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## Sri Ramanasramam Today and Tomorrow

*Sri Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai, South India has been a source of spiritual inspiration and the spiritual home to countless seekers worldwide ever since Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi settled there in 1922 and the Ashram grew up around him.*

*In the Will approved by the Maharshi, it was stated that the management of Sri Ramanasramam would continue under the guidance of the descendents of Bhagavan's brother, Niranjanananda Swami. Thus, the only son of Sri Niranjanananda Swami, Sri T. N. Venkataraman, succeeded his father. Then, in 1994, Sri T. N. Venkataraman's eldest son, Sri V. S. Ramanan, succeeded his father. Next in line is Sri Venkat Ramanan who presently lives in the USA and who serves as a medical doctor in Maryland.*

*At the 65th Maha Nirvana program at Arunachala Ashrama in Queens, New York City on April 18th, **Dr. Venkat Ramanan** kindly accepted our invitation to speak to us about the vision and guiding principles of Sri Ramanasramam, its present activities and those planned for the future. His talk so convincingly assured us all that the traditions established in Sri Ramanasramam by Bhagavan Ramana himself will continue to be honored and carried forth into the future that we decided to print it for all to read.*

### **Om Namo Bhagavate Sri Ramanaya**

**D**EAR fellow devotees and children of our Sadguru Ramana, I am happy to spend this auspicious occasion with some of the best devotees of Bhagavan Ramana and a model satsang group. The advent of Bhagavan at Arunachala opened the path for our spiritual journey in Jnana Marga and eventual Jeevan Mukthi.

Today I stand before you representing the current president Sri V. Sundara Ramanan, who I am sure that many of you may not know. He is a self-effacing person who works in the background without becoming a source of distraction for the visiting devotees. Thus, he keeps alive the tradition set by the first Sarvadhikari, Niranjananda Swami, who rarely came into the presence of Sri Bhagavan but who worked quietly taking care of the day-to-day activities of the Ashram. That was his sadhana: to be doing some routine mundane work while the highest spiritual drama was happening in the next

room. The focus then and today in Sri Ramanasramam has always been only on Bhagavan and HIS devotees.

All of you who have been reading the Ashram's monthly newsletter *Saranagathi* would be following a good series of articles on the life of the previous president, Sri T. N. Venkataraman, later known as Swami Ramanananda. His struggles to preserve the character of our beloved Ashram are legendary. In the immediate years after the Maha Nirvana of Sri Bhagavan, he had to face 40 court cases to prevent the Ashram from being taken over by government departments. He was alive to see the final judgment of the Madras High Court in favor of the Ashram administration in 2006. The Ashram is now run by a Board of Trustees—the hereditary president with his two appointed trustees along with the two government trustees.

I am sure that all of you who have visited Sri Ramanasramam know that it is a very unique place.

Bhagavan chose the then least desirable spot at the foot of Arunachala—a cremation ghat where his mother was buried. However, by the Jnani's presence it is now the holiest and most desirable place in the world for an earnest seeker to attain spiritual fulfillment. It is the devotees' spiritual home where they are welcome at all times. In the Ashram a devotee is given 100 percent freedom to pursue his or her spiritual activities. No impositions, such as seva, fixed meditation times or monetary transactions are imposed. Every visitor is treated the same, including some four-legged ones and some with wings.

I am glad to report to you that your spiritual home continues to thrive and, if I may use a totally non-Advaitic term, "grow in strength".

The following are some of the few developments of recent years. All these activities are only a continuation and expansion of the projects from Sri Bhagavan's time. Everything happens only by HIS Grace and we are mere observers of what we view as daily miracles.

1. **Veda Pathashala and Pooja:** The Veda Pathashala continues to attract new students due to the excellent teaching by our Ganapadhigal Sri Sendil. The tuition-free Ashram Veda Patashala is considered to be one of the country's best centers of learning. Qualified students are attracted here from many states in India. Steps have been taken to make it one of the chief examination centers toward final degrees. A new extension was recently added to accommodate more students. The students are also taught the English language. On completion of their course they are awarded a lump sum of money. One has to mention the legacy of Major Chadwick who supported this cause during tough financial times.

Two new Archakas, Sri Divaspathi and Sri Udhaya, the best performing graduates from our own Veda Pathashala, have been appointed to perform daily Poojas to the Shrines of Bhagavan and Mathrubhuteswara. Their devotion and sense of punctuality continues to impress devotees.

