

# A TERRIBLE SECRET

## The Curse of the Morelands.

BY LEON LEWIS.

### CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

"Are you quite sure all the people who sailed in the yacht with you from Calcutta are dead?" he asked quietly.

"Quite sure, sir, or they would have turned up during my stay at Cape Town."

"That don't follow by any means," declared Radd. "Any one of the men in the yacht, if saved, may have kept in the background purposely, with the intention of watching you in secret and seeing what you would do."

The suggestion made Hillington so uncomfortable that he could not help moving uneasily in his chair.

"Did only your companions about the yacht know that you were bound for The Elms?" continued Radd.

"No, sir. No one save Colonel Ridley. He of course had conversed with me freely about everything here. He has even spoken to me about you, and the speaker ventured to smile a little queerly. 'As you have seen by the Colonel's last letter, I have long been his alter ego!'"

"But are you sure, Mr. Hillington—perfectly sure—that the Colonel is dead?"

"Absolutely, my friend—absolutely!"

"Did you see him thrown overboard the yacht into the water?"

"I did. We were thrown overboard at the same moment."

Radd started so violently that Hillington could not help looking inquiringly at him.

"It's those rats again," he said, by way of explaining his sudden excitement.

"But let us suppose that the Colonel was no more dead on reaching the water than you were! Let us suppose that he reached the shore, as you did! Couldn't he have taken that later Peninsula and Oriental steamer, and been here last Monday, or five days ahead of you?"

"Why, certainly," admitted Hillington, instantly adding: "But I know he's dead! There was no chance for him!"

The conviction of the bookkeeper was of that absolute character which points at least to a supposed certainty, and it was evidently as agitating as deep, for he again made use of his salts.

The curious gaze Radd had for several minutes been turning upon the guest had now become a curiosity, so very significant!

He had dovelated the fingers of his hands, and was unconsciously working them in a way which showed that he was very contented—very!

"You told me not long since," he resumed, "that the Colonel just as you were stricken down senseless at his feet."

"I—I did?" stammered Hillington, with a start. "Did I say that?"

"And now you say you saw him thrown overboard! Here is a manifest discrepancy. But of course," he added, sneeringly, "you can explain it."

"I can. My insensibility was very brief."

"I should say so," remarked Radd, still more sneeringly, "for you to have recovered your consciousness between the moment when you were picked up from the deck and that when you were pitched overboard—very short, indeed."

The confidential bookkeeper whitened at these words to his very lips, and sat as if stricken with dumbness, his eyes staring as wildly as if he had seen the accusing angel beside him.

"I—I don't quite understand you, Mr. Moreland," he ejaculated, at the end of a pause which lasted nearly a minute.

"No?" Then I shall have to speak still more plainly, in order, as I have suggested, that you may tell your story in such a way as to command the belief of my sister-in-law and niece. Unless you can talk to them better than you have talked to me, they'll make you a great deal of trouble."

"Of what nature, may I ask?"

"Why, they may say that you are the Colonel's robber and assassin! Radd, with the same audacity with which he had previously talked to Vance Wyville. 'You, the confidential bookkeeper, who has long known that the Colonel intended to sail to America with a couple of millions, and who converted his fortune into paper money that it might be easily transported. You, who told the Colonel that a score of the worst villains in Calcutta had taken steership passage in the R. & O. steamer, with the intention of securing his millions at any cost, even if they had to burn or scuttle the ship. You, who have had every opportunity of conspiring with your fellow clerks or others, and who may be the chief conspirators of all the 'outlaws' and 'pirates' there are in the case, and even have in your hands at this moment the victim's millions.'"

These sentences, rapidly and sternly uttered, had seemed like so many sledge-hammer blows upon the head of Agnus Hillington.

He sat as if stunned.

Once or twice he put his hand imploringly, as if to shut off the torrent of accusations assailing him, but otherwise he had remained motionless, so completely was he taken aback by the logic and daring of Radd.

