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Chapter 6 - "Hast Thou Found Me, O Mine Enemy?"

Aynesworth was waiting in the hall on the following afternoon when Lady Ruth arrived. He had half expected that she would drive up to the side door in a hansom, would wear a thick veil, and adopt the other appurtenances of a clandestine meeting. But Lady Ruth was much too clever a woman for anything of the sort. She descended at the great front entrance from her own electric coupe, and swept into the hotel followed by her maid. She stopped to speak to the manager of the hotel, who knew her from her visits to the world-famous restaurant, and she asked at once for Sir Wingrave Seton. Then she saw Aynesworth, and crossed the hall with outstretched hand.

"How nice of you to be here," she murmured. "Can you take me to Sir Wingrave at once? I have such a busy afternoon that I was afraid at the last moment that I should be unable to come!"

Aynesworth led her towards the lift.

"Sir Wingrave is in his sitting room," he remarked. "It is only on the first floor."

She directed her maid where to wait, and followed him. On the way down the corridor, he stole a glance at her. She was a little pale, and he could see that she had nerved herself to this interview with a great effort. As he knocked at the door, her great eyes were raised for a moment to his, and they were like the eyes of a frightened child.

"I am afraid!" she murmured.

There was no time for more. They were in the room, and Wingrave had risen to meet them. Lady Ruth did not hesitate for a moment. She crossed the room towards him with outstretched hands. Aynesworth, who was standing a little on one side, watched their meeting with intense, though covert interest. She had pushed back her veil, her head was a little upraised in a mute gesture of appeal.

She was pale to the lips, but her eyes were soft with hidden tears. Wingrave stood stonily silent, like a figure of fate. His hands remained by his sides. Her welcome found no response from him. She came to a standstill, and, swaying a little, stretched out her hand and steadied herself by grasping the back of a chair.

"Wingrave," she murmured, and her voice was full of musical reproach.

Aynesworth turned to leave the room, but Wingrave, looking over her head, addressed him.

"You will remain here, Aynesworth," he said. "There are some papers at that desk which require sorting."

Aynesworth hesitated. He had caught the look on Lady Ruth's face.

"If you could excuse me for half an hour, Sir Wingrave," he began.

"I cannot spare you at present," Wingrave interrupted. "Kindly remain!"

Aynesworth had no alternative but to obey. Wingrave handed a chair to Lady Ruth. He was looking at her steadfastly. There were no signs of any sort of emotion in his face. Whatever their relations in the past might have been, it was hard to believe, from his present demeanor, that he felt any.

"Wingrave," she said softly, "are you going to be unkind to me--you, whom I have always thought of in my dreams as the most generous of men! I have looked forward so much to seeing you again--to knowing that you were free! Don't disappoint me!"

Wingrave laughed shortly, and Aynesworth bent closer over his work, with a gathering frown upon his forehead. A mirthless laugh is never a pleasant sound.

"Disappoint you!" he repeated calmly. "No! I must try and avoid that! You have been looking forward with so much joy to this meeting then? I am flattered."

She shivered a little.

"I have looked forward to it," she answered, and her voice was dull and lifeless with pain. "But you are not glad to see me," she continued. "There is no welcome in your face! You are changed--altogether! Why did you send for me?"

"Listen!"

There was a moment's silence. Wingrave was standing upon the hearthrug, cold, passionless, Sphinx-like. Lady Ruth was seated a few feet away, but her face was hidden.

"You owe me something!" he said.

"Owe--you something?" she repeated vaguely.

"Do you deny it?" he said.

"Oh, no, no!" she declared with emotion. "Not for a moment."

"I want," he said, "to give you an opportunity of repaying some portion of that debt!"

She raised her eyes to his. Her whispered words came so softly that they were almost inaudible.

"I am waiting," she said. "Tell me what I can do!"

He commenced to speak at some length, very impassively, very deliberately.

