

FIFTEEN MEN IN A SMOKE-FILLED ROOM

At first, the stage is dark - dark and silent... and so it remains for another moment or two until the LIGHTS begin to rise ever so faintly. Then... PUFF! A puff of smoke emerges from one side of the stage. It begins to dance daintily up and out into the theater, glowing in the light. Then... PUFF! Another - and then... PUFF! Another - and then... PUFF! PUFF! PUFF! Another... and another... and another... until clouds of smoke begin to suffocate the stage. Accompanying this is a LOW MURMUR of HUSHED CONVERSATION - the type you would expect from villains in some secret lair. We can tell from the VOICES that their makers are male - likely wealthy - likely dressed in cummerbund and bowtie. THEY hum with a certain chortle of self-contentedness and confidence. The CONVERSATION rises and rises in its babbling as the smoke rises and rises towards the ceiling. A LOUD VOICE bellows from offstage.

THE GREAT VOICE

Gentlemen, gentlemen! May we all be seated?

The CONVERSATION slowly subsides, culled into submission by the potency of the VOICE.

THE GREAT VOICE

Now, we all know why we're here. We have the future of a country to choose - and, I trust, with your considered judgment, we will choose wisely.

Some RUMBLINGS from the OTHER VOICES - discontent... amusement... nervousness?

THE GREAT VOICE

At this moment, it is easier to know who cannot be chosen rather than who can - but choose we must. Here and now, I say that we choose Harding.

More RUMBLINGS - now of surprise -
as unseen MALE VOICES chip in.

MALE VOICES

Harding!
Harding?
Harding!?

THE GREAT VOICE

Harding.

MALE VOICES

He's a lightweight!
He's a nothing!
He's a...

ANOTHER MALE VOICE

Winner. He's the hope of us all.

THE GREAT VOICE

(Emphasizing.)
Yes - of us all.

More RUMBLINGS.

VOICES

(Variously.)
He's too far behind!
Even Johnson could trounce him!
We can't have Johnson win!
We can't have Wilson win!
Harding might not be bad, but...
Lowden and Wood are too strong!
He'll never get enough votes!

THE GREAT VOICE

He can get enough votes, gentlemen... with our help. It is
why we are here - and it is why we must act, now... before
it is too late.

More RUMBLINGS from the VOICES -
now slowly won over.

VOICES

(Variously.)
But can we rely on Harding?
Who's his campaign manager?
It's Daugherty!
Harry Daugherty!
Someone's got to talk to Daugherty!

VOICES (CONT)

Yeah, Daugherty!
Get Daugherty!

With that, the LIGHTS abruptly rise and the VOICES suddenly die. - flipped off, as if by a switch.

We are now in the Florentine Room of the Congress Hotel at about 8 o'clock at night. The Balcony Door is ajar to help air out the terribly hot interior.

Suddenly, the Hall Door opens and slams against the wall - BAM! HARRY M. DAUGHERTY brusquely enters like a charging elephant with tusks gleaming. HE is a determined-looking man aged about 60 whose suit is as limited as HIS imagination. DAUGHERTY - the campaign manager for Warren G. Harding - is the purest paragon of that brilliant and unscrupulous kingmaker who often lives in political legend. HE is not an ill-meaning man, per se, but one so cursed with tunnel vision that HE is unable to register anything but the immediately political. The fact that human lives may be twisted and torn during the process is not something HIS limited antennae is able to process or otherwise detect.

Having just entered, DAUGHERTY rushes over to the phone and puts the receiver to HIS ear.

DAUGHERTY

(Into the phone.)
Hello, operator? Get me the Congress Hotel.

As DAUGHERTY waits (though not patiently), the DAINTY SOUND of CHORAL SINGING is heard outside the hotel. The semi-angelic voices come from the Republican Glee Club of Columbus. THEY are singing some God-awful, corny song in praise of Ohio's candidate for the Presidency - Warren G. Harding.

DAUGHERTY listens to the singing with clear contentment, oblivious to how terrible it is.

Just then, the wonderland moment is interrupted by the terrible tubas of a LOUD and OBNOXIOUS BRASS BAND playing some SOUSA tune. In an instant, DAUGHERTY is awoken from HIS daydreaming and turns incredulously towards the source of the sound - the Balcony Door. HE doesn't have long to register consternation, though, since a voice on the other end of the phone quickly distracts HIM.

DAUGHERTY

(Into the phone.)

