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## Chapter 5 - The Gospel Of Hate

"And what," Wingrave asked his secretary as they sat at dinner that night, "did you think of Lady Ruth?"

"In plain words, I should not like to tell you," Aynesworth answered. "I only hope that you will not send me to see her again."

"Why not?"

"Lady Ruth," Aynesworth answered deliberately, "is a very beautiful woman, with all the most dangerous gifts of Eve when she wanted her own way. She did me the scanty honor of appraising me as an easy victim, and she asked no questions."

"For instance?"

"She wanted me to tell her if you still had in your possession certain letters of hers," Aynesworth said.

"Good! What did you say?"

"I told her, of course," Aynesworth continued, "that having been in your service for a few hours only, I was scarcely in a position to know. I ventured further to remind her that such questions, addressed from her to me, were, to say the least of it, improper."

Wingrave's lips parted in what should have been a smile, but the spirit of mirth was lacking.

"And then?"

"There was nothing else," Aynesworth answered. "She simply dismissed me."

"I can see," Wingrave remarked, "your grievance. You are annoyed because she regarded you as too easy a victim."

"Perhaps," Aynesworth admitted.

"There was some excuse for her, after all," Wingrave continued coolly. "She possesses powers which you yourself have already admitted, and you, I should say, are a fairly impressionable person, so far as her sex is concerned. Confess now, that she did not leave you altogether indifferent."

"Perhaps not," Aynesworth admitted reluctantly. He did not care to say more.

"In case you should feel any curiosity on the subject," Wingrave remarked, "I may tell you that I have those letters which she was so anxious to know about, and I shall keep them safe--even from you! You can amuse yourself with her if you like. You will never be able to tell her more than I care for her to know."

Aynesworth continued his dinner in silence. After all, he was beginning to fear that he had made a mistake. Lovell had somehow contrived to impart a subtly tragic note to his story, but the outcome of it all seemed to assume a more sordid aspect. These two would meet, there would be recriminations, a tragic appeal for forgiveness, possibly some melodramatic attempt at vengeance. The glamour of the affair seemed to him to be fading away, now that he had come into actual contact with it. It was not until he began to study his companion during a somewhat prolonged silence that he felt the reaction. It was then that he began to see new things, that he felt the enthusiasm kindled by Lovell's strangely told story begin to revive. It was not the watching for events more or less commonplace which would repay him for the step he had taken; it was the study of this man, placed in so strange a position,--a man come back to life, after years of absolute isolation. He had broken away from the chain which links together men of similar tastes and occupations, and which goes to the creation of type. He was in a unique position! He was in the world, but not of it. He was groping about amongst familiar scenes, over which time had thrown the pall of unfamiliarity. What manner of place would he find--what manner of place did he desire to find? It was here that the real interest of the situation culminated. At least, so Aynesworth thought then.

They were dining at a restaurant in the Strand, which Aynesworth had selected as representing one, the more wealthy, type of Bohemian life. The dinner and wine had been of his choosing. Wingrave had stipulated only for the best. Wingrave himself had eaten very little, the bottle of wine stood half empty between them. The atmosphere of the place, the effect of the wine, the delicate food, and the music, were visible to a greater or less degree, according to temperament, amongst all the other little groups of men and women by whom they were surrounded. Wingrave alone remained unaffected. He was carefully and correctly dressed in clothes borrowed from his new tailor, and he showed not the slightest signs of strangeness or gaucherie amongst his unfamiliar surroundings. He looked about him always, with the cold, easy nonchalance of the man of the world. Of being recognized he had not the slightest fear. His frame and bearing, and the brightness of his deep, strong eyes, still belonged to early middle age, but his face itself, worn and hardened, was the face of an elderly man. The more Aynesworth watched him, the more puzzled he felt.

"I am afraid," he remarked, "that you are disappointed in this place."

"Not at all," Wingrave answered. "It is typical of a class, I suppose. It is the sort of place I wished to visit."

In a corner of the room Aynesworth had recognized a friend and fellow clubman, who was acting at a neighboring theater. He was dining with some young ladies of his company, and beckoned to Aynesworth to come over and join them. He pointed them out to Wingrave.

"Would you care to be introduced?" he asked. "Holiwell is a very good fellow, and the girls might interest you. Two of them are Americans, and they are very popular."

Wingrave shook his head.

"Thank you, no!" he said. "I should be glad to meet your friend some time when he is alone."

It was the first intimation which Aynesworth had received of his companion's sentiments as regards the other sex. Years afterwards, when his attitude towards them was often quoted as being one of the extraordinary features of an extraordinary personality, he remembered his perseverance on this occasion.

