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WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY MAEVE BINCHY



OF HUMAN BONDAGE

W. Somerset Maugham

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Bondage

With an Introduction by
Benjamin DeMott
and a New Afterword by
Maeve Binchy



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William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) studied medicine, but the quick success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), started him on his lifelong literary career, during which he would become one of the most popular English authors since Dickens. His own life, however, was more tragic, shocking, and fascinating than any novel. After his adored parents died, he grew up in a miserable vicarage and suffered from an embarrassing handicap. During his lifetime, Maugham would marry and divorce, be sent to Russia as a spy, and entertain such celebrities as Jean Cocteau, Winston Churchill, Noel Coward, the Aga Khan, and Ian Fleming at his Riviera mansion. Among his masterpieces are *Of Human Bondage*, *The Painted Veil*, *The Razor's Edge*, and *The Moon and Sixpence*. In addition, such works as "The Letter" and "Rain" established Maugham as a gifted short story writer.

Maeve Binchy is the author of *Quentins*, *Scarlet Feather*, *Tara Road* (an Oprah's Book Club Selection), *Circle of Friends*, *Light a Penny Candle*, and many other bestselling novels. She lives in Dalkey, Ireland, and London with her husband, writer Gordon Snell.

INTRODUCTION

Of Human Bondage is a novel about growing up, shrewdly observant of stages and processes of growth, unobtrusively penetrating about right relations between self and others. The body of knowledge that the book marshals, non-theoretical and transmitted without pomp, seems in part perfectly familiar. Philip Carey isn't unique in lust-ing for "experiences," or in breaking with his elders' faith (and perceiving the break as momentous), or in suffering frustration at the elusiveness of "meaning." But even where the materials of Carey's story are indistinguishable from those of standard initiation/apprenticeship tales, the tone and treatment are subtly different. And the book's later sections, for example the account of Carey's work as a hospital "obstetric clerk," engage themes of fraternity that seldom figure centrally in the conventional novel of education (the *Bildungsroman*).

The circumstances of the book's composition help to explain its special place among autobiographical novels. In general—no rules without exceptions—autobiographical novels produced by authors at an early age have the strength of intensity and the weakness of self-absorption, while those produced in mid-life lose passion and gain objectivity. Writers in their forties either remember defectively the content of youthful solemnities and aspirations, or they remember well but with embarrassment, and attempt to restrain yesterday's springy naïveté in corsets of irony. Some measure of the distinction of Maugh-am's autobiographical novel can be attributed to its having been composed in youth and reworked in early middle age.

The author finished the first version of the book (titled *The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey*) at age twenty-three; when publishers rejected it he laid it aside for fifteen years. Throughout much of that period he struggled—and often failed—as a novelist and short story writer. But in his middle thirties he enjoyed a sudden

success as a playwright in London and on Broadway, and the attendant publicity (cleverly exploited) transformed W. Somerset Maugham into an icon of cosmopolitan sophistication.

The mind that returned after a decade and a half to the first draft of *The Artistic Temperament* wasn't, in short, merely removed from juvenilities; it had endured seasoning by adversity and gone on to win kudos for elegant worldliness. It felt no need to pace off, publicly, the distance between itself and callowness, no obligation to mock a young hero's jejune self-preoccupation in order to parry charges of egomania. Further good fortune, it was free of the burden of inventing (or laboring to recall) half-forgotten volatility, fervor, or despair. Thanks to the effort of a literary apprentice—the author himself, barely into his twenties—the essential raw stuff already existed in words. And the words in question had been set down at a time when the young writer was totally convinced that all the pertinent feelings, states of mind, and revolutions of belief mattered deeply on their own terms.

