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THE CITY IN THE SOFA

By Cyril M. Kornbluth

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Lieutenant J. C. Battle tweaked the ends of his trim little military moustache and smiled brilliantly at the cashier.

"Dear lady," he said, "there seems to have been some mistake. I could have sworn I'd put my wallet in this suit—"

The superblond young lady looked bored and crooked a finger at the manager of the cafeteria. The manager crooked a finger at three muscular busboys, who shambled over to the exit.

"Now," said the manager, "what seems to be the trouble?"

The lieutenant bowed. "My name," he said, "is Battle. My card, sir." He presented it.

"A phony," said the manager with the wickedest of smiles. "A deadbeat. The check says thirty cents, Major—do you cough up or wash dishes?" He flung the card aside, and an innocent-appearing old man, white-haired, wrinkled of face and shabbily dressed, who had been patiently waiting to pay his ten-cent check, courteously stooped and tapped the manager on the shoulder.

"You dropped this," he said politely, extending the card.

"Keep it," snarled the manager. The innocent old man scanned the card and stiffened as though he had been shot.

"If you will allow me," he said, interrupting Battle's impassioned plea for justice, "I shall be glad to pay this young man's check." He fished out an ancient wallet and dropped a half dollar into the superblond's hand.

"May I have your address, sir?" asked Battle when they were outside. "I shall mail you the money as soon as I get back to my club."

The old man raised a protesting hand. "Don't mention it," he smiled toothlessly. "It was a pleasure. In fact I should like you to come with me to *my* club." He looked cautiously around. "I think," he half-whispered, "that I have a job for you, Lieutenant—if you're available."

"Revolution?" asked Battle, skeptically surveying the old man, taking in every wrinkle in the suit he wore. "I'm rather busy at the moment, sir, but I can recommend some very able persons who might suit you as well. They do what might be called a cut-rate business. My price is high, sir—very high."

"Be that as it may, Lieutenant. My club is just around the corner. Will you follow me, please?"

Only in New York could you find a two-bit cafeteria on a brightly lit avenue around the corner from the homes of the wealthy on one side and the poor on the other. Battle fully expected the old man to cross the street and head riverwards; instead he led the soldier of fortune toward Central Park.

Battle gasped as the old man stopped and courteously gestured him to enter a simple door in an old-style marble-faced building. Disbelievingly he read the house number.

"But this is—" said Battle, stuttering a little in awe.

"Yes," said the old man simply. "This is the Billionaire's Club."

In the smoking room, Battle eased himself dazedly into a chair upholstered with a priceless Gobelin tapestry shot through by wires of pure gold. Across the room he saw a man with a vast stomach and a nose like a pickled beet whom he recognized as Old Jay. He was shaking an admonishing finger at the stock-market plunger known as The Cobra of Wall Street.

"Where you should put your money—" Old Jay rumbled. As Battle leaned forward eagerly, the rumble dropped to a

whisper. The Cobra jotted down a few notes in a solid-silver memo pad and smiled gratefully. As he left the room he nodded at a suave young man whom the lieutenant knew to be the youngest son of the Atlantis Plastic and Explosives Dynasty.

"I didn't," said Battle breathlessly, "I didn't catch the name, sir."

"Cromleigh," snapped the old man who had brought him through the fabulous portals. "Ole Cromleigh, 'Shutter-shy,' they call me. I've never been photographed, and for a very good reason. All will be plain in a moment. Watch this." He pressed a button.

"Yessir?" snapped a page, appearing through a concealed door as if by magic.

Cromleigh pointed at a rather shabby mohair sofa. "I want that fumigated, sonny," he said. "I'm afraid it's crummy."

"Certainly, sir," said the page. "I'll have it attended to right away, sir." He marched through the door after a smart salute.

"Now study that sofa," said Cromleigh meditatively. "Look at it carefully and tell me what you think of it."

The lieutenant looked at it carefully. "Nothing," he said at length, and quite frankly. "I can't see a thing wrong with it, except that beside all this period furniture it looks damned shabby."

