

Death Scene  
Cifford D Simak

She was waiting on the stoop of the house when he turned into the driveway and as he wheeled the car up the concrete and brought it to a halt he was certain she knew, too.

She had just come from the garden and had one arm full of flowers and she was smiling at him just a shade too gravely.

He carefully locked the car and put the keys away in the pocket of his jacket and reminded himself once again, "Matter- of-factly, friend. For it is better this way."

And that was the truth, he reassured himself. It was much better than the old way. It gave a man some time.

He was not the first and he would not be the last and for some of them it was rough, and for others, who had prepared themselves, it was not so rough and in time, perhaps, it would become a ritual so beautiful and so full of dignity one would look forward to it. It was more civilized and more dignified than the old way had been and in another hundred years or so there could be no doubt that it would become quite acceptable.

All that was wrong with it now, he told himself, was that it was too new. It took a little time to become accustomed to this way of doing things after having done them differently through all of human history.

He got out of the car and went up the walk to where she waited for him. He stooped and kissed her and the kiss was a little longer than was their regular custom--and a bit more tender. And as he kissed her he smelled the summer flowers she carried, and he thought how appropriate it was that he should at this time smell the flowers from the garden they both loved.

"You know," he said and she nodded at him.

"Just a while ago," she said. "I knew you would be coming home. I went out and picked the flowers."

"The children will be coming, I imagine."

"Of course," she said, "They will come right away."

He looked at his watch, more from force of habit than a need to know the time. "There is time," he said. "Plenty of time for all of them to get here. I hope they bring the kids."

"Certainly they will," she said. "I went to phone them once, then I thought how silly."

He nodded. "We're of the old school, Florence. It's hard even yet to accept this thing--to know the children will know and come almost as soon as we know. It's still a little hard to be sure of a thing like that."

She patted his arm. "The family will be all together. There'll be time to talk. We'll have a splendid visit." "Yes, of course," he said.

He opened the door for her and she stepped inside.

"What pretty flowers," he said.

"They've been the prettiest this year that they have ever been."

"That vase," he said. "The one you got last birthday. The blue and gold. That's the one to use."

"That's exactly what I thought. On the dining table."

She went to get the vase and he stood in the living-room and thought how much he was a part of this room and this room a part of him. He knew every inch of it and it knew him as well and it was a friendly place, for he'd spent years making friends with it.

Here he'd walked the children of nights when they had been babies and been ill of cutting teeth or croup or colic, nights when the lights in this room had been the only lights in the entire block. Here the family had spent many evening hours in happiness and peace--and it had been a lovely thing, the peace.

For he could remember the time when there had been no peace, nowhere in the world, and no thought or hope of peace, but in its place the ever-present

dread and threat of war, a dread that had been so commonplace that you scarcely noticed it, a dread you came to think was a normal part of living.

Then, suddenly, there had been the dread no longer, for you could not fight a war if your enemy could look ahead an entire day and see what was about to happen. You could not fight a war and you could not play a game of baseball or any sort of game, you could not rob or cheat or murder, you could not make a killing in the market. There were a lot of things you could no longer do and there were times when it spoiled a lot of fun, for surprise and anticipation had been made impossible. It took a lot of getting used to and a lot of readjustment, but you were safe, at least, for there could be no war--not only at the moment, but forever and forever, and you knew that not only were you safe, but your children safe as well and their children and your children's children's children and you were willing to pay almost any sort of price for such complete assurance.

It is better this way, he told himself, standing in the friendly room. It is much better this way. Although at times it's hard.

He walked across the room and through it to the porch and stood on the porch steps looking at the flowers. Florence was right, he thought; they were prettier this year than any year before. He tried to remember back to some year when they might have been prettier, but he couldn't quite be sure. Maybe the autumn when young John had been a baby, for that year the mums and asters had been particularly fine. But that was unfair, he told himself, for it was not autumn now, but summer.

It was impossible to compare summer flowers with autumn. Or the year when Mary had been ill so long--the lilacs had been so deeply purple and had smelled so sweet; he remembered bringing in great bouquets of them each evening because she loved them so. But that was no comparison, for the lilacs bloomed in spring.

A neighbour went past on the sidewalk outside the picket fence and he spoke gravely to her: "Good afternoon, Mrs. Abrams."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Williams," she said and that was the way it always was, except on occasions she would stop a moment and they'd talk about the flowers. But today she would not stop unless he made it plain he would like to have her stop, for otherwise she would not wish to intrude upon him.

That was the way it had been at the office, he recalled.

