

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **The Human Factor** 1978

Graham Greene

### OVERVIEW

*The Human Factor* tells the story of Maurice Castle, a man in his sixties who works in London for MI6, the British international intelligence agency. He is married to Sarah (the 'human factor'), a black South African who used to be one of his agents when he worked in South Africa. Castle's humdrum office life is interrupted by rumours of a leak in his department. Suspicion falls on Davis, one of Castle's colleagues, who is swiftly 'eliminated'. Castle knows Davis is innocent because he himself is the double-agent, passing what he considers innocuous information to the Russians. He does this not out of ideological comradeship but only because the communists helped him and Sarah flee South Africa when they were wanted by the police for breaking the country's race laws. More drama is created by the appearance of Muller, a white South African man who works for BOSS, the South African intelligence agency, and who knew Castle and Sarah in his country. Muller has come to London to collaborate with MI6 on a new project to defeat communist-backed black rebel forces in Africa. Before Castle is exposed as the traitor, he is secreted out of the country and taken to Moscow, with the promise that Sarah will join him. She never does.

### LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Graham Greene later said that he wrote this book as a spy novel without the violence found in many novels and films about MI6 (James Bond, for example). He was able to draw on his own experiences in MI6 during the World War II, particularly the moral dilemmas faced by its officers. Despite some obvious resemblances, Greene explicitly stated that the character of Castle was not based on the infamous Kim Philby, who had been Greene's boss in MI6 and later fled to Moscow after being exposed as a double agent. In fact, Green abandoned writing the book right after the sensational news of Philby's flight (in 1963) because he did not want the novel to be read as a *roman à clef*. However, the novelist's sympathies for his old friend may have inspired his portrait of an intelligence officer whose betrayal of his country is motivated by human rather than ideological concerns. In 1979, a film of the same name as the novel was directed by Otto Preminger.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Castle    Maurice Castle, the protagonist, works for MI6, the British international intelligence agency.  
Sarah    Sarah, a black South African, is his wife.  
Davis    Davis, one of Castle's colleagues, is suspected of being a traitor.  
C        C (or Hargreaves) is the head of MI6.  
Daintry   Colonel Daintry is the new head of security in MI6  
Percival   Dr Percival is an advisor to C.  
Muller    Muller is an agent with BOSS, the South African intelligence agency.

### STORY

*Security*    The story begins on an ordinary day in the London offices of MI6, the British overseas intelligence service. Maurice Castle and his younger colleague Davis make up Section 6A, responsible for decoding encrypted messages coming in from southern Africa. That morning Castle is called in for a 'chat' with Colonel Daintry, the new head of security. Everyone is undergoing security checks, just routine, of course, but Castle bristles at the prying into his briefcase.

*Home sweet home*    Middle-aged and mild mannered, Castle commutes back to his suburban home, where he lives with his wife, Sarah, and her son (by her first, now-dead husband), Sam. Although the

scene is of dull, conventional married life, there is a frisson of tension: a mysterious telephone call, a repeated reference to a novel that Castle brought home in his briefcase and Castle's nervousness about the security check at the office.

*Shooting Pheasants* The next chapter describes a pheasant shoot organised by 'C' (the overall head of MI6) at his country house. Gathered there are Watson, head of Section 6, Percival a 'doctor' and senior adviser, and Colonel Daintry. C explains that he suspects a leak in Section 6 because intelligence gathered in southern Africa is making its way 'to the other side' (the Russians). C holds confidential conversations with each of his guests, trying to gain insight and discover who is responsible.

*Suspect* Various pieces of 'evidence' point toward Davis: he once took an office file out to read at lunch; he told a 'lie', saying he was going to the dentist, when in fact he was taking the office secretary out to lunch; and Castle described Davis as someone who is 'restless' and wants a foreign posting. 'Makes sense,' the intelligence chiefs think, 'the chap wants an escape route if he's found out.' Davis is also suspect because he's outside the Oxbridge coterie of most everyone else in MI6.

*Mysterious books* Castle goes to his usual bookshop and buys two copies of *War and Peace*. It is an apparently innocent transaction, but hints are dropped that all may not be as it seems. Back at the office, Castle and Davis chat about work, including a report from Zaire about predictions for the harvest and reports of a foreign diplomat having lunch with the President. This is the humdrum nature of their clandestine work, nothing very interesting.

