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The Hollow of Her Hand

By
GEORGE BARR MCCUTCHEON

Author of "Grazers" and "Trust in King," etc.

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for all the world. You would suffer, you would—"

Sara suddenly put her hands over her eyes. A single moan escaped her lips—a hoarse gasp of pain.

"Dearest!" cried Hetty, springing to her side.

Sara threw her head up and met her with a cold, repelling look.

"Wait!" she commanded. "The time has come when you should know what is in my mind, and has been for months. It concerns you. I expect you to marry Leslie Wrاندall."

Hetty stopped short.

"How can you jest with me, Sara?" she cried, suddenly indignant.

"I am not jesting," said Sara levelly.

"You—you—really mean—what you have just said?" The puzzled look gave way to one of revulsion. A great shudder swept over her.

"Leslie Wrاندall must pay his brother's debt to you."

"My God!" fell from the girl's stiff lips. "You—you must be going mad—mad!"

Sara laughed softly. "I have meant it almost from the beginning," she said. "It came to my mind the day that Challis was buried. It has never been out of it for an instant since that day. Now you understand."

If she expected Hetty to fall into a fit of weeping, to collapse, to plead with her for mercy, she was soon to find herself mistaken. The girl straightened up suddenly and met her gaze with one in which there was the fierce determination. Her eyes were steady, her bosom heaved.

"And I have loved you so devotedly—so blindly," she said, in low tones of scorn. "You have been hating me all these months while I thought you were loving me. What a fool I have been! I might have known. You couldn't love me."

"When Leslie asks you tonight to marry him, you are to say that you will do so," said Sara, betraying no sign of having heard the bitter words.

"I shall refuse, Sara," said Hetty, every vestige of color gone from her face.

"There is an alternative," announced the other deliberately.

"You will expose me to—him? To his family?"

"I shall turn you over to them, to let them do what they will with you. If you go as his wife, the secret is safe. If not, they may have you as you really are, to destroy, to annihilate. Take your choice, my dear."

"And you, Sara?" asked the girl quietly. "What explanation will you have to offer for all these months of protection?"

Her companion stared. "Has the prospect no terror for you?"

"Not now. Not since I have found you out. The thing I have feared all along has come to pass. I am relieved, now that you show me just where I truly stand. But, I asked: what of you?"

"The world is more likely to applaud than to curse me, Hetty. It likes a new sensation. My change of heart will appear quite natural."

"Are you sure that the world will applaud your real design? You hate the Wrاندalls. Will they be charitable toward you when the truth is given out? Will Leslie applaud you? Listen, please: I am trying to save you from yourself, Sara. You will fall in everything you have hoped for. You will be more accursed than I. The world will pity me, it may even forgive me. It will listen to my story, which is more than you will do, and it will believe me. Ah, I am not afraid now. At first I was in terror. I had no hope to escape. All that is past. Today I am ready to take my chances with the big, generous world. Men will try me, and men are not made of stone and steel. They punish but they do not avenge when they sit in jury boxes. They are not women! Good God, Sara, is there a man living today who could have planned this thing you have cherished all these months? Not one! And all men will curse you for it, even though they send me to prison or to the chair. But they will not condemn me. They will hear my story and they will set me free. And then, what of you?"

Sara stood perfectly rigid, regarding this earnest reasoner with growing wonder.

"My dear," she said, "you would better be thinking of yourself, not of me."

"Why, when I tell my story, the world will hate you, Sara Wrاندall. You have helped me, you have been good to me, no matter what sinister motive you may have had in doing so. It is my turn to help you."

"To help me!" cried Sara, astonished in spite of herself.

"Yes. To save you from execration—and even worse."

"There is no moral wrong in marriage with Leslie Wrاندall," said Sara, returning to her own project.

"No moral wrong!" cried Hetty, aghast. "No, I suppose not," she went on, a moment later. "It is something much deeper, much blacker than moral wrong. There is no word for it. And if I marry him, what then? Wherein lies your triumph? You can't mean that—God in heaven! You would not do to them with the truth when it was too late for him to—cast me off!"

"I am no such fool as that. The secret would be forever safe in that event. My triumph, as you call it, we will not discuss."

"How you must hate me, to be willing to do such an infamous thing to me!"

"I do not hate you, Hetty."

"In heaven's name, what do you call it?"

"Justification. Listen to me now. I am saying this for your good sense to seize and appreciate. Would it be right in me to allow you to marry any other man, knowing all that I know? There is but one man you can in justice marry: the one who can repair the

wreck that his own blood created. Not Brandon Booth, nor any man save Leslie Wrاندall. He is the man who must pay."

"I do not intend to marry," said Hetty.

"But Leslie will marry some one, and I intend that it shall be you. He shall marry the ex-chorus girl, the artist's model, the—the prostitute! Wait! Don't fly at me like that! Don't assume that look of virtuous horror! Let me say what I have to say. This much of your story shall they know, and no more. They will be proud of you!"

Hetty's eyes were blazing. "You use that name—you call me that—and yet you have kissed me, caressed me—loved me!" she cried hoarse with passion.

"He will ask you tonight for the second time. You will accept him. That is all."

"You must take back what you have just said to me—Sara Wrاندall. You must unsay it! You must beg my pardon for that!"

"I draw no line between mistress and prostitute."

"But I—"

"Enough!"

"You wrong me vilely! You must let me—"

"I have an excellent memory, and it serves me well."

Hetty suddenly threw herself upon the couch and buried her face in her arms. Great sobs shook her slender frame.

Sara stood over her and watched for a long time with pitiless eyes. Then a queer, uneasy, wondering light began to develop in those dark, ominous eyes. She leaned forward the better to listen to the choked, inarticulate words that were pouring from the girl's lips. At last, moved by some power she could not have accounted for, she knelt beside the quivering body, and laid her hand, almost timidly, upon the girl's shoulder.

