



# W. Somerset MAUGHAM

'One of my favourite writers'  
GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

*The Merry-  
Go-Round*

VINTAGE CLASSICS



## THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

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William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris in 1874. He trained as a doctor in London where he started writing his first novels. He achieved fame in 1907 with the production of *Lady Friedrich*, and by 1908 he had four plays running simultaneously in London. In 1926 he bought a house in Cap Ferrat, France, which was to become a meeting place for a number of writers, artists and politicians. He died in 1965.

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W. Somerset Maugham

THE  
MERRY-GO-ROUND

V I N T A G E

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TO  
HERBERT AND MARGUERITE BUNNING

*'I bring not only all I wrought  
Into the faltering words of speech,  
I dedicate the song I sought,  
Yet could not reach.'*



## PART ONE

### 1

ALL her life Miss Elizabeth Dwarris had been a sore trial to her relations. A woman of means, she ruled tyrannously over a large number of impecunious cousins, using her bank balance like the scorpions of Rehoboam to chastise them; and, like many another pious creature, for their souls' good making all and sundry excessively miserable. Nurtured in the Evangelical ways current in her youth, she insisted that her connections should seek salvation according to her own lights, and with harsh tongue and bitter gibe made it her constant business to persuade them of their extreme unworthiness. She arranged lives as she thought fit, and ventured not only to order the costume and habits, but even the inner thought, of those about her; the Last Judgement could have no terrors for any that had faced her searching examination. She invited to stay with her in succession various poor ladies who presumed on a distant tie to call her Aunt Eliza, and they accepted her summons, more imperious than a royal command, with gratitude by no means unmixed with fear, bearing the servitude meekly as a cross which in the future would meet due testamentary reward.

Miss Dwarris loved to feel her power. During these long visits – for in a way the old lady was very hospitable – she made it her especial object to break the spirit of her guests, and it entertained her hugely to see the mildness with which were borne her extravagant demands, the humility with which every inclination was crushed. She took a malicious pleasure in publicly affronting persons, ostensibly to bend a sinful pride, or in obliging them to do things which they peculiarly disliked. With a singular quickness for discovering the points on which they were most sensitive, she attacked every weakness with blunt invective till the sufferer writhed before her raw and bleeding; no defect, physical or mental, was protected from her raillery, and she could pardon as little an excess of avoirdupois as a want



of memory. Yet with all her heart she despised her victims, she flung in their face insolently their mercenary spirit, vowing that she would never leave a penny to such a pack of weak fools; it delighted her to ask for advice in the distribution of her property among charitable societies, and she heard with unconcealed hilarity their unwilling and confused suggestions.

With one of her relations only Miss Dwarris found it needful to observe a certain restraint – for Miss Ley, perhaps the most distant of her cousins, was as plain-spoken as herself, and had besides a far keener wit, whereby she could turn rash statements to the utter ridicule of the speaker. Nor did Miss Dwarris precisely dislike this independent spirit; she looked upon her, in fact, with a certain degree of affection and not a little fear. Miss Ley, seldom lacking a repartee, appeared really to enjoy the verbal contests, from which, by her greater urbanity, readiness, and knowledge, she usually emerged victorious; it confounded, but at the same time almost amused, the elder lady that a woman so much poorer than herself, with no smaller claim than others to the coveted inheritance, should venture not only to be facetious at her expense, but even to carry war into her very camp. Miss Ley, really not grieved to find someone to whom without prickings of conscience she could speak her whole mind, took a grim pleasure in pointing out to her cousin the poor logic of her observations or the foolish unreason of her acts. No cherished opinion of Miss Dwarris was safe from satire; even her Evangelicism was laughed at, and the rich old woman, unused to argument, was easily driven to self-contradiction; and then – for the victor took no pains to conceal her triumph – she grew pale and speechless with rage. The quarrels were frequent, but Miss Dwarris, though it was a sharp thorn in her flesh that the first advances must be made by her, in the end always forgave. Yet at last it was inevitable that a final breach should occur. The cause thereof, characteristically enough, was very trivial.

Miss Ley, accustomed when she went abroad for the winter to let her little flat in Chelsea, had been obliged by unforeseen circumstances to return to England while her tenants were still in possession, and had asked Miss Dwarris whether she might

stay with her in Old Queen Street. The old tyrant, much as she hated her relatives, hated still more to live alone; she needed someone on whom to vent her temper, and through the illness of a niece, due to spend March and April with her, had been forced to pass a month of solitude. She wrote back, in the peremptory fashion which even with Miss Ley she could not refrain from using, that she expected her on such and such a day by such and such a train. It is not clear whether there was in the letter anything to excite in Miss Ley a contradictory spirit, or whether her engagements really prevented it, but at all events she answered that her plans made it more convenient to arrive on the day following and by a different train. Miss Dwarris telegraphed that unless her guest came on the day and at the hour mentioned in her letter she could not send the carriage to meet her, to which the younger lady replied concisely: 'Don't!'

