

THE GOLDEN AGE

Chapter 5

"This is the day!" whispered the radios in a hundred tongues. "This is the day!" said the headlines of a thousand newspapers. "This is the day!" thought the cameramen as they checked and rechecked the equipment gathered round the vast empty space upon which Karellen's ship would be descending.

There was only the single ship now, hanging above New York. Indeed, as the world had just discovered, the ships above Man's other cities had never existed. The day before, the great fleet of the Overlords had dissolved into nothingness, fading like mists beneath the morning dew.

The supply ships, coming and going far out in space, had been real enough; but the silver clouds that had hung for a lifetime above almost all the capitals of Earth had been an illusion. How it had been done, no-one could tell, but it seemed that every one of those ships had been nothing more than an image of Karellen's own vessel. Yet it had been far more than a matter of playing with light, for radar had also been deceived, and there were still men alive who swore that they had heard the shriek of torn air as the fleet came in through the skies of Earth.

It was not important: all that mattered was that Karellen no longer felt the need for this display of force. He had thrown away his psychological weapons.

"The ship is moving!" came the word, flashed instantly to every corner of the planet. "It is heading westward!"

At less than a thousand kilometers an hour, falling slowly down from the empty heights of the stratosphere, the ship moved out to the Great Plains and to its second rendezvous with history. It settled down obediently before the waiting cameras and the packed thousands of spectators, so few of whom could see as much as the millions gathered round their TV sets. The ground should have cracked and trembled beneath that tremendous weight, but the vessel was still in the grip of whatever forces drove it among the stars. It kissed the earth as gently as a falling snowflake. The curving wall twenty meters above the ground seemed to flow and shimmer: where there had been a smooth and shining surface, a great opening had appeared. Nothing was visible within it, even to the questing eyes of the camera. It was as dark and shadowed as the entrance to a cave.

Out of the orifice, a wide, glittering gangway extruded itself and drove purposefully towards the ground. It seemed a solid sheet of metal with handrails along either side. There were no steps; it was steep and smooth as a toboggan slide and, one would have thought, equally impossible to ascend or descend in any ordinary manner.

The world was watching that dark portal, within which nothing had yet stirred.

Then the seldom-heard yet unforgettable voice of Karellen floated softly down from some hidden source. His message could scarcely have been more unexpected

"There are some children by the foot of the gangway. I would like two of them to come up and meet me."

There was silence for a moment. Then a boy and a girl broke from the crowd and walked, with complete lack of self-consciousness, towards the gangway and into history. Others followed, but stopped when Karellen's chuckle came from the ship.

"Two will be enough."

Eagerly anticipating the adventure, the children-they could not have been more than six years old-jumped on to the metal slide. Then the first miracle happened.

Waving cheerfully to the crowds beneath, and to their anxious parents-who, too late, had probably remembered the legend of the Pied Piper-the children began swiftly ascending the steep slope. Yet their legs were motionless, and soon it was clear also that their bodies were tilted at right angles to that peculiar gangway. It possessed a private gravity of its own, one which could ignore that of Earth. The children were still enjoying this novel experience, and wondering what was drawing them upwards, when they disappeared into the ship.

A vast silence lay over the whole world for the space of twenty seconds-though, afterwards, no-one could believe that the time had been so short. Then the darkness of the great opening seemed to move forward, and Karellen came forth into the sunlight.

The boy was sitting on his left arm, the girl on his right. They were both too busy playing with Karellen's wings to take any notice of the watching multitude.

It was a tribute to the Overlords' psychology, and to their careful years of preparation, that only a few people fainted. Yet there could have been fewer still, anywhere in the world, who did not feel the ancient terror brush for one awful instant against their minds before reason banished it forever.

There was no mistake. The leathery wings, the little horns, the barbed tail-all were there. The most terrible of all legends had come to life, out of the unknown past. Yet now it stood smiling, in ebon majesty, with the sunlight gleaming upon its tremendous body, and with a human child resting trustfully on either arm.

Chapter 6

Fifty years is ample time in which to change a world and its people almost beyond recognition. All that is required for the task are a sound knowledge of social engineering, a clear sight of the intended goal-and power.

These things the Overlords possessed. Though their goal was hidden, their knowledge was obvious-and so was their power.

That power took many forms, few of them realized by the peoples whose destinies the Overlords now ruled. The might enshrined in their great ships had been clear enough for every eye to see. But behind that display of sleeping force were other and much subtler weapons.

"All political problems," Karellen had once told Stormgren, "can be solved by the correct application of power."

"That sounds a rather cynical remark," Stormgren had replied doubtfully. "It's a little too much like 'Might is Right'. In our own past, the use of power has been notably unsuccessful in solving anything."

"The operative word is correct. You have never possessed real power, or the knowledge necessary to apply it. As in all problems, there are efficient and inefficient approaches. Suppose, for example, that one of your nations, led by some fanatical ruler, tried to revolt against me. The highly inefficient answer to such a threat would be some billions of horsepower in the shape of atomic bombs.

