




The Secret Agent Agent



ABOUT THIS BOOK

For the Student

-  Listen to the story and do some activities on your Audio CD.
-  Talk about the story.
-  Prepare for Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET) for schools.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Conrad was born in 1857 in Berdychiv (Ukraine). At the time the city was part of the Russian Empire, but before that it was part of Poland. He came from a Polish family of intellectuals and political activists¹ who fought for the reunification and independence of Poland. So he was Russian, but he considered himself Polish.

He wasn't a good student at school, but he read a lot of novels, poems and Shakespeare, and he spoke French perfectly. He showed a great talent as a storyteller² from a very early age. At 16 he joined the French merchant navy³ first, and later the British one. Over 19 years he worked on many ships, traveled the world and reached the rank⁴ of captain.



He suffered from bad health and from clinical depression⁵ all his life. At 20 he even tried to kill himself. In 1886 he became a British citizen. In 1894 he left the merchant navy and became a writer. Two years later he married an English woman, Jessie George, and they had two sons.

Although English was Conrad's third language and he only learnt it from the age of 20, he became one of the most famous and influential⁶ British writers. His stories are about people's reactions to extreme situations, and for many of them he used his experiences at sea.

He died in 1924 at his house in Kent, probably of a heart attack.

- 1 **political activists:** people who take non-violent action to achieve political results
- 2 **storyteller:** person who tells stories
- 3 **merchant navy:** a country's ships that transport goods
- 4 **rank:** official position
- 5 **clinical depression:** a mental illness that makes people feel sad and hopeless
- 6 **influential:** that changed how other writers wrote

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Secret Agent is set in London. It tells the story of Mr. Verloc, a man who lives a double life: one as the owner of a shop where he sells all sorts of junk¹, and the other as a spy for a foreign government. He lives in a house above his shop with his young wife Winnie, her mother and her brother Stevie, a young man in his early twenties who has a learning disability². There are also a group of anarchists³, at least one terrorist⁴, two police officials and some government officials in the plot.

The idea for this story came from a real event: in 1894 a French anarchist, Martial Bourdin, blew himself up⁵ in Greenwich Park, near the Greenwich Royal Observatory,

when the bomb he was carrying exploded. Everything about this event remained a mystery: it was impossible to discover the reason for the attack, the aim⁶, or even what happened exactly. But although he had very little information, Conrad managed to base a whole novel on this unexplained and violent death.

The Secret Agent was published in 1907, but its themes are so modern that they are often in today's news: terrorism, espionage⁷ and power. Conrad shows us the thinking behind terrorism and what terrorists and people in power want to achieve through it. *The Secret Agent* is a spy story, a detective story and a psychological⁸ drama.



- 1 junk: things of little or no value
- 2 learning disability: something that makes it difficult to learn
- 3 anarchists: people who believe there should be no government
- 4 terrorist: person who uses violence for political purpose
- 5 blew himself up: killed himself with a bomb
- 6 aim: what he wanted to do
- 7 espionage: when you try to find out secret information
- 8 psychological: studying how the mind works

REAL LIFE SECRET AGENTS

Oliver "the Spy" and the Pentrich Revolution

Britain became a parliamentary democracy¹ in 1215, but in 1817 less than 3% of the people had the right² to vote. In 1775 thirteen American colonies started a War of Independence from Britain with the idea of creating the first truly democratic country. And in 1789 the French Revolution abolished³ the monarchy and created a republic. The British workers read about this in newspapers and were not happy.

This situation was made worse by a series of poor crops⁴ and a new tax on imported⁵ grains⁶ that made food very expensive.



In order to vote in 1817 you needed to tick these 3 boxes:

- Male
- over 21
- own property of value

The government knew that political groups were forming and asking for a change in the law to give workers the right to vote. So it created a network⁷ of spies and informers to infiltrate⁸ these groups and give the government information. The government needed an excuse to stop these groups and they were going to make sure they had one.

