

The Hollow of Her Hand

by **George Barr McCutcheon**
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"Truxton King," etc.

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—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. 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—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 robbing her of the man who, though she loved him deeply, had caused her great sorrow, Mrs. Wrاندall determines to shield her and takes her to her own home.

CHAPTER III—Mrs. Wrاندall hears the story of Hetty Castleton's life, except that portion that relates to Wrاندall. The story of the tragedy she finds the girl ever to tell her. She offers Hetty a home, friendship and security from peril on account of the tragedy.

CHAPTER IV—Mrs. Sara Wrاندall and Hetty attend the funeral of Challis Wrاندall at the home of his parents. Sara had always been treated as an interloper by the snobbish Wrاندall family, but the tragedy seems to draw them closer together.

CHAPTER V.

Discussing a Sister-in-Law.

"You remember my sister-in-law, don't you, Brandy?" was the question that Leslie Wrاندall put to a friend one afternoon, as they sat drowsily in a window of one of the fashionable uptown clubs, a little more than a year after the events described in the foregoing chapters. Drowsily, I have said, for the reason that it was Sunday, and raining at that.

"I met Mrs. Wrاندall a few years ago in Rome," said his companion, renewing interest in a conversation that had died some time before of its own exhaustion. "She's most attractive. I saw her but once. I think it was at somebody's fete."

"She's returning to New York the end of the month," said Leslie. "I'll be abroad for over a year. She had a villa at Nice this winter."

"I remember her quite well. I was of an age then to be particularly sensitive to female loveliness. If I'd been staying on in Rome, I should have screwed up the courage, I'm sure, to have asked her to sit for me."

Brandon Booth was of an old Philadelphia family; an old and wealthy family. Both views considered, he was qualified to walk hand in glove with the fastidious Wrاندalls. Leslie's mother was charmed with him because she was also the mother of Vivian. The fact that he went in for portrait painting and seemed averse to subsisting on the generosity of his father, preferring to live by his talent, in no way operated against him, so far as Mrs. Wrاندall was concerned. That was his lookout, not hers; if he elected to that sort of thing, all well and good. He could afford to be eccentric; there remained, in the perspective he scorned, the bulk of a huge fortune to offset whatever idiosyncrasies he might choose to cultivate. Some day, in spite of himself, she contended serenely, he would be very, very rich. What could be more desirable than fame, family and fortune all heaped together and thrust upon one exceedingly interesting and handsome young man?

He had been the pupil of celebrated draftsmen and painters in Europe, and had exhibited a sincerity of purpose that was surprising, all things considered. The mere fact that he was not obliged to paint in order to obtain a living was sufficient cause for wonder among the artists he met and studied with or under.

His studio in New York was not a fashionable resting place. It was a workshop. You could have tea there, of course, and you were sure to meet people you knew and liked, but it was quite as much of a workshop as any you could mention. He was not a dabbler in art, not a mere dauber of pigments; he was an artist.

Booth was thirty—perhaps a year or two older; tall, dark and good looking. The air of the thoroughbred marked him. He did not affect loose, flowing cravats and baggy trousers, nor was he careless about his fingernails. He was simply the ordinary, every-day sort of chap you would meet in Fifth avenue during parade hours, and you would take a second look at him because of his face and manner but not on account of his dress. Some of his ancestors came over ahead of the Mayflower, but he did not gloat.

Leslie Wrاندall was his closest friend and harshest critic. It didn't really matter to Booth what Leslie said of his paintings; he quite understood that he didn't know anything about them.

"When does Mrs. Wrاندall return?" asked the painter, after a long period of silence spent in contemplation of the gleaming pavement beyond the club's window.

"That's queer," said Leslie, looking up. "I was thinking of Sara myself. She sails next week. I've had a letter asking me to open her house in

the country. Her place is about two miles from father's. It hasn't been opened in two years. Her father built it fifteen or twenty years ago, and left it to her when he died. She and Challis spent several summers there."

"Vivian took me through it one afternoon last summer."

"It must have been quite as much of a novelty to her as it was to you, old chap," said Leslie gloomily.

"What do you mean?"

"Vivian's a bit of a snob. She never liked the place because old man Gooch built it out of worsteds. She never went there."

"But the old man's been dead for years."

