



The Hollow of Her Hand

by George Barr McCutcheon



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 killing her husband, she takes her to her own home. Mrs. Wrاندall determines to shield her daughter, but she is forced to reveal the truth to the police. She offers Hetty a home, friendship and security from prison on account of the tragedy. Sara Wrاندall and Hetty return to New York after an absence of a year. In Europe, Leslie Wrاندall, brother of Challis, becomes greatly interested in Hetty. Sara sees in Leslie's infatuation a possibility for revenge on the woman who murdered her husband. She arranges to marry him in company with his friend Brandon Booth, an artist, visits Sara at her country place. Leslie confesses to her that he is madly in love with Hetty. Sara agrees 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. She is very much interested in the picture. She is refused by Hetty. Booth and Hetty confess their love for each other. Hetty declares that she can never marry as there is an insurmountable barrier in the way. Hetty admits to Sara that she loves Booth. Sara declares to Hetty that she must marry Leslie, who must be made to pay his brother's debt to the girl. Hetty again attempts to tell the real story of the tragedy and Sara threatens to strangle her if she says a word. Sara insults Hetty by revealing that all this time she has believed Hetty to have shared in her relations with Challis Wrاندall. Later she realizes that Hetty is innocent. Leslie again proposes to Hetty and is refused. Hetty prepares to leave with her father. She declares that after what has happened she can remain no longer.

CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

Leslie did not turn up at his father's place in the High street that night until Booth was safely out of the way. He spent a dismal evening at the boat club.

His father and mother were in the library when he came home at half-past ten. From a dark corner of the garden he had witnessed Booth's early departure. Vivian had gone down to the gate in the low-lying hedge with her visitor. She came in a moment after Leslie's entrance.

"Hello, Les," she said, bending an inquiring eye upon him. "Isn't this early for you?"

Her brother was standing near the fireplace.

"There's a heavy dew falling. Matter," he said gruffly, "Shan't I touch a match to the kindling?"

His mother came over to him quickly, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Your coat is damp," she said anxiously. "Yes, light the fire," said Mr. Wrاندall, looking up from his book. They were always doing something for Leslie's comfort.

No one seemed to notice him. Leslie knelt and struck a match.

"Well!" said Vivian.

"Well what?" he demanded without looking up.

His sister took a moment for thought. "Is Hetty coming to stay with us in July?"

He stood erect, first rubbing his knee to dislodge the dust—then his palms.

"No, she isn't coming," he said. He drew a very long breath—the first in several hours—and then expelled it vigorously. "She has refused to marry me."

Mr. Wrاندall turned a leaf in his book; it sounded like the crack of doom, so still had the room become.

Vivian had the forethought to push a chair toward her mother. It was a most timely act on her part, for Mrs. Wrاندall sat down very abruptly and very limply.

"She—what?" gasped Leslie's mother.

"Turned me down—cold," said Leslie briefly.

Mr. Wrاندall laid his book on the table without thinking to put the book-

re-read four or five pages before discovering his error.

No one spoke for a matter of five minutes or more. Then Mrs. Wrاندall got up, went over to the library table and closed with a snap the bulky book with the limp leather cover, saying as she held it up to let him see that it was the privately printed history of the Murgatroyd family:

"It came by post this evening from London. She is merely a fourth cousin, my son."

He looked up with a gleam of interest in his eye.

CHAPTER XIV.

Crossing the Channel.

Booth, restless with a vague uneasiness that had come over him during the night, keeping him awake until nearly dawn, was hard put during the early hours of the forenoon to find occupation for his interest until a reasonable time arrived for appearing at Southlook. He was unable to account for this feeling of uncertainty and irritation.

At nine he set out to walk over to Southlook, realizing that he should have to spend an hour in profitless gossip with the lodge keeper before presenting himself at the villa, but somehow relishing the thought that even so he would be nearer to Hetty than if he remained in his own doorway.

Half-way there he was overtaken by Sara's big French machine returning from the village. The car came to a standstill as he stepped aside to let it pass, and Sara herself leaned over and cordially invited him to get in and ride home with her.

"What an early bird you are," he exclaimed as he took his seat beside her.

