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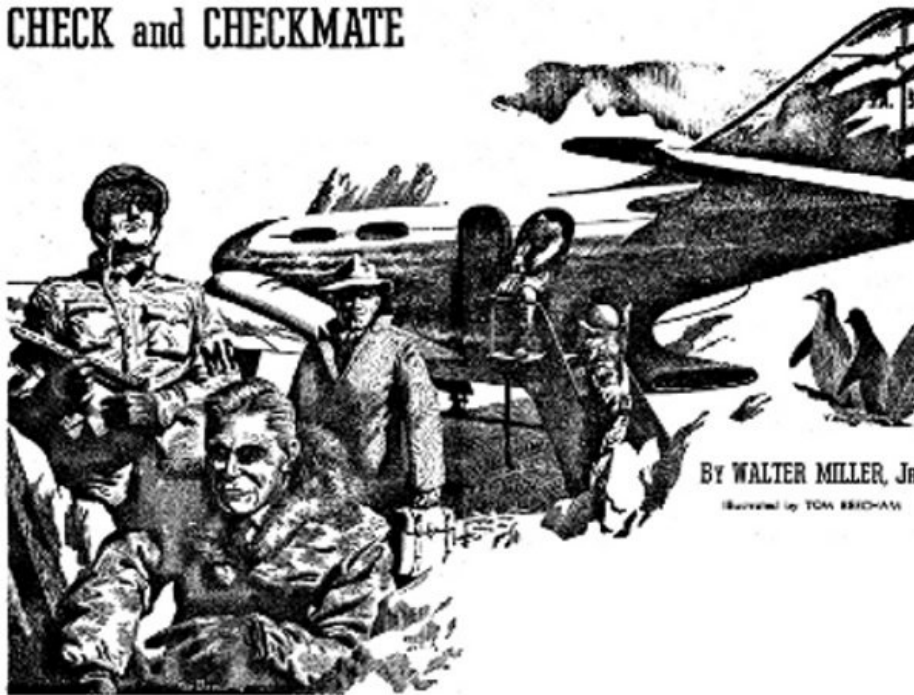
CHECK and CHECKMATE

By WALTER MILLER, Jr.

Illustrated by TOM BEECHAM

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CHECK and CHECKMATE



John Smith XVI, new President of the Western Federation of Autonomous States, had made a number of campaign promises that nobody really expected him to fulfill, for after all, the campaign and the election were only ceremonies, and the President—who had no real name of his own—had been trained for the executive post since birth. He had been elected by a popular vote of 603,217,954 to 130, the dissenters casting their negative by announcing that, for the sake of national unity, they refused to participate in any civilized activities during the President's term, whereupon they were admitted (voluntarily) to the camp for conscientious objectors.

Victory hinges not always on the mightiest sword, but often on lowly subterfuge. Here is a classic example, with the Western World as stooge!

But now, two weeks after his inauguration, he seemed ready to make good the first and perhaps most difficult promise of the lot: to confer by televuephone with Ivan Ivanovitch the Ninth, the Peoplesfriend and Vicar of the Asian Proletarian League. The President apparently meant to keep to himself the secret of his success in the difficult task of arranging the interview in spite of the lack of any diplomatic contact between the nations, in spite of the Hell Wall, and the interference stations which made even radio communication impossible between the two halves of the globe. Someone had suggested that John Smith XVI had floated a note to Ivan IX in a bottle, and the suggestion, though ludicrous, seemed not at all unlikely.

John XVI seemed quite pleased with himself as he sat with his staff of Primary Stand-ins in the study of his presidential palace. His face, of course, was invisible behind the golden mask of the official helmet, the mask of tragedy with its expression of pathos symbolizing the self-immolation of public service—as well as protecting the President's own personal visage from public view, and hence from assassination in unmasked private life, for not only was he publicly nameless, but also publicly faceless and publicly unknown as an individual. But despite the invisibility of his expression, his contentment became apparent by a certain briskness of gesticulation and a certain smugness in his voice as he spoke to the nine Stand-ins who were also bodyguards, council-members, and advisors to the chief executive.

"Think of it, men," he sighed happily in his smooth tenor, slightly muffled by the mask. "Communication with the East—after forty years of the Big Silence. A great moment in history, perhaps the greatest since the last peace-effort."

The nine men nodded dutifully. The President looked around at them and chuckled.

"'Peace-effort'," he echoed, spitting the words out distinctly as if they were a pair of phonetic specimens. "Do you remember what it used to be called—in the middle of the last century?"

A brief silence, then a Stand-in frowned thoughtfully. "Called it 'war', didn't they, John?"

"Precisely." The golden helmet nodded crisply. "'War'—and now 'peace-effort'. Our semantics has progressed. Our present 'security-probe' was once called 'lynch'. 'Social-security' once meant a limited insurance plan, not connoting euthanasia and sterilization for the ellie-moes. And that word 'ellie-moe'—once eleemosynary—was once applied to institutions that took *care* of the handicapped."

He waited for the burst of laughter to subside. A Stand-in, still chuckling, spoke up.

"It's our institutions that have evolved, John."

"True enough," the President agreed. "But as they changed, most of them kept their own names."

Like 'the Presidency'. It used to be rabble-chosen, as our ceremonies imply. Then the Qualifications Amendment that limited it to the psychologically fit. And then the Education Amendment prescribed other qualifying rules. And the Genetic Amendment, and the Selection Amendment, and finally the seclusion and depersonalization. Until it gradually got out of the rabble's hands, except symbolically." He paused. "Still, it's good to keep the old names. As long as the names don't change, the rabble is happy, and say, 'We have preserved the Pan-American way of life'."

"While the rabble is really impotent," added a Stand-in.

"Don't say that!" John Smith XVI snapped irritably, sitting quickly erect on the self-conforming couch. "And if you believe it, you're a fool." His voice went sardonic. "Why don't you try abolishing me and find out?"

