

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Narrow Corner

W. Somerset Maugham

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About the Book

On his way home across the Pacific, Dr Saunders travels with two strangers: the treacherous Captain Nichols, and Fred, a handsome Australian with a shadowy past. Driven to shelter from a storm on the island of Kanda, the trio meet good-natured Erik Christessen and his fiancée, the cool and beautiful Louise. This tense, exotic tale of love, jealousy, murder and suicide evolved from a passage in Maugham's earlier masterpiece, *The Moon and Sixpence*.

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' 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. At the same time his fame as a successful playwright and short story writer was being consolidated with acclaimed productions of various plays and the publication of *The Trembling of a Leaf*, subtitled *Little Stories of the South Sea Islands*, in 1921, which was followed by seven more collections. His other works include travel books, 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

Novels

The Moon and Sixpence
Of Human Bondage
The Razor's Edge
Cakes and Ale
The Merry-Go-Round
The Painted Veil
Catalina
Up at the Villa
Mrs Craddock
The Casuarina Tree
Christmas Holiday
The Magician
Theatre
Liza of Lambeth
Then and Now

Collected Short Stories

Collected Short Stories Vol. 1
Collected Short Stories Vol. 2
Collected Short Stories Vol. 3
Collected Short Stories Vol. 4
Ashenden
Short Stories
Far Eastern Tales
More Far Eastern Tales

Travel Writing

The Gentleman in the Parlour
On a Chinese Screen
Don Fernando

Literary Criticism

Ten Novels and their Authors

Points of View

The Vagrant Mood

Autobiography

The Summing Up

A Writer's Notebook

The Narrow Corner

W. Somerset Maugham

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Short, therefore, is man's life,
and narrow is the corner of the earth wherein he dwells

Preface

The characters of fiction are strange fish. They come into your mind. They grow. They acquire suitable characteristics. An environment surrounds them. You think of them now and again. Sometimes they become an obsession so that you can think of nothing else. Then you write of them and for you they cease to be. It is odd that someone who has occupied a place, often only in the background of your thoughts, but also often in the very centre of them, who then perhaps for months has lived with you all the waking hours of the day and often in your dreams, should slip your consciousness so completely that you can remember neither his name nor what he looks like. You may even forget that he ever existed. But on occasion it does not happen like that. A character whom you had thought you were done with, a character to whom you had given small heed, does not vanish into oblivion. You find yourself thinking of him again. It is often exasperating, for you have had your will of him and he is no longer of any use to you. What is the good of his forcing his presence on you? He is a gate-crasher whom you do not want at your party. He is eating the food and drinking the wine prepared for others. You have no room for him. You must concern yourself with the people who are more important to you. But does he care? Unmindful of the decent sepulchre you have prepared for him, he goes on living obstinately; indeed, he betrays an uncanny activity, and one day to your surprise he has forced his way to the forefront of your thoughts and you cannot help but give him your attention.

The reader of this novel will find Dr Saunders in a brief sketch in *On a Chinese Screen*. He was devised in order to act his part in the little story called *The Stranger*. I had space there to draw him but in a few lines and I never expected to think of him again. There was no reason why he, rather than any other of the many persons who made an appearance in that book, should go on living. He took the matter into his own hands.

And Captain Nichols was introduced to the reader in *The Moon and Sixpence*. He was suggested by a beachcomber I met in the South Seas. But in his case I was conscious soon after I had finished that book that I was not finished with him. I went on thinking about him and when the manuscript came back from the typist and I was correcting errors, a little piece of his conversation struck me. I could not but think that here was the idea for a novel and the more I thought of it the more I liked it. When the proofs at last reached me I had made up my mind to write it and so cut out the passage in question. It ran as follows:

‘About other parts of his career he was fortunately more communicative. He had smuggled guns into South America and opium into China. He had been engaged in the blackbird business in the Solomon Islands and showed a scar on his forehead as the result of a wound some scoundrelly nigger had given him who did not understand his philanthropic intentions. His chief enterprise was a long cruise he had taken in the Eastern seas, and his recollection of this formed an unfailing topic of his conversation. It appeared that some man in Sydney had been unlucky enough to commit a murder and his friends were anxious to keep him out of harm’s way for a time, so Captain Nichols was approached. He was given twelve hours to buy a schooner and find a crew, and the following night, a little way down the coast, the interesting passenger was brought on board.

