

when *there* is the source of today's achievement, the man who made it all possible—Dr. Robert Stadler!”

It seemed to him for an instant that he saw an incongruous look on the worn, cynical faces of the newsmen, a look that was not quite respect, expectation or hope, but more like an echo of these, like a faint reflection of the look they might have worn in their youth on hearing the name of Robert Stadler. In that instant, he felt an impulse which he would not acknowledge: the impulse to tell them that he knew nothing about today's event, that his power counted for less than theirs, that he had been brought here as a pawn in some confidence game, almost as . . . as a prisoner.

Instead, he heard himself answering their questions in the smug, condescending tone of a man who shares all the secrets of the highest authorities: “Yes, the State Science Institute is proud of its record of public service. . . . The State Science Institute is not the tool of any private interests or personal greed, it is devoted to the welfare of mankind, to the good of humanity as a whole—” spouting, like a dictaphone, the sickening generalities he had heard from Dr. Ferris.

He would not permit himself to know that what he felt was self-loathing; he identified the emotion, but not its object; it was loathing for the men around him, he thought; it was they who were forcing him to go through this shameful performance. What can you do—he thought—when you have to deal with people?

The newsmen were making brief notes of his answers. Their faces now had the look of automatons acting out the routine of pretending that they were hearing news in the empty utterances of another automaton.

“Dr. Stadler,” asked one of them, pointing at the building on the knoll, “is it true that you consider Project X the greatest achievement of the State Science Institute?”

There was a dead drop of silence.

“Project . . . X . . . ?” said Dr. Stadler.

He knew that something was ominously wrong in the tone of his voice, because he saw the heads of the newsmen go up, as at the sound of an alarm; he saw them waiting, their pencils poised.

For one instant, while he felt the muscles of his face cracking into the fraud of a smile, he felt a formless, an almost supernatural terror, as if he sensed again the silent working of some smooth machine, as if he were caught in it, part of it and doing its irrevocable will. “Project X?” he said softly, in the mysterious tone of a conspirator. “Well, gentlemen, the value—and the motive—of any achievement of the State Science Institute are not to be doubted, since it is a nonprofit venture—need I say more?”

He raised his head and noticed that Dr. Ferris had stood on the edge of the group through the whole of the interview. He wondered whether he imagined that the look on Dr. Ferris' face now seemed less tense—and more impertinent.

Two resplendent cars came shooting at full speed into the parking lot and stopped with a flourish of screeching brakes. The newsmen deserted him in the middle of a sentence and went running to meet the group alighting from the cars.

Dr. Stadler turned to Ferris. "What is Project X?" he asked sternly.

Dr. Ferris smiled in a manner of innocence and insolence together. "A non-profit venture," he answered—and went running off to meet the newcomers.

From the respectful whispers of the crowd, Dr. Stadler learned that the little man in a wilted linen suit, who looked like a shyster, striding briskly in the center of the new group, was Mr. Thompson, the Head of the State. Mr. Thompson was smiling, frowning and barking answers to the newsmen. Dr. Ferris was weaving through the group, with the grace of a cat rubbing against sundry legs.

The group came closer and he saw Ferris steering them in his direction. "Mr. Thompson," said Dr. Ferris sonorously, as they approached, "may I present Dr. Robert Stadler?"

Dr. Stadler saw the little shyster's eyes studying him for the fraction of a second: the eyes had a touch of superstitious awe, as at the sight of a phenomenon from a mystical realm forever incomprehensible to Mr. Thompson—and they had the piercing, calculating shrewdness of a ward heeler who feels certain that nothing is immune from his standards, a glance like the visual equivalent of the words: What's your angle?

"It's an honor, Doctor, an honor, I'm sure," said Mr. Thompson briskly, shaking his hand.

He learned that the tall, stoop-shouldered man with a crew haircut was Mr. Wesley Mouch. He did not catch the names of the others, whose hands he shook. As the group proceeded toward the officials' grandstand, he was left with the burning sensation of a discovery he dared not face: the discovery that he had felt anxiously pleased by the little shyster's nod of approval.

A party of young attendants, who looked like movie theater ushers, appeared from somewhere with handcars of glittering objects, which they proceeded to distribute to the assembly. The objects were field glasses. Dr. Ferris took his place at the microphone of a public-address system by the officials' stand. At a signal from Wesley Mouch, his voice boomed suddenly over the prairie, an unctuous, fraudulently solemn voice magnified by the microphone inventor's ingenuity into the sound and power of a giant:

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . !"

The crowd was struck into silence, all heads jerking unanimously toward the graceful figure of Dr. Floyd Ferris.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you have been chosen—in recognition of your distinguished public service and social loyalty—to witness the unveiling of a scientific achievement of such tremendous importance, such staggering scope, such epoch-making possibilities that up to this moment it has been known only to a very few and only as Project X."

Dr. Stadler focused his field glasses on the only thing in sight—on the blotch of the distant farm.

He saw that it was the deserted ruin of a farmhouse, which had obviously been abandoned years ago. The light of the sky showed through the naked ribs of the roof, and jagged bits of glass framed the darkness of empty windows. He saw a sagging barn, the rusted tower of