"Sorry, John. I didn't mean—"

The President stood up and paced slowly toward the window where he stood gazing between the breeze-stirred drapes at the sun-swept city of Acapulco and at the breakers rolling toward the distant beach.

"No, my power is of the rabble," he confessed, "and I am their friend." He turned to look at them and laugh. "Should I build my power on men like you? Or the Secondary Stand-ins? Baa! For all your securities, you are still stooges. Of the rabble. Do you obey me because I control military force? Or because I control rabble? The latter I think. For despite precautions, military forces can be corrupted. Rabble cannot. They rule you through me, and I rule you through them. And I am their servant because I have to be. No tyrant can survive by oppression."

A gloomy hush followed his words. It was still fourteen minutes before time for the televiewphone contact with Ivan Ivanovitch IX. The President turned back to the "window". He stared "outside" until he grew tired of the view. He pressed a button on the wall. The window went black. He pressed another button, which brought another view: Pike's Peak at sunset. As the sky gathered gray twilight, he twisted a dial and ran the sun back up again.

The palace was built two hundred feet underground, and the study was a safe with walls of eight-inch steel. It lent a certain air of security.

The historic moment was approaching. The Stand-ins seemed nervous. What changes had occurred behind the Hell Wall, what new developments in science, what political mutations? Only rumors came from beyond the Wall, since the last big peace-effort which had ended in stalemate and total isolation. The intelligence service did the best that it could, but the picture was fuzzy and incomplete. There was still "communism", but the word's meaning had apparently changed. It was said that the third Ivan had been a crafty opportunist but also a wise man who, although he did nothing to abolish absolutism, effected a bloody reformation in which the hair-splitting Marxist dogmatics had been purged. He appointed the most pragmatic men he could find to succeed them, and set the whole continental regime on the road to a harsh but practical utilitarian civilization.

A slogan had leaked across the Wall recently: "There is no God but a Practical Man; there is no Law but a Best Solution," and it seemed to affirm that the third Ivan's influence had continued after his passing—although the slogan itself was a dogma. And it might mean something quite non-literal to the people who spoke it. The rabble of the West were still stirred to deep emotion by a thing that began, "When in the course of human events—" and they saw nothing incongruous about Tertiary Stand-ins who quoted it in the name of the Federation's rule.

But the unknown factor that disturbed the President most was not the present Asian political or economic situation, but rather, the state of scientific development, particularly as it applied to military matters. The forty years of non-communication had not been spent in military stasis, at least not for the West. Sixty percent of the federal budget was still being spent for defense. Powerful new weapons were still being developed, and old ones pronounced obsolete. The seventh John Smith had even conspired to have a conspiracy against himself in Argentina, with resulting civil war, so that the weapons could be tested under actual battle conditions—for the region had been overpopulated anyway. The results had been comforting—but John the Sixteenth wanted to know more about what the enemy was doing.

The Hell Wall—which was really only a globe-encircling belt of booby-trapped land and ocean, guarded from both sides—had its political advantages, of course. The mysterious doings of the enemy, real and imagined, were a constant and suspenseful threat that made it easy for the Smiths to keep the rabble in hand. But for all the present Smith knew, the threat might very well be real. He had to find out. It would also be a popular triumph he could toss to the rabble, bolstering his position with them, and thereby securing his hold on the Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Stand-ins, who were becoming a little too presumptuous of late.

He had a plan in mind, vague, tentative, and subject to constant revision to suit events as they

might begin to occur. He kept the plan's goal to himself, knowing that the Stand-ins would call it insane, dangerous, impossible.

"John! We're picking up their station!" a Stand-in called. "It's a minute before time!"

He left the window and walked calmly to the couch before the televuephone, whose screen had come alive with the kaleidoscope patterns of the interference-station which sprang to life as soon as an enemy station tried to broadcast.

"Have the fools cut that scatter-station!" he barked angrily.

A Stand-in grabbed at a microphone, but before he made the call the interference stopped—a few seconds before the appointed time. The screen revealed an empty desk and a wall behind, with a flag of the Asian League. No one was in the picture, which was slightly blurred by several relay stations, which had been set up on short notice for this one broadcast.

A wall-clock peeped the hour in a childish voice: "Sixteen o'clock, Thirdday, Smithweek, also Accident-Prevention Week and Probe-Subversives Week; Happy 2073! Peep!"

A man walked into the picture and sat down, facing John Smith XVI. A heavy-set man, clad in coveralls, and wearing a red rubber or plastic helmet-mask. The mask was the face of the first Soviet dictator, dead over a century ago. John's scalp bristled slightly beneath his own golden headdress. He tried to relax. The room was hushed. The opposing leaders stared at each other without speaking. Historic moment!

Ivan Ivanovitch slowly lifted his hand and waved it in greeting. John Smith returned the gesture, then summoned courage to speak first.

"You have translators at hand?"

"I need none," the red mask growled in the Western tongue. "You are unable to speak my tongue. We shall speak yours."

The President started. How could the Red know that he did not speak the Russo-Asian dialect?

"Very well." The President reached for a prepared text and began to read. "I requested this conference in the hope of establishing some form of contact between our peoples, through their duly constituted executive authorities. I hope that we can agree on a series of conferences, aimed eventually at a lessening of the tension between us. I do not propose that we alter our respective positions, nor to change our physical isolation from one another, except in the field of high-level diplomacy and...."

"Why?" grunted the Asian chieftain.

John Smith XVI hesitated. The guttural monosyllable had been toneless and disinterested. The Red was going to draw him out, apparently. Very well, he would be frank—for a time.

"The answer should be evident, Peoplesfriend. I presume that your government spends a respectable sum for armaments. My government does likewise. The eventual aim should be economy...."

"Is this a disarmament proposal?"

The fellow was blunt. Smith cleared his throat. "Not at the present time, Peoplesfriend. I hoped that eventually we might be able to establish a mutual trust so that to some extent we could lessen the burden...."

"Stop talking Achesonian, President. What do you want?"

