It’s a Job

Isaac Asimov

I HAD BEEN NOTICING IT ALL THROUGH dinner and by now I had decided it was unmistakable. George had an undeniable look of prosperity about him.

Not much, you understand. It was just that his jacket sleeve looked less frayed, his tie more neatly knotted, his cheeks a little pinker. It was no use actually trying to spot the individual changes that made up the impression. It was the impression as a whole.

Nothing in the world would make George look like anything but a deadbeat, but somehow today the beat seemed to have a wan spark of life in it.

“George,” I said, “you haven’t done something desperate like getting a job, have you?”

He winced, and took a quick sip of wine. Then he said to me haughtily, “Didn’t your mother ever tell you that there are some subjects that aren’t proper in civilized discourse? A j—a j—”

“A job,” I said, helping out.

“I can say it,” he answered with asperity. “I’m just too much of a decent human being to say it in connection with myself.”

“Well, then, George, what accounts for your altogether unac­countable air of not being utterly and completely broke?”

“Ah, I see. You are impressed by my devil-may-care impression of munificence. —Actually, I made a small investment that paid off rather handsomely.”

“To the extent of your picking up the check that sooner or later will be handed to me?”

“On the other hand,” said George, “talking about jobs—1 can recall the days when a friend of mine was dying for a job, and would, in fact, have given anything for a job, and couldn’t possibly keep one even when he had it.”

“I said, George—are you munificent to the extent of your pick­ing up—”

“Why do you insist on interrupting me with aimless chatter when I’m trying to tell you the story of Vainamoinen Glitz?”

George always knows how to stop me cold. “Vainamoinen!” I said. “What kind of name is Vainamoinen? You haven’t the faintest idea who Vainamoinen was!”

“Of course I do. I’ve just told you. He was my friend, Vainamoinen Glitz. Everyone called him Van.”

“But that’s ridiculous. There’s not a person outside Finland who could possibly be called Vainamoinen. Vainamoinen is the Finnish mythic hero; a musician; a magician; a demigod—”

“My Vainamoinen was just a pleasant sort of nebbish, very good-looking the young ladies seemed to think, and as rich as the day was long. Actually, he was Vainamoinen Glitz III.”

“You mean his father and grandfather—”

“Yes, that’s the assumption. Maybe he had a faint trace of Choctaw blood in him. I think Vainamoinen is a Choctaw word meaning ‘brave warrior.’ But, talking about Finnish, can we finish with this thing you seem to have over an ordinary Choctaw name, or Chickasaw, and let me go on with the story.”

I shrugged.

I see that you are eager [said George] so let me plunge into the story without any further ado.

I had known Van’s father well (his name being Vainamoinen Glitz, Jr.) and I had watched with pleasure as Van grew older. He had the pleasant upbringing of a young man in comfortable circumstances, since his father, having had the newsstand conces­sion at the Pentagon, was naturally a multimillionaire.

Van was a daring young fellow, too, for I’ll never forget his dis­appointment at having the Vietnam War end just before he reached draftable age. He was looking forward with such excitement to entering the National Guard.

But it was not to be. He served his country, instead, by inspect­ing the various resort areas of our great nation, returning to the city every once in a while, for as he said, “All that lounging about is hard work, George, and it’s nice to get back to the occasional dinner with you.”

Things might have gone very well with him, for he was becom­ing one of the nation’s leading experts on beaches, nightclubs, the­aters, and other important business establishments, and then he met Dulcinea Greenwich. Now don’t start gasping over the first name, old man. She told me that her father had once read a book called *Don Quixote,* but I think she was making that up, because you know and I know that no one would ever write a book with a silly name like that. It wouldn’t sell.

Van came to me all of a twitter. “George,” he said, “I have met the most wonderful woman in all the world. She is dynamic. She is strong. She is intelligent.”

“Intelligent?” I said. I had seen him through a dozen mild love affairs and it had never seemed to me that his criterion for feminine excellence had been intelligence.

“Well,” he said, simpering, “she says she’s madly in love with me and if that’s not a sign of intelligence, George, what is?”

“Van,” I said, “when someone is as good-looking as you are, and as filthy rich, what’s not to love? That’s not a sign of intelli­gence, that’s just a sign that she’s not dead.”

