

**THE  
BECKONING HAND:**

**The Third Time**

**By  
Grant Allen**

**1887**

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# THE THIRD TIME.

## I.

If Harry Lewin had never come to Stoke Peveril, Edie Meredith would certainly have married her cousin Evan.

For Evan Meredith was the sort of man that any girl of Edie's temperament might very easily fall in love with. Tall, handsome, with delicate, clear-cut Celtic face, piercing yet pensive black Welsh eyes, and the true Cymric gifts of music and poetry, Evan Meredith had long been his pretty cousin's prime favourite among all the young men of all Herefordshire. She had danced with him over and over again at every county ball; she had talked with him incessantly at every lawn-tennis match and garden-party; she had whispered to him quietly on the sofa in the far corner while distinguished amateurs were hammering away conscientiously at the grand piano; and all the world of Herefordshire took it for granted that young Mr. Meredith and his second cousin were, in the delightfully vague slang of society, "almost engaged."

Suddenly, like a flaming meteor across the quiet evening skies, Harry Lewin burst in all his dashing splendour upon the peaceful and limited Herefordshire horizon. He came from that land of golden possibilities, Australia: but he was Irish by descent, and his father had sent him young to Eton and Oxford, where he picked up the acquaintance of everybody worth knowing, and a sufficient knowledge of things in general to pass with brilliant success in English society. In his vacations, having no home of his own to go to, he had loitered about half the capitals and spas of Europe, so that Vichy and Carlsbad, Monte Carlo and Spezzia, Berlin and St. Petersburg, were almost as familiar to him as London and Scarborough. Nobody knew exactly what his father had been: some said a convict, some a gold-miner, some a bush-ranger; but whatever he was, he was at least exceedingly rich, and money covers a multitude of sins quite as well and as effectually as charity. When Harry Lewin came into his splendid property at his father's death, and purchased the insolvent Lord Tintern's old estate at Stoke Peveril, half the girls and all the mothers in the whole of Herefordshire rose at once to a fever of anxiety in their desire to know upon which of the marriageable young women of the county the wealthy new-comer would finally bestow himself in holy matrimony.

There was only one girl in the Stoke district who never appeared in the slightest degree flattered or fluttered by Harry Lewin's polite attentions, and that girl was Edie Meredith. Though she was only the country doctor's daughter—"hardly in our set at all, you know," the county people said depreciatingly—she had no desire to be the

mistress of Peveril Court, and she let Harry Lewin see pretty clearly that she didn't care the least in the world for that distinguished honour.

It was at a garden party at Stoke Peveril Rectory that Edie Meredith met one afternoon her cousin Evan and the rich young Irish-Australian. Harry Lewin had stood talking to her with his easy jaunty manner, so perfectly self-possessed, so full of Irish courtesy and Etonian readiness, when Evan Meredith, watching them half angrily out of his dark Welsh eyes from the corner by the laburnum tree, walked slowly over to interrupt their *tête-à-tête* of set purpose. He chose certainly an awkward moment: for his earnest serious face and figure showed to ill advantage just then and there beside the light-hearted cheery young Oxonian's. Edie fancied as he strolled up to her that she had never seen her cousin Evan look so awkward, so countrified, and so awfully Welsh. (On the border counties, to look like a Welshman is of course almost criminal.) She wondered she had overlooked till now the fact that his was distinctly a local and rustic sort of handsomeness. He looked like a Herefordshire squireen gentleman, while Harry Lewin, with his Irish chivalry and his Oxford confidence, looked like a cosmopolitan and a man of society.

As Evan came up, glancing blackly at him from under his dark eyebrows, Harry Lewin moved away carelessly, raising his hat and strolling off as if quite unconcerned, to make way for the new-comer. Evan nodded to him a distant nod, and then turned to his cousin Edie.

"You've been talking a great deal with that fellow Lewin," he said sharply, almost angrily, glancing straight at her with his big black eyes.

Edie was annoyed at the apparent assumption of a right to criticise her. "Mr. Lewin's a very agreeable man," she answered quietly, without taking the least notice of his angry tone. "I always like to have a chat with him, Evan. He's been everywhere and knows all about everything—Paris and Vienna, and I don't know where. So very different, of course, from our Stoke young men, who've never been anywhere in their whole lives beyond Bristol or Hereford."

