

## How to Write a Novel! (After W. S. Maugham)

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Not every successful author would be generous enough to give away his method for the benefit of the rising generation. Yet in Mr W. S. Maugham this nobility of nature is found in overflowing measure—the give-away is singularly complete in *The Magician*.

Yet so dull—we regret to say—are some people that it will not seem impertinent in us to analyse and explain. The first essential is to choose a vague subject—one on which everybody is curious and almost nobody well-informed. For example, we might take "magic" and "art." It will thus be rather difficult to catch us out. Anyway, we can insure correctness by making a photographically-accurate portrait of somebody great with whom we have scraped acquaintance—"the spider taketh hold with her hands and is in kings' palaces." Thus we find on pages 29 and 30 an exact sketch of one of the five or six really great landscape painters the world has ever seen, with every finest physical and moral quality particularised with exquisite accuracy. Add the slur, "very nearly a great painter," and we may—so you think—get back at him for his cutting contempt of us. And so on through the book. We have hastily collected some seventy personalities of this kind.

Unfortunately this method will not carry us all the way. But if we happen to know one well-educated man, the task of writing is not so difficult as it may seem to the beginner. Get invited to his house—possibly some cosy vicarage—read in his library a few of the works dealing with our subject and copy them wholesale into our book; sometimes verbatim, sometimes altering words here and there—for in the case of well-known authors it is best to make a pretence of not having copied verbatim.

We give examples of both methods, italicising only identical words and phrases.

### **Mather's *Kabbalah Unveiled*, "Introduction" [p.6].**

*"Moses, who was learned in all the wisdom of Egypt, was first initiated into the Qabalah in the land of his birth, but became most proficient in it during his wanderings in the wilderness, when he not only devoted to it the leisure hours of the whole forty years, but received lessons in it from one of the angels. By the aid of this mysterious science the law-giver was enabled to solve the difficulties which arose during his management of the Israelites, in spite of the pilgrimages, wars, and frequent miseries of the nation. He covertly laid down the principles of this secret doctrine in the first four books of the Pentateuch, but withheld them from Deuteronomy. Moses also initiated the seventy elders into the secrets of this doctrine, and they again transmitted them from hand to hand. Of all who formed the unbroken line of tradition, David and Solomon were the most deeply initiated into the Kabbalah. No one, however, dared to write it down, till Schimeon Ben Jochai, who lived at the time of the destruction of the second temple . . . . After his death, his son, Rabbi Eleazar, and his secretary, Rabbi Abba, as well as his disciples, collated Rabbi Simon Ben Jochai's treatises, and out of these composed the celebrated work called ZHR, Zohar, splendour, which is the grand store-house of Kabbalism."*

### ***The Magician*, p. 72.**

*"This, then, is its history. Moses, who was learned in all the wisdom of Egypt, was first initiated into the Kabbalah in the land of his birth; but became most proficient in it during his wanderings in the wilderness. Here he not only devoted the leisure hours of forty years to this mysterious science, but received lessons in it from an obliging angel. By aid of it he was able to solve the difficulties which arose during his management of the Israelites, notwithstanding the pilgrimages, wars, and miseries of that most unruly nation. He covertly laid down the principles of the doctrine in the first four books of the Pentateuch, but withheld them from Deuteronomy. Moses also initiated the Seventy Elders into these secrets, and they in turn transmitted them from hand to hand. Of all who formed the unbroken line of tradition, David and Solomon were the most deeply learned in the Kaballah. No one, however, dared to write it down till Schimeon ben Jochai, who lived in the time of the destruction of Jerusalem; and after his death the Rabbi Eleazar, his son, and the Rabbi Abba, his secretary, collected his manuscripts and from them composed the celebrated treatise called Zohar."*

From Franz Hartmann's *The Life of Paracelsus*," p. 257:

