The Social Science

W. Somerset Maugham

I DO NOT LIKE long-standing engagements. How can you tell whether on a certain day three or four weeks ahead you will wish to dine with a certain person? The chances are that in the interval something will turn up that you would much sooner do and so long a notice presages a large and formal party. But what help is there? The date has been fixed thus far away so that the guests bidden may be certainly disengaged and it needs a very adequate excuse to prevent your refusal from seeming churlish. You accept, and for a month the engagement hangs over you with gloomy menace. It interferes with your cherished plans. It disorganizes your life. There is really only one way to cope with the situation and that is to put yourself off at the last moment. But it is one that I have never had the courage or the want of scruple to adopt.

It was with a faint sense of resentment then that one June evening towards half past eight I left my lodging in Half Moon Street to walk round the corner to dine with the Macdonalds. I liked them. Many years ago I made up my mind not to eat the food of persons I disliked or despised, and though I have on this account enjoyed the hospitality of far fewer people than I otherwise should have done I still think the rule a good one. The Macdonalds were nice, but their parties were a toss-up. They suffered from the delusion that if they asked six persons to dine with them who had nothing in the world to say to one another the party would be a failure, but if they multiplied it by three and asked eighteen it must be a success. I arrived a little late, which is almost inevitable when you live so near the house you are going to that it is not worth while to take a taxi, and the room into which I was shown was filled with people. I knew few of them and my heart sank as I saw myself laboriously making conversation through a long dinner with two total strangers. It was a relief to me when I saw Thomas and Mary Warton come in and an unexpected pleasure when I found on going in to dinner that I had been placed next to Mary.

Thomas Warton was a portrait-painter who at one time had had considerable success, but he had never fulfilled the promise of his youth and had long ceased to be taken seriously by the critics. He made an adequate income, but at the Private View of the Royal Academy no one gave more than a passing glance at the dull but conscientious portraits of fox-hunting squires and prosperous merchants which with unfailing regularity he sent to the annual exhibition. One would have liked to admire his work because he was an amiable and kindly man. If you happened to be a writer he was so genuinely enthusiastic over anything you had done, so charmed with any success you might have had, that you wished your conscience would allow you to speak with decent warmth of his own productions. It was impossible and you were driven to the last refuge of the portrait painter’s friend.

“It looks as if it were a marvellous likeness,” you said.

Mary Warton had been in her day a well-known concert singer and she had still the remains of a lovely voice. She must in her youth have been very handsome. Now, at fifty-three, she had a haggard look. Her features were rather mannish and her skin was weather-beaten; but her short grey hair was thick and curly and her fine eyes were bright with intelligence. She dressed picturesquely rather than fashionably and she had a weakness for strings of beads and fantastic ear-rings. She had a blunt manner, a quick sense of human folly, and a sharp tongue, so that many people did not like her. But no one could deny that she was clever. She was not only an accomplished musician, but she was a great reader and she was passionately interested in painting. She had a very rare feeling for art. She liked the modern, not from pose but from natural inclination, and she had bought for next to nothing the pictures of unknown painters who later became famous. You heard at her house the most recent and difficult music and no poet or novelist in Europe could offer the world something new and strange without her being ready to fight on his behalf the good fight against the philistines. You might say she was a highbrow; she was; but her taste was almost faultless, her judgement sound, and her enthusiasm honest.

No one admired her more than Thomas Warton. He had fallen in love with her when she was still a singer and had pestered her to marry him. She had refused him half a dozen times and I had a notion that she had married him in the end with hesitation. She thought that he would become a great painter and when he turned out to be no more than a decent craftsman, without originality or imagination, she felt that she had been cheated. She was mortified by the contempt with which the connoisseurs regarded him. Thomas Warton loved his wife. He had the greatest respect for her judgement and would sooner have had a word of praise from her than columns of eulogy in all the papers in London. She was too honest to say what she did not think. It wounded him bitterly that she held his work in such poor esteem, and though he pretended to make a joke of it you could see that at heart he resented her outspoken comments. Sometimes his long, horse-like face grew red with the anger he tried to control and his eyes dark with hatred. It was notorious among their friends that the couple did not get on. They had the distressing habit of fripping in public. Warton never spoke to others of Mary but with admiration, but she was less discreet and her confidants knew how exasperating she found him. She admitted his goodness, his generosity, his unselfishness; she admitted them ungrudgingly; but his defects were of the sort that make a man hard to live with, for he was narrow, argumentative, and conceited. He was not an artist and Mary Warton cared more for art than for anything in the world. It was a matter on which she could not compromise. It blinded her to the fact that the faults in Warton that maddened her were due in large part to his hurt feelings. She wounded him continually and he was dogmatic and intolerant in self-protection. There cannot be anything much worse than to be despised by the one person whose approval is all in all to you; and though Thomas Warton was intolerable it was impossible not to feel sorry for him. But if I have given the impression that Mary was a discontented, rather tiresome, pretentious woman I have been unjust to her. She was a loyal friend and a delightful companion. You could talk to her of any subject under the sun. Her conversation was humorous and witty. Her vitality was immense.

