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Chapter 2 - Outside The Pale

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Three men were together in a large and handsomely furnished sitting room of the Clarence Hotel, in Piccadilly. One, pale, quiet, and unobtrusive, dressed in sober black, the typical lawyer's clerk, was busy gathering up a collection of papers and documents from the table, over which they had been strewn. His employer, who had more the appearance of a country gentleman than the junior partner in the well-known firm of Rocke and Son, solicitors, had risen to his feet, and was drawing on his gloves. At the head of the table was the client.

"I trust, Sir Wingrave, that you are satisfied with this account of our stewardship," the solicitor said, as his clerk left the room. "We have felt it a great responsibility at times, but everything seems to have turned out very well. The investments, of course, are all above suspicion."

"Perfectly satisfied, I thank you," was the quiet reply. "You seem to have studied my interests in a very satisfactory manner."

Mr. Rocke had other things to say, but his client's manner seemed designed to create a barrier of formality between them. He hesitated, unwilling to leave, yet finding it exceedingly difficult to say the things which were in his mind. He temporized by referring back to matters already discussed, solely for the purpose of prolonging the interview.

"You have quite made up your mind, then, to put the Tredowen property on the market," he remarked. "You will excuse my reminding you of the fact that you have large accumulated funds in hand, and nearly a hundred thousand pounds worth of easily realizable securities. Tredowen has been in your mother's family for a good many years, and I should doubt whether it will be easily disposed of."

The man at the head of the table raised his head. He looked steadily at the lawyer, who began to wish that he had left the room with his clerk. Decidedly, Sir Wingrave Seton was not an easy man to get on with.

"My mind is quite made up, thank you, on this and all other matters concerning which I have given you instructions," was the calm reply. "I have had plenty of time for consideration," he added drily.

The lawyer had his opening at last, and he plunged.

"Sir Wingrave," he said, "we were at college together, and our connection is an old one. You must forgive me if I say how glad I am to see you here, and to know that your bad time is over. I can assure you that you have had my deepest sympathy. Nothing ever upset me so much as that unfortunate affair. I sincerely trust that you will do your best now to make up for lost time. You are still young, and you are rich. Let us leave business alone now, for the moment. What can I do for you as a friend, if you will allow me to call you so?"

Wingrave turned slightly in his chair. In his altered position, a ray of sunshine fell for the first time upon his gaunt but striking face. Lined and hardened, as though by exposure and want of personal care, there was also a lack of sensibility, an almost animal callousness, on the coldly lit eyes and unflinching mouth, which readily suggested some terrible and recent experience--something potent enough to have dried up the human nature out of the man and left him soulless. His clothes had the impress of the ready-made, although he wore them with a distinction which was obviously inherent; and notwithstanding the fact that he seemed to have been writing, he wore gloves.

"I am much obliged to you, Rocke," he said. "Let me repeat your question. What is there that you can do for me?"

Mr. Rocke was apparently a little nonplussed. The absolute imperturbability of the man who had once been his friend was disconcerting.

"Well," he said, "the governor sent me instead of coming himself, because he thought that I might be more useful to you. London changes so quickly--you would hardly know your way about now. I should like you to come and dine with me tonight, and I'll take you round anywhere you care to go; and then if you don't want to go back to your old tradespeople, I could take you to my tailor and bookmaker."

"Is that all?" Wingrave asked calmly.

Rocke was again taken aback.

"Certainly not," he answered. "There must be many ways in which I could be useful to you, but I can't think of them all at once. I am here to serve you professionally or as a friend, to the best of my ability. Can you suggest anything yourself? What do you want?"

"That is the question," Wingrave said, "which I have been asking myself. Unfortunately, up to now, I have not been able to answer it. Regarding myself, however, from the point of view of a third party, I should say that the thing I was most in need of was the society of my fellow creatures."

"Exactly," Rocke declared. "That is what I thought you would say! It won't take us long to arrange something of the sort for you."

"Can you put me up," Wingrave asked, "at your club, and introduce me to your friends there?"

Rocke flinched before the steady gaze of those cold enquiring eyes, in which he fancied, too, that a gleam of malice shone. The color mounted to his cheeks. It was a most embarrassing situation.

"I can introduce you to some decent fellows, of course, and to some very charming ladies," he said hesitatingly, "but as to the club--I--well, don't you think yourself that it

would scarcely be wise to--"

"Exactly," Wingrave interrupted. "And these ladies that you spoke of--"

"Oh! There's no difficulty about that," Rocke declared with an air of relief. "I can make up a little dinner party for tonight, if you like. There's an awfully smart American woman over here, with the Fanciful Fan Company--I'm sure you'd like her, and she'd come like a shot. Then I'd get Daisy Vane--she's all right. They don't know anything, and wouldn't care if they did. Besides, you could call yourself what you liked."

