Home

W. Somerset Maugham

THE FARM LAY in a hollow among the Somersetshire hills, an old-fashioned stone house surrounded by barns and pens and outhouses. Over the doorway the date when it was built had been carved in the elegant figures of the period, 1673, and the house, gray and weather-beaten, looked as much a part of the landscape as the trees that sheltered it. An avenue of splendid elms that would have been the pride of many a squire’s mansion led from the road to the trim garden. The people who lived here were as stolid, sturdy and unpretentious as the house; their only boast was that ever since it was built from father to son in one unbroken line they had been born and died in it. For three hundred years they had farmed the surrounding land. George Meadows was now a man of fifty, and his wife was a year or two younger. They were both fine, upstanding people in the prime of life; and their children, two sons and three girls, were handsome and strong. They had no newfangled notions about being gentlemen and ladies; they knew their place and were proud of it. I have never seen a more united household. They were merry, industrious and kindly.

Their life was patriarchal. It had a completeness that gave it a beauty as definite as that of a symphony by Beethoven or a picture by Titian. They were happy and they deserved their happiness. But the master of the house was not George Meadows (not by a long chalk, they said in the village) : it was his mother. She was twice the man her son was, they said. She was a woman of seventy, tall, upright and dignified, with gray hair, and though her face was much wrinkled, her eyes were bright and shrewd. Her word was law in the house and on the farm; but she had humour, and if her rule was despotic it was also kindly. People laughed at her jokes and repeated them. She was a good business woman and you had to get up very early in the morning to best her in a bargain. She was a character. She combined in a rare degree good will with an alert sense of the ridiculous.

One day Mrs George stopped me on my way home. She was all in a flutter. (Her mother-in-law was the only Mrs Meadows we knew: George’s wife was known only as Mrs George.)

“Whoever do you think is coming here today?” she asked me. “Uncle George Meadows. You know, him as was in China.”

“Why, I thought he was dead."

“We all thought he was dead.”

I had heard the story of Uncle George Meadows a dozen times and it had amused me because it had the savour of an old ballad: it was oddly touching to come across it in real life. For Uncle George Meadows and Tom, his younger brother, had both courted Mrs Meadows when she was Emily Green, fifty years and more ago, and when she married Tom, George had gone away to sea.

They heard of him on the China coast. For twenty years now and then he sent them presents; then there was no more news of him; when Tom Meadows died his widow wrote and told him, but received no answer; and at last they came to the conclusion that he must be dead. But two or three days ago to their astonishment they had received a letter from the matron of the sailors’ home at Portsmouth. It appeared that for the last ten years George Meadows, crippled with rheumatism, had been an inmate and now, feeling that he had not much longer to live, wanted to see once more the house in which he was born. Albert Meadows, his great-nephew, had gone over to Portsmouth in the Ford to fetch him and he was to arrive that afternoon.

“Just fancy,” said Mrs George, “he’s not been here for more than fifty years. He’s never even seen my George who’s fifty-one next birthday.”

“And what does Mrs Meadows think of it?” I asked.

“Well, you know what she is. She sits there and smiles to herself. All she says is, ‘He was a good-looking young fellow when he left, but not so steady as his brother.’ That’s why she chose my George’s father. ‘But he’s probably quietened down by now,’ she says.”

Mrs George asked me to look in and see him. With the simplicity of a countrywoman who had never been further from her home than London, she thought that because we had both been in China we must have something in common. Of course I accepted. I found the whole family assembled when I arrived; they were sitting in the great old kitchen, with its stone floor, Mrs Meadows in her usual chair by the fire, very upright, and I was amused to see that she had put on her best silk dress, while her son and his wife sat at the table with their children. On the other side of the fireplace sat an old man, bunched up in a chair. He was very thin and his skin hung on his bones like an old suit much too large for him; his face was wrinkled and yellow and he had lost nearly all his teeth.

I shook hands with him.

“Well, I’m glad to see you’ve got here safely, Mr Meadows,” I said.

