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The Last Time I Saw Thatcher

The last time I saw Thatcher, he was at his usual table on the veranda of the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, sunken into his crumpled suit and stroking the yellowing *London Times* tucked under his toast plate. His watery eyes gathered like mould in the damp January air.

I had introduced myself earlier, for he intrigued me. I was standing at the bar, looking around, when Thatcher and his unassuming little table appeared before me. My curiosity took over.

I lied about being a successful mystery writer, and he lied about having heard of me, mumbling apologies about not yet having had enough time to read any of my works. To tell the truth, I write cheap detective fiction and some coarser stuff, and all of that is published under assumed names.

My bluff worked, though, and he hinted that if I were to come around again he would have a good story for me to use.

Naturally, I came around the next evening. I get most of my ideas in hotel bars, and once one of these odd characters gets my interest, there's nothing to do except sit back and see where he takes me.

It was a shock, nonetheless, to learn that he had been at the Raffles Hotel—in fact, at that very table—for over sixty years.

Thatcher ignored my astonishment and explained that he had been created and abandoned by Somerset Maugham, all in a matter of minutes, in 1926. He was born to be given a proper place in one of the Maugham's short stories, he said, and was abandoned by the oddest of accidents.

"You see, one evening Mr. Maugham was dining at his club and attempting to work out a bit of a story about a colonial station here in the East. Borneo, actually, rather a dreadful jungle compared to Malaya. At any rate, he had settled upon a simple story situation: two chaps who couldn't get along together at all because of their class differences, even though they were the only two white men among all of those natives.

"One, a young man named Cooper, was quite settled upon. Apparently Mr. Maugham felt that he needed a burly sort of fellow with some class hostility. Cooper felt that he had been abused during the war because he could not become an officer, even after that frightful slaughter of officers at the Somme. Cooper made a big to do, as it happened, and bitterly resented his betters. Oh, he wasn't as dreadful as some of Lawrence's unwashed miners and that lot, but he was a rough and tumble fellow with no understanding of England's more civilizing customs.

"Now, the other character must be well bred, mustn't he. He must respect and represent all of those wonderful traditions which this Cooper chap belittles. Quite a reasonable decision Mr. Maugham, I should say. The man must be educated—Eton and Oxford, perhaps—and very old school."

I waved down a waiter for another drink, covering this inattention with some offhand compliment. Maybe that this second opening appeared perfect for Thatcher himself.

"Quite. I would have been rather good there, I believe, had I only had the chance. But the problem was . . . was rather delicate. My class and breeding were, of course, above question."

He was stalling. I hated slow stories, so I drew him out a bit: I assured him that we were both men of the world, that as a writer I had seen just about everything, that sort of thing. Apparently it worked. Thatcher took a deep breath, precariously tilted backwards, and continued.

"The fact of the matter is that Mr. Maugham was, like so many great writers," looking away as he blurted it out, "a homosexual, don't you know. Hardly something he could write about in those days. Perhaps this was too cautious of him, but I certainly don't want to criticize Mr. Maugham."

I must have looked puzzled. Maybe it was all those whiskeys. The waiters were beginning to ignore me.

"It created this problem, you see: when he was thinking of the position to be filled at the outstation, he thought of me as a homosexual like

himself. Frankly, I sometimes think that he did that because he rather fancied what he had created.

"But he really didn't want to write about this sort of thing, and in musing over the end of the story he simply could not get rid of the notion that I was to be quite taken with a particularly handsome serving lad, a fellow who, in his own brash and impetuous way, objected to Europeans quite as much as Cooper resented the better classes.

"Mr. Maugham felt that this just wouldn't do, not only because of the scandal, but because this new angle, as I think you American writers call it, might muddy the entire matter of motivation, might overshadow the issue of class conflict.

"You see, the person I was to be actually permits Cooper's death, and this native lad is the one who does the deed. The new order and old order at odds, that sort of thing. But Mr. Maugham feared that the whole affair might be seen merely as some sort of horrid lovers' quarrel. That certainly wouldn't do."

My mind searched for possibilities. "Weren't there other positions for a man of your qualifications?" I was really just thinking out loud.

"Oh, dear me, yes, of course there were many stories and plays after this one, but the problem was that when he did go looking about for something suitable for me—a humiliating process to watch, I assure you—he landed upon this."

Thatcher's arms opened weakly to frame the Raffles veranda.

"Mr. Maugham had in mind a certain diplomatic intrigue in which I was to be a secret agent posing as an aeronautical engineer, of all things. Important dealings with certain Chinese of the better sort. All very hush hush."

Yes, maybe, but not a great story beginning.

"Well, Mr. Maugham had just thought of me here, breakfasting, waiting for some mysterious contact, when the club butler interrupted him. I shattered from his mind like a Mills bomb. He went in to dinner, and I was stuck here."

Sure I was sceptical, but my imagination took over quickly. Thatcher seemed almost amused at his problem, but he might have been waiting for Maugham to suddenly remember him again.

"You know," I said straight out, watching his face for reactions among the tics, "Maugham is dead."

Thatcher was unmoved. He knew. "1965," he whispered, and thrust out the *Times* at me like a reproach. He tapped the obituary notice, already yellow with age and stained from endless breakfasts at the Raffles.

