

Leviathan

SIMON BROWN

Simon Brown's latest book, *Rival's Son*, the second book in the Chronicles of Kydan trilogy, was published by PanMacmillan Australia in 2005 and DAW in the US in early 2006. He has a collection of short stories called *Troy* coming out from Ticonderoga Publications in April 2006, and the last Kydan book, *Daughter of Independence*, coming out from PanMacmillan in July.

He lives on the New South Wales south coast with his wife Alison and children Edlyn and Fynn.

About 'Leviathan', he writes: "This story is a result of serendipity and the imagination of two men who like their monsters big and in rubber, Robert Hood and Robin Pen. Although 'Leviathan' did not end up being the type of story they could use, if not for them and their generous encouragement it would never have been written."

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ike all fish stories, this one's a whopper. Unlike all other fish stories, this one starts thirty-five thousand feet in the air.

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Gerard Francis McVitty

Over the Pacific Ocean, a Boeing 707 en route to Honolulu from Sydney, just past the Gilbert Islands and a whisker short of the International Date Line, suddenly encountered the sort of engine trouble an engineer would call 'catastrophic'.

Not too many minutes later, bits of 707 and people and suitcases and loose clothing were floating down onto the ocean like confetti at a wedding. One of those bits comprised a large man's overcoat, puffed out like a parachute, and Gerard Francis McVitty, ten years old, hanging onto the

coat's arms and tail for dear life.

Looking down between his feet, Gerard saw blue - dimpled, sun-reflecting - and precious little else.

Except.

Except for a splodge of something darker near his left ankle; he tugged experimentally on the overcoat with his right hand and the splodge shifted to between his feet. As Gerard descended it developed into a round island, green-topped and surrounded by rippling circles of waves.

He was saved.

It turned out to be a very wet island, and slippery as all out, but there was fresh water and what looked like figs and Gerard figured he could fix up a fishing rod, although he'd have to give some thought to making a hook; there were bits of metal from the 707 around, and he thought he could rig something from that. The island wasn't big as islands went, but at least it was solid land and he wasn't going to die from hunger or thirst, and as far as he could see he was the only big animal on it. He had been secretly worried about the possibility of tigers on his way down, but there was nothing more aggressive here than a couple of hungry mosquitoes.

He gave some thought to attracting any rescue craft that might come by; he was sure someone would send out search parties once the 707 didn't arrive in Honolulu. It was too wet to start a signal fire, and anyway he wasn't sure he knew how to start one without matches. He hit upon the idea of using palm leaves to spell 'HELP' on the fringe of the island.

But that could wait, for after his near miss with death and his exploration of his island, he was exhausted. He found a relatively dry, mossy spot near a shallow pool of rain water, and for a pillow used the overcoat that had saved his life. He felt warm and safe, and in no time was fast asleep.

When he woke what felt like many hours later, Gerard searched the island looking for palm leaves that had dropped to the ground, but he didn't find any. He figured they must have blown away. Then he tried climbing up one of the palm trees, but it was too slippery and rubbery and all he could do was clamber up to his height before sliding down. He wondered how else he might make a sign for any searchers, but didn't come up with any ideas. Then he remembered the overcoat. He searched the pockets and found a pocket knife on the end of a key chain. The biggest blade was no

longer than his little finger, but it was better than nothing at all.

He picked the thinnest palm tree, steadied the trunk with one hand, and then started sawing away. Almost immediately the ground beneath him shook. Gerard figured it was an earthquake and dropped the knife to hold onto the palm tree with both hands, but both of his hands slipped right off as if they were greased and his head bounced off the trunk.

The earth stopped moving.

For a moment he didn't do anything. Then he remembered his head *bounced* off the trunk. He automatically felt his skull. It seemed hard enough, but there was blood on his hands.

Gerard panicked. He frantically wiped his head with his forearm to see where the blood was coming from, but nothing rubbed off. He whipped off all his clothes and searched his body - the bits he could see - for any wound.

Nothing.

Drip. He looked up. The palm tree was bleeding. His little island lurched again. Gerard fell heavily, bouncing on the ground as if it was made from a trampoline. He opened his mouth automatically to say 'ouch' but he was so surprised nothing came out. He was scrabbling to his feet when the ground moved beneath him again, and he had the nauseating sensation of rising into the sky. He just had time to grasp onto the bleeding palm tree when the island tipped over and started sinking. His body slipped sideways and dangled precariously over the ocean, then he was in it, salty, caustic, gulping, drowning...

