

THE  
SECRET AGENT

A SIMPLE TALE



*Joseph Conrad*

*With a New Introduction by  
E. L. Doctorow*



SIGNET CLASSICS



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**Joseph Conrad** (1857-1924) lived a life that was as fantastic as any of his fiction. His aristocratic parents were ardent Polish patriots who died as a result of their revolutionary activities when he was a child. Conrad went to sea at sixteen, taught himself English, and gradually worked his way up until he passed his master's examination and was given command of merchant ships in Asia and on the Congo River. At the age of thirty-two, he decided to try his hand at writing. Although his work won the admiration of critics, sales were small. He was a nervous, introverted, gloomy man, for whom writing was an agony, but he was rich in friends who appreciated his genius, among them Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Ford Madox Ford.

**Edgar Lawrence Doctorow** was born in New York in 1931 and is a graduate of Kenyon College. He worked as a reader for a motion picture company and then as a prominent book editor before the publication of his third novel, *The Book of Daniel* (1971), brought him acclaim as a writer and he was nominated for a National Book Award. Among his other works are *Ragtime* (1975, National Book Critics Circle Award), *World's Fair* (1986, National Book Award), *Loon Lake* (1980), *Billy Bathgate* (1989, PEN/Faulkner Prize), *The Waterworks* (1994), and *The March* (2005), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. He holds the Glucksman Chair in American Letters at New York University and is the recipient of many additional honors, including the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Humanities Medal.

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Published by New American Library, a division of  
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,  
New York, New York 10014, USA  
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,  
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)  
Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2,  
Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)  
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124,  
Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)  
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi - 110 017, India  
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Mairangi Bay,  
Auckland 1311, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)  
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue,  
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa  
Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices:  
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
Published by Signet Classics, an imprint of New American Library,  
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.  
First Signet Classics Printing, November 1983  
First Signet Classics Printing (Doctorow Introduction), April 2007

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eISBN : 978-1-101-12689-9



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## Introduction

The amazing Joseph Conrad, a Pole whose genius found its metier in the English language, published *The Secret Agent* in 1908. His previous career as a merchant sailor having endowed him with a geographical reach—the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the East Indies in *Lord Jim* (1900), South America in *Nostramo* (1904)—it was only a matter of time before he would turn his laser eye on his adopted homeland. The man who at age twenty taught himself English and in less than a quarter century produced a body of work that put him in the pantheon of great English novelists, would choose for a setting the same city that a more circumspect writer would have thought was owned by Charles Dickens.

Dickens' London is the city of the industrial revolution—it may be dirty, sooty, class-ridden, rife with injustice, and populated by bumbling lawyers, street thieves, orphans deprived of their patrimony, and bizarre characters given to inane homilies, but it is not the heart of darkness of Conrad's London. We have moved forward in time some fifty years: the London of *The Secret Agent* is hermetic, “choked in raw fog” or “drowned in cold rain.” The Thames is “a sinister marvel of shadows and flowing gleams mingling ... in a black silence.” The sun, insofar as it manages to appear, may be “bloodshot” and the city at night slumbers “monstrously on a carpet of mud under a veil of raw mist.” Just a few people are its significant population. And though they range from the low to the highborn, their lives are brought into relief by a single violent episode—a terrorist bombing—that, not to disturb the closeted drama of the piece, occurs offstage.

In Dickens there is a possibility of redemption, a capacity for forgiveness, a discerning eye for innocence. Conrad by contrast forgives no one, redeems no one, nor will he portray innocence of that kind to bring tears to our eyes. Those characters he does not view with contempt may suffer only his ironic amusement, or be condescended to with pity, but no one escapes his accounting. Conrad writes looking down. It is his achievement to provide us no character with whom we wish to identify, yet to keep us intensely engaged.

What has put the novelist in this frame of mind? Recalling his earlier *Heart of Darkness*, we might be justified in attributing to him the despairingly bleak view of humankind of a prophet. In that work nameless, spiritually bereft Congolese slaves and murderous European colonialists seem to exhaust the range of human possibility. But something more specific is at work in this London *noir*. What it can be surmised from the quartet of anarchists Conrad puts on display early in the story: Michaelis, an overweight philosophic dreamer, Jundt, a bitter wizened misanthrope, and Ossipon, an example of the revolutionary as opportunist, are met in the back parlor of the indolent Verloc, a presumed member of this local anarchist cell, but in fact the secret agent of the title, a man whose income derives not from the shabby part-porno, part-stationer's shop he owns, but from his work as a mole and would-be *agent provocateur* on behalf of a foreign government. Conrad derives from the situation of the hapless marginal men a reason to abhor utopian thinking. The futility and death immanent in revolutionary activism is his presiding theme. He will show us that any noble social ideal is necessarily configured to the weak minds of its adherents.

But why anarchism? Today it exists mostly in books as a political philosophy. Anarchism would

replace the nation-state, and the hieratic economic structures, capitalist or communist, that legitimizes, with the loose association of libertarian-socialist communities that it conceives bringing true freedom and individual self-realization to mankind. But in Conrad's time anarchism was an international political force that took the form of militant trade unionism. In Italy, Spain, France, the United States, and in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, anarchist parties had adherents in the tens not hundreds of thousands. Strikes, rallies, demands for an eight-hour working day, mass marches, factory occupations, and, inevitably, acts of violence were front-page stories all over the world. Ferocious repression of such anarchist tactics as the general strike engendered violence in turn. It was a hybridized movement and there were those anarchists who instigated bombings and assassinations intended to raise public awareness and rally support. Inevitably the newspaper cartoon of the black bearded alien tossing a bomb that was drawn like an apple with a stem became the reductive image of the movement.

