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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CULLY ***

By all the laws of nature, he should have been dead. But if he were alive ... then there was something he had to find.

CULLY

By JACK EGAN

Illustrated by SCHELLING



ABOVE him eighty feet of torpid, black water hung like a shroud of Death, and still he heard his ragged breathing. And something else. Cully concentrated on that sound, and the rhythmic pulsing of his heart. Somehow he had to retain a hold on his sanity ... or his soul.

After an hour of careful breathing and exploring of body sensations, Cully realized he could move. He flexed an arm; a mote of gold sand sifted upward in the dark water. It had a pleasant color, in contrast with the ominous shades of the sea. In a few moments, he had struggled to a sitting position, delighting in the curtain of glittering metal grains whirling around him as he moved.

And the other sound. A humming in his mind; a distant burble of tiny voices of other minds. Words swirling in giddy patterns he couldn't understand.

Shortly thereafter, Cully discovered why he still lived, breathed: a suit. A yellow, plastic, water-tight suit, with an orange-on-black shield on the left breast pocket, and a clear bubble-helmet. He felt weight on his back and examined it: two air tanks and their regulator, a radio, and ... the box.

Suit, tanks, regulator; radio, black water, box; sand, sea, stillness.

Cully considered his world. It was small; it was conceivable; it was incomplete.

Where is it?

"Where is what?" He knew he had a voice—a means of communication between others of his kind, using low-frequency heat waves caused by agitation of air molecules. Why couldn't he make it work?

Words. Thousands of them, at his beck and call. What were they? What did they mean? He shifted uncomfortably in the tight yellow suit, searching the near horizon for ...

Where is it?

A VAGUE calling came from beyond the black sea curtain. Objectively, because he could do nothing to stop them, he watched his feet pick up, move forward, put down; pick up, move forward, put down. Funny. He had the feeling, the concept, that this action held meaning. It was supposed to cause some reaction, accomplish an act. He wondered at the regular movement of his legs. One of them hurt. A hurt is a sensation of pain, caused by over-loading sensory-units in the body; a hurt is bad, because it indicates something is wrong.

Something certainly was wrong. Something stirred in Cully's mind. He stopped and sat down on the sandy sea bottom, gracefully, like a ballet dancer. He examined his foot. There was a tiny hole in the yellow plastic fabric, and a thin string of red-black was oozing out. Blood. He knew.

He was bleeding. He could do nothing about it. He got up and resumed walking.

Where is it?

Cully lifted his head in annoyance at the sharp thought.

"Go away," he said in a low, pleading voice. The sound made him feel better. He began muttering to himself.

"Water, black, s-sand, hurt. Pain. Radio tanks ..."

It didn't sound right. After a few minutes, he was quiet. The manythoughts were calling him. He must go to the manythoughts.

If his foot was bleeding, then something had happened; if something had happened, then his foot was bleeding.

"No!"

If something had happened, then maybe other things had happened—before that. But how could something happen in a world of flat gold sand and flaccid sea? Surely there was something wrong. Wrong: the state of being not-right; something had happened that was not-right. Cully stared at the edges of the unmoving curtain before him.

Where is it?

It was a driving, promise-filled concept. No words; just the sense that something wonderful lay just beyond reach. But this voice was different from the manythoughts. It was directing his body; his mind was along for the ride.

The sameness of the sea and sand became unbearable. It was too-right, somehow. Cully felt anger, and kicked up eddies of dust. It changed the sameness a little. He kicked more up, until it swirled around him in a thick gold haze, blotting out the terrible emptiness of the sea.

He felt another weight at his side. He found a holster and gun. He recognized neither. Again he watched objectively as his hand pulled the black object out and handled it. His body was evidently familiar with it, though it was strange to his eyes. His finger slipped automatically into the trigger sheaf. His legs were still working under two drives: the manythoughts' urging, and something else, buried in him. A longing. Up-and-down, back-and-forth.

Where is it?

Anger, frustration flared in him. His hand shot out, gun at ready. He turned around slowly. Through the settling trail of suspended sand, nothing was visible.

