

# A MASTER OF MEN

By E. P. OPPENHEIM

CHAPTER XXVI.

The next morning's post brought Strone a pile of letters. He glanced them through hurriedly enough—invitations, congratulatory epistles, appeals for charity. But towards the end he came across one in a familiar handwriting. He leaned back in his chair and opened it. It was dated from the National Liberal Club.

"Dear Sir—We are much disappointed not to have seen you here tonight. It was, I thought, understood that an informal meeting should take place to report and discuss the prospects of the Bill. Tomorrow is Directors' day at your office in Leadenhall Street, we will wait upon you there at eleven o'clock—I am, yours truly, RICHARD FAGAN."

Strone read his letter through, and flung it on one side with a little exclamation of contempt. Not a word of congratulation. By his speech he had ensured the passage through the House of a Bill which Fagan and his friends had been working at for years. They took no account of his success. They went out of their way to complain at his absence from a meeting of which he had received not the slightest intimation. He felt that this note was the beginning of the end, throwing him over his head. He glanced at his watch, and sent for a hansom. As he passed into the hall Milly descended the stairs.

She was wearing an untidy dressing gown, and her hair was coiled in dishevelled fashion on the top of her head. Her eyes were red, and her general appearance far from attractive. Strone looked her up and down with a disapproval which he took no pains to conceal.

"You are rather late this morning," he remarked coldly.

"What if I am?" she answered. "It doesn't matter to me, does it?"

"You please yourself, of course—but I think that you might get down to breakfast."

"What for?" she asked sharply. "What wants me? You don't want me here yesterday, and you never spoke a word. You went off without even saying good-bye! I am sorry for that," he said. "You see yesterday was an anxious day for me."

She laughed hardily.

"They might all be anxious days," she declared, "for all the notice you take whether I am in the room or not. As for not getting up to breakfast, well, I like to lie as long as I can. It makes the day shorter."

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye, and good riddance," she answered, with an air of triumphant laughter. He drew his hat.

"What is the matter with you, Milly?" he asked.

"Matter with me? Oh, nothing," she answered sullenly. "It's fair sickening, though. Off you go again first thing in the morning, and I can't see you till tomorrow morning, and then it'll be the same thing over again. How do you suppose I'm to amuse myself cooped up here? You and your Parliament work in it, don't you? It was all at the bottom of the seat!"

Strone thought for a moment.

"I am sorry that I have not more time to spare, Milly," he said. "If you are feeling lonely I must try and get you away more. Would you like to come and have lunch with me today?"

Milly tossed her head, but she was evidently mollified.

"Have I ever refused—when I've been asked?" she demanded faintly. "Where and what time?"

"Say, half-past one at the Trocadero," he decided. "I'll try my best to be punctual."

She opened the door for him and held up her lips. Strone handed himself for the aversion with which he knew that he had done something cheerful, and drew a deep breath of relief as he passed through the gate.

He took a hansom to the offices of Messrs. Strone and Dobell, Ltd., and for an hour or more was immersed in business. Finally, at eleven o'clock, he found head clerk brought him word that the deputation had arrived. They were ushered into his private room, and from his seat he glanced into their faces. He saw that they had come in no friendly spirit. He smiled grimly as he shook hands with them and prepared for the contest.

Mr. Fagan was accompanied by three supporters whose faces Strone scarcely knew, and who seemed quite content to remain as far as possible in the background. They were to some extent surprised and impressed by their surroundings. For Strone & Dobell, Ltd., were no longer country engineers. They held a patent of worldwide value, and their business had increased by leaps and bounds. Strone's private room was plainly but handsomely furnished. From the adjoining offices came the click of typewriters, the subdued voices of many clerks. The whole place had a busy and proper appearance.

"I received your letter, Mr. Fagan," Strone said, leaning back in his chair. "I was not aware that you expected to see me last night. I had private engagements. However, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say now."

Richard Fagan, a weaver by trade, and Mr. P. for Oldham, stroked his long beard thoughtfully.

"You must not think, Mr. Strone," he said, "that we have come here to urge any formal complaint against you. You made a rare speech last night. There's no denying that. There isn't a paper on either side that hasn't something to say about it."

