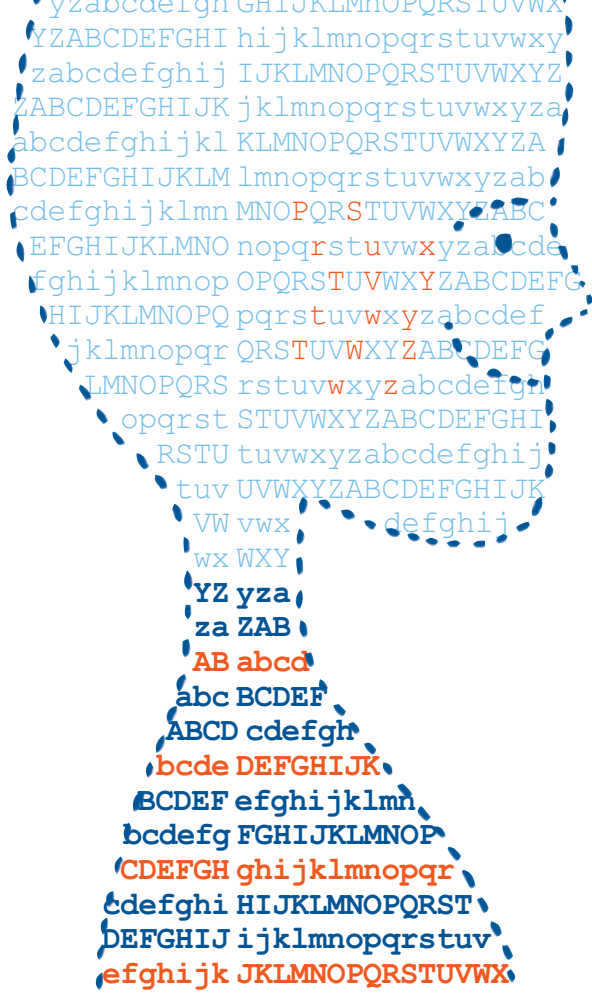


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# Alvin's Secret Code

Clifford B. Hicks  
Illustrated by Bill Sokol

"An exciting adventure and engaging primer on cryptography."  
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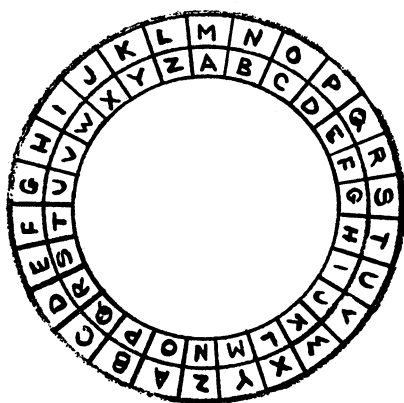
The Marvelous Inventions of Alvin Fernald