If I used enough bombs, the solution would be complete and final. It would also, as I remarked, be inefficient-even if it possessed no other defects."

"And the efficient solution?"

"That requires about as much power as a small radio transmitter-and rather similar skills to operate. For it's the application of the power, not its amount, that matters. How long do you think Hitler's career as dictator of

Germany would have lasted, if wherever he went a voice was talking quietly in his ear? Or if a steady musical note, loud enough to drown all other sounds and to prevent sleep, filled his brain night and day? Nothing brutal, you appreciate. Yet, in the final analysis, just as irresistible as a tritium bomb."

"I see," said Stormgren; "and there would be no place to hide?"

"No place where I could not send my-ah-devices if I felt sufficiently strongly about it. And that is why I shall never have to use really drastic methods to maintain my position."

The great ships, then, had never been more than symbols, and now the world knew that all save one had been phantoms.

Yet, by their mere presence, they had changed the history of Earth. Now their task was done, and their achievement lingered behind them to go echoing down the centuries.

Karellen's calculations had been accurate. The shock of revulsion had passed swiftly, though there were many who prided themselves on their freedom from superstition yet would never be able to face one of the Overlords. There was something strange here, something beyond all reason or logic.

In the Middle Ages, people believed in the devil and feared him. But this was the twenty-first century: could it be that, after all, there was such a thing as racial memory?

It was, of course, universally assumed that the Overlords, or beings of the same species, had come into violent conflict with ancient man. The meeting must have lain in the remote past, for it had left no traces in recorded history. Here was another puzzle, and Karellen would give no help in its solution.

The Overlords, though they had now shown themselves to man, seldom left their one remaining ship. Perhaps they found it physically uncomfortable on Earth, for their size, and the existence of their wings, indicated that they came from a world of much lower gravity. They were never seen without a belt adorned with complex mechanisms which, it was generally believed, controlled their weight and enabled them to communicate with each other. Direct sunlight was painful to them, and they never stayed in it for more than a few seconds. When they had to go into the open for any length of time, they wore dark glasses which gave them a somewhat incongruous appearance. Though they seemed able to breathe terrestrial air, they sometimes carried small cylinders of gas from which they refreshed themselves occasionally.

Perhaps these purely physical problems accounted for their aloofness. Only a small fraction of the human race had ever actually met an Overlord in the flesh, and no-one could guess how many of them were aboard Karellen's ship. No more than five had ever been seen together at one time, but there might be hundreds, even thousands of them aboard that tremendous vessel.

In many ways, the appearance of the Overlords had raised more problems than it had solved. Their origin was still no-known, their biology a source of endless speculation. On many matters they would give information freely, but on others their behavior could only be described as secretive. On the whole, however, this did not annoy anyone except the scientists. The average man, though he might prefer not to meet the Overlords, was grateful to them for what they had done to his world.

By the standards of all earlier ages, it was Utopia. Ignorance, disease, poverty and fear had virtually ceased to exist. The memory of war was fading into the past as a nightmare vanishes with the dawn: soon it would lie outside the experience of all living men.

With the energies of mankind directed into constructive channels, the face of the world had been remade. It was, almost literally, a new world. The cities that had been good enough for earlier generations had been rebuilt-or deserted and left as museum specimens when they had ceased to serve any useful purpose.

Many cities had already been abandoned in this manner, for the whole pattern of industry and commerce had changed completely. Production had become largely automatic: the robot factories poured forth consumer goods in such unending streams that all the ordinary necessities of life were virtually free. Men worked for the sake of the luxuries they desired: or they did not work at all.

It was One World. The old names of the old countries were still used, but they were no more than convenient postal divisions. There was no-one on earth who could not speak English, who could not read, who was not within range of a television set, who could not visit the other side of the planet within twenty four hours..

Crime had practically vanished. It had become both no-necessary and impossible.

When no-one lacks anything, there is no point in stealing. Moreover, all potential criminals knew that there could be no escape from the surveillance of the Overlords. In the early days of their rule, they had intervened so effectively on behalf of law and order that the lesson had never been forgotten.

Crimes of passion, though not quite extinct, were almost unheard of. Now that so many of its psychological problems had been removed, humanity was far saner and less irrational. And what earlier ages would have called vice was now no more than eccentricity-or, at the worst, bad manners.

One of the most noticeable changes had been a slowing-down of the mad tempo that had so characterized the twentieth century. Life was more leisurely than it had been for generations. It therefore had less zest for the few, but more tranquility for the many. Western man had relearned-what the rest of the world had never forgotten-that there was nothing sinful in leisure as long as it did not degenerate into mere sloth.

Whatever problems the future might bring, time did not yet hang heavy on humanity's hands. Education was now much more thorough and much more protracted.