"Bristol and Hereford are much better places, I've no doubt, for a man to be brought up in than Paris or Vienna," Evan Meredith retorted hastily, the hot blood flushing up at once into his dusky cheek. "But as you seem to be so very much taken up with your new admirer, Edie, I'm sure I'm very sorry I happened at such an unpropitious moment to break in upon your conversation."

"So am I," Edie answered, quietly and with emphasis.

She hardly meant it, though she was vexed with Evan; but Evan took her immediately at her word. Without another syllable he raised his hat, turned upon his heel, and left her standing there alone, at some little distance from her mother, by the

edge of the oval grass-plot. It was an awkward position for a girl to be left in—for everybody would have seen that Evan had retired in high dudgeon—had not Harry Lewin promptly perceived it, and with quiet tact managed to return quite casually to her side, and walk back with her to her mother's protection, so as to hide at once her confusion and her blushes. As for Evan, he wandered off moodily by himself among the lilacs and arbutus bushes of the lower shrubbery.

He had been pacing up and down there alone for half an hour or more, nursing his wrath and jealousy in his angry heart, when he saw between the lilac branches on the upper walk the flash of Edie's pretty white dress, followed behind at a discreet distance by the rustle of Mrs. Meredith's black satin. Edie was walking in front with Harry Lewin, and Mrs. Meredith, attempting vainly to affect a becoming interest in the rector's conversation, was doing the proprieties at twenty paces.

As they passed, Evan Meredith heard Harry Lewin's voice murmuring something in a soft, gentle, persuasive flow, not a word of which he could catch individually, though the general accent and intonation showed him at once that Harry was pleading earnestly with his cousin Edie. Evan could have written her verses—pretty enough verses, too—by the foolscap ream; but though he had the Welsh gift of rhyme, he hadn't the Irish gift of fluency and eloquence; and he knew in his own heart that he could never have poured forth to any woman such a steady, long, impassioned flood of earnest solicitation as Harry Lewin was that moment evidently pouring forth to his cousin Edie. He held his breath in silent expectation, and waited ten whole endless seconds—a long eternity—to catch the tone of Edie's answer.

Instead of the mere tone, he caught distinctly the very words of that low soft musical reply. Edie murmured after a slight pause: "No, no, Mr. Lewin, I must not—I cannot. I do not love you."

Evan Meredith waited for no more. He knew partly from that short but ominous pause, and still more from the half-hearted, hesitating way in which the nominal refusal was faintly spoken, that his cousin Edie would sooner or later accept his rival. He walked away, fiercely indignant, and going home, sat down to his desk, and wrote at white-heat an angry letter, beginning simply "Edith Meredith," in which he released her formally and unconditionally from the engagement which both of them declared had never existed.

Whether his letter expedited Harry Lewin's wooing or not, it is at least certain that in the end Evan Meredith's judgment was approved by the result; and before the next Christmas came round again, Edie was married to Harry Lewin, and duly installed as mistress of Peveril Court.

## II.

The first three months of Edie Lewin's married life passed away happily and pleasantly. Harry was always kindness itself to her; and as she saw more of him, she found in him what she had not anticipated, an unsuspected depth and earnestness of purpose. She had thought him at first a brilliant, dashing, clever Irishman; she discovered upon nearer view that he had something more within him than mere showy external qualities. He was deeply in love with her: he respected and admired her: and in the midst of all his manly chivalry of demeanour towards his wife there was a certain indefinable air of self-restraint and constant watchfulness over his own actions which Edie noticed with some little wifely pride and pleasure. She had not married a mere handsome rich young fellow; she had married a man of character and determination.

About three months after their marriage, Harry Lewin was called away for the first time to leave his bride. An unexpected letter from his lawyer in London—immediate business—those bothering Australian shares and companies! Would Edie forgive him? He would run up for the day only, starting early and getting back late the same night. It's a long run from Stoke to London, but you can just manage it if you fit your trains with dexterous ingenuity. So Harry went, and Edie was left alone, for the first time in her life, in the big rooms of Peveril Court for a whole day.

That very afternoon Evan Meredith and his father happened to call. It was Evan's first visit to the bride, for he couldn't somehow make up his mind to see her earlier. He was subdued, silent, constrained, regretful, but he said nothing in allusion to the past—nothing but praise of the Peveril Court grounds, the beauty of the house, the charm of the surroundings, the magnificence of the old Romneys and Sir Joshuas.

