



WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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puppet government

BY GEORGE REVELLE

BRANDON WAS looking at his desk again. An artificial grin spread across the narrow face of the Secretary of Interior who was watching him closely. The Secretary's pencil-thin fingers continued to toy with the small,

Year after year they came back, despite his

constant refusals. And still Brandon couldn't

figure out why he was so important . . .

wood figure he was holding. "Brandon," he tried to lie gracefully, "You're a card. A real card."

Brandon shifted his position, brought his attention back to the thin man with the receding hairline. He couldn't, for the life of of him, remember anything humorous he had said or done. He was too tired to be jovial. The past few days had sapped his strength. He was exhausted and there were still two more interviews scheduled.

Good Lord, he thought. Two more! He found his eyes wandering back to his desk. He would never finish the papers in time. That would mean a severe penalty.

"Come now, Brandon. Admit it. You *know* you want to work for us in Interior."

"Right now I don't know anything," Brandon said wearily. "My head is tired and clouded. I can't think straight." He rubbed his hand across his forehead, wondering how much longer he would be able to continue to say no to their requests. He had almost found himself agreeing with the thin man a few moments ago. That wasn't good.

Brandon leaned back in the contour chair and let some of the

strength seep back into his outstretched legs. Each year at this time they would begin to wander in with their strange, outlandish offers of positions with the government. It was perplexing.

"Why me?" he asked suddenly. "Why in Interior? I know nothing about such work?"

The thin man leaned forward, "Because you are a good man, Brandon. And we need good men these days. Government is big business and we want the top positions filled with the best men we can get. Besides," the Secretary laughed softly, "you're wasting your time playing with dolls."

"They aren't dolls!" Brandon said indignantly.

"So they aren't dolls."

"There is a difference," Brandon insisted. "You make it sound as if I'm in my second childhood."

"All right. Puppets!" The thin man shifted in his chair. He ran his lean fingers over the hand-painted figure he was holding in one hand. "But you can see my point."

Brandon shook his head. That was it. He couldn't see the point. His puppets were becoming world

famous, the result of reviving the almost lost art of hand carving. He was earning a fair living at it. He could see no reason for a change.

"Think of the prestige if you come with us. You will be heading a department of your own," the Secretary said.

Brandon wrinkled his brow, thinking of how his name was already associated with his puppets. If only they would leave him alone, if only there wasn't so much paper work waiting for him on his desk, he would be able to spread out, expand, really have a going business. But they had to keep pestering him with worthless offers that they knew he couldn't handle, wasting his time, especially now when time was of the essence. The paper work on his desk had to be completed by midnight. He would never finish it now.

Brandon felt the beginning of a headache. Because of the paper work he hadn't had time to touch a new puppet in months. Now these damn interviews were keeping him from the desk work. It was a vicious circle leading to ruin.

"You will be serving your Country, Brandon," the Secretary said strongly. "Not fiddling with dolls."

"I told you . . ."

The Secretary held up his hand. "I know. Puppets."

Brandon got up and walked to the window and looked out at the setting sun. It was hard to define; there were some things words couldn't explain. All the offers had been good ones. But a man had to have some rule, some yardstick to

guide him. Brandon had his. He wanted to be useful, that wasn't too much to ask. Life was too short to waste laboring in a position he wasn't fitted for. If he took Interior's offer all that would be ended. He would be caught in a web which allowed no escape.

Brandon turned. "I'm afraid, Mr. Secretary, that you don't understand my position. It isn't that I feel above being employed by the President. I have all the respect in the world for him and his office. I have nothing but respect for you . . ."

"Then what is it, Brandon?"

"I don't think I would be happy taking orders from some one else."

"We all have a boss, Brandon."

"I haven't."

The Secretary grinned. "You can head your own department. The President and myself will be the only ones you will have to answer to, I promise."

"That's what I mean," Brandon answered softly.

The Secretary felt his face flush. "You *are* insinuating that you are above working for the President, Mr. Brandon!" he said stiffly.

"You're twisting words." Brandon's voice was determined. "It's just that I like to work alone. I like to put my hat on and go, whenever, and wherever I please."

The Secretary shook his head "Brandon! I happen to know that you haven't been off this estate, this property of yours, in the past five years."

"That doesn't alter a thing. I can go, anytime I please. I have no reason to leave now. But when I do, I won't feel obligated, I won't have

to ask permission."

