

Chapter - III

THE RECKLESS MILDRED AND THE CONSIDERATE NORAH

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I

Of Human Bondage

Maugham's Of Human Bondage appeared in the year 1915. It was published immediately after the World War I began. The novel deals with the life of Philip Carey and his girl friends. Throughout the novel Philip tries to find out the meaning of life. He comes in contact with women of different status. He wants to find out the real meaning of life in their company. At last he comes to realise the meaning of life in the company of Sally.

As an orphan child of nine years, Philip is brought up in the home of his uncle and aunt. The couple is totally ignorant as to how a child should be treated. His uncle is an indulgent, stern and selfish person whereas his aunt is a sincere, kind and rather shy woman. Philip likes her for her sincerity and simplemindedness.

Philip's clubfoot becomes a cause of humiliation to him. His fellow students used to tease and humiliate him for this deformity in him. This creates a sense of aloofness in him. He prefers to spend his time in isolation. Consequently he becomes lonely and reticent. He yearns to be whole in limb.

Philip is brought up in an atmosphere where religious faith is instilled in him. He is made to believe that faith in God can move mountains. In his yearning to be whole in limb one night he prays to God to cure him of his clubfoot. During the night he dreams that his clubfoot is completely cured. But in the morning he is very disillusioned when he finds that his prayer has not been answered and that he still has the clubfoot. This incident badly shakes his faith in God. With growing maturity he begins to be aware of the hypocrisy in the life of a clergyman as he observes his uncle's life from close quarters. This also contributes in his gradual loss of faith in God. He starts disliking the idea to be a clergyman and goes to Heidelberg to avoid being ordained. There the intellectual atmosphere contributes to his earlier loss of faith and one day he realises that he has lost faith in God completely :

"... The fact was that he had ceased to believe
... because he had not the religious temperament."¹

He now feels unburdened and free to enjoy life.

Philip returns to Blackstable to stay with his uncle. Now Philip is a changed man. In Blackstable he has an affair with Miss Wilkinson, his uncle's friend. But it lasts for a short period. He is unable to decide the course of his life.

He now wants to be a chartered accountant. But this clerical task does not satisfy his quest for the meaning of life. He begins to take interest in art. In order to pursue his interest in art he goes to Paris. His aunt helps him in this by offering him financial support for his studies. Philip here comes in contact with Miss Fanny Price. She is a fellow artist. She is poor. She loves Philip. But he is totally unaware of her love for him. Only after her suicidal death he sees that she has written his name several times on a sheet of paper. Then he realises that she loved him.

His art teacher Monsieur Foinet notices that he is not good at drawing. The teacher advises him to do something else:

"... if you were to ask my advice, I should say : take your courage in both hands and try your luck at something else ..."¹

Again Philip's quest for the meaning of life changes its course and soon he opts for medical studies.

As a medical student in London he comes in contact with Miss Mildred Rogers. She is a waitress in a tea shop. He visits the shop regularly with his friend. He begins to love Mildred but she does not pay any attention to his wooing. When she

goes with another man, Philip becomes extremely unhappy. Now he comes in contact with Norah Nesbitt. She is a writer of novelettes. Norah is a woman of good ideas and a cheerful nature. She treats Philip with delicate care and loves him sincerely. She tries to make him happy. But Philip's attraction for Mildred has not ceased. When Mildred returns to him, he breaks ties with Norah. Naturally Norah is hurt and she decides to marry an editor.

Mildred returns to Philip thrice. Every time there is a change in her. Now she has become a prostitute. Philip dislikes it very much. He tries to persuade Mildred to give up the prostitution. But all his efforts are in vain.

After completing his studies Philip becomes a doctor. He decides to marry Sally. She is the daughter of a journalist Athelny Thorpe. Sally is a healthy and serene girl of nineteen. Unlike Mildred, she is rosy and healthy and has a healthy view towards life. Sally does not indulge in pleasures like Mildred. In her company Philip experiences a soothing peace. He admires and respects her.

