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More and more readers are discovering the individual and unpredictable delights of the work of Evelyn E. Smith, since she has provided the highspots of several recent anthologies and won a well-deserved "special award" in Ellery Queen's annual contest. All of which makes me proud to point out that F&SF bought Miss Smith's first story, almost three years ago, and even prouder to present this latest one: a grim tale of the stern traditions of the Space Service and a young cadet's first and most perilous assignment.

At Last I've Found You

by EVELYN E. SMITH

IT STRETCHED between them, flat, smooth, shining, sterile; once it had been a tree, vibrant and aware with its own unanimal, unmineral kind of life. Now it was utilitarian and dead, its corpse planed, stained, and polished to the semblance of a desk. In fact, it was a desk. Behind it, the man with no name regarded the two before him without seeing them, and the pupils of his eyes, Pilecky thought, were like tiny, unripe cantaloupes.

"There is good and there is evil," the man said. "There is right and there is wrong. But an evil can be right and a good can be wrong. Or, to put it more succinctly, a wrong can be good and an evil can be right. How are we to distinguish between the good wrong and the evil right?"

"Ay, ay, sir," said Guttenplan, his tough, corneous, weathered face tight-lipped from the sad, experienced, fruitless years he had spent in the Service.

"Ay, ay, sir," said Pilecky, his young, soft, vulnerable face tight-lipped from a series of special training-school exercises for tightening the lips.

The man with the melon eyes looked impassively at them once more. *I should have been a ribbon clerk, fright shrilled inside Pilecky's head. I should have been a certified public accountant. Not this! I was not meant for this.*

Almost as if he had read the young man's mind, the nameless one opened lips like two steel girders. "There is no retrogression, no turning back," he said. "Once committed, you are bound forever. And forever is an endless eternity." Each syllable crepitated sharply in the small, quiet, secret room. "And, if you make a misstep, if you are captured in any way — trapped

in body or mind or soul — well, we cannot help you. It is the law of the Service.”

Years of working in secret had reduced Guttenplan's voice to a mere wisp of susurration. “We shall not ask help, sir,” the time-aged agent said simply, not a muscle in his face moving. Nor could his face move; years ago he had lost his real face in a skirmish and ever since had worn a remarkably lifelike imitation.

Someday I too will be like that, said the tinnitus inside Pilecky's skull. *I should have followed the safe, gentle paths. I should have been a physical training instructor, a vacuum cleaner salesman.*

The man behind the desk contemplated his hands; thick they were and etiolated like fine asparagus. “I have sent many — many on this mission, and all of them failed, as I expected them to fail. Lack of success always results in failure. It is not easy to cope with the difficult; in fact, it is hard.”

Fool, do not speak! the thin self-voice cautioned inside the tortuous canals of Pilecky's tympana. *You do not want to hear the answer; better it were that you should not know.* But it is hard for the young to restrain their eager, questing tongues. “What happened to the others?” he asked, and his voice was a slender, impertinent rivulet of sound in the contrived stillness.

There was silence. If the man without a name had been capable of pity, there would have been pity in his voice. Since he wasn't, there wasn't. “They went mad, all of them,” he replied at length. “Stark, staring mad. You will go mad too; it is in the nature of things. What must be, must be. We shall try, keep on trying, knowing always that we cannot succeed. Have you ever thought that there is a certain glory in failure?”

Pilecky never had. He thought about it now and came to the conclusion that he did not agree. But he was young, young in years, young in the Service. Some day he would think the same — if he lived. But he probably wouldn't live. Most people died.

The man behind the desk struck its burnished surface so abruptly, so violently that Pilecky involuntarily leaped three feet in the air. The other two looked at him without reproach, just a hint, a trifle askance. Not even an eyebrow was overtly raised, but, rubescent to the tips of his ears, Pilecky descended hastily.