... and out again. He gasped, coughed for breath, then was underneath a second time. The surface of the ocean was above him, glittering bright, the sky refracted. Water flooded up his nose and he sneezed, drank more of the ocean...

... was dangling, legs kicking, in the sky. White water spumed over him and it stank.

The island leveled off and, miraculously still gripping the palm, he levered himself to his feet. He was moving.

In fact, the whole island was moving.

* * * *

Diggety

“You got a nickname?”

“Urn,” Gerard said.

The doctor smiled. “I thought all kids had nicknames these days.” He used his hands to press the boy’s stomach; Gerard was supposed to tell him if it hurt.

“Sometimes the kids at school call me Diggety.” There was a twinge in his stomach and he flinched.

The doctor progressed to his ribcage. “Diggety? Why do they call you that?”

“Hot diggety dog. I got sunburned at the swimming carnival.”

The doctor turned Gerard around and started pressing his back, especially along his spine. A couple of times the boy flinched.

“How long ago was that?”

“February.” Gerard said it like the doctor should have known. When else did schools hold their swimming carnivals?

“Did you win anything?”

“Got a ribbon for the relay. My house came second.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

Gerard didn’t say anything, but didn’t understand why coming second was any good. He flinched more as the doctor explored his lower back.

“Okay, you can put your shirt on.”

As Gerard dressed the doctor turned to his parents and sighed. “I’d really like to get some X-rays.”

“Where do we go for them?” Mrs McVitty asked.

“The base hospital. I’ll give you a referral. Go as soon as you can, then come back here next week.”

The drive back to the family’s cattle station took longer than expected. A storm came out of the north - thunderheads the size of cities - and dumped the best part of the district’s annual rainfall in less than an hour. Gidgee Gidgee Creek flash-flooded and Gerard and his parents were stuck on the wrong side of the road.

“Mum’s gonna kill us,” Mr McVitty said. “She didn’t want to baby-sit the kids in the first place.”

“Nothin’ we can do about it,” Mrs McVitty said flatly, as if being killed by Gerard’s grandmother was a danger she faced every day.

An hour and a half later the rain had stopped but the creek was still up. Gerard’s parents were walking around the car, heads bent down in earnest talk they didn’t want their son to hear. Gerard stayed in the car, head resting against a side window. It was hot, and his clothes stuck to his skin, but he didn’t have the energy to get out.

They didn’t know it, but Gerard knew they were talking about him. They didn’t look at him at all, that’s how he could tell. Maybe when they looked at him they couldn’t forget how sick he was. Not that anybody would tell him he was sick. But he wasn’t stupid.

A couple of weeks later it felt like fire when he pissed, and when he tried to shit all he could do was bleed. Gerard was too embarrassed to tell his dad, so he told his mother when Mr McVitty left to do a boundary ride. She listened attentively, then looked out over the station, her big brown eyes narrowing for a second. Gerard saw his mother swallow once, twice, then heard her clear her throat.

“We’ve been kinda expecting it,” she said slowly, drawing out the words. “I’m sorry it hurts. I wished to God it didn’t, but there you go.”

She reached out suddenly and took Gerard’s hand in her own. “We’ll tell your dad when he gets back.” She cleared her throat again. “You go and play now.”

“Don’t feel like playing much,” Gerard said.

Mrs McVitty nodded. “Guess not.”

“What’s for tea tonight?”

“Corned beef. Same as always on Tuesday. Would you like something special?”

“We got any ice cream?”

“We’ll see about that. I gotta go to town later, so I might get some then.”

“What’s in town?”

“Your grandma,” Mrs McVitty said, almost disinterested. Then she smiled down at her son. “And ice cream, of course.”

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Gerard Francis McVitty

The monster had a deep sing-song voice that seemed too thin and too high for something so big, and it came from its spout - what Gerard had first thought was a pool - and not its mouth. And when it spoke the water in the spout bubbled so it sounded like it was talking under water.

“Don’t go cutting me again or I’ll drown you.”

