

W. Somerset MAUGHAM

Ashenden

'The modern writer who has influenced me most' GEORGE ORWELL

W. Somerset Maugham ASHENDEN

∜ VINTAGE

Published by Vintage 2000 2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

Copyright © by The Royal Literary Fund

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

> First published in Great Britain in 1928 by William Heinemann This edition published in 1991 by Mandarin Paperbacks

Vintage Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited 20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited 18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House (Pty) Limited Endulini, 5A Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009 www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 09 928970 9

Papers used by Random House are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon, Surrey

Preface

This book is founded on my experiences in the Intelligence Department during the war, but rearranged for the purposes of fiction. Fact is a poor story-teller. It starts a story at haphazard, generally long before the beginning, rambles on inconsequently and tails off, leaving loose ends hanging about, without a conclusion. It works up to an interesting situation, and then leaves it in the air to follow an issue that has nothing to do with the point; it has no sense of climax and whittles away its dramatic effects in irrelevance. There is a school of novelists that looks upon this as the proper model for fiction. If life, they say, is arbitrary and disconnected, why, fiction should be so too: for fiction should imitate life. In life things happen at random, and that is how they should happen in a story; they do not lead to a climax, which is an outrage to probability, they just go on. Nothing offends these people more than the punch or the unexpected twist with which some writers seek to surprise their readers, and when the circumstances they relate seem to tend towards a dramatic effect they do their best to avoid it. They do not give you a story, they give

you the material on which you can invent your own. Sometimes it consists of an incident presented, you might think, at haphazard, and you are invited to divine its significance. Sometimes they give you a character and leave it at that. They give you the materials for a dish and expect you to do the cooking yourself. Now this is one way like another of writing stories and some very good stories have been written in it. Chekov used it with mastery. It is more suitable for the very short story than for the longer one. The description of a mood, an environment or an atmosphere, can hold your attention for half a dozen pages, but when it comes to fifty a story needs a supporting skeleton. The skeleton of a story is of course its plot. Now a plot has certain characteristics that you cannot get away from. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It is complete in itself. It starts with a set of circumstances which have consequences, but of which the causes may be ignored; and these consequences, in their turn the cause of other circumstances, are pursued till a point is reached when the reader is satisfied that they are the cause of no further consequences that need be considered. This means that a story should begin at a certain point and end at a certain point. It should not wander along an uncertain line, but follow, from exposition to climax, a bold and vigorous curve. If you wanted to represent it diagrammatically you would draw a semicircle. It is very well to have the element of surprise, and this punch, this unexpected twist, which the imitators of Chekov despise, is only bad when it is badly done;

when it is an integral part of the story and its logical issue it is excellent. There is nothing wrong in a climax, it is a very natural demand of the reader; it is only wrong if it does not follow naturally from the circumstances that have gone before. It is purely an affectation to elude it because in life as a general rule things tail off ineffectively.

For it is quite unnecessary to treat as axiomatic the assertion that fiction should imitate life. It is merely a literary theory like another. There is in fact a second theory that is just as plausible, and this is that fiction should use life merely as raw material which it arranges in ingenious patterns. You have a very good analogy in painting. The landscape painters of the seventeenth century were not interested in the direct representation of nature, which to them was no more than the occasion for a formal decoration. They constructed a scene architecturally, balancing for example the mass of a tree with the mass of a cloud, and used light and shade to make a definite pattern. Their intention was not to portray a landscape but to create a work of art. It was a deliberate composition. In their arrangement of the facts of nature they were satisfied if they did not outrage the spectator's sense of reality. It was left for the Impressionists to paint what they saw. They tried to catch nature in its fleeting beauty: they were content to render the radiance of sunlight, the colour of shadows or the translucency of the air. They aimed at truth. They wanted a painter to be no more than an eye and a hand. They despised intelligence. It is strange how empty their paintings look