On their own terms. It bears strong emphasis that Maugham's novel registers shaping events and emotions in language commensurate with the electric portentousness those events possess in childhood and youth. The book's unashamed fullness of feeling is evident almost from the start, when the hero as a griefstruck nine-year-old visits his mother's bedroom after her death: "Philip opened a large cupboard filled with dresses and, stepping in, took as many of them as he could in his arms and buried his face in them." And the same intense demonstrativeness is no less evident 500 pages later when, no longer a child, and depressed by his seemingly hopeless prospects, Philip is moved to tears by a Greek bas-relief in the British Museum—an Athenian tombstone that speaks to him of the history of human friendship:

There was one stone which was very beautiful, a bas-relief of two young men holding each other's hand; and the reticence of line, the simplicity, made one like to think that the author here had been touched with a genuine emotion. It was an exquisite memorial . . . to a friendship; and as Philip looked at it, he felt the tears come to his eyes. He thought of Hayward and his

eager admiration for him when first they met, and how disillusion had come and then indifference, till nothing held them together but habit and old memories. It was one of the queer things of life that you saw a person every day for months and were so intimate with him that you could not imagine existence without him; then separation came and everything went on in the same way, and the companion who had seemed essential proved unnecessary. Your life proceeded and you did not even miss him.

The novelist understands—here as elsewhere in the book—that feeling can be tinged with self-pity and still not deserve contempt. He also understands that, in a writer, terror of the *déjà vu* is proof neither of talent nor genius. When *Of Human Bondage* (the *ur*-version) was begun, in 1899, the shedding of religious faith had become a near-cliché, but, happily, Maugham wasn't intimidated. He renders the event with a delicate particularity that makes it new—reveals it, moment by moment, as a complex, ceaselessly evolving configuration of emotion and reflection.

Philip Carey's first daring utterance—"I don't see why one should believe in God at all"—takes his own breath away "like a plunge into cold water." He's startled, puzzled at himself; he feels fear ("a mistake might lead to eternal damnation"), and hungers for solitude in which to think matters out. The time frame expands and the reader enters the "strange and lonely" days and weeks that follow for the hero, grasping how the very risks of unbelief nourish him ("he was upheld by the excitement; it seemed to make life a more thrilling adventure"). Out on the frontier called atheism, Carey experiences "wild exhilaration," and a transformation of nature into a "tremendous spaciousness." Scorn breathes in him at the timidity of the weakly faithful among his friends; he feels the onset of "pride in his intelligence and fearlessness"; at length he commits himself highmindedly to practice Christian virtues for their own sake:

There was small occasion for heroism in the Frau Professor's house, but he was a little more exactly truthful than he had been, and he forced himself to be more

than commonly attentive to the dull, elderly ladies who sometimes engaged him in conversation.

The tone bespeaks the worldly narrator's awareness that, while Philip Carey as born-again skeptic has been seized with a heroic imagination of himself, he's miles removed from any recognizably heroic venue. But the narrator's proportioning, smiling realism is in no respect satirically reductive; even as he acknowledges the extravagance of youthful idealism and self-congratulation, Maugham centers attention on the importance of what lies behind them. *It's as individuals*, his tempering voice seems to say, *It's one by one that we cease to believe, and jaded retrospective views of our veerings obscure the truth that the death of faith can indeed be individually momentous*. When detached observers concentrate only on the relative invariability of human patterns of rupture and rebellion, refusing to install themselves within the single naïve soul at its felt hours of crisis, they pay a price. They lose touch with the *insides* of the reality called adolescence and growth.

If this novelist's scrupulousness about details of feeling were a factor only in the handling of major turning points of belief or conscience, *Of Human Bondage* would be less telling as a chronicle of growth and less poignant, from page to page, as a work of fiction. As it is, the author's standard of observation—his dedicated yet unfussy attentiveness—is uniform throughout, alert to back-currents and intricacies in the slightest movements of the heart. The effortful reserve, for instance, that Philip Carey maintains in the first days of intimacy with his schoolboy friend Rose: "He would not let himself yield entirely to the proud joy that filled him . . ." Or the odd inhibition which, when Carey writes his first love letter to Miss Wilkinson, prevents him not only from speaking the "vehement things" he imagines to be appropriate, but from using any salutation more affectionate than "dear." (The inhibition is named almost offhandedly, but with fine precision: Carey is afflicted with "some inexplicable modesty.")

