

**THE
BECKONING HAND:**

My Uncle's Will

**By
Grant Allen**

1887

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MY UNCLE'S WILL.

I.

“My dear Mr. Payne,” said my deceased uncle’s lawyer with an emphatic wag of his forefinger, “I assure you there’s no help for it. The language of the will is perfectly simple and explicit. Either you must do as your late uncle desired, or you must let the property go to the representative of his deceased wife’s family.”

“But surely, Blenkinsopp,” I said deprecatingly, “we might get the Court of Chancery to set it aside, as being contrary to public policy, or something of that sort. I know you can get the Court of Chancery to affirm almost anything you ask them, especially if it’s something a little abstruse and out of the common; it gratifies the Court’s opinion of its own acumen. Now, clearly, it’s contrary to public policy that a man should go and make his own nephew ridiculous by his last will and testament, isn’t it?”

Mr. Blenkinsopp shook his head vigorously. “Bless my soul, Mr. Payne,” he answered, helping himself to a comprehensive pinch from his snuff-box (an odious habit, confined, I believe, at the present day to family solicitors), “bless my soul, my dear sir, the thing’s simply impossible. Here’s your uncle, the late Anthony Aikin, Esquire, deceased, a person of sound mind and an adult male above the age of twenty-one years—to be quite accurate, *ætatis suæ*, seventy-eight—makes his will, and duly attests the same in the presence of two witnesses; everything quite in order: not a single point open to exception in any way. Well, he gives and bequeaths to his nephew, Theodore Payne, gentleman—that’s you—after a few unimportant legacies, the bulk of his real and personal estate, provided only that you adopt the surname of Aikin, prefixed before and in addition to your own surname of Payne. But,—and this is very important,—if you don’t choose to adopt and use the said surname of Aikin, in the manner hereinbefore recited, then and in that case, my dear sir—why, then and in that case, as clear as currant jelly, the whole said residue of his real and personal estate is to go to the heir or heirs-at-law of the late Amelia Maria Susannah Aikin, wife of the said Anthony Aikin, Esquire, deceased. Nothing could be simpler or plainer in any way, and there’s really nothing on earth for you to do except to choose between the two alternatives so clearly set before you by your deceased uncle.”

“But look here, you know, Blenkinsopp,” I said appealingly, “no fellow can really be expected to go and call himself Aikin-Payne, now can he? It’s positively too ridiculous. Mightn’t I stick the Payne before the Aikin, and call myself Payne-

Aikin, eh? That wouldn't be quite so absurdly suggestive of a perpetual toothache. But Aikin-Payne! Why, the comic papers would take it up immediately. Every footman in London would grin audibly when he announced me. I fancy I hear the fellows this very moment: flinging open the door with a violent attempt at seriousness, and shouting out, 'Mr. Haching-Pain, ha, ha, ha!' with a loud guffaw behind the lintel. It would be simply unendurable!"

"My dear sir," answered the unsympathetic Blenkinsopp (most unsympathetic profession, an attorney's, really), "the law doesn't take into consideration the question of the probable conduct of footmen. It must be Aikin-Payne or nothing. I admit the collocation does sound a little ridiculous, to be sure; but your uncle's will is perfectly unequivocal upon the subject—in fact, ahem! I drew it up myself, to say the truth; and unless you call yourself Aikin-Payne, 'in the manner hereinbefore recited,' then and in that case, observe (there's no deception), then and in that case the heir or heirs-at-law of the late Amelia Maria Susannah aforesaid will be entitled to benefit under the will as fully in every respect as if the property was bequeathed directly to him, her, or them, by name, and to no other person."

"And who the dickens are these heirs-at-law, Blenkinsopp?" I ventured to ask after a moment's pause, during which the lawyer had refreshed himself with another prodigious sniff from his snuff-box.

"Who the dickens are they, Mr. Payne? I should say Mr. Aikin-Payne, ahem—why, how the dickens should I know, sir? You don't suppose I keep a genealogical table and full pedigree of all the second cousins of all my clients hung up conspicuously in some spare corner of my brain, do you, eh? Upon my soul I really haven't the slightest notion. All I know about them is that the late Mrs. Amelia Maria Susannah Aikin, deceased, had one sister, who married somebody or other somewhere, against Mr. Anthony Aikin's wishes, and that he never had anything further to say to her at any time. 'But where she's gone and how she fares, nobody knows and nobody cares,' sir, as the poet justly remarks."

