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Meeting At The Summit

by

Ivar Jorgenson

Some readers will accuse us of injecting politics into the magazine with this story; we submit the idea transcends party preferences!

IT was quite late when the Press Secretary asked for an audience. He was one of the very few who made direct contact—a trusted friend of the President as well as an able buffer between the chief executive and the fourth estate.

The President said, "Why certainly—if it's that important. Come right up."

As the line went dead, the President put down the phone and picked up the western story anthology he had been reading. He thumbed the pages pensively, then laid that down too and sat back in his chair. He closed his eyes.

So darn seldom he got a chance to read anymore; or to do anything else for that matter except play a little golf once in a while and spend the rest of the time trying to stem the world's mad dash to destruction.

He smiled gently, his tired eyes still closed. He estimated it would take the Press Secretary a good ten minutes to get to the White House. Good, The President had come to a point where he savored every precious moment of solitude.

He left his mind drift—first to the state of the world. It wasn't so bad, really, Not in comparison. After all, a cold war was better than a hot one. And even the cold war was softening up a little. Enough to—the President's smile deepened.

Enough to quit. That was his big secret. He hadn't told them yet. In deference to political strategy, responsibility to the party, and that sort of thing, he'd held his peace. But his decision had been made. He would not run again. A man, he told himself, is entitled to a few blessed years as his own



master; a time when he ceases to be a slave of duty. Why just think! To grab the clubs and shoot eighteen without having to make "arrangements!" To go out and catch a couple of fish without the Secret Service plotting the course, calling the tune, following, grim-faced in his wake.

The President's smile deepened. It was all so darned crazy! You go out to get a little relaxation—to catch a fish. But before you arrive the stream has to be stocked so thick you can almost walk on the beauties because if the President failed to catch a trout in one of their mountain streams, the state involved gets a black eye and

might lose a few thousand tourists that year. He wondered idly if they gave the fish a pep talk when they tossed them in.

But that sort of thing would be finished, soon. He was going to quit. He was going to tell them—"Mr. President."

He jerked erect, blinked, and gave the Press Secretary his famous smile—half-apologetic now. "Sorry. I was napping I guess. Didn't hear you. Sit down—sit down."

The Press Secretary did as instructed and the President was struck by the tight, stricken look on his gray face. "Good Lord, Jim! What happened? You look as

though somebody just dropped a bomb on New York City." He could afford to speak lightly because he knew any news of grave import would not come through the Press Secretary.

The latter appeared to have difficulty with his reply. With the President's eye upon him—sharp but friendly—he floundered for a moment, then said, "I might as well give it to you straight, Mr. President. Then we can go on from there."

"An excellent idea."

"All right—here goes. A man contacted me and requests that you come to the top of Mount Rainer for a conference."

The President couldn't find any words. The silence was heavy.

"And I think you'd better go," the Press Secretary finished in a voice charged with sheer misery. He sat mute, wondering what was going on through The President's mind.

Finally the chief executive said, "Jim—I—really—"

The Press Secretary leaned forward, his whole being tense. "Mr. President. Please answer one question—honestly. Do you think I've lost my mind? Do you think I've suddenly gone crazy?"

THE reply was in a quiet tone.

"No, Jim—I don't. I know

you too well for that. I think you're saying something you have to say—doing a job you feel you have to do—even if it puts you in a position where you have to ask a question like that."

"Thank you."

"And now—why don't you just sit back and explain it? I'll be frank. It makes no sense to me. But I'm listening."

A warm feeling swept the Press Secretary. This president we had. This solid rock of a guy. You just couldn't beat him!

The homely, earnest ex-journalist leaned forward again. "The success of this mission, Mr. President—my visit here—hinges upon whether or not you believe I'm telling the truth. I'm going to tell you some strange things. And if you doubt my word—" he shrugged, "well—I will have just wasted your time."

"Go ahead with it, Jim." The words were almost sharp now.

