

CHAPTER X

The Assistant Commissioner, driven rapidly in a hansom from the neighbourhood of Soho in the direction of Westminster, got out at the very centre of the Empire on which the sun never sets. Some stalwart constables, who did not seem particularly impressed by the duty of watching the august spot, saluted him. Penetrating through a portal by no means lofty into the precincts of the House which is the House, par excellence in the minds of many millions of men, he was met at last by the volatile and revolutionary Toodles.

That neat and nice young man concealed his astonishment at the early appearance of the Assistant Commissioner, whom he had been told to look out for some time about midnight. His turning up so early he concluded to be the sign that things, whatever they were, had gone wrong. With an extremely ready sympathy, which in nice youngsters goes often with a joyous temperament, he felt sorry for the great Presence he called "The Chief," and also for the Assistant Commissioner, whose face appeared to him more ominously wooden than ever before, and quite wonderfully long. "What a queer, foreign-looking chap he is," he thought to himself, smiling from a distance with friendly buoyancy. And directly they came together he began to talk with the kind intention of burying the awkwardness of failure under a heap of words. It looked as if the great assault threatened for that night were going to fizzle out. An inferior henchman of "that brute Cheeseman" was up boring mercilessly a very thin House with some shamelessly cooked statistics. He, Toodles, hoped he would bore them into a count out every minute. But then he might be only marking time to let that guzzling Cheeseman dine at his leisure. Anyway, the Chief could not be persuaded to go home.

"He will see you at once, I think. He's sitting all alone in his room thinking of all the fishes of the sea," concluded Toodles airily. "Come along."

Notwithstanding the kindness of his disposition, the young private secretary (unpaid) was accessible to the common failings of humanity. He did not wish to harrow the feelings of the Assistant Commissioner, who looked to him uncommonly like a man who has made a mess of his job. But his curiosity was too strong to be restrained by mere compassion. He could not help, as they went along, to throw over his shoulder lightly:

"And your sprat?"

"Got him," answered the Assistant Commissioner with a concision which did not

mean to be repellent in the least.

“Good. You’ve no idea how these great men dislike to be disappointed in small things.”

After this profound observation the experienced Toodles seemed to reflect. At any rate he said nothing for quite two seconds. Then:

“I’m glad. But—I say—is it really such a very small thing as you make it out?”

“Do you know what may be done with a sprat?” the Assistant Commissioner asked in his turn.

“He’s sometimes put into a sardine box,” chuckled Toodles, whose erudition on the subject of the fishing industry was fresh and, in comparison with his ignorance of all other industrial matters, immense. “There are sardine canneries on the Spanish coast which—”

The Assistant Commissioner interrupted the apprentice statesman.

“Yes. Yes. But a sprat is also thrown away sometimes in order to catch a whale.”

“A whale. Phew!” exclaimed Toodles, with bated breath. “You’re after a whale, then?”

“Not exactly. What I am after is more like a dog-fish. You don’t know perhaps what a dog-fish is like.”

“Yes; I do. We’re buried in special books up to our necks—whole shelves full of them—with plates. . . . It’s a noxious, rascally-looking, altogether detestable beast, with a sort of smooth face and moustaches.”

“Described to a T,” commended the Assistant Commissioner. “Only mine is clean-shaven altogether. You’ve seen him. It’s a witty fish.”

“I have seen him!” said Toodles incredulously. “I can’t conceive where I could have seen him.”

“At the Explorers, I should say,” dropped the Assistant Commissioner calmly. At the name of that extremely exclusive club Toodles looked scared, and stopped short.

“Nonsense,” he protested, but in an awe-struck tone. “What do you mean? A

member?"

"Honorary," muttered the Assistant Commissioner through his teeth.

"Heavens!"

Toodles looked so thunderstruck that the Assistant Commissioner smiled faintly.

"That's between ourselves strictly," he said.

"That's the beastliest thing I've ever heard in my life," declared Toodles feebly, as if astonishment had robbed him of all his buoyant strength in a second.

