

THE two girls studied one another, curiously and warily. Sophie's eyes travelled over Rosalind, in her russet woollen dress with its brown cross appliqué, and rested for a moment on her leather shoes. She looked down at her own soft moccasins, then at her short, tattered skirt. In the course of her self-inspection she discovered new stains that had not been on her bodice half an hour before. Without any embarrassment she pulled it off and began to soak them out in the cold water. To Rosalind she said:

'You must get rid of that cross. Hers, as well,' she added, glancing at Petra. 'It marks you. We women in the Fringes do not feel that it has served us very well. The men resent it, too. Here.' She took a small, thin-bladed knife from a niche, and held it out.

Rosalind took it, doubtfully. She looked at it, and then down at the cross which had been displayed on every dress she had ever worn. Sophie watched her.

'I used to wear one,' she said. 'It didn't help me, either.'

Rosalind looked at me, still a little doubtfully. I nodded.

'They don't much like insistence on the true image in these parts. Very likely it's dangerous.' I glanced at Sophie.

'It is,' she said. 'It's not only an identification; it's a challenge.'

Rosalind lifted the knife and began, half reluctantly, to pick at the stitches.

I said to Sophie: 'What now? Oughtn't we to try to get as far away as we can before it's light?'

Sophie, still dabbling her bodice, shook her head.

'No. They may find him any time. When they do, there'll be a search. They'll think that you killed him, and then all three of you took to the woods. They'll never think of looking for you here, why should they? But they'll rake the whole neighbourhood for you.'

'You mean we stay here?' I asked her. She nodded.

'For two, perhaps three, days. Then, when they've called off the search, I'll see you clear.'

Rosalind looked up from her unpicking thoughtfully.

'Why are you doing all this for us?' she asked.

I explained to her about Sophie and the spider-man far more quickly than it could have been put into words. It did not seem to satisfy her entirely. She and Sophie went on regarding one another steadily in the flickering light.

Sophie dropped the bodice into the water with a plop. She stood up slowly. She bent towards Rosalind, locks of dark hair dangling down on her naked breasts, her eyes narrowed.

'Damn you,' she said viciously. 'Leave me alone, damn you.'

Rosalind became taut, ready for any movement. I shifted so that I could jump between them if necessary. The tableau held for long seconds. Sophie, uncared for, half naked in her ragged skirt, dangerously poised; Rosalind, in her brown dress with the unpicked left arm of the cross hanging forward, with her bronze hair shining in the candlelight, her fine features upturned, with eyes alert. The crisis passed, and the tension lost pitch. The violence died out of Sophie's eyes, but she did not move. Her mouth twisted a little and she trembled. Harsh and bitter:

'Damn you!' she said again. 'Go on, laugh at me, God damn your lovely face. Laugh at me because I *do* want him, *me!*' She gave a queer, choked laugh herself. 'And what's the use? Oh, God, what's the use? If he weren't in love with you, what good would I be to him - like this?'

She clenched her hands to her face and stood for a moment, shaking all over, then she turned and flung herself on the brushwood bed.

We stared into the shadowy corner. One moccasin had fallen off. I could see the brown, grubby sole of her foot, and the line of six toes. I turned to Rosalind. Her eyes met mine, contrite and appalled. Instinctively she made to get up. I shook my head, and hesitantly she sank back.

The only sounds in the cave were the hopeless, abandoned sobbing, and plop-plop-plop of the drips.

Petra looked at us, then at the figure on the bed, then at us

again, expectantly. When neither of us moved she appeared to decide that the initiative lay with her. She crossed to the bedside and knelt down concernedly beside it. Tentatively she put a hand on the dark hair.

'Don't,' she said. 'Please *don't*.'

There was a startled catch in the sobbing. A pause, then a brown arm reached out round Petra's shoulders. The sound became a little less desolate . . . it no longer tore at one's heart: but it left it bruised and aching. . . .

I awoke reluctantly, stiff and cold from lying on the hard rock floor. Almost immediately there was Michael:

'Did you mean to sleep all day?'

I looked up and saw a chink of daylight beneath the skin curtain.

'What's the time?' I asked him.

'About eight, I'd guess. It's been light for three hours, and we've fought a battle already.'

'What happened?' I inquired.

'We got wind of an ambush, so we sent an outflanking party. It clashed with the reserve force that was waiting to follow up the ambush. Apparently they thought it was our main body; anyway, the result was a rout, at a cost of two or three wounded to us.'

'So now you're coming on?'

'Yes. I suppose they'll rally somewhere, but they've melted away now. No opposition at all.'

That was by no means as one could have wished. I explained our position, and that we certainly could not hope to emerge from the cave in daylight, unseen. On the other hand, if we stayed, and the place were to be captured, it would undoubtedly be searched, and we should be found.

'What about Petra's Sealand friends?' Michael asked. 'Can we really count on them, do you think?'

Petra's friend, herself, came in on that, somewhat coolly.

'You *can* count on us.'

'Your estimated time is the same? You've not been delayed?' Michael asked.

'Just the same,' she assured us. 'Approximately eight and a half hours from now.' Then the slightly huffy note dropped, a tinge almost of awe coloured her thoughts.

