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The SKELETON FINGER

by Headon Hall



BEGIN HERE TODAY
SIR DUDLEY GLENISTER, baronet, believed to be the murderer of his cousin, George Glenister, to obtain the estate and title, makes prisoners of—
KATHLEEN GLENISTER, sister of the dead man, and her lover, Norman Slater. He visits Slater in the old mill, and tells him that the building is to be burned unless Kathleen promises to marry him, but—

INSPECTOR WRAGGE of Scotland Yard, working on the murder case, meets Stephen Colne, who for unexplained reasons wants Sir Dudley arrested immediately.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
I have tried to get the information from Miss Glenister, sir," he replied bitterly, "but bad luck dogged me again. The young lady had disappeared under mysterious circumstances which on the surface point to her having eloped with Captain Norman Slater."
The inspector's revelation had an extraordinary effect on Mr. Colne—far greater than the failure of this source of information would account for.

"So Miss Kathleen is missing?" he purred softly. "If I could show you where to find her, Wragge, and prove to you that she had been put out of the way by Sir Dudley Glenister in order to stifle the evidence you want from her, you wouldn't have any qualms about arresting him, ah?"
Wragge conceded gravely.

"Come with me then," said Mr. Colne, "and I will remove the last shred of doubt as to the scoundrel's guilt. What you have told me about Miss Glenister probably explains something that has been plucking my curiosity. You can manage a two-mile walk?"
"Try me," replied Wragge grimly. "But pardon a suggestion, sir. If I am correct in guessing that you

have reason to believe that Miss Glenister is being forcibly detained, ought we not to take assistance? With all respect, you and I couldn't put up much of a scrap if the young lady is strongly guarded. Hadn't I better ring up the county police and have a couple of constables sent on?"

"By no means," was the rejoinder. "A pretty fool I should look if by any means I have made a mistake. Our present expedition is by way of being only a reconnaissance. Then if things turn out as I expect, we can procure help and return in force to the rescue."

"And, incidentally, to put a rope round the neck of Mr. George Glenister's murderer," remarked Wragge with gusto.

"That of course," said Mr. Colne. After his exciting interview with Mrs. Coningsby, as witnessed and overheard by Wragge from the Whispering Gallery, Sir Dudley found the time drag heavily. It is true there was a brief interlude of acrobacy, managing director of "The Amphibian Film Syndicate," starring "Miss Maud Blair," rang him up from London and begged permission to film the old mill. So magnificent was the impudence of the request that the baronet's somber mood yielded to the humor of it and he allowed himself to be amused.

CHAPTER XXIV
What the Butler Knew

MR. FABIAN WOMMERSLEY'S cars, passing through the peaceful countryside on the business of the Amphibian Film Syndicate, observed no speed limits. Among the passengers was Alf Grimstead, Captain Slater's man, who had been picked up half-conscious on the road after an accident had befallen his motorcycle. So fast did they travel that Grimstead had hardly taken his seat in the big limousine when the pretty Samaritan to him so graciously blew through the speaking-tube and bade the chauffeur halt.

"Got there, Maudie?" piped Mr. Wommersley from the recesses of his fur coat. "What a damned road to the clearing in the woods where the film was to be 'registered.' They would have to walk, and the electricians and camera men would have to carry the implements of their respective trades."

Alf Grimstead listened with all his ears—ears that had been frost-bitten in Flanders.

"If that's what you're going to do, miss," he said, "I'd better nip on in front of the rest of the blooming show and get busy. I've got to start that fire for you and I expect the boss will be waiting for me according to arrangement. There's more than the scraping of a match to putting an old mill into a proper blaze. It requires scientific preparation."

Mr. Wommersley was delighted with the zeal of the incendiary expert whom they had retrieved from the wreck of his motorcycle and who, having been engaged direct by Sir Dudley Glenister, would cost the syndicate nothing.