“We must discover the secret,” the man without the name said, separating each syllable cleanly, as if his tongue were a sharp, shining, silver knife. “For ten long years these aliens have come through intergalactic space in their ship, from a planet circling Betelgeuse — they say — bringing their products with them and purchasing ours in exchange. Trading their wares for ours. And never once questioning the tariff!”

"There's something amiss," commented Guttenplan.

Pilecky trembled at the older man's temerity.

But the camaraderie of 30 years' slight acquaintanceship stood the old agent in good stead. The cantaloupe eyes were unclouded. "Ay, Guttenplan, you've struck the nail squarely upon the nob. Why is it that for all those years, search as we may, search as we will, we cannot find the secret of the power that motivates the aliens' ship? The secret which, held from us, alone keeps us confined to our own strait solar system, perhaps keeps us from unriddling the very conundrum of existence?"

Guttenplan's mask was unmoving, but his vitreous eyes deliquesced. "The dirty curs!" he wisped. "I say: shoot them like the dogs they are!"

The massive albescent hand clenched and struck the desk again. Wood quivered and groaned, remembering that once it was alive and could suffer and ache and twinge. "Nay, that will not serve the higher good. We do not seek revenge — at least, not yet. We seek knowledge. Knowledge is power. Conversely, power is knowledge. We must learn their secret first — afterward you may do with them what you will."

"Ay, I'll hang them by the thumbs," Guttenplan murmured.

Oh, that I too could be as impervious, as pachydermatous as he is, the Pilecky within whimpered. But I have not the genius. I should have been a ceramicist. Or played the violoncello in a small string quartet.

"They have no thumbs," the melon-eyed one remarked drily. "They are a nonhumanoid life form . . . But we have tried every means to discover their secret." And his voice was of a sudden reboant in the hushed confines of the little room. "Made our attempts and failed most miserably, most wretchedly, most damnably . . . We have tried, spied, pried — all to no avail. Now we are forced to the last, desperate measure —"

"And that is, sir . . . ?" Guttenplan's aphonic voice prompted.

The lustrous desk top shivered under a third blow. "It is our only hope. We must *ask* them their secret."

Oh no, no, no, not that, not that, Pilecky's mind screeched.

But Guttenplan retained the seeming of calm. "As you will, sir," he said quietly.

Pilecky could not help but admire him.

Surrounded by the hulky shapes of the regular interplanetary transports, the alien ship rested in its berth at Idlewild like a fragile, esoteric poem, perpetually aquiver, as if it were on the instant ready to take off . . . although it was not scheduled to do so until half-past 9.

What was the ship like? Men averted their eyes when they passed — not that it was so horrible but that its beauty defied human conception and

comprehension. It was a helix, a sphere, a cube, a jagged irregular shape. It was iridescent, opaline, prismatic, chatoyant. It was emerald, ocher, azure, amber, gamboge, puce, turquoise, luteous, porraceous, murrey, magenta, indigo, cyanic, xanthic, gridelin, saffron, citrine, roan, cobalt, vitrescent, garnet, apricot. . . . It was heaven and hell combined — sheer terror and divinest pleasure.

I am afraid, Pilecky's brain moaned. I am afraid. I should have been a foetus, secure in the quiet darkness of the womb.

Guttenplan seemed to sense this. *He too has been young, Pilecky marveled. He too must have known qualms and terror.*

"Don't let yourself be daunted, lad," Guttenplan said. "After all, they're naught but a pack of foreigners."

The words sent a freshet of self-confidence pouring into Pilecky's fear-arid mind. He lifted his head and threw back his shoulders. "Ay, comrade," he said, invigorated. "That's all they are after all." There was kindness in the older man, he thought. *The mask then was but a mask.*

An aperture widened in the side of the ship and two aliens peered forth. Pretty, delicate little creatures they were — nacre and ivory and pearl — though not humanoid by any stretch of the imagination, save for the long, golden curls and the large, wondering, limpid blue eyes (three apiece).

They spoke in English, with hardly a trace of accent in their dainty little voices — like the tinkling of small silver bells on a Christmas parcel.

