

Lisbon Cubed

William Tenn

The telephone rang. Alfred Smith, who had been hauling clothes out of his valise and stuffing them into a typical hotel room bureau, looked up startled.

"Now, who—" he began, and shook his head.

Obviously it must be a wrong number. Nobody knew he was in New York, and nobody—this for a certainty—knew he had checked into this particular hotel. Or come to think of it, somebody did.

The room clerk at the desk where he had just registered.

Must be some hotel business. Something about don't use the lamp on the end table: it tends to short-circuit.

The telephone rang again. He dropped the valise and walked around the bed. He picked up the phone.

"Yes?" he said.

"Mr. Smith?" came a thick voice from the other end.

"Speaking."

"This is Mr. Jones. Mr. Cohen and Mr. Kelly are with me in the lobby. So is Jane Doe. Do you want us to come up or shall we wait for you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, then, we'll come up. Five-oh-four, isn't it?"

"Yes, but wait a minute! *Who* did you say?" He realized they had hung up.

Alfred Smith put down the telephone and ran his fingers through his crewcut. He was a moderately tall, moderately athletic, moderately handsome young man with the faintest hint at jowl and belly of recent prosperity.

"Mr. *Jones? Cohen? Kelly?* And for suffering Pete's sake, *Jane Doe?*"

It must be a joke. Any Smith was used to jokes on his name. What was your name before it was Smith? *Alfred* Smith? Whatever happened to good old Johnnie?

Then he remembered that his caller had just asked for Mr. Smith. Smith *was* a common name, like it or not.

He picked up the phone again. "Desk," he told the operator.

"Yes, Desk?" a smooth voice said after a while.

"This is Mr. Smith in Room 504. Was there another Smith registered here before me?"

A long pause. "Are you having any trouble, sir?"

Alfred Smith grimaced. "That's not what I'm asking. Was there or wasn't there?"

"Well, sir, if you could tell me if it is causing you inconvenience in any way..."

He got exasperated. "I asked you a simple question. Was there a Smith in this room before me? What's the matter, did he kill himself?"

"We have no right to believe he committed suicide, sir!" the desk clerk said emphatically, "There are many, *many* circumstances under which a guest might disappear after registering for a room!"

There was a peremptory knock on the door. Alfred Smith grunted. "Okay. That's all I wanted to know," and hung up.

He opened the door, and before he could say anything, four people came in. Three were men; the last was a mildly attractive woman.

"Now, look—" he began.

"Hello, Gar-Pitha" one of the men said. "I'm Jones. This is Cohen, this is Kelly. And, of course, Jane Doe."

"There's been a mistake," Alfred told him.

"And how there's been a mistake!" said Cohen, locking the door behind him care-fully, "Jones, you called Smith by his right name! When the corridor door was open! That's unpardonable stupidity."

Jane Doe nodded. "Open or closed, we must remember that we are on Earth. We will use only Earth names. Operating Procedure Regulations XIV-XXII."

Alfred took a long, slow look at her, "On Earth?"

She smiled shamefacedly. "There I go, myself. I did practically the same thing. You're right. In *America*. Or rather, to put it more exactly and less suspiciously, in New York City."

Mr. Kelly had been walking around him, staring at Alfred. "You're perfect," he said at last. "Better than any of us. That disguise took a lot of hard, patient work. Don't tell me, I know. You're perfect, Smith, perfect."

What in the world were they, Alfred wondered frantically—lunatics? No, *spies!* Should he say something, should he give the mistake away, or should he start yelling his head off for help? But maybe they weren't spies—maybe they were detectives on the trail of spies. He was in New York, after all. New York wasn't Grocery Corners, Illinois.

And that suggested another possibility. New York, the home of the sharpie, the smart aleck. It could be a simple practical joke being played by some city slickers on a new little hayseed.

If it were...

His visitors had found seats for themselves. Mr. Kelly opened the briefcase he was carrying and grubbed around in it with his fingers. A low hum filled the room.

"Not enough power," Mr. Kelly apologized. "This is a small sun, after all. But give the rig a few minutes: it'll build up."

Mr. Jones leaned forward. "Listen, do you folks mind if I slip out of my disguise? I'm hot."

"You're not supposed to," Jane Doe reminded him. "The uniform is to be worn at all times when we're on duty."

"I know, I know, but Sten-Durok—*oops*, I mean Cohen, locked the door. Nobody comes in through windows in this particular place, and we don't have to worry about materialization. So how about I relax for a second or two?"

Alfred had perched on the edge of the dresser. He looked Mr. Jones over with great amusement. The pudgy little man was wearing a cheap gray sharkskin suit. He was bald; he wore no eyeglasses; he had no beard. He didn't even have a mustache.

Disguise, huh?

"I say let him," Alfred suggested with an anticipatory chuckle. "We're all alone—he might as well be comfortable. Go ahead, Jones, *take* off your disguise."

"Thanks," Jones said with feeling. "I'm suffocating in this outfit."

Alfred chuckled again. He'd show these New Yorkers.

"Take it off. Be comfortable. Make yourself at home."

Jones nodded and unbuttoned the jacket of his gray sharkskin suit. Then he un-buttoned the white shirt under it. Then he put his two forefingers into his chest, all the way in, and pulled his chest apart. He

kept pulling until there was a great dark hole about ten inches wide.

A black spider squirmed out of the opening. Its round little body was about the size of a man's fist, its legs about the size and length of pipe stems. It crouched on Jones's chest, while the body from which it had emerged maintained its position in a kind of paralysis, the fingers still holding the chest apart, the back and legs still resting comfortably in the chair.

"Whew!" said the spider. "That feels good."

Alfred found he couldn't stop chuckling. He finally managed to halt the noise from his mouth, but it kept on going in his head. He stared at the spider, at the stiff body from which it had come. Then, frantically, he stared at the others in the room, at Cohen, at Kelly, at Jane Doe.

They couldn't have looked less interested.

The hum from the briefcase on Kelly's knees abruptly resolved itself into words. Alfred's visitors stopped looking bored and leaned forward attentively.

"Greetings, Special Emissaries," said the voice. "This is Command Central speaking. Robinson, to you. Are there any reports of significance?"

"None from me," Jane Doe told it.

"Nor me," from Kelly.

"Nothing new yet," said Cohen.

The spider stretched itself luxuriously. "Same here. Nothing to report."

"Jones!" ordered the voice from the briefcase. "Get back into your uniform!"

"It's *hot*, chief. And we're all alone in here, sitting behind what they call a locked door. Remember, they've got a superstition on Earth about locked doors? We don't have anything to worry about."

"I'll tell you what to worry about. You get into that uniform, Jones! Or maybe you're tired of being a Special Emissary? Maybe you'd like to go back to General Emissary status?"

The spider stretched its legs and performed what could only be described as a shrug. Then it backed carefully into the hole in the chest. The hole closed behind it. The body of Jones came to life and buttoned his shirt and jacket.

"That's better," said the voice from the briefcase on Kelly's knee. "Don't ever do that again while you're on duty."

"Okay, chief, okay. But couldn't we cool down this planet? You know, bring on winter, start a new ice age? It would make it a lot easier to work."

"And a lot easier to be detected, stupid. You worry about the big things like conventions and beauty contests. We'll worry about the little things here, in Command Central, like arbitrarily changing the seasons and starting new ice ages. All right, Smith, how about you? What's your report?"

Alfred Smith shook the thick gathered wool out of his head, slid off the dresser, and on to his feet. He looked around wildly.

"Re-report?" A breath. "Why, nothing—nothing to report."

"Took you a long time to make up your mind about it. You're not holding anything back, are you? Remember, it's our job to evaluate information, not yours."

Alfred wet his lips. "N-no. I'm not holding anything back."

"You'd better not. One beauty contest you forget to tell us about and you're through, Smith. We still haven't forgotten that boner you pulled in Zagreb."

"Oh, chief," Jane Doe intervened. "It was only a local stunt to discover who was the tallest card-carrying Communist in Croatia. You can't blame Smith for missing *that*."

"We certainly can blame Smith for that. It was a beauty contest, within the definition of the term you

were given. If Cohen hadn't stumbled across a mention of it in the Kiev *Pravda*, all hell could have broken loose, Remember that, Smith. And stop calling me *chief*, all of you. The name is Robinson. Remember it."

They all nodded, Alfred with them. He shot a mixed look of uncertainty and grati-tude at Jane Doe.

