



The Hollow of Her Hand

by George Barr McCutcheon



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CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

He did not once interrupt her. All the time she was speaking he was studying the profile of her face as if fascinated by its strange immobility. For the matter of a full half-hour he sat on the rail, his back against a post, his arms folded across the breast of the thick ulster he wore, staring at her, drinking in every word of the story she told. A look of surprise crept into his face when she came to the point where the thought of marrying Hetty to the brother of her victim first began to manifest itself in her designs. For a time the look of incredulity remained, to be succeeded by utter scorn as she went on with the recital. Her reasons, her excuses, her explanations for this master stroke in the way of compensation for all that she had endured at the hands of the scornful Wrاندalls, all of whom were hateful to her without exception, stirred him deeply. He began to understand the forces that compelled her to resort to this Machiavellian plan for revenge on them. She admitted everything: her readiness to blight Hetty's life forever; her utter callousness in laying down these ugly plans; her surpassing vindictiveness; her reflections on the triumph she was to enjoy when her aims were fully attained. She confessed to a genuine pity for Hetty Castleton from the beginning, but it was outweighed by that thing she could only describe as an obsession! . . . How she hated the Wrاندalls! . . . Then came the real awakening: when the truth came to her as a revelation from God. Hetty had not been to blame. The girl was innocent of the one sin that called for vengeance so far as she was concerned. The slaying of Challis Wrاندall was justified! All these months she had been harboring a woman she believed to have been his mistress as well as his murderer. It was not so much the murderer that she would have foisted upon the Wrاندalls as a daughter, but the mistress! . . . She loved the girl, she had loved her from that first night. Back of it all, therefore, lay the stern, unsuspected truth: from the very beginning she instinctively had known this girl to be innocent of guile. . . . Her house of cards fell down. There was nothing left of the plans on which it had been constructed. It had all been swept away, even as she strove to protect it against destruction, and the ground was strewn with the ashes of fires burnt out. . . . She was shocked to find that she had even built upon the evil spot! . . . Almost word for word she repeated Hetty's own story of her meeting with Challis Wrاندall, and how she went, step by step and blindly, to the last scene in the tragedy, when his villainous, his true nature was revealed to her. The girl had told her everything. She had thought herself to be in love with Wrاندall. She was carried away by his protestations. She was infuriated. (Sara smiled to herself as she spoke of this. She knew Challis Wrاندall's charm!) The girl believed in him implicitly. When he took her to Burton's inn it was to make her his wife, as she supposed. He had arranged everything. Then came the truth. She defended herself. . . . "I came upon her in the road on that wild night, Brandon, at the place I pointed out. Can you picture her as I have described her? Can you picture her despair, her hopelessness, her misery? I have told you everything, from beginning to end. You know how she came to me, how I prepared her for the sacrifice, how she left me. I gave not written to her. I cannot. She must hate me with all her soul, just as I have hated the Wrاندalls, but with greater reason, I confess. She would have given herself up to the law long ago, if it had not been for exposing me to the world as her defender, her protector. She knew she was not morally guilty of the crime of murder. In the beginning she was afraid. She did not know our law, our laws. In time she came to understand that she was in no real peril, but then it was too late. A confession would have placed me in an impossible position. You see, she thought of me all this time. She loved me as no woman ever loved another. Was not I the wife of the man she had killed, and was not I the noblest of all women in her eyes? God! And to think of what I had planned for her!"

This was the end of the story.

The words died away in a sort of whimpering wail, falling in with the wind to be lost to his straining ears. Her head drooped, her arms hung limply at her side.

For a long time he sat there in silence, looking out over the darkening water, unwilling, unable indeed, to speak. His heart was full of compassion for her, mingling strangely with what was left of scorn and horror. What could he say to her?

At last she turned to him. "Now you know all that I can tell you of Hetty Castleton—of Hetty Glynn. You could not have forced this from me, Brandon. She would not tell you. It was left for me to do in my own good time. Well, I have spoken. What save you to say?"

"I can only say, Sara, that I thank God for everything," he said slowly. "For everything!"

"I thank God for you, for her and for everything. I thank God that she found him out in time, that she killed him, that you shielded her, that you failed to carry out your devilish scheme, and that your heart is very sore today."

"You do not despise me?"

"No. I am sorry for you."

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't want you to feel sorry for me."

"You don't understand. I am sorry for you because you have found yourself out and must be despising yourself."

