

# The Malefactor

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## I.1. A Society Scandal

Tall and burly, with features and skin hardened by exposure to the sun and winds of many climates, he looked like a man ready to face all hardships, equal to any emergency. Already one seemed to see the clothes and habits of civilization falling away from him, the former to be replaced by the stern, unlovely outfit of the war correspondent who plays the game. They crowded round him in the club smoking room, for these were his last few minutes. They had dined him, toasted him, and the club loving cup had been drained to his success and his safe return. For Lovell was a popular member of this very Bohemian gathering, and he was going to the Far East, at a few hours' notice, to represent one of the greatest of English dailies.

A pale, slight young man, who stood at this right hand, was speaking. His name was Walter Aynesworth, and he was a writer of short stories-- a novelist in embryo.

"What I envy you most, Lovell," he declared, "is your escape from the deadly routine of our day by day life. Here in London it seems to me that we live the life of automatons. We lunch, we dine, we amuse or we bore ourselves, and we sleep--and all the rest of the world does the same. Passion we have outgrown, emotion we have destroyed by analysis. The storms which shake humanity break over other countries. What is there left to us of life? Civilization ministers too easily to our needs, existence has become a habit. No wonder that we are a tired race."

"Life is the same, the world over," another man remarked. "With every forward step in civilization, life must become more mechanical. London is no worse than Paris, or Paris than Tokyo."

Aynesworth shook his head. "I don't agree with you," he replied. "It is the same, more or less, with all European countries, but the Saxon temperament, with its mixture of philosophy and philistinism, more than any other, gravitates towards the life mechanical. Existence here has become fossilized. We wear a mask upon our faces; we carry a gauge for our emotions. Lovell is going where the one great force of primitive life remains. He is going to see war. He is going to breathe an atmosphere hot with naked passion; he is going to rub shoulders with men who walk hand in hand with death. That's the sort of tonic we all want, to remind us that we are human beings with blood in our veins, and not sawdust-stuffed dolls."

Then Lovell broke silence. He took his pipe from his mouth, and he addressed Aynesworth.

"Walter," he said, "you are talking rot. There is nothing very complex or stimulating about the passion of war, when men kill one another unseen; where you feel the sting in

your heart which comes from God knows where, and you crumple up, with never a chance to have a go at the chap who has potted you from the trenches, or behind a rock, a thousand yards off. Mine is going to be, except from a spectacular point of view, a very barren sort of year, compared with what yours might be if the fire once touched your eyes. I go where life is cruder and fiercer, perhaps, but you remain in the very city of tragedies."

Aynesworth laughed, as he lit a fresh cigarette.

"City of tragedies!" he exclaimed. "It sounds all right, but it's bunkum all the same. Show me where they lie, Lovell, old chap. Tell me where to stir the waters."

Several of those who were watching him noticed a sudden change in Lovell's face. The good humor and bonhomie called up by this last evening amongst his old friends had disappeared. His face had fallen into graver lines, his eyes seemed fixed with a curious introspective steadiness on a huge calendar which hung from the wall. When at last he turned towards Aynesworth, his tone was almost solemn.

"Some of them don't lie so very far from the surface, Walter," he said. "There is one"--he took out his watch--"there is one which, if you like, I will tell you about. I have just ten minutes."

"Good!"

"Go ahead, Lovell, old chap!"

"Have a drink first!"

He held out his hand. They were all silent. He stood up amongst them, by far the tallest man there, with his back to the chimney piece, and his eyes still lingering about that calendar.

"Thirteen years ago," he said, "two young men--call them by their Christian names, Wingrave and Lumley--shared a somewhat extensive hunting box in Leicestershire. They were both of good family, well off, and fairly popular, Lumley the more so perhaps. He represented the ordinary type of young Englishman, with a stronger dash than usual of selfishness. Wingrave stood for other things. He was reticent and impenetrable. People called him mysterious."

Lovell paused for a moment to refill his pipe. The sudden light upon his face, as he struck a match, seemed to bring into vivid prominence something there, indescribable in words, yet which affected his hearers equally with the low gravity of his speech. The man himself was feeling the tragedy of the story he told.

"They seemed," he continued, "always to get on well together, until they fell in love with the same woman. Her name we will say was Ruth. She was the wife of the Master of

Hounds with whom they hunted. If I had the story-writing gifts of Aynesworth here, I would try to describe her. As I haven't, I will simply give you a crude idea of what she seemed like to me.