“I got a thousand pounds for that job, money down, paid in gold,” said Captain Nichols. “We had a wonderful trip. We went all through the Celebes and round about the islands of the Borneo Archipelago. They’re wonderful those islands. Talk of beauty, vegetation, you know, and all that sort of thing. Shooting whenever you fancy it. Of course we kept out of the beaten track.”

“What sort of man was your passenger?” I asked.

“Good fellow. One of the best. Fine card player too. We played écarté every day for a year and by the end of the year he’d got all the thousand pounds back again. I’m a pretty good card player myself and I kept my eyes skinned too.”

“Did he go back to Australia eventually?”

“That was the idea. He’d got some friends there and they reckoned as how they’d square his little trouble in a couple of years.”

“I see.”

“It looked as if I was going to be made the goat.”

‘Captain Nichols paused for a moment and his lively eyes seemed strangely veiled. A sort of opaqueness covered them.

“Poor fellow, he fell overboard one night off the coast of Java. I guess the sharks did the rest. He was a fine card player, one of the best I ever saw.” The Captain nodded reflectively. “I sold the schooner at Singapore. What with the money I got for that and the thousand pounds in gold I didn’t do so badly after all.”’

This then was the incident that gave me the idea for this novel, but it was not till twelve years later that I began to write it.

1

All this happened a good many years ago.

2

Dr Saunders yawned. It was nine o'clock in the morning. The day lay before him and he had nothing in the world to do. He had already seen a few patients. There was no doctor on the island and on his arrival such as had anything the matter with them seized the opportunity to consult him. But the place was not unhealthy and the ailments he was asked to cure were chronic, and he could do little; or they were trifling, and responded quickly to simple remedies. Dr Saunders had practised for fifteen years in Fu-chou and had acquired a great reputation among the Chinese for his skill in dealing with the ills that affect the eye, and it was to remove a cataract for a rich Chinese merchant that he had come to Takana. This was an island in the Malay Archipelago, a long way down, and the distance from Fu-chou was so great that at first he had refused to go. But the Chinese, Kim Ching by name, was himself a native of that city and two of his sons lived there. He was well acquainted with Dr Saunders, and on his periodical visits to Fu-chou had consulted him on his failing sight. He had heard how the doctor, by what looked like a miracle, had caused the blind to see, and when in due course he found himself in such a state that he could only tell day from night, he was prepared to trust no one else to perform the operation which he was assured would restore his sight. Dr Saunders had advised him to come to Fu-chou when certain symptoms appeared, but he had delayed, fearing the surgeon's knife, and when at last he could no longer distinguish one object from another the long journey made him nervous and he bade his sons persuade the doctor to come to him.

Kim Ching had started life as a coolie, but by hard work and courage, aided by good luck, cunning, and

unscrupulousness, he had amassed a large fortune. At this time, a man of seventy, he owned large plantations on several islands; his own schooners fished for pearl, and he traded extensively in all the products of the Archipelago. His sons, themselves middle-aged men, went to see Dr Saunders. They were his friends and patients. Two or three times a year they invited him to a grand dinner, when they gave him bird's-nest soup, shark fins, *bêche de mer*, and many other delicacies; singing girls engaged at a high price entertained the company with their performances; and everyone got tight. The Chinese liked Dr Saunders. He spoke the dialect of Fu-chou with fluency. He lived, not like the other foreigners in the settlement, but in the heart of the Chinese city; he stayed there year in and year out and they had become accustomed to him. They knew that he smoked opium, though with moderation, and they knew what else there was to be known about him. He seemed to them a sensible man. It did not displease them that the foreigners in the community turned a cold shoulder on him. He never went to the club but to read the papers when the mail came in, and was never invited to dinner by them; they had their own English doctor and called in Dr Saunders only when he was away on leave. But when they had anything the matter with their eyes, they put their disapproval in their pockets and came down for treatment to the shabby little Chinese house over the river where Dr Saunders dwelt happily amid the stench of a native city. They looked about them with distaste as they sat in what was both the doctor's consulting-room and parlour. It was furnished in the Chinese style but for a roll-top desk and a couple of rocking-chairs much the worse for wear. On the discoloured walls Chinese scrolls, presented by grateful patients, contrasted oddly with the sheet of cardboard on which were printed in different sizes and combinations the letters of the alphabet. It always seemed to them that there hung about the house faintly the acrid scent of opium.