"You have a lovely place, Edie," he said, hesitating a second before he spoke the old familiar name, but bringing it out quite naturally at last. "And your husband? I hope I may have the—the pleasure of seeing him again."

Edie coloured. "He has gone up to town to-day," she answered simply.

"By himself?"

"By himself, Evan."

Evan Meredith coughed uneasily, and looked at her with a silent look which said more plainly than words could have said it, "Already!"

"He will be back this evening," Edie went on apologetically, answering aloud his unspoken thought. "I—I'm sorry he isn't here to see you, Evan."

"I'm sorry too, very sorry," Evan answered with a half-stifled sigh. He didn't

mean to let her see the ideas that were passing through his mind; but his quick, irrepressible Celtic nature allowed the internal emotions to peep out at once through the thin cloak of that conventionally polite expression of regret. Edie knew he meant he was very sorry that Harry should have gone away so soon and left her.

That evening, about ten o'clock, as Edie, sitting alone in the blue drawing-room, was beginning to wonder when Harry's dogcart would be heard rolling briskly up the front avenue, there came a sudden double rap at the front door, and the servant brought in a sealed telegram. Edie tore it open with some misgiving. It was not from Harry. She read it hastily: "From Proprietor, Norton's Hotel, Jermyn Street, London, to Mrs. Lewin, Peveril Court, Stoke Peveril, Herefordshire. Mr. Lewin unfortunately detained in town by urgent business. He will not be able to return before to-morrow."

Edie laid down the telegram with a sinking heart. In itself there was nothing so very strange in Harry's being detained by business; men are always being detained by business; she knew it was a way they had, a masculine peculiarity. But why had not Harry telegraphed himself? Why had he left the proprietor of Norton's Hotel to telegraph for him? Why was he at Norton's Hotel at all? And if he really was there, why could he not have written the telegram himself? It was very mysterious, perplexing, and inexplicable. Tears came into Edie's eyes, and she sat long looking at the flimsy pink Government paper, as if the mere inspection of the hateful message would help her to make out the meaning of the enclosed mystery.

Soon the question began to occur to her, what should she do for the night's arrangements? Peveril Court was so big and lonely; she hated the idea of stopping there alone. Should she have out the carriage and drive round to spend the night as of old at her mother's? But no; it was late, and the servants would think it so very odd of her. People would talk about it; they would say Harry had stopped away from her unexpectedly, and that she had gone back in a pique to her own home. Young wives, she knew, are always doing those foolish things, and always regretting them afterwards when they find the whole county magnifying the molehill into a veritable mountain. Much as she dreaded it, she must spend the night alone in that big bedroom—the haunted bedroom where the last of the Peverils died. Poor little Edie! with her simple, small, village ways, she hated that great rambling house, and all its halls and staircases and corridors! But there was no help for it. She went tearfully up to her own room, and flung herself without undressing on the great bed with the heavy crimson tapestry hangings.

There she lay all night, tossing and turning, crying and wondering, dozing off at times and starting up again fitfully, but never putting out the candles on the dressing-



table, which had burned away deep in the sockets by the time morning began to peep through the grey Venetians of the east window.

### III.

Next morning Evan Meredith heard accidentally that Harry Lewin had stopped for the night in London, and had telegraphed unexpectedly to Edie that he had been detained in town on business.

Evan shook his head with an ominous look. "Poor child," he said to himself pityingly; "she *would* marry a man who had been brought up in Paris and Vienna!"

And when Harry came back that evening by the late train, Evan Meredith was loitering casually by the big iron gates of Peveril Court to see whether Edie's husband was really returning.

There was a very grave and serious look on Harry's face that surprised and somewhat disconcerted Evan. He somehow felt that Harry's expression was not that of a careless, dissipated fellow, and he said to himself, this time a little less confidently: "Perhaps after all I may have been misjudging him."

Edie was standing to welcome her husband on the big stone steps of the old manor house. He stepped from the dogcart, not lightly with a spring as was his usual wont, but slowly and almost remorsefully, like a man who has some evil tidings to break to those he loves dearest. But he kissed Edie as tenderly as ever—even more tenderly, she somehow imagined; and he looked at her with such a genuine look of love that Edie thought it was well worth while for him to go away for the sake of such a delightful meeting.

