



ZEPHYR BOOKS

OF HUMAN
BONDAGE

by

W. Somerset Maugham

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THE CONTINENTAL BOOK COMPANY · STOCKHOLM/LONDON

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LXVI

PHILIP worked well and easily; he had a good deal to do, since he was taking in July the three parts of the First Conjoint examination, two of which he had failed in before; but he found life pleasant. He made a new friend. Lawson, on the look out for models, had discovered a girl who was understudying at one of the theatres, and in order to induce her to sit to him arranged a little luncheon-party one Sunday. She brought a chaperon with her; and to her Philip, asked to make a fourth, was instructed to confine his attentions. He found this easy, since she turned out to be an agreeable chatterbox with an amusing tongue. She asked Philip to go and see her; she had rooms in Vincent Square, and was always in to tea at five o'clock; he went, was delighted with his welcome, and went again. Mrs. Nesbit was not more than twenty-five, very small, with a pleasant, ugly face; she had very bright eyes, high cheek-bones, and a large mouth: the excessive contrasts of her colouring reminded one of a portrait by one of the modern French painters; her skin was very white, her cheeks were very red, her thick eyebrows, her hair, were very black. The effect was odd, a little unnatural, but far from unpleasing. She was separated from her husband and earned her living and her child's by writing penny novelettes. There were one or two publishers who made a speciality of that sort of thing, and she had as much work as she could do. It was ill-paid, she received fifteen pounds for a story of thirty

thousand words; but she was satisfied.

"After all, it only costs the reader twopence," she said, "and they like the same thing over and over again. I just change the names and that's all. When I'm bored I think of the washing and the rent and clothes for baby, and I go on again."

Besides, she walked on at various theatres where they wanted supers and earned by this when in work from sixteen shillings to a guinea a week. At the end of her day she was so tired that she slept like a top. She made the best of her difficult lot. Her keen sense of humour enabled her to get amusement out of every vexatious circumstance. Sometimes things went wrong, and she found herself with no money at all; then her trifling possessions found their way to a pawnshop in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, and she ate bread and butter till things grew brighter. She never lost her cheerfulness.

Philip was interested in her shiftless life, and she made him laugh with the fantastic narration of her struggles. He asked her why she did not try her hand at literary work of a better sort, but she knew that she had no talent, and the abominable stuff she turned out by the thousand words was not only tolerably paid, but was the best she could do. She had nothing to look forward to but a continuation of the life she led. She seemed to have no relations, and her friends were as poor as herself.

"I don't think of the future," she said. "As long as I have enough money for three weeks' rent and a pound or two over for food I never bother. Life wouldn't be worth living if I worried over the future as well as the present. When things are at their worst I find something always happens."

Soon Philip grew in the habit of going in to tea with

her every day, and so that his visits might not embarrass her he took in a cake or a pound of butter or some tea. They started to call one another by their Christian names. Feminine sympathy was new to him, and he delighted in someone who gave a willing ear to all his troubles. The hours went quickly. He did not hide his admiration for her. She was a delightful companion. He could not help comparing her with Mildred; and he contrasted with the one's obstinate stupidity, which refused interest to everything she did not know, the other's quick appreciation and ready intelligence. His heart sank when he thought that he might have been tied for life to such a woman as Mildred. One evening he told Norah the whole story of his love. It was not one to give him much reason for self-esteem, and it was very pleasant to receive such charming sympathy.

"I think you're well out of it," she said, when he had finished.

She had a funny way at times of holding her head on one side like an Aberdeen puppy. She was sitting in an upright chair, sewing, for she had no time for doing nothing, and Philip had made himself comfortable at her feet.

"I can't tell you how heartily thankful I am it's all over," he sighed.

"Poor thing, you must have had a rotten time," she murmured, and by way of showing her sympathy put her hand on his shoulder.

He took it and kissed it, but she withdrew it quickly.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, with a blush.

"Have you any objection?"

She looked at him for a moment with twinkling eyes, and she smiled.

"No," she said.

He got up on his knees and faced her. She looked into his eyes steadily, and her large mouth trembled with a smile.

"Well?" she said.

"You know, you are a ripper. I'm so grateful to you for being nice to me. I like you so much."

"Don't be idiotic," she said.

Philip took hold of her elbows and drew her towards him. She made no resistance, but bent forward a little, and he kissed her red lips.

"Why did you do that?" she asked again.

"Because it's comfortable."

