

Chapter 8

No Utopia can ever give satisfaction to everyone, all the time.

As their material conditions improve, men raise their sights and become discontented with powers and possessions that once would have seemed beyond their wildest dreams. And even when the external world has granted all it can, there still remain the searchings of the mind and the longings of the heart. Jan Rodricks, though he seldom appreciated his luck, would have been even more discontented in an earlier age. A century before, his color would have been a tremendous, perhaps an overwhelming, handicap. Today, it meant nothing. The inevitable- reaction that had given early twenty-first-century Negroes a slight sense of superiority had already passed away.

The convenient word "nigger" was no longer taboo in polite society, but was used without embarrassment by everyone. It had no more emotional content than such labels as republican or Methodist, conservative or liberal.

Jan's father had been a charming but somewhat feckless Scot who had made a considerable name for himself as a professional magician. His death at the early age of forty-five had been aggravated by the excessive consumption of his country's most famous product. Though Jan had never seen his father drunk, he was not sure that he had ever seen him sober.

Mrs. Rodricks, still very much alive, lectured in advanced probability theory at Edinburgh University. It was typical of the extreme mobility of twenty-first century Man that Mrs. Rodricks, who was coal black, had been born in Scotland, whereas her expatriate and blond husband had spent almost all his life in Haiti. Maia and Jan had never had a single home, but had oscillated between their parents' families like two small shuttlecocks. The treatment had been good fun, but had not helped to correct the instability they had both inherited from their father.

At twenty-seven, Jan still had several years of college life ahead of him before he needed to think seriously about his career. He had taken his bachelors' degrees without any difficulty, following a syllabus that would have seemed very strange a century before. His main subjects had been mathematics and physics, but as subsidiaries he had taken philosophy and musical appreciation. Even by the high standards of the time he was a first-rate amateur pianist.

In three years he would take his doctorate in engineering physics, with astronomy as a second subject. This would involve fairly hard work, but Jan rather welcomed that. He was studying at what was perhaps the most beautifully situated place of higher education in the world-the University of Cape Town, nestling at the foot of Table Mountain.

He had no material worries, yet he was discontented and saw no cure for his condition. To make matters worse, Maia's own happiness-though he did not grudge it in the least-had underlined the chief cause of his own trouble. For Jan was still suffering from the romantic illusion-the cause of so much misery and so much poetry-that every man has only one real love in his life. At an unusually late age, he had lost his heart for the first time, to a lady more renowned for beauty than constancy. Rosita Tsien claimed, with perfect truth, to have the blood of Manchu emperors flowing in her veins. She still possessed many subjects, including most of the Faculty of Science at Cape. Jan had been taken prisoner by her delicate, flower-like beauty, and the affair had proceeded far enough to make its termination all the more galling. He could not imagine what had gone wrong....

He would get over it, of course. Other men had survived similar catastrophes without irreparable damage, had even reached the stage when they could say, "I'm sure I could never have been really serious about a woman like that!" But such detachment still lay far in the future, and at the moment Jan was very much at odds with life.

His other grievance was less easily remedied, for it concerned the impact of the Overlords upon his own ambitions. Jan was a romantic not only in heart but in mind. Like so many other young men since the conquest of the air had been assured, he had let his dreams and his imagination roam the unexplored seas of space.

A century before, Man had set foot upon the ladder that could lead him to the stars. At that very moment-could it have been coincidence?-the door to the planets had been slammed in his face. The Overlords had imposed few positive bans on any form of human activity (the conduct of war was perhaps the major exception), but research into space flight had virtually ceased. The challenge presented by the science of the Overlords was too great. For the moment, at least, Man had lost heart and had turned to other fields of activity. There was no point in developing rockets when the Overlords had infinitely superior means of propulsion, based on principles of which they had never given any hint. A few hundred men had visited the moon, for the purpose of establishing a lunar observatory. They had travelled as passengers in a small vessel loaned by the Overlords-and driven by rockets. It was obvious that little could be learned from a study of this primitive vehicle, even if its owners handed it over without reservation to inquisitive terrestrial scientists.