“No,” said Van, “she’s not that kind of young woman and I think that cynicism does not become you. It so happens that the other young women who seemed to me to be attracted to my charm and insouciance all wanted to marry me and achieve large settle­ments and double-indemnity insurance policies. Remember?”

“I remember.”

“Well, Dulcinea doesn’t want anything.”

“Not *anything'”* I viewed that statement with the deepest suspicion.

“Well, one thing.”

“Aha.”

“It’s not what you think. She wants me to get a job.”

I won’t deny the fact, old man. that I swallowed the wrong way when he said that and it took me some time before I could convince myself I wasn’t going to choke to death. Finally, everything stopped swimming before my eyes and I said in a ghastly whisper, “A job? Why does she want you to have a job?”

“She thinks.” said Van moodily, “that it will make a man of me.”

“But you *are* a man. You are even.” I said with a sense of awe. for I have always been impressed by those with the talent and clev­erness to be born rich, “a wealthy man. and if anything defines a man more securely than pelf, lucre, and a thick wallet. I would like to know what it is.”

(I feel strongly about such things, old man. for though my cir­cumstances have cast me into a certain shadow of poverty. I have the heart and soul of as rich a man as any in these United States.)

“She says.” said Van. “that I am charming and that she loves me dearly, but I’m an idle wastrel.”

“Idle wastrel? With all the work you’ve been doing on the beaches and resorts?”

“For some reason, she won’t count that. She wants me to have a nine-to-five job, however humble, and to hold it for no less than six weeks, thus proving myself to be a go-getter—to use her phrase.”

“She must be sick.”

“No, George. She is not. She is a creature of high ideals and she has my heart. I will simply get a job and show her that I can go-get as well as any go-getter in the world.”

“What kind of a job are you thinking of. Van?”

Van shook his head. “There you have me, George. I have not been trained or educated for anything and I can only hope that some prospective employer will be satisfied with the fact that I know very little—even nothing.” He smiled bravely. “I am. of course, an expert and certified beach inspector. Perhaps that will help. Good-bye, George. I’m off to rhe barricades.”

Poor Van. What followed thereafter was pitiful. Pitiful! If I were to give it to you in detail, old man. I could a tale unfold whose light­est word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy—

(Please don’t recite along with me. Has someone been stealing my lines again? —Hamlet’s father? Never heard of him.)

In any case, he didn’t make it. I didn’t follow his case closely, of course, for I am a busy man with a million things to do constantly. The racing form alone—but I digress.

Occasionally, he would invite me to dinner and it was plain that he was sinking under the strain. His tan was fading and he admitted that his polo game was quite off. “When I tell you, George,” he said, in a husky whisper, “that in the last month I have fallen off my polo pony twice you will know what I mean. Please don’t let it get round.”

“But it must get round. Surely the other players would have noticed that you fell off?”

“Polo players never talk about such things, George. It’s the code of the pony.”

The problem was that infernal matter of a job, of course. He had tried everything, he said. He had obtained a job as champagne taster at his favorite nightclub, got drunk the first night and insulted the boss. He was evicted with extreme prejudice. He offered to show me where he was kicked but I was not interested in the sight.

He got a job as a cashier, but couldn’t figure out how to work the register. And he said all those numbers made him numb, which (he thinks) is why they’re called numbers. He got a job at a gasoline pump but never figured out how to get the gas cap off the tank. He got a job at the information desk at Bloomingdale’s, but quit after one hour in a dudgeon because it seemed the customers expected him to have information. Need I go on?

“It seems,” said Van, “that I will never have the girl of my dreams. My life, George,” he went on, “will be empty and void of meaning. Inspecting beaches will have no allure. Trying out a new nightclub will result in but hollow gaiety. Of what use is it if I plumb the heights of idle wastreldom, if I lose the woman to whom my soul is indissolubly bound?” And here he wept into his cham­pagne, diluting it in the most appalling fashion.

My heart ached for him, old man. It seemed to me that if he retired into a life of moroseness and sorrow, he would be far less likely to stand me the occasional meal. True altruism, as you know very well, begins at home, so I would have to do something for him.

That meant Azazel. —Have I ever told you about my two- centimeter alien whom I can call upon by means of arcane methods known only to myself?