Yes, is this the concierge? Is there a man standing by your desk wearing a "Harding for President" button?... Well, put him on, would you?

Throughout, the BRASS BAND continues to blare away. Fed up by the band's bombast, DAUGHERTY puts the phone down on the coffee table, stomps over to the Balcony Door, and shuts it decisively. One senses that a loud "damn you!" should otherwise accompany the moment. Alas, the terrifying tubas still manage to live on. Outraged, DAUGHERTY dives again for the phone.

DAUGHERTY

(Into the phone.)

Hey, Malcolm. Sorry about the delay. I just told the Lowden people that it's time to pay up. I demanded my delegates back and they burst into tears. You never saw such wailing and flailing in all your life. Hell, I thought I was at a shaker's convention. They tried to pull the patriotic line on me and they even mentioned something about "God" - whoever He is. Debtors will try anything when the bank calls in the loan. Now how's it going down there? Any problems? You keeping on your toes?

(Leadingly.)

Good. I'm glad to hear it. Now do me a favor. Look outside the front of the hotel. Tell me what you see.

A pause, as DAUGHERTY looks out on nighttime Chicago.

DAUGHERTY

Can't quite get a glimpse, huh? Well, then, listen.

DAUGHERTY opens the Balcony Door. SOUSA-STYLE BAND MUSIC blares into the room. Under it tiptoes the faint and pathetic SINGING of the Glee Club. DAUGHERTY violently thrusts the phone out into the hot Chicago air so that the music comes in loud and clear on the other line. HE pauses a moment and then brings the receiver back inside the room.

DAUGHERTY

(Into the phone, shouting above the music.)
What do you think of that, Malcolm? No, no - scratch that. I don't really care what you think. I'll start by telling you what I know. I know it's not our band playing out there. I know we don't even have a goddamn band.

DAUGHERTY closes the Balcony Door.

DAUGHERTY

Yes, I know we have the Glee Club - but what's the point of the damn thing if Lowden's brass band is there to blast it into Lake Michigan? The morning papers will have a field day drawing a link between the fate of Harding's singers and the fate of Harding's candidacy. Just see that the Glee Club wrings hearts and votes from inside buildings where no brass band can blow them away.

KNOCK, KNOCK from the Hall Door.

DAUGHERTY

(Barreling on - not hearing the sound.)
No excuses, Malcolm. I want action, like those directors in the pictures... action! I haven't been paying you to be a goddamn philosopher. One little misstep now could send us all falling down on our asses. Which reminds me - have you been watching the Ohio delegation like I told you? I smell a huge, filthy rat in their ranks and I'm not going to let him scamper off with our victory.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK!

DAUGHERTY

(Finally hearing it, turning towards the Hall Door.)
Who is it?

GEORGE HARVEY sticks HIS head in.

Santa Claus.
HARVEY

HARVEY is the middle-aged editor of the *North American Review* and another well-connected politico.

DAUGHERTY
(Suddenly pleasant - too pleasant.)
George! Come in. I was just finishing on the phone.

HARVEY enters.

HARVEY
Oh, well, Harry, if it's an emergency, I can always...

DAUGHERTY
(Quickly.)
No, no - no emergency. Just annoyances. Make yourself at home. I'll be through in a second.

Knowingly, HARVEY smiles in return. As DAUGHERTY continues on the phone, HARVEY proceeds to examine the room with superficial interest. Throughout the following, HE listens subtly to every little word DAUGHERTY utters - and DAUGHERTY knows it.

DAUGHERTY
(Into the phone, a complete change in tone.)
Now, Malcolm, about the Ohio delegation... No, no - just keep an eye on them... No, you don't have to rush or anything. It's not a big problem at all. Just a little hiccup - a hangnail - an eyecore - an... an...

DAUGHERTY becomes conscious of the fact that HARVEY is staring at HIM.

DAUGHERTY
(Into the phone.)
...an annoyance - that's all. I know you'll clear it up for me. You've done a wonderful job so far. Keep up the good work. Victory is near. Goodbye!

DAUGHERTY swiftly hangs up and turns to HARVEY with a smile too wide for its own good.

DAUGHERTY
How are the readers, George?

HARVEY

Reading.

DAUGHERTY

I'm glad to hear it.

HARVEY

How are the delegates, Harry?

DAUGHERTY

Growing.

HARVEY

I'm glad you think so.

DAUGHERTY

I don't, George. I don't "think." In politics, when you have to think about something, you're in trouble. Victory is something you should sense like a wolf senses a kill.

