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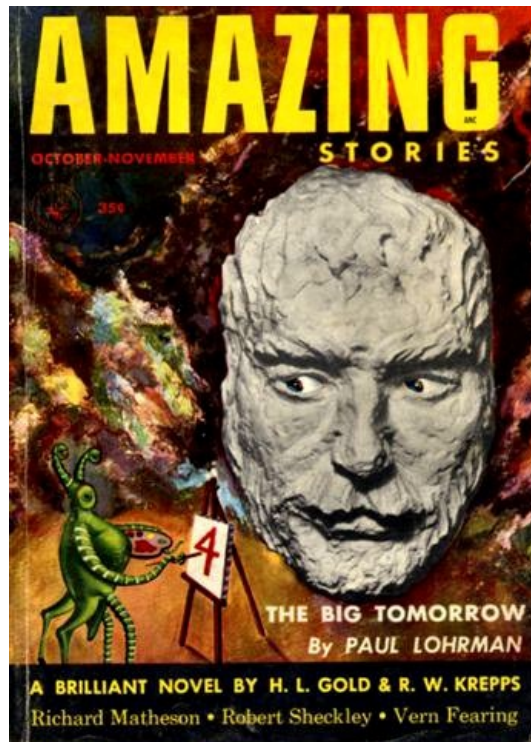
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ENORMOUS ROOM ***



THE ENORMOUS ROOM

BY H. L. GOLD & ROBERT KREPPS

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One big name per story is usually considered to be sufficient. So when two of them appear in one by-line, it can certainly be called a scoop; so that's what we'll call it. H. L. Gold and science-fiction go together like a blonde and a henna rinse. Robert Krepps is also big time. You may know him also under his other label—Geoff St. Reynard, but a Krepps by any name can write as well.

The roller coaster's string of cars, looking shopworn in their flaky blue and orange paint, crept toward the top of the incline, the ratcheted lift chain clanking with weary patience. In the front seat, a young couple held hands and prepared to scream. Two cars back, a heavy, round-

shouldered, black-mustached man with a swarthy skin clenched his hands on the rail before him. A thin blond fellow with a briefcase on his lap glanced back and down at the receding platform, as though trying to spot a friend he had left behind. Behind him was a Negro youth, sitting relaxed with one lean foot on the seat; he looked as bored as someone who'd taken a thousand coaster rides in a summer and expected to take ten thousand more.

In the last car, a tall broad man put his elbows on the backboard and stared at the sky without any particular expression on his lined face.

The chain carried its load to the peak and relinquished it to the force of gravity. The riders had a glimpse of the sprawling amusement park spread out below them like a collection of gaudy toys on the floor of a playroom; then the coaster was roaring and thundering down into the hollow of the first big dip.

Everyone but the Negro boy and the tall man yelled. These two looked detached—without emotion—as though they wouldn't have cared if the train of cars went off the tracks.

The cars didn't go off the tracks. The people did.

The orange-blue rolling stock hit the bottom, slammed around a turn and shot upward again, the wind of its passage whistling boisterously. But by then there were none to hear the wind, to feel the gust of it in watered eyes or open shouting mouths. The cars were empty.

"Is this what happens to *everybody* who takes a ride on the coaster?" asked a bewildered voice with a slight Mexican accent. "*Santos*," it continued, "to think I have waited so many years for this!"

"What is it?" said a woman. "Was there an accident? Where are we?"

"I don't know, dear. Maybe we jumped the tracks. But it certainly doesn't look like a hospital."

John Summersby opened his eyes. The last voice had told the truth: the room didn't look like a hospital. It didn't look like anything that he could think of offhand.

It was about living-room size, with flat yellow walls and a gray ceiling. There was a quantity of musty-smelling straw on the floor. Four tree trunks from which the branches had been lopped were planted solidly in that floor, which felt hard and a little warm on Summersby's back. Near the roof was a round silver rod, running from wall to wall; over in a corner was a large shallow box filled with something, he saw as he slowly stood up, that might have been sand. An old automobile tire lay in the straw nearby, and a green bird-bath sort of thing held water that splashed from a tiny fountain in its center. Five other people, four men and a woman, were standing or sitting on the floor.

"If it was a hospital, we'd be hurt," said a thin yellow-haired man with a briefcase under one arm. "I'm all right. Feel as good as I ever did."

Several men prodded themselves experimentally, and one began to take his own pulse. Summersby stretched and blinked his eyes; they felt gummy, as though he'd been asleep a long time, but his mouth wasn't cottony, so he figured the blacked-out interval must have been fairly short.

"Where's the door?" asked the woman.

Everyone stared around the room except Summersby, who went to the fountain, scooped up a palmful of water, and drank it. It was rather warm, with no chemical taste.

"There isn't any door," said a Negro boy. "Hey, there isn't a door at all!"

"There must be a door," said the heavy man with the accent.

Several of them ran to the walls. "Here's something," said the blond man, pushing with his fingertips. "Looks like a sliding panel, but it won't budge. We never came in through anything *that* small, anyway." He looked over at Summersby. "You didn't, at least. I guess they could have slid me through it."

"They?" said the woman in a piercing voice. "Who are they?"

"Yes," said the heavy man, looking at the blond man accusingly, "who put us here?"

"Don't ask me," said the blond man. He looked at a watch, held it to his ear, and Summersby saw him actually go pale, as at a terrible shock. "My God," he gasped, "what day is this?"

"Tuesday," said the Negro.

"That's right. We got on the coaster about eleven Tuesday morning. It's three o'clock Thursday!" His voice was flat and astonished as he held up the watch. "Two days," he said, winding it. "This thing's almost run down."

"How do you know it's Thursday?" asked Summersby.

"This is a chronograph, High-pockets," said the blond man.

"Calvin, we've been kidnapped!" the woman said shrilly, clutching at a man who must be her husband or boy friend.

"No, no, dear. How could they do it on a roller coaster?"

"*Maria y José!*" said the Mexican. "Then for two days that idiot relief man has had charge of my chili stand! It'll go to hell!"

"Our things at the hotel," the woman said, "all my new clothes and the marriage license."

"They'll be all right, dear."

"And where's my bag?"

The blond man stooped and picked up a leather handbag from the straw. "This it?" She took it and rummaged inside before she said, "Thank you."

"I don't like all this," said the Negro boy. "Where are we? I got to get back to my job. Where's the door?"

"Come on," said the man with the briefcase shortly, "let's get out of here and find out what's what." He was going along the wall, pushing and rapping it. "How did they cop us, that's what I'd like to know. All I remember is hitting the bottom of that big dip, and then I was waking up in here." He stopped, then said sharply, "I hear something moving. My God! It sounds as big as an elephant."

Then the wall began to glide noiselessly and smoothly to the left, and he scuttled back to the knot of them, looking over his shoulder.

The entire wall slid sideways and vanished, leaving an open end to the room through which Summersby could see a number of large structures that seemed to be machinery, painted various colors. There was no sign of movement. He wondered, in a quiet, detached way, what sort of people might be out there.

"It sounded big," said the blond man again, and looked up at Summersby.

"I am six feet five," said Summersby bleakly. "Whoever it is will have to go some to top me."

An unknown thing moved beyond the room with a brief shuffling sound and then a hand came in through the open end. It was on an arm with a wrist the thickness of Summersby's biceps, an arm two yards long with no indication that it might not be even longer. The hand itself was a foot and a half broad, with a prehensile thumb at either side. Summersby did not notice how many fingers it had. The backs of the fingers and the whole great arm were covered with a thick gray-black thatch of coarse hair, and the naked palm was gun-metal gray. Between one thumb and finger it held a long green rod that was tipped by an ivory-colored ball.

There was no sign of anyone looking in, only the incredible arm and hand.



Illustrator: Tom O'Sullivan

The others cried out and drew together. Summersby stood still, watching the hand. It poked the stick forward in short jabs, once just missing his head. Then it made a wide sweep and the stick collided with the fat Mexican. He squealed, and at once the hand shot forward, exposing still more of the thick arm, and prodded him away from the group. He skipped toward a far corner, but the stick had him now and was tapping him relentlessly toward the open end.

"*Amigos!*" he yelled, his voice full of anguish. "*Por favor, save me!*"

"Go along with it peaceably," advised the Negro youth frightenedly. "Don't get it annoyed." He was shaking and his glasses kept sliding down his sweaty nose so that he had to push them up continually.

"What is it?" the woman was asking, over and over.

The Mexican was driven to the edge of the room. The place beyond seemed to be much larger than their prison. He waved his hands despairingly.

"Now, quick, you have only a *momentito* to save me! Don't *stand* there!"

The stick touched him and he jumped as if he had been shocked. The wall began to slide into place again.

"Let's rush it," said the man with the briefcase suddenly.

"Why?" asked Summersby. The wall closed and they were alone, staring at one another.

"There wasn't anything we could do," the Negro said. "It happened too quick. But if it comes in again we better fight it." He looked around, plainly expecting to be contradicted. "We can't get split up like this."

"Possibly one of us can suggest something," said the husband. He was a sober-looking man of about twenty-eight or thirty, with a face veneered by stubborn patience. "We should make a real try at escape."

"We know where the door is, at least," said the blond man. He went to the sliding wall and threw his weight obliquely against it. "Give me a hand here, will you, big fellow?"

"You won't move it that way," said Summersby. He sat down on the automobile tire, which seemed to have been chewed on by some large animal. "It's probably electrically operated."

"We can try, can't we?"

Summersby did not answer. In one corner, six feet off the floor, was a thing he had not noticed before, a network of silver strands like an enormous spider's web or a cat's cradle. He stared at it, but after the first moment he did not actually see it. He was thinking of the forest, and wishing dully that he might have died there.

The woman spoke sharply, intruding on his detachment; he hoped someone would sit on her. "Will you please *do* something, Calvin! We must get out of this place."

"Where are we, anyway?" asked the Negro boy, who looked about nineteen, a tall, well-built youth with beautiful hands. "How'd they get us here? And what was that thing that took the Mex?"

"It doesn't matter where we are," snapped the woman.

"Yes, it does, ma'am," said the youth. "We got to know how they brought us here before we can escape."

"The hell we do," said the blond man. "We can't guess our location until we get out. I think you're right about the door," he told Summersby. "There isn't any lock to it you could reach from inside. The mechanism for sliding and locking must be inside the wall itself. Nothing short of a torch will get through to it." He came over to Summersby. "We'll have to gimmick it next time it opens."

"With what?" asked the woman's husband.

"Something small, so it won't be noticed."

"Your briefcase?" suggested the husband, who had a hard New England twang.

"No, chum," said the blond man, "not my briefcase."

"Hey, look," said the Negro. "What happened, anyway? I remember the coaster hitting the dip and then nothing, no wind or motion, until I woke up here. And it's two days later."

"I lost consciousness at the same place," said the New Englander.

"Something was done to knock us out," said the blond man. "Then we must have been taken off the cars at the end of the ride, and brought here." He rubbed his chin, which was stubbled with almost invisible whiskers. "That's impossible, on the face of it," he went on, "but it must be the truth." He grinned; it was the first time Summersby had seen any of them smile. "Unless I'm in a hatch," he said.

"Are we in South America? Or Africa?" asked the Negro.

"Why?"

"That hand!"

"Yeah," said the blond man, "that never grew on anything American." The colored boy looked at him, ready to take offence. "Could it be a freak gorilla?"

"That size and with two thumbs?" asked the boy. "And what would it be doing roaming around loose?"

"Could it be a machine?" asked the husband. "A robot?" His wife screamed, and Summersby got up and went over to the door, getting as far as possible from them. His stomach was a hard ball of hunger, and he wished he were a thousand miles away. Anywhere.

"That hand was alive," said the Negro. "I never saw anything like it in biology, but I'd sure love to dissect it. Did you see those two thumbs? I don't know any animal that has two thumbs."

"Would you come over, sir?" called the New Englander. Summersby realized he was talking to him. "We must plan a course of action." Reluctantly Summersby joined them. "My name is Calvin Full, sir, and this is Mrs. Full."

Summersby took his hand; it was dry and had a preciseness about its grip that irritated him. "John Summersby."

"I'm a milk inspector. My wife and I were on our honeymoon," said Full. "I work through the southern portions of Vermont; that's in the New York milk shed, you know."

"I didn't know. I'm a forest ranger," said Summersby. Retired, he thought bitterly, pensioned off to die with a rotten heart. They couldn't even let a man die on the job, in the woods.

"My work," said Calvin Full, "consists of watching for unsanitary and unsterile practices, making tuberculin tests, and so forth. I'm afraid I'm not much good at this sort of emergency."

His wife, who had been looking as if she would scream again, turned to him. Her almost-pretty face, cleared of fright, was swept by pride. "You're as brave as the next man, Calvin, and as clever. You'll get us home."

"I hope so, dear. But Mr. Summersby must be a great deal more used to problems of this sort."

They all gaped up at him expectantly. Because of his size, of course; he was the big born leader! "Sir" in trouble, "High-pockets" when things were clear again. The hell with them. He kept his mouth shut.

The blond man said, "I'm Tom Watkins."

"Adam Pierce," said the Negro.

"What do you do, Adam?"

The boy pushed his glasses up on his nose again, frowning. "I go to C.C.N.Y. Summers, I'm the

Wild Man from Zululand in the sideshow, and I shill for the coaster when I'm not on duty. It helps out my family some, for me to be making money in the summers."

"Are you taking subjects that might help us?" asked Full.

"I major in English. I'm going to teach it when I graduate. Then I take psych, biology, the usual courses."

"Hmm," said Watkins, looking at the end of the room through which the Mexican had been taken. "Psych and biology. Could be some use here."

"What we need is a locksmith," said Summersby. He felt himself unwillingly drawn into the group, sharing their problems that were not his, and it angered him. He fished out a bent pack of cigarettes, lit one and was about to put the rest away.

