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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
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Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
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Burroughs Vatsyayana Crane
Curtis Tocqueville Verne
Homer Tolstoy Gogol Busch
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
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The Hollow of Her Hand

George Barr McCutcheon

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: George Barr McCutcheon
Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany
ISBN: 978-3-8424-6077-5

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CHAPTER I

MARCH COMES IN LIKE THE LION

The train, which had roared through a withering gale of sleet all the way up from New York, came to a standstill, with many an ear-splitting sigh, alongside the little station, and a reluctant porter opened his vestibule door to descend to the snow-swept platform: a solitary passenger had reached the journey's end. The swirl of snow and sleet screaming out of the blackness at the end of the station-building enveloped the porter in an instant, and cut his ears and neck with stinging force as he turned his back against the gale. A pair of lonely, half-obscurd platform lights gleamed fatuously at the top of their icy posts at each end of the station; two or three frost-encrusted windows glowed dully in the side of the building, while one shone brightly where the operator sat waiting for the passing of No. 33.

The train itself was dark. Frosty windows, pelted for miles by the furious gale, white outside but black within, protected the snug travellers who slept the sleep of the hurried and thought not of the storm that beat about their ears nor wondered at the stopping of the fast express at a place where it had never stopped before. Far ahead the panting engine shed from its open fire-box an aureole of glaring red as the stoker fed coal into its rapacious maw. The unblinking head-light threw its rays into the thick of the blinding snow storm, fruitlessly searching for the rails through drifts denser than fog and filled with strange, half-visible shapes.

An order had been issued for the stopping of the fast express at B—, a noteworthy concession in these days of premeditated haste. Not in the previous career of flying 33 had it even so much as slowed down for the insignificant little station, through which it

swooped at midnight the whole year round. Just before pulling out of New York on this eventful night the conductor received a command to stop 33 at B— — and let down a single passenger, a circumstance which meant trouble for every despatcher along the line.

The woman who got down at B— — in the wake of the shivering but deferential porter, and who passed by the conductors without lifting her face, was without hand luggage of any description. She was heavily veiled, and warmly clad in furs. At eleven o'clock that night she had entered the compartment in New York. Throughout the thirty miles or more, she had sat alone and inert beside the snow-clogged window, peering through veil and frost into the night that whizzed past the pane, seeing nothing yet apparently intent on all that stretched beyond. As still, as immobile as death itself she had held herself from the moment of departure to the instant that brought the porter with the word that they were whistling for B— —. Without a word she arose and followed him to the vestibule, where she watched him as he unfastened the outer door and lifted the trap. A single word escaped her lips and he held out his hand to receive the crumpled bill she clutched in her gloved fingers. He did not look at it. He knew that it would amply reward him for the brief exposure he endured on the lonely, wind-swept platform of a station, the name of which he did not know.

She took several uncertain steps in the direction of the station windows and stopped, as if bewildered. Already the engine was pounding the air with quick, vicious snorts in the effort to get under way; the vestibule trap and door closed with a bang; the wheels were creaking. A bitter wind smote her in the face; the wet, hurtling sleet crashed against the thin veil, blinding her.

The door of the waiting-room across the platform opened and a man rushed toward her.

"Mrs. Wrandall?" he called above the roar of the wind.

She advanced quickly.

"Yes."

"What a night!" he said, as much to himself as to her. "I'm sorry you would insist on coming to-night. To-morrow morning would have satisfied the —"

"Is this Mr. Drake?"

They were being blown through the door into the waiting-room as she put the question. Her voice was muffled. The man in the great fur coat put his weight against the door to close it.

"Yes, Mrs. Wrandall. I have done all that could be done under the circumstances. I am sorry to tell you that we still have two miles to go by motor before we reach the inn. My car is open,—I don't possess a limousine,—but if you will lie down in the tonneau you will find some protection from—"

She broke in sharply, impatiently. "Pray do not consider me, Mr. Drake. I am not afraid of the blizzard."