HARVEY

So do you, eh... "sense a kill," Harry?

DAUGHERTY

Sense it? I'm already at the dinner table.

HARVEY

I'd say "bon appetite," but from the phone call...

DAUGHERTY

(Not understanding.)

The phone call?

HARVEY

Well, it sounded like you had some problems.

DAUGHERTY

(Quickly - too quickly.)

Oh, no, no - merely...

HARVEY

"Annoyances?"

DAUGHERTY

Annoyances.

HARVEY

That's a shame. I chatted with Lowden's campaign manager a little while ago. He's not your biggest fan right now. He had some choice words for you.

DAUGHERTY

I could choose a few good words for Lowden, too - starting with "loser."

HARVEY

Cute, Harry - but your man Harding doesn't seem to be as confident as you are.

DAUGHERTY

(Carefully - where is he going with this?)
Oh, yes?

HARVEY

The good Senator from Ohio looks like a reenactment of the charge of the Light Brigade.

DAUGHERTY

Well, George, it's a trying time - for all of us.

HARVEY

All of us, yes - but for only one is the exhaustion worth it. Now who will it be?

DAUGHERTY

You know my opinion.

HARVEY

Some would say your opinion is a fairy tale.

DAUGHERTY scoffs.

HARVEY

Oh? First Ballot - Harding: 65 and a half votes. Fourth Ballot - Harding: 61 and a half votes. Four-hundred ninety-three votes needed for the nomination. Do you believe in elves, as well?

HARVEY continues to tour the room leisurely.

HARVEY

There is also a lot of betting going on. The odds are quite telling. Seven to five for Wood. Eight to five for Lowden. Three to one for Johnson. Four to one for Hoover. Five to one for Hughes. Eight to one for Harding.

(Quickly turning to DAUGHERTY.)
How about goblins?

DAUGHERTY stares back blandly.

HARVEY

Now, Harry, help me out. I want you to advise me who to put my money on and why I should put it there.

DAUGHERTY

(Feeling things out.)
And who wants to know this? Just you?

HARVEY

Me and some... friends.

DAUGHERTY

Of yours?

HARVEY

Of us all.

DAUGHERTY

Well, it will be Harding, George.

HARVEY

Will it? With Wood and Lowden and...

DAUGHERTY

Damn it, George - four days! It's been four pointless days and four pointless ballots. Why should a voter spend a single second of thought on a candidate if his own people have to sit and think for four days before they nominate him? Wood and Lowden have tapped, twirled, waltzed, and can-canned their way across the convention floor in the hope that one of them will tire out and withdraw their name from the balloting - and where has it gotten us?

HARVEY

Here, apparently - so what's your point?

DAUGHERTY

My point, George, is that the convention members are tired, sweaty, and homesick. They're fed up with Wood and Lowden and their pussyfooting filibuster and they're hungry for a compromise candidate to break the tie. That is when Warren G. Harding will prove to you that elves and goblins and whatever else you care to name might just exist after all.

HARVEY

Fair enough, Harry. I know you too well not to take you seriously. With your managing him, Harding is a contender - but as president...

DAUGHERTY

As president he will examine each situation carefully and act accordingly.

HARVEY

You mean - as others tell him to?

DAUGHERTY

I mean he will examine each situation carefully...

DAUGHERTY, HARVEY

...and act accordingly.

HARVEY

You sound very sure of yourself.

DAUGHERTY

Is there any other way to sound in our business?

HARVEY smiles cheekily.

DAUGHERTY

Listen to me, George - Harding will win. It is fated to happen. He is everyone's friend and no one's enemy. He is too jovial to hate and too obscure to slander. He has voted yea on every winning proposal. He has voted nay on every failing proposal. His whole damn record is spotless. He is, in short...

HARVEY

Yours.

DAUGHERTY

Ours.

HARVEY

I'm glad to hear your mother taught you to share.

DAUGHERTY

She also told me to be wary of Greeks bearing gifts.

HARVEY

Oh, now, Harry, I don't speak a word of Greek.

DAUGHERTY considers the sphinx-like HARVEY for a minute.

DAUGHERTY

Well... is that it?

HARVEY

Almost, Harry. Getting there.

DAUGHERTY

Getting where?

HARVEY

(Simply.)
There.

DAUGHERTY

What else, then?

HARVEY

Those rumors of marital infidelity...

DAUGHERTY

(Lamely.)

What rumors?

