

**THE
BECKONING HAND:**

Lucretia

**By
Grant Allen**

1887

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LUCRETIA.

I will acknowledge that I was certainly a very young man in the year '67; indeed, I was only just turned of twenty, and was inordinately proud of a slight downy fringe on my upper lip, which I was pleased to speak of as my moustache. Still, I was a sturdy young fellow enough, in spite of my consumptive tendencies, and not given to groundless fears in a general way; but I must allow that I was decidedly frightened by my adventure in the Richmond Hotel on the Christmas Eve of that aforesaid year of grace. It may be a foolish reminiscence, yet I dare say you won't mind listening to it.

When I say the Richmond Hotel, you must not understand me to speak of the Star and Garter in the town of that ilk situated in the county of Surrey, England. The Richmond where I passed my uncomfortable Christmas Eve stands on the banks of the pretty St. Francis River in Lower Canada. I had gone out to the colony in the autumn of that year, to look after a small property of my mother's near Kamouraska; and I originally intended to spend the winter in Quebec. But as November and December wore away, and the snow grew deeper and deeper upon the plains of Abraham, I became gradually aware that a Canadian winter was not the best adapted tonic in the world for a hearty young man with a slight hereditary predisposition to consumption. I had seen enough of Arctic life in Quebec during those two initial months to give me a good idea of its pleasures and its drawbacks. I had steered by toboggan down the ice-cone at the Falls of Montmorenci; I had driven a sleigh, *tête-à-tête* with a French Canadian belle, to a surprise picnic in a house at Sainte Anne; I had skated, snow-shoed, and curled to my heart's content; and I had caught my death of cold on the frozen St. Lawrence, not to mention such minor misfortunes as getting my nose, ears, and feet frostbitten during a driving party up the banks of the Chaudière. So a few days before Christmas, I determined to strike south. I would go for a tour through Virginia and the Carolinas, to escape the cold weather, waiting for the return of the summer sun to catch a glimpse of Niagara and the great lakes.

For this purpose I must first go to Montreal; and, that being the case, what could be more convenient than to spend Christmas Day itself with the rector at Richmond, to whom I had letters of introduction, his wife being in fact a first cousin of my mother's? Richmond lies half-way on the Grand Trunk line between Quebec and Montreal, and it would be more pleasant, by breaking my journey there, to eat my turkey and plum-pudding in a friend's family than in that somewhat cheerless hotel, the Dominion Hall. So off I started from the Point Levy station, at four o'clock on the twenty-fourth of December, hoping to arrive at my journey's end about one o'clock on Christmas morning.

Now, those were the days, just after the great American civil war, when gold was almost unknown either in the States or Canada, and everybody used greasy dollar notes of uncertain and purely local value. Hence I was compelled to take the money for expenses on my projected tour in the only form of specie which was available, that of solid silver. A hundred and fifty pounds in silver dollars amounts to a larger bulk and a heavier weight than you would suppose; and I thought it safer to carry the sum in my own hands, loosely bundled into a large leather reticule. *Hinc illæ lacrimæ*:—that was the real cause of my night's adventure and of the present story.

When I got into the long open American railway-carriage, with its comfortable stove and warm foot-bricks, I found only one seat vacant, and that was a red velvet sofa, opposite to another occupied by a girl of singular beauty. I can remember to this day exactly how she was

dressed. I dare say my lady readers will think it horribly old-fashioned at the present time, but it was the very latest and most enchanting style in the year '67. On her head was a coquettish little cheese-plate bonnet, bound round with one of those warm, soft, fleecy woollen veils or head-wraps which Canadian girls know as Nubias. Her dress was a short winter walking costume of the period, trimmed with fur, and vandyked at the bottom so as to show a glimpse of the quilted down petticoat underneath. Her little high-heeled boots, displayed by the short costume, were buttoned far above the ankle, and bound with fur to match the dress; while a tiny tassel at the side added just a suspicion of Parisian coquetry. Her cloak was lined with sable, or what seemed so to my indiscriminating eyes; and her rug was a splendid piece of wolverine skins. As to her eyes, her lips, her figure, I had rather not attempt them. I can manage clothes, but not goddesses. Altogether, quite a dream of Canadian beauty, not devoid of that indefinable grace which goes only with the French blood.

