



The Hollow of Her Hand

by George Barr McCutcheon



CHAPTER I.

March Comes in Like the Lion.

The train, which had roared through a withering gale of sleet all the way up from New York, came to a standstill, with many an ear-splitting sigh, alongside the little station, and a reluctant porter opened his vestibule door to descend to the snow-swept platform: a solitary passenger had reached the journey's end. The swirl of snow and sleet screaming out of the blackness at the end of the station building enveloped the porter in an instant, and cut his ears and neck with stinging force as he turned his back against the gale. A pair of lonely, half-obscured platform lights gleamed fatuously at the top of their icy posts at each end of the station; two or three frost-encrusted windows glowed dully in the side of the building, while one shone brightly where the operator sat waiting for the passing of No. 33.

An order had been issued for the stopping of the fast express at B—, a noteworthy concession in these days of premeditated haste. Not in the previous career of flying 33 had it even so much as slowed down for the insignificant little station, through which it swooped at midnight the whole year round. Just before pulling out of New York on this eventful night the conductor received a command to stop 33 at B— and let down a single passenger, a circumstance which meant trouble for every dispatcher along the line.

The woman who got down at B— in the wake of the shivering but deferential porter, and who passed by the conductors without lifting her face, was without hand luggage of any description. She was heavily veiled, and warily clad in furs. At eleven o'clock that night she had entered the compartment in New York. Throughout the thirty miles or more she had sat alone and inert beside the snow-clogged window, peering through veil and frost into the night that whizzed past the pane, seeing nothing yet apparently intent on all that stretched beyond. As still, as immobile as death itself she had held herself from the moment of departure to the instant that brought the porter with the word that they were whistling for B—. Without a word she arose and followed him to the vestibule, where she watched him as he unfastened the outer door and lifted the trap. A single word escaped her lips and he held out his hand to receive the crumpled bill she clutched in her gloved fingers. He did not look at it. He knew that it would amply reward him for the brief exposure he endured on the lonely, wind-swept platform of a station, the name of which he did not know.

She took several uncertain steps in the direction of the station windows and stopped, as if bewildered. Already the engine was pounding the air with quick, vicious snorts in the effort to get under way; the vestibule trap and door closed with a bang; the wheels were creaking. A bitter wind smote her in the face; the wet, huriling sleet crashed against the thin veil, blinding her.

The door of the waiting room across the platform opened and a man rushed toward her.

"Mrs. Wrاندall?" he called above the roar of the wind.

She advanced quickly.

"Yes."

"What a night!" he said, as much to himself as to her. "I'm sorry you would insist on coming tonight. Tomorrow morning would have satisfied the—"

"Is this Mr. Drake?" They were being blown through the door into the waiting room as she put the question. Her voice was muffled. The man in the great fur coat put his weight against the door to close it.

"Yes, Mrs. Wrاندall. I have done all that could be done under the circumstances. I am sorry to tell you that we still have two miles to go by motor before we reach the inn. My car is open—I don't possess a limousine—but if you will lie down in the tonneau you will find some protection from—"

She broke in sharply, impatiently. "Pray do not consider me, Mr. Drake. I am not afraid of the blizzard."

"Then we'd better be off," said he, a note of anxiety in his voice—a certain touch of nervousness. "I drive my own car. The road is good, but I shall drive cautiously. Ten minutes, perhaps. I—I am sorry you thought best to brave this wretched—"

"I am not sorry for myself, Mr. Drake, but for you. You have been most kind. I did not expect you to meet me."

"I took the liberty of telephoning to you. It was well that I did it early in the evening. The wires are down now, I fear." He hesitated for a moment, staring at her as if trying to penetrate the thick, wet veil. "I may have brought you on a fool's errand. You see, I—I have seen Mr. Wrاندall but once, in town somewhere, and I may be wrong. Still, the coroner—and the sheriff—seemed to think you should be notified—I might say questioned. That is why I called you up. I trust, madam, that I am mistaken."

"Yes," she said shrilly, betraying the intensity of her emotion. It was as

if she lacked the power to utter more than a single word, which signified neither acquiescence nor approval.

He was ill at ease, distressed. "I have engaged a room for you at the inn, Mrs. Wrاندall. You did not bring a maid, I see. My wife will come over from our place to stay with you if you—"

She shook her head. "Thank you, Mr. Drake. It will not be necessary. I came alone by choice. I shall return to New York tonight."

