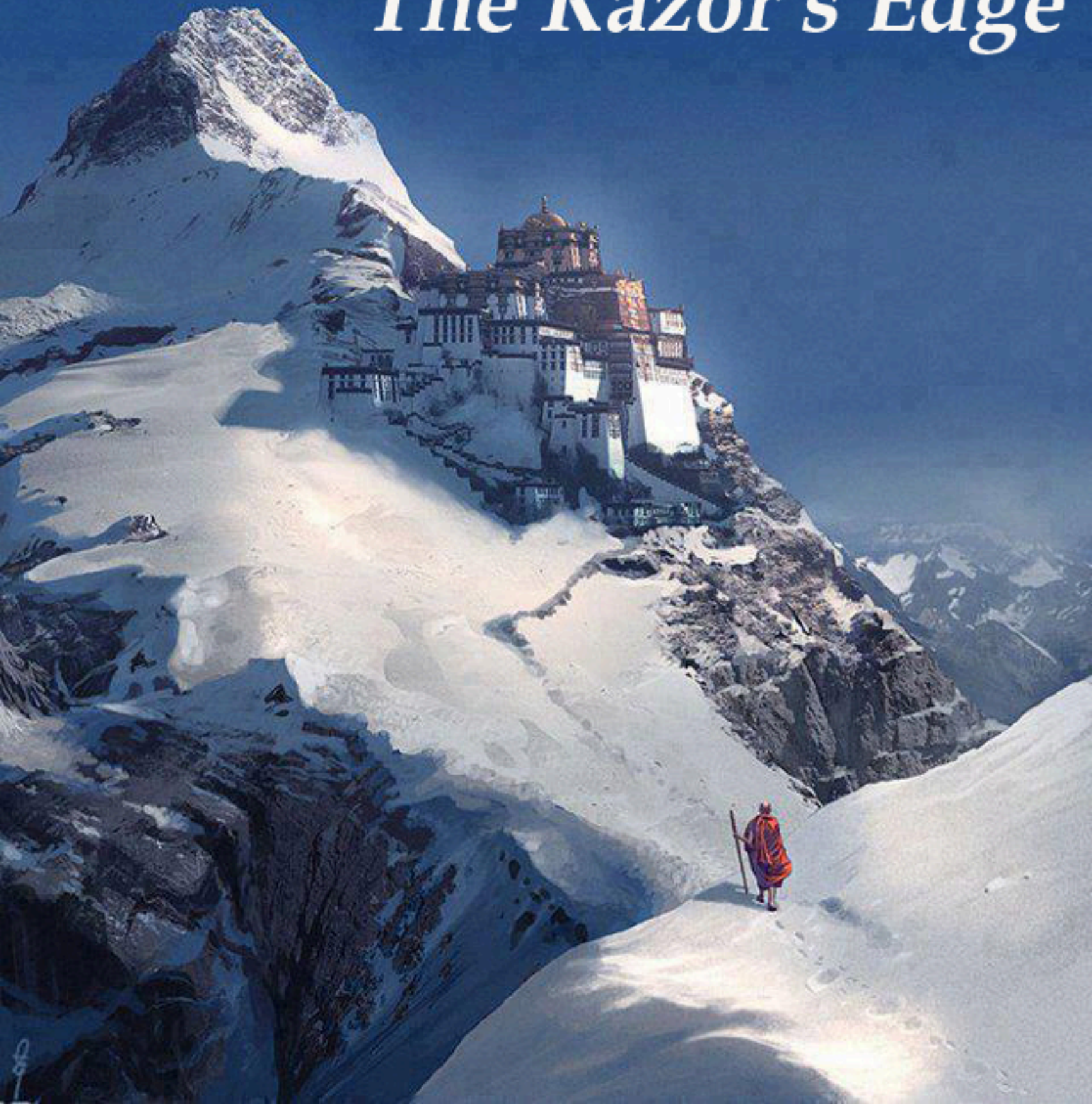


The Razor's Edge



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Dramatization of William Somerset Maugham's novel

by Christian Lanciai (2013)

The characters:

Elliot Templeton
William Somerset Maugham
Laurence Darrell (Larry)
Isabel Bradley
Louisa Bradley
Henry Maturin
Gray Maturin
Sophie MacDonald
Robert Graves
Erich Maria Remarque
Dimitry Mereshkovsky
Sergei Rachmaninov
Ernest Hemingway
a serving maid
a pimp
a waiter
Hakim
a sailor

Guests at balls, cafés and restaurants

The action is in Chicago, Paris and Toulon
after the First World War and after the crash 1929.

Footnote. W.S.Maugham's last great and most personal novel, it is in fact his greatest short story, got a special status in my family, since Larry's destiny and character in many ways became that of my uncle. *editor's note*

Act I scene 1. A relaxed cocktail party in Chicago. The band is playing dance music.
Elliot Templeton and Somerset Maugham appear each with a drink.

Elliot How could this impossible nation ever amount to anything? I assure you, that we are lost from the very start.

Somerset Why do you think so?

Elliot We are infected by a hopeless vulgarity from the beginning. We can never become real people. It's not just culture that we are lacking but also everything else, history, traditions, proud memories, peerage and nobility, in brief, something to build on. We lack all grounds for our existence.

Somerset But you have Europe in the background, which you can always return to and go to for comfort.

Elliot That's the most terrible thing of all, that we have lost Europe. What's left of Europe after the hellish world war? All empires and monarchies that were of any importance have fallen. Russia is lost in a chaos of barbaric violence. Germany has submitted to anarchy. Austria is no more. Italy is torn asunder by extremists, these new-fangled so called fascists, that are only a mob of terror. France already fell 50 years ago and has never risen again from its permanent downfall.

Somerset So there is only England.

Elliot Bled to death. Disillusioned. Damaged for life by the war. All England suffers from a grenade shock from which it will never recover, like a permanent hangover.

Somerset But here in America you still have some sort of economy.

Elliot You said it. Some sort of. It is running wild. It is senselessly undisciplined. The only religion here is capitalism, the brief gospel of which is but and consume more! It has to end in disaster. It's Sodom and Gomorrah.

Somerset Your luck then is that you still have Paris and London.

Elliot Yes, that's about all I have. Everything else is gone to blazes. But here is the young couple now. I am suspicious against the young man. Let's see what you may think of him.

Somerset What's wrong with him? He is good-looking enough.

Elliot He is too good-looking. He has also been damaged by the war.

– Welcome, Isabel and Larry! Isabel, you are always so dazzlingly stylish!

Isabel How nice to see you, Mr Maugham! I thought you had returned to Paris.

Somerset No, I have just arrived from there. I am on my way to East Asia.

Larry And of all places, you land in Chicago in between!

Somerset I happen to have a sister here, and I know Elliot since fifteen years.

Isabel I hope you will not get too much bored here. We are so vulgar here in America. That's what uncle Elliot always keeps saying.

Elliot Yes, I say so, for that's unfortunately how it is.

Somerset I heard that you had had some experience from the war, Mr?

Larry Darrell. Laurence Darrell. Call me Larry. I served in France as a pilot.

Somerset I can't see anything wrong with you.

Larry I had no damages, only afterthoughts.

Somerset Who didn't, after such a long and devastating war.

Isabel Larry lost his best friend.

Somerset I am sorry.

Elliot Don't get bogged down now in macabre memories, but let's have a drink. This is actually a party, and almost your engagement party, Isabel.

Isabel Yes, we are practically engaged.

Somerset Why not definitely? You look as the ideal marrying couple.

Isabel Larry wants to take a break before we go on.

Elliot The world war made Larry a brooder, and between ourselves I can't consider it very healthy, especially as it does not seem to pass over.

Larry I simply learned to take it more easy. Here in America everyone is too much in a hurry and all for nothing. *That* is unhealthy, uncle Elliot.

Elliot Enough. Larry has a splendid future ahead, and he is stupid enough to wish to postpone it.

Somerset It sounds like a maturity process and a mental deviation. He has perhaps become a European.

Elliot Here at last we have our long expected cocktails. And my less longed for sister Louisa.

Louisa But Elliot, you are completely sequestering Mr Maugham!

Elliot He is my friend, not yours.

Louisa But I am your sister, and he is almost our guest of honour. You must meet our local celebrity Henry Maturin.

Elliot (to Maugham) Our local millionaire.

Louisa Yes, he raises everything to a higher level by just showing up.

Elliot (to Maugham) Almost richest in town and totally without taste.

Somerset But still a man like everyone else.

Maturin How nice to meet you, Mr Maugham.

