

The Last Outpost

by Nelson S. Bond, 1908-2006

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*And tell of the signs you shall shortly see;
Of the times that are now, and the times that shall be.*
—Hogg—Kilkenny

From my study window, with a frank and half-amused curiosity, I watched him coming down the street. He was such a worried looking little man and—unlike the usual run of magazine peddlers of which, to judge by the bulging briefcase under his arm, he was one—so obviously intent on finding one particular address.

The reason for my amusement was, of course, that in our neighborhood homes have no numbers. Our suburb barely clings to the fringes of the city; it is the rare block that boasts more than two or three dwellings. Thus our houses need no numbers, and we give them none.

Finally he glimpsed me standing at my study window, and started across my lawn. It was a hot day, and my work was not going well. Under such circumstances, a writer welcomes any interruption. I stepped forth to meet him.

Call it fate, if you will, or coincidence. Call it anything you wish to explain why I, of all persons, should have been the one who met the stranger. Whatever you call it, it was the first of a series of surprises too intimate, too disturbingly accurate, to be wholly fortuitous.

For as we approached each other across the lawn, he smiled apologetically and—

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Could you tell me which of these houses is the home of Nelson Bond?”

“I’m Nelson Bond,” I said, and his eyes lighted.

“You are? What luck! I wonder if we might—” He glanced meaningfully in the direction of my study. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with you. A matter of greatest importance.”

To you, I thought derisively. An encyclopedia. Or life insurance. Or maybe an investment trust of some sort. Though why in the world anyone should suspect a writer of having any money to invest...

But it was a dull day, and any excuse to escape the typewriter was a good one. I nodded and led the way indoors. As I cleared space for him on a lounge chair cluttered with a hodge-podge of reference books and old manuscript carbons, he watched me with bright, birdlike interest.

“You’re a younger man than I thought,” he said.

I kept a straight face, but chuckled inwardly. Then it is insurance, I thought; well, watch him take a powder when I toss my bombshell at him. In as casual a tone as I could manage I said, “Well, maybe I’d look even younger if I didn’t have this damned ulcer.”

That’s the gambit which usually quick-freezes insurance men. One whisper of the magic word “ulcer” and they make for the nearest exit. But my visitor merely shook his head commiseratingly.

“You have one, too? Does it annoy you all the time, or only periodically? Mine seems to act up worst in April and October. They tell me—”

"Sit down," I said, a bit disgruntled. "I'd rather not talk about it, if it's all the same to you. Now—you had something to discuss with me?"

He sat—perched, rather—on the edge of his chair and gazed intently into my eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Bond, I have. But before I begin, let me introduce myself. My name is Westcott—Dr. Arthur Westcott. I am a medical doctor and a practicing psychiatrist connected with—"

The institution he named is one of the South's most famous clinics, specializing in mental ailments. I looked at him with some suspicion.

"Delighted to meet you, Dr. Westcott. But if you're here to make a case history of me simply because my stories run for the most part to fantasy—"

He leaned forward earnestly.

"I have no intention of making you a case history," he said. "But I *am* here because you are known as a writer of fantasies. Fantasies and science fiction." Perhaps I preened myself a trifle. His wasn't much of a compliment, but any writer likes to hear he is "known"—if only for his *Pro Bono Publico* complaints in the Letters to the Editor section of his local newspaper.

I corrected him gently. "Fantasies only, Dr. Westcott. I don't write science fiction any more."

He stared at me in something remarkably like alarm. "You don't write science fiction?"

"Not for a number of years. Five or six, anyway."

"But," he protested, "you must! It's the only way! That's why I'm here. You've got to do it—or Grayson is mad, and the whole thing is a maniac's wild dreaming. I can't believe that's true."

It was my turn to stare at him in something considerably like alarm. I said carefully, "I'm afraid I don't understand. Who is Grayson? And why on Earth should I write a story for a field of fiction I deserted years ago?"

"On Earth!" laughed my guest—without mirth in his laughter. "On Earth, indeed. It is odd you should use those words."

Then his face was suddenly grave, and his eyes were bleak with a vision I could not share.

"You must do one more tale," he said, and his words were a grim command. "You must do one more story of the days that are yet to be. You dare not refuse. For on its telling may depend the fate of all mankind..."

Chapter I

It was a hot summer day. Everywhere the leaves stirred fretfully in the wake of a stifling breeze; in the skies above no wisp of cloud offered shield to the searing torrent of the sun. There was, then, no reason why it should seem to me that for an instant there touched my nape a breath of chilling wind, heavy and foreboding as the draft that precursors a squall.

No reason, again, why my query that ended the brief silence should have been voiced in something barely more than a whisper. But there was something about

Dr. Westcott—his preternatural gravity, the taut conviction of his plea that was more than a demand—which compelled a like intensity.

"Tell me," I suggested.

He nodded and touched the briefcase beside him. "I will explain," he said in that curiously stilted, definition-conscious style so frequently found in educators. "I will explain. Only this can tell you."

It was a manuscript he drew from the briefcase. In the true meaning of the word a manuscript—a thick bundle of pages written by hand, not type. Westcott did not give it to me. I had time to notice only that the writing was sprawling and ill-formed; then my visitor laid the sheets down again.

"I have already told you who I am and what I do. I take it you are familiar with the nature of our clinic and my work?"

I nodded. "Mental rehabilitation. Emphasis on war victims. Shellshock, battle fatigue—that sort of thing."

"Quite correct," nodded Westcott. "And if I may say so, we have had an unusual degree of success in our treatment of those unfortunates through the use of new and experimental therapies.

"Not the least of which," he continued in his stiff, pedantic style, "is a treatment of the psychotic trauma by hypnosis. You have undoubtedly read or heard something about this technique. Our efforts include conversational hypnosis, post-hypnotic suggestion, and automatic writing."

"You make the patient remember what happened to him," I said, "things so terrible that his psyche rejected them—and you effect a cure. That the principle?"

"That," nodded my visitor, "is the basic principle. But suppose—" Here he lifted to mine eyes that were frankly baffled—"Suppose a patient were to remember events which he could never possibly have witnessed? What then would your explanation be?"

I frowned. "The question is a contradiction in terms. No one can remember things he hasn't known."

"Grayson can," said Dr. Westcott simply.

"Grayson?"

"One of my patients. An ex-pilot with the Army Air Corps. The man who wrote this."

He touched once more the manuscript lying face down between us. I stared at it, then at him, curiously.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Doctor." I essayed the light touch. "Which of us is the fantasist? You or me?"

"I don't know," replied Westcott ruefully. "I honestly don't know. I wish to God I did. For if Frank Grayson is sane, then all our scientific knowledge is as a sapling in the vast forest of truths yet to be learned, and man's infant culture totters on the brink of a frightful catastrophe. And if Grayson is mad—then I, too, am mad. For, Lord help me—I believe him!"

"Please let me finish," he went on hurriedly, "and listen with an open mind. I came two hundred miles to see you because, whether you will it or not, you are a part of this strange, tangled skein. It may be that you won't believe what I have come to tell you. That doesn't matter. Whether you believe or not, there is a story you must write.

"Or, rather, there is a story you must publish. It is this story—" He touched the manuscript. "The tale written by Frank Grayson under automatic reflex, when he was hypnotized and had no knowledge of what his hand was doing."

"Just a minute!" I interrupted a bit angrily. "You want me to publish under my own name these dreamworld ravings of a mental patient? What gives you the idea I'd do such—"

"Isaiah," said Westcott in strangely trancelike tones. "Isaiah, Samuel, and Jeremiah. The na-bi-u of Babylon, the oracles of Greece. Nostradamus, Joseph Smith—and Billy Mitchell. What is prophecy, and by what wild talent may some men glimpse a fragment of the future?"

"All those I have named, and countless others, were mocked by their fellow men for daring to foresay that which was to come. Yet in the ebbing of slow time their prescience was proven. And all too terribly may yet be proven true the prophecy of Frank Grayson."

"This manuscript was written by the hand of Grayson. But it was not his brain that dictated its words. Grayson is my patient; I know the way he thinks, the way he talks. These words are no more his than the hand in which these sentences are written is his handwriting. See here—"

He laid before me the final page of the manuscript. Beneath the concluding lines of that sprawling cacography was a final paragraph:

Francis J. Grayson, hereby attest that the foregoing was written by me, under hypnosis, at the times hereafter noted—

The statement gave dates and hours. Both statement and signature were penned in a neat, precise hand—the printed script favored by draftsmen and artists. The writing was in no respect like that of the preceding pages.

"Whether this be prophecy or prescience," continued Westcott, "I do not know. By whatever means Grayson happened forward up the stream of time, the fact remains that McLeod's story is vivid, forceful, and potentially of the greatest importance—"

"McLeod?" I interrupted. "Who is McLeod?"

"The man who really lived this adventure," answered Westcott. "Kerry McLeod—soldier, pioneer, and colonist of Earth's outpost on the planet Venus in the year Nineteen Eighty-five A.D."

There are times when speech is impossible. This was such a time. I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came. I didn't know what to say because I didn't know my own reaction to this fantastically incredible situation.

If Westcott were a would-be writer trying to snare me into publishing under my name one of his fledgling tales, I had every justification for anger. Yet there was a disconcerting sincerity in the manner of my guest. His were not the eyes of a guileful man, nor was there any laughter in them.

What finally I should have said, I do not know. It was spared me the necessity of saying anything, for Westcott rose, placing before me the manuscript.

"I will go now," he said, "and leave this with you. I ask only one thing: that even though you doubt, when you have finished reading it, you do that which the tale tells you you must do. No matter what you believe, dare not gamble on your judgment."

