

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 subsequently disappears. 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. 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 saving her from the man who though she loved him deeply had caused her great sorrow, Mrs. Wrاندall determines to assist her and takes her to her own home. Mrs. Wrاندall hears the story of Hetty Glynn'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 peril on account of the tragedy. Mrs. Sara Wrاندall and Hetty attend the funeral of Challis Wrاندall at the home of his parents. Sara 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 repudiates the hands of Challis Wrاندall by marrying his murderer into the family. Leslie, in company with his friend Brandon Booth, an artist, visits Sara at her country place. Leslie confides in Sara that he is ready to love with Hetty. Sara arranges with Booth to paint a picture of Hetty. Booth has a haunting feeling that he is making Hetty before. Looking through a portfolio of pictures by an unknown English artist he finds one of Hetty. He declares it must be a picture of Hetty Glynn, an English actress, who resembles her very much.

CHAPTER IX—Continued.

Leslie was coming out on an evening train. Booth in commenting on this, again remarked a sharp change in Hetty's manner. They had been conversing somewhat boyauntly up to the moment he mentioned Leslie's impending visit. In a flash her manner changed. A quick but unmistakable frown succeeded her smiles, and for some reason she suddenly relapsed into a state of reserve that was little short of sullen. He was puzzled, as he had been before.

The day was hot. Sara volunteered to take him home in the motor. An errand in the village was the excuse she gave for riding over with him. Heretofore she had sent him over alone with the chauffeur.

She looked very handsome, very tempting, as she came down to the car.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "she is wonderful!"

He handed her into the car with the grace of a courtier, and she smiled upon him serenely, as a princess might have smiled in the days when knight-hood was in flower.

When she sat him down at his little garden gate, he put the question that had been seething in his mind all the way down the shady stretch they had traversed.

"Have you ever seen Hetty Glynn, the English actress?"

Sara was always prepared. She knew the question would come when least expected.

"Oh, yes," she replied, with interest. "Have you noticed the resemblance? They are as like as two peas in a pod. Isn't it extraordinary?"

He was a bit staggered. "I have never seen Hetty Glynn," he replied.

"Oh? You have seen photographs of her?" she inquired casually.

"What has become of her?" he asked, ignoring her question. "Is she still on the stage?"

"Heaven knows," she replied lightly. "Miss Castleton and I were speaking of her last night. We were together the last time I saw her. Who knows? She may have married into the nobility by this time. She was a very poor actress, but the loveliest thing in the world—excepting our Hetty, of course."

If he could have seen the troubled look in her eyes as she was whirled off to the village, he might not have gone about the cottage with such a blithe smile. He was happier than he had been in days, and all because of Hetty Glynn!

Leslie Wrاندall did not arrive by the evening train. He telephoned late in the afternoon, not to Hetty but to Sara, to say that he was unavoidably detained and would not leave New York until the next morning. Something in his voice, in his manner of speaking, disturbed her. She went to



"It's All Tommy-Rot," He Growled.

bed that night with two sources of uneasiness threatening her peace of mind. She scented peril.

The motor met him at the station and Sara was waiting for him in the cool, awning-covered verandah as he drove up. There was a sullen, dissatisfied look in his face. She was stretched out comfortably, lazily, in a great chair-lounger, her black little slippers peeping out at him with perfect abandonment.

"Hello," he said shortly. She gave him her hand. "Sorry I couldn't get out last night." He shook her hand rather ungraciously.

"We missed you," she said. "Pull up a chair. I was never so lazy as now. Dear me, I am afraid I'll get stout and gross."

"Spring fever," he announced. He was plainly out of sorts. "I'll stand, if you don't mind. Beasty tiresome, sitting in a hot, stuffy train."

He took a couple of turns across the porch, his eyes shifting in the eager, annoyed manner of one who seeks for something that, in the correct order of things, ought to be plainly visible.

"Please sit down, Leslie. You make me nervous, tramping about like that. We can't go in for half an hour or more."

"Can't go in?" he demanded, stopping before her. He began to pull at his little moustache.

"No, Hetty's posing. They won't permit even me to disturb them."

He glared. With a final, almost dramatic twist he gave over jerking at his moustache, and grabbed up a chair, which he put down beside her with a vehemence that spoke plainer than words.

"I say," he began, scowling in the direction of the doorway, "how long is he going to be at this silly job?"

"Silly job? Why, it is to be a masterpiece," she cried.

"I asked you how long?"

"Oh, how can I tell? Weeks, perhaps. One can't prod a genius."

