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A tribute to

MAUGHAM



by H. E. BATES

EVERY age has what is known, popularly, as its Grand Old Man of Letters. In my boyhood and youth it was Hardy, achieving a new and enduring reputation as a writer of poems of nutty bitter-sweetness. In the next two or three decades it was Shaw, tenaciously outstripping contemporaries like Galsworthy, Chesterton, Bennett and Wells and practically everyone else except Sir Max Beerbohm. Today it is William Somerset Maugham, who was born shortly after the end of the Franco-Prussian War.

Posterity has a way of putting a glass-case round certain writers, if only for a limited period, and of allowing others freedom to accumulate dust on library shelves. In my youth Trollope was a glass-case writer who has now triumphantly re-emerged. Meredith, thought to be the writer at the turn of the century, is another still confined. Dickens is never behind the glass case. Thackeray, on the other hand, seems for some reason to be a persistent dust-accumulator.

Certain writers, however, are powerfully persistent in survival. They triumph over glass and dust through sheer flame of personality, as Emily Brontë does, or because the taste of them, like that of good honest bread, finally palls less than that of more fancy confectionery. To this latter class belongs, I think, the author of the not in-aply titled *Cakes and Ale*.

Maugham has many remarkable features as a writer, not the least important of which is that he began his writer's life, as George Moore did, without the blessing of a gift for words. Another interesting characteristic of Maugham's long career—his first book, *Liza of Lambeth*, was inspired by experiences as a medical student in London's East End, and published in 1897—is that it really consists of three separate reputations.

A Third Career

HE began as a novelist, achieving a most distinguished and solid success with *Of Human Bondage*, and his undoubted masterpiece, *Cakes and Ale*. Parallel with all this he set out to conquer the theatre, doing so with such thorough tailored brilliance that he once had four plays running in London at the same time.

