



AILEEN
ARMITAGE

*The Radley Curse
and Mallory Keep*

**THE
RADLEY CURSE**

Aileen Armitage

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Chapter 1

The master was coming downstairs. Fern Saxby, like all the other occupants of this imposing London villa in Elton Square, held her breath and hoped that the master's Monday morning humor, usually indicative of his mood for the whole week, would be sunny, for the weather decidedly was not. She ushered the two Hastings children hurriedly before her into the parlor to be ready to greet their papa and mamma.

"Now, remember, children, greet your papa first, and then your mamma. As soon as they enter, mind, don't wait until I have to nudge you," Fern advised them gently. A quick glance around the room reassured her that all was as it should be; though the grandfather clock in the vestibule was only now chiming eight, the parlor had hours ago been swept and dusted and the fire lit. No trace of skimped effort or sloth could be detected in the gleaming fire brasses by the fender to arouse Mr. Hastings' swiftly awakened disapproval.

Heavy footsteps approached the door. Fern ran her hands quickly over her smoothly coiled fair hair, then clasped them dutifully before her as the door swung open and Mr.

Hastings, his pallid wife on his arm, entered slowly and majestically. Lydia Hastings smiled timorously at her children and then glanced nervously at her husband. He, tall, graying, and imposing, stood glaring at his offspring expectantly.

"Good morning, Papa. Good morning, Mamma," two stifled voices breathed in unison.

Mr. Hastings nodded. "Good morning, children. Good morning, Miss Saxby."

He expected no reply from her, Fern knew, and from habit bred of the last two years' experience she walked across to the bell, anticipating the master's next command. Never on any one morning, except the week he had once been confined to bed with influenza, had the ritual of morning prayers in the Hastings household varied.

"Summon the staff to prayers," came the order as Mr. Hastings took his seat at the head of the chenille-covered table. Opening the great family Bible, he began to select the text for the day. Almost as soon as Fern released the bell rope the door opened and the servants shuffled in at the far end of the parlor. Under the vigilant eye of Bunting, the butler, they had all been awaiting the summons just beyond the green-baize door that marked the boundary between house and servants' domain.

Heads bowed now, they all stood respectfully before the master and mistress, the one inspecting their caps and uniforms critically before beginning to pray, the other surreptitiously smiling at her offspring while her husband's attention was diverted. Fern stood behind her little charges, midway between the seated Hastingses and the standing servants, as befitted her anomalous position as governess. A strange creature is a governess, she thought for the thousandth time, neither gentry nor common folk, but a curious hybrid, left to fend alone, vulnerable and friendless, in the no-man's-land that yawned between them. Mrs. Hastings, despite her undoubted warmth, dared not befriend a governess, however lonely she herself might feel. Nor dared Hetty and Rosa and Clara, the kitchen and parlor maids, for venturing to presume friendship with one above their own station would undoubtedly bring a

sharp reproof from the butler. Bunting knew well the boundaries of class, and firmly instilled the knowledge of these unalterable limits into the minds of his staff.

So I'm trapped, thought Fern as she stared directly ahead at the William Morris wallpaper and dimly heard Mr. Hastings' ponderous voice droning in prayer. Like the pimpernel entwined in the inexorable intricacy of the fronds on that wallpaper, I am trapped in this mesh of class boundary. If only Papa and Mamma were alive; if only we were all still comfortably wealthy and free.

Sighing, she turned her attention to Mr. Hastings' words. He was reading from Ecclesiastes, giving full emphasis to every word, conscious of his captive audience and of the resonance of his voice. From the corner of her eye Fern saw Hetty fidgeting restlessly.

"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity," intoned Mr. Hastings, pausing to lower his pince-nez a half-inch down his nose, the better to survey the effect of his words on his hearers. "What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away and another generation cometh."

Fern permitted herself a covert glimpse of the maids. Hetty, up before six to clear and relay the grates, was already trying to hide a yawn. Was she too speculating as to the uselessness of her labor? Fern wondered, for the grate would be dirty again tomorrow morning, and the next, and the next, and still even when the next generation came.