She did not answer, but a tender look came into her eyes, and she passed her hand softly over his hair.

"You know, it's awfully silly of you to behave like this. We were such good friends. It would be so jolly to leave it at that."

"If you really want to appeal to my better nature," replied Philip, "you'll do well not to stroke my cheek while you're doing it."

She gave a little chuckle, but she did not stop.

"It's very wrong of me, isn't it?" she said.

Philip, surprised and a little amused, looked into her eyes, and as he looked he saw them soften and grow liquid, and there was an expression in them that enchanted him. His heart was suddenly stirred, and tears came to his eyes.

"Norah, you're not fond of me, are you?" he asked, incredulously.

"You clever boy, you ask such stupid questions."

"Oh, my dear, it never struck me that you could be."

He flung his arms round her and kissed her, while she,

laughing, blushing, and crying, surrendered herself willingly to his embrace.

Presently he released her and sitting back on his heels looked at her curiously.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he said.

"Why?"

"I'm so surprised."

"And pleased?"

"Delighted," he cried with all his heart, "and so proud and so happy and so grateful."

He took her hands and covered them with kisses. This was the beginning for Philip of a happiness which seemed both solid and durable. They became lovers but remained friends. There was in Norah a maternal instinct which received satisfaction in her love for Philip; she wanted someone to pet, and scold, and make a fuss of; she had a domestic temperament and found pleasure in looking after his health and his linen. She pitied his deformity, over which he was so sensitive, and her pity expressed itself instinctively in tenderness. She was young, strong and healthy, and it seemed quite natural to her to give her love. She had high spirits and a merry soul. She liked Philip because he laughed with her at all the amusing things in life that caught her fancy, and above all she liked him because he was he.

When she told him this he answered gaily:

"Nonsense. You like me because I'm a silent person and never want to get a word in."

Philip did not love her at all. He was extremely fond of her, glad to be with her, amused and interested by her conversation. She restored his belief in himself and put healing ointments, as it were, on all the bruises of his soul. He was immensely flattered that she cared for

him. He admired her courage, her optimism, her impudent defiance of fate; she had a little philosophy of her own, ingenuous and practical.

"You know, I don't believe in churches and parsons and all that," she said, "but I believe in God, and I don't believe He minds much about what you do as long as you keep your end up and help a lame dog over a stile when you can. And I think people on the whole are very nice, and I'm sorry for those who aren't."

"And what about afterwards?" asked Philip.

"Oh, well, I don't know for certain, you know," she smiled, "but I hope for the best. And anyhow there'll be no rent to pay and no novelettes to write."

She had a feminine gift for delicate flattery. She thought that Philip did a brave thing when he left Paris because he was conscious he could not be a great artist; and he was enchanted when she expressed enthusiastic admiration for him. He had never been quite certain whether this action indicated courage or infirmity of purpose. It was delightful to realise that she considered it heroic. She ventured to tackle him on a subject which his friends instinctively avoided.

"It's very silly of you to be so sensitive about your club-foot," she said. She saw him flush darkly, but went on. "You know, people don't think about it nearly as much as you do. They notice it the first time they see you, and then they forget about it."

He would not answer.

"You're not angry with me, are you?"

"No."

She put her arm round his neck.

"You know, I only speak about it because I love you. I don't want it to make you unhappy."

"I think you can say anything you choose to me," he answered, smiling. "I wish I could do something to show you how grateful I am to you."

She took him in hand in other ways. She would not let him be bearish and laughed at him when he was out of temper. She made him more urbane.

"You can make me do anything you like," he said to her once.

"D'you mind?"

"No, I want to do what you like."

He had the sense to realise his happiness. It seemed to him that she gave him all that a wife could, and he preserved his freedom; she was the most charming friend he had ever had, with a sympathy that he had never found in a man. The sexual relationship was no more than the strongest link in their friendship. It completed it, but was not essential. And because Philip's appetites were satisfied, he became more equable and easier to live with. He felt in complete possession of himself. He thought sometimes of the winter, during which he had been obsessed by a hideous passion, and he was filled with loathing for Mildred and with horror of himself.

His examinations were approaching, and Norah was as interested in them as he. He was flattered and touched by her eagerness. She made him promise to come at once and tell her the result. He passed the three parts this time without mishap, and when he went to tell her she burst into tears.

"Oh, I'm so glad, I was so anxious."

"You silly little thing," he laughed, but he was choking.