Somerset I have heard much about you as the one standing for the local welfare here in the district.

Maturin You do what you can to favour your neighbourhood. Here is my son Gray.

Elliot (to Maugham) The perfect slugger.

Somerset His father's son, no doubt.

Maturin And universal heir. He will reach much farther than I.

Gray Pleased to meet you, Mr Maugham.

Isabel Mother always wants to boast of her richest acquaintances, as if capitalism was something sacred.

Somerset At least it has secured a status here in America.

Elliot You are listening too much to your fiancé, Isabel.

Somerset Is he a communist?

Larry As far from it as you can get. I am not interested in money at all.

Elliot His father was a professor of Latin languages, and his mother was a Quaker. He has the intellectual spirituality in his blood.

Maturin Then I really hope you will accept my offer of a future position in my firm. We could need some linguistic talents there, since they are not very common in America. And you could also need some decent and considerable income when you are marrying Isabel.

Larry I have begged for some time to think about it.

Maturin Don't think too long.

Elliot And don't think too deep.

Isabel Sophie, there you are! I was just looking for you. This is my dearest friend and oldest classmate Sophie.

Sophie I didn't know if I would dare to show myself here.

Isabel Why not?

Sophie When there was such a great author here.

Somerset Nonsense. I am really just a short story and documentary writer. I was never serious about anything I wrote.

Louisa But the more brilliant as a stylist.

Elliot And knowledgeable of human nature.

Somerset The human knowledge that I have is mainly from my failure as a doctor.

Maturin Gynaecologist? Did you become too intimate?

Somerset No, I had simply landed in the wrong business and made a mistake, but you learn chiefly by your mistakes.

Elliot Unfortunately I never succeeded with that. No matter how heavy efforts I made, I always failed in all my efforts to make mistakes.

Louisa And that's why you never got married, you incorrigible libertine.

Elliot Not even that I could regard as a mistake.

Gray Would you dare to have a dance with me, Isabel?

Isabel If Larry gives permission.

Larry I could dance with Sophie instead, if she would allow me. (*The young couples disappear.*)

Somerset What happened to him in the war?

Maturin He was far too young and bluffed his way into the air force. He was wounded twice but never seriously. He was only eighteen, and now he is only twenty. They are far too young to get married.

Somerset Then there are reasons enough to wait a bit after the war, aren't there?

Elliot Exactly what I think. Isabel is after all only nineteen.

Maturin But that's the very sort of talent I need, and he is more than just clever.

Somerset What about your own son?

Maturin He will do well in time but only for mediocrity. He lacks perspective, which is what Larry has got.

Elliot Doctor Nelson, his guardian, wants to see him settled down. Or else the risk is that he might become a vagabond.

Somerset It's obvious that Isabel and Larry love each other. They really have a future and good margins by their youth. Give them some time for their engagement for one or two years.

Maturin Everything should be settled now.

Elliot Between ourselves, Larry has no solidity and can't get any.

Somerset Why do you think so?

Elliot He is a dreamer. He lost his parents when he was small. He has grown up in loneliness and mainly associated only with books and philosophy. That girl Sophie he is dancing with is of the same kind, a lonely orphan who can only write poetry and not very well. They go better together than Larry and Isabel.

Somerset But your niece loves him.

Elliot Yes, that's the problem.

Maturin If he doesn't accept my offer they could hardly marry, at least not for some years.

Louisa Here our dear young ones are returning.

Isabel Now it's my turn to dance with you, Larry.

Larry With pleasure. *(They dance away.)*

Louisa They make a beautiful couple indeed.

Elliot They look like the eternally betrothed who never get married.

Louisa Elliot!

Elliot Am I wrong? We shall see. We need another round of drinks, don't we, William? *(They all leave for the bar in a good humour.)*

Scene 2.

Isabel Well, when do you wish us to announce our engagement?

Larry Are we in a hurry?

Isabel Not at all. We have all our life in front of us.

Larry Exactly. Everything is served to us like on a silver plate, we love each other, and we have no rivals. It is as if we already owned each other completely without any threats.

Isabel What is your angle?

Larry We are so young. I would like to wait for two years.

Isabel Two years?

Larry I love you, Isabel. You must not doubt that for a moment.

Isabel I don't, but what will you do for two years? Did you intend to study and get some kind of a diploma? Or will you enter Henry Martin's firm? It's a terrific offer. Our country is at the start of an unheard of development and expansion, and he is right in the middle of it.

Larry I have declined his offer.

Isabel What?

Larry I acquired a taste for Europe, Isabel. I want to go to Paris and live there for two years and get some education in the art of living.

Isabel And shall I then wait here for two years?

Larry If you want to.

Isabel You put my love to test and trial.

Larry You are only nineteen, and I am twenty. Everybody consider us too young to marry. Let's mature first.

Isabel You want us to give us a chance to mature? Is that necessary?

Larry I don't know if it's necessary, but I would like to give ourselves that chance.

Isabel As you wish. I will wait for two years but no longer. Go to Paris and make your life there as you wish. I might join you. I know nothing about Europe.

Larry Everything is there that we are missing here.

Isabel What are we missing?

Larry Perspective. History. Cultivation. Culture. Beauty. Art. Everything that is beautiful and makes life worth living.

Isabel Europe is broke.

Larry Yes, there is no money, but it's not vital there as it is here. You can live very cheaply over there. Here everything is only about money, as if there was nothing beyond materialism. There you find everything except materialism, and I miss that asset here.

Isabel (looks down) Gray Maturin would have loved to see you as his partner in the bank. He was the one who insisted on his father to take you in.

Larry Banks are not for me.

Isabel But they are safe.

Larry I have my doubts about everything that is considered safe.

Isabel What could happen?

Larry Even banks can founder. Europe has already foundered and is starting again from scratch. I find greater security in those who have passed through disaster and survived than in those who haven't yet had that experience.

Isabel You are a philosopher.

Larry Perhaps.

Isabel (embraces him) O Larry, I love you so much! At least give me the hope, that it might not be full two years. You are welcome to come home earlier.

Larry Unless you come to Paris.

Isabel That is also a possibility. *(embraces him)* When will you go?

Larry As soon as I can.

Isabel I hope we will see each other before you go?

Larry Every day.

Isabel I have to be satisfied with that. Pardon me for crying, but it feels like a divorce.

Larry It will pass. Everything will pass over.

Isabel (embraces him again) Two years is a long time, almost too long.

Larry Not when it has passed. Then it has passed quickly. Time is so relative.

Isabel At least we will not age much in two years.
Larry No. Only mature. (*They embrace again.*) Now I must go.
Isabel Will we see each other tomorrow?
Larry Definitely. (*Larry leaves. Isabel cries.*)

Scene 3.

Louisa What does he mean? How can he do such a thing?
Elliot Take it easy, Louisa. He hasn't disgraced her.
Louise She should break the engagement immediately!
Maturin Honestly speaking, I don't really understand your son-in-law to be. He couldn't have had a better offer or a better starting point for perpetual expansion. His future would have been secured for good. And then he throws it all over board. What does he mean?
Gray He has to follow his own way, father.
Maturin But what kind of a blind alley to nowhere is that and away instead of home?
Elliot I knew it would take a wretched course. Honestly, I don't mind. May he disappear in his dreams, and may Isabel find a better husband instead.
Sophie There is no better one.
Elliot What do you say, William, about this breakneck sudden turn without any reason or sense?
Somerset I find it a stunning example of exemplary maturity.
Elliot What do you mean?
Somerset We were all agreed that they were rather young. He has also realized that fact. Almost no young people get that insight. Usually they want everything at once and rush in too fast, and then it ends in disaster and divorce. Also he couldn't have waged on a better education than two years in Paris.
Gray How does Isabel take it?
Louisa She cries.
Gray Then someone had better comfort her.
Maturin There is a gentleman. It was my son who insisted that I should take on Larry. What a disappointment to both of us!
Somerset Let them have their two years, and perhaps she will mature as well. She is after all only nineteen years.
Elliot She is inconsolable. She will never get over it. She is like a fresh widow. She will never be able to stand a divorce for two years. She might as well scrap him at once and wage on better candidates. Such a man as Larry Darrell will never reach solvency.
Louisa We will never forgive him.
Somerset Calm down! They are only youths!

Maturin If you throw away your life's opportunity and decline the best and most beautiful girl of the county, you are unforgivably foolish and nothing else.

Somerset I am not so sure. Give him his two years and judge him afterwards.

Maturin (to Louisa) Will she really wait for two years?

Louisa She says she loves him enough to be able to do it.

