

Books by W. Somerset Maugham

LIZA OF LAMBETH
MRS. CRADDOCK
THE MAGICIAN
OF HUMAN BONDAGE
THE MOON AND SIXPENCE
THE TREMBLING OF A LEAP
ON A CHINESE SCREEN
THE PAINTED VEIL
THE CASUARINA TREE
ASHENDEN
THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR
CAKES AND ALE
FIRST PERSON SINGULAR
THE NARROW CORNER
AH KING
DON FERNANDO
COSMOPOLITANS
THEATRE
THE SUMMING UP
CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY
BOOKS AND YOU
THE MIXTURE AS BEFORE
UP AT THE VILLA
STRICTLY PERSONAL
THE RAZOR'S EDGE
THEN AND NOW
CREATURES OF CIRCUMSTANCE
CATALINA
HERE AND THERE (*Collection of Short Stories*)
QUARTET (*Four Short Stories with Film Script*)
A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK
TRIO (*Three Short Stories with Film Scripts*)
THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES (3 Vols.)
ENCORE (*Three Short Stories with Film Scripts*)
THE VAGRANT MOOD
THE COLLECTED PLAYS (3 Vols.)
THE SELECTED NOVELS (3 Vols.)
THE PARTIAL VIEW
TEN NOVELS AND THEIR AUTHORS
THE TRAVEL BOOKS
POINTS OF VIEW
PURELY FOR MY PLEASURE

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

THE
RAZOR'S EDGE



heinemann : london

William Heinemann Ltd

LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO
CAPE TOWN AUCKLAND

First published 1944

Reprinted 1944, 1945, 1946, 1948

Collected Edition 1949

Reprinted 1952, 1953, 1955, 1960, 1964

Printed in Great Britain
by Bookprint limited
Kingswood, Surrey

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

KATHA-UPANISHAD

CHAPTER ONE

(i)

I HAVE never begun a novel with more misgiving. If I call it a novel it is only because I don't know what else to call it. I have little story to tell and I end neither with a death nor a marriage. Death ends all things and so is the comprehensive conclusion of a story, but marriage finishes it very properly too and the sophisticated are ill-advised to sneer at what is by convention termed a happy ending. It is a sound instinct of the common people which persuades them that with this all that needs to be said is said. When male and female, after whatever vicissitudes you like, are at last brought together they have fulfilled their biological function and interest passes to the generation that is to come. But I leave my reader in the air. This book consists of my recollections of a man with whom I was thrown into close contact only at long intervals, and I have little knowledge of what happened to him in between. I suppose that by the exercise of invention I could fill the gaps plausibly enough and so make my narrative more coherent; but I have no wish to do that. I only want to set down what I know of my own knowledge.

Many years ago I wrote a novel called *The Moon and Sixpence*. In that I took a famous painter, Paul Gauguin, and, using the novelist's privilege, devised a number of incidents to illustrate the character I had created on the suggestions afforded me by the scanty facts I knew about the French artist. In the present book I have attempted to do nothing of the kind. I have invented nothing. To save embarrassment to people still living I have given to the persons who play a part in this story names of my own contriving, and I have in other ways taken pains to make sure that no one should recognize them. The man I am writing about is not famous. It may be that he never will be. It may be that when his life at last comes to an end he will leave no more trace of his sojourn on earth than a stone thrown into a river leaves on the surface of the

water. Then my book, if it is read at all, will be read only for what intrinsic interest it may possess. But it may be that the way of life that he has chosen for himself and the peculiar strength and sweetness of his character may have an ever-growing influence over his fellow men so that, long after his death perhaps, it may be realized that there lived in this age a very remarkable creature. Then it will be quite clear of whom I write in this book and those who want to know at least a little about his early life may find in it something to their purpose. I think my book, within its acknowledged limitations, will be a useful source of information to my friend's biographers.