The President went rigid. "Very well," he said sarcastically, "I propose that we reduce military expenses by blowing the planet in half. The halves can circle each other as satellite twins, and we'll have achieved perfect isolation. It would seem more economical than the present course."

He apparently had sized-up the Peoplesfriend correctly. The man threw back his masked head and laughed uproariously.

"The Solomon solution!... ha ha!... Slice the baby in half!" the Stalin-mask chuckled. Then he paused to grow sober. "Too bad we can't do it, isn't it?"

John Smith sat stiffly waiting. Diplomacy was dead, and he had made a mistake in trying to be polite. Diplomats were dead, and the art forgotten. Poker-game protocol had to apply here, and it was really the only sensible way: for two opponents to try to cheat each other honestly and jovially. He was glad the Soviet Worker's Vicar had not responded to his first politeness.

"Anything else, Smith?"

"We can discuss agenda later. What about the continued conferences?"

"Suits me. I have nothing to lose. I am in a position to destroy you anyway, a position I have occupied for several years. I have not cared to do so, since you made no overt moves against us."

A brief silence. Bluff? Smith wondered. Certainly bluff. On the other hand, it would be interesting to see how far Ivan would brag.

"I gather your atomic research has made rapid strides, for you to make such a boast," Smith ventured.

"Not at all. In fact, my predecessor had it curtailed and limited to industrial applications. Our weapons program has become uni-directional, and extremely inexpensive. I'll tell you about it sometime."

Smith's flesh crawled. Something was wrong here. The Asian leader was too much at his ease. His words meant nothing, of course. It had to be lying noise; it could be nothing else. A meeting such as this was not meant to communicate truth, but to discern an opponent's attitude and to try to hide one's own.

"Let it suffice to say," the Red leader went on, "that we know more about you than you know about us. Our system has changed. A century ago, our continent suffered a blight of dogmatism and senseless butchery such as the world had never seen. Obviously, such conditions cannot endure. They did not. There was strong reaction and revolution within the framework of the old system. We have achieved a workable technological aristocratism, based on an empirical approach to problems. We realize that the final power is in the hands of the people—and I use that archaic word in preference to your 'rabble'—"

"Are you trying to convert me to something?" John Smith growled acidly.

"Not at all. I'm telling you our position." He paused for a moment, then inserted his fingertips under the edge of the mask. "Here is probably the best way to tell you."

The Red leader ripped off the mask, revealing an impassive Oriental face with deepset black eyes and a glowering frown. The President sucked in his breath. It was unthinkable, that a man should expose himself to ... but then, that was what he was trying to prove wasn't it?

He kicked a foot-switch to kill the microphone circuit, and spoke quickly to the Stand-ins, knowing that the Asian could not see his lips move behind the golden mask.

"Is Security Section guarding against spy circuits?"

"Yes, John."

"Then quick, get out of the room, all of you! Join the Secondaries."

"But John, it'll leave you fingered! If nine of us leave, they'll know that the remaining one is—"

"Get on your masks and get out! I'm going to take mine off."

"But John—!"

"Move, Subversive!"

"You don't need to curse," the Stand-in muttered. The nine men, out of the camera's field, donned golden helmets identical to Smith's, whistled six notes to the audio-combination, then slipped out the thick steel door as it clicked and came open.

The Red was jeering at him quietly. "Afraid to take off your mask, President? The rabble? Or your self-appointed Stand-ins? Which frightens you, President—"

John Smith plucked at a latch under his chin, and the golden headdress came apart down the sides. He lifted it off and laid it casually aside, revealing a hard, blocky face, slightly in need of a shave, with cool blue eyes and blond brows. His hair was graying slightly at the temples, with a fortyish hairline.

The Red nodded. "Greetings, human. I doubted that you would."

"Why not?" growled Smith.

"Because you fear your Stand-ins, as appointees, not subject to your 'rabble'. Our ruling clique selects its own members, but they are subject to popular approval or recall by referendum. I fear nothing from them."

"Let's not compare our domestic forms, Peoplesfriend."

"I wanted to point out," the Asian continued calmly, "that your system slipped into what it is without realizing it. A bad was allowed to grow worse. We, however were reacting against unreasonableness and stupidity within our own system. In the year 2001—"

"I am aware of your history before the Big Silence. May we discuss pertinent matters—?"

The Asian stared at him sharply. The frown grew deeper. The black eyes looked haughty. "If you

really want to discuss something, John Smith, suppose we arrange a personal meeting in a non-walled, neutral region? Say, Antarctica?"

John Smith XVI, unaccustomed to dealing without a mask, let surprise fill his face before he caught himself. The Asian chuckled but said nothing. The President studied the border of the television screen for a moment.

"I shall have to consider your proposal," he said dully.

The Peoplesfriend nodded curtly, then suggested a time for the next interview. Smith revised it ahead to gain more time, and agreement was reached. The screen went blank; the interview was at an end. The Sixteenth Smith took a slow, worried breath, then slowly donned the mask of office again. He summoned the nine Primaries immediately.

"That was dangerous, John," one of them warned him as they entered. "You may regret it. They knew you were in here alone. We're not all identical from the neck-down you know. When we come out, they might compare—"

He cut the man off with a curt gesture. "No time. We're in a bad situation. Maybe worse than I guess." He began pacing the floor and staring down at the metallifiber rug as he spoke. "He knows more about us than he should. It took me awhile to realize that he's speaking our latest language variations. A language changes idiom in forty years, and slang. He's got the latest phrases. 'Greetings, human' is one, like a rabbleman says when somebody softens up."

"Spies?"

"Maybe a whole network. I don't see how they could get them through the Wall, but—maybe it's not so hard. Antarctic's open, as he pointed out."

"What can we do about it, John?"