"All things are full of labor," Mr. Hastings pontificated. "Man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be, and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun."

The staff shuffled to their knees for the Lord's Prayer while Mr. Hastings assisted his wife to kneel as gracefully as her rheumatically stricken joints would permit. This London fog and damp, thought Fern. No doubt, as Mr. Hastings' business grew more lucrative day by day, he would eventually consider sending his wife abroad to a spa or to a sunnier climate. It

was possible, even though he seemed to spare little thought for the comfort of others, even for his patient, uncomplaining wife. Matthew Hastings' vision seemed to be bounded by his own comfort and seeing to the continuing prosperity of his business. Little else existed in his world, save the fluctuations of national and international affairs, and only then insofar as they might affect trade.

Fern's musings were interrupted by the rustle of skirts and shuffling of feet as the company rose from its knees. Mr. Hastings closed the Bible and put down his pince-nez.

"And now, to your duties," he commanded his flock. Mrs. Paddock, the cook-housekeeper, led the servants out, all save Bunting, who stood at attention awaiting the customary order. "Order breakfast to be served, Bunting, and bring me the morning post."

"Very good, sir." Fern stood hesitantly, a hand on the shoulder of each child, awaiting Mr. Hastings' decision as to whether he would allow his son and daughter to remain in the parlor for breakfast or dismiss them to the day nursery to eat with their governess.

Mrs. Hastings, noticing his air of abstraction, ventured to resolve the dilemma. "Shall the children return upstairs, my dear, or would you prefer them to remain?" she asked timidly.

"They must remain, of course, to hear our decision. Very well, Miss Saxby, you may go."

As Fern made to withdraw, Rosa, the housemaid, entered bearing a large tray laden with a tureen of porridge and a platter of scrambled eggs and kidneys. It was a relief to Fern to quit the pretentious parlor with its gloomy oil paintings and its ponderous, ornately carved furniture. Fern felt sorry for Lydia Hastings, trapped in that claustrophobic room with her domineering husband, unable to escape the pattern which marriage dictated, the undeviating pattern of husband, lord and master of his universe, while his wife was no more than his servant, trained always to listen and obey. Poor Mrs. Hastings, her lot is no better than mine, thought Fern, and

possibly even worse. Marriage seems a deadly, stifling affair for a woman, for she gains nothing from it but her children.

Fern breakfasted alone in the nursery, her meal being served, not by Rosa, second in importance only to Mrs. Paddock, the cook, but by Clara, whose humbler position as kitchen maid would not be offended by having to serve a mere governess. Clara grinned as she set down the dishes.

"So you can eat in peace this morning, eh, miss? Miss Sarah and Master Robert been allowed downstairs for once."

Fern smiled. It was true, the children were rarely allowed to disturb Mr. Hastings' morning reading of the *Times* over breakfast. Though they were not permitted to speak at table, Mr. Hastings found their foot shuffling annoying and their manners distasteful, declaring it ruined his digestion. Today there must be something special he wished to impart to them if he was prepared to suffer their presence. Idly Fern wondered what it could be.

When the breakfast dishes were cleared away, Fern took out the schoolbooks from the bottom of the cupboard and laid them on the table. The grandfather clock was chiming nine. If Mr. Hastings had finished with the children, it was time for their lessons. Fern descended the stairs and knocked at the parlor door.

"Enter," Mr. Hastings commanded. He was relaxing in an overstuffed armchair while his wife and children still sat at the dining table, their white faces and tight expressions indicating that Mr. Hastings' news had not been pleasant.

Before Fern could speak, he rose from his chair. "Ah, Miss Saxby, the mistress would like to speak to you. Please be seated," he said, indicating a straight chair by the window. "And, children, return to the nursery. Miss Saxby will join you shortly." The children, rising obediently, shuffled quickly and silently out of the room.

