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Background to Danger

ERIC AMBLER

BACKGROUND TO DANGER

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BACKGROUND TO DANGER

Eric Ambler was born in London in 1909. Before turning to writing full-time, he worked at an engineering firm and wrote copy for an advertising agency. His first novel was published in 1936. During the course of his career, Ambler was awarded two Gold Daggers, one Silver Dagger, and a Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain, named Grand Master by the Mystery Writers Association of America, and made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth. In addition to his novels, Ambler wrote a number of screenplays, including *A Night to Remember* and *The Cruel Sea*, which won him an Oscar nomination. Eric Ambler died in 1998.

Eric Ambler

BACKGROUND

to

DANGER



VINTAGE CRIME/BLACK LIZARD

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“To-day, with Europe assuming the appearance of an armed camp in which an incident, unimportant in itself, would be sufficient to ignite a conflagration that would consume Europe and perhaps spread to other quarters of the globe: to-day, when national security in Europe and perhaps elsewhere, depends primarily upon the strength and effectiveness of a nation’s armed forces, the question of supply of raw materials and particularly supply of petroleum is of the first importance.”

—*World Petroleum.*

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GRACECHURCH STREET

ONE sunny morning in July, Mr. Joseph Balterghen's blue Rolls-Royce oozed silently away from the pavement in Berkeley Square, slid across Piccadilly into St. James's, and sped soft eastward towards the City of London.

Mr. Balterghen was a very small man and, as his Rolls-Royce was a very large car, the few persons waiting for buses on the north side of Trafalgar Square would have had to have craned their necks to see him. None of them troubled to do so. This was a pity, for, while Mr. Balterghen was anything but pleasing to the eye, he was chairman of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum and of fifteen other companies and a director of thirty more, including one bank. In the words of those who write bank references, he was "highly respectable."

That the phrase had nothing to do with church attendances, ten-o'clock bedtimes and nice rolled umbrellas was made obvious by his face. A disgruntled business associate had once described it as looking like "a bunch of putty-coloured grapes with some of the crevices filled in." He should have added that the grapes were also very shrivelled and that a black toothbrush moustache sprouted surrealistically from the lower part of the bunch.

As his car glided down Northumberland Avenue, Mr. Balterghen gnawed thoughtfully at this moustache. The chauffeur, catching a glimpse of this in the driving mirror, muttered "the perisher's goin' to a board meetin'," opened out along the Embankment, and did not look in the driving mirror again until he pulled up outside the new offices of the Pan-Eurasian Petroleum Company in Gracechurch Street.

Inside the building, Mr. Balterghen stopped gnawing his moustache, set his face in the impassive glare he reserved for business hours, and was shot up to the sixth floor in a chromium-plated lift. Then he went to his office.

To Mr. Balterghen's second secretary, his master's office was an evergreen source of wonder. Blundell had been taken into Pan-Eurasian under Mr. Balterghen's "Recruiting-from-the-Universities" plan and was one of the few bewildered survivors of the subsequent "Experience-not-Education" purge. "Balterghen's room," he had once told his wife, "is more like a harlot's parlour than an office. He's got a red Turkey carpet and stippled green walls, a Second Empire desk and a Chinese lacquer cabinet, a neo-Byzantine book-case and several baroque chairs plus a Drage-Aztec cocktail cabinet that flies apart and exposes all the bottles and things inside when you press the button. Even if you didn't know from experience what a complete wart the man is, that room would tell you."

The first thing Mr. Balterghen did on that sunny July morning was to operate his cocktail cabinet. From it he took a large bottle of stomach powder and mixed himself a draught. Then he lit a cigar to take the taste away and rang the fifth bell along on the Second Empire desk. After a short interval, Blundell came in.

"What time was the meeting called for, Blundell?"

Mr. Balterghen spoke English as though he had a hot potato in his mouth.

"Eleven, Mr. Balterghen."

"It's five to now; are the other directors here?"

"All except Lord Welterfield."

"We'll begin without his lordship."

"Very well, Mr. Balterghen. I'll tell Mr. Wilson. Here are your notes."

"Put them down there. Wait a minute. If a gentleman named Colonel Robinson calls for me about twelve forty-five, I don't want him shown in here to wait. Put him in a vacant office on the floor below. You understand? I don't want him shown up here."

"Yes, Mr. Balterghen."

He went out.

At eleven two precisely, the board of directors of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum began the meeting.

The agenda that day was tackled with a certain amount of gusto. All knew that there was only one really interesting item on it, but that titbit had been placed last. When Lord Welterfield arrived at a quarter to twelve his profuse apologies were acknowledged hurriedly. It did not, it was clear, matter whether Lord Welterfield was present or not.

