

THE SECRET AGENT A SIMPLE TALE

CHAPTER IX

Mr Verloc returning from the Continent at the end of ten days, brought back a mind evidently unrefreshed by the wonders of foreign travel and a countenance unlighted by the joys of home-coming. He entered in the clatter of the shop bell with an air of sombre and vexed exhaustion. His bag in hand, his head lowered, he strode straight behind the counter, and let himself fall into the chair, as though he had tramped all the way from Dover. It was early morning. Stevie, dusting various objects displayed in the front windows, turned to gape at him with reverence and awe.

“Here!” said Mr Verloc, giving a slight kick to the gladstone bag on the floor; and Stevie flung himself upon it, seized it, bore it off with triumphant devotion. He was so prompt that Mr Verloc was distinctly surprised.

Already at the clatter of the shop bell Mrs Neale, blackleading the parlour grate, had looked through the door, and rising from her knees had gone, aproned, and grimy with everlasting toil, to tell Mrs Verloc in the kitchen that “there was the master come back.”

Winnie came no farther than the inner shop door.

“You’ll want some breakfast,” she said from a distance.

Mr Verloc moved his hands slightly, as if overcome by an impossible suggestion. But once enticed into the parlour he did not reject the food set before him. He ate as if in a public place, his hat pushed off his forehead, the skirts of his heavy overcoat hanging in a triangle on each side of the chair. And across the length of the table covered with brown oil-cloth Winnie, his wife, talked evenly at him the wifely talk, as artfully adapted, no doubt, to the circumstances of this return as the talk of Penelope to the return of the wandering Odysseus. Mrs Verloc, however, had done no weaving during her husband’s absence. But she had had all the upstairs room cleaned thoroughly, had sold some wares, had seen Mr Michaelis several times. He had told her the last time that he was going away to live in a cottage in the country, somewhere on the London, Chatham, and Dover line. Karl Yundt had come too, once, led under the arm by that “wicked

old housekeeper of his." He was "a disgusting old man." Of Comrade Ossipon, whom she had received curtly, entrenched behind the counter with a stony face and a faraway gaze, she said nothing, her mental reference to the robust anarchist being marked by a short pause, with the faintest possible blush. And bringing in her brother Stevie as soon as she could into the current of domestic events, she mentioned that the boy had moped a good deal.

"It's all along of mother leaving us like this."

Mr Verloc neither said, "Damn!" nor yet "Stevie be hanged!" And Mrs Verloc, not let into the secret of his thoughts, failed to appreciate the generosity of this restraint.

"It isn't that he doesn't work as well as ever," she continued. "He's been making himself very useful. You'd think he couldn't do enough for us."

Mr Verloc directed a casual and somnolent glance at Stevie, who sat on his right, delicate, pale-faced, his rosy mouth open vacantly. It was not a critical glance. It had no intention. And if Mr Verloc thought for a moment that his wife's brother looked uncommonly useless, it was only a dull and fleeting thought, devoid of that force and durability which enables sometimes a thought to move the world. Leaning back, Mr Verloc uncovered his head. Before his extended arm could put down the hat Stevie pounced upon it, and bore it off reverently into the kitchen. And again Mr Verloc was surprised.

"You could do anything with that boy, Adolf," Mrs Verloc said, with her best air of inflexible calmness. "He would go through fire for you. He—"

She paused attentive, her ear turned towards the door of the kitchen.

There Mrs Neale was scrubbing the floor. At Stevie's appearance she groaned lamentably, having observed that he could be induced easily to bestow for the benefit of her infant children the shilling his sister Winnie presented him with from time to time. On all fours amongst the puddles, wet and begrimed, like a sort of amphibious and domestic animal living in ash-bins and dirty water, she uttered the usual exordium: "It's all very well for you, kept doing nothing like a gentleman." And she followed it with the everlasting plaint of the poor, pathetically mendacious, miserably authenticated by the horrible breath of cheap rum and soap-suds. She scrubbed hard, snuffling all the time, and talking volubly. And she was sincere. And on each side of her thin red nose her bleared, misty eyes swam in tears, because she felt really the want of some sort of stimulant in the morning.

In the parlour Mrs Verloc observed, with knowledge:

"There's Mrs Neale at it again with her harrowing tales about her little children. They can't be all so little as she makes them out. Some of them must be big enough by now to try to do something for themselves. It only makes Stevie angry."

These words were confirmed by a thud as of a fist striking the kitchen table. In the normal evolution of his sympathy Stevie had become angry on discovering that he had no shilling in his pocket. In his inability to relieve at once Mrs Neale's "little 'uns'" privations, he felt that somebody should be made to suffer for it. Mrs Verloc rose, and went into the kitchen to "stop that nonsense." And she did it firmly but gently. She was well aware that directly Mrs Neale received her money she went round the corner to drink ardent spirits in a mean and musty public-house—the unavoidable station on the *via dolorosa* of her life. Mrs Verloc's comment upon this practice had an unexpected profundity, as coming from a person disinclined to look under the surface of things. "Of course, what is she to do to keep up? If I were like Mrs Neale I expect I wouldn't act any different."

In the afternoon of the same day, as Mr Verloc, coming with a start out of the last of a long series of dozes before the parlour fire, declared his intention of going out for a walk, Winnie said from the shop:

"I wish you would take that boy out with you, Adolf."