I was not bold in '67, and I would have preferred to take any other seat rather than face this divine apparition; but there was no help for it, since all the others were filled: so I sat down a little sheepishly, I dare say. Almost before we were well out of the station we had got into a conversation, and it was *she* who began it.

"You are an Englishman, I think?" she said, looking at me with a frank and pleasant smile.

"Yes," I answered, colouring, though why I should have been ashamed of my nationality for that solitary moment of my life I cannot imagine,—unless, perhaps, because *she* was a Canadian; "but how on earth did you discover it?"

"You would have been more warmly wrapped up if you had lived long in Canada," she replied. "In spite of our stoves and hot bricks, you'll find yourself very cold before you get to your journey's end."

"Yes," I said; "I suppose it's rather chilly late at night in these big cars."

"Dreadfully; oh, quite terribly. You ought to have a rug, you really ought. Won't you let me lend you one? I have another under the seat here."

"But you brought that for yourself," I interposed. "You will want it by-and-by, when it gets a little colder."

"Oh no, I shan't. This is warm enough for me; it's wolverine. You have a mother?"

What an extraordinary question, I thought, and what an unusually friendly girl! Was she really quite as simple-minded as she seemed, or could she be the "designing woman" of the novels? Yes, I admitted to her cautiously that I possessed a maternal parent, who was at that moment safely drinking her tea in a terrace at South Kensington.

"I have none," she said, with an emphasis on the personal pronoun, and a sort of appealing look in her big eyes. "But you should take care of yourself, for her sake. You really *must* take my rug. *Hundreds*, oh, *thousands* of young Englishmen come out here and kill themselves their first winter by imprudence."

Thus adjured, I accepted the rug with many thanks and apologies, and wrapped myself warmly up in the corner, with a splendid view of my *vis-à-vis*.

Exactly at that moment, the ticket collector came round upon his official tour. Now, on American and Canadian railways, you do not take your ticket beforehand, but pay your fare to the collector, who walks up and down through the open cars from end to end, between every station. I lifted up my bag of silver, which lay on the seat beside me, and imprudently opened it to take out a few dollars full in sight of my enchanting neighbour. I saw her look with unaffected curiosity at the heap of coin within, and I was proud at being able to give such an unequivocal proof of my high respectability—for what better guarantee of all the noblest moral

qualities can any man produce all the world over than a bag of dollars?

"What a lot of money!" she said, as the collector passed on. "What can you want with it all in coin?"

"I'm going on a tour in the Southern States," I confided in reply, "and I thought it better to take specie." (I was very proud ten or twelve years ago of that word *specie*.)

"And I suppose those are your initials on the reticule? What a pretty monogram! Your mother gave you that for a birthday present."

"You must be a conjurer or a clairvoyant," I said, smiling. "So she did;" and I added that the initials represented my humble patronymic and baptismal designations.

"My name's Lucretia," said my neighbour artlessly, as a child might have said it, without a word as to surname or qualifying circumstances; and from that moment she became to me simply Lucretia. I think of her as Lucretia to the present day. As she spoke, she pointed to the word engraved in tiny letters on her pretty silver locket.

I suppose she thought my confidence required a little more confidence in return, for after a slight pause she repeated once more, "My name's Lucretia, and I live at Richmond."

"Richmond!" I cried. "Why, that's just where I'm going. Do you know the rector?"

"Mr. Pritchard? Oh yes, intimately. He's our greatest friend. Are you going to stop with him?"

"For a day or two at least, on my way to Montreal. Mrs. Pritchard is my mother's cousin."

