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Chapter 3 - A Student Of Character

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Left alone, Wingrave walked for several minutes up and down the room, his hands behind him, his head bent. He walked, not restlessly, but with measured footsteps. His mind was fixed steadfastly upon the one immediate problem of his own future. His interview with Rocke had unsettled--to a certain extent unnerved--him. Was this freedom for which he had longed so passionately, this return into civilized life, to mean simply the exchange of an iron-barrel cell for a palace whose outer gates were as hopelessly locked, even though the key was of gold! Freedom! Was it after all an illusion? Was his to be the hog's paradise of empty delights; were the other worlds indeed forbidden? He moved abruptly to the window and threw it open. Below was Piccadilly, brilliant with May sunshine, surging with life. Motors and carriages, omnibuses and hansoms, were all jostled together in a block; the pavements were thronged with a motley and ever-hurrying crowd. It seemed to him, accustomed to the callous and hopeless appearance of a less happy tribe, that the faces of these people were all aflame with the joy of the springtime. The perfume from the great clusters of yellow daffodils and violets floated up from the flower sellers' baskets below; the fresh, warm air seemed to bring him poignant memories of crocus-starred lawns, of trim beds of hyacinths, of the song of birds, of the perfume of drooping lilac. Grim and motionless, as a figure of fate, Wingrave looked down from his window, with cold, yet discerning eyes. He was still an alien, a denizen in another world from that which flowed so smoothly and pleasantly below. It was something to which he did not belong, which he doubted, indeed, if ever again he could enter. He had no part in it, no share in that vigorous life, whose throbbings he could dimly feel, though his own heart was beating to a slower and a very different tune. They were his fellows in name only. Between him and them stood the judgment of--Rocke!

The evil chances of the world are many! It was whilst his thoughts traveled in this fashion that the electric landaulette of Lady Ruth Barrington glided round the corner from St. James' Street, and joined in the throng of vehicles slowly making their way down Piccadilly. His attention was attracted first by the white and spotless liveries of the servants--the form of locomotion itself was almost new to him. Then he saw the woman who leaned back amongst the cushions. She was elegantly dressed; she wore no veil; she did not look a day more than thirty. She was attractive, from the tips of her patent shoes, to the white bow which floated on the top of her lace parasol; a perfectly dressed, perfectly turned out woman. She had, too, the lazy confident air of a woman sure of herself and her friends. She knew nothing of the look which flashed down upon her from the window overhead.

Wingrave turned away with a little gasp; a half-stifled exclamation had crept out from between his teeth. His cheeks seemed paler than ever, and his eyes unnaturally bright. Nevertheless, he was completely master of himself. On the table was a large deed box of papers, which Rocke had left for his inspection. From its recesses he drew out a smaller box, unlocked it with a key from his chain, and emptied its sole contents--a small packet of letters--upon the table. He counted them one by one. They were all there--and on top a photograph. A breath of half-forgotten perfume stole out into the room. He opened one of the letters, and its few passionate words came back to his memory, linked with a hundred other recollections, the desire of her eyes, of her lips raised for his, the caressing touch of her fingers. He found himself wondering, in an impersonal sort of way, that these things should so little affect him. His blood ran no less coldly, nor did his pulses beat the faster, for this backward glance into things finished.

There was a knock at the door. He raised his head.

"Come in!"

A slim, fair young man obeyed the summons, and advanced into the room. Wingrave eyed him with immovable face. Nevertheless, his manner somehow suggested a displeased surprise.

"Sir Wingrave Seton, I believe?" the intruder said cheerfully.

"That is my name," Wingrave admitted; "but my orders below have evidently been disobeyed. I am not disposed to receive visitors today."

The intruder was not in the least abashed. He laid his hat upon the table, and felt in his pocket.

"I am very sorry," he said. "They did try to keep me out, but I told them that my business was urgent. I have been a journalist, you see, and am used to these little maneuvers."

Wingrave looked at him steadily, with close-drawn eyebrows.

"Am I to understand," he said "that you are in here in your journalistic capacity?"

The newcomer shook his head.

"Pray do not think," he said, "that I should be guilty of such an impertinence. My name is Aynesworth. Walter Aynesworth. I have a letter for you from Lovell. You remember him, I daresay. Here it is!"

