

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



THE PAINTED VEIL

W Somerset Maugham

CONTENTS

About the Author

Also by W. Somerset Maugham

Title Page

Epigraph

Preface

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61

Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70
Chapter 71
Chapter 72
Chapter 73
Chapter 74
Chapter 75
Chapter 76
Chapter 77
Chapter 78
Chapter 79
Chapter 80

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About the Author

William Somerset Maugham was born in 1874 and lived in Paris until he was ten. He was educated at King's School, Canterbury, and at Heidelberg University. He spent some time at St. Thomas's Hospital with the idea of practising medicine, but the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, published in 1897, won him over to letters. *Of Human Bondage*, the first of his masterpieces, came out in 1915, and with the publication in 1919 of *The Moon and Sixpence* his reputation as a novelist was established. His position as a successful playwright was being consolidated at the same time. His first play, *A Man of Honour*, was followed by a series of successes just before and after World War I, and his career in the theatre did not end until 1933 with *Sheppey*.

His fame as a short story writer began with *The Trembling of a Leaf*, subtitled *Little Stories of the South Sea Islands*, in 1921, after which he published more than ten collections.. His other works include travel books such as *On a Chinese Screen* and *Don Fernando*, essays, criticism, and the autobiographical *The Summing Up* and *A Writer's Notebook*.

In 1927 Somerset Maugham settled in the South of France and lived there until his death in 1965.

ALSO BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Of Human Bondage
The Moon and Sixpence
The Narrow Corner
The Razor's Edge
Cakes and Ale
The Summing Up
Collected Short Stories Vol. 1
Collected Short Stories Vol. 2
Collected Short Stories Vol. 3
Collected Short Stories Vol. 4
Ashenden
South Sea Tales
For Services Rendered
The Merry-Go-Round
Don Fernando
On a Chinese Screen
Catalina
Up at the Villa
Mrs Craddock
Liza of Lambeth
Ten Novels and their Authors
A Writer's Notebook
The Casuarina Tree
Christmas Holiday
The Magician
Points of View
Selected Plays
Theatre
Then and Now
The Vagrant Mood
Far Eastern Tales
More Far Eastern Tales

W. Somerset Maugham

THE PAINTED VEIL

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘. . . the painted veil which those who live call Life.’

Preface

This story was suggested by the lines of Dante that run as follows:

*Deb, quando tu sarai tomato al mondo,
E riposato della lunga via,
Seguito il terzo spirito al secondo,
Ricoiditi di me, che son la Pia:
Siena mi fè; disfecemi Maremma:
Salsi colui, che, innanellata pria
Disposando m'avea con la sua gemma.*

‘Pray, when you are returned to the world, and rested from the long journey; followed the third spirit on the second, ‘remember me, who am Pia. Siena made me, Maremma unmade me: this he knows who after betrothal espoused me with his ring.’

I was a student at St. Thomas’s Hospital and the Easter vacation gave me six weeks to myself. With my clothes in a gladstone bag and twenty pounds in my pocket I set out. I was twenty. I went to Genoa and Pisa and then to Florence. Here I took a room in the via Laura, from the window of which I could see the lovely dome of the Cathedral, in the apartment of a widow lady, with a daughter, who offered me board and lodging (after a good deal of haggling) for four lire a day. I am afraid that she did not make a very good thing out of it, since my appetite was enormous, and I could devour a mountain of macaroni without inconvenience. She had a vineyard on the Tuscan hills, and my recollection is that the Chianti she got from it was the best I have ever drunk in Italy. Her daughter gave me an

Italian lesson every day. She seemed to me then of mature age, but I do not suppose that she was more than twenty-six. She had had trouble. Her betrothed, an officer, had been killed in Abyssinia and she was consecrated to virginity. It was an understood thing that on her mother's death (a buxom, grey-haired, jovial lady who did not mean to die a day before the dear Lord saw fit) Ersilia would enter religion. But she looked forward to this with cheerfulness. She loved a good laugh. We were very gay at luncheon and dinner, but she took her lessons seriously, and when I was stupid or inattentive rapped me over the knuckles with a black ruler. I should have been indignant at being treated like a child if it had not reminded me of the old-fashioned pedagogues I had read of in books and so made me laugh.