No one could help being pleased with the way she took it.

“And what are you going to do now?” she asked.

“I can take a holiday with a clear conscience. I have no work to do till the winter session begins in October.”

“I suppose you’ll go down to your uncle’s at Blackstable?”

“You suppose quite wrong. I’m going to stay in London and play with you.”

“I’d rather you went away.”

“Why? Are you tired of me?”

She laughed and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Because you’ve been working hard, and you look utterly washed out. You want some fresh air and a rest. Please go.”

He did not answer for a moment. He looked at her with loving eyes.

“You know, I’d never believe it of anyone but you. You’re only thinking of my good. I wonder what you see in me.”

“Will you give me a good character with my month’s notice?” she laughed gaily.

“I’ll say that you’re thoughtful and kind, and you’re not exacting; you never worry, you’re not troublesome, and you’re easy to please.”

“All that’s nonsense,” she said, “but I’ll tell you one thing: I’m one of the few persons I ever met who are able to learn from experience.”

LXVII

PHILIP looked forward to his return to London with impatience. During the two months he spent at Blackstable Norah wrote to him frequently, long letters in a bold, large hand, in which with cheerful humour she described the little events of the daily round, the domestic troubles of her landlady, rich food for laughter, the comic vexations of her rehearsals—she was walking on in an important spectacle at one of the London theatres—and her odd adventures with the publishers of novelettes. Philip read a great deal, bathed, played tennis and sailed. At the beginning of October he settled down in London to work for the Second Conjoint examination. He was eager to pass it, since that ended the drudgery of the curriculum; after it was done with the student became an out-patients' clerk, and was brought in contact with men and women as well as with text-books. Philip saw Norah every day.

Lawson had been spending the summer at Poole, and had a number of sketches to show of the harbour and of the beach. He had a couple of commissions for portraits and proposed to stay in London till the bad light drove him away. Hayward, in London too, intended to spend the winter abroad, but remained week after week from sheer inability to make up his mind to go. Hayward had run to fat during the last two or three years—it was five years since Philip first met him in Heidelberg—and he was prematurely bald. He was very sensitive about it and wore his hair long

to conceal the unsightly patch on the crown of his head. His only consolation was that his brow was now very noble. His blue eyes had lost their colour; they had a listless droop; and his mouth, losing the fullness of youth, was weak and pale. He still talked vaguely of the things he was going to do in the future, but with less conviction; and he was conscious that his friends no longer believed in him: when he had drunk two or three glasses of whisky he was inclined to be elegiac.

"I'm a failure," he murmured, "I'm unfit for the brutality of the struggle of life. All I can do is to stand aside and let the vulgar throng hustle by in their pursuit of the good things."

He gave you the impression that to fail was a more delicate, a more exquisite thing than to succeed. He insinuated that his aloofness was due to distaste for all that was common and low. He talked beautifully of Plato.

"I should have thought you'd got through with Plato by now," said Philip impatiently.

"Would you?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

He was not inclined to pursue the subject. He had discovered of late the effective dignity of silence.

"I don't see the use of reading the same thing over and over again," said Philip. "That's only a laborious form of idleness."

"But are you under the impression that you have so great a mind that you can understand the most profound writer at a first reading?"

"I don't want to understand him, I'm not a critic. I'm not interested in him for his sake but for mine."

"Why d'you read then?"

"Partly for pleasure, because it's a habit and I'm just

as uncomfortable if I don't read as if I don't smoke, and partly to know myself. When I read a book I seem to read it with my eyes only, but now and then I come across a passage, perhaps only a phrase, which has a meaning for *me*, and it becomes part of me; I've got out of the book all that's any use to me, and I can't get anything more if I read it a dozen times. You see, it seems to me, one's like a closed bud, and most of what one reads and does has no effect at all; but there are certain things that have a peculiar significance for one, and they open a petal; and the petals open one by one; and at last the flower is there."

Philip was not satisfied with his metaphor, but he did not know how else to explain a thing which he felt and yet was not clear about.

"You want to do things, you want to become things," said Hayward, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It's so vulgar."

Philip knew Hayward very well by now. He was weak and vain, so vain that you had to be on the watch constantly not to hurt his feelings; he mingled idleness and idealism so that he could not separate them. At Lawson's studio one day he met a journalist, who was charmed by his conversation, and a week later the editor of a paper wrote to suggest that he should do some criticism for him. For forty-eight hours Hayward lived in an agony of indecision. He had talked of getting occupation of this sort so long that he had not the face to refuse outright, but the thought of doing anything filled him with panic. At last he declined the offer and breathed freely.