I was not previously acquainted with the poet's striking observation on this matter, but I didn't stop to ask Mr. Blenkinsopp in what author's work these stirring lines had originally appeared. I was too much occupied with other thoughts at that moment to pursue my investigations into their authorship and authenticity. "Upon my word, Blenkinsopp," I said, "I've really half a mind to shy the thing up and go on with my schoolmastering."

Mr. Blenkinsopp shrugged his shoulders. "Believe me, my dear young friend," he said sententiously, "twelve hundred a year is not to be sneezed at. Without inquiring too precisely into the exact state of your existing finances, I should be inclined to say

your present engagement can't be worth to you more than three hundred a year."

I nodded acquiescence. "The exact figure," I murmured.

"And your private means are?"

"Non-existent," I answered frankly.

"Then, my dear sir, excuse such plainness of speech in a man of my profession; but if you throw it up you will be a perfect fool, sir; a perfect fool, I assure you."

"But perhaps, Blenkinsopp, the next-of-kin won't step in to claim it!"

"Doesn't matter a bit, my dear fellow. Executors are bound to satisfy themselves before paying you over your legacy that you have assumed and will use the name of Aikin before and in addition to your own name of Payne, in the manner hereinbefore recited. There's no getting over that in any way."

I sighed aloud. "Twelve hundred a year is certainly very comfortable," I said. "But it's a confounded bore that one should have a condition tacked on to it which will make one a laughing-stock for life to all the buffoons and idiots of one's acquaintance."

Blenkinsopp nodded in modified assent. "After all," he answered, "I wouldn't mind taking it on the same terms myself."

"Well," said I, "*che sarà sarà*. If it must be, it must be; and you may put an advertisement into the *Times* accordingly. Tell the executors that I accept the condition."

II.

"I won't stop in town," said I to myself, "to be chaffed by all the fellows at the club and in the master's room at St. Martin's. I'll run over on the Continent until the wags (confound them) have forgotten all about it. I'm a sensitive man, and if there's anything on earth I hate it's cheap and easy joking and punning on a name or a personal peculiarity which lays itself open obviously to stupid buffoonery. Of course I shall chuck up the schoolmastering now;—it's an odious trade at any time— and I may as well take a pleasant holiday while I'm about it. Let me see—Nice or Cannes or Florence would be the best thing at this time of year. Escape the November fogs and January frosts. Let's make it Cannes, then, and try the first effect of my new name upon the *corpus vile* of the Cannois."

So I packed up my portmanteau hurriedly, took the 7.45 to Paris, and that same evening found myself comfortably ensconced in a *wagon lit*, making my way as fast as the Lyons line would carry me *en route* for the blue Mediterranean.

The Hôtel du Paradis at Cannes is a very pleasant and well managed place,

where I succeeded in making myself perfectly at home. I gave my full name to the *concierge* boldly. "Thank Heaven," I thought, "Aikin-Payne will sound to her just as good a label to one's back as Howard or Cholmondely. She won't see the absurdity of the combination." She was a fat Vaudoise Swiss by origin, and she took it without moving a muscle. But she answered me in very tolerable English—me, who thought my Parisian accent unimpeachable! "Vary well, sirr, your lettares shall be sent to your apartments." I saw there was the faintest twinkle of a smile about the corner of her mouth, and I felt that even she, a mere foreigner, a Swiss *concierge*, perceived at once the incongruity of the two surnames. Incongruity! that's the worst of it! Would that they were incongruous! But it's their fatal and obvious congruity with one another that makes their juxtaposition so ridiculous. Call a man Payne, and I venture to say, though I was to the manner born, and it's me that says it as oughtn't to say it, you couldn't find a neater or more respectable surname in all England: call him plain Aikin, and though that perhaps is less aristocratic, it's redeemed by all the associations of childhood with the earliest literature we imbibed through the innocuous pages of "Evenings at Home:" but join the two together, in the order of alphabetical precedence, and you get an Aikin-Payne, which is a thing to make a sensitive man, compelled to bear it for a lifetime, turn permanently red like a boiled lobster. My uncle must have done it on purpose, in order to inflict a deadly blow on what he would doubtless have called my confounded self-conceit!

