

**FOUL
PLAY. A NOVEL**

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Foul play. A novel by Charles Reade & Dion Boucicault

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CHARLES READE & DION BOUCICAULT

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BY

CHARLES READE

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FOUL PLAY.

CHAPTER I.

THERE are places which appear at first sight inaccessible to romance; and such a place was Mr. Wardlaw's dining-room in Russell Square. It was very large, had sickly green walls, picked out with aldermen, full length; heavy maroon curtains; mahogany chairs; a turkey carpet an inch thick; and was lighted with wax candles only.

In the centre, bristling and gleaming with silver and glass, was a round table, at which fourteen could have dined comfortably; and at opposite sides of this table sat two gentlemen, who looked as neat, grave, precise, and unromantic, as the place; Merchant Wardlaw and his son.

Wardlaw senior was an elderly man, tall, thin, iron-gray, with a round head, a short, thick neck, a good, brown eye, a square jaw that betokened resolution, and a complexion so sallow as to be almost cadaverous. Hard as iron: but a certain stiff dignity and respectability sat upon him, and became him.

Arthur Wardlaw resembled his father in figure, but his mother in face. He had, and has, hay-colored hair, a forehead singularly white and delicate, pale blue eyes, largish ears, finely chiselled features, the under lip much shorter than the upper; his chin oval and pretty, but somewhat receding; his complexion beautiful. In short, what nineteen people out of twenty would call a handsome young man, and think they had described him.

Both the Wardlaws were in full dress, according to the invariable custom of the house; and sat in a dead silence, that scented natural to the great, sober room.

This, however, was not for want of a topic; on the contrary, they had a matter of great importance to discuss, and in fact this was why they dined *tête-à-tête*: but their tongues were tied for the present; in the first place, there stood in the middle of the table an epergue, the size of a Putney laurel-tree; neither Wardlaw could well see the other, without craning out his neck like a rifleman from behind his tree; and then there were three fine suppressors of confidential intercourse, two gorgeous footmen, and a sombre, sublime, and, in one word, episcopal, butler; all three went about as softly as cats after a robin, and conjured one plain away, and smoothly insinuated another, and seemed models of grave discretion: but were known to be all ears, and bound by a secret oath to carry down each crumb of dialogue to the servants' hall, for curious dissection, and boisterous ridicule.

At last, however, those three smug hypocrites retired, and, by good luck, transferred their suffocating epergue to the sideboard; so then father and son looked at one another with that conscious air which naturally precedes a topic of interest; and Wardlaw senior invited his son to try a certain decanter of rare old port, by way of preliminary.

While the young man fills his glass, haul we in his antecedents.

At school till fifteen, and then clerk in his father's office till twenty-two, and showed an aptitude so remarkable, that John Wardlaw, who was getting tired, determined, sooner or later, to put the reins of government into his hands. But he conceived a desire that the future head of his office should be an university man. So he announced his resolution, and to Oxford went young Wardlaw, though he had not looked at Greek or Latin for seven years. He was, however, furnished with a private tutor, under whom he recovered lost ground rapidly. The Reverend Robert Penfold was a first-class man, and had the gift of teaching. The house of Wardlaw had peculiar claims on him, for he was the son of old Michael Penfold, Wardlaw's cashier; he learned from young Wardlaw the stake he was playing for, and, instead of merely giving him one hour's lecture per day, as he did to his other pupils, he used to come to his rooms at all hours, and force him to read, by reading with him. He also stood his friend in a serious emergency. Young Wardlaw, you must know, was blessed or cursed with Mimicry; his powers in that way really seemed to have no limit, for he could imitate any sound you liked with his voice, and any form with his pen or pencil. Now, we promise you, he was one man, under his father's eye, and another down at Oxford; so, one night, this gentleman, being warm with wine, opens his window, and, seeing a group of undergraduates chattering and smoking in the quadrangle, imitates the peculiar grating tones of Mr. Champion, vice-president of the college, and gives them various reasons why they ought to disperse to their rooms and study. "But, perhaps," says he, in conclusion, "you are too blind drunk to read Bosh in crooked letters by candle-light! In that case—" And he then gave them some very naughty advice how to pass the evening; still in the exact tones of Mr. Champion, who was a very, very strict moralist;

and this unexpected sally of wit caused shrieks of laughter, and mightily tickled all the hearers, except Champion *ipse*, who was listening and disapproving at another window. He complained to the president. Then the ingenious Wardlaw, not having come down to us in a direct line from Bayard, committed a great mistake, — he denied it.

It was brought home to him, and the president, who had laughed in his sleeve at the practical joke, looked very grave at the falsehood; Rustication was talked of and even Expulsion. Then Wardlaw came sorrowfully to Penfold, and said to him, "I must have been awfully cut, for I don't remember all that; I had been wineing at Christchurch. I do remember slanging the fellows, but how can I tell what I said? I say, old fellow, it will be a bad job for me if they expel me, or even rusticate me; my father will never forgive me; I shall be his clerk, but never his partner; and then he will find out what a lot I owe down here. I'm done for! I'm done for!"