"Yes," said Ole Cromleigh. "I see." He rubbed his hands meditatively. "You heard me order that page to fumigate it, eh? Well—he's going to forget all about those orders as completely as if I'd never delivered them."

"I don't get it," confessed Battle. "But I'd like you to check—for my benefit."

Cromleigh shrugged and pressed the button again. To the page who appeared, he said irascibly, "I told you to have that sofa fumigated—didn't I?"

The boy looked honestly baffled. "No, sir," he said, wrinkling his brows. "I don't think so, sir."

"All right, sonny. Scat." The boy disappeared with evident relief.

"That's quite a trick," said Battle. "How do you do it?" He was absolutely convinced that it was the same boy and that he had forgotten all about the incident.

"You hit the nail on the head, young man," said Cromleigh, leaning forward. "I didn't do it. I don't know who did, but it happens regularly." He looked about him sharply and continued, "I'm owing-gay oo-tay eek-spay in ig-pay atin-lay. Isten-lay."

And then, in the smoking room of the Billionaire's Club, the strangest story ever told was unreeled—in pig-Latin!—for the willing ears of Lieutenant J. C. Battle, Soldier of Fortune. And it was the prelude to his strangest job—the strangest job any soldier of fortune was ever hired for throughout the whole history of the ancient profession.

Battle was bewildered. He stared about himself with the curious feeling of terrified uncertainty that is felt in nightmares. At his immediate left arose a monstrous spiral mountain, seemingly of metal-bearing ore, pitted on the surface and crusted with red rust.

From unimaginable heights above him filtered a dim, sickly light ... beneath his feet was a coarse stuff with great ridges and interstices running into the distance. Had he not known, he would never have believed that he was standing on wood.

"So this," said Battle, "is what the inside of a mohair sofa is like."

Compressed into a smallness that would have made a louse seem mastodonic, he warily trod his way across huge plains of that incredible worm's-eye wood, struggled over monstrous tubes that he knew were the hairy padding of the sofa.

From somewhere far off in the dusk of this world of near night, there was a trampling of feet, many feet. Battle drew himself on the alert, snapped out miniature revolvers, one in each hand. He thought briskly that these elephant-pistols had

been, half an hour ago, the most dangerous handguns on Earth, whereas here—well?

The trampling of feet attached itself to the legs of a centipede, a very small centipede that was only about two hundred times the length of the lieutenant. Its many sharp eyes sighted him, and rashly the creature headed his way.

The flat crash of his guns echoing strangely in the unorthodox construction of this world, Battle stood his ground, streaming smoke from both pistols. The centipede kept on going.

He drew a smoke bomb and hurled it delicately into the creature's face. The arthropod reared up and thrashed for a full second before dying. As Battle went a long way around it, it switched its tail, nearly crushing the diminished soldier of fortune.

After the equivalent of a two-mile walk he saw before him a light that was not the GE's filtering down from the smoking room of the Billionaire's Club, but a bright, chemical flare of illumination.

"It's them," breathed the lieutenant. "In person!" He crouched behind a towering wood shaving and inspected the weird scene. It was a city that spread out before him, but a city the like of which man's eyes had never seen before.

A good, swift kick would have sent most of it crashing to the ground, but to the tiny lieutenant it was impressive and somehow beautiful. It was built mostly of wood splinters quarried from the two-by-fours which braced the sofa; the base of the city was more of the same, masticated into a sort of papier-mâché platform. As the soldier of fortune looked down on it from the dizzy height of two feet, he felt his arms being very firmly seized.

"What do we do about this?" demanded a voice, thin and querulous. "I never saw one this size."

"Take him to the Central Committee, stupid," snapped another. Battle felt his guns being hoisted from their holsters and snickered quietly. They didn't know—

Yes they did. A blindfold was whipped about his eyes and his pockets and person were given a thorough going-over. They even took the fulminate of mercury that he kept behind his molars.

