## LVII. A City Built on a Rock

W. Somerset Maugham

They say of it that the dogs bark when peradventure the sun shines there. It is a grey and gloomy city, shrouded in mist, for it stands upon its rock where two great rivers meet so that it is washed on all sides but one by turbid, rushing waters. The rock is like the prow of an ancient galley and seems, as though possessed of a strange unnatural life, all tremulous with effort; it is as if it were ever on the point of forging into the tumultuous stream. Rugged mountains hem the city round about.

Outside the walls bedraggled houses are built on piles, and here, when the river is low, a hazardous population lives on the needs of the watermen; for at the foot of the rock a thousand junks are moored, wedged in with one another tightly, and men’s lives there have all the turbulence of the river. A steep and tortuous stairway leads to the great gate guarded by a temple, and up and down this all day long go the water coolies, with their dripping buckets; and from their splashing the stair and the street that leads from the gate are wet as though after heavy rain. It is difficult to walk on the level for more than a few minutes,  and there are as many steps as in the hill towns of the Italian Riviera. Because there is so little space the streets are pressed together, narrow and dark, and they wind continuously so that to find your way is like finding it in a labyrinth. The throng is as thick as the throng on a pavement in London when a theatre is emptying itself of its audience. You have to push your way through it, stepping aside every moment as chairs come by and coolies bearing their everlasting loads: itinerant sellers, selling almost anything that anyone can want to buy, jostle you as you pass.

The shops are wide open to the street, without windows or doors, and they are crowded too. They are like an exhibition of arts and crafts, and you may see what a street looked like in medieval England when each town made all that was necessary to its needs. The various industries are huddled together so that you will pass through a street of butchers where carcasses and entrails hang bloody on each side of you, with flies buzzing about them and mangy dogs prowling hungrily below; you will pass through a street where in each house there is a hand-loom and they are busily weaving cloth or silk. There are innumerable eating houses from which come heavy odours and here at all hours people are eating. Then, generally at a corner, you will see tea-houses, and here all day long again the tables are packed with men of all sorts drinking tea and smoking. The barbers ply their trade in the public view and you will see men leaning patiently on their crossed arms  while their heads are being shaved; others are having their ears cleaned, and some, a revolting spectacle, the inside of their eyelids scraped.

It is a city of a thousand noises. There are the peddlers who announce their presence by a wooden gong; the clappers of the blind musician or of the masseuse; the shrill falsetto of a man singing in a tavern; the loud beating of a gong from a house where a wedding or a funeral is being celebrated. There are the raucous shouts of the coolies and chair-bearers; the menacing whines of the beggars, caricatures of humanity, their emaciated limbs barely covered by filthy tatters and revolting with disease; the cracked melancholy of the bugler who incessantly practises a call he can never get; and then, like a bass to which all these are a barbaric melody, the insistent sound of conversation, of people laughing, quarrelling, joking, shouting, arguing, gossiping. It is a ceaseless din. It is extraordinary at first, then confusing, exasperating, and at last maddening. You long for a moment’s utter silence. It seems to you that it would be a voluptuous delight.

And then combining with the irksome throng and the din that exhausts your ears is a stench which time and experience enable you to distinguish into a thousand separate stenches. Your nostrils grow cunning. Foul odours beat upon your harassed nerves like the sound of uncouth instruments playing a horrible symphony.

You cannot tell what are the lives of these thousands who surge about you. Upon your own people  sympathy and knowledge give you a hold; you can enter into their lives, at least imaginatively, and in a way really possess them. By the effort of your fancy you can make them after a fashion part of yourself. But these are as strange to you as you are strange to them. You have no clue to their mystery. For their likeness to yourself in so much does not help you; it serves rather to emphasize their difference. Someone attracts your attention, a pale youth with great horn spectacles and a book under his arm, whose studious look is pleasant, or an old man, wearing a hood, with a grey sparse beard and tired eyes: he looks like one of those sages that the Chinese artists painted in a rocky landscape or under Kang-hsi modelled in porcelain; but you might as well look at a brick wall. You have nothing to go upon, you do not know the first thing about them, and your imagination is baffled.

But when, reaching the top of the hill, you come once more to the crenellated walls that surround the city and go out through the frowning gate, you come to the graves. They stretch over the country, one mile, two miles, three, four, five, interminable green mounds, up and down the hills, with grey stones to which the people once a year come to offer libation and to tell the dead how fare the living whom they left behind; and they are as thickly crowded, the dead, as are the living in the city; and they seem to press upon the living as though they would force them into the turbid, swirling river. There is something menacing  about those serried ranks. It is as though they were laying siege to the city, with a sullen ruthlessness, biding their time; and as though in the end, encroaching irresistibly as fate, they would drive those seething throngs before them till the houses and the streets were covered by them, and the green mounds came down to the water gate. Then at last silence, silence would dwell there undisturbed.

They are uncanny, those green graves, they are terrifying. They seem to wait.