## XXIII. God’s Truth

W. Somerset Maugham

Birch was the agent of the B.A.T. and he was stationed in a little town of the interior with streets which, after it had rained, were a foot deep in mud. Then you had to get right inside your cart to prevent yourself from being splashed from head to foot. The roadway, worn to pieces by the ceaseless traffic, was so full of holes that the breath was jolted out of your body as you jogged along at a foot pace. There were two or three streets of shops, but he knew by heart everything that was in them; and there were interminable winding alleys which presented a monotonous expanse of wall broken only by solid closed doors. These were the Chinese houses and they were as impenetrable to one of his colour as the life which surrounded him. He was very homesick. He had not spoken to a white man for three months.

His day’s work was over. Since he had nothing else to do he went for the only walk there was. He went out of the city gate and strolled along the ragged road, with its deep ruts, into the country. The valley was bounded by wild, barren mountains and they seemed to shut him  in. He felt immeasurably far away from civilisation. He knew he could not afford to surrender to that sense of utter loneliness which beset him, but it was more of an effort than usual to keep a stiff upper lip. He was very nearly at the end of his tether. Suddenly he saw a white man riding towards him on a pony. Behind came slowly a Chinese cart in which presumably were his belongings. Birch guessed at once that this was a missionary going down to one of the treaty-ports from his station further up country, and his heart leaped with joy. At last he would have some one to talk to. He hurried his steps. His lassitude left him. He was all alert. He was almost running when he came up to the rider.

“Hulloa,” he said, “where have you sprung from?”

The rider stopped and named a distant town.

“I am on my way down to take the train,” he added.

“You’d better put up with me for the night. I haven’t seen a white man for three months. There’s lots of room at my place. B.A.T. you know.”

“B.A.T.,” said the rider. His face changed and his eyes, before friendly and smiling, grew hard. “I don’t want to have anything to do with you.”

He gave his pony a kick and started on, but Birch seized the bridle. He could not believe his ears.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t have anything to do with a man who trades in tobacco. Let go that bridle.”

“But I’ve not spoken to a white man for three months.”

“That’s no business of mine. Let go that bridle.”

He gave his pony another kick. His lips were obstinately set and he looked at Birch sternly. Then Birch lost his temper. He clung to the bridle as the pony moved on and began to curse the missionary. He hurled at him every term of abuse he could think of. He swore. He was horribly obscene. The missionary did not answer, but urged his pony on. Birch seized the missionary’s leg and jerked it out of the stirrup; the missionary nearly fell off and he clung in a somewhat undignified fashion to the pony’s mane. Then he half slipped, half tumbled to the ground. The cart had come up to them by now and stopped. The two Chinese who were sitting in it looked at the white men with indolent curiosity. The missionary was livid with rage.

“You’ve assaulted me. I’ll have you fired for that.”

“You can go to hell,” said Birch. “I haven’t seen a white man for three months and you won’t even speak to me. Do you call yourself a Christian?”

“What is your name?”

“Birch is my name and be damned to you.”

“I shall report you to your chief. Now stand back and let me get on my journey.”

Birch clenched his hands.

“Get a move on or I’ll break every bone in your body.”

The missionary mounted, gave his pony a sharp cut with the whip, and cantered away. The Chinese cart lumbered slowly after. But when Birch was left alone his anger left him and a sob broke unwillingly from his lips. The barren mountains were less hard than the heart of man. He turned and walked slowly back to the little walled city.