"In a book called 'The *Sphinx*', edited by Dr Emil Besetzny, and published at Vienna in 1873 by L. Rosner (Tuchlauben, No. 22), we find some interesting *accounts* in regard to a number of 'spirits' generated by a Joh. Ferd. Count of Kueffstein, in Tyrol, in the year 1775. The sources from which these accounts are taken consist in masonic manuscripts and prints, but more especially in a diary kept by a certain Jas. Kammerer, who acted in the capacity of butler and famulus to the said Count. There were ten homunculi—or, as he calls them, 'prophesying spirits'—preserved in strong bottles, such as are used to preserve fruit, and which were filled with water; and these 'Spirits' were the product of the labour of the Count J. F. of Kueffstein (Kufstein), and of an Italian Mystic and Rosicrucian, Abbe Geloni. They were made in the course of five weeks, and consisted of a King, a queen, a knight, a monk, a nun, an architect, a miner, a seraph, and finally of a blue and a red spirit. The bottles were closed with ox-bladders, and with a great magic seal (Solomon's seal?). The spirits swam about in those bottles, and were about one span long, and the Count was very anxious that they should grow. They were, therefore, buried under two cart-loads of horse-manure, and the pile daily sprinkled with a certain liquor, prepared with great trouble by the two adepts, and made out of some 'very disgusting materials'. The pile of manure began after such sprinklings to ferment and to steam as if heated by a subterranean fire, and at least once every three days, when everything was quiet at the approach of the night, the two gentlemen would leave the convent and go to pray and to fumigate at that pile of manure. After the bottles were removed the 'spirits' had grown to be each one about one and a half span long, so that the bottles were almost too small to contain them, and the male homunculi had come into possession of heavy beards, and the nailes of their fingers and toes had grown a great deal. By some means the Abbe Geloni provided them with appropriate clothing, each one according to his rank and dignity. In the bottle of the red and in that of the blue spirit, however, there was nothing to be seen but 'clear water'; but whenever the Abbe knocked three times at the seal upon the mouth of the bottles, speaking at the same time some Hebrew words, the water in the bottles began to turn blue (respectively red), and the blue

From *The Magician*, p. 112 (note Mr Maugham's accurate translations of "the" and "of" into "die" and "von"):

"It was called 'Die *Sphinx*' and was edited by a certain Dr Emil Besetzny. It contained the most extraordinary *accounts* I have ever read of certain spirits generated by Johann-Ferdinand, Count von Kuffstein, in the Tyrol, in 1775. The sources from which these accounts are taken consist of masonic manuscripts, but more especially of a diary kept by a certain James Kammerer, who acted in the capacity of butler and famulus to the count. The evidence is ten times better than any upon which men believe the articles of their religion. If it related to less wonderful subjects you would not hesitate to believe implicitly every word you read. There were ten homunculi—James Kammerer calls them prophesying spirits—kept in strong bottles, such as are used to preserve fruit, and these were filled with water. They were made in five weeks, by the Count Von Kuffstein and an Italian mystic and Rosicrucian, the Abbe Geloni. The bottles were closed with ox-bladders and with a magic seal. The spirits were about a span long, and the Count was anxious that they should grow. They were, therefore, buried under two cart-loads of manure, and the pile daily sprinkled with a certain liquor prepared with great trouble by the adepts. The pile after such sprinklings began to ferment and steam, as if heated by a subterranean fire. When the bottles were removed, it was found that the spirits had grown to about a span and a half each; the male homunculi were come into possession of heavy beards, and the nails of the fingers had grown. In two of the bottles there was nothing to be seen save clear water, but when the Abbe knocked thrice at the seal upon the mouth, uttering at the same time certain Hebrew words, the water turned a mysterious colour and the spirits showed their faces, very small at first, but growing in size till they attained that of a human countenance. And this countenance was horrible and fiendish.

"Haddo spoke in a low voice that was hardly steady, and it was plain that he was much moved. It appeared as if his story affected him so that he could scarcely preserve his composure. He went on.

"These beings were fed every three days by the Count, with a rose-coloured substance which was kept in a silver box. Once a week the bot-

and the red *spirits* would *show their faces, first very small, but growing* in proportions until they attained the size of an ordinary human face. The face of the blue spirit was beautiful, like an angel, but that of the red one bore a *horrible* expression.