I lived laborious days. I started each one by translating a few pages of one of Ibsen's plays so that I might acquire mastery of technique and ease in writing dialogue; then, with Ruskin in my hand, I examined the sights of Florence. I admired according to instructions the tower of Giotto and the bronze doors of Ghiberti. I was properly enthusiastic over the Botticellis in the Uffizi and I turned the scornful shoulder of extreme youth on what the master disapproved of. After luncheon I had my Italian lesson and then going out once more I visited the churches and wandered day-dreaming along the Arno. When dinner was done I went out to look for adventure, but such was my innocence, or at least my shyness, I always came home as virtuous as I had gone out. The Signora, though she had given me a key, sighed with relief when she heard me come in and bolt the door, for she was always afraid I should forget to do this, and I returned to my perusal of the history of the Guelphs and Ghibellines. I was bitterly conscious that not thus behaved the writers of the romantic era, though I doubt whether any of them managed to spend six weeks in Italy

on twenty pounds, and I much enjoyed my sober and industrious life.

I had already read the *Inferno* (with the help of a translation, but conscientiously looking out in a dictionary the words I did not know), so with Ersilia started on the *Purgatorio*. When we came to the passage I have quoted above she told me that Pia was a gentlewoman of Siena whose husband, suspecting her of adultery and afraid on account of her family to put her to death, took her down to his castle in the Maremma the noxious vapours of which he was confident would do the trick; but she took so long to die that he grew impatient and had her thrown out of the window. I do not know where Ersilia learnt all this, the note in my own Dante was less circumstantial, but the story for some reason caught my imagination. I turned it over in my mind and for many years from time to time would brood over it for two or three days. I used to repeat to myself the line: *Siena mi fè; disfecemi Maremma*. But it was one among many subjects that occupied my fancy and for long periods I forgot it. Of course I saw it as a modern story, and I could not think of a setting in the world of today in which such events might plausibly happen. It was not till I made a long journey in China that I found this.

I think this is the only novel I have written in which I started from a story rather than from a character. It is difficult to explain the relation between character and plot. You cannot very well think of a character in the void; the moment you think of him, you think of him in some situation, doing something; so that the character and at least his principle action seem to be the result of a simultaneous act of the imagination. But in this case the characters were chosen to fit the story I gradually evolved; they were constructed from persons I had long known in different circumstances.

I had with this book some of the difficulties that are apt to befall an author. I had originally called my hero and heroine Lane, a common enough name, but it appeared that there were people of that name in Hong-Kong. They brought an action, which the proprietors of the magazine in which my novel was serialised, settled for two hundred and fifty pounds, and I changed the name to Fane. Then the Assistant Colonial Secretary, thinking himself libelled, threatened to institute proceedings. I was surprised, since in England we can put a Prime Minister on the stage or use him as the character of a novel, an Archbishop of Canterbury or a Lord Chancellor, and the tenants of these exalted offices do not turn a hair. It seemed to me strange that the temporary occupant of so insignificant a post should think himself aimed at, but in order to save trouble I changed Hong-Kong to an imaginary colony of Tching-Yen.*
The book had already been published when the incident arose and was recalled. A certain number of astute reviewers who had received it did not on one pretext and another return their copies. These have now acquired a bibliographical value, I think there are about sixty of them in existence, and are bought by collectors at a high price.

1

She gave a startled cry.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

Notwithstanding the darkness of the shuttered room he saw her face on a sudden distraught with terror.

‘Some one just tried the door.’

‘Well, perhaps it was the amah, or one of the boys.’

‘They never come at this time. They know I always sleep after tiffin.’