I do not pretend that the conversations I have recorded can be regarded as verbatim reports. I never kept notes of what was said on this or the other occasion, but I have a good memory for what concerns me, and though I have put these conversations in my own words they faithfully represent, I believe, what was said. I remarked a little while back that I have invented nothing; I want now to modify that statement. I have taken the liberty that historians have taken from the time of Herodotus to put into the mouths of the persons of my narrative speeches that I did not myself hear and could not possibly have heard. I have done this for the same reasons as the historians have, to give liveliness and verisimilitude to scenes that would have been ineffective if they had been merely recounted. I want to be read and I think I am justified in doing what I can to make my book readable. The intelligent reader will easily see for himself where I have used this artifice, and he is at perfect liberty to reject it.

Another reason that has caused me to embark upon this work with apprehension is that the persons I have chiefly to deal with are American. It is very difficult to know people and I don't think one can ever really know any but one's own countrymen. For men and women are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learnt to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poets they read, and the God they believed in. It is all these things that have made them what they are, and these are the things

that you can't come to know by hearsay, you can only know them if you have lived them. You can only know them if you are them. And because you cannot know persons of a nation foreign to you except from observation, it is difficult to give them credibility in the pages of a book. Even so subtle and careful an observer as Henry James, though he lived in England for forty years, never managed to create an Englishman who was through and through English. For my part, except in a few short stories I have never attempted to deal with any but my own countrymen, and if I have ventured to do otherwise in short stories it is because in them you can treat your characters more summarily. You give the reader broad indications and leave him to fill in the details. It may be asked why, if I turned Paul Gauguin into an Englishman, I could not do the same with the persons of this book. The answer is simple: I couldn't. They would not then have been the people they are. I do not pretend that they are American as Americans see themselves; they are American seen through an English eye. I have not attempted to reproduce the peculiarities of their speech. The mess English writers make when they try to do this is only equalled by the mess American writers make when they try to reproduce English as spoken in England. Slang is the great pitfall. Henry James in his English stories made constant use of it, but never quite as the English do, so that instead of getting the colloquial effect he was after, it too often gives the English reader an uncomfortable jolt.

(ii)

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 greying 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 Lorraine 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 chocolates, 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 protege had made so great a success, and on the other a trifle nettled that he should be on 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.

(iii)

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 should inflict them on my friends."

He sought to make amends by sending them great baskets of roses and huge boxes of chocolates, but some-

times he had to do more. It was then, somewhat naively 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.

(iv)

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 me 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 acquaintance from an ulterior motive, he continued to do so when it was no longer necessary. It caused him pleasure to give. He was hospitable. His chef was as good as any in Paris and you could be sure at his table of having set before you the earliest delicacies of the season. His wine proved the excellence of his judgment. It is true that his guests were chosen for their social importance rather than because they were good company, but he took care to invite at least one or two for their powers of entertainment, so that his parties were almost always amusing. People laughed at him behind his back and called him a filthy snob, but nevertheless accepted his invitations with alacrity. His French was fluent and correct and his accent perfect. He had taken great pains to adopt the manner of speech as it is spoken in England and you had to have a very sensitive ear to catch now and then an American intonation. He was a good talker if only you could keep him off the subject of dukes and duchesses, but even about them, now that his position was unassailable, he allowed himself,

especially when you were alone with him, to be amusing. He had a pleasantly malicious tongue and there was no scandal about these exalted personages that did not reach his ears. From him I learnt who was the father of the Princess X's last child and who was the mistress of the Marquis de Y. I don't believe even Marcel Proust knew more of the inner life of the aristocracy than Elliott Templeton.

When I was in Paris we used often to lunch together, sometimes at his apartment and sometimes at a restaurant. I like to wander about the antiquity shops, occasionally to buy but more often to look, and Elliott was always enchanted to go with me. He had knowledge and a real love of beautiful objects. I think he knew every shop of the kind in Paris and was on familiar terms with the proprietor. He adored haggling and when we started out would say to me:

"If there's anything you want don't try to buy it yourself. Just give me a hint and let me do the rest."

He would be delighted when he had got for me something I fancied for half the asking price. It was a treat to watch him bargain. He would argue, cajole, lose his temper, appeal to the seller's better nature, ridicule him, point out the defects of the object in question, threaten never to cross his threshold again, sigh, shrug his shoulders, admonish, start for the door in frowning anger and when finally he had won his point shake his head sadly as though he accepted defeat with resignation. Then he would whisper to me in English.