"*These beings were fed by the Count about once every three or four days with some rose-coloured substance which he kept in a silver box, and of which he gave to each spirit a pill of about the size of a pea. Once every week the water had to be removed, and the bottles filled again with pure rain-water. This change had to be accomplished very rapidly because during the few moments that the spirits were exposed to the air they closed their eyes, and seemed to become weak and unconscious, as if they were about to die. But the blue spirit was never fed, nor was the water changed; while the red one received once a week a thimbleful of fresh blood of some animal (chicken) and this blood disappeared in the water as soon as it was poured into it without colouring or troubling it.*

"*By some accident the glass containing the monk fell one day upon the floor and was broken. The poor monk died after a few painful respirations, in spite of all the efforts of the Count to save his life, and his body was buried in the garden. An attempt to generate another one, made by the Count without the assistance of the Abbe, who had left resulted in failure, as it produced only a small thing like a leech, which had very little vitality and soon died.*"

Does Mr Maugham wish us to believe that his is an independent translation from *Die Sphinx*?

Considerations of space prevent us from quoting further parallels of this kind. One, however, occupies no less than four and a half pages of *The Magician*, and is taken from A. E. Waite's translation of Eliphaz Levi, *Rituel et Dogme de la Haute Magie* (pp. 113-117).

Then, too, we can take our host's sister as the heroine, but as we are unwilling to drag the name of any lady into a mere affair of letters, we must beg to be excused from following Mr Maugham's example in this one matter.

The would-be novelist should not be content with actuality alone. There are a very large number of really striking incidents in fiction, which we can borrow with advantage. For example, it would be a graceful compliment to the fair sex (with whom our gold, if not our eloquence, should make us a favourite) if we were to borrow a scene from Mabel Collins' *Blossom and the Fruit*.

We italicise identical incidents:

**From *The Blossom and the Fruit*, by Mabel Collins, pp. 144-146:**

"He had scarcely done so when the Duchess uttered a shrill cry.

"*My God!*" she exclaimed in a voice of horror, '*who is in the carriage with us?*'

*bles* were emptied and filled again with pure rain-water. The change had to be made rapidly because, while the homunculi were exposed to the air, they closed their eyes and seemed to grow weak and unconscious, as though they were about to die. But with the spirits that were invisible, at certain intervals blood was poured into the water; and it disappeared at once, inexplicably, without colouring or troubling it. By some accident one of the bottles fell one day and was broken. The homunculus within died after a few painful respirations in spite of all efforts to save him, and the body was buried in the garden. An attempt to generate another, made by the Count without the assistance of the Abbe, who had left, failed: It produced only a small thing like a leech, which had little vitality and soon died."

***The Magician*, pp. 286-289:**

"There's someone in the room.' The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she heard Arthur fling himself upon the intruder. She knew at once, with the

"She flung herself across and knelt upon the floor between Hilary and Fleta; her terror was so great she did not know what she was doing.

"Hilary leaned across her and instantly discovered that she was right—that there was another man in the carriage besides himself.

"'Oh, kill him! kill him!' cried the little Duchess, in an agony of fear; 'he is a thief, a murderer, a robber!'

*"Hilary rose up and precipitated himself upon this person whom he could not see. A sense of self-defence, of defence of the women with him, seized him as we see it seize the animals. He discovered that this man had risen also. Blindly and furiously he attacked him, and with extraordinary strength. Hilary was young and full of vigour, but slight and not built like an athlete. Now, however, he seemed to be one. He found his adversary to be much larger and stronger than himself.*

"A fearful struggle followed. The carriage drove on through unseen scenery as fast as possible; Fleta could have stopped it had she thrown the window down and cried out to the postillions. But Fleta remained motionless; she might have fainted, she was so still. The little Duchess simply cowered on the ground beside her, clinging to her motionless figure. This terrified girl had not the presence of mind to think of stopping the carriage, and so obtaining help. She was too horror-struck to do anything. And, indeed, it was horrible, for the swaying, struggling forms sometimes were right upon the two women, sometimes at the other side of the carriage; it was a deadly horrible, ghastly struggle, all the more horrid for the silence. There were no cries, no exclamations, for indeed, so far as Hilary was concerned, he had no breath to spare for them. There were only gasps and heavy breathings, and the terrible sound that came from a man's throat when he is fighting for his life. *How long this hideous battle lasted none could tell—Hilary had no idea of the passage of time. The savage in him had now come so entirely uppermost and drowned all other consciousness, that his one thought was he must kill—kill—kill—and at last it was done. There was a moment when his adversary was below him, when he could use his whole force upon him—and then came a gasp and an unearthly cry—and silence.*

