## LVI. The Vice-Consul

W. Somerset Maugham

His bearers set down his chair in the yamen and unfastened the apron which protected him from the pouring rain. He put out his head, like a bird looking out of its nest, and then his long thin body and finally his thin long legs. He stood for a moment as if he did not quite know what to do with himself. He was a very young man and his long limbs with their ungainliness somehow added to the callowness of his air. His round face (his head looked too small for the length of his body) with its fresh complexion was quite boyish, and his pleasant brown eyes were ingenuous and candid. The sense of importance which his official position gave him (it was not long since he had been no more than a student-interpreter) struggled with his native shyness. He gave his card to the judge’s secretary and was led by him into an inner court and asked to sit down. It was cold and draughty and the vice-consul was glad of his heavy waterproof. A ragged attendant brought tea and cigarettes. The secretary, an emaciated youth in a very shabby  black gown, had been a student at Harvard and was glad to show off his fluent English.

Then the judge came in, and the vice-consul stood up. The judge was a portly gentleman in heavily wadded clothes, with a large smiling face and gold-rimmed spectacles. They sat down and sipped their tea and smoked American cigarettes. They chatted affably. The judge spoke no English, but the vice-consul’s Chinese was fresh in his mind and he could not help thinking that he acquitted himself creditably. Presently an attendant appeared and said a few words to the judge, and the judge very courteously asked the vice-consul if he was ready for the business which had brought him. The door into the outer court was thrown open and the judge, walking through, took his place on a large seat at a table that stood at the top of the steps. He did not smile now. He had assumed instinctively the gravity proper to his office and in his walk, notwithstanding his obesity, there was an impressive dignity. The vice-consul, obeying a polite gesture, took a seat by his side. The secretary stood at the end of the table. Then the outer gateway was flung wide (it seemed to the vice-consul that there was nothing so dramatic as the opening of a door) and quickly, with an odd sort of flurry, the criminal walked in. He walked to the centre of the courtyard and stood still, facing his judge. On each side of him walked a soldier in khaki. He was a young man and the vice-consul thought that he could be no older than  himself. He wore only a pair of cotton trousers and a cotton singlet. They were faded but clean. He was bare-headed and bare-foot. He looked no different from any of the thousands of coolies in their monotonous blue that you passed every day in the crowded streets of the city. The judge and the criminal faced one another in silence. The vice-consul looked at the criminal’s face, but then he looked down quickly: he did not want to see what was there to be seen so plainly. He felt suddenly embarrassed. And looking down he noticed how small the man’s feet were, shapely and slender; his hands were tied behind his back. He was slightly built, of the middle height, a lissome creature that suggested the wild animal, and standing on those beautiful feet of his there was in his carriage a peculiar grace. But the vice-consul’s eyes were drawn back unwillingly to the oval, smooth, and unlined face. It was livid. The vice-consul had often read of faces that were green with terror and he had thought it but a fanciful expression, and here he saw it. It startled him. It made him feel ashamed. And in the eyes too, eyes that did not slant as the Chinese eye is wrongly supposed always to do, but were straight, in the eyes that seemed unnaturally large and bright, fixed on those of the judge, was a terror that was horrible to see. But when the judge put him a question—trial and sentence were over and he had been brought there that morning only for purposes of identification—he answered in a loud plain voice, boldly. However his body might betray  him he was still master of his will. The judge gave a brief order, and, flanked by his two soldiers, the man marched out. The judge and the vice-consul rose and walked to the gateway, where their chairs awaited them. Here stood the criminal with his guard. Notwithstanding his tied hands he smoked a cigarette. A squad of little soldiers had been sheltering themselves under the overhanging roof, and on the appearance of the judge the officer in charge made them form up. The judge and the vice-consul settled themselves in their chairs. The officer gave an order and the squad stepped out. A couple of yards behind them walked the criminal. Then came the judge in his chair and finally the vice-consul.

They went quickly through the busy streets and the shopkeepers gave the procession an incurious stare. The wind was cold and the rain fell steadily. The criminal in his cotton singlet must have been wet through. He walked with a firm step, his head held high, jauntily almost. It was some distance from the judge’s yamen to the city wall and to cover it took them nearly half an hour. Then they came to the city gate and went through it. Four men in ragged blue—they looked like peasants—were standing against the wall by the side of a poor coffin, rough hewn and unpainted. The criminal gave it a glance as he passed by. The judge and the vice-consul dismounted from their chairs and the officer halted his soldiers. The rice fields began at the city wall. The criminal was led to a pathway between two patches and  told to kneel down. But the officer did not think the spot suitable. He told the man to rise. He walked a yard or two and knelt down again. A soldier was detached from the squad and took up his position behind the prisoner, three feet from him perhaps; he raised his gun; the officer gave the word of command; he fired. The criminal fell forward and he moved a little, convulsively. The officer went up to him, and seeing that he was not quite dead emptied two barrels of his revolver into the body. Then he formed up his soldiers once more. The judge gave the vice-consul a smile, but it was a grimace rather than a smile; it distorted painfully that fat good-humoured face.

They stepped into their chairs; but at the city gate their ways parted; the judge bowed the vice-consul a courteous farewell. The vice-consul was carried back towards the consulate through the streets, crowded and tortuous, where life was going on just as usual. And as he went along quickly, for the consular bearers were fine fellows, his mind distracted a little by their constant shouts to make way, he thought how terrible it was to make an end of life deliberately: it seemed an immense responsibility to destroy what was the result of innumerable generations. The human race has existed so long and each one of us is here as the result of an infinite series of miraculous events. But at the same time, puzzling him, he had a sense of the triviality of life. One more or less mattered so little. But just as he reached the consulate he looked at his watch, he had no idea it was so late,  and he told the bearers to take him to the club. It was time for a cocktail and by heaven he could do with one. A dozen men were standing at the bar when he went in. They knew on what errand he had been that morning.

“Well,” they said, “did you see the blighter shot?”

“You bet I did,” he said, in a loud and casual voice.

“Everything go off all right?”

“He wriggled a bit.” He turned to the bartender. “Same as usual, John.”