

Johnstone Nursery School

There was the greatest of excitements in the Planetary Command Centre. Intelligence Unit had pulled off a master-stroke, but they weren't telling what it was.

At last, Galactic Peace was theirs for the taking! The hour of the Pacificians was at hand!

Thousands of Pacific beings scuttled to the great Stadium of Peace to hear what the news was. Rumour was rife, stories spread like wildfire. There was a school of thought which absolutely knew that Whesley, the Wharmongering Wharrior of Whatsit Whun, had been captured alive and was about to recant all his whicked whays, before having an operation on his spectacular sinuses to make him speak properly. No, no, said others, that's not it at all: our underground spies have found the secret plans for Interplanetary Domination which had been prepared by the Snuckites of Snell, that cold cold planet at the other end of the wormhole. A small minority laughed at this very idea and advised their friends to be prepared for an announcement by the Grand Placator of Pacifica, which would tell them of a binding agreement with the Roche-Lizards of Serpentia Prime, bringing to an end decades of being nervous when you went for a Sunday afternoon spin round the asteroid belt and had forgotten your reptile repellent.

The Pacificians now gathered in the Stadium and applied their video-stalks to their leaders on the platform. There was the Grand Placator herself, going amongst her lieutenants, calming them down. In the background, the self-effacing one, Pro-Zak of Val-Yum, dozed peacefully. A cluster of rather excited beings in pink suits and extravagant hair-dos represented the Intelligence Service of Pacifica.

At last, the time had come: the Grand Placator stepped forward.

"My quiet friends," she said in a voice that immediately sent waves of calm lapping across the vast audience. There was always a danger when listening to her that you would fall asleep and miss something really important. Mothers nudged their husbands and children to keep them awake. "...and people of Pacifica. This is a great day for us, in our search for Galactic Peace and Goodwill. Our very brave Intelligence Service has found evidence of a place where all aliens and all beings from all planets can gather together in harmony and play with each other." There were gasps of wonder and amazement round the stadium. It could not be true! After millennia - even after a very long time indeed - at last peace could break out, and there would be inter-planetary travel without being waylaid by pirates with long snouts or breathed upon by twenty-legged earwigs who smelled of garlic or kidnapped by those tiny things which multiplied as soon as you looked at them, who hung about at the entrances to worm-holes.

When all was quiet again, except for the snores of the older generation, the Grand Placator announced that an expedition was to be mounted to this new gathering-place, to send an embassy to the other aliens and to seek Peace for All Time. "This new place is called 'The Johnstone Nursery'," she announced, "And you will remember that name, and your children will remember that name and your children's children will remember that name and your children's children's children will remember that name and -"

The rest of her speech, which was calculated to send anyone to sleep, was lost in a sort of purple haze which the beings of Pacifica tended to send out from tiny nozzles in the top of their second head whenever they were quite tired. Soon, everyone in the Stadium of Peace was dreaming happily of Peace, Co-Operation, Sisterhood and other pleasant universal items.

This episode had begun the previous week, when a lone operative of the Pacifica Intelligence Unit, beavering away unnoticed until then on the third planet in the Sol System, had suddenly turned up on a dredger making a routine journey across the universe. 40Ws (winks) it had taken her because the captain of the dredger was no boy-racer and disapproved of anyone

travelling too fast. On docking, the operative had immediately rushed down the gangway, much to the captain's chagrin, and sprinted all the way to the pastel-green headquarters of Intelligence.

"I've found it!" she cried, when ushered into the presence of the Highest Smartypants, who headed up the Unit. "I've found it - look!"

And she pulled from her back fourth pocket an article made of cloth, with writing and pictures on it. "Earthlings call this a tea-towel, which is something they use secretly in their homes. I believe it is a sort of religious icon, used when the sun goes down, to purify their homes and to flap in the direction of sacred insects like wasps and things. But look, look at these pictures and this writing."

The Highest Smartypants looked at the towel, turning it over and over in his hand, holding it up to the dim light, inverting it. Then he passed it back.

"Very interesting, ZZZZZZ-576, very interesting indeed. Perhaps you can save me the trouble and tell my colleagues here what it all says." The Highest Smartypants was not skilled in deciphering Earth-texts, although he had done it at university. His strengths were more in Administration, and he had a side-line in Old Railways of the Pheta Quadrant, with which he could (and would) bore all his colleagues for hours on end.

