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Arthur C. Clarke

Childhood's
End



By the award-winning author of
2001: A Space Odyssey
and
Rendezvous With Rama

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EARTH AND THE OVERLORDS

THE volcano that had reared Taratua up from the Pacific depths had been sleeping now for half a million years. Yet in a little while, thought Reinhold, the island would be bathed with fires fiercer than any that had attended its birth. He glanced towards the launching site, and his gaze climbed the pyramid of scaffolding that still surrounded the Columbus. Two hundred feet above the ground, the ship's prow was catching the last rays of the descending sun. This was one of the last nights it would ever know: soon it would be floating in the eternal sunshine of space.

It was quiet here beneath the palms, high up on the rocky spine of the island. The only sound from the Project was the occasional yammering of an air compressor or the faint shout of a workman. Reinhold had grown fond of these clustered palms; almost every evening he had come here to survey his little empire. It saddened him to think that they would be blasted to atoms when the Columbus rose in flame and fury to the stars.

A mile beyond the reef, the James Forrestal had switched on her searchlights and was sweeping the dark waters. The sun had now vanished completely, and the swift tropical night was racing in from the east. Reinhold wondered, a little sardonically, if the carrier expected to find Russian submarines so close to shore.

The thought of Russia turned his mind, as it always did, to Konrad, and that morning in the cataclysmic spring of 1945. More than thirty years had passed, but the memory of those last days when the Reich was crumbling beneath the waves from the East and from the West had never faded. He could still see Konrad's tired blue eyes, and the golden stubble on his chin, as they shook hands and parted in that ruined Prussian village, while the refugees streamed endlessly past. It was a parting that symbolized everything that had since happened to the world—the cleavage between East and West. For Konrad chose the road to Moscow. Reinhold had thought him a fool, but now he was not so sure.

For thirty years he had assumed that Konrad was dead. It was only a week ago that Colonel Sandmeyer, of Technical Intelligence, had given him the news. He didn't like Sandmeyer, and he was sure the feeling was mutual. But neither let that interfere with business.

"Mr. Hoffmann," the Colonel had begun, in his best official manner, "I've just had some alarming information from Washington. It's top secret, of course, but we've decided to break it to the engineering staff so that they'll realize the necessity for speed." He paused for effect, but the gesture was wasted on Reinhold. Somehow, he already knew what was coming.

"The Russians are nearly level with us. They've got some kind of atomic drive-it may even be more efficient than ours, and they're building a ship on the shores of Lake Baikal. We don't know how far they've got, but Intelligence believe it may be launched this year. You know what that means."

Yes, thought Reinhold, I know. The race is on-and we may not win it.

"Do you know who's running their team?" he had asked, not really expecting an answer. To his surprise, Colonel Sandmeyer had pushed across a typewritten sheet-and there at its head was the name: Konrad Schneider.

"You knew a lot of these men at PeenemOnde, didn't you?" said the Colonel. "That may give us some insight into their methods. I'd like you to let me have notes on as many of them as you can-their specialities, the bright ideas they had, and so on. I know it's asking a lot after all this time-but see what you can do."

"Konrad Schneider is the only one who matters," Reinhold had answered. "He was brilliant-the others are just competent engineers. Heaven only knows what he's done in thirty years. Remember-he's probably seen all our results and we haven't any of his. That gives him a decided advantage."

He hadn't meant this as a criticism of Intelligence, but for a moment it seemed as if Sandmeyer was going to be offended. Then the Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"It works both ways-you've told me that yourself. Our free exchange of information means swifter progress, even if we do give away a few secrets. The Russian research departments probably don't know what their own people are doing half the time. We'll show them that Democracy can get to the moon first."

Democracy-Nuts! thought Reinhold, but knew better than to say it. One Konrad Schneider was worth a million names on an electoral roll. And what had Konrad done by this time, with all the resources of the U.S.S.R. behind him? Perhaps, even now, his ship was already outward bound from Earth....

