

The Little Finger On The Left Hand

by Ardath Mayhar

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It wasn't the pain. That was control-lable, even without the medication they insisted on shooting into me every time I opened my mouth. I mean, it isn't as though I'd been some sort of marsh-mallow. In the house wrecking busi-ness, you get your share of knocks and cuts, even when you're careful. No, it wasn't exactly the pain. Maybe part was the inactivity.

For a man who has spent his entire life on his feet, when he wasn't actually asleep or making love, this lying flat on my back and staring at the antiseptic white ceiling was making me crazy. For the first time in my life, I was grate-ful to my Dad for making me graduate from college. Bits and pieces came back to me . . . oddball scraps of literature, formulas, bits of history. It helped to make the time pass, though not much.

Still, it wasn't just the boredom that was getting to me. It was that damned little finger on my left hand. The one that isn't there any more.

With all the broken bones and con-tusions and whatnot that I got when that cut-stone wall fell on me, you'd think the loss of that finger wouldn't even be noticeable. I mean, it isn't as if you use the thing much. And right now I can't use *anything*, being strung up like a wounded mummy. But that was the bit that was missing from me when they dug me out, and that was the bit that was giving me Hell.

Dr. Yoshida came in, the first day I was out from under sedation enough to tell him what was bothering me.

"Your nerves are still there, in the stump, Mr. Carstairs," he said. "They send signals to the brain, even though they no longer lead to the finger. After such a trauma, they are sending scram-bled signals, I suspect. That is why you have that gnawing sensation and the sudden sharp pains.

"After a time, they will heal at the severed ends, and the worst will be past. Though I must admit that I have had patients who had terrible itches in missing limbs for years after losing them. However, right now you can call for sedation, when it gets too painful. You need that for rest, too, I am sure. By the time you are able to move about a bit, the worst will be over."

It made some sense. I believed him. But I'm not one who likes to be doped up, no matter what. I just lay there and felt sharp teeth gnawing away at that finger until I was ready to scream. If it hadn't been for Lola, I'd have gone off my gourd.

She comes in every day for as long as they'll let her stay. I keep reminding her

that if she'd said yes when I asked her to marry me she might stay as long as she liked. She grins at that, because she didn't exactly say no. She said in four months, when she has her degree and time for a husband and a new job, both at once.

Anyway, she kept looking at me, those first few days, as if she could sense what I was pretending not to feel.

Finally she asked, right out, "Hamp, you're hurting, aren't you?"

I had sworn never to lie to her. I meant it, too, so I nodded. "Some."

"More than some. What is it? The back? The neck? You're so wrapped up I can't tell what's hurt the worst."

I felt silly. I stared up at her, and she fixed me with those big brown eyes that demand the truth and nothing but the truth. "It's that little finger. The one that's gone. The thing's driving me wild . . . feels as if mice with saber-teeth are gnawing it to rags."

"Ghost pains," she said, nodding. "They told me you'd have them, but I don't think they realize how bad it is for you. They're used to people having them in entire arms and legs. I think they don't expect a small bit like a fin-ger to give you so much trouble."

That was probably true, but at least she knew and sympathized. That helped a little. When it got so that I was trying to turn off the TV with thought waves, she read to me or told me funny stories about her classmates and professors, or her boss and the techs in the lab where she worked. It helped.

But when she was gone . . . after dark when the hospital quieted to its nightly routine, there was nothing left in the world but me and the little finger on my left hand.

Rog, the foreman of my crew, came in to see me, once they took the sign off my door. I felt funny about asking him the question I'd saved for him, but I finally got up the nerve.

"Rog, that house. The one that fell in on me. Is it all the way down, yet?"

He looked at me sort of funny. "Not yet. They got the contractor out there and some engineers. It's a funny deal — if we'd had any idea of problems, we'd have gone that route first and waited to start demolition. Maybe we'd have used a wrecking ball.

"That entire house is so unstable it stinks. And it looked solid as Gibraltar, too. It's still sitting there, only that one wall down so far. They can't figure why that

one fell or why the rest didn't come down, too. All you did was to chip out an anchor-point for a towline, and whammo! Down she came, right on top of you. I was never so scared in my life ... we thought you'd had it. No joke!"

