## VI. Dinner Parties

W. Somerset Maugham

### I: LEGATION QUARTER

The Swiss director of the Banque Sino-Argentine was announced. He came with a large, handsome wife, who displayed her opulent charms so generously that it made you a little nervous. It was said that she had been a cocotte, and an English maiden lady (in salmon pink satin and beads) who had come early, greeted her with a thin and frigid smile. The Minister of Guatemala and the Chargé d’Affaires of Montenegro entered together. The Chargé d’Affaires was in a state of extreme agitation; he had not understood that it was an official function, he thought he had been asked to dine en petit comité, and he had not put on his orders. And there was the Minister of Guatemala blazing with stars! What in heaven’s name was to be done? The emotion caused by what for a moment seemed almost a diplomatic incident was diverted by the appearance of two Chinese servants in long silk robes and four-sided hats with cocktails and zakouski. Then a Russian princess sailed in. She had white hair and a black silk dress up  to her neck. She looked like the heroine of a play by Victorien Sardou who had outlived the melodramatic fury of her youth and now did crochet. She was infinitely bored when you spoke to her of Tolstoi or Chekov; but grew animated when she talked of Jack London. She put a question to the maiden lady which the maiden lady, though no longer young, had no answer for.

“Why,” she asked, “do you English write such silly books about Russia?”

But then the first secretary of the British Legation appeared. He gave his entrance the significance of an event. He was very tall, baldish but elegant, and he was beautifully dressed: he looked with polite astonishment at the dazzling orders of the Minister of Guatemala. The Chargé d’Affaires of Montenegro, who flattered himself that he was the best dressed man in the diplomatic body, but was not quite sure whether the first secretary of the British Legation thought him so, fluttered up to him to ask his candid opinion of the frilled shirt he wore. The Englishman placed a gold-rimmed glass in his eye and looked at it for a moment gravely; then he paid the other a devastating compliment. Everyone had come by now but the wife of the French Military Attaché. They said she was always late.

“Elle est insupportable,” said the handsome wife of the Swiss banker.

But at last, magnificently indifferent to the fact that she had kept everyone waiting for half an hour, she swam into the room. She was tall on  her outrageously high heels, extremely thin, and she wore a dress that gave you the impression that she had nothing on at all. Her hair was bobbed and blonde, and she was boldly painted. She looked like a post-impressionist’s idea of patient Griselda. When she moved the air was heavy with exotic odours. She gave the Minister of Guatemala a jewelled, emaciated hand to kiss; with a few smiling words made the banker’s wife feel passée, provincial, and portly; flung an improper jest at the English lady whose embarrassment was mitigated by the knowledge that the wife of the French Military Attaché was très bien née; and drank three cocktails in rapid succession.

Dinner was served. The conversation varied from a resonant, rolling French to a somewhat halting English. They talked of this Minister who had just written from Bucharest or Lima, and that Counsellor’s wife who found it so dull in Christiania or so expensive in Washington. On the whole it made little difference to them in what capital they found themselves, for they did precisely the same things in Constantinople, Berne, Stockholm and Peking. Entrenched within their diplomatic privileges and supported by a lively sense of their social consequence, they dwelt in a world in which Copernicus had never existed, for to them sun and stars circled obsequiously round this earth of ours, and they were its centre. No one knew why the English lady was there and the wife of the Swiss director said privately that she was without doubt a German spy. But she  was an authority on the country. She told you that the Chinese had such perfect manners and you really should have known the Empress Dowager; she was a perfect darling. You knew very well that in Constantinople she would have assured you that the Turks were such perfect gentlemen and the Sultana Fatima was a perfect dear and spoke such wonderful French. Homeless, she was at home wherever her country had a diplomatic representative.

The first secretary of the British Legation thought the party rather mixed. He spoke French more like a Frenchman than any Frenchman who ever lived. He was a man of taste, and he had a natural aptitude for being right. He only knew the right people and only read the right books; he admired none but the right music and cared for none but the right pictures; he bought his clothes at the right tailor’s and his shirts from the only possible haberdasher. You listened to him with stupefaction. Presently you wished with all your heart that he would confess to a liking for something just a little vulgar: you would have felt more at your ease if only with bold idiosyncrasy he had claimed that The Soul’s Awakening was a work of art or The Rosary a masterpiece. But his taste was faultless. He was perfect and you were half afraid that he knew it, for in repose his face had the look of one who bears an intolerable burden. And then you discovered that he wrote vers libre. You breathed again.

### II: AT A TREATY PORT

There was about the party a splendour which has vanished from the dinner tables of England. The mahogany groaned with silver. In the middle of the snowy damask cloth was a centrepiece of yellow silk such as you were unwillingly constrained to buy in the bazaars of your prim youth and on this was a massive épergne. Tall silver vases in which were large chrysanthemums made it possible to catch only glimpses of the persons opposite you, and tall silver candlesticks reared their proud heads two by two down the length of the table. Each course was served with its appropriate wine, sherry with the soup and hock with the fish; and there were the two entrées, a white entrée and a brown entrée, which the careful housekeeper of the nineties felt were essential to a properly arranged dinner.

Perhaps the conversation was less varied than the courses, for guests and hosts had seen one another nearly every day for an intolerable number of years and each topic that arose was seized upon desperately only to be exhausted and followed by a formidable silence. They talked of racing and golf and shooting. They would have thought it bad form to touch upon the abstract and there were no politics for them to discuss. China bored them all, they did not want to speak of that; they only knew just so much about it as was necessary to their business, and they looked with distrust upon any man who studied the Chinese  language. Why should he unless he were a missionary or a Chinese Secretary at the Legation? You could hire an interpreter for twenty-five dollars a month and it was well known that all those fellows who went in for Chinese grew queer in the head. They were all persons of consequence. There was number one at Jardine’s with his wife, and the manager of the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Bank with his wife, the A.P.C. man and his wife, and the B.A.T. man with his wife, and the B.&S. man with his wife. They wore their evening clothes a little uneasily as though they wore them from a sense of duty to their country rather than as a comfortable change from day dress. They had come to the party because they had nothing else in the world to do, but when the moment came that they could decently take their leave they would go with a sigh of relief. They were bored to death with one another.