

THE HAIRY PARENTS

We met him at one of those small seaside resorts, with a name all "M"s and "L"s and "O"s on the Queensland Coast, north of Brisbane. It was mid-winter, but the weather, to those of us from the more southerly States, was pleasantly warm, even hot at times, during the day. There were quite a few holidaymakers who, like ourselves, had come north to enjoy the sunshine. He was one of them.

He had the holiday flat underneath ours. We couldn't avoid running in to him now and again when we were on our way to or from the beach. There was no possibility of our not recognising him; he was a remarkably ugly man. It was not a repellent ugliness, his face exhibited the rather pathetic cheerfulness of the higher apes. When he was wearing only swimming trunks and sandals his resemblance to an ape, or a gorilla, was even more pronounced. His body was thick, his legs bowed. A mat of coarse hair covered his chest and belly, a corresponding mat coated his back. There was very little exposed skin on his arms and legs, apart from the bald patches on his knees and elbows. With the aid of only a little trick photography, but no assistance from the make-up department, he could have played King Kong if Hollywood ever got around to refilming that classic yet again.

One morning we left the flat as usual, shortly after breakfast, wearing our costumes and carrying towels. We crossed the road to the promenade, then made our way down to the beach and found a spot against the sea wall where we were shielded from the slight but chilly breeze and got the full benefit of the sun. Sandra opened her book — it was Morris's *The Naked Ape* — and I got going on the cryptic crossword in the morning paper. I admit that I wasn't paying too much attention to the crossword; not far from us two girls, in their late teens to judge from the physical development, but probably younger, were sitting. Their bikinis left very little to the imagination, and I have always liked the combination of very blonde hair with a deep tan ...

Too young ... I decided, after having listened to their conversation. Their voices were high and childish, and they were asking each other riddles.

"What's the difference," demanded one, "between the Prince of Wales, a bald man, and a monkey's mother?"

"Tell me," pleaded the other at last.

"Don't you know?" in an incredulous squeal.

"You know I don't, Shirl. Come on!"

"Well, the Prince of Wales is the Heir Apparent. A bald man is no hair apparent. And a monkey's mother is a hairy parent!"

Ha, ha, I thought sardonically, but if I'd said it out loud I should not have been heard above the cacophony of girlish laughter. Surely the joke was not all that funny ... And then Shirl gasped. "A hairy parent ... Would you believe it?"

I looked round. Our neighbour from the downstairs flat, attired in skimpy swimming trunks, was shambling along the beach. The knuckles of his dangling hands were, in fact, well clear of the sand but seemed to be actually brushing it. He stopped when he came abreast of us and smiled; it was a charming smile. He asked, "Do you mind if I sit here? This seems to be the only place out of the wind . . ."

"Go ahead," I told him.

He flopped down on to the sand beside me. The two girls, on his other hand, got up and walked off haughtily. I admired the jiggling of their young buttocks. Sandra looked up from her book and said, "Good morning, Mr. Cormack."

"And a good morning to you, Mrs. Whitley. And it is a good morning. All this sun ..."

She said, "I love the sun . . ."

"And I do, too ..." He glanced at the cover of Sandra's book. "Those naked apes on the jacket certainly know what's good for them ..." (The "naked apes" were a man, woman and child, all unclothed, all with overall tans.) He went on, "Have you read African Genesis?"

"Not yet," she told him.

"Oh, you should: I still can't see, though, why our ancestors should have left Africa, with its civilised climate, for Northern Europe . . ."

"And if they'd stayed put?" I asked. "These ifs of history .. If Homo Sapiens didn't have that built-in urge to explore there wouldn't be a fantastically expensive buggy parked on the Moon. Come to that, we shouldn't be here now . . ."

"Not only Homo Sapiens," he said. "There was also Neanderthal Man."

"But he was doomed, in any case. He was outclassed by the true men."

"What do you mean by the true men?" To my surprise Cormack sounded quite indignant. "Neanderthal Man was a true man, at least as much a man as the Cromagnards. Oh, he wasn't pretty by their standards, perhaps, but he was a damn' sight smarter. Too smart for his own good, as it turned out."

