

# THE MINISTRY OF FEAR 1943

Fritz Lang

## OVERVIEW

The setting is England, outside London, during World War II. The main character, Stephen Neale, is released from a mental asylum and visits a village fête, where he carts off a prize cake, which, unbeknownst to him, contains a microfilm of government military secrets. He is soon plunged into a bizarre series of events, including a murder at a séance, and finds himself on the run from the police and an unknown group. He gets help from Willi and his sister Carla, with whom he falls in love. After a bomb explosion, and a suicide, Neale and Carla manage to uncover the leader of the Nazi spies, who turns to be Willi, Carla's brother. In the fast-moving finale, Carla saves Neale only by killing her brother, and the couple plan their marriage. While the spy thriller plot is slight, and in places unconvincing, director Fritz Lang creates a nightmarish atmosphere among the bombs, asylums, clairvoyants and dark streets.

## LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The film is adapted from Graham Greene's novel of the same name (1943), but the author was not happy with the many liberties the film took with his story. If we ever needed to remember that novels and films are not the same thing, we see here how Lang's masterly direction, as evidenced in his masterpieces of German expressionism (*Spies*, *M* and the Dr Mabuse series), turns a somewhat dull story into a drama of lunacy and inner torment. One element of the novel that serves Lang's purpose well is the guilt that Neale suffers for his belief that he helped to kill his terminally ill wife. That psychological burden is visualised in the first scene and clings to Neale as he moves through the spy thriller story. The issue of what we would now call 'assisted suicide' is handled sensitively. Euthanasia was a widely debated topic in the 1930s and 1940s in England, with societies formed to lobby the government to reform the law. Although doctors injected King Edward VII with fatal doses of morphine and cocaine to assist his passing in 1936, assisted suicide remains a controversial issue in contemporary Britain.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Neale	Stephen Neale, the protagonist, is a widower just released from a mental institution.
Willi	Willi is the head of the Mother of Free Nations charity, and the spymaster of a Nazi underground group.
Carla	Carla is his sister, who later falls in love with Neale.
Forrester	Dr Forrester is a consultant for the Ministry of Home Security and, also, a Nazi spy.
Travers	Travers is another Nazi spy, who pretends to be a tailor.
Prentice	Prentice is an inspector at Scotland Yard.

## STORY

*Free man* Stephen Neale is released after two years in a mental hospital, declaring that he wants to go to London, to mix with crowds and feel normal again. The doctor, who walks him to the heavy iron gates, gives him a piece of advice: 'Don't get involved with the police again.'

*The fête* Having bought a ticket at the train station, Neale strolls over to a village fête to kill time before his train. Amid happy scenes of children playing and lovers arm in arm, he is guided to a fortune-teller's tent. She gives him bizarre instructions: 'You must give the weight of the cake as four pounds, fifteen and a half ounces.' When Neale asks if that is the correct weight, she says it is 'immaterial.' He wins the cake, but as walks off with his prize, a blonde-haired man arrives in a car and goes into the fortune-teller's tent. He is then said to have guessed the correct weight, but Neale keeps the cake and boards his train.

*Attack* On the journey, his travelling companion is an old blind man, who describes how he hears the

German bombers passing over his farm on their way to London at night. Neale shares his cake with the harmless stranger, but notices that the man crumbles the piece in his hand before eating it, as if looking for something inside. A bombing raid begins, and Neale looks out the window; at that moment, the man hits him over the head with this walking stick and runs off with the cake. When Neale chases him, the man shoots at him but is killed by a bomb. Neale cannot find the cake, but takes the man's gun and resumes his journey to London.

*Investigation* In the capital, Neale hires a private detective to help him solve the mystery of the cake. Learning that the event was sponsored by the Mothers of Free Nations, he goes to their office, where he meets Willi and his sister, Carla, both refugees from Nazi-occupied Austria. After explaining what happened at the fête, Willi and Anna are shocked and agree to help him investigate.

*Séance* Neale and Willi go to the London residence of the fortune-teller, where the old lady at the fête turns out to be a beautiful young clairvoyant. She invites the two men to stay for her séance, attended by several others, including Dr Forrester and the blonde-haired man who claimed the cake at the event. In the darkened room, a woman's voice accuses Neale of wanting to kill her. He screams, 'How did you know that?'

