

**JOSEPH
CONRAD**

THE SECRET
AGENT

Joseph Conrad

The Secret Agent

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The Secret Agent



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CHAPTER 1

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 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 mustaches, 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 shoulder 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 was 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 parlor at the back. His eyes were naturally heavy; he had an air 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 labelled 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 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—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 parlor, 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 licensed 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 splendor 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 lodgers' 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 a 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 black smooth mustache 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 down-stairs, 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, as 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. They 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 Steevie she need have no anxiety. She had not been able to conceal from herself that he was a terrible encumbrance, that poor Steevie. 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 Steevie.

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 unfavorable 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 unsavory 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 protecting policeman, it would often become apparent that poor Steevie 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's 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, loudly 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. Steevie did not seem to 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 Steevie 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 Steevie 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 her 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 that pastime with great industry, with his elbows spread out and bowed low over the kitchen table. Through the open door of the parlor at the back of the shop Winnie, his sister, glanced at him from time to time with maternal vigilance.

CHAPTER 2

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 unsociable, and solitary women followed at a long distance by a groom with a cockade to his hat and a leather belt 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 favorable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labor. 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 labor. It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease; or it might have been he was the victim of a 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 notion 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 of labor 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, in 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—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 lamppost, 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 last belonged to Porthill Street, a street well known in the neighborhood, 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 (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 in both hands before his calm and severe face. He didn't move; but another lackey, in brown trousers and claw-hammer 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 at first only black clothes, the bald top of a head, and a drooping dark-gray 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 short-sighted. 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-gray hairs, barred heavily by thick and bushy eyebrows. He put 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.

"The 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 distinct, significant fact—I would almost say of an alarming fact."

"I need not say that all my endeavors 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 eye-glasses 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 Chancellor d'Ambassade intrusted 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 arm-chair 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 favorite 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 perplexity.

But there was no trace of merriment or perplexity in the way he looked at Mr. Verloc. Lying far back in the deep arm-chair, 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 stand nonsense from anybody.

“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 lifelessly 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?”

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’re a member of a starving proletariat—never! You’re a 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 Wurm 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 to 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 dare say 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 dare say 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 years at open-air meetings and at workmen's assemblies in large halls, had contributed, he said, to his reputation of a good and trustworthy comrade. It was, therefore, a part of his usefulness. It had inspired confidence in his principles. I was always put up to speak by the leaders at a critical moment, Mr. Verloc declared, with obvious satisfaction. There was no uproar above which he could not make himself heard, he added; and suddenly he made a demonstration.

Allow me, he said. With lowered forehead, without looking up, swiftly and ponderously he crossed the room to one of the French windows. As if giving way to an uncontrollable impulse, he opened it a little. Mr. Vladimir, jumping up amazed from the depths of the arm-chair, looked over his shoulder; and below, across the court-yard of the Embassy, well beyond the open gate, could be seen the broad back of a policeman watching idly the gorgeous perambulator of a wealthy baby being wheeled in state across the square.

Constable! said Mr. Verloc, with no more effort than if he were whispering; and Mr. Vladimir burst into a laugh on seeing the policeman spin round as if prodded by a sharp instrument. Mr. Verloc shut the window quietly, and returned to the middle of the room.

With a voice like that, he said, putting on the husky conversational pedal, I was naturally trusted. And I knew what to say, too.

Mr. Vladimir, arranging his cravat, observed him in the glass over the mantel-piece.

I dare say you have the social revolutionary jargon by heart well enough, he said, contemptuously. Vox et preterea nihil. You haven't ever studied Latin, have you?

No, growled Mr. Verloc. You did not expect me to know it. I belong to the million. Who knows Latin? Only a few hundred imbeciles who aren't fit to take care of themselves.

For some thirty seconds longer Mr. Vladimir studied in the mirror the fleshy profile, the gross bulk, of the man behind him. And at the same time he had the advantage of seeing his own face, clean-shaved and round, rosy about the gills, and with the thin, sensitive lips formed exactly for the utterance of those delicate witticisms which had made him such a favorite in the very highest society. Then he turned, and advanced into the room with such determination that the very ends of his quaintly old-fashioned bow necktie seemed to bristle with unspeakable menaces. The movement was so swift and fierce that Mr. Verloc, casting an oblique glance, quailed inwardly.

Aha! You dare be impudent, Mr. Vladimir began, with an amazingly guttural intonation not only utterly un-English, but absolutely un-European, and startling even to Mr. Verloc's experience of cosmopolitan slums. You dare! Well, I am going to speak plain English to you. Voice won't do. We have no use for your voice. We don't want a voice. We want facts! startling facts, damn you! he added, with a sort of ferocious discretion, right into Mr. Verloc's face.

Don't you try to come over me with your Hyperborean manners! Mr. Verloc defended himself huskily, looking at the carpet. At this his interlocutor, smiling mockingly above the bristling bow of his necktie, switched the conversation into French.

You give yourself for an agent provocateur. The proper business of an agent provocateur is to provoke. As far as I can judge from your record kept here, you have done nothing to earn your money for the last three years.

Nothing! exclaimed Verloc, stirring not a limb, and not raising his eyes, but with the note of sincere feeling in his tone. I have several times prevented what might have been

There is a proverb in this country which says prevention is better than cure, interrupted Mr. Vladimir, throwing himself into the arm-chair. It is stupid in a general way. There is no end to prevention. But it is characteristic. They dislike finality in this country. Don't you be too

English. And in this particular instance, donâ##t be absurd. The evil is already here. We donâ##t want preventionâ##we want cure.â##

He paused, turned to the desk, and turning over some papers lying there, spoke in a changed businesslike tone, without looking at Mr. Verloc.

â##You know, of course, of the International Conference assembled in Milan?â##

Mr. Verloc intimated hoarsely that he was in the habit of reading the daily papers. To a further question his answer was that, of course, he understood what he read. At this Mr. Vladimir, smiling faintly at the documents he was still scanning one after another, murmured: â##As long as it is not written in Latin, I suppose.â##

â##Or Chinese,â## added Mr. Verloc, stolidly.

â##Hâ##m. Some of your revolutionary friendsâ## effusions are written in a charabia every bit as incomprehensible as Chineseâ##â## Mr. Vladimir let fall disdainfully a gray sheet of printed matter. â##What are all these leaflets headed F. P., with a hammer, pen, and torch crossed? What does it mean, this F. P.?â## Mr. Verloc approached the imposing writing-table.

â##The Future of the Proletariat. Itâ##s a society,â## he explained, standing ponderously by the side of the arm-chair, â##not anarchist in principle, but open to all shades of revolutionary opinion.â##

â##Are you in it?â##

â##One of the vice-presidents,â## Mr. Verloc breathed out heavily; and the First Secretary of the Embassy raised his head to look at him.

â##Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself,â## he said, incisively. â##Isnâ##t your society capable of anything else but printing this prophetic bosh in blunt type on this filthy paperâ##eh? Why donâ##t you do something? Look here. Iâ##ve this matter in hand now, and I tell you plainly that you will have to earn your money. The good old Stott-Wartenheim times are over. No work, no pay.â##

Mr. Verloc felt a queer sensation of faintness in his stout legs. He stepped back one pace, and blew his nose loudly.

He was, in truth, startled and alarmed. The pale London sunshine, struggling clear of the London mist, shed a lukewarm brightness into the First Secretaryâ##s private room; and, in the silence, Mr. Verloc heard, against a window-pane, the faint buzzing of a flyâ##his first fly of the yearâ##heralding, better than any number of swallows, the approach of spring. The useless fussing of that tiny, energetic organism affected unpleasantly this big man, threatened in his indolence.

In the pause Mr. Vladimir formulated in his mind a series of disparaging remarks concerning Mr. Verlocâ##s face and figure. The fellow was unexpectedly vulgar, heavy, and impudently unintelligent. He looked uncommonly like a master plumber come to present his bill. The First Secretary of the Embassy, from his occasional excursions into the field of American humor, had formed a special notion of that class of mechanic as the embodiment of fraudulent laziness and incompetency.

This was, then, the famous and trusty secret agent, so secret that he was never designated otherwise but by the symbol Δ in the late Baron Stott-Wartenheimâ##s official, semiofficial, and confidential correspondence; the celebrated agent Δ , whose warnings had the power to change the schemes and the dates of royal, imperial, grand-ducal journeys, and sometimes caused them to be put off altogether! This fellow! And Mr. Vladimir indulged mentally in an enormous and derisive fit of merriment, partly at his own astonishment, which he judged naive, but mostly at the expense of the universally regretted Baron Stott-Wartenheim. His late Excellency, whom the august favor of his Imperial master had imposed as Ambassador upon several reluctant Ministers of Foreign Affairs, had enjoyed in his lifetime a fame for an owlish, pessimistic gullibility. His Excellency had the social revolution on the brain. He imagined himself to be a diplomatist set apart by a special dispensation to watch the end of diplomacy, and pretty nearly the end of the world in a horrid democratic upheaval. His prophetic and doleful despatches had been for years the joke of Foreign Offices. He was said to

have exclaimed on his death-bed (visited by his Imperial friend and master): 'Unhappy Europe! Thou shalt perish by the moral insanity of thy children!' He was fated to be the victim of the first humbugging rascal that came along, thought Mr. Vladimir, smiling vaguely at Mr. Verloc.

'You ought to venerate the memory of Baron Stott-Wartenheim!' he exclaimed, suddenly.

The lowered physiognomy of Mr. Verloc expressed a sombre and weary annoyance.

'Permit me to observe to you,' he said, 'that I came here because I was summoned by a peremptory letter. I have been here only twice before in the last eleven years, and certainly never at eleven in the morning. It isn't very wise to call me up like this. There is just a chance of being seen. And that would be no joke for me.'

Mr. Vladimir shrugged his shoulders.

'It would destroy my usefulness,' continued the other, hotly.

'That's your affair,' murmured Mr. Vladimir, with soft brutality. 'When you cease to be useful, you shall cease to be employed. Yes. Right off. Cut short. You shall' Mr. Vladimir, frowning, paused, at a loss for a sufficiently idiomatic expression, and instantly brightened up, with a grin of beautifully white teeth. 'You shall be chucked!' he brought out, ferociously.

Once more Mr. Verloc had to react with all the force of his will against that sensation of faintness running down one's legs which, once upon a time, had inspired some poor devil with the felicitous expression: 'My heart went down into my boots.' Mr. Verloc, aware of the sensation, raised his head bravely.

Mr. Vladimir bore the look of heavy inquiry with perfect serenity.

'What we want is to administer a tonic to the Conference in Milan,' he said, airily. 'Its deliberations upon international action for the suppression of political crime don't seem to get anywhere. England lags. This country is absurd with its sentimental regard for individual liberty. It's intolerable to think that all your friends have got only to come over to'

'In that way I have them all under my eye,' Mr. Verloc interrupted, huskily.

'It would be much more to the point to have them all under lock and key. England must be brought into line. The imbecile bourgeoisie of this country make themselves the accomplices of the very people whose aim is to drive them out of their houses to starve in ditches. And they have the political power still, if they only had the sense to use it for their preservation. I suppose you agree that the middle classes are stupid?'