HARVEY

The name Carrie Phillips leaps to mind.

DAUGHERTY

(Jumping in - a readymade response.)

Mrs. Phillips is soon to be sent on an all-expenses-paid trip around the world with her husband. We need him to investigate the complications of the raw silk trade. No doubt he will serve his country bravely.

HARVEY

No doubt - and this will happen how soon?

DAUGHERTY

As soon as the Senator is nominated.

HARVEY

And when they come back - what then?

DAUGHERTY

Nothing other than the occasional checks that pass between friends.

A dead pause, as HARVEY stares -
either amused or unconvinced.

DAUGHERTY

(Seeking to end the moment.)

Well, if I have satisfied your curiosity...

HARVEY

(Butting in - not done yet.)

What about Mrs. Harding?

DAUGHERTY

(Suspiciously.)

What about her?

HARVEY

It is rumored in Washington that she has great influence over the Senator.

DAUGHERTY

Only over the color of the curtains.

HARVEY

Curtains, fine - but what about cabinets?

DAUGHERTY grimaces visibly.

HARVEY

Not only that, Harry, but it is also rumored that Mrs. Harding has a tendency to sneak out of her Washington home under the cover of night to meet with...

HARVEY catches DAUGHERTY's glower.

HARVEY

...people.

DAUGHERTY

It is a natural social custom.

HARVEY

No, I mean... eccentric people.

DAUGHERTY

(Again - lamely.)

I don't know what you mean.

HARVEY

I wouldn't mention it normally, but it is felt by some that these particular people have a negative - or at least debatable - influence on Mrs. Harding. Now, with her being such an influence on her husband...

DAUGHERTY

Senator Harding will lead according to the dictates of his own conscience.

HARVEY

But who will play the part of Senator Harding's conscience in this torrid little melodrama of ours - you, as you assume, or Mrs. Harding?

DAUGHERTY stares daggers.

HARVEY

My friends just want to be assured of what we are getting.

DAUGHERTY faintly smiles.

HARVEY

(Quickly correcting himself.)

...of what we might be getting, if elves are real.

DAUGHERTY snorts with derision.

HARVEY

(Suddenly very serious.)

Tell me frankly, Harry. No games, no jokes. If Mrs. Harding becomes first lady, who will control her?

DAUGHERTY

(Assuredly - too assuredly.)
I will.

HARVEY

(Smiling slightly.)
Will you now?

MRS. HARDING'S VOICE

Don't bet on it, Mr. Harvey.

HARVEY and DAUGHERTY turn to find FLORENCE KLING HARDING standing in the doorframe of the Connecting Door. The woman herself is not much to look at - about 60 years of age, dressed in a formally frumpy bit of attire, and as wrinkly as an autumn leaf. SHE compliments the frail look by carrying a knitted work-in-progress from which glistening knitting needles stick out visibly like daggers. The woman herself, however, is best defined by the needles, not the frailty, because MRS. HARDING is anything but frail. SHE is, in fact, a tank with a bonnet, often called either "Boss" or "Ma" or "Duchess" by those close to HER. SHE is also known for her annoyingly high-pitched screech and its relatively constant direction towards HER henpecked husband - whose name, thanks to a grating Midwestern accent, SHE painfully pronounces "Wurrrrrrrren."

HARVEY

(A sudden salesman's grin.)
 Ah, Mrs. Harding!

DAUGHERTY

(Bowing to HER as if to royalty.)
 Duchess.

MRS. HARDING

(Looking HIM over coldly and calmly.)
 Lawyer.

(To HARVEY.)

And - praise the stars - Mr. George Harvey, Editor of the *North American Review*. Another old buzzard come to circle my husband's campaign?

HARVEY

Hardly, Mrs. Harding - merely a fan and an admirer.

MRS. HARDING

Here for the nomination party, then? Well, Mr. Harvey, come and join the crowd. I'm afraid this is all we could muster for the occasion. All the other lemmings are in Senator Johnson's suite. It's just you, Mr. Daugherty, myself, and my husband here tonight. Oh, yes, and Governor Lowden's brass band. How could I ever forget? They have kindly offered us a free funeral march.

MRS. HARDING gives a glum look and heads for the couch.

MRS. HARDING

Do forgive me, Mr. Harvey, if I don't bow in your presence. Governor Lowden's band has been busy serenading my rheumatism. I'm afraid my joints are martyrs to this political cacophony. My bones will creak with joy when we are on the train back to Marion.