For the third time that day Mr Verloc was surprised. He stared stupidly at his wife. She continued in her steady manner. The boy, whenever he was not doing anything, moped in the house. It made her uneasy; it made her nervous, she confessed. And that from the calm Winnie sounded like exaggeration. But, in truth, Stevie moped in the striking fashion of an unhappy domestic animal. He would go up on the dark landing, to sit on the floor at the foot of the tall clock, with his knees drawn up and his head in his hands. To come upon his pallid face, with its big eyes gleaming in the dusk, was discomposing; to think of him up there was uncomfortable.

Mr Verloc got used to the startling novelty of the idea. He was fond of his wife as a man should be—that is, generously. But a weighty objection presented itself to his mind, and he formulated it.

"He'll lose sight of me perhaps, and get lost in the street," he said.

Mrs Verloc shook her head competently.

"He won't. You don't know him. That boy just worships you. But if you should miss him—"

Mrs Verloc paused for a moment, but only for a moment.

"You just go on, and have your walk out. Don't worry. He'll be all right. He's sure to turn up safe here before very long."

This optimism procured for Mr Verloc his fourth surprise of the day.

"Is he?" he grunted doubtfully. But perhaps his brother-in-law was not such an idiot as he looked. His wife would know best. He turned away his heavy eyes, saying huskily: "Well, let him come along, then," and relapsed into the clutches

of black care, that perhaps prefers to sit behind a horseman, but knows also how to tread close on the heels of people not sufficiently well off to keep horses—like Mr Verloc, for instance.

Winnie, at the shop door, did not see this fatal attendant upon Mr Verloc's walks. She watched the two figures down the squalid street, one tall and burly, the other slight and short, with a thin neck, and the peaked shoulders raised slightly under the large semi-transparent ears. The material of their overcoats was the same, their hats were black and round in shape. Inspired by the similarity of wearing apparel, Mrs Verloc gave rein to her fancy.

“Might be father and son,” she said to herself. She thought also that Mr Verloc was as much of a father as poor Stevie ever had in his life. She was aware also that it was her work. And with peaceful pride she congratulated herself on a certain resolution she had taken a few years before. It had cost her some effort, and even a few tears.

She congratulated herself still more on observing in the course of days that Mr Verloc seemed to be taking kindly to Stevie's companionship. Now, when ready to go out for his walk, Mr Verloc called aloud to the boy, in the spirit, no doubt, in which a man invites the attendance of the household dog, though, of course, in a different manner. In the house Mr Verloc could be detected staring curiously at Stevie a good deal. His own demeanour had changed. Taciturn still, he was not so listless. Mrs Verloc thought that he was rather jumpy at times. It might have been regarded as an improvement. As to Stevie, he moped no longer at the foot of the clock, but muttered to himself in corners instead in a threatening tone. When asked “What is it you're saying, Stevie?” he merely opened his mouth, and squinted at his sister. At odd times he clenched his fists without apparent cause, and when discovered in solitude would be scowling at the wall, with the sheet of paper and the pencil given him for drawing circles lying blank and idle on the kitchen table. This was a change, but it was no improvement. Mrs Verloc including all these vagaries under the general definition of excitement, began to fear that Stevie was hearing more than was good for him of her husband's conversations with his friends. During his “walks” Mr Verloc, of course, met and conversed with various persons. It could hardly be otherwise. His walks were an integral part of his outdoor activities, which his wife had never looked deeply into. Mrs Verloc felt that the position was delicate, but she faced it with the same impenetrable calmness which impressed and even astonished the customers of the shop and made the other visitors keep their distance a little wonderingly. No! She feared that there were things not good for Stevie to hear of, she told her husband. It only excited the poor boy, because he could not help them being so. Nobody could.

It was in the shop. Mr Verloc made no comment. He made no retort, and yet the retort was obvious. But he refrained from pointing out to his wife that the

idea of making Stevie the companion of his walks was her own, and nobody else's. At that moment, to an impartial observer, Mr Verloc would have appeared more than human in his magnanimity. He took down a small cardboard box from a shelf, peeped in to see that the contents were all right, and put it down gently on the counter. Not till that was done did he break the silence, to the effect that most likely Stevie would profit greatly by being sent out of town for a while; only he supposed his wife could not get on without him.

"Could not get on without him!" repeated Mrs Verloc slowly. "I couldn't get on without him if it were for his good! The idea! Of course, I can get on without him. But there's nowhere for him to go."

Mr Verloc got out some brown paper and a ball of string; and meanwhile he muttered that Michaelis was living in a little cottage in the country. Michaelis wouldn't mind giving Stevie a room to sleep in. There were no visitors and no talk there. Michaelis was writing a book.

Mrs Verloc declared her affection for Michaelis; mentioned her abhorrence of Karl Yundt, "nasty old man"; and of Ossipon she said nothing. As to Stevie, he could be no other than very pleased. Mr Michaelis was always so nice and kind to him. He seemed to like the boy. Well, the boy was a good boy.

"You too seem to have grown quite fond of him of late," she added, after a pause, with her inflexible assurance.

Mr Verloc tying up the cardboard box into a parcel for the post, broke the string by an injudicious jerk, and muttered several swear words confidentially to himself. Then raising his tone to the usual husky mutter, he announced his willingness to take Stevie into the country himself, and leave him all safe with Michaelis.