'She's as obstinate as a pig,' muttered Miss Dwarris, reading the telegram, and she saw in her mind's eye the thin smile on her cousin's mouth when she wrote that one indifferent word. 'I suppose she thinks she's very clever.'

Her hostess greeted Miss Ley, notwithstanding, with a certain grim affability reserved only for her; she was at all events the least detestable of her relations, and, though neither docile nor polite, at least was never tedious. Her conversation braced Miss Dwarris, so that with her she was usually at her best, and sometimes, forgetting her overbearing habit, showed herself a sensible and entertaining woman of not altogether unamiable disposition.

'You're growing old, my dear,' said Miss Dwarris when they sat down to dinner, looking at her guest with eyes keen to detect wrinkles and crow's-feet.

'You flatter me,' Miss Ley retorted; 'antiquity is the only excuse for a woman who has determined on a single life.'

'I suppose, like the rest of them, you would have married if anyone had asked you?'

Miss Ley smiled.

'Two months ago an Italian Prince offered me his hand and heart, Eliza.'

‘A Papist would do anything,’ replied Miss Dwarris. ‘I suppose you told him your income, and he found he’d misjudged the strength of his affections.’

‘I refused him because he was so virtuous.’

‘I shouldn’t have thought at your age you could afford to pick and choose, Polly.’

‘Allow me to observe that you have an amiable faculty for thinking of one subject at one time in two diametrically opposed ways.’

Miss Ley was a slender woman of middle size; her hair, very plainly arranged, beginning to turn grey, and her face, already much wrinkled, by its clear precision of feature indicating a comfortable strength of character; her lips, thin but expressive, mobile, added to this appearance of determination. She was by no means handsome, and had certainly never been pretty, but her carriage was not without grace nor her manner without fascination. Her eyes were very bright, and so shrewd as sometimes to be almost disconcerting: without words they could make pretentiousness absurd; and most affectations, under that searching glance, part contemptuous, part amused, willingly hid themselves. Yet, as Miss Dwarris took care to remind her, she was not without her own especial pose, but it was carried out so admirably, with such a restrained, comely decorum, that few observed it, and such as did found not the heart to condemn: it was the perfect art that concealed itself. To execute this æsthetic gesture, it pleased Miss Ley to dress with the greatest possible simplicity, usually in black, and her only ornament was a Renaissance jewel of such exquisite beauty that no museum would have disdained to possess it: this she wore around her neck attached to a long gold chain, and she fingered it with pleasure, to show, according to her plain-spoken relative, the undoubted beauty of her hands. Her well-fitting shoes and the elaborate open-work of her silk stockings suggested also a not unreasonable pride in a shapely foot, small and high of instep. Thus attired, when she had visitors Miss Ley sat in an Italian straight-backed chair of oak, and delicately carved, which was placed between two windows against the wall; and she cultivated already a certain primness

of manner which made very effective the audacious criticism of life wherewith she was used to entertain her friends.

Two mornings after her arrival in Old Queen Street Miss Ley announced her intention to go out. She came downstairs with a very fashionable parasol, a purchase on her way through Paris.

'You're not going out with that thing?' cried Miss Dwarris scornfully.

'I am indeed.'

'Nonsense; you must take an umbrella. It's going to rain.'

'I have a new sunshade and an old umbrella, Eliza. I feel certain it will be fine.'

'My dear, you know nothing about the English climate. I tell you it will pour cats and dogs.'

'Fiddlesticks, Eliza!'

'Polly,' answered Miss Dwarris, her temper rising, 'I wish you to take an umbrella. The barometer is going down, and I have a tingling in my feet which is a sure sign of wet. It's very irreligious of you to presume to say what the weather is going to be.'

'I venture to think that meteorologically I am no less acquainted with the ways of Providence than you.'

'That, I think, is not funny, but blasphemous, Polly. In my house I expect people to do as I tell them, and I insist on your taking an umbrella.'

'Don't be absurd, Eliza!'

Miss Dwarris rang the bell, and when the butler appeared ordered him to fetch her own umbrella for Miss Ley.

