

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

CAKES AND ALE



PENGUIN BOOKS
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William Somerset Maugham was born in 1874 and lived in Paris until he was ten. He was educated at King's School, Canterbury, and at Heidelberg University. He afterwards walked the wards of St Thomas's Hospital with a view to practice in medicine, but the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), won him over to letters. Something of his hospital experience is reflected, however, in the first of his masterpieces, *Of Human Bondage* (1915), and with *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) his reputation as a novelist was assured.

His position as one of the most successful playwrights on the London stage was being consolidated simultaneously. His first play, *A Man of Honour* (1903), was followed by a procession of successes just before and after the First World War. (At one point only Bernard Shaw had more plays running at the same time in London.) His theatre career ended with *Sheppey* (1933).

His fame as a short-story writer began with *The Trembling of a Leaf*, sub-titled *Little Stories of the South Sea Islands*, in 1921, after which he published more than ten collections.

Somerset Maugham's general books are fewer in number. They include travel books, such as *On a Chinese Screen* (1922) and *Don Fernando* (1935), essays, criticism, and the self-revealing *The Summing Up* (1938) and *A Writer's Notebook* (1949).

Somerset Maugham became a Companion of Honour in 1954. He died in 1965.

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OR

THE SKELETON IN THE
CUPBOARD



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IT was as a short story, and not a very long one either, that I first thought of this novel. Here is the note I made when it occurred to me: 'I am asked to write my reminiscences of a famous novelist, a friend of my boyhood, living at W. with a common wife, very unfaithful to him. There he writes his great books. Later he marries his secretary, who guards him and makes him into a figure. My wonder whether even in old age he is not slightly restive at being made into a monument.' I was writing at the time a series of short stories for the *Cosmopolitan*. My contract stipulated that they were to be between twelve hundred and fifteen hundred words, so that with the illustration they should not occupy more than a page of the magazine, but I allowed myself some latitude and then the illustration spread across the opposite page and gave me a little more space. I thought this story would do for this purpose, and put it aside for future use. But I had long had in mind the character of Rosie. I had wanted for years to write about her, but the opportunity never presented itself; I could contrive no setting in which she found a place to suit her, and I began to think I never should. I did not very much care. A character in a writer's head, unwritten, remains a possession; his thoughts recur to it constantly, and while his imagination gradually enriches it he enjoys the singular pleasure of feeling that there, in his mind, someone is living a varied and tremulous life, obedient to his fancy and yet in a queer wilful way independent of him. But when once that character is set down on paper it belongs to the writer no more. He forgets it. It is curious how completely a person who may have occupied your reveries for many years can thus cease to be. It suddenly struck me that the little story I had jotted down offered me just the framework for this character that I had been looking for. I would make her the wife of my distinguished novelist. I saw that my story could never be got into a couple of thousand words, so I made up my mind to wait a little and use my material for one

of the much longer tales, fourteen or fifteen thousand words, with which, following upon *Rain*, I had been not unsuccessful. But the more I thought of it the less inclined I was to waste my Rosie on a story even of this length. Old recollections returned to me. I found I had not said all I wanted to say about the W. of the note, which in *Of Human Bondage* I had called Blackstable. After so many years I did not see why I should not get closer to the facts. The Uncle William, Rector of Blackstable, and his wife Isabella, became Uncle Henry, vicar, and his wife, Sophie. The Philip Carey of the earlier book became the I of *Cakes and Ale*.

When the book appeared I was attacked in various quarters because I was supposed in the character of Edward Driffield to have drawn a portrait of Thomas Hardy. This was not my intention. He was no more in my mind than George Meredith or Anatole France. As my note suggests, I had been struck by the notion that the veneration to which an author full of years and honour is exposed must be irksome to the little alert soul within him that is alive still to the adventures of his fancy. Many odd and disconcerting ideas must cross his mind, I thought, while he maintains the dignified exterior that his admirers demand of him. I read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* when I was eighteen with such enthusiasm that I determined to marry a milkmaid, but I had never been so much taken with Hardy's other books as were most of my contemporaries, and I did not think his English very good. I was never so much interested in him as I was at one time in George Meredith, and later in Anatole France. I knew little of Hardy's life. I know now only enough to be certain that the points in common between his and that of Edward Driffield are negligible. They consist only in both having been born in humble circumstances and both having had two wives. I met Thomas Hardy but once. This was at a dinner-party at Lady St Helier's, better known in the social history of the day as Lady Jeune, who liked to ask to her house (in a much more exclusive world than the world of today) everyone that in some way or another had caught the public eye. I was then a popular and fashionable playwright. It was one of those great dinner-parties that people gave before