"Absolute silence for a little while. No one moved, no one stirred. The Duchess was petrified with horror. Hilary had sunk exhausted on the seat of the carriage—not only exhausted, but bewildered, for a host of other emotions besides savage

certainty of an intuition, that it was Haddo. But how had he come in? What did he want? She tried to cry out, but no sound came from her throat. Dr Porhoet seemed bound to his chair. He did not move. He made no sound. She knew that an awful struggle was proceeding. It was a struggle to the death between two men who hated one another, but the most terrible part of it was that nothing was heard. They were perfectly noiseless. She tried to do something, but she could not stir. And Arthur's heart exulted, for his enemy was in his grasp, under his hands, and he would not let him go while life was in him. He clenched his teeth, and tightened his straining muscles. Susie heard his laboured breathing, but she only heard the breathing of one man. She wondered in abject terror what that could mean. *They struggled silently, hand to hand, and Arthur knew that his strength was greater. He had made up his mind what to do and directed all his energy to a definite end. His enemy was extraordinarily powerful, but Arthur appeared to create strength from the sheer force of his will. It seemed for hours that they struggled.* He could not bear him down.

"Suddenly he knew that the other was frightened and sought to escape from him. Arthur tightened his grasp; for nothing in the world now would he ever loosen his hold. He took a deep, quick breath, and then put out all his strength in a tremendous effort. They swayed from side to side. Arthur felt as if his muscles were being torn from the bones, he could not continue for more than a moment longer; but the agony that flashed across his mind at the thought of failure braced him to a sudden angry jerk. All at once Haddo collapsed, and they fell heavily to the ground. Arthur was breathing more quickly now. He thought that if he could keep on for one instant longer, he would be safe. *He threw all his weight on the form that rolled beneath him, and bore down furiously on the man's arm.* He twisted it sharply, with all his might, and felt it give way. He gave a low cry of triumph; the arm was broken. And now his enemy was seized with panic; he struggled madly, he wanted only to get away from those long hands that were killing him.

fury began to rise within him. What—who—was this being he had destroyed? At that moment the horses were urged into a gallop, for they were entering the city gates. Hilary threw down the window next him with a crash. *'Lights, lights!' he cried out, 'bring lights!'* The carriage stopped, and there was a crowd immediately at the windows, and the glare of torches fell into the carriage, making it bright as day. *The little Duchess was crouched in the corner on the ground in a dead faint.* Fleta sat up, strangely white, but calm. *Nothing else was to be seen, alive or dead, save Hilary himself;* and so horror-struck was he at this discovery, that he turned and buried his face in the cushions of the carriage, *and he never knew what happened—whether he wept, or laughed, or cursed—but some strange sound of his own voice he heard with his ears.*

"There was a carriage full of servants behind Fleta's carriage; when hers stopped so suddenly they all got out and came quickly to the doors.

"The Duchess has fainted,' said Fleta, rising so as to hide Hilary; 'the journey has been too long. Is there a house near where she can lie still a little while, and come on later to the palace?'

"Immediately offers of help were made, and the servants and those who were glad to help them carried the poor little Duchess away."

They seemed to be of iron. Arthur seized the huge bullock throat and dug his fingers into it, and they sunk in the heavy rolls of fat. He exulted, he knew that his enemy was in his power at last; he was strangling him, strangling the life out of him. He wanted light so that he might see the horror of that vast face, and the deadly fear, and the starting eyes. And still he pressed with those iron hands. And now the movements were strangely convulsive. His victim writhed with the agony of death. His struggles were desperate, but the avenging hands held him as in a vice. And then the movements grew utterly spasmodic, and then they grew weaker. Still the hands pressed upon the gigantic throat, and Arthur forgot everything. *He was mad with rage and fury and hate and sorrow.* He thought of Margaret's anguish and of her fiendish torture, and *he wished the man had ten lives so that he might take them one by one. And at last all was still,* and that vast mass of flesh was motionless, and he knew that his enemy was dead. He loosened his grasp and slipped one hand over the heart. It would never beat again. The man was stone dead. Arthur got up and straightened himself. The darkness was intense still and he could see nothing. Susie heard him, and at length she was able to speak:

"Arthur, what have you done?'