"Well, darling," she asked, as she went with him into the great dining-room, "why didn't you come back to the little wife, as you promised yesterday?"

Harry looked her full in the face, not evasively or furtively, but with a frank, open glance, and answered in a very quiet voice, "I was detained on business, Edie."

"What business?" Edie asked, a little piqued at the indefiniteness of the answer.

"Business that absolutely prevented me from returning," Harry replied, with a short air of perfect determination.

Edie tried in vain to get any further detail out of him. To all her questions Harry only answered with the one set and unaltered formula, "I was detained on important business."

But when she had asked him for the fiftieth time in the drawing-room that evening, he said at last, not at all angrily, but very seriously, "It was business, Edie, closely connected with your own happiness. If I had returned last night, you would

have been sorry for it, sooner or later. I stayed away for your own sake, darling. Please ask me no more about it.”

Edie couldn't imagine what he meant; but he spoke so seriously, and smoothed her hand with such a tender, loving gesture, that she kissed him fervently, and brushed away the tears from her swimming eyes without letting him see them. As for Harry, he sat long looking at the embers in the smouldering fire, and holding his pretty little wife's hand tight in his without uttering a single syllable. At last, just as they were rising to go upstairs, he laid his hand upon the mantelpiece as if to steady himself, and said very earnestly, “Edie, with God's help, I hope it shall never occur again.”

“What, Harry darling? What do you mean? What will never occur again?”

He paused a moment. “That I should be compelled to stop a night away from you unexpectedly,” he answered then very slowly.

And when he had said it he took up the candle from the little side table and walked away, with two tears standing in his eyes, to his own dressing-room.

From that day forth Edie Lewin noticed two things. First, that her husband seemed to love her even more tenderly and deeply than ever. And second, that his strange gravity and self-restraint seemed to increase daily upon him.

And Evan Meredith, watching closely his cousin and her husband, thought to himself with a glow of satisfaction—for he was too generous and too true in his heart to wish ill to his rival—“After all, he loves her truly; he is really in love with her. Edie will be rich now, and will have a good husband. What could I ever have given her compared to what Harry Lewin can give her? It is better so. I must not regret it.”

#### IV.

For five or six months more, life passed as usual at Peveril Court, or at Harry Lewin's new town house in Curzon Street, Mayfair. The season came and went pleasantly enough, with its round of dances, theatres, and dinners; and in the autumn Edie Lewin found herself once more back for the shooting in dear old Herefordshire. Harry was always by her side, the most attentive and inseparable of husbands; he seemed somehow to cling to her passionately, as if he could not bear to be out of her sight for a single moment. Edie noticed it, and felt grateful for his love. Evan Meredith noticed it too, and reproached himself bitterly more than once that he should ever so unworthily have distrusted the man who had been brought up in Paris and Vienna.

One day, however, Harry had ridden from Stoke to Hereford, for the exercise

alone, and Edie expected him back to dinner. But at half-past seven, just as the gong in the hall was burrr-ing loudly, a telegram arrived once more for Mrs. Lewin, which Edie tore open with trembling fingers. It was almost exactly the same mystifying message over again, only this time it was sent by Harry himself, not by an unknown hotel-keeping deputy. "I have been suddenly detained here by unexpected business. Do not expect me home before to-morrow. Shall return as early as possible. God bless you!"

Those last words, so singular in a telegram, roused and accentuated all Edie's womanly terrors. "God bless you!"—what on earth could Harry mean by that solemn adjuration under such strange and mysterious circumstances? There was something very serious the matter, Edie felt sure; but what it could be she could not even picture to herself. Her instinctive fears did not take that vulgarly mistrustful form that they might have taken with many a woman of lower and more suspicious nature; she knew and trusted Harry far too well for that; she was too absolutely certain of his whole unshaken love and tenderness; but the very vagueness and indefiniteness of the fears she felt made them all the harder and more terrible to bear. When you don't know what it is you dread, your fancy can dress up its terrors afresh every moment in some still more painful and distressing disguise.

