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GENERAL MAX SHORTER

By KRIS NEVILLE

Illustrated by GIUNTA

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To spread Mankind to the stars carries a high cost in lives—and not all of them are human!

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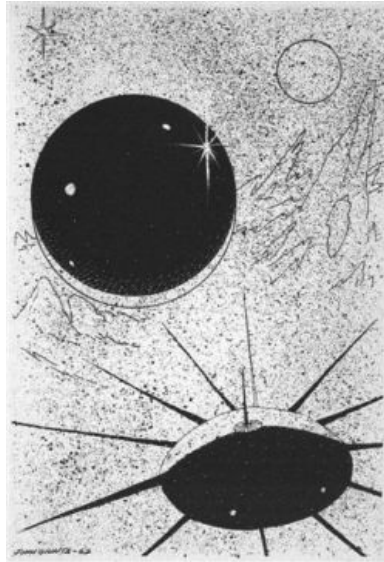
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I

Miracastle: The initial landing had been made on a flat plateau among steep, foreboding mountains which seemed to float through briefly cleared air. In the distance a sharp rock formation stood revealed like an etching: a castle of iron-gray stone whose form had been carved by alien winds and eroded by acid tears from acid clouds.

Far above was a halo where the sun should be. The sun was an orange star only slightly larger than Sol and as near to Miracastle as Sol to Earth. The orange rays splintered against the fog and gloom was perpetually upon the dark face of existence.



This was the first two-stage planet man had ever attempted to colonize. Miracastle was so far from Earth that the long ships were destroyed twice to reach it.

The technicians came, commanded by General Max Shorter, sixty-three years old. Men wearing the circle whose diameter was etched in ruby steel enclosing a background of gleaming ebon—the emblem was a silver D over a sunburst of hammered gold.

The surface of Miracastle roiled with unfamiliar storms and tornados and hurricanes. Before these, the films of lichen evaporated into dust, and the sparse and stunted vegetation with ochre foliage turned sear and was powdered by the fury in the air.

Earth equipment, alien to the orange sun, hammered into the heart of Miracastle. Night and day it converted the pulverized substance of the planet in the white-hot core of its atomic furnaces.

Acid rivers snapped at the wind and changed to salt deposits and super-heated steam. In the gaseous atmosphere, neutral crystals formed and fell like powdered rain. Miracastle heated and cooled and shivered with the virus of man-made chemical reactions, and the storms screamed and tore at the age-old mountains.

Inside the eternal, self-renewing Richardson domes, the technicians worked and waited and superintended the computers which controlled the processes raging beyond them.

The long ship lifted steadily and majestically through the battering storm and the driving rain of dust and crystals. Out beyond the dense space that surrounds all stars, the long ship probed the ever-shifting currents in the four-dimensional universe. The long ship found a low-density flaw, where space could hardly be said to exist at all. The long ship, described mathematically, was half as long as the continuum—the length being inversely proportional and related only to mass. Time was but a moth's wing between twin cliffs of eternity.

Inside Miracastle's orange sun, at its very core, an atom of hydrogen was destroyed completely; and in the inconceivable distance, an atom of hydrogen appeared. The pulsing, steady-state equation of the universe maintained its knife-edge and inevitable thermo-dynamic balance.

Inside the long ship, a pilot-machine ordered the destruction of a vastly greater collection of matter. The atoms of the ship and the sailors—fixed in relationship, each to each—imploded into nothingness.

And the long ship and the men aboard it were born again at a low-density area a million light

years away—halfway to Earth. Born and were destroyed again, in the blink of an eye.

Beyond the ship now lay Sol, pulsing in its own warmth and warming its children embedded in the cold and distant texture of the universe. The sailors were ghosts come home.

Miracastle was alone with her conquerors.

General Max Shorter, a few weeks later, began writing a diary.

"I have been Destroyed thirty-seven times during forty years' service with the long ships," he wrote. He wrote with a pen, using a metal straight edge as a line rule.

"I have served faithfully and I believe as well as any man the Corps, the planet and mankind. It is perhaps appropriate at this time, as I approach the end of my long service, to record a few observations which have occurred to me during the course of it as well as to record the day-to-day details of my present command."

The general wrote: "A man is given a job to do. And when all is said and done, that is the most important thing in his life: to do his job."

It took perhaps ten seconds for the soft knock to penetrate his concentration. He adjusted himself to the moment and closed the diary softly. He deposited it in the upper right-hand drawer of the writing desk and locked the drawer.

The knock came again.

He arranged his tie.

"Come in," General Shorter said.

