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# THE SECRET AGENT

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## 《THE SECRET AGENT》

by Joseph Conrad

(二)

### CHAPTER 7

The Assistant Commissioner walked along a short and narrow street like a wet, muddy trench, then crossing a very broad thoroughfare entered a public edifice, and sought speech with a young private secretary (unpaid) of a great personage.

This fair, smooth-faced young man, whose symmetrically arranged hair gave him the air of a large and neat schoolboy, met the Assistant Commissioner's request with a doubtful look, and spoke with bated breath.

‘Would he see you? I don't know about that. He has walked over from the House an hour ago to talk with the Permanent Under-Secretary, and now he's ready to walk back again. He might have sent for him; but he does it for the sake of a little exercise, I suppose. It's all the exercise he can find time for while this session lasts. I don't complain; I rather enjoy these little strolls. He

leans on my arm, and doesn't open his lips. But, I say, he's very tired, and - well - not in the sweetest of tempers just now.'

'It's in connection with that Greenwich affair.'

'Oh! I say! He's very bitter against you people. But I will go and see, if you insist.'

'Do. That's a good fellow,' said the Assistant Commissioner.

The unpaid secretary admired this pluck. Composing for himself an innocent face, he opened a door, and went in with the assurance of a nice and privileged child. And presently he reappeared, with a nod to the Assistant Commissioner, who passing through the same door left open for him, found himself with the great personage in a large room.

Vast in bulk and stature, with a long white face, which, broadened at the base by a big double chin, appeared egg-shaped in the fringe of greyish whisker, the great personage seemed an expanding man. Unfortunate from a tailoring point of view, the crossfolds in the middle of a buttoned black coat added to the impression, as if the fastenings of the garment

were tried to the utmost. From the head, set upward on a thick neck, the eyes, with puffy lower lids, stared with a haughty droop on each side of a hooked, aggressive nose, nobly salient in the vast pale circumference of the face. A shiny silk hat and a pair of worn gloves lying ready at the end of a long table looked expanded, too, enormous.

He stood on the hearthrug in big, roomy boots, and uttered no word of greeting.

‘I would like to know if this is the beginning of another dynamite campaign;’ he asked at once in a deep, very smooth voice. ‘Don’t go into details. I have no time for that.’

The Assistant Commissioner’s figure before this big and rustic Presence had the frail slenderness of a reed addressing an oak. And indeed the unbroken record of that man’s descent surpassed in the number of centuries the age of the oldest oak in the country.

‘No. As far as one can be positive about anything I can assure you that it is not.’

‘Yes. But your idea of assurances over there,’ said the great man, with a contemptuous wave of his hand

towards a window giving on the broad thoroughfare, 'seem to consist mainly in making the Secretary of State look a fool. I have been told positively in this very room less than a month ago that nothing of the sort was even possible.'

The Assistant Commissioner glanced in the direction of the window calmly.

'You will allow me to remark, Sir Ethelred, that so far I have had no opportunity to give you assurances of any kind.'

The haughty droop of the eyes was focused now upon the Assistant Commissioner.

'True,' confessed the deep, smooth voice. 'I sent for Heat. You are still rather a novice in your new berth. And how are you getting on over there?'

'I believe I am learning something every day.'

'Of course, of course. I hope you will get on.'

'Thank you, Sir Ethelred. I've learned something today, and even within the last hour or so. There is much in this affair of a kind that does not meet the eye in a usual anarchist outrage, even if one looked into it as deep as can be. That's why I am here.'

The great man put his arms akimbo, the backs of his big hands resting on his hips.

‘Very well. Go on. Only no details, pray. Spare me the details.’

