

## ***Project: Earth***

The sound echoed hollowly through the big frame house. It vibrated among the dishes in the kitchen, the gutters along the roof, thumping slowly and evenly like distant thunder. From time to time it ceased, but then it began again, booming through the quiet night, a relentless sound, brutal in its regularity. From the top floor of the big house.

In the bathroom the three children huddled around the chair, nervous and hushed, pushing against each other with curiosity.

"You sure he can't see us?" Tommy rasped.

"How could he see us? Just don't make any noise." Dave Grant shifted on the chair, his face to the wall. "Don't talk so loud." He went on looking, ignoring them both.

"Let me see," Joan whispered, nudging her brother with a sharp elbow. "Get out of the way."

"Shut up." Dave pushed her back. "I can see better now." He turned up the light.

"I want to see," Tommy said. He pushed Dave off the chair onto the bathroom floor. "Come on."

Dave withdrew sullenly. "It's our house."

Tommy stepped cautiously up onto the chair. He put his eye to the crack, his face against the wall. For a time he saw nothing. The crack was narrow and the light on the other side was bad. Then, gradually, he began to make out shapes, forms beyond the wall.

Edward Billings was sitting at an immense old-fashioned desk. He had stopped typing and was resting his eyes. From his vest pocket he had taken a round pocket watch. Slowly, carefully, he wound the great watch. Without his glasses his lean, withered face seemed naked and bleak, the features of some elderly bird. Then he put his glasses on again and drew his chair closer to the desk.

He began to type, working with expert fingers the towering mass of metal and parts that reared up before him. Again the ominous booming echoed through the house, resuming its insistent beat.

Mr Billings's room was dark and littered. Books and papers lay everywhere, in piles and stacks, on the desk, on the table, in heaps on the floor. The walls were covered with charts, anatomy charts, maps, astronomy charts, signs of the zodiac. By the windows rows of dust-covered chemical bottles and packages lay stacked. A stuffed bird stood on the top of the bookcase, gray and drooping. On the desk was a huge magnifying glass, Greek and Hebrew dictionaries, a postage stamp box, a bone letter opener. Against the door a curling strip of flypaper moved with the air currents rising from the gas heater.

The remains of a magic lantern lay against one wall. A black satchel with clothes piled on it. Shirts and socks and a long frock coat, faded and threadbare. Heaps of newspapers and magazines, tied with brown cord. A great black umbrella against the table, a pool of sticky water around its metal point. A glass frame of dried butterflies, pressed into yellowing cotton.

And at the desk the huge old man hunched over his ancient typewriter and heaps of notes and papers.

"Gosh," Tommy said.

Edward Billings was working on his report. The report was open on the desk

beside him, an immense book, leather-bound, bulging at its cracked seams. He was transferring material into it from his heaps of notes.

The steady thumping of the great typewriter made the things in the bathroom rattle and shake, the light fixture, the bottles and tubes in the medicine cabinet. Even the floor under the children's feet.

"He's some kind of Communist agent," Joan said. "He's drawing maps of the city so he can set off bombs when Moscow gives the word."

The heck he is," Dave said angrily.

"Don't you see all the maps and pencils and papers? Why else would— "

"Be quiet," Dave snapped. "He will hear us. He is not a spy. He's too old to be a spy."

"What is he, then?"

"I don't know. But he isn't a spy. You're sure dumb. Anyhow, spies have beards."

"Maybe he's a criminal," Joan said.

"I talked to him once," Dave said. "He was coming downstairs. He spoke to me and gave me some candy out of a bag."

"What kind of candy was it?"

"I don't know. Hard candy. It wasn't any good."

"What's he do?" Tommy asked, turning from the crack.

"Sits in his room all day. Typing."

"Doesn't he work?"

Dave sneered. "That's what he does. He writes on his report. He's an official with a company."

"What company?"

"I forget."

"Doesn't he ever go out?"

"He goes out on the roof."

"On the roof?"

"He has a porch he goes out on. We fixed it. It's part of the apartment. He's got a garden. He comes downstairs and gets dirt from the back yard."

"Shhh!" Tommy warned. "He turned around."

Edward Billings had got to his feet. He was covering the typewriter with a black cloth, pushing it back and gathering up the pencils and erasers. He opened the desk drawer and dropped the pencils into it.

"He's through," Tommy said. "He's finished working."

The old man removed his glasses and put them away in a case. He dabbed at his forehead wearily, loosening his collar and necktie. His neck was long and the cords stood out from yellow, wrinkled skin. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he sipped some water from a glass.

His eyes were blue and faded, almost without color. For a moment he gazed directly at Tommy, his hawk-like face blank. Then abruptly he left the room, going through a door.

