

The People's Choice

Continued from Last Week

IV

Dan Dickson was a pointed nosed man with a small chin and small eyes, above the latter of which was a bushy fringe that gave him, with his sharp-pointed ears, much the appearance of a fox.

He climbed the rickety stairs of the decayed and dusty old Powers Building in the furtive fashion of a darky about to rob a henroost. He tiptoed swiftly to Room 7, on the door of which, in nearly obliterated gilt letters, was "James Fleece, Real Estate and Investments." He listened intently. No voices. He tested the knob. He opened the door and applied one cold eye to the crack.

"Well, come in!" shouted Fleece exasperatedly.

Mr. Dickson edged himself into the room and walked over to the bare desk with the soft-footed care of a cat. He sat down on the edge of an old wooden chair which Fleece pushed out for him, removed his derby and looked into it with the concern he might have bestowed had it been filled to the brim with precious and priceless secrets.

"Good morning," he confided.

"I sent for you to pass you some pleasant news," observed Fleece. "You win this next election."

Dan Dickson refused to concede a point by appearing pleased.

"It's about time," he insinuated.

"My organization is so starved that it can't lean alone."

Fleece surveyed the opposition gang leader with a half smile.

"You didn't pick strong ones in the first place," he retorted. "Now, Dickson, I'm going to give you a chance this election, but you needn't think I'm going to let you clinch anything. You may swing things for just one term, and then my bunch goes in again." With some distaste he watched the twinkle of speculative planning gather at the corners of Dickson's eyes.

"Of course," agreed Dickson, looking into his hat. "I suppose you want to keep control of the city funds too."

"I don't know what a city fund is," denied the guardian of his party. "Your bunch will step in and run things to suit themselves, and I'll manage to wiggle along for two years with a side interest in a few contracts I have."

"Then it's wide open!" returned the incredulous Dickson, betraying at last a certain degree of animation that amounted almost to enthusiasm. He began to plan immediately the apportionment of his favors. "The boys will throw away the prussic acid tonight," he granted.

"You'd better tell some of them to keep it," advised Fleece dryly. "What boys do you mean? Give me a list of the live members."

Dickson turned his hat slowly about one-eight of the way round, as if he had the names inscribed in the bell.

"Well, to begin with, there's Tanguis," he announced. "He's for treasurer. He's not very strong, but the party owes him a lot."

"It owes him five thousand a year for the past ten years, and a lot of you split it up," laughed Fleece. "Tanguis is after the honor, and he gets it so far as I'm concerned. He's exactly the kind of a fluff who will queer himself with the public before half his term is out."

"Then there's Fizzer," went on Dickson, enjoying himself with great secrecy. "He wants the recordership. He has lobbied round for —"

"Fizzer gets an assistant clerkship some place away down the line," interrupted Fleece. "It's only because I want to let you have your own way that I don't hand you a few locomotor ataxia germs and tell you to slip them in Fizzer's beer. I have about as much use for that lollipop as I would have for a rudder on a rocking chair. For city recorder you get Mike Fennessey."

Dickson looked out of his hat with a jerk.

"Fennessey's no rope to tie to," he objected. "He hasn't the strength of a string of spaghetti. He couldn't succeed himself if he was nominated on all five tickets."

"He's not supposed to succeed himself," Fleece sharply reminded him. "He's in your party, isn't he?"

"Yes, but —"

"Well, Fennessey did me a big favor once and you get him for recorder. For assessor you get Johnny Beckman."

Dickson shifted uneasily as if he were sitting on a radiator.

"What kind of a mess of stewed prunes are you handing me?" he protested.

"Why, this ticket couldn't be elected in wartime if mine was the home and fireside party."

Fleece turned on him savagely. "You can't elect any ticket unless I say so," he stated. "You wouldn't get a look-in if I wasn't ready. I've been winning by a smaller majority every campaign, and I know the public like a trainer knows his tiger. It wants a change of meat; besides that, I want to build up a new organization. That's how your piffle brigade gets a look-in, and I'm going to hand you a nice bunch of old fluffs who will begin to queer themselves and the party the day they take office and begin to steal the paperweights. I'll be white with you though. I'll give you a chance to clear off as many old

"He's fought duels with two of those," grinned Fleece. "Just the same, he's your candidate, Dan. You'd better go right out and see him, but don't tell him I sent you, or it's all off."

"It may be a good choice anyhow," mused Dickson, patiently summing up all the pros and cons he found in the crown of his hat. "The old party has a fine fat barrel anyhow."

With this comforting thought in mind Dan Dickson went out to see Colonel Watterson Blossom, who received him, with a carefully concealed distaste, in the library, and wondered what a man so far removed from any possible trace of gentility could want in his house.

"Colonel," began Dan Dickson, overcoming his own reluctance to deal with one so far removed from any possible trace of practical politics, "I came to tell you as a staunch party sympathizer, that the party is in a jam."

"A —" hesitated the colonel. "Oh, yes, a predicament. Mr. Dickson, my party is right, as it has always been; but it has fallen locally into the hands of unscrupulous and unpatriotic persons."

Mr. Dickson, whose hat had been taken from him in the hall, looked into the wastebasket for a suitable response.

"The party has been left by all the old-time voters to stagger its own way home," he retorted; "so of course it fell in bad

enough to say. "I only know politics the way it's run and not the way it's doped out. I know this much. If you and I decide to run you for mayor I'm the man who can hand you the nomination. More than that, if we pass you the nomination you're elected, and that's a pipe."