"Oh, joy!" the larger one tintinnabulated. "Company!"

"How absolutely divine!" the other chimed. "Just in time for dinner. And we were afraid we'd have to eat all by our lonesome little selves. What gorgeous fun!"

"Darling," piped the first, "you're blocking the entryway. The handsome gentlemen can't get in with your great clumsy form in their path."

"Silly creature!" jingled the second, slapping the first lightly with a vivacious tentacle. "Silly, silly creature!"

"If you ask me," Guttenplan told his comrade, reducing his whisper to a silken thread of sound, "they're queers."

"How do we know what they are?" Pilecky asked, amazed at his own brilliance, his own audacity. "They might be female, or male-and-female, or something else entirely."

"Good man," Guttenplan commented. "Wouldn't have thought of that myself."

Pilecky glowed and sputtered deprecatingly, like a defective Roman candle.

"Come in, come in, come in," chimed the second alien. "All we have to do is lay another two places and we're all shipshape and ready. What

enchantment for us! Oh, rare, rare treat!" Delicate pastels of joy flecked his shimmering pearl body.

"You needn't worry about the food," the first said astutely. "All Earth comestibles; we do love them so. So much of your food is simply divine. Look what we have: hot cocoa with marshmallows and little cakes with varicolored icings and thick, soft chocolate creams . . . oh, the ecstasy, the joy of it all!"

Guttenplan and Pilecky started to move toward the ship; then halted, irresolute. Something besides light seemed to be coming from the open port — a warm glutinous aura. *I feel as if I were being bathed in glue*, Pilecky thought, *in warm, sweet glue*.

"We must go in," Guttenplan hissed. "The die is cast."

Pilecky conscientiously firmed his jaw. "Ay," he said.

"You wouldn't be able to understand our names in our — language," the first alien trilled, "so you'd better call us by Earth names. We've chosen simply precious ones for ourselves. Call me Hyacinth and —"

"And I'm Larkspur," gurgled the other. "Pretty, pretty names, don't you think?"

Pilecky found himself and Guttenplan in a cabin — a room as indefinable as the exterior of the ship. It was bathed in rich colors and soft lights, languorous frangible sensations — a series of rapidly changing abstract tapestries. The room, Pilecky noted dimly, seemed to fill the whole of the ship. Where then was the machinery?

The food Larkspur had described was set forth on a small species of table, set with purely terrestrial dishes and implements — evidently to exploit the meal's exoticism to the very full.

Pilecky felt large and clumsy and carnivorous as he gazed at the aliens and their simple dinner. Not that he felt any desire to eat Hyacinth or Larkspur, for they resembled nothing so much as spun sugar, and what he wanted was a thick beefsteak, swimming in melted butter and topped by mushrooms and perhaps onions. Onions! To think of onions in the company of these gossamer creatures was unthinkable!

"What's the matter?" Hyacinth fluttered. "Why aren't you eating?" To Pilecky's consternation, large tears stood in the alien's cerulean eyes, and three lachrymose eyes dismay so much more than two. "Have we done something wrong? Tell us? Have we?"

"Oh, no!" sobbed Larkspur. "And we tried so hard to make everything just right. We did so want to be friends, we did, we did."

"Everything's fine," Pilecky gruffed, accepting a cup of marshmallows sauced with cocoa. "It's just that we had to stop to catch our breath — long walk across the field."

Guttenplan looked at his subordinate and his expression was inscrutable. He turned back to the aliens. "Quite so," he agreed, sinking sharp, synthetic canines into a chocolate cream.

The aliens resumed their normal, joyous colors. "We've been trading here for years and years," Hyacinth offered, "and so few people ever come to call on us, and we do so adore company!"

"And we don't dare go out," shuddered Larkspur. "The rigors of your climate, my dears; I don't know how you can stand it. Of course —" he gave Pilecky a sidelong glance "— big strong men like you can take a lot more than poor little us." He laid a shyly tentative tentacle on the agent's arm. "Ooooo," he squealed. "Such muscles. Such strength. I'd be afraid to have you angry at me, really I would."

