

The Way of an Eagle

Developmental edit

This is a romance with a magnificent engine. In its first chapter the hero swears to shoot the heroine, if it comes to that, rather than let her be taken. In the third he forcibly drugs her and carries her out into the night. From that violence the book draws a forty-chapter question: can a woman learn to love the man she fears? Around it sit well-placed devices. The ring with its hidden motto (ch 12, 13, 18, 44, 55) is one. The dream of horses and chariots of fire (ch 2, 7, 56) is another. Nick's oath never to marry her "unless you ask me to" (ch 16) is a third, and it pays off exactly as promised. Nick himself, banter over a barely hidden violence, is the book's great asset.

The most valuable change is to bring Nick back into the middle of the book. He is nearly absent from chapters 17 to 26, about 20,000 words. In that stretch the story is carried by Muriel's retreat to Blake and by the Daisy/Blake adultery subplot, which makes the same beat over and over: a near-confession, an embrace, a retreat (ch 22, 25, 26, 28, 38, 40). The sections with Nick are the ones where tension lives. Give him a scene or letter with Muriel in that stretch, even a hostile one, and cut the Daisy/Blake material to two scenes, one that sets it up and one that tips it over.

Second, the hero's best acts happen offstage or without the heroine. The arm is lost and explained afterwards by Jim (ch 37). Blake's death is reported (ch 43). The hardest fight is won in a sermon to Daisy (ch 42). Nick's blackmail of Blake (ch 39) is superb, but Muriel only receives its result in a letter. Let her see or live one of these costs on the page, so her love answers something she witnessed. Ch 43 is the example: her "fiend" accusation is strong, but Nick never answers it.

Third, protect the surprises. Jim announces the ending in ch 37 ("the new love will be the old love before the week is out"). The monastery rumour (ch 50) is dismantled within a chapter by Bobby (ch 51). The ending's emotional payoffs deserve more room: Nick's apology for the drugging (ch 55), and a moment where he says outright that she has "asked" (ch 54).

Genre expectations

The expected beats are all present and land in sensible places. The inciting incident, Nick's pledge and the drugging, falls in the first 8% (ch 1-3). The forced-proximity wilderness stretch (ch 3-7) runs to roughly 16%. The engagement comes at about 19% (ch 10) and the first rupture at about 32% (ch 16). The false refuge with Blake is at about 41% (ch 21). Nick's return, one-armed, comes at the midpoint (ch 27). The thaw is built on the storm and Olga's illness (ch 32-35), and Muriel realises she loves him at about 82% (ch 44). The climax is the beggar rescue and the palm-kiss, at about 92-100% (ch 52-54), and the honeymoon HEA closes the book. The genre's own question,

whether love conquers, is answered literally in the title motto, and the book argues it through Daisy and Will as well.

The shape is where a modern reader might balk. At 103k words in 56 chapters averaging 1,850 words, the book is long for romance but ordinary for the period, and short chapters keep it moving. It roams across too many points of view for a single love story: Roscoe, Muriel, Nick, Daisy, Blake, Will, and briefly Jim. A long middle (ch 17-31) is carried by a secondary adultery plot. That plot gives the theme variation but costs the central romance its momentum.

The central relationship rests on a heavy trope: the hero's coercion of the heroine (the drugging, ch 3; the forced biscuit, ch 4). The book is aware of it. Muriel's fear is its running subject, and Nick explicitly regrets the act in ch 55. Consider that the payoff needs more weight than a throwaway line.