now when you place them beside the stately pictures of Claude. The method of Claude is the method of that master of the short story Guy de Maupassant. It is a very good one and I have a notion that it will survive the other. Already it is getting a little difficult to care much what middle-class Russians were like fifty years ago, and the anecdote in Chekov's stories is not as a rule absorbing enough (as the story of Paolo and Francesca or of Macbeth is absorbing to hold your attention apart from your interest in the people. The method of which I speak is that which chooses from life what is curious, telling and dramatic: it does not seek to copy life, but keeps to it closely enough not to shock the reader into disbelief; it leaves out this and changes that; it makes a formal decoration out of such of the facts as it has found convenient to deal with and presents a picture, the result of artifice, which, because it represents the author's temperament, is to a certain extent a portrait of himself, but which is designed to excite, interest and absorb the reader. If it is a success he accepts it as true.

I have written all this in order to impress upon the reader that this book is a work of fiction, though I should say not much more so than several of the books on the same subject that have appeared during the last few years and that purport to be truthful memoirs. The work of an agent in the Intelligence Department is on the whole extremely monotonous. A lot of it is uncommonly useless. The material it offers for stories is scrappy and pointless; the author

has himself to make it coherent, dramatic and probable.

In 1917 I went to Russia. I was sent to prevent the Bolshevik Revolution and to keep Russia in the war. The reader will know that my efforts did not meet with success. I went to Petrograd from Vladivostock. One day, on the way through Siberia, the train stopped at some station and the passengers as usual got out, some to fetch water to make tea, some to buy food and others to stretch their legs. A blind soldier was sitting on a bench. Other soldiers sat beside him and more stood behind. There were from twenty to thirty. Their uniforms were torn and stained. The blind soldier, a big, vigorous fellow, was quite young. On his cheeks was the soft, pale down of a beard that has never been shaved. I daresay he wasn't eighteen. He had a broad face, with flat, wide features; and on his forehead was a great scar of the wound that had lost him his sight. His closed eyes gave him a strangely vacant look. He began to sing. His voice was strong and sweet. He accompanied himself on an accordion. The train waited on and he sang song after song. I could not understand his words, but through his singing, wild and melancholy, I seemed to hear the cry of the oppressed: I felt the lonely steppes and the interminable forests, the flow of the broad Russian rivers and all the toil of the countryside, the ploughing of the land and the reaping of the ripe corn, the sighing of the wind in the birch trees, the long months of dark winter; and then the dancing of women in the villages and the youths bathing in

shallow streams on summer evenings: I felt the horror of war, the bitter nights in the trenches, the long marches on muddy roads, the battlefield with its terror and anguish and death. It was horrible and deeply moving. A cap lay at the singer's feet and the passengers filled it full of money; the same emotion had seized them all, of boundless compassion and of vague horror, for there was something in that blind. scarred face that was terrifying; you felt that this was a being apart, sundered from the joy of this enchanting world. He did not seem quite human. The soldiers stood silent and hostile. Their attitude seemed to claim as a right the alms of the travelling herd. There was a disdainful anger on their side and unmeasurable pity on ours; but no glimmering of a sense that there was but one way to compensate that helpless man for all his pain.

\mathbf{I} R.

It was not till the beginning of September that Ashenden, a writer by profession, who had been abroad at the outbreak of the war, managed to get back to England. He chanced soon after his arrival to go to a party and was there introduced to a middle-aged Colonel whose name he did not catch. He had some talk with him. As he was about to leave this officer came up to him and asked:

'I say, I wonder if you'd mind coming to see me. I'd rather like to have a chat with you.'

'Certainly,' said Ashenden. 'Whenever you like.'

'What about to-morrow at eleven?'

'All right.'

T'll just write down my address. Have you a card on you?'

