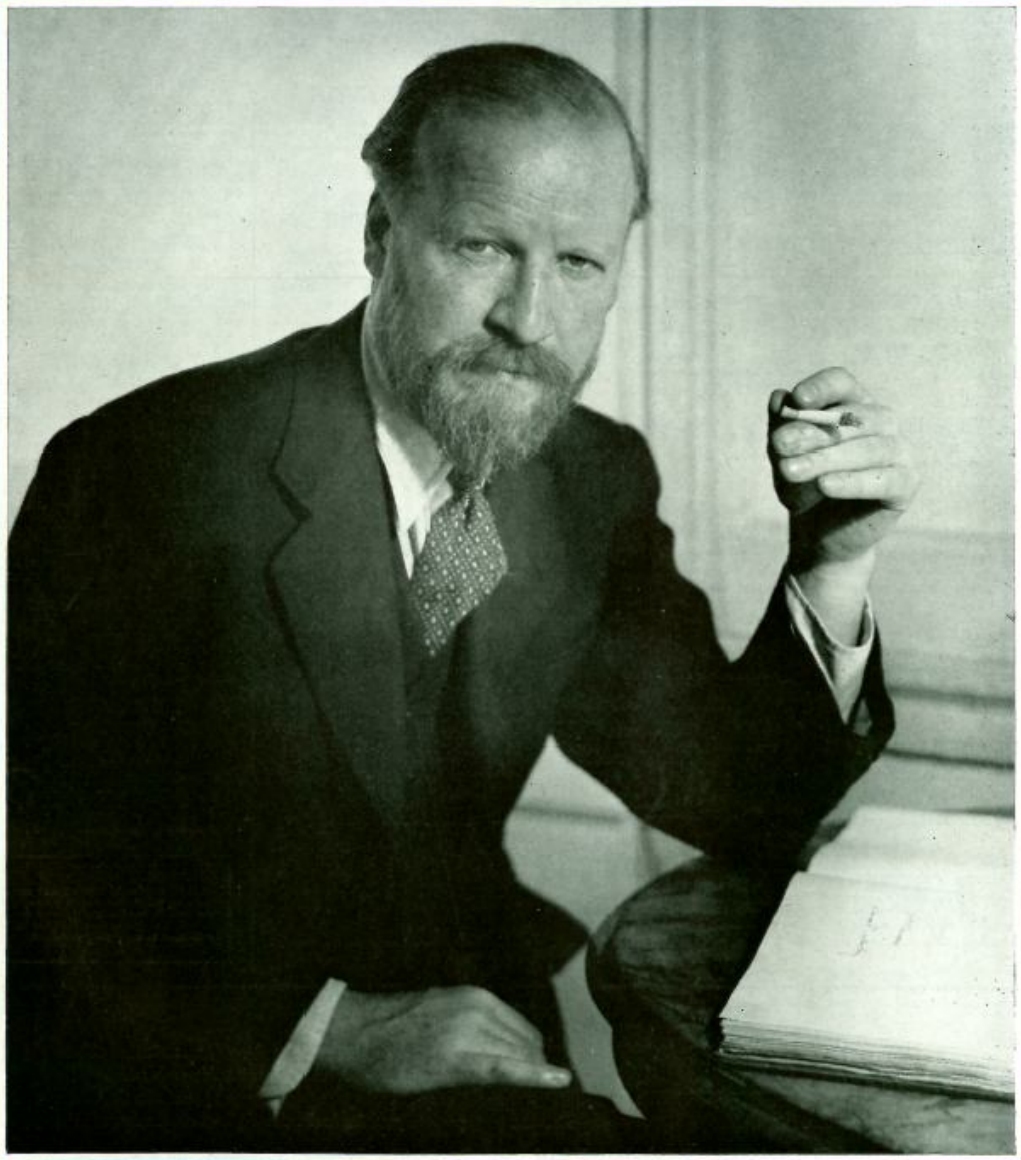


MY MOMENT OF SUCCESS by HOWARD SPRING—page 7

Books and Bookmen

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WILLIAM GOLDING

Author of *Lord of the Flies*, whose new novel, *Free Fall*, is out this month (see page 9)

The Novel is Suffocating Itself

says WINSTON GRAHAM

who blames intellectual obscurantism, the attitudes of the critics and over-emphasis on technical expertise. He discusses his own working methods and his new novel, **THE TUMBLER HOUSE**, to be published this month

"I'VE always had the wish to write," says Winston Graham, "but where that came from and how early it came I've no idea."