However, I changed my tourist suit for a black cutaway, and made my way down to the *salle-à-manger*. The dinner was good in itself, and was enlivened for me by the presence of an extremely pretty girl of, say nineteen, who sat just opposite, and whose natural protector I soon managed to draw casually into a general conversation. I say her natural protector, because, though I took him at the time for her father, I discovered afterwards that he was really her uncle. Experience has taught me that when you sit opposite a pretty girl at an hotel, you ought not to open fire by directing your observations to herself in person; you should begin diplomatically by gaining the confidence of her male relations through the wisdom or the orthodoxy of your political and social opinions. Mr. Shackleford—that, I found afterwards, was the uncle's name—happened to be a fiery Tory, while I have the personal misfortune to be an equally rabid Radical: but on this occasion I successfully dissembled, acquiescing with vague generality in his denunciation of my dearest private convictions; and by the end of dinner we had struck up quite an acquaintance with one another.

"Ruby," said the aunt to the pretty girl, as soon as dinner was over, "shall we take a stroll out in the gardens?"

Ruby! what a charming name really. I wonder, now, what is her surname? And what a beautiful graceful figure, as she rises from the table, and throws her little pale blue Indian silk scarf around her pretty shoulders! Clearly, Ruby is a person whose acquaintance I ought to cultivate.

“Uncle won’t come, of course,” said Ruby, with a pleasant smile (what teeth!). “The evening air would be too much for him. You know,” she added, looking across to me, “almost everybody at Cannes is in the invalid line, and mustn’t stir out after sunset. Aunt and I are unfashionable enough to be quite strong, and to go in for a stroll by moonlight.”

“I happen to be equally out of the Cannes fashion,” I said, directing my observation, with great strategic skill, rather to the aunt than to Miss Ruby in person; “and if you will allow me I should be very glad to accompany you.”

So we turned out on the terrace of the Paradis, and walked among the date-palms and prickly pears that fill the pretty tropical garden. It was a lovely moonlight evening in October; and October is still almost a summer month in the Riviera. The feathery branches of the palms stood out in clear-cut outline against the pale moonlit sky; the white houses of Cannes gleamed with that peculiarly soft greenish Mediterranean tint in the middle distance; and the sea reflected the tremulous shimmer in the background, between the jagged sierra of the craggy Esterel and the long low outline of the Ile Ste. Marguerite. Altogether, it was an ideal poet’s evening, the very evening to stroll for the first time with a beautiful girl through the charmed alleys of a Provençal garden!

Ruby Estcourt—she gave me her name before long—was quite as pleasant to talk to as she was beautiful and graceful to behold. Fortunately, her aunt was not one of the race of talkative old ladies, and she left the mass of the conversation entirely to Ruby and myself. In the course of half an hour or so spent in pacing up and down that lovely terrace, I had picked out, bit by bit, all that I most wanted to know about Ruby Estcourt. She was an orphan, without brothers or sisters, and evidently without any large share of this world’s goods; and she lived with her aunt and uncle, who were childless people, and who usually spent the summer in Switzerland, retiring to the Riviera every winter for the benefit of Mr. Shackelford’s remaining lung. Quite simple and unaffected Ruby seemed, though she had passed most of her lifetime in the too-knowing atmosphere of Continental hotels, among that cosmopolitan public which is so very sharp-sighted that it fancies it can see entirely through such arrant humbug as honour in men and maidenly reserve in women. Still, from that world Ruby Estcourt had somehow managed to keep herself quite unspotted; and a simpler, prettier, more natural little fairy you wouldn’t find anywhere

in the English villages of half a dozen counties.

It was all so fresh and delightful to me—the palms, the Mediterranean, the balmy evening air, the gleaming white town, and pretty Ruby Estcourt—that I walked up and down on the terrace as long as they would let me; and I was really sorry when good Mrs. Shackelford at last suggested that it was surely getting time for uncle's game of cribbage. As they turned to go, Ruby said good evening, and then, hesitating for a moment as to my name, said quite simply and naturally, "Why, you haven't yet told us who you are, have you?"