"Nothing but a torch would help. I know a little about locks myself." Watkins grinned genially. "I'm out of smokes," he said, and Summersby gave him the pack. He took one and passed it to Full, who declined. Adam took one. The boy reached up and pushed at his glasses again; a look of irritation appeared on his face. "Say," he muttered, "is this room a little wobbly, or is it my eyes?"

"Wobbly?"

"Wavy. See how those tree trunks are blurred?"

"You need your glasses changed, Adam," said Watkins.

"No, sir." Adam took them off and started to polish them on a handkerchief; then his brown eyes opened wide. "I can see!" he said. The others stared at him. "My astigmatism's gone! My glasses make everything blur, but I can see plain as noon without 'em. Look, I've had astigmatism since I was a kid!"

"What happened?" asked the woman, addressing her husband. "How could that be, Calvin?"

"Don't know, dear."

"My headache is gone," she said. "I never realized it till this boy mentioned his eyes."

"Mrs. Full has suffered from an almost constant headache for years," said Calvin, and sniffed twice. "My post-nasal drip is missing, too. Do you suppose my sinus trouble is cleared up?"

"That's what must have been happening those two days we were out," said Watkins, knocking ash from his cigarette. "We were put through a hospital or something. I feel good, even if I'm damned hungry."

Summersby looked from one to another, detesting them; against his will, against sanity and decency that fought for recognition, he detested them. He had a heart for which there was no help, a heart no two-day period of miraculous cures could touch. Their puny ailments had been relieved, but he was still at the slow, listless task of dying.

"Listen," said Watkins jubilantly, "whoever or whatever brought us here, it's a cinch they don't mean to harm us. They wouldn't mend us if they were going to hurt us, would they?"

"In two days," said Adam, nodding hard. "Two days! How could they do it?"

There was an air of near-gaiety about them that repelled Summersby. In a desperate rebellion against these boons handed out to everyone but himself, he tried to hurt them. "What do you do to a duck before you cook it? Clean it. Think that over."

Adam Pierce looked at him levelly. "No, sir. If that duck has sinus trouble or bad eyes, you don't have to fix that up before you eat it. No, sir."

"What about the Mexican?" Summersby asked. "What's happened to him?"

Then the wall slid open again and they all started forward; Summersby looked after them bitterly, feeling the resentment drain out and leave only the old hopelessness, the apathetic disregard of everything but death.

II

Porfirio Villa had known from the first that this adventure of his was a mistake. His wife had told him to stay off the roller coaster, but he had sneered. What could happen? The people always got off again, laughing and wiping their brows. He had the bad burn on his left hand, caused by an accidental smacking of the steam table in a rage at his fool of a helper;—that idiot who now had had charge of the stand for two days! *lodo feo!*—and so, enforced to a vacation, he must step into the cars and go crawling up that terrible incline, giggling nervously, and then rush madly down the other side. Dreaming is better than doing; he should have stayed in his chili stand and dreamed of the ride.

Por Dios! What a terror the rising, what a discomfort the drop, what a fearful thing the disappearance of the park and the awakening in this place ... this place a man could not believe

in, though he stood upon its floor and gazed round-eyed, with sweating lips and shaking hands, upon its size, its devices for unknown purposes, its impossible inhabitant!

The thing was twelve feet tall. Was it a machine? He had seen machines in the *revistas* and the cinema, looking much like this one, a clumsy copy of a man moving, speaking, tearing people to pieces. There was also King Kong, who resembled this thing.

If it was not alive, it moved very creditably. The gray-furred legs were long and thin, placed on the sides of the body at the waist; the arms, much thicker than the legs, swung very low, and must be fully eight feet long. It was backing from him slowly, holding out one hand—six fingers and two thumbs, *demonio!*—with the green stick. That stick stung like a bee when it touched you.

The monster was already a good distance away. Porfirio cast his eyes slyly to one side, the other. There was a complication of machinery so great that even a teacher of mechanics would be dismayed.

There! A hole between two pink walls. He glanced once at the thing, standing now with its impossible face turned down to him, and then he ran for the hole.

It was after him with a short cry, but he reached the hole and scuttled through. Four paths faced him. What a time for decisions! He took the left-hand path, went round several turns, came to two more openings. The pink walls were smooth and featureless, well over his head so that he could not tell where he was. He ran like the mouse in the game next to his chili stand, the game in which suckers bet on which escape—the red, green, blue or white—the mouse would choose. Paths opened and Porfirio plunged on, losing his sense of direction, becoming more terrified as he went. His famished guts dragged him down, made him a weak frightened mouse indeed.

He panted past two doorways and abruptly, like the flashing of a pigeon's wing, the greenstick shot down before him, held in that monstrous gray hand!

The stick appeared and disappeared, herding him, chivving him from place to place, all places looking alike, till finally the great room lay again before his eyes. Whimpering, he stepped out of the pink maze and leaned against the wall, his chest and belly heaving. He was done. Let it murder him. A man could not run forever.

The brute stood over him. Cautiously it brought its face down to peer. Its eyes were set in deep pits, there was a hole between them, and far below in the watermelon-shaped head, a mouth like a man's with lips the color of rust on iron.

Panting, he gazed at it, then flung up one arm in a futile blow that fell short by two feet. The thing was angering him. Let it watch out for itself!

A hand, unnoticed, had crept round behind him and now took him by the back of the shirt, belt, and trousers, and lifted him off the floor. He regretted the useless punch. Now he would be dead.

The monster inspected him, prodding aside his bedraggled collar points and digging gently at his belly with the rod, which did not sting him this time. It made a sound from its mouth like the last weak bellow of a dying *toro*—"Mmwaa gnaa!" then set him down once more with a thump that jolted his teeth, nearly fractured his ankles.

Maria y José, but it moved as fast as a lizard's tongue! Escape was beyond hope.

It backed away from him, stood by a huge box and gestured with the green stick. It wanted him to come. He walked toward it. The box was enormous, oblong, like a huge shoe box. Only when he had come to it did he realize it was the room in which he had awakened earlier.

In this hall it was lost. Untouched by the monster, he looked at the hall with seeing eyes for the first time. It had yellow walls and a gray roof, like the box. He clapped a hand to his head. Like a theater without seats! Over ten varas high, thirty broad and forty long: or he should say, being a man of the States now for many years, roughly thirty feet by seventy-five by a hundred. Scattered here and there in staggering confusion were the machines, the gadgets, the unknown things. All colors he had ever seen were there. It was gaudy as the amusement park, but slicker and more fresh-looking.

The creature laid a hand on the box, and the wall began to slide open. He looked up, and it gestured, telling him as plainly as words to go in. He was to enter again. It seemed as happy a thing to him as the breaking of a Christmas piñata.

He braced himself now. *He* had emerged, while *they* had cowered behind, refusing him aid. Worms that they were, he would show them the bearing of a hero, one who had braved mysterious dangers while all others trembled. He sucked in his belly, threw forward his chest, placed his fists carefully on his hips and strutted into the strawed room, turning his head proudly from side to side. He heard the wall close behind him.

The worms came crowding to him.

"What is it? What happened?"

Porfirio Villa, adventurer, laughed. The relief that washed through him was making him shake, his empty stomach still heaved after the panic, but from somewhere in his soul he dredged up the casual laugh. "Very little happened," he said. "Truly very little of interest."

III

Mrs. Full sat on the straw, twisting her hands together. She did not know she was doing it until she had to disentangle them to pull her skirt lower on her folded legs, and then she deliberately put one hand flat on the floor so that she would not appear to be nervous. She wanted Calvin to be as proud of her in this terrible crisis as she was of him.

But Calvin was calm, at any rate; so she was impatiently proud of him.

"We've got to slam something into that opening next time the wall slides back," said Watkins. She nodded at him approvingly. There was a man who might be of some help.

"What do you think these creatures are, Mr. Watkins?" she asked quietly, though she felt like screeching the question.

"I haven't the least idea, ma'am."

"Freak gorillas," said Calvin.

"No, sir," said Adam. "I've been thinking. Wasn't the Java Ape Man about nine feet tall?"

"Five and a half's more like it," said Watkins. "At least that's how I remember it."

"Well, *some* fossil man was nine feet tall," said Adam dogmatically. "Couldn't that thing be one of them? There's plenty of places in the world where a race of people or animals could have developed without Homo sapiens being any the wiser. Now suppose they got hold of us?"

"How?" asked Calvin.

"Through people working for 'em. We might all have been doped and put on a plane and we might be on an island somewhere now, or in the middle of a jungle, with these whatcha-may-call-'ems."

"How were we doped?" persisted Calvin.

"Gosh, I don't know that!"

"And what the devil do they want with us?" asked Watkins.

Mrs. Full did not hear what Adam said. She was wondering, with a cold horror, if the creatures were near enough human to desire white girls as—as mates. "Calvin, we've got to get home!" she cried.

"We will, dear." He patted her shoulder. "Don't you worry."

"Someone has to worry."

"We all are, ma'am," said the pleasant Watkins. "Except you, I guess, Summersby," he added accusingly.

Summersby stared at him, seemed about to speak, then looked away. She was afraid of this great man. He might be a lunatic, with that lined, tormented face.

"We might be in the East Indies somewhere," said Adam thoughtfully. "A plane could get us there from New York in a lot less than two days."

"Where are these East Indies?" asked Villa. Mrs. Full wished he would stop rubbing his stomach that way. It reminded her that she was very hungry.

"Someplace near Siam," said Adam vaguely. "Question is, if we're there, or anyplace else for that matter, *why* are we?"

A number of reasons shot through Mrs. Full's mind, all of them too fantastic to suggest aloud. They might be potential mates for these incredible animals, or slaves, or food, or.... She was surprised at herself for thinking of such things; one would suppose she had been reared on a diet of sensational thrillers.

She rose and walked aside, ostensibly studying the green fountain (which augmented her suffering with its tinkling splash). "Oh, Calvin," she said.

He came over to her. "Yes, dear?"

"Calvin, I—" she halted unable to phrase her question. But he did it for her.

"I've been thinking: if there are—certain basic needs—I mean, if you find it necessary to—"

"I do, Calvin," she said gratefully.

"Oh. Well, there is the, hrm, sand box. I believe it's meant for such, ah, purposes."

"Calvin! In front of you, in front of these strangers?" She was shocked, and put up one hand to

push nervously at her hair, which felt untidy.

"We'll ask them to turn their backs. After all, such things must be attended to."

"I'd rather die," she said, but not at all certainly.

"There are sacrifices to be made in this predicament, and modesty is one," he clipped out. "Er, gentlemen."

Watkins said, "I know, it just hit me too."

"What?"

"I've got to go to the john."

"Yes," said Calvin stiffly. "I suggest we retire to the farther end from the sand box, while one by one—"

"We could rig a screen or something, but there isn't anything to do it with," said Watkins. He walked away; despite his outspoken manner, he seemed to have the proper instincts.

Adam followed him. Summersby turned his back. Calvin looked at the Mexican. "Come along."

"Why?" asked Villa, raising his black brows. "What is there in a simple relieving of—"

Calvin strode to him, catching him by the nape, lifted him bodily from the floor, and sent him reeling after the others. He half-turned, then walked on, muttering, "Crazy *gringos!*" Calvin went and stood a little behind the others, his back to her.



The minutes following were interminable, horribly embarrassing. At last she touched his shoulder. "All right, Calvin," she whispered.

One by one the others used the sand box. By the time they were through with the unspeakably primitive ritual, she had become almost inured to it, and considered herself to be admirably calm. There were unsuspected resources in her nature, she thought.

"When do you suppose they feed us?" asked Watkins. He was holding his tan briefcase under his left arm; he hadn't once laid it down. "I'm so empty I rattle."

"Soon," said Calvin firmly, and she felt reassured.

Summersby was standing by the door-wall, his great hands working along the seams of his trouser legs. A violent temper, held in check, thought Mrs. Full. He was the worst of the problems facing them, except for the unknown animals.

Even as she looked at him, the wall opened again. This time no one jumped or shrieked, though she felt her breath hiss back over her tongue. Watkins said, "Well, Viva, here's your pal again."

The Mexican glared. Evidently the joke was a stale one to him. "My name is Villa, not Viva. I hope you get a good taste of that green stick, you little man!"

"Viva Villa," said Watkins. "Lead on. You know the way."

The awful arm came in like a hairy python, groping blindly with the rod.

Summersby, standing near the opening, was the first to be touched. It tapped him lightly, and he walked out of the room, really very bravely, she thought. The rod discovered Adam. The boy backed up, too frightened to put on a show of boldness. The rod slapped him impatiently, and he yelled and darted forward into the other room. He and Summersby stood together, staring up at something that could not be seen from inside the prison box.

"It's electrical," said Calvin. "Like a bull prod."

"Yes, dear," she said automatically.

"We may as well go out. I don't want you shocked."

"All right, Calvin." She took his arm. Watkins had been caught and herded out. As they stepped forward after him, she glanced sideways at her husband. She would have liked to tell him she loved him, but it would have been too melodramatic. She pressed his arm tightly, affectionately. They walked out into the great hall.

Villa's cursory description had not prepared Calvin Full for the reality of the huge beings.

There were three of them. They stood absolutely motionless, grotesquely humanoid figures with smallish, sunken eyes fixed rigidly on the people some yards away. Then, as Calvin watched, two of them thrust out their hands holding the ball-tipped rods. The gestures were almost too swift to follow.

He stared at the central figure, and it gazed back with its withdrawn, pupilless, rust-red eyes. Its head was, as Villa had told them, the shape of a watermelon, with the eyes wide-set on either side of a gently agitating orifice that was probably a nostril. The mouth, very human in shape, with full lips the color of the eyeballs, was quite low in the face. There was a rough growth of gray-black hair on the crown of the big head and a fuzz of it, less dark, on the face itself. There seemed to be no ears.

