

Brian W. Aldiss

THE CIRCULATION OF THE BLOOD...

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I

Under the impact of sunlight, the ocean seemed to burn. Out of the confusion of its flames and its long breakers, an old motor vessel was emerging, engine thudding as it headed for the narrow channel among the coral reefs. Two or three pairs of eyes watched it from the shore, one pair protected behind dark glasses from the glare beyond.

The *Kraken* shut off its engines. As it slid between the pincers of coral, it let off a double blast from its siren. Minutes later, it lost all forward momentum, and an anchor rattled down on to the collapsed coral bed, clearly visible under the water. Then it was rubbing its paintless hull against the landing stage.

The landing stage, running out from the shore over the shallow water, creaked and swayed. As it and the ship became one unit, and a negro in a greasy nautical cap jumped down from the deck to secure the mooring lines, a woman detached herself from the shade of the coconut palms that formed a crest to the first rise of the beach.

She came slowly forward, almost cautiously, dangling her sunglasses now from a hand held at shoulder level. She came down on to the landing stage, her sandals creaking and tapping over the slats.

The motor vessel had its faded green canopy up, protecting part of the fore-deck from the annihilating sun. A bearded man stuck his head out of the side of the rail, emerging suddenly from the shadow of the canvas. He wore nothing but a pair of old jeans, rolled high up his calf - jeans, and a pair of steel rimmed spectacles; his body was tanned brown. He was ambiguously in his mid-forties, a long-faced man called Clement Yale. He was coming home.

Smiling at the woman, he jumped down on to the landing stage. For a moment they stood regarding each other. He looked at the line that now divided her brow, at the slight wrinkles by the corners of her eyes, at the fold that increasingly encompassed her full mouth. He saw that she had applied lipstick and powder for this great event of his return. He was moved by what he saw; she was still beautiful - and in that phrase, 'still beautiful', was the melancholy echo of another thought. She tires, she tires, although her race is not half-run!

'Caterina!' he said.

As they went into each other's arms, he thought, but perhaps, perhaps it could now be arranged that she would live - well, let's be conservative and say... say six or seven hundred years...

After a minute, they broke apart. The sweat from his torso had marked her dress. He said, 'I must help them unload a few essentials, darling, then I'll be with you. Where's Philip? He's still here, isn't he?'

'He's somewhere around,' she said, making a vague gesture at the backdrop of palms, their house, and the scrub-clad cliff behind that - the only high ground on Kalpeni. She put the sunglasses on again, and Yale turned back to the ship.

She watched him move sparely, recalling that laconic and individual way he had of ordering both his sentences and his limbs. He set about directing the eight crew quietly, joking with Louis, the fat creole cook from Mauritius, supervising the removal of his electron microscope. Gradually a small pile of boxes and trunks appeared on the wooden quay. Once she looked round to see if Philip was about, but the boy was not to be seen.

She moved back to the shore as the men began to shoulder their loads. Without looking round, she climbed the board walk over the sand, and went into the house.

Most of the baggage from the ship was taken into the laboratory next door, or the store adjoining it. Yale brought up the rear, carrying a hutch made from old orange boxes. Between the bars of the hutch, two young Adelie penguins peered, croaking to each other.

He walked into the house by the back door. It was a simple one-storey structure, built of chunks of coral and thatched in the native manner, or the native manner before the Madrassis had started importing corrugated iron to the atolls.

'You'd like a beer, darling,' she said, stroking his arm.

'Can't you rustle up some for the boys? Where's Philip?'

'I said I don't know.'

'He must have heard the ship's siren.'

'I'll get some beer.'

She went through into the kitchen where Joe, the boy, was lounging at the door. Yale looked round the cool familiar living-room, at the paperbacks propped up with seashells, the rug they had bought in Bombay on the way out here, the world map and the oil portrait of Caterina hanging on the walls. It had been months since he had been home - well, it really was home, though it was in fact only a fisheries research station to which they had been posted. Caterina was here, so it must be home, but they could now think about getting back to the U.K. The research stint was over, the tour of duty done. It would be better for Philip if they went home to roost, at least temporarily, while he was still at university. Yale went to the front door and looked along the length of the island.

Kalpeni was shaped like an old-fashioned beer bottle opener, the top bar of which had been broken by sea action to admit small boats into the lagoon. Along the shaft of the island grew palms. Right at the far end lay the tiny native settlement, a few ugly huts, not visible from here because of intervening higher ground.

'Yes, I'm home,' he said to himself. Along with his happiness ran a thread of worry, as he wondered how he'd ever face the gloom of the Northern European climate.

He saw his wife through the window talking to the crew of the trawler, watched their faces and drew pleasure from their pleasure in looking at and talking to a pretty woman again. Joe trotted behind her with a tray full of beers. He went out and joined them, sat on the bench beside them and enjoyed the beer.

When he had the chance, he said to Caterina, 'Let's go and find Philip.'

'You go, darling. I'll stay and talk to the men.'

'Come with me.'

'Philip will turn up. There's no hurry.'

'I've something terribly important to tell you.'

She looked anxious. 'What sort of thing?'

'I'll tell you this evening.'

'About Philip?'

'No, of course not. Is anything the matter with Philip?'

'He wants to be a writer.'

Yale laughed. 'It isn't long since he wanted to be a moon pilot, is it? Has he grown very much?'

'He's practically an adult. He's serious about being a writer.'

'How've you been, darling? You haven't been too bored? Where's Fräulein Reise, by the way?'

Caterina retreated behind her dark glasses and looked towards the low horizon. 'She's got bored. She went home. I'll tell you later.' She laughed awkwardly. 'We've got much to tell each other, Clem. How was the Antarctic?'

'Oh, marvellous! You should have been with us, Cat! Here it's a world of coral and sea - there it's ice and sea. You can't imagine it. It's clean. All the time I was there, I was in a state of excitement. It's like Kalpeni - it will always belong to itself, never to man.'

When the crew were moving back to the ship, he put on a pair of canvas shoes and strolled out towards the native huts to look for his son, Philip.

Among the shanties, nothing moved. Just clear of the long breakers, a row of fishing boats lay on the sand. An old woman sat against the elephant-grey bole of a palm, watching an array of jewfish drying before her, too idle to brush the flies away from her eyelids. Nothing stirred but the unending Indian Ocean. Even the cloud over distant Karavatti was anchored there. From the largest hut, which served also as a store, came the thin music of a radio and a woman singing.

Happiness, oh Happiness,

It's what you are, it's not Progress.

