


Collins English Library Level 6

THE DARK

FRONTIER
ERIC AMBLER

Abridged and simplified by Richard Hail

Illustrations by Scoular Anderson

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Collins English Library

Series editors: K R Cripwell and Lewis Jones

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<i>Sons and Lovers</i>	D H Lawrence	6
<i>The Dark Frontier</i>	Eric Ambler	6

STATEMENT OF HENRY BARSTOW

F.R.S., D.S.C., PHYSICIST
OF PARK LANE, WIMBLEDON

The events in this book, I am told, form an account of my life during the period from April 17th to May 26th of last year.

I am unable either to confirm or deny this. I have been shown a photograph, taken by a newspaper photographer and forwarded from Ixania. In it, a person who looks like me is getting out of a large car in Zovgorod. However, my features are too ordinary for me to accept the photograph as proof of my presence in that attractive city. The machine-guns and barricades in the background make it even more unlikely, since I am nervous of guns and I hate the noise they make.

More considerable evidence for this amazing story is contained in the newspaper report of Mr William L. Casey, of the *New York Tribune*. Mr Casey was in Zovgorod during the same period, and his account of the affair has a grain of truth. But I must warn the reader that American journalists are an excitable group of people with too much imagination. Yet Mr Casey can always reply: "Well, what *did* you do during those five weeks?" I shall not be able to tell him, and I shall have to admit once again: this story is true.

Here, however, are the few definite facts.

I am forty years old, unmarried, and a physicist by profession. During the four months before

April 17th I had been working for a firm of instrument manufacturers who were producing a new and highly complicated piece of astronomical machinery. The job was difficult and demanding, and I worked almost day and night for many weeks. The strain soon began to affect my health. On April 10th I called to see my doctor. He said that I must either take a long holiday immediately or else risk a nervous breakdown.

I decided to finish my work first and to leave two days later. Before going, I sent notes to my mother and sister, and told my housekeeper to forward my letters. On April 17th at 6.30 a.m. I set out alone in my car. I was planning to go to Truro in Cornwall. By 1.30 p.m. I was in Launceston and stopped there for lunch at a hotel.

At this point my memory becomes less clear. I remember entering the hotel; I do not remember leaving it. I remember having a glass of sherry, not the meal which followed. I do not remember the mysterious Mr Groom at all. I have a vague memory of feeling ill and going into the hotel lounge to sit down. There, I know, I looked at a book on whose cover there was a man holding a gun. I think I was waiting for the rain to stop. The next thing I remember is driving along in the country. Then I felt sleepy. The next memory I have is of finding myself in the Bâle-Paris express, with the guard forcing whisky between my teeth. This was on May 26th, more than five weeks later. I do not remember what happened during this period. All I possessed on May 26th were my clothes and my passport. I believe that one of my

pockets contained a photograph – which I did not recognise – of a woman. Later I could find neither photograph nor passport.

For some months afterwards I was seriously ill. When I was almost better, I was brought the story which follows. To read about your own life is an odd experience. I rather liked this strange man, Henry Barstow. He was vain and romantic, yet full of energy and courage. At night, while I was ill, I often used to dream of him and his Countess. But now that I am well again, these dreams have faded. For me, Barstow has become a shadow, featureless – like a man behind a light.

Henry Barstow, *January, 193-*



PART ONE

The man who changed his mind

Chapter 1

April 17th

By half past twelve, Professor Barstow was feeling tired. He had already driven 300 km that day. With a sigh of relief, about three-quarters of an hour later, he turned his car into the courtyard of the Royal Crown Hotel at Launceston. He got out, stretched, and with methodical care, locked the doors.

Professor Barstow did everything methodically, whether he was applying the laws of physics or combing his beautiful cat. His lean, pale face, critical expression and neat dark-grey suit clearly showed the precision of his habits. His lectures before the Royal Society were respected for their impartial reviews of fact and their cautious admissions of theory. In fact, he deeply distrusted his imagination.

