

very immaculate in his dress, sat opposite, smoking a cigar.

"This is the complete roster of the new council, eh?" the president was saying. "How've you sized them up, Davis?"

Davis, the company's attorney, took the paper from his superior, placed it before him on the low table and as he mentioned each name checked it off with a white forefinger.

"There's Harvey, Griggs, Dudley, Smith, Conway and Nelson—all our men," he began, quietly. "We can rely upon each of them to the last. As you will note, they compose exactly half of the council. There are six opposed to us. Hamilton, Fisher and Mackey are wealthy men and money is of no consequence to them. Miller is interested heavily in the new light and power company, so he can't be touched, of course. Reese is a personal enemy of yours, so that lets him out!"

Hall, the president, listened narrowly. "Well, that is five. Who is the other one?"

DAVIS moved his finger down the list. "Gregory Blake! Young man, too, living in my neighborhood. Magazine writer, married, owns his home, and as far as I have been able to fathom out, is a straightforward and honest chap!"

The president looked out of the low window into the chill of a December afternoon. "He's out last hope, Davis. There isn't another one we can approach. You say he's young—and just married?"

"Married about a year, I guess."

"A thousand dollars ought to look pretty good to him, don't you think?"

"Possibly." The lawyer's voice was not very enthusiastic. "But this is his first political position and, of course, he is bound to be moved by his friends' advice. Duty and all that sort of stuff, don't you know? Every one of them are dead against us, too!"

"The renewal of our franchise will mean considerably over a million for us, Davis," Hall went on. "We can't afford to allow one man to stand in our way. One man, understand that, Davis? Seems as if everything is going to rest on him. We've six men certain—and we've got to get the seventh! There are no ifs or buts or maybes about it. We have got to have him! . . . Offer him five thousand cash!"

Still Davis remained dubious.

"I might try it, but—"

The president flung out his hands with a gesture of annoyance. "Good heavens, five thousand cash ought to be a gold-mine to a councilman with a twelve-hundred-dollar salary," he broke out. "I've found in my career, that a little cash is the open sesame to about every door. What's your opinion?"

"Mine's the same, of course," Davis instantly agreed. "But I've been watching this Blake ever since his nomination and I haven't so far found a likely loophole."

"You've got around greater obstacles

than this, Davis," the president came back sharply. "That's why we've been glad to pay you your ten thousand a year! You can't fall back on us at this critical time!"

Davis came to his feet with the cigar clenched tightly between his teeth and paced slowly back and forth across the office floor.

AS a confidential lawyer at a comfortable salary Davis had been fighting these identical knotty problems for the past ten years. Until to-day he had never admitted himself defeated. He had been the one port in the storm, and at the present time the greatest kind of a storm threatened the Milltown Gas and Electric Company. A new, independent company, backed by some of the town's oldest citizens, had asked for a franchise; against this the old company was fighting for a twenty-year renewal. Either one or the other must back down.

Suddenly Davis stood still and set his teeth so hard together that the cigar was severed and dropped unheeded to the floor.

"By heavens!" he broke out. "Why haven't I thought of it before? I've got it! I've got it! Blake will come over on our side, Mr. Hall!"

A broad smile lighted up the president's face.

"That's good! Thought you'd rake up something! Let's hear the plan!"

But Davis only put out a hand. "I've never fallen down on a thing yet, have I? Always carried a thing straight through to the end when I said I would, haven't I?"

The president agreed that this was so.

