

The Strayed Finger.

By JOHN WALCOTT.



MR. WILKINSON was not only a very susceptible young man, but his sense of propriety was so keen that when, on an important occasion, he presented his betrothed with a jewel-case which he supposed to contain a pearl necklace, and it turned out to enclose a woman's finger, his horror was hardly greater than his sense of the indecorum of the circumstance. The lady shared his feelings. After the cold water had brought her to, she informed him, with even more firmness than sorrow, that she would never see him again until she had received from him in writing a proper explanation of the deplorable incident. Mr. Wilkinson was grieved at her decision. Nevertheless, he could but admire her for it. Having ascertained that she did not suspect him of direct complicity in the unpleasant occurrence, he went away without remonstrance, carrying with him the uncanny object still in its delicate silk-lined receptacle.

to find that the necklace was there; the second, that there was nothing there; the third, that the finger was some clever imitation—and thrice he was disappointed. The finger was there, and it was a finger—the ring finger of the left hand he decided. It was a small, delicate member, with something curious in its formation, and yet offering a shadowy suggestion of youth and prettiness which grated horribly upon the young man's nerves. It might have been one of Mary's fingers.

The incident was unwelcome and incomprehensible, but none the less real. It had actually happened, and, of all persons, happened to him! To have come a respectable road to within gunshot of forty and wedlock only to be wound, as it were, around an unknown woman's detached finger was hard—very hard. Mr. Wilkinson began to entertain a grudge against this strange and fragmentary intruder. It had taken an unfair advantage of an unoffending person. He rose once more and placed it under a table in the farthest corner of the room. This act left his mind free for the moment to consider in a less prejudiced way that it was the



"I came upon a shabby person in the act of picking it up."

The name on the case was that of the prominent jeweler from whom the necklace had been ordered.

Mr. Wilkinson was not a man to be carried away by passion, but he was determined to bring to justice the perpetrator of the trick—for he had no doubt that a cruel and ghastly jest had been played upon him and his fiancée—and he knew that blind anger would not help him to this end. So he immediately took a cab and gave the address of a private detective whom he had met professionally and felt he could trust. To put the matter into the hands of the police would be to court instant publicity. The press would take hold of it, and a swarm of reporters would gather, like flies upon carrion, to his own annoyance and, what was much more important, to the great discomfort of his Mary. The detective was out, and after a few moments' hesitation Mr. Wilkinson went home, where he passed a sleepless night.

The more he thought of the thing, the less possible it seemed to him that it could have happened. Thrice within the first hour or two he rose from his bed, turned up the light and examined the gruesome contents of the case. The first time he half expected

sender of the object, rather than the object itself, that called for rigorous treatment. He prepared him a table in the presence of his enemies, and for the time ate with gusto from the dish of their imagined discomfiture. Only he did not know who they were. He could think of no enemy who would be likely to sacrifice a charming portion of wife or sister to cause him temporary chagrin. The sudden suspicion that the finger might be a memento of some less reputable person filled him with disquiet. If it should be—if Mary should find. . . . He became again dissatisfied with the present situation of the offending member. From its remote obscurity it appeared to his imagination to be pointing at him ironically, like some disagreeably incarnated finger of fate. A feeling of shame, such as he had never known before, began to creep and curdle in his blood.

Morning came at last, and breakfast, which still lay untasted before the pondering Wilkinson when the detective was shown in. He listened with much interest to his client's story, looked at the finger and its case, and passed judgment on the whole affair in a word of one syllable. Further, he recommended that the business be turned

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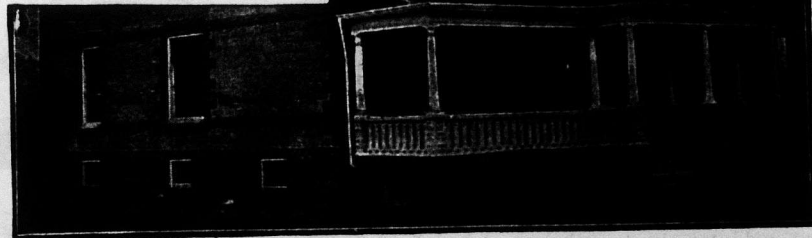
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