

A TERRIBLE SECRET

The Curse of the Morelands.

BY LEON LEWIS.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

How cordial and sympathetic, as well as affectionate, were the relations of the couple already been made apparent. They were like two brothers, despite the difference in their ages.

"Let's see, Vance," resumed Mr. Wyeville, after his cigar was well lighted, "I have been several. I remember one man who was born without hands or arms, but who nevertheless became a renowned painter, holding his brush and palette with his feet. Since that day, however, the manufacture of artificial limbs has become a wonderful science, and these poor ladies have evidently purchased the best there is in the market!"

"What! You think their hands are artificial, Uncle Erastus?"

"Undoubtedly, my dear nephew—undoubtedly."

The assertion seemed to come with immense force upon the young physician, for he made no immediate attempt to controvert it. He merely set his teeth hard together, while his eyes gleamed with tender pity, and murmured involuntarily:

"Poor Jessie!"

The silence that ensued lasted several minutes.

"But, after all, this is only your suspicion or suggestion, uncle?" Vance then said.

"True, Vance. But what if it should be true? Would you marry Jessie Moreland—always supposing she would have you—if it should appear that she has no hands?"

"Certainly, uncle," affirmed Vance without an instant's hesitation. "Whatever may be her defects, if there is enough of her to stand up or sit down in the presence of a magistrate or clergyman, and pronounce the one word, 'Yes,' I would marry her."

"Well, Vance!"

"Well, uncle, I concluded, at an early stage of my acquaintance with Jessie and Mrs. Moreland, that they had some similar affliction, and I had too much professional pride to be the first to refer to it!"

"And so it has been left to me to give you the solution of the enigma," exclaimed Mr. Wyeville. "You must certainly be aware, as a medical man, that many persons have been born into this world without hands?"

"I have read of such cases," replied Vance, "although I never saw one."

"Then I have the advantage of you in this respect," pursued Mr. Wyeville, "for I have seen several. I remember one man who was born without hands or arms, but who nevertheless became a renowned painter, holding his brush and palette with his feet. Since that day, however, the manufacture of artificial limbs has become a wonderful science, and these poor ladies have evidently purchased the best there is in the market!"

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CHAPTER III.

JESSIE AND HER MOTHER.

FOR a few minutes subsequent to her terrible interview with her lover, Jessie Moreland lay in the arms of her mother, at first sobbing convulsively, and then sinking into a profound quietude, which was equally the silence of exhaustion and despair.

"Has he gone, mamma?" she at length asked, turning her face toward the veranda and listening.

"Certainly," was the answer. "He remained scarcely a moment after you left him. You—you are not sorry you dismissed him?"

"No, mamma. And now to take up the burden of our lives on a new basis. Let's complete our preparations and start for Egg Island."

"That's now my one thought, Jessie."

"There are a dozen reasons why we should not lose a moment," continued the resolute girl, gaining her feet with feverish impatience, while a flash of excitement crept into her cheeks. "In the first place, we may expect Vance to be here early in the morning, and I would sooner die than go through another such scene with him!"

There came a ring at the front door at this moment, and it caused Jessie to start violently and change color. Had Vance come back?

"No, it's merely a young man from Potter & Carpenter's," said Mrs. Moreland, in response to Jessie's mute appeal. "His arms are full of signs which he has come to put up. I'll take a lantern and show him where to put them, while you close the house and light the lamps."

By the time Jessie had acted upon these suggestions, her mother came back to the sitting-room, remarking:

"I am glad the real estate people have been so prompt. To see these signs staring him in the face at the moment of his proposed arrival will hardly be the sort of welcome for which your Uncle Radd is looking."

"But it will be just what he deserves, mamma," returned Jessie, "and the fact that The Elms is in the market will also be a timely admonition to Vance. He will realize that I am irrevocably resolved not to marry him, and will turn his thoughts into the only channel which can bring him a lasting peace."

Leading the way to an adjoining bedroom Jessie bathed her face and eyes, and passed a brush deftly over her wavy hair.

"Let us now have a bit to eat, mamma," she proposed with a mien that was almost cheerful, as she drew her mother's arm within her own, with fervent caress, and turned towards the dining-room. "I really had no appetite at our usual supper hour, and I haven't a great deal at present, but we must think of our health and strength."

The couple were soon in their accustomed places at table with an excellent repast before them, and with blinds closed and curtains drawn, while a mellow radiance was diffused around them through the shades of a couple of large kerosene lamps suspended from the ceiling.

For a few minutes the meal progressed in silence, both eating as an encouragement to the other rather than because they had any appetite.

