

**THE  
BECKONING HAND:**

**Harry's Inheritance**

**By  
Grant Allen**

**1887**

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# *HARRY'S INHERITANCE.*

## I.

Colonel Sir Thomas Woolrych, K.C.B. (retired list), was a soldier of the old school, much attached to pipe-clay and purchase, and with a low opinion of competitive examinations, the first six books of Euclid, the local military centres, the territorial titles of regiments, the latest regulation pattern in half-dress buttons, and most other confounded new-fangled radical fal-lal and trumpery in general. Sir Thomas believed as firmly in the wisdom of our ancestors as he distrusted the wisdom of our nearest descendants, now just attaining to years of maturity and indiscretion. Especially had he a marked dislike for this nasty modern shopkeeping habit of leaving all your loose money lying idly at your banker's, and paying everybody with a dirty little bit of crumpled paper, instead of pulling out a handful of gold, magnificently, from your trousers pocket, and flinging the sovereigns boldly down before you upon the counter like an officer and a gentleman. Why should you let one of those bloated, overfed, lazy banker-fellows grow rich out of borrowing your money from you for nothing, without so much as a thank-you, and lending it out again to some other poor devil of a tradesman (probably in difficulties) at seven per cent. on short discount? No, no; that was not the way Sir Thomas Woolrych had been accustomed to live when he was an ensign (sub-lieutenant they positively call it nowadays) at Ahmednuggur, in the North-West Provinces. In those days, my dear sir, a man drew his monthly screw by pay-warrant, took the rupees in solid cash, locked them up carefully in the desk in his bungalow, helped himself liberally to them while they lasted, and gave IOUs for any little trifle of cards or horses he might happen to have let himself in for meanwhile with his brother-officers. IOUs are of course a gentlemanly and recognized form of monetary engagement, but for bankers' cheques Sir Thomas positively felt little less than contempt and loathing.

Nevertheless, in his comfortable villa in the park at Cheltenham (called Futteypoor Lodge, after that famous engagement during the Mutiny which gave the Colonel his regiment and his K.C.B.-ship) he stood one evening looking curiously at his big devonport, and muttered to himself with more than one most military oath, "Hanged if I don't think I shall positively be compelled to patronize these banker-fellows after all. Somebody must have been helping himself again to some of my sovereigns."

Sir Thomas was not by nature a suspicious man—he was too frank and open-hearted himself to think ill easily of others—but he couldn't avoid feeling certain that

somebody had been tampering unjustifiably with the contents of his devonport. He counted the rows of sovereigns over once more, very carefully; then he checked the number taken out by the entry in his pocket-book; and then he leaned back in his chair with a puzzled look, took a meditative puff or two at the stump of his cigar, and blew out the smoke in a long curl that left a sort of pout upon his heavily moustached lip as soon as he had finished. Not a doubt in the world about it—somebody must have helped himself again to a dozen sovereigns.

It was a hateful thing to put a watch upon your servants and dependents, but Sir Thomas felt he must really do it. He reckoned up the long rows a third time with military precision, entered the particulars once more most accurately in his pocket-book, sighed a deep sigh of regret at the distasteful occupation, and locked up the devonport at last with the air of a man who resigns himself unwillingly to a most unpleasant duty. Then he threw away the fag-end of the smoked-out cigar, and went up slowly to dress for dinner.

Sir Thomas's household consisted entirely of himself and his nephew Harry, for he had never been married, and he regarded all womankind alike from afar off, with a quaint, respectful, old-world chivalry; but he made a point of dressing scrupulously every day for dinner, even when alone, as a decorous formality due to himself, his servants, society, the military profession, and the *convenances* in general. If he and his nephew dined together they dressed for one another; if they dined separately they dressed all the same, for the sake of the institution. When a man once consents to eat his evening meal in a blue tie and a morning cutaway, there's no drawing a line until you finally find him an advanced republican and an accomplice of those dreadful War Office people who are bent upon allowing the service to go to the devil. If Colonel Sir Thomas Woolrych, K.C.B., had for a single night been guilty of such abominable laxity, the whole fabric of society would have tottered to its base, and gods and footmen would have felt instinctively that it was all up with the British constitution.

"Harry," Sir Thomas said, as soon they sat down to dinner together, "are you going out anywhere this evening, my boy?"

Harry looked up a little surlily, and answered after a moment's hesitation, "Why, yes, uncle, I thought—I thought of going round and having a game of billiards with Tom Whitmarsh."