He carried out this scheme on the very next day. Stevie offered no objection. He seemed rather eager, in a bewildered sort of way. He turned his candid gaze inquisitively to Mr Verloc's heavy countenance at frequent intervals, especially when his sister was not looking at him. His expression was proud, apprehensive, and concentrated, like that of a small child entrusted for the first time with a box of matches and the permission to strike a light. But Mrs Verloc, gratified by her brother's docility, recommended him not to dirty his clothes unduly in the country. At this Stevie gave his sister, guardian and protector a look, which for the first time in his life seemed to lack the quality of perfect childlike trustfulness. It was haughtily gloomy. Mrs Verloc smiled.

"Goodness me! You needn't be offended. You know you do get yourself very untidy when you get a chance, Stevie."

Mr Verloc was already gone some way down the street.

Thus in consequence of her mother's heroic proceedings, and of her brother's absence on this villegiature, Mrs Verloc found herself oftener than usual all alone

not only in the shop, but in the house. For Mr Verloc had to take his walks. She was alone longer than usual on the day of the attempted bomb outrage in Greenwich Park, because Mr Verloc went out very early that morning and did not come back till nearly dusk. She did not mind being alone. She had no desire to go out. The weather was too bad, and the shop was cosier than the streets. Sitting behind the counter with some sewing, she did not raise her eyes from her work when Mr Verloc entered in the aggressive clatter of the bell. She had recognised his step on the pavement outside.

She did not raise her eyes, but as Mr Verloc, silent, and with his hat rammed down upon his forehead, made straight for the parlour door, she said serenely:

“What a wretched day. You’ve been perhaps to see Stevie?”

“No! I haven’t,” said Mr Verloc softly, and slammed the glazed parlour door behind him with unexpected energy.

For some time Mrs Verloc remained quiescent, with her work dropped in her lap, before she put it away under the counter and got up to light the gas. This done, she went into the parlour on her way to the kitchen. Mr Verloc would want his tea presently. Confident of the power of her charms, Winnie did not expect from her husband in the daily intercourse of their married life a ceremonious amenity of address and courtliness of manner; vain and antiquated forms at best, probably never very exactly observed, discarded nowadays even in the highest spheres, and always foreign to the standards of her class. She did not look for courtesies from him. But he was a good husband, and she had a loyal respect for his rights.

Mrs Verloc would have gone through the parlour and on to her domestic duties in the kitchen with the perfect serenity of a woman sure of the power of her charms. But a slight, very slight, and rapid rattling sound grew upon her hearing. Bizarre and incomprehensible, it arrested Mrs Verloc’s attention. Then as its character became plain to the ear she stopped short, amazed and concerned. Striking a match on the box she held in her hand, she turned on and lighted, above the parlour table, one of the two gas-burners, which, being defective, first whistled as if astonished, and then went on purring comfortably like a cat.

Mr Verloc, against his usual practice, had thrown off his overcoat. It was lying on the sofa. His hat, which he must also have thrown off, rested overturned under the edge of the sofa. He had dragged a chair in front of the fireplace, and his feet planted inside the fender, his head held between his hands, he was hanging low over the glowing grate. His teeth rattled with an ungovernable violence, causing his whole enormous back to tremble at the same rate. Mrs Verloc was startled.

“You’ve been getting wet,” she said.

“Not very,” Mr Verloc managed to falter out, in a profound shudder. By a great effort he suppressed the rattling of his teeth.

“I’ll have you laid up on my hands,” she said, with genuine uneasiness.

“I don’t think so,” remarked Mr Verloc, snuffling huskily.

He had certainly contrived somehow to catch an abominable cold between seven in the morning and five in the afternoon. Mrs Verloc looked at his bowed back.

“Where have you been to-day?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” answered Mr Verloc in a low, choked nasal tone. His attitude suggested aggrieved sulks or a severe headache. The insufficiency and uncandidness of his answer became painfully apparent in the dead silence of the room. He snuffled apologetically, and added: “I’ve been to the bank.”

Mrs Verloc became attentive.

“You have!” she said dispassionately. “What for?”

Mr Verloc mumbled, with his nose over the grate, and with marked unwillingness.

“Draw the money out!”

“What do you mean? All of it?”

“Yes. All of it.”

Mrs Verloc spread out with care the scanty table-cloth, got two knives and two forks out of the table drawer, and suddenly stopped in her methodical proceedings.

“What did you do that for?”

“May want it soon,” snuffled vaguely Mr Verloc, who was coming to the end of his calculated indiscretions.

“I don’t know what you mean,” remarked his wife in a tone perfectly casual, but standing stock still between the table and the cupboard.

“You know you can trust me,” Mr Verloc remarked to the grate, with hoarse feeling.

Mrs Verloc turned slowly towards the cupboard, saying with deliberation:

“Oh yes. I can trust you.”

And she went on with her methodical proceedings. She laid two plates, got the bread, the butter, going to and fro quietly between the table and the cupboard in the peace and silence of her home. On the point of taking out the jam, she reflected practically: “He will be feeling hungry, having been away all day,” and she returned to the cupboard once more to get the cold beef. She set it under the purring gas-jet, and with a passing glance at her motionless husband hugging the fire, she went (down two steps) into the kitchen. It was only when coming back, carving knife and fork in hand, that she spoke again.

“If I hadn’t trusted you I wouldn’t have married you.”

Bowed under the overmantel, Mr Verloc, holding his head in both hands, seemed to have gone to sleep. Winnie made the tea, and called out in an undertone:

“Adolf.”

Mr Verloc got up at once, and staggered a little before he sat down at the table. His wife examining the sharp edge of the carving knife, placed it on the dish, and called his attention to the cold beef. He remained insensible to the suggestion, with his chin on his breast.