When Conrad set about writing *The Secret Agent* in 1907, anarchists were the designated terrorists of his day.

But what of this quartet meeting in the shabby parlor behind the shop of the secret agent Verloc? They are anything but menacing. When they meet it is only to argue with one another as to how best to bring their revolutionary vision into being. Shall it come inevitably from the pacific, literary publicizing of its reasonableness on one hand, or through acts of violence against capitalist symbols of power, on the other? In any case they will end up doing nothing. Their internal dissension renders these anarchists hapless, however dangerous they are portrayed in the press.

Conrad accurately satirizes the ineffective anarchist underworld in Britain; it was a sputtering, stumbling movement compared to what was happening on the Continent. The plot of *The Secret Agent* unfolds, ironically, as Verloc goes on to report to Mr. Vladimir, the suave and contemptuous foreign embassy official—French, Russian, Hungarian?—who runs him. Apparently the indolent Verloc has not been getting results. If the anarchists he spies upon are too weak to do anything, Verloc will have to do it for them. Something must be done to awaken England to the anarchist menace. Verloc is ordered to compromise his vacillating comrades and fulfill his role as *agent provocateur* by committing “an outrage”—specifically he is to blow up the Greenwich Observatory.

It is an historical fact that there had been an attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory more than a dozen years before Conrad undertook his novel. The bomber, an anarchist, had only succeeded in blowing himself up. In an Author's Note for the collected works edition of his novel, Conrad tells how the incident eventually aroused his imaginative instincts when he heard from someone that the bomber's sister committed suicide shortly after the bombing. From such forgotten newspaper stories and casual conversations are novels born. Conrad's friend, Henry James, in his essay “The Art of Fiction,” speaks of novels emerging from a writer's “immense sensibility ... that takes to itself the faintest hints of life ... and converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.”

Verloc is married to a younger woman, Winnie, who minds the shop for him when he is away; she has married him to ensure a home for her younger retarded brother, Stevie, and her old mother, the onetime keeper of a boardinghouse, where, indeed, Verloc had been a lodger and had come to know the three of them. And so in the small rooms behind the shop does this improvised family live in a state of passionless dependence until a bomb explodes at the Greenwich Observatory and does no damage except to the bomber.

Here we must acknowledge the construction of the book: Verloc will now disappear for several chapters. He disappears either because he has destroyed himself, or because he is alive and the author must absent him from the narrative if the truth of what happened is to be withheld, as it must in all works that participate suspensefully in the genre of the detective novel. For of course this one does even as its substance is political intrigue. At the Observatory the police have found only the unidentifiable fragments of a body—"a heap of rags," says Conrad, "scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast." And in a series of real-time scenes with no elisions, we follow the investigation of this event as it works like a fuse for another kind of bomb, a revelation that will wreak devastation in the lives of several of the characters.

Remarkably, in a work dealing with espionage and terrorist violence, its realms are private. Most of the action occurs indoors, and when outdoors in alleys or dark narrow streets. The story develops through the conversational exchanges of the characters. These exchanges succeed one another as a narrative skein of event and reaction rolling itself out—Verloc and the embassy official Mr. Vladimir, the Chief Inspector of Police with the Professor, a malign little nihilist who lives only to devise "the perfect detonator," the Assistant Commissioner of Police with "the great lady," a patroness of the anarchist Michaelis and a practitioner of fin de siècle radical chic, and so on. In nineteenth-century novels of espionage and political intrigue—Stendhal, Dumas—the geography is generously given and lots of time passes. People move about, there are vistas, horizons. Not so here. *The Secret Agent* foretells the twentieth-century genre, as exemplified by Graham Greene and John Le Carré, in which the players are not romantics but woeful interior men not quite up to the demands of their profession. But what has never been achieved since, in the genre of political thriller, is the intensity with which Conrad attends to his characters. He may treat them with disdain or grisly amusement but his authorial love for them is unbounded. He loves them for the opportunity they give him for extended moral analysis. Never more clearly than in this novel can the novel be seen as an aesthetic system of opinions. The story moves forward through the characters' thoughts and feelings; there is total invasion of their privacy, and with the exception of the afflicted boy Stevie, they are a company that would not want that much shown of themselves—certainly not their ruling self-interest. Nor would they want to learn of themselves their capacity for self-deception.

We read *The Secret Agent* in the illusion that the time it takes us to read is equivalent to the passage of time in the story. We feel this despite the major disruption of chronology. With some variation, and not eccentricity, Conrad is observing the classical unities of time and place and—by means of the consistent attitudinal voice—theme.

It may not be unfair to say that Conrad's conservatism was bred in him when, as a child, he went into exile with his politically active Polish parents (the family name was Korzeniowski) only to have them die by the time he was eleven. Some of his biographers have made much of this fact. Such a stunning bereavement had come of his parents' radicalism—his father having been a Polish nationalist in prominent opposition to the Tsarist occupation of his country—and it is not hard to imagine that Conrad was educated to a despair of political activism by the bitterness of his childhood losses. Of course such psychologizing of an author's childhood does not account for the self-sufficiency of his art. *The Secret Agent* proves out on its own—it is an aesthetically realized work, a devised universe of words that tells us all we need to know in order to understand it and it requires of us no knowledge

the author's life to justify its given nature. Nevertheless this work, which deals most directly with the dissident political life of the sort to which his father was given, happens to be the most constrictive of Conrad's novels. It is as if only by sealing off his characters in their dark hermetic city, and giving them their being in the formal genre of a deductive mystery, could he resist polemic and find a secure aesthetic accommodation for his own passionately held political beliefs. For as the poet W. H. Auden once said: "A writer's politics are more of a danger to him than his cupidity."

