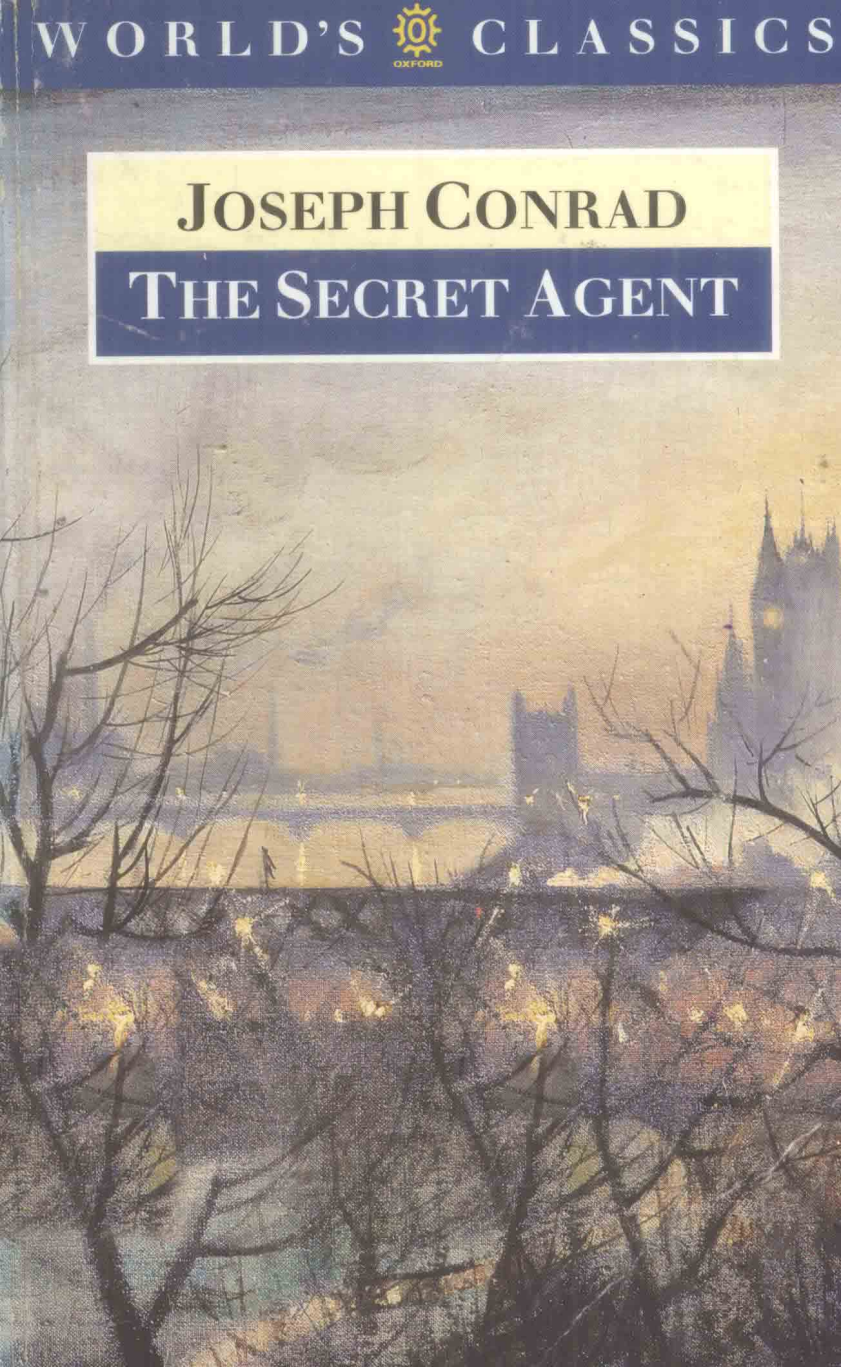
WORLD'S CLASSICS

JOSEPH CONRAD

THE SECRET AGENT



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

JOSEPH CONRAD

The Secret Agent

A Simple Tale

Edited with an Introduction by
ROGER TENNANT

Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bombay
Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

This edition first published 1983 as a World's Classics paperback

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Conrad, Joseph, 1857-1924.
The secret agent. (The World's classics)
Bibliography: p.
I. Tennant, Roger. II. Title.
PR6005.04.S4 1983 823'.912 83-2419
ISBN 0-19-281627-6 (pbk.)

