Preface

W. Somerset Maugham

This book is founded on my experiences in the Intelligence Department during the war, but rearranged for the purposes of fiction. Fact is a poor story-teller. It starts a story at haphazard, generally long before the beginning, rambles on inconsequently and tails off, leaving loose ends hanging about, without a conclusion. It works up to an interesting situation, and then leaves it in the air to follow an issue that has nothing to do with the point; it has no sense of climax and whittles away its dramatic effects in irrelevance. There is a school of novelists that looks upon this as the proper model for fiction. If life, they say, is arbitrary and disconnected, why, fiction should be so too; for fiction should imitate life. In life things happen at random, and that is how they should happen in a story; they do not lead to a climax, which is an outrage to probability, they just go on. Nothing offends these people more than the punch or the unexpected twist with which some writers seek to surprise their readers, and when the circumstances they relate seem to tend towards a dramatic effect they do their best to avoid it. They do not give you a story, they give you the material on which you can invent your own. Sometimes it consists of an incident presented, you might think, at haphazard, and you are invited to divine its significance. Sometimes they give you a character and leave it at that. They give you the materials for a dish and expect you to do the cooking yourself. Now this is one way like another of writing stories and some very good stories have been written in it. Chekov used it with mastery. It is more suitable for the very short story than for the longer one. The description of a mood, an environment or an atmosphere, can hold your attention for half a dozen pages, but when it comes to fifty a story needs a supporting skeleton. The skeleton of a story is of course its plot. Now a plot has certain characteristics that you cannot get away from. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It is complete in itself. It starts with a set of circumstances which have consequences, but of which the causes may be ignored; and these consequences, in their turn the cause of other circumstances, are pursued till a point is reached when the reader is satisfied that they are the cause of no further consequences that need be considered. This means that a story should begin at a certain point and end at a certain point. It should not wander along an uncertain line, but follow, from exposition to climax, a bold and vigorous curve. If you wanted to represent it diagrammatically you would draw a semicircle. It is very well to have the element of surprise, and this punch, this unexpected twist, which the imitators of Chekov despise, is only bad when it is badly done; when it is an integral part of the story and its logical issue it is excellent. There is nothing wrong in a climax, it is a very natural demand of the reader; it is only wrong if it does not follow naturally from the circumstances that have gone before. It is purely an affectation to elude it because in life as a general rule things tail off ineffectively.

For it is quite unnecessary to treat as axiomatic the assertion that fiction should imitate life. It is merely a literary theory like another. There is in fact a second theory that is just as plausible, and this is that fiction should use life merely as raw material which it arranges in ingenious patterns. You have a very good analogy in painting. The landscape painters of the seventeenth century were not interested in the direct representation of nature, which to them was no more than the occasion for a formal decoration. They constructed a scene architecturally, balancing for example the mass of a tree with the mass of a cloud, and used light and shade to make a definite pattern. Their intention was not to portray a landscape but to create a work of art. It was a deliberate composition. In their arrangement of the facts of nature they were satisfied if they did not outrage the spectator’s sense of reality. It was left for the Impressionists to paint what they saw. They tried to catch nature in its fleeting beauty; they were content to render the radiance of sunlight, the colour of shadows or the translucency of the air. They aimed at truth. They wanted a painter to be no more than an eye and a hand. They despised intelligence. It is strange how empty their paintings look now when you place them beside the stately pictures of Claude. The method of Claude is the method of that master of the short story Guy de Maupassant. It is a very good one and I have a notion that it will survive the other. Already it is getting a little difficult to care much what middle-class Russians were like fifty years ago, and the anecdote in Chekov’s stories is not as a rule absorbing enough (as the story of Paolo and Francesca or of Macbeth is absorbing) to hold your attention apart from your interest in the people. The method of which I speak is that which chooses from life what is curious, telling and dramatic; it does not seek to copy life, but keeps to it closely enough not to shock the reader into disbelief; it leaves out this and changes that; it makes a formal decoration out of such of the facts as it has found convenient to deal with and presents a picture, the result of artifice, which, because it represents the author’s temperament, is to a certain extent a portrait of himself, but which is designed to excite, interest and absorb the reader. If it is a success he accepts it as true.

I have written all this in order to impress upon the reader that this book is a work of fiction, though I should say not much more so than several of the books on the same subject that have appeared during the last few years and that purport to be truthful memoirs. The work of an agent in the Intelligence Department is on the whole extremely monotonous. A lot of it is uncommonly useless. The material it offers for stories is scrappy and pointless; the author has himself to make it coherent, dramatic and probable.

In 1917 I went to Russia. I was sent to prevent the Bolshevik Revolution and to keep Russia in the war. The reader will know that my efforts did not meet with success. I went to Petrograd from Vladivostock. One day, on the way through Siberia, the train stopped at some station and the passengers as usual got out, some to fetch water to make tea, some to buy food and others to stretch their legs. A blind soldier was sitting on a bench. Other soldiers sat beside him and more stood behind. There were from twenty to thirty. Their uniforms were torn and stained. The blind soldier, a big, vigorous fellow, was quite young. On his cheeks was the soft, pale down of a beard that has never been shaved. I daresay he wasn’t eighteen. He had a broad face, with flat, wide features; and on his forehead was a great scar of the wound that had lost him his sight. His closed eyes gave him a strangely vacant look. He began to sing. His voice was strong and sweet. He accompanied himself on an accordion. The train waited on and he sang song after song. I could not understand his words, but through his singing, wild and melancholy, I seemed to hear the cry of the oppressed: I felt the lonely steppes and the interminable forests, the flow of the broad Russian rivers and all the toil of the countryside, the ploughing of the land and the reaping of the ripe corn, the sighing of the wind in the birch trees, the long months of dark winter; and then the dancing of women in the villages and the youths bathing in shallow streams on summer evenings; I felt the horror of war, the bitter nights in the trenches, the long marches on muddy roads, the battlefield with its terror and anguish and death. It was horrible and deeply moving. A cap lay at the singer’s feet and the passengers filled it full of money; the same emotion had seized them all, of boundless compassion and of vague horror, for there was something in that blind, scarred face that was terrifying; you felt that this was a being apart, sundered from the joy of this enchanting world. He did not seem quite human. The soldiers stood silent and hostile. Their attitude seemed to claim as a right the alms of the travelling herd. There was a disdainful anger on their side and unmeasurable pity on ours; but no glimmering of a sense that there was but one way to compensate that helpless man for all his pain.