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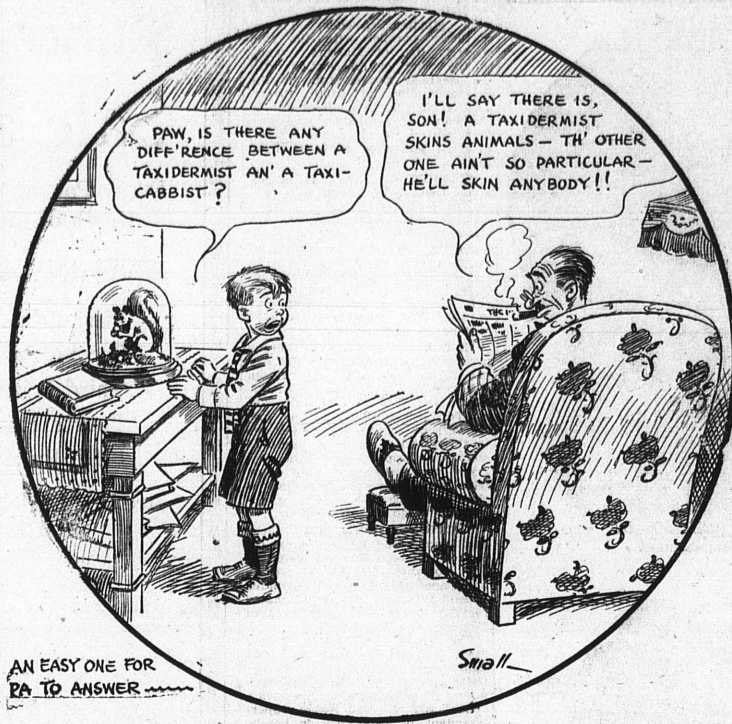
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The SKELETON FINGER



BEGIN HERE TODAY
 SIR DUDLEY GLENISTER, suspected of the murder of his cousin, George Glenister, has a strange caller in the person of—
SIMON TRICKEY, whose bloated face culminated in one big red blob at the end of his nose. Trickey's plan to blackmail Dudley is interrupted by the arrival of—
DOCTOR WILLOUGHBY MELVILLE and James Wragge.
NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
 From under half-closed lids Doctor Melville watched for the effect of this request, apparently so ill-timed, on his host.

Sir Dudley walked quickly to his writing table and filled in a "bearer" check for five guineas. "There you are, sir," he said, handing it to the black-coated canvasser. "I don't mind paying to a gentleman who asks pretty, but I'll be hanged if I sell out to a blackguard who tries to bluff me."

"Now, I wonder," mused Inspector Wragge presently, as he stroked down the drive after pocketing the check and thanking the donor. "I wonder whether a man who deserves to be hanged would refer to the operation so lightly. I also wonder who the red-nosed blackmailer is. Possible I shall have the pleasure of traveling back to town in the same train with him."

And as he made his way to the railway station he further reflected on his good fortune in having met at the lodge gates the West End specialist who had treated him for "nerves."
 Meanwhile Doctor Melville was taking leave of his host in spite of blustering requests that he should remain.

"Out of the question," he resisted firmly. "My patients have first call on me. Besides, I can't be of any use to you here, now that the inquest has let you out. Your best plan is to keep quiet and let the rumors die down, unless there is something vital that you are concealing from me."
 Sir Dudley dropped his eyes before the probing gaze.

"No," he said. "No, I haven't concealed anything from you, Melville. I didn't kill my cousin George."
 Melville shrugged his shoulders and went away to pack up his bag. His brows were drawn together in a puzzled frown.
 "You may not have killed your cousin George," he muttered, "but you have done something, my friend, that is pretty rotten. And if I am any judge of physiology you contemplate doing something else that won't bear inspection. It would be interesting to know what view Wragge takes. I must look the eminent detective up in my case-book when I get home."
CHAPTER VIII
 Violence
 THE evil which the nerve specialist believed Sir Dudley to be plotting was not long in coming to maturity. On the day after Trickey's call and Melville's departure from Beechwood Grange he went to London and put up at the Millennium Hotel in Piccadilly. On the same afternoon he had a taxi called and gave the driver the address of Lady Marrables in Cadogen Gardens.
 Kathleen and her dowager guardian, after being practically turned out of the Grange, had ostentatiously resumed their normal existence.
 All Kathleen's old suspicions of her cousin Dudley had been revived by the weird incident in the Beechwood coverts. The trouble was that she did not know to