"Then we'd better be off," said he, a note of anxiety in his voice,—a certain touch of nervousness. "I drive my own car. The road is good, but I shall drive cautiously. Ten minutes, perhaps. I—I am sorry you thought best to brave this wretched—"

"I am not sorry for myself, Mr. Drake, but for you. You have been most kind. I did not expect you to meet me."

"I took the liberty of telephoning to you. It was well that I did it early in the evening. The wires are down now, I fear." He hesitated for a moment, staring at her as if trying to penetrate the thick, wet veil. "I may have brought you on a fool's errand. You see, I—I have seen Mr. Wrandall but once, in town somewhere, and I may be wrong. Still, the coroner,—and the sheriff,—seemed to think you should be notified,—I might say questioned. That is why I called you up. I trust, madam, that I am mistaken."

"Yes," she said shrilly, betraying the intensity of her emotion. It was as if she lacked the power to utter more than a single word, which signified neither acquiescence nor approval.

He was ill-at-ease, distressed. "I have engaged a room for you at the inn, Mrs. Wrandall. You did not bring a maid, I see. My wife will come over from our place to stay with you if you—"

She shook her head. "Thank you, Mr. Drake. It will not be necessary. I came alone by choice. I shall return to New York to-night."

"But you—why, you can't do that," he cried, holding back as they started toward the door. "No trains stop here after ten o'clock. The locals begin running at seven in the morning. Besides—"

She interrupted him. "May we not start now, Mr. Drake? I am—well, you must see that I am suffering. I must see, I must know. The suspense—" She did not complete the sentence, but hurried past him to the door, throwing it open and bending her body to the gust that burst in upon them.

He sprang after her, grasping her arm to lead her across the icy platform to the automobile that stood in the lee of the building.

Disdaining his command to enter the tonneau, she stood beside the car and waited until he cranked it and took his place at the wheel. Then she took her seat beside him and permitted him to tuck the great buffalo robe about her. No word was spoken. The man was a stranger to her. She forgot his presence in the car.

Into the thick of the storm the motor chugged. Grim and silent, the man at the wheel, unoggled and tense, sent the whirring thing swiftly over the trackless village street and out upon the open country road. The woman closed her eyes and waited.

You would know the month was March. He said: "It comes in like a lion," but apparently the storm swallowed the words for she made no response to them.

They crossed the valley and crept up the tree-covered hill, where the force of the gale was broken. If she heard him say: "Fierce, wasn't it?" she gave no sign, but sat hunched forward, peering ahead through the snow at the blurred lights that seemed so far away and yet were close at hand.

"Is that the inn?" she asked as he swerved from the road a few moments later.

"Yes, Mrs. Wrandall. We're here."

"Is—is he in there?"

"Where you see that lighted window upstairs." He tooted the horn vigorously as he drew up to the long, low porch. Two men dashed out from the doorway and clumsily assisted her from the car.

"Go right in, Mrs. Wrandall," said Drake. "I join you in a jiffy."

She walked between the two men into the feebly lighted office of the inn. The keeper of the place, a dreary looking person with dread in his eyes, hurried forward. She stopped stock-still. Some one was brushing the stubborn, thickly caked snow from her long chinchilla coat.

"You must let me get you something hot to drink, madam," the landlord was saying dolorously.

She struggled with her veil, finally tearing it away from her face. Then she took in the rather bare, cheerless room with a slow, puzzled sweep of her eyes.

"No, thank you," she replied.

"It won't be any trouble, madam," urged the other. "It's right here. The sheriff says it's all right to serve it, although it is after hours. I run a respectable, law-abiding house. I wouldn't think of offering it to anyone if it was in violation—"

"Never mind, Burton," interposed a big man, approaching. "Let the lady choose for herself. If she wants it, she'll say so. I am the sheriff, madam. This gentleman is the coroner, Dr. Sheef. We waited up for you after Mr. Drake said you'd got the fast train to stop for you. To-morrow morning would have done quite as well. I'm sorry you came to-night in all this blizzard."