2. **Goshala:** The Ashram Goshala, started by our own Kamadhenu, Lakshmi the cow, continues to grow in strength. As per Bhagavan's instructions a wonderful Goshala with teakwood and granite was built in those days when the other buildings in the Ashram, including Mother's shrine, had thatched roofs. Bhagavan's exact words of instruction to Annamalai Swami were: "If you build this cowshed for Lakshmi we will get the necessary punya (merit) to build a bookstore, a dining room and a

Shrine for Mother. All this will happen in due course. This area will eventually become a town."

Under the personal stewardship of my uncle Mani, more varieties of native Indian cows are being added to preserve the genetic purity of the herd. The surplus organic milk is donated to local schools and to an orphanage.

Gosamrakshana has also been started. This provides a place for the old cows to spend their last days in peace. In the future, the Ashram will have its own old cows retreat for the devotees to see.

3. **Ashram Kitchen:** Ashram prasadam is part of the spiritual experience in Sri Ramansramam. We have added new cooks and helpers. The vegetables and fruits are supplied from a reputable retailer, ensuring that even good, non-seasonal vegetables are available. Strict hygienic principles of food handling are enforced. More mechanized techniques, including automatic vegetable cutting machines, steam cookers, chapatti machines, etc. have been introduced. Industrial designed utensil dish washers will be introduced soon. All this has been slowly introduced to insure the continuation of the homely character of the kitchen and preservation of employment for the old workers. The same quality of food and hygiene is also maintained for daily Narayana Seva.

4. **Internet Web Page / Publications:** Our Bhagavan used scientific terms which were modern at his time to explain complex Advaitic concepts. To name a few: the prism, splitting the light into rainbow colors; electricity and fan and the cinema picture and the screen. That has been an inspiration for our Ashram website, [Sriramanamaharshi.org](http://Sriramanamaharshi.org), and the use of modern electronic methods in the propagation of Bhagavan's teachings. This is presently managed under the leadership of Sri Vaidyanathan, who returned to India from USA after living here for thirty-eight years, and the help of local talents. Along with English, the website is available in eight other languages, with more languages being added on a regular basis. Along with basic information about the Ashram and Bhagavan's teachings, it is also possible to reserve accommodation in the Ashram online. One can browse passages from books, purchase books, photographs, audio and video CDs and DVDs online. The Ashram publications continue to be priced reasonably to ensure affordability.

Various Ashram functions including Aradhana and Jayanthi Pooja are broadcast live through our website. The limiting factor is the low band width. I look forward

to a day when there will be live transmission of the daily pooja and evening Parayana.

To reduce piracy and to promote e-books we have over 60 titles available on Kindle and iBooks. Several new titles will be made available soon.

Our present goal is to have at least ten titles in every important world and Indian languages available online. The first book in Mandarin came out three months ago.

**5. *Media:*** *The Mountain Path*, started by Arthur Osborne, continues to maintain the same high standard of its founder. The lofty spiritual quality of the quarterly magazine has been strengthened by the subsequent editors, including Vishwanatha Swamigal, Lucia Osborne, Professor K. Swaminathan and V. Ganesan. Each editor brought a unique flavor to the magazine. The editorials written by the current editor, Chris Quilkey, are inspiring. It is now possible to read the older issues online.

*Saranagathi* is our Ashram's monthly e-newsletter which connects the devotees with the current events of the Ashram. It also features some serious spiritual articles. The present editor, Michael Highburger is a transplant from USA. He maintains a high literary quality and produces dazzling photographs from the Ashram.

In 1971, Professor K. Swaminathan said these words on the release of Bhagavan's commemorative stamp:

"Sri Ramana Maharshi, resplendent like the mid-day sun, belongs to all mankind and none of us can claim a preferential share in the plentitude of HIS grace. The release of the commemorative stamp will turn a million eyes towards the Jnana-bhanu (Sun of Knowledge) of the modern age. Those bright, calm, piercing eyes, tender like a mother's, even in a photograph, comfort, sustain and purify the hearts of all beholders."

These words are the inspiration for our Facebook page, with the slightly more ambitious aim of turning several more millions of eyes towards Bhagavan! The Ashram's Official Facebook page has frequent posts with dazzling photographs, propagating Sri Bhagavan's message to remote corners of the world, and especially to the youth of the world. It is heartening to see people from places like Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia showing interest in Bhagavan's teachings. A very high standard for the posted media is maintained by an editorial board.

**6. *Dispensary:*** There are two full-time physicians running an active outpatient department, six days a week. Over a hundred patients a day are treated with free medicines, minor wound repairs, etc. Ophthalmology camps are held monthly and patients undergo free cataract surgeries.

