

The Reptile Enclosure

or, The Sherrington Theory

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„They remind me of the Gadarene swine,“ Mildred Peiham remarked.

Interrupting his scrutiny of the crowded beach below the cafeteria terrace, Roger Peiham glanced at his wife. „Why do you say that?“

Mildred continued to read for a few moments, and then lowered her book. „Well, don't they?“ she asked rhetorically. „They look like pigs.“

Peiham smiled weakly at this mild but characteristic display of misanthropy. He peered down at his own white knees protruding from his shorts and at his wife's plump arms and shoulders. „I suppose we all do,“ he temporized. However, there

was little chance of Mildred's remark being overheard and resented. They were sitting at a corner table, with their backs to the hundreds of ice-cream eaters and cola-drinkers crammed elbow to elbow on the terrace. The dull hubbub of voices was overlaid by the endless commentaries broadcast over the transistor radios propped among the bottles, and by the distant sounds of the fairground behind the dunes.

A short drop below the terrace was the beach, covered by a mass of reclining figures which stretched from the water's edge up to the roadway behind the cafeteria and then away over the dunes. Not a single grain of sand was visible. Even at the tide-line, where a little slack water swilled weakly at a debris of old cigarette packets and other trash, a huddle of small children clung to the skirt of the beach, hiding the grey sand.

Gazing down at the beach again, Peiham realized that his wife's ungenerous judgment was no more than the truth. Everywhere bare haunches and shoulders jutted into the air, limbs lay in serpentine coils. Despite the sunlight and the considerable period of time they had spent on the beach, many of the people were still white-skinned, or at most a boiled pink, restlessly shifting in their little holes in a hopeless attempt to be comfortable.

Usually this spectacle of jostling, over-exposed flesh, with its unsavoury bouquet of stale suntan lotion and sweat looking along the beach as it swept out to the distant cape, Peiham could almost see the festering corona, sustained in the air by the babble often thousand transistor radios, reverberating like a swarm of flies—would have sent him hurtling along the first inland highway at seventy miles an hour. But for some reason Peiham's usual private distaste for the general public had evaporated. He felt strangely exhilarated by the presence of so many people (he had calculated that he could see over 50 thousand along the five-mile stretch of beach) and found himself unable to leave the terrace, although it was now 3 o'clock and neither he nor Mildred had eaten since breakfast. Once their corner seats were surrendered they would never regain them.

To himself he mused: „The ice-cream eaters on Echo beach...“ He played with the empty glass in front of him. Shreds of synthetic orange pulp clung to the sides, and a fly buzzed half-heartedly from one to another. The sea was flat and calm, an opaque grey disc, but a mile away a low surface mist lay over the water like vapour on a vat.

„You look hot, Roger. Why don't you go in for a swim?“

„I may. You know, it's a curious thing, but of all the people here, not one is swimming.“

Mildred nodded in a bored way. A large passive woman, she seemed content merely to sit in the sunlight and read. Yet it was she who had first suggested that they drive out to the coast, and for once had suppressed her usual grumbles when they ran into the first heavy traffic jams and were forced to abandon the car and complete the remaining two miles on foot. Pelham had not seen her walk like that for ten years.

„It is rather strange,“ she said. „But it's not particularly warm.“

„I don't agree.“ Peiham was about to continue when he suddenly stood up and looked over the rail at the beach. Halfway down the slope, parallel with the promenade, a continuous stream of people moved slowly along an informal right-

of-way, shouldering past each other with fresh bottles of cola, lotion and ice-cream.

„Roger, what’s the matter?“

„Nothing... I thought I saw Sherrington.“ Pelham searched the beach, the moment of recognition lost.

