

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen  
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman  
Darwin Thoreau Twain  
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte  
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse  
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke  
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving  
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# **Hushed Up! A Mystery of London**

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HUSHED UP!

*A MYSTERY OF LONDON*

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX



LONDON  
EVELEIGH NASH

1911

[Pg 4]



## HUSHED UP!

### PROLOGUE

#### I

## IS MAINLY SCANDALOUS

“And he died mysteriously?”

“The doctors certified that he died from natural causes—heart failure.”

“That is what the world believes, of course. His death was a nation’s loss, and the truth was hushed up. But you, Phil Poland, know it. Upon the floor was found something—a cigar—eh?”

“Nothing very extraordinary in that, surely? He died while smoking.”

“Yes,” said the bald-headed man, bending towards the other and lowering his voice into a harsh whisper. “He died while smoking a cigar—a cigar that had been poisoned! You know it well enough. What’s the use of trying to affect ignorance—*with me!*”

“Well?” asked Philip Poland after a brief pause, his brows knit darkly and his face drawn and pale.

“Well, I merely wish to recall that somewhat unpleasant fact, and to tell you that I know the [Pg 8] truth,” said the other with slow deliberation, his eyes fixed upon the man seated opposite him.

“Why recall unpleasant facts?” asked Poland, with a faint attempt to smile. “I never do.”

“A brief memory is always an advantage,” remarked Arnold Du Cane, with a sinister grin.

“Ah! I quite follow you,” Poland said, with a hardness of the mouth. “But I tell you, Arnold, I refuse to lend any hand in this

crooked bit of business you've just put before me. Let's talk of something else."

"Crooked business, indeed! Fancy you, Phil Poland, denouncing it as crooked!" he laughed. "And I'm a crook, I suppose," and he thoughtfully caressed his small moustache, which bore traces of having been artificially darkened.

"I didn't say so."

"But you implied it. Bah! You'll be teaching the Sunday School of this delightful English village of yours before long, I expect. No doubt the villagers believe the gentleman at the Elms to be a model of every virtue, especially when he wears a frock-coat and trots around with the plate in church on Sundays!" he sneered. "My hat! Fancy you, Phil, turning honest in your old age!"

"I admit that I'm trying to be honest, Arnold—for the girl's sake."

"And, by Jove! if the good people here, in Middleton, knew the truth, eh—the truth that you—"

"Hush! Somebody may overhear!" cried the [Pg 9] other, starting and glancing apprehensively at the closed door of his cosy study. "What's the use of discussing the business further? I've told you, once and for all, Arnold, that I refuse to be a party to any such dastardly transaction."

"Ho! ho!" laughed Du Cane. "Why, wasn't the Burke affair an equally blackguardly bit of business—the more so, indeed, when one recollects that young Ronald Burke had fallen in love with Sonia."

"Leave my girl's name out of our conversation, Arnold, or, by Gad! you shall pay for it!" cried the tall, dark-haired, clean-shaven man, as he sprang from his chair and faced his visitor threateningly. "Taunt me as much as ever it pleases you. Allege what you like against me. I know I'm an infernal blackguard, posing here as a smug and respectable churchgoer. I admit any charge you like to lay at my door, but I'll not have my girl's name associated with my misdeeds. Understand that! She's pure and honest, and she knows nothing of her father's life."

“Don’t you believe that, my dear fellow. She’s eighteen now, remember, and I fancy she had her eyes opened last February down at the Villa Vespa, when that unfortunate little trouble arose.”

Arnold Du Cane, the round-faced man who spoke, was rather short and stout, with ruddy cheeks, a small moustache and a prematurely bald head—a man whose countenance showed him to be a *bon vivant*, but whose quick, shifty eyes would have betrayed to a close observer a readiness of subterfuge which would have probably aroused suspicion. His exterior [Pg 10] was that of a highly refined and polished man. His grey tweed suit bore evidence of having been cut by a smart tailor, and as he lolled back in his big saddle-bag chair he contemplated the fine diamond upon his white, well-manicured hand, and seemed entirely at his ease.

That August afternoon was stiflingly hot, and through the open French windows leading into the old-world garden, so typically English with its level lawns, neatly trimmed box-hedges and blazing flowerbeds, came the drowsy hum of the insects and the sweet scent of a wealth of roses everywhere.

The pretty house in which his host, Philip Poland, alias Louis Lessar, lived, stood back a little distance from the London road, two miles or so out of the quiet market-town of Andover, a small picturesque old place surrounded by high old elms wherein the rooks cawed incessantly, and commanding extensive views over Harewood Forest and the undulating meadow-lands around, while close by, at the foot of the hill, nestled a cluster of homely thatched cottages, with a square church-tower, the obscure village of Middleton.

