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Chapter 15 - A Deed Of Gift

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Wingrave threw the paper aside with an impatient exclamation. A small notice in an obscure corner had attracted his attention; the young man, Richardson, had been fished out of the river half drowned, and in view of his tearful and abject penitence, had been allowed to go his way by a lenient magistrate. He had been ill, he pleaded, and disappointed. His former employer, in an Islington emporium, gave him a good character, and offered to take him back. So that was an end of Mr. Richardson, and the romance of his days!

A worm like that to have brought him--the strong man, low! Wingrave thought with sullen anger as he leaned back in his chair with half-closed eyes. Here was an undignified hiatus, if not a finale, to all his schemes, to the even tenor of his self-restrained, purposeful life! The west wind was rippling through the orchards which bordered the garden. The muffled roar of the Atlantic was in his ears, a strange everlasting background to all the slighter summer sounds, the murmuring of insects, the calling of birds, the melodious swish of the whirling knives in the distant hayfield. Wingrave was alone with his thoughts, and he hated them!

Even Mr. Pengarth was welcome, Mr. Pengarth very warm from his ride, carrying his hat and a small black bag in his hand. As he drew nearer, he became hotter and was obliged to rest his bag upon the path and mop his forehead. He was more afraid of his client than of anything else in the world.

"Good afternoon, Sir Wingrave," he said. "I trust that you are feeling better today."

Wingrave eyed him coldly. He did not reply to the inquiry as to his health.

"You have brought the deed?" he asked.

"Certainly, Sir Wingrave."

The lawyer produced a roll of parchment from his bag. In response to Wingrave's gesture, he seated himself on the extreme edge of an adjacent seat.

"I do not propose to read all that stuff through," Wingrave remarked. "I take it for granted that the deed is made out according to my instructions."

"Certainly, Sir Wingrave!"

"Then we will go into the house, and I will sign it."

Mr. Pengarth mopped his forehead once more. It was a terrible thing to have a conscience.

"Sir Wingrave," he said, "I apologize most humbly for what I am about to say, but as the agent of your estates in this county and your--er--legal adviser with regard to them, I am forced to ask you whether you are quite determined upon this--most unexampled piece of generosity. Tredowen has been in your mother's family for a great many years, and although I must say that I have a great affection for this young lady, I have also an old fashioned dislike to seeing--er--family property pass into the hands of strangers. You might, forgive me--marry!"

Wingrave smiled very faintly, otherwise his face was inscrutable.

"I might," he admitted calmly, "but I shall not. Do you consider me, Mr. Pengarth, to be a person in possession of his usual faculties?"

"Oh, most certainly--most certainly," the lawyer declared emphatically.

"Then please do not question my instructions any further. So far as regards the pecuniary part of it, I am a richer man than you have any idea of, Mr. Pengarth, and for the rest--sentiment unfortunately does not appeal to me. I choose to give the Tredowen estates away, to disappoint my next of kin. That is how you may regard the transaction. We will go into the house and complete this deed."

Wingrave rose slowly and walked with some difficulty up the gravel path. He ignored, however, his companion's timid offer of help, and led the way to the library. In a few minutes the document was signed and witnessed.

"I have ordered tea in the garden," Wingrave said, as the two servants left the room; "that is, unless you prefer any other sort of refreshment. I don't know much about the cellars, but there is some cabinet hock, I believe--"

Mr. Pengarth interposed.

"I am very much obliged," he said, "but I will not intrude upon you further. If you will allow me, I will ring the bell for my trap."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Wingrave answered testily. "You will stay here and talk to me."

"I will stay with pleasure if you desire it," the lawyer answered. "I had an idea that you preferred solitude."

"Then you were wrong," Wingrave answered. "I hate being alone."

They moved out together towards the garden. Tea was set out in a shady corner of the lawn.

"If you will forgive my remarking it," Mr. Pengarth said, "this seems rather an extraordinary place for you to come to if you really dislike solitude."