Few people left college before twenty-and that was merely the first stage, since they normally returned again at twenty-five for at least three more years, after travel and experience had broadened their minds. Even then, they would probably take refresher courses at intervals for the remainder of their lives in the subjects that particularly interested them.

This extension of human apprenticeship so far past the beginning of physical maturity had given rise to many social changes. Some of these had been necessary for generations, but earlier periods had refused to face the challenge-or had pretended that it did not exist. In particular, the pattern of sexual mores insofar as there had ever been a single pattern- had altered radically. It had been virtually shattered by two inventions, which were, ironically enough, of purely human error and owed nothing to the Overlords.

The first was a completely reliable oral contraceptive: the second was an equally infallible method-as certain as fingerprinting and based on a very detailed analysis of the blood- of identifying the father of any child. The effect of these two inventions upon human society could only be described as devastating, and they had swept away the last remnants of the Puritan aberration.

Another great change was the extreme mobility of the new society. Thanks to the perfection of air-transport, everyone was free to go anywhere at a moment's notice. There was more

room in the skies than there had ever been on the roads, and the, twenty-first century had repeated, on a larger scale, the great American achievement of putting a nation on wheels. It had given wings to the world.

Though not literally. The ordinary private flyer or air-car had no wings at all, or indeed any visible control surfaces.

Even the clumsy rotor blades of the old helicopters had been banished. Yet Man had not discovered anti-gravity: only the Overlords possessed that ultimate secret. His air-cars were propelled by forces which the Wright brothers would have understood. Jet reaction, used both directly and in the more subtle form of boundary layer control, drove his flyers forward and held them in the air. As no laws or edicts of the Overlords could have done, the ubiquitous little air-cars had washed away the last barriers between the different tribes of mankind.

Profounder things had also passed. It was a completely secular age. Of the faiths that had existed before the coming of the Overlords, only a form of purified Buddhism-perhaps the most austere of all religions-still survived. The creeds that had been based upon miracles and revelations had collapsed utterly.

With the rise of education, they had already been slowly dissolving, but for a while the Overlords had taken no sides in the matter. Though Karellen was often asked to express his views on religion, all that he would say was that a man's beliefs were his own affair, so long as they did not interfere with the liberty of others.

Perhaps the old faiths would have lingered for generations yet, had it not been for human curiosity. It was known that the Overlords had access to the past, and more than once historians had appealed to Karellen to settle some ancient controversy.

It may have been that he had grown tired of such questions, but it is more likely that he knew perfectly well what the outcome of his generosity would be....

The instrument he handed over on permanent loan to the World History Foundation was nothing more than a television receiver with an elaborate set of controls for determining coordinates in time and space. It must have been linked somehow to a far more complex machine, operating on principles that no-one could imagine, aboard Karellen's ship. One had merely to adjust the controls, and a window into the past was opened up. Almost the whole of human history for the past five thousand years became accessible in an instant. Earlier than that the machine would not go, and there were baffling blanks all down the ages. They might have had some natural cause, or they might be due to deliberate censorship by the Overlords.

Though it had always been obvious to any rational mind that all the world's religious writings could not be true, the shock was nevertheless profound. Here was a revelation which no-one could doubt or deny: here, seen by some unknown magic of Overlord science, were the true beginnings of all the world's great faiths. Most of them were noble and inspiring- but that was not enough. Within a few days, all mankind's multitudinous messiahs had lost their divinity. Beneath the fierce and passionless light of truth, faiths that had sustained millions for twice a thousand years vanished like morning dew. All the good and all the evil they had wrought were swept suddenly into the past, and could touch the minds of men no more.

Humanity had lost its ancient gods: now it was old enough to have no need for new ones.

Though few realized it as yet, the fall of religion had been paralleled by a decline in science. There were plenty of technologists, but few original workers extending the frontiers of human knowledge. Curiosity remained, and the leisure to indulge in it, but the heart had been taken

out of fundamental scientific research. It seemed futile to spend a lifetime search-tog fur secrets that the

Overlords had probably uncovered ages before.

This decline had been partly disguised by an enormous efflorescence of the descriptive sciences such as zoology, botany and observational astronomy. There had never been so many amateur scientists gathering facts for their own amusement-but there were few theoreticians correlating these facts.

The end of strife and conflicts of all kinds had also meant the virtual end of creative art. There were myriads of performers, amateur and professional, yet there had, been no really outstanding new works of literature, music, painting or sculpture for a generation. The world was still living on the glories of a past that could never return.

No-one worried except a few philosophers. The race was too intent upon savoring its new-found freedom to look beyond the pleasures of the present. Utopia was here at last: its novelty had not yet been assailed by the supreme enemy of all Utopias-boredom.

Perhaps the Overlords had the answer to that, as they had to all other problems.