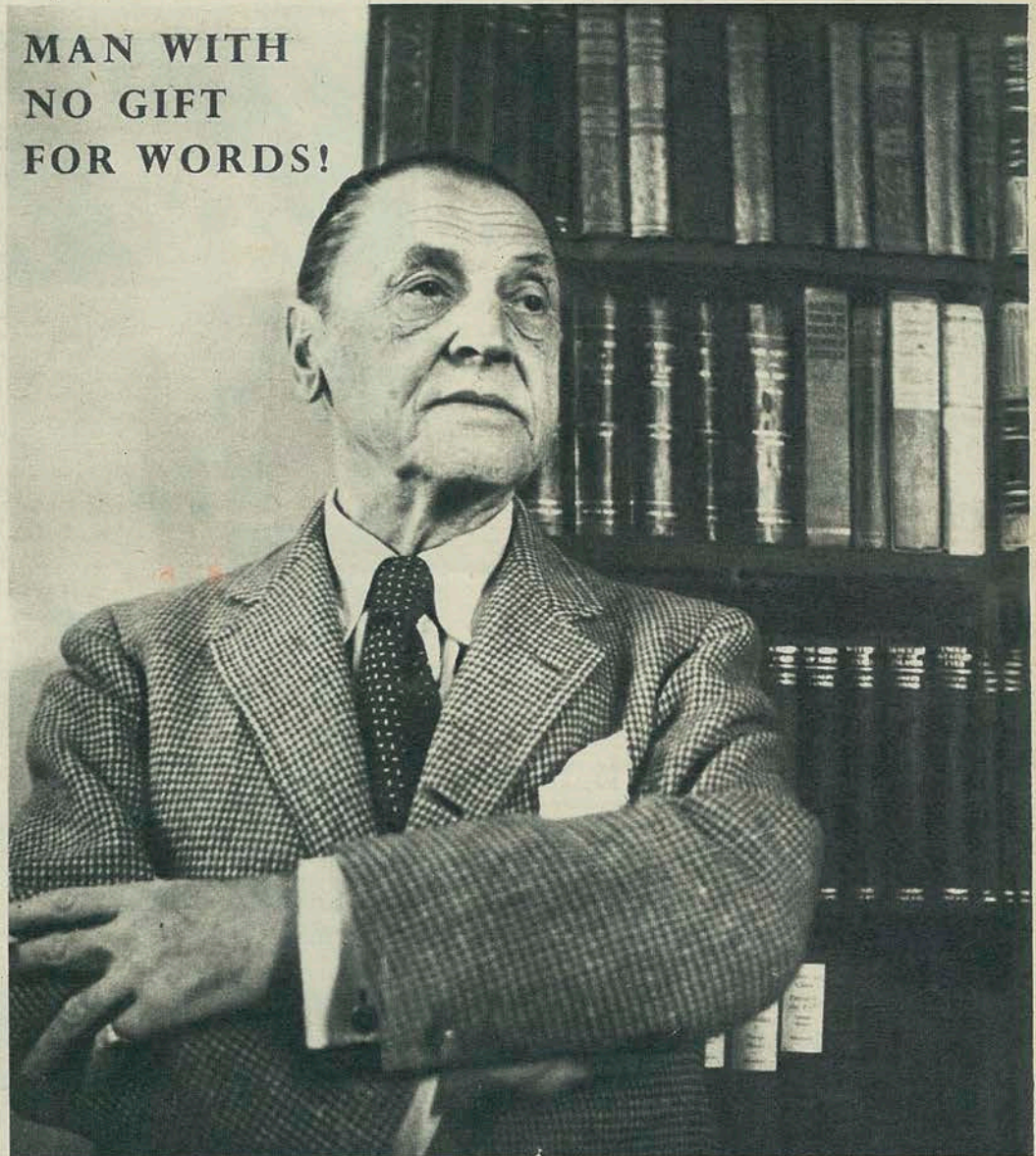
His third career, and in my view his most important, both now and for the future, did not begin until he was a man of nearly fifty. It was then that he first emerged as a short-story writer, though it is clear that he had been making notes for stories for some time before, and appeared at once not as a footling amateur groping his way in what is always held to be a dangerously difficult craft, but with the characteristically professional and famous *Rain*.

The writing of short stories may be compared with the making of soufflés. A few people can do it; most people can't. It is an art, also, that has always been considered as being very much the province of the younger writer. Tchekov, Kipling, Wells, Maupassant, Stevenson, O. Henry, Katherine Mansfield, Hemingway, Stephen Crane, Ambrose Bierce, Stacy Aumonier, D. H. Lawrence—all of them wrote their finest stories as young writers and most of them were dead at about the age at which Maugham embarked on the third act of his career.

In that respect he sometimes reminds me of the French painter Pissarro, who even as an old man never allowed the muscles of his art to become stiffened and rigid but was always eager to loosen and flex and train them for an essay in some fresh development, in new schools, side by side with far younger painters.

In the early 'twenties, both in England and

MAN WITH
NO GIFT
FOR WORDS!



"It is not in me to take people at their face value, and I am not easily impressed. . . ."

America, the short story was about to enter on a period of renaissance. This was the time at which Hemingway, Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson and A. E. Coppard emerged. It is impossible to find a common label that will illuminate the intentions and products of these writers and a great number of their contemporaries, and perhaps the nearest you can get to it is to say that all of them were, in different degrees of intensity, poets seeking to express themselves in prose.

Maugham was not a poet. He is not, and never has been, a poet; and he is the first to admit this. He has little or no feeling for nature and is incapable of writing, as he recently said to me, what is known as a descriptive passage. His writing

never flowers. He is in fact the purveyor of plain bread.

It is important to realise this, for it is this absolute plainness, so disarmingly undistinguished in itself, that is really the key to all his work. Any reader of *Liza of Lambeth* may see for himself that it is the work of a writer to whom words do not come easily: that there is nothing in it of the wild verbal torrents that so often sweep through first books, frequently never to be repeated.