Mr. Verloc agreed hoarsely.

'They are.'

'They have no imagination. They are blinded by an idiotic vanity. What they want just now is a jolly good scare. This is the psychological moment to set your friends to work. I have had you called here to develop to you my idea.'

And Mr. Vladimir developed his idea from on high, with scorn and condescension, displaying at the same time an amount of ignorance as to the real aims, thoughts, and methods of the revolutionary world which filled the silent Mr. Verloc with inward consternation. He confounded causes with effects more than was excusable; the most distinguished propagandists with impulsive bomb-throwers; assumed organization where, in the nature of things, it could not exist; spoke of the social revolutionary party one moment as of a perfectly disciplined army, where the word of chiefs was supreme, and, at another, as if it had been the loosest association of desperate brigands that ever camped in a mountain gorge. Once Mr. Verloc had opened his mouth for a protest, but the raising of a shapely, large white hand arrested him. Very soon he became too appalled to even try to protest. He listened in a stillness of dread which resembled the immobility of profound attention.

'A series of outrages,' Mr. Vladimir continued, calmly, 'executed here in this country; not only *planned* here—that would not do—they would not mind. Your friends could set half the Continent on fire without influencing the public opinion here in favor of a universal repressive legislation. They will not look outside their back yard here.'

Mr. Verloc cleared his throat, but his heart failed him, and he said nothing.

“These outrages need not be especially sanguinary,” Mr. Vladimir went on, as if delivering a scientific lecture, “but they must be sufficiently startling and effective. Let them be directed against buildings, for instance. What is the fetish of the hour that all the bourgeoisie recognize eh, Mr. Verloc?”

Mr. Verloc opened his hands and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“You are too lazy to think,” was Mr. Vladimir’s comment upon that gesture. “Pay attention to what I say. The fetish of to-day is neither royalty nor religion. Therefore the Palace and the Church should be left alone. You understand what I mean, Mr. Verloc?”

The dismay and the scorn of Mr. Verloc found vent in an attempt at levity.

“Perfectly. But what of the Embassies? A series of attacks on the various Embassies—he began. But he could not withstand the cold, watchful stare of the First Secretary.

“You can be facetious, I see,” the latter observed, carelessly. “That’s all right. It may enliven your oratory at socialistic congresses. But this room is no place for it. It would be infinitely safer for you to follow carefully what I am saying. As you are being called upon to furnish facts instead of cock-and-bull stories, you had better try to make your profit of what I am taking the trouble to explain to you. The sacrosanct fetish of to-day is science. Why don’t you get some of your friends to go for that wooden-faced panjandrum eh? Is it not part of these institutions which must be swept away before the F. P. comes along?”

Mr. Verloc said nothing. He was afraid to open his lips, lest a groan should escape him.

“This is what you should try for. An attempt upon a crowned head or on a president is sensational enough in a way, but not so much as it used to be. It has entered into the general conception of the existence of all chiefs of state. It’s almost conventional—especially since so many presidents have been assassinated. Now let us take an outrage upon—say, a church. Horrible enough at first sight, no doubt, and yet not so effective as a person of an ordinary mind might think. No matter how revolutionary and anarchist in inception, there would be fools enough to give such an outrage the character of a religious manifestation. And that would detract from the especial alarming significance we wish to give to the act. A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre would suffer in the same way from the suggestion of non-political passion: the exasperation of a hungry man, an act of social revenge. All this is used up; it is no longer instructive as an object-lesson in revolutionary anarchism. Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away. I am about to give you the philosophy of bomb-throwing from my point of view; from the point of view you pretend to have been serving for the last eleven years. I will try not to talk above your head. The sensibilities of the class you are attacking are soon blunted. Property seems to them an indestructible thing. You can’t count upon their emotions either of pity or fear for very long. A bomb outrage to have any influence on public opinion now must go beyond the intention of vengeance or terrorism. It must be purely destructive. It must be that, and only that, beyond the faintest suspicion of any other object. You anarchists should make it clear that you are perfectly determined to make a clean sweep of the whole social creation. But how to get that appallingly absurd notion into the heads of the middle classes so that there should be no mistake? That’s the question. By directing your blows at something outside the ordinary passions of humanity is the answer. Of course, there is art. A bomb in the National Gallery would make some noise. But it would not be serious enough. Art has never been their fetish. It’s like breaking a few back windows in a man’s house; whereas, if you want to make him really sit up, you must try at least to raise the roof. There would be some screaming, of course, but from whom? Artists, art critics, and such like—people of no account. Nobody minds what they say. But there is learning—science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that. He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow. It is the sacrosanct fetish. All the damned professors are radicals at heart. Let them know that their great panjandrum has got to go, too, to make room for the Future of the Proletariat. A howl from all

these intellectual idiots is bound to help forward the labors of the Milan Conference. They will be writing to the papers. Their indignation would be above suspicion, no material interests being openly at stake, and it will alarm every selfishness of the class which should be impressed. They believe that in some mysterious way science is at the source of their material prosperity. They do. And the absurd ferocity of such a demonstration will affect them more profoundly than the mangling of a whole street—or theatre—full of their own kind. To the last they can always say: ‘‘Oh, it’s mere class hate.’’ But what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable—in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes. Moreover, I am a civilized man. I would never dream of directing you to organize a mere butchery, even if I expected the best results from it. But I wouldn’t expect from a butchery the result I want. Murder is always with us. It is almost an institution. The demonstration must be against learning—science. But not every science will do. The attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy. Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics. But that is impossible. I have been trying to educate you; I have expounded to you the higher philosophy of your usefulness, and suggested to you some serviceable arguments. The practical application of my teaching interests *you* mostly. But from the moment I have undertaken to interview you I have also given some attention to the practical aspect of the question. What do you think of having a go at astronomy?’’

For some time Mr. Verloc’s immobility by the side of the arm-chair resembled a state of collapsed coma—a sort of passive insensibility interrupted by slight convulsive starts, such as may be observed in the domestic dog having a nightmare on the hearth-rug. And it was in an uneasy, doglike growl that he repeated the word:

‘‘Astronomy.’’

He had not recovered thoroughly as yet from that state of bewilderment brought about by the effort to follow Mr. Vladimir’s rapid, incisive utterance. It had overcome his power of assimilation. It had made him angry. This anger was complicated by incredulity. And suddenly it dawned upon him that all this was an elaborate joke. Mr. Vladimir exhibited his white teeth in a smile, with dimples on his round, full face posed with a complacent inclination above the bristling bow of his necktie. The favorite of intelligent society women had assumed his drawing-room attitude accompanying the delivery of delicate witticisms. Sitting well forward, his white hand upraised, he seemed to hold delicately between his thumb and forefinger the subtlety of his suggestion.

‘‘There could be nothing better. Such an outrage combines the greatest possible regard for humanity with the most alarming display of ferocious imbecility. I defy the ingenuity of journalists to persuade their public that any given member of the proletariat can have a personal grievance against astronomy. Starvation itself could hardly be dragged in there—eh? And there are other advantages. The whole civilized world has heard of Greenwich. The very boot-blacks in the basement of Charing Cross Station know something of it. See?’’

The features of Mr. Vladimir, so well known in the best society by their humorous urbanity, beamed with cynical self-satisfaction, which would have astonished the intelligent women his wit entertained so exquisitely. ‘‘Yes,’’ he continued, with a contemptuous smile, ‘‘the blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration.’’

‘‘A difficult business,’’ Mr. Verloc mumbled, feeling that this was the only safe thing to say.

‘‘What is the matter? Haven’t you the whole gang under your hand? The very pick of the basket? That old terrorist, Yundt, is here. I see him walking about Piccadilly in his green havelock almost every day. And Michaelis, the ticket-of-leave apostle—you don’t mean to say you don’t know where he is? Because if you don’t, I can tell you,’’ Mr. Vladimir went on, menacingly. ‘‘If you imagine that you are the only one on the secret fund list, you are mistaken.’’

This perfectly gratuitous suggestion caused Mr. Verloc to shuffle his feet slightly.

And the whole Lausanne lot eh? Haven't they been flocking over here at the first hint of the Milan Conference? This is an absurd country.

It will cost money, Mr. Verloc said, by a sort of instinct.

That cock won't fight, Mr. Vladimir retorted, with an amazingly genuine English accent. You'll get your screw every month, and no more till something happens. And if nothing happens very soon, you won't get even that. What's your ostensible occupation? What are you supposed to live by?

I keep a shop, answered Mr. Verloc.

A shop! What sort of shop?

Stationery, newspapers. My wife's.

Your what? interrupted Mr. Vladimir, in his guttural Central-Asian tones.

My wife. Mr. Verloc raised his husky voice slightly. I am married.

That be damned for a yarn! exclaimed the other, in unfeigned astonishment. Married! And you a professed anarchist, too! What is this confounded nonsense? But I suppose it's merely a manner of speaking. Anarchists don't marry. It's well known. They can't. It would be apostasy.

My wife isn't one, Mr. Verloc mumbled, sulkily. Moreover, it's no concern of yours.

Oh yes, it is, snapped Mr. Vladimir. I am beginning to be convinced that you are not at all the man for the work you've been employed on. Why, you must have discredited yourself completely in your own world by your marriage. Couldn't you have managed without? This is your virtuous attachment eh? What with one sort of attachment and another, you are doing away with your usefulness.

Mr. Verloc, puffing out his cheeks, let the air escape violently, and that was all. He had armed himself with patience. It was not to be tried much longer. The First Secretary became suddenly very curt, detached, final.

You may go now, he said. A dynamite outrage must be provoked. I give you a month. The sittings of the Conference are suspended. Before it reassembles again something must have happened here, or your connection with us ceases.

He changed the note once more with an unprincipled versatility.

Think over my philosophy, Mr. Mr. Verloc, he said, with a sort of chaffing condescension, waving his hand towards the door. Go for the first meridian. You don't know the middle classes as well as I do. Their sensibilities are jaded. The first meridian. Nothing better, and nothing easier, I should think.

He had got up, and with his thin, sensitive lips twitching humorously, watched in the glass over the mantel-piece Mr. Verloc backing out of the room heavily, hat and stick in hand. The door closed.

