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W. Somerset Maugham

The Summing Up



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Pan Books in association with
William Heinemann



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The Summing Up

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 spent some time at St Thomas's Hospital with the idea of practising medicine, but the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, published in 1897, won him over to letters. *Of Human Bondage*, the first of his masterpieces, came out in 1915, and with the publication in 1919 of *The Moon and Sixpence* his reputation as a novelist was established. His position as a successful playwright was being consolidated at the same time. His first play, *A Man of Honour*, was followed by a series of successes just before and after World War I, and his career in the theatre did not end until 1933 with *Sheppey*.

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. His other works include travel books such as *On a Chinese Screen* and *Don Fernando*, essays, criticism, and the autobiographical *The Summing Up* and *A Writer's Notebook*.

In 1927 Somerset Maugham settled in the South of France and lived there until his death in 1965.

Also by

W. Somerset Maugham in Pan Books

Collected Short Stories Volumes 1-4

Of Human Bondage

The Moon and Sixpence

Cakes and Ale

The Razor's Edge

The Narrow Corner

Catalina

Liza of Lambeth

Mrs Craddock

The Magician

Up at the Villa

The Painted Veil

Theatre

Christmas Holiday

A Writer's Notebook

Ten Novels and their Authors

Selected Plays

THIS is not an autobiography nor is it a book of recollections. In one way and another I have used in my writings whatever has happened to me in the course of my life. Sometimes an experience I have had has served as a theme and I have invented a series of incidents to illustrate it; more often I have taken persons with whom I have been slightly or intimately acquainted and used them as the foundation for characters of my invention. Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other. It would not interest me to record the facts, even if I could remember them, of which I have already made a better use. They would seem, moreover, very tame. I have had a varied, and often an interesting, life, but not an adventurous one. I have a poor memory. I can never remember a good story till I hear it again, and then I forget it before I have had a chance to tell it to somebody else. I have never been able to remember even my own jokes, so that I have been forced to go on making new ones. This disability, I am aware, has made my company less agreeable than it might otherwise have been.

I have never kept a diary. I wish now that during the year that followed my first success as a dramatist I had done so, for I met then many persons of consequence, and it might have proved an interesting document. At that period the confidence of the people in the aristocracy and the landed gentry had been shattered by the muddle they had made of things in South Africa, but the aristocracy and the landed gentry had not realized this, and they preserved their old self-confidence. At certain political houses I frequented they still talked as though to run the British Empire were their private business. It gave me a peculiar sensation to hear it discussed, when a general election was in the air, whether Tom should have the Home Office and whether Dick would be satisfied with Ireland. I do not suppose that anyone today reads the novels of Mrs Humphry Ward, but dull though they may be, my recollection is that some of them give a very good picture of

what the life of the ruling class was then. Novelists were still much concerned with it, and even writers who had never known a lord thought it necessary to write largely about persons of rank. It would astonish anyone now who looked at the playbills of the day to see how many of the characters were titled. Managers thought that they attracted the public, and actors liked to portray them. But as the political importance of the aristocracy dwindled the public took less interest in it. Playgoers began to be ready to observe the actions of people of their own class, the well-to-do merchants and professional men who were then conducting the affairs of the country; and the rule, though never formulated, prevailed that the writer should not introduce persons of title unless they were essential to his theme. It was still impossible to interest the public in the lower classes. Novels and plays that dealt with them were very generally considered sordid. It will be curious to see if now that these classes have acquired political power the public at large will take the same interest in their lives that for so long it took in the lives of the titled, and for a while in those of the opulent bourgeoisie.

During this period I met persons who by their rank, fame, or position might very well have thought themselves destined to become historical figures. I did not find them as brilliant as my fancy had painted them. The English are a political nation, and I was often asked to houses where politics were the ruling interest. I could not discover in the eminent statesmen I met there any marked capacity. I concluded, perhaps rashly, that no great degree of intelligence was needed to rule a nation. Since then I have known in various countries a good many politicians who have attained high office. I have continued to be puzzled by what seemed to me the mediocrity of their minds. I have found them ill-informed upon the ordinary affairs of life, and I have not often discovered in them either subtlety of intellect or liveliness of imagination. At one time I was inclined to think that they owed their illustrious position only to their gift of speech, for it must be next door to impossible to rise to power in a democratic community unless you can catch the ears of the public; and the gift of speech, as we know, is not often accompanied by the power of thought. But since I have seen statesmen who did not

seem to me very clever conduct public affairs with reasonable success I cannot but think I was wrong: it must be that to govern a nation you need a specific talent and that this may very well exist without general ability. In the same way I have known men of affairs who have made great fortunes and brought vast enterprises to prosperity, but in everything unconcerned with their business appear to be devoid even of common sense.