The most compelling proof of Maugham's powers of evocation comes in the treatment of what recent generations describe as learning experiences. And in Heidel-

berg and Paris those experiences arise largely from encounters with culture and the arts; the confusions, perplexities, and self-deceptions that enter into the forming of aesthetic judgment haven't often been as charmingly or convincingly dramatized as in the chapters recounting the advance of the hero's taste from Burne-Jones to Manet and Monet.

But closest to the book's imaginative core, of course, is Philip Carey's schooling in human attachment and love. Like many of us, he's a slow learner in this sector of life; unlike most of us, he has an excuse for ineptitude, namely a physical affliction that heightens self-consciousness. (His clubfoot is commonly taken as a disguise for Maugham's own stammer.) Carey's sensitivity, ego and naïveté regularly multiply his miseries and occasionally rouse impatience in the reader. (At his worst—best to be candid—Philip Carey qualifies as a wimp.) Partly because of the hero's limited vision, partly because Maugham looking back from literary fulfillment on his own seedtime wasn't bounded by that vision, *Of Human Bondage* becomes a sort of inventory of wrong relations between self and others (child and child, man and man, man and woman). And the book provides oblique guidance, as well, on how to set wrong relations right.

A commonplace of moralists is that moderating self-involvement and opening oneself to others fosters right human relations. A principal feature of Philip Carey's nature is that he's hugely self-preoccupied, and disposed to conceal "his shyness . . . under a frigid taciturnity." His flaws are most salient in the bondage of the book's title—his obsession with Mildred Rogers; the wrong human relations that the flaws engender are those of domination and dependency. (In the early phases of his connection with Mildred, Carey is a dependent, craving to be dominated; in time the pair reverse roles.)

But the catastrophe of Philip and Mildred is only one strand of Maugham's inquiry into the psychology of self-absorption. Beginning with Carey's boyish demand for exclusivity (in his friendship with Rose), the novelist moves on to scrutinize a number of other troubling personality traits: Carey's compulsive classification and ranking of the intelligence and gifts of friends and associates, his frequent obliviousness (as in his dealings

with Fanny Price), the faintly abstract, mechanical quality of his kindness. And toward the end Maugham immerses his reader in the positive processes that ultimately induce in Carey a more welcoming, objective mental outlook—a realization that claims, values, and emotions at odds with one's own can inspire respect and even affection.

The chapters that draw us close to these processes are both powerfully composed and firm in their rejection of simplicities that tyrannize the immature. Working as a hospital outpatients' clerk under the downright but not heartless supervision of Dr. Tyrell (Chapter LXXI), Carey copes day by day with a world too "manifold and various" for interpretation in the languages of morality (good and evil) or art (tragedy and comedy). Later, on his own, delivering babies in London slums, he's further educated not only in the world's cruelty but in the existence of class perspectives—class satisfactions—hitherto beyond his imagining. Breaks appear in the puerile self-concern that once enclosed him.

The most winning moment in his progress, perhaps, is the evening on which he breaks bread with a working class couple soon after he's delivered their first child (Chapter CXIII). The scene is brief and the narrator's commentary is sparing. 'Erb and Polly, the married couple, speak a tongue that instantly opens their personalities to clear view. Like Philip's schoolboy friend years before, 'Erb has an athlete's confident affability and self-respecting certainty of his worth, and Polly, for her part, is cheerful, hardworking, and kind; the couple's teasingly humorous affection and pride in their newborn are touching, and the fun of their chaffing invitation—of the meal, the talk, the exchange of a tobacco pouch—come swiftly alive.

On parting, visitor and couple shake hands warmly, and just then the perspective widens, as it hasn't often done in this book. Philip's undeliberated perception of the pair—people whom he'll never dominate and on whom he'll never depend—takes its place on even terms with their perception of him: "He saw that it had given them pleasure that he shared their meal, and they saw that he had thoroughly enjoyed it."