"This lad's a bit of all right, ain't he, Maudie?" said the showman. "Just set his feet on the narrow way that leads to the destruction of the mill while I put these Johnnies wise to their duties."

Alf promised all due caution, and, climbing the stile, he started on his tramp through the wood. As he stepped out he pondered the curious injunction just given him. He thoroughly acquitted the filmmakers of any evil designs. If their presence had any bearing on his quest for his master, he was convinced that they were only dupes. But he had a shrewd suspicion that Sir Dudley was the sinister figure behind the mystery, and it might be that if the baronet had not confided in the keeper it was for reasons which would constitute the latter a valuable ally.

Groping his way along the bramble-girt path, he suddenly became aware of shambling footsteps coming to meet him to the tune of heart-rending groans. A moment later he came into violent contact with something large and soft and the last of the groans died away in a muffled scream. With a diabolical presence of mind Alf had a match alight in a jiffy and saw that he had collided with a pallid-faced old man in a swallow-tailed dress coat.

The apparition waved its hands feebly, and then the match went out. Out of the darkness came the plaintive cry: "For God's sake don't stop me. There's bloody murder going to be done yonder. I am running for the constable."

Alf lit another match and took a longer survey of the frightened fugitive. "Look here," he said, with swift intuition recognizing that there was no villain, "just cough up your trouble. I reckon we may be on the same lay. I'm searching for my master, Captain Norman Slater, late of the Rifle Brigade, and one of the best. Who might you be and where's the bloody murder? It might save time if you told me I'm as good at a scrap as a country bobby any day or night."

"I am Hinkley, the butler at the Grange," was the eager reply. And in a flood of tremulous words the terrible tale came tumbling out. How he had learned from a Scotland Yard detective

that Miss Glenister and Captain Slater had disappeared and how in consequence of Sir Dudley's strange behavior he had suspected him of foul play toward them. The suspicion had increased when Sir Dudley had arranged to be out that evening on the pretext of having to meet some cinema actors in the keeper's clearing, and it had become unbearable on Sir Dudley's angrily refusing him permission to witness the performance. The preposterous idea of staging a film in the middle of the Beechwood covert, he was assured, some sinister design.

"He's got them prisoners in the disused water mill," quavered the butler. "It was dark when I reached the cursed place, but there was light enough to see Miss Kathleen sitting at an upper window. I had speech with her and she told me that she and the captain had been there since yesterday—her above and him below. That devil is coming tonight to burn the mill and them in it if she won't consent to marry him, and he is going to flop the captain and he is going to flop the captain first. The bargain he tried to drive with her was that he would spare her life and the captain his flogging if she would give in, but the captain would have to burn anyone at the mill."

"By roosh, he's a whopper!" murmured the scout. "And I'm only a little 'un. I'd tackle him all right if 'tweren't for the gun. I shouldn't be much use to the captain with an ounce of rabbit shot in my guts."

But the peril passed. The giant gamekeeper struck into another path that opened into the woods a little to the left and at a different angle. Alf breathed freely again.

(To Be Continued)

Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Barnes and family, of Flower street, spent Sunday with Mr. and Mrs. H. W. Bartlett of Torrance.

Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Barnes and family, of Flower street, spent Sunday with Mr. and Mrs. H. W. Bartlett of Torrance.



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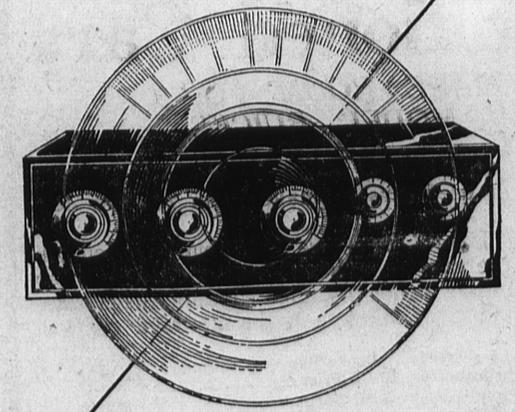
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