

**THE  
BECKONING HAND:**

**In Strict Confidence**

**By  
Grant Allen**

**1887**

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# *IN STRICT CONFIDENCE.*

## I.

Harry Pallant was never more desperately in love with his wife Louie than on the night of that delightful dance at the Vernon Ogilvies'. She wore her pale blue satin, with the low bodice, and her pretty necklet of rough amber in natural lumps, which her husband had given her for a birthday present just three days earlier. Harry wasn't rich, and he wasn't able to do everything that he could have wished for Louie—a young barrister, with no briefs to speak of, even if he ekes out his petty professional income with literary work, can't afford to spend very much in the way of personal adornment upon the ladies of his family—but he loved his pretty little wife dearly, and nothing pleased him better than to see Louie admired as she ought to be by other people. And that evening, to be sure, she was looking her very sweetest and prettiest. Flushed a little with unwonted excitement, in the glow of an innocent girlish flirtation, as she stood there talking to Hugh Ogilvie in the dim recess by the door of the conservatory, Harry, watching her unobserved from a nook of the refreshment-room, thought he had never in his life seen her look more beautiful or more becomingly animated. Animation suited Louie Pallant, and Hugh Ogilvie thought so too, as he half whispered his meaningless compliments in her dainty little ear, and noted the blush that rose quickly to her soft cheek, and the sudden droop of her long eyelashes above her great open hazel-grey eyes.

“Hugh's saying something pretty to Louie, I'm sure,” Harry thought to himself with a smile of pleasure, as he looked across at the sweet little graceful girlish figure. “I can see it at once in her face, and in her hands, playing so nervously with the edge of her fan. Dear child, how she lets one read in her eyes and cheeks her every tiny passing feeling! Her pretty wee mouth is like an open book! Hugh's telling her confidentially now that she's the belle of the evening. And so she is; there's not a doubt about it. Not a girl in the place fit to hold a candle to my Louie; especially when she blushes—she's sweet when she blushes. Now she's colouring up again. By Jove, yes, he must be positively making love to her. There's nothing I enjoy so much as seeing Louie enjoying herself, and being made much of. Too many girls, bright young girls, when they marry early, as Louie has done, settle down at once into household drudges, and never seem to get any happiness worth mentioning out of their lives in any way. I won't let it be so with Louie. Dear little soul, she shall flit about as much as she likes, and enjoy herself as the fancy seizes her, like a little butterfly, just like a butterfly. I love to see it!” And he hugged one clasped hand upon

the other silently.

Whence the astute reader will readily infer that Harry Pallant was still more or less in love with his wife Louie, although they had been married for five years and upwards.

Presently Louie and Hugh went back into the ballroom, and for the first time Harry noticed that the music had struck up some minutes since for the next waltz, for which he was engaged to Hugh's sister, Mrs. Wetherby Ferrand. He started hastily at the accusing sound, for in watching his wife he had forgotten his partner. Returning at once in search of Mrs. Ferrand, he found her sitting disconsolate in a corner waiting for him, and looking (as was natural) not altogether pleased at his ungallant treatment.

"So you've come at last, Harry!" Mrs. Ferrand said, with evident pique. They had been friends from childhood, and knew one another well enough to use both their Christian names and the critical freedom of old intimacy.

"Yes, Dora, I've come at last," Harry answered, with an apologetic bow, as he offered her his arm, "and I'm so sorry I've kept you waiting; but the fact is I was watching Louie. She's been dancing with Hugh, and she looks perfectly charming, I think, this evening."

Mrs. Ferrand bit her lip. "She does," she answered coldly, with half a pout. "And you were so busy watching her, it seems, you forgot all about *me*, Harry."

Harry laughed. "It was pardonable under the circumstances, you know, Dora," he said lightly. "If it had been the other way, now, Louie might have had some excuse for being jealous."