"He's going to bed," Tommy said.

Mr Billings returned, a towel over his arm. At the desk he stopped and laid the towel over the back of the chair. He lifted the massive report book and carried it from the desk over to the bookcase, holding it tightly with both hands. It was heavy. He laid it down and left the room again.

The report was very close. Tommy could make out the gold letters stamped into the cracked leather binding. He gazed at the letters a long time— until Joan finally pushed him away from the crack, shoving him impatiently off the chair.

Tommy stepped down and moved away, awed and fascinated by what he had seen. The great report book, the huge volume of material on which the old man worked, day after day. In the flickering light from the lamp on the desk he had easily been able to make out the gold-stamped words on the ragged leather binding.

PROJECT B: EARTH.

"Let's go," Dave said. "He'll come in here in a couple minutes. He might catch us watching."

"You're afraid of him," Joan taunted.

"So are you. So is Mom. So is everybody." He glanced at Tommy. "You afraid of him?"

Tommy shook his head. "I'd sure like to know what's in that book," he murmured. "I'd sure like to know what that old man is doing."

The late afternoon sunlight shone down bright and cold. Edward Billings came slowly down the back steps, an empty pail in one hand, rolled-up newspapers under his arm. He paused a moment, shielding his eyes and gazing around him. Then he disappeared into the back yard, pushing through the thick wet grass.

Tommy stepped out from behind the garage. He raced silently up the steps two at a time. He entered the building, hurrying down the dark corridor.

A moment later he stood before the door of Edward Billings's apartment, his chest rising and falling, listening intently.

There was no sound.

Tommy tried the knob. It turned easily. He pushed. The door swung open and a musty cloud of warm air drifted past him out into the corridor.

He had little time. The old man would be coming back with his pail of dirt from the yard.

Tommy entered the room and crossed to the bookcase, his heart pounding excitedly. The huge report book lay among heaps of notes and bundles of clippings. He pushed the papers away, sliding them from the book. He opened it quickly, at random, the thick pages crackling and bending.

Denmark.

Figures and facts. Endless facts, pages and columns, row after row. The lines of type danced before his eyes. He could make little out of them. He turned to another section.

New York.

Facts about New York. He struggled to understand the column heads. The number of people. What they did. How they lived. What they earned. How they spent their time. Their beliefs. Politics. Philosophy. Morals. Their age. Health. Intelligence. Graphs and statistics, averages and evaluations.

Evaluations. Appraisals. He shook his head and turned to another section.

California.

Population. Wealth. Activity of the state government. Ports and harbors. Facts, facts, facts—

Facts on everything. Everywhere. He thumbed through the report. On every part of the world. Every city, every state, every country. Any and all possible information.

Tommy closed the report uneasily. He wandered restlessly around the room, examining the heaps of notes and papers, the bundles of clippings and charts. The old man, typing day after day. Gathering facts, facts about the whole world. The earth. A report on the earth, the earth and everything on it. All the people. Everything they did and thought, their actions, deeds, achievements, beliefs, prejudices. A great report of all the information in the whole world.

Tommy picked up the big magnifying glass from the desk. He examined the surface of the desk with it, studying the wood. After a moment he put down the glass and picked up the bone letter knife. He put down the letter knife and examined the broken magic lantern in the corner. The frame of dead butterflies. The drooping stuffed bird. The bottles of chemicals.

He left the room, going out onto the roof porch. The late afternoon sunlight flickered fitfully; the sun was going down. In the center of the porch was a wooden frame, dirt and grass heaped around it. Along the rail were big earthen jars, sacks of fertilizer, damp packages of seeds. An over-turned spray gun. A dirty trowel. Strips of carpet and a rickety chair. A sprinkling can.

Over the wood frame was a wire netting. Tommy bent down, peering through the netting. He saw plants, small plants in rows. Some moss, growing on the ground. Tangled plants, tiny and very intricate.

At one place some dried grass was heaped up in a pile. Like some sort of cocoon.

Bugs? Insects of some sort? Animals?

He took a straw and poked it through the netting at the dried grass. The grass stirred. Something was in it. There were other cocoons, several of them, here and there among the plants.

Suddenly something scuttled out of one of the cocoons, racing across the grass. It squeaked in fright. A second followed it. Pink, running quickly. A small herd of shrilling pink things, two inches high, running and dashing among the plants.

Tommy leaned closer, squinting excitedly through the netting, trying to see what they were. Hairless. Some kind of hairless animals. But tiny, tiny as grasshoppers. Baby things? His pulse raced wildly. Baby things or maybe—

A sound. He turned quickly, rigid.

Edward Billings stood at the door, gasping for breath. He set down the pail of dirt, sighing and feeling for his handkerchief in the pocket of his dark blue coat. He mopped his forehead silently, gazing at the boy standing by the frame.

