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Chapter 10 - A Forlorn Hope

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Aynesworth ceased tugging at the strap of his portmanteau, and rose slowly to his feet. A visitor had entered his rooms--apparently unannounced.

"I must apologize," the newcomer said, "for my intrusion. Your housekeeper, I presume it was, whom I saw below, told me to come up."

Aynesworth pushed forward a chair.

"Won't you sit down?" he said. "I believe that I am addressing Mr. Lumley Barrington."

Not altogether without embarrassment, Barrington seated himself. Something of his ordinary confidence of bearing and demeanor had certainly deserted him. His manner, too, was nervous. He had the air of being altogether ill at ease.

"I must apologize further, Mr. Aynesworth," he continued, "for an apparently ill-timed visit. You are, I see, on the eve of a journey."

"I am leaving for America tomorrow," Aynesworth answered.

"With Sir Wingrave Seton, I presume?" Barrington remarked.

"Precisely," Aynesworth answered.

Barrington hesitated for a moment. Aynesworth was civil, but inquiring. He felt himself very awkwardly placed.

"Mr. Aynesworth," he said, "I must throw myself upon your consideration. You can possibly surmise the reason of my visit."

Aynesworth shook his head.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I must plead guilty to denseness--in this particular instance, at any rate. I am altogether at a loss to account for it."

"You have had some conversation with my wife, I believe?"

"Yes. But--"

"Before you proceed, Mr. Aynesworth," Barrington interrupted, "one word. You are aware that Sir Wingrave Seton is in possession of certain documents in which my wife is interested, which he refuses to give up?"

"I have understood that such is the case," Aynesworth admitted. "Will you pardon me if I add that it is a matter which I can scarcely discuss?"

Barrington shrugged his shoulders.

"Let it go, for the moment," he said. "There is something else which I want to say to you."

Aynesworth nodded a little curtly. He was not very favorably impressed with his visitor.

"Well!"

Barrington leaned forward in his chair.

"Mr. Aynesworth," he said, "you have made for yourself some reputation as a writer. Your name has been familiar to me for some time. I was at college, I believe, with your uncle, Stanley Aynesworth."

He paused. Aynesworth said nothing.

"I want to know," Barrington continued impressively, "what has induced you to accept a position with such a man as Seton?"

"That," Aynesworth declared, "is easily answered. I was not looking for a secretaryship at all, or anything of the sort, but I chanced to hear his history one night, and I was curious to analyze, so far as possible, his attitude towards life and his fellows, on his reappearance in it. That is the whole secret."

Barrington leaned back in his chair, and glanced thoughtfully at his companion.

"You know the story of his misadventures, then?" he remarked.

"I know all about his imprisonment, and the cause of it," Aynesworth said quietly.

Barrington was silent for several moments. He felt that he was receiving but scanty encouragement.

"Is it worth while, Mr. Aynesworth?" he asked at length. "There is better work for you in the world than this."

Again Aynesworth preferred to reply by a gesture only. Barrington was watching him steadily.

"A political secretaryship, Mr. Aynesworth," he said, "might lead you anywhere. If you are ambitious, it is the surest of all stepping stones into the House. After that, your career is in your own hands. I offer you such a post."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you," Aynesworth replied, "but I scarcely understand."

"I have influence," Barrington said, "which I have never cared to use on my own account. I am willing to use it on yours. You have only to say the word, and the matter is arranged."

"I can only repeat," Aynesworth said, "that I am exceedingly obliged to you, Mr. Barrington, but I cannot understand why you should interest yourself so much on my behalf."

"If you wish me to speak in plain words," Barrington said, "I will do so. I ask you to aid me as a man of honor in the restoration of those letters to my wife."

"I cannot do it," Aynesworth said firmly. "I am sorry that you should have come to me with such an offer. It is quite out of the question!"

Barrington held out his hand.

"Do not decide too hastily," he said. "Remember this. Sir Wingrave Seton had once an opportunity of putting those letters to any use he may have thought fit. He ignored it. At that time, their tenor and contents might easily have been explained. After all these years, that task would be far more difficult. I say that no man has a right to keep a woman's letters back from her years after any friendship there may have been between them is over. It is not the action of an honorable man. Sir Wingrave Seton has placed himself outside the pale of honorable men."