He was staring as if fascinated at the white, colourless face of the woman who with nervous fingers unfastened the heavy coat that enveloped her slender figure. She was young and strikingly beautiful, despite the intense pallor that overspread her face. Her dark, questioning, dreading eyes looked up into his with an expression he was never to forget. It combined dread, horror, doubt and a smouldering anger that seemed to overcast all other emotions that lay revealed to him.

"This is a—what is commonly called a 'road-house'?" she asked dully, her eyes narrowing suddenly as if in pain.

The inn-keeper made haste to resent the implied criticism.

"My place is a respectable, law-abiding—"

The sheriff waved him aside.

"It is an inn during the winter, Mrs. Wrاندall, and a road-house in the summer, if that makes it plain to you. I will say, however, that Burton has always kept well within the law. This is the first—er—real bit of trouble he's had, and I won't say it's his fault. Keep quiet, Burton. No one is accusing you of anything wrong. Don't whine about it."

"But my place is ruined," groaned the doleful one. "It's got a black eye now. Not that I blame you, madam, but you can see how—"

He quailed before the steady look in her eyes, and turned away mumbling.

There were half a dozen men in the room, besides the speakers, sober-faced fellows who conversed in undertones and studiously kept their backs to the woman who had just come among them. They were grouped about the roaring fireplace in the lower end of the room. Steam arose from their heavy winter's garments. Their caps were still drawn far down over their ears. These were men who had been out in the night.

"There is a fire in the reception-room, madam," said the coroner; "and the proprietor's wife to look out for you if you should require anything. Will you go in there and compose yourself before going upstairs? Or, if you would prefer waiting until morning, I shall not insist on the—er—ordeal to-night."

"I prefer going up there to-night," said she steadily.

The men looked at each other, and the sheriff spoke. "Mr. Drake is quite confident the—the man is your husband. It's an ugly affair, Mrs. Wrاندall. We had no means of identifying him until Drake came in this evening, out of curiosity you might say. For your sake, I hope he is mistaken."

"Would you mind telling me something about it before I go upstairs?"

I am quite calm. I am prepared for anything. You need not hesitate."

"As you wish, madam. You will go into the reception-room, if you please. Burton, is Mrs. Wrاندall's room quite ready for her?"

"I shall not stay here to-night," interposed Mrs. Wrاندall. "You need not keep the room for me."

"But, my dear Mrs. Wrاندall—"

"I shall wait in the railway station until morning if necessary. But not here."

The coroner led the way to the cosy little room off the office. She followed with the sheriff. The men looked worn and haggard in the bright light that met them, as if they had not known sleep or rest for many hours.

"The assistant district attorney was here until eleven, but went home to get a little rest. It's been a hard case for all of us—a nasty one," explained the sheriff, as he placed a chair in front of the fire for her. She sank into it limply.

"Go on, please," she murmured, and shook her head at the nervous little woman who bustled up and inquired if she could do anything to make her more comfortable.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "Well, it happened last night. All day long we've been trying to find out who he is, and ever since eight o'clock this morning we've been searching for the woman who came here with him. She has disappeared as completely as if swallowed by the earth. Not a sign of a clew—-not a shred. There's nothing to show when she left the inn or by what means. All we know is that the door to that room up there was standing half open when Burton passed by it at seven o'clock this morning—-that is to say, yesterday morning, for this is now Wednesday. It is quite clear, from this, that she neglected to close the door tightly when she came out, probably through haste or fear, and the draft in the hall blew it wider open during the night. Burton says the inn was closed for the night at half-past ten. He went to bed. She must have slipped out after every one was sound asleep. There were no other guests on that floor. Burton and his wife sleep on this floor, and the servants are at the top of the house and in a wing. No one heard a sound. We have not the remotest idea when the thing happened, or when she left the place. Dr. Sheef says the man had been dead for six or eight hours when he first saw him, and that was very soon after Burton's

discovery. Burton, on finding the door open, naturally suspected that his guests had skipped out during the night to avoid paying the bill, and lost no time in entering the room.