I laughed. "Come off it, Mr. Cormack. He looked like an ape, and he had the brains of an ape . . ." I regretted having said that, bearing in mind Cormack's own appearance.

Rather to my relieved surprise he did not take offense. He said, "Appearances aren't everything, you know ..."

"Then just how was Neanderthal Man too smart for his own good?" (Sandra had abandoned all attempts at reading and was listening, a faint smile curving her full mouth.) "If he'd been all that smart he'd have stayed in Africa," I persisted.

"The original migration," Cormack told me, "probably seemed a good idea at the time. Richer hunting grounds, without the carnivores, such as lions, that hunted men as well as the other animals, away to the north. A climate in Europe that was still quite good — until the Ice Age set in ..."

"Then why didn't the Neanderthaler go back to where he came from?"

"We don't know how the Ice Age started. Probably it was a gradual process, with every summer a little less warm than the previous one, with every winter just a little bit colder. And when even the summers got cold Neanderthal Man must have shrugged his shoulders and muttered, 'She'll be right again next year . But she wasn't right again, not for millenia. It was a long drawn out deterioration, though, stretched over decades, over generations. By the time that conditions got really grim the Neanderthalers had put down roots in their new tribal grounds. They'd forgotten the way back to Africa — and, in any case, the way was barred by hostile tribes. They put their brains to work and found ways to make their lives tolerable, even comfortable. After all, they were superb technicians, without equal . . ."

"Superb technicians?" I demanded incredulously.

"Too right. The weapons and tools they used, made from bone and stone, were superior to those being made at the same time by the much-ballyhooed Cromagnards. They were hunters. They dressed the skins of the beasts they killed and sewed them into fur garments ..."

"Then why didn't they survive?"

"As I said, they were too smart for their own good."

"Even when — according to you — they were as snug as bugs in a rug?"

"Especially then."

"How do you make that out?" I demanded.

"It's obvious — or should be. They were too proud of their beautiful fur coats. They never took them off — except in bed."

"And why should they have done?"

He laughed softly. "Why have we removed all our clothing but for the bare minimum?"

"To get a tan, of course."

"Of course. A tan — and Vitamin D. So that if it happens to be in short supply in our diets it's still being manufactured by our bodies. The Neanderthalers didn't know about Vitamin D. If they had known, it would all have turned out differently. They'd have made a point of baring their bodies to the sun as much as possible. After all, you can sunbathe in comfort in the lee of an iceberg, or a glacier. If they'd got some sun on their skins they and their children would not have been crippled and killed by rickets."

"I suppose so," I admitted. Rickets is a vitamin deficiency disease. And I

remembered reading about the craze for nude winter sports that there'd been in Europe a while ago. The young men and women in those photographs, naked except for ski boots and skis, had looked healthy enough.

"You seem to know a lot about Neanderthal Man, Mr. Cormack," put in Sandra sweetly.

He grinned at her. "I do, I suppose, compared to most people. He's one of the bees — the only bee—in my bonnet. You know how it is. People tend to make various periods of history their very own. There's usually a reason ..."

"And yours is ...?" she persisted.

Why ask? I thought. Every time that he looks into a mirror he identifies with his bloody Neanderthals ...

He ignored me then, talked only to Sandra. He said "There was interbreeding, of course, between the two races, the Neanderthals and the Cromagnards. Their tribes must have been in contact from time to time. There was fighting, perhaps, and women captured. There were hybrids, crossbreeds. Even when Neanderthal Man was dead, his genes lived on ... Recessive genes, probably. But, every now and again, somebody —somebody like me — gets born who's a throw-back to the original stock."

"You don't really think ...?" I began, getting back into the conversation.

"I don't think, I know, Whitley. And I'm proud of my ancestry. My forefathers weren't scavengers, picking over the half-putrid leavings of the big carnivores. They were hunters, from the very start. Save for that slip-up over ultra-violet they had the climate licked. They survived where the Cromagnards would have just curled up and died."

"But they didn't survive . . ." said Sandra gently.

"I... I was forgetting ..." Abruptly he was deflated, looked for a moment or so like an empty gorilla suit that somebody had left on the beach. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost—but I've never been one of those to get all hot and bothered about his ancestors. One of mine was hanged from his own yardarm for piracy, but he deserved it. If his seamanship or his gunnery —or or his luck—had been better he might have finished up the same way that Sir Henry Morgan did, but my heart doesn't bleed for him.

