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Editor: JOHN CARNELL

Cover: CLOTHIER

Illustrations: CLOTHIER & HUNTER

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GUARDIAN ANGEL

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Earth's cities lay in the shadow of alien spaceships, watched over by a benevolent Overlord who never revealed himself. Perhaps because . . .

Illustrated by CLOTHIER

PIETER VAN RYBERG shivered, as he always did, when he came into Stormgren's room. He looked at the thermostat and shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation.

"You know, Chief," he said, "although we'll be sorry to lose you, it's nice to feel that the pneumonia death-rate will soon be falling."

"How do you know?" smiled Stormgren. "The next Secretary-General may be an Eskimo. The fuss some people make over a few degrees centigrade!"

Van Ryberg laughed and walked over to the curving double window. He stood in silence for a moment, staring along the avenue of great white buildings, still only partly finished.

"Well," he said, with a sudden change of tone. "Are you going to see them?"

Behind him he heard Stormgren fidgetting nervously with his famous uranium paper-weight.

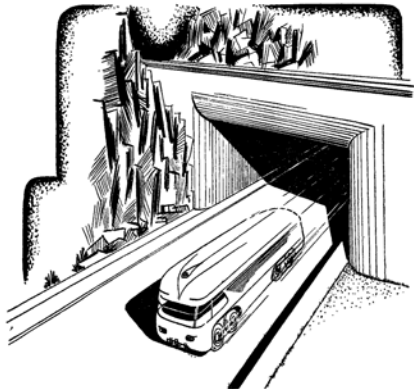
"Yes, I think so. It usually saves trouble in the long run."

Van Ryberg suddenly stiffened and pressed his face against the glass.

"Here they are!" he said. "They're coming up Wilson Avenue. Not as many as I expected, though—about two thousand, I'd say."

Stormgren walked over to the Assistant-Secretary's side. Half a mile away, a small but determined crowd was moving along the avenue towards Headquarters Building. It carried banners which Stormgren could not read at this distance, but he knew their message well enough. Presently he could hear, even through the insulation, the ominous sound of chanting voices. He felt a sudden wave of disgust sweep over him. Surely the world had had enough of marching mobs and angry slogans!

THE CROWD had now come abreast of the building: it must know that he was watching, for here and there fists were being shaken in the air. They were not defying him, though the gesture was meant for him to see. As pygmies may threaten a giant, those angry fists were directed against the sky fifty miles above his head.



And as likely as not, thought Stormgren, Karellen was watching the whole thing and enjoying himself hugely.

This was the first time that Stormgren had ever met the head of the Freedom League. He still wondered if the action was wise: in the final analysis he had only taken it because the League would employ any refusal as ammunition against him. He knew that the gulf was far too wide for any agreement to come from this meeting.

Alexander Wainwright was a tall but slightly stooping man in the late fifties. He seemed inclined to apologise for his more boisterous followers, and Stormgren was rather taken aback by his obvious sincerity and considerable personal charm. It would be rather hard to dislike him, whatever one's views of the cause for which he stood.

Stormgren wasted no time after van Ryberg's brief and somewhat strained introductions.

"I suppose," he began, "the chief object of your visit is to register a formal protest against the Federation Scheme. Am I correct?"

Wainwright nodded.

"That is my main purpose, Mr. Secretary. As you know, for the last five years we have tried to awaken the human race to the danger that confronts it. I must admit that, from our point of view, the response has been disappointing. The great majority of people seem content to let the Overlords run the world

as they please. But this European Federation is as intolerable as it will be unworkable. Even Karellen can't wipe out two thousand years of history at the stroke of a pen."

"Then do you consider," interjected Stormgren, "that Europe, and the whole world, must continue indefinitely to be divided into scores of sovereign states, each with its own currency, armed forces, customs, frontiers, and all the rest of that—that medieval paraphernalia?"

"I don't quarrel with Federation as an *ultimate* objective, though some of my supporters might not agree. My point is that it must come from within, not be superimposed from without. We must work out our own destiny—we have a right to independence. There must be no more interference in human affairs!"

STORMGREN sighed. All this he had heard a hundred times before, and he knew that he could only give the old answers that the Freedom League had refused to accept. He had faith in Karellen, and they had not. That was the fundamental difference, and there was nothing he could do about it. Luckily, there was nothing that the Freedom League could do either.

"Let me ask you a few questions," he said. "Can you deny that the Overlords have brought security, peace and prosperity to the world?"

"That is true. But they have taken our freedom. Man does not live—"

"By bread alone. Yes, I know—but this is the first age in which every man was sure of getting even that. In any case, what freedom have we lost compared with that which the Overlords have given us for the first time in human history?"

"Freedom to control our own lives, under God's guidance."

Stormgren shook his head.

"Last month, five hundred bishops, cardinals and rabbis signed a joint declaration pledging support for the Supervisor's policy. The world's religions are against you."

"Because so few people realise the danger. When they do, it may be too late. Humanity will have lost its initiative and will have become a subject race."

Stormgren did not seem to hear. He was watching the crowd below, milling aimlessly now that it had lost its leader. How long, he wondered, would it be before men ceased to abandon their reason and identity when more than a few of them were gathered together? Wainwright might be a sincere and honest man, but the same could not be said of many of his followers.

Stormgren turned back to his visitor.

"In three days I shall be meeting the Supervisor again. I shall explain your objections to him, since it is my duty to represent the views of the world. But it will alter nothing."

There was a slight pause. Then, rather slowly, Wainwright began again.

"That brings me to another point. One of our main objections to the Overlords, as you know, is their secretiveness. You are the only human being who has ever spoken with Karellen—and even you have never seen him. Is it surprising that many of us are suspicious of his motives?"

"You have heard his speeches. Aren't they convincing enough?"

"Frankly, words are not sufficient. I do not know which we resent more—Karellen's omnipotence, or his secrecy."

Stormgren was silent. There was nothing he could say to this—nothing, at any rate, that would convince the other. He sometimes wondered if he had really convinced himself.

IT WAS, of course, only a very small operation from their point of view, but to Earth it was the biggest thing that had ever happened. There had been no warning, but a sudden shadow had fallen across a score of the world's greatest cities. Looking up from their work, a million men saw in that heart-freezing instant that the human race was no longer alone.

Countless times this day had been described in fiction, but no one had really believed that it would ever come. Now it had dawned at last: the twenty great ships were the symbol of a science man could not hope to match for centuries. For seven days they floated motionless above his cities, giving no hint that they knew of his existence. But none was needed: not by chance alone could those mighty ships have come to rest so precisely over New York, London, Moscow, Canberra, Rome, Capetown, Tokyo . . .

Even before the ending of those unforgettable days, some men had guessed the truth. This was not the first tentative contact by a race which knew nothing of Man. Within those silent, unmoving ships, master psychologists were studying humanity's reactions. When the curve of tension had reached its peak, they would reveal themselves.

And on the eighth day, Karellen, Supervisor for Earth, made himself known to the world. He spoke in English so perfect that the controversy it began was to rage across the Atlantic for half a century. But the context of the speech was more staggering even than its delivery. By any standards, it was a work of superlative genius, showing a complete and absolute mastery of human affairs. There was little doubt but that its scholarship and virtuosity, its tantalising glimpses of knowledge still untapped, were deliberately designed to convince mankind that it was in the presence of overwhelming intellectual power. When Karellen had finished, the nations of Earth knew that their days of precarious sovereignty were ending. Local, internal governments would still retain their powers, but in the wider field of international affairs the supreme decisions had passed out of human hands. Arguments, protests—all were futile. No weapon could touch those brooding giants, and even if it could their downfall would utterly destroy the cities beneath. Overnight, Earth had become a protectorate in some shadowy, star-strewn empire beyond the knowledge of Man.

In a little while the tumult had subsided, and the world went about its business again. The only change a suddenly awakened Rip Van Winkle would have noticed was a hushed expectancy, a mental glancing-over-the-shoulder, as mankind waited for the Overlords to show themselves and to step down from their gleaming ships.

Five years later, it was still waiting. That, thought Stormgren, was the cause of all the trouble.

THE ROOM was small and, save for the single chair and the table beneath the vision-screen, unfurnished. As was intended, it told nothing of the creatures who had built it. There was only the one entrance, and that led directly to the airlock in the curving flank of the great ship. Through that lock only Stormgren, alone of living men, had ever come to meet Karellen, Supervisor for Earth.

