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

[The Malefactor](#)

[Book 1](#)

This Work:  
[Contents](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

[Next Book](#)  
Book 1:  
[Contents](#)  
[Previous Chapter](#)  
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 7 - Lord Of The Manor

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She came slowly towards the two men through the overgrown rose garden, a thin, pale, wild-eyed child, dressed in most uncompromising black. It was a matter of doubt whether she was the more surprised to see them, or they to find anyone else, in this wilderness of desolation. They stood face to face with her upon the narrow path.

"Have you lost your way?" she inquired politely.

"We were told," Aynesworth answered, "that there was a gate in the wall there, through which we could get on to the cliffs."

"Who told you so?" she asked.

"The housekeeper," Aynesworth answered. "I will not attempt to pronounce her name."

"Mrs. Tresfarwin," the child said. "It is not really difficult. But she had no right to send you through here! It is all private, you know!"

"And you?" Aynesworth asked with a smile, "you have permission, I suppose?"

"Yes," she answered. "I have lived here all my life. I go where I please. Have you seen the pictures?"

"We have just been looking at them," Aynesworth answered.

"Aren't they beautiful?" she exclaimed. "I--oh!"

She sat suddenly down on a rough wooden seat and commenced to cry. For the first time Wingrave looked at her with some apparent interest.

"Why, what is the matter with you, child?" Aynesworth exclaimed.

"I have loved them so all my life," she sobbed; "the pictures, and the house, and the gardens, and now I have to go away! I don't know where! Nobody seems to know!"

Aynesworth looked down at her black frock.

"You have lost someone, perhaps?" he said.

"My father," she answered quietly. "He was organist here, and he died last week."

"And you have no other relatives?" he asked.

"None at all. No one--seems--quite to know--what is going to become of me!" she sobbed.

"Where are you staying now?" he inquired.

"With an old woman who used to look after our cottage," she answered. "But she is very poor, and she cannot keep me any longer. Mrs. Colson says that I must go and work, and I am afraid. I don't know anyone except at Tredowen! And I don't know how to work! And I don't want to go away from the pictures, and the garden, and the sea! It is all so beautiful, isn't it? Don't you love Tredowen?"

"Well, I haven't been here very long, you see," Aynesworth explained.

Wingrave spoke for the first time. His eyes were fixed upon the child, and Aynesworth could see that she shrank from his cold, unsympathetic scrutiny.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Juliet Lundy," she answered.

"How long was your father organist at the church?"

"I don't know," she answered. "Ever since I was born, and before."

"And how old are you?"

"Fourteen next birthday."

"And all that time," he asked, "has there been no one living at Tredowen?"

"No one except Mrs. Tresfarwin," she answered. "It belongs to a very rich man who is in prison."

Wingrave's face was immovable. He stood on one side, however, and turned towards his companion.

"We are keeping this young lady," he remarked, "from what seems to be her daily pilgrimage. I wonder whether it is really the pictures, or Mrs. Tresfarwin's cakes?"

She turned her shoulder upon him in silent scorn, and looked at Aynesworth a little wistfully.

"Goodbye!" she said.

He waved his hand as he strolled after Wingrave.

"There you are, Mr. Lord of the Manor," he said. "You can't refuse to do something for the child. Her father was organist at your own church, and a hard struggle he must have had of it, with an absentee landlord, and a congregation of seagulls, I should think."

"Are you joking?" Wingrave asked coldly.

"I was never more in earnest in my life," Aynesworth answered. "The girl is come from gentlefolks. Did you see what a delicate face she had, and how nicely she spoke? You wouldn't have her sent out as a servant, would you?"

Wingrave looked at his companion ominously.

"You have a strange idea of the duties of a landlord," he remarked. "Do you seriously suppose that I am responsible for the future of every brat who grows up on this estate?"

"Of course not!" Aynesworth answered. "You must own for yourself that this case is exceptional. Let us go down to the Vicarage and inquire about it."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Wingrave answered. "Nor will you! Do you see the spray coming over the cliffs there? The sea must be worth watching."