HARVEY

Marion? Surely not. Your husband still has a chance.

MRS. HARDING

Well, Mr. Harvey, you can tell him that yourself. I so hate to break a commandment. Wait, just wait, and Wurren will manage to lumber on in. It takes him a while to drag his face behind him.

HARVEY

Stress, no doubt, Mrs. Harding.

MRS. HARDING

Age, no doubt, Mr. Harvey. I trust you remember age; age certainly remembers you. It's damn near obsessed with me and Wurren - and, as for Mr. Daugherty, he doesn't age, he distills.

DAUGHERTY

(A weak smile.)

The Duchess knows me well, George.

MRS. HARDING

(To no one in particular.)

I know everyone and everything and don't you forget it, Mr. Daugherty. I keep my ear to the ground and I feel every rumble in the Earth.

(To HARVEY.)

Do you know I can see the future, Mr. Harvey?

HARVEY

The future?

MRS. HARDING

Yes, you know - the thing that occurs after the present.

HARVEY

Ah, yes, Mr. Daugherty has been telling me all about it.

MRS. HARDING

Oh, now, don't listen to Mr. Daugherty. He's been in politics so long he believes his own press releases. I only came along on this trip because I knew he'd be so sad without me.

DAUGHERTY laughs uncomfortably.

MRS. HARDING

(To DAUGHERTY.)

Am I making you nervous, Lawyer?

(To HARVEY, not waiting for a response.)

Mr. Daugherty is an expert, Mr. Harvey. He's a plotter and a planner and a conjurer extraordinaire. He has a Midas touch on him like you've never seen. The problem is that he also has a poisoned finger. The only time he slips up is when he uses the one for the other.

DAUGHERTY

(Sotto voice, indicating HARVEY.)

Please, Duchess - remember Mr. Harvey.

MRS. HARDING turns with exaggerated surprise.

MRS. HARDING

Oh, Mr. Harvey! Am I keeping you? Surely you have other campaigns to visit. I suggest you go see General Wood. I'm sure his company will be much merrier than ours.

HARVEY

Perhaps not for long.

HARVEY makes to exit.

MRS. HARDING

Oh and one more thing...

HARVEY turns expectantly.

MRS. HARDING

On your way out, would you be so kind as to give this to Governor Lowden's band?

SHE hands HARVEY a coin.

MRS. HARDING

Ask them if they know a good dirge.

SHE gives HARVEY a wry look. An unhappy DAUGHERTY breaks the moment by quickly taking HARVEY by the arm and rushing HIM to the Hall Door.

DAUGHERTY

Come along now, George.

HARVEY

(Calling back to MRS. HARDING.)
Goodbye, Mrs. Harding.

MRS. HARDING

Good riddance, Mr. Harvey.

MRS. HARDING serenely returns to her knitting, while:

DAUGHERTY

(Secretively, to HARVEY.)
I'm sorry about all that.

HARVEY

You control her masterfully.

DAUGHERTY

What will you tell your "friends?" You won't...

HARVEY

I will consider the situation carefully and act accordingly.

DAUGHERTY

(Relieved.)
That's all right, then.

DAUGHERTY opens the Hall Door.

HARVEY

By the way, it might help if you stop by. My friends always like surprise company... especially if they expect it.

DAUGHERTY

(Mighty pleased.)
Yes, well, I might just do that.

HARVEY

The Hotel Blackstone, Suite Four-oh-Four.

HARVEY moves to walk out the Hall Door. Suddenly, HE turns, before DAUGHERTY can close it.

HARVEY

Oh, Mrs. Harding?

MRS. HARDING looks up, as HARVEY throws the coin to HER. SHE catches it like a baseball pro.

HARVEY

I don't think we'll need any dirge tonight. Give my regards to your husband.

HARVEY exits. DAUGHERTY closes the Hall Door. After a question-mark pause, giving Harvey time to disappear down the hall:

MRS. HARDING

Was that what I think it was?

DAUGHERTY

Yes - yes, it was.

MRS. HARDING

So? Did you sell him the goods?

DAUGHERTY

I... I think so.

MRS. HARDING

You think as well, do you?

DAUGHERTY

I just can't believe they sent Harvey. What about Brandegee? What about Watson?

MRS. HARDING

I take it, Mr. Daugherty, you're not one of Mr. Harvey's readers. No, I dare say, you've never read any political journal. That would be like God studying the Bible - completely unnecessary.

DAUGHERTY

Damn it, we at least deserved a Congressman.