"My thoughts keep coming back to the necessity of at least a brief absence," at length remarked Jessie. "If I cannot really expect Vance to remain away, it is certainly too much for me to struggle with his pleadings and with my own feelings. We must go."

"And not merely on his account," returned Mrs. Moreland, "but also and particularly because of the threatened intrusion of your Uncle Radd. Now that he has found out where we live, it would be useless for us to remain here and receive him. No kindness of ours could prevent him from getting drunk

and making an exhibition of himself in this neighborhood. There is no question of our remaining here to await his advent. We must fly."

The more Mrs. Moreland thought about the proposed advent of her brother-in-law, the more uneasy she became, and it was not long before she resumed:

"There is a singular history involved in my marriage, Jessie, and I think you now ought to know it. I met your Uncle Radd nearly a year before I made your father's acquaintance. Radd professed to be greatly smitten with me, and improved every opportunity of intruding upon me. Intruding, I say, for I quickly made him know that I did not desire his company. He nevertheless kept coming with such persistency as to provoke a great deal of comment, besides inspiring me with the keenest terror and apprehension, and at last he presented himself to me in such a state of intoxication that he could hardly keep his feet. He not only fell into a furious passion at my remonstrances but became violent and threatening. Heaven only knows what would have happened if your father had not been near me at that moment and hastened to give me his protection."

It was the first time Jessie had ever heard these facts, and they naturally possessed a strange fascination for her.

"The acquaintance thus begun," pursued Mrs. Moreland, "was duly continued with devoted respect on my side, and with grateful affection on the part of your father, until he asked to marry me."

"And you refused?"

"I did, although I don't remember ever speaking of that fact to you. But Walter Moreland loved me too well to take a negative answer, and he was destined to be favored by circumstances, as you shall hear. To be brief, Radd made a resolute attempt to carry me off, with the aid of one of his cronies, a ruffian named Hutchley, who was as drunken and lawless as himself. The couple would have certainly got away with me, despite my desperate resistance, if it had not been for the timely intervention of your father."

"And soon after this event you married him?"

Mrs. Moreland assented.

"And have you ever regretted doing so?"

"Certainly not," answered the mother, as soon as she had recovered from the surprise caused her by the question. "Your father was one of the best and kindest of men. Not strong-willed and positive, like Vance and his uncle, but good, thoughtful and devoted. I was not only contented with him but happy. Only too briefly happy," she added, as her eyes filled with tears, "for he was taken ill soon after your birth and died the very day you were four months old."

"Poor papa!" breathed Jessie. "How often I have wished he could have been spared to us! How much I would have loved him!"

"For a year or two after your father's death," resumed Mrs. Moreland, "I saw very little of your Uncle Radd, who, deprived of his brother's advice and assistance, went to the bad rapidly. I heard of him from time to time, but he was generally at some distance from home, he having entered upon the vagabondish career he has ever since been following, but at length he came back to renew his persecutions."

Jessie remained all attention.

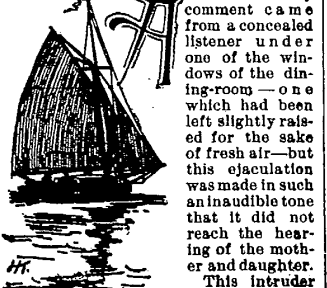
"Fortunately I was ready for him," continued Mrs. Moreland. "I had long had the keys of The Elms, and had been quietly endeavoring to find a tenant or purchaser for it, but your Uncle Barton's affairs in India had prospered to such an extent that he felt able to give us the place, and he did so, urging me repeatedly to take possession of it. To comply with these injunctions seemed the best way of escaping the persecutions of Radd Moreland, and I accordingly gave him the slip and came here with you."

Jessie drew a long breath of relief.

"I have stated these facts, Jessie," finished the mother, "that you may have a clear comprehension of the situation. That man has at last discovered where I am, and his one thought is to force himself upon us for the rest of his days. He writes me that I am the 'only woman he has ever loved,' and that I am the 'realization of his life's ideal.' What can be done with such a man? A retreat to Egg Island for a few weeks is the only way of getting rid of him."

CHAPTER IV.

RADD MORELAND.



AN involuntary comment came from a concealed listener under one of the windows of the dining-room—one which had been left slightly raised for the sake of fresh air—but this ejaculation was made in such an inaudible tone that it did not reach the hearing of the mother and daughter.

This intruder was of such singular and sinister aspect, even as seen in the imperfect light struggling out upon him, that almost any one encountering him would have formed a very unfavorable impression of him.