“You should feed your cold,” Mrs Verloc said dogmatically.

He looked up, and shook his head. His eyes were bloodshot and his face red. His fingers had ruffled his hair into a dissipated untidiness. Altogether he had a disreputable aspect, expressive of the discomfort, the irritation and the gloom following a heavy debauch. But Mr Verloc was not a debauched man. In his conduct he was respectable. His appearance might have been the effect of a feverish cold. He drank three cups of tea, but abstained from food entirely. He recoiled from it with sombre aversion when urged by Mrs Verloc, who said at last:

“Aren’t your feet wet? You had better put on your slippers. You aren’t going out any more this evening.”

Mr Verloc intimated by morose grunts and signs that his feet were not wet, and that anyhow he did not care. The proposal as to slippers was disregarded as beneath his notice. But the question of going out in the evening received an unexpected development. It was not of going out in the evening that Mr Verloc was thinking. His thoughts embraced a vaster scheme. From moody and incomplete phrases it became apparent that Mr Verloc had been considering the expediency of emigrating. It was not very clear whether he had in his mind France or California.

The utter unexpectedness, improbability, and inconceivableness of such an event robbed this vague declaration of all its effect. Mrs Verloc, as placidly as if her husband had been threatening her with the end of the world, said:

“The idea!”

Mr Verloc declared himself sick and tired of everything, and besides—She interrupted him.

“You’ve a bad cold.”

It was indeed obvious that Mr Verloc was not in his usual state, physically and even mentally. A sombre irresolution held him silent for a while. Then he murmured a few ominous generalities on the theme of necessity.

“Will have to,” repeated Winnie, sitting calmly back, with folded arms, opposite her husband. “I should like to know who’s to make you. You ain’t a

slave. No one need be a slave in this country—and don't you make yourself one." She paused, and with invincible and steady candour. "The business isn't so bad," she went on. "You've a comfortable home."

She glanced all round the parlour, from the corner cupboard to the good fire in the grate. Ensconced cosily behind the shop of doubtful wares, with the mysteriously dim window, and its door suspiciously ajar in the obscure and narrow street, it was in all essentials of domestic propriety and domestic comfort a respectable home. Her devoted affection missed out of it her brother Stevie, now enjoying a damp villegiature in the Kentish lanes under the care of Mr Michaelis. She missed him poignantly, with all the force of her protecting passion. This was the boy's home too—the roof, the cupboard, the stoked grate. On this thought Mrs Verloc rose, and walking to the other end of the table, said in the fulness of her heart:

"And you are not tired of me."

Mr Verloc made no sound. Winnie leaned on his shoulder from behind, and pressed her lips to his forehead. Thus she lingered. Not a whisper reached them from the outside world.

The sound of footsteps on the pavement died out in the discreet dimness of the shop. Only the gas-jet above the table went on purring equably in the brooding silence of the parlour.

During the contact of that unexpected and lingering kiss Mr Verloc, gripping with both hands the edges of his chair, preserved a hieratic immobility. When the pressure was removed he let go the chair, rose, and went to stand before the fireplace. He turned no longer his back to the room. With his features swollen and an air of being drugged, he followed his wife's movements with his eyes.

Mrs Verloc went about serenely, clearing up the table. Her tranquil voice commented the idea thrown out in a reasonable and domestic tone. It wouldn't stand examination. She condemned it from every point of view. But her only real concern was Stevie's welfare. He appeared to her thought in that connection as sufficiently "peculiar" not to be taken rashly abroad. And that was all. But talking round that vital point, she approached absolute vehemence in her delivery. Meanwhile, with brusque movements, she arrayed herself in an apron for the washing up of cups. And as if excited by the sound of her uncontradicted voice, she went so far as to say in a tone almost tart:

"If you go abroad you'll have to go without me."

"You know I wouldn't," said Mr Verloc huskily, and the unresonant voice of his private life trembled with an enigmatical emotion.

Already Mrs Verloc was regretting her words. They had sounded more unkind than she meant them to be. They had also the unwisdom of unnecessary things. In fact, she had not meant them at all. It was a sort of phrase that is suggested by the

demon of perverse inspiration. But she knew a way to make it as if it had not been.

She turned her head over her shoulder and gave that man planted heavily in front of the fireplace a glance, half arch, half cruel, out of her large eyes—a glance of which the Winnie of the Belgravian mansion days would have been incapable, because of her respectability and her ignorance. But the man was her husband now, and she was no longer ignorant. She kept it on him for a whole second, with her grave face motionless like a mask, while she said playfully:

“You couldn’t. You would miss me too much.”

Mr Verloc started forward.

“Exactly,” he said in a louder tone, throwing his arms out and making a step towards her. Something wild and doubtful in his expression made it appear uncertain whether he meant to strangle or to embrace his wife. But Mrs Verloc’s attention was called away from that manifestation by the clatter of the shop bell.

“Shop, Adolf. You go.”

He stopped, his arms came down slowly.

“You go,” repeated Mrs Verloc. “I’ve got my apron on.”

Mr Verloc obeyed woodenly, stony-eyed, and like an automaton whose face had been painted red. And this resemblance to a mechanical figure went so far that he had an automaton’s absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside of him.

He closed the parlour door, and Mrs Verloc moving briskly, carried the tray into the kitchen. She washed the cups and some other things before she stopped in her work to listen. No sound reached her. The customer was a long time in the shop. It was a customer, because if he had not been Mr Verloc would have taken him inside. Undoing the strings of her apron with a jerk, she threw it on a chair, and walked back to the parlour slowly.

