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the maugham obsession

by . . . August Derleth

All inventors seek success. Some few achieve it. And now and then a Quintus Maugham is a bit too successful for his own health.

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN A moot point with me," said Harrigan one evening over a glass of sherry at the Cliffdwellers' Club, "whether or not there is such a thing as a man's being too successful. I always think of Quintus Maugham."

"You have the advantage of me," I said.

"By rights he should have been famous," Harrigan went on, warming to his subject, "but things don't always work out that way. He was a plodding inventor obsessed by an idea. What inventor isn't, given a modicum of success? Perhaps he was a product of his time for Maugham's obsession was robots."

"The principle's sound enough."

"Oh, yes. It could be practical, to. After all, machines have been operated by mechanical men or mechanical brains for years. So Maugham's idea wasn't out of line. The operation didn't work out according to Hoyle, however. Maugham was one of those gaunt earnest men, a tall fellow with deep-set eyes and an habitually grim mouth. He took himself very seriously and you were always just a little embarrassed when he tried

What is a Derleth? The question pops up frequently in fantasy circles. The general consensus seems to be that a Derleth is a sort of human windmill that plucks finished manuscripts from the breeze while waving its arms in circles, printing and publishing same with its own machinery. In truth the Derleth output is prodigious, as it has been for many a year . . . enough to keep rolling the presses of his own publishing firm (Arkham) as well as to keep other publishers well supplied. Here is top-flight Derleth.

to explain something to you—you felt that he so badly wanted your understanding."

He paused and sipped his sherry, looking reflectively out over the silvery lake.

"Where'd you meet him?" I asked. "On assignment?"

"Oh, he'd invented a little gadget connected with the recoil mechanism for the military so I was sent over to his place for an interview—the usual thing. He lived in a nice old house in Oak Park, left him by his mother and he lived pretty well, if a little on the frugal side. He was considerate and courteous, which is a damned sight more than you can say for most of the people a reporter gets to see.

"He gave me everything I wanted to know and a good deal more besides. He wound up with a half apologetic question about his newest invention—would I like to see it? I said I would so he took me down into one of the most elaborate private laboratories I've ever seen and introduced me to Herman."

"Ah, another character," I said, pouring more sherry into his glass.

"Herman was his robot. A neat well-oiled scrupulously-clean mechanical man in the process of being born. He was run by electrical impulses and was a good deal more self-sufficient than the traditional pushbutton robot of an earlier day. Even though he wasn't quite 'born' yet Herman did a turn or two for us, up and down the laboratory,

with a precision that was almost military.

"Unlike most robots of that day Herman had a physiognomy carefully moulded after a human face. He looked damnably real. He could blink his glass eyes, he could shake hands, he could nod and, because of the mobility of his plastic rubber face, he could even smile after a fashion, though I always thought his smile a little grim.

"The next step is to make him talk," Maugham said. "I believe it can be done."

"Can he hear?" I asked.

"That will come," he said.

"He seemed so sure of himself that I was almost inclined to believe him until of course I remembered all the others who had been so sure of themselves. That seems to be a characteristic of my queer people—each one has an unlimited belief in his own particular delusion.

"Well, Maugham put Herman through his paces and it was certainly novel to watch. He asked me not to write anything about Herman for publication and I didn't. I figured I owed him that courtesy. He had great plans for Herman, he explained—he meant Herman to be his general factotum and planned to perfect the robot as the housewife's dream. If I'd had to guess I'd have said he might accomplish as much.

"Well, I examined Herman inside and out. It was uncanny, the resemblance he bore to a human being. It was Maugham's conceit to dupli-

cate as nearly as possible the organs and characteristics of the human body. That still left room for the complicated machinery necessary. The skeleton was of steel with a plastic overlay carefully moulded into the shape of a man approximately six feet high and weighing about two hundred pounds.

"Over the entire structure he had stretched a kind of plastic-rubber made to resemble human skin in color and texture. There were doors in both front and back of course—to allow Maugham to service his robot, inspect the machinery, charge and replace the batteries, oil the parts and so forth."

"He could almost have patented that as a bachelor's companion," I suggested.

Harrigan took another draught of sherry and smiled reminiscently. "His enthusiasm was infectious until I got out into the open air and started thinking about Herman's practicability. Then of course Herman slid back to his proper plane and I saw Maugham in a more balanced perspective. He struck me then as another little man with ideas just a trifle too big for them.

"In the ordinary course of events I wouldn't have seen Maugham again but about a month later he came up with another of those military valuable gadgets and I went out to get a propaganda story for Army Intelligence. I thought at the time that Maugham looked a little harassed but he was as cooperative as before when he knew

what I wanted and he came through with just the right stuff for Army Intelligence.

