

The Human Factor

G. Greene

May 26–30, 2012

At the center of the novel is the typical Graham Greene character. He is tired and skeptical, basically decent yet cynical. One senses that life has no real colors to him, in fact it bores him, yet there is an underlying hope of some redemption, of some sense of meaning. It is tempting to see this as a self-portrait. Is it not true that Greene in his youth once played Russian Roulette in a desperate attempt to inject into his existence some drama, some passion, or at least a moment of excitement? After all does not life seem sweetest when you are about to lose it? Also Greene converted to Catholicism. Out of some inner need, or simply because of a certain stylishness, the thing to do? One suspects a combination of both, with the first predominating, even if the author may not admit to it.

The man in the novel is called Castle. He has a routine job in one of the British security offices. This makes for a mixture of the hum-drum and the exciting. This is also the kind of information gathering work with which Greene has had some experience, as with the case of his older colleague Somerset Maugham a generation earlier. Castle is in fact a double agent. Not because of the excitement such a position engenders, but because of the forces of circumstances. We learn that Castle is married to a black woman, and that the child he raises with her, is not his, but the offspring of an earlier liason of his wife. How many men would put up with that in good cheer? Probably far less than white men happily willing to marry black women. All of this establishes for the reader that Castle is a decent man. Not only decent but singularly free of the selfishness that underlies the lives of most men (and women). In fact he is in love with his wife, and the fact that she was working in the Communist underground in South Africa committed him. Or so we may conclude. The one open ideological statement in the novel is that while Castle may disapprove of Soviet policies in Europe, he thinks that the Soviets have chosen the right side in Africa, working against the apartheid society.

So there are complications to make up a plot. He has to work with a South African agent, who supposedly is a full-blooded racist, and for reasons not sufficiently convincing, has to be invited to the privacy of his home, where he conducts himself with social aplomb, which in a sense is even more disturbing than had he actually shown overt hostility. It is one thing to do evil out of genuine convictions, another to do it instrumentally for ends which may never materialize. There is also a leak discovered. But instead of being under surveillance, he notices how suspicions are settled on his innocuous assistant, who suffers death at the hands of the special services. This incident is done in a rather farcical manner, making you suspect that Greene is overcome with boredom while writing the book and allows himself some mild digression of hilarity. Soon, however, eyes are inevitably zeroing in on the real culprit, and Castle has no choice but to let himself be ejected into safety. He gets his wife and her son out of the house, and then makes the crucial connections. It all works, and he is safely transferred to Moscow, where an entirely new life begins. But a

life without his wife and family. Will she be joining him? There is a problem, the son does not have a passport. To arrange such, under the watchful eyes of the British authorities, may be very difficult, not to say impossible, for the Soviet handlers. And there we are, the book ends open-endedly, we will never know, and the author absolves himself from the duty of having to make up his mind. Castle is a decent man, so in our imagination we will easily imagine a happy ending for him, on the other hand if your temperament is more sadistic or simply of a more pessimistic bent, you can as easily imagine what should be the logical conclusion. The author will have it both ways.

The book was written in the end of the 70's, at the beginning of the second and final phase of the cold war. The defections of the famous Cambridge spies had occurred about ten years earlier, and the final fifth man was soon to be revealed. That was the 'Zeigeist' at the time. The Soviet Union still appearing as a monolithic society seemingly forever aloof from the Western hemisphere. Another planet in fact, if tantalizingly close to our own. Now for better or for worse, this split does no longer exist, or at least appears not to. It dates the novel, but that dating makes it more interesting after all.

June 16, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*