- ¹ **parliamentary democracy:** type of government in which people elect representatives to make laws
- ² **right:** something the law allows you to do
- ³ **abolished:** officially ended
- ⁴ **crops:** plants grown for food, like potatoes or wheat
- ⁵ **imported:** that come from abroad
- ⁶ **grains:** seeds that we eat, like rice and wheat
- ⁷ **network:** system of connected parts
- ⁸ **infiltrate:** become part of a group to spy on it



Oliver the Spy

William J. Oliver, known as “Oliver the Spy”, infiltrated a group of workers in Derbyshire, in the north of England. He gave information to the government, and he created the excuse that the government needed. He told the men that people in larger cities like Manchester were angry, and that armed workers were getting ready to march¹ to London to force the government to give them the right to vote.

On 9th June 1817 about 300 men left the village of Pentrich, 14 miles north of Nottingham. They marched south towards London. When they reached the village of Eastwood they realized it was a trap²: the soldiers were

When you read *The Secret Agent*

Are there any similarities between the story and the Pentrich Revolution?

Find out more

What was the Peterloo Massacre?

What was the Chartist Movement?

When did women get the right to vote at 21?

When did all men and women get the right to vote at 18?

waiting for them. The men tried to escape but 46 of them were arrested for High Treason³.

The government wanted to teach the workers a lesson, so the sentences⁴ were very hard: death for three men and deportation⁵ to Australia and prison for 23 others. None of them ever came back. Their families were forced to leave their homes. Oliver ‘the Spy’ went to work in South Africa.

In 1918, after many small reforms, all men above the age of 21 and all women above the age of 30 got the right to vote.

¹ march: walk

² trap: device for catching animals or people so they can't escape

³ High Treason: crime that puts the safety of your country in danger

⁴ sentences: punishments for crimes

⁵ deportation: when somebody is removed from a country by force



REAL LIFE SECRET AGENTS

The Cambridge Spies

The Cambridge Spies were a group of four men who met at Cambridge University in the 1930s and became secret agents for the Soviet Union during World War II and the Cold War period, which followed the war. Their story is the subject of many books and films.

Anthony Blunt, who was a little older than the other three, was teaching at Cambridge and he recruited¹ Harold 'Kim' Philby, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess. A Russian spy who later defected² to the UK said there was at least one more spy in the group, but he has never been found.



Anthony Blunt Donald Maclean



Guy Burgess Harold 'Kim' Philby

The four spies were not discovered for a long time. One of the reasons for this was that they came from privileged³ backgrounds: the British establishment⁴ could

not even imagine that men from rich families and with a Cambridge University degree could betray⁵ their country and be secret agents for the Soviet Union.

After they left Cambridge, they all had important jobs: Anthony Blunt worked for MI5 during WWII, then became an important art historian, worked for the queen and was knighted⁶ in 1956. Guy Burgess became a journalist, worked for the BBC and then for MI6. Donald Maclean worked at the Foreign Office. Philby worked in Vienna during the war, helping refugees from Nazi Germany; then he became a journalist, working for various papers including *The Times*, and joined MI6.

- 1 recruited: invited to join a group
- 2 defected: left his country to join an opposing country
- 3 privileged: with many advantages that most people don't have
- 4 establishment: the important and powerful people who control a country
- 5 betray: do something bad to somebody who trusts you
- 6 knighted: given an honour by the queen and become Sir

At MI6 Philby, a Soviet agent, became the head of the anti-Soviet section, and later chief British intelligence¹ officer in the United States. His position at MI6 meant that he could not only pass information to the KGB (the Soviet secret services), but he could also make sure that he and the other Cambridge Spies were not discovered. So when MI6 realized there could be a spy inside the Foreign Office, Philby was one of the first to know that Burgess and Maclean were suspects². He told them, and helped them defect to the Soviet Union.

However, after this he also became a suspect and had to resign. Not long after that he, too, defected to the Soviet Union. All three lived there until the end of their lives.

In 1963 the British government discovered that Anthony Blunt was a spy. They offered him immunity³ in exchange for information. He gave them very little, but he didn't go to prison and kept living in London.



