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FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

COME AWAY HOME

There was only one survivor from the wrecked alien spaceship- a baby. But the subsequent search for the child was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The trouble is that children grow up...

In a long, sloping trajectory the vessel came, ringing still from its impact with the atmosphere. Too low, too fast, it howled eastward, hull vibrating with the shock of the braking jets that spat ahead. A mountain top loomed momentarily, and the vessel sounded like a gong at the glancing impact. Flame licked outwards through its torn side, and it fell, skimming wooded slopes. Its speed now barely that of an express train, it flashed at tree-top height over rough pasture.

Cliffs fell away ahead . . . flashed behind. The vessel struck deep water. Frothing spray shone dully under the grey dawn sky. Waves ran from the point of impact and the sea bubbled, tossed, and began to subside. High above and behind, the pursuing vessel curved gracefully heavenwards. Its quarry was gone.

Henry Cromer stood with his thumb in the crook of his stick, gazing out across towards the jutting headland of Tarbat Ness. Below lay the waters ot Dornoch Firth, running now with a strong tide. A lonely scene, he thought. He had walked three miles and met no one.

He turned, putting his back to the breeze coming in from the sea. Ahead, sheep stood on the rough pasture, watching a bundle that moved. Henry blinked, screwing up his faded blue eyes. But there was a bundle — and it moved . . .

He approached, slowly at first, then hastening, and sank to his knees upon the turf. Amazement came to his lined face, followed by an inner, radiant wonder.

Blue, baby eyes looked up into his. He touched the child’s garment. A pale green, it was of a material he had never before seen, indescribably glossy and soft and edged with white. The child was beautiful, golden haired and fair skinned. He took it up, gazing round.

No one was visible anywhere as far as the eye could see. Dew sparkled on the infant’s garment. Taking it in, Henry’s face clouded. With an abrupt movement he cradled the child more comfortably in his arms and set off briskly across the slope.

Mary Cromer saw him coming and opened the door of their little stone house, the only

building on the headland. Never given to talking, Henry found his words to be few indeed.

“ A child — left up by the cliffs,” he said.

His wife took it, opening the glossy folds from about its head. “ There’s wicked folk in this world,” she said at last.

“ Aye, lass.”

He let her take it in, glad she seemed to know what to do. Five minutes later she came to the door.

“ It’s a tiny baby girl that we have, Henry,” she said, “ and that covered with bruises it’s a miracle the wee mite is alive withall.”

Henry bit a lip. “ Is there anything?”

“ Nothing. Not a name nor mark upon any of her clothes. Only this there was, looped to one tiny wrist . . .”

Mary Cromer held aloft a silvery ball and Henry took it. Metallic, its surface was without marking except for a ring to which a loop of silken material was attached. He shook his head slowly. An odd plaything.

Agent M77 to Commander.

Report.

Starship subject of previous reports chased into region of planetary group and its destruction witnessed. In endeavouring to make a close escape orbit it went out of control and struck high ground on an island adjacent to the planet’s largest land-mass. Thence it fell into the sea and sank. There were no survivors.

Respectfully awaiting my recall :

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.

Order.

Re starship subject of previous reports : Return at once to point of impact. Subsequent Headquarter’ s examination of radiophotos furnished by you show that some object fell

from the chased vessel immediately prior to its destruction. Locate and take possession of this object.

NOTE. No details of galaxy into which chase took you exist here. Observe planet in question and report what forms of life exist there, if any. Your recall will then be considered.

Commander.

Agent M77 to Commander.

Report.

Apologies to Your Excellency. Examination of originals of radio-photos, and subsequent observation, shows a child was accidentally or purposely thrown from the chased vessel. It is being cared for by two of the erect bipeds which are the predominant life-form of the planet. These bipeds are an intelligent, tool-making species unlike any yet encountered. A detailed report of them is appended.

Respectfully awaiting your instructions :

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.

Order.

Destroy the child and any of the bipeds who have had contact with it.

Commander.