Man was, therefore, still a prisoner on his own planet. It was a much fairer, but a much smaller, planet than it had been a century before. When the Overlords had abolished war and hunger and disease, they had also abolished adventure. The rising moon was beginning to paint the eastern sky with a pale milky glow. Up there, Jan knew, was the main base of the Overlords, lying within the ramparts of Pluto. Though the supply ships must have been coming and going

for more than seventy years, it was only in Jan's lifetime that all concealment had been dropped and they had made their departure in clear sight of Earth. In the two-hundred-inch telescope, the shadows of the great ships could be dearly seen when the morning or evening sun cast them for miles across the lunar plains. Since everything that the Overlords did was of immense interest to mankind, a careful watch was kept of their comings and goings, and the pattern of their behavior (though not the reason for it) was beginning to emerge. One of those great shadows had vanished a few hours ago. That meant, Jan knew, that somewhere off the moon an Overlord ship was lying in space, carrying out whatever routine was necessary before it began its journey to its distant, unknown home.

He had never seen one of those returning ships launch itself towards the stars. If conditions were good the sight was visible over half the world, but Jan had always been unlucky. One could never tell exactly when the take-off would be and the Overlords did not advertise the fact. He decided he would wait another ten minutes, then rejoin the party.

What was that? Only a meteor sliding down through Eridanus. Jan relaxed, discovered his cigarette had gone out, and lit another. He was half-way through it when, half a million kilometers away, the Stardrive went on. Up from the heart of the spreading moon-glow a tiny spark began to climb towards the zenith. At first its movement was so slow that it could hardly be perceived, but second by second it was gaining speed. As it climbed it increased in brilliance, then suddenly faded from sight. A moment later it had reappeared, gaining speed and brightness. Waxing and waning with a peculiar rhythm, it ascended ever more swiftly into the sky, drawing a fluctuating line of light across the stars. Even if one did not know its real distance, the impression of speed was breathtaking: when one knew that the departing ship was somewhere beyond the moon, the mind reeled at the speeds and energies involved.

It was an unimportant by-product of those energies, Jan knew, what he was seeing now. The ship itself was invisible, already far ahead of that ascending light.

As a high-flying jet may leave a vapor trail behind it, so the outward-bound vessel of the Overlords left its own peculiar wake. The generally accepted theory-and there seemed little doubt of its truth- was that the immense accelerations of the Stardrive caused a local distortion of space. What Jan was seeing, he knew, was nothing less than the light of distant stars, collected and focused into his eye wherever conditions were favorable along the track of the ship. It was a visible proof of relativity-the bending of light in the presence of a colossal gravitational field. Now the end of that vast, pencil-shaped lens seemed to be moving more slowly, but that was only due to perspective. In reality the ship was still gaining speed: its path was merely being foreshortened as it hurled itself outwards to the stars. There would be many telescopes following it, Jan knew, as Earth's

scientists tried to uncover the secrets of the Drive. Dozens of papers had already been published on the subject; no doubt the Overlords had read them with the greatest interest.

The phantom light was beginning to wane. Now it was a fading streak, pointing to the heart of the constellation Carina, as Jan had known that it would. The home of the Overlords was somewhere out there, but it might circle any one of a thousand stars in that sector of space. There was no way of telling its distance from the Solar System.

It was all over. Though the ship had scarcely begun its Journey, there was nothing more that human eyes could see. But in Jan's mind the memory of that shining path still burned, a beacon that would never fade as long as he possessed ambition and desire.

The party was over. Almost all the guests had climbed back into the sky and were now scattering to the four corners of the globe. There were, however, a few exceptions.

One was Norman Dodsworth, the poet, who had got unpleasantly drunk but had been sensible enough to pass out before any violent action proved necessary. He had been deposited, not very gently, on the lawn, where it was hoped that a hyena would give him a rude awakening. For all practical purposes he could, therefore, be regarded as absent.

The other remaining guests were George and Jean. This was not George's idea at all: he wanted to go home. He disapproved of the friendship between Rupert and Jean, though not for the usual reason. George prided himself on being a practical, level-headed character, and regarded the interest which drew Jean and Rupert together as being not only childish in this age of science, but more than a little unhealthy. That anyone should still place the slightest credence in the supernatural seemed extraordinary to him, and finding Rashaverak here had shaken his faith in the Overlords.

It was now obvious that Rupert had been plotting some surprise, probably with Jean's connivance. George resigned himself gloomily to whatever nonsense was coming.

"I tried all sorts of things before I settled on this," said Rupert proudly.

"The big problem is to reduce friction so that you get complete freedom of movement. The old-fashioned polished table and tumbler set-up isn't bad, but it's been used for centuries now and I was sure that modern science could do better. And here's the result. Draw up your chairs- are you quite sure you don't want to join, Rasy?"

The Overlord seemed to hesitate for a fraction of a second. Then he shook his head. (Had they learned that habit on Earth? George wondered.)