"I am very much obliged to you," Strone answered, impassively. At the same time, he believed he was right in concluding that your visit here is not altogether a congratulatory one. You have come here not to applaud but to condemn. Very well! Let me know what I have done or left undone. Let me understand the exact position, at least."

Mr. Fagan coughed deprecatingly.

"You must remember, Mr. Strone," he said, "that you're the boss of an independent lot, and we like things explained."

Strone nodded.

"Go on! I'm here. Question number one!"

"There was the master of the Duke of Massingham's property," Mr. Fagan said slowly. "That was a flagrant case. We had him on the hip. Why didn't you bring it forward and expose him? You had all the facts."

"I exercised my own discretion in the matter," Strone answered coolly. "I did not see that any useful end would be gained in doing so."

"He is an aristocrat, one of the very class whom we have to fight against. It was a fair weapon."

"I am not sure," Strone said, "that I am with you there. I do not look upon the aristocrats as the natural enemies of the poor. I believe the Duke of Massingham is a well-meaning man. I know that he has a long, lean man, with shock hair and a collar which was certainly not clean that morning, and no tie."

"Mr. Strone," he said, "the papers say that you were having dinner at Lord Sydenham's on Monday."

"Quite right," Strone assented. "I was there."

"The Duke of Massingham was there?"

"He was."

"Did you have any conversation with him about this property?"

"I mentioned it."

"Did you mention it to induce you to leave his name out of your speech?"

"He did! I made him no promises. I did what I thought best."

There was an awkward silence. Strone smiled upon them scornfully.

"You are meaning, I suppose," he said, "to impute that I was induced to say—suggested by his Grace. Is that it, Fagan, eh?"

"It isn't that," Fagan answered, "but we don't know what you said. There! Now it's out. Your own man, ain't you? You were a workman a few years ago, and we chose you to lead our little party. Well, you ain't a workman now—they say you are getting on towards being a millionaire, and we read your name in the paper as hobnobbing with these swells all the time—and to tell you the long and short of it we're beginning to wonder whether you're the right sort of man for our job."

Strone swung round in his chair.

"My income last year," he said, "was twenty-two thousand pounds. Of that sixteen thousand pounds went back to my workmen and to build houses for them. I am not ashamed of that as a practical exposition of my principles. I was present at Lord Sydenham's dinner from a political point of view only. I represented Labor there; socially to these people I do not exist, and don't want to. You hint that I made a bargain with the Duke of Massingham. I made none. Yet of his own free will he has guaranteed the passage of my Bill through the House of Lords. You have come here with fancied grievances against me. What do they amount to? Simply that having pushed the claims of our little party, people have begun to recognize them. You know very well that we stand better than ever we did. We are in a position to make terms. I am hand in glove with the manufacturing corporations. There are several other measures you know of which stand well with you. You are a judge. You are satisfied, let Fagan come and take my place."

Fagan hastened to dissent from any such idea.

"You take our little remonstrance too seriously, Strone," he declared. "All that we want to impress upon you is that you are a Labor man. You are a man who do to do with the government or the opposition. Keep away from them both. You'd make a fair progressive Conservative if we've got the idea that Lord Sydenham thinks the same."