"How delightful! Then we may consider ourselves acquaintances. But you don't mean to knock them up to-night? They'll all be in bed long before one o'clock."

"No, I haven't even written to tell them I was coming," I answered. "They gave me a general invitation, and said I might drop in whenever I pleased."

"Then you must stop at the hotel to-night. I'm going there myself. My people keep the hotel."

Was it possible! I was thunderstruck. I had pictured Lucretia to myself as at least a countess of the *ancien régime*, a few of whom still linger on in Montreal and elsewhere. Her locket, her rugs, her eyes, her chiseled features, all of them seemed to me redolent of the old French *noblesse*. And here it turned out that this living angel was only the daughter of an inn-keeper! But in that primitive and pleasant Canadian society such things, I thought, can easily be. No doubt she is the petted child of the house, the one heiress of the old man's savings; and after spending a winter holiday among the gaieties of Quebec, she is now returning to pass the Christmas season with her own family. I will not conceal the fact that I had already fallen over head and ears in love with Lucretia at first sight, and that frank avowal made me love her all the more. Besides, these Canadian hotel-keepers are often very rich; and was not her manner perfect, and was she not an intimate friend of the rector and his wife? All these things showed at least that she was accustomed to refined society. I caught myself already speculating as to what my mother would think of such a match.

In five minutes it was all arranged about the hotel, and I had got into the midst of a swimming conversation with Lucretia. She told me about herself and her past; how she had been educated at a convent in Montreal, and loved the nuns, oh *so* dearly, though she was a Protestant herself, and only French on her mother's side. (This, I thought, was well, as a safeguard against parental prejudice.) She told me all the gossip of Richmond, and whom I should meet at the rector's, and what a dull little town it was. But Quebec was delightful, and Montreal—oh, if she could only live in Montreal, it would be perfect bliss. And so I thought myself, if only Lucretia would live there with me; but I prudently refrained from saying so, as I

thought it rather premature. Or perhaps I blushed and stammered too much to get the words out. "Had she ever been in Europe?" No, never, but she would so like it. "Ah, it would be delightful to spend a month or two in Paris," I suggested, with internal pictures of a honeymoon floating through my brain. "Yes, that would be most enjoyable," she answered. Altogether, Lucretia and I kept chatting uninterruptedly the whole way to Richmond, and the other passengers must have voted us most unconscionable bores; for they evidently could not sleep by reason of our incessant talking. *We* did not sleep, nor wish to sleep. And I am bound to say that a more frankly enchanting or seemingly guileless girl than Lucretia I have never met from that day to this.

At last we reached Richmond Depôt (as the Canadians call the stations), very cold and tired externally, but lively enough as regards the internal fires. We got out, and looked after our luggage. A sleepy porter promised to bring it next morning to the hotel. There were no sleighs in waiting—Richmond is too much of a country station for that—so I took my reticule in my hand, threw Lucretia's rug across her shoulders, and proceeded to walk with her to the hotel.

Now, the "Depôt" is in a suburb known as Melbourne, while Richmond itself lies on the other side of the river St. Francis, here crossed by a long covered bridge, a sort of rough wooden counterpart of the famous one at Lucerne. As we passed out into the cold night, it was snowing heavily, and the frost was very bitter. Lucretia took my arm without a word of prelude, as naturally as if she were my sister, and guided me through the snow-covered path to the bridge. When we got under the shelter of the wooden covering, we had to pass through the long dark gallery, as black as night, heading only for the dim square of moonlight at the other end. But Lucretia walked and chatted on as unconcernedly as if she had always been in the habit of traversing that lonely tunnel-like bridge with a total stranger every evening of her life. I confess I was surprised. I fancied a prim English girl in a similar situation, and I began to wonder whether all this artlessness was really as genuine as it looked.