"You have guessed the truth. I despise myself. But what could be expected of me?" she asked ironically. "As the Wrاندalls would say, 'blood will tell.'"

"Nonsense! Don't talk like that! It is quite unworthy of you. In spite of everything, Sara, you are wonderful. The very thing you tried to do, the way you went about it, the way you surrender, makes for greatness in you. If you had gone on with it and succeeded, that fact alone would have put you in the class with the great, strong, virile women of history. It—"

"With the Mediceis, the Borgias and—"

"She began bitterly. "Yes, with them. But they were great women, just the same. You are greater, for you have more than they possessed: a conscience. I wish I could tell you just what I feel. I haven't the words. I—"

"I only want you to tell me the truth. Do you despise me?"

"Again I say that I do not. I can only say that I regard you with—yes, with awe."

"As one might think of a deadly serpent."

"Hardly that," he said, smiling for the first time. He crossed over and laid his hand on her shoulder. "Don't think too meanly of yourself. I understand it all. You lived for months without a heart, that's all."

"You put it very gently."

"I think I am right. Now, you've got it back, and it's hungry for the sweet, good things of life. You want to be happy. You want to love again and to be loved. You don't want to pined. I understand. It's the return of a heart that went away long months ago and left an empty place that you filled with gall. The bitterness is gone. There is something sweet in its place. Am I not right?"

She hesitated. "If you mean that I want to be loved by my enemies, Brandon, you are wrong," she said clearly. "I have not been chastened in that particular."

"You mean the Wrاندalls?"

"It is not in my nature to love my enemies. We stand on the same footing as before, and always shall. They understand me, I understand them. I am glad that my project failed, not for their sake, but for my own."

He was silent. This woman was beyond him. He could not understand a nature like this.

"You say nothing. Well, I can't ask you to understand. We will not discuss my enemies, but my friends. What do you intend to do in respect to Hetty?"

"I am going to make her my wife," he said levelly.

She turned away. It was now quite dark. He could not see the expression on her face.

"What you have heard does not weaken your love for her?"

"No. It strengthens it."

"You know what she has done. She

away with that last ugly thought of mine, with the thought of me as I appeared to her on that last, enlightening day. All these months it has been growing more horrible to her. It has been beside her all the time. All these months she has known that I pretended to love her as—"

"I don't believe you know Hetty as well as you think you do," he broke in. "You forget that she loved you with all her soul. You can't kill love so easily as all that. It will be all right, Sara. You must write and ask her to come back. It—"

"Ah, but you don't know!" Then she related the story of the liberated canary bird. "Hetty understands. The cage door is open. She may return when she chooses, but—don't you see?—she must come of her own free will."

"You will not ask her to come?"

"No. It is the test. She will know that I have told you everything. You will go to her. Then she may understand. If she forgives she will come back. There is nothing else to say, nothing else to consider."

"I shall go to her at once," he said resolutely.

She gave him a quick, searching glance.

"She may refuse to marry you, even now, Brandon."

"She can't!" he cried. An instant later his face fell. "By Jove, I—I suppose the law will have to be considered now. She will at least have to go through the form of a trial."

She whirled on him angrily. "The law? What has the law to do with it? Don't be a fool!"

"She ought to be legally exonerated," he said.

Her fingers gripped his arm fiercely. "I want you to understand one thing, Brandon. The story I have told you was for your ears alone. The secret lives with us and dies with us."

He looked his relief. "Right! It must go no farther. It is not a matter for the law to decide. You may trust me."

"I am cold," she said. He heard her teeth chatter distinctly as she pulled her thick mantle closer about her throat and shoulders. "It is very raw and wet down here. Come!"

As she started off along the long, narrow pier, he sprang after her, grasping her arm. She leaned rather heavily against him for a few steps and then drew herself up. Her teeth still chattered, her arm trembled in his clasp.

"By Jove, Sara, this is bad," he cried, in distress. "You're chilled to the marrow."

"Nerves," she retorted, and he somehow felt that her lips were set and drawn.

"You must get to bed right away. Hot bath, mustard, and all that. I'll not stop for dinner. Thanks just the same. I will be over in the morning."

"When will you call?" she asked, after a moment.

"I can't go for ten days, at least. My mother goes into the hospital next week for an operation, as I've told you. I can't leave until after that's over. Nothing serious, but—well, I can't go away. I shall write to Hetty tonight, and cable her tomorrow. By the way, I—don't know just where to find her. You see, we were not to write to each other. It was in the bargain. I suppose you don't know how I can—"

"Yes, I can tell you precisely where she is. She is in Venice, but leaves there for Rome, by the Express."