*Murder* A shot rings out and a man lies dead. The others point the finger at Neale, who admits to having a gun (taken from the old man who ran off with the cake). 'I didn't do it,' he says. 'There's was only one bullet left, and it's still there.' But when Willi examines the gun, he finds five bullets in it. Neale explains that he must escape because he has a previous murder charge. But Willi can't let him go because, as an alien, the police would arrest him. Willi then tells Neale to knock him out, so that he cannot be held responsible for his escape.

*Flight* Neale flees and looks for shelter in the private detective's office but finds that it has been ransacked. He calls Carla, who meets him on the street until a bombing raid forces them into an Underground station, with hundreds of others.

*Revelation* Trapped in close quarters, Neale explains to the charming Carla that he had planned to kill his terminally ill wife, a mercy killing, but backed down. She committed suicide using the poison he had bought, and he was sent to the asylum for two years as punishment. He is still haunted by his decision to buy the poison.

*Safe house* Carla takes Neale into hiding in a friend's bookstore, where Neale sees a book about the psychology of Nazism by Dr Forrester. Forrester was at the séance; he is a volunteer for the Mother of Free Nations; and he is also a consultant for the Ministry of Home Security. All this convinces Neale that the charity is a Nazi front organisation, but Carla is sceptical until she discovers that all the people at the séance are volunteers for the charity and that they had all been recommended by Forrester.

*Seduction* Neale goes to the flat of a woman at the séance only to find the beautiful fake fortune-teller. Trying to seduce her, she admits that she knew all about his trial for murder from the newspapers, and Neale discovers a gun in her handbag. She also tries to explain away the mysterious cake at the fête, but Neale is not fooled.

*Suspicion and love* In the office, Carla shows Willi the evidence that proves their charity is a front for a Nazi spy ring. Willi is not convinced, however, and warns Carla not to get too close to Neale. Carla reveals that she is in love with him.

*Explosion* The bookshop owner asks Carla and Neale to take a suitcase full of books to an address. When they arrive, they find no one in the flat and Neale opens the suitcase. A bomb inside explodes, but both he and Carla are unhurt.

*Microfilm* When the smoke clears, Neale is in a bed, overseen by Inspector Prentice of Scotland Yard. Prisoner and inspector share information and questions, which leads Prentice to search the spot where the old blind man carrying the cake from the train was killed by a bomb. The search reveals nothing, and Neale is about to be charged with another murder (the private detective he'd hired has been found dead), when Neale sees a bird's nest. Inside is the cake (miraculously intact), which conceals a microfilm of British military secrets.

*The tailor* Prentice learns that those secret documents have only been taken out of a safe on two occasions, the last being when Dr Forrester had them. On that occasion, Forrester's tailor, a man named Travers, was also present. Neale says that the flat where the bomb exploded was registered in the name of Travers. When Prentice and Neale go to the tailor's shop, they see that Travers is actually the blonde-haired man at the fête and séance. The tailor makes a telephone call and then commits suicide. Neale dials the number he called and Carla answers.

*Showdown* While the police look after Travers' corpse, Neale slips away and goes to Carla's flat. When he demands answers, Willi appears with a gun and admits that he is the leader of the spy ring. He also says that he has another copy of the microfilm sewn into a suit he got from Travers. Carla knocks the gun out of Willi's hand, and the two men fight. Carla picks up the gun and, when Willi attempts to escape, shoots him dead. Forrester and other spies arrive and chase Carla and Neale onto a roof, but Prentice arrives with police, who kill all the Nazi spies, including Willi.

*Wedding* In the final scene, Neale and Carla are driving in peaceful countryside, planning their wedding. When Carla mentions the wedding cake, Neale reacts with comic horror.