Sir Thomas cleared his throat, and hemmed dubiously. "In that case," he said at last, after a short pause, "I think I'll go down to the club myself and have a rubber. Wilkins, the carriage at half-past nine. I'm sorry, Harry, you're going out this evening."

“Why so, uncle? It’s only just round to the Whitmarshes’, you know.”

Sir Thomas shut one eye and glanced with the other at the light through his glass of sherry, held up between finger and thumb critically and suspiciously. “A man may disapprove *in toto* of the present system of competitive examinations for the army,” he said slowly; “for my part, I certainly do, and I make no secret of it; admitting a lot of butchers and bakers and candlestick makers plump into the highest ranks of the service: no tone, no character, no position, no gentlemanly feeling; a great mistake—a great mistake; I told them so at the time. I said to them, ‘Gentlemen, you are simply ruining the service.’ But they took no notice of me; and what’s the consequence? Competitive examination has been the ruin of the service, exactly as I told them. Began with that; then abolition of purchase; then local centres; then that abominable strap with the slip buckle—there, there, Harry, upon my soul, my boy, I can’t bear to think of it. But a man may be opposed, as I said, to the whole present system of competitive examination, and yet, while that system still unfortunately continues to exist (that is to say, until a European War convinces all sensible people of the confounded folly of it), he may feel that his own young men, who are reading up for a direct commission, ought to be trying their hardest to get as much of this nonsensical humbug into their heads as possible during the time just before their own examinations. Now, Harry, I’m afraid you’re not reading quite as hard as you ought to be doing. The crammer’s all very well in his way, of course, but depend upon it, the crammer by himself won’t get you through it. What’s needed is private study.”

Harry turned his handsome dark eyes upon his uncle—a very dark, almost gipsy-looking face altogether, Harry’s—and answered deprecatingly, “Well, sir, and don’t I go in for private study? Didn’t I read up *Samson Agonistes* all by myself right through yesterday?”

“I don’t know what Samson Something-or-other is,” the old gentleman replied testily. “What the dickens has Samson Something-or-other got to do with the preparation of a military man, I should like to know, sir?”

“It’s the English Literature book for the exam., you know,” Harry answered, with a quiet smile. “We’ve got to get it up, you see, with all the allusions and what-you-may-call-its, for direct commission. It’s a sort of a play, I think I should call it, by John Milton.”

“Oh, it’s the English Literature, is it?” the old Colonel went on, somewhat mollified. “In my time, Harry, we weren’t expected to know anything about English literature. The Articles of War, and the Officer’s Companion, By Authority, that was the kind of literature we used to be examined in. But nowadays they expect a soldier to be read up in Samson Something-or-other, do they really? Well, well, let them

have their fad, let them have their fad, poor creatures. Still, Harry, I'm very much afraid you're wasting your time, and your money also. If I thought you only went to the Whitmarshes' to see Miss Milly, now, I shouldn't mind so much about it. Miss Milly is a very charming, sweet young creature, certainly—extremely pretty, too, extremely pretty—I don't deny it. You're young yet to go making yourself agreeable, my boy, to a pretty girl like that; you ought to wait for that sort of thing till you've got your majority, or at least, your company—a young man reading for direct commission has no business to go stuffing his head cram full with love and nonsense. No, no; he should leave it all free for fortification, and the general instructions, and Samson Something-or-other, if soldiers can't be made nowadays without English literature. But still, I don't so much object to that, I say—a sweet girl, certainly, Miss Milly—what I do object to is your knocking about so much at billiard-rooms, and so forth, with that young fellow Whitmarsh. Not a very nice young fellow, or a good companion for you either, Harry. I'm afraid, I'm afraid, my boy, he makes you spend a great deal too much money.”

“I've never yet had to ask you to increase my allowance, sir,” the young man answered haughtily, with a curious glance sideways at his uncle.

“Wilkins,” Sir Thomas put in, with a nod to the butler, “go down and bring up a bottle of the old Madeira. Harry, my boy, don't let us discuss questions of this sort before the servants. My boy, I've never kept you short of money in any way, I hope; and if I ever do, I trust you'll tell me of it, tell me of it immediately.”

Harry's dark cheeks burned bright for a moment, but he answered never a single word, and went on eating his dinner silently, with a very hang-dog look indeed upon his handsome features.

## II.

At half-past nine Sir Thomas drove down to the club, and, when he reached the door, dismissed the coachman. "I shall walk back, Morton," he said. "I shan't want you again this evening. Don't let them sit up for me. I mayn't be home till two in the morning."

