FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

CONTINUITY MAN

Children born on a long-voyage spaceship may not be so adaptable to their environment as the psychologists imagine. It depends upon the viewpoint. But there will always be one way of solving the problem.

The inter-galactic ship Styria sped like a silver mote amid the scattered suns beyond Capella. Great nebula had dawned ahead, drifted past her ports as fiery gold, and faded into oblivion behind. Old, the Styria was roughened by her long voyage through cosmic dust, and by the impact of uncounted sand-grain meteorites. But now directive equipment on her bow responded to a spectrum it was designed to receive, and an infinitesimal adjustment was made to her course. After three hundred years she was nearing journey's end.

Tony pressed his slightly upturned nose against the port, gazing at the stars. As days and nights passed, marked by the automatic lighting of the ship, the constellations had slowly changed, and he never ceased to marvel at them, or at the fiery and remote suns that grew and waned.

A light step came in the playroom behind him. A little girl, dragging a battered golliwog on a frayed string, halted near him.

" I've promised Helen I won't do it again, ever," she said emotionally.

Tony nodded. " That's good, Suzy. It was wrong."

" But you've felt the same yourself, Tony !" Suzy pointed out quickly.

Her round, clear blue eyes were accusing. Freckled, barely twelve, she had a way of digging home her points with disconcerting directness, Tony knew. Though three years older, and a boy, he realised he could not expect to win an argument on this point.

" Maybe I did," he admitted grudgingly. " But that don't mean I'd really do it."

They stared at each other, silent but understanding. The faded blue garments made their faces seem pale, but both were strong limbed, if bony. Suzy swung the battered doll by its string, whirled it faster and faster round her head, then released it. It stuck the steel wall and fell, grotesque legs extended.

“ That’s the last golliwog,” Tony said severely. “ Douglas told me there weren’t any more.”

Suzy laughed. The sound was brittle, too loud in the confined space.

“ Let’s-let’s put it down there-” she suggested.

He felt shocked. There was a place they never named a hole from which nothing returned. A place of dread.

“ Our foster-parents will be angry,” he objected.

She noted the tone. “ You’re afraid !” Her freckled nose wrinkled in disdain. “ Well, I’m not ! I’ll put it down myself, if you don’t come. I don’t want it any more, so why shouldn’t I? "

He had to admit there was logic in her words. They went out, squeezing past the door which now never opened properly, and along a narrow corridor where they knew every nut, brace, and hiding corner. At the end was a door with a big black handle and they hesitated. Suzy looked pale under her freckles, her small, round face screwed up. Tony squared his shoulders. He was growing fast and felt he must give the lead to prove he was not afraid.

The door opened at his touch. Near the end of the small room, at floor level, was a round hole two feet across. It was dark down inside, and no amount of fearful peering ever let him discover where it lead.

“ Goodbye golly,” she cried, and tossed it into the hole. A momentary rumble as of ravening fires reached their ears, far in the distance, then silence.

Tony stared at the hole, fascinated. It was down there that he had thrown all the broken cups and plates, after he had fought with Douglas four or five years ago, tearing everything from the breakfast table, and dancing on it furiously. Longer ago, almost forgotten, was a day when foster-mother Helen had told him that he would not be seeing his real mother any more. Then solemnly, a long wrapped package had been slid down there. Tony had screamed and kicked, somehow feeling the hole was stealing away for ever a thing he valued, but not fully understanding.

Suzy took a piece of sticky, highly coloured gum from a pocket of her pinafore, and offered it.

“ Don’t look so miserable. Golly wasn’t much good. Have some ?”

He shook his head. The sweets Douglas and Helen made didn’t taste nice. He

wondered if they ever tried them before giving out the ration, then remembered they wouldn't. If they did, they would have a mighty funny idea of what sweets should be like !

" You shouldn't have said you- you'd jump down there, Suzy," he decided. The hole was like a bottomless pit, and nothing ever came out again. " That was wrong, even to frighten Douglas or Helen."

