BEST SHORT STORIES OF W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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Introduction

Somerset Maugham’s short stories are among the most accessible in all English literature. They are wonderfully easy to read. Maugham addresses the reader with a candour entirely his own. He is matter-of-fact in his depiction of character, direct in his handling of narrative. He does not play tricks or contrive surprise outcomes. But his people and his plots are nonetheless powerfully compelling. The lack of embellishment heightens both tension and credibility.

No other writer comes close to Maugham in this respect. How did he do it? A great part of the secret has to be his own life, which was long and extremely eventful. He harvested the experiences of his travels and acquaintanceships, his triumphs and his sorrows, with ruthless determination. Even though he was arguably the most celebrated, and certainly the best paid, writer of his day, he did not consider himself a serious creative force. ‘I have small power of imagination,’ he confessed, ‘but an acute power of observation.’

William Somerset Maugham, always known in his circle as Willie, was born in Paris on 24 January 1874. His father, Robert Ormond Maugham, belonged to a family with a long pedigree in the legal profession and was the lawyer for the British Embassy. William was a late baby whose three elder brothers had already been sent away to English boarding schools, so his early upbringing was in effect that of an only child. But the happy years were ended by the death of
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his adored, artistic and socially accomplished mother Edith from tuberculosis, aged just forty-one, a week after the boy’s eighth birthday. Two years later, his father succumbed to cancer.

Willie, who knew little of England and had French as his first language, was sent to live at the home of his late father’s younger brother, Henry Maugham, the Vicar of Whitstable on the Kent coast. Henry Maugham and his German-born wife Sophie were childless, but seem not to have welcomed their new charge with any enthusiasm. The boy was promptly sent, as a boarder, to the King’s School in Canterbury, just a few miles distant.

By his own account, Willie had a wretched time of it. He was below average height and to begin with spoke rather broken English. He was mocked on both accounts. He seems to have won little sympathy from his uncle, whose Christian calling did not inhibit his glacial snobbery and detachment. Sophie, downtrodden, ailing and homesick, proved no substitute for Willie’s mourned mother (whose photograph he kept by his bed from this time and for all of his life) and he developed a disabling stammer which he never entirely shook off.

But such melancholic childhoods can translate into lives of energy and creativity. Willie endured the school until 1889, and after his sixteenth birthday in January of the following year refused to return. Abetted by Sophie, he was allowed to continue his education in Germany, at the esteemed and cosmopolitan university of Heidelberg, where he studied the German language and its literature, and found love.

His inamorato was John Ellingham Brooks, a
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Cambridge-educated lawyer, talented musician, impecunious aesthete and conspicuous homosexual. Ten years older than Maugham, he introduced him not only to the love that dares not speak its name, but to the philosophical writings of figures such as Dutch theologian Spinoza and German pessimist Schopenhauer. Above all, Brooks encouraged his protégé to write. Maugham needed no second asking, and within the year had completed his first book, a biography of the German composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), a pioneer of grand opera whose reputation had been maliciously ruined by a jealous Richard Wagner.

Maugham and Brooks were to remain long-term friends, but after just a year at Heidelberg, the aspiring young writer was recalled to England. His uncle was anxious he should find a profession, but conceded Willie might not be as suited to the law as so many other Maughams had proved (one brother, later Viscount Maugham, rose to the Lord Chancellorship) and was content when, after a very short dalliance with accountancy, Willie enrolled at St Thomas’s Hospital in Lambeth as a medical student. It is a testament to his forbearance and intellect that he stayed the five-year course. All along, in tandem with his medical studies, he observed and noted the character and circumstances of the patients, many in desperate straits, in his care. In 1897, he qualified as a doctor and published his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, a gritty tragedy of working-class lives and loves in the impoverished London borough. It drew unreservedly on the author’s own experiences.

The book amply illustrated the powers of observation and ear for dialogue that were to be Maugham’s
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hallmarks, and it sold strongly following favourable reviews. The handsome young doctor, writing with stark and spare realism – and plenty of drama – on themes of adultery and domestic violence set against the background of Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee, became as famous overnight as he might very well have anticipated.