"Yes, this is what the ladies might say to you," added the crafty accuser, with smiling triumph, as he remarked that Hillington seemed barely alive, "and what they certainly will say if I should become their promiser."

The confidential bookkeeper from India made no attempt to resent or refute the terrible accusations Radd had heaped upon him.

He had broken down completely, as all rascals do when some superior rascal shows them the flaws and inherent weaknesses of their situation.

But there was such a significant "if" in the closing words of Radd Moreland that Agnus Hillington would have been a poor fool indeed not to have caught at it as a drowning man catches at a life-preserver.

"You—you don't mean to ruin me!" he faltered, as wild of eye as ghastly of mien.

"Ruin you?" blurted Radd. "For whose benefit, I'd like to know! For Mrs. Moreland's? I hate her as I hate—well, I can't give you any equivalent! For the benefit of Colonel Barton Ridley? Not much, I assure you! The Col-

onel has never been of any more use to me than one of those rats in yonder hall! During all the time he has been in India he has not written me a line or sent me a dollar. I was not at the wedding when his sister married my brother. In fact, I never saw him!"

"No?" returned Hillington, with a flush of intense relief. "How singular."

"Not at all. The fact is, I was on bad terms with the sister, who rejected an offer of marriage from me long before she met Jessie's father!"

"Ah! I remember now!" cried Hillington, looking more and more relieved. "The Colonel gave me not long ago some idea of these bad relations, or rather this utter absence of all personal association!"

"When there's no occasion for me to gabble on the subject," declared Radd. "The Colonel and his sister have left me to starve all these years, and I'd be a hard-boiled fool to care a tinker's single iota for what becomes of them or of their money! If some Thug gets hold of them, so much the better for the Thug, that's all! Their fate is nothing to me—nothing whatever! Oh! how I hate them!"

Radd hastened to produce his bottle of Yquem, with a couple of tumblers, and drank freely, ostensibly to the health of the East Indian, but in reality to the tempering of his intense excitement.

"And now, Mr. Hillington," he resumed, after a pause, "let's get down to bed-rock, as we say in America. Did you write from Cape Town or elsewhere to my sister-in-law about the terrible fate which has overtaken her brother?"

"I did not, for several reasons. One was that I was very busy, and another that I hoped from one moment to another to have better news to send her. Finally, when my worst fears were verified, I concluded such bad news could be best left to her."

"That was well reasoned," commented Radd, who thought a great deal for himself while not losing a word of his new acquaintance had to say. "But you are not in America merely to report to my relatives that Colonel Ridley is dead?"

"No, sir; I have left India and the East forever. I am here to remain. But one of the chief motives of my presence here remains to be told."

He produced a photograph of Jessie from one of his pockets, fixing an admiring glance upon it, after affording Radd a glimpse of it, and proceeded somewhat nervously:

"The Colonel has often spoken to me of his niece, suggesting that he would like to see me make a favorable impression upon her, as you have seen, in fact, by his latest letter to his sister. Curiously enough, I have fallen madly in love with Miss Jessie through this 'counterfeit presentment,' which Colonel Ridley was so good as to give me, and I have come here, Mr. Moreland, with an ardent, all-absorbing hope of being able to make her my wife. She seems to be very beautiful!"

"In her way—yes," admitted Radd. "I could give you a curious point or two about her, as also about the old girl herself, but I won't. You'll be wise, Hillington—very wise—if you seek to make a good impression upon that girl, and a very fortunate fellow indeed if you can win her."

"Then I may consider that you are in favor of my proposed wooing?"

"Certainly—certainly!"

CHAPTER X.  
FOREWARNER AGAINST HIM.

HE will now proceed in advance of the conspirators to the retreat to which Mrs. Moreland and Jessie had gone—to Egg Island.

It contains a dozen square miles, and is one of the loveliest gems of the shores of Wisconsin, in the midst of Lake Michigan.