*South Africa* Next, Castle reflects back on his experiences as an MI6 agent in South Africa. He fell in love with Sarah, a black woman, which violated the country's racial laws and brought him into conflict with the police and generated threats against Sarah by the BOSS (South African equivalent of MI6 or the CIA). Afraid for the future and their safety, Castle accepted help from a Communist (and anti-apartheid activist), who arranged for him and Sarah to be taken across the border into Mozambique and on to England, where they settled down with his stepson Sam.

*Uncle Remus* Mr Muller, the same BOSS agent who interrogated Castle in South Africa, arrives in London to work with MI6 on a new intelligence operation code-named Uncle Remus. Castle is brought into the plan and is told that South Africa is being threatened by Soviet-backed guerrilla forces based in Namibia and Mozambique. The 'West', Muller explains, cannot afford to let his country, with all its gold and diamond resources, go communist. Uncle Remus is a joint operation between BOSS, MI6 and the CIA, plus other smaller agencies in Europe, whose goal is to develop small nuclear weapons capable of use on the battlefield. Although the losses would be heavy, not only for the guerrillas but also local civilians, the greater good of stopping communism outweighs those unfortunate negative consequences.

*Poisoning* Dr Percival, who had earlier speculated about how to poison someone without leaving a trace, carries out his plan and poisons Davis, who he and the others believe is the traitor in their ranks. When C finds out that Percival has killed one of his own men, he is irritated but not unduly bothered. Daintry knows that Percival perpetrated the murder but keeps silent. Castle knows that Davis is innocent but keeps that knowledge to himself.

*Boris* Now, we learn that Castle is the mole inside MI6 and that his controller is a Russian named Boris, with whom he communicates by radio. Following Davis' death, Castle writes to Boris, explaining that he won't send him any more radio reports. The idea is that if there is 'radio silence', MI6 will be further convinced that Davis was the leak and thereby ensure the continued success of his own spying (and safety). However, when Castle learns about the nuclear weapons at the heart of Uncle Remus, with its possible death toll on black people, he begins to have doubts and wishes to expose the plan (and himself in the process).

*Trap* Meanwhile, based on their relationship in South Africa, Muller has begun to suspect Castle of being the leak and sets a trap for him. Muller deliberately leaves a set of his private notes for Castle to pick up after one of their meetings. If those notes are found to have been leaked, then the case against Castle will have been proved.

*Suspicion confirmed* Castle takes the bait, reports to Boris and begins to fear that his superiors are on to him. Sick with anxiety, he sends Sarah and Sam to his mother's house in the country, making the excuse that they have had a big argument. He wants to face the music by himself. After a long day's wait alone in the house, Colonel Daintry arrives and they have a heart-to-heart talk, in which his guest reveals his own romantic disappointments. When they chat about Davis' death, Castle assures

Daintry that Davis was innocent, which only suggests that Castle must know who the true leak is. Daintry later reports to C that he suspects Castle. Muller tells C the same thing. Convinced, C orders all ports and airports to stop Castle leaving the country.

*Escape plan* As Castle sits at home, nervously awaiting his fate, one of his old contacts arrives. He is an Englishman, and a member of the Communist Party, who drives him to a hotel near Heathrow airport, where Castle waits for the next link in his escape chain. A man knocks on his hotel room and says he is the person he's waiting for.

*Disguise* Inside the room, the newcomer trims Castle's hair and gives him a fake moustache and a white cane, as part of his new identity. He also hands him a fake passport. The plan is that Castle, as an older blind man, is to take a bus to the airport and catch a plane to Paris. As Castle waits in the hotel lobby for the bus, a person he met in the hotel bar the previous night seems to recognise him but isn't sure.

*Mother-in-law* Sarah is unhappy staying with Castle's mother. She feels alone; her mother-in-law is cool toward her. Plus, Sam cannot settle in his new school. Mrs Castle is shocked that her son has 'betrayed his country' and threatens to take Sam away from him by making Sam a ward of the court.

*Moscow* The narrative jumps to Moscow, where Castle is safe and sound. He has escaped from England, having somehow deceived the border guards at Heathrow. But, like Sarah, he is unhappy in his new environment. After an unpleasant KGB officer shows him his 'luxury' flat, Castle meets other disgruntled exiles in the Soviet capital. All Castle wants is to be reunited with Sarah and Sam. Plans are made to smuggle Sarah and Sam out of the country and onto Moscow, but there is a problem. Sam is too young to have been included on Sarah's passport. She could be secreted out of the country by herself, but not both of them. Sam would be too obvious and draw attention to her.