The Secretary relaxed. "You can do that in the department anytime you wish. Visit the conservations, then, when you are tired of traipsing around, you can come back and write up a report or two." The Secretary cleared his throat. "Just for the records, of course."

Brandon sighed. "Of course. Just for the records." He brushed back his thick, black hair and sat down. Damn it. Why couldn't they leave him alone? That was all he wanted, to be left alone. He was sick of all this. They knew he wasn't fitted to be a clerk in any of the departments. Yet they wasted his time offering him important positions, as if the title would persuade him. Why?

"We could outlaw your doll-making," the Secretary said casually.

Brandon shrugged his shoulders. "Harmonics did that with my music writing, remember! I didn't always do hand-carving."

The Secretary remembered. He had had an indirect hand in that. It had been thought that if Brandon was suddenly without income he might easily be persuaded to accept a position. They hadn't counted on Brandon's resourcefulness, nor his stubbornness.

The thin man leaned back in his chair, looked again at the doll thing resting in one hand. The man was clever; there was a life-like quality to the doll. Brandon was an artist and it would be a shame to take him out of circulation. Yet what could he do? The President had insisted on the visit again this year,

knowing full well that Brandon would turn down the offer.

Suddenly, the Secretary felt sorry for Brandon. The man was breaking down and didn't realize it. His face was drawn and pale. He looked dog-tired.

"Won't you change your mind, Brandon?" the Secretary asked softly. "With Interior you will have an opportunity to get out into the sunlight. It will be a healthy life visiting the many conservations we have situated around the country; it will agree with you, I'm sure."

Brandon sighed. "I'm afraid, Mr. Secretary, that we are both wasting our time. I have a tremendous amount of paper work to finish before midnight tonight and I am tired. I also have a few more interviews before I can get at it." Brandon got up, "So if you don't mind—"

The thin man looked at Brandon searchingly. "Won't you reconsider?"

"I'm afraid not," Brandon answered.

The Secretary paused at the door. "See you next year, then!"

"Next year," Brandon answered flatly.

THE SECRETARY of Interior hardly spoke to the young man waiting by his vehicle. He wanted to get away from there as soon as possible. These yearly visits to Brandon always upset him, made him feel like a cad. It would be days before he shook the unwanted feeling.

"How did it go?" the young

man asked eagerly.

The Secretary took in the youngish face, the confidence flowing from the eyes. Evans always managed to give that youthful impression, yet he wasn't really a young man. In a way the thin man envied Evans . . . with one exception, of course. This would be Evan's first visit to Brandon. Some of the confidence would be gone when he walked out of Brandon's house.

"I said how did it go?" Evans repeated.

The Secretary shrugged his thin shoulders. "As usual. He refused."

Evans showed white, even teeth. "Is he tired?"

"Very."

"Excellent," Evans said "And the paper work. Is it worrying him?"

The thin man studied Evans. No, he didn't envy the man any longer. Evans had no feelings; it was written on his face. "The paper work is worrying him to death." he heard himself say.

"Wonderful!"

The Secretary became conscious of the small figure he was holding in his hand. He had walked out with one of Brandon's creations! Suddenly, he slammed it to the ground. The paint chipped and cracked. The small head rolled loosely across the lawn. Evans looked at him queerly.

"I think *you* need a rest," the young man said softly, unsmiling.

"Brandon is a good man. I hate to see him broken. He has a lot of talent. But not for the work we're offering him. It isn't right, grinding him into the dirt the way we are."

Evans leaned over, picked up the broken puppet. One arm was twisted at an odd angle, the clown suit was torn and dirty. Evans tried to fit the head back on the small body. Finally he succeeded.

He looked at the Secretary of Interior. His eyes seemed different. "I have a position he can fill and do a good job. He won't refuse. I'm sure." Evans walked away, toward Brandon's house, still holding the broken figure.

Brandon stood on the veranda looking across his small estate, in the direction of the city. The site of the government was located there. Perhaps that was why he was so reluctant; he lived too close to it, had it around him day in and day out. The Government was ubiquitous, omnipresent and omnipotent. It dominated every conversation, every business, every life from birth to death. Lately it even seemed that every one he came in contact with held a position with some agency connected with the government.

"Mr. Brandon!"

"I know," he answered without turning. "You're from Labor."

"We've never met!"

Brandon turned and took in the lean individual who called himself Evans. Quite different from the one who had called last year. That one had been old and grumpy. Brandon's lips parted: "I assumed. All the other departments have been here except Revenue. I didn't see Wilson standing outside; I've heard he's out of the country. That leaves you."

