

THE PROPER GANDER

Camouflage does not require that an object be made invisible; merely that, no matter how obvious, it be considered of no importance

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by Leo Summers

His title of rank in literal translation was Officer-Commanding-Not-Less-Than-Four-And-Not-More-Than-Twelve-Spaceships. And his name, also in literal translation, was Worker-in-metals; in the early days of any technological culture craftsmen tend to assume the names of their crafts. We could refer to him, therefore, as Commodore Smith—but that doesn't have a very alien sound to it. "Commodore Pandordikring" conveys the right impression without being too long-winded.

He was humanoid, was, this Commodore Pandordikring. He had been born and raised upon an Earth-type planet on which parallel evolution had taken its course. To even more than casual observation he would have looked quite human, just as human as any Earthling of equivalent rank aboard a Terran surface vessel. Under his deeply tanned skin he was different, more than a little different, but it was extremely unlikely that his body would ever fall into the hands of an Earthly surgeon or medical student smitten by the urge to carry out either a major operation or a thorough postmortem.

The Commodore had been running to this planet called, by its natives, Earth, for quite some years—first as a junior officer, then as a captain, finally in his present rank. The Earth run was not popular, but somebody had to make it. On other worlds there was shore leave for the crews of the starships; on Earth there was none. There was a brief stay on the oversized satellite called the Moon, for maintenance and briefing. Then there would be the swift descent through the planet's atmosphere, followed by a dive almost as swift to one of the submarine mines. After loading, which never took long, there would be departure, and another short stay on the Moon for refueling and what little maintenance was required. After that—the long and boring voyage home. It was a pity, the Commodore always thought. Those cities—what little he ever saw of them—looked fascinating. And there was still so much absolutely unspoiled scenery—while it lasted. Already it was obvious that Earth would go the same way as all the other planets that have spawned heavy industry.

Commodore Pandordikring appreciated scenery. He could have led his squadron of nine ships to the intersection of meridian and parallel on the ocean surface, below which lay the mine at which he was scheduled to load, by a much more direct route; there had been no need for him to fly over one of the continents, far less need to go rock-hopping among the mountains. But he liked rock-hopping. There was the thrill of speed, a thrill absolutely lacking in the control room of a ship falling through interstellar space at a multiple of the velocity of light. There was the thrill of speed, and there was the grandeur of the spectacle, the great, stony giants, green-clad, thrusting their ice-crowned heads high against the cloudless blue sky.

Pandordikring was handling the flagship himself, her Captain sulking slightly in the background, muttering in a disgruntled voice to his own second-in-command, "If you've seen one mountain, you'd seen them all . . ." The First Officer, a spidery being from a world that even close by resembled billiards ball, made a noncommittal clicking noise. Then his limbs stiffened with an equally audible click. He pointed with one of his many-segmented arms. Even coming from the artificial diaphragm on his thorax his voice held urgency. "Look!"

The Captain looked. The Commodore looked. The other officers looked. A junior made rapid adjustments to the scanner controls, brought the target up to a high magnification in the big screen. It was a machine. From the viewpoint of these spacefarers it was a relic out of a museum. Small it was, in spite of the magnification, and it had wings, and a whirling tractor screw at its forward end.

The Commodore shrugged. "Just one of the natives' mechanical geese," he said in a bored voice. (The word he used was not "geese," of course, but he referred to an avian life form not dissimilar to the Terran goose, indigenous to his own world.) He shrugged again. "We're supposed to give, these things a wide berth, but, from what I know, the pilot will be too busy keeping his contraption airborne to notice us."

He was wrong.

Big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em. Commodores have Admirals to get on their backs. And Admirals? Well, they have been known to marry. But we are digressing.

The Admiral Commanding Earth Satellite Base was in a bad mood. He towered behind his approximate acre of highly polished desk, glowering. As Nature had endowed him with vicious looking tusks and crimson eyes he was well equipped to glower. He glowered, and Pandordikring did his best not to cower. After all, he told himself, he can't have me shot . . .