'This is a dreadful country indeed. We have seen Badlands before, but none of us has ever imagined anything quite so terrible as this. There are stretches, miles across, where it looks as if all the ground has been fused into black glass; there is nothing else, nothing but the glass like a frozen ocean of ink . . . then belts of Badlands . . . then another wilderness of black glass. It goes on and on . . . What did they do here? What *can* they have done to create such a frightful place? . . . No wonder none of us ever came this way before. It's like going over the rim of the world, into the outskirts of hell . . . it must be utterly beyond hope, barred to any kind of life for ever and ever. . . . But why? - why? - why? . . . There was the power of gods in the hands of children, we know: but were they *mad* children, all of them quite mad? . . . The mountains are cinders and the plains are black glass - still, after centuries! . . . It is so dreary . . . dreary . . . a monstrous madness . . . It is frightening to think that a whole race could go insane. . . . If we did not know that you are on the other side of it we should have turned back and fled -'

Petra cut her off, abruptly blotting everything with distress. We had not known she was awake. I don't know what she had made of most of it, but she had clearly caught that thought of turning back. I went across to soothe her down, so that presently the Sealand woman was able to get through again and reassure her. The alarm subsided, and Petra recovered herself.

Michael came in, asking:

'David, what about Rachel?'

I remembered his anxiety the previous night.

'Petra, darling,' I said, 'we've got too far away now for any of us to reach Rachel. Will you ask her something?'

Petra nodded.

'We want to know if she has heard anything of Mark since she talked to Michael.'

Petra put the question. Then she shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'She hasn't heard anything. She's very

miserable, I think. She wants to know if Michael is all right.'

'Tell her he's quite all right - we all are. Tell her we love her, we're terribly sorry she's all alone, but she must be brave - and careful. She must try not to let anyone see she's worried.'

'She understands. She says she'll try.' Petra reported. She remained thoughtful for a moment. Then she said to me, in words: 'Rachel's afraid. She's crying inside. She wants Michael.'

'Did she tell you that?' I asked.

Petra shook her head. 'No. It was a sort of behind-think, but I saw it.'

'We'd better not say anything about it,' I decided. 'It's not our business. A person's behind-thinks aren't really meant for other people, so we must just pretend not to have noticed them.'

'All right,' Petra agreed, equably.

I hoped it was all right. When I thought it over I wasn't at all sure that I cared much for this business of detecting 'behind-thinks.' It left one a trifle uneasy, and retrospective . . .

Sophie woke up a few minutes later. She seemed calm, competent again, as though the last night's storm had blown itself out. She sent us to the back of the cave and unhooked the curtain to let the daylight in. Presently she had a fire going in the hollow. The greater part of the smoke from it went out of the entrance; the rest did at least have the compensation that it helped to obscure the interior of the cave from any outside observation. She ladled measures from two or three bags into an iron pot, added some water, and put the pot on the fire.

'Watch it,' she instructed Rosalind, and then disappeared down the outside ladder.

Some twenty minutes later her head reappeared. She threw a couple of discs of hard bread over the sill and climbed in after them. She went to the pot, stirred it, and sniffed at the contents.

'No trouble?' I asked her.

'Not about that,' she said. 'They found him. They think you did it. There was a search - of a sort - early this morning. It wasn't as much of a search as it would have been with more men. But now they've got other things to worry about. The men who went to the fighting are coming back in twos and threes. What happened, do you know?'

I told of the ambush that had failed, and the resulting disappearance of resistance.

'How far have they come now?' she wanted to know.

I inquired of Michael.

'We're just clear of forest for the first time, and into rough country,' he told me.

I handed it on to Sophie. She nodded. 'Three hours, or a bit less, perhaps, to the river-bank,' she said.

She ladled the species of porridge out of the pot into bowls. It tasted better than it looked. The bread was less palatable. She broke a disc of it with a stone, and it had to be dipped in water before one could eat it. Petra grumbled that it was not proper food like we had at home. That reminded her of something. Without any warning she launched a question:

'Michael, is my father there?'

It took him off guard. I caught his 'yes' forming before he could suppress it.

I looked at Petra, hoping the implications were lost on her. Mercifully, they were. Rosalind lowered her bowl and stared into it silently.

Suspicion insulated one curiously little against the shock of knowledge. I could recall my father's voice, doctrinaire, relentless. I knew the expression his face would be wearing, as if I had seen him when he spoke.

'A baby - a baby which . . . would grow to breed, and breeding, spread pollution until all around us there would be mutants and abominations. That has happened in places where the will and faith were weak, but here it shall *never* happen.'

And then my Aunt Harriet:

'I shall pray God to send charity into this hideous world. . . .'

Poor Aunt Harriet, with her prayers as futile as her hopes. . . .

A world in which a man could come upon such a hunt himself! What kind of a man?

Rosalind rested her hand on my arm. Sophie looked up. When she saw my face her expression changed.

'What is it?' she asked.

Rosalind told her. Her eyes widened with horror. She looked from me to Petra, then slowly, bemusedly, back to me again. She opened her mouth to speak, but lowered her eyes, leaving the thought unsaid. I looked at Petra, too: then at Sophie, at the rags she wore, and the cave we were in. . . .