THE BRITISH SECRET SERVICES

MI5 is the domestic⁴ intelligence agency⁵ that tries to stop possible terrorist attacks and espionage within the UK. It is controlled by the Home Secretary.

MI6 is the foreign intelligence agency. It is controlled by the Foreign Secretary. All MI6 directors since 1909 have signed documents simply with the letter C, to hide their name.

- 1 **intelligence:** (here) information about the governments of other countries
- 2 **suspects:** people the authorities think may have committed a crime
- 3 **immunity:** the promise you will not go to prison
- 4 **domestic:** about your own country
- 5 **agency:** organisation



The Secret Agent



Mr. Verlock



Winnie Verloc



Stevie



Winnie's Mother



Wurmt



Vladimir



Sir Ethel



Chief Inspector Heat



The Assistant Commissioner



The Professor



Ossipon



Michaelis



Karl Yundt

BEFORE READING

1 Match the pictures to the characters.



- _____ ① Mrs. Winnie Verloc was young and attractive and looked after her brother.
- _____ ② Stevie had fair hair, loved his sister very much and got easily lost.
- _____ ③ Winnie's mother's husband was dead and her health wasn't very good.
- _____ ④ Mr. Verloc was lazy and fat and had dark hair.

2 Who do you think is most important?
Talk with a friend and decide.



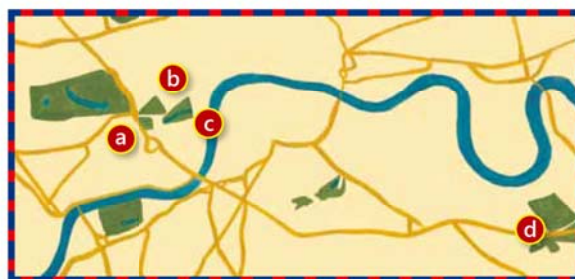
Assistant Commissioner



Police Officer



3 Match the places on the map A–D with the pictures. Use the internet to help you. How many other places can you add to the map?



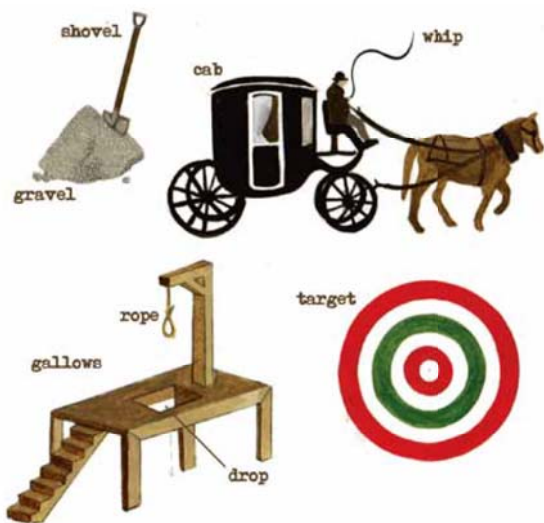
- _____ ① The Royal Observatory is in Greenwich Park.
- _____ ② Mr. Verloc's house is in Brett Street, in Soho.
- _____ ③ There's an important Embassy in Belgravia.
- _____ ④ The British Parliament is in the Palace of Westminster on the River Thames.

4 Match the following elements of the story with the places in Exercise 3.

- _____ ① the Home Secretary
- _____ ② the First Secretary of the Ambassador
- _____ ③ the First Meridian
- _____ ④ Mrs. Winnie Verloc

5 Look at the pictures and complete the definitions.

- a In the past, a _____ was a vehicle pulled by a horse and used as a taxi. The driver sat on the box and hit the horse with a _____ to make it start moving.
- b The thing you aim at is called a _____.
- c In the past in England, criminals were hanged from the _____, with a _____ around their neck. A door opened under their feet, and the _____ was fourteen feet.
- d A _____ is a thing used to move _____, snow, sand, earth, etc.