Ashenden gave him one and on this the Colonel scribbled in pencil the name of a street and the number of a house. When Ashenden walked along next morning to keep his appointment he found himself in a street of rather vulgar red-brick houses in a part of London that had once been fashionable, but was now fallen in the esteem of the house-hunter who wanted a good address. On the house at which Ashenden had been asked to call there was a board up to announce that it was for sale, the shutters were

closed and there was no sign that anyone lived in it. He rang the bell and the door was opened by a noncommissioned officer so promptly that he was startled. He was not asked his business, but led immediately into a long room at the back, once evidently a dining-room, the florid decoration of which looked oddly out of keeping with the office furniture, shabby and sparse, that was in it. It gave Ashenden the impression of a room in which the brokers had taken possession. The Colonel, who was known in the Intelligence Department, as Ashenden later discovered, by the letter R., rose when he came in and shook hands with him. He was a man somewhat above the middle height, lean, with a yellow, deeplylined face, thin grey hair and a toothbrush moustache. The thing immediately noticeable about him was the closeness with which his blue eyes were set. He only just escaped a squint. They were hard and cruel eyes. and very wary; and they gave him a cunning, shifty look. Here was a man that you could neither like nor trust at first sight. His manner was pleasant and cordial.

He asked Ashenden a good many questions and then, without further to-do, suggested that he had particular qualifications for the secret service. Ashenden was acquainted with several European languages and his profession was excellent cover; on the pretext that he was writing a book he could without attracting attention visit any neutral country. It was while they were discussing this point that R. said:

'You know you ought to get material that would be very useful to you in your work.'

'I shouldn't mind that,' said Ashenden.

'I'll tell you an incident that occurred only the other day and I can vouch for its truth. I thought at the time it would make a damned good story. One of the French ministers went down to Nice to recover from a cold and he had some very important documents with him that he kept in a dispatch-case. They were very important indeed. Well, a day or two after he arrived he picked up a yellow-haired lady at some restaurant or other where there was dancing, and he got very friendly with her. To cut a long story short, he took her back to his hotel - of course it was a very imprudent thing to do - and when he came to himself in the morning the lady and the dispatch-case had disappeared. They had one or two drinks up in his room and his theory is that when his back was turned the woman slipped a drug into his glass.'

R. finished and looked at Ashenden with a gleam in his close-set eyes.

'Dramatic, isn't it?' he asked.

'Do you mean to say that happened the other day?'
'The week before last.'

'Impossible,' cried Ashenden. 'Why, we've been putting that incident on the stage for sixty years, we've written it in a thousand novels. Do you mean to say that life has only just caught up with us?'

R. was a trifle disconcerted.

Well, if necessary, I could give you names and dates, and believe me, the Allies have been put to no end of trouble by the loss of the documents that the dispatch-case contained.'

'Well, sir, if you can't do better than that in the secret service,' sighed Ashenden, 'I'm afraid that as a source of inspiration to the writer of fiction it's a washout. We really can't write that story much longer.'

It did not take them long to settle things and when Ashenden rose to go he had already made careful note of his instructions. He was to start for Geneva next day. The last words that R. said to him, with a casualness that made them impressive, were:

'There's just one thing I think you ought to know before you take on this job. And don't forget it. If you do well you'll get no thanks and if you get into trouble you'll get no help. Does that suit you?'

'Perfectly.'

'Then I'll wish you good afternoon.'

2 A Domiciliary Visit

Ashenden was on his way back to Geneva. The night was stormy and the wind blew cold from the mountains, but the stodgy little steamer plodded sturdily through the choppy waters of the lake. A scudding rain, just turning into sleet, swept the deck in angry gusts, like a nagging woman who cannot leave a subiect alone. Ashenden had been to France in order to write and dispatch a report. A day or two before, about five in the afternoon, an Indian agent of his had come to see him in his rooms; it was only by a lucky chance that he was in, for he had no appointment with him, and the agent's instructions were to come to the hotel only in a case of urgent importance. He told Ashenden that a Bengali in the German service had recently come from Berlin with a black cane trunk in which were a number of documents interesting to the British Government. At that time the Central Powers were doing their best to foment such an agitation in India as would make it necessary for Great Britain to keep their troops in the country and perhaps send others from France. It had been found possible to get the Bengali arrested in Berne on a charge that would keep him out of harm's way for a while, but the black cane trunk could not be found. Ashenden's agent was a very brave and very clever

