

only a wooden box with some knobs and a circle of cloth stretched over an empty loud-speaker.

"We seem to have heard it," said Tinky Holloway.

"We couldn't help it," said Chick Morrison.

Mr. Thompson was sitting on a crate. The pale, oblong smear at the level of his elbow was the face of Wesley Mouch, who was seated on the floor. Far behind them, like an island in the vast semidarkness of the studio space, the drawing room prepared for their broadcast stood deserted and fully lighted, a semicircle of empty armchairs under a cobweb of dead microphones in the glare of the floodlights which no one had taken the initiative to turn off.

Mr. Thompson's eyes were darting over the faces around him, as if in search of some special vibrations known only to him. The rest of them were trying to do it surreptitiously, each attempting to catch a glimpse of the others without letting them catch his own glance.

"Let me out of here!" screamed a young third-rate assistant, suddenly and to no one in particular.

"Stay put!" snapped Mr. Thompson.

The sound of his own order and the hiccough-moan of the figure immobilized somewhere in the darkness, seemed to help him recapture a familiar version of reality. His head emerged an inch higher from his shoulders.

"Who permitted it to hap—" he began in a rising voice, but stopped; the vibrations he caught were the dangerous panic of the cornered. "What do you make of it?" he asked, instead. There was no answer. "Well?" He waited. "Well, say something, somebody!"

"We don't have to believe it, do we?" cried James Taggart, thrusting his face toward Mr. Thompson, in a manner that was almost a threat. "Do we?" Taggart's face was distorted; his features seemed shapeless; a mustache of small beads sparkled between his nose and mouth.

"Pipe down," said Mr. Thompson uncertainly, drawing a little away from him.

"We don't have to believe it!" Taggart's voice had the flat, insistent sound of an effort to maintain a trance. "Nobody's ever said it before! It's just one man! We don't have to believe it!"

"Take it easy," said Mr. Thompson.

"Why is he so sure he's right? Who is he to go against the whole world, against everything ever said for centuries and centuries? Who is he to know? Nobody can be sure! Nobody can know what's right! There isn't any right!"

"Shut up!" yelled Mr. Thompson. "What are you trying to—"

The blast that stopped him was a military march leaping suddenly forth from the radio receiver—the military march interrupted three hours ago, played by the familiar screeches of a studio record. It took them a few stunned seconds to grasp it, while the cheerful, thumping chords went goose-stepping through the silence, sounding grotesquely irrelevant, like the mirth of a half-wit. The station's program director was blindly obeying the absolute that no radio time was ever to be left blank.

"Tell them to cut it off!" screamed Wesley Mouch, leaping to his feet. "It will make the public think that we authorized that speech!"

"You damn fool!" cried Mr. Thompson. "Would you rather have the public think that we didn't?"

Mouch stopped short and his eyes shot to Mr. Thompson with the appreciative glance of an amateur at a master.

"Broadcasts as usual!" ordered Mr. Thompson. "Tell them to go on with whatever programs they'd scheduled for this hour! No special announcements, no explanations! Tell them to go on as if nothing had happened!"

Half a dozen of Chick Morrison's morale conditioners went scurrying off toward telephones.

"Muzzle the commentators! Don't allow them to comment! Send word to every station in the country! Let the public wonder! Don't let them think that we're worried! Don't let them think that it's important!"

"No!" screamed Eugene Lawson. "No, no, no! We can't give people the impression that we're endorsing that speech! It's horrible, horrible, horrible!" Lawson was not in tears, but his voice had the undignified sound of an adult sobbing with helpless rage.

"Who's said anything about endorsing it?" snapped Mr. Thompson.

"It's horrible! It's immoral! It's selfish, heartless, ruthless! It's the most vicious speech ever made! It . . . it will make people demand to be happy!"

"It's only a speech," said Mr. Thompson, not too firmly.

"It seems to me," said Chuck Morrison, his voice tentatively helpful, "that people of nobler spiritual nature, you know what I mean, people of . . . of . . . well, of mystical insight"—he paused, as if waiting to be slapped, but no one moved, so he repeated firmly—"yes, of mystical insight, won't go for that speech. Logic isn't everything, after all."

"The workingmen won't go for it," said Tinkv Holloway, a bit more helpfully. "He didn't sound like a friend of labor."

"The women of the country won't go for it," declared Ma Chalmers. "It is, I believe, an established fact that women don't go for that stuff about the mind. Women have finer feelings. You can count on the women."

"You can count on the scientists," said Dr. Simon Pritchett. They were all pressing forward, suddenly eager to speak, as if they had found a subject they could handle with assurance. "Scientists know better than to believe in reason. He's no friend of the scientists."

"He's no friend of anybody," said Wesley Mouch, recapturing a shade of confidence at the sudden realization, "except maybe of big business."

"No!" cried Mr. Mowen in terror. "No! Don't accuse us! Don't say it! I won't have you say it!"

"What?"

"That . . . that . . . that anybody is a friend of business!"

"Don't let's make a fuss about that speech," said Dr. Floyd Ferris.

"It was too intellectual. Much too intellectual for the common man. It will have no effect. People are too dumb to understand it."

"Yeah," said Mouch hopefully, "that's so."

"In the first place," said Dr. Ferris, encouraged, "people can't think. In the second place, they don't want to."

"In the third place," said Fred Kinnan, "they don't want to starve. And what do you propose to do about that?"

It was as if he had pronounced the question which all of the preceding utterances had been intended to stave off. No one answered him, but heads drew faintly deeper into shoulders, and figures drew faintly closer to one another, like a small cluster under the weight of the studio's empty space. The military march boomed through the silence with the inflexible gaiety of a grinning skull.

"Turn it off!" yelled Mr. Thompson, waving at the radio "Turn that damn thing off!"

Someone obeyed him. But the sudden silence was worse.

"Well?" said Mr. Thompson at last, raising his eyes reluctantly to Fred Kinnan "What do you think we ought to do?"

"Who, me?" chuckled Kinnan "I don't run this show."

Mr. Thompson slammed his fist down on his knee. "Say something—" he ordered, but seeing Kinnan turn away, added, "somebody!" There were no volunteers. "What are we to do?" he yelled, knowing that the man who answered would, thereafter, be the man in power. "What are we to do? Can't somebody tell us what to do?"

"I can!"

It was a woman's voice, but it had the quality of the voice they had heard on the radio. They whirled to Dagny before she had time to step forward from the darkness beyond the group. As she stepped forward, her face frightened them—because it was devoid of fear.

"I can," she said, addressing Mr. Thompson "You're to give up."

"Give up?" he repeated blankly.

"You're through. Don't you see that you're through? What else do you need, after what you've heard? Give up and get out of the way. Leave men free to exist." He was looking at her, neither objecting nor moving. "You're still alive, you're using a human language, you're asking for answers, you're counting on reason—you're still counting on reason, God damn you! You're able to understand. It isn't possible that you haven't understood. There's nothing you can now pretend to hope, to want or gain or grab or reach. There's nothing but destruction ahead, the world's and your own. Give up and get out."

They were listening intently, but as if they did not hear her words, as if they were clinging blindly to a quality she was alone among them to possess: the quality of being alive. There was a sound of exultant laughter under the angry violence of her voice, her face was lifted, her eyes seemed to be greeting some spectacle at an incalculable distance, so that the glowing patch on her forehead did not look like the reflection of a studio spotlight, but of a sunrise.

"You wish to live, don't you? Get out of the way, if you want a chance. Let those who can, take over. *He* knows what to do. You don't. *He* is able to create the means of human survival. You aren't."