„You’re always seeing Sherrington. That’s the fourth time alone this afternoon. Do stop worrying.“

„I’m not worrying. I can’t be certain, but I felt I saw him then.“

Reluctantly, Peiham sat down, edging his chair fractionally closer to the rail. Despite his mood of lethargy and vacuous boredom, an indefinable but distinct feeling of restlessness had preoccupied him all day. In some way associated with Sherrington’s presence on the beach, this uneasiness had been increasing steadily. The chances of Sherrington—with whom he shared an office in the Physiology Department at the University actually choosing this section of the beach were remote, and Peiham was not even sure why he was so convinced that Sherrington was there at all. Perhaps these illusory glimpses—all the more unlikely in view of Sherrington’s black beard and high severe face, his stooped long-legged walk—were simply projections of this underlying tension and his own peculiar dependence upon Sherrington.

However, this sense of uneasiness was not confined to himself. Although Mildred seemed immune, most of the people on the beach appeared to share this mood with Peiham. As the day progressed the continuous hubbub gave way to more sporadic chatter. Occasionally the noise would fall away altogether, and the great concourse, like an immense crowd waiting for the long-delayed start of some public spectacle, would sit up and stir impatiently. To Peiham, watching carefully from his vantage point over the beach, these ripples of restless activity, as everyone swayed forward in long undulations, were plainly indicated by the metallic glimmer of the thousands of portable radios moving in an oscillating wave. Each successive spasm, recurring at roughly half-hour intervals, seemed to take the crowd slightly nearer the sea.

Directly below the concrete edge of the terrace, among the mass of reclining figures, a large family group had formed a private enclosure. To one side of this, literally within reach of Peiham, the adolescent members of the family had dug their own nest, their sprawling angular bodies, in their damp abbreviated swimming suits, entwined in and out of each other like some curious annular animal. Well within earshot, despite the continuous background of noise from the beach and the distant fair-grounds, Peiham listened to their inane talk, following the thread of the radio commentaries as they switched aimlessly from one station to the next.

„They’re about to launch another satellite,“ he told Mildred. „Echo XXII.“

„Why do they bother?“ Mildred’s flat blue eyes surveyed the distant haze over the water. „I should have thought there were more than enough of them flying about already.“

„Well...“ For a moment Peiham debated whether to pursue the meagre conversational possibilities of his wife’s reply. Although she was married to a lecturer in the School of Physiology, her interest in scientific matters was limited to little more than a blanket condemnation of the entire sphere of activity. His own

post at the University she regarded with painful tolerance, despising the untidy office, scruffy students and meaningless laboratory equipment. Peiham had never been able to discover exactly what calling she would have respected. Before their marriage she maintained what he later realized was a polite silence on the subject of his work; after eleven years this attitude had barely changed, although the exigencies of living on his meagre salary had forced her to take an interest in the subtle, complex and infinitely wearying game of promotional snakes and ladders.

As expected, her acerbic tongue had made them few friends, but by a curious paradox Peiham felt that he had benefited from the grudging respect this had brought her. Sometimes her waspish comments, delivered at the overlong sherry parties, always in a loud voice during some conversational silence (for example, she had described the elderly occupant of the Physiology chair as „that gerontological freak“ within some five feet of the Professor's wife) delighted Peiham by their mordant accuracy, but in general there was something frightening about her pitiless lack of sympathy for the rest of the human race. Her large bland face, with its prim, rosebud mouth, reminded Pelham of the description of the Mona Lisa as looking as if she had just dined off her husband. Mildred, however, did not even smile.

„Sherrington has a rather interesting theory about the satellites,“ Peiham told her. „I'd hoped we might see him so that he could explain it again. I think you'd be amused to hear it, Mildred. He's working on IRM's at present—“

„On what?“ The group of people behind them had turned up the volume of their radio and the commentary, of the final countdown at Cape Kennedy, boomed into the air over their heads.

Peiham said: „IRM's—*innate releasing mechanisms*. I've described them to you before, they're inherited reflexes—“ He stopped, watching his wife impatiently.