10

Printed in Great Britain by
BPC Paperbacks Ltd.
Aylesbury, Bucks

INTRODUCTION

CONRAD is probably unique among novelists, even expatriate novelists, in that he never wrote a story about his own country or his own people. No scene is set in Poland or the Ukraine, no Pole appears as even a minor character in any of his stories, not even in the Russia of *Under Western Eyes*, where a Polish presence would have been natural enough—Poles had appeared, and been slandered, in the stories of Dostoevsky.

No doubt this can partly be accounted for by the fact that Conrad had left his homeland at the age of sixteen, and would hardly see it again, while his books were written for English readers at a time when their confident contempt for lesser breeds would have made it difficult for them to identify with a Polish hero, or even to admit the right of a Polish author to assess a British hero. One of the uses of Marlow as narrator, perhaps the primary one from Conrad's point of view, was as lightning conductor: he allowed Conrad to become, in effect, an Englishman writing about Englishmen, and thus avoid the otherwise unacceptable situation of a man who was a 'bloody foreigner' attempting to dissect a hero who was 'one of us'.

Nevertheless, one's inheritance is not so easily disposed of, and there is another, and obvious, sense in which it could be said that every one of his major characters is something of a Pole and that all his more serious stories have their Polish reference. Whether or not, by simply leaving his native land, Conrad could fairly be said to have 'betrayed' it, the accusation was made, and whatever degree of guilt he may have

felt, it can hardly be denied that certain concerns of his father, and the predicament of Poland, seem to appear in his stories in disguised or parabolic forms.

The Secret Agent is no exception, and one can see that Conrad wove into its dark tapestry the threads of a great many of his own emotions and experiences, at all levels from the earliest and deepest to the most recent and explicit. There is, for instance, as he mentions in the Author's Note, the pain of his 'solitary and nocturnal walks all over London' in his early days as a seaman, isolated in 'dismal lodgings', and often unemployed; then there is his marriage to a plump London-born woman whose circumstances, and stoic calm, seem to have resembled those of Winnie Verloc in the story, along with Conrad's confidence that, like Winnie's husband, he was loved for his own sake, evident enough from letters to his friends during the early days of his marriage; his resentment, also born of his early days as a seaman, against the idle rich, such as the passengers on the *Titanic*, for whom he did not mourn—'a fatuous handful of individuals who have more money than they know what to do with', and in *The Secret Agent* we see them in their 'hygienic idleness' riding in The Row under the approving gaze of Mr. Verloc, who betrays anarchists on their behalf; his traditional Polish hatred of the Russian oppressors of his country, who inevitably supply the chief villain of the story. And beyond and beneath all these things exist the ideals of the Polish anarchists with whom his father had been associated, and from which, under the influence of his Bobrowski uncle, he had strongly dissociated himself, but not, one imagines, without some residue of sympathy or guilt.

It is interesting to note that when allowance has been made for all of its author's conflicting sympathies, resentments, and ironies, *The Secret Agent* must still be seen, in the end, as backing Britain. The story underlines, not by exhortation, but by its overall engagement of the reader's sympathies,

Conrad's fundamental commitment to British values, his conviction that British tolerance, even if it is sometimes naïve, is better than foreign extremism and foreign cynicism. There is no doubt where Conrad's sympathy lies, or where the reader's is intended to lie, in that final confrontation between Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner. At the same time it must not be taken as unconditional approval of the Anglo-Saxon way of life: it is always balanced by the feeling that, as Natalia Haldin puts it in *Under Western Eyes*, the British are 'a people which has made a bargain with fate and wouldn't like to be rude to it'. Conrad's father must have shared, and conveyed to his son, something of the bitterness felt by Poles at Britain's failure to help them in their desperate rebellion against the Russians in 1863. One is made to feel the ironic contrast between the attitude of 'Toodles' and his master, for whom a Fisheries Bill is 'revolutionary', and revolution as it is understood by Vladimir and his anarchist enemies. In making the Assistant Commissioner who mediates between these two worlds dark and foreign in appearance, with experience in the East, was Conrad attempting to represent what he felt to be his own role? To accept this at one level is not to deny that in some deeper way Verloc also may be representing the author, in his relation to the ideals of his father.