The lacy touch was not at all unpleasant. *Maybe these aliens are human after all*, Pilecky thought. *In a strictly nonhumanoid way, of course.*

Guttenplan looked at Pilecky, and this time the younger man thought he discerned a *souçon* of reproach. Nonfraternization was the rule, but rules were made to be broken. Besides, in order to find out what they wanted to know, they must employ desperate measures — even, as a last resort, friendliness.

"What do you trade in?" Guttenplan asked, with the bluntness of experience.

"Oh, don't you know?" All that prevented Hyacinth from pouting was the fact that he had no lips. "I thought our products were known all over your world. We fill so many needs. We bring Valentines and popular ballads, embroidered pincushions and calendars and sentimental mottoes to hang on the wall. Heavy floral scents and our native sweetmeats, music boxes, photograph frames, and clocks that play tunes on the half hour. Little decorative boxes and other pretty bibelots."

"Your world is deficient in so many things," Larkspur sighed. "So many, many lovesome things."

"Larkspur!" Hyacinth jangled. "Manners! Manners!" He turned to the Earthmen. "But of course you have so many things we don't have. Honey, gardenias, violins . . ."

"Violins," Larkspur breathed. "Such exquisite ecstasy. I swoon when I hear some of your gypsy music, really I do." He began to sing to himself.

"But there's one thing you do have," Guttenplan pointed out — Pilecky held his breath; this was the moment and Guttenplan's the courage — "which you don't export and which we should very much like to have."

"What is that, hon?" asked Hyacinth, languidly popping a rose-colored petit four into his oral aperture. "Anything we have is yours — anything. Just name it."

"Ask and your wish will be granted," Larkspur chimed in.

There was a pause so pregnant it almost miscarried.

"The secret of the power which moves this ship?" Guttenplan asked. "The motive power. That's what we don't have — and we too would like to reach the stars, 'stead of being bound by an exiguous solar system."

"There has been talk around Betelgeuse," Hyacinth admitted, "and snide remarks bandied about anent your thinking yourselves too good to come visit us."

"They say you're aloof and unfriendly," Larkspur put in, "and too proud to go outside your own solar system, but we know that isn't true, don't we, darling?"

Both aliens regarded the Earthmen fondly.

Pilecky felt himself almost smothered by uliginous, succulent, melliferous sensations, as if he were being laved in thick nectar.

Guttenplan apparently sensed it too. "I feel like a fly caught on a piece of flypaper," he whispered. And, to the aliens, "But what is this power then?"

"You really don't know?" Larkspur asked. "Oh, you're just being funny." He tintinnabulated appreciatively. "Funny, funny Earthman."

"I am not either," retorted Guttenplan, a trifle more sharply than the turgid ways of diplomacy require. "And I don't know what you're talking about."

"But I always thought you knew . . . ?" Hyacinth's eyes were large and marvelful. "It's the same motive power as, I am given to understand, makes your planet rotate upon its axis . . . You mean you don't know how to use it?"

"Oh, isn't that too screamingly absurd?" Larkspur gasped. "Here they've had the power eons and eons and eons, without knowing how to use it, silly ninnies!"

Both burst into tinkles of delighted laughter.

"D like to ram their ethereal little heads together," Guttenplan said *sotto voce*. To the aliens: "You must be mistaken. We don't have —"

"Yes we do!" Pilecky exclaimed suddenly. And he did know. Suddenly it had come to him on the last wave of viscid, enervating sweetness. "I know what the power is that makes the world go round. It's *love*, of course."

"Of course," beamed Hyacinth. "Absurdly easy. You mean you don't use the power of love to motivate *anything*? What makes your planes fly then? Your ships move? Your locomotives run?"

"Various kinds of power," Pilecky tried to explain, and his explanation was inadequate and he knew it. "There's the internal combustion engine and the Diesel . . ."