“I thought you were an island.”

“That’s my lure. I get sailors landing on me all the time, then I drown them and swallow them and eat their ship.”

Gerard, who had survived a thirty-five thousand foot drop from a busted 707 and was filled with so much cancer he was almost all tumor and no boy, found he was still afraid of dying. He did not want to be eaten alive.

“I wouldn’t have landed on you if I’d known you were a...” Gerard thought, but couldn’t come up with the name. “You gotta be almost as big as a blue whale. I’ve seen pictures of them. They’re a hundred feet long.”

“No. Bigger than any whale. I’m Leviathan. I’m in the Bible. You read your Bible?”

“Don’t have one. Read my mum’s now and then. So you gonna eat me now?”

“Thinking about it. You very big? I can’t see you way up there.”

“I’m just a boy. I wouldn’t be bigger’n one of your teeth. I’m as little as a mouse.”

“If you slipped down a little so I could see you I could tell you if I was gonna eat you or not.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’m not hungry or anything. I just want to see you. Climb down next to one of my eyes.”

“I don’t wanna. I like it up here just fine.”

“Well, alright,” Leviathan said, sort of easy.

But Gerard wasn’t trusting the monster, and it was just as well, because next second it was heaving and curving and Gerard was holding his breath again. He thought he was going to die this time for sure, but then he was gasping for air and water was running off Leviathan in waterfalls. He didn’t think he’d last another one, he was so tired and scared, but when he saw the blow hole spray hot steam in the air, and heard air getting sucked back in, he got an idea.

“So, slip down and show yourself,” Leviathan said, almost teasing.

“Still don’t think that’s a good idea,” Gerard said as casually as he could, and let go of the palm tree or whatever it was to collect a long piece of 707 with a flash of red kangaroo on it, then scrambled back to the tree.

“Well, okay. I hate to do it this way. I like swallowing my prey whole and quick so nothing suffers. But you had a choice.”

“I had a choice,” Gerard admitted.

“So,” Leviathan said, and started his dive again.

But this time Gerard was ready for him. As they went under, he used the metal to dig around in the pool until he found the actual blow hole in the bottom and wedged it open. They came up so fast Gerard thought they would launch into the sky, and the sound from the blow hole was a scream so high, so piercing, he could feel his brain go all fuzzy around the edges.

When the scream was finished, Leviathan sucked in a few acres of air and said, "We gotta talk about this."

* * * *

Diggety

It wasn't just the hospital that convinced Gerard he was really sick - like so sick he might not be coming home; it was the way everyone smiled at him and told him he would be discharged in no time at all. That and the pain, which never really went away. He was getting morphine through a drip, and although it made bearable that small wafer of life still left to him, the pain lurked beneath like a shark under a wave.

The worst thing was the vomiting, especially when there was blood in the sputum, red traces of it in the phlegm. That was when he really wanted everyone to tell him he was going to be alright, but whenever it happened he could see the skin on his parents' faces go as white as the bark on a dead gum tree.

His mum stayed by his bed almost the whole time, but his dad had to go home to look after the station and his brothers and sisters. Grandma was not up to babysitting full time. His mum always bought him comic books: *Casper the Ghost*, and *Wendy the Witch*, and *Archie*, and best of all *Classics Illustrated*: Gerard's favourite was *Sinbad the Sailor*. He liked the look of the Arabian dhows with their fore-and-aft sails like white triangles, the garish brightness of tropical lands in seas too blue to be true, the rocs and whales and the sword fighting with saifs and tulwars...

But instead of white sails he had white sheets, instead of a steel sword he had a cold bedpan, and instead of the currents and tides of the Indian Ocean he had the currents and tides of pain that swirled through his little body in eddies and whirlpools.

A priest came to talk to him. Gerard first saw him talking with his parents, their voices low, the priest with one hand on his father's shoulder and another on his mother's. Then he sat down next to Gerard's bed and smiled in the way a lot of adults smiled at children, as if to prove they were not really adults at all but just kids with big hands.

"So, skipping school, eh?" The priest winked.

Gerard stared at him.

“My name is Father Walsh. I wanted to come in and see how you were going.”

“Why?”

Walsh pursed his lips. “Because I look after Catholics who are staying in the hospital.” He winked again. “You’re part of my flock.”

