

Chapter 1

If a man walks in dressed like a hick and acting as if he owned the place, he's a spaceman.

It is a logical necessity. His profession makes him feel like boss of all creation; when he sets foot dirtside he is slumming among the peasants. As for his sartorial inelegance, a man who is in uniform nine tenths of the time and is more used to deep space than to civilization can hardly be expected to know how to dress properly. He is a sucker for the alleged tailors who swarm around every spaceport peddling "ground outfits."

I could see that this big-boned fellow had been dressed by Omar the Tentmaker-padded shoulders that were too big to start with, shorts cut so that they crawled up his hairy thighs as he sat down, a ruffled chemise that might have looked well on a cow.

But I kept my opinion to myself and bought him a drink with my last half-Imperial, considering it an investment, spacemen being the way they are about money. "Hot jets!" I said as we touched glasses. He gave me a quick glance.

That was my initial mistake in dealing with Dak Broadbent. Instead of answering, "Clear space!" or, "Safe grounding!" as he should have, he looked me over and said softly, "A nice sentiment, but to the wrong man. I've never been out."

That was another good place to keep my mouth shut. Spacemen did not often come to the bar of Casa Mañana; it was not their Sort of hotel and it's miles from the port. When one shows up in ground clothes, seeks a dark corner of the bar, and objects to being called a spaceman, that's his business. I had picked that spot myself so that I could see without being seen-I owed a little money here and there at the time, nothing important but embarrassing. I should have assumed that he had his reasons, too, and respected them.

But my vocal cords lived their own life, wild and free. "Don't give me that, shipmate," I replied. "If you're a ground hog, I'm Mayor of Tycho City. I'll wager you've done more drinking on Mars," I added, noticing the cautious way he lifted his glass, a dead giveaway of low-gravity habits, "than you've ever done on Earth."

"Keep your voice down!" he cut in without moving his lips. "What makes you sure that I am a voyageur? You don't know me."

"Sorry," I said. "You can be anything you like. But I've got eyes. You gave yourself away the minute you walked in."

He said something under his breath. "How?"

"Don't let it worry you. I doubt if anyone else noticed. But I see things other people don't see." I handed him my card, a little smugly perhaps. There is only one Lorenzo Smythe, the One-Man Stock Company. Yes, I'm "The Great Lorenzo"-stereo, canned opera, legit-"Pantomimist and Mimicry Artist Extraordinary."

He read my card and dropped it into a sleeve pocket-which annoyed me; those cards had cost me money-genuine imitation hand engraving. "I see your point," he said quietly, "but what was wrong with the way I behaved?"

"I'll show you," I said. "I'll walk to the door like a ground hog and come back the way you walk. Watch." I did so, making the trip back in a slightly exaggerated version of his walk to allow for his

untrained eye-feet sliding softly along the floor as if it were deck plates, weight carried forward and balanced from the hips, hands a trifle forward and clear of the body, ready to grasp.

There are a dozen other details which can't be set down in words; the point is you have to be a spaceman when you do it, with a spaceman's alert body and unconscious balance-you have to live it. A city man blunders along on smooth floors all his life, steady floors with Earth-normal gravity, and will trip over a cigarette paper, like as not. Not so a spaceman.

"See what I mean?" I asked, slipping back into my seat.

"I'm afraid I do," he admitted surlily. "Did I walk like that?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm... Maybe I should take lessons from you."

"You could do worse," I admitted.

He sat there looking me over, then started to speak-changed his mind and wiggled a finger at the bartender to refill our glasses. When the drinks came, he paid for them, drank his, and slid out of his seat all in one smooth motion. "Wait for me," he said quietly.

With a drink he had bought sitting in front of me I could not refuse. Nor did I want to; he interested me. I liked him, even on ten minutes' acquaintance; he was the sort of big ugly-handsome galoot that women go for and men take orders from.

He threaded his way gracefully through the room and passed a table of four Martians near the door. I didn't like Martians. I did not fancy having a thing that looks like a tree trunk topped off by a sun helmet claiming the privileges of a man. I did not like the way they grew pseudo limbs; it reminded me of snakes crawling out of their holes. I did not like the fact that they could look all directions at once without turning their heads-if they had had heads, which of course they don't. And I could not stand their smell!

Nobody could accuse me of race prejudice. I didn't care what a man's color, race, or religion was. But men were men, whereas Martians were things. They weren't even animals to my way of thinking. I'd rather have had a wart hog around me any day. Permitting them in restaurants and bars used by men struck me as outrageous. But there was the Treaty, of course, so what could I do?

These four had not been there when I came in, or I would have whiffed them. For that matter, they certainly could not have been there a few moments earlier when I had walked to the door and back. Now there they were, standing on their pedestals around a table, pretending to be people. I had not even heard the air conditioning speed up.