"She was neither dark nor fair, short nor tall; amongst a crowd of other women, she seemed undistinguishable by any special gifts; yet when you had realized her there was no other woman in the room. She had the eyes of an angel, only they were generally veiled; she had the figure of a miniature Venus, soft and with delicate curves, which seemed somehow to be always subtly asserting themselves, although she affected in her dress an almost puritanical simplicity. Her presence in a room was always felt at once. There are some women, beautiful or plain, whose sex one scarcely recognizes. She was not one of these! She seemed to carry with her the concentrated essence of femininity. Her quiet movements, the almost noiseless rustling of her clothes, the quaint, undistinguishable perfumes which she used, her soft, even voice, were all things which seemed individual to her. She was like a study in undernotes, and yet"--Lovell paused a moment--"and yet no Spanish dancing woman, whose dark eyes and voluptuous figure have won her the crown of the demi-monde, ever possessed that innate and mystic gift of kindling passion like that woman. I told you I couldn't describe her! I can't! I can only speak of effects. If my story interests you, you must build up your own idea of her."

"Becky Sharpe!" Aynesworth murmured.

Lovell nodded.

"Perhaps," he admitted, "only Ruth was a lady. To go on with my story. A hunting coterie, as you fellows know, means lots of liberty, and a general free-and-easiness amongst the sexes, which naturally leads to flirtations more or less serious. Ruth's little affairs were either too cleverly arranged, or too harmless for gossip. Amongst the other women of the hunt, she seemed outwardly almost demure. But one day--there was a row!"

Lovell paused, and took a drink from a glass by his side.

"I hope you fellows won't think that I'm spinning this out," he said. "It is, after all, in itself only a commonplace story, but I've carried it locked up in my memory for years, and now that I've let it loose, it unwinds itself slowly. This is how the row came about. Lumley one afternoon missed Wingrave and Ruth from the hunting field. Someone most unfortunately happened to tell him that they had left the run together, and had been seen riding together towards White Lodge, which was the name of the house where these two young men lived. Lumley followed them. He rode into the stable yard, and found there Ruth's mare and Wingrave's covert hack, from which he had not changed when they had left the field. Both animals had evidently been ridden hard, and there was something ominous in the smile with which the head groom told him that Lady Ruth and Wingrave were in the house.

"The two men had separate dens. Wingrave's was much the better furnished, as he was a young man of considerable taste, and he had also fitted it with sporting trophies collected from many countries. This room was at the back of the house, and Lumley deliberately crossed the lawn and looked in at the window."

Lovell paused for a moment or two to relight his pipe.

"Remember," he continued, "that I have to put this story together, partly from facts which came to my knowledge afterwards, and partly from reasonable deductions. I may say at once that I do not know what Lumley saw when he played the spy. The housekeeper had just taken tea in, and it is possible that Wingrave may have been holding his guest's hand, or that something in their faces or attitude convinced him that his jealousy was well founded. Anyhow, it is certain that Lumley was half beside himself with rage when he strode away from that window. Then in the avenue he must have heard the soft patter of hounds coming along the lane, or perhaps seen the pink coats of the huntsmen through the hedge. This much is certain. He hurried down the drive, and returned with Ruth's husband."

Lovell took another drink. No one spoke. No one even made a remark. The little circle of listeners had caught something of his own gravity. The story was an ordinary one enough, but something in Lovell's manner of telling it seemed somehow to bring into their consciousness the apprehension of the tangled web of passions which burned underneath its sordid details.

"Ruth's husband--Sir William I will call him--stood side by side with Lumley before the window. What they saw I cannot tell you. They entered the room. The true story of what happened there I doubt if anyone will ever know. The evidence of servants spoke of raised voices and the sound of a heavy fall. When they were summoned, Sir William lay on the floor unconscious. Lady Ruth had fainted; Lumley and Wingrave were both bending over the former. On the floor were fragments of paper, which were afterwards put together, and found to be the remains of a check for a large amount, payable to Lady Ruth, and signed by Wingrave.

"The sequel is very soon told. Sir William died in a few days, and Wingrave, on the evidence of Lumley and Ruth, was committed for manslaughter, and sent to prison for fifteen years!"

Lovell paused. A murmur went round the little group of listeners. The story, after all, except for Lovell's manner of telling it, was an ordinary one. Everyone felt that there was something else behind.

So they asked no questions whilst Lovell drank his whisky and soda, and refilled his pipe. Again his eyes seemed to wander to the calendar.

