## XLVI. The Plain

W. Somerset Maugham

The incident was of course perfectly trivial, and it could be very easily explained; but I was surprised that the eyes of the spirit could blind me so completely to what was visible to the eyes of sense. I was taken aback to find how completely one could be at the mercy of the laws of association. Day after day I had marched among the uplands and to-day I knew that I must come to the great plain in which lay the ancient city whither I was bound; but when I set out in the morning there was no sign that I approached it. Indeed the hills seemed no less sheer and when I reached the top of one, thinking to see the valley below, it was only to see before me one steeper and taller yet. Beyond, climbing steadily, I could see the white causeway that I had followed so long, shining in the sunlight as it skirted the brow of a rugged tawny rock. The sky was blue and in the west hung here and there little clouds like fishing boats becalmed towards evening off Dungeness. I trudged along, mounting all the time, alert for the prospect that awaited me, if not round this bend, then round the next, and at last, suddenly, when I was thinking  of other things, I came upon it. But it was no Chinese landscape that I saw, with its padi fields, its memorial arches and its fantastic temples, with its farmhouses set in a bamboo grove and its wayside inns where under the banyan trees the poor coolies may rest them of their weary loads; it was the valley of the Rhine, the broad plain all golden in the sunset, the valley of the Rhine with its river, a silvery streak, running through it, and the distant towers of Worms; it was the great plain upon which my young eyes rested, when, a student in Heidelberg, after walking long among the fir-clad hills above the old city, I came out upon a clearing. And because I was there first conscious of beauty; because there I knew the first glow of the acquisition of knowledge (each book I read was an extraordinary adventure); because there I first knew the delight of conversation (oh, those wonderful commonplaces which each boy discovers as though none had discovered them before); because of the morning stroll in the sunny Anlage, the cakes and coffee which refreshed my abstemious youth at the end of a strenuous walk, the leisurely evenings on the castle terrace, with the smoky blue haze over the tumbled roofs of the old town below me; because of Goethe and Heine and Beethoven and Wagner and (why not?) Strauss with his waltzes, and the beer-garden where the band played and girls with yellow plaits walked sedately; because of all these things—recollections which have all the force of the appeal of sense—to me not only does the word plain mean  everywhere and exclusively the valley of the Rhine; but the only symbol for happiness I know is a wide prospect all golden in the setting sun, with a shining stream of silver running through it, like the path of life or like the ideal that guides you through it, and far away the grey towers of an ancient town.