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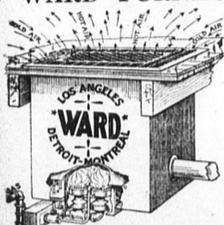
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The SKELETON FINGER

by Headdon Hall



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BEGIN HERE TODAY

SIR DUDLEY GLENISTER, laboring under the suspicion of murder of his cousin, George Glenister, is overjoyed when he is informed by—

MRS. SIMON TRICKEY that her husband had died suddenly, but the joy was short-lived, for Mrs. Trickey told him of a diary her husband left which contained some information about the late George Glenister. However, a MRS. CONINGSBY, sister of Simon Trickey, had stolen the diary to protect her lover, Sir Dudley, and it had by mischance fallen into the hands of James Wragge, a detective.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Then he went on to tell her the story of Simon Trickey—and how Trickey's widow demanded the continuance of the annuity. "She swears that someone has stolen the diary, but that she remembers

enough of it to make things hot for me if I don't shell out," Sir Dudley finished. "I told her that if she couldn't produce the diary she hadn't a leg to stand on, but— I don't like it, Ivy."

Mrs. Coningsby rose from the sofa, took a cigarette from a silver box on the table, lighted it, and resumed her seat.

"Mrs. Trickey can't do you any harm without the diary," she said. "Mrs. Trickey's exclamation, 'Dudley, I never mentioned the name. How the devil do you come by it?'"

"Sit down and don't be melodramatic," Mrs. Coningsby adjured him. "Mrs. Trickey is my sister-in-law. Your clerk, Simon Trickey, was my brother."

"Good God! You never told me." "Was it likely? It was hard work enough to start socially as Ivy Beadesert of the chorus without labeling myself as his sister. I knew all about that diary and that it would fly into the sky if it ever came to light. I also knew where Simon kept it."

"Then it was you who pinched the thing?" "Not so fast," Mrs. Coningsby checked him. "You may as well have it all while we are about it. The diary wasn't your greatest danger so long as Simon was alive. He could probably have repeated every word of it. The diary would only become a direct menace to you when it became the sole menace, so I had a double task, you see, Dudley."

"I am afraid I don't," rejoined her hearer. "You must be pretty dense, then," Mrs. Coningsby laughed mirthlessly. "First I had to kill my brother and then steal the diary. I did both. How you say for a woman's service to the man she loves?"

Sir Dudley Glenister leaned back in his chair, took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"Where is the diary?" he asked hoarsely.

"Mrs. Coningsby put down the stub of her cigarette in the ash-tray at her elbow and very deliberately lit another.

"Gone beyond recall," she replied. "I burned it."

"Come, Dudley! Ain't you going to fling me a word of praise for what I've done?"

Sir Dudley rose heavily from his chair and glanced at the door.

"Thanks are cheap," he replied gloomily.

CHAPTER XVII

The Voice on the Phone
THIS is the note that reached Kathleen Glenister one bright morning:

"If Miss K. Glenister desires evidence to convict her brother's murderer, let her come alone on Thursday next, 3 p. m., to the Bull Hotel, Beaconsfield. In the coffee room will be a gentleman who will inform her how to proceed. Miss Glenister is advised to conceal this appointment from everyone but Captain Norman Slater, in whose favor an exception may be made. Any attempt to involve the assistance of the police will have especially disastrous consequences on the object Miss Glenister has in view.

"The informant will make himself known by greeting Miss Glenister as an acquaintance, though probably she will not recognize him. He will wear in his button-hole a pink and white carnation with a sprig of maidenhair fern."

Norman Slater carefully read and

reread the letter and handed it back to his sweetheart.

"Seems promising," he said a little doubtfully. "I don't like your having to go alone, though. Why this fear of the police?"

"I can understand that," Kathleen laughed bitterly. "The writer must be aware that a hopeless duffer Wragge is—the officer who is conducting the case officially."

"Well," said Norman, in parting, "you will phone or wire me the result of your interview at the Three Pips Club. I shall be there all afternoon."

He was. He lunched there, and instructed the hall porter that he expected to be called up and would be found in the smoking room when he was wanted.

Four o'clock came without any call for him, and Norman began to be seriously alarmed.

Two hours more passed, and when Tommy, the headwaiter, came to carry him off to the billiard room for a game of snooker he yielded because he thought it might deaden the suspense that was laying such a cold hand on his head. But in twenty minutes he flushed the cue and the pleading headache deferred out into the hall again. As he entered it a hurrying page ran into him.