She looked rebellious. " Well, it worked. Didn't they give me more sweets ?" She stuck a piece in her mouth, dribbling pink. " Not that I'm certain sure I didn't mean it a tiny bit. About jumping, that is."

He turned her away and pushed her from the room, closing the door at their backs, feeling anxious. It would be so easy to slip down the hole, or to jump down on impulse, to see what happened.

She stuffed more gum in her mouth. For the moment she was happy. She wiped her stubby fingers on her pinafore, leaving pink marks.

" You'll be sick," Tony said soberly.

She laughed at him, putting out a tongue red as a strawberry. " Who was sick last time from too many sweets?"

He shrugged, tired, not bothering to deny it. " So would you have been, if you'd eaten any. Then afterwards Douglas asked me if it tasted nasty !" He felt scornful.

" They do make rotten sweets," Suzy admitted. She tried to swing on a heel like a ballerina, bumped the steel wall, and stopped. " Let's go down where the forest was."

He nodded. " If you like."

They walked slowly. Tony knew that if Douglas or Helen saw them going to the forest, there would be trouble. He had never been a manageable boy, and the outburst with Douglas over breakfast had been only one of many. But he had learnt that he never won, and had adopted the attitude that it was silly to fight when you knew you'd be beaten.

" Aren't you just absolutely sick of always having Helen and Douglas hanging about, telling you what to do ?" he said morosely as they began to descend a metal stairway. He halted at the bottom, watching Suzy come down. For a moment an adult, sad wisdom put lines and angles to his boyish face.

" S'pose I am," she said, her tone showing she was not really thinking about it. " But

they get our food, and do things for us. I suppose that's what foster-parents are for !"

" We could do things for ourselves."

" But then we wou1dn't have time to play."

He started off down a corridor that was only dimly lit. "Who wants to play all the time ? It's stale."

" Playing is fun."

He snorted. " Doing things worth while is more fun, I'd say !"

She did not reply, but ran on ahead. She was at the end of the corridor, with a big door open, when he reached her. A smell quite unlike anything elsewhere in the ship drifted out.

Suzy wrinkled up her nose. " It smells. But let's go in."

They closed the door behind them. The forest seemed even worse than Tony remembered it. Dim lights, high overhead, showed a tangled mass of plants, oozing out of tanks, slopping over the floor, climbing over each other, and growing out of decayed masses of leaves. In some way a trailing plant had reached the cable of an overhead light, and festoons of pale green leaves, spotted with mould and disease, hung like curtains.

" It stinks !" Suzy said disgustedly. " And it doesn't look a bit like the forest pictures in the books."

They walked in a little way. Slushly, rotten vegetation was ankle deep. In places great heaps of it had reared up towards the lights and sprinklers. Suzy held up her skirt, wading where the mess was knee deep. She pulled a long, trailing stem, and a tottery mound of blighted, sickly green half as high as the room began to tilt.

" You'll get dirty, then Helen will know you've been here," Tony said warningly.

She put gum in her mouth, leaving a smear of green on a cheek.

" Let's push Helen and Douglas down- there," she suggested.

He opened his lips to object, saw she was joking, and let it pass. He did not feel like playing. The forest was merely nasty, now, and the smell nauseated him.

" There were more people than just four, in the picture books," Suzy said. She had

grown tired of the forest, and stood regarding it with her face screwed up. “ There’s only me and you, and Douglas and Helen. It --it’s lonely, sometimes-”

Tears stood in her eyes. Tony put an arm round her shoulders awkwardly. They squatted amid the rotten plants, her head on his chest, tears coming thickly, red and green from her cheek on his faded blue shirt.

“ There-- aren’t any more people, Suzy,” he said gently. “At least not here. Only you and me, and our foster- parents.”

She burrowed her small golden head into his shirt. “ You you’ll stay with me-”

“ Of course I will.”

After a little she grew quiet. She moved her head, nestling an ear on his chest.

“ Funny thing,” she said, “ when Helen nursed me I didn’t hear her heart beating like I can hear yours.”