"Take it with you. It would be cheap at double the money."

Elliott was a zealous Catholic. He had not lived long in Paris before he met an abbé who was celebrated for his success in bringing infidels and heretics back to the fold. He was a great diner-out and a noted wit. He confined his ministrations to the rich and the aristocratic. It was inevitable that Elliott should be attracted by a man who, though of humble origins, was a welcome guest in the most exclusive houses, and he confided to a wealthy American lady who was one of the abbé's recent converts that, though his family had always been Episcopalian, he had for long been interested in the Catholic Church. She asked Elliott to meet the abbé at dinner one evening, just

three of them, and the abbé was scintillating. Elliott's hostess brought the conversation around to Catholicism and the abbé spoke of it with unction, but without pedantry, as a man of the world, though a priest, speaking to another man of the world. Elliott was flattered to discover that the abbé knew all about him.

"The Duchesse de Vendôme was speaking of you the other day. She told me that she thought you highly intelligent."

Elliott flushed with pleasure. He had been presented to Her Royal Highness, but it had never occurred to him that she would give him a second thought. The abbé spoke of the faith with wisdom and benignity; he was broad-minded, modern in his outlook and tolerant. He made the Church seem to Elliott very like a select club that a well-bred man owed it to himself to belong to. Six months later he was received into it. His conversion, combined with the generosity he showed in his contributions to Catholic charities, opened several doors that had been closed to him before.

It may be that his motives in abandoning the faith of his fathers were mixed, but there could be no doubt of his devoutness when he had done so. He attended Mass every Sunday at the church frequented by the best people, went to confession regularly and made periodical visits to Rome. In course of time he was rewarded for his piety by being made a papal chamberlain, and the assiduity with which he performed the duties of his office was rewarded by the order of, I think, the Holy Sepulchre. His career as a Catholic was in fact no less successful than his career as an *homme du monde*.

I often asked myself what was the cause of the snob-bishness that obsessed this man who was so intelligent, so kindly and so cultivated. He was no upstart. His father had been president of one of the southern universities and his grandfather a divine of some eminence. Elliott was too clever not to see that many of the persons who accepted his invitations did so only to get a free meal and that of these some were stupid and some worthless. The glamour of their resounding titles blinded him to their faults. I can only guess that to be on terms of intimate familiarity with these gentlemen of ancient lineage, to be the faithful retainer of their ladies, gave him a

sensation of triumph that never palled; and I think that at the back of it all was a passionate romanticism that led him to see in the weedy little French duke the crusader who had gone to the Holy Land with Saint Louis and in the blustering, fox-hunting English earl the ancestor who had attended Henry the Eighth to the Field of the Cloth of Gold. In the company of such as these he felt that he lived in a spacious and gallant past. I think when he turned the pages of the Almanach de Gotha his heart beat warmly as one name after another brought back to him recollections of old wars, historic sieges and celebrated duels, diplomatic intrigues and the love affairs of kings. Such anyhow was Elliott Templeton.

(v)

I was having a wash and a brush-up before starting out to go to the luncheon Elliott had invited me to, when they rang up from the desk to say that he was below. I was a little surprised, but as soon as I was ready went down.

"I thought it would be safer if I came and fetched you," he said as we shook hands. "I don't know how well you know Chicago,"

He had the feeling I have noticed in some Americans who have lived many years abroad that America is a difficult and even dangerous place in which the European cannot safely be left to find his way about by himself.

"It's early yet. We might walk part of the way," he suggested.

There was a slight nip in the air, but not a cloud in the sky, and it was pleasant to stretch one's legs.

"I thought I'd better tell you about my sister before you meet her," said Elliott as we walked along. "She's stayed with me once or twice in Paris, but I don't think you were there at the time. It's not a big party, you know. Only my sister and her daughter Isabel and Gregory Brabazon."

"The decorator?" I asked.

"Yes. My sister's house is awful, and Isabel and I want her to have it done over. I happened to hear that Gregory was in Chicago and so I got her to ask him to lunch today. He's not quite a gentleman, of course, but he has taste. He did Raney Castle for Mary Olifant and St.

