



The Hollow of Her Hand

by George Barr McCutcheon

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SYNOPSIS.

Challis Wrاندall is found murdered in a road house near New York. Mrs. Wrاندall is summoned from the city and identifies the body. A young woman who accompanied Wrاندall to the inn and subsequently disappeared, is suspected. Mrs. Wrاندall starts back for New York in an auto during a blinding snow storm. On the way she meets a young woman in the road who proves to be the woman who killed Wrاندall. Feeling that the girl had done her a service in ridding her of the man who though she loved him deeply, had caused her great sorrow, Mrs. Wrاندall determines to shield her and takes her to her own home. Mrs. Wrاندall hears the story of Hetty Castleton's life, except that portion that relates to Wrاندall. This and the story of the tragedy she forbids the girl ever to tell. She offers Hetty a home, friendship and security from her own account of the tragedy. Mrs. Sara Wrاندall and Hetty attend the funeral of Challis Wrاندall at the home of his parents. Mrs. Wrاندall and Hetty return to New York after an absence of a year. In Europe, Leslie Wrاندall, brother of Challis, makes himself useful to Sara and becomes greatly interested in Hetty. Sara sees in Leslie's infatuation possibility for revenge on the Wrاندalls and reparation for the wrongs she suffered at the hands of Challis Wrاندall by marrying his murderer. She arranges with Leslie to marry her. Sara arranges with Booth to paint a picture of Hetty. Booth has a haunting feeling that he has seen Hetty before. Looking through a portfolio of pictures by an unknown English artist he finds one of Hetty. He speaks to her about it. Hetty declares it must be a picture of Hetty Glynn, an English actress, who resembles her very much. Leslie Wrاندall becomes impatient and jealous over the picture painting and declares he is going to propose to Hetty at the first opportunity. Much to his chagrin Leslie is refused by Hetty. Sara, between whom and Hetty a strong mutual affection has grown up, tries to persuade the girl that she should not let the tragedy prevent her from marrying.

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

"You do know it, don't you?" he went on.

"I—God knows I don't want you to love me. I never meant that you should—" she was saying, as if to herself.

"I suppose it's hopeless," he said dumbly, as her voice trailed off in a whisper.

"Yes, it is utterly hopeless," she said, and she was white to the lips.

"I—I shan't say anything more," said he. "Of course, I understand how it is. There's some one else. Only I want you to know that I love you with all my soul, Hetty. I—I don't see how I'm going to get on without you. But I—I won't distress you, dear."

"There isn't anyone else, Brandon," she said in a very low voice. Her fingers tightened on his in a sort of desperation. "I know what you are thinking. It isn't Leslie. It never can be Leslie."

"Then—then—" he stammered, the blood surging back into his heart—"there may be a chance—"

"No, no!" she cried, almost vehemently. "I can't let you go on hoping. It is wrong—so terribly wrong. You must forget me. You must—"

He seized her other hand and held them both firmly, masterfully.

"See here, my love—look at me, dearest! What is wrong? Tell me! You are unhappy. Don't be afraid to tell me. You—you do love me!"

She drew a long breath through her half-closed lips. Her eyes darkened with pain.

"No, I don't love you. Oh, I am so sorry to have given you—"

He was almost radiant. "Tell me the truth," he cried triumphantly. "Don't hold anything back, darling. If there is anything troubling you, let me shoulder it. I can—I will do anything in the world for you. Listen: I know there's a mystery somewhere. I have felt it about you always. I have seen it in your eyes. I have always sensed it stealing over me when I'm with you—this strange, bewildering atmosphere of—"

"Hush! You must not say anything more," she cried out. "I cannot love you. There is nothing more to be said."

"But I know it now. You do love me. I could about it to—"

The miserable, whipped expression in her eyes checked this outburst. He was struck by it, even dismayed. "My dearest one, my love," he said, with infinite tenderness, "what is it? Tell me!"

He drew her to him. Her arm went about her shoulders. The final thrill of ecstasy bounded through his veins. The feel of her! The wonderful, subtle, feminine feel of her! His brain reeled in a new and vast whirl of intoxication.

She sat there very still and unresisting, her hand to her lips, uttering no word, scarcely breathing. He waited. He gave her time. After a little while her fingers strayed to the crown of her limp, rakish panama. They found the single hatpin and drew it out. He smiled as he pushed the hat away and then pressed her dark little head against his breast. Her blue eyes were swimming.