**7. *Granthalaya / Auditorium:*** The Ashram's library was started with a small cupboard in the Old Hall. Bhagavan was the first librarian, personally handing out books to devotees to read in response to some of their questions. Later on, some of the distinguished librarians have included Devaraja Mudaliar and Arthur Osborne. Since 1980, the Library building was inside the Morvi Compound. To ensure a more efficient use of this resource, and to avoid the spine-chilling experience of crossing the Chengam Road, a new Granthalaya building was built on the northern edge of the Ashram at the base of the Hill. Over 20,000 books are available for lending.

An auditorium was built on the ground floor of the Library, with a larger-than-life image of Lord Dakshinamurthy presiding over all the functions. Spiritual discourses, cultural activities, including musical concerts and classical dance programs, are regularly conducted there.

**8. *Guest Rooms:*** Over the years, new guest rooms have gradually been constructed. The old Morvi guest houses have been redesigned and rebuilt with comfortable, modern rooms. In the future, we plan to construct a good number of women's guest rooms with twenty-four hour security. For these and all the present new rooms built we are using up-to-date energy conservation techniques.

**9. *Green Initiatives:*** How can Bhagavan's abode be anything but green! HE used to recycle everything. For example, he insisted that even vegetable stalks should be cooked and eaten. He personally stitched notebooks out of scrap paper and used his pencils down to the last millimeter. One remembers him picking up some fallen grains outside the kitchen saying, "We all have to answer to Arunachala."

Following his example, we have put solar panels on the roofs of the Shrines which supply 100 percent of the power for the shrines. Waste water is recycled and used to water the gardens. From cow manure bio-gas is produced for cooking.

These are only a few of the environmental preservation steps we are at present taking in the Ashram.

Also, at Skandashram and Virupaksha Cave we have planted many new plants and trees. College students volunteer their services to maintain the vegetation on the Hill. One can almost walk all the way from the Ashram up to Skandashram under the shade of the trees planted and maintained by the Ashram.

Tiruvannamalai, especially Ramana Nagar, is our Vrindhavan. We have to preserve its history at all costs.

We do not desire that commercial development should be allowed to destroy the unique atmosphere around the Ashram. Efforts are being made by the Ashram to preserve the greenery around the Ashram.

I would like to end this talk with the following advice given by Niranjanananda Swami on his deathbed to my grandfather. It has become the guiding principle and mission statement for the administration:

**“I am departing with a clear conscience and clean hands. I have not utilised even a pie of the Asramam funds for my own benefit. Everything here belongs to**

**Bhagavan, and should be guarded with care and vigilance as such. Devote yourselves heart and soul to the service of the Lord and in return He will shower His grace on you. Be sincere and truthful to the core of your heart. Uphold our revered ancient traditions in the working of this Asramam, as I have upheld them all my life.”**

I welcome any new ideas in person today or by emails. Thanks for your attention.

*Namo Ramana*

Venkat Ramanan: [nityavenkat@gmail.com](mailto:nityavenkat@gmail.com)

## The Razor's Edge Larry Darrell Revealed

*We conclude with Louis Buss' two-part article that recounts the meeting of two British citizens in Sri Ramanasramam – Major A. W. Chadwick, the spiritual aspirant, and Somerset Maugham, the world-famous novelist – and the best-selling book that this encounter produced.*

IT is natural to assume that Somerset Maugham undertook the long journey from Madras to Tiruvannamalai to see Ramana Maharshi, the greatest guru of the age. After all, why else would a famous writer, then well into his 60s, undertake an arduous journey which he was to describe as a ‘dull, hot drive along a dusty, bumpy road’? But the visit took place towards the end of Maugham’s stay in India, by which time he had come to the conclusion that all her holy men said more or less the same thing. Having read much about Hinduism before he left, and been much baffled by it, he had hoped that encounters with living proponents might enlighten him. Yet, to Maugham’s undisguised frustration, the various yogis and sages he encountered just repeated exactly the same formulations he had already read in the books. It seems unlikely that Maugham would have trekked all the way down from Madras just to hear yet another holy man trot out the analogy of the snake and the rope, which he had by this time come to find particularly tiresome.