Clement Talbot for the St. Erths. The duchess was delighted with him. You'll see Louisa's house for yourself. How she can have lived in it all these years I shall never understand. For the matter of that how she can live in Chicago I shall never understand either."

It appeared that Mrs. Bradley was a widow with three children, two sons and a daughter; but the sons were much older and married. One was in a government post in the Philippines and the other, in the diplomatic service as his father had been, was at Buenos Aires. Mrs Bradley's husband had occupied posts in various parts of the world, and after being first secretary in Rome for some years was made minister to one of the republics on the west coast of South America and had there died.

"I wanted Louisa to sell the house in Chicago when he passed over," Elliott went on, "but she had a sentiment about it. It had been in the Bradley family for quite a long while. The Bradleys are one of the oldest families in Illinois. They came from Virginia in 1839 and took up land about sixty miles from what is now Chicago. They still own it." Elliott hesitated a little and looked at me to see how I would take it. "The Bradley who settled here was what I suppose you might call a farmer. I'm not sure whether you know, but about the middle of last century, when the Middle West began to be opened up, quite a number of Virginians, younger sons of good family, you know, were tempted by the lure of the unknown to leave the fleshpots of their native state. My brother-in-law's father, Chester Bradley, saw that Chicago had a future and entered a law office here. At all events he made enough money to leave his son very adequately provided for."

Elliott's manner, rather than his words, suggested that perhaps it was not quite the thing for the late Chester Bradley to have left the stately mansion and the broad acres he had inherited to enter an office, but the fact that he had amassed a fortune at least partly compensated for it. Elliott was none too pleased when on a later occasion Mrs. Bradley showed me some snapshots of what he called their "place" in the country, and I saw a modest frame house with a pretty little garden, but with a barn and a cowhouse and hog pens within a stone's throw, surrounded by a desolate waste of flat fields. I couldn't

help thinking that Mr. Chester Bradley knew what he was about when he abandoned this to make his way in the city.

Presently we hailed a taxi. It put us down before a brown-stone house. Narrow and rather high, and you ascended to the front door by a flight of steep steps. It was in a row of houses, in a street that led off Lake Shore Drive, and its appearance, even on that bright autumn day, was so drab that you wondered how anyone could feel any sentiment about it. The door was opened by a tall and stout Negro butler with white hair, and we were ushered into the drawing-room. Mrs. Bradley got up from her chair as we came in and Elliott presented me to her. She must have been a handsome woman when young, for her features, though on the large side, were good and she had fine eyes. But her sallowish face, almost aggressively destitute of make-up, had sagged and it was plain that she had lost the battle with the corpulence of middle age. I surmised that she was unwilling to accept defeat, for when she sat down she sat very erect in a straight-backed chair which the cruel armour of her corsets doubtless made more comfortable than an upholstered one. She wore a blue gown, heavily braided, and her high collar was stiff with whalebone. She had a fine head of white hair tightly marcelled and intricately dressed. Her other guest had not arrived and while waiting for him we talked of one thing and another.

"Elliott tells me that you came over by the southern route," said Mrs. Bradley. "Did you stop in Rome?"

"Yes, I spent a week there,"

"And how is dear Queen Margherita?"

Somewhat surprised by her question, I said I didn't know.

"Oh, didn't you go and see her? Such a very nice woman. She was so kind to us when we were in Rome. Mr. Bradley was first secretary. Why didn't you go and see her? You're not like Elliott, so black that you can't go to the Quirinal?"

"Not at all," I smiled. "The fact is I don't know her."

"Don't you?" said Mrs. Bradley as though she could hardly believe her ears. "Why not?"

"To tell you the truth authors don't hobnob with kings and queens as a general rule."

"But she's such a sweet woman," Mrs. Bradley expostulated, as though it were very hoity-toity of me not to know that royal personage. "I'm sure you'd like her."

At this moment the door was opened and the butler ushered in Gregory Brabazon.