But as soon as the coachman had had full time to get back again in perfect safety, Sir Thomas walked straight down the club steps once more, and up the Promenade, and all the way to Futteypoor Lodge. When he got there, he opened the door silently with his latch-key, shut it again without the slightest noise, and walked on tip-toe into the library. It was an awkward sort of thing to do, certainly, but Sir Thomas was convinced in his own mind that he ought to do it. He wheeled an easy chair into the recess by the window, in front of which the curtains were drawn, arranged the folds so that he could see easily into the room by the slit between them, and sat down patiently to explore this mystery to the very bottom.

Sir Thomas was extremely loth in his own mind to suspect anybody; and yet it was quite clear that some one or other must have taken the missing sovereigns. Twice over money had been extracted. It couldn't have been cook, of that he felt certain; nor Wilkins either. Very respectable woman, cook—very respectable butler, Wilkins. Not Morton; oh dear no, quite impossible, certainly not Morton. Not the housemaid, or the boy: obviously neither; well-conducted young people, every one of them. But who the dickens could it be then? for certainly somebody had taken the money. The good old Colonel felt in his heart that for the sake of everybody's peace of mind it was his bounden duty to discover the real culprit before saying a single word to anybody about it.

There was something very ridiculous, of course, not to say undignified and absurd, in the idea of an elderly field officer, late in Her Majesty's service, sitting thus for hour after hour stealthily behind his own curtains, in the dark, as if he were a thief or a burglar, waiting to see whether anybody came to open his devonport. Sir Thomas grew decidedly wearied as he watched and waited, and but for his strong sense of the duty imposed upon him of tracking the guilty person, he would once or twice in the course of the evening have given up the quest from sheer disgust and annoyance at the absurdity of the position. But no; he must find out who had done it: so there he sat, as motionless as a cat watching a mouse-hole, with his eye turned always in the direction of the devonport, through the slight slit between the folded curtains.

Ten o'clock struck upon the clock on the mantelpiece—half-past ten—eleven.

Sir Thomas stretched his legs, yawned, and muttered audibly, "Confounded slow, really." Half-past eleven. Sir Thomas went over noiselessly to the side table, where the decanters were standing, and helped himself to a brandy and seltzer, squeezing down the cork of the bottle carefully with his thumb, to prevent its popping, till all the gas had escaped piecemeal. Then he crept back, still noiselessly, feeling more like a convicted thief himself than a Knight Commander of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, and wondering when the deuce this pilfering lock-breaker was going to begin his nightly depredations. Not till after Harry came back most likely. The thief, whoever he or she was, would probably be afraid to venture into the library while there was still a chance of Harry returning unexpectedly and disturbing the whole procedure. But when once Harry had gone to bed, they would all have heard from Morton that Sir Thomas was going to be out late, and the thief would then doubtless seize so good an opportunity of helping himself unperceived to the counted sovereigns.

About half past eleven, there was a sound of steps upon the garden-walk, and Harry's voice could be heard audibly through the half-open window. The colonel caught the very words against his will. Harry was talking with Tom Whitmarsh, who had walked round to see him home; his voice was a little thick, as if with wine, and he seemed terribly excited (to judge by his accent) about something or other that had just happened.

"Good night, Tom," the young man was saying, with an outward show of carelessness barely concealing a great deal of underlying irritation. "I'll pay you up what I lost to-morrow or the next day. You shall have your money, don't be afraid about it."

"Oh, it's all right," Tom Whitmarsh's voice answered in an offhand fashion. "Pay me whenever you like, you know, Woolrych. It doesn't matter to me when you pay me, this year or next year, so long as I get it sooner or later."

Sir Thomas listened with a sinking heart. "Play," he thought to himself. "Play, play, play, already! It was his father's curse, poor fellow, and I hope it won't be Harry's. It's some comfort to think, anyhow, that it's only billiards."

"Well, good night, Tom," Harry went on, ringing the bell as he spoke.

"Good night, Harry. I hope next time the cards won't go so persistently against you."

The cards! Phew! That was bad indeed. Sir Thomas started. He didn't object to a quiet after-dinner rubber on his own account, naturally: but this wasn't whist; oh, no; nothing of the sort. This was evidently serious playing. He drew a long breath, and felt he must talk very decidedly about the matter to Harry to-morrow morning.

“Is my uncle home yet, Wilkins?”

“No, sir; he said he wouldn’t be back probably till two o’clock, and we wasn’t to sit up for him.”

“All right then. Give me a light for a minute in the library. I’ll take a seltzer before I go upstairs, just to steady me.”