Gerard had a quick mental image of being a sheep.

“A good shepherd always looks after his flock,” Walsh continued. “That is something our lord Jesus Christ taught us, through his example.”

“Jesus will look after me?”

“He will,” Walsh said with certainty.

“Will he make me get better?”

“He may. Or...” Walsh swallowed. “Or he may call you to him.”

Gerard knew what that meant, and in that moment knew why the priest was here. He glanced over Walsh’s shoulder and saw his parents looking at him like he was already half ghost. Somehow it made what he already knew was going to happen to him more than concrete; his sickness was becoming an execution. Suddenly anger swirled through him.

“I piss blood,” he said to the priest. “Will Jesus still love me?”

“Especially,” Walsh said softly.

And the anger ebbed away as quickly as it had come.

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Gerard Francis McVitty

Despite saying he wanted to talk, Leviathan said nothing for a long time. Gerard shivered as he dried, and at first did not notice the wake. When he did he looked up, saw the sky setting ahead, and knew they were heading west. He was hungry and tired and still scared.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Sinbad’s Sea.”

“Where’s that?”

“A way. You going to let me see you, little mouse?”

“Haven’t changed my mind.”

“That thing in my blowhole is hurting. Take it out? Won’t dive if you do.”

“Won’t dive for sure if I leave it in,” Gerard said, more to himself. “Is there anything I can eat up here? I’m betting those figs aren’t real figs.”

“Why should I help you? If you starve to death you’ll just drop off one day and then I can eat you.”

“If I die that metal in your blowhole will never come out.”

“Don’t matter to me.”

Gerard snorted in disbelief. He was ten - hell, almost eleven! - and could play that game better than any monster. “Don’t matter to me, either,” he said nonchalantly, and meant it.

“I can float on the surface for years and years, my little mouse, and not worry about it.”

“Sure.” There was a long pause, and then Leviathan said,

“Mussels.”

Automatically, like he was playing Connections with his mum, Gerard said, “Bones.”

“No, not muscles. Mussels like shellfish. You eat shellfish?”

Gerard frowned. “I come from the middle of Australia. We don’t get much shellfish there.”

“Don’t know where Australia is, but if you look in the pool, you’ll see mussels and barnacles and things stuck to my skin. Try and eat them.”

Gerard put his hand over the lip of the pool and felt under the rim. There were some hard shells there and he pulled one off. It looked like a stone mouth with a wispy beard.

“What do I do with it?”

“Open it and eat the animal inside.”

Gerard looked around for something to open it with. He regretted losing the pen knife, but he had been hanging on for dear life at the time and it was gone and there was nothing he could do about it. Then he remembered the metal plug in the blowhole, and he worked a part of the top of it loose, bending it this way and then that until he had a jagged piece about the size and shape of a carving knife. With some effort, and a cut finger, he opened the shellfish and, without looking too closely at the white soft thing inside, swallowed the contents in one gulp. It tasted fishy and gritty and slimy all the way down, and Gerard almost gagged, but his stomach liked having something inside it, and he quickly scavenged another one.

* * * *

Diggety

He had never tasted piss, but Gerard reckoned the medicine he had to take every four hours would probably be close to it. It made his whole face screw up and his tongue hang out looking for relief. Afterwards he always got an orange cordial, double strength so it was real sweet, but even that did not get rid of the grungy-piss taste at the back of his throat. The taste lasted until he had a hot meal.

In the confined space he inhabited, with the repetitive routine that became for Gerard as predictable and boring as the hundreds of flat miles back on the station, that medicine was the only highlight in the whole day. He had been in the hospital so long that when his mum visited they had ran out of things to say. And his dad, on the rare occasion he made it in, uttered barely a half dozen words and stared at his son almost balefully, as if it was his fault he was sick, as if he had planned to get cancer all along; Gerard wanted to stare defiantly back at his dad, but it was like looking at car lights on high beam and he could not do it.

Other than the medicine, the only other bump in the routine happened once a week when Father Walsh came in. They played cards a lot, first it was whist, but then Walsh taught him how to play poker and what a suicide

king was and just how much fun you could have when jokers were wild. They used matchsticks for stakes.

