

A brilliant, young scholarship student, the pretty girl who was that year's Orange Bowl Queen, a shy, taciturn boarder, a heavy, mysterious box . . .

"A super spy yarn in the best tradition ... Mr. Wylie has exercised his remarkable talents and his gift for writing volcanic prose ...he will not leave many of his readers untouched" -binghamton press

"An ingeniously contrived spy super thriller, it has all the sus-pense of being locked in a small, dark room with a live rattlesnake ... the plot goes bang, then continues exploding like a string of firecrackers" -Milwaukee journal

"Brilliant, daring, honest, stringent ... a top-form thriller"

-CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Philip Wylie

The Smuggled Atom Bomb

A stirring novel of suspense, high adventure and romance by America's H best-loved writer of fiction .. "BRILLIANT"

-BOSTON POST

"A MFSNORTING SPY STORY ABOUT A CON-SPIRACY TO BLOW UP THE USA THAT MAKES YOUR BLOOD RUN COLD"

—Meriden Record

"A law-abiding American household near Miami Beach, secret trips to Baltimore and New York, night visits to the warehouses of giant trucking companies, a rendezvous with a Russian college widow, a mad sailing to the Bahamas, and the explosion of an atom bomb are all included in the swift action"

—Key West Citizen

"INTRIGUE, ROMANCE, FANTASTIC, AMAZING"

—Phoenix Republic

A LANCER BOOK • 1967

THE SMUGGLED ATOM BOMB

Copyright, 1948, 1951, by the Curtis Publishing Company All rights reserved Printed in the U.S.A. THE SMUGGLED ATOM BOMB was originally published in hard cover by Holt, Rinehart & Winston under the title THREE TO BE READ. Its large sale in the higher-priced edition makes possible this in-expensive Lancer reprint.

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 185 MADISON AVENUE • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10015

ONE

A languorous ocean breeze set sail from the Bahama Islands for the coast of Florida. It crossed the Gulf Stream and came ashore where autumn tourists sprawled on the allegedly golden but actually pale brown sands of Miami Beach. A breath of it, after crossing Miami, following a road lined with fluffy evergreens., swung finally into a stand of much larger trees: mahoganies, tamarinds., poincianas, gumbo limbos and live oaks. These it stirred audibly before it moved over a sun-brilliant lawn, entered the screened window of a dilapidated, two-story frame house and touched bright blond hair on the brow of a pretty, middle-aged woman who sat in a bed.

5

She glanced up with the pleasant thought that the still heat of day was ended. She saw the clock. Three-twenty. She faced the screen, then, and called in a contralto that was penetrating with-out being harsh, "Charlee-ee!"

Her mind pictured her dark-haired, merry-eyed son, age twelve. The picture did not materialize and she remembered he was going to try to get a newspaper route after school. She conjured up the brunette glow and giggly adolescence of her younger daughter. "Marian! Marian!"

Again there was no answer and again she re-membered. Marian had said she would be de-layed. Eleanor, her eldest, wasn't due until four-thirty because she had a regular lab period that day at the university. Mrs. Yates, invalided eight years before in the accident that had taken her husband's life, leaned back on her pillows, still smiling, and wished she hadn't called. For she knew what would happen. Feet strode on the crushed coral of the drive-way. A foot tripped on the threshold of the back door. And a young man appeared, grinning, at the entrance of her downstairs room—a man of less than twenty-five, a tall man and thin, a stooped young man with polelike arms and legs, eyes of a faded blue, unkempt hair the hue of new rope, and a determination of mouth and chin that did not fit his over-all diffidence.

"Duff," she said apologetically, "I didn't mean

6

to bring you in from the barn! What in the world were you doing, though? You've still got on your good gabardine slacks!"

The young man chuckled, looked down as if to check the statement, started to answer and was obliged to deal with a slight impediment of speech before saying, "Oh! Oh—sure! Decided not to change. Not doing anything messy—labelling a lot of cans with small hardware in 'em."

She laughed. "Of course! You said you were going to. I'm so scattered! Well—I'm sorry I dis-turbed you."

"Not a bit. Nearly finished. Did you want something? Iced tea, maybe? Eleanor left things ready."

"Later, perhaps. No, Duff. Don't want any-thing. I'd forgotten the kids were going to be late. It's their afternoon to sweep and dust and scour."

His grin widened. "I'll do it. Give me an excuse to put off mowing the lawn till a cooler day. Be-sides, I'm a talented house cleaner."

She laughed again. Duff Bogan—Allan Diffen-duffer Bogan—had been a boarder at the Yates home for more than a year. The luckiest boarder, she thought, that any invalid woman with three children ever had—though Eleanor couldn't possibly be called a child any more. "You go back and finish." Seeing he wouldn't, she added, "Or at least put on an apron."

He executed a comic salute and soon she heard

7

a broom working upstairs. Not long after, came a bizarre din from the bathroom, and she lay on her pillows, chuckling.

He was, she thought, such a dear. A graduate student of physics at the University of Miami. He'd come over at the start of the first semester, the year before, when the Yateses had had a vacancy in the two-boarder schedule which aug-mented their slender finances. Who'd brought him? One of Eleanor's numberless admirers. She thought back. It was that fullback, she believed, the one with that absurd nickname—Avalanche, Avalanche Billings.

"We have to have," she remembered saying to Duff, "somebody who can help around the place, take care of the yard and the station wagon—which is vintage and requires plenty of care. Somebody who

can tend the trees and shrubs, won't mind doing dishes at times, and so on. The rate is low on account of the help I need."

Duff had regarded her amiably, even warmly, and replied, "Mrs. Yates, I was brought up in the family of an underpaid Indiana preacher. Housework, its simplification and efficient management, became one of my hobbies. I have other hobbies that might prove helpful."

She had taken him, on trial. After a week, she had come to feel Duff was indispensable. Now, he was like a son—except, of course, where Eleanor was concerned. He was too shy, too self-

8

effacing to be like a brother to Eleanor, which somewhat interfered with his status as "son." Mrs. Yates sighed. Eleanor didn't give him much encouragement. Much? Not any. Which wasn't surprising in a girl elected Miss Freshman in her first year, the Belle of the Junior Prom, and who now, as a senior, was Queen-elect of the Orange Bowl festivities.

Upstairs in the bathroom, Duff Bogan had gone to work with equipment of his own devising—a "gun" for spraying insecticides and a second "gun" for dusting. First he dampened all porcelain, metal and tile surfaces with a water spray. Then he dusted with a scouring powder. Thereafter, a damp cloth in each hand, he polished furiously—which caused the din Mrs. Yates had heard. In fifteen minutes the bathroom glittered.

Perspiring in the damp warmth of the day, he called down the stairway, "What about Harry's room?"

"That, too," she responded. "He never locks it."

So Duff entered the quarters of the other boarder, Harry Ellings. A light dust mopping only was needed there. For Harry, who had been with the Yateses ever since the father's death, made his own bed and kept his own premises picked up. It wasn't, Duff thought, much of a home for a fifty-year-old bachelor like Harry. A living-sitting room in somebody else's house—a day

9

bed and a desk, a shelf of books, bridge lamps, old chair, a worn rug, a radio, a few photographs, a calendar hung on the knob of the closet door. That was Harry's residence.

He had a job as a mechanic with a trucking concern; before that he'd been a letter carrier. He had quit during his early years with the Yateses because of varicose veins, and had gone to school to learn his present trade.

Church on Sundays, a Friday bridge game, his Wednesday evenings practicing casting, a lot of porch sitting and radio listening, occasional fishing trips, few visitors, little mail—that summed up all Duff knew of the other boarder.

Maybe, from Harry's viewpoint, it was a good life, whole and satisfying. The thought depressed Duff. He finished dusting, helped himself to one of Harry's cigarettes and stared out at the sunshine, wondering, as young men do, what he would do when his degree had been awarded and the uncertain world said wordlessly, "Okay, Bogan; beat me if you can!"

He picked up the mop and noticed then, behind the calendar that hung from the knob, a lock on the closet door, a lock newer than the hardware of the Yates house, which he constantly repaired and replaced.

If he had not observed the lock, it is possible, although unlikely, that Duff Bogan's life might have been relatively speaking, as colorless as

10

his estimate of Harry Ellings'. But Duff did notice the lock and wonder about it, and nothing was ever the same for him afterward.

Wondering about locks was not, in Duff's case, an idle exercise in bafflement. Early in life he had been discarded by his schoolmates as a possible pitcher, fielder, end or basketball center. Competitive sports revealed him as something of an Ichabod Crane and, since his middle name was Diffenduffer, after his mother's father, he had been called Duffer from the age of ten. He was . Duff only to the kindly Yateses. But though a duffer at games and sports, he excelled in hobbies. Among them was a know-how concerning locks.

At eleven, Duff had sent ten cents for a booklet called The Boy Locksmith. Finding that people were

either charmed by or aghast at his proficiency with skeleton keys, he had advanced to more elaborate literature on the subject. Before he reached high-school age he was much in demand where keys were lost or where trunks, barns, cabinets and the like refused to open. In high school, while other boys mowed lawns for extra change, Duff had repaired luggage and started cars that lacked keys.

To look at Harry Ellings' lock-fitted closet door, then, was to know how to get the door open rather

^A quickly. Since it was unthinkable that the drab, good-natured star boarder had anything im-

11

Jl

portant or secret locked away, Duff felt no curiosity. But it would be fun, he thought, to open the door, set something alien in the closet—and wait for results.

Grinning, Duff ran down the back stairs, came back with selected tools, and took steps three at a time while Mrs. Yates gripped the binding of her magazine tightly—sometimes, when he rushed that way, Duff fell.

His hands, however, were not clumsy. They worked rapidly over the lock and soon the door swung open. Inside, Harry's suits hung neatly. On the shelf were suitcases, old and dusty. On the floor was a cubical hatbox of cardboard. Duff procured a metal wastebasket and set it on top of the hatbox.

He thought his joke would be more noticeable if he put the hatbox on the basket. Only he couldn't lift the hatbox. He took another hold and tried again. The cardboard threatened to tear, but the box didn't budge. So Duff untied the tape and raised the lid. Inside, was a hardwood box, well made, waxed, with an inset handle and a lock of a kind Duff had never before seen. He stared at this and then tipped over the box and its hatbox disguise—which could be done only with effort. The whole thing weighed about a hundred pounds.

He went downstairs then and interrupted Mrs. Yates' reading. "The doggonedest thing," he said—and told her. "What could he have—what

12

could anybody have?—in a fifteen-inch box, weighing that much? Gold?"

"Harry?" She chuckled. "Heavens! I know what Harry does with every cent! Better put it back Duff."

He went upstairs. It was about four-thirty. Harry wouldn't be home for more than an hour. Duff had opened the closet without curiosity; the box and its peculiar lock left him with no feeling but curiosity. He struggled with his conscience—and tried certain tools. When the lock clicked, he found it hard to raise the lid because of its weight. The underside was metal-lined. Lead. Whatever was in the box was packed in cotton. He raised the cotton and saw a very odd object of grayish-silver metal, machined and polished. It looked like a segment of a big egg, saw-toothed on one face, as a cog or gear would be. When he hefted it, he judged it weighed about five pounds. Maybe more.

He tried, as a graduate student of physics and a man with mechanical hobbies, to imagine what the object was. He couldn't, at first. When, presently, he had a single idea, he pushed it from his mind: too crazy.

Nevertheless, after some very worried thought, he went downstairs again.

"Sweeping the kids' rooms," he called untruthfully to Mrs. Yates. "Bring you your iced tea before long."

He worked fast after that. With fine emery 13

paper he removed a trace of the metal; with scouring powder he polished away the scratches made by the emery. He wore gloves and took extreme care. Having obtained a microscopic sample, he restored everything to the exact state in which he had found it. He left the cigarette in Harry's ash-tray after thought which told him Harry could easily notice his room had been dusted that day.

He then hid the emery-paper sample in the barn, washed his hands repeatedly and did a quick sweeping job on Charles' and Marian's rooms. He was making iced tea in the kitchen when Eleanor drove up in the family station wagon.

"Let me do that," she said. "You've spilled on the drainboard and got ice on the floor!" She put a load of books on the table and turned her back to him. "Unbutton."

Duff smiled and undid little buttons between her shoulder blades where she couldn't reach easily. The dress was one of two cotton prints she'd found at a sale—yellow like her curly hair, light brown like her topaz eyes. She hurried from the room, called to her mother, and was soon back in the kitchen wearing an old dress and moccasins, instead of her high-heeled shoes.

A match struck; the burners of the kerosene stove slowly took fire. "I wish we had gas or electricity! Kerosene's so slow!"

She bent over a bin Duff had made from lumber scraps, and came up with an armful of potatoes. "Peel!"

She emptied out a sack of green peas and started shelling. "What's new?"

"We had a burglar."

Her eyes glowed. "No! I bet he didn't steal anything! I bet, if he really looked the place over, and if he was a nice burglar, he left something for us when he went out! Five dollars, maybe, on the hall table!"

"I was the burglar."

"Oh!" Her eyes looked up and laughed. "What'd you rob? The kids' banks?"

"Harry's room. His closet. The locked closet."

"Harry hasn't got a locked anything! That poor, sweet guy is the world's openest book!"

Duff rinsed a white-peeled potato, cut it up, started another. "I'd have agreed, two hours ago. He's still probably innocent. Just keeping something that some pal asked him to put under lock and key."

"What are you talking about, Duff Bogan?"

He told her. "First, you see, it was going to be a gag. Then I got curious. The lock on that box was a new one to me. And then, the gadget inside—"

"Sounds like some sort of trophy."

"Trophy?"

"Sure," Eleanor said. "You know. Golfers get silver golf balls. Anglers get gold-plated fish. Probably Harry won the Never-Missed-a-Working-

15

Day-in-Five-Years prize at his company. Being a mechanic, it was probably a cogwheel, only silver or something."

"Oh." Duff thought about that. "It wasn't silver. It wasn't a cog. It wasn't engraved."

"Then," she said, snatching at a pea that popped out of its pod and rolled, "what was it?"

"It barely might be—uranium."

She was about to answer derisively. His seriousness sank in. "What?"

"The only thing I could imagine it looked like was a carefully machined part of something which, with other parts like it, would fit together to make a sphere. A sphere weighing maybe twenty pounds, more or less. It might have been any of a half dozen metals or a thousand alloys. Still, there's only one thing I know of, made of parts which fit perfectly into what is probably a sphere around that size. The pieces that come together to form a critical mass and go off with a hell of a bang."

"You mean an atomic bomb?"

"Maybe it's only a mock-up. A model, I mean. That's why I took a sample. To test and see what the metal is. I could be wrong, but I think Harry, whether he knows it or not, either has a piece of the heart of an A-bomb up there or else a metal model of one."

Eleanor began to laugh. "Harry—a spy?" When he didn't join her laughter, she looked at

16

him for a long moment. "You think somebody's stealing more of our A-bomb secrets and Harry's being used to keep the thing—until time to move it on out of the country? Let's ask Harry where he got the box!"

Duff wished for a moment he hadn't told Eleanor anything. "Ye gods!" he answered. "Not really! I just—have to know what the metal was, now that I've seen the gadget. Chances are a million to one my idea is totally nuts. But if it did happen to be that millionth chance, then asking Harry anything would be a terrible blunder!"

"You're right about that," she said contritely. Then, hearing a car in the drive, she murmured, "There

Harry is now. Go clean up, and I'll finish supper. At the least, get that repulsive apron off. You look like a cross between Mother Hubbard and the Scarecrow in the Oz books!"

His smile was sheepish. "Okay." - Before he left the kitchen she asked hastily and in a low tone, "Can you tell, from such a tiny sample?"

"I'm no microchemist. But I should be able to, yes."

"I hope you're crazy," she said earnestly.

Duff's room was not much different from Harry's save that it was less neat and contained more books. In order to save time, he had availed himself of an old-fashioned pitcher and wash bowl which he'd found in the attic. He began

17

shaving while Harry took his daily shower. Charles Yates came whizzing home, bike siren loud, his voice shrill as he shouted through his mother's window, "I got the old paper route!"

Duff grinned, grinned again when Marian, panting after running three blocks from the bus stop, dramatically announced she would be Ti-tania in the play. He felt at home with the Yateses; there had been a troop of young Bogans.

Gazing into the mirror, still wearing the apron over his work-stained T-shirt, Duff thought about Eleanor's description of his looks. Mother Hubbard and the Oz-book Scarecrow. His grin faded somewhat, but a glimmer remained. He cer-tainly was on the bean-pole side. No girl like Eleanor would ever think of any guy like himself in romantic terms. She was already Orange Bowl Queen. Why, if she just wanted to, she could be in the movies! Perhaps she'd do something like that when she graduated—to compensate for be-ing so poor, for endless cooking, washing, mend-ing, cleaning and bargain hunting. And for the constant care of her mother.

In his small and rather dappled mirror, Duff saw that his eyes were shiny. "Nuts," he said, and attacked his face with such energy that he cut himself.

Dinner was early. Eleanor had to leave at seven. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, from eight to eleven, she did filing in the offices of the

18

Florida Electric Company. It was a job she'd got through a friend of her mother's, which netted a welcome eighteen dollars and ten cents a week.

Duff wheeled Mrs. Yates up to the table. The Yates youngsters, both dark-haired and dark-eyed, like their father, were so excited over their respective successes that Harry Ellings - didn't notice the special looks directed toward him by Eleanor and Duff.

After dinner, after Eleanor had driven away in a station wagon as weatherbeaten as the house, Duff went to his room arjd made plans. He'd want one of the chemistry labs on a day when it wasn't full of freshmen doing Chemistry 101-A. He could do the physics all right—that was in his de-partment. He'd need advice about the mi-croanalysis. ...

* * *

It took a week. But one week later—with shaky hands, because he had never done anything of the sort—he looked in the beat-up phone book . beside a drugstore booth for the Federal Bureau - of Investigation, dialed and closed the door.

A man answered. "I'd like to talk to some-body," Duff said, "about making an appoint- ment."

"Just a minute." It was quite a long minute. Duff got ready another nickel. "Yes? Hello? Higgins speaking." "Oh," Duff said. "Well—look, sir. My name f

19

is Allan D. Bogan. I'm a graduate student at the university. I want to talk to somebody down there. I've run across something odd."

A slight pause. "Could you give me any idea of the nature of what you've encountered? We're pretty busy here—"

"I—I—I know that. Over the phone—" Duff hesitated. "Suppose I told you that I'm a graduate student in physics. The science that led to the atomic bomb—"

Mr. Higgins' voice, businesslike to begin with, cut him off sharply, "Would three-fifteen this afternoon do?"

"P-p-perfectly."

"Ask for me. Higgins. Slater Higgins."

* * *

The office of the FBI looked like any office. No fancy equipment visible, no gun racks, no alarm or communication devices. And Mr. Slater Higgins, in his own small cubicle, with its swivel chair and desk, its one large window, looked like any junior executive.

They shook hands. Mr. Higgins pointed to a chair with his pipe stem and said, smiling faintly, "What's on your mind, Duff?"

The younger man stared. "You know—"

"Checked, sure. After your call. Registrar. Got everything from your nickname to your lack of an athletic record. Tell you so you can skip it."

20

Duff sat silent, flushing a little. "Well, it begins with where I board. Did you check that?"

Higgins laughed. "Address is all. Shoot!"

Duff was embarrassed about the start of his story, since it involved curiosity and his unethical behavior. So he decided to give weight to his words immediately. "I have found a stolen part of what is plainly an atomic bomb."

Mr. Higgins did look at him sharply. But that was all. No exclamation. No excitement. "Okay. Start where it starts. Take your time."

The G-man was a good listener—putting in questions only when the narrative confused him or left a gap.

"I had to wait," Duff wound up, "until yesterday, to get a good chance to run the tests. They checked, all right. It was uranium. Uranium 235, I am sure. High neutron emission—"

"You can skip the technical part. That isn't for me. I'm a lawyer. An accountant. You sure?"

Duff hesitated. The sample had been extremely small. The tests had been difficult. The apparatus in the physics lab hadn't worked as well as he could have hoped. "I'm—sure enough," he finally said, "to come in here."

"Can you give us some of the stuff to test?"

"That's another thing. I did have a trace left when I got through. But—I'm cow-clumsy. When I finished the last test I started doing a dumb-

21

headed dance—I was excited. I batted a bottle of sulphuric off a shelf—had to wash it and the last of my sample down the drain, but quick. The place was fuming up."

"Too bad." Mr. Higgins locked his hands behind his head, looked at Duff and thought for a while. "You could be mistaken about your experiment?"

"I don't believe so. It's possible."

"Stick around a few minutes." Higgins walked from the room. He was gone for quite a while. When he came back, his face was unreadable. He sat in his chair again.

"We'd like a look at that cached stuff, Bogan. I take it there's always somebody at home. Mrs. Yates."

"Not always. On sunny Sundays we wheel her to the car and lift her in and take her wheel chair along. Church. Harry EUings never misses church."

"Good. You see, we'd also like to look at that thing without anybody knowing. If it does happen to be uranium, we want to know more than just that Ellings has it."

"Naturally." Duff felt better. "You'd want him to keep right on doing whatever he may be doing. He's probably innocent. The Yates family knows him mighty well. He doubtless thinks he's keeping something for a friend."

"Could be."

"And by watching him, you'd be led to some 22

group that's stealing not just atomic secrets but actual bombs."

"The trouble is," Higgins answered slowly, "that, except for a trace stolen during the war, and a bit some

character took home for a collection, we've never lost any uranium, Bogan. Nothing remotely approaching the quantity that would make the lump you described."

Duff's pale blue eyes were surprised. "No! Are they sure? Couldn't they make a mistake?"

Higgins chuckled without mirth. "Brother, can't you conceive the guarding and checking and cross-checking that goes into protecting something worth maybe half a hundred thousand bucks a pound? Something that we've spent billions to be able to make? They can tell you where every thousandth of an ounce is, every day, every minute!"

Duff's reaction was one of humiliation. "Then I must have pulled a boner at the lab! Maybe—having got that cockeyed notion—I saw what I wanted to see, in my tests."

The G-man's eyes were unsympathetic. "Probably. But you came in here and told us. We're used to that. Stories and rumors of A-bomb spies come in here as thick as reports of flying saucers. And we waste our lives on 'em all. Thanks, however. Provisionally."

Duff stood. "If you're going to investigate, I could leave a plan of the house. And some notes

23

on the lock on the box. How to open it, I mean. And my door key."

Higgins grinned. "Right. Would help."

The following Sunday when they came home from church, Duff tried to find evidence that the FBI had entered and examined the house. There wasn't any such evidence.

On Monday, however, Duff was called from a class to talk to a Mr. Higgins who "insisted," according to a girl from the front office, "that the call was important and you should be disturbed."

