I HAVE known W. Somerset Maugham for over twenty years and yet I do not know a great deal about him. What I do know about him is interesting from a very unusual angle, and so for the first time I write about my friend. Perhaps this study will help somewhat towards a full-length photograph which will no doubt some day be 'written to fulfil public demand.

Perhaps I had best introduce myself to you. This article is a splendid example of a 'nobody' writing about a 'somebody'—a man of the slums writing about a social lion who seldom roars!

I was born and have lived all my life in the slum district of Walworth, one mile from Big Ben. I deal in books—am, in fact, a third-rate bookseller in a fifth-rate neighbourhood. I do say 'ain't' and 'blimey' on occasions, and I do wear a cap and a choker. How did the likes of me come to know the likes of 'im? I'll tell you all about it. I have read every book, play, and story that W. Somerset Maugham to date has had published. (In 1931 I compiled _The Bibliography of the Writings of W. S. Maugham_, Unicorn Press.) I have not seen every play he has written because a good many of them were produced while I was trying to walk. I'm told that I saw _The Tenth Man_ by him when I was six. I was only present because a neighbour helped to keep the théâtre clean and got some complimentary tickets and I was taken along because I couldn't be left alone with safety to the furniture. But ten years' later I saw Maugham's play _The Unknown_ (round about 1920), and I didn't like it! 'So much so' that with the colossal impudence of sixteen I wrote and told the author that I hadn't enjoyed it a bit and it still remained Unknown to me and why I didn't like it, and that I did know I'd sooner have gone to see Tom Mix (he was my hero then). I was amazed to get a very kind, very human and friendly letter back about two weeks later. It came from France, and it had Maugham's celebrated device in deep red on the back of a blue envelope. The letter was typed (he apologized for the typing) and it was kind. He said he would be delighted to meet me some day when he was back in London.

When Christmas of that year came something prompted me to send W. S. M. a card of greeting (I used 'to paint my own in those days), and as there was some talk about a play of his called _The Circle_ I drew a circle with 'much holly and mistletoe and a ? representing 'The Unknown' in the centre. I supposed it amused him because a few days later I got another very human and friendly letter from him in which he reminded himself (and me) that he intended to meet me when in London.

He came down to Walworth on Pancake-Day. I had never seen a reasonably recognizable photograph of him but when I went to the door I knew it was Maugham—the one and only! I was very excited and not a little uneasy. Our home was very working-class, while he lived in Mayfair and some posh spot in south France. I was very poor. He was rich 'and famous.' I went to an ordinary L.C.C. elementary school and was earning to help keep my folks at fourteen. He was educated at King's Schoël, Canterbury and at Heidelberg University. I had read all his novels, from _Liza to Moon and Sixpence_ by the time I was sixteen. (Yes, I was a book-
seller at sixteen and my own master at that!" Talk about Mohammed going
to the blinking mountain! Here was W. S. M. calling upon me—when
fashionable hostesses couldn't get him to their Mayfair parties!

My dear mother had got a very special tea with pancakes all hot and cakes with
fruit in them. (He had sent a wire saying he would visit us at four that day
and that we were not to make any special preparations for him.) She
knew how much I admired Maugham. She had seen me put aside my sixpences
in order to buy cheap editions of his novels and plays and knew that my
admiration for his writings was very real and
sincere. Mother wasn't going to
let me down. The nicest tea possible
was spread with Mum's very best china
out from the cupboard—it hadn't been
used for ages. It was the high days and
holidays set. The fire was bright and
the room was warm and homely. It
was a basement room with a very dim
light (we all lived and slept for months
in this room during the blitz).

Maugham came in. He took his coat
off and looking round for a peg, found
one behind the door and hanging up his
coat. I just watched him. I'd said
nothing except, 'It's you, isn't it, sir?—
Do come in and be at home.' I didn't
quite know what to say. (You can't
talk about the blinking weather on such
a red letter occasion!) Mother had
been upstairs tidying herself. She came
downstairs and the ice was broken. She
gave him a box of Fortnum & Mason's
best chocolates (that box lasted her
nearly four months at the rate of one
every three days—luxury is a thing to
be taken in regular doses at reasonable
times was one of her sayings).

He sat down and looked at me from
across the spread on the table. I had
better describe him. He is small, dark,
and dapper in appearance. He is in
manner quietly courteous and charming.
He has dark, piercing eyes, the kind
which see right through you. You
couldn't tell W. S. M. a downright lie
and get away with it! I have one word
to describe him: it is Elegance. He was
throughout the years I knew him always
elegant in person and in culture. I liked
the look of him when he smiled. He was
at home and I could see that there was
no side or swank in him. He stayed two
hours with us. I regret that I didn't
keep a copy of all the questions I asked
and the answers he gave. Twenty years
have passed and it is practically impos-
ible to record the conversation. It was
never my ambition to be a wirer of
books—only a seller of them! And,
besides, he was my friend and one
doesn't keep records of conversations
with friends! I know that Mumm
apologized for the humbleness of the
home and he said it didn't matter a bit
and that it was not by any means the
first time he had visited a working-class
home. He recalled that round about
1896 he was a medical student at St
Thompson's and often visited the poor of
Lambeth—and that the folks in Liza of
Lambeth were very much drawn from
life and that the surroundings of
Lambeth in those days were even worse
than Walworth twenty years later.