Elliot I doubt it. I know her. It will never work.

Maturin Well, we shall see, but my offer will not last for two years. It was now or never, and he has missed the chance of his life. (*breaks up*)

Louisa She will never get over it.

Elliot Oh yes, she will get over it. Just you wait. She will soon have a better fiancé. (*Sophie leaves.*)

Somerset There will certainly be a sequel to this story, and I am sure it will be interesting.

Elliot If I find him when I am in Paris I will let you know what kind of misery and vagabondage he has gone down into.

Somerset He will no doubt let us hear from him. He did after all promise to come back after two years.

Elliot Do you think it will stick? Never, old boy. He has chosen a downhill course himself, and he will never get up again.

Act II scene 1. Paris. A café in Quartier Latin.

Robert Graves The problem is that we have nothing to live for. The world war put an end to all idealism, all ambitions, all meaning of life, all future hopes and faiths, all belief in man and his infallibility, and we who are left are just grey shadows who have outlived ourselves. Look at poor Kipling, who is sitting there in the corner. He is here in France once more to try to find any clue to the mystery of his vanished son, lost without a trace and probably just another of some millions of unknown casualties, but he can't even get any clear information about that. I have done with my past and give a damn about England and her greatness. The empire is a lost cause, and there is nothing more to do but to scrap it.

Remarque All the same you still have got it, while we in Germany have lost absolutely everything. The peace treaty of Versailles forces us into a period of years of misery to which we cannot see any end, and it will only result in a very dangerous direction of angry extremist movements, which has to make us wonder what is worst, the communists or the national socialists.

Mereshkovsky Still you retain here in Europe a kind of order, and above all you have democracy. At home in Russia everything is lost. We have nothing left, and an arbitrary dictatorship has seized all power and has started by exterminating all who previously belonged to the intelligent and educated class of society. Now we have no educated people left, and the result is chaos, anarchy, civil war and terrorism

established in the ruling government. Ask Rachmaninov over there what he thinks about the situation. He couldn't even play the piano in Russia any more.

Rachmaninov I tried to cooperate with the new order. I stood up for its culture but was only assigned tasks below my competence and could not give concerts any more, so it was just to leave and at least save the life.

Hemingway Here you are, Larry, the lost generation, the Europe of ghosts that survived itself, that can't do anything any more but sit here in Paris in a kind of universal exile and drink and go down sinking in pathetic lamentations. Paris is still the best place in the world to live in, but there is no future here for sure. If I were you I would go further away.

Larry I promised my folks to stay here until further, so that they know where they have me.

Hemingway Where do you belong?

Larry Chicago.

Hemingway The most godforsaken pit of all, the king of gangster cities. And surely your people would never come here to visit you.

Larry (discovers Maugham) But here is actually one who is in touch with my people.

– Mr Maugham, how very nice to see you! Please come over here!

Somerset I am also very pleased to have come across you. I was hoping to see you somewhere.

Larry I usually don't come here since I am most at the university reading.

Somerset Are you studying?

Larry No, I am only reading for my own interest.

Somerset Anything special?

Larry At the moment it's Greek.

Somerset An inexhaustible subject. Are you in any touch with your folks at home?

Larry Not much. They keep saying that they will come over here, but they never do.

Somerset I have heard that the offer of Henry Maturin will be kept open as long as your engagement lasts.

Larry The two years will soon be over, and I still have very much to do here.

Somerset I can understand that. But Isabel will surely come across and visit you sooner or later, at least for a settlement if for nothing else.

Larry She is welcome, but she must accept me as I am.

Somerset How are you living?

Larry As you see, as simple as possible. I live cheap on a cheap rent and manage more than well on my three thousand a year, so I can even save something.

Somerset You were always so unpretentious.

Larry In contrast to all other Americans. I couldn't stand their boasting and urge to advance themselves, where the common law for all was the obligatory dance around the golden calf, the adoration of the reckless capitalistic unscrupulousness as the only salvation and possible correctness, and the worship of the right of vulgarity to dominate everything by its stupidity and ugliness.

Somerset You really are most un-American but at the same time sound surprisingly much like Isabel's uncle Elliot, who detested you and discarded you as a suitable husband for his niece. Even her mother was against an engagement and wanted her to break it when you went to Europe. Is she faithful to you?

Larry As far as I know.

Somerset I believe so too. You separated in perfect harmony. Well, have you considered the matter? Have you reached maturity? Do you intend to return to her?

Larry That's the question. The world war disturbed my mental balance of my soul, and I haven't recovered it.

Somerset What really happened?

Larry Hasn't Isabel told you?

Somerset Yes, but I would like to hear it from the original source.

Larry It was in March 1918, and we were in for a longer leave of absence, my best friend Patsy and I, when we received the order to make an inspection flight across the enemy lines to then report our observations. He was an ace of flying and perfectly self-confident, nothing could happen to him, and I always felt completely safe together with him in the air. But suddenly there were Germans over us and we were involved in an air fight. I had two planes behind me and great trouble with navigating away from them, when I saw Patsy coming to my rescue and shooting down both the Germans, but it was with the greatest difficulty I then succeeded in landing. Patsy got down before me, and when I came out they had got him out of his machine and put him on a stretcher in wait for an ambulance. When he saw me he grinned and said with satisfaction, that he had managed to bring down my two pursuers. I asked him how he was, and he said that it was nothing but admitted to having been hit. Suddenly I realized that he was dying. "I'll be damned," he said and laughed, and then he was dead. He was twenty-two years and newly engaged and was getting married after the war.

It was as if my soul had been clutched by a cold hand, and I felt my life had been brought to an edge, as if I had landed out on a razor's edge. He was the most living person I have ever known, and then he was suddenly cold and dead with nothing remaining but an empty shell. It was the supreme cruelty and meaninglessness. Since then I have wondered what life really is for if it isn't just a tragic mistake by a blind destiny.

Somerset You are a typical representative of the lost generation.

Larry I couldn't marry Isabel with a clear conscience in total doubt of any justification for my own existence and still less accept the generous offer of Henry Maturin. I can't believe in or trust a world of happiness and success and least of all in the America of omnipresent superficial vulgarity. What would be your advice?

Somerset Carry on as you are doing. Take one day at a time and reflect. In time something will turn up to show you the way.

Larry That's what I am waiting for, but I am afraid I will have to wait for long.

Scene 2. Chicago.

Gray What news about Larry?

Isabel Nothing.

Gray Haven't the two years passed yet?

Isabel In October. Before that I will go to Paris with mother. She needs a change and be uprooted now as she has turned diabetic, and uncle Elliot is already there.

Gray Is he meeting Larry?

Isabel Not if he can avoid it, but when we are there he will not likely be able to avoid it any more. He doesn't even know Larry's address.

Gray Do you know it?

Isabel Poste Restante American Express. A totally anonymous address, but he stays in Quartier Latin among the students and emigrants. Mr Maugham has met him among other Americans and Englishmen.

Gray Does that mean that he at least is studying?

Isabel Not by any curriculum.

Gray Daddy sticks to his word, and his offer remains as long as you are still engaged. But if your engagement is broken you must know that I am here.

Isabel Thank you, Gray, but I will stick to Larry as long as possible.

Gray I understand that. He is unique.

Isabel Yes, he is.

Scene 3. A simple rented room with two windows, a bed, an armchair,
a cupboard with a mirror, a heater and books on the mantelpiece.

Enter Larry with Isabel.

Isabel Is this where you live?

Larry Yes.

Isabel It's very basic.

Larry As basic as possible. The great advantage is the closeness to Bibliothèque Nationale and the Sorbonne.

Isabel Have you lived like this for long?

Larry Since I came here.

Isabel What kind of people are living here?

Larry I hardly know them. Some students in the attic, some old bachelors and a pensioned actress. It's a very decent and peaceful place.

Isabel No nightly customers?

Larry One lady is visited by an elderly gentleman every second Thursday, but she may also have temporary guests. She is the only one except me who has a bathroom of her own.

Isabel What luxury! Uncle Elliot was sure you were leading a self-indulgent life with heavy traffic.

Larry (*indicates the mantelpiece*) There's my heaviest vice.

Isabel What is it?

Larry My Greek dictionary.

Isabel Are you studying Greek?

Larry Yes.

Isabel What for?

Larry You can't imagine the satisfaction and enjoyment of reading the *Odyssey* in the original language.

Isabel What more do you read?

Larry Everything remarkable in French literature and rather much Latin but mainly prose.

Isabel And what's the purpose of that?

Larry Acquiring knowledge.

Isabel It doesn't sound very practical.