He quit medicine for ever, and set off for Seville in Spain to begin the writer’s life he had so long imagined for himself. As a member of a homosexual milieu, he considered the Continent a far safer place for him. He was well aware that Oscar Wilde, sensationaly convicted for sodomy in a British court two years earlier, had fled to France. But unlike Wilde, who died in miserable exile in 1900, Maugham was at liberty to come and go between his own home in London and those he subsequently rented in Spain, on Capri in southern Italy, and on the French Riviera.

He wrote assiduously through the years leading up to the First World War, producing ten novels, at least as many plays, and a growing canon of short stories. He needed patience, because it was not until the sudden success of a 1907 play, *Lady Frederick*, that he repeated the éclat of *Liza of Lambeth*. Within a year, he had three more plays – all previously rejected by London managements – running in the West End. This is what made him famous as a writer in every genre. He suddenly became a major figure in literary and social circles.

Maugham is now largely forgotten as a playwright, but his novel of 1915, *Of Human Bondage*, immortalised him as a writer of fiction. This great work, with its title borrowed from the proposal in Spinoza’s *Ethics* that we can escape enslavement to our
Mrs Hamlyn lay on her long chair and lazily watched the passengers come along the gangway. The ship had reached Singapore in the night and since dawn had been taking on cargo; the winches had been grinding away all day, but by now her ears were accustomed to their insistent clamour. She had lunched at the Europe and for lack of anything better to do had driven in a rickshaw through the gay, multitudinous streets of the city. Singapore is the meeting-place of many races. The Malays, though natives of the soil, dwell uneasily in towns, and are few; and it is the Chinese, supple, alert and industrious, who throng the streets, the dark-skinned Tamils walk on their silent, naked feet as though they were but brief sojourners in a strange land, but the Bengalis, sleek and prosperous, are easy in their surroundings and self-assured; the sly and obsequious Japanese seem busy with pressing and secret affairs; and the English in their topis and white ducks, speeding past in motor cars or at leisure in their rickshaws, wear a nonchalant and careless air. The rulers of these teeming peoples take their authority with a smiling unconcern. And now, tired and hot, Mrs Hamlyn waited for the ship to set out again on its long journey across the Indian Ocean.

She waved a rather large hand, for she was a big woman, to the doctor and Mrs Linsell as they came on board. She had been on the ship since it left Yokohama, and had watched with acid amusement the intimacy which had sprung up between the two.
Linsell was a naval officer who had been attached to the British Embassy in Tokyo, and she had wondered at the indifference with which he took the attentions that the doctor paid his wife. Two men came along the gangway, new passengers, and she amused herself by trying to discover from their demeanour whether they were married or single. Close by, a group of men were sitting together on rattan chairs, planters she judged by their khaki suits and wide-brimmed double felt hats, and they kept the deck-steward busy with their orders. They were talking loudly and laughing, for they had all drunk enough to make them somewhat foolishly hilarious, and they were evidently giving one of their number a send-off; but Mrs Hamlyn could not tell which it was that was to be a fellow-passenger. The time was growing short. More passengers arrived, and then Mr Jephson with dignity strolled up the gangway. He was a consul and was going home on leave. He had joined the ship at Shanghai and had immediately set about making himself agreeable to Mrs Hamlyn. But just then she was disinclined for anything in the nature of a flirtation. She frowned as she thought of the reason which was taking her back to England. She would be spending Christmas at sea, far from anyone who cared two straws for her, and for a moment she felt a little twist at her heart-strings; it vexed her that a subject which she was so resolute to put away from her should so constantly intrude on her unwilling mind.

But a warning bell clanged loudly and there was a general movement among the men who sat beside her.

‘Well, if we don’t want to be taken on we’d better be toddling,’ said one of them.
They rose and walked towards the gangway. Now that they were all shaking hands she saw who it was that they had come to see the last of. There was nothing very interesting about the man on whom Mrs Hamlyn’s eyes rested, but because she had nothing better to do she gave him more than a casual glance. He was a big fellow, well over six feet high, broad and stout; he was dressed in a bedraggled suit of khaki drill and his hat was battered and shabby. His friends left him, but they banded chaff from the quay, and Mrs Hamlyn noticed that he had a strong Irish brogue; his voice was full, loud and hearty.