I coloured a little—happily invisible by moonlight—as I answered, "That was an omission on my part, certainly. When you told me you were Miss Estcourt, I ought to have mentioned in return that my own name was Aikin-Payne, Theodore Aikin-Payne, if you please: may I give you a card?"

"Aching Pain!" Ruby said, with a smile. "Did I hear you right? Aching Pain, is it? Oh, what a very funny name!"

I drew myself up as stiffly as I was able. "Not Aching Pain," I said, with a doleful misgiving in my heart—it was clear everybody would put that odd misinterpretation upon it for the rest of my days. "Not Aching Pain, but Aikin-Payne, Miss Estcourt. A-i-k-i-n, Aikin, the Aikins of Staffordshire; P-a-y-n-e, Payne, the Paynes of Surrey. My original surname was Payne, a surname that I venture to say I'm a little proud of; but my uncle, Mr. Aikin, from whom I inherit property," I thought that was rather a good way of putting it, "wished me to adopt his family name in addition to my own—in fact, made it a condition, *sine quâ non*, of my receiving the property."

"Payne—Aikin," Ruby said, turning the names over to herself slowly. "Ah, yes, I see. Excuse my misapprehension, Mr.—Mr. Aikin-Payne. It was very foolish of me; but really, you know, it *does* sound so very ludicrous, doesn't it now?"

I bit my lip, and tried to smile back again. Absurd that a man should be made miserable about such a trifle; and yet I will freely confess that at that moment, in spite of my uncle's twelve hundred a year, I felt utterly wretched. I bowed to pretty little Ruby as well as I was able, and took a couple more turns by myself hurriedly around the terrace.

Was it only fancy, or did I really detect, as Ruby Estcourt said the two names over to herself just now, that she seemed to find the combination a familiar one? I really didn't feel sure about it; but it certainly did sound as if she had once known something about the Paynes or the Aikins. Ah, well! there are lots of Paynes and Aikins in the world, no doubt; but alas! there is only one of them doomed to go through life with the absurd label of an Aikin-Payne fastened upon his unwilling

shoulders.

III.

“Good morning, Mr.—Mr. Aikin-Payne,” said Ruby Estcourt, stumbling timidly over the name, as we met in the *salle-à-manger* at breakfast next day. “I hope you don’t feel any the worse for the chilly air last evening.”

I bowed slightly. “You seem to have some difficulty in remembering my full name, Miss Estcourt,” I said suggestively. “Suppose you call me simply Mr. Payne. I’ve been accustomed to it till quite lately, and to tell you the truth, I don’t altogether relish the new addition.”

“I should think not, indeed,” Ruby answered frankly. “I never heard such a ridiculous combination in all my life before. I’m sure your uncle must have been a perfect old bear to impose it upon you.”

“It was certainly rather cruel of him,” I replied, as carelessly as I could, “or at least rather thoughtless. I dare say, though, the absurdity of the two names put together never struck him. What are you going to do with yourselves to-day, Mr. Shackleford? Everybody at Cannes has nothing to do but to amuse themselves, I suppose?”

Mr. Shackleford answered that they were going to drive over in the morning to Vallauris, and that if I cared to share a carriage with them, he would be happy to let me accompany his party. Nothing could have suited my book better. I was alone, I wanted society and amusement, and I had never seen a prettier girl than Ruby Estcourt. Here was the very thing I needed, ready cut out to my hand by propitious fortune. I found out as time went on that Mr. Shackleford, being a person of limited income, and a bad walker, had only one desire in life, which was to get somebody else to pay half his carriage fares for him by arrangement. We went to a great many places together, and he always divided the expenses equally between us, although I ought only to have paid a quarter, as his party consisted of three people, while I was one solitary bachelor. This apparent anomaly he got over on the ingenious ground that if I had taken a carriage by myself it would have cost me just twice as much. However, as I was already decidedly anxious for pretty little Ruby Estcourt’s society, this question of financial detail did not weigh heavily upon me. Besides, a man who has just come into twelve hundred a year can afford to be generous in the matter of hackney carriages.