But this the sons of Kim Ching did not notice, and if they had it would not have incommoded them. After the usual compliments had passed and Dr Saunders had offered them cigarettes from a green tin, they set forth their business. Their father had bidden them say that now, too old and too blind to make the journey to Fu-chou, he desired Dr Saunders to come to Takana and perform the operation which he had said two years before would be necessary. What would be his fee? The doctor shook his head. He had a large practice in Fu-chou and it was out of the question for him to absent himself for any length of time. He saw no reason why Kim Ching should not come there; he could come on one of his own schooners. If that did not suit him he could get a surgeon from Macassar, who was perfectly competent to perform the operation. The sons of Kim Ching, talking very volubly, explained that their father knew that there was no one who could do the miracles that Dr Saunders could, and he was determined that no one else should touch him. He was prepared to double the sum that the doctor reckoned he could earn at Fu-chou during the period he would be away. Dr Saunders continued to shake his head. Then the two brothers looked at one another and the elder took out from an inner pocket a large and shabby wallet of black leather bulging with the notes of the Chartered Bank. He spread them out before the doctor, a thousand dollars, two thousand dollars; the doctor smiled and his sharp, bright eyes twinkled: the Chinese continued to spread out the notes; the two brothers were smiling too, ingratiatingly, but they keenly watched the doctor's face and presently they were conscious of a change in his expression. He did not move. His eyes kept their tolerant good humour, but they felt in their bones that his interest was aroused. Kim Ching's elder son paused and looked inquiringly into his face.

'I can't leave all my patients for three solid months,' said the doctor. 'Let Kim Ching get one of the Dutch doctors from

Macassar or Amboyna. There's a fellow at Amboyna who's quite all right.'

The Chinese did not reply. He put more notes on the table. They were hundred-dollar bills and he arranged them in little packets of ten. The wallet bulged less. He laid the packets side by side and at last there were ten of them.

'Stop,' said the doctor. 'That'll do.'

3

It was a complicated journey. From Fu-chou he went on a Chinese vessel to Manila in the Philippines, and from there, after waiting a few days, by cargo boat to Macassar. Thence he took passage on the Dutch ship that ran every other month to Merauke in New Guinea, stopping at a great many places on the way, and thus at last landed at Takana. He travelled with a Chinese boy who acted as his servant, gave anaesthetics when required, and made his pipes when he smoked opium. Dr Saunders performed a successful operation on Kim Ching, and now there was nothing for him to do but sit and twiddle his thumbs till the Dutch ship called on her way back from Merauke. The island was fairly large, but it was isolated and the Dutch Régisseur visited it only at intervals. The government was represented by a half-caste Javanese, who spoke no English, and a few policemen. The town consisted of a single street of shops. Two or three were owned by Arabs from Baghdad, but the rest by Chinese. There was a small rest-house about ten minutes' walk from the town which the Régisseur inhabited on his periodical visits, and here Dr Saunders had installed himself. The path that led to it ran on through plantations for three miles, and then was lost in the virgin jungle.

When the Dutch ship came in, there was a certain animation. The captain, one or two of the officers, and the chief engineer came ashore, and the passengers if there were any, and they sat in Kim Ching's store and drank beer, but they never stayed for more than three hours and when they got back into their boats and rowed away the little town went to sleep again. It was in the doorway of this store that Dr Saunders sat now. There was a rattan awning that protected it from the sun, but in the street the sun beat

down with a harsh glare. A mangy dog sniffed about some offal over which a swarm of flies was buzzing and looked for something to eat. Two or three chickens scratched about in the roadway and one, squatting, ruffled her feathers in the dust. Outside the shop opposite, a naked Chinese child with a distended belly was trying to make a sand castle out of the dust in the road. Flies flew about him, settling on him, but he did not mind them, and intent on his game did not try to brush them away. Then a native passed, with nothing on but a discoloured sarong, and he carried two baskets of sugar-cane suspended to each end of a pole balanced on one shoulder. With his shuffling feet he kicked up the dust as he walked. Inside the store a clerk, hunched over a table, was busy with brush and ink writing some document in Chinese characters. A coolie sitting on the floor was rolling cigarettes and smoking them one after the other. No one came in to buy. Dr Saunders asked for a bottle of beer. The clerk left his writing and going to the back of the store took a bottle out of a pail of water and brought it along with a glass to the doctor. It was pleasantly cool.

