

THE CONFIDENTIAL AGENT 1945

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OVERVIEW

The confidential agent of the title is Luis Denard, who travels from war-ravaged Spain to England. His mission is to secure a contract from Lord Benditch to supply coal to his side in the Civil War. He is pursued by dark fascist forces throughout the film, who resort to beatings, shootings, robbery and theft. He is assisted by a young girl Else and later by Rose, who falls in love with him. Despite his courageous efforts, he fails in his mission to secure the coal contract, although his enemies are also unsuccessful. At the end, he and Rose escape together on a boat, leaving the dangerous politics behind.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The film is a faithful adaptation of Graham Greene's novel of the same name, published a few years earlier. Indeed, Greene considered this film the best Hollywood treatment of his fiction, in part because (unlike British film critics) he thought that Laureen Bacall was excellent as the stormy, smouldering Rose.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Denard	Denard, a concert pianist, is the confidential agent.
Licarta	Licarta is a fascist agent and his rival.
Benditch	Lord Benditch is coal mine owner.
Rose	Rose is his daughter.
Forbes	Forbes is Benditch's associate and Rose's fiancé.
Melandez	Mrs Melandez is the manageress of Denard's hotel.
Else	Else is a young maid in the hotel.
Contreas	Contreas is another agent on the Republican side.

STORY

Context The film begins with a printed message on the screen: 'In October 1937, a man crossed the English Channel knowing that the success or failure of his confidential mission could mean victory or defeat for his people.' That man is Luis Denard, an agent for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War against the fascist dictator Franco.

Encounters On board that ship, a young and attractive woman repels unwanted advances in the second-class public room. She asks the bartender to send up to first-class for better whisky. Denard silently observes her and goes out on deck, where he runs into a man named Licarta, a representative of the Fascist government. 'I had heard that you were dead,' Licarta says. 'Too bad. I always admired your work before you became a soldier. You are in an unpleasant business, and you will not survive.' Denard replies, 'It's more important to me that you do not survive.'

Suspicion Going through immigration checks in Dover, Denard is taken aside and an official questions him. His passport is fine, but the photograph doesn't match. 'It was taken a few years ago,' Denard explains, 'before the fighting began in my country.' The inspector notices that his face now has a scar and asks if he was involved in the fighting. Denard says yes and the official wants to know which side. Denard hesitates for a second before saying, 'Why, the Republicans, of course.' The inspector smiles, hands back his passport and suggests that he stay at a particular hotel in London.

Introductions Both Denard and the young woman are late clearing customs and miss the last train to London. When Denard overhears her identifying herself as Lord Benditch's daughter, his face lights up with interest. The woman decides to hire a car and gives Denard a ride. He says his name is Denard, and she says hers is Rose Cullen.

Danger As they ride along, Denard reveals that he has business with her father, Lord Benditch. 'An odd coincidence,' he says, but she doesn't agree. 'Everyone I meet has business with him,' she says through a haze of her cigarette smoke. The car breaks down and they stop at a roadside restaurant to get it repaired. While she goes inside to enquire, he takes a small packet out of his coat pocket and hides it in his shoe. Inside the men's room, a man with a chauffeur's cap searches through Denard's coat, hanging on a hook. When Denard turns around and confronts him, the man threatens to beat him up.

Urgency Back in the restaurant with Rose, he receives a note from Licarta, the man he met on the boat, which seems to be an offer to buy whatever secrets he is carrying. The mystery builds and Denard urges Rose to leave the restaurant because he has to get to London.

Licarta When she starts to dance with someone, Denard wanders outside, where Licarta catches up with him. As a representative of the fascist government, Licarta expresses regret that Denard, a man of talents, is on the other side and says that the two of them are really similar in terms of culture if not politics. 'We're really brothers,' Licarta says. Licarta also dismisses the killing of Denard's wife and daughter as a 'regrettable accident.' The man leaves saying that he has tried to reconcile Denard to his side and is not responsible for what happens next.