the war, with a vast number of courses, thick and clear soup, fish, a couple of entrées, sorbet (to give you a chance to get your second wind), joint, game, sweet, ice, and savoury; and there were twenty-four people all of whom by rank, political eminence, or artistic achievement, were distinguished. When the ladies retired to the drawing-room I found myself sitting next to Thomas Hardy. I remember a little man with an earthy face. In his evening clothes, with his boiled shirt and high collar, he had still a strange look of the soil. He was amiable and mild. It struck me at the time that there was in him a curious mixture of shyness and self-assurance. I do not remember what we talked about, but I know that we talked for three-quarters of an hour. At the end of it he paid me a great compliment: he asked me (not having heard my name) what was my profession.

I am told that two or three writers thought themselves aimed at in the character of Alroy Kear. They were under a misapprehension. This character was a composite portrait: I took the appearance from one writer, the obsession with good society from another, the heartiness from a third, the pride in athletic prowess from a fourth, and a great deal from myself. For I have a grim capacity for seeing my own absurdity and I find in myself much to excite my ridicule. I am inclined to think that this is why I see people (if I am to believe what I am frequently told and frequently read of myself) in a less flattering light than many authors who have not this unfortunate idiosyncrasy. For all the characters that we create are but copies of ourselves. It may be of course also that they really are nobler, more disinterested, virtuous, and spiritual than I. It is very natural that being godlike they should create men in their own image. When I wanted to draw the portrait of a writer who used every means of advertisement possible to assist the diffusion of his works I had no need to fix my attention on any particular person. The practice is too common for that. Nor can one help feeling sympathy for it. Every year hundreds of books, many of considerable merit, pass unnoticed. Each one has taken the author months to write, he may have had it in his mind for years; he has put into it something of himself

which is lost for ever, it is heart-rending to think how great are the chances that it will be disregarded in the press of matter that weighs down the critics' tables and burdens the booksellers' shelves. It is not unnatural that he should use what means he can to attract the attention of the public. Experience has taught him what to do. He must make himself a public figure. He must keep in the public eye. He must give interviews and get his photograph in the papers. He must write letters to *The Times*, address meetings, and occupy himself with social questions; he must make after-dinner speeches; he must recommend books in the publishers' advertisements; and he must be seen without fail at the proper places at the proper times. He must never allow himself to be forgotten. It is hard and anxious work, for a mistake may cost him dear; it would be brutal to look with anything but kindness at an author who takes so much trouble to persuade the world at large to read books that he honestly considers so well worth reading.

But there is one form of advertisement that I deplore. This is the cocktail party that is given to launch a book. You secure the presence of a photographer. You invite the gossip writers and as many eminent people as you know. The gossip writers give you a paragraph in their columns and the illustrated papers publish the photographs, but the eminent people expect to get a signed copy of the book for nothing. This ignoble practice is not rendered less objectionable when it is presumed (sometimes no doubt with justice) to be given at the expense of the publisher. It did not flourish at the time I wrote *Cakes and Ale*. It would have given me the material for a lively chapter.

I

I HAVE noticed that when someone asks for you on the telephone and, finding you out, leaves a message begging you to call him up the moment you come in, as it's important, the matter is more often important to him than to you. When it comes to making you a present or doing you a favour most people are able to hold their impatience within reasonable bounds. So when I got back to my lodgings with just enough time to have a drink, a cigarette, and to read my paper before dressing for dinner, and was told by Miss Fellows, my landlady, that Mr Alroy Kear wished me to ring him up at once, I felt that I could safely ignore his request.

'Is that the writer?' she asked me.

'It is.'

She gave the telephone a friendly glance.

'Shall I get him?'

'No, thank you.'

'What shall I say if he rings again?'

'Ask him to leave a message.'

'Very good, sir.'

