## I. The Rising of the Curtain

W. Somerset Maugham

You come to the row of hovels that leads to the gate of the city. They are built of dried mud and so dilapidated that you feel a breath of wind will lay them flat upon the dusty earth from which they have been made. A string of camels, heavily laden, steps warily past you. They wear the disdainful air of profiteers forced to traverse a world in which many people are not so rich as they. A little crowd, tattered in their blue clothes, is gathered about the gate and it scatters as a youth in a pointed cap gallops up on a Mongolian pony. A band of children are chasing a lame dog and they throw clods of mud at it. Two stout gentlemen in long black gowns of figured silk and silk jackets stand talking to one another. Each holds a little stick, perched on which, with a string attached to its leg, is a little bird. They have brought out their pets for an airing and in friendly fashion compare their merits. Now and then the birds give a flutter into the air, the  length of the string, and return quickly to their perch. The two Chinese gentlemen, smiling, look at them with soft eyes. Rude boys cry out at the foreigner in a shrill and scornful voice. The city wall, crumbling, old and crenellated, looks like the city wall in an old picture of some Palestinish town of the Crusaders.

You pass through the gateway into a narrow street lined with shops: many of them with their elegant lattice work, red and gold, and their elaborate carving, have a peculiar ruined magnificence, and you imagine that in their dark recesses are sold all manner of strange wares of the fabulous East. A great multitude surges along the uneven narrow footwalk or in the deepset street; and coolies, bearing heavy loads, shout for way in short sharp cries. Hawkers with guttural sound call their wares.

And now at a sedate pace, drawn by a sleek mule, comes a Peking cart. Its hood is bright blue and its great wheels are studded with nails. The driver sits with dangling legs on a shaft. It is evening and the sun sets red behind the yellow, steep, and fantastic roof of a temple. The Peking cart, the blind in front drawn down, passes silently and you wonder who it is that sits cross-legged within. Perhaps it is a scholar, all the learning of the classics at his finger ends, bound on a visit to a friend with whom he will exchange elaborate compliments and discuss the golden age of Tang and Sung which can return no more; perhaps it is a singing girl in splendid silks and richly  embroidered coat, with jade in her black hair, summoned to a party so that she may sing a little song and exchange elegant repartee with young blades cultured enough to appreciate wit. The Peking cart disappears into the gathering darkness: it seems to carry all the mystery of the East.