

Literature.org:

[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Malefactor](#)

[Book 1](#)

This Work:

[Contents](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

[Next Book](#)

Book 1:

[Contents](#)

[Previous Chapter](#)

[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 12 - Mephistopheles On A Steamer

In some respects, the voyage across the Atlantic was a surprise to Aynesworth. His companion seemed to have abandoned, for the time at any rate, his habit of taciturnity. He conversed readily, if a little stiffly, with his fellow passengers. He divided his time between the smoke room and the deck, and very seldom sought the seclusion of his state room. Aynesworth remarked upon this change one night as the two men paced the deck after dinner.

"You are beginning to find more pleasure," he said, "in talking to people."

Wingrave shook his head.

"By no means," he answered coldly. "It is extremely distasteful to me."

"Then why do you do it?" Aynesworth asked bluntly.

Wingrave never objected to being asked questions by his secretary. He seemed to recognize the fact that Aynesworth's retention of his post was due to a desire to make a deliberate study of himself, and while his own attitude remained purely negative, he at no time exhibited any resentment or impatience.

"I do it for several reasons," he answered. "First, because misanthropy is a luxury in which I cannot afford to indulge. Secondly, because I am really curious to know whether the time will ever return when I shall feel the slightest shadow of interest in any human being. I can only discover this by affecting a toleration for these people's society, which I can assure you, if you are curious about the matter, is wholly assumed."

Aynesworth shrugged his shoulders.

"Surely," he said, "you find Mrs. Travers entertaining?"

Wingrave reflected for a moment.

"You mean the lady with a stock of epigrams, and a green veil?" he remarked. "No! I do not find her entertaining."

"Your neighbor at table then, Miss Packe?"

"If my affections have perished," Wingrave answered grimly, "my taste, I hope, is unimpaired. The young person who travels to improve her mind, and fills up the gaps by reading Baedeker on the places she hasn't been to, fails altogether to interest me!"

"Aren't you a little severe?" Aynesworth remarked.

"I suppose," Wingrave answered, "that it depends upon the point of view, to use a hackneyed phrase. You study people with a discerning eye for good qualities. Nature--and circumstances have ordered it otherwise with me. I see them through darkened glasses."

"It is not the way to happiness," Aynesworth said.

"There is no highroad to what you term happiness," Wingrave answered. "One holds the string and follows into the maze. But one does not choose one's way. You are perhaps more fortunate than I that you can appreciate Mrs. Travers' wit, and find my neighbor, who has done Europe, attractive. That is a matter of disposition."

"I should like," Aynesworth remarked, "to have known you fifteen years ago."

Wingrave shrugged his shoulders.

"I fancy," he said, "that I was a fairly average person--I mean that I was possessed of an average share of the humanities. I have only my memory to go by. I am one of those fortunate persons, you see, who have realized an actual reincarnation. I have the advantage of having looked out upon life from two different sets of windows.--By the bye, Aynesworth, have you noticed that unwholesome-looking youth in a serge suit there?"

Aynesworth nodded.

"What about him?"

"I fancy that he must know--my history. He sits all day long smoking bad cigarettes and watching me. He makes clumsy attempts to enter into conversation with me. He is interested in us for some reason or other."

Aynesworth nodded.

"Shocking young bounder," he remarked. "I've noticed him myself."

"Talk to him some time, and find out what he means by it," Wingrave said. "I don't want to find my biography in the American newspapers. It might interfere with my

operations there. Here's this woman coming to worry us! You take her off, Aynesworth! I shall go into the smoking room."

But Mrs. Travers was not so easily to be disposed of. For some reason or other, she had shown a disposition to attach herself to Wingrave.

"Please put me in my chair," she said to him, holding out her rug and cushion. "No! Not you, Mr. Aynesworth. Mr. Wingrave understands so much better how to wrap me up. Thanks! Won't you sit down yourself? It's much better for you out here than in the smoking room--and we might go on with our argument."

"I thought," Wingrave remarked, accepting her invitation after a moment's hesitation, "that we were to abandon it."

