

W. SOMERSET
MAUGHAM

*The Razor's
Edge*

A NEW NOVEL

*The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over;
thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard.*

KATHA-UPANISHAD

The Razor's Edge

A NOVEL

BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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the colloquial effect he was after, it too often gives the English reader an uncomfortable jolt.

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In 1919 I happened to be in Chicago on my way to the Far East, and for reasons that have nothing to do with this narrative I was staying there for two or three weeks. I had recently brought out a successful novel and being for the moment news I had no sooner arrived than I was interviewed. Next morning my telephone rang. I answered.

“Elliott Templeton speaking.”

“Elliott? I thought you were in Paris.”

“No, I’m visiting with my sister. We want you to come along and lunch with us today.”

“I should love to.”

He named the hour and gave me the address.

I had known Elliott Templeton for fifteen years. He was at this time in his late fifties, a tall, elegant man with good features and thick waving dark hair only sufficiently graying to add to the distinction of his appearance. He was always beautifully dressed. He got his haberdashery at Charvet’s, but his suits, his shoes and his hats in London. He had an apartment in Paris on the Rive Gauche in the fashionable Rue St. Guillaume. People who did not like him said he was a dealer, but this was a charge that he resented with indignation. He had taste and knowledge, and he did not mind admitting that in bygone years, when he first settled in Paris, he had given rich collectors who wanted to buy pictures the benefit of his advice; and when through his social connections he heard that some impoverished nobleman, English or French, was disposed to sell a picture of first-rate quality he was glad to put him in touch with the directors of American museums who, he happened to know, were on the lookout for a fine example of such and such a master. There were many old families in France and some in England whose circumstances compelled them to part with a signed piece of Buhl or a writing-table made by Chippendale himself if it could be done quietly, and they were glad to know a man of great culture and perfect manners who could arrange the matter with discretion. One would naturally suppose that Elliott profited by the transactions, but one was too well-bred to mention it. Unkind people asserted that everything in his apartment was for sale and that after he had invited wealthy Americans to an excellent lunch, with vintage wines, one or two of his valuable drawings would disappear or a marquetry commode would be replaced by one in lacquer. When he was asked why a particular piece had vanished he very plausibly explained that he hadn’t thought it quite up to his mark and had exchanged it

for one of much finer quality. He added that it was tiresome always to look at the same things.

“*Nous autres américains*, we Americans,” he said, “like change. It is at once our weakness and our strength.”

Some of the American ladies in Paris, who claimed to know all about him, said that his family was quite poor and if he was able to live in the way he did it was only because he had been very clever. I do not know how much money he had, but his ducal landlord certainly made him pay a lot for his apartment and it was furnished with objects of value. On the walls were drawings by the great French masters, Watteau, Fragonard, Claude Lorrain and so on; Savonnerie and Aubusson rugs displayed their beauty on the parquet floors; and in the drawing-room there was a Louis Quinze suite in *petit point* of such elegance that it might well have belonged, as he claimed, to Madame de Pompadour. Anyhow he had enough to live in what he considered was the proper style for a gentleman without trying to earn money, and the method by which he had done so in the past was a matter which, unless you wished to lose his acquaintance, you were wise not to refer to. Thus relieved of material cares he gave himself over to the ruling passion of his life, which was social relationships. His business connections with the impecunious great both in France and in England had secured the foothold he had obtained on his arrival in Europe as a young man with letters of introduction to persons of consequence. His origins recommended him to the American ladies of title to whom he brought letters, for he was of an old Virginian family and through his mother traced his descent from one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence. He was well favoured, bright, a good dancer, a fair shot and a fine tennis player. He was an asset at any party. He was lavish with flowers and expensive boxes of chocolate, and though he entertained little, when he did it was with an originality that pleased. It amused these rich ladies to be taken to Bohemian restaurants in Soho or *bistros* in the Latin Quarter. He was always prepared to make himself useful and there was nothing, however tiresome, that you asked him to do for you that he would not do with pleasure. He took an immense amount of trouble to make himself agreeable to ageing women, and it was not long before he was the *ami de la maison*, the household pet, in many an imposing mansion. His amiability was extreme; he never minded being asked at the last moment because someone had thrown you over and you could put him next to a very boring old lady and count on him to be as charming and amusing with her as he knew how.