But if Conrad rejected the parental Korzeniowskis' activism, he did not abjure the social position that gave it leave: the family had been of the Polish upper class, they were landed gentry, and what the orphaned boy came away with was a recollection of the regal presumption he was born to.

We find a trace of this presumption in Conrad's most often quoted remark about the writer's task from his introduction to his *Nigger of the Narcissus*:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

That tail at the end, that "glimpse of truth" for which we "have forgotten to ask" puts us down there with Verloc and his self-deluding companions. Certainly no American writer from the last century could get away with such grandiose sentiments, all capped by some regal disdain for the common reader. We can forgive Conrad because he delivered great work, and in a time when perhaps writers had more right to claim their importance to the culture of mankind than now when they are hardly heard through the static of electronic life, and the stroboscopic dazzlement of film. Conrad wrote when, in the words of the critic Alfred Kazin, "writing was everything." He had the hard life of the writer's writer with very little money to show for it. And writing for no matter how many years, and with whatever brilliance, in a language to which you were not born, could you not have heard antiphonally, as if whispered by ghosts, the language you were born to and from which you derive your aristocratic sense of yourself?

But we can take these observations back to the book itself and remark with appreciation how Conrad has applied his finely textured Jamesian prose to distinctly non-Jamesian characters. He writes of Verloc, for example, that

Mr Verloc extended as much recognition to Stevie as a man not particularly fond of animals may give to his wife's beloved cat; and this recognition, benevolent and perfunctory, was essentially of the same quality.

A peculiarity of the book is that some characters have names but others are referred to only by the title or their station in life—not only the "great lady" but the "Assistant Commissioner," or the malignant bomb maker whom we know only as the "Professor." Presumably there are ironic distinctions to be made in Conrad's overview of the society of the book. Or perhaps it is the author sounding his voice in whatever way he conceivably can. For however presumptive his invasion of his characters' minds, he does maintain his distance somewhat above them.

Withal we are heartened to notice the workmanlike strategies to which Conrad sometimes resorts. When Verloc is brought back into the narrative, it is to a time before the failed bombing of the Observatory. Here we find Winnie Verloc's old mother, concerned that Verloc may grow to resent his

economic responsibility for Winnie's extended family, sacrificially deciding to move herself to an almshouse to lighten Verloc's burden and ensure that the poor, weak-minded Stevie will always have home. There is a long, memorable cab ride in the middle of the night as Winnie and Stevie take the mother across London to her new home for indigents. And Conrad being Conrad, he does not stint in this scene: the cabbie, the cabbie's horse, and the entire London night get their full due in one of the most brilliant chapters of the book. He will use nobody carelessly as a functional presence with more character than the job he or she holds. Every person will be given their justice—they are each the center of their universe, as with the barely articulate disgruntled cabbie with his broken-down hackney carriage and wretched knacker of a horse taking Winnie Verloc's mother to her rest home.

The pertinent strategy is this: why in the middle of this novel of political intrigue does Winnie Verloc's mother decide to leave the family home and take up residence across London? The answer, of course, is that she has to be gotten out of the way for the climactic scenes of the novel. For finally it is this family of the secret agent and his wife and her retarded younger brother to whom Conrad gives most of his attention. The family home, the precinct of intimate family life, is where history will crash through the door and demolish everything in its path.

But in deciding he had to remove the old mother from any diluting influence she might have on the horrifying final scenes, Conrad discovered, with what must have been nothing short of exuberance how he loved describing that journey across the London night, with poor Stevie concerned that the cabbie was whipping his broken-down horse, and the cabbie, to whom Conrad had given a prosthetic arm and an oversized head, becoming a frightening presence to the old woman, and the horse itself made as specific a horse as decrepitude could ensure.

And so we reclaim Conrad from his august throne as a writer of classics to make him a working writer for the here and now: What is strategically necessary—the tactical removal of a minor character—becomes first a brilliant improvisation—Conrad's aesthetic conscience allowing him to let nothing go by without milking its meaning to the fullest—and then, perhaps unanticipated even by him—the iconic image of this woeful society of sad, doomed people that will endure long after we have read the last page.

-E. L. Doctorow

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To H. G. Wells  
The Chronicler of Mr. Lewisham's Love  
The Biographer of Kipps and  
The Historian of the Ages to Come  
This Simple Tale of the XIX Century  
Is Affectionately Offered

Mr. Verloc, going out in the morning, left his shop nominally in charge of his brother-in-law. It could be done, because there was very little business at any time, and practically none at all before the evening. Mr. Verloc cared but little about his ostensible business. And, moreover, his wife was in charge of his brother-in-law.

The shop was small, and so was the house. It was one of those grimy brick houses which existed in large quantities before the era of reconstruction dawned upon London. The shop was a square box of a place, with the front glazed in small panes. In the daytime the door remained closed; in the evening it stood discreetly but suspiciously ajar.

