



Remembrances of H. G. Wells

SOMERSET MAUGHAM



Somerset Maugham

I MET H. G. Wells for the first time at a flat which Reggie Turner had near Berkeley Square. I was living then in Mount Street and sometimes I would drop in to see him. Reggie Turner was on the whole the most amusing man I have known.

I will not attempt to describe his humor, since Max Beerbohm has done it to perfection in the essay called "Laughter." Reggie was not so well pleased as he might have been with this flattering tribute because Max had added that he was not very responsive to the humor of others. He asked me if it was true, and I was bound to admit that it was. Reggie liked an audience, though he was quite content with one of three or four, and then he would take a theme and embroider upon it with much drollery that he made your sides ache with laughter that at last you had to beg him to stop. He was in every way of being a novelist, but somehow, when he took up his pen his gaiety, his extravagant invention, his brightness deserted him, and his novels

were dull. They were unsuccessful. He said of them: "With most novelists it's their first edition that is valuable, but with mine it's the second. It doesn't exist." I will set down here a quip of his because I do not think it is well known. He was one of the few of Oscar Wilde's friends who remained faithful to him after his disgrace. Reggie was in Paris when Wilde, living in a cheap, dingy hotel on the left bank of the Seine, was dying. Reggie went to see him every day. One morning he found him distraught. He asked him what was the matter. "I had a terrible dream last night," said Oscar. "I dreamt I was supping with the dead." "Well," said Reggie, "I'm sure you were the life and soul of the party, Oscar." Wilde burst into a roar of laughter and regained his spirits. It was not only witty, but kind.

On the day on which I was first introduced to H. G. he had been lunching with Reggie and they had gone back to his flat to continue their conversation. H. G. was then, I suppose, at the height of his fame. I had not expected to find him there and was slightly disconcerted. I had recently made a success as a dramatist which the newspapers described as spectacular, but I was well aware that I had thereby lost caste with the intelligentsia. H. G. was cordial enough, but, perhaps because I was sensitive, I received the impression that he looked upon me with a sort of off-hand amusement as he might have looked upon Arthur Roberts or Dan Leno. He was busy recon-

structing the world according to his own notions of how it should be shaped, and he had no time for anyone who was not with him, so that he could be enlisted to serve his ideas, or against him, so that he could be reasoned with, argued with, and, if not brought round, ignominiously discarded.

THOUGH after that I saw him now and then, it was not till a number of years later, when I had settled down on the Riviera and H. G. had a house there too at which he spent a considerable part of the year, that our slight acquaintance ripened into friendship. Later still, when he had parted with the companion who shared the house with him (carved on the chimney-piece in the sitting room was the phrase: "This house was built by two lovers") and abandoned it to her, he would from time to time come to stay with me. He was very good company. He was not a wit as Max Beerbohm or Reggie Turner was, but he had a lively sense of humor and could laugh at himself as well as at others. Once he asked me to lunch to meet Barbusse, the author of a novel called "Le Feu" that had made a great stir. It is a long time ago and I can only remember that Barbusse was a long, thin, hirsute man dressed in shabby black like a mute at a French funeral. He had dark angry eyes and a restless manner. He was an ardent, violent Socialist and his speech was torrential. Though H. G. understood French well enough he spoke it haltingly, so that

Somerset Maugham's article is drawn from his book of essays "The Unpleasant Mood," published last week by Doubleday & Co. Copyright 1953 by W. Somerset Maugham.

Barbusse had the conversation pretty much to himself. He treated us as though we were a public meeting. When he left, H. G. turned to me with a wry smile and said: "How silly our own ideas sound when we hear them out of somebody else's mouth." He was sharp-witted and, though apt to find persons who didn't agree with him stupid and so objects of ridicule, the humor he exercised at their expense was devoid of malice.