'Purity . . . ' I said. 'The will of the Lord. Honour thy father . . . Am I supposed to forgive him! Or to try to kill him?'

The answer startled me. I was not aware that I had sent out the thought at large.

'Let him be,' came the severe, clear pattern from the Sealand woman. 'Your work is to survive. Neither his kind, nor his kind of thinking will survive long. They are the crown of creation, they are ambition fulfilled - they have nowhere more to go. But life is change, that is how it differs from the rocks, change is its very nature. Who, then, were the recent lords of creation, that they should expect to remain unchanged?'

'The living form defies evolution at its peril; if it does not adapt, it will be broken. The idea of completed man is the supreme vanity: the finished image is a sacrilegious myth.

'The Old People brought down Tribulation, and were broken into fragments by it. Your father and his kind are a part of those fragments. They have become history without being aware of it. They are determined still that there is a final form to defend: soon they will attain the stability they strive for, in the only form it is granted - a place among the fossils. . . .'

Her patterns became less harsh and decisive. A kindlier shaping softened them, but, for all that, she seemed to be in a mood which required an oracular style of presentation, for she went on:

'There is comfort in a mother's breast, but there has to be a weaning. The attainment of independence, the severing of ties, is, at best, a bleak process for both sides; but it is necessary, even though each may grudge it and hold it against the other. The cord has been cut at the other end already; it will only be a futile entanglement if you do not cut it at your end, too.

'Whether harsh intolerance and bitter rectitude are the armour worn over fear and disappointment, or whether they are the festival-dress of the sadist, they cover an enemy of the life-force. The difference in kind can be bridged only by self-sacrifice: *his* self-sacrifice, for yours would bridge nothing. So, there is the severance. We have a new world to conquer: they have only a lost cause to lose.'

She ceased, leaving me somewhat bemused. Rosalind, too, looked as if she were still catching up on it. Petra seemed bored.

Sophie regarded us curiously. She said:

'You give an outsider an uncomfortable feeling. Is it something I could know?'

'Well - ' I began, and paused, wondering how to put it.

'She said we're not to bother about my father because he doesn't understand - I think,' observed Petra. It seemed a pretty fair summary.

'She . . . ?' Sophie inquired.

I remembered that she knew nothing of the Sealand people.

'Oh, a friend of Petra's,' I told her, vaguely.

Sophie was sitting close to the entrance, the rest of us farther back, out of sight from the ground. Presently she looked out and down.

'There are quite a lot of the men back now - most of them I should think. Some of them are collected round Gordon's tent, most of the others are drifting that way. He must be back, too.'

She went on regarding the scene while she finished the contents of her bowl. Then she put it down beside her.

'I'll see what I can find out,' she said, and disappeared down the ladder.

She was gone fully an hour. I risked a quick look-out once or twice, and could see the spider-man in front of his tent. He seemed to be dividing his men up into parties and instructing them by drawing diagrams in the bare earth.

'What's happening?' I asked Sophie as she returned. 'What's the plan?'

She hesitated, looking doubtful.

'For goodness sake,' I told her, 'we *want* your people to win, don't we? But we don't want Michael to get hurt, if it can be helped.'

'We're going to ambush them this side of the river,' she said.

'Let them get across?'

'There's nowhere to make a stand on the other side,' she explained.

I suggested to Michael that he should hang back at the riverside, or, if he could not do that, he might fall off during the crossing and get carried away downstream. He said he'd bear the proposal in mind, but try to think of a less uncomfortable means of delay.

A few minutes later a voice called Sophie's name from below.

She whispered:

'Keep back. It's him,' and sped across and down the ladder.

After that nothing happened for more than an hour, when the Sealand woman came through again:

'Reply to me, please. We need a sharper reading on you now. Just keep on sending numbers.'

Petra responded energetically, as if she had been feeling left out of things lately.

'Enough,' the Sealand woman told her. 'Wait a moment.' Presently she added: 'Better than we hoped. We can cut that estimate by an hour.'

Another half hour went by. I sneaked a few quick glimpses outside. The encampment looked all but deserted now. There was no one to be seen among the shacks but a few older women.

'In sight of the river,' Michael reported.

Fifteen to twenty minutes passed. Then Michael again:

'They've muffed it, the fools. We've spotted a couple of them moving on the top of the cliffs. Not that it makes a lot

of difference, anyway - that cleft's much too obvious a trap. Council of war now.'

The council was evidently brief. In less than ten minutes he was through again:

'Plan. We retreat to cover immediately opposite the cleft. There, at a gap in the cover, we leave half a dozen men occasionally passing and repassing in view to give the impression of more, and light fires to suggest that we are held up. Rest of the force is splitting to make detours and two crossings, one upstream and one down. We then pincer-in behind the cleft. Better inform, if you can.'

The encampment was no great distance behind the river cliffs. It looked likely that we might be caught within the pincers. With so few about now, and only women, as far as I could see, we should very likely be able to get safely across the place and into the trees. . . . Or would that carry us into the path of one of the pincer forces? I looked out again, prospecting, and the first thing I noticed was that a dozen of the women now carried bows and were sticking arrows in the ground to be handy. I changed my mind about a sprint across the encampment.