"In a few days," Higgins said, when he had identified Duff, "we will call on your friend at your place.

Ostensibly, we'll be checking another matter. Actually, we'll make ourselves an opportunity to take a look at the matter we've discussed. You aren't to give away the fact that we may have seen it previously.

On some pretext, we'll call you up. We want you to see it again and tell us, if you can, whether it's what you originally—sampled."

"Did you see—the matter?" Duff asked breathlessly.

"Yeah. And don't act astonished when you learn what it is!" Mr. Higgins hesitated. "You might tip off the rest of the family, since you've discussed it with them."

It was curt, perfunctory, unsatisfying. He told Eleanor and her mother exactly what he had done, precisely what he had been advised to do. A few

24

more days passed. There was no change in the behavior of Harry Ellings. The graying, inconspicuous boarder played bridge with his postman pals, went out to practice with his casting rod on an illuminated target range, did his work, and said nothing unusual until the end of the week.

Then, one night during supper, he changed the subject, which was a popular and interminable one: the kidding of Eleanor about her various dates by her younger brother and sister, who were particularly diverted by the salmon-pink convertible of a Mr. Prescott Smythe, of Omega fraternity.

"Don't be surprised," Harry interrupted abruptly, "if the Gestapo calls on me."

Duff felt the beginning of a start, and repressed it. He wondered quickly, too, if any man who had reason to fear the FBI would refer to the bureau in so insulting a term. It was evidence that Harry had no reason for worry. Mrs. Yates was saying, "Gestapo?"

Eleanor said calmly, "He means the FBI. You been kidnapping people, or something, Harry?"

The star boarder grinned and then frowned. "Everybody at the plant"—it was his word for the trucking company that employed him—"is being processed. Supposed to keep it to themselves. But you know how fellows talk."

"Processed?" The term was unfamiliar to Mrs. Yates.

25

Harry stirred his coffee. "Checked. Questioned. There's been some fancy counterfeiting going on. A few guys on the lam. Unlawful flight, the Gestapo men call it. And they're looking for counterfeiting plates that have eased out of the state they were used in. A big trucking company, like Miami-Dade, is always being suspected of doing something against the law."

In the person of Mr. Higgins and an assistant, the "Gestapo" called that night. Although he had a chance to wink or mutter a word when Duff answered the doorbell, Higgins behaved as if Duff were a stranger. He asked for Mr. Harry Ellings and was conducted upstairs. Charles Yates said loudly as the two men climbed, "Real G-men! Golly! Maybe I'll be one!"

Nearly an hour passed. Eleanor and Duff washed and dried the dishes. Marian and Charles pretended to do homework and actually discussed the visit of the FBI, speculating horrendously on its possible causes. Then Higgins came to the head of the stairs. "Oh, Miss Yates?" When Eleanor appeared, he added, "You are Miss Yates? Will you come up a moment?" And that other young boarder, too, if he will." They went up. The box was open, in the middle of the room. Harry was sitting in his easy chair, looking angry. Higgins pointed to the ob-

26

ject in the box. "Either of you ever seen that before?"

They had been instructed. They looked at the object. Duff squatted down by the box and scrutinized the curious piece of machined metal.

"No," he said positively.

Eleanor shook her bright head. "Not even the box!"

"I told you!" Harry said crossly. "I brought it in when they were on a picnic. Ye gods! Government snoops! Government snoops! I'm well within my rights—"

"What is it?" Duff asked.

Higgins smiled tightly and looked at Harry.

Harry raised his eyes to Duff and shrugged. "It's my life savings, that's what it is! Since way back when Roosevelt threw us off the gold standard and I had to turn in the gold I kept. I bought platinum. Finally made one piece of it. Harder to swipe. Made that box, in the end, and melted down old pieces of solder to wall it in lead. Too heavy now for any housebreaker to snitch. Then I got bad legs and had to have a lot of medical care. An operation. After that, a year in machinist's school—with board, room and tuition to pay! So I began cutting out wedges of the stuff and selling it. That's what's left! It's perfectly legal to own it and I'll be damned if I see what right the G-men have to make me haul it out and explain it. My

27

secret—the only one I ever had—and no harm in it."

Duff looked at Higgins. Higgins said, "Ellings isn't kidding. He has a right to stash platinum away, and I did snoop. No search warrant—just noticed he kept his closet locked and asked for a look. We're hunting some of the best counterfeit plates ever made—and that box was heavy. . . . I hope you'll accept our apology, Ellings."

"How much good would it do me, if I refused?" the boarder asked tartly.

And that was that. Higgins and his companion left quickly with no further word.

Duff was on his way home from the campus the next afternoon when Higgins overtook him in a sedan and picked him up. He started driving in a direction tangential to the Yates place.

He said, "All right! Was it the same dingus?"

Duff had asked himself a thousand times. "I don't believe it was. It was brighter, shinier, I think. And the machining on the first one was more precise, as I remember it. Of course, I was hurrying then. There were saw marks in this casting. Was it platinum?"

Higgins said, "Yeah. A little impure. Commercial stuff. Also, he did buy at least some of it a long while back. Years. We checked that. He did make the box in spare time at his garage. It looks, Bo-gan, as if you'd been fooled. After all, you got that brainstorm about it being part of an A-bomb

28

^before you ran the tests. Not after. Could have conditioned your reading of the tests. Must have.

We've checked Harry Ellings through his whole life. Checked his friends and family. Nothing whatever on the record. No convictions. No arrests. No association with subversive groups or people. Just a stolid, hard-working bachelor who's a churchgoer and not a bad bridge player. If a segment of a bomb had been stolen, I'd say this business might somehow be connected. None has."

Duff rode uncomfortably. Finally he said, "Would a segment of the uranium heart of a bomb look like

that?"

Higgins glanced at him, grinned, gazed at the road again. "Do you suppose they'd tell even us that? What they did hint at—not say—was that we were goons down at this office to even rise to any reported 'uranium.' Suggested we should know the bombs were plutonium now. There's a difference, apparently. Wouldn't know what it is."

"Different elements," Duff said absently. "Like iron and nickel. The Hiroshima bomb was uranium. The Nagasaki one was plutonium. I suppose that is what they use now."

"The last loose end," Higgins answered, turning back toward the Yates house, "was your identification. Since you aren't sure about that, the whole picture falls completely apart. You find the kitty of a gold-standard crank. So you pop off, having bomb jitters, like everyone. But you weren't

29

smart to run your own tests. You should have given us the sample, since you suspected it was something a lot different from platinum."

"It wasn't platinum," Duff said earnestly, but not quite certainly.

"Maybe it was hamburger." Higgins stopped to let out an abashed Duff. "Next time you run across any espionage, keep it to yourself. We got trouble enough at the bureau with real agents of foreign powers!"

* * *

"Cute college types," said Prescott Smythe, gazing at one through the porch screens of the Omega house, "are a dime a dozen!"

A brother at his side examined the girl, from auburn hair to flat-heeled green sandals. "Make it two bits. Everything's high these days."

"That one," said another brother, "is named Althena Bailey." Faces turned and the brother went on, "A transfer. From 'Johjah.' She is interested in collecting. She'd like to collect an Omega fraternity pin. Otherwise she is not interested. Any further questions?"

A man with a crew-cut, freckles, a gold football, said, "Why is it so many women who want to act unsteady have to go steady first?"

"Ask Heartbreak Smythe! He's gone steady with more unsteady dames than an assistant director of B pictures!"

Prescott Smythe, or Scotty, ignored the refer-

ence. He rose. He crossed the porch to a large concrete urn in which was growing a huge vine with dark green, lacy slit leaves. He peered intently at the vine.

"There is nothing for breaking hearts," said a thin brother, "like a convertible. That's what the word means. It converts 'em."

Scotty Smythe finally spoke. "You know," he said in elegant tones, "when I stole this vine it was hardly two feet tall. I've had to swipe four pots for it, through the years. In graduated sizes. Now, look at it! Magnificent foliage. A *monstera deliciosa*, the botany boys tell me. Should bear fruit. Edible fruit. Never had so much as a cucumber on it!"

The brothers ignored the countermeasure. "Sad thing about Smythe," said the football player. "Stealing flowerpots. Now he's trying to swipe the Orange Bowl. The Queen, anyhow. As soon as a man recognizes a cutest college type, he's through."

Scotty grinned. "Okay! So, okay! I got it bad."

"What will your family say?" the thin brother asked in a somber tone. "Imagine the scene. You take la Yates to Manhattan, ride up in a marble elevator to your familial penthouse, whip out your golden latchkey, open the door and say, 'Mother, here's the girl I'm going to marry! This poor cracker chile.' Your mother can see the babe is a looker who would bring a blush of envy to the proud features—all the proud features—of Kim Novak.

31

And has topaz eyes, besides. But your mother isn't fooled by mere externals. Not like you, Smythe! Raising a jewel-encrusted lorgnette, she frigidly asks the girl, "Where are your Junior League papers? Even your first papers?"

"Where does Eleanor's family come from?" a brother asked. "Anybody know?"

"Olean," said Scotty.

"I thought olean was something you spread on bread."

Scotty smirked. "Look, you jealous weevils! Olean is a town in New York State. It has history, paved streets, electric lights—and Eleanor Yates' birthplace!"

"We are worrying ourselves unduly," said a plump, shrewd-eyed brother who had apparently been reading a magazine. "I know, out of what we lawyers call our own knowledge, that she necked with Avalanche Billings last week. Kissed him, anyhow. I also know she gets orchids from a guy in the Miami Junior Chamber of Commerce. He raises 'em in his yard—which shows a good business head. And there are eight thousand other guys!"

The main object of the ribbing, evidently accustomed to it, again discussed his vine. "They graft things on trees down here," Scotty murmured. "Maybe a graft could be managed. If it won't bear its own fruit, perhaps a few limes would do. A mango or two, now and then. Even a bunch

32

of broccoli." He turned. "Listen, oafs! What you see in these nice gray eyes is pure loathing! My sister belongs to the Junior League, true. Mother's farsighted and sometimes uses a lorgnette— I guess the first time most of you swamp Willies ever saw one was when she came to the Open House last year. I say, phooey to you gentlemen and I say faugh! I am going on a hayride tonight with Eleanor, so if anybody wants to borrow my car—" He was overwhelmed by the onslaught.

* * *

Duff Bogan was standing in the Yates back yard, studying the sky. Several broken limbs needed to be removed from the live oaks, but that meant borrowing an extension ladder from a distant neighbor, and Eleanor had the car. Tree pruning, except near the house, was hopeless anyhow. There were broken branches all through the jungle. A whole tree had fallen across the water-filled sinkhole in the woods west of the house. He examined passing clouds. There was no prospect of showers that he could discern. He decided to begin a long-postponed operation: painting the sun-faded house. With the stepladder he could reach nearly half of it. He started, some while later, on the east wall. He heard but did not see Eleanor drive in.

But presently, from the back yard, a sharp whacking commenced. A cloud of dust eddied

33

around the house and settled grittily on the fresh paint. He came down the ladder. Barelegged, in shorts and a blouse, with an old silk scarf around her hair, Eleanor was beating rugs. She stood with her back to him, and Duff, as often, admired the line of her chin, eye and forehead. She had high cheekbones and rather deep-set, slightly slanted eyes so his view, which he thought of as a one-quarter profile, gave a special outline of the anatomy of her beauty. The act of beating rugs in such a costume exhibited her body at its muscular best. He watched her for quite a while before he said, "Hey!"

She turned. "Oh, hello!" Gold tendrils had escaped the scarf and curled like shavings on a damp brow.

"One of us has got to quit—or at least move. I started painting the house a while back."

"Duff! I'm sorry! I didn't know!"

He grinned. "Would you mind if I transferred your carpets to the line behind the barn?"

Once there, she asked abruptly, "Duff, has anything happened?"

He shook his head. "Everything's stopped happening. I saw Higgins a while ago. The FBI checked Harry's story about platinum. So I guess I made one really sour bunch of mistakes." He told her the situation.

She dropped the carpet beater. "Only—you don't believe you did. Do you?"

34

f "No."

Her look was thoughtful, measuring. "But you aren't absolutely positive?"

"I don't know. I've been chivvied around so much that I don't know. The tests I ran seem okay, on review. I thought that hunk of platinum didn't look exactly like the thing I sandpapered the first time. After all, though, it would be crazy. Us. Harry. A house like this. Mixed up in anything of that kind."

"Maybe not too crazy. Look at the facts that have come out of the samples swiped. The espionage. And no doubt there are plenty of other stories that haven't come out! That won't come out—until we get in another war and win it. Until we find a way to disarm the world and make it peaceful. Every government has things like that locked away. Hushed up. Some forever. It wasn't the craziness that made me think you were mistaken."

> "Then what was it?" he asked morosely. ; "Nothing, Duff. I never thought so. But I don't really believe Harry is a party to anything—sinister. I still thought there was some sort of hanky-panky. Did you ever consider it backwards?" ; "What do you mean—backwards?" Suddenly his mild eyes flew wide open and his cigarette fell from limp fingers. He said, "Holy whirling cyclo-trons!" He picked up the cigarette. "You mean, that was a hunk of U235 coming into the U.S.A!"

35

She nodded. "If it was uranium and if platinum was substituted, it means there's a mighty ingenious gang, doesn't it?"

He whistled. Eleanor went on, "They—who-ever they might be—would have careful plans to bring in atomic bombs piece by piece. Plans even to substitute something plausible, that resembled the real thing, if they got caught up with. And maybe to use innocent people as their agents. Harry could no doubt, for instance, get one of his truck-driver pals to take a box like that, of several, to some city up north."

Duff's Adam's apple made a round trip as he gulped. "A lot of the top men in physics have mentioned that very possibility!" He named names familiar in the news since Hiroshima. "They've said atom bombs could be brought into harbors in tramp steamers. Or smuggled into the country in sections and assembled in secret and planted—like mines, like infernal machines—to be set off in the centers of cities—perhaps by radio, at some zero hour!"

"That's what I mean," she said quietly.

Duff leaned backward and looked cautiously around the corner of the barn toward the Yates house. He leaned back and shook his head. "No. Every time I get on the idea, really think about it, it sounds too unlikely. This place. Us."

"Wouldn't a beat-up place like this, nobodies like us, be ideal? Couldn't things have been in

36

Harry's room, passing through, for years, without us knowing? Don't you think you should call the **FBI** again?"

The cold water his imagination had needed was supplied by that suggestion. He started to speak, stammered, fell silent for a moment and then said, "Heck! The FBI probably thought of that angle ten seconds after they realized what I was talking about!"

"But they didn't mention it, Duff!"

His smile was faint, rueful. "They have a way of not mentioning all they're thinking about. Nix, Eleanor, but nix! I am not going to expose myself to another reprimand for taking up their time over nothing."

Her expression was disappointed, then angry—as if she were going to argue—and finally, unemotional. She knew about arguing with Duff when his mind was made up; it was like trying to talk a hole in a rock. "At least," she said, after a while, "we might sort of keep watching Harry—or his room, any-how. Then, if anything did happen—"

He nodded. "I was thinking that."

She picked up the carpet beater and turned her back. He saw the "one-quarter profile" again and heard himself say, "There's a dandy movie to-night at the Coconut Grove Theater, if you'd like—"

"I'm hay riding with Scotty Smythe," she answered.

"That lamb!" She attacked a carpet Duff had hung for her.

Several evenings later, Harry Ellings, sitting on the front porch as usual, smoking a cigar, listening as

usual to the radio, announced he was going to take a moonlight stroll. He announced it loudly through an open window. Upstairs, poring over a textbook, Duff vaguely heard and at first dis-missed the words. Harry didn't go for many strolls, owing to his bad legs, but occasionally he took a preslumber ramble, and this evening, warm, moon-white, was an invitation.

Duff had finished a two-page equation before it occurred to him that a "moonlight stroll" was the sort of thing which he had agreed with Eleanor ought to be watched. He turned his heavy book face down on his desk. He stepped into the dark hall and looked out the window. Through the trees, on the coral-white road, he could see Ellings walking slowly, apparently aimlessly, toward the west. Duff hurried down the back stairs, saying nothing of his departure, and started along the drive. The coral crackled, so he stepped on the grass, reflecting that he was poorly equipped by nature for any act, such as stealthy pursuit, that required a lack of clumsiness.

By walking along the roadside in the shadow of trees, Duff managed, however, to gain enough on Ellings to get him in view. And Duff was sur-prised—or was he, he asked himself—to find that

38

the star boarder stopped now and again, looked back and seemed to listen, as if he worried over the possibility of pursuit.

The road was crossed by another about a half mile from the house. Harry turned. After walking some distance, he came to a region where there were no houses at all—an area of pines, palmettos and cabbage palms which was cross-hatched with weedy streets and sidewalks and provided here and there with the ghostly remnants of lampposts. This area, a quarter of a century ago, had been laid out as a real-estate subdivision. Then the boom had burst, and since that time the vegeta-tion of South Florida had worked its way—vegeta-tion aided by storms, heat and the rain. Harry walked with accelerated speed in this moonlit, ruin-like place, following the cracked and broken line of a sidewalk. Duff took off his shoes and stayed behind in the shadows.

Harry was certainly headed somewhere. Be-yond the ruined development was a rock pit with a moonlit pond in its bottom, used now as a trash dump. Duff thought Harry might be on his way there, but he stopped short of it. He stood still. His cigar shone brighter, twice. He turned clear around, looking. Then he whistled.

From the undergrowth almost beside him, a figure rose. Duff thought its rise would never stop —thought it was a shadow, an optical illusion. For the man, who must have been squatting there,

39

was one of the tallest Duff had ever seen—al-most a freak, all but a circus giant.

The cigar, perhaps having served its purpose, was stamped out. The two men began to talk. Duff couldn't hear and did not dare go closer.

When the conference ended, Duff took a short cut home. He reached his room before Harry re-turned. He was sitting there, appalled by Harry's companion, and sure now that a direct and dread-ful suspicion of the boarder was justified, when he heard voices in the driveway and the slam of a car door, followed by Eleanor's running feet and her voice, "Mother! You still up? Guess what? Scotty Smythe, that rich boy in Omega, proposed tome!"

Duff couldn't miss the thrill in her tone.

40

TWO

In a classroom on the "old campus" of the University of Miami, four young men were en-gaged in a discussion of the Uncertainty Principle with Dr. Oliver Slocum, a full professor of mathe-matics and a large man with twinkling eyes, no hair on his head, and a goatee.

"A common mistake," said the doctor, "made by many philosophers, has been to assume that the 'uncertainty' is neither logical nor empirical, and not even physical, but that it derives from a subjective interposition of the purely human ob-server, whereas—"

At about "whereas," Duff Bogan, one of the four graduate students present for the seminar,

41

lost track of the thought. Since he already knew that the interposition of a machine had the same effect as

the interposition of a person, and had known it since his mathematically precocious high school days, he missed nothing essential.

Duff looked out the windows. He watched a huge truckload of dead branches proceed down the street past several pretty houses. He reflected that there were still hurricane-detached branches hanging serenely in the Yates trees. His mind passed to greater worries.

There was the matter of the proposal of marriage to Eleanor Yates by Scotty Smythe, of the New York-Bar Harbor-Palm Beach Smythes. Duff had nothing against Smythe. He was a good-looking, intelligent, witty young man. Eleanor deserved the best. Plainly, she liked Smythe. The question was: Did Smythe represent the best? A lightweight, Duff felt. No character. Too smooth. Too social. Too much given to girl-chasing. It was Duff's belief, during the reverie, that he was thinking in abstract, detached and big-brotherly terms. Any suggestion that jealousy motivated him would have been met by a haughty, almost amused stare of his china-blue eyes.

By coincidence, yet not surprisingly—since Doctor Slocum greatly enjoyed discussing his part in the work of the Manhattan District; within the limits of secrecy, of course—Duff's wandering

42

attention came back abruptly to a relevant speech: "Some of our early calculations on the subsidiary effects of nuclear reactions to bomb-released particles were rendered difficult by—"

Duff listened, hoping to be able to frame a question that might start a new line of discussion which would not advance the class in any way, but which might help him with another worry. Luckily for Duff, when the professor finished a sentence as long and as neatly balanced as a complex equation, Iron-Brain Bates, the grind of the group, took an ideal tack.

"Doctor," he said, "to deviate for a moment. How many bombs do you think Russia has?"

The mathematician frowned momentarily, as if he were not to be budged from the path of instruction.

Then he grinned. "If our present political misadventuring continues, we will probably find out how many in the most pragmatic fashion. They will be dropped on us!"

The four graduate students laughed. Duff said, "Let's hope most of them will miss." And he went on idly, "Of course, any nation that had only a few atomic bombs could easily smuggle them into this country and distribute them at ideal sites, to be exploded at the time chosen by that nation."

"Easier said than done!"

"Why?" Duff asked. "Look at prohibition. Hundreds of tons of stuff brought across every

43

border every week. Florida, here, was a center for it. Million bays, channels, waterways, lagoons, empty wastes of Everglades—**

"An atom bomb, Mr. Bogan, is pretty big. Very heavy."

"It could be built in small pieces. Imported, so to speak, in sections."

Hank Garvey, who intended to be a math teacher, said, "There's radioactivity. How do you smuggle radioactive stuff?"

The professor scowled at Hank. "You really ought to know, Mr. Garvey, that neither plutonium nor the disintegrative isotope of uranium is radioactive enough to be detected readily. Oppenheimer pointed out that you'd need a screwdriver to find a bomb on a ship—have to open every case aboard. Until you assemble a critical mass—enough of the stuff in one spot to set up a chain reaction—your plutonium or uranium would be comparatively easy to handle."

"Then," said Duff, "what's to hinder a nation from mining our cities?"

"Unpleasant notion," the professor smiled. "Mr. Bogan, you have always inclined toward the fantastic."

"What's fantastic about it? If you were a nation with only a few dozen atom bombs, and if you intended to attack, wouldn't you be smart to plant all the bombs you could exactly where they'd wreck the most vital industries or kill the most peo-

44

ple, rather than risk them in bombers that might be shot down or might miss the targets?"

"There, gentlemen, we have an example of the very sort of pseudo-logic I discussed a week ago yesterday!" Professor Slocum's delight brought chagrin to Duff even before he went on, "Any nation

with a few atomic bombs, only a few, would like to plant them in any enemy nation. True, gentlemen. Such bombs could be fabricated in sections, assembled later, armed and made ready for firing. They could be rigged for detonation by radio. The borders of the United States are comparatively unguarded; large objects and quantities of objects have been smuggled into this nation. So far, we see nothing to limit or to prevent the reality of Mr. Bogan's shocking implication that one cold winter night or one day—one busy working day—atomic bombs might be exploded without warning in a dozen cities or more. It is logical—to a point. To what point, gentlemen?"