"All right," the voice went on, somewhat mollified. "And to show you that I can hand out the boosts as well as the knocks, I want to commend Smith on his disguise. It's a little offbeat, but it rings true—and that's the main thing. If the rest of you only spent as much time and care on your uniform, we'd be in the home stretch in no time." The voice paused and took on an oily, heavily whimsical quality. "Before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' "

They all laughed dutifully at that one, even Alfred.

"You think Smith did a good job on his disguise, don't you, chief, I mean, Mr. Robinson?" Jane Doe asked eagerly, as if she wanted to underline the fact for everyone.

"I certainly do. Look at that suit, it's not just any old suit, but a tweed jacket and flannel pants. Now that's what I call using your imagination. His chin isn't just a chin, it's a *deft chin*. Very good. The color of his hair—first-rate. The only thing I might possibly object to is the bow tie. I'd say a good solid rep tie, regular length, would be a little less chancy, a little less likely to attract attention. But it feels right, and that's the main thing—the *feel* of the disguise. In this business, you either have an instinct for merging with the population of the planet, or you don't. I think Smith has it. Good work, Smith."

"Thank you," Alfred mumbled.

"All right, oh—er, Robinson," Mr. Jones said impatiently. "It's a good uniform-disguise. But it's not that important. Our work is more important than how we look."

"Your work *is* how you look. If you look right, you work right. Take yourself, for example, Jones. A more nondescript, carelessly assembled human being, I don't think I've ever come across before. What are you supposed to be—Mr. American-Man-in-the-Street?"

Mr. Jones looked deeply hurt. "I'm supposed to be a Brooklyn druggist. And be-lieve me, the uniform is plenty good enough. I know. You should see some of these druggists."

"Some, Jones, but not most. And that's my point."

There was a throat-clearing sound from Mr. Cohen. "Don't want to interrupt you, Robinson, but this isn't supposed to be a long visit we're having with Smith. We just dropped up, kind of."

"Right, Cohen, right on the old button. All right, everybody ready for instructions?"

"Ready," they all chorused, Alfred coming in raggedly on the last syllable.

"Here we go then. Cohen, you're back on your old assignment, keeping careful check on any new beauty contests scheduled anywhere in the country, with special attention to be paid to New York, of course. Kelly, you're to do the same with conven-tions. Jane Doe and John Smith will continue to look into anything that might be a camouflaged attempt."

"Anything particular in mind?" Jane Doe asked.

"Not for you at the moment. You just keep making the rounds of beauty parlors and see if you stumble across something. Smith, we have a special item we'd like you to look into. There's a fancy dress ball of the plumbers of the New York City area. Drop down there and see what you can see. And let us know if you hit it. Fast."

Alfred kept his voice determinedly casual. "What do you want me to look out for?"

"Well, if you don't know by this time—" the voice from the briefcase rose impa-tiently. "Door prizes, an award for the best costume, even a contest for Miss Pipe Wrench of 1921 or whatever year Earth is in right now. I don't think we have to worry about that last, though. It would be too damn obvious, and we haven't hit anything obvious yet"

"How about me?" Jones wanted to know.

"We'll have special instructions for you pretty soon. There may be a new angle."

They all looked interested at that, but the voice from the briefcase did not seem disposed to elucidate further.

"That will be all," it said unequivocally. "You can start leaving now."

Mr. Kelly zipped the briefcase shut, nodded at everyone, and left.

A few moments later, Mr. Cohen followed him. Then Jones yawned and said, "Well, goodbye, now." He closed the door behind him.

Jane Doe rose, but she didn't go toward the door. She came over to where Alfred Smith was standing with a punched expression in his eyes.

"Well, John?" she said softly.

Alfred Smith couldn't think of anything to say to that, except, "Well, Jane?"

"We're together again. Working on an assignment again, together. Isn't it wonderful?"

He nodded slowly, carefully. "Yes. Wonderful."

"And if we can only close it up this time, finish the whole nasty business once and for all, we'll be going back together"

"And then?"

Her eyes glistened. "You know, darling. A quiet little web somewhere, just for two. You and I alone. And piles and piles of eggs."

Alfred gulped, and, in spite of himself, turned away.

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling," she cried, taking his hand. "I've upset you. I was talking out of uniform. Well then, put it this way: a cottage small by a waterfall. And baby makes three. You and I, down the golden years together. When your hair has turned to silver. There! Is that better?"

"Lots," he managed to get out, staring at her wildly. "Lots better."

She threw her arms around him. He realized he was expected to respond, and squeezed back.

"Oh, I don't care," she whispered into his ear. "I don't care about discipline or any-thing when I'm close to you. And I'll say it, even if Command Central is listening. Darling, do you know what I'd like right now?"

Alfred sighed. He was more than half afraid of what was coming. "No, what? What would you like right now?"

"I'd like for us to be out of uniform, scuttling about and over each other in some damp, dark place, I'd like to feel your claws upon me, your antennae caressing me, *me*—instead of this clumsy emotionless disguise I'm wearing."

He thought. "It—it'll come. Be patient, darling."

She straightened up and became businesslike again. "Yes, and I'd better be going. Here's a list of all our telephone numbers, in case you want to get in touch with any of us. Remember, this operation is to be conducted strictly according to regulations. And that means no *phmpffing*, no *phmpffing* at all, except in case of the greatest emergency. For everything else, we use telephones."

"Telephones?" he found himself echoing.

"Yes." She gestured to the black instrument on its stand near the bed. "Those things."

"Oh, *those* things," he repeated, fighting the impulse to shake his head hard in a brain-clearing gesture. "Yes. Those things. But no—no, er, what did you say?"

"No *phmpffing*."

"None at all?" Surely if he continued to ask questions something would become clear. And sane! Jane Doe looked extremely concerned. "Of course not! This is a maximum operation."

"Yes, that's right," he agreed. "A maximum operation. I'd forgotten that."

"Well, don't," she advised him earnestly. "Don't forget. That way, you'll get into trouble again. One more boner like the one you pulled in Zagreb, darling, and you're through. You'll be kicked out of the Service. And then what do you think will happen to our plans together?"

"We'll be finished, huh?" Alfred studied her. Under all that girl-flesh, he reminded himself, there was a large, black spider working at controls like a mechanic in a power crane.

"Right. I'd never marry outside the Service. We'd be finished. So do take care of yourself, darling, and give it all you've got. Stay on the ball. Fly right. Get with it. Rise and shine. Stick to the straight and narrow. Go in there and pitch. Don't let George do it. Work hard and save your money. Early to bed and early to rise. Don't be half safe."

"I'll do my best," he promised, his voice rattling.

"My little crawler," she whispered intimately and kissed him on the ear.

She closed the door behind her.

Alfred groped his way to the bed. After a while, he noticed that he was uncomfortable. He was sitting on a valise. Absent-mindedly, he shoved it to the floor.

What had he wandered into? Or, to put it more accurately, what had wandered into him?

Spies. Yes, obviously spies. But *such* spies...?

Spies from another planet. What were they spying on—beauty contests, conventions, plumbers' fancy dress balls? What were they looking for? What in the world—or rather the universe—*could* they be looking for?

One thing was obvious. They were up to no good. That omnipresent contempt whenever they mentioned Earth or the things of Earth.

An advance wave of invaders? Scouts preparing the way for the main body? They could be that. But why beauty contests, why fancy dress balls?

What was there of value that they could possibly learn from institutions such as these?

You'd expect to find them at nuclear research labs, at rocket proving grounds, skulking about the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

Alfred decided there was no point in trying to follow their thought processes. They were completely alien creatures: who knew what kind of information they might consider valuable, what might be important to them?

But they were undoubtedly spies sizing up Earth for an invasion to come.

"Filthy little spiders," he growled in a righteous excess of xenophobia.

And one of them was in love with him. One of them intended to marry him. What was it she had said—piles and piles of eggs? A pretty thought! He shuddered from his neck to his knees.

But they believed he was this other Smith, John Smith. Earth still had a chance. Pure luck had given Earth a counterspy. Him.

He felt frightened, but a little proud. A *counterspy*.

The first thing to do was to check on this John Smith.

Alfred Smith reached for the telephone. "Desk!"

There was precious little information from the clerk to supplement what he had been given before. John Smith had registered here two weeks ago. He had left one after-noon and not come back. After the usual interval it was assumed he had skipped, since he owed a few days on the bill at the time. His

belongings were in the hotel store room.

"No, sir, I'm sorry, sir, but hotel regulations do not permit us to let you go through his belongings. Unless you wish to claim a relationship."

"And if I did?" Alfred asked eagerly. "If I did wish to claim a relationship?"

"Then it would be necessary for you to establish proof, sir."

"I see. Well, thank you very much." He hung up.