"You will doubtless appreciate the fact," he said, "that my position, today, is a somewhat peculiar one. I have had enough of solitude. I am rich! I desire to mix once more on equal terms amongst my fellows. And against that, I have the misfortune to be a convicted felon, who has spent the last ten or a dozen years amongst the scum of the earth, engaged in degrading tasks, and with no identity save a number. The position, as you will doubtless observe, is a difficult one."

Her eyes fell from his. Once more she shivered, as though with physical pain. Something that was like a smile, only that it was cold and lifeless, flitted across his lips.

"I have no desire," he continued, "to live in foreign countries. On the contrary, I have plans which necessitate my living in England. The difficulties by this time are, without doubt, fully apparent to you."

She said nothing. Her eyes were once more watching his face.

"My looking glass," he continued, "shows me that I am changed beyond any reasonable chance of recognition. I do not believe that the Wingrave Seton of today would readily be recognized as the Wingrave Seton of twelve years ago. But I propose to make assurance doubly sure. I am leaving this country for several years, at once. I shall go to America, and I shall return as Mr. Wingrave, millionaire--and I propose, by the way, to make money there. I desire, under that identity, to take my place once more amongst my fellows. I shall bring letters of introduction--to you."

There was a long and somewhat ominous silence! Lady Ruth's eyes were fixed upon the floor. She was thinking, and thinking rapidly, but there were no signs of it in her pale drawn face. At last she looked up.

"There is my husband," she said. "He would recognize you, if no one else did."

"You are a clever woman," he answered. "I leave it to you to deal with your husband as seems best to you."

"Other people," she faltered, "would recognize you!"

"Do me the favor," he begged her, "to look at me carefully for several moments. You doubtless have some imperfect recollection of what I was. Compare it with my present appearance! I venture to think that you will agree with me. Recognition is barely possible."

Again there was silence. Lady Ruth seemed to have no words, but there was the look of a frightened child upon her face.

"I am sorry," he continued, "that the idea does not appeal to you! I can understand that my presence may serve to recall a period which you and your husband would doubtless prefer to forget--"

"Stop!"

A little staccato cry of pain; a cry which seemed to spring into life from a tortured heart, broke from her lips. Aynesworth heard it, and, at that moment, he hated his employer. Wingrave paused for a moment politely, and then continued.

"But after all," he said, "I can assure you that you will find very little in the Mr. Wingrave of New York to remind you of the past. I shall do my utmost to win for myself a place in your esteem, which will help you to forget the other relationship, which, if my memory serves me, used once to exist between us!"

She raised her head. Either she realized that, for the present, the man was immune against all sentiment, or his calm brutality had had a correspondingly hardening effect upon her.

"If I agree," she said, "will you give me back my letters?"

"No!" he answered.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"It depends," he said, "upon you. I enter into no engagement. I make no promises. I simply remind you that it would be equally possible for me to take my place in the world as a rehabilitated Wingrave Seton. Ten years ago I yielded to sentiment. Today I have outlived it."

"Ten years ago," she murmured, "you were a hero. God knows what you are now!"

"Exactly!" he answered smoothly. "I am free to admit that I am a puzzle to myself. I find myself, in fact, a most interesting study."

"I consent," she said, with a little shudder. "I am going now."

"You are a sensible woman," he answered. "Aynesworth, show Lady Ruth to her carriage."

She rose to her feet. Hung from her neck by a chain of fine gold, was a large Chinchilla muff. She stood before him, and her hands had sought its shelter. Timidly she withdrew one.

"Will you shake hands with me, Wingrave?" she asked timidly.

He shook his head.

"Forgive me," he said; "I may better my manners in America, but a present I cannot."

She passed out of the room. Aynesworth followed, closing the door behind them. In the corridor she stumbled, and caught at his arm for support.

"Don't speak to me," she gasped. "Take me where I can sit down."

He found her a quiet corner in the drawing room. She sat perfectly still for nearly five minutes, with her eyes closed. Then she opened them, and looked at her companion.