Smith stopped pacing, popped his knuckles hard, stared at them. "Assemble Congress. Security-probe. It's the only answer. Let the 'Rabble's Parliament' run their own inquisition. They were always good at purging themselves. Start a big spy-scare, and keep it in the channels. I'll lead with a message to the rabble." He paused, the tragedy mask gaping at them. "You won't like this, but I'm having the Stand-ins probed too. The Presidency is not immune."

A muttering of indignation. Some of them went white. No one protested however.

"No witch-hunt in this group, however," he assured them. "I'll veto anything that looks unfair for the Primaries, but—" He paused and rang the word again. "*—but—*there will be no leniency tolerated from here on down. If Congress thinks it's found a spy, it can execute him on the spot—and I won't lift a finger. This has got to be rooted out and burned."

He began to pace again. He began barking crisp orders for specific details of the probe, or rather, for the campaign that would start the probe. The rabble were better at witch-hunts than a government was. Congress had not been assembled for fifteen years, since there had been nothing suspicious to investigate, but once it was called to duty, heads would roll—some of them literally. If some innocent people were hurt, the rabble could only blame themselves, for their own enthusiasm in ruthlessly searching out the underground enemy. Smith couldn't worry about that. If an Asian spy-system were operating in the continent, it had to be crushed quickly.

When he had outlined the propaganda and string-pulling plans for them, he turned to the other matter—the Red leader's boast of ability to conquer the West.

"It's probably foolish talk, but we don't know their present psychology. Double production on our most impressive weapons. Give the artificial-satellite program all the money it wants, and get them moving on it. I want a missile-launching site in space before the end of the year. Pay particular attention to depopulation weapons for use against industrial areas. We may have to strike in a hurry. We've been fools—coasting this way, feeling secure behind the Wall."

"You're *not* contemplating another peace-effort, John?" gasped an elderly Stand-in.

"I'm contemplating survival!" the leader snapped. "I don't know that we're in serious danger, but if it takes a peace-effort to make sure, then we'll start one. So fast it'll knock out their industry before they know we've hit them." He stood frozen for a moment, the mask lifted proudly erect. "By Ike, I love the West! And it's not going to suffer any creeping eruption while I'm at its head!"

When the President had finished and was ready to leave, the others started donning their masks again.

"Just a minute," he grunted. "Number Six."

One of the men, about the President's size and build, looked up quickly. "Yes, John?"

"Your cloak is stained at the left shoulder. Grease?"

Six inspected it curiously, then nodded. "I was inspecting a machine shop, and—"

"Never mind. Trade cloaks with me."

"Why, if—" Six stopped. His face lost color. "But the others—might have—"

"Precisely."

Six unclasped it slowly and handed it to the Sixteenth Smith, accepting the President's in return. His face was set in rigid lines, but he made no further protest.

Masked and prepared, a Stand-in whistled a tune to the door, which had changed its combination since the last time. The tumblers clicked, and they walked out into a large auditorium containing two hundred Secondary Stand-ins, all wearing the official mask.

If a Secondary ever wanted to assassinate the President, one shot would give him a single chance in ten as they filed through the door.

"Mill about!" bellowed a Sergeant-at-Arms, and the two hundred began wandering among themselves in the big room, a queer porridge, stirred clumsily but violently. The Primaries and the President lost themselves in the throng. For ten minutes the room milled and circulated.

"Unmask!" bellowed the crier.

The two hundred and ten promptly removed their helmets and placed them on the floor. The President was unmasked and unknown—unmarked except by a certain physical peculiarity that could be checked only by a physician, in case the authenticity of the presidential person was challenged, as it frequently was.

Then the Secondaries went out to lose themselves in a larger throng of Tertiaries, and the group split randomly to take the various underground highways to their homes.

The President entered his house in the suburbs of Dia City, hugged the children, and kissed his wife.

John Smith was profoundly disturbed. During the years of the Big Silence, a feeling of uneasy security had evolved. The Federation had been in isolation too long, and the East had become a mysterious unknown. The Presidency had oscillated between suspicious unease and smug confidence, depending perhaps upon the personality of the particular president more than anything else. The mysteriousness of the foe had been used politically to good advantage by every president selected to office, and the Sixteenth Smith had intended to so use it. But now he vaguely regretted it.

The tenure of office was still four years, and he could not help feeling that if he had maintained the intercontinental silence, he would not have had to worry about the spy-matter. If the hemisphere had been infiltrated, the subversive work had not begun yesterday. It had probably been going on for years, during several administrations, and the plans of the East, if any, would perhaps not come to a climax for several more years. He felt himself in the position of a man who suffered no pain as yet, but learned that he had an incurable disease. Why did he have to find out?

But now that the danger was apparent, he had to go ahead and fight it instead of allowing it to pass on to the next John Smith.

He made a stirring speech to Congress when it convened. The cowed figures of the people's representatives sat like gloomy gray shadows in the tiers of seats around the great amphitheatre under the night sky; the symbolic torches threw fluttering black shadows among their ranks. The sight always made him shiver. Their cowls and robes had been affected during the last great peace-effort, at which time they had been impregnated with lead to protect against bomb-radiation, but the garb of office had endured for ceremonial reasons.

There was still a Senate and a House, the former acting chiefly as an investigating body, the latter serving a legislative function in accordance with the rabble-code, which no longer applied to the Executive, being chiefly concerned with matters of rabble morals and police-functions. Its duties could mostly be handled by mail and televuephone voting, so that it seldom convened in the physical sense.

President John quoted freely from the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, the MacArthur Speech to Congress, and the immortal words of the first John Smith in his *Shall We Submit?* which began: "If thy brother the son of thy mother, or thy son, or daughters, or thy wife, or thy friend whom thou lovest, would persuade thee secretly, saying, 'Let us go and serve strange gods', neither let thy eyes spare him nor conceal him, but thou shalt presently put him to death!"