The footman in trousers, appearing suddenly in the corridor, let Mr. Verloc another way out, and through a small door in the corner of the court-yard. The porter standing at the gate ignored his exit completely, and Mr. Verloc retraced the path of his morning's pilgrimage as if in a dream an angry dream. This detachment from the material world was so complete that, though the mortal envelope of Mr. Verloc had not hastened unduly along the streets, that part of him to which it would be unwarrantably rude to refuse immortality found itself at the shop door all at once, as if borne from west to east on the wings of a great wind. He walked straight behind the counter, and sat down on a wooden chair that stood there. No one appeared to disturb his solitude. Steevie, put into a green baize apron, was now sweeping and dusting up-stairs, intent and conscientious, as though he were playing at it; and Mrs. Verloc, warned in the kitchen by the clatter of the cracked bell, had merely come to the glazed door of the parlor, and, putting the curtain aside a little, had peered into the dim shop. Seeing her husband sitting there, shadowy and bulky, with his hat tilted far back on his head, she had at once returned to her stove. An hour or more later she took the green baize apron off her brother

Steevie, and instructed him to wash his hands and face in the peremptory tone she had used in that connection for fifteen years or so—ever since she had, in fact, ceased to attend to the boy's hands and face herself. She spared presently a glance away from her dishing-up for the inspection of that face and those hands which Steevie, approaching the kitchen table, offered for her approval with an air of self-assurance hiding a perpetual residue of anxiety. Formerly the anger of the father was the supremely effective sanction of these rites, but Mr. Verloc's placidity in domestic life would have made all mention of anger incredible—even to poor Steevie's nervousness. The theory was that Mr. Verloc would have been inexpressibly pained and shocked by any deficiency of cleanliness at meal-times. Winnie, after the death of her father, found considerable consolation in the feeling that she need no longer tremble for poor Steevie. She could not bear to see the boy hurt. It maddened her. As a little girl she had often faced with blazing eyes the irascible licensed victualler in defence of her brother. Nothing now in Mrs. Verloc's appearance could lead one to suppose that she was capable of a passionate demonstration.

She finished her dishing-up. The table was laid in the parlor. Going to the foot of the stairs, she screamed out: "Mother!" Then opening the glazed door leading to the shop, she said, quietly: "Adolf!" Mr. Verloc had not changed his position; he had not apparently stirred a limb for an hour and a half. He got up heavily, and came to his dinner in his overcoat and with his hat on, without uttering a word. His silence in itself had nothing startlingly unusual in this household, hidden in the shades of the sordid street seldom touched by the sun, behind the dim shop with its wares of disreputable rubbish. Only that day Mr. Verloc's taciturnity was so obviously thoughtful that the two women were impressed by it. They sat silent themselves, keeping a watchful eye on poor Steevie, lest he should break out into one of his fits of loquacity. He faced Mr. Verloc across the table, and remained very good and quiet, staring vacantly. The endeavor to keep him from making himself objectionable in any way to the master of the house put no inconsiderable anxiety into these two women's lives. "That boy," as they alluded to him softly between themselves, had been a source of that sort of anxiety almost from the very day of his birth. The late licensed victualler's humiliation at having such a very peculiar boy for a son manifested itself by a propensity to brutal treatment; for he was a person of fine sensibilities, and his sufferings as a man and a father were perfectly genuine. Afterwards Steevie had to be kept from making himself a nuisance to the single gentlemen lodgers, who are themselves a queer lot, and are easily aggrieved. And there was always the anxiety of his mere existence to face. Visions of a workhouse infirmary for her child had haunted the old woman in the basement breakfast-room of the decayed Belgravian house. "If you had not found such a good husband, my dear," she used to say to her daughter, "I don't know what would have become of that poor boy."

Mr. Verloc extended as much recognition to Steevie 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. Both women admitted to themselves that not much more could be reasonably expected. It was enough to earn for Mr. Verloc the old woman's reverential gratitude. In the early days, made sceptical by the trials of friendless life, she used sometimes to ask anxiously: "You don't think, my dear, that Mr. Verloc is getting tired of seeing Steevie about?" To this Winnie replied habitually by a slight toss of her head. Once, however, she retorted, with a rather grim pertness: "He'll have to get tired of me first." A long silence ensued. The mother, with her feet propped up on a stool, seemed to be trying to get to the bottom of that answer, whose feminine profundity had struck her all of a heap. She had never really understood why Winnie had married Mr. Verloc. It was very sensible of her, and evidently had turned out for the best; but her girl might have naturally hoped to find somebody of a more suitable age. There had been a steady young fellow, only son of a butcher in the next street, helping his father in business, with whom Winnie had been walking out with obvious gusto. He was dependent on his father, it is true; but the business was good, and his prospects excellent. He took her girl to the theatre on several evenings. Then just as she began

to dread to hear of their engagement (for what could she have done with that big house alone, with Steevie on her hands?), that romance came to an abrupt end, and Winnie went about looking very dull. But Mr. Verloc, turning up providentially to occupy the first-floor front bedroom, there had been no more question of the young butcher. It was clearly providential.

CHAPTER 3

‘All idealization makes life poorer. To beautify it is to take away its character of complexity—it is to destroy it. Leave that to the moralists, my boy. History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production—by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by capitalism for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism. No one can tell what form the social organization may take in the future. Then why indulge in prophetic phantasies? At best they can only interpret the mind of the prophet, and can have no objective value. Leave that pastime to the moralists, my boy.’

Michaelis, the ticket-of-leave apostle, was speaking in an even voice, a voice that wheezed as if deadened and oppressed by the layer of fat on his chest. He had come out of a highly hygienic prison, round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a pale, semi-transparent complexion, as though for fifteen years the servants of an outraged society had made a point of stuffing him with fattening foods in a damp lightless cellar. And ever since he had never managed to get his weight down as much as an ounce.

It was said that for three seasons running a very wealthy old lady had sent him for a cure to Marienbad, where he was about to share the public curiosity once with a crowned head; but the police on that occasion ordered him to leave within twelve hours. His martyrdom was continued by forbidding him all access to the healing waters. But he was resigned now.

With his elbow presenting no appearance of a joint, but more like a bend in a dummy’s limb, thrown over the back of a chair, he leaned forward slightly over his short and enormous thighs to spit into the grate.

‘Yes! I had the time to think things out a little,’ he added, without emphasis. ‘Society has given me plenty of time for meditation.’

On the other side of the fireplace, in the horsehair arm-chair where Mrs. Verloc’s mother was generally privileged to sit, Karl Yundt giggled grimly, with a faint black grimace of a toothless mouth. The terrorist, as he called himself, was old and bald, with a narrow, snow-white wisp of a goatee hanging limply from his chin. An extraordinary expression of underhand malevolence survived in his extinguished eyes. When he rose, painfully, the thrusting forward of a skinny, groping hand, deformed by gouty swellings, suggested the effort of a moribund murderer summoning all his remaining strength for a last stab. He leaned on a thick stick, which trembled under his other hand.

‘I have always dreamed,’ he mouthed, fiercely, ‘of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death-enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity—that’s what I would have liked to see.’

His little bald head quivered, imparting a comical vibration to the wisp of white goatee. His enunciation would have been almost totally unintelligible to a stranger. His worn-out passion, resembling in its impotent fierceness the excitement of a senile sensualist, was badly served by a dried throat and toothless gums which seemed to catch the tip of his tongue. Mr. Verloc, established in the corner of the sofa at the other end of the room, emitted two hearty grunts of assent.

The old terrorist turned slowly his head on his skinny neck from side to side.

‘And I could never get as many as three such men together. So much for your rotten pessimism,’ he snarled at Michaelis, who uncrossed his thick legs, similar to bolsters, and slid his feet abruptly under his chair in sign of exasperation.

He a pessimist! Preposterous! He cried out that the charge was outrageous. He was so far from pessimism that he saw already the end of all private property coming along logically, unavoidably, by the mere development of its inherent viciousness. The possessors of property had not only to face the awakened proletariat, but they had also to fight among themselves. Yes. Struggle, warfare, was the condition of private ownership. It was fatal. Ah! he did not depend upon emotional excitement to keep up his belief, no declamations, no anger, no visions of blood-red flags waving, or metaphorical lurid suns of vengeance rising above the horizon of a doomed society. Not he! Cold reason, he boasted, was the basis of his optimism. Yes, optimism##

His laborious wheezing stopped; then, after a gasp or two, he added:

##Don##t you think that, if I had not been the optimist I am, I could not have found in fifteen years some means to cut my throat? And, in the last instance, there were always the walls of my cell to dash my head against.##

The shortness of breath took all fire, all animation out of his voice; his great pale cheeks hung like filled pouches, motionless, without a quiver; but in his blue eyes, narrowed as if peering, there was the same look of confident shrewdness, a little crazy in its fixity, they must have had while the indomitable optimist sat thinking at night in his cell. Before him, Karl Yundt remained standing, one wing of his faded greenish havelock thrown back cavalierly over his shoulder. Seated in front of the fireplace, big Comrade Ossipon, ex-medical student, the principal writer of the F. P. leaflets, stretched out his robust legs, keeping the soles of his boots turned up to the glow in the grate. A bush of crinkly yellow hair topped his red, freckled face, with a flattened nose and prominent mouth cast in the rough mold of the negro type. His almond-shaped eyes leered languidly over the high cheekbones. He wore a gray flannel shirt, the loose ends of a black silk tie hung down the buttoned breast of his serge coat; and his head resting on the back of his chair, his throat largely exposed, he raised to his lips a cigarette in a long wooden tube, puffing jets of smoke straight up at the ceiling.

Michaelis pursued his idea##the idea of his solitary reclusion##the thought vouchsafed to his captivity and growing like a faith revealed in visions. He talked to himself, indifferent to the sympathy or hostility of his hearers, indifferent indeed to their presence, from the habit he had acquired of thinking aloud hopefully in the solitude of the four whitewashed walls of his cell, in the sepulchral silence of the great blind pile of bricks near a river, sinister and ugly, like a colossal mortuary for the socially drowned.

He was no good in discussion, not because any amount of argument could shake his faith, but because the mere fact of hearing another voice disconcerted him painfully, confusing his thoughts at once##these thoughts that for so many years, in a mental solitude more barren than a waterless desert, no living voice had ever combatted, commented, or approved.

No one interrupted him now, and he made again the confession of his faith, mastering him, irresistible and complete, like an act of grace: the secret of fate discovered in the material side of life; the economic condition of the world responsible for the past and shaping the future; the source of all history, of all ideas, guiding the mental development of mankind and the very impulses of their passion##

A harsh laugh from Comrade Ossipon cut the tirade dead short in a sudden faltering of the tongue and a bewildered unsteadiness of the apostle##s mildly exalted eyes. He closed them slowly for a moment, as if to collect his routed thoughts. A silence fell; but what with the two gas-jets over the table and the glowing grate, the little parlor behind Mr. Verloc##s shop had become frightfully hot. Mr. Verloc, getting off the sofa with ponderous reluctance, opened the door leading into the kitchen to get more air, and thus disclosed the innocent Steevie, seated, very good and quiet, at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting

the inconceivable. The artist never turned his head; and in all his soul's application to the task his back quivered, his thin neck, sunk into a deep hollow at the base of the skull, seemed ready to snap.

Mr. Verloc, after a grunt of disapproving surprise, returned to the sofa. Alexander Ossipon got up, tall in his threadbare blue serge suit under the low ceiling, shook off the stiffness of long immobility, and strolled away into the kitchen (down one step) to look over Stevie's shoulder. He came back, pronouncing oracularly: "Very good. Very characteristic, perfectly typical."