"Just this once, just this once," she murmured with a sob in her voice.

"Some Day You Will Tell Me—Everything!"

Her hand stole upward and caressed his brown cheek and throat. Tears of joy started in his eyes—tears of exquisite delight.

"Good God, Hetty, I—I can't do without you," he whispered, shaken by his passion. "Nothing can come between us. I must have you always like this."

"Che sara, sara," she sighed, like the breath of the summer wind as it sings in the trees.

The minutes passed and neither spoke. His rapt gaze hung upon the glossy crown that pressed against him so gently. He could not see her eyes, but somehow he felt they were tightly shut, as if in pain.

"I love you, Hetty. Nothing can matter," he whispered at last. "Tell me what it is."

She lifted her head and gently withdrew herself from his embrace. He did not oppose her, noting the serious, almost somber look in her eyes as she turned to regard him steadfastly, an unwavering integrity of purpose in her depths.

She had made up her mind to tell him a part of the truth. "Brandon, I am Hetty Glynn."

He started, not so much in surprise as at the abruptness with which she made the announcement.

"I have been sure of it, dear, from the beginning," he said quietly.

Then her tongue was loosed. The words rushed to her lips. "I was Hawright's model for six months. I posed for all those studies, and for the big canvas in the academy. It was either that or starvation. Oh, you will hate me—you must hate me."

He laid his hand on her hair, a calm smile on his lips. "I can't love and hate at the same time," he said.

"There was nothing wrong in what you did for Hawright. I am a painter, you know. I understand. Does—does Mrs. Wrاندall know all this?"

"Yes—everything. She knows and understands. She is an angel, Brandon, an angel from heaven. But," she burst forth, "I am not altogether a sham. I am the daughter of Colonel Castleton, and I am cousin of all the Murgatroids—the poor relation. It isn't as if I were the scum of the earth, is it? I am a Castleton. My father comes of a noble family. And Brandon, the only thing I've ever done in my life that I am really ashamed of is the deception I practiced on you when you brought that magazine to me and faced me with it. I did not lie to you. I simply let you believe I was not the person you thought I was. But I deceived you—"

"No, you did not deceive me," he said gently. "I read the truth in your dear eyes."

"There are other things, too. I shall not speak of them, except to repeat that I have not done anything else in my life that I should be ashamed of." Her eyes were burning with earnestness. He could not but understand what she meant.

Again he stroked her hair. "I am sure of that," he said.

"My mother was Kitty Glynn, the actress. My father, a younger son, fell in love with her. They were married against the wishes of his father, who cut him off. He was in the service, and he was brave enough to stick. They went to one of the South African garrisons, and I was born there. Then to India. Then back to London, where an aunt had died, leaving my father quite a comfortable fortune. But his old friends would have nothing to do with him. He had lived—well, he had made life a hell for my mother in those frontier posts. He deserted us in the end, after he had squandered the fortune. My mother made no effort to compel him to provide for her or for me. She was proud. She was hurt. Today he is in India, still in the service, a martinet with a record for bravery on the field of battle that cannot be taken from him, no matter what else may befall. I hear from him once or twice a year. That is all I can tell you about him. My mother died three years ago, after two years of invalidism. During those years I tried to repay her for the sacrifice she had made in giving me the education, the—"

She choked up for a second, and then went bravely on. "Her old manager made a place for me in one of his companies. I took my mother's name, Hetty Glynn, and—well, for a season and a half I was in the chorus. I could not stay there. I could not, I repeated with a shudder. "I gave it up after my mother's death. I was fairly well equipped for work as a children's governess, so I engaged myself to—"

She stopped in dismay, for he was laughing.

"And now do you know what I think of you, Miss Hetty Glynn?" he cried, seizing her hands and regarding her with a serious, steadfast gleam in his eyes. "You are the pluckiest, sandiest girl I've ever known. You are the kind that heroines are made of. There is nothing in what you've told me that could in the least alter my regard for you, except to increase the love I thought could be no stronger. Will you marry me, Hetty?"

She jerked her hands away, and held them clenched against her breast.

"No! I cannot. It is impossible. Brandon. If I loved you less than I do, I might say yes, but—no, it is impossible."

His eyes narrowed. A gray shadow crept over his face.

"There can be only one obstacle so serious as all that," he said slowly. "You—you are already married."