The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two-and-six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string, as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like *The Torch*, *The Gong*—rousing titles. And the two gas-jets inside the window panes were always turned low, either for economy's sake or for the sake of the customers.

These customers were either very young men, who hung about the window for a time before slipping in suddenly; or men of a more mature age, but looking generally as if they were not in funds. Some of that last kind had the collars of their overcoats turned right up to their moustaches, and traces of mud on the bottom of their nether garments, which had the appearance of being much worn and not very valuable. And the legs inside them did not, as a general rule, seem of much account either. With their hands plunged deep in the side pockets of their coats, they dodged in sideways, one should think first, as if afraid to start the bell going.

The bell, hung on the door by means of a curved ribbon of steel, was difficult to circumvent. It would hopelessly cracked; but of an evening, at the slightest provocation, it clattered behind the customer with impudent virulence.

It clattered; and at that signal, through the dusty glass door behind the painted deal counter, Mr. Verloc would issue hastily from the parlour at the back. His eyes were naturally heavy; he had an appearance of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed. Another man would have felt such an appearance a distinct disadvantage. In a commercial transaction of the retail order much depends on the seller's engaging and amiable aspect. But Mr. Verloc knew his business, and remained undisturbed by any sort of aesthetic doubt about his appearance. With a firm, steady-eyed impudence, which seemed to hold back the threat of some abominable menace, he would proceed to sell over the counter some object looking obviously and scandalously not worth the money which passed in the transaction—a small cardboard box with apparently nothing inside, for instance, or one of those carefully closed yellow flimsy envelopes, or a soiled volume in paper covers with a promising title. Now and then it happened that one of the faded, yellow dancing girls would get sold to an amateur, as though she had been alive and young.

Sometimes it was Mrs. Verloc who would appear at the call of the cracked bell. Winnie Verloc was ~~a young woman with a full bust, in a tight bodice, and with broad hips. Her hair was very tidy.~~ Steady-eyed like her husband, she preserved an air of unfathomable indifference behind the rampart of the counter. Then the customer of comparatively tender years would get suddenly disconcerted at having to deal with a woman, and with rage in his heart would proffer a request for a bottle of marking ink of retail value sixpence (price in Verloc's shop one-and-sixpence), which, once outside, he would drop stealthily into the gutter.

The evening visitors—the men with collars turned up and soft hats rammed down—nodded familiarly to Mrs. Verloc, and with a muttered greeting, lifted up the flap at the end of the counter in order to pass into the back parlour, which gave access to a passage and to a steep flight of stairs. The door of the shop was the only means of entrance to the house in which Mr. Verloc carried on his business of a seller of shady wares, exercised his vocation of a protector of society, and cultivated his domestic virtues. These last were pronounced. He was thoroughly domesticated. Neither his spiritual nor his mental, nor his physical needs were of the kind to take him much abroad. He found at home the ease of his body and the peace of his conscience, together with Mrs. Verloc's wifely attentions and Mrs. Verloc's mother's deferential regard.

Winnie's mother was a stout, wheezy woman, with a large brown face. She wore a black wig under a white cap. Her swollen legs rendered her inactive. She considered herself to be of French descent, which might have been true; and after a good many years of married life with a licenced victualler of the more common sort, she provided for the years of widowhood by letting furnished apartments for gentlemen near Vauxhall Bridge Road in a square once of some splendour and still included in the district of Belgravia. This topographical fact was of some advantage in advertising her rooms; but the patrons of the worthy widow were not exactly of the fashionable kind. Such as they were, her daughter Winnie helped to look after them. Traces of the French descent which the widow boasted of were apparent in Winnie, too. They were apparent in the extremely neat and artistic arrangement of her glossy dark hair. Winnie had also other charms: her youth; her full, rounded form; her clear complexion; the provocation of her unfathomable reserve, which never went so far as to prevent conversation, carried on on the lodger's part with animation, and on hers with an equable amiability. It must be that Mr. Verloc was susceptible to these fascinations. Mr. Verloc was an intermittent patron. He came and went without any very apparent reason. He generally arrived in London (like the influenza) from the Continent, only he arrived unheralded by the Press; and his visitations set in with great severity. He breakfasted in bed, and remained wallowing there with an air of quiet enjoyment till noon every day—and sometimes even to a later hour. But when he went out he seemed to experience great difficulty in finding his way back to his temporary home in the Belgravian square. He left it late and returned to it early—as early as three or four in the morning; and on waking up at ten addressed Winnie, bringing in the breakfast tray, with jocular, exhausted civility, in the hoarse, failing tones of a man who had been talking vehemently for many hours together. His prominent, heavy-lidded eyes rolled sideways amorously and languidly, the bedclothes were pulled up to his chin, and his dark smooth moustache covered his thick lips capable of much honeyed banter.

In Winnie's mother's opinion Mr. Verloc was a very nice gentleman. From her life's experience gathered in various "business houses" the good woman had taken into her retirement an ideal of gentlemanliness as exhibited by the patrons of private-saloon bars. Mr. Verloc approached that ideal; he attained it, in fact.



“Of course, we’ll take over your furniture, mother,” Winnie had remarked.