I put one leading question. 'You have
known poverty—haven't you, sir? You
weren't always posh and famous!' He
laughed when mother scolded me for
being rude. 'Yes, I've certainly known
poverty—and starvation. I was
absolutely stony broke when the Stage
Society decided to produce my first play,
The Man of Honour, for a two-day
performance. I was very hungry—and
very nearly friendless. Yes, I've known
real poverty.'

There was silence. Maugham looked
away from us and gazed into the fire.
He took out a tortoiseshell cigarette-case
with diamonds set in the clasp. His
hands trembled and he was unable to
open the case. I tried but failed. He
smoked his Woodbine for the rest of
the afternoon—instead of his own
specially-made Egyptian cigarettes.
Mum poured out the tea. He would
have no pancakes: he was on a strict
diet. I ate mine as we chatted together.

(An Afterthought: I ate mine and then
his pancakes as well, it should be.
Dear fellow, how elegantly can one tell
as he didn't want any I got on with his!) I
remember another question that I
asked him. 'Do you write when you get
the inspiration? Sort of wait for the
urge and then dash off the masterpiece?'

'No, no, I'm a business man. Writing
is my business. I get up, have my
breakfast, have a little smoke, a little
read—maybe a little walk—and then I
go up to my study to work—and I
work until lunch-time. I don't work
after lunch. I don't wait for inspira-
ations. I go to my study and sort
my ideas out. And you'll be interested
to know that I still use the same chair
to sit on as I did when I wrote Liza.

This made me think that W. S. M.
was very sentimental—but a cloak
(that's sometimes chilly) covers that
sentimentality to protect him. I still
think he's sentimental at heart. I bet
way down in Carolina, at over seventy,
he still keeps his rigid rule of writing
until lunch-time, and that he often sighs
for a London fog and for the sign that
hung over his door of the Villa Maures-
que, Cap Ferrat, to ward off the evil eye.

As the light was drawing just a little
dim I boldly asked him if he would
allow me to take a snap-shot of him in
our back yard. He agreed. Out into
the yard we went. He stood beside the
dustbin. We didn't notice how very
near the dustbin he actually was until
the picture was developed. Then we
apologized sincerely for allowing the
dustbin to appear with his elegant self
(complete with monocle) beside it. He
said he was out of mind a bit. 'One's got
to have a dustbin!'

Before he left he autographed for me
eight various books of his that were in
my little den. And he told me to sell
them whenever I was hard up and that
he had no objection to others of those six of
which I sold six of those eight in 1929 at the first
edition boom period. I still have the
other two (although Hitler, with his
bombs, nearly damaged them when we
were blitzed in 1941). Perhaps it is of
slight interest to record that he had his
teas at his own request in Russian
fashion, medium-strength tea with
french lemon. Nowadays when
I myself get sentimental I have my
teas in that same manner (if I can get
hold of a lemon!) and think of Maugh-
ham, whom I haven't seen for four
years and am most unlikely ever to see
again. (I doubt if he will ever again
visit England.)

My father came in just as Maugham
was preparing to leave and was intro-
duced, but the name conveyed nothing
to Dad, who had never once in his
whole life read a novel, and whose only
literature was the racing edition of
Star. Maugham gave him a cigar—the
first Dad had had for ten years—and
father called him 'A Toof' (the highest
possible praise for any man down Wal-
worth way). As a parting present I gave
W. S. M. a copy of The Bookman in
which there was a sketch by Maugham
and a picture of him in tights acting
for some amateur dramatic society.

I didn't ever expect to see him again.
He had many claims on his time during
his infrequent visits to London. I was
but a ship passing in the night—a no-
body he was amused to meet out of
curiosity. But about a month later he
wrote suggesting another meeting. He
wanted my company to see something of
Walworth as a whole and to attend
our local variety theatre, I was
delightful. I had made a favourable im-
pression upon him by just being my
ordinary (or extra-ordinary) self. I told
him that our 'local' was the South
London Palace of Variety, called The
South,' and was in the London Road.
We arranged to meet at five, see Wal-
worth till six, and get to the music hall
just before the overture began.