The free drink in front of me did not attract me; I simply wanted my host to come back so that I could leave politely. It suddenly occurred to me that he had glanced over that way just before he had left so hastily and I wondered if the Martians had anything to do with it. I looked over at them, trying to see if they were paying attention to our table-but how could you tell what a Martian was looking at or what it was thinking? That was another thing I didn't like about them.

I sat there for several minutes fiddling with my drink and wondering what had happened to my spaceman friend. I had hoped that his hospitality might extend to dinner and, if we became sufficiently simpatico, possibly even to a small temporary loan. My other prospects were-I admit it!-slender. The last two times I had tried to call my agent his autosecretary had simply recorded the message, and unless I deposited coins in the door, my room would not open to me that night . . . That was how low my fortunes had ebbed: reduced to sleeping in a coin-operated cubicle.

In the midst of my melancholy ponderings a waiter touched me on the elbow. "Call for you, sir."

believe. At least two of his escapes had seemed almost miraculous. Suppose they were not miraculous? Suppose they had all been successful-but dear old Uncle Joe Bonforte had always been somewhere else at the time?

You could use up a lot of actors that way.

Chapter 3

I had never meddled in politics. My father had warned against it. "Stay out of it, Larry," he had told me solemnly. "The publicity you get that way is bad publicity. The peasants don't like it." I had never voted-not even after the amendment of '98 made it easy for the floating population (which includes, of course, most members of the profession) to exercise franchise.

However, insofar as I had political leanings of any sort, they certainly did not lean toward Bonforte. I considered him a dangerous man and very possibly a traitor to the human race. The idea of standing up and getting killed in his place was-how shall I put it?-distasteful to me. But-what a role!

I had once played the lead in L'Aiglon and I had played Caesar in the only two plays about him worthy of the name. But to play such a role in life-well, it is enough to make one understand how a man could go to the guillotine in another man's place-just for the chance to play, even for a few moments, the ultimately exacting role, in order to create the supreme, the perfect, work of art.

I wondered who my colleagues had been who had been unable to resist that temptation on those earlier occasions. They had been artists, that was certain-though their very anonymity was the only tribute to the success of their characterizations. I tried to remember just when the earlier attempts on Bonforte's life had taken place and which colleagues who might have been capable of the role had died or dropped out of sight at those times. But it was useless. Not only was I not too sure of the details of current political history but also actors simply fade out of view with depressing frequency; it is a chancy profession even for the best of us.

I found that I had been studying closely the characterization.

I realized I could play it. Hell, I could play it with one foot in a bucket and a smell of smoke backstage. To begin with, there was no problem of physique; Bonforte and I could have swapped clothes without a wrinkle. These childish conspirators who had shanghaied me had vastly overrated the importance of physical resemblance, since it means nothing if not backed up by art-and need not be at all close if the actor is competent. But I admit that it does help and their silly game with the computer machine had resulted (quite by accident!) in selecting a true artist, as well as one who was in measurements and bony structure the twin of the politician. His profile was much like mine; even his hands were long, narrow, and aristocratic like mine-and hands are harder than faces.

That limp, supposedly the result of one of the attempts on his life-nothing to it! After watching him for a few minutes I knew that I could get up from that bed (at one gravity, that is) and walk in precisely the same way and never have to think about it. The way he had of scratching his collarbone and then brushing his chin, the almost imperceptible tic which preceded each of his sentences-such things were no trouble; they soaked into my subconscious like water into sand.

-is missing. Once we have this adoption thing wrapped up, we can put you out of sight, then announce the kidnaping as if it had just taken place-and make them take the city apart rivet by rivet. The city authorities are all Humanity Party appointees, but they will have to co-operate-after the ceremony. It will be the most wholehearted co-operation you ever saw, for they will be deadly anxious to produce him before the whole Kkkahgral nest swarms over them and tears the city down around their ears."

"Oh. I'm still learning about Martian psychology and customs."

"Aren't we all?"

"Rog? Mmm... What leads you to think that he is still alive? Wouldn't theft be better served-and with less risk-just by killing him?" I was thinking queasily how simple it had turned out to be to get rid of a body, if a man was ruthless enough.

"I see what you mean. But that, too, is tied up with Martian notions about 'propriety.'" (He used the Martian word.) "Death is the one acceptable excuse for not carrying out an obligation. If he were simply killed, they would adopt him into the nest after his death-and then the whole nest and probably every nest on Mars would set out to avenge him. They would not mind in the least if the whole human race were to die or be killed-but to kill this one human being to keep him from being adopted, that's another kettle of fish entirely. Matter of obligation and propriety-in some ways a Martian's response to a situation is so automatic as to remind one of instinct. It is not, of course, since they are incredibly intelligent. But they do the damndest things." He frowned and added, "Sometimes I wish I had never left Sussex."

