

Questions to think about while you read....

- 1). Why does the man with the scar kill his wife? What reason does he give? Is this a good reason to kill someone? Why or why not? Do you believe him when he says he loved his wife? Why or why not?
- 2). The man with the scar likes to gamble. How is killing his wife similar to the poker game he plays or the lottery tickets he sells?
- 3). Why did Somerset Maugham have the man with the scar get his scar from an “exploding ginger ale bottle” and not from some brave action during battle? How does this change our idea of the man with the scar?
- 4). The man’s scar is described in detail. How does his external features match his internal character? How does the outside of him match his character as a person?
- 5). Think about how you are supposed to feel about the man with the scar at the beginning of the story? How do you feel about him in the middle of the story? How do you feel by the end? Plot out how your feelings for the man with the scar change throughout the story.
- 6). How does the narrator feel about the man with the scar by the end of the story? How do we know?
- 7). The title of this story is “The Man with the Scar.” Think up one more title for this story. If you had to rename this story, what title would you give it? Why?

The Man With The Scar
William Somerset Maugham

It was on account of the scar that I first noticed him, for it ran, broad and red, in a great crescent from his temple to his chin. It must have been due to a formidable wound and I wondered whether this had been caused by a sabre or by a fragment of shell. It was unexpected on that round, fat and good-humoured face. He had small and undistinguished features, and his expression was artless. His face went oddly with his corpulent body. He was a powerful man of more than common height. I never saw him in anything but a very shabby grey suit, a khaki shirt and a battered sombrero. He was far from clean. He used to come into the Palace Hotel at Guatemala City every day at cocktail time and strolling leisurely round the bar offered lottery tickets for sale. If this was the way he made his living it must have been a poor one, for I never saw anyone buy, but now and then I saw him offered a drink. He never refused it. He threaded his way among the tables with a sort of rolling walk as though he were accustomed to traverse long distances on foot, paused at each table, with a little smile mentioned the numbers he had for sale and then, when no notice was taken of him, with the same smile passed on. I think he was for the most part a trifle the worse for liquor.

I was standing at the bar one evening, my foot on the rail, with an acquaintance – they make a very good dry martini at the Palace Hotel in Guatemala City - when the man with the scar came up. I shook my head as for the twentieth time since my arrival he held out for inspection his lottery tickets. But my companion nodded affably.

‘Qué tal, general? How is life?’

‘Not so bad. Business is none too good, but it might be worse.’

‘What will you have, general?’

‘A brandy.’

He tossed it down and put the glass back on the bar. He nodded to my acquaintance. ‘Gracias. Hasta Luego.’

Then he turned away and offered tickets to the men who were standing next to us.

‘Who is your friend?’ I asked. ‘That’s a terrific scar on his face.’

‘It doesn’t add to his beauty, does it? He’s an exile from Nicaragua. He’s a ruffian of course and a bandit, but not a bad fellow. I give him a few pesos now and then. He was a revolutionary general and if his ammunition hadn’t given out he’d have upset the government and be minister of war now instead of selling lottery tickets in Guatemala. They captured him, along with his staff, such as it was, and tried him by court-martial. Such things are rather summary in those countries, you know, and he was sentenced to be shot at dawn. I guess he knew what was coming to him when he was caught. He spent the night in gaol and he and the others, there were five of them altogether, passed the time playing poker. They used matches for chips. He told me he’d never had such a run of bad luck in his life.

When day broke and the soldiers came into the cell to fetch them for execution he had lost more matches than a reasonable man could use in a life time.

They were led into the patio of the gaol and placed against a wall, the five of them side by side, with the firing party facing them. There was a pause and our friend asked the officer in charge of them what the devil they were keeping him waiting for. The

officer said that the general commanding the government troops wished to attend the execution and they awaited his arrival.

“Then I have time to smoke another cigarette,” said our friend. “He was always unpunctual.”

But he had barely lit it when the general – it was San Ignacio, by the way: I don’t know whether you ever met him – followed by his A.D.C. came into the patio. The usual formalities were performed and San Ignacio asked the condemned men whether there was anything they wished before the execution took place. Four of the five shook their heads, but our friend spoke.

“Yes, I should like to say goodbye to my wife.”

“Bueno,” said the general, “I have no objection to that. Where is she?”

“She is waiting at the prison door.”

“Then it will not cause a delay of more than five minutes.”

“Hardly that, Señor General.”

“Have him placed on one side.”

Two soldiers advanced and between them the condemned rebel walked to the spot indicated. The officer in command of the firing squad on a nod from the general gave an order, there was a ragged report, and the four men fell. They fell strangely, not together, but one after the other, with movements that were almost grotesque, as though they were puppets in a toy theatre. The officer went up to them and into one who was still alive emptied two chambers of his revolver. Our friend finished his cigarette and threw away the stub.

There was a little stir at the gateway. A woman came into the patio, with quick steps, and then, her hand on her heart, stopped suddenly. She gave a cry and with outstretched arms ran forward.

“Caramba,” said the general.

She was in black, with a veil over her hair, and her face was dead white. She was hardly more than a girl, a slim creature, with little regular features and enormous eyes. But they were distraught with anguish. Her loveliness was such that as she ran, her mouth slightly open and the agony of her face beautiful, a gasp of surprise was wrung from those indifferent soldiers who looked at her.

The rebel advanced a step or two to meet her. She flung herself into his arms and with a hoarse cry of passion: *alma de mi corazón*, soul of my heart, he pressed his lips to hers. And at the same moment he drew a knife from his ragged shirt – I haven’t a notion how he had managed to retain possession of it – and stabbed her in the neck. The blood spurted from the cut vein and dyed his shirt. Then he flung his arms round her and once more pressed his lips to hers.

It happened so quickly that many didn’t know what had occurred, but from the others burst a cry of horror; they sprang forward and seized him. They loosened his grasp and the girl would have fallen if the A.D.C. hadn’t caught her. She was unconscious. They laid her on the ground and with dismay on their faces stood round watching her. The rebel knew where he was striking and it was impossible to staunch the blood. In a moment the A.D.C. who had been kneeling by her side rose.

“She’s dead,” he whispered.

The rebel crossed himself.

“Why did you do it?” asked the general.

“I loved her.”

A sort of sigh passed through those men crowded together and they looked with strange faces at the murderer. The general stared at him for a while in silence.

“It was a noble gesture,” he said at last. “I cannot execute this man. Take my car and have him led to the frontier. Señor, I offer you the homage which is due from one brave man to another.”

A murmur of approbation broke from those who listened. The A.D.C. tapped the rebel on the shoulder, and between the two soldiers without a word he marched to the waiting car.’

My friend stopped and for a time I was silent. I must explain that he was a Guatemaltecan and spoke to me in Spanish. I have translated what he told me as well as I could, but I have made no attempts to tone down his rather high-flown language. To tell the truth I think it suits the story.

‘But how did he get the scar?’ I asked at length.

‘Oh, that was due to a bottle that burst when he was opening it. A bottle of ginger ale.’

‘I never liked it,’ said I.