"All right, sir." He took a deep breath and plunged in. "I've just had a briefing such as no man on this globe ever went through. I've been to the top of Mount Ranier."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Go on."

"I'll tell you step-by-step exactly what happened—or what

seemed to happen. Then you can make your decision."

The Press Secretary began to talk. He talked for a long time. The President listened, his face a mask giving no clue whatever to his inner thoughts. This was a trick he learned over conference tables through the years. His skill at this would have made him a great poker player but he never cared for the game.

When the Press Secretary stopped talking, he sat looking at the President with question marks in his eyes. He had no idea what the latter would say or do. The possible extremes were in his mind. The President might smile and say, "You've done a good job, Jim." Or he might reach for the phone and say, "Please send in two strong men and a straight jacket."

The President did neither. He spoke very quietly. "I think I'd better go to Mount Ranier. Tell them I'm ready."

The Press Secretary picked up the phone, dialed a number. When the party at the other end answered, he said, "The President agrees. He awaits your contact."

He put down the phone and they sat looking at each other, waiting. There was nothing else to do, now. The President's eyes were vague as though he were

looking through space and time. He said, "We've come a long way in a very short time, Jim. It's worth pondering."

"A long way, Mr. President."

"In a scant fifty years, we've gone practically straight up in matters of science, invention—" The thought broke off as his mind went to some of the things his Press Secretary had told him. And regardless of the gravity of this situation, he found himself looking forward to seeing them for himself.

He had not long to wait. A moment later an odd red haze appeared in a far corner of the room. There was a crackling sound as of high-voltage electricity jumping its bounds. The phenomenon vanished as quickly as it had appeared and a young man was approaching the President's chair.

So far as the President could see, he might have been one of the bright young career men who hurried about Washington these days; except that the eternal briefcase was missing and the young man wore a one-piece coverall type of garment in pastel red. He was blonde, pleasant, and had even, white teeth. He was also respectful.

He bowed and said, "Mr. President. I have been sent to con-

duct you and your assistant to the rendezvous."

The President glanced quickly at the Press Secretary, then said, "Of course."

"If you will be so kind as to move with me to the far corner of the room."

The Press Secretary's expression said, *It's all right. This is just how it happened to me*, and they followed the young man across the thick carpeting.

In the corner, he arranged them precisely. "If you will stand just there—" Then he stepped between them and looked pleasantly unconcerned.

The President tensed himself for what was to come. But nothing came except the crackling and the red light; the dissolving of the walls and the young man saying, "You may sit down now if you wish."

No physical discomfort whatever.

THE President sat down and looked about. He was in a small, well-furnished room, pastelled in a light shade of green complimenting the young man's uniform, and he got the flash of an idea that color was very important in the scheme of whatever science brought this transposition about.

There was a soft whirring sound. The President said, "May I ask

where we are?"

"Certainly, sir. We are in a small ship. We are crossing your country at around one hundred thousand of your feet."

"At what speed?"

This gave the young man pause. "It would be very hard to translate into terms with which you are familiar. I would say roughly the speed of light. The major time-lapse is consumed in ascent and descent."

The President showed great interest. "Tell me this—we were moved from my study through some scientific process I won't ask you to explain, but why weren't we carried the entire distance to Ranier in that manner?"

The young man pondered. "That is of course difficult for you to understand. And quite difficult for me to explain so allow me to put it this way. When planning a trip from Washington to New York, you walk from your office to your car, and ride in the car from your residence to the airport."

"I see—a matter of slower speeds over short distances."

"In a way, but moreso a matter of practicality. You could hardly bring the car into your office nor the aircraft onto your front lawn."

The President let it rest there. He said, "One more thing—why was I not contacted directly in this matter?"

This embarrassed the young man. "Wherever we go, sir, we attempt to conform to customs and manner existing in that place. We understood that to reach The President of the United States, one always proceeds through channels."

The President smiled. The humming sound ceased. The young man arose, forestalling further questions.

"This way, if you will be so kind."

