

**THE
BECKONING HAND:**

The Two Carnegies

**By
Grant Allen**

1887

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THE TWO CARNEGIES.

I.

“Harold,” said Ernest Carnegie to his twin-brother at breakfast one morning, “have you got a tooth aching slightly to-day?”

“Yes, by Jove, I have!” Harold answered, laying down the *Times*, and looking across the table with interest to his brother; “which one was yours?”

“The third from the canine on the upper left side,” Ernest replied quickly. “And yours?”

“Let me see. This is the canine, isn’t it? One, two, three; yes. The same, of course. It’s really a very singular coincidence. How about the time? Was that as usual?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute. Mine came on the day of the Guthries’ hop. I was down at Brighton that morning. What date? Let me think; why, the 9th, I’m certain. To-day’s what, mother?”

“The 23rd,” said Harold, glancing for confirmation at the paper. “The law works itself out once more as regularly as if by machinery. I’m just a fortnight later than you, Ernest, as always.”

Ernest drummed upon the table with his finger for a minute. “I’m afraid you’ll have it rather badly to-day, Harold,” he said, after a pause. “Mine got unbearable towards midday, and if I hadn’t had it looked to in the afternoon, I couldn’t have danced a single dance to save my life that evening. I advise you to go round to the dentist’s immediately, and try to get it stopped before it goes any further.”

Harold finished his cup of coffee, and looked out of the window blankly at the fog outside. “It’s an awful thought,” he said at last, “this living, as we two do, by clockwork! Everybody else lives exactly the same way, but they don’t have their attention called to it, as we do. Just to think that from the day you and I were born, Ernest, it was written in the very fabric of our constitutions that when we were twenty-three years and five months old, the third molar in our upper left jaws should begin to fail us! It’s really appalling in its unanswerable physical fatalism, when ones comes to think upon it.”

“So I said to myself at the Guthries’, the morning it began to give me a twinge,” said Ernest, in the self-same tone. “It seemed to me such a terrible idea that in a fortnight’s time, as certain as the sun, the very same tooth in your head would begin to go, as the one that was going in mine. It’s too appalling, really.”

“But do you actually mean to say,” asked pretty little Nellie Holt, the visitor,

newly come the day before from Cheshire, "that whenever one of you gets a toothache, the other one gets a toothache in the same tooth a fortnight later?"

"Not a toothache only," Ernest answered—he was studying for his degree as a physician, and took this department upon himself as by right—"but every other disease or ailment whatsoever. We're like two clocks wound up to strike at fixed moments; only, we're not wound up to strike exactly together. I'm fourteen days in advance of Harold, so to speak, and whatever happens to me to-day will happen to him, in all probability, exactly a fortnight later."

"How very extraordinary!" said Nellie, looking quickly from one handsome clear-cut face to its exact counterpart in the other. "And yet not so extraordinary, after all, when one comes to think how very much alike you both are."

"Ah, that's not all," said Ernest, slowly; "it's something that goes a good deal deeper than that, Miss Holt. Consider that every one of us is born with a certain fixed and recognizable constitution, which we inherit from our fathers and mothers. In us, from our birth upward, are the seeds of certain diseases, the possibilities of certain actions and achievements. One man is born with hereditary consumption; another man with hereditary scrofula; a third with hereditary genius or hereditary drunkenness, each equally innate in the very threads and strands of his system. And it's all bound to come out, sooner or later, in its own due and appointed time. Here's a fellow whose father had gout at forty: he's born with such a constitution that, as the hands on his life-dial reach forty, out comes the gout in his feet, wherever he may be, as certain as fate. It's horrible to think of, but it's the truth, and there's no good in disguising it."

Nellie Holt shuddered slightly. "What a dreadful materialistic creed, Mr. Carnegie," she said, looking at him with a half-frightened air. "It's almost as bad as Mohammedan fatalism."

"No, not so bad as that," Ernest Carnegie answered; "not nearly so bad as that. The Oriental belief holds that powers above you compel your life against your will: we modern scientific thinkers only hold that your own inborn constitution determines your whole life for you, will included. But whether we like it or dislike it, Miss Holt, there are the facts, and nobody can deny them. If you'd lived with a twin-sister, as Harold and I have lived together for twenty-three years, you'd see that the clocks go as they are set, with fixed and predestined regularity. Twins, you know, are almost exactly alike in all things, and in the absolute coincidence of their constitutions you can see the inexorable march of disease, and the inexorable unfolding of the predetermined life-history far better than in any other conceivable case. I'm a scientific man myself, you see, and I have such an opportunity of watching it all as no

other man ever yet had before me.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Carnegie, the mother, from the head of the table, “you’ve no idea how curiously their two lives have always resembled one other. When they were babies, they were so much alike that we had to tie red and blue ribbons round their necks to distinguish them. Ernest was red and Harold blue—no, Ernest was blue and Harold red: at least, I’m not quite certain which way it was, but I know we have a note of it in the family Bible, for Mr. Carnegie made it at the time for fear we should get confused between them when we were bathing them. So we put the ribbons on the moment they were christened, and never took them both off together for a second, even to bathe them, so as to prevent accidents. Well, do you know, dear, from the time they were babies, they were always alike in everything; but Ernest was always a fortnight before Harold. He said “Mamma” one day, and just a fortnight later Harold said the very same word. Then Ernest said “sugar,” and so did Harold in another fortnight. Ernest began to toddle a fortnight the earliest. They took the whooping cough and the measles in the same order; and they cut all their teeth so, too, the same teeth first on each side, and just at a fortnight’s distance from one another. It’s really quite an extraordinary coincidence.”

“The real difficulty would be,” said Harold, “to find anything in which we didn’t exactly resemble one another. Well, now I must be off to this horrid office with the Pater. Are you ready, Pater? I’ll call in at Estwood’s in the course of the morning, Ernest, and tell him to look after my teeth. I don’t want to miss the Balfours’ party this evening. Curious that we should be going to a party this evening too. *That* isn’t fated in our constitutions, anyhow, is it, Ernest? Good morning, Miss Holt; the first waltz, remember. Come along, Pater.” And he went out, followed immediately by his father.

“I must be going too,” said Ernest, looking at his watch; “I have an appointment with Dowson at Guy’s at half-past ten—a very interesting case: hereditary cataract; three brothers, all of them get it, each as he reaches twelve years old, and Dowson has performed the operation on two, and is going to perform it on the other this very day. Good morning, Miss Holt; the second waltz for me; you won’t forget, will you?”

“How awfully alike they really are, Mrs. Carnegie,” said Nellie, as they were left alone. “I’m sure I shall never be able to tell them apart. I don’t even know their names yet. The one that has just gone out, the one that’s going to be a doctor—that’s Mr. Harold, isn’t it?”