"You have not spoken to a woman for so many years," he persisted. "Why not renew the experience? Nothing so humanizing, you know--not even cigarettes."

Wingrave's face fell, if possible into sterner lines. His tone was cold and hard.

"My scheme of life," he said, "may be reconstructed more than once before I am satisfied. But I can assure you of this! There will be no serious place in it for women!"

Aynesworth shrugged his shoulders. He never doubted but that in a month or two his vis-a-vis would talk differently.

"Your scheme of life," he repeated thoughtfully. "That sounds interesting! Have you any objection, I wonder, to telling me what manner of life you propose to lead?"

It was several moments before Wingrave answered him. He was smoking a cigar in a mechanical sort of way, but he obviously derived no pleasure from it. Yet Aynesworth noticed that some instinct had led him to choose the finest brand.

"Perhaps," he said, letting his eyes rest coldly upon his questioner, "if I told you all that was in my mind you would waive your month's salary and get back to your journalism!"

Aynesworth shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should you suppose that?" he asked. "I am not a moralist myself, nor am I the keeper of your conscience. I don't think that you could frighten me off just yet."

"Nevertheless," Wingrave admitted, "there are times when I fear that we shall not get on together. I begin to suspect that you have a conscience."

"You are the first," Aynesworth assured him, "who has ever flattered me to that extent."

"It may be elastic, of course," Wingrave continued, "but I suspect its existence. I warn you that association with me will try it hard."

"I accept the challenge," Aynesworth answered lightly.

"You are rasher than you imagine," Wingrave declared. "For instance, I have admitted to you, have I not, that I am interested in my fellow creatures, that I want to mix with them and watch them at their daily lives. Let me assure you that that interest is not a benevolent one."

"I never fancied that you were a budding philanthropist," Aynesworth remarked, lighting a fresh cigarette.

"I find myself," Wingrave continued thoughtfully, "in a somewhat unique position. I am one of the ordinary human beings with whom the world is peopled, but I am not conscious of any of the usual weaknesses of sentiment or morality. For instance, if that gentleman with the red face, who has obviously eaten and drunk too much, were to have an apoplectic fit at the moment, and die in his chair, it would not shock or distress me in the least. On the contrary, I should be disposed to welcome his removal from a world which he obviously does nothing to adorn."

Aynesworth glanced at the person in question. He was a theatrical agent and financier of stock companies, whom he knew very well by sight.

"I suppose," Wingrave continued, "that I was born with the usual moral sentiments, and the usual feelings of kinship towards my fellow creatures. Circumstances, however, have wholly destroyed them. To me, men have become the puppets and women the dancing dolls of life. My interest in them, if it exists at all, is malevolent. I should like to see them all suffer exactly as I have suffered. It would interest me exceedingly."

Still Aynesworth remained silent. He was anxious to hear all that was in the other's mind, and he feared lest any interruption might divert him.

"There are men in the world," Wingrave continued, "called philanthropists, amiable, obese creatures as a rule, whose professed aim in life it is to do as much good as possible. I take my stand upon the other pole. It is my desire to encourage and to work as much evil as possible. I wish to bring all the suffering I can upon those who come within the sphere of my influence."

"You are likely," Aynesworth remarked, "to achieve popularity."

Wingrave regarded him steadfastly.

"Your speech," he said, "is flippant, but you yourself do not realize how near it comes to the truth. Human beings are like dogs--they are always ready to lick the hand that flogs them. I mean to use the scourge whenever I can seize the opportunity, but you will find the jackals at my heels, nevertheless, whenever I choose to whistle."

Aynesworth helped himself to a liqueur. He felt that he needed it.

"One weakness alone distresses me," Wingrave continued. "In all ordinary matters of sentiment I am simply a negation. There is one antipathy, however, which I find it hard to overcome. The very sight of a woman, or the sound of her voice, distresses me. This is the more unfortunate," he continued, "because it is upon the shoulders of her sex that the greater portion of my debt to my fellow creatures rests. However, time may help me!"

Aynesworth leaned back in his chair, and contemplated his companion for the next few moments in thoughtful silence. It was hard, he felt, to take a man who talked like this seriously. His manner was convincing, his speech deliberate and assured. There was not the slightest doubt but that he meant what he said, yet it seemed to Aynesworth equally certain that the time would come, and come quickly, when the unnatural hardness of the man would yield to the genial influence of friendship, of pleasure, of the subtle joys of freedom. Those past days of hideous monotony, of profitless, debasing toil, the long, sleepless nights, the very nightmare of life to a man of Wingrave's culture and habits, might well have poisoned his soul, have filled him with ideas such as these. But everything was different now! The history of the world could show no epoch when pleasures so many and various were there for the man who carries the golden key. Today he was a looker-on, and the ice of his years of bitterness had not melted. Tomorrow, at any moment, he might catch a whiff of the fragrance of life, and the blood in his veins would move to a different tune. This was how it

seemed to Aynesworth, as he studied his companion through the faint blue mist of tobacco smoke.