"But you—why, you can't do that," he cried, holding back as they started toward the door. "No trains stop here after ten o'clock. The locals begin running at seven in the morning. Besides—"

She interrupted him. "May we not start now, Mr. Drake? I am—well, you must see that I am suffering. I must see, I must know. The suspense—" She did not complete the sentence, but hurried past him to the door, throwing it open and bending her body to the gust that burst in upon them.

He sprang after her, grasping her arm to lead her across the icy platform to the automobile that stood in the lee of the building.

Disobeying his command to enter the tonneau, she stood beside the car and waited until he cranked it and took his place at the wheel. Then she took her seat beside him and permitted him to tuck the great buffalo robe about her. No word was spoken. The man was a stranger to her. She forgot his presence in the car.

Into the thick of the storm the motor chugged. Grim and silent, the man at the wheel, unguarded and tense, sent the whirring thing swiftly over the trackless village street and out upon the open country road. The woman closed her eyes and waited.

You would know the month was March. He said: "It comes in like a lion," but apparently the storm swallowed the words for she made no response to them.

They crossed the valley and crept up the tree-covered hill, where the force of the gale was broken. If she heard him say: "Fierce, wasn't it?" she gave no sign, but sat hunched forward, peering ahead through the snow at the blurred lights that seemed so far away and yet were close at hand.

"Is that the inn?" she asked as he swerved from the road a few moments later.

"Yes, Mrs. Wrاندall. We're here."

"Is he in there?"

"Where you see that lighted window upstairs." He tooted the horn vigorously as he drew up to the long, low porch. Two men dashed out from the doorway and clumsily assisted her from the car.

"Go right in, Mrs. Wrاندall," said Drake. "I will join you in a jiffy."

She walked between the two men into the feebly lighted office of the inn. The keeper of the place, a dreary looking person with dread in his eyes, hurried forward. She stopped, stock still. Some one was brushing the stubborn, thickly caked snow from her long chinchilla coat.

"You must let me get you something hot to drink, madam," the landlord was saying dolorously.

She struggled with her veil, finally tearing it away from her face. Then she took in the rather bare, cheerless room with a slow, puzzled sweep of her eyes.

"No, thank you," she replied.

"It won't be any trouble, madam," urged the other. "It's right here. The sheriff says it's all right to serve it."



A Man Rushed Toward Her.

although it is after hours. I run a respectable, law-abiding house. I wouldn't think of offering it to anyone if it was in violation—"

"Never mind, Burton," interposed a big man, approaching. "Let the lady choose for herself. If she wants it, she'll say so. I am the sheriff, madam. This gentleman is the coroner, Dr. Sheef. We waited up for you after Mr. Drake said you'd got the fast train to stop for you. Tomorrow morning would have done quite as well. I'm sorry you came tonight in all this blizzard."

He was staring as if fascinated at the white, colorless face of the woman who with nervous fingers unfastened the heavy coat that enveloped her

slender figure. She was young and strikingly beautiful, despite the intense pallor that overspread her face. Her dark, questioning, dreading eyes looked up into his with an expression he was never to forget. It combined dread, horror, doubt and a smoldering anger that seemed to overcast all other emotions that lay revealed to him.

"This is a—what is commonly called a 'road house'?" she asked dully, her eyes narrowing suddenly as if in pain.

"It is an inn during the winter, Mrs. Wrاندall, and a road house in the summer, if that makes it plain to you. I will say, however, that Burton has always kept well within the law. This is the first—er—real bit of trouble he's had, and I won't say it's his fault. Keep quiet, Burton. No one is accusing you of anything wrong. Don't whine about it."

"But my place is ruined," groaned the doleful one. "It's got a black eye now. Not that I blame you, madam, but you can see how—"

He quailed before the steady look in her eyes, and turned away mumbling.

"There is a fire in the reception room, madam," said the coroner; "and the proprietor's wife to look out for you if you should require anything. Will you go in there and compose yourself before going upstairs? Or, if you would prefer waiting until morning, I shall not insist on the—er—ordel tonight."

"I prefer going up there tonight," said she steadily.

