## XII. The Picture

W. Somerset Maugham

I do not know whether he was a mandarin bound for the capital of the province, or some student travelling to a seat of learning, nor what the reason that delayed him in the most miserable of all the miserable inns in China. Perhaps one or other of his bearers, hidden somewhere to smoke a pipe of opium (for it is cheap in that neighborhood and you must be prepared for trouble with your coolies) could not be found. Perhaps a storm of torrential rain had held him for an hour an unwilling prisoner.

The room was so low that you could easily touch the rafters with your hand. The mud walls were covered with dirty whitewash, here and there worn away, and all round on wooden pallets were straw beds for the coolies who were the inn’s habitual guests. The sun alone enabled you to support the melancholy squalor. It shone through the latticed window, a beam of golden light, and threw on the trodden earth of the floor a pattern of an intricate and splendid richness.

And here to pass an idle moment he had taken his stone tablet and mixing a little water with the stick of ink which he rubbed on it, seized the  fine brush with which he executed the beautiful characters of the Chinese writing (he was surely proud of his exquisite calligraphy and it was a welcome gift which he made his friends when he sent them a scroll on which was written a maxim, glitteringly compact, of the divine Confucius) and with a bold hand he drew on the wall a branch of plum-blossom and a bird perched on it. It was done very lightly, but with an admirable ease; I know not what happy chance guided the artist’s touch, for the bird was all a-quiver with life and the plum-blossoms were tremulous on their stalks. The soft airs of spring blew through the sketch into that sordid chamber, and for the beating of a pulse you were in touch with the Eternal.