**The Casuarina Tree**

W. Somerset Maugham

Of the Casuarina tree they say that if you take in a boat with you a piece of it, be it ever so small, contrary winds will arise to impede your journey or storms to imperil your life. They say also that if you stand in its shadow by the light of the full moon you will hear, whispered mysteriously in its dark ramage, the secrets of the future. These facts have never been disputed; but they say also that when in the wide estuaries the mangrove has in due time reclaimed the swampy land from the water the Casuarina tree plants itself and in its turn settles, solidifies and fertilises the soil till it is ripe for a more varied and luxuriant growth; and then, having done its work, dies down before the ruthless encroachment of the myriad denizens of the jungle. It occurred to me that The Casuarina Tree would not make so bad a title for a collection of stories about the English people who live in the Malay Peninsula and in Borneo; for I fancied that they, coming after the pioneers who had opened these lands to Western civilisation, were destined in just such a manner, now that their work was accomplished and the country was peaceable, orderly and sophisticated, to give way to a more varied, but less adventurous, generation; and I was excessively disconcerted on enquiry to learn that there was not a word of truth in what I had been told. It is very hard to find a title for a volume of short stories; to give it the name of the first is to evade the difficulty and deceives the purchaser into thinking that he is about to read a novel; a good title should, however vaguely, have a reference to all the stories gathered together; the best titles have already been used. I was in a quandary. But I reflected that a symbol (as Master Francis Kabelais pointed out in a diverting chapter) can symbolise anything; and I remembered that the Casuarina tree stood along the sea shore, gaunt and rough-hewn, protecting the land from the fury of the winds, and so might aptly suggest these planters and administrators who, with all their shortcomings, have after all brought to the peoples among whom they dwell tranquillity, justice and welfare, and I fancied that they too, as they looked at the Casuarina tree, grey, rugged and sad, a little out of place in the wanton tropics, might very well be reminded of their native land; and, thinking for a moment of the heather on a Yorkshire moor or the broom on a Sussex common, see in that hardy tree, doing its best in difficult circumstances, a symbol of their own exiled lives. In short I could find a dozen reasons for keeping my title, but, of course, the best of them all was that I could think of no better.