No-one knew-any more than they knew, a lifetime after their arrival-what their ultimate purpose might be. Mankind had grown to trust them, and to accept without question the superhuman altruism that had kept Karellen and his companions so long exiled from their homes. If, indeed, it was altruism. For there were still some who wondered if the policies of the Overlords would always coincide with the true welfare of humanity.

Chapter 7

WHEN Rupert Boyce sent out the invitations for his party, the total mileage involved was impressive. To list only the first dozen guests, there were the Fosters from Adelaide, the Shoenbergers from Haiti, the Farrans from Stalingrad, the Moravias from Cincinnati, the Ivankos from Paris, and the Sullivans from the general vicinity of Easter Island, but approximately four kilometers down on the ocean bed. It was a considerable compliment to Rupert that although thirty guests had been invited, over forty turned up-which was about the percentage he had expected. Only the Krauses let him down, and that was simply because they forgot about the International Date Line and arrived twenty-four hours late.

By noon an imposing collection of flyers had accumulated in the park, and the later arrivals would have quite a distance to walk once they had found somewhere to land. At least, it would seem quite a distance to them, under this cloudless sky and with the mercury at a hundred and ten. The assembled vehicles ranged from one-man Flitterbugs to family Cadillacs which were more like air-borne palaces than sensible flying machines. In this age, however, nothing could be deduced concerning the social status of the guests from their modes of transport.

"It's a very ugly house," said Jean Morrel as the Meteor spiraled down. "It looks rather like a box that somebody's stepped on."

George Greggson, who had an old-fashioned dislike of automatic landings, readjusted the rate-of-descent control before answering.

"It's hardly fair to judge the place from this angle," he replied, sensibly enough. "From ground level it may look quite different. Oh dear!"

"What's the matter?"

"The Fosters are here. I'd recognize that color-scheme anywhere."

"Well, there's no need to talk to them if you don't want to. That's one advantage of Rupert's parties-you can always hide in the crowd."

George had selected a landing place and was now diving purposefully towards it.

They floated to rest between another Meteor and something that neither of them could identify. It looked very fast and, Jean thought, very uncomfortable. One of Rupert's technical friends, she decided, had probably built it himself. She had an idea that there was a law against that sort of thing.

The heat hit them like a blast from a blow-torch as they stepped out of the flyer. It seemed to suck the moisture from their bodies, and George almost imagined that he could feel his skin cracking. It was partly their own fault, of course.

They had left Alaska three hours before, and should have remembered to adjust the cabin temperature accordingly.

"What a place to live!" gasped Jean. "I thought this climate was supposed to be controlled."

"So it is," replied George. "This was all desert once-and look at it now. Come on-it'll be all right indoors!"

Rupert's voice, slightly larger than life, boomed cheerfully in their ears. Their host was standing beside the flyer, a glass in each hand, looking down at them with a roguish expression.

He looked down at them for the simple reason that he was about twelve feet tall: he was also semi-transparent. One could see right through him without much difficulty.

"This is a fine trick to play on your guests!" protested George. He grabbed at the drinks, which he could just reach.

His hand, of course, went right through them. "I hope you've got something more substantial for us when we reach the house!"

"Don't worry!" laughed Rupert. "Just give your order now, and it'll be ready by the time you arrive." "Two large beers, cooled in liquid air," said George promptly. "We'll be right there."

Rupert nodded, put down one of his glasses on an invisible table, adjusted an equally invisible control, and promptly vanished from sight.

"Well!" said Jean. "That's the first time I've seen one of those gadgets in action. How did Rupert get hold of it? I thought only the Overlords had them."

"Have you ever known Rupert not to get anything he wanted?" replied George.

"That's just the toy for him. He can sit comfortably in his studio and go wandering round half of Africa. No heat, no bugs, no exertion-and the icebox always in reach. I wonder what Stanley and Livingstone would have thought?"

The sun put an end to further conversation until they had reached the house. As they approached the front door (which was not very easy to distinguish from the rest of the glass wall facing them) it swung automatically open with a fanfare of trumpets. Jean guessed, correctly, that she would be heartily sick of that fanfare before the day was through.

The current Mrs. Boyce greeted them in the delicious coolness of the hail. She was, if truth be known, the main reason for the good turn-out of guests. Perhaps half of them would have come in any case to see Rupert's new house: the waverers had been decided by the reports of Rupert's new wife.

There was only one adjective that adequately described her. She was distracting.

Even in a world where beauty was almost commonplace, men would turn their heads when she entered the room. She was, George guessed, about one quarter Negro; her features were practically Grecian and her hair was long and lustrous. Only the dark, rich texture of her

skin - the overworked word "chocolate" was the only one that described it - revealed her mixed ancestry.

"You're Jean and George, aren't you?" she said, holding out her hand. "I'm so pleased to meet you. Rupert is doing something complicated with the drinks-come along and meet everybody."

Her voice was a rich contralto that sent little shivers running up and down

George's back, as if someone was playing on his spine like a flute. He looked nervously at Jean, who had managed to force a somewhat artificial smile, and finally recovered his voice.

