

## The Sky at Night

'No, dash it, Flowers, you're going too far this time!'

Bronstein was annoyed. It was bad enough that he should have to work this shift with Dr Flowers, a man clearly on another planet as far as serious star-gazing was concerned. Worse still that the kettle's fuse should blow just when it was his turn to make coffee. But the final straw was Flowers' excited babbling.

'But I tell you it's true, Leonard,' said Flowers, his eye glued to the telescope, his arms waving. 'Come here and look!'

'No,' said Bronstein, adamantly, his feet planted firmly on the ground. 'No, no, no!' He had been caught once too often by Flowers' imaginings. 'And stop calling me Leonard. You know my name is Leopold. And to you it's Professor Bronstein.'

'Sorry, Leo,' said Flowers. Although the rest of his body twitched in agitation, his arms waving, his legs doing a little dance on the floor, Flowers' eyes remained firmly attached to the telescope. It was as if he was glued by the eyebrows to the instrument and was trying to escape. 'But please come and look - I tell you it's true!'

Bronstein sighed. It was only the start of the shift, and there were nine hours to go. He knew that Flowers could keep this up indefinitely. 'All right, I'll look. But if I find you're playing a trick, *you're* going to mend the fuse and make the coffee for the rest of the night, ok?'

'Yes, yes,' said Flowers impatiently. 'Anything you want, professor - just come and look.'

Bronstein approached the telescope cautiously. Flowers stood up and waved him towards the eyepiece. After looking closely at the eyepiece to make sure that Flowers had not blacked it with boot-polish (he had fallen for that one once too often), and holding his hands over the seat of his trousers (Flowers had on one occasion stuck a pin in him as he had bent over), he applied his eye to the telescope.

'Now, in the south-eastern sky, at a declination of  $53^\circ$ , just beside the twin stars of Gemini - can you see it?'

Prof. Bronstein looked closely. The night sky was unusually clear. Outside the temperature was at zero and water was freezing rapidly. He looked closely at the segment of the sky that Flowers had indicated. There was Castor and Pollux, and to the right of them Betelgeuse shining brightly. Below the twin stars was the constellation of Canis Minor, the Little Dog. But the astronomer could see nothing unusual. Perhaps some vague milky pinkish traces - interstellar debris, most likely.

Finally he stood up again and looked sternly at Flowers.

'I see anything unusual, Dr. Flowers. I warned you...'

'Oh, dash it all, Leonard, it's out there! I'm not playing a trick this time. I saw it with my own eyes. There's a long string-like object, probably an extended corona of debris, then a large object shaped rather like a pine-cone, and on top of the object there's a little man with a tall red hat, whistling. He has rosy-pink cheeks. I would calculate from the Doppler Shift that it's about 60,000 light-years away.'

'Flowers!!!' shrieked Bronstein, beside himself with rage. 'You expect me to believe that?! What on earth do you take me for? Do you think I'm from another planet? Let me get my hands on you!'

Dr. Flowers backed away before the onslaught of Bronstein's wrath.

'But I did, I tell you,' he stammered, 'I saw it, the jolly little man just up there in the stars, swinging and whistling. I know it sounds odd, but it's true...'

Flowers came back to the telescope. Bronstein counted to ten and controlled himself. He folded his arms and barred the way.

'Now listen,' said the Professor, 'I'm not going to let you get away with it this time. Last month you had me looking for the Man in the Moon. I wasted a whole night at that.'

'Yes, but -', babbled Flowers.

'The month before that,' continued Bronstein, holding up his hand to stop Flowers, 'You faxed our Canadian colleagues that you had caught a falling star and put it in your pocket. I was only just in time to stop a sizeable party of eminent scientists boarding the plane at Toronto to see it.'

'I know, but -'

'Last June, our important visitors from Spain spent a full week investigating your report that the constellation of Cetus, the Sea Monster, was moving towards the stars of Pisces and had already gobbled one up.'

'I know that was silly, but -'

'I seem to recall that it was only last April, Dr Flowers, that you submitted an article to the *'Professional Astronomer'* journal, describing the newly-discovered Tea-Tray constellation. That really had the e-mail buzzing!'

'But it was only a joke -'

'So this time, Flowers, you're asking me to believe that there is a red-hatted elf swinging on a pine-cone somewhere in the vicinity of Gemini. Flowers, go and get me a cup of coffee.'

Flowers' shoulders sagged. It was no good. No one would believe him this time. He wandered off to the coffee machine. Up there in the night sky, the jolly little man whistled merrily, without a care in his heart.

Prof. Bronstein shook his head and returned to his own work. He was surveying the southern sky for a comet which had been forecast to pass across the sky tonight. It should appear somewhere just behind the moon. The moon was a hunter's moon, a thin sliver of light to the naked eye, a dim ball of grey against black through the telescope.

Bronstein settled down again to his vigil. He carefully adjusted the telescope and watched deep space for any sign of movement. Beside him, the output from the radio-telescope clicked and buzzed. Peace began to settle on the Observatory once more. Outside he heard a little dog barking; it sounded just like laughter.

Suddenly he leaped up, looked again, and gasped. There it was, as large as life. He rubbed his eyes - no! there was no mistake! He had not imagined it!

'Dr. Flowers, come quickly!' he shouted, 'Look, there's a cow jumping over the moon! I've never seen such a thing... Flowers! Flowers!'