Attack When Rose still does not appear, Denard drives off in the car by himself. He is soon overtaken by the chauffeur, who along with two other thugs beat him up and takes his passport but fails to find the document hidden in his shoe. Rose comes on the scene in another car and shows sympathy for him, as he walks off alone down the dark road.

London Denard makes it to a particular hotel in London, where he is expected. He is shown to his room by a fourteen-year-old maid named Else. A letter is waiting for him from Mr Bellows, inviting him to take lessons in Entrenationo, an international language, at an office on Oxford Street.

Mrs Melandez He hides his document in the room and then speaks to the hotel manageress, a Spanish woman named Mrs Melandez and informs her that her sister was killed in Madrid in a bombing raid. He asks if she has any instructions for him and she replies that he will receive them 'in the proper manner.'

Assignment Rose calls Denard on the telephone and arranges to meet him that evening on a crowded street corner in the centre of London. Before he leaves the hotel, he gives his key to Else and tells her to make sure that no one gets into his room.

Mr Contreas Denard goes to the international language centre, which promotes peace by spreading a common language across the world. After a brief interview with an eccentric old man, Denard meets his tutor, Mr Contreas, who conducts a lesson in a mixture of international gibberish and English. Contreas is also a Republican agent and wants to know why Denard was delayed. Denard explains, adding that the Fascist agent tried to buy his valuable document for a lot of money. Contreas is not entirely convinced that Denard is telling the truth, while Denard has doubts about Contreas' allegiance to the cause. Contreas says that Denard must meet with Lord Benditch and complete his mission within a few days.

Assassination attempt On his way to meet Rose that evening, Denard is accosted by a beggar while a man in a car shoots at him and misses. When he tells Rose what happened, she is dismissive—'more stories from the mystery man,' she says. But he shows her the bullet hole in the wall and she changes her mind.

Revelations In her apartment, Denard, who was once a successful concert pianist, attempts to play but finds that he cannot. As they talk, he reveals his mission: he has come to buy coal from her father in order to supply the army on his side in the civil war. That would also prevent the other side from getting more coal. For her part, Rose tells him to concentrate on Forbes, one of her father's associates, because he is honest in business, if not in love. 'He wants me to marry him, but he's been cheating on me for years,' she says, without much sadness. By the time Denard leaves, she has confessed that she's falling in love with him and he admits that he likes her.

Mistrust Back at his hotel, Else warns Denard that Mrs Melandez and a man searched his room. 'Are they your enemies?' she asks. 'I don't know,' he says, 'perhaps I'll find out now.' Denard finds Melandez and Contreas together and tells them that he was shot at and followed. Melandez is sceptical that Denard, an intellectual, is truly on the Republican side. 'You're soft,' she says, 'and

probably don't even carry a gun.' The three of them quarrel about motives and aims, until Melandez hands him a letter purportedly from the Republican government-in-waiting, stating that Denard is 'relieved of all duties connected with his mission.' He is also told to hand over all his documents, including the letter of credit to a bank to cover the purchase of the coal. Denard refuses to accept this, suspecting that the signature is forged and that Melandez and Contreas want to sell his document and make money for themselves.

Trust Melandez reaches for a gun, but Denard grabs it and the crisis is averted. He then entrusts Else with his documents, and she hides it in her stockings. Knowing that she is in danger from Melandez, he promises to find a safe place for her.

Accusation In the morning, he accuses Melandez of being a traitor and of bullying Else. 'I will take her away,' he explains and leaves. Melandez makes a phone call to someone, who orders her to steal the document and get Denard involved with the police.

Murder Melandez and Contreas follow Else up the stairs to her room, where they confront her and demand that she hand over the document. Melandez pushes her out of the window and she falls to her death.

Negotiations Denard goes to Lord Benditch's house and is shown into a study, where Benditch introduces his associates, including Forbes. The men negotiate the sale of the coal, but a problem occurs over the payment. Benditch's men demand full payment in gold since notes may lose their value given the contingencies of war. They also warn that they may consider an offer from the other side because they are businessmen not politicians. Denard argues that if the Germans win in Spain, they will not need English coal since they have large reserves themselves. Benditch, though, is willing to draw up a contract.

