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Chapter 20 - The Way Of Peace

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They awaited his coming in varying moods. Barrington was irritable and restless, Lady Ruth gave no signs of any emotion whatever. She had the air of a woman who had no longer fear or hope. Only her eyes were a little weary.

Barrington was walking up and down the room, his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed upon his wife. Every now and then he glanced nervously towards her.

"Of course," he said, "if he wants a settlement--well, there's an end of all things. And I don't see why he shouldn't. He hasn't lent money out of friendship. He hates me--always has done, and sometimes I wonder whether he doesn't hate you too!"

Lady Ruth shivered a little. Her husband's words came to her with peculiar brutality. It was as though he were blaming her for not having proved more attractive to the man who held them in the hollow of his hand.

"Doesn't it strike you," she murmured, "that a discussion like this is scarcely in the best possible taste? We cannot surmise what he wants--what he is going to do. Let us wait!"

The door opened and Wingrave entered. To Barrington, who greeted him with nervous cordiality, he presented the same cold, impenetrable appearance; Lady Ruth, with quicker perceptions, noticed at once the change. She sat up in her chair eagerly. It was what she had prayed for, this--but was it for good or evil? Her eyes sought his eagerly. So much depended upon his first few words.

Wingrave closed the door behind him. His greetings were laconic as usual. He addressed Lady Ruth.

"I find myself obliged," he said, "to take a journey which may possibly be a somewhat protracted one. I wished, before I left, to see you and your husband. I sent for you together, but I wish to speak to you separately--to your husband first. You have often expressed a desire to see over my house, Lady Ruth. My major domo is outside. Will you forgive me if I send you away for a few minutes?"

Lady Ruth rose slowly to her feet.

"How long do you wish me to keep away?" she asked calmly.

"A few minutes only," he answered. "You will find me here when Parkinson has shown you round."

He held the door open and she passed out, with a single upward and wondering glance. Wingrave closed the door, and seated himself close to where Barrington was standing.

"Barrington," he said, "twenty years ago we were friends. Since then we have been enemies. Today, so far as I am concerned, we are neither."

Barrington started a little. His lips twitched nervously. He did not quite understand.

"I am sure, Wingrave--" he began.

Wingrave interrupted him ruthlessly.

"I give you credit," he continued, "for understanding that my attitude towards you since I--er--reappeared, has been inimical. I intended you to speculate, and you did speculate. I meant you to lose, and you have lost. The money I lent to your wife was meant to remain a rope around your neck. The fact that I lent it to her was intended to humiliate you, the attentions which I purposely paid to her in public were intended to convey a false impression to society--and in this, too, I fancy that I have been successful."

Barrington drew a thick breath--the dull color was mounting to his cheeks.

Wingrave continued calmly--

"I had possibly in my mind, at one time," he said, "the idea of drawing things on to a climax--of witnessing the final disappearance of yourself and your wife from the world--such as we know it. I have, however, ceased to derive amusement or satisfaction from pursuing what we may call my vengeance. Consequently, it is finished."

The light of hope leaped into Barrington's dull eyes, but he recognized Wingrave's desire for silence.

"A few feet to your left, upon my writing table," Wingrave continued, "you will find an envelope addressed to yourself. It contains a discharge, in full, for the money I have lent you. I have also ventured to place to your credit, at your own bank, a sum sufficient to give you a fresh start. When you return to Cadogan Square, or, at least, this evening, you will receive a communication from the Prime Minister, inviting you to become one of the International Board of Arbitration on the Alaskan question. The position, as you know, is a distinguished one, and if you should be successful, your future career should be assured."

Barrington broke down. He covered his face with his hands. Great sobs shook him. Wingrave waited for a few minutes, and then rose to his feet.

"Barrington," he said, "there is one little. What the world may say or think counts for very little. Society reverses its own judgments and eats its own words every day. A little success will bring it to your feet like a whipped dog. It is for yourself I say this, for yourself alone. There is no reason why you should hesitate to accept any service I may be able to render you. You understand me?"