"I come to escape from an intolerable situation, and because I was ill," Wingrave said.

"You might have brought friends," the lawyer suggested.

"I have no friends," Wingrave answered.

"Some of the people in the neighborhood would be very glad--" Mr. Pengarth began.

"I do not wish to see them," Wingrave answered.

Mr. Pengarth took a peach, and held his tongue. Wingrave broke the silence which followed a little abruptly.

"Tell me, Mr. Pengarth," he said, "do I look like a man likely to fail in anything he sets out to accomplish?"

The lawyer shook his head vigorously.

"You do not," he declared.

"Nor do I feel like one," Wingrave said, "and yet my record since I commenced, shall I call it my second life, is one of complete failure! Nothing that I planned have I been able to accomplish. I look back through the months and through the years, and I see not a single purpose carried out, not a single scheme successful.

"Not quite so bad as that, I trust, Sir Wingrave," the lawyer protested.

"It is the precise truth," Wingrave affirmed drily. "I am losing confidence in myself."

"At least," the lawyer declared, "you have been the salvation of our dear Miss Juliet, if I may call her so. But for you, her life would have been ruined."

"Precisely," Wingrave agreed. "But I forgot! You don't understand! I have saved her from heaven knows what! I am going to give her the home she loves! Benevolence, isn't it? And yet, if I had only the pluck, I might succeed even now--so far as she is concerned."

The lawyer took off his spectacles and rubbed them with his handkerchief. He was thoroughly bewildered.

"I might succeed," Wingrave repeated, leaning back in his chair, "if only--"

His face darkened. It seemed to Mr. Pengarth as he sipped his tea under the cool cedars, drawing in all their wonderful perfume with every puff of breeze, that he saw two men in the low invalid's chair before him. He saw the breath and desire of evil things struggling with some wonderful dream vainly seeking to realize itself.

"Some of us," the lawyer said timidly, "build our ideals too high up in the clouds, so that to reach them is very difficult. Nevertheless, the effort counts."

Wingrave laughed mockingly.

"It is not like that with me," he declared. "My plans were made down in hell."

"God bless my soul!" the lawyer murmured. "But you are not serious, Sir Wingrave?"

"Ay! I'm serious enough," Wingrave answered. "Do you suppose a man, with the best pages of his life rooted out, is likely to look out upon his fellows from the point of view of a philanthropist? Do you suppose that the man, into whose soul the irons of bitterness have gnawed and eaten their way, is likely to come out with a smirk and look around him for the opportunity of doing good? Rubbish! My aim is to encourage suffering wherever I see it, to create it where I can, to make sinners and thieves of honest people."

"God bless my soul!" the lawyer gasped again. "I don't think you can be--as bad as you think you are. What about Juliet Lundy?"

Fire flashed in Wingrave's eyes. Again, at the mention of her name, he seemed almost to lose control of himself. It was several moments before he spoke. He looked Mr. Pengarth in the face, and his tone was unusually deliberate.

"Gifts," he said, "are not always given in friendship. Life may easily become a more complicated affair for that child with the Tredowen estates hanging round her neck. And anyhow, I disappoint my next of kin."

Morrison, smooth-footed and silent, appeared upon the lawn. He addressed Wingrave.

"A lady has arrived in a cab from Truro, sir," he announced. "She wishes to see you as soon as convenient."

A sudden light flashed across Wingrave's face, dying out again almost immediately.

"Who is she, Morrison?" he asked.

The man glanced at Mr. Pengarth.

"She did not give her name, sir."

Mr. Pengarth and Wingrave both rose. The former at once made his adieux and took a short cut to the stables. Wingrave, who leaned heavily upon his stick, clutched Morrison by the arm.

"Who is it, Morrison?" he demanded.

"It is Lady Ruth Barrington, sir," the man answered.

"Alone?"

"Quite alone, sir."