The vision screen was empty now, as it had always been. Behind that rectangle of darkness lay utter mystery—but there too lay affection and an immense and tolerant understanding of mankind. An understanding which, Stormgren knew, could only have been acquired through centuries of study.

From the hidden grille came that calm, never-hurried voice with its undercurrent of humour—the voice which Stormgren knew so well though the world had heard it only thrice in history.

"Yes, Rikki, I was listening. What did you make of Mr. Wainwright?"

"He's an honest man, whatever his supporters may be. What are we going to do about him? The League itself isn't dangerous, but some of its more extreme supporters are openly advocating violence. I've been wondering for some time if I should put a guard on my house. But I hope it isn't necessary."

Karellen evaded the point in the annoying way he sometimes had.

"The details of the European Federation have been out for a month now. Has there been a substantial increase in the seven per cent. who disapprove of me, or the nine per cent. who Don't Know?"

"Not yet, despite the press reactions. What I'm worried about is a general feeling, even among your supporters, that it's time this secrecy came to an end."

Karellen's sigh was technically perfect, yet somehow lacked conviction.

"That's your feeling too, isn't it?"

The question was so rhetorical that Stormgren didn't bother to answer it.

"Do you really appreciate," he continued earnestly, "how difficult this state of affairs makes my job?"

"It doesn't exactly help mine," replied Karellen with some spirit. "I wish people would stop thinking of me as a world dictator and remember that I'm only a civil servant trying to administer a somewhat idealistic colonial policy."

"Then can't you at least give us some reason for your concealment? Because we don't understand it, it annoys us and gives rise to all sorts of rumours."

Karellen gave that deep, rich laugh of his, just too musical to be altogether human.

"What am I supposed to be now? Does the robot theory still hold the field? I'd rather be a mass of cogwheels than crawl around the floor like a centipede, as most of the tabloids seem to imagine."

Stormgren let out a Finnish oath he was fairly sure Karellen wouldn't know—though one could never be quite certain in these matters.

"Can't you ever be serious?"

"My dear Rikki," said Karellen, "it's only by *not* taking the human race seriously that I retain those fragments of my once considerable mental powers that I still possess."

Despite himself, Stormgren smiled.

"That doesn't help me a great deal, does it? I have to go down there and convince my fellow men that although you won't show yourself, you've got nothing to hide. It's not an easy job. Curiosity is one of the most dominant human characteristics. You can't defy it forever."

"Of all the problems that faced us when we came to Earth, this was the most difficult," admitted Karellen. "You have trusted our wisdom in other things—surely you can trust us in this!"

"I trust you," said Stormgren, "but Wainwright doesn't, nor do his supporters. Can you really blame them if they put a bad interpretation upon your unwillingness to show yourself?"

"Listen, Rikki," Karellen answered at length. "These matters are beyond my control. Believe me, I regret the need for this concealment, but the reasons are—sufficient. However, I will try and get a statement from my superiors which may satisfy you and perhaps placate the Freedom League. Now, please, can we return to the agenda and start recording again? We've only reached Item 23, and I want to make a better job of settling the Jewish question than my predecessors for the last few thousand years . . ."

II

"ANY LUCK, Chief?" asked van Ryberg anxiously.

"I don't know," Stormgren replied wearily as he threw the files down on his desk and collapsed into the seat. "Karellen's consulting *his* superiors now, whoever or whatever they may be. He won't make any promises."

"Listen," said Pieter abruptly. "I've just thought of something. What reason have we for believing that there *is* anyone beyond Karellen? The Overlords may be a myth—you know how he hates the word."

Tired though he was, Stormgren sat up with a start.

"It's an ingenious theory. But it clashes with what little I do know about Karellen's background."

"And how much is that?"

"Well, he was a professor of astropolitics on a world he calls Skyrondel, and he put up a terrific fight before they made him take this job. He pretends to hate it, but he's really enjoying himself."

Stormgren paused for a moment, and a smile of amusement softened his rugged features.

"At any rate, he once remarked that running a private zoo is rather good fun."

"Hmm—a somewhat dubious compliment. He's immortal, isn't he?"

"Yes, after a fashion, though there's something thousands of years ahead of him which he seems to fear: I can't imagine what it is. And that's really all I know."

"He could easily have made it up. My theory is that his little fleet's lost in space and looking for a new home. He doesn't want us to know how few he and his comrades are. Perhaps all those other ships are automatic, and there's no one in any of them. They're just an imposing façade."

"You," said Stormgren with great severity, "have been reading science fiction in office hours."

Van Ryberg grinned.

"The 'Invasion From Space' didn't turn out quite as expected, did it? My theory would certainly explain why Karellen never shows himself. He doesn't want us to learn that there are no Overlords."

Stormgren shook his head in amused disagreement.

"Your explanation, as usual, is much too ingenious to be true. Though we can only infer its existence, there must be a great civilisation behind the Supervisor—and one that's known about Man for a very long time. Karellen himself must have been studying us for centuries. Look at his command of English, for example. He taught *me* how to speak it idiomatically!"

"I sometimes think he went a little too far," laughed van Ryberg. "Have you ever discovered anything he *doesn't* know?"

"Oh yes, quite often—but only on trivial points. I think he has an absolutely perfect memory, but there are some things he hasn't bothered to learn. For instance, he only understands English, though in the past two years he's picked up a good deal of Finnish just to tease me. And Finnish isn't the sort of language one learns in a hurry! I think he can quote the whole of the 'Kalevala' whereas I'm ashamed to say I know only a few dozen lines. He also knows the biographies of all living statesmen, and sometimes I can spot the references he's used. His knowledge of history and science seems complete: you know how much we've already learned from him. Yet, taken one at a time, I don't think his mental gifts are quite outside the range of human achievement. But no man could possibly do all the things he does."

"That's more or less what I'd decided already," agreed van Ryberg. "We can argue round Karellen forever, but in the end we always come back to the same question—why the devil won't he show himself? Until he does, I'll go on theorising and the Freedom League will go on fulminating."

He cocked a rebellious eye at the ceiling.

"One dark night, Mr. Supervisor, I'm going to take a rocket up to your ship and climb in through the back door with my camera. What a scoop *that* would be!"

If Karellen was listening, he gave no sign of it. But, of course, he never did.

STORMGREN slept badly that night, and in the small hours of the morning rose from his bed and wandered restlessly out on to the veranda. It was warm, almost oppressive, but the sky was clear and a brilliant moon hung low in the south-west. In the far distance the lights of London glowed on the skyline like a frozen dawn.

Stormgren raised his eyes above the sleeping city, climbing again the fifty miles of space he alone of living men had crossed. Far away though it was, the beautiful lines of Karellen's ship were clearly visible in the moonlight. He wondered what the Supervisor was doing, for he did not believe that the Overlords ever slept.

High above, a meteor thrust its shining spear through the dome of the sky. The luminous trail glowed faintly for a while: then only the stars were left. The reminder was brutal: in a hundred years Karellen would still be leading mankind towards the goal that he alone could see, but four months from now another man would be Secretary-General. That in itself Stormgren was far from minding—but there was little time left if he ever hoped to learn what lay behind that darkened screen.

A naturally reticent man himself, the reasons for Karellen's behaviour had never worried Stormgren once its initial strangeness had worn off. But now he knew that the mystery which tormented so many minds was beginning to obsess his own: he could understand—in time he might even share—the psychological outlook which had driven man to support the Freedom League. The propaganda about Man's enslavement was just—propaganda. Few people seriously believed it, or really wished for a return to the old days of national rivalries. Men had grown accustomed to Karellen's imperceptible rule; but they were becoming impatient to know who ruled them.

There was a faint "click" from the teletype in the adjoining room as it

ejected the hourly summary from Central News. Stormgren wandered indoors and ruffled half-heartedly through the sheets. On the other side of the world, the Freedom League had thought of a new headline. "IS MAN RULED BY MONSTERS?" asked the teletype, and went on to quote:—"Addressing a meeting in Madras today, Dr. C. V. Krishnan, President of the Indian Division of the Freedom League, said: 'The explanation of the Overlords' behaviour is quite simple. Their physical form is so alien and so repulsive that they dare not show themselves to humanity. I challenge the Supervisor to deny this.'"