Inform, Michael had said. And a good idea, too. But how? Even if I should risk leaving Rosalind and Petra I would stand an exceedingly poor chance of ever giving my information. For one thing there were standing orders from the spider-man to shoot me. Moreover, I was clearly, even at a distance, no Fringes man, which would of itself be plenty of reason for quick shooting, in the circumstances.

I very much wished Sophie would return: and went on wishing that for an hour or so.

'We're across the river downstream from you. No opposition,' Michael told us.

We went on waiting.

Suddenly a gun went off somewhere in the woods, on the left. Three or four more shots followed, then silence, then another two.

A few minutes later a crowd of ragged men with quite a number of women among them came pouring out of the woods,

leaving the scene of their intended ambush and making towards the firing. They were a woebegone, miserable lot, a few of them visibly deviants, but most of them looking simply the wrecks of normal human beings. I could not see more than three or four guns in all. The rest had bows, and a number had short spears scabbarded at their backs as well. The spider-man stood out among them, taller than the rest, and close beside him I could see Sophie, with a bow in her hand. Whatever degree of organization there may have been had clearly disintegrated.

'What's happening?' I asked Michael. 'Was that your lot shooting?'

'No. That was the other party. They're trying to draw the Fringes men across their way so that we can come in from the opposite side and take them in the rear.'

'They're succeeding,' I told him.

The sound of more firing came from the same direction as before. A clamour and shouting broke out. A few spent arrows dropped into the left-hand end of the clearing. Some men came running back out of the trees.

Suddenly there was a strong, clear question:

'You're still safe?'

We were all three lying on the floor in the front part of the cave now. We had a view of what was going on, and there was little enough chance of anyone noticing our heads, or bothering about us if he did. The way things were going was plain even to Petra. She loosed off an urgent, excited flash.

'Steady, child, steady! We're coming,' admonished the Sealand woman.

More arrows fell into the left-hand end of the clearing, and more ragged figures appeared in rapid retreat. They ran back, dodging as they came, and took cover among the tents and hovels. Still more followed, with arrows spitting out of the woods after them. The Fringes men crouched behind their bits of cover, bobbing up now and then to take quick shots at figures scarcely visible between the trees.

Unexpectedly a shower of arrows flew in from the other end of the clearing. The tattered men and women discovered themselves to be between two fires, and started to panic. Most of

them jumped to their feet and ran for the shelter of the caves. I got ready to push the ladder away if any of them should try to climb into ours.

Half a dozen horsemen appeared, riding out of the trees on the right. I noticed the spider-man. He was standing by his tent, bow in hand, watching the riders. Sophie, beside him, was tugging at his ragged jacket, urging him to run towards the caves. He brushed her back with his long right arm, never taking his eyes from the emerging horsemen. His right hand went back to the string, and held the bow half-drawn. His eyes kept on searching among the horsemen.

Suddenly he stiffened. His bow came up like a flash, bent to its full. He loosed. The shaft took my father in the left of his chest. He jerked, and fell back on Sheba's hindquarters. Then he slithered off sideways and dropped to the ground, his right foot still caught in the stirrup.

The spider-man threw down his bow, and turned. With a scoop of his long arms he snatched up Sophie, and began to run. His spindly legs had not made more than three prodigious strides when a couple of arrows took him simultaneously in the back and side, and he fell.

Sophie struggled to her feet and ran on by herself. An arrow pierced right through her upper arm, but she held on, with it lodged there. Then another took her in the back of the neck. She dropped in mid-stride, and her body slid along in the dust. . . .

Petra had not seen it happen. She was looking all round, with a bewildered expression.

'What's that?' she asked. 'What's that queer noise?'

The Sealand woman came in, calm, confidence-inspiring.

'Don't be frightened. We're coming. It's all right. Stay just where you are.'

I could hear the voice now. A strange drumming sound, gradually swelling. One could not place it; it seemed to be filling everywhere, emanating from nowhere.

More men were coming out of the woods into the clearing, most of them on horseback. Many of them I recognized, men I had known all my life, all joined together now to hunt us

down. Most of the Fringes people had bolted into the caves, and were shooting a little more effectively from their cover.

Suddenly one of the horsemen shouted and pointed upwards.

I looked up, too. The sky was no longer clear. Something like a bank of mist, but shot with quick iridescent flashes, hung over us. Above it, as if through a veil, I could make out one of the strange, fish-shaped craft that I had dreamt of in my childhood, hanging in the sky. The mist made it indistinct in detail, but what I could see of it was just as I remembered: a white, glistening body with something half-invisible whizzing round above it. It was growing bigger and louder as it dropped towards us.

As I looked down again I saw a few glistening threads, like cobwebs, drifting past the mouth of the cave. Then more and more of them, giving sudden gleams as they twisted in the air and caught the light.

The shooting fell off. All over the clearing the invaders lowered their bows and guns and stared upwards. They goggled incredulously, then those on the left jumped to their feet with shouts of alarm, and turned to run. Over on the right the horses pranced with fright, whinnied, and began to bolt in all directions. In a few seconds the whole place was in chaos. Fleeing men cannoned into one another, panic-stricken horses trampled through the flimsy shacks, and tripped on the guy-ropes of tents flinging their riders headlong.