Gregory Brabazon, notwithstanding his name, was not a romantic creature. He was a short, very fat man, as bald as an egg except for a ring of black curly hair round his ears and at the back of his neck, with a red, naked face that looked as though it were on the point of breaking out into a violent sweat, quick grey eyes, sensual lips and a heavy jowl. He was an Englishman and I had sometimes met him at bohemian parties in London. He was very jovial, very hearty and laughed a great deal, but you didn't have to be a great judge of character to know that his noisy friendliness was merely cover for a very astute man of business. He had been for some years the most successful decorator in London. He had a great booming voice and little fat hands that were wonderfully expressive. With telling gestures, with a spate of excited words he could thrill the imagination of a doubting client so that it was almost impossible to withhold the order he seemed to make it a favour to accept.

The butler came in again with a tray of cocktails.

"We won't wait for Isabel," said Mrs. Bradley as she took one.

"Where is she?" asked Elliott.

"She went to play golf with Larry. She said she might be late."

Elliott turned to me.

"Larry is Laurence Darrell. Isabel is supposed to be engaged to him."

"I didn't know you drank cocktails, Elliott," I said.

"I don't," he answered grimly, as he sipped the one he had taken, "but in this barbarous land of prohibition what can one do?" He sighed. "They're beginning to serve them in some houses in Paris. Evil communications corrupt good manners."

"Stuff and nonsense, Elliott," said Mrs Bradley.

She said it good-naturedly enough, but with a decision that suggested to me that she was a woman of character and I suspected from the look she gave him, amused but shrewd, that she had no illusions about him.

I wondered what she would make of Gregory Brabazon.

I had caught the professional look he gave the room as he came in and the involuntary lifting of his bushy eyebrows. It was indeed an amazing room. The paper on the walls, the cretonne of the curtains and on the upholstered furniture were of the same pattern; on the walls were oil paintings in massive gold frames that the Bradleys had evidently bought when they were in Rome. Virgins of the school of Raphael, Virgins of the school of Guido Reni, landscapes of the school of Zuccarelli, mins of the school of Pannini. There were the trophies of their sojourn in Peking, blackwood tables too profusely carved, huge cloisonne vases, and there were the purchases they had made in Chili or Peru, obese figures in hard stone and earthenware vases. There was a Chippendale writing-table and a marquetry vitrine. The lamp-shades were of white silk on which some ill-advised artist had painted shepherds and shepherdesses in Watteau costumes. It was hideous and yet, I don't know why, agreeable. It had a homely, lived-in air and you felt that that incredible jumble had a significance. All those incongruous objects belonged together because they were part of Mrs. Bradley's life.

We had finished our cocktails when the door was flung open and a girl came in, followed by a boy.

"Are we late?" she asked. "I've brought Larry back. Is there anything for him to eat?"

"I expect so," smiled Mrs. Bradley. "Ring the bell and tell Eugene to put another place."

"He opened the door for us. I've already told him."

"This is my daughter Isabel," said Mrs. Bradley, turning to me. "And this is Laurence Darrell."

Isabel gave me a rapid handshake and turned impetuously to Gregory Brabazon.

"Are you Mr. Brabazon? I've been crazy to meet you. I love what you've done for Clementine Dormer. Isn't this room terrible? I've been trying to get Mamma to do something about it for years and now you're in Chicago it's our chance. Tell me honestly what you think of it." I knew that was the last thing Brabazon would do. He gave Mrs. Bradley a quick glance, but her impassive face told him nothing. He decided that Isabel was the person who counted and broke into a boisterous laugh.

"I'm sure it's very comfortable and all that," he said, "but if you ask me point-blank, well, I do think it's pretty awful."

Isabel was a tall girl with the oval face, straight nose, fine eyes and full mouth that appeared to be characteristic of the family. She was comely though on the fat side, which I ascribed to her age, and I guessed that she would fine down as she grew older. She had strong, good hands, though they also were a trifle fat, and her legs, displayed by her short skirt, were fat too. She had a good skin and a high colour, which exercise and the drive back in an open car had doubtless heightened. She was sparkling and vivacious. Her radiant health, her playful gaiety, her enjoyment of life, the happiness you felt in her were exhilarating. She was so natural that she made Elliott, for all his elegance, look rather tawdry. Her freshness made Mrs. Bradley, with her pasty, lined face, look tired and old.