‘Who else could it be?’

‘Walter,’ she whispered, her lips trembling.

She pointed to his shoes. He tried to put them on, but his nervousness, for her alarm was affecting him, made him clumsy, and besides, they were on the tight side. With a faint gasp of impatience she gave him a shoe-horn. She slipped into a kimono and in her bare feet went over to her dressing-table. Her hair was shingled and with a comb she had repaired its disorder before he had laced his second shoe. She handed him his coat.

‘How shall I get out?’

‘You’d better wait a bit. I’ll look out and see that it’s all right.’

‘It can’t possibly be Walter. He doesn’t leave the laboratory till five.’

‘Who is it then?’

They spoke in whispers now. She was quaking. It occurred to him that in an emergency she would lose her head and on a sudden he felt angry with her. If it wasn't safe why the devil had she said it was? She caught her breath and put her hand on his arm. He followed the direction of her glance. They stood facing the windows that led out on the verandah. They were shuttered and the shutters were bolted. They saw the white china knob of the handle slowly turn. They had heard no one walk along the verandah. It was terrifying to see that silent motion. A minute passed and there was no sound. Then, with the ghastliness of the supernatural, in the same stealthy, noiseless and horrifying manner, they saw the white china knob of the handle at the other window turn also. It was so frightening that Kitty, her nerves failing her, opened her mouth to scream; but, seeing what she was going to do, he swiftly put his hand over it and her cry was smothered in his fingers.

Silence. She leaned against him, her knees shaking, and he was afraid she would faint. Frowning, his jaw set, he carried her to the bed and sat her down upon it. She was as white as the sheet and notwithstanding his tan his cheeks were pale too. He stood by her side looking with fascinated gaze at the china knob. They did not speak. Then he saw that she was crying.

'For God's sake don't do that,' he whispered irritably. 'If we're in for it we're in for it. We shall just have to brazen it out.'

She looked for her handkerchief and knowing what she wanted he gave her her bag.

'Where's your topee?'

'I left it downstairs.'

'Oh, my God!'

'I say, you must pull yourself together. It's a hundred to one it wasn't Walter. Why on earth should he come back at this hour? He never does come home in the middle of the day, does he?'

'Never.'

'I'll bet you anything you like it was the amah.'

She gave him the shadow of a smile. His rich, caressing voice reassured her and she took his hand and affectionately pressed it. He gave her a moment to collect herself.

'Look here, we can't stay here for ever,' he said then. 'Do you feel up to going out on the verandah and having a look?'

'I don't think I can stand.'

'Have you got any brandy in here?'

She shook her head. A frown for an instant darkened his brow, he was growing impatient, he did not quite know what to do. Suddenly she clutched his hand more tightly.

'Suppose he's waiting there?'

He forced his lips to smile and his voice retained the gentle, persuasive tone the effect of which he was so fully conscious of.

'That's not very likely. Have a little pluck, Kitty. How can it possibly be your husband? If he'd come in and seen a strange topee in the hall and come upstairs and found your room locked, surely he would have made some sort of row. It must have been one of the servants. Only a Chinese would turn a handle in that way.'

She did feel more herself now.

'It's not very pleasant even if it was only the amah.'

‘She can be squared and if necessary I’ll put the fear of God into her. There are not many advantages in being a government official, but you may as well get what you can out of it.’

He must be right. She stood up and turning to him stretched out her arms: he took her in his and kissed her on the lips. It was such rapture that it was pain. She adored him. He released her and she went to the window. She slid back the bolt and opening the shutter a little looked out. There was not a soul. She slipped on to the verandah, looked into her husband’s dressing-room and then into her own sitting-room. Both were empty. She went back to the bedroom and beckoned to him.

‘Nobody.’

‘I believe the whole thing was an optical delusion.’

‘Don’t laugh. I was terrified. Go into my sitting-room and sit down. I’ll put on my stockings and some shoes.’