"No, thank you," he replied. "I would prefer to observe. Some other time, perhaps."

"Very well-there's plenty of time to change your mind later."

Oh, is there? thought George, looking gloomily at his watch.

Rupert had shepherded his friends round a small but massive table, perfectly circular in shape. It had a flat plastic top which he lifted off to reveal a glittering sea of closely packed ball-bearings. They were prevented from escaping by the table's slightly raised rim, and George found it quite impossible to imagine their purpose. The hundreds of reflected points of light formed a fascinating and hypnotic pattern, and he felt himself becoming slightly dizzy.

As they drew up their chairs, Rupert reached under the table and brought forth a disc some ten centimeters in diameter, which he placed on the surface of the ball-bearings.

"There you are," he said. "You put your fingers on this, and it moves around with no resistance at all."

George eyed the device with profound distrust. He noted that the letters of the alphabet were placed at regular intervals - though in no particular order-round the circumference of the table. In addition there were the numbers one to nine, scattered at random among the letters, and two cards bearing the words "YES" and "NO". These were on opposite sides of the table.

"It looks like a lot of mumbo-jumbo to me," he muttered. "I'm surprised that anyone takes it seriously in this age." He felt a little better after delivering this mild protest, which was aimed at Jean quite as much as Rupert. Rupert didn't pretend to have more than a detached scientific interest in these phenomena. He was open-minded, but not credulous. Jean, on the other hand-well, George was sometimes a little worried about her. She really seemed to think that there was something in this business of telepathy and second-sight. Not until he had made his remark did George realize that it also implied a criticism of Rashaverak. He glanced nervously round but the Overlord showed no reaction. Which, of course, proved absolutely nothing at all.

Everyone had now taken up their positions. Going in a clockwise direction round the table were Rupert, Maia, Jan, Jean, George, and Benny Shoenberger. Ruth Shoenberger was sitting outside the circle with a notebook. She apparently had some objection to taking part in the proceedings, which had caused Benny to snake obscurely sarcastic remarks about people who still took the Talmud seriously. However, she seemed perfectly willing to act as a recorder.

"Now listen," began Rupert, "for the benefit of skeptics like George, let's get this straight. Whether or not there's anything supernatural about this, it works.

Personally, I think there's a purely mechanical explanation. When we put our

hands on the disc, even though we may try to avoid influencing its movements, our subconscious starts playing tricks.

I've analyzed lots of these séances, and I've never got answers that someone in the group mightn't have known or guessed- though sometimes they weren't aware of the fact. However, I'd like to carry out the experiment in these rather-ah-peculiar circumstances."

The Peculiar Circumstance sat watching them silently, but doubtless not with indifference. George wondered just what Rashaverak thought of these antics. Were his reactions those of an anthropologist watching some primitive religious rite?

The whole set-up was really quite fantastic, and George felt as big a fool as he had ever done in his life.

If the others felt equally foolish, they concealed their emotions. Only Jean looked flushed and excited, though that might have been the drinks.

"All set?" asked Rupert. "Very well." He paused impressively; then, addressing no-one in particular, he called out: "Is there anybody there?"

George could feel the plate beneath his fingers tremble slightly. That was not surprising, considering the pressure being exerted upon it by the six people in the circle. It slithered around in a small figure-eight, then came to rest back at the center.

"Is there anybody there?" repeated Rupert. In a more conversational tone of voice he added, "It's often ten or fifteen minutes before we get started. But sometimes-"

"Hush!" breathed Jean.

The plate was moving. It began to swing in a wide arc between the cards labeled "YES" and "NO". With some difficulty, George suppressed a giggle. Just what would it prove, he wondered, if the answer was "NO"? He remembered the old joke:

"There's nobody here but us chickens, Massa. . . ."

But the answer was "YES". The plate came swiftly back to the center of the table. Somehow it now seemed alive, waiting for the next question. Despite himself, George began to be impressed.

"Who are you?" asked Rupert.

There was no hesitation now as the letters were spelled out. The plate darted across the table like a sentient thing, moving so swiftly that George sometimes found it hard to keep his fingers in contact.

He could swear that he was not contributing to its motion. Glancing quickly round the table, he could see nothing suspicious in the faces of his friends.

They seemed as intent, and as expectant, as he himself~

"I AM ALL" spelled the plate, and returned to its point of equilibrium.

"I am all," repeated Rupert. "That's a typical reply. Evasive, yet stimulating. It probably means that there's nothing here except our combined minds." He

paused for a moment, obviously deciding upon his next question. Then he addressed the air once more.