"The tale, you will find, begins and ends abruptly, as began and ended Grayson's curious rapport with Kerry McLeod. It has several gaps, coincident with Grayson's intervals of non-hypnotic consciousness. The text has errors, both of grammar and fact. Some of these I have already corrected. Feel free to revise others as seems best to you. The degree of literary excellence is incidental. It is not important that Kerry McLeod lacks culture. It is of the utmost importance that he be given the message, the clue, he so direly needs."

He smiled briefly, tentatively.

"I hope," he said, "that when you have read, you will believe—as I do. And now, I wish you good day."

I watched him down the street and out of sight, the little stranger whose curious demand had roused in me emotions so troubled and confused. And then, of course, I read the manuscript.

—Which now, as I was bade, I offer you. It comes to you under my name in a book of stories, the rest of which are frankly and admittedly fantasies.

How, then, can I convince you that of the lot, this one alone is not wild imagining, but chill and sober truth? What protest will convince you that I am herein simply an instrument through which is brought to you the story of a man not yet born?

Only the by-line is mine. The story is the story of Kerry McLeod, colonist of an outpost distant by many millions of miles and many decades of time...

Chapter II

...shoved me violently, and another snatched at my gun. I kicked at the one in front of me and he fell back, spitting curses and teeth. Then I whirled and grabbed the hand fumbling at my holster. It was a lean, strong, sinewy hand, but mine was toughened in the Bratislava campaign and on the steppes before Moscow. I twisted, and my attacker screamed as bones grated.

Even so they would have got to me in a few minutes, for there must have been eight or ten of them surrounding me, held at bay only by the fear I might use my gun. The streets were deserted at this late hour, and lightless. There was no moon, and the fitful glare of that damned crimson ball crawling across the sky was worse than starlight or no light at all. It cast its red, unhealthy hue on all it touched, until even the shadows seemed dabbled with the color of blood, and they flickered and shifted like furtive, creeping things.

Footsteps shuffled nearer, and a taut voice called, "Don't be a fool, Corpsman! We don't want to hurt you unless you make us. We are your friends and the friends of all mankind. Throw down your blaster and join with us."

"And if I don't?" I asked.

"Then we'll take it anyway," came the answer, "but you won't live to join us."

"Your opinion," I said. "I've got a full cartridge that says otherwise. Come and get it, Sackies!"

I thought that would anger them, and it did. Other voices merged in a growl, and in the blood-tinted darkness you could feel them tensing for action. If there's

anything in the world they can't stand, it's to be called Sackies. I slipped my blaster from its holster and thumbed back the safety catch. I wasn't as confident as I'd tried to sound, but of one thing I was certain: they would take from *me* no blast-gun to add to their steadily growing arsenal. My cartridge would go before I did.

"As you wish," snarled their spokesman. "They who refuse our friendship are our enemies. Brothers—*by the Sign!*"

I set myself as they came at me in a flood of clawing, fanatic humanity. Not yet did I hit the stud. Too well had been drilled into me the law of the Corps. *Fight solely to keep the peace, and then to disable, not kill.* With clubbed barrel I struck at them, spinning, whirling, fending them off, fighting to break out of their tightening net. A cudgel glanced off my temple, raked my cheek and jaw, and suddenly I tasted the hot, salt flavor of blood. A weight hurled itself on my back, and the chill of an outlawed knife touched my arm as I stumbled to my knees.

Then came relief, as welcome as it was un hoped for. Twin beams of light swirled around the corner, with whiteness sponging out the sallow shadows, with blinding clarity fixing my attackers in midstride. The distinctive whistle of a patrol siren shrilled, brakes squealed, and a voice cried, "Hey, what's going on here? Break it up! Break it up!"

The weight lifted suddenly from my back, encircling arms no longer bound my knees, as the Diarist gang took to its heels. Where they disappeared to, heaven only knows. Like the rats they were, they scuttled into doorways, alleys, entrances that mysteriously opened to receive them, then as mysteriously closed. In a matter of seconds I was alone in the street with the two Corpsmen who hurried to me from the car.

I rose, dusting myself, and they gasped as they saw my uniform.

"A Corpsmen!" exclaimed the patrol sergeant. Then, suspiciously, "But what outfit? You're not local."

"That's right," I nodded. "Lieutenant McLeod, Pan-American Sector." I didn't think it necessary to tell a pair of local watchdogs I was with Intelligence. "Thanks for the rescue job. Things looked bad."

"You look bad. That cut very deep?"

I had felt the steel, but had not realized until he brought it to my attention that the Diarist's blade had gashed my arm from wrist to elbow. It was an ugly slash, but neither painful nor serious. I wrapped a handkerchief about it.

"I don't think so. It will hold till I get a medic to look at it."

"Get him to look at that bump on your noggin, too," suggested the sergeant. "It looks like a second head."

"I could use another one—with more brains than the first. A midnight walk alone through this sector wasn't such a bright idea. The Sackies are nasty here, eh?"

"They're nasty everywhere," he grunted, "but Fedhed is infested with the meanest breed." He eyed me thoughtfully. "I suppose you know we'll have to take you to sector headquarters for a ref check, Lieutenant? You've got your creds?"

I patted my pocket. "All in order, Sergeant."

"You *look* right," he conceded, "but we can't afford to take chances any more. They've been picking up Corpsmen's uniforms lately, as well as arms and ammo.

Last month a Fedhed guard turned out to be a Diarist in disguise. We have no idea what information he managed to smuggle out to his Sackcloth buddies before we nabbed him. We'll learn that the hard way, I suppose, a few months from now."

"You're right to play it safe," I told him. "And I want to meet the local authorities, anyway. Let's go."

We piled into the patrol car. The headlights bored a tunnel of safety before us as we sped across the avenues of once-populous New York to the massive buildings which are the World Federation Headquarters. Above us that damned, sanity-shaking demon watched our progress with a baleful, scarlet eye.

* * * * *

General Harkrader, commander of Fedhed, motioned me to a chair across the wide mahogany desk from his own. There were cigarettes in a box at my elbow and a decanter of Scotch in a cellaret beside me.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said, "now that your credentials have been checked and you're patched up, relax and take it easy for a few minutes." He grinned. "We gave you a fine welcome to Fedhed, didn't we?"

"My own fault, sir," I admitted. "I should have known better than to take a post-curfew stroll through Diarist districts. But where I come from, the Sackies are scattered and not at all dangerous."

Harkrader grunted his envy.

"Wish I could say the same! This area is a regular hotbed of them. Mass demonstrations, noonday worships, public exhibitions of resistance, passive and otherwise—everything you've ever heard of them doing anywhere else, and some you've never dreamed of in your worst nightmares. Where do you come from, anyway?"

"Pan-American," I told him. "St. Thomas."

His brows lifted.

"Oh? Intelligence?"

"That's right."

He selected a cigarette with slow care and lighted it. "Here on furlough?" he asked, not casually enough. "Or assignment?"

"Assignment," I said frankly. Then, as a swift apprehension swept his eyes, "But there's nothing for you to be concerned about, General. I'm not here to investigate Fedhed or your command, but to ask your help. We need information."

He seemed almost to expand with relief. It's funny how the rest of the Corps always jells with something akin to horror when you admit to being an I-man. It must trace back to the Loyalty Purges. But, Lord, those took place way back in '71 or '72, when I was a cadet on the Island.

"Anything I can do to help, Lieutenant—"

"Good. Here's the sixtifer. What do you know about a man named Douglas Frisbee?"

"Professor Frisbee?"

"He calls himself that," I said, "in spite of the edict against such titles."

"Of course," said Harkrader, flustered. "I mean, he used to be a profess—a teacher at Columbia, here in New York, when that university was still in use as an institution of higher learning."

"Distributing point," I corrected mechanically, "of individualistic fallacies."

"Quite!" agreed the Fedhed commander immediately. "I mean simply that—well, I'm thirty years your senior, Lieutenant, and we oldsters are inclined to be a bit lenient in our appraisal of the old ways and customs—"

"We were speaking of Frisbee," I reminded him.

"Oh, yes—Frisbee. Nice old fellow. Shade on the dreamy side, but solid—confoundedly solid!—in his field. Which was—"

"Nuclear physics. We know that. What else?"

"Eh? Why—nothing else. You're right, of course. Frisbee was a nuclear physicist. One of the pioneer students in that field. Studied with Bohr in the early part of the century, worked with the United States Government on the primitive A-bomb experiments of World War II."

"With the U.S. Government? A highly nationalistic man, then?"

"No more than any man born before the Federation was formed," denied Harkrader. "No more than I—and I was a voting adult in 1971, the year the Federation militia seized control of world government."

"Assumed control," I amended, "under mandate of the freemen. You use words rather carelessly, General, for the commander of so important a post."

"Lieutenant," he said curtly, "you forget the difference in our rank!"

"And you, General," I answered quietly, "forget the difference in our branches of service. It is my job to learn the facts. If in attempting to do so I offend you, I am sorry. But your condoning of Frisbee implies sympathy with his ideology. If you, yourself, have nationalistic leanings—"

"Now, Lieutenant," interposed Harkrader hastily, "don't jump to conclusions. I use words poorly, perhaps, but I'm a good soldier. I've commanded this post for a long time without any complaints. I don't want to tangle with Intelligence at this late date. I'm not a separationist, and I'm not a crackpot, radical, or troublemaker of any kind. I'm just a middle-aged human who understands—as you Island-bred youngsters may never understand—how the older generation feels about this strange new world we live in.