Time hung somewhat heavily on the doctor's hands, but he was not discontented. He was able to amuse himself with little things, and the mangy dog, the thin chickens, the pot-bellied child all diverted him. He drank his bottle of beer slowly.

4

He looked up. He gave a cry of surprise. For there, strolling towards him, down the middle of the dusty road, were two white men. No ship was in and he wondered where they had come from. They walked idly, looking to right and left of them, like strangers visiting the island for the first time. They were shabbily dressed in trousers and singlets. Their topis were grimy. They came up, saw him sitting in the open shop and stopped. One of them addressed him.

'Is this Kim Ching's.'

'Yes.'

'Is he here?'

'No, he's sick.'

'Bad luck. I suppose we can get a drink.'

'Surely.'

The speaker turned to his companion.

'Come on in.'

They entered.

'What'll you have?' asked Dr Saunders.

'A bottle of beer for me.'

'Same here,' said the other.

The doctor gave the order to the coolie. He brought bottles of beer and chairs for the strangers to sit on. One of them was middle-aged, with a sallow, lined face, white hair, and a scrub of white moustache. He was of the middle height, spare, and when he spoke he showed hideously decayed teeth. His eyes were cunning and restless. They were small and pale and set somewhat close together, which gave him a foxy look, but his manner was ingratiating.

'Where have you come from?' asked the doctor.

'We just come in on a lugger. From Thursday Island.'

'A goodish way. Have fine weather?'

'Couldn't want better. A nice breeze and no sea to speak of. Nichols' my name. Captain Nichols. Maybe you've 'eard of me.'

'I can't say I have.'

'I been sailin' these seas for thirty years. There's not an island in the Archipelago I ain't put in at one time or another. I'm pretty well known around 'ere. Kim Ching knows me. Known me for twenty years.'

'I'm a stranger myself,' said the doctor.

Captain Nichols looked at him, and though his face was open and his expression cordial, you had a feeling that there was suspicion in his glance.

'I seem to know your face,' he said. 'I could swear I seen you somewhere.'

Dr Saunders smiled but did not volunteer any information about himself. Captain Nichols screwed up his eyes in the effort to remember where he had run across the little man. He scanned his face with attention. The doctor was short, only just over five foot six, and slight, but with something of a paunch. His hands were soft and podgy, but they were small, with tapering fingers, and if he had been vain it was possible to suppose that once upon a time he had been not a little pleased with them. They had still a sort of well-bred elegance. He was very ugly, with a snub nose and a large mouth; and when he laughed, which he did often, you saw big, yellow, uneven teeth. Under his bushy grey eyebrows his green eyes gleamed bright, amusing, and clever. He was not very closely shaved and his skin was blotchy; he had a high colour which over the cheekbones spread into a purple flush. It suggested some long-standing affection of the heart. His hair must once have been thick and black and coarse, but now it was nearly white and on the crown very thin. But his ugliness, far from being repellent, was attractive. When he laughed his skin puckered round the eyes, giving his face infinite vivacity, and his expression was

charged with an extreme but not ill-natured malice. You would have taken him then for a buffoon, but for the shrewdness that gleamed from his shining eyes. His intelligence was obvious. And though merry and bright, fond of a joke and amused both at his own and at others', you had an impression that even in the abandon of laughter he never quite gave himself away. He seemed to be on his guard. For all his chattiness and however hearty his manner, you were conscious (if you were observant and did not allow yourself to be taken in by his superficial frankness) that those merry, laughing eyes were watching, weighing, judging, and forming an opinion. He was not a man to take things at their face value.

