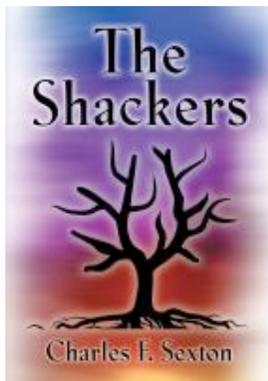


The Shackers



Charles F. Sexton



Shacklers have lived isolated on a very unique island in the cold Southern Indian Ocean for who knows how long. Befriended by Antarctic explorer Sir Edmond Shackleton in 1920, their world advanced tremendously until Shackleton's untimely death. Shacklers deal with issues like humans do-and then some. They know they are vulnerable, and remain afraid of rediscovery and plunder. Will that happen? One family, the Alexanders, have the courage to take on unanticipated challenges.

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First Edition

1

The brilliant colors are back again for their long-awaited cycle in the island. Shacklers are mesmerized by the weaving of the phosphorescent colors, ebbing and flowing through the plasma base, especially at night. For about six weeks, a symphony of lights almost hypnotize residents with their hues of blue, green, red and deep black appearing like a basket woven with colored light. Shacklers attach to branches and watch in awe, trying to describe to each other with a variety of conflicting interpretations what they see. This is an unusual event on the Shack, occurring only about once a generation. Some say it is caused by ionized plasma flares which are emitted from supermassive black holes when they gobble up and rip apart large gas clouds in space at the center of the Milky Way. It doesn't matter.

One evening, what looks at a distance like a firefly seems to be lost in the abyss of colors below the island's surface. It is darting around in a mindless frenzy, changing course rapidly with no place to finish. Suddenly it comes to a dead stop.

"Ouch!"

"Ouch!"

It seems like the firefly had run in to something. The firefly and an old man slowly rose to the surface.

"Why don't you look where you're going?" The old man asked the firefly. "I'm sorry!" The firefly replied, "I just like to go fast!"

"You're a hazard!" the old man scolded.

"That's me!" The firefly exclaimed.

That's how they meet. Hazard, who is not really a firefly, and August are opposites in so many ways, but they are destined to influence each other in ways they could not yet know. Hazard explains that she is a midsighter who is lucky enough to be a fast swimmer. She knows of no one who is faster than she. She loves to speed about the island's vast plasma and be a show-off.

August listens to Hazard with great interest. He is good at listening and tells people that it is a good way to learn something new. "If you do all of the talking, you learn nothing new because you already know what you hear yourself saying!" he often opines to them.

"How old are you?" boldly asks Hazard.

"Well, I'm not really sure."

"Wait, I'm not really sure how old I am, either!"

"Why is that?"

"I'm adopted and I don't know when I was born."

"I'm sorry!"

"I have great parents, though. I don't remember or miss my birth parents, but when I swim about, I meet people like you and ask questions. Do you remember a

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branch fire in this neighborhood about twelve years ago?" she inquires.

"I heard about it. I heard a nice family lived there, but I did not know them."

"Do you remember your parents?"

"Yes, they lived quite awhile."

"Were they strict or nice?"

"They were both. They helped me learn to think. They helped me learn that I was responsible for my decisions and actions. And they taught me how to have fun!"

"I wish I knew more about my birth parents. Knowing more about them would tell me more about me."

"Indeed it would," replies August. "But you are still lucky to be in a family that loves you. They did not know what kind of person you would turn out to be when they decided to adopt you. You are all fortunate!"

I lost my wife a few years ago and have been alone on my branch much of the time with my limited mid range vision since then. I have learned to get along with my handicap with little difficulty."

The two continue to talk until Hazard realizes she is late and has to go home.

2

Hazard's dad, Sky Alexander, has been asked to visit the neighboring Diaz family that has not felt well. He is like a Shacker doctor, since he has been medically trained to help Shackers figure out what is making them sick or weak and to recommend cures.. The family of five has sent word to Sky that they need his advice.

"We all have the same problems!" explains the mom. "We don't have any energy! And we have gotten smaller! That's weird! And scary!"

Shackers are not prone to a lot of illnesses but can be infected by a unique archaebacteria which had adapted to the cold water around the Shack. The infection is not deadly to Shackers, but it can send them to their home branch for an extended period. Shackers' health can also be negatively influenced by lack of movement, poor quality nutrition and a few other lesser issues.

