

THE HOUR - FLUTTER

by FRANK GLOVER HEATON

(Concluded From Last Week.)

THE delegate convention which was to nominate a candidate for Mayor was only two days distant, and Mayor Walters was the only candidate so far brought forward. The Mayor had not asked for second time nomination—but the powers that be had used him so successfully during his first term insisted upon his making the race again. A thoroughly reliable puppet—one that was not to be found in any crisis—was not easy to find, and so, though the Mayor's experience during his first two years had been anything but pleasant, he had been forced into the race.

The nervous apprehension that had taken such complete possession of him during the earlier months of his administration had not worn away, and the brandy bottle in the locked drawer of his desk was still in frequent requisition. The lines of the Mayor's face, always pronounced, were drawn more deeply than ever; the gray hairs had thickened perceptibly about his temples, and his eyes had acquired a furtive expression. The change wrought in the two years since his election were marked—so strongly that more than once some friend or old time associate had commented wonderingly upon it.

On this, the last evening but one before the convention that was to renominate him for Mayor, Walters sat in his private office talking over with Chairman Clark the plans for the campaign.

"I guess, old man, that everything's all right this time," he said, leaning back in his big revolving chair. "Not one of the papers except the Tribune has said a word, and nobody pays any attention to the Trib, anyhow. Even the preachers have kept pretty still, for a wonder. And Stone, I haven't heard a word out of him so far, except his usual reform guff, and I guess he's called off his dog—at least I haven't seen or heard anything of 'em lately."

"Yes," Clark replied, "it does look pretty good, for a fact—a whole lot better than I expected. But I'll not feel safe until you've been nominated and elected, and I don't mind saying that Stone's the one I'm worrying about."

"He had me pretty nervous for awhile, too," growled the Mayor, "with his spies and his secret meetings, and our men going to him, and all. And, by hell, I'll have his hide for the once for it, one of these days, too—mark my word. But Billings and Staub and the rest of 'em swore to me that they never tipped a word to him, in spite of his trying to trap 'em, and I believe 'em. So what's he going to do?"

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He's got nothing to work on; he's tried his four flushes and lost out, and now Stone's done."

Clark nervously shredded a piece of paper as he rejoined: "Maybe he's left off camping on our trail and maybe Billings and the others never told him anything. But I'm not going to begin crowing until I'm mighty certain of it. He threw a big scare into me, all right, and I've not forgotten it yet," with a half shiver.

The Mayor's feet came to the floor with a crash at the sound of a rap on the office door. A night watchman thrust his head in at the door, and, with an apologetic "Vote for de Mayor," admitted a messenger boy. Mayor Walters shrank back to his chair as the blue uniformed lad crossed the floor. "Hell," he whispered, as Clark received and accepted for the note. "Hell!" he muttered again, as the chairman laid the message on the desk. With trembling hands he tore open the envelope and hurriedly glanced through the brusque note.

"To Charles Walters, Esq., Mayor: "Sir—You will be kind enough to call on me at my office immediately on receipt of this. Matters of vital importance to yourself make it imperative that this request be not disregarded."

"JOHN STONE."

"Hell!" grunted the Mayor for the third time, as he handed the note to Clark. The Chairman read it and looked blankly at the Mayor as he said:

"What are we going to do—stand pat?"

"How the hell can we stand pat?" snarled the Mayor. "I've got to go. I'll not walk into that devil's office alone, no matter what happens. Undiminished now of the chairman, Walters opened the locked drawer, drew forth the hidden bottle and drank deep.

"All right, Charles, I'll go with you," Clark answered.

"But what do you suppose is up now?" persisted the Mayor, desperately.

"I'd give a good deal to know," said Clark. "It's sure got something to do with the convention. What's Stone got up his sleeve—have Billings and the rest been lying to you?"

"Well, come along," Walters growled, slamming down the top of his desk. "It's a case of have to; Stone's got us, and we've got to go to him—have, anyhow. But for God's sake, old man, stick with me—it's hell for a man to go alone handed when he don't know what he's up against."

At a table that stood squarely under a

face was stamped an expression of dawning apprehension.

"Just this," Stone replied, calmly as ever, as he drew from an inside pocket a bundle of documents folded and securely tied with a stout tape. Walters approached the table, where, under the glare of the lights, he could read the endorsements on the backs of the documents.

