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with
Willie

recollections of
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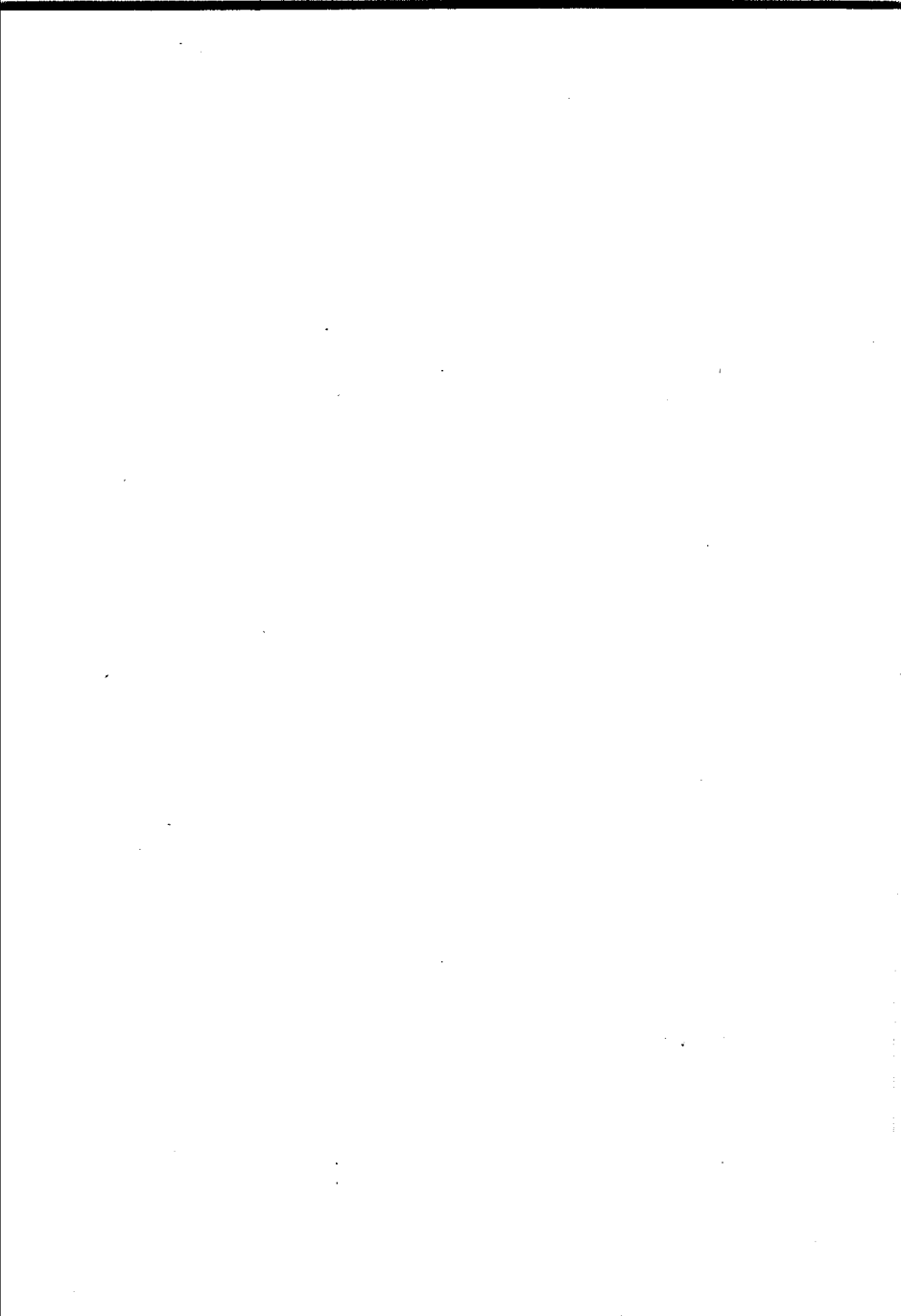
Conversations with Willie

Robin Maugham was born in 1916. Educated at Eton and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, he succeeded his father as Viscount Maugham in 1958. During the war he served with the Inns of Court Regiment as a trooper and was commissioned into the London Yeomanry (Sharpshooters) in 1940. He suffered wounds and was mentioned in despatches during service in the Western Desert.

In 1945 Robin Maugham was called to the Bar and also published his first book. Since then he has travelled extensively and published a long list of books, notably *Line on Ginger*, *The Rough and the Smooth*, and *The Servant* – all three of which have been filmed.

He is also the author of the controversial *The Slaves of Timbuktu* – which drew attention to the existence of slavery in the modern world – and the outstanding study of his uncle W. Somerset Maugham, *Somerset and all the Maughams*.

Part One



Willie—as I called my uncle, William Somerset Maugham, since the days when I was a schoolboy—was certainly the most famous author alive. And he was probably the saddest.

