

## ACT I

### Scene One

*Page, Mark, Wanda, Tom*

*A rear lobby in a D.C. hotel, Spring, 1911. Switchboard in a corner. A long, narrow table or shelf with three phones on it. In another corner, a group of club chairs. Entrances leading to the front of the hotel, to the cafe, restaurant and bar, and a "rear" entrance that leads to halls and rooms further into the building.*

*At opening, all the Congressmen sing "Oh, Blessed Land". When the song breaks into harmony, Wanda enters and sets up at her station. At song's end, the switchboard buzzes and the men immediately join the action.*

PAGE

(entering and exiting) Senator Scott. Senator Scott, please.

MARK

(coming in) Has Mr. Blake passed through here yet?

WANDA

No, sir - I believe he's expected any minute.

MARK

Mmm.

WANDA

Oh, Governor Robertson, someone just called you up.

MARK

Who was it?

WANDA

Didn't say. Said he'd call back later.

*Tom Blake enters, thirty, well-dressed and pleasant. Wanda signals to Tom that Mark is in earshot as soon as she sees him.*

TOM

Good evening, Miss Kelly.

WANDA

Good evening, Mr. Blake.

Oh, Tom. MARK

Hello, Governor. TOM

Have you seen your father? MARK

Left him at Reed House, why? TOM

Phoned me. Asked me to meet him here. Don't know what it's about, do you? MARK

No, sir. TOM

Look worried Tom - something the matter? MARK

Nothing. TOM

Ah, good. MARK

Feeling a little worn out... TOM

Ah. MARK

...that's all. TOM

Yes. Wish I knew what's keeping him. MARK

(entering and exiting) Mr. Standish, please. Mr. Standish. PAGE

Doesn't concern you that your brother-in-law is old before his time? TOM

Deeply concerned. (pause) He's never late. MARK

(partly to Wanda) I see I'm not getting sympathy from this family. TOM

Mmm? MARK

This family's all politics.

TOM

Right now, yes.

MARK

Right now and always. If it's not Mullins it's something else.

TOM

Right now, it's Mullins. Fight's too close, no time for family.... um... sympathy. (and he flashes a charming grin)

MARK

## Scene Two

*Neligan, Tom, Mark, (Wanda) Gregg, Van Dyke*

*Neligan enters, garrulous, cavalier and conventional.*

'lo, Governor.

NELIGAN

How do you do, Mr. Neligan.

TOM

Oh, Neligan.

MARK

Chief turned up yet?

NELIGAN

Not yet.

MARK

Mmm. Late. (Goes to Wanda) Miss Kelly, ring my office at the Capitol. (Wanda calls) You know what he wants?

NELIGAN

Something about the Mullins Bill.

MARK

We're going to save it, it's got to be done now. This afternoon was bad. Tonight will be war.

NELIGAN

I was there.

MARK

Number one, Mr. Neligan. (Neligan uses phone)

WANDA

MARK  
Think he went home first?

TOM  
Who?

MARK  
Your father. He's never late.

TOM  
Never goes home, either. That's why I'm usually here or at the club. If you and Grace'd take a house in Washington, maybe Dad wouldn't always be here at the hotel. He lives here when Grace is in town. Stay at our house. All family. This hotel and club existence is getting on my nerves.

MARK  
(Laughing) I'd take a house here, but your sister's afraid of this city.

TOM  
She is?

MARK  
Might absorb us whole, we'll cease being New Yorkers and become Washingtonians, addicted, hooked and hopeless.

TOM  
Happens

MARK  
Could. Not to Grace, of course, but to me. It could.

TOM  
She's coming down tomorrow?

MARK  
Probably leave New York tonight. I'm supposed to call at eight, discover her plans.

TOM  
Be good to see her! How long she plan to stay?

MARK  
Adjournment, I suppose. Travel back up together.

*Neligan comes from phone as Silas Gregg comes on, stops him, speaks, then turns and pays WANDA Gregg is a little man with a shrewd, crafty expression. Gregg and Neligan immediately set about playing their regular game of gin rummy.*

NELIGAN  
Go back to stay if things keep on like they been.