"Now," he went on, "you were speaking about Douglas Frisbee. What else do you want to know about him?"

"To your knowledge," I asked, "is he connected with Diarist activities?"

Harkrader stared at me incredulously.

"Frisbee a Sackie? Damn it, man, the very thought is absurd! If you had ever met him—"

"It is my intention to do just that," I said. "For your sake—and for his—I hope our suspicions are baseless. But Frisbee's movements during the past year have been most mysterious. His rural retreat has been frequented by an odd, if not sinister, group of associates. An inventory of his purchases discloses the fact that a great and rather alarming amount of dangerous material has been accumulated at his workshop. There is even reason to believe that from somewhere he has obtained a small amount of radioactive ore, and that he is conducting research prohibited by law."

"Old Frisbee!" said Harkrader. "I simply can't believe it! Oh, I can understand his accumulating experimental material. That's in nature with his character. But

Frisbee a Sackie? Preposterous! I'd as soon judge *you* a worshipper of the Sign. Or myself."

"Nevertheless," I told him, "I must meet Frisbee."

"And you shall. I'll arrange transportation to his place right away." He reached for the visiphone. "Would you rather go by groundcar or gyro?"

"Gyro," I said.

So it was arranged.

* * * * *

If Douglas Frisbee was engaged in any conspiratorial activity, he was clever enough to have concealed all evidence of it perfectly.

I had deliberately elected to travel by gyro to his Long Island dwelling in order that from the air I might get a bird's-eye view of the estate. I got it, and noticed nothing at all suspicious. Frisbee's place was the home of a typical moderately well-to-do gentleman farmer. It had the usual line of larches separating its small acreage from adjacent estates and shielding it from the highway, and the usual outlay of barns, siloes and storage bins, the usual patch of land under cultivation, the usual formal garden around an attractive home in the somewhat conservative Frank Lloyd Wright manner.

It had, in addition, a large and beautiful artificial lake, upon the shimmering surface of which bobbed a number of small sail-and rowboats. Between this and the house stretched a wide expanse of lawn. It was here we landed our gyro.

Someone—a boy in his teens, I thought at first—saw us and crossed the lawn to greet us as our fans idled. I discovered almost immediately, however, that the slim, youthful figure dressed in sport shirt and slacks had deceived me. Our visitor had bronze hair cut to shoulder-length and clubbed in the perennially popular page-boy style. The swing of her walk—the smooth grace of an arm lifted in welcome—the glimpse of golden shadow where the curve of linen collar met the rise of warm young flesh—was pleasing evidence that the newcomer was very much a woman.

My pilot whistled appreciatively as she approached.

"Oh, brother!" he chuckled. "For once in my life they handed me a good assignment. It that's what little girl Sackies look like, the Corps just lost itself a man!"

"That will do, Corporal," I said. I spoke a trifle more sternly than was necessary, I'm afraid, but for some reason or other his attitude annoyed and repelled me. He was a city-bred man, of course, and I should have let that be his apology. On the Island we see few women. Toward the sex, therefore, I have a feeling of curiously mingled respect and uneasiness. "Let me remind you that treason, even though spoken in jest, is still treason."

"Yes, sir," he said. "I'm sorry, sir."

Then the girl was beside us, watching us climb from the gyro.

"Hello!" she called. "You got here early. Dad was not expecting you till—" She stopped in mid-sentence as she saw our uniforms. "Why, you're Corpsmen!"

I saluted. "Yes, miss. Lieutenant McLeod, at your service. Corporal Babacz. This is the home of Dr. Frisbee?"

A look of guarded wariness clouded her gold-flecked eyes, and her smile of pleased expectancy had faded.

"Yes, Lieutenant. I am Dana Frisbee. Was my father expecting you?"

"No. But I'd like to see him. Is he at home?"

"He's—on the grounds somewhere. If you gentlemen will make yourselves comfortable on the porch, I'll find him. Have you had lunch?"

"Yes, thanks. Before we left Fedhed."

"Fedhed! Then this is an official visit?"

I said quietly, "If I could see your father, miss?"

"Yes. Oh, yes—of course. I won't be long."

She turned and left us, disappearing in the general direction of the outbuildings we had seen from topside. That she was apprehensive was obvious; that there was some secretive sense of guilt underlying her anxiety was quite possible. I stared after her, frowning.

"It would be a shame," I mused, "for such a girl to be involved in illegal activities."

Corporal Babacz stared at me in slack-jawed astonishment. "Beg pardon, sir? What did you say?"

I felt myself flush. It was true I had spoken with incautious impulse. A Corpsman should never permit himself to be swayed by personal considerations. But Babacz didn't have to be so damned obvious in his amazement. I am a human. I have a normal man's emotions and sympathies.

"Never mind," I said. "Let's go to the porch."

Chapter III

"Diarist activities, Lieutenant?" said Dr. Frisbee. "Diarist activities? You're joking. You can't mean the Federation is serious in its suspicion that I am implicated in the Diarist movement?"

"The authorities never joke, sir," I said severely. "I was sent here by Intelligence—"

"The title," said the ex-professor, "is a misnomer. Intelligence is not intelligent if it conceives for one instant that I would ally myself with the forces of superstition, ignorance and terror. Do you know, Lieutenant, just what the Diarist movement is?"

"Of course. An organized attempt on the part of an exhibitionist cult to overthrow the World Federation." Frisbee shook his head, and sighed.

"You have been well versed in the semantics of your profession, Lieutenant. Your definition is letter-perfect—but it describes the goal of the Diarists, not the reason for the cult's existence. Do you know why they call themselves Diarists? Why they debase themselves in smocks of sackcloth? Why they hold public prayer sessions? Why their most solemn oath is by 'the Sign'?"

I said, "It has something to do with the comet."

"Something! It has everything to do with the comet! McLeod—are you an educated man?"

I told him proudly, "I was schooled on the Island, and graduated *cum laude* from the Federation Military Academy."

"I see. Then you are not educated—"

"My dear sir!"

"You are not educated," repeated Frisbee imperturbably, "in subjects of real and lasting importance to mankind. You have been well schooled in the so-called science of military tactics and maneuver, you have learned political dogma, and absorbed a certain amount of more or less distorted history—"

There was a sound suspiciously like a snicker at my elbow, but when I turned to look sharply at Babacz, he met my gaze with straight-lipped gravity. Dana Frisbee, on the other hand, was openly amused. Her lips curved in a smile that was more than polite friendliness, and in her tawny eyes the gold flecks danced and sparkled.

It was not a warm day, but I felt the sting of perspiration on my throat and brow.

I said carefully, "Dr. Frisbee, I think it is only fair to warn you that you are already under investigation for suspected disloyalty to the Federation. I shall have to make an official report on this interview. If you persist in your treasonable attacks on the government—"

"Treasonable, fiddlesticks!" exploded the scholar. "Since when has it become treason for a man to speak his mind on a subject of his own choosing? The trouble with you, young man—" Here he bent forward and shook his finger in my face as if he were a teacher admonishing some recalcitrant student—"The trouble with you is that you know nothing of life—nothing, sir!—except the pitiful potage of propaganda they've shoveled down your gullible young throat at that monstrous academy!"

"No—sit down!" he thundered as I started to rise.

"I'm not through yet. You came here to interview me, get my views on certain subjects. Well, you shall have them. If you want to arrest me when I'm finished, so be it. But at least I shall have the satisfaction of getting off my chest a lot of words that have needed airing for a long time."

"Dad—" ventured Dana Frisbee.

"Later, my dear. Right now I'm going to give these two young dupes of a corrupt and tyrannous autocracy a little history lesson. You, sir—" he glowered at Babacz from beneath shaggy white brows—"when was the Federation formed?"

Babacz was wholly under the old pedant's spell. He parroted reply as if reciting in a grade-school classroom.

"The World Federation of Sovereign Nations was conjoined in 1961 and ratified by a majority of member states in the same year."

"Correct!" snapped Frisbee. "Note that the Charter designated those member states as *sovereign* nations. And now you, sir. For what purpose was created the military force of which you are an officer?"

"The World Federation Police Corps," I replied, "is composed of selected youth of all member states, in ratio to the population of those states. It serves to preserve international harmony—"

"Ha!" interjected Frisbee savagely.

"—protect individual liberties—"

“Ha!”

“—and prevent the encroachment of force or ideals by any group upon any other portion of the world populace—”

“Enough!” said Frisbee. “Those were the principles on which our predecessors, twenty-odd years ago, agreed to surrender their ancient heritage of sovereign rights, in order to create what they hoped might be a finer union of all mankind. But was this dream accomplished? No—because the very tool with which the Federation hoped to implement a high ideal turned out to be the weapon of destruction.

“The Corps! It was the Corps itself that ten years after ratification of the Federation Charter, in Nineteen seventy-one, ruthlessly took advantage of the fact that it was the only armed body in existence, and in a series of lightning moves overthrew the government and set up its own military oligarchy.

“It was the Corps which put into effect the drastic and oppressive code under which we now—”

* * * * *

At this point regrettably occurs one of those interruptions in the narrative of which I was forewarned by Dr. Westcott. This is doubly unfortunate: first, because of vast interest should be Douglas Frisbee’s *post facto* commentary on that fragment of “history” which is still to us the unguessed future; second, because the manuscript resumes confusingly at a later time, and in other surroundings.

Anticipating the reader’s natural curiosity, let me point out that the tale appears to resume about a day later, and that without making an arrest, Lieutenant McLeod has returned to Federation Headquarters, or, as in the easy vernacular of that era he calls it Fedhed...