Where was he now? This John Smith had registered here, evidently under a previous agreement, as his room was to provide the meeting place for the entire group. Then he had walked out one day and not returned.

Since the disguises were subject to frequent change, when another Smith had registered in the same room, the spies assumed it was their man. They may not even have known of the hiatus between the two Smiths.

What had happened to John Smith? Had he defected to the United States government? To the United Nations? Hardly. There would be an F.B.I. man, a small army unit staked out in the room in that case, when John Smith's friends showed up.

No, he had just disappeared. But was he dead, killed in some freak accident while crossing a bridge—that would account for his body not being recovered—or was he only temporarily away, working on some newly discovered angle for his interplanetary organization?

And what would happen to Alfred when he returned? The young man on the bed shivered. Espionage groups, he recalled from the novels he had read, tended to a sort of hatchet-man justice. Obviously, they would not let an Earthman with knowledge of their existence and operations go on living.

Then, obviously, he had to get help.

But from where? The police? The F.B.I.? He shivered again at the picture evoked; himself, somewhat embarrassed, stammering a bit, not quite remembering all the details, telling this story to a hard-faced desk sergeant.

An interplanetary invasion, Mr. Smith? From Mars? Oh, not from Mars—from where then? Oh, you don't quite know, Mr. Smith? All you're sure of is that it's an interplanetary invasion? I see. And how did you happen to hear of this on your first day in New York? Oh, four people came up to your hotel room and told you about it? Very interesting. Very, *very* interesting. And their names were Mr. Cohen, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Jones, and Jane Doe? And *your* name is Smith, isn't it? And all we have to do to prove your story is find the address behind one of these telephone numbers, cut open the person in whose name the phone is registered, and find a big black spider inside...

"No!" Alfred groaned aloud. "Not that way—I wouldn't have a chance!"

He needed proof—tangible proof. And facts. Mostly he needed facts. Who were these spiders, what was their home planet, when were they planning to invade, what kind of weapons did they have at their disposal—stuff like that. And lots and lots of data about their organization here on Earth, especially in America.

How did you get such data? You couldn't ask—that would be the surest way to expose yourself as a bona fide human with nothing more interesting inside you than a length or so of intestine and a couple of ribs.

But they'd given him an assignment. Something about a plumber's fancy dress ball. Now, obviously an assignment like that concerned their plans, their organization. Obviously.

He grabbed for the phone.

"Desk? This is Mr. Smith in 504. Yes, Mr. Smith *again*. Listen, how do I find out where the plumbers are in New York?"

"If the plumbing in your room is out of order, sir," the smooth, patient voice explained, "the hotel will send up a—"

"No, no, no! I don't want a plumber, I want *plumbers*, *all* of them! The New York plumbers, how do I find them?"

He distinctly heard lips being licked at the other end as this question was digested and then, aside, a whispered comment, "Yeah, it's 504, again. We got a real beauty in that room this time. I don't envy the night man tonight, let me tell you!" Loudly and clearly, if just a shade less smoothly, the voice replied: "You will find a classified tele-phone directory on the desk near your bed, sir. You can look up plumbers under *P*. Most of the plumbers in Manhattan are listed there. For plumbers in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island, I would suggest—"

"I don't want plumbers in Brooklyn or the Bronx! I don't even want plumbers in—" Alfred Smith drew a deep breath. He had to get a grip on himself! The fate of the entire planet, of the entire human race, depended on his keeping his head. He forced his mind backward, inch by inch, off the plateau of hysteria it had mounted. He waited until his voice was calm.

"This is the problem," he began again, slowly and carefully. "There is a fancy dress ball of the plumbers of the New York area. It's being held somewhere in the city to-night, and I'm supposed to be there. Unfortunately, I've lost my invitation and it contained the address. Now, how do you think I could go about finding where the ball is going to be?" He congratulated himself on the swiftness of his thinking. This was really being a counterspy!

Pause. "I could make some inquiries, sir, through the usual channels, and call you back "And aside: "Now he says *he's* a plumber and he wants to go to a fancy dress ball. Can you beat that? I tell you in this business..." And to him: "Would that be satisfactory, sir?"

"Fine," Alfred Smith told him enthusiastically. "That would be *fine*."

He hung up. Well, he was getting the hang of this espionage business. Nothing like a sales background for practice in quick thinking and quick talking.

He didn't have to report to the office until tomorrow. That gave him this afternoon and this evening to save the human race.

Who would have thought when he was offered a job in New York with the BlakSeme Hosiery Company ("Men *Notice* BlakSemes—They're so Shockingly Stocking!") what tremendous stakes he'd be playing for the very day of his arrival? Of course, BlakSeme knew what kind of man he was, they knew he was executive timber or they'd never have hired him right out from under PuzzleKnit, their biggest competitor. He'd made quite a name for himself, Alfred Smith was modestly willing to admit, in the Illinois territory. Highest sales increases for three years running, steadiest repeat orders for five. But to PuzzleKnit Nylons ("PuzzleKnit Attracts Their Attention and Keeps Them Gues-sing"), he had just been a top-notch salesman: it had taken BlakSeme, with their upper-bracket, Madison-Avenue orientation, to see him as a possible district sales manager.

BlakSeme alone had seen he was big-league material. But even they had not guessed how big a league it was in which he was destined to play.

The desk clerk called back. "I find, sir, that there is a fancy dress ball of the boss plumbers and steamfitters of the metropolitan New York area. It's at Menshevik Hall on Tenth Avenue at eight o'clock tonight. The theme of the ball is the *ancien regime* in France, and only people in pre-French-Revolution costumes will be admitted. Would you like the name of a place near the hotel where you can rent the right costume for the occasion?"

"Yes," Alfred Smith babbled. "Yes, yes, yes!" Things were beginning to click! He was on the trail of the aliens' organization!

He went out immediately and hurriedly selected a Due de Richelieu outfit. Since some small alterations were necessary, he had time to get dinner before the costume would be delivered to his hotel.

He ate carefully and nutritiously; this was going to be a big night. His reading matter throughout the meal was a booklet he'd picked up in the outfitting place, a booklet giving the descriptions and background of all the cos-tumes available for this period—sixteenth-to eighteenth-century France. Any fact might be the vital clue...

Back in his room, he tore off his clothes and pulled on the rented apparel. He was a little disappointed at the result. He did not quite look like a Gray Eminence. More like a young Protestant in Cardinal's clothing. But then he found the scrap of gray beard in the box that belonged with the costume and fitted it on. It made all the difference.

Talk about your disguises! Here his body was supposed to be a disguise, a disguise which was the uniform of the Aliens' Special Agents Division, of their terrestrial spy service. And now he was disguising that supposed disguise with a real one—just as by being a supposed spy he was laying a trap for all the real secret operatives.

Alfred Smith—one lone man against the aliens! "So that," he whispered reverently, "government of humans, by humans, and for humans shall not perish from the Earth."

The telephone. This time it was Jones.

"Just got word from Robinson, Smith. That special mission of mine. It looks like tonight's the night."

"Tonight, eh?" Alfred Smith felt the lace tighten around his throat.

"Yes, they're going to try to contact tonight. We still don't know just where—just that it's in New York City, I'm to be on reserve: I'll rush around to whoever finds the contact. You know, reinforce, lend a helping hand, be a staunch ally, give an assist to, help out in a pinch, stand back to back with, buddy mine, pards till hell freezes over. You'll be at the plumbers' ball, won't you? Where is it?"

Alfred shook his head violently to clear it of the fog of clichés thrown out by Jones. "Menshevik Hall. Tenth Avenue. What do I do if I—if I discover the contact?"

"You *phmpff*, guy, *phmpff* like mad. And I'll come a-running. Forget about tele-phones if you discover the contact. Also forget about special-delivery mail, passenger pigeon, pony-express rider, wireless telegraphy, and couriers from His Majesty. Discovering the contact comes under the heading of 'emergency' under Operating Procedure Regulations XXXIII-XLIX inclusive. So *phmpff* your foolish head off."

"Right! Only thing, Jones—" there was a click at the other end as Jones hung up.

Tonight, Alfred Smith thought grimly, staring into the mirror. Tonight's the night!

For *what*?

Menshevik Hall was a gray two-story building in the draftiest section of Tenth Avenue. The lower floor was a saloon through whose greasy windows a neon sign proclaimed:

**THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION WAS
THE ONLY REAL REVOLUTION BAR & GRILL
BEER----WINES----CHOICE LIQUORS
Alexei Ivanovich Anphinov, Prop.**

The second floor was brightly lit. Music oozed out of its windows. There was a penciled sign on a doorway to one side of the bar:

**BOSS PLUMBERS AND STEAMFITTERS OF
THE METROPOLITAN NEW YORK AREA
SEMIANNUAL FANCY DRESS BALL**

You Must Be in Costume to Be Admitted Tonight

(If you haven't paid your association dues for this quarter, see Bushke Horowitz at the bar before going upstairs—Bushke's wearing a Man in the Iron Mask costume and he's drinking rum and Seven-Up.)