"Who said I was jealous?" Mrs. Ferrand cried, colouring up. "Jealous of you, indeed! What right have I got to be jealous of you, Harry? She may dance with Hugh all night long, for all I care for it. She's danced with him now three times already, and I dare say she'll dance with him as often again. You men are too conceited. You always think every woman on earth is just madly in love with you."

"My dear child," Harry answered, with a faint curl of his lip, "you quite misunderstand me. Heaven knows I at least am not conceited. What on earth have I got to be conceited of? I never thought any woman was in love with me in all my life except Louie; and what in the name of goodness even she can find to fall in love with in me—a fellow like me—positively passes my humble comprehension."

"She's going to dance the next waltz but one with Hugh, he tells me," Mrs. Ferrand replied drily, as if changing the conversation.

"Is she? Hugh's an excellent fellow," Harry answered carelessly, resting for a moment a little aside from the throng, and singling out Louie at once with his eye

among the whirling dancers. "Ah, there she is, over yonder. Do you see?—there, with that Captain Vandeleur. How sweetly she dances, Dora! And how splendidly she carries herself! I declare, she's the very gracefulest girl in all the room here."

Mrs. Ferrand dropped half a mock curtsy. "A polite partner would have said 'bar one,' Harry," she murmured petulantly. "How awfully in love with her you are, my dear boy. It must be nice to have a man so perfectly devoted to one. . . . And I don't believe either she half appreciates you. Some women would give their very eyes, do you know, to be as much loved by any man as she's loved by you, Harry." And she looked at him significantly.

"Well, but Ferrand——"

"Ah, poor Wetherby! Yes, yes; of course, of course, I quite agree with you. You're always right, Harry. Poor Wetherby is the worthiest of men, and in his own way does his very best, no doubt, to make me happy. But there is devotion and devotion, Harry. *Il y a fagots et fagots*. Poor dear Wetherby is no more capable ——"

"Dora, Dora, for Heaven's sake, I beg of you, no confidences. As a legal man, I must deprecate all confidences, otherwise than strictly in the way of business. What got us first into this absurd groove, I wonder? Oh yes, I remember—Louie's dancing. Shall we go on again? You must have got your breath by this time. Why, what's the matter, Dora? You look quite pale and flurried."

"Nothing, Harry. Nothing—nothing, I assure you. Not quite so tight, please; go quietly—I'm rather tired. . . . Yes, that'll do, thank you. The room's so very hot and close this evening. I can hardly breathe, I feel so stifled. Tight-lacing, I suppose poor dear Wetherby would say. I declare, Louie isn't dancing any longer. How very odd! She's gone back again now to sit by Hugh there. What on earth can be the reason, I wonder!"

"Captain Vandeleur's such an awfully bad waltzer, you know," Harry answered unconcernedly. "I dare say she was glad enough to make some excuse or other to get away from him. The room's so very hot and stifling."

"Oh, you think so," and Dora Ferrand gave a quiet little smile, as one who sees clearly below the surface. "I dare say. And she's not sorry either to find some good reason for another ten minutes' chat with Hugh, I fancy."

But Harry, in his innocence, never noticed her plain insinuation. "He's as blind as a bat," Dora Ferrand thought to herself, half contemptuously. "Just like poor dear Wetherby! Poor dear Wetherby never suspects anything! And that girl Louie doesn't half appreciate Harry either. Just like me, I suppose, with that poor dear stupid old stockbroker. Stockbroker, indeed! What in the name of all that's sensible could ever

have induced me to go and marry a blind old stick of a wealthy stockbroker? If Harry and I had only our lives to live again—but there, what’s the use of bothering one’s head about it? We’ve only got one life apiece, and that we generally begin by making a mull of.”

## II.

Three days later Harry Pallant went down as usual to his rooms in the Temple, and set to work upon his daily labour. The first envelope he opened of the batch upon his table was from the editor of the *Young People's Monitor*. It contained the week's correspondence. Harry Pallant glanced over the contents hastily, and singled out a few enclosures from the big budget with languid curiosity.