Fern dutifully sat down, smoothing the skirt of her dark merino dress and folding her hands in her lap. Mr. Hastings went to follow his children, but paused in the doorway and glanced at the letters in his hand. "Oh, by the way, Miss Saxby, there is a letter for you among my mail this morning."

he commented in tones of surprise. He held the intrusive letter toward her. Fern started in surprise. Who could possibly have written to her? She, with no friends and not a relative in the world. Never before in her life had she received a letter, save those that used to come at regular intervals from her parents in India, but that was long ago, before Afghan bullets had claimed their lives.

Even Mrs. Hastings' puffy face registered alarmed surprise at a governess's letter finding its furtive way into the master's correspondence. Fern took the letter from Mr. Hastings' outstretched fingertips and thanked him quietly. A quick glance at the neat, spidery handwriting on the envelope revealed no clue as to the sender, for it was completely strange to her.

Mr. Hastings cleared his throat noisily. "Now, remember, my dear," he addressed his wife, "tell Miss Saxby what has been decided and make arrangements accordingly. I wish everything to be clear-cut and orderly, as in business. No shilly-shallying or compromise, as is your wont, you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Hastings, indeed," murmured Lydia unhappily. Fern felt sorry for the woman. Whatever unpleasantness Mr. Hastings had to communicate to his children's governess, he was deputing the task to his weary little wife to perform, and it was evident that Mrs. Hastings did not relish the prospect. A reprimand perhaps, thought Fern, some mistake or oversight on my part which has displeased him. As the master departed, closing the door sharply behind him, Fern forgot the letter on her lap and waited for Mrs. Hastings to begin.

The mistress's eyes shone unnaturally bright, Fern noted, as she sat twisting her fingers nervously in the folds of her skirt. As though she were feverish, or her eyes held unshed tears. As a good servant should, Fern sat in silence and waited to be addressed. At length Mrs. Hastings rose and crossed to the window, looking out at the square outside over Fern's shoulder.

"I . . . I really don't know where to begin, Miss Saxby," she stammered without looking down at her. "I don't, and that's the truth of it."

"Perhaps you could tell me what decision the master has taken, madam," Fern prompted.

The other woman's voice quivered yet more as she answered. "He . . . he has decided to send Sarah and Robert away to school."

It was a bald statement, terse and to the point, yet Fern's sympathy rose at once for Mrs. Hastings, for the fact she had just revealed meant far more to the wretched woman. Her children, the only joy of her life, were to be wrenched from her. Fern's dislike for Mr. Hastings grew more intense as she realized his unfeeling callousness toward his wife.

"Both of them?" she queried, aghast. "But Miss Sarah is only seven."

"I know. But Mr. Hastings feels that since Robert is now old enough to go to boarding school, it might be wise to send Sarah away as well. He feels they are not developing as they should. . . . Oh, not on your account, Miss Saxby, please don't misunderstand me. Mr. Hastings has said no word against you."

Her tear-filled eyes turned full on Fern now, anxious not to hurt. "It is not your fault at all, but mine, I fear. My husband feels that I indulge them overmuch and that they would be better removed from my influence."

Her voice caught on a sob as she spoke. Fern had to resist the urge to rise and comfort the woman, which would have betokened criticism of her master. Instead she tried to divert Mrs. Hastings from her misery.

"So I understand you will soon have no further need of my services, madam. Is that what the master wished you to inform me? Do not worry unduly on that account, for I am sure I shall be able to find another position soon."

Mrs. Hastings gripped Fern's hands between her own. "Oh, my dear, I would not lose you for the world if I could keep you here, but there is nothing I can do. I shall give you an excellent reference, of course, but . . ." Her voice trailed away in anguish. Making a firm effort to regain her self-control, she turned sharply away. "I shall do what I can, of course. No doubt Mr. Hastings will permit me to recommend your ser-

VICES to others of our acquaintance who may be in need of a governess. We do entertain on occasion, as you know, and if the opportunity arises, I shall speak of you. . . .”

On occasion, thought Fern sadly, Mr. Hastings had long ago despaired of his wife as a hostess, and although Mrs. Paddock could be relied upon to provide a substantially appetizing if not inspired meal for his guests, his wife's social inadequacies left much to be desired. He could impress his business acquaintances far better over a meal in town.