"No!" she cried, lifting her pathetic eyes to his. "It isn't that. Oh, please be good to me! Don't ask me to say anything more. Don't make it hard for me, Brandon. I love you—I love you. To be your wife would be the most glorious—No, no! I must not even think of it. I must put it out of my mind. There is a barrier, dearest. We cannot surmount it. Don't

ask me to tell you, for I cannot. I—I am so happy in knowing that you love me, and that you still love me after I have told you how mean and shameless I was in deceiving—"

He drew her close and kissed her full on the trembling lips. She gasped and closed her eyes, lying like one in a swoon. Soft, moaning sounds came from her lips. He could not help feeling a vast pity for her, she was so gentle, so miserably hurt by something he could not understand, but knew to be monumental in its power to oppress.

"Listen, dearest," he said, after a long silence; "I understand this much, at least: you can't talk about it now. Whatever it is, it hurts, and God knows I don't want to make it worse for you in this hour when I am so selfishly happy. Time will show us the way. It can't be insurmountable. Love always triumphs. I only ask you to repeat those three little words, and I will be content. Say them."

"I love you," she murmured.

"There! You are mine! Three little words bind you to me forever. I will wait until the barrier is down. Then I will take you."

"The barrier grows stronger every day," she said, staring out beyond the tree-tops at the scudding clouds. "It never can be removed."

"Some day you will tell me—everything!"

She hesitated long. "Yes, before God, Brandon, I will tell you. Not now, but—some day. Then you will see why—I cannot—" She could not complete the sentence.

"I don't believe there is anything you can tell me that will alter my feelings toward you," he said firmly. "The barrier may be insurmountable, but my love is everlasting."

"I can only thank you, dear, and—love you with all my wretched heart."

"You are not pledged to some one else?"

"No."

"That's all I want to know," he said, with a deep breath. "I thought it might be—Leslie."

"No, no!" she cried out, and he caught a note of horror in her voice.

"Does he know this—this thing you can't tell me?" he demanded, a harsh note of jealousy in his voice.

She looked at him, hurt by his tone. "Sara knows," she said. "There is

CHAPTER XII.

Sara Wrاندall Finds the Truth.

Sara had kept the three Wrاندalls over for luncheon.

"My dear," said Mrs. Redmond Wrاندall, as she stood before Hetty's portrait at the end of the long living-room. "I must say that Brandon has succeeded in catching that lovely little something that makes her so—what shall I say?—so mysterious? Is that what I want? The word is as elusive as the expression."

"Subtle is the word you want, mother," said Vivian, standing beside Leslie, tall, slim and aristocratic, her hands behind her back, her manner one of absolute indifference. Vivian was more than handsome; she was striking.

"There isn't anything subtle about Hetty," said Sara, with a laugh. "She's quite ingenuous."

Leslie was pulling at his mustache, and frowning slightly. The sunburn on his nose and forehead had begun to peel off in chappy little flakes.

"Ripping likeness, though," was his comment.

"Oh, perfect," said his mother. "Really wonderful. It will make Brandon famous."

"She's so healthy-looking," said Vivian.

"English," remarked Leslie, as if that covered everything.

"Nonsense," cried the elder Mrs. Wrاندall, lifting her lorgnette again. "Pure, honest, unmixed blood, that's what it is. There is birth in that girl's face."

"You're always talking about birth, mother," said her son sourly, as she turned away.

"It's a good thing to have," said his mother with conviction.

"It's an easy thing to get in America," said he, pulling out his cigarette case.

It was then that Sara prevailed upon them to stop for luncheon. "Hetty always takes these long walks in the morning, and she will be disappointed if she finds you haven't waited—"

"Oh, as for that—" began Leslie and stopped, but he could not have been more lucid if he had uttered the sentence in full.

"Why didn't you pick her up and

bring her home with you?" asked Sara, as they moved off in the direction of the porch.

"She seemed to be taking Brandy out for his morning exercise," said he surlily. "Far be it from me to—Umph!"

Sara repressed the start of surprise. She thought Hetty was alone.

"She will bring him in for luncheon, I suppose," she said carelessly, although there was a slight contraction of the eyelids. "He is a privileged character."

It was long past the luncheon hour when Hetty came in, flushed and warm. She was alone, and she had been walking rapidly.

"Oh, I'm sorry to be so late," she apologized, darting a look of anxiety at Sara. "We grew careless with time. Am I shockingly late?"

