THE LONG WAY

There was Bruce Clayden, spaceman on holiday, and there was Betty Gavin, who was a not-unsuccessful painter. They were naked, both of them, but their relationship (although Clayden had entertained hopes that it might become otherwise) was purely platonic. They were wearing the rig of the day of the Helios Club. Clayden had joined from the need to relax after months cooped up in a tin coffin, and as a revolt against the obligatory wearing of uniform every waking hour, and the girl had become a member partly because of the opportunities for the study of human anatomies of all shapes and sizes.

There was not, thought Clayden, watching her as she fussed with her little portable coffee maker, anything wrong with either the shape or the size of her own anatomy. The sunshine was lustrous on her golden hair, on the gleaming skin that was perhaps two shades darker, on the firm yet soft curves of her. She was frowning as she tinkered with the temperamental machine, and she was one of those women who, in such circumstances, somehow convey the impression of a very charming schoolgirl whose sums just will not come out right. Not that she was little.

He said helpfully, "I suppose you charged the power pack"

She snapped, "There's no need. This thing lives on solar energy."

Clayden looked up at the cloudless sky. "You must have left it standing in the shade."

She told him, "The trouble with you, Bruce, is that you think that only qualified astronauts are competent to handle even the simplest machinery."

"The trouble with all of us," he said, half seriously, "is that we have all become far too dependent upon machinery. Even on the premises of this club, where we come to lead a simple life. If we were doing it properly we should be building a fire to boil the billy."

"And could you light it by rubbing two dry sticks together?" she demanded.

He said, "One could use a burning glass . . ."

"That'd be cheating." Suddenly the little contraption clicked sharply and then began purring to itself. "Well, that's that. Coffee's under way." She got to her feet and stretched gracefully. "Coming into the pool? A swim will do you good — help to get your tummy down.

He said, looking at her, "Then you don't need a swim? Then, softly, "I wish that I were an artist"

"And I," she laughed, "wish that I were a spaceman. Or a spacewoman."

"Why?" he asked, genuinely puzzled. "Oh, it's a job, and it pays well enough, but ..."

Half seriously she replied, "The romance."

"Romance!" He made the word sound like a particularly dirty one. "Oh, there might have been romance once upon a time, when the first manned rockets landed on the Moon, when the first ships touched down on Mars. In spite of all the robot probes that had gone before, nobody knew quite what to expect. But we know what to expect now. We expect worlds that are quite incapable of supporting human life, worlds on which the colonists live under domes in which Terran conditions are duplicated as closely as possible." He got to his feet and stood there, a dark, rather sullen giant, somehow primitive in his nudity. "That's the trouble these days. Everything — but everything—is so damned artificial," He flung out a muscular arm. "Even here. There's the pool—but we should be doing our swimming in a river or the sea. And there're all these pretty bubble tents, each one equipped with all the latest electronic household gadgets. If we took ourselves seriously we should be living in grass huts and cooking over open fires . . ."

She laughed. "You should have a good talk with Bill. You and he would get on well together."

"Bill?"

"Haven't you met him yet? He stays here quite often. His guiding principle is 'the natural way's the right way'. That's why he became a nudist, and that's why he's always campaigning to have all machinery banned from the club grounds. He almost left in a huff when the committee stopped him from building cooking fires on the lawn."

Clayden grinned. 'Sounds like a man after my own heart."

"He's here now. I saw him pottering round the toolshed. I'll ask him to take coffee with us."

Clayden sat down again, picked up his pipe from his gaily coloured beach mat, filled and lit it, watched Betty walking gracefully towards the club's administration buildings, permanent structures but no less gay than the bubble tents. He saw her vanish into the open door of the toolshed, emerge after a few seconds with a little man walking by her side. The spaceman regarded him with interest. Here was a real primitive, a being who would not have looked out of place squatting outside a cave, chipping flint arrowheads, somewhere in the prehistory of the race. Although his hair was neat enough, his beard was untidy and straggly. Gnarled muscles were prominent beneath his sun-darkened skin. Something metallic, gleaming, in his right hand looked out of character. A boomerang, thought Clayden, would have looked just right.

"Bruce," said Betty as the spaceman got to his feet, "this is Bill. Bill, this is Bruce. He's another primitive, like you."