The men looked at each other, and the sheriff spoke. "Mr. Drake is quite confident—the man is your husband. It's an ugly affair, Mrs. Wrاندall. We had no means of identifying him until Drake came in this evening, out of curiosity you might say. For your sake, I hope he is mistaken."

"Would you mind telling me something about it before I go upstairs? I am quite calm. I am prepared for anything. You need not hesitate."

"As you wish, madam. You will go into the reception room, if you please. Burton, is Mrs. Wrاندall's room quite ready for her?"

"I shall not stay here tonight," interposed Mrs. Wrاندall. "You need not keep the room for me."

"But, my dear Mrs. Wrاندall—"

"I shall wait in the railway station until morning if necessary. But not here."

The coroner led the way to the cosy little room off the office. She followed with the sheriff. The men looked worn and haggard in the bright light that met them, as if they had not known sleep or rest for many hours.

"The assistant district attorney was here until eleven, but went home to get a little rest. It's been a hard case for all of us—a nasty one," explained the sheriff, as he placed a chair in front of the fire for her. She sank into it limply.

"Go on, please," she murmured, and shook her head at the nervous little woman who bustled up and inquired if she could do anything to make her more comfortable.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "Well, it happened last night. All day long we've been trying to find out who he is, and ever since eight o'clock this morning we've been searching for the woman who came here with him. She has disappeared as completely as if swallowed by the earth. Not a sign of a clew—not a shred. There's nothing to show when she left the inn or by what means. All we know is that the door to that room up there was standing half open when Burton passed by it at seven o'clock this morning—that is to say, yesterday morning, for this is now Wednesday. It is quite clear, from this, that she neglected to close the door tightly when she came out, probably through haste or fear, and the draft in the hall blew it wider open during the night. Burton says the inn was closed for the night at half-past ten. He went to bed. She must have slipped out after everyone was sound asleep. There were no other guests on that floor. Burton and his wife sleep on this floor, and the servants are at the top of the house and in a wing. No one heard a sound. We have not the remotest idea when the thing happened, or when she left the place. Dr. Sheef says the man had been dead six or eight hours when he first saw him, and that was very soon after Burton's discovery. Burton, on finding the door open, naturally suspected that his guests had skipped out during the night to avoid paying the bill, and lost no time in entering the room.

"He found the man lying on the bed, sprawled out, face upward and as dead as a mack—I should say, quite dead. He was partly dressed. His coat and vest hung over the back of a chair. A small service carving knife, belonging to the inn, had been driven squarely into his heart and was found sticking there. Burton says that the man, on their arrival at the inn, about nine o'clock at night, ordered supper sent up to the room. The tray of dishes, with most of the food untouched, and an empty champagne bottle, was found on the service table near the bed. One of the chairs was overturned. The servant who took the meal to the room says that the woman was sitting at the window

with her wraps on, motor veil and all, just as she was when she came into the place. The man gave all the directions, the woman apparently paying no attention to what was going on. The waitress left the room without seeing her face. She had instructions not to come for the tray until morning."

"That was the last time the man was seen alive. No one has seen the woman since the door closed after the servant, who distinctly remembers hearing the key turn in the lock as she went down the hall. It seems pretty clear that the man ate and drank but not the woman. Her food remained untouched on the plate and her glass was full. 'Gad, it must have been a merry feast!' I beg your pardon, Mrs. Wrاندall!"

"Go on, please," said she levelly.

"That's all there is to say so far as the actual crime is concerned. There



She Sank Into It Limply.

were signs of a struggle—but it isn't necessary to go into that. Now, as to their arrival at the inn. The blizzard had not set in. Last night was dark, of course, as there is no moon, but it was clear and rather warm for the time of year. The couple came here about nine o'clock in a high power runabout machine, which the man drove. They had no hand baggage and apparently had run out from New York. Burton says he was on the point of refusing them accommodations when the man handed him a hundred-dollar bill. It was more than Burton's cupidity could withstand. They did not register. The state license numbers had been removed from the automobile, which was of foreign make. Of course it was only a question of time until we could have found out who the car belonged to. It is perfectly obvious why he removed the numbers."

At this juncture Drake entered the room. Mrs. Wrاندall did not at first recognize him.

"It has stopped snowing," announced the newcomer.