"I've killed him,' he said, hoarsely.

"O God, what shall we do?" *Arthur began to laugh aloud, hysterically,* and in the darkness his hilarity was terrifying.

*"For God's sake let us have some light."*

'I've found the matches,' said Dr Porhoet. He seemed to awake suddenly from his long stupor. He struck one. The looked down on the floor for the man who lay there dead. Susie gave a sudden cry of horror.

*"There was no one there."*

"Arthur stepped back in terrified surprise. *There was no one in the room, living or dead, but the three friends.* The ground sank under Susie's feet, *she felt horribly ill, and she fainted.* When she awoke, seeming with difficulty to emerge from an eternal night, Arthur was holding down her head.

"Bend down,' he said; 'bend down.'

"All that had happened came back to her, and she burst into tears. Her self-control deserted her, and, clinging to him for protection, she sobbed as though her heart would break. She was shaken from head to foot. The strangeness of this last horror had overcome her, and she could have shrieked with fright."

For our main plot though, we are probably safer if we stick to a classic like Dumas. Thus the *Memoirs of a Physician* will furnish us with a picture of a magician marrying a girl but omitting to make her a wife, using her blood in magical ceremonies, killing her thereby, the grand climax being the burning of the laboratory and all its horrors. That burning of the laboratory, too, may remind us of Wells' *Island of Dr Moreau* and his homunculi, and the incident of the broken arm. Every little helps!

***The Island of Dr Moreau*, by H. G. Wells, p. 261:**

"Then I saw that the dawn was upon us. The sky had grown brighter, the setting moon was growing pale and opaque in the luminous blue of the day. The sky to the eastward was rimed with red.

"Then I heard a thud and a hissing behind me, and, looking round sprang to my feet with a cry of horror. Against the warm dawn great tumultuous masses of black smoke were boiling up out of the enclosure, and through their stormy darkness shot flickering threads of blood-red flames. Then the thatched roof caught. I saw the curving charge of the flames across the sloping straw. A spurt of fire jetted from the window of my room. . . . I bent down to his face, put my hand through the rent in his blouse. He was dead; and even as he died a line of white heat, the limb of the sun, rose eastward beyond the projection of the bay, splashing its radiance across the sky, and turning the dark sea into a weltering tumult of dazzling light."

***The Magician*, p. 308:**

"It was dark still, but they knew the dawn was at hand, and Susie rejoiced in the approaching day. In the east the azure of the night began to thin away into pale amethyst, and the trees seemed gradually to stand out from the darkness in a ghostly beauty . . . . 'Let us wait here and see the sun rise,' said Susie.

"'As you will.' . . . And as he spoke it seemed that the roof fell in, for suddenly vast flames sprang up, rising high into the still night air; and they saw that the house they had just left was blazing furiously. It was a magnificent sight from the distant hill on which they stood to watch the fire as it soared and sunk, as it shot scarlet tongues along like strange Titanic monsters, as it raged from room to room. Skene was burning. It was beyond the reach of human help. In a little while, there would be no trace of all those crimes and all those horrors. Now it was one mass of flame. It looked like some primeval furnace, where the gods might work unheard-of miracles.

"'Arthur, what have you done?' asked Susie, in a tone that was hardly audible.

"He did not answer directly. He put his arm about her shoulder again, so that she was obliged to turn round.

"'Look, the sun is rising.'

"In the east a long ray of light climbed up the sky, and the sun, yellow and round, appeared upon the face of the earth."

The whole description of the homunculi suggest Dr Moreau's "Beast Folk" in method and treatment; but it is difficult to follow out in detail. The likeness is rather one of atmosphere than anything else.

Of course, the more ingredients you are able to find for your haggis the harder it is for anyone to identify the sheep's head basis of it! After studying the make-up of *The Magician*, we are constrained to wonder whether any of Mr Maugham's numerous plays have been composed in the same way.