"That doesn't matter. The fact is, Vivian didn't quite take to Sara until after—well, until after Challis died. We're dreadful snobs, Brandy, the whole lot of us. Sara was quite good enough for a much better man than my brother. She really couldn't help the worsteds, you know. I'm very fond of her, and always have been. We're pals. Gad, it was a fearful slip at the home folks when Challis justified Sara by getting snuffed out the way he did."

Booth made an attempt to change the subject, but Wrاندall got back to it.

"Since then we've all been exceedingly sweet on Sara. Not because we want to be, mind you, but because—"

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when I wrote to Sara about what she'd been through, she settled a neat bit of money on her, and she'll never want for anything. She's out west somewhere, with her mother and sisters. I tell you, Sara's a wonder. She's got a heart of gold."

"I look forward to meeting her, old man."

"I was with her for a few weeks this winter. In Nice, you know. Vivian stayed on for a week, but mother had to get to the baths. Gad, I believe she hated to go. Sara's got a most adorable girl staying with her. A daughter of Colonel Castleton, and she's connected in some way with the Murgatroyds—old Lord Murgatroyd, you know. I think her mother was a niece of the old boy. Anyhow, mother and Vivian have taken a great fancy to her. That's proof of the pudding."

"I think Vivian mentioned a companion of some sort."

"You wouldn't exactly call her a companion," said Leslie. "She's got money to burn, I take it. Quite keeps up with Sara in making it fly, and that's saying a good deal for her resources. I think it's a pose on her part, this calling herself a companion. An English joke, eh? As a matter of fact, she's an old friend of Sara's and my brother's too. Knew them in England. Most delightful girl. Oh, I say, old man, she's the one for you to paint."

Leslie waxed enthusiastic. "A type, a positive type. Never saw such eyes in all my life. Dammit, they haunt you. You dream about 'em."

"You seem to be hard hit," said Booth indifferently. He was watching the man in the "slicker" through moody eyes.

"Oh, nothing like that," disclaimed Leslie with unnecessary promptness. "But if I were given to that sort of thing, I'd be bowled over in a minute. Positively adorable face. If I thought you had it in you to paint a thing as it really is I'd commission you myself to do a miniature for me, just to have it around where I could pick it up when I liked and hold it between my hands, just as I've often wanted to hold the real thing."

Sara Wrاندall returned to New York at the end of the month, and Leslie met her at the dock, as he did on an occasion fourteen months earlier. Then she came in on a fierce gale from the wintry Atlantic; this time the air was soft and balmy and sweet with the kindness of spring. It was May and the sea was blue, the land was green.

Again she went to the small, exclusive hotel near the park. Her apartment was closed, the butler and his wife and all of their hastily recruited company being in the country, awaiting her arrival from town. Leslie attended to everything. He lent his resourceful man servant and his motor to his lovely sister-in-law, and saw to it that his mother and Vivian sent flowers to the ship. Redmond Wrاندall called at the hotel immediately after banking hours, blessed his daughter-in-law, and delivered an ultimatum second-hand from the power at home: she was to come to dinner and bring Miss Castleton. A little quiet family dinner, you know, because they were all in mourning, he said in conclusion, vaguely realizing all the while that it really wasn't necessary to supply the information, but, for the life of him, unable to think of anything else to say under the circumstances. Somehow it seemed to him that while Sara was in black she was not in mourning in the same sense that the rest of them were. It seemed only right to acquaint her with the conditions in his household. And he knew that he deserved the scowl that Leslie bestowed upon him.

Sara accepted, much to his surprise and gratification. He had been rather dubious about it. It would not have surprised him in the least if she had declined the invitation, feeling, as he did, that he had in a way come to her with a white flag or an olive branch or whatever it is that a combative force utilizes when it wants to surrender in the cause of humanity.

As soon as they were alone Hetty turned to her friend.

"Oh, Sara, can't you go without me? Tell them that I am ill—suddenly ill. I—I don't think it right or honorable of me to accept—"

Sara shook her head, and the words died on the girl's lips.

"You must play the game, Hetty."

"It's—very hard," murmured the other, her face very white and bleak.

"I know, my dear," said Sara gently. "If they should ever find out," gasped the girl, suddenly giving way to the dread that had been lying dormant all these months.

"They will never know the truth unless you choose to enlighten them," said Sara, putting her arm about the girl's shoulders and drawing her close.

"You never cease to be wonderful, Sara—so very wonderful," cried the girl, with a look of worship in her eyes.

Sara regarded her in silence for a moment, reflecting. Then, with a swift rush of tears to her eyes, she cried fiercely:

"You must never, never tell me all that happened, Hetty! You must not speak it with your own lips."