Mildred had turned on him the dead stare with which she surveyed the remainder of the people on the beach. Testily Pelham snapped: „Mildred, I'm trying to explain Sherrington's theory about the satellites!“

Undeterred, Mildred shook her head. „Roger, it's too noisy here, I can't possibly listen. And to Sherrington's theories less than to anyone else's.“

Almost imperceptibly, another wave of restless activity was sweeping along the beach. Perhaps in response to the final digital climax of the commentators at Cape Kennedy, people were sitting up and dusting the coarse sand from each other's backs. Pelham watched the sunlight flickering off the chromium radio sets and diamante sunglasses as the entire beach swayed and surged. The noise had fallen appreciably, letting through the sound of the wurlitzer at the funfair. Everywhere there was the same expectant stirring. To Peiham, his eyes half-closed in the glare, the beach seemed like an immense pit of seething white snakes.

Somewhere, a woman's voice shouted. Peiham sat forward, searching the rows of faces masked by sunglasses. There was a sharp edge to the air, an unpleasant and almost sinister implication of violence hidden below the orderly surface.

Gradually, however, the activity subsided. The great throng relaxed and reclined again. Greasily, the water lapped at the supine feet of the people lying by the edge of the sea. Propelled by one of the off-shore swells, a little slack air moved over the beach, carrying with it the sweet odour of sweat and suntan lotion. Averting his face, Peiham felt a spasm of nausea contract his gullet. Without doubt, he

reflected, homo sapiens en masse presented a more unsavoury spectacle than almost any other species of animal. A corral of horses or steers conveyed an impression of powerful nervous grace, but this mass of articulated albino flesh sprawled on the beach resembled the diseased anatomical fantasy of a surrealist painter. Why had all these people congregated there? The weather reports that morning had not been especially propitious. Most of the announcements were devoted to the news of the imminent satellite launching, the last stage of the worldwide communications network which would now provide every square foot of the globe with a straight-line visual contact with one or other of the score of satellites in orbit. Perhaps the final sealing of this inescapable aerial canopy had prompted everyone to seek out the nearest beach and perform a symbolic act of self-exposure as a last gesture of surrender.

Uneasily, Peiham moved about in his chair, suddenly aware of the edge of the metal table cutting into his elbows. The cheap slatted seat was painfully uncomfortable, and his whole body seemed enclosed in an iron maiden of spikes and clamps. Again a curious premonition of some appalling act of violence stirred through his mind, and he looked up at the sky, almost expecting an airliner to plunge from the distant haze and disintegrate on the crowded beach in front of him.

To Mildred he remarked: „It’s remarkable how popular sunbathing can become. It was a major social problem in Australia before the second World War.“

Mildred’s eyes flickered upwards from her book. „There was probably nothing else to do.“

„That’s just the point. As long as people are prepared to spend their entire time sprawled on a beach there’s little hope of ever building up any other pastimes. Sunbathing is anti-social because it’s an entirely passive pursuit.“ He dropped his voice when he noticed the people sitting around him glancing over their shoulders, ears drawn to his high precise diction. „On the other hand, it does bring people together. In the nude, or the near-nude, the shop-girl and the duchess are virtually indistinguishable.“

„Are they?“

Peiham shrugged. „You know what I mean. But I think the psychological role of the beach is much more interesting. The tide-line is a particularly significant area, a penumbral zone that is both of the sea and above it, forever half-immersed in the great time-womb. If you accept the sea as an image of the unconscious, then this beachward urge might be seen as an attempt to escape from the existential role of ordinary life and return to the universal time-sea—“ „Roger, please!“ Mildred looked away wearily. „You sound like Charles Sherrington.“

Peiham stared out to sea again. Below him, a radio commentator announced the position and speed of the successfully launched satellite, and its pathway around the globe. Idly, Peiham calculated that it would take some fifteen minutes to reach them, almost exactly at half past three. Of course it would not be visible from the beach, although Sherrington’s recent work on the perception of infra-red radiation suggested some of the infra-red light reflected from the sun might be perceived subliminally by their retinas.

Reflecting on the opportunities this offered to a commercial or political demagogue, Peiham listened to the radio on the sand below, when a long white

arm reached out and switched it off. The possessor of the arm, a plump whiteskinned girl with the face of a placid madonna, her round cheeks framed by ringlets of black hair, rolled over on to her back, disengaging herself from her companions, and for a moment she and Peiham exchanged glances. He assumed that she had deliberately switched off the radio to prevent him hearing the commentary, and then realized that in fact the girl had been listening to his voice and hoped that he would resume his monologue.