Larry But it is rewarding. I am reaching higher all the time.

Isabel And when do you come to Chicago?

Larry Honestly, I don't know. There is so much for me to do here.

Isabel Two years have passed. You gave me two years.

Larry I need more time.

Isabel How long? Five years? Ten years?

Larry Perhaps.

Isabel And what use will you make of all this wisdom?

Larry If I ever manage to acquire any wisdom I should then be wise enough to know what to do with it.

Isabel You are an American, Larry. You don't fit in this dusty wardrobe of Spartan poverty. You don't fit in a hairshirt and a monk's cell. You were born to a better life than this. Does money mean nothing to you?

Larry Absolutely nothing.

Isabel And America? Have you forgotten all about your country?

Larry Not at all, but I like it better here.

Isabel You are missing the entire show, Larry. Europe is finished. Everything is in America and especially the future. We are growing into the world's most powerful nation, and you are neglecting your duties to your home country. Can't you see how irresponsible it is of you to bury yourself in books here in an attic?

Larry I am searching, Isabel, and I want to find what I am searching for.

Isabel And what about me? Don't I mean anything any more?

Larry You mean everything. I still wish us to be married.

Isabel I have waited for two years. How much longer do you want me to wait?

Larry We could marry at once if you wish.

Isabel Will you not come home then?

Larry No. We could marry here.

Isabel And live here? In this hovel? I can't support you. You will have to work.

Larry I manage all right here.

Isabel On three thousand a year?

Larry I manage on half. The rest I save.

Isabel We can't support a family on that, Larry. I want children.

Larry No problem.

Isabel Do you know the cost of having children? You are so unpractical. I could never accept a life in poverty. I am used to brilliant parties and great dinners, rich associates and beautiful clothes. Your shabby circumstances make me shudder.

Larry Isabel!

Isabel I want to live, Larry, not be forced into a strait-jacket of narrow circumstances where you are obliged to turn every coin just to survive and manage one more tomorrow. You must work, Larry! It's your duty to society!

Larry So it's my duty to start in Henry Maturin's business and force people to buy his papers? Will I serve society that way?

Isabel There has to be bankers, and it's a very respectable and honest way to make money.

Larry There is nothing in Chicago of any interest to me. Even your uncle Elliot denounces the entire world of Chicago as intellectually absolutely worthless and much poorer than my simple place here.

Isabel I can't leave Chicago. I have lived there all my life, and I can't let my ailing mother down.

Larry Do you mean that there could be no marriage unless I come home to Chicago?

Isabel Yes, that's what I mean.

Larry I can't come home, Isabel. That would be my grave.

Isabel You have to! I love you! I want you! I don't want anyone else! You are the only one for me! And I can't share the life you are leading here like a Trappist monk!

Larry So it's over?

Isabel (*removes her engagement ring*) Here you are, Larry. Thanks for the borrowing. It was fun while it lasted.

Larry Keep it as a souvenir. I gave it to you for keeps.

Isabel I accepted it as a sincere evidence of your love, which has proved impossible, since you are too superior in your intellectual spirituality, which honestly speaking I don't understand. Well, I will keep it at least as a sign of an unbroken lasting friendship.

Larry Forever. Let's now join your crass family and be polite enough to endure a conventional dinner in their company.

Isabel Sometimes you sound exactly like my uncle Elliot, which strikes me by its identical similarity. I could never understand what he had against you.

Larry Perhaps we are too much alike. Perhaps he envies me my greater freedom. He was always completely chained to his business.

Isabel Yes, he is, and that's why he can't understand your voluntary poverty.

Larry Well, we will have to endure each other at least for tonight.

Isabel It's always a pleasure to listen to both of you.

(They leave as good friends without problems of the broken engagement.)

Scene 3. A fashionable restaurant in Paris.

Elliot That's the best news this year! I knew he wouldn't make it! The boy was impossible. He actually threw away his life, when he turned down the best offer a young man ever received!

Somerset The problem is that she still loves him.

Elliot She will get over it. She will go back to Chicago, take care of her sick mother my sister, join the society life and enter better thoughts. She will probably marry Gray Maturin, who was eager for her all the time. He is an impossible oaf of no education, but he has money and can give her all she wants.

Somerset Do you know where Larry has gone?

Elliot I heard the strangest rumours about him. He was planning for Greece but had second thoughts and is said to have started working in a coal mine somewhere up north, just to learn the situation of workers and what hard work means. As you know, he hasn't worked all his life.

Somerset Neither have you.

Elliot No, but at least I made money. Why did he never take any academic degree, when he had such an evident penchant for studying? Could you understand it?

Somerset It didn't serve him. He wanted to be independent and find his own way.

Elliot Obstinate wilfulness unto damnation. Such ego fanatics never end well. Isabel was lucky to get rid of him.

Somerset I don't think she feels the same way.

Elliot Do you really think that he ever loved her, the way he behaved and acted?

Somerset I think she was the only one he will ever love.

Elliot And that chance he has forfeited by his own behaviour. What an idiot! Still I had the highest thoughts of him since he in contrast to all other hopeless Americans had some endowment.

Somerset I am sure we will hear of him again.

Elliot That will probably in that case only be reports of new sensational bloomers.

Act III Scene 1. Ten years later. A grand stylish apartment in Paris.

Enter Isabel with Gray in a wheelchair.

Isabel Look how excellently he has arranged things for us! Isn't he generous?

Gray Exorbitantly. I just wonder how he could manage the crash.

Isabel He always had a fine instinct for business and always sold out in time. Lucky for us that anyone in the family got out of it alive. Or else we would all have been ruined.

Gray We are, my love. I am sorry I couldn't carry on giving you a decent life.

Isabel It wasn't your fault. All Chicago went under. Thanks to uncle Elliot we can now start all over from the beginning here in Paris and retain our pride and decency in spite of all. We did have ten good years after all.

Gray And two wonderful daughters.

Isabel We have to be content with having survived. Others jumped from bridges, laid themselves under trains or shot themselves. We can at least manage.

Gray Without your care I would not have made it.

Isabel You did what you could. Your father went under in the crash, and all you could do was to try to save what could be saved.

Gray And it proved to amount to nothing.

Isabel And not even your health.

Gray I should have given up like my father.

Isabel Fortunately you didn't.

Gray Since you were there to stop me.

Isabel That was the least thing for a good wife to do.

Maid A gentleman is here to see you, madam.

Isabel Who is it?

Maid An old friend of the family, he says. He has greetings from your uncle.

Isabel Show him in by all means.

(She presents Somerset Maugham.)

Somerset Your uncle told me that you lived here and asked me to see you.

Isabel Mr Maugham! It must be ten years ago! What a happy surprise!

Somerset So much has happened since then. Your uncle is one of the few to have managed well.

Isabel Isn't he generous to have offered us his Paris flat?

Somerset Have you nothing left in Chicago?

Isabel Nothing. Mother died long before the crash, and when the crash came we lost everything. Our choice was between a rice farm in South Carolina that had turned into a swamp and a new life in Paris in smaller circumstances.

Somerset You made the right choice. But why are you in a wheelchair, Mr Maturin? Surely you didn't have more than a nervous breakdown?

Isabel It's his headaches. When it strikes he is completely paralysed and can't do anything.

Somerset It will be a long convalescence for the entire world.

Gray I regret, Mr Maugham, the loss of our status. We had everything, and now we have nothing.

Somerset Except your uncle, who evidently is looking after you.

Isabel Gray couldn't get any work in Chicago any more because of his incurable attacks of migraine after the breakdown, so all we have to live on now is three thousand a year.

Somerset Exactly the same as Larry's yearly allowance.

Isabel I know. Isn't it ironic? He offered me a life here with him on three thousand a year, I refused to accept such a humiliation, and here we are now in an even worse humiliation. Who could have guessed it?

Somerset You still had ten happy years, didn't you?

Gray No one can take them away from us.

Isabel Do you know anything about Larry now? Uncle Elliot always used to brag about his extravagances in the wrong direction.

Somerset They say he is in Asia.

Gray In Asia? What is he doing there? Wasn't the antiquities of Europe his special interest?

Isabel He ought to have left Asia now. He wrote from different addresses over there in India, China and Singapore. I almost suspect he is back in Paris.

Somerset I will find out about it.

Gray I regret my invalidity, Mr Maugham. My life's intention was to become a paragon citizen of society who made a good job for the common good, and instead I became a burden to everybody by my paralysing headaches.

Isabel Don't be sorry. I am here to look after you.

Gray Most of all I became a burden to you.