Duff's three seminar mates contemplated the problem. They seemed unable to find in it any major syllogistic flaw.

Professor Slocum chuckled. "What defenses have we?"

"Well," said Iron-Brain, "there's the FBI—"

"Correct! The Federal Bureau of Investigation! Also an active body known as Central Intelligence, Also the various branches of Military Intelligence. The Immigration men. The Treasury

45

men. Finally, an alert police force, sheriffs and the like. In other words, an invisible net protects our people. Many nets, I ought to say. A hole in one layer is matched by a fresh fine mesh behind the hole. In addition, in the camp of any enemy, in their secret societies, their so-called underground their cells and so on, this nation has undercover agents. Malevolent plotters are marked men. It would be impossible to set up an organization large enough to bring in, assemble, rig and conceal atomic bombs."

Down the hall a bell rang.

Two of the four students looked gratefully at Duff. He had succeeded in side-tracking old Slocum on his favorite theme for long enough to use up the period. Professor Slocum hastily assigned a double day's work for the next seminar and, smiling and nodding, skittered down the rather dim hall.

Duff walked into the sunshine feeling neither warmed nor illuminated. Logic was well enough. There was also such a thing as complacency. The world had been complacent about the Kaiser, about Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito. A lot of the world had been wrecked owing to such complacency. Possibly old bald-headed Slocum was on the beam. But possibly there was a radioactive beam in the making, right in Miami.

As Duff walked toward his next class he gazed rather doubtfully down the palm-lined, flower-

46

bright streets of Coral Gables. Far in the distance he could see the tops of buildings in the center of Miami—white towers above the flat green land. He tried to imagine a sudden and unexpected brilliance flaring down there, hurting the eyes, setting ten thousand fires, launching a terrible spray of gamma rays and sending forth a steely wall of blast across the city.

Somebody clapped his back. "Shut your mouth, Bogan! Flies'll enter!"

He grinned weakly. "Hi, Scotty."

"Must have been some dream!"

Duff nodded and walked along with young Smythe, who continued, "What dazed you, baby?"

"Just—fantasy. I've been to a seminar in quantum math. Old Slocum got talking about atom bombs. I was imagining one going off in Miami."

He expected Scotty to laugh. But the somewhat younger man merely shook his head. "That old goat will never forget his dear old Manhattan District days!"

"You know him?"

"Slightly—in a painful way. He's head of the department where I keep flunking. Trig this year. Duff," it was said earnestly, "do you think there is any way for the feeble-minded—meaning me—to ever catch onto the mere meaning of trigonometry?"

"Why you studying it?" 47

"Had to have the credit. In science. To graduate."

"Why don't you come and talk about it to me? I bet I could straighten you out. Trig's a cinch. Trouble is, they teach it hard."

"Brother! You have poured the tea! Would you run over the topic with me some night? I'd appreciate it!"

"Glad to."

"What about day after tomorrow? It's one of Eleanor's working nights, so I won't be distracted. Be able to concentrate. At least till she comes home."

"Okay," Duff said.

He continued toward his class alone, watching the retreat of the elegantly dressed Mr. Smythe. Duff didn't need to glance down at his own faded jeans and frayed shirt cuffs to visualize the comparison or to think how odious it would seem to a young lady soon to serve as Orange Bowl Queen.

He threw off the thought and replaced it with another; in the process, no doubt, merely exchanging hostilities. Professor Slocum could be overconfident about the American vigilance. He, 'duff Bogan, could have been right about his tests. People—suspicion-proof people like Harry Ellings—could be busy on a project calculated to go far in overthrowing the freedom of the world. Somebody would have to investigate further, even if it was only an overtall, underweight, overworked,

48

badly dressed graduate student named Allan Duffender Bogan.

* * *

"I don't know what to do, exactly," Duff said later in the day to Mrs. Yates, who had listened patiently to his story. "I can keep following Harry, of course. If he has a secret date with that big guy again—that darn-near giant—I can try to follow the big man when he leaves cover. I'm a lousy follower, though." He grinned. "One of my many hobbies wasn't being a boy detective. Or even trailing animals in the woods. I never did make a good Boy Scout."

Mrs. Yates smiled maternally. "I can imagine. Poor Duff."

"Oh," he hurriedly protested the pitying sound. "I had my compensations, remember. Best stamp collection in town. I could send Morse Code, as I taught the kids and Eleanor. Pick locks and do escape tricks. I was the best slingshot marksman in the county."

She nodded and sighed. Her eyes rested on him wonderingly. He was twenty-four now, she thought. An age when lots of men had homes, jobs, families. But Duff was a sort of split personality. Half of him was stuck in his childhood and his innumerable boyish interests. The other half, abstract, precocious, was far ahead of most of the college boys brought home by Eleanor.

"Why don't you," she suggested, "go see that 49

Mr. Higgins and tell him about Harry's meeting? He seemed very shrewd, from the glimpse I had."

Duff's long head shook slowly. "Not me! Not again! Not until and unless I can tell him something that'll really convince him."

"You afraid, Duff? False pride? Or what?"

His grin reassured her about false pride. "Mrs. Yates, I'm a small-town boy from the Middle West. I hope someday to get a Ph.D. in physics and maybe even to make a small contribution in some branch of the big field of ideas. All I'll probably ever really do is teach high-school kids about gravity and friction and Ohm's law. I don't think the stars wrote me down for a big melodrama like catching spies—or for a hero part, like saving my country."

"Yet you said—"

"Sure. I said! Got more mouth than sense! If what I really suspect is true, it's so crazy I don't believe it."

Mrs. Yates was a sentimental woman, though not a sentimentalist. During his recital of his hopes she had felt a mist in her eyes and turned her head away. Now, however, she looked back at him sharply.

"You say you don't know what to do. Well, you did one thing. You followed Harry and found his walks weren't entirely innocent moon-gazing. You can go on doing that. If I had legs to walk on, and if I were a man, and if I thought it was

50

useless to talk to the FBI again right now, I'd look over that trucking company where Harry works.

Maybe that great, tall man works there, too. Anyway, you could find out what cities the trucks serve.

You could perhaps get a line on their customers. If Harry was using trucks to move—what you

think—up north, then where the trucks went to would be something to learn."

Duff nodded. "That's not a bad idea!" He lighted a cigarette. "I could maybe apply for a job there. Look the people over. At night when Harry wouldn't be there to notice me around."

It seemed a useful project. Actually, if it had any immediate value, the effort served to give some occupation to Duff at a time when the conflict between his suspicions and his feeling that what he suspected was absurd kept him in a state of nervous anxiety. It also served to show him how inept he was at any sort of investigation.

The Miami-Dade Terminal Trucking Company consisted of a half-dozen large buildings in a light-industry section of the city on its northwest fringe. The buildings were low and very large. Some were warehouses, and these were provided with huge doors and long loading platforms; one was the repair garage in which Harry Ellings worked by day; in another, idle trucks of the company fleet were merely parked; the smallest building contained the business offices of the concern, which operated around the clock. At night there

51

was a loneliness about the place in spite of the occasional arrival or departure of a huge trailer truck or of a smaller vehicle bringing merchandise from the South Florida area for reshipment.

Duff studied the scene. Colored loading crews worked here and there under flaring lights. A watchman made his rounds occasionally, throwing the round finger of a flashlight at the vast blanks of closed doors. Across the wide and intermittently rumbling street was a diner which boasted, with painted, illuminated signs, that Truck Drivers Eat Here and We Never Close.

Duff walked around the establishment twice and then entered the front office, where a half dozen men worked at desks, smoked, roamed about with invoices in their hands and marked crates and cases and bundles.

"What do you want?" one of the men yelled at him from a desk.

Duff grinned. "Looking for work."

"What kind?"

"Any."

"We haven't got any kind. Just three kinds right now. Driving trucks—and you gotta be expert. Timekeeper. And paper work."

"No experience on those big rigs."

"You work a night shift?"

"Sure."

"Then come around in the daytime. That's 52

when they hire the night force and the day force." The man seemed to think it was pretty funny that they hired the night shift in the daytime, so he laughed.

Duff laughed. "This company go to all cities?"

The man rocked his chair back. "You looking for work? Or transportation?"

"Work."

"Florida's full of guys that came down and couldn't find a job and want a free ride some-where else."

Duff stood in front of a railing that crossed the wide, dingy room. "Look. Suppose I could bring a friend's business here? Would that help me get a job?"

"Wouldn't hurt none. What kind of business?"

Duff invented a business. "Making a modern-istic line of furniture out of bamboo. Getting popular up north. He ships by rail right now."

"Fool to, I'd say."

"He's got a pretty good deal. Still, if your trucks go to all the big cities—regularly, I mean—"

"New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Buffalo, Cleveland and Toledo, regularly. And points between. And unscheduled trips about once a month to ten-fifteen more cities. Would that suit your friend?"

"Sounds good," Duff said, and left.

He went over to the diner. Four big-shouldered 53

truck drivers leaned on the counter drinking coffee, dunking doughnuts, listening to radio dance music. Duff ordered the same. The men were alert, fresh—waiting, obviously, for trucks to be loaded and their runs to begin. By morning they wouldn't be so tidy, so cleanly shaven, and they'd look tired.

"Miami-Dade a good company to work for?"

They looked at Duff closely. "Why?" one asked.

"Going to apply for a job."

The men shrugged. "Good as any."

"Where do they truck to, mainly?"

"All over," one man said, "this side of the Mississippi River."

"Some guy," Duff said, "that I ran across in an eating joint told me Miami-Dade was a place where a guy could settle down to a life job. Good management."

"It's all right," one of the drivers answered. . "This guy," Duff went on, "didn't give me his name but you might know him." He looked at them and they waited. "Because he was the biggest guy I ever saw.

Maybe near seven feet tall, and broad. A powerhouse."

Heads shook. "Never saw no giants around the joint. . . . You, Bizzmo?"

"Nope."

Duff paid and went out into the night to begin a long walk to the nearest bus stop. . . .

54

When, on the following afternoon, Eleanor took up the attempt to persuade Duff to see the FBI, he told her of his efforts. It was her afternoon to iron and his day to air and turn the mattresses. So their talk was conducted at intervals when he passed through the kitchen with his loads and while she continued to press clothes she had washed, with Marian's help, on the day before. It made for a rather incoherent discussion.

"In other words," she finally summed up, "either you don't think much of my idea or else you're too stuck-up to take a chance on annoying the G-men?"

He had three sun-warm pillows in each hand. He flung them up the back stairway. "I need something more before I bother the FBI." "Wasn't seeing Harry meet that big man enough?"

"It'll have to be enough," he answered, "if it turns out to be all I can get."

"What in the world did you think you'd find at Miami-Dade that you couldn't find out just by idly asking Harry?"

He laughed—at himself. "Dunno. Whether there was a big guy working there, for one thing. Wasn't."

"Which means practically nothing."

"I know. Then I thought maybe I could find out the main, regular customers. Crazy idea, that

55

one. You can't just walk into a firm and say, 'Who do you do business with?' and be handed a list."

"Harry'd tell you that too."

"Sure. And wonder why the deuce I asked. He's probably wondered already why the G-men were interested enough in his locked closet to ask him to open it and why that box intrigued them enough to make him open that. In fact, if what we think is going on is real, and if by any chance Harry knows what it is, which I doubt, then Harry is plenty worried by what has already happened. Worried enough, anyhow, so he'd never again have anything in that box in his closet except his precious platinum. I wonder how much it's worth?"

"Probably two or three thousand dollars," she said. "Awful funny way to keep your life savings."

He nodded. "Certainly is! Hard to melt. Hard to make that ingot of it. Be like Harry, in a way, though."

Eleanor licked her finger and absently tested her iron. "If you really want to know where that company hauls its stuff, I could find out."

"You could? How?"

She resumed ironing, spreading out one of Charles' shirts on the board. "Well, I naturally know quite a lot of girls who work downtown— secretaries, file clerks like me, and so on. And the stuff they ship—"

56

"Cargo."

"The cargo is no doubt insured. It would be easy to learn what company insures it. Not hard to find who files for them. Possible to meet that girl or one of the girls. And you might—I might— get the dope from her."

"Would you?"

Her eyes rested on him. "Try? Sure, Duff! Why not? I'm more worried than you seem to be. I think your experiments were right. I think my idea that the stuff is being brought into this coun-try is true. I'm scared!"

What a reply Duff might have made was pre-vented by a distant roar, a whispering gush. It was a familiar South Florida effect: the approach of rain. Duff's arms and legs made wide, loose-jointed motions as he flung himself from the kitchen chair to the back door and out into the yard. A moment later a mattress thudded on the kitchen floor, then another and a third.

When the squall dinned on the single roof of the old house, Duff returned. "Narrow squeak," he said. Harry came in behind him. They hadn't heard his car in the rain.

* * *

The next few days were uneventful for Duff— classes, laboratory work, hard study at home and, of course, more domestic duties than he could perform adequately. In Florida, grass grows all

57

year around and must be mowed and trimmed un-relentingly; shrubs and vines and trees also need frequent trimming. In Florida, the blazing sun and salty air make painting as constant a require-ment as on shipboard. In Florida, too, fish breed year-round, a fact which was to lead Duff to a new and painful experience. For some time, how-ever, life went on in its usual pattern.

Harry Ellings even volunteered one day to help Duff. "Son," he said, "I generally wake around six. Leave the clippers out and I'll get after those hibiscus bushes."

"That'd be a help."

The older man shook his head sympathetically. "Having money is a wonderful thing. Not having it means day and night slaving. Work, work, work! Dunno how those Yateses keep their spirits so high sometimes. Look at that girl! Orange Bowl Queen, come Christmas! Going to college on a scholarship, she is. Has to get good marks to earn her tuition. Runs home to wash and iron and cook. Drives downtown three nights a week to earn a measly few bucks. Then goes dancing on her free nights, or posing for pictures, or fitting a costume, or attending some college party or meet-ing! The young sure have energy!"

Duff nodded. "She sure has, anyhow."

Harry Ellings went on, "Got it from her mother. Look at Sarah Yates. Lies there day and night—can't move her legs. So what? Does she

58

gripe and whine? No. Knits. Sews. Makes all the clothes the kids wear. By golly, son, that's pluck!"

"Yeah."

"So leave the shears out. I'll pitch in, mornings. Money! Doggone! A person could use a barrel of gold!"

Duff didn't reply. He merely thought, for the thousandth time, that a simple, gentle good-hearted, mousy guy like Ellings could never be associated with anything un-American. Anything dangerous, deadly, murderous. It didn't make % sense.

Harry continued to talk, which was unusual. He gave a self-deprecating laugh and said, "Near-est I ever got to any money was that melted-down platinum. Guess it was kind of dumb."

He hadn't mentioned the cache before, except to grunt impolite syllables concerning its discovery by the G-men.

Duff felt himself stiffen internally. But he said, . "Man has a right—"

"Oh, sure. Person like me gets crazy ideas, though. I sure did hate it when the country went off the gold standard. Figured I'd stay on a stand-ard of some sort with my savings. Seems foolish now. I sold that metal and put the money in the bank." As he spoke, he took a small deposit book from a hip pocket. "All I got to show now is this here ink balance. Hope we don't get worse in-flation."

59

From then on, Harry put in an hour or so at gardening every morning. Duff was grateful.

The days that were humdrum for him were filled with excitements for Eleanor Yates. Not the least of these was associated with her queenship and consisted of parade plans, the selection of maids of honor, newspaper interviews and appearances at lunches and other public affairs. Another source of excitement was the fond courtship paid to her by the amusing, cheerful Scotty Smythe in his salmon-pink convertible. He seemed to regard her tentative replies to his now-frequent proposals as proof of an arbitrary state of mind which would change in the long run. And he appeared to be unimpressed by the large numbers of other young males in the university and in the city who pursued her.

Some further part of her complicated life was made anxious, if not precisely exciting, by a decision to take into her own hands the matter of Duff's refusal to make any further immediate contact with the FBI. She had thought over the situation and decided it was her duty to do something, whether Duff felt that way or not. So she phoned the bureau, asked for Mr. Higgins and made an appointment.

The G-man welcomed the girl in his office one evening after dinner and before she was due at work. He told her that the newspaper photographs—even the colored ones—didn't do her justice.

60

He asked her what was on her mind and she made the suggestion that had so startled Duff, "Did it ever occur to you that if nobody has stolen any of our bombs, somebody could be bringing parts into the country?"

She could see instantly that the idea had not occurred to the G-man. And he, realizing she could discern his surprise, made no effort to camouflage it. "No. Not me, anyhow. McIntosh may have thought of it." "McIntosh?"

"Head of this office." He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. "Interesting—highly unpleasant idea." "There's this." She told him about the night Harry Ellings had gone for a stroll, about Duff's secret pursuit and about the furtive meeting with the man seven feet tall.

He doodled while she talked. "That's odd," he said. "But, again, we've got everybody who might be involved in any such a thing pretty well tagged. And there's no superman in the bunch. I know that. It's my business to know."

"Harry Ellings isn't tagged."

"No."

"Isn't it possible, somehow, that there could be a whole group you aren't on to?"

His eyes flickered. "Hardly. I won't say it couldn't be. We've had one or two nasty surprises along that line. Like some of the scientists the

61

high-ups cleared, who turned out later to be plain spies."

"That's what I mean."

He pondered again. "Look here, Miss Yates. I'll talk to Mac. We did a pretty good work-up on your boarder. There are a thousand reasons why a man could meet a pal in an empty lot at night. Some legal, some not, but none necessarily what you're thinking about. I doubt, for instance, if the kind of organization you imagine would ever use a guy so big he'd be identified half a mile away. Ever think of that?"

Eleanor shook her head. "No."

"Your other boarder, Bogan, probably never did either."

"I guess not."

"Well, I'll talk to Mac. We may see Bogan again. We may want to talk to you again. There's a lot we might do. Of course, if anything else should come up—anything of the sort that young Bogan's waiting for—inform us at once. And don't let anybody else know you've noticed any such happening. You or Bogan."

Eleanor flushed. "He doesn't know I came here. He wouldn't come. He was too much afraid he'd merely be starting another wild-goose chase."

Higgins chuckled. "He should see our files! That's our commonest form of chase! Well, thanks."

It wasn't particularly satisfactory. Mr. Higgins 62

had been polite, but not much worried. He had thanked her. Yet she felt that if she had been Duff, instead of a pretty girl, Mr. Higgins might have delivered a scolding for suspecting fire where there was hardly even smoke. She kept the visit to herself.

In the matter of learning the regular large customers of the Miami-Dade Terminal Trucking Company, Eleanor was more effective. She had no trouble finding the name of the insurance company that did the underwriting for Miami-Dade. She knew two girls who worked for the firm. She found out where they had lunch. She cut two classes to be at the right drugstore at the proper time. Both girls were flattered to eat lunch with what they called a "celebrity." When they learned Eleanor had "a friend" who was thinking of using the Miami-Dade concern for shipping, but who was trying to find out exactly where the truck fleet went regularly—so as not to pay special or excessive rates—the girls were amused by Eleanor's "friend's" astuteness and readily agreed to supply her with a list of regular drop points.

Two days later Eleanor had the list: firm names, street addresses and cities. "Miami-Dade," one of the girls had scrawled, "hits all these joints at least once per wk."

Eleanor proudly gave the typewritten pages to Duff that evening.

He was pleased. "Marvelous! Marvelous!" 63

"Elementary," she answered, in Sherlock Holmes' conventional words. "Elementary, my dear Watson."

"What about a movie tonight?" he asked.

Her head shook. "Gotta work tonight. Over-time."

"Doggone! It's Saturday. I forgot!" He laughed. "Can't go, myself. I've got a date with your boy friend again."

"Which boy friend?"

He made a face at her. "Guess, gal."

"You mean Scotty's coming? For some more math tutoring?"

Duff chuckled. "Yep. And you know what? I'm getting paid! Three bucks for an hour of the old sines and cosines." Suddenly he was embarrassed. "Is that all right? I did it for free the first time. He got by his next exam after that. But then he insisted on coughing up. Said he'd pay any other tutor. And he can afford it."

Eleanor's eyes were shadowy. She sighed. "Of course, it's all right, Duff. It's just too bad, some-how that you have to tutor my—"

He pushed the tip of her nose with his fore-finger fraternally, fondly. "Tutor your suitor? Glad to. Three bucks a week comes in right handy."

She looked away. "And Scotty can sure afford it. Goodness, he's rich!"

"Pretty nice guy," Duff nodded. "The dough 64

doesn't seem to dizzy him any. And he's a bright lad, besides. It's only that he and trig aren't soul mates. Still he's coming along. I taught him what trig was for. That interested him. Once Scotty got onto the fact that there's a practical • angle, he did real well."

Eleanor smiled. "He's a practical sort of boy, Duff, in spite of the gay-blade exterior."

"Yeah." Duff felt suddenly very much outside Eleanor—her life, her friends and the places where her life would undoubtedly lead her. "Yeah. He's nice."

That was when she kissed him. She kissed him hurriedly, almost in confusion, certainly impulsively, and she missed his cheek, getting his chin instead. But when she did it her eyes were shiny. And she said, "Duff, you're a love!"

Then she ran out to the barn and drove away. Duff heard Scotty's car hoot as they passed each other; the pink convertible came crackling up the drive. But during that time Duff stood where he was, beside the front door, even when he heard Scotty Smythe's feet on the worn porch boards. *She kissed me*, Duff thought. And he thought, *She kissed me because she feels sorry for me*. It was the kind of idea that made a man want to kick walls down, even in sandals, such as he had on. Nobody wants to be felt sorry for by a girl. By anyone.

But when Scotty reached the door, Duff had re-65

covered. His smile was hospitable; he took in Scotty's new, herringbone-Angora sports jacket, and said, "Hello, Pythagoras."

Scotty replied in the gravest tone, "Good eve-ning, Euclid."

After Scotty had paid gay respects to Mrs. Yates and briefly teased the younger children, who were studying, they went up to Duff's room and settled down to work.

Duff possessed the second most important faculty of a true teacher, as well as the first—which is to present new knowledge lucidly. The second is the ability to perceive the mental gaps and blocks in a student—the points at which, for individual reasons, he fails to grasp the subject. Often it is not stupidity, but a particular shape of a special personality or a bad background in previous teaching which causes a student to appear unintelligent. In Scotty's case it was both; no previous teacher had ever given him the feel, the sense and excitement of mathematics. Under Duff's tutelage, Scotty's attitude changed; he learned to appreciate the reasons behind the symbols.

Their hour went quickly and was extended to a second hour. Finally, however, Scotty broke up the session, "Getting late, pal. And we're already a week ahead of my class. Wouldn't my old man be startled if I got good marks in trig!"

"You will."