## THEMES

*Mental instability* From the very first image—a slowly swinging clock pendulum—the director Fritz Lang signals that this is a drama of the mind. Neale is recovering in a mental asylum, not from madness but from guilt at having colluded in his wife's suicide. He has been looking at the pendulum, counting the minutes until his release, just as (we later learn) he counted the minutes until his wife ceased to breathe after swallowing the poison that he had bought. The following sequence at the fête is an unsettling mixture of normality and the bizarre, happy children and the strange cake. The faces in the crowd change suddenly, and inexplicably, from joy to fear. Nightmarish scenes of bombs punctuate the rest of the story, as Neale is pursued by an unknown force. The sinister aura is augmented by the cinematography, which uses high-contrast shots, illuminating faces surrounded by darkness, and also disorienting shots of extra-large objects, such as the scissors with which Travers kills himself. Other visual distortions, for example, the vertiginous stairs in the final chase scene, also contribute to the surrealism of the film. With these effects, Lang succeeds in projecting Neale's mental instability on the screen. Nothing is clear, no part of the plot is revealed, until the very end, when Neale himself is secure and happily in love. Until that endpoint, the story is engulfed by the smoke of bombs and the secrecy of seances.

*Suspicion and guilt* Within that garish surreal world, the story is propelled by the twin forces of suspicion and guilt. Neale is afflicted by guilt for his role in his wife's suicide, which is underpinned by the police's ongoing suspicion that he might be involved in another murder. Haunted by guilt, he is suspicious of others throughout the story, as if his self-doubt extends beyond himself. For example, when travelling with the 'blind' man in the train, he notices how the man crumbles the cake before eating it. His guilt also makes him act in a suspicious manner, for instance, in the séance scene. Frightened by the apparent voice of his dead wife accusing him of murder, he screams and is then blamed for killing a man in the séance group. From that moment, he is on the run, not only from the police but also from himself since he isn't absolutely confident that he didn't, in some sense, murder his wife. The validity of his suspicions about the fake fortune-teller, the bogus blind man and the disputed cake are difficult to assess, as the police themselves find out. But his finely-tuned antenna of suspicion eventually succeeds in discovering the truly guilty party. The ministry of fear is internal as well as external.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Neale**

Character Neale is a highly strung person burdened by the past. Nevertheless, he can be cheerful and is always considerate. His troubled past seems, however, to have left with a suspicious nature and a keen eye for detail.

### Illustrative moments

*Gentle* Despite his long stay in the mental hospital, Stephen Neale is not only a normal person but a man with gentle and kind instincts. We first witness this side of his character when he leaves the asylum and wanders into a local fair. He has said that he doesn't want to hide away in a peaceful

village, as the doctor advises; instead, he wants to 'find the biggest crowds I can... After that clock pendulum, to see their faces will be a good tonic.' The released patient enters the fair with a gentle smile on his face and retrieves a ball for young children who are playing happily. Lovers stroll by and cheerful music is heard in the background. Smiling still, he graciously agrees to place a bet on the weight of a cake—such a silly but innocent thing to do. So pleased to be again mixing among 'normal' people, he can't stop smiling as he indulges the old lady by making a guess about the cake and then can't refuse when another woman guides him to a fortune-teller's tent. Neale is genial toward everyone, generous with his money and happy to cooperate with such ordinary people. His gentle demeanour, however, is soon crushed by suspicion and guilt.

**Suspicious** Neale's contentment is shattered by a walking stick wielded by a supposedly blind man, who runs off with his cake. From that moment, Neale is unable to trust anyone. A good illustration of this suspicious nature occurs when he goes to the office of the Mothers of Free Nations, who sponsored the fair. When the secretary leaves him alone, he looks at the letter she is typing: '...wish to thank Dowager Cooper for her kind gift of tea...' and is a little ashamed. Inside the office, he meets Carla and Willi, who run the charity. His story of the mysterious cake, which he mentioned to them over the telephone, is treated by them as a funny joke, but now Neale is not smiling. Grim faced, he asks about the fortune-teller at the fête, and studies the card with her details that Willi has given to him from their files. He looks at it for a long time, cocks his head to one side and asks, 'Could any of your volunteers be using your organisation as a shield?' When they ask what he means, he says, 'Some kind of crime.' 'Our old dowagers?' Carla says with a dismissive laugh. Neale does not join in and tells them the story of the old blind man who shot at him. His suspicions have been aroused and he will not be deflected.