"After we had finished I naturally asked, 'And how's Herman?'"

"He brightened a little and said that Herman was coming along fine. Forthwith he left the room and came back with his robot. He had put clothes on him and for a minute, candidly, I didn't know it was Herman.

"Maugham came up behind him and Herman said, 'Good day, Master.'

"Of course, his voice had a flat sort of scratchy sound, like a phonograph, and there was no inflection of any kind but it was undeniably speech.

"'Can he hear?' I asked.

"Maugham nodded. 'He responds to an auditory mechanism very similar in principle to an electric eye. But he's far from perfect, Mr. Harrigan, very far.'

"'I'd say he was pretty good myself,' I said.

"But Maugham only shook his head.

"'What's the trouble?' I asked.

"'He's too mechanical,' said Maugham.

"'You couldn't expect him to be human.'

"'No, but a little more human than he is,' Maugham answered.

"I had my doubts but I kept them to myself. After all I'm just a reporter. I've seen a lot of things I never dreamed were possible but none of them has warped my ob-

jectivity. Maybe he could make Herman more human but I doubted that he could.

"Herman looked as human as a typical product of the Prussian military machine. If he'd come in saluting and saying 'Heil, Hitler!' you could almost have believed in his humanity—if you'd call it that, all things considered. So I held my tongue and watched Herman.

"That robot could move around and get things for Maugham—an ashtray, his bedroom slippers, a tray with a decanter and glasses on it. He could dust things but he was pretty awkward at that and now and then knocked something over. Maugham had removed all the breakables, I noticed, so no harm was done. I saw Maugham watching Herman with undeniable triumph and self-satisfaction but nevertheless there was an undercurrent of doubt in his eyes.

"He never said a thing, however, to follow through. It was just in the way I felt, as if this triumph and self-satisfaction were somehow watered by some question he did not care to voice. I knew intuitively too that whatever it was could not readily be drawn from him. But I felt it like something tangible and, curiously—which is a testimony to his inventive skill—I felt it to be something personal between him and his robot.

"Just what was going on in his mind it was impossible for me to find out, of course."

Maugham congratulated himself on his ability to maintain his composure in the face of the reporter's interest. He was definitely uneasy about Herman and it was only now, after Harrigan had gone, that he relaxed a little. For one thing Herman's responses were not quite what they should be—not so much on the negative side as on the positive. After Harrigan had gone he eyed Herman for some time in profound perturbation. If Maugham had to put his finger on the trouble he would be compelled to say that Herman was becoming somewhat too human for his own good.

His own attitude toward Herman was considerably more that of one man to another than of inventor to invention. It was not, thought Maugham, a good thing—it meant that Herman was in the process of becoming no longer just an invention but an obsession. Herman, meanwhile, stood immobile, waiting upon his command.

"Herman, go to the laboratory," said Maugham, enunciating each syllable with the clarity necessary to the precision machinery which was Herman's ear.

Was there hesitation in Herman's obedience? Maugham could not be sure and this very uncertainty troubled him all the more. But once moving Herman went forward with his customary smoothness, marching straight down to the laboratory and waiting there for Maugham, in whose breast pride was once more swelling at this concrete evidence

of his inventive ingenuity. He recognized that Herman was indeed almost as perfect a machine as it was possible for man to conceive and bring into being.

He had some question now as to whether he could improve on Herman or not. Or whether indeed it would be wise. But his ambition overcome his qualms and, marshalling Herman, he went to work.

"The next time I ran into Maugham, I saw a badly jangled man," said Harrigan. "For one thing he looked as harassed as any man who was ever nagged by his ball-and-chain. For another he found it seemingly impossible to talk freely.

"You're not looking so well,' I said to him.

"No,' he agreed. 'I've been working.'

"On Herman?"

"I've worked on him enough,' he said ominously.

"I confess I wasn't particularly observant that morning. I knew something was bothering him but I knew too, as if by instinct, that he wasn't saying anything about it. I couldn't resist having a little fun with him.

"Look,' I said, 'if you scientists get around to inventing life would it be necessary to rewrite the Bible?'

"He blinked at me, a little startled. 'Why, no,' he said, 'we're not in conflict with the Bible. It's organized religion that's in conflict with us.'

"And the creation of life has nothing to do with it? I always thought that all conflicts and arguments came back to that basic point. Who was responsible—a Supreme Being or a process of evolution from dead matter?'

"Listen,' he said, 'why are you asking me all this?'

"I noticed then how extremely nervous he was. He had taken hold of my arm and I could feel his hand trembling.