6 Read the text and match the words in bold to their definition.

When there is a crime, the police need to **investigate** and discover who **committed** it. If they have a **suspect**, they need to find **evidence** that **incriminates** him or her. Sometimes if the suspect feels **guilt**, he or she **confesses**, which usually makes things easier for the police. If there is enough evidence, they arrest the person and they put him or her on **trial**. If it is clear during the trial that the suspect is guilty, the judge decides the **sentence**. In Britain the law says that the sentence cannot be death, so if the crime is serious, the sentence is usually a certain amount of time in prison. But in the past the death penalty was **legal**. **Executions** were carried out in prisons, often by hanging from the **gallows** with a **rope** around their neck. Today if a prisoner behaves well in prison, he or she can be **released** before the end of their sentence on **parole**, and live out of prison. However, if they commit even a small crime, they have to go back to prison and finish their sentence.

- a _____ allowed by the law.
- b _____ the legal process to decide if someone committed a crime.
- c _____ something that proves something else.
- d _____ allowed to leave prison.
- e _____ did something that is considered wrong.
- f _____ a wooden construction for hanging people in executions.
- g _____ someone the police think has committed a crime.
- h _____ try to prove what happened and who did something.
- i _____ when someone feels very bad for something they have done.
- j _____ permission to leave prison if the prisoner promises to behave well.
- k _____ admits they have done something wrong.
- l _____ the way the criminal will be punished.
- m _____ killings of people sentenced to death .
- n _____ makes someone seem like they have committed a crime.
- o _____ a very thick string.



1. Mr. Verloc

1 When Mr. Verloc went out, he often left Stevie, his brother-in-law, to look after his shop. And his wife, Mrs. Verloc, to look after Stevie. The shop was small, and so was the house above it. It was like a square box in Brett Street. The shop window showed cheap dusty¹ items. The customers looked generally as if they didn't have much money.

There was a bell above the door and when it rang, Mr. Verloc came from the sitting room at the back of the shop. He was overweight², had dark hair, heavy eyelids³ and an air of having spent the day fully dressed on an unmade bed. He then sold his customer some object at a price that was clearly too high.

Sometimes it was Mrs. Verloc who appeared when the shop bell rang. Mrs. Winnie Verloc was a young, attractive woman who seemed very uninterested in the customers in the shop and the special visitors who went into the sitting room at the back. The door of the shop was the only entrance to the house.

Winnie's mother also lived with them. She was a heavy woman, with swollen⁴ legs that made her disabled, and she was a widow⁵. In the past she had a lodging house⁶ where Winnie helped her look after the lodgers⁷, and that's where she met Mr. Verloc. He stayed there every time he returned from his frequent mysterious trips to Europe.

1 **dusty**: covered with dust as they have been there for a long time

2 **overweight**: too heavy; fat

3 **eyelids**: the skin that covers your eyes when you close them

4 **swollen**: larger than usual and full of liquid

5 **widow**: woman whose husband is dead

6 **lodging house**: house where you can rent a room

7 **lodgers**: people who rent a room in a house

2 When they got married, Winnie's mother sold the lodging house because it wasn't convenient¹ for Mr. Verloc's other business. What his business was he did not say. His work was in a way political, he told Winnie once. It was impossible for Winnie's mother to discover anything more.

The couple took Winnie's mother and brother to their new home. Winnie was very fond of her delicate² brother, and Mr. Verloc was kind and generous, so Winnie's mother felt that the poor boy was safe in this hard world.

Winnie's brother, Stevie, was 23 years old, of slight³ build⁴, with fair hair, and difficult to look after. He could read and write, but as an errand boy⁵ he was not a great success. He forgot his messages; he was easily distracted by street cats and dogs and he got lost. When something confused him, he stuttered⁶. He helped his sister with blind love in her household⁷ work. Winnie looked after him like a mother.

Such was the house, the household, and the business that Mr. Verloc left behind him on his way towards Hyde Park at half-past ten on that particular⁸ morning.

Mr. Verloc

- Who is in Mr. Verloc's household?
- What jobs does Mr. Verloc do?