Alfred Smith climbed the creaky wooden stairs apprehensively, his eyes on the burly General Montcalm guarding the entrance at the top. To his relief, however, no invitation or ticket was demanded: his costume was sufficient validation. The red-faced general barely gave him a glance from under the plushly decorated cocked hat before waving him through.

It was crowded inside. Scores of Louis XIII's, XIV's, XV's, and XVI's were dancing sedately with Annes of Austria and Marie Antoinettes to the strains of rumba and cha-cha. Overhead, two colored chandeliers rotated slowly, unwinding the spectrum upon the glittering, waxed floor.

Where did he begin? He glanced at the platform where the musicians sat; they alone were not in costume. Lettering on the bass drum told the world that "Ole Olsen and His Latin Five" were providing the rhythms, but that did not seem like much to go on. No one here looked like an interstellar spy.

On the other hand, neither did Jones, Cohen, Kelly nor Jane Doe. They looked almost spectacularly ordinary. That was it: you had to find these people in the unlikeliest, most prosaic places.

Pleased by the inspiration, he went into the Men's Room.

At first, he thought he had hit it exactly right. The place was crowded. Sixteen or so Musketeers stood around the washbasin, munching enormous cigars and conversing in low voices.

He insinuated himself among them and listened closely. Their talk was eclectic, ranging freely from the wholesale price of pastel-colored water closets to the problems of installing plumbing in a new housing development on Long Island that was surrounded by unsewered streets.

"I told the contractor to his face," said a somewhat sallow, undersized Musketeer, knocking his cigar ash off against the pommel of his sword, "Joe, I told him, how can you expect me to lay pipe when you don't even know the *capacity*, let alone the type—look, we won't even *talk* about the type—of the sewer system they're going to have installed out here? Joe, I said to him, you're a bright guy: I ask you, Joe, is that fair, does that make sense? You want me to maybe install plumbing that's going to be a lot weaker than the sewer system in the streets so that the first time the new customers flush the toilets everything backs up all over the bathroom floor—you want that, Joe? No, he says, I don't want that. All right, then, I say, you want me to maybe install plumbing that's a lot better than necessary, a lot stronger than the sewer system will require, and that'll add cost to the houses that doesn't have to be added—you want that, Joe? No, he says, I don't want that. So, look, Joe, I say, you're willing to admit this is a dumb proposition from top to bottom? Suppose someone asked you to build a house, Joe, and couldn't tell you whether the foundation under it is concrete or steel or sand or cinder-block. That's just exactly what you're asking me to do, Joe, that's just exactly what."

There was a rustle of approbation. A tall, weedy, mournful-looking Musketeer blew his nose and carefully replaced the handkerchief in his doublet before commenting, "That's the trouble with everybody. They think plumbers are miracle men. They got to learn that plumbers are only human."

"I don't know about that," said a stout Huguenot who had come up in the last few moments. "I take the attitude that plumbers *are* miracle men. What we got to use is our American imagination, our American know-how, our American thinking straight to the point. You show me a sewer system in a new community, like, that hasn't been installed yet, that nobody knows what its capacity is going to be, and I'll figure out a plumbing system for the development that'll fit it no matter what. And I'll save on cost, too."

"How?" demanded the sallow, undersized Musketeer. "Tell me how."

"I'll tell you how," retorted the Huguenot. "By using my American imagination, my American know-how, my American thinking straight to the point. *That's* how."

"Pardon me," Alfred Smith broke in hurriedly as he saw the sallow, undersized Musketeer take a

deep breath in preparation for a stinging rebuttal. "Do any of you gentlemen know of any prizes that will be given for the best costume, any door prizes, anything like that?"

There was a silence as they all chewed their cigars at him appraisingly. Then the Huguenot (Coligny, Alfred wondered? Conde? de Rohan?) leaned forward and tapped him on the chest. "When you got a question, sonny, the thing to do is find the right man to ask the question of. That's half the battle. Now who's the right man to ask questions about door prizes? The doorman. You go out to the doorman—he's wearing a General Montcalm—and you tell him Larry sent you. You tell him Larry said he should tell you all about door prizes, and, sonny, he'll tell you just what you want to know." He turned back to his smoldering adversary. "Now before you say anything, I know just what you're going to say. And I'll tell you why you're wrong."

Alfred squeezed his way out of the mobful of rising tempers. At the outskirts, a Cardinal's Guard who had just come up remarked broodingly to a black-hooded executioner: "That Larry. Big man. What I wouldn't give to be around when he takes a pratfall."

The executioner nodded and transferred his axe thoughtfully to the other shoulder. "One day there'll be an anonymous phone call to the Board of Health about Larry, and they'll send out an inspector who can't be pieced off, and that'll be that. Any guy who'll buy up junk pipe and chromium-plate it and then sell it to his friends as new stuff that he's overstocked in..." Over his shoulder, the rubbery blade of the axe began flapping like a flag in a breeze.

"Don't know nothing about prizes," the doorman stated, rocking his folding chair back and forth in front of the ballroom entrance. "Anything important, they don't tell me." He tilted his cocked hat forward over his eyes and stared bitterly into space, as if reflecting that with just a little more advance information from Paris the day might indeed have gone quite differently on the Plains of Abraham. "Why'n't you ask around down in the bar? All the big wheels are down in the bar."

There must, Alfred reflected, be a good many big wheels, as he apologized his way through the crowded room downstairs. The hoop-skirts and rearing, extravagant hair-do's, the knobby-kneed hose, swinging swords, and powdered wigs jam-packed *The February Revolution Was the Only Real Revolution Bar & Grill* so that the half-dozen or so regular customers in shabby suits and worn windbreakers seemed to be the ones actually in costume, poverty-stricken, resentful anachronisms from the future who had stumbled somehow into imperial Versailles and the swaggering intrigue of the Tuileries.

At the bar, Bushke Horowitz, his iron mask wide open despite the sternest decrees of King and Cardinal, accepted dues money, dispensed opinions on the future of standpipes and stall showers to the mob in heavy brocade and shot silk around him, and periodically threw a handful of largesse to the bartender, a chunky, angry-looking man with a spade beard and a white apron, along with the injunction to "set 'em up again."

There was no way to get through to him, Alfred realized. He asked several times about "prizes," was ignored, and gave up. He had to find a wheel of somewhat smaller diameter.

A tug at the sleeve of his clerical gown. He stared down at the rather thinnish Mme. Du Barry sitting in the empty booth. She gave him a smile from underneath her black vizard. "Drinkie?" she suggested. Then, seeing his blank look, she amplified: "Yousie and mesie. Just us twosie."

Alfred shook his head. "Nosie—I mean, no, thank you. I—uh—some business. Maybe later."

He started to walk away and found that his sleeve failed to accompany him. Mme. Du Barry continued to hold it between two fingers: she held it winsomely, delicately, archly, but the hold was absolutely unequivocal.

"Aw," she pouted. "Look at the whizzy-busy businessman. No time for drinkie, no time for mesie, just busy, busy, busy, all the livelong day."

Despite his irritation, Alfred shrugged. He wasn't doing himself much good any other way. He came

back and sat across the table from her in the booth. Then, and only then, was his sleeve released by the dainty fingers.

The angry-looking man in the spade beard and white apron appeared at their booth. "*Nyehh?*" he grunted, meaning, quite obviously, "What'll you have?"

"I'll have Scotch on the rocks," she told Alfred. "Scotch on the rocks is absolutely the only ever drink for me."

"Two scotch on the rocks," Alfred told the bartender, who replied "*Nyehh*" signify-ing, "You order the stuff, I bring it. It's your funeral."

"I heard you asking about contests. I won a contest once. Does that make you like me a little better?"

"What kind of contest did you win?" Alfred asked absent-mindedly, studying her. Under that mask she was probably somewhat pretty in a rather bony, highly ordinary sort of way. There was nothing here.

"I was voted The Girl the Junior Plumbers of Cleveland Would Most Like to Wipe a Joint With. It was supposed to be The Girl Whose Joint the Junior Plumbers Would Most Like to Wipe, but some nasty people made a fuss and the judges had to change the title. It was three years ago, but I still have the award certificate, Now, does that help me at *all?*"

"I'm afraid not. But congratulations anyway on winning the title. It's not every-body who can—uh, say that."