The warning hooter broke up the discussion by forcing us to hurry to our bunks. Dak had cut it fine on purpose; the shuttle rocket from Goddard City was waiting for us when we settled into free fall. All five of us went down, which just filled the passenger couches-again a matter of planning, for the Resident Commissioner had expressed the intention of coming up to meet me and had been dissuaded only by Dak's message to him that our party would require all the space.

I tried to get a better look at the Martian surface as we went down, as I had had only one glimpse of it, from the control room of the Tom Paine-since I was supposed to have been there many times I could not show the normal curiosity of a tourist. I did not get much of a look; the shuttle pilot did not turn us so that we could see until he leveled off for his glide approach and I was busy then putting on my oxygen mask.

That pesky Mars-type mask almost finished us; I had never had a chance to practice with it-Dak did not think of it and I had not realized it would be a problem; I had worn both spacesuit and aqua lung on other occasions and I thought this would be about the same. It was not. The model Bonforte favored was a mouthfree type, a Mitsubishi "Sweet Winds" which pressurizes directly at the nostrils-a nose clamp, nostril plugs, tubes up each nostril which then run back under each ear to the supercharger on the back of your neck. I concede that it is a fine device, once you get used to it, since you can talk, eat, drink, etc., while wearing it. But I would rather have a dentist put both hands in my mouth.

The real difficulty is that you have to exercise conscious control on the muscles that close the back of your mouth, or you hiss like a teakettle, since the device operates on a pressure difference. Fortunately the pilot equalized to Mars-surface pressure once we all had our masks on, which gave me twenty minutes or so to get used to it. But for a few moments I thought the jig was up, just over a silly piece of gadgetry. But I reminded myself that I had worn the thing hundreds of times before and that I was as used to it as I was to my toothbrush. Presently I believed it.

Dak had been able to avoid having the Resident Commissioner chit-chat with me for an hour on the

force a general election on them-but at our own time, when we estimated that we could win the election."

"Oh. And you don't figure you can win now? You think Quiroga will go back into office for another five years-or at least the Humanity Party will?"

Clifton looked thoughtful. "No, I think our chances are pretty good to win the election."

"Eh? Maybe I'm not awake yet. Don't you want to win?"

"Of course. But don't you see what this resignation has done to us?"

"I guess I don't."

"Well, the government in power can order a general election at any time up to the constitutional limitation of five years. Ordinarily they will go to the people when the time seems most favorable to them. But they don't resign between the announcement and the election unless forced to. You follow me?"

I realized that the event did seem odd, little attention as I paid to politics. "I believe so."

"But in this case Quiroga's government scheduled a general election, then resigned in a body, leaving the Empire without a government. Therefore the sovereign must call on someone else to form a 'caretaker' government to serve until the election. By the letter of the law he can ask any member of the Grand Assembly, but as a matter of strict constitutional precedent he has no choice. When a government resigns in a body-not just reshuffling portfolios but quits as a whole-then the sovereign must call on the leader of the opposition to form the 'caretaker' government. It's indispensable to our system; it keeps resigning from being just a gesture. Many other methods have been tried in the past; under some of them governments were changed as often as underwear. But our present system insures responsible government."

I was so busy trying to see the implications that I almost missed his next remark. "So, naturally, the Emperor has summoned Mr. Bonforte to New Batavia."

"Eh? New Batavia? Well!" I was thinking that I had never seen the Imperial capital. The one time I had been on the Moon the vicissitudes of my profession had left me without time or money for the side trip. "Then that is why we got under way? Well, I certainly don't mind. I suppose you can always find a way to send me home if the Tommie doesn't go back to Earth soon."

"What? Good heavens, don't worry about that now. When the time comes, Captain Broadbent can find any number of ways to deliver you home."

"Sorry. I forget that you have more important matters on your mind, Rog. Sure, I'm anxious to get home now that the job is done. But a few days, or even a month, on Luna would not matter. I have nothing pressing me. But thanks for taking time to tell me the news." I searched his face. "Rog, you look worried as hell."

"Don't you see? The Emperor has sent for Mr. Bonforte. The Emperor, man! And Mr. Bonforte is in no shape to appear at an audience. They have risked a gambit-and perhaps trapped us in a checkmate!"

"Eh? Now wait a minute. Slow up. I see what you are driving at -but, look, friend, we aren't at New Batavia. We're a hundred million miles away, or two hundred million, or whatever it is. Doc Capek will have him wrung out and ready to speak his piece by then. Won't he?"

"Well-we hope so."

"But you aren't sure?"