"Affidavit of George Billings in relation to the passage by the City Council of the franchise ordinance of the Southern Railway."

This was what he read inscribed boldly across the top of the first of the folded documents. As Stone turned down only after another of the papers and the Mayor read the endorsements, the color fled from his face and he sank weakly into a chair.

"Affidavit of Adolph Staub in the matter of the Great United Telephone franchise."

And you will find further particulars of the water company's amended franchise, the fourth read. And a fifth and sixth and seventh and more, each proper to the endorsement and bearing the seal of a notary.

Walters sank back in his chair. Every vestige of color had vanished from his face and his big body seemed visibly to shrink within his clothes. His eyes shone in a terrified stare on the papers gripped in Stone's hand, he muttered:

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cluster of incandescent Stone was seated. Two men prominently identified with the "reform" movement and close friends of the young attorney occupied chairs near the table. As Mayor Walters and Chairman Clark entered the office Stone looked up and nodded.

His courage bolstered up by the brandy he swallowed, the mayor strode across the room and planted himself before Stone. His hat was pushed back on his head and the veins stood out on his flushed forehead. Without returning Stone's greeting he exclaimed:

"Well, young fellow, your infernally important note reached me and I'm here. Now what is this vitally important matter?"

"Out it short—my time's too valuable to be wasted on young cubs like you!"

"Very good of you to come," responded Stone, never raising his voice. "The business will require very little of your time. I assure you. It is simply that you place your signature to this statement."

"And what may be the purport of this precious statement?" queried Walters, ignoring the slip of paper held out to him by the young attorney.

"Simply this, as you do not seem inclined to read it," Stone answered. "It is your refusal to permit your name to come before the convention and a declaration to accept the nomination if in spite of this, it should be tendered you; that is all."

For a moment Mayor Walters stood speechless. Then he burst into a torrent of profanity. His face purple and his frame quivering with rage, he howled:

"I'll see you damned first! Sign your infernal paper? Not if Charles Walters knows what he is doing, and he thinks he does. You thought you had a smooth scheme cooked up, you and your sleek, sneaking bunch of four flushers, didn't you? Bluff me into withdrawing and have an open field for yourself, hey? That's what you've been up to, with your damned spies and your sneaking notes. That's what you've been planning for—trying to gumshoe around and find out something from men as sane as you are, or any of your crowd. Oh, I know all about your talks with Billings and Staub and the rest of them. But you got fooled, you infernal pup—you fell down, didn't you? And now you've fallen down again. What do I care for you and your spies? To hell with you, John Stone—to hell with the whole bunch of your four flushers!"

The Mayor's voice raised to a frenzied scream as he poured forth his stream of vituperative defiance. Through it all Stone's face retained its imperturbable smile, and as Walters paused, out of breath, he said quietly:

"Have you quite finished?"

"The young attorney's calmness lashed the older man to renewed frenzy, and he raged about the narrow confines of the room, hurling curses and threats at the three men who sat so calmly at the table, until at last from very weakness he was forced to desist. Then Stone spoke again.

"If you have quite finished, then, I will sign this formal notice of withdrawal, which I shall then send to the newspapers. And you will find further particulars of the water company's amended franchise, the fourth read. And a fifth and sixth and seventh and more, each proper to the endorsement and bearing the seal of a notary."

Walters sank back in his chair. Every vestige of color had vanished from his face and his big body seemed visibly to shrink within his clothes. His eyes shone in a terrified stare on the papers gripped in Stone's hand, he muttered:

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"AND THE BRANDY BOTTLE CAME OFFERED FROM ITS HIDING PLACE"

rest of 'em swore to me they never told you a thing. Where did you get those affidavits?"

"Mr. Billings and the others probably did tell you they had not told me anything—perhaps I should have done the same in their place," said Stone, his voice calm as ever. "But you see the affidavits, I assure myself, and if you act as a sensible man and withdraw from the mayoralty no one shall see them. But if you do not they go tonight to the newspapers."

Again he pushed the announcement of withdrawal across the table toward the Mayor. Walters gazed at him as if fascinated, while the sweat stood out in huge drops on his forehead.

"But, Stone, and my voice now took a pleading tone, 'this'll ruin me.