## LII. One of the Best

W. Somerset Maugham

I could never remember his name, but whenever he was spoken of in the port he was always described as one of the best. He was a man of fifty perhaps, thin and rather tall, dapper and well-dressed, with a small, neat head and sharp features. His blue eyes were good-natured and jovial behind his pince-nez. He was of a cheerful disposition, and he had a vein of banter which was not ineffective. He could turn out the sort of jokes that make men standing at the club bar laugh heartily, and he could be agreeably malicious, but without ill-nature, about any member of the community who did not happen to be present. His humour was of the same nature as that of the comedian in a musical play. When they spoke of him they often said:

“You know, I wonder he never went on the stage. He’d have made a hit. One of the best.”

He was always ready to have a drink with you and no sooner was your glass empty than he was prompt with the China phrase:

“Ready for the other half?”

But he did not drink more than was good for him.

“Oh, he’s got his head screwed on his shoulders the right way,” they said. “One of the best.”

When the hat was passed round for some charitable object he could always be counted on to give as much as anyone else, and he was always ready to go in for a golf competition or a billiards tournament. He was a bachelor.

“Marriage is no use to a man who lives in China,” he said. “He has to send his wife away every summer and then when the kids are beginning to be interesting they have to go home. It costs a deuce of a lot of money and you get nothing out of it.”

But he was always willing to do a good turn to any woman in the community. He was number one at Jardine’s, and he often had the power to make himself useful. He had been in China for thirty years, and he prided himself on not speaking a word of Chinese. He never went into the Chinese city. His compradore was Chinese, and some of the clerks, his boys of course, and the chair coolies; but they were the only Chinese he had anything to do with, and quite enough too.

“I hate the country, I hate the people,” he said. “As soon as I’ve saved enough money I mean to clear out.”

He laughed.

“Do you know, last time I was home I found everyone cracked over Chinese junk, pictures and porcelain, and stuff. Don’t talk to me about Chinese things, I said to ’em. I never want to see anything Chinese as long as I live.”

He turned to me.

“I’ll tell you what, I don’t believe I’ve got a single Chinese thing in my house.”

But if you wanted him to talk to you about London he was prepared to do so by the hour. He knew all the musical comedies that had been played for twenty years and at the distance of nine thousand miles he was able to keep up with the doings of Miss Lily Elsie and Miss Elsie Janis. He played the piano and he had a pleasing voice; it required little persuasion to induce him to sit down and sing you the popular ditties he had heard when last he was at home. It was quite singular to me, the unfathomable frivolity of this grey-haired man; it was even a little uncanny. But people applauded him loudly when he finished.

“He’s priceless, isn’t he?” they said. “Oh, one of the best.”