The same, Yale thought to himself dryly, applied to laziness. These people had the good life here, or their version of it. They wanted to do nothing, and their wish was almost entirely fulfilled. Caterina also liked the life. She could enjoy looking at the vacant horizon day after day. He had always to be doing. You had to accept that people differed - but he had always accepted that, taken pleasure in it.

He ducked his head and went into the big hut. A genial and plump young Madrassi, all oiled and black and shining, sat behind his counter picking his teeth. His name was over the door, painted painfully on a board in English and Sanskrit, 'V. K. Vandranasis'. He rose and shook hands with Yale.

'You are glad to get back from the South Pole, I presume?'

'Pretty glad, Vandranasis.'

'Without doubt the South Pole is cold even in this warm weather?'

'Yes, but we've been on the move, you know - covered practically ten thousand nautical miles. We didn't simply sit on the Pole and freeze! How's life with you? Making your fortune?'

'Now, now, Mr Yale, on Kalpeni are no fortunes to be made. That you surely know!' He beamed with pleasure at Yale's joke. 'But life is not too bad here. Suddenly you know we got a swarm of fish here, more than the men can catch. Kalpeni never before got so many fish!'

'What sort of fish? Jewfish?'

'Yes, yes, many many jewfish. Other fish not so plenty, but the jewfish are now in their millions.'

'And the whales still come?'

'Yes, yes, when it is full moon the big whales are coming.'

'I thought I saw their carcasses up by the old fort.'

'That is perfectly correct. Five carcasses. The last one last month and one the month before at the time of the full moon. I think maybe they come to eat the jewfish.'

'That can't be. The whales started visiting the Laccadives before we had a glut of jewfish. In any case, blue whales don't eat jewfish.'

V. K. Vandranasis put his head cutely on one side and said, 'Many strange things happen you science wallahs and learned men don't know. There's always plenty change happening in the old world, don't you know? Maybe this year the blue whales newly are learning to appreciate eating the jewfish. At least, that is my theory.'

Just to keep the man in business, Yale bought a bottle of raspberryade and drank the warm scarlet liquid as they chatted. The storekeeper was happy to give him the gossip of the island, which had about as much flavour to it as the sugary mess Yale was drinking. In the end, Yale had to cut him short by asking if he had seen Philip; but Philip had not been down this end of the island for a day or two it appeared. Yale thanked him, and started back along the strip of beach, past the old woman still motionless before her drying fish.

He wanted to get back and think about the jewfish. The months-long survey of ocean currents he had just completed, which had been backed by the British Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture and the Smithsonian Oceanic Research Institute under the aegis of the World Waters Organization, had been inspired by a glut of fish - in this case, a super-abundance of herring in the over-fished waters of the Baltic, which had begun ten years ago and continued ever since. That superabundance was spreading slowly to the herring banks of the North Sea; in the last two years, those once-vast reservoirs of fish had been yielding and even surpassing their old abundance. He knew, too, from his Antarctic expedition, that the Adelie penguins were also greatly on the increase. And there would be other creatures, also proliferating, unrecorded as yet.

All these apparently random increases in animal population seemed not to have been made at the expense of any other animal - though obviously that state of affairs would not be maintained if the numbers multiplied to really abnormal proportions.

It was a coincidence that these increases came at a time when the human population explosion had tailed off. Indeed, the explosion had been more of a dread myth than an actuality; now it had turned into a phantom of might-have-been, rather like the danger of uncontained nuclear war, which had also vanished in this last decade of the old twentieth century. Man had not been able to voluntarily curtail his reproductive rate to any statistically significant extent, but the mere fact of overcrowding with all its attendant physical discomforts and anti-familial pressures, and with its psychic pressures of neurosis, sexual aberration, and sterility operating exactly in the areas previously most fecund, had proved dynamic enough to level off the accelerating birth spiral in the dense population centres. One result of this was a time of tranquillity in international affairs such as the world had hardly known throughout the rest of the century.

It was curious to think of such matters on Kalpeni. The Laccadives lay awash in ocean and sun; their lazy peoples lived on a diet of dry fish and coconut, exporting nothing but dry fish and copra; they were remote from the grave issues of the century - of any century. And yet, Yale reminded himself, misquoting Donne, no island is an island. Already these shores were lapped by the waves of a new and mysterious change that was flooding the world for better or worse - a change over which man had absolutely no command, any more than he could command the flight of the lonely albatross through the air above the southern oceans.

II

Caterina came out of the coral-built house to meet her husband.

'Phil's home, Clem!' she said, taking his hand.

'Why the anxiety?' he asked, then saw his son emerge from the shade, ducking slightly to avoid the lintel of the door. He came forward and put his hand out to his father. As they shook hands, Philip smiling and blushing, Yale saw he had indeed grown adult.

This son by his first marriage - Yale had married Caterina only three and a half years ago - looked much as Yale himself had done at seventeen, with his fair hair clipped short and a long mobile face that too easily expressed the state of mind of its owner.

'Good to see you again. Come on in and have a beer with me,' Yale said. 'I'm glad the *Kraken* got back here before you had to leave for England.'

'Well, I wanted to speak to you about that, Father. I think I'd better go home on the *Kraken* - I mean, get a lift in it to Aden, and fly home from there.'

'No! They sail tomorrow, Phil! I shall see so little of you. You don't have to leave so soon, surely?'

Philip looked away, then said as he sat down at the table opposite his father, 'Nobody asked you to be away the best part of a year.'

The answer caught Yale unexpectedly. He said, 'Don't think I haven't missed you and Cat.'

'That doesn't answer the question, does it?'

'Phil, you didn't ask me a question. I'm sorry I was away so long, but the job had to be done. I hoped you'd be able to stay here a bit longer, so that we could see more of each other. Why have you got to go all of a sudden?'

The boy took the beer that Caterina had brought, raised his glass to her as she sat down between them, and took a long drink. Then he said, 'I have to work, Father. I take finals next year.'

'You're going to stay with your mother in the U.K.?'

'She's in Cannes or somewhere with one of her rich boyfriends. I'm going to stay in Oxford with a friend and study.'

'A girl friend, Phil?'

The attempt at teasing did not come off. He repeated sullenly, 'A friend.'

Silence overcame them. Caterina saw they were both looking at her neat brown hands, which lay before her on the table. She drew them on to her lap and said, 'Well, let's all three of us go and have a swim in the lagoon, the way we used to.'

The two men rose, but without enthusiasm, not liking to refuse.

They changed into their swim things. Excitement and pleasure buoyed Yale as he saw his wife in a bikini again. Her body was as attractive as ever, and browner, her thighs not an ounce too heavy, her breasts firm. She grinned naughtily at him as if guessing his thoughts and took his hand in hers. As they went down to the landing stage, carrying flippers and goggles and snorkels, Yale said, 'Where were you hiding out when the *Kraken* arrived, Phil?'