At the opposite end of the bridge we emerged upon a street of wooden frame houses. In one of them only was there a light. "That's the hotel!" said Lucretia, nodding towards it, and again I suffered a thrill of disappointment. I had pictured to myself a great solid building like the St. Lawrence Hall at Montreal, forgetting that Richmond was a mere country village; and here I found a bit of a frame cottage as the whole domain of Lucretia's supposed father. It was too awful!

We reached the door and entered. Fresh surprises were in store for me. The passage led into a bar, where half-a-dozen French Canadians were sitting with bottles and glasses, playing some game of cards. One rather rough-looking young man jumped up in astonishment as we entered, and exclaimed, "Why, Lucretia, we didn't expect you for another hour. I meant to take the sleigh for you." I could have knocked him down for calling her by her Christian name, but the conviction flashed upon me that this was Lucretia's brother. He glanced up at the big Yankee clock on the mantelpiece, which pointed to a quarter past twelve, then pulled out his watch and whistled. "Stopped three quarters of an hour ago, by Jingo," was his comment. "Why, I forgot to wind it up. Upon my word, Lucretia, I'm awfully sorry. But who is the gentleman?"

"A friend of the Pritchards, Tom dear, who wants a bed here to-night. I couldn't imagine why the sleigh didn't come for me. It's so unlike you not to remember it." And she gave him a look to melt adamant.

Tom was profuse in his apologies, and made it quite clear that his intentions at least had been most excellent; besides, he kissed Lucretia with so much brotherly tenderness that I

relented of my desire to knock him down. Then brother and sister retired for a while, apparently to see after my bedroom, and I was left alone in the bar.

I cannot say I liked the look of it. The men were drinking whiskey and playing *écarté*—two bad things, I thought in my twenty-year-old propriety. My dear mother hated gambling, which hatred she had instilled into my youthful mind, and this was evidently a backwoods gambling-house. Moreover, I carried a bag of silver coin, quite large enough to make it well worth while to rob me. The appearances were clearly against Lucretia's home; but surely Lucretia herself was a guarantee for anything.

Presently Tom returned, and told me my room was ready. I followed him up the stairs with a beating heart and a heavy reticule. At the top of the landing Lucretia stood smiling, my candle in her hand, and showed me into the room. Tom and she looked around to see that all was comfortable, and then they both shook hands with me, which certainly seemed a curious thing for an inn-keeper and his sister. As soon as they were gone, I began to look about me and consider the situation. The room had two doors, but the key was gone from both. I opened one towards the passage, but found no key outside; the other, which probably communicated with a neighbouring bedroom, was locked from the opposite side. Moreover, there had once been a common bolt on this second door, but it had been removed. I looked close at the screw-holes, and was sure they were quite fresh. Could the bolt have been taken off while I was waiting in the bar? All at once it flashed upon my mind that I had been imprudently confiding in my disclosures to Lucretia. I had told her that I carried a hundred and fifty pounds in coin, an easy thing to rob and a difficult thing to identify. She had heard that nobody was aware of my presence in Richmond, except herself and her brother. I had not written to tell the Pritchards I was coming, and she knew that I had not told any one of my whereabouts, because I did not decide where I should go until I talked with her about the matter. No one in Canada would miss me. If these people chose to murder me for my money (and inn-keepers often murder their guests, I thought), nobody would think of inquiring or know where to inquire for me. Weeks would elapse before my mother wrote from England to ask my whereabouts, and by that time all traces might well be lost. I left Quebec only telling the people at my hotel that I was going to Montreal. Then I thought of Lucretia's eagerness to get into conversation, her observation about my money, her suggestion that I should come to the Richmond Hotel. And how could she, a small inn-keeper's daughter, afford to get all those fine furs and lockets by fair means? Did she really know the Pritchards, or was it likely, considering her position? All these things came across me in a moment. What a fool I had been ever to think of trusting such a girl!