Hetty's eyes grew dark with pain and wonder.

"That is the thing I can't understand in you, Sara," she said slowly.

"We must not speak of it!" Hetty's bosom heaved. "Speak of it!" she cried, absolute agony in her voice. "Have I not kept it locked in my heart since that awful day—"

"Hush!"

"I mean that you shall live for me," said Sara, smiling through her tears. "How silly of me to cry. It must be the room we are in. These are the same rooms, dear, that you came to on the night we met. Ah, how old I feel!"

"Old? You say that to me? I am ages and ages older than you," cried Hetty, the color coming back to her soft cheeks.

"You are twenty-three."

"And you are twenty-eight."

Sara had a far-away look in her eyes. "About your size and figure," said she, and Hetty did not comprehend.

CHAPTER VI.

Southlook.

Sara Wrاندall's house in the country stood on a wooded knoll overlooking the sound. It was rather remotely located, so far as neighbors were concerned. Her father, Sebastian Gooch, shrewdly foresaw the day when land in this particular section of the suburban world would return dollars for pennies, and wisely bought thousands of acres: woodland, meadowland, beachland and hills, inserted between the environs of New York city and the rich towns up the coast. Years afterward he built a commodious summer home on the choicest point that his property afforded, named it Southlook, and transformed that particular part of his wilderness into a millionaire's paradise, where he could dawdle and putter to his heart's content, where he could spend his time and his money with a prodigality that came so late in life to him that he made waste of both in his haste to live down a rather parsimonious past.

Two miles and a half away, in the heart of a scattered colony of purebred New Yorkers, was the country home of the Wrاندalls, an imposing place and older by far than Southlook. It had descended from well-worn and time-stained ancestors to Redmond Wrاندall, and, with others of its kind, looked with no little scorn upon the modern, mushroom structures that sprouted from the seeds of trade. There was no friendship between the old and the new. Each had recourse to a bitter contempt for the other, though consolation was small in comparison.

It was in the wooded by-ways of this despised domain that Challis Wrاندall and Sara, the earthly daughter of Midas, met and loved and defied all things supernal, for matches are made in heaven. Their marriage did not open the gates of Nineveh. Sebastian Gooch's paradise was more completely ostracised than it was before the disaster. The Wrاندalls spoke of it as a disaster.

Clearly the old merchant was not over-pleased with his daughter's choice, a conclusion permanently established by the alteration he made in his will a year or two after the marriage. True, he left the vast estate to his beloved daughter Sara, but he fastened a stout string to it, and with this string her hands were tied. It must have occurred to him that Challis was a profligate in more ways than one, for he deliberately stipulated in his will that Sara was not to sell a foot of the ground until a period of twenty years had elapsed. A very polite way, it would seem, of making his investment safe in the face of considerable odds.

He lived long enough after the making of his will, I am happy to relate, to find that he had made no mistake. As he preceded his son-in-law into the great beyond by a scant three years, it readily may be seen that he wrought too well by far. Seventeen unnecessary years of proscription remained, and he had not intended them for Sara alone. He was not afraid of Sara, but for her.

When the will was read and the condition revealed, Challis Wrاندall took it in perfect good humor. He had the grace to proclaim in the bosom of his father's family that the old gentleman was a father-in-law to be proud of. "A canny old boy," he had announced with his most engaging smile, quite free from rancor or resentment. Challis was well acquainted with himself.

And so the acres were strapped together snugly and firmly, without so much as a town lot protruding.

So impressed was Challis by the far-sightedness of his father-in-law that he forthwith sat him down and made a will of his own. He would not have it said that Sara's father did a whit better by her than he would do. He left everything he possessed to his wife, but put no string to it, blandly implying that all danger would be past when she came into possession. There was a sort of grim humor in the way he managed to present himself to view as the real and ready source of peril.

Sara and Hetty did not stay long in town. The newspapers announced the return of Challis Wrاندall's widow and reporters sought her out for interviews. The old interest was revived and columns were printed about the murder at Burton's inn, with sharp editorial comments on the failure of the police to clear up the mystery.

"I shall ask Leslie down for the week-end," said Sara, the third day after their arrival in the country. The house was huge and lonely, and time hung rather heavily and densely, the glorious uplift of spring.