"You could have been wrong, you know." Evans said.

"How?" Brandon asked without fully caring.

"Revenue has been split. There are two departments now. Revenue and Taxation. Taxation handles income from taxpayers only."

"Big deal," Brandon said harshly, remembering his desk piled high with papers.

"They say you are a stubborn man, Brandon."

"Stubborn?"

"Quite."

"Let's say I'm content with my lot."

"Are you really, Brandon?"

Brandon took in the young man's wide shoulders, the face that was almost too young for such a responsible position. For just an instant he had felt that this man would be different, that there might be a challenge here. He could see he was wrong. The man was going to offer him a position.

"Let's get to the point," he said hurriedly. "I'm happy making puppets and I feel no need for a change."

"I'm glad you are happy, Mr. Brandon."

"Good. Then there is no need to continue. I refuse your offer." Brandon was getting irritated. He didn't wait for an answer, he walked past Evans, into the house.

He stood by his desk. The pile of papers was still resting there, waiting for him. He had hoped, in some magical way, that they might have vanished. A foolish thought, he knew.

"Income tax?" he heard Evans

say from his shoulder.

Brandon nodded wearily. Evans reached over and picked up a form. He frowned. "Complicated!"

"Each year it gets worse," Brandon said listlessly.

"I've never had to file one," Evans said.

Brandon lifted one eyebrow.

"Government employees never do. We are paid a flat sum and our subsistence is taken care of. Calculators and computers adjust our salary each year in proportion to the expense of the government. We have been operating out of the red that way for years. It works out fine."

Brandon ran his hands through the papers and forms. Why then did he have to wade through this mess each year when it could be made so simple? He had been staggering under the load.

"You're an independent, Brandon," Evans said. "You stay in business for yourself because you dislike working for someone else. Isn't that right?"

"You might say that."

Evans dangled a handful of papers in front of Brandon's brown eyes. "You are working for someone else now. The tax department."

"Not exactly. I don't have to answer to anyone."

Evans snorted. "Not even the tax collector?"

"Not unless I make an error," Brandon said stubbornly. "And I won't. I'm becoming an expert on this. When a man spends one hundred days a year working on these damn things he learns quite a bit. There will be no errors."

"One hundred days!" Evans laughed. "Soon it'll be every day of the year. Then where will you be?" He looked directly into Brandon's eyes. "Can't you see? You're in the web already, working a third of the year without compensation."

Evans pulled from his pocket the broken puppet he had picked up from the driveway outside Brandon's house. He laid it in front of Brandon on the pile of income tax blanks. "Soon you'll be without income; your business will deteriorate from lack of attention."

Brandon said nothing.

Evans moved to the contour chair and sat down. He closed his eyes. "You've been out of circulation a long time, Brandon. The world is changing. Government is big business, one of the largest, and it's expanding. We need more men, good men."

Evans opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. "You said you've become an expert on forms. Would you consider taking a position as head of the tax department?" he asked abruptly.

Brandon lifted his gaze from the desk. "I thought you were with labor?"

"I could arrange it." Evans closed his eyes again.

"But . . ."

"Think, Brandon. As chief of the bureau, you won't have to answer to anyone, not even the President. You've seen the mess the forms have become. You can straighten it out."

"I don't think . . ."

"I'll have it put in writing that no one will bother you."

Brandon stared at the papers on his desk. For the first time they were offering him a position he understood, one he could handle. It would be a challenge. He would be in a position to eliminate three-quarters of that damn paperwork. God knew how many like himself were gradually getting snowed under each year.

Brandon played with the puppet. The silly face stared back at him with a fixed, smiling expression. "Tell me, Evans," he asked idly. "Why so much effort to locate me in a government position? I've had no special training; this is the first offer I'm even qualified enough to accept." He lifted the puppet face high, gazed at its face. "For ten years I've been pestered."

Evans laughed as he pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. "You have determination and will power. We need that type of nature these days more than ever." Evans' smile became wide "And you will be one less taxpayer we will have to worry about now. You'll be on our side."

Evans pushed all the forms from Brandon's desk with a sweep of his tanned hand. "Forget all of that, Brandon, forever. No more taxes for you. This is the last form you will have to sign. It appoints you Secretary of Taxation, *carte blanche*."

"You had all this prepared?" Brandon said in amazement.

Evans' smile grew wider. "We knew you couldn't refuse an intelligent offer, one where you would be useful."

"We!"