Maugham might have met plenty of holy men by now, but he had not yet encountered a Great War veteran who was living in one of their ashrams. This was a rare specimen indeed, and a far better incentive to go bumping down that hot and dusty road. After all, Maugham was here to research a new novel about Hinduism – he was on the lookout for characters and plots. Given that he was already interested in soldiers who had trouble fitting back

into society, he must have been desperate to meet a Major from the First World War who had hidden himself away in a Hindu ashram. With any luck, Chadwick would hand him the whole of his next novel on a plate.

Sure enough, it was not a devotee of the Maharshi who brought Maugham to the Ashram, but a friend of Chadwick’s: one Mrs. Austin, wife of the Collector of Madras. This strongly implies that Maugham travelled south not to meet the famous Maharshi, but to seek out Mrs Austin’s enigmatic Major C. Subsequent events bear this out. Once Maugham’s party had arrived at the Ashram, Chadwick tried to leave them to their lunch, but he was not allowed to escape. Instead, he was subjected to a lengthy grilling. ‘Somerset Maugham asked innumerable questions about my life and the Ashram, apologising for his inquisitiveness.’ Yet when the greatest guru of the age finally appeared on the scene, Maugham had not prepared one single question to ask of him! Further clear evidence that Maugham was here to find out about Chadwick rather than his guru comes from the account in his own *Notebook*, which ends with these words: ‘It was hard to make up one’s mind what sort of a man he (Major C) was. He was certainly very happy. I had thought to discover something of the truth about him from what he looked like and what he said, but I came away completely puzzled.’

‘I had thought...’ In other words, Maugham was already puzzling over the mysterious Major C before

he even travelled to the Ashram, and he arrived there determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. But if Chadwick was indeed the prey that the great literary predator had come seeking, then he proved an infuriatingly elusive quarry. Even on the ordinary, human level, Chadwick was difficult to pin down. In the *Notebook*, we find Maugham struggling to guess his age, which might have been anywhere from thirty-five to fifty. Chadwick was in fact forty-eight at the time, but looking good on it. Maugham's first impression was of 'a tall, broad-built man, with close-cropped brown hair.' His clean-shaven face was 'rather large, but with small features and a short blunt nose.' Chadwick 'went barefoot' and was wearing 'a sort of Chinese coat and Chinese trousers of white cotton.'

The difficulty of guessing Chadwick's age was only the first of many perplexing riddles. Maugham couldn't even make up his mind if Chadwick was intelligent or rather stupid, though he did form the clear impression that he was not widely read. He was serene, beaming, eager to please. All in all, there was a distinct touch of the boy-scout about him. Yet this modest, self-effacing man also showed a baffling tendency to brag about his special status in the Ashram:

'He told me several times that he enjoyed privileges that no other inmate of the Ashrama was accorded. His attitude was a little like that of a schoolboy inclined to boast because he is in the headmaster's favour.'

When Maugham tried to get Chadwick to talk about his past, he became reticent and elusive. All he would say was that there had been nobody particularly close to him in England. For what Chadwick really wanted to talk about, and the one subject on which it was difficult to make him shut up, was Ramana Maharshi – or The Yogi, as Maugham's *Notebook* calls him.

'He said that he had found peace and (over and over again) that the presence and the sight of the Yogi gave him a spiritual serenity which was beyond all price.'

One is left with the clear impression that Maugham and Chadwick had very different agendas and different ideas of what the interview should achieve. Maugham, perhaps already planning a novel about a veteran who hides himself away in an ashram, wanted to know about Chadwick's past and what had motivated him to take up his current strange mode of life. Chadwick himself clearly hoped that Maugham would be impressed by the greatness of Ramana Maharshi and go back to proclaim it in the West.

Although they might not have agreed on what it should achieve, both men were to agree on how the interview abruptly ended, with Somerset Maugham fainting clean away. Chadwick diagnosed a touch of the sun, and Maugham later revealed he had always been prone to such fainting fits. In any case, Maugham was duly carried into Chadwick's cottage, and it was there that the most celebrated novelist of the age finally came face to face with its greatest spiritual teacher.

'The Maharshi was of average height for an Indian, of a dark honey colour, with close-cropped white hair and a close-cropped white beard. He was not stout, but plump. Though he wore nothing but a white loin-cloth he looked neat, very clean and almost dapper. His mouth was somewhat large, with thickish lips, and his eyes were neither so big nor so lustrous as are the eyes of most Indians; the whites were bloodshot. He bore himself with simplicity and at the same time with dignity. He was cheerful, smiling, polite; he did not give me the impression of a scholar, but rather of a sweet-natured old peasant.'