In two or more years, both in London to which he went for the last part of the season and to pay a round of country house visits in the early autumn, and in Paris, where he had settled down, he knew everyone whom a young American could know. The ladies who had first introduced him into society

were surprised to discover how wide the circle of his acquaintance had grown. Their feelings were mixed. On the one hand they were pleased that their young protégé had made so great a success and on the other a trifle nettled that he should be on such intimate terms with persons with whom their own relations had remained strictly formal. Though he continued to be obliging and useful to them, they were uneasily conscious that he had used them as stepping-stones to his social advancement. They were afraid he was a snob. And of course he was. He was a colossal snob. He was a snob without shame. He would put up with any affront, he would ignore any rebuff, he would swallow any rudeness to get asked to a party he wanted to go to or to make a connection with some crusty old dowager of great name. He was indefatigable. When he had fixed his eye on his prey he hunted it with the persistence of a botanist who will expose himself to dangers of flood, earthquake, fever and hostile natives to find an orchid of peculiar rarity. The war of 1914 gave him his final chance. When it broke out he joined an ambulance corps and served first in Flanders and then in the Argonne; he came back after a year with a red ribbon in his buttonhole and secured a position in the Red Cross in Paris. By then he was in affluent circumstances and he contributed generously to the good works patronized by persons of consequence. He was always ready with his exquisite taste and his gift for organization to help in any charitable function that was widely publicized. He became a member of the two most exclusive clubs in Paris. He was *ce cher Elliott* to the greatest ladies in France. He had finally arrived.

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When I first met Elliott I was just a young author like another and he took no notice of me. He never forgot a face and when I ran across him here or there he shook hands with me cordially, but showed no desire to further our acquaintance; and if I saw him at the opera, say, he being with a person of high rank, he was apt not to catch sight of me. But then I happened to make a somewhat startling success as a playwright, and presently I became aware that Elliott regarded me with a warmer feeling. One day I received a note from him asking me to lunch at Claridge's, where he lived when in London. It was a small party and not a very smart one, and I conceived the notion that he was trying me out. But from then on, since my success had brought me many new friends, I began to see him more frequently. Shortly after this I spent some weeks of the autumn in Paris and met him at the house of a common acquaintance. He asked me where I was staying and in a day or two I received another invitation to lunch, this time at his apartment; when I arrived I was surprised to see that it was a party of considerable distinction. I giggled to

myself. I knew that with his perfect sense of social relations he had realized that in English society as an author I was not of much account, but that in France, where an author just because he is an author has prestige, I was. During the years that followed our acquaintance became fairly intimate without ever developing into friendship. I doubt whether it was possible for Elliott Templeton to be a friend. He took no interest in people apart from their social position. When I chanced to be in Paris or he in London, he continued to ask me to parties when he wanted an extra man or was obliged to entertain travelling Americans. Some of these were, I suspected, old clients and some were strangers sent to him with letters of introduction. They were the cross of his life. He felt he had to do something for them and yet was unwilling to have them meet his grand friends. The best way of disposing of them of course was to give them dinner and take them to a play, but that was often difficult when he was engaged every evening for three weeks ahead, and also he had an inkling that they would scarcely be satisfied with that. Since I was an author and so of little consequence he didn't mind telling me his troubles on this matter.

“People in America are so inconsiderate in the way they give letters. It's not that I'm not delighted to see the people who are sent to me, but I really don't see why I should inflict them on my friends.”

He sought to make amends by sending them great baskets of roses and huge boxes of chocolate, but sometimes he had to do more. It was then, somewhat naïvely after what he had told me, that he asked me to come to the party he was organizing.

“They want to meet you so much,” he wrote to flatter me. “Mrs. So and So is a very cultivated woman and she's read every word you've written.”

Mrs. So and So would then tell me she'd so much enjoyed my book *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill* and congratulate me on my play *The Mollusc*. The first of these was written by Hugh Walpole and the second by Hubert Henry Davies.

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If I have given the reader an impression that Elliott Templeton was a despicable character I have done him an injustice.

He was for one thing what the French call *serviable*, a word for which, so far as I know, there is no exact equivalent in English. The dictionary tells one that *serviceable* in the sense of helpful, obliging and kind is archaic. That is just what Elliott was. He was generous, and though early in his career he had doubtless showered flowers, candy and presents on his acquaintances from an ulterior motive, he continued to do so when it was no longer necessary. It