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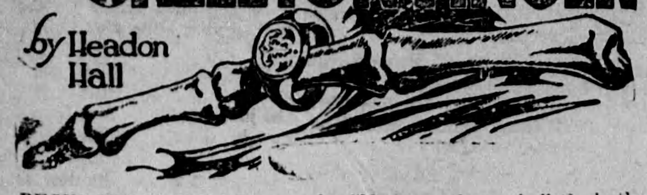
The SKELETON FINGER

by Headon Hall



BEGIN HERE TODAY.

Norman Slater, in love with Kathleen Glenister, searches for her on a motorcycle after she had been tricked to visit a lonely spot by—

Sir Dudley, who wishes to marry her to allay suspicion that he is the murderer of her brother, James Glenister. Slater is made prisoner by Sir Dudley's agent, when—

James Wragge, detective, assigned to the case, begins a search for the two young lovers.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WHISPERING GALLERY.

Inspector Wragge followed the old butler through the green baize door on the tip-toe of expectation. Here at last was a man who for years had lived at the very heart of the happenings which led up to the Beechwood mystery and who seemed to want to tell him things. The pantry proved to be a cosy and secluded den, far removed from the clatter of the kitchen, and evidently a sanctum into which minor satellites of the household would not dare to intrude.

Hinkley produced a bottle of port and with trembling fingers filled two glasses.

"I'm all shaken up, sir," he said. "I heard you tell the master that Miss Kathleen and Captain Slater have eloped—but it can't be true. There was no need for them to run away together. Both of age and Lady Marrables set on the match. There's something behind it all."

Wragge felt that it would be good policy to give confidence for confidence. "I agree with you," he said. "I don't mind telling you that for the moment I am more concerned with Miss Kathleen Glenister's safety than with tracking her brother's murderer. What exactly do you apprehend has befallen her, Mr. Hinkley?"

"God knows," was the reply. "I don't trust the master since our young lady turned against him over that ghastly finger, sweet as he used to be on her. He was away all yesterday till late at night, and he went out again after breakfast this morning. He had only just come in when you called."

"See here, Mr. Hinkley, all this is very serious," the inspector said in his most seductive tone. "And the gravity has been increased by the arrival of the lady you admitted as I was leaving the library. I have reason to believe that she is culpably implicated in the case."

"No error there, sir," the butler rejoined with quavering heartiness. "Mrs. Coninsgby wants to be Lady Glenister—you can lay to that. It would suit her to rights for the girl the master hankered after to meet with foul play."

"You are a colleague to be proud of," Wragge pursued his advantage. "You won't raise any objection if I creep back into the entrance hall and use my eyes at the library door?"

The butler's face lit up with senile glee. "I can do you better than that," he said. "I'll take you up to the whispering gallery. You can hear every word spoken in the library and see what's going on through the Judas-hole. The place was fixed up by the monks hundreds of years ago when this house was a priory. I never told Sir Dudley about it.

Wragge finished his wine and stood up. "Take me there at once," he said.

"If we meet any of the maids you are a plumber," enjoined Hinkley.

But they met no maids as with all due caution they mounted a back staircase, traversed several corridors and so came to a spare bedroom on the front landing. Here the butler did something to the carved mantel-piece

"I will denounce you to Scotland Yard."

and Wragge found himself passing through a suddenly disclosed aperture in the wall to a narrow space that smelt of all the ages.

"There is the Judas-hole," said Hinkley, pointing to a pin-prick of light in the darkness of the secret gallery. "I will wait in the bedroom, but I must shut you in or you won't hear anything. Tap when you want to come out."

The panel slid back into place and Wragge at once heard voices in heated altercation.

"I don't believe you," the woman was saying. "You've got the girl somewhere and you are trying to force her to marry you. I warn you here and now Dudley, that I won't stand it. You have got to marry me or take the consequences."

Wragge's eye was glued to the Judas-hole by now. The scene below in the library was as clear as if viewed from a stage box, yet he was peering through a perforation in the wall so small that it might have been the puncture of a needle.

"The consequences?" sneered the master of Beechwood. "What consequences can you threaten me with, my dear Ivy?"

She raised one of her clenched fists. "I will denounce you to Scotland Yard," she replied in low, tense tones. "I will repeat to the police the revelations of my brother's diary, showing how you faked the details of George Glenister's death. Simon Trickey shall come back from the grave to accuse you."

Sir Dudley's laugh rang out unafraid. "If Simon is dug up he will make it a good deal hotter for you than for me," he retorted. "You are hardly in a position to throw stones from your poor little glass house, Ivy. Your disclosure to me aout that dose of poison would interest Scotland Yard far more than your unconfirmed recollections of Simon's diary."

For a moment the woman seemed to be nonplussed by the baronet's counterstroke.

"I don't care," she broke out again. "I'd go to the gallows gladly, if you were to hang, too. And Simon's diary will work that all right."