"Who are you, young man?" Billings said, after a moment. "I don't remember seeing you before."

Tommy shook his head. "No."

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing."

"Would you like to carry this pail out onto the porch for me? It's heavier than I realized."

Tommy stood for a moment. Then he came over and picked up the pail. He carried it out onto the roof porch and put it down by the wood frame.

"Thank you," Billings said. "I appreciate that." His keen, faded-blue eyes flickered as he studied the boy, his gaunt face shrewd, yet not unkind. "You look pretty strong to me. How old are you? About eleven?"

Tommy nodded. He moved back toward the railing. Below, two or three stories

down, was the street. Mr Murphy was walking along, coming home from the office. Some kids were playing at the corner. A young woman across the street was watering her lawn, a blue sweater around her slim shoulders. He was fairly safe. If the old man tried to do

anything— "Why did you come here?" Billings asked. Tommy said nothing. They stood looking at each other, the stooped old man, immense in his dark old-fashioned suit, the young boy in a red sweater and jeans, a beanie cap on his head, tennis shoes and freckles. Presently Tommy glanced toward the wood frame covered with netting, then up at Billings.

"That? You wanted to see that?"

"What's in there? What are they?"

"They?"

"The things. Bugs? I never saw anything like them. What are they?"

Billings walked slowly over. He bent down and unfastened the corner of the netting.

"I'll show you what they are. If you're interested." He twisted the netting loose and pulled

it back. Tommy came over, his eyes wide. "Well?" Billings said presently. "You can see what they are." Tommy whistled softly. "I thought maybe they were." He straightened up slowly, his

face pale. "I thought maybe— but I wasn't sure. Little tiny men!"

"Not exactly," Mr Billings said. He sat down heavily in the rickety chair. From his coat he took a pipe and a worn tobacco pouch. He filled the pipe slowly, shaking tobacco into it. "Not exactly men."

Tommy continued to gaze down into the frame. The cocoons were tiny huts, put together by the little men. Some of them had come out in the open now. They gazed up at him, standing together. Tiny pink creatures, two inches high. Naked. That was why they were pink.

"Look closer," Billings murmured. "Look at their heads. What do you see?"

"They're so small— "

"Go get the glass from the desk. The big magnifying glass." He watched Tommy hurry

into the study and come out quickly with the glass. "Now tell me what you see."

Tommy examined the figures through the glass. They seemed to be men, all right. Arms, legs— some were women. Their heads. He squinted. And then recoiled.

"What's the matter?" Billings grunted. "They're— they're queer." "Queer?" Billings smiled. "Well, it all depends on what you're used to. They're different— from you. But they're not queer. There's nothing wrong with them. At least, I hope there's nothing wrong." His smile faded, and he sat sucking on his pipe, deep in silent thought.

"Did you make them?" Tommy asked.

"I?" Billings removed his pipe. "No, not I."

"Where did you get them?"

"They were lent to me. A trial group. In fact, *the* trial group. They're new. Very new."

"You want— you want to sell one of them?"

Billings laughed. "No, I don't. Sorry. I have to keep them."

Tommy nodded, resuming his study. Through the glass he could see their heads

clearly. They were not quite men. From the front of each forehead antennae sprouted, tiny wire-like projections ending in knobs. Like the vanes of insects he had seen. They were not men, but they were similar to men. Except for the antennae they seemed

normal— the antennae and their extreme minuteness. "Did they come from another planet?" Tommy asked. "From Mars? Venus?" "No." "Where, then?" "That's a hard question to answer. The question has no meaning, not in connection

with them." "What's the report for?" "The report?" "In there. The big book with all the facts. The thing you're doing." "I've been working on that a long time." "How long?" Billings smiled. "That can't be answered, either. It has no meaning. But a long time

indeed. I'm getting near the end, though." "What are you going to do with it? When it's finished." "Turn it over to my superiors." "Who are they?" "You wouldn't know them." "Where are they? Are they here in town?" "Yes. And no. There's no way to answer that. Maybe someday you'll— " "The report's about us," Tommy said.

Billings turned his head. His keen eyes bored into Tommy. "Oh?" "It's about us.

The report. The book." "How do you know?" "I looked at it. I saw the title on the back. It's about the earth, isn't it?" Billings nodded. "Yes. It's about the earth."

"You're not from here, are you? You're from someplace else. Outside the system."

"How— how do you know that?" Tommy grinned with superior pride. "I can tell.

I have ways." "How much did you see in the report?" "Not much. What's it for?

