## XXVIII. The Dining-Room

W. Somerset Maugham

It was an immense room in an immense house. When it was built, building was cheap, and the merchant princes of that day built magnificently. Money was made easily then and life was luxurious. It was not hard to make a fortune and a man, almost before he had reached middle age, could return to England and live the rest of his days no less splendidly in a fine house in Surrey. It is true that the population was hostile and it was always possible that a riot might make it necessary for him to fly for his life, but this only added a spice to the comfort of his existence; and when danger threatened it was fairly certain that a gunboat would arrive in time to offer protection or refuge. The foreign community, largely allied by marriage, was sociable, and its members entertained one another lavishly. They gave pompous dinner parties, they danced together, and they played whist. Work was not so pressing that it was impossible to spend now and again a few days in the interior shooting duck. It was certainly very hot in summer, and after a few years a man was apt to take things easily, but the rest of the year was only warm, with blue skies  and a balmy air, and life was very pleasant. There was a certain liberty of behaviour and no one was thought the worse of, so long as the matter was not intruded on the notice of the ladies, if he had to live with him a little bright-eyed Chinese girl. When he married he sent her away with a present and if there were children they were provided for at a Eurasian school in Shanghai.

But this agreeable life was a thing of the past. The port lived on its export of tea and the change of taste from Chinese to Ceylon had ruined it. For thirty years the port had lain a-dying. Before that the consul had had two vice-consuls to help him in his work, but now he was able to do it easily by himself. He generally managed to get a game of golf in the afternoon and he was seldom too busy for a rubber of bridge. Nothing remained of the old splendour but the enormous hongs, and they were mostly empty. The tea merchants, such as were left of them, turned their hands to all manner of side lines in the effort to make both ends meet. But the effort was listless. Everyone in the port seemed old. It was no place for a young man.

And in the room in which I sat I seemed to read the history of the past and the history of the man I was awaiting. It was Sunday morning and when I arrived after two days on a coasting steamer, he was in church. I tried to construct a portrait of him from the room. There was something pathetic about it. It had the magnificence of a past generation, but a magnificence run to seed,  and its tidiness, I know not why, seemed to emphasize a shame-faced poverty. On the floor was a huge Turkey carpet which in the seventies must have cost a great deal of money, but now it was quite threadbare. The immense mahogany table, at which so many good dinners had been eaten, with such a luxury of wine, was so highly polished that you could see your face in it. It suggested port, old and tawny, and prosperous, red faced gentlemen with side whiskers discussing the antics of the mountebank Disraeli. The walls were of that sombre red which was thought suitable for a dining room when dinner was a respectable function and they were heavy with pictures. Here were the father and mother of my host, an elderly gentleman with grey whiskers and a bald head and a stern dark old lady with her hair dressed in the fashion of the Empress Eugenie, and there his grandfather in a stock and his grandmother in a mob cap. The mahogany sideboard with a mirror at the back, was laden with plated salvers, and a tea service, and much else, while in the middle of the dining table stood an immense épergne. On the black marble chimney piece was a black marble clock, flanked by black marble vases, and in the four corners of the room were cabinets filled with all manner of plated articles. Here and there great palms in pots spread their stiff foliage. The chairs were of massive mahogany, stuffed, and covered with faded red leather, and on each side of the fireplace was an arm-chair. The room, large though it was, seemed crowded, but because  everything was rather shabby it gave you an impression of melancholy. All those things seemed to have a sad life of their own, but a life subdued, as though the force of circumstances had proved too much for them. They had no longer the strength to struggle against fate, but they clung together with a tremulous eagerness as though they had a vague feeling that only so could they retain their significance, and I felt that it was only a little time before the end came when they would lie haphazard, in an unlovely confusion, with little numbers pasted on them, in the dreary coldness of an auction room.