At that precise moment Mr Verloc entered from the shop.

He had gone in red. He came out a strange papery white. His face, losing its drugged, feverish stupor, had in that short time acquired a bewildered and harassed expression. He walked straight to the sofa, and stood looking down at his overcoat lying there, as though he were afraid to touch it.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mrs Verloc in a subdued voice. Through the door left ajar she could see that the customer was not gone yet.

“I find I’ll have to go out this evening,” said Mr Verloc. He did not attempt to pick up his outer garment.

Without a word Winnie made for the shop, and shutting the door after her, walked in behind the counter. She did not look overtly at the customer till she had established herself comfortably on the chair. But by that time she had noted

that he was tall and thin, and wore his moustaches twisted up. In fact, he gave the sharp points a twist just then. His long, bony face rose out of a turned-up collar. He was a little splashed, a little wet. A dark man, with the ridge of the cheek-bone well defined under the slightly hollow temple. A complete stranger. Not a customer either.

Mrs Verloc looked at him placidly.

“You came over from the Continent?” she said after a time.

The long, thin stranger, without exactly looking at Mrs Verloc, answered only by a faint and peculiar smile.

Mrs Verloc’s steady, incurious gaze rested on him.

“You understand English, don’t you?”

“Oh yes. I understand English.”

There was nothing foreign in his accent, except that he seemed in his slow enunciation to be taking pains with it. And Mrs Verloc, in her varied experience, had come to the conclusion that some foreigners could speak better English than the natives. She said, looking at the door of the parlour fixedly:

“You don’t think perhaps of staying in England for good?”

The stranger gave her again a silent smile. He had a kindly mouth and probing eyes. And he shook his head a little sadly, it seemed.

“My husband will see you through all right. Meantime for a few days you couldn’t do better than take lodgings with Mr Giuliani. Continental Hotel it’s called. Private. It’s quiet. My husband will take you there.”

“A good idea,” said the thin, dark man, whose glance had hardened suddenly.

“You knew Mr Verloc before—didn’t you? Perhaps in France?”

“I have heard of him,” admitted the visitor in his slow, painstaking tone, which yet had a certain curtness of intention.

There was a pause. Then he spoke again, in a far less elaborate manner.

“Your husband has not gone out to wait for me in the street by chance?”

“In the street!” repeated Mrs Verloc, surprised. “He couldn’t. There’s no other door to the house.”

For a moment she sat impassive, then left her seat to go and peep through the glazed door. Suddenly she opened it, and disappeared into the parlour.

Mr Verloc had done no more than put on his overcoat. But why he should remain afterwards leaning over the table propped up on his two arms as though he were feeling giddy or sick, she could not understand. “Adolf,” she called out half aloud; and when he had raised himself:

“Do you know that man?” she asked rapidly.

“I’ve heard of him,” whispered uneasily Mr Verloc, darting a wild glance at the door.

Mrs Verloc’s fine, incurious eyes lighted up with a flash of abhorrence.

“One of Karl Yundt’s friends—beastly old man.”

“No! No!” protested Mr Verloc, busy fishing for his hat. But when he got it from under the sofa he held it as if he did not know the use of a hat.

“Well—he’s waiting for you,” said Mrs Verloc at last. “I say, Adolf, he ain’t one of them Embassy people you have been bothered with of late?”

“Bothered with Embassy people,” repeated Mr Verloc, with a heavy start of surprise and fear. “Who’s been talking to you of the Embassy people?”

“Yourself.”

“I! I! Talked of the Embassy to you!”

Mr Verloc seemed scared and bewildered beyond measure. His wife explained:

“You’ve been talking a little in your sleep of late, Adolf.”

“What—what did I say? What do you know?”

“Nothing much. It seemed mostly nonsense. Enough to let me guess that something worried you.”

Mr Verloc rammed his hat on his head. A crimson flood of anger ran over his face.

“Nonsense—eh? The Embassy people! I would cut their hearts out one after another. But let them look out. I’ve got a tongue in my head.”

He fumed, pacing up and down between the table and the sofa, his open overcoat catching against the angles. The red flood of anger ebbed out, and left his face all white, with quivering nostrils. Mrs Verloc, for the purposes of practical existence, put down these appearances to the cold.

“Well,” she said, “get rid of the man, whoever he is, as soon as you can, and come back home to me. You want looking after for a day or two.”

Mr Verloc calmed down, and, with resolution imprinted on his pale face, had already opened the door, when his wife called him back in a whisper:

“Adolf! Adolf!” He came back startled. “What about that money you drew out?” she asked. “You’ve got it in your pocket? Hadn’t you better—”

Mr Verloc gazed stupidly into the palm of his wife’s extended hand for some time before he slapped his brow.

“Money! Yes! Yes! I didn’t know what you meant.”

He drew out of his breast pocket a new pigskin pocket-book. Mrs Verloc received it without another word, and stood still till the bell, clattering after Mr Verloc and Mr Verloc’s visitor, had quieted down. Only then she peeped in at the amount, drawing the notes out for the purpose. After this inspection she looked

round thoughtfully, with an air of mistrust in the silence and solitude of the house. This abode of her married life appeared to her as lonely and unsafe as though it had been situated in the midst of a forest. No receptacle she could think of amongst the solid, heavy furniture seemed other but flimsy and particularly tempting to her conception of a house-breaker. It was an ideal conception, endowed with sublime faculties and a miraculous insight. The till was not to be thought of. It was the first spot a thief would make for. Mrs Verloc unfastening hastily a couple of hooks, slipped the pocket-book under the bodice of her dress. Having thus disposed of her husband's capital, she was rather glad to hear the clatter of the door bell, announcing an arrival. Assuming the fixed, unabashed stare and the stony expression reserved for the casual customer, she walked in behind the counter.

