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Cause for Alarm

ERIC AMBLER

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CAUSE FOR ALARM

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CAUSE FOR ALARM

Eric Ambler was born in London in 1909. Before turning to writing full-time, he worked at a engineering firm, and wrote copy for an advertising agency. His first novel was published 1936. During the course of his career, Ambler was awarded two Gold Daggers, a Silv 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 th Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth. In addition to his novels, Ambler wrote number of screenplays, including *A Night to Remember* and *The Cruel Sea*, which won him a Oscar nomination. Eric Ambler died in 1998.

The Dark Frontier
Background to Danger
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The Schirmer Inheritance
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A Kind of Anger
To Catch a Spy (Editor)
The Intercom Conspiracy
The Levanter
Doctor Frigo
Send No More Roses
The Care of Time
Here Lies Eric Ambler (Autobiography)
The Story So Far

Eric Ambler

CAUSE FOR ALARM

VINTAGE CRIME/BLACK LIZARD

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“Such subtle covenants shall be made,
Till peace itself is war in masquerade.”

Dryden, “Absalom and Achitophel”

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DEATH IN MILAN

THE man standing in the shadow of the doorway turned up the collar of his overcoat ar stamped his numb feet gently on the damp stones.

In the distance he could hear the sound of a train pulling out of the *Stazione Centrale*, ar wished he was riding in it, lounging back in a first-class compartment on his way to Palerm Perhaps after this job was done he would be able to take a holiday in the sun. That was, c course, if They would let him. It never seemed to occur to Them that a man might like to g back to his home occasionally. Milan was no good. Too dry and dusty in the summer; in th winter these damnable fogs rolled in from the plains and ricefields, damp and cold ar bringing the smoke from the factories with them. It was getting misty already. In anoth hour you wouldn't be able to see your hand in front of your face, let alone anything els That meant that Buonometti and Orlano wouldn't be able to see what they were doing. The would have to be another night of watching and waiting in the cold. He had no patience wi it. If this Englishman had to be killed, let him be killed easily, quickly. A dark stretch c pavement, a knife under the ribs, a slight twist of the wrist to let the air inside the woun and it was done. No fuss, no trouble, practically no noise. Whereas this....

His gaze travelled up the dark façade of the office building across the street to the sing lighted window on the fourth floor. He shrugged resignedly and leaned against the wall. Or hour or two, what difference did it make? What did They care if he got pneumonia?

Only once during the next twenty-five minutes did he move. The footsteps of a stra pedestrian echoing along this deserted business street caused him to shrink back into th shadow. But of a passing policeman he took no notice, and grinned to himself when th uniformed man seemed deliberately to avoid looking his way. That was one advantage working for Them. You didn't have to worry about the police. You were safe.

He straightened his back suddenly. The solitary light had gone out. He stretched h cramped muscles, adjusted the brim of his hat and walked quietly away towards th telephone booth at the end of the street. Two minutes later his work for the night wa finished.

The door of the office building opened and two men came out. One of them turned to shu the door behind him. The other did not wait. With a muttered "*a rivederci*" he crossed th road and disappeared in the direction of the station. The man who had shut the door turne and stood there watching him out of sight.

He was a stoutish, middle-aged man with rounded shoulders and a way of holding his arn slightly in front of his body, as though he were trying perpetually to squeeze through a ver narrow opening. That posture had been his life. He had squeezed his way by, rigid y without dignity; an ineffectual, apprehensive man who had fed his self-respect on dreams ar always satisfied it.

He felt in his jacket pocket, lit a cigarette, rebuttoned his overcoat and started to walk the opposite direction. At the first corner he hesitated. On his right a little way down th

main thoroughfare the words Caffè Faraglio in neon tubing glowed through the fog. H
hesitation was only momentary. He turned right and crossed to the *caffè*.

He found a table near one of the heating stoves and ordered a *caffè latte* and a *Strega*. Th
spirit he drank at a gulp. Then he took an envelope from his pocket, dropped his hands belo
the level of the table top and drew a thick roll of one hundred lire notes from it. He counte
them carefully—there were twenty-five—and transferred them to a wallet. Then he drank h
coffee, paid the waiter and went.

The fog was thickening. Now it lay in patches so that at one moment he picked his wa
cautiously along the side of the pavement, while at the next he was able to step out briskly.
crowd pouring out of a cinema jostled him, and he turned down a side street to avoid them.

He was going in the direction of the Monte di Pieta quarter in which he lived. As, at las
he crossed the Corso Venezia to turn down the Via Monte Napoleone he saw a blac
limousine drawn up by the kerb. But there were other cars about and he took no notice of i
It was not until he was threading his way through the net-work of streets behind the publ
gardens that he noticed that the car seemed to be following him. He could hear it whinin
along in low gear just behind him and see the yellow glare of its headlights through the fo
He walked on, telling himself that the driver had probably missed the way. Then it happene

The fog had lifted for a few yards ahead. He stepped into the road to cut off a corner.
fraction of a second later the car accelerated violently. Jerking round quickly, he saw it swin
over towards him. The headlights grew suddenly larger, blinding him. He shouted and trie
to jump clear. The next moment the car hit him.