Sir Thomas almost laughed outright. This was really too ridiculous. Suppose, after all the waiting, Harry was to come over and discover him sitting there in the darkness by the window, what a pretty figure he would cut before him. And besides, the whole thing would have to come out then, and after all the thief would never be discovered and punished. The Colonel grew hot and red in the face, and began to wish to goodness he hadn’t in the first place let himself in, in any way, for this ridiculous amateur detective business.

But Harry drank his seltzer standing by the side table, with no brandy, either; that was a good thing, no brandy. If he’d taken brandy, too, in his present excited condition, when he’d already certainly had quite as much as was at all good for him, Sir Thomas would have been justly and seriously angry. But, after all, Harry was a good boy at bottom, and knew how to avoid such ugly habits. He took his seltzer and his bedroom candle. Wilkins turned out the light in the room, and Harry went upstairs by himself immediately.

Then Wilkins turned the key in the library door, and the old gentleman began to reflect that this was really a most uncomfortable position for him to be left in. Suppose they locked him in there till to-morrow morning! Ah! happy thought; if the worst came to the worst he could get out of the library window and let himself in at the front door by means of his latch-key.

The servants all filed upstairs, one by one, in an irregular procession; their feet died away gradually upon the upper landings, and a solemn silence came at last over the whole household. Sir Thomas’s heart began to beat faster: the excitement of plot interest was growing stronger upon him. This was the time the thief would surely choose to open the devonport. He should know now within twenty minutes which it was of all his people, whom he trusted so implicitly, that was really robbing him.

And he treated them all so kindly, too. Ha, the rascal! he should catch it well, that he should, whoever he was, as soon as ever Sir Thomas discovered him.

Not if it were Wilkins, though; not if it were Wilkins. Sir Thomas hoped it wasn’t really that excellent fellow Wilkins. A good old tried and trusty servant. If any unexpected financial difficulties——

Hush, hush! Quietly now. A step upon the landing.

Coming down noiselessly, noiselessly, noiselessly. Not Wilkins; not heavy enough

for him, surely; no, no, a woman's step, so very light, so light and noiseless. Sir Thomas really hoped in his heart it wasn't that pretty delicate-looking girl, the new housemaid. If it was, by Jove, yes, he'd give her a good lecture then and there, that very minute, about it, offer to pay her passage quietly out to Canada, and—recommend her to get married decently, to some good young fellow, on the earliest possible opportunity.

The key turned once more in the lock, and then the door opened stealthily. Somebody glided like a ghost into the middle of the room. Sir Thomas, gazing intently through the slit in the curtains, murmured to himself that now at last he should fairly discover the confounded rascal.

Ha! How absurd! He could hardly help laughing once more at the ridiculous collapse to his high-wrought expectations. And yet he restrained himself. It was only Harry! Harry come down, candle in hand, no doubt to get another glass of seltzer. The Colonel hoped not with brandy. No; not with brandy. He put the glass up to his dry lips—Sir Thomas could see they were dry and feverish even from that distance; horrid thing, this gambling!—and he drained it off at a gulp, like a thirsty man who has tasted no liquor since early morning.

Then he took up his candle again, and turned—not to the door. Oh, no. The old gentleman watched him now with singular curiosity, for he was walking not to the door, but over in the direction of the suspected devonport. Sir Thomas could hardly even then guess at the truth. It wasn't, no it wasn't, it couldn't be Harry! not Harry that . . . that borrowed the money!

The young man took a piece of stout wire from his pocket with a terrible look of despair and agony. Sir Thomas's heart melted within him as he beheld it. He twisted the wire about in the lock with a dexterous pressure, and it opened easily. Sir Thomas looked on, and the tears rose into his eyes slowly by instinct; but he said never a word, and watched intently. Harry held the lid of the devonport open for a moment with one hand, and looked at the rows of counted gold within. The fingers of the other hand rose slowly and remorsefully up to the edge of the desk, and there hovered in an undecided fashion. Sir Thomas watched still, with his heart breaking. Then for a second Harry paused. He held back his hand and appeared to deliberate. Something within seemed to have affected him deeply. Sir Thomas, though a plain old soldier, could read his face well enough to know what it was; he was thinking of the kind words his uncle had said to him that very evening as they sat together down there at dinner.

For half a minute the suspense was terrible. Then, with a sudden impulse, Harry shut the lid of the devonport down hastily; flung the wire with a gesture of horror and

remorse into the fireplace; took up his candle wildly in his hand; and rushed from the room and up the stairs, leaving the door open behind him.