Nor was the conversation that I heard then as clever as I had expected. It seldom gave you much to think about. It was easy, though not always, gay, amiable and superficial. Serious topics were not dealt with, for there was a feeling that to discuss them in general company was embarrassing, and the fear of 'shop' seemed to prevent people from speaking of the subjects in which they were most interested. So far as I could judge conversation consisted in little more than a decorous badinage; but it was not often that you heard a witticism worth repeating. One might have thought that the only use of culture was to enable one to talk nonsense with distinction. On the whole I think the most interesting and consistently amusing talker I ever knew was Edmund Gosse. He had read a great deal, though not very carefully, it appears, and his conversation was extremely intelligent. He had a prodigious memory, a keen sense of humour, and malice. He had known Swinburne intimately and could talk about him in an entrancing fashion, but he could also talk of Shelley, whom after all he could not possibly have known, as if he had been a bosom-friend. For many years he had been acquainted with eminent persons. I think he was a vain man, and he had observed their absurdities with satisfaction. I am sure he made them much more amusing than they really were.

II

I HAVE always wondered at the passion many people have to meet the celebrated. The prestige you acquire by being able to tell your friends that you know famous men proves only that you are yourself of small account. The celebrated develop a technique to deal with the persons they come across. They show

the world a mask, often an impressive one, but take care to conceal their real selves. They play the part that is expected from them, and with practice learn to play it very well, but you are stupid if you think that this public performance of theirs corresponds with the man within.

I have been attached, deeply attached, to a few people; but I have been interested in men in general not for their own sakes, but for the sake of my work. I have not, as Kant enjoined, regarded each man as an end in himself, but as material that might be useful to me as a writer. I have been more concerned with the obscure than with the famous. They are more often themselves. They have had no need to create a figure to protect themselves from the world or to impress it. Their idiosyncrasies have had more chance to develop in the limited circle of their activity, and since they have never been in the public eye it has never occurred to them that they have anything to conceal. They display their oddities because it has never struck them that they are odd. And after all it is with the common run of men that we writers have to deal; kings, dictators, commercial magnates are from our point of view very unsatisfactory. To write about them is a venture that has often tempted writers, but the failure that has attended their efforts shows that such beings are too exceptional to form a proper ground for a work of art. They cannot be made real. The ordinary is the writer's richer field. Its unexpectedness, its singularity, its infinite variety afford unending material. The great man is too often all of a piece; it is the little man that is a bundle of contradictory elements. He is inexhaustible. You never come to the end of the surprises he has in store for you. For my part I would much sooner spend a month on a desert island with a veterinary surgeon than with a prime minister.

III

In this book I am going to try to sort out my thoughts on the subjects that have chiefly interested me during the course of my life. But such conclusions as I have come to have drifted about

my mind like the wreckage of a foundered ship on a restless sea. It has seemed to me that if I set them down in some sort of order I should see for myself more distinctly what they really were and so might get some kind of coherence into them. I have long thought I should like to make such an attempt and more than once, when starting on a journey that was to last for several months, have determined to set about it. The opportunity seemed ideal. But I have always found that I was assailed by so many impressions, I saw so many strange things, and met so many people who excited my fancy, that I had no time to reflect. The experience of the moment was so vivid that I could not attune my mind to introspection.

