## XIII. Her Britannic Majesty’s Representative

W. Somerset Maugham

He was a man of less than middle height, with stiff brown hair en brosse, a little toothbrush moustache, and glasses through which his blue eyes, looking at you aggressively, were somewhat distorted. There was a defiant perkiness in his appearance which reminded you of the cock-sparrow, and as he asked you to sit down and inquired your business, meanwhile sorting the papers littered on his desk as though you had disturbed him in the midst of important affairs, you had the feeling that he was on the look out for an opportunity to put you in your place. He had cultivated the official manner to perfection. You were the public, an unavoidable nuisance, and the only justification for your existence was that you did what you were told without argument or delay. But even officials have their weakness and somehow it chanced that he found it very difficult to bring any business to an end without confiding his grievance to you. It appeared that people, missionaries especially, thought him supercilious and domineering. He assured you that he thought there was a  great deal of good in missionaries; it is true that many of them were ignorant and unreasonable, and he didn’t like their attitude; in his district most of them were Canadians, and personally he didn’t like Canadians; but as for saying that he put on airs of superiority (he fixed his pince-nez more firmly on his nose) it was monstrously untrue. On the contrary he went out of his way to help them, but it was only natural that he should help them in his way rather than in theirs. It was hard to listen to him without a smile, for in every word he said you felt how exasperating he must be to the unfortunate persons over whom he had control. His manner was deplorable. He had developed the gift of putting up your back to a degree which is very seldom met with. He was in short a vain, irritable, bumptious, and tiresome little man.

During the revolution, while a lot of firing was going on in the city between the rival factions, he had occasion to go to the Southern general on official business connected with the safety of his nationals, and on his way through the yamen he came across three prisoners being led out to execution. He stopped the officer in charge of the firing party and finding out what was about to happen vehemently protested. These were prisoners of war and it was barbarity to kill them. The officer—very rudely, in the consul’s words—told him that he must carry out his orders. The consul fired up. He wasn’t going to let a confounded Chinese officer talk to him in that way. An altercation  ensued. The general informed of what was occurring sent out to ask the consul to come in to him, but the consul refused to move till the prisoners, three wretched coolies green with fear, were handed over to his safe-keeping. The officer waved him aside and ordered his firing squad to take aim. Then the consul—I can see him fixing his glasses on his nose and his hair bristling fiercely—then the consul stepped forwards between the levelled rifles and the three miserable men, and told the soldiers to shoot and be damned. There was hesitation and confusion. It was plain that the rebels did not want to shoot a British consul. I suppose there was a hurried consultation. The three prisoners were given over to him and in triumph the little man marched back to the consulate.

“Damn it, Sir,” he said furiously, “I almost thought the blighters would have the confounded cheek to shoot me.”

They are strange people the British. If their manners were as good as their courage is great they would merit the opinion they have of themselves.