Near its southern end, at some distance from the other residence, stood a large stone cottage, which was almost lost in a wilderness of wood and verdure.

Mrs. Moreland had bought the place of the heirs of the original owner and occupant, who had been a misanthrope of the most pronounced type.

On the front veranda of this dwelling sat the mother and daughter, eagerly watching a boat that was approaching from the nearest point of the mainland.

"How slow he is!" cried Jessie. "I'll run down to the landing and take the mail from him."

She did so, returning in due course.

"Five letters," she reported, "and one of them is from Uncle Barton."

"Your uncle's first," was all Mrs. Moreland said, as her daughter dropped into a seat beside her.

The letter was quickly opened and read, proving to be the one Colonel Ridley had sent from India. It had been forwarded from The Elms, it will be comprehended, by Agnus Hillington and Radd Moreland, after both of these worthies had read it.

"Oh, what good news!" was the mother's commentary, with streaming eyes, when Jessie had finished reading the letter. "It must be! Your uncle is near us, and may arrive within an hour. What joy!"

Jessie was too excited to speak. She could only throw her arms around her mother and weep for very gladness.

"But read the next letter, Jessie," enjoined the mother, handing it to Jessie, as soon as she could master her emotions. "I do not recognize the handwriting. It must be from some stranger or new correspondent."

The letter was quickly opened, and Jessie bestowed a few rapid glances upon it.

"Why, it's from that famous Doctor Robinnett, who has been so often mentioned in Uncle Barton's letters," she announced.

"And the Doctor is in America?"

"Yes, mamma. The letter is post-marked Waukegan, and dated yesterday."

"How singular! Read, read!"

Jessie hastened to obey.

"Why, Uncle Barton has engaged Dr. Robinnett to come to America to treat us," she said, after a few swift glances at the letter. "We are to be his patients. He says he has no doubt, from what Uncle Barton has told him, that he can cure us."

Mrs. Moreland looked too startled to speak, while Jessie herself seemed to hang upon the communication precisely as a condemned prisoner would cling to a reprieve.

"Instant possession, so that he will be near us."

"But what does he say about your uncle?"

Jessie's glances ran rapidly on to the conclusion.

"He says Uncle Barton may be looked for from one day to another," she then announced. "He even adds that uncle should have been here before now."

The joy this assurance gave Mrs. Moreland could have been read on her features.

"You see, now, what a glorious uncle you have got, my dear child," she murmured. "Not only is he coming home to spend the remainder of his days with us, but his kindly heart seeks to relieve us of the great shadow under which we have been living."

"It has even a thought for your future, as is indicated by this reference to Agnus Hillington, his bookkeeper, whose photograph he has enclosed. You have not yet given it a glance."

The photograph in question now came in for an earnest examination, and such was the impression it made upon Jessie that she shrank from expressing it, preferring to get her mother's opinion before making known her own.

"Well, I don't like it," avowed Mrs. Moreland, frankly, with an air of pain and disappointment, in response to Jessie's inquiring glance. "How unlike the sunny, noble face of Vance Wyville. What do you think about it?"

"It certainly seems to represent a strange type of man," replied Jessie. "But we must not condemn him lightly, the more especially as uncle's idea of any sort of relation between the man and me is entirely out of the question. I'm not at all taken with him. The impression the photograph makes on me is a disagreeable one."

Nodding approvingly, Mrs. Moreland passed a third letter to Jessie, with the remark:

"This also seems to be from a stranger. What can it be?"

Jessie hastened to break the seal and glance at the signature.

"I'm from Mr. Hillington himself," she announced, with sudden change of countenance. "He has arrived! He has been to The Elms to find us gone. He has had news for us and will be here by the morning train from Milwaukee."

"And nothing about my brother—his friend and employer?" cried Mrs. Moreland, as the blood receded from her face.

"Not a word, mamma—not a word!"