"Have you a message for anyone here?"

"No," replied the plate promptly.

Rupert looked around the table.

"It's up to us; sometimes it volunteers information, but this time we'll have to ask definite questions. Anyone like to start?"

"Will it rain tomorrow?" said George jestingly.

At once the plate began to swing back and forth in the YESNO line. -

"That's a silly question," reproved Rupert. "It's bound to be raining somewhere and to be dry somewhere else. Don't ask questions that have ambiguous answers."

George felt appropriately squashed. He decided to let someone else have the next turn.

"What is my favorite color?" asked Maia.

"BLUE," came the prompt reply.

"That's quite correct."

"But it doesn't prove anything. At least three people here knew that," George pointed out.

"What's Ruth's favorite color?" asked Benny.

"RED."

"Is that right, Ruth?"

The recorder looked up from her notebook.

"Yes, it is. But Benny knows that, and he's in the circle."

"I didn't know," retorted Benny.

"You darn well ought to-I've told you enough times."

"Subconscious memory," murmured Rupert. "That often happens. But can we have some more intelligent questions, please? Now that this has started so well, I don't want it to peter out."

Curiously enough, the very triviality of the phenomenon was beginning to impress George. He was sure that there was no supernormal explanation; as Rupert had said, the plate was simply responding to their unconscious muscular movements. But this fact in itself was surprising and impressive: he would never have believed that such precise, swift replies could have been obtained. Once he tried to see if he could influence the board by making it spell out his own name. He got the "G", but that was all: the rest was nonsense. It was virtually impossible, he decided, for one person to take control without the remainder of the circle knowing it.

After half an hour, Ruth had taken down more than a dozen messages, some of them quite long ones. There were occasional spelling mistakes and curiosities of grammar, but they were few. Whatever the explanation, George was now convinced that he was not contributing consciously to the results. Several times, as a word was being spelt out, he had anticipated the next letter and hence the

meaning of the message. And on each occasion the plate had gone in a quite unexpected direction and spelt something totally different. Sometimes, indeed -since there was no pause to indicate the end of one word and the beginning of the next-the entire message was meaningless until it was complete and Ruth had read it back.

The whole experience gave George an uncanny impression of being in contact with some purposeful, independent mind. And yet there was no conclusive proof one way or the other. The replies were so trivial, so ambiguous. What, for example, could one make of:
BELIEVEINMANNATURRISWITHYOU.

Yet sometimes there were suggestions of profound, even disturbing truths:
RIMEMBERMANISNOTALONENEARMANISCOUNTRYOFOTHERS.

But of course everyone knew that-though could one be sure that the message merely referred to the Overlords?

George was growing very sleepy. It was high time, he thought drowsily, that they headed for home. This was all very intriguing, but it wasn't getting them anywhere and you could have too much of a good thing. He glanced around the table.

Benny looked as if he might be feeling the same way, Maia and Rupert both appeared slightly glazed, and Jean-well, she had been taking it too seriously all along. Her expression worried George; it was almost as if she were afraid to stop-yet afraid to go on.

That left only Jan. George wondered what he thought of his brother-in-law's eccentricities. The young engineer had asked no questions, shown no surprise at any of the answers. He seemed to be studying the movement of the plate as if it was just another scientific phenomenon.

Rupert roused himself from the lethargy into which he appeared to have fallen. "Let's have one more question," he said, "then we'll call it a day. What about you, Jan? You've not asked anything."

Surprisingly, Jan never hesitated. It was as if he had made his choice a long time ago and had been waiting for the opportunity. He glanced once at the impassive bulk of Rashaverak, then called out in a clear, steady voice:
"Which star is the Overlord's sun?"

Rupert checked a whistle of surprise. Maia and Benny showed no reaction at all. Jean had closed her eyes and seemed to be asleep. Rashaverak had leaned forward so that he could look down into the circle over Rupert's shoulder. And the plate began to move.

When it came to rest again, there was a brief pause: then Ruth asked, in a puzzled voice:

"What does NGS 549672 mean?"

She got no reply, for at the same moment George called out anxiously:

"Give me a hand with Jean. I'm afraid she's fainted."

Chapter 9

"THIS man Boyce," said Karellen. "Tell me all about him." The Supervisor did not use those actual words, of course, and the thoughts he really expressed were far more subtle. A human listener would have heard a short burst of rapidly modulated sound, not unlike a high speed Morse sender in action. Though many samples of Overlord language had been recorded, they all defied analysis because of their extreme complexity. The speed of transmission made it certain that no Interpreter, even if he had mastered the elements of the language, could ever keep up with the Overlords in their normal conversation.