Then Sir Thomas rose slowly from his seat in the window corner; lighted the gas in the centre burner; unlocked the devonport, with tears still trickling slowly down his face; counted all the money over carefully to make quite certain; found it absolutely untouched; and flung himself down upon his knees wildly, between shame, and fear, and relief, and misery. What he said or what he thought in that terrible moment of conflicting passions is best not here described or written; but when he rose again his eyes were glistening, more with forgiveness than with horror (anger there never had been); and being an old-fashioned old gentleman, he took down his big Bible from the shelf, just to reassure himself about a text which he thought he remembered somewhere in Luke: "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance." "Ah, yes," he said to himself, "he repented; he repented. He didn't take it. He felt he couldn't after what I said to him." And then, with the tears still rolling silently down his bronzed cheeks, he went up stairs to bed, but not to sleep; for he lay restless on his pillow all night through with that one terrible discovery weighing like lead upon his tender old bosom.

### III.

Next morning, after breakfast, Sir Thomas said in a quiet tone of command to Harry, "My boy, I want to speak to you for a few minutes in the library."

Harry's cheek grew deadly pale and he caught his breath with difficulty, but he followed his uncle into the library without a word, and took his seat at the table opposite him.

"Harry," the old soldier began, as quietly as he was able, after an awkward pause, "I want to tell you a little—a little about your father and mother."

Harry's face suddenly changed from white to crimson, for he felt sure now that what Sir Thomas was going to talk about was not the loss of the money from the devonport a week earlier; and on the other hand, though he knew absolutely nothing about his own birth and parentage, he knew at least that there must have been some sort of mystery in the matter, or else his uncle would surely long since have spoken to him quite freely of his father and mother.

"My dear boy," the Colonel went on again, in a tremulous voice, "I think the time has now come when I ought to tell you that you and I are no relations by blood; you are—you are my nephew by adoption only."

Harry gave a sudden start of surprise, but said nothing.

"The way it all came about," Sir Thomas went on, playing nervously with his watch-chain, "was just this. I was in India during the Mutiny, as you know, and while I was stationed at Boolundshahr, in the North-West Provinces, just before those confounded niggers—I mean to say, before the sepoy revolted, your father was adjutant of my regiment at the same station. He and your mother—well, Harry, your mother lived in a small bungalow near the cantonments, and there you were born; why, exactly eight months before the affair at Meerut, you know—the beginning of the Mutiny. Your father, I'm sorry to say, was a man very much given to high play—in short, if you'll excuse my putting it so, my boy, a regular gambler. He owed money to almost every man in the regiment, and amongst others, if I must tell you the whole truth, to me. In those days I sometimes played rather high myself, Harry; not so high as your poor father, my boy, for I was always prudent, but a great deal higher than a young man in a marching regiment has any right to do—a great deal higher. I left off playing immediately after what I'm just going to tell you; and from that day to this, Harry, I've never touched a card, except for whist or cribbage, and never will do, my boy, if I live to be as old as Methuselah."

The old man paused and wiped his brow for a second with his capacious handkerchief, while Harry's eyes, cast down upon the ground, began to fill rapidly

with something or other that he couldn't for the life of him manage to keep out of them.

“On the night before the news from Meerut arrived,” the old soldier went on once more, with his eye turned half away from the trembling lad, “we played together in the major's rooms, your father and I, with a few others; and before the end of the evening your father had lost a large sum to one of his brother-officers. When we'd finished playing, he came to me to my quarters, and he said ‘Woolrych, this is a bad job. I haven't got anything to pay McGregor with.’”

“All right, Walpole,” I answered him—your father's name was Captain Walpole, Harry—‘I'll lend you whatever's necessary.’

“No, no, my dear fellow,” he said, ‘I won't borrow and only get myself into worse trouble. I'll take a shorter and easier way out of it all, you may depend upon it.’

“At the moment I hadn't the slightest idea what he meant, and so I said no more to him just then about it. But three minutes after he left my quarters I heard a loud cry, and saw your father in the moonlight out in the compound. He had a pistol in his hand. Next moment, the report of a shot sounded loudly down below in the compound, and I rushed out at once to see what on earth could be matter.

“Your father was lying in a pool of blood, just underneath a big mango-tree beside the door, with his left jaw shattered to pieces, and his brain pierced through and through from one side to the other by a bullet from the pistol.

“He was dead—stone dead. There was no good doctoring him. We took him up and carried him into the surgeon's room, and none of us had the courage all that night to tell your mother.