This little, frail old man, with a wizened, wrinkled face like a Chinese sage, would shuffle through the vast, deserted rooms of the Villa Mauresque—his luxurious house on Cap Ferrat in the South of France—like a lost ghost. He sought comfort in the past. He was bewildered by the present, and afraid of the future.

When I stayed with him in 1965 in this famous villa on the Riviera, I was the first guest for several months.

"You know," he said to me, with his pronounced stammer, "I shall be dead very soon. And I der-don't like the idea of it at all."

The lines of his face were twisted in misery.

"I'm a very old party," he said. "But that doesn't make it any easier for me."

At the age of ninety-one my uncle William Somerset Maugham still made a fortune—even though he hadn't written a word for ages. The royalties from his books and short stories still literally flowed in from all over the world. And so did the fan-letters: he got more than three hundred a week—most of them from teenagers. (All of them were answered, and all replies were signed.) But he could no longer read the letters himself, for

cataracts had formed on both his eyes. His favourite pastime—reading—was now denied him.

At this moment four of his plays were running in Germany. His play *The Circle* had been brilliantly revived in England by Evelyn Laye and Frank Lawton, and *The Constant Wife* had just been turned into a musical.

One of his most famous novels, *Of Human Bondage*, was soon to be made into a film—which might bring him as many millions of dollars as did *Rain*, *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge*.

Unfortunately, the one reward all Willie's talent and success had not given him was happiness.

"What is the happiest memory of your life?" I asked him as he sat beside me on the sofa at the Villa Mauresque.

"I cer-can't think of a single moment," he stammered.

I glanced at Alan Searle, his sixty-year-old secretary and friend who had been Willie's most loyal and devoted companion for over twenty years. I looked round the drawing-room at the immensely valuable furniture and pictures and objects that Willie's success had enabled him to acquire. I remembered that the villa itself, and the wonderful garden I could see through the windows—a fabulous setting on the edge of the Mediterranean—were worth £600,000.

Willie had eleven servants, including his cook, Annette, who was the envy of all the other millionaires on the Riviera. He dined off silver plates, waited on by Marius his butler and Henri his footman. But it no longer meant anything to him.

* * *

A broad corridor ran all the way round the upper

storey of the patio. The following afternoon of my stay, I found Willie reclining on a sofa, peering through his spectacles at a Bible which had very large print. He looked horribly wizened and his face was grim. As I walked along the corridor in a beach dressing-gown on my way to the swimming-pool, he looked up angrily at the intrusion.

"Good afternoon," I said. He did not recognise me. His hands began to tremble. He glared at me.

"What's that? What's that you said?"

I spoke loudly and distinctly. "I said 'Good Afternoon'."

Willie now recognised me, and his hands stopped trembling, but he was still in a bad mood.

"Well, at least your remark is apt and to the point—for it is a good afternoon," he said. "And once again I've been reading the Bible you gave me... And I've come across the quotation—'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'"

Willie clasped and unclasped his hands.

"I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child... Of course, it's all a lot of bunk. But the thought is quite interesting all the same."

Willie took up a cigarette and I lit it for him.

"Where are you off to now?" he demanded.

"I was thinking of going for a swim in the pool," I replied.

"Won't you take me round the garden first?" he asked.

He walked slowly, leaning on my arm, along a green glade between the eucalyptus and pine trees.

"You know, when I die," he said, "they'll take it all away from me—every tree, the whole house, and every

stick of furniture. I shan't even be able to take a single table with me."

For a while he was silent as we walked through a grove of orange trees.

"Jesus Christ could cope with all the miseries I have had to contend with in life," he announced. Then he stopped walking and peered across the top of the trees towards the blue sea beyond. Suddenly he smiled sardonically, and there was a flash of Willie as he had been in his prime.

"But then Jesus Christ had certain advantages I don't possess," he said.

As I helped Willie down the steps towards the house, he stopped and turned to me.

"You know, dying is a very dull, dreary affair," he said. Then he smiled. It was a smile full of compassion for all the foibles of the human race.

"And my advice to you is to have nothing whatever to do with it," he concluded.

That evening in the drawing-room after dinner, Willie was standing by the fireplace. He was wearing an old smoking-jacket and a silk scarf. He put down his empty coffee cup on a side-table, then flung himself down on to the sofa. He looked up at me.

"Oh, Robin, I'm so tired, so tired..." he muttered. Then he gave a gulp of sorrow and buried his head in his hands.

"I've been a fer-failure the whole way through my life," he said. "I've made mistake after mistake. I've made a hash of everything."

I sat down on the sofa beside him and tried to comfort him.

"You're the most famous writer alive. Surely that means something?" I asked.

"I wish I'd never written a single word," he answered. "It's brought me nothing but misery... Everyone who's got to know me well has ended up by hating me... My whole life has been a failure..."