"I see," said Mr. Balterghen at last, "that the next item on the agenda concerns the Rumanian negotiations."

He said it with an air of slight surprise that deceived nobody. The board settled itself in its chairs. The chairman continued:

"I don't think Lord Welterfield was present at the first meeting we held on this subject, so I think that I had better run over the few main points that were discussed then. You will remember that, in nineteen twenty-two, the Company obtained a drilling concession from the Rumanian Government. That concession covered a tract of land east of Jassi which was believed at the time to be rich oil country. You will also remember that the concession turned out to be a failure from the company's point of view. In the years nineteen twenty-three and nineteen twenty-four only five thousand barrels were produced and early in nineteen twenty-five the most promising well ceased producing. Our geologists reported unfavorably on the prospect of striking commercially useful deposits and the concession was, to all intents and purposes, written off as a dead loss. At the time, this did not matter very much as our subsidiaries in Venezuela, Mexico and the Near East were producing profitably, and, for that matter, still are."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"But," continued Mr. Balterghen, "the developments in the political situation in Europe during nineteen thirty-five and thirty-six have suggested that we should look once again in the direction of Rumania. The sanctions against Italy taught Mussolini one thing at least—the Italian could not safely depend for her supplies of oil on the Caribbean. Iran and Iraq were in the hands of the British. Russia was in the hands of the Soviets. The Italian fleet was being burning, the big Italian air force would be helpless faced with an oil shortage; so would the mechanised army. There was only one solution—Rumania. At the moment Italy is taking large quantities of Rumanian oil. She will take more. Her new armament programme—and I speak from personal knowledge—is based less on further increases in man-power than on the addition of submarines to her navy, heavy bombers to her air force, and a new kind of tank to her army. That is important, for in all three cases"—he tapped a stubby finger on the table—"in all three cases Diesel engines are being used."

The meeting looked impressed. The chairman licked his lips and went on.

"I did not have to explain to you gentlemen that here was worthwhile business. Lord Welterfield will, I feel sure, see the point immediately. Two months ago we made representations to the Rumanian Government. We asked that the existing concessions should be revised. We told them that we were ready to pay and pay handsomely. All that was required was a fair share of the oil lands at present divided between our competitors. Our agents in Bucharest approached the right people. Steps were taken—their nature unimportant to this meeting—to ensure a favourable reception of our proposals in Governmental circles. It was arranged that at the November session of the Rumanian Chamber of Deputies a responsible leader would table our proposals for concession revision as a necessary reform—as, of course, it is."

The meeting signified its approval of this sentiment.

"Ten days ago," added Mr. Balterghen calmly, "I received news that at the November session, concession reform would be defeated."

For a moment there was dead silence. Then everyone began to talk at once. The chairman held up his hand.

"I can appreciate your feelings, gentlemen," he said amiably; "they are much the same as were my own when I was informed. But allow me to give you the reasons for this setback. I would like to say, at the outset, that no blame attaches to our agents in Rumania. They have done their work admirably. The failure has resulted from one thing and one thing only—a scurrilous article published in Bucharest." He produced a battered newspaper from the folds in front of him and held it up. "This is the sheet. It is called—I translate freely—*The Workers' People* and it is published by the United Socialist Party of Rumania."

"Reds!" said Lord Welterfield violently.

"Actually," said Mr. Balterghen, "the United Socialists are not affiliated to the Communist International; but they are, I agree, very much of the Left."

"Same thing," snapped Lord Welterfield.

"However," went on the chairman, "I don't suppose any of you gentlemen read Rumanian. I do; so I propose to read to you one or two extracts from the article. It is entitled, 'The Vultures Gather,' and after a rather wordy preamble on the subject of capitalist intrigue gets down to business. Who, it asks, are the directors of the Pan-Eurasian Petroleum Company? The question is rhetorical, for it goes on, I'm afraid, to give our names supplemented by a series of biographies which are such obvious lies that I will not trouble to translate them."

"What," said Lord Welterfield, incautiously, "do the blackguards say about me?"

Mr. Balterghen glanced at the paper.

"Lord Welterfield," he read, "colliery owner and millionaire. Famous for his patronage of sport. Less well-known as the man who employed *agents provocateurs* to provoke a riot in a colliery town during a strike, and for his numerous offences against the Factory Acts."

"Lies!" shouted Lord Welterfield shrilly; "it was never proved who employed the men. I absolutely deny it!"

The chairman sighed.

"Exactly, Lord Welterfield, we are agreed that the entire article is socialist propaganda. I assume, gentlemen, that we can take this portion as read?"

There were hasty murmurs of assent.