If Harry had let her know where he was stopping, she would have ordered the carriage then and there, and driven over to Hereford, not to spy him out, but to be with him in his trouble or difficulty. That, however, was clearly impossible, for Harry had merely sent his telegram as from "H. Lewin, Hereford;" and to go about from hotel to hotel through the county town, inquiring whether her husband was staying there, would of course have been open to the most ridiculous misinterpretation. Everybody would have said she was indeed keeping a tight hand upon him! So with many bitter tears brushed hastily away, Edie went down in solemn and solitary state to dinner, hating herself for crying so foolishly, and burning hot with the unpleasant consciousness that the butler and footman were closely observing her face and demeanour. If she could have dined quite alone in her own boudoir very furtively it wouldn't have been quite so dreadful; but to keep up appearances with a sinking heart before those two eminently respectable and officious men-servants—it was really enough to choke one.

That night again Edie Lewin never slept for more than a few troubled minutes together; and whenever she awoke, it was with a start and a scream, and a vague consciousness of some impending evil.

When Harry came again next day he didn't laugh it off carelessly and lightly; he didn't soothe her fears and uneasiness with ready kisses and prompt excuses; he

didn't get angry with her and tell her not to ask him too many questions about his own business: he met her as gravely and earnestly as before, with the same tender, loving, half self-reproachful tone, and yet with the same evident desire and intention to love and cherish her more fondly than ever. Edie was relieved, but she was by no means satisfied. She knew Harry loved her tenderly, devotedly; but she knew also there was some sort of shadow or secret looming ominously between them.

Another wife, supposed dead? He would have trusted her and told her. Another love? Oh, no: she could trust him; it was impossible.

And so the weeks wore away, and Edie wondered all to no purpose. At last, by dint of constant wondering, she almost wore out the faculty of wonder, and half ceased to think about it any longer.

But she noticed that from day to day the old bright, brilliant Irish character was slowly fading out of Harry's nature, and that in its place there was growing up a settled, noble, not unbecoming earnestness. He seemed perhaps a trifle less striking and attractive than formerly, but a great deal worthier of any true woman's enduring love and admiration.

Evan Meredith noticed the change as well. He and Harry had grown now into real friends. Harry saw and recognized the genuine depth of Evan's nature. Evan had made amends and apologies to Harry for a single passing rudeness or two. Both liked the other better for the momentary rivalry and for the way he had soon forgotten it. "He's a good fellow," Evan said to his father often, "and Edie, with her quiet, simple English nature, has made quite another man of him—given him the ballast and the even steadiness he once wanted."

## V.

Spring came, and then summer; and with summer, the annual visitation of garden parties. The Trenches at Malbury Manor were going to give a garden party, and Harry and Edie drove across to it. Edie took her husband over in the pony-carriage with the two little greys she loved so well to drive herself: the very prettiest and best-matched ponies, everybody said, in the whole county of Hereford.

As they walked about on the lawn together, they met Edie's father and mother. Somehow, Edie happened to fasten herself accidentally upon her mother, while Harry strolled away alone, and stood talking with something of his old brilliancy to one group or another of loungers independently. For awhile, Edie missed him; he had gone off to look at the conservatories or something. Then, she saw him chatting with Canon Wilmington and his daughters over by one of the refreshment tables, and

handing them champagne cup and ices, while he talked with unusual volubility and laughter. Presently he came up to her again, and to her great surprise said, with a yawn, "Eddie, this is getting dreadfully slow. I can't stand it any longer. I think I shall just slip away quietly and walk home; you can come after me whenever you like with the ponies! Good-bye till dinner. God bless you, darling!"

It wasn't a usual form of address with him, and Eddie vaguely noted it in passing, but thought nothing more about the matter after the first moment. "Good-bye, Harry," she said laughingly. "Perhaps Evan will see me home. Good-bye."

Harry smiled rather sadly. "Evan has ridden over on one of my cobs," he answered quietly, "and so I suppose he'll have to ride back again."

"He's the best fellow that ever lived," Evan said, as Harry turned away with a friendly nod. "Upon my word, I'm quite ashamed of the use I make of your husband's stables, Eddie."

"Nonsense, Evan; we're always both delighted when you will use anything of ours as if it were your own."

At six o'clock the ponies were stopping the way, and Eddie prepared to drive home alone. She took the bye-road at the back of the grounds in preference to the turnpike, because it wouldn't be so crowded or so dusty for her to drive upon.