- **Inciting incident** (fits) — Roscoe's request and Nick's pledge in ch 1, then the drugging in ch 3, all inside the first 8%. A superb hook.
- **Meet and thaw** (fits) — Forced proximity in the ravine (ch 4-7) lets her feed him, protect him and see him kill. The engagement follows at about 19% (ch 10), which is quick, but it is a marriage of convenience and the genre allows that.
- **Midpoint turn** (fits) — Nick's return with an empty sleeve (ch 27) at about 50% reverses the power dynamic and sets up the 'eagle caged' image. Strong.
- **Dark moment** (worth a thought) — Blake's death and Muriel's "I take you for a fiend" (ch 43) and her realisation (ch 44) land at about 80%. The false second dark moment of the monastery rumour (ch 50) is deflated one chapter later.
- **Climax driven by the heroine** (fits) — Muriel disarms the assassin (ch 52) and then kisses Nick's palm (ch 54). She acts, and the oath of ch 16 is fulfilled. Excellent.
- **Length and chapter length** (worth a thought) — 103,615 words in 56 chapters, averaging 1,850 (shortest 859, longest 4,172). Long for a romance today, but the short chapters keep the reading brisk.
- **POV characters** (worth a thought) — The book roams over six or seven minds. The Daisy/Blake sections (ch 22, 26, 40, 42) and the Will chapters (ch 24, 45, 46) are well written but pull away from the central couple.
- **Hero's coercion** (flag) — The drugging (ch 3) and the forced feeding (ch 4) are the foundation of Muriel's fear. The book acknowledges them in ch 55, but only in passing.

What to try

- Give Nick at least one scene or letter with Muriel between ch 17 and ch 26, even a hostile one, so the central relationship is live while Blake courts her.
- Reduce the Daisy/Blake storyline to its two essential scenes (the proposal-day confrontation in ch 22 and the capitulation in ch 26) and merge ch 25 and 28 into the surrounding material.

- In ch 55, expand Nick's "I would rather have died in torment than have done it" into a short exchange in which Muriel asks about that night and he answers, so the founding act is addressed as an event, not a joke.
- Let Muriel witness one of Nick's costs directly, for example by being present for the amputation news or the confrontation with Blake in ch 39, so her love in ch 44 answers something she saw.

Pacing

The hook is exceptional and its promise is clear within a page: Roscoe asks who will shoot his daughter, and Nick says he will (ch 1). Everything afterwards connects to that pledge: the drugging, the flight, the fear of him, the question of why Roscoe chose him (answered in ch 18). The wilderness chapters (ch 4-7) are pure sustained tension: starvation, a killing, a delirium and a rescue. Chapters 8 to 16 keep the engine going through the engagement and its collapse, and ch 14 and 16 are the best examples of tension tied to the goal.

The rise goes slack in the middle. Between ch 17 and ch 26 the heroine's goal is to forget Nick, which is clear, but Nick is almost never on the page. The reader's tension is carried by the Blake/Daisy subplot, which relates to the main story only by contrast. Tension returns with Nick's arrival in ch 27 and holds through ch 36. After the Blake blackmail the book runs a series of near-identical beats: Blake and Daisy (ch 40), Nick and Daisy (ch 42), Blake's death (ch 43), Daisy's confession (ch 46, 49). The ending grows out of the main plot, but it takes about 10,000 words after Muriel's realisation (ch 44) to reach the climax, and some of that is travel and a false rumour (ch 47-51).

- **Hook** (fits) — Ch 1's request that a man shoot a child sets up the whole book's promise. The hook is immediate and relates directly to the protagonist's goal.
- **Rise and hold (ch 3-16)** (fits) — Escape, wilderness, engagement, the overheard gossip and the oath all connect to whether Muriel can love Nick. Tension climbs steadily.
- **Slack middle (ch 17-26)** (flag) — About 20,000 words with Nick almost absent. Muriel's goal is plain, but what stands in her way is not on the page.
- **Re-engagement (ch 27-36)** (fits) — Nick's return, the Redlands lunch, the storm and Olga's illness, then the shore declaration. Every chapter moves the central question.
- **Late-book circling (ch 40-46)** (worth a thought) — Four chapters (40, 42, 45, 46) go to Daisy and Will. They are moving, but the heroine is offstage and her realisation (ch 44) sits between them.
- **Ending** (fits) — The climax (ch 52-54) is driven by Muriel and fulfils the ch 16 oath. The honeymoon epilogue (ch 56) answers the ch 2 dream. It grows entirely from the main plot.
- **False dark moment** (worth a thought) — The monastery rumour (ch 50) is contradicted in ch 51 (about 1,300 words later), so the reader barely feels the loss.