"We can't be sure. Capek says that there is little clinical data on such massive doses. It depends on the individual's body chemistry and on the exact drug used."

"He's here?"

"Yes." Clifton hesitated. "We put him in what is supposed to be the wife's room of your bedroom suite. It was the only place where we could maintain utter privacy and still give him the care he needs. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"It won't inconvenience you. The two bedrooms are joined, you may have noticed, only through the dressing rooms, and we've shut off that door. It's soundproof."

"Sounds like a good arrangement. How is he?"

Clifton frowned. "Better, much better-on the whole. He is lucid much of the time." He hesitated. "You can go in and see him, if you like."

I hesitated still longer. "How soon does Dr. Capek think he will be ready to make public appearances?"

"It's hard to say. Before long."

"How long? Three or four days? A short enough time that we could cancel all appointments and just put me out of sight? Rog, I don't know just how to make this clear but, much as I would like to call on him and pay my respects, I don't think it is smart for me to see him at all until after I have made my last appearance. It might well ruin my characterization." I had made the terrible mistake of going to my father's funeral; for years thereafter when I thought of him I saw him dead in his coffin. Only very slowly did I regain the true image of him-the virile, dominant man who had reared me with a firm hand and taught me my trade. I was afraid of something like that with Bonforte; I was now impersonating a well man at the height of his powers, the way I had seen him and heard him in the many stereo records of him. I was very much afraid that if I saw him ill, the recollection of it would blur and distort my performance.

"I was not insisting," Clifton answered. "You know best. It's possible that we can keep from having you appear in public again, but I want to keep you standing by and ready until he is fully recovered."

I almost said that the Emperor wanted it done that way. But I caught myself-the shock of having the Emperor find me out had shaken me a little out of character. But the thought reminded me of unfinished business. I took out the revised cabinet list and handed it to Corpsman. "Here's the approved roster for the news services, Bill. You'll see that there is one change on it-De la Torre for Braun."

"What?"

"Jesus de Ia Tone for Lothar Braun. That's the way the Emperor wanted it."

Clifton looked astonished; Corpsman looked both astonished and angry. "What difference does that make? He's got no goddamn right to have opinions!"

Clifton said slowly, "Bill is fight, Chief. As a lawyer who has specialized in constitutional law I assure you that the sovereign's confirmation is purely nominal. You should not have let him make any changes."

I felt like shouting at them, and only the imposed calm personality of Bonforte kept me from it. I had had a hard day and, despite a brilliant performance, the inevitable disaster had overtaken me. I wanted to tell Rog that if Willem had not been a really big man, kingly in the fine sense of the word, we would all be in the soup-simply because I had not been adequately coached for the role. Instead I answered sourly, "It's done and that's that."

Corpsman said, "That's what you think! I gave out the correct list to the reporters two hours ago. Now you've got to go back and straighten it out. Rog, you had better call the Palace right away and-"

sorehead Corpsman finds something to yap about. An artist can't do his best work with somebody continually snarling at him. So let's let it go at this and ring down the curtain."

"Take it easy, Chief. I'll keep Corpsman out of your hair from now on. Here we won't be in each other's laps the way we were in the ship."

"No, Rog, my mind is made up. Oh, I won't run out on you. I'll stay here until Mr. B. is able to see people, in case some utter emergency turns up"-I was recalling uneasily that the Emperor had told me to hang on and had assumed that I would-"but it is actually better to keep me out of sight. At the moment we have gotten away with it completely, haven't we? Oh, they know- somebody knows-that Bonforte was not the man who went through the adoption ceremony-but they don't dare raise that issue, nor could they prove it if they did. The same people may suspect that a double was used today, but they don't know, they can't be sure-because it is always possible that Bonforte recovered quickly enough to carry it off today. Right?"

Clifton got an odd, half-sheepish look on his face. "I'm afraid they are fairly sure you were a double, Chief."

"Eh?"

"We shaded the truth a little to keep you from being nervous. Doc Capek was certain from the time he first examined him that only a miracle could get him in shape to make the audience today. The people who dosed him would know that too."

I frowned. "Then you were kidding me earlier when you told me how well he was doing? How is he, Rog? Tell me the truth."

"I was telling you the truth that time, Chief. That's why I suggested that you see him-whereas before I was only too glad to string along with your reluctance to see him." He added, "Perhaps you had better see him, talk with him."

"Mmm-no." The reasons for not seeing him still applied; if I did have to make another appearance I did not want my subconscious playing me tricks. The role called for a well man. "But, Rog, everything I said applies still more emphatically on the basis of what you have just told me. If they are even reasonably sure that a double was used today, then we don't dare risk another appearance. They were caught by surprise today-or perhaps it was impossible to unmask me, under the circumstances. But it will not be later. They can rig some deadfall, some test that I can't pass- then blooey/ There goes the old ball game." I thought about it. "I had better be 'sick' as long as necessary. Bill was right; it had better be 'pneumonia.'"