“Very well. It goes on: ‘There is a movement afoot to effect sweeping concession reform

What exactly is meant by reform in this case? Simply, that the Government is asked to break its contracts with existing oil *concessionnaires* in order that the Pan-Eurasian Petroleum Company can have the lion’s share of the increasing trade with Italy. Now there are three unsavoury aspects of this business. The first is that there has evidently been wholesale bribery in Governmental circles—there can be no other explanation of this sudden desire for revision. The second is the now familiar spectacle of foreign capitalist exploiters meddling with the destinies of the Rumanian people. The third is the obvious dangers of such a revision. The Pan-Eurasian Company probably has allies amongst the British and American interests already in our country; but what of the other nations? Nicholas Titulescu, manœuvred from office and poisoned by the Fascist Iron Guard, is no longer here to protect our interests. But the people must fight on without him. Our foreign alliances are too valuable to be jeopardised by corrupt officials and capitalist pawns ...’ The article,” continued Mr. Balterghen, “lapses here into mere abuse. The entire story is, of course, a flagrant distortion of the truth of the case. We are business men and we are anxious to do business with the Rumanian Government. We are not interested in politics.”

There were several “hear-hears.”

“All the same,” went on the chairman, “the article has caused us serious inconvenience. The paper was suppressed and its offices were destroyed by a band of youths armed with hand grenades, but too late to prevent wide distribution of the article. The public prosecutor has been compelled to charge several of our friends in the Government with corrupt practices. Public interest has been aroused, and, though Concession Reform is tabled, it will not be supported.”

A stout man at the other end of the table cleared his throat loudly.

“Then we can’t do anything so far as I can see.”

“On the contrary, Sir James,” said Mr. Balterghen, “we can do a great deal. I have been anticipating the confidence of the meeting, retained the services of a man with considerable experience in matters of this sort. He has worked for me before. His services will be expensive, but I think I can safely say that the results will warrant the expenditure.”

“What’s he going to do?” wheezed the stout man facetiously; “shoot the socialists down with a whiff of grape-shot, eh?”

The meeting laughed heartily and felt a little better.

Mr. Balterghen twisted his lips slightly. It was his way of smiling.

“Perhaps such extreme measures won’t be necessary. The man in question could, I suppose, best be described as a propagandist.”

“Well,” said Lord Welterfield, “as long as the fellow isn’t a Red, he can call himself anything he likes as far as I’m concerned.”

“Then, gentlemen, I take it that I have your permission to deal with this man. I should like to make it clear, however, that, for the moment, I propose to keep the nature of the measures to be taken absolutely confidential.”

The meeting looked knowing, declared that it had every confidence in the chairman’s judgment on the matter in hand, and, after a few formalities, dispersed weightily to luncheon.

Mr. Balterghen returned to his office. Blundell followed him in.

“Colonel Robinson is waiting in room 542, Mr. Balterghen. Shall I show you the way?”

They went down in the lift and walked along a corridor.

“Here, sir.”

Mr. Balterghen opened the door and went in. Blundell heard his employer say “Ah, Stefan” and noticed that Colonel Robinson’s arm seemed to be a trifle stiff at the elbow as he shook hands. Then they began talking in a language he did not recognise. It sounded like a cross between Russian and Italian.

“Colonel Robinson my foot!” said Blundell to his wife that evening. “If that fellow’s name is Robinson, then I’m Hitler. Salt, please.”

LINZ TRAIN

WITH a thick woollen scarf wound twice round his neck, his shoulders hunched and his hands thrust deep in his overcoat pockets, Kenton waited at Nuremberg for the Frankfurt-Linz train. An icy November wind blustered through the almost deserted station, swinging the enamel reflectors and causing mad shadows to dance on the platform. He shivered and, leaving his suitcase, started to walk up and down in the lee of a small station building.

A thin, intelligent-looking man, Kenton gave the impression of being older than his thirty years. It was, perhaps, the mouth. There was a pleasant quality of humour combined with discretion in the rather full lips. He looked more like an American than an Englishman and was actually neither. His father had come from Belfast, his mother from a Breton family living in Lille.

As he paced the Nuremberg platform that night, his self-contempt increased with the numbness of his feet. It was not, he told himself, as if he enjoyed gambling. It bored him; but he had in him that unhappy quality of recklessness that decrees that when the possessor once starts to gamble he shall go on until all the money in his pocket has gone. It had happened to Kenton before; but as he had always been a sufferer from one of the two principal diseases of newspapermen, lack of money—the other is cirrhosis of the liver—it had not mattered much. Now, however, it was more serious, for, in his pocket that day, he had been carrying his entire fortune, four hundred odd marks.

Kenton was accounted a good journalist. It was not that he possessed the miraculous nose for news that detects the visiting film star behind the dark glasses and dirty mackintosh. His qualifications were of a different order.

