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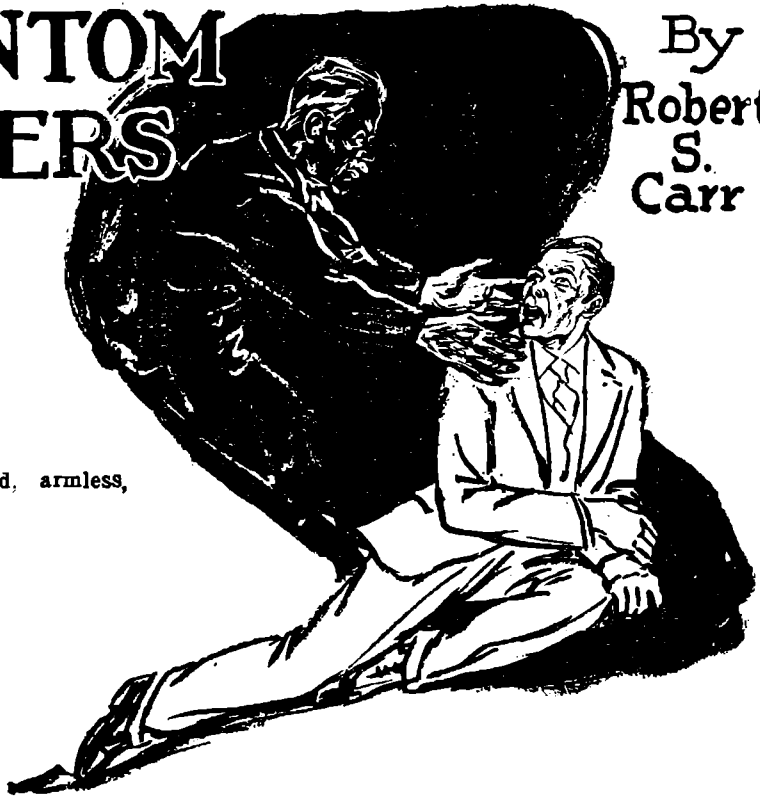
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PHANTOM FINGERS

By
Robert
S.
Carr



"The hands floated, armless, toward his throat."

"NEVERTHELESS," declared Alfred Meyers to himself with a certain tightening of the lips, "spirits do not return, much less materialize and lay their hands on peoples' shoulders!"

He walked nervously down the broad front steps of the old brownstone building, turned, and started briskly toward the rumble of heavy traffic on the avenue. A tired clerk shuffling his way to the subway would have casually glanced at Alfred Meyers and seen a pale, slim man of indefinite years whose gait held a hint of tense nervousness. But a keen-eyed physician brushing close by might have noticed a significant tinge of his eyeballs and a tiny tell-tale twitching of his mouth.

Alfred Meyers had been to his first materialization seance and it had stirred him a great deal more than anything had been able to do for a

long, long while. An extremely disturbing subject had been revived, a subject which Meyers thought he had succeeded in putting forever out of the range of his conscience—namely, his addiction to cocaine. A vague, cloudlike figure which claimed to be his father had appeared, a figure whose hands—

A nervous tremor shook Alfred's slim body. He quickened his pace and tried his best to put down the fresh and active memory of the darkened room he had so recently left. Time enough for such thoughts when he had reached his rooms and quieted his quivering nerves.

He hunched his shoulders up and together as if he were facing a biting north wind. His steps lengthened until he was nearly running. Soon the face which had been merely pale and serious when he descended the steps of the brownstone building was

rapidly becoming a haggard ashen mask. Oh, if he could only hold up under the gnawing within until he reached the next street!

Eyes sunken and dull, lips twitching uncontrollably, he stumbled up the steps of the apartment house to his rooms. Inside, he leaped for the drawer of his desk. With shaking, icy fingers he found his cigarette case, jerked the dummy tray of cigarettes out and snatched one of the tiny waxed envelopes that were packed snugly beneath the false bottom. Shuddering with abject craving, he clumsily tore open the envelope, tapped a pinch of fine white cocaine out into the back of his hand and traced the powdery stuff into a little ridge with his forefinger. He leaned over in frantic eagerness and with a quick, spasmodic inhalation sniffed up every particle.

The psychological effect of the stuff was instant. Although his lips still twitched and his eyes rolled helplessly from side to side, he sank into a deep armchair and relaxed. His fingers closed over the cigarette case in a clawlike grip. He must never forget his cigarettes again, he told himself, especially when there was any likelihood of his encountering as unnerving a set of circumstances as that seance had been.

