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

[The Malefactor](#)

[Book 2](#)

This Work:  
[Contents](#)  
[Previous Book](#)

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Chapter 21 - "Love Shall Make All Things New"

Book 2:  
[Contents](#)  
[Previous Chapter](#)

Mr. Pengarth was loth to depart. He felt that all pretext for lingering was gone, that he had outstayed his welcome. Yet he found himself desperately striving for some excuse to prolong an interview which was to all effects and purposes concluded.

"I will do my best, Sir Wingrave," he said, reverting to the subject of their interview, "to study Miss Lundy's interests in every way. I will also see that she has the letter you have left for her within eight days from now. But if you could see your way to leave some sort of address so that I should have a chance of communicating with you, if necessary, I should assume my responsibilities with a lighter heart."

Wingrave gave vent to a little gesture of annoyance.

"My dear sir," he said, "surely I have been explicit enough. I have told you that, within a week from now, I shall be practically dead. I shall never return to England--you will never see me again. I have given life here a fair trial, and found it a failure. I am going to make a new experiment--and it is going to be in an unexplored country. You could not reach me there through the post. You, I think, would scarcely care to follow me. Let it go at that."

Mr. Pengarth took up his bag with a sigh.

"Sir Wingrave," he said, "I am a simple man, and life with me has always been a very simple affair. I recognize the fact, of course, that I am not in a position to judge or to understand the mental attitude of one who, like yourself, has suffered and passed through great crises. But I cannot help wishing that you could find it possible to try, for a time, the quiet life of a countryman in this beautiful home of yours."

Wingrave shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr. Pengarth," he said, "no two men are born alike into this world. Some are blessed with a contented mind, some are wanderers by destiny. You will forgive me if I do not discuss the matter with you more fully. My journey, wherever and whatever it is, is inevitable."

Mr. Pengarth was braver than he had ever been in his life.

"Sir Wingrave," he said, "there is one journey which we must all take in God's good time. But the man who starts before he is called finds no welcome at the end. The greatest in life are those who are content to wait!"

"I am not in the least disposed to doubt it, Mr. Pengarth," Wingrave said calmly. "Now I must really send you away."

So Mr. Pengarth went, but Wingrave was not long destined to remain in solitude. There was a sound of voices in the hall, Morrison's protesting, another insistent. Then the door opened, and Wingrave looked up with darkening face, which did not lighten when he recognized the intruder.

"Aynesworth!" he exclaimed, "what are you doing here? What do you want with me?"

"Five minutes," Aynesworth answered, "and I mean to have it. You may as well tell your man to take his hand off my shoulder."

Wingrave nodded to Morrison.

"You can go," he said. "Come back when I ring."

They were alone! Aynesworth threw down his hat and crossed the room until he was within a few feet of Wingrave.

"Well, sir?"

Aynesworth laughed a little unnaturally.

"I had to come," he said. "It is humiliating, but the discipline is good for me! I was determined to come and see once more the man who has made an utter and complete fool of me."

Wingrave eyed him coldly.

"If you would be good enough to explain," he began.

"Oh, yes, I'll explain," Aynesworth answered. "I engaged myself to you as secretary, didn't I, and I told you the reason at the time? I wanted to make a study of you. I wanted to trace the effect of your long period of isolation upon your subsequent actions. I entered upon my duties--how you must have smiled at me behind my back! Never was a man more completely and absolutely deceived. I lived with you, was always by your side, I was there professedly to study your actions and the method of them. And yet you found it a perfectly simple matter to hoodwink me whenever you chose!"

"In what respect?" Wingrave asked calmly.

"Every respect!" Aynesworth said. "Let me tell you two things which happened yesterday. I met a young New York stockbroker, named Nesbitt, in London, and in common with all London, I suppose, by this time, I learnt the secret of all those anonymous contributions to the hospitals and other charitable causes during the last year."

"Go on," Wingrave said.

"I have come here on purpose to tell you what I think you are," Aynesworth said. "You are the greatest hypocrite unchanged. You affect to hate your fellows and to love evil-doers. You deceived the whole world, and you deceived me. I know you now for what you are. You conceived your evil plans, but when the time came for carrying them out, you funk'd it every time. You had that silly little woman on the steamer in your power, and you yourself, behind your own back, released her with that Marconigram to her husband, sent by yourself. You brought the boy Nesbitt face to face with ruin, and to his face you offered him no mercy. Behind his back you employ a lawyer to advance him your own money to pay your own debt. You decline to give a single penny away in charity and, as stealthily as possible, you give away in one year greater sums than any other man has ever parted with. You decline to help the poor little orphan child of the village organist, and secretly you have her brought up in your own home, and stop the sale of your pictures for the sake of the child whom you had only once contemptuously addressed. Can you deny any one of these things?"

