Ah King

W. Somerset Maugham

I WAS in Singapore, about to start on a journey through Borneo, Indo-China and Siam, and I wanted a servant who could turn his hand to anything. I asked my friends if they knew a Chinese who was looking for a job, and they all knew the very man who would have suited me, but unfortunately he had just taken a place or had gone back to Canton for a holiday. Then someone gave me the address of a registry office. I went there, finding it with some difficulty; it was a trim little bungalow, standing in its own small garden, and somehow or other it gave me a sinister impression. I was received by a Eurasian, with flashing eyes, a flat muddy face and glittering teeth. He was ingratiating; he smiled a great deal and knew, almost before I began to speak, so exactly what I wanted that I despaired of explaining myself. He told me that he would have no difficulty at all in finding me what I wanted and impressively opened a huge ledger in which were the names of the servants on his list He was very much annoyed when he discovered that every likely man had either just got a place or had gone for a holiday to Canton. At last he besought me, with tears in his eyes, to come back in three or four days, or a week, or maybe a month and he was quite sure that he would have the perfect servant for me. I explained that I was leaving Singapore next day and must have a boy to take with me. He vowed it was impossible and in his distress wrung his hands, and then said that if I would wait half an hour he would see what he could do. I lit a cigarette and prepared to wait He left me.

He returned in an hour bringing with him a youth of twenty, with a smooth yellow face, a shy look in his black eyes, smallish, but very neat in his white clothes and self-possessed. His name was Ah King and he was prepared to travel. He spoke English. He showed me his references, written on grubby half-sheets of paper, and they were very satisfactory. He was said to be clean and willing, industrious and well up in his duties. 1 liked his look and at once engaged him.

Next day we set out I soon found that though he could speak English tolerably he could not understand it, so that our conversation was one-sided. He was with me for six months. He was a perfect servant. He could cook, he could valet, he could pack, he could wait at table. He was quick, neat and silent. He was imperturbable. Nothing surprised him, no catastrophe dismayed him, no hardship ruffled him, no novelty took him unawares. It was impossible to tire him. He smiled all day long. I have never met anyone so good-humoured. He had his idiosyncrasies. He was very fond of having a bath and at first when I discovered that the moment my back was turned he went into my bathroom and washed himself with my soap and dried himself with my towel I felt a little uncomfortable. But I told myself that I must not be pernickety. His only fault was that when I was just starting to catch a train or get on to a boat he was nowhere to be found. I would send people hunting for him. He bad vanished. No one knew where he was. In the end I had to set off without him, but always, just as the train was steaming out or the last tender about to leave the quay, he would stroll along, unhurried and smiling; and when, fuming with rage, I asked him what the devil he meant by going off like that he continued to smile.

“I no miss train,” he said. “Plenty time. Train always wait”

And when I asked him where he had been he looked at me with his calm, untroubled eyes and answered:

“Nowhere. I go for a walk.”

My journey came to an end and I returned to Singapore, intending from there to sail for Europe. I told Ah King that I should not want him any more. He asked me for a testimonial. I gave him this and his wages and a present.

“Good-bye, Ah King,” I said. “I hope you’ll find another job soon.”

Then I saw that he was crying. I stared at him with amazement. An excellent servant, he had attended to all my wants for six months, but he had always seemed to me strangely detached; he had been as indifferent to my praise as he was unconcerned at my reproofs. It had never occurred to me for an instant that he looked upon me as anything but an odd, rather silly person who paid his wages and gave him board and lodging. That he had any feeling for me had never entered my head. I was embarrassed. I felt a little uncomfortable. I knew that I had often been impatient with him, tiresome and exacting. I had never thought of him as a human being. He wept because he was leaving me. It is for these tears that I now give his name to this collection of stories that I invented while he was travelling with me. To the best of my belief the characters that play their part in them are creatures of my own fancy.