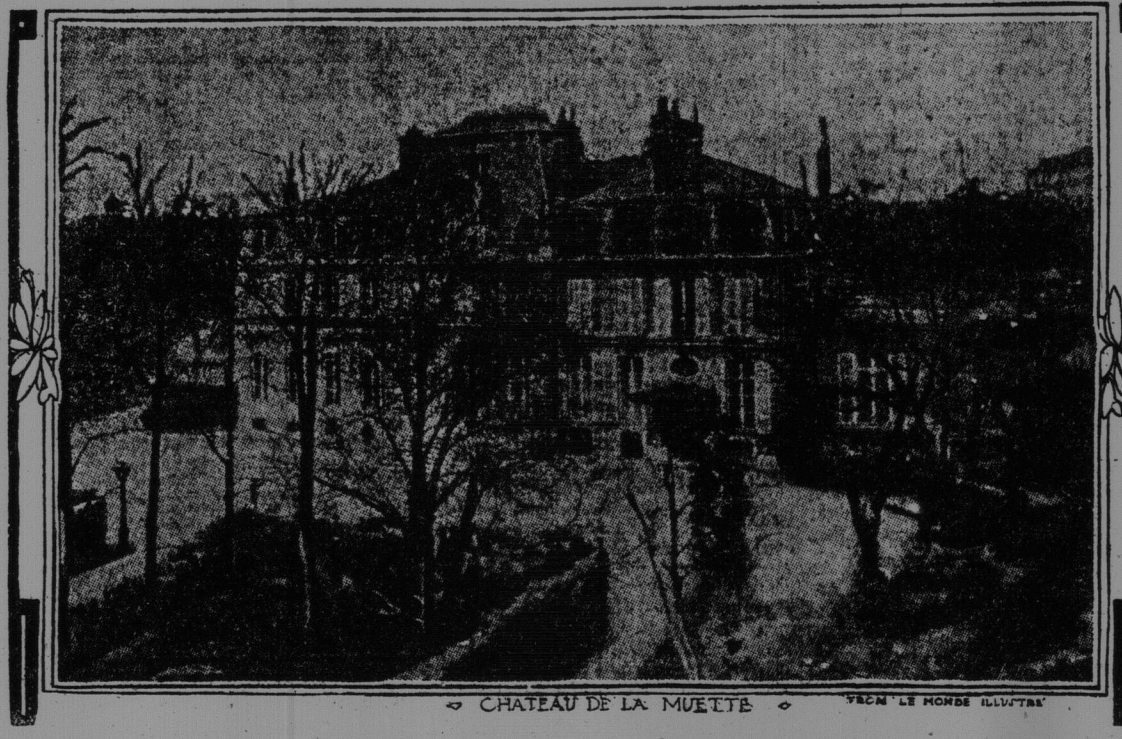
Strone smiled impatiently.

"My colors," he said, "are natted to the mast. I am not likely to desert them. I come from the people, and the whole desire of my life is to open the eyes of all educated men and women to the hideous defects in our social laws. My ways may not be your ways. Very well, when the time comes tell me so, and let another take my place."

The deputation withdrew half-aloopingly. Strone proceeded with his business for an hour or more. Then the luncheon hour came—the clerks trooped out, the outer office was quiet. Strone leaned back in his chair and thought.

He knew the men and their natures—small, jealous, suspicious. He guessed their point of view, and despised it. He knew in his heart that if these were the prophets whom the great cities had sent to beat the dust of the time, they would be before long when he must choose another party or form one of his own. They were honest men, most of them, but ignorant and prejudiced. They would never prevail against men of trained reasoning power, men of acumen and intelligence. A rough sort of eloquence to which most of them were not equal. He was a man of letters, and he knew that the House of Commons was a place where the words of a man counted for more than the words of a man. He was a man of letters, and he knew that the House of Commons was a place where the words of a man counted for more than the words of a man. He was a man of letters, and he knew that the House of Commons was a place where the words of a man counted for more than the words of a man.

## Paris Mansion Where French Bishops Discussed Their Policy



CHATEAU DE LA MUETTE. (The house where the French Bishops discussed their policy.)

Paris, Feb. 5.—It is learned from an ecclesiastical source that as a result of the advice tendered to the Pope at Rome on January 25 by five French prelates, including Bishops Touchet and Dadolet, the pontiff changed his position toward the church and state separation question in a certain manner.

France will issue new instructions under which, it is believed, it will be possible to organize public worship under the Supplementary and state separation law introduced by M. Briand, the minister of education.

Cardinal Richard, archbishop of Paris, has sent telegrams to the members of the French episcopate requesting them to attend another meeting here. A preliminary assembly of bishops, at which thirty were present, took place this afternoon at the residence of M. Denys-Cochin, where the cardinal has made his headquarters since he was compelled to leave the Episcopal Palace.

"But how nice not to be obliged to have personal opinions! Think of what a delightful restful state!"

"It would not suit me," he declared bluntly.

She laughed, very softly and very musically.

"That I am sure it would not," she agreed.

"You are such a vigorous, independent person. You will never prove amenable to whichever party you finally join."

"In time," he answered thoughtfully. "I, too, across the board, and learn to think with the brains of other people. But just now I am a rebel. It seems to me that the hardest part of Parliamentary life is the inevitable loss of individuality. It is a sort of suicide."

"I do not believe that it is inevitable," she declared. "It is hard to retain it, I know, but the man who succeeds finds his way into high places."