"No!" Wingrave answered quietly, "I cannot."

"And I thought you a strong man," Aynesworth continued, aggrieved and contemptuous. "I nearly went mad with fear when I heard that it was you who were the self-appointed guardian of Juliet Lundy. I looked upon this as one more, the most diabolical of all your schemes!"

Wingrave rose to his feet, still and grave.

"Aynesworth," he said, "this interview does not interest me. Let us bring it to an end. I admit that I have made a great failure of my life. I admit that I have failed in realizing the ambitions I once confided to you. I came out from prison with precisely those intentions, and I was conscious of nothing in myself or my nature to prevent my carrying them out. It seems that I was mistaken. I admit all this, but I do not admit your right to force yourself into my presence and taunt me with my failure. You served me well enough, but you were easily hoodwinked, and our connection is at an end. I have only one thing to say to you. I am leaving this part of the world altogether. I shall not return. That child has some foolish scruples about taking any more of my money. That arises through your confounded interference. She is poor, almost in want. If you should fail her now--"

Aynesworth interrupted with a hoarse little laugh.

"Wingrave," he said, "are you playing the simpleton? If Juliet will not take your money, why should she take mine?"

Wingrave came out from his place. He was standing now between Aynesworth and the door.

"Aynesworth," he said, "do I understand that you are not going to marry the child?"

"!? Certainly not!" Aynesworth answered.

Wingrave remained quite calm, but there was a terrible light in his eyes.

"Now, for the first time, Aynesworth," he said, "I am glad that you are here. We are going to have a complete understanding before you leave this room. Juliet Lundy, as my ward, was, I believe, contented and happy. It suited you to disturb our relations, and your excuse for doing so was that you loved her. You took her away from me, and now you say that you do not intend to marry her. Be so good as to tell me what the devil you do mean!"

Aynesworth laughed a little bitterly.

"You must excuse me," he said, "but a sense of humor was always my undoing, and this reversal of our positions is a little odd, isn't it? I am not going to marry Juliet Lundy because she happens not to care for me in that way at all. My appearance is scarcely that of a joyous lover, is it?"

Wingrave eyed him more closely. Aynesworth had certainly fallen away from the trim and carefully turned out young man of a few months back. He was paler, too, and looked older.

"I do not understand this," Wingrave said.

"I do!" Aynesworth answered bitterly. "There is someone else?"

"Someone whom I do not know about?" Wingrave said, frowning heavily. "Who is he, Aynesworth?"

Aynesworth shrugged his shoulders. He said nothing. Wingrave came a step nearer to him.

"You may as well tell me," he said quietly, "for I shall postpone my journey until I know the whole truth."

"It is not my secret," Aynesworth answered. "Ask her yourself!"

"Very well," Wingrave declared, "I will. I shall return to London tonight."

"It is not necessary," Aynesworth remarked.

Wingrave started.

"You mean that she is here?" he exclaimed.

Aynesworth drew him towards the window.

"Come," he said, "you shall ask her now."

Wingrave hesitated for a moment. An odd nervousness seemed to have taken possession of him.

"I do not understand this, Aynesworth," he said. "Why is she here?"

"Go and ask her your question," Aynesworth said. "Perhaps you will understand then."

Wingrave went down the path which led to the walled garden and the sea. The tall hollyhocks brushed against his knees; the air, as mild as springtime, was fragrant with the perfume of late roses. Wingrave took no note of these things. Once more he seemed to see coming up the path the little black-frosted child, with the pale face and the great sad eyes; it was she indeed who rose so swiftly from the hidden seat. Then Wingrave stopped short for he felt stirring within him all the long repressed madness of his unlived manhood. It was the weakness against which he had fought so long and so wearily, triumphant now, so that his heart beat like a boy's, and the color flamed into his cheeks. And all the time she was coming nearer, and he saw that the child had become a woman, and it seemed to him that all the joy of life was alight in her face, and the one mysterious and wonderful secret of her sex was shining softly out of her eager eyes. So that, after all, when they met, Wingrave asked her no questions. She came into his arms with all the graceful and perfect naturalness of a child who has wandered a little away from home . . . .

"I am too old for you, dear," he said presently, as they wandered about the garden, "much too old."

"Age," she answered softly, "what is that? What have we to do with the years that are past? It is the years to come only which we need consider, and to think of them makes me almost tremble with happiness. You are much too rich and too wonderful a personage for a homeless orphan like me; but," she added, tucking her arm through his with a contented little sigh, "I have you, and I shall not let you go!"

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