Isabel That's the last thing you have become. (*kisses him*) How is uncle Elliot?

Somerset He has never been better. He is in high favours shuttling between Paris and the Riviera and enjoying every invitation that he sees any possibility not to miss. He would like to have all of us for dinner.

Isabel How nice. But try to search out Larry before we meet. If he is in Paris it would be nice if he came along.

Gray I agree.

Somerset I will see what I can do. (*politely and amicably excusing himself and leaving.*)

Gray (when he has left) Do you think Larry could be found and return?

Isabel He always returns. He knows what he is doing. It's only we who don't always understand what he is doing.

Scene 2. A joint.

Elliot Imagine that Larry has been found and returned! I never believed it! But why does he want us all to dine in such a shabby place as this? It's a third-rate eating-house! Perhaps he feels it's typical of Paris, a bistro at the lowest level, a joint

for stevedores, pimps and easy women, absinth drinkers and other downhill wrecks and pathetic outcasts, one or other street musician and sparrow woman singing gutter chants... Well, here they are. (*enter Larry with Isabel and Gray.*) Why on earth did you choose a place like this, Larry?

Larry I usually go here.

Elliot Why?

Larry The food is cheap and good, and the house wine is the best in the neighbourhood.

Elliot You are completely bogged down in Quartier Latin.

Larry Not without reason. It's the best part and the very heart of Paris.

Elliot How nice to see you again, Gray. You look better.

Gray Thank you. Larry has helped me.

Elliot How?

Isabel By a miracle! He has learned healing in India.

Larry Not at all. It is simple fundamental yoga. I only helped Gray to help himself. All responsibility for your health is within yourself, and no one else can help you unless you make an effort yourself.

Gray My headache is gone without a trace. I can only regard it as a miracle.

Elliot What did he do?

Isabel He hypnotized Gray into a state of trance, and when he woke up the headache was gone. It sounds very simple and must certainly have been more complicated, but I don't understand either how he did it.

Elliot Whatever did you really busy yourself with over there in India, Larry?

Larry I devoted myself to my health, both physically and spiritually, but above all I enriched myself spiritually.

Elliot So you learned a lot of mumbo jumbo and black magic and stuff like that and how to climb ropes that stand straight without hanging and how to lie comfortably on spike mats...

Larry (laughs) Not at all! I just found myself a suitable teacher.

Elliot Some sort of guiding teacher?

Larry Yes, a teacher to show me the way.

Elliot What way?

Larry Up.

Elliot There's the rope trick again.

Isabel The way you are talking! Shouldn't we order soon?

Larry It's already done. I ordered the best on the menu. I am a good friend of the chef. I hope you will like it. Here comes the wine.

(A shabby waiter, simply dressed without an apron, brings a decanter.

Larry gives a sign and allows Elliot the test.)

Elliot (tastes thoroughly) Mmmm. You are right. This is unusually good to be an ordinary house wine. (*Larry signs to the waiter to serve the others.*)

Isabel Tell me more about India, Larry. Nothing could be more exciting. How did you find your teacher?

Larry Jesus must have been there, he who said, 'search and you shall find'. I searched and found, but it was not until I came up into the mountains for real that I really started realizing where I was heading.

Isabel And where were you heading?

Larry I think that happiness is waiting for me at the end, but that it is of a totally different kind than what you could expect.

Elliot India is in the fashion. They gave the Nobel prize to an Indian guru before the war, and Romain Rolland, the great pacifist, is completely lost in Hinduism. The fellowship of Monte Verità is also heading in that direction with the mystic Hermann Hesse for a guide.

Isabel Tell us more.

Sophie (has entered and seen them, completely decayed) I know those people.

Gray (discovers her) Who is that?

Isabel My goodness! Sophie MacDonald!

Sophie (comes up to them) Hallo!

Isabel (rises and embraces her) Sophie! What has happened to you?

Sophie Can't you see?

Gray (to Elliot) Is it Sophie who married Bob MacDonald?

Elliot The same. Her husband was driving when they had a fatal car accident, he and the child were lost while Sophie was unlucky enough to survive but had a long convalescence and rehabilitation. She has never recovered.

Sophie Hallo, Larry.

Larry (rises and brings her a chair)

Sophie No.

Larry We insist. We are after all old Chicago chums, you know.

Sophie (takes a seat but somewhat embarrassed) It was such a long time ago. So you are still married to Gray, Isabel.

Isabel Elliot, you said once that man could never have the same woman for longer than five years. Gray and I are still like newly married after ten years, and we never intend to separate.

Gray I agree. You have lived too long without women, Elliot, and know nothing about them.

Elliot It's safest not to know anything about them.

Larry How nice to see you again, Sophie. Are you still writing poetry?

Sophie No, it was a long time ago. *(fills her glass with their wine and drinks)* May I?

Larry Of course. We just started. You are welcome to have dinner with us.

Sophie Thank you, but I am not hungry. *(wants to get up when something like a hoodlum enters)*

Larry No, stay on.

Hoodlum I told you not to flirt with the guests!

Larry She comes from our own city and is a childhood friend of us all. She is our guest.

Sophie (to the hoodlum) Leave me in peace for once! (The hoodlum leaves them but keeps them under observation at some distance.)

Isabel Who was that?

Elliot You had better ask no questions.

Sophie My employer. I shouldn't have shown myself. Forget me.

Isabel Never, Sophie. You stay put. We are still best friends.

Sophie (suddenly bursts into tears)

Larry (tries to comfort her) It's all right, Sophie. You are among friends.

Sophie (reacts and rises suddenly) No! You don't know anything about me! Why the devil did I have to be reminded of my old life again? Damn! I just want to forget!

(breaks up and goes to the hoodlum, who brings her out)

Elliot I am afraid I suddenly lost my appetite.

Gray Me too.

Isabel Take it easy. She will not come back.

Larry (rises) I must make sure that she will manage. (leaves)

Elliot That's all we wanted. I guess there is no point in remaining? He will certainly not come back.

Isabel I was so much looking forward to an evening with him to hear him tell about all his adventures.

Gray The atmosphere is ruined, and our good mood is gone.

Isabel Poor Sophie! *(rises. The others also rise, and they all leave.)*

Larry (returning after they have left) Pity! Some other time. (leaves again)

Scene 3. A shabby place.

Sophie lying on a bed under the obvious influence of opium, ill and coughing. She rises half way, obviously drunk, has another glass, stretches out again, cries with her hand to her front, in general despair. – Enter Larry, who sees her, rushes to her bed, falls on his knees by her side.

Larry Sophie, this is not you.

Sophie What are you doing here?

Larry I called for a doctor. You are ill.

Sophie I know. Leave me alone.

Larry No.

Sophie (looks at him, sobers up somewhat) Everyone was in love with you when you came home as a war hero. You were to marry Isabel. What happened?

Larry I got other things to think about.

Sophie Like what?

Larry I got other things to do as well.

Sophie Like what?

Larry Like learning something about life.

Sophie For what purpose? Everything must go to hell anyway whatever you do.

Larry You are not to be blamed for your fate. You happened to a misfortune.

Sophie You don't have to remind me.

Larry But you could raise yourself out of it.

Sophie How?

Larry (sits down closer to her) Do you remember how we used to write poems to each other like the worst aliens of school? We were outsiders and orphans both of us, and we found each other in a secret penchant for poetry, of which we were almost ashamed, since all the others regarded poetry as ridiculous. But poetry is an elementary secret of life, a key to its innermost entity, an opening door to eternity and the basics of beauty, since it focuses and pinpoints the word, which is the spiritual basis of all life.

Sophie Now I recognize you. But what are you doing here? I am a fallen woman, I am lost, I have given up my life and become a prostitute, my pimp owns me, and all I can do is to drink and fuck, the more the better, for the easier I forget myself, my failure and the whole damned reality.

Larry You have not failed.

Sophie Haven't I? What is this then? (*indicates the scruffy room*)

Larry A mask to your real self, which still is there.

Sophie You believe so?

Larry Yes.

Sophie And what can you do about it?

Larry At least remove the mask of your false martyrdom and restore you.

Sophie How is that to be done?

Larry Come away with me from here.

Sophie Where?

Larry Home to my place. Live with me.

Sophie Like a married couple?

Larry Why not?

Sophie Do you really want to marry me?

Larry Why not?

Sophie You are crazy.

Larry On the contrary. I know you. I know who you are. I can take care of you and restore you. I can't give you back your husband and your daughter, but I can help you stand on your own two legs and give you back your self respect.

Sophie I don't think I ever had any.

Larry Then it's about time that you acquired it.