"What's very good?" grunted, inquiringly, Mr. Verloc, settled again in the corner of the sofa. The other explained his meaning negligently, with a shade of condescension and a toss of his head towards the kitchen:

"Typical of this form of degeneracy—these drawings, I mean."

"You would call that lad a degenerate, would you?" mumbled Mr. Verloc.

Comrade Alexander Ossipon—nicknamed "The Doctor," ex-medical student without a degree; afterwards wandering lecturer to working-men's associations upon the socialistic aspects of hygiene; author of a popular quasi-medical study (in the form of a cheap pamphlet seized promptly by the police) entitled "The Corroding Vices of the Middle Classes"; special delegate of the more or less mysterious Red Committee, together with Karl Yundt and Michaelis for the work of literary propaganda—turned upon the obscure familiar of at least two Embassies that glance of insufferable, hopelessly dense sufficiency which nothing but the frequentation of science can give to the dulness of common mortals.

"That's what he may be called scientifically. Very good type, too, altogether, of that sort of degenerate. It's enough to glance at the lobes of his ears. If you read Lombroso—"

Mr. Verloc, moody and spread largely on the sofa, continued to look down the row of his waistcoat buttons; but his cheeks became tinged by a faint blush. Of late even the merest derivative of the word "science" (a term in itself inoffensive and of indefinite meaning) had the curious power of evoking a definitely offensive mental vision of Mr. Vladimir, in his body as he lived, with an almost supernatural clearness. And this phenomenon, deserving justly to be classed among the miracles of science, induced in Mr. Verloc an emotional state of dread and exasperation tending to express itself in violent swearing. But he said nothing. It was Karl Yundt who was heard, implacable to his last breath.

"Lombroso is an ass."

Comrade Ossipon met the shock of this blasphemy by an awful, vacant stare. And the other, his extinguished eyes without gleams blackening the deep shadows under the great bony forehead, mumbled, catching the tip of his tongue between his lips at every second word, as though he were chewing it angrily:

"Did you ever see such an idiot? For him the criminal is the prisoner. Simple, is it not? What about those who shut him up there—forced him in there? Exactly. Forced him in there. And what is crime? Does he know that, this imbecile who has made his way in this world of gorged fools by looking at the ears and teeth of a lot of poor, luckless devils? Teeth and ears mark the criminal? Do they? And what about the law that marks him still better—the pretty branding instrument invented by the overfed to protect themselves against the hungry? Red-hot applications on their vile skins—hey? Can't you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle? That's how criminals are made for your Lombrosos to write their silly stuff about."

The knob of his stick and his legs shook together with passion, while the trunk, draped in the wings of the havelock, preserved his historic attitude of defiance. He seemed to sniff the tainted air of social cruelty, to strain his ear for its atrocious sounds. There was an extraordinary force of suggestion in this posturing. The all but moribund veteran of dynamite wars had been a great actor in his time—actor on platforms, in secret assemblies, in private interviews. The famous terrorist had never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice. He was no man of action; he was not even an orator of torrential eloquence, sweeping the masses along in the rushing

noise and foam of a great enthusiasm. With a more subtle intention, he took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful and noble illusions of righteous anger, pity, and revolt. The shadow of his evil gift clung to him yet, like the smell of a deadly drug in an old vial of poison, emptied now, useless, ready to be thrown away upon the rubbish-heap of things that had served their time.

Michaelis, the ticket-of-leave apostle, smiled vaguely with his glued lips; his pasty moon face drooped under the weight of melancholy assent. He had been a prisoner himself. His own skin had sizzled under the red-hot brand, he murmured softly. But Comrade Ossipon, nicknamed the Doctor, had got over the shock by that time.

“You don’t understand,” he began, disdainfully, but stopped short, intimidated by the dead blackness of the cavernous eyes in the face turned slowly towards him with a blind stare, as if guided only by the sound. He gave the discussion up, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

Steevie, accustomed to move about disregarded, had got up from the kitchen table, carrying off his drawing to bed with him. He had reached the parlor door in time to receive in full the shock of Karl Yundt’s eloquent imagery. The sheet of paper covered with circles dropped out of his fingers, and he remained staring at the old terrorist, as if rooted suddenly to the spot by his morbid horror and dread of physical pain. Steevie knew very well that hot iron applied to one’s skin hurt very much. His scared eyes blazed with indignation: it would hurt terribly. His mouth dropped open.

Michaelis, by staring unwinkingly at the fire, had regained that sentiment of isolation necessary for the continuity of his thought. His optimism had begun to flow from his lips. He saw Capitalism doomed in its cradle, born with the poison of the principle of competition in its system. The great capitalists devouring the little capitalists, concentrating the power and the tools of production in great masses, perfecting industrial processes, and in the madness of self-aggrandizement only preparing, organizing, enriching, making ready the lawful inheritance of the suffering proletariat. Michaelis pronounced the great word “Patience” and his clear blue glance, raised to the low ceiling of Mr. Verloc’s parlor, had a character of seraphic trustfulness. In the doorway Steevie, calmed, seemed sunk in hebetude.

Comrade Ossipon’s face twitched with exasperation.

“Then it’s no use doing anything—no use whatever.”

“I don’t say that,” protested Michaelis, gently. His vision of truth had grown so intense that the sound of a strange voice failed to rout it this time. He continued to look down at the red coals. Preparation for the future was necessary, and he was willing to admit that the great change would perhaps come in the upheaval of a revolution. But he argued that revolutionary propaganda was a delicate work of high conscience. It was the education of the masters of the world. It should be as careful as the education given to kings. He would have it advance its tenets cautiously, even timidly, in our ignorance of the effect that may be produced by any given economic change upon the happiness, the morals, the intellect, the history of mankind. For history is made with tools, not with ideas; and everything is changed by economic conditions—art, philosophy, love, virtue—truth itself!

The coals in the grate settled down with a slight crash; and Michaelis, the hermit of visions in the desert of a penitentiary, got up impetuously. Round like a distended balloon, he opened his short, thick arms, as if in a pathetically hopeless attempt to embrace and hug to his breast a self-regenerated universe. He gasped with ardor.

“The future is as certain as the past—slavery, feudalism, individualism, collectivism. This is the statement of a law, not an empty prophecy.”

The disdainful pout of Comrade Ossipon’s thick lips accentuated the negro type of his face.

“Nonsense,” he said, calmly enough. “There is no law and no certainty. The teaching propaganda be hanged! What the people knows does not matter, were its knowledge ever so accurate.”

The only thing that matters to us is the emotional state of the masses. Without emotion there is no action.â##

He paused, then added with modest firmness:

â##I am speaking now to you scientificallyâ##scientificallyâ##Eh? What did you say, Verloc?
â##

â##Nothing,â## growled from the sofa Mr. Verloc, who, provoked by the abhorrent sound, had merely muttered a â##damn.â##

The venomous spluttering of the old terrorist without teeth was heard.

â##Do you know how I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. Thatâ##s what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the peopleâ##nothing else.â##

Steevie swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp, and at once, as though it had been swift poison, sank limply in a sitting posture on the steps of the kitchen door.

Michaelis gave no sign of having heard anything. His lips seemed glued together for good; not a quiver passed over his heavy cheeks. With troubled eyes he looked for his round, hard hat, and put it on his round head. His round and obese body seemed to float low between the chairs under the sharp elbow of Karl Yundt. The old terrorist, raising an uncertain and clawlike hand, gave a swaggering tilt to a black felt sombrero shading the hollows and ridges of his wasted face. He got in motion slowly, striking the floor with his stick at every step. It was rather an affair to get him out of the house because, now and then, he would stop, as if to think, and did not offer to move again till impelled forward by Michaelis. The gentle apostle grasped his arm with brotherly care; and behind them, his hands in his pockets, the robust Ossipon yawned vaguely. A blue cap with a patent-leather peak set well at the back of his yellow bush of hair gave him the aspect of a Norwegian sailor bored with the world after a thundering spree. Mr. Verloc saw his guests off the premises, attending them bareheaded, his heavy overcoat hanging open, his eyes on the ground.

He closed the door behind their backs with restrained violence, turned the key, shot the bolt. He was not satisfied with his friends. In the light of Mr. Vladimirâ##s philosophy of bomb-throwing they appeared hopelessly futile. The part of Mr. Verloc in revolutionary politics having been to observe, he could not all at once, either in his own home or in larger assemblies, take the initiative of action. He had to be cautious. Moved by the just indignation of a man well over forty, menaced in what is dearest to himâ##his repose and his securityâ##he asked himself scornfully what else could have been expected from such a lot: this Karl Yundt, this Michaelis, this Ossipon.

Pausing in his intention to turn off the gas burning in the middle of the shop, Mr. Verloc descended into the abyss of moral reflections. With the insight of a kindred temperament he pronounced his verdict. A lazy lotâ##this Karl Yundt, nursed by a bleary-eyed old woman, a woman he had years ago enticed away from a friend, and afterwards had tried more than once to shake off into the gutter. Jolly lucky for Yundt that she had persisted in coming up time after time, or else there would have been no one now to help him out of the â##bus by the Green Park railings, where that spectre took its constitutional crawl every fine morning. When that indomitable, snarling old witch died the swaggering spectre would have to vanish tooâ##there would be an end to fiery Karl Yundt. And Mr. Verlocâ##s morality was offended also by the optimism of Michaelis, annexed by his wealthy old lady, who had taken lately to sending him to a cottage she had in the country. The ex-prisoner could moon about the shady lanes for days together in a delicious and humanitarian idleness. As to Ossipon, that beggar was sure to want for nothing as long as there were silly girls with savings-bank books in the world. And Mr. Verloc, temperamentally identical with his associates, drew fine distinctions in his mind on the strength of insignificant differences. He drew them with a certain complacency, because the instinct of conventional respectability was strong within him, being only overcome by his dislike of all kinds of recognized laborâ##a temperamental defect which he shared with a large proportion of revolutionary reformers of a given social state. For obviously one does

not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil. These are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures, too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by this way of vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries.

Lost for a whole minute in the abyss of meditation, Mr. Verloc did not reach the depth of these abstract considerations. Perhaps he was not able. In any case he had not the time. He was pulled up painfully by the sudden recollection of Mr. Vladimir, another of his associates, whom in virtue of subtle moral affinities he was capable of judging correctly. He considered him as dangerous. A shade of envy crept into his thoughts. Loafing was all very well for these fellows, who knew not Mr. Vladimir, and had women to fall back upon; whereas he had a woman to provide for##

At this point, by a simple association of ideas, Mr. Verloc was brought face to face with the necessity of going to bed some time or other that evening. Then why not go now##at once? He sighed. The necessity was not so normally pleasurable as it ought to have been for a man of his age and temperament. He dreaded the demon of sleeplessness, which he felt had marked him for his own. He raised his arm, and turned off the flaring gas-jet above his head.