"But you haven't got Simon's diary—at least so you say," Sir Dudley returned. "Look here, Ivy, why can't we run this on business lines? We are both tarred with the same brush, and the tar is thicker on you than on me. Let's call it a deal. I don't believe you were fool enough to burn Simon's record, which would be your only real hold on me. I will give you ten thousand pounds for it."

"You brute—to suppose I want your money," her anger rang out. "You have got to accept my terms or I give you away."

Sir Dudley shrugged and, walking to the table, poured himself a stiff drink.

"If that is your ultimatum, here's mine," he said calmly. "As soon as you start giving me away I shall lay an information against you for doing Simon in."

Wragge's complacent thought that the information was as good as laid already was interrupted by a movement flashed on his vision from a quarter apart from the principal actors in the scene below. It took place outside one of the French windows of the library, and as it focussed through the monkish spy-hole on the retina of the detective's eye it gave him the surprise of his life. The whole pile of evidence built up during the last ten minutes fell with a crash.

For standing outside the window, his fishy eyes staring through the plate glass into the lirary, was Mr. Simon Tricky. He didn't look as if he had been buried very deep, unless it was in the recesses of a saloon bar. His nose was perhaps a little more inflamed, and his check suit hung a little looser than when Wragge had seen him last. But there was no doubt that he was very much alive, and deeply interested in the couple in the library.

Wragge concentrated all his attention on immediate developments. Did the reprobate intend to reveal his presence, and if not what were the chances that he would be able to retreat without being seen? Mrs. Conings by had her back to the window and unless she turned round the apparition there would remain unnoticed by her so long as it preserved silence. But Sir Dudley had only to raise his eyes from the woman confronting him and he could hardly fail to perceive the malign countenance of his former clerk.

This was exactly what happened. In setting down his empty glass the baronet had to turn slightly to the window, and the detective, watching him like a cat, saw by the gleam of surprised horror that he had recognized Trickey. Wragge could scarcely contain himself. Would Sir Dudley rush forward, fling open the window and demand explanations from the dissolute blackmailer who had so mysteriously risen from the dead, or would he conceal his discovery from the woman who had somehow failed to administer a fatal dose to the man outside?

Five seconds later, by the masterly manner in which he adopted the latter course, Sir Dudley had earned a grudging meed of admiration from the detective. With perfect composure he addressed the lady in the only way possible if he was not to loosen his hold on her by revealing her failure.

"Well," he said. "Are you going to face the music, Ivy?"

* * * *

"The shortest way down to the garden, Mr. Hinkley!" Wragge egged. "There is not a moment to spare."

The butler gave some brief directions and a minute later Wragge emerged from the gunroom door by which Norman and Kathleen had left the mansion on a certain memorable night. A few steps brought him round the angle of the house and so into view of his quarry. Mr. Simon Trickey was still hovering near the library window, having only withdrawn far enough to be invisible from the interior.

(To be continued.)

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British Spelling Note.

(From the London Humorist).

The name of an Argyllshire estate is Achagiachgach. Fortunately, however, it is pronounced exactly as it is spelt.

Minard's Liniment kills warts.

Engaged Sister: "When we are married, dear, we must have a hyphenated name—it's so much smarter. What would go well with Eaton?" Her Small Brother: "Moth!"

Lobsters That Wear Odd Colors

Lobsters alive and in their native element are a dark green, which turns to a brilliant red when they are boiled; but there are exceptions, and sometimes a lobster fresh from the salt water wil be some other color than green.

Near Amherst, N.S., a pure white or albino lobster was taken once and sent to a Portland (Me.) wholesale lobster dealer, who for many years exhibited it preserved in alcohol. Near Mohegan Island a lobsterman took from a trap a thirteen-inch lobster which was a rich indigo along the top of the body shell and tail, the indigo shading off on the sides of the carapace into blues of a clear, lighter tint.

At Peaks Island a specimen was captured whose back and tail were a bright indigo blue, while the under parts shaded off into an almost pure white. At Beal's Island a jet-black lobster was caught a few years ago, and near Vinalhaven this Winter a cream-colored one was found.

Bright red lobsters, looking precisely as if they had been boiled, while infrequentt, have been hauled up at several points along the Maine coast. A few weeks ago a Nova Scotia lobster in a consignment for Boston attracted attention because its body shell was in alternatet stripes of green and yellowish whitet or ivory tint, almost as if it had been painted.

Keep Minard's in the Medicine Chest.

A housewife objected to being awakened at dawn by the crowing of a neighbor's chickens. Some people would have threatened Police Court. The housewife wrote a courteous note to her neighbor. A few days later the neighbor's maid appeared with a nicely dressed chicken on a platter. A note attached said: "We think this is the rooster that has been causing all the trouble." Courtesy wins every time.

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