The Supervisor for Earth stood with his back to Rashaverak, staring out across the multicolored gulf of the Grand Canyon.

Ten kilometers away, yet scarcely veiled by distance, the terraced walls were catching the full force of the sun. Hundreds of meters down the shadowed slope at whose brim Karellen stood, a mule-train was slowly winding its way into the valley's depths. It was strange, Karellen thought, that so many human beings still seized every opportunity for primitive behavior. They could reach the bottom of the canyon in a fraction of the time, and in far greater comfort, if they chose. Yet they preferred to be jolted along tracks which were probably as unsafe as they looked. Karellen made an imperceptible gesture with his hand. The great panorama faded from view, leaving only a shadowy blankness of indeterminable depth. The realities of his office and of his position crowded in upon the Supervisor once more.

"Rupert Boyce is a somewhat curious character," Rashaverak answered.

"Professionally, he's in charge of animal welfare over an important section of the Main African Reservation. He's quite efficient, and interested in his work.

Because he has to keep watch over several thousand square kilometers, he has one of the fifteen panoramic viewers we've so far issued on loan-with the usual safeguards, of course. It is, incidentally, the only one with full projection facilities. He was able to make a good case for these, so we let him have them."

"What was his argument?"

"He wanted to appear to various wild animals so that they could get used to seeing him, and so wouldn't attack when he was physically present. The theory has worked out quite well with animals that rely on sight rather than smell though he'll probably get killed eventually. And, of course, there was another reason why we let him have the apparatus."

"It made him more co-operative?"

"Precisely. I originally contacted him because he has one of the world's finest libraries of books on parapsychology and allied subjects. He politely but firmly refused to lend any of them, so there was nothing to do but to let him. I've now read about half his library. It has been a considerable ordeal."

"That I can well believe," said Karellen dryly. "Have you discovered anything among all the rubbish?"

"Yes-eleven clear cases of partial breakthrough and twenty-seven probables. The material is so selective, however, that one cannot use it for sampling purposes.

And the evidence is hopelessly confused with mysticism-perhaps the prime aberration of the human mind."

"And what is Boyce's attitude to all this?"

"He pretends to be open-minded and skeptical, but it's clear that he would never have spent so much time and effort in this field unless he had some subconscious faith. I challenged him on this and he admitted that I was probably right.

He would like to find some convincing proof. That is why he is always carrying out these experiments, even though he pretends that they are only games."

"You are sure he doesn't suspect that your interest is more than academic?"

"Quite sure. In many ways Boyce is remarkably obtuse and simple-minded. That makes his attempts to do research in this, of all fields, rather pathetic. There is no need to take any special action regarding him."

"I see. And what about the girl who fainted?"

"This is the most exciting feature of the entire affair. Jean Morrel was, almost certainly, the channel through which the information came. But she is twenty-six-far too old to be a prime contact herself, judging by all our previous experience. It must, therefore, be someone closely linked to her. The conclusion is obvious. We cannot have many more years to wait. We must transfer her to Category Purple: she may be the most important human being alive."

"I will do that. And what of the young man who asked the question? Was it random curiosity, or did he have some other motive?"

"It was chance that brought him there-his sister has just married Rupert Boyce. He had never met any of the other guests before. I am sure the question was unpremeditated, being inspired by the unusual conditions-and probably by my presence. Given these factors, it is hardly surprising that he acted in the way he did. His great interest is astronautics: he is secretary of the space-travel group at Cape Town University, and obviously intends to make this field his life study."

"His career should be interesting. Meanwhile, what action do you think he will take, and what shall we do about him?"

"He will undoubtedly make some checks as soon as he can.

But there is no way in which he can prove the accuracy of his information, and because of its peculiar origin he is hardly likely to publish it. Even if he does, will it affect matters in the slightest?"

"I will have both situations evaluated," Karellen replied. "Though it is part of our Directive not to reveal our base, there is no way in which the information could be used against us."

"I agree. Rodricks will have some information which is of doubtful truth, and of no practical value."

"So it would seem," said Karellen. "But let us not be too certain. Human beings are remarkably ingenious, and often very persistent. It is never safe to underrate them, and it will be interesting to follow Mr. Rodricks' career. I must think about this further."

