**The Escape**

William Somerset Maugham

 I have always been convinced that if a woman once made up her mind to marry a man nothing but instant flight could save him. Not always that; for once a friend of mine, seeing the inevitable loom menacingly before him, took ship from a certain port (with a tooth­brush for all his luggage, so conscious was he of his danger and the necessity for immediate action) and spent a year travelling round the world; but when, thinking himself safe (women are fickle, he said, and in twelve months she will have forgotten all about me), he landed at the selfsame port the first person he saw gaily waving to him from the quay was the little lady from whom he had fled. I have only once known a man who in such circumstances managed to extricate him­self. His name was Roger Charing. He was no longer young when he fell in love with Ruth Barlow and he had had sufficient experience to make him careful; but Ruth Barlow had a gift (or should I call it a, quality?) that renders most men defenseless, and it was this that dispossessed Roger of his common sense, his prudence and his worldy wisdom. He went down like a row of ninebins. This was the gift of pathos. Mrs. Barlow, for she was twice a widow, had splendid dark eyes and they were the most moving I ever saw; they seemed to be ever on the point of filling with tears; they suggested that the world was too much for her, and you felt that, poor dear, her sufferings had been more than anyone should be asked to bear. If, like Roger Char­ing, you were a strong, hefty fellow with plenty of money, it was al­most inevitable that you should say to yourself: I must stand between the hazards of life and this helpless little thing, or, how wonderful it would be to take the sadness out of those big and lovely eyes! I gath­ered from Roger that everyone had treated Mrs. Barlow very badly. She was apparently one of those unfortunate persons with whom nothing by any chance goes right. If she married a husband he beat her; if she employed a broker he cheated her; if she engaged a cook she drank. She never had a little lamb but it was sure to die.2

When Roger told me that he had at last persuaded her to marry him, I wished him joy.

"I hope you'll be good friends," he said. "She's a little afraid of you, you know; she thinks you're callous.

"Upon my word I don't know why she should think that."

"You do like her, don't you?"

"Very much."

"She's had a rotten time, poor dear. I feel so dreadfully sorry for her."

"Yes," I said.

I couldn't say less. I knew she was stupid and I thought she was scheming. My own belief was that she was as hard as nails.

The first time I met her we had played bridge together and when she was my partner she twice trumped my best card. I behaved like an angel, but I confess that I thought if the tears were going to well up into anybody1 s eyes they should have been mine rather than hers. And when, having by the end of the evening lost a good deal of mon­ey to me, she said she would send me a cheque and never did, I could not but think that I and not she should have worn a pathetic expres­sion when next we met.

Roger introduced her to his friends. He gave her lovely jewels. He took her here, there, and everywhere. Their marriage was announced for the immediate future. Roger was very happy. He was committing a good action and at the same time doing something he had very much a mind to. It is an uncommon situation and it is not surprising if he was a trifle more pleased with himself than was altogether becoming.

Then, on a sudden, he fell out of love. I do not know why. It could hardly have been that he grew tired of her conversation, for she had never had any conversation. Perhaps it was merely that this pathetic look of hers ceased to wring his heart-strings. His eyes were opened and he was once more the shrewd man of the world he had been. He became acutely conscious that Ruth Barlow had made up her mind to marry him and he swore a solemn oath that nothing would induce him to marry Ruth Barlow. But he was in a quandary. Now that he was in possession of his senses he saw with clearness the sort of woman he had to deal with and he was aware that, ii he asked her to release him, she would (in her appealing way) assess her wound­ed feelings at an immoderately high figure.3 Besides, it is always awkward for a man to jilt a woman. People are apt to think he has behaved badly.

Roger kept his own counsel. He gave neither byword nor gesture an indication that his feelings towards Ruth Barlow had changed. He remained attentive to all her wishes; he took her to dine at restaurants, they went to the play together, he sent her flowers; he was sympathet­ic and charming. They had made up their minds that they would be married as soon as they found a house that suited them, for he lived in chambers and she in furnished rooms; and they set about looking at desirable residences. The agents sent Roger orders to view and he took Ruth to see a number of houses. It was very hard to find anything that was guite satisfactory. Roger applied to more agents. They visited house after house. They went over them thoroughly, examining them from the cellars in the basement to the attics under the roof. Sometimes they were too large and sometimes they were too small, sometimes they were too far from the centre of things and sometimes they were too close; sometimes they were too expensive and sometimes they wanted too many repairs; sometimes they were too stuffy and some­times they were too airy; sometimes they were too dark and sometimes they were too bleak. Roger always found a fault that made the house unsuitable. Of course, he was hard to please; he could not bear to ask his dear Ruth to live in any but the perfect house, and the perfect house wanted finding.

House-hunting is a tiring and a tiresome business and presently Ruth began to grow peevish. Roger begged her to have pa­tience; somewhere, surely, existed the very house they were looking for, and it only needed a little perseverance and they would find it. They looked at hundreds of houses; they climbed thousands of stairs; they inspected innumerable kitchens. Ruth was exhausted and more than once lost her temper.

