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Chapter 14 - The Moth And The Candle

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"Tomorrow morning," Aynesworth remarked, "we shall land."

Wingrave nodded.

"I shall not be sorry," he said shortly.

Aynesworth fidgeted about. He had something to say, and he found it difficult. Wingrave gave him no encouragement. He was leaning back in his steamer chair, with his eyes fixed upon the sky line. Notwithstanding the incessant companionship of the last six days, Aynesworth felt that he had not progressed a single step towards establishing any more intimate relations between his employer and himself.

"Mrs. Travers is not on deck this afternoon," he remarked a trifle awkwardly.

"Indeed!" Wingrave answered. "I hadn't noticed."

Aynesworth sat down. There was nothing to be gained by fencing.

"I wanted to talk about her, sir, if I might," he said.

Wingrave withdrew his eyes from the sea, and looked at his companion in cold surprise.

"To me?" he asked.

"Yes! I thought, the first few days, that Mrs. Travers was simply a vain little woman of the world, perfectly capable of taking care of herself, and heartless enough to flirt all day long, if she chose, without any risk, so far as she was concerned. I believe I made a mistake!"

"This is most interesting," Wingrave said calmly, "but why talk to me about the lady? I fancy that I know as much about her as you do."

"Very likely; but you may not have realized the same things. Mrs. Travers is a married woman, with a husband in Boston, and two little children, of whom, I believe, she is really very fond. She is a foolish, good-natured little woman, who thinks herself clever because her husband has permitted her to travel a good deal, and has evidently been rather fascinated by the latitudinarianism of continental society. She is a little afraid of being terribly bored when she gets back to Boston, and she is very sentimental."

"I had no idea," Wingrave remarked, "that you had been submitting the lady and her affairs to the ordeal of your marvelous gift of analysis. I rather fancied that you took no interest in her at all."

"I did not," Aynesworth answered, "until last night."

"And last night?" he repeated questioningly.

"I found her on deck--crying. She had been tearing up some photographs, and she talked a little wildly. I talked to her then for a little time."

"Can't you be more explicit?" Wingrave asked.

Aynesworth looked him in the face.

"She gave me the impression," he said, "that she did not intend to return to her husband."

Wingrave nodded.

"And what have you to say to me about this?" he asked.

"I have no right to say anything, of course," Aynesworth answered. "You might very properly tell me that it is no concern of mine. Mrs. Travers has already compromised herself, to some extent, with the people on board who know her and her family. She never leaves your side for a moment if she can help it, and for the last two or three days she has almost followed you about. You may possibly derive some amusement from her society for a short time, but--afterwards!"

"Explain yourself exactly," Wingrave said.

"Is it necessary?" Aynesworth declared brusquely. "Talk sensibly to her! Don't encourage her if she should really be contemplating anything foolish!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, hang it all!" Aynesworth declared. "I'm not a moralist, but she's a decent little woman. Don't ruin her life for the sake of a little diversion!"

Wingrave, who had been holding a cigar case in his hand for the last few minutes, opened it, and calmly selected a cigar.

"Aren't you a little melodramatic, Aynesworth?" he said.

"Sounds like it, no doubt," his companion answered, "but after all, hang it, she's not a bad little sort, and you wouldn't care to meet her in Piccadilly in a couple of years' time."

Wingrave turned a little in his chair. There was a slight hardening of the mouth, a cold gleam in his eyes.

"That," he remarked, "is precisely where you are wrong. I am afraid you have forgotten our previous conversations on this or a similar subject. Disconnect me in your mind at once from all philanthropic notions! I desire to make no one happy, to assist at no one's happiness. My own life has been ruined by a woman. Her sex shall pay me where it can. If I can obtain from the lady in question a single second's amusement, her future is a matter of entire indifference to me. She can play the repentant wife, or resort to the primeval profession of her sex. I should not even have the curiosity to inquire which."

"In that case," Aynesworth said slowly, "I presume that I need say no more."

"Unless it amuses you," Wingrave answered, "it really is not worth while."

"Perhaps," Aynesworth remarked, "it is as well that I should tell you this. I shall put the situation before Mrs. Travers exactly as I see it. I shall do my best to dissuade her from any further or more intimate intercourse with you."

"At the risk, of course," Wingrave said, "of my offering you--this?"