Sophie Good lord, you actually mean what you are saying.

Larry Why wouldn't I?

Sophie No conditions? No snag?

Larry Yes, one.

Sophie Well?

Larry You must stop drinking.

Sophie Do you think it would work?

Larry It has to work.

Sophie Well, Larry, you win. Fair deal. Let's try it. I agree to the experiment. If we succeed we could perhaps marry.

Larry It's worth an effort.

Sophie (suddenly embracing him) Oh Larry, I have been so terribly lonely so terribly long! No one to speak with, and my French is a bad joke. When I suddenly saw you there all together in one of my customer joints I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a shock. And you rose up and treated me as if we were still all young and fresh, as if nothing had happened, as if I never had been married, as if I never had lost...

Larry It's over now. Restart from the beginning.

Sophie I will try. Do think Isabel despises me?

Larry Not if you stop drinking.

Sophie Very well, I will stop drinking.

Larry That's all you have to do. The rest will be easy.

Sophie I almost believe I can trust you, Larry.

Larry You can.

Sophie (embraces him) Oh Larry, it almost feels as if I had suddenly come home!

Larry (embraces her tenderly) That's the intention.

Act IV scene 1. Isabel's home.

Somerset Why did you wish to see me so suddenly?

Isabel Have you heard the terrible news? Larry is going to marry Sophie.

Somerset Why is that so terrible?

Isabel It's impossible! He has gone mad! We happened to the drunk slut at a joint which Larry invited us to without suspecting anything, and Gray was very upset. And now she has seduced our Larry!

Somerset I still can't see what is so terrible about it.

Isabel She is drinking all day and goes to bed with every man suggesting it!

Somerset That doesn't have to make her a bad woman. There are many highly respected citizens who drink and have a vulgar taste. He is perhaps the very man she needs to be cured of her grief. I don't think he will allow her to drink or be promiscuous any more.

Isabel He claims that she has stopped drinking, and that idiot thinks she is cured!

Somerset Couldn't she be then?

Isabel I know her since childhood. She was liable already then. And when a woman falls she is definitely lost and can never rise again no matter how hard she tries. And do you think she could stick to such an altruist as Larry? Of course not! He is all too good for her. She will use him as far as possible and then disappear. It's in her blood. She will make life a hell for Larry.

Somerset Give them a chance. Let them try. She was your best friend from the beginning. And why are you dragging me into this? What can I do about it?

Isabel You are the only person who has any influence over him. He likes you and listens to you. You must try to avert what could only turn to misery for him.

Somerset If I try he will only say that it's no business of mine, and he would be perfectly right.

Isabel But we can't just stand by and watch him ruining his life!

Somerset Gray is his best and oldest friend. Let him try. Besides, you underestimate her potential. Prostitutes can make very good wives, they are grateful and humble to their men, they have an invaluable knowledge of human nature and know exactly how a man is to be treated and pleased.

Isabel Do you think I have sacrificed myself to let Larry fall into the hands of a nymphomaniac?

Somerset How have you sacrificed yourself?

Isabel I gave him up once just to not stand in his way.

Somerset Nonsense. You sacrificed him for a diamond ring and a sable-coat.

Isabel (*on fire at once, hurling first possible object against him. He ducks.*) And you are supposed to be an English gentleman!

Somerset I never pretended to be.

Isabel Get out! I never want to see you again!

Somerset Try then to understand Larry a little! After all, you have known him all your life. He is completely different from all of us by not being any egoist at all. It's almost as if he didn't have an ego. He has always followed his ideals by complete self-sacrifice, and there is no higher and more powerful passion. Now he sees an opportunity to save the soul of a fallen woman, and nothing can stop him from carrying through the experiment. We have to just accept it and wait and see if it will succeed or not. And if it succeeds we would be criminal if we tried to stop it.

Isabel It can't succeed. I can only see her abyss for him. I have always loved him, and no one can love more unselfishly than I love him. I never asked him for anything and I never will. But then I cannot let another destroy him.

Somerset I don't think he can be destroyed. He is too wise for that.

Isabel What shall I do then?

Somerset If you don't want to lose him you must make the best of friends with Sophie. Include her in your circle, like you used to do, and let her join your dinners. Treat her like a human being. Why not go out shopping with her? If she is about to be married she will need some new clothes.

Isabel Very well, I will try to behave as long as possible.

Somerset No second thoughts or invidious intrigues.

Isabel I will try not to.

Somerset You will see that it will all be successful. Larry is in charge of his life.

Isabel What do you think he really found in India?

Somerset That's the great question.

Scene 2. A finer restaurant.

Elliot (is already seated when Larry and Sophie enter) Well, there you are, my dear children. I must congratulate you to this important step in life, and especially you, Larry, who never married before. Imagine that even you would finally fall!

Larry There are still three days to go.

Elliot Three days of freedom, and you don't even consider concluding them with an honorary bachelor's party!

Larry I am thirty-two and too old for such things.

Elliot As a bachelor you never grow too old, but as soon as you are married you immediately get too old.

Larry (to Sophie) Old Elliot was always a sarcastic jester but always succeeds in being benevolent after all.

Sophie I know. I know him. He saved the lives of Isabel and Gray when they had nowhere to go.

Elliot Here they are.

Gray How nice to see you! Congratulations, Sophie and Larry! So you will finally get settled, Larry!

Larry That's what it looks like.

Isabel You look splendid, Sophie.

Sophie I have been on the wagon now for three months. Larry has helped me.

Elliot You really look dry, dear me. Well, I myself don't drink anything else than tonic water, but I still must offer you some cocktails.

Larry Thanks, not for us.

Gray I am hungry. Shouldn't we at once attack the food?

Elliot As you wish. May I see the wine list, please? (*A waiter gives him the wine list.*) I simply must make sure that the wine you are having under my supervision is first class.

Gray And where will you go for your honeymoon?

Sophie We had intended Greece.

Larry For ten years I tried to get there, but there was always something coming up in between.

Isabel Your wanderings brought you to India instead.

Larry Among other places.

Gray And thanks to that you could cure me by your secret tricks. You can't imagine how grateful I am. Now I haven't had a headache for three months, and as soon as I can get a job I will start working again. It is altogether to your credit alone.

Larry Not at all. I just helped you to find yourself and mobilize your own resources. All you need is your own good will, and that is with everyone.

Waiter Are you really not going to have anything yourself, Monsieur? I am certain that a few drops of zubrovka wouldn't harm you.

Elliot Zubrovka? Do you have zubrovka?

Waiter We just had a shipment from Poland.

Elliot It's so difficult to find nowadays. May I have a look at a bottle. (*while the waiter fetches the bottle, to the others*) It's the kidneys. My doctor forbids me to drink any spirits any more, but zubrovka is something really healthy. (*The waiter brings the bottle.*) The real thing. I can see that at once! It couldn't be more genuine! It's a certain grass that the Poles put in the liquor that gives it a very special quality of its own. You have to test it.

Gray No thank you, I will stick to brandy.

Larry We decline.

Isabel Let me try it.

Elliot If you do me such an honour, my dear niece, I will keep you company with a few drops, just to make an exception. No doctor will watch me here.

Isabel It tastes divine! It's like mother's milk. I never tasted anything so good.

Elliot Another glass, Isabel?

Isabel Oh, I dare not! But it's divine. I am so glad that I got to know it. Gray, we must get some.

Elliot I will send a few bottles home to you.

Isabel Thanks, uncle! Gray, you must taste it! It smells like fresh hay and spring flowers and cowberries and lavender, it caresses the palate and is like listening to music in moonlight.

Larry Are you drunk?

Isabel No, only enthusiastic. We must not miss that fashion show later, Sophie, where we must find the right bridal outfit for you!

Sophie Yes! It will be great fun!

(They continue their communion in perfect harmony.)

Scene 3. Isabel's apartment.

The doorbell. The maid opens. It's Sophie.

Sophie I had an appointment with Isabel. We were going out to buy my dress.

Maid She had to go out, but do come in and wait.

Sophie What happened?

Maid Little Joan had a toothache. They had to go to the dentist.

Sophie How long will it take?

Maid Perhaps an hour. But do sit down in the meantime. Would you like some coffee?

