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The Malefactor

Book 2

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Chapter 6 - Spreading The Nets

"By the bye," the Marchioness asked him, "have you a Christian name?"

"Sorry," Wingrave answered, "if I ever had, I've forgotten it."

"Then I must call you Wingrave," she remarked. "I hate calling anyone I know decently well Mr. anything."

"Charmed," Wingrave answered; "it isn't a bad name."

"It isn't," she admitted. "By the bye," she continued, looking at him critically, "you are rather a surprising person, aren't you?"

"Glad you've found it out," Wingrave answered. "I always thought so."

"One associates all sorts of terrible things with millionaires--especially African and American ones," she remarked. "Now you could pass anywhere for the ordinary sort of decent person."

Wingrave nodded.

"I was told the other day," he remarked reflectively, "that if I would only cultivate two things, I might almost pass as a member of the English aristocracy."

"What were they?" she asked rashly.

"Ignorance and impertinence," he answered.

The Marchioness was silent for a moment. There was a little more color than usual in her beautiful cheeks and a dangerous glitter in her eyes.

"You can go home, Mr. Wingrave," she said.

He rose to his feet imperturbably. The Marchioness stretched out a long white hand and gently forced him back again.

"You mustn't talk like that to me," she said quietly. "I am sensitive."

He bowed.

"A privilege, I believe, of your order," he remarked.

"Of course, if you want to quarrel--" she began.

"I don't," he assured her.

"Then be sensible! I want to talk to you."

"Sensible, alone with you!" he murmured. "I should establish a new record."

"You certainly aren't in the least like a millionaire," she declared, smiling at him, "you are more like a--"

"Please go on," he begged.

"I daren't," she answered, shaking her head.

"Then you aren't in the least like a marchioness," he declared. "At least, not like our American ideas of one."

She laughed outright.

"Bring your chair quite close to mine," she ordered, "I really want to talk to you."

He obeyed, and affected to be absorbed in the contemplation of the rings on the hand which a great artist had called the most beautiful in England. She withdrew it a little peevishly, after a moment's pause.

"I want to talk about the Barringtons," she said. "Do you know that they are practically ruined?"

"I heard that Barrington had been gambling on the Stock Exchange the last few days," he answered.

"He has lost a great deal of money," she answered, "and they were almost on their last legs before. Are you going to set them straight again?"

"No idea," he answered. "I haven't been asked, for one thing."

"Ruth will ask you, of course," the Marchioness said impatiently. "I expect that she is waiting at your flat by now. I want to know whether you are going to do it."

The hand was again very close to his. Again Wingrave contemplated the rings.

"I forgot that you were her friend, and are naturally anxious," he remarked.

"I am not her friend," the Marchioness answered, "and--I do not wish you to help them."

Wingrave was silent. The hand was insistent, and he held it for a moment lightly, and then let it go.

"Well, I don't know," he said doubtfully. "The Barringtons have been very hospitable to me."

"Rubbish!" the Marchioness answered. "You have done quite enough for them already. Of course, you are a man--and you must choose. I am sure that you understand me."

He rose to his feet.

"I must think this out," he said. "The Barringtons have a sort of claim on me. I will let you know which way I decide."

She stood close to him, and her hand fell upon his shoulder.

"You are not going!" she exclaimed. "I have told them that I am at home to no one, and I thought that you would stay and entertain me. Sit down again, Wingrave!"

"Sorry," he answered, "I have a lot to do this afternoon. I came directly I had your note; but I have had to keep some other people waiting."

"You are going to see Lady Ruth!"

"Not that I know of," he declared. "I have heard nothing from her. By the bye, I lost some money to you at bridge the other evening. How much was it? Do you remember?"

She looked at him for a second, and turned away.

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

"If you please. Put the amount down on a piece of paper, and then I sha'n't forget it."

She crossed the room to her desk, and returned with a folded envelope. He stuffed it into his waistcoat pocket.

"I shall be at the opera tonight," she said. "Will you come there and tell me what--which you decide?"

"With pleasure," he answered, "if I can get away from a stupid dinner in time."

She let him go reluctantly. Afterwards she passed into her own room, and stood looking at herself in the pier glass. Artists and the society papers called her the most beautiful woman in England; fashion had placed her upon such a pinnacle that men counted it a distinction to be seen speaking to her. She dealt out her smiles and favors like Royalty itself; she had never once known a rebuff. This afternoon she felt that she had received one. Had she been too cold or too forward? Perhaps she had underestimated the man himself. She rang for her maid.