He took my hand. For an instant he was calmer.

"And now it's too late to change," he said. "It's too late."

Willie looked up and his grip tightened on my hand. He was staring towards the door. His face was contorted with fear, and he was trembling violently.

"Who's that coming into the room?" he asked.

Willie's face was now ashen as he stared in horror ahead of him. Suddenly he began to shriek.

"Go away!" he cried. "I'm not ready... I'm not dead yet... I'm not dead yet, I tell you..."

His high-pitched terror-struck voice seemed to echo from wall to wall. I looked round, but the room was empty as before.

"There's no one there, Willie," I told him.

Willie began to gasp hysterically. Then the attack passed. His grip on my hand relaxed. He lay back on the sofa and tried to smile. He spoke very quietly.

"You know, I'm at death's door," he said. "But the trouble is that I'm afraid to knock."

* * *

The reader of this book may well wonder how it was that over a dozen years after Willie's death I could remember scenes and dialogue so accurately. Let me explain.

As a child I had always admired my uncle, and when I grew up I realised how many people shared my admiration for his work. A few weeks before the New Year of 1945 I went to stay with Willie in North

Carolina. I then began to take notes of what he said, what he did, what he wore, and what he ate.

Willie spent the last few years of his life at his villa in Cap Ferrat. Each time I stayed with him and with his wonderfully kind and patient companion, Alan Searle, my interest in my Uncle Willie increased. By then I had become a writer myself, and my first novel, *The Servant*, had been a success. I could now think of my uncle as a fellow writer. Moreover, he fascinated me as an individual. I began to observe him carefully and to record my impressions in folio-sized notebooks.

Willie died in 1965. Shortly afterwards, I went to live in Spain. The notebooks—together with many other documents—went into store.

When I returned to England, after nearly ten years abroad, I was foraging through the various papers which had been stored, and I came across—dusty and a little mouldy—my Willie diaries. As I read my almost indecipherable handwriting, suddenly the realisation came to me: I had found a treasure-trove. In the pages which I was turning over in my hands were the observations, almost instantly recorded, of and about a great man. Two tasks remained to me: the first was to have typed out the quickly written notes from all my diaries—the second was to fill in the abbreviations in the text and to link the notes together.

I knew Willie intimately for many years. I will try to present him with the accuracy of a ciné-camera taking shots of a subject who is unaware that his conversation and movements are being recorded. If some of the things he said were trivial, and if he often repeated himself, it must be remembered that towards the end he was a worn man. Inasmuch as this book has been compiled

from my diaries, I will deliberately include the repetitions which occurred, because I want to give an honest picture of what he was like—particularly in his ageing years. I will try to complete—"warts and all"—the portrait of a famous man of letters.

* * *

Who *were* the Maughams, I used to ask Willie, and where did they come from? Willie said that he didn't care a tinker's cuss. But when the *Genealogists' Magazine* came out with an article called "Two Royal Descents" tracing our ancestry back to King Edward I, Willie was quite amused and interested.

"I'm *ter-terribly* impressed," he stammered. Then he looked up at me with a sarcastic smile. "But I daresay you've noticed that all the descents are in the female line," he added. "Didn't the Maughams have *any* reputable ancestors?"

Willie's great-great-great-grandfather was born in the reign of Charles II. He was a yeoman farmer in Westmorland—his house is still standing. He had eight children, one of whom was so respectable that he became a clergyman and a schoolmaster. This was the Reverend William Maugham, Master of the Free Grammar School at Moulton, in Lincolnshire, for fifty years until his death in 1814. I have an old box full of the Reverend William's sermons which he wrote out in longhand on pages cut to the size of a postcard and bound together with cotton. They are dull and staid. Sometimes a sermon was composed for a special occasion, such as Wolfe's victory at Quebec in 1759. But even Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 failed to inspire the man.

There is no foreshadowing of Willie's neat diamond-

cut prose and stark realism in the whole bunch of his namesake's conventional sermons.

* * *

The youngest of the Westmorland farmer's eight children was named Robert, and he was Willie's great-great-grandfather. He was a glazier, who spent most of his life in the ancient town of Appleby, where he died in the year of Waterloo. But his sons came south to London to seek more genteel professions. There seems to have been almost a mass movement of Maughams away from Westmorland and the other Border counties in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some even emigrated to America—including a grandchild of the Reverend William, who bought a thirty-acre farm in Summit County, Ohio, for six hundred dollars.

Willie's great-grandfather was also called William. He was the eldest son of Robert the glazier, and he seems to have had some nodding acquaintance with the legal profession—perhaps as a clerk in a solicitor's office or in a firm of law stationers, for he was living in Chancery Lane when his first child was born in 1788. I wish I knew more about him. He must have had certain qualities to have produced a long line of lawyers and writers.

