

hell of a time trying to find somebody to fix it—there's getting to be so damn few cars out on the road that half the service stations are closed."

There was more annoyance than apology in his voice. He sat down without waiting for an invitation to do so.

Dr. Floyd Ferris would not have been noticed as particularly handsome in any other profession, but in the one he had chosen he was always described as "that good-looking scientist." He was six feet tall and forty-five years old, but he managed to look taller and younger. He had an air of immaculate grooming and a ballroom grace of motion, but his clothes were severe, his suits being usually black or midnight blue. He had a finely traced mustache, and his smooth black hair made the Institute boys say that he used the same shoe polish on both ends of him. He did not mind repeating, in the tone of a joke on himself, that a movie producer once said he would cast him for the part of a titled European gigolo. He had begun his career as a biologist, but that was forgotten long ago; he was famous as the Top Co-ordinator of the State Science Institute.

Dr. Stadler glanced at him with astonishment—the lack of apology was unprecedented—and said dryly, "It seems to me that you are spending a great deal of your time in Washington."

"But, Dr. Stadler, wasn't it you who once paid me the compliment of calling me the watchdog of this Institute?" said Dr. Ferris pleasantly. "Isn't that my most essential duty?"

"A few of your duties seem to be accumulating right around this place. Before I forget it, would you mind telling me what's going on here about that oil shortage mess?"

He could not understand why Dr. Ferris' face tightened into an injured look. "You will permit me to say that this is unexpected and unwarranted," said Dr. Ferris in that tone of formality which conceals pain and reveals martyrdom. "None of the authorities involved have found cause for criticism. We have just submitted a detailed report on the progress of the work to date to the Bureau of Economic Planning and National Resources, and Mr. Wesley Mouch has expressed himself as satisfied. We have done our best on that project. We have heard no one else describe it as a mess. Considering the difficulties of the terrain, the hazards of the fire and the fact that it has been only six months since we . . ."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dr. Stadler.

"The Wyatt Reclamation Project. Isn't that what you asked me?"

"No," said Dr. Stadler, "no, I . . . Wait a moment. Let me get this straight. I seem to recall something about this Institute taking charge of a reclamation project. What is it that you're reclaiming?"

"Oil," said Dr. Ferris. "The Wyatt oil fields."

"That was a fire, wasn't it? In Colorado? That was . . . wait a moment . . . that was the man who set fire to his own oil wells."

"I'm inclined to believe that that's a rumor created by public hysteria," said Dr. Ferris dryly. "A rumor with some undesirable, unpatriotic implications. I wouldn't put too much faith in those newspaper stories. Personally, I believe that it was an accident and that Ellis Wyatt perished in the fire."

"Well, who owns those fields now?"

"Nobody—at the moment. There being no will or heirs, the government has taken charge of operating the fields—as a measure of public necessity—for seven years. If Ellis Wyatt does not return within that time, he will be considered officially dead."

"Well, why did they come to you—to us, for such an unlikely assignment as oil pumping?"

"Because it is a problem of great technological difficulty, requiring the services of the best scientific talent available. You see, it is a matter of reconstructing the special method of oil extraction that Wyatt had employed. His equipment is still there, though in a dreadful condition; some of his processes are known, but somehow there is no full record of the complete operation or the basic principle involved. That is what we have to rediscover."

"And how is it going?"

"The progress is most gratifying. We have just been granted a new and larger appropriation. Mr. Wesley Mouch is pleased with our work. So are Mr. Balch of the Emergency Commission, Mr. Anderson of Crucial Supplies and Mr. Pettibone of Consumers' Protection. I do not see what more could be expected of us. The project is fully successful."

"Have you produced any oil?"

"No, but we have succeeded in forcing a flow from one of the wells, to the extent of six and a half gallons. This, of course, is merely of experimental significance, but you must take into consideration the fact that we had to spend three full months just to put out the fire, which has now been totally—almost totally—extinguished. We have a much tougher problem than Wyatt ever had, because he started from scratch while we have to deal with the disfigured wreckage of an act of vicious, anti-social sabotage which . . . I mean to say, it is a difficult problem, but there is no doubt that we will be able to solve it."

"Well, what I really asked you about was the oil shortage here, in the Institute. The level of temperature maintained in this building all winter was outrageous. They told me that they had to conserve oil. Surely you could have seen to it that the matter of keeping this place adequately supplied with such things as oil was handled more efficiently."

"Oh, is that what you had in mind, Dr. Stadler? Oh, but I am so sorry!" The words came with a bright smile of relief on Dr. Ferris' face; his solicitous manner returned. "Do you mean that the temperature was low enough to cause you discomfort?"

"I mean that I nearly froze to death."

"But that is unforgivable! Why didn't they tell me? Please accept my personal apology, Dr. Stadler, and rest assured that you will never be inconvenienced again. The only excuse I can offer for our maintenance department is that the shortage of fuel was not due to their negligence, it was—oh, I realize that you would not know about it and such matters should not take up your invaluable attention—but, you see, the oil shortage last winter was a nationwide crisis."