The President and the Press Secretary followed the young man from the room into a low corridor. The walls of this passage were transparent and the President caught his breath at the grandeur outside. He got the impression they were moving from the small ship to a larger one perched precariously on the edge of an abyss. Below, under bright moonlight, lay the snow-covered approaches to Ranier and her sister peaks. A view of overpowering majesty such as few men had ever seen. One of the reasons, the President thought, why some men join the air force.

They entered another room, this one with a blue motif, through another door that opened automatically on approach, and into one of pastel green.

This room was somewhat larger but no more ornate nor less efficiently furnished than the others. A streamlined, oval desk sat in its

center from the far side of which a man arose and held forth his hand.

He was slim as a reed and had snow-white hair. He gave the impression of ripe years yet with no physical indications of this other than a head of beautiful snow-white hair. Perhaps, the President thought, this indication was an illusion. And perhaps the aura of power emanating from the man was also an illusion but the President would not have been willing to bet on it.

The man's smile was an odd mixture of friendliness and impersonality as they shook hands. He said, "My name is Rex, Mr. President. The fact that in one of your languages the word means *king* is purely coincidental. I am not a monarch in any sense. My title is Director of the Seventh Sector."

As Rex had got to his feet, the chair under him had swung under the desk out of his way. Now it moved back to its original position. And as the President took the seat Rex indicated beside the desk, he had a whimsical thought: *I wonder how that chair knew he was ready to sit down again?*

REX nodded to the young man in the pastel-red uniform. The latter bowed slightly, turned and left the room. Rex turned his dark eyes—almost feminine in their beauty—on the President. His quick

smile was even more impersonal now. "Shall we get to the business at hand, or could you do with a little refreshment first?"

"I'd prefer the former," The President said briefly.

"Good. I imagine your aide told you some of it, but I'd better recap that and then go on."

Rex nodded briefly in The Press Secretary's direction. It was the silver-haired man's first acknowledgement of his presence.

"You are probably curious as to who I am and just what the Seventh Sector is. I'll tell you. The Seventh Sector is a team denoting a certain part of the known universe. It contains approximately nine-hundred thousand solids of a twenty-million-ton weight or over. Eleven of these solids supports animate life at around the evolutionary stage of your own—or higher. Do you follow me?"

When The President was slow in answering, Rex said "I suggest you lay aside any mental resistance and take all statements I make as fact."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because my deceiving you would be pointless and because I must transfer a great deal of information to your mind in a very short time."

The President said nothing and Rex went on. "As Director of this sector, it is my job to check the de-

velopment on its various planets and make progress reports to the Council."

"And this Council is located—?"

"Many light years from here—at the hub of the known universe, but that is not important."

"I thought perhaps we—or our representatives might someday—"

"Appear before it? I'm afraid not. I fear you are treading the path of those who once inhabited your neighbor planet, Mars."

"Then life does exist—or did—on Mars?"

"Oh yes, but we were forced to eliminate it."

The President spoke calmly. "Then you are able to depopulate whole planets?"

"Whole systems if necessary. Let me explain. When conditions are right, life inevitably comes into existence upon a planet. The entities involved are always pretty much as you and I, physically, because conditions produce a ruling race of our structure or do not produce life at all.

"The problem, Mr. President, lies in the spiritual. Every race on every inhabited planet is given the intelligence and desire to evolve upward spiritually but they do not always succeed. A time limit is set on this so that the inhabitants of each planet arrive finally at an evolutionary crisis."

The President thought of nuclear fission, the atom bomb, mankind's incredible progress over the last two hundred years. "And you have come to aid us in spiritual development?"

"On the contrary. You have had all the guidance necessary—far more than those on most planets—more than did your neighbors on Mars. I have come to annihilate you."

The President hid his shock well. "If killing me will—"

"Annihilate life on the planet. You see, Mr. President, there comes a time when each inhabited planet must join the Council—when it reaches a point at which its existence affects the great family of planets. If at that time, its state of affairs and development are negative, its population is eradicated for the greater good."

"May I ask two questions?" The President said.

