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Chapter 11 - Nemesis At Work

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Wingrave was present that evening at a reception given by the Prime Minister to some distinguished foreign guests. He had scarcely exchanged the usual courtesies with his host and hostess before Lady Ruth, leaning over from a little group, whispered in his ear.

"Please take me away. I am bored. I want to talk to you."

He paused at once. Lady Ruth nodded to her friends.

"Mr. Wingrave is going to take me to hear Melba sing," she said. "See you all again, I suppose, at Hereford House!"

They made slow progress through the crowded rooms. Once or twice Wingrave fancied that his companion hung a little heavily upon his arm. She showed no desire to talk. She even answered a remark of his in a monosyllable. Only when they passed the Marchioness, on the arm of one of the foreign guests in whose honor the reception was given, she seemed to shiver a little, and her grasp upon his arm was tightened. Once, in a block, she was forced to speak to some acquaintances, and during those few seconds, Wingrave studied her curiously. She was absolutely colorless, and her strange brilliant eyes seemed to have lost all their fire. Her gown was black, and the decorations of her hair were black except for a single diamond. There was something almost spectral about her appearance. She walked stiffly--for the moment she had lost the sinuous grace of movement which had been one of her many fascinations. Her neck and shoulders alone remained, as ever, dazzlingly beautiful.

They reached a quiet corner at last. Lady Ruth sank with a little gesture of relief into an easy chair. Wingrave stood before her.

"You are tired tonight," he remarked.

"I am always tired," she answered wearily. "I begin to think that I always shall be."

He said nothing. Lady Ruth closed her eyes for a moment as though from sheer fatigue. Suddenly she opened them again and looked him full in the face.

"Who was she?" she asked.

"I do not understand," he replied.

"The child you were with--the ingenue, you know--with the pink cheeks and the wonderful eyes! Is she from one of the theaters, or a genuine article?"

"The young lady to whom you refer," he answered, "is the daughter of an old friend of mine. I am practically her guardian. She is in London studying painting."

"You are her guardian?" Lady Ruth repeated. "I am sorry for her."

"You need not be," he answered. "I trust that I shall be able to fulfill my duties in a perfectly satisfactory manner."

"Oh! I have no doubt of it," she answered. "Yet I am sorry for her."

"You are certainly," he remarked, "not in an amiable mood."

"I am in rather a desperate one if that is anything," she said, looking at him with something of the old light in her tired eyes.

"You made a little error, perhaps, in those calculations?" he suggested. "It can be amended."

"Don't be a brute," she answered fiercely.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That sounds a little severe," he remarked.

"Don't take any notice of anything I say tonight," she murmured softly. "I am a little mad. I think that everything is going against me! I know that you haven't a grain of sympathy for me--that you would rather see me suffer than not, and yet you see I give myself away entirely. Why shouldn't I? Part of it is through you in a way."

"I rather fancied," he remarked, "that up to now--"

"Yes! Of course!" she interrupted, "you saved me from ruin, staved it off at any rate. And you held over the reckoning! I--I almost wish--"

She paused. Again her eyes were searching his.

"I am a little tired of it all, you see," she continued. "I don't suppose Lumley and I can ever be the same again since I brought him--that check. He avoids being alone with me--I do the same with him. One would think--to watch the people, that the whole transaction was in the Morning Post. They smile when they see us together, they grin when they see you with anybody else. It's getting hateful, Wingrave!"

"I am afraid," he said quietly, "that you are in a nervous, hypersensitive state. No one else can possibly know of the little transaction between us, and, so far as I am concerned, there has been nothing to interfere with your relations with your husband."

"You are right," she answered, "I am losing my nerve. I am only afraid that I am losing something else. I haven't an ounce of battle left in me. I feel that I should like to close my eyes and wake up in a new world, and start all over again."

"It is nothing but a mood," he assured her. "Those new worlds don't exist any longer. They generally consist of foreign watering places where the sheep and the goats house together now and then. I think I should play the game out, Lady Ruth, until--"

"Until what?"