Barrington's face was like the face of a young man. All the cloud of suspicion and doubts and fears was suddenly lifted. He looked through new eyes on to a new world.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed. "Not that I ever doubted it, Wingrave, but--thank God!" . . .

Barrington left the house radiant,--Lady Ruth and Wingrave were alone. She watched him close the door and turn towards her, with a new timidity. The color came and went in her pale cheeks, her eyes were no longer tired. When he turned towards her, she leaned to him with a little seductive movement of her body. Her hands stole out towards him.

"Wingrave!" she murmured.

His first action seemed to crush all the desperate joy which was rising fast in her heart. He took one hand, and he led her to a chair.

"Ruth," he said, "I have been talking to your husband. There are only a few words I want to say to you."

"There are only three I want to hear from you," she murmured, and her eyes were pleading with him passionately all the time. "It seems to me that I have been waiting to hear them all my life. Wingrave, I am so tired--and I am losing--I want to leave it all!"

"Exactly," he answered cheerfully, "what you are going to do. You are going to America with your husband."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am rather tired of the game," he said, "that is all. I am like the child who likes to build up again the house of bricks which he has thrown down. I have procured for your husband a seat on the Alaskan Board. It is a very distinguished position, and you will find that it will entail considerable social obligations in America. When you return, he will be able to claim a judgeship, or a place in the Government. You will find things go smoothly enough then."

"But you!" she cried; "I want you!"

He looked at her gravely.

"Dear Lady Ruth," he said, "you may think so at this moment, but you are very much mistaken. What you really desire is a complete reconciliation with your husband and a place in the great world which no one shall be able to question. These things are arranged for you; also--these."

He handed her a little packet. She dropped it idly into her lap. She was looking steadfastly away from them.

"You are free from me now," he continued. "You will find life run quite smoothly, and I do not think that you will be troubled with me when you come back from America. I have other plans."

"There was a slave," she murmured, "who grew to love her gaoler, and when they came to set her free and take her back to her own people--she prayed only to be left in her cell! Freedom for her meant a broken heart!"

"But that was fiction," he answered. "For you, freedom will mean other things. There is work for you to do, honorable work. You must fan the flame of your husband's ambition, you must see that he does justice to his great opportunities. You have your own battle to fight with society, but you have the winning cards for, before you go, you and your husband will be received as guests--well, by the one person whose decision is absolute."

She looked at him in amazement.

"My word of honor," he said quietly, "was enough for Lord Marendon. You will find things go smoothly with you."

"You are wonderful," she gasped, "but--you--you spoke of going away."

"I am going to travel," he said quietly, "rather a long journey. I have lived three lives, I am going to try a fourth!"

"Alone?" she asked.

"Quite alone," he answered.

"Tell me where you are going?" she begged.

"I cannot do that," he answered. "It is my secret."

She rose to her feet. She was very pale. She stood in front of him, and she laid her hands upon his shoulders.

"Wingrave," she said, "I will obey. I will live the life you have shown me, and I will live it successfully. But I will know this. Who is it that has succeeded where I have failed?"

"I do not understand you," he answered.

"You do!" she declared, "and I will know. For years you have been a man with a shell upon your heart. Every good impulse, every kind thought seemed withered up. You were absolutely cold, absolutely passionless! I have worn myself out trying to call you back to your own, to set the blood flowing once more in your veins, to break for one moment the barriers which you had set up against Nature herself. Some day, I felt that it must come--and it has! Who has done it, Wingrave? It is not--Emily?"

"Emily!" he exclaimed. "I have not seen her for months. She has no interest for me--she never had."

"Then tell me who it is!"

"Nature unaided," he answered carelessly. "Human intervention was not necessary. It was the swing of the pendulum, Ruth, the eternal law which mocks our craving for content. I had no sooner succeeded in my new capacity--than the old man crept out."

"But Nature has her weapons always," she protested. "Wingrave, was it the child?"

He touched the electric bell. Taking her hands, he bent down and kissed them.

"Dear lady," he said, "goodbye--good fortune! Conquer new worlds, and remember--white is your color, and Paquin your one modiste. Morrison, Lady Barrington's carriage.