"You may."

"Thank you. First, why do you contact only me with this news? I am the titular head of only one nation on this planet. There are many others."

"I would rather reserve the answer to that question."

"Very well, the second. How can we affect a family of inhabited planets the existence of which we are not even aware. Planets with

which we have no contact whatever?"

"In a few short years you would know of their existence—you would not only be able to contact them—you would visit them and they would visit you."

"And just how would we affect them adversely?"

"That should be apparent. Your present state of dwarfed spirituality is made clear by your background of violence and injustice. I refer to your planet rather than to your nation. Practically all your scientific progress has come as a result of war. Nations that lose a war on your planet study and invent and discover like demons possessed for tools with which to win the next one. Do you deny that at this moment your planet is little more than an armed camp?"

"No," The President said sadly. "I cannot deny this."

"Then you realize why we cannot let you move out into space, carrying with you the greed, the envy, the hatred, the violence that stalks the corridors of your history."

TH**ERE** was no doubt in the President's mind that this remarkable man could back up his every word. His statements were not idle threats. The President said, "But your accusations are not entirely just. You make no mention of

our great progress toward spiritual goals in the past hundred years—even the past fifty have seen marked changes in that direction.”

“I have noted that. It is what caused me to make this contact with you. Ordinarily, no such contact would have been made. I would have checked the planet, reported it to the Council, and annihilation would have been automatic.”

“Then there is hope for us?”

A look of skepticism was mirrored in Rex’s eyes. “A slim one, perhaps—a very slim one.” He leaned suddenly forward. “You asked me why I contacted you only. Because, of all the nations on this planet, yours is the most powerful—the first powerful nation in the history of your planet that has fought no wars of aggression—that has subjugated no weaker nations. Certainly a hopeful overall sign.”

“And greater progress will be made in the future. Progress comes slowly. We must have time.”

“But progress has been too slow. There is little time left.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“In rare cases, where planets have been found to be approaching a crest so to speak, extensions have been granted.”

“And you will grant us an extension?”

“I’m not sure. There is nothing,

at the moment, that justifies one.” Rex pondered. “Yet there are strong indications—”

The President waited. Rex gave his decision. “I will withhold judgment for five years. At the end of that time, I will contact you again. My judgment will then rest on what progress you have made in the interim.”

“But I am only one man!”

“A powerful man. And I am very much afraid the fate of the planet lies with you and your nation.”

The President arose from his chair. Rex did likewise. The President said, “I will go personally to the United Nations—all together the heads of all the nations—”

Rex shook his head. “I’m sorry. I can allow no such deviation from the channel of your present efforts. Telling your world of this meeting would put it in the nature of a threat. Thus, any results achieved would come through fear of punishment and would not be permanent.”

“There is one more point. Mine is an elective office. I may not be in the President’s chair five years from now.”

Rex considered gravely. “I see. In that case, one of two things will happen, depending upon the man in your present office and the sincerity of his efforts.”

“And they are—?”

“Perhaps we will contact him and

give him our decision.”

“Or—?”

Rex shrugged. “Perhaps we won’t bother.” He held out his hand. “Goodbye, Mr. President, and good luck . . .”

THE President of the United States sat alone in his study. His face seemed wearier than usual. There was a sag in his shoulders that would have drawn comment in public. He was considering his future—the future of the world.

There were of course many good men in both parties. In the privacy of his own thoughts, it was hard to judge which party had really done the nation greater service. At one time, he himself had debated running for the Presidency on the

other ticket. The country would be in good hands regardless.

Ordinarily.

But now it came down to the man rather than the party. Would he be able to convince an incoming president of what had occurred on Mount Ranier? Make him truly understand how little time remained? Would his predecessor have been able to convince him?

No. Of course not. Only he, The President of the United States, knew of the peril ahead. He pressed a button on his desk. The Press Secretary entered. The President straightened his shoulders. “When the right moment comes,” he said, “tell them I will run again.”

And God grant I win, he added in his heart.