* * * * *

“—six riot calls since sunrise,” he growled, “and more yet to come, or I miss my guess. I’ve called Boston and Philadelphia for reinforcements. They both turned me down on the same grounds: no can do. The Sackies have opened up with mass demonstrations in their cities, too. And judging by the tele reports—” he gestured hopelessly at the papers strewn on his desk—“it’s the same story everywhere.”

I asked, “What’s behind it, General? Is this one of their holy days, or something?”

“Every day is a holy day to them, damn their hides! And will continue to be as long as that burning devil rides the heavens!” He turned to shake an angry fist at the comet which, spiraling high in the western sky, merged its crimson with the sun’s summer gold to flood the room with a weird, orange hue. It was that shade of orange found in fog lamps, or on bridges, and in spots where night mists gather. By its reflection living flesh looks dead and corpselike, lips seem swollen to a purplish pulp, and eyes gleam feverishly from heavy-circled sockets. Harkrader shook his fist in futile and impotent rage.

“It’s a thing of evil. Its red magic is a spell on the minds of men.”

“It’s only a comet,” I said; “a comet known to man for centuries. Halley’s Comet. Our fathers saw it last time it approached the Earth in nineteen ten; their grandfathers saw it in eighteen thirty-five. It’s nothing to fear. It’s a perfectly

natural phenomenon, accurately predicted by astronomers and making its appearance on schedule.”

“You know that,” grunted the Fedhead commander, “and I know it. But the Diarists don’t know it. Ignorant, superstitious scum that they are, they’ve made it their god, named it a sacred Sign to justify their rebellion.”

I said, “Well, it’s annoying, but I don’t think it’s anything to get disturbed over. This isn’t the first time we’ve seen Diarist demonstrations.”

“No? Speak for yourself, Lieutenant. Never in all my years have I seen an uprising to equal this one. This is serious! Spontaneous outbreaks in every major city of the world. Deliberate and concerted efforts to disrupt our lines of communication. Demonstrations of violence against any man wearing the uniform of the Corps. Attempts to break into our arsenals and arm their sackcloth rabble—Yes?”

This last was over his shoulder as an adjutant came hurriedly into the room, too excited to observe the formality of knocking.

“The Sackies, sir. The mob surrounding the Central Park Arsenal—”

“Yes? I gave orders they were to be dispersed. It wasn’t necessary to fire on them?”

“It was, sir. We did. But—”

“Too bad. I had hoped to avoid bloodshed. Issue a proclamation informing the public that the Corps sincerely regrets the incident and hopes it may not find it necessary to repeat such stringent measures.”

“But that’s not it, sir!” cried the adjutant, his voice cracking. “We fired on them, but they didn’t run. Instead, they attacked in force. There were hundreds...thousands...of them. Many were killed, but the rest came on and on—”

“Speak up, man!” shouted the General. “What is it? What are you trying to tell me?”

“This, sir. That the garrison was wiped out to the last man. The Sackies have taken our main stronghold in New York sector!” In the silence that followed the messenger’s words, General Harkrader turned and stared down into the streets below. When he turned again to face us he had become subtly an older man.

“You see, McLeod?” he said.

I saw. In Central Park Arsenal had been stored material sufficient to arm and maintain for an indefinite siege every able-bodied man in the New York area. With the winning of these weapons the Sackies ceased to be a rabble, became an army equaling the Corps in equipment, outnumbering us perhaps twenty to one.

I said, “You were right, sir. But it’s too late to cry over spilt milk. What are we going to do now?”

As if seeking answer himself, he turned and snapped on the video. After a few seconds the screen cleared to show the familiar newsroom of the FBC’s television studio. It was a scene of unreserved chaos and confusion. Forgotten was the traditional smoothness and urbanity of visual newscasting as a swarm of harassed reporters and analysts jockeyed for space in the equipment-cluttered studio, elbowing each other, sometimes bumping the cameras and making the image shake as their own sense of assurance must be shaking at this tense hour.

Before our eyes a reporter tore from one teletype a late report, rushed it to the camera and read it to us:

“Bulletin: Washington. Panic seized the erstwhile capital city of the United States today as Diarists rose in overwhelming numbers to occupy all points of military importance in this strategic sector.

“Bulletin: London. A pitched battle rages in the ancient City of London today as hordes of Diarists pit their numerical superiority against the armaments and tactics of a beleaguered handful of Corpsmen. The Diarists now claim control of all terrain north of the Thames, and are advancing in force on the well-fortified Southwark district.

“Bulletin: Rome. Sons of the Sign, arise! As we have done here, so can you do. Be forthright and brave. The Day has dawned—”

The newscaster paled, stopped reading, hastily cast aside the Rome dispatch which provided self-evident proof that the Sackies held control of at least the Rome centers of news dissemination. He resumed:

“Bulletin: Ottawa. The Governor-General of the Dominion has asked the local Diarist leader, Brother John Carstairs, for a truce. This request followed seizure by the cultists of every important warehouse and fortress in the sector.

Bulletin: Moscow. Amid scenes reminiscent of the days of Soviet control, Corpsmen and Diarists today locked in a grim battle for control of this city’s vital Krem—”

The screen shook suddenly, and the image fogged. A voice, cool and confident, overrode that of the newscaster.

“Here’s the *latest* report, Brother. Let me give it to the public.”

The image cleared. Fronting the camera stood a man clad in the loose sackcloth smock of the Diarist brotherhood. About the newsroom his armed followers rounded up the members of the video staff. The Sackie leader smiled, spoke squarely into the camera’s eye.

“Bulletin: World Federation Headquarters, New York. The Day has dawned. Brothers of the Sign, under the inspiration of their sacred symbol, now control the major portion of this city, seat of the corrupt World Federation government.

“We call upon all oppressed citizens to join us and celebrate the long-awaited Day. To Corpsmen and hirelings of the deposed government who will renounce their former allegiance, we offer full amnesty and Brotherhood in the Sign.

“Further resistance is useless. We are prepared to subdue without mercy any who—”

Harkrader snapped off the video.

“Well,” he said heavily, “that’s it. A lifetime of building and planning overthrown in a single day. It seems we made a mistake, gentlemen. The always fatal error of underestimating our opponents.”

The adjutant cried, “But there must be *something* we Can do, General! They can’t have won so final a victory. Not in so few hours!”

“Wrong again,” sighed Harkrader. “Our strength was never in numbers. It lay in the fact that only we had weapons. Once they took the Arsenals—Simpson?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Gather the men of Fedhed. I want to talk to them. At once, please.”

“Very good, sir.”

The adjutant saluted and left. Harkrader stared at me somberly.

"I'm going to turn them loose, McLeod. There's no use in their being slaughtered in a hopeless cause. The best we could hope for would be a delaying action—then heaven knows what retribution for our stubbornness."

"And you, sir?" I asked.

"I don't know. What does it matter? My life work, my career, ended today. They will execute me, I suppose. I cannot say I care. I am an old man. Within my lifetime I have seen strong sovereign nations fight innumerable bloody wars—to no conclusion. I have seen men devise a plan for peaceful living, and I have watched that plan go awry. Now this. What will come of it, I do not know. I do not greatly care.

"But you are young. What will *you* do?"

"I am a Corpsman," I said.

"You *were* a Corpsman. The Corps is dead."

"I am a Corpsman," I repeated, "bred and trained on the Island. I will carry on."

"Not from here, McLeod. I am surrendering Fedhed."

"There are other places. Secret places. Forts the Sackies never dreamed of."

He shrugged. "As you wish. Order what you need in the way of supplies or transportation facilities. That much I can give you."

"But first," I said. "I must return to Long Island. Frisbee warned me this was coming. He is not with us, but he is not with them, either. And he knows something—something great and important that he would not tell me. It is my duty to go back and learn his secret."

"Frisbee!" said Harkrader. "By Jove, yes! Frisbee. You've got something there, McLeod. He may be our last hope. Lieutenant—give me fifteen minutes, and then I'll go with you."

"It would be an honor, sir," I told him.

Thus it was that a quarter-hour later Harkrader and I, in a gyro with Corporal Babacz again at the controls, took off from the roof of the Federation Headquarters on the first leg of a journey which was to carry us farther than our minds in their wildest imaginings could ever have conceived.

Chapter IV

Our landing at Frisbee's refuge was in strange contrast to our first visit there. Then the only one to meet us had been Dana. This time the poising of our gyro for vertical descent brought running to the field so startling a number of people that I could hardly believe my eyes.

It was a motley group. The only thing its members, of whom there were at least fifty, appeared to have in common was youth. All, with the exception of the scientist himself, were of my own generation.

There similarity ended, diversity began. About half were young women or girls. A part of these were dressed in normal street clothes, others wore laboratory smocks, still others were clad—like the majority of men—in grease-stained jumpers. Those men who were not in work clothes were garbed variously in executives' day-briefs, technicians' pileproofs, or similarly designed garments for

special jobs. I noted two or three wearing portions of the distinctive rubberized suits used by divers for work in shallow submarine depths.

Harkrader glanced at me in frowning bewilderment.

"You didn't mention anything like this, McLeod."

"I didn't see anything like this yesterday."

"Maybe," suggested Babacz, "the old man is mixed up with the Sackies, after all?"

"I don't believe so. I have no idea where these people came from. But you'll notice they don't wear the smocks of the Brotherhood."

Our tricycle gear touched ground; Babacz halted the fans as the gyro bounced and settled. Instantly a solid wall of determined young bodies hemmed us in. A voice asked, "Who are you, and what do you want?"