"He found the man lying on the bed, sprawled out, face upward and as dead as a mack—I should say, quite dead. He was partly dressed. His coat and vest hung over the back of a chair. A small service carving knife, belonging to the inn, had been driven squarely into his heart and was found sticking there. Burton says that the man, on their arrival at the inn, about nine o'clock at night, ordered supper sent up to the room. The tray of dishes, with most of the food untouched, and an empty champagne bottle, was found on the service table near the bed. One of the chairs was overturned. The servant who took the meal to the room says that the woman was sitting at the window with her wraps on, motor veil and all, just as she was when she came into the place. The man gave all the directions, the woman apparently paying no attention to what was going on. The waitress left the room without seeing her face. She had instructions not to come for the tray until morning.

"That was the last time the man was seen alive. No one has seen the woman since the door closed after the servant, who distinctly remembers hearing the key turn in the lock as she went down the hall. It seems pretty clear that the man ate and drank but not the woman. Her food remained untouched on the plate and her glass was full. 'Gad, it must have been a merry feast! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Wrandall!"

"Go on, please," said she levelly.

"That's all there is to say so far as the actual crime is concerned. There were signs of a struggle,—but it isn't necessary to go into that. Now, as to their arrival at the inn. The blizzard had not set in. Last night was dark, of course, as there is no moon, but it was clear and rather warm for the time of year. The couple came here about nine o'clock in a high power runabout machine, which the man drove. They had no hand-baggage and apparently had run out from New York. Burton says he was on the point of refusing them accommodations when the man handed him a hundred dollar bill. It was more than Burton's cupidity could withstand. They did not register. The state license numbers had been removed from the automobile,

which was of foreign make. Of course, it was only a question of time until we could have found out who the car belonged to. It is perfectly obvious why he removed the numbers."

At this juncture Drake entered the room. Mrs. Wrandall did not at first recognise him.

"It has stopped snowing," announced the new-comer.

"Oh, it is Mr. Drake," she murmured. "We have a little French car, painted red," she announced to the sheriff without giving Drake another thought.

"And this one is red, madam," said the sheriff, with a glance at the coroner. Drake nodded his head. Mrs. Wrandall's body stiffened perceptibly, as if deflecting a blow. "It is still standing in the garage, where he left it on his arrival."

"Did no one see the face of—of the woman?" asked Mrs. Wrandall, rather querulously. "It seems odd that no one should have seen her face," she went on without waiting for an answer.

"It's not strange, madam, when you consider ALL the circumstances. She was very careful not to remove her veil or her coat until the door was locked. That proves that she was not the sort of woman we usually find gallivanting around with men regardless of—ahem, I beg your pardon. This must be very distressing to you."

"I am not sure, Mr. Sheriff, that it IS my husband who lies up there. Please remember that," she said steadily. "It is easier to hear the details now, before I KNOW, than it will be afterward if it should turn out to be as Mr. Drake declares."

"I see," said the sheriff, marvelling.

"Besides, Mr. Drake is not POSITIVE," put in the coroner hopefully.

"I am reasonably certain," said Drake.

"Then all the more reason why I should have the story first," said she, with a shiver that no one failed to observe.

The sheriff resumed his conclusions. "Women of the kind I referred to a moment ago don't care whether they're seen or not. In fact, they're rather brazen about it. But this one was different. She

was as far from that as it was possible for her to be. We haven't been able to find any one who saw her face or who can give the least idea as to what she looks like, excepting a general description of her figure, her carriage, and the out-door garments she wore. We have reason to believe she was young. She was modestly dressed. Her coat was one of those heavy ulster affairs, such as a woman uses in motoring or on a sea-voyage. There was a small sable stole about her neck. The skirt was short, and she wore high black shoes of the thick walking type. Judging from Burton's description she must have been about your size and figure, Mrs. Wrandall. Isn't that so, Mrs. Burton?"