"That was before dinner," she answered, glancing sideways at him. "I feel braver now."

"You are prepared," he remarked, "for unconditional surrender?"

She looked at him again. She had rather nice eyes, quite dark and very soft, and she was a great believer in their efficacy.

"Of my argument?"

He did not answer her for a moment. He had turned his head slightly towards her, and though his face was, as usual, expressionless, and his eyes cold and hard, she found nevertheless something of meaning in his steady regard. There was a flush in her cheek when she looked away.

"I am afraid," she remarked, "that you are rather a terrible person."

"You flatter me," he murmured. "I am really quite harmless!"

"Not from conviction then, I am sure," she remarked.

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "Let us call it from lack of enterprise! The virtues are all very admirable things, but it is the men and women with vices who have ruled the world. The good die young because there is no useful work for them to do. No really satisfactory person, from a moral point of view, ever achieved greatness!"

She half closed her eyes.

"My head is going round," she murmured. "What an upheaval! Fancy Mephistopheles on a steamer!"

"He was, at any rate, the most interesting of that little trio," Wingrave remarked, "but even he was a trifle heavy."

"Do you go about the world preaching your new doctrines?" she asked.

"Not!" he answered. "Nothing would ever make a missionary of me, for good or for evil, for the simple reason that no one else's welfare except my own has the slightest concern for me."

"What hideous selfishness!" she said softly. "But I don't think--you quite mean it?"

"I can assure you I do," he answered drily. "My world consists of myself for the central figure, and the half a dozen or so of people who are useful or amusing to me! Except that the rest are needed to keep moving the machinery of the world, they might all perish, so far as I was concerned."

"I don't think," Mrs. Travers said softly, "that I should like to be in your world."

"I can very easily believe you," he answered.

"Unless," she remarked tentatively, "I came to convert!"

He nodded.

"There is something in that," he admitted. "It would be a great work, a little difficult, you know."

"All the more interesting!"

"You see," he continued, "I am not only bad, but I admire badness. My wish is to remain bad--in fact, I should like to be worse if I knew how. You would find it hard to make a start. I couldn't even admit that a state of goodness was desirable!"

She looked at him curiously. The night air was perhaps getting colder, for she shivered, and drew the rug a little closer around her.

"You speak like a prophet," she remarked.

"A prophet of evil then!"

She looked at him steadfastly. The lightness had gone out of her tone.

"Do you know," she said, "I am almost sorry that I ever knew you?"

He shook his head.

"You can't mean it," he declared.

"Why not?"

"I have done you the greatest service one human being can render another! I have saved you from being bored!"

She nodded.

"That may be true," she admitted. "But can you conceive no worse state in the world than being bored?"

"There is no worse state," he answered drily. "I was bored once," he added, "for ten years or so; I ought to know!"

"Were you married?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Not quite so bad as that," he answered. "I was in prison!"

She turned a startled face towards him.

"Nonsense!"

"It is perfectly true," he said coolly. "Are you horrified?"

"What did you do?" she asked in a low tone.

"I killed a man."

"Purposely?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"He attacked me! I had to defend myself."

She said nothing for several moments.

"Shall I go?" he asked.

"No! Sit still," she answered. "I am frightened of you, but I don't want you to go away. I want to think Yes! I can understand you better now! Your life was spoilt!"

"By no means," he answered. "I am still young! I am going to make up for those ten years."

She shook her head.

"You cannot," she answered. "The years can carry no more than their ordinary burden of sensations. If you try to fill them too full, you lose everything."

"I shall try what I can do!" he remarked calmly.

She rose abruptly.

"I am afraid of you tonight," she said. "I am going downstairs. Will you give my rug and cushion to the deck steward? And--good night."

She gave him her hand, but she did not look at him, and she hurried away a little abruptly.

Wingrave yawned, and lighting a cigar, strolled up and down the deck. A figure loomed out of the darkness and almost ran into him. It was the young man in the serge suit. He muttered a clumsy apology and hurried on.