"Now what?" asked the first voice. Battle could picture its owner gingerly handling the arsenal that he habitually carried with him.

"Now," said the second voice, "now freedom slowly broadens down." *Clunk!* Battle felt something—with his last fighting vestige of consciousness, he realized that it was one of his own gun butts—contact his head, then went down for the count.

The next thing he knew a dulcet voice was cooing at him. The lieutenant had never heard a dulcet voice before, he decided. There had been, during his hitch with the Foreign Legion, one Messoua whose voice he now immediately classified as a sort of hoarse cackle. The blond Hedvig, the Norwegian spy he had encountered in service with Los Invincibles de Bolivia, had seemed at the time capable of a dulcet coo; Battle reallocated the Norse girl's tones as somewhere between a rasp and a metallic gurgle.

The voice cooed at him, "Get up, stupid. You're conscious."

He opened his eyes and looked for the voice as he struggled to his feet. As he found the source of the coo he fell right flat on his back again. J. C. Battle, soldier of fortune extraordinary, highest-priced insurrectionnaire in the world, had seen many women in the course of his life. Many women had looked on him and found him good, and he had followed the lead with persistence and ingenuity. His rep as a Lothario stretched over most of the Earth's surface. Yet never, he swore fervently to himself, never had he seen anything to match this little one with the unfriendly stare.

She was somewhat shorter than the lieutenant and her coloring was the palest, most delicate shade of apple green imaginable. Her eyes were emerald and her hair was a glorious lushness like the hue of a high-priced golf club's putting green on a summer morning. And she was staring at him angrily, tapping one tiny foot.

"Excuse me, madame," said Battle as he rose with a new self-possession in his bearing. He noted that she was wearing

what seemed to be a neat little paper frock of shell pink. "Excuse me—I had no notion that it was a lady whom I was keeping waiting."

"Indeed," said the lady coldly. "We'll dispense with introductions, whoever you are. Just tell your story. Are you a renegade?" She frowned. "No, you couldn't be that. Begin talking."

Battle bowed. "My card," he said, tendering it. "I presume you to be in a position of authority over the—?" He looked around and saw that he was in a room of wood, quite unfurnished.

"Oh, sit down if you wish," snapped the woman. She folded herself up on the floor and scrutinized the card.

"What I am doesn't concern you," she said broodingly. "But since you seem to know something about our plans, know that I am the supreme commander of the—" She made a curious, clicking noise. "That's the name of my people. You can call us the Invaders."

"I shall," began Battle. "To begin at the beginning, it is known that your—Invaders—plan to take over this world of ours. I congratulate you on your location of your people in a mohair sofa; it is the most ingenious place of concealment imaginable. However, so that the sofa will not be fumigated, you must perform operations at long range—posthypnotic suggestion, I imagine—on the minds of the servants at the Billionaire's Club. Can you explain to me why you cannot perform these operations on the club members themselves?"

"Very simple," said the woman sternly, with the ghost of a smile. "Since all the billionaire members are self-made men, they insist that even the lowest busboys have advanced degrees and be Phi Beta Kappas. This betokens a certain type of academic mind which is very easy to hypnotize. But even if we worked in twenty-four-hour relays on Old Jay we couldn't put a dent in him. The psychic insensitivity of a billionaire is staggering.

"And," she added, looking at Battle through narrowed eyes, "there was one member who noticed that the busboys never fumigated the sofa. We tried to work on him while he slept, but he fought us back. He even subconsciously acquired knowledge of our plans. Thought he'd dreamed it and forgot most of the details."

Battle sighed. "You're right," he admitted. "Cromleigh was his name, and he tipped me off. Where are you Invaders from?"

"None of your business," she tartly retorted. "And where, precisely, do *you* come from?"

"This Cromleigh," said Battle, "was—and is—no fool. He went to a psychologist friend and had his mind probed. The result was a complete outline of your civilization and plans—including that ingenious device of yours, the minifier. He had one built in his lab and paid me very highly to go into it. Then I was dropped by him personally into this sofa with a pair of tweezers."