"It's-it's very nice to meet you," he said lamely. "We've been looking forward to this party."

"Rupert always gives such nice parties," put in Jean. By the way she accented the "always", one knew perfectly well she was thinking "Every time he gets married". George flushed slightly and gave Jean a glance of reproof, but there was no sign that their hostess noticed the barb. She was friendliness itself as she ushered them into the main lounge, already half packed with a representative collection of Rupert's numerous friends. Rupert himself was sitting at the console of what seemed to be a television engineer's control unit: it was, George assumed the device that had projected his image out to meet them. He was busily demonstrating it by surprising two more arrivals as they descended into the parking place, but paused just long enough to greet Jean and George and to apologize for having given their drinks to somebody else.

"You'll find plenty more over there," he said, waving one hand vaguely behind him while he adjusted controls with the other. "Just make yourselves at home.

You know most of the people here-Maia will introduce you to the rest. Good of you to come."

"Good of you to invite us," said Jean, without much conviction. George had already departed towards the bar and she made her way after him, occasionally exchanging greetings with someone she recognized. About three-quarters of those present were perfect strangers, which was the normal state of affairs at one of Rupert's parties.

"Let's explore," she said to George when they had refreshed themselves and waved to everyone they knew. "I want to look at the house."

George, with a barely concealed backward look at Maia Boyce, followed after her.

There was a faraway look in his eyes that Jean didn't like in the least. It was such a nuisance that men were fundamentally polygamous. On the other hand, if they weren't. . . Yes, perhaps it was better this way, after all.

George quickly came back to normal as they investigated the wonders of Rupert's new abode. The house seemed very large for two people, but this was just as well in view of the frequent overloads it would have to handle. There were two storeys, the upper considerably larger so that it overhung and provided shade around the ground floor. The degree of mechanization was considerable, and the kitchen closely resembled the cockpit of an airliner.

"Poor Ruby!" said Jean. "She would have loved this place."

"From what I've heard," replied George, who had no great sympathy for the last Mrs. Boyce, "she's perfectly happy with her Australian boy-friend."

This was such common knowledge that Jean could hardly contradict it, so she changed the subject.

"She's awfully pretty, isn't she?"

George was sufficiently alert to avoid the trap.

"Oh, I suppose so," he replied indifferently. "That is, of course, if one likes brunettes."

"Which you don't, I take it," said Jean sweetly.

"Don't be jealous, dear," chuckled George, stroking her platinum hair. "Let's go and look at the library. What floor do you think that will be on?"

"It must be up here: there's no more room down below. Besides, that fits in with the general design. All the living, eating, sleeping and so-ons relegated to the ground floor. This is the fun and games department-though I still think it's a crazy idea having a swimming-pool upstairs."

"I guess there's some reason for it," said George, opening a door experimentally. "Rupert must have had skilled advice when he built this place.

I'm sure he couldn't have done it himself."

"You're probably right. If he had, there'd have been rooms without doors, and stairways leading nowhere. In fact, I'd be afraid to step inside a house that

Rupert had designed all by himself."

"Here we are," said George, with the pride of a navigator making landfall, "the fabulous Boyce collection in its new home. I wonder just how many of them Rupert has really read."

The library ran the whole width of the house, but was virtually divided into half a dozen small rooms by the great bookcases extending across it. These held, if George remembered correctly, some fifteen thousand volumes-almost everything of importance that had ever been published on the nebulous subjects of magic, psychic research, divining, telepathy, and the whole range of elusive phenomena lumped in the category of parapsysics. It was a very peculiar hobby for anyone to have in this age of reason. Presumably it was simply Rupert's particular form of escapism.

George noticed the smell the moment he entered the room.

It was faint but penetrating, not so much unpleasant as puzzling. Jean had observed it too: her forehead was wrinkled in the effort of identification.

Acetic acid, thought George- that's the nearest thing to it. But it's got something else as well....

The library terminated in a small open space just large enough for a table, two chairs and some cushions. This, presumably, was where Rupert did most of his reading. Someone was reading there now, in an unnaturally dim light.

Jean gave a little gasp and clutched at George's hand. Her reaction was, perhaps excusable. It was one thing to watch a television picture, quite another to meet the reality. George, who was seldom surprised by anything, rose to the occasion at once.

"I hope we haven't disturbed you, sir," he said politely. "We'd no idea that there was anyone here. Rupert never told us...."

The Overlord put down the book, looked at them closely, then commenced reading again. There was nothing impolite about the action, coming as it did from a being who could read, talk, and probably do several other things at the same time. Nevertheless, to human observers the spectacle was disturbingly schizophrenic.

"My name is Rashaverak," said the Overlord amiably. "I'm afraid I'm not being very sociable, but Rupert's library is a difficult place from which to escape."