They had gone about a mile from the house, and had passed the Beehive, where a group of half-tipsy fellows was loitering upon the road outside the tavern, when a few hundred yards farther Eddie suddenly checked the greys for no immediately apparent reason.

"Got a stone in his hoof, ma'am?" the groom asked, looking down curiously at the off horse, and preparing to alight for the expected emergency.

"No," Eddie answered with a sudden shake of her head. "Look there, William! On the road in front of us! What a disgusting brute. I nearly ran over him."

The groom looked in the direction where Eddie pointed with her whip, and saw lying on the ground, straight before the horses' heads, a drunken man, asleep and helpless, with a small pocket flask clasped in his hand, quite empty.

"Pick him up!" Eddie said in a tone of disgust. "Carry him over and lay him on the side of the road there, will you, William?"

The man went off to do as he was directed. At that moment, Evan Meredith, coming up from behind on Harry's cob, called out lightly, "Can I help you, Eddie? What's the matter? Ho! One of those beastly fellows from the Beehive yonder. Hold a minute, William, you've got a regular job there—more than an armful. Drunken men are heavy to carry. Wait a bit, and I'll come and help you."

He rode forward to the groom's side just as the groom raised in his arms the

drunkard's head and exposed to view his down-turned face. Then, with a sudden cry of horror and pity, Evan Meredith, not faltering for a moment, drove his heel into his horse's flank, and rode off, speechless with conflicting emotions, leaving Edie there alone, face to face with her fallen husband.

It was Harry Lewin.

Apoplexy? Epilepsy? An accident? A sunstroke? No, no. Edie could comfort herself with none of those instantaneous flashes of conjecture, for his face and his breath would alone have told the whole story, even if the empty flask in his drunken hand had not at once confirmed the truth of her first apprehension. She sat down beside him on the green roadside, buried her poor face in her trembling hands, and cried silently, silently, for twenty minutes.

The groom, standing motionless officially beside her, let her tears have free vent, and knew not what to say or do under such extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances.

One thing only Edie thought once or twice in the midst of that awful blinding discovery. Thank God that Evan Meredith had not stopped there to see her misery and degradation. An Englishman might have remained like a fool, with the clumsy notion of assisting her in her trouble, and getting him safely home to Peveril Court for her. Evan, with his quick Welsh perception, had seen in a second that the only possible thing for her own equals to do on such an occasion was to leave her alone with her unspeakable wretchedness.

After a while, she came-to a little, by dint of crying and pure exhaustion, and began to think that something must at least be done to hide this terrible disgrace from the prying eyes of all Herefordshire.

She rose mechanically, without a word, and motioning the groom to take the feet, she lifted Harry's head—her own husband's head—that drunken wretch's head—great heavens, which was it? and helped to lay him silently on the floor of the pony carriage. He was helpless and motionless as a baby. Her eyes were dry now, and she hardly even shuddered. She got into the carriage again, covered over the breathing mass of insensible humanity at the bottom with her light woollen wrapper, and drove on in perfect silence till she reached Peveril Court. As she drew up in front of the door, the evening was beginning to close in rapidly. The groom, still silent, jumped from the carriage, and ran up the steps with his usual drilled accuracy to ring the bell. Edie beckoned to him imperiously with her hand to stop and come back to her. He paused, and turned down the steps again to hear what she wished. Edie's lips were dry; she couldn't utter a word: but she pointed mutely to her husband's prostrate form, and the groom understood at once that she wished him to

lift Harry out of the carriage. Hastily and furtively they carried him in at the library door—the first room inside the house—and there they laid him out upon the sofa, Edie putting one white finger passionately on her lip to enjoin silence. As soon as that was done, she sat down to the table with marvellous resolution, and wrote out a cheque for twenty pounds from her own chequebook. Then at last she found speech with difficulty. “William,” she said, her dry husky throat almost choking with the effort, “take that, instead of notice. Go away at once—I’ll drive you to the station—go to London, and never say a single word of this to any one.”

William touched his hat in silence, and walked back slowly to the carriage. Edie, now flushed and feverish, but dry of lips and erect of mien, turned the key haughtily in the door, and stalked out to the greys once more. Silently still she drove to the station, and saw William take the London train. “You shall have a character,” she said, very quietly; “write to me for it. But never say a word of this for your life to anybody.”