"Then you have been hearing from her?" he cried sharply.

"Much: there has not been a day since she landed in England that I have not received news of her. I have not been out of touch with her, Brandon, not even for an hour."

"Good heaven, Sara! You don't mean to say you've had her shadowed by—by detectives," he exclaimed, aghast.

"Not directly. But I will say this: 'Her maid is a very faithful servant,' was her ambiguous rejoinder."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Disturbing News.

He walked home swiftly through the early night, his brain seething with tumultuous thoughts. The revelations of the day were staggering; the whole universe seemed to have turned topsy-turvy since that devastating hour at Burton's inn. Somehow he was not able to confine his thoughts to Hetty Castleton alone. She seemed to sink into the background, despite the absorption he had been so ready, so eager to grant her on hearing the story from Sara's lips. Not that his resolve to search her out and claim her in spite of everything was likely to weaken, but that the absorbing figure of Sara Wrاندall stood out most clearly in his reflections.

What an amazing creature she was! He could not drive her out of his thoughts, even when he tried to concentrate them on the one person who was dearest to him of all in all the world, his warm-hearted, adorable Hetty. Strange contrasts suggested themselves to him as he strode along, head bent and shoulders hunched. He could not help contrasting the two women. He loved Hetty; he would always love her, of that he was posi-

tive. She was Sara's superior in every respect, infinitely so, he argued. And yet there was something in Sara that could crowd this adored one, this perfect one out of his thoughts for the time being. He found it difficult to concentrate his thoughts on Hetty Castleton.

How white and ill Sara had looked when she said good night to him at the door! The memory of her dark, mysterious eyes haunted him; he could see them in the night about him. They had been full of pain; there were torrents of tears behind them. They had glistened as if burnished by the fires of fever.

Even as he wrote his long, triumphant letter to Hetty Castleton, the picture of Sara Wrاندall encroached upon his mental vision. He could not drive it out. He thought of her as she had appeared to him early in the spring; through all the varying stages of their growing intimacy; through the interesting days when he vainly tried to translate her matchless beauty by means of wretched pigments; up to this present hour in which she was revealed, and yet not revealed, to him. Her vivid face was always before him, between his eyes and the thin, white paper on which he scribbled so eagerly. Her feverish eyes were looking into his; she was reading what he wrote before it appeared on the surface of the sheet!

His letter to Hetty was a triumph of skill and diplomacy, achieved after many attempts. He found it hard not to say too much, and quite as difficult not to say too little. He spent hours over this all-important missive. At last it was finished. He read and reread it, searching for the slightest flaw: a fatal word or suggestion that might create in her mind the slightest doubt as to his sincerity. She was sure to read this letter a great many times, and always with the view to finding something between the lines: such as pity, resignation, an enforced conception of loyalty, or even faith! He meant that she should find nothing there but love. It was full of tenderness, full of hope, full of promise. He was coming to her with a steadfast, enduring love in his heart, he wanted her now more than ever before.

There was no mention of Challis Wrاندall, and but once was Sara's name used. There was nothing in the letter that could have betrayed their joint secret to the most acute outsider, and yet she would understand that he had wronged everything from Sara's lips. Her secret was safe.

He decided that it would not be safe to anticipate the letter by a cablegram. It was not likely that any message he could send would have the desired effect. Instead of reassuring her, in all probability it would create fresh alarm.

Sleep did not come to him until after three o'clock. At two he got up and deliberately added a postscript to the letter, he had written. It was in the nature of a poignant plea for Sara Wrاندall. Even as he penned these lines, he shuddered at the thought of what she had planned to do to Hetty Castleton. Staring hard at the black window before him, the pen still in his hand, he allowed his thoughts to dwell so intimately on the subject of his well-meant postscript that her ashen face with its burning eyes seemed to take shape in the night beyond. It was a long time before he could get rid of the illusion. Afterwards he tried to conjure up Hetty's face and to drive out the likeness of the other woman, and found that he could not recall a single feature in the face of the girl he loved!

When he reached Southlook in the morning, he found that nearly all of the doors and windows were boarded up. Wagons were standing in the stable yard, laden with trunks and crates. Servants without livery were scurrying about the halls. There was an air of finality about their movements.