The Assistant Commissioner gave him an unsmiling glance. Till they came to the door of the great man's room, Toodles preserved a scandalised and solemn silence, as though he were offended with the Assistant Commissioner for exposing such an unsavoury and disturbing fact. It revolutionised his idea of the Explorers' Club's extreme selectness, of its social purity. Toodles was revolutionary only in politics; his social beliefs and personal feelings he wished to preserve unchanged through all the years allotted to him on this earth which, upon the whole, he believed to be a nice place to live on.

He stood aside.

"Go in without knocking," he said.

Shades of green silk fitted low over all the lights imparted to the room something of a forest's deep gloom. The haughty eyes were physically the great man's weak point. This point was wrapped up in secrecy. When an opportunity offered, he rested them conscientiously.

The Assistant Commissioner entering saw at first only a big pale hand supporting a big head, and concealing the upper part of a big pale face. An open despatch-box stood on the writing-table near a few oblong sheets of paper and a scattered handful of quill pens. There was absolutely nothing else on the large flat surface except a little bronze statuette draped in a toga, mysteriously watchful in its shadowy immobility. The Assistant Commissioner, invited to take a chair, sat down. In the dim light, the salient points of his personality, the long face, the black hair, his lankness, made him look more foreign than ever.

The great man manifested no surprise, no eagerness, no sentiment whatever. The attitude in which he rested his menaced eyes was profoundly meditative. He did not alter it the least bit. But his tone was not dreamy.

“Well! What is it that you’ve found out already? You came upon something unexpected on the first step.”

“Not exactly unexpected, Sir Ethelred. What I mainly came upon was a psychological state.”

The Great Presence made a slight movement. “You must be lucid, please.”

“Yes, Sir Ethelred. You know no doubt that most criminals at some time or other feel an irresistible need of confessing—of making a clean breast of it to somebody—to anybody. And they do it often to the police. In that Verloc whom Heat wished so much to screen I’ve found a man in that particular psychological state. The man, figuratively speaking, flung himself on my breast. It was enough on my part to whisper to him who I was and to add ‘I know that you are at the bottom of this affair.’ It must have seemed miraculous to him that we should know already, but he took it all in the stride. The wonderfulness of it never checked him for a moment. There remained for me only to put to him the two questions: Who put you up to it? and Who was the man who did it? He answered the first with remarkable emphasis. As to the second question, I gather that the fellow with the bomb was his brother-in-law—quite a lad—a weak-minded creature. . . . It is rather a curious affair—too long perhaps to state fully just now.”

“What then have you learned?” asked the great man.

“First, I’ve learned that the ex-convict Michaelis had nothing to do with it, though indeed the lad had been living with him temporarily in the country up to eight o’clock this morning. It is more than likely that Michaelis knows nothing of it to this moment.”

“You are positive as to that?” asked the great man.

“Quite certain, Sir Ethelred. This fellow Verloc went there this morning, and took away the lad on the pretence of going out for a walk in the lanes. As it was not the first time that he did this, Michaelis could not have the slightest suspicion of anything unusual. For the rest, Sir Ethelred, the indignation of this man Verloc had left nothing in doubt—nothing whatever. He had been driven out of his mind almost by an extraordinary performance, which for you or me it would be difficult to take as seriously meant, but which produced a great impression obviously on him.”

The Assistant Commissioner then imparted briefly to the great man, who sat still,

resting his eyes under the screen of his hand, Mr Verloc's appreciation of Mr Vladimir's proceedings and character. The Assistant Commissioner did not seem to refuse it a certain amount of competency. But the great personage remarked:

"All this seems very fantastic."

"Doesn't it? One would think a ferocious joke. But our man took it seriously, it appears. He felt himself threatened. In the time, you know, he was in direct communication with old Stott-Wartenheim himself, and had come to regard his services as indispensable. It was an extremely rude awakening. I imagine that he lost his head. He became angry and frightened. Upon my word, my impression is that he thought these Embassy people quite capable not only to throw him out but, to give him away too in some manner or other—"

"How long were you with him," interrupted the Presence from behind his big hand.

"Some forty minutes, Sir Ethelred, in a house of bad repute called Continental Hotel, closeted in a room which by-the-by I took for the night. I found him under the influence of that reaction which follows the effort of crime. The man cannot be defined as a hardened criminal. It is obvious that he did not plan the death of that wretched lad—his brother-in-law. That was a shock to him—I could see that. Perhaps he is a man of strong sensibilities. Perhaps he was even fond of the lad—who knows? He might have hoped that the fellow would get clear away; in which case it would have been almost impossible to bring this thing home to anyone. At any rate he risked consciously nothing more but arrest for him."