There was a movement through the crowd, and Frisbee appeared.

"It's all right, Warren," he said quietly. "I know these men. They are not our enemies."

"They're Corpsmen, Professor," called one angrily. "All Corpsmen are our enemies."

"Man's greatest enemy," replied Frisbee in his calm, classroom manner, "is his animal instinct toward herd action. I will take care of this. The rest of you will please return to your tasks. And hurry! Remember that every minute, every second, is precious now."

Reluctantly, not without some grumbling and ominous backward looks, the group split and sifted away, leaving only Frisbee and his daughter. Dana wore stained denim overalls, and her bronze hair was caught in a faded kerchief. But she was beautiful. Her hands were oil-stained, and there was a smudge of carbon black on her nose, but I found her breath-taking in her loveliness. She smiled at me, and I could tell that she, too, was remembering that moment in the garden.

Frisbee said, "You are Harkrader. It's been a long time since we met, John."

"Thirty years, Professor," said Harkrader. "I graduated with the class of fifty-seven."

He used the old term quite instinctively and without seeming to know he had done so. Frisbee had that curious effect on the people. He retained an aura of the old days.

"Yes. That was a good class. One of the last *free* classes. In it were men of bright promise. Yourself... Harry Sanders... Lou Chauvenet... Aaron Jablonski..."

I listened, appalled and yet in awe. If these had been Harkrader's classmates, it had indeed been a year of great, if oddly various, men. All the names were famous—or infamous. Harold Sanders was permanent Chairman of the World Health Commission. Louis Chauvenet, renowned for his astrogational research, had for a decade blazed new trails toward spaceflight, and with the disappearance of his ill-fated Luna expedition in 1978, had become a legend. Aaron Jablonski had died with his stubborn little army of Loyalists at Cincinnati in the Nationalist Rebellion of 1973-4.

"Men of bright promise," repeated Frisbee. "I fear we shall not soon again see classes like that." He shook his head sadly. "This is an evil day, John. The long twilight has ended, and darkness falls."

"You've heard the news, then?"

"Yes."

"We heard nothing while flying here," I interposed. "Are the Diarists successful everywhere?"

"Almost everywhere. A few cities, some of the more remote garrisons, hold out. But the movement snowballs as the Brothers gain arms and converts. They hold airports now, and are flying reinforcements and supplies to stubborn sectors."

"Paris has fallen," said Dana, "and Berlin, and Fort Wainwright in the Philippines. The Diarists control all South America from Tierra del Fuego to the Gulf, excepting only the supply depot in the Matto Grasso. Asia is—"

"The Island?" I demanded. "They have not yet taken the Island?"

"Which island?"

Frisbee smiled at his daughter.

"To an I-man, my dear, there is only one Island."

"St. Thomas," I elucidated. "Intelligence G.H.Q."

"Oh—in the Virgins? No. We heard no report from there."

I smiled grimly. "You won't. The Sackies planned well but futilely. We still have a few aces up our sleeves."

Frisbee glanced shrewdly at me from beneath silvered brows. "Such as—"

"Well manned garrisons," I told him proudly, "in places the world doesn't even suspect. Antarctica, Van Diemen's Land—no need to name them. But I think the Sackies will start chanting a different hymn when the plutes begin to fall."

"Plutes!" cried Frisbee. "Plutonium bombs? But you can't do that! Atomic warfare was outlawed more than twenty years ago!"

"In warfare between powers. But this is different. This is world revolt against a recognized authority. The end justifies the means."

"You fools!" roared the physicist. "You stupid and arrogant damned fools! Don't you realize the authority of your government has been challenged because it is dictatorial and venal? Because men would rather die than live under such restrictions as you have placed on them?"

"Would you rather see a world governed by religious fanatics? Madmen in sackcloth who worship a comet?"

"I'd rather see *such* a world than no world at all!" Frisbee ran shaking fingers through his hair. "I dislike the Diarist rebellion and its precepts, but I was prepared to accept it for a time as the lesser of evils. Now the choice is out of my hands. Out of the hands of all men."

"You're getting excited over nothing," I said. "In a few days the revolt will be brought under control—"

"In a few days," cried the scientist, "the Earth on which we live may no longer exist! McLeod—did it never occur to your precious Intelligence that the conspirators, too, may have atomic weapons?"

I stared at him, dry-lipped. The thought had never occurred to me, I freely acknowledged—not until that moment. Now suddenly I realized what could happen if by any chance he were right. In my second year of training as a cadet we were taken to the Safety Zone around what used to be the Oak Ridge experimental station, and were shown the results of the catastrophe there. That pile had exploded some nine years before, but the terrain for a thirty mile diameter about the gigantic crater was still violently radioactive.

I answered, "But—but they can't. Atomic materiel is on the proscribed list. Only the Federation—"

"Nonsense!" rapped Frisbee. "Uranium and plutonium are hard, perhaps impossible, to get, it's true. But those are not the only radioactive minerals, McLeod. Thorium... actinium... phoebium...(1) All these are equally as potent a source of atomic energy as the commonly used elements. With what do you think I have conducted my experiments, built my—"

He stopped abruptly as Dana cried, "Dad!" But what had been said was beyond recall. I picked him up swiftly.

"Yes—your experiments. What *have* you built?"

Dana said, "Kerry, let's go up to the house? I'm a little tired, and it's so hot here in the sun—"

"What, Doctor?"

"Why do you want to know?" flared Dana. "So you can report it to your cold-blooded superiors on the Island? Well, we'll not tell you. It's our secret, and—"

"Dana, my dear," interposed Frisbee. "If you don't mind? Thank you. McLeod, it had not been my intention to let you in on our secret. But my careless tongue has already betrayed me, and perhaps it does no harm. Tell me—had you not guessed, in a wide sense, what we are doing here?"

"Frankly, sir, no. My information was that you had gathered a considerable amount of construction material and a certain amount—we do not know how much—of active ores. I satisfied myself yesterday that you were not a Diarist. So I assume you have been conducting some private experiments with atomic force. Further than that—"

"Why make you waste time and words?" asked Frisbee. "The answer is quite simple. We have utilized atomic energy, McLeod. But not as a means for destruction. We are using the power of the atom as a drive."

"Drive?"

"Yes. That which my followers have built here, the creation with which we had planned to escape this Earth and a despotic rulership, is—a spaceship!"

"Spaceship!" I cried. And I looked at Hark—

* * * * *

Here again it is necessary to apologize for a break in the continuity of Kerry McLeod's narrative, as relayed via the hand of Frank Grayson.

There seems to be no day-to-day correlation between these two men's lives. According to the attested record, only four days elapsed between the conclusion of this segment and Frank Grayson's next period of hypnosis. But there appears to be an interval of almost two weeks in the world of Kerry McLeod.

Obviously, I cannot explain the conversion of the three Corpsmen to Frisbee's cause. Events of which there exist no record must have had much to do with such a change. However, the text provides ample evidence that a growing personal interest in Dana Frisbee may have influenced McLeod.

As usual, the narrative resumes abruptly. The scene of the following portion is the interior of Frisbee's covertly constructed spacecraft:

* * * * *

—assorted instruments, the usage of which I could only surmise. The massive control panel, with its banks of keys and levers, made that of the most complex jet-plane look simple as a child's toy. A bucket-shaped pressure seat was centrally mounted before the controls. Just above this pilot seat were six vision plates, each about two feet square. They formed a cross shape, with four squares in a vertical line and the other two as wings jutting from the second panel.

"For universal vision," explained Dr. Frisbee. "We cannot get by with mere peripheral vision, as can aviators of earthbound machines. In space we must be able to spot danger coming at us from any direction."

"How do they read?" I asked.

"The vertical plates reflect the images of topside, fore, below, and aft. The wings mirror starboard and port. I fear there isn't much to see just now—"

He smiled whimsically. The crossbar showed only the dull gray of lapping lake waters, as did the pane at the bottom. The topmost plate shone yellow-green as the sunlight filtered through the waters above us, and schools of darting minnows passed briefly before our vision and vanished. It was a striking reminder of where we were. Harkrader voiced a query for the three of us.

"But why did you build it under water, Professor?"

"Can you think of a safer place?" demanded Frisbee. "Concealed as the *Phoenix* was, Intelligence got suspicious of me and sent Kerry here to investigate. If it had been out in the open—"

He shrugged.

"A safer place, he says!" grunted Babacz. "Suppose it had sprung a leak?"

"Teofil, Teofil!" clucked our host. "A vessel that lets water in would also let air out. And that is one fault, above all others, we must not allow. Indeed, one of the main reasons for finishing the *Phoenix* under water was so we might adequately test its spaceworthiness.

"You understand, of course," he continued, "that we built the frame in the open. Then we sunk the shell and went on with our work."

I asked, "Why is it you're showing us all this now, doctor? Why didn't you let us into this section the time you first told us about the spaceship, and took us through it?"

"A fair question, Kerry, simply answered. I wasn't completely sure all or any of you could be trusted—then. Now I am satisfied you are with us."

"The way things are going, we'd be idiots not to be with you."

"This is the heart of the *Phoenix*, the nerve-center from which originate its most vital impulses. Until you were solidly allied with us, I dared not risk letting you see this chamber."

"We have said we are with you," said John Harkrader quietly. "The word of a Corpsman—even of an ex-Corpsman—can be depended upon."

"I know that. That's why you are here today. That is why I am going to teach you things about the *Phoenix* that even the earliest of my young followers do not know.

"You three men," continued Frisbee, "are our latest recruits, but in many ways you are our most valuable. Technicians, all of you, skilled professionals in your fields, you must be my aides and co-pilots in handling the *Phoenix*."

