Postscript to Maugham

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In the winter of 1965 I was talking to Sir Compton Mackenzie about Somerset Maugham. I told him how Maugham had befriended me as a boy, but, I added: 'He owes me a thousand pounds.' When Sir Compton expressed surprise I told him the story which I'll repeat to you, dear reader, in a moment.

'Typical Maugham!' said Sir Compton. 'And now he seems to have only one ambition left: to leave more money than any other author. How much better if he left a lot of friends.'

What has happened since Maugham's death has proved the truth of Mackenzie's words. I wish I could say I was a friend of Maugham's. I ought to be, for he was very kind to me once. But I would like to have that thousand pounds.

I was barely seventeen when Maugham came into my life. I suppose I was a novelty to him. He called me the Compleat Cockney.

Our first of several meetings was on a Pancake Day. He came down to 152 Westmoreland Road, Walworth, to see me. He made himself very agreeable to my parents, and my father called him a 'real toff', which was the highest term my father knew for a nice bloke. I won't repeat all the particulars of that first meeting for you can read all about it in volume five of The Saturday Book. Before he left Maugham autographed eight of his books for me.

I didn't know if we should meet again. A thousand well-to-do people in London at that time would have been overjoyed to have Maugham in their houses. Who the heck was I? But about a month later he wrote saying that he wanted to attend my local music hall in Walworth in order to recapture the atmosphere for a future work. (It could have been Cakes and Ale.) I must have made quite a favourable impression at our first meeting.
Our local music hall was close by the Elephant and Castle, and was called the South London Palace of Varieties. We had seats in the front row of the circle and to the best of my recollection I paid 1s. 6d. each for these seats and twopence for a programme. We had tea at my home and then wandered slowly along the Walworth Road. We arrived at the theatre two minutes before the curtain went up on the first turn, which was called The Three Elysées, a group of acrobats and tumblers. Maugham was most interested in their act but said that he disliked risky turns. He mentioned that whilst in Monte Carlo some years ago he saw a woman at a local theatre dive one hundred feet into eight feet of water. ‘It made me sick to watch her,’ said Maugham.

He wondered how on earth this act had arrived at the name of The Three Elysées. I volunteered to go back-stage and ask them. Maugham said I was not to bother, that it came into the department of useless knowledge. I asked him if he thought that any kind of knowledge was useless. After a pause he said he thought it was useless to know that as we sat in these seats it was four o’clock in the morning in Peking. I thought this one out for a moment and then said: ‘Not useless, sir. Supposing you took it into your head to ring up the Emperor of China at this moment. He would be greatly displeased to be got out of his bed so early, even by you!’ This made Maugham laugh. Good for me.

The next turn that evening at the music hall was Varney and Butt, two popular artistes at this theatre. They made Maugham laugh. One joke in their act which particularly amused Maugham was when Varney asked: ‘How far did you sink to get those fine clothes?’ and in a piteous whisper his woman partner answered: ‘Only... only as far as Selfridges’ Bargain Basement.’

During the interval we sat in our seats whilst the orchestra gave a painful rendering of ‘You are my Heart’s Delight’. I tried to distract Maugham’s attention from this lamentable performance by telling him about the friend whom I had asked about the attendance at this theatre. ‘Oh, it’s not so bad on the whole,’ the friend had replied. ‘Sometimes it’s half full, and sometimes it’s half empty.’ This seemed to tickle Maugham’s fancy. He laughed again.

At the end of the performance Maugham and I were the only people who stood to attention for the National Anthem. The rest of the audience were on the way out—as I should have been if I’d been alone.

We got a taxi and were driven to the Garrick Club. Maugham thanked me for a pleasant evening, and then, after a pause, said: ‘Perhaps sometime you’d like to come to Cap Ferat for a week or two. It would do you good, and we could have some fun.’ I asked him if he was joking, but he said he never joked. I said it would be a great honour. Maugham didn’t invite me into the club.

The next afternoon, by sheer chance, I met Miles Mander, the film actor, for whom I had a great admiration and respect. Naturally I told him at once how I had taken the great novelist and dramatist to the South London Theatre of Varieties and had been invited by him to go for a holiday to Cap Ferat. I will never forget how emphatically Miles Mander told me not to go there. He also told me some of the Facts of Life I didn’t know.

Whenever the question of a visit to Maugham’s house cropped up I told him I was too busy. Then, one day in the autumn of 1936, I think it was, Maugham again turned up at 132 Wemoreland Road. I was helping my father to chop firewood, which he could sell. His trade as a harness-maker and my earnings as a book-barrow boy couldn’t have been bringing in more than fifty shillings a week at that time.

Maugham sized up the situation. He said he could put me on my feet. He told me he had a collection of manuscripts of his writings which he wanted to sell in order to found a literary prize for poor authors. He told me that if I could find someone to pay £10,000 for these manuscripts he would give me £1,000.

Well, this was my chance—my chance to buy a bookshop, which was the dream of my young life. I got the addresses of a lot of very rich Americans. I got some high-class deckle-edge notepaper and envelopes to match. I drafted a careful letter, had it typed by a first-class typist, and began to send it out.

After months of waiting I hit the jackpot. I found a man willing to pay £10,000 for forty-eight manuscripts by Maugham which he would present to the University of Texas. Let us call this man Mr. Hill. (That wasn’t his real name.) He had only one
condition. He asked that the prize for poor authors which Maugham wanted to set up should be called the Maugham-Hill Scholarship. This seemed reasonable to me.

Maugham refused to consider it. Indeed he properly told me off. He wasn’t going to have his name associated with any Tom, Dick or Harry. I had to accept his decision. For a long time I kept his letter setting out the terms of the contract which he had backed out of. I reckon I had kept my part of the bargain.

Maugham wrote introductions to my first two books—a bibliography of his writings, published in 1931, and Gallery Unreserved, 1932. I shall always be grateful to him for this, and for his taking notice of an unknown Cockney boy. But, whether because of the £1,000 debt or of something else, he passed out of my life.

During the war I was in hospital, with Potts Fractures in both legs. I developed a stutter—like Maugham’s. I wrote to him asking for advice, as I knew he had had a lot of help from some specialist. All I got from Maugham was a plain piece of paper with the doctor’s name and address written in the middle of it. Not even a ‘Good luck’ or ‘Get well soon’. When he was hurriedly evacuated from France in the war, and landed in London from a coal barge, I sent him a box of the most expensive soap I could buy. I thought this was a friendly gesture. I heard nothing from him.

Many years later I was waiting for an American friend in the hall of a posh hotel when I saw Maugham, very aged, sitting in an armchair. I went over to him, took off my cap. Politely I said: ‘Good afternoon, Mr. Maugham. It’s a long time since we met. I’m Freddie Bason, your first bibliographer. You remember me? How are you, sir?’

He looked me up and down for a moment. Then, in his usual carefully measured words, he said coldly: ‘None the better for your asking.’ This was followed by a stream of swear words. It was just as well that my American friend arrived at that moment.

When Maugham died he left two million pounds. He left me that final memory of him, and the recollection of one of his sayings, many years ago, that the surest way to develop a dislike of a man is to owe him money.