
OF SECRECY AND THE PILE¹²

By Laura Fermi

The period of great secrecy in our life started when we moved to Chicago. Enrico walked to work every morning. Not to the physics building, nor simply to the "lab," but to the "Met. Lab," the Metallurgical Laboratory. Everything was top secret there. I was told one single secret: there were no metallurgists at the Metallurgical Laboratory. Even this piece of information was not to be divulged. As a matter of fact, the less I talked, the better; the fewer people I saw outside the group working at the Met. Lab., the wiser I would be.

In the fall, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Compton—I was to learn later that he was in charge of the Metallurgical Project—gave a series of parties for newcomers at the Metallurgical Laboratory. Newcomers were by then so numerous that not even in Ida Noyes Hall, the students' recreation hall, was there a room large enough to seat them all at once; so they were invited in shifts. At each of these parties the English film *Next of Kin* was shown. It depicted in dark tones the consequences of negligence and carelessness. A briefcase laid down on the floor in a public place is stolen by a spy. English military plans become known to the enemy. Bombardments, destruction of civilian homes, and an unnecessary high toll of lives on the fighting front are the result.

After the film there was no need for words.

Willingly we accepted the hint and confined our social activities to the group of "metallurgists." Its always expanding size provided ample possibilities of choice; besides, most of them were congenial, as was to be expected, for they were scientists.

The nonworking wives wished, quite understandably, to do something for the war effort. One of the possible activities along this line was to help entertain the armed forces at the USO. I preferred to sew for the Red Cross or to work as a volunteer in the hospital of the university, and to save my social capacities for the people at the Met. Lab., who had not the benefit of the USO.

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