"Thank you," Wingrave said. "I am afraid I did not make myself quite clear. I was not thinking of play fellows. I was thinking of the men and women of my own order. Shall I put the matter quite clearly? Can I take my place in society under my own name, renew my old friendships and build up new ones? Can I do this even at the risk of a few difficulties at first? I am not a sensitive man. I am prepared for the usual number of disagreeable incidents. But can I win my way through?"

With his back against the wall, Rocke displayed more courage. Besides, what was the use of mincing matters with a man who had all the appearance of a human automaton, who never flinched or changed color, and whose passions seemed dried up and withered things?

"I am afraid not, Sir Wingrave," he said. "I should not recommend you to try, at any rate for the present."

"Give me your reasons," was the cool response.

"I will do so with pleasure," Rocke answered. "About the time of the trial and immediately afterwards, there was a certain amount of sympathy for you. People felt that you must have received a good deal of provocation, and there were several unexplained incidents which told in your favor. Today, I should think that the feeling amongst those who remember the affair at all is rather the other way. You heard, I believe, that Lady Ruth married Lumley Barrington?"

"Yes."

"Barrington has been very successful at the Bar, and they say that he is certain of a judgeship before long. His wife has backed him up well, they have entertained lavishly, and today I should think that she is one of the most popular hostesses in London. In her earlier days, I used to hear that she was one of the very fast hunting set--that was the time when you knew her. I can assure you that if ever that was true, she is a completely altered woman today. She is patroness of half a dozen great charitable schemes, she writes very clever articles in the Reviews on the Betterment of the Poor Question, and royalty itself visits at her house."

"I see," Wingrave said drily. "I was not aware of these changes."

"If ever," Mr. Rocke continued, "people were inclined to look a little askance at her, that has all gone by. Today she is one of the last women in the world of whom people would be likely to believe ill."

Wingrave nodded slowly.

"I am very much obliged to you," he said, "for this information. You seem to have come here today, Mr. Rocke, with good intentions towards me. Let me ask you to put yourself in my place. I am barely forty years old, and I am rich. I want to make the most of my life--under the somewhat peculiar circumstances. How and where should you live?"

"It depends a little upon your tastes, of course," Rocke answered. "You are a sportsman, are you not?"

"I am fond of sport," Wingrave answered. "At least I was. At present I am not conscious of having any positive tastes."

"I think," Rocke continued, "that I should first of all change my name. Then, without making any effort to come into touch with your old friends, I should seek acquaintance amongst the Bohemian world of London and Paris. There I might myself, perhaps, be able to help you. For sport, you might fish in Norway or Iceland, or shoot in Hungary; you could run to a yacht if you cared about it, and if you fancy big game, why, there's all Africa before you."

Wingrave listened, without changing a muscle of his face.

"Your programme," he remarked, "presupposes that I have no ambitions beyond the pursuit of pleasure."

Rocke shrugged his shoulders. He was becoming more at his ease. He felt that his advice was sound, that he was showing a most comprehensive grasp of the situation.

"I am afraid," he said, "that none of what we call the careers are open to you. You could not enter Parliament, and you are too old for the professions. The services, of course, are impossible. You might write, if your tastes ran that way. Nowadays, it seems to be the fashion to record one's experiences in print, if--if they should happen to be in any way exceptional. I can think of nothing else!"

"I am very much obliged to you," Wingrave said. "Your suggestions are eminently practical. I will think them over. Don't let me keep you any longer!"

"About this evening," Rocke remarked. "Shall I fix up that little dinner party? You have only to say the word!"

"I am very much obliged to you, but I think not," answered Wingrave. "I will dine with you alone some evening, with pleasure! Not just as present!"

Rocke looked, as he felt, puzzled. He honestly wished to be of service to this man, but he was at a loss to know what further suggestion he could make. There was something impenetrable about his client, something which he could not arrive at, behind the hard, grim face and measured words. He could not even guess as to what the man's hopes or intentions were. Eventually, although with some reluctance, he took up his hat.

"Well, Sir Wingrave," he said, "if there is really nothing I can do for you, I will go. If you should change your mind, you have only to telephone. You can command me at any time. I am only anxious to be of service to you."

"You have already been of service to me," Wingrave answered quietly. "You have spoken the truth! You have helped me to realize my position more exactly. Will you give your father my compliments and thanks, and say that I am entirely satisfied with the firm's conduct of affairs during my--absence?"

Rocke nodded.

"Certainly," he said. "That will please the governor! I must be off now. I hope you'll soon be feeling quite yourself again, Sir Wingrave! It must seem a bit odd at first, I

suppose, but it will wear off all right. What you want, after all, is society. Much better let me arrange that little dinner for tonight!"

Wingrave shook his head.

"Later on, perhaps," he answered. "Good morning!"