In fact, Maugham, like George Moore, was originally clumsy; but he also happened to be highly intelligent. His view of himself was, as it has always remained, severely objective. He

Continued on page 37

'IT IS NOT THE BUSINESS OF THE AUTHOR TO TELL THE TRUTH BUT TO EXAGGERATE'

Continued from page 17

grasped that his problem was to seek for himself a model, or models, on which he could formulate a narrative style that would be unpretentious, workmanlike and yet plausible and distinctive. To have chosen in poetical, highly-coloured fields would have been fatal. He chose Guy de Maupassant. It was a good choice and he followed it, some time later, with a still better one, Samuel Butler, to whom Shaw was also much indebted. And he followed it, still later, and best of all, with himself.

Maupassant has been called "the born popular writer, battered by Flaubert into austerity." Maugham may be said to have taken the lesson to heart. He had clearly no intention of being battered into austerity. He has never in fact concealed his belief—a painful and surprising one to those critics and intellectuals who are so ready to believe that any writer whose books sell more than ten thousand copies is automatically despicable—that one of the motives behind writing a book is to get it read. He learned from Maupassant, in fact, the secret of narrative readability.

He wanted none of the humbug that surrounds writers who, the more their work writhes in coils of high and tedious obscurity, the more are they held to be prophets giving out miraculous meanings and messages. Maugham had no message. Like Maupassant he was interested in people; not always the nice people, not always the best ones, the kind ones, or the ones he would like to have dinner with; but just people. In fact, he was content to be a writer of fiction, presenting the human world.

The public has a number of queer ideas about fiction. One of these is that it is the business of the novelist to tell the truth in order to achieve an effect of reality. Maugham knows better. The material of life, as he himself says, is often "scrappy and pointless: the author has himself to make it coherent, dramatic and probable."

In other words, it is not the business of the author to tell the truth but to exaggerate, omit, re-shape and even to cheat and to distort what he

sees in order that his work may contain "more truth in essence," as Thackeray remarked, "than the work which purports to be all true."

This, the novelist's method, does not always win friends for novelists, and it may truthfully be said that it has often won enemies for Maugham. Already, before the writing of *Rain*, Maugham had travelled extensively in the East, the Far East and the South Seas and his keen Maupassant-like eye had noted things of which the local inhabitants, both white and coloured, were not aware. It was very natural that he should be stimulated to write them down.

If he had written them down in youth the result might, of course, have been a very different matter, but by the 'twenties Maugham was already middle-aged, cosmopolitan, shorn of illusions. His style, modelled now on Butler, was already acidulous, even corrosive. The eye was cultivated, ironic, amused and severe.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the greater part of Maugham's stories of travel, and particularly those of white settlements where voluptuous women seek the pleasures of the voluptuous without having the quality itself to offer, should not particularly have pleased those people who thought they recognised themselves in his pages.

As His Art Matured . . .

MAUGHAM undoubtedly worked close to the bone. Yet anyone who has been caught up in the shattering tedium of colonial life cannot fail to recognise that Maugham's truth about it, penetrating and devastating though it is, is only a glimpse of the whole picture. Intrigue, gossip, faction, adultery, jealousy, pettiness, provinciality: Maugham merely touched the fringe of it all. That did not prevent many people from experiencing an outraged sense that their most private affairs had been spied upon through sacred curtains.

The fact, I am sure, did not worry Maugham. It is the general fate of artists, perhaps more particularly of painters but certainly also of novelists, to be accused of drawing things and people in a way not seen by others. People on the whole are not very good at seeing themselves. Maugham is. I said earlier that his three influences were Maupassant, Butler and himself—a list to which I shrewdly suspect we might add William Hazlitt and Robert Louis Stevenson—and that the most important is himself.