H. G. had strong sexual instincts and he said to me more than once that the need to satisfy these instincts had nothing to do with love. It was a purely physiological matter. If humor, as some say, is incompatible with love, then H. G. was never in love, for he was keenly alive to what was rather absurd in the objects of his unstable affections and sometimes seemed almost to look upon them as creatures of farce. He was incapable of the idealization of the desired person which most of us experience when we fall in love. If his companion was not intelligent he soon grew bored with her, and if she was, her intelligence sooner or later palled on him. He did not like his cake unsweetened and if it was sweet it cloyed. He loved his liberty and when he found that a woman wished to restrict it he became exasperated and somewhat ruthlessly broke off the connection. Sometimes this was not so easily done and he had to put up with scenes and recriminations that even he found difficult to treat with levity. He was, of course, like most creative persons self-centered. That to sever a tie that had lasted for years might cause the other party pain and humiliation appeared to him merely silly. I was somewhat closely concerned in one of these upheavals in his life, and speaking of the trouble it was causing him, he said: "You know, women often mistake possessiveness for passion and when they are left it is not so much that their heart is broken as that their claim to property is repudiated." He thought it unreasonable that what on his side was merely the relaxation from what he regarded as his life's work on the other might be enduring passion. This he aroused. It surprised me, since his physical appearance was not particularly pleasing. He was fat and homely. I once asked one of his mistresses what especially attracted her in him. I expected her to say his acute mind and his sense of fun; not at all; she said that his body smelt of honey.

Notwithstanding H. G.'s immense reputation and the great influence he had had on his contemporaries, he was devoid of conceit. There was nothing of the stuffed shirt in him. He never put on airs. He had nat-

urally good manners and he would treat some unknown scribbler, the assistant librarian, for instance, of a provincial library, with the same charming civility as if he were as important as himself. It was only later that by a grin and a quip you could tell what a donkey he had thought him. I remember attending a dinner of the PEN, of which H. G. was then president. There were a great many people present and after H. G. had read a report a number of them got up to ask questions. Most of them were silly, but H. G. replied to them all with great courtesy. One thickly bearded man, which marked him out as a conscious intellectual, leapt to his feet time and time again to make short speeches of a singular ineptitude and it was only too obvious that he was trying merely to attract attention to himself. H. G. could have crushed him with a report, but he listened to him attentively and then reasoned with him as if he had been talking sense. After the proceedings were over I told H. G. how much I admired the wonderful patience with which he had dealt with the silly fellow. He chuckled and said: "When I was a member of the Fabian Society I got a lot of practice in dealing with fools."

HE HAD no illusions about himself as an author. He always insisted that he made no pretension to be an artist. That was, indeed, something he despised rather than admired, and when he spoke of Henry James, an old friend, who claimed perhaps a little too often that he was an artist and nothing else, it was good-humoredly to ridicule him. "I'm not an author," H. G. would say, "I'm a publicist. My work is just high-class journalism." On one occasion, after he had been staying with me, he sent me a complete edition of his works and next time he came he saw them displayed in an imposing row on my shelves. They were well printed on good paper and handsomely bound in red. He ran his finger along them and with a cheerful grin said:



—Max Beerbohm (Bettmann Archive).

"Prophet and Idealist, Conjuring Up the Darling Future."

"They're as dead as mutton, you know. They all dealt with matters of topical interest and now that the matters aren't topical any more they're unreadable." There is a good deal of truth in what he said. He had a fluent pen and too often it ran away with him. I have never seen any of his manuscripts, but I surmise that he wrote with facility and corrected little. He had a way of repeating in one sentence, but in other words, exactly what he said in the previous one. I suppose it was because he was so full of the idea he wanted to express that he was not satisfied to say it only once. It made him unnecessarily verbose.

H. G.'s theory of the short story was a sensible one. It enabled him to write a number that were very good and several that were masterly. His theory of the novel was different. His early novels, which he had written to earn a living, did not accord with it and he spoke of them slightly. His notion was that the function of the novelist was to deal with the pressing problems of the day and to persuade the reader to adopt the views for the betterment of the world which he, H. G., held. He was fond of likening the novel to a woven tapestry of varied interest, and he would not accept my objection that after all a

tapestry has unity. The artist who designed it has given it form, balance, coherence, and arrangement. It is not a jumble of unrelated items.