He did not feel interested. It seemed silly to be squatting with Suzy’s head on his chest, and he rose awkwardly, pushing her away.

“ If you don’t wash your face, they’ll know.”

He felt completely depressed. The forest stank. It wasn’t fun. There wasn’t any fun, any more. He would have howled, quite suddenly, without knowing why, if Suzy had not been watching him. She wiped her face with the end of her pinafore.

“ Let’s go, Tony.”

Something in her tone said she would never want to come to see the forest again. It had been the same with other things, he thought unhappily. The toys were gone. Douglas and Helen made rotten sweets. There was no one else to talk to and nothing to do. It was enough to make a fellow sick to death.

“ I hate it !” he declared suddenly. “ I hate it- hate it !”

Suzy stopped, turning. “ You- you won’t jump down there ?” It was a cry of anguish. “ I couldn’t stand it, with only Douglas and Helen !”

He stared at her, saw her need. His spirit shrank, receding into some remote corner where hope and joy had no place. Yet he could not desert Suzy. She tugged his arm, pleading.

“ Promise, Tony ! Promise !”

“ I promise,” he said heavily.

They walked soberly along the dimly lit corridor and began to ascend the stairs. They weren’t going anywhere, he thought in utter misery. There was nowhere to go. They were simply going away from the forest, because it stank and wasn’t fun any more. As he walked tears welled slowly into his eyes. He hated two things above anything. The loneliness. And having Douglas and Helen always watching, always telling them what to do. It was virtually impossible to eat, drink, go to bed or get up, without one of the pair interfering.

Through complex instruments Douglas studied the spectrum of the sun Antaria, comparing the lines with those on an illuminated slide incorporated in the equipment. This was the right sun, and therefore the Earth-type planet, revealed hundreds of years before by the Effermann Test, must soon be within reach of the apparatus. In less than six months the Styria would reach the planet. A further month would be spent in reducing orbit, then the auto-pilot could set the ship down.

Satisfied, he turned off the equipment and left the control room. He had the easy step and features of a young man of thirty. Of moderate height, he did not need to stoop as he passed into a dimly lit corridor, and went from there to the dormitory.

It was a long room, but only at opposite ends were occupied beds. A graceful figure of about his own age was bending over the nearer bed, her corn-coloured hair hanging in thick curls around her cheeks. She straightened at his step, putting a finger to her lips.

“ Suzy is asleep,” she whispered.

They moved on down the long dormitory, halting half way under a subdued light.

“ She was sick again,” Helen said. “ It was probably the gum. But she doesn’t seem well.”

Douglas nodded. “ You know another seven months will see us landed ?”

“ Yes. When shall you tell Tony and Suzy ?”

“ Tomorrow.”

They went slowly to the end of the Dormitory. Tony was restless, murmuring in his sleep and moving uneasily. He flung out an arm, but his eyes were closed. They watched him for a short time, then left the dormitory.

“ It’s been trying for the pair of them,” Douglas said. “ They’ve only each other to play with, and us.” He drew in his cheeks, suggesting cogitation. “They seem to resent us, lately. Tony was always a bit difficult and self-willed. It’s still there, though he doesn’t show it so much.”

She closed the door, giving a last look through its round glass window. “ I know. Suzy isn’t easy to deal with, either. They both have these moods. They’re nervy, troubled.”

He nodded soberly. “ When we’ve landed it should be better. There’ll be lots to do, then.”

They went into the large recreation room. Helen indicated a book.

“ I’ve been looking for more sweet recipes. It’s difficult, though, with only the synthetic sugar, Flavouring and colour.”

“ I know.”

He left her, going on into the compact, neatly ordered library. There, he settled down to read up on childhood illnesses, physical, nervous and mental, and their symptoms. It was difficult to be a specialist in all subjects, he thought. According to the log, over thirty years had passed since the last trained doctor aboard had died. There had been no replacement.