The agitation of the man in the doorway was announced by the paleness of his face.

"Come in, David," General Shorter said, rising politely from the writing desk. "Be seated, please."

"General, we've had a ... a very unfortunate thing happen on the shift."

The general sank back into his chair. Light from the desk lamp framed his expressionless and immobile face, half in light, half in shadow. He fingered the straight-edge on the desk top.

"Sit down, David, and then tell me about it."

Shift-Captain Arnold moved uncertainly.

"Sit down, sit down," General Shorter repeated impatiently.

Captain Arnold seated himself on the edge of the chair.

"One of the men," he said, "just committed suicide. He was in charge of the air changing monitor this shift. He went outside without a suit."

The general blinked as though to remove an irritation from his eye. His hand lay still and hard upon the straight-edge. "What was his name?" he asked in a voice that was vaguely puzzled.

"Schuster. Sergeant Schuster, sir."

"Yes, I remember him," the general said. "He came to us about a week before the lift. I think he was from Colorado. He had very broad shoulders. Short and broad. Neat appearing. Uniform always in good order."

General Shorter ran his thumb and forefinger up the bridge of his nose and then, with a very small sigh, placed his palm over his eyes.

"Draw up the report," he said. "Was there a final message?" The question was uttered without hesitation and was followed by a moment of silence.

"No, sir."

General Shorter's breath was audible.

"Please feel free to smoke, David."

"Thank you, sir, I don't smoke."

"No, of course not. I'd forgotten." General Shorter half turned and placed his hands on the desk. He stood under their pressure. "What would you say to a brandy?"

"I should return to duty, sir."

"A few minutes more," the general said. "The brandy is good." He moved into the shadow and sorted bottles at his tiny cupboard. "Here." He held the glass to the light. Amber liquid flowed softly and the general handed across the half-filled glass. "Sit back," he said. "I'll join you."

Glass in hand, the general stood with his back to the light. He seemed surrounded by cold fire, and the glass sparkled as he lifted it. He sipped. "Try it, it's good."

"It's very good, sir."

For a moment neither spoke. Then the general said, "This isn't my first command, you know. I've seen men die. I've had to take chances with them occasionally. You could say, I suppose, that I ordered some men to their deaths. But still, the men came aboard knowing the risks. In the final sense, they, not I, made the decision. I never sent a—"

The sentence ended as the glass slipped and fell. "I'm sorry," he said, looking down at the sparkling fragments at his feet. The dark liquid—the light gave it a reddish cast—puddled and flowed and its aroma filled the room. "No, no. Let it be, David. I'll get it later."

The general went to the cupboard and poured into a new glass. Again he was light and shadow. The spilled liquid approached the shadow and was devoured in it as though it had never been, but still the aroma stood on the air.

The general said: "Imagine, if you can, David, that Earth were attacked, and the attack destroyed many of the military installations. After you struck back, David, what would you do next?"

"I don't know, sir. I'm not a strategist, I'm afraid."

"What about your cities? The millions of people trapped without supplies—over-running the countryside, looting, plundering in search of food. Carrying pestilence and disease and terror. What would you do, David?"

"Well, I guess I'd try to organize some relief organization or something."

"But David. Anything you diverted to care for these people would limit your ability to fight back, wouldn't it? They would be cluttering up all your transportation, frustrating effective retaliation. Your second move would be to take the bombs which destroy people and not property and ... use them on your own cities."

Captain Arnold drained his glass. "That would be...." He did not finish.

"Insane, David? No. Rational. Field Commanders must be realists. The job comes first. In this case, the job of defeating the enemy.... But what does that have to do with us? Nothing, eh? You're right. Sometimes I like to talk, and I suppose that's one of my privileges. I'm not the idealist I used to be, I guess. I remember when I was your age. I saw things differently than I do now. What used to seem important no longer does. Each stage of development has its unique biological imperatives: a child, a youth, a mature man, look out on the world from a body held in focus to different chemistries. But the job remains." General Shorter held up his glass. "Cheers." He drained it.

Again there was silence.

"David, do you think I'm in much trouble?"

"I'm afraid so, General. The Committee is due to arrive tomorrow."

"I know," the general said. "This suicide isn't going to help us. Tomorrow. Is it that soon? I thought ... yes, I guess it is tomorrow.... Well, we've been here long enough to lose our immunity, so we'll all catch colds."

Captain Arnold stood. "I better get started on my report."

"Poor Sergeant Schuster," General Shorter said. "If anyone's to blame, it must be me."

"He obeyed the orders."