Jean managed to suppress a nervous giggle. Their unexpected fellow guest was, she noticed, reading at the rate of a page every two seconds. She did not doubt that he was assimilating every word, and she wondered if he could manage to read a book with each eye.

"And then, of course," she thought to herself, "he could go on to learn Braille so he could use his fingers. . . ." The resulting mental picture was too comic to be comfortable, so she tried to suppress it by entering into the conversation.

After all, it was not every day that one had a chance of talking to one of the masters of Earth.

George let her chatter on, after he had made the introductions, hoping that she wouldn't say anything tactless. Like Jean, he had never seen an Overlord in the flesh. Though they mixed socially with government officials, scientists and others who dealt with them in the course of business, he had never heard of one being present at an ordinary private party. One inference was that this party was not as private as it seemed. Rupert's possession of a piece of Overlord equipment also hinted at this, and George began to wonder, in capital letters, just What Was Going On. He would have to tackle Rupert about this when he could get him into a corner.

Since the chairs were too small for him, Rashaverak was sitting on the floor, apparently quite at ease since he had ignored the cushions only a meter away. As a result his head was a mere two meters from the ground, and George had a unique chance of studying extra-terrestrial biology. Unfortunately, as he knew little about terrestrial biology, he was not able to learn much that he did not already know. Only the peculiar, and by no means unpleasant, acid odor was new to him.

He wondered how humans smelt to the Overlords, and hoped for the best.

There was nothing anthropomorphic about Rashaverak.

George could understand the way in which, if seen from a distance by ignorant, terrified savages, the Overlords could be mistaken for winged men, and so could have given rise to the conventional portrait of the Devil. From as close as this, however, some of the illusion vanished. The little horns (what function did they serve? wondered George) were as per specification, but the body was neither like that of a man nor of any animal Earth had ever known. Coming from a totally alien evolutionary tree, the Overlords were neither mammals, insects, nor reptiles. It was not even certain that they were vertebrates: their hard, external armor might well be their only supporting framework.

Rashaverak's wings were folded so that George could not see them clearly, but his tail, looking like a piece of armored hose-pipe, lay neatly curled under him.

The famous barb was not so much an arrowhead as a large, flat diamond. Its purpose, it was now generally accepted, was to give stability in flight, like the tail-feathers of a bird. From scanty facts and suppositions such as these, scientists had concluded that the Overlords came from a world of low gravity and very dense atmosphere.

Rupert's voice suddenly bellowed from a concealed speaker.

"Jean! George! Where the hell are you hiding? Come down and join the party.

People are beginning to talk."

"Perhaps I'd better go too," said Rashaverak, putting his book back on the shelf- He did that quite easily, without moving from the floor, and George noticed for the first time that he had two opposed thumbs, with five fingers between them. I'd hate to do arithmetic, George thought to himself, in a system based on fourteen.

Rashaverak getting to his feet was an impressive sight, and as the Overlord bent to avoid the ceiling it became obvious that, even if they were anxious to mix with human beings, the practical difficulties would be considerable.

Several more cargoes of guests had arrived in the last half hour, and the room was now quite crowded. Rashaverak's arrival made matters a good deal worse, because everyone in the adjacent rooms came running in to see him. Rupert was obviously very pleased with the sensation. Jean and George were much less gratified, as no-one took any notice of them. Indeed, few people could see them, because they were standing behind the Overlord.

"Come over here, Rashy, and meet some of the folks," shouted Rupert. "Sit on the divan-then you can stop scraping the ceiling."

Rashaverak, his tail draped over his shoulder, moved across the room like an icebreaker worrying its way through a pack. As he sat down beside Rupert, the room seemed to become much larger again and George let out a sigh of relief.

"It gave me claustrophobia when he was standing. I wonder how Rupert got hold of him-this looks like being an interesting party."

"Fancy Rupert addressing him like that, in public too. But he didn't seem to mind. It's all very peculiar."

"I bet you he did mind. The trouble with Rupert is that he likes to show off and he's got no tact. And that reminds me- some of those questions you asked!"

"Such as?"

"Well-'How long have you been here?' 'How do you get on with Supervisor Karellen?' 'Do you like it on Earth?'

Really, darling! You just don't talk to Overlords that way!"

"I don't see why not. It is about time someone did."

Before the discussion could get acrimonious, they were accosted by the Shoenbergers and fission rapidly occurred. The girls went off in one direction to discuss Mrs. Boyce: the men went in another and did exactly the same thing, though from a different viewpoint. Benny Shoenberger, who was one of George's oldest friends, had a good deal of information on the subject.

"For heaven's sake don't tell anyone," he said. "Ruth doesn't know this, but I introduced her to Rupert."

"I think," George remarked enviously, "that she's much too good for Rupert.

However, it can't possibly last. She'll soon get fed up with him." This thought seemed to cheer him considerably.

"Don't you believe it! Besides being a beauty, she's a really nice person. It's high time someone took charge of Rupert, and she's just the girl to do it."