The lodging-house was to be given up. It seems it would not answer to carry it on. It would have been too much trouble for Mr. Verloc. It would not have been convenient for his other business. What his business was he did not say; but after his engagement to Winnie he took the trouble to get up before noon, and descending the basement stairs, make himself pleasant to Winnie’s mother in the breakfast-room downstairs where she had her motionless being. He stroked the cat, poked the fire, had his lunch served to him there. He left its slightly stuffy cosiness with evident reluctance, but, all the same, remained out till the night was far advanced. He never offered to take Winnie to theatres, such a nice gentleman ought to have done. His evenings were occupied. His work was in a way political, he told Winnie once. She would have, he warned her, to be very nice to his political friends. And with her straight, unfathomable glance she answered that she would be so, of course.

How much more he told her as to his occupation it was impossible for Winnie’s mother to discover. The married couple took her over with the furniture. The mean aspect of the shop surprised her. The change from the Belgravian square to the narrow street in Soho affected her legs adversely. The room became of an enormous size. On the other hand, she experienced a complete relief from material cares. Her son-in-law’s heavy good nature inspired her with a sense of absolute safety. Her daughter’s future was obviously assured, and even as to her son Stevie she need have no anxiety. She had not been able to conceal from herself that he was a terrible encumbrance, that poor Stevie. But in view of Winnie’s fondness for her delicate brother, and of Mr. Verloc’s kind and generous disposition, she felt that the poor boy was pretty safe in this rough world. And in her heart of hearts she was not perhaps displeased that the Verlocs had no children. As that circumstance seemed perfectly indifferent to Mr. Verloc, and as Winnie found an object of quasi-maternal affection in her brother, perhaps this was just as well for poor Stevie.

For he was difficult to dispose of, that boy. He was delicate and, in a frail way, good-looking, too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip. Under our excellent system of compulsory education he had learned to read and write, notwithstanding the unfavourable aspect of the lower lip. But as errand boy he did not turn out a great success. He forgot his messages; he was easily diverted from the straight path of duty by the attractions of stray cats and dogs, which he followed down narrow alleys into unsavoury courts; by the comedies of the streets, which he contemplated open-mouthed, to the detriment of his employer’s interests; or by the dramas of fallen horses, whose pathos and violence induced him sometimes to shriek piercingly in a crowd, which disliked to be disturbed by sounds of distress in its quiet enjoyment of the national spectacle. When led away by a grave and protective policeman, it would often become apparent that poor Stevie had forgotten his address—at least for a time. A brusque question caused him to stutter to the point of suffocation. When startled by anything perplexing he used to squint horribly. However, he never had any fits (which was encouraging); and before the natural outbursts of impatience on the part of his father he could always, in his childhood days, run for protection behind the short skirts of his sister Winnie. On the other hand, he might have been suspected of hiding a fund of reckless naughtiness. When he had reached the age of fourteen a friend of his late father, an agent for a foreign preserved milk firm, having given him an opening as office-boy, he was discovered one foggy afternoon, in his chief’s absence, busy letting off fireworks on the staircase. He touched off in quick succession a set of fierce rockets, angry catherine wheels, loud exploding squibs—and the matter might have turned out very serious. An awful panic spread through the whole building. Wild-eyed, choking clerks stampeded through the passages full of smoke; silk hats and elderly business men could be seen rolling independently down the stairs. Stevie did not seem

derive any personal gratification from what he had done. His motives for this stroke of originality were difficult to discover. It was only later on that Winnie obtained from him a misty and confused confession. It seems that two other office-boys in the building had worked upon his feelings by tales of injustice and oppression till they had wrought his compassion to the pitch of that frenzy. But his father's friend, of course, dismissed him summarily as likely to ruin his business. After that altruistic exploit Stevie was put to help wash the dishes in the basement kitchen, and to black the boots of the gentlemen patronizing the Belgravian mansion. There was obviously no future in such work. The gentlemen tipped him a shilling now and then. Mr. Verloc showed himself the most generous of lodgers. But altogether all that did not amount to much either in the way of gain or prospects; so that when Winnie announced her engagement to Mr. Verloc her mother could not help wondering, with a sigh and a glance towards the scullery, what would become of poor Stephen now.

It appeared that Mr. Verloc was ready to take him over together with his wife's mother and with the furniture, which was the whole visible fortune of the family. Mr. Verloc gathered everything as it came to his broad, good-natured breast. The furniture was disposed to the best advantage all over the house, but Mrs. Verloc's mother was confined to two back rooms on the first floor. The luckless Stevie slept in one of them. By this time a growth of thin fluffy hair had come to blur, like a golden mist, the sharp line of his small lower jaw. He helped his sister with blind love and docility in his household duties. Mr. Verloc thought that some occupation would be good for him. His spare time he occupied by drawing circles with compass and pencil on a piece of paper. He applied himself to this pastime with great industry, with his elbows spread out and bowed low over the kitchen table. Through the open door of the parlour at the back of the shop Winnie, his sister, glanced at him from time to time with maternal vigilance.