Oh, Gregg.

MARK

Governor.

GREGG

They'll be salt water over the rail and us scrambling for the life preservers. Mullins is sinkin' fast and we'll go down with it.

NELIGAN

Always on the bright side.

MARK

It's a panic. Doubt there'll be room in the boats.

NELIGAN

What's your opinion, Governor?

GREGG

Bail. Taking water, but not down yet.

MARK

How's your breast stroke?

NELIGAN

(a political laugh) Hm. Tom, your father arrives, I'm in the cafe.

MARK

No such luck, I'm joining you. Mr. Neligan, Mr. Gregg, we'll be in the cafe. (they exit)

TOM

I don't understand it, Tim. My constituents rarely pay any attention at all to this sort of thing.

GREGG

'Stituents're being fed tripe.

NELIGAN

But the papers put the public solidly behind us not two days ago.

GREGG

The tide's proverbially turned. With Standish in the role of King Canute. What a pain in the ass, that man.

NELIGAN

An insurgent.

GREGG

And a scrapper. Ain't seen his likes in all my years in the House.

NELIGAN

Mullins got to pass, Tim.

GREGG

NELIGAN

Got to pass. Won't though, 'less we affect a change. 'less something unfortunate can happen to Standish.

*Enter Ralph Van Dyke, a man in his early thirties. He dresses with more flair than the others. He is a lawyer from New York City, and a lobbyist for rail interests. He has an educated accent.*

VAN DYKE

Neligan - Gregg.

*They greet him in return*

VAN DYKE

Came in this way to dodge the press.

WANDA

Mr. Neligan.

*Neligan crosses to her and gets memorandum which he reads and destroys*

GREGG

Surprised to see you in town. What pried you away from New York?

VAN DYKE

I have ears, Mr. Gregg, I have ears. Mullins is going pretty wrong as I understand it.

NELIGAN

And then some.

VAN DYKE

I need to get hold of Jim Blake. Seen him?

GREGG

We expect him here, shortly.

VAN DYKE

So, what's the trouble? Couple of days ago Mullins was on a greased slide. What the hell happened?

NELIGAN

Standish.

VAN DYKE

That's it?

NELIGAN

Oh, yeah.

GREGG

Regular insurgent.

NELIGAN

Had the votes lined up like ducks at a shootin' gallery, it was gonna be so easy.

GREGG

Then Standish goes public, the churches back him up and Mullins is going down like a stone.

NELIGAN

If we could knock the pulpit out from under him, maybe we'd have a chance.

GREGG

But the people are reform crazy and he got their attention first.

VAN DYKE

(a little sarcastic) The people!

NELIGAN

The people, the press, the preachers. Pivotal and peevish. (The other men groan)

GREGG

You may joke, but look. (Taking a bunch of letters and telegrams from his pocket) I get hundreds of these every hour. They're telling me who's unemployed if I don't vote with Standish.

NELIGAN

Not so many from my District, but I got some. And given the silent, reticent Pennsylvanians I represent, a few is notable.

GREGG

After all those promises the Party made...

NELIGAN

Promises. Ha! We made promises 'til the platform looked like a mixture of Poor Richard's Almanac and the ten commandments.

GREGG

But you'd think the public'd stand behind us on something as obscure as Mullins. I mean, what do they really understand about it, anyway?

NELIGAN

They understand what Standish tells 'em, and he's tellin' 'em plenty.

VAN DYKE

Why believe Standish?

NELIGAN

New face, begets new faith.

GREGG

Novelty.

NELIGAN

It'll wear off, but not in time for Mullins.

GREGG

He attacked first, is the problem. And public is swayed 'cause he seems so darned honest.

VAN DYKE

Does he?

GREGG

Overflowing with honesty.

NELIGAN

Honesty. Damn. How the hell we gonna run a country?

VAN DYKE

Seen the afternoon papers?

GREGG

Oh, yes.

NELIGAN

Whew. When I got through readin' 'bout myself, I was afraid to go home.