The sun which had deserted Taratua was still high above Lake Baikal when Konrad Schneider and the Assistant Commissar for Nuclear Science walked slowly back from the motor test rig. Their ears were still throbbing painfully, though the last thunderous echoes had died out across the lake ten minutes before.

"Why the long face?" asked Grigorievitch suddenly. "You should be happy now. In another month we'll be on our way, and the Yankees will be choking themselves with rage."

"You're an optimist, as usual," said Schneider. "Even though the motor works, it's not as easy as that. True, I can't see any serious obstacles now-but I'm worried about the reports from Taratua. I've told you how good Hoffmann is, and he's got billions of dollars behind him. Those photographs of his ship aren't very clear, but it looks as if it's not far from completion. And we know he tested his motor five weeks ago."

"Don't worry," laughed Grigorievitch. "They're the ones who are going to have the big surprise. Remember-they don't know a thing about us."

Schneider wondered if that was true, but decided it was much safer to express no doubts. That might start Grigorievitch's mind exploring far too many tortuous channels, and if there had been a leak, he would find it hard enough to clear himself

The guard saluted as he reentered the administration building. There were nearly as many soldiers here, he thought grimly, as technicians. But that was how the Russians did things, and as long as they kept out of his way he had no complaints. On the whole-with exasperating exceptions-events had turned out very much as he had hoped. Only the future could tell if he or Reinhold had made the better choice.

He was already at work on his final report when the sound of shouting voices disturbed him. For a moment he sat motionless at his desk, wondering what conceivable event could have disturbed the rigid discipline of the camp. Then he walked to the window-and for the first time in his life he knew despair.

The stars were all around him as Reinhold descended the little hill. Out at sea, the Forrester was still sweeping the water with her fingers of light, while further along the beach the scaffolding round the Columbus had transformed itself into an illuminated Christmas tree. Only the projecting prow of the ship lay like a dark shadow across the stars.

A radio was blaring dance-music from the living quarters, and unconsciously Reinhold's feet accelerated to the rhythm.

He had almost reached the narrow road along the edge of the sands when some premonition, some half-glimpsed movement, made him stop. Puzzled, he glanced from land to sea and back again: it was some little time before he thought of looking at the sky.

Then Reinhold Hoffmann knew, as did Konrad Schneider at this same moment, that he had lost his race. And he knew that he had lost it, not by the few weeks or months that he had feared, but by millennia. The huge and silent shadows driving across the stars, more miles above his head than he dared to guess, were as far beyond his little Columbus as it

surpassed the log canoes of paleolithic man. For a moment that seemed to last forever, Reinhold watched, as all the world was watching, while the great ships descended in their overwhelming majesty-until at last he could hear the faint scream of their passage through the thin air of the stratosphere.

He felt no regrets as the work of a lifetime was swept away. He had laboured to take men to the stars, and in the moment of success the stars-the aloof, indifferent stars-had come to him. This was the moment when history held its breath, and the present sheared asunder from the past as an iceberg splits from its frozen, parent cliffs, and goes sailing out to sea in lonely pride. All that the past ages had achieved was as nothing now: only one thought echoed and re-echoed through Reinhold's brain:

The human race was no longer alone.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations stood motionless by the great window, staring down at the crawling traffic on 43rd Street. He sometimes wondered if it was a good thing for any man to work at such an altitude above his fellow humans. Detachment was all very well, but it could change so easily to indifference. Or was he merely trying to rationalize his dislike of skyscrapers, still unabated after twenty years in New York?

He heard the door open behind him, but did not turn his head as Pieter van Ryberg came into the room. There was the inevitable pause as Pieter looked disapprovingly at the thermostat, for it was a standing joke that the Secretary-General liked living in an icebox. Stormgren waited until his assistant joined him at the window, then tore his gaze away from the familiar yet always fascinating panorama below.