Why are you making it? What are they going to do with it?" Billings considered a long time before he answered. At last he spoke. "That," he said,

'depends on *those*.' He gestured toward the wood frame. "What they do with the report

depends on how Project C works." "Project C?" "The third project. There've been only two others before. They wait a long time. Each

project is planned carefully. New factors are considered at great length before any decision is reached." "Two others?" "Antennae for these. A complete new

arrangement of the cognitive faculties. Almost

no dependence on innate drives. Greater flexibility. Some decrease in over-all emotional index, but what they lose in libido energy they gain in rational control. I would expect more emphasis on individual experience, rather than dependence on traditional group learning. Less stereotyped thinking. More rapid advance in situation control."

Billings's words made little sense. Tommy was lost. "What were the others like?" he asked.

"The others? Project A was a long time ago. It's dim in my mind. Wings."

"Wings."

"They were winged, depending on mobility and possessing considerable individualistic characteristics. In the final analysis we allowed them too much self-dependence. Pride. They had concepts of pride and honor. They were fighters. Each against the others. Divided into atomized antagonistic factions and— "

"What were the rest like?"

Billings knocked his pipe against the railing. He continued, speaking more to himself than to the boy standing in front of him. "The winged type was our first attempt at high-level organisms. Project A. After it failed we went into conference. Project B was the result. We were certain of success. We eliminated many of the excessive individualistic characteristics and substituted a group orientation process. A herd method of learning and experiencing. We hoped general control over the project would be assured. Our work with the first project convinced us that greater supervision would be necessary if we were to be successful."

"What did the second kind look like?" Tommy asked, searching for a meaningful thread in Billings's dissertation.

"We removed the wings, as I said. The general physiognomy remained the same. Although control was maintained for a short time, this second type also fractured away from the pattern, splintering into self-determined groups beyond our supervision. There is no doubt that surviving members of the initial type A were instrumental in influencing them. We should have exterminated the initial type as soon— "

"Are there any left?"

"Of Project B? Of course." Billings was irritated. "You're Project B. That's why I'm down here. As soon as my report is complete the final disposition of your type can be effected. There is no doubt my recommendation will be identical with that regarding Project A. Since your Project has moved out of jurisdiction to such a degree that for all intents and purposes you are no longer functional— "

But Tommy wasn't listening. He was bent over the wood frame, peering down at the tiny figures within. Nine little people, men and women both. Nine— and no more in all the world.

Tommy began to tremble. Excitement rushed through him. A plan was dawning, bursting alive inside him. He held his face rigid, his body tense.

"I guess I'll be going." He moved from the porch, back into the room toward the hall door.

"Going?" Billings got to his feet. "But— "

"I have to go. It's getting late. I'll see you later." He opened the hall door. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Mr Billings said, surprised. "I hope I'll see you again, young man."

"You will," Tommy said.

He ran home as fast as he could. He raced up the porch steps and inside the house.

"Just in time for dinner," his mother said, from the kitchen.

Tommy halted on the stairs. "I have to go out again."

"No you don't! You're going to— "

"Just for awhile. I'll be right back." Tommy hurried up to his room and entered, glancing around.

The bright yellow room. Pennants on the walls. The big dresser and mirror, brush and comb, model airplanes, pictures of baseball players. The paper bag of bottle caps. The small radio with its cracked plastic cabinet. The wooden cigar boxes full of junk, odds and ends, things he had collected.

Tommy grabbed up one of the cigar boxes and dumped its contents out on the bed. He stuck the box under his jacket and headed out of the room.

"Where are you going?" his father demanded, lowering his evening newspaper and looking up.

"I'll be back."

"Your mother said it was time for dinner. Didn't you hear her?"

"I'll be back. This is important." Tommy pushed the front door open. Chill evening air blew in, cold and thin. "Honest. Real important."

"Ten minutes." Vince Jackson looked at his wristwatch. "No longer. Or you don't get any dinner."

"Ten minutes." Tommy slammed the door. He ran down the steps, out into the darkness.

A light showed, flickering under the bottom and through the keyhole of Mr Billings's room.

Tommy hesitated a moment. Then he raised his hand and knocked. For a time there was silence. Then a stirring sound. The sound of heavy footsteps.

The door opened. Mr Billings peered out into the hall.

"Hello," Tommy said.

"You're back!" Mr Billings opened the door wide and Tommy walked quickly into the room. "Did you forget something?"

"No."

Billings closed the door. "Sit down. Would you like anything? An apple? Some milk?"

"No." Tommy wandered nervously around the room, touching things here and there, books and papers and bundles of clippings.

Billings watched the boy a moment. Then he returned to his desk, seating himself with a sigh. "I think I'll continue with my report. I hope to finish very soon." He tapped a pile of notes beside him. "The last of them. Then I can leave here and present the report along with my recommendations."