When *The Secret Agent* was accepted for publication by Methuen at the end of 1906, Conrad was asked to provide a 'descriptive note', but he thought that 'the author is not the proper person for that work'. He had, he said, a definite idea of what he had tried to do, but he did not think that a bookseller, or many of his readers, would understand:

> A piece of literary work may be defined in twenty ways. The people who are serialising the *Secret Agent* in the U.S. now have found their own definition. They describe it on posters as 'A Tale of Diplomatic Intrigue and Anarchist Treachery'. But they don't do it on my authority and that's all I care for.
>
> I could never have found that. I confess that in my eyes the

story is a fairly successful (and sincere) piece of ironic treatment applied to a special subject—a sensational subject if one likes to call it so. And it is based on the inside knowledge of a certain event in the history of active anarchism. But otherwise it is *purely a work of imagination.* It has no social or philosophical intention . . .

The Author's Note, which was not added to the book until 1920, also contains various 'confessions', but like this letter seems intended more to evade than to enlighten. At the beginning of the Note Conrad feels that he must 'explain that there was no perverse intention, no secret scorn for the natural sensibilities of mankind at the bottom of my impulses' and he ends with the assurance that he has 'not intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind'. Here, no doubt, Conrad is reacting to critics who had spoken of the story's 'sordid setting' and its 'moral squalor'—one of them had thought that it was 'as indecent to exhibit a murder done in this slow and tedious manner as it would be to have the shambles of a butcher on the public streets'.

The British public was not familiar, as Conrad was, with the explicit 'realism' of nineteenth-century French novels, and Conrad never attempted to portray anything as horrifying as Flaubert's description of the death of Emma Bovary. Even so, shortly after the publication of *The Secret Agent*, the poet and critic Arthur Symons produced a study of Conrad in which he was presented, quite approvingly, as one who 'delighted in cruelty' and was 'obsessed with the shedding of blood'. In a private letter Conrad replied, 'The fact is I am really a much simpler person. Death is a fact, and violent death is a fact too. In the simplicity of my heart, I tried to realise these facts when they came in. Do you really think that old Flaubert gloated over the deathbed of Emma, or the death march of Matho, or the last moments of Félicie?'

Conrad pretended to a MacWhirrish contempt for metaphysics, and when one reviewer of *The Secret Agent*, affected

by the sense of evil that haunts the book, spoke of Conrad's vision as 'Neo-Platonic', he wrote to his friend Edward Garnett, 'There is even one abandoned creature who says I am a neo-platonist. What on earth is that?' Yet one can hardly deny that the London of *The Secret Agent* has been given elements that are more than Dickensian, more than earthly—it is spiritual Babylon, 'darkness enough to bury five millions of lives'.

By 1926, two years after Conrad's death, most of his major works had been translated into Polish, and a Polish critic, Stefan Napulski, having wondered at them, wrote:

> It is not easy to imagine that on breezy decks, leaning back in their canvas chairs, white-clad gentlemen handle these volumes without the slightest sign of unease. How provocative they are at bottom! It would seem that if ever anyone's work contained the maximum of unpopular elements it is Conrad's. How cultivated and sensitive—or how superficial—must his Anglo-Saxon readers be, to have accepted this fascinating artist! Do they not feel the despair lurking behind these truly nihilistic books?

The answer to this provocative question would seem to be 'yes and no', for Conrad had the skill, developed maybe through his long association with *Blackwood's Magazine*, to write stories that could satisfy, each at their own level, both the superficial and the sensitive, and no doubt the white-clad passengers of the P & O, like any other group, included among many of the former a few of the latter.

Nor can one, without qualification, describe his work as 'truly nihilistic', but this was certainly country that Conrad had explored. It might be said of him, as was said of Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, that his 'knowledge of unexplored regions must have been necessarily extensive and peculiar—owing to his great abilities and to the deplorable circumstances in which he had been placed . . .' Conrad did not have the mind of a professional philosopher and he did not analyse the nihilism of late nineteenth-century Europe in the manner

of Nietzsche, or attempt to 'conquer' it with a new set of values, but he knew the feel of it more keenly and more consciously than his British contemporaries, and he produced his own pragmatic, and rather British, formula for dealing with it—hard work, and fidelity to a professional code. This was his form of what in *Lord Jim* Marlow describes as 'that shelter each one of us makes for himself to creep under in moments of danger, as a tortoise withdraws within its shell', for outside of it, 'the world wears a vast and dismal aspect of disorder'.