She was sitting now on the left hand of her host and the talk around her was general. I was occupied with my next-door neighbour, but I guessed by the laughter with which Mary’s sallies were greeted that she was at her brilliant best. When she was in the vein no one could approach her.

“You’re in great form tonight,” I remarked, when at last she turned to me.

“Does it surprise you?”

“No, it’s what I expect of you. No wonder people tumble over one another to get you to their houses. You have the inestimable gift of making a party go.”

“I do my little best to earn my dinner.”

“By the way, how’s Manson? Someone told me the other day that he was going into a nursing-home for an operation. I hope it’s nothing serious.”

Mary paused for a moment before answering, but she still smiled brightly.

“Haven’t you seen the paper tonight?”

“No, I’ve been playing golf. I only got home in time to jump into a bath and change.”

“He died at two o’clock this afternoon.” I was about to make an exclamation of horrified surprise, but she stopped me. “Take care. Tom is watching me like a lynx. They’re all watching me. They all know I adored him, but they none of them know for certain if he was my lover, even Tom doesn’t know; they want to see how I’m taking it. Try to look as if you were talking of the Russian Ballet.”

At that moment someone addressed her from the other side of the table, and throwing back her head a little with a gesture that was habitual with her, a smile on her large mouth, she flung at the speaker so quick and apt an answer that everyone round her burst out laughing. The talk once more became general and I was left to my consternation.

I knew, everyone knew, that for five and twenty years there had existed between Gerrard Manson and Mary Warton a passionate attachment. It had lasted so long that even the more strait-laced of their friends, if ever they had been shocked by it, had long since learnt to accept it with tolerance. They were middle-aged people, Manson was sixty and Mary not much younger, and it was absurd that at their age they should not do what they liked. You met them sometimes sitting in a retired corner of an obscure restaurant or walking together in the Zoo and you wondered why they still took care to conceal an affair that was nobody’s business but their own. But of course there was Thomas. He was insanely jealous of Mary. He made many violent scenes and indeed, at the end of one tempestuous period, not so very long ago, he forced her to promise never to see Manson again. Of course she broke the promise, and though she knew that Thomas suspected this, she took precautions to prevent him from discovering it for a fact.

It was hard on Thomas. I think he and Mary would have jogged on well enough together and she would have resigned herself to the fact that he was a second-rate painter if her intercourse with Manson had not embittered her judgement. The contrast between her husband’s mediocrity and her lover’s brilliance was too galling.

“With Tom I feel as if I were stifling in a closed room full of dusty knick-knacks,” she told me. “With Gerrard I breathe the pure air of the mountain tops.”

“Is it possible for a woman to fall in love with a man’s mind?” I asked in a pure spirit of inquiry.

“What else is there in Gerrard?”

That, I admit, was a poser. For my part I thought, nothing; but the sex is extraordinary and I was quite ready to believe that Mary saw in Gerrard Manson a charm and a physical attractiveness to which most people were blind. He was a shrivelled little man, with a pale intellectual face, faded blue eyes behind his spectacles, and a high dome of shiny bald head. He had none of the appearance of a romantic lover. On the other hand he was certainly a very subtle critic and a felicitous essayist. I resented somewhat his contemptuous attitude towards English writers unless they were safely dead and buried; but this was only to his credit with the intelligentsia, who are ever ready to believe that there can be no good in what is produced in their own country, and with them his influence was great. On one occasion I told him that one had only to put a commonplace in French for him to mistake it for an epigram and he had thought well enough of the joke to use it as his own in one of his essays. He reserved such praise as he was willing to accord his contemporaries to those who wrote in a foreign tongue. The exasperating thing was that no one could deny that he was himself a brilliant writer. His style was exquisite. His knowledge was vast. He could be profound without pomposity, amusing without frivolity, and polished without affectation. His slightest article was readable. His essays were little masterpieces. For my part I did not find him a very agreeable companion. Perhaps I did not get the best out of him. Though I knew him a great many years I never heard him say an amusing thing. He was not talkative and when he made a remark it was oracular. The prospect of spending an evening alone with him would have filled me with dismay. It never ceased to puzzle me that this dull and mannered little man should be able to write with so much grace, wit, and gaiety.