Now I think it is time to say that
although in W. S. M.'s novels and plays
you get epigrams and wit of the highest
order, you do not find in conversation
that he is epigrammatic or witty. He
Mr Somerset Maugham

opened his mouth to speak. You wait some important and significant pronouncement. But it never comes! We walked and talked for the best part of an hour, but for the life of me I cannot recall any significant saying. I remember that he said he wished they would plant more trees in London. That the slums wouldn't look so much slums if there were more trees. To which I replied that I was sure that mongrel dogs would appreciate more trees, but that women wouldn't, if their boys climbed them—and tore their trousers—and what about the leaves in autumn? He seemed to think that one out, then he said: 'Well—there will always be leaves in autumn.'

I can recall that just once he said something that might have been written in one of his plays and might have been called an epigram. I was talking about marriage (I'm still single—unfortunately). I had read that his own marriage to a daughter of Dr Barnardo (Homes for Orphan Boys) hadn't been particularly happy, and ended in divorce. I asked something about the gambles of matrimony, and he replied: 'Gamble—yes. You get better odds on dogs! And looking back—I'm now thirty-seven—over my own romances which came to nothing but faded petals and sighs, I feel bound to agree with him.'

As I have said, we walked for about an hour all round Walworth. Then just as we found ourselves in the Old Kent Road it commenced to become chilly and rainied. He asked if I preferred to have a meal 'up West' and leave the show to another time. I had never had a meal in the West End—and it was much more a treat for me than a visit to 'The South,' and I said so. Maugham called a taxi (you could call 'em in those days) and we went to a little café in Soho where we had a slap-up dinner.

A whole year passed before I saw him again, but in the meantime I had many letters and postcards from him, which came from various parts of the globe. Some were exceedingly long and inter-
esting, others were very short—such as a postcard from Egypt with the words: 'Pah! It's 'ot! W. S. M.' And another from Greece, 'Most certainly not. W. M.' (Which took me a devil of a job to find out what was 'most certainly not'—until I eventually gathered that it meant he had no objection to writing a foreword to a book on the theatre and gallery used which I was then writing. 'Gallery Untapped, Heritage.' At this moment I possess nearly a hundred letters from W. S. M. (after-thought: they are not for sale at any time or price! One does not sell the letters of one's friends.) On his next visit to me in Walworth he brought him a large suitcase and a lady. The suitcase was filled with books, buy and clothes. The lady was radiant with good humour and her name was G. B. Stern. She called him 'Willy,' rather like one does a little boy; and he called her 'Peter.' I commenced by calling her madame, but finished up by also calling her Peter. She was a real good sport. Mother liked her a lot. You just couldn't help liking her. Miss Stern and Mr Maugham have been friends a great many years, and seeing them together you could quite easily understand why. While she chatted with Mum W. S. M. unloaded the suitcase. There was an even bigger box of chocolates for Mother. There were a dozen or so American first editions for me and there was a lovely suit (one of his own cast-offs, but practically new), some shirts and vests and several pairs of handmade button-up boots in their trees for Dad. Six years afterwards my father was still wearing with much pride on Sundays and high days those second-hand boots Mr Maugham had discarded. The suit didn't fit—but was exchanged quite easily (owing to its superb quality and cut) for one that did from a jew dealer in misfits. I wore the vests and shirts for over three years (after-thought: cut that out, for it was not as long as that) until washing and wear together made them unwearable, to my deepest regret. Twenty years have passed since that day, but we still have the suits the boots came in, and I still possess two of the books he brought.

As he presented the books he said: 'These are for you to make money on, Fred. I intend to autograph them all before I leave today and when the market is favourable I will fix you up to get them and go and have a good holiday abroad on the proceeds.' (And I did: I went to Madeira and lay in the sun, and didn't worry about work or slums, and I prayed every night of that visit for the safety and happiness of W. S. M.)

You, the reader, have now no doubt the impression that W. S. Maugham's friendship was exceedingly profitable to me! I admit it. But in defence—if defence be needed—I say Maugham realized it was, gave me permission to sell the books he autographed, wrote forewords to my own literary efforts, and in fact put me on my feet. Yet in actual s. d. I've only accepted one sum of money from him in the twenty odd years I have known him, and that was when he said he considered it impossible to spend a whole week in Paris and see all the sights on a five-pound note. He gave me a five and I went to Paris, was there a week and came home with change out of his original note. And I bought a coat with a lovely fur collar for twelve shillings as well! I stayed in a hotel where all were darkies (working in night clubs) except me, and because I have no objection whatever to clean and civil darkies, male or female, I made myself amiable and friendly and I had the time of my young life—a very gay time. I had never seen the female form divine until I went on that trip alone—and I knew no French at all nor anyone in Paris. Maugham helped me. I shall always be grateful. (after-thought: Oh, oh, something wrong here! Maugham didn't help me to see the female form—I helped myself to that fish and chips!)