MRS. HARDING

Why, Lawyer, I do believe you're nervous.

DAUGHERTY

You should know me better, Duchess.

MRS. HARDING

Now there's a frightening thought.

DAUGHERTY coughs and nods off to the side of the room. WARREN G. HARDING has just entered through the Connecting Door. We notice the room seems to clear immediately of its crisp political formality upon HARDING's entrance. Part of this has to do with HIS relaxed attire: no jacket, a sweat-stained shirt, a loose tie, suspenders, pants, old shoes. To complement this, HIS jowls are lined with stubble, HIS white hair is ruffled, HIS eyes look drawn and weary, and HIS face seems to sag in a very human way. Despite this most unregal appearance, however, HARDING still manages to broadcast a manner and bearing that reaches heights of Roman grandeur. One might compare HIM to a great temple, weathered by time, but clearly magnificent beneath the dirt and the grime - likely the sole reason HE commands attention whatsoever. Currently, though, the man before us seems like an overworked dirt farmer whose best days are behind HIM and whose future is nothing but years of endless sowing - and HE knows it.

HARDING

(Lifelessly.)

Harry. Ma.

HARDING steps into the room like a tentative child.

MRS. HARDING

(During the above.)

Well, well, well! Look who we have here! The next president comes. Hail to the Chief - Chief Sittin' Still. Just where have you been at, Chief? Don't you know George Harvey was in here a few minutes ago? He had some business about you and you should have been here to chat him up - but oh, no, you were out wandering from the wigwam.

HARDING

I'm sorry, Ma.

HARDING lazily crosses to the Balcony Door, opens it, and takes in a deep, desperate breath for air. HE then gazes longingly at the starry Chicago sky, as if a prisoner peeking past black iron bars to a field just beyond. Indeed, it seems HARDING's gaze becomes fixed on something in the sky which transfixes HIS mind. Throughout, MRS. HARDING blathers on... and on... and on.

MRS. HARDING

Honestly, Wurren Harding, you're like an inept salesman who goes around knocking on gopher holes. You won't be able to sell a single suitcase of yourself that way. Why, the other candidates are running for office and you're merely strolling there. The only way you can catch up now is to grab hold of the nearest comet!

DAUGHERTY

Now, now, Duchess - be calm.

MRS. HARDING

Why, Mr. Daugherty, I'm just as calm as I can be! I just can't stand it when my husband tears his flesh to give himself wounds to lick. He couldn't sell a single suitcase of himself with that face on. It's no wonder he's left whimpering in the dust on all the ballots like the sagging rear of an old horse - and besides...

Throughout the above, another SOUND begins a steady ascent that is even louder than MRS. HARDING's caterwauling. It is the sound of RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE, reaching up and out from unseen crevices of the stage. We can't tell where the noise is coming from - and, indeed, it is clear that MRS. HARDING and DAUGHERTY don't hear it at all. In that, however, THEY are alone, because HARDING clearly does hear the SOUND - and, in fact, we get an eerie sense that HE is somehow staring at it in the Chicago sky with a mixture of trepidation and awe.

Soon enough, the APPLAUSE grows louder and louder to the point that the clamor becomes unbearable to the human ear. MRS. HARDING is

now just pantomiming in HER shrillness - DAUGHERTY trying to calm HER down - as the LIGHTS focus anew on HARDING. Some CRISP, CRACKLING STATIC is now accompanying the APPLAUSE, indicating we are listening to a RADIO BROADCAST. We - or, rather, HARDING - then hears the voice of a man - fittingly, a RADIO BROADCASTER - emit from the cacophony with a properly enthused tempo of voice.

RADIO BROADCASTER

Yes, ladies and gentlemen - the results are in! We finally have a winner at the Republican National Convention! The G.O.P. has chosen Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio as its presidential candidate for this year's election. Senator Harding received the party nod on the tenth ballot after a long convention standoff between candidates Governor Frank Lowden and General Leonard Wood. Harding was long considered a dark-horse candidate in the field and his upset victory has stumped many political observers. Party insiders credit the Harding campaign's success to Senator Harding's longtime friend and campaign manager, Harry M. Daugherty - but just how did Mr. Daugherty pull off his little miracle?

MRS. HARDING

(A great bellow - probably the fifth time SHE's called for HIM.)

Warren Harding!

Suddenly, with MRS. HARDING's screech, HARDING is awoken from HIS daydream. The LIGHTS instantly return to normal and the RADIO BROADCAST evaporates into the Chicago air. Evidently, it was a fixture of HARDING's mind.