He drew a paper from his pocket book, and held it out. It was the return half of a steamer ticket.

"Even at that risk," Aynesworth answered without hesitation.

Wingrave carefully folded the document, and returned it to his pocket.

"I am glad," he said, "to find that you are so consistent. There is Mrs. Travers scolding the deck steward. Go and talk to her! You will scarcely find a better opportunity."

Aynesworth rose at once. Wingrave in a few moments also left his seat, but proceeded in the opposite direction. He made his way into the purser's room, and carefully closed the door behind him.

Mrs. Travers greeted Aynesworth without enthusiasm. Her eyes were resting upon the empty place which Wingrave had just vacated.

"Can I get your chair for you, Mrs. Travers," Aynesworth asked, "or shall we walk for a few minutes?"

Mrs. Travers hesitated. She looked around, but there was obviously no escape for her.

"I should like to sit down," she said. "I am very tired this morning. My chair is next Mr. Wingrave's there."

Aynesworth found her rug and wrapped it around her. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"I shall try to sleep," she said. "I had such a shocking night."

He understood at once that she was on her guard, and he changed his tactics.

"First," he said, "may I ask you a question?"

She opened her eyes wide, and looked at him. She was afraid.

"Not now," she said hurriedly. "This afternoon."

"This afternoon I may not have the opportunity," he answered. "Is your husband going to meet you at New York, Mrs. Travers?"

"No!"

"Are you going direct to Boston?"

She looked at him steadily. There was a slight flush of color in her cheeks.

"I find your questions impertinent, Mr. Aynesworth," she answered.

There was a short silence. Aynesworth hated his task and hated himself. But most of all, he pitied the woman who sat by his side.

"No!" he said, "they are not impertinent. I am the looker-on, you know, and I have seen--a good deal. If Wingrave were an ordinary sort of man, I should never have dared to interfere. If you had been an ordinary sort of woman, I might not have cared to."

She half rose in her chair.

"I shall not stay here," she began, struggling with her rug.

"Do!" he begged. "I am--I want to be your friend, really!"

"You are supposed to be his," she reminded him.

He shook his head.

"I am his secretary. There is no question of friendship between us. For the rest, I told him that I should speak to you."

"You have no right to discuss me at all," she declared vehemently.

"None whatever," he admitted. "I have to rely entirely upon your mercy. This is the truth. People are thrown together a good deal on a voyage like this. You and Mr. Wingrave have seen a good deal of one another. You are a very impressionable woman; he is a singularly cold, unimpressionable man. You have found his personality attractive. You fancy--other things. Wingrave is not the man you think he is. He is selfish and entirely without affectionate impulses. The world has treated him badly, and he has no hesitation in saying that he means to get some part of his own back again. He does not care for you, he does not care for anyone. If you should be contemplating anything ridiculous from a mistaken judgment of his character, it is better that you should know the truth."

The anger had gone. She was pale again, and her lips were trembling.

"Men seldom know one another," she said softly. "You judge from the surface only."

"Mine is the critical judgment of one who has studied him intimately," Aynesworth said. "Yours is the sentimental hope of one fascinated by what she does not understand. Wingrave is utterly heartless!"

"That," she answered steadfastly, "I do not believe."

"You do not because you will not," he declared. "I have spoken because I wish to save you from doing what you would repent of for the rest of your days. You have the one vanity which is common to all women. You believe that you can change what, believe me, is unchangeable. To Wingrave, women are less than playthings. He owes the unhappiness of his life to one, and he would see the whole of her sex suffer without emotion. He is impregnable to sentiment. Ask him and I believe that he would admit it!"

She smiled and regarded him with the mild pity of superior knowledge.

"You do not understand Mr. Wingrave," she remarked.

Aynesworth sighed. He realized that every word he had spoken had been wasted upon this pale, pretty woman, who sat with her eyes now turned seawards, and the smile still lingering upon her lips. Studying her for a moment, he realized the danger more acutely than ever before. The fretfulness seemed to have gone from her face, the weary lines from her mouth. She had the look of a woman who has come into the knowledge of better things. And it was Wingrave who had done this! Aynesworth for the first time frankly hated the man. Once, as a boy, he had seen a keeper take a rabbit from a trap and dash its brains out against a tree. The incident flashed then into his mind, only the face of the keeper was the face of Wingrave!