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

[The Malefactor](#)

[Book 1](#)

This Work:

[Contents](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

[Next Book](#)

Book 1:

[Contents](#)

[Previous Chapter](#)

Chapter 16 - The Hidden Hand

Wingrave glanced up as they entered. He motioned Nesbitt to a chair by his side, but the young man remained standing.

"My secretary tells me," Wingrave said curtly, "that you cannot pay me what you owe."

"It's more than I possess in the world, sir," Nesbitt answered.

"It is not a large amount," Wingrave said. "I do not see how you can carry on business unless you can command such a sum as this."

Nesbitt moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"I have only been doing a very small business, sir," he answered, "but quite enough to make a living. I don't speculate as a rule. Hardwells seemed perfectly safe, or I wouldn't have touched them. I sold at four. They are not worth one. I could have bought thousands last week for two dollars."

"That is beside the question," Wingrave answered. "If you do not pay this, you have cheated me out of my profits for I should have placed the commission with brokers who could. Why did you wish to see me again?"

"I thought that you might give me time," Nesbitt answered, raising his head and looking Wingrave straight in the face. "It seems rather a low down thing to come begging. I'd rather cut my right hand off than do it for myself, but I've--someone else to think about, and if I'm hammered, I'm done for. Give me a chance, Mr. Wingrave! I'll pay you in time."

"What do you ask for?" Wingrave said.

"I thought that you might give me time," Nesbitt said, "and I'll pay you the rest off with the whole of my profits every year."

"A most absurd proposal," Wingrave said coolly. "I will instruct my brokers to take twenty thousand dollars down, and wait one week for the balance. That is the best offer I can make you. Good day!"

The young man stood as though he were stunned.

"I--I can't find it," he faltered. "I can't indeed."

"Your resources are not my affair," Wingrave said. "I shall instruct my broker to do as I have said. If the money is not forthcoming, you know the alternative."

"You mean to ruin me, then?" Nesbitt said slowly.

"I mean to exact the payment of what is due to me," Wingrave said curtly. "If you cannot pay, it seems to me that I am the person to be pitied--not you. Show Mr. Nesbitt out, Aynesworth."

Nesbitt turned towards the door. He was very pale, but he walked steadily. He did not speak another word to Wingrave.

"I'm beastly sorry," Aynesworth said to him on the stairs. "I wish I could help you!"

"Thank you," Nesbitt answered. "No one can help me. I'm through."

Aynesworth returned to the sitting room. Wingrave had lit a cigarette and watched him as he arranged some papers.

"Quite a comedy, isn't it?" he remarked grimly.

"It doesn't present itself in that light to me," Aynesworth answered.

Wingrave blew the smoke away from in front of his face. "Ah!" he said, "I forgot that you were a sentimentalist. I look upon these things from my own point of view. From yours, I suppose I must seem a very disagreeable person. I admit frankly that the sufferings of other people do not affect me in the slightest."

"I am sorry for you," Aynesworth said shortly. "If there is going to be much of this sort of thing, though, I must ask you to relieve me of my post. I can't stand it."

"Whenever you like, my dear fellow," Wingrave answered. "I think that you would be very foolish to leave me, though. I must be a most interesting study."

"You are--what the devil made you!" Aynesworth muttered.

Wingrave laid down his cigarette.

"I am what my fellows have made me," he said slowly. "I tasted hell for a good many years. It has left me, I suppose, with a depraved taste. Ring up my brokers, Aynesworth!"

want to speak to Malcolmson. He had better come round here."

The day dragged on. Aynesworth hated it all, and was weary long before it was half over. Everyone who came was angry, and a good many came whom Wingrave refused to see. Just before five o'clock, young Nesbitt entered the room unannounced. Aynesworth started towards him with a little exclamation. The young man's evident excitement terrified him, and he feared a tragedy. Malcolmson, too, half rose to his feet. Wingrave alone remained unmoved.

Nesbitt walked straight up to the table at which Malcolmson and Wingrave were sitting. He halted in front of the latter.

"Mr. Wingrave," he said, "you will give me my receipt for those shares for fifty-seven thousand six hundred dollars."

Wingrave turned to a paper by his side, and ran his forefinger down the list of names.

"Mr. Nesbitt," he said. "Yes! sixty thousand dollars."

The young man laid a slip of paper upon the table.

"That is a certified check for the amount," he said. "Mr. Malcolmson, please give me my receipt"

"Ah!" Mr. Wingrave remarked. "I thought that you would find the money."

Nesbitt bit his lip, but he said nothing till he had the receipt and had fastened it up in his pocket. Then he turned suddenly round upon Wingrave.

"Look here!" he said. "You've got your money. I don't owe you a cent. Now I'm going to tell you what I think of you."