"What did you say?"

"I said he obeyed the orders, sir."

"Of course he obeyed the orders," the general said. "What else could he have done?"

II

The long ship hung in orbit above Miracastle and discharged its passengers. The Scout Ball could handle them: saving energy, which along with time itself, is the ultimate precious commodity of the universe governed by the laws of entropy.

The Scout Ball settled through the dark turbulence undisturbed by the hissing winds. It hovered momentarily in the invisible beacon above the Richardson dome as if both attracted and repelled. It moved horizontally and settled. Suited figures on the surface wrestled with its flexible exit-tube against the storm, fighting to couple it to the lock of the Richardson dome. The exit-tube moved rhythmically until the Scout Ball inched away, drawing it taut. Pumps whirred. The suited figures entered the forward lock of the Scout Ball.

Inside, General Shorter divested himself of the helmet. The suit hung upon him like ancient, wrinkled skin.

He asked, "What time is it?"

Upon being told, he nodded with satisfaction. "Seventeen minutes, total. Good job. Who's in charge?"

"A Mr. Tucker, sir."

"Tucker? Jim Tucker, by any chance?"

"Yes, sir."

General Shorter grunted. "Served with him once. He's probably forgotten.... That's all right. I'll keep the suit on."

"I don't think they're expecting you with the surface party, General."

"Probably not or they'd be here. Earth crew?"

"They've been out ten months or so, sir."

"We will have colds, then. Would you take me to Mr. Tucker, please?" To the other suited men he said, "Good, fast job."

General Shorter followed the crewman up the spiral staircase and along the corridor. His hand touched a frictionless wall. "New plastic?"

"This is one of the most recent balls, sir."

"How does it handle?"

"Quite well, sir."

"I miss the Model Ten," he said.

"There's only a few left now, I guess."

"I haven't seen one in years."

The crewman stopped before a numberless panel. He knocked politely. "Mr. Tucker? I have General Shorter here. He came out with the surface party."

Mr. Tucker's voice, the edge of surprise partly lost through the partition, came: "Just a moment."

In silence they waited. General Shorter moved restlessly. Several minutes passed.

The panel opened.

Mr. Tucker was a short, rotund man. His close-cropped hair was graying, although his face was unlined, with the smooth complexion of a child. His irises were gray and gold.

General Shorter stepped forward and introduced himself.

"Come in."

The panel closed.

The two men stood. General Shorter glanced around for a chair.

"Small quarters," Mr. Tucker said. "If you like, sit there. I'll sit on the bed."

They arranged themselves.

"Perhaps you don't remember me?" the general said. "We served together—what, ten years ago?—for about two weeks on Avalon, I believe it was."

"Yes, I thought that was the case. You have a good memory, General."

"Please," the general said, "just call me Max."

Mr. Tucker considered, without committing himself. He proffered a cigar. The general declined.

Mr. Tucker lighted the cigar carefully, moving the flame several times across the blunt end. He regarded the results without expression. "A cigar should be properly lit, General," he said.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so," the general said. He paused to worry at a wrinkle on his suit. "Good trip out?"

"Routine."

"New ship? I notice this is one of the new Balls."

"Mark Six."

"Ah, those. I've always liked the Mark Six. Solid construction. I've been Destroyed maybe half the time in the Mark Sixes. Each one of the Marks has its own personality—I've always thought so. I don't suppose you remember the old Mark Two? That was a long time ago. I've been around. We got lost in one once. It picked a pseudo-fault line and ... well, never mind. Earth the same, I guess?"

"Hasn't changed."

"I don't know when I'll get back," the general said. The statement seemed to dangle as though it were an unfinished question.

"The new detectors have put Miracastle on the fringe of things."

"I've followed the work," the general said. "I try to keep up. It involves a new concept of mass variation, doesn't it?"

"It just about makes it uneconomical to colonize a two-stage planet any more. Or to keep one going."

The general's eyelids flickered. His body moved beneath the wrinkled folds of the surface suit. Cigar smoke curled in the still air.

Mr. Tucker said, "You must have been aware that it would not have been a great loss to have evacuated Miracastle."

The general shuffled in silence. "Yes, sir, I knew the background. It's part of my job to know things like that. You'll find, sir, that I have a strong sense of responsibility. If it's part of my job, I'll know about it."

General Max Shorter abruptly stood and for a moment was motionless, a man deformed and diminished in stature by the ill-fitting surface suit. Expressionless, he looked down, without psychological advantage, at the seated civilian holding the partially smoked cigar.