I have? —Surely you jest.

But be that as it may, I called upon Azazel.

Azazel, as you might have expected, was furious. He arrived still shrieking in his counter-soprano and waving his arms madly. Then he looked about, spied me, and said, “You idiot of a grobbledug, is this a time to call me?”

“It is a time I need you, O Marvel of the Universe.”

“But I was watching—” He went on to describe the matter in tedious detail. There are apparently beasts on his world with six legs who proceed by leaps and somersaults in random directions and a great deal of money is placed on their progress. The first one to blunder across a finish line wins. Azazel insisted that his steed, whose name was unpronounceable, was on the point of winning.

“If I don’t get back to the exact instant at which I left,” he screamed, “I will lose seventy dworshaks.”

“Of course you will get back to the exact instant. What I am going to ask of you is simplicity itself and will take you only another instant, O Champion of the Cosmos.” (He loves being addressed in that fulsome fashion for he is a little creature and on his home planet he is usually referred to with the utmost contempt, I gather.)

I explained the situation. “A job?” he said, “On my world, we have the word *klastron* by which we refer to any demeaning task that must be performed by people of low social status over their objections and against their will.”

“Yes,” I said, feelingly, “that’s what we mean by a ‘job.’”

“Poor fellow,” said Azazel, dripping a tiny tear that fell upon the table cloth and burnt a tiny hole in it. “And he actually wants one?”

“He needs one if he is to have the girl of his dreams, the woman to whom his soul is indissolubly bound.”

“Ah, love, love,” said Azazel, dripping another tiny tear, “to what extremities it takes even the wisest being. I remember once, when for the love of a dear zapulnik—who was six feet tall, which created a problem, I can tell you—I challenged her middle-mate to a—But that is neither here nor there. I take it you want me to arrange to have him find a job that he can keep.”

“That is right.”

“And he has no qualifications?”

“None.”

“Then we must work purely emotionally. We must arrange to have an employer who will be perpetually satisfied with this friend of yours, and arrange further to have your friend perpetually satis­fied with his job. An intricate affair.”

“Not too intricate for the Unpuzzler of the Pulsars.”

“No, of course not,” said Azazel doubtfully, “and yet this has its difficult points. Since we don’t know who the employer might be, I will have to arrange a general field of acquiescence and that’s not easy. ”

I must say, old man, that this was one time when I seemed to lack faith in Azazel. He took a long time, mumbled a great deal, and, although I cannot tell what it is he does when he is engaged in the advanced technology of his own society, it did *seem* to me that he was backing and filling, with much shaking of the head and the making of new starts.

When he finally heaved a tremulous sigh and said, “It is done,” he said it in a tone of voice that filled me with doubt. I thanked him effusively, of course, but I didn’t entirely believe he had done it.

1 blame myself for this, old man. It was my doubt that led to dis­aster. —No, I am not about to drip a tiny tear into my champagne. And this is not champagne, I might as well remind you. It is cheap white wine.

I put a lot of thought into it, old man. It seemed to me that Azazel was a broken reed and that, besides, I didn’t want to see Van get a job. I admit jobs have to be done, but surely not by myself or those I consider my friends and loved ones. So I had an idea.

I sought Van out at his club. “Van,” I said, “I have never met this Dulcinea of yours and I would like to.”

He looked at me with what I can only describe as an ugly suspi­cion. “She is too young for you,” he said.

“Van,” I said, “you wrong me. Women are entirely safe with me. They may beg and they may offer money, as they frequently do, but except out of pure kindness and a view of ameliorating their suffering I assure you I would have nothing to do with them.”

My earnestness and my transparent honesty had their effect. “Well, well,” he said. “I will introduce you.”

He did, eventually, and I got to know her. She was a rather small girl, rhin, beautiful figure, dark hair. She had dark eyes that were very keen. She moved quickly and had an air of suppressed energy about her at all times. She was, in fact, quite the opposite of Van, for Van was easygoing and allowed life to drift casually past him. Dulcinea, on the other hand, gave me the definite impression that she seized life by the throat, shook it, and threw it in the direction she wanted it to go.

