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For several minutes Lady Ruth said nothing. She was leaning back in the farthest corner of her chair, her head resting slightly upon her fingers, her eyes studying with a curious intentness the outline of Wingrave's pale, hard face. He himself, either unconscious of, or indifferent to her close scrutiny, had simply the air of a man possessed of an inexhaustible fund of patience.

"Wingrave," she said quietly, "I think that the time has gone by when I was afraid of you."

He turned slightly towards her, but he did not speak.

"I am possessed," she continued, "at present, of a more womanly sentiment. I am curious."

"Ah!" he murmured, "you were always a little inclined that way."

"I am curious about you," she continued. "You are, comparatively speaking, young, well-looking enough, and strong. Your hand is firmly planted upon the lever which moves the world. What are you going to do?"

"That," he said, "depends upon many things."

"You may be ambitious," she remarked. "If so, you conceal it admirably. You may be devoting your powers to the consummation of vengeance against those who have treated you ill. There are no signs of that, either, at present."

"We have excellent authority," he remarked, "for the statement that a considerable amount of satisfaction is derivable from the exercise of that sentiment."

"Perhaps," she answered, "but the pursuit of vengeance for wrongs of the past is the task of a fool. Now, you are not a fool. You carry your life locked up within you as a strong man should. But there are always some who may look in through the windows. I should like to be one."

"An empty cupboard," he declared. "A cupboard swept bare by time and necessity."

She shook her head.

"Your life," she said, "is molded towards a purpose. What is it?"

"I must ask myself the question," he declared, "before I can tell you the answer!"

"No," she said, "the necessity does not exist. Your reckless pursuit of wealth, your return here, the use you are making of my husband and me, are all means towards some end. Why not tell me?"

"Your imagination," he declared, "is running away with you."

"Are you our enemy?" she asked. "Is this seeming friendship of yours a cloak to hide some scheme of yours to make us suffer? Or--" She drew a little closer to him, and her eyes drooped.

"Or what?" he repeated.

"Is there a little left," she whispered, "of the old folly?"

"Why not?" he answered quietly. "I was very much in love with you."

"It is dead," she murmured. "I believe that you hate me now!"

Her voice was almost a caress. She was leaning a little towards him; her eyes were seeking to draw his.

"Hate you!" How impossible! he said calmly. "You are still a beautiful woman, you know, Ruth."

He turned and studied her critically. Lady Ruth raised her eyes once, but dropped them at once. She felt herself growing paler. A spasm of the old fear was upon her.

"Yes," he continued, "age has not touched you. You can still pour, if you will, the magic drug into the wine of fools. By the bye, I must not be selfish. Aren't you rather neglecting your guests?"

"Never mind my guests," she answered. "I have been wanting to talk to you alone for days. Why have you done this? Why are you here? What is it that you are seeking for in life?"

"A little amusement only," he declared. "I cannot find it except amongst my own kind."

"You have not the appearance of a pleasure seeker," she answered.

"Mine is a passive search," he said. "I have some years to live--and of solitude, well, I have tasted at once the joys and the depths."

"You are not in love with me any longer, are you?" she asked.

"I am not bold enough to deny it," he answered, "but do not be afraid that I shall embarrass you with a declaration. To tell you the truth, I have not much feeling left of any sort."

"You mean to keep your own counsel, then?" she asked.

"It is so little to keep," he murmured, "and I have parted with so much!"

She measured the emotion of his tone, the curious yet perfectly natural indifference of his manner, and she shivered a little. Always she feared what she could not understand.

"I had hoped," she said sadly, "that we might at least have been friends."

He shook his head.

"I have no fancy," he declared, "for the cemeteries of affection. You must remember that I am beginning life anew. I do not know myself yet, or you! Let us drift into the knowledge of one another, and perhaps--"

"Well! Perhaps?"

"There may be no question of friendship!"

Lady Ruth went back to her guests, and with the effortless ease of long training, she became once more the gracious and tactful hostess. But in her heart, the fear had grown a little stronger, and a specter walked by her side. Once during the evening, her husband looked at her questioningly, and she breathed a few words to him. He laughed reassuringly.

"Oh! Wingrave's all right, I believe," he said, "it's only his manner that puts you off a bit. He's just the same with everyone! I don't think he means anything by it!"

Lady Ruth shivered, but she said nothing. Just then Aynesworth came up, and with a motion of her fan she called him to her.

"Please take me into the other room," she said "I want a glass of champagne, and on the way you can tell me all about America."

"One is always making epigrams about America," he protested, smiling. "Won't you spare me?"

"Tell me, then, how you progress with your great character study!"

"Ah!" he remarked quietly, "you come now to a more interesting subject."

"Yes?"

"Frankly, I do not progress at all."

"So far as you have gone?"