Or can he? Beside the Admiral sat a being as humanoid, as outwardly Terran, as the Commodore himself. This man's drab, Earth-style clothing made him a dowdy sparrow in the company of these two gorgeously caparisoned hawks—but there was nothing of the sparrow in his bearing. There was no chirpiness, but there was a quiet, unostentatious strength. A literal translation of his name would be Maker-of-clothing-from-woven-materials. In the Earth city where he had lived for many years he was known as Mr. Tailor.

"You and your rock-hopping!" snarled the Admiral in his own language. (He had always refused to learn any other.)

"I'd expect a first trip cadet to have more sense!" continued the Admiral.

"While you were about it, why didn't you land in Times Square and have your chaplain celebrate the Rites of Drophilon?" concluded the Admiral.

"Times Square?" echoed Pandordikring weakly.

"It's a gathering place in New York, one of their major cities,"

Mr. Tailor informed him pleasantly.

"You mean that one on the Eastern seaboard of the North American continent, with all the tall buildings?" asked the Commodore.

"And have you been playing 'Chase Me' round the Empire State Building?" bellowed the Admiral. "I wouldn't put it past you!"

"No, sir," answered Pandordikring.

"Only because the thought of it, until now, hasn't flickered through your tiny mind. No matter. You've done quite enough damage." His huge hand plunged into a drawer of his desk, came out with a little black box. "I have here the control-room audio record from your ship. Normally I never bother to listen to such infantile babblings; I leave that to my staff. But after Agent Tailor came here by Special Express Shuttle to make his report I decided I'd better listen to this one." He depressed a button on the side of the box.

"If you've seen one mountain, you've seen them all . . ." That was the Captain.

"Look!" That was the First Officer.

"Just one of the natives' mechanical geese. We're supposed to give these things a wide berth, but, from what I know, the pilot will be too busy keeping his contraption airborne to notice us." That was the Commodore.

"From what you know," sneered the Admiral. "From what you think you know . . . But perhaps you will admit, Commodore, that I know more than you. I know that I have received orders that this Base is not only to be discontinued, it is to be demolished, and all traces of its ever having been here are to be erased. Agent Tailor knows why it has been necessary for these plans to be put in preparation, he knows that it will not be long before those pilots, like the one who was too busy keeping his contraption airborne to notice you, land on the surface of this satellite. Meanwhile, it is essential that the Earthlings do not suspect our existence. Have I made myself clear? Quite clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't think that you realize yet how serious this is. Perhaps Agent Tailor will be able to explain things better."

"Thank you, Admiral." Tailor smiled briefly at the Base Commander, then turned to Pandordikring. He said, in a dry, school-masterly voice, "During the many centuries that we have been mining the ocean beds of Earth there have, inevitably, been sightings by the natives of our ships and our people. Until now it hasn't mattered much. Anything they've seen has been an angel, or a devil, or a god. But, quite recently, they learned that flight is possible by other than supernatural means. As you should know, Commodore, the mechanical geese at which you sneer are the forerunners of the starship.

"The pilot of the mechanical goose you encountered saw you all right. He

reported the sighting. He was believed by far too many people. And already there's a name for your ships—flying saucers."

"Absurd!" ejaculated Pandordikring.

"No more absurd than mechanical geese." Tailor turned again to the Admiral. "But I don't think that the Commodore's altogether to blame, sir. No matter how careful your people are, there are bound to be more sightings, and by trained observers, by men well above the superstitious peasant level."

"So I am to recommend to my masters that we abandon our mines? It's bad enough having to demolish this Base and build a new one on one of the moons of the Ringed Planet."

"Is that what they have in mind?" asked Tailor.

"Yes. According to you agents it'll be quite a while before the Earthlings get that far."

"Not according to me, Admiral. But I'm not a decision maker."

"You'd better start making decisions as of now, Tailor. You know those people. What can we do to throw them off the scent?"

Tailor smiled—and as he did so his face was no longer ordinary, was suddenly very old and very wise. He murmured, "I shall need the services of the Commodore and some of his personnel. Commodore Pandordikring, your flagship carries the normal complement of officers and ratings?"