Rupert Boyce never really got to the bottom of it. When his guests had departed, rather less boisterously than usual, he had thoughtfully rolled the table back into its corner. The mild alcoholic fog prevented any profound analysis of what had happened, and even the actual facts were already slightly blurred. He had a vague idea that something of great but elusive importance had happened, and wondered if he should discuss it with Rashaverak. On second thought, he decided it might be tactless. After all, his brother-in-law had caused the trouble, and Rupert felt vaguely annoyed with young Jan. But was it Jan's fault? Was it anybody's fault? Rather guiltily, Rupert remembered that it had been his experiment. He decided, fairly successfully, to forget the whole business. Perhaps he might have done something if the last page of Ruth's notebook could have been found, but it had vanished in the confusion. Jan always feigned innocence-and, well, one could hardly accuse Rashaverak. And no-one could ever remember exactly what had been spelled out, except that it didn't seem to make any sense.

The person most immediately affected had been George Greggson. He could never forget his feeling of terror as Jean latched into his arms. Her sudden helplessness transformed her in that moment from an amusing companion to an object of tenderness and affection. Women had fainted-not always without forethought since time immemorial, and men had invariably responded in the desired way.

Jean's collapse was completely spontaneous, but it could not have been better planned. In that instant, as he realized later, George came to one of the most important decisions of his life. Jean was definitely the girl who mattered, despite her queer ideas and queerer friends. He had no intention of totally abandoning Naomi or Joy or Elsa or-what was her name?-Denise; but the time had come for something more permanent. He had no doubt that Jean would agree with him, for her feelings had been quite obvious from the start.

Behind his decision there was another factor of which, he was unaware. Tonight's experience had weakened his con-tempt and skepticism for Jean's peculiar interests. He would never recognize the fact, but it was so-and it had removed the last barrier between them.

He looked at Jean as she lay, pale but composed, in the reclining chair of the flyer. There was darkness below, stars above. George had no idea, to within a thousand kilometers, where they might be-nor did he care. That was the business of the robot that was guiding them homewards and would land them in, so the control board announced, fifty-seven minutes from now.

Jean smiled back at him and gently dislodged her hand from his.

"Just let me restore the circulation," she pleaded, rubbing her fingers. "I wish you'd believe me when I tell you I'm perfectly all right now."

"Then what do you think happened? Surely you remember something?"

"No-it's just a complete blank. I heard Jan ask his question-and then you were all making a fuss over me. I'm sure it was some kind of trance. After all-"

She paused, then decided not to tell George that this sort of thing had happened before. She knew how he felt about these matters, and had no desire to upset him further-and perhaps scare him away completely.

"After all-what?" asked George.

"Oh, nothing. I wonder what that Overlord thought about the whole business. We probably gave him more material than he bargained for."

Jean shivered slightly, and her eyes clouded.

"I'm afraid of the Overlords, George. Oh, I don't think they're evil, or anything foolish like that. I'm sure they mean well and are doing what they think is best for us. I wonder just what their plans really are."

George shifted uncomfortably.

"Men have been wondering that ever since they came to Earth," he said. "They'll tell us when we're ready for it-and, frankly, I'm not inquisitive. Besides, I've got more important things to bother about." He turned towards Jean and grasped her hands.

"What about going to Archives tomorrow and signing a contract for-let's say-five years?"

Jean looked at him steadfastly, and decided that, on the whole, she liked what she saw.

"Make it ten," she said.

Jan bided his time. There was no hurry, and he wanted to think. It was almost as if he feared to make any checks, lest the fantastic hope that had come into his mind be too swiftly destroyed. While he was still uncertain, he could at least dream.

Moreover, to take any further action he would have to see the Observatory librarian. She knew him and his interests too well, and would certainly be

intrigued by his request. Probably it would make no difference, but Jan was determined to leave nothing to chance. There would be a better opportunity in a week. He was being super-cautious, he knew, but that added a schoolboy zest to the enterprise. Jan also feared ridicule quite as much as anything that the Overlords might conceivably do to thwart him. If he was embarking on a wild goose chase, no-one else would ever know.

He had a perfectly good reason for going to London: the arrangements had been made weeks ago. Though he was too young and too unqualified to be a delegate, he was one of the three students who had managed to attach themselves to the official party going to the meeting of the International Astronomical Union. The vacancies had been there, and it seemed a pity to waste the opportunity, as he had not visited London since his childhood. He knew that very few of the dozens of papers to be delivered to the I.A.U. would be of the slightest interest to turn, even if he could understand them. Like a delegate to any scientific congress, he would attend the lectures that looked promising, and spend the rest of the time talking with fellow enthusiasts, or simply sightseeing.