Penfold uttered not a word, but grasped his hand, and went off to the president, and said his pupil had wineed at Christchurch, and could not be expected to remember minutely. Mimicry was, unfortunately, a habit with him. He then pleaded for the milder construction, with such zeal and eloquence, that the high-minded scholar he was addressing admitted that construction was *possible*, and therefore must be received. So the affair ended in a written apology to Mr. Champion, which had all the smoothness and neatness of a merchant's letter. Arthur Wardlaw was already a master in that style.

Six months after this, and one fortnight before the actual commencement of our tale, Arthur Wardlaw, well crummed by Penfold, went up for his final examination, throbbing with anxiety. He passed; and was so grateful to his tutor that, when the advowson of a small living near Ox-

ford came into the market, he asked Wardlaw senior to lend Robert Penfold a sum of money, much more than was needed: and Wardlaw senior declined without a moment's hesitation.

This slight sketch will serve as a key to the dialogue it has postponed, and to subsequent incidents.

"Well, Arthur, and so you have really taken your degree?"

"No, sir; but I have passed my examination: the degree follows as a matter of course,—that is a mere question of fees."

"Oh! Then now I have something to say to you. Try one more glass of the '47 port. Stop; you'll excuse me; I am a man of business; I don't doubt your word; Heaven forbid! but, do you happen to have any document you can produce in further confirmation of what you state; namely, that you have passed your final examination at the University?"

"Certainly, sir"; replied young Wardlaw. "My Testamur."

"What is that?"

The young gentleman put his hand in his pocket, and produced his Testamur, or "We bear witness"; a short printed document in Latin, which may be thus translated:—

"We bear witness that Arthur Wardlaw, of St. Luke's College, has answered our questions in humane letters."

"GEORGE RICHARDSON,

"ARTHUR SMYTHE,

"EDWARD MERIVALE,

"Examiners."

Wardlaw senior took it, laid it beside him on the table, inspected it with his double eye-glass, and, not knowing a word of Latin, was mightily impressed, and his respect for his son rose 40 or 45 per cent.

"Very well, sir," said he. "Now listen to me. Perhaps it was an old man's fancy; but I have often seen in the world what a stamp these Universities put upon a man. To send

you back from commerce to Latin and Greek, at two-and-twenty, was trying you rather hard; it was trying you doubly; your obedience, and your ability into the bargain. Well, sir, you have stood the trial, and I am proud of you. And so now it is my turn: from this day and from this hour, look on yourself as my partner in the old-established house of Wardlaw. My balance-sheet shall be prepared immediately, and the partnership deed drawn. You will enter on a flourishing concern, sir; and you will virtually conduct it, in written communication with me; for I have had five-and-forty years of it; and then my liver, you know! Watson advises me strongly to leave my desk, and try country air, and rest from business and its cares."

He paused a moment; and the young man drew a long breath, like one who was in the act of being relieved of some terrible weight.

As for the old gentleman, he was not observing his son just then, but thinking of his own career; a certain expression of pain and regret came over his features; but he shook it off with manly dignity. "Come, come," said he, "this is the law of Nature, and must be submitted to with a good grace. Wardlaw junior, fill your glass." At the same time he stood up and said, stoutly, "The setting sun drinks to the rising sun"; but could not maintain that artificial style, and ended with, "God bless you, my boy, and may you stick to business; avoid speculation, as I have done; and so hand the concern down healthy to your son, as my father there (pointing to a picture) handed it down to me, and I to you."

His voice wavered slightly in uttering this benediction; but only for a moment: he then sat quietly down, and sipped his wine composedly.

Not so the other: his color came and went violently all the time his father was speaking, and, when he ceased, he sank into his chair with another sigh deeper than the last, and

two half-hysterical tears came to his pale eyes.

But presently, feeling he was expected to say something, he struggled against all this mysterious emotion, and faltered out that he should not fear the responsibility, if he might have constant recourse to his father for advice.

"Why, of course," was the reply. "My country house is but a mile from the station; you can telegraph for me in any case of importance."

"When would you wish me to commence my new duties?"

"Let me see, it will take six weeks to prepare a balance-sheet, such as I could be content to submit to an incoming partner. Say two months."

Young Wardlaw's countenance fell. "Meantime you shall travel on the Continent and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you," said young Wardlaw, mechanically, and fell into a brown study.

The room now returned to what seemed its natural state. And its silence continued until it was broken from without.

A sharp knocking was heard at the street door, and resounded across the marble hall.

The Wardlaws looked at one another in some little surprise.

"I have invited nobody," said the elder.

Some time elapsed, and then a footman made his appearance, and brought in a card.

"Mr. Christopher Adams."