Its body, long and thick, was dwarfed by the tremendous arms. Its feet were large, toeless, and flat; its legs joined smoothly to the trunk about halfway up. It wore clothing of a sort, which surprised Calvin Full, perhaps more than anything else about the being. There was a kind of short sleeveless jacket of amber color caught at the front by a long silver bar, and a white skirt worn under the legs, reaching from just below the hip joints to the bottom of the torso.

Its companions were almost identical with it, except for clothing of different hues and varying cut.

The thing in the middle now opened its mouth and made a noise that reminded Full of an off-key clarinet.

"Gpwk?" it said, with a rising inflection. "Hummr gpwk?"

Abruptly it came forward, its motions flowing and yet a bit jerky, its long legs carrying it rhythmically, but with a hint of gawkiness; Calvin thought of a galloping giraffe he and his wife had seen in a travelogue some nights before. It towered over them, bending at the hip joints.

"Steady, dear," he said.

"I'm all right," his wife said shakily, seeming just on the verge of screaming.

"Wish I could say the same," said Adam Pierce, the Negro boy. "What a specimen!"

"Look like anything to you?" asked Watkins.

"Hell, no. Unless it's something from Mars."

"Maybe we're on Mars," said Watkins conversationally, but no one responded.

It's as sensible a suggestion as the East Indian one, thought Calvin. He had not the slightest idea where they were, and he saw no sense in worrying over it until they had more information to build theories on.

The beast making no further move, his wife at last leaned toward him and said in his ear, "Calvin, can you tell what—I mean whether it's male or female?"

He studied it carefully. He couldn't even make a guess. He shook his head.

Then it reached forward its stick and thrust it directly at Calvin's face. He backed off, startled and somewhat frightened. At once the thing touched Mrs. Full with the ivory ball, as if to separate her from the knot of men.

She cried out in pain, and Calvin leaped forward; he had a flash of the great paw coming at him with the prod aimed for his face again. It touched his forehead, he felt an intense shock, and then he was powerless to move.

His mind screamed, he could feel tiny muscles try sluggishly to crawl deep under his skin, but he was paralyzed where he stood in an attitude of charging; he knew his face must be twisted in horror and rage, but he could feel nothing. Only his mind and eyesight seemed wholly clear.

He saw his wife taken off, stumbling unwillingly and looking back at him over her shoulder. Watkins said, (Calvin could hear plainly, he found), "Watch it, he's falling!" Then the paralysis left him and he slumped as though all his bones had been extracted. Someone caught him under the arms, holding him up. He tried to move, but aside from rolling his eyes and lolling his tongue out, he was helpless.

Summersby, behind him, said, "Are his eyes open?"

"Yeah." Watkin's face appeared before him. "Poor guy looks half dead."

Calvin blinked and made a try at speech, but nothing came out but a flop-tongued drooling sound.

The two creatures remaining near them squatted down and observed them, making fragmentary noises to each other. Watkins started to walk after the third, which had escorted Mrs. Full across the wide room and was on the point of making her get onto a low platform on which were a number of structures of purple tubing and crimson boxes and varicolored small contrivances. One of the pair flicked its goad across his path.

Villa said, "Come back, you foolish, do you think you can take that stick?" He sounded furious, probably because he was afraid of the beasts becoming enraged.

Calvin made a wracking effort to say, "Let him go," for surely they couldn't stand callously by and see his wife undergo the Lord knew what tortures; but the sound he made was unintelligible.

Watkins said, "Blast it, Viva, we don't know what the thing might do to her."

"Come on back," said Summersby. "Do you want to get this?" He hefted the limp Full.

Calvin writhed and managed to move his hands up and down.

"He's gaining," said Watkins, coming back.

"Those rods pack a wallop," said Adam. "What sort of power can they have in 'em? Seems to me they're away beyond our science."

"They're not hitched to batteries," said Watkins. "Say, look at all this machinery. If these animals built it, they're a pretty advanced race."

Mrs. Full was seated now on a large thing like a chrome-and-rubber chair, one of those modern abominations which she and Calvin so cordially detested. He could not see her face. The twelve-foot brute was moving its fingers before her, evidently telling her to do something. Calvin heard her say plaintively, "But what *is* it?"

Summersby hoisted him up and about then feeling began to come back to him with a sharp, unpleasant tingling of the skin. He said, "Help her!" quite distinctly.

"Nothing's happening to her," said Watkins. "Take it easy."

Mrs. Full was apparently pulling levers and moving blocks of vividly colored material back and forth on rods; like an abacus, thought her husband.

Suddenly one of the other pair of creatures gave a cry, "Brrm hmmm!" and pointed to the left. From a muddle of gear rose a small airship, orange, with a nose like a spaceship and streamlined fins, and a square box on its tail. It made no noise, but rose straight toward the ceiling, moving slowly, jerkily.

His wife had her back to it. He heard her give an exasperated, bewildered cry. "What on earth ... what are you *doing*?" She spoke to the creature as if it understood. "I don't see why you—"

Calvin pushed free of Summersby. He could stand now, shakily. The beast indicated a blue block on a vertical bar; Mrs. Full moved it down, the airship halted and began to sail toward them. "Do you see the toy ship?" called Calvin. "You're flying the ship!"

"Oh, my," she said helplessly. "What shall I do now?"

"This is crazy," said Watkins. "Absolutely crazy."

"Go on moving things," Calvin called to his wife. "Experiment. It wants you to fly it." It occurred to him that this was too obvious to bother stating. He must be distracted by weakness. He rubbed his tingling arms and hands, hoping she wouldn't crash the ship. Villa and Adam Pierce were calling encouragement to her as the orange thing drifted up and down and sideways.

Now the twelve-foot being gestured briefly at a portion of the apparatus, Mrs. Full caught his

meaning and moved something, and the ship tilted and flew along the wall without touching it. All three of the creatures uttered sounds that might be taken for words of pleasure.

"Good girl!" yelled Watkins. "Keep it up!"

She turned to them and Calvin saw she was smiling. "There's really nothing to it," she said. The airship bumped into the wall and fell. The animal above her squawked and pressed down a lever, which evidently sent out a beam or impulse that caught the ship in midair and held it suspended. Then it grasped Mrs. Full and carried her, flailing her limbs, over to the corner.

Calvin started forward, apprehensive.

"Hold it, Cal, you don't want another shock." Watkins took his arm.

The creature kicked aside a mound of small gadgets, sending them helter-skelter, picked up what looked like a big five-legged stool and set it on its feet. It was perhaps ten feet high. Then he deposited Mrs. Full on its smooth round top and turned her bodily so that she faced the wall.

"Help her!" snapped Calvin.

"We can't do a damn thing."

"Just wait a minute, sir," said Adam. "He's leaving her alone. I don't think he'll hurt her."

She twisted her head around, looking frightened. Her legs hung over the edge. The being strode back with its curious gawky-graceful walk, and firmly turned her face to the wall again, using one big rubbery finger. "Oh!" she said, in a small voice, and remained staring at the wall, like a naughty child on a dunce's stool. The beast came over to the group.

The three talked among themselves, glancing at the men. The airship hung on its invisible beam of energy, ignored. Mrs. Full patted up her hair. She must be terrified, thought Calvin.

The three came to them, their skirts swishing like taffeta. They knelt—it was an odd movement, their high-hipped legs angling to the sides, their bodies slanting forward as their heads dropped toward the humans—and stared at one and then another. The one who was evidently the leader put out his green goad, but slowly, as if showing no harm was intended, and pushed at Calvin's jacket. The ivory ball touched his chest but no shock followed. The thing made noises, perhaps comparing his clothing with its own.

"Take it off, Cal," said Watkins.

"Why?"

"He'd like to see it. Be friendly."

"That's it," agreed Adam, "be friendly."

He removed his jacket and handed it to the brute, who received it dubiously, fingered it, exhibited it to the other two, and dropped it. Calvin bent to pick it up; the goad barred his way. Two large fingers plucked at his trousers. He felt himself flush with outrage.

"No!"

Watkins chuckled. "I'll bet you will."

"Don't make it mad," said Adam.

"I won't take my trousers off."

"If we took them off, it might soothe this monster," suggested Villa. "Let us throw him down and take off his pants."

"Try it," said Calvin. The Mexican started toward him. Then the creature had lifted him high in the air, peering closely at the trousers. It tugged at them. "Ouch!" said Calvin. The beast would tear them off; the humiliation of that would be worse than removing them himself. It might rip them to shreds. He loosened his belt and unbuttoned and unzipped just in time; they came off over his shoes and were held up in front of the sunken red eyes. Calvin was set down, carefully enough, and the garment was handed to the other monstrosities. Calvin cast a look at the stool. He was glad his wife was not witnessing his shame.

"Nice shorts," said Villa.

Full whirled on him, angry enough to bark out an insult, even an oath, but the man was evidently sincere in his praise.

"Thank you," he said stiffly.

His trousers were thrown to him and he shoved his feet into them and secured them once more. He put on his jacket.

One of the beasts which had not taken an active part in the business now walked to Mrs. Full and picked her up by the back of the waist, as though she had been a cat, and brought her over. For

one ghastly moment Calvin thought it was going to divest her of her skirt, but after scrutinizing her a while, it set her down among them.

He took her hand. "Are you all right, dear?"

She was amazingly calm. "I am, Calvin, I am. I don't believe they mean us any harm, after all."

The first great animal pointed at the box, waving his prod.

"We're supposed to go in again, I guess," said Watkins.

"Let's go, then," said Adam. "No sense in getting shocked."

They trooped in, and the wall closed behind them.

IV

Adam Pierce had an idea. It had begun to grow in his mind while the woman was running the miniature spaceship, but he had thought it over until he was certain it wasn't so silly as to make them laugh at him. Now he felt sure he'd hit on the truth; too many evidences for it, and nothing much that he could see against it.

"I have an idea," he said.

"To get out?" asked the woman.

"No, ma'am. I think I know where we are."

"Where?" asked everyone, except the big man, Summersby, who was sitting on the tire looking away from them.

"In a lab! This is a laboratory, and those big things are some kind of scientists!"

"You could be right," said Watkins reluctantly. "My God, what a spot, if you're right!"

"Sure. That's why we were snatched off the coaster, however it happened. They wanted to experiment on us, and study us. They got this lab someplace where it's secret, and they make tests—"

"There was a contrivance like a milking machine," said Full.

"You don't know *what* it's used for," said Adam darkly. He imagined it might be an especially nasty way of picking over a man's brains or body. "Look, it all fits. That stool, that's a funny way to punish a person, but all their stuff is a little cockeyed."

"By our standards," added Watkins.

"That's what I meant. Look, you punish a guinea pig when it does something wrong, if you're trying to teach it some trick or other; I mean, suppose you want to determine its intelligence, you give it a problem, and if it does the thing wrong it gets a shock, maybe, or a bat on the nose. That stool was punishment. If you hadn't crashed the rocket," he said to Mrs. Full, "it might have given you a reward."

"Maybe some food," said Villa.

"Here's another angle," said Watkins, who obviously knew something about lab work. "They may be trying to give us neuroses. Scientists induce neuroses in all kinds of critters, by punishment and complex problems and—"

"What is that?" asked Villa.

"Neuroses?" Watkins rubbed his chin. "Well, say they want to make an animal nervous, anxious, worried." Villa nodded.

"You mean they might be trying to drive us mad?" said the woman in a high scared voice.

"I doubt it," said Calvin Full.

"They might be," said Watkins.

"Then let's get out of here," said his wife. She went trotting to the wall. "Didn't anyone shove a barrier into this?"

"I forgot," said Full. She gave him a dirty look.

"Anyway," Adam went on, "that could explain why we were fixed up before they woke us—it was like quarantine. They wouldn't want sick animals."

"Who was fixed up how?" asked the Mexican suspiciously.

"My astigmatism," he said to Villa, "and this gentleman's sinus trouble, and his wife's headache."

"And they pulled a rotten wisdom tooth for me," said Watkins. "I just discovered it a minute ago."

Hole's healed up neatly."

Villa was peeling away the bandage on his hand. Now he gave a glad shout. "*Madre de Dios!* Look, the burn has gone!" He showed them his hand. "Tuesday, a terrible scorched place; today, behold, it is well!"

The woman said, "You know, this *might* be a laboratory. When I taught kindergarten we had simple tests for the children that were somewhat like that remote control apparatus."

Watkins pushed the big man, Summersby, on the shoulder. "I wish you'd get into this," he said irritably. "We need all the brains we have to get out."

Summersby looked at him. "You think we'll get out?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"Why?" Summersby sounded tired, and as if his mind was a long way off. "If these are scientists, they'll keep a fairly close watch on their lab animals."

"You're a forest ranger, man. Don't you have to meet emergencies all the time?" Watkins was exasperated. Adam thought, I wouldn't talk to the big fellow that way; he looks as wild as a panther.

"I'm sorry," said Summersby, turning away again. "I don't think we can escape, or plan to, until we have more information."

"You needn't inflict your morbidity on us," said Full. "Because you're a defeatist is no reason for us to be."

Summersby stood up. He looked as tall to Adam as one of the monsters. "If we're guinea pigs, we'll end up as guinea pigs," he said. "And what do experimenters do with guinea pigs, finally? They infect or dissect them. Now leave me alone!" He walked to the farthest corner and sat down on the straw, staring at his feet.

Adam reached up automatically to push at his glasses, found them missing, and was confused for an instant. Then he said, "There's a thought. We better bust out as quick as we can."

"Summersby won't help," said Watkins. "Anybody else feel fatalistic about this mess?"