Henry Cromer smiled at his wife, and at the bundle she nursed. During the last two months new life had come into her eyes. Fifty, and childless, he had that day found all she would have asked of heaven.

“ Glad we’re moving, lass?” he asked.

No one else was in the railway carriage. She nodded happily.

“ London is a big place, Henry, but Judith will make us at home.”

“ Aye, lass.” Henry could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times he had met Mary’s sister, Judith. He remembered her as a big woman, wholly practical. “ You’ll be happy helping in her lodging-house, Mary?” he asked. “You won’t regret?”

“ Never, Henry !”

He nodded, satisfied. The move to London had often been considered. Every time Judith wrote, she asked them to go. And finding little Stella had seemed to settle matters. They had called her Stella — Stella Sutherland. Stella because she had seemed to drop from Heaven, Mary said. Sutherland because that fitted, and because they would never pretend to be her real parents.

Henry thought of the long hours of travelling which still lay ahead, and of London. It was only a name, to him. But he would get a job, right enough, Judith wrote; if not, there was need of a strong man’s help in her lodging-house . . .

He closed his eyes, lulled by the rhythm of the wheels. London would be huge, after the quietude of Dornoch and Tain. At last he slept, awaking only as Mary touched his shoulder.

“ We’re there, Henry

The train was slowing. He looked through the window, feeling lost. At Dornoch had been earth and sky; here, all was noise and hurrying people. Mary, Stella, and himself had shrunken to three insignificant dots amid many million others.

Agent M77 to Commander .

Report.

Your Excellency : During the interval preceding the arrival here of your last order there arose an unanticipated development. The two bipeds journeyed almost to the other end of their island, taking the child with them. Their species is gregarious and the two entered a thickly-populated area with many artifacts. Their continued observation was impossible.

I respectfully suggest the matter be regarded as closed, and myself withdrawn.

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.

Order.

The child cannot be permitted to live, since it could eventually endanger our security. Locate and destroy it. In no circumstances can your withdrawal from the affected galaxy otherwise be countenanced.

Commander.

Agent M77 to Commander.

Note and Query.

Your Excellency, the area mentioned is computed to contain upwards of five million individuals ! I therefore respectfully suggest that you reconsider your previous order.

Hoping that you will do so, I am, Your Excellency,

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.

Order.

My previous instructions stand — without time limit.

Commander.

Stella halted at the gateway, watching the two uniformed men at the corner twenty paces away. Behind her stretched the vast building of Intelligence Central, fifteen floors high, yet ten times as long as it was tall. A man passed her, going in.

“ Evening, Miss Sutherland.”

Again alone, she watched the guards from the corner of an eye, her breathing slightly hastened. The moment was coming, she thought. She must judge her time exactly. At 7:59 the electric train crossed the viaduct beyond the end of the high wall enclosing Intelligence Central. At 8:00 the perimeter lights would flash on all along that wall. There would be one minute of evening dimness and noise, and in that single minute she must act. The guards would probably watch the train, eyes following the flashing window-lights that sped above.

Fifteen paces down the wall, almost at the corner, was a doorway. The key concealed in her palm would fit the lock, unless Security had changed it during the previous week.

A tiny, wry smile momentarily crossed her face. She thought of the party which was to be held on the morrow — her party. She was twenty, and her friends seemed to think that warranted celebration. The woman she always called Mother would be there, but not Henry Cromer and Aunty Judith. The years had reaped their harvest. Stella dimly

remembered the lodging house, always cold, always filled with the smell of cooking. It had been a long step from there to an important and trusted secretarial position in Intelligence Central, but she had made it.

A murmur grew from eastward behind the building. She eased the satchel strap on her right shoulder, the half-smile gone, her face white. If things went wrong, there would be no party on the morrow.

The train sped into view, a long, dim outline with rows of lighted windows. The guards raised their glance to it, just as they always did. This was it, Stella thought.

Silently, rapidly, she walked the fifteen paces to the door. A question, never, she hoped, to be asked, was ready on her lips, if the men turned … " What's the right time?" Her watch was set twenty minutes slow to substantiate the defence . . .