His eldest son, Robert, entered the employment of an attorney in Threadneedle Street. He worked as an ordinary clerk for some years and was given his articles in 1812. Apparently he was quite successful in practice, but he seems to have been more concerned with the well-being of the profession as a whole than for his own future. In 1825 he published his *Treatise on the Law of Attornies*, which was the first attempt to provide attorneys with a text-book covering every aspect of their

professional activities. This "energetic little man" who became the "father of legal journalism"* was also one of the founders and the first secretary of the Law Society, with a salary of £400 a year and "apartments for his family in the newly completed Hall". In 1830 he founded the Legal Observer, "the first successful legal journal to combine current professional news with reports of cases and articles of practical interest to lawyers", and he continued as its proprietor and editor until 1856 when he sold out.

A Maugham had made good at last.

The portrait of Robert Maugham in the Law Society's hall shows an impressive-looking, rather sinister man with dark, piercing eyes and a firm jaw. And Robert seems to have had the Maugham temperament. When Willie was a boy he met an old solicitor who had dined in his youth at Robert Maugham's house.

"A servant handed the old party a dish of potatoes baked in their jackets," Willie told me. "But it seems that your great-grandfather didn't like them for some reason. Anyhow he took up the potatoes one by one and threw them at the pictures round the wall. And nobody dared say a word."

* * *

When Robert Maugham died in 1862, his eldest son, Robert Ormond Maugham—Willie's father—was already a well-established lawyer. He had his own firm in Paris and was also solicitor to the British Embassy. A year later he married Edith Mary Snell, whose mother, the widow of a major in the service of the East India Company, had settled in Paris to have her two daughters

* Mr Michael Birks in *The Law Society's Gazette* for December, 1959.

educated at a convent school. The old lady also had some talent as an author, and she wrote a dozen or so tales for French children, that were published in the series *Bibliothèque Morale de la Jeunesse*. It was through her, incidentally, that my uncle Willie and I derived our smart ancestors and our drop of Edward I's royal blood.

Edith Snell was twenty-three and very lovely when she married Robert Ormond Maugham.

"She was lovely, with russet hair, a straight little nose, and a creamy complexion, almost wax-like," I was told by her god-daughter, Mrs Hammersley.* "Her great brown eyes were always sad. She must have suffered a lot of pain from her terrible consumption, and she was sometimes terribly ill. My mother, who always took me visiting with her in the afternoons, often had tea with Mrs Maugham. Your grandmother would give me a doll to play with. I would take it with me under the tea-table. I could hear them above me, talking in low and earnest tones."

* Violet Williams-Freeman, later Mrs Arthur Hammersley, was a god-daughter of Edith Maugham, Willie's mother and, like Willie, had been born in the British Embassy in Paris. A friend of many of the Bloomsberries—Lytton Strachey, Desmond MacCarthy, Duncan Grant and Virginia Woolf; a family friend of the Mitfords—Mrs Hammersley, whom I met in 1963, died on Willie's ninetieth birthday—January 25th, 1964. Only that morning she had written to me. She stamped the letter, but she never posted it. Her solicitors found it and sent it on to me. It was quite a short letter, lively yet muddled, but I was able to make out the first few lines. "Dear Robin," she wrote, "I feel I must write you a line because on every page of every paper which passes through my hands I am faced with photographs of Willie, and dissertations about him—his dignity, benignity, deep loving kindness—until I scarcely feel I ever knew my faithful friend at all... And yet I'm sure I did..."

I reminded Mrs Hammersley that my grandparents had been known as "Beauty and the Beast" by their friends.

"Oh yes," she replied. "Your grandfather was very ugly—almost a monster to look at, with a large, very yellow face and very yellow eyes. But he was a very loving parent, and wonderfully kind to children."

The Maughams moved in a brilliant circle of friends in Paris. To their large and spacious apartment on the third floor of number 25 Avenue d'Antin (now Avenue Franklin D. Roosevelt) might come Prosper Mérimée and Gustave Doré and Clemenceau, together with some of the most influential and talented people of their day.

Charles Ormond, their first son, was born in November 1865. Frederic Herbert, my father, was born in October 1866, and their third son Henry Neville, called Harry, was born in 1868. My grandmother was frail and suffered from tuberculosis, but child-bearing was believed at that time to be helpful in combating the disease. Her first three sons flourished and her fourth son, William Somerset Maugham, was born on January 25th, 1874. But the next child was still-born. And in January 1882, wasted and exhausted, Willie's mother died, at the age of forty-one, after bearing yet another child, which lived for only a few hours.

* * *

Willie adored his mother, and for most of the five years after his eldest brothers had been packed off to school at Dover College in 1877, he had her warm affection all to himself. He was shattered by her death.

But the death of his mother and his stammer were not the only afflictions that Willie had to bear when he was a boy. He had been brought up to believe that his family