Wingrave rose slowly to his feet. He was as tall as the boy, long, lean, and hard. His face expressed neither anger nor excitement, but there was a slight, dangerous glitter in his deep-set eyes.

"If you mean," he said, "that you are going to be impertinent, I would recommend you to change your mind."

Nesbitt for a moment hesitated. There was something ominous in the cool courage of the older man. And before he could collect himself, Wingrave continued:--

"I presume," he said, "that you chose your own profession. You knew quite well there was no place in it for men with a sense of the higher morality. It is a profession of gamblers and thieves. If you'd won, you'd have thought yourself a smart fellow and pocketed your winnings fast enough. Now that you've lost--don't whine. You sat down willingly enough to play the game with me. Don't call me names because you lost. This is no place for children. Pocket your defeat, and be more careful next time."

Nesbitt was silent for a moment. Wingrave, cool and immovable, dominated him. He gave a little laugh, and turned towards the door.

"Guess you're right," he declared; "we'll let it go at that."

Aynesworth followed him from the room.

"I'm awfully glad you're out of the scrape," he said.

Nesbitt caught him by the arm.

"Come right along," he said. "I haven't had a drink in the daytime for a year, but we're going to have a big one now. I say, do you know how I got that money?"

Aynesworth shook his head.

"On easy terms, I hope."

They sat down in the American Bar, and a colored waiter in a white linen suit brought them whisky and Apollinaris in tall tumblers.

"Listen," Nesbitt said. "My brain is on the reel still. I went back to my office, and if it hadn't been for the little girl, I should have brought a revolver by the way. Old Johnny there waiting to see me, no end of a swell, Phillson, the uptown lawyer. He went straight for me.

"Been dealing in Hardwells?" he asked.

"I nodded.

"Short, eh?"

"Six hundred shares,' I answered. There was no harm in telling him for the Street knew well enough.

"Bad job,' he said. 'How much does Wingrave want?"

"Shares at par,' I answered. 'It comes to close on fifty-seven thousand six hundred dollars.'

"I'm going to find you the money,' he said.

"Then I can tell you the things in my office began to swim. I'd an idea somehow that he was there as a friend, but nothing like this. I couldn't answer him.

"It's a delicate piece of business,' he went on. 'In fact, the fewer questions you ask the better. All I can say is there's a chap in Wall Street got his eye on you. Your old dad once helped him over a much worse place than this. Anyhow, I've a check here for sixty thousand dollars, and no conditions, only that you don't talk.'

"But when am I to pay it back?" I gasped.

"If my client ever needs it, and you can afford it, he will ask for it.' Phillson answered. 'That's all.'

"And before I could say another darned word, he was gone, and the check was there on my desk."

Aynesworth sipped his whisky and Apollinaris, and lit a cigarette.

"And they say," he murmured, "that romance does not exist in Wall Street. You're a lucky chap, Nesbitt."

"Lucky! Do you think I don't realize it? Of course, I know the old governor had lots of friends on the Street, but he was never in a big way, and he got hit awfully hard himself before he died. I can't understand it anyway."

"I wouldn't try," Aynesworth remarked, laughing. "By the bye, your friend, whoever he was, must have got to know pretty quickly."

Nesbitt nodded.

"I thought of that," he said. "Of course, Phillsons are lawyers for Malcolmson, Wingrave's broker, so I daresay it came from him. Say, Aynesworth, you don't mind if I ask you something?"

"Not at all," Aynesworth answered. "What is it?"

"Why the devil do you stop with a man like Wingrave? He doesn't seem your sort at all."

Aynesworth hesitated.

"Wingrave interests me," he answered. "He has had a curious life, and he is a man with very strange ideas."

Nesbitt finished his drink, and rose up.

"Well," he said, "he's not a man I should care to be associated with. Not but what I daresay he was right upstairs. He's strong, too, and he must have a nerve. But he's a brute for all that!"

Nesbitt went his way, and Aynesworth returned upstairs. Wingrave was alone.

"Have we finished this miserable business?" Aynesworth asked.

"For the present," Wingrave answered. "Mr. Malcolmson will supply you with a copy of the accounts. See that Hardwell is credited with a quarter share of the profits. Our dealings are over for the present. Be prepared to start on Saturday for the West. We are going to look for those bears."

"But the mine?" Aynesworth exclaimed. "It belongs to you now. Aren't you going out to examine it?"

Wingrave shook his head.

"No," he said, "I know nothing about mines. My visit could not teach me anything one way or the other. I have sent a commission of experts. I am tired of cities and money-making. I want a change."

Aynesworth looked at him suddenly. The weariness was there indeed--was it his fancy, or was it something more than weariness which shone out of the dark, tired eyes?