What to try

- Insert a Nick appearance in ch 20 or 24: when Muriel's horse startles at the news that he is coming home, have a letter from him reach her through Olga, so the reader meets his voice again before ch 27.
- In ch 40 and 42, keep the Daisy material but cross-cut a brief Muriel moment at Weir, so the heroine's thread is not suspended through the book's most dramatic night.
- Let the monastery rumour hurt for a chapter or more: end ch 50 on Muriel's despair, and have Bobby's correction (ch 51) arrive the next evening, so the lift in ch 51 has a deeper low to climb from.
- Tighten ch 47-48 (the racecourse and journey) so the route from Muriel's realisation to the ball is shorter.

Reader satisfaction

The tropes are classic and mostly delivered with relish: the protector-hero with a menace, forced proximity, marriage of convenience, enemies-to-lovers with the heroine as the one who hates, a rival who is outmatched, a hero who sacrifices himself for her happiness, a disguise (the beggar) and a heroine who finally chooses. The strongest payoffs are the ring and its motto, which is planted in ch 12, deepened in ch 13, echoed on Roscoe's own prayer-book in ch 18, and returned in ch 44 and 55; the oath of ch 16, fulfilled in ch 54; and the chariots of fire, spoken in ch 2 and ch 7 and closed in ch 56. These are what the reader picks up the book for.

Some moments could land harder. Muriel's recognition of the beggar (ch 52) is dramatic but the clue is slight: she tosses coins to him in ch 47, 48 and 51, and the reader may guess. The gossip scene (ch 14) is a dependable trope, but it makes the break rest on one silence. The ending's emotional apology is thin, and Nick's "you have left off cheating" (ch 54) is a lovely line that could carry more.

- **Ring and motto** (fits) — Planted in ch 12, deepened in 13, echoed in 18, returned in 44, restored in 55. A complete setup and payoff.
- **The oath** (fits) — Nick's "I will never marry you unless you ask me to" (ch 16) is invoked in ch 31, 39 and 53 and honoured in 54. The book's best structural device.
- **Beggar disguise** (worth a thought) — Planted in ch 47-48, revealed in ch 52. Fair play, but you could add one tiny tell (a gesture) for the sharp-eyed reader.
- **Rival defeated** (worth a thought) — Blake's undoing is skillfully built (ch 31 vow, 38 watching, 39 blackmail), but his death offstage (ch 43) takes the satisfaction from the confrontation.
- **Hero's apology** (flag) — The drugging is acknowledged in ch 55 in a half-sentence inside banter. Readers who winced at ch 3 want more.

- **Grovel and surrender** (worth a thought) — Muriel kisses his palm and asks to be married (ch 54). The surrender is earned and tender, though a line from Nick naming it as her asking would complete the oath.

What to try

- In ch 54, after her "I want to be married—soon," give Nick a beat where he reminds her of the ch 16 oath and says, in effect, "That was you asking." The line would pay off the book's key promise.
- Let Muriel see the beggar do one thing in ch 47 or 51 that only Nick would do (the whistling, the quick blink, a gesture with the left hand), so the reveal in ch 52 is a recognition and not just a surprise.
- Expand the exchange in ch 55: have Muriel raise the night of the drugging, and let Nick answer plainly. The reader has carried that scene for fifty chapters.
- Add a moment in ch 14 where Nick's behaviour could have cleared the matter (a conversation he almost has), so the gossip misunderstanding feels like fate and not like withheld information.

Where the reader might wander

The reader is most likely to wander in the middle. After the engagement ends (ch 16), eight months pass and Nick disappears from the page. Ch 17-26 follow Muriel's recovery, Grange's courtship and the Daisy/Blake subplot. These chapters are well made individually, but a reader who came for Nick and Muriel may feel the book has changed its subject. The same beat repeats: Daisy and Blake near their secret (ch 22, 25, 26, 28), and later the same confrontation in new rooms (ch 38, 39, 40, 42). Muriel's flinching from Nick recurs in ch 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 16, 21, 27 and 30 with little change between instances.

The start is not slow. The book promises within a page. The ending has the opposite problem, a long final approach: the heroine realises in ch 44 but the book needs eight more chapters before union. Her goal is clear throughout, to forget Nick (ch 18) and then to flee him (ch 21), but between ch 29 and 31 her inner goal blurs. She says she wants peace with Nick, then wounds him, then promises Blake marriage.