For some considerable time – from half an hour to an hour depending on which of the accounts you trust – the celebrated novelist and the Yogi sat before each other. Somerset Maugham – the most famous writer on earth, the friend of statesmen and kings, and an acknowledged master of the witty remark – was dumbstruck before the humble old peasant. Eventually a few words did pass between them, with the Maharshi saying something to the effect that silence was also a form of conversation. Then he turned to Chadwick and said, in his child-like way, that he should be going, because nobody else in the Ashram knew where he was, and they would be looking for him.

So, having slightly bowed to Somerset Maugham, the sweet-natured old peasant left the room and continued with his afternoon stroll. Later on, Maugham went to peer at him through the window of the Old Hall, where he sat on his sofa with incense burning and disciples gathered at his feet. Having made a few mental notes of the scene, Maugham climbed back into the car with Mrs Austin and the others who had accompanied him. Soon the great novelist was bumping back up the long, dusty road to Madras, and Major C never set eyes on him again.

It would be fascinating to read the full text of the notes that Maugham made on his return to Madras that

evening. Had he and Chadwick discussed the war as they chatted on the veranda? Had Chadwick revealed his own military history, perhaps mentioning wounds and even shell-shock? Might he have explained why he had never married, revealing details of a broken engagement in his past? Had he explained to Maugham, as he did to other friends in India, that during his youth he had done 'every job under the sun'? Might he even have let slip that this had included working down the mines?

Since Maugham burnt his original notes, we shall never know. However, it is worth pointing out that what Major C told him that day was not necessarily all Maugham discovered. Mrs Austin was a friend of Chadwick's, after all, and she and Maugham had hours of driving to get through on either side of the encounter. Even if Chadwick didn't feel like mentioning shell-shock or a failed engagement to Maugham, he might already have confided such things in Mrs Austin, and she might easily have let something slip on that long, bumpy drive back to Madras.

All we can say for certain is that there are similarities between Larry and Chadwick that stretch the usual definition of a coincidence to breaking point. Both of them had been wounded during the war and been able to continue fighting, but had then needed to rest on being discharged from the army. The problem in both cases was shell-shock; we know from historical records that Chadwick was admitted to a clinic for shell-shocked officers for a short time in 1920. Remarkably, just like Larry, Chadwick speaks of losing his best friend during the conflict. Both men then spent the 1920s drifting from job to job but never settling down to anything. Even though there is no hard evidence of Chadwick working in the mines, as Larry did, we know that he had previously worked as a surveyor and that during the war he was a part of a pioneer regiment, responsible for digging entrenchments, laying light railways and the like – and thus would have been admirably suited to peacetime mining work. Both he and Larry had got engaged then broken it off. Both of them were driven to seek the meaning of life, and both were able to devote themselves to this because they were both lucky enough to have small private incomes. Both of them were eventually led to India, where they both lived for two years in very similar ashrams with very similar gurus. Indeed, the differences between the real Sri Ramana and the fictional Sri Ganesha are about as trivial as those between the real Alan Chadwick and

the fictional Larry Darrell. In both cases, Maugham has just lifted his characters straight from life and made a few superficial changes for the sake of form.

The big difference between Larry and Chadwick, of course, lies in the future course of their lives. Larry returned to the West after his two years in India, whilst we know that Chadwick ended his days in the Ashram. But while we may know this about him with the benefit of hindsight, Chadwick himself did not know it at the time when he met Somerset Maugham. At that point, he was still very much intending to return home one day. In fact, he specifically told Maugham that he only intended to stay in India until his beloved Yogi died or until he himself had achieved enlightenment. Once one of those conditions was met, there would be no need for him to stay in India any more, and he would return to Europe. So Maugham took Chadwick's real life up till the point where the two of them met, including those two years in the Ashram, then simply added on an imaginary future suggested by Chadwick himself. For Larry's story is merely a fulfilment of what Chadwick then dreamt of: becoming enlightened and going home.

Only once you have made the connection between Chadwick and Larry Darrell can you understand the otherwise baffling hostility shown towards Somerset Maugham in *A Sadhu's Reminiscences*. Although the book is a very short one, Chadwick finds time to launch an extended and bitter attack on Maugham, accusing him of lying, of putting his own words in the mouths of others, of failing to understand Bhagavan and advaita, and generally of confusing fact with fiction. Given that Maugham was an admirer of the Maharshi, this demolition job is very strange. Stranger still is Chadwick's failure even to mention *The Razor's Edge* in his own book. It is as if Somerset Maugham's most famous novel, which had sold millions of copies and which everyone knew referred to Ramana Maharshi, had simply never happened.