Most foreign news comes from the permanent correspondents of individual papers and the agency men. The free-lance abroad does not, as a rule, stand a very great chance against them. Kenton, however, had three important assets: the ability to learn foreign idiom quickly and to speak it with an un-English accent, a very sound knowledge of European politics, and a quick and shrewd judgment of news values. The first was the most valuable. The majority of English men and women working abroad speak the language of the country fluently. Very few speak it as it should be spoken. Kenton was one of those who did. That advantage made the difference between getting and not getting an occasional crumb of exclusive news.

It had been in search of such a crumb that he had come to Nuremberg. Some of the high Nazi officials were gathered together, and it had been rumoured that important decisions were to be made. Nobody had known what the decisions were about; but they were almost certain to be unpleasant and, therefore, news.

Ninety per cent of political reporting consists of waiting for conferences to end. The time usually passed in a bar. At Nuremberg it was the Kaiserhof. When Kenton had arrived the

had been several correspondents he knew already installed. Among them was the Havas Agency man, a Pole, whom he liked. It had been this Pole who had produced the poker-dice.

Kenton had lost steadily from the first.

Poker-dice is not a good game for those who don't know when to stop, for it combines the most dangerous aspects of poker with the simplicity of dice. Large amounts of money can thus be lost, and won, quickly and effortlessly.

By the time it had been learnt that the conference would issue no press *communiqué* that day, but resume the sitting on the morrow, Kenton had just five *Pfennige* left in his pocket. He had explained the situation to the other three players and, amid murmurs of regret and goodwill, drinks were called for. Over them, he had taken the opportunity to point out that the bankruptcy was merely temporary and that he possessed funds in Vienna. All that remained, he had added, was to get to Vienna. The Havas man had promptly volunteered a hundred marks. Feeling several sorts of worm, Kenton had accepted it as gracefully as possible, ordered and paid for another round of drinks, and left soon after for the station. There he had found that the only through train to Vienna that night carried first and second *luxe* only. If *mein Herr* wished to go third class there was a slow train that went as far as Linz in Upper Austria, where he could change for Vienna. He had resigned himself to waiting for the Linz train.

He had been waiting for three-quarters of an hour when the Night Orient Express from Ostend came in, flecked with melting snow. Behind the steamy windows of the coaches braided waiters hurried towards the first-class restaurant car. He heard the clatter of dishes and the clink of glasses. From where he stood out of the wind he could see a destination board on the side of one of the sleeping-cars—Wien, Buda-Pesth, Belgrade, Sofia, Istanbul. The Orient Express looked warm and luxurious inside and he was glad when it moved out. At that moment it seemed to epitomise all the security and comfort—bodily, financial and gastronomic—that he craved. He wallowed in self-pity.

It would not have been so bad if his jaunty claim to funds in Vienna had been founded on fact; but it was not. He had no money whatever in Vienna. He was going there with the faint hope that a Jewish instrument maker he knew would lend him some. Kenton had been able to help him get his family out of Munich in the bad days of 1934 and the instrument maker had been grateful. But, for all Kenton knew, his old friend might have left Vienna. Or he might have no money to lend. That, Kenton told himself, would be far worse. He would have to explain that it didn't matter at all really, and the little man would feel miserable. Jews were sensitive about such things. Still, it was his one chance, and in any case, he couldn't be worse off in Vienna than he was in Nuremberg.

He dug his fists deeper into his overcoat pockets. After all, he had been broke before—never always through his own folly either—and invariably something had turned up to help him. Sometimes it had been a good news story, sometimes an unexpected cheque from his New York agent for second rights on a long-forgotten article. Once he had been at the Sofka railway station when the King of the Bulgars had left for a destination unknown. The chance remark of a ticket inspector to a German commercial traveller had sent him scurrying to the telephone with the first news of a projected meeting between Boris and Carol. Perhaps Hitler would be on the Linz train on his way to meet the leader of the Austrian Social Democrats. The idea entertained him and he amused himself by sketching in the events that might render

that fantastic encounter feasible. By the time the Linz train arrived he was feeling almost cheerful.

It was practically empty and he had a compartment to himself. The seats were hard, but not so hard as Nuremberg platform. He slung his suitcase on to the rack, wedged himself in a corner and went to sleep.

The cold woke him as the train was pulling out of Ratisbon. Another passenger had entered the compartment and opened the window an inch. The stream of icy air mixed with smoke from the engine completed what lack of food and the hardness of the seat had started. Suddenly, he was wide awake, cold, stiff, hungry and wretched. All the artificial optimism he had so painstakingly acquired had gone. For the first time he was conscious of the true seriousness of his position.