"Yes, sir," said Watson, in reply to his question, "we are in a rush. Mrs. Wrاندall expects to close the house this evening, sir. We all go up this afternoon. I suppose you know, sir, we've taken a new apartment in town."

"No!" exclaimed Booth.

"Yes, sir, we've, sir. They've been decorating it for the past two weeks. Seems like she didn't care for the old one we had. As a matter of fact, I didn't care much for it, either. She's taken one of them expensive ones looking out over the park, sir. You know we used to look out over Madison avenue, sir, and God knows it wasn't hinpaprin'. Yes, sir, we go up this afternoon. Mrs. Wrاندall will be down in a second, thank you, sir."

Booth actually was startled by her appearance when she entered the room a few minutes later. She looked positively ill.

"My dear Sara," he cried anxiously, "this is too bad. You are making yourself ill. Come, come, this won't do."

"I shall be all right in a day or two," she said, with a weary little gesture. "I have been nervous. The strain was too great, Brandon. This is the reaction you might say."

"Your hand is hot, your eyes look feverish. You'd better see your doc-

tor as soon as you get to town. An ounce of prevention, you know."

"Well," she said, with a searching look into his eyes, "have you written to her?"

"Yes. Posted it at seven o'clock this morning."

"I trust you did not go so far as to—well, to volunteer a word in my behalf. You were not to do that, you know."

He looked uncomfortable. "I'm afraid I did take your name in vain," he equivocated. "You are a—wonderful woman, Sara," he went on, moved to the remark by a curious influence that he could not have explained any more than he could have accounted for the sudden gush of emotion that took possession of him.

She ignored the tribute. "You will persuade her to come to New York with you?"

"For your sake, Sara, if she won't come for mine."

"She knows the cage is open," was her way of dismissing the subject. "I am glad you came over. I have a letter from Leslie. It came this morning. You may be interested in what he has to say of Hetty—and of yourself." She smiled faintly. "He is determined that you shall not be without a friend while he is alive."

"Les isn't such a rotter, Sara. He's spoiled, but he is hardly to be blamed for that."

"I will read his letter to you," she said, and there was no little significance in the way she put it. She held the letter in her hand, but he had failed to notice it before. Now he saw that it was a crumpled ball of paper. He was obliged to wait for a minute or two while she restored it to a readable condition. "He was in London when this was written," she explained, turning to the window for light. She glanced swiftly over the first page until she found the place where she meant to begin. "I suppose Hetty Castleton has written that we met in Lucerne two weeks ago," she read. "Curious coincidence in connection with it, too. I was with her father, Col. Braid Castleton, when we came upon her most unexpectedly. I ran across him in Paris just before the aviation meet, and got to know him rather well. He's a fine chap, don't you think? I confess I was somewhat surprised to learn that he didn't know she'd left America. He explained it quite naturally, however. He'd been ill in the north of Ireland and must have missed her letters. Hetty was on the point of leaving for Italy. We didn't see much of her. But, by Jove, Sara, I am more completely gone on her than ever. She is adorable. Now that I've met her father, who had the biggest misfortune to miss old Murgatroyd's funeral, I can readily see where in the saying 'blood will tell' applies to her. He is a prince. He came over to London with me the day after we left Hetty in Lucerne, and I had him in to meet mother and Vivian at Claridge's. They like him immensely. He set us straight on a good many points concerning the Glynn and Castleton families. Of course, I knew they were among the best over here, but I didn't know how fine they were until we prevailed on him to talk a little about himself. You will be glad to hear that he is coming over with us on the Mauretania. She sails the twenty-seventh. We'll be on the water by the time you get this letter. It had been our intention to sail last week, but the colonel had to go to Ireland for

make the sale. 'Gad, I almost had to beg him to take the money. Terribly proud and haughty, as the butler would say. He said he wouldn't sleep well until he has returned the filthy lucre. We are looking for him back any hour now. But if he shouldn't get here by Friday, we will sail without him. He said he would follow by the next boat, in case anything happened that he didn't catch the Mauretania."

Sara interrupted herself to offer an ironic observation: "If Hetty did not despise her father so heartily, I should advise you to look farther for a father-in-law, Brandon. The colonel is a bad lot. Estates in the north of Ireland! Poor Leslie!" She laughed softly.

"He'll not show up, eh?"