He smiled. Or least he seemed to.

"Oh, I assure you that it hasn't been as awful as you might think. And there are a frightful lot of us about, you know. The world is full of us. How many of those people idling about the world have you passed unawares? So many, waiting for something to happen to them. Authors die and leave us stranded like so many waifs left behind by naughty sailors."

I called for another whiskey and watched as Thatcher's teacup was delicately refilled.

"Perhaps, Mr. Thatcher, you would still like to find a position? Or do you find this comfortable?" Maybe I was insulting him. I wasn't sure.

But he drew himself up rather stiffly and leaned over his abandoned toast, tipping the teacup and crushing the *Times* against the spoon.

"My dear young man, we do rather make of our lives what we want, don't we. I am indeed comfortable here, as you put it, but I have not been idle. I was not reared to be idle."

A grim smile tightened over his face. "In fact, my dear colleague, I'm rather in your line of work already."

A writer? I was startled. Other writers make me nervous.

"Yes, actually. I have penned a bit of a story. It concerns this fellow Warburton."

Warburton? Thatcher was drifting, and my whiskeys were beginning to soak through. I wondered if the entire story of Thatcher's wasn't just a fabrication.

"Warburton," Thatcher began with patience, "is the fellow who took my position in the story, at the outstation with Cooper. I wrote him into a story of my own." Thatcher settled limply in his chair. His smile widened and he laughed.

"Well, Mr. Maugham did make me an Etonian, and I used to fancy that I had won a prize or two in composition. Why shouldn't I be able to write?"

I was barely keeping one step ahead of Thatcher, and had no idea of where this story about Warburton might go. But I've learned to just let these old characters go on.

"I wrote a sequel to Mr. Maugham's story, one in which Warburton's family comes East to plague him. A loud and distressing aunt, and a silly old man of a cousin. All very vulgar—Liverpool manufacturing money, that sort of thing. Mr. Maugham had made Warburton quite a snob, but his unspeakable cousins come back to unmask him at last. Dreadful gossip among his colleagues in the Malay office. The most tormenting innuendoes, even in official correspondence."

But what *happened*? My own dread of inconclusive stories asked this. Who knows what an obsessive old man could do to paralyse a story so many years in the making.

"Well, he took his own life, actually. None of my doing. Too much for the poor fellow to bear when the natives began to discover his wretched circumstances. So much depends upon appearances, of course, and on other people's faith in one."

I wondered how Warburton died. Writers need details.

Thatcher tapped his lapel to indicate that the story lay buried in an inside pocket. "A bit of a surprise," he said. "I think you will find it reasonably clever. Some of Mr. Maugham's own ironies, and not a bad job of it at that."

I wondered if he expected to stay at the Raffles, writing. The question must have touched something dreadful, for I honestly believed he winced. I am not certain, but I think he did.

"No," Thatcher said, too loudly. "This story is all that there is. Warburton and Cooper are gone now. Sometimes I am nearly envious, I must confess to you. They are no longer wondering and waiting. Even Warburton must be happy to be rid of the pomp and show at the outstation—all paraded before gawking natives at that. Rid of his endless cocktails precisely at six, and his immaculate evening clothes and his starched collars. Every day precisely the same. Every day without end."

Thatcher's reverie broke. I wondered if Thatcher could help me out in one of my novels. His problem isn't a problem any more.

"Oh, no, I dare say it is not!" he interrupted. "I'm rather too old for that anyway, and I suspect that I would find the whole of it rather a bore. The reading public will have to find younger men to offend them."

So he was interested in being in my writing?

Thatcher stiffened in his chair, staring at me with his watery eyes. He seemed catatonic. My drink was empty, and the waiters were ignoring me.

Thatcher called me back with his soft question. "Could you be a bit more precise about the situation you have in mind?"

He wanted the job, but he had enough dignity left to make a last bluff. At least I think so. I'm not sure.

Actually, I thought to myself, there are two or three possibilities which might work out. Nothing too far from his original position. Something in the East.

"Quite. England is bloody well insufferable these days with all of that young crowd, the ruffians and the layabouts," Thatcher replied.

I was searching for something definite. The silence grew and then sagged, and sounds of restaurant clatter began to trickle over the table. Whether we were lost in the contemplation of possibilities or Thatcher was merely gathering his frailties for a final, quaint superiority, I am not sure. My interest and my contempt enfolded each other. I needed a definite commitment from him.

Then: tossing the *Times* onto the plate, onto the rancid marmalade and the stained tea spoon and the flaking butter, Thatcher took his teacup to his lips for a last sip, and, as he lowered the cup through a quaking parabola of twilight, he said, almost too softly to be heard, "yes."

I am standing at the bar again. Thatcher remains motionless, his teacup caught halfway through its curve, its swoon downward towards the empty and shallow grave of the saucer. The ragged edges of the *Times* wave slightly in the breeze. Thatcher's faded school tie hangs stiffly over his starched shirt front, guarding Warburton's secret, a silk tombstone.

Thatcher's head is locked in its last submissive nod, his lips halted in the endless sibilant of his last "yes." From the bar, Thatcher almost looks as if he were intently reading the *Times* lying open before him. Perhaps he is. Perhaps the *Times* is open to Maugham's obituary, or to his own.