"It's all Tommy-rot," he growled. "I suppose I'd better take the next train back to town."

"Don't you like talking with me?" she inquired, with a pout.

"Of course I do," he made haste to say. "But do you mean to say they won't let anybody in where—Oh, I say! This is rich!"

"Spectators upset the muse, or words to that effect."

He stared gloomily at his cigarette case for a moment. Then he carefully selected a cigarette and tapped it on the back of his hand.

"See here, Sara, I'm going to get this off my chest," he said bluntly. "I've been thinking it over all week. I don't like this portrait painting nonsense."

"Dear me! Didn't you suggest it?" she inquired innocently, but all the time her heart was beating violent time to the song of triumph.

He was jealous. It was what she wanted, what she had hoped for all along. Her purpose now was to encourage the ugly flame that tortured him, to fan it into fury, to make it unendurable. She knew him well: His supreme egotism could not withstand an attack upon its complacency. Like all the Wrاندalls, he had the habit of thinking too well of himself. He possessed a clearly-defined sense of humor, but it did not begin to include self-sacrifice among its endowments.

He had never been able to laugh at himself for the excellent reason that some things were truly sacred to him.

She realized this, and promptly laughed at him. He stiffened.

"Don't sneer, Sara," he growled. He took time to light his cigarette, and at the same time to consider his answer to her question. "In a way, yes. I suggested a sort of portrait, of course. A sketchy thing, something like that, you know. But not an all-summer operation."

"But she doesn't mind," explained Sara. "In fact, she is enjoying it. She and Mr. Booth get on famously together."

"She likes him, eh?"

"Certainly. Why shouldn't she like him? He is adorable."

He threw his cigarette over the railing. "Comes here every day, I suppose?"

"My dear Leslie, he is to do me as soon as he has finished with her. I don't like your manner."

"Oh," he said in a dull sort of wonder. "No one had ever cut him short in just that way before. 'What's up, Sara? Have I done anything out of the way?'"

"You are very touchy, it seems to me."

"I'm sore about this confounded portrait monopoly."

"I'm sorry, Leslie. I suppose you will have to give in, however. We are three to one against you—Hetty, Mr. Booth and I."

"I see," he said, rather blankly. Then he drew his chair closer. "See here, Sara, you know I'm terribly keen about her. I think about her, I dream about her, I—oh, well, here it is in a nutshell: I'm in love with her. Now do you understand?"

"I don't see how you could help being in love with her," she said calmly. "I believe it is a habit men have where she is concerned."

"You're not surprised?" he cried, himself surprised.

"Not in the least."

"I mean to ask her to marry me," he announced with finality. This was intended to bowl her over completely.

She looked at him for an instant, and then shook her head. "I'd like to be able to wish you good luck."

He stared. "You don't mean to say she'd be fool enough—?" he began incredulously, but caught himself up in time. "Of course, I'd have to take my chances," he concluded, with more humility than she had ever seen him display. "Do you know of any one else?"

"I've given the whole situation a deuce of a lot of thought, and I've made up my mind to do it. I'm not the sort, you know, to delay matters on my mind's made up. By Jove, Sara, you ought to be pleased. I'm not such a rotten catch, if I do say it who shouldn't."

She was perfectly still for a long time, so still that he did not appear to be breathing. Her eyes grew darker, more mysterious. If he had taken the pains to notice, he would have seen that her fingers were rigid.

"I am pleased," she said, very gently. She could have shrieked the words. How she hated all these smug Wrاندalls!

"I came to the decision yesterday," he went on, tapping the arm of the chair with his finger tips as if timing his words with care and precision. "Spoke to dad about it at lunch. I was coming out on the five o'clock, as I'd planned, but he seemed to think I'd better talk it over with the mater first. Not that she would be likely to kick up a row, you know, but—well, decent thing to do, you know. She never quite got over the way you and Chal stole a march on her. God knows I'm not like Chal."

Her eyes narrowed again. "No," she said, "you are not like your brother."

"Chal was all right, mind you, in what he did," he added hastily, noting the look. "I would do the same, 'pon my soul I would, if there were any senseless objections raised in my case. But, of course, it was right for me to talk it over with her, just the same. So I stayed in and gave them all the chance to say what they thought of me—and, incidentally, of Hetty. Quite the decent thing, don't you think? A fellow's mother is his mother, after all. See what I mean?"

"You must not kieve it again, Mr. Wrاندall," she said in a low, intense voice. Then she passed him by and hurried up the stairs, without so much as a glance over her shoulder.