Such is the power of suggestion that I woke up the next morning with a stopped-up nose and a sore throat. Dr. Capek took time to dose me and I felt almost human by supertime; nevertheless, he issued bulletins about "Mr. Bonforte's virus infection." The sealed and air-conditioned cities of the Moon being what they are, nobody was anxious to be exposed to an S-vectored ailment; no determined effort was made to get past my chaperones. For four days I loafed and read from Bonforte's library, both his own collected papers and his many books . . . I discovered that both politics and economics could make engrossing reading; those subjects had never been real to me before. The Emperor sent me flowers from the royal greenhouse-or were they for me?

Never mind. I loafed and soaked in the luxury of being Lorenzo, or even plain Lawrence Smith. I found that I dropped back into character automatically if someone came in, but I can't help that. It was not necessary; I saw no one but Penny and Capek, except for one visit from Dak.

But even lotus-eating can pall. By the fourth day I was as tired of that room as I had ever been of a

buried constitutionally."

"Yes-but suppose some idiot did object?"

"No one will. Oh, it could force a constitutional crisis. But it won't happen."

Neither one of us said anything for a while. Dak made no move to leave. "Dak, would it make things easier if I showed up and gave that speech?"

"Huh? Shucks, I thought that was settled. You decided that it wasn't safe to risk another appearance short of an utter save-the-baby emergency. On the whole, I agree with you. There's the old saw about the pitcher and the well."

"Yes. But this is just a walk-through, isn't it? Lines as fixed as a play? Would there be any chance of anyone puffing any surprises on me that I couldn't handle?"

"Well, no. Ordinarily you would be expected to talk to the press afterwards, but your recent illness is an excuse. We could slide you through the security tunnel and avoid them entirely." He smiled grimly. "Of course, there is always the chance that some crackpot in the visitors' gallery has managed to sneak in a gun...Mr. B. always referred to it as the 'shooting gallery' after they winged him from it."

My leg gave a sudden twinge. "Are you trying to scare me off?"

"You pick a funny way to encourage me. Dak, be level with me. Do you want me to do this job tomorrow? Or don't you?"

"Of course I do! Why the devil do you think I stopped in on a busy day? Just to chat?"

The Speaker pro tempore banged his gavel, the chaplain gave an invocation that carefully avoided any differences between one religion and another-and everyone kept silent. The seats themselves were only half filled but the gallery was packed with tourists.

We heard the ceremonial knocking amplified over the speaker system; the Sergeant at Arms rushed the mace to the door. Three times the Emperor demanded to be admitted, three times he was refused. Then he prayed the privilege; it was granted by acclamation. We stood while Willem entered and took his seat back of the Speaker's desk. He was in uniform as Admiral General and was unattended, as was required, save by escort of the Speaker and the Sergeant at Arms.

Then I tucked my wand under my arm and stood up at my place at the front bench and, addressing the Speaker as if the sovereign were not present, I delivered my speech. It was not the one Corpsman had written; that one went down the oubliette as soon as I had read it. Bill had made it a straight campaign speech, and it was the wrong time and place.

Mine was short, non-partisan, and cribbed right straight out of Bonforte's collected writings, a paraphrase of the one the time before when he formed a caretaker government. I stood foursquare for good roads and good weather and wished that everybody would love everybody else, just the way all us good democrats loved our sovereign and he loved us. It was a blank-verse lyric poem of about five hundred words and if I varied from Bonforte's earlier speech then I simply went up on my lines.

They had to quiet the gallery.

Rog got up and moved that the names I had mentioned in passing be confirmed-second and no objection and the clerk cast a white ballot As I marched forward, attended by one member of my own party and one member of the opposition, I could see members glancing at their watches and wondering if they could still catch the noon shuttle.

Then I was swearing allegiance to my sovereign, under and subject to the constitutional limitations,

But Penny told me that she had taken me through only one wing of it. The file of the files, she said, occupied a cavern the size of the Grand Assembly Hall. It made me glad that government was not a career with me, but merely a passing hobby, so to speak.

Seeing people was an unavoidable chore, largely useless since Rog, or Bonforte through Rog, made the decisions. My real job was to make campaign speeches. A discreet rumor had been spread that my doctor had been afraid that my heart had been strained by the "virus infection" and had advised me to stay in the low gravity of the Moon throughout the campaign. I did not dare risk taking the impersonation on a tour of Earth, much less make a trip to Venus; the Farleyfile system would break down if I attempted to mix with crowds, not to mention the unknown hazards of the Actionist goon squads-what I would babble with a minim dose of neodexocaine in the forebrain none of us liked to think about, me least of all.