Troubles He asks to see Denard's credentials, but they have been stolen. On his way out, he meets Licarta, who is on his way in. Rose appears and vouches for Denard to Forbes, her would-be fiancé, but then the police arrive and question Denard over the 'stolen' car in Dover and Else's death.

Flight With no other recourse, Denard pulls out a gun and flees into the foggy streets. From a telephone booth, he calls Rose and she carries on a disguised conversation in front of the policemen, who are in her flat. On the run from the police, Denard takes Contreas to a safe flat, where he admits that he was with Melandez when she killed Else and that the pair of them have 'sold out' to Licarta on the other side. Denard pulls the trigger to assassinate Contreas, but the gun misfunctions and Contreas dies of a heart attack. Rose meets him in the flat and tells him that her father has signed a contract with Licarta and plans to reopen a coal mine in a town up north.

Suicide Mr Mukherjee, one of the guests in Mrs Melandez's hotel, informs her that his 'mass observation' activities have proved that she pushed Else out the window and that he has sent his evidence to the police. Knowing she is trapped, she drinks poison and is dying when Denard confronts her. 'Before you die,' he says, 'this is for Else.' He slaps her hard, twice.

Up north Denard, still on the run, makes the train journey up north to the coal mine that is about to be opened. Once there, he joins a crowd who cheer wildly when Benditch announces the news that they will have their jobs back soon. Denard interrupts the speech to condemn the coal as something that 'will be used to kill people.' Denard tells the crowd that the man standing beside Benditch, Licarta, is a fascist. The crowd of miners is uninterested in Denard's political ideas, especially coming from a foreigner. 'We want jobs, that's all,' they shout at him. The crowd is about to throw stones when one of them begins to persuade them that they must fight the fascists.

Escape As the tide is turning, someone shoots at Denard. In the chaos, Rose arrives and takes Denard away in her car. She drives them to Forbes' house and convinces him to help Denard leave the country. He agrees to arrange something but advises Rose to go back because the police will be looking for her car.

Contract cancelled Forbes informs Denard that the contract with the fascists has been cancelled because the risk of political turmoil in Spain is too great. It seems that news reports of the chaos at the meeting up north scared Benditch and his friends. Forbes drops Denard off and tells him to go to a hotel, where a man will appear in the morning and guide him to a ship in the English Channel.

Surprise At the hotel, Denard is recognised as a wanted man and is detained. The police arrive and drive him away, but it turns out that the 'police' are men sent by Forbes to take him out to the boat in

the Channel. Denard climbs on to the deck and finds Rose waiting for him. They kiss and he says, 'One day, I know, we will win.'

THEMES

Fascism The force that drives the film forward is fascism, the fear of its power and the idealism of those who want to defeat it. This is what motivates Denard, the protagonist, throughout the story, beginning with his arrival at Dover, England. As he is driven through the English countryside by Rose, he makes a strange comment: 'You should be very happy here, in England...I come from a civil war. I would go along a road like this very slowly, so I could stop and get into a ditch if I heard a plane.' Later we learn that his wife and daughter were murdered by a firing squad, which was explained away by a fascist agent as 'a regrettable accident.' Denard dedicates his life to defeating the militaristic regime of Franco and undertakes the secret mission to London for that reason. At various points, Denard describes his enemies as 'vicious' and 'well-supplied,' but the key scene of anti-fascism occurs toward the end when Denard addresses a crowd of coal miners, who are about to get back their jobs. He appeals to their sense of solidarity with the working class in Spain, pointing out that the coal they dig will be used to power the military machine that is killing innocent women and children. The fascists employ thugs and assassins, and the leading fascist agent in the film is an arrogant aristocrat. Denard is up against a formidable force, and his ultimate victory is due more to the stock market than any weakness in his enemy.