The angry-looking man in the spade beard came back and set glasses and coasters in front of them. "*Nyehh!*" he announced, meaning, "You pay me now. That's the way we do it in this place." He took the money, glowered at it, at them, and clumped back to the becustomered bar.

"Well, what kind of contest *are* you looking for? If you tell me, I might be able to help. I know lots of little things about lots and lots of little things."

"Oh, contests, prizes, nothing particular." He glanced at the rear of the booth. There was a framed photograph on the wall of Plekhanov shaking hands with Kerensky. A tough younger version of the chunky, angry-looking man in the spade beard was standing on tiptoe behind Plekhanov, straining hard to get his face into the picture. Alfred realized he was wasting time and swallowed his drink unceremoniously. "I'll have to be going."

She cooed dismay. "So soon? When we've just met? And when I like you so much?"

"What do you mean you like me so much?" he asked her irritably. "When, to quote you, we've just met."

"But I do like you, I *do*. You're the cream in my coffee. You're the top. You do things to me. You're what makes the world go round. I'm nuts about you. I go for you in a big way, big boy. I'm wild, simply wild over you. I'd climb the highest mountain, swim the deepest river. Body and soul. Roses are red, violets are blue. Drink to me only with thine eyes. Oh, Johnny, oh-h-h! You're in my heart and my heart's on my sleeve." She stopped and drew breath.

"*Gah!*" Alfred commented, his eyes almost popping. He started to get up. "Thanks, lady, for the pretty talk, but—"

Then he sat down again, his eyes reverting to their previous, pop-like state. The way she'd expressed herself when she'd wanted to make certain she was understood! Like Jane Doe, like Jones—

He'd established rendezvous!

"So that's how much you like me?" he queried, fighting for time, trying to think out his next step.

"Oh, yes!" she assured him. "I'm carrying the torch, all right. I idolize you. I fancy you. I dote on you. I hold dear, make much of, cherish, prize, cling to—"

"Good!" he almost yelled in the desperation of his attempt to break in on the lan-guage of love.

"Good, good, good, good! Now, I'd like to go some place where we can have some privacy and discuss your feelings in more detail." He worked his face for a moment or two, composing it into an enormous leer. "My hotel room, say, or your apartment?"

Mme. Du Barry nodded enthusiastically. "My apartment. It's closest."

As she tripped out of the bar beside him, Alfred had to keep reminding himself that this was no human wench, despite the tremulous pressure of her arm around his or the wriggling caress of her hip. This was an intelligent spider operating machinery, no more, no less. But it was also his first key to the puzzle of what the aliens wanted of Earth, his entry into the larger spy organization—and, if he kept his head and enjoyed just a bit of luck, it might well be the means to the saving of his world.

A cab rolled up. They got in, and she called out an address to the driver. Then she turned to Alfred.

"Now let's kiss passionately," she said.

They kissed passionately.

"Now let's snuggle," she said.

They snuggled.

"Now let's snuggle a lot harder," she said.

They snuggled a lot harder.

"That's enough," she said. "For now."

They stopped in front of a large old apartment house that dozed fitfully high above the street, dreaming of its past as it stared down at a flock of run-down brownstones.

Alfred paid the driver and accompanied Mme. Du Barry to the entrance. As he held the elevator door open for her, she batted her eyes at him excitedly and breathed fast in his ear a couple of times.

In the elevator, she pressed the button marked "B."

"Why the basement?" he asked. "Is your apartment in the basement?"

For answer, she pointed a tiny red cylinder at his stomach. He noticed there was a minute button on top of the cylinder. Her thumb was poised over the button.

"Never you mind what's in the basement, you lousy Vaklittian sneak. You just stand very still and do exactly what I tell you. And for your information, I know where you are and where your control cubicle is, so don't entertain any hopes of getting away with nothing more than a damaged uniform."

Alfred glanced down at the region covered by her weapon and swallowed hard. She was wrong about the location of his control cubicle, of course, but still, face it, how much living would he be able to do without a belly?

"Don't worry," he begged her. "I won't do anything foolish."

"You'd better not. And no *phmpffs* out of you either, if you know what's good for you. One solitary *phmpff* and I fill you full of holes. I ventilate you, mister, I plug you where you stand. I let daylight through you. I spray your—"

"I get the idea," Alfred broke in, "No *phmpffs*. Absolutely. I give you my word of honor."

"*Your* word of honor!" she sneered. The elevator stopped and she backed out, gesturing him to follow. He stared at her masked face and resplendent costume, remembering that when Du Barry had been dragged to the guillotine in 1793, she had screamed to the crowds about her tumbriel: "Mercy! Mercy for repentance!" He was glad to recall that neither the crowds nor the Revolutionary Tribunal had taken her up on the honest offer.

Not exactly to Alfred's surprise, there was a man waiting for them in the clammy, whitewashed basement. The Huguenot. He of the American thinking straight-to-the-point.

"Any trouble?"

"No, it was easy," she told him. "I pulled him in with the Cleveland-contest-three-years-ago routine. He was smooth about it, I'll say that for him: pretended not to be interested, you know, but he must have bitten hard. I found that out a few seconds later when I told him I loved him and he asked me right off to come up to his apart-ment." She chuckled. "The poor, pathetic incompetent! As if any normal American human male would react like that—without so much as a remark about my beauti-ful eyes and how cute I am and how different I am and how about another drink, baby."

The Huguenot pulled at his lip dubiously. "And yet the uniform-disguise is a fine one," he pointed out. "That shows a high degree of competence."

"So what?" the woman shrugged. "He can design a good uniform, he can think up a splendid disguise, but what good is that if he's slip-shod about his *performance*? This one's barely learned anything about human methods and human manners. Even if I hadn't known about him before, I'd have spotted him on the basis of his love-mak-ing in the cab."

"Bad, eh?"

"*Bad!*" She rolled her eyes for maximum emphasis, "Oh, brother! I pity him if he ever pulled that clumsy counterfeit on a real human female. Bad isn't the word. A cheap fake. A second-rate ad-lib, but from hunger. No conviction, no feeling of real-ity, nothing!"

Alfred glared at her through the wide-open wounds of his ego. There were holes in *her* performance, he thought savagely, that would have closed any show the first night. But he decided against giving this critical appraisal aloud. After all, she had the weapon—and he had no idea how ugly a mess that little red cylinder might make.

"All right," said the Huguenot, "let's put him in with the other one."

As the red cylinder prodded into his backbone, Alfred marched up the main base-ment corridor, turned right at their command, turned right again, and halted before a blank wall. The Huguenot came up beside him and rubbed his hand across the surface several times. A part of the wall swung open as if on hinges, and they stepped inside.

Secret panels, yet! Alfred was thinking morosely. Secret panels, a female siren, a Huguenot master-mind—all the equipment. The only thing that was missing was a reason for the whole damn business. His captors evidently had not discovered that he was a human counterspy, or they would have destroyed him out of hand. They thought he was a—what was it?—a Vakilittian. A Vakilittian sneak, no less? So there were two sets of spies—the Huguenot had said something about putting him in with the other one. But what were these two sets of spies after? Were they both grappling for preinvasion control of Earth? That would make his mission much more compli-cated. To say nothing about trying to tell the police, if he ever managed to get to the police, about *two* interplanetary invasions!

And look who'd thought *he* was the counterspy in the picture...

The room was large and windowless. It was almost empty. In one corner, there was a transparent cube about eight feet on each side. A middle-aged man in a single-breasted brown business suit sat on the floor of the cube watching them curiously and a little hopelessly.

The Huguenot paused as he reached the cube. "You've searched him, of course?"

Mme. Du Barry got flustered. "Well—no, not exactly. I *intended* to—but you were waiting when we got out of the elevator—I hadn't expected you for a while yet, you know—and then we got into conversation—and I just didn't—"

Her superior shook his head angrily. "And you talk about competence! Oh, well, if I have to do everything, I guess I just have to do everything!"

He ran his hands over Alfred. He took out Alfred's fountain pen and his cigarette lighter and examined them very closely. Then he replaced them and looked puzzled. "He's not carrying a weapon. Does that make sense?"

"I think so. He's not experienced enough to be trusted with anything dangerous."

The Huguenot thought about it for a while. "No. He wouldn't be running around by himself, then. He'd be under supervision."