Such was the house, the household, and the business Mr. Verloc left behind him on his way westward at the hour of half-past ten in the morning. It was unusually early for him; his whole person exhaled the charm of almost dewy freshness; he wore his blue cloth overcoat unbuttoned; his boots were shiny; his cheeks, freshly shaven, had a sort of gloss; and even his heavy-lidded eyes, refreshed by a night of peaceful slumber, sent out glances of comparative alertness. Through the park railings these glances beheld men and women riding in the Row, couples cantering past harmoniously, others advancing sedately at a walk, loitering groups of three or four, solitary horsemen looking unsociably, and solitary women followed at a long distance by a groom with a cockade to his hat and a leather bag over his tight-fitting coat. Carriages went bowling by, mostly two-horse broughams, with here and there a victoria with the skin of some wild beast inside and a woman's face and hat emerging above the folded hood. And a peculiarly London sun—against which nothing could be said except that it looked bloodshot—glorified all this by its stare. It hung at a moderate elevation above Hyde Park Corner with an air of punctual and benign vigilance. The very pavement under Mr. Verloc's feet had an old-gold tinge in that diffused light, in which neither wall, nor tree, nor beast, nor man cast a shadow. Mr. Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold. There were red, coppery gleams on the roofs of houses, on the corners of walls, on the panels of carriages, on the very coats of the horses, and on the broad back of Mr. Verloc's overcoat, where they produced a dull effect of rustiness. But Mr. Verloc was not in the least conscious of having got rusty. He surveyed through the park railings the evidences of the town's opulence and luxury with an approving eye. All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour. It had to—and Mr. Verloc would have rubbed his hands with satisfaction had he not been constitutionally averse from every superfluous exertion. His idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence from an impulse as profound, as inexplicable, and as imperious as the impulse which directs a man's preference for one particular woman in a given thousand. He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour. It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease; or it might have been that he was the victim of philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort. Such a form of indolence requires, implies, a certain amount of intelligence. Mr. Verloc was not devoid of intelligence—and at the notice of a menaced social order he would perhaps have winked to himself if there had not been an effort to make in that sign of scepticism. His big, prominent eyes were not well adapted to winking. They were rather of the sort that closes solemnly in slumber with majestic effect.

Undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style, Mr. Verloc, without either rubbing his hands with satisfaction or winking sceptically at his thoughts, proceeded on his way. He trod the pavement heavily with his shiny boots, and his general get-up was that of a well-to-do mechanic in business for himself. He might have been anything from a picture-frame maker to a locksmith; an employer

labour in a small way. But there was also about him an indescribable air which no mechanic could have acquired in the practice of his handicraft however dishonestly exercised: the air common to men who live on the vices, the follies, or the baser fears of mankind; the air of moral nihilism common to keepers of gambling hells and disorderly houses; to private detectives and inquiry agents; to drink-sellers and, I should say, to the sellers of invigorating electric belts and to the inventors of patent medicines. But of that last I am not sure, not having carried my investigations so far into the depths. For all I know, the expression of these last may be perfectly diabolic. I shouldn't be surprised. What I want to affirm is that Mr. Verloc's expression was by no means diabolic.

Before reaching Knightsbridge, Mr. Verloc took a turn to the left out of the busy main thoroughfare uproarious with the traffic of swaying omnibuses and trotting vans, into the almost silent, swift flow of hansoms. Under his hat, worn with a slight backward tilt, his hair had been carefully brushed into respectful sleekness; for his business was with an Embassy. And Mr. Verloc, steady like a rock—of a soft kind of rock—marched now along a street which could with every propriety be described as private. In its breadth, emptiness, and extent it had the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies. The only reminder of mortality was a doctor's brougham arrested in august solitude close to the curbstone. The polished knockers of the doors gleamed as far as the eye could reach, the clean windows shone with a dark opaque lustre. And all was still. But a milk cart rattled noisily across the distant perspective; a butcher boy, driving with the noble recklessness of a charioteer at Olympic Games, dashed round the corner sitting high above a pair of red wheels. A guilty-looking cat issuing from under the stones ran for a while in front of Mr. Verloc, then dived into another basement; and a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion, as if he, too, were part of inorganic nature, surging apparently out of a lamp-post, took not the slightest notice of Mr. Verloc. With a turn to the left Mr. Verloc pursued his way along a narrow street by the side of a yellow wall which, for some inscrutable reason, had No. 1 Chesham Square written on it in black letters. Chesham Square was at least sixty yards away, and Mr. Verloc, cosmopolitan enough not to be deceived by London's topographical mysteries, held on steadily, without a sign of surprise or indignation. At last, with business-like persistency, he reached the Square, and made diagonally for the number 10. This belonged to an imposing carriage gate in a high, clean wall between two houses, of which one rationally enough bore the number 9 and the other was numbered 37; but the fact that this latter belonged to Porthill Street, a street well known in the neighbourhood, was proclaimed by an inscription placed above the ground-floor windows by whatever highly efficient authority is charged with the duty of keeping track of London's strayed houses. Why powers are not asked of Parliament (or a short act would do) for compelling those edifices to return where they belong is one of the mysteries of municipal administration. Mr. Verloc did not trouble his head about it, his mission in life being the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism.

It was so early that the porter of the Embassy issued hurriedly out of his lodge still struggling with the left sleeve of his livery coat. His waistcoat was red, and he wore knee-breeches, but his aspect was flustered. Mr. Verloc, aware of the rush on his flank, drove it off by simply holding out an envelope stamped with the arms of the Embassy, and passed on. He produced the same talisman also to the footman who opened the door, and stood back to let him enter the hall.

A clear fire burned in a tall fireplace, and an elderly man standing with his back to it, in evening dress and with a chain round his neck, glanced up from the newspaper he was holding spread out on both hands before his calm and severe face. He didn't move; but another lackey, in brown trousers and a clawhammer coat edged with thin yellow cord, approaching Mr. Verloc listened to the murmur of his

name, and turning round on his heel in silence, began to walk, without looking back once. Mr. Verloc thus led along a ground-floor passage to the left of the great carpeted staircase, was suddenly motioned to enter a quite small room furnished with a heavy writing-table and a few chairs. The servant shut the door, and Mr. Verloc remained alone. He did not take a seat. With his hat and stick held in one hand he glanced about, passing his other podgy hand over his uncovered sleek head.