We went down to lunch. Gregory Brabazon blinked when he saw the dining-room. The walls were papered with a dark red paper that imitated stuff and hung with portraits of grim, sour-faced men and women, very badly painted, who were the immediate forebears of the late Mr. Bradley. He was there, too, with a heavy moustache, very stiff in a frock coat and a white starched collar. Mrs. Bradley, painted by a French artist of the nineties, hung over the chimney piece in full evening dress of pale blue satin with pearls around her neck and a diamond star in her hair. With one bejewelled hand she fingered a lace scarf so carefully painted that you could count every stitch and with the other negligently held an ostrich-feather fan. The furniture, of black oak, was overwhelming.

"What do you think of it?" asked Isabel of Gregory Brabazon as we sat down.

"I'm sure it cost a great deal of money," he answered.

"It did," said Mrs. Bradley. "It was given to us as a wedding present by Mr. Bradley's father. It's been all over the world with us. Lisbon, Peking, Quito, Rome. Dear Queen Margherita admired it very much."

"What would you do if it was yours?" Isabel asked Brabazon, but before he could answer, Elliott answered for him.

"Burn it," he said.

The three of them began to discuss how they would

treat the room. Elliott was all for Louis Quinze, while Isabel wanted a refectory table and Italian chairs. Brabazon thought Chippendale would be more in keeping with Mrs. Bradley's personality.

"I always think that's so important," he said, "a person's personality." He turned to Elliott. "Of course you know the Duchess of Olifant?"

"Mary? She's one of my most intimate friends."

"She wanted me to do her dining-room and the moment I saw her I said George the Second."

"How right you were. I noticed the room the last time I dined there. It's in perfect taste."

So the conversation went on. Mrs. Bradley listened, but you could not tell what she was thinking. I said little and Isabel's young man, Larry, I'd forgotten his surname, said nothing at all. He was sitting on the other side of the table between Brabazon and Elliott and every now and then I glanced at him. He looked very young. He was about the same height as Elliott, just under six feet, thin and loose-limbed. He was a pleasant-looking boy, neither handsome nor plain, rather shy and in no way remarkable. I was interested in the fact that though, so far as I could remember, he hadn't said half a dozen words since entering the house, he seemed perfectly at ease and in a curious way appeared to take part in the conversation without opening his mouth. I noticed his hands. They were long, but not large for his size, beautifully shaped and at the same time strong. I thought that a painter would be pleased to paint them. He was slightly built but not delicate in appearance; on the contrary I should have said he was wiry and resistant. His face, grave in repose, was tanned, but otherwise there was little colour in it, and his features, though regular enough, were undistinguished. He had rather high cheekbones and his temples were hollow. He had dark brown hair with a slight wave in it. His eyes looked larger than they really were because they were deep set in the orbits and his lashes were thick and long. His eyes were peculiar, not of the rich hazel that Isabel shared with her mother and her uncle, but so dark that the iris made one colour with the pupil, and this gave them a peculiar intensity. He had a natural grace that was attractive and I could see why Isabel had been taken by him. Now and again her glance rested on him for a moment

and I seemed to see in her expression not only love but fondness. Their eyes met and there was in his a tenderness that was beautiful to see. There is nothing more touching than the sight of young love, and I, a middle-aged man then, envied them, but at the same time, I couldn't imagine why, I felt sorry for them. It was silly because, so far as I knew, there was no impediment to their happiness; their circumstances seemed easy and there was no reason why they should not marry and live happily ever afterwards.

Isabel, Elliott and Gregory Brabazon went on talking of the redecoration of the house, trying to get out of Mrs. Bradley at least an admission that something should be done, but she only smiled amiably.

"You mustn't try to rush me. I want to have time to think it over." She turned to the boy. "What do you think of it all, Larry?"

He looked round the table, a smile in his eyes.

"I don't think it matters one way or the other," he said.

"You beast, Larry," cried Isabel. "I particularly told you to back us up."

"If Aunt Louisa is happy with what she's got, what is the object of changing?"