'I was in the fort, and I was not hiding.'

'I was only asking. Cat says you're taking up writing?'

'Oh, does she?'

'What are you writing? Fiction? Poetry?'

'I suppose you'd call it fiction.'

'What would you call it?'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, stop examining me, can't you? I'm not a bloody kid any more, you know!'

'Sounds as if I came back on the wRong day!'

'Yes, you did, if you want to know! You divorced Mother and then you went chasing after Cat and married her - why don't you look after her if you want her?'

He flung his equipment down, took a run along the wooden platform, and made a fast shallow dive into the blue waters. Yale looked at Caterina, but she avoided his stare.

'He sounds as if he's jealous! Have you been getting a lot of this sort of thing?'

'He's at the moody stage. You must leave him alone. Don't annoy him.'

'I've hardly spoken to him.'

'Don't oppose his going away tomorrow if he's set on it.'

'You two have been quarrelling over something, haven't you?'

He was looking down at her. She was sitting on the platform, putting on her flippers. As he looked down at the well between her breasts, love overcame him again. They must go back to

London, and Cat must start a baby, for her sake; you could sacrifice too much just for the sake of sunlight; civilized behaviour could be defined as a readiness to submit to increased doses of artificial light and heat; maybe there was a direct relationship between the ever-growing world demand for power and a bolstering of the social contract. His moment's speculation was checked by her reply.

'On the contrary, we got on very well when you weren't here.'

Something in her tone made him stand where he was, looking after her as she swam towards her stepson, sporting in the middle of the lagoon beyond the *Kraken*. Slowly, he pulled down his goggles and launched himself after her.

The swim did them all good. After what Vandranasis had said, Yale was not surprised to find jewfish in the lagoon, although they generally stayed on the outer side of the atoll. There was one fat old fellow in particular, over six feet long and half-inclined to set up a leering and contemptuous friendship that made Yale wish he had brought the harpoon gun.

When he had had enough, Yale swam over to the north-west side of the lagoon, below the old Portuguese fort, and lay in the gritty coral sand. The others came and joined him in a few minutes.

'This is the life,' he said, putting an arm round Caterina. 'Some of our so-called experts explain all of life in terms of our power drives, others see everything explicable in terms of God's purpose; for another, it's all a matter of glands, or for another it boils down to a question of sublimated incest-wishes. But for me, I see life as a quest for sunlight.'

He caught his wife's strained look.

'What's the matter? Don't you agree?'

'I - no, Clem, I - well, I suppose I have other goals.'

'What?'

When she didn't answer, he said to Philip, 'What are your goals in life, young man?'

'Why do you ask such boring questions? I just live. I don't intellectualize all the time.'

'Why did Fräulein Reise go home? Was it because you were as discourteous to her as you are to me?'

'Oh, go to...!' He got up, roughly pulled on his mask, and flung himself back in the water, striking out violently for the far beach. Yale stood up, kicked off his flippers, and trod up beach, ignoring the sharp bite of the coral sand. Over the top of the bank, scraggy grass grew, and then the slope tilted down towards the reef and the long barrier of ocean. Here the whales lay rotting, half out of water, flesh that was now something too terrible to count any more as flesh. Fortunately the south-west trades kept the stench away from the other side of the island; sniffing it now, Yale recalled that this scent of corruption had trailed far across the sea to the *Kraken*, as if all Kalpeni were the throne of some awful and immeasurable crime. He thought of that now, as he tried to control his anger against his son.

That evening, they gave supper to the men of the little trawler. It was a genial farewell meal, but it broke up early and afterwards Yale, Philip and Caterina sat on the veranda, taking a final drink and looking across to the lights of the *Kraken* in the lagoon. Philip seemed to have completely recovered from his earlier sulkiness and was taking cheerfully, burbling on about life at the university until finally Caterina interrupted him.

'I've heard enough about Oxford over the past few weeks. How about hearing about the Antarctic from Clem?'

'It all sounds a gloomy dump to me.'

'It has its vile moments and its good moments,' Clem said, 'which I suppose could be claimed for Oxford too. Take these penguins I've brought back. The conditions in which their species mate are death to man - perhaps minus thirty degrees fahrenheit and with a howling snowstorm moving over them at something like eighty miles an hour. You'd literally freeze solid in that sort of weather, yet the penguins regard it as ideal for courting.'

'More fool them!'

'They have their reasons. At certain times of the year, Antarctica is swimming with food, the richest place in the world. Oh, you'll have to go there one day, Philip. Great doses of daylight in the summer! It's - well, it's another planet down there, and far more undiscovered than the moon. Do you realize that more people have set foot on the moon than have ever ventured into the Antarctic?'

The reasons for the *Kraken's* sailing into those far south waters had been purely scientific. The newly established World Water Organization, with its headquarters in a glittering new skyscraper on the Bay of Naples, had inaugurated a five-year study of oceans, and the rusty old *Kraken* was an inglorious part of the Anglo-American contribution. Equipped with Davis-Swallows and other modern oceanographic instrumentation, it had been at work for many months charting the currents of the Atlantic. During that

time, Clement Yale had done an unexpected piece of detective work.

'I told you this morning I had something important to say. I'd better get it off my chest now. You know what a copepod is, Cat?'

'I've heard you speak of them. They're fish, aren't they?'

'They're crustaceans living among the plankton, and a vital link in the food chain of oceans. It's been computed that there may be more individual copepods than there are individuals in all other multi-celled animal classes combined - all human beings, fish, oysters, monkeys, dogs, and so on - the lot. A cope-pod is about the size of a rice grain. Some genera eat half their own weight in food - mainly diatoms - in a day. The world champion pig never managed that. The rate at which this little sliver of life ingests and reproduces might well stand as a symbol of the fecundity of old Earth.

'It might stand, too, for the way in which all life is linked all round the globe. The copepods feed on the smallest living particles in the ocean, and are eaten by some of the largest, in particular the whale shark and the basking shark and various whales. Several sea-going birds like a bit of copepod in their diet too.

'The different genera of copepods infest different lanes and levels in the multi-dimensional world of the ocean. We followed one genus for thousands of miles while we were tracking one particular ocean current.'

'Oh-oh, I thought he was edging on to his favourite topic!' Philip said.

'Get your father another drink and don't cheek him. The complex of ocean flow is as necessary to human life as the circulation of the blood. The one as much as the other is the stream of existence, bearing us all forward willy-nilly. On the *Kraken* we were interested in one part of that stream in particular, a current of whose existence oceanographers were aware in theory for some time. Now we have charted it exactly, and named it.