I got up and walked about the room. It was evidently Lucretia's own bedroom; "part of the decoy," said I to myself sapiently. But could so beautiful a girl really hurt one? A piece of music was lying on the dressing-table. I took it up and looked at it casually. Gracious heavens! it was a song from "Lucrezia Borgia!" Her very name betrayed her! She too was a Lucretia. I walked over to the mantelpiece. A little ivory miniature hung above the centre: I gave it a glance as I passed. Incredible! It was the Beatrice Cenci! Talk of beautiful women! Why, they poison one, they stab one, they burn one alive, with a smile on their lips. Lucretia must have a taste for murderesses. Evidently she is a connoisseur.

At least, thought I, I shall sell my life dearly. I could not go to bed; but I pulled the bedstead over against one of the doors—the locked one—and I laid the mattress down in front of the other. Then I lay down on the mattress, my money-bag under my head, and put the poker conveniently by my side. If they came to rob and murder me, they should at least have a broken head to account for next day. But I soon got tired of this defensive attitude, and reflected that,

if I must lie awake all night, I might as well have something to read. So I went over to the little book-case and took down the first book which came to hand. It bore on the outside the title "Œuvres de Victor Hugo. Tome I^{er}. Théâtre." "This, at any rate," said I to myself, "will be light and interesting." I returned to my mattress, opened the volume, and began to read *Le Roi s'amuse*.

I had never before dipped into that terrible drama, and I devoured it with a horrid avidity. I read how Triboulet bribed the gipsy to murder the king; how the gipsy's sister beguiled him into the hut; how the plot was matured; and how the sack containing the corpse was delivered over to Triboulet. It was an awful play to read on such a night and in such a place, with the wind howling round the corners and the snow gathering deeply upon the window-panes. I was in a considerable state of fright when I began it: I was in an agony of terror before I had got half-way through. Now and then I heard footsteps on the stairs: again I could distinguish two voices, one a woman's, whispering outside the door; a little later, the other door was very slightly opened and then pushed back again stealthily by a man's hand. Still I read on. At last, just as I reached the point where Triboulet is about to throw the corpse into the river, my candle, a mere end, began to sputter in its socket, and after a few ineffectual flickers suddenly went out, leaving me in the dark till morning.

I lay down once more, trembling but wearied out. A few minutes later the voices came again. The further door was opened a second time, and I saw dimly a pair of eyes (*not*, I felt sure, Lucretia's) peering in the gloom, and reflecting the light from the snow on the window. A man's voice said huskily in an undertone, "It's all right now;" and then there was a silence. I knew they were coming to murder me. I clutched the poker firmly, stood on guard over the dollars, and waited the assault. The moment that intervened seemed like a lifetime.

A minute. Five minutes. A quarter of an hour. They are evidently trying to take me off my guard. Perhaps they saw the poker; in any case, they must have felt the bedstead against the door. That would show them that I expected them. I held my watch to my ear and counted the seconds, then the minutes, then the hours. When the candle went out it was three o'clock. I counted up till about half-past five.

After that I must have fallen asleep from very weariness. My head glided back upon the reticule, and I dozed uneasily until morning. Every now and then I started in my sleep, but the murderers hung back. When I awoke it was eight o'clock, and the dollars were still safe under my head. I rose wearily, washed myself, and arranged the tumbled clothes in which I had slept, for my portmanteau had not yet arrived from the Depôt. Next, I put back the bed and mattress, and then I took the dollars and went downstairs to the bar, hardly knowing whether to laugh at my last night's terror, or to congratulate myself on my lucky escape from a den of robbers. At the foot of the stairs, whom should I come across but Lucretia herself!

In a moment the doubt was gone. She was enchanting. Quite a different style of dress, but equally lovely and suitable. A long figured gown of some fine woollen material, giving very nearly the effect of a plain neat print, and made quite simply to fit her perfect little figure. A plain linen collar, and a quiet silver brooch. Hair tied in a single broad knot above the head, instead of yesterday's chignon and cheese-plate. Altogether, a model winter morning costume for a cold climate. And as she advanced frankly, holding out her hand with a smile, I could have cut my own throat with a pocket-knife as a merited punishment for daring to distrust her. Such is human nature at the ripe age of twenty!