Later the same day, Mr. Tucker and two of the three other members of the Committee donned surface suits and, together with Captain Meford, the cartographer assigned to Miracastle, they boarded the surface scout.

They arranged themselves in the uncomfortable bucket seats and strapped in.

"Little early for an easy ride," Mr. Tucker commented.

"I've been out before," Captain Meford said laconically. It was his usual manner.

"How long do you think it will take us to get there?"

"Between fifteen and twenty minutes, if I don't hit too much cross wind."

Mr. Ryan, one of the other two civilians, commented, "A long time between cigars, eh, Jim?"

The question was out of place and was ignored without hostility.

Mr. Ryan twisted uncomfortably. At length he said, apologetically, "Dirty, filthy business. I wish it were over with."

"So do I," Mr. Tucker said.

Captain Meford activated the ramp and eased the scout out. It was immediately buffeted by the winds.

"Sorry," he said. "It'll take a minute. Hold tight." The scout moved in three dimensions, erratically. "Wow! Let's set it at about twenty-six inches. Sorry. This will slow us down, but it will ease the bumps on down draft. There. That's better. We're okay now, I think. I guess we can settle back."

Thirty-five minutes later, they came to what was left of the alien city.

Back in the Richardson dome, General Shorter had coffee, in his quarters, with the remaining man on the Committee, a Mr. Flison. They were going through the ritual of conversation.

"This is the first time you've been Destroyed then, sir," the general said. "My first time was so long ago I've forgotten what it feels like."

"I was uneasy in advance," Mr. Flison said. "You read various descriptions about the physical sensations. Intellectually, of course, you draw a distinction, but emotionally you know that the only word which applies is death—pure and simple. But there's no sensation. It happens too fast. You don't even notice it."

Politely attentive, the general had leaned forward. "I don't think it could be put better," he contributed. "That's very apt. You don't even notice it."

Mr. Flison's eyes narrowed in speculation. They maintained the general's own in unwavering focus. He did not acknowledge the compliment.

The general's eyes broke to one side. He moved nervously as though physically to dismiss the tactical error of underestimating his opponent.

"Since this is your first planet," the general said, "perhaps you'd like to see something of the operation? Basically, we have nine Richardson Domes here on Miracastle. Two are the living quarters—the other similar to this. Right now domes Seven and Nine are the more important. They contain the air-changing equipment. We are holding tightly to our completion date, and these two—Seven and Nine—will be pulled out in fifteen days. That is to say, they will, barring any serious interruptions in our work. On schedule, I should point out."

The general poured coffee for himself. Mr. Flison politely declined.

"When you've been in the Corps as long as I have," the general resumed, "the schedule becomes a part of you. Everything—" he held his hands before him, fingers spread, palms facing, and drew them together—"converges on that. It's that simple. Other planets are waiting. In a society as complex as ours, a million—and I mean this literally, sir—a million decisions must be reviewed if the schedule falls behind. Delay of a critical item of equipment can necessitate an unbelievably vast reassignment of personnel and supply patterns. A small cause reverberates throughout the whole fabric of the space technology."

"General Shorter, I think perhaps you're being carried away a little. I'm sure we have adequate procedures to accommodate minor variations in equipment delivery dates. If we don't, the Lord help us: we'd have been dead long ago."

The general was in the process of forming an immediate reply, but he reconsidered. When he reached for the coffee, which by now was cool and bitter, his hand was trembling.

The general licked his lips. "More coffee? No? Well, I didn't intend to get off on this. I really wanted to ask if you'd like to inspect our operations." He glanced at his time piece. "I could show you the present shift operation in Dome Nine."

Mr. Flison rose. "No, General, I don't want to be of any bother. I wouldn't want to interfere with your—work."

III

"City" is not necessarily descriptive: perhaps less so than the application of Euclidean axioms to advanced geometry. Physically, it was this:

1. Three dozen stone arches whose keystones were inverted bowls.
2. A smooth-walled recess in the sheer face of a cliff.
3. A level lip of rock, as precisely flat as though honed, from which the arches seemed to grow.

"Is this all?" Mr. Tucker asked.

"Yes, sir," Captain Meford said.

Mr. Ryan came to the viewing section. "It looks," he said, "as though the cliff were split down to here and then hewn away to leave the structures there and the apron."

"We found no tools, sir. There were no tools here, nor with them."

"Nothing else at all?"

"They left behind some four hundred chips of stone, apparently numbered. We have them in the dome. And there's a two-line inscription on one of the arches. There's nothing else."