A bright band of light fell through the parlor door into the part of the shop behind the counter. It enabled Mr. Verloc to ascertain at a glance the number of silver coins in the till. These were but few; and, for the first time since he opened his shop, he took a commercial survey of its value. This survey was unfavorable. He had gone into trade for no commercial reasons. He had been guided in the selection of this peculiar line of business by an instinctive leaning towards shady transactions, where money is picked up easily. Moreover, it did not take him out of his own sphere##the sphere which is watched by the police. On the contrary, it gave him a publicly confessed standing in that sphere, and as Mr. Verloc had unconfessed relations which made him familiar with, yet careless of, the police, there was a distinct advantage in such a situation. But as a means of livelihood it was by itself insufficient.

He took the cash-box out of the drawer, and, turning to leave the shop, became aware that Steevie was still down-stairs.

##What on earth is he doing there?## Mr. Verloc asked himself. ##What##s the meaning of these antics?## He looked dubiously at his brother-in-law, but he did not ask him for information. Mr. Verloc##s intercourse with Steevie was limited to the casual mutter of a morning, after breakfast, ##My boots,## and even that was more a communication at large of a need than a direct order or request. Mr. Verloc perceived with some surprise that he did not know really what to say to Steevie. He stood still in the middle of the parlor, and looked into the kitchen in silence. Nor yet did he know what would happen if he did say anything. And this appeared very queer to Mr. Verloc in view of the fact, borne upon him suddenly, that he had to provide for this fellow, too. He had never given a moment##s thought till then to that aspect of Steevie##s existence.

Positively he did not know how to speak to the lad. He watched him gesticulating and murmuring in the kitchen. Steevie prowled round the table like an excited animal in a cage. A tentative ##Hdn##t you better go to bed now?## produced no effect whatever; and Mr. Verloc, abandoning the stony contemplation of his brother-in-law##s behavior, crossed the parlor wearily, cash-box in hand. The cause of the general lassitude he felt while climbing the stairs being purely mental, he became alarmed by its inexplicable character. He hoped he was not sickening for anything. He stopped on the dark landing to examine his sensations. But a slight and continuous sound of snoring pervading the obscurity interfered with their clearness. The sound came from his mother-in-law##s room. Another one to provide for, he thought##and on this thought walked into the bedroom.

Mrs. Verloc had fallen asleep with the lamp (no gas was laid up-stairs) turned up full on the table by the side of the bed. The light thrown down by the shade fell dazzlingly on the white pillow sunk by the weight of her head, reposing with closed eyes, and dark hair done up in several plaits for the night. She woke up with the sound of her name in her ears, and saw her husband standing over her.

Winnie! Winnie!

At first she did not stir, lying very quiet and looking at the cash-box in Mr. Verloc's hand. But when she understood that her brother was capering all over the place down-stairs, she swung out in one sudden movement onto the edge of the bed. Her bare feet, as if poked through the bottom of an unadorned, sleeved calico sack buttoned tightly at neck and wrists, felt over the rug for the slippers while she looked upward into her husband's face.

I don't know how to manage him, Mr. Verloc explained, peevishly. Won't do to leave him down-stairs alone with the lights.

She said nothing, glided across the room swiftly, and the door closed upon her white form.

Mr. Verloc deposited the cash-box on the night-table, and began the operation of undressing by flinging his overcoat onto a distant chair. His coat and waistcoat followed. He walked about the room in his stockinged feet, and his burly figure, with the hands worrying nervously at his throat, passed and repassed across the long strip of looking-glass in the door of his wife's wardrobe. Then, after slipping his braces off his shoulders, he pulled up violently the Venetian blind, and leaned his forehead against the cold window-pane a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man.

Mr. Verloc felt the latent unfriendliness of all out-of-doors with a force approaching to positive bodily anguish. There is no occupation that fails a man more completely than that of a secret agent of police. It's like your horse suddenly falling dead under you in the midst of an uninhabited and thirsty plain. The comparison occurred to Mr. Verloc because he had sat astride various army horses in his time, and had now the sensation of an incipient fall. The prospect was as black as the window-pane against which he was leaning his forehead. And suddenly the face of Mr. Vladimir, clean-shaved and witty, appeared enhaloed in the glow of its rosy complexion, like a sort of pink seal impressed on the fatal darkness.

This luminous and mutilated vision was so ghastly physically that Mr. Verloc started away from the window, letting down the Venetian blind with a great rattle. Discomposed and speechless with the apprehension of more such visions, he beheld his wife re-enter the room and get into bed in a calm, businesslike manner which made him feel hopelessly lonely in the world. Mrs. Verloc expressed her surprise at seeing him up.

I don't feel very well, he muttered, passing his hands over his moist brow.

Giddiness?

Yes. Not at all well.

Mrs. Verloc, with all the placidity of an experienced wife, expressed a confident opinion as to the cause, and suggested the usual remedies; but her husband, rooted in the middle of the room, shook his lowered head sadly.

You'll catch cold standing there, she observed.

Mr. Verloc made an effort, finished undressing, and got into bed. Down below, in the quiet, narrow street, measured footsteps approached the house, then died away unhurried and firm, as if the passerby had started to pace out all eternity, from gas-lamp to gas-lamp in a night without end; and the drowsy ticking of the old clock on the landing became distinctly audible in the bedroom.

Mrs. Verloc, on her back, and staring at the ceiling, made a remark.

Takings very small to-day.

Mr. Verloc, in the same position, cleared his throat as if for an important statement, but merely inquired:

“Did you turn off the gas down-stairs?”

“Yes; I did,” answered Mrs. Verloc conscientiously. “That poor boy is in a very excited state to-night,” she murmured, after a pause which lasted for three ticks of the clock.

Mr. Verloc cared nothing for Steevie’s excitement, but he felt horribly wakeful, and dreaded facing the darkness and silence that would follow the extinguishing of the lamp. This dread led him to make the remark that Steevie had disregarded his suggestion to go to bed. Mrs. Verloc, falling into the trap, started to demonstrate at length to her husband that this was not “impudence” of any sort, but simply “excitement.” There was no young man of his age in London more willing and docile than Stephen, she affirmed; none more affectionate and ready to please, and even useful, as long as people did not upset his poor head. Mrs. Verloc, turning towards her recumbent husband, raised herself on her elbow, and hung over him in her anxiety that he should believe Steevie to be a useful member of the family. That ardor of protecting compassion, exalted morbidly in her childhood by the misery of another child, tinged her sallow cheeks with a faint, dusky blush, made her big eyes gleam under the dark lids. Mrs. Verloc then looked younger; she looked as young as Winnie used to look, and much more animated than the Winnie of the Belgravian mansion days had ever allowed herself to appear to gentlemen lodgers. Mr. Verloc’s anxieties had prevented him from attaching any sense to what his wife was saying. It was as if her voice were talking on the other side of a very thick wall. It was her aspect that recalled him to himself.

He appreciated this woman, and the sentiment of this appreciation, stirred by a display of something resembling emotion, only added another pang to his mental anguish. When her voice ceased he moved uneasily, and said:

“I haven’t been feeling well for the last few days.”

He might have meant this as an opening to a complete confidence; but Mrs. Verloc laid her head on the pillow again, and, staring upward, went on:

“That boy hears too much of what is talked about here. If I had known they were coming to-night I would have seen to it that he went to bed at the same time I did. He was out of his mind with something he overheard about eating people’s flesh and drinking blood. What’s the good of talking like that?”

There was a note of indignant scorn in her voice. Mr. Verloc was fully responsive now.

“Ask Karl Yundt,” he growled, savagely.

Mrs. Verloc, with great decision, pronounced Karl Yundt “a disgusting old man.” She declared openly her affection for Michaelis. Of the robust Ossipon, in whose presence she always felt uneasy behind an attitude of stony reserve, she said nothing whatever. And continuing to talk of that brother who had been for so many years an object of care and fears:

“He isn’t fit to hear what’s said here. He believes it’s all true. He knows no better. He gets into his passions over it.”

Mr. Verloc made no comment.

“He glared at me, as if he didn’t know who I was, when I went down-stairs. His heart was going like a hammer. He can’t help being excitable. I woke mother up, and asked her to sit with him till he went to sleep. It isn’t his fault. He’s no trouble when he’s left alone.”

Mr. Verloc made no comment.

“I wish he had never been to school,” Mrs. Verloc began again, brusquely. “He’s always taking away those newspapers from the window to read. He gets a red face poring over them. We don’t get rid of a dozen numbers in a month. They only take up room in the front window. And Mr. Ossipon brings every week a pile of these F. P. tracts to sell at a halfpenny each. I wouldn’t give a halfpenny for the whole lot. It’s silly reading—that’s what it is. There’s no sale for it. The other day Steevie got hold of one, and there was a story in it of a German soldier officer tearing half-off the ear of a recruit, and nothing was done to him for it. The brute! I couldn’t do anything with Steevie that afternoon. The story was enough, too, to make one’s blood boil. But

whatâ##s the use of printing things like that? We arenâ##t German slaves here, thank God! Itâ##s not our business, is it?â##

Mr. Verloc made no reply.

â##I had to take the carving-knife from the boy,â## Mrs. Verloc continued, a little sleepily now. â##He was shouting and stamping and sobbing. He canâ##t stand the notion of any cruelty. He would have stuck that officer like a pig if he had seen him then. Itâ##s true, too! Some people donâ##t deserve much mercy.â## Mrs. Verlocâ##s voice ceased, and the expression of her motionless eyes became more and more contemplative and veiled during the long pause. â##Comfortable, dear?â## she asked, in a faint, far-away voice. â##Shall I put out the light now?â##

The dreary conviction that there was no sleep for him held Mr. Verloc mute and hopelessly inert in his fear of darkness. He made a great effort.

â##Yes. Put it out,â## he said at last, in a hollow tone.

CHAPTER 4

Most of the thirty or so little tables, covered by red cloths with a white design, stood ranged at right angles to the deep brown wainscoting of the underground hall. Bronze chandeliers, with many globes, depended from the low, slightly vaulted ceiling, and the fresco-paintings ran, flat and dull, all round the walls without windows, representing scenes of the chase and of out-door revelry in mediaeval costumes. Varlets in green jerkins brandished hunting-knives and raised on high tankards of foaming beer.

“Unless I am very much mistaken, you are the man who would know the inside of this confounded affair,” said the robust Ossipon, leaning over, his elbows far out on the table and his feet tucked back completely under his chair. His eyes stared with wild eagerness.

An upright semi-grand piano near the door, flanked by two palms in pots, executed suddenly all by itself a valse tune with aggressive virtuosity. The din it raised was deafening. When it ceased, as suddenly as it had started, the bespectacled, dingy little man, who faced Ossipon behind a heavy glass mug full of beer, emitted calmly what had the sound of a general proposition.

“In principle what one of us may or may not know as to any given fact can’t be a matter for inquiry to the others.”

“Certainly not,” Comrade Ossipon agreed, in a quiet undertone. “In principle.”

With his big florid face held between his hands he continued to stare hard, while the dingy little man in spectacles coolly took a drink of beer and stood the glass mug back on the table. His thin, large ears departed widely from the sides of his skull, which looked frail enough for Ossipon to crush between thumb and forefinger; the dome of the forehead seemed to rest on the rim of the spectacles; the flat cheeks, of a greasy, unhealthy complexion, were merely smudged by the miserable poverty of a rare dark whisker. The lamentable inferiority of the whole physique was made ludicrous by the supremely self-confident bearing of the individual. His speech was curt, and he had a particularly impressive manner of keeping silent.