Bill transferred the bright wire and brass tubing to his left hand. His grip was strong. He said, in a rusty baritone, "A primitive, Betty? You surprise me. That is what a man in Captain Clayden's profession can never be."

"And why not?" demanded Clayden, neither expecting nor receiving an answer.

The three of them sat down and the girl pulled beakers from their rack

under the coffee maker, filled them.

"I would have thought," said Clayden, pointing with the stem of his pipe to the contraption that Bill had dropped to the grass, "that a man like yourself would have had nothing to do with metal."

"I would have preferred," the other told him, "to have managed without it. But hazel twigs are hard to come by in this part of the world."

"Hazel twigs?" asked Clayden.

"Yes. They are the recommended material."

"Bill," explained Betty, "is trying to revive the lost art of dowsing."

"Dowsing?"

"Water divining," said the little man testily. "Although it can be used to find other substances — oil, for example, or metals. And it's not a lost art, Betty." He turned to Clayden, "No doubt there are dowsers on Mars, Bruce."

"I'm sorry, Bill, there aren't, Not unless you class people who fly around in blimps with cabins stuffed with electronic gear as dowsers."

"I don't. That's just another example of making life complicated when the natural way's so much cheaper and better." He picked up one of the short brass tubes and an L-shaped length of stout wire. He inserted the short arm of the L into the tube, held it so that the long arm was horizontal. It pivoted easily. "This is a simple divining rod as used at the present day."

"But why are you playing around with it?" asked Betty. "There's plenty of water here."

"Just an experiment. Just trying to find out how it works when the operator is completely naked, when his body is absolutely open to the currents . . ."

"Currents?" asked Clayden. "What currents?"

"Well, fields, then" snapped Bill. "Every element has its own field and, given the right conditions, the human mind and body act as an amplifier ..."

Clayden groaned inwardly. People like Bill were not common — but they were not uncommon enough. They possessed a smattering of scientific knowledge—and this smattering was always distorted to make it fit within their own cranky frames of reference. The last person of Bill's type with whom he had come into contact had been a passenger on a voyage from Earth to Mars, and this passenger had with him an absurdly complicated affair of gyroscopes that he had claimed was an interstellar drive, a device that would enable spaceships to travel faster than light and which would put the stars, with their teeming planets, within the reach of expanding Mankind.

"And then," Bill was explaining, "the current flows back from the body into the rods and induces like polarity ..."

"Perhaps," said Betty hastily, reading aright the spaceman's expression, "we could see it actually working..:'

"Of course." The little man had the two divining rods assembled now.

"But we can see the water," Clayden told him unkindly, pointing with his pipe at the swimming pool.

"Shut up, Bruce," snapped Betty.

"But it must be moving water ... " muttered Bill.

"All right," said Clayden. "See if you can trace the line to that tap." He got up and walked a few yards to the standpipe, turned on the faucet. Bill followed him, a divining rod in each hand, an oddly rapt expression on his face. The two L's swung aimlessly.

"Now!" the little man ejaculated—and the other man and the girl saw that the rods were no longer swinging, were standing out stiffly away from each other as though they were, in fact, bar magnets with like polarity. Clayden thought that the brass tubes in which they pivoted must be tilted — but, so far as he could see, this was not the case.

Slowly Bill paced over the close-cropped grass. Sometimes the rods seemed to be no longer subject to whatever force it was that was making them behave in that strange manner, but then a step to the right or to the left would restore the effect of repulsion. Once Bill seemed to be baffled, then he announced, "There's a right-angled bend here."

"Could I try it?" asked Clayden.

"But surely." Bill's manner became professorial. "It is a common misconception that only a very few people are capable of dowsing; in actuality it is very few who are not."

"Is that so?"

The spaceman took the rods. The brass tubes felt somehow odd in his hands, seemed almost alive. When he was over the buried pipe the long arms of the L-shaped wires twisted sharply away from each other. Clayden looked at his hands, made sure that he had not inadvertently tilted the tubes away from each other. If anything, he decided, he had tilted them towards each other.

He said slowly, "You know, you've got something."

"It's something that the human race has had ever since men were men — perhaps our non-human ancestors had it before us. The pity of it is that it's disregarded, that people rely upon clumsy assemblages of electronic gadgetry rather than their own talents."

"There are times," said Clayden, thinking of the control room of an inertial drive spaceship, "when we have to rely on electronic gadgetry. As you call it."