William touched his hat once more, and went away, meaning conscientiously in his own soul to keep this strange and unexpected compact.

Then Edie drove herself back to Peveril Court, feeling that only Evan Meredith knew besides; and she could surely count at least on Evan’s honour.

But to-morrow! to-morrow! what could she ever do to-morrow?

Hot and tearless still, she rang the drawing-room bell. “Mr. Lewin will not be home to-night,” she said, with no further word of explanation. “I shall not dine. Tell Watkins to bring me a cup of tea in my own bedroom.”

The maid brought it, and Edie drank it. It moistened her lips and broke the fever. Then she flung herself passionately upon the bed, and cried, and cried, and cried, wildly, till late in the evening.

Eleven o’clock came. Twelve o’clock. One. She heard them tolling out from the old clock-tower, clanging loudly from the church steeple, clinking and tinkling from all the timepieces in all the rooms of Peveril Court. But still she lay there, and wept, and sobbed, and thought of nothing. She didn’t even figure it or picture it to herself; her grief and shame and utter abasement were too profound for mind to fathom. She only felt in a dim, vague, half-unconscious fashion that Harry—the Harry she had loved and worshipped—was gone from her for ever and ever.

In his place, there had come that irrational, speechless, helpless Thing that lay below, breathing heavily in its drunken sleep, down on the library sofa.

By half-past one the lights had long been out in all the rooms, and perfect silence reigned throughout the household. Impelled by a wild desire to see him once more, even though she loathed him, Edie took a bedroom candle in her hand, and stole slowly down the big staircase.

Loathed him? Loved him—ay, loved him even so. Loved him, and the more she loved him, the more utterly loathed him.

If it had been any lesser or lower man, she might have forgiven him. But *him*—Harry—it was too unspeakable.

Creeping along the passage to the library door, she paused and listened. Inside, there was a noise of footsteps, pacing up and down the room hurriedly. He had come to himself, then! He had slept off his drunken helplessness! She paused and listened again to hear further.

Harry was stalking to and fro across the floor with fiery eagerness, sobbing bitterly to himself, and pausing every now and then with a sort of sudden spasmodic hesitation. From time to time she heard him mutter aloud, “She must have seen me! She must have seen me! They will tell her, they will tell her! Oh, God! they will tell her!”

Should she unlock the door, and fling herself wildly into his arms? Her instinct told her to do it, but she faltered and hesitated. A drunkard! a drunkard! Oh no! she could not. The evil genius conquered the good, and she checked the impulse that alone could have saved her.

She crept up again, with heart standing still and failing within her, and flung herself once more upon her own bed.

Two o’clock. Three. Half-past three. A quarter to four.

How long the night seems when you are watching and weeping!

Suddenly, at the quarter-hour just gone, a sharp ring at a bell disturbed her lethargy—a ring two or three times repeated, which waked the butler from his sound slumber.

Edie walked out cautiously to the top of the stairs and listened. The butler stood at the library door and knocked in vain. Edie heard a letter pushed under the door, and in a muffled voice heard Harry saying, “Give that letter to your mistress, Hardy—to-morrow morning.”

A vague foreboding of evil overcame her. She stole down the stairs in the blank dark and took the letter without a word from the half-dressed and wondering butler. Then she glided back to her own room, sat down eagerly by the dressing-table, and began to read it.



“EDIE,

“This is the third time, and I determined with myself that the third time should be the last one. Once in London; once at Hereford; once now. I can stand it no longer. My father died a drunkard. My mother died a drunkard. I cannot resist the temptation. It is better I should not stop here. I have tried hard, but I am beaten in the struggle. I loved you dearly: I love you still far too much to burden your life by my miserable presence. I have left you everything. Evan will make you happier than I could. Forgive me.

“HARRY.”

She dropped the letter with a scream, and almost would have fainted.

But even before the faintness could wholly overcome her, another sound rang out sharper and clearer far from the room below her. It brought her back to herself immediately. It was the report of a pistol.

Edie and the butler hurried back in breathless suspense to the library door. It was locked still. Edie took the key from her pocket and turned it quickly. When they entered, the candles on the mantelpiece were burning brightly, and Harry Lewin's body, shot through the heart, lay in a pool of gurgling blood right across the spattered hearthrug.

## 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 Third Time* by Grant Allen]