High above the men and the ship, the new wind sang in one of the inverted bowls and fluttered lightly over the inscription. It, like the face of the cliff, was oxidizing. Dust filtered down before the recess, alien symbols falling. Life is the recording angel of time. Without life, all ceases.

"Dust," Mr. Tucker said. "Dust ... dust ... more dust. Soon the dust will be over everything. When the wind is gone, it will be there to hold our footprints."

Inside the air-conditioned scout, the men shivered.

"How did you come to find them?" Mr. Ryan asked.

"I saw the constructions from the photos, sir. This had been missed by the mapping party. It's easy enough to see why when you see the pictures."

"This the only one?"

"Yes, sir."

"How can you be sure of that, Captain Meford? It's a large planet."

"I had one of the machines scan the remaining maps for geometrical patterns, sir."

"Isn't that done routinely?" Mr. Tucker asked rather sharply.

"Yes, sir. But you see, we've always expected that if we were ever going to encounter intelligent life on a planet, it would be rather widespread. Accordingly—and this is the routine procedure, sir, used, as far as I know, by all contact parties—we ran through a statistically significant sample of the terrain. There was nothing on Miracastle out of the ordinary. There was the typical, low-order vegetable matter, about what we always find. It was a very typical planet, sir."

The third man from the Earth Committee, Mr. Wallace, seldom spoke. When he did, his voice was mild, and there was a sense of child-like wonder in his tone. "The natives?" he asked.

"They ... had fled when we discovered the city."

"Where did they flee to?" Mr. Wallace asked.

Captain Meford glanced upward. Other eyes followed to end just below the edge of the view screen. Above stood the sheer face of the cliff. Clouds roiled below the summit, obscuring it from view.

"There is a long sloping plateau up there, and a series of natural caves back in the next cliff face," Captain Meford said. This did not seem adequate. He continued: "Most of the air-changing activity starts in the low-lying areas, at first around the dome positions. It advances along an elevation front, gradually drifting up. Little tongues are carried up in advance by the heated currents. The aliens retreated before it. On the plateau you can see the sentries. I guess they posted themselves there, at intervals, between the edge and the new caves, to define the limits of safety. They died there. Six of them. The rest, several hundred, reached the caves. They are dead, too."

"I see," Mr. Wallace said.

"When you first discovered them—?" Mr. Ryan asked after a moment.

Captain Meford hesitated.

Mr. Tucker said: "I believe one of your men killed himself last night—wasn't it? A technician? I was told he felt you could reverse the air-changing equipment in time to save the aliens. I understand that was very much on his mind for the last week or so."

"I'm not too familiar with the man, sir. He was on Captain Arnold's shift, I believe."

"Captain Meford," Mr. Ryan insisted, "when did you say you first discovered the aliens?"

Captain Meford hesitated. The others waited.

"They were then scaling the cliff, sir."

"And General Shorter, was he told of this immediately?" Mr. Ryan asked.

"I don't know when the general was told."

"You discovered them?"

"Yes, sir. I ... you see, at the time the winds completely prohibited air traffic. As you know, the air scouts are not stable enough until ... later. Later, I ... Yes, sir. I discovered them."

"Did you then inform the general?"

"No, sir. I informed the duty officer."

"Did he inform the general?"

"I don't know."

"Why didn't you tell the general?" Mr. Tucker asked.

"I was then in communication with Captain Geiger, and I felt he...." The sentence trailed away.

"Would tell the general?" Mr. Tucker prompted. "Well, did he?"

"I believe he did, sir," Captain Meford said. He let out a long breath.

"May we see the aliens?" Mr. Ryan asked.

"I wouldn't advise it, sir," Captain Meford said. "High flights are still very risky because of the wind velocities."

After the evening meal, General Shorter called Captain Arnold aside. "Mind if I go over to Nine with you?" he asked. "The air around here is—well, the fact of the matter is, I'd like to get away from them for awhile."

"Of course not, sir," Captain Arnold said.

"We'll call it an inspection. Which might be a good idea at that. With these people running around trying to interfere with my schedule. Poking around. Asking questions. Taking men away from their work, basically." He tapped his teeth with his right thumb in reflection. "I'd better check up on all the domes tonight, just to be sure."

"Yes, sir."

"I wouldn't want anything to go wrong because they're here."

In the dressing quarters, they donned surface suits and exited through the locks to Miracastle. In the area immediately beyond the Dome, the solidly positioned connection rails radiated away. The general gestured for the captain to lead.

The wind buffeted them. Inside the surface suits it was quiet.

"David?" the general asked.

