

# CERTAIN PEOPLE *of* IMPORTANCE

By

A. G. GARDINER

Author of *Prophets, Priests and Kings*, etc.



JONATHAN CAPE  
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE LONDON

## 24. Mr. W. R. Morris

IT is a saying, I think, of the Zend-Avesta, that the man who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before has done more to win salvation than he who utters ten thousand prayers. From this it is evident that the great controversy between salvation by faith and salvation by works is not confined to the Christian religion. If, accepting this doctrine, we assume that the multiplication of motor cars is as beneficent an achievement as the multiplication of blades of grass, Mr. William R. Morris has advanced as far along the road to salvation as any Englishman of his time. He has incidentally done a conspicuous service to British industry.

It is probably true that if there had been no Mr. Morris the blades of grass would have multiplied all the same; but it is certainly also true that the culture would not have been of a home-grown type. The genius of Henry Ford, soaring up in far away Detroit, had seemed to transcend competition. He had taken the world for his parish. His missionaries were out in all lands, and the sound of his gospel was heard on every highway from China to Peru. He had taken this country in his stride and scattered motor-cars among us as plentifully as the wind scatters leaves in autumn. I remember driving along the Bristol road from Birmingham some five years ago, when the chauffeur, commenting on the vehicles we met, said he estimated that 95 per cent. of the cars normally on that road were Ford cars. If they were not flagrantly Fords, they were Fords in disguise. To-day on

that road, as on any other road in the country, the overwhelming majority of cars that would be met would bear the signature of W. R. Morris. He has, as a witty friend of mine observed, given us "a Ford with an Oxford education."

His achievement does not of course detract from the title of Henry Ford to be the supreme adventurer into the vast kingdom that petrol opened up for exploitation. It may not be true, as is sometimes said, that if there had been no Ford there would have been no Morris, but it is true that to Ford belongs the conception of the vast potentialities of the baby he had done so much to bring into the world, and that it was his bold pioneer work that blazed the path for others. If there had been no Ford the astonishing development of the industry would certainly have been delayed, but it is by no means certain that if there had been no Ford the impetus would not have come from Morris. For though, as will be apparent, there is little likeness between the two men in one respect, they are extraordinarily alike in those matters which are relevant, that is, the practical application of imaginative ideas to strictly business ends and the force of will that overcomes difficulties.

In a word, the priority of Detroit over Oxford may only be due to the fact that Henry Ford chanced to come into the world before William Morris. In the year (1893) in which Henry Ford drove his first gasoline-propelled motor-car through the streets of Detroit, to the amused curiosity of a world which did not realise what a revolutionary portent had appeared in their midst, young Morris, then a lad of seventeen, entered the lists. In the matter of time, therefore, Ford had arrived before Morris had started. Morris was twenty years behind, and he had

## CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE

to travel precisely the same road as his forerunner. There was no golden road to the Samarkand he reached. In an established industry where all the routes are marked and all the possibilities explored, there may be golden roads, but in a new and uncharted field like that of the motor industry, such an adventure as that of the Fords and the Morris is only possible to a man who has worked every inch of the way and fought every difficulty with his own hands.

This is the key to Mr. Morris. He does not stand out as the creator of the most remarkable "one man show" in contemporary British industry by virtue of luck or financial skill or any occult power. He would be the last to deny that he had had luck—or that he had had the wit to take it by the hand—and he will readily admit that he owes much to the facilities which the bank accorded him. But the "glittering prize" he has won is the reward, not of the astute financier, but of the working man, the mechanic, the engineer who has saturated himself with the knowledge of his subject and has built his vast structure upon the foundation of that knowledge. It is because he is a great mechanic that Mr. Morris is a prince of industry—a great mechanic with a genius for concentration. "Young man," said the first Rothschild to young Buxton, "stick to your brewing and you can make yourself the first of brewers. But squander yourself in banking, in business, in this, that, and the other and your name will soon be in the *Gazette*." No one can doubt the tyrannic absorption of Mr. Morris in his one theme. He is the spirit of the motor-car made flesh. The bewildering lightnings, gaieties, idealisms, irrelevancies that coruscate around the personality of Mr. Ford are wholly absent from this one-ideal man.

He carries his burden lightly because he has no other impedimenta, and because all his driving energy is applied to a single purpose. His physique is powerful, though spare, but it gives the impression of being over-engined, of a dynamo that is running ceaselessly and always at high voltage. He has no gift for relaxing the strain, and he will tell you that when he was once induced to take a holiday on the Riviera he found it an intolerable affliction. He has no personal tastes to gratify and no uses for money except that of fertilising the astonishing business of which he is sole creator and, until recently, the sole owner. He has the natural pride of the creator in his own creation, and claims that it is the product of one thing only, his power of work. If you suggest to him that it was the fortuitous direction of that power of work into a certain channel that had something to do with the result—that if, for example, events had thrown him into the building of ships in these days instead of the building of motor-cars his success would have been somewhat less sensational—he will gaily admit the thrust.