His later novels are, if not, as he said, unreadable, at least difficult to read with delight. You begin to read them with interest, but as you go on you find your interest dwindle and it is only by an effort of will that you continue to read. I think "Tono Bungay" is generally considered his best novel. It is written with his usual liveliness, though perhaps the style is better suited to a treatise than to a novel, and the characters are well presented. He has deliberately avoided the suspense which most novelists attempt to create and he tells you more or less early on what is going to happen. His theory of the novelist's function allows him to digress abundantly, which, if you are interested in the characters and their behavior, can hardly fail to arouse in you some impatience.

One day when he was staying with me, in the course of conversation he made the remark: "I am only interested in people in the mass, I'm indifferent to the individual." Then with a smile: "I like you, in fact I've got a real affection for you, but I'm not interested in you." I laughed. I knew it was true. "I'm afraid I can't multiply myself by ten thousand to arouse your interest, old boy," I said. "Ten thousand?" he cried. "That's nothing. Ten million." During the course of his life he came in contact with a great many people, but with rare exceptions, though consistently pleasant and courteous, they made no more impression on him than the "extras" who compose the crowd in a moving picture.

I think that is why his novels are less satisfactory than one would have liked them to be. The people he puts before you are not individuals, but lively and talkative marionettes whose function it is to express the ideas he was out to attack or to defend. They do not develop according to their dispositions, but change for the purposes of the theme. It is as though a tadpole did not become a frog, but a squirrel—because you had a cage that you wanted to pop him into. H. G. seems often to have grown tired of his characters before he was halfway through and then, frankly discarding any attempt at characterization, he becomes an out-and-out pamphleteer. One curious thing that you can hardly help noticing if you have read most of H. G.'s novels is that he deals with very much the same people in book after book. He appears to have been content to use with little variation the few persons

(Continued on page 68)



—Bettmann Archive.

"No, Sir Joshua, you may *not* make me known to Dr. Johnson."

A Plea for Literary Mayhem

RICHARD HANSER

"I HAVE had great pleasure in reading Jean-Paul Sartre's latest novel," said François Mauriac not long ago, pausing a moment before adding the stinger, "—and in finding that it was extremely bad."

This openly malicious flick by a Nobel Prize winner at one of his leading contemporaries is merely the most recent instance of how much saltier the literary life is in France than over here, where a suffocating decorum tends to deaden and flatten almost everything printed and publicly said about books and their authors. Our literary feuds, when there are any, are usually conducted with an anemic propriety that reduces everything to impersonal generalities and polite tsk-tsks, leaving the participants unscarred and the public unmoved. In political dispute we slash and hack and rip and bludgeon, and the arena is invariably heaped high with mangled corpses and bleeding survivors. But in our literary tussles a galloping leukemia inexplicably sets in, and nobody ever gets hurt.

There is no earthly reason why writers at odds with each other should be any more gentlemanly than rival candidates for Congress, and the whole history of literature shows that writers usually *are* at odds with each other. ("How odious all authors are," observed Henry Edward Fox, Fourth

Lord Holland, "and how doubly so to each other!") In the current tameness of the American literary scene, the crime of dullness is compounded by the sin of hypocrisy.

We are likely to be pretty patronizing to the Victorians, imagining that we live in a more full-blooded and forthright age, but in literary matters our own time has every reason to blush for its virility in comparison. The Victorians were passionate about literature, and their celebrated sense of propriety went down the drain when bookish vendettas flared.

Swinburne, for example, once told Edmund Gosse that he was quarreling with Emerson by mail. "I hope your language was quite moderate," Gosse said.

"Perfectly moderate!" Swinburne replied. "I merely informed him, in language of the strictest reserve, that he was a hoary-headed and toothless baboon, who, first lifted into notice on the shoulder of Carlyle, now spits and splutters from a filthier platform of his own finding and fouling. That is all I said."

Carlyle, for his part, refused to meet Swinburne, saying he did not care to be introduced to anyone "who was sitting in a sewer and adding to it." There is, of course, nothing in current literary criticism to compare with the savagery of Carlyle's com-