"Yes, sir?" Captain Arnold said. He was fastening his safety line in the keyed slot. He fumbled with it for a moment before the wind.

"You on suit communications?"

"Yes, sir." Captain Arnold straightened and moved forward. The general replaced him and dropped his safety line in place with practiced efficiency.

Captain Arnold, surrounded by dust devils, became a distant, indistinct bulk. His motions were ponderous. The general could no longer see his face or his expression.

"I do not entirely understand this, David," the general said conversationally. "The investigation. I thought I had powerful friends in the Corps. Though a man makes enemies." The general lurched awkwardly over the broken surface of Miracastle, drawing the safety line taut. He moved toward the connection rail again. "A general is separated from much of his command. Some of the technical refinements are too involved—and, of course, men hide their feelings." Once again he struggled with the wind, turning slowly at the end of the safety line: held from the devouring anger of the planet only by the slender umbilical cord from the stars. "General Grisley, now. I think he's sixteen star, in headquarters. He was a politician. He came up fast. In fact, he was my adjutant a few years ago. He was always a man to hold a grudge."

Captain Arnold made no reply.

"You know how politics is in the Corps."

Dome Nine rose from the swirling mist before them. The wind seemed to increase in fury. And still, inside the suits, there was the sound only of labored breathing and the general's voice.

"These natives," the general said. "They were very primitive, David." Neither could see the other's face. "I can't think of them as intelligent at all. I feel they were very low on the evolutionary ladder. I wouldn't call it a city, as I've heard it called. Natural formation, more likely. Nature plays strange tricks."

They were at the lock of Dome Nine.

Inside, the general removed his helmet. "David," he said, "I've been meaning to talk to you for some time now. You've got a good career in front of you in the Corps. You're going to move up. With a few breaks, right to the top. I'm just now writing up my evaluation for your files. I plan to give you a very fine recommendation, Captain. Normally, I don't talk about this sort of thing, but I thought you might like to know."

"Thank you, sir," Captain Arnold said uneasily, opening his surface suit.

"Well, let's inspect the area, Captain."

The inspection was perfunctory. As he always did, the general paused at the pile monitor and watched, in the Dante screen, the virtually indescribable reactions being sustained far beneath the surface: molten rock flowing and smoking. Orange, blue and white flames danced as though in agony in the great, expanding cavern, danced and merged and vanished and reappeared in an ever-changing pattern.

Back at the locks, the general bid Captain Arnold good-bye and turned to leave. Then, as if an afterthought came forward, he turned back.

"David, oh, David!"

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps you remember a conversation we had a few weeks ago? I called on you for some technical advice." He held his helmet in his hands.

"When was that, sir?"

"Oh, it was about the technical feasibility of reversing the air-changing equipment, I believe. As you know, I can't be up on all the technical, purely detailed procedure, for all phases of the operation. That's what we have experts for." The last statement was unusually jovial. "I believe you told me, David, that the process was too far along at that time. Perhaps you remember?"

"General Shorter, when was that?"

"I thought you would remember, David. I'm sure it was you. Yes, I'm almost positive it was. But if you say.... Well, David, it wasn't quite so much as exactly a statement like that. But that was the general meaning of it, you know, stripped of all the technical language. You have to take it in the over-all context. That was the meaning I got." He laughed tactfully. "You're like lawyers, all you technicians. You answer everything yes and no at the same time. I hoped you'd remember the conversation. I got that idea from it." The general waited. "Well, David—don't look like that—it's not at all important. Just trying to refresh my own memory. It's not important, really.... Good night, David." He placed the helmet over his head.

"Good night, General."

Methodically the general completed his rounds. He laughed often and joked with the men and seemed in exceptionally good spirits.

Back in his own quarters, he brought out his diary. With a weary sigh, he sat down to it. He glanced at his timepiece. The day extended backward almost beyond memory but it was not yet late.

After thumbing the diary listlessly for several minutes—pausing now and then at a paragraph—he began to write. He put the events of the day down precisely in their logical sequence.

IV

The Committee took over the dining area when the general left for his tour of inspection. While the steward's department was preparing coffee for the interviewees, now assembling in the corridor, the four members of the Committee arranged themselves at the larger of the tables. Notepaper lay before them.

Mr. Tucker lighted a cigar and fingered it. "A rather good meal," he said.

The others nodded.

"I may as well start off, while we're waiting," Mr. Wallace said. "I'll summarize my somewhat contradictory observations.