"I'd like to know,' I answered, 'but it's not that important. Forget it. I'm a little dubious about the scientists anyway. Whether you worship Science or God sometimes gets to seem like six of one and a half-dozen of the other. Or do you think it's possible to create life, Maugham?'

"I wonder,' he said. And nothing else.

"All this time we had been walking along toward his place. I noticed that his steps began to lag a trifle and the closer we got to his home the slower he walked. I gathered finally that for some reason he was reluctant about my coming but was much too courteous to say so.

"As long as we're so close to your place,' I said at last, 'I might as well stop in and take another look at Herman.'

"He stopped short at that and showed his distress pretty plainly. A newspaperman has to be impervious to most emotion and I guess I was. I didn't bat an eyelash and let on I never saw a thing.

"I don't know in what shape the house is in," he said then. "I've forgotten just what I set Herman to doing."

"Well, we'll see," I said.

"We went in. Maugham led the way, jittery as a confirmed tosspot too long gone without a drink."

"Which reminds me," I put in. "Will you have another, Harrigan?"

"Sure. But find something stronger," he said. "Well, we went in, as I said. I don't know what I had expected to see but there was nothing unusual about the place. It was spic and span. You'd think he'd had a housemaid working on it all day. And as for Herman—he was sitting in the living room in an easy chair that was clearly enough Maugham's own favorite.

"Maugham stared at his creation, as if he hadn't expected to see him there. 'Herman,' he said, 'go to the laboratory.'

"The robot got up without a sound—I had expected to hear creaks, the meshing of gears or something—and walked out of the room. Maugham sat down. I could see that he was sweating but he seemed relieved about something.

"He looks perfected," I said.

"He's a very serviceable robot," Maugham agreed. "He certainly did himself proud on this room."

"You mean he cleaned it?" I asked.

"Every foot of it," he answered. "I gave him his orders before I left the house."

"But I thought you didn't know

what you'd find, what you'd set him to doing?"

"Oh, I knew, all right. What I didn't know was what Herman might get to do. He's not quite perfect yet, you see, Mr. Harrigan."

"I saw, all right. I saw that Herman had become his inventor's obsession in a very real sense. I felt sorry for him but I had known enough inventors to understand what had happened. They work so much alone they're apt to over-emphasize the importance of their work. The same thing holds true for authors and composers, I suppose. They lose perspective—it's little more than that.

"And my friend Maugham seemed to have lost his."

Maugham was relieved at Harrigan's going. He sat for a few moments after the door had closed behind the reporter. But in a moment his relief gave way before an attitude of listening. Was there movement? Did he hear shuffling footsteps? Or was it again his imagination?

He walked across to the door through which Herman had disappeared. There he stood for a moment more, listening. He was undeniably nervous. He wondered whether Harrigan had seen or not. In final analysis perhaps it made no difference. He opened the door.

Herman stood there, immobile. For a ludicrous moment Maugham thought that his robot had been listening at the door even as he

himself had been. But of course that was impossible. If only he could remember what he had done to Herman the last time he had worked on the complicated and delicate mechanism of the robot! He was convinced that something had happened, something which had given Herman considerably more animation than had been either planned or foreseen.

There was of course one solution, though he hesitated to resort to it since it involved undoing everything he had done. He could take Herman apart again and find out just how he functioned so well. He would have been ashamed to confess to Harrigan or anyone else that he was candidly perplexed at Herman's abilities.

He stepped across the threshold, brushing past the motionless robot, and turned at the door to the laboratory stairs. "Come, Herman," he said.

The robot did not move.

"Herman, go to the laboratory," said Maugham in a firm clear voice.

Still no move.

He remembered abruptly that he had given Herman this order before when Harrigan was still in the house. Apparently then Herman had not obeyed the order at that time. Something was wrong with the auditory mechanism.

He came back to the robot's side and tried once more. Herman's mechanical arms came up, his fingers opened and closed on Maugham's arm. He held him immobile.

"Stop!" commanded Maugham angrily.

Herman held on.

"Put me down," said Maugham.

Herman released him. His arms once again fell laxly to his sides. He stood there, unblinking, apparently waiting upon his next command.

"Go to the laboratory," said Maugham again.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the robot's head turned and shook his refusal.

Maugham stared, aghast. He was at a loss for word or deed.

"I never saw Maugham around again after that," continued Harrigan. "He virtually went into seclusion and no one saw him at his old haunts. Not that he'd been in the habit of moving around a good deal—he hadn't. But now, abruptly, he appeared to give up all his customary walks and visits and to retire into his house.