He felt a terrible pain shoot through his legs up to his waist and a second shock as he h
the ground. For a moment he lay still. He was dimly aware that he was lying across the kerb
He tried to raise himself. Then the pain surged up to his chest and there was a thin, hig
singing noise in his head. He knew that he was losing consciousness and he put up a hand
grasp the wallet in his pocket. It was his last conscious movement.

The car had stopped several yards farther on. A man got out of the seat next to the drive
walked back and, bending down, thumbed back one of the injured man's eyelids. Then h
returned to the car.

"*Sta bene?*" said the driver.

"*No*. He is still alive. Go back and make certain."

The driver shifted the gear into reverse, peered through the rear window and the ca
moved back to the corner.

"Now!" said the man beside him.

The car jerked forward. The wheels bumped twice and came to rest against the kerb. Th
man in front got out again and again walked back. When he returned to the car he wa
wiping his fingers on his handkerchief.

"*Sta bene?*" said the driver.

"*Bene*." He got back into his seat and slammed the door. "As soon as we have reported
headquarters," he said as the car moved slowly across the tram-lines along the main road,
shall drink half a bottle of cognac. This fog gets on to my chest."

It was twenty minutes before a child ran screaming to its mother that there was a ma
lying bleeding in the street.

1

FIRST CAUSES

ONE thing is certain. I would not even have considered the job if I had not been desperate.

Early in January, the Barnton Heath Engineering Company decided to close down th greater part of its works.

It was the day after I had asked Claire to marry me that the first blow fell. I had walke into my office that morning feeling very pleased with life. Not that, strictly speaking, I ha any cause to feel pleased. She had promised to “think about it carefully” and let me know Still, I felt pleased. A girl like Claire would, I assured myself, have made up her min immediately if she were going to refuse. She was probably terrified that, if she didn strengthen her position by reducing me to a state of jittering suspense, I might be tempted play the dominant male and expect her to give up being a very promising surgeon in order become a second-rate housekeeper. She has a dangerous theory that, when two persons g married, a court of inquiry ought to sit in order to determine from the available evidenc which of the two is better fitted to assume responsibility for the housework—the husband o the wife. I had, however, not the slightest intention of asking her to give up her work. Qui apart from the fact that I did not wish her to do so, I knew perfectly well that, if it came to trial of wills, she would win. She is very beautiful and very intelligent.

Towards lunch-time I was going over a batch of costs with my assistant when I received message from the head office in London saying that Herrington, the General Manager, woul like to see me that afternoon. Summonses from Herrington were rare. Wondering what it wa all about and irritated at having to interrupt my work, I caught the two-forty-five at Barnto Station. At half-past three I saw Herrington. At four o’clock I was walking slowly dow Queen Victoria Street with a letter in my pocket informing me that “owing to circumstanc beyond the control of the Board,” my services had to be dispensed with.

Herrington’s carefully chosen words of regret still lingered in my ears.

“Damned unfortunate, Marlow, but there it is. The Barnton Heath works just aren’t payin Nothing to do with you, of course. Labour’s too expensive so near London. Felstead ha warned us that he can’t renew his contract at our price, and things are too shaky at th moment for us to risk keeping your show going. Question of cutting our losses. Hard-lines o you, of course. And hard-lines on us, too. Good production engineers don’t grow on tree You won’t have any difficulty in getting fixed up. If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

So that was that. I had a month in which to find another job. And “things were shaky at th moment.” Production engineers might not grow on trees; but then nor did jobs. “Trac recession” they called it in the newspapers. As far as I could see there wasn’t a great deal o difference between a trade recession and a good old-fashioned slump. “If there’s anything can do, let me know.” Well, yes, there *was* something he could do. He could find me anoth

job. But probably he hadn't meant quite that. Nice chap, Herrington, but a little to charming. Dammit no! That was humbug. He wasn't a nice chap. I'd always loathed him lik poison and he'd detested me. He'd probably been quite pleased to get rid of me. He'd neve quite forgiven me for making him look a fool over the original Felstead estimates. Still, ther it was. No use getting sorry for myself. I knew plenty of people who might put me on something good. I might even get something better. No need to panic, anyway. Plenty o time. I'd telephone Dowsett in the morning and see if he knew of anything going. There wer the men to be thought of, too. They were Hallett's responsibility, of course, and he would d his best for them; but it would be devilish for some of them, all the same. The girls woul quickly be absorbed by neighbouring factories. Girl labour was at a premium in the Barnto district. The skilled men would not have much trouble either: those munition people tw miles away would jump at them. It was the rest, the unskilled, the clerks and storekeepe with wives and families, who would suffer. I ought to be thanking my stars.