“Next day, news came of the rising at Meerut.

“That same night, while we were all keeping watch and mounting guard, expecting our men would follow the example of their companions at head-quarters, there was a sudden din and tumult in the lines, about nine in the evening, when the word was given to turn in, and McGregor, coming past me, shouted at the top of his voice, ‘It's all up, Woolrych. These black devils have broken loose at last, and they're going to fire the officers' quarters.’

“Well, Harry, my boy, I needn't tell you all about it at full length to-day; but in the end, as you know, we fought the men for our own lives, and held our ground until the detachment came from Etawah to relieve us. However, before we could get to the Bibi's bungalow—the sepoy's used to call your mother the Bibi, Harry—those black devils had broken in there, and when next morning early I burst into the ruined place, with three men of the 47th and a faithful havildar, we found your poor mother—well,

there, Harry, I can't bear to think of it, even now, my boy: but she was dead, too, quite dead, with a hundred sabre-cuts all over her poor blood-stained, hacked-about body. And in the corner, under the cradle, the eight-month-old baby was lying and crying—crying bitterly; that was you, Harry.”

The young man listened intently, with a face now once more ashy white, but still he answered absolutely nothing.

“I took you in my arms, my boy,” the old Colonel continued in a softer tone; “and as you were left all alone in the bungalow there, with no living soul to love or care for you, I carried you away in my arms myself, to my own quarters. All through the rest of that terrible campaign I kept you with me, and while I was fighting at Futteypoor, a native ayah was in charge of you for me. Your poor father had owed me a trifling debt, and I took you as payment in full, and have kept you with me as my nephew ever since. That is all your history, Harry.”

The young man drew a deep breath, and looked across curiously to the bronzed face of the simple old officer. Then he asked, a little huskily, “And why didn't my father's or mother's relations reclaim me, sir? Do they know that I am still living?”

Sir Thomas coughed, and twirled his watch-chain more nervously and uneasily than ever. “Well, you see, my boy,” he answered at last, after a long pause, “your mother—I must tell you the whole truth now, Harry—your mother was a Eurasian, a half-caste lady—very light, almost white, but still a half-caste, you know, and—and—well, your father's family—didn't exactly acknowledge the relationship, Harry.”

Harry's face burnt crimson once more, and the hot blood rushed madly to his cheeks, for he felt in a moment the full force of the meaning that the Colonel wrapped up so awkwardly in that one short embarrassed sentence.

There was another long pause, during which Harry kept his burning eyes fixed fast upon Sir Thomas, and Sir Thomas looked down uncomfortably at his boots and said nothing. Then the young man found voice again feebly to ask, almost in a whisper, one final question.

“Had you . . . had you any particular reason for telling me this story about my birth and my parents at this exact time . . . just now, uncle?”

“I had, Harry. I—I have rather suspected of late . . . that . . . that you are falling somehow into . . . into your poor father's unhappy vice of gambling. My boy, my boy, if you inherit his failings in that direction, I hope his end will be some warning to you to desist immediately.”

“And had you . . . any reason to suspect me of . . . of any other fault . . . of . . . of any graver fault . . . of anything really very serious, uncle?”

The Colonel held his head between his hands, and answered very slowly, as if

the words were wrung from him by torture: "If you hadn't yourself asked me the question point-blank, Harry, I would never have told you anything about it. Yes, my boy, my dear boy, my poor boy; I know it all . . . all . . . all . . . absolutely."

Harry lifted up his voice in one loud cry and wail of horror, and darted out of the room without another syllable.

"I know that cry," the Colonel said in his own heart, trembling. "I have heard it before! It's the very cry poor Walpole gave that night at Boolundshahr, just before he went out and shot himself!"

## IV.

Harry had rushed out into the garden; of that, Sir Thomas felt certain. He followed him hastily, and saw him by the seat under the lime-trees in the far corner; he had something heavy in his right hand. Sir Thomas came closer and saw to his alarm and horror that it was indeed the small revolver from the old pistol-stand on the wall of the vestibule.

Even as the poor old soldier gazed, half petrified, the lad pushed a cartridge home feverishly into one of the chambers, and raised the weapon, with a stern resolution, up to his temple. Sir Thomas recognized in that very moment of awe and terror that it was the exact attitude and action of Harry's dead father. The entire character and tragedy seemed to have handed itself down directly from father to son without a single change of detail or circumstance.

The old man darted forward with surprising haste, and caught Harry's hand just as the finger rested upon the trigger.

