## XLI. The Skipper

W. Somerset Maugham

I knew he was drunk.

He was a skipper of the new school, a neat little man, clean-shaven, who might easily have passed for the commander of a submarine. In his cabin there hung a beautiful new coat with gold braid on it, the uniform which for its good service in the war has been granted to the mercantile marine, but he was shy of using it; it seemed absurd when he was no more than captain of a small boat on the Yangtze; and he stood on his bridge in a neat brown suit and a homburg hat; you could almost see yourself in his admirably polished shoes. His eyes were clear and bright and his skin was fresh. Though he had been at sea for twenty years and could not have been much less than forty he did not look more than twenty-eight. You might be sure that he was a clean-living fellow, as healthy in mind as he was in body, and the depravity of the East of which they talk had left him untouched. He had a pleasant taste in light literature and the works of E.V. Lucas adorned his book-case. In his cabin you saw a photograph of a football team in which he figured and two of a young woman  with neatly waved hair whom it was possible enough he was engaged to.

I knew he was drunk, but I did not think he was very drunk, till he asked me suddenly:

“What is democracy?”

I returned an evasive, perhaps a flippant answer, and for some minutes the conversation turned on less unseasonable topics to the occasion. Then breaking his silence, he said:

“I hope you don’t think I’m a socialist because I said, what is democracy.”

“Not at all,” I answered, “but I don’t see why you shouldn’t be a socialist.”

“I give you my word of honour I’m not,” he protested. “If I had my way I’d stand them up against a wall and shoot them.”

“What is socialism?” I asked.

“Oh, you know what I mean, Henderson and Ramsay Macdonald and all that sort of thing,” he answered. “I’m about fed up with the working man.”

“But you’re a working man yourself, I should have thought.”

He was silent for quite a long time and I thought his mind had wandered to other things. But I was wrong; he was thinking my statement over in all its bearings, for at last he said:

“Look here, I’m not a working man. Hang it all, I was at Harrow.”