'I'll tell you the name of this current in a minute. It'll amuse you, Cat. The current starts lazily in the Tyrrhenian Sea, which is the name of the bit of the Mediterranean between Sardinia, Sicily and Italy. We've swum in it more than once off Sorrento, Cat, but to us it was just the "Med". Anyhow, the evaporation rate is higher there, and the extra salty water sinks and spills put eventually into the Atlantic, of which the Med is just a land-locked arm.

'The current sinks further and deflects south. We could follow it quite easily with salinity gauges and flow-rate recorders and so on. It divides, but the particular stream we were interested in remains remarkably homogeneous and comprises a narrow ribbon of water moving at a rate of about three miles a day. In the Atlantic, it is sandwiched between two other currents moving in the opposite direction, currents that have been known for some years as the Antarctic Intermediate Water and the Antarctic Bottom Water. Both these north-flowing streams are considerable masses of water - main arteries, you could call them. The Bottom Water is highly saline and icy cold.

'We followed our current right across the Equator and down into southern latitudes, into the cold waters of the Southern Ocean. It is eventually forced to the surface, fanning out as it rises, from the Weddell to the Mackenzie Sea, along the Antarctic coast. In this warmer water, during the short polar summer, the copepods and other small fry proliferate. Another little crustacean, the euphausiids or "krill", turn the seas cinnamon, so many of them pack the waters. The *Kraken* often rode on a pink sea. While they're feeding on diatoms, the whales are feeding on them.'

'Nature's so horrible!' Caterina said.

Yale smiled at her. 'Maybe, but there's nothing *elsebut* nature! Anyhow, we were very proud of our current for making such a long journey. Do you know what we have called it? We've named it in honour of the Director of the World Waters Organization. It is to be known as the Devlin Current, after Theodore Devlin, the great marine ecologist and your first husband.'

Caterina looked most striking when she was angry. Reaching for a cigarette from the sandalwood box on the table, she said, 'I suppose that is your idea of a joke!'

'It's an irony perhaps. But it's only fitting, don't you know. Give the devil his due! Devlin's a great man, more important than I shall ever be.'

'Clem, you know how he treated me!'

'Of course I do. Because of that treatment, I was lucky enough to get you. I hold no malice for the man. After all, he was once a friend of mine.'

'No, he wasn't. Theo has no friends, only expediencies. After my five years with him I should know him better than you.'

'You could be prejudiced.' He smiled, rather enjoying her annoyance.

She threw the cigarette at him and jumped up. 'You're crazy, Clem! You drive me mad! Why don't you sometimes get your back up at someone? You're always so damned level-tempered. Why can't you hate someone, ever? Theo in particular! Why couldn't you hate Theo for my sake?'

He stood up too. 'I love you when you're trying to be a bitch.'

She smacked him across the face, sending his spectacles flying, and stamped out of the room. Philip did not move. Yale went over to the nearest cane chair and picked his spectacles up from the seat; they were not broken. As he put them on again, he said, 'I hope these scenes don't embarrass you too much, Phil. We all need safety valves for our emotions, women in particular. Caterina's marvellous, isn't she? Don't you think? You did get on well with her, didn't you?'

Philip flushed a slow red. 'I'll leave you to your capers. I have to go and pack.'

As he turned, Yale caught his arm. 'You don't have to go. You are almost adult. You must face violent emotions. You never could as a child - but they're as natural as storms at sea.'

'Child! You're the child, Father! You think you're so poised and understanding, don't you? But you've never understood how people feel!'

He pulled himself away. Yale was left standing in the room alone. '*Explain*and I'd understand,' he said aloud.

III

When he walked into the bedroom, Caterina was sitting dejectedly on her bed, barefoot, with her feet resting on the stone floor. She looked up at him intently, with something of the inscrutable stare of a cat.

'I drank too much tonight, darling. You know beer doesn't agree with me. I'm sorry!'

Yale went over to her, pulled the rug under her feet, and knelt beside her. 'You horrible alcoholic! Come and help me feed the penguins before we turn in. Philip's gone to bed, I think.'

'Say you've forgiven me.'

'Oh, Christ, let's not have *that*, my sweet Cat! You can see I have forgiven you.'

'Say it then, say it!'

He thought to himself, 'Phil's entirely right, I don't understand anyone. I don't even understand myself. It's true I have forgiven Cat; why then should I be reluctant to say so because she insists I say so? Maybe it was because I thought there was so little to forgive. Well, what's a man's dignity beside a woman's need?' And he said it.

Outside, the waves made slumberous noises along the reef, a sound of continuous content. The island looked so low by night that it seemed a wonder the sea did not sweep over it. Not a light showed anywhere except for the lamp on the *Kraken's* mast.

The two penguins were in one of the permanent cages at the rear of the lab. They stood with their beaks tucked under their flippers, asleep, and did not alter their position when the lights came on.

She put an arm round his waist. 'Sorry I flew off the handle. I suppose we ought to have congratulated you? I mean, I suppose this current is rather a big discovery, isn't it?'

'It's certainly *along* discovery - nine and a half thousand miles long.'

'Oh, be serious, darling. You're underplaying what you've done as usual, aren't you?'

'Oh, terribly! I may get a knighthood any day. Anyhow, we'll have to fly to London in a week to receive some sort of applause, and I'll have to make a fuller report than I have done so far. In fact there is another discovery that I've only communicated to one other person as yet which makes the discovery of Devlin's Current seem nothing, a discovery that could affect every one of us.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's late and we're both tired. You shall hear about it in the morning.'

'Can't you tell me now, while you're feeding the birds?'

'They're okay. I just wanted to check on them. They'll feed better in the morning.' He looked speculatively at her.

'I am a greedy man, Cat, though I try to hide it. I want life. I'd like to share life with you for a thousand years. I'd like to roam the Earth for a thousand years - with or without a knighthood! That may be possible.'

They stood looking at each other, feeling for the neutral currents that flowed between them, relaxed enough after their tiff to feel that they were no longer two entirely separate organisms.

'There's a new infection in the world's bloodstream,' he said. 'It could bring a sort of illness that we could call longevity. It was first isolated in the herring schools in the Baltic a decade ago. It's a virus, Cat - you understand how we traced the Devlin Current, don't you? We had deep trawls and sonar devices and special floats that sink to predetermined water densities, so that we could trace the particular salinity and temperature and speed of our current all the way. We could also check the plankton content. We found that the copepods carried a particular virus that I could identify as a form of the Baltic virus - it's a highly characteristic form. We don't know where the virus came from originally. The Russians think it was brought to Earth encased in a taktite, or by meteoritic dust, so that it may be extra terrestrial in origin -'

'Clem, please, all this is beyond me! What does this virus *do* ? It lengthens life, you say?'

