

THE MASTER SPIRIT

By
SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY

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THE MASTER SPIRIT



“Alexia—has the time come?”

THE MASTER SPIRIT

CHAPTER I

A DWELLER IN DARKNESS

THE light on the Clock Tower, that cheerful beacon which assures Britons that good and picked men are kept from their beds to raise the standard of their liberties, and, incidentally, their taxes, had just gone out, sharply, as though glad to announce to yet-stirring London a respite from the babble of lawmaking; and the great workshop of Westminster where the artisans are so many and busy, and the results perhaps so meagre, discharged its crowd into the illuminated night. Out they came hurrying, for the hour was late: the sitting had been animated and prolonged, and even professional, to say nothing of casual, politicians are nowadays too busy in wasting the nation's time not to set a high value on their own. Out they streamed, still chattering and arguing, as became the priests in that great Temple of the Tongue, those of them whose voices were seldom heard and never listened to in the House talking the loudest outside; a varied crew typifying the component parts of their country's greatness. Ministers, bent, fine-drawn and unkempt, as men whose ceaseless rolling of Sisyphean stones gave no time to spare for the clothes-brush, superior Under-Secretaries, some dapper, others affecting a soul and a mission above the niceties of costume, all far more important than any Prime Minister who ever lived, and displaying a pretty contempt for those of the rank and file who took upon themselves to criticise the conduct of the debate; then the mob

of hungry politicians, keen hustlers; here sharp-faced woodcutters in the tangled forests of the Law, each with his axe to grind; there egotistical, opulent tradesmen, members by virtue of contributions to the Party coffers, and with a never-sleeping eye on the Birthday Honours list; now smart men of leisure gained by their fathers' toil, merely adding the House of Commons to their clubs; and so on, with here and there a single-minded politician who imagined, misguided man, that he served his country by supporting his own shade of opinion, seeking nothing for himself, and getting nothing—but influenza and the privilege of leaving to his party the legacy of an inconvenient bye-election.

“Capital speech of yours, Herriard. Won't do you any harm.” The speaker was a genial, middle-aged man of fashion who liked to be in the House as he liked to have the *entrée* everywhere, and to stand well with everybody from the Premier to the latest blatant labour member.

“Glad you liked it, Sir Henry. I was rather afraid I should be squeezed out after Darrell's interminable effort,” answered Herriard, as he swung himself into a hansom. “Can I give you a lift?”

“Thanks. No. My man ought to be here. Many congratulations. Good-night.”

Herriard nodded and leaned back. “Park Lane,” he called out to the driver. As the cab turned out of the courtyard the more brilliant lights of Great George Street fell upon the face within it, that of a young man, interesting enough, handsome and not without character, which latter trait was perhaps just then

more strongly accentuated than usual by the illuminating expression of the hour's success. It was a face more interesting by its suggestion of possibilities than by any marked indication of actual, present power.

A short distance up Park Lane Herriard dismissed the cab and walked on. On his left, under a crescent moon, the Park lay slumbering still, and, save for a few nocturnal prowlers, lifeless: in vivid contrast to the still busy, if languid, roll of traffic on the other side of its railings. Herriard, walking briskly, turned up Hertford Street, and presently taking a little used thoroughfare, made his way deep into the intricacies of Mayfair, that curious maze of mansions and slums where Peers live next door to slop-shops, and the chorus from a footman's Free-and-Easy at the public-house across the street may keep awake a dowager countess or weave melody into ducal dreams.

At the end of an out-of-the-way spur from what was half street, half mews, Herriard stopped before the old-fashioned portico of a house the frontage of which, at any rate, was squeezed up in a corner, giving at the same time a suggestion of greater expansion at the back. A curious eighteenth century residence, built on unconventional and, with regard to space, ingeniously utilitarian lines; a house that nineteen out of twenty passers-by would fail to notice and the twentieth would stop to wonder at, since the genuinely quaint has of late years in London given way to the hideously regular or the pretentiously unconventional. As he reached the projecting doorway, Herriard turned sharply and glanced back down the short street. He was alone there; obviously no one without special business would be likely to pass that way. Then he took out a

latch-key and let himself in, passed through an octagon hall hung with rare tapestry, went up a broad staircase so heavily carpeted that no footfall could be heard, gave a slight knock at one of the doors on the square landing, and went in.

If the hall and stairway were marvels of costly decoration, the room Herriard had entered was, particularly in contrast to the house's dingy exterior, a still greater revelation, and, in its bearing upon the character of the inmate, should have a short word of description. The walls were hung with dark crimson silk of which, however, little could be seen between the exquisitely toned frames of the multitudes of striking pictures, mostly or all of the French school, with which it was covered. But the whole tone and furniture of the room were French, and French at its most ingenious and its quaintest. The eye fed on a mass of art, simple and applied, never flamboyant, and subdued with such skill and taste that the sense of crowding and profusion was kept from obtruding itself. Everything was novel, unexpected, and yet logically fitted to its place, and the general toning-down effect was aided by the many exquisite bronzes which were placed with an artistic eye about the room. To make an end, the ceiling was a radiant specimen of Angelica Kaufmann's brush-work, showing so little age that the newer glories below could not kill it, and the floor was covered with a rare Aubusson of a design that invited and yet defied analysis.