In that rural retreat lived the Honourable Philip Poland beneath a cloak of highest respectability. The Elms was, indeed, delightful after the glare and glitter of that fevered life he so often led, and here, with his only child, Sonia, to whom he was so entirely devoted, he lived as a gentleman of leisure.

Seldom he went to London, and hardly ever called [Pg 11] upon his neighbours. With Sonia he led a most retired existence, reading much, fishing a little, and taking long walks or cycling with his daughter and her fox-terrier, “Spot,” over all the country-side.

To the village he had been somewhat of a mystery ever since he had taken the house, three years before. Yet, being apparently comfortably off, subscribing to every charity, and a regular attendant at Middleton church, the simple country-folk had grown to tolerate him, even though he was somewhat of a recluse. Country-folk are very slow to accept the stranger at his own valuation.

Little did they dream that when he went away each winter he went with a mysterious purpose—that the source of his income was a mystery.

As he stood there, leaning against the roll-top writing-table of his prettily furnished little study and facing the man who had travelled half across Europe to see him, Phil Poland, with clean-shaven face and closely-cropped hair tinged with grey, presented the smart and dapper appearance of a typical British naval officer, as, indeed, he had been, for, prior to his downfall, he had been first lieutenant on board one of his Majesty's first-class cruisers. His had been a strangely adventurous career, his past being one that would not bear investigation.

In the smart, go-ahead set wherein he had moved when he was still in the Navy opinion regarding him had been divided. There were some who refused to believe the truth of the scandals circulated concerning [Pg 12] him, while others believed and quickly embellished the reports which ran through the service clubs and ward-rooms.

Once he had been one of the most popular officers afloat, yet to-day—well, he found it convenient to thus efface himself in rural Hampshire, and live alone with the sweet young girl who was all in all to him, and who was happy in her belief that her devoted father was a gentleman.

This girl with the blue eyes and hair of sunshine was the only link between Phil Poland and his past—that past when he held a brilliant record as a sailor and had been honoured and respected. He held her aloof from every one, being ever in deadly fear lest, by some chance word, she should learn the bitter truth—the truth concerning that despicable part which he had been compelled to play. Ah, yes, his was a bitter story indeed.

Before Sonia should know the truth he would take his own life. She was the only person remaining dear to him, the only one for whom he had a single thought or care, the only person left to him to respect and to love. Her influence upon him was always for good. For the past year he had been striving to cut himself adrift from evil, to reform, to hold back from participating in any dishonest action—for her dear sake. Her soft-spoken words so often caused him to hate himself and to bite his lip in regret, for surely she was as entirely ignorant of the hideous truth as Mr. Shuttleworth, the white-headed parson, or the rustic villagers themselves.

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Yes, Phil Poland's position was indeed a strange one.

What Du Cane had just suggested to him would, he saw, put at least twenty thousand pounds into the pockets of their ingenious combination, yet he had refused—refused because of the fair-headed girl he loved so well.

Within himself he had made a solemn vow to reform. Reformation would probably mean a six-roomed cottage with a maid-of-all-work, yet even that would be preferable to a continuance of the present mode of life.

Bitter memories had, of late, constantly arisen within him. Certain scenes of violence, even of tragedy, in that beautiful flower-embowered villa beside the Mediterranean at Beaulieu, half-way between Nice and Monte Carlo, had recurred vividly to him. He was unable to wipe those horrible visions from the tablets of his memory. He had realized, at last, what a pitiless blackguard he had been, so he had resolved to end it all.

And now, just as he had made up his mind, Arnold Du Cane had arrived unexpectedly from Milan with an entirely new and original scheme—one in which the risk of detection was infinitesimal, while the stakes were high enough to merit serious consideration.

He had refused to be a party to the transaction, whereupon Du Cane had revived a subject which he had fondly believed to be buried for ever—that terrible affair which had startled and mystified the [Pg 14] whole world, and which had had such an important

political bearing that, by it, the destinies of a great nation had actually been changed.

A certain man—a great man—had died, but until that hour Phil Poland's connection with the tragedy had never been suspected.

Yet, from what Arnold Du Cane had just said, he saw that the truth was actually known, and he realized that his own position was now one of distinct insecurity.

He was silent, full of wonder. How could Arnold have gained his knowledge? What did he know? How much did he know? The strength of his defiance must be gauged upon the extent of Arnold's knowledge.

He set his teeth hard. The scandal was one which must never see the light of day, he told himself. Upon the suppression of the true facts depended the honour and welfare of a nation.

