

SCIENCE FICTION

STORIES

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Sometimes worlds can meet without the inhabitants of either realizing. . . .

The Natives

by KATHERINE MACLEAN

THE old one said, "Stick close by me, child."

"What'll it be like, Grandpa?" The youngster was frightened.

"Dark, very dark, and big. It moves fast, but we'll keep up with it." The tone was consciously reassuring.

"Dark, Grandpa?"

"Yes, it sucks heat and absorbs light. You'll find out when you're old and strong enough to swim down to the bottom and see what's there. Now stay with me when we follow it, and don't get lost in the crowd; and don't get ahead of me or get too close to it — you might take in too much, and get overcharged."

"What's 'overcharged,' Grandpa? Can you really get too much?" The youngster jiggled up and down a little with excitement and anticipation.

For a moment, the oldster turned his attention from watching for the thing that was coming, and considered him fondly. "Poor youngling. I forget. You've had no chance to learn what it means to get enough. You're too young to ride the storms and tap the lightnings . . . Listen now. When a grownup has to let out a flash of blue light, that means that he's overcharged and spinning off balance inside, and so he has to save himself by letting out his energy to let down the pressure. So be careful; take enough, but don't be greedy and take in too much too suddenly. Now let's just float here with the others and be ready."

It was a beautiful bright day. The sun poured down its flood of light, here and there energizing a molecule of the blue air into little sparkles of ionization; and below, a mist of bright clouds half veiled the darkness that was the bottom.

"What's it mean when someone blinks blue light in lots of flashes, and then glows red and starts sinking, huh, Grandpa?"

"I'll tell you later when you're older. Just be careful and don't get too close." He was abruptly excited. "Here it comes!"

Out of the blue translucence far below, a black dot appeared and grew rapidly, rushing closer until it was a huge fish-shaped object with wide

spread fins, rushing towards them. It would pass slightly to the left of them, and already the waiting crowd was moving to intercept it.

It flashed by, and the youngster thought they were going to lose it — it was going so much faster than they; but as the thought crossed his mind, and he saw the two churning glowing openings in its rear, a burning blast of energy struck him. A multitude of glowing, charged particles crackled around him, streamed against him. His fields shifted to reach out and capture them; the spin of stored energy within spun faster, absorbing the new energy into its drive, its life-pulse rising to a deep hum, and he felt strong, stronger than he had ever felt before in his life.

They were flying faster now, accelerating faster than he had ever flown, and it was easy. They drew up closer to the dark thing, matching it speed for speed, laving in the glowing cloud of energy-particles that roared backward from its jets. The youngster was astounded and exhilarated at the tremendous, effortless speed with which they were driving forward. This was the first time he had ever had so much power. It was ten times more than any aurora borealis with its pale wash of energy waves.

Drunken in his new found strength, he pulled ahead closer to the roaring jets.

AT THE peak of the arc of climb of the New York-Istanbul strato-liner, high in the ionosphere where the Earth was merely a giant globe far below, the pilot of the stratoliner boredly cut the jets for the fuel-saving glide that turned their nose toward Earth again.

The radar was clanging its usual senseless warning of imminent collision with some solid objects, which had approached closer than the automatic relays considered safe. It had been clanging for several minutes. The pilot glanced in annoyance at the radar screen, where several hundred globes — from two to seven feet in diameter — showed vividly, trailing the ship in a fan-shaped cluster. "Some day I'm going to take a hammer to that thing."

The co-pilot, looking back from the control blister's rear window, saw nothing, as usual, except a few of the shining globes, which showed themselves transiently in a brief flash of blue light as they carelessly overloaded and discharged — and one, smaller than the rest, who blinked on and off rapidly in brilliant flashes of blue. As he watched, it ran suddenly down the color-scale to red and began to lag behind, a glowing red globe, sinking.

"I wonder what the hell they think they're doing?" he grumbled.

KATHERINE MACLEAN In recent years, stories dealing with such "psychic" phenomena as telepathy, teleportation, and telekinesis have been frequent. Katherine MacLean was not the first to explore the scientific possibilities in these fields, but a number of her stories have dealt with them; and all have been unusual.