Billings bent over his immense typewriter, tapping steadily away. The relentless rumble of the ancient machine vibrated through the room. Tommy turned and stepped out of the room, onto the porch.

In the cold evening air the porch was pitch black. He halted, adjusting to the darkness. After a time he made out the sacks of fertilizer, the rickety chair. And in the center, the wood frame with its wire netting over it, heaps of dirt and grass piled around.

Tommy glanced back into the room. Billings was bent over the typewriter, absorbed in his work. He had taken off his dark blue coat and hung it over the chair. He was working in his vest, his sleeves rolled up.

Tommy squatted beside the frame. He slid the cigar box from under his jacket and laid it down, lid open. He grasped the netting and pried it back, loose from the row of nails.

From the frame a few faint apprehensive squeaks sounded. Nervous scuttlings among the dried grass.

Tommy reached down, feeling among the grass and plants. His fingers closed over something, a small thing that squirmed in fright, twisting in wild terror. He dropped it into the cigar box and sought another.

In a moment he had them all. Nine of them, all nine in the wood cigar box.

He closed the lid and slipped it back under his jacket. Quickly he left the porch,

returning to the room.

Billings glanced up vaguely from his work, pen in one hand, papers in the other. "Did you want to talk to me?" he murmured, pushing up his glasses.

Tommy shook his head. "I have to go."

"Already? But you just came!"

"I have to go." Tommy opened the door to the hall. "Goodnight."

Billings rubbed his forehead wearily, his face lined with fatigue. "All right, boy. Perhaps I'll see you again before I leave." He resumed his work, tapping slowly away at the great typewriter, bent with fatigue.

Tommy shut the door behind him. He ran down the stairs, outside on the porch. Against his chest the cigar box shook and moved. Nine. All nine of them. He had them all. Now they were his. They belonged to him— and there weren't any more of them, anywhere in the world. His plan had worked perfectly.

He hurried down the street toward his own house, as fast as he could run.

He found an old cage out in the garage he had once kept white rats in. He cleaned it and carried it upstairs to his room. He spread papers on the floor of the cage and fixed a water dish and some sand.

When the cage was ready he emptied the contents of the cigar box into it.

The nine tiny figures huddled together in the center of the cage, a little bundle of pink. Tommy shut the door of the cage and fastened it tightly. He carried the cage to the dresser and then drew a chair up by it so he could watch.

The nine little people began to move around hesitantly, exploring the cage. Tommy's heart beat with rapid excitement as he watched them.

He had got them away from Mr Billings. They were his, now. And Mr Billings didn't know where he lived or even his name.

They were talking to each other. Moving their antennae rapidly, the way he had seen ants do. One of the little people came over to the side of the cage. He stood gripping the wire, peering out into the room. He was joined by another, a female. They were naked. Except for the hair on their heads they were pink and smooth.

He wondered what they ate. From the big refrigerator in the kitchen he took some cheese and some hamburger, adding crumbled up bits of bread and lettuce leaves and a little plate of milk.

They liked the milk and bread. But they left the meat alone. The lettuce leaves they used to begin the making of little huts.

Tommy was fascinated. He watched them all the next morning before school, then again at lunch time, and all afternoon until dinner.

"What you got up there?" his Dad demanded, at dinner.

"Nothing."

"You haven't got a snake, have you?" his Mom asked apprehensively. "If you have another snake up there, young man—"

"No." Tommy shook his head, bolting down his meal. "It's not a snake."

He finished eating and ran upstairs.

The little creatures had finished fixing their huts out of the lettuce leaves. Some were inside. Others were wandering around the cage, exploring it.

Tommy seated himself before the dresser and watched. They were smart. A lot smarter than the white rats he had owned. And cleaner. They used the sand he had put there for them. They were smart— and quite tame.

After awhile Tommy closed the door of the room. Holding his breath he unfastened the cage, opening one side wide. He reached in his hand and caught one of the little men. He drew him out of the cage and then opened his hand carefully.

The little man clung to his palm, peering over the edge and up at him, antennae waving wildly.

"Don't be afraid," Tommy said.

The little man got cautiously to his feet. He walked across Tommy's palm, to his wrist. Slowly he climbed Tommy's arm, glancing over the side. He reached Tommy's shoulder and stopped, gazing up into his face.

"You're sure small," Tommy said. He got another one from the cage and put the two of them on the bed. They walked around the bed for a long time. More had come to the open side of the cage and were staring cautiously out onto the dresser. One found Tommy's comb. He inspected it, tugging at the teeth. A second joined him. The two tiny creatures tugged at the comb, but without success.