Level with the door, not looking at it, she inserted the key and twisted. The tail of the train streamed into view. Simultaneously, lights sprang on round the high wall, dazzlingly bright. One guard said something, moving.

The door opened under her hand. She passed through and closed it, ears expecting a warning shout . . .

Silence returned, broken only by the slow pacing of one set of feet past the door. The sound of the key could not be risked, now, and she left it on the inner side, her back to it.

Before her lay the core of Intelligence Central. She had never been there, but recognised its layout. Those who had provided the key had shown her plans. The outer, locked door, purposely unimposing, was the least of the defences which she must penetrate. Those who had provided the key had not pretended that her task would be easy.

De-ilth to Fay-ish.

From: Search Ship.

Hail. Information on our companion vessel chased to destruction by the Gonom ship has at last been discovered.

That there can have been survivors seems unlikely. Almost twenty planetary periods have elapsed since the vessel struck highlands and sank in adjacent water. I can hold out no hope that the revered child was saved. Have you further instructions? De-ilth.

Fay-ish to De-ilth.

Hail. Now that you have located the site of the disaster, I am ordered to convey the following most-secret information to you : The revered child had in its possession a piezo sub-radio repeater, as identification. Its nurse knew of the grave importance of this object, disguised as a toy, but not of its purpose. It is assumed that if she was able to save the revered child, she would save also the identification repeater. Appended hereto are the sub-radio characteristics. Radiate these and scan for echoes. Gradually extend the area of search, if necessary, until the object is found. Take no action, but then inform me of related circumstances.

Fay-ish.

Stella pressed her back to the wall, listening. In one hand was a hollow tube, taken from her satchel. Minutes passed in silence, and she inserted the tube into a hole in the door at her side. It had taken two years secret work by a man she had never seen to obtain possession of the resonant-cavity lock’s key. The lock-smith who had made the copy she held had afterwards died in curious circumstances.

A sound like that of a fairy flute came from the lock; the door, massive beyond all her expectation, slid aside smoothly as an opening eyelid. She stepped through and the door closed.

Inside was a long corridor, presumably crossed at many points by seeing rays. Security were no fools. And in the core of Intelligence Central lay hidden things of vital import . . .

From her satchel she took an image-converter that might have been a lipstick, and looked through it. Before her, so near that a careless movement would have interrupted it, was a purple ray normally invisible to the human eye. It played upon an electric eye. That eye was undoubtedly triggered to warning bells throughout the building, she thought, bending low to pass under the beam.

Two further beams, both waist high, spanned the corridor, and were passed. After the last, she halted, thinking it all a little too easy. Only the knowledge that her sabotage was in the interests of world peace quelled a trembling that came to her limbs.

She listened, but could hear only her own rapid breathing. The portable transceiver in her satchel hung heavy, and she half wished she had not brought it. It was not intended to be used — was merely bluff, because she might be caught.

Agent M77 to Commander.

Most Urgent.

Your Excellency. Sub-radio signals have been heard in this galaxy, and are thought to emanate from a Highborn ship. If this is so, it seems that the Highborn are searching this area. Your Excellency will realise the implications of this. It immediately substantiates the old rumours of the disappearance of the Highborn's revered child. For nothing less would such a search be undertaken.

Respectfully, Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.

Most Urgent.

Your report substantiates expectation. The Highborn’s revered child must be found, if possible, and brought back as hostage. If she cannot be captured, kill her. If she cannot be located, destroy the whole area within which she lies. If she returns to the Highborn they will undoubtedly unite and successfully resist our planned aggression. Her death was originally planned in order to disrupt Highborn unity.

You will be recalled immediately you have taken or destroyed her.

Commander .

Agent M77 to Commander.

Query.

Your Excellency, the area in question contains many millions of. the intelligent bipeds. Shall this area be destroyed ?

Respectfully thanking you in anticipation of my early recall :

Agent M77.

