

## The secret agent: A simple tale (Penguin classics)



The novel is set in London in 1886 and follows the life of Mr. Verloc, a secret agent. Verloc is also a businessman who owns a shop which sells pornographic material, contraceptives, and bric-a-brac. He lives with his wife Winnie, his mother-in-law, and his brother-in-law, Stevie. Stevie has a mental disability, possibly autism, which causes him to be very excitable; his sister, Verloc's wife, attends to him, treating him more as a son than as a brother. Verloc's friends are a group of anarchists of which Comrade Ossipon, Michaelis, and The Professor are the most prominent. Although largely ineffectual as terrorists, their actions are known to the police. The group produce anarchist literature in the form of pamphlets entitled F.P., an abbreviation for The Future of the Proletariat. The novel begins in Verloc's home, as he and his wife discuss the trivialities of everyday life, which introduces the reader to Verloc's family. Soon after, Verloc leaves to meet Mr. Vladimir, the new First Secretary in the embassy of a foreign country (implied to be Russia). Although a member of an anarchist cell, Verloc is also secretly employed by the Embassy as an agent provocateur. Vladimir informs Verloc that from reviewing his service history he is far from an exemplary model of a secret agent and, in order to redeem himself, must carry out an operation - the destruction of Greenwich Observatory by a bomb explosion. Vladimir explains that Britain's lax attitude to anarchism endangers his own country, and he reasons that an attack on science, which he claims is the current vogue amongst the public, will provide the necessary outrage for suppression. Verloc later meets with his friends, who discuss politics and law, and the notion of a communist revolution. Unbeknownst to the group, Stevie, Verloc's brother-in-law, overhears the conversation, which greatly disturbs him. Comrade Ossipon later meets

The Professor, who describes the nature of the bomb which he carries in his coat at all times: it allows him to press a button which will blow him up in twenty seconds, and those nearest to him. After The Professor leaves the meeting, he stumbles into Chief Inspector Heat. Heat is a policeman who is working on the case regarding a recent explosion at Greenwich, where one man was killed. Heat informs The Professor that he is not a suspect in the case, but that he is being monitored due to his terrorist inclinations and anarchist background. Knowing that Michaelis has recently moved to the countryside to write a book, the Chief Inspector informs the Assistant Commissioner that he has a contact, Verloc, who may be able to assist in the case. The Assistant Commissioner later speaks to his superior, Sir Ethelred, about his intentions to solve the case alone, rather than relying on the effort of Chief Inspector Heat.

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