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Chapter 19 - Revenge Is--Bitter

At no time during his career did Wingrave appear before the public more prominently than during the next few months. As London began to fill up again, during the early part of October, he gave many and magnificent entertainments, his name figured in all the great social events, he bought a mansion in Park Lane which had been built for Royalty, and the account of the treasures with which he filled it read like a chapter from some modern Arabian Nights. In the city, he was more hated and dreaded than ever. His transactions, huge and carefully thought out, were for his own aggrandizement only, and left always in their wake ruin and disaster for the less fortunate and weaker speculators. He played for his own hand only, the camaraderie of finance he ignored altogether. In one other respect, too, he occupied a unique position amongst the financial magnates of the moment. All appeals on behalf of charity he steadily ignored. He gave nothing away. His name never figured amongst the hospital lists; suffering and disaster, which drew their humble contributions from the struggling poor and middle classes, left him unmoved and his check book unopened. In an age when huge gifts on behalf of charity was the fashionable road to the peerage, his attitude was all the more noticeable. He would give a thousand pounds for a piece of Sevres china which took his fancy; he would not give a thousand farthings to ease the sufferings of his fellows. Yet there were few found to criticize him. He was called original, a crank; there were even some who professed to see merit in his attitude. To both criticism and praise he was alike indifferent. With a cynicism which seemed only to become more bitter he pursued his undeviating and deliberate way.

One morning he met Lady Ruth on the pavement in Bond Street. She pointed to the vacant seat in her landau.

"Get in, please, for a few minutes," she said. "I want to talk to you. I will take you where you like."

They drove off in silence.

"You were not at the Wavertons last night," he remarked.

"No!" she answered quietly. "I was not asked."

He glanced at her questioningly.

"I thought that you were so friendly," he said.

"I was," she answered. "Lady Waverton scarcely knows me now! It is the beginning of the end, I suppose."

"You are a little enigmatical this morning," he declared.

"Oh, no! You understand me very well," she answered. "Everybody knows that it is you who keep us going. Lumley has not got quite used to taking your money. He has lost nearly all his ambition. Soon his day will have gone by. People shrug their shoulders when they speak of us. Two years ago the Wavertons were delighted to know me. Society seems big, but it isn't. There are no end of little sets, one inside the other. Two years ago, I was in the innermost, today I'm getting towards the outside edge. Look at me! Do you see any change?"

He scrutinized her mercilessly in the cold morning light.

"You look older," he said, "and you have begun to use rouge, which is a pity."

She laughed hardly.

"You think so? Well, I don't want Emily to see my hollow cheeks--or you! Are you satisfied, Wingrave?"

"I am afraid I don't understand--" he began.

"Don't lie," she interrupted curtly. "You do understand. This is your vengeance--very subtle and very crafty. Everything has turned out exactly as you planned. You have broken us, Wingrave! I thought myself a clever woman, but I might as well have tried to gamble with the angels. Why don't you finish it off now--make me run away with you?"

"It would bore us both," he answered calmly. "Besides, you wouldn't come!"

"I should, and you know that I would," she answered. "Everyone expects it of us. I think myself that it would be more decent."

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"You are a strange woman," he said. "I find it hard sometimes to understand you."

"Then you are a fool," she declared in a fierce little whisper. "You know what is underneath all my suffering, all my broken pride! You know that I was fool enough to keep the flame flickering--that I have cared always and for no one else!"

He stopped the carriage.

"You are the most original woman I ever met," he said quietly. "I neither wish to care nor be cared for by anyone. Go home to your husband, and tell him to buy Treadwells."

up to six."

That same afternoon Wingrave met Aynesworth and cut him dead. Something in the younger man's appearance, though, perplexed him. Aynesworth certainly had not the air of a successful man. He was pale, carelessly dressed, and apparently in ill health. Wingrave, after an amount of hesitation, which was rare with him, turned his car towards Battersea, and found himself, a few minutes later, mounting the five flights of stone steps. Juliet herself opened the door to him. She gave a little gasp when she saw who it was, and did not immediately invite him to enter.

"I am sorry," Wingrave said coldly, "to inflict this visit upon you. If you are alone, and afraid to ask me in, we can talk here."

Her cheeks became as flushed as a moment before they had been pale. She looked at him reproachfully, and, standing on one side to let him pass, closed the door behind him. Then she led the way into her sitting room.

"I am glad that you have come to see me," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

He ignored her invitation, and stood looking around him. There was a noticeable change in the little room. There were no flowers, some of the ornaments and the silver trifles from her table were missing. The place seemed to have been swept bare of everything, except the necessary furniture. Then he looked at her. She was perceptibly thinner, and there were black rings under her eyes.