She pursed her lips. She took the empty siphon, swept the room with a look to see that it was tidy, and went out. Miss Fellows was a great novel reader. I was sure that she had read all Roy's books. Her disapproval of my casualness suggested that she had read them with admiration. When I got home again, I found a note in her bold, legible writing on the side-board:

Mr Kear rang up twice. Can you lunch with him tomorrow? If not what day will suit you?

I raised my eyebrows. I had not seen Roy for three months and then only for a few minutes at a party; he had been very friendly, he always was, and when we separated he had expressed his hearty regret that we met so seldom.

'London's awful,' he said. 'One never has time to see any of

the people one wants to. Let's lunch together one day next week, shall we?'

'I'd like to,' I replied.

'I'll look at my book when I get home and ring you up.'

'All right.'

I had not known Roy for twenty years without learning that he always kept in the upper left-hand pocket of his waistcoat the little book in which he put down his engagements; I was therefore not surprised when I heard from him no further. It was impossible for me now to persuade myself that this urgent desire of his to dispense hospitality was disinterested. As I smoked a pipe before going to bed I turned over in my mind the possible reasons for which Roy might want me to lunch with him. It might be that an admirer of his had pestered him to introduce me to her or that an American editor, in London for a few days, had desired Roy to put me in touch with him; but I could not do my old friend the injustice of supposing him so barren of devices as not to be able to cope with such a situation. Besides, he told me to choose my own day, so it could hardly be that he wished me to meet anyone else.

Than Roy no one could show a more genuine cordiality to a fellow novelist whose name was on everybody's lips, but no one could more genially turn a cold shoulder on him when idleness, failure, or someone else's success had cast a shade on his notoriety. The writer has his ups and downs, and I was but too conscious that at the moment I was not in the public eye. It was obvious that I might have found excuses without affront to refuse Roy's invitation, though he was a determined fellow and if he was resolved for purposes of his own to see me, I well knew that nothing short of a downright 'go to hell' would check his persistence; but I was beset by curiosity. I had also a considerable affection for Roy.

I had watched with admiration his rise in the world of letters. His career might well have served as a model for any young man entering upon the pursuit of literature. I could think of no one among my contemporaries who had achieved so considerable a position on so little talent. This, like the wise man's

daily dose of Bemax, might have gone into a heaped-up tablespoon. He was perfectly aware of it, and it must have seemed to him sometimes little short of a miracle that he had been able with it to compose already some thirty books. I cannot but think that he saw the white light of revelation when first he read that Thomas Carlyle in an after-dinner speech had stated that genius was an infinite capacity for taking pains. He pondered the saying. If that was all, he must have told himself, he could be a genius like the rest; and when the excited reviewer of a lady's paper, writing a notice of one of his works, used the word (and of late the critics have been doing it with agreeable frequency) he must have sighed with the satisfaction of one who after long hours of toil has completed a cross-word puzzle. No one who for years had observed his indefatigable industry could deny that at all events he deserved to be a genius.

Roy started with certain advantages. He was the only son of a civil servant who after being Colonial Secretary for many years in Hong Kong ended his career as Governor of Jamaica. When you looked up Alroy Kear in the serried pages of *Who's Who* you saw 'o.s. of Sir Raymond Kear, K.C.M.G., K.C.V.O., q.v., and of Emily, y.d. of the late Major-General Percy Camperdown, Indian Army.' He was educated at Winchester and at New College, Oxford. He was president of the Union and but for an unfortunate attack of measles might very well have got his rowing blue. His academic career was respectable rather than showy, and he left the university without a debt in the world. Roy was even then of a thrifty habit, without any inclination to unprofitable expense, and he was a good son. He knew that it had been a sacrifice to his parents to give him so costly an education. His father, having retired, lived in an unpretentious, but not mean, house near Stroud, in Gloucestershire, but at intervals went to London to attend official dinners connected with the colonies he had administered, and on these occasions was in the habit of visiting the Athenaeum, of which he was a member. It was through an old crony at this club that he was able to get his boy, when he came down from Oxford, appointed tutor to the delicate and only son of a very