Of course everybody knows the *Young People's Monitor*. It is one of the most successful among the penny weeklies, and in addition to its sensational stories and moral essays, it gives advice gratis to all and sundry in its correspondence columns upon every conceivable subject that our common peccant or ignorant humanity can possibly inquire about. Now, Harry Pallant happened to be the particular person employed by the editor of this omniscient journal to supply the answers to the weekly shoals of anxious interrogators *de omni scibili*. His legal learning came in handy for the purpose, and being a practised London journalist as well, his knowledge of life stood him in good stead at this strange piece of literary craftsmanship. But the whole affair was "in strict confidence," as the *Monitor* announced. It was a point of honour between himself and the editor that the secret of the correspondence column should be jealously guarded from all and several; so Harry Pallant, accustomed, lawyer-like, to keeping secrets, had never mentioned his connection with the *Monitor* in this matter even to Louie. It came as part of his week's work at his chambers in the Temple, and it was duly finished and sent off to press, without note or comment, on the same day, in true business-like barrister fashion.

The first letter that Harry opened and listlessly glanced through with his experienced eye was one of the staple *Monitor* kind—Stella or Euphemia had quarrelled, in a moment of pique, with her lover, and was now dying of anxiety to regain his affections. Harry scribbled a few words of kindly chaff and sound advice in reply upon a blank sheet of virgin foolscap, and tossed the torn fragments of letter number one into the capacious mouth of his waste-paper basket.

The second letter requested the editor's candid opinion upon a short set of amateur verses therewith enclosed. Harry's candid opinion, muttered to himself beneath his moustache, was too unparliamentary for insertion in full; but he toned its verbal expression down a little in his written copy, and passed on hastily to the others in order.

"Camilla" would like to know, in strict confidence (thrice underlined), what is the editor's opinion of her style of handwriting. "A Draper's Assistant" is desirous to



learn how the words “heterogeneous” and “Beethoven” are usually pronounced in the best society. “Senex,” having had a slight difference as to the buttered toast with his present landlady (in whose house he has lodged for forty years), would be glad of any advice as to how, at his age, he is to do without her. “H. J. K.” has just read with much surprise a worthless pamphlet, proving that the inhabitants of the northern divisions of Staffordshire and Warwickshire are the lost Ten Tribes of Israel, and cannot imagine how this reckless assertion can be scripturally reconciled with the plain statements of the prophet Habakkuk, which show that the descendants of Manasseh are really to be looked for in the county of Sligo. And so forth, through every variety of male feebleness and feminine futility, in answer to all which Harry turned off his hasty rejoinder with the dexterous ease acquired of long practice and familiar experience.

At last he came in due course to a small white envelope, of better paper and style than the others, marked “17” in red pencil on the back in the formal hand of the systematic editor. He turned it over with mechanical carelessness. To his immense amusement and no little surprise, he saw at once, by the writing of the address, that the note came from his own Louie!

What could Louie have to ask of advice or information from the anonymous editor of the *Young People’s Monitor*?

He stood for a moment, with a quiet smile playing about his lips, thinking to himself that he had often wondered whether he should ever get a letter thus incognito from any person among his private acquaintances. And now he had got one from Louie herself. How very funny! How truly ridiculous! And how odd too that she shouldn’t even have told him beforehand she was going to write for counsel or assistance to the *Young People’s Monitor*!

And then a strange doubt flashed idly for a moment across his mind—a doubt that he felt immediately ashamed of. What possible subject could there be on which Louie could want advice and aid from an editor, a stranger, an unknown and anonymous impersonal entity, rather than from him, Harry, her own husband, her natural guide, assistant, and counsellor? It was odd, very odd—nay, even disquieting. Harry hardly knew what to make of the unexpected episode.

