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Chapter 15 - "Devil Take The Hindmost"

Wingrave and Aynesworth were alone in a private room of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The table at which the former was seated was covered with letters and papers. A New York directory and an atlas were at his elbow.

"I propose," Wingrave said, leaning back in his chair, "to give you some idea of the nature of my business in this country. You will be able then, I trust, to carry out my instructions more intelligibly."

Aynesworth nodded.

"I thought," he said, "that you came here simply to remain in seclusion for a time."

"That is one of my reasons," Wingrave admitted, "but I had a special purpose in coming to America. During my--enforced seclusion--I made the acquaintance of a man called Hardwell. He was an Englishman, but he had lived in America for some years, and had got into trouble over some company business. We had some conversation, and it is upon his information that I am now going to act."

"He is trustworthy?" Aynesworth asked.

"I take the risk," Wingrave answered coolly. "There is a small copper mine in Utah called the Royal Hardwell Copper Mine. The shares are hundred dollar ones, and there are ten thousand of them. They are scarcely quoted now, as the mine has become utterly discredited. Hardwell managed this himself with a false report. He meant to have the company go into liquidation, and then buy it for a very small amount. As a matter of fact, the mine is good, and could be worked at a large profit."

"You have Hardwell's word for that," Aynesworth remarked.

"Exactly!" Wingrave remarked. "I am proceeding on the assumption that he told me the truth. I wish to buy, if possible, the whole of the shares, and as many more as I can get brokers to sell. The price of the shares today is two dollars!"

"I presume you will send out an expert to the mine first?" Aynesworth said.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Wingrave answered. "The fact that I was buying upon information would send the shares up at once. I mean to buy first, and then go out to the mine. If I have made a mistake, I shall not be ruined. If Hardwell's story is true, there will be millions in it."

Aynesworth said nothing, but his face expressed a good deal.

"Here are the names of seven respectable brokers," Wingrave continued, passing a sheet of paper towards him. "I want you to buy five hundred shares from each of them. The price may vary a few points. Whatever it is, pay it. Here are seven signed checks. I shall buy myself as many as I can without spoiling the market. You had better start out in about a quarter of an hour and see to this. You have my private ledger?"

"Yes."

"Open an account to Hardwell in it; a quarter of all the shares I buy are to be in his name, and a quarter of all the profits I make in dealing in the shares is to be credited to him."

"A fairly generous arrangement for Mr. Hardwell," Aynesworth remarked.

"There is nothing generous about it," Wingrave answered coldly. "It is the arrangement I made with him, and to which I propose to adhere. You understand what I want you to do?"

"Perfectly," Aynesworth answered; "I still think, however, that much the wiser course would be to send an expert to the mine first."

"Indeed!" Wingrave remarked politely. "That is all, I think. I shall expect to see you at luncheon time. If you are asked questions as to why you are dealing in these shares to such an extent, you can say that the friend for whom you are acting desires to boom copper, and is going on the low price of the metal at the moment. They will think you a fool, and perhaps may not trouble to conceal their opinion after they have finished the business. You must endeavor to support the character. I have no doubt but that you will be successful."

Aynesworth moved towards the door.

Once more Wingrave called him back. He was leaning a little forward across the table. His face was very set and cold.

"There is a question which I wish to ask you, Aynesworth," he said. "It concerns another matter altogether. Do you know who sent the Marconigram to Dr. Travers, which brought him to New York to meet his wife?"

"I do not," Aynesworth answered.

"It was sent by someone on board the ship," Wingrave continued "You have no suspicion as to whom it could have been?"

"None!" Aynesworth answered firmly. "At the same time, I do not mind telling you this. If I had thought of it, I would have sent it myself."

Wingrave shrugged his shoulders.

"It is perhaps fortunate for the continuation of our mutual relations that you did not think of it," he remarked quietly. "I accept your denial. I shall expect you back at one o'clock."

At a few minutes after that hour the two men sat down to luncheon. Wingrave at that time was the possessor of six thousand shares in the Royal Hardwell Copper Mine, which had cost him, on an average, two dollars twenty-five. The news of the dealing, however, had got about, and although derision was the chief sentiment amongst the brokers, the price steadily mounted. A dozen telegrams were sent out to the mine, and on receipt of the replies, the dealing became the joke of the day. The mine was still deserted, and no fresh inspection had been made. The price dropped a little. Then Wingrave bought a thousand more by telephone, and it rose again to four. A few minutes before closing time, he threw every share of which he was possessed upon the market, and the next morning Royal Hardwells stood at one dollar seventy-five.

For a week Wingrave pursued the same tactics, and at the end of that time he had made twenty thousand dollars. The brokers, however, now understood, or thought they understood, the situation. No one bought for the rise; they were all sellers. Wingrave at once changed his tactics. He bought five thousand shares in one block, and sold none. Even then, the market was only mildly amused. In a fortnight he was the nominal owner of sixteen thousand shares in a company of which only ten thousand actually existed. Then he sat still, and the panic began. The shares in a company which everyone believed to be worthless stood at thirty dollars, and not a share was offered.