noble lord. This gave Roy a chance to become acquainted at an early age with the great world. He made good use of his opportunities. You will never find in his works any of the solecisms that disfigure the productions of those who have studied the upper circles of society only in the pages of the illustrated papers. He knew exactly how dukes spoke to one another, and the proper way they should be addressed respectively by a member of Parliament, an attorney, a bookmaker, and a valet. There is something captivating in the jauntiness with which in his early novels he handles viceroys, ambassadors, prime ministers, royalties, and great ladies. He is friendly without being patronizing and familiar without being impertinent. He does not let you forget their rank, but shares with you his comfortable feeling that they are of the same flesh as you and I. I always think it a pity that, fashion having decided that the doings of the aristocracy are no longer a proper subject for serious fiction, Roy, always keenly sensitive to the tendency of the age, should in his later novels have confined himself to the spiritual conflicts of solicitors, chartered accountants, and produce brokers. He does not move in these circles with his old assurance.

I knew him first soon after he resigned his tutorship to devote himself exclusively to literature, and he was then a fine, upstanding young man, six feet high in his stockinged feet and of an athletic build, with broad shoulders and a confident carriage. He was not handsome, but in a manly way agreeable to look at, with wide, blue, frank eyes and curly hair of a lightish brown; his nose was rather short and broad, his chin square. He looked honest, clean, and healthy. He was something of an athlete. No one who has read in his early books the descriptions of a run with the hounds, so vivid and so accurate, can doubt that he wrote from personal experience; and until quite lately he was willing now and then to desert his desk for a day's hunting. He published his first novel at the period when men of letters, to show their virility, drank beer and played cricket, and for some years there was seldom a literary eleven in which his name did not figure. This particular school, I hardly know why, has lost its bravery, their books are neglected,

and, cricketers though they have remained, they find difficulty in placing their articles. Roy ceased playing cricket a good many years ago, and he has developed a fine taste for claret.

Roy was very modest about his first novel. It was short, neatly written, and, as is everything he has produced since, in perfect taste. He sent it with a pleasant letter to all the leading writers of the day, and in this he told each one how greatly he admired his works, how much he had learned from his study of them, and how ardently he aspired to follow, albeit at a humble distance, the trail his correspondent had blazed. He laid his book at the feet of a great artist as the tribute of a young man entering upon the profession of letters to one whom he would always look up to as his master. Deprecatingly, fully conscious of his audacity in asking so busy a man to waste his time on a neophyte's puny effort, he begged for criticism and guidance. Few of the replies were perfunctory. The authors he wrote to, flattered by his praise, answered at length. They commended his book; many of them asked him to luncheon. They could not fail to be charmed by his frankness and warmed by his enthusiasm. He asked for their advice with a humility that was touching, and promised to act upon it with a sincerity that was impressive. Here, they felt, was someone worth taking a little trouble over.

His novel had a considerable success. It made him many friends in literary circles and in a very short while you could not go to a tea-party in Bloomsbury, Campden Hill, or Westminster without finding him handing round bread and butter or disembarassing an elderly lady of an empty cup. He was so young, so bluff, so gay, he laughed so merrily at other people's jokes that no one could help liking him. He joined dining clubs where in the basement of an hotel in Victoria Street or Holborn men of letters, young barristers, and ladies in Liberty silks and strings of beads, ate a three-and-sixpenny dinner and discussed art and literature. It was soon discovered that he had a pretty gift for after-dinner speaking. He was so pleasant that his fellow writers, his rivals and contemporaries, forgave him even the fact that he was a gentleman. He was generous in his

praise of their fledgeling works, and when they sent him manuscripts to criticize could never find a thing amiss. They thought him not only a good sort, but a sound judge.

He wrote a second novel. He took great pains with it and he profited by the advice his elders in the craft had given him. It was only just that more than one should at his request write a review for a paper with whose editor Roy had got into touch and only natural that the review should be flattering. His second novel was successful, but not so successful as to arouse the umbrageous susceptibilities of his competitors. In fact it confirmed them in their suspicions that he would never set the Thames on fire. He was a jolly good fellow; no side, or anything like that: they were quite content to give a leg up to a man who would never climb so high as to be an obstacle to themselves. I know some who smile bitterly now when they reflect on the mistake they made.

But when they say that he is swollen-headed they err. Roy has never lost the modesty which in his youth was his most engaging trait.

