## XXXVI. Democracy

W. Somerset Maugham

It was a cold night. I had finished my dinner, and my boy was making up my bed while I sat over a brazier of burning charcoal. Most of the coolies had already settled themselves for the night in a room next to mine and through the thin matchboarding of the wall that separated us I heard a couple of them talk. Another party of travellers had arrived about an hour before and the small inn was full. Suddenly there was a commotion and going to the door of my room to look out I saw three sedan chairs enter the courtyard. They were set down in front of me and from the first stepped out a stout Chinese of imposing aspect. He wore a long black robe of figured silk, lined with squirrel, and on his head a square fur cap. He seemed taken aback when he saw me at the door of the principal guest chamber and turning to the landlord addressed him in authoritative tones. It appeared that he was an official and he was much annoyed to find that the best apartment in the inn was already taken. He was told that but one room was available. It was small, with pallets covered with tumbled straw lining the walls, and was used as a rule only by  coolies. He flung into a violent passion and on a sudden arose a scene of the greatest animation. The official, his two companions, and his bearers exclaimed against the indignity which it was sought to thrust upon him, while the landlord and the servants of the inn argued, expostulated, and entreated. The official stormed and threatened. For a few minutes the courtyard, so silent before, rang with the angry shouts; then, subsiding as quickly as it began, the hubbub ceased and the official went into the vacant room. Hot water was brought by a bedraggled servant, and presently the landlord followed with great bowls of steaming rice. All was once more quiet.

An hour later I went into the yard to stretch my legs for five minutes before going to bed and somewhat to my surprise, I came upon the stout official, a little while ago so pompous and self-important, seated at a table in the front of the inn with the most ragged of my coolies. They were chatting amicably and the official quietly smoked a water-pipe. He had made all that to-do to give himself face, but having achieved his object was satisfied, and feeling the need of conversation had accepted the company of any coolie without a thought of social distinction. His manner was perfectly cordial and there was in it no trace of condescension. The coolie talked with him on an equal footing. It seemed to me that this was true democracy. In the East man is man’s equal in a sense you find neither in Europe nor in America. Position and wealth put a man in a  relation of superiority to another that is purely adventitious, and they are no bar to sociability.

When I lay in my bed I asked myself why in the despotic East there should be between men an equality so much greater than in the free and democratic West, and was forced to the conclusion that the explanation must be sought in the cess-pool. For in the West we are divided from our fellows by our sense of smell. The working man is our master, inclined to rule us with an iron hand, but it cannot be denied that he stinks: none can wonder at it, for a bath in the dawn when you have to hurry to your work before the factory bell rings is no pleasant thing, nor does heavy labour tend to sweetness; and you do not change your linen more than you can help when the week’s washing must be done by a sharp-tongued wife. I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stink he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of a sensitive nostril. The matutinal tub divides the classes more effectually than birth, wealth, or education. It is very significant that those novelists who have risen from the ranks of labour are apt to make it a symbol of class prejudice, and one of the most distinguished writers of our day always marks the rascals of his entertaining stories by the fact that they take a bath every morning. Now, the Chinese live all their lives in the proximity of very nasty smells. They do not notice them. Their nostrils are blunted to the odours that assail the Europeans and so they can move on an equal footing with the  tiller of the soil, the coolie, and the artisan. I venture to think that the cess-pool is more necessary to democracy than parliamentary institutions. The invention of the “sanitary convenience” has destroyed the sense of equality in men. It is responsible for class hatred much more than the monopoly of capital in the hands of the few.

It is a tragic thought that the first man who pulled the plug of a water-closet with that negligent gesture rang the knell of democracy.