**R*.***

W. Somerset Maugham

It was not till the beginning of September that Ashenden, a writer by profession, who had been abroad at the outbreak of the war, managed to get back to England. He chanced soon after his arrival to go to a party and was there introduced to a middle-aged Colonel whose name he did not catch. He had some talk with him. As he was about to leave this officer came up to him and asked:

‘I say, I wonder if you’d mind coming to see me. I’d rather like to have a chat with you.’

‘Certainly,’ said Ashenden. ‘Whenever you like.’

‘What about to-morrow at eleven?’

‘All right.’

‘I’ll just write down my address. Have you a card on you?’

Ashenden gave him one and on this the Colonel scribbled in pencil the name of a street and the number of a house. When Ashenden walked along next morning to keep his appointment he found himself in a street of rather vulgar red-brick houses in a part of London that had once been fashionable, but was now fallen in the esteem of the house-hunter who wanted a good address. On the house at which Ashenden had been asked to call there was a board up to announce that it was for sale, the shutters were closed and there was no sign that anyone lived in it. He rang the bell and the door was opened by a non-commissioned officer so promptly that he was startled. He was not asked his business, but led immediately into a long room at the back, once evidently a dining-room, the florid decoration of which looked oddly out of keeping with the office furniture, shabby and sparse, that was in it. It gave Ashenden the impression of a room in which the brokers had taken possession. The Colonel, who was known in the Intelligence Department, as Ashenden later discovered, by the letter R., rose when he came in and shook hands with him. He was a man somewhat above the middle height, lean, with a yellow, deeply-lined face, thin grey hair and a toothbrush moustache. The thing immediately noticeable about him was the closeness with which his blue eyes were set. He only just escaped a squint. They were hard and cruel eyes, and very wary; and they gave him a cunning, shifty look. Here was a man that you could neither like nor trust at first sight. His manner was pleasant and cordial.

He asked Ashenden a good many questions and then, without further to-do, suggested that he had particular qualifications for the secret service. Ashenden was acquainted with several European languages and his profession was excellent cover; on the pretext that he was writing a book he could without attracting attention visit any neutral country. It was while they were discussing this point that R. said:

‘You know you ought to get material that would be very useful to you in your work.’

‘I shouldn’t mind that,’ said Ashenden.

‘I’ll tell you an incident that occurred only the other day and I can vouch for its truth. I thought at the time it would make a damned good story. One of the French ministers went down to Nice to recover from a cold and he had some very important documents with him that he kept in a dispatch-case. They were very important indeed. Well, a day or two after he arrived he picked up a yellow-haired lady at some restaurant or other where there was dancing, and he got very friendly with her. To cut a long story short, he took her back to his hotel – of course it was a very imprudent thing to do – and when he came to himself in the morning the lady and the dispatch-case had disappeared. They had one or two drinks up in his room and his theory is that when his back was turned the woman slipped a drug into his glass.’

R. finished and looked at Ashenden with a gleam in his close-set eyes.

‘Dramatic, isn’t it?’ he asked.

‘Do you mean to say that happened the other day?’

‘The week before last.’

‘Impossible,’ cried Ashenden. ‘Why, we’ve been putting that incident on the stage for sixty years, we’ve written it in a thousand novels. Do you mean to say that life has only just caught up with us?’

R. was a trifle disconcerted.

‘Well, if necessary, I could give you names and dates, and believe me, the Allies have been put to no end of trouble by the loss of the documents that the dispatch-case contained.’

‘Well, sir, if you can’t do better than that in the secret service,’ sighed Ashenden, ‘I’m afraid that as a source of inspiration to the writer of fiction it’s a washout. We really can’t write that story much longer.’

It did not take them long to settle things and when Ashenden rose to go he had already made careful note of his instructions. He was to start for Geneva next day. The last words that R. said to him, with a casualness that made them impressive, were:

‘There’s just one thing I think you ought to know before you take on this job. And don’t forget it. If you do well you’ll get no thanks and if you get into trouble you’ll get no help. Does that suit you?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Then I’ll wish you good afternoon.’