

Breaking Out

By Judith Evans

Wilmet Forsyth stood back and examined her floral arrangement. She had been concentrating on a new style but something was not quite right. She looked down frowningly at the illustration which she had been trying to follow and it was a relief when the phone rang and interrupted her endeavours. It was her old friend Rowena Talbot. But this was a Rowena she could scarcely recognise.

"Wilmet," she sobbed, "can you come and see me? Now!" she wailed.

"What on earth is the matter? Is it one of the children?"

"Harry," gasped Rowena.

A dread flooded through Wilmet. "Is he... has he ...?" she stammered.

"Nothing like that," shot back Rowena angrily. "He's left me."

"Left you?" echoed Wilmet in shocked astonishment. "But why?" she asked uncomprehendingly, for were Harry and Rowena not a well matched pair? It's true that Harry liked his little flirtations, but he loved Rowena surely?

"He has met someone else; some other woman," she wept.

"But who?"

"A Miss Bates."

"Oh!" said Wilmet weakly, for the name was not unknown to her.

"Oh Wilmet, I cannot be alone this evening, please come." And she cried afresh.

"I'll need to wait until Rodney returns from work," she demurred. "Don't worry Rowena." And, rebuking herself thought that was that's a silly thing to have said.

"Of course I'll come," she said decisively, reflecting that perhaps after all she had become less selfish than she used to be. The Wilmet of a year ago would not have troubled herself about the trials of even close friend.

Wilmet, who normally took such care over her clothes, hastily and unthinkingly packed a bag, her thoughts in turmoil. Miss Prudence Bates. Why, her own husband Rodney had conducted a flirtation with that very woman only last year. But he had not taken the step of leaving their home. At last she heard his key in the door and waited until he entered the drawing room. Rodney made to pour them both a gin as usual but Wilmet stopped him.

"Harry has left Rowena," she blurted out. "For Miss Prudence Bates," she said pointedly.

Rodney paled and said, feebly, "Oh dear, I didn't think it would come to this."

"You knew?" she asked aghast.

"No," he denied. And after a pause, said, "That is, I may have suspected."

"How? Why?"

Rodney, looking abashed, reached for a whisky before replying, "Once, when I had lunch with Prudence, Miss Bates," he amended seeing Wilmet's expression, "Harry

came to the same restaurant. I introduced them and a few weeks later Harry rang and asked me for her phone number. I saw no reason not to give it to him." He paused, "Our... relationship, if that's the term for something which didn't really happen, was over by then," he added lamely.

Wilmet, who had been harbouring romantic thoughts about Rowena's brother Piers Longridge at around the same time as Rodney's flirtation, had little to say on that score. And she had lunched with Harry on one occasion she remembered. But for Rodney to have given Miss Bates' number to Harry! Surely he was aware of the danger?

After an uncomfortable silence she said that she had promised Rowena she would go to stay with her.

"But what about dinner?" said Rodney.

"Oh go out somewhere," she snapped, blaming him. "Go to your mother's, make a sandwich."

Resignedly he said, "I'll call a taxi," and went into the hallway.

"Have you checked the train times? What about dinner?" he asked awkwardly on his return.

"There's one at 8.05. And I am not hungry," she flung at him at him as she made her way to the door to wait for the taxi.

Wilmet arrived at Rowena's home to find her friend pale, but composed. Rowena poured her a glass of wine and pressed on her a light supper of smoked salmon and thin slices of brown bread. "You must be hungry," she said. And Wilmet spared a brief thought for Rodney, wondering whether or not he had some dinner.

"Now," said Wilmet, getting down to business, "where exactly is Harry tonight?"

"He's at his Club. He felt that it would be indelicate to move in immediately with ... Miss Bates," said Rowena despairingly, her voice breaking as she said her name.

Wilmet asked, anxiously, "How did he meet this.. woman?"

"He said that Rodney introduced them," replied Rowena, looking intently at her friend.

"At least you know that," she replied grimly.

"Did Rodney...?" Rowena broke off.

"Oh yes, but it amounted only to a few lunches and dinners," said Wilmet, adding, "I believe that, Rodney is very transparent."

She knew that Rowena thought Rodney was little dull and unlikely to 'break out'. And Harry Grinders, as they'd called him, was rather dashing. For had he not suggested an affair with Wilmet herself? But perhaps now Rowena would have preferred Rodney's dullness?

"What will you do?" Wilmet asked Rowena.

"I don't know Wilmet," she wailed. "There's this house, the children, their school fees. Everything. And what can I do? Since leaving the Wrens and marriage and children I have never worked. I have nothing - no skills, nor profession."

"Much like me," responded Wilmet despondently,

knowing she was quite unlike the formidable career women with whom Rodney worked at the Ministry. "Why even Miss Bates has a career." Rowena looked at her enquiringly. Wilmet elaborated, "She's an Oxford graduate, she works in some vague way for a famous economist."

"Why isn't her career enough for her?" said Rowena venomously. "Why need she break up a man's marriage?"

"I've heard that she had once been engaged to an MP, but broke it off," reported Wilmet.

"She cannot be a reliable person," judged Rowena resentfully.

"Let's try to get some sleep and see what the morning brings," Wilmet suggested, quietly hoping that Rodney would round up Harry and bring him home.

But the morning brought not Rodney and Harry, but Piers, Rowena's brother, and his companion Keith who arrived early, all concern.

"How did you hear?" demanded Rowena.

"I ran into Rodney last evening in a restaurant," replied Piers and he told me. "He's very upset," he added, glancing at Wilmet, whose expression told him nothing.