London had changed enormously in the last fifty years. It now contained scarcely two million people, and a hundred times as many machines. It was no longer a great port, for with every country producing almost all its needs, the entire pattern of world trade had been altered. There were some goods that certain countries still made best, but they went directly by air to their destinations. The trade routes that had once converged on the great harbors, and later on the great airports, had finally dispersed into an intricate web-work covering the whole world with no major nodal points.

Yet some things had not altered. The city was still a center of administration, of art, of learning. In these matters, none of the continental capitals could rival it-not even Paris, despite many claims to the contrary. A Londoner from a century before could still have found his way around, at least at the city's center, with no difficulty. There were new bridges over the Thames, but in the old places. The great, grimy railway stations had gone-banished to the suburbs. But the Houses of Parliament were unchanged: Nelson's solitary eye still stared down Whitehall: the dome of St. Paul's still stood above Ludgate Hill, though now there were taller buildings to challenge its pre-eminence. And the guard still marched in front of Buckingham Palace. All these things, thought Jan, could wait. It was vacation time, and he was lodged, with his two fellow students, in one of the University hostels. Bloomsbury also had not changed its character in the last century: it was still an island of hotels and boarding-houses, though they no longer jostled each other so closely, or formed such endless, identical rows of soot-coated brick. It was not until the second day of the Congress that Jan got his opportunity. The main papers were being read in the great assembly chamber of the Science Center, not far from the Concert Hall that had done so much to make London the musical metropolis of the world. Jan wanted to hear the first of the day's lectures,

which, it was rumored, would completely demolish the current theory of the formation of the planets.

Perhaps it did, but Jan was little the wiser when he left after the interval. He hurried down to the directory, and looked up the rooms he wanted. Some humorous civil servant had put the Royal Astronomical Society on the top floor of the great building, a gesture which the Council members fully appreciated as it gave them a magnificent view across the Thames and over the entire northern part of the city. There seemed to be nobody around, but brandishing his membership card like a passport in case he was challenged-had no difficulty in locating the library.

It took him almost an hour to find what he wanted, and to learn how to handle the great star catalogues with their millions of entries. He was trembling slightly as he neared the end of his quest, and felt glad that there was no-one around to see his nervousness.

He put the catalogue back among its fellows, and for a long time sat quite still, staring sightlessly at the wall of volumes before him. Then he slowly walked Out into the still corridors, past the secretary's office (there was somebody there now, busily unpacking parcels of books) and down the stairs. He avoided the elevator, for he wanted to be free and unconfined.

There was another lecture he had intended to hear, but that was no longer important now.

His thoughts were still in turmoil as he crossed to the embankment wall and let his eye follow the Thames on its unhurried way to the sea. It was hard for anyone with his training in orthodox science to accept the evidence that had now come into his hands. He would never be certain of its truth, yet the probability was overwhelming. As he paced slowly beside the river wall, he marshaled the facts one by one.

Fact one: no-one at Rupert's party could possibly have known that he was going to ask that question. He had not known it himself: it had been a spontaneous reaction to the circumstances. Therefore, no-one could have prepared any answer, or had it already lying in their minds.

Fact two: "NGS 549672" probably meant nothing to anyone except an astronomer.

Though the great National Geographic Survey had been completed half a century before, its existence was known only to a few thousand specialists. And taking any number from it at random, no-one could have said where that particular star lay in the heavens.

But-and this was Fact three, which he had only this moment discovered-the small and insignificant star known as NGS 549672 was in precisely the right place. It

lay in the heart of the constellation Carina, at the end of that shining trail Jan himself had seen, so few nights ago, leading from the Solar System out across the depths of space.

It was an impossible coincidence. NGS 549672 must be the home of the Overlords.

Yet to accept the fact violated all Jan's cherished ideas of scientific method. Very well-let them be violated. He must accept the fact that, somehow, Rupert's fantastic experiment had tapped a hitherto unknown source of knowledge. Rashaverak? That seemed the most probable explanation. The Overlord had not been in the circle, but that was a minor point. However, Jan was not concerned with the mechanism of parapsysics: he was only interested in using the results. Very little was known about NGS 549672: there had been nothing to distinguish it from a million other stars. But the catalogue gave its magnitude, its coordinates, and its spectral type. Jan would have to do a little research, and make a few simple calculations: then he would know, at least approximately, how far the world of the Overlords was from Earth.