Another door opened noiselessly, and Mr. Verloc immobilizing his glance in that direction saw a first only black clothes, the bald top of a head, and a drooping dark grey whisker on each side of a pair of wrinkled hands. The person who had entered was holding a batch of papers before his eyes and walked up to the table with a rather mincing step, turning the papers over the while. Privy Councillor Wurmt, Chancellor d'Ambassade, was rather shortsighted. This meritorious official, laying the papers on the table, disclosed a face of pasty complexion and of melancholy ugliness surrounded by a lot of fine, long dark grey hairs, barred heavily by thick and bushy eyebrows. He put on a black-framed pince-nez upon a blunt and shapeless nose, and seemed struck by Mr. Verloc's appearance. Under the enormous eyebrows his weak eyes blinked pathetically through the glasses.

He made no sign of greeting; neither did Mr. Verloc who certainly knew his place; but a subtle change about the general outlines of his shoulders and back suggested a slight bending of Mr. Verloc's spine under the vast surface of his overcoat. The effect was of unobtrusive deference.

"I have here some of your reports," said the bureaucrat in an unexpectedly soft and weary voice, and pressing the tip of his forefinger on the papers with force. He paused; and Mr. Verloc, who had recognized his own handwriting very well, waited in an almost breathless silence. "We are not very satisfied with the attitude of the police here," the other continued, with every appearance of mental fatigue.

The shoulders of Mr. Verloc, without actually moving, suggested a shrug. And for the first time since he left his home that morning his lips opened.

"Every country has its police," he said, philosophically. But as the official of the Embassy went on blinking at him steadily he felt constrained to add: "Allow me to observe that I have no means of action upon the police here."

"What is desired," said the man of papers, "is the occurrence of something definite which should stimulate their vigilance. That is within your province—is it not so?"

Mr. Verloc made no answer except by a sigh, which escaped him involuntarily, for instantly he tried to give his face a cheerful expression. The official blinked doubtfully, as if affected by the dim light of the room. He repeated vaguely:

"The vigilance of the police—and the severity of the magistrates. The general leniency of the judicial procedure here, and the utter absence of all repressive measures, are a scandal to Europe. What is wished for just now is the accentuation of the unrest—of the fermentation which undoubtedly exists—"

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly," broke in Mr. Verloc in a deep, deferential bass of an oratorical quality, so utterly different from the tone in which he had spoken before that his interlocutor remained profoundly surprised. "It exists to a dangerous degree. My reports for the last twelve months make it sufficiently clear."

"Your reports for the last twelve months," State Councillor Wurmt began in his gentle and

dispassionate tone, "have been read by me. I failed to discover why you wrote them at all."

A sad silence reigned for a time. Mr. Verloc seemed to have swallowed his tongue, and the other gazed at the papers on the table fixedly. At last he gave them a slight push.

"That state of affairs you expose there is assumed to exist as the first condition of your employment. What is required at present is not writing, but the bringing to light of a distinctly significant fact—I would almost say of an alarming fact."

"I need not say that all my endeavours shall be directed to that end," Mr. Verloc said, with convinced modulations in his conversational husky tone. But the sense of being blinked at watchfully behind the blind glitter of these eyeglasses on the other side of the table disconcerted him. He stopped short with a gesture of absolute devotion. The useful hard-working, if obscure member of the Embassy had an air of being impressed by some newly-born thought.

"You are very corpulent," he said.

This observation, really of a psychological nature, and advanced with the modest hesitation of an officeman more familiar with ink and paper than with the requirements of active life, stung Mr. Verloc in the manner of a rude personal remark. He stepped back a pace.

"Eh? What were you pleased to say?" he exclaimed, with husky resentment.

The Chancelier d'Ambassade, entrusted with the conduct of this interview, seemed to find it too much for him.

"I think," he said, "that you had better see Mr. Vladimir. Yes, decidedly I think you ought to see Mr. Vladimir. Be good enough to wait here," he added, and went out with mincing steps.

At once Mr. Verloc passed his hand over his hair. A slight perspiration had broken out on his forehead. He let the air escape from his pursed-up lips like a man blowing at a spoonful of hot soup. But when the servant in brown appeared at the door silently, Mr. Verloc had not moved an inch from the place he had occupied throughout the interview. He had remained motionless, as if feeling himself surrounded by pitfalls.

He walked along a passage lighted by a lonely gas-jet, then up a flight of winding stairs, and through a glazed and cheerful corridor on the first floor. The footman threw open a door, and stood aside. The feet of Mr. Verloc felt a thick carpet. The room was large, with three windows; and a young man with a shaven, big face, sitting in a roomy armchair before a vast mahogany writing-table, said in French to the Chancelier d'Ambassade, who was going out with the papers in his hand:

"You are quite right, mon cher. He's fat—the animal."

Mr. Vladimir, First Secretary, had a drawing-room reputation as an agreeable and entertaining man. He was something of a favourite in society. His wit consisted in discovering droll connections between incongruous ideas; and when talking in that strain he sat well forward on his seat, with his left hand raised, as if exhibiting his funny demonstrations between the thumb and forefinger, while his round and clean-shaven face wore an expression of merry perplexity.