He glanced at us in turn.

“Well, gentlemen? World events plunge to disaster. There is little time left to us. What do you say?”

Babacz gave the simplest and most convincing reply, touching a red-handled lever on the control panel: “This here gadget, Professor,” he asked. “What is it for? And how does it work?”

* * * * *

It was good for our sanity that in the ensuing days we had study with which to divert our minds from what went on in the world outside our little refuge.

As Frisbee had grimly foretold, neither the Sackies nor the Corps could be called winners in the atomic battles raging throughout the world. If the destruction of a stronghold, the ravaging of an entire city, could be called a victory, there were victories for each side. But they are hollow triumphs wherein a salient is not taken but blasted out of existence, where the bomb dropped by a robot plane brings agonizing death to a civilian population ranging into the hundreds of thousands.

I will confess that my own emotions were confused. I believed in Frisbee and trusted him. Yet I was trained on the Island, and in those earliest days my hope was that the Corps would put down the rebellion, restoring peace and order to a world gone mad.

I will contend, too, that the Corps adhered to its principles. It did not—as did the Diarists—strike without warning. From its remote headquarters on the Byrd Peninsula it issued an ultimatum that key cities were to be bombed unless returned to Federation control within a specified time. These cities were fairly named, and the citizens were warned of the consequences of refusal. But they rejected the order scornfully. And at the expiration of the time limit, the bombs fell. Chicago died in a day, victim of a disaster even more terrible than that which had razed part of it a century before. Dublin and its half-million inhabitants disappeared in a red fungus. So, too, passed other admonished and defiant cities.

Then came retaliation, swift and terrible. On the Island fell the bombs of the Sackies, on cities still held by Federation forces fell others. Civilization staggered as two blind and brutal giants trampled back and forth over the face of the globe, exchanging blows in a battle of mutual destruction.

We saw New Orleans fall. The Sackies, triumphantly in possession of what had been Fedhed’s master station, telecast a remote of the bombing of the Gulf city. Through electronic eyes set in the robot bombers we watched the city rise from the morning mists, saw the bomb find its target, watched the stalk of lurid smoke burgeon with its flower of flame and death.

Then, even as the news commentator boasted, “*So falls another Federation fortress that defies the Brotherhood*”—a tremor shook the screen. The vision plate burned with an eye-piercing color more dazzling than white, and the image ended. Two hours later we learned that the first of four A-bombs landing on Manhattan had scored a direct hit on the TV tower. The old landmark of Radio City was now a tangled mass of steel struts and powdered masonry.

My heart was with the Corps when the bombing began. It was sick for all mankind after a few days. And it was well, as I have said, that we had study with

which to divert our minds from what went on in the world outside. Study and work. For there remained to us little time, thought Dr. Frisbee.

"We have been lucky so far," he claimed. "It would be foolish to expect our good luck to last forever. We are living now on borrowed time. A guerrilla battle in this sector... chance discovery by a band of pillaging Diarists... miscalculation of a ballistics engineer thousands of miles away... any of these could lead to our instant destruction. Our only hope for survival is flight. As soon as possible."

"How soon can that be, Professor?" asked Harkrader.

"Possibly tomorrow. Surely no later than the day after that. We are laying in stores and supplies now as fast as we can. The fuel bins are filled, the motor is primed and ready. There remains but to finish loading, and to transfer my library from the house to the Phoenix—"

"Books, too? I thought you were trying to conserve cargo space as much as possible, Professor?"

Frisbee smiled thinly.

"On nonessentials only, Kerry. A reference library may prove our saving weapon in the strange world to which we are going. Yes, I am taking the books. Not only those on technical subjects, but fiction, as well. Novels... poetry... plays... a sampling of man's efforts in the world of dreaming. Had men read more and striven less for personal gain, what we seek now to escape might never have come upon us."

I shrugged and said nothing. He was entitled to his opinion, of course. But for my part I found no need of such soporifics. Novels and plays, silly rhymes by longhaired bards of bygone days—these had no place in my life. I was bred a Corpsman. We honor facts, not fancies.

Babacz looked interested. But, then, Babacz is not a cultured man, an Academy graduate like myself.

"Say, Professor, I'd like to get a crack at some of those books. How about letting me see that they're transferred safely?"

"A good idea, Teofil."

"All right. I'll get at it right away."

Babacz left. We heard him outside calling together some of the crew members to help him. He got along well with those others, did Babacz. Better, I must admit frankly, than did Harkrader and I. It was not that they were not fine youngsters. It was just that—oh, I can't explain it, exactly. But we were—or had been—Corpsmen. And Frisbee's recruits were one and all from the masses.

Still, they were needed. Frisbee had made that clear.

"No, they are not the best educated of Earth's present-day children," he admitted candidly one night, "but they are the soundest. They are neither wards of the Federation, schooled only in the science of military politics, nor are they products of the inept public schooling system that today teaches nothing but blind acquiescence to authority.

"These youths and maidens are my own students, handpicked and trained by myself. On them depends the success of our venture, not only in their generation but in the years to come.

"The *Phoenix*," he said gravely, "is the new Ark of mankind, built to escape the deluge of terror. From the loins of these sound children must spring a new race of freemen, bringing the best of Earth's heritage to our far outpost on Venus—"

That was when first I learned our destination.

* * * * *

That night I walked again with Dana in the gardens. It was a night of no moon, but none was needed. The light of the comet was like the crimson of an August dawn, except that where the rising sun of summer is clean and fresh and promising, the comet's lurid glare was sickly and foreboding. It was not hard to understand the superstitious dread of those who humbled themselves in sackcloth to its worship. Its awful presence, to an unlearned mob, could easily seem herald of the grim Day of Judgment, for the advent of which the Diarists had named their cult.

Still, when we walked in the garden together it was possible to forget for a while the evil which had maddened the minds of men. The breezes of night were gentle and cool, and the accents of evening were sweet. By the hedge where first we had learned we were fated to be more than warring strangers, Dana paused.

"It was here, Kerry. Funny, isn't it? I hated you then—or thought I did. You were our enemy; you had come to spy on us. My only thought was to keep you here as long as I could, delay your report to your superiors. When you told me you must go, I could have killed you. But I had no weapon."

"You had a weapon," I told her. "Your hatred was a weapon, and your scorn. Your hair and your eyes in the moonlight. When you struck me, and I took you in my arms—"

"Must I make you defend yourself again?" she whispered. She raised her lips to mine, and there was no defense. There was only herself and myself, a oneness with the silence of the night...

Later, we lay and looked up at the stars. Even the comet's baleful glow could not occult the whole star-spangled bowl which is the sky. Dana drowsily recited the strange and magic names of the ageless constellations burning above us.

"Scorpio, Sagittarius and Capricorn," she murmured. "Hercules, and Cygnus the Swan. They're lovely, aren't they, Kerry?"

She was lovely.

"Antares, the foe of Mars—" She pointed to a red star low on the southern horizon. "And that blue one is Vega, base of the gods' own lyre. And, see? The brightest of them all, Kerry. There!" She turned my head, and I searched for an echo of the starlight mirrored in the copper of her hair.

"Do you know what that one is, Kerry? The one that shines like a jewel? That's Venus, my darling. Venus, who was the goddess of love. Could there be a better omen? We shall found our new empire on love."

I kissed her. There was much to be said for the education of Frisbee's school, I was learning. Useless knowledge, perhaps, some of it. But rich and warm and filling.

"And those other stars?" I teased her. "Don't they have names? Or do they move so fast they can't be named?"

"Others? Move so fast? But the stars move slowly, Kerry. You can't see them move. Only shooting stars, meteors—"

Her eyes followed the direction of my gaze. Then a gasp broke from her lips, and she leaped to her feet, tugging at my hand.

"Kerry! Those aren't stars! Those are jet-flames—rocket planes headed this way. Hurry!"

We started toward the house. But we were not alone in spotting the flight. The guard posted by Frisbee had seen it, too. Even as we stumbled awkwardly over green lawns made sallow by the blood-red rays of the comet, the silence keened with the moan of our warning siren.

We had almost reached the porch when the first bomb fell. Not on us, or I should not be here to tell of it. Not even very close, thank God!—but close enough that its scream reached our ears like the far, faint cry of a wounded animal, the thunder of its blast numbing our senses. The earth beneath us rose and shook; we tumbled to the ground and clung there for a breathless moment, wondering dimly if there would follow another closer blow. A flaming radiance, a withering hell of heat...

Then Babacz was beside us, screaming orders into our deafened ears.

"This is it! The real thing. The Corps is hitting Fedhed with an all-out attack. The Sackies are striking back with every interceptor rocket they have and we're caught in the line of fire! We've got to get out of here—fast!"

"Out? But where? How can we—"

"The Phoenix. It's sooner than we planned, but the old man says it's now or never. That's our only chance."

We hit the ramp on the run. The tube was a riot of confusion—crewmen and workers of our little band scurrying, luggage-laden, to their assigned quarters aboard the Phoenix. Others elbowed their way back outside to pick up material as yet unshipped, being turned back at the entrance by Frisbee, who stood there urging, shoving, bawling, "No more! Get to your assigned stations! No time for another load!" His face was tense and strained. Some of its tenseness lifted as his eyes found us.

"Dana! Thank God! And Kerry! I didn't know where you were. The others reported you missing."

"Were all right. Harkrader aboard?"

"In the control turret. Join him there. I'll come as soon as the last one is in."

We hurried topside. Harkrader's creased face broke into a smile of relief at our appearance.

