## XL. A Game of Billiards

W. Somerset Maugham

I was sitting in the lobby of the hotel, reading a number, several days old, of the South China Times, when the door of the bar was somewhat brusquely thrown open and a very long, thin man appeared.

“Do you care for a game of billiards?” he said.

“By all means.”

I got up and went with him into the bar. It was a small hotel, of stone, somewhat pretentious in appearance, and it was kept by a half-caste Portuguese who smoked opium. There were not half a dozen people staying there, a Portuguese official and his wife waiting for a ship to take them to a distant colony, a Lancashire engineer who was sullenly drunk all day long, a mysterious lady, no longer young but of voluptuous appearance, who came to the dining room for meals and went back to her room immediately afterwards, and I had not seen the stranger before. I supposed he had come in that evening on a Chinese boat. He was a man of over fifty, I should think, shrivelled as though the sap had been dried out of him by tropical suns, with a face that was almost brick red. I could not place him. He might have been  a skipper out of a job or the agent of some foreign firm in Hong Kong. He was very silent and he made no answer to the casual remarks that I made in the course of the game. He played billiards well enough, though not excellently, but he was a very pleasant fellow to play with; and when he pocketed my ball, instead of leaving me a double balk, gave me a reasonable shot. But when the game was over I should never have thought of him again, if suddenly, breaking his silence for the first time, he had not put me a very odd question.

“Do you believe in fate?” he asked.

“At billiards?” I retorted not a little astonished at his remark.

“No, in life.”

I did not want to answer him seriously.

“I hardly know,” I said.

He took his shot. He made a little break. At the end of it, chalking his cue, he said:

“I do. I believe if things are coming to you, you can’t escape them.”

That was all. He said nothing more. When we had finished the game he went up to bed, and I never saw him again. I shall never know what strange emotion impelled him to put that sudden question to a stranger.