1 convenient: easy; practical

2 delicate: needing care

3 slight: thin and not very strong

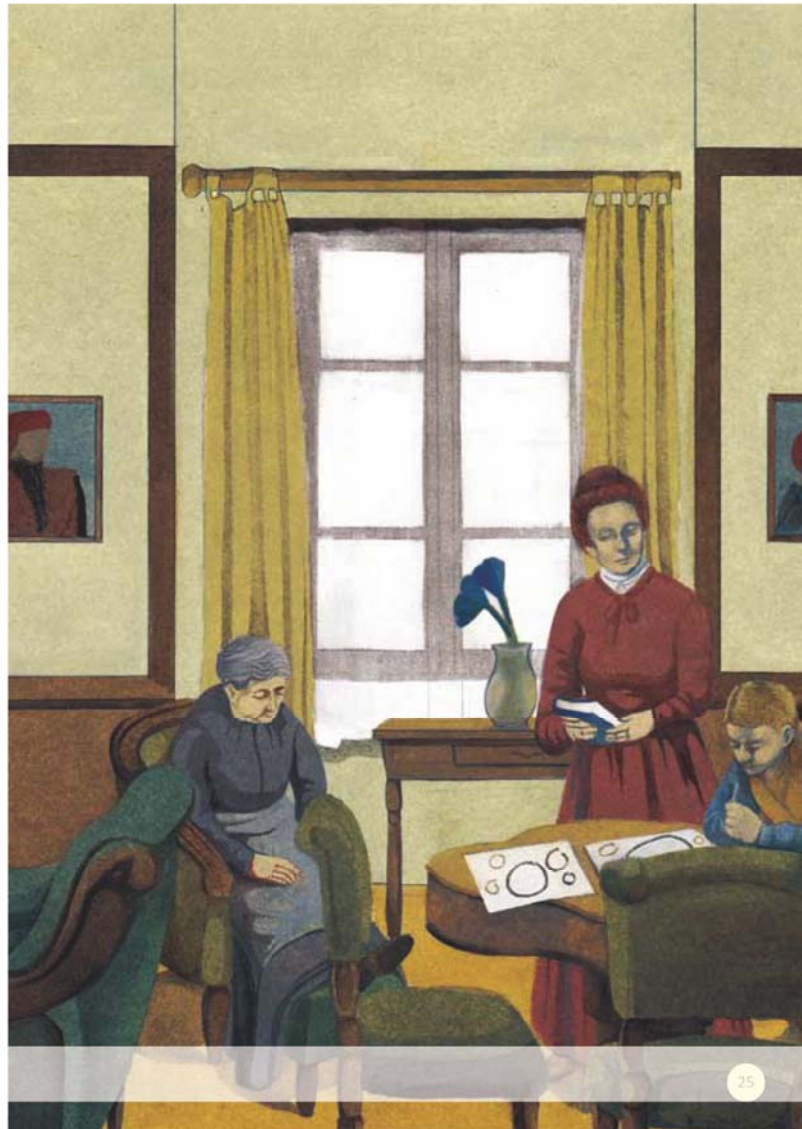
4 build: size and shape of a person's body

5 errand boy: boy whose job is to take messages, goods, etc.

6 stuttered: spoke repeating the first sound of words several times

7 household: a house and the people living in it

8 particular: that one and not any other



2. The Embassy

3 Half-past ten in the morning was unusually early for Mr. Verloc. He watched the busy streets, pleased to notice the signs of the city's wealth¹ and luxury. All these people needed to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of wealth and luxury.

He was a lazy man. Or maybe he believed that nothing people do, has ever any effect. He also had an air² which people who work never have. The air that is common to men who make money from the weaknesses³, the stupidity⁴ or the lowest fears of people.

He had some business with an Embassy. A letter ordering him to be there that morning was in his pocket. When he arrived, he was taken into a small room with a heavy writing-table and a few chairs. Mr. Wurm, an official from the Embassy, walked in holding some papers. Mr. Verloc recognized his own handwriting.