Hetty looked up quickly from her book. A look of dismay flickered in her eyes for an instant and then gave way to the calmness that had come to dwell in their depths of late. Her lips parted in the sudden impulse to cry

out against the pian, but she checked the words. For a moment her dark, questioning eyes studied the face of her benefactress; then, as if nothing had been revealed to her, she allowed her gaze to drift pensively out toward the sunset sea.



Hetty Looked Up Quickly From the Book.

They were sitting on the broad verandah overlooking the sound. The dusk of evening was beginning to steal over the earth. She laid her book aside.

"Will you telephone in to him after dinner, Hetty?" went on Sara, after a long period of silence.

Again Hetty started. This time a look of actual pain flashed in her eyes. "Would not a note by post be more certain to find him in the—" she began hurriedly.

"I dislike writing notes," said Sara calmly. "Of course, dear, if you feel that you'd rather not telephone him, I can—"

"I dare say I am finicky, Sara," apologized Hetty in quick contrition. "Of course he is your brother. I should remember—"

"My brother-in-law, dear," said Sara, a trifle too literally.

"He will come often to your house," went on Hetty rapidly. "I must make the best of it."

"He is your friend, Hetty. He admires you."

"I cannot see him through your eyes, Sara."

"But he is charming and agreeable, you'll admit," persisted the other. "He is very kind, and he is devoted to you. I should like him for that."

"You have no cause for disliking him."

"I do not dislike him. I—I am—Oh, you always have been so thoughtful, so considerate, Sara, I can't understand your falling to see how hard it is for me to—to—well, to endure his open-hearted friendship."

Sara was silent for a moment. "You draw a pretty fine line, Hetty," she said gently.

Hetty flushed. "You mean that there is little to choose between wife and brother? That isn't quite fair. You know everything, he knows nothing. I wear a mask for him; you have seen into the very heart of me. It isn't the same."

Sara came over and stood beside the girl's chair. After a moment of indecision she laid her hand on Hetty's shoulder. The girl looked up, the ever-recurring question in her eyes.

"We haven't spoken of—of these things in many months, Hetty."

"Not since Mrs. Wrاندall and Vivian came to Nice. I was upset—dreadfully upset then, Sara. I don't know how I managed to get through with it."

"But you managed it," pronounced Sara. Her fingers seemed to tighten suddenly on the girl's shoulder. "I think we were quite wonderful, both of us. It wasn't easy for me."

"Why did we come back to New York, Sara?" burst out Hetty, clasping her friend's hand as if suddenly spurred by terror. "We were happy over there. And free!"

"Listen, my dear," said Sara, a hard note growing in her voice: "this is my home. I do not love it, but I can see no reason for abandoning it. That is why we came back to New York."

Hetty pressed her friend's hand to her lips. "Forgive me," she cried impulsively. "I shouldn't have complained. It was detestable."

"Besides," went on Sara evenly, "you were quite free to remain on the other side. I left it to you."

"You gave me a week to decide," said Hetty in a hurried manner of speaking. "I—I took but twenty-four hours—less than that. Over night, you remember. I love you, Sara. I could not leave you. All that night I could feel you pulling at my heart strings, pulling me closer, and holding me. You were in your room, I in mine, and yet all the time you seemed to be bending over me in the darkness, urging me to stay with you and love you and be loved by you. It couldn't have been a dream."

"It was not a dream," said Sara, with a queer smile.

woman's pensive gaze rested on the peaceful waters below, taking in the slow approach of the fog that was soon to envelop the land. Neither spoke for many minutes; inscrutable thinkers, each a prey to thoughts that leaped backward to the beginning and took up the puzzle at its inception.

"I wonder—" began Hetty, her eyes narrowing with the intensity of thought. She did not complete the sentence.

Sara answered the unspoken question. "It will never be different from what it is now, unless you make it so."

Hetty started. "How could you have known what I was thinking?" she cried in wonder.

"It is what you are always thinking, my dear. You are always asking yourself when will I turn against you."

"Sara!"

"Your own intelligence should supply the answer to all the questions you are asking of yourself. It is too late for me to turn against you." She abruptly removed her hand from Hetty's shoulder and walked to the edge of the veranda. For the first time, the English girl was conscious of pain. She drew her arm up and cringed. She pulled the light scarf about her bare shoulders.

The butler appeared in the doorway. "The telephone, if you please, Miss Castleton. Mr. Leslie Wrاندall is calling."

The girl stared. "For me, Watson?"

"Yes, miss."

Hetty had risen, visibly agitated. "What shall I say to him, Sara?" she cried.