"Hetty—Hetty, if I have wronged you in—thinking that of you—I—"

she began brokenly. Then she lifted her eyes, and the harsh light tried to steal back into them. "No, no! What am I saying? What a fool I am to give way—"

"You have wronged me—terribly, terribly!" came in smothered tones from the cushions. "I did not dream you thought that of me."

"What was I to think?"

Hetty lifted her head and cried out: "You would not let me speak! You refused to hear my story. You have been thinking this of me all along, holding it against me, damning me with it, and I have been closer to you than— My God, what manner of woman are you?"

Sara seized her hands and held them in a fierce, tense grip. Her eyes were glowing with a strange fire.

"Tell me—tell me now, on your soul, Hetty were you—were you—"

"No! No! On my soul, no!"

"Look into my eyes!"

The girl's eyes did not falter. She met the dark, penetrating gaze of the other and, though dimmed by tears, her blue eyes were steadfast and resolute. Sara seemed to be searching the very soul of her, the soul that laid itself bare, denuded of every vestige of guile.

"I—I think I believe you," came slowly from the lips of the searcher.

"You are looking the truth. I can see it, Hetty, I—I don't understand myself. It is so—so overwhelming, so tremendous. It is so incredible. Am I really believing you? Is it possible that I have been wrong in—"

"Let me tell you everything," cried the girl, suddenly throwing her arms about her.

"Not now! Wait! Give me time to think. Go away now. I want to be alone." She arose and pushed the girl toward the door. Her eyes were fixed on her in a wondering, puzzled sort of way, and she was shaking her head as if trying to discredit the new emotion that had come to displace the one created ages ago.

Slowly Hetty Castleton retreated toward the door. With her hand on the knob, she paused.

"After what has happened, Sara, you must not expect me to stay with you any longer. I cannot. You may give me up to the law, but—"

Some one was tapping gently at the door.

"Shall I see who it is?" asked the girl, after a long period of silence.

"Yes."

It was Murray. "Mr. Leslie has returned, Miss Castleton, and asks if he may see you at once. He says it is very important."

"Tell him I will be down in a few minutes, Murray."

After the door closed, she waited until the footman's steps died away on the stairs.

"I shall say no to him, Sara, and I shall say to him that you will tell him why I cannot be his wife. Do you understand? Are you listening to me?"

Sara turned away without a word or look of response.

Hetty quietly opened the door and went out.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Second Encounter.

Booth trudged rapidly homeward after leaving Hetty at the lodge. He was throbbing all over with the love of her. The thrill of conquest was in his blood. She had raised a mysterious barrier; all the more zest to the inevitable victory that would be his. He would delight in overcoming obstacles—the bigger the better—for his heart was valiant and the prize no smaller than those which the ancient knights went out to battle for in the lists of love.

It was enough for the present to know that she loved him.

What if she were Hetty Glynn? What if she had been an artist's model? The look he had had into the soul of her through those pure blue eyes was all-conquering. She was worthy of the noblest love.

After luncheon—served with some exasperation by Patrick an hour and a half later than usual—he smoked his pipe on the porch and stared reminiscently at the shifting clouds above the tree tops.

He did not see the Wrاندall motor at his garden gate until a lusty voice brought him down from the clouds into the range of earthly sounds. Then he dashed out to the gate, bareheaded and coatless, forgetting that he had been sitting in the obscurity of trailing vines and purple blossoms the while he thought of her.

Leslie was sitting on the wide seat between his mother and sister.

"Glad to see you back, old man," said Booth, reaching in to shake hands with him. "Day early, aren't you? Good afternoon, Mrs. Wrاندall. Won't you come in?"

He looked at Vivian as he gave the invitation.

"No, thanks," she replied. "Won't you come to dinner this evening?"

He hesitated. "I'm not quite sure whether I can, Vivian. I've got a half-way sort of—"

"Oh, do, old chap," cut in Leslie, more as a command than an entreaty. "Sorry I can't be there myself, but you'll fare quite as well without me. I'm dining at Sara's. Wants my private ear about one thing and another—see what I mean?"

"We shall expect you, Brandon," said Mrs. Wrاندall, fixing him with her lorgnette.

"I'll come, thank you," said he.

He felt disgustingly transparent under that inquisitive glass.

Wrاندall stepped out of the car. "I'll stop off for a chat with Brandy, mother."

"Shall I send the car back, dear?"

"Never mind. I'll walk down."

The two men turned in at the gate as the car sped away.

"Well," said Booth, "it's good to see you, Pat!" He called through a basement window. "Come up and take the gentleman's order."

"No drink for me, Brandy. I've been in the temperance state of Maine for two weeks. One week more of it and I'd have been completely pickled. I shall always remember Maine."

Booth sat down on the porch rail, hooked his toes in the supports and proceeded to fill his pipe. Then he struck a match and applied it, Leslie watching him with moody eyes.

"How do you like the portrait, old man?" he inquired between punctuating puffs.

"It's bully. Sargent never did anything finer. Ripping."

"I owe it all to you, Les."

"To me?"

"You induced her to sit to me."

"So I did," said Leslie sourly. "I was Mr. Fix-it sure enough." He allowed a short interval to elapse before taking the plunge. "I suppose, old chap, if I should happen to need your valuable services as best man in the near future, you'd not disappoint me?"

Booth eyed him quizzically. "I trust you're not throwing yourself away, Les," he said drily. "I mean to say, on some one—well, some one not quite up to the mark."

Leslie regarded him with some severity. "Of course not, old chap. What the devil put that into your head?"

Continued on Page 6

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