'In certain cases, In certain genera.'

'In men and women?'

'No. Not yet. Not as far as I know.' He gestured towards the equipment on the lab bench. 'I'll show you what it looks like when I get the electron microscope set up. The virus is very small, about twenty millimicrons long. Once it finds a host it can use, it spreads rapidly through the cell tissue, where its action appears to be the destruction of anything threatening the life of the cell. In fact, it is a cell repairer, and a very effective one at that. You see what that means! Any life form infected with it is inclined to live for ever. The Baltic virus will even re-build cells completely where it finds a really suitable host. So far, it seems to have found only two such hosts, both sea-going, one fish, one mammal, the herring and the blue whale. In the copepods it is merely latent.'

He could see that Caterina was trembling. She said, 'You mean that all herrings and blue whales are - immortal?'

'Potentially so, if they've caught the infection, yes. Of course, the herrings get eaten, but the ones that don't go on reproducing year after year with unimpaired powers. None of the animals that eat the herring appear to catch the infection. In other words, the virus cannot sustain itself in them. It's an irony that this minute germ holds the secret of eternal life, yet is itself threatened constantly with extinction.'

'But people -'

'People don't come into it yet. The copepods we traced along our current were infected with the Baltic virus. They surfaced in the Antarctic. That was one of the discoveries that I made - that there is another species that can be infected. The Adelie penguins have it too. They just don't die from natural causes any more. These two birds here are virtually immortal.'

She stood looking at them through the mesh of the cage. The penguins perched on the edge of their tank, their comical feet gripping its tiled lip. They had awakened without removing their beaks from under their wings, and now regarded the woman with bright and unwinking eyes.

'Clem - it's funny, generations of men have dreamed of immortality. But they never thought it would come to penguins... I suppose that's what you'd call an irony! Is there any way we can infect ourselves from these birds?'

He laughed. 'It's not as easy as picking up psittacosis from a parrot. But it may be that laboratory research will find a means of infecting human beings with this disease. Before that happens, there's another question we ought to ask ourselves.'

'How do you mean?'

'Isn't there a moral question first? Are we capable, either as a species or as individuals, of living fruitfully for a thousand years? Do we deserve it?'

'Do you think herrings deserve it more than we do?'

'They cause less damage than man.'

'Try telling that to your copepods!'

This time he laughed with genuine pleasure, enjoying one of the rare occasions when he considered she answered him back wittily.

'It's interesting the way copepods carry the virus in a latent form all the way down from the Med to the Antarctic without becoming infected themselves. Of course, there must be a connecting link between the Baltic and the Med, but we haven't found it yet.'

'Could it be another current?'

'Don't think so. We just don't know. Meanwhile, the ecology of Earth is slowly being turned upside down. Up till now, it has just meant a pleasant glut of food and the survival of whales that were on the threshold of extinction, but it may lead in time to famines and other unpleasant natural upheavals.'

Caterina was less interested in that aspect. 'Meanwhile, you are going to see if the virus can be implanted in us?'

'That could be very dangerous. Besides, it's not my field.'

'You're not just going to let it slide?'

'No. I've kept the whole matter secret, even from the others on the *Kraken*. I've communicated the problem to only one other person. You'll hate me for this, Cat, but this thing is far too important to let personalities enter the situation. I sent a coded report to Theo Devlin at the WWO in Naples. I shall drop in to see him on our way back to London.'

Suddenly her face looked tired and aged. 'You're either a saint or you're raving mad,' she said.

The penguins watched without moving as the two humans left the room. Long after the lights went out, they shut their eyes and returned to sleep.

Dawn next morning set the sky afire with a more than Wagnerian splendour, revealing the first sluggish activity on the *Kraken*, and mingling with the smell of preserved eggs frying in the galley. In four or five days, the crew would be back at their base in Aden, enjoying fresh and varied food again.

Philip was also astir early. He had slept naked between the sheets and did nothing more in the way of dressing than slipping on a pair of swimming trunks. He walked round the back of the house and looked into his father's bedroom window. Yale and Cat both slumbered peacefully together in her bed. He turned away, his face distorted, and made his way falteringly down to the lagoon for a last swim. A short

while later, Joe, the negrito house boy, was bustling round the house, getting the breakfast and singing a song about the coolness of the hour.

As the day grew hotter, the bustle of preparation for departure increased. Yale and his wife were invited aboard the trawler for a farewell lunch, which was eaten under the deck canopy. Although Yale tried to talk to Philip, his son had retired behind his morose mood and would not be drawn; Yale comforted himself by reflecting that they would meet again in the U.K. in a very few days.

The ship sailed shortly after noon, sounding its siren when it moved through the narrow mouth of the reef as it had done when it entered. Yale and Cat waved for a while from the shade of the palms, and then turned away.

'Poor Philip! I hope his holiday did him good. That troubled adolescent phase is hard to deal with. I went through just the same thing, I remember!'

'Did you, Clem? I doubt it.' She looked about her desperately, at her husband's gentle face, at the harsh sea on which the trawler was still clearly visible, up at the heavy leaves of palm above them. In none of these elements, it seemed, could she find help. She burst out, 'Clem, I can't keep it a secret, I must tell you now, I don't know what you'll say or what it'll do to you, but, these last few weeks, Philip and I have been lovers!'

He looked at her in a puzzled way, eyes narrow behind his lenses, as if he could not understand the expression she had used.

'That's why he went off the way he did! He couldn't bear to be around when you were. He begged me never to tell you... He... Clem, it was all my fault, I should have known better.' She paused and then said, 'I'm old enough to be his mother.'

Yale stood very still, and expelled one long noisy gasp of breath.

'You - you couldn't, Caterina! He's only a boy!'

'He's as adult as you are!'

'He's a boy! You seduced him!'

'Clem, try to see. It was the fräulein originally. She did it to him - or he started it. I don't know which way it was. But it's a small island. I came on them one afternoon, both naked, inside the old fort. I sent her away but somehow the poison spread. I... After I'd seen him...'

'Oh, God, it's incest!'

'You use these stupid old-fashioned terms!'

'You cow! How could you do it with him?' He turned away. He started walking. She did not stop him. She could not stand still herself. Swinging about in misery, she burst weeping into the house and flung herself on to her unmade bed.