A GAIN he was moving. Something made his legs move. He walked on through the shrouds of Death until he felt a taut singing in his nerves. An irrational fear sprang out in him, cascading down his spine, and Cully shuddered. Ahead there was *something*. Two motives: get there because it (they?) calls; get there because you must.

Where is it?

The mind-voice was excited, demanding. Something was out there, besides the sameness. Cully walked on, trailing gold. The death-curtain parted ...

An undulating garden of blue-and-gold streamers suddenly drifted toward him on an unfelt current. Cully was held, entranced. They flowed before him, their colors dazzling, hypnotic.

Come closer, Earthling, the manythoughts spoke inside his head, soothingly.

Here it is! Cully's mind shouted.

Cully's mind was held, hypnotized, but his body moved of its own volition.

He moved again. His mind and the manythoughts' spoke: fulfillment—almost. There was one action left that must be completed.

Cully's arms moved. They detached the small black box from his pack. He moved on into the midst of the weaving, gold-laced plants. Little spicules licked out from their flexing stalks and jabbed, unsensed, into Cully's body to draw nourishment. From the manythoughts came the sense of complete fulfillment.

From Cully's mind came further orders.

Lie down. It was a collective concept. *Lie still. We are friends.*

He could not understand. They were speaking words; words were beyond him. His head shook in despair. The voices were implanting an emotion of horror at what his hands were doing, but he had no control over his body. It was as if it were not his.

The black box was now lying in the sand among the streaming plants. Cully's fingers reached out and caressed a small panel. A soundless 'click' ran through the murkiness. The strangely beautiful, gold-laced blue plants began a writhing dance. Their spicules withdrew and jabbed, withdrew and jabbed. A rending, silent scream tore the quiet waters.

NO! they cried. It was a negative command, mixed in with the terrible screaming. *Turn it off!*

"Stop it, stop it!" Cully tried to say, but there were no words. He tried to cover his ears within the helmet, but the cries went on. Emotions roiled the water: pain, hurt, reproach. Cully sobbed. Something was wrong here; something was killing the plants—the beautiful blue things! The plants were withering, dying. He looked up at them, stupefied, not understanding, tears streaming down his face. What did they want from him? What had he done ...

Where is it?

A different direction materialized; a new concept of desire.

CULLY'S body turned and crawled away from the wonderful, dying garden, oblivious to the pleadings floating, now weakly, in the torpid water. He scuffed up little motes of golden sand, leaving a low-lying scud along the bottom, back to the little black box in the garden. The plants, the box, all were forgotten by now. Cully crawled on, not knowing why. A rise appeared; surprise caught Cully unaware. A change in the sameness!

Where is it?

Again the voice was insistent. His desire was close ahead; he did not look back at the black churning on the sea bottom. His legs worked, his chest heaved, words swirled in his mind. He topped the rise.

Below him, in the center of a shallow golden bowl, floated a long, shiny cylinder. Even from here he knew it was huge. He knew other things about it: how heavy it was; how it was; that it carried others of his kind. He had been in it before. And they were waiting for him. He lurched on.

"Captain! Here comes Cully!" the midshipman shouted from the airlock. "Look what they've done to him!"

The old man's grey eyes took in the spectacle without visible emotion. He watched the pathetic, bleeding yellow plastic sack crawl up to the ship and look up. His hands reached down and lifted Cully up into the lock.

They took his suit off and stared with loathing at what had once been a man. A white scar zig-zagged across his forehead. The Captain bent close, in range of the dim blue eyes.

"It was a brave thing you did, Cully. The whole system will be grateful. Venus could never be colonized as long as those cannibals were there to eat men, and drive men mad." Cully fingered the scar on his forehead, and looked unseeing into the old man's compassionate eyes. "I'm sorry Cully. We all are. But there was no other way. Prefrontal lobotomy, destruction of your speech center ... it was the only way you could get past the telepaths and destroy them. I'm sorry, Cully. The race of Man shall long honor your name."

Cully smiled at the old man, the words churning in his brain; but he did not understand.

Where is it?

The emptiness was still there.

THE END

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CULLY ***

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