"Darned if I don't believe you're right!" Scotty

went down the stairs, looked into Mrs. Yates' room to say good night, and opened the front door. "Tell Eleanor I couldn't wait for her. Omega meeting in the a.m. Tell her"—his eyes lighted up—"that any time she wants to shop for jewelry suits me."

Two red taillights swept down the drive. Duff stayed on the porch. An old moon had risen; it threw shadows across the silver nebula of lawn. An automatic smile on Duff's long, earnest face slowly faded. He imagined the excitement with which Eleanor might "shop" with Scotty, or some other boy, for a diamond ring. He would have been less than human if he had not also reflected that any diamond he could buy would be almost invisible. Yet no purposeful thought of himself and Eleanor and an engagement ring entered his head.

He sighed into the moonglow and noticed the glint of it on the lily pool he'd built the year before—partly in pursuance of a hobby and partly to embellish the Yates' lawn, which, at the time of his arrival, had been unkempt.

Years before, in Indiana, Duff had become interested in aquariums. He'd built several of wood and window glass, stocked them from local brooks, and sold a few. In Florida he had soon observed that pools could be dug in the underlying lime-stone; they needed only a little cement to water-proof them, and frost never heaved the ground. He had also found that tropical fish could be raised outdoors, that some species were native, and that colored water lilies of many varieties could be obtained at no cost when the university was separating its plants. So he had built a pool some twenty feet long and fifteen feet wide, trapped mollies in a nearby canal and bought a pair of wagtails.

Having noticed, some days before, that a new crop of mollies was due—and not feeling in a mood to sleep—Duff now went back to the house, procured a flashlight and walked down to the pond.

Sure enough, half a hundred tiny minnows swam in the open places and among the water plants and hid under the lily pads. Four of his crimson, night-blooming lilies were out, each one as big as a dinner plate. His torch moved about, touching the flowers, penetrating the clear water to search out snails and to follow the upward dive and downward lunge of water beetles. A small branch had dropped on one of the day-blooming lilies, and Duff walked over to a cabbage palm where he kept a dip net for retrieving such objects.

The branch lay among the lily pads at a place where they intermingled—reddish leaves floating alongside green. The surface was covered densely in an area as big as the top of a dining-room table. But, in dipping out the branch with one arm while with the other hand he aimed the

68

flashlight, Duff opened up a space between the pads. It wasn't a wide gap, but it was wide enough to allow the light beam to penetrate the water to what should have been the bottom of the pond—and wasn't. A board was revealed.

Duff tossed out the small branch and pulled the lily pads farther apart. He presumed the board had fallen

into the pond during the October hurricane, and wondered why it hadn't floated. He thought it might be a section of one of the boxes in which the lillies were planted, a section came loose, but held under water by a nail.

With the idea of "box" on his mind, Duff gasped audibly. He pushed hard at the leaves. It was not a side of a lily box and it was not a board. Leaning, holding his light closer, he could now see the top, the grain of hardwood, the glimmer of varnish or wax, and a glint of brass screw heads around the sides. Probing again with the net and changing his position, he thought he made out handles at both ends of the box. He switched out his light. He let the lily pads float together, covering a hiding place that wasn't as ideal as Harry's closet, since, from time to time, Duff cleaned out excess algae in the pond and scrubbed its sides, wading hip-deep. But it was a good-enough hiding place now, because he performed those chores at long intervals and had finished them just after the blow in October.

Those thoughts had taken seconds only. He 69

leaned the net against a tree and walked along the east side of the house. Harry's lights were on. After a moment, he saw Harry as he passed the window—Harry in pajamas.

Duff went back quietly to the pool. The thing to do, he reflected, was to wade in, get the box and hide it somewhere else. Or, better, put it in it in the station wagon as soon as Eleanor returned from work and drive straight to the FBI. This one, Duff thought, would probably contain uranium—pure uranium—shaped for a certain use.

Duff sat down on the grassy edge of his pool. He took off his shoes and socks. He was excited, exultant, and also afraid. He did not know just what he feared, just why he was afraid. Then, abruptly, he did know. It was the disturbance of a leaf behind him or the tiny sound of a pine needle snapping underfoot. A very near sound, too near to give him time to escape or even to whirl around for attack. For he was sitting and there was something, somebody, in the dark right behind him.

For a second or two he was unable to think at all. Then, when he thought he heard the whisper of a swung weapon of some kind, he tried to lunge as far forward as he could. Fear was a sickness in him as he plunged, and fear was his final recollection. There was a ringing sound, a bursting in his head that he sensed at the instant and never afterward remembered. . . .

70

In the house, Harry turned out his light and went to his window. He looked at the moonlight. From the sinkhole west of the house came a mur-murous croaking of bullfrogs. At last he walked to his bed and lay down to sleep.

Mrs. Yates, weary and warm under her reading light, pulled toward herself the pivoted bedside table that Duff had built. With a pencil, she wrote a goodnight note to her daughter. She pinned the note to her wheel chair and gave it a push which rolled it through the door and into the living room where Eleanor would see it.

Marian Yates slept peacefully; damp curls of her dark hair overspread her pillow. Charles Yates, having finished the last installment of *The Queen of the Planet Brandri*, tossed *Fabulous Science Magazine* onto the floor and switched out his light. There was silence, deep and tropical.

After a while, car headlights swept into the Yates' driveway. Eleanor parked in the barn, came in by the back door, read her mother's note, smiled a little, and switched out the living-room light. The porch was in the shadow, but moonlight poured on the lawn. She stepped out to look at it and saw, as her eyes accommodated themselves, that one of the big branches torn off by the hurricane and stuck in the trees had come loose and fallen into the lily pool. She also saw something that glinted beside the water. Even so, she would have gone to bed; she was very tired. But,

71

as she turned, she heard a sound. A low, bubbling mutter. A horrible sound. She rushed for the flashlight, but it was not in its place. She knew instantly that what she had seen glinting on the lawn was the light.

"Duff," she whispered frantically, and she ran out the front door.

She picked up the light. Worked the switch. Aimed at the mass of dead leaves, twigs and thigh-thick branch in the pond. With flinching nerves she saw that the water was stained red.

And then she saw Duff—Duff's head. The scalp was open. His eyes were shut. He didn't seem conscious. But his hands, on the pond edge, were grasping feebly and he had his mouth out of water. He was trying to say something.

"Duff!" she cried.

He muttered.

"Duff! I'll get help! Can you hang on?"

His blood-streaked face looked up. His eyes showed now as slits. His teeth bared. His lips worked. "Scream," he finally enunciated. "And look behind you."

She swung around—and saw no one. But she screamed.

72

THREE

Emery McIntosh, chief of the Miami office of the FBI, listened to Higgins without interrupting. He was a medium-sized man of about fifty with a bald spot on the top of his head, nattily dressed in tropical-worsted suit, silk socks, black, highly polished shoes and a white shirt with a stiff collar. When he did speak, there was little in his accent to suggest his Scottish descent. But the ways and even the looks of his ancestors might have been read into the crisp mustache which matched his sandy hair, the blue glint of his eyes, the extraordinary firmness of his mouth and the deep, rather melancholy timbre of his voice. McIntosh looked, Higgins reflected, like a Presby-

73

terian deacon dressed for taking up a Sunday collection—which he was and had been about to do when the younger agent had telephoned.

"And the lad's coming along all right?" McIntosh finally asked.

Higgins nodded. "Hardly a lad. Twenty-four."

"But still in college," the G-man sighed. "That keeps 'em young. One minute they can act like wise old professors. The next, fall apart like adolescents."

Higgins' grin was quick. "Well, Bogan is different. And he's all right. They had him in a hospital soon after midnight. Eleven stitches."

"Any tree bark in the wound?"

"Several bits, the surgeon said."

"I see."

"I'm not sure you do," Higgins answered stubbornly. "The poor guy was clunked more than once. He could have been blackjacked. And then that limb could have been hauled down from the tree. And after that he could have been pounded a couple with it. I think they thought he was dead."

"If there was a human agent—any 'they' at all! A big 'if.'"

Higgins shrugged in a swift, shadowy way. "All right. I couldn't find tracks on the lawn or in the shrubbery. Hasn't rained lately, so why should I? Nobody in the family heard or saw anybody. He must have made a big splash, going

74

in, but the house is fairly distant. Ellings' room's on the other side. The mother and the girl were asleep. The boy's room is on the back."

"Ground wet around the pool? That box—if it existed—would have come out dripping."

"The ground was wet, all right. But it would have been soaked by the splash of the man and the limb anyhow. There might once have been an impression of the box on the grass—it would have been heavy. But the police were there first and they had it fairly well trampled."

McIntosh sank lower in his swivel chair. "Tree?"

"I gave it a going-over. You could see where the limb had been jammed. Rubbed the bark of a sound branch. You could see that it hadn't been attached by much. A few slivers of wood and bark. It weighed around a hundred and fifty pounds. It could, so far as signs show, simply have come loose while he crouched there, and dropped on him and conked him, turned as it hit the pool, and swatted him again. It could, for all I can surely prove."

McIntosh looked at his watch. On its chain was a Phi Beta Kappa key. "You say the lilies were in wooden boxes. Could one of them have changed position so he mistook it, at night, in a flashlight beam, for what he imagined was related to his other—discovery?"

"How can anybody answer that except Bogan himself? He said he saw the box plainly. Said he

75

saw brass screw heads. No screws in his lily boxes. And it's hardly anything he'd dream up. Besides, the lily boxes have no tops. They're filled with compost, and that's covered with white sand."

"One might turn turtle."

"Yes. Except that it would haul under water a conspicuous bouquet of lily pads and buds and flowers."

"You believe there was a box and Bogan got slugged and the box was taken away while he was unconscious?"

"Yes."

"And you believe"—McIntosh took time to make himself say it—"that there was uranium in the box?"

"Or some other part of an A-bomb."

"I don't."

Higgins started to say something argumentative, changed his mind, and smiled. "I don't blame you."

"Not one tangible piece of evidence! Bogan once had what he called a sample, a few particles he filed off, and he claims he analyzed them—which is difficult even for a specialist, and he wasn't that. But he lost what was left of his sample before we could work on it. Ellings did have a hunk of platinum on hand, and that's peculiar, but it's not uranium. Ellings met a man we're supposed to believe was seven feet tall. Phooey! Ellings doubtless met a man. He may even be

76

busy with some deal—a little smuggling or the passing of stolen goods. But do you realize what you're saying when you talk about A-bombs?"

"Yes."

"I doubt it. You're saying, man, that whole cities are being prepared for slaughter without warning! And you're saying this is being done by people we have no whisper of, line on, word about—not a notion of, a smell, scent, track, trail or even hunch about!"

"Exactly."

"Frankly, I think that's impossible."

"You can't say it's impossible, Mac."

The Scotsman shrugged. "Very well. As unlikely as flying saucers. Put it that way. On the other hand, grant, for a second, it's true. What then?"

"That's what I'd really like to discuss."

McIntosh put away his key and folded his hands across his chest. "All right. We'll discuss it. I will. In the first place, any such an underground outfit actually doing any such thing wouldn't hesitate for a second to murder this Bogan lad, or the whole Yates family, or any hundred other people."

"Obviously."

"Second, such an outfit actually might use the Yates house. It's off the beaten track. No other houses near. Rundown. Surrounded by big trees. Not conspicuous. And protected. Those Yateses

77

would be about the last persons anyone would suspect of doing anything criminal or harboring criminals. Mother a cripple. Beautiful young daughter—Orange Bowl Queen. Normal Americans. Two boarders. And a man like Ellings, if he were an enemy agent, would be ideal because he's got such a long, hardworking, churchgoing, commonplace history."

"Check."

"Third, the whole routine you're trying to sell me would therefore have worked—except this Bogan lad had a lot of cockeyed hobbies. Like picking locks. Like housework. And he's a physics graduate student, so when he sees metal, he's curious. He has, besides, a hobby of

raising tropical fish and water lilies. When he can't get a satisfactory answer from us, he takes on another hobby."

"Yeah," said Higgins dryly. "The hobby of danger!"

McIntosh sniffed. "Nosing! He gets nosy. He gets the girl nosing, even. And he gets bopped on the bean by a branch—and lucky his brains weren't knocked out." McIntosh unlocked his hands and flattened them on his desk. "Not a sign that anything happened but a branch fell! Ellings, the logical one to hit Bogan if all this wonder dust is real, was in bed. Mrs. Yates saw him come downstairs. So who hit him? Presumably, somebody coming for or standing guard over

78

the alleged box in the lily pool. So now what? pour-five days, Bogan's out of the hospital. Ready to nose some more!"

"We could tell him to quit. Tell him the bureau Was taking over from here on in."

The Scotsman scowled. "Which is exactly what we don't want anybody to know!"

There was quiet elation and relief in Higgins' voice. "Meaning, we are taking over?"

McIntosh frowned harder and then smiled. "If it weren't Sunday, I believe I'd swear. Of course, we're taking over! However, we won't accomplish anything unless all and sundry really believe we've missed our cues by deciding the injury was an accident, the box a myth. You can see that?"

"Sure. The Yates place is hot. It will be as long as we're interested. Or the cops. Anybody. Maybe it always will be, from now on, and maybe—if Ellings was merely being used—we have only one hope: finding out who used him. But there's one difficulty about telling Bogan and the Yates family that we don't feel anything was going on around there. It's Bogan himself. He really believes what he reported. I believe it. And if we give him the brush, he's undoubtedly going to push right on with—"

"His hobby of danger?" McIntosh smiled bleakly. "I suppose he is. But—still just being hypothetical—if there is such an outfit as you take on faith, will they be badly alarmed by a physics student's attempt to catch up with them? I think not."

"They near killed him."

The bureau head was silent for a long time. Finally he said, "See here, Hig. If this operation is real, maybe several million people might get killed all of a sudden. Good Americans. Risking the life of one or two or even a family isn't important. If it's not real—which is my opinion—there's no risk."

Higgins gestured as if to protect that logic. Then he said, "Yeah."

McIntosh consulted his watch again. "You go back to the hospital. Tell Bogan that we did have a watch on the place ever since he started bringing tales to us. Tell him no stranger or anybody else was even near the hammock trees that night. Tell him we're calling off our men. Let him feel we're sick and tired of a lot of to-do that pans out as nothing. Give him the notion that his accident, and his 'theory' that it was something different, is the last straw. He's already sore at us for apparently doing little. If you say we did a job of watching he knew nothing about, and are quitting now because this time we know he was mistaken—well, it'll leave him high and dry."

"Sure will," Higgins said. "And I hate to do it to him. He's a nice guy, Mac. Got brains. Sense of humor. Guts."

"Can you think of a better way to handle it?" 80

McIntosh rose and set his Panama carefully on his head. "If I hurry, I can just about hit the middle of the sermon. My wife'll be annoyed." He put his arm over Higgins' shoulder and propelled him toward the single elevator in service on that Sunday morning. "You haven't really got this thing focused yet, Hig. Remember what I said. If it's all a pipe dream, no harm done. If it's not, we have to run the risk of one man being in danger in order to have any chance at all, ourselves, of stopping something"—as the elevator came, he hesitated—"that we'd gladly sacrifice every man in the bureau to stop."

Higgins, with whose words, felt the full impact of his chiefs fear. He walked around the building and got in his car and started toward the hospital again. He could tell Bogan that a man under great strain often

mistranslates what he sees and hears, and Duff Bogan had certainly been under strain.

* * *

Thinking about it alone in bed, after Higgins had gone, Duff agreed that Higgins might be right. After all, they had watched the house. They had acted, when he'd assumed they were ignoring his story. It could have been a lily box, bright insect eggs, a falling branch. Or could it? In his mind's eye, going over and over the scene, he could see the slots in the screw heads. Insect eggs didn't have slots. He could tell them that. But they

81

wouldn't believe it. He could hardly believe it himself. Maybe it wasn't true. The FBI didn't believe it, and the FBI wasn't dumb, so why should he?

With the last shreds of consciousness—of consciousness free of head-splitting pain—Duff answered himself: It was real and awful and growing worse because nobody would do anything about it. So he would have to do what he could, as soon as he was able to leave the hospital. He'd have to work alone. It was only afterward, long afterward, that Duff could collate and define the moods and incidents that followed. At the time they seemed unrelated and inexplicable.

His head mended rapidly. The doctors were pleased. Duff explained to them with simulated hauteur that physicists had tough brains. He missed Thanksgiving at the Yates home, but not the meal, as Eleanor borrowed from a restaurant a portable foodwarmer and brought turkey with trimmings to the hospital. Three days later he was released, bandaged, but whole again.

Immediately upon his return he noticed a difference in the temper of the household. Mrs. Yates seemed nervous and worried. The two younger children were cross and strained. And Harry Ellings had been suffering from what he described as "attacks"; he stayed away from work

82

twice. Eleanor showed the change most sharply if more subtly.

She was, if anything, lovelier than ever and seemed more aware of her attractiveness. Miami's best beauty parlors had vied for a chance to give her wavy, tawny hair its prettiest cut; they had taught her new uses of make-up. Stores in Miami and Miami Beach had supplied her, for the first time in her life, with a luxurious wardrobe. These gifts were, of course, donated for publicity—the traditional due of a Bowl Queen.

She was edgy, Duff thought. No doubt she was overtired. The mere fact that he had lain for a week in the hospital had meant a large addition to her work. And now that Charley Yates spent every afternoon carrying newspapers, she was short another helper. Her own job, the demands made on a Queen-elect and the burden of housework were more than enough for any girl. But, in addition to that, she had arranged several dates with other young men than Scotty: Avalanche Billings, the fullback, for one; and Tony Bradley, a Miami businessman, for another.

She seemed glad to have Duff back at home one minute, and the next, annoyed at everything. "Christmas is coming," she kept saying, "and we're so broke and there's so much to do."

When he tried to reassure her, she turned away.

83

Finally, they quarreled over the subject of most quarrels: practically nothing. He had worked late in the laboratory on a difficult problem. When he reached home, Eleanor was in the kitchen, and he went immediately to help.

She said petulantly, "Where in heaven's name have you been?"

"Over on the campus. Working."

"Fine thing! I needed you here! The pipe's plugged under the sink!" She picked up a pan of hot vegetables and drained them over a larger vessel. "See?"

"I'll fix it right after dinner."

"You'll have to or wash dishes in the yard! The kids are going to the movies tonight."

She lifted the lid on a skillet of sizzling meat. He noticed that she was wearing no apron and hadn't changed from a particularly pretty dress—gray and scarlet—in her new wardrobe. Her mood communicated to him.

"You'll get spattered," he said. "Let me turn the chops. You've no apron on."

"You set the table," she said. "It isn't yet. ... I don't know why Marian's late!"

"But that meat's spitting all over the place."

She muttered something that sounded like, "Mind your own business," seized a fork, and immediately was splashed so that the fresh dress was turned into something for the dry cleaner.

84

She said, "Damn!"

"I told you so."

She whirled from the stove. "You tell me noth-ing, Duffer Bogan! All the aprons were dirty and I was too darn tired to change!"

"I'm sorry."

"Sure, you're sorry! So am I sorry! I'm sorry my kid sister is probably giggling with some pimply boy in a schoolyard somewhere! I'm sorry you had to work late and Harry's feeling rotten! I'm sorry we can't afford a cook, or to eat out once in a while, or even own enough aprons to keep neat! I'm sorry we're so mouse-poor, and right now I'm even sorry I've got what people think are good looks—except that maybe I can use 'em, somehow, to get this family out of a lousy mess that goes on forever!"

It wasn't like Eleanor. It was nothing like her, Duff thought glumly. She had even called him by the derogatory form of his nickname. He felt pity but he thought it was no time to show it. Perhaps, too, he felt in a deep recess of his personality, where his aware mind couldn't look, the blaze of resentment.

"All you have to do," he said stonily, "is to say 'yes' to Scotty Smythe. I'm sure he'd manage things fine for everybody. You wouldn't need boarders, so I'd be delighted to hunt up some other place—" It was childish.

85

He had never heard her shout in anger. She did now. She raised her fork and stabbed it in his di-rection and yelled, "Get out of this kitchen!"

As he went through the living room, Mrs. Yates called nervously, "What's wrong, Duff?"

He answered, "Nothing," and began to set the table. She didn't offer to make up, so he didn't.

The day after that, Harry Ellings announced he was going to take a week of his annual two weeks' vacation to go up to Baltimore to see some doctors about his condition. When Duff learned that, he wanted, once again, to let the FBI know. But Higgins, the G-man, had been very final in his last talk at the hospital. The FBI wouldn't be interested in Harry's trip, and though Duff ached with anxiety over the potential danger of it, he felt he could do nothing.

When Harry returned, he didn't seem improved. His color had become a grayish yellow. His ap-petite was bad. His hands shook constantly. His neatly parted gray hair seemed to be getting thin-ner almost day by day. He talked little and spent most of his time, when he wasn't at work, lying on his bed.

Nobody gave him much attention—the Yates family was demoralized. Dinners were hurriedly prepared. Every night, afterward, Eleanor either drove to Miami to her job or went to a meeting or had a date, leaving the dishes and most of the housework to Marian, Charles and Duff. With

86

Eleanor absent, and while he worked with the youngsters, Duff could revive the old feeling of cheerfulness, but when Eleanor was at home a jittery gloom prevailed.

In early December there was a cold spell. It was the sort that Florida chambers of commerce would like to keep hushed up. Frost crept over the Everglades. The power company put every generator in service to meet the load of electric heaters glowing in tens of thousands of homes. People with fireplaces stoked them, so that all Dade County was spiced with pine-wood smoke.

During the night, millions of dollars' worth of winter vegetables stiffened, took on frosty cara-paces and perished ignominiously. Duff chopped wood and the younger Yateses did their home-work around a fire while a kerosene heater burned odoriferously in their mother's room. In the morning, which was sunny, but, to natives, shockingly cold, public schools stayed closed and many business firms failed to open, owing to the absence of employees who had no overcoats to wear to their jobs. Duff went to his classes, however.

He was chilled through by midafternoon and stopped in the Student Club cafeteria for a cup of coffee

before taking the bus. There he spotted Scotty Smythe, sitting alone, looking morose. Duff carried his cup over to Scotty's table.

87

"Coming for your lesson tomorrow, Sir Isaac?"

Smythe looked up. "Hi, Einstein! Guess so."

"Haven't seen you around lately. What gives?"

Scotty stared thoughtfully at Duff. His lips drew out in a somber line, but his eyes flickered. "You observe here," he presently replied, a young man, five foot ten and a quarter, one hundred and fifty-eight pounds. Hair, muddy black; eyes, putty gray; occupation, college senior. He is carrying the torch."

"Fight?"

Scotty contemplated the question. "No. Brush."

"Meaning what?"

"You notice any change in Eleanor lately?"