The lists were long, and though he was a quick reader, with a retentive memory, it took hours before he was satisfied that he could not classify the malady. Numerous illnesses, characterised by raised temperature and other specified and obvious symptoms, he dismissed at once, skipping the detailed explanations. When he put the books away the wall clock showed that it was only two hours to the dawn lighting up of the ship.

Tony and Suzy did not come into the breakfast room until several minutes after the gong had sounded. When Douglas saw their faces, he knew a troublesome day was ahead.

“ It’s better to be on time,” he said in mild reproof.

Tony sat down and Suzy followed slowly. Both gazed with unconcealed distaste at their plates, piled high with a synthetic food shaped like roasted wheat. Helen poured synthetic milk from a jug, smiling.

“ Eat it up quickly !” she said cheerily.

Suzy stirred the food with her spoon, then looked at them, eyes unnaturally bright.

“ Why ‘?” She pulled a face. “ I hate it !”

“ But it’s good for you,” Helen explained, patient but worried.

Tony’s lips twitched. His face was pale, with hot spots on the cheeks.

“ You’re always telling us what to do, aren’t you? ” he stated nastily.

Helen sighed, and Douglas moved closer to the table. “We like to help you.”

“ Your way of helping is never to leave us alone !” Tony objected, and his voice cracked on the last word. “ We have to do this, do that.” He began to mimic Douglas. “ Don’t go in the forest, it’s unhealthy. Don’t touch this or that. Don’t stay up reading, it strains your eyes.” His voice rose. Abruptly he lifted the plate, turned it over, and dumped it on the table. Synthetic milk swam in a puddle, dribbling to the floor.

He jumped up, overturning his seat. “ I’m sick of it ! Suzy is sick of it too ! It’s boring-boring-to be told what to do from morning to night ! And when I’m in bed, you come and stand over me. I’m sick of you, and your filthy sweets, and this rotten, stinking ship!”

Tears of frustration, anger and misery streamed down his cheeks. Suzy let out a wail, and stood up, spilling the synthetic food. She stamped a foot.

“ Go on telling them, Tony !” she urged. “ Tell them how I threw golly down there! He was rotten, too. There’s nothing any good any more. It’s all gone, all used-”

She sank in a crumpled heap, wailing, face hidden and her hair hanging over her hands. Tony ran to her, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“ She means it- and I mean it, too !” he declared fiercely. “ I’m sick to death of this stinking place ! I loathe and hate it, and everything in it.” He drew a deep breath. “ Most of all I hate you, the pair of you ! Following us, watching us, telling us what to do !” He sought for words. “ Don’t you see-- we want to do things for ourselves ! We’ve got to ! If we don’t, we’ll die!”

Douglas had been frozen with unease. He had not realised things were as bad as this.

“ We do the best for you we can,” he said carefully. “ If you want to do new things, perhaps we can arrange that.”

“ Arrange it !” Tony raised a Iist. “ Don’t you see ? That’s the trouble. You arrange

everything.” He stared at Douglas, panting. “ Oh ! You don’t understand. You’re killing us by doing everything, arranging everything, and yet you don’t understand !”

He pulled Suzy to her feet and dragged her towards the door. Douglas made a gesture indicating helplessness.

“ In time there’ll be lots more things for you to do,” he said. “ New things.” He debated whether he should explain how the Styria would soon land. Perhaps this was not the best moment, he thought. Tony and Suzy were too excited already. “ Later we’ll see there are interesting things for you to do,” he finished lamely.

Tony paused at the door, baring his teeth like an animal. “ You won’t arrange interesting things for me to do !” he stated hotly. “ I’m tired to death of it all ! So is Suzy. We’re through, finished with it all !”

He banged through the door, Suzy after him. The sound of their running feet receded down the corridor.

“ I-I think it’s best to leave them a while to grow calm,” Helen suggested. “ Suzy will make herself sick again, if we argue.”

Douglas halted, hand on the door. “ Perhaps you’re right.”