"I have here some of your reports," said Mr. Wurm. "We are not very satisfied with the attitude of the police in this country. They are too soft. We need an event which will attract the attention of the police and make judges give harder sentences⁵. Something that will increase the tension⁶ which undoubtedly⁷ exists . . ."



4 "There's a dangerous level of tension," said Mr. Verloc interrupting him. "My reports for the last twelve months make that very clear."

"I have read your reports," Mr. Wurm said. "They are useless."

There was silence. Then Mr. Wurm spoke.

"You are too fat," he said. "I think that you should see Mr. Vladimir. Please wait here," and he left the room.

Some small drops of sweat⁸ appeared on Mr. Verloc's forehead. He didn't move. He was afraid to move.

A servant came and took him to the first floor, opened a door and let him in. The room was large, with three windows. A young man with a big face was sitting in a large armchair in front of a large wooden writing table. He spoke in French to Mr. Wurm, who was leaving, and said: "You're quite right, my dear. He's fat—the animal."

Mr. Vladimir, First Secretary of the Ambassador, was a favorite in high society. "You understand French, I suppose?" he said.



1 **wealth:** large amounts of money and possessions

2 **air:** way of behaving; quality

3 **weaknesses:** weak parts of someone's personality

4 **stupidity:** lack of intelligence

5 **sentences:** (here) when criminals are punished

6 **tension:** scared feeling

7 **undoubtedly:** without a doubt

8 **sweat:** liquid that comes through the skin if someone is hot, nervous or ill

5 Mr. Verloc said that he did and muttered¹ something about his service in the French army. Suddenly Mr. Vladimir began to speak in English with no sign of a foreign accent.

"How long have you worked for the Embassy here?" he asked.

"Eleven years, ever since the time of the late² Baron Stott-Wartenheim," Mr. Verloc answered.

"Baron Stott-Wartenheim was a gullible³ old man. Things are different now. So, tell me, why did you let yourself get out of condition like this? Look at yourself. You—a member of the hungry proletariat⁴? You—a desperate socialist⁵ or anarchist⁶ . . . which is it?"

"Anarchist," said Mr. Verloc.

"Do you really think anybody will believe you?" continued Mr. Vladimir. "Not even the stupid will, and they are all stupid. You are simply ridiculous, not very smart, and lazy. As far as I can judge from our documents, you have done nothing to earn your money for the last three years."

"Nothing?" exclaimed Verloc. "I have several times prevented . . ."