Stormgren threw down the paper with a sigh. Even if it were true, did it really matter? The idea was an old one, but it had never worried him. He did not believe that there was any biological form, however strange, which he could not accept in time and, perhaps, even find beautiful. If he could convince Karellen of this, the Overlords might change their policy. Certainly they could not be half as hideous as the imaginative drawings that had filled the papers soon after their coming to Earth!

Stormgren smiled a little wryly as he turned back to his bedroom. He was honest enough to admit that, in the final analysis, his real motive was ordinary human curiosity.

WHEN STORMGREN failed to arrive at his usual hour, Pieter van Ryberg was surprised and a little annoyed. Though the Secretary-General often made a number of calls before reaching his own office, he invariably left word that he was doing so. This morning, to make matters worse, there had been several urgent messages for Stormgren. Van Ryberg rang half a dozen departments to try and locate him, then gave it up in disgust.

By noon he had become alarmed and sent a car to Stormgren's house. Ten minutes later he was startled by the scream of a siren, and a police patrol came racing up Wilson Avenue. The news agencies must have had friends in that machine, for even as van Ryberg watched it approach, the radio was telling the world that he was no longer Assistant, but Acting-Secretary-General of the United Nations.

IF VAN RYBERG had not had so many other matters on his hands, he would have found it very interesting to study the Press reactions to Stormgren's disappearance. For the past month, the world's papers had divided themselves into two sharply defined groups. The American press, on the whole, thought that the Federation of Europe was long overdue, but had a nervous feeling that this was only the beginning. The Europeans, on the other hand, were undergoing violent but largely synthetic spasms of national pride. Criticism of the Overlords was widespread and energetic: after an initial period of caution the Press had discovered that it could be as rude to Karellen as it liked and nothing would happen. Now it was excelling itself.

Most of these attacks, though very vocal, were not representative of the great mass of the public. Along the frontiers that would soon be gone for ever the guards had been doubled—but the soldiers eyed each other with a still inarticulate friendliness. The politicians and the generals might storm and rave, but the silently waiting millions felt that, none too soon, a long and bloody chapter of history was coming to an end.

And now Stormgren had gone, no one knew where or how. The tumult

suddenly subsided as the world realised that it had lost the only man through whom the Overlords, for their own strange reasons, would speak to Earth. A paralysis seemed to descend upon press and radio, but in the silence could be heard the voice of the Freedom League, anxiously protesting its innocence.

IT WAS completely dark when Stormgren awoke. How strange that was, he was for a moment too sleepy to realise. Then, as full consciousness dawned, he sat up with a start and felt for the light switch beside his bed.

In the darkness his hand encountered a bare stone wall, cold to the touch. He froze instantly, mind and body paralysed by the impact of the unexpected. Then, scarcely believing his senses, he kneeled on the bed and began to explore with his finger tips that shockingly unfamiliar wall.

He had been doing this for only a moment when there was a sudden 'click' and a section of the darkness slid aside. He caught a glimpse of a man silhouetted against a dimly lit background: then the door closed again and the darkness returned. It happened so swiftly that he saw nothing of the room in which he was lying.

An instant later, he was dazzled by the light of a powerful electric torch. The beam flickered across his face, held him steadily for a moment, then dipped to illuminate the whole bed—which was, he now saw, nothing more than a mattress supported on rough planks.

Out of the darkness a soft voice spoke to him in excellent English but with an accent which at first Stormgren could not identify.

"Ah, Mr. Secretary, I'm glad to see you're awake. I hope you feel all right."

There was something about the last sentence that caught Stormgren's attention, so that the angry questions he was about to ask died upon his lips. He stared back into the darkness, then replied calmly: "How long have I been unconscious?"

The other chuckled.

"Several days. We were promised that there would be no after-effects: I'm glad to see it's true."

Partly to gain time, partly to test his own reactions, Stormgren swung his legs over the side of the bed. He was still wearing his night-clothes, but they were badly crumpled and seemed to have gathered considerable dirt. As he moved he felt a slight dizziness—not enough to be troublesome, but sufficient to convince him that he had indeed been drugged.

He turned towards the light.

"Where am I?" he said sharply. "Does Wainwright know about this?"

"Smart, aren't you?" said the voice admiringly. "But we won't talk about that now. I guess you'll be pretty hungry. Get dressed and come along to dinner."

The oval of light slipped across the room and for the first time Stormgren had an idea of its dimensions. It was not really correct to call it a room at all, for the walls seemed bare rock, roughly smoothed into shape. He realised that he was underground, possibly at a great depth. He realised too that if he had been unconscious for several days he might be anywhere on Earth.

THE TORCH-LIGHT illuminated a pile of clothes draped over a packing case.

"This should be enough for you," said the voice from the darkness.

"Laundry's rather a problem here, so we grabbed a couple of your suits and half-a-dozen shirts."

"That," said Stormgren without humour, "was very considerate of you."

"We're sorry about the absence of furniture and electric light. This place is convenient in some ways, but it rather lacks amenities."

"Convenient for what?" asked Stormgren as he climbed into a shirt. The feel of the familiar cloth beneath his fingers was strangely reassuring.

"Just—convenient," said the voice. "And by the way, since we're likely to spend a good deal of time together, you'd better call me Joe."

"Despite your nationality," retorted Stormgren, "I think I could pronounce your real name. It won't be worse than many Finnish ones."

There was a slight pause and the light flickered for an instant.

"Well, I should have expected it," said Joe resignedly. "You must have plenty of practice at this sort of thing."

"It's a useful hobby for a man in my position. I suppose you were born in Poland, and picked up your English in Britain during the War? I should think you were stationed quite a while in Scotland, from your r's."

"That," said the other very firmly, "is quite enough. As you seem to have finished dressing—thank you."

The door opened as Stormgren walked towards it, and the other stood aside to let him pass. Stormgren wondered if Joe was armed and decided that he probably was. In any case, he would certainly have friends around.

The corridor was dimly lit by oil lamps at intervals, and for the first time Stormgren could see his captor. He was a man of about fifty, and must have weighed well over two hundred pounds. Everything about him was outsize, from the stained battledress that might have come from any of half a dozen armed forces, to the startlingly large signet ring on his left hand. It should not be difficult to trace him, thought Stormgren, if he ever got out of this place. He was a little depressed to think that the other must be perfectly well aware of this.

The walls around them, though occasionally faced with concrete, were mostly bare rock. It was clear to Stormgren that he was in some disused mine, and he could think of few more effective prisons. Until now the thought that he had been kidnapped had somehow failed to worry him greatly. He felt that, whatever happened, the immense resources of the Supervisor would soon locate and rescue him. Now he was not so sure: there must be a limit even to Karellen's powers, and if he was indeed buried in some remote continent all the science of the Overlords might be unable to trace him.

III

THERE were three other men round the table in the bare but brightly lit room. They looked up with interest and more than a little awe as Stormgren entered, and a substantial pile of meat sandwiches was quickly placed before him. He could have done with a more interesting meal, for he felt extremely hungry, but it was very obvious that his captors had dined no better.

As he ate, he glanced quickly at the four men around him. Joe was by far the most outstanding character—not merely in physical bulk. The others were nondescript individuals, probably Europeans also. He would be able to place them when he heard them talk.

He pushed away the plate, and ignoring the other men spoke directly to the huge Pole.

"Well," he said evenly, "now perhaps you'll tell me what this is all about, and what you hope to get out of it."

Joe cleared his throat.

"I'd like to make one thing clear," he said. "This is nothing to do with Wainwright. He'll be as surprised as anyone."

Stormgren had rather expected this. It gave him relatively little satisfaction to confirm the existence of an extremist movement inside the Freedom League.

"As a matter of interest," he said, "how did you kidnap me?"

He hardly expected a reply, and was taken aback by the other's readiness—even eagerness—to answer. Only slowly did he guess the reason.