"What do you want?" Tommy asked. After a while they gave up. They found a nickel lying on the dresser. One of them managed to turn it up on end. He rolled it. The nickel gained speed, rushing toward the edge of the dresser. The tiny men ran after it in consternation. The nickel fell over the side.

"Be careful," Tommy warned. He didn't want anything to happen to them. He had too many plans. It would be easy to rig up things for them to do— like fleas he had seen at the circus. Little carts to pull. Swings, slides. Things they could operate. He could train them, and then charge admission.

Maybe he could take them on tour. Maybe he'd even get a write-up in the newspaper. His mind raced. All kinds of things. Endless possibilities. But he had to start out easy— and be careful.

The next day he took one to school in his pocket, inside a fruit jar. He punched holes in the lid so it could breathe.

At recess he showed it to Dave and Joan Grant. They were fascinated.

"Where did you get it?" Dave demanded.

"That's my business."

"Want to sell it?"

"It's not *it*. It's him."

Jean blushed. "It doesn't have anything on. You better make it put clothes on right away."

"Can you make clothes for them? I have eight more. Four men and four women."

Joan was excited. "I can— if you'll give me one of them."

"The heck I will. They're mine."

"Where did they come from? Who made them?"

"None of your business."

Joan made little clothes for the four women. Little skirts and blouses. Tommy lowered the clothing into the cage. The little people moved around the heap uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

"You better show them," Joan said.

"Show them? Nuts to you."

"I'll dress them." Joan took one of the tiny women from the cage and carefully dressed her in a blouse and skirt. She dropped the figure back in. "Now let's see what happens."

The others crowded around the dressed woman, plucking curiously at the clothing. Presently they began to divide up the remaining clothes, some taking blouses, some skirts.

Tommy laughed and laughed. "You better make pants for the men. So they'll all be dressed."

He took a couple of them out and let them run up and down his arms.

"Be careful," Joan warned. "You'll lose them. They'll get away."

"They're tame. They won't run away. I'll show you." Tommy put them down onto the floor. "We have a game. Watch."

"A game?"

"They hide and I find them."

The figures scampered off, looking for places to hide. In a moment none were in sight. Tommy got down on his hands and knees, reaching under the dresser, among the bedcovers. A shrill squeak. He had found one.

"See? They like it." He carried them back to the cage, one by one. The last one stayed hidden a long time. It had got into one of the dresser drawers, down in a bag of marbles, pulling the marbles over its head.

"They're clever," Joan said. "Wouldn't you give me even one of them?"

"No," Tommy said emphatically. "They're mine. I'm not letting them get away from me. I'm not giving any of them to *anybody*."

Tommy met Joan after school the next day. She had made little trousers and shirts for the men.

"Here." She gave them to him. They walked along the sidewalk. "I hope they fit."

"Thanks." Tommy took the clothes and put them in his pocket. They cut across the vacant lot. At the end of the lot Dave Grant and some kids were sitting around in a circle, playing marbles.

"Who's winning?" Tommy said, stopping.

"I am," Dave said, not looking up.

"Let me play." Tommy dropped down. "Come on." He held out his hand. "Give me your agate."

Dave shook his head. "Get away."

Tommy punched him on the arm. "Come on! Just one shot." He considered. "Tell you what—"

A shadow fell over them.

Tommy looked up. And blanched.

Edward Billings gazed down silently at the boy, leaning on his umbrella, its metal point lost in the soft ground. He said nothing. His aged face was lined and hard, his eyes like faded blue stones.

Tommy got slowly to his feet. Silence had fallen over the children. Some of them scrambled away, snatching up their marbles.

"What do you want?" Tommy demanded. His voice was dry and husky, almost inaudible.

Billings's cold eyes bored into him, two keen orbs, without warmth of any kind. "You took them. I want them back. Right away." His voice was hard, colorless. He held out his hand. "Where are they?"

"What are you talking about?" Tommy muttered. He backed away. "I don't know what you mean."

"The Project. You stole them from my room. I want them back."

"The heck I did. What do you mean?"

Billings turned toward Dave Grant. "He's the one you meant, isn't he?"

Dave nodded. "I saw them. He has them in his room. He won't let anybody near them."

"You came and stole them. *Why?*" Billings moved toward Tommy ominously. "Why did you take them? What do you want with them?"

"You're crazy," Tommy murmured, but his voice trembled. Dave Grant said nothing. He looked away sheepishly. "It's a lie," Tommy said.

Billings grabbed him. Cold, ancient hands gripped him, digging into his shoulders. "Give them back! I want them. I'm responsible for them."

"Let go." Tommy jerked loose. "I don't have them with me." He caught his breath. "I mean— "

"Then you do have them. At home. In your room. Bring them there. Go and get them. All nine."

