



William Somerset Maugham was born in 1874. After graduating from Heidelberg University he worked at a hospital, but the success of his first novel "Liza of Lambeth" (1897) encouraged him to give up medicine and become a professional writer. Somerset Maugham is the author of several well-known novels and plays, and a lot of short stories. He died in 1966 at the age of ninety-two.

When Mrs Forrester's first detective story "The Achilles Statue" was published, she had reached the respectable age of fifty-seven, and the number of her works was considerable. Her great talent, however, remained undiscovered by ordinary readers and this was the reason her books did not sell, though they were highly praised by the critics.

Mrs Forrester was deeply interested in politics and even thought of going into Parliament. Her only difficulty was that she did not know which party to choose.

A lot of people very much wanted to be invited to the parties she gave every Saturday, but only a few were among her guests.

The only person who spoiled these parties was Mr Albert Forrester, her husband. All her friends considered him a bore and often asked one another how she had ever married him. He was known among them as the Philatelist because a young writer had once said that he was collecting stamps.

Albert, I should explain, was an ordinary businessman and not a very rich one. The suits he wore always looked shabby, the expression on his face was gloomy and he never said anything worth listening to. Mrs Forrester, however, was kind to him and always knew how to put to shame anyone who tried to make fun of him in her presence. The event that had such a great influence on Mrs Forrester's literary activities happened towards the end of one of her most successful parties. The guests sat in a circle of which Mrs Forrester was the centre. She was talking and the rest of the company were listening with great attention, only interrupting her from time to time to ask a question. Suddenly there came a noise¹ as if something heavy had fallen², and then came the sound of voices.

"Well, Carter, what is it?" Mrs Forrester asked the maid. "Is the house falling down?"

"It's the new cook's box, ma'am," answered the maid. "The porter dropped it as he was bringing it in and the cook got all upset about it."

"What do you mean by 'the new cook'?"

"Mrs Bullfinch went away this-afternoon, ma'am," said the maid.

"Does Mr Forrester know about it?" Mrs Forrester asked, for matters like that were his responsibility. "The moment Mr Forrester comes in, tell him that I want to speak to him."

"Mr Forrester's gone, ma'am," answered the maid. "He said I was to give you this letter when you asked for him." The maid left the room, and Mrs Forrester opened the letter. One of her lady friends told me that at the sight of Mrs Forrester reading the letter she thought that Albert, feeling responsible for the cook's departure, and being afraid he would be punished, had thrown himself in the Thames.

Mrs Forrester read the letter and cried out: "Oh, how unfair! how terrible!"

"What is it, Mrs Forrester?" asked Mr Simmons, her agent. "Read it", she said. "Just read it."

The short-sighted Mr Simmons put on his glasses, and holding the letter very close to his eyes read this:

'My Dear,

Mrs Bullfinch needs a change and has decided to leave, and as I do not wish to stay on without her I'm going, too. I have had all the literature I can stand and I am sick and tired of art. Mrs Bullfinch does not care about marriage³ but if you wish to divorce me, she's willing to marry me.

I've hired a new cook instead of Mrs Bullfinch and I hope you will be pleased with her. Mrs Bullfinch and I are living at 411, Kennington Road, S. E.

Albert.'

The silence that followed was broken by Mr Simmons, who said: "You must get him back." "I will never see him again as long as I live!" Mrs Forrester cried out. But Mr Simmons continued calmly: "I've been your agent for twenty years, and you can consider me one of your best friends. But if you think you can make your living by writing the sort of books you do, I must tell you that you haven't a chance."

"But I can't fight with my cook for him!" Mrs Forrester cried out.

"I was just coming to that," said Mr Simmons coldly. "A dancer or a lady of title wouldn't do you any harm, but a cook would finish you."

"He's quite right", said one of her guests. "The Philatelist must come back".

"You will go and see him tomorrow, won't you?" asked Mr Simmons. Mrs Forrester didn't answer for some time and finally said: .

"For my art's sake⁴, not for mine!"

It was rather late in the afternoon of the next day when Mrs Forrester set out on her journey to Kennington Road. Mr Simmons had explained to her by telephone how to get there, and it did not take her long to find the house she wanted. She rang the bell, and when the door opened, she recognised her cook.