## LVIII. A Libation to the Gods

W. Somerset Maugham

She was an old woman, and her face was wizened and deeply lined. In her grey hair three long silver knives formed a fantastic headgear. Her dress of faded blue consisted of a long jacket, worn and patched, and a pair of trousers that reached a little below her calves. Her feet were bare, but on one ankle she wore a silver bangle. It was plain that she was very poor. She was not stout, but squarely built, and in her prime she must have done without effort the heavy work in which her life had been spent. She walked leisurely, with the sedate tread of an elderly woman, and she carried on her arm a basket. She came down to the harbour; it was crowded with painted junks; her eyes rested for a moment curiously on a man who stood on a narrow bamboo raft, fishing with cormorants; and then she set about her business. She put down her basket on the stones of the quay, at the water’s edge, and took from it a red candle. This she lit and fixed in a chink of the stones. Then she took several joss-sticks, held each of them for a moment in the flame of the candle and set them up around it. She took three tiny bowls and filled them with  a liquid that she had brought with her in a bottle and placed them neatly in a row. Then from her basket she took rolls of paper cash and paper “shoes,” and unravelled them, so that they should burn easily. She made a little bonfire, and when it was well alight she took the three bowls and poured out some of their contents before the smouldering joss-sticks. She bowed herself three times and muttered certain words. She stirred the burning paper so that the flames burned brightly. Then she emptied the bowls on the stones and again bowed three times. No one took the smallest notice of her. She took a few more paper cash from her basket and flung them in the fire. Then without further ado, she took up her basket, and with the same leisurely, rather heavy tread, walked away. The gods were duly propitiated, and like an old peasant woman in France who has satisfactorily done her day’s housekeeping, she went about her business.