"Better strap down. The motor is warming. We take off as soon as Frisbee gets here."

I helped Dana into a percussion seat, saw to it that she was securely buckled for the blastaway, then harnessed myself into another of the chairs. I had just finished when a clang of metal signaled the closing of the last port. The thunder of bombing stopped abruptly. Until that moment I hadn't been aware of its incessant din, but now there was an almost ominous stillness punctuated only by the thin sighing of the air replenishment system.

I caught myself thinking with a curious detachment, this is impossible. This can't be happening to me. It is a dream, a nightmare. I will wake in a moment—

Then Frisbee was with us, moving swiftly to the pilot's seat. As he buckled himself into the pressure chair his eyes offered each of us a brief message of courage and hope. He said no word. There was no word to say. All of us knew what he was thinking. To stay was certain death—but a death we could understand on a world we knew. To go was—

We did not know. But the time had passed for fearing the unknown terrors of a strange world. It was too late to turn back.

Frisbee touched a button. There was no sound, but a massive hand reached forth and squeezed my chest-crushing, grinding, driving the breath from my lungs. The blood burned and sang in my brain, blotted my sight. The darkness—

Chapter V

Here again the Grayson-McLeod manuscript breaks off. From this point on, the narrative becomes progressively more sketchy, more skimpy of details, more episodic, until its baffling and far from conclusive ending.

I deplore this fact, but there is nothing I can do about it. As a mere medium for its publication, I do not feel it is my right to make other than those few changes of continuity and phrase permitted me by Dr. Westcott.

The reader, therefore, must form his own determinations (as I have done for myself) as to the periods of time elapsed, the locales of the scenes so inadequately portrayed. And, above all, as to the meanings of these fragments.

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—water. But I thought it would hold out until we reached our destination, now only a week distant if Frisbee's calculations were correct.

There was no food problem. Fresh and tinned goods had been shipped in quantity. We were not eating much, anyway. Everyone aboard was queasy with the vague disorder that troubled me, an indefinable squeamishness that made us all half drowsy and irritable, a fever for which there was no medicine because it was not caused by a germ. Just a dry, parched fretfulness, like that you feel after lying too long on a beach.

It was hard to believe we had been over four months in space. Looking back on it now, the wonder of those first excitement-filled days seems callow. Hard to realize that once we had gaped, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, at each new sight that offered.

Now we were acceptant to the fact that the space we voyaged through was deepest jet, not the sun-swept radiance we had thought in our ignorance it would be. Now we marveled no longer at the glory of the firm, unwinking stars as seen in airless space, unblanketed by a stifling layer of atmosphere. We chilled no longer with terror when a flaming bullet as big as an earthly mountain loomed in our vision plates, boding to sweep us to oblivion in its furious, headlong chase. We had learned that in the vast emptiness of the gulf that stretches between the worlds, they are near neighbors which pass within a score of thousands of miles,

and that the meteor so “closely” threatening us might be a full day’s journey distant.

All this is not romantic, but it is true. I was a Corpsman; I was trained to observe and report the facts. Let the poets and dreamers sing of the wonders of spaceflight. I say simply and truthfully that the trip was uneventful; it was dull. There were no hours of day and night to dispel the monotony. Our ports looked out on a star-bright but everlasting night in which even the sun was but another burning star. One greater, brighter, then most, it is true, but still half the size it looks through Earth’s refracting mantle.

We did what any group will do that must live under a single roof, within entrapping walls, for more than a hundred days. We worked, we studied, we played. We slept and we ate. We talked of what lay before us and, less often, of what lay behind. We learned to know our shipmates as we had known few men and women in our lives. We became friends with some. We did not permit ourselves to become enemies with any. In the civilization we must create, hatred must be a word unknown.

And—since we were young and warm and alive—love rode the *Phoenix* with us. A boy and a girl, hands locked together, would come to Frisbee asking permission to marry. It was granted always, for as Frisbee said to me after one such ceremony, with a smile filled with understanding, “I will not argue the propriety of these marriages, on either a religious or a civil basis. But we have a new world to people, and one theological precept we must never forget: be fruitful. If mankind is to endure, we must be fruitful and multiply.”

It seemed as good a time as any to tell him about Dana and myself. He heard me with pleasure, and with no great surprise.

“I am glad, Kerry. I deeply and heartily approve.” He laid his hand on my shoulder. “It is best and fitting that you should become my son, as Dana is my daughter. For one day you must lead this little band. I am an old man. I will not always be here to guide, encourage and instruct. You are best suited to the leadership I must one day relinquish.

“So—my blessing on you both. But—”

He beamed. “We must have a celebration. A real one. I’ll prepare a special banquet, with music and dan—”

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—stood there stunned. Babacz rushed to the radio cabinet, frantically twisted dials. Uselessly. Where should have been voices was only the dry crackling of static. Where once had been music was silence. Our last, thin-drawn contact with Earth was gone.

My wife turned, and with a sob buried her head in my shoulder. I touched those dear bronze locks with hands that shook, and spoke to Frisbee through uncertain lips.

“It—it could be a technical fault, Professor. We are more than thirty million miles from Earth. Even Hertzian transmission can go wrong.”

He shook his head slowly, gravely.

"No, Kerry. Those last cries you heard, those last labored gasps, were the swan song of mankind on Earth. There will be no more messages from our native planet. Never. Not ever—in our lifetime."

Harkrader said, "You speak with terrible assurance, Dr. Frisbee. As if you had known this would happen."

"I did," said Frisbee sadly. "Forgive me. Forgive me, all my friends, if you can. I did know it would happen. I learned the dreadful truth more than three years ago. That was when—and why—I gathered about me the children of this colony, and started building the Phoenix."

"I knew the comet would brush Earth this time. For a while I feared it would strike our old world head-on. Then I found the saving error in my calculations, learned that the head would graze, and the tail rake, the planet."

"It was not to be utter destruction, but it was bad enough. Once before, many thousands of years ago, a wayward comet grazed a civilized Earth. That civilization died. It took two thousands of decades to regain it."

"I read about that," said Babacz, "in one of the books we brought along. A writer named Bond, I think. But I thought it was only fiction. He wrote a lot of that stuff, most of it kind of crazy. I haven't read all his books yet, but—"

"All fantasy is not sheer dreaming. Much is truth, much more is simple logic. All men knew Halley's Comet was a potential source of danger. Or should have known if they had stopped to think. It almost brushed Earth on its last visit in 1910. Then, too, there were riots, outbursts of religious fanaticism, terror and awe. But to a lesser extent. To that extent which was a measure of the danger. Instincts are more sound than most men know. The very scope and violence of the Diarist movement was an indication that their fears were well grounded. They cried a day of judgment—and that day came."

"If I had only known," mourned Harkrader. "Frisbee, if I had known—"

"That is why I asked you to forgive me, John," said our leader. "I knew, but I told none of you—not even Dana, my own daughter—for I knew what your reaction would be. As men of Earth, you did not greatly fear leaving your homeland. Not so long as you knew it was there to come back to. But if you had dreamed you were making a one-way voyage, a trip from which there was no return, you would not have come. You would have chosen to stay and suffer the fate of your fellow humans. So I deceived you."

"The others, Professor. Shall I tell the colony?" That was Warren. As a proven leader, he had taken his place in our council. He was a fine chap. His ingenious handling of that snake-vine problem had made possible the building of New Eden.

"I think it would be better not to, Dick. They are happy here. They are even happier in their belief that we will one day return to Earth. Let us not disturb that happiness."

"Dad," said Dana suddenly, "a while ago you said 'in our lifetime'! Do you mean by that the comet has not killed all life on Earth?"

"Exactly that, my dear. Many—perhaps millions—must have died in the first dreadful hours. The burning heat as the comet neared... the tidal waves and earthquakes... riots and panic... you heard about these before the messages ended."

"But man is a resourceful creature, and resilient. In Earth's bowels are many refuges. Mines, caverns, grottoes—even such manmade havens as deep-sea submarines and diving bells.

"In all of these, human life will persist; also in remote corners of the globe untouched by the comet's scourge. Lapland or Antarctica, Baffin Bay or Siberia. We do not know which face of Earth took the brunt of the blow, and which was spared."

"Then," I cried excitedly, "life *will* go on. And I think you are wrong, Professor. We can't stay here now. Our duty to our world, its people, demands that we go back and do what we can to help them. We can repair the *Phoenix*. It was not altogether ruined when we crashed. In a month or two—"

Frisbee shook his head sadly.

"No, Kerry. I still have not told you all. There is one thing more my observations of the comet revealed."

"Yes?"

"Its chemical nature. The elements that combine to form its gaseous envelope."

Harkrader said tremulously, "You mean it's—poisonous?"

"Not quite that, but the next worse thing. Unless my analysis is wholly in error—and from the dwindling gasps which were the last thing we heard from Earth I believe it is not—the gaseous composition of the comet was anesthetic.

"I think," concluded Dr. Frisbee sadly, "that back on Earth our brothers sleep. Those who did not die rest in a drugged slumber that may last as long as a taint of the comet's breath mingles with the air of our native planet."

"Which may be—"

"Decades, Kerry."

"But then they'll all die! If they sleep and can't feed themselves—"

"I think not. There is a rather obscure gas in the comet's spectrum. Its peculiar property is that—"

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—walked to the door and looked out. The towering weed-like trees of Venus, tops mantled in the eternal mists of cloud, rose like a green wall about that tiny cleared area we had so hopefully named New Eden.