Alvin Fernald, Mayor for a Day

Alvin Fernald's Incredible Buried Treasure

Alvin Fernald, Superweasel

# Alvin's Secret Code



**Clifford B. Hicks**  
illustrated by **Bill Sokol**

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Kentucky

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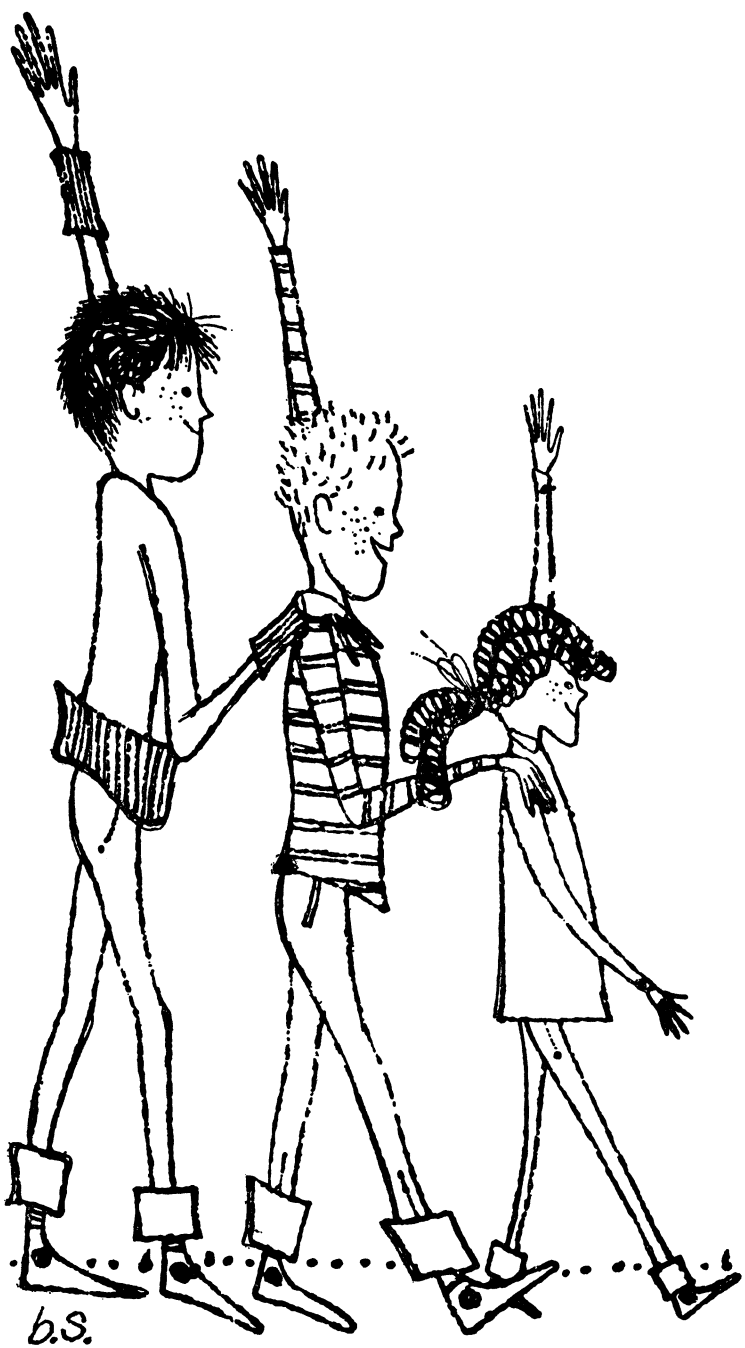
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For David, Doug and Gary, who are more difficult to read than the most secret of codes.



b.s.

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# CHAPTER 1

## The Secret Message

ALVIN FERNALD had a warm, tingly feeling smack in the middle of his stomach.

It was a feeling that started at exactly the same moment every Friday afternoon, just as Miss Peppersmith closed the books on her desk and replaced them neatly between the bookends—each book lined up just so. Always, just at that moment on Friday afternoon, Alvin got the strange little feeling, kind of squishy and warm, inside his stomach, as though he'd just swallowed a miniature hot-water bottle.

Now, walking home from school with Shoie, the feeling was still there. In fact, it had grown bigger. Not even the gray clouds that scudded across the sky, low and threatening with the approach of winter, bothered him; nor the theme he knew he had to write for Monday; nor the knowledge that Mom would be waiting for him at home with a reminder that cleaning his room was “number one” on his list of jobs for the weekend.

Mom never seemed to number the *really* important things to be done on a weekend, such as having a mudball fight with Shoie and Gooey Larson, hunting for pheasant nests in the cornfields on the edge of town, or finishing the library book about spies he was reading. It was called

*The Great Spies of History* and was a real bellywhacker of a book. Alvin could hardly wait to get back to it.

But no, cleaning his room would be “number one” for the weekend.

The thought didn’t completely wipe away the tingly feeling. Somehow he’d get Shoie to help him clean his room, and they’d still have time to drift out to Maldowski’s farm and heave rocks at the hornets’ nest.

The nest was in an apple tree in the pasture where Mr. Maldowski kept his prize bull. The bull liked to stand under the tree, just beneath the nest, which was the biggest hornets’ nest Alvin had ever seen. For a couple of weeks now, standing on the other side of the fence, Alvin and Shoie had been trying to hit the nest with rocks. They figured that if they succeeded, the hornets would dive bomb the bull below. But so far they had missed.

The warm feeling, for some reason, made Alvin stick his elbow into Shoie’s ribs as they walked toward home. It was a good sharp punch, and Shoie doubled over. Instead of stopping, though, Shoie rolled right on over, did two somersaults across Peevey’s lawn, and ended with three cartwheels and a back flip.

“Act your age,” said Alvin. Then he grinned and added, “Secret Agent Q-3, that’s no way for a spy to behave. A spy has to *un*-draw attention to himself.”