Occasionally, as a kind of *tour de force*, Conrad could produce a tale such as *Typhoon*, full of courage and good humour, but he was more at home in those situations where, to quote the much-folded popular newspaper that at the end of *The Secret Agent* Ossipon draws from his pocket, 'an impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair'.

Marlow had stared at Kurtz 'as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines', and *The Secret Agent* seems to belong to this same abyss, some 'unfathomable depth' of Conrad's personality in which was reflected that 'vast and dismal aspect of disorder' that he was trying to keep at bay. This is something that goes beyond the problems of politics—the book provides a critique not only of the governments of Russia or Britain, or the anarchist alternative to them, but of the Universe itself. He may not have held it as a conscious and continuing belief, but it seems that Conrad was frequently driven to a view of the world that implied that the Devil was its lord and master, and even at best he saw it as something quite alien to the human race. In *Lord Jim*, Stein says, 'Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him.'

Such views were expressed more freely in his letters than in his books, notably in the oft-quoted correspondence with R. B. Cunninghame Graham, in which Conrad speaks of the

world as a machine that has 'made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it'—sentiments that are echoed, less rationally, by the Professor in *The Secret Agent*.

Here Conrad seems to see the world in terms so mechanical that it would be pointless to protest—there are no eyes to see, nor ears to hear—but in his earlier correspondence, in French, with Marguerite, the widow of his cousin Alexander Poradowski, Conrad had seen it as not merely mechanical and indifferent, but as ruled by an actively malignant power. At a time when, soon after losing her husband, Marguerite was affected by the accidental death of a beloved cousin, who had been with child at the time, Conrad told her of his 'indignation against the injustice of the suffering that pursues you, against the cruelty of things and the brutality of the inevitable', and he went on to speak of being 'stunned with astonishment at the inexplicable cruelty of the Invisible that guides inanimate things to destroy a life necessary to the happiness of innocent beings—even of one that was not yet conscious! Truly we are the slaves of fate before our birth, and we pay tribute to misfortune before we have known what it is. Does it, I fearfully ask myself, follow us beyond the tomb?'

This letter was written in the summer of 1891, a time of illness and indecision that followed Conrad's return from the Congo, and when he wrote to his cousin again from Adelaide a few months later, after the sea breezes had to some extent restored his health, he was recalling traces of his Catholic inheritance, and almost prepared to accept the universe for the sake of 'charity', for 'Charity is eternal and universal love, the divine virtue, the sole manifestation of the Almighty which may in some manner justify the act of creation.'

In *The Secret Agent* one shaft of this light is allowed to penetrate the darkness, when Winnie's mother banishes herself

to an almshouse out of pure love for Stevie; but in Conrad's dark vision, not only is her action misinterpreted as selfishness by those whom she loves, but it also serves to precipitate Stevie's death. And although in the Author's Note Conrad would deny that he had been 'elaborating mere ugliness in order to shock', the manner of Stevie's death is carried rather beyond the bounds of what it is physically possible for a small bomb to do. One of the newspapers that reported the original Greenwich explosion gave it the headline 'Blown to Pieces!' but they did not expect it to be taken as literally as it would be by Conrad—Stevie, in the story, seems to have been not so much 'blown up' as put through a mincing machine. The original victim, Bourdin, had a hand blown off, and shrapnel wounds in his stomach, from which subsequently he died, but Stevie is reduced to a 'heap of mixed things which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops' and scraped together, along with gravel and bits of bark, by a constable with a spade.

There is a corresponding tendency to bend reality in order to shock, or intensify the blackness, in Conrad's treatment of his characters. The complete lack of communication between Verloc and his wife may be psychologically credible, but the equal lack of it between Winnie and her mother, the way in which Winnie's powerful maternal instincts are concentrated solely on her brother and not allowed to spill over, to the slightest degree, on anyone else, her complete lack of any instinctive feeling that a threat to her husband's security is a threat to her own, and Stevie's rather unlikely combination of subnormal intelligence and extremely imaginative compassion—all these can be seen as examples of the way in which Conrad risks psychological credibility for the sake of intensifying the effect. As if aware of these dangers, between publication as a serial in 1906 and in book form in September 1907, Conrad added many thousands of words, most of them elaborating the thoughts and feelings of Verloc and Winnie in the final scenes.

