

# THE MALICE OF INANIMATE OBJECTS

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**T**he Malice of Inanimate Objects is a subject upon which an old friend of mine was fond of dilating, and not without justification. In the lives of all of us, short or long, there have been days, dreadful days, on which we have had to acknowledge with gloomy resignation that our world has turned against us. I do not mean the human world of our relations and friends: to enlarge on that is the province of nearly every modern novelist. In their books it is called "Life" and an odd enough hash it is as they portray it. No, it is the world of things that do not speak or work or hold congresses and conferences. It includes such beings as the collar stud, the inkstand, the fire, the razor, and, as age increases, the extra step on the staircase which leads you either to expect or not to expect it. By these and such as these (for I have named but the merest fraction of them) the word is passed around, and the day of misery arranged. Is the tale still remembered

of how the Cock and the Hen went to play a visit to Squire Korbes? How on the journey they met with and picked up a number of associates, encouraging each with the announcement:

"To Squire Korbes we are going  
For a visit is owing."

Thus they secured the company of the Needle, the Egg, the Duck, the Cat, possibly—for memory is a little treacherous here—and finally the Millstone: and when it was discovered that Squire Korbes was for the moment out, they took up positions in his mansion and awaited his return. He did return, wearied no doubt by a day's work among his extensive properties. His nerves were first jarred by the raucous cry of the Cock. He threw himself into his armchair and was lacerated by the Needle. He went to the sink for a refreshing wash and was splashed all over by the Duck. Attempting to dry himself with the towel he broke the Egg upon his face. He suffered other indignities from the Hen and her accomplices, which I cannot now recollect, and finally, maddened with pain and fear, rushed out by the back door and had his brains dashed out by the Millstone that had perched itself in the appropriate place. "Truly," in the concluding words of the story, "this Squire Korbes must have been either a very wicked or a very unfortunate man." It is the latter alternative which I incline to accept. There is nothing in the preliminaries to show that any slur rested on his name, or that his visitors had any injury to avenge. And will not this narrative serve as a striking example of the Malice of which I have taken upon me to treat? It is, I know, the fact that Squire Korbes's visitors were not all of them, strictly speaking, inanimate. But are we sure that the perpetrators of this Malice are really inanimate either? There are tales which seem to justify a doubt.

Two men of mature year were seated in a pleasant garden after breakfast. One was reading the day's paper, the other sat with folded arms, plunged in thought, and on his face were a piece of sticking plaster and lines of care. His companion lowered his paper. "What," said he, "is the matter with you? The morning is bright, the birds are singing, I can hear no aeroplanes or motor bikes."

"No," replied Mr. Burton, "it is nice enough, I agree, but I have a bad day before me. I cut myself shaving and spilt my tooth powder."

"Ah," said Mr. Manners, "some people have all the luck," and with this expression of sympathy he reverted to his paper. "Hullo," he exclaimed, after a moment, "here's George Wilkins dead! You won't have any more bother with him, anyhow."

"George Wilkins?" said Mr. Burton, more than a little excitedly. "Why, I didn't even know he was ill."

"No more he was, poor chap. Seems to have thrown up the sponge and put an end to himself."

Yes," he went on, "it's some days back: this is the inquest. Seemed very much worried and depressed, they say. What about, I wonder? Could it have been that will you and he were having a row about?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Manners, "he was a man, I thought, who did take things hard: they rankled. Well, I'm sorry, though I never saw much of him. He must have gone through a lot to make him cut his throat. Not the way I should choose, by a long sight. Ugh! Lucky he hadn't a family, anyhow. Look here, what about a walk round before lunch? I've an errand in the village."

Mr. Burton assented rather heavily. He was perhaps reluctant to give the inanimate objects of the district a chance of getting at him. If so, he was right. He just escaped a nasty purl over the scraper at the top of the steps: a thorny branch swept off his hat and scratched his fingers, and as they climbed a grassy slope he fairly leapt into the air with a cry and came down flat on his face. "What in the world?" said his friend coming up. "A great string, of all things! What business—Oh, I see—belongs to the kite" (which lay on the grass a little farther up). "Now if I can find out what little beast has left that kicking about, I'll let him have it—or rather I won't, for he shan't see his kite again. It's rather a good one, too." As they approached, a puff of wind raised the kite and it seemed to sit upon its end and look at the them with two large round eyes painted red, and, below them, three large printed red letters, I.C.U. Mr. Manners was amused and scanned the device with care. "Ingenious," he said, "it's a bit off a poster, of course: I see! Full Particulars, the word was." Mr. Burton on the other hand was not amused, but thrust his stick through the kite. Mr. Manners was inclined to regret this. "I dare say it serves him right," he said, "but he'd taken a lot of trouble to make it."

"Who had?" said Mr. Burton sharply. "Oh, I see, you mean the boy."

"Yes, to be sure, who else? But come on down now: I want to leave a message before lunch." As they turned a corner into the main street, a rather muffled and choky voice was heard to say, "Look out! I'm coming." They both stopped as if they had been shot.

"Who *was* that?" said Manners. "Blest if I didn't think I knew"—then, with almost a yell of laughter he pointed with his stick. A cage with a grey parrot in it was hanging in an open window across the way. "I *was* startled, by George: it gave you a bit of a turn, too, didn't it?" Burton was inaudible. "Well I shan't be a minute: you can go and make friends with the bird." But when he rejoined Burton, that unfortunate was not, it seemed, in trim for talking with either birds or men; he was some way ahead and going rather quickly. Manners paused for an instant at the parrot window and then hurried on laughing more than ever. "Have a good talk with Polly?" said he, as he came up.

"No, of course not," said Burton, testily. "I didn't bother about the beastly thing."

"Well, you wouldn't have got much out of her if you'd tried," said Manners. "I remembered after a bit; they've had her in the window for years: she's stuffed." Burton seemed about to make a remark, but suppressed it.

Decidedly this was not Burton's day out. He choked at lunch, he broke a pipe, he tripped in the carpet, he dropped his book in the pond in the garden. Later on he had or professed to have a telephone call summoning him back to town next day and cutting short what should have been a week's visit. And so glum was he all the evening that Manners's disappointment in losing an ordinarily cheerful companion was not very sharp.

At breakfast Mr. Burton said little about his night: but he did intimate that he thought of looking in on his doctor. "My hand's so shaky," he said, "I really daren't shave this morning."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Mr. Manners, "my man could have managed that for you: but they'll put you right in no time."

Farewells were said. By some means and for some reason Mr. Burton contrived to reserve a compartment to himself. (The train was not of the corridor type.) But these precautions avail little against the angry dead.

I will not put dots or stars for I dislike them, but I will say that apparently someone tried to shave Mr. Burton in the train, and did not succeed overly well. He was however satisfied with what he had done, if we may judge from the fact that on a once white napkin spread on Mr. Burton's chest was an inscription in red letters: GEO. W. FEEI.

Do not these facts—if facts they are—bear out my suggestion that there is something not inanimate behind the Malice of Inanimate Objects? Do they not further suggest that when this malice begins to show itself we should be very particular to examine and if possible rectify any obliquities in our recent conduct? And do they not, finally, almost force upon us the conclusion that, like Squire Korbes, Mr. Burton must have been either a very wicked or a singularly unfortunate man?