"Superficially, the cultural level of the natives appeared quite primitive. The absence of tools would normally be indicative. On the other hand, the city was carved from rock in a way so as to suggest a very sophisticated technology. And writing, while apparently not practiced to any considerable extent, was known—or, if not writing as we understand it, some advanced decorative technique. We've found two lines of it, at least.

"Again superficially, the city would suggest a nomadic tradition, but for its craftsmanship. It seems independent of any obvious supply of food and their equivalent of water, if any. Nor were any provisions in evidence for the disposal of waste products. Yet the city had the appearance of age and continual usage. If you notice, the floor of the recess was worn unevenly toward the center by what I should guess to be the traffic of several centuries.

"The thought naturally occurs that the aliens were the rather decadent relics of a highly developed technological civilization existing on the planet in the not too distant past. Yet Miracastle offers no evidence for the existence of a prior technology—no ruins, no residual radioactivity from atomic operations. In short, the city has no apparent genesis in the past.

"The alternative arises: perhaps the natives were not natives at all, but immigrants or colonists like ourselves. Yet the age of the city contradicts this.

"Perhaps there is a simple explanation, although it does not occur to me. But I do have this feeling. The city was utilitarian. To me, it calls to mind one of those exquisite etchings of Picasso. The severe economy of line suggests simplicity. Yet, on further inspection, you see that each line contributes to a rather bewildering variety of perspectives. I strongly suspect that the city and the people of Miracastle will remain one of the great, unsolved mysteries of the universe."

Mr. Wallace was finished with his remarks.

Mr. Ryan nodded. "Perhaps I'm deficient in sensibilities, but I find that the most ... agonizing ... thing of all is not ever to be able to know what these people were like. It's almost as if some part of us had been lopped off, isn't it? What did the people of Miracastle think about? What was their philosophy of life? What was their social organization? What was their ultimate goals? When you realize how much we learned of ourselves from an examination of our own primitive cultures, the sense of loss really comes home. Think how much more we could have learned of ourselves by acquiring the perspective of a truly alien culture. It's almost as if we could really understand

ourselves at last if we could only understand a totally alien culture ..."

"Well, that's gone," Mr. Tucker said. The words were brittle and discrete. They hung in memory and the listeners waited as though for an echo of something shouted into a canyon. The echo did not come.

They were silent. Grief is the final knowledge of time. When one first learns that it can never be turned backward upon itself to permit the correction of past sins and the rightings of wrongs transfixed and forever unalterable. Grief is the frantic, futile beating of hands against a barrier without substance, both obscenely unreal and yet the only reality. Grief is the knowledge that we cannot step backwards before the death of loved ones and see those precious half-forgotten dream faces once again. Grief is the knowledge that time is immutable.

Outside the Richardson Dome, the wind was changing. It could now neither support the life that was nor the life that would be, and it howled in melancholy and insensate anguish its loneliness and longing to the eternal and ever-changing pattern of the stars.

The Committee concluded their interviews with an old-line corporal. He had just short of thirty years service and had several times traveled the two-way escalator of non-commissioned rank from master sergeant to private. He was perhaps typical of many of the older soldiers. His love of the Corps was expressed by his loyalty to it; his hatred of the Corps was expressed by his inability to abide by its regulations.

"You knew Sergeant Schuster very well?" Mr. Tucker asked.

"He was a new man," the corporal said. "He got on just before lift-off. A week, two weeks, something like that. I knew him, I guess. He was one of them kind that was always thinking. And like you know, sir, thinking ain't too good for a soldier. I've known a lot of guys like that in my time. You know what I mean? They're not cut out for the Corps."

"He talked to you quite a bit?"

The corporal turned to face Mr. Ryan. "He was always talking, sir. He was a regular nut. I thought for a while he was queer. He had all those crazy ideas."

"Like what, Corporal?"

"Oh, like—well, you know." The corporal hesitated and rummaged his memory without conspicuous success. "Sunsets," he said rather emphatically. "Talked about sunsets. Talked about just *anything*. Called me out back on Earth to look at a sunset once, I remember."

"What did he think about killing the natives?" Mr. Wallace asked.

The question alerted the mechanism which produced the almost-Pavlovian loyalty response.

"We didn't kill no natives," the corporal said. "They just died when we changed the air. Tough."

He looked at Mr. Wallace and then into the silence around him.