The whole novel depicts the different attitudes of women towards life. Throughout his life Philip tries to weave a meaningful

pattern of life but he is unable to do so. At last in the company of Sally Philip is able to evolve such a pattern. Though it is a simple pattern with a home, a wife, a son and love, Philip knows that by following this pattern he would be happy. He knows this is the reality as contrasted to the pursuit of ideals which is a dream. Instead of following such ideals and being unhappy, Philip decides to follow the reality and be happy.

Of Human Bondage is Maugham's masterpiece. He wrote it in two years. The novel is said to be autobiographical. Maugham says he wrote the novel to free himself of his past memories which obsessed him. The writing of the novel provided a kind of catharsis to him. In it 'facts and fiction are inextricably mixed.'

II

Miss Mildred Rogers

There are two important characters in the novel : Mildred Rogers and Norah Nesbitt.

About Mildred it is said that :

"... she is ... unforgettable, one of the most hateful, disagreeable female characters in fiction ..."³

Miss Mildred Rogers is a waitress in a tea shop. She becomes the very epitome of emotional bondage to Philip Carey. He used to go to the tea shop regularly with his friend Dunsford. Though her blue eyes, broad low brow and thin stature have attracted his attention, he begins to think seriously about her only when she snubs him.

She is a careless woman. She pays no attention to the calls of the hurried. She goes about her work with a bored, snobbish air. She constantly snubs Philip and when he tries to be friendly with her, she is insolent to him. She accepts his invitation to dinner. But she behaves as if she is doing

a favour to him. She is not desirous to speak to him even in the restaurant. Philip, quite eager to please her, nervously realises that he does not amuse her :

"She listened carelessly to his remarks with her eyes on other diners, and made no pretence that she was interested in him ..."⁴

She is a woman of no sense, no morals and no ethics. She used to take interest in the musical comedy, a crude and gaudy entertainment. She enjoys reading only cheap novelettes and has no interest in good literature. But she poses herself as to be a great woman. She forbids Philip to use bad language when she is with him. But in reality she has no sincerity, faithfulness and fidelity. She does not like to admire people. On the contrary she expects praise from others. Though Philip loves her, she insults him. She is a woman of mere pretensions. To avoid the disgrace she has fallen into, she invents many false tales :

"... she got pleasure out of the stories she invented, and she showed a certain fertility of invention in the working out of details ..."⁵

She lacks sense of humour, when Philip tries to make fun of her, she is angry with him. Naturally she is not fit to enjoy life happily. She is fascinated by boisterous persons like Emil Miller and Griffiths. She is like a butterfly and she enjoys honey from each and every flower. Once she prefers the German customer to Philip. Naturally Philip is very hurt and unhappy. But he has to tolerate this for his love for her. She just flirts with him and is totally indifferent to his sincere love for her. She tells him quite blandly about her intention of going to a play with another man. Like Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', she throws the emotions to the wind and is only concerned with worldly joys and pleasures. When Philip gives her presents, she is more pleased with him than before :

"... it was only when he gave her anything that she showed any affection ... her gratitude was in exact proportion with the price of his gift..."⁶

Mildred deliberately tries to wound Philip. She tells him quite excitedly about her proposed outing with another man. She is more interested in going out with others than in paying attention to Philip's sincere love for her. At some stage Philip tries to awaken her feminine jealousy by telling her of his false flirtations, but she does not feel anything about it, because she herself follows the same course of life.

She is a woman who gives more importance to wealth than to emotions. And precisely from this point of view she declines Philip's offer of marriage :

"... I shouldn't mind marrying, but I don't want to marry if I am going to be no better off than what I am now. I don't see the use of it."⁷

Mildred is fascinated by some exotic charm in Miller and hence tries to establish some ties of love with him. In fact, Miller is a married man and yet to her he seems to be very charming. Mildred prefers to go with him because :

"... she had always liked Miller; he amused her; there was in his foreign birth an exotic charm which she felt unconsciously."⁸

She is a very shrewd and cunning woman. She realises that Philip has a good nature and good manners. So she dares to return to him. She knows that her aunt would not give her refuge now.

She is now pregnant but does not wish at all to go back to Miller. She is happy to accept the help extended by Philip to her. She wants to live with him. She wants to give herself

to him. He is shocked by this :

"He was a little horrified by her feeling that her body was a commodity which she could deliver indifferently as an acknowledgement for services rendered"⁹

She could well have shown her gratitude in some other manner but instead she prefers this disgraceful manner.

