

talk  
to  
me!

LET'S TALK EMPOWERMENT. LET'S TALK ENGLISH

# Footprints without Feet 3

## The Midnight Visitor

*Ausable, a secret agent, is expecting to get a very important report. Another secret agent, Max, threatens him with a pistol, demanding the report. Does Ausable outwit him?*

### READ AND FIND OUT

- How is Ausable different from other secret agents?
- Who is Fowler and what is his first authentic thrill of the day?

AUSABLE did not fit any description of a secret agent Fowler had ever read. Following him down the musty corridor of the gloomy French hotel where Ausable had a room, Fowler felt let down. It was a small room, on the sixth and top floor, and **scarcely** a setting for a **romantic** adventure.

Ausable was, for one thing, fat. Very fat. And then there was his **accent**. Though he spoke French and German **passably**, he had never altogether lost the American accent he had brought to Paris from Boston twenty years ago.

"You are disappointed," Ausable said **wheezily** over his shoulder. "You were told that I was a secret agent, a spy, dealing in **espionage** and danger. You wished to meet me because you are a writer, young and romantic. You **envisioned** mysterious figures in the night, the crack of pistols, drugs in the wine."

"Instead, you have spent a dull evening in a French music hall with a **sloppy** fat man who, instead of having messages slipped into his hand by dark-eyed beauties, gets only a **prosaic** telephone call making an appointment in his room. You have been bored!" The fat man **chuckled** to himself as he unlocked the door of his room and stood aside to let his **frustrated** guest enter.

"You are **disillusioned**," Ausable told him. "But take cheer, my young friend. Presently you will see a paper, a quite important paper for which **several** men and women have **risked** their lives, come to me. Someday soon that paper may well **affect** the course of history. In that thought is drama, is there not?"



As he spoke, Ausable closed the door behind him. Then he switched on the light.

And as the light came on, Fowler had his first authentic thrill of the day. For halfway across the room, a small **automatic** pistol in his hand, stood a man.

Ausable blinked a few times.

“Max,” he **wheezed**, “you gave me quite a start. I thought you were in Berlin. What are you doing here in my room?”

#### READ AND FIND OUT

- How has Max got in?
- How does Ausable say he got in?

Max was **slender**, a little less than tall, with features that suggested slightly the **crafty**, pointed **countenance** of a fox. There was about him — aside from the gun — nothing especially **menacing**.

“The report,” he murmured. “The report that is being brought to you tonight concerning some new missiles. I thought I would take it from you. It will be safer in my hands than in yours.”

Ausable moved to an armchair and sat down heavily. “I’m going to raise the devil with the management this time, and you can bet on it,” he said grimly. “This is the second time in a month that somebody has got into my room through that nuisance of a balcony!” Fowler’s eyes went to the single window of the room. It was an ordinary window, against which now the night was pressing blackly.

“Balcony?” Max said, with a rising **inflection**. “No, a **passkey**. I did not know about the balcony. It might have saved me some trouble had I known.”

“It’s not my balcony,” Ausable said with extreme irritation. “It belongs to the next apartment.” He glanced **explanatorily** at Fowler. “You see,” he said, “this

room used to be part of a large unit, and the next room — through that door there — used to be the living room. It had the balcony, which extends under my window now. You can get onto it from the empty room two doors down — and somebody did, last month. The management promised to block it off. But they haven't."

Max glanced at Fowler, who was standing **stiffly** not far from Ausable, and waved the gun with a **commanding gesture**. "Please sit down," he said. "We have a wait of half an hour, I think."

"Thirty-one minutes," Ausable said moodily. "The appointment was for twelve-thirty. I wish I knew how you learned about the report, Max." The little spy smiled evilly. "And we wish we knew how your people got the report. But no harm has been done. I will get it back tonight. What is that? Who is at the door?"

Fowler jumped at the sudden knocking at the door. Ausable just smiled. "That will be the police," he said. "I thought that such an important paper as the one we are waiting for should have a little extra protection. I told them to check on me to make sure everything was all right."

Max bit his lip nervously. The knocking was repeated.

