," continued the man. "What makes you think this has anything to do with the Republican Party?"

"Please!" said Edith, coming back into the parlor. "We didn't invite you here to fight. This is supposed to be a birthday party."

"It's all right, Edith," said Roosevelt. "It's a fair question; it deserves an answer." He turned to his questioner. "I believe in the Republican Party," he said, "and I tell you that the party will rise or fall on this single issue. It's as simple as that."

"How can you say such a thing?" demanded the man incredulously.

"How can you not see it?" retorted Roosevelt. "How can they not see it, those fools in the Congress? It's only a matter of a few years, a decade at most, before women get the vote, before we stop harassing our minorities at the polls. Can't anyone else see that the party that fights most vigorously for their rights will count them among their numbers? Can't anyone else understand that an influx of voters greater than the number that already exist will totally change the balance of political power in this country?" He paused, and his chin jutted out pugnaciously. "No matter what you think, I haven't been waging this war for myself -- though I pity the man who has to tell my Alice that she can't vote for her father on election day. I'm waging it because it's the right thing to do, whether I win or lose -- and because if the Republicans don't realize what the future holds, then sooner or later the Democrats will, and we will permanently become the nation's minority party."

"Calm yourself, Theodore," said Root, laying a hand on his shoulder. "We can't have the President dying of a stroke a week before the election."

Roosevelt jumped at the touch of Root's hand, then blinked his eyes rapidly, as if suddenly realizing his surroundings. "I'm sorry, Elihu," he said. "The election is all but over, and here I am, still campaigning."

"It's an issue worth campaigning for," said the plain-looking woman.

"The problem is that nobody who agrees with me is allowed to vote for me," said Roosevelt with a wry smile.

"That's not so, Theodore," said Pinchot. "I agree with you."

"And I," added Root.

"Me, too, Teddy," said McCoy. "You know that."

"That's probably why none of you hold elected office," remarked the President with dry irony.

The party continued for another three hours, as still more relatives and old friends stopped by to pay their respects, and to see Roosevelt one last time while he was still the President of the United States. Politicians and Rough Riders, New York dandies and Indian chiefs, men of letters and men of action, black men and white, women of all political stripes, mingled and rubbed shoulders in the Hyde Park mansion, for the President had made many friends in his 58 years. Even F. C. Selous had taken time off from a safari to cross the Atlantic and celebrate his most famous client's birthday. Roosevelt, for his part, was soon so busy greeting guests that there were no more outbursts.

At ten o'clock Edith had the servants bring out a case of champagne, which everyone except the

President imbibed. Then came the cake, and a chorus of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow", and then, one by one, the guests began departing.

By midnight only a handful of people remained: Root, McCoy, Selous, two grizzled old Rough Riders, and the plain-looking woman.

"I see your husband's left without you again," noted Roosevelt.

"He had business to conduct," replied the woman. "Politicians are just the opposite of flowers: they don't bloom until the sun goes down."

Roosevelt chuckled. "You always did have a fine wit."

"Thank you."

"I'll never know what perverse whim caused you to marry a Democrat," he continued, "but I suppose he's no worse than most and probably better than some. Grow him out and I imagine he'll turn out all right."

"I plan to, Uncle Theodore." She paused. "By the way, I fully agree with what you said before. The party that reaches out to the disfranchised will dominate the next half century of American politics."

"I'm glad someone was listening," said Roosevelt.

"Listening and taking notes." She smiled. "Well, mental notes, anyway."

"How about your husband?" said Roosevelt. "I've never asked before -- but what's his position on enfranchisement?"

"The same as yours."

"Really?" said Roosevelt, suddenly interested. "I didn't know that."

"He doesn't know it, either," answered the plain-looking woman, "but he will when I get through speaking to him."

Roosevelt grinned. "You're a remarkable woman, Eleanor."

She smiled back at him. "Why, thank you, Uncle Theodore."

"Play your cards right and you may be the second First Lady named Roosevelt."

"I plan to," she assured him.

-- The End --

Visit www.Fictionwise.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.