## XLVII. Failure

W. Somerset Maugham

A little man, portly, in a fantastic hat, like a bushranger’s, with an immense brim, a pea-jacket such as you see in Leech’s pictures of the sea-faring man, and very wide check trousers of a cut fashionable heaven knows how many years ago. When he takes off his hat you see a fine head of long curly hair, and though he is approaching the sixties it is scarcely grey. His features are regular. He wears a collar several sizes too large for him so that his whole neck, massive and statuesque, is shown. He has the look of a Roman Emperor in a tragedy of the sixties and this air of an actor of the old school is enhanced by his deep booming voice. His stumpy frame makes it slightly absurd. You can imagine his declaiming the blank verse of Sheridan Knowles with an emphasis to rouse the pit to frenzy, and when he greets you, with too large a gesture, you guess how that resonant organ would tremble when he wrung your heart (in 1860) over the death of his child. It was splendid a little later to hear him ask the Chinese servant for “me boots, boy, me boots. A  kingdom for me boots.” He confessed that he should have been an actor.

“To be or not to be, that was the question, but me family, me family, dear boy, they would have died of the disgrace, and so I was exposed to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

In short he came out to China as a tea-taster. But he came when the Ceylon tea was already ousting the Chinese and it was no longer possible for the merchant to enrich himself in a few years. But the old lavishness endured and life was led in a grand style when the means to pay for it no longer existed. The struggle became harder. Finally came the Sino-Japanese war, and with the loss of Formosa, ruin. The tea-taster looked about for other means of livelihood. He became a wine-merchant, an undertaker, an estate-agent, a broker, an auctioneer. He tried every way of making money that his ardent imagination suggested, but with the diminishing prosperity of the port his efforts were bootless. Life was too much for him. And now at last he had the pitiful air of a broken man; there was even something touching in it, like the appeal of a woman who cannot believe in the loss of her beauty and implores the compliment which reassures but no longer convinces her. And yet, notwithstanding, he had a solace: he had still a magnificent assurance; he was a failure and he knew it; but it did not really affect him, for he was the victim of fate: no shadow of a doubt in his own capacity had ever crossed his mind.