## XVII. Henderson

W. Somerset Maugham

It was very hard to look at him without a chuckle, for his appearance immediately told you all about him. When you saw him at the club, reading The London Mercury or lounging at the bar with a gin and bitters at his elbow (no cocktails for him) his unconventionality attracted your attention; but you recognised him at once, for he was a perfect specimen of his class. His unconventionality was exquisitely conventional. Everything about him was according to standard, from his square-toed, serviceable boots to his rather long, untidy hair. He wore a loose low collar that showed a thick neck and loose, somewhat shabby but well-cut clothes. He always smoked a short briar pipe. He was very humorous on the subject of cigarettes. He was a biggish fellow, athletic, with fine eyes and a pleasant voice. He talked fluently. His language was often obscene, not because his mind was impure, but because his bent was democratic. As you guessed by the look of him he drank beer (not in fact but in the spirit) with Mr. Chesterton and walked the Sussex downs with Mr. Hilaire Belloc. He had played football at Oxford, but with Mr. Wells  he despised the ancient seat of learning. He looked upon Mr. Bernard Shaw as a little out of date, but he had still great hopes of Mr. Granville Barker. He had had many serious talks with Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Webb, and he was a member of the Fabian Society. The only point where he touched upon the same world as the frivolous was his appreciation of the Russian Ballet. He wrote rugged poems about prostitutes, dogs, lamp-posts, Magdalen College, public houses and country vicarages. He held English, French, and Americans in scorn; but on the other hand (he was no misanthropist) he would not listen to a word in dispraise of Tamils, Bengalis, Kaffirs, Germans, or Greeks. At the club they thought him rather a wild fellow.

“A socialist, you know,” they said.

But he was junior partner in a well-known and respectable firm, and one of the peculiarities of China is that your position excuses your idiosyncrasies. It may be notorious that you beat your wife, but if you are manager of a well-established bank the world will be civil to you and ask you to dinner. So when Henderson announced his socialistic opinions they merely laughed. When he first came to Shanghai he refused to use the jinrickshaw. It revolted his sense of personal dignity that a man, a human being no different from himself, should drag him hither and thither. So he walked. He swore it was good exercise and it kept him fit; besides, it gave him a thirst he wouldn’t sell for twenty dollars, and he drank his  beer with gusto. But Shanghai is very hot and sometimes he was in a hurry so now and again he was obliged to use the degrading vehicle. It made him feel uncomfortable, but it was certainly convenient. Presently he came to use it frequently, but he always thought of the boy between the shafts as a man and a brother.

He had been three years in Shanghai when I saw him. We had spent the morning in the Chinese city, going from shop to shop and our rickshaw boys were hot with sweat; every minute or two they wiped their foreheads with ragged handkerchiefs. We were bound now for the club and had nearly reached it when Henderson remembered that he wanted to get Mr. Bertrand Russell’s new book, which had just reached Shanghai. He stopped the boys and told them to go back.

“Don’t you think we might leave it till after luncheon?” I said. “Those fellows are sweating like pigs.”

“It’s good for them,” he answered. “You mustn’t ever pay attention to the Chinese. You see, we’re only here because they fear us. We’re the ruling race.”

I did not say anything. I did not even smile.

“The Chinese always have had masters and they always will.”

A passing car separated us for a moment and when he came once more abreast of me he had put the matter aside.

“You men who live in England don’t know what it means to us when new books get out here,” he  remarked. “I read everything that Bertrand Russell writes. Have you seen the last one?”

“Roads to Freedom? Yes. I read it before I left England.”

“I’ve read several reviews. I think he’s got hold of some interesting ideas.”

I think Henderson was going to enlarge on them, but the rickshaw boy passed the turning he should have taken.

“Round the corner, you bloody fool,” cried Henderson, and to emphasize his meaning he gave the man a smart kick on the bottom.