'I know I'm not a great novelist,' he will tell you. 'When I compare myself with the giants I simply don't exist. I used to think that one day I should write a really great novel, but I've long ceased even to hope for that. All I want people to say is that I do my best. I do work. I never let anything slipshod get past me. I think I can tell a good story and I can create characters that ring true. And after all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: *The Eye of the Needle* sold thirty-five thousand in England and eighty thousand in America, and for the serial rights of my next book I've got the biggest terms I've ever had yet.'

And what, after all, can it be other than modesty that makes him even now write to the reviewers of his books, thanking them for their praise, and ask them to luncheon? Nay, more: when someone has written a stinging criticism and Roy, especially since his reputation became so great, has had to put up with some very virulent abuse, he does not, like most of us, shrug his shoulders, fling a mental insult at the ruffian who does not like our work, and then forget about it; he writes a

long letter to his critic, telling him that he is very sorry he thought his book bad, but his review was so interesting in itself, and if he might venture to say so, showed so much critical sense and so much feeling for words, that he felt bound to write to him. No one is more anxious to improve himself than he, and he hopes he is still capable of learning. He does not want to be a bore, but if the critic has nothing to do on Wednesday or Friday will he come and lunch at the Savoy and tell him why exactly he thought his book so bad? No one can order a lunch better than Roy, and generally by the time the critic has eaten half a dozen oysters and a cut from a saddle of baby lamb, he has eaten his words too. It is only poetic justice that when Roy's next novel comes out the critic should see in the new work a very great advance.

One of the difficulties that a man has to cope with as he goes through life is what to do about the persons with whom he has once been intimate and whose interest for him has in due course subsided. If both parties remain in a modest station the break comes about naturally, and no ill feeling subsists, but if one of them achieves eminence the position is awkward. He makes a multitude of new friends, but the old ones are inexorable; he has a thousand claims on his time, but they feel that they have the first right to it. Unless he is at their beck and call they sigh and with a shrug of the shoulders say:

'Ah, well, I suppose you're like everyone else. I must expect to be dropped now that you're a success.'

That, of course, is what he would like to do if he had the courage. For the most part he hasn't. He weakly accepts an invitation to supper on Sunday evening. The cold roast beef is frozen and comes from Australia and was over-cooked at middle day; and the burgundy – ah, why will they call it burgundy? Have they never been to Beaune and stayed at the Hôtel de la Poste? Of course it is grand to talk of the good old days when you shared a crust of bread in a garret together, but it is a little disconcerting when you reflect how near to a garret is the room you are sitting in. You don't feel at ease when your friend tells you that his books don't sell and that he can't place his short stories; the managers won't even read his plays,

and when he compares them with some of the stuff that's put on (here he fixes you with an accusing eye) it really does seem a bit hard. You are embarrassed and you look away. You exaggerate the failures you have had in order that he may realize that life has its hardships for you too. You refer to your work in the most disparaging way you can and are a trifle taken aback to find that your host's opinion of it is the same as yours. You speak of the fickleness of the public so that he may comfort himself by thinking that your popularity cannot last. He is a friendly but severe critic.

'I haven't read your last book,' he says, 'but I read the one before. I've forgotten its name.'

You tell him.

'I was rather disappointed in it. I didn't think it was quite so good as some of the things you've done. Of course you know which my favourite is.'

And you, having suffered from other hands than his, answer at once with the name of the first book you ever wrote: you were twenty then, and it was crude and ingenuous, and on every page was written your inexperience.

'You'll never do anything so good as that,' he says heartily, and you feel that your whole career has been a long decadence from that one happy hit. 'I always think you've never *quite* fulfilled the promise you showed then.'

The gas-fire roasts your feet, but your hands are icy. You look at your wrist-watch surreptitiously and wonder whether your old friend would think it offensive if you took your leave as early as ten. You have told your car to wait round the corner so that it should not stand outside the door and by its magnificence affront his poverty, but at the door he says:

'You'll find a bus at the bottom of the street. I'll just walk down with you.'

Panic seizes you and you confess that you have a car. He finds it very odd that the chauffeur should wait round the corner. You answer that this is one of his idiosyncrasies. When you reach it your friend looks at it with tolerant superiority. You nervously ask him to dinner with you one day. You