2

He did as she bade and in five minutes she joined him. He was smoking a cigarette.

‘I say, could I have a brandy and soda?’

‘Yes, I’ll ring.’

‘I don’t think it would hurt *you* by the look of things.’

They waited in silence for the boy to answer. She gave the order.

‘Ring up the laboratory and ask if Walter is there,’ she said then. ‘They won’t know your voice.’

He took up the receiver and asked for the number. He inquired whether Dr. Fane was in. He put down the receiver.

‘He hasn’t been in since tiffin,’ he told her. ‘Ask the boy whether he has been here.’

‘I daren’t. It’ll look so funny if he has and I didn’t see him.’

The boy brought the drinks and Townsend helped himself. When he offered her some she shook her head.

‘What’s to be done if it was Walter?’ she asked.

‘Perhaps he wouldn’t care.’

‘Walter?’

Her tone was incredulous.

‘It’s always struck me he was rather shy. Some men can’t bear scenes, you know. He’s got sense enough to know that there’s nothing to be gained by making a scandal. I don’t

believe for a minute it was Walter, but even if it was, my impression is that he'll do nothing. I think he'll ignore it.'

She reflected for a moment.

'He's awfully in love with me.'

'Well, that's all to the good. You'll get round him.'

He gave her that charming smile of his which she had always found so irresistible. It was a slow smile which started in his clear blue eyes and travelled by perceptible degrees to his shapely mouth. He had small white even teeth. It was a very sensual smile and it made her heart melt in her body.

'I don't very much care,' she said, with a flash of gaiety. 'It was worth it.'

'It was my fault.'

'Why did you come? I was amazed to see you.'

'I couldn't resist it.'

'You dear.'

She leaned a little towards him, her dark and shining eyes gazing passionately into his, her mouth a little open with desire, and he put his arms round her. She abandoned herself with a sigh of ecstasy to their shelter.

'You know you can always count on me.' he said.

'I'm so happy with you. I wish I could make you as happy as you make me.'

'You're not frightened any more?'

'I hate Walter,' she answered.

He did not quite know what to say to this, so he kissed her. Her face was very soft against his.

But he took her wrist on which was a little gold watch and looked at the time.

‘Do you know what I must do now?’

‘Bolt?’ she smiled.

He nodded. For one instant she clung to him more closely, but she felt his desire to go, and she released him.

‘It’s shameful the way you neglect your work. Be off with you.’

He could never resist the temptation to flirt.

‘You seem in a devil of a hurry to get rid of me,’ he said lightly.

‘You know that I hate to let you go.’

Her answer was low and deep and serious. He gave a flattered laugh.

‘Don’t worry your pretty little head about our mysterious visitor. I’m quite sure it was the amah. And if there’s any trouble I guarantee to get you out of it.’

‘Have you had a lot of experience?’

His smile was amused and complacent.

‘No, but I flatter myself that I’ve got a head screwed on my shoulders.’

3

She went out on to the verandah and watched him leave the house. He waved his hand to her. It gave her a little thrill as she looked at him; he was forty-one, but he had the lithe figure and the springing step of a boy.

The verandah was in shadow; and lazily, her heart at ease with satisfied love, she lingered. Their house stood in the Happy Valley, on the side of the hill, for they could not afford to live on the more eligible but expensive Peak. But her abstracted gaze scarcely noticed the blue sea and the crowded shipping in the harbour. She could think only of her lover.

Of course it was stupid to behave as they had done that afternoon, but if he wanted her how could she be prudent? He had come two or three times after tiffin, when in the heat of the day no one thought of stirring out, and not even the boys had seen him come and go. It was very difficult at Hong-Kong. She hated the Chinese city and it made her nervous to go into the filthy little house off the Victoria Road in which they were in the habit of meeting. It was a curio dealer's; and the Chinese who were sitting about stared at her unpleasantly; she hated the ingratiating smile of the old man who took her to the back of the shop and then up a dark flight of stairs. The room into which he led her was frowsy and the large wooden bed against the wall made her shudder.