Quiroga was hitting all continents on Earth, making his stereo appearances as personal appearances on platforms in front of crowds. But it did not worry Rog Clifton. He shrugged and said, "Let him. There are no new votes to be picked up by personal appearances at political rallies. All it does is wear out the speaker. Those rallies are attended only by the faithful."

I hoped that he knew what he was talking about. The campaign was short, only six weeks from Quiroga's resignation to the day he had set for the election before resigning, and I was speaking almost every day, either on a grand network with time shared precisely with the Humanity Party, or speeches canned and sent by shuttle for later release to particular audiences. We had a set routine; a draft would come to me, perhaps from Bill although I never saw him, and then I would rework it. Rog would take the revised draft away; usually it would come back approved-and once in a while there would be corrections made in Bonforte's handwriting, now so sloppy as to be almost illegible.

I never ad-libbed at all on those parts he corrected, though I often did on the rest-when you get rolling there is often a better, more alive way to say a thing. I began to notice the nature of his corrections; they were almost always eliminations of qualifiers- make it blunter, let 'em like it or lump it!

After a while there were fewer corrections. I was getting with it.

I still never saw him. I felt that I could not "wear his head" if I looked at him on his sickbed. But I was not the only one of his intimate family who was not seeing him; Capek had chucked Penny out-for her own good. I did not know it at the time. I did know that Penny had become irritable, absent-minded, and moody after we reached New Batavia. She got circles under her eyes like a raccoon-all of which I could not miss, but I attributed it to the pressure of the campaign combined with worry about Bonforte's health. I was only partly right. Capek spotted it and took action, put her under light hypnosis and asked her questions-then he flatly forbade her to see Bonforte again until I was done and finished and shipped away.

The poor girl was going almost out of her mind from visiting the sickroom of the man she hopelessly loved-then going straight in to work closely with a man who looked and talked and sounded just like him, but in good health. She was probably beginning to hate me.

Good old Doc Capek got at the root of her trouble, gave her helpful and soothing post-hypnotic suggestions, and kept her out of the sickroom after that. Naturally I was not told about it at the time; it wasn't any of my business. But Penny perked up and again was her lovable, incredibly efficient self.

It made a lot of difference to me. Let's admit it; at least twice I would have walked out on the whole incredible rat race if it had not been for Penny.

There was one sort of meeting I had to attend, that of the campaign executive committee. Since the

"How long has Bill been with him?" I asked suddenly.

"Eh? About four years. A little over."

Bonforte evidently had liked his work. "That's past one general election, isn't it? Why didn't he make him an Assemblyman then?"

"Why, I don't know. The matter never came up."

"When was Penny put in?"

"About three years ago. A by-election."

"There's your answer, Rog."

"I don't follow you."

"Bonforte could have made Bill a Grand Assemblyman at any time. He didn't choose to. Change that nomination to a 'resigner.' Then if Mr. Bonforte wants Bill to have it, he can arrange a byelection for him later-when he's feeling himself."

Clifton showed no expression. He simply picked up the list and said, "Very well, Chief."

Later that same day Bill quit. I suppose Rog had to tell him that his arm-twisting had not worked. But when Rog told me about it I felt sick, realizing that my stiff-necked attitude had us all in acute danger. I told him so. He shook his head.

"But he knows it all! It was his scheme from the start. Look at the load of dirt he can haul over to the Humanity camp."

"Forget it, Chief. Bill may be a louse-I've no use for a man who will quit in the middle of a campaign; you just don't do that, ever. But he is not a rat. In his profession you don't spill a client's secrets, even if you fall out with him."

"I hope you are right."

"You'll see. Don't worry about it. Just get on with the job."

As the next few days passed I came to the conclusion that Rog knew Bill better than I did. We heard nothing from him or about him and the campaign went ahead as usual, getting rougher all the time, but with not a peep to show that our giant hoax was compromised. I began to feel better and buckled down to making the best Bonforte speeches I could manage-sometimes with Rog's help; sometimes just with his okay. Mr. Bonforte was steadily improving again, but Capek had him on absolute quiet.

Rog had to go to Earth during the last week; there are types of fence-mending that simply can't be done by remote control. After all, votes come from the precincts and the field managers count for more than the speechmakers. But speeches still had to be made and press conferences given; I carried on, with Dak and Penny at my elbow-of course I was much more closely with it now; most questions I could answer without stopping to think.

There was the usual twice-weekly press conference in the offices the day Rog was due back. I had been hoping that he would be back in time for it, but there was no reason I could not take it alone. Penny walked in ahead of me, carrying her gear; I heard her gasp.

I saw then that Bill was at the far end of the table.