“You gotta bet with poker, otherwise there’s no point and it’s just cards,” Walsh told Gerard. “Might as well stick with whist.”

Eventually the conversation would get off one-eyed jacks and onto cancer and dying and God. Gerard was getting the idea that all three were inextricably linked. You could not have cancer without God, and you could not have God without dying coming into it somewhere, and he wondered what role Walsh fulfilled in the whole deal.

“You been a priest your whole life?” he asked Walsh one day.

Walsh was studying his hand. “Not yet.”

“I mean, you go straight into it from school?”

Walsh shook his head. “I was a teacher first. Wasn’t enough for me.” He put some cards down and held up two fingers. Gerard passed him two from the top of the deck. “My mother said I should be a priest. So I thought about it and figured she was right. And here I am.” He grinned widely and lay down two pair. “Kings over tens.”

“And here I am,” Gerard said, smiling slyly, and lay down a full house. He won an awful lot of matches. “Does it make you closer to God?”

Walsh pursed his lips. “Not that I’ve noticed. But I rely on him a lot more than I used to. I’ve gotten to understand some of His ways.”

“What about dying. Gotten to understand that yet?”

Walsh paused in shuffling the cards. At first he did not meet Gerard’s gaze. “Well, not really. My mother died last year, and I reckon it was as hard for me as a priest as it would have been if I was a teacher. One thing I’ve learned, maybe, is that not everything has an answer, at least not an answer we want to hear.”

Gerard thought death was like one of those great summer storms that came every couple of years from the north, with huge dense banks of curving darkness, and no matter how long you looked it just seemed to stay where it was, but once you looked away it rushed in and next thing you know the wind’s ripping off your tin roof and cattle are being blown over and the rain’s so heavy it turns the whole plain into a river as wide as the state of

Queensland. Gerard didn't want to be surprised like that by death, so he kept on staring at it, and it just stayed there on the horizon, coming no closer, as big as the sky.

* * * *

Gerard Francis McVitty

Over the next few days, Gerard saw islands slide by as Leviathan made his way west. These were real islands, with people and beaches on them, and sometimes the people ran away when they saw Leviathan, and sometimes they just stood still and stared at the monster. The first time it happened Gerard called for help, but he did not know if anyone saw him - just a dot up near the blowhole - let alone heard him over the whooshing sound of the sea parting before them, white walls of water jetting up either side of Leviathan's maw.

"Cut your caterwauling," Leviathan told him. "It's hurting my ears."

Gerard shut up.

Leviathan must have been moving at close to fifty or sixty miles an hour, and the wind chaffed and burned Gerard's face if he stood up all the time, like he was sticking his head out of a car window. He found he could get quite comfortable sitting against one of the growths that looked like a palm tree and with his feet in the blowhole. Although the back of the beast was as wide and big as an island itself, at night Gerard tied himself to the tree with the overcoat he'd used as a parachute because he was afraid of slipping off.

"Do you always travel so close to land?" he asked Leviathan on the morning of the third day after he fell from the sky.

"Sure, it's how I navigate, but I'm usually underwater so nobody knows I'm around." The blowhole made a sound like a disappointing hiss. "But since that isn't possible right now, I'm forced to do it on the surface. No thanks to you, and no telling what will happen because of it."

Gerard found out soon enough. It was almost evening of the third day, and the sun was a bloated yellow balloon on the horizon, cool enough to look at, when a flash in the darkening sky to their left drew their attention. They saw a thin white line curve into the sky and then droop towards them. Without hesitation, Leviathan smashed his great tail in the ocean, sending up a waterspout over a hundred feet high, and shouted, "Hang on, little

mouse!” and made a quick and violent turn to port.

Gerard didn't hang on quite quick enough and his feet slipped out from underneath him. He slid about three yards before he could get up, and he scrambled for the overcoat, still tied to its palm tree, and held on to it for dear life.

If Gerard thought the monster was going fast before, it was nothing to the burst of speed it put on now. The sea rainbowed above him, drenching him. Fish smacked down next to him, flapping uselessly, some spilling into the blowhole. Gerard felt Leviathan surge above the surface of the ocean then splash back down with a huge crack that sounded like a cannon shot, then surge forward and up again.