"Perhaps to the end," he answered. "Who can tell? Not I! By this time tomorrow, it might be I who would be reminding you--"

"Yes?"

"That there are other worlds, and other lives to live!"

"I should like," she whispered very softly, "to hear of them. But I fancy somehow that you will never be my instructor. What of your ward?"

"Well! What of her?" he answered calmly.

She shivered a little.

"You were very frank with me once, Wingrave," she said. "You are a man whose life fate has wrecked, fate and I! You have no heart left, no feeling. You can create suffering and find it amusing. I am beginning to realize that."

He nodded.

"There is some truth," he declared, "in what you say."

"What of that child? Is she, too, to be a victim?"

"I trust," he answered, "that you are not going to be melodramatic."

"I don't call it that. I really want to know. I should like to warn her."

"I am not at war with children," he answered. "Her life and mine are as far apart as the poles."

"I had an odd fancy when I saw you with her," Lady Ruth said slowly. "She is very good-looking--and not so absurdly young."

"The fancy was one," he remarked coldly, "which I think you had better get rid of."

"In a way," she continued thoughtfully, "I should like to get rid of it, and yet--how old are you, Wingrave? Well, I know. You are very little over forty. You are barely in the prime of life, you are strong, you have the one thing which society today counts almost divine--great, immeasurable wealth! Can't you find someone to thaw the snows?"

"I loved a woman once," he answered. "It was a long time ago, and it seems strange to me now."

Lady Ruth lifted her eyes to his, and their lambent fires were suddenly rekindled.

"Love her again," she murmured. "What is past is past, but there are the days to come! Perhaps the woman, too, is a little lonely."

"I think not," he answered calmly. "The woman is married, she has lived with her husband more or less happily for a dozen years or so! She is a little ambitious, a little fond of pleasure, but a leader of society, and, I am sure, a very reputable member of it. To love her again would be as embarrassing to her--as it would be difficult for me. You, my dear Lady Ruth, I am convinced, would be the last to approve of it."

"You mock me," she murmured, bending her head. "Is forgiveness also an impossibility?"

"I think," he said, "that any sentiment whatever between those two would be singularly misplaced. You spoke of Melba, I think! She is singing in the further room."

Lady Ruth rose up, still and pale. There was fear in her eyes when she looked at him.

"Is it to be always like this, then?" she said.

"Ah!" he answered, "I am no prophet. Who can tell what the days may bring? In the meantime..."

The Marchioness was very much in request that evening, and she found time for only a few words with Wingrave.

"What have you been doing to poor Ruth?" she asked. "I never saw her look so ill!"

"Indeed!" he answered, "I had not noticed it."

"If I didn't know her better," she remarked, "I might begin to suspect her of a conscience. Whose baby were you driving about this afternoon? I didn't know that your taste ran to ingenues to such an extent. She's sweetly pretty, but I don't think it's nice of you to flaunt her before us middle-aged people. It's enough to drive us to the rouge box. Come to lunch tomorrow!"

"I shall be delighted," he answered, and passed on.

An hour or so later, on his way out, he came upon Lady Ruth sitting a little forlornly in the hall.

"I wonder whether I dare ask you to drop me in Cadogan Square?" she asked. "Is it much out of your way? I am leaving a little earlier than I expected."

"I shall be delighted," he answered, offering his arm.

They passed out of the door and down the covered way into the street. A few stragglers were loitering on the pavement, and one, a tall, thin young man in a long ulster, bent forwards as they came down the steps. Wingrave felt his companion's grasp tighten upon his arm; a flash of light upon the pale features and staring eyes of the young man a few feet off, showed him to be in the act of intercepting them. Then, at a sharp word from Wingrave, a policeman stretched out his arm. The young man was pushed unceremoniously away. Wingrave's tall footman and the policeman formed an impassable barrier--in a moment the electric brougham was gliding down the street. Lady Ruth was leaning back amongst the cushions, and the hand which fell suddenly upon Wingrave's was cold as ice!