## XVIII. Dawn

W. Somerset Maugham

It is night still and the courtyard of the inn is rich with deep patches of darkness. Lanterns throw fitful lights on the coolies busily preparing their loads for the journey. They shout and laugh, angrily argue with one another, and vociferously quarrel. I go out into the street and walk along preceded by a boy with a lantern. Here and there behind closed doors cocks are crowing. But in many of the shops the shutters are down already and the indefatigable people are beginning their long day. Here an apprentice is sweeping the floor, and there a man is washing his hands and face. A wick burning in a cup of oil is all his light. I pass a tavern where half a dozen persons are seated at an early meal. The ward gate is closed, but a watchman lets me through a postern and I walk along a wall by a sluggish stream in which are reflected the bright stars. Then I reach the great gate of the city, and this time one half of it is open; I pass out, and there, awaiting me, all ghostly, is the dawn. The day and the long road and the open country lie before me.

Put out the lantern. Behind me the darkness  pales to a mist of purple and I know that soon this will kindle to a rosy flush. I can make out the causeway well enough and the water in the padi fields reflects already a wan and shadowy light. It is no longer night, but it is not yet day. This is the moment of most magical beauty, when the hills and the valleys, the trees and the water, have a mystery which is not of earth. For when once the sun has risen, for a time the world is very cheerless, the light is cold and grey like the light in a painter’s studio, and there are no shadows to diaper the ground with a coloured pattern. Skirting the brow of a wooded hill I look down on the padi fields. But to call them fields is too grandiose. They are for the most part crescent shaped patches built on the slope of a hill, one below the other, so that they can be flooded. Firs and bamboos grow in the hollows as though placed there by a skilful gardener with a sense of ordered beauty to imitate formally the abandon of nature. In this moment of enchantment you do not look upon the scene of humble toil, but on the pleasure gardens of an emperor. Here throwing aside the cares of state, he might come in yellow silk embroidered with dragons, with jewelled bracelets on his wrists, to sport with a concubine so beautiful that men in after ages felt it natural if a dynasty was destroyed for her sake.

And now with the increasing day a mist arises from the padi fields and climbs half way up the gentle hills. You may see a hundred pictures of the sight before you, for it is one that the old  masters of China loved exceedingly. The little hills, wooded to their summit, with a line of fir trees along the crest, a firm silhouette against the sky, the little hills rise behind one another, and the varying level of the mist, forming a pattern, gives the composition a completeness which yet allows the imagination ample scope. The bamboos grow right down to the causeway, their thin leaves shivering in the shadow of a breeze, and they grow with a high-bred grace so that they look like groups of ladies in the Great Ming dynasty resting languidly by the way-side. They have been to some temple, and their silken dresses are richly wrought with flowers and in their hair are precious ornaments of jade. They rest there for a while on their small feet, their golden lilies, gossiping elegantly, for do they not know that the best use of culture is to talk nonsense with distinction; and in a moment slipping back into their chairs they will be gone. But the road turns and my God, the bamboos, the Chinese bamboos, transformed by some magic of the mist, look just like the hops of a Kentish field. Do you remember the sweet smelling hop-fields and the fat green meadows, the railway line that runs along the sea and the long shining beach and the desolate greyness of the English Channel? The seagull flies over the wintry coldness and the melancholy of its cry is almost unbearable.