"She's tired. Nervous. On edge."

The younger man turned over those words in his mind. "Minimally," he said in the end. "She is also suddenly interested in a laddy-boy named Tony who owns half the hardware stores in Florida, or will, when his pappy kicks off or re-tires., This chump is pretty to look at; he went to Princeton, and he has a convertible too. Char-treuse."

"I've seen it. And him."

Scotty went on musingly, "Now, Eleanor never did okay my proposition exactly. But I felt she was interested in me. Seems not. No time for Smythes these days. She's also taken to going places with that large charge of human barge known as Avalanche Billings."

i



"A wholesome boy," Duff said, not enthusias-tically.

"In a nutshell, man, you've said it all! It's not enough that his pappy is a brewer. His boy had to be an athlete too. Nearly Ail-American, you may have noticed. Avalanche is a clown—makes the girls laugh. Outside of rugged good looks— destined to become bloated as the years pass—"

"Very little," Duff agreed.

"A cipher. A zero. A zed. What she sees in him—"

"Not even a convertible," Duff murmured.

"*Touche*, pal!" Scotty chuckled dolefully. "You don't sound so doggoned elated yourself."

"Things are melancholy," Duff agreed.

Scotty was silent. He finished his coffee. He eyed Duff for a while. "Speaking of beer and such," he said, "and I was, by inference, a while back, are you a drinking man?"

"No," Duff replied. "Not a matter of scruples. Purse. And lack of experience."

"I was sitting here," Scotty continued, "con-sidering the poor condition of my soul. I was thinking of ringing up a babe and buying same a drink or two. Only a lack of companionship pre-vented me from recourse to the anodyne. But it runs through my mind, now, that if you'd consent to the measure, I might ring up two babes."

Duff grinned. "You forget my devoirs, chores, duties."

89

"On the contrary. I know your routine. I know the kids could manage things one evening with-out you. You could meet me at the Palm Para-dise Cafe at eight o'clock, and I would bring the ladies. It would be my party. Celebration for an A in a math test."

"You know," Duff answered after a moment, "I think I will! I feel in a mood to do damed near anything!"

"I'll pick a dame accordingly," Scotty grinned.

When Duff had gone, Prescott Smythe took from a pocket a small black notebook and began earnestly to con its pages. Listed in them were the names and phone numbers of several scores of young ladies who would gladly consent to help lift any shadow from the Smythe soul. The problem was to find one who would serve Duff in the same way. Duff was not, Scotty reflected, the kind of collegian, or post-collegian, who impressed young women. His small talk was unreliable. He had said once that he didn't dance much. As far as Scotty knew, he had never been seen to take a cocktail or even a beer. He had dated no coeds, so there was no grapevine information available on him.

Scotty turned pages all the way to the S's before he halted for any length of time. His finger rested on the name of Indigo Stacey. "Indigo Stacey," the entry read, "99-7663." And under that "bruvl—s—tt—cw—wfi." That, in Scotty's code,

90

meant, "Brunette, very good-looking, sexy, too tall, college widow, worth further investigation." He remembered. Peculiar dame, but handsome. Graduated two years before. Lived with another gal in a bungalow near the campus. Liked older guys, even as a student; very tall and helpfully man-crazy. The trouble with old Duff, Scotty reflected fondly, was that you had to get to know him to appreciate him. He gave the first impression of an absent-minded Leaning Tower of Pisa, and it took time to find out that he was as human as anybody and far brighter than most.

When the object of such meditations reached the Yates home, his feet were cold both literally and figuratively. He called to Mrs. Yates and then backed away from telling her. He dallied in his room and heard Eleanor come home, and finally went downstairs, where he found the two women together. In a kind of panic, he considered trying to tell Scotty by phone that he couldn't make it, but, instead, he blurted, "Won't be here for supper. Sorry, folks."

Both women stared. It was true that he was occasionally absent, but always after giving long notice. Eleanor said, rather crossly, "You might have told us!"

"Date," he answered uncomfortably. "Just made it."

91

"A date"—Eleanor was sarcastic—"with some little group, I bet, that does calculus for party games!"

"Dame," he said coldly.

"Who?"

"That would be telling." He was rather pleased by the half-angry, half-startled look on Eleanor's face, but mystified by the smile Mrs. Yates gave him behind Eleanor's back.

Duff dressed. He put on his topcoat. He caught a bus at seven-fifteen. He got out nervously a half block from the Palm Paradise, and walked un-easily toward its glittering, one-story-high electric sign. He went in.

What happened after that, he never clearly understood. Scotty was sitting at a ringside table, under revolving rainbow-hued lights, with two young ladies, one a girl with brown bangs who satisfied every detail of the "cute-college-type" description, and the other a stately, almost regal brunette with black hair, a heavy chignon at the nape of her neck, dazzling dark eyes and a smile, as Duff was introduced, which shocked him by its warmth and intimacy. He sat down, and there were cocktails. Scotty and his girl danced, but the tall brunette expressed herself as delighted not to do so, and she listened to Duff's words, which flowed with increasing ease—as if every one were a jewel of remarkable brightness.

92

There was dinner, a very gay meal with a bottle of red wine. There was coffee with brandy in it. There was a floor show. Duff was further startled and pleased when Scotty, in a moment during which their ladies were absent, said, "You know, old-timer, when I called Indigo, she'd heard of you and seen you around, and said she was dying to meet you and already planning how to do it."

"Wonderful girl," Duff said. "Why me?"

"She goes for serious types, I guess," Scotty answered. "Only girl I ever heard of named Indigo."

"Suits her, though."

"Deep purple? You bet! Well. Have fun, Archimedes."

"I'm having a wonderful time."

He was. The wonderful time continued. There was a long drive in the convertible, windows wound up "against the chill, and Indigo Stacey snuggled close as a further thermal measure. A Miami Beach night club and another floor show. A still longer ride back to Coral Gables—a ride on which Indigo said, "You can start kissing me good night about here, Duff."

"Here" was some miles from her bungalow.

When the two young ladies had been deposited at their homes, Scotty suggested a nightcap.

And it was in a small bar not far from the campus

where Duff, far removed from normal reticence and warmed by the fellowship of Scotty Smythe, shared his problem.

"You know, Duff," Scotty had said, turning his nightcap highball in his fingers and not tasting it, "I can't figure you out. On a party, you're tops. You have fun. At school the work doesn't seem to bother you—you breeze through it. And yet you act like a man carrying a mountain on his back all the time. Why?"

"Because I happen to be one," Duff answered. And suddenly, without planning it, he told his story, beginning with the day, which now seemed long ago, when an old hobby had led him to pick the fairly new lock of a closet door.

Excepting for an occasional quiet expletive, Scotty listened to the account without interruption. At its end, his expletives were many and vehement. But they wound up mildly. "Ye gods," he murmured. "I'll say you carry a mountain around. But you've got to do something."

Duff shrugged miserably. "What can I do?"

Scotty drummed on the table, his drink forgotten. "Not much, here. Ellings—and whoever else is involved—that super-jerk you saw, no doubt—will certainly be careful not to act suspiciously for a while. But I bet they are using that truck company to ship the parts! What I'd do, if I were you, is take that list of customers and go north for the Christmas holidays! I'd look

94

into as many places those trucks serve regularly as I could. Because if you found even one that was a drop—"

"What," Duff asked disconsolately, "would you use for money?"

Scotty smiled sympathetically and thought a moment. "I was going to fly up home for the holidays," he said. "Come back after, with the family, as far as Palm Beach. But I could drive. We could. We could stop off at the various cities."

The Yates family was surprised and disappointed by Duff's sudden announcement that he was going home for the holidays. It was a very hard thing to do, and he almost hated himself for his decision.

Eleanor took the news especially badly. She accused him of deserting. She reminded him that he wouldn't see her as Orange Bowl Queen. And she burst into tears. But he stuck to his story that he was going to Indiana to visit his family.

Even Indigo Stacey, at whose home he spent an evening playing bridge—the one game in which he was expert—expressed disappointment. She told him that she had developed a "large passion" for him and that the approaching holidays would be the "longest and duller in years" without him.

He felt, therefore, very much like a fugitive when, carrying a big, beat-up cheap suitcase, he took the bus, ostensibly to the train. Actually, at

95

the station, he was picked up furtively by Scotty Smythe.

In Washington they put up at a second-class hotel, donned old clothes and began "job hunting" at the regular delivery places of the Miami-Dade Terminal Trucking Company. These were stores, markets, wholesale houses and other trucking firms. There seemed to be nothing suspicious about any.

"Trouble is," Scotty said at supper that night, "we don't know what we're looking for. We do know it wouldn't be anything conspicuous. To locate a receiver of the freight we believe is moving, evidently might take fifty guys a month. And I've got to show up at home pretty soon. I got one idea."

"What?" Duff was leg-weary, insult-weary, discouraged.

"General Baines. Three stars. Friend of my old man. Has something to do with Military Intelligence.

Maybe the FBI didn't see your tale as anything but hallucination. The Army boys might be different." ,
"We could try," Duff agreed.

They tried the next morning. The general was located by phone in his office in the Pentagon Building. He told Scotty that he was "right busy." He agreed, however, that, since the matter "in-volved national security;" he could spare a few minutes.

96

So Duff and Scotty wound their way through the Pentagon labyrinths, found the outer office, waited half an hour, and at length stood face to face with a uniformed, silver-haired, paternal-looking officer who worked in an atmosphere of maps, papers, flags and autographed portraits of great men. He was cordial and quiet.

The general's reaction to the narrative was familiar to Duff; it angered Scotty. When the in-ter-view was ended, when the two young men were out in the winding, sloping corridors again, Scotty said enragedly, "He thought it was a gag! Tried to be polite! Tried to shoo us out, like a cou-ple of flies at a picnic! Got positively humiliated when we kept talking! Annoyed too."

Duff shrugged. "That's how the G-men felt about it!"

"What a country! Easy pickings for an enemy!"

Neither Duff nor Scotty had any way of know-ing that that the moment after they had left Gen-eral Baines' office, he had picked up his phone, switched to a special line, and said, "Chief of Staff. It's an emergency call."

The two self-appointed investigators reached Manhattan in an aggrieved mood.

Ordinarily, the elegance of the modernistic, duplex Smythe penthouse would have awed Duff. The warmth with which he was received by Scotty's white-haired, aristocratic-looking mother would only partially have put him at ease. The

97

amiability of Scotty's father would have helped. On the other hand, the cool though well-mannered greeting of Scotty's sisters—Adelaide, home from Sweet Briar, and Melinda, back from Vassar— would have frightened him. As things were, how-ever, he was so downcast about the journey that the skyline view from the picture window had no impact for him. Even the palatial surround-ings, the silver and damask at dinner, the dressed and dated, orchid-wearing sisters scratched only the surface of his mind. Inner suffering enabled him to appear more poised than he would other-wise have been.

Duff spent a night at the Smythe residence, and then put up at a small, midtown hotel. Scotty had wanted him to remain in his home, but Duff had been too embarrassed for that, too aware that he lacked the clothes, even the temperament, and above all the funds for the round of entertain-ment on the Smythe holiday schedule. His hotel bill was to be paid by money which Scotty wanted to "give to the cause" and which Duff insisted he would only borrow.

The three days remaining before Christmas Duff devoted to a survey of Miami-Dade delivery points in and near Manhattan. It was an exhaust-ing and fruitless effort. He posed, according to the nature of each firm, as a potential buyer, ship-per, customer or job seeker. He learned nothing

98

and spent the lowest Christmas in his life—alone at his hotel, unable to engage even in his vain researches because every place in the city was closed. He thought of the Yateses all day and of the work his foolish venture had added to their slim yuletide.

Then, on the day after Christmas, his patient checking of the list Eleanor had contrived to get for him led to a warehouse located in the down-town area of Manhattan, three blocks from Broadway, near Wall Street. There was nothing remarkable about the warehouse. In fact, it was the least provocative of any of the places he had visited, inasmuch as he was able to see, by peer-ing through a very dirty window in the early twi-light, that the mammoth interior was absolutely empty. Duff would have gone back to his hotel, then and there, tired, defeated, shamed by his absurd efforts, if he had not heard, while he was §till peering, the sound of a door closing some-where. An empty building is unsuspecting; an empty building with someone moving about inside it is different.

Duff crossed the street and fixed his eye on the vast brick structure overtopped on both sides by taller

buildings which were as grimy. He buttoned his coat under his chin. He crouched in a doorway.

It began to rain. The rain brought quick darkness—

shiny streets, spattering traffic and a glitter of light on the cobblestone pavement. At last a little door cut in the truck entrance of the warehouse opened slowly. A man came out. One of the tallest men Duff had ever seen in his life—a man proportionately broad.

The misery, the despair, the frustrations of past weeks disappeared in the first sharp breath Duff drew.

For this huge specter against the night was like an abrupt light in a long and dreadful darkness. The man looked up the street, down the street and across the street. He flipped up his coat collar and strode toward Broadway.

With surging excitement, Duff followed. He was sure it would be simple to do. The man towered above the other pedestrians; he would stand out a block away, even at night. People, furthermore, looked up at him in sudden astonishment and made extra way for him, which added to the ease of pursuit. On a city street, furthermore, Duff felt that his own clumsiness would be no handicap; there was noise and confusion everywhere.

But what Duff hadn't thought of soon happened. The huge man stopped walking abruptly. Duff dived into a doorway. The man again looked up the street, down the street and across it, as he stood at the curb. He had that habit; evidently, he seemed to suspect or fear he might be followed.

100

Quite suddenly, then, he took keys from his coat pocket, bent, opened the door of a parked car, climbed in, switched on its lights and drove into the traffic stream.

Duff searched so wildly for a cab in which to follow that he neglected to notice the license number of the car. There wasn't an empty cab in sight. When Duff thought of the number, the big man's car had disappeared.

He was ashamed of his error. But now he was - no longer without resources. He would have to find a hardware store that was still open, and make certain purchases. He would have to learn, after that, the timing of the watchman's rounds, if the empty warehouse was watched at all.

It took him an hour to locate a store. He gave half an hour to watching the warehouse. No man seemed on duty there. He crossed the street in a hard, icy rain—a rain now welcome—and applied himself to the lock on the small warehouse door. It was difficult and he was forced, whenever a pedestrian passed, to exhibit a bunch of keys and pretend he was having trouble finding the right one. Nobody stopped him or questioned him, and eventually the door opened. He went in, turning on a flashlight as he did so.

He hurried through an office that showed, by closed roll-top desks and gritty furnishings, long disuse.

Another door led to the main floor

101

of the place. A ramp in the rear sloped up through cavernous emptiness to a floor above. Another like the first rose to the top floor.

Afraid that there might be a partitioned room within-a-room on the two upper floors, Duff climbed both ramps with his flashlight switched off. He found that in the whole building there was nothing—nothing but over-all grime and rubbish in the corners, nothing but spiderwebs and a scuttle of rats somewhere in the walls, nothing but gleaming specks on the ground floor of rock particles such as constitute the underlying base of Manhattan and stick to wheels of vehicles— nothing but hollow silence, the dusty odor of desertion and the dim-heard rumble of the great city outside.

The very emptiness of the building had at first seemed meaningful. The meaning now appeared only to be that it was waiting for some new and perhaps different cargo. It had been a storage garage; more recently a warehouse. Now, perhaps, it had changed hands and was being prepared for other uses by the towering and somehow terrifying figure of the man whose face Duff had not yet clearly seen. The giant.

Duff thought of him in that term.

He left the building cautiously and hurried for the subway. No use to call Scotty now; Scotty would be at a post-Christmas party.

And no use, Duff thought to get in touch with 102

the New York FBI office. What would be added to his story by the report of a menacing figure lost in

the night and an empty building?

He was hungry, wet and weary as he went up the steps of his nondescript hotel.

The desk clerk stopped him. "Mr. Bogan! A Mr. Smythe has been trying to get in touch with you. Been here twice and phone every fifteen minutes since!"

Puzzled, Duff went into a phone booth and dialed. The ring was answered instantly by Scotty, "Duff!

Thank the Lord! Look! Eleanor phoned at half past four this afternoon—"

"Eleanor!"

"Asked for you. Talked to me. I've talked again to her since."

"How'd she know where I was?"

"Called your family in Indiana, first! You evi-dently wrote 'em you were spending Christmas with me—gave 'em my name—something."

"Oh. Yes, I did! You mean Eleanor phoned clear to Indiana?"

"Listen, chump!" It was then that Duff got the overtones in Scotty's voice. "Harry Ellings is dead."

"Dead?"

"Died in bed. The family thought he'd been up early working in the yard and got a ride to Miami. So they didn't find him till afternoon. Charley." Scotty said the name grimly. "Tough on the kid

103

to find the body. Could have been heart failure— probably was, the doctor thought. But that's not all. Eleanor said she'd found something. Can you imagine what? She said she wasn't able to move it."

"A box!" Duff all but shouted.

"I presume so. Look, pal! We gotta get back, and fast! I've been frantic for you to call! My old man's working on the air lines—they're loaded. If he can't chivvy space for us, I have a pal in Mineola with a sweet, fast job. War surplus plane he bought. I told Eleanor to phone Higgins or Mr. McIntosh at once."

"I'll be over in fifteen minutes!" Duff said. "Whatever is happening, this time it looks as if we were going to prove something they'll believe!"

104

FOUR

The commercial air lines were sold out to the last seat for the holiday season. Scotty's father was unable to get reservations. So it was in the plane of Scotty's friend that they left an ice-coated airfield, shortly before midnight. The plane, as Scotty had promised, was fast. They made one stop for fuel, in Savannah, and swept south over the Everglades at dawn.

A red sky at morning, Duff reflected, wasn't a "sailor's warning" in Miami. Just a custom of the country. And he reflected—thinking of whatever came to mind in order to wear away the inter-minable hours of flight—that it was an advantage to be rich, like the Smythes. To have friends with

105

planes, who'd make an emergency hop from New York to Miami just for fun. To be able to have a convertible you were too rushed to drive put aboard a freight car by the family chauffeur. Money meant things like that. But it didn't neces-sarily "corrupt character," as Duff's preacher fa-ther firmly believed and as Duff himself had vaguely assumed. There was nothing corrupt about Scotty Smythe's character.

Duff was dozing when the plane bounced, braked, turned and taxied. Its pilot looked back. "All out!"

Scotty said, "Thanks a million, Al! Go on over to my place—"

"Nope. Gotta get back. Check in here, and out."

"Wonderful thing of you to do."

"Rather fly than eat. Well—"

There was the slant of morning sunshine, the Florida smell of flowers and mold and warmth, the sleepy look of people around an airport at daybreak. They carried their own bags to a taxi and started for the Yates home.

When they reached the house no one appeared to be awake. Duff unlocked the front door. Scotty tiptoed in behind him.

From across the living room came the mur-mur of Mrs. Yates, "Who's there?"

-Duff was smiling. "Me and Scotty Smythe. A pal of his flew us down."

A hand-knit bed jacket, blue as her eyes, cov-106

erded her shoulders. Her golden hair was dis-heveled and as she sat up she reached for a comb. "I'm a sight! I'd dropped off—"

"I'll get you some coffee. Eleanor and the children asleep?" He waited for her nod and went to the kitchen.

When, after a few minutes, he came back with three cups of coffee on a tray, Mrs. Yates had fixed herself up. She smiled tiredly at him. "It's like you two boys to rush down here—"

"We were badly worried!"

"You needn't have been. Not to this extent! I was telling Scotty about it. When Charles found Harry Ellings, we were upset, naturally. He's been a member of the family for so long! He was so quiet—so nice! I don't suppose we'll ever find a boarder who will replace him." She sighed. "He'd been ill, of course. His heart just stopped. His funeral is arranged. Eleanor has been trying to get his friends together. There aren't many."

Duff couldn't hold back the question any longer, "What about the thing Eleanor said she found? Was it another box?"

Mrs. Yates' head shook. "The same one. That Mr. Higgins came last night. Poor Harry! He must have been a little off balance about money! He told you he'd sold his platinum, didn't he? Well, he hadn't. He did open a small savings ac-count, but apparently he couldn't bear to part with that—metal. He just moved the box."

107

Duff tried to hide an enormous disappointment. "Oh."

Her smile was wistful. "So perhaps it was in your lily pond, Duff. Perhaps he fetched it out between the time you were taken to the hospital and the time the police and all the others searched. He'd put it up in the tree house."

"Tree house?"

"Didn't you ever notice it? In the woods, to-ward the house from that pit with water in it? Eleanor's father built it when she was little and it's stood all these years."

Duff remembered the weathered platform.

"It was a very sad Christmas for us," Mrs. Yates said. "And poor Eleanor was exhausted, anyhow."

Duff finished his coffee and signaled to Scotty. They went out on the lawn.

"It looks," Scotty said ruefully, "as if we've been hurrying ourselves and friends around with-out any need."

"I'm glad I'm here, though. They can stand help." Duff thought a moment. "Do you believe it's possible that all the rumpus could come from Ellings' merely moving that box around?"

"What about seeing the big man in New York?"

"Sure. That. I've got to tell the FBI that—and take a razz, probably. But if all the rest of it isn't coincidence—if it was just Ellings' platinum

108

hoard—then two extra-tall men could be coinci-dence."

"Could be," Scotty agreed with grim sympathy.

"Only—" Duff shrugged and began again. "Only I had a feeling that there was something about that empty warehouse that meant some-thing. I got one of those spooky impressions. Whatever it was, I can't bring it up to view in my mind. Tried, off and on, all the way down here."

Scotty removed his jacket; New York clothes were too warm even for the early sunshine. He sat down on the grass. "You can be certain, if what you suspected had been going on, that it would take a big organization. Brains. Imagina-tion. Planning. Either there is a mob engaged in a very elaborate routine or else nothing was hap-pening. Harry was a hoarder whose heart failed, and a branch hit you, period. The thing that gets me is, if any such thing is going on, why hasn't anybody, anywhere, got onto any of it, so the FBI or General Baines—would have some notion?"

"Maybe I've wasted a lot of your time, Scotty. And more than a hundred borrowed bucks."

"Forget it!" Scotty grinned and got up; he stretched and walked down the drive to the place where the

sleeping cabdriver had parked in the shade.

At ten, Duff presented himself in the office of the FBI.

109

Higgins listened, somewhat dazedly, to Duff's account of the trip to New York. When Duff finished, the first thing he said was, "Haven't you got any sense at all?"

The younger man flushed and stammered. What he finally got out was, "Apparently not!"