Bit by bit the color crept back into his cheeks and his facial muscles relaxed. He smiled, lay comfortably back in his chair and chuckled. That seance had been amusing! In a luxury of blissful contentment he allowed himself to live over the episode of the afternoon. He recalled the frame of mind he had been in—a secretly cynical attitude of investigation. Physically and mentally he had been in a state which was very nearly normal—that phase of several hours' duration which comes to an addict after every trace of the effects of the drug has worn off,

but before the system has begun to call for more.

He had been met at the door of the brownstone house by a middle-aged gentleman.

"Mr. Addison?"

"Yes, come in."

Meyers looked at Mr. Addison closely. He was a man a trifle under medium height, with thin, silver-gray hair. His face was that of a scholar—lined, delicate, sensitive, but behind it lurked the suggestion of tremendous nervous energy and a powerful personality. He was a man that seemed in a subtle way like a powerful spring of finest tempered steel, the vital part of some mighty, silent engine; a spring which seemed merely a quiet coil till one looked very closely and saw that it was a living thing, humming soundlessly under the weight of terrific withheld power. Mr. Addison's voice was well modulated, his dress retiring, and his bearing one of absolute poise.

He showed Alfred into a high-ceilinged, old-fashioned, dark oak room and motioned him into a chair. The whole house seemed steeped in an atmosphere of calm silence. Meyers looked about him and felt a bit surprized. So far he had seen none of the tin trumpets, incense stands and Egyptian draperies that he had somehow always associated with spiritualism. The room was furnished a bit sparsely and severely, but with evident good taste.

"You are the Mr. Meyers who made the appointment by 'phone yesterday?"

"Yes. Is the—ah—seance held right in here?"

"Yes, Mr. Meyers . . . Miss Addison, my daughter, will be down presently. She thinks we shall be able to get some very good materializations this afternoon."

"Your daughter is the—medium?"

"Exactly. You understand, Mr. Meyers, that any rash action you

might possibly be tempted to make could very easily result in the death of my daughter. Materialization is an extremely serious affair, involving the life-forces of the medium."

Alfred Meyers started imperceptibly and shot a disturbed look at the speaker. Rash actions had been precisely what he was thinking of when Mr. Addison spoke. For the first time he noticed what compelling, piercing eyes the older man had.

Both turned as a girl entered the room. She was a frail little wisp of a thing, beautiful in the same way as a rare lily—waxlike, colorless, and yet palpitating with fragile life. She acknowledged Meyers with a faint smile, but turned away abruptly as she felt his eyes travel up and down her figure appraisingly.

Mr. Addison was standing on a heavy chair fastening a black curtain across an empty corner of the room. Meyers stood waiting. The other stepped down and lifted the big chair easily to one side. Alfred could not help noticing Mr. Addison's hands as they gripped the dark wood. They were very large hands, but so extremely well-proportioned that their size did not make them conspicuous. The fingers were long and immensely powerful. Meyers saw the cords stand out on the backs of Mr. Addison's hands like great wires as he moved the chair.

A moment later Alfred himself casually attempted to pull the same chair to one side and sit down. To his surprise he was unable to move it. He took a firm hold and pulled. It moved slightly. The chair was massively built of solid mahogany and amazingly heavy. Meyers looked again at those huge fine hands of Mr. Addison's with a feeling akin to awe.

The girl seated herself in the little curtained-off corner of the room. Mr. Addison carefully parted the curtain so that his daughter's head

and shoulders were visible. She sat quietly, her body relaxed and her eyes closed.

As Mr. Addison pulled down the heavy window-blinds, Alfred stole stealthy, covetous glances at her pale face. The room suddenly became quite dark as the last blind came down. The face in the oval parting of the curtains dimmed to a white blur.

Meyers was seated in the center of the room facing the curtained corner. Mr. Addison sat to his left and slightly in front of him. For perhaps a minute there was utter silence. Then the older man began to sing *Nearer, My God, to Thee* in a very low, soft voice. Alfred hummed an accompaniment, a rather irregular and broken accompaniment, for it had been years since he had heard that piece sung. It brought back disquieting memories . . .

The singing gradually grew softer and softer until it ceased entirely. Alfred's eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom and he again closely scrutinized the still form of the girl. Her face was now rigid and motionless. She looked unpleasantly like a corpse. Meyers correctly guessed that she was in a trance.