Mrs Linsell had gone below and the doctor came and sat down beside Mrs Hamlyn. They told one another their small adventures of the day. The bell sounded again and presently the ship slid away from the wharf. The Irishman waved a last farewell to his friends and then sauntered towards the chair on which he had left papers and magazines. He nodded to the doctor.

‘Is that someone you know?’ asked Mrs Hamlyn.

‘I was introduced to him at the club before tiffin. His name is Gallagher. He’s a planter.’

After the hubbub of the port and the noisy bustle of departure, the silence of the ship was marked and grateful. They steamed slowly past green-clad, rocky cliffs (the P&O anchorage was in a charming and secluded cove), and came out into the main harbour. Ships of all nations lay at anchor, a great multitude, passenger boats, tugs, lighters, tramps; and beyond, behind the breakwater, you saw the crowded masts, a bare straight forest, of the native junks. In the soft light of the evening the busy scene was strangely touched with mystery, and you felt that all those
vessels, their activity for the moment suspended, waited for some event of a peculiar significance.

Mrs Hamlyn was a bad sleeper and when the dawn broke she was in the habit of going on deck. It rested her troubled heart to watch the last faint stars fade before the encroaching day and at that early hour the glassy sea had often an immobility which seemed to make all earthly sorrows of little consequence. The light was wan, and there was a pleasant shiver in the air. But next morning when she went to the end of the promenade deck, she found that some one was up before her. It was Gallagher. He was watching the low coast of Sumatra which the sunrise like a magician seemed to call forth from the dark sea. She was startled and a little vexed, but before she could turn away he had seen her and nodded.

‘Up early,’ he said. ‘Have a cigarette?’

He was in pyjamas and slippers. He took his case from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She hesitated. She had on nothing but a dressing-gown and a little lace cap which she had put over her tousled hair, and she knew that she must look a sight; but she had her reasons for scourging her soul.

‘I suppose a woman of forty has no right to mind how she looks,’ she smiled, as though he must know what vain thoughts occupied her. She took the cigarette. ‘But you’re up early too.’

‘I’m a planter. I’ve had to get up at five in the morning for so many years that I don’t know how I’m going to get out of the habit.’

‘You’ll not find it will make you very popular at home.’

She saw his face better now that it was not shadowed by a hat. It was agreeable without being
handsome. He was of course much too fat, and his features which must have been good enough when he was a young man were thickened. His skin was red and bloated. But his dark eyes were merry; and though he could not have been less than five and forty his hair was black and thick. He gave you an impression of great strength. He was a heavy, ungraceful, commonplace man, and Mrs Hamlyn, except for the promiscuity of shipboard, would never have thought it worth while to talk to him.

‘Are you going home on leave?’ she hazarded.

‘No, I’m going home for good.’

His black eyes twinkled. He was of a communicative turn, and before it was time for Mrs Hamlyn to go below in order to have her bath he had told her a good deal about himself. He had been in the Federated Malay States for twenty-five years, and for the last ten had managed an estate in Selantan. It was a hundred miles from anything that could be described as civilisation and the life had been lonely; but he had made money; during the rubber boom he had done very well and with an astuteness which was unexpected in a man who looked so happy-go-lucky he had invested his savings in government stock. Now that the slump had come he was prepared to retire.

‘What part of Ireland do you come from?’ asked Mrs Hamlyn.

‘Galway.’

Mrs Hamlyn had once motored through Ireland and she had a vague recollection of a sad and moody town with great stone warehouses, deserted and crumbling, which faced the melancholy sea. She had a sensation of greenness and of soft rain, of silence and of resignation. Was it here that Mr Gallagher
meant to spend the rest of his life? He spoke of it with boyish eagerness. The thought of his vitality in that grey world of shadows was so incongruous that Mrs Hamlyn was intrigued.