There was no strong literary tradition in his family: "My father and mother read quite good books but they didn't seem to go out of their way to urge me to read them. If I had I probably shouldn't have liked them. My early favourites were Buchan, Mason, Wodehouse, Stevenson (highest brow of the lot I think) and every conceivable type of ephemeral writer who's now gone and forgotten."

But he reacts strongly if you suggest he is a born story-teller: "There's no such thing as a born novelist any more than there's such a thing as a born doctor or a born engineer. People look at me and think, 'Ah, you lucky fellow; as a silk-worm spins silk, so a writer spins stories; it's so easy, he just goes to his study and writes it all down.' A man is born with certain talents and realising those talents is a very exacting job. In some ways it's more exacting for a novelist because he has to supply his own discipline all the time — that's the hideous thing."

His first novel, published in 1934, was a thriller, a genre in which he eventually achieved eminence with *The Little Walls*, chosen by the Crime Writers' Association as the best book of its breed in 1956.

But Graham is by no means exclusively a thriller writer. His books range from the historical to the contemporary, from Cornwall to Greece, from high adventures to domestic drama. The common elements are intense readability and well constructed, compelling plots. For he believes in contrast to the views of many current practitioners, that the novelist's first duty is to tell a story: "My feeling is that the novel began as a story and that it has now in a good many people's hands, lost that story-telling quality. I'm very much against the type of novel which is merely an intellectual exercise strung on a succession of incidents."

WINSTON GRAHAM IN PRINT: *The Tumbled House* will be published on October 8th by Hodder and Stoughton, at 16s. Others available: *The Little Walls*, 6s. (paperback 2s. 6d.); *Greek Fire*, 12s. 6d.; *Night Without Stars*, 6s.; *Fortune Is A Woman*, paperback, 2s. 6d., all published by Hodder and Stoughton. *The Forgotten Story*; *Take My Life*; *Cordelia*; *Warleggan*, 6s. 6d. each, published by Ward Lock.

While accepting this point of view entirely and without adopting the pseudo-psychological analysis beloved by the academic critics, one can still find a good deal more than a story in Graham's novels. Without interfering with the narrative-thrust of the plot, characters are examined in detail and he is never reluctant to use the novel as an expression of his own opinions: "All my books have some point of view to put over, although sometimes it may have been so disguised that nobody discovered it except myself. In *Fortune Is A Woman*, for example, I wanted to discuss the effect of the war upon, firstly, an unemployed man whom the war made and, secondly, a wealthy man whom the war broke — and their meeting together. Ostensibly, though, the story is about an insurance fraud."

His outlook is long-term and professional: "I don't like to go on repeating myself. I know that it's an advantage in some ways to keep on writing the same sort of book but I feel that one grows more by having a shot at something else." So, after writing

three thrillers, his fourth book, published just before the war was a straight novel—"It was very bad but it did help me to get out of a groove."

Then, during the war in the Coastguard Service there were long periods of just walking the Cornish beaches and cliffs. The first literary result of this experience was *The Forgotten Story*. "I had to sit looking at a wreck for so long that it had gradually got into my system. Then one day I met a man who had seen the wreck occur in 1900 and I thought of writing a fictitious story of the people who were on the ship. Before publishing I was afraid that it wasn't a very good novel but in fact it was the first one to be greeted with pleasure both by the critics and the public."

1945, the year of this first success, also saw the publication of an even bigger seller, *Ross Poldark*, the first of a series of four Cornish historical novels.

From then on, success snowballed. A film company bought *The Forgotten Story*; another company paid him fabulous sums to work on a script; *Cordelia*, a novel of nineteenth-century Manchester sold 550,000 copies in America after becoming a Literary Guild Book Club choice; a new thriller *Night Without Stars* was filmed and sold well; *Fortune Is A Woman* was a Dollar Book Club choice in America and was recently screened with Jack Hawkins in the lead; *The Little Walls* won the Crime Writers' Association award; *The Sleeping Partner* was a Readers' Digest Book Club choice in America; and *Greek Fire* gained a great deal of critical acclaim.