"Maybe he is. Maybe that's the answer. In that case—"

"In that case, you both might have been followed here. Yes, that could be it. Well, we'll fool them. Contact or no contact, we'll close the operation here as of tonight. Don't go out again—in an hour or so, we'll leave the planet and take off with our prisoners for headquarters." He rubbed his hands against the cube as he had on the wall outside. An opening appeared in the transparency and widened rapidly. With the cylinder at his back, Alfred was pushed inside.

"Give him a small blast," he heard the Huguenot whisper. "Not too much—I don't want him killed before he's questioned. Just enough to stun him and keep him from talking to the other one."

There was a tiny click behind him. A rosy glow lit up the cube and the basement room. Alfred felt a bubble of gas form in his belly and rise upward slowly. After a while, he belched.

When he turned around, the opening in the transparency had closed and the Huguenot had whirled angrily on Mme. Du Barry. The lady was examining her weapon with great puzzlement.

"I told you I wanted him stunned, not tickled! Is there anything I can depend on you to do right?"

"I was trying to be careful—I didn't want to kill him, like you said! I aimed right at the control cubicle and I used the medium-low Vaklittian index. I don't understand how he—how he—"

The Huguenot flapped both hands at her disgustedly. "Oh, let's get out of here and start packing! When we get back tonight, I intend to ask headquarters to assign me a new female assistant for the next Earth operation. One without so exact a knowledge of human sexual approaches, perhaps, but who can be counted on to disarm a newly captured prisoner and to tell a Vaklittian index from a hole in her cylinder!"

Mme. Du Barry hung her head and followed him out of the room. The door-wall swung shut behind them.

Alfred touched the transparent wall of the cube gingerly. There was no longer any hint of the opening he had been pushed through. The stuff, while as transparent as glass, was rubbery and slightly sticky, something like newly melted plastic. But a plastic, he found out, incredibly strong. And it gave off a whitish glow which enabled him to see through it, dimly, the featureless walls of the secret basement room.

He turned and surveyed his co-prisoner, a few feet away, on the other side of the cube.

The man was looking at him suspiciously, and yet uncertainly, as if he did not quite know what to make of the situation. There was a peculiarly nondescript, uninteresting and ordinary quality to his features which made them somehow remarkably familiar.

Of course! He looked every bit as average as Jones, as Cohen, as Kelly and—in her own submerged feminine way—as Jane Doe. And so Alfred knew who the man had to be.

"John Smith?" he inquired tentatively. "I mean," he added, as he recollected one of Jones' earlier remarks, "Gar-Pitha?"

The middle-aged man rose to his feet and smiled relief. "I couldn't figure out who you were, but you had to be one of us. Unless you were a decoy they were planting here to make me talk. But if you know my real name...What's yours, by the way?"

Alfred shook his head coyly. "Command Central—Robinson, I mean—has me on a special mission. I'm not allowed to give my name."

John Smith nodded heavily. "Then you don't give it—and that's that. Robinson knows what he's doing. You can't go wrong by following Robinson's orders to the letter. Special mission, eh? Well, you won't complete it—now. She trapped me the same way. We're both in the soup and good."

"The soup?"

"Sure. Those filthy Lidsgallians—you heard them? They're leaving tonight and taking us with them. Once they've got us on their home planet, they'll be able to work us over at their leisure. They won't get anything out of me, and I hope, for the honor of the Academy, they won't get anything out of you, no matter *what* they do to us, but we won't be good for very much by the time they're through. Oh, those Lidsgallians know their way around a torture chamber, yessiree, Bob!"

"Torture chamber?" Alfred felt sick and knew he looked it.

The older man reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Steady on, lad," he said. "Don't show the white feather before the natives. Keep a stiff upper lip. Bite the bullet. Fight on for old Notre Dame. Never say die. You have nothing to lose but your chains. Let's keep the old flag flying."

As Alfred said nothing, John Smith took his silence for agreement with these high principles and went on; "You can't get out of this cell—it's a spun web of pure *chrok*, practically unbreakable. But the worst of it, of course, is its insulating quality: you can't *phmpff* through *chrok* if you stand on your head. I've tried to *phmpff* for help until I almost fractured an antenna—couldn't raise a whisper. That's why they don't have to split up their force to guard us. And that's why I haven't bothered to come out of my uniform to talk to you: if we can't *phmpff* we'll make more sense to each other with the jaw attachments of our uniforms."

Grateful for this small mercy, Alfred began to look around at the enclosing walls of *chrok*. "How about using these—these jaw attachments to get help?" he suggested. "Sound seems to go through. We could try yelling together."

"And who would hear you? Humans. What could *they* do?"

Alfred spread his hands. "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes—even humans can be—"

"No, forget about it. Things are bad, but they're not that bad. Besides, these walls are especially thick and there are no cracks in them. If those Lidsgallians hadn't come down a couple of times a day to change the air, I'd have suffocated by now. As it was, I was in a bad way a couple of times and had to fall back on the reserve air supply in the chest—you know, the compartment right over the control cubicle? But I'll tell you this, if I ever get back to Vaklitt in one piece, there's a modification of our uni-form I'll really try to talk Command Central into making. I thought of it while I was watching them search you. Do away with the air reserve in the chest. I'll tell Robinson—how often, when you come right down to it, does one of our Special Emissaries ever find himself drowning or in the middle of a poison-gas war?—and find some way an agent can take a weapon—a real, honest, claw-operated weapon, into his uniform-disguise with him. Although come to think of it, you'd need some sort of turret arrangement coming out of the human flesh to fire it, and those Lidsgallians, once they found out about it, would—"

He rambled on. Alfred, watching him, realized how hungry he'd been for com-panionship. And this talkative mood might be put to use. They both might be in a Lidsgallian torture chamber somewhere out in the galaxy in a couple of hours, but there was a very slender chance that they might not. And, besides, facts were always useful; he could cope with whatever lay ahead a bit more easily if he only had some coherent facts on which to base his plans. This was the time, if ever, to find out who was the greater menace to Earth, the Vaklittians or the Lidsgallians—and who was more likely to accept the proffer of friendship from a badly frightened, torture-leery human.

Only—he had to be careful how he phrased the questions. He had to be prepared to cover up any blunders quickly.

"Why do you think," he asked carelessly, "the Lidsgallians hate us so much? Oh, I know the usual answers, but I'm interested in hearing *your* opinion. You seem to have a very refreshing slant."

John Smith grunted appreciatively, thought for a moment, then shrugged. "The usual answers are the only answers in this case. It's the war. Naturally."

"Just the war? That's all, you think?"

"*Just* the war? What do you mean, *just* the war? How can an interstellar war, going on across two-thirds of the galaxy for almost three centuries, be *just* the war? Trillions upon trillions of individuals killed, dozens upon dozens of fertile planets smashed into space dust—you call that *just* the war? You youngsters must really be growing up pretty cynical these days!"

"I—I didn't mean it quite like that," Alfred said rapidly, placatingly. "Of course, the war—it's a terrible business, and all that. Awful. Positively horrible. Sickening, sickening. And our enemy, those vicious Lidsgallians—"

John Smith looked sandbagged. "*What?* The Lidsgallians aren't our enemies—they're our *allies!*"

It was Alfred's turn under the sandbag. "Our *allies?*" he repeated weakly, wondering how he was ever going to get out of this one. "*Our* allies?" he said again, trying a different intonation on for size and the bare possibility of sense.

"I don't know what the Academy's coming to any more," John Smith muttered to himself. "In my day, you got a good general education there, with just enough lab work in espionage to warrant giving you a commission in the Service if you filled all the other requirements. You came out of the Academy as a wide-awake, cultured interstellar citizen, with a good background in history, economics, art, science, and total terroristic warfare. On top of that, you had, whenever you wanted to use it, a decent and honorable trade—spying—under your belt. Of course, if you wanted to specialize, you could always go back, after graduation, for intensive study in elementary and advanced ciphers, creative disguise design, plain and fancy lying, physical and mental torture, narrow fields of scholarship like that. But that used to be strictly postgraduate work. *Now*—now, everything is specialization. They turn out dewy youngsters who can crack any code in space, but can't tell a simple espionage lie to save their heads; they graduate kids who can knock out a masterpiece of a uniform-disguise, but don't even know the difference between a Lidsgallian and a Pharseddic! Mark my words, this overspecialization will be the death of the Academy yet!"