Projecting from one side of the room was a singular piece of furniture, half bed, half sofa, with a fantastic canopy arranged on carved supports, and with a coverlet of the finest silk. On this couch lay a man. The face that, with the exception of a long thin hand resting on the silken coverlet, was all that could be

seen of him, showed a man of singular power and character. The impression which this vivid personality gave might be summed up in one word, concentration: intense concentration physical as well as mental. The dark eyes seemed to scintillate as under the high pressure of a fully charged brain. The black hair was clinched close to the head in tight, crisp curls, the thin lips were compressed, the whole being seemed to palpitate with concentrated vitality, and yet it was a wreck, or why was he lying there?

He welcomed Herriard with a smile which held more than mere greeting.

“You are late, Geof. A field-night of course. Well?”

Herriard took the hand that was raised towards him, then wheeled round a chair and sat down.

“I got on all right.”

“That’s well. So you did speak?”

Herriard nodded. “And, I think, made every point you gave me. They beat us by only thirty-three.”

The dark eyes lighted up with malicious triumph. “Good! That’s a nasty rap for Master Askew. We had the logic and they the numbers, eh?”

Herriard gave a short laugh. “Certainly we got in our hits every time.”

“That’s as it should be.”

“They were feeble, and not over-confident after the first hour. It was quite fun to watch them.”

“Weaklings! Fancy losing their nerve and half their majority. What are such sheep good for but to follow their leader through the hedge? I wish I had been there.”

A look of almost passionate regret crossed the man’s face as he spoke the last words.

“I wish you had, my dear Gastineau. We would have had more fun still, and they more funk.”

“Congreve?”

“Spoke for twenty minutes. An exhibition of the superior person in the throes of embarrassment. That point of yours about the repudiation of the Colonies hit them hard.”

“Ah, you made the most of that. Good! Congreve the Superior could not touch it?” He spoke eagerly.

“Touch it? He could not get near it. I wished afterwards, as I listened to his floundering, that I had elaborated it still more.”

Gastineau’s thoughts seemed to be far away; as though he were living in the scene his brain reconstructed. “I don’t doubt you did very well, my dear boy,” he murmured, still preoccupied. Suddenly he flashed out with a spiteful laugh, “The pattern Robert Congreve at a loss! His Baliol quibbles at a discount for once. Faugh! A brilliant party to depend for its allies upon the callow prigs of the Oxford Union! Ah, to be back again! to be back again!” His clenched hand rose and fell; he gave a great sigh of impotence.

“It is hard on you, old fellow,” Herriard said sympathetically; “cruelly hard. As it is, I only wish that, as your proxy, I could do you more justice.”

The look of almost savage impatience on Gastineau’s face had given place to a quiet smile as he replied. “I could not find a better man for my purpose, Geof. We must both of us have patience,” he gave a short bitter laugh, “a virtue that you should find easier to practise than I, since its exercise need last but a short time with you, while I must die of it. But the *savoir attendre* pays, Geof, both in the House and at the Bar.”

Herriard smiled. “That’s just as well, since one has no option but to wait.”

Gastineau gave a quick shake of the head. “Many men won’t wait; they can’t play the game. The world thinks they are waiting, and they flatter themselves so too. But they are really out of it, Geof. They have shot their bolt and missed. Why? Because they were in a hurry. Then there are others, like this fellow Congreve, who get pushed up by the stupid party that mistakes academical show and froth for real power. They manage to keep balanced on their pedestals by the weights of self-advertisement and self-confidence. They act upon the well-known ethical principle that the majority of mankind, being fools too lazy to think for themselves, will appraise a man at his own value, if only he will take care to proclaim the precious figure in season and out. If I were a living instead of a dead man, Geoffrey, I’d blow that fellow out of the water in which he swims so complacently.”

Perhaps it was his glance at the malignant face beneath him that made Herriard remark, "You are a good hater, Gastineau."

In an instant the sinister expression had relaxed. "Yes," with a half-apologetic smile. "I hate prigs and, above all, the superior person, with his impudence in assuming a rank in the human category to which he is not in the least entitled. Ah, well, you shall smash him up for me one of these days, Geof. I'm going to make a real, a brilliant success of you. When you are perfect in your guard, I am going to teach you how to hit still harder."

"It is very good of you."