A man standing in the middle of the shop was inspecting it with a swift, cool, all-round glance. His eyes ran over the walls, took in the ceiling, noted the floor—all in a moment. The points of a long fair moustache fell below the line of the jaw. He smiled the smile of an old if distant acquaintance, and Mrs Verloc remembered having seen him before. Not a customer. She softened her "customer stare" to mere indifference, and faced him across the counter.

He approached, on his side, confidentially, but not too markedly so.

"Husband at home, Mrs Verloc?" he asked in an easy, full tone.

"No. He's gone out."

"I am sorry for that. I've called to get from him a little private information."

This was the exact truth. Chief Inspector Heat had been all the way home, and had even gone so far as to think of getting into his slippers, since practically he was, he told himself, chucked out of that case. He indulged in some scornful and in a few angry thoughts, and found the occupation so unsatisfactory that he resolved to seek relief out of doors. Nothing prevented him paying a friendly call to Mr Verloc, casually as it were. It was in the character of a private citizen that walking out privately he made use of his customary conveyances. Their general direction was towards Mr Verloc's home. Chief Inspector Heat respected his own private character so consistently that he took especial pains to avoid all the police constables on point and patrol duty in the vicinity of Brett Street. This precaution was much more necessary for a man of his standing than for an obscure Assistant Commissioner. Private Citizen Heat entered the street, manoeuvring in a way which in a member of the criminal classes would have been stigmatised as slinking. The piece of cloth picked up in Greenwich was in his pocket. Not that he had the slightest intention of producing it in his private capacity. On the contrary, he wanted to know just what Mr Verloc would be disposed to say voluntarily. He hoped Mr Verloc's talk would be of a nature to incriminate Michaelis. It was a conscientiously professional hope in the main, but not without

its moral value. For Chief Inspector Heat was a servant of justice. Finding Mr Verloc from home, he felt disappointed.

“I would wait for him a little if I were sure he wouldn’t be long,” he said.

Mrs Verloc volunteered no assurance of any kind.

“The information I need is quite private,” he repeated. “You understand what I mean? I wonder if you could give me a notion where he’s gone to?”

Mrs Verloc shook her head.

“Can’t say.”

She turned away to range some boxes on the shelves behind the counter. Chief Inspector Heat looked at her thoughtfully for a time.

“I suppose you know who I am?” he said.

Mrs Verloc glanced over her shoulder. Chief Inspector Heat was amazed at her coolness.

“Come! You know I am in the police,” he said sharply.

“I don’t trouble my head much about it,” Mrs Verloc remarked, returning to the ranging of her boxes.

“My name is Heat. Chief Inspector Heat of the Special Crimes section.”

Mrs Verloc adjusted nicely in its place a small cardboard box, and turning round, faced him again, heavy-eyed, with idle hands hanging down. A silence reigned for a time.

“So your husband went out a quarter of an hour ago! And he didn’t say when he would be back?”

“He didn’t go out alone,” Mrs Verloc let fall negligently.

“A friend?”

Mrs Verloc touched the back of her hair. It was in perfect order.

“A stranger who called.”

“I see. What sort of man was that stranger? Would you mind telling me?”

Mrs Verloc did not mind. And when Chief Inspector Heat heard of a man dark, thin, with a long face and turned up moustaches, he gave signs of perturbation, and exclaimed:

“Dash me if I didn’t think so! He hasn’t lost any time.”

He was intensely disgusted in the secrecy of his heart at the unofficial conduct of his immediate chief. But he was not quixotic. He lost all desire to await Mr Verloc’s return. What they had gone out for he did not know, but he imagined it possible that they would return together. The case is not followed properly, it’s being tampered with, he thought bitterly.

“I am afraid I haven’t time to wait for your husband,” he said.

Mrs Verloc received this declaration listlessly. Her detachment had impressed Chief Inspector Heat all along. At this precise moment it whetted his curiosity. Chief Inspector Heat hung in the wind, swayed by his passions like the most private of citizens.

“I think,” he said, looking at her steadily, “that you could give me a pretty good notion of what’s going on if you liked.”

Forcing her fine, inert eyes to return his gaze, Mrs Verloc murmured:

“Going on! What *is* going on?”

“Why, the affair I came to talk about a little with your husband.”

That day Mrs Verloc had glanced at a morning paper as usual. But she had not stirred out of doors. The newsboys never invaded Brett Street. It was not a street for their business. And the echo of their cries drifting along the populous thoroughfares, expired between the dirty brick walls without reaching the threshold of the shop. Her husband had not brought an evening paper home. At any rate she had not seen it. Mrs Verloc knew nothing whatever of any affair. And she said so, with a genuine note of wonder in her quiet voice.

Chief Inspector Heat did not believe for a moment in so much ignorance. Curtly, without amiability, he stated the bare fact.

Mrs Verloc turned away her eyes.

“I call it silly,” she pronounced slowly. She paused. “We ain’t downtrodden slaves here.”

The Chief Inspector waited watchfully. Nothing more came.

“And your husband didn’t mention anything to you when he came home?”

