## XLV. The Old Timer

W. Somerset Maugham

He was seventy-six years old. He had come to China when he was little more than a boy as second mate of a sailing vessel and had never gone home again. Since then he had been many things. For long years he had commanded a Chinese boat that ran from Shanghai to Ichang and he knew by heart every inch of the great and terrible Yangtze. He had been master of a tug at Hong-Kong and had fought in the Ever-Victorious Army. He had got a lot of loot in the Boxer troubles and had been in Hankow during the revolution when the rebels shelled the city. He had been married three times, first to a Japanese woman, then to a Chinese, and finally when he was hard upon fifty to an Englishwoman. They were all dead now and it was the Japanese who lingered in his memory. He would tell you how she arranged the flowers in the house in Shanghai, just one chrysanthemum in a vase or a sprig of cherry blossom; and he always remembered how she held a tea-cup, with both hands, delicately. He had had a number of children, but he took no interest in them; they were settled in the various ports of China, in banks and shipping  offices, and he seldom saw them. He was proud of his daughter by his English wife, the only girl he ever had, but she had married well and was gone to England. He would never see her again. The only person now for whom he had any affection was the boy who had been with him for five and forty years. He was a little wizened Chinaman, with a bald head, slow of movement and solemn. He was well over sixty. They quarrelled incessantly. The old timer would tell the boy that he was past his work and that he must get rid of him, and then the boy would say that he was tired of serving a mad foreign devil. But each knew that the other did not mean a word he said. They were old friends, old men both of them, and they would remain together till death parted them.

It was when he married his English wife that he retired from the water and put his savings into a hotel. But it was not a success. It was a little way from Shanghai, a summer resort, and it was before there were motor cars in China. He was a sociable fellow and he spent too much of his time in the bar. He was generous and he gave away as many drinks as were paid for. He also had the peculiar habit of spitting in the bath and the more squeamish of his visitors objected to it. When his last wife died he found it was she who had kept things from going to pieces and in a little while he could no longer bear up against the difficulty of his circumstances. All his savings had gone into buying the place, now heavily mortgaged, and in making up the deficit year by year. He was  obliged to sell out to a Japanese and having paid his debts at the age of sixty-eight found himself without a penny. But, by God, sir, he was a sailor. One of the companies running boats up the Yangtze, gave him a berth as chief officer—he had no master’s certificate—and he returned to the river which he knew so well. For eight years he had been on the same run.

And now he stood on the bridge of his trim little ship, not so large as a penny steamer on the Thames, a gallant figure, upright and slender as when he was a lad, in a neat blue suit and the company’s cap set jauntily on his white hair, with his pointed beard nattily trimmed. Seventy-six years old. It is a great age. With his head thrown back, his glasses in his hand, the Chinese pilot by his side, he watched the vast expanse of the winding river. A fleet of junks with their high sterns, their square sails set, descended on the swift current, and the rowers chanted a monotonous chant as they worked at their creaking oars. The yellow water in the setting sun was lovely with pale soft tints, it was as smooth as glass; and along the flat banks the trees and the huts of a bedraggled village, hazy in the heat of the day, were now silhouetted sharply, like the shadows of a shadowgraph, against the pale sky. He raised his head as he heard the cry of wild geese and he saw them flying high above him in a great V to what far lands he knew not. In the distance against the sunlight stood a solitary hill crowned with temples. Because he had seen  all this so often it affected him strangely. The dying day made him think, he knew not why, of his long past and of his great age. He regretted nothing.

“By George,” he muttered, “I’ve had a fine life.”