"I must get back to my chili stand," said Villa. "And my wife," he added.

"Adam, you're nearer to college courses than I am," said Watkins. Adam nodded. "How many places in the world are there, big enough and unexplored enough to hide a race of giants like these?"

"I guess parts of Africa and South America, maybe the Arctic, some islands. I don't really know."

"Neither do I."

"Perhaps we aren't on the earth at all," said Mrs. Full. They all looked at her. "I read a book once in which a party of people discovered a land beneath the earth's surface," she went on, actually blushing a little. "It was a trashy sort of book, but—but I thought possibly there might be something in the idea."

"There might," said her husband.

"Wherever we are, we've got to get out of this box before we do anything else," said Adam. He felt panicky, as the realization sank into him of what they might be in for, in this alien lab, under the care of scientists that looked more like apes than anything.

"Look!" shouted Villa. Adam whirled and saw the small panel, that Watkins had discovered earlier, just sliding open. A large platter came through, heaped with what looked like a collection of junk. The huge hand which had pushed it in withdrew, the panel slipping shut after it. Villa was the first to reach the platter. "*Santos*," he muttered. "*Santos y santas!*"

The platter was two feet square, of sky-blue plastic, and on it lay seven pies, several dozen cupcakes, a double handful of macaroon cookies, and a quantity of glass shards. Some of the pies were upside down.

"What on earth...." said Mrs. Full.

"Looks like the contents of a bakery window," said Watkins, leaning over with his briefcase clamped to his thin chest. "Window and all, I might add."

Villa picked up a custard pie. It had been smeared up by rough handling but it looked good to Adam. He chose one for himself, and Watkins handed Mrs. Full an apple pie. She thanked him. They all took tentative bites.

"What do you make of this?" Watkins asked Summersby, still trying to drag him into their group. The big man shrugged. "The glass," went on the blond fellow, "that doesn't make sense. Do they think we eat glass?"

"Possibly," said Calvin Full.

Among the six of them, they consumed all the eatable contents of the tray. Almost immediately Adam felt his eyelids drooping. "I'm sleepy," he said, yawning.

"So am I," said Villa. He lay prone and closed his eyes at once.

Adam sat down, more heavily than he had meant to. He was vaguely disturbed by the sudden tiredness.

"Someone ought to stand guard," said Mrs. Full.

"I will," said Summersby unexpectedly.

"I'll do it," said Watkins. He started to pace up and down. "I'm a little groggy myself, but I'll take first trick."

V

When they were let out of their prison box next morning—nine o'clock Friday, by the chronograph, and they had slept another fifteen hours—there were five of the gigantic beast-creatures waiting for them. Any hopes that Tom Watkins had had of rooting around the big hall for a way of escape died with a dejected grunt. There must be well over a ton of enemies there, with their caverned red eyes peering down at the humans. No chance to explore under those gazes.

The boss of the alien scientists—Watkins recognized it, or him (or was it her?), by the clothing and by certain differences in facial structure—came and bent over them. Watkins was smoking a cigarette he had bummed from Villa, Summersby's having given out the day before. He took a hearty drag and blew out the smoke, which unfortunately lifted right into the creature's eyes. It shook its head and made a squawking sound, "Hwrak!" and flipped its green prodder into his belly. He abruptly sat down, with the sensation of having stuck his finger into a lamp socket. "My God!" he said. Cal helped him up.

Summersby walked off toward a twenty-foot-high door. None of the beings tried to stop him. The boss motioned Watkins to go with it, so he rather shakily followed it across the room.

Before him was a gadget that resembled a five-manual organ console. The banks of keys were broad and there was a kind of chair, or stool, fixed on a horizontal bar in front of them. The giant indicated that he was to get onto it.

"Now what?" he said, when he had been stopped directly in front of the apparatus. "Expect me to play this? Look, Buster, I'm tone deaf, I haven't had my coffee yet, and I'd just as soon dance a polka as play you a tune."

The thing pressed down two of the keys—they were of an amethyst color, longer and more tapered than those of an organ—and looked at Watkins.

"Drop dead," he said to it. He was always bitterly antagonistic to everything and everybody if he didn't have three cups of coffee before he got out of bed. "Go on, you big ape, make me play."

It hit him on the head with a couple of its big rubbery fingers. He felt as if a cop had sloshed him with a blackjack, and all the hostility went out of him. He leaned forward and pushed down half a dozen keys at random.

There was no sound, at least none that he could hear, though he remembered the whistle he had at home to call his dog, and wondered if the notes of this organ were sub- or supersonic. Certainly there was no reason to suppose this race of creatures was limited to the same range of hearing that humans were.

The thing went down the hall some yards and folded itself into a sitting position before a large white space on the wall. When Watkins did nothing, it gestured angrily with its goad. He pressed more keys. It jerked its head around and stared at the white space.

Accidentally he discovered that by pressing with his calves on certain pedals below the stool he could maneuver the seat to either side. The gadget began to intrigue him.

He had never played any musical instrument, but had always had a quiet desire to produce music. He couldn't hear this organ's sounds, but he could go through the motions with fervor. He did.

The boss scientist gazed raptly at the wall screen; was it concentrating on what he played? Did his random selection of keys indicate something to it, something about his mental powers or emotions or—what?

Or was it possible that the playing produced images or colors on the blank space? He craned his neck, but could distinguish nothing. Pounding on, he called over his shoulder, "Come here, somebody!"

No one answered. Pushing keys at random, he turned to look for them. Each of them was doing something under the supervision of a twelve-foot beast, except for Summersby, who was still examining the door. "Hey, High-pockets!" he yelled, knowing the big man hated the nickname, but not giving a damn. "Summersby! Come here!"

"What is it?" said Summersby in a moment, standing below his seat.

"Take a squint at that screen the old boy's gaping at. I want to know what the devil I'm doing."

Summersby walked over and stood beside the scientist.

"What's happening?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"Well, the screen's mottled gray and white, and the pattern's swirling slowly; but that's all."

"Is it particularly beautiful?" asked Watkins.

"No. It's hardly distinguishable."

Sliding right and left on the bar, striking first one and then another of the manuals, Watkins said to Summersby, "What do you figure these scientists are, anyway?"

"Mammals," said the big man.

"I suppose so—"

"They have navels. They weren't hatched."

"Oh." Watkins hadn't noticed that. "Where are we, then?"

"I don't know."

Another scientist wandered over and sat down beside the first. Shortly they seemed to get in each other's way, and there was a lot of shoving and squawking. At last one of them hit the other in the face with an open hand. Then they were rolling on the floor, snatching at one another's hair and pummeling the big bodies and heads with those gargantuan fists. It sounded like a brawl between elephants. Watkins swiveled round to watch. Mrs. Full said to someone—Watkins heard her distinctly in a lull in the ruckus—"If these are scientists, what are the common people like?" For the first time that day he grinned. He had stopped playing the organ. The other scientists had gathered around the fight and were uttering strange cries, like wild geese honking. Cheering them on? he wondered.

Adam came over. "Mr. Watkins," he said, "could we have been wrong about them? Do you think a scientist would act like that?"

"They sure seem to be a quarrelsome race, Adam," he said, "they're not noticing what we do. Suppose you go look for a way out."

"We want to get away as soon as we can," nodded the boy. "Dangerous around here!" He ran down the hall.

The giants arose and straightened their clothing. They had patched up their argument in the midst of fighting over it. The leader walked toward a tall device of pipes and boards and steps, motioning Mrs. Full to follow.

Apparently Watkins had been forgotten. He took his briefcase off his lap, where he had held it all the time he played, and dropped it to the floor. Then he hung by his hands and let go. He picked up the case and went to investigate the room.

Before he had done more than glimpse the enormous door, he was picked up kitten-fashion by a scientist, who carried him off, dangling and swearing, to another infernal machine.

For a couple of hours they were put through paces, all of them; sometimes one man would be working a gadget while all the scientists and humans watched him, at other periods they would each be hard at work doing something the result of which they had no conception of.

Several of the machines could be figured: the pink maze, one or two others; and Watkins had at least a theory on the organ. The sleek modernistic machinery which directed the airship was plain enough. There were certain designs and arrangements to follow that flew it up and down the room. They were hard to memorize but Mrs. Full and the somber ranger, Summersby,

became adept at them.

Then there were the others....

There was a remote control device that played "music," weird haunting all-but-harmonies that sounded worst when the creatures appeared most pleased, and earned the punishment stool or a brutal cuffing for the operator when he did manage to produce something resembling a tune. Evidently bearing a relation to this was the sharp slap Adam got when he started to sing "The Whiffenpoof Song" while idling around a pile of outside blocks like a child's building bricks. What the human ear relished, the giant ear flinched from.

There was a sort of vertical maze that verged on the four-dimensional, for when they thought they were finding a way out the top they would come abruptly to the side, or even the bottom, and have to begin anew. This one was obviously impossible to figure out, thought Watkins. It must be one of the ways in which the scientists induced neuroses in their experimental subjects. He had a quick mind for puzzles and intricacies of any kind, but this one stumped him cold.

"You think it's calculated to drive you crazy?" he asked Cal.

The New Englander considered for a minute. Then he nodded. "Possibly," he said.

"You think it might work?"

This time Cal pondered longer. At last he said, "Not if we don't let it."

"I could develop a first-class neurosis," said Watkins to Mrs. Full, "if I let myself really go."

"We must all keep our heads, Mr. Watkins," she told him. "Those of us who have not given up—" She glanced at Summersby with a frown—"must hold a tight rein on ourselves."

"That's right, ma'am," he said. They all called her "ma'am" or "Mrs. Full." Nobody knew her first name. He wondered if she'd be insulted if he asked her, and decided that she would.

Capriciously, then, on the heels of a series of punishments, the head scientist went out of the room and came back with food for them. It flung the food—three chickens—on the floor. Villa snatched one of them up with a happy shout, but at once his dark face soured. "Raw? How can we cook them?" His hand with the fowl dropped limply to his side.

"We can make a fire," said Calvin. Watkins was a little surprised that it was Cal who made the suggestion first, but the Vermont man added, "I've made enough campfires to know something about it."

"Mr. Full is an enthusiastic hunter," said his wife.

"A fire of what?" asked Villa, managing to look starved, helpless, and wistful, all at once.

Summersby said, "There are plates of plastic over there, and plenty of short rods. I don't know what these beasts use them for, but if they're fireproof, we can construct a grill with them." He went without further talk to a stack of the multicolored slabs and dowels, which lay beside a neat array of what looked like conduit pipes, electromagnets, and coiled cable. He picked up an armload. One of the giants put a hand down before him. He pushed it aside and strode back to the group. Guttery, thought Watkins, or just hungry? Or is it his sense of kismet?

"I'll cut some kindling from the trees in our room," said Calvin. "Who has a knife?"

Summersby handed him a large pocket knife, and set about making a grill over two of the plastic slabs. It was a workmanlike job when he had finished. He held his lighter under one of the rods, which was apparently impervious to fire. He nodded to himself. Looks more human, thought Watkins, than he has yet.

Villa was plucking one of the chickens, humming to himself. Mrs. Full was working on another, Adam on the third. Watkins felt useless, and sat down, running his fingers along the smooth side of his briefcase.

Cal made a heap of chips and pieces of wood and bark under the grill. Summersby lit it. The giants, who were grouped around them at a few yards' distance, mumbled among themselves as the shavings took flame. The plucked and drawn fowls were laid on the grill. Watkins' mouth began to water.

"Now if we only had some coffee," he said to Adam. "One lousy pot of greasy-spoon coffee!"

VI

"I have seen you," said Villa to Adam, who was gnawing on a drumstick. "You wear the wig and a bone in the nose, and a tigerskin around you."

"Sure," said Adam. "I'm the Wild Man from Zululand. It's one job where my color's an advantage."

"A fine job!" said Villa. "You should have come down to my stand. The best chili in New York."

"I had a bowl there last week. Without my make-up, I mean."

"I will give you a bowl free when we go home. With tacos," added Villa generously.

"It's good stuff," said the boy.

Calvin Full wiped his fingers and his lips on a handkerchief. He looked about at the hall, through which the giants had now scattered; some of them were tinkering with the machines, others were simply loitering, as if bored by the whole matter of scientific research. They had lost their early wariness of the humans, and did not carry the green goads, but kept them tucked into holsters at the back of their swishing skirts.

One of them removed the blond man, Watkins, and set him to doing something with a pipe-and-block apparatus. The processes they went through with their strange mechanical and electrical gadgets, the end results they achieved, were a mystery to Calvin. And as the afternoon wore on, their conduct as a whole became even more mysterious. It was, from human standards, totally irrational. One would begin a test, analysis, or whatever it might be; he would follow it through its devious windings to its ambiguous result, or to no result, and suddenly leave it to begin something else, or come to watch the humans perform.

The longer he observed their conduct, the more worried he became. Finally, after a good bit of hiding and spying, he found out something which he had been trying to figure for hours; and then it seemed time for him to talk to someone about their escape.

The blond man had been peering into his briefcase. He zipped it shut quickly as Calvin approached, with a kind of guilty movement. What does he have in there? Calvin wondered.

"Mr. Watkins," he said, rubbing his chin and wishing he had a razor, "did you ever see a scientist, or laboratory assistant, skip from one thing to another as these creatures do?"

"I never did."

"Nor did I. They don't take care of their equipment, either; several times one or another has kicked down a neat pile of gear, and once I distinctly heard something break."

"It might be junked machinery," suggested Watkins.

"I doubt it."

One of the giants made a raucous noise—*Brangg!*

"And how irritable they are, in addition to their capriciousness and sloppiness! I can't imagine a race of emotional misfits producing equipment of such complexity. Their science is beyond ours in many ways, yet look at this place." He made a broad gesture. "When we were let out this morning, it was clean and well ordered. I've inspected dairies that were far dirtier. Now it's a hodge-podge of scattered materials, upset stacks of gear, tipped-over instruments. What sort of mind can bear such confusion?"