Arnold Du Cane knew the truth. Of that, there could be no doubt. Did he intend to use this knowledge in order to secure his assistance in this latest dastardly scheme?

At last, after a long silence, Poland asked in as cool a voice as he could—

“What causes you to suspect that Sonia knows anything?”

“Well,” replied this crafty, round-faced visitor, “considering how that young Russian let out at you when you were walking with her that moonlight night out in the garden, I don't think there can be [Pg 15] much doubt that she is fully aware of the mysterious source of her father's income.”

“Sonia doesn't know Russian. The fellow spoke in that language, I remember,” was his reply. “Yet I was a fool, I know, to have taken her over that accursed place—that hell in paradise. She is always perfectly happy at the Hôtel de Luxembourg at Nice, where each season she makes some pleasant friends, and never suspects the reason of my absences.”

“All of us are fools at times, Phil,” was his visitor's response, as he selected a fresh cigar from the silver box upon the table and slowly lit it. “But,” he went on, “I do really think you are going too

far in expecting that you can conceal the truth from the girl much longer. She isn't a child, you must recollect."

"She must never know!" cried the unhappy man in a hoarse voice. "By Gad! she must never know of my shame, Arnold."

"Then go in with us in this new affair. It'll pay you well."

"No," he cried. "I—I feel that I can't! I couldn't face her, if she knew. Her mother was one of the best and purest women who ever lived, and — —"

"Of course, of course. I know all that, my dear fellow," cried the other hastily. "I know all the tragedy of your marriage—but that's years ago. Let the past bury itself, and have an eye to the main chance and the future. Just take my advice, Phil. [Pg 16] Drop all this humbug about your girl and her feelings if she learnt her father's real profession. She'll know it one day, that's certain. You surely aren't going to allow her to stand in your way and prevent you from participating in what is real good solid business—eh? You want money, you know."

"I've given my answer," was the man's brief response.

Then a silence fell between the pair of well-dressed cosmopolitans—a dead, painful silence, broken only by the low hum of the insects, the buzzing of a fly upon the window-pane, and the ticking of the old grandfather clock in the corner.

"Reflect," urged Du Cane at last, as he rose to his feet. Then, lowering his voice, he said in a hoarse whisper, "You may find yourself in a corner over that affair of young Burke. If so, it's only I and my friends who could prove an alibi. Remember that."

"And you offer that, in return for my assistance?" Poland said reflectively, hesitating for a moment and turning to the window.

His visitor nodded in the affirmative.

Next second the man to whom those terms had been offered quickly faced his friend. His countenance was haggard, blanched to the lips, for he had been quick to realize the full meaning of that covert threat.

"Arnold!" he said in a hoarse, strained voice, full of bitter reproach, "you may turn upon me, give me away to the police—tell them the truth—but my [Pg 17] decision remains the same. I will lend no hand in that affair."

"You are prepared to face arrest—eh?"

"If it is your will—yes."

"And your daughter?"

"That is my own affair."

"Very well, then. As you will," was the bald-headed man's response, as he put on his grey felt hat and, taking his stick, strode through the open French windows and disappeared.

Phil Poland stood rigid as a statue. The blow had fallen. His secret was out.

He sprang forward towards the garden, in order to recall his visitor. But next instant he drew himself back.

No. Now that the friend whom he had trusted had turned upon him, he would face the music rather than add another crime to his discredit and dishonour.

Philip Poland, alias Louis Lessar and half-a-score of other names, halted, and raised his pale, repentant face to Heaven for help and guidance.

[Pg 18]

## II

### CONCERNS TWO STRANGERS

That night Phil Poland glanced longingly around the well-furnished dining-room with its white napery, its antique plate, and its great bowl of yellow roses in the centre of the table between the silver candelabra with white silk shades. Alone he sat at his dinner, being waited upon by Felix, the thin-faced, silent Frenchman in

black who was so devoted to his master and so faithful in his service.

It was the last time he would eat his dinner there, he reflected. The choice of two things lay before him – flight, or arrest.

Sonia was on a visit to an old school-fellow in London, and would not return until the morrow. For some reasons he was glad, for he desired to be alone – alone in order to think.

Since the abrupt departure of his visitor he had become a changed man. His usually merry face was hard and drawn, his cheeks pale, with red spots in the centre, and about his clean-shaven mouth a hardness quite unusual.

Dinner concluded, he had strolled out upon the lawn, and, reclining in a long deck-chair, sipped his coffee and curaçao, his face turned to the crimson sundown showing across the dark edge of the forest. He was full of dark forebodings.