Both Rupert and Maia were now sitting beside Rashaverak, receiving their guests in state.

Rupert's parties seldom had any focal point, but usually consisted of half a dozen independent groups intent on their own affairs. This time, however, the whole gathering was polarized towards a center of attraction.

George felt rather sorry for Maia. This should have been her day, but Rashaverak had partially eclipsed her.

"Look," said George, nibbling at a sandwich. "How the devil has Rupert got hold of an Overlord? I've never heard of such a thing-but he seems to take it for granted. He never even mentioned it when he invited us."

Benny thudded.

"Just another of his little surprises. You'd better ask him about it. But this isn't the first time it's happened, after all. Karellen's been to parties at the White House and Buckingham Palace, and-"

"Heck, that's different! Rupert's a perfectly ordinary citizen."

"And maybe Rashaverak's a very minor Overlord. But you'd better ask them."

"I will," said George, "just as soon as I can get Rupert by himself."

"Then you'll have to wait a long time."

Benny was right, but as the party was now warming up it was easy to be patient. The slight paralysis which the appearance of Rashaverak had cast over the assembly had now vanished. There was still a small group around the Overlord, but elsewhere the usual fragmentation had taken place and everyone was behaving quite naturally. Sullivan, for example, was describing his latest submarine research to an interested audience.

"We're not sure, yet," he said, "just how big they grow.

There's a canyon not far from our base where a real giant lives.

I've caught a glimpse of it once, and I'd say that its tentacle-spread is the best part of thirty meters. I'm going in after it next week. Anyone like something really novel in the way of pets?"

There was a squeal of horror from one of the women.

"Ugh! It gives me the creeps just to think about it! You must be terribly brave."

Sullivan looked quite surprised.

"I'd never thought about that," he said. "Of course, I take suitable precautions, but I've never been in any real danger.

The squids know that they can't eat me, and as long as I don't go too close they never take the slightest notice. Most sea-creatures leave you alone unless you interfere with them."

"But surely," someone asked, "sooner or later you're bound to run up against one that thinks you're edible?"

"Oh," replied Sullivan airily, "that happens now and then.

I try not to hurt them, because after all I'm anxious to make friends. So I just turn the jets full on and it usually takes only a minute or two to pull free. If I'm too busy to stop and play, I may tidy them up with a couple of hundred volts. That settles the matter and they never bother me again."

You certainly met some interesting people at Rupert's parties, thought George as he moved on to the next group.

Rupert's literary tastes might be specialized, but his friendships were wide-ranging.

Without bothering to turn his head, George could see a famous film producer, a minor poet, a mathematician, two actors, an atomic power engineer, a game warden, the editor of a weekly news magazine, a statistician from the World Bank, a violin virtuoso, a professor of anthropology and an astrophysicist. There were no other representatives of George's own profession, television studio design-which was a good thing, as he wanted to get away from shop. He loved his work: indeed, in this age, for the first time in human history, no-one worked at tasks they did not like. But George was content to mentally lock the studio doors behind him at the end of the day.

He finally trapped Rupert in the kitchen, experimenting with drinks. It seemed

A pity to bring him back to earth when he had such a far-away look in his eye, but

George could be ruthless when necessary.

"Look here, Rupert," he began, perching himself on the nearest table. "I think you owe us all some explanation."

"Um," said Rupert thoughtfully, rolling his tongue round his mouth. "Just a teeny bit too much gin, I'm afraid."

"Don't hedge, and don't pretend you're not still sober, because I know perfectly well you are.

Where does your Overlord friend come from, and what's he doing here?"

"Didn't I tell you?" said Rupert. "I thought I'd explained it to everybody. You couldn't have been around-of course, you were hiding up in the library." He thudded in a manner which George found offensive. "It's the library, you know, that brought Rashy here."

"How extraordinary!"

"Why?"

George paused, realizing that this would require tact. Rupert was very proud of his peculiar collection.

"Er-well, when you consider what the Overlords know about science, I should hardly think they'd be interested in psychic phenomena and all that sort of nonsense."

"Nonsense or not," replied Rupert, "they're interested in human psychology, and I've got some books that can teach them a lot. Just before I moved here some Deputy Under-Overlord, or Over-Underlord, got in touch with me and asked if they could borrow about fifty of my rarest volumes. One of the keepers of the British Museum Library had put him on to me, it seemed. Of course, you can guess what I said."

"I can't imagine."

"Well, I replied very politely that it had taken me twenty years to get my library together. They were welcome to study my books, but they'd darn well have to read them here. So Rashy came along and has been absorbing about twenty volumes a day. I'd love to know what he makes of them."

George thought this over, then shrugged his shoulders in disgust.

"Frankly," he said, "my opinion of the Overlords goes down. I thought they had better things to do with their time."