She was shaking hands with Mrs. Redmond Wrاندall as she spoke, Leslie and Vivian stood by, rigidly awaiting their turn. Neither appeared to be especially cordial.

"What is the passing of an hour, my dear," said the old lady, "to one who is young and can spare it?"

"I did not expect you—I mean to say, nothing was said about luncheon, was there, Sara?" She was in a pretty state of confusion.

"No," said Leslie, breaking in; "we butted in, that's all. How are you?" He clasped her hand and bent over it. She was regarding him with slightly dilated eyes. He misinterpreted the steady scrutiny. "Oh, it will all peel off in a day or two," he explained, going a shade redder.

"When did you return?" she asked. "I thought tomorrow was—"

"Leslie never has any tomorrows, Miss Castleton," explained Vivian. "He always does tomorrow's work today. That's why he never has any troubles ahead of him."

"What rot!" exclaimed Leslie. "Where is Mr. Booth?" inquired Sara. "Wouldn't he come in, Hetty?"

"I—I didn't think to ask him to stop for luncheon," she replied, and then hurried off to her room to make herself presentable.

Hetty was in a state of nervous excitement during the luncheon. The encounter with Booth had not resulted at all as she had fancied it would. She had betrayed herself in a most disconcerting manner, and now was more deeply involved than ever before. She had been determined at the outset, she had failed, and now he had a claim—an incontestable claim against her. She found it difficult to meet Sara's steady, questioning gaze. She wanted to be alone.

After luncheon, Leslie drew Sara aside.

"I must say she doesn't seem especially overjoyed to see me," he growled. "She's as cool as ice."

"What do you expect, Leslie?" she demanded with some asperity.

"I can't stand this much longer, Sara," he said. "Don't you see how things are going? She's losing her heart to Booth."

"I don't see how we can prevent it."

"By gad, I'll have another try at it—tonight. I say, has she said—anything?"

"She pities you," she said, a malicious joy in her soul. "That's akin to something else, you know."

"Confound it all, I don't want to be pitied!"

"Then I'd advise you to defer your try at it," she remarked.

"I'm mad about her, Sara. I can't sleep, I can't think, I can't—yes, I can eat, but it doesn't taste right to me. I've just got to have it settled. Why, people are beginning to notice the change in me. They say all sorts of things. About my liver, and all that sort of thing. I'm going to settle it tonight. It's been nearly three weeks now. She's surely had time to think it over; how much better everything will be for her, and all that. She's no fool, Sara. And you know what Vivian's doing this very instant over there in the corner? She's inviting her to spend a fortnight over at our place. If she comes—well, that means the engagement will be announced at once."

Sara did not marvel at his assurance in the face of what had gone before. She knew him too well. In spite of the original rebuff, he was thoroughly satisfied in his own mind that Hetty Castleton would not be such a fool as to refuse him the second time.

"It is barely possible, Leslie," she said, "that she may consider Brandon Booth quite as good a catch as you, and infinitely better looking at the present moment."

"It's this beastly sunburn," he lamented, rubbing his nose gently, thinking first of his person. An instant later he was thinking of the other half of the declaration. "That's just what I've been afraid of," he said. "I told you what would happen if that portrait nonsense went on forever. It's your fault, Sara."

"But I have reason to believe she will not accept him, if it goes so far as that. You are quite safe in that direction."

"Gad, I'd hate to risk it," he muttered. "I have a feeling she's in love with him."

Vivian approached. "Sara, you must let me have Miss Castleton for the first two weeks in July," she said serenely.

"I can't do it, Vivian," said the other promptly. "I can't bear the thought of being alone in this big old barn of a place. Nice of you to want her, but—"

"Oh, don't be selfish, Sara," cried Vivian.

"You don't know how much I depend on her," said Sara.

"I'd ask you over, too, dear, if there weren't so many others coming to put them. You understand, don't you?"

"Perfectly," said her sister-in-law. "But I've been counting on—Hetty."

"I say, Sara," broke in Leslie, "you could go up to Bar Harbor with the Williamsons at that time. Tell her about the invitation, Vivie."

"It isn't necessary," said Sara coldly. "I scarcely know the Williamsons." She hesitated an instant and then went on with sardonic dismay: "They're in trade, you know."

"That's nothing against 'em," protested he. "Awfully jolly people—really ripping. Ain't they, Viv?"