I sought for Michael.

'Here!' I told him. 'This way. Come along over here.'

'Coming,' he told me.

I spotted him then, just getting to his feet beside a prone horse that was kicking out violently. He looked up towards our cave, found us, and waved a hand. He turned to glance up at the machine in the sky. It was still sinking gently down, perhaps a couple of hundred feet above us now. Underneath it the queer mist eddied in a great swirl.

'Coming,' repeated Michael.

He turned towards us and started. Then he paused and picked at something on his arm. His hand stayed there.

'Queer,' he told us. 'Like a cobweb, but sticky. I can't get my hand...' His thought suddenly became panicky. 'It's stuck. I can't move it!'

The Sealand woman came in, coolly advising:

'Don't struggle. You'll exhaust yourself. Lie down if you can. Keep calm. Don't move. Just wait. Keep still, on the ground, so that it can't get round you.'

I saw Michael obey the instruction, though his thoughts were by no means confident. Suddenly I realized that all over the clearing men were clawing at themselves, trying to get the stuff off, but where their hands touched it they stuck. They were struggling with it like flies in treacle, and all the time more strands were floating down on them. Most of them fought with it for a few seconds and then tried to run for shelter of the trees. They'd take about three steps before their feet stuck together, and they pitched on to the ground. The threads already lying there trapped them further. More threads fell lightly down on them as they struggled and thrashed about until presently they could struggle no more. The horses were no better off. I saw one back into a small bush. When it moved forward it tore the bush out by the roots. The bush swung round and touched the other hind leg. The legs became inseparable. The horse fell over and lay kicking - for a while.

A descending strand wafted across the back of my own hand. I told Rosalind and Petra to get back into the cave. I looked at the strand, not daring to touch it with my other hand. I turned the hand over slowly and carefully, and tried to scrape the stuff off on the rock. I was not careful enough. The movement brought the strand, and other strands, looping slowly towards me, and my hand was glued to the rock.

'Here they are,' Petra cried, in words and thoughts together.

I looked up to see the gleaming white fish-shape settling into the middle of the clearing. Its descent swirled the floating filaments in a cloud about it and thrust a waft of air outwards. I saw some of the strands in front of the cave-mouth hesitate, undulate, and then come drifting inwards. Involuntarily I closed my eyes. There was a light gossamer touch on my face. When I tried to open my eyes again I found I could not.

It needs a lot of resolution to lie perfectly still while you feel more and more sticky strands falling with a feathery, tickling touch across your face and hands: and still more when you begin to feel that those which landed first press on your skin like fine cords, and tug gently at it.

I caught Michael wondering with some alarm if this was not a trick, and whether he might not have been better off if he had tried to run for it. Before I could reply the Sealand woman came in reassuring us again, telling us to keep calm and have patience. Rosalind emphasized that to Petra.

'Has it got you, too?' I asked her.

'Yes,' she said. 'The wind from the machine blew it right into the cave - Petra, darling, you heard what she said. You must try to keep still.'

The throbbing and the whirring which had dominated everything grew less as the machine slowed down. Presently it stopped. The succeeding silence was shocking. There were a few half-muffled calls and smothered sounds, but little more. I understood the reasons for that. Strands had fallen across my own mouth. I could not have opened it to call out if I wanted to.

The waiting seemed interminable. My skin crawled under the touch of the stuff, and the pull of it was becoming painful.

The Sealand woman inquired: 'Michael? - Keep counting to guide me to you.'

Michael started counting, in figure shapes. They were steady until the one and the two of his twelve wavered and dissolved into a pattern of relief and thankfulness. In the silence that had now fallen I could hear him say in words: 'They're in that cave there, that one.'

There was a creak from the ladder, a gritting of its poles against the ledge, and presently a slight hissing noise. A dampness fell on my face and hands, and the skin began to lose its puckered feeling. I tried to open my eyes again; they resisted,

but gave slowly. There was a sticky feeling about the lids as I raised them.

Close in front of me, standing on the upper rungs of the ladder, and leaning inwards, was a figure entirely hidden in a shiny white suit. There were still filaments leisurely adrift in the air, but when they fell on the headpiece or shoulders of the white suit they did not stick. They slithered off and wafted gently on their downward way. I could see nothing of the suit's wearer but a pair of eyes looked at me through small, transparent windows. In a white-gloved hand was a metal bottle, with a fine spray hissing from it.

'Turn over,' came the woman's thought.

I turned, and she played the spray up and down the front of my clothes. Then she climbed the last two or three rungs, stepped over me where I lay and made her way towards Rosalind and Petra at the back of the cave, spraying as she went. Michael's head and shoulders appeared above the sill. He, too, was bedewed with spray, and the few vagrant strands that settled him lay glistening for a moment before they dissolved. I sat up and looked past him.

The white machine rested in the middle of the clearing. The device on top of it had ceased to revolve, and now that it was observable, seemed to be a sort of conical spiral, built up in a number of spaced sections from some almost transparent material. There were glazed windows in the side of the fish-shaped body, and a door stood open.