"My boy! my boy!" he cried, wrenching the revolver easily from his trembling grasp, and flinging it, with a great curve, to the other end of the garden. "Not that way! Not that way! I haven't reproached you with one word, Harry; but this is a bad return, indeed, for a life devoted to you. Oh, Harry! Harry! not by shuffling off your responsibilities and running away from them like a coward, not by that can you ever mend matters in the state you have got them into, but by living on, and fighting against your evil impulses and conquering them like a man—that's the way, the right way, to get the better of them. Promise me, Harry, promise me, my boy, that whatever comes you won't make away with yourself, as your father did; for my sake, live on and do better. I'm an old man, an old man, Harry, and I have but you in the world to care for or think about. Don't let me be shamed in my old age by seeing the boy I have brought up and loved as a son dying in disgrace, a poltroon and a coward. Stand by your guns, my boy; stand by your guns, and fight it out to the last minute."

Harry's arm fell powerless to his side, and he broke down utterly, in his shame and self-abasement flinging himself wildly upon the seat beneath the lime-trees and covering his face with his hands to hide the hot tears that were bursting forth in a feverish torrent.

"I will go," he said at last, in a choking voice, "I will go, uncle, and talk to Milly."

"Do," the Colonel said, soothing his arm tenderly. "Do, my boy. She's a good girl, and she'll advise you rightly. Go and speak to her; but before you go, promise me, promise me."

Harry rose, and tried to shake off Sir Thomas's heavy hand, laid with a fatherly pressure upon his struggling shoulder. But he couldn't; the old soldier was still too strong for him. "Promise me," he said once more caressingly, "promise me; promise me!"

Harry hesitated for a second in his troubled mind; then, with an effort, he answered slowly, "I promise, uncle."

Sir Thomas released him, and he rushed wildly away. "Remember," the Colonel cried aloud, as he went in at the open folding windows, "remember, Harry, you are on your honour. If you break parole I shall think very badly, very badly indeed, of you."

But as the old man turned back sadly into his lonely library, he thought to himself, "I wonder whether I oughtn't to have dealt more harshly with him! I wonder whether I was right in letting him off so easily for two such extremely—such extremely grave breaches of military discipline!"

## V.

“Then you think, Milly, that’s what I ought to do? You think I’d better go and never come back again till I feel quite sure of myself?”

“I think so, Harry, I think so . . . I think so. . . . And yet . . . it’s very hard not to see you for so long, Harry.”

“But I shall write to you every day, Milly, however long it may be; and if I conquer myself, why, then, Milly, I shall feel I can come back fit to marry you. I’m not fit now, and unless I feel that I’ve put myself straight with you and my uncle, I’ll never come back again—never, never, never!”

Milly’s lip trembled, but she only answered bravely, “That’s well, Harry; for then you’ll make all the more effort, and for my sake I’m sure you’ll conquer. But, Harry, I wish before you go you’d tell me plainly what else it is that you’ve been doing besides playing and losing your uncle’s money.”

“Oh, Milly, Milly, I can’t—I mustn’t. If I were to tell you that you could never again respect me—you could never love me.”

Milly was a wise girl, and pressed him no further. After all, there are some things it is better for none of us to know about one another, and this thing was just one of them.

So Harry Walpole went away from Cheltenham, nobody knew whither, except Milly; not daring to confide the secret of his whereabouts even to his uncle, nor seeing that sole friend once more before he went, but going away that very night, on his own resources, to seek his own fortune as best he might in the great world of London. “Tell my uncle why I have gone,” he said to Milly; “that it is in order to conquer myself; and tell him that I’ll write to you constantly, and that you will let him know from time to time whether I am well and making progress.”

It was a hard time for poor old Sir Thomas, no doubt, those four years that Harry was away from him, he knew not where, and he was left alone by himself in his dreary home; but he felt it was best so; he knew Harry was trying to conquer himself. How Harry lived or what he was doing he never heard; but once or twice Milly hinted to him that Harry seemed sorely in want of money, and Sir Thomas gave her some to send him, and every time it was at once returned, with a very firm but gentle message from Harry to say that he was able, happily, to do without it, and would not further trouble his uncle. It was only from Milly that Sir Thomas could learn anything about his dear boy, and he saw her and asked her about him so often that he learned at last to love her like a daughter.

Four years rolled slowly away, and at the end of them Sir Thomas was one day

sitting in his little library, somewhat disconsolate, and reflecting to himself that he ought to have somebody living with him at his time of life, when suddenly there came a ring and a knock that made him start with surprise and pleasure, for he recognized them at once as being Harry's. Next moment, the servant brought him a card, on which was engraved in small letters, "Dr. H. Walpole," and down in the left-hand corner, "Surrey Hospital."