But next moment he had dismissed his doubts, though he stood still toying with the unopened envelope. He was half afraid to look inside it. Louie had only written, he felt sure, about some feminine trifle or other, some foolish point of petty etiquette—how to fold napkins mitre-fashion, or whether “P.P.C.” cards should be turned down at the upper right or the lower left-hand corner—some absurd detail about which she would have laughed outright at his personal opinion, but would defer at

once to the dignity of print, and the expressed verdict of the *Young People's Monitor*. So great is the power of printer's ink, that if you say a thing face to face, your own wife even will take no notice of it; but if you set it up in type anonymously, she, and the world at large to boot, will treat it like an inspired oracle in stone fallen down direct from the seventh.

And yet somehow Harry Pallant couldn't make up his mind at once to break open the tiny envelope of that mysterious, incomprehensible letter.

At last he broke it, and read it hurriedly. As he did so a terrible, ominous pang came across his heart, and the writing, familiar as it was, swam illegibly in dancing lines before his strained and aching vision.

"Dear Mr. Editor," the letter began, somewhat shakily, "you give your advice and assistance to many people. Will you give it to me? Will you help me? Will you save me?"

"This is my position. I was married young to a man I did not love, but liked and respected. I thought love would come afterwards. It never came. On the contrary, the longer I have lived with him the less I care for him. Not that he is unkind to me—he is good enough and generous enough in all conscience; but he inspires me with no affection and no enthusiasm. Till lately this was all I felt. I did not love him, but I jogged along comfortably somehow.

"Now, however, I find to my dismay that I am in love—not with him, but with another man a hundred times more congenial to my tastes and feelings in every way. I have done no wrong, but I think of him and live in him all my time. I cannot for a moment dismiss him from my thoughts. Oh, what am I to do? Tell me, help me!

"I can never love my husband—of that I am certain. I can never leave off loving the other—of that I am still more confident. Can you advise me? Can you relieve me? This torture is too terrible. It is killing me—killing me.

"Yours ever, in strict confidence,

"EGERIA."

Harry Pallant gazed at that awful accusing letter in blank horror and speechless bewilderment. He could not even cry or groan. He could not utter a word or shed a tear. The shock was so sudden, so crushing, so unexpected, so irretrievable!

He had never till that moment in the faintest degree doubted that Louie loved him

as he loved her—devotedly, distractedly.

Why, that very morning, before he came away on his journey to the Temple, Louie had kissed him so tenderly and affectionately, and called him “darling,” and wished he hadn’t always to go to that horrid City. How the memory stung him!

Yes; that was the hardest thought of all. If Louie wrote it, Louie was a hypocrite. Not only did she not now love him—not only had she never loved him, but, lowest depth of misery and shame, she had pretended to love him when in her heart of hearts she hated and despised him. He couldn’t believe it. He wouldn’t believe it. In her own words, it was too terrible!

If Louie wrote it? He turned the letter over once more. Ah, yes, there was no denying it. It was Louie’s handwriting—Louie’s, Louie’s. His brain reeled, but he could not doubt it or palter over it for a moment. Not even disguised—her very own handwriting. It was the seal of doom for him, yet he could not even pretend to disbelieve it.

He sat there long, incapable of realizing the full horror of that crushing, destroying, annihilating disclosure. It was useless trying to realize it—thank God for that! It so dazed and stunned and staggered and bewildered him that he fell for a time into a sort of hopeless lethargy, and felt and saw and thought of nothing.

At last he roused himself. He must go out. He rose from the table by the dingy window, took up his hat dreamily in his hand, and walked down the stairs, out of the gateway, and into the full tide of life and bustle in busy Fleet Street.

The cooler air upon his forehead and the sight of so many hurrying, active figures sobered and steadied him. He walked with rapid strides as far as Charing Cross Station, and then back again. After that, he came into his chambers once more, sat down resolutely at his table by himself, and began to write in a trembling shaky hand his answer to “Egeria.”