The speech was televised to the rabble, and for that matter, one of the Stand-ins delivered the actual address to protect the President who was present on the platform among the ranks of Primaries and Secondaries, although not even these officials were aware of it. The address was honestly an emotional one, not bothering with any attempt at logical analysis. None was needed. Congress was always eager to investigate subversion. It was good political publicity, and about the only congressional activity that could command public attention and interest. The cheers were rousing and prolonged. When it was over, the Speaker and the President of the Senate both made brief addresses to set the machinery in motion.

John Smith watched the proceedings with deep satisfaction. But as time wore on, he began to wonder how many spies were truly being apprehended. Among the many thousands who were brought to justice, only sixty-nine actually confessed to espionage, and over half of them, upon being subjected to psychiatric examination, proved to be neurotic publicity-seekers who would have confessed to anything sufficiently dramatic. Twenty-seven of them were psychiatrically cleared, but even so, their stories broke down when questioned under hypnosis or hypnotic drugs, except for seven who, although constantly maintaining their guilt, could not substantiate one another's claims, nor furnish any evidence which might lead to the discovery of a well-organized espionage network. John Smith was baffled.

He was particularly baffled by the disappearance of seventeen men in key positions, who, upon being mentioned as possible candidates for the probe, immediately vanished into thin air, leaving no trace. It seemed to Smith, upon reading the individual reports, that many of them would have been absolved before their cases got beyond the deputy level, so flimsy were the accusations made against them. But they had not waited to find out. Two were obviously guilty of *something*. One had murdered a deputy who came to question him, then fled in a private plane, last seen heading out to sea. He had apparently run out of fuel over the ocean and crashed. The second man, an ordnance officer at the proving ground, had spectacularly committed suicide by exploding an atomic artillery shell, vaporizing himself and certain key comrades including his superior officer.

Here, the President felt, was something really ominous. The disappearances and the suicides spelled careful discipline and planning. Their records had been impeccable. The accusations seemed absurd. If they were agents, they had done nothing but sit in their positions and wait for an appointed time. The possibilities were frightening, but evidence was inconclusive and led nowhere. Nevertheless, the house-cleaning continued.

On Fourthday of Traffic Safety Week, which was also Eat More Corn-Popsies Week, John Smith XVI conferred with Ivan Ivanovitch IX again at the appointed time. Contrary to all traditions, he again ordered the Stand-ins—temporarily eight in number, since Number Six had died mysteriously in the bathtub—to leave the study so that he might unmask. Promptly at sixteen o'clock the Asian's face—or rather his ceremonial mask—came on the screen. But seeing the Westerner's square-cut visage smiling at him sourly, he promptly removed the covering to reveal his Oriental face. The exchange of greetings was curt.

"I see by recent events," said Ivan, "that you are nervous on your throne. For the sake of your own people, let me warn you that we have no designs on your autonomy unless you become aggressive toward us. The real difficulty, as revealed by your purge, is that you feel insecure, and insecurity makes you unpredictable. I do not, of course, expect you to be trustworthy. But insecurity sometimes breeds impulsiveness. If you are to strike out blindly, perhaps the talks had best be broken off."

Smith XVI reddened angrily but held his temper. The man's presumption was intolerable. Further, he knew about the probe, knowledge which could only come from espionage.

"I have become aware," the President said firmly, "that you have managed to establish a spy-system on this continent. If you wish better relations, you will have the activity stop at once."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the Peoplesfriend with a bland smile. "I might point out however that at least forty of your spies are either killed while trying to cross the Wall, or are apprehended after they manage to enter my regime."

"The accusation is too ridiculous to deny," Smith lied. "We have no desire to pry into your activities. We wish only to maintain the status quo."

The exchange continued, charges and countercharges and denials. Neither side expected truth or honesty, and the game was as old as civilization. Neither expected to be believed, although the press of both nations would heatedly condemn the other's lack of good faith. The ethical side of the affair was for the rabble to consider, for only the rabble cared about such things. The real task was to ferret out the enemy's attitudes and intentions without revealing one's own.

Smith felt that he had won a little, and lost a little too. He had found many hints of subversive activity, but had betrayed his own lack of certainty by reacting so swiftly to it. Ivan IX, on the other hand, seemed too much at ease, too secure, and even impertinent.

"At our last meeting," said the Asian, "I suggested a meeting between ourselves. Have you given thought to the matter?"

"I have given it thought," said the President, "and will agree to the proposal provided you come to this country. The meeting will be held at my capitol."

"Which you change at random intervals, I notice," purred Ivan with a bland smile. "For security reasons?"

"You could only know that by espionage!" Smith snapped.

"Your proposal of course is outrageous. The only sensible place for the meeting is in Singapore."

"That is out of the question. I must insist on the capitol of my government as the only acceptable meeting-place. My government in contacting yours put itself in the position of extending an invitation, a position from which we could not depart without loss of dignity."

"I suggest we delay the matter then," grunted the Peoplesfriend. "And talk about the agenda for such a meeting. What did you have in mind?"

"I have already stated our general aims as being a reduction of armament expenses, beneficial to both sides. I think you agree?"

"Not necessarily, since our budget is already rather low. However, make your specific proposals, and I shall consider them. Further economy, where not injurious to security, is always desirable."

"I propose, then, that we discuss a method whereby agreement might be reached on a plan to divulge the nature of our respective armaments, including number, nature, and purpose of each weapon-class, as a foundation for discussions relating to reductions."

Smith waited for a flat "no" to the suggestion. The Asian leader apparently knew a great deal more about the West's armaments than Smith knew about the East. The Peoplesfriend had nothing to gain by revealing the military strength of his own hemisphere. But he paused, watching Smith with an expressionless stare.

"I accept that for further consideration, at least," Ivan said at last.

John XVI hovered between elation and suspicion. Suspicion won. "Of course there must be some method to assure that accurate figures are divulged."

"That could probably be settled."

Again the President was shocked. It was all too easy. Something was rotten about the whole thing. The Peoplesfriend agreed too readily to things that seemed to be to his disadvantage. The discussion continued for several hours, during which both men presented viewpoints and postponed agreement until a later meeting.