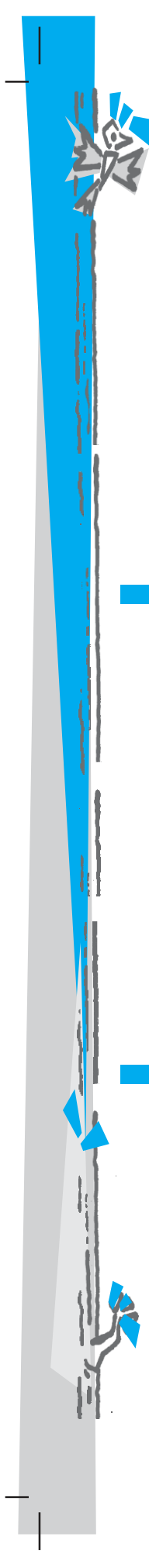
"What will you do now, Max?" Ausable asked. "If I do not answer the door, they will enter anyway. The door is unlocked. And they will not hesitate to shoot."

Max's face was **black with anger** as he backed **swiftly** towards the window. He swung a leg over the sill. "Send them away!" He warned. "I will wait on the balcony. Send them away or I'll shoot and take my chances!"

The knocking at the door became louder and a voice was raised. "Mr Ausable! Mr Ausable!"



Keeping his body twisted so that his gun still covered the fat man and his guest, the man at the window **grasped** the frame with his free



hand to support himself. Then he swung his other leg up and over the window-sill.

The doorknob turned. Swiftly Max pushed with his left hand to free himself from the sill and drop to the balcony. And then, as he dropped, he screamed once, **shrilly**.

The door opened and a waiter stood there with a tray, a bottle and two glasses. "Here is the drink you ordered for when you returned," he said, and set the tray on the table, **deftly uncorked** the bottle, and left the room.

White-faced, Fowler stared after him. "But..." he stammered, "the police..."

"There were no police." Ausable sighed. "Only Henry, whom I was expecting."

"But won't that man out on the balcony...?" Fowler began.

"No," said Ausable, "he won't return. You see, my young friend, there is no balcony."

ROBERT ARTHUR

## GLOSSARY

**romantic:** imaginative; having a fantastic view of reality

**passably:** just well enough; tolerably well

**espionage:** spying

**sloppy:** (here) carelessly dressed

**prosaic:** ordinary

**chuckled:** laughed quietly, without opening his mouth

**wheezed:** spoke breathing noisily and heavily

**missiles:** weapons directed by remote control or automatically

**shrilly:** piercingly; in a high pitch

## 1. Watch and listen to the story

Click on the link below to watch a video of the story being read. Note the pronunciations of the words and read along using the subtitles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiiOWFR0ecw&list=PLhSPJ2EPWbV4sh8Ov2KFRj0rIoM9a41SS&index=8>

## 2. Summary

The Midnight Visitor is a story about many things – pre-conceived ideas, deceptive appearances, drama, intrigue and the importance of having presence of mind to outwit your opponent.

The story is told from the viewpoint of Fowler, a young and romantic writer. It revolves around the dramatic meeting between a secret agent, Ausable and his opponent, another secret agent, Max. Max is very jealous of Ausable and wants to outsmart him and get the important report on missiles that Ausable is expecting. Ausable gets rid of Max by using his presence of mind and fooling him into thinking that there is a balcony outside his window and that the person knocking on his door is from the Police. Max, to escape from the Police, steps out of the window and falls out of the building. There was actually no balcony outside the window and the person, who was knocking on the door, was the waiter who had brought some drinks that Ausable had ordered.

The story shows us how books, drama and films are massive influences on our life and how they create ideas and notions in our mind of what and how particular professions should look and behave like. We also quickly learn that appearances can be very deceptive and that we must spend some time to observe and analyse before we judge people. It is an exciting and fast paced story which has many elements of surprise and drama.

## 3. Vocabulary

1. **Scarcely** – hardly ever seldom, rarely  
When he was admitted to Law School he could **scarcely** hide his happiness.  
Seema can **scarcely** move her arm after the accident.
2. **Romantic** – imaginative, having a fantastic view of reality  
Realistic movies are more popular than **romantic** movies today.
3. **Accent** – to speak in a particular way that reveals your country or region, pronunciation

When his cousin returned from the United States, he had a definite American **accent**.