If Rosen wasn't in Vienna, what exactly was his next move? He could, of course, wire home to a paper for money; but they would probably refuse him. His contributions were of necessity spasmodic, and if he preferred running round as a free-lance abroad to a nice steady job doing police-court news in London, that was his own affair. Gloomily, he searched his mind for information on the subject of the Consular Service. What were the qualifications for becoming a "Distressed British Citizen"? An English sailor he had once met had spoken contemptuously of a "cargo of D.B.C.s" loaded at Cape Town. He saw himself consigned, with a label round his neck, carriage paid from Vienna to London. Looking round for something else to think about, he glanced at his fellow passenger.

Kenton had travelled on Continental trains long enough to regard anyone who wanted the window open, even the merest fraction, with some suspicion. The author of this window-opening outrage was small and very dark. His face was narrow and he had the kind of jaw that should be shaved twice a day, but isn't. He wore a dirty starched collar with a huge green flowered tie and a crumpled dark-striped suit. On his knees rested a limp American cloth attaché-case from which he was extracting paper bags containing sausage and bread. A bottle of Vichy water stood propped against the back of the seat beside him.

His eyes, dark brown and lustrous, met Kenton's. He waved a piece of sausage at the open window.

"Please?"

Kenton nodded. The other filled his mouth with sausage.

"Good. I prefer to travel *à l'anglaise*."

He munched. A thought seemed to strike him. He indicated the attaché-case.

"Please, you will accept some sausage?"

The automatic refusal that rose to Kenton's lips died there. He was hungry.

"It's very good of you. Thank you."

He was passed a piece of sausage and a hunk of bread. The sausage was impregnated with garlic and he enjoyed it. His companion plied him with more. Kenton accepted it gratefully. The brown-eyed man crammed some bread into his mouth, saturated it with a draught of Vichy, and began to talk about his stomach.

"Doctors are fools. You would not think to look at me, to see me eating with you now, though two years ago the doctors told me that I must have an operation for ulcers of the duodenum. It is true. I have a stomach of iron"—he thumped it to prove the point and gurgitated violently—"but it is thanks to no doctors. I tell you they are fools. They wish only to put you

to the knife, to cut and probe and pry. But I said no. No prying and probing into me, my friends; I have a better way. They ask me what it is, but I laugh. I am not one to be tricked into telling such things to prying doctors. But you are no doctor and I will tell you. *Pasta* is the secret. Nothing but *pasta*. I ate nothing but *pasta* for six months and I am cured. I am not a prying Italian, but I tell you *pasta* is good for the stomach. *Maccheroni, fettucine, tagliatelli, spaghetti*, they are all the same; all are *pasta* and all good for the stomach."

He continued in praise of flour and water, and Kenton's face must have revealed his wandering attention, for the owner of the iron stomach broke off suddenly and announced that he would sleep.

"Please to wake me," he added, "when we approach the frontier."

He took off his hat, replaced it with a copy of the *Völkischer Beobachter* to protect his head from the smuts and, curling up on the seat, seemed to go to sleep. Kenton went outside to smoke.

It was ten-thirty by his watch and he estimated that another hour should see him at Passau. As he crushed out his cigarette he noticed that he was no longer alone in the corridor. A few compartments down a man was leaning on the rail, gazing out at the distant lights of a Bavarian village. Kenton had the impression that the man had that second turned his head and had been watching him. Then the man started walking towards him. Kenton noticed that he glanced in each compartment as he passed it and that he had small dull eyes set like pebbles in a puffy, unwholesome-looking face. As he came up, Kenton flattened himself against the window to allow the other to pass, but the man did not do so. Glancing behind him, Kenton saw that he was gazing into the compartment at his sleeping fellow traveller. Then, with a muttered "*Verzeihung*", he walked back and disappeared into the next coach. Kenton dismissed him from his mind and returned to the compartment.

The newspaper had slipped from the little man's head. His eyes were closed. He looked sound asleep. But as Kenton passed him he saw that the man's forehead was shining with sweat.

Kenton sat and watched him for a bit, then he saw the brown eyes open slowly and flicker towards him.

"Has he gone?"

"Who?" said Kenton.

"He—the man in the corridor."

"Yes."

The other sat up and, after fumbling in his pocket, brought out a large and dirty handkerchief. He wiped his forehead and the palms of his hands. Then he looked at Kenton.

"You are, perhaps, an American?"

"No, English."

"Ah, yes. You will understand—it was not your speech but your clothes that made me think..."

His voice trailed off into inaudibility. Suddenly he leapt to the switch and plunged the compartment into darkness. Kenton, not quite sure what was happening, stayed in his corner. If he were sharing a compartment with a madman, a negative attitude was probably safe. The next moment his blood froze as he felt the man sit on the seat beside him. He could hear him breathing heavily.

“Please do not be alarmed, *mein Herr*.”

The voice was strained, as if its owner had been running. Then he began to speak, slowly first, then quickly and breathlessly.

