

By the time Dr. Stadler believed it, the pile was motionless, except for one beast's leg sticking out of the mass, stiff as a rod and shaking as in a strong wind. The farmhouse tore into strips of clapboard and went down, followed by a geyser of the bricks of its chimney. The tractor vanished into a pancake. The water tower cracked and its shreds hit the ground while its wheel was still describing a long curve through the air, as if of its own leisurely volition. The steel beams and girders of the solid new trestle collapsed like a structure of matchsticks under the breath of a sigh. It was so swift, so uncontested, so simple, that Dr. Stadler felt no horror, he felt nothing, it was not the reality he had known, it was the realm of a child's nightmare where material objects could be dissolved by means of a single malevolent wish.

He moved the field glasses from his eyes. He was looking at an empty prairie. There was no farm, there was nothing in the distance except a darkish strip that looked like the shadow of a cloud.

A single, high, thin scream rose from the tiers behind him, as some woman fainted. He wondered why she should scream so long after the fact—and then he realized that the time elapsed since the touch of the first lever was not a full minute.

He raised his field glasses again, almost as if he were suddenly hoping that the cloud shadow would be all he would see. But the material objects were still there; they were a mount of refuse. He moved his glasses over the wreckage, in a moment, he realized that he was looking for the kid. He could not find it; there was nothing but a pile of gray fur.

When he lowered the glasses and turned, he found Dr. Ferris looking at him. He felt certain that through the whole of the test, it was not the target, it was his face that Ferris had watched, as if to see whether he, Robert Stadler, could withstand the ray.

"That's all there is to it," the fatish Dr. Blodgett announced through the microphone, in the ingratiating sales tone of a department-store floorwalker. "There is no nail or rivet remaining in the frame of the structures and there is no blood vessel left unbroken in the bodies of the animals."

The crowd was rustling with jerky movements and high-pitched whispers. People were looking at one another, rising uncertainly and dropping down again, restlessly demanding anything but this pause. There was a sound of submerged hysteria in the whispers. They seemed to be waiting to be told what to think.

Dr. Stadler saw a woman being escorted down the steps from the back row, her head bent, a handkerchief pressed to her mouth; she was sick to her stomach.

He turned away and saw that Dr. Ferris was still watching him. Dr. Stadler leaned back a little, his face austere and scornful, the face of the nation's greatest scientist, and asked, "Who invented that ghastly thing?"

"You did."

Dr. Stadler looked at him, not moving.

"It is merely a practical appliance," said Dr. Ferris pleasantly, "based upon your theoretical discoveries. It was derived from your

invaluable research into the nature of cosmic rays and of the spatial transmission of energy."

"Who worked on the Project?"

"A few third-raters, as you would call them. Really, there was very little difficulty. None of them could have begun to conceive of the first step toward the concept of your energy-transmission formula, but given that—the rest was easy."

"What is the practical purpose of this invention? What are the epoch-making possibilities?"

"Oh, but don't you see? It is an invaluable instrument of public security. No enemy would attack the possessor of such a weapon. It will set the country free from the fear of aggression and permit it to plan its future in undisturbed safety." His voice had an odd carelessness, a note of offhand improvisation, as if he were neither expecting nor attempting to be believed. "It will relieve social frictions. It will promote peace, stability and—as we have indicated—harmony. It will eliminate all danger of war."

"What war? What aggression? With the whole world starving and all those People's States barely subsisting on handouts from this country—where do you see any danger of war? Do you expect those ragged savages to attack you?"

Dr. Ferris looked straight into his eyes. "Internal enemies can be as great a danger to the people as external ones," he answered. "Perhaps greater." This time his voice sounded as if he expected and was certain to be understood. "Social systems are so precarious. But think of what stability could be achieved by a few scientific installations at strategic key points. It would guarantee a state of permanent peace—don't you think so?"

Dr. Stadler did not move or answer; as the seconds clicked past and his face still held an unchanged expression, it began to look paralyzed. His eyes had the stare of a man who suddenly sees that which he had known, had known from the first, had spent years trying not to see, and who is now engaged in a contest between the sight and his power to deny its existence. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he snapped at last.

Dr. Ferris smiled. "No private businessman or greedy industrialist would have financed Project X," he said softly, in the tone of an idle, informal discussion. "He couldn't have afforded it. It's an enormous investment, with no prospect of material gain. What profit could he expect from it? There are no profits henceforth to be derived from that farm." He pointed at the dark strip in the distance. "But, as you have so well observed, Project X had to be a non-profit venture. Contrary to a business firm, the State Science Institute had no trouble in obtaining funds for the Project. You have not heard of the Institute having any financial difficulties in the past two years, have you? And it used to be such a problem—getting them to vote the funds necessary for the advancement of science. They always demanded gadgets for their cash, as you used to say. Well, here was a gadget which some people in power could fully appreciate. They got the others to vote for it. It wasn't difficult. In fact, a great many of those others felt safe in voting money for a project that was secret—