When I got back to the works I went straight to Hallett.

"You've heard the news, of course," I said.

He sniffed. "Yes. Herrington wanted me to break it to you, but I told him to do his ow dirty work. He actually had the nerve to suggest to me, too, that we keep quiet about it s far as the works were concerned until three days before we shut down. There's the tail end o the Felstead contract to complete, and I suppose he's afraid of the production figures fallin off over the month. I told him to go and boil himself. Quite apart from the fact that a goo many of them ought to do some quick saving if they can, the girls in the turret shop a organising a social club. Their foreman tells me they're going to ask me to be President. shouldn't be able to look myself in a glass if, knowing what I do, I let them go on with it."

I nodded. "You're right. I was thinking of that side of it while I was coming down. You an I are about the only people sitting pretty over this business."

He looked at me curiously. "You think so? I hope you're right, Marlow. Personally, I've g a wife, three kids and a house on mortgage to think about. My idea is that the only peop who are sitting pretty, as you put it, are Herrington, his plump-backed Board and the dea shareholders. Did you see the last balance-sheet?"

"No?"

"It was a sight for sore eyes. The Forces of Fat, Marlow, move in strange and mysteriou ways. Who are we, the mugs who do the job, to question their wisdom? All the same, I *d* question it. But, then, I'm only a blank-dash Socialist."

I left him composing a round-robin to the foreman. Not till then did I remember that I wa meeting Claire at seven o'clock.

I broke the news over the soup.

She was wearing a new hat—a fact upon which I had been careful to comment—but it wa not the sort of hat behind which she could hide while she thought of something to say. Sh looked as though she wished it had been.

"That's bad, Nicky," she said. Her voice was quite steady. She paused and then added: hope that you're not going to let it interfere with the wedding."

We were eating in a Chinese place, and I have heard that the Chinese are a very difficu race to astonish; but I seem to remember seeing the cook, a Cantonese with a figure like water butt, goggling incredulously at us through the service door. By the time I had returne

to my side of the table, the entire restaurant was buzzing with comment. There was som giggling. Blushing, we got on with our food.

"And now," said Claire some minutes later, "that that is settled, what are you going to d about keeping me in the style to which I have been unaccustomed?"

A wave of remorse swept over me. "Look here," I urged weakly. "This is all wrong. W shouldn't be talking about marriage at this time. Things are pretty bad at the moment. It ma be months before I can get the job I want. That's all right as far as it goes. The bank will sta friendly for a bit. But I wouldn't like to make any statement about my prospects. Not fo publication, that is. What would your father say?"

"He'll say exactly what I tell him to say."

"But …"

"Listen, Nicky." She wagged her chopsticks at me. "You're thirty-five, five foot ten in you socks and handsome to boot. More important, you're a very clever engineer. Hallett told m so that night we had dinner with him and his wife. Why shouldn't you get a good job? Thin may be slow just now, but not for first-rate men. Don't be so silly. Besides, I'm twenty-nin and a female in my position who isn't married by that time ought to be forced to eat her ow scalpel."

She succeeded, almost, in convincing me. At all events, for the rest of that evening w forgot about such things as money. To be more precise, we went to a cinema, sat in the bac row and held hands. The film, I remember, was very bad. We enjoyed it enormously an took a taxi to her home. Her father gave me a whisky and soda and asked me what I thoug of the foreign situation in general with particular reference to the prospects of the Rom Berlin axis breaking over the Czech question. I forget what I replied. After a bit he looked us over his glasses, smirked and trotted off to bed. I went home finally by an all-night tram. was in excellent spirits. I hummed a tune to myself. She was right, bless her heart. I knew m job. I should be all right. It was the man without qualifications who suffered when trac "receded."

But I was wrong.

It took me about two and a half months to find out just how wrong: two and a half mont of raised hopes and disappointments, of fruitless interviews and abortive correspondenc Towards the end of my last week at Barnton, I was offered a job at two-thirds the salary had been getting and turned it down. Six weeks later I would have given my left arm for th chance; but it was too late. I knew that Hallett had thought me a fool and, when he careful refrained from saying "I told you so," it didn't improve matters. He himself had accepted a offer at fifty per cent. less than Barnton had paid and seemed relieved. I began to get worrie and, I am afraid, irritable.

Claire was amazingly good about it all; but I was in a mood to imagine things, and began suspect that she was losing confidence in me. Foolish of me, no doubt. She, too, was worrie but not as much by my difficulties as by the effect they were having on me. The plain truth that I was rapidly losing confidence in myself. Then we had a slight quarrel. In itself it wa trivial, but other circumstances were to render it important.

We were sitting, rather gloomily, over tea. It was a Tuesday afternoon, and she had left th hospital for an hour to hear the result of an interview with a Birmingham man who was London for the day. The result was negative. The man from Birmingham had been ve

pleasant and had given me introductions to two firms from both of which I had alread drawn blanks. She heard the news in silence.