I have been held back also by the irksomeness of setting down my thoughts in my own person. For though I have written a good deal from this standpoint I have written as a novelist and so in a manner have been able to regard myself as a character in the story. Long habit has made it more comfortable for me to speak through the creatures of my invention. I can decide what they would think more readily than I can decide what I think myself. The one has always been a pleasure to me; the other has been a labour that I have willingly put off. But now I can afford to put it off no longer. In youth the years stretch before one so long that it is hard to realize that they will ever pass, and even in middle age, with the ordinary expectation of life in these days, it is easy to find excuses for delaying what one would like to do but does not want to; but at last a time comes when death must be considered. Here and there one's contemporaries drop off. We know that all men are mortal (Socrates was a man; therefore -- and so forth), but it remains for us little more than a logical premiss till we are forced to recognize that in the ordinary course of things our end can no longer be remote. An occasional glance at the obituary column of *The Times* has suggested to me that the sixties are very unhealthy; I have long thought that it would exasperate me to die before I had written this book, and so it seemed to me that I had better set about it at once. When I have finished it I can face the future with serenity, for I shall have rounded off my life's work. I can no longer persuade myself that I am not ready to write it, since if I have not by now made up

my mind about the things that seem of importance to me there is small likelihood that I shall ever do so. I am glad at last to collect all these thoughts that for so long have floated at haphazard on the various levels of my consciousness. When they are written down I shall have finished with them and my mind will be free to occupy itself with other things. For I hope that this will not be the last book I shall write. One does not die immediately one has made one's will; one makes one's will as a precaution. To have settled one's affairs is a very good preparation to leading the rest of one's life without concern for the future. When I have finished this book I shall know where I stand. I can afford then to do what I choose with the years that remain to me.

IV

It is inevitable that in it I should say many things that I have said before; that is why I have called it *The Summing Up*. When a judge sums up a case he recapitulates the facts that have been put before the jury and comments on the speeches of counsel. He does not offer new evidence. And since I have put the whole of my life into my books much of what I have to say will naturally have found a place in them. There are few subjects within the compass of my interests that I have not lightly or seriously touched upon. All I can attempt to do now is to give a coherent picture of my feelings and opinions; and here and there, maybe, to state with greater elaboration some idea which the limitations I have thought fit to accept in fiction and in the drama have only allowed me to hint at.

This book must be egotistic. It is about certain subjects that are important to me and it is about myself because I can only treat of these subjects as they have affected me. But it is not about my doings. I have no desire to lay bare my heart, and I put limits to the intimacy that I wish the reader to enter upon with me. There are matters on which I am content to maintain my privacy. No one can tell the whole truth about himself. It is not only vanity that has prevented those who have tried to reveal themselves to the world from telling the whole truth;

it is direction of interest; their disappointment with themselves, their surprise that they can do things that seem to them so abnormal, make them place too great an emphasis on occurrences that are more common than they suppose. Rousseau in the course of his *Confessions* narrates incidents that have profoundly shocked the sensibility of mankind. By describing them so frankly he falsified his values and so gave them in his book a greater importance than they had in his life. They were events among a multitude of others, virtuous or at least neutral, that he omitted because they were too ordinary to seem worth recording. There is a sort of man who pays no attention to his good actions, but is tormented by his bad ones. This is the type that most often writes about himself. He leaves out his redeeming qualities, and so appears only weak, unprincipled, and vicious.

V

I WRITE this book to disembarass my soul of certain notions that have hovered about in it too long for my comfort. I do not seek to persuade anybody. I am devoid of the pedagogic instinct, and when I know a thing never feel in myself the desire to impart it to others. I do not much care if people agree with me. Of course I think I am right, otherwise I should not think as I do, and they are wrong, but it does not offend me that they should be wrong. Nor does it greatly disturb me to discover that my judgement is at variance with that of the majority. I have a certain confidence in my instinct.