“Captain,” he corrected.

“He walked here,” Albert, his great-nephew, told me. “When he got to the gate he made me stop the car and said he wanted to walk.”

“And mind you, I’ve not been out of me bed for two years. They carried me down and put me in the car. I thought I’d never walk again, but when I see them elm trees, I remember my father set a lot of store by them elm trees, I felt I could walk. I walked down that drive fifty-two years ago when I went away and now I’ve walked back again.” “Silly, I call it,” said Mrs Meadows.

“It’s done me good. I feel better and stronger than I have for ten years. I’ll see you out yet, Emily.”

“Don’t you be too sure,” she answered.

I suppose no one had called Mrs Meadows by her first name for a generation. It gave me a little shock, as though the old man were taking a liberty with her. She looked at him with a shrewd smile in her eyes and he, talking to her, grinned with his toothless gums. It was strange to look at them, these two old people who had not seen one another for half a century, and to think that all that long time ago he had loved her and she had loved another. I wondered if they remembered what they had felt then and what they had said to one another.

I wondered if it seemed to him strange now that for that old woman he had left the home of his fathers, his lawful inheritance, and lived an exile’s life.

“Have you ever been married, Captain Meadows?” I asked.

“Not me,” he said, in his quavering voice, with a grin. “I know too much about women for that.”

“That’s what you say,” retorted Mrs Meadows. “If the truth was known I shouldn’t be surprised to hear as how you’d had half-a-dozen black wives in your day.”

“They’re not black in China, Emily, you ought to know better than that, they’re yellow.”

“Perhaps that’s why you’ve got so yellow yourself. When I saw you, I said to myself, why, he’s got jaundice.”

“I said I’d never marry anyone but you, Emily, and I never have.”

He said this not with pathos or resentment, but as a mere statement of fact, as a man might say, I said I’d walk twenty miles and I’ve done it. There was a trace of satisfaction in the speech.

“Well, you might have regretted it if you had,” she answered.

I talked a little with the old man about China.

“There’s not a port in China that I don’t know better than you know your coat pocket. Where a ship can go I’ve been. I could keep you sitting here all day long for six months and not tell you half the things I’ve seen in my day.”

“Well, one thing you’ve not done, George, as far as I can see,” said Mrs Meadows, the mocking but not unkindly smile still in her eyes, “and that’s to make a fortune.”

“I’m not one to save money. Make it and spend it: that’s my motto. But one thing I can say for myself : if I had the chance of going through my life again I’d take it. And there’s not many as’ll say that.”

“No, indeed,” I said.

I looked at him with admiration and respect. he was a toothless, crippled, penniless old man, but he had made a success of life, for he had enjoyed it. When I left him he asked me to come and see him again next day. If I was interested in China he would tell me all the stories 1 wanted to hear.

Next morning I thought I would go and ask if the old man would like to see me. I strolled down the magnificent avenue of elm trees and when I came to the garden saw Mrs Meadows picking flowers. I bade her good morning and she raised herself. She had a huge armful of white flowers. I glanced at the house and saw that the blinds were drawn: I was surprised, for Mrs Meadows liked the sunshine.

“Time enough to live in the dark when you’re buried,” she always said.

“How’s Captain Meadows?” I asked her.

“He always was a harum-scarum fellow,” she answered. “When Lizzie took him in a cup of tea this morning she found he was dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes. Died in his sleep. I was just picking these flowers to put in the room. Well, I’m glad he died in that old house. It always means a lot to them Meadows to do that.”

They had had a good deal of difficulty in persuading him to go to bed. He had talked to them of all the things that had happened to him in his long life. He was happy to be back in his old home. He was proud that he had walked up the drive without assistance, and he boasted that he would live for another twenty years. But fate had been kind: death had written the full stop in the right place.

Mrs Meadows smelt the white flowers that she held in her arms.

“Well, I’m glad he came back,” she said. “After I married Tom Meadows and George went away, the fact is I was never quite sure that I’d married the right one.”