"Nonsense! If you knew how much of selfishness there is in my tuition you would not give me much credit. I shouldn't expect you to let me use you as a mask for my battery were it not that the benefits of my marksmanship go to you. There, that's enough of that. Now, about these briefs. I have looked through them."

"They are all simple enough, eh?"

"Absolutely. In *Slater v. Sudbury Tramway*, though, I should make a strong point of the contributory negligence and, as a second shot, cross-examine closely as to the father's actual income and financial position and prospects. I see they claim six thousand. A glorious British jury is pretty sure to find against you, and your best point will be to suggest a try-on and go for mitigation. There you are."

He gave Herriard the parcel of briefs with an encouraging smile and nod of confidence. "Now you had better turn in," he said,

“or you won’t be fit for Court in the morning. Who tries the tramway case?”

“Gartree.”

“That old fool? He will probably misdirect, and give you a second chance. Good-night, my dear boy. So glad you scored to-night.”

They shook hands affectionately, and in another minute Herriard, in spite of a long, exciting day, was walking, with the brisk step of that elation which knows no fatigue, towards his rooms in Mount Street.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORY OF A COMPACT

THREE years earlier there had been an appalling railway accident between Cordova and Seville. Two tightly packed trains had come into collision, with results that had prevented even the Spanish officials from hushing up the *contretemps*, and had sent an electric wave of shudders over the whole news-reading world. Among the second division of its victims, the dangerously, even mortally, wounded, there appeared one name at least which added, in England, at any rate, to the sensational interest which for nearly a week the affair induced. It was that of the most prominent coming man of the day, Paul Gastineau, K.C., M.P., a man who had indeed arrived and who was bound, in French phrase, to go far. Lay politicians were fond of quoting one another that a man of such marvellous brain-power and capability for hard work had the easy and certain reversion to the Woolsack: members of his own branch of the profession, if they did not agree with the forecast, let it pass unchallenged; while there were many grains of intentional truth in the chaff indulged in by the other branch when they would declare that the solicitor, who, having a fighting case on hand, failed to retain Paul Gastineau, laid himself open to an action for negligence.

For Gastineau was above all things a fighter, and one who fought with his brains as well as with his tongue; a distinction which they who know courts of law will readily appreciate. An

awkward adversary, ever in deadly earnest, who always fenced with the button off; his enemies and defeated opponents, and they were many, said not too scrupulously; but he fought to win, and usually did win, leaving mere niceties and quibbles to the schoolmen; and to have the knack of winning means much, if not everything. It meant much for Paul Gastineau. He became the most talked about man at the Bar, and his enemies being too human to let his praises pass in silence, simply added their voices to the babble that made him known. Our forefathers were stupid enough to regard the envy, hatred and malice that attend on success as something of a drawback; a toll, they called it, paid for being eminent: we know better, and nowadays the wisely successful man regards his detractors as a valuable asset in the working capital on which he pursues the business of eminence.

Parties in the political world do not look far or seek beneath the surface for their allies. Perhaps they are too busy, or too lazy; not to suggest that they are too stupid. Anyhow they have a well-defined leaning towards ready-made reputations: the practice may be expensive and exacting, but it saves trouble. Once Gastineau had become an established success his Party found that they could not do without him, and to that success and to that discovery did a very worthy and somnolent brewer, whose legislative faculties appeared to be somewhat clouded by the fumes of his own ale, owe his more comfortable place of repose in that honourable, if shunted, *wagon-lit* called the House of Lords. Eminent forensic lawyers are often failures in Parliament, and Gastineau was clever enough at the Bar to make wiseacres pretty sure of his falling short in the House. But the short-sighted soothsayers who judge the individual

from the aggregate had made no allowance for a certain quality which, beyond his grit, his talent, and his power of concentration, was to be an important factor in the success which he forthwith became. They forgot that he was not altogether an Englishman: there was Southern blood in his veins, a warmer tinge to his mind; he had the vivacity and intellectual *chic* of the Italian added to the determination of an Englishman. So he rose almost at a bound to a high position among the legal members of the House, and with that his position seemed assured.

Naturally when it was seen that this distinguished man was among the victims of the Spanish railway smash, something like a thrill ran through the country which was the stage of his career. Society speculated as to the extent of his injuries and his chance of recovery; his own profession believed, many of them hoped, that, even if he did recover, his flight would thenceforward be a drooping one, while our old friend, the man in the street, always ready with an obvious moral platitude, made much of the impending sword which Fate hangs over the heads of even the most brilliantly successful of poor humanity.

Meanwhile in a poor monastery near an obscure Spanish town Gastineau lay battling with characteristic determination to keep at bay Death who stood over him. When he had been extricated from the wreckage of the train he was placed aside on the ground to await means of removal to the improvised hospital; and he had lain there in what, to a man of his character and ambition, far exceeded the bitterness of death. His spine was injured, he felt no pain, was, indeed, scarcely

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