Yet the riddle is quickly solved if you read *The Razor's Edge* and try to imagine how it would feel to have everyone thinking you 'were' Larry Darrell. Besides being a very private and reticent person, Chadwick was a conservative Englishman from a traditional Christian background. To be shown tramping around Europe and working down the mines was perhaps embarrassing enough. Yet Larry is shown having casual flings with all sorts of women, including a farmer's wife and an eighteen-year-old Flamenco dancer – all this after

Somerset Maugham had explicitly declared that he had ‘invented nothing’! No doubt Chadwick also saw his philosophical and spiritual beliefs misrepresented, his war experiences sensationalised, and his whole life turned into a sort of cheap, penny-dreadful parody. No wonder that when he came to write his own *Reminiscences*, Chadwick seized the opportunity to ridicule Maugham and undermine his credibility in every way possible. Yet no wonder he somehow contrived to do this without so much as mentioning *The Razor’s Edge*, one of the most widely-read novels of the century, yet the last book Chadwick would ever encourage anyone to read.

Unfortunately for Chadwick, *The Razor’s Edge* was one of those books that everyone had on their shelves. All his friends and family must have known that he ‘was’ Larry. The last of them that I managed to track down was his nephew John Chadwick, who sadly died in 2009. I thus missed the chance of interviewing him, though I was able to contact some of his friends. They told me that John had hardly ever mentioned ‘the uncle who was never there.’ It seems that John Chadwick had only ever said two things about his mysterious Uncle Alan. The first was that he had lived in an Indian ashram; the second was that he had been mentioned in a story by Somerset Maugham.

It is hardly any surprise to find that Chadwick’s family identified him with Larry. The really surprising thing is that nobody else ever seems to have made the connection. A novelist famous for putting real people in his books visits India and conducts a detailed interview with a First World War veteran who has been living in an Ashram for two years. The novelist then returns to the West and writes a book about a First World War veteran who lives in an ashram for two years – and for decades afterwards people scratch their heads, wondering who on earth it might have been! But one of the many similarities between Larry and Chadwick is that they were both humble, self-effacing and elusive, able to deflect unwanted attention with a beaming smile. One of the other characters in the book complains that Larry slips through your fingers like a smoke-ring. So Chadwick, strapping six-foot-two though he was, somehow contrives to hide himself from view.

We shall never know, of course. It may be that the staggering coincidences between Larry and Chadwick are just that – staggering coincidences. We can never finally prove that Chadwick ‘was’ Larry, since this would

involve entering the mind of a long-dead author. Indeed, the only character in *The Razor’s Edge* we can be absolutely sure was based on a real person is none other than Somerset Maugham himself, because the great writer not only appears in the pages of his own novel, but does so under his own name, without the conventional thin disguise. All the other characters know him and recognise him at once. For who could fail to recognise the world-famous Mr Maugham?

Given the religious theme of Maugham’s book, the symbolism of all this is particularly apt. Once the author appears among his own characters to declare that their story is based on something more real, the ordinary fabric of the illusion is undermined. If all the world’s a stage, then we are all Larry Darrells seeking our Chadwicks, searching for the real selves behind these fictional facades. And for Somerset Maugham to put himself into a book that contained Sri Ramana Maharshi as one of its characters was a beautiful hymn of praise, an unconscious literary alleluia. God himself is the Great Author, after all, this universe being no more than the ultimate masterpiece of magical realism. And, like Somerset Maugham, the great genius behind it all sometimes allows himself the luxury of taking the stage under a more or less transparent disguise. Many believe he appeared here two thousand years ago in the radiant form of the Nazarene, with his forked beard and flowing robes. There are even a few who believe he has actually appeared among us in living memory, under the guise of a sweet-natured old peasant, a beggar with nothing to his name but a loincloth, water-pot and stick.

Chadwick was certainly one of those believers. For here is what Maugham wrote about the elusive Major C after he’d driven back to Madras that day in 1938:

‘He has an intense adoration for the Yogi and says that he looks upon him as the greatest spiritual figure that the world has known since Christ.’

Shortly after Chadwick had made this staggering declaration, the great enchanter materialised on the stage in person. Having dreamt up Mrs Austin, Major C and even the famous Somerset Maugham – not to mention the solemn temples of Tiruvannamalai, the cloud-capped mountain, the great globe itself – the divine author had been unable to resist writing himself a little part to play. This time he adopted the disguise of a sweet old peasant, limping a little as he entered, leaning heavily upon his stick.