*Dead line* After weeks of frustration, Castle is finally able to get through on the telephone and speak to Sarah at his mother's house. They declare their undying love for each other and talk in vague terms about when they will be reunited. Then the line goes dead. Nothing more is said, but it is implied that Castle will never see Sarah again.

## THEMES

*Loyalty and corruption* The idea running through this story is that loyalty contains a seed of corruption. Greene chooses his epigraphs carefully, and the one for this novel is from Joseph Conrad: 'I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered his soul.' If one becomes loyal to someone or something, that bond can force one to harm someone or fight against another idea. Loyalty, in other words, increases the likelihood of betrayal, an irony that Greene knew only too well and explores through his character of Castle. The corruption of Maurice Castle begins in South Africa, when he was working for MI6 and fell in love with Sarah, accepting her son Sam as his own. His 'tie' to her, his intense love for a person, meant that he broke the (absurd) race laws of that country and that he would have to flee with Sarah. And in that hour of need, it was his friend Carson, a leader in the local Communist party, who managed their escape. He was eternally grateful to his friend, as he told Sarah: 'If it hadn't been for Carson, Sam would have been born in a prison and you would probably have died in one.' That bond with Carson led to Castle thinking highly of the Communist Party—not Stalin and the ruthless suppression of uprisings in Budapest and Prague, but the party as a movement. And that led to Castle agreeing to spy for them when he got back to London. And so, Castle owes everything to the Communist party. His betrayal of his country derives from his love of Sarah. Anyone who falls in love is a potential traitor.

*Amoral government* The second theme of the novel is less a personal and more a political statement. Although Greene rarely takes political stands in his novels, *The Human Factor* is something of an exception in its unambiguous support for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and its condemnation of the West (US and UK) for their backing of the racist regime in that country. As in some of Greene's other novels (*The Quiet American* and *The Comedians*, for example), Western governments and their security agencies are motivated by a paranoia about Communism. This means that the West works closely with the South African government and BOSS (its security agency) in oppressing any political opposition and, in doing so, contributes to the violence perpetrated against many innocent members of the already downtrodden black majority population in that country. As C says to Castle, 'Can you imagine what would happen to the West if the South African gold mines were ever closed by a racial war? And losing the war, as happened in Vietnam?...Russia would be the chief source of gold. And the diamond mines. De Beers are more important than General Motors.' Daintry adds that he doesn't like this project of allying MI6 with the South African BOSS, 'but

it's what the politicians call a realistic policy.' C is nostalgic about the old days when he could solve Africa's problems by dealing with tribal chiefs and witch doctors. Now, it's the White House.

*Cynicism* Despite its criticism of the amoral west, the novel does not actually endorse any ideological position. Castle (like Greene) is not a believer in any cause or government, only an opponent of oppression and poverty. Although Castle is grateful to the 'party' for getting him and Sarah out of South Africa, he is not ready to wave the red flag and is especially downbeat when he is taken to Moscow. On his way to the airport to board a plane that will fly him to the Soviet capital, the communist Halliday says that he (Castle) is a militant, but Castle disputes this. 'I'm only a casualty,' he says. And when his companion says that 'they'll cure you in Moscow,' Castle asks sarcastically, 'In a psychiatric ward?' Castle's lack of belief immobilises him; he does not act to support any political or social agenda, which condemns him, in his own mind, as a coward. The novel's cynicism is also articulated by Dr Percival, a rather sinister character, who advises C, the head of MI6. In a long conversation with C, Percival admits that he was a communist 'thirty years ago' and that he supported international peace. Now, however, he just wants to be on the 'winning side.' He's not the 'crusader type', doesn't believe in 'God or Marx' and only wants to be able to build better hospitals. When C mentions Davis and suggests that being a traitor to one's country is despicable, Percival dismisses 'traitor' as 'an old-fashioned word.' Espionage, the novel suggests, breeds cynicism. No one can afford to trust anyone else; contacts are anonymous. It's better that way; no can betray anyone. It doesn't matter if the spy agency is supposed to serve communism or capitalism, the nature of clandestine work turns its agents into cynics, suspicious of everyone and trusting no one. The author himself was once a spy (in west Africa during the Second World War) and spent many other years as a journalist (another sort of spying). Those experiences shaped the writing of this novel.

#### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Castle** Maurice Castle is an ordinary man, more civil servant than spy. He is sixty-two when the story begins, having spent years working in MI6, most recently in South Africa, where he met Sarah, whom he later married. He is a mild man, who avoids conflict. He is also a loving husband as well as a kind father to Sarah's son, Sam. He is a non-believer, in religions and politics, but has a moral core.

*Principled* Castle is not a hero. He is not brave or particularly clever or strong, and he is certainly not a crusader for a cause. But he does have principles, or at least, a desire not to cause harm to innocent people. The moment when this moral scruple directs him comes toward the end of the story, when he has already learned from Muller about the secret plan code-named Uncle Remus. The important element of the plan is a 'tactical' nuclear weapon that can be used on the battlefield to kill thousands of black African rebels. Up to that point, Castle has decided to play along with Muller and Uncle Remus; after all, he thinks to himself, it's my job. And more important, he has decided to stop communicating with his KGB controller until the hunt for the mole inside MI6 is over. Now, however, he decides to risk one more report to the KGB in order to warn them of this dangerous nuclear weapon. The moment of his decision is significant. Castle is reading stories to Sarah's son, Sam, about a dangerous masked man. Sam says that he thinks the man is black and that the white people are afraid of him. 'At that moment, Sam never looked more black, and Castle put his arms around him in a gesture of protection.' Sam stands for all the black Africans who could be annihilated by the nuclear weapon. With that thought, Castle copies the notes that Muller has given him about Uncle Remus and sends them to his controller. He knows it is rash and might draw attention to himself. He knows he 'has taken the ultimate risk, has gone too far, as Sarah would have said.' But he acts anyway because of his love for Sam, Sarah and, through them, others in South Africa.

*Meek* Castle is a typical, meek-minded English bureaucrat. He keeps his head down and gets on with his job as an MI6 agent working in South Africa, before his escape back to England. But he falls in love with Sarah and, much like a spy, carries on this clandestine love affair in defiance of the country's strict racial laws. He is found out, though, and summoned to an 'interview' with Muller, an officer of BOSS, the South African secret police. As he sits in an outer office, Castle is afraid. He tries to read the newspaper, but 'he was deeply aware of his cowardice. Three years in South Africa and six months of love for Sarah had turned him, he knew well, into a coward.' He remembers how he has had to hide, to conceal and to dissemble in order to avoid detection. Fear has become part of his personality, as deeply ingrained as his hatred for the apartheid regime. Greene comments that 'hate is an automatic response to fear, for fear humiliates.' And Castle has been humiliated by months of having to cover up his love for Sarah. The self-perception that he is a coward is itself an act of cowardice, a giving up, a surrender. He is no longer strong enough to fight.

*Despondent* Like many of Green's leading men, Castle is beset by an inner sickness, a lingering malaise, a concoction of guilt, loneliness and despair. The moment we learn of his despondency comes when he is lying in bed. Sarah has already gone to sleep. They have had a long conversation about the past and the communists they knew in South Africa. Castle states his admiration for a 'comrade, a genuine communist,' who made him think more positively about the party. But he admits that 'things stuck in his throat' about communism, so that he was always a 'half-believer.' He is also disturbed by thoughts of his first wife, whom he could not save from a bombing during World War II. It's all too much, this pain in life, and he longs to 'slip off into that underground stream that will take him to a permanent home, in a city where he could be accepted as a citizen...without any pledge of faith, not the city of God or Marx, but a city called "Peace of Mind." ' In this moment, Castle reveals his deep desire to escape into fantasy. It is a kind of death wish.

**Muller** Muller, like Castle, is a professional man, dedicated to his job. While his colleagues are sometimes brutal, he has a gentler approach. Smooth on the surface, he is still a hard and calculating person, not swayed by emotion.

