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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MAN'S BEST FRIEND ***



Man's Best Friend

By EVELYN E. SMITH

Illustrated by MEL HUNTER

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***Sometimes a job comes after the man ... and
this one came after Gervase like a tiger!***

The annunciator aroused Gervase from pleasant semi-slumber. He knew the interruption was his own fault for not having turned off the device, but he so seldom had a visitor that he could hardly be blamed for his forgetfulness. Frowning, he pressed the viewer button. A round, red face appeared on the screen. "May I be the first to congratulate you, Mr. Schnee?" it said.

"You may, indeed," Gervase replied. "But for what?"

"You haven't heard the news? Good, then I'm the first. I imagine I got a head-start on the others because of my superior facilities for locating you. Your address wasn't given; these pronouncements do tend to be a bit vague. Matter of tradition, I suppose."

"I haven't heard any news for days," Gervase said, uncomfortably conscious that he was apologizing. "I've been listening to my sound-tapes and—and meditating," he added defiantly. "Wait a minute; I'll let you in."

He struggled with the door-stud, but the door refused to open. The autobursar must have neglected to pay the door bill—probably because Gervase had failed to put enough money into it. But his allowance was limited and sound-tapes, not to speak of meditators, were so expensive.

Sighing, Gervase got up and opened the door manually. The individual outside was short and stout and dressed, unfortunately, in the uniform of an upper-echelon salesman. Gervase had been caught! Still, he reminded himself, no one could force him to buy anything. He was a free citizen.

"Well, come in if you must," he said grudgingly. "I suppose the big news is that I'm the lucky householder to whom the Little Gem Room Expander will first be offered."

"Nothing of the sort!" the man replied indignantly.

At this point, Gervase noticed with surprise that the other wore a jeweled merchant-prince's badge. Apparently this was one of those consumer reaction tests in which executives themselves participated to check on their employees.

The man remembered to smile. "The Prognosticator has just given its fortnightly Prognostication. You, Mr. Schnee, are going to be our new Ruler." He seized the young man's limp hand and shook it enthusiastically. "And I'm sure you'll be a splendid one, too."

Gervase accepted a pale green cheroot from the dispenser. It shook in his lips. "And what's to become of the old Ruler?"

"You're scheduled to dispose of him sometime this month. Now, Mr. Schnee," the man went on briskly, "allow me to introduce myself. I am Bedrich Florea, vice president of the Florea Munitions and Container Corporation." He extracted a gleaming weapon from his brief case and offered it to Gervase. The young man recoiled. "If you will only agree to shoot Overlord Kipp with a Florea Semper Fidelis Gun," the executive continued, "my corporation will be happy to place a substantial amount of credits at your disposal in any bank you choose. Six billion, to be exact. Now if you'll just sign here on the dotted line...." He held out a stylus temptingly.

"Nonsense!" Gervase backed away.

"Even a Ruler can use money. Bribery for government officials, bread and circuses for the people—oh, money's a very useful commodity, Mr. Schnee. Shall we say seven billion?"

"I don't doubt that money is useful," Gervase replied, thinking wistfully of seven billion credits. "But when I said 'nonsense,' I meant the Prognosticator. The whole thing's a lot of—well, nonsense. A whole planet of supposedly intelligent people listening to what's nothing more, really, than an oracle! A machine can't read the future. It's impossible."

Florea's eyes bulged. "Mr. Schnee, that's sacrilege! You can't—confound it, sir, you can't talk that way about The Machine. After all," he added in a more placatory manner, "let's look at this reasonably. Machines can and do answer all the problems of our daily life, so why shouldn't a superior machine be able to tell the future?"

"If you ask me," Gervase all but sneered, "behind the wires and gimmicks and whatnots in The Machine, there's a secret room in which a half-mad, half-intoxicated old priestess sits delivering her Delphic pronouncements. Might as well have an aboveboard oracle and be done with it."