1 **muttered**: spoke in a very low voice that is difficult to hear

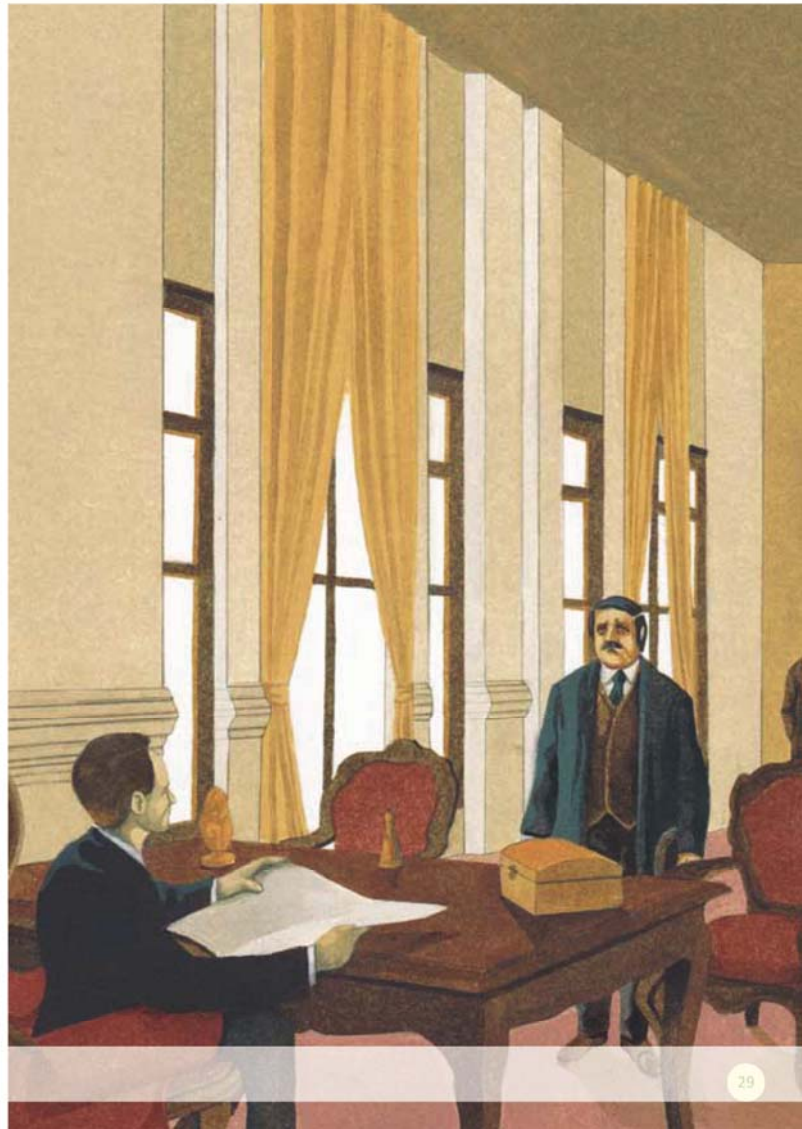
2 **late**: now dead

3 **gullible**: someone who believes lies easily

4 **proletariat**: class of people who are paid low wages for their work

5 **socialist**: someone who believes that the government should give services to the people

6 **anarchist**: someone who believes there should be no government



6 "The idea that preventing is better than curing¹," interrupted Mr. Vladimir, "is stupid in a general way, but in this particular case it's more than stupid. The evil² is already here. We don't want to prevent—we want to cure. I'm in charge now, and I tell you clearly that you will have to earn your money. No work, no pay."

Mr. Verloc was surprised and started to feel afraid.

"We want something that will cause repression³," said Mr. Vladimir. "England is silly with its respect for individual freedom⁴. I have an idea."

Mr. Vladimir explained his idea showing himself to know very little about the revolutionary world, which shocked the silent Mr. Verloc.

"We want the middle class to feel fear, and we need a series of outrages⁵ to do that," Mr. Vladimir said. "These outrages don't need to be especially violent, but they must be very worrying. They should be directed against buildings. What is the latest fashion in middle class beliefs⁶, Mr. Verloc?"

Mr. Verloc moved his shoulders slightly⁷.

"You are too lazy to think," said Mr. Vladimir. "Listen carefully. These days the middle class believes neither in royalty nor religion. Therefore the Palace⁸ and the Church should not be targeted⁹. The latest fashion is science. To be successful, an attack should make it clear that you are determined¹⁰ to destroy society. Anyone with a good job believes in learning and science. What do you think of an attack on astronomy¹¹?"

7 Mr. Verloc thought this idea was stupid.

"The whole civilized world has heard of Greenwich," continued Mr. Vladimir, very proud of himself. "The first meridian¹² is the perfect target."

Mr. Verloc didn't know what to say.

"You may go now," said Mr. Vladimir. "We want a dynamite¹³ outrage. I give you a month, or your connection with us will end."

Mr. Vladimir

- What do you think of his ideas?
- What kind of person do you think he is?
- Can you think of any people like this today in your country?



1 curing: making someone with an illness healthy again

2 evil: something that is very bad

3 repression: the use of force or violence to control people

4 freedom: the state of being free

5 outrages: shocking and violent actions

6 beliefs: ideas you are certain they are true

7 slightly: a little

8 the Palace: Buckingham Palace and other Royal houses

9 targeted: aimed at

10 determined: want to do something and will not let anyone stop you

11 astronomy: the scientific study of planets and stars

12 first meridian: Greenwich Astronomical Observatory

13 dynamite: explosive