But I looked around the room as usual and said, "Good morning, gentlemen."

"Good morning, Mr. Minister!" most of them answered.

I added, "Good morning, Bill. Didn't know you were here. Whom are you representing?"

They gave him dead silence to reply. Every one of them knew that Bill had quit us-or had been

out of his hide. I hope they do."

I could not mistake what he meant. "Oh! But, Rog-they won't stop there. There are a dozen other places. Social Security

Uh, lots of places."

"You think perhaps we were not thorough? Chief, I knew this could happen, one way or another. From the moment Dak sent word to complete Plan Mardi Gras, the necessary cover-up started.

Everywhere. But I didn't think it necessary to tell Bill." He sucked on his dead cigar, took it out of his mouth, and looked at it. "Poor Bill."

Penny sighed softly and fainted again.

Chapter 10

Somehow we got to the final day. We did not hear from Bill again; the passenger lists showed that he went Earthside two days after his fiasco. If any news service ran anything I did not hear of it, nor did Quiroga's speeches hint at it.

Mr. Bonforte steadily improved until it was a safe bet that he could take up his duties after the election. His paralysis continued in part but we even had that covered: he would go on vacation right after election, a routine practice that almost every politician indulges in. The vacation would be in the Tommie, safe from everything. Sometime in the course of the trip I would be transferred and smuggled back-and the Chief would have a mild stroke, brought on by the strain of the campaign.

Rog would have to unsort some fingerprints, but he could safely wait a year or more for that.

Election day I was happy as a puppy in a shoe closet. The impersonation was over, although I was going to do one more short turn. I had already canned two five-minute speeches for grand network, one magnanimously accepting victory, the other gallantly conceding defeat; my job was finished. When the last one was in the can, I grabbed Penny and kissed her. She didn't even seem to mind.

The remaining short turn was a command performance; Mr. Bonforte wanted to see me-as him-before he let me drop it. I did not mind. Now that the strain was over, it did not worry me to see him; playing him for his entertainment would be like a comedy skit, except that I would do it straight. What am I saying? Playing straight is the essence of comedy.

The whole family would gather in the upper living room-there because Mr. Bonforte had not seen the sky in some weeks and wanted to-and there we would listen to the returns, and either drink to victory or drown our sorrows and swear to do better next time. Strike me out of the last part; I had had my first and last political campaign and I wanted no more politics. I was not even sure I wanted to act again. Acting every minute for over six weeks adds up to about five hundred ordinary performances. That's a long run.

They brought him up the lift in a wheel chair. I stayed out of sight and let them arrange him on a couch before I came in; a man is entitled not to have his weakness displayed before strangers. Besides, I wanted to make an entrance.

I was almost startled out of character. He looked like my father! Oh, it was just a "family" resemblance; he and I looked much more alike than either one of us looked like my father, but the

making a great effort to control the errant muscles of his mouth and his speech was clear but labored.

Then he asked me what I intended to do now. I told him that I had no plans as yet. He nodded and said, "We'll see. There is a place for you. There is work to be done." He made no mention of pay, which made me proud.

The returns were beginning to come in and he turned his attention to the stereo tank. Returns had been coming in, of course, for forty-eight hours, since the outer worlds and the districtless constituencies vote before Earth does, and even on Earth an election "day" is more than thirty hours long, as the globe turns. But now we began to get the important districts of the great land masses of Earth. We had forged far ahead the day before in the outer returns and Rog had had to tell me that it meant nothing; the Expansionists always carried the outer worlds. What the billions of people still on Earth who had never been out and never would thought about it was what mattered.

But we needed every outer vote we could get. The Agrarian Party on Ganymede had swept five out of six districts; they were part of our coalition, and the Expansionist Party as such did not put up even token candidates. The situation on Venus was more ticklish, with the Venerians split into dozens of splinter parties divided on fine points of theology impossible for a human being to understand. Nevertheless, we expected most of the native vote, either directly or through caucused coalition later, and we should get practically all of the human vote there. The Imperial restriction that the natives must select human beings to represent them at New Batavia was a thing Bonforte was pledged to remove; it gained us votes on Venus; we did not know yet how many votes it would lose us on Earth.

Since the nests sent only observers to the Assembly the only vote we worried about on Mars was the human vote. We had the popular sentiment; they had the patronage. But with an honest count we expected a shoo-in there.

Dak was bending over a slide rule at Rog's side; Rog had a big sheet of paper laid out in some complicated weighting formula of his own. A dozen or more of the giant metal brains through the Solar System were doing the same thing that night, but Rog preferred his own guesses. He told me once that he could walk through a district, "sniffing" it, and come within two per cent of its results. I think he could.