"Now, now, Mr. Schnee—" the executive smiled with obvious effort—"even our Ruler shouldn't flout the Authority of Machinery. Of course, it's all right when you're alone with friends, like me, but in public—"

The annunciator sounded again. An eager face appeared on the screen. "Mr. Schnee," an equally eager voice said, "I'm from the *Daily Disseminator*. How does it feel to be Ruler Prognosticate?"

There was the sound of a scuffle. His face disappeared, to be replaced by two others. "Mr. Schnee, will you tell us in your very own words—"

As Gervase clicked off the interviewer, the vidiphone blinked. Gervase lifted the receiver. The face of Overlord Kipp himself came into view, pale but composed. "I understand you're the young man who is destined to dispose of me and take my place?"

Gervase paled also. "Honestly, Your Honorship, I haven't the slightest inten—"

"You'll make it quick and painless, won't you? And it really would be very decent of you to give me the exact day and hour of my—er—demise so I won't have to sit around waiting."

"But, really—"

"You don't look like a hard-hearted chap. As a matter of fact, I would say, offhand, that you had a kind face."

"Well, thank you, but—"

"I do wish you'd stop shilly-shallying and name the day. By the way, have you anything on for tomorrow?"

"I didn't have anything special planned—"

"Splendid! Suppose you come over to the Palace around one o'clock or so. We can have a bite of lunch and discuss the matter together. After all, I think you'll agree that I have been a reasonably good Ruler and so I have the right to die with dignity." He looked pleadingly at Gervase.

"Oh, absolutely," the young man said in haste. "No question of it. I think it's a very good idea to have a chat about it first. Awkward to—dispose of someone you haven't met previously."

The dictator gave him a wan smile. "Thank you, Mr. Schnee. I hope you'll find your successor as cooperative as yourself."

The screen darkened.

"Hmmm," Gervase mused. He took a lavender cheroot, forgetting he still held the lime one. "I wonder whether he wants me to make an appointment so he'll have a band of counter-assassins ready to kill me, saving him the expense of a stand-by guard. He is noted for his thriftiness, you know. Perhaps I just shouldn't show up at all."

"He wouldn't dream of doing anything of the sort," Florea said austerely. "Overlord Kipp knows what is due to his position. He has a sense of duty and responsibility which, unfortunately, seems to be lacking in his successor ... if you'll excuse my speaking frankly," he added in haste. "I am, of course, considerably older than you and so I feel—"

"It's quite all right," Gervase reassured him. "You may speak freely."

"Furthermore," Florea continued, "if he had you killed, the people would probably give him a painful and lingering death for attempting to interfere with the course of destiny.... There, I hear them now!"

And they could indeed hear the sound of voices raised in song—so many and so loud that they penetrated the soundproofing of the walls. "The *polloi* are coming to hail their new Leader," Florea beamed.

"Well, I'm not going to do it!" Gervase declared. "They can't make me kill him and take over and that's flat. I'm not the administrative type—never have been."

Florea took a cheroot of his own out of a platinum portable. "In that case, the people probably will kill *you* for attempting to interfere with fate."

"But I wouldn't have done anything!" Gervase protested.

"There are sins of omission as well as commission. Come now, it's true a Ruler's life expectancy isn't very long—at least it hasn't been for the last few reigns—but it's longer than yours will be if you refuse to fulfill your destiny."

"I wouldn't make a fit Ruler," Gervase said desperately. "Consider my origins. I wouldn't tell this to anyone but you—I'm illegitimate. I don't even know who my father is."

The other man smiled again. "It's a wise child who knows his own father. And some of the most celebrated leaders in history have been illegitimate. Look at William the Conqueror."

Gervase turned on the historiscope, dialed 1066 A.D., looked, shuddered, and turned it off. "I don't think that's much of a recommendation!"

"You see," Florea told him encouragingly, "almost anybody can be a leader. The important thing is that he be *destined* for leadership."

"But I'm no good! Everybody says so. I've never done a thing in my life. My aged mother has had to work to support me."