How often he had written a different answer to just the same type of tragic little letter—an answer of the commonplace conventional morality, a small set sermon on the duties of wives and the rights of husbands—as though there was nothing more in that fearful disclosure than the merest fancy; and now, when at last it touched himself, how profoundly awful in their mockery of the truth those baldly respectable answers seemed to him!

“EGERIA.—Your letter shall be treated, as you wish, in strict confidence. No one but ourselves shall ever know of it. You need not fear that H. P. will any longer prove a trouble to you. By the time you read this you will have learnt, or will shortly learn, that he is not in a position to cause you further discomfort. This is the only intimation you will receive of his intention. You will understand what it all means soon after you

read this communication.”

He rang the hand-bell on the table for his boy, put the answers into a long blue envelope, and said mechanically in a dry voice, “To the *Young People’s Monitor*. For press immediately.” The boy nodded a mute assent, and took them off to the office in silent obedience.

As soon as he was gone Harry Pallant locked the door, flung himself upon the table with his head buried madly in his arms, and sobbed aloud in terrible despondency. He had found at least the relief of tears.

There was only one comfort. He was fully insured, and Hugh Ogilvie was a rich man. Louie at least would be well provided for. He cared for nothing except for Louie. If Louie was happier—happier without him, what farther need had he got for living?

He had never thought before of Hugh, but now, now, Dora’s words came back to him at once, and he saw it all—he saw it all plainly.

Heaven be praised, they had no children! If they had had children—well, well, as things now stood, he could do what was best for Louie’s happiness.

### III.

For the next two days Louie could not imagine what sudden change had come so inexplicably over Harry Pallant. He was quite as tender and as gentle as ever, but so silent, sad, and incomprehensible. Louie coaxed him and petted him in vain; the more she made of him the more Harry seemed to retreat within himself, and the less could she understand what on earth he was thinking of.

On the Thursday night, when Harry came back from his work in the City, he said to Louie in an offhand tone, "Louie, I think of running down to-morrow to dear old Bilborough."

"What for, darling?"

"Well, you know, I've been fearfully out of sorts lately—worried or something—and I think three or four days at the seaside would be all the better for me—and for you too, darling. Let's go to the Red Lion, Louie. I've telegraphed down to-night for rooms, and I dare say—I shall get rid there of whatever's troubling me."

The Red Lion at Bilborough was the hotel at which they had passed their honeymoon, and where they had often gone at various times since for their summer holiday. Louie was delighted at the proposed trip, and smoothed her husband's hair softly with her hand.

"My darling," she said, "I'm so glad you're going there. I've noticed for the last few days you looked fagged and worried. But Bilborough's just the right place. Bilborough always sets you up again."

Harry smiled a faint, unhappy smile. "I've no doubt," he answered evasively, "I shall leave all my trouble behind at Bilborough."

They started by the early train next day, Louie hastily packing their little portmanteau overnight, and got down to Bilborough before noon. As soon as they were fairly settled in at the Lion, Harry kissed his wife tenderly, and, with a quiet persistence in his voice said, on a sudden, "Louie, I think I shall go and have a swim before lunchtime."

"A swim, Harry! So soon?—already?"

"Yes," Harry answered, with a twitching mouth, and looking at her nervously. "There's nothing like a swim you know, Louie, to wash away the cobwebs of London."

"Well, don't be long, darling," Louie said, with some undisguised anxiety. "I've ordered lunch, remember, for one."

"For one, Louie?" Harry cried with a start. "Why for one, dearest? I don't understand you. . . . Oh, I see. How very stupid of me! Yes, yes, I'll be back by one

o'clock. . . . That is to say, if I'm not back, don't you wait lunch for me."

He moved uneasily to the door, and then he turned back again with a timid glance, and drew a newspaper slowly from his pocket. "I've brought down this morning's *Young People's Monitor* with me, Louie," he said, in a tremulous voice, after a short pause. "I know you sometimes like to see it."