*Adaptable* Although Muller is a high-ranking officer in the South African security police, he is neither crude nor cruel, at least on the surface. Instead, he has a calm, unflappable exterior, which adapts to the necessities of each occasion. The most dramatic illustration of that 'chameleon' character, as Greene described it, is his meeting with Castle at the latter's home outside London. The two men were enemies years back in South Africa, when Muller had to warn Castle about his 'association with a Bantu girl' (that is, with Sarah). Now, years later, the two men are sitting in Castle's drawing room in sedate England. Muller has sloughed off his racial prejudice and even speaks of himself as an 'African.' Castle, still smarting from the incident in South Africa, wants to embarrass Muller by introducing that 'Bantu girl' as his wife; Muller has no idea that Castle has married Sarah. However, when Sarah enters the room, and Muller sees who she is, he smiles, holds out his hand and says genially, 'I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs Castle.' Sarah remarks, sharply, that they almost met seven years ago (when she was smuggled out of the country to avoid arrest), but Muller only compliments Castle on his 'beautiful wife.' He then offers her a shawl that he brought as a gift from South Africa, and the three of them reminisce about the warm weather that they now miss in chilly England. Castle had underestimated Muller. The BOSS man is a consummate spy who adapts himself to the situation.

*Calculating* Beneath that affable exterior, however, Mr Muller is a cold and calculating man. As a senior officer in BOSS, he cannot permit sentiment to distract him from carrying out his sometimes diabolical duties. A good example of his methodical mind occurs in a later conversation with Castle, when Muller briefs his English counterpart on the plan known as Uncle Remus. He explains to Castle that the idea behind the operation is that 'troops will be unnecessary' because the rebels will be killed by using 'tactical nuclear weapons.' Castle raises the issue of retaliation by the Americans, but Muller assures him that no one will be seriously worried about a 'tactical weapon used in a country that is almost desert and very far away.' Muller also mentions that 'we are lucky in our prevailing winds and deserts,' which means that few white South Africans would be affected by the nuclear fall-out. The Germans are on board, Muller explains, because of their past colonial territories in the region, the French are too 'Cartesian' to take sides and even the Russians want 'to die in their beds, not in a bunker.' Muller and his superiors have it all figured out. A few thousand dead black Africans are a good price for five years of peace in the region. Muller has calculated all the costs and weighed up all the benefits.

**Percival** Percival could be seen as something of a caricature of the 'evil doctor.' He appears to be an ordinary man, who loves trout fishing and admires modern painting. But he is a man of harsh judgements and uncompromising methods, who can kill someone as part 'of a little experiment.'

*Judgemental* Dr Percival is quick to judge others, often sizing them up in a moment. But he sometimes gets it wrong, with disastrous consequences for the ill-judged person. The best illustration is his erroneous judgement of Davis as the mysterious source of information that has been going over to the 'other side.' After explaining why democracy is not a good idea for Africa, the ultra-conservative Percival confides in C about his suspicion that Davis is the leak. C asks for evidence, and Percival cites Davis' heavy drinking, especially since the internal security checks began. Although Percival admits that Davis doesn't drink as much as other well-known traitors in the firm, such as Philby and Maclean (real-life double-agents), Percival declares that Davis is a 'manic depressive...a bit schizoid, which is essential for a double agent.' Davis is also restless, probably, reckons Percival, because he wants to escape and go abroad. Percival concedes that his evidence is 'a bit patchy...circumstantial,' but he warns C that they can't afford to wait. 'After all, we're not going to put him on trial.' C is still

unsure, but Percival's precipitous logic finally convinces him to condemn an innocent man to death.

*Sinister* Dr Percival is not the garrulous medic with good bedside manners. Although he appears to be an ordinary bloke, who likes fishing, admires painting and enjoys his whisky, he is also capable of murder, as is shown in his elimination of Davis, who he suspects of being the leak in MI6. The truly sinister aspect of his character is exposed after the fact, when Davis' death is announced. 'I had not expected this to happen,' Percival says, and Castle immediately thinks that is an odd statement for him to make. Percival has been treating Davis for a supposed liver problem, when, in fact, the doctor has been feeding him poison in the form of a mould made from peanuts. The doctor's demeanour is as cold as the body itself. Castle asks if there is to be a post-mortem, and Percival says, 'Of course, of course.' As Greene comments, 'his "of courses" started to multiply like flies around a corpse.' As the conversation proceeds, Percival hints at mysterious entries in the dead man's diary, trying to deflect attention from the real cause of his death. Someone else says, 'I wonder what the post-mortem will show,' and Percival says firmly, 'As I told you. His liver was almost totally destroyed.' With his pseudo-medical authority, Percival manipulates the situation, altering expectations and deftly covering up his own actions that led to Davis' death.