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The end of his career – a scandalous career – was near. The truth was out!

As he lay back with his hot, fevered head upon the cushion of the long cane chair, his dead cigar between his nerveless fingers, a thousand bitter thoughts crowded upon him. He had striven to reform, he had tried hard to turn aside and lead an honest life, yet it seemed as though his good intentions had only brought upon him exposure and disaster.

He thought it all over. His had, indeed, been an amazing career of duplicity. What a sensation would be caused when the truth became revealed! At first he had heaped opprobrium upon the head of the man who had been his friend, but now, on mature consideration, he realized that Du Cane's motive in exposing him was twofold – in order to save himself, and also to curry favour in certain high quarters affected by the mysterious death of the young Parliamentary Under-Secretary who had placed to his lips that fatal cigar. Self-preservation being the first instinct of the human race, it surely was not surprising that Arnold Du Cane should seek to place himself in a position of security.

Enormous eventualities would be consequent upon solving the mystery of that man's death. Medical science had pronounced it to have been due to natural causes. Dare the authorities re-open the question, and allege assassination? Aye, that was the question. There was the press, political parties and public opinion all to consider, in addition to the national prestige.

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He held his breath, gazing blankly away at the blood-red after-glow. How strange, how complicated, how utterly amazing and astounding was it all. If the truth of that dastardly plot were ever told, it would not be believed. The depths of human wickedness were surely unfathomable.

Because he, Phil Poland, had endeavoured to cut himself adrift from his ingenious friends, they were about to make him the scape-goat.

He contemplated flight, but, if he fled, whither should he go? Where could he hide successfully? Those who desired that he should pay the penalty would search every corner of the earth. No. Death itself would be preferable to either arrest or flight, and as he contemplated how he might cheat his enemies a bitter smile played upon his grey lips.

The crimson light slowly faded. The balmy stillness of twilight had settled upon everything, the soft evening air became filled with the sweet fragrance of the flowers, and the birds were chattering before roosting. He glanced across the lawns and well-kept walks at the rose-embowered house itself, his harbour of refuge, the cosy place which Sonia loved so well, and as his eyes wandered he sighed sadly. He knew, alas! that he must bid farewell to it for ever, bid farewell to his dear daughter – bid farewell to life itself.

He drew at his dead cigar. Then he cast it from him. It tasted bitter.

Suddenly the grave-faced Felix, the man who seldom, if ever, spoke, and who was such a mystery [Pg 21] in the village, came across the lawn, and, bowing, exclaimed in French that the curé, M'sieur Shuttleworth, had called.

"Ah! yes," exclaimed his master, quickly arousing himself. "How very foolish of me! I quite forgot I had invited Mr. Shuttleworth to come in and smoke to-night. Ask him to come out here, and bring the cigars and whisky."

"Oui, M'sieur," replied the funereal-looking butler, bowing low as he turned to go back to the house.

"How strange!" laughed Poland to himself. "What would the parson think if he knew who I am, and the charge against me? What will he say afterwards, I wonder?"

Then, a few moments later, a thin, grey-faced, rather ascetic-looking clergyman, the Reverend Edmund Shuttleworth, rector of Middleton, came across the grass and grasped his host's hand in warmest greeting.

When he had seated himself in the low chair which Poland pulled forward, and Felix had handed the cigars, the two men commenced to gossip, as was their habit.

Phil Poland liked the rector, because he had discovered that, notwithstanding his rather prim exterior and most approved clerical drawl, he was nevertheless a man of the world. In the pulpit he preached forgiveness, and, unlike many country rectors and their wives, was broad-minded enough to admit the impossibility of a sinless life. Both he and Mrs. Shuttleworth [Pg 22] treated both chapel and church-going folk with equal kindness, and the deserving poor never went empty away.

Both in the pulpit and out of it the rector of Middleton called a spade a spade with purely British bluntness, and though his parish was only a small one he was the most popular man in it—a fact which surely spoke volumes for a parson.

"I was much afraid I shouldn't be able to come to-night," he said presently. "Old Mrs. Dixon, over at Forest Farm, is very ill, and I've been with her all the afternoon."

"Then you didn't go to Lady Medland's garden-party?"

"No. I wanted to go very much, but was unable. I fear poor old Mrs. Dixon may not last the night. She asked after Miss Sonia, and

expressed a great wish to see her. You have no idea how popular your daughter is among the poor of Middleton, Mr. Poland."

"Sonia returns from London to-morrow afternoon," her father said. "She shall go over and see Mrs. Dixon."