Higgins summed up his view of the affair, "To start with, you go on a wildgoose chase. If any customer of Miami-Dade was the sort of drop you thought of, you had no chance of finding it out just by making a call. Take a hundred men, working weeks—short of some lucky break. So your scheme is dumb. The next thing you do, just because you can pick locks, is break into what you call a suspicious building. That was plain crazy! If you'd run into what you suspected, you'd be lying on the bottom of the Hudson now in a barrel of cement. Fortunately, the joint's empty. But you saw a man—a whopping big man—come out. You'd also once seen Ellings talking to some flag-pole-si-ed guy. There are many big men, Bogan, and unless a man stands beside somebody whose height you know, how can you tell how big he is exactly?"

"If you'd seen him! Here in Florida. There on Broadway—"

"So, all right! He gets in a car. Drives off. You never notice its license! So there's no way on earth of tracing him. Even the FBI can't find a man in New York by merely knowing he's outside."

110

Duff's face was a deep scarlet. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm at last beginning to think I was souped up over nothing."

For perhaps a minute, Higgins merely looked at Duff. When he spoke again, his brisk manner had left him. His tone was level and there was nothing sarcastic in it. "Look here, son. We've checked you from hell to breakfast. You're a solid citizen, from a solid family. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

The long series of disappointments and embarrassments suddenly, incredibly vanished. Duff said, "Yes." Higgins rocked back in his chair. "I wouldn't tell you this if General Baines hadn't been brought into it by you lads. He thought you ought to know. One more crazy thing you did! A three-thousand-mile, cockeyed chase! And you go in-interview the Chief of Intelligence—through Smythe's pull! Okay! Look. There is something going on in the country, Bogan, that involves a group of agents we've only just got wind of. It could be—what you came in here claiming a while back. Getting A-bombs stashed here. It could be. It could be something less spectacular—some other sabotage system. Like making arrangements to start diseases, epidemics. We don't know. We haven't connected your boarder—your late boarder—to any of it. But something's happening!"

III

Duff said, in a near-whisper, "I see."

"One more thing. The head of this outfit may be just such a big guy as you keep describing. Six-ten, possibly even seven feet tall—and heavy, besides. He's been seen. He apparently carries orders or gives orders. The men he sees are apt to move on afterward. To turn up missing."

"Who is the guy?" Duff asked.

"You tell me!" Higgins was angry for an instant. "Three or four times, in various cities, our men have spotted him making a contact of some sort with somebody. Always at night—probably because he was so big. Conspicuous. So far, he's eluded us. The people he's spoken to have been checked. Nothing on any of them—just like Ellings. Loyal Americans. We don't care to pick up any of them at this stage of the game. No single one probably knows enough to mean much. Or to point to many others. So we wait. Watch. And, I don't mind telling you, we worry!"

Duff repeated, "I see."

The G-man rocked forward abruptly and resumed his ordinary crisp manner. "What I just said, you never heard. The Yates place may have been a freight station. It may have been a mere blind. Tell nobody what I told you. I presume, with Ellings dead, the Yates house is safe enough. It's now under FBI surveillance, in any case, and that's also under your hat. Go about your business perfectly normally. Keep your eyes open. If you

notice anything, phone here at once. I'll give you a list of people to talk to, in case I'm out. But don't—absolutely don't—try to do anything! If you phone us, be sure you aren't listened to. That's all." He wrote busily for a moment and handed a list of names to Duff. "Memorize it on your way home and then burn it. We don't want anybody to know that the FBI is interested in you or the Yateses! Understand?"

"I certainly do!"

Higgins rose lithely and held out his hand. "Fine! I might add this: We weren't such chumps as you've probably imagined. We didn't quite believe your tale, but lately we have been watching. Nothing and nobody suspicious has been near the Yates house since you left town. And look. If anything does come out of this, we'll be grateful. Tips from people like you have helped us before. The tips you gave—that we seemed to brush off—may be a big help now. See?"

Duff saw.

When he went out on the street, his steps had new confidence. A great deal of his life was unsatisfactory: The Yates family was sad and Eleanor was pretty sore at him, or had been, before his trip to New York; he was broke and in debt to Scotty. But he hadn't been such an utter fool as he had believed. Even though, he suddenly reflected, he couldn't tell Scotty about that. Not yet, anyway.

Eleanor had just risen when he returned. She was wearing a light green, very sheer negligee that was part of her new wardrobe. He thought she was pale and thinner.

"Dear old Duff! I'm so glad you're home!" She was suddenly embarrassed. "Oh, doggone it! When I called down, mother said you were out. I'm a fright! You can kiss me if you can stand it."

"I just can." He grinned and kissed her cheek.

She stepped back and surveyed him. "Come in the kitchen!" When they were there and the swing-ing door had shut, she went ont, "Duff, what hap-pened? Mother told me you'd gone right off to see Mr. Higgins."

He nodded.

"Where's Scotty?"

"Went back to his place. Tired. We flew down in a private plane. Didn't sleep any too well."

"Tell me all about it! Your trip! Why on earth didn't you tell us what you were doing?"

Duff walked over to the stove and poured coffee for himself. He felt as if he needed a dozen cups. He refilled her cup and added the two teaspoons of sugar she liked. "Look, Eleanor. What Scotty and I were doing was checking the tracking places. We didn't find anything important. And from now on the FBI is taking over— whatever there is to take over. I'm out of it. And I promised to quit talking about it to a living soul. And I'm dead tired."

She said, "Well, I'm half dead! This Queen business is exhausting." She sighed and then laughed. "All right. I won't ask. Positively eaten with curiosity, but a lady to the end. Anyway, I'm dreadfully glad you're back again!"

The phone rang. She ran to answer.

Outdoors, Charles and Marian came in view. They were carrying pails of warm water, mops, cloths and a box of soap powder. Without ado, they began to wash the outside of a kitchen window, their dark heads bobbing in busy unison. Presently Charles called to Duff to lower the top section of the window, which he did. Duff remembered that Mrs. Yates had held a family council at which a list of necessary vacation chores had been drawn up. Charles and Marian were evidently working their way through the list. It wasn't much of a holiday, Duff thought, but they didn't appear to mind.

Eleanor stopped talking, started back, and the phone rang again. Her voice took up a new conversation with a pleasure he knew to be stimulated.

Meanwhile, through the now-open window, Marian and Charles began to discuss their lister, somewhat for Duff's benefit.

"Phone again!" Charles said disgustedly. "Rings all day! You answer, it's for Eleanor. Your pals try to

phone you. The line's busy!"

"A pain!" Marian agreed. "The doorbell rings, 115

it's flowers for the Queen. Or it's a telegram for the Queen. Or clothes in big, fancy boxes. You walk out on the porch, some character is waiting for the Queen—maybe even with a mustache and in striped pants. Every time she skids past you, she's got on something new. Gifts from the local cou-turiers." She made deliberate hash of the French word. "You pick up a newspaper and what do you see? The Queen, wearing her million-dollar, photogenic smirk!"

Duff chuckled; he was back "at home" all right. And very glad to be.

The phone rang a third time and Eleanor came through the door. "You, Duff."

Through the window, Charles leered. "Amaz-ing!"

"A gal," Eleanor went on, her eyes a little cu-rious. "With a voice like a torch song."

From that, Duff knew who it was before he reached the phone. He wondered how Indigo had learned of his return. Probably she'd run into Scotty Smythe. He also wondered what she wanted—and found out. In fact, after elaborate refusals and protests, he eventually found that he was going to have dinner with her. When he hung up, he saw Eleanor in the doorway; she'd been listening; her expression was indignant, and not even humorously so.

"Indigo," she mimicked. "She's notorious!"

Duff was surprised, embarrassed, and slightly 116

annoyed. "Is she? She's also darn good-looking!" He shrugged. "I can get the kids' dinner— and then go out—"

"The kids can get their own!" She seemed un-duly disturbed. "But, no fooling, she isn't your type, Duff."

Her attitude somehow pleased him and yet made him feel obliged to seem resentful. "Bru-nette, you mean?"

"She's actually Russian. Her parents were."

"Wha-a-a-t?" He drew the word out skeptiT cally. "Never met a more American dame in my life."

"How did you meet, by the way?"

"Scotty dug her up. She lives in the Gables."

"I know where she lives!" Eleanor retorted hotly. "Scotty would!"

"He told me," Duff responded with heat, "that she wanted to meet me. What do you mean, she's Russian?"

"She wants to meet any person in pants! Being tall, she likes tall ones, if available. White Russian, she was. Family came here to Miami during the revolution. Ask mother."

Mrs. Yates, whose door was open, could not avoid overhearing. She called, "Children! Quit squabbling! . . . Eleanor, Duff has a perfect right to go out with Miss Stacey if he wants." They heard the catch in her breath that indicated she was turning her wheel chair, and then she ap-

117

peared in the doorway, smiling. "Stacey wasn't the real name, Duff. It was, originally, Stan-oblovsky. They changed it to Stacey. Back in the old days, before Walter and I came to Florida. And I guess the local people were fairly proud of having them. They were nobility, till the Bolsheviks threw them out. Maybe in 1917 or around that time. They made money here in lots of different businesses, mostly in selling cars. Mr. Stacey, Indigo's father, had a big agency. Her un-cle's still—"

"Indigo!" Eleanor repeated scathingly.

"I always thought it was a very attractive name. The girl'a mother chose it because she claimed it was the prettiest word in English."

"That's what some broken-down Russian no-ble would think!" Eleanor turned angrily to Duff. "Go ahead! Fall for that towering twerp! Have a marvelous time with her! Everybody does!"

"Eleanor!" said Mrs. Yates reproachfully.

The phone rang again at that point. Eleanor seized it, and instantly her voice became honey-sweet. "Of course," she smiled. "I'll manage, somehow! I've got to appear at the Watercade at four. And then there's a cocktail party for me on the beach. And the ball. But I could spare a few minutes, maybe, between eight and nine."

Charles came through the swinging door. "Is anybody getting lunch? Or do we just starve to death quietly?"

118

After lunch, Duff appointed himself a task that the Yateses had avoided. Harry Ellings' room had been examined by the police, but his possessions had not been packed and the room had not, of course, been prepared for a new boarder. Nobody had even spoken about a new boarder. But the Yates budget meant that one would have to be found, and very soon.

Duff first packed Harry's clothes in his suit-cases. Then he put Harry's letters, papers, pictures, books and personal knickknacks in cartons. These he moved to the barn and stored in its loft until they should learn what to do with them. The men who had gone through his effects and read every word of his correspondence had found no will. Mrs. Yates knew of none. He'd had, apparently, no relatives with whom he had kept in touch.

When all of Harry's belongings had been removed from the room, Duff commenced to clean. There was dust beneath the bed which showed that the police, though they might have looked there, had not moved it. Duff presumed, however, that they had probed every square inch of the mattress, and when he stripped it off he thought he could see, here and there, tiny openings that long pins might have made. He carried the mattress outdoors. He went back and commenced, with the Dutch-wife neatness on which his mother had insisted, to dust the bed frame.

119

It was on the inner edge of a steel angle iron that he found the capsule. He presumed it to be one of the large, pliant kind in which liquid vitamins and other medicines are commonly administered. Something Harry had used long ago, dropped and lost track of. It must have fallen between the mattress and the wall and rolled onto the bed frame. But the capsule wasn't dusty. And wetness showed at the ruptured edge. Also, Duff could see dents where teeth had recently come down on it to bite it open.

It was brown and egg-shaped. He sniffed. Its odor was medicinal, not identifiable. He decided that it was something Harry must have taken just before his death, something the police hadn't noticed the day before because they were looking for nothing of that sort. He went to his room to get an envelope and tipped in the capsule without touching it. He finished cleaning the room thoroughly, and then, for the sake of the family and their memories, he rearranged the furniture.

After that, with the envelope in his breast pocket, Duff went outdoors. He knew now that the Yates place was being watched and he thought he could locate the agent on duty. He walked clear around the large rectangle of roads by which the property was bounded.

At the back of the property three Negroes were busy in a languid, hot-afternoon fashion, clearing the overgrown edges of the paved street. There

120

was no one else. He then decided the watcher was hidden in the woods, and entered them. The undergrowth was thick and he went cautiously, as he was very sensitive to poisonwood, which abounded in the hammock around the house. He passed the platform where Eleanor had found the box again. The G-men had it now. Platinum. He thought of that and shrugged.

He came, finally, to the sinkhole. It was about twenty feet one way and thirty the other, overhung by big trees, with a big tree blown across it, and deep enough to contain water. Such sink-holes, common in Dade County, were caused by the eating out of soft limestone by underground water. When a pocket was thus formed its roof eventually collapsed. Most such "glades" were dry, but some, like this one, had been deeply eroded and held pools of dark water.

Duff looked in. The water, gleaming in the shade, reached back out of sight beneath great, thirsty roots and an overhang of limestone encrusted with fossil shells. Around its rim were faint signs of visitation. Kids came there occasionally—though forbidden by their parents—to catch minnows in traps or just to throw stones for the sake of the splash. The water was too shallow for drowning, but a person could have a nasty fall into it.

Looking down, Duff remembered the night he'd seen one of the mysterious boxes—if there

121

had ever been "one" among many—in his own homemade lily pool. That thought led to another: the sinkhole reached back out of sight around its rim, and he was wearing old clothes. He could go back to the house for a rope or use a tree. He decided on a tree and found a suitable one near-by, a small palm uprooted by the October blow. He scrambled down it and landed high-deep, in warm water.

The bottom was mucky. Overhead was an oval of blue sky. Around him, the sides of the hole curved back and the water glinted in gloom. Sometimes, he recalled, there were alligators in these sinks. He saw none. He walked around the edges, peering into the recesses, stirring up mud.

Presently he came to an area, hidden from above by the overhang, which had been visited by somebody else. Perhaps by several people. And perhaps often. It was a kind of roofed room, open toward the pit; its muddy floor emerged as a soft bank. The bank showed many signs of feet—old markings and some probably not very old. There were flat marks, too, where boards had evidently sunk down into the mucky sediment. One or two boards were visible now, and he located another with his foot, then others. They'd settled beneath the surface of the ooze.

The footprints weren't plain, except for one, which he studied. It was the mark of the side of a man's shoe. The man evidently had fallen on the

122

tarlike stuff. But his leg, curiously enough, had left no print. Duff decided that the man must have turned his ankle to make such a mark.

He wondered if the FBI had investigated the sinkhole. Doubtless they had; probably the foot-prints and boards were signs of FBI scrutiny, though there were other possibilities. The little fish in the pool were sought by kids and also by men; they made excellent bait. Some angler might have set minnow traps there from time to time, using boards to stand on. Tramps might have found shelter in the half cave. Highschool boys might have used it as a place for a gang meeting or an initiation. It was hidden and pretty far from the Yates house.

Wet to the waist, he shinnied up the tree again. He hadn't yet found the watching G-man that Higgins had said would always be near. He finished a search of the hammock without luck, returned to the house, took the capsule from his pocket, washed himself outdoors with a hose, and afterward changed his clothes.

Then he went up to the bus line, rode into the Gables and phoned Higgins from a booth in a drugstore. The G-man didn't seem much interested in the capsule, but he told Duff to leave it with the druggist to be picked up. Duff went home to help with supper for the kids.

Indigo came for him in her car after dark. When they drove down Flagler Street together,

123

on the way to Miami Beach, the crowds, the lights, the Christmas decorations seemed out of key with his life and his mood and his fatigue.

"It's beautiful!" Indigo kept pointing to every-thing. And she said, "I'm so glad you're back! I was lonesome for you."

He watched her drive, looked at her sleek, dark desirableness, breathed the perfume she wore and felt sure it was called Damnation or something of the sort.

He grinned. "Glad to be back! I was going kind of stale. I'm tired, besides."

"For being tired, the extra cocktail is recommended."

"Probably go straight to my head."

"The very effect I had in mind."

Duff laughed. "Why, Indigo? How come?"

Her lucent, dark eyes flashed briefly. "Why? Who can say why? I saw you on the campus one day. And again at a football game one night. I asked people who you were. Why?" She shrugged as she turned the car. "When you get a certain kind of feeling you shouldn't ask why."

They dined and sat afterward in a moonlit patio on the edge of the sea. At midnight they drove back to her house and kissed good night. Duff, for a reason he couldn't quite name, refused to go in to have a nightcap, and went home by bus because his refusal angered her. They quarreled

124

on the doorstep, and she went in, finally, slam-ming the door in his face.

* * *

During that space of time the capsule left in a drugstore made a journey to the FBI in Miami and thence to a laboratory. About two o'clock in the morning, when Duff was in bed, but unable to sleep, owing to alternate waves of self-approval and self-castigation over his rather alarmed flight from Miss Indigo Stacey, Higgins, who was sound asleep at home, reached from his bed to snatch up a ringing phone.

"Yeah?"

"This is Ed Waite, at the lab. Sorry to wake you."

"Okay. What?"

"That capsule. Anybody take the stuff?"

"Probably." The G-man was wide awake, then.

"Person that did is dead, if so."

Higgins evaded the implied question. "What was it?"

"Aconitine. Enough to kill a few horses."

"How would the person die?"

"Like heart failure," Ed said. "And you couldn't find the stuff by autopsy. It combines chemically with substances in the body and dis-appears."

"I see. Thanks." Higgins was about to hang up.

125

"One other thing, Hig. I don't think that dose was made in U.S.A."

"No? Why?"

"Because I never heard of anything like it. Aconitine isn't used to put animals out of mis-ery—nothing like that. And the capsule wasn't any kind—chemically speaking—manufactured here. Different base. The gelatin part, I mean. An-other thing: It isn't a little item anybody would whip up to poison somebody else."

"No?" Higgins sounded skeptical. "Why?"

"You couldn't feed it secretly to anybody. Too big. They'd see it or else feel it and not swallow it. And you wouldn't want to try to bust it over somebody's soup. Skin's tough. It would splash and spurt all around."

"I see. Well, that's good work, Ed."

"Only thing it could be, Hig, I figure, is some-thing I've only read about."

"What's that?"

"Well, if you were a foreign agent in somebody else's country, for instance, and you thought you might be nabbed at any point and you wanted to be sure you'd never talk, you'd carry around, something about like that. Taped to you some-place. In a crisis, you could pop it in your mouth, bite, swallow—and quick curtains."

Higgins said, "Thanks, Ed. Keep it to your-self."

"Right."

126

When Duff wakened, it was after ten. He leaped guiltily out of bed and took a shower. Then he tiptoed downstairs and learned from Mrs. Yates that the precaution hadn't been wasted: Eleanor was still sleeping.

"A whole bunch of people drove her home last night around three," she said. "This being Queen is bad for girls, Duff. I thought I'd brought up Eleanor so nothing in the world could turn her head. But with everybody in the city at her feet—with dates every second and things to do and all the clothes and the photographs! I'd hate it if—"

"If what, Mrs. Yates?"

"Oh, if she got glamour-struck. Thought she could get in movies. Anything like that. Eleanor's actually serious—and a simple person. A home-body. If she got yearning to be rich and famous and all that, she could make a wrong marriage! Even if she didn't try Hollywood."

"I wouldn't worry too much. She's level-headed. And I don't believe it hurts a girl to be Cinderella once

in a lifetime. Something to re-member."

"If she doesn't develop a prince complex! Yes."

The doorbell rang and Duff answered it.

Higgins was standing there, smiling. "Hi, Bo-gan."

Duff opened the screen door. "Come out in the kitchen, will you? I just got up."

127

In the kitchen, Mr. Higgins told Duff briefly about the capsule.

"You see," he concluded, "how we can all go haywire. My men went through his things with the police.

Never looked under the bed—which is the first thing an old maid would do. Never looked, I mean, beyond seeing nothing big was there. Thought I'd have a squint, myself."

Duff bit toast he had made. He shook his head. "Too late. I cleaned the place yesterday. You think, then, that Harry—"

Higgins exhaled slowly. "Knocked himself off. Sure. They do. The heat was on him. His peo-ple"—Higgins cursed softly—"whoever they may be, were probably sore at him because you started uncovering Harry's business. I think when Harry went to Baltimore he was trying to contact somebody. We had men on him the whole time."

"You did!"

'Higgins' eyes smiled, but not his lips. "This isn't any amateur outfit, Bogan! Yes. But he never made a contact—not that our men saw, any-how. He did consult doctors. He said he was sick—and I guess he was. Sick from fear. The doc-tors couldn't treat that. So he came back here and maybe got the word. Or knew his number was up because they didn't get to him in Balti-more. So he took that thing—and probably coughed the skin of it out as he died."

128

"That means," Duff said gravely, "Harry knew what he was doing the whole time."

Again the G-man swore. "It means that, what-ever the hell they are trying to do! By now, I'd give a leg to know. A life, I guess! I'll take a fast gander at the room, even though you did clean it up."

Duff nodded. "Okay. Incidentally, I tried to find your agents around here yesterday. They must have been taking a day off."

Higgins stared. Then he laughed. "You thought you could deliver the capsule to my men, hunh? They were here, just the same, son, As I said they'd be."

"But there wasn't a soul! Except some colored road workers!" Duff, seeing the G-man's look, broke off and blushed. "Oh!" He joined ruefully in Higgins' chuckle. "I did find one thing, though. There's a sinkhole"—he pointed out the win-dow—"beyond the banyan and those gumbo-limbo trees."

Higgins said he'd have it looked over. Perhaps it had been; Duff couldn't tell from the G-man's response.

Higgins went upstairs and returned to the kitchen shortly. He said to Duff, who was eating a home-grown banana and drinking coffee, "Brother, you sure would make some girl a won-derful wife! When you clean, you clean!"

Duff walked down the drive with him. 129

"Thought you didn't want any—people to know you were still interested in this place?"

Higgins nodded. "I checked with my road crew before this call. If anybody peculiar had showed up, I'd have got a signal and you'd have had to sneak me out."

"There's another item. Harry's funeral. That's tomorrow. Since we know now what Harry was, perhaps the family—"

The G-man shook his head. "No. They're go-ing?"

"They intend to. Even Eleanor plans to cut some of her schedule."

"Lovely girl," Higgins said absently. "No, Bo-gan. Things have to keep seeming normal around here.

We'll have a man at the services, of course. There won't be many people. Some of his old let-ter-carrier pals. A few from the garage. Some of the cronies he used to fish and spot-cast with. You and the kids and the missus, you go. Don't tell 'em Harry was a spy."

The word, even then, shocked Duff. "A funny person to be one."

Higgins said grimly, "That's the worst thing about it! About those—those— Hell! No word for 'em. They

reach the insides of patient, peace-ful, law-abiding guys like Ellings! Rot out their hearts! And yet leave their outside just like al-ways. You see some good-humored, industrious chap. Courteous, helpful, loves kids, sticks

130

around home. Maybe, long ago, he was slighted or hurt or made to feel inferior. Something— something that switched him over to that crooked, rotten, enemy line! So he goes overboard. He keeps on looking like a good citizen. But in his head, night and day, he's scheming to kill or en-slave every man and woman and kid in the coun-try! You know, Bogan, it's the ability to do that to people that frightens me more than all the war and defeat and national uproar and trouble put together. It gets me!" He tried for a better phrase. "I hate it!"