"How much does he know?" snapped the woman.

"Not much. Only what one of your more feeble-minded citizens let him know. He doesn't know the final invasion plans and he doesn't know the time schedule—if there is any as yet."

"There isn't," she said with furrowed brow. "And if there were, you imbecile monsters would never learn it from *us*." Suddenly she blazed at him, "Why must you die the hard way? Why don't you make room for the superrace while you have the chance? But no! We'd never be able to live in peace with you—you—cretins!" Then her lip trembled. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't mean to be harsh—but there are so few of us and so many of you—" The dam broke, and the little lady dissolved in a flood of tears.

Battle leaped into the breach like a veteran. He scored 99.9807 on the firing range consistently and that was pretty good, but when it came to comforting weeping female soldiers of fortune Battle *really* shone.

Some minutes later they were chummily propped up against the wall of the wooden room. Her weeps over, the little lady—who had identified herself as Miss Aktying *click!* Byam—began:

"We came—you could have guessed this from our size—from an asteroid near Jupiter. Don't ask me why my people are so much like yours except for size; after all, why shouldn't they be? Spores of life, you know.

"Our spaceship's somewhere in your New Jersey; we landed there two years ago and sized up the situation. We'd been driven from our own planet by nasty creatures from Ceres who had the damndest war machines you ever saw—flame guns, disintegrator rays—and they're going to mop up the universe when they get around to it. By your standards they were three inches tall; to us they were twenty-foot horrors.

"We sent out a few agents who learned the language in two or three days; we could live on the spaceship and keep out of sight. The agents came back to us all steamed up. They'd been riding in coat pockets and things, listening in on private wires. They found out that most of the wealth in the world is concentrated in the Billionaire's Club, right here where we are. So we moved en masse, all three hundred of us, into this sofa and built our city.

"It isn't as easy as it sounds, of course. To listen in on a conversation means that you have to weigh yourself down with almost an ounce of equipment for raising the octaves of the voice and scaling it down to fit our ears. But now we have our listening posts and we eavesdrop in relays to every word that's spoken. If you knew what I know about Atlantis Plastic and Explosive—

"Anyway, Battle, we have our fingers on the economic pulse of the planet. We could release information through dreams and hunches that would wreck the market, as you call it, and create the most staggering panic of all times. Once that happens, Battle...."

"Go on," snapped the lieutenant.

"Once that happens, Battle," she said in a small, tense voice, "we turn on a little machine we have and every human being that walks the Earth turns into pocket fuzz."

She faced his horrified stare with a pitying smile. "It's true," she said. "We can do it. When we're ready, when we're convinced that science and research are so disorganized that they can't possibly do anything about it, we turn on the machine, technically known as a protoplasmo high carbon proteidic discellular converter, and *it* happens."

"Not," grated Battle, "if I can stop it."

"That's the rub, my dear," she said with a frown. "You can't. You're my prisoner." And she smiled exquisitely, baring apple-green teeth, so that Battle was constrained to agree with the little lady.

"It seems fitting," he brooded absently. "A superrace indeed is come to humble man."

"Darling," said Battle, "it's the strange mixture of ruthlessness and sentimentality that makes your people perpetually amazing to me. It's a pitched battle in the dark on our part; my people have no notion of what's going on behind their backs, and you see nothing evil or dark in the situation."

Busily Miss Aktying *click!* Byam kissed him and returned to her desk. "My sweet," she said, "if you trouble your head over our alien morality you'll never get to the end of it. Enough that you are accepted into our midst as a noncombatant worker and the very special charge of the Expediter-in-Chief—that's me. Now, go away, please. I'll see you tonight."

Battle pocketed the seal he had lifted from her desk and blew a kiss at her back as he closed the door behind him.

The week he had been imprisoned had been no great hardship; he had been privileged to roam within the limits of the city and examine the marvelously complicated life these tiny invaders had made for themselves. There had been other privileges as well....