“Food!” Leviathan shouted with glee, and Gerard pulled himself to his feet to see what it was Leviathan had sighted.

About halfway to the horizon was a grey ship, not much bigger than a ferry. It had a single gun near the bow which fired, pom-pom-pom, sending tracer overhead. The distance between them closed quicker than Gerard would have thought possible, and when it seemed they were about to collide Leviathan arched into the sky and came down, maw open, straight onto the ship. There was sound of twisting, crunching metal, flames shot out the side of Leviathan's jaws and Gerard thought he heard the squeal of someone impaled on a giant tooth.

And then calm, absurd and sudden.

Gerard peered over the side and saw a slight oil slick, shiny blue, floating on the surface, and then they left it behind.

Leviathan's stomach rumbled. “Delicious,” the monster said.

* * * *

Diggety

His mother came in smiling like she had good news, and she was holding her arms out straight.

“Wings,” she said.

Gerard smiled back. “Aeroplane.”

“Jet.”

“Boeing 707.”

She plumped down next to him on the bed and shook her arms out.

“Red Skelton,” he said.

Her mum looked confused. “What?”

“On television. He comes on stage shaking his arms and says, ‘I’ve just flown in from Albuquerque and boy! are my arms tired.’”

His mum laughed. “I’ve got good news.”

“I’m getting out of hospital and going home,” Gerard said, feeling hope rise in him like mercury in a thermometer.

For a fraction of a second, Gerard saw his mum’s face collapse, and underneath got a glimpse of all the sorrow in the world. Then it all came right, smile perfect, and she said, “Almost! You’re going to Disneyland.”

Gerard was still seeing the sorrow, though, and his brain did not understand the words.

“You hear that, sweetheart? You’re getting out of hospital and going to Disneyland!”

His brain caught up, and he said, vaguely, “But that’s in America.”

She put her arms out again and made pathetic engine sounds, and Gerard understood at last. “I’m going on a 707? All the way to America?”

His mother nodded. “There’s a group in Sydney who give very sick kids special favours. We asked if you could go to Disneyland, and they’re going to pay for you and me to go.”

“Wow.”

“But,” his mother said, straightening his bed clothes with one hand, “you have to get a bit better first. Just a bit, just enough to let you travel. Can you do that for me, honey?”

Gerard nodded eagerly. “Oh, yeah.”

* * * *

Gerard Francis McVitty

Leviathan went after the big, round, red-hulled ships the most. They plumped like metal sausages in the sea, smoky, rusty, white-masted ships, and he would chase them down from astern then raise himself in the sky like a tidal wave and fall on them, smashing them, swallowing them, flipping people in the air with his tongue and gobbling them like cocktail frankfurters. Squishy sounds, rending metal sounds, explosions when the oil caught fire and whooshed up the monster's sides, singing Gerard's eyebrows. Then off again, fast as the wind, throwing the sea up in long curtains of glistening water.

"This is Sinbad's Sea, little mouse," Leviathan told him. "This is where the ocean is warmest, where the meat is sweetest, where the ships always travel the same lanes, following the coastlines that captains have been navigating for thousands of years."

"Is that how old you are?"

"Older. I am as old as the sea. As long as sailors have existed, they've remembered me. I am their first nightmare, and sometimes their last one." He laughed his funny, air-blowing laugh, almost a whistle. "I am adventure. Without me all sailors have to fear is storms and drowning, and that's not enough. Imagination's way too big for storms and drowning, and needs me to fill it up."

Gerard felt cold suddenly. "You're death," he said.

"Nothing so fancy," Leviathan said, his levity gone, and then more lightly, "Look, there's an old-time dhow. See how the sail's rigged? Arabs been using that kind of boat for three thousand years or more."

"You going to eat it?"

"I'm Leviathan. What do you think?"

At night Leviathan would slow down. He didn't have to rush through the sea to find ships because they had their lights on and he could see them from quite some distance. Then he would ease up and take them broadside, snapping the hull in two with one bite, then obliterating everything left with a smack of his giant tail. When the monster wasn't

rushing after food, Gerard would sometimes lay on his back and look at the stars, making sure one arm of the overcoat was tied to his leg, and another tied to one of the fake palm trees. He was still, and sure he always would be, afraid of slipping off and just disappearing into the sea, splash, and sinking so deep he would scrunch up like a prune. To while away the hours he would talk with the monster. Leviathan liked talking, because he didn't get much chance to do it.