The Secret Agent is often treated as if it were primarily a political novel, concerned with 'Diplomatic Intrigue and Anarchist Treachery' or the corruptions of British society, or capitalism, or urbanization, but if one gives due weight to what Edward Garnett in a contemporary review of the book called 'the hidden weakness in the springs of impulse', the way in which Conrad both bends the psychology of his players, and loads the dice against them, it suggests that, as sometimes with Hardy, the ultimate object of his critique is not so much the social order as the universe: it is a cry of protest at the tragic accident that we cannot even smash, an indictment of the Invisible that guides inanimate things to bring about our destruction.

It is noticeable that frequently in *The Secret Agent* Conrad emphasizes the hostility of the inanimate world, not only in the grime of Soho, but even in the elegance of a street in Knightsbridge—'in its breadth, emptiness, and extent it had the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies'. This hostility is given its most memorable representation in the automatic piano in the Silenus restaurant, an inanimate object that shows a disturbing animation, and at the end of the story will make its own mocking comment on the human tragedy—as Ossipon's brain 'pulsated to the rhythm of *this act of madness or despair*', the piano 'played through a valse cheekily, then fell silent all at once, as if gone grumpy'.

The book is dedicated to H. G. Wells, and more specifically to Wells as 'the chronicler of Mr. Lewisham's love, the biographer of Kipps and the historian of the ages to come'. Why these particular books out of the twenty-five or so that Wells had by that time produced? *Love and Mr. Lewisham* and *Kipps* are both set very largely in London, and although they are realistic about the darker side of the city, of which Wells had more real experience than Conrad, they have also a bubbling gaiety expressive of Wells's optimistic temperament.

The Secret Agent might be seen as a pessimist's reply, and the way in which Conrad deals with his characters may also reflect the influence of Wells, for in 1903, after reading the latter's *Filmer*, Conrad had written to say that he considered Wells 'an uncompromising realist', and added 'there is a cold jocular ferocity about the handling of the mankind in which you believe, that gives me the shudders sometimes. However, as you believe in them, it is right and proper and excellent that you should get some fun in making their bones rattle. And can't you do it too!' *The Secret Agent* might be seen as Conrad's attempt at rattling bones, but with a difference: he never lets us forget that the bones are clad in vulnerable flesh. As each of the main characters nears his end, Conrad withdraws the screen of irony, and so moves us to compassion. Verloc has behind him a lifetime of despicable betrayals, but his simple belief that he is loved for himself, his genuine concern for his wife, and, in the last scene, his weariness and his hunger for both food and sympathy begin to win us over. Then Winnie, in turn, having committed a terrible crime, becomes in her fear of the gallows, and her abject dependence on Ossipon, an object of compassion; and finally the reader must absolve Ossipon also, as he walks the streets of London, 'a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases. ". . . *Will hang for ever over this act . . . of madness or despair . . .*" '

The editor of the American magazine that advertised the story in terms of 'intrigue' and 'treachery' was no doubt hoping that it would be popular as a 'thriller', and Conrad had similar hopes, telling his agent that 'there is an element of popularity in it'. Indeed there was, and the fact that critics accused it of 'moral squalor' and 'indecency' would not have been a handicap from that point of view. It was an early example of a genre that in the hands of Graham Greene and others has proved immensely popular: that *The Secret Agent*

itself was not so may be largely due to the lack of any character with whom the reader could identify—whether Conrad, without compromising his own integrity, could have provided one, is a complex question, involving as it does the universality of his irony, and the corresponding width of sympathy that it demands.

Conrad's use of sources in *The Secret Agent* follows very much the pattern set by his other major works. He liked to begin with a real-life event from a travel book, or a newspaper, or his own experience, often preserving the actual names of the persons and places, and would then weave around them a fictional web that probably bore little relation to the original event, but would in his own memory so completely replace it that he would become quite indignant if later anyone suggested that he had not put down the simple truth of the affair.