"It was all rather like one of those old Fritz Lang films," said Joe cheerfully. "We weren't sure if Karellen had a watch on you, so we took somewhat elaborate precautions. You were knocked out by gas in the air conditioner: that was easy. Then we carried you out into the car and drove off—no trouble at all. All this, I might say, wasn't done by any of our people. We hired—er, professionals for the job. Karellen may get them—in fact, he's supposed to—but he'll be no wiser. When it left your house the car drove into a long road tunnel not many miles from the centre of London. It came out again on schedule at the other end, still carrying a drugged man extraordinarily like the Secretary-General. About the same time a large truck loaded with metal cases emerged in the opposite direction and drove to a certain airfield where one of the cases was loaded aboard a freighter. Meanwhile the car that had done the job continued elaborate evasive action in the general direction of Scotland. Perhaps Karellen's caught it by now: I don't know. As you'll see—I do hope you appreciate my frankness—our whole plan depended on one thing. We're pretty sure that Karellen can see and hear everything that happens on the surface of the Earth—but unless he uses magic, not science, he can't see underneath it. So he won't know about that transfer in the tunnel. Naturally we've taken a risk, but there were also one or two other stages in your removal which I won't go into now. We may have to use them again one day, and it would be a pity to give them away."

JOE had related the whole story with such obvious gusto that Stormgren found it difficult to be appropriately furious. Yet he felt very disturbed. The plan was an ingenious one, and it seemed more than likely that whatever watch Karellen kept on him, he would have been tricked by this ruse.

The Pole was watching Stormgren's reactions closely. He would have to appear confident, whatever his real feelings.

"You must be a lot of fools," said Stormgren scornfully, "if you think you can trick the Overlords like this. In any case, what conceivable good would it do?"

Joe offered him a cigarette, which Stormgren refused, then lit one himself and sat on the edge of the table. There was an ominous creaking and he jumped off hastily.

"Our motives," he began, "should be pretty obvious. We've found that argument's useless, so we have to take other measures. There have been underground movements before, and even Karellen, whatever powers he's got, won't find it easy to deal with us. We're out to fight for our independence. Don't misunderstand me. There'll be nothing violent—at first, anyway.

But the Overlords have to use human agents, and we can make it mighty uncomfortable for them."

Starting with me, I suppose, thought Stormgren. He wondered if the other had given him more than a fraction of the whole story. Did they really think that these gangster methods would influence Karellen in the slightest? On the other hand, it was quite true that a well organised resistance movement could make things very difficult.

"What do you intend to do with me?" asked Stormgren at length. "Am I a hostage, or what?"

"Don't worry—we'll look after you. We expect some visitors in a day or two, and until then we'll entertain you as well as we can."

He added some words in his own language, and one of the others produced a brand-new pack of cards.

"We got these especially for you," explained Joe. His voice suddenly became grave. "I hope you've got plenty of cash," he said anxiously. "After all, we can hardly accept cheques."

Quite overcome, Stormgren stared blankly at his captors. Then, as the true humour of the situation sank into his mind, it suddenly seemed to him that all the cares and worries of office had lifted from his shoulders. Whatever happened, there was absolutely nothing he could do about it—and now these fantastic criminals wanted to play cards with him.

Abruptly, he threw back his head and laughed as he had not done for years.

THERE WAS no doubt, thought van Ryberg morosely, that Wainwright was telling the truth. He might have his suspicions, but he did not know who had kidnapped Stormgren. Nor did he approve of the kidnapping itself. Van Ryberg had a shrewd idea that for some time extremists in the Freedom League had been putting pressure on Wainwright to make him adopt a more active policy. Now they were taking things into their own hands.

The kidnapping had been beautifully organised, there was no doubt of that. Stormgren might be anywhere on earth and there seemed little hope of tracing him. Yet something would have to be done, decided van Ryberg, and done quickly. Despite the jests he had so often made, his real feeling towards Karellen was one of overwhelming awe. The thought of approaching the Supervisor directly filled him with dismay, but there seemed no alternative.

Communication Section had several hundred channels to Karellen's ship. Most of them were operating continuously, handling endless streams of statistics—production figures, census returns and all the book-keeping of a world economic system. One channel, van Ryberg knew, was reserved for Karellen's personal messages to Stormgren. No one but the Secretary-General himself had ever used it.

Van Ryberg sat down at the keyboard and, after a moment's hesitation, began to tap out his message with unpractised fingers. The machine clicked away contentedly and the words gleamed for a few seconds on the darkened screen. Then he waited; he would give the Supervisor ten minutes and after that someone else could bring him any reply.

There was no need. Scarcely a minute later the machine started to whirr again. Not for the first time, van Ryberg wondered if the Supervisor ever slept.

The message was as brief as it was unhelpful.

NO INFORMATION. LEAVE MATTERS ENTIRELY TO YOUR DISCRETION.

Rather bitterly, and without any satisfaction at all, van Ryberg realised how much greatness had been thrust upon him.

DURING the last three days Stormgren had analysed his captors with some thoroughness. Joe was the only one of any importance: the others were nonentities—the riffraff one would expect any illegal movement to gather round itself. The ideals of the Freedom League meant nothing to them: their only concern was earning a living with the minimum of work. They were the gangster types from which civilisation might never be wholly free.

Joe was an altogether more complex individual, though sometimes he reminded Stormgren of an overgrown baby. Their interminable canasta games were punctuated with violent political arguments, but it became obvious to Stormgren that the big Pole had never thought seriously about the cause for which he was fighting. Emotion and extreme conservatism clouded all his judgements. His country's long struggle for independence had conditioned him so completely that he still lived in the past. He was a picturesque survival, one of those who had no use for an ordered way of life. When his type had vanished, if it ever did, the world would be a safer but less interesting place.

There was little doubt, as far as Stormgren was concerned, that Karellen had failed to locate him. He had tried to bluff, but his captors were unconvinced. He was fairly certain that they had been holding him here to see if Karellen would act, and now that nothing had happened they could proceed with the next part of their plan.

Stormgren was not surprised when, five or six days after his capture, Joe told him to expect visitors. For some time the little group had shown increasing nervousness, and the prisoner guessed that the leaders of the movement, having seen that the coast was clear, were at last coming to collect him.

They were already waiting, gathered round the rickety table, when Joe waved him politely into the living room. The three thugs had vanished, and even Joe seemed somewhat restrained. Stormgren could see at once that he was now confronted by men of a much higher calibre, and the group opposite reminded him strongly of a picture he had once seen of Lenin and his colleagues in the first days of the Russian Revolution. There was the same intellectual force, iron determination, and ruthlessness in these six men. Joe and his like were harmless: here were the real brains behind the organisation.

WITH a curt nod, Stormgren moved over to the seat and tried to look self-possessed. As he approached, the elderly, thickset man on the far side of the table leaned forward and stared at him with piercing grey eyes. They made Stormgren so uncomfortable that he spoke first—something he had not intended to do.

"I suppose you've come to discuss terms. What's my ransom?"

He noticed that in the background someone was taking down his words in a shorthand notebook. It was all very businesslike.

The leader replied in a musical Welsh accent.

"You could put it that way, Mr. Secretary-General. But we're interested in information, not cash."

So that was it, thought Stormgren. He was a prisoner of war, and this was his interrogation.

"You know what our motives are," continued the other in his softly lilting voice. "Call us a resistance movement, if you like. We believe that sooner or later Earth will have to fight for its independence—but we realise that the struggle can only be by indirect methods such as sabotage and disobedience. We kidnapped you partly to show Karellen that we mean business and are well organised, but largely because you are the only man who can tell us anything of the Overlords. You're a reasonable man, Mr. Stormgren. Give us your co-operation, and you can have your freedom."

"Exactly what do you wish to know?" asked Stormgren cautiously.

Those extraordinary eyes seemed to search his mind to its depths: they were unlike any that Stormgren had ever seen in his life. Then the sing-song voice replied:

"Do you know who, or what, the Overlords really are?"

Stormgren almost smiled.

"Believe me," he said, "I'm quite as anxious as you to discover that."

"Then you'll answer our questions?"

"I make no promises. But I may."

There was a slight sigh of relief from Joe and a rustle of anticipation went round the room.

"We have a general idea," continued the other, "of the circumstances in which you meet Karellen. Would you go through them carefully, leaving out nothing of importance."

That was harmless enough, thought Stormgren. He had done it scores of times before, and it would give the appearance of co-operation.

He felt in his pockets and produced a pencil and an old envelope. Sketching rapidly while he spoke, he began:

"You know, of course, that a small flying machine, with no obvious means of propulsion, calls for me at regular intervals and takes me up to Karellen's ship. There is only one small room in that machine, and it's quite bare apart from a couch and table. The layout is something like this."

