On a Chinese Screen, by W. S. Maugham. London: Heinemann, New York: Doran, 1923.

[*The Nation and the Athenæum*]

In the East, and especially in China, there is a strange thing: there is, among many poets and sages, content. We fear the West frequently mistakes this content for indifference, for lack of enterprise, for some drugged sleep. It is not that. It is that, for these men of the older civilizations, the Golden Age is not of the past or of the future, but of the present. Their serenity springs not from a dulled acquiescence in miserable conditions, but from a power of withdrawal which may be selfish, is often cruel, but, unlike the callous selfishness of the West, does at least give to its possessor harmony and spiritual peace. The Chinese are, in a sense, non-Christian Quakers — their poets and sages are so independent of actuality, so profoundly convinced that three quarters of what we think important does not matter, that they sit, calm as their own Buddhas, above the turmoil of a world of illusion, disappointment, and decay.

Some of this Mr. Maugham paints on his screen. He shows us much activity — the hearty energy of bankers and merchants; the trivial self-importance of consuls, soldiers, and officials; the dull monotony of the laboring men and women; the persistent, often hideously mistaken, enterprises of missionaries; the great movements of nature in that huge land whose geography is as startling as its history. But above all these we see the ancient, noble spirit of that great people who, before there were religious orders in Christendom, learned that activity by itself can be altogether futile, and that being, not action, is the end of the rational man.

That conviction is not always held easily, and is never held lightly; and its apprehension has not been made easier, except to haughty souls, by the incursions into ancient China of the vehement missionaries of action from Europe and America. Mr. Maugham is severe with most of the foreigners in China, except such as share the spirit of contemplation — Catholic missionaries, nuns, and a few scholars. That he is hardest on the Americans, especially the American Protestant missionary, need not give the English any satisfaction; it probably means that our cousins are more in evidence, not that we are less mischievous than they.

Throughout the book we get an extraordinary picture of the loneliness of the average European resident. Men live in China, trade with Chinamen, see hardly anyone but Chinamen for years, and never learn more of the language than is needed to order food or drink, and curse their servants. This practice contrasts violently with that of early mediæval travelers, or with that of the great Jesuit and Dominican missions; then a missionary's first business was to make his faith intelligible and acceptable to the people, whose habits he adopted, and whose manner he respected. Now the Protestant missionaries, at least, appear to be concerned first with a futile effort to Westernize the Chinamen and give to them a civilization infinitely cheaper, more vulgar, and less rational than theirs. Mr. Maugham tells of houses in which you will see nothing which you could not find in a middle-class home in Kidderminster, or of apartments which simulate, with a depressing success, the most tedious taste of Kensington. His satire at the expense of the cultured official is quite as severe as his strictures on the ignorant and uncultivated. Men and women, with the opportunity of studying one of the most beautiful traditions in the world, spend bored months in an industrious effort to reproduce the conditions of Hammersmith or Brooklyn, of Mayfair or Fifth Avenue.