The couple stared a few moments at each other, with a vague but terrible sense of evil.

"Something is wrong!" then said the mother, with agonized mien. "Why should this man come here alone, or even at all? Why isn't he with me? Why not give us some idea of his 'bad news' at once?"

"I can only suppose," replied Jessie, turning deathly pale, "that he cannot trust his news to paper—what he has to reveal is so terrible."

"Yes, that's it," cried Mrs. Moreland. "I'm not at all taken with you, but I must have died on the homeward voyage."

"Or been murdered for his money, mamma," faltered Jessie. "Oh, what a frightful mystery!"

As was only too natural, the couple broke down completely with the flood of fears and anxieties that came surging over them.

For several minutes they could neither regard their grief nor muster their thoughts coherently, and during this time the two letters remaining in the mother's lap were forgotten, but at length they caught the eye of Jessie, who seized them with a mien like that with which a drowning man clutches at any object floating near him.

"One of them is evidently from Dr. Robinnett," she said, with forced calmness, glancing at the address, "and the other appears to be from Mr. Wyville. Perhaps we shall soon know the worst."

She opened one of the letters, her hands shaking with anxiety, and read a few words with a rapidly swelling eye.

"Yes, it is from the Doctor," she announced, with a sigh of intense relief. "But what a strange communication! Listen!"

And she read as follows:

DEAR MADAM—I beg to add a few words to my communication of this date. A certain Agnus Hillington, who has been several years in the employ of your brother, as confidential bookkeeper, is likely to call upon you within a day or two with some very startling declarations. You will please hear patiently, with your daughter, all this man has to say, but you need not believe a word he says, and you had better be as much on your guard against him as if you knew him to be a knave or madman. To the contrary of what he has said, Hillington may tell you, Col. Barton Ridley is in the best of health and not far distant, but reserves his personal advent for the moment when he will be able to tell you the truth, and turned to naught an infamous conspiracy of which he has been the victim. Begging you, therefore, not to be at all dismayed by the lies of this daring criminal, and promising to see you in person soon, in accordance with your brother's command of recent date, I remain faithfully yours,

THE BRIEF SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED THE reading of this letter was as profound as that of the grave.

"Read that again," then came in a hazy whisper from Mrs. Moreland.

"The daughter complies."

"Thank heaven for his mercies!" commented Mrs. Moreland, with a sigh of relief. "I comprehend it all. My brother has been in some dreadful peril at the hands of this Hillington. He may even have been robbed of his yacht and his two millions. But he is still alive and well—and near us. He's working in secret to unearth an 'infamous conspiracy' and bring a 'daring criminal' to justice. He is busy in his own way for the detection and confounding of his enemies, but he's safe."

She opened her arms to Jessie, who threw herself, sobbing, upon her breast, and for a few minutes they mingled their tears in a joy and relief for which words had no expression.

"But here is a postscript I did not read, mamma," at length said Jessie, as her glances came back to the Doctor's letter. "And as it is always the case with postscripts, it has its importance."

The postscript was as follows:

"N. B. It will be well to give Mr. Hillington and his baggage a room at your cottage, and to treat him in such a way that he will not suspect that you have received these present advices concerning him."

G. R.

"Of course; but what is that other letter? See what it is."

The remaining letter was opened, and Jessie scanned it hastily until she reached the signature.

"It's from Mr. Wyville, as I supposed," she announced. "He writes to say that Uncle Radd turned up there almost as soon as we vanished. In fact, he has taken possession of The Elms, effecting an entrance by breaking a glass, and is taking himself quite at home there. Mr. Wyville wants to know if the intruder is to be left in undisturbed possession!"

"And that's all, Jessie?"

"All of a business nature, mamma. The rest is merely a hope that we are well and enjoying this beautiful weather."

Mrs. Moreland extended her hand for the letter, and read it from beginning to end, sighing profoundly when she had reached the signature.