Commander to Agent M77.

Destroy the area. Commander.

Stella turned the door-knob slowly. The collodion with which her fingers were covered slightly dulled her sense of touch, but there would be no prints. She quivered slightly from the hazards passed, and from knowing that she must seek that way again, in escape, when her task was done.

The door opened and she felt through the crack with a long wire, searching for booby traps. There were none. She insinuated a detector through the inch-wide slit. It gave

no reaction. A periscope gadget that might have been a stenographer's pencil followed, and for a full minute she examined the room. Then she opened the door, watching the detector. No blip on its tiny screen showed that an electric circuit had somewhere been completed. Satisfied, she slipped through and closed the door at her back.

The broad desk in the centre of the room was the obvious place to search. She cut the locks away one by one, using a pocket blowtorch of a type that no industrial engineer would ever see. She searched methodically, quick, yet careful to miss nothing.

The documents were locked in a brown leather folder, as she had been told they would. A tiny tool sharper than steel slit the stout case from end to end. The crisp papers in one hand, she listened, eyes shining with a fever of triumph.

Moments passed and her well-learnt routine was remembered. If she could not escape, at least she need not fail. The documents were in themselves valueless — but the information they contained, or, rather, its secrecy, was all-important, she thought. It was for this reason that she had been provided with a transceiver. She drew it round to the front and switched it to " Transmit."

Bluff, she thought. Escape must come first.

She opened the door and gained the passage. Four men in uniform were walking briskly along it towards her. The first raised a weapon. Gas stung her eyes; she stumbled, buffetting the wall, and felt the odour strong in her nostrils. As she strove to run she knew that her knees were failing. Her will-power carried her on so that she was unconscious before striking the floor.

The blue-jawed man sat with his hands flat on the desk before him. Fifty, he was square-headed, with hard eyes.

" We do not feel kindliness towards those who will not co-operate," he said.

Stella met his gaze, hoping that she had not flinched. The leather straps holding her upper arms to the chair were too tight.

He touched one of the objects arrayed on the desk before him, gaze turning upon the four men who stood at attention at one side.

" The transmitter was on when you caught her?"

One nodded. " Yes, sir."

Stella saw her interrogator draw in his lips. " The documents were open, in her hand?"

“ Yes, sir.”

Stella closed her eyes, feigning tiredness to hide the triumph. The man behind the desk had a masterful voice; now, it had a sharp snap to it.

“ She had the opportunity of spending at least ten minutes alone ! The significant part of the documents could have been read in less than that !”

Came silence, and Stella opened her eyes. She had wanted them to reach this opinion on their own, and they had done so. It was more effective, that way.

A thick, strong-fingered hand moved the objects on the desk one by one. “ A periscope. Could even be used through a key-hole. Most ingenious. And this, I assume, is a wide-waveform detector.” He did not wait for her to answer. “Could be used to detect any form of radiation, including the static impulse caused by warning circuits. Very clever.” He looked up. “ I assume you have been trained for this part for some years?”

Stella did not allow herself to be tricked into any response. Let them guess. Guessing sometimes made five of two and two.

The big man shrugged. “ We have ways to make our guests talk, eventually.” His fingers closed over another object. “ And this?”

None of the four replied. Stella remembered Henry and Mary Cromer, the dear old pair who had been as much as any true parents could have been, and who had never pretended she was their own. “ We found you, lass,” Henry had said. Wide-eyed, almost ten, she had listened. “ Way up on the cliffs. Except for your baby clothes, there was only this . . . keep it always— some day it may prove who you are.”

The object which he had placed before her was now replaced upon the desk by a thick hand. A silvery ball, with a loop to carry it, it was enigmatical.

“ An odd thing for a spy to carry,” the man said.

Stella tried to move. “ I’m no spy. You’re the spies, planning secretly in the very heart of Intelligence Central ! Intelligence Central is non-national. You are nationals, planning to achieve personal power, only half realising that your plans would end in war !” She let her lips curl. “ And you thought you’d get away with it ! You thought you’d keep your plans secret !” She let her glance flicker momentarily to the transceiver.

