## XXIV. Romance

W. Somerset Maugham

All day I had been dropping down the river. This was the river up which Chang Chien, seeking its source, had sailed for many days till he came to a city where he saw a girl spinning and a youth leading an ox to the water. He asked what place this was and in reply the girl gave him her shuttle telling him to show it on his return to the astrologer Yen Chün-ping, who would thus know where he had been. He did so and the astrologer at once recognised the shuttle as that of the Spinning Damsel, further declaring that on the day and at the hour when Chang Chien received the shuttle he had noticed a wandering star intrude itself between the Spinning Damsel and the Cowherd. So Chang Chien knew that he had sailed upon the bosom of the Milky Way.

I, however, had not been so far. All day, as for seven days before, my five rowers, standing up, had rowed, and there rang still in my ears the monotonous sound of their oars against the wooden pin that served as rowlock. Now and again the water became very shallow and there was a jar and a jolt as we scraped along the stones  of the river bed. Then two or three of the rowers turned up their blue trousers to the hip and let themselves over the side. Shouting they dragged the flat-bottomed boat over the shoal. Now and again we came to a rapid, of no great consequence when compared with the turbulent rapids of the Yangtze, but sufficiently swift to call for trackers to pull the junks that were going up stream; and we, going down, passed through them with many shouts, shot the foaming breakers and presently reached water as smooth as any lake.

Now it was night and my crew were asleep, forward, huddled together in such shelter as they had been able to rig up when we moored at dusk. I sat on my bed. Bamboo matting spread over three wooden arches made the sorry cabin which for a week had served me as parlour and bedroom. It was closed at one end by matchboarding so roughly put together that there were large chinks between each board. The bitter wind blew through them. It was on the other side of this that the crew—fine sturdy fellows—rowed by day and slept by night, joined then by the steersman who had stood from dawn to dusk, in a tattered blue gown and a wadded coat of faded grey, a black turban round his head, at the long oar which was his helm. There was no furniture but my bed, a shallow dish like an enormous soup-plate in which burned charcoal, for it was cold, a basket containing my clothes which I used as a table, and a hurricane lamp which hung from one of the arches and swayed slightly with the motion of the water.  The cabin was so low that I, a person of no great height (I comfort myself with Bacon’s observation that with tall men it is as with tall houses, the top story is commonly the least furnished) could only just stand upright. One of the sleepers began to snore more loudly, and perhaps he awoke two of the others, for I heard the sound of speaking; but presently this ceased, the snorer was quiet, and all about me once more was silence.

Then suddenly I had a feeling that here, facing me, touching me almost, was the romance I sought. It was a feeling like no other, just as specific as the thrill of art; but I could not for the life of me tell what it was that had given me just then that rare emotion.

In the course of my life I have been often in situations which, had I read of them, would have seemed to me sufficiently romantic; but it is only in retrospect, comparing them with my ideas of what was romantic, that I have seen them as at all out of the ordinary. It is only by an effort of the imagination, making myself as it were a spectator of myself acting a part, that I have caught anything of the precious quality in circumstances which in others would have seemed to me instinct with its fine flower. When I have danced with an actress whose fascination and whose genius made her the idol of my country, or wandered through the halls of some great house in which was gathered all that was distinguished by lineage or intellect that London could show, I have only recognized afterwards that here perhaps, though  in somewhat Ouidaesque a fashion, was romance. In battle, when, myself in no great danger, I was able to watch events with a thrill of interest, I had not the phlegm to assume the part of a spectator. I have sailed through the night, under the full moon, to a coral island in the Pacific, and then the beauty and the wonder of the scene gave me a conscious happiness, but only later the exhilarating sense that romance and I had touched fingers. I heard the flutter of its wings when once, in the bedroom of a hotel in New York, I sat round a table with half a dozen others and made plans to restore an ancient kingdom whose wrongs have for a century inspired the poet and the patriot; but my chief feeling was a surprised amusement that through the hazards of war I found myself engaged in business so foreign to my bent. The authentic thrill of romance has seized me under circumstances which one would have thought far less romantic, and I remember that I knew it first one evening when I was playing cards in a cottage on the coast of Brittany. In the next room an old fisherman lay dying and the women of the house said that he would go out with the tide. Without a storm was raging and it seemed fit for the last moments of that aged warrior of the seas that his going should be accompanied by the wild cries of the wind as it hurled itself against the shuttered windows. The waves thundered upon the tortured rocks. I felt a sudden exultation, for I knew that here was romance.

And now the same exultation seized me, and once more romance, like a bodily presence, was before me. But it had come so unexpectedly that I was intrigued. I could not tell whether it had crept in among the shadows that the lamp threw on the bamboo matting or whether it was wafted down the river that I saw through the opening of my cabin. Curious to know what were the elements that made up the ineffable delight of the moment I went out to the stern of the boat. Alongside were moored half a dozen junks, going up river, for their masts were erect; and everything was silent in them. Their crews were long since asleep. The night was not dark, for though it was cloudy the moon was full, but the river in that veiled light was ghostly. A vague mist blurred the trees on the further bank. It was an enchanting sight, but there was in it nothing unaccustomed and what I sought was not there. I turned away. But when I returned to my bamboo shelter the magic which had given it so extraordinary a character was gone. Alas, I was like a man who should tear a butterfly to pieces in order to discover in what its beauty lay. And yet, as Moses descending from Mount Sinai wore on his face a brightness from his converse with the God of Israel, my little cabin, my dish of charcoal, my lamp, even my camp bed, had still about them something of the thrill which for a moment was mine. I could not see them any more quite indifferently, because for a moment I had seen them magically.