“I am a German,” he began.

Kenton said “Yes,” but disbelieved him. He had been trying to place the man’s accent.

“I am a German, a Jew. My father was a Gentile, but my mother was a Jewess. Because of her I am persecuted and robbed. You do not know what it is to be a German with a Jewess for a mother. They have ruined my business. I am a metallurgist. You say perhaps this man does not look like a metallurgist, but you are wrong. I am a metallurgist. I have worked in Essen and at Düsseldorf in the foundries. I had my own business, my own factory—small, you understand; but you are English and will know that it is the small factory that is sometimes good. Now that is over. I have a little money. I wish to leave the country of my father and my Jewess mother and start again a small business. I wish to take my money, but these Nazi brutes say no. It is forbidden that I take my own money where I wish. I think perhaps I take it secretly by a quiet way across the frontier. All goes well. I meet a good English friend, we eat together, we hold conversation as gentlemen. Then I see this Nazi spy and he sees me. Now I know. They will search me at the frontier, strip me, send me to a concentration camp where I shall be whipped. You saw this spy. He stopped and looked at me. You saw? He recognised me. I saw it in his face. In my pocket here I have ten thousand marks in gold and German securities—all I have in the world. Unless you will consent to help me they will take them from me at Passau.”

He paused and Kenton could see that he was wiping his forehead again.

The man was lying; of that he had no doubt. Metallurgist and Jew he might be. German he certainly was not. For one thing, his German was not as good as Kenton’s own; for another, any German business man would know that, as at that time all German bonds were “blocked” and not negotiable abroad, the only way to get money out of Germany was in hard cash. Again, there was the story of the Nazi spy. From what he knew of the Nazis, Kenton could not imagine them taking the trouble to send spies to peep at non-Aryan metallurgists in third-class compartments. If they had wanted the man, he would not have been allowed to board the train at Ratisbon. All the same, the whole thing was a little puzzling. The man in the corridor had certainly behaved oddly, and Brown-Eye’s fright was obviously linked in some way with his appearance. Kenton began to scent a story of some sort.

“I don’t see how I can help you,” he said.

The other leant towards him. Kenton could feel his breath on his cheek.

“You could take my securities past the frontier for me.”

“And if I, too, am searched?”

“You are an Englishman. They would not dare. There is no risk. It is a little thing for you.”

Kenton was not so sure about that, but let it pass.

“I am afraid I cannot take the responsibility.”

“But I will pay you, *mein Herr* ...” He stopped, rummaged quickly in his pocket and drew Kenton into the light from the corridor. He had a wallet in his hand. “Look!... I will pay you one, two, three hundred marks to take my securities out of Germany for me.”

At that moment Kenton ceased for a time to be an impartial recorder of events and became a participator. Three hundred marks! A hundred owing to the Havas man left two hundred

Two hundred! Enough to get back to Berlin with plenty to spare. Brown-Eyes might be anything but what he claimed, and he, Kenton, might be heading straight for a German prison, but it was worth the risk—for three hundred marks.

He hedged a little at first and allowed the man to press and finally persuade him. Tears of emotion oozed from the brown eyes as he handed Kenton one hundred and fifty marks in advance. The balance was to be paid when the securities were handed back. They were, the owner hastened to explain, in his name, Herman Sachs, and of no value to anyone else.

“*Mein Herr,*” he went on, laying his hand on Kenton’s arm, “I am trusting you with my poor savings. You will not betray me?”

His lustrous brown eyes were infinitely sad and appealing, but his fingers gripped with surprising force.

Kenton protested his good faith, Herr Sachs’s grip relaxed, and with a cautious glance at the corridor, he handed over a long, bulging envelope. Kenton could feel a bundle of stiff paper rolled up inside it. He put the envelope in his pocket.

Sachs drew a deep breath and relapsed into his seat exhaling loudly.

Kenton found his exhibition of relief a trifle disconcerting. With a growing dislike of the man he could not quite explain, he watched Sachs light a short black cigar and open a large and battered composition suitcase. He seemed to have forgotten Kenton’s existence.

From where Kenton sat he could see into the suitcase. It was stuffed to bursting-point with soiled linen. But Sachs seemed to know his way about it. He dived straight into one corner of the case. When his hand reappeared it held a heavy-calibre automatic. He slipped it easily into a holster under his left arm.

There was, thought Kenton, more to Herr Sachs than met the eye.

They went through the customs formalities separately.

Sachs hurried off first. Kenton, with a hollow feeling in the region of the solar plexus, the envelope lodged down his right sock and his German banknotes tucked in his left shoe, followed at a discreet distance.