Tommy put his hands in his pockets. Some of his courage was returning. "I don't know," he said. "What'll you give me?"

Billings's eyes flashed. "Give you?" He raised his arm threateningly. "Why, you little— "

Tommy jumped back. "You can't make me return them. You don't have any control over us." He grinned boldly. "You said so yourself. We're out of your power. I heard you say so."

Billings's face was like granite. "I'll take them. They're mine. They belong to me."

"If you try to take them I'll call the cops. And my Dad'll be there. My Dad and the cops."

Billings gripped his umbrella. He opened and shut his mouth, his face a dark, ugly red. Neither he nor Tommy spoke. The other kids gazed at the two of them wide-eyed, awed and subdued.

Suddenly a thought twisted across Billings's face. He looked down at the ground, the crude circle and the marbles. His cold eyes flickered. "Listen to this. I will— I will play against you for them."

"What?"

"The game. Marbles. If you win you can keep them. If I win I get them back at once. All of them."

Tommy considered, glancing from Mr Billings down at the circle on the ground. "If I win you won't ever try to take them? You will let me keep them— for good?"

"Yes."

"All right." Tommy moved away. "It's a deal. If you win you can have them back. But if I win they belong to me. And you don't ever get them back."

"Bring them here at once."

"Sure. I'll go get them."— And my agate, too, he thought to himself. "I'll be right back."

"I'll wait here," Mr Billings said, his huge hands gripping the umbrella.

Tommy ran down the porch steps, two at a time.

His mother came to the door. "You shouldn't be going out again so late. If you're not home in half an hour you don't get any dinner."

"Half an hour," Tommy cried, running down the dark sidewalk, his hands pressed

against the bulge in his jacket. Against the wood cigar box that moved and squirmed. He ran and ran, gasping for breath.

Mr Billings was still standing by the edge of the lot, waiting silently. The sun had set. Evening was coming. The children had gone home. As Tommy stepped onto the vacant lot a chill, hostile wind moved among the weeds and grass, flapping against his pants legs.

"Did you bring them?" Mr Billings demanded.

"Sure." Tommy halted, his chest rising and falling. He reached slowly under his jacket and brought out the heavy wood cigar box. He slipped the rubber band off it, lifting the lid a crack. "In here."

Mr Billings came close, breathing hoarsely. Tommy snapped the lid shut and restored the rubber band. "We have to play." He put the box down on the ground. "They're mine— unless you win them back."

Billings subsided. "All right. Let's begin, then."

Tommy searched his pockets. He brought out his agate, holding it carefully. In the fading light the big red-black marble gleamed, rings of sand and white. Like Jupiter. An immense, hard marble.

"Here we go," Tommy said. He knelt down, sketching a rough circle on the ground. He emptied out a sack of marbles into the ring. "You got any?"

"Any?"

"Marbles. What are you going to shoot with?"

"One of yours."

"Sure." Tommy took a marble from the ring and tossed it to him. "Want me to shoot first?"

Billings nodded.

"Fine." Tommy grinned. He took aim carefully, closing one eye. For a moment his body was rigid, set in an intense, hard arc. Then he shot. Marbles rattled and clinked, rolling out of the circle and into the grass and weeds beyond. He had done well. He gathered up his winnings, collecting them back in the cloth sack.

"Is it my turn?" Billings asked.

"No. My agate's still in the ring." Tommy squatted down again. "I get another shot."

He shot. This time he collected three marbles. Again his agate was within the circle.

"Another shot," Tommy said, grinning. He had almost half. He knelt and aimed, holding his breath. Twenty-four marbles remained. If he could get four more he would have won. Four more—

He shot. Two marbles left the circle. And his agate. The agate rolled out, bouncing into the weeds.

Tommy collected the two marbles and the agate. He had nineteen in all. Twenty-two remained in the ring.

"Okay," he murmured reluctantly. "It's your shot this time. Go ahead."

Edward Billings knelt down stiffly, gasping and tottering. His face was gray. He turned his marble around in his hand uncertainly.

"Haven't you ever played before?" Tommy demanded. "You don't know how to hold it, do you?"

Billings shook his head. "No."

"You have to get it between your first finger and your thumb." Tommy watched the stiff old fingers with the marble. Billings dropped it once and picked it quickly up again. "Your thumb makes it go. Like this. Here, I'll show you."

Tommy took hold of the ancient fingers and bent them around the marble. Finally he had them in place. "Go ahead." Tommy straightened up. "Let's see how you do."

The old man took a long time. He gazed at the marbles in the ring, his hand shaking. Tommy could hear his breathing, the hoarse, deep panting, in the damp evening air.