"Stockpiles of fissionable material," said the President, "which could quickly be converted to weapons use should also be discussed."

Ivan frowned. "I mentioned before that we have no need of atomic armaments, nor any plans for building them. Our defense is secured by something entirely different, a weapon which serves an industrial function in time of peace, and a weapon which I might add was largely responsible for our abandoning Marxism. A single discovery, Andrei Sorkin's, made communist doctrine not only a wrong solution, but a wrong solution to a problem that had ceased to exist."

"What problem are you referring to?"

"The use of human beings as automatic devices in a corporate machine—the social-structure of industry, in which the worker was caught and bolted down and expected to perform a single, highly specialized task. That of course, is almost a definition of the word 'proletarian'. We no longer have a true proletariat. For that reason, we are no longer Marxist—although the name 'communist' has survived with its meaning changed."

The conference ended after setting the time for another meeting. John Smith XVI felt that he had been groping in the dark, because of the information-vacuum that kept him from even making a reasonable guess as to Ivan's real aims. He kept feeling vaguely that Ivan was just playing along, reacting according to the opportunity of the moment, not particularly caring what Smith did next. But leaders of states just did not proceed so carelessly—not unless they were fools, or unless they were supremely confident in the ultimate outcome.

The intelligence service analysis of his latest conversation with Ivan gave him something to think about later however. Andrei Sorkin had been a physicist who had done considerable work in crystal-structure before the Big Silence had cut off knowledge of his activities from the West. Further, the Peoplesfriend's references to industrial usage, coupled with his remarks about specialized labor, seemed to suggest that the East had made great strides in servo-mechanisms and auto-control devices. But control devices were not weapons in themselves. Electronic rocket-pilots were not weapons unless there were rockets for them to fly. Automatic target-trackers were not weapons unless they guided a weapon to shoot at the target. It made little sense; he concluded that Ivan had not meant it to make much sense. Smith could only interpret it as meaning: "Our weapons are marvelously controlled; therefore we need fewer of them."

On the probe front, events were about as usual. The lists of suspects and convictions grew bulky enough to keep a large office staff busy with details. More sinister, in the President's judgment, was the small list of suspects who vanished or committed suicide at the slightest hint of suspicion. The list grew at a slow but steady pace. John assumed that these were certainly guilty. And thorough, searching inquiries into their past activities were made. These post mortem probes revealed nothing. Their records were clean. Their families, friends, relatives, and even their ancestors were above suspicion. If they had sold out to the enemy, they had given him

nothing in return for his wages except perhaps a promise to be fulfilled on a Deadline Day.

He called the Secretary of Defense and demanded a screening procedure be adopted for future personnel, a procedure which would be aimed at selecting men with fanatic loyalty, rather than merely guarding against treason.

"We seem to already have something," murmured the Secretary, a slender, graying gentleman with aristocratic features. "The incidents at the satellite-project seem to indicate that there's something they don't like about our ordinary testing methods."

"Eh? How do you mean?"

"Three men—volunteers for the project—vanished as soon as they found out that they had to submit to all the physicals, mental tests, and so forth. I don't know what they were afraid of. They were already on the reservation. Found out they'd have to be tested again, and vanished. One a known suicide, but the body's still in the river."

"Tested *again*?" the President echoed.

"That's right, John. They'd gone through it before. This was just a recheck for this particular project. Of course, I don't *know* that they were agents."

"Mmm! So they can't stand a recheck. All right, recheck everybody."

"John! A third of the population works for the government!"

"I mean everybody connected with new projects, the most important installations. This might be a weapon for us."

When he received the Secretary's report a week later, John grinned happily. The rechecks had begun, and the disappearances were mounting. But the grin faded when he read the rest of it. Two of the men had been caught attempting to escape. They had been lodged in a local jail to await transfer to the capitol. During the night, the jailer became aware of a blinding light from the cell-blocks and the stench of burnt organic matter. By the time he reached their cells, the men were gone, and there were only sickening fumes, charred ashes, and a pair of red-hot patches on the floor. Somehow they had gotten incendiary materials into their cells, and the cremation was complete—too complete to be credible.

Then the disappearances began to taper off—until finally, after a few weeks, they ceased completely. He wondered: were the culprits all ferreted out, or had some of them managed to get around the rechecks?

He had spoken to the Asian leader several times, and Ivan was growing curt, even bitingly nasty at times. The President hopefully interpreted it as a sign that his probe was successful enough to worry the Red. He tried to strengthen his position with respect to the proposed conferences, and made only minor concessions such as agreeing to a coastal city in Mexico as the site, rather than the shifting capitol. Ivan sneeringly made equally minute adjustments eastward from Singapore. There was apparently going to be a deadlock, and John was somehow not sorry.

Then the cold-eyed face on the screen did an abrupt about-face, and announced, "I propose that the delegates, including the leaders of both states, meet at a site of your selection in either of the neutral polar regions, not later than Seventhday of Veto Week—which, I think is your Fried Pie Week?—and come prepared to discuss and exchange information relating to size of armament-inventories and future plans. This is my last proposal."

They stared at each other coldly. John started to utter a refusal, then paused. Seventhday of ... it was one day before the satellite program began moving into space. If he could keep the Eastern Leader tied up for a few weeks afterwards—

"I'll consider your proposal and give you a reply tomorrow," he said bluntly.

The Peoplesfriend gave him a curt nod and clicked off the screen. John chuckled. The enemy's espionage program was evidently getting badly hurt. About one percent of the West's population had been executed, imprisoned, or shifted to other jobs as a result of the congressional probe. The one percent probably included quite a few guilty citizens.

"Rodner, I want a Strike-Day set, a full-scale blitz-operation readied as soon as possible," he told the defense-chief. "I know that a lot of your target information is forty years old, but work out the best plan you can. A depopulation strike, perhaps; there are only two opinions in the world, so 'world-opinion' is not one of the things we need to consider."