Of minor consequence in the narrative as a whole, this outward turn from self has large meaning in the devel-

opment of a sensibility. Crossing a border, the hero steps beyond the self-anxiety (including a sometimes too desperate compassion) in which he's been long entangled. And the emotional movement is registered with brilliant exactitude: Philip Carey *relaxes* into fellow feeling.

Sadly, Somerset Maugham's own life seems not to have been rich in experiences of fellow feeling. It was a long life (Maugham died in 1965 at the age of 91), and during its course the novelist inhabited many different selves. In an exemplary biography, Ted Morgan writes that "Maugham was all of these: an alienated child, a medical student, an avant-garde novelist and playwright, a bohemian in Paris, a successful West End dramatist, a London social lion, an ambulance driver on the Flanders front, a spy in Russia, a promiscuous homosexual who paid for the favors of boys in remote lands, a cuckolded husband, a host to the famous persons of his time, a World War II propagandist, the most widely read novelist since Dickens, a living legend kept alive by cellular therapy, and a senile old man who tried to disinherit his daughter and adopt his secretary." Maugham's time of greatest contentment—his fullest realization of the happiness and ease of unselfconscious fraternity—seems to have occurred during his relatively brief stretch of service in World War I as an ambulance driver and hospital aide.

Sadly, too, Maugham's reputation has been in steady decline for a half-century. There are, to be sure, few pages in the dozens of novels, story collections, and plays that he published in his lifetime that begin to match the humanity or power of a dozen different chapters of the work at hand. And Maugham's preference for plain, straight-on, linear narrative is only one of several barriers cutting him off from the main currents of modernism.

The likelihood remains strong, though, that his masterpiece will survive. Fascinated with discontinuity, we nevertheless continue to believe, at some level, in the possibility of stable knowledge, and continue to need—and savor—evidence that it's attainable. Twentieth-century writers have produced only a handful of novels that meet

this need: books in which intelligent people achieve advances in understanding, and succeed in learning things truly worth knowing. *Of Human Bondage* remains, triumphantly, one of them.

*Of Human
Bondage*

I

The day broke gray and dull. The clouds hung heavily, and there was a rawness in the air that suggested snow. A woman servant came into a room in which a child was sleeping and drew the curtains. She glanced mechanically at the house opposite, a stucco house with a portico, and went to the child's bed.

"Wake up, Philip," she said.

She pulled down the bed-clothes, took him in her arms, and carried him downstairs. He was only half awake.

"Your mother wants you," she said.

She opened the door of a room on the floor below and took the child over to a bed in which a woman was lying. It was his mother. She stretched out her arms, and the child nestled by her side. He did not ask why he had been awakened. The woman kissed his eyes, and with thin, small hands felt the warm body through his white flannel nightgown. She pressed him closer to herself.

"Are you sleepy, darling?" she said.

Her voice was so weak that it seemed to come already from a great distance. The child did not answer, but smiled comfortably. He was very happy in the large, warm bed, with those soft arms about him. He tried to make himself smaller still as he cuddled against his mother, and he kissed her sleepily. In a moment he closed his eyes and was fast asleep. The doctor came forward and stood by the bedside.

"Oh, don't take him away yet," she moaned.

The doctor, without answering, looked at her gravely. Knowing she would not be allowed to keep the child much longer, the woman kissed him again; and she passed her hand down his body till she came to his feet; she held the right foot in her hand and felt the five small toes; and then slowly passed her hand over the left one. She gave a sob.

"What's the matter?" said the doctor. "You're tired."

She shook her head, unable to speak, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. The doctor bent down.

"Let me take him."

She was too weak to resist his wish, and she gave the child up. The doctor handed him back to his nurse.

"You'd better put him back in his own bed."

"Very well, sir."

The little boy, still sleeping, was taken away. His mother sobbed now broken-heartedly.

"What will happen to him, poor child?"

The monthly nurse tried to quiet her, and presently, from exhaustion, the crying ceased. The doctor walked to a table on the other side of the room, upon which, under a towel, lay the body of a still-born child. He lifted the towel and looked. He was hidden from the bed by a screen, but the woman guessed what he was doing.