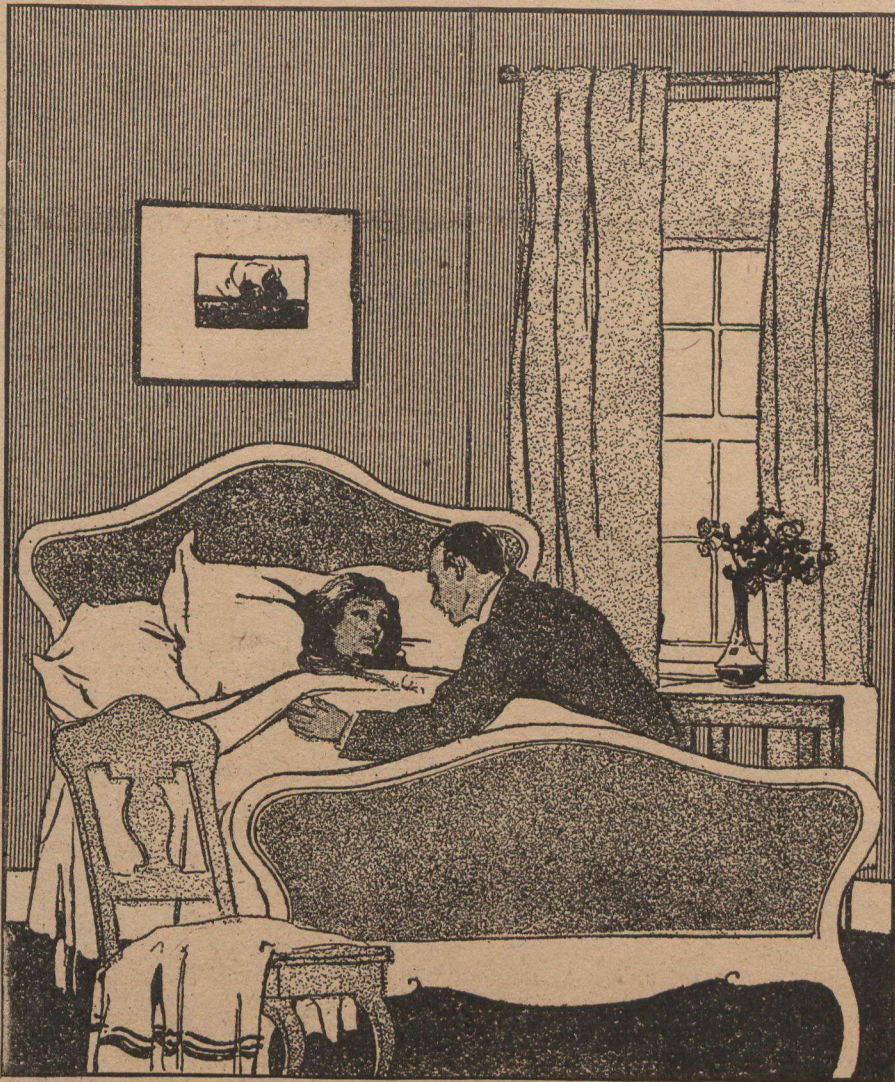
"Then trust me! I'll call on Blake to-morrow afternoon. When I'm through with him I'll see you. So don't worry. Blake's our man, and as he's the seventh, our renewal is as good as won!"

Gregory Blake was plainly surprised to have call upon him, the following afternoon, the well-known attorney for the Milltown Gas and Electric Company. After they were seated in the study and Davis had offered cigars the conversation was opened immediately.

"As a member of the new city council, Mr. Blake," Davis began, "I trust that you are looking upon all the matters that are to be decided upon by the board in a fair and unprejudiced light!"

"I am making every effort to, yes, sir!"

"Quite right. A man in public life and holding so much power must not only look upon the surface of things, but must delve deep into the very heart, as it were. Also he must weigh both sides in the balance." He cleared his throat.



"You're to be well and strong again, dear."

"I believe you are in favour of granting this new company their franchise in the place of renewing ours, am I not correct?" he continued, bluntly.

Blake nodded. "I am but the mouthpiece of my citizen friends who elected me"—frankly—"and they feel as if the new company will be of greater advantage to the town."

Davis removed his cigar and eyed it reflectively. "And your reward for these—er—valuable services, is what, may I ask?"

"Reward?" Blake frowned. "I have yet to hear of rewarding one for doing his duty!"