Sophie Thank you, I would love to. (*makes herself comfortable. The maid leaves. She lights a cigarette and starts smoking.*)

I hate waiting. Why today of all days, Isabel? Couldn't little Joan get her toothache some other day? (*looks around restlessly smoking. Catches sight of a bottle on the table.*)

It must be that zubrovka that uncle Elliot was talking about. It will do no harm to smell it. (*opens the bottle and smells it*) Indeed! The scents of beatitude itself! It couldn't be more seductive! (*replaces the cork when maid brings the coffee*)

Maid Help yourself. There is more in the kitchen if you want some more.
(leaves again)

Sophie (has her coffee while constantly eyeing the bottle. When she has finished the coffee she lights another cigarette and starts walking around to get away from the bottle.) No books to look into! And the pictures I have seen before! She should have returned by now. (watches the clock) And it was planned to be such a joyous day! (sits down again. Can't keep herself any more, takes the bottle and pours herself a small glass.) A small taste of it can do no harm. (empties it at once) What a bliss! He was right! This is something very special! (pours herself another glass) But what am I doing? Already done! Larry, where are you? You should see me now. I actually haven't felt so good as this for three months. (empties the second glass) It's strong as well, strong and wholesome – and irresistibly tasty. But why did she leave the bottle like this so blatantly conspicuous? Well, it's her own fault. He would send some more bottles. (pours the third glass and empties it at once) I just feel better and better. Larry, I am afraid there can't be any wedding. I have already fallen down again. Sorry to disappoint you. We didn't go well together anyway. Ask Isabel why she let the bottle stand here when I arrived and she was gone. It certainly isn't my fault. (empties the fourth glass and pours another) I might just as well empty the whole bottle and have done with it. If you are to fall, you might as well fall all the way. I should leave then before she comes back. She mustn't see me like this. She would laugh me to scorn. My dearest childhood friend. I should look up Hakim then and improve the indulgence with a pipe. He probably has some new boys and goats in line for me. He always has. I am not finished yet. But the bottle is. (rises with a last cigarette, mimicking Isabel) Thanks for the visit, Sophie. How nice that you liked the zubrovka. I had left it there especially for you. Welcome back and drink some more. It's only good for you. You don't have to see me ever again anyway nor Larry. (puts down the last emptied glass, butts the cigarette and leaves.)

Maid (comes out after she has left, understands nothing and takes out the coffee tray.)

Scene 4.

Somerset What do you mean? Was there no wedding?

Elliot The girl disappeared. Just as well. It would have been a disaster in any case.

Somerset Tell me what you know.

Elliot It was three days before the wedding. Sophie and Isabel had made a date to go and buy the wedding dress. Isabel had to suddenly bring one of the children to the dentist, and meanwhile Sophie had to sit and wait. When Isabel returned, she was gone. She didn't come home for the night, and then Larry sounded the alarm to let the police search the city. She was found nowhere. He searched everywhere, but she was like devoured by darkness. After three days Larry learned from her concierge that she had packed her bag and gone away, no one knows where.

Somerset What do you think really happened?

Elliot I haven't the faintest idea.
Somerset How does Larry take it?
Elliot He doesn't want to talk about it.
Somerset And Isabel?
Elliot Her entire attitude screams 'what did I tell you', but her mask is intact. She must rejoice inside about the matter gone to the dogs, but she doesn't show it.
Somerset Something tells me that Sophie must have gone to the Riviera. That's where Americans always go when they leave Paris.
Elliot You may be right. I am moving down there now for the season. Perhaps we will come across her there.
Somerset I will tell Isabel and Larry about our plans.

Act V scene 1. An opium den.

Hakim Here is all you need. Anything else?
Sophie Keep me company. I am afraid.
Hakim There is always company for you here. I can get you whatever kind of boys you desire. You always have good customers here. What are you afraid of?
Sophie I am afraid that Larry will find me.
Hakim You did eliminate all traces? And left the hotel? And said that you had gone away?
Sophie He is combing all Paris.
Hakim He will never find you in my cellar.
Sophie Thank heavens for your opium. That saves me. Drinking can go too far sometimes, so that I see my dead child and wake up at the hospital again, as if I had never left it, but the opium is a blessing.
Hakim That's intended.
Sophie I shall not stay for long. Soon I will really go down to the Riviera, it's a high season there at this time of the year among the sailors of Toulon, so there is much to do, and many eager customers with plenty of money to collect, and there Larry will never find me.
Hakim Why are you so afraid of him? He only wished you well.
Sophie That's exactly why. He wanted to save me and failed.
Hakim Perhaps you should have let him.
Sophie Too late now. I am finished. Every morning when I wake up I am in hell and only want to die, for it's exactly like waking up at the hospital, and all I get to know about my own condition is that my child and my husband are dead while I lie chained in bed and can only receive syringes, as if I hadn't myself seen my child bloody dead beside me in the wreck of the car and my husband at the wheel all covered in blood and rattling from outrageous pains... I can never get rid of it. It will pursue me until they fish me out of the canal, and poor Larry with all his good

intentions only made the awareness of the pain even worse... Thank goodness for good old Isabel and her zubrovka! That set me on the right course again.

Hakim Another pipe?

Sophie Thank you. That's exactly what I need.

(Hakim prepares another pipe for her, she lies down trying to make herself comfortable and indulges, crying.)

Scene 2.

Isabel Give up, Larry.

Larry Never in my life.

Isabel She was a hopeless case. If once you have lost your only child and refuse to start all over from a new beginning, nothing can save you. She was just a woman, Larry.

Larry You mean I should be glad to have got rid of her? Anything might have happened to her, and I have given her my word and cannot go back on it. As long as she lives there is hope.

Isabel She was the one who deserted *you*. Accept it. Realize the cold facts. Be realistic. Your idealism could find better channels.

Larry How long will you remain?

Isabel As soon as Gray has found a good job at home we move back. You have helped him back to life. He will always be grateful to you for that.

Larry I am glad that I could be of service.

Isabel You saved his life. He was more or less a vegetable and paralysed like a beaten man who could no longer get up,

Larry But he could get up, and so can Sophie.

Isabel Hardly any longer.

Larry I don't think we will see each other again if you are going so soon.

Isabel Where will *you* go?

Larry I will go down to the Riviera. Your uncle is gradually ebbing out down there, and Somerset Maugham is with him. They think Sophie also could turn up there.

Isabel You are more driven by your sense of duty and responsibility than by your love.

Larry My only love was you.

Isabel Like you were mine. Why didn't it work?

Larry You didn't have patience and said no, and my life was too miserable for you. Besides you had Gray.

Isabel Without you he would have become a millstone around my neck.

Larry What luck that he didn't then.

Isabel We only owe you our thanks for that.

Larry Perhaps we'll see each other again in America.

Isabel Are you planning to come back?

Larry Why not. Everything is possible.
Isabel There is always some hope. (*offers her hand*)
Larry *Au revoir. (kisses it and leaves without anything further.)*
Isabel No, I will never see him again. And if he comes home to America he will only vanish in the muddled masses and the general stress. He fits better in his secret monastery in the Himalayas. There you can have a clearer view of the world without getting lost in it, like poor Sophie.

Scene 3. A café in Toulon.

Maugham passes by and catches sight of Sophie sitting alone by a table with an empty glass. She recognizes him and nods.

Sophie Sit down and have a drink.
Somerset Yes, if you keep me company.
Sophie How are they at home in Paris?
Somerset I haven't seen them since you disappeared. What happened?
Sophie I didn't marry Larry.
Somerset Yes, I know that. How come?
Sophie When the moment of truth arrived, I couldn't become a kind of Magdalene figure to his Christ. No thank you, not for me.
Somerset But you didn't change your mind until the last moment. Was it cowardice or fear or something else?
Sophie Do you want me to talk about it? (*Maugham nods.*) I hadn't been drinking anything for three months and hadn't even smoked. I don't mean holy water. (*giggles*) It was a terrible feeling that only grew worse all the time. Sometimes when I was alone I could start yelling. I could bear it somehow together with Larry, but even he could not look after me all the time.

Isabel wanted to give me a bridal outfit. I wonder what become of it afterwards. It was super elegant. We had agreed on that I would fetch her and that we would go to Molyneux together. I can say that much to the honour of Isabel, that what she doesn't know about clothes is not worth knowing. When I came home to them the maid said that she had had to go to the dentist with Joan but that she would soon be back. I went into the salon. The maid brought me some coffee, and the coffee was the only thing that kept me there. On the table there was also a bottle. I had a look at it and saw that it was that Polish trash we had discussed at the Ritz.

Somerset Oh, the zubrovka. I remember that Elliot had promised Isabel to send up a few bottles.