**Guilt-ridden** The most powerful and debilitating element in his character is his guilt for his wife's suicide. We have two or three cryptic references to 'past crimes' and 'trouble with the police,' but the full story is revealed in a key scene in the Underground station. Neale and Carla have taken refuge there, where the close conditions and the budding romance encourage disclosures. Neale tells Carla the whole story—how he wanted to put his suffering wife out of her misery, how he bought the poison and how he couldn't go through with it, only for her to use the poison to kill herself. 'Do you see?' he asks, longing for Carla's understanding. 'I'm not a murderer.' She nods, but it is not enough. 'Murderer,' he repeats. 'Perhaps I was a murderer if thinking of a thing for months before you do it makes you one. Lying awake every night, thinking about how to do it.' Carla looks on with sympathy when he concludes his story by saying, 'I don't know if I was right, even now.' This is the key that unlocks the mystery to Neale's dark fears, his hesitations and his flight from the police.

### **Carla**

**Character** Carla is a young refugee, attractive and efficient in the office. She is light-hearted and laughs easily, even when Neale tells her about his suspicions of a spy ring. Her fundamentally kind nature is eventually aroused by his predicament and she then shows her courage and loyalty.

### Illustrative moments

**Naïve** Beautiful Carla is young and naïve. Although she runs the Mothers of Free Nations charity with her brother, she has no idea of how he has been using it as a front organisation for Nazi spies. Her somewhat blasé attitude is revealed in the first scene in which she appears, when Neale comes to their office to ask for help in finding the fortune-teller from the fête. Neale tells his story about the cake and his suspicions about spies, and she laughs, along with her brother. 'Willi and I have run this office for three years' she says. 'Our volunteers are all old dowagers who bake cakes.' Neale persists with his doubts, and she says, 'Besides, where is that cake? Was it too good and you ate it all?' Although she has escaped from Nazi-occupied Austria, and later shows her awareness of their ruthless methods there, she responds with frivolity to Neale's suggestion of espionage in London.

**Brave** Led on by her love for Neale, Carla not only comes to believe his story but offers to help him uncover the truth behind the mysterious cake. Her newfound bravery is illustrated in a scene with Neale, when they are hiding out in the bookshop. Neale realises that the suspicious Dr Forrester works for the Ministry of Home Security and wants to warn the government of that man's involvement in the spy ring. But, of course, he can't go because the police are looking for him. 'I can go,' Carla says immediately. 'At least, I can try to warn them.' Neale rejects this plan since, as an alien, she might not be believed. 'I've taken risks before,' she says. 'You're not afraid?' he asks. 'Yes,' she says honestly, but her expression also says that she is ready to act anyway. The bravery revealed in that

key scene foreshadows the courage she shows in the final sequence, when she picks up a gun and kills her brother, now unmasked as the Nazi spymaster.

### ***Willi***

Character Willi comes across as a charming and cooperative person. He smiles, he listens and he offers to help Neale. Underneath that exterior, though, he is cold and calculating.

### Illustrative moments

*Helpful* Willi is the genial head of the Mothers of Free Nations charity, which sponsors fairs and other events. When we first meet him in his office, with his sister and Neale, he appears to be generous in offering to help Neale. He smiles widely to welcome Neale into his modern-looking office, gestures for him to sit down and holds out a cigarette. As Neale explains the reason for this visit, Willi's beaming expression changes to one of concern. The moment Neale mentions the name of the fake fortune-teller, he gets up and looks through his files. 'Here it is,' he says triumphantly and reads off the address of the woman. 'She lives in London. Come on,' he urges his guest, 'I'll accompany you.' No one could be more forthcoming, more cooperative, in assisting a stranger with, let's face it, a rather strange story about a cake. Willi is helpfulness personified.

*Devious* Willi's true colours show a little later, after he realises that Neale is beginning to close in on his underground spy ring. He and Carla are in their office, when Carla says that she has been talking with Neale and that shares his doubts about the legitimacy of the fair and the fortune teller and the charity's 'volunteers.' As she talks, we see Willi's lips curl into a snarl of anxiety. He turns his back and spins around. 'Now listen, Carla,' he says with his fake smile. 'You should be careful. I've been looking into Mr Neale's background. He was convicted of murder.' He know that this is not true (it was declared a mercy killing), but he wants to warn Carla off the determined investigations of Neale. He continues to urge her to stay clear of him, feigning concern for her welfare, when the real reason, not yet clear to us in the audience, is that he is afraid of being exposed. Calm and helpful Willi is a devious man, capable of lying even to his sister.



(Neale in the mental asylum)



(Neale and Carla)