"You can't tell that, no matter what my record or personal worth," objected the colonel.

"Of course not," agreed Dan. "I got my info. from headquarters. You're meant, and it's a killing. Come in before they muddy the water."

The colonel arose and paced the library. He paused before the stern portrait of the great-uncle who had been a supreme court judge. He turned suddenly and faced Mr. Dickson.

"I do not quite gather all that you mean," he declared, folding his arms; "but I do obtain that certain corrupt practices, the existence of which I have steadfastly refused to believe, actually prevail in my own party. Under the circumstances I consider it my duty to accept this nomination at whatever hands it is offered me, in order that I may throw the weight of my influence and example on the side of honor. Sir, I take conditions as I find them; but I pledge you the word of a gentleman to alter those conditions at my earliest opportunity."

The leader of the colonel's bleeding party found this speech as difficult to unravel as the colonel had his own, but nevertheless he gathered that he had his work cut out for him.

"That'll be all right," he assented with a bravery of which the last of the Blossoms could have had no conception. "It all depends on who can swing the biggest pull when it comes to a showdown; and I've seen the regular system bucked up against some hard layouts. Then you'll stand for the nomination?"

"So far as I am personally concerned, I am ready to relinquish my privacy for the good of my party; but there is still one other important interest to be considered." He rang a bell and waited with great solemnity. A stiff-necked old negro, so saturated with rheumatism that he creaked, shuffled into the room.

"Wash," directed the colonel, "you will present my compliments to your mistress and ask if it will suit her convenience to have me consult with her upon a matter of importance."

"Yas, suh," agreed Wash with a duck of his head which necessitated a movement from the ankles.

The colonel remained silent, gravely surveying the mournfully apprehensive Dickson, until his messenger returned.

"Mah mistress' compliments, suh, an' she's comin' down immediately," announced Wash.

There was a swish of silken garments in the hallway. Wash hastened to open the door. Cordelia Blossom, clad in a bewildering housegown with many cherry ribbons, her cheeks glowing, her round eyes sparkling, her round mouth adorably curved, her brown hair waving, stood on the threshold and glanced inquiringly at Dan Dickson. The colonel hastened to set her a chair. Wash brought a footstool. The colonel gallantly gave her his hand.

"My dear," said he, "this is Mr. Dickson, a leader in my political party. Mr. Dickson, Mrs. Blossom." He assisted the peerless Cordelia to her seat, and somehow the heavy heart of Dan Dickson grew a shade lighter. "Mr. Dickson, my dear," went on the colonel as soon as the greetings were over, "has come to offer me the nomination for mayor. Permit me to advise you that I do not like the manner in which it is done. I have warned Mr. Dickson that, if elected, I shall remove my party from one-man rule. In other words, I am considering entering upon a dishonorable enterprise in order to make it honorable. My dear, as you know, I rely much upon

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Camping along the road to Hudson Bay

scores as possible, so you give me a list of the patient workers that it would be a shame to turn out into the night, and we'll pack them away. Then I'll make up your slate for you."

Together the two leading citizens worked; and the dictator of the reigning party gave to the boss of the unreigned party a complete list of the candidates that the free-born American people would choose at the next election to be their representatives.

Point by point Dan Dickson gave way, trying desperately to carve as large a slice of the melon for himself as possible; but in the end it was Fleece who had made the real selection for the careful and cautious voters.

"For mayor, of course," concluded Dickson, all the important offices having been disposed of, "Judge Simon Purdee goes on the ticket. He's made speeches for us for twenty years."

"Getting to make the speeches is reward enough for that foghorn," returned Fleece. "Don't you worry about your mayor. I have a fine, clean old party for you, without a flaw in his record, who will be too much of a statesman to know what the politicians under him are doing. It's Colonel Watterson Blossom."

"Colonel Watterson Blossom?" repeated Dickson in perplexity. "Oh, yes, I know who you mean! He hands a hundred to the party fund every year and thinks he's still voting for Andrew Jackson. Why, that old guy isn't in politics. He couldn't influence any vote but the Confederate veterans, and there's only six in the city."

company. If some of you square, straight on-the-level members will stand up and make a fight we can come back. Just now we want a man like you to head the city ticket in this coming campaign. Will you take a chance?"

"I don't quite understand," puzzled the colonel, glancing up at the stern-visaged portrait of his great-grandfather, once vice-president of these United States. "Do you mean that the party expects me to enter politics — actively?"

"That's the thought," returned Dan. "We want to run you for mayor."

The colonel unbuttoned the top button of his Prince Albert and fastened it again. "Are you authorized to represent the party in this demand?" he inquired.

Dan Dickson eyed the wastebasket accusingly while he swallowed the dry-as-dust shadow of a smile.

"We're all for you," he distinctly stated. "Of course we haven't held a primary yet, but all that's necessary is for us two to agree."

The colonel stiffened instantly, and his frown was most portentous.

"If I should make the sacrifice of deserting the comfort of private life for the unrest of a public career, and if I should gain any ascendancy in the councils of my party, I shall see to it that no two men shall be able to decide, at their whim, upon any matters so grave as the choice of the head of a ticket. No wonder my party lies bleeding, sir!"

Mr. Dickson blinked somberly at the wastebasket.

"Well, you see, I'm a practical politician, Colonel," he finally choked himself