"I don't know them well enough to say," said Vivian, turning away. "I only know we're all snobs of the worst sort."

"Just a minute, Viv," he called out. "What does Miss Castleton say about coming?" It was an eager question. Much depended on the reply.

"I haven't asked her," said his sister succinctly. "How could I, without first consulting Sara?"

"Then you don't intend to ask her?" "Certainly not."

After the Wrاندalls had departed, Sara took Hetty off to her room. The girl knew what was coming.

"Hetty," said the older woman, facing her after she had closed the door of her boudoir, "what is going on between you and Brandon Booth? I must have the truth. Are you doing anything foolish?"

"Foolish? Heaven help me, no! It—it is a tragedy," cried Hetty, meeting her gaze with one of utter despair.

"What has happened? Tell me!"

"What am I to do, Sara darling? He—he has told me that he—he—"

"Loves you?"

"And you have told him that his love is returned?"

"I couldn't help it. I was carried away. I did not mean to let him see that I—"

"You are such a novice in the business of love," said Sara sneeringly. "You are in the habit of being carried away, I fear."

"Oh, Sara!"

"You must put a stop to all this at once. How can you think of marrying him, Hetty Glynn? Send him—"

"I do not intend to marry him," said the girl, suddenly calm and dignified.

"I am to draw but one conclusion, I suppose," said the other, regarding the girl intently.

"What do you mean?"

"Is it necessary to ask that question?"

The puzzled expression remained in the girl's eyes for a time, and then slowly gave way to one of absolute horror.

"How dare you suggest such a thing?" she cried, turning pale, then crimson. "How dare you?"

Sara laughed shortly. "Isn't the inference a natural one? You are forgetting yourself."

"I understand," said the girl, through pallid lips. Her eyes were dark with pain and misery. "You think I am altogether bad." She drooped perceptibly.

"You went to Burton's inn," sententiously.

"But, Sara, you must believe me. I did not know he was married. For God's sake, do me the justice to—"

"But you went there with him," insisted the other, her eyes hard as steel. "It doesn't matter whether he was married—or free. You went."

Hetty threw herself upon her companion's breast and wound her strong arms about her.

"Sara, Sara, you must let me explain—you must let me tell you everything. Don't stop me! You have refused to hear my plea—"

"And I still refuse," cried Sara, throwing her off angrily. "Good God, do you think I will listen to you? If you utter another word, I will—"

Strangle you!"

Hetty shrank back, terrified. Slowly she moved backward in the direction of the door, never taking her eyes from the impassioned face of her protector.

"Don't, Sara, please don't!" she begged.

"Don't look at me like that! I promise—I promise. Forgive me! I would not give you an instant's pain for all the world. You would suffer, you would—"

Sara suddenly put her hands over her eyes. A single moan escaped her lips—a hoarse gasp of pain.

"Dearest!" cried Hetty, springing to her side.

Sara threw her head up and met her with a cold, repelling look.

"Wait!" she commanded. "The time has come when you should know what is in my mind, and has been for months. It concerns you. I expect you to marry Leslie Wrاندall."

Hetty stopped short.

"How can you jest with me, Sara?" she cried, suddenly indignant.

"I am not jesting," said Sara levelly.

"You—you—really mean—what you

begged. "Don't look at me like that! I promise—I promise. Forgive me! I would not give you an instant's pain for all the world. You would suffer, you would—"

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"I am not jesting," said Sara levelly.

"You—you—really mean—what you

have just said?" The puzzled look gave way to one of revulsion. A great shudder swept over her.

"Leslie Wrاندall must pay his brother's debt to you."

"My God!" fell from the girl's stiff lips. "You—you must be going mad!"

Sara laughed softly. "I have meant it almost from the beginning," she said. "It came to my mind the day that Challis was buried. It has never been out of it for an instant since that day. Now you understand."

If she expected Hetty to fall into a fit of weeping, to collapse, to plead with her for mercy, she was soon to find herself mistaken. The girl straightened up suddenly and met her gaze with one in which there was the fierce determination. Her eyes were steady, her bosom heaved.

"And I have loved you so devotedly—so blindly," she said, in low tones of scorn. "You have been hating me all these months while I thought you were loving me. What a fool I have been! I might have known. You couldn't love me."

"When Leslie asks you tonight to marry him, you are to say that you will do so," said Sara, betraying no sign of having heard the bitter words.