Sir Thomas turned the card over and over with a momentary feeling of disappointment, for he had somehow fancied to himself that Harry had gone off covering himself with glory among Zulus or Afghans, and he couldn't help feeling that beside that romantic dream of soldierly rehabilitation a plain doctor's life was absurdly prosaic. Next moment, Harry himself was grasping his hand warmly, and prose and poetry were alike forgotten in that one vivid all-absorbing delight of his boy recovered.

As soon as the first flush of excitement was fairly over, and Harry had cried regretfully, "Why, uncle, how much older you're looking!" and Sir Thomas had exclaimed in his fatherly joy, "Why, Harry, my boy, what a fine fellow you've turned out, God bless me!" Harry took a little bank bag of sovereigns from his coat pocket and laid it down, very red, upon the corner of the table. "These are yours, uncle," he said simply.

Sir Thomas's first impulse was to say, "No, no, my boy; keep them, keep them, and let us forget all about it," but he checked himself just in time, for he saw that the best thing all round was to take them quietly and trouble poor Harry no more with the recollection. "Thank you, my boy," the old soldier answered, taking them up and pocketing them as though it were merely the repayment of an ordinary debt. ("The School for the Orphan Children of Officers in the Army will be all the richer for it," he thought to himself) "And now tell me, Harry, how have you been living, and what have you been doing ever since I last saw you?"

"Uncle," Harry cried—he hadn't unlearned to think of him and call him by that fond old name, then—"uncle, I've been conquering myself. From the day I left you I've never touched a card once—not once, uncle."

"Except, I suppose, for a quiet rubber?" the old Colonel put in softly.

"Not even for a rubber, uncle," Harry answered, half smiling; "nor a cue nor a dice-box either, nor anything like them. I've determined to steer clear of all the dangers that surround me by inheritance, and I'm not going to begin again as long as I live, uncle."

"That's well, Harry, that's well. And you didn't go in for a direct commission, then? I was in hopes, my boy, that you would still, in spite of everything, go into the

Queen's service."

Harry's face fell a little. "Uncle," he said, "I'm sorry to have disappointed you; sorry to have been compelled to run counter to any little ambitions you might have had for me in that respect; but I felt, after all you told me that day, that the army would be a very dangerous profession for me; and though I didn't want to be a coward and run away from danger, I didn't want to be foolhardy and heedlessly expose myself to it. So I thought on the whole it would be wiser for me to give up the direct commission business altogether, and go in at once for being a doctor. It was safer, and therefore better in the end both for me and for you, uncle."

Sir Thomas took the young man's hand once more, and pressed it gently with a fatherly pressure. "My boy," he said, "you are right, quite right—a great deal more right, indeed, than I was. But how on earth have you found money to keep yourself alive and pay for your education all these years—tell me Harry?"

Harry's face flushed up again, this time with honest pride, as he answered bravely, "I've earned enough by teaching and drawing to pay my way the whole time, till I got qualified. I've been qualified now for nine months, and got a post as house-surgeon at our hospital; but I've waited to come and tell you till I'd saved up that money, you know, out of my salary, and now I'm coming back to settle down in practice here, uncle."

Sir Thomas said nothing, but he rose from his chair and took both Harry's hands in his with tears. For a few minutes, he looked at him tenderly and admiringly, then he said in his simple way, "God bless you! God bless you! I couldn't have done it myself, my boy. I couldn't have done it myself, Harry."

There was a minute's pause, and then Sir Thomas began again, "What a secretive little girl that dear little Miss Milly must be, never to have told me a word of all this, Harry. She kept as quiet about all details as if she was sworn to the utmost secrecy."

Harry rose and opened the library door. "Milly!" he called out, and a light little figure glided in from the drawing-room opposite.

"We expect to be married in three weeks, uncle—as soon as the banns can be published," Harry went on, presenting his future wife as it were to the Colonel. "Milly's money will just be enough for us to live upon until I can scrape together a practice, and she has confidence enough in me to believe that in the end I shall manage to get one."

Sir Thomas drew her down to his chair and kissed her forehead. "Milly," he said, softly, "you have chosen well. Harry, you have done wisely. I shall have two children now instead of one. If you are to live near me I shall be very happy. But,

Harry, you have proved yourself well. Now you must let me buy you a practice.”

THE END.

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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: Harry's Inheritance* by Grant Allen]