“Well, now”—Mrs. Hastings wiped her eyes hastily—“I must begin the arrangements. The master wants me to order new clothes for the children, so if you would see that they are dressed in their street clothes, Miss Saxby, I shall take them to the dressmaker this morning.”

“Very well, Mrs. Hastings. Shall they have their lessons this afternoon instead?”

“Oh . . . er . . . no, I think not. Mr. Hastings has not said what he wishes done then. Best leave lessons today. You may have the day off.”

“Thank you, madam.” Taking Mrs. Hastings' words as a dismissal, Fern rose and left the room, thrusting the letter into her pocket. Mounting the steep, balustraded staircase to the nursery, she found two disconsolate children sitting at the nursery table, their books unopened and their faces vacant. Poor little things, thought Fern, never the brightest or most rewarding of pupils, but amiable and anxious to please nonetheless, like their mother.

“Come, children, no lessons today,” she said brightly, sweeping the books away from in front of them. “Your mamma is to take you to the dressmaker's instead, to buy you new clothes. Aren't you lucky?”

Robert looked up mournfully. “New clothes for school,” he commented in a lackluster voice. “I don't want to go away to school, nor does Sarah.”

Sarah's little white face stared beseechingly at Fern. “No, we'd rather stay here with Mamma . . . and Papa,” she added quickly. “Please ask Papa if we can stay, Miss Saxby.” The

little voice was so plaintive that Fern could have hugged the child, but instead she spoke cheerfully.

"But you haven't really thought about it, Sarah. Just think, lots of playmates every day and all day. You haven't anyone to play with here, save Robert. Now you'll have lots of little girls your own age, and Robert will have boys of his age. You should be glad your father is so concerned for you. Come now, let me help you button on your boots while Robert fetches his coat."

She watched the two dispirited figures leave the house with their mother before returning to her room. A cheerless, sparsely furnished room, in strong contrast to the heavily overfurnished parlor, it was nevertheless a more congenial lodging than those the servants shared in the attic. On the second floor, far removed from the main bedrooms, it was yet close to the children's rooms and heated by a small coal fire in the hearth.

Fern seated herself on the edge of the bed and reflected. So, events would seem to decree yet another upheaval in her life. Soon she would be forced to leave this secure if monotonous existence, and what then? Two years ago had seen the first upheaval, when her father and mother had died suddenly and she had been obliged to leave her pleasant life at Miss Danby's Academy for Young Ladies in order to earn a living. She had coped then, so why not now? After all, at twenty-two she was no longer the immature miss she had been once, cosseted and indulged. Now she was both abler and wiser in the ways of the world. She would manage. Something would turn up. An advertisement in the columns of the *Times*, perhaps. That might produce a suitable position.

Suddenly Fern remembered the unexpected letter that remained still unopened in her pocket. She withdrew it curiously.

The letterhead indicated it was from Nathaniel Lennox, a solicitor in London. That was clear enough, but the text of the letter was puzzling: "If you would be so kind as to call at my office as soon as it is convenient to your good self, you will

hear of a matter which may be greatly to your advantage." What matter? How could it be of advantage? puzzled Fern.

It was not far from Elton Square to the solicitor's office, and as Fern threaded her way through the streets, among fashionably dressed ladies and their frock-coated escorts mingling with the shabby poor who scraped a living selling matches or flowers and blacking boots, she wondered about the letter. Could it be a legacy of some kind? Fifty pounds would be extremely welcome just now, but who could possibly have named her in a will, since she had no living relative in the world? But if it were not a legacy, why should a solicitor speak of a matter "to her advantage"? It really was most perplexing.

Mr. Nathaniel Lennox sat smiling benignly behind his wide oak desk, his chins dimpling above his constricting high stock and his fingertips arched together as he surveyed his young visitor. The ordered regularity of his chambers with their bookshelves lined with huge legal tomes lurched suddenly into confusion to Fern's disordered mind, for his words were senseless, crazy, and fantastic beyond all imagination.