ZZZZZZ-576 was delighted to oblige: here, perhaps, was her ticket home, to become a big cheese in Intelligence HQ. She held up the dish-cloth so that everyone could see.

"Up at the top, it says The Johnstone Nursery. This is a place much used by Earthlings to send their most skilled diplomats to be trained; I have been many times in The Johnstone Nursery, of course," she fibbed. In fact, she had found this cloth attached to a washing-line, and had not the faintest idea where the Johnstone Nursery was. "Now, underneath, you will see the proof that this is a meeting-place of all beings throughout the universe, where they gather together and play nicely. Look here - "

She pointed to one of about a hundred tiny pictures on the cloth. It was of a head, roughly triangular in shape, with two eyes on one side and a mouth full of teeth barely attached to the other. Underneath were two thin arms crowned with seven-fingered hands and below them what appeared to be two sausages. One of the Highest Smartypants' officers gasped and turned blue:

"But that's - that's surely not - that is Grim Grii-helm of Cah-Lode!" he exclaimed, his voice quivering. Those nearest to him stroked him gently on the back, for they remembered that Cah-Lode had done for him in the field: he had had to be retired to HQ.

ZZZZZZ-576 smirked. "Indeed, sir. Now look what it says underneath - 'Graham McLeod'. Now look at this one..."

She pointed now to a picture of a creature with long black things poking out of a head, like a thistle. It had two cross-eyes, and a nose which had not been seen in this sector since the Harassian Wars of 5000 Winks ago. The word below said 'Harriet Harris'.

"Hurri'iat of Harassian 76" muttered someone.

"And this one?" went on the operative, thoroughly enjoying herself.

There was a picture vaguely resembling a creature with bubbles emerging from its arm, a vague squiggle where you might expect a head, and a huge triangle with pockets. Underneath was the name 'Sarah Svenson'.

The Highest Smartypants recognised this one: "Xsara of Xsilicon Xstar Xseven", he announced. His minions nodded and muttered furiously.

There were ninety-three of these pictures, a regular rogue's gallery of the worst fiends of the Universe. There were creatures without noses, some with two tongues, one with at least seven arms, and more than a dozen whose heads seemed to have no attached body whatsoever. One was manifestly a Piscean from the planet Gholfush'boll, although the name was given as 'Gareth Robertson'. There were creatures apparently flying through the clouds with wings,

huge hairy beings with beards, potato-shaped entities with long wiggly arms. The Pacificians were perturbed to find at least fifteen alien species which they could not even identify - evidently the universe was altogether larger and more dangerous than they had ever imagined. But fiercest of them all was the picture of a huge head with ears the size of dinner-plates, with 'Kevin McGrath' printed underneath. This was the one which reduced the Intelligence Unit to a quivering mass of bubblers: "K+argh+vvin of M+groth!" they whispered, and groaned. When they had all recovered sufficiently, the Highest Smartypants took a decision. "We must tell the Grand Placator and recommend that a team be sent straight away to this - this Johnstone Nursery, to join in the peace process and seek co-operation with all these beings and entities."

And so it was that an interstellar craft, the size and shape of a large bed, set off across the zillions of miles to Sol System and its third planet, to seek out the Johnstone Nursery and to mingle with the ninety-three representatives of war-mongering planets everywhere. In the craft was, of course, ZZZZZZ-576, to show the way, and two of the most experienced negotiators of Pacifica. After some 25W, the craft entered Earth's atmosphere and crashed through a window to land in the bedroom of a house; ZZZZZZ-576 was not very good at handling interplanetary ships, and had clipped some trees as she came in. But all were unhurt, and luckily the owners of the house were away at the time (they did wonder later where the second bed had come from).

After several days of searching, which ZZZZZZ-576 explained away by a mild concussion from being catapulted out of the craft into a pile of old Beans (for she could not admit that she did not know where the Nursery was), they stumbled across the Johnstone place and crept in. There were dozens of children screaming and rushing about, and some tired-looking larger female humans shouting and trying to keep order. One of them immediately noticed the three ambassadors from Pacifica, and gathered them in her arms, for she was twice the size of them, in all directions.

"Well, and who do we have here? Welcome to the Nursery. Why don't we go and play with Graham and Harriet - oh, there now, don't cry: we'll find some nice things to play with..."