

The Hollow of Her Hand

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLSWORTH YOUNG

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Charles 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. Wrاندall, it appears, had led a gay life and neglected his wife. Mrs. Wrاندall starts back for New York in an auto during a blinding snow storm.

CHAPTER II.

The Passing of a Night.

The sheriff was right. Sara Wrاندall was an extraordinary woman, if I may be permitted to modify his rather crude estimate of her. It is difficult to understand, much less describe a nature like hers. Fine-minded, gently bred women who can go through an ordeal such as she experienced without breaking under the strain are rare indeed. They must be wonderful. It is hard to imagine a more heart-breaking crisis in life than the one which confronted her on this dreadful night, and yet she faced it with a fortitude that seems almost unholy.

She had loved her handsome, wayward husband. He had hurt her deeply more times than she chose to remember during the six years of their married life, but she had loved him in spite of the wounds up to the instant when she stood beside his dead body in the cold little room at Burton's inn. She went there loving him as he had lived, yet prepared, almost forewarned, to loathe him as he had died, and she left him lying there alone in that dreary room without a spark of the old affection in her soul. Her love for him died in giving birth to the hatred that now possessed her. While he lived it was not in her power to control the unreasoning, relentless thing that stands for love in woman; he was her lover, the master of her impulses. Dead, he was an unwholesome, unlovely cloud, a pallid thing to be scorned, a hulk of worthless clay. His blood was cold. He could no longer warm her with it; it could no longer kill the chill that his misdeeds cast about her tender sensitiveness; his lips and eyes never more could smile and conquer. He was a dead thing. Her love was a dead thing. They lay separate and apart. The tie was broken. With love died the final spark of respect she had left for him in her tired, loyal, betrayed heart. He was at last a thing to be despised, even by her. She despised him.

thing that was hers to kill. She could not mourn for him. She could only wonder what the poor, hunted, terrified creature would do when taken and made to pay for the thing she had done.

Once, in the course of her bitter reflections, she spoke aloud in a shrill, tense voice, forgetful of the presence of the man beside her:

God they will see him now as I have seen him all these years. They will know him as they have never known him. Thank God for that!

The man looked at her stupidly and muttered something under his breath. She heard him, and recalling her wits, asked which turn she was to take for the station. The fellow lopped back in the seat, too drunk to reply.

For a moment she was dismayed, frightened. Then she resolutely reached out and shook him by the shoulder. She had brought the car to a full stop.

"Arouse yourself, man!" she cried. "Do you want to freeze to death? Where is the station?"

He straightened up with an effort, and, after vainly seeking light in the darkness, fell back again with a grunt, but managed to wave his hand toward the left. She took the chance. In five minutes she brought the car to a standstill beside the station. Through the window she saw a man with his feet cocked high, reading. He leaped to his feet in amazement as she entered the waiting room.

"Are you the agent?" she demanded. "No, ma'am. I'm simply staying here for a woman—say! We're looking for a woman—say!" He stopped short and stared at the veiled face with wide, excited eyes. "Gee whiz! Maybe you—"

"No, I am not the woman you want. Do you know anything about the trains?"

conditions. With her, it was not a question of her own capacity and strength, but a belief in the fidelity of the engine that carried her forward. It had not occurred to her that the task of guiding that heavy, swerving thing through the unbroken road was something beyond her powers of endurance. She often had driven it a hundred miles and more without resting, or without losing zest in the enterprise; then why should she fear the small matter of 30 miles, even under the most trying of conditions?

Sharply there came to her mind the question: was she the only one abroad in this black little world? What of the other woman? The one who was being hunted? Where was she? And what of the ghost at her heels?

The car bounded over a railroad crossing. She recalled the directions given by the man at the station and hastily applied the brake. There was another and more dangerous crossing a hundred yards ahead. She had been warned particularly to take it carefully, as there was a sharp curve in the road beyond.

Suddenly she jammed down the emergency brake, a startled exclamation falling from her lips. Not 20 feet ahead, in the middle of the road and directly in line with the light of the lamps, stood a black, motionless figure—the figure of a woman whose head was lowered and whose arms hung limply at her sides.

The woman in the car bent forward over the wheel, staring hard. Many seconds passed. At last the forlorn object in the roadway lifted her face and looked vacantly into the glare of the lamps. Her eyes were wide-open, her face a ghastly white.