'I absolutely refuse to use it,' said the younger lady, smiling.

'Pray remember that you are my guest, Polly.'

'And therefore entitled to do exactly as I like.'

Miss Dwarris rose to her feet, a massive old woman of commanding presence, and stretched out a threatening hand.

'If you leave this house without an umbrella, you shall not come into it again. You shall never cross this threshold so long as I am alive.'

Miss Ley cannot have been in the best of humours that morning, for she pursed her lips in the manner already charac-

teristic of her, and looked at her elderly cousin with a cold scorn most difficult to bear.

'My dear Eliza, you have a singularly exaggerated idea of your importance. Are there no hotels in London? You appear to think I stay with you for pleasure rather than to mortify my flesh. And really the cross is growing too heavy for me, for I think you must have quite the worst cook in the Metropolis.'

'She's been with me for five-and-twenty years,' answered Miss Dwarris, two red spots appearing on her cheeks, 'and no one has ventured to complain of the cooking before. If any of my guests had done so, I should have answered that what was good enough for me was a great deal too good for anyone else. I know that you're obstinate, Polly, and quick-tempered, and this impertinence I am willing to overlook. Do you still refuse to do as I wish?'

'Yes.'

Miss Dwarris rang the bell violently.

'Tell Martha to pack Miss Ley's boxes at once, and call a four-wheeler,' she cried in tones of thunder.

'Very well, madam,' answered the butler, used to his mistress' vagaries.

Then Miss Dwarris turned to her guest, who observed her with irritating good-humour.

'I hope you realize, Polly, that I fully mean what I say.'

'All is over between us,' answered Miss Ley mockingly, 'and shall I return your letters and your photographs?'

Miss Dwarris sat for a while in silent anger, watching her cousin, who took up the *Morning Post* and with great calmness read the fashionable intelligence. Presently the butler announced that the four-wheeler was at the door.

'Well, Polly, so you're really going?'

'I can hardly stay when you've had my boxes packed and sent for a cab,' replied Miss Ley mildly.

'It's your own doing; I don't wish you to go. If you'll confess that you were headstrong and obstinate, and if you'll take an umbrella, I am willing to let bygones be bygones.'

'Look at the sun,' answered Miss Ley.

And, as if actually to annoy the tyrannous old woman, the

shining rays danced into the room and made importunate patterns on the carpet.

'I think I should tell you, Polly, that it was my intention to leave you ten thousand pounds in my will. This intention I shall, of course, not now carry out.'

'You'd far better leave your money to the Dwarris people. Upon my word, considering that they've been related to you for over sixty years, I think they thoroughly deserve it.'

'I shall leave my money to whom I choose,' cried Miss Dwarris, beside herself; 'and if I want to, I shall leave every penny of it in charity. You're very independent because you have a beggarly five hundred a year, but apparently it isn't enough for you to live without letting your flat when you go away. Remember that no one has any claims upon me, and I can make you a rich woman.'

Miss Ley replied with great deliberation.

'My dear, I have a firm conviction that you will live for another thirty years to plague the human race in general, and your relations in particular. It is not worth my while, on the chance of surviving you, to submit to the caprices of a very ignorant old woman, presumptuous and overbearing, dull and pretentious.'

Miss Dwarris gasped and shook with rage, but the other proceeded without mercy.

'You have plenty of poor relations – bully them. Vent your spite and ill-temper on those wretched sycophants, but, pray, in future spare *me* the infinite tediousness of your conversation.'

Miss Ley had ever a discreet passion for the rhetorical, and there was a certain grandiloquence about the phrase which entertained her hugely. She felt that it was unanswerable, and with great dignity walked out. No communication passed between the two ladies, though Miss Dwarris, peremptory, stern, and Evangelical to the end, lived in full possession of her faculties for nearly twenty years. She died at last in a passion occasioned by some trifling misdemeanour of her maid; and, as though a heavy yoke were removed from their shoulders, her family heaved a deep and unanimous sigh of relief.

They attended her funeral with dry eyes, looking still with

silent terror at the leaden coffin which contained the remains of that harsh, strong, domineering old woman; then, nervously expectant, begged the family solicitor to disclose her will. Written with her own hand, and witnessed by two servants, it was in these terms:

I, Elizabeth Ann Dwarris, of 79 Old Queen Street, Westminster, spinster, hereby revoke all former wills and testamentary dispositions made by me, and declare this to be my last will and testament. I appoint Mary Ley, of 72 Eliot Mansions, Chelsea, to be the executrix of this my will, and I give all my real and personal property whatsoever to the said Mary Ley. To my great-nephews and great-nieces, to my cousins near and remote, I give my blessing, and I beseech them to bear in mind the example and advice which for many years I have given them. I recommend them to cultivate in future strength of character and an independent spirit. I venture to remind them that the humble will never inherit this earth, for their reward is to be awaited in the life to come, and I desire them to continue the subscriptions which, at my request, they have so long and generously made to the Society for the Conversion of the Jews and to the Additional Curates Fund.