"We were so afraid you didn't sleep, Tom and I," she said with a little tone of anxiety; "we saw a light in your room till so very late, and Tom opened the door a wee bit once or twice to

see if you were sleeping; but he said you seemed to have pulled the mattress on the floor. I *do* hope you weren't ill."

What on earth could I answer? Dare I tell this angel how I had suspected her? Impossible! "Well," I stammered out, colouring up to my eyes, "I *was* rather over-tired, and couldn't get to rest, so I put the candle on a chair, took a book, and lay on the floor so as to have a light to read by. But I slept very well after the candle went out, thank you."

"There were none but French books in the room, though," she said quickly: "perhaps you read French?"

"I read *Le Roi s'amuse*, or part of it," said I.

"Oh, what a dreadful play to read on Christmas Eve!" cried Lucretia, with a little deprecating gesture. "But you must come and have your breakfast."

I followed her into the dining-room, a pretty little bright-looking room behind the bar. Frightened as I was during the night, I could not fail to notice how tastefully the bedroom was furnished; but this little *salle-à-manger* was far prettier. The paper, the carpet, the furniture, were all models of what cheap and simple cottage decorations ought to be. They breathed of Lucretia. The Montreal nuns had evidently taught her what "art at home" meant. The table was laid, and the white table-cloth, with its bright silver and sprays of evergreen in the vase, looked delightfully appetising. I began to think I might manage a breakfast after all.

"How pretty all your things are!" I said to Lucretia.

"Do you think so?" she answered. "I chose them, and I laid the table."

I looked surprised; but in a moment more I was fairly overwhelmed when Lucretia left the room for a minute, and then returned carrying a tray covered with dishes. These she rapidly and dexterously placed upon the table, and then asked me to take my seat.

"But," said I, hesitating, "am I to understand . . . You don't mean to say . . . Are you . . . going . . . to *wait upon me*?"

Lucretia's face was one smile of innocent amusement from her white little forehead to her chiselled little chin. "Why, yes," she answered, laughing, "of course I am. I always wait upon our guests when I'm at home. And I cooked these salmon cutlets, which I'm sure you'll find nice if you only try them while they're hot." With which recommendation she uncovered all the dishes, and displayed a breakfast that might have tempted St. Anthony. Not being St. Anthony, I can do Lucretia's breakfast the justice to say that I ate it with unfeigned heartiness.

So my princess was, after all, the domestic manager and assistant cook of a small country inn! Not a countess, not even a murderess (which is at least romantic), but only a prosaic housekeeper! Yet she *was* a princess for all that. Did she not read Victor Hugo, and play "Lucrezia Borgia," and spread her own refinement over the village tavern? In no other country could you find such a strange mixture of culture and simplicity; but it was new, it was interesting, and it was piquant. Lucretia in her morning dress officiously insisting upon offering me the buckwheat pancakes with her own white hands was Lucretia still, and I fell deeper in love than ever.

After breakfast came a serious difficulty. I must go to the Pritchards, but before I went, I must pay. Yet, how was I to ask for my bill? I *couldn't* demand it of Lucretia. So I sat a while ruminating, and at last I said, "I wonder how people do when they want to leave this house."

"Why," said Lucretia, promptly, "they order the sleigh."

"Yes," I answered sheepishly, "no doubt. But how do they manage about paying?"

Lucretia smiled. She was so absolutely transparent, and so accustomed to her simple way of doing business, that I suppose she did not comprehend my difficulty. "They ask *me*, of course,

and I tell them what they owe. You owe us half-a-dollar.”

Half-a-dollar—two shillings sterling—for a night of romance and terror, a bed and bedroom, a regal breakfast, and—Lucretia to wait upon one! It was *too* ridiculous. And these were the good simple Canadian villagers whom I had suspected of wishing to rob and murder me! I never felt so ashamed of my own stupidity in the whole course of my life.