It is notable that as his career has developed and his art matured there has been much more of the direct self in his pages. He becomes the acid and delicious satirist of *Cakes and Ale*; the urbane and ironic narrator of *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, still one of his best books; and the disarmingly frank and intelligent dissector of himself, his world, his work and his contemporaries in *The Summing Up*. When a writer becomes his own yardstick you may, in fact, reckon that you are dealing with no ordinary man.

Maugham is more than thirty years my senior; he belongs to an age even earlier than that of my mother and father, and I approach him, on the occasions when we meet, with diffidence. He is always delightful.

At his villa at Cap Ferrat in Southern France, where in April his garden is a mass of blue and purple cinerarias and where the view is of incomparable loveliness across a sea-scape of rock and mimosa and pine, we were able to talk, two or three years back, of a common love of painting, to which his work, like my own, inevitably owes a good deal.

It was characteristic of him that a few months

NEXT WEEK

**"Everybody's" will
publish a short story by
W. Somerset Maugham
to celebrate his 80th
birthday**

THE MAN MAUGHAM . . .

WRITING makes all other activities seem a little pale and flat, says Somerset Maugham on the eve of his eightieth birthday. He has himself been writing for nearly sixty years—during which some thirty millions of his books have been sold—and he is writing still.

He was born on January 25, 1874, in Paris, where his father was solicitor to the British Embassy. Both parents died while he was young, and he was brought up in the care of an uncle. His education took him on the first of the many travels of his life, for he went first to England (King's School, Canterbury) and later to Germany (Heidelberg University). He then studied medicine at St. Thomas's Hospital, London, and qualified M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1898.

His medical experiences gave him material for *Liza of Lambeth*, a realistic first novel which created a great stir in 1897, just as his studies were finishing. Its success, and his own natural urge to write, encouraged him to continue, with the result that we now see in a score of world-famous novels, a score of successful plays, and dozens of celebrated short stories.

Somerset Maugham has always gone out to find his own material. When he decided to make writing his career, he went first to live in Spain, and thereafter to Italy; successively he visited and came to know well France, America, China, Burma, India, the South Seas, and most of the countries of Europe. From all of them he returned with stories, so that the reader of his books may take a world tour in his own armchair.

Now, as much 'retired' as so active and eager a personality could ever be, he lives in his beautiful Riviera villa at Cap Ferrat and continues to write. Here, too, he entertains his friends—including the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Sir Winston Churchill (whom he admires more than any other man living) and his fellow writers and artists. Like ordinary folk, he borrows books from the public library and usually includes a detective story among them. Here, with his game of bridge or patience, and his morning bathe, he will enjoy his eightieth birthday on January 25; and with him will be the good wishes of millions of satisfied readers.

earlier he had sent me a pleasant message by Graham Sutherland, the painter of his portrait, though he had never met me. A year later, in London, I thought he talked with the vitality, intelligence and sparkle of a man of sixty, and I was infuriated, though he wasn't, that one of our smart evening critics had described him as looking like a totem-pole. He is not at all like a totem-pole. He very much resembles a walnut, inevitably shrunken and wizened in the skin but still fresh and succulent and crisp inside.

Two serious operations, since then, have entirely failed to quell his vitality. He is at present engaged on a series of prefaces to classic novelists. He has also fallen victim to the spirit of post-war London. Indeed, London, I believe, has given him regeneration. This quality of insistent vitality in age, combined with a general impatience with the academic, the stuffy, the commonplace and provincial, is probably one of the reasons why his work, except for his plays, shows no sign of dating.

His own suggestion that it may survive through sheer simplicity of language is a shrewd one. My own belief is that he will never be a glass-case writer. His work is too full of people, and like that of Hazlitt, another of his favourite writers, of himself.

For with all artists, in the final assessment, it is the man, and not the technician, that truly matters.



In his library at Cap Ferrat. On the doorway of this villa in the South of France Maugham has a Moorish sign against the 'Evil Eye,' and it appears on the cover of all his books.