Since Alvin had started reading the spy book, he and Shoie were secret agents. Shoie was Agent Q-3 and Alvin was Agent K-21½.

“Got to keep in shape,” said Shoie. “You never can tell when I might have to knock off a counterspy.”

If there was one thing Agent Q-3 didn't have to worry about, it was keeping in shape. Shoie was the best athlete in Roosevelt School. He didn't *look* like an athlete; he was tall and spindly, half a head taller than Alvin, and seemed to be sort of a loose mishmash of arms, legs, elbows, and knees. Shoie—his real name was Wilfred Shoemaker—was the star of the Roosevelt football and basketball teams, and could throw a baseball farther than anyone in school. If anyone could hit that hornets' nest, Shoie could.

Secret Agent Q-3 did two more cartwheels and ended up walking on his hands across the grass beside the curb in front of Mr. Pinkney's house. Then, carefully, he walked along the edge of the street, one hand in the gutter, the other on the curb. Suddenly he stopped, still balancing on his hands, and stared into the gutter.

"Found one!" he shouted.

"Found one what?" asked Alvin.

"Another tottle bop. I mean bottle top." Shoie frequently got his words mixed up, particularly when he was excited. "It's a little rusty, but not bad."

"Forget the kid stuff," said Alvin. Actually, he envied Shoie the collection of bottle tops. Shoie now had 7,623 bottle tops. They had been smashed flat with a hammer in Shoie's basement and stored in twenty-one cigar boxes. "Come on, Q-3. Forget the kid stuff." Because it was Alvin who was always getting them into scrapes—and back out again—he pretended that he was much older than Shoie, even though they had birthdays within a week of each other.

Shoie, now purple in the face, carefully balanced himself on one hand and reached out with the other to snatch the bottle top from the gutter. He managed to snag the bottle top all right, but at the same time he accidentally scooped up a stray scrap of paper. Flexing his arms, he gave a mighty heave, flew through the air, and landed on his feet. Then he sat down to look at the bottle top.

“Boot reer,” he announced to Alvin, who sat down beside him. “I mean root beer.”

Shoie was about to toss the scrap of paper aside when he glanced at it. “What’s this, old bean?”

“What’s what, old man?”

The two boys frequently called each other “old bean” and “old man.”

“What does this scrap of paper mean? Looks mighty mysterious to me.”

Alvin looked at the scrap of paper in Shoie’s hand. Suddenly, a sixth sense told him that Secret Agent Q-3 had found something important, much more important than a root beer cap.

On the piece of paper was scrawled a message:

*SERIOUS MILLY HIDING THURSDAY. START SECRETS.  
IVAN HIDING MESSAGE OAK. REMAIN SILENT.  
HERMAN*

The message didn’t make sense—but that’s why it *did* make sense to Secret Agent K-21½.

“It’s a secret message,” he said quietly, trying to keep his voice matter-of-fact. “A message in a spy’s secret code.”

“Wow!” Q-3 straightened out the piece of paper.

“Don’t let anyone see you put it in your pocket,” said Alvin out of the corner of his mouth. “You can’t tell who might be watching. Pick up a handful of grass and pretend you’re putting *it* in your pocket instead.”

“A handful of grass? Why would I pocket a handful of grass?”

Alvin was ready with the answer. “There’s nothing else to pick up,” he said, “so it *has* to be grass.”

Shoie grabbed a tuft of grass and stuffed it in his pocket with the paper.

The two agents, trying to be nonchalant, strolled down the sidewalk until they reached the corner. Then they ran for spy headquarters in the bedroom of Agent K-21½.

That’s how the adventure began. And Alvin Fernald had a remarkable knack for landing smack in the middle of adventures.

Alvin was a bit short for a twelve-year-old, and was far from good-looking. There were more freckles on one side of his face than the other, which gave him a slightly lop-sided look when you stood straight in front of him. He had the short blond hair of his father, who was a sergeant on the police force.

Alvin was perhaps the best-known kid in Riverton, a middle-sized town in Indiana. His name had appeared in the *Riverton News* numerous times, because of the adventures he had stumbled into. Somehow, though, he always came out victorious.

Shoie greatly admired Alvin’s thinking ability, and

frequently talked about it as though it were a super-electronic computer. He called it “Alvin’s Magnificent Brain.”