"If," he said, "I were to take pen and paper and write down, at this moment, my conclusions so far as I have been able to form any, I fancy that they would make evil reading. Permit me!"

They stood for a few minutes before the long sideboard. A footman had poured champagne into their glasses, and Lady Ruth talked easily enough the jargon of the moment. But when they turned away, she moved slowly, and her voice was almost a whisper.

"Tell me this," she said, "is he really as hard and cold as he seems? You have lived with him now for four years. You should know that, at least."

"I believe that he is," Aynesworth answered. "I can tell you that much, at least, without breach of faith. So far as one who watches him can tell, he lives for his own gratification--and his indulgence in it does not, as a rule, make for the happiness of other people."

"Then what does he want with us?" she asked almost sharply. "I ask myself that question until--I am terrified."

Aynesworth hesitated.

"It is very possible," he said, "that he is simply making use of you to re-enter the world. Curiously enough, he has never seemed to care for solitude. He makes numberless acquaintances. What pleasure he finds in it I do not know, but he seldom avoids people. He may be simply making use of you."

"What do you think yourself?"

"I cannot tell," Aynesworth answered. "Indeed I cannot tell."

She left him a little impatiently, and Aynesworth joined the outside of the circle of men who had gathered round Wingrave. He was answering their questions readily enough, if a little laconically. He was quite aware that he occupied in society the one unique place to which princes might not even aspire--there was something of divinity about his millions, something of awe in the tone of the men with whom he talked. Women pretended to be interested in him because of the romance of his suddenly acquired wealth--the men did not trouble to deceive themselves or anyone else. A break up of the group came when a certain great and much-talked-about lady sent across an imperative message by her cavalier for the moment. She desired that Mr. Wingrave should be presented to her.

They passed down the room together a few moments later, the Marchioness wonderfully dressed in a gown of strange turquoise blue, looking up at her companion, and talking with somewhat unusual animation. Everyone made remarks, of course--exchanged significant glances and unlovely smiles. It was so like the Marchioness to claim, as a matter of course, the best of everything that was going. Lady Ruth watched them with a curious sense of irritation for which she could not altogether account. It was impossible that she should be jealous, and yet it was equally certain that she was annoyed. If Wingrave resisted his present fair captor, he would enjoy a notability equal to that which his wealth already conferred upon him. No man as yet had done it. Was it likely that Wingrave would wear two crowns? Lady Ruth beckoned Aynesworth to her.

"Tell me," she said, "what is Mr. Wingrave's general attitude towards my sex?"

"Absolute indifference," he declared promptly, "unless--"

He stopped short.

"You must go on," she told him.

"Unless he is possessed of the ability to make them suffer," he answered after a moment's hesitation.

"Then Emily will never attract him," she declared almost triumphantly, "for she has no more heart than he has."

"He has yet to discover it," Aynesworth remarked. "When he does, I think you will find that he will shrug his shoulders--and say farewell."

"All the same," Lady Ruth murmured to herself, "Emily is a cat."

Lady Ruth spoke to one more man that night of Wingrave--and that man was her husband. Their guests had departed, and Lady Ruth, in a marvelous white dressing gown, was lying upon the sofa in her room.

"How do you get on with Wingrave?" she asked. "What do you think of him?"

Barrington shrugged his shoulders.

"What can one think of a man," he answered, "who goes about like an animated mummy? I have done my best; I talked to him for nearly half an hour at a stretch today when I took him to the club for lunch. He is the incarnation of indifference. He won't listen to politics; women, or tales about them, at any rate, seem to bore him to extinction; he drinks only as a matter of form, and he won't talk finance. By the bye, Ruth, I wish you could get him to give you a tip. I scarcely see how we are going to get through the season unless something turns up."

"Is it as bad as that?" she asked.

"Worse!" her husband answered gloomily. "We've been living on our capital for years. Every acre of Queen's Norton is mortgaged, and I'm shot if I can see how we're going to pay the interest."

She sighed a little wearily.

"Do you think that it would be wise?" she asked. "Let me tell you something, Lumley. I have only known what fear was once in my life. I am afraid now. I am afraid of Wingrave. I have a fancy that he does not mean any good to us."

Barrington frowned and threw his cigarette into the fire with a little jerk.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "The man's not quite so bad as that. We've been useful to him. We've done exactly what he asked. The other matter's dead and buried. We don't want his money, but it is perfectly easy for him to help us make a little."

She looked up at him quietly.

"I think, Lumley, that it is dangerous!" she said.

"Then you're not the clever woman I take you for," he answered, turning to leave the room. "Just as you please. Only it will be that or the bankruptcy court before long!"

Lady Ruth lay quite still, looking into the fire. When her maid came, she moved on tiptoe for it seemed to her that her mistress slept. But Lady Ruth was wide awake though the thoughts which were flitting through her brain had, perhaps, some kinship to the land of dreams.