"We've come to see what we can do," put in Keith chirpily. "I'll look after the children and see to meals. And he bustled off to the kitchen where he could hear Sara, Patience and Bertram squabbling over cereal. In no time at all he had them seated, and he summoned the others to a carefully prepared breakfast of orange juice, a little scrambled egg, the remains of last night's smoked salmon, and toast.

The children having finished their breakfast were hustled off to the playroom where he organised puzzles and a seemingly complicated game.

"Right, he said, "that's got them settled, now I'll get us a pot of coffee and we can have a council of war."

Rowena squeezed his arm, "Keith, you are a tower of strength," she said. Piers looked at him affectionately and Wilmet was struck with admiration. She reflected that he had developed - there was little trace of the arch young man of last year. He's acquired authority and confidence, why, Piers and Keith are good for each other, thought Wilmet, relieved that she had recovered from her infatuation for Piers, recalling, with chagrin, how jealous she'd been on first meeting Keith. Piers too seemed changed, being less mercurial and restless, a calmer person altogether.

Pondering the present dilemma, they all agreed that there should be no confrontation with Harry for the moment, but that sooner or later, he would need to be asked what arrangements he would make for Rowena and the children.

"Miss Bates is quite capable of earning her own living," put in Wilmet bluntly. Piers and Keith looked surprised. Glancing at Rowena, she avoided saying too much but merely explained that she was a close friend of one of Rodney's colleagues. Piers, suspecting more, let it pass,

It was decided that the next morning - Sunday - Wilmet should return home and that Piers would return to London

the same evening as he needed to be at work on Monday. Wilmet noticed that he no longer produced excuses to avoid work as he once had done. Keith, whose hours of attendance at the coffee bar where he worked were flexible, to fit in with his engagements for modelling knitting patterns, agreed to stay at Rowena's to help with the house and the children.

The rest of Saturday passed quietly, if not cheerfully, with Keith doing everything he could to keep the children entertained while managing to prepare sustaining meals.

On Wilmet's return home she interrogated Rodney and found that Harry had met Rodney for a drink on Saturday evening and that he intended meeting Prudence Bates today to "make plans". Wilmet, with a grim smile, left it there, refraining from pointing out that Harry should be considering plans for his family.

The following morning Wilmet was shocked to receive a phone call from Harry himself.

"Wilmet, can we meet? Will you have lunch with me?" he ventured.

"Talk to Miss Bates," she snapped.

There was a silence.

"Wilmet, everything has gone terribly wrong," said Harry sounding beleaguered.

She unbent a little. After all, were they not old friends and perhaps Harry needed her support as much as Rowena did? "All right, I'll meet you." And he named a place and time.

"How does one dress to meet the man who has left one's best friend for one's husband's former... But former what, exactly?" thought Wilmet. She was fleetingly amused to think that this was like a scene from a novel or a tortured new modern play. She settled on black, to show that this was serious matter, but so to avoid any suggestion of mourning, she added touches of cream and wore understated pearl earrings. The ensemble gave the air of a legal person which Wilmet found pleasing.

Harry was waiting for her at the restaurant which was not the one where she had lunched with him all that care-free time ago.

He looked sheepish. "As well he might," thought Wilmet almost pityingly.

They began by ordering the food and drinks. This was not a celebratory meal, so Wilmet opted for no hors d'oeuvre and selected an omelette and an undressed green salad. She accepted a glass of sherry, but settled for water to drink with her meal. She did not wish to give Harry any ideas

Harry, who had ordered soup to begin, began to crumble his bread roll, hardly daring to look at Wilmet.

"Oh Wilmet, everything has gone wrong," he despaired. "Prudence, Miss Bates, has called everything off."

Wilmet was startled. "What do you mean, called everything off?" she asked with asperity. "Harry what was there to call off? Was she your ... ?" she broke off not quite knowing how to phrase the question.

“My mistress?” said Harry loudly, flushing, to the amusement of two young girls lunching at a nearby table. On hearing their sniggers he lowered his voice saying stiffly, “Nothing like that has happened. Nothing improper. That’s not to say that I...” he paused.

“That you hoped?” demanded Wilmet barely disguising her contempt. She began toying with her omelette and Harry made a poor attempt at eating his steak.

“But she has put an end to it,” he said miserably. “I saw her yesterday and told her that I had left Rowena. I thought we could make plans for the future.”

“And what of Rowena and your children in that...future?” snapped Wilmet, “Shouldn’t you have thought of their future?”

As if he hadn’t heard her Harry went on, “But she said that I had taken it all too seriously, that all she wanted was friendship and company and a few good lunches and dinners. ‘Romantic flirtation’ was how she expressed it” he said bleakly.

“And then I realised what a big mistake I had made. It was all an infatuation. Wilmet, you know how it is. Prudence and Rodney...”

“We have no need to speak of that,” she interrupted.

“And Piers?”

Wilmet flushed hotly. So Harry had guessed at her attempt to flirt and conduct ... what exactly with Piers last year. But that had come to nothing when Piers had introduced her to Keith.

She softened a little. “So you want to go home, is that what you are trying to say?”

“Yes.” And he looked at her with rounded pleading eyes. “Please Wilmet, will you get in touch with Rowena?”

He could not be denied and Wilmet took herself home, and made the phone call.

Rowena was incoherent with relief and delight. “Oh Wilmet, I knew you would do things,” she said.

So, Harry was to be forgiven and taken back into the marital home. A satisfactory end to his escapade surely? For had not she and Rodney been happier since their own unfruitful attempts to ‘break out’ last year. On hearing Rodney’s key in the lock, happily she ran to tell him the good news, throwing herself into his arms with an uncharacteristic display of emotion.