“What does the Magnificent Brain have cooked up for today?” Shoie would ask on Saturday morning. Or, if they were faced with a problem such as trying to hit a hornets’ nest over Maldowski’s bull with a rock from seventy-five feet away, he’d say, “Put this problem through the Magnificent Brain and see what clicks out the other end.”

And, of course, it was the Magnificent Brain that involved Alvin in so many scrapes. Like the time the Magnificent Brain had suggested that they paint turtles for sale in the local dimestore. They’d found several turtles out along the creek, and set up an assembly line inside Alvin’s garage. Everything had gone fine until they’d tried to dip an oversized snapping turtle in a bucket of red paint. At the critical moment, the turtle slipped out of Alvin’s hands and fell into the bucket. When Alvin reached in to rescue it from drowning, the turtle grabbed him by the thumb. Alvin ran from the garage hollering bloody murder. That was the day the Woman’s Aid Society was having tea next door at Mrs. Gooley’s house, and the women were just coming down the front walk full of tea and gab. The turtle finally let go of Alvin’s thumb, and when Alvin heaved it away with a howl, it happened to land on Mrs. Osterback’s head, splattering red paint in every direction. The *Riverton News* carried a story under the headline RED SNAPPING TURTLE DROPS IN ON AID SOCIETY MEETING.

Now, the Magnificent Brain had decided they should be spies, stimulated of course, by *The Great Spies of History*.

The book was so exciting that he could hardly put it down. Last night he had read the chapter on “Spies of World War II” in the dim glow of a flashlight, with his head covered by a blanket, after his mother had insisted that he turn off the light and get some sleep. Now, the Magnificent Brain knew that Alvin just *had* to be a spy. Thus was born Secret Agent K-21½.

As Q-3 and K-21½ walked in the door, Alvin’s mother called from the kitchen, “Is that you, Alvin?”

“Yes, Mom.” Alvin turned and whispered to Shoie, mimicking his mother’s voice, “Number one on your list for the weekend is cleaning your room.”

“Number one on your list for the weekend is cleaning your room,” called his mother.

“Yes, Mom.”

“I want you to do it right now, before you get involved in anything else.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“There are some cookies out here to give you strength for the job.”

Alvin and Shoie went to the kitchen. Mrs. Fernald was standing by the oven, holding out a plate of cookies. She was a pretty woman, with eyes that were surprisingly clear and blue. Looking into them, Alvin frequently had the feeling that Mom knew a great deal more about what was going through the Magnificent Brain than *he* did—almost as though she were a mind reader. Sometimes, it made him a bit nervous.

The Secret Agents each took five cookies and headed upstairs for Alvin’s room. At the top of the stairs the Pest

was sitting, a football snuggled tightly under her arm, so tightly that it seemed to be part of her small body.

The Pest's real name was Daphne, but Alvin had called his sister the Pest for as long as he could remember. She was eight years old, and because she had always thought Alvin was the greatest, she wanted to be a boy, too. Dressed in Alvin's outgrown blue jeans, she carried a football or baseball wherever she went, and left her fancy dolls to gather dust on the shelf in her closet. But even the way she dressed couldn't hide the fact that she was a girl, for she had a round little face with a slightly turned-up nose and long golden curls that were tied by a ribbon into a ponytail. When she rode Alvin's bike (which she did whenever she could), the ponytail streamed out behind like a flag in the wind.

"Hi, Alvin," she said. "What're you going to do?"

"Man stuff," said Alvin, climbing around her.

"Can I help?"

Down deep, Alvin really liked his little sister. But her turned-up nose was always turning up in his business and this was a continual source of irritation between them.

"Nope."

Before Alvin could close the door to his room the Pest slipped inside.

"Mom says you have to clean your room, number one," she said.

"I'll number one you!" he said, pretending to threaten her.

"I'll clean your room if I can stay," she pleaded.

Alvin was tempted. The sooner they cleaned the room,



the sooner they could try to solve the secret code in Shoie's pocket.

"Let 'er stay," said Shoie. He wouldn't admit it, but he enjoyed having the Pest around, mostly for laughs.

"Okay," said Alvin. "But you're going to do most of the work. We have secret business to tend to—maybe involving the H-bomb."

"Oh, Alvin," said the Pest admiringly. "Are you really going to make an H-bomb?" She thought her brother could do anything.