“Oh no, dear,” Mrs. Carnegie answered, putting her arm round Nellie’s waist affectionately, “that’s Ernest. Harold’s the lawyer. You’ll soon learn the difference

between them. You can tell Ernest easily, because he usually wears a horrid thing for a scarf-pin, an ivory skull and cross-bones: he wears it, he says, just to distinguish him professionally from Harold. Indeed, that was partly why Mr. Carnegie was so anxious that Harold should go into his own office; so as to make a distinction of profession between them. If Harold had followed his own bent, he would have been a doctor too; they're both full of what they call physiological ideas—dreadful things, I think them. But Mr. Carnegie thought as they were so very much alike already we ought to do something to give them some individuality, as he says: for if they were both to be doctors or both solicitors, you know, there'd really be no knowing them apart, even for ourselves; and I assure you, my dear, as it is now even they're exactly like one person."

"Are they as alike in character, then, as they are in face?" asked Nellie.

"Alike in character! My dear, they're absolutely identical. Whatever the one thinks, or says, or does, the other thinks, says, and does at the same time, independently. Why, once Ernest went over to Paris for a week's holiday, while Harold went on some law business of his father's to Brussels. Would you believe it, when they came back they'd each got a present for the other. Ernest had seen a particular Indian silver cigar-case in a shop on the Boulevards, and he brought it home as a surprise for Harold. Well, Harold had bought an exactly similar one in the Montagne de la Cour, and brought it home as a surprise for Ernest. And what was odder still, each of them had had the other's initials engraved upon the back in some sort of heathenish Oriental characters."

"How very queer," said Nellie. "And yet they seem very fond of one another. As a rule, one's always told that people who are exactly alike in character somehow don't get on together."

"My dear child, they're absolutely inseparable. Their devotion to one another's quite unlimited. You see they've been brought up together, played together, sympathized with one another in all their troubles and ailments, and are sure of a response from each other about everything. It was the greatest trouble of their lives when Mr. Carnegie decided that Harold must become a solicitor for the sake of the practice. They couldn't bear at first to be separated all day; and when they got home in the evening, Ernest from the hospital and Harold from the office, they met almost like a pair of lovers. They've talked together about their work so much that Harold knows almost as much medicine now as Ernest, while Ernest's quite at home, his father declares, in 'Benjamin on Sales,' and 'Chitty on Contract.' It's quite delightful to see how fond they are of one another."

At five o'clock Ernest Carnegie returned from his hospital. He brought two little

bunches of flowers with him—some lilies of the valley and a carnation—and he handed them with a smile, one to his sister and one to pretty little Nellie. “I thought you’d like them for this evening, Miss Holt,” he said. “I chose a carnation on purpose, because I fancied it would suit your hair.”

“Oh, Ernest,” said his sister, “you ought to have got a red camelia. That’s the proper thing for a brunette like Nellie.”

“Nonsense, Edie,” Ernest answered, “I hate camelias. Ugliest flowers out: so stiff and artificial. One might as well wear a starchy gauze thing from the milliner’s.”

“I’m so glad you brought Nellie Holt a flower. She’s a sweet girl, Ernest, isn’t she?” said Mrs. Carnegie a minute or two later, as Edie and Nelly ran upstairs. “I wish either of you two boys could take a fancy to a nice girl like her, now.”

“My dear mother,” Ernest answered, turning up his eyes appealingly. “A little empty-headed, pink-and-white thing like that! I don’t know what Harold thinks, but she’d never do for me, at any rate. Very pretty to look at, very timid to talk to, very nice and shrinking, and all that kind of thing, I grant you; but nothing in her. Whenever I marry, I shall marry a real live woman, not a dainty piece of delicate empty drapery.”

At six o’clock, Mr. Carnegie and Harold came in from the office. Harold carried in his hand two little button-hole bouquets, of a few white lilies and a carnation. “Miss Holt,” he said, as he entered the drawing-room, “I’ve brought you and Edie a flower to wear at the Balfours’ this evening. This is for you, Edie, with the pale pink; the dark will suit Miss Holt’s hair best.”

Edie looked at Ernest, and smiled significantly. “Why didn’t you get us camelias, Harold?” she asked, with a faint touch of mischief in her tone.

“Camelias! My dear girl, what a question! I gave Miss Holt credit for better taste than liking camelias. Beastly things, as stiff and conventional as dahlias or sunflowers. You might just as well have a wax rose from an artificial flower-maker while you are about it.”

Edie laughed and looked at Nellie. “See here,” she said, taking up Ernest’s bunches from the little specimen vases where she had put them to keep them fresh in water, “somebody else has thought of the flowers already.”

Harold laughed, too, a little uneasily. “Aha,” he said, “I see Ernest has been beforehand with me as usual. I’m always a day too late. It seems to me I’m the Esau of this duet, and Ernest’s the Jacob. Well, Miss Holt, you must take the will for the deed; and after all, one will do for your dress and the other for your hair, won’t they?”

“Harold,” said his father, as they went upstairs together to dress for dinner,

“Nellie Holt’s a very nice girl, and I’ve reason to believe—you know I don’t judge these matters without documentary evidence—I have reason to believe that she’ll come into the greater part of old Stanley Holt’s money. She’s his favourite niece, and she benefits largely, as I happen to know, under his will. *Verbum sap.*, my dear boy, she’s a pretty girl, and has sweet manners. In my opinion, she’d make——”

“My dear Pater,” Harold exclaimed, interrupting him, “for Heaven’s sake don’t say so. Pretty enough, I grant you; and no doubt old Stanley Holt’s money would be a very nice thing in its way; but just seriously consider now, if you were a young man yourself, what on earth could you see in Nellie Holt to attract your love or admiration? Why, she shrinks and blushes every time she speaks to you. No, no, whenever I marry I should like to marry a girl of some presence and some character.”

“Well, well,” said his father, pausing a second at his bedroom door, “perhaps if she don’t suit you, Harold, she’ll suit Ernest.”

“I should have thought, Pater, you knew us two better than that by this time.”

“But, my dear Harold, you can’t both marry the same woman!”

“No, we can’t, Pater, but it’s my opinion we shall both fall unanimously in love with her, at any rate, whenever we happen to see her.”

II.

The Balfours were very rich people—city people; “something in the stockbroking or bankruptcy line, I believe,” Ernest Carnegie told Nelly Holt succinctly as they drove round in the brougham with his sister; and their dance was of the finest modern moneyed fashion. “Positively reeks with Peruvian bonds and Deferred Egyptians, doesn’t it?” said Harold, as they went up the big open staircase and through the choice exotic flowers on the landing. “Old Balfour has so much money, they say, that if he tries his hardest he can’t spend his day’s income in the twenty-four hours. He had a good hard try at it once. Prince of Wales or somebody came to a concert for some sort of public purpose—hospital, or something—and old B. got the whole thing up on the tallest possible scale of expenditure. Spent a week in preparation. Had in dozens of powdered footmen; ordered palms and orange-trees in boxes from Nice; hung electric lights all over the drawing-room; offered Pattalini and Goldoni three times as much for their services as the total receipts for the charity were worth; and at the end of it all he called in a crack accountant to reckon up the cost of the entertainment. Well, he found, with all his efforts, he’d positively lived fifty pounds within his week’s income. Extraordinary,

isn't it?"