"Time enough that you stood on your two feet, my boy!" the businessman said, clapping the youth

upon the shoulder. "And remember, destiny must take its course."

He flung open the door. A cheering crowd stood outside. "My friends, allow me to introduce you to your new Ruler—Gervase Schnee!"

A hoarse shout of approval went up.

"He is planning to assassinate Overlord Kipp with a Florea Semper Fidelis Gun. Florea Semper Fidelis Guns retail from c2.98 for the Peasant's Pistol all the way up to c1089.56 for the Super Deluxe Conspirator's Model, but each is the best obtainable for the price. Mr. Schnee, of course, will use the Super Deluxe model."

There were more cries, cheers and shouts.

"Thank you for your—for your confidence and support," Gervase said brokenly. "I only hope I prove worthy of them."

Gervase lunched with Overlord Kipp the next day and was not assassinated. The disposal was set for the coming Tuesday and announced to the public. Gervase was so nervous, he couldn't sleep the night before. When, early in the morning, he finally did manage to doze off, he was awakened by the encouraging telegrams that kept pouring in.

At nine, he finally got up and dressed himself in the immaculate black-and-silver assassin's uniform that had been custom-made for him without charge by an eminent tailor. He was in no mood for breakfast, so he went outside to the handsome black-and-silver limousine that had been presented to him by a thoughtful industrialist. As he emerged from his door, a brass band struck up the national anthem and the crowd waiting outside broke into cheers suitably restrained to fit the melancholy occasion.

Gervase bowed wanly left and right as he got into the car. His two hired assistants, dressed in the customary black cloak and hood of the body-remover, were, he noticed, already seated beside the chauffeur. They did not turn their heads as Gervase entered, but preserved the traditional impassivity of their calling.

The band started to play a funeral march as the car moved slowly down the boulevard. Stands had been put up all along the route and he was greeted by subdued cheering and applause from crowds neatly arranged according to rank. Little children of all classes rushed out into the street to present him with bouquets of flowers.

The television cameras joined him en route and followed him all the way to the Palace. On the steps, Bedrich Florea awaited him, magnificently garbed in full executive uniform, his jewels flashing in the clear sunlight.

"Allow me to load your Super Deluxe Conspirator's Florea Semper Fidelis Gun for you, Overlord Prognosticate," he announced in a ringing voice, as he turned his profile toward the cameras.

"It's already loaded," Gervase said, nervously clutching the gun in his pocket.

"Permit me to check it then." Florea put out an eager hand.

Gervase executed a deft chassé in the opposite direction. "It's perfectly all right, I tell you! No one," he added in a burst of inspiration, "would have any difficulty in loading a Florea Semper Fidelis Gun."

"That's right," the baffled munitions magnate admitted, falling back reluctantly. "Whether you buy the Peasant's or the Conspirator's Model, both have the same smooth free-loading mechanism...."

"Out of the way, Executive," a cameraman said, unceremoniously sweeping Florea aside as Gervase paced into the Palace, followed by his two black-robed henchmen, carrying an elaborate, gold-mounted stretcher between them.

"Candy, popcorn, hashish, yoghurt!" yelled a strident voice behind them. "Buy your refreshments here!"

Overlord Kipp stood beside his desk, dressed in his finest uniform—which was, however, virtually invisible, it was so bedecked with glittering and sparkling medals and decorations. Gervase waited patiently while the soon-to-be-disposed-of Ruler made a speech pointing out the numerous benefits and improvements his reign had brought to the people. It was rather a long speech and Gervase's nose began to itch. He would have liked to scratch it, but the cameras were pointing directly at him. Life as Ruler, he saw, was going to be a long series of similar repressions. He sighed. But what could he do? Nobody could go against the Prognostications.

Finally the speech was finished. "Good-by and good luck, Overlord Schnee," Kipp said. He stood, waiting.

Gervase fired. There was a loud report. Kipp crumpled to the ground.

Gervase hurled the Florea Semper Fidelis Gun to the desk. "Everyone will now please leave," he ordered in calm but firm tones, "while the removers take over."