"Oh, it is Mr. Drake," she murmured. "We have a little French car, painted red," she announced to the sheriff without giving Drake another thought. "And this one is red, madam," said the sheriff, with a glance at the coroner. Drake nodded his head. Mrs. Wrاندall's body stiffened perceptibly, as if detecting a blow. "It is still standing in the garage, where he left it on his arrival."

"Did no one see the face of—the woman?" asked Mrs. Wrاندall, rather querulously. "It seems odd that no one should have seen her face," she went on without waiting for an answer.

"It's not strange, madam, when you consider all the circumstances. She was very careful not to remove her veil or her coat until the door was locked. That proves that she was not the sort of woman we usually find galavanting around with men regardless of—ahem, I beg your pardon. This must be very distressing to you."

"I am not sure, Mr. Sheriff, that it is my husband who lies up there. Please remember that," she said steadily. "It is easier to hear the details now, before I know, than it will be afterward if it should turn out to be as Mr. Drake declares."

"I see," said the sheriff, marveling. "Besides, Mr. Drake is not positive," put in the coroner hopefully.

"I am reasonably certain," said Drake.

"Then all the more reason why I should have the story first," said she, with a shiver that no one failed to observe.

The sheriff resumed his conclusions. "Women of the kind I referred to a moment ago don't care whether they're seen or not. In fact, they're rather brazen about it. But this one was different. She was as far from that as it was possible for her to be. We haven't been able to find anyone who saw her face or who can give the least idea as to what she looks like, excepting a general description of her figure, her carriage and the outdoor garments she wore. We have reason to believe she was young. She was modestly dressed. Her coat was one of those heavy winter affairs, such as a woman

uses in motoring or on a sea voyage. There was a small sable stole about her neck. The skirt was short, and she wore high black shoes of the thick walking type. Judging from Burton's description she must have been about your size and figure, Mrs. Wrاندall. Isn't that so, Mrs. Burton?"

The innkeeper's wife spoke. "Yes, Mr. Harben, I'd say so myself. About five feet six, I'd judge; rather slim and graceful like, in spite of the big coat."

Mrs. Wrاندall was watching the woman's face. "I am five feet six," she said, as if answering a question.

The sheriff cleared his throat somewhat needlessly.

"Burton says she acted as if she were a lady," he went on. "Not the kind that usually comes out here on such expeditions, he admits. She did not speak to anyone, except once in very low tones to the man she was with, and then she was standing by the fireplace out in the main office, quite a distance from the desk. She went upstairs alone, and he gave some orders to Burton before following her. That was the last time Burton saw her. The waitress went up with a specially prepared supper about half an hour later."

"It seems quite clear, Mrs. Wrاندall, that she robbed the man after stabbing him," said the coroner.

Mrs. Wrاندall started. "Then she was not a lady, after all," she said quickly. There was a note of relief in her voice. It was as if she had put aside a half-formed conclusion.

"His pockets were empty. Not a penny had been left. Watch, cuff links, scarf pin, cigarette case, purse and bill folder—all gone. Burton had seen most of these articles in the office."

"Isn't it—but no! Why should I be the one to offer a suggestion that might be construed as a defense for this woman?"

"You were about to suggest, madam, that some one else might have taken the valuables—is that it?" cried the sheriff.

"Had you thought of it, Mr. Sheriff?" "I had not. It isn't reasonable. No one about this place is suspected. We have thought of this, however: the murderer may have taken all of these things away with her in order to prevent immediate identification of her victim. She may have been clever enough for that. It would give her a start."

"Not an unreasonable conclusion, when you stop to consider, Mr. Sheriff, that the man took the initiative in that very particular," said Mrs. Wrاندall in such a self-contained way that the three men looked at her in wonder. Then she came abruptly to her feet. "It is very late, gentlemen. I am ready to go upstairs, Mr. Sheriff."

"I must warn you, madam, that Mr. Drake is reasonably certain that it is your husband," said the coroner uncomfortably. "You may not be prepared for the shock that—"

"I shall not faint, Dr. Sheef. If it is my husband I shall ask you to leave me alone in the room with him for a little while." The final word trailed out into a long, tremulous wail, showing how near she was to the breaking point in her wonderful effort at self-control. The men looked away hastily. They heard her draw two or three deep, quivering breaths; they could almost feel the tension that she was exercising over herself.