She was not in a mood for airy persiflage, as he soon discovered.

"Miss Castleton has gone up to town, Mr. Booth," she said rather lifelessly. "I have just taken her to the station. She caught the eight-thirty."

He was at once solicitous. "No bad news, I hope?" There was no thought in his mind that her absence was other than temporary.

"She is not coming back, Brandon." She had not addressed him as Brandon before.

He stared. "You—you mean—" The words died on his lips.

"She is not coming back," she repeated.

An accusing gleam leaped into his eyes.

"What has happened, Mrs. Wrاندall?" he asked.

She was quick to perceive the change in his voice and manner.

"She prefers to live apart from me. That is all."

"When was this decision reached?" "But yesterday. Soon after she came in from her walk with you."

"Do—do you mean to imply that had that anything to do with her leaving your home?" he demanded, with a flush on his cheek.

She met his look without flinching. "It was the beginning."

"You—you criticised her? You took her to task—"

"I notified her that she was to marry Leslie Wrاندall if she marries anyone at all," she said in a perfectly level tone.

"Good Lord, Mrs. Wrاندall!" "But she is not going to marry Leslie."

"I know it—I knew it yesterday," he cried triumphantly. "She loves me, Sara. Didn't she say as much to you?"

"Yes, Brandon, she loves you. But she will not be your wife."

"What is all this mystery? Why can't she be my wife? What is there to prevent?"

She regarded him with dark, inscrutable eyes. Many seconds passed before she spoke.

"Would you want her for your wife if you knew she had belonged to another man?"

He turned very cold. The palms of his hands were wet, as with ice-water. Something dark seemed to flit before his eyes.

"I will not believe that of her," he said, shaking his head with an air of finality.

"That is not an answer to my question."

"Yes, I would still want her," he declared steadily.

"I merely meant to put you to the harshest test," she said, and there was relief in her voice. "She is a good girl, she is pure. I asked my question because until yesterday I had reason to doubt her."

"Good heavens, how could you doubt those honest, guileless eyes of—"

She shook her head sadly. "To answer you I would have to reveal the secret that makes it impossible for her to become your wife, and that I cannot, will not do."

"Is it fair to me?"

"Perhaps not, but it is fair to her, and that is why I must remain silent."

"Before God, I shall know the truth—from her, if not from you—and—"

"If you love her, if you will be kind to her, you will let her go her way in peace."

He was struck by the somewhat sinister earnestness of her words.

"Tell me where I may find her," he said, setting his jaw.

"It will not be difficult for you to find her," she said, frowning. "If you insist on pursuing her."

"You drive her away from your house, Sara Wrاندall, and yet you expect me to believe that your motives are friendly. Why should I accept your word as final?"

"I did not drive her away, nor did I ask her to stay."

He stared hard at her.

"Good Lord, what is the meaning of all this?" he cried in perplexity.

"What am I to understand?"

"The car had come to a stop under

the porte cochere. She laid her hand on his arm.

"If you will come in with me, Brandon, I will try to make things clear to you."

He left in half an hour, walking rapidly down the drive, his coat buttoned closely, although the morning was hot and breathless. He held in his hand a small scrap of paper on which was written: "If I loved you less, I would come to you now and lie to you. If you love me, Brandon, you will let me go my way. It is the only course. Sara is my friend, and she is yours. Be guided by her, and believe in my love for you. Hetty."

And now, as things go in fairy stories, we should prepare ourselves to see Hetty pass through a season in drudgery and hardship, with the ultimate quintessence of joy as the reward for her trials and tribulations. Happily, this is not a fairy tale. There are some things more fantastic than fairy tales, if they are not spoiled in



He Stood Looking Down Into Her Serious Blue Eyes.

the telling. Hetty did not go forth to encounter drudgery, disdain and obloquy. By no manner of means! She went with a well-filled purse, a definite purpose ahead and a determined factor behind.

In a manner befitting her station as the intimate friend of Mrs. Challis Wrاندall, as the cousin of the Murgatroyds, as the daughter of Colonel Castleton of the Indian corps, as a person supposed to be possessed of independent means withal, she went, with none to question, none to cavil.