His coat was patched and ragged, and had been browned by the suns and rains of many a year, while his pantaloons looked as if they had sustained the brunt of many a skirmish with watch-dogs. Undersized, and at least fifty years of age, as was only too plainly announced by his long gray beard and bushy hair, he was nevertheless possessed of a wiry, well-knit frame, and the very steps by which he had reached his concealment were sufficient to indicate that he was strong and active.

His face was red and bloated, without having lost its natural sharpness and vigour, and its very features were a living indication of the dissipation and degeneracy of its owner.

This man, it is hardly necessary to

add, was no other than Radd Moreland. He had been hanging round the house ever since twilight set in, and had overheard the various "golden opinions" of Mrs. Moreland and Jessie concerning him, with what grim satisfaction need not be stated.

Seeing all they were doing and hearing all they said, he could afford to be patient.

"We will of course go to Egg Island in our sloop," remarked Jessie, after a thoughtful pause. "The moon will be up at ten o'clock, and the night is charming, with the wind in our favor. How much better to get away quietly than to toss in sleepless misery upon our beds all morning!"

"I agree with you, my dear child," returned Mrs. Moreland. "What you need now is something to do—just such a task as it will be for you to take the sloop up the lake. After the excitement we have had for the last twenty-four hours, we shall not be able to sleep until we are thoroughly worn out."

"Or until we have found that peace which only a change of scene can bring us," supplemented Jessie. "How impatient I am to be gone!"

A singular and undefined sound reached the hearing of the ladies at this moment, causing Jessie to raise her hand warningly, while Mrs. Moreland suspended her breathing and listened.

"What can that be, mamma?" whispered the daughter.

Mrs. Moreland stirred uneasily in her chair, looking around sharply as she answered:

"We're nervous, I suppose. This is not the first time I have heard that sound, or something like it. For several days past I have been unable to put away from me the thought that the house is haunted."

"Haunted, mamma?"

"Yes. I have heard such singular sounds at all hours of the day and night since last Monday."

"What sort of sounds?"

"Why, footsteps, whisperings, movements, and the opening and shutting of doors," explained Mrs. Moreland. "Mere nervousness, you may say, but I cannot forget that The Elms had stood empty ten years when your Uncle Barton purchased it just before his departure for India, nearly twenty years ago, and was even then popularly believed to be haunted. My brother was also told that there is an underground passage from the cellar to the lake, although I have never been able to find any trace of it."

"Why, in that case," suggested Jessie, looking startled, "may not the noise we have heard be caused by human intruders? Did Uncle Barton ever live here?"

"Certainly several months."

"Then he may have discovered the 'underground passage' referred to, and wouldn't it be splendid if Uncle Barton should take it into his head to come home suddenly and secretly, and get into the house without our knowing anything about it, and take a good look at us before showing himself?"

"Oh, yes; that would be very nice," replied Mrs. Moreland, with a smile and a sigh, "but your Uncle Barton is rather too practical for that sort of performance. It's far more likely that a gang of tramps or other marauders may be making free with The Elms by means of the secret passage."

The suggestion of Mrs. Moreland gave Jessie a positive shock.

"Let's be off," she proposed, laying down her knife and fork abruptly. "I shall never dare sleep here again!"

"Oh, there's no necessity of being quite so nervous," assured Mrs. Moreland. "Even if such persons were to intrude upon us, they would have every motive for keeping as shady as possible. Then, again, even if there is a secret passage from the cellar to the lake, it is by no means likely that there is a secret passage between the cellar and the rest of the house." You can finish your supper."

"I have had all I want, mamma," returned Jessie. "Besides, the voyage will not be a long one, and we can take along with us a good basket of lunch."

"Well, I am not so hungry as to need to linger here longer," declared Mrs. Moreland, as she arose and set about clearing off the table, "and the sooner we are off the better."

The words were immediately followed by a brisk ring at the door.

The ladies started nervously, exchanging questioning glances.

Was the newcomer Vance? Was he Radd Moreland? Or who could he be at that hour, considering how rarely The Elms had received a visitor, other than the young physician and his uncle?

As the couple stood undecided, almost holding their breath, the ring was repeated.

Seizing a lamp, Mrs. Moreland led the way to the door, which she cautiously drew ajar.

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Sheen?" she exclaimed, with a polite bow at sight of the visitor.

"Yes, ma'am. Here's a letter for you," extending it. "I was coming this way, and thought I would take the liberty of handing it in, as you seemed to be so anxious when you inquired this morning."

"Many thanks, Mr. Sheen."

The thoughtful and good-natured visitor was already turning away, the young lady he was waiting upon residing near by, and Mrs. Moreland had barely time to return his good-night before he vanished.