"If you don't find a house soon," she said, "I shall have to recon­sider my position. Why, if you go on like this we shan't be married for years."

"Don't say that," he answered. "I beseech you to have patience. I've just received some entirely new lists from agents I've only just heard of. There must be at least sixty houses on them."

They set out on the chase again. They looked at more houses and more houses. For two years they looked at houses. Ruth grew silent and scornful: her pathetic, beautiful eyes acquired an expression that was almost sullen. There are limits to human endurance. Mrs. Bar­low had the patience of an angel, but at last she revolted.

"Do you want to marry me or do you not?" she asked him.

There was an unaccustomed hardness in her voice, but it did not affect the gentleness of his reply.

"Of course, I do. We'll be married the very moment we find a house. By the way I've just heard of something that might suit us."

"I don't feel well enough to look at any more houses just yet."

"Poor dear, I was afraid you were looking rather tired."

Ruth Barlow took to her bed. She would not see Roger and he had to content himself with calling at her lodgings to enquire and send­ing her flowers. He was as ever assiduous and gallant. Every day he wrote and told her that he had heard of another house for them to look at. A week passed and then he received the following letter:

Roger,

I do not think you really love me. I have found someone who is anxious to take care of me and I am going to be married to him today.

Ruth.

He sent back his reply by special messenger:

Ruth,

Your news shatters me. I shall never get over the blow, but of course your happiness must be my first consideration. I send you herewith seven orders to view; they arrived by this morning's post and lam quite sure you will find among them a house that will exactly suit you.

Roger.

Commentary

1. He went down like a row of ninepins, (fig.) here: He was defeat­ed at once and surrendered without resisting.

2. She never had a little lamb but it was sure to die: There was never anything dear to her that she wouldn't lose. "A little lamb" is somebody that one loves dearly; an allusion to the well-known nurs­ery rhyme:

Mary had a little lamb.

Its fleece was white as snow,

And everywhere that Mary went,

The lamb was sure to go.

1.     She would assess her wounded feelings at an immoderately high figure: she would make him pay much for jilting her

EXERCISES

1. Read the text and consider its following aspects:

a) What is the relation of the opening passage of the story (ending "... from whom he had fled") to the main plot? Comment on the syntax of the second sen­tence ("Not always that;..."); justify its length.

b) What would be lost if the sentence "but Ruth Barlow had a 'gift' (or should I call it a 'quality'?! That renders most men defenseless" were written "but Ruth Bar­low had a 'quality' that renders most men defenseless..."? What does the device of contrasting 'quality' to 'gift' aim at?

c) Select from the first paragraph words and phrases characterizing Ruth Bar­low. What is the attitude implied? What method of characterization is used here? Point out clichés. Why does the author use them? How do they colour Roger's at­tachment to Ruth?

d) Analyze the rhythm in the sentence beginning "If she married a husband..." and the effect achieved. Indicate the stylistic devices in "She never had a little lamb but it was sure to die".

e) What method (or methods) of characterization is used in the fragment be­ginning "I couldn't say less...", ending "...when next we met"? Is this description of Ruth in full accord with the one given in the first paragraph? If not, what is the reason? Explain "as hard as nails".

f) Exemplify the author's use of vivid epithets in the character of Ruth Barlow. Which features of hers do they accentuate?

g) Point out instances of irony. (Is it irony or humour? Prove your point.)

h) What is the purpose of the parenthesis in "...she would (in her appealing way) assess her wounded feelings..."?

i) Comment on the sentence structure in "Sometimes they were too large...". What is the effect achieved?

j) Exemplify the use of metaphors, similes and repetition. Comment on their effect.

k) Indicate the variety of the sentences and the rhythmic effects achieved.

1) Point out the climax of the story. Comment on the methods used for height­ening the tension in the passages leading to the climax.

3. Reread the text to answer the following questions on its style and com­position.

a) In what way does the story begin? Is the reader's interest awakened at once? If so, how does the author achieve it?

b) What is gained by telling the story in the first person? From whose point of view is it told? Point out the passages reflecting the narrator's attitude, Roger's and the author's. Is the author detached in his attitude to Ruth? Prove your point.

c) Is the plot an important feature of the story? Indicate briefly the stages by which the narrative is unfolded.

d) Does the story end as the reader expects? Point out passages aiming at sus­pense.

e) Is the title appropriate? Does it reflect the point of the story?

f) What words and phrases give atmosphere to the story in descriptions of hu­man appearance, characters, human relations? (Make up lists.)

g) Do you regard "The Escape" as a typical specimen of Somerset Maugham's prose? Read the following to answer the question:

The qualities of Somerset Maugham are not at all elusive. An in­nate dramatic sense enables him to write sound, solidly constructed novels that never fail to interest the reader, His prose is clean and hard and is always marked by a precision that is rare in contempo­rary writing. Passion and lyricism are not evident but in their place the reader will find a superbly controlled irony and a brilliant wit. Transforming the commonplace into art, he produced a long, distin­guished list of plays, short stories and novels that will never cease to give the greatest of pleasure.