"Apparently it is he who has something to say to you," said the other, still smiling. "Wait and see what it is. Please don't neglect to say that we'd like to have him over Sunday."

"A box of flowers has just come up from the station for you, miss," said Watson.

Hetty was very white as she passed into the house. Mrs. Wrاندall resumed her contemplation of the fog-screened sound.

"Shall I fetch you a wrap, ma'am?" asked Watson, hesitating.

"I am coming in, Watson. Open the box of flowers for Miss Castleton. Let there be a fire in the library."

"Yes, Mrs. Wrاندall."

"Mr. Leslie will be out on Saturday. Tell Mrs. Conkling."

"The evening train, ma'am?"

"No. The eleven-thirty. He will be here for luncheon."

When Hetty hurried into the library

a few minutes later, her manner was that of one considerably disturbed by something that has transpired almost on the moment. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were reflectors of a no uncertain distress of mind. Mrs. Wrاندall was standing before the fireplace, an exquisite figure in the stinky black evening gown which she affected in these days. Her perfectly modelled neck and shoulders gleamed like pink marble in the reflected glow of the burning logs. She wore no jewelry, but there was a single white rose in her dark hair, where it had been placed by the whimsical Hetty an hour earlier as they left the dinner table.

"He is coming out on the eleven-thirty, Sara," said the girl nervously, "unless you will send the motor in for him. The body of his car is being changed and it's in the shop. He must have been jesting when he said he would pay for the petrol—I should have said gasoline."

Sara laughed. "You will know him better, my dear," she said. "Leslie is very light-hearted."

"He suggested bringing a friend," went on Hetty hurriedly. "A Mr. Booth, the portrait painter."

"I met him in Italy. He is charming. You will like him, too, Hetty." The emphasis did not escape notice.

"It seems that he is spending a fortnight in the village, this Mr. Booth, painting spring lambs for rest and recreation, Mr. Leslie says."

"Then he is at our very gates," said Sara, looking up suddenly.

"I wonder if he can be the man I saw yesterday at the bridge," mused Hetty. "Is he tall?"

"I really can't say. He's rather vague. It was six or seven years ago."

"It was left that Mr. Wrاندall is to come out on the eleven-thirty," explained Hetty. "I thought you wouldn't like sending either of the motors in."

"And Mr. Booth?"

"We are to send for him after Mr. Wrاندall arrives. He is stopping at the inn, wherever that may be."

"Poor fellow!" sighed Sara, with a grimace. "I am sure he will like us immensely if he has been stopping at the inn."

Hetty stood staring down at the blazing logs for a full minute before

Continued on Page 6



"You Must Play the Game, Hetty."

"we're afraid she'll marry some chap who wouldn't be acceptable to us."

"I should consider that a very neat way out of it," said Booth coldly.

"Not at all. You see, Challis was fond of Sara, in spite of everything. He left a will and under it she came in for all he had. As that includes a third interest in our extremely refined and irreproachable business, it would be a deuce of a trick on us if she married one of the common people and set him up amongst us, willy-nilly. We don't want strange bedfellows. We're too snug—and I might say, too snug. Down in her heart mother is saying to herself it would be just like Sara to get even with us by doing just that sort of a trick. Of course Sara is rich enough without accepting a sou under the will, but she's a canny person. She hasn't handed it back to us on a silver platter, with thanks; still, on the other hand, she refuses to meddle. She makes us feel pretty small. She won't sell out to us. She just sits tight. That's what gets under the skin with mother."

"I wouldn't say that, Les, if I were in your place."

"It is a rather priggish thing to say, isn't it?"

"Rather."

"You see, I'm the only one who really took sides with Sara. I forget myself sometimes. She was such a brick, all those years."

Booth was silent for a moment, noting the reflective look in his companion's eyes.

"I suppose the police haven't given up the hope that sooner or later—the woman will do something to give herself away," said he.

"They don't take any stock in my theory that she made way with herself the same night. I was talking with the chief yesterday. He says that anyone who had wit to cover up her tracks as she did, is not the kind to make way with herself. Perhaps he's right. It sounds reasonable. Gad, I felt sorry for the poor girl they had up last spring. She went through the third degree, if ever anyone did, but, by Jove, she came out of it all right. The Ashley girl, you remember. I've dreamed about that girl, Brandy, and what they put her through. It's a sort of nightmare to me, even when I'm awake. Oh, they've questioned others as well, but she was the only one to have the screws twisted in just that way."

"Where is