## XXXIV. Mirage

W. Somerset Maugham

He is a tall man with bulging, sky blue eyes and an embarrassed manner. He looks as though he were a little too large for his skin and you feel that he would be more comfortable if it were a trifle looser. His hair, very smooth and crisp, fits so tightly on his head that it gives you the impression of a wig, and you have an almost irresistible inclination to pull it. He has no small talk. He hunts for topics of conversation and, racking his brain to no purpose, in desperation offers you a whisky and soda.

He is in charge of the B.A.T., and the building in which he lives is office, godown, and residence all in one. His parlour is furnished with a suite of dingy upholstered furniture placed neatly round the walls, and in the middle is a round table. A hanging petroleum lamp gives a melancholy light, and an oil stove heat. In appropriate places are richly framed oleographs from the Christmas numbers of American magazines. But he does not sit in this room. He spends his leisure in his bedroom. In America he has always lived in a boarding house where his bedroom was the only privacy  he knew, and he has gotten the habit of living in one. It seems unnatural to him to sit in a sitting-room; he does not like to take his coat off, and he only feels at home in shirt sleeves. He keeps his books and his private papers in his bedroom; he has a desk and a rocking chair there.

He has lived in China for five years, but he knows no Chinese and takes no interest in the race among whom in all likelihood the best years of his life will be spent. His business is done through an interpreter and his house is managed by a boy. Now and then he takes a journey of several hundred miles into Mongolia, a wild and rugged country, either in Chinese carts or on ponies; and he sleeps at the wayside inns where congregate merchants, drovers, herdsmen, men at arms, ruffians, and wild fellows. The people of the land are turbulent; when there is unrest he is exposed to not a little risk. But these are purely business undertakings. They bore him. He is always glad to get back to his familiar bedroom at the B.A.T. For he is a great reader. He reads nothing but American magazines and the number of those he has sent to him by every mail is amazing. He never throws them away and there are piles of them all over the house. The city in which he lives is the gateway into China from Mongolia. There dwell the teeming Chinese, and through its gates pass constantly the Mongols with their caravans of camels; endless processions of carts, drawn by oxen, which have brought hides from the illimitable distances of  Asia rumble noisily through its crowded streets. He is bored. It has never occurred to him that he lives a life in which the possibility of adventure is at his doors. He can only recognise it through the printed page; and it needs a story of derring-do in Texas or Nevada, of hairbreadth escape in the South Seas, to stir his blood.