"Not a bit of it," she said. "He may be charged to profit and loss in Leslie's books. This part of the letter will interest you," she went on, as if all that had gone before was of no importance to him. "I hear interesting news concerning you, my dear girl. My heartiest congratulations if it is all true. Brandy is one in a million. I have hoped all along to have him as a full-fledged brother-in-law. If that's the way you'd put it. Father writes that every one is talking about it, and saying what a fine thing it is. He has a feeling of delicacy about approaching you in the matter, and I fancy it's just as well until everything is settled. I wish you'd let me make a suggestion, however. Wouldn't it be wise to let us all get together and talk over the business end of the game? Brandy's a fine chap, a corker, in fact, but the question is: has he got it in him to take Challis' place in the firm? You've got to consider the future as well as the present, my dear. We all do. With his artistic temperament he might play hob with your interests, and ours too, for that matter. Wouldn't it be wise for me to sound him a bit before we take him into the firm? Forgive me for suggesting this, but, as you know, your interests are mine, and I'm terribly keen about seeing you get the best of everything. By the way, wasn't he a bit gone on Hetty? Passing fancy, of course, and not deep enough to hurt anybody. Good old Brandy!"

"There is more, Brandon, but it's of no consequence," she said, tossing the letter upon the table. "You see how the land lays."

Booth was pale with annoyance. "By Jove, Sara, what an insufferable ass he is!"

"The shoe pinches?"

"Oh, it's such perfect rot! I'm sorry on your account. Have you ever heard of such gall?"

"Oh, he is merely acting as the family spokesman. I can see them now in solemn conclave. They think it their indisputable right to select a husband for me, to pass upon him, to accept or decline him as they see fit, to say whether he is a proper man to hang up his hat and coat in the offices of Wrاندall & Co."

"Do you mean to say—"

"Let's not talk about it, Brandon. It is too silly."

They fell to discussing her plans for the immediate future, although the minds of both were at work with something else.

"Now that I have served my purpose, I suppose you will not care to see so much of me," she said, as he prepared to take leave of her.

"Served your purpose? What do you mean?"

"I should have put it differently. You have been most assiduous in your efforts to force the secret from me. It has been accomplished. Now do you understand?"

"That isn't fair, Sara," he protested. "If you'll let me come to see you, in spite of what the gossips and Mr. Redmond Wrاندall predict, you may be sure I will be as much in evidence as ever. I suppose I have been a bit of a nuisance, hanging on as I have."

"I admire your perseverance. More than that, I admire your courage in accepting the situation as you have. I only hope you may win her over to your way of thinking. Brandon. Goodby."

"I shall go up to town tomorrow, kit and bag. When shall I see you? We have a great deal left to talk about before I sail."

"Come when you like."

"You really want me to come?"

"Certainly."

He studied her pale, tired face for a moment, and then shook his head. "You must take care of yourself," he said. "You are unstrung. Get a good rest and—forget certain things if you can. Everything will come out all right in the end."

"It depends on what one is willing to accept as the end," he said.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Why She Mourned.

"Boo-hoo!" sobbed the lady.

"What are you crying about?" the man asked.

"You know the bread and the jelly I sent to the fair?"

"Yes. Didn't it take a prize? Well, cheer up—those judges—"

"But it did take a prize—they both took first prizes—boo-hoo!"

"Well, what are you crying about?"

"The bread took first prize as the best specimen of concrete, and the jelly as the best china cement!"



This Woman Was Beyond Him.

has taken a life with her own hands. Can you take her to your bosom, can you make her the mother of your own children? Remember, there is blood on her hands."

"Ah, but her heart is clean!"

"True," she said moodily, "her heart is clean."

"No cleaner than yours is now, Sara."

She uttered a short, mocking laugh. "It isn't necessary to say a thing like that to me."

"I beg your pardon."

Her manner changed abruptly. She turned to him, intense and serious. "She is so far away, Brandon. On the other side of the world, and she is full of loathing for me. How am I to regain what I have lost? How am I to make her understand? She went



Booth Was Startled by Her Appearance.

a few days to settle some beastly squabbles among the tenants. Next year he wants me to come over for the shooting. He isn't going back to India for two years, you may be interested to hear. Two years' leave. Lots of influence, believe me! We've been expecting him back in London since day before yesterday. I dare say he found matters worse than he suspected and has been delayed. He has been negotiating for the sale of some of his property in Belfast—factory sites, I believe. He is particularly anxious to close the deal before he leaves England. Had to lift a mortgage on the property, before he could think of making the sale. I staked him to four thousand pounds, to tide him over. Of course, he is eager to