fellow and he mixed freely with such of his countrymen as were disaffected to the interests of Great Britain. He had just discovered that the Bengali before going to Berne had, for greater safety, left the trunk in the cloak-room at Zürich Station, and now that he was in jail, awaiting trial, was unable to get the bulletin by which it might be obtained into the hands of any of his confederates. It was a matter of great urgency for the German Intelligence Department to secure the contents of the trunk without delay, and since it was impossible for them to get hold of it by the ordinary official means, they had decided to break into the station that very night and steal it. It was a bold and ingenious scheme and Ashenden felt a pleasant exhilaration (for a great deal of his work was uncommonly dull) when he heard of it. He recognised the dashing and unscrupulous touch of the head of the German secret service at Berne. But the burglary was arranged for two o'clock on the following morning and there was not a moment to lose. He could trust neither the telegraph nor the telephone to communicate with the British officer at Berne, and since the Indian agent could not go (he was taking his life in his hands by coming to see Ashenden and if he were noticed leaving his room it might easily be that he would be found one day floating in the lake with a knife-thrust in his back), there was nothing for it but to go himself.

There was a train to Berne that he could just catch and he put on his hat and coat as he ran downstairs. He jumped into a cab. Four hours later he rang the bell of the headquarters of the Intelligence Department. His name was known there but to one person, and it was for him that Ashenden asked. A tall tired-looking man, whom he had not met before, came out and without a word led him into an office. Ashenden told him his errand. The tall man looked at his watch.

'It's too late for us to do anything ourselves. We couldn't possibly get to Zürich in time.'

He reflected.

'We'll put the Swiss authorities on the job. They can telephone, and when your friends attempt their little burglary, I have no doubt they'll find the station well guarded. Anyhow, you had better get back to Geneva.'

He shook hands with Ashenden and showed him out. Ashenden was well aware that he would never know what happened then. Being no more than a tiny rivet in a vast and complicated machine, he never had the advantage of seeing a completed action. He was concerned with the beginning or the end of it, perhaps, or with some incident in the middle, but what his own doings led to he had seldom a chance of discovering. It was as unsatisfactory as those modern novels that give you a number of unrelated episodes and expect you by piecing them together to construct in your mind a connected narrative.

Notwithstanding his fur coat and his muffler, Ashenden was chilled to the bone. It was warm in the saloon and there were good lights to read by, but he thought it better not to sit there in case some habitual traveller, recognising him, wondered why he made

these constant journeys between Geneva in Switzerland and Thonon in France; and so, making the best of what shelter could be found, he passed the tedious time in the darkness of the deck. He looked in the direction of Geneva, but could see no lights, and the sleet, turning into snow, prevented him from recognising the landmarks. Lake Leman, on fine days so trim and pretty, artificial like a piece of water in a French garden, in this temptestuous weather was as secret and as menacing as the sea. He made up his mind that, on getting back to his hotel, he would have a fire lit in his sitting-room, a hot bath, and dinner comfortably by the fireside in pyjamas and a dressing-gown. The prospect of spending an evening by himself with his pipe and a book was so agreeable that it made the misery of that journey across the lake positively worth while. Two sailors tramped past him heavily, their heads bent down to save themselves from the sleet that blew in their faces, and one of them shouted to him: Nous arrivons; they went to the side and withdrew a bar to allow passage for the gangway, and looking again Ashenden through the howling darkness saw mistily the lights of the quay. A welcome sight. In two or three minutes the steamer was made fast and Ashenden, muffled to the eyes, joined himself to the little knot of passengers that waited to step ashore. Though he made the journey so often - it was his duty to cross the lake into France once a week to deliver his reports and to receive instructions - he had always a faint sense of trepidation when he stood among the crowd at the