"Very extraordinary indeed," said Nellie, "if it's quite true, you know."

"You owe me the first waltz," Harold said, without noticing the reservation. "Don't forget it, please, Miss Holt."

"I say, Balfour," Ernest Carnegie observed to the son of the house, shortly after they had entered the ballroom, "who's that beautiful tall dark girl over there? No, not the pink one, that other girl behind her in the deep red satin."

"She? oh, she's nothing in particular," Harry Balfour answered carelessly (the girl in pink was worth eighty thousand, and her figure cast into the shade all her neighbours in Harry Balfour's arithmetical eyes). "Her name's Walters, Isabel Walters, daughter of a lawyer fellow—no offence meant to your profession, Carnegie. Let me see: you *are* the lawyer, aren't you? No knowing you two fellows apart, you know, especially when you've got white ties on."

"No, I'm not the lawyer fellow," Ernest answered quietly; "I'm the doctor fellow. But it doesn't at all matter; we're used to it. Would you mind introducing me to Miss Walters?"

"Certainly not. Come along. I believe she's a very nice girl in her way, you know, and dances capitally; but not exactly in our set, you see; not exactly in our set."

"I should have guessed as much to look at her," Ernest answered, with a faint undertone of sarcasm in his voice that was quite thrown away upon Harry Balfour. And he walked across the room after his host to ask Isabel Walters for the first waltz.

"Tall," he thought to himself as he looked at her: "dark, fine face, beautiful figure, large eyes; makes her own dresses; strange sort of person to meet at the Balfours' dances."

Isabel Walters danced admirably. Isabel Walters talked cleverly. Isabel Walters had a character and an individuality of her own. In five minutes she had told Ernest Carnegie that she was the Poor Relation, and in that quality she was asked once yearly to one of the Balfours' Less Distinguished dances. "This is a Less Distinguished," she said quickly; "but I suppose you go to the More Distinguished too?"

"On the contrary," Ernest answered, laughing; "though I didn't know the nature of the difference before, I've no doubt that I have to thank the fact of my being Less Distinguished myself for the pleasure of meeting you here this evening."

Isabel smiled quietly. "It's a family distinction only," she said. "Of course the Balfours wouldn't like the people they ask to know it. But we always notice the difference ourselves. My mother, you know, was the first Mrs. Balfour's half-sister.

But in those days, I need hardly tell you, Mr. Balfour hadn't begun to do great things in Grand Trunk Preferences. Do you know anything about Grand Trunk Preferences?"

"Absolutely nothing," Ernest replied. "But, to come down to a more practical question: Are you engaged for the next Lancers?"

"A square dance. Oh, why a square dance? I hate square dances."

"I like them," said Ernest. "You can talk better."

"And yet you waltz capitally. As a rule, I notice the men who like square dances are the sticks who can't waltz without upsetting one. No, I'm not engaged for the next Lancers. Yes, with pleasure."

Ernest went off to claim little Nellie Holt from his brother.

"By Jove, Ernest," Harold said, as he met him again a little later in the evening, "that's a lovely girl you were dancing with just now. Who is she?"

"A Miss Walters," Ernest answered drily.

"I'll go and get introduced to her," Harold went on, looking at his brother with a searching glance. "She's the finest girl in the room, and I should like to dance with her."

"You think so?" said Ernest. And he turned away a little coldly to join a group of loungers by the doorway.

"This is not *our* Lancers yet, Mr. Carnegie," Isabel said, as Harold stalked up to her with her cousin by his side, "Ours is number seven."

"I'm not the same Mr. Carnegie," Harold said, smiling, "though I see I need no introduction now. I'm number seven's brother, and I've come to ask whether I may have the pleasure of dancing number six with you."

Isabel looked up at him in doubt. "You are joking, surely," she said. "You danced with me just now, the first waltz."

"You see my brother over by the door," Harold answered. "But we're quite accustomed to be taken for one another. Pray don't apologize; we're used to it."

Before the end of the evening Isabel Walters had danced three times with Ernest Carnegie, and twice with Harold. Before the end of the evening, too, Ernest and Harold were both at once deeply in love with her. She was not perhaps what most men would call a lovable girl; but she was handsome, clever, dashing, and decidedly original. Now, to both the Carnegies alike, there was no quality in a woman so admirable as individuality. Perhaps it was their own absolute identity of tastes and emotions that made them prize the possession of a distinct personality by others so highly; but in any case, there was no denying the fact that they were both head over ears in love with Isabel Walters.

“She’s a splendid girl, Edie,” said Harold, as he went down with his sister to the cab in which he was to take her home; “a splendid girl; just the sort of girl I should like to marry.”

“Not so nice by half as Nellie Holt,” said Edie simply. “But there, brothers never do marry the girls their sisters want them to.”

“Very unreasonable of the brothers, no doubt,” Harold replied, with a slight curl of his lip: “but possibly explicable upon the ground that a man prefers choosing a wife who’ll suit himself to choosing one who’ll suit his sisters.”

“Mother,” said Ernest, as he took her down to the brougham, with little Nellie Holt on his other arm, “that’s a splendid girl, that Isabel Walters. I haven’t met such a nice girl as that for a long time.”

“I know a great many nicer,” his mother answered, glancing half unconsciously towards Nellie, “but boys never do marry as their parents would wish them.”

“They do not, mother dear,” said Ernest quietly. “It’s a strange fact, but I dare say it’s partly dependent upon the general principle that a man is more anxious to live happily with his own wife than to provide a model daughter-in-law for his father and mother.”

“Isabel,” Mrs. Walters said to her daughter, as they took their seats in the cab that was waiting for them at the door, “what on earth did you mean by dancing five times in one evening with that young man with the light moustache? And who on earth is he, tell me?”

“He’s two people, mamma,” Isabel answered seriously; “and I danced three times with one of him, and twice with the other, I believe; at least so he told me. His name’s Carnegie, and half of him’s called Ernest and the other half Harold, though which I danced with which time I’m sure I can’t tell you. He’s a pair of twins, in fact, one a doctor and one a lawyer; and he talks just the same sort of talk in either case, and is an extremely nice young man altogether. I really like him immensely.”

“Carnegie!” said Mrs. Walters, turning the name over carefully. “Two young Carnegies! How very remarkable! I remember somebody was speaking to me about them, and saying they were absolutely indistinguishable. Not sons of Mr. Carnegie, your uncle’s solicitor, are they?”

“Yes; so Harry Balfour told me.”

“Then, Isabel, they’re very well off, I understand. I hope people won’t think you danced five times in the evening with only one of them. They ought to wear some distinctive coat or something to prevent misapprehensions. Which do you like best, the lawyer or the doctor?”