Watkins smiled. "The minds that conceived—well, that vertical maze, for instance—must be orderly after a fashion, even though it isn't the human fashion."

"This is far from what I wanted to say, though. Have you been noticing the door?"

"There isn't much to notice. It's a sliding panel like our wall."

"When one of the creatures leaves, he passes his right hand across what is evidently an electric eye beam, as nearly as I can place it about ten or eleven feet off the floor. That opens the door."

"Good going, Cal!" said Watkins. "I hadn't seen 'em do it."

"Our try for escape should be made as soon as possible," went on Calvin in a low voice. "As we've talked about, the object of these tests and experiments may be to infect us with neuroses—" Watkins grinned again—"I know my phrasing isn't right," said Calvin stiffly, "but I never looked into such matters. There's also Summersby's suggestion about the fate of guinea pigs. So I think we'd better try to get out right away."

"With five of them here?"

"If we have any luck, we may find an opportunity, yes. Occasionally they get absorbed in something, and that door makes no noise."

Watkins looked at his briefcase uncertainly. "Okay," he said finally. "May as well try it. Though God knows where we are when we do get out of the lab."

Calvin congratulated himself on his choice of an ally. "Good man," he said.

In the next hour they managed to build a crude platform beside the door, of various boxlike things, nondescript plastic blocks and impedimenta. The giants didn't even look at them. They were, indeed, a strange race. Now the platform was high enough so that Calvin felt he could reach the opening ray.

Summersby wandered over. "What are you doing?" he asked, seeming to force out the question from politeness, not curiosity.

"We're going to make a break, High-pockets," said Watkins. "Want to help?"

"They won't let you," said the big man.

"We can try, can't we?" asked Watkins hotly.

"It's your neck."

"Listen, you may be the size of a water buffalo, but if Cal and Adam and I piled on you, you'd go down all right. Why don't you cooperate?"

Summersby stared at him a moment and Calvin thought he was going to say something, something that would be important; but he shrugged and went across the hall and into the prison box.

"What's eating that big bastard, anyway?" said Watkins.

Calvin believed he knew, but it was not his secret; it was Summersby's. He said nothing.

"Watch it," said Watkins. "They're coming." The two men scurried behind their rampart. The five giants marched, flat-footed, down the hall, their thick arms swinging. The door opened and all of them went out. It closed behind them.

"How about that!" said Watkins exultantly, a grin on his face.

"I'll get Mrs. Full and the others," said Calvin. He felt a tingle of rising excitement. "Get up there and be ready to open it. We'll give them five minutes and then make our break."

"Right." Watkins was already clambering up the boxes and blocks.

Calvin almost ran to his wife. She was standing in front of the color organ. "Dear," he said, and halted.

"Yes, what is it, Calvin?"

"I don't know. I was going to say—"

A sluggishness was pervading his body, a terrible lassitude crept through his brain. What was it? What was happening?

"I was going to—"

He caught her as she slumped, but could not hold up her weight, and sank to the floor beside her. His eyes blinked a couple of times. Then knowledge and sensation vanished together.

VII

Tom Watkins awoke slowly. He had a cramp in one arm from sleeping on it, but otherwise he was conscious of a comfortable, healthy feeling, which told him he'd slept well and long. He stretched and brushed a few pieces of straw from his face.

Straw?

He suddenly remembered sitting down on their platform, very sleepy and worried because of the abruptness of it.

He sat up. Summersby had just stood, yawning. "Did you carry me in here?" he asked the big man.

"I was going to ask you that."

"Christ! What happened?" He was wholly awake now. "Did you drop off out in the lab?"

"Yeah."

"So'd I," said Adam. He was sitting next to the Mexican, whom he now pushed gently. "You okay, Porfirio?"

Villa erupted with a grunt. The Fulls were looking at each other owlishly.

And then it hit him. Watkins twisted, cased the floor, and saw nothing but straw and fountain and tree trunks. He was literally staggered, and nearly lost his balance.

His briefcase was gone!

He stared about wildly, panic lifting in him like a swift debilitating disease. Then he took four fast steps and grabbed Summersby by the coat. It was queer, but he didn't even think of anyone else having taken it. Summersby towered over him, but he could be brought down.

"Okay, you skyscraper," said Watkins, "where'd you put it?"

"Put what?"

"My case! Where is it?"

"I never touched your damned case."

Well, Watkins could smell honesty, and here it was. That startled amazement was genuine. He glared at Adam Pierce, Villa, the Fulls. Not that last pair, surely! As rock-ribbed and staunchly honest as their New England coasts, and about as imaginative. Not the colored boy, either, a good kid; and he didn't think it was Villa.

"We must have been carried in here by the scientists," said Adam rationally. "Maybe they left it outside."

That was logical. But he'd had a death-grip on the handle when he fell asleep, just as he always did. He looked at them all again. He went from wall to wall, kicking the straw. Then he scowled at the sand box, the only place a thing that size could be stashed away. He was suddenly on his knees, tossing sand left and right.

Avoiding certain places, he checked the pile. Nothing! Not a scrap of leather or a piece of green paper!

"If you are through," said Villa heavily, "I wish to use the box."

"Go ahead, Viva." Watkins walked across the room, groping for a cigarette, then remembering he had none left. "What happened out there?" he asked loudly. "Were we doped? Something in the chickens?"

"We were awake for a long time after we ate," said Adam. "Not even these people could make a drug act on six of us in the same minute, after that long; too many differences in metabolism. If that's the word I want."

"They weren't even in the room when we dropped off," said Mrs. Full.

That was a tip-off. Watkins momentarily forgot his great loss. "They left, and in a minute, we were asleep. They must have pumped some sort of gas into the lab. Sleep gas."

"Is there such a thing?" asked Cal. "An anesthetic vapor that would permeate such a large place so quickly?"

"Is there such a thing as a four dimensional maze?" asked Adam shortly.

Watkins grinned. He wasn't the only one who needed his morning coffee.

Then he thought of his briefcase again. He tried to push the moving wall to one side; no go. He got mad again. "It's no good to them," he said. "What do they want with it?"

"It couldn't have been so important that—" began Full.

"Important?" Watkins was yelling now, and although he disliked raising his voice and making scenes, he did it now, with furious pleasure. "Cal, you never saw anything more important in your life than that case, and I don't care how many blue-ribboned cows you've gaped at!"

"What was in it?" asked Villa.

"Money, goddammit, money!" It didn't matter if his secret came out now. In this insane place, God knew where, the cautious habits of half a lifetime slid away. "The best haul I'd made this year. The contents of the safe of Roscoe & Bates, that's what was in it! Better than twenty-two thousand in good, green cash!"

"The contents of a safe?" Calvin Full frowned. "You mean you were a messenger, taking it somewhere, and got on that roller coaster with—"

Adam Pierce laughed abruptly. "No, he wasn't a messenger," he said. "He wasn't any messenger. He's a safe-cracker. Mr. Watkins, what good do you think it'd do you in here?"

"We'll get back."

"You're a safe-cracker?" asked Mrs. Full, her pale face lengthening with horror, disgust, and fear. "A criminal?"

"In a manner of speaking, ma'am," said Tom Watkins, "I am."

"I'll be hanged," said Summersby. "And you accused me of stealing your loot. I ought to butter you all over the wall."

"You try it, you overgrown galoot. I didn't do a hitch in the Philippines for nothing." Watkins smoothed back his hair, which was dangling into his eyes. "Sure, I'm a safe man. Don't worry, Mrs. Full, that doesn't mean I'm a thug." She looked scared.

"That's right," said Adam, still chuckling. "This boy's the aristocracy of crime. You don't have to worry about your purse. He only plays around with big stuff."

Tom flipped him a grin. "I'll bet you even know why I was on the coaster."

"Sure. You were hiding out."

"That's it. If I kept out of sight till dark I was okay. They were out for me, because my touch is known; but who'd think of checking an amusement park?" He turned as Cal made a noise in his throat. The Vermonter was a study in outraged sensibilities.

"You—you swine," he said, a typical Victorian hero facing the mustache-twisting villain. "You stole that money—"

"My morals and your morals, Cal," said Watkins as genially as he could, "are probably divergent, but it doesn't make a whale of a difference now, does it?"

Full turned to his wife and began to mutter to her.

Villa said, "I don't like crooks, I run a respectable stand and I am an honest man," and scratching his hand where the healed burn was, he turned away likewise. Summersby was sitting on the tire, and only Adam looked sympathetic. The boy wasn't crooked, that was plain, but Watkins had the glamor that a big-time thief has for the young, the fake aura of Robin-Hoodism.

He shook his head. He'd had to spill it. For a while they'd trusted him and now he was a pariah.

The food panel opened and something plumped in. Watkins glanced at his chronograph. Ten o'clock Saturday. He went over to the food.

It was a big, glossy chocolate-brown vulture with a blue head.

"Well," said Adam. "Well, now, I don't know."

"They pulled a boner this time," said Watkins. "Unless it's part of the conditioning."

Villa picked it up. "It weighs many pounds. It's warm, just killed. I don't want any of it." He dropped it on the straw. "With my spices, perhaps; but not cooked on that grill, without sauce and spice. Aargh!"

Watkins thought, Amen to that. He rubbed the sandy bristles on his chin. No razor or soap here. It dawned on him that he was thirsty, and he went to the fountain. As it always did when he bent over to drink, the curious web of silver strands in the corner caught his eye. There were so many puzzles about this damned lab that he despaired of ever solving all of them.

After fifteen minutes, the wall opened. They went out, Villa carrying the vulture. He flung it at the feet of the chief scientist, who was there with two associates.

"No!" he bellowed up at it. "We do not eat this!" He articulated slowly, clearly, as though to a foreigner with a slim knowledge of English. It picked up the great bird and regarded it closely, then without warning threw it at one of the other giants.

The vulture caught it on the side of the head and knocked it off balance; falling to its knees, it bleated out an angry sound and dived for the boss' legs. They went down together in a gargantuan scrimmage that made the humans dance backward to avoid being smashed by the thick swinging arms.

Tom Watkins walked off, unimpeded, to look for his briefcase. It was nowhere in the lab. He cursed bitterly. Twenty-two grand, up the spout.

The head scientist, having chastised the other, left the room; Watkins had a glimpse of another fully as large, with something like a big table therein. Shortly the creature returned, carrying in one arm a load of wood chips, and in the other a bulgy, leathery thing that turned out to be a partially stunned octopus, still dripping the waters of an unknown ocean.

They killed it, rebuilt their grill (larger this time), and cut up the octopus and cooked and ate it. It wasn't as bad as Watkins had feared.

After a dragging day, they were locked into their box—no one had a chance to gimmick the wall, for the giant were watching them closely—and shortly afterward a load of raw vegetables was dumped in.

Watkins paced the floor after he had eaten, waiting for the sleep gas, determined to combat it if he could. When the drowsiness came, he walked faster. It didn't do any good. He knew he was sinking to the floor. Powerful stuff, he said to himself, very powerful st—

Mrs. Full kept close to Calvin all through Sunday. They had been here since Thursday, all these men without women, and she knew there were men who had to have women frequently or they became vicious and could not be stopped by any thought of consequences. The Mexican seemed all right, but you never knew with a person from a Latin country.

Another facet of the same problem was the fact that she and Calvin were supposed to be on their honeymoon. She faced it: she was frustrated. She wanted a honeymoon, no matter what sort of prison they were in. So after their first meal on Sunday, she asked Calvin to fix up a private

apartment in their prison.

With various materials, plastic blocks and the different sizes of slabs, and some screens of translucent fabric she had dug up in a corner, he made a walled-off compartment just large enough for two.

Then one of the scientists looked in, saw what he was doing, and promptly knocked it down.

Adam, who had been helping in the latter stages, squinted at the ceiling of the box. "You know, Mrs. Full, I think they can see us through that. If it's opaque to us, it still might be transparent to them; like a mirror, I mean, I've seen them at home, mirror on one side, window from the other. That'd explain the light we get in here. And if they want to observe us all the time, then this private cell of yours would make 'em mad."

"But *it* had no roof," she objected.

"That's right." He shook his head. "Another theory gone poof."

"I'll build it again," said Calvin stubbornly, and did so. This time the giants left it alone. He and Adam made a screen for the sand box too, and built a permanent grill on one side of the box.

VIII

By Tuesday they were all in a state of anxiety and scarcely-contained rage. Their surveillance was casual, often non-existent, yet not once had they been able to block the wall of their prison or open the great door of the laboratory. Circumstances, chance, fate, whatever you wanted to call it, something had stopped them every time.

There were three giants in the lab today. Sometimes there would be one of them, sometimes as many as five; but always there would be the one who had first removed them from the box, who seemed to be the head scientist, giving orders, bullying the others in the queer emotional way of these creatures. Today there were three. As usual, when they had let the humans out, the lab was clean and orderly. The sloppy scientists had very efficient janitors, thought Adam. By this time the place was a shambles.

Out in the lab, there rose the honking sound of pain and anger—some of the noises they made, especially the commands, were recognizable now to the people—and a sharp slap. Then Mrs. Full hurried into the box, carrying a number of two-foot-square slabs under her arm.

"What happened, ma'am?"

"Hello, Adam. The criminal Watkins played a few bars of a real song on that device, and the brutes hit him." She laid down the slabs. "Our harmonies enrage them, I think perhaps cause them actual pain. They held the sides of their heads where ears ought to be, and shook themselves and made those hideous noises."

"They hit me when I sang the other day," said Adam, "remember?"

