## XXXV. The Stranger

W. Somerset Maugham

It was a comfort in that sweltering heat to get out of the city. The missionary stepped out of the launch in which he had dropped leisurely down the river and comfortably settled himself in the chair which was waiting for him at the water’s edge. He was carried through the village by the river side and began to ascend the hill. It was an hour’s journey along a pathway of broad stone steps, under fir trees, and now and again you caught a delightful glimpse of the broad river shining in the sun amid the exultant green of the padi fields. The bearers went along with a swinging stride. The sweat on their backs shone. It was a sacred mountain with a Buddhist monastery on the top of it, and on the way up there were rest houses where the coolies set down the chair for a few minutes and a monk in his grey robe gave you a cup of flowered tea. The air was fresh and sweet. The pleasure of that lazy journey—the swing of the chair was very soothing—made a day in the city almost worth while; and at the end of it was his trim little bungalow where he spent the summer, and before him the sweet-scented night. The mail had come in  that day and he was bringing on letters and papers. There were four numbers of the Saturday Evening Post and four of the Literary Digest. He had nothing but pleasant things to look forward to and the usual peace (a peace, as he often said, which passeth all understanding), which filled him whenever he was among these green trees, away from the teeming city, should long since have descended upon him.

But he was harassed. He had had that day an unfortunate encounter and he was unable, trivial as it was, to put it out of his mind. It was on this account that his face bore a somewhat peevish expression. It was a thin and sensitive face, almost ascetic, with regular features and intelligent eyes. He was very long and thin, with the spindly legs of a grasshopper, and as he sat in his chair swaying a little with the motion of his bearers he reminded you, somewhat grotesquely, of a faded lily. A gentle creature. He could never have hurt a fly.

He had run across Dr. Saunders in one of the streets of the city. Dr. Saunders was a little grey-haired man, with a high colour and a snub nose which gave him a strangely impudent expression. He had a large sensual mouth and when he laughed, which he did very often, he showed decayed and discoloured teeth; when he laughed his little blue eyes wrinkled in a curious fashion and then he looked the very picture of malice. There was something faunlike in him. His movements were quick and unexpected. He walked with a  rapid trip as though he were always in a hurry. He was a doctor who lived in the heart of the city among the Chinese. He was not on the register, but someone had made it his business to find out that he had been duly qualified; he had been struck off, but for what crime, whether social or purely professional, none know; nor how he had happened to come to the East and eventually settle on the China coast. But it was evident that he was a very clever doctor and the Chinese had great faith in him. He avoided the foreigners and rather disagreeable stories were circulated about him. Everyone knew him to say how do you do to, but no one asked him to his house nor visited him in his own.

When they had met that afternoon Dr. Saunders had exclaimed:

“What on earth has brought you to the city at this time of year?”

“I have some business that I couldn’t leave any longer,” answered the missionary, “and then I wanted to get the mail.”

“There was a stranger here the other day asking for you,” said the doctor.

“For me?” cried the other with surprise.

“Well, not for you particularly,” explained the doctor. “He wanted to know the way to the American Mission. I told him; but I said he wouldn’t find anyone there. He seemed rather surprised at that, so I told him that you all went up to the hills in May and didn’t come back till September.”

“A foreigner?” asked the missionary, still wondering who the stranger could be.

“Oh, yes, certainly.” The doctor’s eyes twinkled. “Then he asked me about the other missions; I told him the London Mission had a settlement here, but it wasn’t the least use going there as all the missionaries were away in the hills. After all it’s devilish hot in the city. ’Then I’d like to go to one of the mission schools,’ said the stranger. ’Oh, they’re all closed,’ I said. ’Well, then I’ll go to the hospital.’ ’That’s well worth a visit,’ I said, ’the American hospital is equipped with all the latest contrivances. Their operating theatre is perfect.’ ’What is the name of the doctor in charge?’ ’Oh, he’s up in the hills.’ ’But what about the sick?’ ’There are no sick between May and September,’ I said, ’and if there are they have to put up with the native dispensers.’”

Dr. Saunders paused for a moment. The missionary looked ever so slightly vexed.

“Well?” he said.

“The stranger looked at me irresolutely for a moment or two. ’I wanted to see something of the missions before I left,’ he said. ’You might try the Roman Catholics,’ I said, ’they’re here all the year round.’ ’When do they take their holidays then?’ he asked. ’They don’t,’ I said. He left me at that. I think he went to the Spanish convent.”

The missionary fell into the trap and it irritated him to think how ingenuously he had done so. He ought to have seen what was coming.

“Who was this anyway?” he asked innocently.

“I asked him his name,” said the doctor. “’Oh, I’m Christ,’ he said.”

The missionary shrugged his shoulders and abruptly told his rickshaw boy to go on.

It had put him thoroughly out of temper. It was so unjust. Of course they went away from May to September. The heat made any useful activity quite out of the question and it had been found by experience that the missionaries preserved their health and strength much better if they spent the hot months in the hills. A sick missionary was only an encumbrance. It was a matter of practical politics and it had been found that the Lord’s work was done more efficiently if a certain part of the year was set aside for rest and recreation. And then the reference to the Roman Catholics was grossly unfair. They were unmarried. They had no families to think of. The mortality among them was terrifying. Why, in that very city, of fourteen nuns who had come out to China ten years ago all but three were dead. It was perfectly easy for them, because it was more convenient for their work, to live in the middle of the city and to stay there all the year round. They had no ties. They had no duties to those who were near and dear to them. Oh, it was grossly unjust to drag in the Roman Catholics.

But suddenly an idea flashed through his mind. What rankled most was that he had left the rascally doctor (you only had to look at his face all puckered with malicious amusement to know he was a rogue) without a word. There certainly  was an answer, but he had not had the presence of mind to make it; and now the perfect repartee occurred to him. A glow of satisfaction filled him and he almost fancied that he had made it. It was a crushing rejoinder and he rubbed his very long thin hands with satisfaction. ’My dear Sir,’ he ought to have said, ’Our Lord never in the whole course of his ministry claimed to be the Christ.’ It was an unanswerable snub, and thinking of it the missionary forgot his ill-humour.