The Assistant Commissioner paused in his speculations to reflect for a moment.

"Though how, in that last case, he could hope to have his own share in the business concealed is more than I can tell," he continued, in his ignorance of poor Stevie's devotion to Mr Verloc (who was good), and of his truly peculiar dumbness, which in the old affair of fireworks on the stairs had for many years resisted entreaties, coaxing, anger, and other means of investigation used by his beloved sister. For Stevie was loyal. . . . "No, I can't imagine. It's possible that he never thought of that at all. It sounds an extravagant way of putting it, Sir Ethelred, but his state of dismay suggested to me an impulsive man who, after committing suicide with the notion that it would end all his troubles, had discovered that it did nothing of the kind."

The Assistant Commissioner gave this definition in an apologetic voice. But in truth there is a sort of lucidity proper to extravagant language, and the great man was not offended. A slight jerky movement of the big body half lost in the gloom

of the green silk shades, of the big head leaning on the big hand, accompanied an intermittent stifled but powerful sound. The great man had laughed.

“What have you done with him?”

The Assistant Commissioner answered very readily:

“As he seemed very anxious to get back to his wife in the shop I let him go, Sir Ethelred.”

“You did? But the fellow will disappear.”

“Pardon me. I don’t think so. Where could he go to? Moreover, you must remember that he has got to think of the danger from his comrades too. He’s there at his post. How could he explain leaving it? But even if there were no obstacles to his freedom of action he would do nothing. At present he hasn’t enough moral energy to take a resolution of any sort. Permit me also to point out that if I had detained him we would have been committed to a course of action on which I wished to know your precise intentions first.”

The great personage rose heavily, an imposing shadowy form in the greenish gloom of the room.

“I’ll see the Attorney-General to-night, and will send for you to-morrow morning. Is there anything more you’d wish to tell me now?”

The Assistant Commissioner had stood up also, slender and flexible.

“I think not, Sir Ethelred, unless I were to enter into details which—”

“No. No details, please.”

The great shadowy form seemed to shrink away as if in physical dread of details; then came forward, expanded, enormous, and weighty, offering a large hand.

“And you say that this man has got a wife?”

“Yes, Sir Ethelred,” said the Assistant Commissioner, pressing deferentially the extended hand. “A genuine wife and a genuinely, respectably, marital relation. He told me that after his interview at the Embassy he would have thrown everything up, would have tried to sell his shop, and leave the country, only he felt certain that his wife would not even hear of going abroad. Nothing could be more characteristic of the respectable bond than that,” went on, with a touch of grimness, the Assistant Commissioner, whose own wife too had refused to hear of

going abroad. "Yes, a genuine wife. And the victim was a genuine brother-in-law. From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama."

The Assistant Commissioner laughed a little; but the great man's thoughts seemed to have wandered far away, perhaps to the questions of his country's domestic policy, the battle-ground of his crusading valour against the paynim Cheeseman. The Assistant Commissioner withdrew quietly, unnoticed, as if already forgotten.

He had his own crusading instincts. This affair, which, in one way or another, disgusted Chief Inspector Heat, seemed to him a providentially given starting-point for a crusade. He had it much at heart to begin. He walked slowly home, meditating that enterprise on the way, and thinking over Mr Verloc's psychology in a composite mood of repugnance and satisfaction. He walked all the way home. Finding the drawing-room dark, he went upstairs, and spent some time between the bedroom and the dressing-room, changing his clothes, going to and fro with the air of a thoughtful somnambulist. But he shook it off before going out again to join his wife at the house of the great lady patroness of Michaelis.

He knew he would be welcomed there. On entering the smaller of the two drawing-rooms he saw his wife in a small group near the piano. A youngish composer in pass of becoming famous was discoursing from a music stool to two thick men whose backs looked old, and three slender women whose backs looked young. Behind the screen the great lady had only two persons with her: a man and a woman, who sat side by side on arm-chairs at the foot of her couch. She extended her hand to the Assistant Commissioner.

