## III. The Mongol Chief

W. Somerset Maugham

Heaven knows from what mysterious distance he had come. He rode down the winding pathway from the high Mongolian plateau with the mountains, barren, stony, and inaccessible, stretching on all sides, an impenetrable barrier; he rode down past the temple that guarded the head of the pass till he came to the old river bed which was the gateway into China. It was hedged in by the foothills brilliant under the morning sun, with sharp shadows; and the innumerable traffic of the centuries had formed on that stony floor a rough road. The air was keen and clear, the sky was blue. Here all the year round from daybreak till sundown, passed an unending stream, camels in caravan bearing the brick tea to Urga seven hundred miles away and so to Siberia, long lines of wagons drawn by placid bullocks, and little carts in twos and threes behind stout ponies; and in the contrary direction, into China, again camels in caravan bringing hides to the markets of Peking, and wagons in long procession. Now a mob of horses went by and then a flock of goats. But his eyes did not rest on the various scene. He seemed  not to notice that others were travelling the pass. He was accompanied by his henchmen, six or seven of them, somewhat bedraggled it is true, on sorry nags, but they had a truculent air. They ambled along in a slovenly bunch. He was dressed in a black silk coat and black silk trousers thrust into his long riding boots with their turned-up toes, and on his head he wore the high sable cap of his country. He held himself erect, riding a little ahead of his followers, proudly, and as he rode, his head high and his eyes steady, you wondered if he thought that down this pass in days gone by his ancestors had ridden, ridden down upon the fertile plain of China where rich cities lay ready to their looting.