For the first time since our crash-landing I felt a dreadful loneliness, a helplessness, an insecurity and fear I had not known since that boyhood day when I had been selected as a cadet from my sector and sent to the Island to train as a Corpsman.

Somewhere beyond those clouds, invisible to us forever in heavens we never glimpsed, must twinkle a bright, green, glowing orb—the Earth to which we could never in our lifetimes return. For there men slept. And here...

Warren touched my arm. He spoke softly.

"He wants to see you, Kerry."

I nodded and went back to his room. Dana was still there. She had been crying soundlessly. She read the question in my eyes and shook her head. I moved to Frisbee's bedside, touched very gently the one hand unswathed in bandages. His eyes opened slowly and recognized me.

"Kerry. Kerry, my boy—"

"It's all right, chief," I said. "You mustn't talk now. You must be quiet and try to rest."

His words came muffled from beneath the gauze which encased his lips.

"There is no time for that now. The long rest lies before me, Kerry. Now I must know—"

He faltered, and I prompted him.

"Yes, chief?"

"The lodge. Was it completely destroyed?"

"I'm afraid so. But we'll rebuild it. Already the men are clearing ground for a bigger and better one."

"And the *Phoenix*? Did the fire ruin it, too?"

"It's pretty bad." I could not tell him how bad. I could not bring myself to tell him how the explosion of the auxiliary motor had seared and twisted the ship into a huddle of molten and fused parts.

"The supplies? The lab equipment? The seeds?"

"All saved, sir, thanks to you. We owe you a debt we can never repay."

I think he tried to smile. His eyes smiled until a grimace of pain closed them briefly.

"It was my dream," he said. "My colony. I want no payment. I have been repaid a thousand times over, seeing it grow and prosper. For here—" he said, and I felt that he was quoting an old, loved passage—"For here shall I hew a paradise out of the virgin wild, and I shall people it, and it shall be called the new Eden—"

"Father," said Dana, "you must not talk any longer. You must rest, now, and get back your strength."

He did not seem to hear her words. Once again his eyes were seeking mine.

"A new Eden," he whispered. "A new chance for man, here on man's last outpost. Kerry? Kerry, my son—"

"I'm here, chief."

"There is one thing that troubles me. I have never mentioned it before, but now I must. The—children? There have been no children. We have been here almost half a year, but still there are no children."

I glanced at Dana, and she at me. There was sorrow in her eyes, and a sort of terror. But when she answered her voice was strong and clear.

"Father—there will be children. Kerry and I... we have known... we wanted to surprise you. And others... some of the others, too."

Frisbee's voice was glad.

"Thank God! I was afraid it was the hard radiation aboard the *Phoenix*. Even in laboratories on Earth, sterility was caused by gamma rays. I feared the rays of space. All of us were sick, you remember. But I guess it was only temporary."

"We'll have a feast," I said with forced cheerfulness. "When the first child is born we'll all—"

"That was to be my next project," he continued. "I think there is an answer to the gene injury caused by gamma rays. Once, in a series of experiments, I stumbled across a curious reaction. I found that pure vitamin A seems to stimulate the damaged regenerative cells. Not vitamin E, as might logically be expected, but the anti-xerophthalmiac vitamin A. I had intended to synthesize this vitamin, try injections—"

His voice was getting weaker by the moment.

"But there will be no need of that now. There will be children. The race of man will go on. I am content."

He reached out feebly, in turn touching each of our hands. "Now I will rest," he whispered. "God bless and protect you all."

He closed his eyes. He did not open them again. I think, though, that his last rest was a happy one...

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When we had drawn the blinds and left the room, our need for acting ended. In my arms, Dana gave way at last to tears.

"Kerry, I lied to him. I lied to my father. I never did that before. But I had to, didn't I?"

I soothed her as best I could. "You did the only thing you could do. He was happy at the end, believing your lie. Why should he know—" I could not keep the bitterness from my voice—"Why should he know his fear was based on truth? That there are no children... will not be any children... cannot be any children in our hopeless and sterile Eden."

"But, Kerry—the hint he gave you? The injections of vitamin A. Can't we try that? Couldn't we—"

"Do you," I asked her almost harshly, "know the formula for vitamin A?"

"Well, no, but—"

"And have you forgotten," I cried, "that our entire reference library was destroyed in the fire that cost him his life? No, Dana, it's no use. The race of man has turned its final milepost. Earth sleeps. And we of its last outpost are doomed to a slow but certain oblivion."

She turned away then and—

* * * * *

"—don't say there is, but there could be."

Babacz looked a little sheepish.

"I know I wasn't supposed to take any from the library. But I did. Like I told you, I got kind of interested. Especially in those science-fiction stories. I guess Frisbee must have been, too. He had scads of them. And I'd transferred a lot, maybe half of them, to my own quarters before the explosion.

"I'm sorry if I did wrong, Kerry. I didn't mean any harm. And when I heard what you just told Harkrader—"

"Wrong!" I cried. "Babacz, you may have committed the noblest crime in the history of the human race! Let's see those precious books of yours. There's a bare chance—"

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—most part utterly meaningless. Lurid, fanciful, melodramatic tales of adventure on planets of our solar system, and even on worlds many light-years away. Some are utterly ridiculous, like one that portrayed Venus as being a jungle world peopled by weird, intelligent, spiderlike creatures. He was a fool who wrote that story. Here we have found nothing so incredible as the life forms he invented. Only the echo-plants and the landfish are in any way foreign to our Earthly minds.

I do not believe that, as Warren and a few of the others claim, the nightwalkers have intelligence. No vegetable thinks. And I'm sure their supposed "whispering" is just the rustling of the wind through their curiously cranium-like seed pods. But despite that we must repair that south gate. I don't believe we should risk another accident like that which happened last week. It upsets the colony. Klein swears they attacked him...

But I was talking about the books. It is true that most of them are completely useless. They are silly romances in a frame of pseudo-science. But there are others which are more carefully conceived and written, stories which are based on hard and definite scientific facts. One of these could, just barely and possibly could, contain the clue we need.

Those writers, after all, had access to many books, to facts lost to us when our reference library was destroyed. If one of them—just one of them—had been inspired to base fiction tale on vitamins, and in that story had written the all-important structural formula for vitamin A—

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—her cheek against mine.

"You've got to come to bed, Kerry. You're tired; I know you're tired."

Reluctantly I closed the book, tossed it with those many, many others I had plowed through in vain. The shelf of useless books was growing ever longer, the group in which lay our last hope was becoming smaller, maddeningly smaller. All but a few of the bound books I had read. There remained some old ones. *Really* old ones, I mean. Some of them were thirty or forty years out of print. The Professor had been quite a collector of that sort of thing. On Earth, in a happier day, his accumulation would have been prized by a museum.

"No luck?" asked Dana.

I shook my head. "None."

"Perhaps they didn't know," she suggested. "Those books are very old. Perhaps in those early days—"

"Oh, they knew!" I answered savagely. "I've read a hundred references to vitamins. But never one notation of the actual formula. You see, that knowledge was commonplace to them. Why should they make special mention of details available in any standard book of reference?"

"How could they guess," I cried, "how terribly and desperately we need that simple fact? We have the raw elements here; we have the lab equipment. We can synthesize anything—but we don't know where to begin in creating that one thing that can save our colony."

"The knowledge is lost. And we are lost unless the answer lies somewhere in these last few—"

* * * * *

Here, abruptly as it began, concludes the narrative of Kerry McLeod.

I find it hard to explain my own (perhaps weakling) response to this manuscript, and to the demand of Dr. Arthur Westcott.

Let me say immediately and frankly that I fear I am the victim of either an awesomely elaborate practical joke, or of the auctorial ambitions of a man now known only as a doctor.

I do not believe this narrative to be true. I cannot accept or endorse its facts, its theories, its completely implausible prophecy as to mankind's future history and fate. These things are too fantastic. And yet—And yet a reading of my encyclopedia tells me that Halley's Comet will revisit Earth in 1985. It tells me also that this baleful body's last visitation in 1910 did foment religious hysteria, rioting and furor and (some think) the horrors of the first World War that followed closely after.

I remind myself that Grayson is an inmate of a hospital for the mentally deranged, and with this as reassurance, it seems relatively meaningless that his own script should be so different from that of Kerry McLeod.

Yet it is true that even as I write, foresighted men of good will throughout this squabbling world are arguing for a worldwide union of nations—a federation to be implemented by an armed international police corps. Is it absurd to fear that such an organization could rise and assume the powers of world government? I think not.

Still, I do not believe in this manuscript. But on one point I do agree with Dr. Westcott. That I dare not take a chance on the fallibility of my own judgment.

"You dare not refuse," he told me. "For on its telling may depend the fate of all mankind..."

The last of all weird coincidences: my name appears in this narrative. That is flattery of a dubious nature, but it is a fact that forces upon me the obligation of presenting this tale under my by-line.

Because there is a slim chance that somehow this story may be true. Because there is a faint hope that the book in which this story is printed may be, still unread, in that dwindling pile through which McLeod so desperately searches.

Therefore—though I suspect that in so doing I am making a final and utter fool of myself—I offer here that clue you are seeking: the formula which may mean life or death to Earth's last outpost.

Here, Kerry McLeod, is the structural chemical formula for synthesizing vitamin A. *Be fruitful, sons of Earth, and multiply...*

⁽¹⁾ This word is here faithfully reproduced from Kerry McLeod's manuscript, though the meaning is not clear. Present-day chemistry recognizes no element known as phoebium, but we do not know whether the word is a later era term for a mineral now known to us by another name, or whether phoebium is an element now "missing" from our periodic tables, thus yet to be discovered by science.