## XIX. The Point of Honour

W. Somerset Maugham

Nothing hinders friendly relations between different countries so much as the fantastic notions which they cherish about one another’s characteristics, and perhaps no nation has suffered so much from the misconception of its neighbours as the French. They have been considered a frivolous race, incapable of profound thought, flippant, immoral, and unreliable. Even the virtues that have been allowed them, their brilliancy, their gaiety, have been allowed them (at least by the English) in a patronising way; for they were not virtues on which the Anglo-Saxon set great store. It was never realised that there is a deep seriousness at the bottom of the French character and that the predominant concern of the average Frenchman is the concern for his personal dignity. It is by no hazard that La Rochefoucauld, a keen judge of human nature in general and of his countrymen in particular, should have made l’honneur the pivot of his system. The punctiliousness with which our neighbours regard it has often entertained the Briton who is accustomed to look upon himself with humour; but it is a living force, as the phrase  goes, with the Frenchman, and you cannot hope to understand him unless you bear in mind always the susceptibility of his sense of honour.

These reflections were suggested to me whenever I saw the Vicomte de Steenvoorde driving in his sumptuous car or seated at the head of his own table. He represented certain important French interests in China and was said to have more power at the Quai d’Orsay than the minister himself. There was never a very cordial feeling between the pair, since the latter not unnaturally resented that one of his nationals should deal in diplomatic matters with the Chinese behind his back. The esteem in which M. de Steenvoorde was held at home was sufficiently proved by the red button that adorned the lappet of his frock coat.

The Vicomte had a fine head, somewhat bald, but not unbecomingly (une légère calvitie, as the French novelists put it and thereby rob the cruel fact of half its sting), a nose like the great Duke of Wellington’s, bright black eyes under heavy eyelids, and a small mouth hidden by an exceedingly handsome moustache the ends of which he twisted a great deal with white, richly jewelled fingers. His air of dignity was heightened by three massive chins. He had a big trunk and an imposing corpulence so that when he sat at table he sat a little away from it, as though he ate under protest and were just there for a snack; but nature had played a dirty, though not uncommon trick on him; for his legs were much too short for his body so that, though seated he had all the appearance  of a tall man, you were taken aback to find when he stood up that he was hardly of average height. It was for this reason that he made his best effect at table or when he was driving through the city in his car. Then his presence was commanding. When he waved to you or with a broad gesture took off his hat, you felt that it was incredibly affable of him to take any notice of human beings. He had all the solid respectability of those statesmen of Louis Philippe, in sober black, with their long hair and clean-shaven faces, who look out at you with portentous solemnity from the canvases of Ingres.

One often hears of people who talk like a book. M. de Steenvoorde talked like a magazine, not of course a magazine devoted to light literature and the distraction of an idle hour, but a magazine of sound learning and influential opinion. M. de Steenvoorde talked like the Revue des Deux Mondes. It was a treat, though a little fatiguing, to listen to him. He had the fluency of those who have said the same thing over and over again. He never hesitated for a word. He put everything with lucidity, an admirable choice of language, and such an authority that in his lips the obvious had all the sparkle of an epigram. He was by no means without wit. He could be very amusing at the expense of his neighbours. And when, having said something peculiarly malicious, he turned to you with an observation “Les absents ont toujours tort,” he managed to invest it with the freshness of an original aphorism. He was an ardent  Catholic, but, he flattered himself, no reactionary; a man of standing, substance, and principle.

A poor man, but ambitious (fame, the last infirmity of noble mind) he had married for her enormous dot the daughter of a sugar broker, now a painted little lady with hennaed hair, in beautiful clothes; and it must have been a sore trial to him that when he gave her his honoured name he could not also endow her with the sense of personal pride which was so powerful a motive in all his actions. For, like many great men, M. de Steenvoorde was married to a wife who was extremely unfaithful to him. But this misfortune he bore with a courage and a dignity which were absolutely characteristic. His demeanour was so perfect that his infelicity positively raised him in the eyes of his friends. He was to all an object of sympathy. He might be a cuckold, but he remained a person of quality. Whenever, indeed, Mme. de Steenvoorde took a new lover he insisted that her parents should give him a sufficient sum of money to make good the outrage to his name and honour. Common report put it at a quarter of a million francs, but with silver at its present price I believe that a business man would insist on being paid in dollars. M. de Steenvoorde is already a man of means, but before his wife reaches the canonical age he will undoubtedly be a rich one.