"I agree with you," Alfred told him with ringing sincerity. He thought for a moment and decided to underline his bona fides. "Shoemaker, stick to your last. A place for everything and everything in its place. Spare the rod and spoil the child. Look to the ant, thou sluggard!" He found he was going off the track and stopped himself. "But you see, the way the Academy feels today, its graduates will go into active service and meet older, more experienced men like yourself who can give them this general political orientation right on the spot. Now, of course, in a way, I really knew all the time that the actual enemy, in the deeper sense of the word, so to speak, were the Pharseddics, but—"

"The Pharseddics? Our enemy? But the Pharseddics are the neutrals—the only neutrals! Look here, youngster, and try to get it straight in your mind for once. You absolutely can't do a first-class job of espionage on Earth unless you know the general principles and the background data from which they're derived. To begin with, the Lidsgallians were attacked by the Garoonish, right?"

Alfred assented with a positive shake of his head. "Right! Any school child knows that."

"All right, then. We had to go to war with the Garoonish, not because we had anything particular against them, or liked the Lidsgallians, but because if the Garoonish won they would then be in a position to conquer the Mairunians who were our only possible allies against the growing power of the Ishpolians."

"Naturally," Alfred murmured. "Under the circumstances, there was no alternative."

"Well, that forced the Garoonish to make common cause with the Ossfollians. The Ossfollians activated their mutual assistance pact with the Kenziash of the Rigel region, and, out of fear of the Kenziash, the Ishpolians joined forces with us and pushed the Mairunians into the Garoonish camp. Then came the Battle of the Ninth Sector in which the Ossfollians switched sides four times and which resulted in the involvement of the Menyemians, the Kazkafians, the Doksads, and even the Kenziash of the

Procyon and Canopus regions. After that, of course, the war got a lot more complicated."

Alfred wet his lips. "Yes, of course. Then it got complicated." He decided, for the sake of sanity, to bring matters much closer to present time and place. "Meanwhile, here on Earth, there are the spies of—the spies of—Pardon me, but in your opinion just how many of these belligerents operate espionage networks on Earth? Regularly, I mean."

"All of them! Every single one of them! Including the Pharseddics, who have to know what's going on if they're to maintain their neutrality. Earth, as I hope you re-member from your first-year course in Elementary Secrecy, is ideally situated just outside the usual battle zones but within easy access of almost all the belligerents. It's the only place left where information can be transmitted across the combat lines and deals can be made back and forth—and, as such, it's zealously respected by ev-eryone. After all, it was on Earth that we sold out the Doksads, and where the annihi-lation of the Menyemians was arranged by their allies, the Mairunians and the Kazkafians. Just as now we have to watch our own oldest allies, the Lidsgallians, who have been trying to make contact with the Garoonish for the purpose of concluding a separate peace. I got the proof—I even found out the specific time and place the contact was to be made and what the arrangements were to be—but then I ran afoul of that female with her yacker of Cleveland contests she won three years ago. And I got caught."

"The contact was to be made through a beauty contest of some sort, wasn't it?"

The middle-aged man looked impatient. "Naturally a beauty contest. Of course a beauty contest. How else would anyone go about contacting a bunch like the Garoonish?"

"I couldn't imagine," Alfred laughed weakly. "The *Garoonish*, after all!" He sat in silence, absolutely unable to close mentally with the picture John Smith had evoked. The closest he could come to it was a memory of something he had read about Lisbon during the Second World War. But this was Lisbon squared, Lisbon cubed, Lisbon raised to some incredible exponential power. All Earth was a vast labyrinth of spy-threaded Lisbon. Spies, counterspies, counter-*counterspies*...

Just what, he suddenly wondered, was the correct human population of Earth? Was it a larger proportion of the total population figures than that of the disguised interstellar agents, and by how much? Or was it possibly, was it conceivably, some-what smaller?

Life had been a lot simpler with PuzzleKnit Nylons, he decided, and that was his only real conclusion.

John Smith nudged him. "Here they come. It's off to Lidsgall for us."

They rose to their feet as the wall opened. Two men and a woman came in, dressed in street clothing. They each carried in one hand a small suitcase that looked heavy, and, in the other, the small, red cylindrical weapon.

Alfred eyed the cylinders and found himself getting tense with a dangerous idea. The weapon hadn't bothered him much before and it had supposedly been set to stun him. Well, perhaps the woman had made a mistake in her setting—and perhaps the metabolisms of Man and Vaklittian were so different that a charge that would knock out the one would merely give the other a slightly upset stomach. Then again, if Earth were so carefully maintained in her ignorance as John Smith had indicated, there might be no setting on the weapon that would damage a native terrestrial at all: in the normal course of their intrigues with and against and around each other, these people might be enjoined by their own laws and by mutual agreement from carrying weap-ons that could damage humans.

But if he were wrong? It still might take them quite a bit of time to tumble to the fact that the Vaklittian frequencies were having no important effect on him, and he might manage a lot of action in that time. The alternative, at any rate, was to be pulled off Earth in just a few minutes and deposited, some time in the near future, in an extraterrestrial torture chamber. Even if he were able to prove his humanity to their satisfaction, they would still have to dispose of him in some way—and the various devices of the torture chamber would be so handy...

No question about it: people who go in for torture chambers do not make good hosts.

One of the men fiddled with his suitcase, and the transparent cube dissolved around Alfred and John Smith. In response to the gestures made with the weapons, they walked gingerly across the floor. They were motioned through the open wall.

Alfred found it difficult to recognize Mme. Du Barry and the Huguenot without their masks and costumes.

They both looked much like the new man with them, not bad, not good, just faces-in-a-crowd. Which, of course, was exactly how they wanted it.

He reached his decision as the five of them began walking through the opening in the wall. For the moment, they were closely bunched together, even bumping against each other.

He grabbed the woman by the arm and swung her violently against the Huguenot, who staggered confusedly. Then, knowing that John Smith was between him and the new man in the rear, he hitched up his cassock and started to run. He turned left, and again left—and found himself in the main basement corridor. Ahead, at the far end, was a flight of stone stairs leading up to the street.

Behind him, there was the noise of struggle, then the sound of feet running in pursuit. He heard John Smith distantly yell: "Go it, laddie, go it! Over the hill! Slide, Kelly, slide! Ride 'em, cowboy! It's the last lap—full speed ahead! Shake a leg! Hit the road!" Then the Vaklittian's voice abruptly disappeared in a breathless grunt after the sound of a wallop.

A pinkish glow shot past him, moved back and over to light up his mid-section. He belched. The glow turned light red, deep red, dark, vicious red. He belched more frequently. He reached the stairs and was clambering up them as the glow became a throbbing, night-like purple.

Ten minutes later, he was on Sixth Avenue, getting into a cab. He had a mildly unpleasant bellyache. It rapidly subsided.

He looked behind him as they drove to his hotel. No pursuit. Good. The Lidsgallians would have no idea where he lived.

Did they look like the Vaklittians, he wondered? Spiders? Hardly, he decided. All these different racial names and these titanic interstellar animosities suggested many, many separate forms. They'd have to be small enough to fit into a normal human body, though. Snail-like creatures, possibly, and worm-like ones. Crab-like ones and squid-like ones. Perhaps even rat-like ones?

On the whole, a dreadfully unpleasant subject. He needed a good night's sleep: tomorrow would be his first day at BlakSeme. And, then, after a bit, when he'd had a chance to think it all out, he'd decide what to do. The police, the F.B.I., or whatever. Maybe even take the whole story to one of the New York newspapers—or some top television commentator might be more sympathetic and reach a bigger audience. His story would have to be coherent and convincing, though. He'd have little proof; the Lidsgallians were probably on their way back to their home planet as of this very moment. But there was his own gang—the Vaklittians. Cohen and Kelly and Jones. And Jane Doe. He'd kid them along for a couple of days and then use them for proof. It was time Earth knew what was going on.

His own gang was waiting for him in his hotel room. Cohen and Kelly and Jones. And Jane Doe. They looked as if they'd been waiting for a long time. Jane Doe looked as if she'd been crying. Mr. Kelly was sitting on the bed with his open briefcase on his knees.

"So there you are," said Robinson's voice from the briefcase. "I hope you have an explanation, Smith. I only hope you have an explanation."

"For what?" he asked irritably. He'd been looking forward to getting out of his costume, taking a hot shower, and then bed. This late performance of "I spy" was very annoying. Repetitious, too.

"For what?" Robinson roared. "For what? Kelly, tell him for what!"

"Look here, Smith," Kelly demanded. "Did you or didn't you ask the desk clerk to find out about a

plumbers' fancy dress ball?"

"I did. Of course, I did. He got all the information I needed."

There was a howl from the briefcase. "*He got all the information I needed!* Six years of general studies in espionage at the Academy, a year of post-graduate work in In-tensive Secrecy, six months at the Special Service School in Data-Sifting and Loca-tion-Tracing—and you have the nerve to stand there with your carapace in your claws and tell me that the only way of tracking down this fancy dress ball you could think of was to ask the desk clerk—an ordinary everyday human desk-clerk—to find out about it for you!"