He pushed the plan across to the old Welshman, but the strange eyes never turned towards it. They were still fixed on Stormgren's face, and as he watched them something seemed to change in their depths. The room had become completely silent, but behind him he heard Joe take a sudden indrawn breath.

Puzzled and annoyed, Stormgren stared back at the other, and as he did so, understanding slowly dawned. In his confusion, he crumpled the envelope into a ball of paper and ground it underfoot.

For the man opposite him was blind.

IV

VAN RYBERG had made no more attempts to contact Karellen. Much of his department's work—the forwarding of statistical information, the abstracting of the world's press, and the like—had continued automatically. In Paris the lawyers were still wrangling over the European Constitution, but that was none of his business for the moment. It was three weeks before the Supervisor wanted the final draft: if it was not ready by then, no doubt Karellen would act accordingly.

And there was still no news of Stormgren.

Van Ryberg was dictating when the "Emergency Only" telephone started to ring. He grabbed the receiver and listened with mounting astonishment, then threw it down and rushed to the open window. In the distance faint cries of amazement were rising from the street and the traffic had already come to a halt.

It was true: Karellen's ship, that never-changing symbol of the Overlords, was no longer in the sky. He searched the heavens as far as he could see, but found no trace of it. Even as he was doing so, it seemed that night had suddenly fallen. Coming down from the North, its shadowed underbelly black as a thundercloud, the great ship was racing low above the towers of London. Involuntarily, van Ryberg shrank away from the onrushing monster. He had always known how huge the ships of the Overlords really were—but it was one thing to see them far away in space, and quite another to watch them passing overhead, almost close enough to touch.

In the darkness of that partial eclipse, he watched until the ship and its monstrous shadow had moved to the south. There was no sound, not even the whisper of air, van Ryberg realised that, for all its apparent nearness, the ship was still a thousand feet or more above his head. He watched it vanish over the horizon, still large even when it dropped below the curve of the Earth.

In the office behind him all the telephones had started to ring, but van Ryberg did not move. He leaned against the balcony, still staring into the south, paralysed by the presence of illimitable power.

AS STORMGREN talked, it seemed to him that his mind was operating on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand he was trying to defy the men who had captured him, yet on the other he was hoping that they might help him to unravel Karellen's secret. He did not feel that he was betraying the Supervisor, for there was nothing here that he had not told many times before. Moreover, the thought that these men could harm Karellen in any way was fantastic.

The blind Welshman had conducted most of the interrogation. It was fascinating to watch that agile mind trying one opening after another, testing and rejecting all the theories that Stormgren himself had abandoned long ago. Presently he leaned back with a sigh and the shorthand writer laid down his stylus.

"We're getting nowhere," he said resignedly. "We want more facts, and that means action—not argument." The sightless eyes seemed to stare thoughtfully at Stormgren. For a moment he tapped nervously on the table—the first sign of uncertainty that Stormgren had noticed. Then he continued:

"I'm a little surprised, Mr. Secretary, that you've never made an effort to learn more about the Overlords."

"What do you suggest?" asked Stormgren coldly. "I've told you that there's only one way out of the room in which I've had my talks with Karellen—and that leads straight to the airlock."

"It might be possible," mused the other, "to devise instruments which could teach us something. I'm no scientist, but we can look into the matter. If we give you your freedom, would you be willing to assist with such a plan?"

"Once and for all," said Stormgren angrily, "let me make my position perfectly clear. Karellen is working for a united world, and I'll do nothing

to help his enemies. What his ultimate plans may be, I don't know, but I believe that they are good. You may annoy him, you may even delay the achievement of his aims, but it will make no difference in the end. You may be sincere in believing as you do: I can understand your fear that the traditions and cultures of little countries will be overwhelmed when the World State arrives. But you are wrong: it is useless to cling to the past. Even before the Overlords came to Earth, the sovereign state was dying. No one can save it now, and no one should try."

There was no reply: the man opposite neither moved nor spoke. He sat with lips half open, his eyes now lifeless as well as blind. Around him the others were equally motionless, frozen in strained, unnatural attitudes. With a little gasp of pure horror, Stormgren rose to his feet and backed away towards the door. As he did so the silence was suddenly broken.

"That was a nice speech, Rikki. Now I think we can go."

"Karellen! Thank God—but what have you done?"

"Don't worry. They're all right. You can call it a paralysis, but it's much subtler than that. They're simply living a few thousand times more slowly than normal. When we've gone they'll never know what happened."

"You'll leave them here until the police come?"

"No: I've a much better plan. I'm letting them go."

Stormgren felt an illogical sense of relief which he did not care to analyse. He gave a last valedictory glance at the little room and its frozen occupants. Joe was standing on one foot, staring very stupidly at nothing. Suddenly Stormgren laughed and fumbled in his pockets.

"Thanks for the hospitality, Joe," he said. "I think I'll leave a souvenir."

He ruffled through the scraps of paper until he found the figures he wanted. Then, on a reasonably clean sheet, he wrote carefully:

LOMBARD BANK, LONDON

Pay "Joe" the sum of One Pound Seventeen Shillings and Six Pence (£1-17-6).

R. Stormgren.

AS HE laid the strip of paper beside the Pole, Karellen's voice enquired: "Exactly what are you up to?"

"Paying a debt of honour," explained Stormgren. "The other two cheated, but I think Joe played fair. At least, I never caught him out."

He felt very gay and lightheaded as he walked to the door. Hanging just outside it was a large, featureless metal sphere that moved aside to let him pass. He guessed that it was some kind of robot, and it explained how Karellen had been able to reach him through the unknown layers of rock overhead.

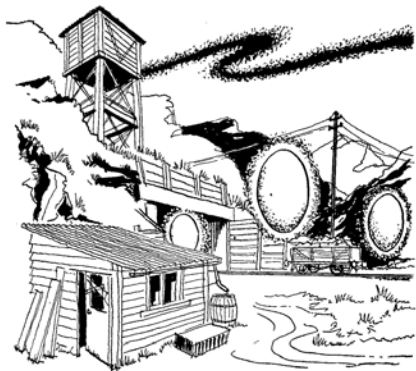
"Carry on for a hundred yards," said the sphere, speaking in Karellen's voice. "Then turn to the left until I give you further instructions."

He ran forward eagerly, though he realised that there was no need for hurry. The sphere remained hanging in the corridor, and Stormgren guessed that it was the generator of the paralysis field.

A minute later he came across a second sphere, waiting for him at a fork in the corridor.

"You've half a mile to go," it said. "Keep to the left until we meet again."

Six times he encountered the spheres on his way to the open. At first he wondered if somehow the first robot had slipped ahead of him; then he guessed



that there must be a chain of them maintaining a complete circuit down into the depths of the mine. At the entrance a group of guards formed a piece of improbable still-life, watched over by yet another of the ubiquitous spheres. On the hillside a few yards away lay the little flying machine in which Stormgren had made all his journeys to Karellen.

He stood for a moment blinking in the fierce sunlight. Then he saw the ruined mining machinery around him, and beyond that a derelict railway stretching down a mountainside. Several miles away dense forest lapped at the base of the mountain, and very far off Stormgren could see the gleam of a great river. He guessed that he was somewhere in Southern France, probably in the Cevenne mountains.

As he climbed into the little ship, he had a last glimpse of the mine entrance and the men frozen round it. Quite suddenly a line of metal spheres raced out of the opening like silver cannon balls. Then the door closed behind him and with a sigh of relief he sank back upon the familiar couch.

For a while Stormgren waited until he had recovered his breath; then he uttered a single, heartfelt syllable:

"Well ? ?"

"I'm sorry I couldn't rescue you before. But you'll see how very important it was to wait until all the leaders had gathered here."



"Do you mean to say," spluttered Stormgren, "that you knew where I was all the time? If I thought—"

"Don't be so hasty," answered Karellen, "or at any rate, let me finish explaining."

"It had better be good," said Stormgren darkly. He was beginning to suspect that he had been no more than the bait in an elaborate trap.