Mildred takes a keen interest in gossip. She does not feel ashamed to tell blatant lies. Perhaps for this she finds ample material in her reading of cheap novelettes. Even for expressing her thoughts and feelings, she makes use of some hackneyed phrases from such novelettes.

She is so callous that she cherishes a secret desire that her child should be still born. She gives birth to a daughter but she does not want to take care of her baby. It is evident that she wants to enjoy her life irrespective of her duties and responsibilities towards her baby. Her cruel nature is quite visible when she inflicts pain on her baby just to punish Philip because he loves the baby. Mildred does not like it that Philip should admire and love that baby. Later the baby dies perhaps because Mildred neglects it.

Mildred always changes her mind. For a short period she lives with Miller and then abruptly ends her relation with him. But in her mind she keeps a person to whom she can return to time and again and that person is Philip. She has realised that Philip loves her intensely and hence exploits him for her own sake.

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After spending/ period with Miller and indulging herself in pleasures, she now thinks of Griffiths as her lover. Philip knows that she is going with Griffiths to enjoy herself. But at the same time Philip is sure that she would return to him soon after her enjoyment with griffiths. When she returns to him, Philip does not even touch her. She is infuriated at this strange behaviour of Philip. She tries to tempt him but to no avail. Soon she loses her temper and expresses her fury in a very destructive manner but not before she has hurt Philip in his most vulnerable spot - his clubfoot.

When she takes to prostitution Philip tries his best to persuade her to give it up. He tells her of the dangers of this trade to her as well as to others. But because of her bitter experiences with Miller and Griffiths who forsake her after enjoying her, she does not pay any heed to Philip's persuasion and bursts out :

"What do I care ? Let them take their chance.
Men haven't been so good to me that I need bother
my head about them ..."¹⁰

Thereafter Philip no more sees her. But he is never completely free from the bondage of passion that he experiences for her. It is as if she has cast a cruel spell over him, which, even if at a much lesser degree, continues to have its sway over him.

Maugham's Mildred represents the suppressed passion of a woman. Her phony gentility is the result of her desire to be a respectable woman. But when this desire is not fulfilled, she crosses the boundaries of morals and ethics and enters a region of sheer shameless enjoyment. This is in turn a result of her lack of restraint on her sense of pleasure. In her pursuit of pleasure she is reckless and does not think of the consequences of such a pursuit. Philip is a passive observer of the incidents. He neither can control her nor can he stop her from committing sinful and immoral deeds. Probably he represents the feeble, meek image of morality. On the contrary, Mildred represents everything that goes against morality, ethics and orderliness in the society. Her prostitution is not compelled upon her. She herself has chosen that path of life to fulfil her luxuries and to avoid hard work. Even with her phony gentility and

refined manner she is detestable. Yet she is true to life. Maugham has confessed that she is :

"... a composite portrait, or a 'sublimation',..."¹¹

Maugham has also said that the sordid love affair of Philip with Mildred is very remotely similar to his own love affair in his youth.

Mildred remains a superb creation of Maugham's art of characterisation. Nothing can be a better testimony to this than the fact that :

"... Readers have confessed to hissing when she appears on a page. Maugham's skill as a storyteller is never more manifest than in his making her a living, believable woman ..." ¹²

III

The Considerate Norah

Another important woman in the novel is Mrs. Norah Nesbitt. She displays an optimistic view of life. She says :

"I don't think of the future, ... Life wouldn't be worth living if I worried over the future as well as the present. When things are at their worst I find something always happens."¹³

Norah is separated from her husband. She has to earn for her and her child. She realises that she has a limited gift of talent and she utilizes it in writing short novels. Through such efforts she begins to earn some money. She writes novelettes under the pen name Courtney Paget. Also she works as a superintendent at theatres.

Norah has very bright eyes, high cheek bones and a large mouth. She has excessive contrasts of colouring like very red cheeks against a very white complexion, and, thick eyebrows and hair of a very black colour.