“I like them both exactly the same, mamma. There isn’t any difference at all

between them, to like one of them better than the other for. They both seem very pleasant and very clever. And as I haven't yet discovered which is which, and didn't know from one time to another which I was dancing with, I can't possibly tell you which I prefer of two identicals. And as to coats, mamma, you know you couldn't expect one of them to wear a grey tweed suit in a ballroom, just to show he isn't the other one."

In the passage at the Carnegies', Ernest and Harold stopped one moment, candle in hand, to compare notes with one another before turning into their bedrooms. There was an odd constraint about their manner to each other that they had never felt before during their twenty-three years of life together.

"Well?" said Ernest, inquiringly, looking in a hesitating way at his brother.

"Well?" Harold echoed, in the same tone.

"What did you think of it all, Harold?"

"I think, Ernest, I shall propose to Miss Walters."

There was a moment's silence, and a black look gathered slowly on Ernest Carnegie's brow. Then he said very deliberately, "You are in a great hurry coming to conclusions, Harold. You've seen very little of her yet; and remember, it was I who first discovered her!"

Harold glanced at him angrily and half contemptuously. "*You* discovered her first!" he said. "Yes, and you are always beforehand with me; but you shall not be beforehand with me this time. I shall propose to her at once, to prevent your anticipating me. So now you know my intentions plainly, and you can govern yourself accordingly."

Ernest looked back at him with a long look from head to foot.

"It is war then," he said, "Harold; war, you will have it? We are rivals?"

"Yes, rivals," Harold answered; "and war to the knife if so you wish it."

"War?"

"War!"

"Good night, Harold."

"Good night, Ernest."

And they turned in to their bedrooms, in anger with one another, for the first time since they had quarrelled in boyish fashion over tops and marbles years ago together.

III.

That night the two Carnegies slept very little. They were both in love, very seriously in love; and anybody who has ever been in the same condition must have

noticed that the symptoms, which may have been very moderate or undecided during the course of the evening, become rapidly more pronounced and violent as you lie awake in the solitude of your chamber through the night watches. But more than that, they had both begun to feel simultaneously the stab of jealousy. Each of them had been very much taken indeed by Isabel Walters; still, if they had seen no chance of a rival looming in the distance, they might have been content to wait a little, to see a little more of her, to make quite sure of their own affection before plunging headlong into a declaration. After all, it's very absurd to ask a girl to be your companion for life on the strength of an acquaintanceship which has extended over the time occupied by three dances in a single evening. But then, thought each, there was the chance of Ernest's proposing to her, or of Harold's proposing to her, before I do. That idea made precipitancy positively imperative; and by the next morning each of the young men had fully made up his mind to take the first opportunity of asking Isabella Walters to be his wife.

Breakfast passed off very silently, neither of the twins speaking much to one another; but nobody noticed their reticence much; for the morning after the occasional orgy or dance is apt to prove a very limp affair indeed in professional homes, where dances are not of nightly occurrence. After breakfast, Harold went off quickly to the office, and Ernest, having bespoken a holiday at the hospital, joined his sister and Nellie Holt in the library.

"Do you know, Ernest," Edie said to him, mindful of her last night's conversation with her other brother, "I really believe Harold has fallen desperately in love at first sight with that tall Miss Walters."

"I can easily believe it," Ernest answered testily; "she's very handsome and very clever."

Edie raised her eyebrows a little. "But it's awfully foolish, Ernest, to fall in love blindfold in that way, isn't it now?" she said, with a searching look at her brother. "He can't possibly know what sort of a girl she really is from half an hour's conversation in a ballroom."

"For my part, I don't at all agree with you, Edie," said Ernest, in his coldest manner. "I don't believe there's any right way of falling in love except at first sight. If a girl is going to please you, she ought to please you instantaneously and instinctively; at least, so I think. It isn't a thing to be thought about and reasoned about, but a thing to be felt and apprehended intuitively. I couldn't reason myself into marrying a girl, and what's more, I don't want to."

He sat down to the table, took out a sheet or two of initialed notepaper, and began writing a couple of letters. One of them, which he marked "Private" in the

corner, ran as follows:—

“MY DEAR MISS WALTERS,

“Perhaps you will think it very odd of me to venture upon writing to you on the strength of such a very brief and casual acquaintance as that begun last night; but I have a particular reason for doing so, which I think I can justify to you when I see you. You mentioned to me that you were asked to the Montagus’ steam-launch expedition up the river from Surbiton to-morrow; but I understood you to say you did not intend to accept the invitation. I write now to beg of you to be there, as I am going, and I am particularly anxious to meet you and have a little conversation with you on a subject of importance. I know you are not a very conventional person, and therefore I think you will excuse me for asking this favour of you. Please don’t take the trouble to write in reply; but answer by going to the Montagus’, and I shall then be able to explain this very queer letter. In haste,

“Yours very truly,

“ERNEST CARNEGIE.”

He read this note two or three times over to himself, looking not very well satisfied with its contents; and then at last, with the air of a man who determines to plunge and stake all upon a single venture, he folded it up and put it in its envelope. “It’ll mystify her a little, no doubt,” he thought to himself; “and being a woman, she’ll be naturally anxious to unravel the mystery. But of course she’ll know I mean to make her an offer, and perhaps she’ll think me a perfect idiot for not doing it outright, instead of beating about the bush in this incomprehensible fashion. However, it’s too cold-blooded, proposing to a girl on paper; I very much prefer the *vivâ voce* system. It’s only till to-morrow; and I doubt if Harold will manage to be beforehand with me in that time. He’ll be deep in business all morning, and have no leisure to think about her. Anyhow, all’s fair in love and war; he said it should be war; and I’ll try to steal a march upon him, for all his lawyer’s quibbles and quiddits.”

He took another sheet from his blotting-book, and wrote a second note, much more rapidly than the first one. It ran after this fashion—

“DEAR MRS. MONTAGU,—

“Will you think it very rude of me if I ask you to let me be one of your

party on your expedition up the river to-morrow? I heard of it from your son Algernon last night at the Balfours', and I happen to be *very* anxious to meet one of the ladies you have invited. Now, I know you're kindness itself to all your young friends in all these little matters, and I'm sure you won't be angry with me for so coolly inviting myself. If I hadn't felt perfect confidence in your invariable goodness, I wouldn't have ventured to do so. Please don't answer unless you've no room for me, but expect me to turn up at half-past two.

“Yours very sincerely,

“ERNEST CARNEGIE.

“P.S.—We might call at Lady Portlebury's lawn, and look over the conservatories.”

“Now, that's bold, but judicious,” Ernest said to himself, admiringly, as he held the letter at arm's-length, after blotting it. “She might have been angry at my inviting myself, though I don't think she would be; but I'm sure she'll be only too delighted if I offer to take her guests over Aunt Portlebury's conservatories. The postscript's a stroke of genius. What a fuss these people will make, even over the widow of a stupid old cavalry officer, because her husband happens to have been knighted. It's all the better that she's a widow, indeed. The delicious vagueness of the title ‘Lady’ is certainly one of its chief recommendations. Sir Antony being out of the way, Mrs. Montagu's guests can't really tell but that poor dear old Aunt Portlebury may be a real live Countess.” And he folded his second letter up with the full satisfaction of an approving conscience.