The doctor turned after a moment and spoke very gently, but with professional firmness. "You must not think of venturing out in this wretched night, madam. It would be the worst kind of folly. Surely you will be guided by me—by your own common sense. Mrs. Burton will be with you—"

"Thank you, Dr. Sheef," she interposed calmly. "If what we all fear should turn out to be the truth, I could not stay here. I could not breathe. I could not live. If, on the other hand, Mr. Drake is mistaken, I shall stay. But if it is my husband, I cannot remain under the same roof with him, even though he be dead. I do not expect you to understand my feelings. It would be asking too much of men—too much."

"I think I understand," murmured Drake.

"Come," said the sheriff, arousing himself with an effort. She moved swiftly after him. Drake and the coroner, following close behind with Mrs. Burton, could not take their eyes from the slender, graceful figure. She was a revelation to them. Feeling as they did that she was about to be confronted by the most appalling crisis imaginable, they could not but marvel at her composure. Drake's mind dwelt on the stories of the guillotine and the heroines who went up to it in those bloody days without so much as a quiver of dread. Somehow, to him, this woman was a heroine.

They passed into the hall and mounted the stairs. At the far end of the corridor a man was seated in front of a closed door. He arose as the party approached. The sheriff signed for him to open the door he guarded. As he did so, a chilly blast of air blew upon the faces of those in the hall. The curtains in the window of the room were flapping and whip-

ping in the wind. Mrs. Wrاندall caught her breath. For the briefest instant it seemed as though she was on the point of fainting. She dropped farther behind the sheriff, her limbs suddenly stiff, her hand going out to the wall as if for support. The next moment she was moving forward resolutely into the icy, dimly lighted room.

A single electric light gleamed in the corner beside the bureau. Near the window stood the bed. She went swiftly toward it, her eyes fastened upon the ridge that ran through the center of it: a still, white ridge that seemed without beginning or end.

With nervous fingers the attendant lifted the sheet at the head of the bed and turned it back. As he let it fall across the chest of the dead man he drew back and turned his face away.

She bent forward and then straightened her figure to its full height, without for an instant removing her gaze from the face of the man who lay before her: a dark-haired man gray in death, who must have been beautiful to look upon in the flush of life.

For a long time she stood there looking, as motionless as the object on which she gazed. Behind her were the tense, keen-eyed men, not one of whom seemed to breathe during the grim minutes that passed. The wind howled about the corners of the inn, but no one heard it. They heard the beating of their hearts, even the ticking of their watches, but not the wail of the wind.

At last her hands, claw-like in their tenseness, went slowly to her temples. Her head dropped slightly forward, and a great shudder ran through her body. The coroner started forward, expecting her to collapse.

"Please go away," she was saying in an absolutely emotionless voice. "Let me stay here alone for a little while."

That was all. The men relaxed. They looked at each other with a single question in their eyes. Was it quite safe to leave her alone with her dead? They hesitated.

She turned on them suddenly, spreading her arms in a wide gesture of self-absolution. Her somber eyes swept the group.

"I can do no harm. This man is mine. I want to look at him for the last time—alone. Will you go?"

"Do you mean, madam, that you intend to—?" began the coroner in alarm. She clasped her hands. "I mean that I shall take my last look at him now—and here. Then you may do what you like with him. He is your dead—not mine. I do not want him. Can you understand? I do not want this dead thing. But there is something I should say to him, something that I must say. Something that no one must hear but the good God who knows how much he has hurt me. I want to say it close to those gray, horrid ears. Who knows? He may hear me!"

Wondering, the others backed from the room. She watched them until they closed the door.

Listening, they heard her lower the window. It squealed like a thing in fear.

Ten minutes passed. The group in the hall conversed in whispers.

"Poor thing," said the innkeeper's wife.

"Well," said Drake, taking a deep breath, "she won't have to worry any more about his not coming home



A Great Shudder Ran Through Her Body.

nights. I say, this business will create a fearful sensation, sheriff. The Four Hundred will have a conniption fit."

"We've got to land that girl, whoever she is," grated the official. "Now that we know who he is, it shouldn't be hard to pick out the woman he's been trailing with lately. Then we can sift 'em down until the right one is left. It ought to be easy."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Tree That Lightning Avoids. Native of South Africa have said regarding the mopane tree, which is often struck, "Lightning hates it;" but they say that the mopane tree is never touched.