A slow smile spread over Jan's face as he turned away from the Thames, back towards the gleaming white façade of the Science Center. Knowledge was power-and he was the only man on Earth who knew the origin of the Overlords. How he would use that knowledge he could not guess. It would lie safely in his mind, awaiting the moment of destiny.

Chapter 10

The human race continued to bask in the long, cloudless summer afternoon of peace and prosperity. Would there ever be a winter again? It was unthinkable. The age of reason, prematurely welcomed by the leaders of the French Revolution two and a half centuries before, had now really arrived. This time, there was no mistake.

There were drawbacks, of course, though they were willingly accepted. One had to be very old indeed to realize that the papers which the telecaster printed in every home were really rather dull. Gone were the crises that had once produced banner headlines. There were no mysterious murders to baffle the police and to arouse in a million breasts the moral indignation that was often suppressed envy. Such murders as did occur were never mysterious: it was only necessary to turn a dial-and the crime could be seen re-enacted. That instruments capable of such feats existed had at first caused considerable panic among quite law-abiding people. This was something that the Overlords, who had mastered most but not all the quirks of human psychology, had not anticipated. It had to be made perfectly clear that no Peeping Tom would be able to spy on his fellows, and that the very few instruments in human hands would be under strict control. Rupert Boyce's projector, for instance, could not operate beyond the borders of the Reservation, so he and Main were the only persons inside its range. Even the

few serious crimes that did occur received no particular attention in the news. For well-bred people do not, after all, care to read about the social gaffes of others. The average working week was now about twenty hours- but those twenty hours were no sinecure. There was little work left of a routine, mechanical nature. Men's minds were too valuable to waste on tasks that a few thousand transistors, some photoelectric cells, and a cubic meter of printed circuits could perform. There were factories that ran for weeks without being visited by a single human being.

Men were needed for trouble-shooting, for making decisions, for planning new enterprises. The robots did the rest.

The existence of so much leisure would have created tremendous problems a century before. Education had overcome most of these, for a well-stocked mind is safe from boredom. The general standard of culture was at a level which would once have seemed fantastic. There was no evidence that the intelligence of the human race had improved, but for the first time everyone was given the fullest opportunity of using what brains they had.

Most people had two homes, in widely separated parts of the world. Now that the Polar Regions had been opened up, a considerable fraction of the human race oscillated from Arctic to Antarctic at six monthly intervals, seeking the long, nightless polar summer. Others had gone into the deserts, up the mountains, or even into the sea. There was nowhere on the planet where science and technology could not provide one with a comfortable home, if one wanted it badly enough.

Some of the more eccentric dwelling-places provided the few items of excitement in the news. In the most perfectly ordered-society there will always be accidents. Perhaps it was a good sign that people felt it worthwhile to risk, and occasionally break, their necks for the sake of a cozy villa tucked under the summit of Everest, or looking out through the spray of Victoria Falls. As a result, someone was always being rescued from somewhere. It had become a kind of game-almost a planetary sport.

People could indulge in such whims, because they had both the time and the money. The abolition of armed forces had at once almost doubled the world's effective wealth, and increased production had done the rest. As a result, it was difficult to compare the standard of living of twenty-first-century man with that of any of his predecessors. Everything was so cheap that the necessities of life were free, provided as a public service by the community as roads, water, street lighting and drainage had once been. A man could travel anywhere he pleased, eat whatever food he fancied-without handing over any money. He had earned the right to do this by being a productive member of the community.

There were, of course, some drones, but the number of people sufficiently strong-willed to indulge in a life of complete idleness is much smaller than is generally supposed. Supporting such parasites was considerably less of a

burden than providing the armies of ticket-collectors, shop assistants, bank clerks, stockbrokers and so forth whose main function, when one took the global point of view, was to transfer items from one ledger to another.

Nearly a quarter of the human race's total activity, it had been calculated, was now expended on sports of various kinds, ranging from such sedentary occupations as chess to lethal pursuits like ski-gliding across mountain valleys. One unexpected result of this was the extinction of the professional sportsmen. There were too many brilliant amateurs, and the changed economic conditions had made the old system obsolete.

Next to sport, entertainment, in all its branches, was the greatest single industry. For more than a hundred years there had been people who had believed that Hollywood was the center of the world. They could now make a better case for this claim than ever before, but it was safe to say that most of 2050's productions would have seemed incomprehensibly highbrow to 1950. There had been some progress: the box-office was no longer lord of all it surveyed. Among all the distractions and diversions of a planet which now seemed well on the way to becoming one vast playground, there were some who still found time to repeat an ancient and never-answered question:

"Where do we go from here?"