Hmm. That brought up my second question. "Did anybody ever look around for my finger? Could it be spotted in all that mess?"

He shook his head. "They won't let us near the thing, now. Once you were out, they put up a fence with padlocks and all the trimmings. Why?"

That was a question I didn't want to answer. "I just wondered. After all, it isn't every day you lose a piece of your-self." I laughed, but it hurt.

After he left, I thought of that loose bit of flesh and bone, lying in all that rubble. By God, mice were probably stripping it down to the bone. And I could, somehow, feel it happening. The thought preyed on my mind.

Then I remembered the motion I had seen, back in the corner when I went in to do my job. Something a lot bigger than a mouse — or even a rat — had been in that old house. I had thought it might be a cat, nosing around, and never thought of it again. But now I recalled the ghost of a growl. Sharp teeth, glinting in the dimness . . .

"Hamp Carstairs," I said aloud, "you will drive yourself completely round the bend, if you lie here making up sto-ries. Go to sleep!"

With the help of a nurse and another shot, I did just that. But the next day I was all nerves. Sedatives just made me worse, until it seemed as if my skin would crawl right out from under the casts and bandages and make off down the hall.

Lola was beside herself. She tried to talk, to read, but I just lay there in a cold sweat, trying to keep from scream-ing. She could see it in my eyes, which was just about all of my face she could see.

"Hamp!"

I'd closed my eyes, so she could get some rest. I opened them to see her bending over me.

"Hamp, it's that damn finger, isn't it? I'm going down there and dig around until I find it. I'm going to bring it right back here and put it in a jar of formal-dehyde on that table, so you can see that nothing's at it. It may not help the nerves, but it just might help the men-tal strain a bit."

It was hard to talk through the band-ages, but I managed. "Lo, listen! That place is a deathtrap. Rog says they locked it up, it's so dangerous. It's not going to

help either of us if you get all smashed up, too. I want all of your parts in working order, when I get out of this cast.”

She smiled, and I recognized that look. I should have kept that problem to myself. She left, determination in the set of her back.

She didn't come back that afternoon at her usual time. There was no call at bedtime. I began to sweat. I had the nurse call Rog at home, just to see if there had been any sort of commotion out at the work site. But no. The next house was down, and they'd begun working on the one on the other side. There had been no problem at the unstable one.

Lola had early morning class, before her shift at the lab. There was no hope of seeing her before noon, and she hadn't a phone. I kept on sweating.

At ten o'clock, I was surprised when the door opened to let her into my room. She should have been at work. Then I saw a flash of white and stared at her left hand. At the bandage wrapped neatly around it.

In her right hand, she carried a small jar, which she set on the table with a thump. I could see something bobbing around in the liquid it contained. I cut my gaze around and stared. It had been a finger. That was clear, if you used imagination. All the flesh was gone, and the bone was scored with long marks.

I couldn't even raise my eyebrows when I looked up at her.

“Have you felt that finger this morning?” she asked.

I thought hard. I had been so worried that I hadn't even remembered the finger. Now I felt for it, but there was no twinge. Not even the faintest tickle.

“No.” I sounded puzzled, even to me.

“Something had it, back in that half-wrecked room. Something furry and bright-eyed and mean. I beat it off with my purse and got your fingerbone away from it. But it. . . got even.” She held out her hand. “It took mine, in exchange.”

“Lo!” I felt my heart thud soggily. “I told you not to go in there . . . you might have been killed! The thing might even be rabid.”

She looked down at me, and I saw deep into her eyes. There was a pain there that I recognized. Oh, did I recognize it!

“You now? It's got yours in place of mine?”

She nodded. “It leaped, when I took the bone away from it, and just snapped

off my little finger like a bread stick. But I'm in better shape to cope with it than you are. I can move around, stay busy. I'm not trapped in that cast, wrapped up in ninety yards of gauze. It's . . . it's not such a bad swap, really." She smiled.

I could see the little lines at the corners of her mouth. I knew exactly what she felt. What a girl!

She couldn't stay long, for she was due at the lab. She'd swapped out with another girl so she could come in and relieve my mind.

Once she was gone, I was alone again, thinking about whatever it was living in that abandoned brownstone. Think-ing about what Lola was enduring.

It isn't the pain, you see. That's bear-able. It's wondering precisely what's causing it.