The inn-keeper's wife spoke. "Yes, Mr. Harben, I'd say so myself. About five feet six, I'd judge; rather slim and graceful-like, in spite of the big coat."

Mrs. Wrandall was watching the woman's face. "I am five feet six," she said, as if answering a question.

The sheriff cleared his throat somewhat needlessly.

"Burton says she acted as if she were a lady," he went on. "Not the kind that usually comes out here on such expeditions, he admits. She did not speak to any one, except once in very low tones to the man she was with, and then she was standing by the fireplace out in the main office, quite a distance from the desk. She went upstairs alone, and he gave some orders to Burton before following her. That was the last time Burton saw her. The waitress went up with a specially prepared supper about half an hour later."

"It seems quite clear, Mrs. Wrandall, that she robbed the man after stabbing him," said the coroner.

Mrs. Wrandall started. "Then she was NOT a lady, after all," she said quickly. There was a note of relief in her voice. It was as if she had put aside a half-formed conclusion.

"His pockets were empty. Not a penny had been left. Watch, cuff-links, scarf pin, cigarette case, purse and bill folder,—all gone. Burton had seen most of these articles in the office."

"Isn't it—but no! Why should I be the one to offer a suggestion that might be construed as a defence for this woman?"

"You were about to suggest, madam, that some one else might have taken the valuables — is that it?" cried the sheriff.

"Had you thought of it, Mr. Sheriff?"

"I had not. It isn't reasonable. No one about this place is suspected. We have thought of this, however: the murderess may have taken all of these things away with her in order to prevent immediate identification of her victim. She may have been clever enough for that. It would give her a start."

"Not an unreasonable conclusion, when you stop to consider, Mr. Sheriff, that the man took the initiative in that very particular," said Mrs. Wrandall in such a self-contained way that the three men looked at her in wonder. Then she came abruptly to her feet. "It is very late, gentlemen. I am ready to go upstairs, Mr. Sheriff."

"I must warn you, madam, that Mr. Drake is reasonably certain that it is your husband," said the coroner uncomfortably. "You may not be prepared for the shock that —"

"I shall not faint, Dr. Sheef. If it IS my husband I shall ask you to leave me alone in the room with him for a little while." The final word trailed out into a long, tremulous wail, showing how near she was to the breaking point in her wonderful effort at self-control. The men looked away hastily. They heard her draw two or three deep, quavering breaths; they could almost feel the tension that she was exercising over herself.

The doctor turned after a moment and spoke very gently, but with professional firmness. "You must not think of venturing out in this wretched night, madam. It would be the worst kind of folly. Surely you will be guided by me — by your own common sense. Mrs. Burton will be with you —"

"Thank you, Dr. Sheef," she interposed calmly. "If what we all fear should turn out to be the truth, I could not stay here. I could not breathe. I could not live. If, on the other hand, Mr. Drake is mistaken, I shall stay. But if it is my husband, I cannot remain under the same roof with him, even though he be dead. I do not expect you to understand my feelings. It would be asking too much of men, — too much."

"I think I understand," murmured Drake.

"Come," said the sheriff, arousing himself with an effort.

She moved swiftly after him. Drake and the coroner, following close behind with Mrs. Burton, could not take their eyes from the slender, graceful figure. She was a revelation to them. Feeling as they did that she was about to be confronted by the most appalling crisis imaginable, they could not but marvel at her composure. Drake's mind dwelt on the stories of the guillotine and the heroines who went up to it in those bloody days without so much as a quiver of dread. Somehow, to him, this woman was a heroine.

