## XXXII. The Fannings

W. Somerset Maugham

They lived in a fine square house, with a verandah all round it, on the top of a low hill that faced the river, and below them, a little to the right, was another fine square house which was the customs; and to this, for he was deputy commissioner, Fanning went every day. The city was five miles away and on the river bank was nothing but a small village which had sprung up to provide the crews of junks with what gear or food they needed. In the city were a few missionaries but these they saw seldom and the only foreigners in the village besides themselves were the tide-waiters. One of these had been an able seaman and the other was an Italian; they both had Chinese wives. The Fannings asked them to tiffin on Christmas day and on the King’s Birthday; but otherwise their relations with them were purely official. The steamers stayed but half an hour, so they never saw the captains or the chief engineers who were the only white men on them, and for five months in the year the water was too low for steamers to pass. Oddly enough it was then they saw most foreigners, for it happened now and again that a  traveller, a merchant or consular official perhaps, more often a missionary, going up stream by junk, tied up for the night, and then the commissioner went down to the river and asked him to dine. They lived very much alone.

Fanning was extremely bald, a short, thickset man, with a snub nose and a very black moustache. He was a martinet, aggressive, brusque, with a bullying manner; and he never spoke to a Chinese without raising his voice to a tone of rasping command. Though he spoke fluent Chinese, when one of his “boys” did something to displease him he abused him roundly in English. He made a disagreeable impression on you till you discovered that his aggressiveness was merely an armour put on to conceal a painful shyness. It was a triumph of his will over his disposition. His gruffness was an almost absurd attempt to persuade those with whom he came in contact that he was not frightened of them. You felt that no one was more surprised than himself that he was taken seriously. He was like those little grotesque figures that children blow out like balloons and you had an idea that he went in lively fear of bursting and then everyone would see that he was but a hollow bladder. It was his wife who was constantly alert to persuade him that he was a man of iron and when the explosion was over she would say to him:

“You know, you frighten me when you get in those passions,” or “I think I’d better say something to the boy, he’s quite shaken by what you said.”

Then Fanning would puff himself up and smile indulgently. When a visitor came she would say:

“The Chinese are terrified of my husband, but of course they respect him. They know it’s no good trying any of their nonsense with him.”

“Well, I ought to know how to treat them,” he would answer with beetling brows, “I’ve been over twenty years in the country.”

Mrs. Fanning was a little plain woman, wizened like a crab-apple, with a big nose and bad teeth. She was always very untidy, her hair, going a little grey, was continually on the point of falling down. Now and then, in the midst of conversation, she would abstractedly take out a pin or two, give it a shake, and without troubling to look in the glass insecurely fix its few thin wisps. She had a love of brilliant colour and she wore fantastic clothes which she and the sewing amah ran up together from the fashion papers; but when she dressed she could never find anything that went with anything else and she looked like a woman who had been rescued from shipwreck and clothed in any oddments that could be found. She was a caricature, and you could not help smiling when you looked at her. The only attractive thing she had was a soft and extremely musical voice and she spoke with a little drawl which came from I know not what part of England. The Fannings had two sons, one of nine and one of seven, and they completed the solitary household. They were attractive children, affectionate and demonstrative, and it was pleasant to see how united the  family was. They had little jokes together that amused them hugely, and they played pranks with one another as though not one of them was more than ten. Though they had so much of one another’s society it really looked as though they could not bear to be out of one another’s sight, and each day when Fanning went to his office his boys would hardly let him go and each day when he returned they greeted him with extravagant delight. They had no fear of his gruff bluster.

And presently you discovered that the centre of this concord was that little, grotesque, ugly woman; it was not chance that kept the family united, nor peculiarly agreeable dispositions, but a passion of love in her. From the moment she got up in the morning till the time she went to bed her thoughts were occupied with the welfare of the three male persons who were in her charge. Her active mind was busy all the time with schemes for their happiness. I do not think a thought of self ever entered her untidy head. She was a miracle of unselfishness. It was really hardly human. She never had a hard word for anyone. She was very hospitable and it was she who caused her husband to go down to the houseboats and invite travellers to come up to dinner. But I do not think she wanted them for her own sake. She was quite happy in her solitude, but she thought her husband enjoyed a talk with strangers.

“I don’t want him to get in a rut,” she said. “My poor husband, he misses his billiards and his  bridge. It’s very hard for a man to have no one to talk to but a woman.”

Every evening when the children had been put to bed they played piquet. She had no head for cards, poor dear, and she always made mistakes, but when her husband upbraided her, she said:

“You can’t expect everyone to be as clever as you are.”

And because she so obviously meant what she said he could not find it in his heart to be angry with her. Then when the commissioner was tired of beating her they would turn on the gramophone and sitting side by side listen in silence to the latest songs from the musical comedies of London. You may turn up your nose. They lived ten thousand miles away from England and it was their only tie with the home they loved: it made them feel not quite so utterly cut off from civilisation. And presently they would talk of what they would do with the children when they grew up; soon it would be time to send them home to school and perhaps a pang passed through the little woman’s gentle heart.

“It’ll be hard for you, Bertie, when they go,” she said. “But perhaps we shall be moved then to some place where there’s a club and then you’ll be able to go and play bridge in the evenings.”