"Sorry, sir," said the boy. "I was coming to fetch you. You're wanted on the telephone."

Norman plunged into the booth and seized the receiver.

"Is that you, Kathleen?" "Oh, for God's sake, yes!" came the agonized reply. "He's got me, Norman. Follow to 'The Bull' and pick up clues there, but don't call in the police. I am to be killed at once if the least sign of pursuit. I—oh, you cruel brute!"

The utterance died away in a strangled sob and over the wire came the sound of a short, sharp struggle. Then all was still. Norman called and called again, but the silence was as if he were against it. Norman felt strangely braced. His task lay clear before him, and that was better than loafing about in a state of impotent funk. Leaving the club, he went round to his rooms and summoned his servant, Alf Grimstead.

"I want you to go out and hire me a motorcycle, Alf," said Norman. "See that it is in good order, and be as quick as you can."

While his man was gone he changed into suitable clothes, and reviewed the nightmare of his past just gone through. He completed his toilet for the road by slipping an automatic pistol into the side pocket of his Norfolk jacket.

Grimstead was back with a reliable motorcycle as soon as he had finished dressing, and the trusty fellow brought news as well.

"A bloke shadowed me to the garage and back, sir," he reported. "Now come down to the street and tip me off if that shadow is still lurking about," said Norman.

"He may have returned."

But there was no sign of the sleuth when Norman mounted the motorcycle and went roaring up the quiet West End thoroughfare.

Gerard's Cross, with its modern colony of smart villas, was next left behind, and in turn the gates of Bulstrode and of Hal Farm were flung to the rear by the maddening motorcycle engine. Just sixty minutes from Jermyn Street Norman ran into the broad High Street of Beaconsfield and stopped at his goal.

The Bull was one of the old-fashioned country inns which with the advent of railways fell upon evil days, to awaken after a long interval into a new lease of prosperity under the benign auspices of King Petrol. But on this winter night there was no sound in the dimly lighted entrance hall when Norman entered but the ticking of a grandfather clock and a hum of distant talk from the public bar somewhere at the back.

On one side was a half-closed door labeled "Coffee Room." The

white-draped tables were all unoccupied.

"Waiter!" Norman called sharply. An old man rose with a start in a distant corner and shuffled forward, rubbing his blue-veined hands deprecatingly.

"Sorry, sir," he wheezed. "I was having a bit of a nap. You wish for dinner, or just a chop or something?"

"No, I don't," Norman replied. "I want to inquire about a lady who was to meet a gentleman here at 3 o'clock today. You probably know her—Miss Glenister, who used to live at Beechwood Grange."

The waiter shook his head. "I haven't been here long," he explained. "There were a lot of motor folks in for luncheon, sir. I didn't have much time to notice. I think I remember a young lady, though she had no truck with anybody, so far as I know. She sat at that table by the window and had a plate of cold chicken. She stayed long after she'd finished and—yes, now I mind she once went out to the front door and came back again."

"Did she stay long after she went out and came back?" Norman asked.

"Not more than five minutes, sir. She paid her bill, tipped me handsomely, and went off. I happened to be looking out of the window, and she turned to the right when she left the hotel."

"That is the way to the railway station?"

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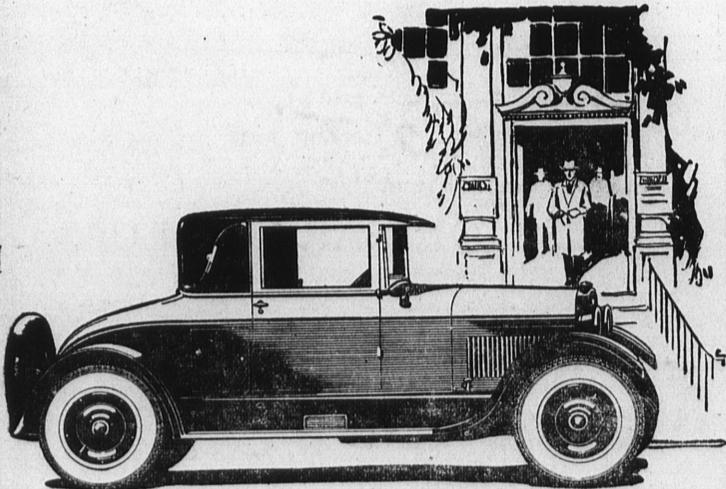
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