Presently, between the curtains, next to the floor, was a slight movement. The agitation increased until an uneasy patch of white appeared. It wavered and shook like a cloud of thick, restless smoke. The thing grew steadily and rapidly till within two minutes of its first appearance it had assumed the vague outline of a tall, thin man, taller by far than the girl who was still perfectly visible, lying unconscious in the chair.

After standing quietly a moment, the figure of the man glided slowly across the room. Alfred felt a curious numbness creep over him as he recognized the features of his father. The materialized spirit stood close to him and spoke in a throaty whis-

per. He said the things Alfred's father would have said in life—hard, uncompromising things that made the young man cringe. As his father bent over him to deliver a parting sentence, Alfred felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder. He started, then squirmed in his chair as the cold sweat trickled down his face. He had rather fancied himself talking to some uncertain nebosity, perhaps even a hoax; accordingly the realization that the hand he had just felt on his shoulder was of some definite substance came as quite a shock to him. As the figure slowly retreated toward the curtain, Meyers pulled himself together somewhat and looked very closely at the hands. The man's body was a bit cloudlike and unreal—it might easily be an illusion or even a clever reflection—but those hands were as solid flesh and blood as his own! Very clear and well-defined they were, hanging loosely at the ends of the more indistinct arms. While the form slowly dwindled and finally disappeared under the curtains, Meyers caught himself scrutinizing the massive, beautiful hands of Mr. Addison.

No sooner had the first figure been completely dissipated than another began to form. Timorously Alfred watched it grow, expand, and take on a settled outline as the other had done. At last it assumed the shape of a rather small man who walked with a slight limp toward the center of the floor. He halted and pointed his finger at Meyers accusingly. Again the hands stood out more clearly than the rest of the form. Meyers thought that he could see the spirit's lips moving, but he heard no sound. Addison reached back and plucked his sleeve.

"He keeps repeating the name of Kane—Roger Kane," he whispered quickly; "his forces are rather weak. Do you recognize the name?"

Again the cold sweat burst out in

glassy beads on Meyers' face. This was too much! Roger Kane was the name of a man he had run down and killed late one night on a lonely suburban street. When he had realized that the man was dead, he had let the body lie and fled. The papers had been full of it for weeks—even to the extent of a sizable reward. And now this!

"No, oh God, no!" whispered Alfred hoarsely; "tell him to go away. I never heard the name before!"

Mr. Addison's deep gray eyes slowly and inexorably pierced the terrified drug addict through and through, till Meyers felt that he had dragged the guilty lie out and was dangling it in plain sight. The small man's form slowly dwindled away, keeping his finger pointed straight at Alfred. The hands were last to go and for a moment they hung palpitating in the air independent of a body. Meyers covered his face with his hands, cowered down in his chair and made a little strangling noise. After a few minutes Mr. Addison went to the windows and raised the blinds, one by one, letting the late afternoon sunlight stream in across the somber room in welcome beams. A far-reaching shaft fell across the inert girl, and for a moment, his fears half forgotten, Alfred gloated on the sight of her with an unholy light in his eyes.

As he stood in the front hall for a moment awaiting Mr. Addison, his eyes, out of force of habit, traveled swiftly over the hall and adjoining room in a practised and appraising glance. He noted the bits of expensive bric-à-brac, a silver vase on the mantel that was a real prize, and a painting on the far wall that might possibly be an original.

AND now, in the privacy of his apartment, Alfred took another tiny waxed paper envelope from his cigarette case. Slowly and luxuri-

ously he sniffed every particle of the white powder. For a long time he lay back in his deep armchair, his fingers moving restlessly. By degrees a dull glow began to show deep down in his pale eyes and from time to time his thin lips twitched themselves into a crooked smile. He was thinking of the girl at the seance—Mr. Addison's daughter—thinking of her flowerlike, helpless beauty as she lay limply back in the chair. And Mr. Addison's hands—perfect, well-manicured, yet possessed of the strength of a gorilla. Queer! That daughter of his was a little beauty . . . and the picture hanging at the far end of the front room—might be an original . . . yes, probably was an original and worth a small fortune if properly handled.