"Time we had our swim," said Sandra brightly, getting to her feet.

"It is," I agreed. "Coming in, Cormack?"

"No thanks," he said. "The sun'll do me."

When we returned from the sea he was gone.

That night, as we were sitting reading after dinner, Sandra threw a magazine towards me. She said, "There's an article here that Mr. Cormack would like to read ..."

"Why?" I asked, looking up from my own book.

"It's about Neanderthal Man. It makes almost the same points that he made this morning."

"Probably he got them from this same article."

"I ... I don't think so. He was so ... sincere. He was feeling it all ..."

"Don't tell me that you've fallen for him."

She laughed. "Don't be absurd. But I do feel sort of sorry for him, and impressed. Why don't we take this down to him? I like to hear him talk ..."
"At this time of night?"

"It's not late."

"Oh, all right."

We got up and went out to the upstairs verandah, and then down the outside staircase. The lights were on in Cormack's flat, and from a half open window drifted the noise of his radio, pop music interspersed with commercials. I knocked at his door. There was no reply. I knocked again, louder.

"Perhaps he's out," Sandra said doubtfully. "But . . ."

"I'll take a dekho through the window," I said.

He wasn't out – not in the sense of physical absence. He was slumped in a chair. I thought at first that he was drunk. He was oblivious to the world – this world. He was staring straight at me, but he wasn't seeing me. His hairy hand came slowly up to his mouth, and between the thick fingers was a hand-rolled cigarette. He inhaled deeply. It was then that I noticed the sweet-acrid smell of the smoke. It was not from tobacco.

"Pot ... ?" whispered Sandra, who had joined me.

"Looks like it. Smells like it . . ."

"Well, it's his business how he gets his kicks."

We went back up. After a while we turned in.

The next morning, as we were leaving for the beach, I asked Sandra, "Where did you put that magazine? I might as well read that article you were so taken with."

She looked embarrassed. "I ... I must have left it on Mr. Cormack's windowsill ... What will he think?"

"He should be worrying about what we think," I said.

Rather to our surprise he joined us in the sunny lee of the sea wall. He was carrying the magazine. He said, "Thank you for this. It's good to see that the scientists are coming round at last."

"I thought that it would interest you," said Sandra.

"It did. "He sat down. He seemed to be making up his mind on what to say next. Then, quite abruptly. "So you know that I smoke . . . "

"You should have had your windows shut and the curtains drawn." I told him severely. "We're broadminded, but not everybody is, the police especially."

He managed a grin. "I suppose you're right. I must be more careful in future ... "

"Why do you do it, Mr. Cormack?" asked Sandra earnestly, who was in one of her missionary moods.

"There are . . . reasons. Good ones."

"There are no reasons," she told him severely. "Only excuses. All these things—alcohol, marijuana—are only crutches. Throw away your crutches."

He looked at her sadly, "I told you. There's a reason. A very good reason ..." He was silent for a few seconds, then went on, "I'll tell you. To begin with, some drugs, such as pot, are consciousness-expanding . . ."

"The people who take them think that their consciousness is being expanded," said Sandra.

"Cogito, ergo sum," I put in, but nobody paid any attention to me.

"I know that mine is being expanded," Cormack insisted. "When I smoke, it takes my mind back to the Ice Age in Europe ... My mind? It takes me back, I see what my ancestors saw, I feel what they felt, I know what it's like to stand up to a bear armed with only a stone axe, and come out on top. I've watched the women scraping the hide with their stone knives, cutting it to pattern, sewing it with their bone needles with sinew for thread .. "

"Is that where you were—or when you were—last night?" I asked.

"Yes." There was no defiance in the affirmative, just a statement of fact.

"H'm ...? Race memory ...? You still haven't convinced me. Why should you, when you get high, travel through time, when the average pot smoker just gets high, period, and just has a good time?"

