

SPACE WARP

"Ever been in a space warp?" he asked.

"Can't say I have," I said. I thought at the time he might be having me on. Or that he was a sf crank.

"I have," he said. He was about forty. Professional class. Perhaps an engineer.

He ordered three more whiskies. The other man with him, younger, also a stranger, didn't say anything.

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"Easy enough," he said. "They arranged it. Of course, they'd been preparing for years. It was just a case of picking a subject here on earth."

"And they chose you?"

"Yes," he said. "Probably because I was a biologist. And I'd had that run in with Monod. They had a sense of humour, I suppose. Not quite like ours but near enough." He drank half his whisky. "It was funny when I showed Monod the photographs and the artifacts."

"It must have disconcerted him - Monod, I mean," said the other man.

"Not really," said the older man. "He's a scientist. It's an occupational hazard, having your pet theories disapproved. He said, mind you, it didn't invalidate his main thesis."

"Are we losing you here?" asked the younger man.

I assured him I knew Jacques Monod's belief that we - hominids - were alone in the universe.

"A second lot of hominids on another planet in the universe and evolving there by chance..." the older man said. "It still leaves the universe pretty empty of hominids. They ... the other lot ... were more startled than Monod."

"Why, if they were preparing for years for a space warp?" asked the other.

"It might seem odd but it isn't," said the other. His English was good but the intonation was European. I speculated if he might be a Hungarian or a Czech.

"They'd argued that if by a remote chance there was another species of hominids it had already destroyed itself. It had been touch and go with them when it all blew up and someone pressed the button. About three thousand years ago in their time."

"It makes sense," said the other man. They looked at me. I nodded.

"How did they survive?" I asked.

"It's too long a story," said the first man. "It would take more time than I have now."

For something to say and to go along with them (we were into another whisky) I said, "How did you talk to them?" I was sorry I'd been drawn into talking with them.

"With computers," he said. "Light years ahead of anything we've got. We - that is we all had our earphones and talked into a mike. Of course, they were not ear-

phones as we know them. I heard them speaking English, but when I took off the earphones it was just the tower of Babel. They have four main languages - they had about as many as we had before the big show." He laughed. "Four were all the pockets of the Pisceans left. We'll call them Pisceans. That's what the largest group there - about five hundred million - call themselves. They were a bit apologetic about it because it was an old religious name and because they were all - the four main groups and the earlier ones - had all been descended from fishes."

"I take off my hat every time I see a starfish," I said.

"Ancestor worship," said the younger man. "The first vertebrates evolved from starfishes."

"Colbert," I said.

"I say, are you a biologist?" asked the older man.

"No," I said. "I've read his works."

"Sound man, Colbert."

"How did it happen - the space warp?" I asked. He snapped his fingers. "As easy as that! I was standing in the Cavendish one afternoon and the next thing I was there."

"They must have been pretty sure of themselves," said the other.

"They'd practised on animals ... experimental animals from the Cavendish."

"We wondered about them," said the other. "First the rats, then the rabbits. And then the horses."

"You got them back," said the other.

"A bit shaken."

"So was I."

"They could have left you there!"

They both laughed. A real in-joke.

"The horses were neurotic for weeks," said the younger man in mock reproach.

"I wasn't but it's no fun having your atoms and molecules teleported - if that's the word. Over ten light years."

"Nine and a half," said the other.

"Round figures for our friend," said the older man.

"Where was this peopled planet?" I asked.

"I'll show it to you on a star map sometime," he said.

"Nowhere well known. About the last place you'd expect but then any second class sun could have planets and one of those could have life."

"But not hominids."

"It could but the odds are very much against it - almost impossible odds. You could say impossible odds almost."

"Monod again," said the younger man. "And again."

"Why didn't they come here?" I asked. "The Pisceans I mean. It might have been easier."

"But riskier," said the older man.

"Easier to press a switch," said the other. "No risk to your own people."

"Brain damage," said the other. "That's what had them worried."

"It had me worried, too," said the other man. "I can tell you I kept a good watch on myself for some months."

"So did I," said the younger man. He turned to me,

"Ever been on a time warp?"

I shook my head. "I thought time travel was impossible."

"You mean you'd run into yourself or something?"

"Something like that."

"Who postulated that first? One of the physicists."

What was his name?"

"Mertensberg or some such name," I ventured.

"You should have seen Mertensberg's face," said the younger man.

"When you showed him the photographs and artifacts?" I asked.

"Of course," he said.

"Riskier than the space warp, really," said the older man.

"And harder to prove you'd been anywhere. Plenty of artifacts of the past and photographs can be faked."

"You could have brought back a dinosaur, say," I said.

"A small one."

"How did you know?" he asked. "I did just that."

"A baby dinosaur."

"A perfect Ceratosaurus."

"You could have chosen better," said the older man shaking his head. "There are important gaps in the fossil record. And anyway a dinosaur is a bit obvious. Our friend here, for instance, suggested that. Typical of the lay mind. What we want badly is a specimen of the first bird - Archaeopteryx, after all, is thirty million years on in the evolution of birds."

"I hadn't much time," said the younger man defensively, "I had to grab what I could. We couldn't pinpoint where I'd land. You biologists are all perfectionists."

"I was only commenting," said the older man. "Its natural enough. The chance of a lifetime."

"What happened to the Cerat - Ceratosaurus?" I asked.

"I mean there were -"

"No photographs in the papers?" he said. He turned to the other. "I knew he was going to say that."

"Predictable," he said. "Laymen are always predictable."

"Predictable and tedious," the other said.

"Always looking for the obvious. Like you."

"How do you mean, like me?"

"You objecting to my bringing back a baby Ceratosaurus?"

They were getting angry so I said, "Tell me more about the space warp..."