"They're late," he said. "Wainwright should have been here five minutes ago."

"I've just heard from the police. He's got quite a procession with him, and it's snarled up the traffic. He should be here any moment now."

Van Ryberg paused, then added abruptly, "Are you still sure it's a good idea to see him?"

"I'm afraid it's a little late to back out of it now. After all, I've agreed-though as you know it was never my idea in the first place."

Stormgren had walked to his desk and was fidgeting with his famous uranium paperweight. He was not nervous- merely undecided. He was also glad that Wainwright was late, for that would give him a slight moral advantage when the interview opened. Such trivialities played a greater part in human affairs than anyone who set much store on logic and reason might wish.

"Here they are!" said van Ryberg suddenly, pressing his face against the window. "They're coming along the Avenue - a good three thousand, I'd say."

Stormgren picked up his notebook and rejoined his assistant. Half a mile away, a small but determined crowd was moving slowly towards the Secretariat Building. It carried banners that were indecipherable at this distance, but Stormgren knew their message well enough. ~Presently he could hear, rising above the sound of the traffic, the ominous rhythm 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, rather self-consciously, in the air. They were not defying him, though the gesture was doubtless meant for Stormgren to see. As pygmies may threaten a giant, so those angry fists were directed against the sky fifty kilometres above his head-against the gleaming silver cloud that was the flagship of the Overlord fleet.

And very probably, thought Stormgren, Karellen was watching the whole thing and enjoying himself hugely, for this meeting would never have taken place except at the Supervisor's instigation.

This was the first time that Stormgren had ever met the head of the Freedom League. He had ceased to wonder if the action was wise, for Karellen's plans were often too subtle for merely human understanding. At the worst, Stormgren did not see that any positive harm could be done. If he had refused to see Wainwright, the League would have used the fact as ammunition against him.

Alexander Wainwright was a tall, handsome man in the late forties. He was, Stormgren knew, completely honest, and therefore doubly dangerous. Yet his obvious sincerity made it hard to dislike him, whatever views one might have about the cause for which he stood-and some of the followers he had attracted.

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 gravely.

"That is my main protest, Mr. Secretary. As you know, for the last five years we have tried to awaken the human race to the danger that confronts it. The task has been a difficult one, for the majority of people seem content to let the Overlords run the world as they please. Nevertheless, more than five million patriots, in every country, have

signed our petition."

"That is not a very impressive figure out of two and a half billion."

"It is a figure that cannot be ignored. And for every person who has signed, there are many who feel grave doubts about the wisdom, not to mention the rightness of this Federation plan. Even Supervisor Karellen, for all his powers, cannot wipe out a thousand years of history at the stroke of a pen."

"What does anyone know of Karellen's powers?" retorted Stormgren. "When I was a boy, the Federation of Europe was a dream-but when I grew to manhood it had become reality. And that was before the arrival of the Overlords. Kardlen is merely finishing the work we had begun."

"Europe was a cultural and geographical entity. The world is not-that is the difference."

"To the Overlords," replied Stormgren sarcastically, "the Earth is probably a great deal smaller than Europe seemed to our fathers-and their outlook, I submit, is more mature than ours."

"I do not necessarily quarrel with Federation as an ultimate objective-though many of my supporters might not agree. But it must come from within-not be superimposed from without. We must work out our own destiny. 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 answer 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 liberty. 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." At last, thought Stormgren, we've got to the point. Basically, the conflict is a religious one, however much it may be disguised. Wainwright never let you forget he was a dergyman. Though he no longer

wore a clerical collar, somehow one always got the impression it was still there.

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

Wainwright shook his head in angry denial.

"Many of the leaders are blind: they have been corrupted by the Overlords. When they realize the danger, it may be too late. Humanity will have lost its initiative and become a subject race."

There was silence for a moment. Then Stormgren replied:

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

"There is one other point," said Wainwright slowly. "We have many objections to the Overlords-but above all we detest 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 we doubt his motives?"