'This is dreadfully sordid, isn't it?' she said to Charlie the first time she met him there.

'It was till you came in,' he answered,

Of course the moment he took her in his arms she forgot everything.

Oh, how hateful it was that she wasn't free, that they both weren't free! She didn't like his wife. Kitty's wandering thoughts dwelt now for a moment on Dorothy Townsend. How unfortunate to be called Dorothy! It dated you. She was thirty-eight at least. But Charlie never spoke of her. Of course he didn't care for her; she bored him to death. But he was a gentleman. Kitty smiled with affectionate irony: it was just like him, silly old thing; he might be unfaithful to her, but he would never allow a word in disparagement of her to cross his lips. She was a tallish woman, taller than Kitty, neither stout nor thin, with a good deal of pale brown hair; she could never have been pretty with anything but the prettiness of youth; her features were good enough without being remarkable and her blue eyes were cold. She had a skin that you would never look at twice and no colour in her cheeks. And she dressed like - well, like what she was, the wife of the Assistant Colonial Secretary at Hong-Kong. Kitty smiled and gave her shoulders a faint shrug.

Of course no one could deny that Dorothy Townsend had a pleasant voice. She was a wonderful mother, Charlie always said that of her, and she was what Kitty's mother called a gentlewoman. But Kitty did not like her. She did not like her casual manner; and the politeness with which she treated you when you went there, to tea or dinner, was exasperating because you could not but feel how little interest she took in you. The fact was, Kitty supposed, that she cared for nothing but her children: there were two boys at school in England, and another boy of six whom she was going to take home next year. Her face was a mask. She smiled and in her pleasant, wellmannered way said the things that were expected of her; but for all her cordiality held you at a distance. She had a few intimate friends in

the Colony and they greatly admired her. Kitty wondered whether Mrs. Townsend thought her a little common. She flushed. After all there was no reason for her to put on airs. It was true that her father had been a Colonial Governor and of course it was very grand while it lasted – every one stood up when you entered a room and men took off their hats to you as you passed in your car – but what could be more insignificant than a Colonial Governor when he had retired? Dorothy Townsend's father lived on a pension in a small house at Earl's Court. Kitty's mother would think it a dreadful bore if she asked her to call. Kitty's father, Bernard Garstin, was a K.C. and there was no reason why he should not be made a judge one of these days. Anyhow they lived in South Kensington.

4

Kitty, coming to Hong-Kong on her marriage, had found it hard to reconcile herself to the fact that her social position was determined by her husband's occupation. Of course every one had been very kind and for two or three months they had gone out to parties almost every night; when they dined at Government House the Governor took her in as a bride; but she had understood quickly that as the wife of the Government bacteriologist she was of no particular consequence. It made her angry.

'It's too absurd,' she told her husband. 'Why, there's hardly any one here that one would bother about for five minutes at home. Mother wouldn't dream of asking any of them to dine at our house.'

'You mustn't let it worry you,' he answered. 'It doesn't really matter, you know.'

'Of course it doesn't matter, it only shows how stupid they are, but it is rather funny when you think of all the people who used to come to our house at home that here we should be treated like dirt.'

'From a social standpoint the man of science does not exist,' he smiled.

She knew that now, but she had not known it when she married him.

'I don't know that it exactly amuses me to be taken in to dinner by the agent of the P. and O.,' she said, laughing in order that what she said might not seem snobbish.

Perhaps he saw the reproach behind her lightness of manner, for he took her hand and shyly pressed it.

'I'm awfully sorry, Kitty dear, but don't let it vex you.'

'Oh. I'm not going to let it do that.'

It couldn't have been Walter that afternoon. It must have been one of the servants and after all they didn't matter. Chinese servants knew everything anyway. But they held their tongues.