Aynesworth walked by his side in silence. He dared not trust himself to speak. Wingrave climbed with long, rapid strides to the summit of the headland, and stood there with his face turned seawards. The long breakers were sweeping in from the Atlantic with a low, insistent roar; as far as the eye could reach the waves were crusted with white foam. Every now and then the spray fell around the two men in a little dazzling shower; the very atmosphere was salt. About their heads the seagulls whirled and shrieked. From the pebbled beach to the horizon there was nothing to break the monotony of that empty waste of waters.

Wingrave stood perfectly motionless, with his eyes fixed upon the horizon. Minute after minute passed, and he showed no signs of moving. Aynesworth found himself presently engaged in watching him. Thoughts must be passing through his brain. He wondered what they were. It was here that he had spent his boyhood: barely an hour ago the two men had stood before the picture of his father. It was here, if anywhere, that he might regain some part of his older and more natural self. Was it a struggle, he wondered, that was going on within the man? There were no signs of it in his face. Simply he stood and looked, and looked, as though, by infinite perseverance, the very horizon itself might recede, and the thing for which he sought become revealed . . . .

Aynesworth turned away at last, and there, not many yards behind, apparently watching them, stood the child. He waved his hand and advanced towards her. Her eyes were fixed upon Wingrave half fearfully.

"I am afraid of the other gentleman," she whispered, as he reached her side. "Will you come a little way with me? I will show you a seagull's nest."

They left Wingrave where he was, and went hand in hand, along the cliff side. She was a curious mixture of shyness and courage. She talked very little, but she gripped her companion's fingers tightly.

"I can show you," she said, "where the seagulls build, and I can tell you the very spot in the sea where the sun goes down night after night."

"There are some baby seagulls in one of the nests, but I daren't go very near for the mother bird is so strong. Father used to say that when they have their baby birds to look after, they are as fierce as eagles."

"Your father used to walk with you here, Juliet?" Aynesworth asked.

"Always till the last few months when he got weaker and weaker," she answered. "Since then I come every day alone."

"Don't you find it lonely?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"At first," she answered, "not now. It makes me unhappy. Would you like to go down on the beach and look for shells? I can find you some very pretty ones."

They clambered down and wandered hand in hand by the seashore. She told him quaint little stories of the smugglers, of wrecks, and the legends of the fisher people. Coming back along the sands, she clung to his arm and grew more silent. Her eyes sought his every now and then, wistfully. Presently she pointed out a tiny whitewashed cottage standing by itself on a piece of waste ground.

"That is where I live now, at least for a day or two," she said. "They cannot keep me any longer. When are you going away?"

"Very soon, I am afraid, little girl," he answered. "I will come and see you, though, before I go."

"You promise," she said solemnly.

"I promise," Aynesworth repeated.

Then she held up her face, a little timidly, and he kissed her. Afterwards, he watched her turn with slow, reluctant footsteps to the unpromising abode which she had pointed out. Aynesworth made his way to the inn, cursing his impecuniosity and Wingrave's brutal indifference.

He found the latter busy writing letters.

"Doing your work, Aynesworth?" he remarked coldly. "Be so good as to write to Christie's for me, and ask them to send down a valuer to go through the pictures."

"You are really going to sell!" Aynesworth exclaimed.

"Most certainly," Wingrave answered. "Heirlooms and family pictures are only so much rubbish to me. I am the last of my line, and I doubt whether even my lawyer could discover a next of kin for my personal property. Sell! Of course I'm going to sell! What use is all this hoarded rubbish to me? I am going to turn it into gold!"

"And what use is gold?" Aynesworth asked curiously. "You have plenty!"

"Not enough for my purpose," Wingrave declared. "We are going to America to make more."

"It's vandalism!" Aynesworth said, "rank vandalism! The place as it is is a picture! The furniture and the house have grown old together. Why, you might marry!"

Wingrave scowled at the younger man across the room.