The lawyer's eyes lifted. "This is your first public position, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, my first."

Again Davis mused, rolling the black cigar between his firm, white fingers.

"The Milltown Gas and Electric Company is a well-known and well-respected corporation, Mr. Blake, and has made every effort to please the citizens of the town. We have, within the past ten years, spent over a million dollars in this district. Don't you think we deserve a small amount of credit? Don't you consider our plea for the renewal of our franchise a just one—and most reasonable?"

"I cannot say I do, Mr. Davis!" Blake's heart was leaping in a choked sort of way. "Your rates are exorbitant for the first thing, and second, for a

twenty-year extension of your franchise you are offering a third under the new company's promise."

"Those are your views, are they, Mr. Blake? You are prejudiced against us—and intend voting as your friends demand?"

"Absolutely!"

"And after that—after you have played the cat's-paw for these same friends and stepped out of office—what then? What will they do for you?"

"I expect nothing!"

"Quite so!" Davis calmly dropped his cigar into the ash-tray. After a moment of silence he resumed. "See here, Blake, let's talk man to man! My company is acting fair and square with you and with every citizen in Milltown. We want a renewal of our franchise. It means a great deal to us. It will mean a great deal to you, too!"

THEIR eyes mirrored and held. Davis, cool, deliberate, frank, facing a crisis he had worked up to and expected; Blake, young, plainly nervous, his face flushed, not quite positive of the other's intentions.

"I say it will mean a great deal to you, Blake!" Davis repeated firmly. "Let's look at it in a fair

light. You have two masters: the friends who elected you, and our company! The first one can offer you nothing for carrying out their wishes—nothing except a pitiful salary of twelve hundred a year! The latter, our company, can offer you a cool—"

Blake was on his feet now, hands clenched, breathing hard. The meaning came like a blow. He felt the hot blood pounding in his ears, sweeping down through his cheeks and neck.

"Stop that!" he choked. "I don't want to listen farther. I'm beyond all your bribes. You get out of here—right now! Understand me? I don't want to listen!"

Davis smiled but ignored the command.

"We want your vote, Blake. We need it! I'm not offering you a bribe! I merely want you to see the wisdom of my remarks. Vote for our renewal, and one hour after that you and your wife can be on the way to Colorado!"

"Why—damn you! What do you mean? My wife—?"

"Just that," Davis arose and faced the trembling young man. "Your wife! I saw your doctor this morning, and he told me how matters stood. Your wife can't live three more months in this low altitude! The West will cure her! You haven't the money—or won't have it within the time. It'll cost at least five thousand dollars!"

Blake lifted his fists as if to strike the other.

"Get out! Get out of here—before I forget and hit you!" His voice was high-pitched and unnatural.

"A year in Colorado, with the very best of nursing, the very best of everything, the clean air—and with you beside her—why, man alive, she'll be a new woman!"

Blake tried to speak, but somehow his tongue failed him. His face was absolutely colourless. Davis, smiling, put out both hands to his shoulders.

"Why should you hesitate? It is an easy battle. Is there anything more dear to you in the world than your wife? Will your friends help you save her life? Will they send her away? Are you going to sit idly by and watch her fade away, day after day, like some helpless little flower?"

Blake pushed aside the lawyer's arms.

"Davis—" his dry lips struggled frantically with the words—"I'm going . . . to give you . . . just one minute . . . to leave my house!"

THE lawyer reached for his hat and stick. "Very well, Mr. Blake! I realize that my proposition was rather—er—sudden, and so, under these circumstances, I cannot accept this decision as final!"

He fumbled in his pocket, brought out a card, and placed it face up on the table. "I shall be in my office until six o'clock this evening," he resumed. "Good-afternoon!"

For fully five minutes, brain whirling, Blake stood in the centre of the little study, his cold fingers gripped at the table edge. An utter silence fell and deepened about him.

Abruptly, bringing him back to the world again, came the sharp twist of the doorbell, followed by a