Her heart beat a little faster as she remembered the way in which that white china knob slowly turned. They mustn't take risks like that again. It was better to go to the curio shop. No one who saw her go in would think anything of it, and they were absolutely safe there. The owner of the shop knew who Charlie was and he was not such a fool as to put up the back of the Assistant Colonial Secretary. What did anything matter really but that Charlie loved her?

She turned away from the verandah and went back into her sitting-room. She threw herself down on the sofa and stretched out her hand to get a cigarette. Her eye caught sight of a note lying on the top of a book. She opened it. It was written in pencil.

Dear Kitty,

Here is the book you wanted. I was just going to send it when I met Dr. Fane and he said he'd bring it round himself as he was passing the house.

V.H.

She rang the bell and when the boy came asked him who had brought the book and when.

'Master bring it, missy, after tiffin,' he answered.

Then it had been Walter. She rang up the Colonial Secretary's Office at once and asked for Charlie. She told

him what she had just learned. There was a pause before he answered.

‘What shall I do?’ she asked.

‘I’m in the middle of an important consultation. I’m afraid I can’t talk to you now. My advice to you is to sit tight.’

She put down the receiver. She understood that he was not alone and she was impatient with his business.

She sat down again, at a desk, and resting her face in her hands sought to think out the situation. Of course Walter might merely have thought she was sleeping: there was no reason why she should not lock herself in. She tried to remember if they had been talking. Certainly they had not been talking loud. And there was the hat. It was maddening of Charlie to have left it downstairs. But it was no use blaming him for that, it was natural enough, and there was nothing to tell that Walter had noticed it. He was probably in a hurry and had just left the book and note on his way to some appointment connected with his work. The strange thing was that he should have tried the door and then the two windows. If he thought she was asleep it was unlike him to disturb her. What a fool she had been!

She shook herself a little and again she felt that sweet pain in her heart which she always felt when she thought of Charlie. It had been worth it. He had said that he would stand by her, and if the worse came to the worse, well... Let Walter kick up a row if he chose. She had Charlie; what did she care? Perhaps it would be the best thing for him to know. She had never cared for Walter and since she had loved Charlie Townsend it had irked and bored her to submit to her husband’s caresses. She wanted to have nothing more to do with him. She didn’t see how he could prove anything. If he accused her she would deny, and if it came to a pass that she could deny no longer, well, she

would fling the truth in his teeth, and he could do what he chose.

6

Within three months of her marriage she knew that she had made a mistake; but it had been her mother's fault even more than hers.

There was a photograph of her mother in the room and Kitty's harassed eyes fell on it. She did not know why she kept it there, for she was not very fond of her mother; there was one of her father too, but that was downstairs on the grand piano. It had been done when he took silk and it represented him in a wig and gown. Even they could not make him imposing; he was a little, wizened man, with tired eyes, a long upper lip, and a thin mouth; a facetious photographer had told him to look pleasant, but he had succeeded only in looking severe. It was on this account, for as a rule the down-turned corners of his mouth and the dejection of his eyes gave him an air of mild depression, that Mrs. Garstin, thinking it made him look judicial, had chosen it from among the proofs. But her own photograph showed her in the dress in which she had gone to Court when her husband was made a King's Counsel. She was very grand in the velvet gown, the long train so disposed as to show to advantage, with feathers in her hair and flowers in her hand. She held herself erect. She was a woman of fifty, thin and flat-chested, with prominent cheek-bones and a large, well-shaped nose. She had a great quantity of very smooth black hair and Kitty had always suspected that, if not dyed, it was at least touched up. Her fine black eyes were never still and this was the most noticeable thing about her; for when she was talking to you it was disconcerting to see those restless eyes in that impassive,

unlined and yellow face. They moved from one part of you to another, to other persons in the room, and then back to you; you felt that she was criticising you, summing you up, watchful meanwhile of all that went on around her, and that the words she spoke had no connection with her thoughts.