The Defense Secretary caught his breath and sat stiffly erect. "War?" he gasped.

"Don't use that word."

"Sorry, peace-effort."

"No. At least I hope not. I want a gun aimed at them as a bargaining point. But I want it to be a damned *big* gun, and one that's capable of shattering every major city in the East on a few hours'

notice. How effective could you make it—if you had to?"

The Secretary frowned doubtfully and tugged at his ear. "Well, John, our strategic command has kept a running plan in effect, revising it to allow for every tidbit of information we can get. Planning continental blitzes is a favorite past-time around high-level strategic commands; it keeps the boys in trim. A plan could probably be agreed upon in a very short time, but its nature would depend on your earliest deadline date."

"Two dates," grunted the tragedy-mask. "The first is Seventhday, Fried Pie Week. I want a maximum possible effort readied by then, with a plan that allows for a possible stand-by at that date, and a continued build-up to a greater maximum—to be reached when the satellite station is in space and ready for battle. Include the station in the extended plan."

"This is a very dangerous business, John."

The mask whirled. "Do you presume to—?"

"No, Sir. The strike-effort will be prepared as soon as possible." He bowed slightly, then left the presidential study-vault.

Smith turned to gaze at his Stand-ins. "You will go," he said, "all of you, to the examining authorities for the standard loyalty tests and psych-phys rechecks."

The nine masked figures glanced at one another in surprise, then nodded. There were no protests. The following day he had only seven Stand-ins; Four and Eight had been trapped in a burning building on the outskirts of the rabble city, and their remains had not been found.

Smith kept a tight cork on his rage, but it seethed inside him and threatened to burn through as the time approached to speak again with Ivan Ivanovitch IX. The enemy's infiltration into the very ranks of the Presidency robbed him even of dignity. Furthermore, now that the two scoundrels were uncovered, and dead, he remembered a very unpleasant but significant fact: he had, even before his "election" by the rabble, discussed the televuephone conferences with the Primaries. The idea of contacting Ivan had started, as most ideas start, from some small seed or other that could scarcely be remembered, some off-hand reference to the costly aspects of the Big Silence perhaps, and it had grown into the plan for contact. *But how* had the idea first come to him? Had one of the guilty Stand-ins perhaps planted the seed in his mind? *After* he proposed it, they had seemed demurring at first, but not too long.

Grimly, he realized that the idea might have originated on the far side of the Pacific.

"Who, pray, is the potter, and who the pot?" he grunted, glowering at the nearest Stand-in.

"I beg your pardon?" answered the man, who could not see the glower for the mask.

"Khayyam, you fool!"

"Oh—"

"*Sixteen o'clock!*" cheeped the timepiece on the wall. "*Fifthday, Anti-Rabies Week, Practice-Eugenics Week; Happy 2073; Peep!*"

Ivan came on the screen, but John did not bother to remove his mask. He sat down quickly and began speaking before any greeting could be exchanged.

"I have decided to accept your last proposal. I specify the meeting place as the deserted weather station at the old settlement of Tharviana in the Byrd-Ellsworth Sector of Antarctica. Date to be Seventhday of Fried Pie Week. Advance cadres of personnel from both sides should meet at the site two weeks earlier to make repairs and preparations. Do you agree?"

Ivan nodded impatiently, his dark eyes watching the President closely. Smith went on to suggest limits for the size of both cadres, their equipment, and the kind of transportation. Ivan made only one suggestion: that the details, such as permissible arms and standards of conduct, be left to the cadre commanders to settle between themselves before the leaders' parties arrived.

"Your continual espionage activities," Smith said coldly, "do not recommend your government as one to be trusted in the matter of agreements without guarantees. My cadre commander will be instructed as to details."

The Asian grunted. "You speak of trust, yet violate it in advance by preparing an assault against us."

They glared at each other. After a few more words, the conversation ended abruptly, and the matter was tentatively settled.

It was Antarctic Summer. The sun lay low in the north, but clouds threatened to obscure it, and a forbidding coastline hulked under the ugly sky. A small group of ships sulked to the east, and watched another group that sulked to the west. Two rows of buoys marked an ice-free strip

across the choppy face of the sea.

A speck appeared in the north, grew larger, became a giant sea-plane. It circled once, then swooped majestically down between the rows of buoys, its atomic-fired jets breathing heat over the water. It slid between streamers of spray until slowly it came to a coasting halt and rode on the rise and the fall of the sea. A section of its back rolled open. It pushed a helicopter up into view. The helicopter unfolded its rotors, spun them, then climbed lazily aloft like a beetle that had ridden the eagle. It soared, and travelled inland. The sea-plane taxied west to join one group of ships.

The helicopter landed near a long, windowless concrete building which lay in the shadow of an old control-tower's skeleton. The tower was twisted awry, and the concrete was pock-marked by shrapnel or bullets dating back to one of the peace-efforts. The President, two Stand-ins, and the pilot climbed from the helicopter. A small detachment of troops presented arms. The cadre commander, a major general, approached the delegation formally, gave it a salute, and took the President's hand.

"The Peoplesfriend is already in the conference hall, Sir, with several of his aides. Do you wish to enter now, or—"

"Where are their troops?"

"Over there, Sir. As you know, we could not agree to completely disarm the site. Only inside the building itself."

"Any unpleasantness?"

"No, sir. Their men are well-disciplined."

"Then let's go and get started. I assume that you're in constant contact with the capitol?"

"Yes, Sir. Televiewphone relay chain all the way up."

John looked around. The Peoplesfriend's helicopter was parked not far away, and beyond it stood a platoon of the Peoplesfriend's troops, lightly armed as his own.

An Asian and a Western guard flanked the entrance to the building, but their only weapons were police-clubs. The party entered slowly and stood for a moment just inside the heavy door that swung closed behind them. John Smith removed his mask.

"Greetings, human."