Duff said, almost whispered, "Yeah. Me too."

Higgins doubled his fist, stared at it un-clenched it. "Shooting it out with gangs. That was easy! Tagging tax violaters. That's just work! But finding out that people who do things you've been led to admire are just rotten, low, filthy ene-mies! Traitors! It makes a man sick! It scares a man!" He nodded curtly and walked away toward the road.

Duff went over to the campus that afternoon. He had left some notes in a laboratory locker, he explained to Mrs. Yates. He had decided to go over them during the holidays and to finish a thesis on certain aspects of electromagnetic fields and radiant particles. He smiled when she an-swered him by making a funny face; she didn't know what he meant.

Even to himself, Duff did not quite admit, until 131

he walked up to the bungalow, that he was really going to Coral Gables to try to call on Indigo. He felt ashamed of running away from her. He also felt more than a little intrigued by her avowed passion for him; it was an unprecedented experi-ence and Duff, after all, was a young man. He had always liked girls, but he'd never really had a girl of his own. Any other young man, un-dergraduate or graduate student, or any young instructor, for that matter, would almost surely have accepted Indigo's passion with enthusiasm; even with a certain smugness. The fact that he was wary of her made Duff wonder if, perhaps, when the right girl came along, he wouldn't know how to behave. In that case, he'd wind up a bach-elor.

On account of such sensations and specu-lations, it seemed very necessary to Duff to make amends for refusing her offer, on the evening be-fore, of a nightcap—a possible euphemism for something more personal and disturbing than alcohol, which had scared him away.

There was a car parked in front of Indigo's pretty, modernistic bungalow. Her own car was in the garage and the sedan of the girl with whom she lived was not there. Duff shied at the fact of a caller and then decided that it might be better, diplomatically, to see her first in the presence of others. So he stepped up to the front door and dropped the chrome knocker. Nobody answered.

.132

That surprised him because he had heard voices inside. He knocked again, loudly, but there was no response.

So she did have a visitor, but she didn't want to be disturbed. Duff reflected gloomily that a girl like Indigo could easily find a thousand admirers and doubtless would brush one off in a hurry for behaving as he had. He walked slowly away. *Great swain, I am*, he thought. *Casanova and Don Juan rolled into one*. He reminded himself never to tell anybody of his behavior and its swift rebuff.

He spent two desultory hours in the lab and went back to the Yates house with a crowd of bus riders who held a general discussion on the prospects of a University of Miami victory in the Orange Bowl game. It was only days away. *And thank the Lord for that*, he thought. Perhaps after-ward Eleanor would return to normal.

It was dark when he reached home. Dark— and Mrs. Yates was fretting. "I wish this busi-ness was over, Duff. It's nearly six. And Eleanor's due at a banquet at seven. And she has to change, but she's not home yet. I know it's not her fault that she gets delayed—"

Charles was setting the table. Marian was cooking. Duff inspected the contents of pots and pans on the oil stove and told Marian—making her happy by doing so—that the guy who won her would have not a

good cook, but a real chef.

133

He took his notes upstairs, looked through them and straightened up the room. He heard Charles calling numbers, asking for his sister and getting unsatisfactory replies, for he kept dialing. Duff lay down on his bed and read a chapter on nuclear engineering.

He was interrupted by the boy's voice, coming worriedly up the stairway, "Hey! Duff! Elea-nor never did get to the Fashion Parade today! I just found out!"

He closed the book, tossed it on hfs table and clattered downstairs. Mrs. Yates had wheeled herself into the living room. Her anxiety had visi-bly increased. "Charley just reached someone who was there, Duff. They waited for Eleanor till half past four. They tried to call here, but the line was busy all the time. No wonder. The calls that come in. So they went ahead without her."

Duff said, "Probably got her dates mixed. Wouldn't be surprising! She had some shenanigan at Fort Lauderdale for tomorrow. Bet she went there by mistake. Probably come in, any min-ute."

"It isn't like her," Mrs. Yates insisted.

Duff grinned rather soberly. "She isn't her-self, these days."

"She wandered off with somebody," Mrs. Yates went on. "I didn't see who. I'd wheeled into the kitchen to block a sweater, and she'd changed to that gorgeous brown dress she was to

134

wear at the Fashion Parade today. She didn't take the car and I don't know who was to call for her.

Scotty came by and they talked a while, and then he drove away and I had a glimpse of her stand-ing out by the banyan. After that, somebody must have picked her up."

Marian, who had gone into the stair hall, now called, "She certainly is getting absent-minded! She didn't even take along the hat that goes with the new brown rig!" Marian came, then, carry-ing a hat the color of Eleanor's eyes, with canary-yellow trimming.

It was not until then that Duff became alarmed. But alarm, when it appeared, was instant and formidable. She wouldn't go without the hat. She was orderly. She was responsible. She had a good memory. And lately, she'd been almost vain; so much attention would have made anybody con-scious of beauty. It was hard to imagine that Elea-nor would barge away when somebody arrived to pick her up—without a hat that, obviously, was a main part of a planned costume for a very important social event.

As he felt ice inside himself, Duff instantly dis-sembled. "Maybe Scotty knows about it."

He went to the phone and dialed. He got Scotty's roommate and, presently, Scotty himself.

"Hi, you phony Sherlock!" Scotty said.

Duff frowned at the greeting and then realized that, as far as Scotty knew, his idea about the

135

boxes had been mistaken and their trip to New York a blunder. He grinned tensely and asked about Eleanor.

"No," young Smythe answered. "I didn't see the Queen depart. I had a little colloquy with her around three, and I blew. I left her among the Yates trees and shrubs."

Duff thanked him. He tried two members of the Orange Bowl Committee without success. He phoned the people who were sponsoring the ban-quet and asked if they had heard anything from Eleanor. They hadn't. The family tried some of Eleanor's closest girl friends. Nobody knew any-thing about her.

"We're probably going bats for nothing," Duff said. "After all, she was terribly balled up with dates. Let's eat."

Eight o'clock.

No sign of Eleanor. Duff called a number Hig-gins had given him, and a sharp voice said, "Rolfe, here."

"My name is Allan Bogan. I live at the Yates house—"

"Right. Where you calling from?"

"There."

"Better use another phone."

"No. The thing is, Eleanor Yates has disap-peared. I mean, she was due home over two hours ago—been missing since around four."

"Right. We'll check."

136

Duff hung up, wild-eyed.

"Who was that? The police?"

Duff nodded. "Sort of."

Mrs. Yates began to cry a little.

Duff nervously walked out on the porch. If they had seized her—if they had taken her away—who were "they"? Why had they done any such thing? Where had they taken her?

There could be a reason. Weeks before, unsatisfied by his effort to convince the FBI that something was happening, she had gone to see Higgins without telling him. Since his return from New York, Duff hadn't exchanged confidences with Eleanor or anyone else. Higgins had forbidden that. It was possible that Eleanor had found out something so final, so telling, that she'd been— What?

"They" wouldn't mind killing a girl. "They," perhaps, were working to kill millions of people. You couldn't even think, rationally, of what "they" might be planning.

Duff paced back and forth on the porch. It was a warm evening, but not so warm as to explain the sweat that burst on his brow, soaked his shirt. Only fear could explain that.

137

FIVE

Four night-blooming-jasmine bushes which Duff had raised from cuttings blossomed along the edge of the veranda. Their perfume, so heady that some people cannot bear it, saturated the darkness and drifted downwind, exotic and sweet. When Duff noticed it, his attention came only in the form of a memory, a memory that Eleanor was very fond of jasmine. He tried to tell him-self it was insane to imagine that, simply because she was missing, Eleanor had been kidnapped and perhaps killed by people whose very existence was shadowy.

He paced the porch, wondering what else might have happened to her, what less-horrifying thing.

138

She had last been seen in the big yard, by Scotty and her mother, over near the banyan. He stood at the porch rail and looked at the black arcades beneath the trunks of the great tree. Had some-body been concealed there?

Suddenly, as if he had been told, Duff realized what had happened: Eleanor hadn't previously known anything that had made her freedom on her existence a danger to "them." What had happened was that she had heard something from the lawn, down near the banyan.

He raced through the house, startling Mrs. Yates and the two children. "Be right back! Ten -fifteen minutes!"

He picked up the flashlight. In the barn, he shouldered a ladder.

Charles yelled, "Need me?"

"No, Charley! Stay with your mother."

It was hard work moving through the jungle with the ladder. Time and again it hooked over trees and fouled up on boughs or vines so that he had to use his light, stop and maneuver. When, finally, he reached the sinkhole, he was panting heavily. He stood there, afraid to swing the beam of the electric torch. He shut his jaws and aimed the light down and around the edges. He didn't see what he feared he would: a body. A girl's body in a brown dress.

The ladder splashed in the water. It was, he noticed, abnormally muddy. Plenty of time to settle

139

since he had roiled it. In the water, he plunged for balance as his feet settled uncertainly. His torch circled the recesses. All he saw was water, rock and innumerable roots. A big moth flew through the light beam. He pushed forward under the rocky roof of the edge.

There were fresh tracks. He was sure of that. He was surer still when he could no longer find the one print that had held his attention, the mark of the side of a shoe on a foot that seemed legless. "They" had been in the pit that afternoon, taking the boxes away. But how had they kept from being seen?

Eleanor, because she had gone over to the banyan, must have heard a sound in the woods and gone to

look. In daylight he could probably find the marks of her heels. She had gone to look. And that was that. Where was she now? Alive? A prisoner? He groaned and only the walls answered sepulchraly. His flashlight fell sharply on the stones and threw sharp shadows. The recess was deeper than he'd thought. He waded back. It seemed to turn at a projecting wall. Following the turn, Duff found a new feature of the sinkhole. An arch of lime-stone, shoulder-high, spanned some ten feet of water. He leaned and shone his light along its surface. The tunnel, half air and half water, led into the distance in a meandering line as far as he could see.

140

Some hundreds of yards away in that direction was the overgrown real-estate development where Harry Ellings had had his furtive rendez-vous with the gigantic man. And beyond those cracked sidewalks, cabbage palms and broken lampposts was the old rock pit, now used as a dump. Sinkholes, if they held water, were sometimes connected, underground, with others. This one could communicate with the water in the rock pit. In that case, the value of the Yates land to anyone wishing to store desperate cargo was self-evident. Such cargo could be unloaded at night in the old quarry and dragged through this tunnel to the place where he stood. It could then be buried in the soft ooze. And no one watching the house or its surrounding grove of jungle trees would see a sign of coming and going. Duff peered again. Surely the boxes went out here that afternoon. Perhaps Eleanor also— He started into the opening and changed his mind. The tunnel might go to the quarry. It might be a blind pocket. It might have a hundred forks and turns; he could get lost underground. It was not sensible, not even sane, to explore alone. Taking gasps of air, he yelled "Eleanor!" repeatedly. Nothing came back but echoes.

He left the pit and raced toward the house. As he rounded the banyan tree he heard a distant siren.

141

Mrs. Yates saw him enter and paled. "You're wet!"

"I'm all right. I was looking in that rock pit in the woods. Nothing. Don't worry so, Mother!"

He changed to dry clothes as rapidly as he could. When he came down, Higgins, with two men in business suits whom he'd never seen and two cops, had just come in. Duff jerked his head at the FBI man and they went to the kitchen, where he told Higgins about the sinkhole.

The men, soaking wet, yelling in the low, rocky passages, found a route to the quarry. They found ample signs that men had used it—often and for a long time. They found evidence that vehicles had driven up to the quarry at a point different from the one used by dump trucks. But no trace of Eleanor.

Near midnight Higgins sat with Duff in the kitchen. Both were muddy to the waist. But Higgins had been on the telephone for twenty minutes. He gulped coffee now and wiped a sticky forehead with a sodden handkerchief.

"Nothing!" he said to Duff. "No lead! Nothing new on the whole proposition. What we've got to do is go over it."

"Go over it!" Duff groaned. "What do you think I've been doing since it started?"

Higgins ignored that. "I've got every man we have-looking into everything they can think of! Mac—my chief—will be here soon. Reports will

142

come in here. Now! Let's go back to that day when you went upstairs to clean the rooms and you noticed Ellings' closet was locked and you decided to pick the lock. You talk. I'll ask questions. Start in!"

Duff stared at the other man, wondering if this was a useful effort or merely a kindly attempt to keep his mind from the final happening. It didn't matter. Either way, it was better than just being silent and frantic. Higgins and he covered every detail. McIntosh came and stayed a while, talked on the phone, issued orders, tried to comfort Mrs. Yates and Marian and Charles, and left.

Higgins and Duff talked on, without effect. Sometime after three in the morning, Higgins stopped alternately sitting and pacing. "Bogan," he said, "I know you can't sleep. But I've got to. For me, it's a job."

"I understand that."

"So I'm starting home. If you hit on anything else, let me know. If we can think of another thing for you to do, we'll call you. This is rugged."

Marian was asleep in a chair in the living room. Charles was asleep on the cot in his mother's room. And Mrs. Yates didn't say a word when he looked in. He went upstairs. After a while he lay down. Through his mind rushed the events he had just so painstakingly discussed with the FBI man. Little by little, in the dark, they ran less swiftly.

143

And after a time, Duff sat up, rubbing his hair, putting his feet on the floor. He had told himself, with a different mental tone, that no feverish at-tempt such as he was making could accomplish a thing. He reminded himself that he was a scien-tist, capable of concentration, attention, analysis.

"What I ought to do, he thought, is take it like mathematics. Check back. Look for discrep-ancies. Things not included. Things not explained. Mistakes. Also, I should extrapolate. Imagine. He felt more detached, less frantic.

There were several elements not satisfac-torily accounted for. Little things. Why, for ex-ample, had the warehouse in New York been empty? And what had there been about it that had impressed him as meaningful, but that he had never called to consciousness?

He had the answer to that, abruptly. The floor of that vast building had glittered faintly with the mica-like brilliance of such broken stone as is excavated in Manhattan. He'd thought of it as coming in from the streets on truck wheels. Actually, it could have come from excavating in the building. And they wouldn't have wanted things stored there if they had wanted to dig. Before this instant, Duff realized, he had con-ceived of an assembled A-bomb as something in a huge case or a truck above ground. Why not bury it? The warehouse wasn't far from Wall Street. An A-bomb going off there, even under-

144

ground, would destroy the financial heart of New York City, of America.

That was one thing. He could tell Higgins to have them tear up the floor of the place. Then, perhaps, they'd get tangible—and terrifying—evidence. That idea, a fresh idea, one in which he had confidence, excited him; his mind raced anew. But he saw the error of that. He had to think, not feel.

The second idea he evolved had to do with Harry Ellings' history. It was odd, in a way. He'd been a letter carrier. Developed varicosis—he had said. He limped a little and complained of leg pains. True. That could have been put on. Why? Because, Duff reasoned, a bad leg might have been a first step in training for a new job. If Harry had belonged for years to a secret underground, the organization might have wanted him to be in a trucking company, where freight could be for-warded secretly.

It would be easier, Duff thought, and a great deal safer, to retrain an established underground member than to try to persuade some unknown mechanic to turn to treason. So, perhaps, Harry had feigned the bad leg, learned to be a mechanic and moved into Miami-Dade Terminal Truck-ing Company as part of a plan. That way Harry could retain his mask of ordinariness. The idea was strengthened, if not corroborated, by the existence of the quarry, the sinkhole and the con-

145

necting tunnel, and by Harry's meeting with the huge man near the quarry.

That pattern, while logical, seemed not to lead any further toward Eleanor. It took Duff more than an hour—an hour of slow, relaxed new thought. He had been turning over in his mind all he knew about the man seven feet tall. He had actually seen the man twice: one evening in New York, one night with Harry Ellings. The FBI also had reports on the man. Two different agents, on two different nights, had seen the man enter a place. But not come out. They'd lost him, both nights.

Why nights? Did he come out only at night, because of his great stature, as Higgins evidently believed? Or could it be that there was something about his immense size which wouldn't look nat-ural in daylight? Could size be a kind of truck? It-self a ruse? The figure, menacing, looming, weird, had obviously perturbed even the sanguine G-men. Was that intentional?

Could a man, Duff asked himself, who was, say, Duff's own height—two and a half inches over six feet—add the balance? Special shoejs, such as many very short men wore to increase their apparent height, would help. He might wear a wig, to, that increased the size of his head. But the man had been

taller even than that, Duff thought. Stilts would do it—little stilts.

Duff remembered the print in the mud. A shoe, 146

laced over a wooden form from which a steel bar rose to a second shoe, would do it. The steel bar wouldn't have to be very long, either. Nine or ten inches. And if a man so equipped fell over, as he might in a mucky place, the side of his shoe would be printed in the mud, and there would be no ankle for ten inches above it, but only a steel rod which mightn't touch the mud at all. Then there would be left exactly such a print as Duff had seen in the mudbank.

The possible meaning of that, in turn, was clear. He and the FBI had been searching for a giant. But the man they wanted, actually, was perhaps no taller than Duff. Size, and especially vast size, is the most conspicuous of all human characteristics. If a veritable giant was seen entering a building and then even a dozen merely tall men came out, no one would connect the first man with the others.

Almost, then, Duff phoned Higgins. But Higgins was sleeping, and Higgins needed sleep. In a couple more hours he would telephone the G-man. Meanwhile, he would go on thinking, There might be still more that could be dredged up and made to mean something other than what he had supposed, until then.

He tore open a new package of cigarettes, saw how his hand shook and forced himself to be calm again. By and by, it grew faintly light. He realized he had dozed a little when the thwack of

147

the morning paper on the porch made him start. He went downstairs in stocking feet. It was light enough by then to read the headlines:

Orange Bowl Queen Vanishes

Police Search for Miss Eleanor

Yates

Kidnaping Feared Crank Suspected

Duff couldn't wait any longer. He dialed Higgins' number, got a sleepy "Yeah?" and began to talk excitedly. Fifteen minutes later he hung up. He knew that he was close to tears, but only when he heard himself snuffle did he realize that fatigue, humiliation and a sense of incompetence had actually brought tears into his eyes.

About the particles on the warehouse floor, Higgins had said, "Hunh! Interesting! I'll pass it on to New York."

But about the idea that Harry Ellings' entire life had been planned, the G-man was brief and cutting, "Good Lord! We've assumed it was that way for weeks!"

A similar response greeted his theory about the huge man. "Did that just occur to you? We've been on the lookout for anybody of any size for a hell of a while!"

Duff said wretchedly, "I shouldn't have phoned."

148

"Oh, sure. That warehouse hunch is solid. And my alarm will let go in less than an hour, any-how."

Nevertheless, Duff felt disappointed; he felt as he had ever since the beginning, foolish. The FBI and the police knew. They could and did think and act. And he chimed in afterward with his half-baked hunches. Bitterly, he started toward the porch, but he heard Mrs. Yates crying softly, and he went in to try to comfort her.

Cars surrounded the Yates home, parked in the drive and on the lawns—police cars, press and radio cars, Orange Bowl officials' cars and the cars of friends, neighbors, curious strangers. They had accumulated all day.

Mrs. Yates and Duff were obliged to keep telling people that they had no idea where Eleanor might have gone, with whom or whether she could have been kidnaped. Because of the numbers "of people, the shock and the confusion, they had sent Marian and Charles to stay with friends.

Some time after lunch Duff observed that Mrs. Yates was not strong enough to bear both her anxiety and the thronging people. He arranged with the police to get her moved to the home of the friend who had already taken in the youngsters. The police saw to it that neither the reporters nor the merely curious followed the Yates station wagon, and when Duff returned to the house, the crowd was thinning.

Toward late afternoon he was alone. As far as he knew, not even the police or the FBI were keeping watch. The Yates place had served its final purpose where Ellings' colleagues were concerned. And if Eleanor should happen to come back home somehow, he was there. He believed she was dead. So, he was sure, did the FBI. But Duff knew he would not give up hope until it was certain.

He went upstairs and lay down exhaustedly. By and by he realized it was the afternoon of Harry's funeral. They had all forgotten. No matter. He slept because a time comes when no one, whatever his anxiety, can stay awake longer. When he woke up, the sun was setting. He realized he had been dreaming about the events of the past weeks and remembered vaguely a jumble of faces, including the face of Indigo Stacey. He lay thinking about her, and it occurred to him that she represented another of the anomalies he'd sought the night before. Scotty had once said that Indigo had wanted to meet Duff even before their first date. Duff wondered why, as he had wondered at other times. He wasn't the type for whom glamour girls fell on sight. Still, Indigo wasn't an ordinary glamour girl. A White Russian—or at least her parents were that.

He thought now about their history. Had Indigo's father and her father's brother necessarily been loyal to the Czar? Necessarily fled the Bolshevik revolution? Was it possible that a con-

spiracy against America could have been forming back in the days of Lenin and Trotsky? Could Indigo Stacey have had a special reason, related to everything else, for wanting to meet him? Had her "large passion" been an unsuccessful attempt to find out what he knew? Who—and where—was her uncle? Apparently, according to Mrs. Yates, her now-deceased father and her uncle had become successful businessmen.

He phoned the house where the Yateses were staying. He said there was no news, but that he would like to ask Mrs. Yates a question. Her answers were tremulous.

"Uncle?" she repeated perplexedly. "Why, no, Duff. He didn't like Stacey for a name. He's Stanton—a very important person in Miami. On directorates and owns businesses. As a matter of fact, he is a director of the trucking company Harry used to work for."

The telephone directory listed an Ivan L. Stanton, 4300 River Vista Drive, Miami Beach.

Duff walked about in the darkening house. He thought of calling Higgins again and cast the thought aside. Stanton was too well known to be made a sudden object of suspicion. A connection between a young lady's interest in a graduate student and the possibility that a leading businessman was also a criminal syndicalist would probably make Higgins believe Duff had lost the last of his senses. Besides, Eleanor would hardly be any-

where near the Stanton place, even if Stanton was connected with her disappearance and even if she was still alive. An immense underground organization could take the girl to any of a hundred places.

And in that moment Duff had the last of his new ideas. He and the FBI had assumed they were dealing with many members of a secret society—scores, perhaps hundreds. That very assumption had made Higgins marvel that no trace of such a group had been uncovered.

Why, Duff abruptly asked himself, would it take many people? A few could accomplish all that Duff suspected had been done, if they had time enough. At least one would have to be an engineer. But the fewer they were, the better their chance of undiscovered activity. And if one of them owned part of a trucking concern—

Duff went to the barn garage. He backed out the Yates station wagon. There was nothing more he could do at the Yates house. The theory on which he was operating was tenuous, all but incredible, yet he had no other.