I must write as though I were a person of importance; and indeed, I am - to myself. To myself I am the most important person in the world; though I do not forget that, not even taking into consideration so grand a conception as the Absolute, but from the standpoint of common sense, I am of no consequence whatever. It would have made small difference to the universe if I had never existed. Though I may seem to write as though significance must necessarily be attached to certain of my works, I mean only that they are of moment to me for the purpose of any discussion during which I may have occasion to mention

them. I think few serious writers, by which I do not only mean writers of serious things, can be entirely indifferent to the fate that will befall their works after their death. It is pleasant to think, not that one may achieve immortality (immortality for literary productions lasts in any case but a few hundred years, and then is seldom more than the immortality of the school-room) but that one may be read with interest by a few generations and find a place, however small, in the history of one's country's literature. But so far as I am concerned, I look upon this modest possibility with scepticism. Even in my life I have seen writers who made much more stir in the world of letters than ever I have, sink into oblivion. When I was young George Meredith and Thomas Hardy seemed certain of survival. They have ceased to mean very much to the youth of today. From time to time they will doubtless find a critic in search of a subject to write an article about them, which may cause readers here and there to get out one or other of their books from a library; but I think it is clear that neither of them wrote anything that will be read as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Tristram Shandy*, or *Tom Jones* is read.

If in the following pages I seem to express myself dogmatically, it is only because I find it very boring to qualify every phase with an 'I think' or 'to my mind'. Everything I say is merely an opinion of my own. The reader can take it or leave it. If he has the patience to read what follows he will see that there is only one thing about which I am certain, and this is that there is very little about which one can be certain.

VI

WHEN I began to write I did so as though it were the most natural thing in the world. I took to it as a duck takes to water. I have never quite got over my astonishment at being a writer; there seems no reason for my having become one except an irresistible inclination, and I do not see why such an inclination should have arisen in me. For well over a hundred years my family has practised law. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography* my grandfather was one of the two founders of the

Incorporated Law Society, and in the catalogue of the Library at the British Museum there is a long list of his legal works. He wrote only one book that was not of this character. It was a collection of essays that he had contributed to the solid magazines of the day, and he issued it, as became his sense of decorum, anonymously. I once had the book in my hands, a handsome volume bound in calf, but I never read it, and I have not been able to get hold of a copy since. I wish I had, for I might have learnt from it something of the kind of man he was. For many years he lived in Chancery Lane, for he became secretary of the Society he founded, and when he retired to a house in Kensington Gore overlooking the Park, he was presented with a salver, a tea and coffee service and an epergne, in silver, so massive and ornate that they have been ever since an embarrassment to his descendants. An old solicitor, whom I knew when I was a boy, told me that as an articled clerk he was once invited to dine with my grandfather. My grandfather carved the beef, and then a servant handed him a dish of potatoes baked in their skins. There are few things better to eat than a potato in its skin, with plenty of butter, pepper, and salt, but apparently my grandfather did not think so. He rose in his chair at the head of the table and took the potatoes out of the dish one by one and threw one at each picture on the walls. Then without a word he sat down again and went on with his dinner. I asked my friend what effect this behaviour had on the rest of the company. He told me that no one took any notice. He also told me that my grandfather was the ugliest little man he ever saw. I went once to the building of the Incorporated Law Society in Chancery Lane to see for myself if he was really so ugly as all that, for there is a portrait of him there. If what my old gentleman said was true the painter must have grossly flattered my grandfather; he has given him very fine dark eyes under black eyebrows, and there is a faintly ironic twinkle in them; a firm-jaw, a straight nose and pouting red lips. His dark hair is windswept as becomingly as that of Miss Anita Loos. He is holding a quill, and there is a pile of books, doubtless his own, by his side. Notwithstanding his black coat, he does not look so respectable as I should have expected, but slightly mischievous. Many years ago when I was destroying the papers

of one of his sons, my uncle, who had died, I came across the diary that my grandfather kept when as a young man at the beginning of the nineteenth century he did what I believe was called the Little Tour, France, Germany and Switzerland; and I remember that when he described the not very impressive fall of the Rhine at Schaffhausen he offered thanks to God Almighty because in creating 'this stupendous cataract' he had given 'His miserable creatures occasion to realize their insignificance in comparison with the prodigious greatness of His works'.