Waiting his turn at the German “control,” Kenton saw Sachs passed through with only the usual currency interrogation. The “German” was neither searched nor detained. Kenton gave himself full marks for prophecy as he saw his doubts of Sachs’s story confirmed. He also caught a glimpse of the “Nazi spy” crossing a lighted yard on his way to the Austrian customs.

His own examination was casual enough, but he was profoundly relieved when it was over. Returning to the train, he found an anxious Sachs.

“Ah, here you are. You have it safely? Good. No, no, no, please!” as Kenton produced the envelope. “Please put it away. It is not yet safe. Put it in your pocket.” He glanced furtively towards the corridor. “He is on the train, the spy. There is still danger.”

At that Kenton lost his temper. He was cold, depressed and disliking Herr Sachs and his affairs intensely. His ordeal at the customs had unnerved him; he found this talk of spies and danger offensively melodramatic. Moreover, he had decided that the securities consisted of either (a) drugs, (b) stolen bearer bonds, (c) a report on white slave traffic possibilities in Westphalia, or (d) something else equally incriminating. Furthermore, he mistrusted Sachs. Whatever dingy game the man was up to, he, Kenton, was not going to be involved any longer.

“I’m afraid,” he said, “that I must ask you to take your securities back. I contracted to bring them across the frontier. I have done so. And now, I think, you owe me one hundred and fifty marks.”

Sachs did not speak for a moment. His brown eyes had become slightly opaque. Then he leant forward and touched the journalist on the knee.

“Herr Kenton,” he said quickly, “please put that envelope back in your pocket. I will increase my offer. Another three hundred marks if you will take my securities on to the Hotel Josef at Linz.”

Kenton had opened his mouth to refuse. Then that same streak of recklessness that had already proved so expensive that day asserted itself again. Six hundred marks! Well, he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

“All right,” he said.

But even as he spoke the words, he knew that all was not right, and that this time his weakness had led him into danger.

ZALESHOFF AND TAMARA

THE offices of the firm of *Kiessling und Pieper Maschinen G.m.b.H. Zürich* are difficult to find. They are reached by walking along a narrow passage leading off a quiet street near Zürich station, unlocking a battered but very sturdy door, and climbing five flights of bare wooden stairs. At the top of these stairs is another door with the name of the firm painted upon it. An arrow points to a bell marked "*Bitte schellen*", "Please ring", but this does not work. There is another bell which does work, but that is operated by inserting a key in the lock, and few people know about it. The firm of Kiessling and Pieper does not encourage business.

Although the firm still retains its original name, Kiessling and Pieper themselves have long since severed their connection with it. Herr Kiessling died in 1910, Herr Pieper in 1924. The firm has not prospered since: chiefly because its subsequent proprietors have always had more important business on their hands than the disposal for profit of vertical borers, milling machines and turret lathes. Drab brown photographs of such things still decorate the office walls; but they remain as the firm's sole surviving connection with the trade it professes.

One afternoon in late November the proprietor of Kiessling and Pieper sat at his desk, staring thoughtfully at one of those brown photographs. It portrayed an all-g geared head straight bed S.S. and S.C. lathe by Schutte and Eberhardt, but Andreas Prokovitch Zaleshoff did not know that.

The unofficial representative of the U.S.S.R. in Switzerland was a broad-shouldered man of about thirty-eight, with brown, curly hair that shot up at an angle of forty-five degrees from his forehead. His clean-shaven face was ugly, but not unpleasantly so. "Knobbly" would have been an unkind description; "rugged" would have been a trifle too romantic. His nose was large and pugnacious, and he had a habit of shooting out his lower jaw when he wished to be emphatic. His eyes were of a surprising blue and very shrewd. Now, they moved from the unseeing contemplation of the screw-cutting lathe to a sheet of paper on the desk, stayed there for a moment, then glanced towards the door leading to the outer office.

"Tamara, come here," he called.

A few moments later a girl came into the room.

Tamara Prokovna Zaleshoff was not, by ordinary standards, beautiful. Her face was an idealised version of her brother's. The complexion was perfect and the proportions were good, but the bone structure was a little too masculine. Her hands were exquisite.

"Have you decoded the letters?"

"Yes, Andreas; there were only two."

No correspondence came direct to Kiessling and Pieper. Those who had dealings with the firm at that time always addressed their communications to a Fräulein Rosa Neumann, care of the poste restante. Twice a day Tamara became Rosa Neumann and collected them. It was

then her business to translate into sense the jumbled strings of letters and numbers, and enter the results in an innocent-looking book marked with the German equivalent of "Bought Ledger" before passing them on to her brother. Most of the messages were dull and the routine bored her exceedingly.

She took off her coat and hung it behind the door. Then she looked at her brother curiously.

"What is it, Andreas?"

"While you were out collecting the letters, Tamara, Petroff telephoned from Berlin."