"I don't agree," Bill said. "What talent is it that is used by migratory birds?

If you could develop the same talent, it would make all your navigational systems obsolete."

"Unluckily," laughed Clayden, "birds migrate only from place to place on the Earth's surface, and not from planet to planet in the Solar System."

"But perhaps the talent could be developed so that it could be used for interplanetary navigation."

"Perhaps." He handed the rods back. "Well, Bill, you've convinced me that there's something in dowsing, anyhow. When I retire I might set up shop as a diviner on Mars . ."

"You could do worse," the little man told him seriously.

"I've a good mind," went on Clayden, "to make a set of these for myself."

"It's easy enough. You'll find some tubing and plenty of wire in the toolshed."

That afternoon Clayden made his own set of divining rods. To the amusement of other members of the club he stalked seriously about the grounds, tracing buried pipes and then, more ambitious, attempting to find small metal objects dropped in the grass. He carried his experiments further, finding that although he did not altogether lose the strange power when he was shod it was, to a certain degree, diminished. It was diminished still further when he put on shorts and shirt in addition to his sandals. Betty helped him at first and then, tiring of the new game, set up her easel and started work on a promised portrait of one of her other friends. Bill drove away in his battered, antique car — one of the last of the wheeled road vehicles — and left him to his own devices.

That evening he had dinner with Betty in her tent and then, after coffee, retired to his own. He had brought a stack of back numbers of The Journal of the Institute Of Astronautics with him and wished to catch up on his back reading, especially a series of articles on the problems of interstellar flight, a subject that had always interested him. He had never made any secret of his desire to still be around when a practicable interstellar drive, preferably faster than light, was brought into operation—if ever. A landing on the Moon or Mars or Venus or the Jovian satellites was merely boring routine; a first landing on one of the planets of, say, Alpha Centauri would be . . . something.

As Clayden already knew, techniques for interstellar travel were already in existence. The crew of a starship would pass most of the voyage in a state of suspended animation. They would return to Earth to find that their friends and families had grown old during their absence, to a world in which their own status would be that of mildly interesting strangers. There had been volunteers for such a ship — but there had been no professional spacemen among them.

Clayden's reading was interrupted by the scratching of finger nails on the flap of his tent. He called, "Come in."

The sheet of plastic was lifted to one side. Betty stood there, the dark

green of the material framing her golden body. She said, "Sorry to disturb you, Bruce ..."

"Not at all. Come in, Betty. Make yourself at home. This is Liberty Hall—you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard,"

She said, "Can you help me, Bruce?"

"But of course. What's wrong?"

"Nothing serious. You know those earclips of mine—the ones shaped like little, golden stars? I've just found that I've lost one. It must be in the grass somewhere between here and the pool. And old Peter will be running his precious mower over the grounds first thing tomorrow morning ..."

Clayden went to the table upon which he kept various odds and ends, picked up a powerful torch. Then he hesitated, Beside the portable light were his divining rods, and his experiments during the afternoon had convinced him that the talent, or whatever it was, worked on metal as well as on water.

He asked, "Have you the other one handy?"

"Yes." Her hand went up under the gleaming hair that covered her right ear, came back into view with the little, glittering object displayed on the open palm.

"This is how we'll work it," Clayden said. "I'll carry the rods and I'll concentrate on a star. You take the torch."

"But how …?"

"I've had plenty of practise. When we get outside the tent, both rods should point in the direction of whatever it is we're looking for. And then, when we're directly over it, the rods should fly apart. Quite simple."

"You don't mean that your really took all that guff of Bill's seriously?"

"Not his explanation of it — but there's something there. Coming?"

"Oh, all right."

They left the tent, walked out into the warm night, the grass soft and springy under the soles of their bare feet. Clayden felt the brass tubes in his hands twitch as the rods pivoted, saw that both lengths of wire were pointing towards the pool. He started walking slowly towards the sheet of water, the girl beside him, the white beam of the torch slicing the darkness before them.

Not that it was really dark. The sky was clear, ablaze with stars, the Southern Cross and the pointers, Alpha and Beta Centauri, low on the horizon. "Wish on a star ..." he murmured. Wish on a star, he thought. Wish on a star a mere 4.3 light years distant . . . But that's one helluva long way away .

The brass tubes seemed to be alive, and there was a surge of power from

... from ... From some field of force, he thought. The ideal conditions for dowsing ... Nudity, and night? Does the absence of sunlight make any difference at all?