"It would have interfered with my work," he told Philip.

“What work?” asked Philip brutally.

“My inner life,” he answered.

Then he went on to say beautiful things about Amiel, the professor of Geneva, whose brilliancy promised achievement which was never fulfilled; till at his death the reason of his failure and the excuse were at once manifest in the minute, wonderful journal which was found among his papers. Hayward smiled enigmatically.

But Hayward could still talk delightfully about books; his taste was exquisite and his discrimination elegant; and he had a constant interest in ideas, which made him an entertaining companion. They meant nothing to him really, since they never had any effect on him; but he treated them as he might have pieces of china in an auction-room, handling them with pleasure in their shape and their glaze, pricing them in his mind; and then, putting them back into their case, thought of them no more.

And it was Hayward who made a momentous discovery. One evening, after due preparation, he took Philip and Lawson to a tavern situated in Beak Street, remarkable not only in itself and for its history—it had memories of eighteenth-century glories which excited the romantic imagination—but for its snuff, which was the best in London, and above all for its punch. Hayward led them into a large, long room, dingily magnificent, with huge pictures on the walls of nude women: they were vast allegories of the school of Haydon; but smoke, gas, and the London atmosphere had given them a richness which made them look like old masters. The dark panelling, the massive, tarnished gold of the cornice, the mahogany tables, gave the room an air of sumptuous comfort, and the leather-covered seats along

the wall were soft and easy. There was a ram's head on a table opposite the door, and this contained the celebrated snuff. They ordered punch. They drank it. It was hot rum punch. The pen falters when it attempts to treat of the excellence thereof; the sober vocabulary, the sparse epithet of this narrative, are inadequate to the task; and pompous terms, jewelled, exotic phrases rise to the excited fancy. It warmed the blood and cleared the head; it filled the soul with well-being; it disposed the mind at once to utter wit and to appreciate the wit of others; it had the vagueness of music and the precision of mathematics. Only one of its qualities was comparable to anything else; it had the warmth of a good heart; but its taste, its smell, its feel, were not to be described in words. Charles Lamb, with his infinite tact, attempting to, might have drawn charming pictures of the life of his day; Lord Byron in a stanza of *Don Juan*, aiming at the impossible, might have achieved the sublime; Oscar Wilde, heaping jewels of Ispahan upon brocades of Byzantium, might have created a troubling beauty. Considering it, the mind reeled under visions of the feasts of Elagabalus; and the subtle harmonies of Debussy mingled with the musty, fragrant romance of chests in which have been kept old clothes, ruffs, hose, doublets, of a forgotten generation, and the wan odour of lilies of the valley and the savour of Cheddar cheese.

Hayward discovered the tavern at which this priceless beverage was to be obtained, by meeting in the street a man called Macalister who had been at Cambridge with him. He was a stockbroker and a philosopher. He was accustomed to go to the tavern once a week; and soon Philip, Lawson, and Hayward got into the habit of meeting there every Tuesday evening: change of

manners made it now little frequented, which was an advantage to persons who took pleasure in conversation. Macalister was a big-boned fellow, much too short for his width, with a large, fleshy face and a soft voice. He was a student of Kant and judged everything from the standpoint of pure reason. He was fond of expounding his doctrines. Philip listened with excited interest. He had long come to the conclusion that nothing amused him more than metaphysics, but he was not so sure of their efficacy in the affairs of life. The neat little system which he had formed as the result of his meditations at Blackstable had not been of conspicuous use during his infatuation for Mildred. He could not be positive that reason was much help in the conduct of life. It seemed to him that life lived itself. He remembered very vividly the violence of the emotion which had possessed him and his inability, as if he were tied down to the ground with ropes, to react against it. He read many wise things in books, but he could only judge from his own experience (he did not know whether he was different from other people); he did not calculate the pros and cons of an action, the benefits which must befall him if he did it, the harm which might result from the omission; but his whole being was urged on irresistibly. He did not act with a part of himself but altogether. The power that possessed him seemed to have nothing to do with reason: all that reason did was to point out the methods of obtaining what his whole soul was striving for.

Macalister reminded him of the Categorical Imperative:

“Act so that every action of yours should be capable of becoming a universal rule of action for all men.”