His novels normally have a long gestatory period before they emerge in a book: "It's much better to leave it for years — and then occasionally I'll think about it, perhaps add a character based on someone I've met who will create some sort of interaction with the previous one, perhaps add a new facet to the story — and so on. But there is a point for me beyond which characters won't come alive until I start writing about them. Then I sometimes have a horrible feeling of knowing that I'm going to work for five or six weeks on it — thirty or forty thousand words — and that none of it is going to be any use. But at the end of that time, I shall have five or six characters who are really *alive* and they will at least have started something.

"I might get up to about three quarters of the way through a book and then I would know that I'd gone wrong somewhere, that it wasn't coming out right. That seems to me the point to start again. With *The Tumbled House*, for instance, I must have written the first half of it about five times."

His novels have been more successful in America than in Britain. "I suspect," he says, "that the Americans like a *story*. I've heard them say, 'what's the good of the average English novel, it's not got a substantial basis of narrative in it.' I think that in England the reading public is a more concentrated one and more easily reached and influenced by the critics, who still by and large recommend the type of novel that I don't enjoy either reading or writing. I have no personal quarrel with the critics; on the whole I have been treated well by them; but I am anxious about the future of the novel which as an Art Form may be flourishing but which as a means of mass communication is steadily and efficiently suffocating itself in intellectual obscurantism and technical expertise. Few of the great novelists of the past had the slightest difficulty in recognising that first and foremost they must entertain, and secondly, that they must make the reader want to know what happened next."

Winston Graham is tall and distinguished-looking in a typically English way that could easily be taken for a doctor or a solicitor. One gains an impression of a likeable, tolerant person — taking his novel-writing seriously but otherwise with wide general interests (the lounge walls are decorated with traditional paintings, portraits of glamorous film-stars who have appeared in films of his books, and one of Moiseiwitsch, an old friend who has stayed in his beautiful home at Perranporth). He seems to gain as much pleasure from the jiving of his teenage son and daughter as from the classics.

He writes by hand mornings and evenings in his study, a Siamese cat perched on the desk ("He hates the typewriter"). After lunch he rests for an hour, then takes some recreation — usually golf. For two or three months a year he and his wife travel abroad. "My wife says I'm terribly unobservant but the impressions seem to get in somehow through the pores."

The Tumbled House is by far his best work to date — one likely to please both the critics and a wide general public.

The central character is Roger, an urbane, suave, thrice-divorced man-about-town and journalist. There are two themes. Firstly, Roger's a-moral, muck-raking, self-righteous

attitude to his newspaper work and, secondly, the effect of his attitude to life on his son, Michael.

"I felt," said Graham, "that there were things I wanted to say about Roger that seemed to me the most important things in the book. I don't believe, contrary to some people, that sophistication is all. I think there's got to be a basis — some sort of ethical and moral behaviour. And on the whole I find that among the people that I know and like in London, even the most sophisticated, there is a point beyond which they will not go. There's the thing that's done and the thing that's not done, not in any snob sense but in regard to ethical behaviour. But there are the few others who don't believe in that and I felt that I wanted to put over something of the effect that a man like Roger might have upon a fairly close circle of people."

Roger, on flimsy evidence obtained by theft, sets out to destroy the reputation of a recently dead barrister and philosopher, the father of one of his friends. The resulting court action raises points of public interest concerning the law of libel and concerning the relations of press and public as well as providing the basis for a study of the fictional characters involved. It is this which makes the book thought-provoking and memorable, although towards the end, it is the story of the son, Michael, his love affair and dabbings in crime, which take command of the book in an exciting and tragic climax.

Such a summary cannot do justice to a plot which is long and involved, though concisely written and clearly unravelled. There are readers who demand a "good long read" with a strong plot; others who demand an analysis of characters' thoughts and motives; some who want the novel to have a "message", some who demand blood and action. *The Tumbled House* has something of all these elements, yet its highly skilled construction adds up to a well-rounded, realistic picture of an important slice of contemporary life.

W. G. S.