"That's right. Look here." She sat down, pulled one of the thick slabs onto her lap. "I found these under a shelf out there. One of the creatures knocked them off and I picked them up. I wondered why they had been up there, when so many stacks of them just sit around on the floor."

"I never saw any like these, ma'am. They have that little ridge on the edge there, and the border of different colored stuff around 'em."

"Watch what happens when I push the ridge upward, Adam. It's like an automatic button." She pressed it and the slab, at first gay orange, turned pale blue; on it appeared three lines of squiggly characters, like a cross between Arabic writing and Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"A magic slate," said Adam. "That's neat!"

"You haven't seen anything yet," she told him, and pushed the ridge again. The writing disappeared, and out of the slab leered a bull gorilla, paws on chest, eyeing Adam with beady, ridge-browed malevolence. It took a second for sanity to convince him that it was only a picture: three-dimensional, on a two-dimensional sheet of plastic, but so real he half-expected the beast to charge out at him. "What about that?" she asked.

He hit his thigh with a fist. It was a photograph, he imagined, but made by an illusory process so far ahead of anything humanity could produce that it seemed he might glimpse whatever was behind the gorilla if he put his eyes down to the side of the slate. "Gosh!" he said, feeling it a little naïve but afraid to swear in front of her. "Isn't that something!"

"It's a book," she said, "an album of photographs. Look here."

The next picture was an equally miraculous one of half a dozen monkeys sitting on a tree trunk. Adam looked at it, then at the farthest trunk in their box of a room. Undeniably it was the same one.

Under the picture was a line of squiggles that probably spelled out the scientists' equivalent of

"monkeys."

"They were here, in this place," said Adam. "The giants must have experimented on them too." He turned his eyes up to the woman and saw that she was white and drawn. "What happened to them?" he asked. "There aren't any monkeys here now."

"Exactly," she said. She put on the next picture, and after a moment the next.

Dogs greeted his eyes, so real he could almost hear them pant; a cow gazed stolidly at him; a cheetah sat on a mound of straw with clown's head cocked inquisitively; two cockatoos perched in rigid still life on the silver rod of the prison box.

"What happened to them?" he asked again.

"The experiments ended," she said.

Then there flashed out a thing like a blue sponge with legs, a thing which sat in the cat's-cradle they had speculated so much about. From its center two ruby eyes blazed with three-dimensional fire. *That* never came from Earth! Mars or Venus could have produced it, maybe, or a planet so far from Earth that it bore no name. He said as much, his voice quavering.

She stared at him. Moistening her lips, she said, "If that was here, in this box, then *where are we?*"

He shook his head. He could not even guess. "What's next?"

The last picture in the slate was a group portrait of himself, the Fulls, Summersby, Watkins, and Porfirio Villa.

When was that taken? They were sitting in a circle on the straw, eating something. Peering closely, he thought it must be the vegetables, for there was a small heap of round things next to Calvin Full which were probably buckeyes. Sunday night, then.

"They must have taken it through the food panel," he said. "Are there any more pictures?"

"That's all. I don't know what's in the other ones yet."

Calvin came in. She handed him the first "book" and showed him how to operate it. He flipped through it and when he came to the monstrosity in the web his eyes widened. "What is it?" he asked, in the hard twang of his region.

"A guinea pig, like all the others including us," his wife said.

"The tree trunks are explained now," said Adam, half to himself. "The sand box, too. That isn't a very scientific-looking treatise, but I guess it's more of a memento, a record of us all." He raised his brows in a facial shrug. "Us and the monkeys," he said. "Gosh!"

She took the next big slate on her lap. It was lavender. The first few pages to appear were covered with the curious writing, very large and only a few words to a page. Then came pictures of many things, not photographs but drawings and paintings in vivid color, and the things could in no way be linked to science. There were portraits of the tall creatures themselves, in various settings, some in labs like this one, some outdoors in a landscape that was predominantly scarlet and green; there were group scenes in which they ate odd-looking foods and walked down blue pathways and examined strange pets and familiar animals. Under each picture was a short grouping of squiggles, marks, scribbles, etc.

"Can that be a science book?" asked Cal, leaning over his wife's shoulder. The beings were pictured as simply as possible, in no minute detail whatever, and their activities were of the dullest and most prosaic sort.

This pattern was followed through page after page—a picture (some of them were of things so alien they could not be placed by either the Fulls or himself), a single character, then a short word and another, long or short as the case might be. After a dozen of them had flashed on and off Adam noticed that the large character was always repeated at the beginning of the last word.

When he realized what it meant, the whole business clicked into focus. The whole damned deal, the lab and the scientists and the experiments and the meaning of the four magic slates, and everything. There was no particular reason why this last slate should have done it, for it was no more suggestive than many other things that he had seen; it was simply the last piece of evidence, the final push that sent him headlong into terrible knowledge.

Carefully, desperately, he went over it all in his mind, while the Fulls spoke in low tones.

God, he thought, *oh, God!* He was shivering now. He was more terrified than he had ever been before. His tongue felt thick.

The punishments, the high stool and the arbitrary cuffs and swats; the gadgets, the mazes, the puzzles; were they all a part of the conditioning to neurosis of a scientific experiment? They were not.

Adam had found an answer, the only possible answer. The fourth slate had given it to him, although a hundred hints of it had shown up every day. His psych teacher would be ashamed of him for muddling along so many days, believing in a theory that was so plainly impossible.

He addressed Mrs. Full. She was a little sharper than her husband, and this was more in her line, too. He had to make her discover the same answer. He had to *know* it was right. And then he had to get out of that place in a hell of a hurry.

"Ma'am, you know what this is?"

"No, Adam."

"Look here. See this big letter, repeated at the first of this word?"

"Yes."

He flipped a few "pages" past. "It's the same with all of them, you see? And the middle word is always the same—four curly letters. You know what that middle word is?"

"No, Adam."

"It's 'stands for' or 'means.'" He stared at her. "Get it?"

She thought an instant. "Of course. Adam, that's very clever of you." She wasn't scared yet. She hadn't seen the implication.

"'Stands for'?" Calvin repeated.

"A stands for Apple," explained Mrs. Full. "Or A stands for Airship, or whatever it might be. It's an alphabet book, dear."

She still hadn't caught it. "Remember when Mr. Full built the cubbyhole here," Adam said, "and the giant knocked it down? Why was he angry?"

"I suppose they want to observe us without any hindrance."

"No, ma'am," he said with conviction. "That was simple frustration. They want to see everything, whether it's interesting to them or not. They aren't scientifically disappointed if they can't, they're just frustrated. Think of the punishment we get, slaps, the dunce stool."

"As though we were children," she said.

"Exactly. Now, here are these books. An alphabet book, and these others. What age would you figure them for? You taught kindergarten, you said. This is something I wouldn't know."

"I'd say they're for fairly bright children about five or six years old."

"Or for us," said her husband, "when they start to teach us their language."

"They are children's books, though, with short sentences and the gaudy pictures our own children love." Mrs. Full stared at Adam. Her brown eyes widened. "Adam," she said, "you've guessed something."

"You guess it too," he pleaded. She had to corroborate his own idea. "Think of all the things about them we haven't been able to make out."

"Nursery books...." she said slowly. "Instability to the point of insanity, if you found it in adult humans. Sloppiness and inefficiency, when these machines point to a high degree of neatness of mind. Wandering attention, inability to concentrate for long periods. Positive tantrums over nothing. Cruelty and affection mixed without rhyme or reason." She took him by the arm, her fingers strong with fear and urgency. "Tell me, Adam."

His breath hissed. He was filled with panic. Where there had been only anxiety for his own life and his world, there was now a fearful knowledge that he could scarcely bear without shrieking. She had it too, but she didn't dare say it. It was a horrible thing.

"These machines," he said, "aren't scientific testers at all."

"Yes?"

"They're toys."

"Yes?"

"We aren't guinea pigs. We're—we're pets. They've had other animals, from Earth and from God knows where, and now they have people."

"Yes. Go on, say it." She thrust her face fiercely up to his.

"Those twelve-foot 'scientists' are kids," he said. Then he stopped and deliberately got his cracking voice under control. She was just as frightened as he was but she wasn't yelling. "It's

the only answer. Everything fits it. They're about five years old."

Calvin Full frowned. "If that's true, we're in trouble."

"You're damn right we're in trouble!" said Adam. "A kid doesn't take care of a pet like a scientist takes care of a guinea pig or a white rat. If it annoys him, he's liable to pick it up and throw it at a wall! I might get my head torn off for singing, or you could be dismembered for making a mistake with one of those toys."

"Some children tear the wings off butterflies," said Mrs. Full. She stood up. "I'll go and tell the others," she said firmly. "It doesn't seem to me that we have much time left."

"If we start to bore them—" began Adam, and shut up.

She went out. In about five minutes everyone had come into the box but Watkins, who was playing the color organ. They discussed the discovery in low voices, as though the alien children might be listening; Villa and Summersby examined the slates. After a while Watkins was pushed in, looking rather worn and frayed. Adam was standing in the far corner under the silver web. He saw the wall start to slide shut, remembered his dowel, and tried to see if it was still in place at the bottom of the wall.

He couldn't see it. Maybe it blended with the color behind it, or maybe somebody had accidentally kicked it out of place.

The wall slid shut.

IX

Summersby was losing the sense of being apart, of having no problems no matter what happened. These people had drawn him into their trouble against his will; the situation was so bad that he could no longer tell himself he didn't give a damn. So he had a bad heart! He couldn't turn his back on these poor devils because of that. It was stupid and selfish. He felt sorry for them. He was uncomfortable with them, as he always was with standard-sized people, and he would still repel any attempt on their part to get close to him; but he was a little chastened by what he had been through. He recognized that.

It was all very well to say he didn't care where he died, but it would be a hell of a lot more dignified to accomplish it as a free man, rather than as a harried rabbit. Even if he were killed trying to escape, it would be endurable. But if his heart gave out while he was, say, trundling up and down the nursery in that ridiculous little auto thing, he knew his last breath would be a bitter one.

Adam had just said, "I laid a rod across the sill there." Summersby walked to the wall, which appeared to be closed as usual. Just as he came to it, he caught the sheen of metal in a thin line up the corner, and knew that he was seeing part of one of the machines in the nursery. The dowel had held the door.

Something moved outside; he could hear the dull slap of immense flat feet. They were going to be fed. He strolled away from the corner, saying quietly, "It worked, Adam. Don't check it now, though."

The small panel opened and one of the garishly hued platters was put in, loaded with a wriggling, seething mass of grubs and half-dead locusts.

"Supper?" cried Villa. "This is supper? Do they think we are a lot of African natives?"

"Well," said Adam, "I guess they were fooled by me." It was the first time he had made any sort of joke about his color. Possibly, thought Summersby, he's becoming one of the group, as I am. God knows the kid has as much reason to be bitter about people as I have; or more reason. It's put him on the defensive.

Summersby felt more chastened than ever.

No one cared to sample the insects. They walked away from the platter and hoped aloud that their captors would see the refusal and give them something else, but nothing was pushed in. After a quarter of an hour Watkins said, "Think it's safe to have a try at the door?"

"No," said Summersby.

Watkins jumped to his feet. "Listen, I've had all I can stomach of you!" he yelled. "If you don't want to help, okay, but keep your nose—"

"I was going to say that they'll be pumping in the sleep gas pretty soon, and we don't know whether they do it from outside the nursery or outside this box."

"That's right," said Calvin Full.

Watkins eyed him a moment. "I'm sorry, Summersby," he said then. "I shot off my mouth too quick."

"They filled the nursery with it once," went on Summersby, "but it seems logical to think they could also let it into this room alone. Maybe it works on them, maybe not; if it does, then they wouldn't flood the nursery with it every night, because the adults have to come in and clean the place up."

"A clever thought, Mr. Summersby," said the woman.

"Not particularly. At any rate, I'm going to stand by the crack and try to get enough air to stay awake; then when I think the coast's clear, I'll shove the door open and scout around. If I find a way out, I'll come back and drag you into the nursery and wake you."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Villa suspiciously. "No, Mr. Big Man, I don't like you going out alone. I think you wouldn't come back. You don't like us."

Watkins, evidently on edge from his mauling by the children, whirled on the Mexican. "Oh, shut your yap! The guy's doing you a favor." Then he said to Summersby, "I'll come along."

Summersby grinned wryly.

"I'm not saying you'd run out on us, man." Watkins made the motions of going through his pockets for a cigarette, which some of them still did occasionally out of hopeful habit. "I know locks and I might be able to help if you ran into trouble."

"Come on along, then." He put an eye to the thin slit. "Here comes one of them. It's the head scientist." He grinned. "Or the kid who owns us, who lives in this house and invites his little pals in every day to play with his toys and his pets."

The monster disappeared. Presently Watkins said, "It's in. I'm sleepy."

Summersby stretched as tall as he could and put his mouth to the crack, trying to breathe only what air came through from the nursery. He saw the enormous child pass on its way to the door, and shortly the sound of its heavy feet stopped. He felt drowsy, his eyelids flickered. He beat his hands together, sucking in air from the opening. Villa started to snore.

Watkins said, "I'm about done, Summersby." He was kneeling at the crack below Summersby, and his voice was sluggish. In a few seconds he rolled over on the straw.

When did the adults come in to clean up? Summersby didn't dare wait much longer. He was fighting sleep with all his vigor. Possibly they wouldn't come till morning.

He had to chance it. He forced his fingers into the gap and heaved. The wall didn't move. Holding his breath, he propped one foot against the adjoining wall, dug his hands as far into the breach as possible, and hurled himself backward. The big door jolted an inch, hung, then slid back a couple of feet. He swung around and jammed himself through the aperture and the wall moved silently back into place; this time the dowel was not there, and when the wall stopped, there was no crack at the corner. Summersby must have kicked the dowel aside when he slid through. Watkins was inside, asleep.