Under the influence of a double dose of cocain, Alfred's mind was functioning rapidly and erratically. He thought of the fine furnishings in Mr. Addison's house—a clever worker could make a worthwhile clean-up in that house. The silver vase on the mantel, a little hand-carved ivory lamp and—why, the girl, too!—mustn't overlook her. Oh no, she was better than any of the other loot. Meyers smiled more crookedly than before. He'd see more of that girl! Yes, sir! Pay a call on her soon—very soon. Why, even tonight was not too soon. The outline of her slim, weak figure danced before his eyes and his drug-twisted face lighted up.

As Alfred chuckled and smirked over the thought of the girl, a slightly disturbing thing kept creeping in. Mr. Addison intruded himself here and there in the jumbled-up scenes which flitted through Meyers' mind. First it was his face and reaching arms, then his arms from the elbow down and finally his hands alone, extended; those great tapered fingers of steel opening and closing convulsively. They intruded themselves

more and more; they grew to monstrous size; the fine hairs on the back of the fingers seemed the size and coarseness of heavy wire.

In the somewhat muddy state of mind induced by cocain, even the most harrowing thoughts do not seem distinctly unpleasant. Meyers sat bolt-upright on the edge of his chair and regarded the phantom hands of Mr. Addison with a grin. The hands fascinated him. They darted in at his throat, they lay quietly on the table for a moment, then waked into life and crawled slowly about like great sluggish spiders. Finally they came to rest on the floor by Alfred's foot. Deliberately he rose and stepped squarely upon one of them. His foot passed through and seemed imbedded in the vapory form of the hand. Meyers laughed, a dry, mirthless laugh, and leaped, both feet together, on the other one. For a minute or so he devoted himself to trying to destroy the very things, then gave it up and fell to laughing at them. He stepped to his cigarette case, emptied another waxed envelope and snuffed it up. Then he stood over the hands and glared at them till the drug had taken full effect. The two things on the floor seemed to grow smaller and paler under his gaze till at last they vanished entirely.

Meyers laughed a very satisfied and high-pitched laugh. He stood before the mirror and straightened his tie. He'd tell Mr. Addison about this hand matter, he told himself, and he also wanted to make it clear that the name Roger Kane meant nothing at all to him. Knew too much, that Mr. Addison did! Have to have a good talk with him. Have a talk with the daughter, too. Might as well make it this evening. Yes, he'd go right now.

He pocketed his cigarette case, donned his hat, and walked briskly down the steps of his apartment

house. In the godlike state of exhilaration which is a later, fuller effect of cocain, he covered the four long city blocks to the old brown-stone house oblivious of the traffic, the twinkling lights and the jostling crowds. At the door of Mr. Addison's house he rang the bell long and loudly. There was an interval of silence, broken only by the far-off rumble of the avenue. Again he rang. From back in the dark recesses of the old house came the sound of an opened door, footsteps, the click of an electric light switch. The knob turned and Mr. Addison, in dressing gown and slippers, stood in the doorway.

"Want to see you, Mr. Addison," said Meyers gruffly, stepping past the elder man and into the hallway.

"About what?" queried Addison, closing the door and regarding his visitor intently.

Under the merciless gaze of Mr. Addison's blazing gray eyes Meyers invented a falsehood quickly. "I would like to make you an offer on that silver vase you have," he said. "I noticed it this afternoon."

"That vase is not for sale," returned the other.

"Understand, Mr. Addison, that I am a connoisseur of fine things and I am interested in your collection. That picture, for instance——"

"Mr. Meyers, my collection is composed entirely of family heirlooms which money can not buy. My daughter and I had retired for the night when you rang. I have nothing for sale and it is late. Good night!"

He stepped toward the door when a sudden movement on Alfred's part caused him to turn. He leaped back and seized the descending wrist with a grip that bruised the very bone. Meyers made a little animal noise of pain and anger as his blackjack thudded on the floor. As if he were

a straw man, Addison jerked Alfred toward the door.

With the tightening of the vise-like grip on his right wrist, something snapped in Meyers' cocain-inflamed brain. With his free hand he jerked a tiny, flat automatic from an armpit pocket, pressed it tight against Addison's chest, and pulled the trigger.

The silencer-equipped little weapon made virtually no report. The terrible grip on Meyers' wrist contracted convulsively as the elder man stood swaying for a few moments. He drew Alfred down with him as he slipped soundlessly to the floor, stone-dead. Meyers struggled to a kneeling position and tore frantically at the steely fingers about his wrist. Half sunken in the crushed flesh, their awful pressure shut off the circulation till Alfred's hand was blue-black and cold as ice. One by one, using all his strength, he bent back the fingers as if escaping from a steel trap. When the death-grip of the last rapidly-cooling finger had been disengaged, Meyers rose to his feet a bit shakily, rubbing his bruised wrist.