VII

My parents died when I was so young, my mother when I was eight, my father when I was ten, that I know little of them but from hearsay. My father, I do not know why unless he was drawn by some such restlessness for the unknown as has consumed his son, went to Paris and became solicitor to the British Embassy. He had offices just opposite, in the Faubourg St Honoré, but he lived in what was then called the Avenue d'Antin, a broad street with chestnut trees on each side of it that leads from the Rond Point. He was a great traveller for those days. He had been to Turkey, Greece, and Asia Minor and in Morocco as far as Fez, which was a place few people then visited. He had a considerable library of travel books, and the apartment in the Avenue d'Antin was filled with the things he had brought back, Tanagra statuettes, Rhodes ware, and Turkish daggers in hilts of richly decorated silver. He was forty when he married my mother, who was more than twenty years younger. She was a very beautiful woman and he was a very ugly man. I have been told that they were known in the Paris of that day as Beauty and the Beast. Her father was in the army; he died in India, and his widow, my grandmother, after squandering a considerable fortune, settled down in France to live on her pension. She was a woman of character, I suspect, and perhaps of some talent, for she wrote novels in French *pour jeunes filles* and composed the music for drawing-room ballads. I like to think that the novels were read and the ballads sung by Octave Feuillet's high-born

heroines. I have a little photograph of her, a middle-aged woman in a crinoline with fine eyes and a look of good-humoured determination. My mother was very small, with large brown eyes and hair of a rich reddish gold, exquisite features, and a lovely skin. She was very much admired. One of her great friends was Lady Anglesey, an American woman who died at an advanced age not very long ago, and she told me that she had once said to my mother: 'You're so beautiful and there are so many people in love with you, why are you faithful to that ugly little man you've married?' And my mother answered: 'He never hurts my feelings.'

The only letter of hers I ever saw was one that I came across when I was going through my uncle's papers after his death. He was a clergyman and she asked him to be godfather to one of her sons. She expressed, very simply and piously, the hope that by reason of his holy calling the relationship into which she invited him to enter would have such an influence on the new-born child that he would grow up to be a good, God-fearing man. She was a great novel-reader, and in the billiard-room of the apartment in the Avenue d'Antin were two great bookcases filled with Tauchnitz. She suffered from tuberculosis of the lungs, and I remember the string of donkeys that stopped at the door to provide her with asses' milk, which at that time was thought to be good for that malady. In the summer we used to take a house at Deauville, not then a fashionable spot but a little fishing village overshadowed by the smarter Trouville, and towards the end of her life we spent winters at Pau. Once when she was lying in bed, I suppose after a haemorrhage, and knew she could not live much longer, the thought came to her that her sons when they grew up would not know what she was like when she died, so she called her maid, had herself dressed in an evening gown of white satin and went to the photographer's. She had six sons and died in childbirth. The doctors of the period had a theory that to have a child was beneficial to women suffering from consumption. She was thirty-eight.

After my mother's death, her maid became my nurse. I had till then had French nurses and I had been sent to a French school for children. My knowledge of English must have been slight.

I have been told that on one occasion, seeing a horse out of the window of a railway carriage, I cried: '*Regardez, Maman, voilà un 'orse.*'

I think my father had a romantic mind. He took it into his head to build a house to live in during the summer. He bought a piece of land on the top of a hill at Suresnes. The view was splendid over the plain, and in the distance was Paris. There was a road down to the river and by the river lay a little village. It was to be like a villa on the Bosphorus, and on the top floor it was surrounded by loggias. I used to go down with him every Sunday by the Seine on a *bateau-mouche* to see how it was getting on. When the roof was on, my father began to furnish it by buying a pair of antique fire-irons. He ordered a great quantity of glass on which he had engraved a sign against the Evil Eye which he had found in Morocco and which the reader may see on the cover of this book. It was a white house and the shutters were painted red. The garden was laid out. The rooms were furnished, and then my father died.

VIII

I HAD been taken away from the French school and went for my lessons every day to the apartment of the English clergyman at the Church attached to the Embassy. His method of teaching me English was to make me read aloud the police-court news in the *Standard*, and I can still remember the horror with which I read the ghastly details of a murder in the train between Paris and Calais. I must then have been nine. I was for long uncertain about the pronunciation of English words, and I have never forgotten the roar of laughter that abashed me when in my preparatory school I read out the phrase 'unstable as water' as though unstable rhymed with Dunstable.

I have never had more than two English lessons in my life, for though I wrote essays at school, I do not remember that I ever received any instruction on how to put sentences together. The two lessons I have had were given me so late in life that I am afraid I cannot hope greatly to profit by them. The first