He watched her narrowly to observe the effect, but Louie took it from him without a visible tremor. "Oh, I'm so glad, Harry," she said in her natural tone, without betraying the least excitement. "How awfully kind of you to get it for me! There's something in it I wanted to see about."

Something in it she wanted to see about! Harry's heart stood still for a second within him! What duplicity! What temerity! What a terrible mixture of seeming goodness and perfect composure! And yet it was Louie, and he couldn't help loving her! He kissed her once more—a long, hard kiss—upon the forehead, and went out, leaving her there with the paper clasped tightly in her small white fingers. Though she said nothing, he could see that her fingers trembled as she held it. Yes, yes, there could be no doubt about it; she was eagerly expecting the answer—the fatal answer—the answer to "Egeria" in the correspondence column.

## IV.

Louie stood long at the window, with the paper still clutched eagerly in her hand, afraid to open it and read the answer, and yet longing to know what the *Young People's Monitor* had to say in reply to "Egeria." So she watched Harry go down to the bathing machines and enter one—it was still early in the season, and he had no need to wait; and then she watched them turning the windlass and letting it run down upon the shelving beach; and then she watched Harry swimming out and stemming the waves in his bold, manly fashion—he was a splendid swimmer; and after that, unable any longer to restrain her curiosity, she tore the paper open with her finger, and glanced down the correspondence column till she reached the expected answer to "Egeria."

She read it over wondering and trembling, with a sudden awful sense of the editor's omniscience as she saw the letters "H. P."—her husband's initials—Harry Pallant. "H. P.!" what could he mean by it? And then a vague dread came across her soul. What could "Egeria" and the editor of the *Young People's Monitor* have to do with Harry Pallant?

She read it over again and again. How terrifying! how mysterious! how dimly incomprehensible! Who on earth could have told the editor—that impersonal entity—that "Egeria's" letter had any connection with her own husband, Harry Pallant? And yet he must have known it—evidently known it. And she herself had never suspected the allusion. Yes, yes, it was clear to her now; the man about whom "Egeria" had written was Harry—Harry—Harry—Harry. Could it have been that that had so troubled him of late? She couldn't bear to distrust Harry; but it must have been that, and nothing else. Harry was in love with Dora Ferrand; or, if not, Dora Ferrand was in love with Harry, and Harry knew it, and was afraid he might yield to her, and had run away from her accordingly. He had come to Bilborough on purpose to escape her—to drag himself away from her—to try to forget her. Oh, Harry, Harry!—and she loved him so truly. To think he should deceive her—to think he should keep anything from her! It was too terrible—too terrible! She couldn't bear to think it, and yet the evidence forced it upon her.

But how did the editor ever come to know about it? And what was this mysterious, awful message that he gave Dora about Harry Pallant?

"You need not fear that H. P. will any longer prove a trouble to you." Why? Did Harry mean to leave London altogether? Was he afraid to trust himself there with Dora Ferrand? Did he fear that she would steal his heart in spite of him? Oh, Dora, Dora! the shameless creature! When Louie came to think it all over, her effrontery

and her wickedness were absolutely appalling.

She sat there long, turning the paper over helplessly in her hand, reading its words every way but the right way, pondering over what Harry had said to her that morning, putting her own interpretation upon everything, and forgetting even to unpack her things and make herself ready for lunch in the coffee-room.

Presently, a crowd upon the beach below languidly attracted her passing attention. The coastguard from the look-out was gesticulating frantically, and a group of sailors were seizing in haste upon a boat on the foreshore. They launched it hurriedly and pulled with all their might outward, the people on the beach gathering thicker meanwhile, and all looking eagerly towards some invisible object far out to sea, in the direction of the Race with the dangerous current. Louie's heart sank ominously within her. At that very moment the chambermaid of the hotel rushed in with a pale face, and cried out in merciless haste, "Oh, ma'am, Mrs. Pallant! quick! quick!—he's drowning! he's drowning! Mr. Pallant's swum too far out, and's got into the Race, and they've put the boat off to try and save him!"