The girl clutched his arm. She said tartly, "My star's in the grass somewhere. It's not up in the sky."

He said, "The rods tilted ..."

He deflected the brass tubes from their backward pointing position and then from the vertical, so that they were tilting away from him. But the two wires bent as he did so, remained pointing up at an angle of about fifteen degrees from the horizontal. He swore softly, felt Betty's free hand holding his arm tightly.

She whispered, "Do . . . do you feel it?"

He felt it. He felt that unnameable force flowing through his body. He felt the surge of it, and the tug of it, and he resisted it and then, in spite of himself, he looked along the two rigid wires, the wires that were pointers, that were pointing towards one of the Pointers, to the star of which he had been thinking when interrupted by Betty.

He looked to the star, to Alpha Centauri. (How many times had he wished upon it, staring out from his control room viewports when falling down the long, boring trajectory from a drab Earth to an even drabber Mars?) He looked to the star — and then the star was gone, the star was gone and the sky was no longer black, star-spangled; it was grey, and there was coarse sand under his feet instead of soft grass, and there was the dull booming of surf in his ears instead of the stridency of cicadas.

He stared at the sagging clouds, tumescent, threatening. To windward there was the incessant flicker of lightning, the continuous low grumble of thunder. The sea was grey-green and empty, a vast, barren expanse already white-flecked by the approaching squall. He turned to look inland. The rising wind was cold on his back.

"Where are we?" Betty was saying, her voice small and frightened. "Where are we?"

Clayden did not answer at once. He looked inland, but could see nothing but a seemingly endless undulation of low dunes, some of them sparsely covered with a straggle of vegetation. There was neither tree nor hill to break the line of the horizon. There was no evidence of human habitation.

Human habitation? Clayden asked himself suddenly, and the uneasy goose-flesh prickling his skin was not altogether the result of the cold wind.

"Where are we?" Betty was whimpering.

He said roughly. "Your guess is as good as mine." He looked at the girl, saw that she was shivering violently. He looked from her to the squall driving in from seaward. "Wherever we are, we'd better find shelter."

With something like a return of her old spirit she demanded, "Where?"

"That," he admitted, "is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question." Then he remembered what a Martian prospector, one of his passengers, had told him once about the way in which he had survived when trapped away from his tractor by a sudden sandstorm. This storm would not be sand; it would be rain, or hail, or sleet, but it could easily prove fatal to two naked human beings.

He took her hand in his, ran inland. It was heavy going over the loose sand of the dunes, but the first icy spatters were like whips on their unprotected backs. Clayden dragged Betty over the first three of the low sand-waves. The fourth one was higher, its surface firmer, bound by the wiry plant life that was more vine than grass. In the trough behind it he came to a panting halt, dropped to his knees and began to shovel with his hands. The girl joined him, helped him to excavate a shallow trench. When he judged that it was deep and long enough he pushed her into it, flopped down beside her and then, as the torrential downpour began, tried to pull the coarse sand back over their bodies.

It helped. It was insulation of a sort. It did not keep all the moisture out, but what soaked through was warmed by their body heat and, combined with the sand, made a sort of humid but warm blanket. And when the wind, after the brief lull that had coincided with the start of the rain, rose again they had a good lee from the dune. Clayden thought, We have no clothing, and nothing to eat or drink, but we could be worse off. He felt Betty's skin hot and soft against his own. Yes, he thought, we could be worse off . . .

She stiffened in his arms, managed to get her hands against his chest, pushed. "No!" she snapped. "No!”

He said, "We have to keep warm."

"Then we will keep warm. Period. But nothing else."

He said, "The wind seems to be easing."

"All right. So it's easing. And what do we do when it has eased?"

He said, "I don't know."

She managed to widen the slight gap between them. "You don't know? You got us into this mess."

"I did?"

"Yes. You and your damn' silly divining rods, and your stupid experiments.

He said coldly, "As I recollect it, it was a friend of yours who started all this."

"No friend of mine," she told him. "An acquaintance, possibly. But that's all."

He said, "All right, have it your own way. But we may as well talk things over, since there isn't anything else that we can do."

"There isn't," she said definitely.

There was a pause. Then, "Have you any ideas on the subject?" asked Clayden.

