## XLII. The Sights Of The Town

W. Somerset Maugham

I am not an industrious sight-seer, and when guides, professional or friendly, urge me to visit a famous monument I have a stubborn inclination to send them about their business. Too many eyes before mine have looked with awe upon Mont Blanc; too many hearts before mine have throbbed with deep emotion in the presence of the Sistine Madonna. Sights like these are like women of too generous sympathies: you feel that so many persons have found solace in their commiseration that you are embarrassed when they bid you, with what practised tact, to whisper in their discreet ears the whole tale of your distress. Supposing you were the last straw that broke the camel’s back! No, Madam, I will take my sorrows (if I cannot bear them alone, which is better) to someone who is not quite so certain of saying so exactly the right thing to comfort me. When I am in a foreign town I prefer to wander at random and if maybe I lose the rapture of a Gothic cathedral I may happen upon a little Romanesque chapel or a Renaissance doorway which I shall be able to flatter myself no one else has troubled about.

But of course this was a very extraordinary sight indeed and it would have been absurd to miss it. I came across it by pure chance. I was sauntering along a dusty road outside the city wall and by the side of it I saw a number of memorial arches. They were small and undecorated, standing not across the way but along it, close to one another, and sometimes one in front of the other, as though they had been erected by no impulse of gratitude to the departed or of admiration for the virtuous but in formal compliment, as knighthoods on the King’s birthday are conferred on prominent citizens of provincial towns. Behind this row of arches the land rose sharply and since in this part of the country the Chinese bury their dead by preference on the side of a hill it was thickly covered with graves. A trodden path led to a little tower and I followed it. It was a stumpy little tower, ten feet high perhaps, made of rough-hewn blocks of stone; it was cone shaped and the roof was like a Pierrot’s hat. It stood on a hillock, quaint and rather picturesque against the blue sky, amid the graves. At its foot were a number of rough baskets thrown about in disorder. I walked round and on one side saw an oblong hole, eighteen inches by eight, perhaps, from which hung a stout string. From the hole there came a very strange, a nauseating odour. Suddenly I understood what the queer little building was. It was a baby tower. The baskets were the baskets in which the babies had been brought, two or three of them were quite new, they could  not have been there more than a few hours. And the string? Why, if the person who brought the baby, parent or grandmother, midwife or obliging friend, were of a humane disposition and did not care to let the new-born child drop to the bottom (for underneath the tower was a deep pit), it could be let down gently by means of the string. The odour was the odour of putrefaction. A lively little boy came up to me while I stood there and made me understand that four babes had been brought to the tower that morning.

There are philosophers who look upon evil with a certain complacency, since without it, they opine, there would be no possibility of good. Without want there would be no occasion for charity, without distress of sympathy, without danger of courage, and without unhappiness of resignation. They would find in the Chinese practice of infanticide an apt illustration of their views. Except for the baby tower there would not be in this city an orphanage: the traveller would miss an interesting and curious sight, and a few poor women would have no opportunity to exercise a beautiful and touching virtue. The orphanage is shabby and bedraggled; it is situated in a poor and crowded part of the city; for the Spanish nuns who conduct it—there are but five of them—think it more convenient to live where they may be most useful; and besides, they have not the money to build commodious premises in a salubrious quarter. The institution is supported by the  work, lace and fine embroidery, which they teach the girls to do, and by the alms of the faithful.

Two nuns, the Mother Superior and another, showed me what there was to see. It was very strange to go through the whitewashed rooms, work-rooms, playrooms, dormitories, and refectory, low, cool, and bare; for you might have been in Spain, and when you passed a window you half expected to catch a glimpse of the Giralda. And it was charming to see the tenderness with which the nuns used the children. There were two hundred of them and they were, of course, orphans only in the sense that their parents had abandoned them. There was one room in which a number were playing, all of the same age, perhaps four, and all of the same size; with their black eyes and black hair, their yellow skins, they all looked so much alike that they might have been the children of a Chinese Old Woman who lived in a Shoe. They crowded round the nuns and began to romp with them. The Mother Superior had the gentlest voice I ever heard, but it became gentler still when she joked with the tiny mites. They nestled about her. She looked a very picture of charity. Some were deformed and some were diseased, some were puny and hideous, some were blind; it gave me a little shudder: I marvelled when I saw the love that filled her kind eyes and the affectionate sweetness of her smile.

Then I was taken into a parlour where I was made to eat little sweet Spanish cakes and given a glass of Manzanilla to drink, and when I told them  that I had lived in Seville a third nun was sent for, so that she might talk for a few minutes with someone who had seen the city she was born in. With pride they showed me their poor little chapel with its tawdry statue of the Blessed Virgin, its paper flowers, and its gaudy, shoddy decoration; for those dear faithful hearts, alas! were possessed of singularly bad taste. I did not care: to me there was something positively touching in that dreadful vulgarity. And when I was on the point of leaving the Mother Superior asked me whether I would care to see the babies who had come in that day. In order to persuade people to bring them they gave twenty cents for every one. Twenty cents!

“You see,” she explained, “they have often a long walk to come here and unless we give them something they won’t take the trouble.”

She took me into a little anteroom, near the entrance, and there lying on a table under a counterpane were four new-born babes. They had just been washed and put into long clothes. The counterpane was lifted off. They lay side by side, on their backs, four tiny wriggling mites, very red in the face, rather cross perhaps because they had been bathed, and very hungry. Their eyes seemed preternaturally large. They were so small, so helpless: you were forced to smile when you looked at them and at the same time you felt a lump in your throat.