They passed into the hall and mounted the stairs. At the far end of the corridor, a man was seated in front of a closed door. He arose as the party approached. The sheriff signed for him to open the door he guarded. As he did so, a chilly blast of air blew upon the faces of those in the hall. The curtains in the window of the room were flapping and whipping in the wind. Mrs. Wrandall caught her breath. For the briefest instant, it seemed as though she was on the point of faltering. She dropped farther behind the sheriff, her limbs suddenly stiff, her hand going out to the wall as if for support. The next moment she was moving forward resolutely into the icy, dimly lighted room.

A single electric light gleamed in the corner beside the bureau. Near the window stood the bed. She went swiftly toward it, her eyes fastened upon the ridge that ran through the centre of it: a still, white ridge that seemed without beginning or end.

With nervous fingers, the attendant lifted the sheet at the head of the bed and turned it back. As he let it fall across the chest of the dead man, he drew back and turned his face away.

She bent forward and then straightened her figure to its full height, without for an instant removing her gaze from the face of the man who lay before her: a dark-haired man grey in death, who must have been beautiful to look upon in the flush of life.

For a long time she stood there looking, as motionless as the object on which she gazed. Behind her were the tense, keen-eyed men, not one of whom seemed to breathe during the grim minutes that passed. The wind howled about the corners of the inn, but no one

heard it. They heard the beating of their hearts, even the ticking of their watches, but not the wail of the wind.

At last her hands, claw-like in their tenseness, went slowly to her temples. Her head drooped slightly forward, and a great shudder ran through her body. The coroner started forward, expecting her to collapse.

"Please go away," she was saying in an absolutely emotionless voice.

"Let me stay here alone for a little while."

That was all. The men relaxed. They looked at each other with a single question in their eyes. Was it quite safe to leave her alone with her dead? They hesitated.

She turned on them suddenly, spreading her arms in a wide gesture of self-absolution. Her sombre eyes swept the group.

"I can do no harm. This man is mine. I want to look at him for the last time—alone. Will you go?"

"Do you mean, madam, that you intend to—" began the coroner in alarm.

She clasped her hands. "I mean that I shall take my last look at him now—and here. Then you may do what you like with him. He is your dead—not mine. I do not want him. Can you understand? *I DO NOT WANT THIS DEAD THING.* But there is something I would say to him, something that I must say. Something that no one must hear but the good God who knows how much he has hurt me. I want to say it close to those grey, horrid ears. Who knows? He may hear me!"

Wondering, the others backed from the room. She watched them until they closed the door.

Listening, they heard her lower the window. It squealed like a thing in fear.

Ten minutes passed. The group in the hall conversed in whispers.

"Why did she put the window down?" asked the wife of the inn-keeper, crossing herself.

Drake shook his head. "I wonder what she is saying to him," he muttered.

"A wonderful nerve," said Dr. Sheef. "Positively wonderful. I've never seen anything like it."

"Her own husband, too," said Mrs. Burton. "Why, I—I should have said she'd go into hysterics. Such a handsome man he was."

"I guess, from what I've heard of this fellow, Wrandall, he's not been an angel," volunteered the sheriff.

Drake shook his head once more.

"He ain't one now, I'll bet on that," said the man who stood guard. "He's in hell if ever a man—"

"Sh!" whispered the woman in horror. "God forgive you for uttering words like that!"

"Every one in the city knows what sort of a man he's been," said Drake.

He comes of a fine family," said the coroner. "One of the best in New York. I guess he's never been much of a credit to it, however."

"They say he ran after chorus girls," said Mrs. Burton. The men grinned.

"I've an idea she's had the devil's own time with him," mused the sheriff, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the door.

"Poor thing," said the inn-keeper's wife.

"Well," said Drake, taking a deep breath, "she won't have to worry any more about his not coming home nights. I say, this business will create a fearful sensation, sheriff. The Four Hundred will have a conniption fit."

"We've got to land that girl, whoever she is," grated the official. "Now that we know who he is, it shouldn't be hard to pick out the women he's been trailing with lately. Then we can sift 'em down until the right one is left. It ought to be easy."