Chapter 20: The Midnight Visitor

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Exercise 20.1 — Read and Find Out 1 (Page 3)

Q1 How is Ausable different from other secret agents?

SOLUTION

Ausable does not fit the popular, romantic image of a secret agent that Fowler had read about in books. He is fat, in fact "Very fat", and though he speaks French and German passably, he has never lost the American accent he brought to Paris from Boston twenty years ago.

He lives in a small room on the sixth and top floor of a gloomy French hotel — "scarcely a setting for a romantic adventure". He does not have messages slipped into his hand by dark-eyed beauties; instead he gets a prosaic telephone call making an appointment in his room.

So, unlike the glamorous, dashing spies of fiction, Ausable is an ordinary-looking, sloppy fat man whose real strength lies not in appearance but in his sharp presence of mind.

Answer: Ausable is fat, wheezy and unglamorous with an American accent, unlike the romantic, dashing spies of fiction; his strength is his quick wit, not his looks.

Q2 Who is Fowler and what is his first authentic thrill of the day?

SOLUTION

Fowler is a young and romantic writer who has come to meet Ausable because he wants to experience the adventurous life of a secret agent. He is initially disappointed to find Ausable dull and unromantic.

His first authentic thrill of the day comes when Ausable switches on the light in his room and they find a man — Max — standing halfway across the room with a small automatic pistol in his hand.

This sudden, dangerous encounter is the real, thrilling moment of espionage that the romantic young writer had hoped to witness.

Answer: Fowler is a young romantic writer; his first authentic thrill is seeing Max standing in Ausable's room with a pistol when the light is switched on.

Exercise 20.2 — Read and Find Out 2 (Page 15)

Q1 How has Max got in?

SOLUTION

Max reveals that he got into the room using a passkey. When Ausable complains that someone has again got in "through that nuisance of a balcony", Max corrects him.

He says, "No, a passkey. I did not know about the balcony. It might have saved me some trouble had I known."

So Max actually entered through the door with a passkey, not through any balcony.

Answer: Max got in through the door using a passkey.

Q2 How does Ausable say he got in?

SOLUTION

Ausable pretends that Max got into the room through a balcony. He complains angrily that this is the second time in a month that somebody has got into his room "through that nuisance of a balcony".

He gives a detailed, convincing explanation: the room was once part of a large unit, and the next room used to be the living room which had a balcony that now extends under his window. He says a person can get onto it from an empty room two doors down, and that the management had promised to block it off but had not.

This entire balcony story is a trick invented by Ausable — in reality there is no balcony at all.

Answer: Ausable falsely says Max got in through a balcony that supposedly extends under his window from the next apartment — a balcony that does not actually exist.

Exercise 20.3 — Think about it

Q1 “Ausable did not fit any description of a secret agent Fowler had ever read.” What do secret agents in books and films look like, in your opinion? Discuss in groups or in class some stories or movies featuring spies, detectives and secret agents, and compare their appearance with that of Ausable in this story.

SOLUTION

In most books and films, secret agents are shown as tall, smart, handsome and physically fit, dressed elegantly and moving with confidence. They are surrounded by glamour, mystery and danger — dark-eyed beauties, the crack of pistols and thrilling chases — like the fictional characters Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple or James Bond.

Ausable, by contrast, is the exact opposite of this image. He is fat, sloppily dressed, wheezy, and lives in a small, dull room on the top floor of a gloomy hotel. He speaks with an American accent and gets his appointments through an ordinary telephone call.

Yet the story shows that a spy's real ability lies in intelligence and presence of mind, not in appearance. Despite his unglamorous looks, Ausable outwits the armed Max, proving that a sharp mind matters more than a dashing image.

Answer: In books and films agents look smart, handsome and glamorous like James Bond or Sherlock Holmes, whereas Ausable is fat, sloppy and ordinary — showing that real skill lies in the mind, not the looks.

Q2 How does Ausable manage to make Max believe that there is a balcony attached to his room? Look back at his detailed description of it. What makes it a convincing story?

SOLUTION

Ausable makes Max believe in the balcony by reacting naturally and giving a detailed, matter-of-fact explanation. First, he shows irritation, complaining that this is the second time in a month someone has got into his room through "that nuisance of a balcony", so the balcony seems like a real, ongoing problem.

He then explains that the balcony does not belong to him but to the next apartment. He adds convincing history: the room used to be part of a large unit, the next room was once the living room which had the balcony, and that balcony

now extends under his window. He even says one can reach it from an empty room two doors down, and that the management had promised to block it off but failed to.

These realistic, specific details — combined with his calm, annoyed tone and the fact that his back is against a real window with the black night pressing behind it — make the false story completely believable, so that a frightened Max escapes onto the non-existent balcony.

Answer: Ausable's calm irritation plus his detailed, realistic explanation of the balcony's history and location makes the invented story so convincing that Max believes it and jumps to his death.

Q3 Looking back at the story, when do you think Ausable thought up his plan for getting rid of Max? Do you think he had worked out his plan in detail right from the beginning? Or did he make up a plan taking advantage of events as they happened?

SOLUTION

Ausable did not have a ready-made plan from the beginning. He did not expect Max to be in his room, since he thought Max was in Berlin. His plan was created on the spot, cleverly using the events as they unfolded.

The waiter Henry was expected to bring the drink Ausable had ordered, and the knocking at the door was really Henry. But Ausable turned this ordinary event to his advantage by telling Max that it was the police coming to protect the important paper. Frightened, Max chose to escape through the window onto what he thought was a balcony.

Thus Ausable improvised his plan, taking advantage of the situation. His quick thinking and presence of mind — inventing the balcony story and the police story on the spot — helped him get rid of Max without any real danger.

Answer: He did not plan it in advance; he improvised, using the expected knock (really the waiter Henry) as a fake ‘police’ arrival and the invented balcony to make Max flee — pure presence of mind.