"I'VE had a tracer on you for some time," began Karellen, "and though your late friends were correct in thinking that I couldn't follow you underground, I was able to keep track until they brought you to the mine. That transfer in the tunnel was ingenious, but when the first car ceased to react it gave the show away and I soon located you again. Then it was merely a matter of waiting. I knew that once they were certain I'd lost you, the leaders would come here and I'd be able to trap them all."

"But you're letting them go!"

"Until now," said Karellen, "I did not know which of the two billion men on this planet were the heads of the organisation. Now that they're located, I can trace their movements anywhere on Earth, and can probably watch most of their actions in detail if I want to. That's far better than locking them up. They're effectively neutralised, and they know it. Your rescue will be completely inexplicable to them, for you must have vanished before their eyes."

That rich laugh echoed round the tiny room.

"In some ways the whole affair was a comedy, but it had a serious purpose. It will be a valuable object lesson for any other plotters. I'm not concerned merely with the few score men of this organisation—I have to think of the moral effect on other groups which may exist elsewhere."

Stormgren was silent for a while. He was not altogether satisfied, but he could see Karellen's point of view and some of his anger had evaporated.

"It's a pity to do it in my last few weeks of office," he said, "but from now on I'm going to have a guard on my house. Pieter can be kidnapped next time. How has he managed, by the way? Are things in as big a mess as I expect?"

"You'll be disappointed to find out how little your absence has mattered. I've watched Pieter carefully this past week, and have deliberately avoided helping him. On the whole he's done very well—but he's not the man to take your place."

"That's lucky for him," said Stormgren, still rather agrieved. "And have you had any word from your superiors about—about showing yourself to us? I'm sure now that it's the strongest argument your enemies have. Again and again they told me: 'We'll never trust the Overlords until we can see them.'"

Karellen sighed.

"No, I have heard nothing. But I know what the answer must be."

Stormgren did not press the matter. Once he might have done so, but now for the first time the faint shadow of a plan had come into his mind. What he had refused to do under duress, he might yet attempt of his own free will.

PIERRE DUVAL showed no surprise when Stormgren walked unannounced into his office. They were old friends, and there was nothing unusual in the Secretary-General paying a personal visit to the chief of the Science Bureau. Certainly Karellen would not think it odd, even if by any remote chance he turned his attention to this corner of the world.

For a while the two men talked business and exchanged political gossip; then, rather hesitantly, Stormgren came to the point. As his visitor talked, the old Frenchman leaned back in his chair and his eyebrows rose steadily millimetre by millimetre until they were almost entangled in his forelock. Once or twice he seemed about to speak but each time thought better of it.

When Stormgren had finished, the scientist looked nervously around the room.

"Do you think he was listening?" he said.

"I don't believe he can. This place is supposed to be shielded from everything, isn't it? Karellen's not a magician. He knows where I am, but that's all."

"I hope you're right. Apart from that, won't there be trouble when he discovers what you're trying to do? Because he will, you know."

"I'll take that risk. Besides, we understand each other rather well."

The physicist toyed with his pencil and stared into space for a while.

"It's a very pretty problem. I like it," he said simply. Then he dived into a drawer and produced an enormous writing pad, quite the biggest that Stormgren had ever seen.

"Right," he began, scribbling furiously. "Let me make sure I have all the facts. Tell me everything you can about the room in which you have your interviews. Don't omit any detail, however trivial it seems."

"There isn't much to describe. It's made of metal, and is about eight yards square and four high. The vision screen is about a yard on a side and there's a desk immediately beneath it—here, it will be quicker if I draw it for you."

Rapidly Stormgren sketched the little room he knew so well, and pushed the drawing over to Duval. As he did so, he remembered with a slight shiver the last time he had done this sort of thing.

The Frenchman studied the drawing with puckered brow.

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"Yes."

He snorted in disgust.

"What about lighting? Do you sit in total darkness? And how about heating, ventilation . . ."

Stormgren smiled at the characteristic outburst.

"The whole ceiling is luminous, and as far as I can tell the air comes through the speaker grille. I don't know how it leaves; perhaps the stream reverses at intervals, but I haven't noticed it. There's no sign of any heaters, but the room is always at normal temperature."

"By that I take it that the carbon dioxide has frozen out, but not the oxygen."

Stormgren did his best to smile at the well-worn joke.

"I think I've told you everything," he concluded. "As for the machine that takes me up to Karellen's ship, the room in which I travel is as featureless as an elevator cage. Apart from the couch and table, it might very well be one."

THERE was silence for several minutes while the physicist embroidered his writing pad with meticulous and microscopic doodles. No one could have guessed that behind that still almost unfurrowed brow the world's finest technical brain was working with the icy precision that had made it famous.

Then Duval nodded to himself in satisfaction, leaned forward and pointed his pencil at Stormgren.

"What makes you think, Rikki," he asked, "that Karellen's vision screen, as you call it, really is what it pretends to be?"

"I've always taken it for granted—it's exactly like one. What else would it be, anyway?"

"The tendency of otherwise first-class minds to overlook the obvious always saddens me. You know that Karellen can watch your movements, but a television system must have some sort of camera. Where is it?"

"I'd thought of that," said Stormgren with asperity. "Couldn't the screen do both jobs? I know our televisions don't, but still—"

Duval didn't like the idea.

"It would be possible," he admitted. "But why on earth go to all that trouble? The simplest solution is always best. Doesn't it seem far more probable that your 'vision screen' is really *nothing more complicated than a sheet of one-way glass*?"

Stormgren was so annoyed with himself that for a moment he sat in silence, retracing the past. From the beginning, he had never challenged Karellen's story—yet now he came to look back, when had the Supervisor ever told him that he was using a television system? He had just taken it for granted; the whole thing had been a piece of psychological trickery, and he had been completely deceived. He tried to console himself with the thought that in the same circumstances even Duval would have fallen into the trap.

But he was jumping to conclusions: no one had proved anything yet.

"If you're right," he said, "all I have to do is to smash the glass—"

Duval sighed.

"These non-technical laymen! Do you think it's likely to be made of anything you could smash without explosives? And if you succeeded, do you imagine that Karellen is likely to breathe the same air as we do? Won't it be nice for both of you if he flourishes in an atmosphere of chlorine?"

Stormgren turned rather pale.

"Well, what *do* you suggest?" he asked with some exasperation.

"I want to think it over. First of all we've got to find if my theory is correct, and if so learn something about the material of the screen. I'll put some of my best men on the job—by the way, I suppose you carry a brief-case when you visit the Supervisor? Is it the one you've got there?"

"Yes."

"It's rather small. Will you get one at least ten inches deep, and use it from now on so that he becomes used to seeing it?"

"Very well," said Stormgren doubtfully. "Do you want me to carry a concealed X-ray set?"

The physicist grinned.

"I don't know yet, but we'll think of something. I'll let you know what it is in about a month's time."

He gave a little laugh.

"Do you know what all this reminds me of?"

"Yes," said Stormgren promptly, "the time you were building illegal radio sets during the German occupation."

Duval looked disappointed.

"Well, I suppose I *have* mentioned that once or twice before. But there's one other thing—"

"Yes?"

"When you're caught, I didn't know what you wanted the gear for."

"What, after all the fuss you once made about the scientist's social responsibility for his inventions? Really, Pierre, I'm ashamed of you!"

STORMGREN laid down the thick folder of typescript with a sigh of relief.

"Thank heaven's that's settled at last," he said. "It's strange to think that those few hundred pages hold the future of Europe."

"They hold a good deal more than that," said Karellen quietly.

"So a lot of people have been suggesting. The preamble, and most of the constitution itself, won't need many alterations when it's time for the rest of the world to join. But the first step will be quite enough to get on with."

Stormgren dropped the file into his brief case, the back of which was now only six inches from the dark rectangle of the screen. From time to time his fingers played across the locks in a half-conscious nervous reaction, but he had no intention of pressing the concealed switch until the meeting was over. There was a chance that something might go wrong: though Duval had sworn that Karellen would detect nothing, one could never be sure.

"Now, you said you'd some news for me," Stormgren continued, with scarcely concealed eagerness. "Is it about—"

"Yes," said Karellen. "I received the Policy Board's decision a few hours ago, and am authorised to make an important statement. I don't think that the

Freedom League will be very satisfied, but it should help to reduce the tension. We won't record this, by the way.