"Why can't we televise the removal?" a daring cameraman asked. "Something new."

There was a shocked silence and then a babble of indignant voices. Gervase held up a weary hand. The voices stopped.

"That sort of thing just isn't done," he told the cameraman with an Olympian smile. "Please leave as quickly as possible—all of you. I might want to meditate."

They scuttled out backward, the cameras still grinding. Gervase pressed the studs that shut and bolted the door.

"Whew!" said Overlord Kipp, sitting up. "I didn't think I'd be able to stand that much longer. You're a good shot, Schnee—that blank stung like crazy. And in a very tender spot, I might add."

"No time for chatting," Gervase said nervously. "We've got to get this over in a hurry. Now comes the part when your friends will have to look like real removers. I hope they can give it that professional touch."

"We are real removers in a sense," said one of the black-robed figures. "At least, both of us have participated in removals before." They dropped their hoods.

Gervase's mouth hung open. "Why, you're Overlord Moorhouse!" he said to one. "And I've seen pictures of you!" he told the other. "You're the one that came before him—Shinnick. You died before I was born—that is, you were supposed to have died. Both of you were. Moorhouse killed—was supposed to have killed you."

Ex-Overlord Shinnick smiled. "We're not precisely dead—only retired, you might say. In a way, anonymity is the same as death. And Overlords Moorhouse and Kipp—" he bowed toward them—"both had kind hearts, like yourself. The Prognosticator didn't say we had to be killed—just disposed of, as Kipp undoubtedly pointed out to you in your little talk together."

"Sorry I couldn't tell you the truth," Kipp apologized as he dusted off his uniform, "but you might have changed your mind and given us away."

"We've formed a sort of little club of dead Overlords," Shinnick elucidated. "After all, we're the only ones with whom we can associate safely—no danger of any one of us betraying the others."

"We're looking forward to the day when you join us, Overlord Schnee," Moorhouse put in eagerly, "assuming that your successor is of as generous a nature as we, of course. Do you play bridge by any chance?"

"You'd better hurry." Gervase worriedly changed the subject as he noticed the time on the wall chronometer. "If the four of us are discovered, the mob would tear us all to pieces."

"Right you are," said ex-Overlord Shinnick. "Get on the stretcher, Kipp. Bad enough we're going to have to carry you out; at least don't expect us to lift you up."

Kipp obediently assumed a recumbent posture: Shinnick and Moorhouse covered him with a black cloth and were preparing to march out when Gervase recollected himself and halted them. "Wait a moment—you'd better take off those medals first, Kipp. They come with the job."

"Grave-robber," said Kipp, reluctantly sitting up on his catafalque and unfastening the jeweled decorations.

When the little procession had left, Gervase pressed a stud on the desk marked *Secretary*. A panel in the wall opened and a timorous-looking man virtually fell into the room. "Y-yes, Your Honorship?"

"The Prognosticator is right here in the Palace, isn't it?" Gervase asked, in a tone that would have been authoritative if his voice hadn't cracked right in the middle of *Palace*.

"Y-yes, Your Honorship."

"Lead me to it immediately."

"Su-certainly, Your Honorship."

As they left the room, Gervase picked the Florea Semper Fidelis Gun off the desk. It was too valuable a piece of property to leave lying around. The Palace was full of sticky-fingered civil servants.

They passed through room after room containing bank after bank of computing machines, each more complicated in appearance than the last. Hordes of officials in the garb of hereditary scientist or technician bowed low as the new Ruler passed. The machines, of course, operated and repaired themselves automatically; nonetheless, they needed a good many attendants as befitted their exalted status.

Gervase and his guide finally came to the room where the Prognosticator itself was enshrined. The apartment was twenty stories high and a hundred meters wide, but it was none too large for all the flashing lights and spinning dials and buzzing relays and levers and cables which jammed it. The hundreds of first-rank scientists who waited upon the Machine stopped their tasks of dusting and polishing to greet the new Usurper with deferent acclaim.