He breathed deeply, and the effects of the sleep gas died, so that he was wide awake and felt very excited and eager. To analyze the reasons for his eagerness would have killed it, and besides he was in a hurry. He ran to the great door of the playroom, whose lintel towered twenty feet from the floor. Hastily he tossed apparatus, boxes, toy blocks, until he had made a pile five feet high.

Scrambling up this, the things sliding under his feet, he waved an arm above his head in the place where he believed the electric eye beam to be. Then the pile collapsed, and he fell into it, giving one knee a terrific crack and skinning his knuckles. The door glided open.

The next room was deserted, and the soft bluish light was dimmer here than in the nursery. This place was far less cluttered, containing no more than a big yellow machine, a gigantic table, and two six-legged chairs. There was a picture on the wall, the size of a barn's side, which he did not stop to look at.

The opposite door was open. The third room was a dining hall, with two tables and a number of chairs, these of metal with eight legs each. Luckily, there was no one in it.

In the next room—all four were in a straight line, and he thought, Either it's a long narrow house, or else it's as big as Rockefeller Center—there were a number of gadgets, colorful and complex like the children's toys, but of different construction. He glanced at them but did not pause until he came to the next door.

It was closed. He presumed its opener beam would be in the same place as that of the playroom, and looked around for something to stand on.

There seemed to be nothing small enough to move. He shoved at a couple of things, but they wouldn't budge. The only slim possibility was a big square brown box, set twelve feet off the floor on one of their mammoth tables. It was of a size to accommodate half a dozen cows, but looked as though it might be of flimsy enough materials, plastic probably, to push off the edge, from which it would fall exactly where he needed it.

He dragged a chair over, climbed up on its seat and then onto the table. He saw at once that the box would be immovable. There was an affair that might be a dynamotor attached to one side,

various objects sticking out of the other, and four stacks of thick coils on top. He was turning away, hoping to find another door in one of the first rooms, when his eye was attracted to a square plate among the things on the right side of the box. The plate was glass, for its surface shone under the blue light, and he thought he saw the pin-point twinkling of stars in it.

On a hunch, he walked over to it. He knew quite a lot of astronomy and if this happened to be a telescope, he might be able to determine their location.

The field of the plate was full of stars, but in patterns he had never seen. He could not understand it. It was not a painting, for the stars twinkled. Where the blazes was the thing focused?

A huge dial beside the plate had a pointer and scores of notches, each labeled with a couple of squiggly characters. He turned the pointer experimentally. The screen blurred, showed a planet with rings: Saturn.

"Neat," he said to himself, and turned the pointer another notch. He got a view of a landscape, trees of olive green and crimson, seen from above. He tried other notches.

Finally, just as he had reminded himself that he had to hurry, he saw a familiar globe swim onto the glass. It was Earth, with the two Americas clearly defined.

What in hell...?

He pushed the pointer on, and was given another landscape, this time of prosaic hue, a meadow with a cow in it. He clicked the thing another notch and got a constellation pattern again. He pushed it back to the cow.

He felt his heart thudding fast, too fast; and he hoped with all his faculties that he wouldn't conk out before he had solved this riddle. There were other dials, other pointers, a little behind the first. He turned one slowly.

The cow grew larger until it almost filled the screen. Only when he could see nothing but its broad placid back did he realize that he was looking at this scene, as at the others, from *above*.

He tried a third pointer. The land whipped by beneath his gaze. He came to a city, the buildings reaching up to him in a wonderful illusion of depth.

Then it dawned on him what the machine was, and he gasped.

There was no use in looking for the outer door. He had found the answer to their last problem, and he had to get back to the box with that answer and thrash it out with all of them. There might be a salvation for them and there might not.

Leaving the screen showing the city, he jumped down off the table, raced back through the room and into the next, the dining hall. Still there were no signs of any of the giants. He had crossed the threshold of the third room when he heard a door open on his right. There was no time to gape around; he covered thirty feet in five strides, dodged under the hanging shelf of the strange yellow machine, like a low desk covered with cogwheels, and ran along beneath it till he came to the extreme end of the contrivance.

A pair of feet, either of which would have outweighed a draft horse, went past him; he dared not lean forward to see the rest of the brute, but it was undoubtedly an adult. It went into the playroom.

After twenty or twenty-five minutes, during which Summersby thought over the problem and agreed with himself that he couldn't find the solution alone, the giant came out of the playroom, crossed near his hiding place, and went out through a door beside the huge picture. It was not in a hurry, so he decided it had not noticed his absence from the box.

He dragged an easy chair over to the nursery door. It was just four times the size of Summersby's Morris chair at home, and about eight times as heavy. As he was crawling up the leg to the seat, he recalled that he had a bad heart. If he hadn't been clinging to the plastic with both arms, he would have shrugged.

He intercepted the beam and opened the door. Having no more than half a minute to get through before it shut, he had to leave the chair where it was. He hoped none of the adults would realize that its position had changed.

The playroom was clean and neat. Likely it would remain unvisited through the night. He went to the box and only then remembered it was shut tight. What did the kids do when they opened it during the day? He had seen them at it twice. They laid their hands on top of the box, there on the left.

Hauling over enough junk to make a pair of steps, he got onto the roof of the box. There was a bar, set into the coaming. He pressed it, leaned over, and saw the wall slide back. A second push returned it to its shut position. He opened it again, swung his legs over the edge, pressed the bar once more and dropped. Snatching up a green dowel from the floor, he jumped into the box as the door was closing. He had just time to lay the rod across the threshold, as Adam had done, before the wall reached it and was held.

Trying not to breathe, Summersby picked up Watkins and slung him over his shoulder. He forced

his fingers into the crack and heaved. Again he threw his weight against the wall.

Then he was buckling at the knees, trying desperately to bring his mouth next to the opening, but not quite making it.

"Describe it again," said Watkins. "Give me all the details you can think of."

As Summersby went over what he remembered of the brown machine, Watkins tried to envisage it. A tough job, and he might not be able to handle it. To reverse a thing like that—when there'd be at least one or two principles he'd never heard of—well, that would be the job of a lifetime.

"How do you know that it's the instrument that brought us here?" he asked.

"It must be." Summersby looked intent, almost eager. "It has those dials that focus it almost pinpoint on any planet they want; at least, I saw quite a few planets, from a distance and close up. I saw a cow and a city on Earth. Then there's the big brown box. It's hollow—the door was half open. If they bring things, living things, from other planets, they need a receiving station large enough to take 'em. The box. It's logical."

"It sure is." Adam whistled. "So we're on another planet. That was plain, if we'd thought about it seriously. No place on Earth could hide a race like this. Not with all the factories they must have to produce the toys and what you saw out there."

"Why couldn't we be inside the Earth?" asked Mrs. Full stridently.

Watkins said, "He looked *down* on Earth. That argues another planet."

"But how did they get us here? In two days?"

Watkins scratched his bristled chin and thought aloud. "It must have been instantaneous. Remember, we went through a quarantine and were healed of just about everything that was wrong with us. That must have taken a while."

"The octopus was still wet," said Adam, "and the grubs and locusts were still kicking. They must focus that rig on Earth and push a button and here it is, like that. Instant transmission of matter." He smiled weakly, as though he were proud of the phrase. He looked very frightened, thought Watkins, and unhappy.

Tom Watkins was scared, too, but not especially unhappy. For the first time in almost twenty years, he was free of worry about the bulls, the law. He only wished he knew what had happened to his loot.

"The planet," said Cal, "whatever its name is, must have the same gravity and atmosphere as Earth. Same water, too."

"That's right. So it's produced a race of critters with plenty of human characteristics," said Watkins.

"Have they done this before?" asked Mrs. Full. "I mean do you think we're the first to be snatched up?"

"No, I don't," said Watkins, surprised that she was talking directly to him. "People disappear all the time. Look at the famous ones: Judge Crater, Ambrose Bierce—"

"Somebody mention the *Marie Celeste*," growled Summersby.

The wall began to open.

"Here's the plan, quick," said Watkins. "I've got to get out and find the machine, and see if I can gimmick it so it'll work backward, send us home. The rest of you create a diversion, keep the kids' minds off me."

"What kind of a diversion?" asked Villa. His abstracted face showed plainly that he was thinking of his chili stand and what he would say to the idiot relief man about conditions he would doubtless find therein.

"If you were a kid with pets, intelligent ones, what would you watch them do for hours? Something unordinary—something you'd never imagine they'd do." He looked at his chronograph. "It's just ten. I never saw the gadget I couldn't figure out in two hours; if I'm not back by noon, you'd better come out, Summersby."

"What if it's four-dimensional?" asked Adam.

"It's possible I can cook up a way to reverse its action anyway. There are some principles of electricity and mechanics that must be universal."

"Shall we run the machines for them?" asked Mrs. Full. "To distract the children?"

"They're used to that," said Watkins. "They bore easy. Suppose you're a kid with a normal regard for pets. You've had cats and dogs and rabbits and now you have monkeys. The monkeys are a lot smarter and more versatile, but they have their limits too. You get jaded with 'em. But one day they—" he snapped his fingers—"they start playing soldiers! They drill, stage mock battles, die and come to life, scrimmage—hell, you go nuts! You can't take your eyes off 'em!"

"That's it," said Villa promptly. "The children have gorillas, cows, they have never seen anything like war."

"Maybe they don't know what war is," said Adam. "It might just look as if we were fighting. None of their toys show a sign of war being ever waged by this race, like our own kids' toys do."

"The toys of any people reflect their civilization in an unreliable and distorted way," said Cal Full rather stuffily. "A visitor from Mars in one of our playrooms would conclude that we already have spaceships and ray guns, and that our usual clothing is chaps, sombreros, and spacesuits."

"They'll get the idea," Watkins said impatiently. The giant children outside were bawling the word that meant "Come!" He was in a hurry. These fools were always arguing. "Let's go," he said. "The four of you line up over there, catch the kids' eyes, and High-pockets can boost me up to the beam. Then he'll join you."

Watkins grinned tightly, slapped Adam on the shoulder, poked Villa in the belly, and dived behind the nearest many-colored pile of gear the moment he saw the children weren't watching him. As he went toward the door, he heard Villa saying, "My fourth cousin Pancho was a great man for war, so I will be general. Spread out in the thin line and be ready to march when I command."

Summersby followed Watkins, and they came to the door. Watkins managed to get up on the big man's shoulders, and waved a hand above his head. Nothing happened.

"Stand on them," said Summersby.

He struggled to do so. "*Un, dos, tres,*" roared the Mexican down the hall. "Begin!"

This time Watkins found the beam. The door glided aside. He dropped off Summersby's shoulders, jumped into the next room. A quick look showed him it was empty. As the door closed he heard Villa shouting hoarsely.

"Make bang noises for the guns. Fall dead, spring to life. We are mountain fighters of great skill. Climb on machines, drop off with bullets in your head, play you are—"

The door cut him off. Watkins chuckled. "What a ham," he said. He started for the opposite door.

X

It was ten minutes to twelve. Summersby was panting like a spent hound. He had not exercised in months, not since the doctors had told him his heart was just about gone, and he was surprised that he hadn't keeled over before now. Dashing around playing guerrilla like some six-year-old! It had been a damn good idea, though. The giant children—there were two of them today—were still enthralled, lying on their bellies with their furry watermelon heads propped in fantastic two-thumbed hands.

Leaning against a pink plastic maze wall, puffing, he thought, I've almost grown to like them. Why?

Because for the first time since he was sixteen, John Summersby had to bend his neck back to look up at someone. These grotesque humanoid beings were the only living things which did not make him feel overgrown, uncouthly out of proportion, a hulking lout. If a chair was too narrow for him, it would be like the head of a pin to one of these kids: if a fork felt uncomfortably small in his own hand, it would be a minikin indeed in one of those vast paws.

In their shadows, Summersby was a very small man. It was an unwonted sensation, the most satisfying he had ever experienced.

He looked at them out there, as they lay watching Mrs. Full and Adam mowing down Cal and Villa with imaginary Brownings. He grinned, felt his lips curve in the unaccustomed grimace, and thought with no particular bitterness that he was getting mellow in his last days. "Hello, High-pockets," he said softly to the kid that owned him. "How's the weather up there?"

At five to noon the door opened. Summersby, seeing its silent motion, left off the mimic gunplay and started for the wall, where he could intercept Watkins and find out whether he'd been successful. But the safe-cracker came running down the middle of the room, yelling.

"Come on, everybody!"

"Come on?"

The two giant children were on their feet, uncertain of what was happening. Obviously they didn't realize Watkins had been out of the room at all.

"The adults spotted me!" roared the blond man, swinging his briefcase wildly; where had he found that? "They're after me!"

Summersby let out an involuntary grunt when through the twenty-foot door came an eighteen-foot creature, a thing so mind-shakingly huge that even the ranger's size complex wasn't pleased by it. This was an adult: leaner in the body, broader of hand and thicker of limb, wearing trouserlike garments and a flaring jacket of royal purple caught by a ruby bar, it advanced calmly into the hall, clumping flat-footed in three yard strides. From its heavy-lipped gash of a mouth came noises like a whole orchestra badly in need of tuning.

"Hwhrangg!" it cried, waving its hands in the air. "Breemingg!" It appeared to be soothing the children, telling them that Daddy was here.

Mrs. Full, on the control platform, screamed. Her husband ran to her, Summersby stepped out irresolute, Adam stood stunned. But Porfirio Villa, afire with the heady make-believe carnage of the afternoon, was as quick to act as his fourth cousin Pancho could have been. A dozen waddling leaps, a swift swing of his legs over the side, and the Mexican landed in the little red vehicle with the vast control board, the car that only he had been able to master. Pressing buttons, pulling plungers, sliding levers, he whirled it around and sent it at the towering adult.

