## VII. The Altar of Heaven

W. Somerset Maugham

It stands open to the sky, three round terraces of white marble, placed one above the other, which are reached by four marble staircases, and these face the four points of the compass. It represents the celestial sphere with its cardinal points. A great park surrounds it and this again is surrounded by high walls. And hither, year after year, on the night of the winter solstice, for then heaven is reborn, generation after generation came the Son of Heaven solemnly to worship the original creator of his house. Escorted by princes and the great men of the realm, followed by his troops, the emperor purified by fasting proceeded to the altar. And here awaited him princes and ministers and mandarins, each in his allotted place, musicians and the dancers of the sacred dance. In the scanty light of the great torches the ceremonial robes were darkly splendid. And before the tablet on which were inscribed the words: Imperial Heaven—Supreme Emperor, he offered incense, jade, and silk, broth and rice spirit. He knelt and knocked his forehead against the marble pavement nine times.

And here at the very spot where the vice-regent  of heaven and earth knelt down, Willard B. Untermeyer wrote his name in a fine bold hand and the town and state he came from, Hastings, Nebraska. So he sought to attach his fleeting personality to the recollection of that grandeur of which some dim rumour had reached him. He thought that so men would remember him when he was no more. He aimed in this crude way at immortality. But vain are the hopes of men. For no sooner had he sauntered down the steps than a Chinese caretaker who had been leaning against the balustrade, idly looking at the blue sky, came forward, spat neatly on the spot where Willard B. Untermeyer had written, and with his foot smeared his spittle over the name. In a moment no trace remained that Willard B. Untermeyer had ever visited that place.