"You've often told me, Rikki, that no matter how unlike you we are physically, the human race will soon grow accustomed to us. That shows a lack of imagination on your part. It would probably be true in your case, but you must remember that most of the World is still uneducated by any reasonable standards, and is riddled with prejudices and superstitions that may take another hundred years to eradicate.

"You will grant us that we know something of human psychology. We know rather accurately what would happen if we revealed ourselves to the world in its present state of development. I can't go into details, even with you, so you must accept my analysis on trust. We can, however, make this definite promise, which should give you some satisfaction. *In fifty years—two generations from now—we shall come down from our ships and humanity will at last see us as we are.*"

STORMGREN was silent for a while. He felt little of the satisfaction that Karellen's statement would have once given him. Indeed, he was somewhat confused by his partial success and for a moment his resolution faltered. The truth would come with the passage of time, and all his plotting was unnecessary and perhaps unwise. If he still went ahead, it would only be for the selfish reason that he would not be alive fifty years from now.

Karellen must have seen his irresolution for he continued:

"I'm sorry if this disappoints you, but at least the political problems of the near future won't be your responsibility. Perhaps you still think that our fears are unfounded, but believe me we've had convincing proof of the dangers of any other course."

Stormgren leaned forward, breathing heavily.

"I always thought so! You *have* been seen by Man!"

"I didn't say that," Karellen answered after a short pause, "Your world isn't the only planet we've supervised."

Stormgren was not to be shaken off so easily.

"There have been many legends suggesting that Earth has been visited in the past by other races."

"I know: I've read the Historical Research Section's report. It makes Earth look like the crossroads of the Universe."

"There may have been visits about which you know nothing," said Stormgren, still angling hopefully. "Though since you must have been observing us for thousands of years, I suppose that's rather unlikely."

"I suppose it is," said Karellen in his most unhelpful manner. And at that moment Stormgren made up his mind.

"Karellen," he said abruptly, "I'll draft out the statement and send it up to you for approval. But I reserve the right to continue pestering you, and if I see any opportunity, I'll do my best to learn your secret."

"I'm perfectly well aware of that," replied the Supervisor, with a slight chuckle.

"And you don't mind?"

"Not in the slightest—though I draw the line at atomic bombs, poison gas, or anything else that might strain our friendship."

Stormgren wondered what, if anything, Karellen had guessed. Behind the

Supervisor's banter he had recognised the note of understanding, perhaps—who could tell?—even of encouragement.

"I'm glad to know it," Stormgren replied in as level a voice as he could manage. He rose to his feet, bringing down the cover of his case as he did so. His thumb slid along the catch.

"I'll draft that statement at once," he repeated, "and send it up on the teletype later to-day."

While he was speaking, he pressed the button—and knew that all his fears had been groundless. Karellen's senses were no finer than Man's. The Supervisor could have detected nothing, for there was no change in his voice as he said good-bye and spoke the familiar code-words that opened the door of the chamber.

Yet Stormgren still felt like a shop-lifter leaving a department store under the eyes of the house detective, and breathed a sigh of relief when the air-lock doors had finally closed behind him.

V

"I ADMIT," said van Ryberg, "that some of my theories haven't been very bright. But tell me what you think of this one."

"Must I?"

Pieter didn't seem to notice.

"It isn't really my idea," he said modestly. "I got it from a story of Chesterton's. Suppose that the Overlords are hiding the fact that they've got nothing to hide?"

"That sounds a little complicated to me," said Stormgren, beginning to take slight interest.

"What I mean is this," van Ryberg continued eagerly. "I think that physically they're human beings like us. They realise that we'll tolerate being ruled by creatures we imagine to be—well, alien and super-intelligent. But the human race being what it is, it just won't be bossed around by creatures of the same species."

"Very ingenious, like all your theories," said Stormgren. "I wish you'd give them Opus numbers so that I could keep up with them. The objections to this one—"

But at that moment Alexander Wainwright was ushered in.

Stormgren wondered what he was thinking. He wondered, too, if Wainwright had made any contact with the men who had kidnapped him. He doubted it, for he believed Wainwright's disapproval of violent methods to be perfectly genuine. The extremists in his movement had discredited themselves thoroughly, and it would be a long time before the world heard of them again.

The head of the Freedom League listened in silence while the draft was read to him. Stormgren hoped that he appreciated this gesture, which had been Karellen's idea. Not for another twelve hours would the rest of the world know of the promise that had been made to its grandchildren.

"Fifty years," said Wainwright thoughtfully. "That is a long time to wait."

"Not for Karellen, nor for humanity," Stormgren answered. Only now was he beginning to realise the neatness of the Overlords' solution. It had given them the breathing space they believed they needed, and it had cut the ground from beneath the Freedom League's feet. He did not imagine that the League would capitulate, but its position would be seriously weakened.

Certainly Wainwright realised this as well, as he must also have realised that Karellen would be watching him. For he said very little and left as quickly as he could: Stormgren knew that he would not see him again in his term of office. The Freedom League might still be a nuisance, but that was a problem for his successor.

There were some things that only time could cure. Evil men could be destroyed, but nothing could be done about good men who were deluded.

"HERE'S your case," said Duval. "It's as good as new."

"Thanks," Stormgren answered, inspecting it carefully none the less. "Now perhaps you can tell me what it was all about—and what we are going to do next."

The physicist seemed more interested in his own thoughts.

"What I can't understand," he said, "is the ease with which we've got away with it. Now if I'd been Kar—"

"But you're not. Get to the point, man. What *did* we discover?"

"Ah me, these excitable, highly-strung Nordic races!" sighed Duval. "Well, it's rather a long story, but the first piece of equipment you carried was a tiny echo sounder using supersonic waves. We went right up the audio spectrum, so high that I was sure no possible sense organs could detect us. When you pressed the button, a rather complicated set of sound pulses went out in various directions. I won't bother about the details, but the main idea was to measure the thickness of the screen and to find the dimensions of the room, if any, behind it.

"The screen seems to be about five inches thick, and the space behind it is at least ten yards across. We couldn't detect any echo from the further wall, but we hardly expected to. However, we *did* get this."

He pushed forward a photographic record which to Stormgren looked rather like the autograph of a mild earthquake.

"See that little kink?"

"Yes: what is it?"

"Only Karellen."

"Good Lord! Are you sure?"

"It's a pretty safe guess. He's sitting, or standing, or whatever he does, about two yards on the other side of the screen. If the resolution had been better, we might even have calculated his size."

Stormgren's feelings were very mixed as he stared at the scarcely visible deflexion of the trace. Until now, there had been no proof that Karellen even had a material body. The evidence was still indirect, but he accepted it with little question.

Duval's voice cut into his reverie.

"The piece of equipment you carried on your second visit was similar," he said, "but used light instead of sound. We had to measure the transmission characteristics of the screen, and that presented considerable difficulties. Obviously we dared not use visible light, so once again we chose frequencies so high that we couldn't imagine any eye focusing them—or any atmosphere transmitting them very far. And again we managed to carry it off.

"You'll realise," he continued, "that there's no such thing as a truly one-way glass. Karellen's screen, we found when we analysed our results, transmits about a hundred times as easily in one direction as the other. We've no

particular reason to assume that the figure is very different in the visible spectrum—but we're giving you an enormous safety margin."

WITH the air of a conjuror producing a whole litter of rabbits, Duval reached into his desk and pulled out a pistol-like object with a flexible bell-mouth. It reminded Stormgren of a rubber blunderbuss, and he couldn't imagine what it was supposed to be.

Duval grinned at his perplexity.

"It isn't as dangerous as it looks. All you have to do is to ram the muzzle against the screen and press the trigger. It gives out a very powerful flash lasting five seconds, and in that time you'll be able to swing it round the room. Enough light will come back to give you a good view."

"It won't hurt Karellen?"

"Not if you aim low and sweep it upwards. That will give him time to accommodate—I suppose he has reflexes like ours, and we don't want to blind him."

Stormgren looked at the weapon doubtfully and hefted it in his hand. For the last few weeks his conscience had been pricking him. Karellen had always treated him with unmistakable affection, despite his occasional devastating frankness, and now that their time together was drawing to its close he did not wish to do anything that might spoil that relationship. But the Supervisor had received due warning, and Stormgren had the conviction that if the choice had been his Karellen would long ago have shown himself. Now the decision would be made for him: when their last meeting came to its end, Stormgren would gaze upon Karellen's face.