"There is not the least reference to his recent proposal of marriage," she commented, while the light faded from her eyes and the color from her cheeks, "nor does he so much as express a desire to ever see me again!"

"Well, he at least writes you, which is more than I can say of Vance," returned Jessie, with a somber countenance and eyes in which had gathered a flood of tears. "But why should either of them write us, after all the care we have taken to thrust them out of our hearts and our lives? Men of that sort are not to be trifled with and they probably accept their dismissal as final."

She gave way to the violent grief which had flashed upon her soul, as such grief will come, at even the slightest provocation, and her example seemed contagious.

At least Mrs. Moreland could not refrain from following it.

"The rumble of wheels suddenly fell upon their hearing, and they had only to turn their heads to see that a two-horse carriage was approaching at a furious pace, and that it was occupied by their expected visitor."

"Yes, there he is—this Agnus Hillington, baggage and all!" cried Jessie, who recognized him from the photograph which had been sent her. "What a task it will be to meet him!"

"But let us do our duty, as pointed out by Doctor Robinnett," returned Mrs. Moreland, as she arose and led the way into the house. "The very life and fortune of my brother may depend upon discretion. The fellow may be as dangerous as a tiger of his native jungles!"

CHAPTER XI.  
A BAD SITUATION.

IN A lonely grove on the shore of Egg Island sat Radd and Moreland, a number of hours later, or just as night was falling. He was as uneasy as a fish out of water, as could have been seen by the manner with which he kept raising himself out of the grass and bushes, and looking in the direction of the Moreland cottage, which was not far from a mile distant.

"Can he have fooled me?" he asked, after looking at his watch again. "He told me, when he separated at the landing, that he would come to me in an hour."

He was interrupted by footsteps behind him, and had only to turn on his heel to find himself face to face with Agnus Hillington.

"You can't imagine, Mr. Moreland, how anxious I have been to come to you," exclaimed the East-Indian abruptly.

"There's something wrong, then?" returned Radd.

"Yes, everything."

"Didn't the ladies hear what you had to say, and give you a room, baggage and all?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"The trouble is they're playing a game, Mr. Moreland; repeating some lesson which has been taught them; watching and waiting; hearing and seeing all they can and saying as little as possible! Oh, they are sharp and critical, as you warned me they would be!"

"So that it was really a bore for you to go into the details of the Cape Town tragedy for their benefit?" queried Radd, with a barely perceptible smile.

"A bore? I would about as soon take poison as go through another such catchism and commentary," and the East Indian sighed profoundly at the recollection. "With all their nods of assent, I saw that they did not believe a word I told them!"

"Nevertheless the story seems to me to be the invention of a master mind," declared Radd, thus treating it as a fable without a shadow of hesitancy, "and I am at a loss to comprehend just where they will pick flaws in it. The mere fact that Colonel Ridley has not turned up here in accordance with his avowed intention is a pretty good evidence that his homeward voyage has been interrupted."

"And yet those ladies venture to 'hope for the best till further advices'—their very words!"

"What can be the secret of their conduct?"

"The secret seems to be that some underhanded game is being played against me."

"How? By whom?"

"That's a mystery. But I begin to see and feel that some one hostile to me is operating to my detriment and disadvantage."

"What proof have you of this?" asked Radd.

"Why, the manner in which the mother and daughter received all I had to say about that horrible tragedy at Cape Town."

"They didn't faint or shriek?"

"They acted precisely as if all I said was an old, old story, which they knew to be false."

"Ah! they did?"

The tone of Radd was grave, and his glance singularly searching. He looked as if the declaration of the East Indian was a sort of admission which harmonized with some suspicion he had been cherishing.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Where It Was.

Careful Housekeeper—Where is that sheet of sticky fly paper I left on this table?

Small Boy—I put it on th' arm-chair in th' parlor. You'll find half of it on sister an' th' other half on Mr. Hughard.—Street & Smith's Good News.

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