"Was it a girl or a boy?" she whispered to the nurse.

"Another boy."

The woman did not answer. In a moment the child's nurse came back. She approached the bed.

"Master Philip never woke up," she said.

There was a pause. Then the doctor felt his patient's pulse once more.

"I don't think there's anything I can do just now," he said. "I'll call again after breakfast."

"I'll show you out, sir," said the child's nurse.

They walked downstairs in silence. In the hall the doctor stopped.

"You've sent for Mrs. Carey's brother-in-law, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"D'you know at what time he'll be here?"

"No, sir, I'm expecting a telegram."

"What about the little boy? I should think he'd be better out of the way."

"Miss Watkin said she'd take him, sir."

"Who's she?"

"She's his godmother, sir. D'you think Mrs. Carey will get over it, sir?"

The doctor shook his head.

II

It was a week later. Philip was sitting on the floor in the drawing-room at Miss Watkin's house in Onslow Gardens. He was an only child and used to amusing himself. The room was filled with massive furniture, and on each of the sofas were three big cushions. There was a cushion too in each armchair. All these he had taken and, with the help of the gilt rout chairs, light and easy to move, had made an elaborate cave in which he could hide himself from the Red Indians who were lurking behind the curtains. He put his ear to the floor and listened to the herd of buffaloes that raced across the prairie. Presently, hearing the door open, he held his breath so that he might not be discovered; but a violent hand pulled away a chair and the cushions fell down.

"You naughty boy, Miss Watkin *will* be cross with you."

"Hulloa, Emma!" he said.

The nurse bent down and kissed him, and then began to shake out the cushions, and put them back in their places.

"Am I to come home?" he asked.

"Yes, I've come to fetch you."

"You've got a new dress on."

It was in 1885, and she wore a bustle. Her gown was of black velvet, with tight sleeves and sloping shoulders, and the skirt had three large flounces. She wore a black bonnet with velvet strings. She hesitated. The question she had expected did not come, and so she could not give the answer she had prepared.

"Aren't you going to ask how your mamma is?" she said at length.

"Oh, I forgot. How is mamma?"

Now she was ready.

"Your mamma is quite well and happy."

"Oh, I am glad."

“Your mamma’s gone away. You won’t ever see her anymore.”

Philip did not know what she meant.

“Why not?”

“Your mamma’s in heaven.”

She began to cry, and Philip, though he did not quite understand, cried too. Emma was a tall, big-boned woman, with fair hair and large features. She came from Devonshire and, notwithstanding her many years of service in London, had never lost the breadth of her accent. Her tears increased her emotion, and she pressed the little boy to her heart. She felt vaguely the pity of that child deprived of the only love in the world that is quite unselfish. It seemed dreadful that he must be handed over to strangers. But in a little while she pulled herself together.

“Your Uncle William is waiting in to see you,” she said. “Go and say good-bye to Miss Watkin, and we’ll go home.”

“I don’t want to say good-bye,” he answered, instinctively anxious to hide his tears.

“Very well, run upstairs and get your hat.”

He fetched it, and when he came down Emma was waiting for him in the hall. He heard the sound of voices in the study behind the dining-room. He paused. He knew that Miss Watkin and her sister were talking to friends, and it seemed to him—he was nine years old—that if he went in they would be sorry for him.

“I think I’ll go and say good-bye to Miss Watkin.”

“I think you’d better,” said Emma.

“Go in and tell them I’m coming,” he said.

He wished to make the most of his opportunity. Emma knocked at the door and walked in. He heard her speak.

“Master Philip wants to say good-bye to you, miss.”

There was a sudden hush of the conversation, and Philip limped in. Henrietta Watkin was a stout woman, with a red face and dyed hair. In those days to dye the hair excited comment, and Philip had heard much gossip at home when his godmother’s changed color. She lived with an elder sister, who had resigned herself contentedly to old age. Two ladies, whom Philip did not know, were calling, and they looked at him curiously.