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# The Engineer's Bookshelf

By PROF. WILSON R. DUMBLE

## SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Again Mr. W. Somerset Maugham has published a novel, his first novel since "Theatre" (1937) and his first book since "Summing Up" (1939), his autobiography. Always, as in the past, the appearance of a new Maugham book in the book stalls is an occasion; and indeed this famous British novelist has a right to crow loudly and long over his accomplishments this time. For his new book, "Christmas Holiday",\* ranks first among his recent novels and foremost among all the novels published during the closing months of 1939. "Christmas Holiday" is far superior in theme and technique to "Theatre", better than "The Narrow Corner", and surely as good as "The Moon and Sixpence". Long after the reader has closed the boards of the book, he will ponder over Mr. Maugham's theme: the middle-class Britisher, living in his comfortable smugness of Belgrave Square, regularly attending his symphonies and his operas, surrounded by his Cezannes and his Van Goghs and his Gauguin, knows little or nothing of how the other half of the world exists.

But Charley Mason does make the discovery. Charley is Mr. Maugham's chief character; and Charley at the age of twenty-three sets out from his pleasant London home one December 24th, with twenty-five pounds in his pocket, to "see Paris and to have one hell of a time." After five days Charley returns to London, and "only one thing had happened to him, it was rather curious when you came to think of it, and he didn't just then quite know what to do about it: the bottom had fallen out of his world."

What happened to Charley makes up the story of "Christmas Holiday"; but before we look at the story, let us have a glimpse of Charley's parents and his education.

Charley and his sister Patsy, born to comfortable wealth and affluence, were the children of Leslie and Venetia Mason. Leslie Mason, in turn, had been the son of the Wilfred Masons and he too had had all the comforts that a middle-class British family of wealth could enjoy. That, however, had not been the case of Charley's great grandparents, the Sibert Masons. Sometime during the 1840's, Sibert had been a gardener at a large and luxurious estate in Sussex, and after marrying his landlord's cook he had astutely invested their small savings in land on the outskirts of London. Both Sibert and his wife lived to ripe ages, lived to see the city expand to the very boundaries of their land, and lived to see their acres converted into a sub-

division known to the London real estate world as The Mason Estate. When Sibert died he left an extremely valuable estate to his only son, Wilfred; and Wilfred, Charley's grandfather, had cared for the fortune in such a manner that over a short period of time the original inheritance had doubled.

Charley had never wanted. He had received his primary education from a private tutor before his father had sent him to Rugby and to Cambridge. As a young man he had regularly attended the symphony concerts; once a year he had heard a production of the "Ring"; often he visited the galleries to see the Cezannes; he preferred Debussy to Arthur Sullivan, Virginia Woolf to John Galsworthy; and he was thoroughly convinced that Sibelius was just as good as Beethoven. After graduation from Cambridge, Charley had enjoyed a Continental Grand Tour and had returned to Belgrave Square with a single idea in mind: he would study art. But through the designed and subtle influence of his mother, he gave up the idea and entered a firm of accountants for four months apprenticeship before he would start in business with his father, the business of handling the monies from The Mason Estate.

It was Leslie Mason's suggestion that Charley go to Paris for a Christmas holiday. After all, with the start of the new year Charley was to enter his business, and Leslie thought that the boy should visit Paris "just once on his own." True indeed, Charley had been in Paris many times before, but it had always been under the careful guidance and watchful eye of his parents. Now, come age twenty-three, Charley should "have his fling." Charley would travel on his own, first class; he would stay at a little hotel in the Latin Quarter near the Gare Montparnasse; he would pay a visit, maybe two or three, to the Serail, one of the more notorious haunts frequented by young Britishers hell-bent for a good time in Paris; and he would see Simon—harsh, cynical, unscrupulous Simon.

Charley had not seen Simon Fenimore since their pleasant days at Cambridge. At the age of seventeen Simon had spent holidays at the Mason home and had shocked Mrs. Mason into a state of insensibility when he had calmly announced that his mother had been a prostitute and his father a drunkard. But Charley liked Simon; they had been fast friends during college years and they had not seen each other since graduation. Simon surely, thought Charley, could help him "see the sights" of Paris.

And Simon did. On Christmas eve they visited the Serail, Simon ordering champagne, on Charley, and

introducing him to Princess Olga, a white Russian, who, in reality was not a princess and whose name was not Olga. Her name was Lydia, and suffice to say, all the hours remaining in his four-day vacation, Charley spent with her.

Lydia's story takes up most of the remainder of the novel. She had been married to a murderer, one Robert Berger, who had killed Teddie Jordon, an English bookie, and at that moment Berger was spending the rest of his life wearing stripes on Devil's Island. Through some quirk of the mind Lydia thought that she was atoning for her and Berger's sins by devoting her life to prostitution.

Simon's story must not be neglected. Charley discovered that Simon had become politically radical, and was turning over in his morbid and tortured mind a series of monstrous schemes for overthrowing the government.

Returned to the sanctuary of Belgrave Square, Charley, reflecting on his five days in Paris, thought it was exactly "like a pleasant parlour-game that grown-ups played to amuse children." It was in reality "a night-

mare from which he thought he had happily awakened." "It was absurd, it was irrational, but that, all that, seemed to have a force, a dark significance, which made the life he shared with those three, his father, his mother, his sister, who were so near his heart, and the larger, decent yet humdrum life of the environment in which some blind chance had comfortably ensconced him, of no more moment than a shadow play. Patsy had asked him if he had had adventures in Paris and he had truthfully answered no. It was a fact that he had done nothing . . . only one thing had happened to him . . . and he didn't just then quite know what to do about it: the bottom had fallen out of his world."

For splendid, thoughtful reading, Mr. Maugham's "Christmas Holiday" cannot be recommended too highly. It makes just as good reading as does "Of Human Bondage" and personally we do not know what better statement can be made for any novel.

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\*CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY by W. Somerset Maugham, Doubleday Doran, New York, \$2.50.