I have from time to time tried in my various humble ways to repay his kindness to me. Once I nearly earned £1,000 from W. S. M. Nearly—but not quite! He was contemplating endowing a scholarship to enable young writers to travel and I was chosen to be his agent to sell all his manuscripts (bound into forty-eight volumes—two versions of Of Human Bondage, his masterpiece, making up eight of the volumes—all in perfect condition, bound in calf). The price he asked was £10,000. But he said if I was able to sell them he would give me £1,000 for my trouble and add £1,000 from his own pocket to keep the sum at the round figure of £10,000 to endow the scholarship. You can bet I tried like the devil to find some rich museum, some millionaire, some wealthy philanthropist who was willing to give £10,000 for forty-eight volumes of manuscripts for such a noble object. I purchased some high-grade stationery (to give a good impression) and I wrote dozens—almost hundreds—of letters, aided by Who's Who? and other useful guides to the wealthy. Heaven knows what would have happened if twelve letters had brought favourable replies at the same time! Perhaps it was a most unlucky time—certainly it was the eve of the slump period—and I didn't get twelve favourable replies. After months of waiting I found one man in the whole world (to me) who was prepared to pay £10,000 'for a bundle of writing' as he called it. He was not a bibliophile. He had a yacht and fishing rods. His hobby was art and he heard of Maugham only through art. This man—his name doesn't matter—we'll make up a name and call him Mr Hill—made one stipulation. The prize was to be called the Maugham-Hill Scholarship. The wealthy man wished to be associated with Maugham in the founding of the prize.

With great rejoicing I wrote to Maugham at Cap Ferrat telling him I had at last found a sportsman. £1,000 was almost in my grasp at a time when I had not £20 in the world in cash. I felt so sure W. S. M. would agree. I couldn't see the slightest objection. We
were all very excited at home. I promised faithfully that my folks would have thefirst real holiday of their lives out of the proceeds! Alas—ah me and alack—Maugham very much objected. He absolutely refused! The prize was his prize and only his name would be incorporated in it. He told me off proper! I felt very miserable and I humbly apologised. Maugham was the boss and what he said went—and I never got £1,000 and never have possessed such a huge sum and am very sure I never will now! Just a simple ‘Yes’ and I’d have been rich. I do not know if he ever sold the manuscripts and founded the prize. I know that they were kept in the safe at the Villa Mauresque—his place on the Riviera—and I know that when the Germans rushed into France Maugham, with a few other lucky folks, was fortunate to get out, and eventually reached England in a collier. (AFTERTHOUGHT: Am I right with that word collier? I can’t help thinking a collier’s a blinking dog!) He in all probability left behind those manuscripts, and the Germans in all probability burnt them—although I do hope not, if it is only for the sake of some writers who may be allowed to travel on the proceeds of the sale of them. But perhaps W. S. M. has at last woke up to the fact that travel doesn’t broaden the mind, and that it is a fallacy to think that travel is any real use in creative work. And has he realized that young writers for the most part prefer to go their own sweet way with their own cash or stay put in their own way? Of course, I now realize that he was quite right. Perhaps Mr Hill was right as well. The fault was mine: I found the wrong buyer!

W. S. M. told me once that the only way to learn to write well was to read well. ‘Read the very best literature—start with Milton and Shakespeare.’ He also said that he always had a particular actor or actress in mind for the leading rôle when he commenced to write a play. I tried so hard to get him to talk about Hollywood and film stars, but it was an uphill task. It seemed to me that his visits to Hollywood hadn’t been particularly happy ones for him. He did say that for the most part the highlights of the film world left little or no impression upon him. He said that Greta Garbo seemed a very ordinary lady, and that he had not been particularly impressed with her—‘just like any other lady’ were his words. She was, I feel pretty sure, very much more impressed with W. S. M.—for he certainly isn’t ‘just like any other gentleman.’ He is a man amongst men! Perhaps it would be best to call him the enigma of the modern literary world. No one really knows Maugham. He is very famous—but he has no side. He worked hard for his success. There was no royal road for him. He was writing plays at seventeen and he was thirty-four before he got his first success. Few wanted to know him when he was starving and struggling. Millions wanted to know him as soon as fame found him—but he was not excited; he chose his friends with the greatest care. And today it’s just the same. If he doesn’t want to know you he doesn’t, and you cannot make him!

W. S. M. is five thousand miles away as I write this, and doubtless we shall never meet again, but all my life I will remember him and be grateful to him. In his unobtrusive way he helped me. He needn’t have done: I was nothing to him. He is ‘the tops’ and I am, as I said at the beginning, ‘a nobody.’ I hope this humble record has proved of some interest. At least, it has placed on record a side of W. S. M. which is probably unknown—a human story of help given at a time when help was needed . . . and although this tribute lacks frills, it says ‘Thank you, friend,’ should W. S. M. ever read this article.

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