He'd put away his work with sure and steady hands--as sure and steady as he could manage them. He'd walked to the rack and got down his hat and no one had spoken to him, not a single one of them had kidded him about his quitting early, for all had guessed--or known--as well as he. You could not always tell, of course, for the foresight ability was more pronounced in some than it was in others, although the lag in even the least efficient of them would not be more than a quarter-hour at most.

He'd often wished he could understand how it had been brought about, but there were factors involved he could not even remotely grasp. He knew the story, of course, for he could remember the night that it had happened and the excitement there had been--and the consternation. But knowing how it came about and the reason for it was quite a different thing from understanding it.

It had been an ace in the hole, a move of desperation to be used only as a last resort. The nation had been ready for a long time with the transmitters all set up and no one asking any questions because everyone had taken it for granted they were a part of the radar network and, in that case, the less said of them the better.

No one had wanted to use those transmitters, or at least that had been the official explanation after they'd been used--but anything was better than another war.

So the time had come, the time of last resort, the day of desperation, and the switches had been flicked, blanketing the nation with radiations that did something to the brain "stimulating latent abilities" was as close a general explanation as anyone had made--and all at once everyone had been able to see twenty-four hours ahead.

There'd been hell to pay, of course, for quite a little while, but after a time it simmered down and the people settled down to make the best of it, to adapt and live with their strange new ability.

The President had gone on television to tell the world what had happened and he had warned potential enemies that we'd know twenty-four hours ahead of time exactly what they'd do.

In consequence of which they did exactly nothing except to undo a number of incriminating moves they had already made --some of which the President had foretold that they would undo, naming the hour and place and the manner of their action.

He had said the process was no secret and that other nations were welcome to the know-how if they wanted it, although it made but little difference if they did or not, for the radiations in time would spread throughout the entire world and would affect all people. It was a permanent change, he said, for the ability was inheritable and would be passed on from one generation to the next, and never again, for good or evil, would the human race be blind as it had been in the past.

So finally there had been peace, but there'd been a price to pay. Although, perhaps, not too great a price, Williams told himself. He'd liked baseball, he recalled, and there could be no baseball now, for it was a pointless thing to play a game the outcome of which you'd know a day ahead of time. He had liked to have the boys in occasionally for a round of pokerm but poker was just as pointless now and as impossible as baseball or football or horse racing or any other sport.

There had been many changes, some of them quite awkward.

Take newspapers, for example, and radio and television reporting of the news. Political tactics had been forced to undergo a change, somewhat for the better, and gambling and crime had largely disappeared.

Mostly, it had been for the best. Although even some of the best was a little hard at first--and some of it would take a long time to become completely accustomed to.

Take his own situation now, he thought.

A lot more civilized than in the old days, but still fairly hard to take. Hard especially on Florence and the children, forcing them into a new and strange attitude that in time would harden into custom and tradition, but now was merely something new and strange. But Florence was standing up to it admirably, he thought. They'd often talked of it, especially in these last few years, and they had agreed that no matter which of them it was they would keep it calm and dignified, for that was the only way to face it. It was one of the payments that you made for peace, although sometimes it was a little hard to look at it that way.

But there were certain compensations. Florence and he could have a long talk before the children arrived. There'd be a chance to go over certain final details--finances and insurance and other matters of like nature. Under the old way there would have been, he told himself, no chance at all for that.

There'd be the opportunity to do all the little worthwhile things, all the final sentimental gestures, that except for the foresight ability would have been denied.

There'd be talk with the children and the neighbours bringing things to eat and the big bouquet of flowers the office gang would send--the flowers that under other circumstances he never would have seen. The minister would drop in for a moment and manage to get in a quiet word or two of comfort, all the time making it seem to be no more than a friendly call.

In the morning the mail would bring many little cards and notes of friendship sent 'by people who wanted him to know they thought of him and would have liked to have been with him if there had been the time. But they would not intrude, for the time that was left was a family time.

The family would sit and talk, remembering the happy days

--the dog that Eddie had and the time John had run away from home for an hour or two and the first time Mary had ever had a date and the dress she

wore. They'd take out the snapshot albums and look at the pictures, recalling all the days of bitter- sweetness and would know that theirs had been a good life-- and especially he would know. And through it all would run the happy clatter of grandchildren playing in the house, climbing up on Grand-dad's knee to have him tell a story. All so civilized, he thought.

Giving all of them a chance to prove they were civilized.

He'd have to go back inside the house now, for he could hear

Florence arranging the flowers in the birthday vase that was blue and gold. And they had so much to say to one another-- even after forty years they still had so much to say to one another.

He turned and glanced back at the garden.

Most beautiful flowers, he thought, that they had ever raised.

He'd go out in the morning, when the dew was on them, when they were most beautiful, to bid them all good-bye.