He blinked in astonishment. All of a sudden there swept over him the unaccustomed sensation of shyness—most unlike in him. He had never been so ashamed before in all his life. Now he was curiously conscious of having overstepped the bounds, and for the first time to be shown his place by a girl. This to him, who had no scruples about boundary lines.

All through luncheon he was volatile and gay. There was a bright spot in his cheek, however, that betrayed him to Sara, who already suspected the temper of his thoughts. He talked aeroplaning without cessation, directing most of his conversation to Booth, yet thrilled with pleasure each time Hetty laughed at his sallies. He was beginning to feel like a half-baked schoolboy in her presence, a most adorable state of affairs he had to admit.

"If you hate the trains so much, and your automobile is out of whack, why don't you try volplaning down from the Metropolitan tower?" demanded Booth in response to his lugubrious wall against the beastly luck of having to go about in railway coaches with a lot of red-eyed, nose-blowing people who hadn't got used to their spring underwear yet.

"Sinister suggestion, I must say," he exclaimed. "You must be eager to see my life blood scattered all over creation. But, speaking of volplaning, I've had three lessons this week. Next week Bronson says I'll be flying like a gull. 'Gad, it's wonderful. I've had two tumbles, that's all—little ones, of course—'net result, a barked knee and a peeled elbow."

"Watch out you're not flying like an angel before you get through with it, Les," cautioned the painter. "I see that a well-known society leader in Chicago was killed yesterday."

"Oh, I love the danger there is in it," said Wrاندall carelessly. "That's what gives zest to the sport."

"I love it, too," said Hetty, her eyes gleam. "The glorious feel of the wind as you rush through it! And yet one seems to be standing perfectly still in the air when one is half a mile high and going fifty miles an hour. Oh, it is wonderful, Mr. Wrاندall."

"I'll take you out in a week or two, Miss Castleton, if you'll trust yourself with me."

"I will go," she announced promptly. Booth frowned. "Better wait a bit," he counseled. "Risky business, Miss Castleton, flying about with fedgeings."

"Oh, come now!" expostulated Wrاندall with some heat. "Don't be a wet blanket, old man."

"I was merely suggesting she'd better wait till you've got used to your wings."

"Jimmy Van Wickle took his wife with him the third time up," said Leslie, as if that were the last word in aeroplaning.

"It's common report that she keeps Jimmy level, no matter where she's got him," retorted Booth.

"I dare say Miss Castleton can hold me level," said Leslie, with a profane bow to her. "Can't you, Miss Castleton?"

She smiled. "Oh, as for that, Mr. Wrاندall, I think we can all trust you to cling pretty closely to your own level."

"Rather ambiguous, that," he remarked dubiously.

"She means you never get below it, Leslie," said Booth, enjoying himself.

"That's the one great principle in aeroplaning," said Wrاندall, quick to recover. "Vivian says I'll break my neck some day, but admits it will be a heroic way of doing it. Much nobler than pitching out of an automobile or catapulting over a horse's head in Central park." He paused for effect before venturing his next conclusion.

"It must be ineffably sublime, being squashed—or is it squashed?—after a drop of a mile or so, isn't it?"

"It is time for luncheon. I suppose we'll have to interrupt them. Perhaps it is just as well, for your sake," she said tauntingly.

He grinned, but it was a sickly effort.

"You're the one to spoil anything of that sort," he said, with some asperity.

"Certainly," he said with so much meaning in the word that she flushed.

Hetty and Booth came into view at that instant. The painter was laying a soft, filmy scarf over the girl's bare shoulders as he followed close behind her.

"Hello!" he cried, catching sight of Wrاندall. "Train late, old chap? We've been expecting you for the last hour. How are you?"

He came up with a frank, genuine smile of pleasure on his lips, his hand extended. Leslie rose to the occasion. His self-esteem was larger than his grievance. He shook Booth's hand heartily, almost exuberantly.

"Didn't want to disturb you, Brandy," he cried, cheerily. "Besides, Sara wouldn't let me." He then passed on to Hetty, who had lagged behind. Bending low over her hand, he said something commonplace in a very low tone, at the same time looking slyly out of the corner of his eye to see if Booth was taking it all in. Finding that his friend was regarding him rather fixedly, he obeyed a sudden impulse and raised the girl's slim hand to his lips. As suddenly he released her fingers and straightened up with a look of surprise in his eyes; he had distinctly heard the agitated catch in her throat. She was staring at her hand in a stupefied sort of way, holding it rigid before her eyes for a moment before thrusting it behind her back as if it were a thing to be shielded from all scrutiny save her own.