Philip's friend Lawson introduces him to Norah. Philip admires her for her courage with which she faces the difficulties

in her life. Added to this, she has a rare gift of cheerfulness which is not hampered by adversity in her life. She is always happy and she makes others also happy. She is a realist. She knows her own limitations and hence prefers to live in economy. She wants to create friendly ties with others. She wants to narrate all her difficulties to Philip, but she gives a humorous colour to such difficulties.

Norah is very considerate and sensible. She listens willingly to the difficulties of Philip. This makes him happy. Philip realises the joy of freedom in her company. So he tells her all about his love affair with Mildred. On hearing this Norah is not angry nor does she show any tint of dislike on her face. Instead she begins to love him.

Norah is interested in Philip. She wants someone whom she can pet, scold, and make a fuss of. She takes care of his health and his linen too. It seems that she has more of the maternal instinct than is usually found in a woman.

Unlike Mildred, Norah is strong, young and healthy. She is kind and cheerful. She has high spirits. She quickly detects Philip's sense of humour and she likes him for it :

"... she liked Philip because he laughed with her at all the amusing things in life that caught her fancy ..."¹⁴

Philip is often insulted by Mildred. He forgets his own self and his self development when he is in the company of Mildred. On the contrary Norah helps him to restore his belief in himself. Norah encourages Philip at every stage to pursue his interests. She appreciates his good decisions but never reproaches him for his wrong decisions.

Philip often compares these two women. Mildred is a possessive and self-centred woman. In her company Philip never feels free. He is attracted by her but he can never enjoy himself in her company. On the contrary, Norah is good natured. She respects him and admires him. Philip has great affection for her but he does not love her.

Norah notices the reticence of Philip and she understands the psychological cause of his reticence. She tells him it is very silly of him to think of his clubfoot. She loves him and hence ventures to make him aware of his own life. She wants him to face reality. She cannot bear to see him unhappy.

Maugham's Norah is so considerate of Philip that she allows him to enjoy his freedom. She is so sympathetic that it pleases Philip very much to be with her.

Norah is a woman who restores the self confidence of Philip. It is due to her good influence that Philip is able to pass his medical examination. She is very happy to know this. She is not selfish and so she advises him now to go to Blackstable for a rest. This unselfishness of Norah makes him to remark :

"... you are thoughtful, and kind, and you are not exacting; ... you're not troublesome and you're easy to please."¹⁵

But Philip's mind is not steady. He changes his attitude towards Norah when he finds that Mildred has come back to him. Norah wants to enjoy some of her time with him. But he dislikes the idea. Still Norah continues to love him. But he tells her now to put an end to their affair. She is upset and goes personally to him to request him and to persuade him for the continuation of their good relation. But all her efforts are in vain. She sinks under this fatal blow as she genuinely loves him. It is not passion but her true love for Philip that had fostered their relation.

Philip is torn between two directions. On the one hand Mildred attracts him and on the other hand Norah's friendship pulls him in her direction. But he is attracted to Mildred more than to Norah. Philip loves Mildred. Norah realises this. She does not wish to be an obstacle in this. But she is sorry to lose him as a lover. The blow is so great that it has already affected the very life force in her :

"... There was a heaviness in her movements as though she had suddenly grown older ..." ¹⁶

Norah is a truly cultured woman. Even though Philip has caused her great pain, she forgives him and does not have any ill-feeling for him. On the contrary she speaks about him in good spirit. She genuinely wishes that Philip should be happy.

When Philip returns to her, she welcomes him. She feels sorry to learn from him that Mildred has deserted him again. Then, as she does not want to cause pain to Philip, she gently breaks the news to him that she is going to marry Mr. Kingsford who is an editor. But Norah desires for Philip's good friendship :

"You'll come and see me again, won't you ? she asked." ¹⁷

Maugham's Norah is so considerate that she does not want to reveal her unhappy past to others. She does not want to cause unhappiness to others by the narration of her sorrows. She genuinely wishes for the happiness of others. Even after her separation from her husband she seeks for happiness in the company of Philip. But it seems that she is an accursed woman because her dream to be Philip's beloved is shattered. And then just to have a better ^{life} than the one she leads, she decides to marry an editor.

Chapter - III

OF HUMAN BONDAGE

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