Since the doctor did not speak Captain Nichols went on:

'This is Fred Blake,' he said, with a gesture of his thumb towards his companion.

Dr Saunders nodded.

'Makin' a long stay?' continued the captain.

'I'm waiting for the Dutch packet.'

'North or south?'

'North.'

'What did you say your name was?'

'I didn't mention it. Saunders.'

'I've knocked about too long in the Indian Ocean to ask questions,' said the captain, with his ingratiating laugh. 'Ask no questions and you won't be told no lies. Saunders? I've known a lot of chaps as answered to that name, but whether it was theirs or not by rights nobody knew but themselves. What's the matter with old Kim Ching? Fine old sport. I was lookin' forward to 'avin' a bit of a chin-wag with 'im.'

'His eyes went back on him. He's had cataract.'

Captain Nichols sat up and held out his hand.

'Doc Saunders. I knew I'd seen your face. Fu-chou. I was up there seven years ago.'

The doctor took the proffered hand. Captain Nichols turned to his friend.

'Everyone knows Doc Saunders. Best doctor in the Far East. Eyes. That's his line. I 'ad a pal once, everyone said 'e'd go blind, nothing could stop it, 'e went to see the doc and in a month 'e could see as well as you or me. The Chinks just swear by him. Doc Saunders. Well, this is a joyful surprise. I thought you never left Fu-chou from one year's end to the other.'

'Well, I have now.'

'It's a bit of luck for me, this. You're the very man I wanted to meet.' Captain Nichols leaned forward and his cunning eyes fixed the doctor with an intensity in which there was something very like menace. 'I suffer from dyspepsia something awful.'

'Oh, Christ!' muttered Fred Blake.

It was the first time he had spoken since they sat down and Dr Saunders turned to look at him. He slouched in his chair, gnawing his fingers, in an attitude that suggested boredom and ill-humour. He was a tall young man, slight but wiry, with curly, dark brown hair and large blue eyes. He did not look more than twenty. In his dirty singlet and dungarees he looked loutish, an unlicked cub, thought the doctor, and there was a surliness in his expression that was somewhat disagreeable; but he had a straight nose and a well-formed mouth.

'Leave off bitin' your nails, Fred,' said the captain. 'Disgustin' 'abit, I call it.'

'You and your dyspepsia,' retorted the young man, with a chuckle.

When he smiled you saw that he had exquisite teeth. They were very white, small, and of a perfect shape; they were so unexpected a grace in that sombre face, their beauty was so dazzling, that you were taken aback. His sulky smile had great sweetness.

'You can laugh because you don't know what it is,' said Captain Nichols. 'I'm a martyr to it. Don't say I'm not careful what I eat. I've tried everything. Nothin' does me any good.'

This beer now. Do you think I shan't suffer for it? You know just as well as I do that I shall.'

'Go on. Tell the doctor all about it,' said Blake.

Captain Nichols asked nothing better. He proceeded to narrate the history of his malady. He described his symptoms with a scientific accuracy. There was not a revolting detail that he omitted to mention. He enumerated the doctors he had consulted and the patent remedies he had tried. Dr Saunders listened in silence, an expression of sympathetic interest on his face, and occasionally nodded his head.

'If there's anyone as can do anythin' for me it's you, doc,' said the captain earnestly. 'They don't 'ave to tell me you're clever, I can see that for meself.'

'I can't work miracles. You can't expect anyone to do much in a minute for a chronic condition like yours.'

'No, I don't ask that, but you can prescribe for me, can't you? There's nothin' I won't try. What I'd like you to do is to make a thorough examination of me, see?'

'How long are you staying here?'

'Our time's our own.'

'But we're pushing off as soon as we've got what we want,' said Blake.

A quick look passed between the two men. Dr Saunders noticed it. He did not know why he had an impression that there was something strange in it.

'What made you put in here?' he asked.

Fred Blake's face once more grew sullen, and when the doctor put his question he threw him a glance. Dr Saunders read suspicion in it, and perhaps fear. He wondered. It was the captain who replied.

'I've known Kim Ching donkey's years. We wanted some stores, and we thought it wouldn't do us any 'arm to fill up our tank.'

'Are you trading?'