

"Why? For heaven's sake, don't tell me that those Wyatt fields were the only source of oil in the country?"

"No, no, but the sudden disappearance of a major supply wrought havoc in the entire oil market. So the government had to assume control and impose oil rationing on the country, in order to protect the essential enterprises. I did obtain an unusually large quota for the Institute--and only by the special favor of some very special connections -but I feel abjectly guilty if this proved insufficient. Rest assured that it will not happen again. It is only a temporary emergency. By next winter, we shall have the Wyatt fields back in production, and conditions will return to normal. Besides, as far as this Institute is concerned, I made all the arrangements to convert our furnaces to coal, and it was to be done next month, only the Stockton Foundry in Colorado closed down suddenly, without notice - they were casting parts for our furnaces, but Andrew Stockton retired quite unexpectedly, and now we have to wait till his nephew reopens the plant."

"I see. Well, I trust that you will take care of it among all your other activities." Dr Stadler shrugged with annoyance. "It is becoming a little ridiculous--the number of technological ventures that an institution of science has to handle for the government."

"But, Dr. Stadler—"

"I know, I know it can't be avoided. By the way, what is Project X?"

Dr. Ferris' eyes shot to him swiftly--an odd, bright glance of alertness, that seemed startled, but not frightened. "Where did you hear about Project X, Dr. Stadler?"

"Oh, I heard a couple of your younger boys saying something about it with an air of mystery you'd expect from amateur detectives. They told me it was something very secret."

"That's right, Dr. Stadler. It is an extremely secret research project which the government has entrusted to us. And it is of utmost importance that the newspapers get no word about it."

"What's the X?"

"Xylophone. Project Xylophone. That is a code name, of course. The work has to do with sound. But I am sure that it would not interest you. It is a purely technological undertaking."

"Yes, do spare me the story. I have no time for your technological undertakings."

"May I suggest that it would be advisable to refrain from mentioning the words 'Project X' to anyone, Dr. Stadler?"

"Oh, all right, all right. I must say I do not enjoy discussions of that kind."

"But of course! And I wouldn't forgive myself if I allowed your time to be taken up by such concerns. Please feel certain that you may safely leave it to me." He made a movement to rise. "Now if this was the reason you wanted to see me please believe that I—"

"No," said Dr. Stadler slowly. "This was not the reason I wanted to see you."

Dr. Ferris volunteered no questions, no eager offers of service; he remained seated, merely waiting.

Dr. Stadler reached over and made the book slide from the corner to the center of his desk, with a contemptuous flick of one hand. "Will you tell me, please," he asked, "what is this piece of indecency?"

Dr. Ferris did not glance at the book, but kept his eyes fixed on Stadler's for an inexplicable moment; then he leaned back and said with an odd smile, "I feel honored that you chose to make such an exception for my sake as reading a popular book. This little piece has sold twenty thousand copies in two weeks."

"I have read it."

"And?"

"I expect an explanation."

"Did you find the text confusing?"

Dr. Stadler looked at him in bewilderment. "Do you realize what theme you chose to treat and in what manner? The style alone, the style, the gutter kind of attitude—for a subject of this nature!"

"Do you think, then, that the content deserved a more dignified form of presentation?" The voice was so innocently smooth that Dr. Stadler could not decide whether this was mockery.

"Do you realize what you're preaching in this book?"

"Since you do not seem to approve of it, Dr. Stadler, I'd rather have you think that I wrote it innocently."

This was it, thought Dr. Stadler, this was the incomprehensible element in Ferris' manner: he had supposed that an indication of his disapproval would be sufficient, but Ferris seemed to remain untouched by it.

"If a drunken lout could find the power to express himself on paper," said Dr. Stadler, "if he could give voice to his essence—the eternal savage, leering his hatred of the mind—this is the sort of book I would expect him to write. But to see it come from a scientist, under the imprint of this Institute!"

"But, Dr. Stadler, this book was not intended to be read by scientists. It was written for that drunken lout."

"What do you mean?"

"For the general public."

"But, good God! The feeblest imbecile should be able to see the glaring contradictions in every one of your statements."

"Let us put it this way, Dr. Stadler. The man who doesn't see that, deserves to believe all my statements."

"But you've given the prestige of science to that unspeakable stuff! It was all right for a disreputable mediocrity like Simon Pritchett to drool it as some sort of woozy mysticism—nobody listened to him. But you've made them think it's science. Science! You've taken the achievements of the mind to destroy the mind. By what right did you use *my* work to make an unwarranted, preposterous switch into another field, pull an inapplicable metaphor and draw a monstrous generalization out of what is merely a mathematical problem? By what right did you make it sound as if I—I!—gave my sanction to that book?"

Dr. Ferris did nothing, he merely looked at Dr. Stadler calmly; but the calm gave him an air that was almost patronizing. "Now,

you see, Dr. Stadler, you're speaking as if this book were addressed to a thinking audience. If it were, one would have to be concerned with such matters as accuracy, validity, logic and the prestige of science. But it isn't. It's addressed to the public. And you have always been first to believe that the public does not think." He paused, but Dr. Stadler said nothing. "This book may have no philosophical value whatever, but it has a great psychological value."

"Just what is that?"

"You see, Dr. Stadler, people don't want to think. And the deeper they get into trouble, the less they want to think. But by some sort of instinct, they feel that they ought to and it makes them feel guilty. So they'll bless and follow anyone who gives them a justification for not thinking. Anyone who makes a virtue--a highly intellectual virtue--out of what they know to be their sin, their weakness and their guilt."

"And you propose to pander to that?"

"That is the road to popularity."

"Why should you seek popularity?"

Dr. Ferris' eyes moved casually to Dr. Stadler's face, as if by pure accident. "We are a public institution," he answered evenly. "supported by public funds."

"So you tell people that science is a futile fraud which ought to be abolished!"

"That is a conclusion which could be drawn, in logic, from my book. But that is not the conclusion they will draw."

"And what about the disgrace to the Institute in the eyes of the men of intelligence, wherever such may be left?"

"Why should we worry about them?"

Dr. Stadler could have regarded the sentence as conceivable, had it been uttered with hatred, envy or malice; but the absence of any such emotion, the casual ease of the voice, an ease suggesting a chuckle, hit him like a moment's glimpse of a realm that could not be taken as part of reality; the thing spreading down to his stomach was cold terror.

"Did you observe the reactions to my book, Dr. Stadler? It was received with considerable favor."

"Yes--and *that* is what I find impossible to believe." He had to speak, he had to speak as if this were a civilized discussion, he could not allow himself time to know what it was he had felt for a moment "I am unable to understand the attention you received in all the reputable academic magazines and how they could permit themselves to discuss your book seriously. If Hugh Akston were around, no academic publication would have dared to treat this as a work admissible into the realm of philosophy."

"He is not around."

Dr. Stadler felt that there were words which he was now called upon to pronounce—and he wished he could end this conversation before he discovered what they were.

"On the other hand," said Dr. Ferris, "the ads for my book—oh, I'm sure you wouldn't notice such things as ads—quoted a letter of high praise which I received from Mr. Wesley Mouch."