When Isabel Walters received Ernest Carnegie's mysterious note, she was certainly mystified by it as he had expected, and also not a little gratified. He meant to propose to her, that was certain; and there was never a woman in the whole world who was not flattered by a handsome young man's marked attentions. It was a very queer letter, no doubt; but it had been written skilfully enough to suit the particular personality of Isabel Walters: for Ernest Carnegie was a keen judge of character, and he flattered himself that he knew how to adapt his correspondence to the particular temperament of the persons he happened to be addressing. And though Isabel had no very distinct idea of what the two Carnegies were severally like (it could hardly have been much more distinct if she had known them both intimately), she felt they were two very good-looking, agreeable young men, and she was not particularly averse to the attentions of either. After all, upon what straws we all usually hang our love-making! We see one another once or twice under

exceptionally deceptive circumstances; we are struck at first sight with something that attracts us on either side; we find the attraction is mutual; we flounder at once into a declaration of undying attachment; we get married, and on the whole we generally find we were right after all, in spite of our precipitancy, and we live happily ever afterwards. So it was not really very surprising that Isabel Walters, getting such a note from one of the two handsome young Mr. Carnegies, should have been in some doubt which of the two identicals it actually was, and yet should have felt indefinitely pleased and flattered at the implied attention. Which was Ernest and which Harold could only mean to her, when she came to think on it, which was the one she danced with first last night, and which the one she danced with second. She decided in her own mind that it would be better for her to go to the Montagus' picnic to-morrow, but to say nothing about it to her mother. "Mamma wouldn't understand the letter," she said to herself complacently; "she's so conventional; and when I come back to-morrow I can tell her one of the young Carnegies was there, and that he proposed to me. She need never know there was any appointment."

IV.

At six o'clock, Harold Carnegie returned from the office. He, too, had been thinking all day of Isabel Walters, and the moment he got home he went into the library to write a short note to her, before Ernest had, as usual, forestalled him. As he did so he happened to see a few words dimly transferred to the paper in the blotting-book. They were in Ernest's handwriting, and he was quite sure the four first words read, "My dear Miss Walters." Then Ernest had already been beforehand with him, after all! But not by a fortnight: that was one good point; not this time by a fortnight! He would be even with him yet; he would catch up this anticipatory twin-brother of his, by force or fraud, rather than let him steal away Isabel Walters from him once and for ever. "All's fair in love and war," he muttered to himself, taking up the blotting-book carefully, and tearing out the tell-tale leaf in a furtive fashion. "Thank Heaven, Ernest writes a thick black hand, the same as I do; and I shall probably be able to read it by holding it up to the light." In his own soul Harold Carnegie loathed himself for such an act of petty meanness; but he did it; with love and jealousy goading him on, and the fear of his own twin-brother stinging him madly, he did it; remorsefully and shamefacedly, but still did it.

He took the page up to his own bedroom, and held it up to the window-pane. Blurred and indistinct, the words nevertheless came out legibly in patches here and there, so that with a little patient deciphering Harold could spell out the sense of both

letters, though they crossed one another obliquely at a slight angle. "Very brief and casual acquaintance . . . Montagus' steam-launch expedition up the river from Surbiton to-morrow . . . am going and am particularly anxious to meet you . . . this favour of you . . ." "So that's his plan, is it?" Harold said to himself. "Softly, softly, Mr. Ernest, I think I can checkmate you! What's this in the one to Mrs. Montagu? 'Expect me to turn up at half-past two.' Aha, I thought so! Checkmate, Mr. Ernest, checkmate: a scholar's mate for you! He'll be at the hospital till half-past one; then he'll take the train to Clapham Junction, expecting to catch the South-Western at 2.10. But to-morrow's the first of the month; the new time-tables come into force; I've got one and looked it out already. The South-Western now leaves at 2.4, three minutes before Mr. Ernest's train arrives at Clapham Junction. I have him now, I have him now, depend upon it. I'll go down instead of him. I'll get the party under way at once. I'll monopolize Isabel, pretty Isabel. I'll find my opportunity at Aunt Portlebury's, and Ernest won't get down to Surbiton till the 2.50 train. Then he'll find his bird flown already. Aha! that'll make him angry. Checkmate, my young friend, checkmate. You said it should be war, and war you shall have it. I thank thee, friend, for teaching me that word. Rivals now, you said; yes, rivals. 'Dolus an virtus, quis in hoste requirat?' Why, that comes out of the passage about Androgeos! An omen, a good omen. There's nothing like war for quickening the intelligence. I haven't looked at a Virgil since I was in the sixth form; and yet the line comes back to me now, after five years, as pat as the Catechism."

Chuckling to himself at the fraud to stifle conscience (for he had a conscience), Harold Carnegie dressed hastily for dinner, and went down quickly in a state of feverish excitement. Dinner passed off grimly enough. He knew Ernest had written to Isabel; and Ernest guessed from the other's excited, triumphant manner (though he tried hard to dissemble the note of triumph in it) that Harold must have written too—perhaps forestalling him by a direct proposal. In a dim way Mrs. Carnegie guessed vaguely that some coldness had arisen between her two boys, the first time for many years; and so she held her peace for the most part, or talked in asides to Nellie Holt and her daughter. The conversation was therefore chiefly delegated to Mr. Carnegie himself, who discoursed with much animation about the iniquitous nature of the new act for reducing costs in actions for the recovery of small debts—a subject calculated to arouse the keenest interest in the minds of Nellie and Edie.

Next morning, Harold Carnegie started for the office with prospective victory elate in his very step, and yet with the consciousness of his own mean action grinding him down to the pavement as he walked along it. What a dirty, petty, dishonourable subterfuge! and still he would go through with it. What a self-degrading bit of

treachery! and yet he would carry it out. "Pater," he said, as he walked along, "I mean to take a holiday this afternoon. I'm going to the Montagus' water-party."

"Very inconvenient, Harold, my boy; 'Wilkins *versus* the Great Northern Railway Company' coming on for hearing; and, besides, Ernest's going there too. They won't want a pair of you, will they?"

"Can't help it, Pater," Harold answered. "I have particular business at Surbiton, much more important to me than 'Wilkins *versus* the Great Northern Railway Company.'"

His father looked at him keenly. "Ha!" he said, "a lady in the case, is there? Very well, my boy, if you must you must, and that's the end of it. A young man in love never does make an efficient lawyer. Get it over quickly, pray; get it over quickly, that's all I beg of you."

"I shall get it over, I promise you," Harold answered, "this very afternoon."

The father whistled. "Whew," he said, "that's sharp work, too, Harold, isn't it? You haven't even told me her name yet. This is really very sudden." But as Harold volunteered no further information, Mr. Carnegie, who was a shrewd man of the world, held it good policy to ask him nothing more about it for the present; and so they walked on the rest of the way to the father's office in unbroken silence.

