

The Happy Man by W.S. Maugham

It is a dangerous thing to order the lives of others and I have often wondered at the self-confidence of politicians, reformers and such like who are prepared to force upon their fellows measures that must alter their manners, habits and points of view. I have always hesitated to give advice, for how can one advise another how to act unless one knows that other as well as one knows oneself? Heaven knows, I know little enough of myself: I know nothing of others. We can only guess at the thoughts and emotions of our neighbours. And life, unfortunately, is something that you can lead but once; and who am I that I should tell this one and that how he should lead it?

But once I knew that I advised well.

I was a young man and I lived in a modest apartment in London near Victoria Station. Late one afternoon, when I was beginning to think that I had worked enough for that day, I heard a ring at the bell. I opened the door to a total stranger. He asked me my name; I told him. He asked if he might come in.

"Certainly".

I led him into my sitting-room and begged to sit down. He seemed a trifle embarrassed. I offered him a cigarette and he had some difficulty in lighting it.

"I hope you don't mind my coming to see you like this", he said, "My name is Stephens and I am a doctor. You're in the medical, I believe?"

"Yes, but I don't practise".

"No, I know. I've just read a book of yours about Spain and I wanted to ask you about it".

"It's not a very good book, I'm afraid".

"The fact remains that you know something about Spain and there's no one else I know who does. And I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me some information".

"I shall be very glad".

He was silent for a moment. He reached out for his hat and holding it in one hand absent-mindedly stroked it with the other.

"I hope you won't think it very odd for a perfect stranger to talk to you like this". He gave an apologetic laugh. "I'm not going to tell you the story of my life".

When people say this to me I always know that it is precisely what they are going to do. I do not mind. In fact I rather like it.

"I was brought up by two old aunts. I've never been anywhere. I've never done anything. I've been married for six years. I have no children. I'm a medical officer at the Camberwell Infirmary. I can't bear it anymore".

There was something very striking in the short, sharp sentences he used. I looked at him with curiosity. He was a little man, thickset and stout, of thirty perhaps, with a round red face from which shone small, dark and very bright eyes. His black hair was cropped close to a bullet-shaped head. He was dressed in a blue suit a good deal the worse for wear. It was baggy at the knees and the pockets bulged untidily.

"You know what the duties are of a medical officer in an infirmary. One day is pretty much like another. And that's all I've got to look forward to for the rest of my life. Do you think it's worth it?"

"It's a means of livelihood", I answered.

"Yes, I know. The money's pretty good".

"I don't exactly know why you've come to me".

"Well, I wanted to know whether you thought there would be any chance for an English doctor in Spain?"

"Why Spain?"

"I don't know, I just have a fancy for it".

"It's not like Carmen, you know", I smiled.

"But there's sunshine there, and there's good wine, and there's colour, and there's air you can breathe. Let me say what I have to say straight out. I heard by accident that there was no English

doctor in Seville. Do you think I could earn a living there? Is it madness to give up a good safe job for an uncertainty?"

"What does your wife think about it?"

"She's willing".

"It's a great risk".

"I know. But if you say take it, I will: if you say stay where you are, I'll stay".

He was looking at me with those bright dark eyes of his and I knew that he meant what he said. I reflected for a moment.

"Your whole future is concerned: you must decide for yourself. But this I can tell you: if you don't want money but are content to earn just enough to keep body and soul together, then go. For you will lead a wonderful life".

He left me, I thought about him for a day or two, and then forgot. The episode passed completely from my memory.

Many years later, fifteen at least, I happened to be in Seville and having some trifling indisposition asked the hotel porter whether there was an English doctor in the town. He said there was and gave me the address. I took a cab and as I drove up to the house a little fat man came out of it. He hesitated, when he caught sight of me.

"Have you come to see me?" he said. "I'm the English doctor".

I explained my matter and he asked me to come in. He lived in an ordinary Spanish house, and his consulting room was littered with papers, books, medical appliances and lumber. We did our business and then I asked the doctor what his fee was. He shook his head and smiled.

"There's no fee".

"Why on earth not?"

"Don't you remember me? Why, I'm here because of something you said to me. You changed my whole life for me. I'm Stephens".

I had not the least notion what he was talking about. He reminded me of our interview, he repeated to me what we had said, and gradually, out of the night, a dim recollection of the incident came back to me.

"I was wondering if I'd ever see you again", he said, "I was wondering if ever I'd have a chance of thanking you for all you've done for me".

"It's been a success then?"

I looked at him. He was very fat now and bald, but his eyes twinkled gaily and his fleshy, red face bore an expression of perfect good humour. The clothes he wore, terribly shabby they were, had been made obviously by a Spanish tailor and his hat was the wide brimmed sombrero of the Spaniard. He looked to me as though he knew a good bottle of wine when he saw it. He had an entirely sympathetic appearance. "You might have hesitated to let him remove your appendix", but you could not have imagined a more delightful creature to drink a glass of wine with.

"Surely you were married?" I said.

"Yes. My wife didn't like Spain, she went back to Camberwell, she was more at home there".

"Oh, I'm sorry for that".

His black eyes flashed a smile.

"Life is full of compensations", he murmured.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a Spanish woman, no longer in her first youth, but still beautiful, appeared at the door. She spoke to him in Spanish, and I could not fail to feel that she was the mistress of the house.

As he stood at the door to let me out he said to me:

"You told me when last I saw you that if I came here I should earn just enough money to keep body and soul together, but that I should lead a wonderful life. Well, I want to tell you that you were right. Poor I have been and poor I shall always be, but by heaven I've enjoyed myself. I wouldn't exchange the life I've had with that of any king in the world".

Give Russian equivalents for the following words and expressions from the text and use them in the sentences of your own:

hesitate to do smth, be embarrassed, would you mind... (doing smth)?, be brought up by smb, look forward to smth, be worth (doing) smth, have a fancy for smth/smb, give up smth, be content to (do) smth, catch sight of smb, shake one's head, remind smb of smth, be a success, keep body and soul together.

III Questions on the text:

- 1) Who visited the author of the story once?
- 2) What did he look like?
- 3) How did he explain the reason of his coming?
- 4) What showed that the man was embarrassed?
- 5) What did Stephens tell the author about his life?
- 6) Why did he say that he couldn't bear it any longer?
- 7) What kind of advice did Stephens want to get?
- 8) What did the author recommend him?
- 9) How did the author happen to meet with Stephens many years later?
- 10) What had changed in the man?
- 11) What proves that Stephens was really happy?

IV Discuss the following:

- 1) Stephens wasn't rich, he had money only to keep body and soul together. But nevertheless he said that he had led a wonderful life. Can a man be happy without money? Are there things in life that are more important?
- 2) Compare Stephens at the beginning and at the end of the story. What in his appearance showed that he was pleased with life?
- 3) Is it easy to advise people? Who to your mind has the right to give advice?
- 4) Speak on the author's attitude to the main hero of the story.

V Say what happened to Stephens during fifteen years of his life in Spain.