"There are so few of us," he said seriously. "You, the descendants of Cromagnon Man, are in the majority. There are billions of you. When you go on a drug trip it's like switching on a radio when there's an infinitude of stations broadcasting on the same frequency ... But even then something gets through sometimes. All the alleged—but some of it quite convincing evidence for reincarnation . . . And that woman who wrote those remarkably detailed books about ancient Egypt ... "

What a nut! I thought. But a harmless one, and an interesting one. I said, "So you're tapping race memories . . ."

"More than that. I am a member of that tribe living under the glacier... That cliff of green ice, gleaming in the sun ... The trickles of cold water during the days when the sky is clear and there's no wind ... But it freezes at

night, and the glacier has always edged forward another fraction of an inch . . .

"You know, it's not a bad life . . . I'm a man of importance, of course, which helps ... I'm a man of importance? No, that's wrong. It's Murg the Hunter who's important; I'm no more than an observer in his mind. But I'm trying to break through. I know, you see, what's going to happen to his people, and I could stop it ... It's just a matter of making suggestions, of starting a religion . . ."

"Starting a religion?" asked Sandra.

"Why not? Somebody has to start religions. Sun worship—that'd be the answer. A ritual baring of the body to the radiance of the god. Now and again Murg will be resting in some place out of that bitter wind, and hell be sweating inside his furs, but will he take them off? Not he."

"No worse," I said, "than the old-fashioned types we used to see once, wearing their blue serge suits, complete with waistcoats, in the middle of the Australian summer ... "

"But even the olders now are dressing more sensibly," said Sandra.

"The climate of the times," I said.

"It's the climate of those times that I'm up against," Cormack told us. "If only I could break through into Murg's mind ... He has quite a good one, you know. He's a leader, an innovator. He has charisma ... "(I tried hard to visualise a charismatic Neanderthaler but without much success.) "Even without the religious angle the people would tend to copy what he did ... "

"Break through . . .?" murmured Sandra.

"And why not, Mrs Whitley? How do you explain the visions which your people have seen now and again, visions which have inspired them to change the course of history? Could those visions, perhaps, have been induced in their minds by some time traveller, some time traveller in the psychological rather than the physical sense, from the future? Why not?"

"Mphm ... " I grunted.

We didn't see much of Cormack after that. He left, to return to Melbourne, the next day. We stayed on for another fortnight.

We almost forgot Cormack. Almost—and then those dreams started. Alternate Universe dreams are, I suppose, an occupational hazard of a science fiction writer's sleep. I've had them before, about worlds in which nothing was changed except my own circumstances, based on memories of some crossroads at which I could have taken the left hand instead of the right hand path. But these dreams are frighteningly different. I haven't changed, but the world has, I'm an outsider, one of the few throw-backs to a long dead race. It wouldn't be so bad if I had those nightmares only at nights, during my sleep.

But the other day ...

We were out at Bondi, on a fine summer Sunday morning. The sun was hot, the sea was blue, the beach crowded. We found a few square feet of vacant sand under the sea wall and stretched out. There were rather too many people for our tastes, otherwise we had nothing to complain about.

And then . . .

It was as though a cloud had come over the sun, although the sky was cloudless. There was a sudden chill, and a feeling of almost unbearable tension—and of something snapping. Heat came back into the air and colour into the light. Nothing was changed, I opened my eyes properly. Everything was changed.

The beach was crowded still, with men, women and children, all completely naked. (That part was all right, I'm among the advocates of free beaches.) But what men, what women and what children! The graceless bodies with their thick coats of coarse hair, the bowed legs, the bulging bellies, the pendulous dugs—and the happy, simian faces.

This can't be true! I thought desperately.

And then, quite suddenly, it wasn't. Things snapped back to normal. I looked around. Sandra, supine, with tightly shut eyes, had obviously experienced nothing. And people were talking and laughing and yelling as usual, and the ubiquitous transistors were blaring. But there were a few, only a few, sunbathers looking around them with frightened faces.

I remembered Cormack and his wild theories. Suppose he really was, by some freak of genetics, a full-blooded Neanderthal Man ... Suppose he was succeeding in making sun worshippers out of the tribe of Murg the Hunter

And suppose that somewhen in the remote Past the world was being switched on to a different Time Track ...

Was Neanderthal Man, rather than his Cromagnon cousin, the Heir Apparent?