"God in heaven!" struggled from the stiffening lips of Sara Wrاندall. Her fingers tightened on the wheel. She knew. This was the woman! The long brown ulster; the limp, fluttering veil? "A woman about your size and figure," the sheriff had said. The figure averted and then moved a few steps forward. Blinded by the lights, she bent her head and shielded her eyes with her hand the better to glimpse the occupant of the car.

"Are you looking for me?" she cried out shrilly, at the same time spreading her arms as if in surrender. It was almost a wail.

Mrs. Wrاندall caught her breath. Her heart began to beat once more. "Who are you? What do you want?" she cried out, without knowing what she said.

The girl started. She had not expected to hear the voice of a woman. She staggered to the side of the road, out of the line of light.

"I—I beg your pardon," she cried—it was like a wail of disappointment—"I am sorry to have stopped you."

The girl laid her head on her arms. Mrs. Wrاندall sat above her, looking down, held mute by warring emotions. The impossible had come to pass. The girl for whom the whole world would be searching in a day of two, had stepped out of the unknown and, by the most whimsical jest of fate, into the custody of the one person most interested of all in that self-same world. It was unbelievable. She wondered if it were not a dream, or the hallucination of an overwrought mind. Spurred by the sudden doubt as to the reality of the object before her, she stretched out her hand and touched the girl's shoulder.

Instantly she looked up. Her fingers sought the friendly hand and clasped it tightly.

"Oh, if you will only take me to the city with you! If you only give me the chance," she cried hoarsely. "I don't know what impulse was driving me back here. I only know I could not help myself. You really mean it? You will take me with you?"

"Yes. Don't be afraid. Come! Get in," said the woman in the car rapidly. "You—you are real!"

The girl did not hear the strange question. She was hurrying around to the opposite side of the car. As she crossed before the lamps, Mrs. Wrاندall noticed with dulled interest that her garments were covered with mud; her small, comely hat was in sad disorder; loose wisps of hair fluttered with the unsteady veil. Her hands, she recalled, were clad in thin suede gloves. She would be half-frozen. She had been out in all this terrible weather—perhaps since the hour of her flight from the inn.

The old feeling of pity grew stronger within her. She made no effort to analyze it, nor to account for it. Why should she pity the slayer of her husband? It was a question unasked, unconsidered. Afterwards she was to recall this hour and its strange impulses, and to realize that it was not pity, but mercy that moved her to do the extraordinary thing that followed.

Trembling all over, her teeth chattering, her breath coming in short little moans, the girl struggled up beside her and fell back in the seat. Without a word, Sara Wrاندall drew the great buffalo robe over her and tucked it in about her feet and legs far up about her body, which had slumped down in the seat.

"You are very, very good," chattered the girl, almost inaudibly. "I shall never forget—" She did not complete the sentence, but sat upright and fixed her gaze on her companion's face. "You—you are not doing this just to turn me over to—the police? They must be searching for me. You are not going to give me up to them, are you? There will be a reward!"

"There is no reward," said Sara Wrاندall sharply. "I do not mean to give you up. I am simply giving you a chance to get away. I have always felt sorry for the fox when the time for the kill drew near. That's the way I feel."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you! But what am I saying? Why should I permit you to do this for me? I mean to go back there and have it over with. I know I can't escape. It will have to come. It is bound to come. Why put it off? Let them take me, let them do what they will with me. I—"

lights, the first signs of thickly populated districts. They were still eight or ten miles from the outskirts of the city and the way was arduous. She was conscious of a sudden feeling of fatigue. The chill of the night seemed to have made itself felt with abrupt.



She Sank to the Floor in a Heap.

almost stupefying force. She wondered if she could keep her strength, her courage—her nerves.

The girl was English. Mrs. Wrاندall was convinced of the fact, almost immediately. Unmistakably English and apparently of the cultivated type. In fact, the peculiarities of speech that determines the London show-girl or music-hall character were wholly lacking. Her voice, her manner, even under such trying conditions, were characteristic of the English woman of cultivation. Despite the dreadful strain under which she labored, there were evidences of that curious serenity which marks the English woman of the better classes; an inborn composure, a calm orderliness of the emotions. Mrs. Wrاندall was conscious of a sense of surprise, of a wonder that increased as her thoughts resolved themselves into something less chaotic than they were at the time of contact with this visible condition.

For a mile or more she sent the car along with reckless disregard for comfort or safety. Her mind was groping for something tangible in the way of intentions. What was she to do with this creature? What was to become of her? At what street corner should she turn her over to the police did not enter her thoughts for an instant. Somehow she felt that the girl was a stranger to the city. She could not explain the feeling, yet it was with her and very persistent. Of course, there was a home of some sort, or lodgings, or friends, but would the girl dare show herself in familiar haunts?