"But how foolishly, foolishly expensive," Larkspur chimed, "when love is free! And so much more powerful. . . . *The moon belongs to everyone,*" he sang, "*the best things in life are fur-eeee. . . .*"

"Not our moon," Guttenplan said stiffly. "The United States took possession of it on March 28, 1971."

"Well, *our* moons are free," Larkspur said, "and so is love." He turned a delicate shade of pink. "*Love is Nature's second sun,*" he said.

"*Mightier far,*" Hyacinth added, turning sky blue, "*than strength of nerve or sinew, or the sway of magic potent over sun and star is love. . . .*"

"*To love is to believe, to hope, to know.*"

"*Love is master where he will.*"

"*Love conquers all.*"

"*Love will conquer at the last.*"

"*Love rules the court, the camp, the grave. . . . Ah,*" said Larkspur, "but you must know all about love. You have so many beautiful proverbs, verses, ballads about it. . . . I wish I could remember them all."

"And you cannot use its power," mourned Hyacinth. "Oh, the pity of it all!"

"The pity, pity, pity of it," added Larkspur. "Try, my friends, you will discover that love can do anything, anything at all — really it can." He and Hyacinth embraced each other with fervent delicacy.

"And that — *that's* the secret?" Guttenplan asked. "That's how you cross interstellar space?"

"That's the secret," Hyacinth tintinnabulated. "Only it was no secret, for love lies all around us everywhere; it permeates your solar system; it pervades the galaxy; it is diffused throughout the universe. Oh, my dears, if you but love, you can move mountains. . . ."

"Providing you want to move mountains," Larkspur joined in.

Pilecky could see Guttenplan was still dazed. He himself was numbed with sweet, viscid, impersonal amorousness.

"No secret . . ." Guttenplan murmured. "No mystery . . ."

"*Ah, sweet mystery of life,*" Larkspur began to sing in a high, pure, sweet, true voice, "*at last I've found you . . .*"

"*Ah, at last I know the secret of it all,*" Hyacinth chimed in.

And, impelled by the power of so much pure emotion, so much unmitigated love, the ship began to quiver tenderly in all of its parts — only here were no parts but the whole — all was one and that was love.

"Oh, dear," clinked Hyacinth, "I'm afraid we've unintentionally generated too much power. The ship wants to start. Well, we'll have to leave a bit earlier than we'd planned; that's all. You'd better disembark, gentlemen, unless you'd like to come along with us."

"You're very welcome, of course," Larkspur murmured coyly, glancing at Pilecky. "Very welcome indeed."

Guttenplan got to his feet.

Pilecky hesitated. "Perhaps — I — should — go — with — them," he murmured, every word slow and thick, as if he were dragging it forcefully out of maple syrup.

Guttenplan seized the younger man's wrist and twisted, and the pungent, plangent, bright shaft of pain brought Pilecky back somewhat to his senses. "Really must go . . ." he babbled. "Wonderful time . . . see you again . . ."

Guttenplan dragged him off the ship.

"Don't forget to come visit us when we make our next trip!" Larkspur tinkled. "We'll be looking for you."

Guttenplan and Pilecky stood on the field, watching the alien ship dwindle to a scintilla in the distance. Still, it seemed, they could hear the thin, tuneful voices singing "*. . . for it is love that makes the world go round.*"

Guttenplan looked at Pilecky. Pilecky looked at Guttenplan.

"Thanks, old chap," Pilecky said; and the words came thick in his throat. "You saved me."

"Oh, it wasn't anything," Guttenplan said.

"It was too," Pilecky retorted, justifiably annoyed.

There was a silence. "What say," Guttenplan proposed, "we go behind the hangar and have a good, clean knockdown fight — no holds barred?"

"Champion," said Pilecky. "A smashing idea."

"I hate you," said Guttenplan.

"I hate you too," said Pilecky.

They beamed at each other.