"Celeste," she said, "I shall wear my new Paquin gown tonight at the opera, and my pearls."

"Very good, your ladyship."

"And I am going to lie down for an hour or two now. Don't let me be disturbed. I want to look my best tonight. You understand?"

"Perfectly, your ladyship."

The Marchioness rested, but she did not sleep. She was thinking of Wingrave!

It was not Lady Ruth, but her husband, who was waiting to see Wingrave on his return. Aynesworth was talking to him, but at once withdrew. Wingrave nodded with slightly upraised eyebrows. He never shook hands with Barrington.

"You wanted to see me?" he inquired, carelessly turning over a little pile of letters.

Barrington was ill at ease. He hated himself and he hated his errand.

"Yes, for a moment or two--if you're not busy," he said. "May I smoke? I'm nervous this morning."

"Help yourself," Wingrave said shortly. "Cigarettes and cigars on the sideboard. Touch the bell if you'll take anything to drink."

"Thanks--Aynesworth gave me a brandy and soda. Capital fellow, Aynesworth!"

"Have another," Wingrave said shortly.

He crossed the room to the sideboard. Wingrave glanced up from his letters, and smiled coldly as he saw the shaking fingers.

"I don't often indulge like this," Barrington said, turning away from the sideboard with a tumbler already empty in his hands. "The fact is, I've had rather a rude knock, and Ruth thought I'd better come and see you."

Wingrave remained a study of impassivity. His guest's whole demeanor, his uneasy words and nervous glances were an unspoken appeal to be helped out in what he had come to say. And Wingrave knew very well what it was. Nevertheless, he remained silent--politely questioning. Barrington sat down a little heavily. He was not so carefully dressed as usual; he looked older, his appearance lacked altogether that air of buoyant prosperity which was wont to inspire his friends and creditors with confidence.

"I've been a fool, Wingrave," he said. "You showed me how to make a little money a few weeks ago, and it seemed so easy that I couldn't resist having a try by myself, only on rather a larger scale. I lost! Then I went in again to pull myself round, and I lost again. I lost--more than I can easily raise before settlement."

"I am sorry," Wingrave said politely. "It is very unwise to meddle in things you know so little about."

For a moment the worm turned. Barrington rose to his feet, and with a deep flush upon his cheeks moved towards the door. But his spark of genuine feeling died out almost as soon as it had been kindled. Outside that door was ruin; within, as he very well knew, lay his only chance of salvation. He set down his hat, and turned round.

"Wingrave," he said, "will you lend me some money?"

Wingrave looked at him with upraised eyebrows.

"I," he remarked, "lend you money? Why should I?"

"Heaven knows," Barrington answered. "It is you who have chosen to seek us out. You have forced upon us something which has at least the semblance of friendship. There is no one else whom I could ask. It isn't only this damned Stock Exchange transaction. Everything has gone wrong with me for years. If I could have kept going till next July, I should have been all right. I have made a little success in the House, and I am promised a place in the next government. I know it seems queer that I should be asking you, but it is that--or ruin. Now you know how things are with me."

"You are making," Wingrave said quietly, "a mistake. I have not pretended or given the slightest evidence of any friendship for yourself."

Barrington looked at him with slowly mounting color.

"You mean--"

"Precisely," Wingrave interrupted. "I do not know what I might or might not do for Lady Ruth. I have not considered the subject. It has not, in fact, been presented to me."

"It is the same thing," Barrington declared hoarsely.

"Pardon me--it is not," Wingrave answered.

"What I ask you to do," Barrington said, "I ask on behalf of my wife."

"As an ambassador," Wingrave said coldly, "you are not acceptable to me. It is a matter which I could only discuss with Lady Ruth herself. If Lady Ruth has anything to say to me, I will hear it."

Barrington stood quite still for several moments. The veins on his forehead stood out like tightly drawn cords, his breath came with difficulty. The light in his eyes, as he looked at Wingrave, was almost murderous.

"If Lady Ruth desires to see me," Wingrave remarked slowly, "I shall be here at nine o'clock this evening. Tomorrow my movements are uncertain. You will excuse me if I hurry you away now. I have an engagement which is already overdue."

Barrington took up his hat and left the room without a word. Wingrave remained in his chair. His eyes followed the departing figure of his visitor. When he was absolutely sure that he was alone, he covered his face with one hand. His engagement seemed to have been with his thoughts for he did not stir for nearly an hour later. Then he rang the bell for Aynesworth.

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