The beast skipped out of his way, blaring anger; he came about sharply, gunned his "motor"—if it was that—and rammed the gigantic enemy on the leg. There was the clear sharp snap of bone breaking. As Villa's car overturned, the creature fell at full length, with a crash like an elephant dropping out of a tree. It contracted its body and gripped its ankle with both hands, honking dismally.

Summersby was running. He skidded up to the groveling Villa, yanked him to his feet and shoved him out of range of the injured beast. The two children had broken into the barks that were their equivalent of weeping, one drawing its goading rod. Summersby crouched, went toward it, hoping to bring it down before it stunned him. As he came within diving range, though, the orange airship streaked over his head and jammed its nose into the child's belly. It folded over with a whoosh, grabbing its middle, as the toy wobbled off in eccentric flight.

Mrs. Full, the expert at flying the miniature vessel, was hectically jamming her blocks along their metal rods; something had gone wrong with the mechanism at the crash. Her husband hauled her off the seat and rushed her toward the door.

The remaining child stood in the middle of the floor, staring at its groaning, breathless playmate and at the maimed adult, honking a little frightened song to itself. Skirting it, the humans made for the door as fast as they could go.

Summersby overtook Watkins. "I found it okay," panted the crook.

"Can you work it?" They were through the door now, the two of them in the lead, running across the first of the rooms.

"There were other adults," said Watkins. "Three or four saw me. I don't know where they went."

"*Can you work it?*"

"The matter transmitter?" He grinned briefly. "Sure. There's two principles I don't get, but—"

The doorway before them was crowded by several of the giants. They came through, not hurrying, talking rather placidly; their movements had the swiftness of the children's without their jerkiness. In their hands were green goads. They pointed and came down upon the humans.

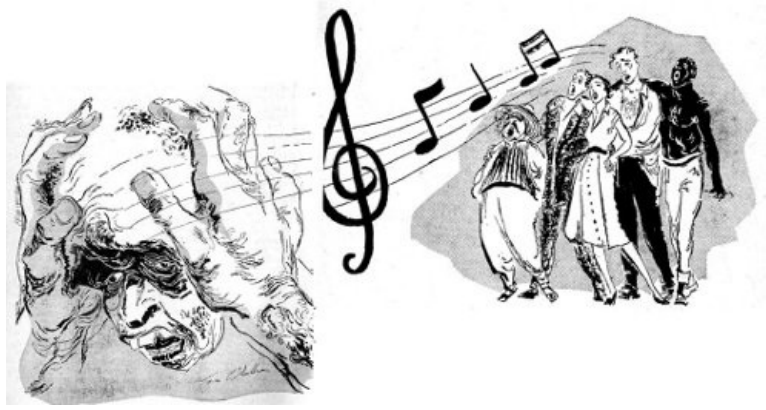
"Scatter!" yelled Summersby, and dodged under the shelf of the machine where he had taken cover last night. He went to the end. In seconds they would be peering under the shelf, spotting him, thrusting in their shockers and laying him out. And, damn it all, he cared! He didn't want to be stopped when so much of the fight was won. His heart might stop, he couldn't help that, but till it did he wanted to go on fighting. Balling his fists, he started to leave the sanctuary. Then he heard Adam Pierce begin to sing.

He had a high tenor voice, mellow with a sweet touch of huskiness in it, and he was singing "Drink to Me Only" at the top of his lungs.

He hadn't gone crazy! Summersby remembered the punishments they had endured for making harmonious noises on the musical toy, the slap Adam got for singing, the agonies the kids had gone through at Earth-type melody. Adam had thought of the only weapon they could use—*song*.

"Or leave a kiss within the cup," roared Summersby, and without further thought walked into the room. Watkins had chimed in now, breathless but true of pitch.

Three eighteen-foot brutes were standing there. Vast hands were pressed to bulbous heads, and agonized croaks came from gaping mouths. Whatever a tune did to them, it wasn't pleasant. What weird auricular structure could cringe so from a simple song? It did, and that was enough.



Mrs. Full clutched his arm. "One of them struck Calvin with his prod," she wailed.

"Where is he?"

"Near that door."

Beginning to sing again, Summersby pelted for the prone milk inspector. He picked him up and slung him, limp as a dead doe, over his left shoulder. The others were gathering. He motioned them forward, and, as Watkins joined him, ran on.

"Where'd you find your case?"

"On a table. Hope the dough is all in there." He glanced back. "They're coming. We're racking 'em but they're game."

The woman, Adam and Villa were right behind them. As they reached the midpoint of the third room, the dining hall, one of the beings staggered through the door behind them. It had lost its goad and was flattening its hands on its skull as Adam and Mrs. Full swung into "Dixie." It came at them like a drunk, unable to navigate a straight course but determined to reach them. It'll stamp on us, thought Summersby, easing Full back a little on his arm. It only has to come down once or twice with that Cadillac-sized foot and we're squashed ants. He sang.

"To live and die in...."

The second brute appeared, lurched over and fell on the table, caught up a flat trencher and skimmed it at them. It was as big as a bathtub. "Drop!" cried Summersby, went to one knee, felt the wind of the trencher's passing ruffle his hair.

The next door was closed. Summersby slammed himself flat against the wall and Adam, cat-lithe and fast, scrambled up over him, stood on his shoulders and broke the controlling beam. The aliens came down the room like two epileptic furies. "Sing!" said Watkins. "Everybody!" The door slid aside with maddening slowness.

"Try a fast one," said Mrs. Full. "'Blow the Man Down.'" It was a funny suggestion, coming from her. Summersby actually chuckled as he started to sing.

"As I was a-walkin' down Paradise Street...."

The third monster entered the dining hall, caught the full blast of their five voices (Calvin Full was still out, but Villa was giving a rum-tum-tum accompaniment), and sank to its knees, shaking its head as though it had been sapped. One of the others made a desperate leap at them, landing prone within a yard of Summersby. Melodies affect its organ of equilibrium, he thought; poor thing's in agony. "I says to her, Lollie, and how d'ye do...."

They were through the doorway now. The only pursuer still on its feet was reeling after them, green rod still held in one shaking hand. Its rust-red eyes were bulging out from their deep pits, and a thin trickle of violet ichor came from its nostril. It made guttural, creaking noises.

"Down at the end," said Watkins. "The brown box."

"Did you gimmick it?" asked Summersby.

"I think so. We have to take a chance. The main idea is easy. I guessed at a few things, but I think it'll work. Unless one of our big pals checked on it and mucked up my improvements."

It was twenty yards away; but so was the last of the monsters. Summersby changed Full to his other arm and added his voice to the general clamor for a bar or so, then asked Watkins the question that had been nagging at him. "Can we all go? Or does somebody have to send the others?"

"I'll send you. I'm not too sure I can get through. The dials and focusing lenses are on the outside, you know."

"I'll work it, then." They were at the table; he dropped Full and helped Adam shove a chair to the table. The woman and Villa were singing "Quiereme Mucho" in Spanish, their voices a trifle hoarse by now.

"You will like hell. It'd take me ten minutes to teach you how to work the transmitter. Think we have ten minutes?"

The giant was standing still, weaving, pawing the air. It would not give in to its pain and dizziness. If it fell now it might hit them. It was that close.

"You've *got* to show me. I have a bad heart. I'm due to die in a month or two," said Summersby urgently.

Watkins stared at him. "Do you think you went through the past hours with a rotten ticker? Don't make me laugh."

"It's true. I'm just waiting to die. You're no more than thirty-eight or forty, and you've got twenty-two thousand dollars there," he said, gesturing at the briefcase. "I don't give a damn about the morals of the case. You're a decent fellow and you ought to have this break."

Watkins snarled, as he gave the valiantly singing Mrs. Full a hand up to the chair seat, "You think I have a martyr complex? You think I *want* to stay here? I'm elected, that's all! It's me stays or it's everybody! I haven't the time to teach you to work it!" He hit Summersby a hard blow on the chest. "Your heart's fixed up the same as Adam's eyes and Cal's sinus. These gentry could turn your lungs upside down without opening you up, they're that good. Go back to your woods. You're okay."

"No," said Summersby with stubborn rage. "I'm sick of waiting to die. That's why I took the coaster ride in the first place. That's why I wanted—"

"You're nuts. You have a heart to match your frame, Highpockets, if you'd admit it. Hand up old Cal."

The monster took two wobbling steps toward them. They were all on the chair, then clambering onto the table. Watkins swung open the door of the brown box. "Fast," he said urgently, "fast!"

Adam had Cal by the armpits; he lugged him into the dark interior. Villa jumped in, Mrs. Full following. Summersby confronted the safe-cracker.

"Show me how to work the machine. I don't believe they could mend a bad heart."

Watkins handed him the briefcase with so unexpected a motion that Summersby took it automatically. "Send it to Roscoe & Bates, if I don't turn up. I guess I can't use it here." He put a hand under his coat. "Go on, Highpockets."

"No!"

Watkins drew a gun, a small steel-blue thing that looked as wicked as a rattler. Summersby had had no idea that he was carrying it. "Hop in, tall man," said Watkins, grinning. "You're holding up the works."

Reluctantly Summersby backed away, stood in the door of the box. He could jump Watkins, but if the mechanism were so complex, he would only doom them all. "You're out of your head," he said.

"Sure."

Abruptly above the safe-cracker towered the fantastic form of their forgotten enemy, reaching for them, one hand still to its head. Summersby inflated his lungs.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot," he roared tunefully, "and never brought to mind!"

Everyone joined him. It was a startling cataclysm of sound, even to Summersby. The alien tottered, hand outstretched; its mouth fell open, its eyes popped, the violet blood coursed from its nostril; with a shudder it clawed the air, honked grotesquely, and pitched forward, half on and half off the table, where it lay gurgling. A spot on the side of its skull, about the width of a gallon jug, on which the hair grew sparse and gray, pulsed as though there were no bone beneath the skin, as though a bellows within was puffing it in and out, in and out. Its ear, thought Summersby. Probably we've wrecked it for good. Maybe the thing will die. Then Watkins is a gone goose, if he stays. He was about to lunge at the steady gun-hand when Adam and Villa yanked him backward into the box. Adam was crying.

"Try and come too, Mr. Watkins, try and come too," he said.

Watkins laughed. "I'll make out okay, son. I like my hide pretty well." He waved with the gun. "Be seeing you." Then he tossed the dark weapon into the box and slammed the door.

There was darkness, then bright sun. They stood on a street corner, and Summersby could read the signs as plainly as Watkins must have read them in the focusing lens of the matter transmitter on the unknown planet.

Broadway and 42nd Street. The five of them had clicked into being on the busiest corner of New York.

"That old crook," said Adam, gulping. "He focused us here for a gag."

"I look *awful*," gasped Mrs. Full, and Summersby, glancing at her, agreed. Like all of them, she had lost weight; her skin showed the effects of a week's washing without soap; and her skirt and blouse were mussed up, to say the least. All the men needed shaves. Calvin Full, recovering gradually from the shock of the goad, and still supported by Villa, looked like a Bowery wino.

"Is he coming?" asked Adam, addressing Summersby. "Will Watkins be along too?"

"I don't know," said Summersby. He stared up at as much of the sky as he could see beyond the block-high ads. "I hope so."

"My chili stand!" shouted Villa, suddenly awakening to the fact of New York about him. "That no-good relief man! I've got to see what he's done to it!" Pushing Calvin to Adam, who grasped him by an arm, the Mexican waved hurriedly. "Come and see me," he said to all of them. "I'll give you a bowl free." He hastened away into the crowd.

"We've got to see about our clothes at the hotel," said Mrs. Full. She sounded apologetic. "I hope we'll see you again, Adam, and Mr. Summersby."

"I doubt it," said Summersby. He looked at Full. "Coming out of it?" he asked.

"Thanks," said Cal, nodding. He took his wife's hand. "Gave you my address, didn't I?"

"I have it," said Summersby.

"Well, good-bye," said Mrs. Full.

"You did a fine job up there," said Adam Pierce. "I'm proud to have known you, ma'am."

"Thank you, Adam. Good-bye." They were gone.

"I suppose you'll be going too," said Adam, somewhat wistfully.

"I guess so. You'll go home?"

"I guess so," Adam repeated. "My folks will be sore. They'll never believe such a story. They'll think I ran wild or something."

Summersby, still looking upward, and wondering if he could be staring blindly at the planet which Watkins must be trying to leave even now, put a hand on his heart. "Was he right? They did fix up everyone else." He laughed. It was the first time he had laughed normally in seven months. "I could get into the rangers again," he said. "Adam, I've got to see a doctor. I've got to find out something."

"Yes, sir," said Adam unhappily. Summersby looked at him. "Really worried about your folks?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll come home and tell them, if you like."

Adam said gratefully, "Mr. Summersby, you're a gentleman."

"No," said Summersby, "no."

"Yes, sir, you are. Can we wait just a minute more? Mr. Watkins might be along any minute now."

"We'll wait."

After a while Adam said, "Remember that first feed we got up there, pies and cookies and glass?"

"I remember it."

"They must have just aimed that machine at a bakery window here on Earth, and taken glass and all."

"That's it."

"Probably it was called a smash-and-grab robbery, down here." He kicked something, bent down and picked it up. It was the safe-cracker's gun. "I didn't think he'd carry one," said the boy. He looked closer at it. "God!"

"What is it?" Summersby shifted the briefcase and held out a hand. Adam laid the weapon in his big palm. "He must have won it at the park that day," Adam said. "That old crook! Old faker!"

Summersby held it up. It looked like a small automatic of blued steel, but it was plastic. He turned it over. A pencil-sharpener.

Summersby grunted. "A toy," he said, giving it back to Adam. "Nothing but a kid's toy."



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ENORMOUS ROOM ***

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