Sara had insisted on this, as much for her own sake as for Hetty's; she argued, and she had prevailed in the end. What would the world think, what would their acquaintances think, and above all what would the high and mighty Wrاندalls think if she went with meek and lowly mien?

Why should they make it possible for anyone to look askance?

And so it was that she departed in state, with a dozen trunks and boxes; an obsequiously attended seat in the parlor car was here; a telegram in her bag assured her that rooms were being reserved for herself and maid at the Ritz-Carlton; alongside it reposed a letter to Mr. Carroll, instructing him to provide her with sufficient funds to carry out the plan agreed upon; and in the seat behind sat the lady's maid who had served her for a twelvemonth and more.

The timely demise of the venerable Lord Murgatroyd afforded the most natural excuse for her trip to England. The old nobleman gave up the ghost, allowing for difference in time, at the very moment when Mrs. Redmond Wrاندall was undoing a certain package from London, which turned out to be a complete history of what his forbears had done in the way of propagation since the fourteenth century.

Hetty did not find it easy to accommodate her pride to the plan which was to give her a fresh and rather imposing start in the world. She was to have a full year in which to determine whether she should accept toil and poverty as her lot, or emulate the symbolic example of Dicky, the canary bird. At the end of the year, unless she did as Dicky had done, her source of supplies would be automatically cut off and she would be entirely dependent upon her own wits and resources.

In the interim she was a probationary person of leisure. It had required hours of persuasion on the part of Sara Wrاندall to bring her into line with these arrangements.

"But I am able and willing to work for my living," had been Hetty's stubborn retort to all the arguments brought to bear upon her.

"Then let me put it in another light. It is vital to me, of course, that you should keep up the show of affluence for a while at least. I think I have made that clear to you. But here is another side to the matter; the question of recompense."

"Recompense?" cried Hetty sharply.

"Without your knowing it, I have virtually held you a prisoner all these months, condemned in my own judgment if not in the sight of the law. I have taken the law unto myself. You have not been convicted of murder in this unvarnished court of mine, but of another sin. For fifteen months you have been living under the shadow of a crime you did not commit. I was reserving complete punishment for you in the shape of an ignominious marriage, which was to have served two bitter ends. Well, I had the truth from you. I believe you to be absolutely innocent of the charge I held over you, for which I condemned you without a hearing. Then, why should I not employ my own means of making restitution?"

"You have condescended to believe in me. That is all I ask."

"True, that is all you ask. But is it altogether the fair way out of it?"

To illustrate: our criminal laws are less kind to the innocent than to the guilty. Our law courts find a man guilty and he is sent to prison. Later on, he is found to be innocent—absolutely innocent. What does the state do in the premises? It issues a formal pardon—a mockery, pure and simple—and the man is set free. It all comes to a curt, belated apology for an error on the part of justice. No substantial recompense is offered. He is merely pardoned for something he didn't do. The state, which has wronged him, condescends to pardon him! Think of it! It is the same as if a man knocked another down and then said, before he removed his foot from the victim's neck: 'I pardon you freely.' My father was opposed to the system we have—that all countries have—of pardoning men who have been unjustly condemned. The innocent victim is pardoned in the same manner as the guilty one who comes in for clemency. I accept my father's contention that an innocent man should not be shamed and humiliated by a pardon. The court which tried him should reopen the case and honorably acquit him of the crime. Then the state should pay to this innocent man, dollar for dollar, all that he might have earned during his term of imprisonment, with an additional amount for the suffering he has endured. Not long ago in an adjoining state a man, who had served seventeen years of a life sentence for murder, was found to be wholly innocent. What happened? A pardon was handed to him and he walked out of prison, broken in spirit, health and purse. His small fortune had been wiped out in the futile effort to prove his innocence. He gave up seventeen years of his life and then was pardoned for the sacrifice. He should have been paid for every day spent in prison. That was the very least they could have done."

"I see now what you mean," mused Hetty. "I have never thought of it in that way before."

"Well, it comes to this in our case. Hetty, I have tried you all over again in my own little court and I have acquitted you of the charge I had against you. I do not offer you a silly pardon. You must allow me to have my way in this matter, to choose my own means of compensating you for—"

"You saved my life," protested Hetty, shaking her head obstinately.