Alvin grinned. "Pick up anything under the bed," he ordered, "while I take care of the rest of this stuff."

"Under the bed," she said, "while you take care of the rest." The Pest had the habit of repeating almost anything that was said to her. Alvin sometimes had the feeling that he was hearing a tiny high-pitched echo of his own voice.

On his bed Alvin made a stack of everything that was out of place: a half-built model plane, two pairs of dirty socks, four springs from an old mattress (which he planned to strap to an old pair of shoes and go bouncing down the street), a tube of glue—minus the lid, of course—a snarl of kite string, a wheel from a baby carriage, a jar of pickles which he'd forgotten to return to the refrigerator, his detective mustache, and two burnt-out television tubes.

On one corner of his desk he placed the jar of pickles and the mustache—which might come in handy in his role as Secret Agent K-21½. Carrying a chair into his closet, he climbed up on it and removed from the top shelf an extra blanket which his mother stored there.



.bs.

Then Shoie handed up the stuff from the bed, and Alvin placed it as far back on the shelf as he could reach. When he replaced the blanket, he tried to be careful, but he heard the wing of the model plane crunch. Well, he'd have to fix it later. It didn't seem quite as important, just now, as it had when he'd started to build it.

Alvin was sure that his mother knew what happened to the stuff he picked up when he "cleaned his room," but she never said a word about the back of the top shelf. Occasionally, Alvin would have to clean off the shelf, behind the blanket, to make room for more stuff.

As he climbed down, the Pest was just kicking his bedroom slippers and sneakers under the bed far enough that they wouldn't show.

"Ready?" asked Shoie, who had flopped down on the bed. "Can we take a look at this secret message now?"

"Okay, Q-3." Alvin sat down beside him and held out his hand for the paper.

"Can I be a Secret Agent, too?" asked the Pest.

"No. This is a man's work."

"Please," she pleaded, "give me a secret name."

Alvin ignored her. By now the Magnificent Brain was analyzing the mysterious words on the secret paper.

And, indeed, they *were* mysterious. No one said anything for a full minute, as the three of them huddled over the paper.

"Maybe it's something one of the other kids dropped," said the Pest helpfully.

Alvin gave a snort of disgust. "Take a good look. Does that look like a kid's writing or what a kid would say?"

SERIOUS MILLY HIDING THURSDAY. START SECRETS.

IVAN HIDING MESSAGE OAK. REMAIN SILENT.

HERMAN

“What could it mean?” asked Shoie, unconsciously lowering his voice.

“It means a secret message, that’s what it means.”

“But what does the *message* mean?” asked the Pest.

The Magnificent Brain clicked. “You’ve got to *analyze* these things. You can’t break a secret code in three minutes. It says so in the spy book.”

Alvin took the message to his desk, sat down, and turned on the desk lamp. With the other two leaning over his shoulder, he held the paper close to the light.

“What’re you doing, Alvin?” whispered the Pest.

“Seeing if there’s any invisible ink on the paper. If there is, probably the light or heat from the lamp will bring it out.”

All three waited expectantly, but nothing happened.

“Let’s see if we can break the code,” said K-21½. He copied each of the words in the message into a list on a sheet of paper. “Anything strange strike you about these words?” he asked.

“‘Hiding’ and ‘secrets’ make it sound like a spy message,” offered the Pest.

“Ivan is a Russian name,” offered Q-3. “Sounds like a Russian is hiding a message in an oak tree somewhere around here.”

Alvin thought for a minute. “Yes,” he finally announced with authority, “this is a secret message, probably from

one Russian to another. Next question is, why should a Russian spy be operating in Riverton?”

“I know!” said Shoie, excitedly. “The new defense plant on the edge of town!”

The new factory had brought a lot of jobs and money into Riverton. But even those who were working in the plant didn’t know for sure what they were making. Small, delicate machines of some kind, but no one knew what they were used for after they were shipped out of Riverton, except that they had something to do with rockets.

“You’re probably right,” said Alvin. “I’ll bet we’ve stumbled onto a spy ring that is sending out the secrets of the defense plant in coded messages.”

The Pest gasped. “Stumbled onto a spy ring! What are we going to do about it, Alvin?”

Secret Agent K-21½ stood up straight, the message trembling slightly in his hand. “We’re going to smash it!” he announced simply. “We’re going to smash the spy ring to smithereens!”