"Well," I added bitterly and very childishly, "when do we get married? Or would yo prefer to call it off?"

"Don't be a fool, Nicky." She paused. "Anyway, I don't see why all this should interfe with our plans. Just because things are a bit tiresome at the moment, there's no reason wh we shouldn't go ahead." She paused again. "After all," she went on lightly, "I've got perfectly good job and they talk about giving me more money soon."

"That's very nice, darling," I snapped. "And what am I supposed to do? Sit in the furnishe bed-sitting-room and darn your stockings?"

It was rude and unpleasant enough, but it was only the beginning. I said a lot of things didn't mean; pompous things about a man having a certain substratum of "self-respect" consider and the ignominy of living on a wife's earnings, none of which bore the slighte relation to what she had meant.

She sat tight-lipped and silent until I had finished. Then she said: "I didn't think you cou be such an ass." With that she got up and walked out of the shop.

Of course, we made it up that evening. But there was a reservation about the reconciliatio of which we were both conscious. When I left that night, she put on her coat and walked wi me a little way.

"You know, Nicky," she said after a while, "you've done a terrible lot of apologising t night. I feel rather bad about it. I know very well it's all my fault really. If I'd had a grain imagination I'd have known that you'd got enough to worry about without having confounded nitwit of a girl talking marriage at you to make it worse."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "What on earth are you getting at, Claire?"

"Go on walking, darling, and I'll tell you." We went on. "You remember that engineerin paper you left in the hall the other night?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"I had a look through it, Nicky. You'd marked an advertisement in the Appointmen Vacant Section. Do you remember it?"

"Yes, vaguely."

"Well …?"

I spluttered. "Good heavens, Claire, you're not suggesting …?"

"Why not? It fits your qualifications exactly. It might have been designed specially fo you." And then, as I began to expostulate once more: "No, listen, Nicky. It would do yo good."

I halted again. "Now you listen to *me*, sweet. There are some things which are fantastic an absurd, and this is one of them."

She laughed. "All right, but here"—she produced a piece of paper from her bag and thrust into a pocket of my overcoat—"I tore it out in case you might want to change your min Good night, darling."

When at last I continued my walk to the station, I had completely forgotten about the piec of paper.

A week went by. Those seven days were the most depressing I have ever spent. For th first six of them nothing at all happened. Then, on the morning of the seventh, I received

letter from a famous engineering firm in answer to an application of mine in reply to a
advertisement for a works manager in one of their smaller factories. I was to call at the
offices at three o'clock that day.

At three o'clock I was there. With me in the reception room were two other men. Bo
were middle-aged. Both, I guessed, were there on the same business as I was. I was right.

I was the last to be seen by the works director. He greeted me with an air of patie
amiability.

"Oh yes"—he glanced at my letter lying on the spotless blotting-pad in front of him—"M
Marlow, isn't it? Yes, yes. Now, I asked you to call for a special reason. Quite frankly w
consider you a little too young for consideration in connection with the post under discussio
at the moment." He primped his moustache wearily. I waited. "However," he went on, "w
could use a young, unmarried man with your qualifications in connection with an importa
contract we have just secured. Mind you, I'm not making you a definite offer. If you'
interested we'll discuss it further. The—er—salary, naturally, is not very large. You probab
know how bad things are at the moment, eh? And, of course, it would mean signing on fo
four years. Still, I don't suppose that would worry a young man like you. It's a great plac
Bolivia, a great …"

I interrupted the flow. "Where did you say?"

He looked surprised. "Bolivia. The Chaco war," he went on confidently, "showed them th
need for relying upon their own resources in time of war. It is a question of establishing tw
factories and putting them on an economical production basis. The experience alone…."

But I had risen. I could feel that I had become very red in the face. "Thank you ver
much," I said curtly. "I am afraid, however, that my time is valuable this afternoon. I mu
apologise for wasting yours. I feel sure that you will find the man you want quite easily."

He stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. "Naturally. Good afternoon. Pull the door
behind you as you go, will you?"

Outside, I bought an evening paper, crossed to a teashop and ordered a cup of tea. Then
noticed that, seated at the next table was one of the men I had seen in the reception roo
On a sudden impulse, I leaned across to him.

"Excuse me, sir. I hope you'll forgive my asking; but, as a matter of interest, do you min
telling me if you have just been offered a post in South America?"

He looked startled. He was a grey-haired man with a heavy, intelligent face and larg
capable hands. He examined me suspiciously. Then he grinned.

"So they tried that on you too, did they? Well, I don't mind telling you. He did offer me
job in South America—at three quid a week. Said I was too old for the job advertised. Boliv
and three quid a week! Me! I told him what he could do with it. I don't think he liked
much."

"I suppose, then, that the other man got the real job."