His question was so much to the point and so sensible that it made me laugh. He looked at me then and smiled.

"And don't grin like that just because you've made a very stupid remark," said Isabel.

But he only grinned the more, and I noticed then that he had small and white and regular teeth. There was something in the look he gave Isabel that made her flush and catch her breath. Unless I was mistaken she was madly in love with him, but I don't know what it was that gave me the feeling that in her love for him there was also something maternal. It was a little unexpected in so young a girl. With a soft smile on her lips she directed her attention once more to Gregory Brabazon.

"Don't pay any attention to him. He's very stupid and entirely uneducated. He doesn't know anything about anything except flying."

"Flying?" I said.

"He was an aviator in the war."

"I should have thought he was too young to have been in the war."

"He was. Much too young. He behaved very badly. He ran away from school and went to Canada. By lying his head off he got them to believe he was eighteen and got into the air corps. He was fighting in France at the time of the armistice."

"You're boring your mother's guests, Isabel," said Larry.

"I've known him all my life, and when he came back he looked lovely in his uniform, with all those pretty ribbons on his tunic, so I just sat on his doorstep, so to speak, till he consented to marry me just to have a little peace and quiet. The competition was awful."

"Really, Isabel," said her mother.

Larry leant over towards me.

"I hope you don't believe a word she says. Isabel isn't a bad girl really, but she's a liar."

Luncheon was finished and soon after Elliott and I left. I had told him before that I was going to the museum to look at the pictures and he said he would take me, I don't particularly like going to a gallery with anyone else, but I could not say I would sooner go alone, so I accepted his company. On our way we spoke of Isabel and Larry,

"It's rather charming to see two young things so much in love with one another," I said.

"They're much too young to marry."

"Why? It's such fun to be young and in love and to marry."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's nineteen and he's only just twenty. He hasn't got a job. He has a tiny income, three thousand a year Louisa tells me, and Louisa's not a rich woman by any manner of means. She needs all she has."

"Well, he can get a job."

"That's just it. He's not trying to. He seems to be quite satisfied to do nothing."

"I dare say he had a pretty rough time in the war. He may want a rest."

"He's been resting for a year. That's surely long enough."

"I thought he seemed a nice sort of boy."

"Oh, I have nothing against him. He's quite well born and all that sort of thing. His father came from Baltimore. He was assistant professor of Romance languages at Yale

or something like that. His mother was a Philadelphian of old Quaker stock."

"You speak of them in the past. Are they dead?"

"Yes, his mother died in childbirth and his father about twelve years ago. He was brought up by an old college friend of his father's who's a doctor at Marvin. That's how Louisa and Isabel knew him."

"Where's Marvin?"

"That's where the Bradley place is. Louisa spends the summer there. She was sorry for the child. Dr. Nelson's a bachelor and didn't know the first thing about bringing up a boy. It was Louisa who insisted that he should be sent to St. Paul's and she always had him out here for his Christmas vacation." Elliott shrugged a Gallic shoulder. "I should have thought she would foresee the inevitable result."

We had now arrived at the museum and our attention was directed to the pictures. Once more I was impressed by Elliott's knowledge and taste. He shepherded me around the rooms as though I were a group of tourists, and no professor of art could have discoursed more instructively than he did. Making up my mind to come again by myself when I could wander at will and have a good time, I submitted; after a while he looked at his watch.

"Let us go," he said. "I never spend more than one hour in a gallery. That is as long as one's power of appreciation persists. We will finish another day."

I thanked him warmly when we separated. I went my way perhaps a wiser but certainly a peevish man.

When I was saying good-bye to Mrs. Bradley she told me that next day Isabel was having a few of her young friends in to dinner and they were going on to dance afterwards, and if I would come Elliott and I could have a talk when they had gone.

"You'll be doing him a kindness," she added. "He's been abroad so long, he feels rather out of it here. He doesn't seem able to find anyone he has anything in common with."

I accepted and before we parted on the museum steps Elliott told me he was glad I had.

"I'm like a lost soul in this great city," he said. "I promised Louisa to spend six weeks with her, we hadn't seen one another since 1912, but I'm counting the days