Alfred noticed that the faces around him were all extremely grave. Despite his weariness and strong feelings of indifference, he made an effort to conciliate. "Well, if he was only an ordinary, everyday human, I fail to see the harm that—"

"He could have been the Garoonish Minister of War for all you knew!" the brief-case blasted. "Not that it made any difference. By the time he'd questioned his various sources and mentioned the matter to his various friends, acquaintances and busi-ness associates, every spy organization in the galaxy had been alerted. They knew what we were worrying about, what we were looking for, and where and when we hoped to find it. You accomplished one of the best jobs of interstellar communication ever. Sixty-five years of patient espionage planning gone down the drain. *Now* what have you to say for yourself?"

Alfred stood up straight and manfully pulled back his shoulders. "Just this. I'm sorry." He considered for a moment, then added: "Deeply and truly sorry."

Some kind of electrical storm seemed to go off in the briefcase. It almost rolled off Kelly's knees.

"I just can't stand this any more," Jane Doe said suddenly. "I'll wait outside." She walked past Alfred to the door, her eyes swimming in reproachfulness. "Darling, darling, how *could* you?" she whispered bitterly as she passed him.

The briefcase crackled down to some semblance of control. "I'll give you one last chance, Smith. Not that I think any conceivable defense you might have would be valid, but I hate to demote a Special Emissary, to push him forever out of the Service, without giving him every chance to be heard. So. Is there any defense you wish to have registered before sentence of demotion is passed upon you?"

Alfred considered. This was evidently a serious business in their eyes, but it was beginning to be slightly meaningless to him. There was too much of it, and it was too complicated. He was tired. *And* he was Alfred Smith, not John Smith.

He could tell them about the events of the night, about the Lidsgallians and the information he'd received from the captive Smith. It might be valuable and it might throw a weight in the scales in his favor. The trouble was that then the question of John Smith's real identity would arise—and that might become very embarrassing.

Besides, he was over the fear he'd felt earlier about these creatures; they could do little more to him than a dose of sodium bicarbonate, he'd found out. Their super-weapons were to be discounted, at least on Earth. And when it came to that point, he was not at all sure that he wanted to give them helpful information. Who knew just where Earth's best interests lay?

He shook his head, feeling the fatigue in his neck muscles. "No defense. I *said* I'm sorry."

From the briefcase, Robinson sighed. "Smith, this hurts me more than it hurts you. It's the principle of the thing, you see. Punishment fit the crime. More in sorrow than in anger. You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs. All right, Kelly. The sentence."

Kelly put the briefcase on the bed and got to his feet. Cohen and Jones came to attention. There was evidently to be a ceremony.

"By virtue of the authority vested in me as acting chief of this field group," Kelly intoned, "and pursuant to Operating Procedure Regulations XCVII, XCVIII and XCIX, I hereby demote and degrade

you, Gar-Pitha of Vaklitt, from the rank of Special Emissary, Second Class, to the rank of General Emissary or such other lower rank as Command Central may find fitting and necessary in the best interests of the Service. And I further direct that your disgrace be published throughout every arm and echelon of the Service and that your name be stricken from the roster of graduates of the Academy which you have shamed. And, finally, in the name of this field group and every individual within it, I disown you now and forevermore as a colleague and an equal and a friend."

It was, Alfred decided, a kind of strong-medicine ceremony. Must be pretty affecting to someone who was really involved in it personally.

Then, from either side, Cohen and Jones moved in swiftly to complete the last, dramatic part of the ceremony.

They were very formal, but very thorough.

They stripped the culprit of his uniform.

Afterword

This is how I wrote this story:

In 1956, I broke up with a woman with whom I had been involved for the better part of a year. But I knew she'd be back (she always came back), and I knew we'd start all over again, as we so many times had. I therefore called all my friends and told them that they had to arrange seven consecutive dates for me; I wanted to see a new woman every day of the coming week—hoping that I'd get deeply committed to at least one of them.

Fruma, as she still likes to remind me, Fruma was Wednesday. Katherine MacLean and the guy she was then living with, Dave Mason, told me they knew somebody I would really like. They came up with Fruma.

After my first date with her on Wednesday night, I told Bob Sheckley—who was recently divorced and who was my closest friend at the time—that I thought I had found the woman of all women who should be my wife. Bob asked when I planned to see her again.

"Saturday night," I told him.

"See if she has a friend," he said.

Well, Fruma did, and her friend's name was Ziva, and Bob and Ziva were married a month after Fruma and me. We all lived in Greenwich Village, not forever after, but most happily, about two or three blocks from each other.

And Bob and I went through a slump. Not a bad long one, but a very annoying one nonetheless, and one more surprising to Bob than to me, because I wrote spasmodically, when some strong idea turned me around, but Bob was a heavy production man.

Bob and I talked to each other very intensively and very worriedly about how to get out of the slump. One of the cures we thought about was to rent a furnished room as a mutual office and add two items of furniture to it—a typewriter table and a heavy wooden chair with shackles permanently attached to the chair. We would both arrive at the office at nine each morning, and one of us would be shackled to the chair by the other. He would not be released, no matter how he pleaded or what the excuse, until one p.m.—or until he typed four pages of good, publishable copy. Then the shackles would be opened and the other would take his place, under the same conditions, until either five p.m. or four typed pages of good copy would bring release. Of course, if the four pages were typed early enough and the writer were still going strong, he could go on and write as much as he wanted to, until his release time.

We thought it was an excellent idea and were eager to try it. Unfortunately, both Fruma and Ziva

claimed to be horrified and begged us not to. Bob and I muttered to each other about the unfortunate weakness of women, and tried to think of something else.

What we settled on was this: The two of us would meet five mornings a week at a neighborhood diner, each with our four pages of new copy in hand. Whoever was late for the appointment or who didn't have his requisite four pages had to pay five dollars into a fund handled by our wives. Whenever the fund grew large enough, it would be used to buy theater tickets for all four of us.

It worked, it really worked well, at least for a time. I put more fives in than Bob, because, after all, I was born a month late and have never caught up: I am frequently tardy for any and all appointments. But both of us were writing again, and selling, and that was the whole point.

Then there was the morning I didn't have a good story in my head. I desperately wrote four pages of something, anything, and hurried off to meet Bob. He had his four pages, too, and they were very professional and very good. But they also looked slightly familiar.

Of course, I realized! They were four pages from one of his first published stories, a story I liked very much and remembered well. I accused him of cheating. He broke down and admitted it, and paid the five dollars. I went home with my four pages of nonsense, righteously angry.

I put the four pages in front of me, one thousand words of pure narrative hook, and wondered if anything at all could be made of it. Yes, it turned out: "Lisbon Cubed" could be made of it. (If you want to see just what the original was pretty much like, count one thousand words from the beginning of the story.)

My title, when it went to Horace Gold's *Galaxy*, was "The Fourth Power of Lisbon." He, finding nothing else to change in the story—although he did try hard—removed my title and substituted his. I've kept it for this edition: the man is dead and deserves some sort of minor prose monument.

If you tell all this to Bob Sheckley, he will swear that it's not quite true; it all happened the other way around, with me being the guilty party. Don't listen to him.

But this is why I wrote this story:

I'm not sure why I write science fiction any more, except that, well, it's a living, and, hell, it's where I made what reputation I have. But there are a couple of responsibilities that I felt I had fifty years ago and at least one of which I still feel very strongly today.

It's my duty—it really is my duty, being the kind of person I am and knowing and believing what I do—to prepare my fellow humans for what they will shortly be facing, at the most in one or two lifetimes. Whatever I write these days, satire, high or low drama, whatever, I ought to get them ready for the unsettling discovery that they and their species will soon no longer be Nature's only child.

The universe is awfully big, and not only are we going out into it physically, we are splashing signals out in every direction that we think, we *think*, therefore we are, we *are*. Somebody (or somebodies) somewhere is abruptly going to be seen—or heard from. We will find that we have very smart siblings.

I pray most of all and first of all that we will not be mice alerting cats. Then I pray that they will not be too far ahead of us technologically; I do not want the U.N. Secretary General to play Montezuma to some galactic Cortez. And then I pray that we will be up to the challenge of living with intelligent creatures who come from a totally different evolution, that we will be able to enjoy and use totally different technologies, totally different art forms, totally different philosophical and religious systems. That we will appreciate the fact there are many, many other forms of intelligence—and that their highest forms must inevitably deal with what they too must call the tragedy of life.

And mostly to that end I write these comedies of space.

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