"According to Lady Ruth's evidence," he said thoughtfully, "her husband entered the room at the exact moment when she was rejecting Wingrave's advances, and indignantly refusing a check which he was endeavoring to persuade her to accept. A struggle followed between the two men, with fatal results for Sir William. That," he added slowly, "is the story which the whole world read, and which most of it believes. Here, however, are a few corrections of my own, and a suggestion or two for you, Aynesworth, and those of you who like to consider yourselves truth seekers. First, then, Lady Ruth was a self-invited guest at White Lodge. She had asked Wingrave to return with her, and as they sat together in his room, she confessed that she was worried, and asked for his advice. She was in some money trouble, ingeniously explained, no doubt. Wingrave, with the utmost delicacy, offered his assistance, which was of course accepted. It was exactly what she was there for. She was in the act of taking the check, when she saw her husband and Lumley. Her reputation was at stake. Her subsequent course of action and evidence becomes obvious. The check unexplained was ruin. She explained it!

"Of the struggle, and of the exact means by which Sir William received his injuries, I know nothing. There is the evidence! It may or may not be true. The most serious part of the case, so far as Lady Ruth was concerned, lay in the facts as to her husband's removal from the White Lodge. In an unconscious state he was driven almost twelve miles at a walking pace. No stimulants were administered, and though they passed two doctors' houses no stop was made. A doctor was not sent for until half an hour after they reached home, and even then they seemed to have chosen the one who lived furthest away. The conclusion is obvious enough to anyone who knows the facts of the case. Sir William was not meant to live!

"Wingrave's trial was a famous one. He had no friends and few sympathizers, and he insisted upon defending himself. His cross examination of the man who had been his friend created something like a sensation. Amongst other things, he elicited the fact that Lumley, after first seeing the two together, had gone and fetched Sir William. It was a terrible half hour for Lumley, and when he left the box, amongst the averted faces of his friends, the sweat was pouring down his face. I can seem him now, as though it were yesterday. Then Lady Ruth followed. She was quietly dressed; the effect she produced was excellent. She told her story. She hinted at the insult. She spoke of the check. She had imagined no harm in accepting Wingrave's invitation to tea. Men and women of the hunt, who were on friendly terms, treated one another as comrades. She spoke of the blow. She had seen it delivered, and so on. And all the time, I sat within a few feet of Wingrave, and I knew that in the black box before him were burning love letters from this woman, to the man whose code of honor would ever have protected her husband from disgrace; and I knew that I was listening to the thing which you, Aynesworth, and many of your fellow story writers, have so wisely and so ignorantly dilated upon--the vengeance of a woman denied. Only I heard the words themselves, cold, earnest words, fall one by one from her lips like a sentence of doom--and there was life in the thing, life and death! When she had finished, the whole court was in a state of tension. Everyone was leaning forward. It would be the most piquant, the most wonderful cross examination every heard--the woman lying to save her honor and to achieve her vengeance; the man on trial for his life. Wingrave stood up. Lady Ruth raised her veil, and looked at him from

the witness box. There was the most intense silence I ever realized. Who could tell the things which flashed from one to the other across the dark well of the court; who could measure the fierce, silent scorn which seemed to blaze from his eyes, as he held her there--his slave until he chose to give the signal for release? At last he looked away towards the judge, and the woman fell forward in the box gasping, a crumpled up, nerveless heap of humanity.

"My lord," he said, "I have no questions to ask this witness!"

"Everyone staggered. Wingrave's few friends were horrified. After that there was, of course, no hope for him. He got fifteen years' penal servitude."

Like an echo from that pent-up murmur of feeling which had rippled through the crowded court many years ago, his little group of auditors almost gasped as Lovell left his place and strolled down the room. Aynesworth laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"All the time," he said, "you were looking at that calendar! Why?"

Lovell once more faced them. He was standing with his back to a round table, strewn with papers and magazines.

"It was the date," he said, "and the fact that I must leave England within a few hours, which forced this story from me. Tomorrow Wingrave will be free! Listen, Aynesworth," he continued, turning towards him, "and the rest of you who fancy that it is I who am leaving a humdrum city for the world of tragedies! I leave you the legacy of a greater one than all Asia will yield to me! Lady Ruth is married to Lumley, and they hold today in London a very distinguished social position. Tomorrow Wingrave takes a hand in the game. He was once my friend; I was in court when he was tried; I was intimately acquainted with the lawyer's clerk who had the arrangement of his papers. I know what no one else breathing knows. He is a man who never forgives; a man who was brutally deceived, and who for years has had no other occupation than to brood upon his wrongs. He is very wealthy indeed, still young, he has marvelous tenacity of purpose, and he has brains. Tomorrow he will be free!"

Aynesworth drew a little breath.

"I wonder," he murmured, "if anything will happen."

Lovell shrugged his shoulders.

"Where I go," he said, "the cruder passions may rage, and life and death be reckoned things of little account. But you who remain--who can tell?--you may look into the face of mightier things."

## I.2. Outside The Pale

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 Roche 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. Roche 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.

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