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Chapter 17 - A Dream Of Paradise

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It seemed to Wingrave that the days which followed formed a sort of hiatus in his life--an interlude during which some other man in his place, and in his image, played the game of life to a long-forgotten tune. He moved through the hours as a man in a maze, unrecognizable to himself, half unconscious, half heedless of the fact that the garments of his carefully cultivated antagonism to the world and to his fellows had slipped very easily from his unresisting shoulders. The glory of a perfect English midsummer lay like a golden spell upon the land. The moors were purple with heather, touched here and there with the fire of the flaming gorse, the wind blew always from the west, the gardens were ablaze with slowly bursting rhododendrons. Every gleam of coloring, every breath of perfume, seemed to carry him unresistingly back to the days of his boyhood. He fished once more in the trout streams; he threw away his stick, and tramped or rode with Juliet across the moors. At night time she sang or played with the windows open, Wingrave himself out of sight under the cedar trees, whose perfume filled with aromatic sweetness the still night air. Piles of letters came every day, which he left unopened upon his study table. Telegrams followed, which he threw into the wastepaper basket. Juliet watched the accumulating heap with amazement.

"Whatever do people write to you so much for?" she asked one morning, watching the stream of letters flow out of the post bag.

Wingrave was silent for a moment. Her question brought a sudden and sharp sting of remembrance. Juliet knew him only as Sir Wingrave Seton. She knew nothing of Mr. Wingrave, millionaire.

"Advertisements, a good many of them," he said. "I must send for Aynesworth some day to go through them all."

"What fun!" she exclaimed. "Do send for him! He thinks that I am staying with Miss Pengarth, and I haven't written once since I got here!"

To Wingrave, it seemed that a chill had somehow stolen into the hot summer morning. His feet were very nearly upon the earth again.

"I forgot," he said, "that Aynesworth was--a friend of yours. He came and saw you often in London?"

She smiled reflectively.

"He has been very, very kind," she answered. "He was always that, from the first time I saw you both. Do you remember? It was down in the lower gardens."

"Yes!" he answered, "I remember quite well."

"He was very kind to me then," she continued, "and you--well, I was frightened of you." She stopped for a moment and laughed. Her eyes were full of amazed reminiscence. "You were so cold and severe! I never could have dreamed that, after all, it was you who were going to be the dearest, most generous friend I could ever have had! Do you know, Walter--I mean Mr. Aynesworth--isn't very pleased with me just now?"

"Why not?"

"He cannot understand why I will not tell him my guardian's name. I think it worries him."

"You would like to tell him?" Wingrave asked.

She nodded.

"I think so," she answered.

Wingrave said no more, but after breakfast he went to his study alone. Juliet found him there an hour later, sitting idly in front of his table. His great pile of correspondence was still untouched. She came and sat on the edge of the table.

"What are we going to do this morning, please?" she asked.

Wingrave glanced towards his letters.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I must spend the day here!"

She looked at him blankly.

"Not really!" she exclaimed. "I thought that we were going to walk to Hanging Tor?"

Wingrave took up a handful of letters and let them fall through his fingers. He had all the sensations of a man who is awakened from a dream of Paradise to face the dull tortures of a dreary and eventless life. His eyes were set in a fixed state. An undernote of despair was in his tone.

"You know we arranged it yesterday," she continued eagerly, "and if you are going to send for Mr. Aynesworth, you needn't bother about these letters yourself, need you?"

He turned and regarded her deliberately. Her forehead was wrinkled a little with disappointment, her brown eyes were filled with the soft light of confident appeal. Tall

and elegantly slim, there was yet something in the graceful lines of her figure which reminded him forcibly that the days of her womanhood had indeed arrived.