Flattered, Peiham studied the girl's round serious face, and her mature but child-like figure stretched out almost as close to him, and as naked, as it would have been had they shared a bed. Her frank, adolescent but curiously tolerant expression barely changed, and Peiham turned away, unwilling to accept its implications, realizing with a pang the profound extent of his resignation to Mildred, and the now unbreachable insulation this provided against any new or real experience in his life. For ten years the thousand cautions and compromises accepted each day to make existence tolerable had steadily secreted their numbing anodynes, and what remained of his original personality, with all its possibilities, was embalmed like a specimen in a jar. Once he would have despised himself for accepting his situation so passively, but he was now beyond any real self-judgment, for no criteria were valid by which to assess himself, a state of gracelessness far more abject than that of the vulgar, stupid herd on the beach around him.

„Something's in the water.“ Mildred pointed along the shore. „Over there.“

Peiham followed her raised arm. Two hundred yards away a small crowd had gathered at the water's edge, the sluggish waves breaking at their feet as they watched some activity in the shallows. Many of the people had raised newspapers to shield their heads, and the older women in the group held their skirts between their knees.

„I can't see anything.“ Peiham rubbed his chin, distracted by a bearded man on the edge of the promenade above him, a face not Sherrington's but remarkably like it. „There seems to be no danger, anyway. Some unusual sea-fish may have been cast ashore.“

On the terrace, and below on the beach, everyone was waiting for something to happen, heads craned forward expectantly. As the radios were turned down, so that any sounds from the distant tableau might be heard, a wave of silence passed along the beach like an immense darkening cloud shutting off the sunlight. The almost complete absence of noise and movement, after the long hours of festering motion, seemed strange and uncanny, focusing an intense atmosphere of self-awareness upon the thousands of watching figures.

The group by the water's edge remained where they stood, even the small children staring placidly at whatever held the attention of their parents. For the first time a narrow section of the beach was visible, a clutter of radios and beach equipment half-buried in the sand like discarded metallic refuse. Gradually the new arrivals pressing down from the promenade occupied the empty places, a manoeuvre carried out without any reaction from the troupe by the tideline. To Peiham they seemed like a family of penitent pilgrims who had travelled some enormous distance and were now standing beside their sacred waters, waiting patiently for its revivifying powers to work their magic.

„What is going on?“ Peiham asked, when after several minutes there was no indication of movement from the waterside group. He noticed that they formed a straight line, following the shore, rather than an arc. „They’re not watching anything at all.“

The off-shore haze was now only five hundred yards away, obscuring the contours of the huge swells. Completely opaque, the water looked like warm oil, a few wavelets now and then dissolving into greasy bubbles as they expired limply on the sand, intermingled with bits of refuse and old cigarette cartons. Nudging the shore like this, the sea resembled an enormous pelagic beast roused from its depths and blindly groping at the sand.

„Mildred, I’m going down to the water for a moment.“ Peiham stood up. „There’s something curious—He broke off, pointing to the beach on the other side of the terrace. „Look! There’s another group. What on earth—?“

Again, as everyone watched, this second body of spectators formed by the water’s edge seventy-five yards from the terrace. Altogether some two hundred people were silently assembling along the shore-line, gazing out across the sea in front of them. Peiham found himself cracking his knuckles, then clasped the rail with both hands, as much to restrain himself from joining them. Only the congestion on the beach held him back.

This time the interest of the crowd passed in a few moments, and the murmur of background noise resumed.