"What is that you are telling me, Mr. Lennox?" she ventured at last, her breath seeming to catch helplessly in her throat. "I cannot fully follow . . ."

"Yes, I admit it is a trifle overwhelming, but it is the truth, Miss Saxby. There is no mistake. Mr. Thomas de Lacy, deceased, has bequeathed to you his estate in Yorkshire—subject to certain conditions, as I mentioned."

"But . . . but I have never heard of this Mr. de Lacy! There must be some mistake!"

"None whatever, I assure you. I have checked most carefully. Though no blood relation of yours, Mr. de Lacy was nonetheless distantly related to you, and anxious to redeem what he considered to be an oversight in the past."

"An estate," murmured Fern, still too dazed to comprehend. "A sum of money, do you mean?"

"Money, as well as a mansion, a mill and several farms that have quite a sizable acreage." He drew a sheaf of papers

toward him. "Would you like to know the precise figures at valuation of the mansion, the mill and the farmlands?"

"No, no. Let me think a little, Mr. Lennox. First, are you *certain* I am the person Mr. de Lacy intended to inherit? It seems so unlikely, as I have no relatives."

"I am certain, be sure of that, young lady. But the matter is a little more complicated. There is also another legatee to share the estate—a Mr. Bruno de Lacy, who again is distantly related to you."

A relative! A living relative—it seemed too good to be true. Fern's hitherto blank face broke into a smile. "Do explain to me, Mr. Lennox, I beg of you. How do these gentlemen come to be related to me?"

"It is a long story, dating from some seventy years ago, but I'll do my best," the old gentleman replied, drawing a blank sheet of paper toward him and dipping his pen in the inkstand. "At the turn of the century, or soon after, there was a Dorian de Lacy at Brackenroyd Hall, the only son and heir. He was to have married a young lady named Annot Radley."

"Radley? That was my mother's name!" Fern interrupted unthinkingly. "But I always understood her to say she had no kin. She did say her family had come from Yorkshire, but she rarely spoke of them."

"Well, Annot Radley bore Dorian de Lacy a son—your maternal grandfather. But she never married Dorian. She died suddenly," Mr. Lennox continued. "He later married a Sarah Ramsden, and it was his son and Sarah's, Thomas de Lacy, who bequeathed Brackenroyd Hall jointly to you and his grandson, Bruno."

"But why?" questioned Fern. "I do not understand."

Mr. Lennox shrugged. "I know it seems odd, for your claim through an illegitimate line would seem thin, but you did not know old Thomas. He was a very Christian gentleman, extremely conscientious and scrupulous, and it troubled him that had his father married Annot, then his elder half-brother would have inherited, and not he. Having lost sight of his half-brother, he resolved to reinstate his descendants if he could trace them. It took time, but I traced you. Thomas'

own son, George, being dead, his grandson, Bruno, inherits, along with you."

Mr. Lennox pushed across to Fern the sheet of paper on which he had been writing. She saw that he had written two neat columns, each one representing the line of descent from Dorian de Lacy.

Annot Radley	=	Dorian	=	Sarah Ramsden
William Radley				Thomas de Lacy
Sophie Radley				George de Lacy
Fern Saxby				Bruno de Lacy

"I see," murmured Fern; then, pointing to the last name on the list, "And this Mr. de Lacy—Mr. Bruno de Lacy—we share a common great-grandfather in Dorian de Lacy. Does he know of me and of the terms of the bequest?"

"Oh, yes, and is quite content with the arrangement, for the inheritance is a substantial one." He beamed encouragingly at Fern. "Well, now, young lady, does the prospect appeal to you, of becoming an heiress and living high on the Yorkshire moors?"

Fern bit her lip dubiously. "To be quite honest, Mr. Lennox, I find it difficult to believe it is true. But if it is, it could hardly have occurred at a happier moment." On seeing Mr. Lennox's bushy eyebrows arch in question, Fern went on to explain. "It's a blessing, and that's a fact. You see, I find I am obliged to leave my present post and had no idea where to turn next to find work. Because money with which to live is vital."