Frankly, I have never had the impulse to marry, but had I—if one can imagine so ludicrous a possibility—it would never have been Dulcinea. Being near her was like standing too close to a crackling bonfire—it made one uncomfortably warm. Of course, opposites attract and I was perfectly willing to let Van marry Dul­cinea. It would after all remove her from circulation and make it more comfortable for other males she might meet.

“I have longed to meet you, Miss Greenwich,” I said, in my most courtly manner, pronouncing it ‘Gren’ij,’ as any civilized per­son would do.

“It’s pronounced ‘Green’wich,’ and you can call me Dulcie. I take it you are George, a friend Van has told me much of.” She gave me an appraising look that seemed to skin me.

“A close friend,” I said.

She harumphed, then said, “Well, after he manages this job­thing, I’ll be able to get on to other matters. I’ll have to, obviously.”

I’ll tell you frankly I didn’t like her tone, but I said, “It is about the job-thing that I wish to talk to you. Why on Earth do you want Van to have a job?”

“Because it is not good for a man to be a gadabout, and to waste his life on trivialities.”

“For a *man?”* I said. “Not for a woman?”

She blinked a few times. “A woman should be up and at ’em, also.”

“Shouldn’t one of a couple be taking care of the house while the other is out there in the jungle?”

“Blatant male chauvinist propaganda.”

“Nonsense! I said ‘one of a couple.’ I didn’t specify. It’s whichever is best suited for whichever job. I take it you are a feminist.”

“Absolutely. I come from a long line of feminists. One of my ancestresses busted General Ambrose Burnside in the snoot for hav­ing the nerve to wink at her. She messed up his sideburns, I can tell you.”

“Exactly. Then it strikes me that you are far more capable of handling yourself in this cruel world of ours than poor Van is. Van is a soft and gentle human being—”

“Yes. he is,” and her voice softened a bit and a look of what was almost human feeling came into her eyes. “He’s my little lambsie-pie.”

I controlled the shudder and went on smoothly, “Where you are as hard as nails.”

“Hard as drop-forged alloy steel. I’ve always thought.”

“Then shouldn’t *you* be the one who gets the job?”

“Hmm,” she said.

“In fact,” I said. “I think you ought to go into politics. We need a hard-hitting, hardheaded, hardfisted, hard-shelled American telling all those shifty swivel-heads what to do.”

“Hmm.” she said.

“And if you go into politics, what can you better have than a rich husband who can supply the money for all those TV shots? Not that it would be lost money, for once you are elected you will find a thousand ways of earning the money back; some of them nearly ethical.”

“Hmm,” she said.

“And Van is just the type of mate a politician would need—at the left, one step back. Smiling for the camera, charming the elderly female vote, looking up at you adoringly as you make your speeches. The last thing you would want is to have him take a job. He’ll need to use all his time to take up some good cause that will make you look good—like homes for aged polo ponies, where he can teach them all to ‘Just say neigh.’”

“Hmm.” she said. “There’s a great deal in what you say.”

“There usually is,” I admitted.

“Let me think about it.”

“Certainly, but act quickly. Otherwise. Van may get a job and it may spoil him for the exacting task of being First Gentleman.”

“First Gentleman.” She rolled the phrase over her tongue, then she murmured, “Madam President"—and said, energetically. “I’ll see him tonight.”

And so she did. and the results were as I had foreseen.

Van phoned me the next day in the greatest excitement. “George,” he said, “Dulcinea wishes to marry me. I am not in the least required to get one of those nine-to-five jobs. She says I will certainly have plenty to do when I marry her and she can no longer wait to have her heart’s desire fulfilled. —You see, she means me, when she speaks of her heart’s desire, of course.”

“Undoubtedly,” I said. To be sure, it might have been the White House, but I saw no reason to mention that to Van at this happy time in his life.

He was married in less than a month. I was one of the Gentle­men Ushers, and the champagne was superb. When I tell you that I even managed to avoid kissing the bride, you will understand that it was an occasion on which the heavens themselves smiled.

The happy couple went off on a honeymoon, and they then retired to their suburban mansion.

They kept themselves busy, for Dulcinea Glitz, as she now was, did enter politics. I don’t know how closely you follow politics, old man, sitting there, as you do, with your nose in your word proces­sor at all times, but in just a few years she blazed her way through the city council, and is now running for rhe state senate.

