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Chapter 8 - The Heart Of A Child

The cottage, as Aynesworth neared it, showed no sign of life. The curtainless windows were blank and empty, no smoke ascended from the chimney. Its plastered front was innocent of any form of creeper, but in the few feet of garden in front a great, overgrown wild rose bush, starred with deep red blossoms, perfumed the air. As he drew near, the door suddenly opened, and with a little cry of welcome the child rushed out to him.

"How lovely of you!" she cried. "I saw you coming from my window!"

"You are up early," he said, smiling down at her.

"The sun woke me," she answered. "It always does. I was going down to the sands. Shall we go together? Or would you like to go into the gardens at Tredowen? The flowers are beautiful there while the dew is on them!"

"I am afraid," Aynesworth answered, "that I cannot do either. I have come to say goodbye."

The light died out of her face all of a sudden. The delicate beauty of her gleaming eyes and quivering mouth had vanished. She was once more the pale, wan little child he had seen coming slowly up the garden path at Tredowen.

"You are going--so soon!" she murmured.

He took her hand and led her away over the short green turf of the common.

"We only came for a few hours," he told her. "But I have good news for you, Juliet, unless you know already. Mr. Saunders has found out some of your friends. They are going to look after you properly, and you will not be alone any more."

"What time are you going?" she asked.

"Silly child," he answered, giving her hand a shake. "Listen to what I am telling you. You are going to have friends to look after you always. Aren't you glad?"

"No, I am not glad," she answered passionately. "I don't want to go away. I am--lonely."

Her arms suddenly sought his neck, and her face was buried on his shoulder. He soothed her as well as he could.

"I must go, little girl," he said, "for I am off to America almost at once. As soon as I can after I come back, I will come and see you."

"You have only been here one day," she sobbed.

"I would stay if I could, dear," Aynesworth answered. "Come, dry those eyes and be a brave girl. Think how nice it will be to go and live with people who will take care of you properly, and be fond of you. Why, you may have a pony, and all sorts of nice things."

"I don't want a pony," she answered, hanging on his arm. "I don't want to go away. I want to stay here--and wait till you come back."

He laughed.

"Why, when I come back, little woman," he answered, "you will be almost grown up. Come, dry your eyes now, and I tell you what we will do. You shall come back with me to breakfast, and then drive up to the station and see us off."

"I should like to come," she whispered, "but I am afraid of the other gentleman."

"Very likely we sha'n't see him," Aynesworth answered. "If we do, he won't hurt you."

"I don't like his face!" she persisted.

"Well, we won't look at it," Aynesworth answered. "But breakfast we must have!"

They were half way through the meal, and Juliet had quite recovered her spirits when Wingrave entered. He looked at the two with impassive face, and took his place at the table. He wished the child "Good morning" carelessly, but made no remark as to her presence there.

"I have just been telling Juliet some good news," Aynesworth remarked. "I went to see Mr. Saunders, the Vicar here, last night, and he has found out some of her father's friends. They are going to look after her."

Wingrave showed no interest in the information. But a moment later he addressed Juliet for the first time.

"Are you glad that you are going away from Tredowen?" he asked.

"I am very, very sorry," she answered, the tears gathering once more in her eyes.

"But you want to go to school, don't you, and see other girls?" he asked.

She shook her head decidedly.

"It will break my heart," she said quietly, "to leave Tredowen. I think that if I have to go away from the pictures and the garden, and the sea, I shall never be happy any more."

"You are a child," he remarked contemptuously; "you do not understand. If you go away, you can learn to paint pictures yourself like those at Tredowen. You will find that the world is full of other beautiful places!"

The sympathetic aspect of his words was altogether destroyed by the thin note of careless irony, which even the child understood. She felt that he was mocking her.

"I could never be happy," she said simply, "away from Tredowen. You understand, don't you?" she added, turning confidentially to Aynesworth.

"You think so now, dear," he said, "but remember that you are very young. There are many things for you to learn before you grow up."

"I am not a dunce," she replied. "I can talk French and German, and do arithmetic, and play the organ. Father used to teach me these things. I can learn at Tredowen very well. I hope that my friends will let me stay here."

Wingrave took no more notice of her. She and Aynesworth walked together to the station. As they passed the little whitewashed cottage, she suddenly let go his hand, and darted inside.

"Wait one moment," she cried breathlessly.

She reappeared almost at once, holding something tightly clenched in her right hand. She showed it to him shyly.

"It is for you, please," she said.

It was a silver locket, and inside was a little picture of herself. Aynesworth stooped down and kissed her. He had had as many presents in his life as most men, but never an offering which came to him quite like that! They stood still for a moment, and he held out her hands. Already the morning was astir. The seagulls were wheeling, white-winged and noiseless, above their heads; the air was fragrant with the scent of cottage flowers. Like a low, sweet undertone, the sea came rolling in upon the firm sands--out to the west it stretched like a sheet of softly swaying inland water. For those few moments there seemed no note of discord--and then the harsh whistle of an approaching train! They took hold of hands and ran.

It was, perhaps, as well that their farewells were cut short. There was scarcely time for more than a few hurried words before the train moved out from the queer little station, and with his head out of the window, Aynesworth waved his hand to the black-frocked child with her pale, eager face already stained with tears--a lone, strange little figure, full of a sort of plaintive grace as she stood there, against a background of milk cans, waving a crumpled handkerchief!

Wingrave, who had been buried in a morning paper, looked up presently.

"If our journeyings," he remarked drily, "are to contain everywhere incidents such as these, they will become a sort of sentimental pilgrimage."

Aynesworth shrugged his shoulders.

"I am sorry," he said, "that my interest in the child has annoyed you. At any rate, it is over now. The parson was mysterious, but he assured me that she was provided for."

Wingrave looked across the carriage with cold, reflective curiosity.

"Your point of view," he remarked, "is a mystery to me! I cannot see how the future of an unfledged brat like that can possibly concern you!"

"Perhaps not," Aynesworth answered, "but you must remember that you are a little out of touch with your fellows just now. I daresay when you were my age, you would have felt as I feel. I daresay that as the years go on, you will feel like it again."

Wingrave was thoughtful for a moment.

"So you think," he remarked, "that I may yet have in me the making of a sentimentalist."

Aynesworth returned his gaze as steadfastly.

"One can never tell," he answered. "You may change, of course. I hope that you will."

"You are candid, at any rate!"

"I do not think," Aynesworth answered, "that there is any happiness in life for the man who lives entirely apart from his fellow creatures. Not to feel is not to live. I think that the first real act of kindness which you feel prompted to perform will mark the opening of a different life for you."

Wingrave spread out the newspaper.

"I think," he said, with a faint sneer, "that it is quite time you took this sea voyage."