The clearing itself looked as if a fantastic number of spiders had spun there with all their might and main. The place was festooned with threads, which appeared more white than glossy now: it took a moment or two of feeling something was wrong with them before one perceived that they failed to move in the breeze as webs would. And not only they, but everything was motionless, petrified.

The forms of a number of men, and horses, too, were scattered among the shacks. They were as unmoving as the rest.

A sudden sharp cracking came from the right. I looked over there, just in time to see a young tree break off a foot from the ground, and fall. Then another movement caught the corner

of my eye – a bush slowly leaning over. Its roots came out of the ground as I watched. Another bush moved. A shack crumpled in on itself and collapsed, and another. . . . It was uncanny and alarming. . . .

Back in the cave there was a sigh of relief from Rosalind. I got up and went to her, with Michael following. Petra announced in a subdued, somewhat expostulatory, tone:

‘That was *very* horrid.’

Her eyes dwelt reprovingly and curiously on the white-suited figure. The woman made a few final, all-encompassing passes with her spray, then pulled off her gloves and lifted back her hood. She regarded us: we frankly stared at her.

Her eyes were large, with irises more brown than green, and fringed with long, deep-gold lashes. Her nose was straight, but her nostrils curved with the perfection of a sculpture. Her mouth was, perhaps, a little wide; the chin beneath it was rounded, but not soft. Her hair was just a little darker than Rosalind’s, and, astonishingly in a woman, it was short. Cut off nearly level with her jaw.

But more than anything it was the lightness of her face that made us stare. It was not pallor, it was simply fairness, like new cream, and with cheeks that might have been dusted with pink petals. There was scarcely a line in its smoothness, it seemed all new and perfect, as if neither wind nor rain had ever touched her. We found it hard to believe that any real, living person could look like that, so untouched, so unflawed.

For she was no girl in a first tender blossoming, unmistakably she was a woman – thirty, perhaps; one could not tell. She was sure of herself, with a serenity of confidence which made Rosalind’s self-reliance seem almost bravado.

She took us in, and then fixed her attention upon Petra. She smiled at her, with just a glimpse of perfect, white teeth.

There was an immensely complex pattern which compounded pleasure, satisfaction, achievement, relief, approval, and, most surprisingly to me, a touch of something very like awe. The intermixture was subtle beyond Petra’s grasp, but enough of it reached her to give her an unwonted, wide-eyed seriousness for some seconds as she looked up into the woman’s

eyes; as if she knew in some way, without understanding how or why, that this was one of the cardinal moments of her life.

Then, after a few moments, her expression relaxed; she smiled and chuckled. Evidently something was passing between them, but it was of a quality, or on a level, that did not reach me at all. I caught Rosalind’s eye, but she simply shook her head and watched.

The Sealand woman bent down and picked Petra up. They looked closely into one another’s faces. Petra raised her hand and tentatively touched the woman’s face, as if to assure herself that it was real. The Sealand woman laughed, kissed her, and put her down again. She shook her head slowly, as if she were not quite believing.

‘It was worth while,’ she said in words, but words so curiously pronounced that I scarcely understood them at first. ‘Yes. Certainly, it was worth while!’

She slipped into thought-forms, much easier to follow than her words.

‘It was not simple to get permission to come. Such an immense distance: more than twice as far as any of us has been before. So costly to send the ship: they could scarcely believe it would be worth it. But it will be . . .’ She looked at Petra again, wonderingly. ‘At her age, and untrained – yet she can throw a thought half-way round the world!’ She shook her head once more, as if still unable to believe it entirely. Then she turned to me.

‘She has still a great deal to learn, but we will give her the best teachers, and then, one day, she will be teaching them.’

She sat down on Sophie’s bed of twigs and skins. Against the thrown-back white hood, her beautiful head looked as though it were framed by a halo. She studied each of us thoughtfully in turn, and seemed satisfied. She nodded.

‘With one another’s help, you have managed to get quite a long way, too; but you’ll find that there is a lot more we can teach you.’ She took hold of Petra’s hand. ‘Well, as you’ve no possessions to collect, and there’s nothing to delay us, we might as well start now.’

‘For Waknuk?’ Michael asked.

It was as much a statement as a question, and she checked herself in the act of rising, to look at him inquiringly.

'There is still Rachel,' he explained.

The Sealand woman considered.

'I'm not sure - Wait a minute,' she told him.

She was suddenly in communication with someone on board the machine outside, at a speed and on a level where I could make almost nothing of it. Presently she shook her head regretfully.

'I was afraid of that,' she said. 'I am sorry, but we cannot include her.'

'It wouldn't take long. It isn't far - not for your flying machine,' Michael insisted.

Again she shook her head.

'I am sorry,' she said again. 'Of course we would if we could, but it is a technical matter. You see, the journey was longer than we expected. There were some dreadful parts that we dare not cross, even at great height: we had to go far round them. Also, because of what was happening here, we had to come faster than we had intended.' She paused, seeming to wonder whether she were attempting an explanation beyond the understanding of such primitives as we. 'The machine,' she told us, 'uses fuel. The more weight it has to carry, and the faster it travels, the more of this fuel it uses, and now we have only just enough of it left to get us back, if we go carefully. If we were to go to Waknuk and make another landing and take-off there, *and* try to carry four of you, as well as Petra; we should use up all our fuel before we could reach home. That would mean that we should fall into the sea, and drown. Three of you from here we can just manage with safety; four, and the extra landing, we can't.'