At that moment he was distrusting his imagination more than usual, as it was telling him what he did not want to believe – that he was a sick man who should be sleeping peacefully in the garden of a hotel somewhere, not racing up and down steep hills in his car.

He dismissed this idea firmly, entered the hotel and ordered a steak. While he waited, he drank a glass of sherry.

He suddenly thought of long-forgotten Cambridge days and of the time when he had almost decided to try for foreign service. Serving his government abroad – it was something he had always dreamed of: secret agreements and political scheming, with himself as the hero. Funny how dreams of that sort stayed with you. One half of your brain became a marvellous reasoning machine, while the other wandered over dark frontiers into strange countries where adventure, romance and sudden death lay waiting for the traveller . . .

He was still considering these youthful dreams as he ate his steak. The dining-room was empty except for a rather fat, white-haired man, who was staring hard at him.

“A lovely day, sir,” the man remarked as their eyes met.

“Yes,” said Professor Barstow, and then, not wishing to appear rude, “Yes, very.” He made no effort to continue the conversation, but the white-haired man was insistent.

“Are you staying in Launceston, sir?”

Professor Barstow shook his head. “I’m going on to Truro. You are staying in the hotel?” he added politely.

The white-haired man nodded absent-mindedly. Then, with a sudden look of decision, he moved his chair nearer to the Professor’s table and leant forward.

“Six months ago I was in China, before that South America, before that Turkey. For six years I’ve been out of England. For six years I’ve been

looking forward to the time when I could come home and settle down. Now I am home – what do I find? Nothing, absolutely nothing! I've been home a month now, and England bores me already."

"You've retired?"

The white-haired man looked at him for a moment without replying. His cheerfulness had left him. A pair of cold calculating eyes stared at the Professor.

"Tell me, sir," the man said thoughtfully. "I feel sure that I've seen your face before somewhere."

"About a year ago," Professor Barstow replied, "I became 'news' for two days and my photograph was in the newspapers. It was all most annoying."

"I knew it! I knew it!" the man exclaimed. "I never forget a face, but the name . . . just a minute, don't tell me . . . let me see, it's . . . Barstow . . . Professor Barstow. If I remember rightly, you caused quite a stir – you said atomic energy would soon be used both to the advantage and to the disadvantage of the human race, or something of the sort."

"Not at all," said the Professor very firmly. "I simply said that important developments in atomic energy might prove to be mixed blessings."

Later, over coffee, the Professor was glad of the opportunity to explain himself to such a sympathetic audience. He soon discovered that the white-haired man's name was Simon Groom. The

man talked fluently, and his knowledge of foreign affairs was remarkable. The Professor began to wonder about Groom's profession: another reporter perhaps? But finally Groom stated the reason for his interest in the Professor:

"Have you ever heard of the firm of Cator and Bliss? I see that you have. It's one of the largest arms-manufacturing organisations in the world." He paused for a moment. "Would you give me your word that this conversation will be treated in the strictest confidence?"

"You may rely upon me."

Simon Groom drew slowly at his cigar before continuing.

"It's a curious reflection on human aims and ideals," he said, "that man's knowledge advances most rapidly when he's creating a weapon of destruction. What would you say is the logical development of a new force such as atomic energy?"

"The ideals of science are constructive, not destructive," answered the Professor stiffly. "Science in the past has been shamefully misused. But it has learnt to protect itself."

Groom shook his head.

"No, Professor, you're wrong. While scientists are men, science cannot protect itself. The desire for power is too strong in the hearts of all men. Even as I talk to you now, events are proving you wrong. The first atomic bomb has been made!"

The Professor's first reaction was one of frightened suspicion. Was he talking to a madman? But, meeting that cold level gaze, he began

to fear that Groom might be speaking the truth. Finally, Professor Barstow laughed and said:

“You have a rather strange sense of humour, sir.”

“I thought you’d laugh,” said Groom calmly; “but let me put a question to you. In your opinion, which laboratory in the world is most likely to have achieved this development?”

Barstow mentioned a few names.

“Unfortunately, Professor, this thing was done in none of those places. Have you ever heard of Zovgorod? I thought not. Zovgorod is the capital of Ixania, and that’s where the work has been carried out.”