"You get used to situations like that involving inventive or creative people of course. You think nothing of it. I didn't, I know, though I was possessed of some curiosity about Herman. But out in his neighborhood, where people knew nothing about Herman, certain rumors began to circulate—that Maugham had hired an assistant, and that the assistant now did all Maugham's errands for him. And so on . . .

"I happened on a description of his assistant one afternoon and it

sounded pretty much like Herman. I was amused at the way in which people can get things balled up. They do, you know. Take any court, any trial—the so-called ‘circumstantial evidence,’ correctly interpreted, is the most effectively damning. Eyewitness accounts vary as much as the weather and are as unreliable actually.

“So that too passed over me.

“I think it was about two months after I had last seen Maugham that I learned of his plans to move west. It was entirely an accident. I happened to be in the circulation department one morning when the circulation manager of the paper got a letter from Maugham asking him to change his address.

“‘You know that fellow Maugham, don’t you, Harrigan?’ asked Howells.

“‘Sure,’ I said. ‘What’s he been up to now?’

“‘Don’t know. He’s moving away.’

“He gave me the change of address as of the first of the coming month. I looked at his crisp letter and saw that Maugham was planning to pull up stakes for the west. It had the look of pretty isolated country in Nevada. It was only a week until the first and I thought that if I had time I’d look in on Maugham before he went.

“So next morning, being in the neighborhood, I went out of my way a little to call on him. I rang his bell several times before I got an

answer. Then it was only the tentative opening of the door on a chain. Maugham’s head appeared in the opening.

“‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘How’s the inventing business?’

“‘You’ll have to ask Mr. Maugham,’ he said.

“‘That’s just what I’m doing,’ I said.

“‘Oh, yes. Well, I’m busy now,’ he answered.

“I could see that he was. He was wearing some sort of cap as if to keep his hair dust-free—he was carrying a broom—and he had an apron tied round his middle. Plainly he was getting ready to take his leave. Remembering his agitation at our last meeting I looked for more of the same. But instead there was only a kind of weary apathy. If he was nervous at sight of me he didn’t show it. I could see that he didn’t intend to let me in if he could help it and this time the chain across the door was an argument I couldn’t very well get around.

“‘How’s Herman?’ I asked.

“‘I’m fine,’ he said in a flat voice.

“‘Herman,’ I said, ‘your robot!’

“‘Oh, yes,’ he answered. ‘Herman’s fine. He can do just about everything now.’

“‘Well in that case it’s up to you to invent a mate for him,’ I said.

“He grinned in a sickly way and started to back into the house.

“‘Hold on,’ I cried. ‘What’s all this about your going to Nevada?’

"'We're leaving next week,' he said. 'Change of air—change of scene.'

"'Are you taking Herman?' I asked.

"'Certainly. It's for his benefit.'

"'Oh, I see. He's still not quite perfect?'

"He shook his head and echoed, 'Not quite perfect!' in a voice as flat as that of his robot.

"'Are you going to perfect him?' I asked.

"'Would you?' he asked.

"'Sure,' I said. 'I'd make him better and better.'

"'Beyond one point you couldn't go,' he said.

"'And what's that?'

"'You couldn't give him a soul—unless you could slip him your own,' he said.

"This time he did back well into the house. I stuck my foot into the doorway so that he couldn't close the door. At the same time I got a glimpse past him. His front door opened directly into his main room, his living room, and I could see that someone was standing there waiting for him—a tallish fellow with one arm folded across his chest and supporting his elbow, one hand cupping his chin. He seemed impatient but of course I couldn't see that clearly.

"If it hadn't been so absurdly impossible I'd have sworn the fellow was Herman. But of course it was undoubtedly Maugham's new as-

sistant. For once the local gadabouts had the story straight."

"And did he move?" I asked.

"Oh yes. He went on schedule—with his assistant. I don't know what became of Herman in the exodus. Presumably he moved with them because he turned up in Nevada with Maugham. But I saw no sign of him when I watched Maugham from a distance boarding the train. I suppose Herman could have been taken apart and shipped on ahead. Then he could have been reassembled and set to working again."

"But how do you know Herman went along to Nevada?" I asked, pouring Harrigan yet another drink.

"By one of those ridiculous mistakes the newspapers sometimes make. Maugham hadn't been out west two months before a flash flood tore through the village in which he'd set up housekeeping and inventing. Maugham was one of the victims. The paper nearest there carried a picture of Maugham and his robot, which by that time was public property out there.

"But by one of those odd accidents of the press the names under the pictures had been transposed—under Herman's picture appeared Maugham's name, and under Maugham's Herman's. And to carry the mistake to the epitome of the ludicrous I'm damned if Maugham didn't look exactly like a robot and Herman just like a man!"