The dull voice called it from the far end of the gloomy hall where Ivan Ivanovitch IX sat facing him, flanked by a pair of aides, at a long, plain table. John Smith XVI advanced with dignity toward him. Curt bows were exchanged, but no handshakes. The Western delegation took their seats.

John nudged the Stand-in on his right, who immediately opened a portfolio to extract a sheaf of papers.

"Would you care to exchange prepared statements to begin with?" Smith asked coolly.

"We have no—" The Peoplesfriend stopped, smirked coldly at his deputies but continued to frown. He peered thoughtfully at his huge knuckles for a moment, then nodded slowly. "A statement—yes."

John slid a section of the sheaf of papers to the Peoplesfriend. The Red leader ignored them, spoke to a deputy curtly.

"Give me a sheet of paper."

The deputy fumbled in a thin briefcase, shook his head and muttered. Finally he found a dog-eared sheet with only a few lines typed across the top. He glanced questioningly at his leader. Ivan snatched it with a low grunt, tore off the good half, produced a stubby, gnawed pencil, and wrote slowly as if his hands were cramped with arthritis. John could see the big block-letters but not the words.

"My prepared statement," said the Peoplesfriend.

With that he pushed the scrap of paper across the table. John stared, and felt the blood leaving his face. The prepared statement said:

I VETO YOU.

"Is this a joke?" he growled, keeping his voice calm. "You cannot mean that you reject proposals before they are made? I fail to see the humor in—"

"There is no humor."

John pushed back his chair, glanced at his men. "Gentlemen, it would appear that we have come to the bottom of the world for nothing. I think we had better retire to discuss—"

"Sit down," the Asian growled.

"Why—" The President stopped. One of the Red deputies had produced a gun. He sat, and stared coldly at the eastern leader. "Have your man dispose of that weapon. This is a conference table."

The Peoplesfriend grunted an order to the other deputy instead. "Search them."

"Stay back," Smith droned. "I can kill you all quite easily."

The deputy hesitated. The leader started laughing, then checked it. "May I ask how?"

John smiled. "Stay back, or you will find out too quickly." He unzipped his heavy Arctic clothing, removed a heavy container, shaped to conform to his chest, and laid it on the table. A cord ran from the container into his sleeve.

The Peoplesfriend laughed. "High explosives? You would not set them off. However—Jacob, let them keep their weapons. This will be over shortly."

They glared at each other for a moment.

"There is no conference?"

"There is no conference."

"Then why this farce?"

The eastern leader wore a tight smile. He glanced at his watch, began counting backwards: "Seven, six, five, four—"

When he reached zero, there was a long pause; then a sharp whistle from outside.

"Your men are now disarmed," said the Asian. "Your cadre commander is ours."

"Impossible! The recheck—"

"He joined us since the recheck. Further, three of your televiewphone stations in the relay chain are ours, and are relaying recorded broadcasts prepared especially for the purpose."

"I don't believe it!"

The Asian shrugged. "In addition, your entire defense system will be in our hands within six days—while your nation imagines that we are here conferring on disarmament."

"Ridiculous!" the President sputtered. "No system of infiltration or subversion could—"

"Your people were not subverted, Smith. They were merely replaced by ours. Your two Stand-ins, for instance, the ones that died in the fire. They were not the original men."

"You could not possibly find exact doubles—" Something about the Asian's smile made his voice taper off.

He picked up the container of explosives and prepared to rise. "I am going to walk out. And you are going with me. We will return in a helicopter to my plane. Let me explain this mechanism. I have no control over the detonator, for it is not a suicide device. The detonator can be triggered only by either of two events."

"Which are?" The Peoplesfriend was smiling.

"The relay would be closed by a sudden drop in my arterial pressure. Or by an attempt to remove it without knowing how. I am going out, and you are going with me."

"Why?"

"Because I am about to reach in my pocket and produce a gun. Your deputy cannot shoot without blasting a fifty-foot crater where this building now rests." Gingerly, while he watched the wavering deputy, he made good the promise. He kept the snub-nosed automatic aimed at the easterner's belly.

But the Peoplesfriend continued to smile. "May I say something before we *go*?"

There was a sour mockery about it that made Smith pause. He nodded slowly.

"I hoped to keep you here alive, so that we would not have to destroy the whole mission, including the ships. Of course, when the building is blown up, your little fleet will see and hear and try to respond, and we shall have to destroy it before word can be gotten to your capital. Our plans included that possibility, but it is unfortunate."

"Our aircraft will—"

"You do not seem to realize the nature of our weapons yet. And there is no harm in telling you now, I suppose."

"Well?"

"We have a microscopic crystalline relay, so small that millions of them can be packed into a few cubic inches. The crystals are minute tetrahedrons, with each pointed corner an electrical contact. And there is a method for arranging them in circuits without individual attention to each connection. It involves certain techniques in electro-plating and the growing of crystals."

Smith glanced questioningly at one of his Stand-ins, a weapons expert. The man shook his head.

"I can see," he muttered, "how it might replace a lot of bulky circuit elements in some electronics work—particularly computers and servo-mechanisms—but—"

"Indeed," said Ivan, "We have built many so-called 'thinking-machines' no larger than a human brain."

"For self-piloting weapons, I suppose?" asked the Stand-in.

"For self-piloting weapons."

"I fail to see how this could do what you seem to think."

The Peoplesfriend snorted. "Jacob—?" He nodded to the deputy, who immediately fumbled in his pocket, found a penknife, opened it, and handed it to Ivan.

He laid his finger on the table. He cut it off at the second joint with the penknife. There was no blood. Flesh of soft plastic. Tendons of nylon. Bones of bakelite.

"Our leader," the robot said, "is still in Singapore."

The President looked at the robot and a great, weariness swept over him. Suddenly it all seemed futile—a senseless game, played by madmen, dancing over countless graves—playing tag among the tombstones.

Check and checkmate. But always there was a way out. Never a final move. Life eternal and with life, the eternal plotting and scheming. And never a final victor.

Almost regretfully, the President turned his mind back to the affair at hand.

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