"I never hoped to see you here to-night. Annie told me—"

"Yes. I had no idea myself that my work would be over so soon."

The Assistant Commissioner added in a low tone. "I am glad to tell you that Michaelis is altogether clear of this—"

The patroness of the ex-convict received this assurance indignantly.

"Why? Were your people stupid enough to connect him with—"

"Not stupid," interrupted the Assistant Commissioner, contradicting deferentially. "Clever enough—quite clever enough for that."

A silence fell. The man at the foot of the couch had stopped speaking to the lady, and looked on with a faint smile.

“I don’t know whether you ever met before,” said the great lady.

Mr Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner, introduced, acknowledged each other’s existence with punctilious and guarded courtesy.

“He’s been frightening me,” declared suddenly the lady who sat by the side of Mr Vladimir, with an inclination of the head towards that gentleman. The Assistant Commissioner knew the lady.

“You do not look frightened,” he pronounced, after surveying her conscientiously with his tired and equable gaze. He was thinking meantime to himself that in this house one met everybody sooner or later. Mr Vladimir’s rosy countenance was wreathed in smiles, because he was witty, but his eyes remained serious, like the eyes of convinced man.

“Well, he tried to at least,” amended the lady.

“Force of habit perhaps,” said the Assistant Commissioner, moved by an irresistible inspiration.

“He has been threatening society with all sorts of horrors,” continued the lady, whose enunciation was caressing and slow, “apropos of this explosion in Greenwich Park. It appears we all ought to quake in our shoes at what’s coming if those people are not suppressed all over the world. I had no idea this was such a grave affair.”

Mr Vladimir, affecting not to listen, leaned towards the couch, talking amiably in subdued tones, but he heard the Assistant Commissioner say:

“I’ve no doubt that Mr Vladimir has a very precise notion of the true importance of this affair.”

Mr Vladimir asked himself what that confounded and intrusive policeman was driving at. Descended from generations victimised by the instruments of an arbitrary power, he was racially, nationally, and individually afraid of the police. It was an inherited weakness, altogether independent of his judgment, of his reason, of his experience. He was born to it. But that sentiment, which resembled the irrational horror some people have of cats, did not stand in the way of his immense contempt for the English police. He finished the sentence addressed to the great lady, and turned slightly in his chair.

“You mean that we have a great experience of these people. Yes; indeed, we

suffer greatly from their activity, while you”—Mr Vladimir hesitated for a moment, in smiling perplexity—“while you suffer their presence gladly in your midst,” he finished, displaying a dimple on each clean-shaven cheek. Then he added more gravely: “I may even say—because you do.”

When Mr Vladimir ceased speaking the Assistant Commissioner lowered his glance, and the conversation dropped. Almost immediately afterwards Mr Vladimir took leave.

Directly his back was turned on the couch the Assistant Commissioner rose too.

“I thought you were going to stay and take Annie home,” said the lady patroness of Michaelis.

“I find that I’ve yet a little work to do to-night.”

“In connection—?”

“Well, yes—in a way.”

“Tell me, what is it really—this horror?”

“It’s difficult to say what it is, but it may yet be a cause célèbre,” said the Assistant Commissioner.

He left the drawing-room hurriedly, and found Mr Vladimir still in the hall, wrapping up his throat carefully in a large silk handkerchief. Behind him a footman waited, holding his overcoat. Another stood ready to open the door. The Assistant Commissioner was duly helped into his coat, and let out at once. After descending the front steps he stopped, as if to consider the way he should take. On seeing this through the door held open, Mr Vladimir lingered in the hall to get out a cigar and asked for a light. It was furnished to him by an elderly man out of livery with an air of calm solicitude. But the match went out; the footman then closed the door, and Mr Vladimir lighted his large Havana with leisurely care.

When at last he got out of the house, he saw with disgust the “confounded policeman” still standing on the pavement.

“Can he be waiting for me,” thought Mr Vladimir, looking up and down for some signs of a hansom. He saw none. A couple of carriages waited by the curbstone, their lamps blazing steadily, the horses standing perfectly still, as if carved in stone, the coachmen sitting motionless under the big fur capes, without as much as a quiver stirring the white thongs of their big whips. Mr Vladimir walked on,

and the “confounded policeman” fell into step at his elbow. He said nothing. At the end of the fourth stride Mr Vladimir felt infuriated and uneasy. This could not last.