It puzzled me even more that a gallant and vivacious creature like Mary Warton should have cherished for him so consuming a passion. These things are inexplicable and there was evidently something in that odd, crabbed, irascible creature that appealed to women. His wife adored him. She was a fat, frowsy, boring person. She had led Gerrard a dog’s life, but had always refused to give him his freedom. She swore to kill herself if he left her and since she was unbalanced and hysterical he was never quite certain that she would not carry out her threat. One day, when I was having tea with Mary, I saw that she was distraught and nervous and when I asked her what was the matter she burst into tears. She had been lunching with Manson and had found him shattered after a terrific scene with his wife.

“We can’t go on like this,” Mary cried. “It’s ruining his life. It’s ruining all our lives.”

“Why don’t you take the plunge?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been lovers so long, you know the best and the worst of one another by now; you’re getting old and you can’t count on many more years of life; it seems a pity to waste a love that has endured so long. What good are you doing to Mrs Manson or to Tom? Are they happy because you two are making yourselves miserable?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you chuck everything and just go off together and let come what may?”

Mary shook her head.

“We’ve talked that over endlessly. We’ve talked it over for a quarter of a century. It’s impossible. For years Gerrard couldn’t on account of his daughters. Mrs Manson may have been a very fond mother, but she was a very bad one, and there was no one to see the girls were properly brought up but Gerrard. And now that they’re married off he’s set in his habits. What should we do? Go to France or Italy? I couldn’t tear Gerrard away from his surroundings. He’d be wretched. He’s too old to make a fresh start. And besides, though Thomas nags me and makes scenes and we frip and get on one another’s nerves, he loves me. When it came to the point I simply shouldn’t have the heart to leave him. He’d be lost without me.”

“It’s a situation without an issue. I’m dreadfully sorry for you.”

On a sudden Mary’s haggard, weather-beaten face was lit by a smile that broke on her large red mouth; and upon my word at that moment she was beautiful.

“You need not be. I was rather low a little while ago, but now I’ve had a good cry I feel better. Notwithstanding all the pain, all the unhappiness this affair has caused me, I wouldn’t have missed it for all the world. For those few moments of ecstasy my love has brought me I would be willing to live all my life over again. And I think he’d tell you the same thing. Oh, it’s been so infinitely worth while.”

I could not help but be moved.

“There’s no doubt about it,” I said. “That’s love all right.”

“Yes, it’s love, and we’ve just got to go through with it. There’s no way out.”

And now with this tragic suddenness the way out had come. I turned a little to look at Mary and she, feeling my eyes upon her, turned too. There was a smile on her lips.

“Why did you come here tonight? It must be awful for you.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“What could I do? I read the news in the evening paper while I was dressing. He’d asked me not to ring up the nursing-home on account of his wife. It’s death to me. Death. I had to come. We’d been engaged for a month. What excuse could I give Tom? I’m not supposed to have seen Gerrard for two years. Do you know that for twenty years we’ve written to one another every day?” Her lower lip trembled a little, but she bit it and for a moment her face was twisted to a strange grimace; then with a smile she pulled herself together. “He was everything I had in the world, but I couldn’t let the party down, could I? He always said I had a social sense.”

“Happily we shall break up early and you can go home.”

“I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to be alone. I daren’t cry because my eyes will get red and swollen, and we’ve got a lot of people lunching with us tomorrow. Will you come, by the way? I want an extra man. I must be in good form; Tom expects to get a commission for a portrait out of it.”

“By George, you’ve got courage.”

“D’you think so? I’m heartbroken, you know. I suppose that’s what makes it easier for me. Gerrard would have liked me to put a good face on it. He would have appreciated the irony of the situation. It’s the sort of thing he always thought the French novelists described so well.”