There was a short silence. A breath of the west wind blew the tulle of a hansom upon my doorstep. You ought to consider my reputation with old Lady Snabell. She is my next door neighbor."

"Hang Lady Snabell and all such old cats," he answered lightly. "I have come to tell you of my new majority. We have secured it upon an unexpected division. One!"

She was suddenly grave.

"Do you mean it, Sydenham?"

"All Fleet Street," he answered, "is hammering it into my ears. Tomorrow you will see it with a black headline and a leading article. We can't last a month."

"Was it sprung upon you?"

"No! Strone's men went with the Opposition."

"I will go and find Fagan," he said. "He is either an imbecile or a scoundrel!"

Lord Sydenham shook his head to and fro.

"Too late now," he declared. "It's almost midnight. Sleep on it, Strone. There's something behind, no doubt."

Strone was white with rage.

"The miserable fools!" he muttered. "This is the result of their bickerings and distrust. All I have been striving for is to get nothing."

He stood with clenched hands, his head thrown back, his eyes ablaze with anger. He had been deceived and tricked, and by the very men whose cause in his mind was becoming a religion. It was ignoble. The man and the woman watched him curiously. Lord Sydenham lit a cigarette and sat down.

"Strone," he said, "I don't blame you; I'm sure you knew nothing of it. I've been uneasy about Fagan for some time. Those fellows aren't used to having a man with ordinary common sense for a leader. After all, they can only back matters. We must go to the country in the autumn, and we shall come back with a larger majority than ever. The question is—what are you going to do?"

"I do not know," Strone answered bitterly.

A unit is of no account in politics. They have bound my hands just as the work was beginning to grow. I do not think that I shall stand again."

Lord Sydenham smoked in silence for a moment or two.

"Strone," he said, "I will be frank with you. I believe that your career as an Independent Labor Member was a mistake. I do not think that your constituency would return you again in the face of this revolt of your party. Well, you should have had your lesson. You are a man of common sense. You must see for yourself that however great their cause, and whatever may be the class of men attracted to it throughout the country, the Labor party, as it is represented in the House, is a rank delusion. You have nothing in common with Fagan and his crew. They talk now, and you know it. They have no discretion nor sense. They clamor for the impossible like a lot of children. They ask for so much that they never have the slightest chance of gaining anything. Their methods are irrational, and they are not even trustworthy."

Strone smiled grimly.

"Pity Fagan isn't here," he remarked. "He's very sensitive to criticism."

"It would give me great pleasure," Lord Sydenham said, "to repeat my words to him. I have an immense respect for the principles which they are supposed to represent, but I must own to thoroughly disliking Fagan and his clique. They are lacking in the first elements which make for success in political life. They have neither stability nor self-restraint. I defy you, Strone, or any man, to make anything of them."

"My opportunity is gone," Strone said. "They have thrown me over."

"It is a proof," Lord Sydenham answered, "of their colossal folly. As for you, Strone, it will be the making of your political career. Come, we are perhaps keeping you late, but I will walk a little way with you and explain what I mean."

Lady Malingcourt rose up and moved towards the door.

"That is a very polite way of hinting that you are going to talk secrets," she remarked. Sit here as long as you like, though. I rather like the idea of my little drawing room being used for the hatching of a political conspiracy."

"We will not be guilty of such sacrilege," Lord Sydenham declared, rising. "It is late, and I shall have a busy day tomorrow. I am going to walk part of the way home with Strone."

They passed out into the cool night. Lord Sydenham remained here and walked alone, carrying it in his hand. Suddenly he turned to his companion.

"Strone," he said, "you must join us."

"I am handicapped," he remarked, "with principles. Besides, imagine the horror with which your old-fashioned Conservatives would regard my social schemes. It is impossible."

"I hope to convince you," Lord Sydenham said earnestly, "that it is nothing of the sort. In the first place, I want you to remember that during the last ten years a marvellous change has transformed the relative positions of the two great political parties. The advent of the Liberal Unionists into our ranks was the consummation of what was fast becoming inevitable. Today it is the Conservative party who are the party of progress. It is the party which you must naturally belong to."

"I will grant what you say about the new Conservative," Lord Sydenham continued, "but it exists, and it will continue to exist for your time and mine. I believe you to be a man of high ability, a member, have you considered your absolutely hopeless position? You would be little if