Sky questions each parent and the three Diaz kids; they all say the same thing. They started feeling weak and all began getting smaller at the same time.

"I have seen these symptoms before, but not in a whole family at the same time. Let's do some blood and urine tests, but in the meantime, make sure to stay

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attached for long periods of time to insure you absorb a lot of amino acids."

Shackers have blood and urine just like humans, but their lab testing technology has not progressed much beyond the 1920's and results have revealed little useful information. All Sky can do at this point is to document his observations. He is at a loss to help, but the good news is that the family should recover in about a month. The bad news is that they won't have the energy to do much until that time-no work, no income, and no school.

3

That evening, at family attachment time, Neon, the oldest Alexander daughter, explains why she had gotten frustrated at college today. "I wasted forty-five minutes today waiting for Josie to show up and coordinate vision so I could work on my genetics research paper! It's like everything has to work on someone else's schedule. I get so tired of it!"

Shackers can see perfectly within their limited focal length; but, outside of that, their vision is blurred or they can't see at all.

"Well, I don't think it's all that bad! I was having a ball today and met this wonderful old man," exclaims Hazard. "You can run into the nicest folks that way!"

"You mean you *ran* into someone, again? Just because you're fast doesn't mean you can keep speeding into people, you blockhead!" scolds her brother, Joey. "I, on the other hand, am smart enough to *know* I need lots of help! I have good friends who are there for me. You would be wise to develop the same!"

"Wait!" says her mother, Aurora. "You stopped to talk with a complete stranger? We've talked about this too many times! I hate to lecture, but that cannot be done, not under any circumstances, young lady!"

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"But you would like him, Mom. I could actually get a word in edgewise, which is more than I can do around here!"

"That a girl, Hazard!" shouts her older brother, Harry. "You do whatever you want! You wanna go on an ion hunt with me and the guys? You would be a ball to watch, bumping into things and all that!"

"Enough already!" Sky has had enough with this waste of time. "Tell me more about this 'wonderful old man' you met today, Hazard." Sky has heard of a man whose father was living when the Shacklers were visited by Sir Ernest Shackleton, a British polar explorer who stumbled upon the island in 1921 aboard the *Quest*. Intending to further survey and explore the southern Indian Ocean region, Shackleton unfortunately died of a heart attack before his work could be officially started. "An old man who lives in town knows more about the Shackleton days than any other modern day Shacker."

"Didn't they name the island after Shackleton," adds Neon.

"Yes", Sky continues. "The story is that during their brief time together, Shackleton and our forefathers secretly developed a deep and trusting relationship. Before his arrival, they lived on the island for centuries without knowing there was an outside world and didn't have a name for themselves or the island. They began

to nickname the island the Shack and themselves Shackers."

"Yeah, and Shackleton taught the islanders English, modern math, science and as much technology as he could. Before he died, he arranged for additional information to be shipped to them. His closest staff fulfilled that promise and for years quietly transported it to them. His influence upon them accelerated progress in their world tremendously," says Neon, showing off what she has learned at the university.

"But they remained isolated and unknown to the world after his closest associate died. They didn't believe that all humans were like Shackleton and requested that the English team not reveal the island's existence upon their return home," continues Sky. "So far as we know, that request has been honored."

But, the Shackers keep a constant ear on the ocean. Many know they cannot remain undiscovered forever!

Responding to her Dad's question, Hazard explains, "So, I was exercising in the plasma when I kind of bumped into this man. I could not see him, and

he certainly could not see me. Well, he was the nicest person! I was somewhat embarrassed and apologized profusely. He is a mid-sighter and looks quite old. His name is August. I don't know much more,

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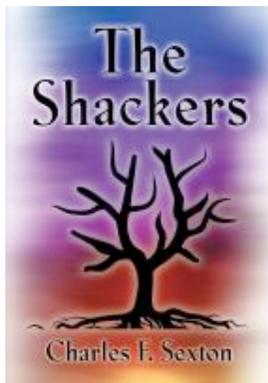
except he listened to everything I said like I was the only person on the Shack."

"Exactly what did you tell him?" asks Aurora.

"Not much. I told him that you are a City Governor here in Macklin, that Dad is involved in medical things, and that I'm adopted."

"Not much more to tell, is there, Sis! I don't think my ion hunting friends know all *that* much!" laughs Harry.

Aurora, thoroughly irritated right now, disconnects and goes for a swim of her own.



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