"If the old lady is still here," said the rector. "I fear her life is fast ebbing, but it is reassuring to know she has made peace with her Maker, and will pass happily away into the unknown beyond."

His host was silent. The bent old woman, the wife of a farm-labourer, had made repentance. If there was repentance for her, was there not repentance for him? He held his breath at the thought.

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Little did Shuttleworth dream that the merry, easy-going man who sat before him was doomed—a man whose tortured soul was crying aloud for help and guidance; a man with a dread and terrible secret upon his conscience; a man threatened by an exposure which he could never live to face.

Poland allowed his visitor to chatter on—to gossip about the work in his parish. He was reviewing his present position. He desired some one in whom he could confide; some one of whom he might seek advice and counsel. Could he expose his real self in all his naked shame; dare he speak in confidence to Edmund Shuttleworth? Dare he reveal the ghastly truth, and place the seal of the confessional upon his lips?

Twilight deepened into night, and the crescent moon rose slowly. Yet the two men still sat smoking and chatting, Shuttleworth somewhat surprised to notice how unusually preoccupied his host appeared.

At last, when the night wind blew chill, they rose and passed into the study, where Poland closed the French windows, and then, with sudden resolve and a word of apology to his visitor, he crossed the room and turned the key in the lock, saying in a hard, strained tone—

"Shuttleworth, I—I want to speak to you in—in strictest confidence—to ask your advice. Yet—yet it is upon such a serious matter that I hesitate—fearing—"

"Fearing what?" asked the rector, somewhat surprised at his tone.

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"Because, in order to speak, I must reveal to you a truth—a shameful truth concerning myself. May I rely upon your secrecy?"

"Any fact you may reveal to me I shall regard as sacred. That is my duty as a minister of religion, Poland," was the other's quiet reply.

"You swear to say nothing?" cried his host eagerly, standing before him.

"Yes. I swear to regard your confidence," replied his visitor.

And then the Honourable Philip Poland slowly sank into the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, and in brief, hesitating sentences related one of the strangest stories that ever fell from any sane man's lips—a story which held its hearer aghast, transfixed, speechless in amazement.

"There is repentance for me, Shuttleworth—tell me that there is!" cried the man who had confessed, his eyes staring and haggard in his agony. "I have told you the truth because—because when I am gone I want you, if you will, to ask your wife to take care of my darling Sonia. Financially, she is well provided for. I have seen to all that, but—ah!" he cried wildly, "she must never know that her father was —"

"Hush, Poland!" urged the rector, placing his hand tenderly upon his host's arm. "Though I wear these clothes, I am still a man of the world like yourself. I haven't been sinless. You wish to repent—to atone for the past. It is my duty to assist you." And he put out his strong hand frankly.

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His host drew back. But next instant he grasped it, and in doing so burst into tears.

"I make no excuse for myself," he faltered. "I am a blackguard, and unworthy the friendship of a true honest man like yourself, Shuttleworth. But I love my darling child. She is all that has re-

mained to me, and I want to leave her in the care of a good woman. She must forget me—forget what her father was— —”

“Enough!” cried the other, holding up his hand; and then, until far into the night, the two men sat talking in low, solemn tones, discussing the future, while the attitude of Philip Poland, as he sat pale and motionless, his hands clasped upon his knees, was one of deep repentance.

That same night, if the repentant transgressor could but have seen Edmund Shuttleworth, an hour later, pacing the rectory study; if he could have witnessed the expression of fierce, murderous hatred upon that usually calm and kindly countenance; if he could have overheard the strangely bitter words which escaped the dry lips of the man in whom he had confided his secret, he would have been held aghast—aghast at the amazing truth, a truth of which he had never dreamed.

His confession had produced a complication unheard of, undreamed of, so cleverly had the rector kept his countenance and controlled his voice. But when alone he gave full vent to his anger, and laughed aloud in the contemplation of a terrible vengeance which, he declared aloud to himself, should be his.

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“That voice!” he cried in triumph. “Why did I not recognize it before? But I know the truth now—I know the amazing truth!”

And he laughed harshly to himself as he paced his room.

Next day Philip Poland spent in his garden, reading beneath the big yew, as was his wont. But his thoughts ever wandered from his book, as he grew apprehensive of the evil his enemy was about to hurl upon him. His defiance, he knew, must cost him his liberty—his life. Yet he was determined. For Sonia’s sake he had become a changed man.

At noon Shuttleworth, calm and pleasant, came across the lawn with outstretched hand. He uttered low words of encouragement and comfort. He said that poor Mrs. Dixon had passed away, and later on he left to attend to his work in the parish. After luncheon, served by the silent Felix, Poland retired to his study with the