“Rotten weather,” he growled savagely.

“Mild,” said the Assistant Commissioner without passion. He remained silent for a little while. “We’ve got hold of a man called Verloc,” he announced casually.

Mr Vladimir did not stumble, did not stagger back, did not change his stride. But he could not prevent himself from exclaiming: “What?” The Assistant Commissioner did not repeat his statement. “You know him,” he went on in the same tone.

Mr Vladimir stopped, and became guttural. “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t. It’s Verloc who says that.”

“A lying dog of some sort,” said Mr Vladimir in somewhat Oriental phraseology. But in his heart he was almost awed by the miraculous cleverness of the English police. The change of his opinion on the subject was so violent that it made him for a moment feel slightly sick. He threw away his cigar, and moved on.

“What pleased me most in this affair,” the Assistant went on, talking slowly, “is that it makes such an excellent starting-point for a piece of work which I’ve felt must be taken in hand—that is, the clearing out of this country of all the foreign political spies, police, and that sort of—of—dogs. In my opinion they are a ghastly nuisance; also an element of danger. But we can’t very well seek them out individually. The only way is to make their employment unpleasant to their employers. The thing’s becoming indecent. And dangerous too, for us, here.”

Mr Vladimir stopped again for a moment.

“What do you mean?”

“The prosecution of this Verloc will demonstrate to the public both the danger and the indecency.”

“Nobody will believe what a man of that sort says,” said Mr Vladimir contemptuously.

“The wealth and precision of detail will carry conviction to the great mass of the public,” advanced the Assistant Commissioner gently.

“So that is seriously what you mean to do.”

“We’ve got the man; we have no choice.”

“You will be only feeding up the lying spirit of these revolutionary scoundrels,” Mr Vladimir protested. “What do you want to make a scandal for?—from morality— or what?”

Mr Vladimir’s anxiety was obvious. The Assistant Commissioner having ascertained in this way that there must be some truth in the summary statements of Mr Verloc, said indifferently:

“There’s a practical side too. We have really enough to do to look after the genuine article. You can’t say we are not effective. But we don’t intend to let ourselves be bothered by shams under any pretext whatever.”

Mr Vladimir’s tone became lofty.

“For my part, I can’t share your view. It is selfish. My sentiments for my own country cannot be doubted; but I’ve always felt that we ought to be good Europeans besides—I mean governments and men.”

“Yes,” said the Assistant Commissioner simply. “Only you look at Europe from its other end. But,” he went on in a good-natured tone, “the foreign governments cannot complain of the inefficiency of our police. Look at this outrage; a case specially difficult to trace inasmuch as it was a sham. In less than twelve hours we have established the identity of a man literally blown to shreds, have found the organiser of the attempt, and have had a glimpse of the inciter behind him. And we could have gone further; only we stopped at the limits of our territory.”

“So this instructive crime was planned abroad,” Mr Vladimir said quickly. “You admit it was planned abroad?”

“Theoretically. Theoretically only, on foreign territory; abroad only by a fiction,” said the Assistant Commissioner, alluding to the character of Embassies, which are supposed to be part and parcel of the country to which they belong. “But that’s a detail. I talked to you of this business because it’s your government that grumbles most at our police. You see that we are not so bad. I wanted particularly to tell you of our success.”

“I’m sure I’m very grateful,” muttered Mr Vladimir through his teeth.

“We can put our finger on every anarchist here,” went on the Assistant Commissioner, as though he were quoting Chief Inspector Heat. “All that’s wanted now is to do away with the agent provocateur to make everything safe.”

Mr Vladimir held up his hand to a passing hansom.

“You’re not going in here,” remarked the Assistant Commissioner, looking at a building of noble proportions and hospitable aspect, with the light of a great hall falling through its glass doors on a broad flight of steps.

But Mr Vladimir, sitting, stony-eyed, inside the hansom, drove off without a word.

The Assistant Commissioner himself did not turn into the noble building. It was the Explorers’ Club. The thought passed through his mind that Mr Vladimir, honorary member, would not be seen very often there in the future. He looked at his watch. It was only half-past ten. He had had a very full evening.