"My dear, I appreciate the fact that you are English," said Sara, with a weary smile, "but won't you please see the point?"

Then Hetty smiled too, and the way was easier after that for Sara. She gained her quietest point, and Hetty went away from Southlook feeling that no woman in all the world was so bewildering as Sara Wrاندall.

When she sailed for England, two days later, the newspapers announced that the beautiful and attractive Miss Castleton was returning to her native land on account of the death of Lord Murgatroyd, and would spend the year on the continent, where probably she would be joined later on by Mrs. Wrاندall, whose period of mourning and distress had been softened by the constant and loyal friendship of "this exquisite Englishwoman."

Four hundred miles out at sea she was overtaken by wireless messages from three persons.

Brandon Booth's message said: "I am sailing tomorrow on a faster ship than yours. You will find me waiting for you on the landing stage." Her heart gave a leap to dizzy heights, and, try as she would, she could not crush it back to the depths in which it had dwelt for days.

The second bit of pale green paper contained a cry from a most unexpected source: "Cable your London address. S. refuses to give it to me. I think I understand the situation. We want to make amends for what you have had to put up with during the year. She has shown her true nature at last." It was signed "Leslie."

From Sara came these cryptic words: "For each year of famine there will come seven years of plenty."

All the way across the Atlantic she lived in a state of subdued excitement. Conflicting emotions absorbed her waking hours but her dreams were all of one complexion: rosy and warm and full of a joyousness that distressed her vastly when she recalled them to mind in the early morning hours. During the day she intermittently hoped and feared that he would be on the landing stage. In any event, she was bound to find unhappiness. If he were there her joy would be short-lived and blighting; if he were not there, her disappointment would be equally hard to bear.

He was there. She saw him from the deck of the tender as they edged up to the landing. His tall figure loomed in the front rank against the rail that held back the crowd; his sun-bronzed face wore a look of eager expectancy; from her obscured position in the shadow of the deck building, purposely chosen for reasons only too obvious, she could even detect the alert, swift-moving scrutiny that he fastened upon the crowd.

Later on, he stood looking down into her serious blue eyes; her hands were lying limp in his. His own eyes were dark with earnestness, with the restraint that had fastened itself upon him. Behind her stood the respectful but immeasurably awed maid, who could not, for the life of her, understand how a man could be on both sides of the Atlantic at one and the same time.

"Thank the Lord, Hetty, say I, for the five-day boats," he was saying.

"You should not have come, Brandon," she cried softly, and the look of misery in her eyes was tinged with a glow she could not suppress. "It only makes everything harder for me. I—I— Oh, I wish you had not come!"

"But isn't it wonderful?" he cried, "that I should be here and waiting for

you! It is almost inconceivable. And you were in the act of running away from me, too. Oh, I have that much of the tale from Sara, so don't look so hurt about it."

"I am so sorry you came," she repeated, her lip trembling.

Noting her emotion, he gave her hands a fierce, encouraging pressure and immediately released them.

"Come," he said gently; "I have booked for London. Everything is arranged. I shall see to your luggage. Let me put you in the carriage first."

As she sat in the railway carriage, waiting for him to return, she tried in a hundred ways to devise a means of escape, and yet she had never loved him so much as now. Her heart was sore, her desolation never so complete as now.

He came back at last and took his seat beside her in the compartment, fanning himself with his hat. The maid very discreetly stared out of the window at the hurrying throng of travelers on the platform.

"How I love you, Hetty—how I adore you!" Booth whispered passionately.

"Oh, Brandon!"

"And I don't mean to give you up. I added, his lean jaw setting hard.

"You must—oh, you must," she cried miserably. "I mean it, Brandon—"

"What are your plans?" asked he.

"Please don't ask me," she pleaded. "You must give it up, Brandon. Let me go my own way."

"Not until I have the whole story from you. You see, I am not easily thwarted, once I set my heart on a thing. I gathered this much from Sara: the object is not insurmountable."

"She—said—that?"

"In effect, yes," he qualified.

"What did she tell you?" demanded Hetty, laying her hand on his arm.