„Heaven knows what they’re doing.’ Mildred turned her back on the group. „There are more of them over there. They must be waiting for something.“

Sure enough, half a dozen similar groups were now forming by the water’s edge, at almost precise one hundred yard intervals. Peiham scanned the far ends of the bay for any signs of a motor boat. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly 3:30. „They can’t be waiting for anything,“ he said, trying to control his nervousness. Below the table his feet twitched a restless tattoo, gripping for purchase on the sandy cement. „The only thing expected is the satellite, and no one will see that anyway. There must be something in the water.“ At the mention of the satellite he remembered Sherrington again. „Mildred, don’t you feel—Before he could continue the man behind him stood up with a curious lurch, as if hoping to reach the rail, and tipped the sharp edge of his seat into Peiham’s back. For a moment, as he struggled to steady the man, Peiham was enveloped in a rancid smell of sweat and stale beer. He saw the glazed focus in the other’s eyes, his rough unshaved chin and open mouth like a muzzle, pointing with a sort of impulsive appetite towards the sea.

„The satellite!“ Freeing himself Peiham craned upwards at the sky. A pale impassive blue, it was clear of both aircraft and birds—although they had seen gulls twenty miles inland that morning, as if a storm had been anticipated. As the glare stung his eyes, points of retinal light began to arc and swerve across the sky in epileptic orbits. One of these, however, apparently emerging from the western horizon, was moving steadily across the edge of his field of vision, boring dimly towards him.

Around them, people began to stand up, and chairs scraped and dragged across the floor. Several bottles toppled from one of the tables and smashed on the concrete.

„Mildred!“

Below them, in a huge disorganized melee extending as far as the eye could see, people were climbing slowly to their feet. The diffused murmur of the beach had given way to a more urgent, harsher sound, echoing overhead from either end of the bay. The whole beach seemed to writhe and stir with activity, the only motionless figures those of the people standing by the water. These now formed a continuous palisade along the shore, shutting off the sea. More and more people joined their ranks, and in places the line was nearly ten deep.

Everyone on the terrace was now standing. The crowds already on the beach were being driven forward by the pressure of new arrivals from the promenade, and the party below their table had been swept a further twenty yards towards the sea.

„Mildred, can you see Sherrington anywhere?“ Confirming from her wristwatch that it was exactly 3:30, Peiham pulled her shoulder, trying to hold her attention. Mildred returned what was almost a vacant stare, an expression of glazed incomprehension. „Mildred! We've got to get away from here!“ Hoarsely, he shouted: „Sherrington's convinced we can see some of the infra-red light shining from the satellites, they may form a pattern setting off IRM's laid down millions of years ago when other space vehicles were circling the earth. Mildred—!“

Helplessly, they were lifted from their seats and pressed against the rail. A huge concourse of people was moving down the beach, and soon the entire five-mile-long slope was packed with standing figures. No one was talking, and everywhere there was the same expression, self-immersed and preoccupied, like that on the faces of a crowd leaving a stadium. Behind them the great wheel of the fairground was rotating slowly, but the gondolas were empty, and Peiham looked back at the deserted funfair only a hundred yards from the multitude on the beach, its roundabouts revolving among the empty sideshows.

Quickly he helped Mildred over the edge of the rail, then jumped down on to the sand, hoping to work their way back to the promenade. As they stepped around the corner, however, the crowd advancing down the beach carried them back, tripping over the abandoned radios in the sand.

Still together, they found their footing when the pressure behind them ceased. Steadying himself, Peiham continued: „...Sherrington thinks Cro-Magnon Man was driven frantic by panic, like the Gadarene swine—most of the bone-beds have been found under lake shores. The reflex may be too strong—He broke off.

The noise had suddenly subsided, as the immense congregation, now packing every available square foot of the beach, stood silently facing the water. Peiham turned towards the sea, where the haze, only fifty yards away, edged in great clouds towards the beach. The forward line of the crowd, their heads bowed slightly, stared passively at the gathering billows. The surface of the water glowed with an intense luminous light, vibrant and spectral, and the air over the beach, grey by comparison, made the lines of motionless figures loom like tombstones.

Obliquely in front of Peiham, twenty yards away in the front rank, stood a tall man with a quiet, meditative expression, his beard and high temples identifying him without doubt.

„Sherrington!“ Peiham started to shout. Involuntarily he looked upwards to the sky, and felt a blinding speck of light singe his retinas.

In the background the music of the funfair revolved in the empty air.

Then, with a galvanic surge, everyone on the beach began to walk forward into the water.