I must pay it somehow, I supposed, but I could not bear to hand over two shilling pieces into Lucretia’s outstretched palm. It was desecration, it was sheer sacrilege. But Lucretia took the half-dollar with the utmost calmness, and went out to order the sleigh.

I drove to the rector’s, after saying good-bye to Lucretia, with a clear determination that before I left Richmond she should have consented to become my wife. Of course there were social differences, but those would be forgotten in South Kensington, and nobody need ever know what Lucretia had been in Canada. Besides, she was fit to shine in the society of duchesses—a society into which I cannot honestly pretend that I habitually penetrate.

The rector and his wife gave me a hearty welcome, and I found Mrs. Pritchard a good motherly sort of body—just the right woman for helping on a romantic love-match. So, in the course of the morning, as we walked back from church, I managed to mention to her casually that a very nice young woman had come down in the train with me from Quebec.

“You don’t mean Lucretia?” cried good Mrs. Pritchard.

“Lucretia,” I answered in a cold sort of way, “I think that *was* her name. In fact, I remember she told me so.”

“Oh yes, everybody calls her Lucretia—indeed, she’s hardly got any other name. She’s the dearest creature in the world, as simple as a child, yet the most engaging and kind-hearted girl you ever met. She was brought up by some nuns at Montreal, and being a very clever girl, with a great deal of taste, she was their favourite pupil, and has turned out a most cultivated person.”

“Does she paint?” I asked, thinking of the Beatrice.

“Oh, beautifully. Her ivory miniatures always take prizes at the Toronto Exhibition. And she plays and sings charmingly.”

“Are they well off?”

“Very, for Canadians. Lucretia has money of her own, and they have a good farm besides the hotel.”

“She said she knew you very well,” I ventured to suggest.

“Oh yes; in fact, she’s coming here this evening. We have an early dinner—you know our simple Canadian habits—and a few friends will drop in to high tea after evening service. She and Tom will be among them—you met Tom, of course?”

“I had the pleasure of making Tom’s acquaintance at one o’clock this morning,” I answered. “But, excuse my asking it, isn’t it a little odd for you to mix with people in their position?”

The rector smiled and put in his word. “This is a democratic country,” he said; “a mere farmer community, after all. We have little society in Richmond, and are very glad to know such pleasant intelligent people as Tom and Lucretia.”

“But then, the *convenances*,” I urged, secretly desiring to have my own position strengthened. “When I got to the hotel last night, or rather this morning, there were a lot of rough-looking hulking fellows drinking whiskey and playing cards.”

“Ah, I dare say. Old Picard, and young Le Patourel from Melbourne, and the Post Office people sitting over a quiet game of *écarté* while they waited for the last train. The English mail was in last night. As for the whiskey, that’s the custom of the country. We Canadians do

nothing without whiskey. A single glass of Morton's proof does nobody any harm."

And these were my robbers and gamblers? A party of peaceable farmers and sleepy Post officials, sitting up with a sober glass of toddy and beguiling the time with *écarté* for love, in expectation of Her Majesty's mails. I shall never again go to bed with a poker by my side as long as I live.

About seven o'clock our friends came in. Lucretia was once more charming; this time in a long evening dress, a peach-coloured silk with square-cut bodice, and a little lace cap on her black hair. I dare say I saw almost the full extent of her wardrobe in those three changes; but the impression she produced upon me was still that of boundless wealth. However, as she had money of her own, I no longer wondered at the richness of her toilette, and I reflected that a comfortable little settlement might help to outweigh any possible prejudice on my mother's part.