"I will confess she didn't reveal the secret that you consider a barrier, but she went so far as to say that it was very dark and dreadful," he said lightly. They were speaking in very low tones. "When I planned her down to it, she added that it did not in any sense bear upon your honor. But there is time enough to talk about this later on. For the present let us not discuss the past. I know enough of your history from your own lips as well as what little I could get out of Sara, to feel sure that you are in a way, drifting. I intend to look after you, at least until you find yourself. Your sudden break with Sara has been explained to me. Leslie Wrاندall is at the back of it. Sara told me that she tried to force you to marry him. I think you did quite right in going away as you did, but, on the other hand, was it quite fair to me?"

"Yes, it was most fair," she said, compressing her lips.

He frowned.

"We can't possibly be of the same opinion," he said seriously.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew everything."

"How long do you intend to stay in London?"

"I don't know. When does this train arrive there?"

"At four o'clock, I think. Will you go to an hotel or to friends?" He put the question very delicately.

She smiled faintly. "You mean the Murgatroyds?"

"Your father is here, I am informed. And you must have other friends or relatives who—"

"I shall go to a small hotel I know near Trafalgar square," she interrupted quietly. "You must not come there to see me, Brandon."

"I shall expect you to dine with me at—say Prince's this evening," was his response to this.

She shook her head and then turned to look out of the window. He sat back in his seat and for many miles,

with deep perplexity in his eyes, studied her half-averted face. The old uneasiness returned. Was this obstacle, after all, so great that it could not be overcome?

They lunched together, but were singularly reserved all through the meal. A plan was growing in her brain, a cruel but effective plan that made her despise herself and yet contained the only means of escape from an even more cruel situation.

He drove with her from the station to the small hotel off Trafalgar square. There were no rooms to be had. It was the week of Ascot and the city was still crowded with people who awaited only the royal sign to break the fetters that bound them to London. Somewhat perturbed, she allowed him to escort her to several hotels of a like character. Falling in each case, she was in despair. At last she plucked up the courage to say to him, not without constraint and embarrassment:

"I think, Brandon, if you were to allow me to apply alone to one of these places I could get in without much trouble."

"Good Lord!" he gasped, going very red with dismay. "What a fool I—"

"I'll try the Savoy," she said quickly, and then laughed at him. His face was the picture of distress.

"I shall come for you tonight at eight," he said, stopping the taxi at once. "Goodbye till then."

He got out and gave directions to the chauffeur. Then he did a very strange thing. He hailed another taxi and, climbing in, started off in the wake of the two women. From a point of vantage near the corridor leading to the "American bar," he saw Hetty sign her slips and move off toward the left. Whereupon, seeing that she was quite out of the way, he approached the manager's office and asked for accommodations.

"Nothing left, sir."

"Not a thing?"

"Everything has been taken for weeks, sir. I'm sorry."

"Sorry, too. I had hoped you might have something left for a friend who expects to stop here—Miss Castleton."

"Miss Castleton has just applied. We could not give her anything."

"Eh?"

"Fortunately we could let her have rooms until eight this evening. We were more than pleased to offer them to her for a few hours, although they are reserved for parties coming down from Liverpool tonight."

Booth tried the Cecil and got a most undesirable room. Calling up the Savoy on the telephone, he got her room. The maid answered. She informed him that Miss Castleton had just that instant gone out and would not return before seven o'clock.

"I suppose she will not remove her trunks from the station until she finds a permanent place to lodge," he inquired. "Can I be of any service?"

"I think not, sir. She left no word, sir."

He hung up the receiver and straightway dashed over to the Savoy, hoping to catch her before she left the hotel. Just inside the door he came to an abrupt stop. She was at the news and ticket booth in the lobby, closely engaged in conversation with the clerk. Presently the latter took up the telephone, and after a brief conversation with some one at the other end, turned to Hetty and nodded his forehead. Whereupon she nodded her own adorable head and began the search for her purse. Booth edged around to an obscure spot and saw her pay for and receive something in return.

"By Jove!" he said to himself, amazed.

She passed near him, without seeing him, and went out into the court. He watched her turn into the Strand.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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