But while making that thrust you suspect that even in shipbuilding this driving energy would have found some way through the murk and stagnation of things. For you cannot doubt that he is of the stuff that will not be denied. Scott said of Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, that he was “born under a sixpenny planet.” He was a defeatist. He was born to failure and, having the spirit of failure in him, everything he touched took the blight. I do not know what planet presided over the birth of W. R. Morris, at Worcester, in 1877, but it must have been the most auriferous planet in the firmament, for it endowed him with just those qualities that make for

## CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE

material success, and denied him all those qualities that divert success.

He struck out adventurously from the start. With no education except that which he had got in the village school at Cowley, the suburb of Oxford where his great factories cover the fields in which he played, and where now a new motor-car is born every few minutes, and with not so much as a £5 note at the back of him, he took the decision to work for himself, on the principle that W. R. Morris would pay him a higher salary than anybody else. "So I started to work for W. R." And what so natural for a boy to work at as jolly things like bicycles? He repaired them, he built them, he rode them in races. Men who were up at New College twenty odd years ago will remember the bicycle place in Holywell and the bright, active young fellow who owned it, and from whom they occasionally hired a not very thrilling motor-car that he also owned.

One of those men has reason to remember it, for he became interested in the ambitions of the bright, active young fellow, lent him some money, and helped him on the road to victory. Morris had conquered all the mysteries of petrol power, matriculated, as it were, with the Morris motor-bicycle, and being now well under way worked night and day for his "degree." He would make a motor-car of his own—a motor-car enriched with all the experience he had got from the repair of myriads of motors. He had analysed them, dissected them, compared them, observed the weaknesses here and the virtues there, and out of the wealth of knowledge with which he had charged himself he evolved during a gestation of ten years a machine which should approximate to the Ford in price and eclipse it in appearance and solid merits. He

had leapt to the idea which Ford had conceived and the exploitation of which had become Ford's monopoly in the world—the idea that the future of the motor-car was not with the rich few but with the multitude of moderately circumstanced people—and fourteen years ago, with the purchase of land at Cowley, he embarked on his great adventure. In his first complete season he turned out some 500 cars, but with success in sight, though not yet achieved, there came the killing frost of the war, and the Morris car, like so much else, went into cold storage, its inventor and his works being commandeered for the manufacture of mine sinkers for the North Sea.

For all practical purposes, the great Morris structure is a growth of the last six years, and the creation of one bold decision. It was taken, curiously enough, at the same moment and in the same circumstances as that crisis in Ford's struggle with Wall Street with which I have dealt elsewhere. In the first year after the war he had an output of 1,500 cars. Then the cloud of depression descended. The bubble of inflated business burst, industry collapsed, most of all, industry, like that of motor-car manufacture, which was of the nature of luxury. Some firms were broken, most ran in for shelter until the storm passed. Morris was urged to run to shelter too, to cut down his production, to reduce his liabilities, to play for safety. Instead, with the instinct of great generalship, he seized the moment when everybody was fleeing to advance with all his banners flying and trumpets sounding. He increased his output and announced the sensational "cut" of £100 in his model. It was magnificent and it was war. The trade was hilariously incredulous. The thing was insane. It could not be done. The public marvelled and Morris

## CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE

became a household name. Across the Atlantic the Goliath of the cheap car became aware that a David had entered the lists to challenge his reign in one part of his world empire.

And in the result it proved the most triumphant calculation in modern business. Morris had risked every penny he had, and probably more, on the throw; but he will tell you that the choice was not whether he should keep it or risk it, but whether he should lose it in running to shelter or risk it for a prize of inconceivable magnitude. Had he had shareholders to consider and directors to consult, he would have been driven to shelter. It was his freedom of personal initiative that won him a kingdom. The fact is worth noting in relation to the conduct of business. There is no need to dwell on the fruits of that dazzling coup. The world knows all about the vast growth of the Morris enterprise, the companies at Oxford, at Birmingham, at Coventry, in France; the increasing torrent of cars that flows hour by hour out of the gates at Cowley; the turnover exceeding £20,000,000 a year; the output that has risen from 500 a week to 1,000 a week and 1,500 a week, and that will soon be 2,000 a week. Mr. Morris thinks—unlike Mr. Ford, who says “Tariff isn’t a graft; it’s a nuisance”—that it is duties that have made him great. He is too modest. The abolition of the McKenna duties not only did not check him. He increased his output, lowered his price, and increased his staff after the abolition. But Mr. Morris is not of interest as a political thinker. He is only of interest as a brilliant business man who has won a famous victory for British trade, and whose career is a sufficient proof that even in this country the ranker of industry can still find the marshal’s baton in his knapsack.