HARDING

Yes, ma?

MRS. HARDING

Where is your mind at?

HARDING

Well, I... I...

MRS. HARDINGS

Oh, just close the door! It's hotter than Hell in here!

Just as HARDING moves to close the door, the LOWDEN BRASS BAND strikes up another tune. For a brief moment, HARDING pauses and listens to a note or two, even managing a slight smile in return - but then, remembering MRS. HARDING's command and fearing perhaps another tongue-lashing, HE quickly closes the door. The BRASS BAND is suffocated... somewhat.

HARDING

(Suddenly - a different tone now.)
You know, Ma, that sound out there makes me think of the Marion People's Band...

MRS. HARDING and DAUGHERTY look at HARDING surprisingly: "He speaks!"

HARDING

Those were fun times - long before there was a "Senator" Harding or a "Lieutenant Governor" Harding or even an "Editor" Harding of the *Marion Star*. Back then it was just "Band Manager and B-coronetist" Harding of the Marion People's Band. I didn't have to give a speech or fill a spotlight or give a damn about anybody but me and the instruments. It was so long, long ago. I guess, somehow, it just seems like it should be longer.

HARDING thinks to HIMSELF for a moment, then smiles.

HARDING

Band Manager and B-coronetist Harding... What a suit! The sash. The hat. The frills. I looked like a Christmas present waiting to be opened. Now I wear gray suits and gray ties and gray... everything.

HARDING shakes HIS head with thoughtful regret.

HARDING

Ah, well, I guess it was all good fun while it lasted - like a lot of things. There's a time to sow, a time to reap, and a time to run - for office. Run, run, run, all the time, like an escaped convict.

HARDING turns to MRS. HARDING and DAUGHERTY with some semblance of animation.

HARDING

Who'd have thought that band was how I'd get bitten by politics? I remember being called on to perform for all these political rallies and looking at the politicians up there on their stumps. "Hey, now," I thought - "that looks better than being a B-coronetist." So what happened? Now the band is playing for me. Now Warren G. Harding is up here and the band is down there. Whatever happened to the B-coronetist of the Marion People's Band? He became state representative - floor leader - senator.

DAUGHERTY

("Helpfully.")

Next, he might even become president.

HARDING

(A heavy sigh.)

Imagine that.

DAUGHERTY

(Trying to be jovial.)

Yes, Senator, you'd better get used to feeling nostalgia for your beloved Marion. You'll be spending full time in the White House soon enough.

HARDING

Oh, Harry, you saw the fourth ballot.

DAUGHERTY

I saw the truth beyond the fourth ballot. Politics is a game for the far-sighted. It's about realizing that there's always another step to take.

HARDING

But, my God, I feel as if I'm on a seesaw! Up, down, up, down, and getting nowhere in the meantime. I'm thinking I should show my hand and call it a day.

DAUGHERTY

(Horrorified at the very thought.)

Now, Senator, that's no way for a president to behave. You can't yell "retreat" after you start the charge. You have to run through the smoke and the gunfire!

HARDING

Where I'll end up wearing a coffin.

DAUGHERTY

Or a chest full of medals.

MRS. HARDING

Or both.

HARDING

No, Harry, I just don't think we can make the grade. We're betting all we've got on a pair of deuces. Our hand is too shaky and my gut is telling me to fold. I'm up against some real tough customers now - Frank Lowden... General Wood...

DAUGHERTY

Neither of whom will win.

MRS. HARDING

And how do you figure that?

DAUGHERTY

Simple, Duchess - we have about 100 delegates committed to your husband, but we've been loaning most of them to the Lowden people so that Lowden can stay tied with General Wood in the balloting.

MRS. HARDING

I didn't realize Christmas came early this year.

DAUGHERTY

It hasn't - because, after four ballots, if Lowden hasn't won, the Lowden people are supposed to instruct all two-hundred-and-fifty-plus of their delegates to shift their support to your husband.

MRS. HARDING

So it's all set in stone, then?

DAUGHERTY

Almost, Duchess.

MRS. HARDING

Almost?

DAUGHERTY

(To HARDING.)