For three hours, Yale stood on the north-west edge of the island, staring paralysed into the sea. In that time, he hardly moved, except once to unhook his spectacles and wipe his eyes. His heart laboured and he glared out at the immensity before him as if challenging it.

She came up quietly behind him, bringing him a glass of water in which she had dissolved lemon crystals.

He took the glass, thanked her quietly, and drank its contents, all without looking at her.

'If it makes any difference, Clement, I love and admire you very much. I'm not fit to be your wife, I know, and I think you are a saint. Much as I hurt you, your hurt was all for what I might have done to Philip, wasn't it?'

'Don't be silly! I shouldn't have left you all these months. I exposed you to temptation.' He looked at her, his face stern. 'I'm sorry for what I said - about incest. You are not related to Philip, except by marriage. In any case, man is the only creature that puts a ban on incest. Most other creatures, including the higher apes, find no harm in it. You can define man as the species that fears incest. Some psycho-analysts define all mental illness as incest-obsessions, you know. So I'm -'

'Stop!' It was almost a scream. For a moment she fought with herself, then she said, 'Look, Clem, talk about *us*, for God's sake, not about what the psycho-analysts say or what the higher apes do! Talk about *us*! Think about *us*!'

'I'm sorry, I'm a pedant, I know, but what I meant -'

'And don't, don't, don't apologize to me! I should be apologizing to you, kneeling, begging for forgiveness! Oh, I feel so awful, so guilty, so desperate! You have no idea what I've been through!'

He seized her painfully and held her, looking for the moment very like his son. 'You're getting hysterical! I don't want you kneeling to me, Cat, though thank heavens it has always been one of your dearest traits that you acknowledge your errors in a way I can never manage with mine. You can see what you've done was wrong. I've thought it all over, and I can see the fault was largely mine. I shouldn't have left you isolated here on Kalpeni for so long. This won't make any difference between us, once I've got over the shock. I've thought it over and I think I must write to Philip and tell him that you've told me everything, and that he is not to feel guilty.'

'Clem - how can you - have you no feeling? How can you have forgiven me so easily?'

'I didn't say I'd forgiven you.'

'You just said it!'

'No, I said - let's not quibble over words. I must forgive you. I have forgiven you.'

She clung to him. 'Then tell me you've forgiven me!'

'I just did.'

'Tell me! Please tell me!'

In a sudden fury, he flung her away from him, crying, 'Damn and blast you, I tell you I have forgiven you, you crazy slut! Why go on?' She fell, sprawling in the sand. Penitently, he stooped to help her up, apologizing for his violence, saying over and over that he had forgiven her. When she was on her feet, they made their way back to the coral-built house, leaving an empty glass lying in the sand. As they went, Caterina said, 'Can you imagine the pain of having to live for a thousand years?'

It was the day after she asked that question that Theodore Devlin arrived on the island.

IV

Almost the entire population of Kalpeni turned out to see the helicopter land on the round chopperport in the centre of the island. Even Vandranasis closed down his little store and followed the thin trickle of spectators northwards.

The great palm leaves clapped together as the machine descended, its WWO insignia gleaming on its black hull. As the blades stopped rotating, Devlin jumped down, followed by his pilot.

Devlin was two or three years Yale's senior, a stocky man in his late forties, well-preserved, and as trim in his appearance as Yale was straggling and untidy. He was a man sharp of face and brain, respected by many, loved by few. Yale, who was wearing nothing but jeans and canvas shoes, strolled over and shook hands with him.

'Fancy seeing you here, Theo! Kalpeni is honoured.'

'Kalpeni is bloody hot! For God's sake, get me in the shade, Clement, before I fry. How you stick it here, I don't know!'

'Gone native, I guess. It's a home from home for me. See my two penguins swimming in the lagoon?'

'Uh.' Devlin was in no mood for small talk. He walked briskly along in a neat light suit, a head shorter than Yale, his muscular movements tight and controlled even over the shifting sand.

At the door of his house, Yale stood aside to let his guest and the pilot, a lanky Indian, enter. Caterina stood inside the room, her face unsmiling. If Devlin was embarrassed at meeting his ex-wife, he gave no sign of it.

'I thought Naples got hot enough. You're living in a damned oven here. How are you, Caterina? You look well. Haven't seen you since you were weeping in the witness box. How does Clement treat you? Not in the style to which you were once accustomed, I hope?'

'You've obviously not come to make yourself pleasant, Theo. Perhaps you and your pilot would care for a drink. Perhaps you were going to introduce him to us?'

After this initial shot across his bows, Devlin pursed his mouth and behaved less pugnaciously. His next remark might even have been construed as an apology. "Those natives out there annoy me, plastering their fingerprints all over the 'copter. They haven't taken one elementary step forward since mankind began. They're parasites in every sense of the word! They owe their little all to the fish and the wonderful coconut, both brought to their doorstep by the courtesy of the tides - even their damned island was built for them by countless coral insects!'

'Our culture owes the same sort of debt to other plants and animals, and to the earthworm.'

'At least we pay our debts. However, that's neither here nor there. I just don't share your sentimental attachment to desert islands.'

'We didn't invite you to come here, Theo,' Caterina said. She was still suppressing surprise and anger at

seeing him.

Joe appeared and served beer to them all. The pilot stood by the open door to drink his, nervously watching his boss. Devlin, Yale, and Caterina sat down facing each other.

'I gather you got my report?' Yale said. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

'You're blackmailing me. Thomas!' Devlin snapped his fingers as he spoke, and his pilot produced a pistol fitted with what Yale recognized as a silencer; it was the first time he had ever seen one in real life. The pilot stood holding his beer glass in his left hand, sipping casually, but his glance was far from casual. Yale stood up.

'Sit down!' Devlin said, pointing at him. 'Sit down and listen to me, or it will appear later that you had a misunderstanding with a shark while out swimming. You're up against a tough organization, Clement, but you may come to no harm if you behave. What are you after?'

Yale shook his head. 'You're in trouble, Theo, not I. You'd better explain this whole situation.'

'You're always so innocent, aren't you? I'm well aware that that report you sent me, with your assurance that you had let nobody else know the facts, was a thinly camouflaged piece of blackmail. Tell me how I buy your silence.'

Yale looked at his wife; he read in her face the same bafflement he himself felt. Anger with himself grew in him to think that he could not understand Devlin. What was the fellow after? His report had been merely a scientific summary of the cycle by which the Baltic virus had been carried from the Tyrrhenian Sea down to the Antarctic. Dumbly, he shook his head and dropped his eyes to his folded hands. 'I'm sorry, Theo; you know how terribly naive I am. I just don't get what you are talking about, or why you should think it necessary to point a gun at us.'