"Such an incident as this shows me how much my nerves are weakening," remarked Mrs. Moreland, as she closed the door. "I am all in a tremble!"

"So am I, mamma," returned Jessie. "And just because a postoffice clerk comes a few steps out of his way to give us a letter he presumes we are anxiously awaiting!"

"Which isn't, after all, the letter we were so anxious about—your Uncle Barton's," observed Mrs. Moreland, glancing at it. "It's from Mrs. Barnett."

It was with a nervous hand that Mrs. Moreland opened the letter, and with a puzzled air that she entered on its perusal, but her face quickly brightened.

It was in every respect such a letter as a long-trusted and faithful housekeeper would write, reporting the state in which she had found the cottage at Egg Island, and what measures she and the chamber-

maid had taken to prepare it for occupancy. It contained a number of thoughtful suggestions, and concluded with the hope that the mother and daughter would arrive as promptly as possible.

"It's a relief to find that they are all right," commented Mrs. Moreland, as she folded the letter and thrust it into her pocket. "It is also pleasant to reflect that we have such a comfortable retreat at our disposal. Let's put everything to rights here in the course of the next hour and take our departure."

"But ought we not to make some arrangement about the letter we expect from Uncle Barton?" asked Jessie, as the couple resumed the task of clearing the table.

"Yes, we ought," returned the mother. "What a pity that we did not speak to Mr. Sheen when he was here. But I can drop a line from our new address to have the letter forwarded. That will suffice."

A little more was said until everything at The Elms had been put in order for the proposed absence.

"What do we need to take with us?" then asked Jessie.

"Nothing more than our toilet and personal effects," answered Mrs. Moreland, "and they will all go into that solid leather portmanteau, which we can readily carry to the boat between us. Let's pack it now!"

This task was quickly executed.

"Of course there is some risk in leaving so many valuables about, with no one in the house," remarked Mrs. Moreland, "but I have requested the young man from Potter & Carpenter's to keep an eye on the place, and he expects to be here often to show the premises, so that there is no occasion to fret about anything we leave behind us. The distance is scarcely a hundred miles, and we ought to arrive at an early hour to-morrow. If we don't, we can go ashore at Bayside, or elsewhere. But we shall need extra wraps, as there will doubtless be quite a chill in the air between now and morning. Let's make a final tour of the house now, to see that all doors are locked, and all fastenings in their places."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

CHICAGO HERALD: In Massachusetts, where the abolition of the death penalty is under consideration, the case of Prendergast is being cited against the advocates of capital punishment. It is argued, with reason, that Mayor Harrison's murderer, if he had been sentenced to life imprisonment, would have been taken to the penitentiary without any more ado, and society would have been rid forever of a dangerous criminal; whereas, having been condemned to death, all sorts of influences have been set to work to save him, and he may go free altogether. It must be admitted that this line of argument is a strong one. Aside from the moral right of society to inflict the death penalty, it is pretty certain that capital punishment does not exercise much influence in preventing murders. A death sentence arouses all the maudlin sentiment in the community, and hysterical philanthropists work night and day to save the neck of the condemned man. A sentence of life imprisonment evokes no such sympathy, and in nineteen cases out of twenty the criminal accepts his fate, thankful that it is no worse. If capital sentences were always executed, the infliction of the death penalty would prove a powerful deterrent. As not one in ten is executed, however, it is a question whether it would not be better to do away with the system altogether and rely upon life imprisonment, which is pretty sure to be enforced in every case.

MUCH senseless prejudice has been aroused against a certain New York society which protects little children from cruelty, but some of the recent developments indicate that it is at least a blessing to some babies. It appears that when a poor mother is neglectful of her babe the fact is made public, but the society officers complain that their work among the rich is never made known. For instance, how many New-Yorkers heard of the case of a society woman who was in the habit of tying her babe to the chain which controlled her pug-dog, until the society put an end to the arrangement? Nor does anyone hear of the society's efforts to put an end to the traffic in various patented devices used by well-to-do mothers and which are designed to help a baby to jump or to walk. The devices are sold because too many mothers in New York are only too glad to get rid of their babies and yet will not pay for a competent nurse. One patented tool was meant to strap a baby in its bed and to prevent it from kicking the clothes off by binding the legs together. Another contrivance was meant to keep a baby's mouth open by force.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL evidence has added another to its long list of suffering victims. A prisoner serving a life sentence for the murder of a man some years ago is soon to be liberated because the man he was found guilty of murdering is alive and well and has only found out that he had been "murdered." Judges, juries, and witnesses should be more careful in sifting circumstantial evidence and less eager to give confessed murderers the benefit of legal technicalities.