The lieutenant, professional and romanticized killer, could not get over the appalling technique of the invaders. It was not inefficient, it was not cold-blooded; somehow to him it was worse. Like all right-minded military men of the old school, he deplored the occasional necessity of spying. What then could he think of a campaign that was spying and nothing else but?

He had been allowed to see—under guard—the wonderful listening posts of the tiny people. From little speakers boomed the voices of Old Jay and the other titans of finance who worked off steam in the smoking room of the

Billionaire's Club. And nobody ever sat on the sofa or moved it; it simply would never occur to a member to do so, and in the minds of the servants there had been built up a myth that it was the very first sofa that the celebrated and deceased founder of the club, Nicholas van Bhoomenbergen, had installed and that it would be a breach of the club's rules to move it. The fact was that it had been brought in by two men from Airways Express who had had their minds taken over for the nonce by the invaders. A Mrs. Pinsky, for whom it had been originally consigned, never did find out what happened to it.

Battle ascertained by judicious inquiry that the pocket-fuzz machine actually did exist. It had been a swipe from the war science of the invaders from Ceres. The thing was broken down at the moment, but when they got it into shape again—!

He had uneasy pictures of a vast number of speculators all waking up with the same hunch on which way the market would jump. All bidding simultaneously for the same securities would make a ticklish situation that could be touched off by judicious inspiration of an investment banker—any investment banker—who could be dreamed into thinking his bank was without assets.

Bank closes and banker commits suicide. Panic on the market; the vast number of speculators find themselves with securities at fantastically high prices and worth fantastically near nothing at all. Vast numbers of speculators sell out and are ruined, for then three more banks close and three more bankers commit suicide. President declares bank holiday; the great public withdraws savings as soon as the banks open again; therefore the banks close again. The great public holes up for a long, hard winter. With loose cash lying around crime is on the upswing and martial law is declared, at which Leftist organizations explode and start minor insurrections in industrial cities.

Mexico attacks across the Rio Grande; the invaders from the asteroid have a contingent of expert hypnotists ready to leave for Chihauhau, where the southern republic's army is stationed.

And then the protoplasmo high carbon proteidic discellular converter would be turned on. The population of Manhattan would turn into pocket fuzz—or at least separate large-molecule units resembling very closely the stuff you find in pockets or handbags after two or three weeks of use.

Manhattan is fortified by the wee folk from the asteroid, who build several more of the flug machines, aiming them at the other boroughs and moving their twenty-mile field of effectiveness at the rate of a state each day. The North American continent would be clear of any and all protoplasmic life at the end of two months, they estimated.

And the hell of it was that they were right. But Battle was whistling cheerily as he forged a pass with the aid of the seal from his lady's desk.

He had crept out into the open, been perceived by the eagle eye of Ole Cromleigh, lifted on a pair of tweezers and whisked into a waiting Rolls.

Once again his natural size in the New Jersey lab, he stretched comfortably. "Thanks for being so prompt," he yawned. "Thanks a lot. They were coming after me, by the sound of the footsteps in the distance."

"Now you see why I had to be quiet and do this thing on the sly?" demanded the financier. "If I'd told all I know they'd have called me mad and locked me up the way his family treated poor old John D.—but don't let that get out, Lieutenant. Now tell me what you found there—begin at the beginning. How much do they know about finance and manipulation? Have they got their records in a safe place?"

Battle lit a cigarette; he hadn't taken any with him for fear of firing the sofa. Luxuriously he drew in a draft of the smoke clear down to his toenails and let it trickle from the corners of his mouth. "One question at a time," he said. "And I'll ask the first few of them. Mr. Cromleigh, why won't you let me bomb the sofa?"

The old man twisted his hands nervously together. "Because a bomb in the smoking room would kill Old Jay when he hears about it; the man always goes to Lhasa in Tibet when July Fourth rolls around. He's been that way since the Wall Street Massacre in '24 or '25. Because I'm not cold-blooded. And because, dammit, those little people I saw were *cute*."