For a long time he stood there over the body of his victim, trying to work some of the circulation back into his right hand. About his wrist there was a great purple hand imprint, the overlapping fingers standing out as clearly as if they were painted on the pale skin.

PRESENTLY Meyers began to fumble in his pocket with his left hand. He drew out his cigarette case and with a little manœuvring was able to take another dose of cocain. Under the continued influence of the drug the pupils of his eyes had dilated enormously, seriously affecting his vision. He looked down at the body of the man he had just murdered, but the sight awoke not the

slightest response on his chalky, set face.

Weird and disconnected forms began to race through his drug-riddled brain. Bright lights flashed before his eyes, discordant bells jangled in his ears, and the cords of his neck stood out tensely as he lurched toward the foot of the stairs to support himself on the banister. Gradually a single thought drew apart from the rest—upstairs, somewhere, was the girl he had come to see. When the idea was firmly fixed in his mind, he made his way slowly up the long, winding staircase and stole cautiously down the darkened hall, one hand on the wall.

From a room to the right came the voice of Mr. Addison's daughter. "Is that you, Father?" she called uneasily. Meyers made no answer, but turned into the room whence the voice had come. His fingers found the light switch, and with the flood of illumination which followed he saw the girl half raised in bed, the covers drawn up over her breast and her dark hair streaming down over her bare shoulders. For a moment he stood and leered, then turned and locked the door, depositing the key in his pocket. The girl did not move, but a deep-rooted horror glistened in her wide, dark eyes.

Meyers extended his arm and beckoned drunkenly. The girl shuddered violently. Suddenly she spoke.

"You have killed my father!"

The drug-fiend nodded indifferently and started across the floor toward her. She leaped from her bed and stood, back to the wall, panting with terror.

"Don't touch me!" she said in a low husky voice; "if you touch me I'll kill myself!"

Meyers staggered forward and crushed her to him. Bracing herself against the wall, the girl thrust him violently away. He reeled unsteadily

backward, tripped over a low stool and sprawled on the floor. The girl fell back into a chair by the side of her bed. The sheets, which she had been holding about her, by an accidental fling of her arm swept up, caught, and hung from the corner of the high bedstead, forming a long, sweeping drape before her.

As Meyers pulled himself up to a sitting position against the opposite wall, he saw the girl's face quiver violently, then settle into the fixed expression he had noticed that afternoon while she was in the materialization trance. Even as he looked, an angry, twisting, nebulous something sprang out from beneath the draped sheets. It writhed like a cloud of hot vapor. It grew with a breath-taking rapidity, shaping itself in a few moments to the form of a man a trifle under medium height. The figure became more compact and more distinct; it quivered and shook as though under the influence of some mighty emotion. Two blazing, piercing gray eyes shone from the spirit's face, while at the end of its extended arms, fingers clutching the air, were two huge, perfectly-formed, gorilla-strong human hands . . .

Cowering low against the wall, Alfred Meyers watched the hands and the eyes advance on him. He could feel the withering gaze of the awful gray orbs boring into him. The lower part of the spirit's body seemed to grow more indistinct, as though concentrating all its solid matter in those terrible, inexorable hands. On they came, the fingers tense as bars of fine steel, eager to grasp and crush. . . .

The burning eyes in the shadowy head were looking down on Meyers. The hands floated, armless, toward his throat. . . . Not a muscle did the drug-fiend move as the long, tapered fingers slipped eagerly around his throat. With a crushing, inhuman strength the two mighty

hands strangled Alfred Meyers, the fingers locking solidly around the back of his neck. Slowly his face took on a purplish cast, his eyes protruded glassily from their sockets. . .

Eyes . . . gray eyes . . . huge, clutching hands . . . about his throat . . . roaring in his ears . . . oblivion.

“**A**ND neither is it possible for a dead man in the front hall to pass through a locked door upstairs and strangle another man to death, is it now?”

The detective was silent under the coroner's crushing logic. “But,” he protested, “there *were* finger-marks on his throat.”

“Yes, there were,” went on the big coroner in a puzzled tone which he immediately tried to cover up, “but nevertheless, this is an extremely obvious case of over-indulgence in narcotics and as such it will be reported!”

Glaring defiantly at the detective, he closed his note-book with a decisive flip.