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He looked to see Miss Castleton wince, and was somewhat dashed to find that she was looking out of the window, quite oblivious to the peril he was in figuratively for her special consideration.

Booth was acutely reminded that the term "prig" as applied to Leslie was a misnomer; he hated the thought of the other word, which reflectively he rhymed with "pad."

It occurred to him early in the course of this one-sided discussion that the hostess was making no effort to take part in it, whether from lack of interest or because of its frivolous nature he was, of course unable to determine. Later, he was struck by the curious pallor of her face, and the lack-luster expression of her eyes.

She seldom removed her gaze from Wrاندall's face, and yet there persisted in the observer's mind the rather uncanny impression that she did not hear a word her brother-in-law was saying. He, in turn, took to watching her covertly. At no time did her expression change. For reasons of his own, he did not attempt to draw her into the conversation, fascinated as he was by the study of that beautiful, emotionless face. Once he had the queer sensation of feeling, rather than seeing, a haunted look in her eyes, but he put it down to fancy on his part.

And Leslie babbled on in blissful ignorance of, not to say disregard for, this strange ghost at the feast, for, to Booth's mind, the ghost of Challis Wrاندall was there.

Turning to Miss Castleton with a significant look in his eyes, meant to call her attention to Mrs. Wrاندall, he was amazed to find that every vestige of color had gone from the girl's face. She was listening to Wrاندall and replying in monosyllables, but that she was aware of the other woman's abstraction was not for an instant to be doubted. Suddenly, after a quick glance at Sara's face, she looked squarely into Booth's eyes, and he saw in hers an expression of actual concern, if not alarm.

Leslie was in the middle of a sentence when Sara laughed aloud, without excuse or reason. The next instant she was looking from one to the other in a dazed sort of way, as if coming out of a dream.

Wrاندall turned scarlet. There had been nothing in his remarks to call for a laugh, he was quite sure of that. Flushing slightly, she murmured something about having thought of an amusing story, and begged him to go on, she wouldn't be rude again.

He had little zest for continuing the subject and sullenly disposed of it in a word or two.

"What the devil was there to laugh at, Brandy?"

"Who is going out, Murray?" he called in surprise.

"Miss Castleton, sir. For the air, sir."

"The deuce you say!" gasped the harassed Mr. Wrاندall. It was a pretty kettle of fish!

Hetty appeared a few minutes later, attired for motoring.

"Oh, there you are," she said, spying him. "I am going for a spin. Want to come along?"

He swallowed hard. The ends of his mustache described a pair of absolutely horizontal exclamation points. "If you don't mind being encumbered," he remarked sourly.

"I don't in the least mind," said she sweetly.

"Where are you going?" he asked without much enthusiasm. He wasn't to be caught appearing eager, not he. Besides, it wasn't anything to be flippant about.

"Yonder," she said, with a liberal sweep of her arm, taking in the whole landscape. "And be home in time to dress for dinner," she added, as if to relieve his mind.

"Good Lord!" he groaned, "do we have to eat again?"

"We have to dress for it, at least," she replied.

"I'll go," he exclaimed, and ambled off to secure a cap and coat.

"Sara has planned for a run to Lenox tomorrow if it doesn't rain," she informed him on his return.

"Oh," he said, starting. "Booth gets a day off on the portrait, then."

"Being Sunday," she smiled. "We knock off on Sundays and bank holidays. But, after all, he doesn't really get a holiday. He is to go with us, poor fellow."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

as he had fondly expected her to do; and then there was that very disquieting laugh of Sara's. A hundred times over he repeated to himself that sickening question: "What the devil was there to laugh at?" and no answer suggested itself. He was decidedly cross about it.

Another hour passed. His heels were quite cool by this time, but his blood was boiling. This was a deuce of a way to treat a fellow who had gone to the trouble to come all the way out in a stuffy train, by Jove, it was! With considerable asperity he rang for a servant and commanded him to fetch a time table, and to be quick about it, as there might be a train leaving before he could get back if it took other people to remember their obligations! His sarcasm failed to impress Murray, who said he thought

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What the Devil Was There to Laugh at, Brandy?

there was a schedule in Mrs. Wrاندall's room, and he'd get it as soon as the way was clear, if Mr. Wrاندall didn't mind waiting.

"If I minded waiting," snapped Leslie. "I wouldn't be here now."

As the footman was leaving, Sara's automobile whirled up to the portecochere.

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