‘You shall not be troubled with them, Sir Ethelred,’ the Assistant Commissioner began, with a calm and untroubled assurance. While he was speaking the hands on the face of the clock behind the great man 5 back - a heavy, glistening affair of massive scrolls in the same dark marble as the mantelpiece, and with a ghostly, evanescent tick - had moved through the space of seven minutes. He spoke with a studious fidelity to a parenthetical manner, into which every little fact - that is, every detail - fitted with delightful ease. Not a murmur nor even a movement hinted at interruption. The great Personage might have been the statue of one of his own princely ancestors stripped of a Crusader's war harness, and put into an ill-fitting frockcoat. The Assistant Commissioner felt as though he were at liberty to talk for an hour. But he kept his head, and at the end of the time mentioned above he broke off with a sudden conclusion, which, reproducing the opening statement,

pleasantly surprised Sir Ethelred by its apparent swiftness and force.

‘The kind of thing which meets us under the surface of this affair, otherwise without gravity, is unusual - in this precise form at least - and requires special treatment.’

The tone of Sir Ethelred was deepened, full of conviction. ‘I should think so - involving the Ambassador of a foreign power!’ ‘Oh! The Ambassador!’ protested the other, erect and slender, allowing himself a mere half smile, ‘It would be stupid of me to advance anything of the kind. And it is absolutely unnecessary, because if I am right in my surmises, whether ambassador or hall porter it's a mere detail.’

Sir Ethelred opened a wide mouth, like a cavern, into which the hooked nose seemed anxious to peer; there came from it a subdued rolling sound, as from a distant organ with the scornful indignation stop.

‘No! These people are too impossible. What do they mean by importing their methods of Crim-Tartary here? A Turk would have more decency.’

‘You forget, Sir Ethelred, that strictly speaking we know nothing positively - as yet.’

‘No! But how would you define it? Shortly?’

‘Barefaced audacity amounting to childishness of a peculiar sort.’

‘We can't put up with the innocence of nasty little children,’ said the great and expanded personage, expanding a little more as it were. The haughty, drooping glance struck crushingly the carpet at the Assistant Commissioner's feet. ‘They'll have to get a hard rap on the knuckles over this affair. We must be in a position to - What is your general idea, stated shortly? No need to go into details.’

‘No, Sir Ethelred. In principle, I should lay it down that the existence of secret agents should not be tolerated, as tending to augment the positive dangers of the evil against which they are used. That the spy will fabricate his information is a mere commonplace. But in the sphere of political and revolutionary action, relying partly on violence, the professional spy has every facility to fabricate the very facts themselves, and will spread the double evil of emulation in one direction, and

of panic, hasty legislation, unreflecting hate, in the other. However, this is an imperfect world--'

The deep-voiced Presence on the hearthrug, motionless, with big elbows stuck out, said hastily:

'Be lucid, please.'

'Yes, Sir Ethelred - An imperfect world. Therefore directly the character of this affair suggested itself to me, I thought it should be dealt with with special secrecy, and ventured to come over here.'

'That's right,' approved the great Personage, glancing down complacently over his double chin. 'I am glad there's somebody over at your shop who thinks that the Secretary of State may be trusted now and then.'

The Assistant Commissioner had an amused smile. 'I was really thinking that it might be better at this stage for Heat to be replaced by--'

'What! Heat? An ass - eh?' exclaimed the great man with distinct animosity.

'Not at all. Pray, Sir Ethelred, don't put that unjust interpretation on my remarks.'

'Then what? Too clever by half?'

'Neither - at least not as a rule. All the grounds of

my surmises I have from him. The only thing I've discovered by myself is that he has been making use of that man privately. Who could blame him? He's an old police hand. He told me virtually that he must have tools to work with. It occurred to me that this tool should be surrendered to the Special Crimes division as a whole, instead of remaining the private property of Chief Inspector Heat. I extended my conception of our departmental duties to the suppression of the secret agent. But Chief Inspector Heat is an old departmental hand. He would accuse me of perverting its morality and attacking its efficiency. He would define it bitterly as protection extended to the criminal class of revolutionists. It would mean just that to him.'

'Yes. But what do you mean?'