"The cabinet and myself."

Brandon picked up the pen, twisted it between his fingers. Evans was right, of course. He would be useful. Half those damn forms were filled with worthless nonsense that could easily be eliminated. Deductions should be higher; small, independent business should be given a break. And he could handle the job—that was important.

"Just sign on the bottom line," Evans said smoothly, pushing the broken puppet out of the way.

The puppet fell to the floor and the head came off again. "Forget it," Evans said quickly.

Brandon studied the other man's face before he reached over and picked up the little figure. It was a funny creature with a large, silly-looking balloon nose. Brandon handled it tenderly, looking at it thoughtfully. Finally he said: "My puppets. What happens to them?"

"I don't understand?"

"Children enjoy them," Brandon answered.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Brandon," Evans shook his head. "I'm offering you a full time position. You can make them—as a hobby of course—give them away, but you can't sell them. That would give you an income again, mean more tax forms."

"But I couldn't hope to produce them for nothing," Brandon insisted. "Not on a large scale, not on the fixed salary that you mentioned!"

"They aren't important, Brandon."

Brandon's lips became a firm,

straight line. For the first time it was clear to him why he had been so reluctant to give up his work. His music had pleased people, just as his puppets were doing now. He was getting satisfaction out of his work. He was giving people something no one else seemed to be able to give them. Accepting a position he couldn't handle, working for someone else had nothing to do with it . . .

"I've changed my mind," he said quietly.

"Changed your mind?" Evans stared at the pen Brandon had carefully laid down on the desk; disbelief disfiguring his face. "You intend fighting *that* each year?" he pointed at the mad array of papers he had strewn at Brandon's feet. "You're willing to risk not having any time at all to work on your puppets against security and a life of ease?"

"I'm willing," Brandon answered. "Now I think you'd better leave Mr. . . ."

"Evans!"

"Mr. Evans. I might be able to finish these damn things before the midnight deadline."

Evans opened his mouth but Brandon was already showing him the way to the door, shoving something in his hand.

EVANS CLIMBED into his car and slumped down on the seat beside the President. He looked at the new puppet Brandon had forced into his hand before he could refuse.

"Is Brandon Secretary of Taxa-

tion?" the President asked hopefully.

Evans shook his head from side to side. What had gone wrong? They had known Brandon was a stubborn man, that was why things were done as they were. The offering of worthless positions had been a feint. He should have grabbed at something he could handle. And the tax forms! That was supposed to be the last straw. They had been loaded, prepared just for Brandon, to break his resistance. Yet they had failed. Why?

"Did he suspect?" The President eyed Evans.

"I don't think so, Sir." Evans said. "I had the pen in his hand. He was ready to sign. Then something went wrong. I can't understand it!"

The President looked the other way, found his eyes fastened on his own reflection on the window. The cabinet had been wrong thinking it was a job for a psychologist like Evans. Brandon was an individual, a decided rarity in this day and age.

"I'm glad," the President said softly to the glass.

"What was that, Sir?"

The President turned. "I said, I'm glad he didn't sign."

"You can't mean that, Sir!"

"But I do."

"Do you realize what this means? Brandon was the last taxpayer. We've been forced to operate an entire bureau just to process his forms. It's the only department operating in the red. He's the only person not employed by the government, the only one still operat-

ing a private business!"

Evans found himself clenching the puppet tightly in his fist. "We will break him. I know we will. Next year it will take him 365 days to compute his tax. I promise."

"Next year," the President said firmly, "Brandon will get a short form. One that he can complete in ten minutes. Do you understand, Evans?"

Evans' forehead creased. "I'm afraid—"

The President looked back at his reflection on the glass. "We don't want to make the boss angry now, do we Evans?"

"The boss, Sir?"

"Brandon, of course," the President smiled. "After all, the government works for the taxpayers, Evans—and Brandon is the last taxpayer. He's our boss, son. The only boss we have left."

"Mr. President. If I might—"

The President returned his gaze to Evans. "I think we've forgotten something over these past years, Evans. Something very important."

"What is that, Sir?"

The President removed the puppet from Evans' limp fingers. "If the sole purpose of the government is to serve the taxpayers—and there were no more—how could we justify our existence in office?"

The President ran his finger under the chin of the little puppet, "Do you mind if I keep this, Evans?" he asked softly. "I'd like to take it home to my granddaughter. She's never seen a puppet, I'm sure she'll love it."

The tiny figure seemed to smile approvingly. **END**