At one o'clock, Harold shut up his desk at the office and ran down to Surbiton. At Clapham Junction he kept a sharp look-out for Ernest, but Ernest was not there. Clearly, as Harold anticipated, he hadn't learnt the alteration in the time-tables, and wouldn't reach Clapham Junction till the train for Surbiton had started.

At Surbiton, Harold pushed on arrangements as quickly as possible, and managed to get the party off before Ernest arrived upon the scene. Mrs. Montagu, seeing "one of the young Carnegies" duly to hand, and never having attempted to discriminate between them in any way, was perfectly happy at the prospect of getting landed at Lady Portlebury's without any minute investigation of the intricate question of Christian names. The Montagus were *nouveaux riches* in the very act of pushing themselves into fashionable society; and a chance of invading the Portlebury lawn was extremely welcome to them upon any terms whatsoever.

Isabel Walters was looking charming. A light morning dress became her even better than the dark red satin of the night before last; and she smiled at Harold with the smile of a mutual confidence when she took his hand, in a way that made his heart throb fast within him. From that moment forward, he forgot Ernest and the unworthy trick he was playing, and thought wholly and solely of Isabel Walters.

What a handsome young man he was, really, and how cleverly and brilliantly he talked all the way up to Portlebury Lodge! Everybody listened to him; he was the life

and soul of the party. Isabel felt more flattered than ever at his marked attention. He was the doctor, wasn't he? No, the lawyer. Well, really, how impossible it was to distinguish and remember them. And so well connected, too. If he were to propose to her, now, she could afford to be so condescending to Amy Balfour.

At Lady Portlebury's lawn the steam-launch halted, and Harold managed to get Isabel alone among the walks, while his aunt escorted the main body of visitors thus thrust upon her hands over the conservatories. Eager and hasty, now, he lost no time in making the best of the situation.

"I guessed as much, of course, from your letter, Mr. Carnegie," Isabel said, playing with her fan with downcast eyes, as he pressed his offer upon her; "and I really didn't know whether it was right of me to come here without showing it to mamma and asking her advice about it. But I'm quite sure I oughtn't to give you an answer at once, because I've seen so very little of you. Let us leave the question open for a little. It's asking so much to ask one for a definite reply on such a very short acquaintance."

"No, no, Miss Walters," Harold said quickly. "For Heaven's sake, give me an answer now, I beg of you—I implore you. I *must* have an answer at once, immediately. If you can't love me at first sight, for my own sake—as I loved you the moment I saw you—you can never, never, never love me! Doubt and hesitation are impossible in true love. Now, or refuse me for ever! Surely you must know in your own heart whether you can love me or not; if your heart tells you that you can, then trust it—trust it—don't argue and reason with it, but say at once you will make me happy for ever."

"Mr. Carnegie," Isabel said, lifting her eyes for a moment, "I do think, perhaps—I don't know—but perhaps, after a little while, I could love you. I like you very much; won't that do for the present? Why are you in such a hurry for an answer? Why can't you give me a week or two to decide in?"

"Because," said Harold, desperately, "if I give you a week my brother will ask you, and perhaps you will marry him instead of me. He's always before me in everything, and I'm afraid he'll be before me in this. Say you'll have me, Miss Walters—oh, do say you'll have me, and save me from the misery of a week's suspense!"

"But, Mr. Carnegie, how can I say anything when I haven't yet made up my own mind about it? Why, I hardly know you yet from your brother."

"Ah, that's just it," Harold cried, in a voice of positive pain. "You won't find any difference at all between us, if you come to know us; and then perhaps you'll be induced to marry my brother. But you know this much already, that here am I,

begging and pleading before you this very minute, and surely you won't send me away with my prayer unanswered!"

There was such a look of genuine anguish and passion in his face that Isabel Walters, already strongly prepossessed in his favour, could resist no longer. She bent her head a little, and whispered very softly, "I will promise, Mr. Carnegie; I will promise."

Harold seized her hand eagerly, and covered it with kisses. "Isabel," he cried in a fever of joy, "you have promised. You are mine—mine—mine. You are mine, now and for ever!"

Isabel bowed her head, and felt a tear standing dimly in her eye, though she brushed it away hastily. "Yes," she said gently; "I will be yours. I think—I think—I feel sure I can love you."

Harold took her ungloved hand tenderly in his, and drew a ring off her finger. "Before I give you mine," he said, "you will let me take this one? I want it for a keepsake and a memorial."

Isabel whispered, "Yes."

Harold drew another ring from his pocket and slipped it softly on her third finger. Isabel saw by the glitter that there was a diamond in it. Harold had bought it the day before for that very purpose. Then he took from a small box a plain gold locket, with the letter H raised on it. "I want you to wear this," he said, "as a keepsake for me."

"But why H?" Isabel asked him, looking a little puzzled. "Your name's Ernest, isn't it?"

Harold smiled as well as he was able. "How absurd it is!" he said, with an effort at gaiety. "This ridiculous similarity pursues us everywhere. No, my name's Harold."

Isabel stood for a moment surprised and hesitating. She really hardly knew for the second which brother she ought to consider herself engaged to. "Then it wasn't you who wrote to me?" she said, with a tone of some surprise and a little start of astonishment.

"No, I certainly didn't write to you; but I came here to-day expecting to see you, and meaning to ask you to be my wife. I learned from my brother ("there can be no falsehood in putting it that way," he thought vainly to himself) that you were to be here; and I determined to seize the opportunity. Ernest meant to have come, too, but I believe he must have lost the train at Clapham Junction." That was all literally true, and yet it sounded simple and plausible enough.

Isabel looked at him with a puzzled look, and felt almost compelled to laugh, the situation was so supremely ridiculous. It took a moment to think it all out rationally. Yet, after all, though the letter came from the other brother, Ernest, it was this

particular brother, Harold, she had been talking to and admiring all the day; it was this particular brother, Harold, who had gained her consent, and whom she had promised to love and to marry. And at that moment it would have been doing Isabel Walters an injustice not to admit that in her own soul she did then and there really love Harold Carnegie.

“Harold,” she said slowly, as she took the locket and hung it round her neck, “Harold. Yes, now I know. Then, Harold Carnegie, I shall take your locket and wear it always as a keepsake from you.” And she looked up at him with a smile in which there was something more than mere passing coquettish fancy. You see, he was really terribly in earnest; and the very fact that he should have been so anxious to anticipate his brother, and should have anticipated him successfully, made her woman’s heart go forth toward him instinctively. As Harold himself said, he was there bodily present before her; while Ernest, the writer of the mysterious letter, was nothing more to her in reality than a name and a shadow. Harold had asked her, and won her; and she was ready to love and cleave to Harold from that day forth for that very reason. What woman of them all has a better reason to give in the last resort for the faith that is in her?

V.