"Indeed it is, my dear. Well, now, your problems would seem to be solved."

"It would be such a relief to leave the . . . restrictions of the household where I live. Oh, just to think of it! Breathing pure fresh air on the moors! Does the house have gardens, Mr. Lennox? Orchards, a lake perhaps?" Fern's eyes grew bright and enthusiastic as she reviewed the potentialities of this unlooked-for future.

"I have never actually seen Brackenroyd Hall, I'm afraid.

Mr. Thomas used always to come to London to transact his affairs with me. But I believe it is a fine house with all you mention in its grounds. On the edge of Brackenroyd village, I believe, not far from the river, with the moors above."

It sounded wonderful. But what of the other legatee, the grandson Bruno? Would he too wish to live in the Hall, or dispose of it and share the proceeds? she wondered. Pointing to his name on the list again, she inquired of Mr. Lennox if he knew the gentleman.

"Not personally, I regret, though no doubt the omission will be rectified in time. A fine, upstanding young man by all accounts, some ten years older than you, at a guess. He's a doctor, you know, and already earning himself quite a reputation in his field."

Mr. Lennox paused, toying with the pen between his fingertips. "But there is more to be discussed, Miss Saxby," he said tentatively, and Fern sensed that he found it difficult to pick his words with care. "As I mentioned before, there are certain conditions attached to the legacy, and these must be met before you can complete your claim."

Ah, yes, the conditions. Having held out a promise of heaven to her, what stumbling block was he now going to produce to make the vision fade? She felt a prick of anger and dismay at the thought of losing Brackenroyd Hall. She would not be cheated of it lightly.

"What are the conditions, Mr. Lennox?" she asked levelly.

"First, that on obtaining the Hall you do not sell it again, at least for five years after your marriage."

"Marriage? That is highly unlikely, Mr. Lennox. I have seen marriage at close quarters, and do not like what I see. It destroys the soul."

"Really?" The lawyer's bushy eyebrows arched again. "You surprise me, my dear young lady. Such a cynical view for one so young. I cannot say I have found marriage to be so destructive."

No, possibly not, she reflected, you have such a warm and kindly face. You, perhaps, would not sap a woman's happiness. You would not tear her beloved children from her.

Mrs. Lennox is a far more fortunate creature than Mrs. Hastings.

Mr. Lennox was studying her closely. "Are you quite determined against marriage, Miss Saxby?"

Fern looked up, puzzled. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I come to the other condition of Mr. Thomas de Lacy's will. In order to inherit and share Brackenroyd Hall equally with Dr. Bruno de Lacy, it is conditional that you and he must marry each other."

Fern sat aghast. Marry—and a man she had never even met? It was unthinkable! Ridiculous! The old man must have been crazed when he dictated his will. Mr. Lennox, watching the reactions on her face, seemed to follow the drift of her thoughts.

"It was a sensible enough solution on Mr. Thomas' part, my dear, if he wished to ensure that both legitimate and illegitimate lines of the family were secure. This way, your claim is valid and no one could ever contest it. I know the idea appalls you, as it would any sensitive young lady, but if you would like to go home and think about it for a few days, I believe the logic of the arrangement will become clear to you. Think it over, my dear, and let me know when you have decided."

Too numb to answer, Fern sat stiffly, clutching her gloves nervously.

Mr. Lennox murmured more persuasive words. "Just think of it, a fine young man, of very presentable appearance, with excellent manners and taste, I am told, and a respected doctor besides. A marriage partner many young society ladies would no doubt find highly desirable, I'll be bound."

A good catch for a governess, thought Fern, a chance I shouldn't sneer at—that's what he means. But the inheritance meant more than that. It meant escape from frustration and claustrophobia, escape from London's filth and poverty and drudgery, freedom to breathe and be one's own mistress. Was marriage to a stranger too high a price to pay for such bliss?

Impulsively Fern rose, stretching out her hand to the lawyer. "I thank you for your courtesy and interest, Mr. Lennox. I would not wish to take up yet more of your valuable time,