- **Slow start** (fits) — There is none. The promise lands in ch 1 and the engine runs by ch 3.
- **Nick's absence (ch 17-26)** (flag) — Roughly 20,000 words of the book's most important character absent apart from his scene with Will (ch 24) and Olga's chatter (ch 19, 20).
- **Repeated beat: Daisy/Blake** (flag) — Ch 22, 25, 26 and 28 each show Blake and Daisy approaching the same moment of confession. Ch 38, 40 and 42 repeat the pattern.
- **Repeated beat: Muriel's fear** (worth a thought) — Her shrinking from Nick is on the page in at least nine chapters before ch 33. Later instances add little new information.

- **Muriel's goal in ch 29-31** (worth a thought) — She offers friendship (ch 30), cuts him at lunch (ch 31), then proposes marriage to Blake immediately (ch 31). Her motive reads as spite, not need.
- **Late circling (ch 45-51)** (worth a thought) — Will and Daisy's reunion (ch 45, 46) is touching but takes two chapters of the heroine's absence before her own final run begins.

What to try

- Merge the Blake/Daisy beats of ch 25 and 28 into the chapters around them (ch 26 and 27), keeping Blake's guilt but removing the need for a separate scene.
- Make Muriel's decision in ch 31 land with cause: after Nick's hawk-and-daisy teasing, have her say aloud why she wants the engagement fixed, so the reader sees fear and pride at work.
- Trim ch 45-46 to one chapter, cutting the dinner and Sammy business in ch 45, so that Daisy's arrival is closer to the start of the section.
- Add one new variation to Muriel's fear in ch 21 and 27 (for instance a physical reaction she cannot control), so that the repetitions show change.

In the margins

- **1. The Trust — Genre.** *“no one ever took Nick Ratcliffe seriously. It seemed a moral impossibility.”* This is an excellent hero setup: a clown whom everyone underrates. The gap between mask and man is what the genre's readers want to peel back. Keep it alive until the last chapter.
- **1. The Trust — Pacing.** *“I am a straight shot, a cool shot, a dead shot. Will you trust me?”* This is the book's promise in one line. Nick's pledge to shoot her if he must creates the question the whole novel answers. Keep returning to it.
- **2. A Soldier's Daughter — Satisfaction.** *“Captain Grange, of course, Daddy.”* The expected protector is named and rejected here, which sets up the Blake triangle fifteen chapters ahead. When Blake returns, the reader knows who Muriel first wanted and how wrong that was.
- **3. The Victim of Treachery — Genre.** *“Holding her with an arm that felt like iron, he forced the glass back between her teeth, and tilted the contents down her throat.”* The inciting act is bold and the genre allows it, but it demands a payoff. Plant a moment later (ch 55 is the natural place) where Nick answers for it in earnest.
- **4. Desolation — Pacing.** *“your father died last night—before we left the fort.”* A strong turn. It deepens her grievance against Nick and makes the forced escape feel as costly as the first chapter promised. The reader now needs to see him earn forgiveness.
- **5. The Devil in the Wilderness — Satisfaction.** *“remembered suddenly and horribly a picture she had once seen of the devil in the wilderness.”* This image is the fear she carries for thirty chapters. The reversal in ch 52, where she watches him fight and feels none of it, is the payoff. Keep this line's phrasing in mind when you write that scene.