Republicans The Republicans, who are fighting the fascists in Spain, are not portrayed as angels, however. Denard, the hero, is of course beyond reproach; he is idealistic, motivated by a desire for justice and would never, he thinks, use violence. But his associates, at least those we see in London, are not up to his standard and are sometimes hard to distinguish from his enemies. One weakness that the film highlights in the Republican side is its innate distrust of intellectuals. As representatives of the working class, the Republicans are wary of Denard, who was a concert pianist. Licarta, the fascist agent, makes this clear when he says to his rival: 'Even if your side wins, what place will there be for you? They'll never trust you. You're an intellectual. An artist.' That distrust later plays a prominent role in the falling out between Denard and Mrs Melandez, the hotel manageress. She doubts that 'an intellectual can be a true Republican. You're too soft-hearted,' she says. 'You probably don't even carry a gun.' It turns out, though, that she, and not Denard, is the traitor who is bought off by fascist money.

Distrust With both sides of the political divide tarnished, while still maintaining that fighting fascism is right, the film is dominated by an atmosphere of distrust. Shadows, frightened faces, dark streets and unidentified figures all contribute to this sense of impending danger. Afraid that he is being watched, Denard hides a document, first in his shoe, then in his hotel room and finally he entrusts it to poor Else, who hides it in her stocking. Other documents are searched for, stolen and sold, in the ever-deepening fog of London streets. A mysterious lodger named Mukherjee creeps around the hotel; people at an international language institute speak in code; and too many encounters appear to be coincidental. Denard is the confidential agent who trusts no one, until the final scenes when Rose joins him on his escape aboard a boat.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Denard

Character Denard dominates this film of mystery, danger and dedication. He is a highly cultured man who is also deeply committed to a political cause. Emotionally numbed by the war at home, trusting no one, he is brought back to life by his growing love for Rose.

Illustrative moments

Committed Denard has one goal in life: to defeat the fascists, not just because they represent authoritarianism but also because they killed his wife and daughter. That fact emerges later, but his commitment to the anti-fascist cause is revealed early in the film, when Rose is driving them in a car away from the port of Dover. He says that he has come from a war, where planes bomb the roads and towns indiscriminately. She replies that she assumes he is fighting for something worthwhile and, when he hesitates, she looks at him and adds, 'Or are you?' Again, there is a momentary pause before he sets his jaw and says, 'Yes. It's worth a great deal.' She looks over at him a second time and sees a face rigid with determination. She knows, and we know, that he has dedicated himself to his mission. From that point onward, amid the mystery and confusion, we never doubt his

commitment. Even the growing interest of the beautiful Rose (played by Laureen Bacall) will not distract him from his goal.

Loyal Denard's political commitment is matched, if not surpassed, by his personal loyalty to Else, the young maid at his hotel. Having lost his own daughter to the fascists, he seems to adopt the mistreated servant as his own, and she responds to his kindnesses with adoration. Else is murdered by Mrs Melandez for assisting Denard, a fact that horrifies Denard. He learns of her death at the lowest point in his troubled mission to buy coal from Lord Benditch. His offer has been rejected by the coal mine owner and he is arrested by the police. At that moment, in the brightly lit entrance hall of Benditch's mansion, he pulls out a gun and makes his escape. But first, he makes this statement: 'I've been beat up, shot at, robbed and betrayed. I've failed in my mission. But that child has been murdered. And for that someone is going to pay.' Fleeing the house, he tracks down the mendacious Mrs Melandez and, against his nature, prepares to kill her but finds that she has poisoned herself. He would not, it is clear, kill her for political reasons. He is driven to consider such violence only because of his deep affection for the murdered girl.

Pessimistic Denard's political commitment cannot disguise his pessimism, for which he has good cause. His wife and daughter murdered, his 'people' bombed and his enemies funded by Germany's fascist government, he knows that his chances of success are limited. Even when negotiating with Lord Benditch for the coal contract, he admits that the other side have all the assets and that his side 'are a desperate people.' But a more poignant illustration of his lack of hope comes much earlier, in the conversation he has with Rose in the car as they drive away from Dover. When the hired vehicle breaks down with a dud tire, Denard instinctively assume that he is to blame for the bad luck. 'I've brought the war with me,' he says. 'Perhaps I ought to wear a bell, like a leper.' Paradoxically, that revelation of self-doubt only underlines the strength of his commitment. His determination to succeed is driven by his knowing that his chances are low.