"Where is Mrs. Tresfarwin?" he asked.

"In Cornwall," she answered.

"Why?"

"I could not afford to keep her here any longer."

"What are you doing for a living--painting still?"

She shook her head a little piteously.

"They can't sell any more of my pictures," she said. "I am trying to get a situation as governess or companion or--anything."

"When did you have anything to eat last?" he asked.

"Yesterday," she answered, and he was just in time to catch her. She had fainted.

He laid her upon the sofa, poured some water over her face, and fanned her with a newspaper. His expression of cold indifference remained unmoved. It was there in his face when she opened her eyes.

"Are you well enough to walk?" he asked.

"Quite, thank you," she answered. "I am so sorry!"

"Put on your hat," he ordered.

She disappeared for a few minutes, and returned dressed for the street. He drove her to a restaurant and ordered some dinner. He made her drink some wine, and while they waited he buried himself in a newspaper. They ate their meal almost in silence. Afterwards, Wingrave asked her a question.

"Where is Aynesworth?"

"Looking for work, I think," she answered.

"Why did you not stay down in Cornwall?"

"Miss Pengarth was away--and I preferred to return to London," she told him quietly.

"When are you going to marry Aynesworth?" he asked.

She looked down into her glass and was silent. He leaned a little towards her.

"Perhaps," he remarked quietly, "you are already married?"

Still she was silent. He saw the tears forced back from her eyes. He heard the sob break in her throat. Yet he said nothing. He only waited. At last she spoke.

"Nothing is settled yet," she said, still without looking at him.

"I see no reason," he said calmly, "why, until that time, you should refuse to accept your allowance from Mr. Pengarth."

"I cannot take any more of your money," she answered. "It was a mistake from the first, but I was foolish. I did not understand."

His lip curled with scorn.

"You are one of those," he said, "who, as a child, were wise, but as a young woman with a little knowledge, become--a prig. What harm is my money likely to do you? I may be the Devil himself, but my gold is not tainted. For the rest, granted that I am at war with the world, I do not number children amongst my enemies."

She raised her eyes then, and looked him in the face.

"I am not afraid of you," she declared. "It is not that; but I have been dependent long enough. I will keep myself--or starve."

He shrugged his shoulders and paid the bill.

"My man," he said, "will take you wherever you like. I have a call to make close here."

They stood upon the pavement. She held out her hand a little timidly. Her eyes were soft and wistful.

"Goodbye, guardian," she said. "Thank you very much for my lunch."

"Ah!" he said gravely, "if you would let me always call myself that!"

She got into the car without a word. Wingrave walked straight back to his own house. Several people were waiting in the entrance hall, and the visitors' book was open upon the porter's desk. He walked through, looking neither to the right nor the left, crossed the great library, with its curved roof, its floor of cedar wood, and its wonderful stained-glass windows, and entered a smaller room beyond--his absolute and impenetrable sanctum. He rang the bell for his servant.

"Morrison," he said, "if you allow me to be disturbed by any living person, on any pretense whatever, until I ring, you lose your place. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Wingrave locked the door. The next hour belonged to himself alone

When at last he rang the bell, he gave Morrison a note.

"This is to be delivered at once," he said.

The man bowed and withdrew. Wingrave, with his hands behind him, strolled out into the library. In a remote corner, a small spectacled person was busy writing at a table. Wingrave crossed the room and stood before him.

"Are you my librarian?" he asked.

The man rose at once.

"Certainly, sir," he answered. "My name is Woodall. You may have forgotten it. I am at work now upon a new catalogue."

Wingrave nodded.

"I have a quarto Shakespeare, I think," he said, "that I marked at Sotheby's, also a manuscript Thomas a Kempis, and a first edition of Herrick. I should like to see them."

"By all means," the man answered, hurrying to the shelves. "You have, also, a wonderful rare collection of manuscripts, purchased from the Abbey St. Jouvain, and a unique Horace. If you will permit me."

Wingrave spent half an hour examining his treasures, leaving his attendant astonished.

"A millionaire who understands!" he exclaimed softly as he resumed his seat. "Miraculous!"

Wingrave passed into the hall, and summoned his major domo.

"Show me the ballroom," he ordered, "and the winter garden."

The little man in quiet black clothes--Wingrave abhorred liveries--led him respectfully through rooms probably unequalled for magnificence in England. He spoke of the exquisite work of French and Italian artists; with a gesture almost of reverence he pointed out the carving in the wonderful white ballroom.

Wingrave listened and watched with immovable face. Just as they had completed their tour, Morrison approached.

"Mr. Lumley and Lady Ruth Barrington are in the library, sir," he announced.

Wingrave nodded.

"I am coming at once," he said.