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The Hollow of Her Hand

By
**GEORGE BARR
 McCUTCHEON**

Author of "Grasshopper"
 "Trustin' King," etc.

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

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

and then shook her head. "I'd like to be able to wish you good luck."

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

"No," she said seriously. "She doesn't confide in me to that extent, I fear. I've never asked."

"Do you think there was any one back there in England?" He put it in the past tense, so to speak, as if there could be no question about the present.

"Oh, I dare say."

He was regaining his complacency. "That's neither here nor there," he declared. The thing I want you to do, Sara, is to rush this confounded portrait. I don't like the idea, not a little bit."

"I don't blame you for being afraid of the attractive Mr. Booth," she said, with a significant lifting of her eyebrows.

"I'm going to have it over with before I go up to town, my dear girl," he announced, in a matter-of-fact way. "I've given the whole situation a deuce of a lot of thought, and I've made up my mind to do it. I'm not the sort, you know, to delay matters once my mind's made up. By Jove, Sara, you ought to be pleased. I'm not such a rotten catch, if I do say it who shouldn't."

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

"I am pleased," she said, very gently.

She could have shrieked the words. How she hated all these smug Wrandralls!

"I came to the decision yesterday," he went on, tapping the arm of the chair with his finger tips, as if timing his words with care and precision. "Spoke to dad about it at lunch. I was coming out on the five o'clock, as I'd planned, but he seemed to think I'd better talk it over with the mater first. Not that she would be likely to kick up a row, you know, but—well, for policy's sake. See what I mean? Decent thing to do, you know. She never quite got over the way you and

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"If she'll have me," he said with a wink, as if to say there wasn't any use doubting it. "They're tickled to death."

"Vivian?"

"Viv's a snob. She says Hetty's much too good for me, blood and bone. What business, says she, has a Wrandrall aspiring to the descendant of Henry the Eighth!"

"What!"

"The Murgatroyds go back to old Henry, straight as a plummet. 'Gad, what Vivvy doesn't know about British aristocracy isn't worth knowing. She looked it up the time they tried to convince her she ought to marry the duke. But she's fond of Hetty. She says she's a darling. She's right: Hetty is too good for me."

Sara swished her gown about and rose gracefully from the chaise-longue. Extending her hand to him she said, and he was never to forget the deep thrill in her voice:

"Well, I wish you good luck, Leslie. Don't take no for an answer."

"Lord, if she should say no," he gasped, confronted by the possibility of such stupidity on Hetty's part.

"You don't think she will?"

Her answer was a smile of doubt, the effect of which was to destroy his tranquility for hours.

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

He grinned, but it was a sickly effort.

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

"I?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He blinked in astonishment. All of a sudden there swept over him the unique sensation of shyness—most unique in him. He had never been

ashamed before in all his life. Now he was curiously conscious of having overstepped the bounds, and for the first time to be shown his place by a girl. This to him, who had no scruples about boundary lines.

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

"If you hate the train so much, and your automobile is out of whack, why don't you try aeroplane down from the Metropolitan tower?" demanded Booth in response to his lugubrious wail against the benighted luck of having to go about in railway



He blinked in astonishment.

coaches with a lot of red-eyed, nose-blowing people who hadn't got used to their spring underwear yet."

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

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

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

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

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

"I will go," she announced promptly.

Booth frowned. "Better wait a bit," he counseled. "Risky business, Miss Castleton, flying about with fiddlings."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rather ambiguous, that," he remarked dubiously.

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

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

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

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

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

It occurred to him early in the course of this one-sided discussion that the hostess was making no effort to take part in it, whether from lack of interest or because of its frivolous nature he was, of course, unable to determine. Later, he was struck by the curious pallor of her face, and the lack-luster expression of her eyes. She seldom removed her gaze from Wrandrall's face, and yet there persisted in the observer's mind the rather uncanny impression that she did not hear a word her brother-in-law was saying. He, in turn, took to watching her covertly. At no time did her expression change.

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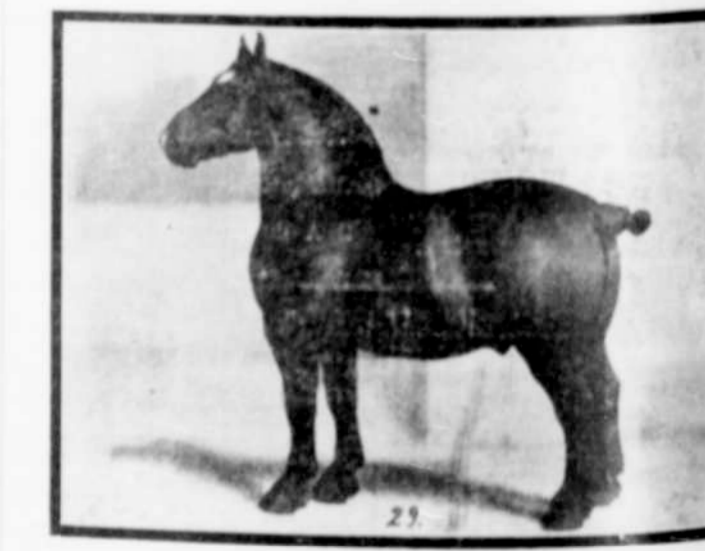
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