Rose

Character Beautiful Rose is no one's fool. She rejects her father's business world and friends, and trusts no one. Deploying sarcasm as self-protection, she appears cool and distant but is capable of deep feelings.

Illustrative moments

Cynical Although still young, Rose is already world-weary. She has had relationships with more than one man and is painfully aware of her father's amoral business methods. Her unsentimental attitude toward life is illustrated in an early scene, when she first meets Denard and he says that he has to be wary of strangers and that he might be in danger. 'Huh!' she snorts. 'Stop being dramatic! I can't stand melodrama.' Denard then remarks on the coincidence that she is the daughter of the man with whom he has an appointment in London. Again, Rose dismisses this with a sarcastic laugh and says, 'Almost everyone I meet has business with him.' When, he suggests that a man is following him, she is incredulous. 'You lay on the mystery with a trowel,' she says. 'Do you want to impress me?' A moment later, when Denard says that the war at home has robbed him of emotion, she says, 'You don't need a war to flatten your life. Money and parents can do it just as well.' This is Rose, daughter of the rich industrialist, who travels second class because she is tired of meeting her father's friends in first class. When she gives the mysterious foreigner a lift, she is not about to be made of fool by his crazy stories of evil fascists.

Wilful Rose is her own person, not taking orders from daddy or anyone else in the privileged world she inhabits. This side of her character is evident when she and Denard stop after the car breaks down and have dinner in a roadside restaurant. She has a drink, another and then a third. Denard suggests, in a quiet voice, that she is drinking too much to drive. Rose holds her glass in mid-air, cocks her head to one side and says, 'Shush! I do just as I please.' Her wilful behaviour seems a little overegged and caricatured—the pretty rich girl who defies everyone because he defies her father. But it also has the important role of increasing the romantic tension between her and the handsome Denard.

Tender Beneath her cynical and impetuous exterior, though, Rose is soft-hearted. But only when the right man comes along, and that man is clearly the soft-spoken but principled Denard (played by the suave Charles Boyer). It takes time for Rose to allow herself to admit that she is attracted to him. At first, she thinks he is playing games with his spy thriller stories, but later she says, 'I like you. I've never before seen a face that is at least 'medium-honest.' After realising that he is in real danger,

Rose drops her guard and falls in love. She makes a dramatic confession when they are alone in a flat, having fled from the police. 'I've known a lot of men,' she says. 'And now I'm falling for a stupid, idealistic fool, who's going to get himself killed sooner or later.' This is vintage Rose. Even her declaration of love is tinged with mockery.

Else

Character Else is fourteen years old, a low-paid hotel maid, without any apparent family support. Although mistreated by her employer, she is cheerful and fiercely loyal to anyone who shows her kindness. She is also clever enough to assist Denard in his secret mission, but her vulnerability means that she will not go unpunished by his enemies.

Illustrative moments

Vulnerable Else is young and poor, which puts her at the mercy of her uncaring employer, Mrs Melandez. Nothing illustrates her predicament more vividly than a scene in the middle of the film. We already suspect that the hotel, run by Melandez, is not a safe place for the fourteen-year old girl. The scene opens with Else in a dark passage, wringing her hands and looking up the staircase as eerie music plays on the soundtrack. The camera angle, showing Else's vantage point, is skewed, and then we hear odd noises—neither a laugh nor a cry, but something strangled. Footsteps are heard behind her. She whirls around and ducks into the shadows beneath the stairs. Not a word is said, but we feel the depth of her fear.

Loyal Else is loyal to her stranger-friend Denard, just as he is to her after her death. Her response to his kindness tells us just how badly she has been treated by others. And when he entrusts her with his secret document, she does not disappoint him. 'Where can you hide it?' he asks with anxiety—after all, she is so young and naïve. But she is equal to the task and cleverly slips it into her stocking. Then she looks up at him and says, 'There's nothing I wouldn't do for you.' It is an ominous statement because, a day later, she pays for her loyalty to Denard with her life.



(Denard and Rose)