"Well ... well, let's see. I guess you'd say that sort of got to him. I mean, you know, he thought it was—" the voice became distant, as though describing a fantastic event which he could not relate to anything in a rational environment—"he thought it was *his* fault. You know how some of these guys are. I used to have a platoon once, you know. And they say—" He twisted his mouth and changed his voice to a childish whine. "What *for*?" The voice reverted to normal. "They don't ask for any reason. They just ask. I say to them, I say, 'God damn it'—excuse me, sir—I told you to do it, ain't that enough?" Well, this Schuster, sir, he worried all the time. He got so he cut himself shaving. Damnedest thing. Oh, hell, maybe for the last week, every morning, he came out a bloody mess. Patches of toilet paper all over his face. 'I can't shave,' he'd say. 'My God, I can't shave.' He wasn't nervous, either. His hands were okay. They didn't shake. It's just that he couldn't shave. Like I say, he was a nut."

No one spoke for a moment, and the corporal twisted uncomfortably.

Then Mr. Tucker said, "Well, Corporal, tell me this, please."

"Yes, sir."

"What's your own personal impression of General Shorter?"

"The old man?" the corporal asked in surprise. "He's okay."

"Feel free to discuss this," Mr. Flison said. "We'd like to know, really, what your opinion is."

"Like I say, he's okay. He's got a job to do. You know, he busted me once. General Shorter personally, I mean. Hell, I don't hold it against him, though. He's got his job to do, I got mine. I wouldn't say anything against General Shorter, no, sir. He's a soldier. I mean, you know ... he's a soldier."

After the corporal was dismissed, Mr. Tucker said, "Well, gentlemen, I guess we've about wrapped it up here. I think this is enough. Anybody's mind changed? I don't think we need any

more, do you?"

Mr. Wallace sighed heavily. He looked down at his hands.

General Shorter was still at his writing desk when he was notified that Mr. Tucker would like to see him first thing in the morning.

"Another day of it, eh?" the general asked the sergeant who brought the message.

"No, sir. From the other crew, I hear they're planning to leave tomorrow."

The general's face relaxed. His smile reflected weary tolerance. "Had enough in one day, have they? It's about time they let us get back to work."

After the sergeant left, the general wrote a final paragraph:

"I've just been informed the 'investigation' is completed. In record time, it seems. They finished up in the mess tonight, talking to some of the men. So what did it all really accomplish? They took a long ship that could better have been used somewhere else. Half my men are down with the virus. They almost cost me my schedule. And to what end? Just another piece of paper somewhere. Put Miracastle on the scale against some nice, heavy report and see which way the scale tips."

The general closed the diary. It was late now. He was very tired.

Mr. Tucker, after breakfast, knocked on the general's door.

"Come in," General Shorter called.

The civilian entered. The general dismissed the orderly with a nod. "And I'll need some clean towels for tonight," he called. His voice was hoarse.

"Yes, sir."

The door closed. The two of them were alone.

"Sit down. Excuse the cold. Got it last night. What do you say to a brandy?"

"Don't let me stop you."

"I never drink alone."

"Perhaps you'd better," Mr. Tucker said.

The general had paused just short of the cupboard. He turned slowly. "In that case, I'll make an exception, this once." He poured. "Just what did you mean by that, sir? Let's get to the point."

"General Shorter, we're going to have to ask you to come back with us."

The general bent slightly forward. His lips were partly open, as though he were listening to hear a second time.

"Why," he said, "I've too much work to do, sir. I'm afraid that's out of the question. It's just not possible at all."

Mr. Tucker waited.

General Shorter poured himself another brandy. His back was to the civilian.

"There's nothing more important, right now, than my job here," he said. He drank the brandy in a single gulp.

"I don't see how it can wait, General," Mr. Tucker said.

The general's lips were dry. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment against the alcohol and the cold. He licked his lips. "What's the formal charge?"

Mr. Tucker bent forward. His voice was soft and curious, as though the question were his final effort to understand something that puzzled him for a long time. "What do you think it is, General?"

"What could it be?" the general said sharply. "I follow orders, sir. I was sent out here to make this planet suitable for human habitation. This is exactly what I have been doing." His voice was growing progressively more angry and with an effort he curbed himself. "Put yourself in my position. I did what any field commander would have done. It was too late to stop it. I've got—It's a question of the limits of normal prudence. A matter of interpretation, sir."

The general was in the process of pouring still another drink. The slender brandy glass broke under the force of his anger. He opened his palm. Blood trickled from between his fingers.

The general looked up from the hand and fleeting annoyance came and went before he was recalled to present reality. His eyes met Mr. Tucker's.

Mr. Tucker suddenly shivered as if touched by a wind from beyond the most distant stars, a wind which whispered: The aliens are among us.

"General," Mr. Tucker said, "the formal charge is murder."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GENERAL MAX SHORTER ***

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