The Professor laughed. “But the cost of the apparatus alone would be far more than Ixania could afford!”

“I’m not joking, Professor,” Groom replied with some annoyance. “Although Ixania is an unimportant strip of unproductive country, it’s still a state with national ambitions. For years she’s envied richer and stronger countries, and now, as if in answer to her prayers, she’s somehow produced a man of genius.”

The Professor was now interested. He leant forward. “Who is he?”

Groom looked thoughtfully at his cigar before replying.

“Little is known about him,” he began. “He was educated at Zurich and at Bonn University. He was an outstanding student. From Bonn he went to Chicago and worked there for about six years. About three years ago he left Chicago and

returned to Zovgorod. His name is Kassen."

"Kassen," the Professor repeated eagerly. "I've heard of him. I once read an article by him, but it was a most moderate and unsensational piece of work. And has he produced an atomic bomb?"

"He has indeed. The trials were carried out three weeks ago in the mountains about a hundred kilometres north of Zovgorod. A representative of Cator and Bliss was there – unofficially of course. It appears that a small Kassen bomb moved over one thousand tonnes of rock."

"But that's horrible," gasped the Professor, "– and incredible."

"Horrible, certainly," agreed Groom, "but incredible, no."

The Professor was silent. He stared out of the window at the garden in front of the hotel. There was a green and peaceful air about the spring afternoon. Suddenly he felt as if he had just woken from a terrible nightmare. He was trembling.

"Why do you tell me this? After all, I'm a complete stranger to you."

Groom leant forward.

"Recently a representative of the Ixanian Government arrived in England and announced that he wanted to buy machinery for a food factory. One of the firms he approached is owned by Cator and Bliss. But either he's completely ignorant of how to manufacture food, or he wants to put the apparatus to another use. Certain persons took an interest in the matter, and orders have been given to get the contract at any price. That will allow us

to delay the manufacture of Kassen bombs on a large scale for a while. It's absolutely essential to get complete information about the bomb. Professor, I wish to put a proposition before you. But first perhaps, I should explain my position: I am the foreign representative of Cator and Bliss, and a director of the company."

The Professor nodded slowly. Groom became very businesslike.

"Briefly, my proposition is this: at the moment I'm waiting for the Ixanian Government representative to leave for Zovgorod. I shall follow. My agents in Ixania will watch him and find out the exact source of his instructions. Now, Professor, it's almost certain that the Government will try to provide me with worthless information. Since this is work of a specialised nature, I need a technical adviser. There's only one man in the world who knows more about the possibilities of atomic energy than you, and his name is Kassen. Professor Barstow, I want you to come with me to Zovgorod. I offer you the post of technical adviser to Cator and Bliss."

It was some moments before Professor Barstow could grasp the other's meaning.

"I see," he said at last.

"Naturally," Groom continued smoothly, "your work would remain confidential. As far as money is concerned, you can, within reason, name your own figure."

"And if I refuse your offer?"

"I hope there'll be no question of that, Professor. There's too much at risk. Imagine

what would happen in Europe if a small and unimportant state were to gain absolute power. Here, Professor, is an opportunity to serve both science and civilisation.”

The Professor stood up with an air of decision. He spoke very distinctly.

“Mr Groom, I said earlier that science can no longer be misused. I meant that. You ask for my co-operation in an undertaking which will serve both science and civilisation. Allow me to correct you. The only people it will serve are those who invest in Cator and Bliss. My answer to your proposition is ‘no’.”

Groom laughed. “Well, Professor, in spite of your doubts I still hope you’ll change your mind.”

For once Professor Barstow let himself go.

“Not a chance in Hell, Mr Groom,” he said firmly.

Chapter 2

April 17th and 18th

Groom rose slowly to his feet. His lips bore a thin smile, but his eyes had narrowed to pin-points of cold anger. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance.

“All the same, Professor, I shall not accept your refusal. For the next few days I expect to be at the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I’m travelling by air today. If you change your mind . . .”