"Real job?" He laughed derisively. "There isn't any real job, my friend. That's just a way
getting good men cheap. I've seen that game before. They cut their price to compete with th
United States and the Monroe Doctrine. Then they have to make their precious profit. I mig
have fallen for it, but luckily I've got a job of sorts, selling small tools." He indicated a
attaché-case on the chair beside him. "Cheap Jap stuff."

I offered him a cigarette. We went on talking. Bit by bit I learned something of his caree

and, as I listened to the quiet, almost casual account of the work he had done, I knew th
here was a man beside whose qualifications and experience mine were second-rate. This ma
knew his job supremely well. Other things being equal, no management with any sense wou
have hesitated to choose him in preference to me. And yet, here he was selling small tool
“Cheap Jap stuff.” When I asked him how business was, he smiled.

“I wouldn’t know about that,” he said ruefully; “I’m not much good as a traveller. It’s
very difficult thing to be good at. I’ve no patience, very little tact, and I’m always gettin
people’s backs up by showing them how they ought to run their businesses. Besides, I can
help telling them just how bad my stuff is. I’m trying to improve, but it’s tough going.” H
called for his bill. “It’s time I was off. Glad to have met you.”

When he had gone I tried to read my evening paper. Herr Hitler had reaffirmed th
principle of the Rome-Berlin collaboration. Signor Mussolini had made another speech fro
the balcony of the Palazzo di Venezia. The chairman of an armaments combine ha
announced complacently that profits for the previous year had proved extremely satisfacto
and had expressed confidence in the future of the company. Another Balkan state had gon
Fascist. A Croat living in the Paris suburbs had dismembered his mistress’s body with
hatchet. A banker had welcomed improved prospects for foreign lending. There were tw
pictures on the front page: one of two grinning and embarrassed soldiers riding on a new typ
of tank, the other of a famous statesman, looking like an apprehensive vulture with a fishin
rod in one hand and a very small fish in the other. On page four was an article entitled: “
thy strength, O Britain …” by an ex-naval officer who, I happened to know, was also
director of a naval construction yard.

I put the paper down, finished my tea and felt in my pocket for a match to light a cigarett
My fingers encountered the piece of paper. I drew it out, smoothed it on the table and rea
the advertisement through again very carefully.

> REQUIRED by Midland firm. Thoroughly experienced production engineer to take charge of Continental office. Must speak fluent Italian and have had experience of high-production practice. Language qualification essential. Generous salary and commission to right man. Excellent prospects. Apply, stating age, experience (in detail) and when available, to Box 536X.

I don’t know what had possessed me to mark it. Maybe it was the bit about the Italian th
had struck me as odd. After my parents had died I had shared a room with an Italian fellow
student who had taught me his language in exchange for mine. It had all been part of a pla
to spend our summer vacation walking south from Naples. The plan had never matured. W
had quarrelled a week before we had been due to start. But my Italian had remaine
nourished by an occasional novel from Hachettes and, lately, vague ideas about a honeymoo
in Rome.

I put the paper back in my pocket. It was out of the question, of course. Absurd. Clair
bless her heart, was talking nonsense.

But the fact that I put the paper back in my pocket instead of throwing it away was,
think, significant. Almost without my knowing it, the seed of the idea was swelling in m
mind. That evening when I arrived at my flat, the seed bore fruit. There were two letters fo
me. Both had the word “regret” in the first line.

I had a bath, changed my clothes, sat down by the fire and lit a cigarette. For ten minutes

remained there, thinking. Then I got up. There was, after all, no harm in writing. It wou probably come to nothing, anyway. Besides, even if I were offered the job, I could alway change my mind.

“By the way,” I remarked casually later that evening; “just as a matter of interest, I’v written for that Italian job. I wouldn’t take it, naturally, but there’s no harm in seeing wh it’s all about.”

“I thought you’d be sensible, darling,” said Claire.

2

SPARTACUS

FOUR days later I received a letter from The Spartacus Machine Tool Company Limited c
Wolverhampton. It was signed by a Mr. Alfred Pelcher, the Managing Director, and requeste
me to call upon him at Wolverhampton the following day. “Should,” the letter conclude
“our meeting not produce any result to our mutual advantage, we shall be pleased to refun
to you the travelling expenses from London.”

That sounded fair enough. The following day I walked out of Wolverhampton station an
asked to be directed to the Spartacus Works. After a bus ride and a ten-minute walk, I cam
to them, a dingy, sprawling collection of buildings at the end of a long and very muddy roa
The view did nothing to raise my drooping spirits. Neither did my reception.

As I approached, a decrepit looking gate-keeper appeared out of a wooden office and aske
my business.

“I want to see Mr. Pelcher.”

He sucked his teeth and shook his head firmly. “No travellers seen except on Tuesdays an
Thursdays. It’s a waste of time to try other days.”