Mrs Verloc simply turned her face from right to left in sign of negation. A languid, baffling silence reigned in the shop. Chief Inspector Heat felt provoked beyond endurance.

“There was another small matter,” he began in a detached tone, “which I wanted to speak to your husband about. There came into our hands a—a—what we believe is—a stolen overcoat.”

Mrs Verloc, with her mind specially aware of thieves that evening, touched lightly the bosom of her dress.

“We have lost no overcoat,” she said calmly.

“That’s funny,” continued Private Citizen Heat. “I see you keep a lot of marking ink here—”

He took up a small bottle, and looked at it against the gas-jet in the middle of the shop.

“Purple— isn’t it?” he remarked, setting it down again. “As I said, it’s strange. Because the overcoat has got a label sewn on the inside with your address written in marking ink.”

Mrs Verloc leaned over the counter with a low exclamation.

“That’s my brother’s, then.”

“Where’s your brother? Can I see him?” asked the Chief Inspector briskly. Mrs Verloc leaned a little more over the counter.

“No. He isn’t here. I wrote that label myself.”

“Where’s your brother now?”

“He’s been away living with—a friend—in the country.”

“The overcoat comes from the country. And what’s the name of the friend?”

“Michaelis,” confessed Mrs Verloc in an awed whisper.

The Chief Inspector let out a whistle. His eyes snapped.

“Just so. Capital. And your brother now, what’s he like—a sturdy, darkish chap—eh?”

“Oh no,” exclaimed Mrs Verloc fervently. “That must be the thief. Stevie’s slight and fair.”

“Good,” said the Chief Inspector in an approving tone. And while Mrs Verloc, wavering between alarm and wonder, stared at him, he sought for information. Why have the address sewn like this inside the coat? And he heard that the mangled remains he had inspected that morning with extreme repugnance were those of a youth, nervous, absent-minded, peculiar, and also that the woman who was speaking to him had had the charge of that boy since he was a baby.

“Easily excitable?” he suggested.

“Oh yes. He is. But how did he come to lose his coat—”

Chief Inspector Heat suddenly pulled out a pink newspaper he had bought less than half-an-hour ago. He was interested in horses. Forced by his calling into an attitude of doubt and suspicion towards his fellow-citizens, Chief Inspector Heat relieved the instinct of credulity implanted in the human breast by putting unbounded faith in the sporting prophets of that particular evening publication. Dropping the extra special on to the counter, he plunged his hand again into his pocket, and pulling out the piece of cloth fate had presented him with out of a heap of things that seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops, he offered it to Mrs Verloc for inspection.

“I suppose you recognise this?”

She took it mechanically in both her hands. Her eyes seemed to grow bigger as she looked.

“Yes,” she whispered, then raised her head, and staggered backward a little.

“Whatever for is it torn out like this?”

The Chief Inspector snatched across the counter the cloth out of her hands, and she sat heavily on the chair. He thought: identification’s perfect. And in that moment he had a glimpse into the whole amazing truth. Verloc was the “other man.”

“Mrs Verloc,” he said, “it strikes me that you know more of this bomb affair than even you yourself are aware of.”

Mrs Verloc sat still, amazed, lost in boundless astonishment. What was the connection? And she became so rigid all over that she was not able to turn her head at the clatter of the bell, which caused the private investigator Heat to spin round on his heel. Mr Verloc had shut the door, and for a moment the two men looked at each other.

Mr Verloc, without looking at his wife, walked up to the Chief Inspector, who was relieved to see him return alone.

“You here!” muttered Mr Verloc heavily. “Who are you after?”

“No one,” said Chief Inspector Heat in a low tone. “Look here, I would like a word or two with you.”

Mr Verloc, still pale, had brought an air of resolution with him. Still he didn’t look at his wife. He said:

“Come in here, then.” And he led the way into the parlour.

The door was hardly shut when Mrs Verloc, jumping up from the chair, ran to it as if to fling it open, but instead of doing so fell on her knees, with her ear to the keyhole. The two men must have stopped directly they were through, because she heard plainly the Chief Inspector’s voice, though she could not see his finger pressed against her husband’s breast emphatically.

“You are the other man, Verloc. Two men were seen entering the park.”

And the voice of Mr Verloc said:

“Well, take me now. What’s to prevent you? You have the right.”

“Oh no! I know too well who you have been giving yourself away to. He’ll have to manage this little affair all by himself. But don’t you make a mistake, it’s I who found you out.”

Then she heard only muttering. Inspector Heat must have been showing to Mr Verloc the piece of Stevie’s overcoat, because Stevie’s sister, guardian, and protector heard her husband a little louder.

“I never noticed that she had hit upon that dodge.”

Again for a time Mrs Verloc heard nothing but murmurs, whose mysteriousness was less nightmarish to her brain than the horrible suggestions of

shaped words. Then Chief Inspector Heat, on the other side of the door, raised his voice.

“You must have been mad.”

And Mr Verloc’s voice answered, with a sort of gloomy fury:

“I have been mad for a month or more, but I am not mad now. It’s all over. It shall all come out of my head, and hang the consequences.”

There was a silence, and then Private Citizen Heat murmured:

“What’s coming out?”

“Everything,” exclaimed the voice of Mr Verloc, and then sank very low.

After a while it rose again.

“You have known me for several years now, and you’ve found me useful, too. You know I was a straight man. Yes, straight.”

This appeal to old acquaintance must have been extremely distasteful to the Chief Inspector.

His voice took on a warning note.