"Yeah," agreed Battle reminiscently. "That she was. To begin at the beginning, your dream was substantially correct. They're little people from an asteroid. They have war machinery and no hearts whatsoever. They're listening twenty-four

hours a day. Not a word spoken in the room escapes them and it all goes onto records."

"Good—good God!" whispered Cromleigh, cracking his freckled knuckles. "What that information must be worth!" He rose. "Let's get back to Manhattan for a drink, Lieutenant," he said shakily. "And there's another aspect I want to discuss with you. Your first trip was a sort of foray. It was mostly to convince me that I wasn't mad. And to size up the ground as well. Now can we discuss planting a permanent spy in the sofa? To keep tabs on them and move only when necessary?"

"Delightful," said Battle thoughtfully. "I have friends. My own club you probably do not know of, but it is the best of its kind."

Cromleigh, nervously tapping his desk with a pencil, was alone in the great New Jersey lab as far as could be seen. Grotesque machinery lined the walls; during the day there would be eight score technicians working, checking and double-checking their results, bringing new honor and glory to the Cromleigh Vacuumaxic Sweeper and the rest of the string of electric products. His sugar plants and labs were far away in Pasadena; the Cromleigh Ironworks were going full blast in the ore basin of the continent. He looked like a very worried man.

From the shadows, with completely noiseless tread, stole a figure. "Good evening, sir," said Battle. "I've brought all of the Saber Club that's available on two hours' notice.

"Miss Millicent, this is Mr. Cromleigh," he announced, leading forth from the shadows a tall, crisp woman.

When she spoke it was with a faint Southern drawl. "Pleased t'know you. Any frien' of Lieutenant Battle's...." She trailed back into the darkness and vanished completely.

"Dr. Mogilov, former Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kazan."

A slight, smiling man bowed out from the darkness; he was smooth-shaven and looked very un-Russian. In a pronounced Cambridge dialect he said, "Delighted," and put one hand on the butt of a revolver slung from his slender waist.

"And Alex Vaughn, Yorkshire born and bred."

The Englishman said thickly, in the peculiar speech that makes the clear-headed, big-boned men of York sound always a little intoxicated, "Ah coom wi' russi-*veh*-shins, soor. Lut thawt bay oondair-stud."

"He says," interpreted the lieutenant, "that he comes with reservations; let that be understood. And that completes the present roster of the Saber Club present in New York."

"Only three?" complained Cromleigh. "And one a woman? You gave me to understand that they could completely smash the invaders."

"Yes," said the lieutenant, his voice heavy with added meaning. "*Any* invaders."

"No doubt—" said Cromleigh. Then some message in Battle's eyes alarmed him unaccountably; his hand trembled on the desk top and gripped the edge to steady itself.

"That did it!" snapped Battle. He swung on Ole Cromleigh. "How long have we?" he grated, pulling a gun and aiming it for the financier's throat.

In a voice hoarse with hatred Cromleigh yelled, "Just two minutes more, you meddling scum! Then—"

"Lights!" yelled Battle. "Turn the damned lights on, Miss Millicent!" As the overhead indirects flared up, bathing the huge lab in a lambent, flaming radiance, the four figures of the Saber Club members, the Billionaire Clubman and one other leaped into sharp reality.

It was the figure of the sofa. "We took the liberty," said Battle, his gun swerving not an inch, "of removing this object from the smoking room. It's going lock, stock and barrel into the enlarging machine you have here."

"You fool!" roared Cromleigh. "Don't you know—" The descending gun butt cut off any further conversation.

"Hurry up!" grated the lieutenant. He hefted the sofa to his broad shoulders. "That trembling hand was a signal if ever I saw one. His friends'll be here any minute. Open that damned machine and plug in the power!"

The Russian philosopher, muttering wildly to himself, swung wide the gates of the boxlike magnifier through which Battle had come only a few hours before.

"Thank God there's plenty of room!" groaned Battle. "And if this doesn't work, prepare for Heaven, friends!" He turned on the machine full power and speed, took Miss Millicent by the arm, and dragged her to the far end of the vast lab.