We had a delightful drive along the shore of that beautiful blue gulf to Vallauris, and another delightful drive back again over the hills to the Paradis. True, old Mr.

Shackleford proved rather a bore through his anxiety to instruct me in the history and technical nature of ceramic ware in general, and of the Vallauris pottery in particular, when I wanted rather to be admiring the glimpses of Bordighera and the Cap St. Martin and the snow-clad summits of the Maritime Alps with Ruby Estcourt. But in spite of all drawbacks—and old Mr. Shackleford with his universal information really *was* a serious drawback—I thoroughly enjoyed that first morning by the lovely Mediterranean. Ruby herself was absolutely charming. Such a light, bright, fairy-like little person, moving among the priceless vases and tazzas at Clément Massier's as if she were an embodied zephyr, too gentle even to knock them over with a whiff of her little Rampoor shawl—but there, I can't describe her, and I won't attempt it. Ruby, looking over my shoulder at this moment, says I always was an old stupid: so that, you see, closes the question.

An old stupid I certainly was for the next fortnight. Old Mr. Shackleford, only too glad to have got hold of a willing victim in the carriage-sharing fraud, dragged me about the country to every available point of view or object of curiosity within ten miles of the Square Brougham. Ruby usually accompanied us; and as the two old people naturally occupied the seat of honour at the back of the carriage, why, of course Ruby and I had to sit together with our backs to the horses—a mode of progression which I had never before known to be so agreeable. Every evening, Ruby and I walked out on the terrace in the moonlight; and I need hardly say that the moon, in spite of her pretended coldness, is really the most romantic and sentimental satellite in the whole solar system. To cut a long story short, by the end of the fortnight I was very distinctly in love with Ruby; and if you won't think the avowal a conceited one, I venture to judge by the sequel that Ruby was almost equally in love with me.

One afternoon, towards the close of my second week at Cannes, Ruby and I were sitting together on the retired seat in the grounds beside the pond with the goldfish. It was a delicious sunny afternoon, with the last touch of southern summer in the air, and Ruby was looking even prettier than usual, in her brocade pattern print dress, and her little straw hat with the scarlet poppies. (Ruby always dressed—I may say dresses—in the very simplest yet most charming fashion). There was something in the time and place that moved me to make a confession I had for some time been meditating; so I looked straight in her face, and not being given to long speeches, I said to her just this, “Ruby, you are the sweetest girl I ever saw in my life. Will you marry me?”

Ruby only looked at me with a face full of merriment, and burst out laughing. “Why, Mr. Payne,” she said (she had dropped that hideous prefix long ago), “you've

hardly known me yet a fortnight, and here you come to me with a regular declaration. How can I have had time to think about my answer to such a point-blank question?"

"If you like, Ruby," I answered, "we can leave it open for a little; but it occurs to me you might as well say 'yes' at once: for if we leave it open, common sense teaches me that you probably mean to say yes in the long-run." And to clench the matter outright, I thought it best to stoop across and kiss Ruby just once, by way of earnest. Ruby took the kiss calmly and sedately; so then I knew the matter was practically settled.

"But there's one thing, Mr. Payne, I must really insist upon," Ruby said very quietly; "and that is that I mustn't be called Mrs. Aikin-Payne. If I marry you at all, I must marry you as plain Mr. Payne without any Aikin. So that's clearly understood between us."

Here was a terrible condition indeed! I reasoned with Ruby, I explained to Ruby, I told Ruby that if she positively insisted upon it I must go back to my three hundred a year and my paltry schoolmastership, and must give up my uncle Aikin's money. Ruby would hear of no refusal.

"You have always the alternative of marrying somebody else, you know, Mr. Payne," she said with her most provoking and bewitching smile; "but if you really do want to marry me, you know the conditions."

"But, Ruby, you would never care to live upon a miserable pittance of three hundred a year! I hate the name as much as you do, but I think I should try to bear it for the sake of twelve hundred a year and perfect comfort."