But there was no trace of merriment or perplexity in the way he looked at Mr. Verloc. Lying far back in the deep armchair, with squarely spread elbows, and throwing one leg over a thick knee, he had with his smooth and rosy countenance the air of a preternaturally thriving baby that will not starve.

nonsense from anybody.

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“You understand French, I suppose?” he said.

Mr. Verloc stated huskily that he did. His whole vast bulk had a forward inclination. He stood on the carpet in the middle of the room, clutching his hat and stick in one hand; the other hung lifeless by his side. He muttered unobtrusively somewhere deep down in his throat something about having done his military service in the French artillery. At once, with contemptuous perversity, Mr. Vladimir changed the language, and began to speak idiomatic English without the slightest trace of a foreign accent.

“Ah! Yes. Of course. Let’s see. How much did you get for obtaining the design of the improved breech-block of their new field-gun?”

“Five years’ rigorous confinement in a fortress,” Mr. Verloc answered, unexpectedly, but without any sign of feeling.

“You got off easily,” was Mr. Vladimir’s comment. “And, anyhow, it served you right for letting yourself get caught. What made you go in for that sort of thing—eh?”

Mr. Verloc’s husky conversational voice was heard speaking of youth, of a fatal infatuation for an unworthy—

“Aha ! Cherchez la femme,” Mr. Vladimir deigned to interrupt, unbending, but without affability; there was, on the contrary, a touch of grimness in his condescension. “How long have you been employed by the Embassy here?” he asked.

“Ever since the time of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim,” Mr. Verloc answered in subdued tones and protruding his lips sadly, in sign of sorrow for the deceased diplomat. The First Secretary observed this play of physiognomy steadily.

“Ah! ever since.... Well! What have you got to say for yourself?” he asked, sharply.

Mr. Verloc answered with some surprise that he was not aware of having anything special to say. He had been summoned by a letter—And he plunged his hand busily into the side pocket of his overcoat, but before the mocking, cynical watchfulness of Mr. Vladimir, concluded to leave it there.

“Bah!” said the latter. “What do you mean by getting out of condition like this? You haven’t got even the physique of your profession. You—a member of a starving proletariat—never! You—desperate socialist or anarchist—which is it?”

“Anarchist,” stated Mr. Verloc in a deadened tone.

“Bosh!” went on Mr. Vladimir, without raising his voice. “You startled old Wurmt himself. You wouldn’t deceive an idiot. They all are that by-the-by, but you seem to me simply impossible. So you began your connection with us by stealing the French gun designs. And you got yourself caught. That must have been very disagreeable to our Government. You don’t seem to be very smart.”

Mr. Verloc tried to exculpate himself huskily.

“As I’ve had occasion to observe before, a fatal infatuation for an unworthy—”

Mr. Vladimir raised a large, white, plump hand.

“Ah, yes. The unlucky attachment—of your youth. She got hold of the money, and then sold you

the police—eh?”

The doleful change in Mr. Verloc's physiognomy, the momentary drooping of his whole person confessed that such was the regrettable case. Mr. Vladimir's hand clasped the ankle reposing on his knee. The sock was of dark blue silk.

“You see, that was not very clever of you. Perhaps you are too susceptible.”

Mr. Verloc intimated in a throaty, veiled murmur that he was no longer young.

“Oh! That's a failing which age does not cure,” Mr. Vladimir remarked, with sinister familiarity. “But no! You are too fat for that. You could not have come to look like this if you had been at all susceptible. I'll tell you what I think is the matter: you are a lazy fellow. How long have you been drawing pay from this Embassy?”

“Eleven years,” was the answer, after a moment of sulky hesitation. “I've been charged with several missions to London while His Excellency Baron Stott-Wartenheim was still Ambassador in Paris. Then by his Excellency's instructions I settled down in London. I am English.”

“You are! Are you? Eh?”

“A natural-born British subject,” Mr. Verloc said, stolidly. “But my father was French, and so—”

“Never mind explaining,” interrupted the other. “I daresay you could have been legally a Marshal of France and a Member of Parliament in England—and then, indeed, you would have been of some use to our Embassy.”

This flight of fancy provoked something like a faint smile on Mr. Verloc's face. Mr. Vladimir retained an imperturbable gravity.

“But, as I've said, you are a lazy fellow; you don't use your opportunities. In the time of Baron Stott-Wartenheim we had a lot of soft-headed people running this Embassy. They caused fellows of your sort to form a false conception of the nature of a secret service fund. It is my business to correct this misapprehension by telling you what the secret service is not. It is not a philanthropic institution. I've had you called here on purpose to tell you this.”

Mr. Vladimir observed the forced expression of bewilderment on Verloc's face, and smiled sarcastically.

“I see that you understand me perfectly. I daresay you are intelligent enough for your work. What we want now is activity—activity.”

On repeating this last word Mr. Vladimir laid a long white forefinger on the edge of the desk. Every trace of huskiness disappeared from Verloc's voice. The nape of his gross neck became crimson above the velvet collar of his overcoat. His lips quivered before they came widely open.

“If you'll only be good enough to look up my record,” he boomed out in his great, clear, oratorical bass, “you'll see I gave a warning only three months ago on the occasion of the Grand Duke Romuald's visit to Paris, which was telegraphed from here to the French police, and—”

“Tut, tut!” broke out Mr. Vladimir, with a frowning grimace. “The French police had no use for your warning. Don't roar like this. What the devil do you mean?”

With a note of proud humility Mr. Verloc apologized for forgetting himself. His voice, famous for



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