"Yes, Agent."

"I have already inspected their likenesses—which, of course, are on file here at the Base. I was rather impressed by one of them —that of Officers' Comfort Second Class Tallela."

The Commodore muttered something about brainless trollops. "It's not her brain I want, sir. It's her face, her body."

"That's what Officers' Comforts are for, Agent."

"You misunderstand me, Commodore. I suppose she can act?" "All women can act."

"Can she learn?"

"Any fool can learn with a hypno-instructor."

"Then, as soon as possible, she must start learning the Terran language known as English." Tailor then addressed himself to the Admiral. "May I suggest, sir, that the senior Captain of Commodore Pandordikring's squadron be promoted to Acting Commodore, and that the Commodore and his own ship be detained here, to work by my orders?"

"So you can rub his nose in his own mess?" boomed the Admiral. "Certainly, Tailor."

Pandordikring sighed. He knew that it would be a long time before he saw home again.

The ramshackle car rattled along the dusty desert road. Its driver jerked it to a sudden, protesting halt, stared incredulously at the huge, lenticulate construction among the towering cacti, dazzlingly reflecting the rays of the westering sun. He was more courageous than most, this man. He did not flee the unknown. Cautiously he got out of his vehicle, walked slowly towards the thing by the roadside.

He paused as he saw movement, stood there and watched as a hatch opened in the underside of the spaceship, as a metal ramp was extruded to the ground: He was tensed to turn and run—who, what would emerge from that opening? He relaxed visibly as a pair of long, very shapely legs appeared, followed by an equally shapely body in a short, revealing tunic on which were gleaming badges of rank, topped by a classically beautiful face above which the golden hair was piled high.

She looked at him with her deep violet eyes, and smiled, revealing perfect teeth. She said, in a voice that reminded him of honey, "Welcome, Earthman. My name is Tallela. I come from Venus."

"Did . . . did you have a good trip?" he asked.

"Trip?" Puzzled, her face was even more beautiful. "Trip?" She looked down at her slim feet in the golden sandals, as though expecting to see something over which she might have stumbled. Then her face cleared. "Trip. Voyage. You must forgive me. We Venusians speak the pure language."

"Did you have a good voyage . . . Tallela?"

"Of course. Our ships are far superior to anything made in your planet."

A man appeared in the open hatchway. "Captain!" he called, as though it were a dirty word. "Captain!"

The blonde turned and stared at him haughtily. "Yes, Pandordikring?"

"It is time, Captain."

Tallela carefully studied an intricate device strapped on her left wrist. "It is time," she admitted regretfully. Then, to the Earthman, "Forgive me, but I must go." She smiled sadly. "I must . . ." She caught herself, said, "There are things that you, as a race, are too young to know. But I shall see you again. Tomorrow, in this place, when the sun is at the same angle from the meridian."

The man in the hatchway—he looked like an irascible retired Rear Admiral of the motorist's acquaintance—called something in an unknown language. The woman smiled sweetly, walked slowly back to her ship, up the ramp. The hatch slammed shut. There was a sudden whine of powerful engines and the thing lifted, dragging a swirl of dust and debris with it. In seconds it was no more than a silvery speck in the cloudless sky.

The Earthman, when he could see no more of the spaceship, walked back to

his car, eased himself into his seat. As he drove home, slowly and thoughtfully, his fingers played on the rim of the wheel as though it were the keyboard of a typewriter.

Commodore Pandordikring was pleased rather than worried when he, together with the Admiral, Agent Tailor and Officers' Comfort First Class Tallela—she had, he admitted grudgingly, earned her promotion—was called to appear before the Inspector, whose ship had put in to the soon-to-be-demolished Moon Base. The Commodore was giving himself credit for a job well done, was already forgetting that it had been the agent's idea in the first place. But he had done most of the real work, hadn't he?

The Inspector, a tall, cadaverous humanoid from Alpha Draconis IV, seemed to be in a fairly good mood. He insisted, however, that all at the meeting speak English; in his younger days he had spent many years as an agent on Earth and, probably, wished to show that he still possessed a good command of one of the planet's most widely spoken languages.