The hero of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, corresponded to a real Charles Olmeyer who did indeed build a house in Borneo that was nicknamed 'Almayer's Folly' by a visiting trader, but research has shown that the overlap between what one might call 'the historical Almayer' and the Almayer of Conrad's gospel is not very great. In the manuscript of *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz was called 'Klein', the name of an actual agent who died on the Congo river-boat that Conrad temporarily commanded, but he had none of the remarkable perversities attributed to his fictional namesake, and so also with *Lord Jim*, *Falk*, 'The Secret Sharer', and other tales.

So it was that when he came to write *The Secret Agent* in 1905, Conrad used memories, and probably also reports, of an incident in 1894 in which a bomb exploded in Greenwich Park, killing the anarchist sympathizer who was carrying it. In doing so, Conrad produced an alternative history that is, on the one hand, darker and more filled with 'madness and despair' than the original, and, on the other hand, tidier, in

that he was able to see that some kind of rough justice was done, and the successive victims avenged, whereas in real life the suspected double agent, aided rather than executed by his wife, continued his vocation as a 'protector of society'.

It is noticeable that none of the anarchists involved in Conrad's story is of British origin, whereas the double agent in the actual case, a man called Samuels, was believed to be working with the British police, who, according to anarchist pamphlets, had been responsible for the whole plot. It was used by the Conservative government of the time to justify a new Aliens Bill, and the arrest of many anarchists. This was opposed by the Liberals, who had been in power at the time of an earlier spate of terrorist activities in the 1880s, instigated not by anarchists, but by the Fenians, forerunners of the IRA, campaigning for Irish home rule.

The Liberal Home Secretary at that time had been Sir William Harcourt, who is used by Conrad as the basis for his 'Sir Ethelred', and most of his material for police attitudes, the role of the Assistant Commissioner, and so on, comes from a book by Robert Anderson, who had been involved in investigating the Fenian campaign before becoming himself Assistant Commissioner, and receiving a knighthood. This book—*Sidelights on the Home Rule Movement*—referred to by Conrad in his Author's Note, was not published until 1906, so that this part of the story must have been developed after Conrad had begun it, under the original title of 'Verloc', towards the end of 1905. This presumably accounts for the way in which these police and political characters make a rather late appearance in the story, dominate it for a while, and then disappear again, a feature that was criticized in contemporary reviews of the book.

The detailed summary of Conrad's sources with which Professor Norman Sherry fills twelve chapters of his *Conrad's Western World* shows that incidents such as the arrest of Michaelis while trying to rescue prisoners from a police van,

and indeed the whole character and story of the 'ticket-of-leave apostle', as also of a man who carries dynamite to blow up, along with himself, anyone who tries to arrest him, come from a Fenian background, and indeed would seem to have more flavour of Ireland than of British anarchism, which, except for a possible *agent provocateur* and occasional psychopathic hangers-on, was no more than an idealistic offshoot of the Socialist movement—William Morris or Ramsay MacDonald were more typical of its supporters than the monsters whom Conrad assembles.

It seems that, as he suggests in the Author's Note, Conrad had his interest in the Greenwich incident aroused by his collaborator Ford Madox Ford, who, largely through his Rossetti relatives, had had some contacts with foreign anarchists. According to Conrad, his informant said of the man who was 'blown to bits', 'that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards'; but in his book *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* Ford claims that what he really said to Conrad was, 'Oh that fellow was half an idiot: his sister murdered her husband afterwards and was allowed to escape by the police. I remember the funeral.' The remarkable thing about these alternative pieces of information is that they are equally untrue, yet proved equally valuable to Conrad in providing the double tragedy with which his story ends.

Bourdin, the original carrier of the bomb, did have a sister who was married to a suspected double agent, and Bourdin was said to be a simpleton who admired his brother-in-law, but his sister does not appear to have been greatly grieved at his disappearance, and far from murdering her husband, terrified his accusers with the violence of her abuse. Needless to say, she did not go on to kill herself. Thus, the murder, and subsequent suicide, which bring Conrad's story to so powerful a conclusion seem to have been invented by Ford and Conrad between them, probably without any conscious awareness of it—they were more or less equally notorious for their inability

to distinguish between fact and fiction. In this way, a depressing tale of an ignorant and unpunished police informer, and his foul-mouthed wife, was elevated into a deeply disturbing tragedy of 'madness and despair'.