

The Escape

W. Somerset Maugham

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 defenceless, and it was this that dispossessed Roger of his commonsense, his prudence, and his worldly wisdom. He went down like a row of ninepins. 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 they you should say to yourself: 'I must stand between the hazards of life and this helpless little thing, oh, 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.

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.' I replied.

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

'Very much.' I said.

'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.

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.

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.

Roger kept his own counsel.

He gave neither by word nor gesture an indication that his feelings towards Ruth Barlow had changed.

He remained attentive to all her wishes; 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 for 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 quite 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.

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.

Househunting 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.

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 and as 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 inquire 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 I am quite sure you will find among them a house that will exactly suit you.

Roger.