4. **Passably** – just well enough, tolerably well  
The air conditioning in the mall is **passably** cool.
5. **Espionage** – spying  
**Espionage** movies are very popular with all age groups.
6. **Envisioned** – visualize, imagine as a future possibility  
I **envisioned** selling the house in the city and moving to the hills.
7. **Sloppy** – here - carelessly dressed, careless, untidy  
The principal warned that any student who is sloppy in dressing will be fined.  
Not only was her homework **sloppy**, she was always late in submitting it.
8. **Prosaic** – ordinary  
The tour guide gave a very **prosaic** explanation when asked about the haunted fort.
9. **Chuckled** – to laugh softly in an amused manner  
Ramesh **chuckled** when he saw the pigeons cooing to each other.
10. **Frustrated** – having feelings of dissatisfaction or lack of fulfilment  
He was extremely **frustrated** at not getting the promotion he had been expecting.
11. **Disillusioned** – disappointed in someone or something because it is not as good as expected  
Several **disillusioned** party members quit to join the ruling party.
12. **Several** – many, numerous  
In villages children have to walk **several** miles to reach school.
13. **Risked** – to do something although there is a chance of things going wrong  
He jumped into the river and **risked** his life to save the drowning child.
14. **Authentic** – genuine, not a copy  
An antique collector always makes sure to collect **authentic** pieces.
15. **Automatic** – weapons directly remote controlled  
He hid the **automatic** pistol on top of the cupboard.

16. **Slender** – slim  
To be a fashion model you need to have a **slender** figure.
17. **Menacing** – presence of danger or threatening  
The streets which look so friendly during day time suddenly seem **menacing** late at night.
18. **Crafty** – cunning, sly, deceitful  
The **crafty** lawyer tried every trick to save his guilty client.
19. **Inflection** – a change in the tone or pitch of voice while speaking  
The **inflection** in my brother's voice was enough to warn us that he was upset by the test reports.
20. **Explanatorily** – in a manner of explaining something  
The tour guide **explanatorily** told us about the various monuments in the complex.
21. **Stiffly** – in a manner that is not relaxed or friendly, firm and difficult to bend  
The soldier stood **stiffly** to attention before the commanding officer.
22. **Commanding** – having the authority to give orders  
In a **commanding** voice he ordered the troops to march forward.
23. **Gesture** – a sign or signal by a movement of hand or face  
Her **gesture** of kindness to the poor family was mentioned in the news.
24. **Black with anger** – in great anger  
I was **black with anger** when Renu spilled tea over my notes.
25. **Swiftly** – quickly  
Mahesh runs so **swiftly** he is sure to be selected in the track events.
26. **Grasped** – hold firmly  
I **grasped** the glass bottle tightly as I climbed up the stairs.
27. **Shrilly** – piercingly, in a high pitch  
She laughed **shrilly** and embarrassed her family.
28. **Uncorked** – open the cork of a bottle  
He **uncorked** the bottle and poured the wine for the guests.
29. **Deftly** – skillfully and quickly



The craftsmen **deftly** wove a beautiful design in the carpet.

30. **Passkey** – a master key, a key to a door of a restricted area  
Since I had lost the key of my hotel room, the manager opened it for me with the **passkey**.
31. **Affect** – have an effect on, make a difference  
The workers strike will **affect** the annual income of the firm.

#### 4. Questions

##### Read and Find Out

1. How is Ausable different from other secret agents?
2. How is Ausable similar to secret agents?
3. Who is Fowler and why is he very disappointed early on in the story?
4. How did the story change dramatically? What made Fowler experience a thrill?
5. Who was Max and what did he want from Ausable?
6. What did Max look like?
7. How did Max get into Ausable's room? How does Ausable say he got in?

##### Think about it

1. How does Ausable manage to make Max convince that there is a balcony attached to his room? ? Look back at his detailed description of it. What makes it a convincing story?
2. 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?
3. Why did Ausable lie about the identity of the person knocking on the door? What effect did that have on Max?

4. "You see, my young friend, there is no balcony." What is the implication of this statement from Ausable to Fowler?

Talk about it

1. What is the connection between presence of mind and mental preparedness?
2. What you would do in the situations described below.

#### 4. Suggested reading

- 'After Twenty Years' by O. Henry
- 'The Stolen Bacillus' by H.G. Wells
- 'The Face on the Wall' by E.V. Lucas

## Haiku

*An old pond!  
A frog jumps in —  
The sound of water.*

MATSUO BASHO



*Right at my feet —  
and when did you get here,  
snail?*

ISSA

The above two poems are examples of Haiku. Haiku is a poetic form and a type of poetry from the Japanese culture. Haiku combines form, content, and language in a meaningful, yet compact form. The most common form of Haiku is three short lines. The themes include nature, feelings, or experiences.