"Petroff! What did he want?"

"He says that he was notified by Moscow last night that Borovansky has turned traitor."

"Borovansky?"

"Yes, they found out at headquarters that he'd taken photographs of all B₂ mobilisation instructions and was on his way to Germany. Petroff says that Borovansky took the train to Ratisbon this afternoon and that he bought a through ticket to Linz. It looks as though he delivers the photographs there."

"Has he got them on him?"

"Yes, in the inside pocket of his coat."

"But can nothing be done to stop him?"

Zaleshoff smiled wanly.

"Yes, Tamara, plenty; but not yet. Petroff has put Ortega on the job."

"Ortega?"

"That Spaniard of Petroff's. The fellow uses a knife, I believe. Petroff, who is not, to my mind, fastidious, admits that the man is an obscenity, but says that he is very useful."

"Can he be trusted?"

"That is one of his virtues in Petroff's eyes. Ortega is wanted for murder—he slit a woman's throat in Lisbon two years ago—and Petroff would put the police on to him if necessary."

Tamara looked thoughtful.

"I never liked Borovansky very much."

Zaleshoff shook his head.

"Neither did I. I always thought they trusted him too much. But they said he was useful because he had worked for years in German factories and knew the Germans well. Silly nonsense! Borovansky could work all his life in a country and not even learn to speak the language like a native, much less think like one. Besides, I'd sooner be served by a fool I could trust than an expert who might betray me."

He lit a large pipe and then put it down.

"It's no use, Tamara," he said, irritably, "I cannot—I will not smoke a pipe. It makes me sick."

"It is better than those interminable cigarettes. You must try."

Zaleshoff picked up the pipe impatiently, but he merely tapped the stem against his strong white teeth. His attention seemed suddenly to have wandered. The girl watched him for a minute.

"Just how serious is this affair, Andreas?" she said at last.

For a moment she thought he had not heard her. Then he shrugged.

“Nobody quite knows—yet. You see the difficulty, Tamara? Borovansky only took photographs of the stuff and it might be put about that they are forgeries. But we have so little to work on. If we knew even who was paying him, we could move. You see, those B2 instructions aren't just ordinary military information. If it were gunnery reports, or fortification details, it would probably find its way to the bureau at Brussels and we should know where we stood. But it isn't. I feel in my bones that there is a political end to this business, and I don't like it. If Borovansky wanted something to sell there are so many more marketable things he might and could have stolen. Why, Tamara, must he photograph these specific instructions? Why? That is what I ask.”

“Either because he hadn't time to get anything else or because someone had offered him money for them.”

“Exactly! Now, if he was merely going to steal and photograph anything of value he could find, he would realise that the B2 papers were, for his purpose, valueless. Would he risk his life getting away with something that he knew to have no market value? No; someone wanted the B2 stuff and Borovansky is being paid to get it. The worst of it is that nothing can be done to stop him until he gets into Austria. Berlin wants an excuse for another anti-Soviet drive and we don't want to provide it. We must hope that he does not deliver the goods before he leaves Germany.”

“Why in Heaven's name wasn't he stopped before he could leave Soviet territory?”

“They didn't know anything was wrong. Borovansky was acting as liaison between Moscow and our people in Riga. If the man who took the photographs hadn't grown suspicious and made up his mind to tell the police about it, we should probably still be in the dark. Borovansky was a fool, too. He might have remained unsuspected for several extra days if he'd had the sense to report at Riga before he made for Germany.”

“Still, it's no affair of ours.”

“No, I suppose not.”

But he still looked thoughtful. Suddenly he rose abruptly, walked to a cupboard in a corner of the room, took a bulky file from it and started turning the pages absently.

“A report came in from the Basel agent this afternoon,” said Tamara. “He says that the British agent has moved. The Englishman used to work from an office in the Badenstrasse. It was called the Swiss Central Import Company. Now he's gone to the Koenig Gustavus Platz and is working from the apartment of a dentist named Bouchard. It's a very good idea. You can't keep a check on everyone who visits a dentist.”

Zaleshoff, immersed in the file, grunted.

“Oh, and the Geneva agents reported this morning that it's not Skoda, but Nordenfelt who did the bribing over that new Italian order for howitzers; and they're going to ship from Hamburg to Genoa,” Tamara went on. “He also reports that one of the South American League delegates is visiting a woman calling herself Madame Fleury. He says that she is actually a Hungarian named Putti and that she worked for Bulgaria in nineteen-sixteen. He doesn't say who she's working for now, and anyway I don't see how he expects us to keep track of all these South American peccadillos.”

Her brother went on reading.

“There's one rather interesting thing in his report. He says that the British, the German and the Italians met at a small hotel across the lake to decide what the Germans and Italian

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