In a second, half the truth flashed terribly upon Louie Pallant's distracted intelligence. She saw that it was Harry himself who wrote the correspondence for the *Young People's Monitor*, and that he had swum out to sea of his own accord to the end of his tether, on purpose to drown himself as if by accident. But she didn't yet perceive, obvious as it seemed, that Harry thought she herself had written "Egeria's" letter in her own person. She thought still he was in love with Dora, and had drowned himself because he couldn't tear himself away from her for ever.



## V.

They brought Harry Pallant ashore, cold and lifeless, and carried him up in haste to the hotel. There the village doctor saw him at once, and detected a faint tremor of the heart. At the end of an hour the lungs began to act faintly of themselves, and the heart beat a little in some feeble fashion.

With care Harry Pallant came round, but it took a week or two before he was himself again, and Louie nursed him meanwhile in fear and trembling, with breathless agony. She had one consolation—Harry loved her. In the long nights the whole truth dawned upon her, clear and certain. She saw how Harry had opened the letter, had jumped at once to the natural conclusion, and had tried to drown himself in order to release her. Oh, why had he not trusted her? Why had he not asked her? A woman naturally thinks like that; a man knows in his own soul that a man could never possibly do so.

She dared not tell him yet, for fear of a relapse. She could only wait and watch, and nurse him tenderly. And all the time she knew he distrusted her—knew he thought her a hypocrite and a traitor. For Harry's sake she had to bear it.

At last, one day, when he was getting very much stronger, and could sit up in a chair and look bitterly out at the sea, she said to him in a gentle voice, very tentatively, "Harry, Dora Ferrand and her husband have gone to spend the summer in Norway."

Harry groaned. "How do you know?" he asked. "Has Hugh written to you? What is it to us? Who told you about it?"

Louie bit her lip hard to keep back the tears. "Dora telegraphed to me herself," she answered softly. "She telegraphed to me as soon as ever"—she hesitated a moment—"as soon as ever she saw your answer to her in the *Monitor*."

Harry's face grew white with horror. "My answer to *her*!" he cried in a ghastly voice, not caring to ask at the moment how Louie came to know it was he who wrote the answers in the *Young People's Monitor*. "My answer to you, you mean, Louie. It was your letter—yours, not Dora's. You can't deceive me. I read it myself. My poor child, I saw your handwriting."

It was an awful thing that, in spite of all, he must have it out with her against his will; but he would not flinch from it—he would settle it then and there, once and for ever. She had introduced it herself; she had brought it down upon her own head. He would not flinch from it. It was his duty to tell her.

Louie laid her hand upon his arm. He did not try to cast it off. "Harry," she said, imploringly, persuasively, "there is a terrible mistake here—a terrible

misunderstanding. It was unavoidable; you could not possibly have thought otherwise. But oh, Harry, if you knew the suffering you have brought upon me, you would not speak so, darling—you would not speak so.”

Harry turned towards her passionately and eagerly. “Then you didn’t want me to die, Louie?” he cried in a hoarse voice. “You didn’t really want to get rid of me?”

Louie withdrew her hand hastily as if she had been stung. “Harry,” she gasped, as well as she was able, “you misunderstood that letter altogether. It was not mine—it was Dora Ferrand’s. Dora wrote it, and I only copied it. If you will listen a minute I will tell you all, all about it.”

Harry flung himself back half incredulously on his chair, but with a new-born hope lighting up in part the gloom of his recovered existence.