There was a pause while we appreciated the situation. She had made it clear enough, and she sat back, a motionless figure in her gleaming white suit, her knees drawn up and her hands clasped round them, waiting sympathetically and patiently for us to accept the facts.

In the pause one became aware of the uncanniness of the silence all about us. There was not a sound to be heard now.

Not a movement. Even the leaves on the trees were unable to rustle. A sudden shock of realization jerked a question from Rosalind:

'They're not - they're not all - *dead*? I didn't understand. I thought . . .'

'Yes,' the Sealand woman told her simply. 'They're all dead. The plastic threads contract as they dry. A man who struggles and entangles himself soon becomes unconscious. It is more merciful than your arrows and spears.'

Rosalind shivered. Perhaps I did, too. There was an unnerving quality about it - something quite different from the fatal issue of a man-to-man fight, or from the casualty roll of an ordinary battle. We were puzzled, too, by the Sealand woman, for there was no callousness in her mind, nor any great concern either: just a slight distaste, as if for an unavoidable, but unexceptional, necessity. She perceived our confusion, and shook her head reprovingly.

'It is not pleasant to kill any creature,' she agreed, 'but to pretend that one can live without doing so is self-deception. There has to be meat in the dish, there have to be vegetables forbidden to flower, seeds forbidden to germinate; even the cycles of microbes must be sacrificed for us to continue our cycles. It is neither shameful nor shocking that it should be so: it is simply a part of the great revolving wheel of natural economy. And just as we have to keep ourselves alive in these ways, so, too, we have to preserve our species against other species that wish to destroy it - or else fail in our trust.'

'The unhappy Fringes people were condemned through no act of their own to a life of squalor and misery - there could be no future for them. As for those who condemned them - well, that, too, is the way of it. There have been lords of life before, you know. Did you ever hear of the great lizards? When the time came for them to be superseded they had to pass away.'

'Sometime there will come a day when we ourselves shall have to give place to a new thing. Very certainly we shall struggle against the inevitable just as these remnants of the Old People do. We shall try with all our strength to grind it back into the earth from which it is emerging, for treachery to

one's own species must always seem a crime. We shall force it to prove itself, and when it does, we shall go; as, by the same process, these are going.

'In loyalty to their kind they cannot tolerate our rise; in loyalty to our kind, we cannot tolerate their obstruction.

'If the process shocks you, it is because you have not been able to stand off and, knowing what you are, see what a difference in *kind* must mean. Your minds are confused by your ties and your upbringing: you are still half-thinking of them as the same kind as yourselves. That is why you are shocked. And that is why they have you at a disadvantage, for *they* are not confused. They are alert, corporately aware of danger to their species. They can see quite well that if it is to survive they have not only to preserve it from deterioration, but they must protect it from the even more serious threat of the superior variant.

'For ours is a superior variant, and we are only just beginning. We are able to think-together and understand one another as they never could; we are beginning to understand how to assemble and apply the composite team-mind to a problem – and where may that not take us one day? We are not shut away into individual cages from which we can reach out only with inadequate words. Understanding one another, we do not need laws which treat living forms as though they were as indistinguishable as bricks; we could never commit the enormity of imagining that we could mint ourselves into equality and identity, like stamped coins; we do not mechanically attempt to hammer ourselves into geometrical patterns of society, or policy; we are not dogmatists teaching God how He should have ordered the world.

'The essential quality of life is living; the essential quality of living is change; change is evolution: and we are part of it.

'The static, the enemy of change, is the enemy of life, and therefore our implacable enemy. If you still feel shocked, or doubtful, just consider some of the things that these people, who have taught you to think of them as your fellows, have done. I know little about your lives, but the pattern scarcely varies wherever a pocket of the older species is trying to pre-

serve itself. And consider, too, what they intended to do to you, and why . . .'

As before, I found her rhetorical style somewhat overwhelming, but in general I was able to follow her line of thought. I did not have the power of detachment that could allow me to think of myself as another species – nor am I sure that I have it yet. In my thinking we were still no more than unhappy minor variants; but I could look back and consider why we had been forced to flee. . . .

I glanced at Petra. She was sitting pretty much bored with all this apologia, watching the Sealand woman's beautiful face with a kind of wistful wonder. A series of memories cut off what my eyes were seeing – my Aunt Harriet's face in the water, her hair gently waving in the current; poor Anne, a limp figure hanging from a beam; Sally, wringing her hands in anguish for Katherine, and in terror for herself; Sophie, degraded to a savage, sliding in the dust, with an arrow in her neck. . . .

Any of those might have been a picture of Petra's future. . . .

I shifted over beside her, and put an arm round her.

During all the Sealand woman's disquisition Michael had been gazing out of the entrance, running his eyes almost covetously over the machine that waited in the clearing. He went on studying it for a minute or two after she had stopped, then he sighed, and turned away. For a few moments he contemplated the rock floor between his feet. Presently he looked up.

'Petra,' he asked. 'Do you think you could reach Rachel for me?'

Petra put out the inquiry, in her forceful way.