Ossipon spoke again from between his hands in a discreet mutter.

“Have you been out much to-day?”

“No. I stayed in bed all the morning,” answered the other. “Why?”

“Oh! Nothing,” said Ossipon, gazing earnestly and quivering inwardly with the desire to find out something, but obviously intimidated by the little man’s overwhelming air of unconcern. When talking with this comrade—which happened but rarely—the big Ossipon suffered from a sense of moral and even physical insignificance. However, he ventured another question. “Did you walk down here?”

“No; omnibus,” the little man answered readily enough. He lived far away in Islington, down a shabby street of small houses, littered with straw and dirty paper, where out-of-school hours a troop of assorted children ran and squabbled with a shrill, joyless, rowdy clamor. His single back room, remarkable for having an extremely large cupboard, he rented furnished from two elderly spinsters, dressmakers in a humble way with a clientele of servant girls mostly. He had a heavy padlock put on the cupboard, but otherwise he was a model lodger, giving no trouble, and requiring practically no attendance. His oddities were that he insisted on being present when his room was being swept, and that when he went out he locked his door and took the key away with him.

Ossipon had a vision of these round, black-rimmed spectacles progressing along the streets on the top of an omnibus, their self-confident glitter falling here and there on the walls of houses or lowered upon the heads of the unconscious stream of people on the pavements. The ghost of a sickly smile altered the set of Ossipon’s thick lips at the thought of the walls nodding and of people running for life at the sight of those spectacles. If they had only known! What a panic! He murmured interrogatively: “Been sitting long here?”

“An hour or more,” answered the other negligently, and took a pull at the dark beer. All his movements—the way he grasped the mug, the act of drinking, the way he set the heavy glass down and folded his arms—had a firmness, an assured precision which made the big and muscular Ossipon, leaning forward with staring eyes and protruding lips, look the picture of eager indecision.

“An hour,” he said. “Then it may be you haven’t heard yet the news I’ve heard just now—in the street. Have you?”

The little man shook his head negatively the least bit. But as he gave no indication of curiosity Ossipon ventured to add that he had heard it just outside the place. A newspaper boy had yelled the thing under his very nose, and not being prepared for anything of that sort, he was very much startled and upset. He had to come in there with a dry mouth. “I never thought of finding you here,” he added, murmuring steadily, with his elbows planted on the table.

“I come here sometimes,” said the other, preserving his provoking coolness of demeanor.

“It’s wonderful that you of all people should have heard nothing of it,” the big Ossipon continued. His eyelids snapped nervously upon the shining eyes. “You of all people,” he repeated, tentatively. This obvious restraint argued an incredible and inexplicable timidity of the big fellow before the calm little man, who again lifted the glass mug, drank, and put it down with brusque and assured movements. And that was all.

Ossipon, after waiting for something—a word or sign—that did not come, made an effort to assume a sort of indifference.

“Do you,” he said, deadening his voice still more, “give your stuff to anybody who’s up to asking you for it?”

“My absolute rule is never to refuse anybody—as long as I have a pinch by me,” answered the little man, with decision.

“That’s a principle,” commented Ossipon.

“It’s a principle.”

“And you think it’s sound?”

The large, round spectacles, which gave a look of staring self-confidence to the sallow face, confronted Ossipon like sleepless, unwinking orbs flashing a cold fire.

“Perfectly. Always. Under every circumstance. What could stop me? Why should I not? Why should I think twice about it?”

Ossipon gasped, as it were, discreetly.

“Do you mean to say you would hand it over to a teck if one came to ask you for your wares?”

The other smiled faintly.

“Let them come and try it on, and you will see,” he said. “They know me, but I know also every one of them. They won’t come near me—not they.”

His thin, livid lips snapped together firmly. Ossipon began to argue.

“But they could send some one to rig a plant on you. Don’t you see? Get the stuff from you in that way, and then arrest you with the proof in their hands.”

“Proof of what? Dealing in explosives without a license, perhaps. This was meant for a contemptuous jeer, though the expression of the thin, sickly face remained unchanged, and the utterance was negligent. “I don’t think there’s one of them anxious to make that arrest. I don’t think they could get one of them to apply for a warrant. I mean one of the best. Not one.”

“Why?” Ossipon asked.

“Because they know very well I take care never to part with the last handful of my wares. I’ve it always by me.” He touched the breast of his coat lightly. “In a thick glass flask,” he added.

“So I have been told,” said Ossipon, with a shade of wonder in his voice. “But I didn’t know if—”

“They know,” interrupted the little man crisply, leaning against the straight chair back, which rose higher than his fragile head. “I shall never be arrested. The game isn’t good enough for any policeman of them all. To deal with a man like me you require sheer, naked, inglorious heroism.”

Again his lips closed with a self-confident snap. Ossipon repressed a movement of impatience.

“Or recklessness or simply ignorance,” he retorted. “They’ve only to get somebody for the job who does not know you carry enough stuff in your pocket to blow yourself and everything within sixty yards of you to pieces.”

“I never affirmed I could not be eliminated,” rejoined the other. “But that wouldn’t be an arrest. Moreover, it’s not so easy as it looks.”

“Bah!” Ossipon contradicted. “Don’t be too sure of that. What’s to prevent half a dozen of them jumping upon you from behind in the street? With your arms pinned to your sides you could do nothing—could you?”

“Yes; I could. I am seldom out in the streets after dark,” said the little man, impassively, “and never very late. I walk always with my right hand closed round the india-rubber ball which I have in my trousers-pocket. The pressing of this ball actuates a detonator inside the flask I carry in my pocket. It’s the principle of the pneumatic instantaneous shutter for a camera lens. The tube leads up—”

With a swift disclosing gesture he gave Ossipon a glimpse of an india-rubber tube, resembling a slender brown worm, issuing from the armhole of his waistcoat and plunging into the inner breastpocket of his jacket. His clothes, of a nondescript brown mixture, were threadbare and marked with stains, dusty in the folds, with ragged buttonholes. “The detonator is partly mechanical, partly chemical,” he explained, with casual condescension.

“It is instantaneous, of course?” murmured Ossipon, with a slight shudder.

“Far from it,” confessed the other, with a reluctance which seemed to twist his mouth dolorously. “A full twenty seconds must elapse from the moment I press the ball till the explosion takes place.”

“Phew!” whistled Ossipon, completely appalled. “Twenty seconds! Horrors! You mean to say that you could face that? I should go crazy—”

“Wouldn’t it matter if you did. Of course, it’s the weak point of this special system which is only for my own use. The worst is that the manner of exploding is always the weak point with us. I am trying to invent a detonator that would adjust itself to all conditions of action, and even to the unexpected changes of conditions. A variable and yet perfectly precise mechanism. A really intelligent detonator.”

“Twenty seconds,” muttered Ossipon again. “Ough! And then—”

With a slight turn of the head the glitter of the spectacles seemed to gauge the size of the beer saloon in the basement of the renowned Silenus Restaurant.

“Nobody in this room could hope to escape,” was the verdict of that survey. “Nor yet this couple going up the stairs now.”

The piano at the foot of the staircase clanged through a mazurka with brazen impetuosity, as though a vulgar and impudent ghost were showing off. The keys sank and rose mysteriously. Then all became still. For a moment Ossipon imagined the overlighted place changed into a dreadful black hole, belching horrible fumes, choked with ghastly rubbish of smashed brickwork and mutilated corpses. He had such a distinct perception of ruin and death that he shuddered again. The other observed, with an air of calm sufficiency:

“In the last instance it is character alone that makes for one’s safety. There are but few people in the world whose character is as well established as mine.”

“I wonder how you managed it,” growled Ossipon.

Force of personality, said the other, without raising his voice; and coming from the mouth of that obviously miserable organism the assertion caused the robust Ossipon to bite his lower lip. Force of personality, he repeated, with ostentatious calm. I have the means to make myself deadly, but that by itself, you understand, is absolutely nothing in the way of protection. What is effective is the belief those people have in my will to use the means. That's their impression. It is absolute. Therefore I am deadly.

There are individuals of character among that lot, too, muttered Ossipon, ominously.

Possibly. But it is a matter of degree obviously, since, for instance, I am not impressed by them. Therefore, they are inferior. They cannot be otherwise. Their character is built upon conventional morality. It leans on the social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of conventions. They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex organized fact open to attack at every point; whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident.

This is a transcendental way of putting it, said Ossipon, watching the cold glitter of the round spectacles. I've heard Karl Yundt say much the same thing not very long ago.

Karl Yundt, mumbled the other, contemptuously, the delegate of the International Red Committee, has been a posturing shadow all his life. There are three of you delegates, aren't there? I won't define the other two, as you are one of them. But what you say means nothing. You are the worthy delegates for revolutionary propaganda, but the trouble is not only that you are as unable to think independently as any respectable grocer or journalist of them all, but that you have no character whatever.

Ossipon could not restrain a start of indignation.

But what do you want from us? he exclaimed, in a deadened voice. What is it you are after yourself?

A perfect detonator, was the peremptory answer. What are you making that face for? You see, you can't even bear the mention of something conclusive.

I am not making a face, growled the annoyed Ossipon, bearishly.

You revolutionists, the other continued, with leisurely self-confidence, are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the defence of that convention. Clearly you are, since you want to revolutionize it. It governs your thought, of course, and your action, too, and thus neither your thought nor your action can ever be conclusive. He paused, tranquil, with that air of close, endless silence, then almost immediately went on. You are not a bit better than the forces arrayed against you than the police, for instance. The other day I came suddenly upon Chief Inspector Heat at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. He looked at me very steadily. But I did not look at him. Why should I give him more than a glance? He was thinking of many things of his superiors, of his reputation, of the law courts, of his salary, of newspapers of a hundred things. But I was thinking of my perfect detonator only. He meant nothing to me. He was as insignificant as I can't call to mind anything insignificant enough to compare him with except Karl Yundt perhaps. Like to like. The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game so do you propagandists. But I don't play; I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes. My experiments cost money now and again, and then I must do without food for a day or two. You're looking at my beer. Yes. I have had two glasses already, and shall have another presently. This is a little holiday, and I celebrate it alone. Why not? I've the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. I've worked alone for years.

Ossipon's face had turned dusky red.

At the perfect detonator eh? he sneered, very low.

“Yes,” retorted the other. “It is a good definition. You couldn’t find anything half so precise to define the nature of your activity with all your committees and delegations. It is I who am the true propagandist.”

“We won’t discuss that point,” said Ossipon, with an air of rising above personal considerations. “I am afraid I’ll have to spoil your holiday for you, though. There’s a man blown up in Greenwich Park this morning.”

“How do you know?”

“They have been yelling the news in the streets since two o’clock. I bought the paper, and just ran in here. Then I saw you sitting at this table. I’ve got it in my pocket now.”