"Your judgment," Aynesworth answered quietly, "seems to me severe. Sir Wingrave Seton has been the victim of peculiar circumstances."

Barrington looked at his companion thoughtfully. He was wondering exactly how much he knew.

"You defend him," he remarked. "That is because you have not yet found out what manner of man he is."

"In any case," Aynesworth answered, "I am not his judge. Mr. Barrington," he added, "You must forgive me if I remind you that this is a somewhat unprofitable discussion."

A short silence followed. With Barrington it did not appear to be a silence of irresolution. He was leaning a little forward in his chair, and his head was resting upon his hand. Of his companion he seemed for the moment to have become oblivious. Aynesworth watched him curiously. Was he looking back through the years, he wondered, to that one brief but lurid chapter of history; or was it his own future of which he was thinking,--a future which, to the world, must seem so full of brilliant possibilities, and yet which he himself must feel to be so fatally and miserably insecure?

"Mr. Aynesworth," he said at last, "I suppose from a crude point of view I am here to bribe you."

Aynesworth shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it worth while?" he asked a little wearily. "I have tried to be civil--but I have also tried to make you understand. Your task is absolutely hopeless!"

"It should not be," Barrington persisted. "This is one of those rare cases, in which anything is justifiable. Seton had his chance at the trial. He chose to keep silence. I do not praise him or blame him for that. It was the only course open to a man of honor. I maintain that his silence then binds him to silence for ever. He has no right to ruin my life and the happiness of my wife by subtle threats, to hold those foolish letters over our heads, like a thunderbolt held ever in suspense. You are ambitious, I believe, Mr. Aynesworth!" Get me those letters, and I will make you my secretary, find you a seat in Parliament, and anything else in reason that you will!"

Aynesworth rose to his feet. He wished to intimate that, so far as he was concerned, the interview was at an end.

"Your proposition, Mr. Barrington," he said, "is absolutely impossible. In the first place, I have no idea where the letters in question are, and Sr. Wingrave is never likely to suffer them to pass into my charge."

"You have opportunities of finding out," Barrington suggested.

"And secondly," Aynesworth continued, ignoring the interruption, "whatever the right or the wrong of this matter may be, I am in receipt of a salary from Sr. Wingrave Seton, and I cannot betray his confidence."

Barrington also rose to his feet. He was beginning to recognize the hopelessness of his task.

"This is final, Mr. Aynesworth?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" was the firm reply.

Barrington bowed stiffly, and moved towards the door. On the threshold he paused.

"I trust, Mr. Aynesworth," he said hesitatingly, "that you will not regard this as an ordinary attempt at bribery and corruption. I have simply asked you to aid me in setting right a great injustice."

"It is a subtle distinction, Mr. Barrington," Aynesworth answered, "but I will endeavor to keep in mind your point of view."

Barrington drove straight home, and made his way directly to his study. Now that he was free from his wife's influence, and looked back upon his recent interview, he realized for the first time the folly and indignity of the whole proceedings. He was angry that, a man of common sense, keen witted and farseeing in the ordinary affairs of life, should have placed himself so completely in a false, not to say a humiliating position. And then, just as suddenly, he forgot all about himself, and remembered only her.

With a breath of violets, and the delicate rustling of half-lifted skirts, she had come softly into the room, and stood looking at him inquiringly. Her manner seemed to indicate more a good-natured curiosity than real anxiety. She made a little grimace as he shook his head.

"I have failed," he said shortly. "That young man is a prig!"

"I was afraid," she said, "that he would be obstinate. Men with eyes of that color always are!"

"What are we to do, Ruth?"

"What can we?" she answered calmly. "Nothing but wait. He is going to America. It is a terrible country for accidents. Something may happen to him there! Do go and change your things, there's a dear, and look in at the Westinghams' for me for an hour. We'll just get some supper and come away."

"I will be ready in ten minutes," Barrington answered. He understood that he was to ask no questions, nor did he. But all the time his man was hurrying him into his clothes, his brain was busy weaving fancies.