‘Does your family live there?’ she asked.

‘I’ve got no family. My mother and father are dead. So far as I know I haven’t a relation in the world.’

He had made all his plans, he had been making them for twenty-five years, and he was pleased to have someone to talk to of all these things that he had been obliged for so long only to talk to himself about. He meant to buy a house and he would keep a motor car. He was going to breed horses. He didn’t much care about shooting; he had shot a lot of big game during his first years in the FMS; but now he had lost his zest. He didn’t see why the beasts of the jungle should be killed; he had lived in the jungle so long. But he could hunt.

‘Do you think I’m too heavy?’ he asked.

Mrs Hamlyn, smiling, looked him up and down with appraising eyes.

‘You must weigh a ton,’ she said.

He laughed. The Irish horses were the best in the world, and he’d always kept pretty fit. You had a devil of a lot of walking exercise on a rubber estate and he’d played a good deal of tennis. He’d soon get thin in Ireland. Then he’d marry. Mrs Hamlyn looked silently at the sea, coloured now with the tenderness of the sunrise. She sighed.

‘Was it easy to drag up all your roots? Is there no one you regret leaving behind? I should have thought after so many years, however much you’d looked forward to going home, when the time came at last to go it must have given you a pang.’

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‘I was glad to get out. I was fed up. I never want to see the country again or anyone in it.’

One or two early passengers now began to walk round the deck and Mrs Hamlyn, remembering that she was scantily clad, went below.

During the next day or two she saw little of Mr Gallagher who passed his time in the smoking-room. Owing to a strike the ship was not touching at Colombo and the passengers settled down to a pleasant voyage across the Indian Ocean. They played deck games, they gossiped about one another, they flirted. The approach of Christmas gave them an occupation, for someone had suggested that there should be a fancy-dress dance on Christmas Day, and the ladies set about making their dresses. A meeting was held of the first-class passengers to decide whether the second-class passengers should be invited, and notwithstanding the heat the discussion was animated. The ladies said that the second-class passengers would only feel ill-at-ease. On Christmas Day it was to be expected that they would drink more than was good for them and unpleasantness might ensue. Everyone who spoke insisted that there was in his (or her) mind no idea of class distinction, no one would be so snobbish as to think there was any difference between first- and second-class passengers as far as that went, but it would really be kinder to the second-class passengers not to put them in a false position. They would enjoy themselves much more if they had a party of their own in the second-class cabin. On the other hand, no one wanted to hurt their feelings, and of course one had to be more democratic nowadays (this was in reply to the wife of a missionary in China who said she had travelled on the P&O for thirty-five years.
and she had never heard of the second-class passengers being invited to a dance in the first-class saloon) and even though they wouldn’t enjoy it, they might like to come. Mr Gallagher, dragged unwillingly from the card-table, because it had been foreseen that the voting would be close, was asked his opinion by the consul. He was taking home in the second-class a man who had been employed on his estate. He raised his massive bulk from the couch on which he sat.

‘As far as I’m concerned I’ve only got this to say: I’ve got the man who was looking after our engines with me. He’s a rattling good fellow and he’s just as fit to come to your party as I am. But he won’t come because I’m going to make him so drunk on Christmas Day that by six o’clock he’ll be fit for nothing but to be put to bed.’

Mr Jephson, the consul, gave a distorted smile. On account of his official position he had been chosen to preside at the meeting and he wished the matter to be taken seriously. He was a man who often said that if a thing was worth doing it was worth doing well.

‘I gather from your observations,’ he said, not without acidity, ‘that the question before the meeting does not seem to you of great importance.’

‘I don’t think it matters a tinker’s curse,’ said Gallagher, with twinkling eyes.

Mrs Hamlyn laughed. The scheme was at last devised to invite the second-class passengers, but to go to the captain privily and point out to him the advisability of withholding his consent to their coming into the first-class saloon. It was on the evening of the day on which this happened that Mrs Hamlyn, having dressed for dinner, came on deck at the same time as Mr Gallagher.