"Despite all that he has done for humanity?"

"Yes-despite that. I do not know which we resent more- Karellen's omnipotence, or his secrecy. If he has nothing to hide, why will he never reveal himself? Next time you speak with the Supervisor, Mr. Stormgren, ask him that!"

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 when the great ships came pouring out of the unknown depths of space.

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 gleaming, silent shapes hanging over every land were the symbol of a science Man could not hope to match for centuries. For six days they floated motionless above his cities, giving no hint 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, Paris, Moscow, Rome, Cape Town, Tokyo, Canberra....

Even before the ending of those heart-freezing 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 act.

And on the sixth day Karellen, Supervisor for Earth, made himself known to the world in a broadcast that blanketed every radio frequency. He spoke in English so perfect that the controversy it began was to rage across the Atlantic for a generation. 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 could be no doubt that its scholarship and virtuosity, its tantalizing 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 had ended. Local, internal governments would still retain their powers, but in the wider field of international affairs the supreme decisions had passed from human hands. Arguments-protests-all were futile.

It was hardly to be expected that all the nations of the world would submit tamely to such a limitation of their powers. Yet active resistance presented baffling difficulties, for the destruction of the Overlords' ships, even if it could be achieved, would annihilate the cities beneath them. Nevertheless, one major power had made the attempt. Perhaps those responsible hoped to kill two birds with one atomic missile, for their target was floating above the capital of an adjoining and unfriendly nation.

As the great ship's image had expanded on the television screen in the secret control room, the little group of officers and technicians must have been torn by many emotions. If they succeeded-what action would the remaining ships take?

Could they also be destroyed, leaving humanity to go its own way once more? Or would Kardllan wreak some frightful vengeance upon those who had attacked him?

The screen became suddenly blank as the missile destroyed itself on impact, and the picture switched immediately to an airborne camera many miles away. In the fraction of a second that had elapsed, the fireball should already have formed and should be filling the sky with its solar flame.

Yet nothing whatsoever had happened. The great ship floated unharmed, bathed in the raw sunlight at the edge of space. Not only had the bomb failed to touch it, but no-one

could ever decide what had happened to the missile. Moreover, Karellen took no action against those responsible, or~ even indicated that he had known of the attack. He ignored them contemptuously, leaving them to worry over a vengeance that never came. It was a more effective, and more demoralizing, treatment than any punitive action could have been. The government responsible collapsed completely in mutual recrimination a few weeks later.

There had also been some passive resistance to the policy of the Overlords. Usually, Karellen had been able to deal with it by letting those concerned have their own way, until they had discovered that they were only hurting themselves by their refusal to cooperate. Only once had he taken any direct action against a recalcitrant government.

For more than a hundred years, the Republic of South Africa had been the centre of social strife. Men of good will on both sides had tried to build a bridge, but in vain-fears and prejudices were too deeply ingrained to permit any cooperation. Successive governments had differed only by the degree of their intolerance; the land was poisoned with hate and the aftermath of civil war.

When it became clear that no attempt would be made to end discrimination, Karellen gave his warning. It merely named a date and time-no more. There was apprehension, but little fear or panic, for no-one believed that the Overlords would take any violent or destructive action which would involve innocent and guilty alike.

Nor did they. All that happened was that as the sun passed the meridian at Cape Town-it went out. There remained visible merely a pale, purple ghost, giving no heat or light. Somehow, out in space, the light of the sun had been polarized by two crossed fields so that no radiation could pass. The area affected was five hundred kilometres across, and perfectly circular.

The demonstration lasted thirty minutes. It was sufficient: the next day the Government of South Africa announced that full civil rights would be restored to the white minority.

Apart from such isolated incidents, the human race had accepted the Overlords as part of the natural order of things. In a surprisingly short time, the initial shock had worn off, and the world went about its business again. The greatest 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.