"Mr. Aynesworth," she said, "are you so poor that you must serve a man like that?"

He shook his head.

"It is not poverty," he answered. "I knew his history, and I am interested in him!"

"You write novels, don't you?" she asked.

"I try," he answered. "His story fascinated me. He stands today in a unique position to life. I want to see how he will come out of it."

"You knew his story--the truth?"

"Everything," he answered. "I heard it from a journalist who was in court, his only friend, the only man who knew."

"Where is he now?"

"On his way to Japan."

She drew a little breath between her teeth.

"There were rumors," she said. "It was hard for me at first, but I lived them down. I was very young then. I ought not to have accepted his sacrifice. I wish to heaven I had not. I wish that I had faced the scandal then. It is worse to be in the power of a man like this today! Mr. Aynesworth!"

"Lady Ruth!"

"Do you think that he has the right to keep those letters?"

"I cannot answer that question."

"Will you be my friend?"

"So far as I can--in accordance with my obligations to my employer!"

She tried him no further then, but rose and walked slowly out of the room. He found her maid, and saw them to their carriage. Then he returned to the sitting room. Wingrave was smoking a cigarette.

"I am trying the humanizing influence," he remarked. "Got rid of her ladyship?"

"Lady Ruth has just gone," Aynesworth answered.

"Have you promised to steal the letters yet?" he inquired.

"Not yet!"

"Her dainty ladyship has not bid high enough, I suppose," he continued. "Don't be afraid to open your mouth. There's another woman there besides the Lady Ruth Barrington, who opens bazaars, and patronizes charity, and entertains Royalty. Ask what you want and she'll pay!"

"What a brute you are!" Aynesworth exclaimed involuntarily.

"Of course I am," he admitted. "I know that. But whose fault is it? It isn't mine. I've lived the life of a brute creature for ten years. You don't abuse a one-legged man, poor devil. I've had other things amputated. I was like you once. It seemed all right to me to go under to save a woman's honor. You never have. Therefore, I say you've no right to call me a brute. Personally, I don't object. It is simply a matter of equity."

"I admit it," Aynesworth declared. "You are acting like a brute."

"Precisely. I didn't make myself what I am. Prison did it. Go and try ten years yourself, and you'll find you will have to grope about for your fine emotions. Are you coming to America with me?"

"I suppose so," Aynesworth answered. "When you we start?"

"Saturday week."

"Sport west, or civilization east?"

"Both," Wingrave answered. "Here is a list of the kit which we shall require. Add yourself the things which I have forgotten. I pay for both!"

"Very good of you," Aynesworth answered.

"Not at all. I don't suppose you'd come without. Can you shoot?"

"A bit," he admitted.

"Be particular about the rifles. I can take you to a little corner in Canada where the bears don't stand on ceremony. Put everything in hand, and be ready to come down to Cornwall with me on Monday."

"Cornwall!" Aynesworth exclaimed. "What on earth are we going to do in Cornwall?"

"I have an estate there, the home of my ancestors, which I am going to sell. I am the last of the Setons, fortunately, and I am going to smash the family tree, sell the heirlooms, and burn the family records!"

"I shouldn't if I were you," Aynesworth said quietly. "You are a young man yet. You may come back to your own!"

"Meaning?"

"You may smoke enough cigarettes to become actually humanized! One can never tell! I have known men proclaim themselves cynics for life, who have been making idiots of themselves with their own children in five years."

Wingrave nodded gravely.

"True enough," he answered. "But the one thing which no man can mistake is death. Listen, and I will quote some poetry to you. I think--it is something like this:--

""The rivers of ice may melt, and the mountains crumble into dust, but the heart of a dead man is like the seed plot unsown. Green grass shall not sprout there, nor flowers blossom, nor shall all the ages of eternity show there any sign of life.""

He spoke as though he had been reading from a child's Primer. When he had finished, he replaced his cigarette between his teeth.

"I am a dead man," he said calmly. "Dead as the wildest seed plot in God's most forgotten acre!"