In witness whereof I have set my hand to this my will the 4th day of April, 1883.

ELIZABETH ANN DWARRIS

To her amazement, Miss Ley found herself at the age of fifty-seven in possession of nearly three thousand pounds a year, the lease of a pleasant old house in Westminster, and a great quantity of early Victorian furniture. The will was written two days after her quarrel with the eccentric old woman, and the terms of it certainly achieved the three purposes for which it was designed: it occasioned the utmost surprise to all concerned, heaped coals of fire on Miss Ley's indifferent head, and caused the bitterest disappointment and vexation to all that bore the name of Dwarris.

IT did not take Miss Ley very long to settle in her house. To its new owner, who hated modernity with all her heart, part of the charm lay in its quaint old fashion: built in the reign of Queen Anne, it had the leisurely, spacious comfort of dwelling-places in that period, with a hood over the door that was a pattern of elegance, wrought-iron railings, and, to Miss Ley's especial delight, extinguishers for the link-boys' torches.

The rooms were large, somewhat low-pitched, with wide windows overlooking the most consciously beautiful of all the London parks. Miss Ley made no great alterations. An epicurean to her finger-tips, for many years the passion for liberty had alone disturbed the equanimity of her indolent temper. But to secure freedom, entire and absolute freedom, she was ever ready to make any sacrifice: ties affected her with a discomfort that seemed really akin to physical pain, and she avoided them – ties of family or of affection, ties of habit or of thought – with all the strenuousness of which she was capable. She had taken care never in the course of her life to cumber herself with chattels, and once, with a courage in which there was surely something heroic, feeling that she became too much attached to her belongings – cabinets and exquisite fans brought from Spain, Florentine frames of gilded wood and English mezzotints, Neapolitan bronzes, tables and settees discovered in out-of-the-way parts of France – she had sold everything. She would not risk to grow so fond of her home that it was a pain to leave it; she preferred to remain a wayfarer, sauntering through life with a heart keen to detect beauty, and a mind, open and unbiassed, ready to laugh at the absurd. So it fitted her humour to move with the few goods which she possessed into her cousin's house as though it were but a furnished lodging, remaining there still unfettered; and when Death came – a pagan youth, twin brother to Sleep, rather



than the grim and bony skeleton of Christian faith – ready to depart like a sated reveller, smiling dauntlessly and without regret. A new and personal ordering, the exclusion of many pieces of clumsy taste, gave Miss Ley's drawing-room quickly a more graceful and characteristic air: the *objets d'art* collected since the memorable sale added a certain grave delicacy to the arrangement; and her friends noticed without surprise that, as in her own flat, the straight, carved chair was set between two windows, and the furniture deliberately placed so that from it the mistress of the house, herself part of the aesthetic scheme, could command and manipulate her guests.

No sooner was Miss Ley comfortably settled than she wrote to an old friend and distant cousin, Algernon Langton, Dean of Terenbury, asking him to bring his daughter to visit her new house; and Miss Langton replied that they would be pleased to come, fixing a certain Thursday morning for their arrival. Miss Ley greeted her relatives without effusion, for it was her whim to discourage manifestations of affection; but notwithstanding the good-humoured, polite contempt with which it was her practice to treat the clergy in general, she looked upon her cousin Algernon with real esteem.

He was a tall old man, spare and bent, with very white hair and a pallid, almost transparent, skin; his eyes were cold and blue, but his expression singularly gentle. There was a dignity in his bearing, and at the same time an infinite graciousness which reminded you of those famous old ecclesiastics whose names have cast for ever a certain magnificent renown upon the English Church; he had a good deal of the polished breeding which made them, whatever their origin, gentlemen and courtiers, and, like theirs, his Biblical erudition was perhaps less noteworthy than his classical attainments. And if he was a little narrow, unwilling to consider seriously modern ways of thought, there was an aesthetic quality about him and a truly Christian urbanity which attracted admiration, and even love. Miss Ley, a student of men, who could observe with interest the most diverse tendencies (for to her sceptical mind no way of life nor method of thought was intrinsically more valuable