She wore a plain white cambric dress and a simple, but much beflowered hat; the smaller details of her toilet all indicated the correct taste and instinctive coquetry of her French descent. And she was beautiful! Wingrave regarded her critically and realized, perhaps for the first time, how beautiful. Her eyes were large and clear, and her eyebrows delicately defined. Her mouth, with its slightly humorous curl, was a little large, but wholly delightful. The sun of the last few weeks had given to her skin a faint, but most becoming, duskiness. Under his close scrutiny, a flush of color stole into her cheeks. She laughed not altogether naturally.

"You look at me," she said, "as though I were someone strange!"

"I was looking," he answered, "for the child, the little black-frocked child, you know, with the hair down her back, and the tearful eyes. I don't think I realized that she had vanished so completely."

"Not more completely," she declared gaily, "than the gloomy gentleman who frowned upon my existence and resented even my gratitude. Although," she added, leaning a little towards him, "I am very much afraid that I see some signs of a relapse today. Don't bother about those horrid letters. Let me tell Mrs. Tresfarwin to pack us up some lunch, and take me to Hanging Tor, please!"

Wingrave laughed a little unsteadily as he rose to his feet. One day more, then! Why not? The end would be soon enough! . . .

Sooner, perhaps, than even he imagined, for that night Aynesworth came, pale and travel-stained, with all the volcanic evidences of a great passion blazing in his eyes, quivering in his tone. The day had passed to Wingrave as a dream, more beautiful even than any in the roll of its predecessors. They sat together on low chairs upon the moonlit lawn, in their ears the murmur of the sea; upon their faces, gathering strength with the darkness, the night wind, salt and fragrant with all the sweetness of dying flowers. Wingrave had never realized more completely what still seemed to him this wonderful gap in his life. Behind it all, he had a subconsciousness that he was but taking a part in some mystical play; yet with an abandon which, when he stopped to think of it, astonished him, he gave himself up without effort or scruple to this most amazing interlude. All day he had talked more than ever before; the flush on his cheeks was like the flush of wine or the sun which had fired his blood. As he had talked the more, so had she grown the more silent. She was sitting now with her hands clasped and her head thrown back, looking up at the stars with unseeing eyes.

"You do not regret Normandy, then?" he asked.

"No!" she murmured. "I have been happy here. I have been happier than I could ever have been in Normandy."

He turned and looked at her with curious intentness.

"My experience," he said thoughtfully, "of young ladies of your age is somewhat limited. But I should have thought that you would have found it--lonely."

"Perhaps I am different, then," she murmured. "I have never been lonely here--all my life!"

"Except," he reminded her, "when I knew you first."

"Ah! But that was different," she protested. "I had no home in those days, and I was afraid of being sent away."

It was in his mind then to tell her of the envelope with her name upon it in his study, but a sudden rush of confusing thoughts kept him silent. It was while he was laboring in the web of this tangled dream of wild but beautiful emotions that Aynesworth came. A pale, tragic figure in his travel-stained clothes, and face furrowed with anxiety, he stood over them almost before they were aware of his presence.

"Walter!" she cried, and sprang to her feet with extended hands. Wingrave's face darkened, and the shadow of evil crept into his suddenly altered expression. It was an abrupt awakening this, and he hated the man who had brought it about.

Aynesworth held the girl's hands for a moment, but his manner was sufficient evidence of the spirit in which he had come. He drew a little breath, and he looked from one to the other anxiously.

"Is this--your mysterious guardian, Juliet?" he asked hoarsely.

She glanced at Wingrave questioningly. His expression was ominous, and the light faded from her own face. While she hesitated, Wingrave spoke.

"I imagine," he said, "that the fact is fairly obvious. What have you to say about it?"

"A good deal," Aynesworth answered passionately. "Juliet, please go away. I must speak to your guardian--alone!"

Again she looked at Wingrave. He pointed to the house.

"I think," he said, "that you had better go."

She hesitated. Something of the impending storm was already manifest. Aynesworth turned suddenly towards her.

"You shall not enter that house again, Juliet," he declared. "Stay in the gardens there, and presently you shall know why."