"And now, Admiral," he asked, looking up from the bulky report before him, "what is all this?"

"It the report is, Inspector."

"I know that. What is it all about?"

"It about is . . . About it is . . ." The Admiral was no linguist. "What it is what . . ."

"You seem to be having language difficulties, Admiral." The Inspector shot him a severe look, then turned to Pandordikring. "Would you mind explaining, Commodore?"

"Certainly, sir. You see, I was flying round this mountain, and it seems that I was seen by this native, who was flying round this mountain . . ."

Tallela giggled. Agent Tailor looked smugly superior. The Inspector frowned and said, "Spare us the account of your childish games, Commodore. It is well known that all spacemen are no more than overgrown children; there is no need for you to stress the obvious. Cut the cackle, man. Spill the beans. Slobber a bibful." He smiled bleakly. "No doubt my idioms are hopelessly outdated, but I am sure that you get my general drift."

"I dig you, sir."

The Inspector permitted himself another smile. "You dig me? That's a good way of putting it." He allowed himself a dry chuckle. "Do you know what my cover was when I was an agent on Earth? You wouldn't, of course, but I'll tell you. I was a mortician. I was always digging people. Digging them under."

As long as you dig me out of here so I can be on my way home, thought Pandordikring.

"And now, Commodore, let's have it. All of it."

Pandordikring let him have it. As he warmed up he did not allow too strict a regard for veracity to spoil a good story. He tended, more and more, to overemphasize the part played by himself—after all it had been his ship that had been used, with himself in command—and to belittle, although not too obviously, the contributions of Tailor and Tallela. Tailor had been useful; he would not deny that. The selection of contactees had been left, in the main, to him. Credulity was one of the main requirements, as was a lust for publicity. A little education was necessary, but not too much. A strong streak of superstition—yes, that helped. There had been the tie-in with the myths of Terran mankind. Meetings with favored natives had been arranged most carefully, with Tallela turning on the alien charm. There had been circumlunar trips, even, for these same Earthmen, excellent material for the books that they were bound to write.

"It was all a matter of psychology, sir," he concluded. "Psychology, and propaganda. There is no way now to avoid our ships being sighted—so we made sure that they have been sighted by those whose stories will be laughed at by anybody with the merest smattering of astronomy, physics or biology. Tallela, here, is obviously from a world that the Terrans would refer to as Earth-type, as are Agent Tailor and myself. As you are, sir. None of us could possibly be a Mercurian, Venusian, Martian, Saturnian, Jovian, Uranian, Neptunian or Plutonian—yet we had no trouble in passing ourselves off as natives of any of the planets in this system which as we know, and as any educated Earthman knows, are utterly impossible for our kind of life.

"So, despite all the very real evidence for their existence, flying saucers, as the natives now call our ships, are just a joke." He smiled. Having now met many Earthmen, talked with them, he had come to appreciate the subtleties of their languages, had acquired a taste for both the proverb and the pun. Surely an accomplished linguist such as the Inspector would share this appreciation. Put the old fool in a good mood, he thought, and I'm on my way home. At last.

He said, grinning, "It all started, I suppose, with my flying saucers and the mechanical goose. A flying saucer for the goose—and now a flying saucer for the proper gander!"

There was a strained silence. "Very funny," said the Inspector at last. "Very, very funny." He turned to the Admiral. "Agent Tailor is overdue for relief. I suggest that your Commodore Pandordikring—now my Mr. Smith—take his place." His bony fingers thoughtfully stroked his bony chin. "There is the question of a cover . . . Ah, I have it." He smiled quite happily at the Commodore, the ex-Commodore. "You can be an entertainer, Mr. Smith, a comedian. You can make amusing jokes about flying saucers on television. If the sample you've just given us is up to standard, saucer will soon become the dirtiest word in the English language."

He sat back in his chair, his hands folded before him, humming softly to himself. The tune was familiar. Pandordikring/Smith tried to identify it. It came, he was sure, from a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Which one was it? "The Mikado," he thought.