

Footprints Without Feet

(Class X – NCERT)

Chapter 3: The Midnight Visitor – Robert Arthur

Detailed Summary (Expanded, Exam-Oriented)

The story "The Midnight Visitor" by Robert Arthur is a thrilling tale that subverts expectations about secret agents. It demonstrates that real intelligence and effectiveness in espionage come from quick thinking and psychological manipulation rather than physical prowess or glamorous appearance.

Fowler, a young and romantic writer, is about to meet Ausable, a secret agent, with high expectations of adventure and excitement. However, when he actually meets Ausable, he is thoroughly disappointed. Ausable is extremely fat and sloppy-looking, completely unlike the dashing secret agents depicted in movies and books.

Ausable speaks with an American accent mixed with French and lives in a shabby hotel room on the sixth floor. He moves slowly and wheezes as he climbs the stairs. Fowler, who had hoped to witness exciting spy activities, has spent a boring evening with Ausable at a dull music hall.

As they enter Ausable's room, he tells Fowler that they are about to receive an important report concerning new missiles. This document is highly sought after by various intelligence agencies. For a moment, Fowler's interest is rekindled.

But when Ausable switches on the light, they find a man already in the room holding a small automatic pistol. This is Max, a rival spy who has come to steal the report. Fowler is both terrified and excited - finally, some real danger!

Max tells them to sit quietly and not try anything foolish. He has been waiting for them and plans to take the report as soon as it arrives. Surprisingly, Ausable seems more annoyed than frightened. He doesn't even appear particularly surprised by the intrusion.

Ausable walks heavily to the window and begins complaining loudly about a balcony that, he claims, extends under his window. He says this is the second time in a month that someone has gotten into his room through that balcony. He grumbles about the hotel management not fixing this security problem.

This casual mention of the balcony plants a crucial seed in Max's mind. Fowler, looking at the window, imagines the balcony outside where Max must have waited before entering. The setup seems plausible, and neither Fowler nor Max questions it.

They sit in tense silence waiting for the report to arrive. Suddenly, there is a loud knock at the door. All three men are startled. Max becomes visibly nervous and waves his gun, whispering harshly to send the visitor away.

Ausable calmly explains that it must be the police. He says he thought such an important document would need extra protection, so he arranged for the police to check on him around this time. The knocking continues, more insistently, and a voice calls out for Mr. Ausable to open the door.

Max panics. He is trapped - the police are at the door, and he cannot escape through the main entrance. His only option, he believes, is the balcony that Ausable mentioned earlier. Despite Ausable's warning that it might be dangerous, Max decides to take his chances on the balcony rather than face arrest.

Max backs toward the window, keeping his gun trained on Ausable and Fowler. He opens the window and jumps out onto what he believes is the balcony. But there is no balcony - there never was one. Ausable fabricated the entire story when they first entered the room.

There is a horrifying scream followed by the sound of Max falling six floors to the ground below. Ausable calmly walks to the door and opens it. Standing there is not a police officer, but a waiter carrying a tray with a bottle of wine and glasses - it is just room service that Ausable had ordered earlier.

Fowler is stunned, his face white with shock. He realizes that everything - the balcony story, the police claim - was a brilliant improvisation by Ausable. The whole situation was a masterful psychological manipulation. Ausable used Max's fear and panic against him.

Ausable had created the balcony fiction the moment they saw Max in the room, mentioning it so casually that it seemed like an established fact. When the knock came (which Ausable knew would be the waiter), he seized the opportunity to claim it was the police. Max, already nervous and believing in the balcony, fell for the trap completely.

Fowler finally understands that real espionage is not about physical appearance, guns, or car chases. It is about intelligence, quick thinking, and the ability to manipulate situations and people psychologically. Ausable may not look like a spy, but he is extraordinarily effective at his job. The evening was not boring after all - it was a masterclass in real intelligence work.

Central Themes

1. Appearance vs Reality

The story's central theme is that appearances can be profoundly deceiving. Ausable looks nothing like a glamorous spy, yet he is far more effective than conventional expectations would suggest.

2. Intelligence Over Physical Strength

Mental acuity, creativity, and psychological insight are shown to be far more powerful than physical attributes or weapons in espionage work.

3. Quick Thinking in Crisis

Ausable's ability to think on his feet and create a convincing fiction in seconds demonstrates the value of presence of mind in dangerous situations.

4. Subversion of Stereotypes

The story deliberately undermines romantic notions about spies, showing that real effectiveness has nothing to do with fitting popular stereotypes.

5. Psychological Manipulation

Understanding human nature - fear, panic, assumptions - can be used as a powerful weapon, more effective than any gun.

Character Sketches

1. Ausable

A secret agent who is fat, sloppy-looking, and wheezy - the complete opposite of spy stereotypes. Despite his unremarkable appearance, he is brilliant, calm under pressure, and extremely skilled at psychological manipulation. His greatest weapons are his mind and his understanding of human psychology. He represents the triumph of intellect over physical prowess.

2. Fowler

A young writer who embodies the reader's initial expectations. He represents romantic notions about espionage and learns that reality is far different from fiction. His journey from disappointment to amazement mirrors the reader's own realization about what makes a truly effective agent.

3. Max

A rival spy who is thin, crafty, and armed with a gun. Despite appearing more like a conventional spy than Ausable, he is ultimately less intelligent. His confidence in his weapon makes him vulnerable to psychological warfare. He underestimates Ausable because of his appearance, which proves fatal.

Important Vocabulary (With Meanings)

- **Espionage** – the practice of spying or using spies
- **Sloppy** – careless and unsystematic; messy
- **Wheeze** – breathe with a whistling or rattling sound
- **Mysterious** – difficult to understand or explain; strange
- **Grimly** – in a serious or gloomy manner
- **Passkey** – a master key that opens several locks
- **Confounded** – used to express anger or annoyance
- **Automatic** – a gun that continues firing until released
- **Disillusioned** – disappointed in someone or something
- **Counterfeit** – made in exact imitation of something valuable; fake

Exam-Ready Key Points

- Ausable is a fat, sloppy-looking secret agent who subverts spy stereotypes
- Max enters Ausable's room with a gun, intending to steal an important report
- Ausable fabricates a story about a balcony outside his window
- When someone knocks, Ausable claims it is the police
- Max jumps out the window to escape to the non-existent balcony and falls to his death
- The person at the door was just a waiter with drinks, not police
- The story demonstrates that intelligence and quick thinking are more powerful than weapons
- Ausable never uses a weapon but defeats Max through psychological manipulation