Two hours passed. Tony and Suzy did not return. Douglas spent part of the time re-reading about mental stresses, but did not get far. Helen left him, and for a long time he sat in silence, pondering what he had learnt. From the scene at breakfast, it was clear the two were in a very nervy state. He hoped it was not so bad that they would do themselves an injury. He also wished that there was someone of greater experience, whose advice he could seek. But the Styria carried only Helen, himself, Tony and Suzy, now.

Running steps broke in on his thoughts. The door burst open. Helen held it, eyes wide and hair disordered.

“ Come to-- to the disposal room !” she whispered.

He ran, leaving her behind, and unfastened the sprung door. Two small, neat bundles of clothing stood near the disposal orifice. Each was complete to the final garment, shoes, socks, underclothing. Thus might two children have undressed to dive into a cool pool, swimming deep into forgetfulness.

For a long time he gazed down into the disposal orifice, leading to the ravening fury which heated and propelled the Styria. On each cheek a tear appeared, running slowly down his smooth skin. He had not known it was this bad, he thought. But he had done

all he could.

He met Helen as he left the room. She was standing in the corridor, hair disordered, lips shaking, tears on her cheeks.

“ There- there aren’t any more children in the ship, Helen,” he said.

She gazed at him, round eyes agonised. “ I didn’t know they were so unhappy, Douglas. If I had, I could have done something.”

He nodded. “ Nor did I know, Helen.” For a moment he listened to the silence. “ According to the log, they’re not the first to take that way out-not by many.”

She was not listening. “ I didn’t realise they were so unhappy !” The voice was a wail. “ They’re the last two, and they’re gone ! We could have done something to make them happier. We could have made more sweets.” Words began to run together, as if some co-ordinating power had been lost. “ We made the best sweets we could. We did all we could. We helped them. I didn’t know, and it’s too late- too late-”

Douglas reached forward, lifted her blouse, opened the panel, and turned the master switch off. Light faded from the gentle eves, the limbs slowlv folded.

Yet she was right, Douglas thought. No more children at all, now Tony and Suzy were gone. It had been the duty of Helen and himself to help and serve the children. He had not understood that all the care and attention which would be sufficient for a hundred had been too overpowering, when directed upon two alone. All he knew was that his purpose had ceased to exist. Designed to care for children, to learn to help them, to exist for them, he now had no reason to exist. After long, silent minutes he lifted his shirt, opened the flap, and turned the master switch off. Oblivion was instantaneous, cutting across his circuits, leaving a blank where reason had been.

The Styria sped on, a silver mote amid the stars, her sensitive equipment now homing on the planet circling Antaria. Within months she would go into orbit, losing velocity, spiralling lower until auto-pilot mechanisms could choose a landing site and set the ship down. Already long-range visual analysis showed that atmosphere, gravity and living conditions were as revealed by the Eifermann Test, and ideal for humans.

In the compact library two silent figures lay together under the dim lights, eyes closed as if in sleep. The simulated tears had evaporated from the synthetic cheeks, and the mechanical limbs had folded automatically into a position imitating rest.

The door opened slowly, creaking, and a disordered mop of hair came through. The naked body following was covered with green slime.

After a few minutes Tony rose, drawing Suzy into the room. Naked, the green on her body testified to the enthusiasm with which she had burrowed into the vegetation of the forest.

“ They- they weren’t real peop1e,” she whispered.

Tony shook his head. “ No, Suzy. Only made to help us. Now, we’ll have to help ourselves. When I fought with Douglas years ago I thought his arms seemed funny, and he didn’t howl when I bit, like you do. You know, now, why they made such rotten sweets. They couldn’t taste them.” He stood more erect, outlined in the glow from the corridor. Already a new self-reliance was coming into his voice.

“ It’s just us, now, Suzy. On our own.”

She looked up at him and grasped his hand in her chubby palms. “ I was sick of having them tell me what to do ! Now we’re alone it’ll be fun, Tony !”

He nodded, but there was wisdom on his face. “ More than just fun, Suzy. There’ll be hard times, failures, work until we drop, but we’ll succeed !”

They turned their backs on the silent figures and went out through the door. A man must be able to decide his own destiny, Tony thought.