He pulled the newspaper out. It was a good-sized, rosy sheet, as if flushed by the warmth of its own convictions, which were optimistic. He scanned the pages rapidly.

“Ah! Here it is. Bomb in Greenwich Park. There isn’t much so far. Half-past eleven. Foggy morning. Effects of explosion felt as far as Romney Road and Park Place. Enormous hole in the ground under a tree filled with smashed roots and broken branches. All round fragments of a man’s body blown to pieces. That’s all. The rest’s mere newspaper gup. No doubt a wicked attempt to blow up the Observatory, they say. H’m. That’s hardly credible.”

He looked at the paper for a while longer in silence, then passed it to the other, who, after gazing abstractedly at the print, laid it down without comment.

It was Ossipon who spoke first—still resentful.

“The fragments of only *one* man, you note. Ergo: blew *himself* up. That spoils your day off for you—don’t it? Were you expecting that sort of move? I hadn’t the slightest idea—not the ghost of a notion of anything of the sort being planned to come off here—in this country. Under the present circumstances it’s nothing short of criminal.”

The little man lifted his thin black eyebrows with dispassionate scorn.

“Criminal! What is that? What *is* crime? What can be the meaning of such an assertion?”

“How am I to express myself? One must use the current words,” said Ossipon, impatiently. “The meaning of this assertion is that this business may affect our position very adversely in this country. Isn’t that crime enough for you? I am convinced you have been giving away some of your stuff lately.”

Ossipon stared hard. The other, without flinching, lowered and raised his head slowly.

“You have!” burst out the editor of the F. P. leaflets in an intense whisper. “No! And are you really handing it over at large like this, for the asking, to the first fool that comes along?”

“Just so! The condemned social order has not been built up on paper and ink, and I don’t fancy that a combination of paper and ink will ever put an end to it, whatever you may think. Yes, I would give the stuff with both hands to every man, woman, or fool that likes to come along. I know what you are thinking about. But I am not taking my cue from the Red Committee. I would see you all hounded out of here, or arrested—or beheaded, for that matter—without turning a hair. What happens to us as individuals is not of the least consequence.”

He spoke carelessly, without heat, almost without feeling, and Ossipon, secretly much affected, tried to copy this detachment.

“If the police here knew their business they would shoot you full of holes with revolvers, or else try to sand-bag you from behind in broad daylight.”

The little man seemed already to have considered that point of view in his dispassionate, self-confident manner.

“Yes,” he assented, with the utmost readiness. “But for that they would have to face their own institutions. Do you see? That requires uncommon grit. Grit of a special kind.”

Ossipon blinked.

“I fancy that’s exactly what would happen to you if you were to set up your laboratory in the States. They don’t stand on ceremony with their institutions there.”

“I am not likely to go and see. Otherwise your remark is just,” admitted the other. “They have more character over there, and their character is essentially anarchistic. Fertile ground for us, the States—very good ground. The great Republic has the root of the destructive matter in her. The collective temperament is lawless. Excellent. They may shoot us down, but—”

“You are too transcendental for me,” growled Ossipon, with moody concern.

“Logical,” protested the other. “There are several kinds of logic. This is the enlightened kind. America is all right. It is this country that is dangerous, with her idealistic conception of legality. The social spirit of this people is wrapped up in scrupulous prejudices, and that is fatal to our work. You talk of England being our only refuge! So much the worse. Capua! What do we want with refuges? Here you talk, print, plot, and do nothing. I dare say it’s very convenient for such Karl Yundts.”

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, then added, with the same leisurely assurance: “To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of the old morality would have set in in its very temple. That is what you ought to aim at. But you revolutionists will never understand that. You plan the future, you lose yourselves in reveries of economical systems derived from what is; whereas what’s wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life. That sort of future will take care of itself if you will only make room for it. Therefore, I would shovel my stuff in heaps at the corners of the streets if I had enough for that; and as I haven’t, I do my best by perfecting a really dependable detonator.”

Ossipon, who had been mentally swimming in deep waters, seized upon the last word as if it were a saving plank.

“Yes. Your detonators. I shouldn’t wonder if it weren’t one of your detonators that made a clean sweep of the man in the park.”

A shade of vexation darkened the determined, sallow face confronting Ossipon.

“My difficulty consists precisely in experimenting practically with the various kinds. They must be tried, after all. Besides—”

Ossipon interrupted.

“Who could that fellow be? I assure you that we in London had no knowledge—Couldn’t you describe the person you gave the stuff to?”

The other turned his spectacles upon Ossipon like a pair of search-lights.

“Describe him,” he repeated, slowly. “I don’t think there can be the slightest objection now. I will describe him to you in one word—Verloc.”

Ossipon, whom curiosity had lifted a few inches off his seat, dropped back, as if hit in the face.

“Verloc! Impossible!”

The self-possessed little man nodded slightly once.

“Yes. He’s the person. You can’t say that in this case I was giving my stuff to the first fool that came along. He was a prominent member of the group, as far as I understand.”

“Yes,” said Ossipon. “Prominent? No, not exactly. He was the centre for general intelligence, and usually received comrades coming over here. More useful than important. Man of no ideas. Years ago he used to speak at meetings—in France, I believe. Not very well, though. He was trusted by such men as Latorre, Moser, and all that old lot. The only talent he showed really was his ability to elude the attentions of the police somehow. Here, for instance, he did not seem to be looked after very closely. He was regularly married, you know. I suppose it’s with her money that he started that shop. Seemed to make it pay, too.”

Ossipon paused abruptly, muttered to himself, “I wonder what that woman will do now?” and fell into thought.

The other waited with ostentatious indifference, His parentage was obscure, and he was generally known only by his nickname of Professor. His title to that designation consisted in his having been once assistant demonstrator in chemistry at some technical institute. He quarrelled with the authorities upon a question of unfair treatment. Afterwards he obtained a post in the laboratory of a manufactory of dyes. There, too, he had been treated with revolting injustice. His struggles, his privations, his hard work to raise himself in the social scale, had filled him with such an exalted conviction of his merits that it was extremely difficult for the world to treat him with justice—the standard of that notion depending so much upon the patience of the individual. The Professor had genius, but lacked the great social virtue of resignation.

Intellectually a nonentity, Ossipon pronounced aloud, abandoning suddenly the inward contemplation of Mrs. Verloc's bereaved person and business. Quite an ordinary personality. You are wrong in not keeping more in touch with the comrades, Professor, he added, in a reproving tone. Did he say anything to you—give you some idea of his intentions? I hadn't seen him for a month. It seems impossible that he should be gone.

He told me it was going to be a demonstration against a building, said the Professor. I had to know that much to prepare the missile. I pointed out to him that I had hardly a sufficient quantity for a completely destructive result, but he pressed me very earnestly to do my best. As he wanted something that could be carried openly in the hand, I proposed to make use of an old one-gallon copal varnish can I happened to have by me. He was pleased at the idea. It gave me some trouble, because I had to cut out the bottom first and solder it on again afterwards. When prepared for use the can enclosed a wide-mouthed, well-corked jar of thick glass packed around with some wet clay and containing sixteen ounces of X2 green powder. The detonator was connected with the screw top of the can. It was ingenious—a combination of time and shock. I explained the system to him. It was a thin tube of tin enclosing a

Ossipon's attention had wandered.

What do you think has happened? he interrupted.

Can't tell. Screwed the top on tight, which would make the connection, and then forgot the time. It was set for twenty minutes. On the other hand, the time contact being made, a sharp shock would bring about the explosion at once. He either ran the time too close, or simply let the thing fall. The contact was made all right—that's clear to me at any rate. The system's worked perfectly And yet you would think that a common fool in a hurry would be much more likely to forget to make the contact altogether. I was worrying myself about that sort of failure mostly. But there are more kinds of fools than one can guard against. You can't expect a detonator to be absolutely foolproof.

He beckoned to a waiter. Ossipon sat rigid, with the abstracted gaze of mental travail. After the man had gone away with the money he roused himself, with an air of profound dissatisfaction.

It's extremely unpleasant for me, he mused. Karl has been in bed with bronchitis for a week. There's an even chance that he will never get up again. Michaelis is luxuriating in the country somewhere. A fashionable publisher has offered him five hundred pounds for a book. It will be a ghastly failure. He has lost the habit of consecutive thinking in prison, you know.

The Professor on his feet, now buttoning his coat, looked about him with perfect indifference.

What are you going to do? asked Ossipon, wearily. He dreaded the blame of the Central Red Committee, a body which had no permanent place of abode, and of whose membership he was not exactly informed. If this affair eventuated in the stoppage of the modest subsidy allotted to the publication of the F. P. pamphlets, then indeed he would have to regret Verloc's inexplicable folly.

Solidarity with the extremest form of action is one thing, and silly recklessness is another, he said, with a sort of moody brutality. I don't know what came to Verloc. There's some mystery there. However, he's gone. You may take it as you like, but under the

circumstances the only policy for the militant revolutionary group is to disclaim all connection with this damned freak of yours. How to make the disclaimer convincing enough is what bothers me.â##

The little man on his feet, buttoned up and ready to go, was no taller than the seated Ossipon. He levelled his spectacles at the latterâ##s face point-blank.

â##You might ask the police for a testimonial of good conduct. They know where every one of you slept last night. Perhaps if you asked them they would consent to publish some sort of official statement.â##

â##No doubt they are aware well enough that we had nothing to do with this,â## mumbled Ossipon, bitterly. â##What they will say is another thing.â## He remained thoughtful, disregarding the short, owlsh, shabby figure standing by his side. â##I must lay hands on Michaelis at once, and get him to speak from his heart at one of our gatherings. The public has a sort of sentimental regard for that fellow. His name is known. And I am in touch with a few reporters on the big dailies. What he would say would be utter bosh, but he has a turn of talk that makes it go down all the same.â##

â##Like treacle,â## interjected the Professor, rather low, keeping an impassive expression.

The perplexed Ossipon went on communing with himself half audibly, after the manner of a man reflecting in perfect solitude.

â##Confounded ass! To leave such an imbecile business on my hands. And I donâ##t even know ifâ##â##

He sat with compressed lips. The idea of going for news straight to the shop lacked charm. His notion was that Verlocâ##s shop might have been turned already into a police trap. â##They will be bound to make some arrests,â## he thought, with something resembling virtuous indignation, for the even tenor of his revolutionary life was menaced by no fault of his. And yet unless he went there he ran the risk of remaining in ignorance of what perhaps it would be very material for him to know. Then he reflected that, if the man in the park had been so very much blown to pieces as the evening papers said, he could not have been identified. And if so, the police could have no special reason for watching Verlocâ##s shop more closely than any other place known to be frequented by marked anarchistsâ##no more reason, in fact, than for watching the doors of the Silenus. There would be a lot of watching all round, no matter where he went. Stillâ##

â##I wonder what I had better do now?â## he muttered, taking counsel with himself.