'This is more of your paranoia, Theo!' Caterina said. She got up and walked towards Thomas with her hand out. He put the beer down hastily and levelled the pistol at her. 'Give it to me!' she said. He faltered, his gaze evaded her, she seized the weapon by the barrel, took it from him, and flung it down in one corner of the room.

'Now get out! Go and wait in your helicopter! Take your beer!'

Devlin made a move towards the gun, then stopped. He sat down again, obviously nonplussed. Choosing to ignore Caterina as the only way of saving his dignity, he said, 'Clement, are you serious? You really are such a fool that you don't know what I'm talking about?'

Caterina tapped him on the shoulder. 'You'd better go home. We don't like people to threaten us on this island.'

'Leave him, Cat, let's get out of him whatever extraordinary idea he is nursing. He comes here all the way from Naples, risking his reputation in order to threaten us as if he were a common crook...' Words failed him.

'What do you want, Theo? It's some horrible thing about me, isn't it?'

That restored his humour and some of his confidence. 'No, Caterina, it's not! It's nothing at all to do with you. I lost all interest in you a long, long time ago, long before you ran off with this fisherman!' He got up

and crossed to the map of the world hanging dark and fly-spotted, on the wall.

'Clement, you'd better come and look at this. Here's the Baltic. Here's the Med. You tracked the immortality virus all the way from the Baltic right down to the Antarctic. I thought you'd had the wit to grasp how the missing link between the Baltic and Mediterranean was forged; I assumed you were suggesting that your silence could be bought on that score. I over-estimated you! You still haven't got it, have you?'

Yale frowned and stroked his face. 'Don't be so superior, Theo. That area was right beyond my bailiwick. I only started in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Of course, if you know what the link is, I'd be tremendously interested... Presumably it's brought from one sea to the other by a pelagic species. A bird seems a likely agent, but as far as I know nobody has established that the Baltic virus - the immortality virus, you call it - can survive in the body of a bird... except the Adelie penguin, of course, but there are none of those in the northern hemisphere.'

Taking his arm, Caterina said, 'Darling, he's laughing at you!'

'Ha, Clement, you are a true man of science! Never see what's under your nose because you're sunk up to your eyes in your own pet theories! You gangling fathead! The vital agent was human -me! I worked on that virus on a ship in the Baltic, I took it back with me to Naples to WWO. H.Q. I worked on it in my own private laboratory, I -'

'I don't see how I was supposed to know - Oh!... Theo, you've found it - you've found a way to infect human beings with the virus!'

The expression on Devlin's face was enough to confirm the truth of that. Yale turned to Caterina. 'Darling, you're right and he's right. I really am a short-sighted idiot! I should have guessed. After all, Naples is situated on the Tyrrhenian Sea - it's just that one never thinks of the term and speaks of it always as the Med.'

'You got there at last!' Devlin said. 'That's how the virus leaked into your Devlin Current. There is a small colony of us in Naples with the virus in our veins. It passes out through the body in inert form, and survives the sewage processing, so that it is carried out to sea still living - to be digested by the copepods, as you managed to discover.'

'The circulation of the blood!'

'What?'

'No matter. A metaphor.'

'Theo - Theo, so you are now... you have it, do you?'

'Don't be afraid to say it, woman. Yes, I have immortality flowing in my veins.'

Tugging at his beard, Yale went and sat down and took a long drink at his beer. He looked from one to the other of them for a long while. At last he said, 'You are something of the true man of science yourself, Theo, aren't you, as well as a career man? You couldn't resist telling us what you know! But leaving that aside, we of course realized that an inoculation of man with the virus was theoretically possible. Cat and I were discussing it until late last night. Do you know what we decided? We decided that even if it were possible to acquire immortality, or shall we say longevity, we should refuse it. We should refuse it

because neither of us feels mature enough to bear the responsibility of our emotional and sexual lives for a span of maybe several hundred years.'

'That's pretty negative, isn't it?' Devlin strolled over to the far corner and retrieved the pistol. Before he could slip it into his pocket, Yale stretched out his hand. 'Until you leave, I'll keep it for you. What were you planning to do with it, anyway?'

'I ought to shoot you, Yale.'

'Give it to me! Then you won't be exposed to temptation. You want to keep your little secret, don't you? How long do you think it will be before it becomes public property anyhow? A thing like that can't be kept quiet indefinitely.'

He showed no sign of giving up the gun. He said, 'We've kept our secret for five years. There are fifty of us now, fifty-three, men with power and some women. Before the secret comes into the open, we are going to be even more powerful: an Establishment. We only need a few years. Meanwhile, we make investments and alliances. Take a look at the way brilliant people have been attracted to Naples these last few years! It's not been just to the WWO. or the European Government Centre. It's been to my clinic! In another five years, we'll be able to step in and rule Europe - and from there it's just a short step to America and Africa.'

'You see,' Caterina said, 'he is mad, Clem, that sort of sane madness I told you about. But he daren't shoot! He daren't shoot, in case they locked him up for life - and that's a long time for him!'

Recognizing the wild note in his wife's voice, Yale told her to sit down and drink another beer. 'I'm going to take Theo round to see the whales. Come on, Theo! I want to show you what you're up against, with all your fruitless ambitions.'

Theo gave him a sharp look, as if speculating whether he might yield useful information if humoured, evidently concluded that he would and rose to follow Yale. As he went out, he looked back towards Caterina. She avoided his glance.

It was dazzling to be out in the bright sun again. The crowd was still hanging about the helicopter, chatting intermittently with the pilot, Thomas. Ignoring them, Yale led Devlin past the machine and round the lagoon, blinding in the glare of noon. Devlin gritted his teeth and said nothing. He seemed diminished as they exposed themselves to a landscape almost as bare as an old bone, walking the narrow line between endless blue ocean and the green socket of lagoon.

Without pausing, Yale led on to the north-west strip of beach. It sloped steeply, so that they could see nothing of the rest of the island except the old Portuguese fort, which terminated their view ahead. Grim, black, and ruinous, it might have been some meaningless tumescence erupted by marine forces. As the men tramped towards it, the fort was dwarfed by the intervening carcasses of whales.

Five whales had died here, two of them recently. The giant bodies of the two recently dead still supported rotting flesh, though the skulls gleamed white where the islanders had stripped them for meat and cut out their tongues. The other three had evidently been cast up here at an earlier date, for they were no more than arching skeletons with here and there a fragment of parched skin flapping between rib bones like a curtain in the breeze.

'What have you brought me here for?' Theo was panting, his solid chest heaving.

