In 1887 William Morris was a man of significant reputation — at least in England. But apparently neither literature nor socialism was enough to carry his reputation into certain corners of French society, for in the summer of 1887 a minor melodrama took place among the agents de police in Paris and Versailles, hot on the trail of a mysterious William Morris.

A small set of references to Morris exists in the archives of the Préfecture de Police in Paris as part of a large file, BA/1135, devoted to the activities of Paul Lafargue. Lafargue was the co-founder, with Jules Guesde of the French Marxist Party; more ominously, to the agents de police, he was the son-in-law of Karl Marx. Exiled after the Commune, Lafargue spent some year in London. There he met Marx and Engels and he married Laura, one of Marx’s three daughters. Lafargue returned to Paris in 1882, when a general amnesty was declared, and at that time BA/1135 was reactivated. The first folder in the file carries, in the large and elegant script of the nineteenth century, the menacing ‘Gendre de Karl Marx’.

The Lafargue file suggests, unintentionally, certain comic archetypes. In the early 1880’s the agents used code names and they leaned toward the flamboyant in their choices. ‘Ludovic,’ for example, was one agent closely associated with the Lafargue situation, and Ludovic developed to a high gloss the art of making something out of nothing. A combination of Miles Glorioso and the Pink Panther, Ludovic sent in his daily reports as he skulked from meeting to meeting. He managed as well to infiltrate the editorial offices of L’Egalité, the Guesde-Lafargue newspaper, and to report from that vantage such minutiae as subscription figures and to keep the Préfect-
ure abreast of the endless rounds of in-fighting among the Guesdist. To enliven these pedestrian accounts, Ludovic would periodically include a quote from Lafargue, representative of the blood-curdling plots of the socialists. For instance on 10 July 1882 he reported that Lafargue ‘recommended’ to La Jeunesse socialiste that they ‘be prepared for the revolution’. All in all the life of the police spy had its tedious side.

It may have been that tediousness which encouraged the excited interchanges over William Morris five years later. The flurry was touched off by a report of 28 August 1887, and concerned the presence on the Island of Jersey of a number of suspicious and dangerous characters. Engels, for one, might have been there, and Lafargue was planning to arrive sometime after 21 August. Now it appeared that Guesde was to travel to Jersey around the first of September. Furthermore, the agent continued, one ‘William Morris’ was presently on the island. Once the agent had elaborated the Lafargues’ vacation into the clandestine meeting of an international conspiracy, it became incumbent on the police, not only of Paris but of Versailles as well, to discover the identity of the unknown ‘Morice’.

As of 28 August very few facts were assembled by the Préfecture. This ‘Morice’, they discovered, ran a journal; the title of the journal, furthermore, meant ‘Le Communiste’ (a rather bizarre translation of Commonweal). In Paris, ‘Morice’ had only one correspondent, Paul Lafargue, and only Lafargue, in all of Paris, was apprised of the address of this suspicious Englishman. More had to be learned, and quickly, for it was only a matter of days until Guesde would arrive on Jersey. Meanwhile, Engels was waiting on the island which would

1 The Paris agents drew these conclusions for themselves. Actually, Lafargue had already returned from Jersey by the end of August, and Engels was spending his customary summer vacation at Eastbourne. Far from indulging in conspiracy, the Lafargues were ‘completely isolated from the world in this corner where we are living; not a single newspaper reaches us . . . . We feel wonderful in this solitude; the children [Laura’s two nephews] are well, eating like ogres and as lively as grigs.’ (Laura Lafargue to Engels, 10 Aug. 1887, Paul Lafargue to Engels, 16 and 24 Aug. 1887, Frederick Engels — Paul and Laura Lafargue: Correspondence [Moscow, 1959], II, 58–62.)
soon become the scene of a meeting of the ‘leaders [sic] du socialisme internationale,’ an opportunity for them to plan concerted action for the future.

No further entries are made in BA/1135 until 9 September. To the report for that date are clipped several undated papers recording the efforts of Paris and Versailles to trace Mr. ‘Morice.’ The first of these papers announces the discovery that ‘Morice,’ now altered to ‘Morrin,’ is the director of a factory in Manchester and that he has donated 5000 francs to the socialist newspaper *La Voie du peuple*. This document is more or less supported by the report of another agent who has uncovered the fact that William ‘Maurice’ is the director of a socialist journal and who echoes the information about a subscription to *La Voie du peuple*. Two more reports follow with their own versions of these facts, and with their own spelling. It is clear that at least five different agents were assigned the job of uncovering the secret identity of William Morris. The fifth, who had the greatest success, was Agent 29 – one hopes it was Ludovic now anonymously numbered, for the romantic *noms de guerre* had been replaced three or four years earlier.

It is not Agent 29 who submitted the report, however. So significant was his information that it had been transmitted to the *inspecteur principal* who then forwarded it to the Préfecture. First of all, it had been learned that William Maurice and William Morrin were the same man (Morice had apparently been forgotten) – one William Morris, a poet and editor of *Commonweal*. It can be inferred from the tone of this report that Morris had deliberately sent up a smokescreen of false spellings to deceive his pursuers. Spectacularly, they had also discovered a photograph of Morris in the *Le Socialiste* for 16 January 1886. The principal inspector concluded with the smug assurance that Agent 29 had given them all the information that it was possible to procure on William Morris.

The comical blundering of the police spies indicates not only the far from surprising information that none of them was a student of Victorian poetry, but that they failed even to do their own gum shoeing with any efficiency. William Morris had been connected with Engels, and a visitor to his
home, from at least 1884. As a member of the Social Demo-
cratic Federation and subsequently of the Socialist League,
Morris was well acquainted with another of Marx’s daughters,
Eleanor, as well as with such prominent English socialists as
Hyndman, Bax, and Eleanor’s husband, Edward Aveling. But
the line from Lafargue to Morris was clearer yet; in March,
1885, Lafargue had contributed an essay to the second num-
ber of Commonweal, an essay he called ‘The Political Game
of the Police in France.’

Ludovic and his colleagues may have conjured up a fear-
some Lafargue, an awful Engels, and a frightening new spectre
called ‘Morice’. but Engels knew better. In a letter to Eduard
Bernstein Engels described Aveling, Bax, and Morris as ‘the
only honest men among the intellectuals — but men as unprac-
tical (two poets and a philosopher) as you could possibly find.’

Similarly, in a letter to Lafargue, Engels called Morris ‘a settled sen-
timental Socialist; he would be easily managed if one saw him regularly
a couple of times a week, but who has the time to do it, and if you drop
him for a month, he is sure to lose himself again. And he is worth all
that trouble even if one had the time?’ (Engels to Lafargue, 13 Sept 1886,
Engels — Lafargue Correspondence, 1, 370.)

Plus ca change . . .

Perhaps time marches on but old habits never die. At the time
this article was submitted, amid revelations of British police
passing on information about overseas students here to the sec-
ret police of their own countries, and of Special Branch appro-
ches to British students to spy on fellow students, the journal
of the Socialist Education Association reported an interesting
case. Apparently Special Branch members visited a WEA class
on William Morris and tried to obtain the names of students.

A Labour MP protested to the Home Secretary and an en-
quiry was held. Subsequently the Minister admitted that this
had in fact occurred ‘not because the course itself could be reg-
arded as subversive but because it might attract extremist elem-
ents . . .’. It is reassuring to know that Special Branch and oth-
ers are as active here safeguarding society today as the French
were in Morris’s time. Ed.