"Yes, Bruce. I have, as a matter of fact. We shan't have been the first to vanish from the face of the Earth — people have been doing it all the time ..."

"So you don't think that this is Earth?"

"I'm sure it's not. It ... it feels wrong. Well, at least we know something of the mechanics of our own vanishment. It was your messing around with divining rods in the nude that . . . that tapped some power source . ."

"Go on."

"You tell me something. When we were looking for that stupid ear clip, what were you really concentrating on?"

"It was shaped like a star," said Clayden slowly. "The ear clip, I mean. But it tied in with what I had been reading and thinking about when you disturbed me. I was reading about the problem of interstellar travel, and I'd been thinking about making the first landing on one of the planets of Alpha Centauri . . ."

"And you've made it," she said. "Or we've made it. But where do we go from here?"

"Home," he said, with an assurance he did not feel. "I've still got the rods. When it's dark, if the sky clears, we should be able to find Sol, and then . . ."

"Why wait until it's dark? If you concentrate, the rods should act as pointers ..."

He said, "The rain has stopped."

He disentangled himself from the girl, scrambled out of the trench. She followed him, helped him to search in the loose sand for the two rods. Meanwhile, the sky was clearing. A westering sun, that could have been Earth's own sun, warmed theft skins.

The rods in his hands, he stood there. He thought of Earth. He tried to visualise London, the city with which he was the most familiar — and then hastily wiped his mind clean, This was not a puritanical age — but the sudden materialisation of a naked man and a naked woman in the middle of Piccadilly Circus would occasion comment. Furthermore, it was midwinter in the Northern Hemisphere. So, hastily, he concentrated on the premises of the Helios Club—the gay bubble tents, the smooth lawn, the swimming pool. But it was all, somehow, empty. He tried to fill in the picture — saw in his mind's eye the sun-browned bodies in and around the pool, engaged in various activities and non-activities around the tents. And still it refused to come alive, still the rods were lifeless in his hands.

He said to Betty, "You'll have to help. I'm trying to imagine Helios; we have to return to the same point as that from which we left."

She said, "I'll try ..."

Did the rods twitch, or was it only the effect of the breeze?

But there was so much at stake. Their lives, almost certainly. And more than their lives. If this worked, if the effect — whatever it was — could be licked into some sort of controllable shape, then here was the interstellar drive of Man's vain imaginings. No, thought Clayden, not an interstellar drive in the strict sense of the words, but a way to the stars, a road to the uncounted Earth-type worlds throughout the Galaxy.

He felt her body against his and again knew the stirrings of desire. But this was no time for such things. When he — when they were rich and famous it would be different, better. But they had to get back. But the physical contact had affected his visualisation — sun-dappled golden flesh loomed larger in his imagination than the green lawn, the blue pool, the rainbow-hued tents.

The rods twitching again, and the two wires stiffened, dipped, lined up in parallel.

So Sol, with Earth, was below the horizon. But it should make no difference.

He whispered, "We almost have it . . ."

And the sudden blaze of sunlight was like a blow on the face, but a gentle one. But the noise of the surf was still there, and there was still sand under their feet — but it was warm sand, fine, not gritty. And there were the happy, brown-skinned people playing in the blue-green shallows, singing as they helped beach an incoming outrigger canoe, some of them, others scampering up the beach with the ends of a long net in the bight of which threshed and struggled the silvery fish.

Slowly Clayden turned his head, saw the coconut palms, their fronds graceful against the sky, saw the flimsy huts of matting under the palm trees, looked at the older people and the very young children sitting in the shade of their frail roofs.

He knew, suddenly, where he and Betty were, although he could not pinpoint the locality. This was somewhere in that vast sprawl of islands known as Polynesia. But . . .

But the huts were of flimsy matting, which antedated even the now antique galvanized iron, and that canoe had been driven by paddles, and there was not a powered boat to be seen, and even though there were coconut palms there was no plantation, there were no facilities for the drying and the shipping of copra.

Oddly, he and Betty had not been noticed yet — or, perhaps, not so oddly. Clothing would have made them conspicuous.

He muttered, "I hope the natives are friendly."

"What do you mean?" she asked softly.

"I don't ... know ..." he said slowly. "I don't know. But I rather think that we've come a long way in a long time. Backwards."

"Is that so bad? she said.

Clayden hoped that it wouldn't be and tried not to remember what he had read about long pig.