## VIII. The Servants of God

W. Somerset Maugham

They were sitting side by side, two missionaries, talking to one another of perfectly trivial things, in the way people talk who wish to show each other civility but have nothing in common; and they would have been surprised to be told that they had certainly one admirable thing in common, goodness, for both had this also in common, humility; though perhaps in the Englishman it was more deliberate, and so, if more conspicuous less natural, than it was in the Frenchman. Otherwise the contrasts between them were almost ludicrous. The Frenchman was hard on eighty, a tall man, still unbent; and his large bones suggested that in youth he had been a man of uncommon strength. Now his only sign of power lay in his eyes, immensely large so that you could not help noticing their strange expression, and flashing. That is an epithet often applied to eyes, but I do not think I have ever seen any to which it might be applied so fitly. There was really a flame in them and they seemed to emit light. They had a wildness which hardly suggested sanity. They were the eyes of a prophet in Israel. His nose was large and aggressive, his  chin was firm and square. At no time could he have been a man to trifle with, but in his prime he must have been terrific. Perhaps the passion of his eyes bespoke battles long fought out in the uttermost depths of his heart, and his soul cried out in them, vanquished and bleeding, yet triumphant, and he exulted in the unclosed wound which he offered in willing sacrifice to Almighty God. He felt the cold in his old bones and he wore wrapped about him like a soldier’s cloak a great fur and on his head a cap of Chinese sable. He was a magnificent figure. He had been in China for half a century and thrice he had fled for his life when the Chinese had attacked his mission.

“I trust they won’t attack it again,” he said, smiling, “for I am too old now to make these precipitate journeys.” He shrugged his shoulders: “Je serai martyr.”

He lit a long black cigar and puffed it with great enjoyment.

The other was very much younger, he could not have been more than fifty, and he had not been in China for more than twenty years. He was a member of the English Church Mission and he was dressed in a grey tweed suit and a spotted tie. He sought to look as little like a clergyman as possible. He was a little taller than the average, but he was so fat that he looked stumpy. He had a round good-natured face, with red cheeks and a grey moustache of the variety known as toothbrush. He was very bald, but with a pardonable and touching vanity he had grown his hair long  enough on one side to be brought over the scalp and so give himself at all events the illusion that his head was well-covered. He was a jovial fellow, with a hearty laugh, and it rang out loudly, honest and true, when he chaffed his friends or was chaffed by them. He had the humour of a schoolboy and you could imagine him shaking in all his bulk when someone slipped on a piece of orange peel. But the laughter would be stopped, and he would redden, as it struck him suddenly that the man who slipped might have hurt himself, and then he would be all kindness and sympathy. For it was impossible to be with him for ten minutes without realising the tenderness of his heart. You felt that it would be impossible to ask him to do anything he would not gladly do, and if perhaps at first his heartiness would make it difficult to go to him in your spiritual needs you could be sure in all practical affairs of his attention, sympathy, and good sense. He was a man whose purse was always open to the indigent and whose time was always at the service of those who wanted it. And yet perhaps it is unjust to say that in the affairs of the soul his help would not be very effectual, for though he could not speak to you, like the old Frenchman, with the authority of a church that has never admitted doubt or with the compelling fire of the ascetic, he would share your distress with such a candid sympathy, consoling you with his own hesitations, less a minister of God then than a halting, tremulous man of the same flesh as yourself, who sought to share with  you the hope and the consolation with which his own soul was refreshed, that perhaps in his own way he had something as good to offer as the other.

His story was a little unusual. He had been a soldier and he was pleased to talk of the old days when he had hunted with the Quorn and danced through the London season. He had no unhealthy feeling of past sin.

“I was a great dancer in my young days,” he said, “but I expect I should be quite out of it now with all these new dances.”

It was a good life so long as it lasted and though he did not for a moment regret it, he had no feeling of resentment for it. The call had come when he was in India. He did not exactly know how or why, it had just come, a sudden feeling that he must give up his life to bringing the heathen to the belief in Christ, but it was a feeling that he could not resist; it gave him no peace. He was a happy man now, enjoying his work.

“It’s a slow business,” he said, “but I see signs of progress and I love the Chinese. I wouldn’t change my life here for any in the world.”

The two missionaries said good-bye to one another.

“When are you going home?” asked the Englishman.

“Moi? Oh, in a day or two.”

“I may not see you again then. I expect to go home in March.”

But one meant the little town with its narrow  streets where he had lived for fifty years, since when he left France, a young man, he left it for ever; but the other meant the Elizabethan house in Cheshire, with its smooth lawns and its oak trees, where his ancestors had dwelt for three centuries.