Meanwhile, at Clapham Junction, Ernest Carnegie had arrived three minutes too late for the Surbiton train, and had been forced to wait for the 2.40. Of that he thought little: they would wait for him, he knew, if they waited an hour; for Mrs. Montagu would not for worlds have missed the chance of showing her guests round Lady Portlebury’s gardens. So he settled himself down comfortably in the snug corner of his first-class carriage, and ran down by the later train in perfect confidence that he would find the steam launch waiting.

“No, sir, they’ve gone up the river in the launch, sir,” said the man who opened the door for him; “and, I beg pardon, sir, but I thought you were one of the party.”

In a moment Ernest’s fancy, quickened by his jealousy, jumped instinctively at the true meaning of the man’s mistake. “What,” he said, “was there a gentleman very like me, in a grey coat and straw hat—same ribbon as this one?”

“Yes, sir. Exactly, sir. Well, indeed, I should have said it was yourself, sir; but I suppose it was the other Mr. Carnegie.”

“It was!” Ernest answered between his clenched teeth, almost inarticulate with anger. “It was he. Not a doubt of it. Harold! I see it all. The treachery—the base treachery! How long have they been gone, I say? How long, eh?”

“About half an hour, sir; they went up towards Henley, sir.”

Ernest Carnegie turned aside, reeling with wrath and indignation. That his brother, his own familiar twin-brother, should have played him this abominable, disgraceful trick! The meanness of it! The deceit of it! The petty spying and letter-opening of it! For somehow or other—inconceivable how—Harold must have opened his brother’s letters. And then, quick as lightning, for those two brains jumped together, the thought of the blotting-book flashed across Ernest’s mind. Why, he had noticed this morning that a page was gone out of it. He must have read the letters. And then the trains! Harold always got a time-table on the first of each month, with his cursed methodical lawyer ways. And he had never told him about the change of service. The dirty low trick! The mean trick! Even to think of it made Ernest Carnegie sick at heart and bitterly indignant.

In a minute he saw it all and thought it all out. Why did he—how did he? Why, he knew as clearly as if he could read Harold’s thoughts, exactly how the whole vile plot had first risen upon him, and worked itself out within his traitorous brain. How? Ah, how! That was the bitterest, the most horrible, the deadliest part of it all. Ernest Carnegie knew, because he felt in his own inmost soul that, had he been put in the same circumstances, he would himself have done exactly as Harold had done.

Yes, exactly in every respect. Harold must have seen the words in the blotting-book, “My dear Miss Walters”—Ernest remembered how thickly and blackly he had written—must have seen those words; and in their present condition, either of the twins, jealous, angry, suspicious, half driven by envy of one another out of their moral senses, would have torn out the page then and there and read it all. He, too, would have kept silence about the train; he would have gone down to Surbiton; he would have proposed to Isabel Walters; he would have done in everything exactly as he knew Harold must have done it; but that did not make his anger and loathing for his brother any the weaker. On the contrary, it only made them all the more terrible. His consciousness of his own equal potential meanness roused his rage against Harold to a white heat. He would have done the same himself, no doubt; yes; but Harold, the mean, successful, actually accomplishing villain—Harold had really gone down and done it all in positive fact and reality.

Flushing scarlet and blanching white alternately with the fierceness of his anger, Ernest Carnegie turned down, all on fire, to the river’s edge. Should he take a boat and row up after them to prevent the supplanted at least from proposing to Isabel unopposed? That would at any rate give him something to do—muscular work for his arms, if nothing else, to counteract the fire within him; but on second thoughts, no, it would be quite useless. The steam launch had had a good start of him, and no

oarsman could catch up with it now by any possibility. So he walked about up and down near the river, chafing in soul and nursing his wrath against Harold for three long weary hours. And all that time Harold, false-hearted, fair-spoken, mean-spirited Harold, was enjoying himself and playing the gallant to Isabel Walters!

Minute by minute the hours wore away, and with every minute Ernest's indignation grew deeper and deeper. At last he heard the snort of the steam-launch ploughing its way lustily down the river, and he stood on the bank waiting for the guilty Harold to disembark.

As Harold stepped from the launch, and gave his hand to Isabel, he saw the white and bloodless face of his brother looking up at him contemptuously and coldly from beside the landing. Harold passed ashore and close by him, but Ernest never spoke a word. He only looked a moment at Isabel, and said to her with enforced calmness, "You got my letter, Miss Walters?"

Isabel, hardly comprehending the real solemnity of the occasion, answered with a light smile, "I did, Mr. Carnegie, but you didn't keep your appointment. Your brother came, and he has been beforehand with you." And she touched his hand lightly and went on to join her hostess.

Still Ernest Carnegie said nothing, but walked on, as black as night, beside his brother. Neither spoke a word; but after the shaking of hands and farewells were over, both turned together to the railway station. The carriage was crowded, and so Ernest still held his tongue.

At last, when they reached home and stood in the passage together, Ernest looked at his brother with a look of withering scorn, and, livid with anger, found his voice at last.

"Harold Carnegie," he said, in a low husky tone, "you are a mean interceptor of other men's letters; a sneaking supplanter of other men's appointments; a cur and a traitor whom I don't wish any longer to associate with. I know what you have done, and I know how you have done it. You have kept my engagement with Isabel Walters by reading the impression of my notes on the blotting-book. You are unfit for a gentleman to speak to, and I cast you off, now and for ever."

Harold looked at him defiantly, but said never a word.

"Harold Carnegie," Ernest said again, "I could hardly believe your treachery until it was forced upon me. This is the last time I shall ever speak to you."

Harold looked at him again, this time perhaps with a tinge of remorse in his expression, and said nothing but, "Oh, Ernest."

Ernest made a gesture with his hands as though he would repel him. "Don't come near me," he said; "Harold Carnegie, don't touch me! Don't call me by my

name! I will have nothing more to say or do with you.”

Harold turned away in dead silence, and went to his own room, trembling with conscious humiliation and self-reproach. But he did not attempt to make the only atonement in his power by giving up Isabel Walters. That would have been too much for human nature.

VI.

When Harold Carnegie was finally married to Isabel Walters, Ernest stopped away from the wedding, and would have nothing whatever to say either to bride or bridegroom. He would leave his unnatural brother, he said, solely and entirely to the punishment of his own guilty conscience.

Still, he couldn't rest quiet in his father's house after Harold was gone, so he took himself small rooms near the hospital, and there he lived his lonely life entirely by himself, a solitary man, brooding miserably over his own wrongs and Harold's treachery. There was only one single woman in the world, he said, with whom he could ever have been really happy—Isabel Walters: and Harold had stolen Isabel Walters away from him by the basest treason. Once he could have loved Isabel, and her only; now, because she was Harold's wife, he bitterly hated her. Yes, hated her! With a deadly hatred he hated both of them.