'I mean to say, first, that there's but poor comfort in being able to declare that any given act of violence - damaging property or destroying life - is not the work of anarchism at all, but of something else altogether - some species of authorized scoundrelism. This, I fancy, is much more frequent than we suppose. Next, it's obvious that the existence of these people in the pay of foreign

governments destroys in a measure the efficiency of our supervision. A spy of that sort can afford to be more reckless than the most reckless of conspirators. His occupation is free from all restraint. He's without as much faith as is necessary for complete negation, and without that much law as is implied in lawlessness. Thirdly, the existence of these spies amongst the revolutionary groups, which we are reproached for harbouring here, does away with all certitude. You have received a reassuring statement from Chief Inspector Heat some time ago. It was by no means groundless - and yet this episode happens. I call it an episode, because this affair, I make bold to say, is episodic; it is no part of any general scheme, however wild. The very peculiarities which surprise and perplex Chief Inspector Heat establish its character in my eyes. I am keeping clear of details, Sir Ethelred.'

The Personage on the hearthrug had been listening with profound attention.

'Just so. Be as concise as you can.'

The Assistant Commissioner intimated by an earnest, deferential gesture that he was anxious to be

concise.

There is a peculiar stupidity and feebleness in the conduct of this affair which gives me excellent hopes of getting behind it and finding there something else than an individual freak of fanaticism. For it is a planned thing, undoubtedly. The actual perpetrator seems to have been led by the hand to the spot, and then abandoned hurriedly to his own devices. The inference is that he was imported from abroad for the purpose of committing this outrage. At the same time one is forced to the conclusion that he did not know enough English to ask his way, unless one were to accept the fantastic theory that he was a deaf mute. I wonder now - But this is idle. He has destroyed himself by an accident, obviously. Not an extraordinary accident. But an extraordinary little fact remains: the address on his clothing discovered by the merest accident, too. It is an incredible little fact, so incredible that the explanation which will account for it is bound to touch the bottom of this affair. Instead of instructing Heat to go on with this case, my intention is to seek this explanation personally - by myself, I mean - where it may be picked up. That is

in a certain shop in Brett Street, and on the lips of a certain secret agent once upon a time the confidential and trusted spy of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim, Ambassador of a Great Power to the Court of St James's.'

The Assistant Commissioner paused, then added: 'Those fellows are a perfect pest.' In order to raise his drooping glance to the speaker's face, the Personage on the hearthrug had gradually tilted his head farther back, which gave him an aspect of extraordinary haughtiness.

'Why not leave it to Heat?'

'Because he is an old departmental hand. They have their own morality. My line of inquiry would appear to him an awful perversion of duty. For him the plain duty is to fasten the guilt upon as many prominent anarchists as he can on some slight indications he had picked up in the course of his investigation on the spot; whereas I, he would say, am bent upon vindicating their innocence. I am trying to be as lucid as I can in presenting this obscure matter to you without details.'

'He would, would he?' muttered the proud head of Sir Ethelred from its lofty elevation.

‘I am afraid so - with an indignation and disgust of which you or I can have no idea. He's an excellent servant. We must not put an undue strain on his loyalty. That's always a mistake. Besides, I want a free hand - a freer hand than it would be perhaps advisable to give Chief Inspector Heat. I haven't the slightest wish to spare this man Verloc. He will, I imagine, be extremely startled to find his connection with this affair, whatever it may be, brought home to him so quickly. Frightening him will not be very difficult. But our true objective lies behind him somewhere. I want your authority to give him such assurances of personal safety as I may think proper.’

‘Certainly,’ said the Personage on the hearthrug. ‘Find out as much as you can; find it out in your own way.’

‘I must set about it without loss of time, this very evening,’ said the Assistant Commissioner.

Sir Ethelred shifted one hand under his coat tails, and tilting back his head looked at him steadily.

‘We'll have a late sitting tonight,’ he said. ‘Come to the House with your discoveries if we are not gone