GREGG

And we can't hit back

VAN DYKE

Why not?

NELIGAN

No place to hit.

GREGG

And public is tired of lies they can see through.

NELIGAN

Can't do that, anymore.

GREGG

And we've got nothing real on him.

NELIGAN

Every damn story's got to have a raft of affidavits attached to it...

GREGG

...or the press is all over you.

NELIGAN

Ends up hurting the perpetrator more than the perpetratee. Damn. How the hell we gonna run a campaign that way?

VAN DYKE

Standish defeats this measure, he has control of the House.

GREGG

He wants Speaker.

NELIGAN

And he's Speaker, it's time to look into opening up that little corner drug store your wife has always dreamed about.

VAN DYKE

There will be investigations into congressional behavior.

GREGG

Ethics!

NELIGAN

What the hell? Time for a long vacation.

GREGG

Hear Paris is nice this time of year.

NELIGAN

So is Attica.

VAN DYKE

And into congressional associations, too. So, look, Mr. Blake has given assurances to my clients...

GREGG

The New York and Northern ...

VAN DYKE

...and others, that this bill will pass. If it fails to pass tonight...

NELIGAN

You think we don't know?

VAN DYKE

the market goes... bust. (he takes some cards, stops the game)

GREGG

You think we haven't been buyin' shares ourselves?

NELIGAN

(dismissing the idea, throwing down his cards) "Assurances."

GREGG

But Standish don't care.

NELIGAN  
Wall Street be damned as far as he's concerned.

GREGG  
He wants to be Speaker.

NELIGAN  
(seemingly disgusted) It's all politics.

VAN DYKE  
Where's your voting block? Isn't there any Party discipline?

GREGG  
You're looking at the voting block.

NELIGAN  
We're all more or less in the same boat.

GREGG  
Letters, telegrams.

VAN DYKE  
(to Gregg) Are you turning insurgent?

GREGG  
No, no - too much riding on this. But...

NELIGAN  
He's a solid Party man.

GREGG  
But...

NELIGAN  
...he's going to vote with the other side.

VAN DYKE  
And you?

NELIGAN  
I'm not budging.

VAN DYKE  
Good.

NELIGAN  
For now.

VAN DYKE  
Look here, Gregg. The NY&N has made contributions, done you favors.

GREGG  
I know they have -

VAN DYKE

You want to save the railroads?

GREGG

Of course, I do.

VAN DYKE

Well, that's what this bill does. And it gives us all -- all of us -- peace of mind. You turn against this bill...

GREGG

Confound it, man, I don't want to turn against you. I'm carrying five thousand shares myself - but my constituents are watching me like a cat. I believe in the premise behind that bill. I've voted with the railroads for years, it's on record. But at the moment, things're getting a little hotter than usual.

NELIGAN

That's the trouble with Kansas. 'Stituents always buttin' into governmental affairs. They know better in Pennsylvania. (Gregg begins to object) I know, your job's on the line. Gregg, that's your problem. You work for the people. In Pennsylvania I got 'em trained.

GREGG

You're blowing hot air.

NELIGAN

Uh-uh. People disagree with me, I make sure they lose their jobs, not the other way around. (slyly, to Van Dyke) It's a kinda social safety net.

GREGG

Hot air. So, anyhow, Van Dyke, that's the picture. Standish got the country so convinced of his own virtue, they'd vote for the devil on his recommendation.

VAN DYKE

And, what've you stalwarts been doing about it, lately? Hoping he'll lose his voice?

NELIGAN

You know the Party better than that.

VAN DYKE

I thought I did, but with the most crucial railroad bill in history hanging in the balance, and all I hear is a bunch of crybabies squealing that this goody-goody Standish is too much for you. Are you mice or are you men?

NELIGAN

We're politicians.

VAN DYKE

Glad you think so, because I don't! So Standish is a paragon of virtue, you going to let that impression stand? Bust him! Set him up! Lie to the press! Buy us time, ferchrissake, offer a distraction, anything until you can find something real to nail him with.