“I’m not a traveller. I have an appointment with Mr. Pelcher.”

He bridled. “Why didn’t you say so? I’ve got my job to do. I can’t be expected to kno
everything. I’m not,” he added unnecessarily, “a ruddy crystal gazer. Here”—he grasped m
arm—“over there and up the stairs.” He indicated a flight of steel stairs set against the side c
a black brick building on the opposite side of the yard and retired, muttering, to his office.

I thanked him, clanked up the stairs and pushed open a door marked “SALES OFFICE A
ENQUIRIES. P*lease walk in*.” Beyond it was a small frosted glass window, labelled “KNOCK.”
knocked. The window slid open with a crash and a fat, pale youth with the beginnings of
moustache peered through at me.

“I want to see Mr. Pelcher.”

“Reps., Tuesdays and Thursdays,” said the youth severely. “There’s a notice at the gate.
don’t know what some of you chaps are coming to. It’s a waste of your time and mine. Yo
can’t see him now.”

“I have an appointment.”

He shrugged. “Oh well! Name?”

“Marlow.”

“O.K.”

The window slammed again and I heard him asking over a telephone for Mrs. Moshowit
Then: “Is that Mrs. Mo? This is your little Ernest speaking from the Sales office.” There was
pause. “Now, now! Naughty, naughty,” he went on playfully. He lapsed suddenly into th
lingua franca of the gangster film. “Say, listen, sister. There’s a sucker here named Marlow

He claims he has an appointment with the Big Boy. Shall I let him have it in the stomach o will the Big Boy give him the works himself?" Another pause. "All right, *all* right, keep you stays on." He slammed down the telephone, reappeared at the door and announced that h would himself take me across to Mr. Alfred's office.

We descended the stairway, turned to the right along an alleyway littered with rusty scra and climbed up another flight of stairs to a door with a Wet Paint notice hanging on th handle. My escort kicked the door open with his heel and informed the elderly and harasse looking Jewess who glared at him indignantly across a sea of blue-prints that I was the ma for Mr. Alfred.

This I was beginning to doubt. What I had so far seen of the Spartacus Machine To Company had impressed me so little that I was within an ace of leaving then and ther without seeing its Managing Director or troubling about my travelling expenses. I was a foo I told myself, to have wasted a day on such a wild goose chase. But it was too late to thin about that now. I was being shown into Mr. Alfred's room.

It was large and very untidy. Stack upon stack of dusty files and tattered blue-prin formed a sort of dado round the green distempered wall, the upper part of which wa decorated with many framed catalogue illustrations of machines and two yellowing gol medal award certificates from Continental trade exhibitions. A coal fire smoked below mantelpiece groaning under a pile of technical reference books, an *Almanach de Gotha*, bronze Krishna mounted on a teak plinth and a partly concealed copy of *Etiquette for Men*. I one corner was a bag of golf-clubs. In the centre of the room, behind an enormous tab strewn with labelled machine parts, correspondence trays, wooden golf tees, engineerin trade papers and boxes of various sorts of paper clips, sat Mr. Alfred Pelcher himself.

He was a small, bald, cheerful man of about fifty with rimless, bi-focal spectacles and soft, soothing manner which suggested that he had judged you to be in a very bad temper an was determined to coax you out of it. His dress—clearly the product of a compromis between the demands of a morning in the office and an afternoon's golf—consisted of a blac lounge suit jacket, a brown cardigan and a pair of grey flannel trousers. He had a habit o wrenching desperately at his collar as if it were choking him.

When I entered the room he was fiddling busily with the curser of a two-foot slide-rule an transferring the results of his calculations to the margin of a copy of *The Times Trade an Engineering Supplement*. Without looking at me he waved the slide-rule in the air to indica that he was nearly finished. A moment or two later he dropped the slide-rule, sprang to h feet and shook me warmly by the hand.

"How very good of you to come all this way to see us." He pressed me into a chair. "Do s down. Now let me see, it's Mr. Marlow, isn't it? Splendid." He waved a deprecatory hand his marginal calculations. "Just a little problem in mechanics, Mr. Marlow. I've been trying t work out approximately how many foot-pounds of energy an eighteen handicap man saves o an average round by having a caddy to carry his clubs for him. It's a tremendous figure." H chuckled. "Do you play golf, Mr. Marlow?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"A great game. The greatest of all games." He beamed at me. "Well, well now. To busines eh? We wrote to you, didn't we? Yes, of course." He relapsed into his chair again and stare at me through the lower half of his spectacles for fully thirty seconds. Then he leane

forward across the table. “*Se non è in grado,*” he said deliberately, “*di accettare questa m proposta, me lo dica francamente. Non me l’avrò a male.*”

I was a little taken aback, but I replied suitably: “*Prima prendere una decisione vorrei sape sua proposta, Signore.*”

His eyebrows went up. He snapped his fingers delightedly. He lifted the slide-rule, bange it down on the table and sat back again.