If, of course, Karellen had a face.

THE NERVOUSNESS that Stormgren had first felt had long since passed away. Karellen was doing almost all the talking, weaving the long, intricate sentences of which he was so fond. Once this had seemed to Stormgren the most wonderful and certainly the most unexpected of all Karellen's gifts. Now it no longer appeared quite so marvellous, for he knew that like most of the Supervisor's abilities it was the result of sheer intellectual power and not of any special talent.

Karellen had time for any amount of literary composition when he slowed his thoughts down to the pace of human speech.

"Do not worry," he said, "about the Freedom League. It has been very quiet for the past month, and though it will revive again it is no longer a real danger. Indeed, since it's always valuable to know what your opponents are doing, the League is a very useful institution. Should it ever get into financial difficulties I might even subsidise it."

Stormgren had often found it difficult to tell when Karellen was joking. He kept his face impassive and continued to listen.

"Very soon the League will lose another of its strongest arguments. There's been a good deal of criticism, mostly rather childish, of the special position you have held for the past few years. I found it very valuable in the early days of my administration, but now that the world is moving along the line that I planned, it can cease. In the future, all my dealings with Earth will be indirect and the office of Secretary-General can once again become what it was originally intended to be.

"During the next fifty years there will be many crises, but they will pass. Almost a generation from now, I shall reach the nadir of my popularity, for plans must be put into operation which cannot be fully explained at the time. Attempts may even be made to destroy me. But the pattern of the future is clear enough, and one day all these difficulties will be forgotten—even to a race with memories as long as yours."

The last words were spoken with such a peculiar emphasis that Stormgren immediately froze in his seat. Karellen never made accidental slips and even his indiscretions were calculated to many decimal places. But there was no time to ask questions—which certainly would not be answered—before the Supervisor had changed the subject again.

"You've often asked me about our long-term plans," he continued. "The foundation of the World State is, of course, only the first step. You will live to see its completion—but the change will be so imperceptible that few will notice it when it comes. After that there will be a pause for thirty years while the next generation reaches maturity. And then will come the day which we have promised. I am sorry that you will not be there."

Stormgren's eyes were open, but his gaze was fixed far beyond the dark barrier of the screen. He was looking into the future, imagining the day he would never see, when the great ships of the Overlords came down at last to Earth and were thrown open to the waiting world.

"On that day," continued Karellen, "the human mind will experience one of its very rare psychological discontinuities. But no permanent harm will be done: the men of that age will be more stable than their grandfathers. We will always have been part of their lives, and when they meet us we will not seem so—strange—as we would do to you."

STORMGREN had never known Karellen in so contemplative a mood, but this gave him no surprise. He did not believe that he had ever seen more than a few facets of the Supervisor's personality: the real Karellen was unknown and perhaps unknowable to human beings. And once again Stormgren had the feeling that the Supervisor's real interests were elsewhere, and that he ruled Earth with only a fraction of his mind, as effortlessly as a master of three-dimensional chess may play a game of checkers.

Karellen continued his reverie, almost as if Stormgren were not there.

"Then there will be another pause, only a short one this time for the world will be growing impatient. Men will wish to go out to the stars, to see the other worlds of the Universe and to join us in our work. For it is only beginning: not a thousandth of the suns in the Galaxy have ever been visited by the races of which we know. One day, Rikki, your descendants in their own ships will be bringing civilisation to the worlds that are ripe to receive it—just as we are doing now."

Faintly across the gulf of centuries Stormgren could glimpse the future of which Karellen dreamed, the future towards which he was leading mankind. How far ahead? He could not even guess: there was no way in which he could measure Man's present stature against the standards of the Overlords.

Karellen had fallen silent and Stormgren had the impression that the Supervisor was watching him intently.

"It is a great vision," he said softly. "Do you bring it to all your worlds?"

"Yes," said Karellen, "all that can understand it."

Out of nowhere, a strangely disturbing thought came into Stormgren's mind.

"Suppose, after all, your experiment fails with Man? We have known such things in our own dealings with other races. Surely you have had your failures too?"

"Yes," said Karellen, so softly that Stormgren could scarcely hear him. "We have had our failures."

"And what do you do then?"

"We wait—and try again."

There was a pause lasting perhaps ten seconds. When Karellen spoke again, his words were muffled and so unexpected that for a moment Stormgren did not react.

"Good-bye, Rikki!"

Karellen had tricked him—probably it was already too late. Stormgren's paralysis lasted only for a moment. Then in a single swift, well-practised movement, he whipped out the flash-gun and jammed it against the screen.

THE PINE-TREES came almost to the edge of the lake, leaving along its border only a narrow strip of grass a few yards wide. Every evening when it was warm enough Stormgren would walk slowly along this strip to the landing-stage, watch the sunlight die upon the water, and then return to the house before the chill evening wind came up from the forest. The simple ritual gave him much contentment, and he would continue it as long as he had the strength.

Far away over the lake something was coming in from the west, flying low and fast. Aircraft were uncommon in these parts, unless one counted the trans-polar liners which must be passing overhead every hour of the day and night. But there was never any sign of their presence, save an occasional vapour trail high against the blue of the stratosphere. This machine was a small helicopter, and it was coming towards him with ominous determination. Stormgren glanced along the beach and saw that there was no chance of escape. Then he shrugged his shoulders and sat down on the wooden bench at the end of the jetty.

The reporter was so deferential that Stormgren found it surprising. He had almost forgotten that he was not only an elder statesman but, outside his own country, almost a mythical figure.

"Mr. Stormgren," the intruder began, "I'm very sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you would mind answering a few questions about the Overlords?"

Stormgren frowned slightly. After all these years, he still shared Karellen's dislike for the word.

"I do not think," he said, "that I can add a great deal to what has already been written elsewhere.

The reporter was watching him with a curious intentness.

"I thought that you might," he answered. "A rather strange story has just come to our notice. It seems that, nearly thirty years ago, one of the Science Bureau's technicians made some remarkable pieces of equipment for you. We wondered if you could tell us anything about it."

For a moment Stormgren was silent, his mind going back into the past. He was not surprised that the secret had been discovered: indeed it was amazing

that it had taken so long. He wondered how it had happened, not that it mattered now.

He rose to his feet and began to walk back along the jetty, the reporter following a few paces behind.

"The story," he said, "contains a certain amount of truth. On my last visit to Karellen's ship I took some apparatus with me, in the hope that I might see the Supervisor. It was rather a foolish thing to do but—well, I was only sixty at the time."

He chuckled to himself and then continued.

"It's not much of a story to have brought you all this way. You see, it didn't work."

"You saw nothing?"

"No, nothing at all. I'm afraid you'll have to wait—but after all, there are only twenty years to go."

TWENTY YEARS to go. Yes, Karellen had been right. By then the world would be ready, as it had not been when he had spoken that same lie to Duval thirty years before.

Yet was it a lie? What had he really seen? No more, he was certain, than Karellen had intended. He was as sure as he could be of anything that the Supervisor had known his plan from the beginning, and had foreseen every moment of its final act.

Why else had that enormous chair been already empty when the circle of light blazed upon it? In the same moment he had started to swing the beam, but he was too late. The metal door, twice as high as a man, was closing swiftly when he first caught sight of it—closing swiftly, yet not quite swiftly enough.

Karellen had trusted him, had not wished him to go down into the long evening of his life still haunted by a mystery he could never solve. Karellen dared not defy the unknown powers above him (were they of that same race too?) but he had done all that he could. If he had disobeyed Them, They could never prove it.

"We have had our failures."

Yes, Karellen, that was true: and were *you* the one who failed, before the dawn of human history? It must have been a failure indeed, for its echoes to roll down all the ages, to haunt the childhood of every race of man. Even in fifty years, could you overcome the power of all the myths and legends of the world?

Yet Stormgren knew there would be no second failure. When the two races met again, the Overlords would have won the trust and friendship of Mankind, and not even the shock of recognition could undo that work. They would go together into the future, and the unknown tragedy that had darkened the past would be lost forever down the dim corridors of prehistoric time.

And Stormgren knew also that the last thing he would ever see as he closed his eyes on life would be that swiftly turning door, and the long black tail disappearing behind it.

A very famous and unexpectedly beautiful tail.

A barbed tail.

THE END