“Don’t you trust so much to what you have been promised. If I were you I would clear out. I don’t think we will run after you.”

Mr Verloc was heard to laugh a little.

“Oh yes; you hope the others will get rid of me for you—don’t you? No, no; you don’t shake me off now. I have been a straight man to those people too long, and now everything must come out.”

“Let it come out, then,” the indifferent voice of Chief Inspector Heat assented. “But tell me now how did you get away.”

“I was making for Chesterfield Walk,” Mrs Verloc heard her husband’s voice, “when I heard the bang. I started running then. Fog. I saw no one till I was past the end of George Street. Don’t think I met anyone till then.”

“So easy as that!” marvelled the voice of Chief Inspector Heat. “The bang startled you, eh?”

“Yes; it came too soon,” confessed the gloomy, husky voice of Mr Verloc.

Mrs Verloc pressed her ear to the keyhole; her lips were blue, her hands cold as ice, and her pale face, in which the two eyes seemed like two black holes, felt to her as if it were enveloped in flames.

On the other side of the door the voices sank very low. She caught words now and then, sometimes in her husband’s voice, sometimes in the smooth tones of the Chief Inspector. She heard this last say:

“We believe he stumbled against the root of a tree?”

There was a husky, voluble murmur, which lasted for some time, and then the Chief Inspector, as if answering some inquiry, spoke emphatically.

“Of course. Blown to small bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters—all mixed up together. I tell you they had to fetch a shovel to gather him up with.”

Mrs Verloc sprang up suddenly from her crouching position, and stopping her ears, reeled to and fro between the counter and the shelves on the wall towards the chair. Her crazed eyes noted the sporting sheet left by the Chief Inspector, and as she knocked herself against the counter she snatched it up, fell into the chair, tore the optimistic, rosy sheet right across in trying to open it, then flung it on the floor. On the other side of the door, Chief Inspector Heat was saying to Mr Verloc, the secret agent:

“So your defence will be practically a full confession?”

“It will. I am going to tell the whole story.”

“You won’t be believed as much as you fancy you will.”

And the Chief Inspector remained thoughtful. The turn this affair was taking meant the disclosure of many things—the laying waste of fields of knowledge, which, cultivated by a capable man, had a distinct value for the individual and for the society. It was sorry, sorry meddling. It would leave Michaelis unscathed; it would drag to light the Professor’s home industry; disorganise the whole system of supervision; make no end of a row in the papers, which, from that point of view, appeared to him by a sudden illumination as invariably written by fools for the reading of imbeciles. Mentally he agreed with the words Mr Verloc let fall at last in answer to his last remark.

“Perhaps not. But it will upset many things. I have been a straight man, and I shall keep straight in this—”

“If they let you,” said the Chief Inspector cynically. “You will be preached to, no doubt, before they put you into the dock. And in the end you may yet get let in for a sentence that will surprise you. I wouldn’t trust too much the gentleman who’s been talking to you.”

Mr Verloc listened, frowning.

“My advice to you is to clear out while you may. I have no instructions. There are some of them,” continued Chief Inspector Heat, laying a peculiar stress on the word “them,” “who think you are already out of the world.”

“Indeed!” Mr Verloc was moved to say. Though since his return from Greenwich he had spent most of his time sitting in the tap-room of an obscure little public-house, he could hardly have hoped for such favourable news.

“That’s the impression about you.” The Chief Inspector nodded at him. “Vanish. Clear out.”

“Where to?” snarled Mr Verloc. He raised his head, and gazing at the closed door of the parlour, muttered feelingly: “I only wish you would take me away to-night. I would go quietly.”

“I daresay,” assented sardonically the Chief Inspector, following the direction of his glance.

The brow of Mr Verloc broke into slight moisture. He lowered his husky voice confidentially before the unmoved Chief Inspector.

“The lad was half-witted, irresponsible. Any court would have seen that at once. Only fit for the asylum. And that was the worst that would’ve happened to him if—”

The Chief Inspector, his hand on the door handle, whispered into Mr Verloc’s face.

“He may’ve been half-witted, but you must have been crazy. What drove you off your head like this?”

Mr Verloc, thinking of Mr Vladimir, did not hesitate in the choice of words.

“A Hyperborean swine,” he hissed forcibly. “A what you might call a—a gentleman.”

The Chief Inspector, steady-eyed, nodded briefly his comprehension, and opened the door. Mrs Verloc, behind the counter, might have heard but did not see his departure, pursued by the aggressive clatter of the bell. She sat at her post of duty behind the counter. She sat rigidly erect in the chair with two dirty pink pieces of paper lying spread out at her feet. The palms of her hands were pressed convulsively to her face, with the tips of the fingers contracted against the forehead, as though the skin had been a mask which she was ready to tear off violently. The perfect immobility of her pose expressed the agitation of rage and despair, all the potential violence of tragic passions, better than any shallow display of shrieks, with the beating of a distracted head against the walls, could have done. Chief Inspector Heat, crossing the shop at his busy, swinging pace, gave her only a cursory glance. And when the cracked bell ceased to tremble on its curved ribbon of steel nothing stirred near Mrs Verloc, as if her attitude had the locking power of a spell. Even the butterfly-shaped gas flames posed on the ends of the suspended T-bracket burned without a quiver. In that shop of shady wares fitted with deal shelves painted a dull brown, which seemed to devour the sheen of the light, the gold circlet of the wedding ring on Mrs Verloc’s left hand glittered exceedingly with the untarnished glory of a piece from some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dust-bin.