I must tell you that I was very proud of myself. For once, I had not depended on Azazel but had done it all myself, and very neatly, too, you will have to admit. It was clear to me that, in this one case, Azazel had failed. There was no strange emotional force field that lured employers into demanding Van’s services; no wild yearning for menial position on Van’s part. No, he and his loved one simply got married.

All was well.

At least, I thought all was well until I met Van a month or so ago. He had aged considerably. His tan was gone; his hands trem­bled a little; he walked with a slight stoop; and there was a haunted look in his eyes.

I ignored it all, and said heartily, “Van! Long time no see!”

He turned to look at me and it seemed to take him a while to recognize me. “Is that you, George?”

“None other.”

“How are you, George? Meeting you is such delicious pain. It reminds me of the old days; days that are never more to be, alas.” And tears coursed down his cheeks.

I was taken aback. “Van!” I said. “What is the matter, old chap? Don’t tell me she made you get a job after all!”

“No, no,” he said. “Would that she had. I am busy in other ways. I must consult the head gardeners on the matter of the grounds and gardens, busy myself with the cook in preparing menus, go into a huddle with the housekeeper on the parties we must constantly give, hire nursemaids for the twins that dear Dulcie took two days off to have. In general, the work is very, very demanding, but on top of that—”

“Yes?”

“On top of that, she is in politics, you know. Someone appar­ently suggested it to her once. Blithering, interfering idiot,” he said peevishly. “If I could find him. I’d hit him over the noggin with my polo mallet. After all, I have no other use for it these days. You wouldn’t know who suggested it, would you, George?”

I said, “I think it must have been her own idea. I can’t conceive that anyone would be so foolish as to suggest it to her. —But tell me, what’s wrong with her having entered politics?”

“What’s wrong? It deprives me of all my individuality. I am con­stantly being asked by interviewers the extent to which I influence her decisions, whether I actually get to sleep with her, whether it’s true that I consult an astrologer to get the proper time for her to make her speeches? I tell you, George, I have no life of my own any­more. Nobody even knows my first name, and why should they? Do you know Mr. Margaret Thatcher’s first name? Of course not. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.”

My heart was wrung. “Have you told her this, Van?”

“Frequently. But she says that I am the ideal politician’s mate and that someday when she retires from her second term as Presi­dent, I will be able to visit the beaches and nightclubs again.”

“I hate to say this, Van, but have you considered a divorce? She’s a politician who can’t stand scandal, so she’s sure to let you go quietly and probably even let you retain custody of the children. Then you’ll be a free man again.”

Van nodded his head and said sadly. “I have often thought of this. I would even allow *her* to retain custody of the rotten—of the precious tykes of ours. But I can’t, George, I can’t.”

“Why can’t you? I’m sure she’d make no trouble.”

“It’s not she, George, it’s I—I—I—I.” He pounded himself on his chest with each / till a fit of coughing stopped him.

When he had recovered, he said, “This marriage I view as a job. From the moment Dulcinea and I stood before the minister I thought to myself exultantly, ‘This is a job—the job I swore to my Dulcinea I would get and keep.’ In fact, I have the feeling that I must *never* give up this job. no matter what, and Dulcinea feels the same. I don’t know why. It is a kind of mystical thing. And so you see, I’ll never be free. Never.”

So there you are. You see the mistake. Azazel’s workings *did* do the job. And when I interfered—with the very best motives in the world, I assure you—I arranged a marriage which, under the cir­cumstances, turned out to be the job neither he nor Dulcinea could end, and which he, at least, couldn’t bear. It’s too bad, but it’s just a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth, to coin a phrase.

I shook my head sadly. “You seem to spoil the broth every time, George. What is it with you? —But in any case, as long as you’re on the road to prosperity, would you take care of the tip, at least?”

George looked revolted. “When I have just told you a sad story, a terrible tragedy—is that the time when you should be discussing anything as sordid as money?”

He was right, of course, so I lumped the tip in with the rest of the check and paid it. Then I handed him five dollars to show that I was sorry I had hurt his feelings.

Habit is a hard thing to break. It would be very hard for me to stop giving money to George, and much harder *still* for George to stop accepting it.