## V. The Cabinet Minister

W. Somerset Maugham

He received me in a long room looking on to a sandy garden. The roses withered on the stunted bushes and the great old trees flagged forlorn. He sat me down on a square stool at a square table and took his seat in front of me. A servant brought cups of flowered tea and American cigarettes. He was a thin man, of the middle height, with thin, elegant hands; and through his gold-rimmed spectacles he looked at me with large, dark, and melancholy eyes. He had the look of a student or of a dreamer. His smile was very sweet. He wore a brown silk gown and over it a short black silk jacket, and on his head a billycock hat.

“Is it not strange,” he said, with his charming smile, “that we Chinese wear this gown because three hundred years ago the Manchus were horsemen?”

“Not so strange,” I retorted, “as that because the English won the battle of Waterloo Your Excellency should wear a bowler.”

“Do you think that is why I wear it?”

“I could easily prove it.”

Since I was afraid that his exquisite courtesy would prevent him from asking me how, I hastened in a few well-chosen words to do so.

He took off his hat and looked at it with the shadow of a sigh. I glanced round the room. It had a green Brussels carpet, with great flowers on it, and round the walls were highly carved blackwood chairs. From a picture rail hung scrolls on which were writings by the great masters of the past, and to vary these, in bright gold frames, were oil paintings which in the nineties might very well have been exhibited in the Royal Academy. The minister did his work at an American roll-top desk.

He talked to me with melancholy of the state of China. A civilisation, the oldest the world had known, was now being ruthlessly swept away. The students who came back from Europe and from America were tearing down what endless generations had built up, and they were placing nothing in its stead. They had no love of their country, no religion, no reverence. The temples, deserted by worshipper and priest, were falling into decay and presently their beauty would be nothing but a memory.

But then, with a gesture of his thin, aristocratic hands, he put the subject aside. He asked me whether I would care to see some of his works of art. We walked round the room and he showed me priceless porcelains, bronzes, and Tang figures. There was a horse from a grave in Honan which had the grace and the exquisite modelling  of a Greek work. On a large table by the side of his desk was a number of rolls. He chose one and holding it at the top gave it to me to unroll. It was a picture of some early dynasty of mountains seen through fleecy clouds, and with smiling eyes he watched my pleasure as I looked. The picture was set aside and he showed me another and yet another. Presently I protested that I could not allow a busy man to waste his time on me, but he would not let me go. He brought out picture after picture. He was a connoisseur. He was pleased to tell me the schools and periods to which they belonged and neat anecdotes about their painters.

“I wish I could think it was possible for you to appreciate my greatest treasures,” he said, pointing to the scrolls that adorned his walls. “Here you have examples of the most perfect calligraphies of China.”

“Do you like them better than paintings?” I asked.

“Infinitely. Their beauty is more chaste. There is nothing meretricious in them. But I can quite understand that a European would have difficulty in appreciating so severe and so delicate an art. Your taste in Chinese things tends a little to the grotesque, I think.”

He produced books of paintings and I turned their leaves. Beautiful things! With the dramatic instinct of the collector he kept to the last the book by which he set most store. It was a series of little pictures of birds and flowers,  roughly done with a few strokes, but with such a power of suggestion, with so great a feeling for nature and such a playful tenderness, that it took your breath away. There were sprigs of plum-blossom that held in their dainty freshness all the magic of the spring; there were sparrows in whose ruffled plumage were the beat and the tremor of life. It was the work of a great artist.

“Will these American students ever produce anything like this?” he asked with a rueful smile.

But to me the most charming part of it was that I knew all the time that he was a rascal. Corrupt, inefficient, and unscrupulous, he let nothing stand in his way. He was a master of the squeeze. He had acquired a large fortune by the most abominable methods. He was dishonest, cruel, vindictive, and venal. He had certainly had a share in reducing China to the desperate plight which he so sincerely lamented. But when he held in his hand a little vase of the colour of lapis lazuli his fingers seemed to curl about it with a charming tenderness, his melancholy eyes caressed it as they looked, and his lips were slightly parted as though with a sigh of desire.