## XVI. The Nun

W. Somerset Maugham

The convent lay white and cool among the trees on the top of a hill; and as I stood at the gateway, waiting to be let in, I looked down at the tawny river glittering in the sunlight and at the rugged mountains beyond. It was the Mother Superior who received me, a placid, sweet-faced lady with a soft voice and an accent which told me that she came from the South of France. She showed me the orphans who were in her charge, busy at the lace-making which the nuns had taught them, smiling shyly; and she showed me the hospital where lay soldiers suffering from dysentery, typhoid, and malaria. They were squalid and dirty. The Mother Superior told me she was a Basque. The mountains that she looked out on from the convent windows reminded her of the Pyrenees. She had been in China for twenty years. She said that it was hard sometimes never to see the sea; here on the great river they were a thousand miles away from it; and because I knew the country where she was born she talked to me a little of the fine roads that led over the mountains—ah, they did not have them here in China—and the vineyards and  the pleasant villages with their running streams that nestled at the foot of the hills. But the Chinese were good people. The orphans were very quick with their fingers and they were industrious; the Chinese sought them as wives because they had learnt useful things in the convent, and even after they were married they could earn a little money by their needles. And the soldiers too, they were not so bad as people said; after all les pauvres petits, they did not want to be soldiers; they would much sooner be at home working in the fields. Those whom the sisters had nursed through illness were not devoid of gratitude. Sometimes when they were coming along in a chair and overtook two nuns who had been in the town to buy things and were laden with parcels, they would offer to take their parcels in the chair. Au fond, they were not bad hearted.

“They do not go so far as to get out and let the nuns ride in their stead?” I asked.

“A nun in their eyes is only a woman,” she smiled indulgently. “You must not ask from people more than they are capable of giving.”

How true, and yet how hard to remember!