One of the four men stirred uneasily. “ She could have blown the whole set-up by talking ”

The man behind the desk scowled, then put a hand on the silvery ball. “ You may as well tell us what this is, Miss Sutherland,” he murmured.

“ Find out !”

“ We shall. It’s a nut our technicians could crack.” He made a gesture and one of the four left. “It would be simpler if you told us. We like people who co-operate.”

Stella let her gaze drop to the ball. She had never known what it was, and had always carried it half for luck, and half because of Henry Cromer’s words.

“ It’s a toy — a child’s toy,” she said.

The big man laughed nastily. “ That all?” His disbelief was clear.

She nodded. “ That’s all, I swear ”

He got up, scraping back the chair, his patience obviously gone. “ We’ve talked too long. As for your — your plaything, our men will soon open it. As for yourself — its’ time you talked. We want to listen. We like listening. And we’re going to have plenty of it to do. We’ve ways. We’ll give you your chance. If you don’t co-operate, well, perhaps a little prefrontal lobotomy will relax your mulishness — it always does. I’m sure you’d rather prove co-operative before such measures ” He made an expressive gesture.

Stella bit the inner side of her lower lip. It wasn’t so easy to be a heroine when the time came, she thought. If necessary, she could appear to break down, but not too soon. She could disclose several names — they wouldn’t expect many. Those persons would already have flown upon her non-return. Only one lie must be maintained. Her captors must believe that she had broadcast to her confederates the text of the documents she had not had time to read . . .

She was taken into a second room and the objects from her satchel placed on a table. Men came, demanding, not satisfied until she spoke, then not satisfied with her answers. Needles pricked her arm and narcotics flowed through her veins. Men waved the objects from her satchel in front of her drooping eyes, shouting questions. Drugs dulled her into semi-consciousness, and stimulants awoke her to awareness of pain.

Soft voices promised freedom ; hard voices threatened death. Lights seared her eyes until she cried, and darkness came until she thought she was blinded. She was shown an open doorway leading to sun-lit streets, and told that only her own stubbornness kept her prisoner. Then she was bound again, and threatened with endless captivity. Men came and went, cajoling, promising, swearing. Hours seemed to grow into days. They held the promise of sleep before her, tantalising they said she would talk, in the

end, inevitably.

Suddenly the wall of her prison opened and they were all stilled. A golden-skinned man clad in white edged with blue stood before her, speaking directly into her mind.

“ Come away home,” he said.

Agent M77 to Commander.

Report.

Your Excellency, a Highborn vessel was observed leaving the area which it was planned to destroy. We could not go out of orbit quickly enough to follow it. Detector equipment showed that the piezo-repeater was aboard. It is therefore beyond doubt that the vessel carried the revered child. In view of this I am immediately leaving this galaxy and will in person wait upon your Excellency for further instruction.

Most respectfully,

Agent M77.

De-ilth to Fay-ish.

From : Search Ship.

Our long quest has at last proved successful ! I personally extracted the revered child from captivity on the planet in question and am returning with her. She is well. A Gonom vessel was observed in orbit, but was unable to follow us.

I have everv hope of a safe journey.

De-ilth.

Mary Cromer sighed, took off her old-fashioned glasses, and laid the newspaper down. It had all seemed a dream when little Stella— as she always thought of her — had appeared, radiant, and said that she was going back to the stars. A simple woman, Mary Cromer felt that she knew all that she needed to know . . . Stella had come, had loved them and been loved, and had gone. There was no regret.

Mary Cromer smiled, remembering. Newspaper headlines lay half hidden under her wrinkled hands.

PANIC STRICKEN FLIGHT OF ENEMY AGENTS

FULL FAITH IN INTELLIGENCE CENTRAL RESTORED

Subsequent to disclosures made this morning, a long period of peace is anticipated and the integrity of Intelligence Central has been placed beyond doubt ....