## IX. The Inn

W. Somerset Maugham

It seems long since the night fell, and for an hour a coolie has walked before your chair carrying a lantern. It throws a thin circle of light in front of you, and as you pass you catch a pale glimpse (like a thing of beauty emerging vaguely from the ceaseless flux of common life) of a bamboo thicket, a flash of water in a rice field, or the heavy darkness of a banyan. Now and then a belated peasant bearing two heavy baskets on his yoke sidles by. The bearers walk more slowly, but after the long day they have lost none of their spirit, and they chatter gaily; they laugh, and one of them breaks into a fragment of tuneless song. But the causeway rises and the lantern throws its light suddenly on a whitewashed wall: you have reached the first miserable houses that straggle along the path outside the city wall, and two or three minutes more bring you to a steep flight of steps. The bearers take them at a run. You pass through the city gates. The narrow streets are multitudinous and in the shops they are busy still. The bearers shout raucously. The crowd divides and you pass through a double hedge of serried  curious people. Their faces are impassive and their dark eyes stare mysteriously. The bearers, their day’s work done, march with a swinging stride. Suddenly they stop, wheel to the right, into a courtyard, and you have reached the inn. Your chair is set down.

The inn—it consists of a long yard, partly covered, with rooms opening on it on each side—is lit by three or four oil lamps. They throw a dim light immediately around them, but make the surrounding darkness more impenetrable. All the front of the yard is crowded with tables and at these people are packed, eating rice or drinking tea. Some of them play games you do not know. At the great stove, where water in a cauldron is perpetually heating and rice in a huge pan being prepared, stand the persons of the inn. They serve out rapidly great bowls of rice and fill the teapots which are incessantly brought them. Further back a couple of naked coolies, sturdy, thickset and supple, are sluicing themselves with boiling water. You walk to the end of the yard where, facing the entrance but protected from the vulgar gaze by a screen, is the principal guest chamber.

It is a spacious, windowless room, with a floor of trodden earth, lofty, for it goes the whole height of the inn, with an open roof. The walls are whitewashed, showing the beams, so that they remind you of a farmhouse in Sussex. The furniture consists of a square table, with a couple of straight-backed wooden arm-chairs, and three or  four wooden pallets covered with matting on the least dirty of which you will presently lay your bed. In a cup of oil a taper gives a tiny point of light. They bring you your lantern and you wait while your dinner is cooked. The bearers are merry now that they have set down their loads. They wash their feet and put on clean sandals and smoke their long pipes.

How precious then is the inordinate length of your book (for you are travelling light and you have limited yourself to three) and how jealously you read every word of every page so that you may delay as long as possible the dreaded moment when you must reach the end! You are mightily thankful then to the authors of long books and when you turn over their pages, reckoning how long you can make them last, you wish they were half as long again. You do not ask then for the perfect lucidity which he who runs may read. A complicated phraseology which makes it needful to read the sentence a second time to get its meaning is not unwelcome; a profusion of metaphor, giving your fancy ample play, a richness of allusion affording you the delight of recognition, are then qualities beyond price. Then if the thought is elaborate without being profound (for you have been on the road since dawn and of the forty miles of the day’s journey you have footed it more than half) you have the perfect book for the occasion.

But the noise in the inn suddenly increases to a din and looking out you see that more travellers,  a party of Chinese in sedan chairs, have arrived. They take the rooms on each side of you and through the thin walls you hear their loud talking far into the night. With a lazy, restful eye, your whole body conscious of the enjoyment of lying in bed, taking a sensual pleasure in its fatigue, you follow the elaborate pattern of the transom. The dim lamp in the yard shines through the torn paper with which it is covered, and its intricate design is black against the light. At last everything is quiet but for a man in the next room who is coughing painfully. It is the peculiar, repeated cough of phthisis, and hearing it at intervals through the night you wonder how long the poor devil can live. You rejoice in your own rude strength. Then a cock crows loudly, just behind your head, it seems; and not far away a bugler blows a long blast on his bugle, a melancholy wail; the inn begins to stir again; lights are lit, and the coolies make ready their loads for another day.