'Yes. She's there. She wants to know what's happening,' she told him.

'Say first that whatever she may hear, we're all alive and quite all right.'

'Yes,' said Petra presently. 'She understands that.'

'Now I want you to tell her this,' Michael went on carefully. 'She is to go on being brave – and very careful – and in a little time, three or four days, perhaps, I shall come and fetch her away. Will you tell her that?'

Petra made the relay energetically, but quite faithfully, and then sat waiting for the response. A small frown gradually appeared.

'Oh dear,' she said, with a touch of disgust. 'She's gone all muddled up and crying again. She does seem to cry an awful lot, that girl, doesn't she? I don't see why. Her behind-thinks aren't miserable at all this time: it's sort of happy-crying. Isn't that silly?'

All of us looked at Michael, without open comment.

'Well,' he said, defensively, 'you two are proscribed as out-laws, so neither of you can go.'

'But, Michael -' Rosalind began.

'She's quite *alone*,' said Michael. 'Would you leave David alone there, or would David leave you?'

There was no answer to that.

'You said "fetch her away,"' observed Rosalind.

'That's what I meant. We *could* stay in Waknuk for a while, waiting for the day when we, or perhaps our children, would be found out. . . . That's not good enough. . . .

'Or we could come to the Fringes.' He looked round the cave and out across the clearing with distaste. 'That's not good enough either.'

'Rachel deserves just as well as any of the rest of us. All right, then; since the machine can't take her, someone's got to bring her.'

The Sealand woman was leaning forward, watching him. There was sympathy and admiration in her eyes, but she shook her head gently.

'It's a very long way - and there's that awful, impassable country in between,' she reminded him.

'I know that,' he acknowledged. 'But the world is round, so there must be another way to get there.'

'It would be hard - and certainly dangerous,' she warned.

'No more dangerous than to stay in Waknuk. Besides, how could we stay now, knowing that there is a place for people like us, that there is somewhere to go.'

'*Knowing* makes all the difference. Knowing that we're not just pointless freaks - a few bewildered deviations hoping to

save their own skins. It's the difference between just trying to keep alive, and having something to live for.'

The Sealand woman thought for a moment or two, then she raised her eyes to meet his again.

'When you do reach us, Michael,' she told him, 'you can be very sure of your place with us.'

The door shut with a thud. The machine started to vibrate and blow a great dusty wind across the clearing. Through the windows we could see Michael bracing himself against it, his clothes flapping. Even the deviational trees about the clearing were stirring in their webby shrouds.

The floor tilted beneath us. There was a slight lurch, then the ground began to drop away as we climbed faster and faster into the evening sky. Soon we steadied, pointed towards the south-west.

Petra was excited, and a bit over strength.

'It's awfully wonderful,' she announced. 'I can see for simply miles and miles and miles. Oh, Michael, you do look funny and tiny down there!'

The lone, miniature figure in the clearing waved its arm.

'Just at present,' Michael's thought came up to us, 'I seem to be feeling a bit funny and tiny down here, Petra, dear. But it'll pass. We'll be coming after you.'

It was just as I had seen it in my dreams. A brighter sun than Waknuk ever knew poured down upon the wide blue bay where the lines of white-topped breakers crawled slowly to the beach. Small boats, some with coloured sails, and some with none, were making for the harbour already dotted with craft. Clustered along the shore, and thinning as it stretched back towards the hills, lay the city with its white houses embedded among green parks and gardens. I could even make out the tiny vehicles sliding along the wide, tree-bordered avenues. A little inland, beside a square of green, a bright light was blinking from a tower and a fish-shaped machine was floating to the ground.

It was so familiar that I almost misgave. For a swift moment

I imagined that I should wake to find myself back in my bed in Waknuk. I took hold of Rosalind's hand to reassure myself.

'It is real, isn't it? You can see it, too?' I asked her.

'It's beautiful, David. I never thought there could be anything so lovely. . . . And there's something else, too, that you never told me about.'

'What?' I asked.

'Listen! . . . Can't you feel it? Open your mind more. . . . Petra, darling, if you *could* stop bubbling over for a few minutes . . .'

I did as she told me. I was aware of the engineer in our machine communicating with someone below, but behind that, as a background to it, there was something new and unknown to me. In terms of sound it could be not unlike the buzzing of a hive of bees; in terms of light, a suffused glow.

'What is it?' I said, puzzled.

'Can't you guess, David? It's people. Lots and lots of our kind of people.'

I realized she must be right, and I listened to it for a bit – until Petra's excitement got the better of her, and I had to protect myself.

We were over the land now, and looked down at the city coming up to meet us.

'I'm beginning to believe it's real and true at last,' I told Rosalind. 'You were never with me those other times.'

She turned her head. The under-Rosalind was in her face, smiling, shiny-eyed. The armour was gone. She let me look beneath it. It was like a flower opening. . . .

'This time, David –' she began.

Then she was blotted out. We staggered, and put our hands to our heads. Even the floor under our feet jerked a little.

Anguished protests came from all directions.

'Oh, sorry,' Petra apologized to the ship's crew, and to the city in general, 'but it is awfully exciting.'

'This time, darling, we'll forgive you,' Rosalind told her. 'It is.'



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