"Leave me," he ordered, gesturing with the gun toward the door. "I would be alone with the Prognosticator."

"Certainly, Your Honorship. Certainly. Your wishes are our commands."

They backed out.

"You, too," Gervase told the secretary who had guided him.

"Y-yes, Your Honorship." The man skittered off.

When they had all gone, Gervase approached a small, unobtrusive door marked *Danger—No Admittance*. Dust lay thick on the sill, for it was seldom opened.

Gervase took a tiny, intricate piece of metal from his pocket and fitted it into the lock. Something inside clicked. The door swung open.

Beyond, a narrow flight of steps spiraled downward. Gervase descended them unhesitatingly until he came to another small door. This one was simply marked *Private*. He knocked on it.

"Aah, go butter your earlobes!" a cracked voice called from within. "Can't you read, you dumb cluck?"

"It's me, Gervase!" He pounded on the door with the butt of his gun. "Open up!"

The door swung open creakily. Through the gloom inside, there could be dimly seen antique furnishings in a poor state of preservation and a still more imperfect state of cleanliness. An outmodedly streamlined twentieth-century typewriting machine was set on a costly metal stand with one caster missing. The flaps of the table were open—one held a chipped teapot, the other a dusty crystal ball and a dog-eared pack of Gypsy cards. Behind all this was a rare old psychoanalyst's couch, ripped open here and there and showing the original stuffing.



Reclining on the couch was an incredibly old woman wearing a quaint costume of a bygone era—long scarlet silk skirt, yellow blouse, great golden hoops swinging in her ears. She was sipping something out of a teacup, but it didn't smell like tea, at least not like tea alone. The ancient reek of gin pervaded and overpowered the general mustiness.

"Hello, son!" the old woman said, waving the cup at Gervase. "'Bout time you came to pay your old mother a visit." She cackled. "I kind of thought something like this would stir you up!"

"Mother," Gervase said reproachfully, "you know you shouldn't have done it."

"What did I do?" she asked, assuming a ludicrous posture of innocence.

"You fixed the Prognostications, that's what you did. Although why you had to pick on me—"

"Aah, I got tired of supporting you! You're a big boy—it's about time you earned your own living. Besides, I thought it'd be a good idea to elect a sympathetic administration. Sympathetic to me,

that is. Palace needs a new ventilating system. Air in here's terrible. Smells as if something'd died and they were too stingy to give it a decent burial."

"But why didn't you use the Prognosticator to get new ventilation put in?" Gervase asked. "Seems to me you could have foretold everyone in the Palace would suffocate or something if it wasn't done."

"They'd have got around it, same way you got around killing Kipp."

Gervase blushed.

"You can't fool me!" she cackled gleefully. "I know everything that goes on around this place and a lot that doesn't." She reached over and tapped his knee. "But you'll pay attention to the Prognosticator, boy. Don't you try to weasel out of what it says by looking for double meanings. Time you Overlords learned that when the Prognosticator says something, it means it."

"Yes, Mother," he said.

"I'd hate to have to give orders to have my own boy disposed of. The last three disposals weren't so bad, but sometimes those things can turn out real messy."

"Yes, Mother."

She drank gustily from her teacup. "Maybe blood is thicker than water ... but not much."

"Yes, Mother."

"And why shouldn't you listen to my Prognostications?" she demanded irritably, slamming her teacup down on the table so hard that the typewriter skipped. "Just because they're dolled up a little doesn't mean they're not true. Don't I have a crystal ball? Don't I have a Gypsy tarot pack? Don't I have tea leaves—best tea money can buy, too?"

"Yes, Mother."

"So?" She looked at him expectantly. "What are you going to do?"

Gervase took a deep breath and drew himself up. "I'm going to have the ventilating system attended to right away."

"That's my boy," she said fondly, draining another cup of tea and peering at the leaves. "I can see everything's going to work out fine—just fine."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MAN'S BEST FRIEND ***

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