Months went by slowly for Ernest Carnegie, in the dull drudgery of his hopeless professional life, for he cared nothing now for ambition or advancement; he lived wholly in the past, nursing his wrath, and devouring his own soul in angry regretfulness. Months went by, and at last Harold's wife gave birth to a baby—a boy, the exact image of his father and his uncle. Harold looked at the child in the nurse's arms, and said remorsefully, “We will call him Ernest. It is all we can do now, Isabel. We will call him Ernest, after my dear lost brother.” So they called him Ernest, in the faint hope that his uncle's heart might relent a little; and Harold wrote a letter full of deep and bitter penitence to his brother, piteously begging his forgiveness for the grievous wrong he had wickedly and deliberately done him. But Ernest still nursed his righteous wrath silently in his own bosom, and tore up the letter into a thousand fragments, unanswered.

When the baby was five months old, Edie Carnegie came round hurriedly one morning to Ernest's lodgings near the hospital. “Ernest, Ernest,” she cried, running up the stairs in great haste, “we want you to come round and see Harold. We're afraid he's very ill. Don't say you won't come and see him!”

Ernest Carnegie listened and smiled grimly. “Very ill,” he muttered, with a

dreadful gleam in his eyes. "Very ill, is he? and I have had nothing the matter with me! How curious! Very ill! I ought to have had the same illness a fortnight ago. Ha, ha! The cycle is broken! The clocks have ceased to strike together! His marriage has altered the run of his constitution—mine remains the same steady striker as ever. I thought it would! I thought it would! Perhaps he'll die, now, the mean, miserable traitor!"

Edie Carnegie looked at him in undisguised horror. "Oh, Ernest," she cried, with the utmost dismay; "your own brother! Your own brother! Surely you'll come and see him, and tell us what's the matter."

"Yes, I'll come and see him," Ernest answered, unmoved, taking up his hat. "I'll come and see him, and find out what's the matter." But there was an awful air of malicious triumph in his tone, which perfectly horrified his trembling sister.

When Ernest reached his brother's house, he went at once to Harold's bedside, and without a word of introduction or recognition he began inquiring into the nature of his symptoms, exactly as he would have done with any unknown and ordinary patient. Harold told him them all, simply and straightforwardly, without any more preface than he would have used with any other doctor. When Ernest had finished his diagnosis, he leaned back carelessly in his easy chair, folded his arms sternly, and said in a perfectly cold, clear, remorseless voice, "Ah, I thought so; yes, yes, I thought so. It's a serious functional disorder of the heart; and there's very little hope indeed that you'll ever recover from it. No hope at all, I may say; no hope at all, I'm certain. The thing has been creeping upon you, creeping upon you, evidently, for a year past, and it has gone too far now to leave the faintest hope of ultimate recovery."

Isabel burst into tears at the words—calmly spoken as though they were perfectly indifferent to both speaker and hearers; but Harold only rose up fiercely in the bed, and cried in a tone of the most imploring agony, "Oh, Ernest, Ernest, if I must die, for Heaven's sake, before I die, say you forgive me, do say, do say you forgive me. Oh, Ernest, dear Ernest, dear brother Ernest, for the sake of our long, happy friendship, for the sake of the days when we loved one another with a love passing the love of women, do, do say you will at last forgive me."

Ernest rose and fumbled nervously for a second with the edge of his hat. "Harold Carnegie," he said at last, in a voice trembling with excitement, "I can never forgive you. You acted a mean, dirty part, and I can never forgive you. Heaven may, perhaps it will; but as for me, I can never, never, never forgive you!"

Harold fell back feebly and wearily upon the pillows. "Ernest, Ernest," he cried, gasping, "you might forgive me! you ought to forgive me! you must forgive me! and

I'll tell you why. I didn't want to say it, but now you force me. I know it as well as if I'd seen you do it. In my place, I know to a certainty, Ernest, you'd have done exactly as I did. Ernest Carnegie, you can't look me straight in the face and tell me that you wouldn't have acted exactly as I did."

That terrible unspoken truth, long known, but never confessed, even to himself, struck like a knife on Ernest's heart. He raised his hat blindly, and walked with unsteady steps out of the sick-room. At that moment, his own conscience smote him with awful vividness. Looking into the inmost recesses of his angry heart, he felt with a shudder that Harold had spoken the simple truth, and he dared not lie by contradicting him. In Harold's place he would have done exactly as Harold did! And that was just what made his deathless anger burn all the more fiercely and fervidly against his brother!

Groping his way down the stairs alone in a stunned and dazzled fashion, Ernest Carnegie went home in his agony to his lonely lodgings, and sat there solitary with his own tempestuous thoughts for the next eight-and-forty hours. He did not undress or lie down to sleep, though he dozed a little at times uneasily in his big arm-chair; he did not eat or drink much; he merely paced up and down his room feverishly, and sent his boy round at intervals of an hour or two to know how the doctor thought Mr. Harold Carnegie was getting on. The boy returned every time with uniformly worse and worse reports. Ernest rubbed his hands in horrid exultation: "Ah," he said to himself, eagerly, "he will die! he will die! he will pay the penalty of his dirty treachery! He has brought it all upon himself by marrying that wicked woman! He deserves it every bit for his mean conduct."

On the third morning, Edie came round again, this time with her mother. Both had tears in their eyes, and they implored Ernest with sobs and entreaties to come round and see Harold once more before he died. Harold was raving and crying for him in his weakness and delirium. But Ernest was like adamant. He would not go to see him, he said, not if they went down bodily on their knees before him.

At midday, the boy went again, and stayed a little longer than usual. When he returned, he brought back word that Mr. Harold Carnegie had died just as the clock was striking the hour. Ernest listened with a look of terror and dismay, and then broke down into a terrible fit of sobbing and weeping. When Edie came round a little later to tell him that all was over, she found him crying like a child in his own easy chair, and muttering to himself in a broken fashion how dearly he and Harold had loved one another years ago, when they were both happy children together.

Edie took him round to his brother's house, and there, over the deaf and blind face that lay cold upon the pillows, he cried the cry that he would not cry over his

living, imploring brother. “Oh, Harold, Harold,” he groaned in his broken agony, “I forgive you, I forgive you. I too sinned as you did. What you would do, I would do. It was bound up in both our natures. In your place I would have done as you did. But now the curse of Cain is upon me! A worse curse than Cain’s is upon me! I have more than killed my brother!”

For a day or two Ernest went back, heart-broken, to his father’s house, and slept once more in the old room where he used to sleep so long, next door to Harold’s. At the end of three days, he woke once from one of his short snatches of sleep with a strange fluttering feeling in his left side. He knew in a moment what it was. It was the same disease that Harold had died of.

“Thank Heaven!” he said to himself eagerly, “thank Heaven, thank Heaven for that! Then I didn’t wholly kill him! His blood isn’t all upon my poor unhappy head. After all, his marriage didn’t quite upset the harmony of the two clocks; it only made the slower one catch up for a while and pass the faster. I’m a fortnight later in striking than Harold this time; that’s all. In three days more the clock will run down, and I shall die as he did.”

And, true to time, in three days more, as the clock struck twelve, Ernest Carnegie died as his brother Harold had done before him, with the agonized cry for forgiveness trembling on his fevered lips—who knows whether answered or unanswered?

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: The Two Carnegies* by Grant Allen]