She found herself wondering why the poor wretch had not made way with herself. Escape seemed out of the question. That must have been clear to her from the beginning, else why was she going back there to give herself up? What better way out of it than self-destruction. She would advise the girl to leave the car when they reached the center of a certain bridge that spanned the river! No one would find her.

Even as the thought took shape in her mind, she experienced a great sense of awe, so overwhelming that she cried out with the horror of it. She turned her head for a quick glance at the mute, wretched face showing white above the robe, and her heart ached with sudden pity for her. The thought of that slender, alive thing going down to the icy waters—her soul turned sick with the dread of it!

In that instant, Sara Wrاندall—no philanthropist, no sentimentalist—made up her mind to give this erring one more than an even chance for salvation. She would see her safely across that bridge and many others. God had directed the footsteps of this girl so that she should fall in judgment on her. It was in that person's power to save her or destroy her. The commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," took on a broader meaning as she considered the power that was hers; the power to kill.

A great relaxation came over Sara Wrاندall. It was as if every nerve, every muscle in her body had reached the snapping point and suddenly had given way. For a moment her hands were weak and powerless; her head fell forward. In an instant she conquered—but only partially—the strange feeling of lassitude. Then she realized how tired she was, how fiercely the strain had told on her body and brain, how much she had really suffered.

Her blurred eyes turned once more for a look at the girl, who sat there, just as she had been sitting for miles, her white face standing out with almost unnatural clearness, and as rigid as that of a sphinx.

"You shall not do that. I, too, thought of that as a way out of it for you, but—no, it must not be that. Give me a few minutes to think. I will find a way."

The girl turned toward her. Her eyes were burning.

"Do you mean that you will help me to get away?" she cried, slowly, incredulously.

"Let me think!" "You will lay yourself liable—" "Let me think, I say."

"But I mean to surrender myself to—" "An hour ago you meant to do it, but what were you thinking of ten minutes ago? Not surrender. You were thinking of the bridge. Listen to me now: I am sure that I can save you. I do not know all the—all the circumstances connected with your association with—that man back there at the inn. Twenty-four hours passed before they were able to identify him. It is not unlikely that tomorrow may put them in possession of the name of the woman who went with him to that place. They do not know it tonight, of that I am positive. You covered your trail too well. But you must have been seen with him during the day or the night—"

The other broke in eagerly: "I don't believe any one knows that I—that I went out there with him. He arranged it very—carefully. Oh, what a beast he was!" The bitterness of that wail caused the woman beside her to cry out as if hurt by a sharp, almost unbearable pain. For an instant she seemed about to lose control of herself. The car swerved and came dangerously near leaving the road.

A full minute passed before she could trust herself to speak. Then it was with a deep hoarseness in her voice.

"You can tell me about it later on, not now. I don't want to hear it. Tell me, where do you live?"

The girl's manner changed so absolutely that there could be but one inference; she was acutely suspicious. Her lips tightened and her figure seemed to stiffen in the seat.

"Where do you live?" repeated the other sharply.

"Why should I tell you that? I do not know you. You—" "You are afraid of me?" "Oh, I don't know what to say, or what to do," came from the lips of the hunted one. "I have no friends, no one to turn to, no one to help me. You—you can't be so heartless as to lead me on and then give me up to— God help me, I—I should not be made to suffer for what I have done. If you only knew the circumstances. If you only knew—"

"Stop!" cried the other, in agony. The girl was bewildered. "You are so strange. I don't understand—" "We have but two or three miles to go," interrupted Mrs. Wrاندall. "We must think hard and—rapidly. Are you willing to come with me to my hotel? You will be safe there for the present. Tomorrow we can plan something for the future."

"If I can only find a place to rest for a little while," began the other. "I shall be busy all day, you will not be disturbed. But leave the rest to me. I shall find a way."

It was nearly three o'clock when she brought the car to a stop in front of a small, exclusive hotel not far from Central park. The street was dark and the vestibule was but dimly lighted. No attendant was in sight.



She Knew—This Was the Woman.

Wrاندall, her voice hoarse and tremulous.

"I am looking for an inn. It must be near by. I do—" "An inn?" with a start. "I do not recall the name. It is not far from a village, in the hills."

"Do you mean Burton's?" "Yes. That's it. Can you direct me?" The voice of the girl was faint; she seemed about to fall.

"It is six or eight miles from here," said Mrs. Wrاندall, still looking in wonder at the miserable night-farer.

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