You see, Senator, there's a member of the Ohio delegation who's been trying to convince our delegates that your candidacy is a lost cause and that they should throw in the towel and vote for Wood on the next ballot. I cannot stress to you how disastrous it would be for over half your delegates to desert your cause tomorrow without even so much as a wave goodbye. The mutiny will make you look weak and give the Lowden people an excuse to hold back their votes. Fortunately, we can avoid all of this with a nice little pep talk. All you have to do is give the delegates from Ohio a friendly pat on the back.

HARDING just stares at DAUGHERTY. After a pause, HE slowly turns away. DAUGHERTY's face falls to the floor.

DAUGHERTY

Senator, you must.

HARDING

Oh, Harry, I hate that word "must."

DAUGHERTY

It's a matter of life and death.

HARDING

(Finally some energy.)
Political life and political death.

DAUGHERTY

(Matching and raising HIM.)
That's what I said! Silence will close off the road to the White House. You'll have reached the end of your travels in the Senate. You're there already, so, hell, you might as well lay back and wait for the coffin.

HARDING

Look, Harry, I've spent six years in the Senate, and the years have been happy ones. I don't mind waiting for a coffin if I'm waiting in the sun. I'm too old to run around the playground and kick the political can.

DAUGHERTY

But Senator...

HARDING

No, Harry. No. I can't. It's useless. It's a final charge in battle that's already over and I'm not going to risk taking a bullet in the brain. I wouldn't mind charging on if I weren't so goddamn tired, but I'm damn near dead and I've earned the peace of staying dead.

DAUGHERTY

Listen to me, Senator - I first met you thirty years ago and I've known you were destined for the White House for all thirty of those years. Being President of the United States is what you were born to do! It was scrawled on your face at birth and you can't just scrub it off!

HARDING

No, Harry. I can't. You're asking me to give up too much on a slim chance.

DAUGHERTY

Let me talk with the Lowden people about fulfilling our little arrangement. Let me prove to you that your nomination is assured and that you'll be taking no risks by staying in the race.

HARDING

Yes, but is that true?

DAUGHERTY

I'll make it true - if you also promise to give a nice pep talk to the Ohio delegation.

HARDING

And if they don't buy it?

DAUGHERTY

Then, goddamn it, Senator, I'll announce your withdrawal from the race myself!

DAUGHERTY extends HIS hand for a friendly shake ("deal?"). HARDING looks at it for a moment. Slowly, cautiously, HE shakes hands.

HARDING

Okay, Harry, I'll give you till midnight.

DAUGHERTY

By twelve, Senator, you will be a convert.

MRS. HARDING

(Ironically.)

Amen.

DAUGHERTY

If you'll both excuse me, I have to rush over to the Lowden headquarters to touch base with Lowden's campaign manager. Then I'll have to collect our supporters in the Ohio delegation together. We have to arrange a meeting between you and them as soon as possible. I think I'll ask Malcolm to go and do that for me. I want to make sure I'll have enough time to make another important stop.

MRS. HARDING

(Raised eyebrows.)

And where's that exactly?

DAUGHERTY

(Trying to remember the number.)

The Hotel Blackstone, Suite Four-oh...

MRS. HARDING

Four.

DAUGHERTY considers MRS. HARDING surprisingly.

DAUGHERTY

I didn't think you were listening, Duchess.

MRS. HARDING

I didn't think you were thinking, Lawyer.

DAUGHERTY

Yes, well, Suite Four-oh-Four it is.

MRS. HARDING

Perhaps, too, Mr. Daugherty, you wouldn't mind taking me along with you. I have no desire to sit around here with the last act of Hamlet.

DAUGHERTY

I'm afraid some of my business is private.

MRS. HARDING

Then I will make do with the hotel tearoom.

DAUGHERTY

(A big smile, holding out HIS arm.)

It would be my pleasure, Duchess.

MRS. HARDING

(Rising, taking HIS arm.)

You should run for office, Mr. Daugherty.

(To HARDING.)

I'll be in the tearoom if you need me, Chief.

(To DAUGHERTY.)

And then, after Mr. Daugherty is done with his nightly conniving, perhaps he might be so gentlemanly as to stop by the premises to take the future First Lady for a bite to eat in the hotel restaurant?

Wanting to shut MRS. HARDING up,
DAUGHERTY smiles and nods.
HE then starts pulling HER towards
the exit.

MRS. HARDING

Stop tugging me, Mr. Daugherty. I'm not a cruise liner.

MRS. HARDING and DAUGHERTY have
now reached the Hall Door.

DAUGHERTY

(Opening the Hall Door.)

Ladies first.

MRS. HARDING

(Sailing through it.)

Lawyers last.