A rasping voice at his elbow said, with sedate scorn:

â##Fasten yourself upon the woman for all sheâ##s worth.â##

After uttering these words the Professor walked away from the table. Ossipon, whom that piece of insight had taken unawares, gave one ineffectual start, and remained still, with a helpless gaze, as though nailed fast to the seat of his chair. The lonely piano, without as much as a music-stool to help it, struck a few chords courageously, and beginning a selection of national airs, played him out at last to the tune of â##Blue Bells of Scotland.â## The painfully detached notes grew faint behind his back while he went slowly up-stairs, across the hall, and into the street.

In front of the great doorway a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men, harmonized excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printersâ## ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapestry the sweep of the curbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. Ossipon looked hurriedly both ways before stepping out into the cross-currents, but the Professor was already out of sight.

CHAPTER 5

The Professor had turned into a street to the left, and walked along, with his head carried rigidly erect, in a crowd whose every individual almost overtopped his stunted stature. It was vain to pretend to himself that he was not disappointed. But that was mere feeling; the stoicism of his thought could not be disturbed by this or any other failure. Next time, or the time after next, a telling stroke would be delivered—something really startling—a blow fit to open the first crack in the imposing front of the great edifice of legal conceptions sheltering the atrocious injustice of society. Of humble origin, and with an appearance really so mean as to stand in the way of his considerable natural abilities, his imagination had been fired early by the tales of men rising from the depths of poverty to positions of authority and affluence. The extreme, almost ascetic purity of his thought, combined with an astounding ignorance of worldly conditions, had set before him a goal of power and prestige to be attained without the medium of arts, graces, tact, wealth—by sheer weight of merit alone. On that view he considered himself entitled to undisputed success. His father, a delicate dark enthusiast with a sloping forehead, had been an itinerant and rousing preacher of some obscure but rigid Christian sect—a man supremely confident in the privileges of his righteousness. In the son, individualist by temperament, once the science of colleges had replaced thoroughly the faith of conventicles, this moral attitude translated itself into a frenzied puritanism of ambition. He nursed it as something secularly holy. To see it thwarted opened his eyes to the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt, and blasphemous. The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds. The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition. To destroy public faith in legality was the imperfect formula of his pedantic fanaticism; but the subconscious conviction that the framework of an established social order cannot be effectually shattered except by some form of collective or individual violence was precise and correct. He was a moral agent—that was settled in his mind. By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearances of power and personal prestige. That was undeniable to his vengeful bitterness. It pacified its unrest; and in their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are, perhaps, doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind—the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or, perhaps, of appeased conscience.

Lost in the crowd, miserable and undersized, he meditated confidently on his power, keeping his hand in the left pocket of his trousers, grasping lightly the india-rubber ball, the supreme guarantee of his sinister freedom; but after a while he became disagreeably affected by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles and of the pavement crowded with men and women. He was in a long, straight street, peopled by a mere fraction of an immense multitude; but all round him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic—to terror, too, perhaps.

That was the form of doubt he feared most. Impervious to fear! Often while walking abroad, when he happened also to come out of himself, he had such moments of dreadful and sane mistrust of mankind. What if nothing could move them? Such moments come to all men whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity—to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers, or saints. A despicable emotional state this, against which solitude fortifies a superior character; and with severe exultation the Professor thought of the refuge of his room, with its padlocked cupboard, lost in a wilderness of poor houses, the hermitage of the perfect anarchist. In order to reach sooner the point where he could take his omnibus, he turned brusquely out of the populous street into a narrow and dusky alley paved with flagstones. On one side the low brick houses had in their dusty windows the sightless,

moribund look of incurable decayâ##empty shells awaiting demolition. From the other side life had not departed wholly as yet. Facing the only gas-lamp yawned the cavern of a second-hand furniture dealer, where, deep in the gloom of a sort of narrow avenue winding through a bizarre forest of wardrobes, with an undergrowth tangle of table legs, a tall pier-glass glimmered, like a pool of water in a wood. An unhappy, homeless couch, accompanied by two unrelated chairs, stood in the open. The only human being making use of the alley, besides the Professor, coming stalwart and erect from the opposite direction, checked his swinging pace suddenly.

â##Halloo!â## he said, and stood a little on one side watchfully.

The Professor had already stopped, with a ready half-turn which brought his shoulders very near the other wall. His right hand fell lightly on the back of the outcast couch, the left remained purposefully plunged deep in the trousers-pocket, and the roundness of the heavy rimmed spectacles imparted an owlish character to his moody, unperturbed face.

It was like a meeting in a side corridor of a mansion full of life. The stalwart man was buttoned up in a dark overcoat, and carried an umbrella. His hat, tilted back, uncovered a good deal of forehead, which appeared very white in the dusk. In the dark patches of the orbits the eyeballs glimmered piercingly. A long, drooping mustache, the color of ripe corn, framed with its points the square block of his shaved chin.

â##I am not looking for you,â## he said, curtly.

The Professor did not stir an inch. The blended noises of the enormous town sank down to an inarticulate, low murmur. Chief Inspector Heat, of the Special Crimes Department, changed his tone.

â##Not in a hurry to get home?â## he asked, with mocking simplicity.

The unwholesome-looking little moral agent of destruction exulted silently in the possession of personal prestige, keeping in check this man armed with the defensive mandate of a menaced society. More fortunate than Caligula, who wished that the Roman Senate had only one head for the better satisfaction of his cruel lust, he beheld in that one man all the forces he had set at defiance: the force of law, property, oppression, and injustice. He beheld all his enemies, and fearlessly confronted them all in a supreme satisfaction of his vanity. They stood perplexed before him as if before a dreadful portent. He gloated inwardly over the chance of this meeting affirming his superiority to the multitude of mankind.

It was in reality a chance meeting. Chief Inspector Heat had had a disagreeably busy day since his department received the first telegram from Greenwich a little after eleven in the morning. First of all, the fact of the outrage being attempted less than a week after he had assured a high official that no outbreak of anarchist activity was to be apprehended was sufficiently annoying. If he ever thought himself safe in making a statement, it was then. He had made that statement with infinite satisfaction to himself, because it was clear that the high official desired greatly to hear that very thing. He had affirmed that nothing of the sort could even be thought of without the department being aware of it within twenty-four hours; and he had spoken thus in his consciousness of being the great expert of his department. He had gone even so far as to utter words which true wisdom would have kept back. But Chief Inspector Heat was not very wiseâ##at least, not truly so. True wisdom, which is not certain of anything in this world of contradictions, would have prevented him from attaining his present position. It would have alarmed his superiors, and done away with his chances of promotion. His promotion had been very rapid.

â##There isnâ##t one of them, sir, that we couldnâ##t lay our hands on at any time of night and day. We know what each of them is doing hour by hour,â## he had declared. And the high official had deigned to smile. This was so obviously the right thing to say for an officer of Chief Inspector Heatâ##s reputation that it was perfectly delightful. The high official believed the declaration, which chimed in with his idea of the fitness of things. His wisdom was of an official kind, or else he might have reflected upon a matter not of theory but of experience, that in the close-woven stuff of relations between conspirator and police there occur unexpected solutions of continuity, sudden holes in space

and time. A given anarchist may be watched inch by inch and minute by minute, but a moment always comes when somehow all sight and touch of him are lost for a few hours, during which something (generally an explosion) more or less deplorable does happen. But the high official, carried away by his sense of the fitness of things, had smiled, and now the recollection of that smile was very annoying to Chief Inspector Heat, principal expert in anarchist procedure.

This was not the only circumstance whose recollection depressed the usual serenity of the eminent specialist. There was another dating back only to that very morning. The thought that when called urgently to his Assistant Commissioner's private room he had been unable to conceal his astonishment was distinctly vexing. His instinct of a successful man had taught him long ago that, as a general rule, a reputation is built on manner as much as on achievement. And he felt that his manner, when confronted with the telegram, had not been impressive. He had opened his eyes widely, and had exclaimed "Impossible!" exposing himself thereby to the unanswerable retort of a fingertip laid forcibly on the telegram which the Assistant Commissioner, after reading it aloud, had flung on the desk. To be crushed, as it were, under the tip of a forefinger, was an unpleasant experience. Very damaging, too! Furthermore, Chief Inspector Heat was conscious of not having mended matters by allowing himself to express a conviction.

"One thing I can tell you at once: none of our lot had anything to do with this."

He was strong in his integrity of a good detective, but he saw now that an impenetrably attentive reserve towards this incident would have served his reputation better. On the other hand, he admitted to himself that it was difficult to preserve one's reputation if rank outsiders were going to take a hand in the business. Outsiders are the bane of the police as of other professions. The tone of the Assistant Commissioner's remarks had been sour enough to set one's teeth on edge.

And since breakfast Chief Inspector Heat had not managed to get anything to eat.

Starting immediately to begin his investigation on the spot, he had swallowed a good deal of raw, unwholesome fog in the park. Then he had walked over to the hospital; and, when the investigation in Greenwich was concluded at last, he had lost his inclination for food. Not accustomed, as the doctors are, to examine closely the mangled remains of human beings, he had been shocked by the sight disclosed to his view when a waterproof sheet had been lifted off a table in a certain apartment of the hospital.

Another waterproof sheet was spread over that table in the manner of a table-cloth, with the corners turned up over a sort of mound—a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast. It required considerable firmness of mind not to recoil before that sight. Chief Inspector Heat, an efficient officer of his department, stood his ground, but for a whole minute he did not advance. A local constable in uniform cast a sidelong glance, and said, with stolid simplicity:

"He's all there. Every bit of him. It was a job."

He had been the first man on the spot after the explosion. He mentioned the fact again. He had seen something like a heavy flash of lightning in the fog. At that time he was standing at the door of the King William Street Lodge, talking to the keeper. The concussion made him tingle all over. He ran between the trees towards the Observatory. "As fast as my legs would carry me," he repeated twice.

Chief Inspector Heat, bending forward over the table in a gingerly and horrified manner, let him run on. The hospital porter and another man turned down the corners of the cloth, and stepped aside. The Chief Inspector's eyes searched the grewsome detail of that heap of mixed things, which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops.

"You used a shovel," he remarked, observing a sprinkling of small gravel, tiny brown bits of bark, and particles of splintered wood as fine as needles.

“Had to in one place,” said the stolid constable. “I sent a keeper to fetch a spade. When he heard me scraping the ground with it, he leaned his forehead against a tree, and was as sick as a dog.”

The Chief Inspector, stooping guardedly over the table, fought down the unpleasant sensation in his throat. The shattering violence of destruction, which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments, affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty, though his reason told him the effect must have been as swift as a flash of lightning. The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony. No physiologist, and still less of a metaphysician, Chief Inspector Heat rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. Instantaneous! He remembered all he had ever read in popular publications of long and terrifying dreams dreamed in the instant of waking; of the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up, streaming, for the last time. The inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye. And meantime the Chief Inspector went on peering at the table with a calm face and the slightly anxious attention of an indigent customer bending over what may be called the by-products of a butcher’s shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner. All the time his trained faculties of an excellent investigator, who scorns no chance of information, followed the self-satisfied, disjointed loquacity of the constable.

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