"You are a fool, Aynesworth," he said shortly. "Take down these letters."

After dinner, Wingrave went out alone. Aynesworth followed him about an hour later, when his work was done, and made his way towards the Vicarage. It was barely nine o'clock, but the little house seemed already to be in darkness. He rang twice before anybody answered him. Then he heard slow, shuffling footsteps within, and a tall, gaunt man, in clerical attire, and carrying a small lamp, opened the door.

Aynesworth made the usual apologies and was ushered into a bare, gloomy-looking apartment which, from the fact of its containing a writing table and a few books, he imagined must be the study. His host never asked him to sit down. He was a long, unkempt-looking man with a cold, forbidding face, and his manner was the reverse of cordial.

"I have called to see you," Aynesworth explained, "with reference to one of your parishioners--the daughter of your late organist."

"Indeed!" the clergyman remarked solemnly.

"I saw her today for the first time and have only just heard her story," Aynesworth continued. "It seems to be a very sad one."

His listener inclined his head.

"I am, unfortunately, a poor man," Aynesworth continued, "but I have some friends who are well off, and I could lay my hands upon a little ready money. I should like to discuss the matter with you and see if we cannot arrange something to give her a start in life."

The clergyman cleared his throat.

"It is quite unnecessary," he answered. "A connection of her father's has come forward at the last moment, who is able to do all that is required for her. Her future is provided for."

Aynesworth was a little taken aback.

"I am very glad to hear it," he declared. "I understood that she had neither friends nor relations."

"You were misinformed," the other answered. "She has both."

"May I ask who it is who has turned up so unexpectedly?" Aynesworth inquired. "I have taken a great fancy to the child."

The clergyman edged a little towards the door, and the coldness of his manner was unmistakable.

"I do not wish to seem discourteous, he said, "but I cannot recognize that you have any right to ask me these questions. You may accept my word that the child is to be fittingly provided for."

Aynesworth felt the color rising in his cheeks.

"I trust," he said, "that you do not find my interest in her unwarrantable. My visit to you is simply a matter of charity. If my aid is unneeded, so much the better. All the same, I should like to know where she is going and who her friends are."

"I do not find myself at liberty to afford you any information," was the curt reply.

Thereupon there was nothing left for Aynesworth to do but to put on his hat and walk out, which he did.

Wingrave met him in the hall on his return.

"Where have you been?" he asked a little sharply.

"On a private errand," Aynesworth answered, irritated by his words and look.

"You are my secretary," Wingrave said coldly. "I do not pay you to go about executing private errands."

Aynesworth looked at him in surprise. Did he really wish to quarrel?

"I imagine, sir," he said, "that my time is my own when I have no work of yours on hand. If you think otherwise--"

He paused and looked at his employer significantly. Wingrave turned on his heel.

"Be so kind," he said, "as to settle the bill here tonight. We leave by the seven o'clock train in the morning."

"Tomorrow!" Aynesworth exclaimed.

"Precisely!"

"Do you mind," he asked, "if I follow by a later train?"

"I do," Wingrave answered. "I need you in London directly we arrive."

"I am afraid," Aynesworth said, after a moment's reflection, "that it is impossible for me to leave."

"Why?"

"You will think it a small thing," he said, "but I have given my promise. I must see that child again before I go!"

"You are referring," he asked, "to the black-frocked little creature we saw about the place yesterday?"

"Yes!"

Wingrave regarded his secretary as one might look at a person who has suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"I am sorry," he said, "to interfere with your engagements, but it is necessary that we should both leave by the seven o'clock train tomorrow morning."

Aynesworth reflected for a moment.

"If I can see the child first," he said, "I will come. If not, I will follow you at midday."

"In the latter case," Wingrave remarked, "pray do not trouble to follow me unless your own affairs take you to London. Our connection will have ended."

"You mean this?" Aynesworth asked.

"It is my custom," Wingrave answered, "to mean what I say."

Aynesworth set his alarm that night for half-past five. It seemed to him that his future would largely depend upon how soundly the child slept.