Now that Mr. Christopher Adams should call on John Wardlaw, in his private room, at nine o'clock in the evening, seemed to that merchant irregular, presumptuous, and monstrous. "Tell him he will find me at my place of business to-morrow, as usual," said he, knitting his brows.

The footman went off with this message; and, soon after, raised voices were heard in the hall, and the episcopal butler entered the room with an injured countenance.

"He says he must see you; he is in great anxiety."

"Yes, I am in great anxiety," said a quivering voice at his elbow; and Mr. Adams actually pushed by the butler, and stood, hat in hand, in those sacred precincts. "Pray excuse me, sir," said he, "but it is very serious; I can't be easy in my mind till I have put you a question."

"This is very extraordinary conduct, sir," said Mr. Wardlaw. "Do you think I do business here, and at all hours?"

"O no, sir; it is my own business. I am come to ask you a very serious question. I could n't wait till morning with such a doubt on my mind."

"Well, sir, I repeat this is irregular and extraordinary; but as you are here, pray what is the matter?" He then dismissed the lingering butler with a look. Mr. Adams cast uneasy glances on young Wardlaw.

"O," said the elder, "you can speak before him. This is my partner; that is to say, he will be as soon as the balance-sheet can be prepared, and the deed drawn. Wardlaw junior, this is Mr. Adams, a very respectable bill-discounter."

The two men bowed to each other, and Arthur Wardlaw sat down motionless.

"Sir, did you draw a note of hand to-day?" inquired Adams of the elder merchant.

"I dare say I did. Did you discount one signed by me?"

"Yes, sir, we did."

"Well, sir, you have only to present it at maturity. Wardlaw and Son will provide for it, I dare say." This with the lofty nonchalance of a rich man, who had never broken an engagement in his life.

"Ah, that I know they will if it is all right; but suppose it is not?"

"What d'ye mean?" asked Wardlaw, with some astonishment.

"O, nothing, sir! It bears your signature, that is good for twenty times the amount; and it is indorsed by your cashier. Only what makes

me a little uneasy, your bills used to be always on your own forms, and so I told my partner; he discounted it. Gentlemen, I wish you would just look at it."

"Of course we will look at it. Show it Arthur first; his eyes are younger than mine."

Mr. Adams took out a large bill-book, extracted the note of hand, and passed it across the table to Wardlaw junior. He took it up with a sort of shiver, and bent his head very low over it; then handed it back in silence.

Adams took it to Wardlaw senior, and laid it before him, by the side of Arthur's Testament.

The merchant inspected it with his glasses.

"The writing is mine, apparently."

"I am very glad of it," said the bill-broker, eagerly.

"Stop a bit," said Mr. Wardlaw. "Why, what is this? For two thousand pounds! and, as you say, not my form. I have signed no note for two thousand pounds this week. Dated yesterday. You have not cashed it, I hope?"

"I am sorry to say my partner has."

"Well, sir, not to keep you in suspense, the thing is not worth the stamp it is written on."

"Mr. Wardlaw!—Sir!—Good heavens! Then it is as I feared. It is a forgery."

"I should be puzzled to find any other name for it. You need not look so pale, Arthur. We can't help some clever scoundrel imitating our hands; and as for you, Adams, you ought to have been more cautious."

"But, sir, your cashier's name is Penfold," faltered the holder, clinging to a straw. "May he not have drawn—is the indorsement forged as well?"

Mr. Wardlaw examined the back of the bill, and looked puzzled.

"No," said he. "My cashier's name

is Michael Penfold, but this is indorsed 'Robert Penfold.' Do you hear, Arthur? Why, what is the matter with you? You look like a ghost. I say there is your tutor's name at the back of this forged note. This is very strange. Just look, and tell me who wrote these two words 'Robert Penfold'!"

Young Wardlaw took the document, and tried to examine it calmly, but it shook visibly in his hand, and a cold moisture gathered on his brow. His pale eyes roved to and fro in a very remarkable way; and he was so long before he said anything, that both the other persons present began to eye him with wonder.

At last he faltered out, "This 'Robert Penfold' seems to me very like his own handwriting. But then the rest of the writing is equally like yours, sir. I am sure Robert Penfold never did anything wrong. Mr. Adams, please oblige me. Let this go no further till I have seen him, and asked him whether he indorsed it."

"Now don't you be in a hurry," said the elder Wardlaw. "The first question is, who received the money?"

Mr. Adams replied that it was a respectable-looking man, a young clergyman.

"Ah!" said Wardlaw, with a world of meaning.

"Father!" said young Wardlaw, imploringly, "for my sake, say no more to-night. Robert Penfold is incapable of a dishonest act."

"It becomes your years to think so, young man. But I have lived long enough to see what crimes respectable men are betrayed into in the hour of temptation. And, now I think of it, this Robert Penfold is in want of money. Did he not ask me for a loan of two thousands pounds? Was not that the very sum? Can't you answer me? Why, the application came through you."

Receiving no reply from his son, but a sort of agonized stare, he took