Lucretia was the soul of the evening. She talked, she flirted innocently with every man in the room (myself included), she played divinely, and she sang that very song from "Lucrezia Borgia" in a rich contralto voice. As she rose at last from the piano, I could contain myself no longer. I must find some opportunity of proposing to her there and then. I edged my way to the little group where she was standing, flushed with the compliments on her song, talking to our hostess near the piano. As I approached from behind, I could hear that they were speaking about me, and I caught a few words distinctly. I paused to listen. It was very wrong, but twenty is an impulsive age.

"Oh, a very nice young man indeed," Lucretia was saying; "and we had a most enjoyable journey down. He talked so simply, and seemed such an innocent boy, so I took quite a fancy to him." (My heart beat about two hundred pulsations to the minute.) "Such a clever, intelligent talker too, full of wide English views and interests, so different from our narrow provincial Canadian lads." (Oh, Lucretia, I feel sure of you now. Love at first sight on both sides, evidently!) "And then he spoke to me so nicely about his mother. I was quite grieved to think he should be travelling alone on Christmas Eve, and so pleased when I heard he was to spend his Christmas with you, dear. I thought what I should have felt if——"

I listened with all my ears. What could Lucretia be going to say?

"If *one of my own dear boys was grown up*, and passing his Christmas alone in a strange land."

I reeled. The room swam before me. It was too awful. So all that Lucretia had ever felt was a mere motherly interest in me as a solitary English boy away from his domestic turkey on the twenty-fifth of December! Terrible, hideous, blighting fact! Lucretia was married!

The rector's refreshments in the adjoining dining-room only went to the length of sponge-cake and weak claret-cup. I managed to get away from the piano without fainting, and swallowed about a quart of the intoxicating beverage by tumblerfuls. When I had recovered sufficiently from the shock to trust my tongue, I ventured back into the drawing-room. It struck me then that I had never yet heard Lucretia's surname. When she and her brother arrived in the early part of the evening, Mrs. Pritchard had simply introduced them to me by saying, "I think you know Tom and Lucretia already." Colonial manners are *so* unceremonious.

I joined the fatal group once more. "Do you know," I said, addressing Lucretia with as little tremor in my voice as I could easily manage, "it's very curious, but I have never heard your surname yet."

"Dear me," cried Lucretia, "I quite forgot. Our name is Arundel."

"And which is Mr. Arundel?" I continued. "I should like to make his acquaintance."

“Why,” answered Lucretia with a puzzled expression of face, “you’ve met him already. Here he is!” And she took a neighbouring young man in unimpeachable evening dress gently by the arm. He turned round. It required a moment’s consideration to recognize in that tall and gentlemanly young fellow with the plain gold studs and turndown collar my rough acquaintance of last night, Tom himself!

I saw it in a flash. What a fool I had been! I might have known they were husband and wife. Nothing but a pure piece of infatuated preconception could ever have made me take them for brother and sister. But I had so fully determined in my own mind to win Lucretia for myself that the notion of any other fellow having already secured the prize had never struck me.

It was all the fault of that incomprehensible Canadian society, with its foolish removal of the natural barriers between classes. My mother was quite right. I should henceforth be a high-and-dry conservative in all matters matrimonial, return home in the spring with heart completely healed, and after passing correctly through a London season, marry the daughter of a general or a Warwickshire squire, with the full consent of all the high contracting parties, at St. George’s, Hanover Square. With this noble and moral resolution firmly planted in my bosom, I made my excuses to the rector and his good little wife, and left Richmond for ever the very next morning, without even seeing Lucretia once again.

But, somehow, I have never quite forgotten that journey from Quebec on Christmas Eve; and though I have passed through several London seasons since that date, and undergone increasingly active sieges from mammas and daughters, as my briefs on the Oxford Circuit grow more and more numerous, I still remain a bachelor, with solitary chambers in St. James’s. I sometimes fancy it might have been otherwise if I could only once have met a second paragon exactly like Lucretia.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

Inconsistent use of hyphens and hyphenated words maintained.

Cover created for this ebook.

[The end of *The Beckoning Hand: Lucretia* by Grant Allen]