"This expression of your sentiments," he remarked at last, "is interesting so far as it goes. I am, however, a practical person, and my connection with you is of a practical order. You don't propose, I presume, to promenade the streets with a cat-o-nine-tails?"

"Your curiosity," Wingrave remarked, "is reasonable. Tomorrow I may gratify some portion of it after my interview with Lady Ruth. In the meantime, I might remark that to the observant person who has wits and money, the opportunities for doing evil present themselves, I think, with reasonable frequency. I do not propose, however, to leave things altogether to chance."

"A definite scheme of ill-doing," Aynesworth ventured to suggest, "would be more satisfactory?"

"Exactly," he admitted.

He called for the bill, and his eyes wandered once more around the room as the waiter counted out the change. The band were playing the "Valse Amoureuse"; the air was grown heavy with the odor of tobacco and the mingled perfumes of flowers and scents. A refrain of soft laughter followed the music. An after-dinner air pervaded the place. Wingrave's lip curled.

"My lack of kinship with my fellows," he remarked, "is exceedingly well defined just now. I agree with the one philosopher who declared that 'eating and drinking are functions which are better performed in private.'"

The two men went on to a theater. The play was a society trifle--a thing of the moment. Wingrave listened gravely, without a smile or any particular sign of interest. At the end of the second act, he turned towards his companion.

"The lady in the box opposite," he remarked, "desires to attract your attention."

Aynesworth looked up and recognized Lady Ruth. She was fanning herself languidly, but her eyes were fixed upon the two men. She leaned a little forward, and her gesture was unmistakable.

Aynesworth rose to his feet a little doubtfully.

"You had better go," Wingrave said. "Present my compliments and excuses. I feel that a meeting now would amount to an ante-climax."

Aynesworth made his way upstairs. Lady Ruth was alone, and he noticed that she had withdrawn to a chair where she was invisible to the house. Even Aynesworth himself could not see her face clearly at first, for she had chosen the darkest corner of the box. He gathered an impression of a gleaming white neck and bosom rising and falling rather more quickly than was natural, eyes which shone softly through the gloom, and the perfume of white roses, a great cluster of which lay upon the box ledge. Her voice was scarcely raised above a whisper.

"That is--Sir Wingrave with you?"

"Yes!" Aynesworth answered. "It was he who saw you first!"

She seemed to catch her breath. Her voice was still tremulous.

"He is changed," she said. "I should not have recognized him."

"They were the best ten years of his life," Aynesworth answered. "Think of how and in what surroundings he has been compelled to live. No wonder that he has had the humanity hammered out of him."

She shivered a little.

"Is he always like this?" she asked. "I have watched him. He never smiles. He looks as hard as fate itself."

"I have known him only a few hours," Aynesworth reminded her.

"I dare not come tomorrow," she whispered; "I am afraid of him."

"Do you wish me to tell him so?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered. "You are very unfeeling, Mr. Aynesworth."

"I hope not," he answered, and looked away towards the orchestra. He did to wish to meet her eyes.

"You are!" she murmured. "I have no one to whom I dare speak--of this. I dare not mention his name to my husband. It was my evidence which convicted him, and I can see, I know, that he is vindictive. And he has those letters! Oh! If I could only get them back?"

Her voice trembled with an appeal whispered but passionate. It was wonderful how musical and yet how softly spoken her words were. They were like live things, and the few feet of darkened space through which they had passed seemed charged with magnetic influence.

"Mr. Aynesworth!"

He turned and faced her.

"Can't you help me?"

"I cannot, Lady Ruth."

The electric bell rang softly from outside, and the orchestra commenced to play. Lady Ruth rose and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she turned and smiled at her visitor. The pallor of her face was no longer unnatural. She was a wonderful woman.

"I shall come tomorrow," she said. "Shall I see you?"

"That," he answered, "depends upon Sir Wingrave."

She made a little grimace as she dismissed him. Wingrave did not speak to his companion for some time after he had resumed his seat. Then he inclined his head towards him.

"Have you come to terms with her ladyship?" he asked drily.

"Not yet!" Aynesworth answered.

"You can name your own price," he continued. "She will pay! Don't be afraid of making her bid up. She has a good deal at stake!"

Aynesworth made no reply. He was thinking how easy it would be to hate this man!