Sophie You all boasted about its sweet smell and excellent taste, so I became curious. I opened it and smelled it. You were absolutely right, it smelled awfully good. I lighted a cigarette and tried to focus on the coffee. That was excellent as well. They talk so much about French coffee, but I leave it, I prefer the American. That's the only thing I miss here. But Isabel's coffee wasn't bad, I felt rather low, but after a cup it felt better. I watched the bottle which was just standing there. It was a terrible

temptation, but I didn't want to think about it but only lighted another cigarette. I thought Isabel would come any moment, but she didn't. I became awfully nervous, I don't like sitting and having to wait. There was no book in the room that I could have a look in. I rose and walked about and watched the pictures, but I couldn't get my eyes off that darn bottle. Then I thought I could pour a glass and see what it looked like. It had a beautiful colour.

Somersset Light green.

Sophie Exactly. It was funny, but the colour reminded exactly of the smell. It was the green nuance that you sometimes find in the middle of a white rose. I had to know if it tasted something like that, I felt that a few drops could do no harm, I only intended to take a few drops, but then I heard a noise and thought it was Isabel coming, so I emptied the whole glass as I didn't want her to take me by surprise. But it wasn't Isabel. But it felt so heavenly good! I hadn't felt so good for such a long time. I felt like starting to have a new life. If Isabel had come at that moment I would probably be married to Larry by now. I wonder how it would have worked out.

Somersset So she didn't come?

Sophie No, she didn't come. I was very cross with her. What kind of a behaviour is that to let me sit and wait? And suddenly I saw the glass was filled up again, I had of course refilled it without thinking of it, but I swear that I was unaware of it. It would have been stupid to pour it back into the bottle, so I drank it up. You can't deny that it tasted heavenly. I felt like a new being, I thought I could laugh out aloud, I hadn't felt like that in three months. Do you remember the old fool recounting that he had seen the Poles emptying large glasses without blinking? Well, I thought I could take as much as any darn Pole. Do it for real, if you have to do it at all, I thought, so I dropped the coffee-grounds in the sink and filled the whole cup. Talk about mother's milk! Oh, kiss me! Then I don't remember much more, but probably there was not much left in the bottle when I was finished. I thought I ought to disappear before Isabel got back. But it was a narrow escape. Just as I entered the hall I heard Joan's voice. I ran up another staircase and waited until they had entered the flat, then I rushed down and got a cab. I told the driver to drive like mad, and when he asked where to I laughed him straight to his face. It was a wonderful feeling of relief.

Somersset Did you go home to your place?

Sophie Do you think I am an idiot? I knew that Larry would come after me. I didn't dare to go to any of the old places, so I went to Hakim. There Larry would never find me. Besides I needed a fix.

Somersset Who is Hakim?

Sophie Hakim is a man from Algiers who can always provide some opium if you put money on the table. We were real good friends. He gets whatever you need or want, a boy, a man, a woman or a nigger. He always has half a dozen Algerians stored. I stayed with him for three days. I don't know how many customers I had. (*giggles*) All shapes and colours and sizes. I had much to catch up with. But I was afraid. I didn't feel safe in Paris. I was afraid Larry would find me out. I also had no

money, you had to pay those blackguards for lying with them, so I left, went home and gave the concierge a hundred francs to say that I had gone away if anyone asked for me. I packed my things and took the night train to Toulon. I couldn't feel quite safe until I was here.

Somerset And have you been here all the time since?

Sophie You bet. And here I intend to stay. You can get any amount of opium, the sailors bring it from the Orient, it's good stuff, not the kind of trash they trade in Paris. I got a room at the hotel *Commerce et la Marine*, you know. It just stinks of opium when you come home at night, (*snuffs with relish*) at the same time sweet and rank. They are lying smoking in their rooms, which gives you a kind of homely feeling. They never bother about who you are bringing with you. At five in the morning they come knocking at the doors, for then the sailors have to get on board, so you never have any trouble getting rid of them. I saw a book by you by a bookshop down at the harbour. If I had known I would meet you I would have bought it and let you write a dedication.

Somerset Perhaps it wouldn't have been of much pleasure to you.

Sophie Why not? I can read, let me tell you.

Somerset I believe you can write as well?

Sophie Well, I wrote some verses as a child. They were certainly not very outstanding, but I liked them rather well myself. I suppose Larry told you about it. Life is of course a hell, but if you want to get anything out of it, it's damned silly if you let it run out of your hands. Will you write your name in the book if I buy it?

Somerset I am leaving tomorrow. If you really want to, I could get you a copy and leave it for you at your hotel.

Sophie That would be nice. (*A fog-horn.*) There's my own boy. (*waves to a company of sailors*) You can have him in for a glass, but then you had better vanish. He is a Corsican and as jealous as our old friend Jehovah.

Somerset (*inspects the arriving sailor*) Are you fond of that kind of rough type?

Sophie The rougher the better.

Somerset With that sort of fellows you might end up with your throat cut.

Sophie It wouldn't come as a surprise. That would be an efficient end of all the misery.

Somerset I have to go now.

Sophie How is uncle Elliot?

Somerset He is dying.

Sophie I hope you will have time to greet him from me one last time. I will probably neither see him nor the others any more. Don't forget about the book.

Somerset Never while I live. (*rises, kisses her hand and leaves.*)

Scene 4. Sophie's shabby hotel room in Toulon.

Larry (sits down on her bed) The main thing is that we have the situation clear. Happy journey, Sophie, to your next life and a better life, which you certainly deserve. This you have already forgotten, and death is just a release at last from all traumas, sorrows and disappointments and actually just the ideal total new start.

Somersset (enters) Has anything happened?

Larry We have been summoned to an identification of Sophie MacDonald's body. They found a photo of me and a book dedicated by you to her.

Somersset How painful. How did she end?

Larry All naked in the sea with her throat slit open probably by a sharp razor.

Somersset Will it at all be possible to identify her?

Larry We have no choice. We are the only ones the police could find who were in contact with her. Isabel and Gray have gone back to America, and how is old Elliot?

Somersset Dead and buried with all the catholic pomp and circumstance he could raise with his last supreme vanity. Therefore Isabel and Gray could then sell his flat in Paris and are now at large with a new life in Dallas, Texas.

Larry Then we shall never see them again. Do you know something that I don't know?

Somersset About what?

Larry About why Sophie dropped off?

Somersset Unfortunately I know everything about it. What is it you don't know?

Larry I know nothing but can guess a great deal.

Somersset What are you guessing?

Larry That Isabel had a hand in it.

Somersset Not just one. She was all hands in it. She was the one who cut Sophie's neck.

Larry How?

Somersset I can't keep anything away from you, Larry, since you honestly tried to marry her and pull her out of her tragedy, and I know that you will never have anything more to do with Isabel and Gray. Therefore I can tell you what I know.

When Isabel and Sophie were to meet to buy Sophie's wedding outfit, they made a date at Isabel's place. When Sophie arrived, Isabel had left with her daughter to the dentist. As far as I know, Isabel has never before walked out on a settled date. Left on the table for Sophie had been left some coffee and zubrovka. Isabel didn't come. Sophie smoked but was tempted by the zubrovka and tasted it.

Larry My God!

Somersset She told me everything. She gorged on it and could never face you any more.

Larry Do you think it was intentional by Isabel?

Somerset Of course it was intentional. She exposed Sophie to a cruel test which neither anyone else in that situation would have managed. She wasn't exactly a puritan, as you know.

Larry But why did she do it? I can't understand such a cruelty in Isabel.

Somerset She still loves you. She could never let you go or grant you your freedom. Her marriage with Gray was just a marriage of convenience and a result of her American vanity to maintain a dazzling appearance, outwardly a happy marriage with two sweet girls and everything, but without love. All true love is unhappy, like Sophie's and hers for you.

Larry (sitting, clasping his head by his hands) How terrible! These women have pursued me all my life!

Somerset We will never be without them, and the best thing we could do about it is to love them.

Larry My love comprised more than just women, I actually never had any interest in sex, naturally you engage in it with pleasure as long as you are young and well, but when your knowledge of life deepens you realize that the spiritual love for all life and the universe is more rewarding and lead to better things. Mundane love is mortal, like Sophie and Isabel, whom I will never see again, but spiritual love is endless and immortal.

Somerset What are your intentions?

Larry To fulfil my duties to Sophie and follow her to her final rest. Then I will probably go to sea again. There are many ships here to choose between in Toulon.

Somerset Where will you go?

Larry Anywhere. You can learn more about life everywhere, even in New York. I might end up a cab driver in New York. That way you can always stay in close contact with life and people.

Somerset So let's go to the identification. Then we will probably not see each other again.

Larry I don't think so either.

(Maugham helps Larry to his feet, and they leave together.)

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