"How many stars can you count?" Leviathan asked once.

"I dunno. Too many to count. Must be millions."

"Thousands of millions," Leviathan said. "I've counted them. Sometimes, more in the past than now, I used to float on the surface at night, just like now, and do nothing but count the stars. My eyes are better than yours, so I can see in the abyss below, and I can see so far into space that sometimes I think there's no end to it."

"You've counted them all?"

"And named them. Every one. There's Opal, blue and bright, above us right now. And over east is Pearl. That red one we're heading towards is -"

"Ruby," Gerard said.

"Now how did you know that?"

"They're all gems. Must be more stars than gems, though."

"Oh, sure. Then I use words like Wind, and Gabriel, and -"

"Must be more stars than words," Gerard pointed out.

"Then I say Red Gabriel and Blue Sunfish. I'll never run out of words."

"What else do you see?"

"Remember Pearl?"

"Oh, yeah. Big white one in the east."

"Six planets. Two have life on them, and one of those has singing crabs, size of houses."

“Really?”

“You laying down?”

Gerard nodded, then remembered Leviathan could not see him.

“Yup.”

“Look real close at Pearl. Don’t take your eyes off it. Then you’ll see for yourself.”

After an hour or two of staring, Gerard was surprised to learn that Leviathan was right.

* * * *

Diggety

His dad came without his mum, but at first his vision was so blurred he couldn’t be sure. Then he heard his dad’s voice, kind of tight. “Does it hurt?”

To his surprise the pain wasn’t too bad, and he said so, but vaguely because his attention was drawn to the spots of blackness that floated around his field of vision. He was surprised that when the spots came it was with a flash, like small explosions, but explosions of darkness, not light.

“Doctor says you’re getting better soon,” his dad went on, but Gerard knew he was lying.

He felt the bed lean when his dad sat down on it. His dad’s big, rough callused hand rested on his chest, which was heaving up and down like a water pump with mud in the pipe. “Oh, Jesus, Gerard.”

That brought Gerard up. His dad had never called him by his name before. It had always been ‘mate’ or ‘son’, or if he was in trouble ‘you’. Never Gerard.

That’s me, he thought. Gerard Francis McVitty.

He wanted to sit up, but did not have the strength. He settled for trying to move his arm, but there was a tube in it and the arm seemed to be as heavy as iron.

“Your mum’s at mass,” his dad said. “She’s prayin’ all day long for you. Wish I could, but she’s doin’ enough for the both of us.”

“You don’t have to go to mass to pray,” Gerard said. “Father Walsh told me that. I pray all the time. I want to go to Disneyland. So I pray to get better. God listens.”

“I guess it’s true.” His father’s face loomed over him. “How are you, Gerard? Really?”

* * * *

Gerard Francis McVitty

“Tired.”

“What are you doing, little mouse?” Leviathan asked, munching the last, flat top bit of an aircraft carrier. Little jets screamed all around the air, looking for someplace to land. Sometimes they zoomed right over Leviathan, firing little bullets that bounced off his skin with a pneumatic phut-phut-phut sound. One bullet came so close to Gerard’s head it made his hair wave and he could smell something acrid and metal.

He was busy pulling the bit of airliner out of Leviathan’s blowhole.

“I’m tired of hanging on,” he said. “I’m tired of being afraid.”

The plug went “pop!” and air hissed after it. Gerard heard Leviathan sigh like a steam train coming to rest.

“You want to see me now?”

There was a long pause before Leviathan said, “I know what you look like, little mouse. We’ve been talking and talking for so long now, I can see you as clearly as Azhur’s Mako, way out near the end of the universe, a blue star as big as the solar system. I can see your face as clearly as I can see the snails at the bottom of the sea.”

Gerard didn’t care about blue stars or little snails. His eyes wanted to close. He undid the arm of the overcoat from around his leg and from around the palm tree and lay down not caring if he dropped into the ocean.

A great lethargy overtook him, like an enormous silence, and he could no longer hear his own breathing.

“Well, you sleep,” Leviathan said gently, “and I’ll just turn around and take you home.”