Doc Capek was sitting back, with his hands over his paunch, as relaxed as an angleworm. Penny was moving around, pushing straight things crooked and vice versa and fetching us drinks. She never seemed to look directly at either me or Mr. Bonforte.

I had never before experienced an election-night party; they were not like any other. There is a cozy, warm rapport of all passion spent. It really does not matter too much how the people decide; you have done your best, you are with your friends and comrades, and for a while there is no worry and no pressure despite the over-all excitement, like frosting on a cake, of the incoming returns.

I don't know when I've had so good a lime.

Rog looked up, looked at me, then spoke to Mr. Bonforte. "The Continent is seesaw. The Americans are testing the water with a toe before coming in on our side; the only question is, how deep?" "Can you make a projection, Rog?"

"Not yet. Oh, we have the popular vote but in the G.A. it could swing either way by half a dozen seats." He stood up. "I think I had better mosey out into town."

Properly speaking, I should have gone, as "Mr. Bonforte." The Party leader should certainly appear at the main headquarters of the Party sometime during election night. But I had never been in headquarters, it being the sort of a buttonholing place where my impersonation might be easily breached.

proper thing to do-the only thing to do-is for you yourself to move on up. The election is won; you've got your majority-now you take office and carry out the program."

He looked at me and shook his head sadly. "I would if I could. I admit it. But I can't. Chief, you remember those confounded executive committee meetings? You kept them in line. The whole coalition has been kept glued together by the personal force and leadership of one man. If you don't follow through now, all that he lived for-and died for-will fall apart."

I had no answering argument; he might be right-I had seen the wheels within wheels of politics in the past month and a half. "Rog, even if what you say is true, the solution you offer is impossible. We've barely managed to keep up this pretense by letting me be seen only under carefully stage-managed conditions-and we've just missed being caught out as it is. But to make it work week after week, month after month, even year after year, if I understand you-no, it couldn't be done. It is impossible. I can't do it!"

"You can!" He leaned toward me and said forcefully, "We've all talked it over and we know the hazards as well as you do. But you'll have a chance to grow into it. Two weeks in space to start with-hell, a month if you want it! You'll study all the time-his journals, his boyhood diaries, his scrapbooks, you'll soak yourself in them. And we'll all help you."

I did not answer. He went on, "Look, Chief, you've learned that a political personality is not onq man; it's a team-it's a team bound together by common purposes and common beliefs. We've lost our team captain and we've got to have another one. But the team is still there."

Capek was out on the balcony; I had not seen him come out. I tuned to him. "Are you for this too?"

"It's your duty," Rog added.

Capek said slowly, "I won't go that far. I hope you will do it. But, damnit, I won't be your conscience. I believe in free will, frivolous as that may sound from a medical man." He turned to Clifton. "We had better leave him alone, Rog. He knows. Now it's up to him."

But, although they left, I was not to be alone just yet. Dak came out. To my relief and gratitude he did not call me "Chief."

"Hello, Dak."

"Howdy." He was silent for a moment, smoking and looking out at the stars. Then he turned to me. "Old son, we've been through some things together. I know you now, and I'll back you with a gun, or money, or fists any time, and never ask why. If you choose to drop out now, I won't have a word of blame and I won't think any the less of you. You've done a noble best."

"Uh, thanks, Dak."

"One more word and I'll smoke out. Just remember this: if you decide you can't do it, the foul scum who brainwashed him will win. In spite of everything, they win." He went inside.

I felt ton apart in my mind-then I gave way to sheer self-pity. It wasn't fair! I had my own life to live. I was at the top of my powers, with my greatest professional triumphs still ahead of me. It wasn't right to expect me to bury myself, perhaps for years, in the anonymity of another man's role-while the public forgot me, producers and agents forgot me-would probably believe I was dead.

It wasn't fair. It was too much to ask.

Presently I pulled out of it and for a time did not think. Mother Earth was still serene and beautiful and changeless in the sky; I wondered what the election-night, celebrations there sounded like. Mars and Jupiter and Venus were all in sight, strung like prizes along the zodiac. Ganymede I could not see, of

have always been right (although I am sure that I am the best-read student in his works in the System). But I have tried to stay in character in his role. A long time ago someone-Voltaire?-someone said, "If Satan should ever replace God he would find it necessary to assume the attributes of Divinity."

I have never regretted my lost profession. In a way, I have not lost it; Willem was right. There is other applause besides handclapping and there is always the warm glow of a good performance. I have tried, I suppose, to create the perfect work of art. Perhaps I have not fully succeeded-but I think my father would rate it as a "good performance."

No, I do not regret it, even though I was happier then-at least I slept better. But there is solemn satisfaction in doing the best you can for eight billion people.

Perhaps their lives have no cosmic significance, but they have feelings. They can hurt.