The old man glanced at the cigar box resting in the shadows. Then back at the circle. His fingers moved—

There was a flash. A blinding flash. Tommy gave a cry, wiping at his eyes. Everything spun, lashing and tilting. He stumbled and fell, sinking into the wet weeds. His head throbbed. He sat on the ground, rubbing his eyes, shaking his head, trying to see.

At last the drifting sparks cleared. He looked around him, blinking.

The circle was empty. There were no marbles in the ring. Billings had got them all.

Tommy reached out. His fingers touched something hot. He jumped. It was a fragment of glass, a glowing red fragment of molten glass. All round him, in the damp weeds and grass, fragments of glass gleamed, cooling slowly into darkness. A thousand splinters of stars, glowing and fading around him.

Edward Billings stood up slowly, rubbing his hands together. "I'm glad that's over," he gasped. "I'm too old to bend down like that."

His eyes made out the cigar box, lying on the ground.

"Now they can go back. And I can continue with my work." He picked up the wood box, putting it under his arm. He gathered up his umbrella and snuffled away, toward the sidewalk beyond the lot.

"Goodbye," Billings said, stopping for a moment. Tommy said nothing.

Billings hurried off down the sidewalk, the cigar box clutched tightly.

He entered his apartment, breathing rapidly. He tossed his black umbrella into the corner and sat down before the desk, laying the cigar box in front of him. For a moment he sat, breathing deeply and gazing down at the brown and white square of wood and cardboard.

He had won. He had got them back. They were his, again. And just in time. The filing date for the report was practically upon him.

Billings slid out of his coat and vest. He rolled up his sleeves, trembling a little. He had been lucky. Control over the B type was extremely limited. They were virtually out of jurisdiction. That, of course, was the problem itself. Both the A and B types had managed to escape supervision. They had rebelled, disobeying orders and therefore putting themselves outside the limit of the plan.

But these— the new type, Project C. Everything depended on them. They had left his hands, but now they were back again. Under control, as intended. Within the periphery of supervisory instruction.

Billings slid the rubber band from the box. He raised the lid, slowly and carefully.

Out they swarmed— fast. Some headed to the right, some to the left. Two columns of tiny figures racing off, head down. One reached the edge of the desk and leaped. He landed on the rug, rolling and falling. A second jumped after him, then a third.

Billings broke out of his paralysis. He grabbed frantically, wildly. Only two remained. He swiped at one and missed. The other—

He grabbed it, squeezing it tight between his clenched fingers. Its companion wheeled. It had something in its hand. A splinter. A splinter of wood, torn from the inside of the cigar box.

It ran up and stuck the end of the splinter into Billings's finger.

Billings gasped in pain. His fingers flew open. The captive tumbled out, rolling on its back. Its companion helped it up, half-dragging it to the edge of the desk. Together the two of them leaped.

Billings bent down, groping for them. They scampered rapidly, toward the door to the porch. One of them was at the lamp plug. It tugged. A second joined it and the two tiny figures pulled together. The lamp cord came out of the wall. The room plunged into darkness.

Billings found the desk drawer. He yanked it open, spilling its contents onto the floor. He found some big sulphur matches and lit one.

They were gone— out onto the porch.

Billings hurried after them. The match blew out. He lit another, shielding it with his hand.

The creatures had got to the railing. They were going over the edge, catching hold of the ivy and swinging down into the darkness.

He got to the edge too late. They were gone, all of them. All nine, over the side of the roof, into the blackness of the night.

Billings ran downstairs and out onto the back porch. He reached the ground, hurrying around the side of the house, where the ivy grew up the side.

Nothing moved. Nothing stirred. Silence. No sign of them anywhere.

They had escaped. They were gone. They had worked out a plan of escape and put it into operation. Two columns, going in opposite directions, as soon as the lid was lifted. Perfectly timed and executed.

Slowly Billings climbed the stairs to his room. He pushed the door open and stood, breathing deeply, dazed from the shock.

They were gone. Project C was already over. It had gone like the others. The same way. Rebellion and independence. Out of supervision. Beyond control. Project A had influenced Project B— and now, in the same way, the contamination had spread to C.

Billings sat down heavily at his desk. For a long time he sat immobile, silent and thoughtful, gradual comprehension coming to him. It was not his fault. It had happened before— twice before. And it would happen again. Each Project would carry the discontent to the next. It would never end, no matter how many Projects were conceived and put into operation. The rebellion and escape. The evasion of the plan.

After a time, Billings reached out and pulled his big report book to him. Slowly he opened it to the place he had left off. From the report he removed the entire last section. The summary. There was no use scrapping the current Project. One Project was as good as any other. They would all be equal— equal failures. He had known as soon as he saw them. As soon as he had raised the lid. They had clothes on. Little suits of clothing. Like the others, a long time before.