“Mr. Marlow,” he said solemnly, “you are the first person to answer our advertiseme who has read it carefully. I have seen six gentlemen before you. Three of them could spea tourist French and insisted that most Italians would understand it. One had been in Ceylo and had a smattering of Tamil. He declared, by the way, that if you shouted loud enough English anyone would know what you were driving at. Of the other two, one spoke flue German, while the last had been on a cruise and spent a day in Naples. You are the first see us who can speak Italian.” He paused. Then a sudden expression of alarm clouded h features. He looked like a child who is about to be hurt. “You *are* an engineer, aren’t you, M Marlow?” He plucked anxiously at his collar. “You are not, by any chance, an electrician or chemist or a wireless expert?”

I summarised my qualifications briefly and was about to refer him for greater detail to th letter I had written when I saw that my letter was on the table in front of him and that was nodding happily over it while I talked. Mr. Pelcher was evidently not quite so ingenio as he appeared.

When I had finished, he slid the letter discreetly under his blotter and emitted a loud sig of relief. “Then *that’s* all right. I feel that we understand one another, Mr. Marlow. Now te me”—he looked like a small boy asking a riddle—“have you had any sales experience?”

“None at all.”

He looked crestfallen. “I was afraid not. However, we can’t have everything. A goo engineer who can speak Italian with reasonable accuracy is something you don’t find ever day. Excuse me one moment.” He lifted the telephone. “Hallo, Jenny, my dear, please as Mr. Fitch if he would mind stepping over to my office for a moment.” He put the telephon down and turned to me again. “Mr. Fitch is our export manager. A very nice fellow, with tw bonny children, a boy and a girl. His wife, poor soul, is dead. I think you will like him.”

“I wonder,” I said, “if you would mind giving me some idea of what the post involves, M Pelcher?”

He clasped his forehead. “Good heavens, of course. I thought I’d told you. You see, M Marlow”—he clutched at his collar—“we are not a very big concern. We specialise in o particular class of machine. You probably know that.” I didn’t, but I nodded. “We have,” continued, “a slogan. ‘There is a Spartacus machine for every high-production boring job.’ is, within limits, a comprehensive description of our activities. Actually, however, we hav been concentrating more and more during the past year or so on high-speed automat machines for shell production. About a third of our shop space is at present given over to th work. It was started more or less as a side-line. I had some ideas on the subject of that typ of machine. We worked them out. They were successful. We secured world patent rights the design of the Spartacus Type S2 automatic. Incidentally, the word Spartacus was my ide originally. It’s good, don’t you think—Spartacus the slave—neat. However, to return to th S2. We hold world patent rights, and I must say they’ve proved very valuable to us. We hav

licensed some of our American friends to manufacture; but we retained the European mark for ourselves. I think we were wise. The Germans have produced a machine to compete wi the S2, but it's no better than ours, and we have had a good start. Business with the Contine has been really brisk. The Italians, in particular, took to the S2 immediately. The ordnan department of the Italian Admiralty were very interested. Firms installing our machines we able to reduce their costs quite phenomenally. We have, of course, been approached b British concerns, but frankly we have been kept so busy with export business that we haven bothered so far to cultivate the home market. The Italians have been so very helpful, too, arranging the financial details. As a rule, you know, it's quite difficult to get money out Italy in these days. In our special case they pay with drafts on New York. You see, they nee the machines. Very friendly of them. About a year ago we decided that it would pay us open an Italian office. I couldn't spare the time to keep on running over there all the tim Milan is, as you may know, the centre of things from our point of view. We got hold of very good man for the job. You may have heard of his sad death. Ferning was the name."

"I can't say that I know of him."

"No? It was mentioned in the trade papers. But perhaps a man of your age doesn't read th obituary notices." He chuckled and pulled so violently at his collar that I thought the stu would snap. He became serious again. "Poor Ferning! A nervous, sensitive sort of fellow always thought. But then you can't always judge by appearances. He made an amazingly goo thing of the Milan office. With an order we got from Turkey, we've sold practically the who of our present output of S2 automatics for the next two years. It's a nice machine. Naturall that is only on our present production basis. We're putting up a new shop, and as soon as th is going we shall be in a position to accept all the orders we can get. Bad luck about Fernin The poor chap was run over a few weeks back. A very sad affair. As far as we can gather was foggy and he was walking home when it happened. Killed outright, fortunately. Th driver of the car, whoever it was, didn't stop. Probably didn't even know he'd hit anybody the fog. They're sometimes pretty thick in Milan, you know. Unmarried, thank goodness, b he leaves a sister who was dependent on him. Very hard lines."

"Yes, very."