'To teach you humility and to make you sweat. Look on these works, ye mighty, and despair! These were blue whales, Theo, the largest mammal ever to inhabit this planet! Look at this skeleton! This chap weighed over a hundred tons for sure. He's about eighty feet long.' As he spoke, he stepped into the huge rib cage, which creaked like an old tree as he braced himself momentarily against it. 'A heart beat right here, Theo, that weighed about eight hundredweight.'

'You could have delivered Fifty Amazing Facts of Natural History, or whatever you call this lecture, in the shade.'

'Ah, but this isn't natural history, Theo. It's highly unnatural. These five beasts rotting here once swallowed krill far away in Antarctic waters. They must have gulped down a few mouthfuls of copepod at the same time - copepods that had picked up the Baltic virus. The virus infected the whales. By your admission, that can only have been five years ago, eh? Yet it is long enough to ensure that more blue whales - they were practically extinct from over-fishing as you know - survived the hazards of immaturity and bred. It would mean too that the breeding period of older specimens was extended. Yet five years is not enough to produce a glut in whales as it is in herrings.'

'What are blue whales doing near the Laccadives in any case?'

'I never found a way to ask them. I only know that these creatures appeared off shore here at full moon, each in a different month. Caterina could tell you - she saw them and told me all about it in her letters. My son Philip was here with her when the last one arrived. Something drove the whales right across the Equator into these seas. Something drove them to cast themselves up on to this beach, raking their stomachs open on the reefs as they did so, to die where you see them lying now. Hang around ten days, Theo, till the next full moon. You may see another cetaceous suicide.'

There were crabs working in the sand among the barred shadows of the rib cage, burrowing and signalling to each other. When Devlin spoke, anger was back in his voice.

'Okay, you clever trawlerman, tell me the answer to the riddle. It's been revealed to you alone, I suppose, why they killed themselves?'

'They were suffering from side effects, Theo. The side effects of the immortality disease. You know the Baltic virus seems to bring long life - but you haven't had time to find out what else it brings. You've been in so much of a hurry you abandoned scientific method. You didn't want to get any older before you infected yourself. You didn't allow a proper trial period. You may be going to live a thousand years -*but what else is going to happen to you?* What happened to these poor creatures so awful that they could not bear their increase of years? Whatever it was, it was terrible, and soon it will be overtaking you, and all your conspirators sweating it out uneasily in Naples!'

The silencer was extremely effective. The pistol made only a slight hiss, rather like a man blowing a strawberry pip from between his teeth. The bullet made a louder noise as it ricocheted off a bleached rib and sped over the ocean. Suddenly Yale was full of movement, moving faster than he had moved in years, lunging forward. He hit Devlin before he fired again. They fell into the sand. Yale on top. He got his foot over Devlin's arm, grasped him by both hands by the windpipe, and bashed his head repeatedly in the sand. When the gun slid loose, he stopped what he was doing, picked up the weapon, and climbed to his feet. Puffing a little, he brushed the sand from his old jeans.

'It wasn't graceful,' he said, glaring down at the purple-faced man rolling at his feet. 'You're a fool!' With a last indignant slap at his legs, he turned and headed back for the coral-built house.

Caterina ran out in terror at the sight of him. The natives surged towards him, thought better of it, and cleared a way for him to pass.

'Clem, Clem, what have you done? You've not shot him?'

'I want a glass of lemonade. It's all right, Cat, my love .. He isn't really hurt.'

When he was sitting down at the table in the cool and drinking the lemonade she mixed him, he began to shake. She had the sense not to say anything until he was ready to speak. She stood beside him, stroking his neck. Presently they saw through the window Devlin coming staggering over the dunes. Without looking in their direction, he made his way over to the helicopter. With Thomas's aid, he climbed in, and in a few moments the engine started and the blades began to turn. The machine lifted, and they watched in silence as it whirled away over the water, eastwards towards the Indian sub-continent. The sound of it died and soon the sight of it was swallowed up in the gigantic sky.

'He was another whale. He came to wreck himself here.'

'You'll have to send a signal to London and tell them everything, won't you?'

'You're right. And tomorrow I must catch some jewfish. I suspect they may be picking up the infection.'

He looked askance at his wife. She had put on her dark glasses, while he was gone. Now she took them off again and sat by him, regarding him anxiously.

'I'm not a saint, Cat. Never suggest that again. I'm a bloody liar. I had to tell Theo an awful lie about why the whales ran themselves up our beach.'

'Why?'

'I don't know! Whales have been beaching themselves for years and nobody knows why. Theo would have remembered that if he hadn't been so scared.'

'I mean, why lie to him? You should only lie to people you respect, my mother used to say.'

He laughed. 'Good for her! I lied to scare him. Everyone is going to know about the immortality virus in a few weeks, and I suspect they're all going to want to be infected. I want them all scared. Then perhaps they'll pause and think what they're asking for - the length of many lifetimes living with their first lifetime's inadequacies.'

'Theo's taking your lie with him. You want that to circulate with the virus?'

He started to clean his spectacles on his handkerchief. 'I do. The world is about to undergo a drastic and radical change. The more slowly that change takes place, the more chance we - all living things, I mean, as well as you and I - have of living quiet and happy as well as lengthy lives. My lie may act as a sort of brake on change. People ought to think what a terrifying thing immortality is - it means sacrificing the mysteries of death. Now how about a bathe, just as if nothing revolutionary had happened?'

As they changed into their swim things, as she stood divested of her clothes, Caterina said, 'I've suddenly had a vision, Clem. Please, I've changed my mind - I want to, I want us both to live as long as we possibly can. I'll sacrifice death for life. You know what I did with Philip? It was only because I suddenly felt my youth slipping from me. Time was against me. I got desperate. With more time... well,

all our values would change, wouldn't they?'

He nodded and said simply, 'You're right, of course.'

They both began to laugh, out of pleasure and excitement. Laughing, they ran down to the lapping ocean, and for a moment it was as if Yale had left all his hesitations behind with his clothes.

As they sat on the edge of the water and snapped their flippers on, he said, 'Sometimes I understand things about people. Theo came here to silence me. But he is an effective man and he was so ineffectual today. It must mean that at bottom he really came to see you, just as you guessed at the time - I reckon he wanted company in all that limitless future he opened up for himself.'

As they sliced out side by side into the warm water, she said without surprise, 'We need time together, Clem, to understand each other.'

They dived together, down in a trail of bubbles below the sparkling surface, startling the fish. Flipping over on his side, Yale made for the channel that led out to the open sea. She followed, glad in her heart, as she was destined to do and be for the next score and half of centuries.