## XLIV. The Normal Man

W. Somerset Maugham

I was once obliged to study anatomy, a very dreary business, since there is neither rhyme nor reason for the vast number of things you have to remember; but one remark made by my teacher, when he was helping me in the dissection of a thigh, has always remained in my memory. I was looking in vain for a certain nerve and it needed his greater skill to discover it in a place in which I had not sought it. I was aggrieved because the text book had misled me. He smiled and said:

“You see, the normal is the rarest thing in the world.”

And though he spoke of anatomy he might have spoken with equal truth of man. The casual observation impressed itself upon me as many a profounder one has not and all the years that have passed since then, with the increasing knowledge of human nature which they have brought, have only strengthened my conviction of its truth. I have met a hundred men who seemed perfectly normal only to find in them presently an idiosyncrasy so marked as to put them almost in a class by themselves. It has entertained me not a little  to discover the hidden oddity of men to all appearances most ordinary. I have been often amazed to come upon a hideous depravity in men who you would have sworn were perfectly commonplace. I have at last sought the normal man as a precious work of art. It has seemed to me that to know him would give me that peculiar satisfaction which can only be described as æsthetic.

I really thought I had found him in Robert Webb. He was a consul in one of the smaller ports and I was given a letter to him. I heard a good deal about him on my way through China and I heard nothing but good. Whenever I happened to mention that I was going to the port in which he was stationed someone was sure to say:

“You’ll like Bob Webb. He’s an awfully good chap.”

He was no less popular as an official than he was as a private person. He managed to please the merchants because he was active in their interests, without antagonising the Chinese who praised his firmness or the missionaries who approved his private life. During the revolution by his tact, decision, and courage he had not only saved from great danger the foreign population of the city in which he then was, but also many Chinese. He had come forward as a peacemaker between the warring parties and by his ingenuity had been able to bring about a satisfactory settlement. He was marked down for promotion. I certainly found him a very engaging fellow. Though he was not good-looking his appearance was pleasing;  he was tall, perhaps a little more than of average height, well covered without being fat, with a fresh complexion inclined now (for he was nearly fifty) to be somewhat bloated in the morning. This was not strange, for in China the foreigners both eat and drink a great deal too much, and Robert Webb had a healthy liking for the good things of life. He kept an excellent table. He liked eating in company and it was seldom that he did not have one or two people to tiffin or to dinner with him. His eyes were blue and friendly. He had the social gifts that give pleasure: he played the piano quite well, but he liked the music that other people liked, and he was always ready to play a one step or a waltz if others wanted to dance. With a wife, a son, and a daughter in England he could not afford to keep racing ponies, but he was keenly interested in racing; he was a good tennis player, and his bridge was better than the average. Unlike many of his colleagues he did not allow himself to be overwhelmed by his position, and in the evening at the club he was affable and unaffected. But he did not forget that he was His Britannic Majesty’s Consul and I admired the skill with which without portentousness he preserved the dignity which he thought necessary to his station. In short he had very good manners. He talked agreeably, and his interests, though somewhat ordinary, were varied. He had a nice sense of humour. He could make a joke and tell a good story. He was very happily married. His son was at Charterhouse and he showed me a photograph  of a tall, fair lad in flannels, with a frank and pleasant face. He showed me also the photograph of his daughter. It is one of the tragedies of life in China that a man must be separated for long periods from his family, and owing to the war Robert Webb had not seen his for eight years. His wife had taken the children home when the boy was eight and the girl eleven. They had meant to wait till his leave came so that they could go all together, but he was stationed in a place that suited neither of the children and he and his wife agreed that she had better take them at once. His leave was due in three years and then he could spend twelve months with them. But when the time for this came the war broke out, the Consular staff was short-handed, and it was impossible for him to leave his post. His wife did not want to be separated from young children, the journey was difficult and dangerous, no one expected the war to last so long, and one by one the years passed.

“My girl was a child when I saw her last,” he said to me when he showed me the photograph. “Now she’s a married woman.”

“When are you going on leave?” I asked him.

“Oh, my wife’s coming out now.”

“But don’t you want to see your daughter?” I asked.

He looked at the photograph again and then looked away. There was a curious look in his face, a somewhat peevish look, I thought, and he answered:

“I’ve been away from home too long now. I shall never go back.”

I leaned back in my chair, smoking my pipe. The photograph showed me a girl of nineteen with wide blue eyes and bobbed hair; it was a pretty face, open and friendly, but the most noticeable thing about it was a peculiar charm of expression. Bob Webb’s daughter was a very alluring young person. I liked that engaging audacity.

“It was rather a surprise to me when she sent along that photograph,” he said presently. “I’d always thought of her as a child. If I’d met her in the street I shouldn’t have known her.”

He gave a little laugh that was not quite natural.

“It isn’t fair.... When she was a child she used to love being petted.”

His eyes were fixed on the photograph. I seemed to see in them a very unexpected emotion.

“I can hardly realise she’s my daughter. I thought she’d come back with her mother, and then she wrote and said she was engaged.”

He looked away now and I thought there was a singular embarrassment in the down-turned corners of his mouth.

“I suppose one gets selfish out here, I felt awfully sore, but I gave a big dinner party to all the fellows here the day she was married, and we all got blind.”

He gave an apologetic laugh.

“I had to, you know,” he said awkwardly. “I had such an awful hump.”

“What’s the young man like?” I asked.

“She’s awfully in love with him. When she writes to me her letters are about nothing else.” There was an odd quaver in his voice. “It’s a bit thick to bring a child into the world and to educate her and be fond of her and all that sort of thing just for some man whom you’ve never even seen. I’ve got his photograph somewhere, I don’t know where it is. I don’t think I’d care about him very much.”

He helped himself to another whisky. He was tired. He looked old and bloated. He said nothing for a long time, and then suddenly he seemed to pull himself together.

“Well, thank God, her mother’s coming out soon.”

I don’t think he was quite a normal man after all.