

Robert A. Heinlein

DOUBLE STAR

Every stand-in dreamed of the starring role —
but what actor would risk his life for the chance?



**HUGO
AWARD
WINNER**

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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 sourly. "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."

"Eh? Very well, friend, will you fetch an instrument to the table?"

"Sorry, sir, but I can't transfer it. Booth 12 in the lobby."

"Oh. Thank you," I answered, making it as warm as possible since I was unable to tip him. I swung wide around the Martians as I went Out.

I soon saw why the call had not been brought to the table; No. 12 was a maximum-security booth, sight, sound, and scramble. The tank showed no image and did not clear even after the door locked behind me. It remained milky until I sat down and placed my face within pickup, then the opalescent clouds melted away and I found myself looking at my spaceman friend.

"Sorry to walk out on you," he said quickly, "but I was in a hurry. I want you to come at once to Room 2106 of the Eisenhower."

He offered no explanation. The Eisenhower is just as unlikely a hotel for spacemen as Casa Mañana. I could smell trouble. You don't pick up a stranger in a bar and then insist that he come to a hotel room-well, not one of the same sex, at least.

"Why?" I asked.

The spaceman got that look peculiar to men who are used to being obeyed without question; I studied it with professional interest-it's not the same as anger; it is more like a thundercloud just before a storm. Then he got himself in hand and answered quietly, "Lorenzo, there is no time to explain. Are you open to a job?"

"Do you mean a professional engagement?" I answered slowly. For a horrid instant I suspected that he was offering me . . . Well, you know-a job. Thus far I had kept my professional pride intact, despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

"Oh, professional, of course!" he answered quickly. "This requires the best actor we can get."

I did not let my relief show in my face. It was true that J was ready for any professional work-I would gladly have played the balcony in Romeo and Juliet-but it does not do to be eager. "What is the nature of the engagement?" I asked. "My calendar is rather full."

He brushed it aside. "I can't explain over the phone. Perhaps you don't know it, but any scrambler circuit can be unscrambled- with the proper equipment. Shag over here fast!"

He was eager; therefore I could afford not to be eager. "Now really," I protested, "what do you think I am? A bellman? Or an untried juvenile anxious for the privilege of carrying a spear? I am Lorenzo!" I threw up my chin and looked offended. "What is your offer?"

"Uh. . . Damn it, I can't go into it over the phone. How much do you get?"

"Eh? You are asking my professional salary?"

"Yes, yes!"

"For a single appearance? Or by the week? Or an option contract?"

"Never mind. What do you get by the day?"

"My minimum fee for a one-evening date is one hundred Imperials." This was simple truth. Oh, I have been coerced at times into paying some scandalous kickbacks, but the voucher never read less than my proper fee. A man has his standards. I'd rather starve.

"Very well," he answered quickly, "one hundred Imperials in cash, laid in your hand the minute you show up here. But hurry!"

"Eh?" I realized with sudden dismay that I could as easily have said two hundred, or even two fifty. "But I have not agreed to accept the engagement."

"Never mind that! We'll talk it over when you get here. The hundred is yours even if you turn us down. If you accept-well, call it bonus, over and above your salary. Now will you sign off and get over here?"

I bowed. "Certainly, sir. Have patience."

Fortunately the Eisenhower is not too far from the Casa, for I did not even have a minimum for tube fare. However, although the art of strolling is almost lost, I savor it-and it gave me time to collect my thoughts. I was no fool; I was aware that when another man is too anxious to force money on one, it is time to examine the cards, for there is almost certainly something illegal, or dangerous, or both, involved in the matter. I was not unduly fussy about legality qua legality; I agreed with the Bard that the Law is often an idiot. But in the main I had stayed on the right side of the Street.

But presently I realized that I had insufficient facts, so I put it out of my mind, threw my cape over my right shoulder, and strode along, enjoying the mild autumn weather and the rich and varied odors of the metropolis. On arrival I decided to forego the main entrance and took a bounce tube from the sub-basement to the twenty-first floor, I having at the time a vague feeling that this was not the place to let my public recognize me. My voyageur friend let me in. "You took long enough," he snapped.

"Indeed?" I let it go at that and looked around me. It was an expensive suite, as I had expected, but it was littered and there were at least a dozen used glasses and as many coffee cups scattered here and there; it took no skill to see that I was merely the latest of many visitors. Sprawled on a couch, scowling at me, was another man, whom I tabbed tentatively as a spaceman. I glanced inquiringly but no introduction was offered.

"Well, you're here, at least. Let's get down to business."

"Surely. Which brings to mind," I added, "there was mention of a bonus, or retainer."

"Oh, yes." He turned to the man on the couch. "Jock, pay him."

"For what?"

"Pay him!"

I now knew which one was boss-although, as I was to learn, there was usually little doubt when Dak Broadbent was in a room. The other

fellow stood up quickly, still scowling, and counted out to me a fifty and five tens. I tucked it away casually without checking it and said, "I am at your disposal, gentlemen."

The big man chewed his lip. "First, I want your solemn oath not even to talk in your sleep about this job."

"If my simple word is not good, is my oath better?" I glanced at the smaller man, slouched again on the couch. "I don't believe we have met. I am Lorenzo."

He glanced at me, looked away. My barroom acquaintance said hastily, "Names don't matter in this."

"No? Before my revered father died he made me promise him three things: first, never to mix whisky with anything but water; second, always to ignore anonymous letters; and lastly, never to talk with a stranger who refuses to give his name. Good day, sirs." I turned toward the door, their hundred Imperials warm in my pocket.

"Hold it!" I paused. He went on, "You are perfectly right. My name is—"

"Skipper!"

"Stow it, Jock. I'm Dak Broadbent; that's Jacques Dubois glaring at us. We're both voyageurs—master pilots, all classes, any acceleration."

I bowed. "Lorenzo Smythe," I said modestly, "jongleur and artist-care of The Lambs Club." I made a mental note to pay my dues.

"Good. Jock, try smiling for a change. Lorenzo, you agree to keep our business secret?"

"Under the rose. This is a discussion between gentlemen."

"Whether you take the job or not?"

"Whether we reach agreement or not. I am human, but, short of illegal methods of questioning, your confidences are sale with me."

"I am well aware of what neodexocaine will do to a man's forebrain, Lorenzo. We don't expect the impossible."

"Dak," Dubois said urgently, "this is a mistake. We should at least--"

"Shut up, Jock. I want no hypnotists around at this point. Lorenzo, we want you to do an impersonation job. It has to be so perfect that no one-I mean no one-will ever know it took place. Can you do that sort of a job?"

I frowned. "The first question is not 'Can I?' but 'Will I?' What are the circumstances?"

"Uh, we'll go into details later. Roughly, it is the ordinary doubling job for a well-known public figure. The difference is that the impersonation will have to be so perfect as to fool people who know him well and must see him close up. It won't be just reviewing a parade from a grandstand, or pinning medals on girl scouts." He looked at me shrewdly. "It will take a real artist."

"No," I said at once.

"Huh? You don't know anything about the job yet. If your conscience is bothering you, let me assure you that you will not be working against the interests of the man you will impersonate-nor against anyone's legitimate interests. This is a job that really needs to be done."

"No."

"Well, for Pete's sake, why? You don't even know how much we will pay."

"Pay is no object," I said firmly. "I am an actor, not a double."

"I don't understand you. There are lots of actors picking up spare money making public appearances for celebrities."