"Ferning's assistant, Bellinetti, is carrying on at the moment. But we are not regarding th arrangement as permanent. A good assistant, no doubt, but not yet ready for responsibilit Besides, he's not a trained engineer. That's what we need, Mr. Marlow. A trained man, a ma who can go into the works and show the customer how to get the best out of our machine With the Germans so active at the moment, we've got to keep well in with the people wh matter, and"—he winked broadly—"and co-operate with the Italian officials. However, M Fitch will tell you more about that." He lifted the telephone again. "Hullo. Is Mr. Fitc coming over, Jenny? On his way? Good." He clawed at his collar and turned to me agai "Naturally, Mr. Marlow, if we were to come to terms we should want you to spend a week so here in the works before you left. But there again, that's something we can discuss late Of course, you may not like the look of *us*"—he chuckled as if at the idea of such a fantast possibility—"but I must say I feel that we might profitably discuss the matter in more deta first."

I laughed politely, and was about to intimate that more detail, and in particular more deta in connection with the financial aspects of the job, was precisely what I *should* like, whe

there was a knock at the door.

“Ah!” said Mr. Pelcher, “here’s Fitch.”

Mr. Fitch was a very tall man with a long, thin head and a way of holding himself th made him look as though he were standing under a low, leaking roof on a wet day. H surveyed us from the door with the mournful air of an elderly borzoi being teased by a pa of fox terrier puppies.

“This, Fitch,” said Mr. Pelcher briskly, “is Mr. Marlow. He is a trained engineer and he ca speak Italian.”

Mr. Fitch shambled forward and we shook hands.

“I was just telling Mr. Marlow,” pursued Mr. Pelcher, “some of the circumstances of ou Italian connection.”

Mr. Fitch nodded and cleared his throat. “The bottom’s out of the export market,” h asserted gloomily.

Mr. Pelcher laughed and twitched at his collar. “Mr. Fitch has been saying that for te years now, Mr. Marlow. You mustn’t take his pessimism too seriously. Nothing less tha doubling our turnover every year would satisfy him.”

Mr. Fitch looked at me doubtfully. “Do you know Italy very well, Mr. Marlow?”

“Not as well as I should like to,” I replied evasively.

“Play golf?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Fitch,” said Mr. Pelcher fondly, “is a scratch golfer. Hits a terrific ball and as accurate a the devil. However”—he dragged his thoughts back to earth with a visible effort—“t business! Perhaps you’d like to have a look round the works, Mr. Marlow? Fitch, do yo mind showing Mr. Marlow round? When you’ve done, come back here and we’ll have anothe chat.”

Whatever the shortcomings of the Spartacus offices, they were nowhere visible in th works. The Works Manager, to whom I took an instant liking, was obviously competent an the standard of work being turned out was extraordinarily high. “Pelcher,” said Mr. Fitch, a we crossed from one shop to another, “likes everything just so. He’s a fine engineer. If he ha his way and we hadn’t got a Board of ex-Generals and Members of Parliament with a title nitwit thrown in, this place would be twice the size. He’s a damned smart business man to But did you ever see anything like his office? He’s a lousy golfer as well. The last time played with him he took a slide-rule out to deal with problems of drift and wind resistanc Not that it made any difference to his game. On the first tee he spent two solid minutes wit the slide-rule and then pulled his drive somewhere round the back of his neck.”

As if to make up for this burst of confidence, Mr. Fitch maintained an unhappy silence fo the rest of the tour; but it was with slightly more zest that I ascended for the second time th stairs to Mr. Pelcher’s office.

Back in London that evening, I gave Claire a résumé of the day’s findings. “I think,” concluded, “that they’ll probably offer me the job. Of course, I shan’t take it. The mone they’ve got in mind is ridiculous. The lira may be in our favour, but that’s nothing to do wi what the job is worth in pounds sterling. And Italy, too! The whole thing is out of th question.”

“Of course, darling,” said Claire.

We said no more about it.

Two letters arrived for me next morning. One was from Mr. Pelcher, formally offering m the post of manager of the Spartacus Milan office. The other was from Hallett. His new jo did not start for another fortnight. He thought I would probably be fixed up by now. Could possibly lend him five pounds?

I went for a short walk, smoked a couple of cigarettes, sat down and replied to both letter

Three weeks later I caught the Folkestone boat-train.

To my intense relief there was nobody at the station to see me off. I had said good-bye t Claire the previous night. She was, she had said with somewhat emotional practicality, to busy at the hospital to spare time to come to the station. Later on she had wept ar explained, unnecessarily, that it wasn't that she couldn't spare the time, but that she didr want to make a fool of herself and me on the platform. "After all," we kept on assuring or another, "it's only for a few months, a temporary job until things get better here." By th time it was time for me to go back to the hotel into which I had moved, we had managed t evolve an atmosphere of bright camaraderie that spared both our feelings and our pock handkerchiefs.

"Good-bye, Nicky, darling," she had called after me as I had left, "don't get into trouble."

And I had laughed at the idea and called back that I wouldn't.

I actually laughed.

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