“I went over to Dora Ferrand’s the day after the Ogilvies’ dance,” Louie began tremulously, “and I found Dora sitting in her boudoir writing a letter. I walked up without being announced, and when Dora saw me she screamed a little, and then she grew as red as fire, and burst out crying, and tried to hide the letter she was writing. So I went up to her and began to soothe her, and asked her what it was, and wanted to read it. And Dora cried for a long time, and wouldn’t tell me, and was dreadfully penitent, and said she was very, very miserable. So I said, ‘Dora, is there anything wrong between you and Mr. Ferrand?’ And she said, ‘Nothing, Louie; I give you my word of honour, nothing. Poor Wetherby’s as kind to me as anybody could be. But ——’ And then she began crying again as if her heart would burst, worse than ever. And I took her head on my shoulder, and said to her, ‘Dora, is it that you feel you don’t love him?’ And Dora was in a dreadfully penitent fit, and she flung herself away from me, and said to me, ‘Oh, Louie, don’t touch me! Don’t kiss me! Don’t come near me! I’m not fit to associate with a girl like you, dear. . . . Oh, Louie, I don’t love him; and—what’s worse—I love somebody else, darling.’ Well, then, of course, I was horribly shocked, and I said, ‘Dora, Dora, this is awfully wicked of you!’ And Dora cried worse than before, and sobbed away, and wouldn’t be comforted. And there was a copy of the *Monitor* lying on the table, and I saw it open at the correspondence, and I said, ‘Were you writing for advice to the *Monitor*, Dora?’ And she looked up and nodded ‘Yes.’ So I coaxed her and begged her to show me the letter, and at last she showed it to me; but she wouldn’t tell me who she was in love with, Harry; and, oh, Harry, my darling, my darling, I never so much as dreamt of its being you, dear—the thought never even crossed my mind. I ran over everybody I could imagine she’d taken a fancy to, but I never for a moment thought of you, darling. I suppose, Harry, I loved you too dearly even to suspect it. And then, I dare say, Dora saw I didn’t suspect it; but, anyhow, she went

on and finished the letter—it was nearly done when I came in to her—and after that she said she couldn't bear to send it in her own handwriting, for fear anybody should know her and recognize it. So I said if she liked I'd copy it out for her, for by that time I was crying just as hard as she was, and so sorry for her and for poor Mr. Ferrand; and it never struck me that anybody could ever possibly think that *I* wrote it about myself. And—and—and that's all, Harry."

Harry listened, conscience-smitten, to the artless recital, which bore its own truth on the very surface of it, as it fell from Louie's trembling lips, and then he held her off at arm's length when she tried to fall upon his neck and kiss him, whispering in a loud undertone, "Oh, Louie, Louie, don't, don't! I don't deserve it! I have been too wicked—too mistrustful!"

Louie drew forth a letter from her pocket and handed it to him silently. It was in Dora's handwriting. He read it through in breathless anxiety.

"Louie,—I dare not call you anything else now. You know it all by this time. We have heard about Harry's accident from your sister. Nobody but ourselves knows it was not an accident. And I have seen the answer in the *Monitor*. Of course Harry wrote it. I see it all now. You can never forgive me. It is I who have brought all this misery upon you. I am a wretched woman. Do not reproach me—I reproach myself more bitterly than anything you could say would ever reproach me. But don't forgive me and pity me either. If you forgive me I shall have to kill myself. It's all over now. I will do the only thing that remains for me—keep out of your way and his for ever. Poor Wetherby is going to take me for the summer to Norway, as I telegraphed to you. We are just starting. When we return we shall winter in Italy. I will leave London in future altogether. Nobody but our three selves need ever know or suspect the reason. Harry will recover, and you two will be happy yet. But I—I shall be as miserable for ever, as I truly deserve to be.

"Your wretched friend,

"D. F."

Harry crumpled up the letter bitterly in his hand. "Poor soul," he said. "Louie, I forgive her. Can I myself ever hope for forgiveness?"

Louie flung herself fiercely upon him. "My darling," she cried, "we will always trust one another in future. You couldn't help it, Harry. It was impossible for you to have judged otherwise. But oh, my darling, what I have suffered! Let us forgive her,

Harry, and let us love one another better now.”

## 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: In Strict Confidence* by Grant Allen]