"You're an incorrigible materialist, aren't you? I don't think Jean will agree at all. But even from your oh-so-practical viewpoint, it-still makes sense.

Surely you'd study the superstitions of any primitive race you were having dealings with!"

"I suppose so," said George, not quite convinced. The table-top was feeling hard, so he rose to his feet. Rupert had now mixed the drinks to his satisfaction and was heading back to his guests. Querulous voices could already be heard demanding his presence.

"Hey!" protested George, "just before you disappear there's one other question.

How did you get hold of that two-way television gadget you tried to frighten us with?"

"Just a bit of bargaining. I pointed out how valuable it would be for a job like mine, and Rashy passed the suggestion on to the right quarters."

"Forgive me for being so obtuse, but what is your new job? I suppose, of course, it's something to do with animals."

"That's right. I'm a super-vet. My practice covers about ten thousand square kilometers of jungle, and as my patients won't come to me I've got to look for them."

"Rather a full-time job."

"Oh, of course it isn't practical to bother about the small fry. Just lions, elephants, rhinos, and so on. Every morning I set the controls for a height of a hundred meters, sit down in front of the screen and go cruising over the countryside. When I find anyone in trouble I climb into my flyer and hope my bedside manner will work. Sometimes it's a bit tricky. Lions and such-like are easy-but trying to puncture a rhino from the air with an anesthetic dart is the devil of a job."

"Rupert!" yelled someone from the next room.

"Now look what you've done! You've made me forget my guests. There-you take that tray. Those are the ones with vermouth-I don't want to get them mixed up."

It was just before sunset that George found his way up to the roof. For a number of excellent reasons he had a slight headache and felt like escaping from the noise and confusion downstairs. Jean, who was a much better dancer than he was, still seemed to be enjoying herself hugely and refused to leave. This annoyed

George, who was beginning to feel alcoholically amorous, and he decided to have a quiet sulk beneath the stars.

One reached the roof by taking the escalator to the first floor and then climbing the spiral stairway round the intake of the air-conditioning plant. This led, through a hatchway, out on to the wide, flat roof. Rupert's flyer was parked at one end: the center area was a garden-already showing signs of running wild-and the rest was simply an observation platform with a few deckchairs placed on it. George flopped into one of these and regarded his surroundings with an imperial eye. He felt very much monarch of all he surveyed.

It was, to put it mildly, quite a view. Rupert's house had been built on the edge of a great basin, which sloped downwards towards the east into swamplands and lakes five kilo-meters away. Westwards the land was flat and the jungle came almost to Rupert's back-door. But beyond the jungle, at a distance that must have been at least fifty kilometers, a line of mountains ran like a great wall out of sight to north and south.

Their summits were streaked with snow, and the clouds above them were turning to fire as the sun descended on the last few minutes of its daily journey. As he looked at those remote ramparts, George felt awed into a sudden sobriety.

The stars that sprang out in such indecent haste the moment the sun had set were completely strange to him. He looked for the Southern Cross, but without success. Though he knew very little of astronomy, and could recognize only a few constellations, the absence of familiar friends was disturbing. So were the noises drifting in from the jungle, uncomfortably close at hand. Enough of this fresh air, thought George. I'll go back to the party before a vampire bat, or something equally pleasant, comes flying up to investigate. He was just starting to walk back when another guest emerged from the hatchway.

It was now so dark that George could not see who it was, so he called out:

"Hello, there. Have you had enough of it too?" His invisible companion laughed.

"Rupert's starting to show some of his movies. I've seen them all before."

"Have a cigarette," said George.

"Thanks."

By the flame of the lighter-George was fond of such antiques-he could now recognize his fellow-guest, a strikingly handsome young negro whose name George had been told but had immediately forgotten, like those of the twenty other complete strangers at the party. However, there seemed something familiar about him, and suddenly George guessed the truth.

"I don't think we've really met," he said, "but aren't you Rupert's new brother-in-law?"

"That's right. I'm Jan Rodricks. Everyone says that Mala and I look rather alike."

George wondered whether to commiserate with Jan for his newly acquired relative.

He decided to let the poor fellow find out for himself; after all, it was just possible that Rupert would settle down this time.

"I'm George Greggson. This is the first time you've been to one of Rupert's famous parties?"

"Yes. You certainly meet a lot of new people this way."

"And not only humans," added George. "This is the first chance I've had of meeting an Overlord socially."

The other hesitated for a moment before replying, and George wondered what sensitive spot he had struck. But the answer revealed nothing.

"I've never seen one before, either-except of course on TV."

There the conversation languished, and after a moment George realized that Jan wanted to be alone. It was getting cold, anyway, so he took his leave and rejoined the party.

The jungle was quiet now; as Jan leaned against the curving wall of the air intake, the only sound he could hear was the faint murmur of the house as it breathed through its mechanical lungs. He felt very much alone, which was the way he wanted to be. He also felt highly frustrated-and that was something he had no desire to be at all.