whom to turn for aid. That local wisecracker, Sergeant Mitchell of the county police, had agreed with the verdict of the jury and she was ignorant that Scotland Yard was interested.
 She had not forgotten Mr. Stephen Colne's offer to Sir Dudley of his official influence in that direction, but the offer had not been made to her and she was reluctant to approach the cabinet minister. There remained only her lover, Norman Slater.
 And then, about the time that Sir Dudley was leaving his hotel to call at Cadogen Gardens, a disreputable stranger was ushered in who revived her rooping hopes. A discreet and elderly parlormaid answered Sir Dudley's ring and informed him that her ladyship was not at home. Yes, Miss Glenister was in, but for the moment she was engaged with another person.
 Struck by the woman's tone, the baronet inquired if the person was anyone he was likely to know.
 "Hardly, I should think, sir, except perhaps in the way of business," was the demure reply. "He looks like a dog fancier. I don't expect he will be long, if you will come in and wait."
 Sir Dudley accepted the invitation and was shown into a cloak-and-hat room, whence he had a view of the hall. He had not been there two minutes when he heard steps descending the stairs. A moment later the parlormaid crossed his line of vision, conducting Mr. Simon Trickey, red-bulb nose, loud-check suit and all complete, to the front door.

The baronet started up to intercept his former clerk, checked the impulse, and waited till the maid appeared to take him upstairs to the drawing-room. When he was announced Kathleen was folding and placing in her purse a slip of paper. She completed the operation carefully before she deigned to notice her latest visitor.
 "Well," she said, looking up at last, "this is an unexpected honor—after being turned out of the Grange so recently."
 Evidently this was to be a duel sans merci on either side.

"I had to ask my guests to leave because most of them were conspiring against me," rejoined Sir Dudley. "You and that puppy Slater worse than any. But I am sure to open the doors of Beechwood Grange to you again. A generous offer, since I now find that you are intriguing with Simon Trickey."
 "That is kind of you," snapped Kathleen. "But I am not at all sure that I want to have the doors of the Grange opened to me. I shouldn't feel very safe there."
 Glenister took a step forward, his huge bulk towering over the slim girl who confronted him, cool and unafraid.
 "Let me make it clear to you," he replied. "I want you to come back to the Grange as my wife. You will be sorry if you don't. I want you because our marriage would be the best answer to the suspicions you have done your best to foster—the suspicion that I murdered your brother."
 "Well, didn't you?" said Kathleen dryly.
 "I will take my oath I didn't."
 "If you didn't do it with your own hands you caused his death."
 This new allegation seemed for the fraction of a second to disconcert the accused.
 "I will take my oath that I never saw George Glenister, alive or dead, after he went to America."
 "And I don't believe you on oath or anyhow," retorted Kathleen. "I am as firmly convinced that you are responsible for my brother's death and that he died at Beechwood as if I had seen you kill him. As to marrying you, the proposition would have had no almost as absurd if all this had not happened."
 The baronet had recovered.
 "Then let us come to grips!" he broke out. "Here is my ultimatum: If you don't marry me I will make your name socially damned up and down the land. Captain Slater was to come out of your room late at night."
 "You beast!" her fresh young voice found vent at last. "The true story of that night would do you far more harm than me. You know very well what Captain Slater and I set out to discover, and how we were thwarted because you heard us following. In a day or two I shall be able to tell the world—and incidentally the police—a good deal more about you. Oh, Norman, you are just in time."
 The last sentence was addressed to Captain Slater, who had entered the drawing-room. The young soldier took in the situation at a glance. Here was all the material for a most lovely row.
 "What am I in time for? What's

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2:20	1:40
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4:20	3:40
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the racket?" he inquired quietly, and with a measuring eye on the baronet.
 In a few crisp words Kathleen told him how her cousin had made her an offer of marriage, and described in Dudley's own language the alternative he had threatened. Norman listened till the unpleasant recital ceased, and then there commenced such a scene as Lady Marrables' decorous drawing-room had never been set for in all its humdrum history. Norman's rush was that of a maddened bull and punishment to the handiest part would have been his own undoing had Glenister been an adept in the art of self-defense. Quickly recognizing that he must be courting disaster, Norman checked his exuberance and introduced a little science into his method. Two or three sledgehammer blows did the bigger man aim, but they fell on empty air, and thence onward the fracas became a brutal assault.
 Up and down the room Sir Dudley stumbled, kicking over furniture and crashing into low-hung pictures, with his agile assailant ever in pursuit and administering punishment to the handiest part of his anatomy. His curses gave way to labored breathing, and finally he crumpled up and lay sprawling over the end of a couch. "There, you swine!" said the easy victor. "That'll teach you." Before the lesson to be learned by Sir Dudley could be defined the door opened and a man stepped in rather hurriedly. He wore side-whiskers and a mustache, and was dressed in a suit of drab reach-me-downs. He bore no resemblance to the clean-shaven clerk who had called at Beechwood Grange on behalf of the Mission to Blackfoot Indians, and his voice was like the crack of a whip.
 (To Be Continued.)

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