Before driving away, he had a protective impulse. He returned to the house and wrote a note which he left on the dining-room table.

Flagler Street was still Yuletide-gaudy in the twilight. Its red and green decorations made a gay tent.

When he stopped for a traffic light, a news-boy intoned, "No trace of missing Bowl Queen!"

Read all about it!" He drove on. Down Biscayne Boulevard, across the Causeway.

The inland passage gleamed with lights from big houses and the lights of Christmas trees. Many homes were strung with colored lights and many palms wore crowns of lights. Boats were tied up at private wharves—speedboats, luxury fishing cruisers, houseboats, yachts. He passed No. 4300, a Spanish residence set back from the street, with a seagoing yacht of its own, brightly lighted trees in its yard and a wall all around.

Duff turned into a side street and went back on foot, furtively. There were no pedestrians. For a moment, as he peered around the ornamental coral entrance posts at the big house, Duff had a feeling of hopelessness. The estate looked civi-lized, secure, and so remote from what tormented him that Duff considered turning back. Then, in the first real confirmation of his frantic weeks, he saw it: a little square of whiteness, of almost lu-minous whiteness, in the shadow. He made as sure as he could that he was not seen, crossed the drive and picked up a woman's folded handkerchief, not dropped on the walk, but tossed, it seemed, to-ward the entrance post. His fingers shook as he saw the initials: E. Y.

He found a rubber tree that overhung the wall and, after a look in each direction, disappeared in its foliage. He dropped onto the lawn. Moving from bush to bush, he reached the big house.

153

The lawn lights intensified the shadows. As long as he didn't expose himself to the red, green, blue and yellow shimmer, they would dazzle anyone looking out of the windows. Duff moved along the wall behind thick crotons.

There were four men in the library, drinking cocktails. Dinner guests, Duff imagined. No women. There were three or four servants in the kitchen and pantries; they, also, were men. At the back of the house, a concrete driveway and a pav-ing-stone walk led to the dock where the yacht was moored. Two decks, about eighty feet long. A motor was running somewhere aboard her; she showed lights.

Duff barely managed to hide himself in time when a rear door opened and a man carried a car-ton of supplies to the ship. The man wore a white coat and Duff heard him speak to someone on board.

"Last load?"

"Yeah."

The yacht—he couldn't see her name—was going to sail soon. He tiptoed into the darkness of overhanging vegetation; his eyes searched the nearby grass and shrubs and planks swiftly, not very expectantly, but with care. When he saw at the base of tree a second square like the one now in his pocket, he smiled, slightly, grimly. Perhaps she had struggled to cover what she had done;

154

perhaps she'd managed it secretively. But she'd left two tiny markers.

He didn't risk retrieving the second one; he was already on the pier, near the yacht. Instead, he walked along the sea wall a short distance, stepped over a short stretch of water and clam-bered aboard the boat near the bow. He could hear men talking in one of the cabins, aft; a smell of cooking came from the galley. He hid behind a lifeboat lashed to the triangle of deck at the bow.

The back door of the big house opened; men came down the walk. Duff had an instant in which he saw with horror a silent foot close beside him before there was a shocking flash and he lost consciousness. ... He was in pain; the moaning sound he heard was his own voice. He was tied and gagged. And he was on a moving ship. He thought for a while that he was blindfolded and then he realized the place where he lay was pitch-dark. There had been a woman in the room because he could smell perfume. Presently he thought it was the kind Eleanor used. The engines of the boat slowed. ' Duff heard voices outside.

"Hello, Coast Guard!"

Thinly, the answer came. "Making a check of outgoing boats, Mr. Stanton!"

"Come aboard! Taking a little party for a cruise!"

155

"No need to board you, Mr. Stanton! Go head!"

The water roughened. Duff knew they were out-ide the bay. At sea. He heard a murmur in the aark and thought it was Eleanor's voice. Ex-citement surged through him. If he could let her Know he was there—that the groaning she must have heard had been his! He tried to make a clearer sound, but the gag

stifled him.

He doubted his senses then. All this was hallu-cination, nightmare. But she continued to mur-mur, and presently he noticed her complaining had a single form. A long moan and two little moans afterward. He moved his mouth in what might have been a near-grin if he had not been gagged. Telegraphy had been a hobby of his, long ago. And he'd taught the Morse code to Charles, Marian and Eleanor. If she was using it, she was signaling his initial: D. He started a se-ries of moans to spell out "Eleanor," but he'd gone only as far as the second *e* when she sig-naled back, "Duff."

So, for minutes, they alternately made sounds. In that time Fle^nor stated, "Heard a noise at sinkhole. Looked. Was grabbed. Brought here. By whom?"

He prepared to reply in the dark, but to his dismay, a third voice spoke, "Very darn ingen-ious" And all the lights went on.

It was a big cabin with two bunks and mod-156

eraistic furnishings. On a tubular chair sat a man of about sixty—tall, gray-haired, wearing a white dinner jacket—one of the men Duff had seen in the house drinking cocktails. Beyond him on the other bunk Duff could see a female knee and the brown dress Eleanor wore.

"I'm Stanton," the man said.

Duff made a sound. Then, realizing Stanton had listened in on their conversation, Duff moaned in code, "Ungag us."

The man bent over Duff. His expression was cold. He had high cheekbones, rather pale gray eyes—features that spelled his Slavic ancestry—features vaguely familiar through newspaper photographs of important Miamians giving par-ties, heading charity drives.

Stanton stared at Duff a moment and then spoke, "I've been waiting for you to come around ever since we cleared the Coast Guard." He paused. "Your—visit—wasn't precisely ex-pected. But we took no chances. You were seen coming over my wall." He turned to Eleanor. "I think you both know why you're here, in a gen-eral way. My yacht is heading for an island in the Bahamas. A small one, uninhabited and far from any others. We won't be spotted there, even from the air, because that island"—he smiled chillily—"has been arranged so that my yacht's hidden when she's in. It has been a transship-ment point for cargo from—another country.

157

Cargo brought here by me. Your interrogation won't begin till we reach that island, a while be-fore daylight. I'm glad we have Miss Yates along. We'd intended to question her. But it will be more effective to use her as a means to get the truth out of you, Bogan."

Duff could feel his muscles freeze. "What truth?" he painfully signaled.

Stanton leaned over him for a moment, brac-ing himself on the far partition for support as the yacht rocked heavily. His face was passive. He might have been talking about the weather, which was warm, clear and breezy. "Through the un-fortunate fact that you got onto Ellings' part in our work, Bogan, my value to my cause has suf-fered." He was silent as, apparently, he thought of his cause. He shrugged. "Ellings believed for some time that he had you—and the FBI—fooled by the device he'd had prepared for just such a meddlesome discovery as you made. But when we found his stratagem hadn't been entirely effec-tive, we had Ellings destroy himself. And went on with our—assignment."

The ship heaved and he balanced again. "You and Miss Yates will also be destroyed. But it is necessary for us to learn, before your deaths, precisely how much information about my activi-ties the FBI has. This will be painful—as painful as certain trained men on board can make it—

158

for you both. We cannot judge whether our work is accomplished and will stand up or whether it must be done over by others, until we have made certain that neither one of you—and you espe-pecially, Bogan—has held anything back. Any-thing. That means the last hours will be—rugged —for you both."

He went out. Minutes later three men carried Duff to another stateroom. Its light was extin-guished.

Sweat-soaked, Duff lay in the darkness, trying to get his mind to work at all. Here and there in American cities the bombs had certainly been planted and were waiting for an unknown zero hour. The FBI, the Army, all intelligent services, surely knew that now. But not at what sites, in what cities.

After torturing and killing Eleanor and him, Stanton would be able to decide whether to flee the country or to go back to his palatial home, his business affairs, his social prominence and his underground activity. What he had to know was whether the FBI had connected him in any way with Ellings or with the gigantic man—evidently Stanton's own disguise—or with the sinister boxes.

Duff clamped his teeth on his gag. He writhed in the ropes that rawly confined him. He thought that the torture had already begun, not with the physical pain of lying there, but with the knowl-

159

edge of what was to happen to the girl. For the rest of his life he was to dream occasionally about that long night of agony.

Toward morning the ship entered calm water, slowed, reversed and touched a dock. Men came for him, blindfolded him and heaved him onto a stretcher. He felt the open air on his face. His bearers walked on planks and then on sand for a little way, and finally down half a dozen steps. A door slammed. He was dumped out on a cement floor. Soon the door opened again and the men moved in once more. He heard Eleanor murmur as she was tipped onto the concrete, and he heard the heavy door shut again. He tried to communi-cate with her as he had before, and was fright-ened because he got no response. She had prob-ably fainted.

Nearby, in an adjoining room or cell, he heard steps, grunts, thumpings, as men moved objects about. A sick stretch of time went by and then the door came open, clanged shut. Hands ripped his blindfold away. He saw plain chairs, bare tables, two kerosene lamps, four men including Stanton, Eleanor's form on the floor and four bare walls. An underground storage room on the island, probably camouflaged above, Duff thought.

"Start with the girl," Stanton said to his men. "She's out," he added, after shaking her. "Or pre-tending." He gave her a terrific slap—a slap that

160

knotted Duff's nerves. "Out," he said. "Open up the case. Get the ammonia."

One of the men fiddled in a case that Duff could not see. He smelled ammonia. Eleanor muttered.

Someone took the gag from Duff's mouth. He worked his jaws and tried to lick his lips with a dry, numb tongue.

Stanton came to him, stood over him, suddenly kicked him. "All right. Start talking. From the be-ginning, and tell everything you know. The first run through it, we won't hurt you—unless you hold out."

Duff found that he could hardly speak at all. They poured a glass of water and gave it to him. Then a second. And he began to tell them the now-overfamiliar story, starting with the first in-stant of suspicion.

He talked slowly, carefully, using time, yet without any real hope that delay would help. He told nearly all the truth because he knew that if they began to do to Eleanor such things as he had read they did, he would try to stop them with the truth anyway—or with lies or by any other method. If he had been alone, he would have held out to the end or as near the end as his sanity lasted.

There was nothing in anything Duff knew to suggest that Higgins had traced a connection to Stanton. And only one way Higgins might learn. That Stanton was a director of the trucking com-

161

pany would seem, to the FBI man, irrelevant. Some big shot had to own it—some man exactly like Stanton. That Harry Ellings and Stanton had been allied in evil would not occur to any reason-able person.

Duff finished.

"That's it?" Stanton asked. "All?"

"All."

Stanton turned to a corner of the room that Duff couldn't see. "Got that water boiling?"

Duff said, "I couldn't add anything if you tore us both apart inch by inch! You must know that! Why not simply—kill us both?"

Stanton smiled a little. "Just to be certain. And besides, I owe you something special. Because of you, they'll find the one in New York!"

Duff began to pray.

And the door opened. Daylight showed.

"Boss!" a scared voice called.

"Hold it!"

Stanton left. He did not return. Ten minutes later the door opened and a man shouted, "All out! Taking off! Leave 'em lay! A damn Coast Guard plane went over twice!"

Time passed. Duff thought he heard the ships engines. Then silence.

A while after that the chamber was filled with reddish light, a thunderous blast. A pressure wave banged Duff against the floor. The concrete walls cracked. Sand gushed into the room. It

162

turned furnace-hot. He thought he was dying and realized, seconds later, that he could see sunlight in the swirling, wrecked chamber.

He rolled across the floor. He got his arms up against a sharp edge of rent metal. It took fifteen or twenty choking minutes to free his hands, as long again to untie his legs. Then he crawled to Eleanor. She was half covered with sand and her nose bled.

They began digging feebly with bits of debris. Before long they had made a way out. The room where they had been was under the island sand. Around them now were barren dunes and coral escarpments, blue sea and blinding sun. In front, in the painful sunshine, they saw a tall stand of mangrove and the well-hidden mooring where the yacht had been tied. They looked out to sea and spotted the yacht, hull down.

The island was small—not a mile around—and except for the concealed pier, the now-smoking storage cellars, a few palms, patches of weed and water birds, there was nothing but tropical ocean. Eleanor stood with him for a moment and then collapsed.

Duff carried her away from the wreckage of the underground chambers. "More dynamite might go off." It was the first thing he had said.

He took her down the dunes to the beach and they washed in the limpid, warm salt water. Eleanor had a spell of shuddering and sobbing. He

163

held her in his arms until she had mastered the spasm.

"What happened? Where is this?"

Duff shook his head. "Bahamas. It was their base. A Coast Guard plane came by twice. Might have been an accident. But probably Higgins is close to the answer. I left a note, anyhow! So they beat it. Blew up the works. But they'd built that cellar like a fort, luckily for us! The blast didn't bring the ceiling down—which they probably presumed it would. Just caved the walls some."

"Bury us?" she said in a sore-throat tone. "Alive?"

"Would they have cared which way?" The wind blew on them. The sun shone. "We'll have to figure out how to get along here till somebody comes for us or till we can signal a boat going by," he said.

"Let's find some shade. We'll sunburn."

They moved to the shade of three coconut palms. The yacht was gradually lost on the blue emptiness of the Gulf Stream. For a while they lay on the sand, silent, resting.

Then Eleanor cried, "Look, Duff! Look!"

He barely glanced toward the sea. Then he threw himself on top of her and forced her to lie face-down on the earth. She gasped, struggled.

"Lie still!" he ordered.

A wave of pressure eventually swept the is-

land, bending the trees; it was accompanied by an immense rumble. Only after that did Duff sit up. Far out on the sea a cloud made unforgettable by the news pictures rose toward the blue zenith. A many-hued, mushroom-shaped cloud with fire flashes eddying enormously in its midst.

"Atom bomb," she whispered.

Duff spoke, too exhausted for emotion and yet unable to stop the working of his mind "Maybe they destroyed themselves that way. Maybe they thought they—and it—would be captured. Maybe an

accident. They could have got too many cases of uranium too close together—a last one, dropped down through a hatch. That might have done it."

For perhaps an hour they watched the cloud rise, change shape in the strong winds aloft, and start to dissipate.

"Somebody else," Duff had said, "should have seen it. Though there are darn few ships in these parts, I imagine." His eyes moved from the distant, separating clouds to the beach; they followed its curve to the Bahama Banks, a glittering, empty infinitude of shallow sea. "Anyhow, it'll show up on plenty of instruments and a slew of people will be down here, looking, pretty soon."

Eleanor said, "Was it close enough to—to hurt us?"

He stared at her, then smiled, and found a lump coming in his throat. "Lord," he mur-

165

mured, "why didn't you ask that before? No. Too far away. The radiation here couldn't have amounted to anything."

The girl smiled back. "Glad I had a physicist along to tell me."

* * *

The first half of the Orange Bowl game ended in the usual pandemonium. Teams trotted from the field and were replaced by bands in red uniforms, in blue, in green, in gold and in the white of the University of Miami. Thousands of colored balloons rose in the sky. The combined bands began to play. Floats moved sedately from the corners of the stadium and paraded around the field. One of these—an immense replica of an orange—proceeded to the center of the field and opened magically. The Orange Bowl Queen stood inside it, and girls on the floats, pretty girls in bathing suits, began to throw real oranges to the crowd. The governors of three states marched forward with what the program called "a retinue of beauty" to crown the queen.

Standing in her robes, smiling, waving, Eleanor felt happy. She was very tired, but everything would soon be over.

In the Yates box, Duff grinned at the yelling of Marian and the shrill whistling of Charles. He handed a pair of borrowed field glasses to Mrs. Yates, who faced her wheel chair to see every detail of the coronation.

166

Duff gazed at Eleanor, standing straight and lovely, as he mused on the recent, dramatic past. They had been discovered on the island by a Coast Guard plane which flew in to investigate. A second plane had taken them back to Miami, where they had landed secretly. Eleanor had given out the story that she had suffered a "loss of memory" due to "exhaustion and an accidental fall" and spent two nights with "a friend in Fort Lauderdale." Nothing about kidnaping, about enemy agents, about a mushroom cloud rising where a boat had vanished. That would not become public, Duff reflected, until it was all over.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see the grinning face of Scotty Smythe. "Duff, old boy, can you come over to our box for a few minutes? Dad and mother are there. And a couple of other people who want to see you."

Out on the sunlit field the coronation ended. Eleanor's float led a circling parade to the jubilant blaring of bands. Duff followed Scotty along an aisle of the jam-packed stadium. He greeted the Smythe family happily, and found himself, to his surprise, shaking hands with General Baines, and then with a physicist he had always wanted to meet, a Doctor Adamas who was a member of the Atomic Energy Commission.

The general presently murmured to Duff, "Adamas and I actually came down to see you."

"Me!"

167

"We both are flying back to Washington as soon as possible after this dandy game. If you could spare us a few minutes now, for a stroll outside—"

It was there, between the stadium walls and the parked cars, that Duff got the shock of his life. He walked along slowly with the general and the scientist.

The soldier did most of the talking. "No use, Bogan, of my telling you what the country owes you. We've

dug out that bomb in New York. One in Philadelphia. Two in Washington. Soon have them all. The Stacey woman talked."

"I should have figured her out sooner," Duff said, with a self-depreciatory shake of his head. "And the country owes Scotty Symthe far more than me. After all, if he hadn't driven over to the Yateses' to help me, and if he hadn't come in when nobody answered his knock, he'd never have found my note or phoned Higgins where I'd gone, and why. The search for the yacht wouldn't have started." Duff shuddered slightly. "They'd have got away with the whole thing!"

"There is nothing tangible we can do for young Smythe," the general replied, grinning at the disclaimer. "His father, my good friend, is amply endowed with worldly goods. In fact, Bogan, the father thinks your influence has made a serious man out of a rather featherbrained boy."

"Scotty was always a man," Duff answered defensively. "He just liked to look frivolous."

168

"The point is," Adamas said dryly, "you've done a very great, very brave and very brilliant service to your country, and one for which there cannot be, at this time, any public reward whatever."

Duff laughed. "Reward? Why should I get a reward? Anybody would have done what I did— and better. If I hadn't been so dumb—"

The general's mouth dropped open and snapped shut. The scientist coughed, cleared his throat and looked closely at the trunk of a nearby palm. And he spoke. "We've gone over your records, Bogan. The FBI has quite a dossier. Besides be-ing a twenty-one-carat fool for danger, you're a good man in the field. My field. Our field. A certain nuclear project is being moved down here under old Slocum. We'd like you to work on it as you continue your studies. We've fixed it so the work itself will contribute toward a doctorate."

Duff had been trying to say he'd be glad to work on any project the Atomic Energy Commission thought he was worthy of. But the mention of an opportunity to get his final degree made him stand still. Tears came in his eyes.

"D-d-don't deserve anything of the sort," he stammered.

General Baines snorted, "Damn it, man! Stop the modesty! Surely you realize what you saved the country from!"

"A lot of people besides me—" 169

'Fiddlesticks! Rubbish! You can continue your studies here. Take your M.A. Then your Ph.D. And have a job meanwhile. It will pay you seven fifty a month, Bogan, and I have orders from the President of the United States—who wants to shake your hand someday, incidentally— that you're to accept."

A roar came from inside the stadium as the opposing teams returned to the field. The scientist, after a look at Duff, took the general's arm. "Let's watch the kickoff."

Duff couldn't speak. When he was able to control his emotions, he walked back into the frenzied stadium and joined the Yates family. He saw the game, and didn't see it. He was thinking that he was a rich man now. For a minute he had imagined that "seven fifty" a month had meant seven dollars and a half. Then he knew. He could rent Harry's room and they wouldn't need to find another boarder. He could put in some improvements, like an electric stove. By and by he'd be a doctor of philosophy, an atomic scientist. Miami made a touchdown and he was only dimly aware—

After the sun set and as the first unimportant-looking buds of the night-blooming jasmine commenced to explode their honey-sweet perfume into the twilight, Duff sat alone beside his lily pool. They'd just come home from the game. He hadn't told the Yateses, yet, about his reward; he

170

was afraid, still, that he'd break up—maybe blubber.

Eleanor had been escorted home, minutes before. He expected she would leave again, soon, for another dinner party.

Charles kicked open the front screen. "Hey, Duff! Kitchen faucet's leaking!"

The homely need somehow bolstered Duff. He laughed. "Washer coming up!" He had shut off the water when Eleanor appeared—in a house dress.

"I thought—"

She read the thought. "I begged off, Duff. After all, I did say I'd been ill. I'm cooking tonight— thank heaven! No more Cinderella! The coach is a punkin again and the horses are mice. And am I happy about that!"

Duff nodded vaguely. He felt that women were impossible to understand. He tinkered with the faucet and she came close, watching him. There was a way her hair curved at the nape of her neck. There was a certain shape of her eyes and a special light in them, a topaz light. A warmth and a femi-ninity about her. She had lovely lips. And he knew the girl very well—though not, perhaps, well enough to do what he did, which was to put down the wrench, take her in his arms and kiss her, hard. Alarmed afterward, he let go. "I'm sorry! I couldn't help it! I'm still distraught —judgment's shot!"

171

Her eyes shone. "Sure is! You let go. Why?"

Duff turned away a little. "I've tried to be a brotherly kind of a guy, Eleanor. It's a beam I can't entirely stay on. But after all, your type of man is some really elegant person, like Scotty."

"Scotty is pretty elegant," she answered very softly. "He had a big crush on me. I had to kind of bust it up—pretend I was crazy about six other lads. He caught on. I mean, he caught on to who I really did care for. So he pitched in to help that guy. It's like Scotty."

Duff nodded and his blue eyes were never more vague, more forlorn. "Then there is some-body."

Her first words of love were, "What does a girl have to do in the case of scientists—hire a marriage broker? You dope! You oaf! You nitwit! You precious dumbbell!"

Marian, who had come quietly through **the** door, yelled, "Mother! Duff and El are having a quarrel!"

Her big sister ignored the interruption **and** went on talking to Duff in a strange voice, "Yes, there's somebody! Somebody who ought **to find** out—seeing I phone all over the country to get him when I'm in trouble! Seeing how jealous I am about his dating another girl! Somebody I've practically been married to for a year and a half! At least, I've had him around, like a husband. And we've had all the trials and tribulations and

172

domestic problems and discomforts and the scrimping and misery and work of marriage, to-gether.

Enough to know for sure we could make a swell team! And none of the joy, except a sort of—distant companionship."

"Mother," Marian bawled jubilantly, "I was wrong! They're necking!" She added in mock horror, "You better come out here and chaperon!"

Eleanor drew away a little and said, "I've loved you, you lug, since the day you came stam-mering in here, towering and shuffling, polite and uneasy, asking for a place to board that was 'rea-sonable'!

Everything at the Yateses' is reasonable, Duff—even poor—and maybe we're crazy if we get married, the way it is. But we'll make out. I know it!"

"About that," he said, and gulped, "maybe I ought to tell you. I just got a job."

THE END