A small pandemonium reigned in Wingrave's sitting room. The telephone rang all the time; the place was besieged with brokers. Then Wingrave showed his hand. He had bought these shares to hold; he did not intend to sell one. As to the six thousand owed to him beyond the number issued, he was prepared to consider offers. One broker left him a check for twenty thousand dollars, another for nearly forty thousand. Wingrave had no pity. He had gambled and won. He would accept nothing less than par price. The air in his sitting room grew thick with curses and tobacco smoke.

Aynesworth began by hating the whole business, but insensibly the fascination of it crept over him. He grew used to hearing the various forms of protest, of argument and abuse, which one and all left Wingrave so unmoved. Sphinx-like he lounged in his chair, and listened to all. He never condescended to justify his position, he never met argument by argument. He had the air of being thoroughly bored by the whole proceedings. But he exacted always his pound of flesh.

On the third afternoon, Aynesworth met on the stairs a young broker, whom he had come across once or twice during his earlier dealings in the shares. They had had lunch together, and Aynesworth had taken a fancy to the boy--he was little more--fresh from Harvard and full of enthusiasm. He scarcely recognized him for a moment. The fresh color had gone from his cheeks, his eyes were set in a fixed, wild stare; he seemed suddenly aged. Aynesworth stopped him.

"Hullo, Nesbitt!" he exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

The young man would have passed on with a muttered greeting, but Aynesworth turned round with him, and led the way into one of the smaller smoking rooms. He called for drinks and repeated his question.

"Your governor has me six hundred Hardwells short," Nesbitt answered curtly.

"Six hundred! What does it mean?" Aynesworth asked.

"Sixty thousand dollars, or thereabouts," the young man answered despairingly. "His brokers won't listen to me, and your governor--well, I've just been to see him. I won't call him names! And we thought that some fool of an Englishman was burning his fingers with those shares. I'm not the only one caught, but the others can stand it. I can't, worse luck!"

"I'm beastly sorry," Aynesworth said truthfully. "I wish I could help you."

Nesbitt raised his head. A sudden light flashed in his eyes; he spoke quickly, almost feverishly.

"Say, Aynesworth," he exclaimed, "do you think you could do anything with your governor for me? You see--it's ruin if I have to pay up. I wouldn't mind--for myself, but I was married four months ago, and I can't bear the thought of going home--and telling her. All the money we have between us is in my business, and we've got no rich friends or anything of that sort. I don't know what I'll do if I have to be hammered. I've been so careful, too! I didn't want to take this on, but it seemed such a soft thing! If I could get off with twenty thousand, I'd keep my head up. I hate to talk like this. I'd go down like a man if I were alone, but--but--oh! Confound it all--!" he exclaimed with an ominous break in his tone.

Aynesworth laid his hand upon the boy's arm.

"Look here," he said, "I'll try what I can do with Mr. Wingrave. Wait here!"

Aynesworth found his employer alone with his broker, who was just hastening off to keep an appointment. He plunged at once into his appeal.

"Mr. Wingrave," he said, "you have just had a young broker named Nesbitt on."

Wingrave glanced at a paper by his side.

"Yes," he said. "Six hundred short! I wish they wouldn't come to me."

"I've been talking to him downstairs," Aynesworth said. "This will break him."

"Then I ought not to have done business with him at all," Wingrave said coolly. "If he cannot find sixty thousand dollars, he has no right to be in Wall street. I daresay he'll pay, though! They all plead poverty--curs!"

"I think Nesbitt's case is a little different from the others," Aynesworth continued. "He is quite young, little more than a boy, and he has only just started in business. To be hammered would be absolute ruin for him. He seems such a decent young fellow, and he's only just married. He's in an awful state downstairs. I wish you'd have another talk with him. I think you'd feel inclined to let him down easy."

Wingrave smiled coldly.

"My dear Aynesworth," he said, "you astonish me. I am not interested in this young man's future or in his matrimonial arrangements. He has gambled with me and lost. I presume that he would have taken my money if I had been the fool they all thought me. As it is, I mean to have his--down to the last cent!"

"He isn't like the others," Aynesworth protested doggedly. "He's only a boy--and it seems such jolly hard luck, doesn't it, only four months married! New York hasn't much pity for paupers. He looks mad enough to blow his brains out. Have him up, sir, and see if you can't compromise!"

"Fetch him," Wingrave said curtly.

Aynesworth hurried downstairs. The boy was walking restlessly up and down the room. The look he turned upon Aynesworth was almost pitiful.

"He'll see you again," Aynesworth said hurriedly. "Come along."

The boy wrung his hand.

"You're a brick!" he declared.