He produced it from his breast coat pocket, and handed it over.

"Where is Lovell?" Wingrave asked.

"He left for the East early this morning," Aynesworth answered. "He had to go almost at an hour's notice."

Wingrave broke the seal, and read the letter through. Afterwards he tore it into small pieces and threw them into the grate.

"What do you want with me, Mr. Aynesworth?" he asked.

"I want to be your secretary," Aynesworth answered.

"My secretary," Wingrave repeated. "I am much obliged to you, but I am not requiring anyone in that capacity."

"Pardon me," Aynesworth answered, "but I think you are. You may not have realized it yet, but if you will consider the matter carefully, I think you will agree with me that a secretary, or companion of some sort, is exactly what you do need."

"Out of curiosity," Wingrave remarked, "I should be glad to know why you think so."

"Certainly," Aynesworth answered. "In the first place, I know the story of your life, and the unfortunate incident which has kept you out of society for the last ten years."

"From Lovell, I presume," Wingrave interrupted.

"Precisely," Aynesworth admitted. "Ten years' absence from English life today means that you return to it an absolute and complete stranger. You would be like a Cook's tourist abroad, without a guide or a Baedeker, if you attempted to rely upon yourself. Now I am rather a Bohemian sort of person, but I have just the sort of all-round knowledge which would be most useful to you. I have gone a little way into society, and I know something about politics. I can bring you up-to-date on both these matters. I know where to dine well in town, and where to be amused. I can tell you where to get your clothes, and the best place for all the etceteras. If you want to travel, I can speak French and German; and I consider myself a bit of a sportsman."

"I am sure," Wingrave answered, "I congratulate you upon your versatility. I am quite convinced! I shall advertise at once for a secretary!"

"Why advertise?" Aynesworth asked. "I am here!"

Wingrave shook his head.

"You would not suit me at all," he answered.

"Why not?" Aynesworth asked. "I forget whether I mentioned all my accomplishments. I am an Oxford man with a degree, and I can write tolerable English. I've a fair head for figures, and I don't require too large a salary."

"Exactly," Wingrave answered drily. "You are altogether too desirable? I should not require an Admirable Crichton for my purpose."

Aynesworth remained unruffled.

"All right," he said. "You know best, of course! Suppose you tell me what sort of a man would satisfy you!"

"Why should I?" Wingrave asked coldly.

"It would amuse me," Aynesworth answered, "and I've come a mile or so out of my way, and given up a whole morning to come and see you. Go on! It won't take long!"

Wingrave shrugged his shoulders.

"I will not remind you," he said, "that you came on your own initiative. I owe you the idea, however, so I will tell you the sort of person I shall look out for. In the first place, I do not require him to be a gentleman."

"I can be a shocking bounder at times," Aynesworth murmured.

"He must be more a sort of an upper servant," Wingrave continued. "I should require him to obey me implicitly, whatever I told him to do. You have a conscience, I presume?"

"Very little," Aynesworth answered. "I have been a journalist."

"You have the remnants of one, at all events," Wingrave said, "quite sufficient, no doubt, to interfere with your possible usefulness to me. I must have someone who is poor - too poor to question my will, or to dispute my orders, whatever they might be."

"I have never," Aynesworth declared, "possessed a superfluous half-crown in my life."

"You probably possess what is called a sense of honor," Wingrave continued. "You would certainly disapprove of some of my proceedings, and you would probably disobey my orders."

"Sense of honor!" Aynesworth repeated. "You have too flattering an opinion of me. I don't know what it is. I always cheat at cards if I get the chance."

Wingrave turned away.

"You are a fool," he said, "and you won't suit me."

"When can I come?" Aynesworth asked.

"You can stay now," Wingrave answered. "Your salary will be four hundred a year. You will live at my expense. The day you disobey an order of mine, you go! No notice, mind!"

"Agreed," Aynesworth answered. "What should I do first? Send you a tailor, I should think."

Wingrave nodded.

"I will give the afternoon to that sort of people," he said. "Here is a list of the tradesmen I used to deal with. Kindly avoid them."

Aynesworth glanced at the slip of paper, and nodded.

"All out-of-date now," he remarked. "I'll be back to lunch."