- **6. When Strong Men Fail — Satisfaction.** *“may it be remembered that your offering was something more substantial than a cup of cold water.”* The best scene for the relationship so far: she feeds him and he is humbled. It is the first time the power runs her way. A callback to this later would repay it.
- **7. The Coming of an Army — Pacing.** *“Stay with me, look at me, love me!”* The reader hears his love before she does, which sets up the tension of the long middle. The relief of the relief column is well timed.
- **8. Comrades — Genre.** *“Do you want to marry her?”* Daisy's warning about marrying without love sets the stakes clearly. It is a fair-play bit of foreshadowing, and her own marriage will test it.
- **9. The School of Sorrow — Attention.** *“Why should I not see him? After all, I suppose I ought to thank him.”* Muriel's goal is clear and active here: she defies Lady Bassett out of spite. Good: her motive is stubbornness, not attraction, which keeps the slow burn honest.
- **10. The Eagle Swoops — Genre.** *“I've come to ask you, dear, how soon you can possibly make it convenient to marry me.”* A marriage-of-convenience proposal delivered as a joke is a delight, and it fits Nick. The cost is speed: nineteen percent in, the engagement is made, so the book must work to keep the leads apart.
- **11. The First Flight — Satisfaction.** *“he bent and kissed the black cloth of her habit, humbly, reverently, as became a slave.”* A tiny gesture that signals the hero's devotion and her puzzlement. This kind of moment does more for the trope than any speech.
- **12. The Message — Satisfaction.** *“It was a love-token, given to her by a man who had spoken no word of love.”* The ring's motto is the book's best planted object. It earns each return (ch 13, 18, 44, 55). Protect it from over-explanation.
- **13. The Voice of a Friend — Satisfaction.** *“If they can't marry the man they love—they'll marry—anything.”* Daisy's line is both a warning for Muriel and a hidden confession about her own marriage. It pays off in ch 22 and 26.
- **14. The Poison of Adders — Pacing.** *“she spent no less than three nights alone in the mountains with him.”* A time-honoured misunderstanding that splits the couple. It works because Muriel's pride is established, but consider giving Nick one beat earlier where he could have warned her, so the silence feels fated and not convenient.
- **16. The Ordeal — Genre.** *“I swear to you—before God—that I will never marry you unless you ask me to.”* The book's most important line. It sets the ending's form and gives Muriel the final choice. Consider quoting it, or having a character recall it, in ch 36 and 44 so the reader keeps hold of it.
- **17. An Old Friend — Attention.** *“Eight months that were like as many years stretched between that tragic time and the present”* The time jump is fine, but Nick vanishes with it. You lose your best character for nine chapters. Give him a letter or a mention in Muriel's thoughts that is more than fear.
- **18. The Explanation — Satisfaction.** *“The rest of us were like women compared to Nick.”* This finally answers the ch 1 question of why Roscoe chose Nick. It is a satisfying payoff, and it deepens Muriel's horror in a way that fuels the next act.

- **19. A Hero Worshipper — Attention.** *"I simply love him—better almost than any one else."* Olga is a clever way to keep Nick on the page while he is abroad. Use her more in this stretch; her view of him is the reader's corrective to Muriel's.
- **21. A Harbour of Refuge — Pacing.** *"I would rather trust myself to you"* A false victory placed at about 41%. The reader knows it is a refuge, not a home, which gives the scene a delicious irony. The kiss and her flash of Nick's face is exactly right.
- **22. An Old Story — Attention.** *"Why disturb that poor old skeleton?"* The Daisy/Blake romance is well seeded here. But the same near-confession returns in ch 25, 26 and 28. Make this scene and ch 26 do all the work.
- **24. The Creed of a Fighter — Genre.** *"I may be small, but if I were no bigger than a mosquito, I'd keep on buzzing."* This is Nick's goal, motivation and method in one image, and it is the middle's best Nick moment. It comes through Will, though. Find a way to give Muriel something like it.
- **26. The Eternal Flame — Attention.** *"Blake, turning at last, met her eyes fixed full upon him with that in their expression which no man could ignore."* The embrace is the third of its kind, after ch 22 and 25. It works as the tipping point, but it is the same beat. Consider cutting the earlier near-misses to one.
- **27. The Eagle Caged — Pacing.** *"in place of the other arm there was an empty sleeve."* The midpoint reversal is well staged: Muriel's confidence breaks as she sees what he has paid. The reader's pity is the first crack in the fear.
- **30. An Offer of Friendship — Satisfaction.** *"He stood as it were outside the ropes, and was powerless to intervene."* Blake's inadequacy dawns on Muriel here, which is the real turn of the Blake triangle. The scene is stronger than the formal proposal in ch 31.
- **31. The Eagle Hovers — Genre.** *"She shall be no man's second best. That I swear."* Nick's warning to Blake is the hero's best moment so far and it shows the rival the reader's fear. But Muriel's snap acceptance of Blake right after is poorly motivated: add a line of her inner reasoning.
- **32. The Face in the Storm — Pacing.** *"A face—a wrinkled face that she knew—was there close against the window-pane, and had looked into her own."* A superb chapter ending. The storm sequence (ch 32-35) is the best run in the book for tension tied to the central relationship.
- **34. At the Gate of Death — Satisfaction.** *"I won't be unkind to him again, darling,"* The deathbed promise to Olga echoes the oath of ch 16 and is paid in ch 44 ("Not when you promised?"). A neat doubling of vows.
- **36. The Eagle Strikes — Genre.** *"I have only—loved you."* The first time Nick says the word aloud, at about 67-70% in. It is earned, restrained and devastating. Do not weaken it: leave the reader with it.
- **37. The Penalty for Sentiment — Pacing.** *"she'll cry herself to sleep for your sake, you gibbering, one-armed ape."* Jim's prediction announces the ending at 72% and removes suspense. Keep his revelation of the arm, but cut his forecast.