During the incredibly long three minutes that ensued, they made ready their weapons for what might prove to be a siege, while Battle explained in rapid-fire undertones what he had had no time for during the plane ride from Manhattan.

As he checked the load of his quick firers he snapped, "Invaders—phooey! Anybody could tell that those women were fresh from an office. They had the clerical air about them. The only invader—as a carefully logical process of deduction demonstrated—was the gruesome creature who's been posing as Cromleigh. Just murdered the old guy—I suppose—and took over his body. He and his friends whom he just signaled. He's the only baby who hypnotized the Phi Beta Kappas they use for busboys.

"Why did he risk sending me in there? The inevitable mark of a louse. Doesn't trust anybody, not even his own office staff dyed a pale green and reduced to half-gnat size. So he sent me in to spy on them. The whole cock-and-bull story of the creatures from an asteroid was so that there'd be no suspicion directed at him in case some bright waiter should find the louse people. Wouldn't be surprised if he's from an asteroid himself. Crazy business! Craziest damned business!"

"How about the financial angle?" asked Vaughn, who could be intelligible when money was involved.

"I picked that bird's pocket slick as a whistle just after I conked him. Feels like a hundred grand."

"Here they come!" snapped Miss Millicent.

"They" were creatures of all sizes and shapes who were streaming through the only door to the lab, at the other end of the room.

"Awk!" gulped the lady involuntarily. "They" were pretty awful. There were a hundred or so of them, many much like men, a few in an indescribable liquid-solid state that sometimes was gaseous. The luminous insides of these churned wildly about; there were teeth inside them two feet long. Others were gigantic birds, still others snakes, still others winged dragons.

"That settles it," grunted the Russian philosopher as he flicked his gun into and out of its holster faster than the eye could follow. "That settles it. They are amoebic, capable of assuming any shape at all. One is changing now—awk!" He persevered. "Indubitably possessed of vast hypnotic powers over unsuspecting minds only. Otherwise they would be working on us."

"They" were rolling in a flood of shifting, slimy flesh down the floor of the lab.

"The machine! The sofa!" cried Miss Millicent. Battle breathed a long sigh of relief as the cabinetlike expander exploded outward and the sofa it held kept on growing—and growing—and *growing*! It stopped just as it filled the segment of the lab that it occupied.

With a squeaking of tortured timbers the laws of cross-sectional sufferance power asserted themselves and the hundred-yard-high sofa collapsed in a monstrous pile of rubble.

"Sit very still," said the lieutenant. "Be quite quiet and blow the head off any hundred-foot centipede that wanders our way."

There were agonized yells from the other side of the couch's ruins. "That couch," Battle informed them, "was just plain lousy. Full of centipedes, lice, what have you. Naturally; never been fumigated. And when a louse smells blood—God help any invaders around, be they flesh, fish, fowl or amoebic!"

After ten minutes there was complete quiet.

"What abah't th' boogs?" asked Vaughn.

"They're dead," said Battle, rising and stretching. "Their respiratory systems can't keep up with the growth. They were good for about ten minutes, then they keeled over. Their tracheae can't take in enough oxygen to keep them going, which is a very good thing for the New Jersey countryside."

He strolled over to the vast pile of rubble and began turning over timbers, Miss Millicent assisting him.

"Ah!" he grunted. "Here it is!" He had found the body of an apple-green young lady whose paint was beginning to peel, revealing a healthy pink beneath. With many endearing terms he brought her out of her swoon as Miss Millicent's eyebrows went higher and higher.

Finally she exploded, as the two were cosily settled on a mountainous upholstery needle that had, at some time, got lost in the sofa.

"Just *when*, Lieutenant, did you find out that these people weren't invaders from an asteroid?"

Battle raised his eyebrows and kissed the girl.

"Have no fear, darling," he said. "A gentleman never—er—kisses—and tells."

[The end of *The City in the Sofa* by Cyril M. Kornbluth]