No, Ruby was inexorable. "Take me or leave me," she said with provoking calmness, "but if you take me, give up your uncle's ridiculous suggestion. You can have three days to make your mind up. Till then, let us hear no more about the subject."

IV.

During those three days I kept up a brisk fire of telegrams with old Blenkinsopp in Chancery Lane; and at the end of them I came mournfully to the conclusion that I must either give up Ruby or give up the twelve hundred a year. If I had been a hero of romance I should have had no difficulty at all in deciding the matter: I would have nobly refused the money off-hand, counting it as mere dross compared with the loving heart of a beautiful maiden. But unfortunately I am not a hero of romance; I am only an ordinary graduate of an English university. Under these circumstances, it

did seem to me very hard that I must throw away twelve hundred a year for a mere sentimental fancy. And yet, on the other hand, not only did I hate the name myself, but I couldn't bear to impose it on Ruby; and as to telling Ruby that I wouldn't have her, because I preferred the money, that was clearly quite impossible. The more I looked the thing in the face, the more certain it appeared that I must relinquish my dream of wealth and go back (with Ruby) to my schoolmastering and my paltry three hundred. After all, lots of other fellows marry on that sum; and to say the truth, I positively shrank myself from going through life under the ridiculous guise of an Aikin-Payne.

The upshot of it all was that at the end of the three days, I took Ruby a little walk alone among the olive gardens behind the shrubbery. "Ruby," I said to her, falteringly, "you're the most fantastic, self-willed, imperious little person I ever met with, and I want to make just one more appeal to you. Won't you reconsider your decision, and take me in spite of the surname?"

Ruby grubbed up a little weed with the point of her parasol, and looked away from me steadfastly as she answered with her immovable and annoying calmness, "No, Mr. Payne, I really can't reconsider the matter in any way. It was you who took three days to make your mind up. Have you made it up yet or not, pray?"

"I *have* made it up, Ruby."

"And you mean——?" she said interrogatively, with a faint little tremor in her voice which I had never before noticed, and which thrilled through me with the ecstasy of a first discovery.

"And I mean," I answered, "to marry you, Ruby, if you will condescend to take me, and let my Uncle Aikin's money go to Halifax. Can you manage, Ruby, to be happy, as a poor schoolmaster's wife in a very tiny cottage?"

To my joy and surprise, Ruby suddenly seized both my hands in hers, kissed me twice of her own accord, and began to cry as if nothing could stop her. "Then you do really and truly love me," she said through her tears, holding fast to my hands all the time; "then you're really willing to make this great sacrifice for me!"

"Ruby," I said, "my darling, don't excite yourself so. And indeed it isn't a very great sacrifice either, for I hate the name so much I hardly know whether I could ever have endured to bear it."

"You shan't bear it," Ruby cried, eagerly, now laughing and clapping her hands above me. "You shan't bear it, and yet you shall have your Uncle Aikin's money all the same for all that."

"Why, what on earth do you mean, Ruby?" I asked in amazement. "Surely, my darling, you can't understand how strict the terms of the will actually are. I'm afraid

you have been deluding yourself into a belief in some impossible compromise. But you must make your mind up to one thing at once, that unless I call myself Aikin-Payne, you'll have to live the rest of your life as a poor schoolmaster's wife. The next-of-kin will be sharp enough in coming down upon the money."

Ruby looked at me and laughed and clapped her hands again. "But what would you say, Mr. Payne," she said with a smile that dried up all her tears, "what would you say if you heard that the next-of-kin was—who do you think?—why me, sir, me, Ruby Estcourt?"

I could hardly believe my ears. "You, Ruby?" I cried in my astonishment. "You! How do you know? Are you really sure of it?"

Ruby put a lawyer's letter into my hand, signed by a famous firm in the city. "Read that," she said simply. I read it through, and saw in a moment that what Ruby said was the plain truth of it.

"So you want to do your future husband out of the twelve hundred a year!" I said, smiling and kissing her.

"No," Ruby answered, as she pressed my hand gently. "It shall be settled on you, since I know you were ready to give it up for my sake. And there shall be no more Aikin-Paynes henceforth and for ever."

There was never a prettier or more blushing bride than dear little Ruby that day six weeks.

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: My Uncle's Will* by Grant Allen]