- **39. By Single Combat — Genre.** *“I swear by all things sacred that I will see you dead sooner than married to her.”* Nick's willingness to trade his own chance for Muriel's happiness is the book's moral centre. It is a fine scene. Consider letting Muriel hear of it, or see him afterwards, so her love can respond.
- **42. The Hardest Fight of All — Attention.** *“It's been a desperate big fight, hasn't it, Nick?”* A powerful scene between the hero and Daisy that carries the book's thesis about love. But Muriel is absent, and Daisy yields quickly. Trim Nick's sermon by a third and leave more of the struggle in Daisy's face.
- **43. Requiescat — Pacing.** *“It isn't the way of an eagle to swoop twice—particularly an eagle with only one wing.”* A great exit line at the dark moment. Muriel's accusation, however, goes unanswered. Let Nick's silence cost him: give a flicker of real hurt, so the reader aches for both.
- **44. Love's Prisoner — Satisfaction.** *“Truly, it conquered; but it left its prisoners to perish of starvation in the wilderness.”* The realisation is vivid, but the cause is the ring and a night's reflection. A single remembered image of Nick at Olga's bed or on the shore would make the turn feel earned, not announced.
- **47. In the Name of Friendship — Satisfaction.** *“He simply lighted a cigarette and set fire to the lady's dress.”* The anecdote plants Nick's ruthless wit and ties Lady Bassett to him (ch 8, 55). It is a fun payoff, and the chapter's work could be done in half the length.
- **49. The Lowering of the Flag — Genre.** *“Love conquers all things—and we must yield to Love.”* Muriel's surrender goes through Daisy. That is touching, but it delays her own act. Consider a scene where she writes it herself, in her own hand.
- **50. Erebus — Pacing.** *“he has gone into a Buddhist monastery in Tibet.”* A good false low, but the next chapter's correction arrives too fast for the despair to register. Let Muriel carry it through a night and a day.
- **52. A Woman's Offering — Satisfaction.** *“She felt no repulsion now—no shrinking of any sort”* The reversal of ch 5 is the book's most important payoff: she watches him fight and is afraid for him, not of him. Linger on it for a line or two longer; this is what the reader has paid for.
- **53. The Last Skirmish — Genre.** *“you are fond of running away when there is no one after you”* The fence banter is the best late use of Nick's voice, a delight, and a reversal of his earlier hunting. Keep it.
- **54. Surrender — Satisfaction.** *“turned it upwards, and stooping low, she pressed her lips closely, passionately, lingeringly, upon his open palm”* A beautiful answer to the oath, and she has found a way without words. Add Nick naming it (“that was you asking”) and the ch 16 promise closes cleanly.
- **55. Omnia Vincit Amor — Satisfaction.** *“I don't suppose it ever occurred to you that I would rather have died in torment than have done it.”* The long-awaited acknowledgement of the drugging, but it is brief and he moves on in jokes. Give Muriel a response that is more than distress, since she has carried this longer than any scene in the book.

- **56. The Eagle Soars — Satisfaction.** *“and chariots—of fire!”* The dream of ch 2 and the vision of ch 7 close together. A well-planted payoff that needs no addition. The pregnancy and Daisy's baby give the HEA its extra warmth.