

Weird Tales

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The
SPIRIT LOVER
by
HOUDINI

*An Astounding Expose
of Fraud Mediums*

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Mally
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The Hoax of the Spirit Lover

By HOUDINI



ONE of the most remarkable instances of coincidence that ever came under my observation took place some years ago, in Montana, a coincidence so remarkable that if a story or a novel were built around it the incident would be considered so highly improbable that the yarn would be entirely unconvincing.

The incident occurred quite unexpectedly during my attempt to expose a charlatan medium. It made my attempt unnecessary. The medium himself was a victim of the improbable coincidence and his boasted powers of materializing spirits were proved a shabby fraud.

Three men came to my hotel room in —, and asked me to aid them in exposing a medium whose powers seemed so miraculous as to admit of no explanation except supernatural aid. One of the three men was a minister of the gospel. All had tried to pick flaws in the medium's powers, and had attended one of his séances without succeeding.

One of the men, a lawyer, declared that he was about convinced of the reality of the medium's pretended spiritualistic powers.

"Were it not that to admit spiritualism opens the door for a wave of superstition and charlatanry," he said, "I

would quit right now and acknowledge myself convinced. The three of us attended a séance last night, in the third story of an office building. We locked the door, locked the window, examined the room carefully, examined the medium's portable cabinet, and then the lights were extinguished, and spirit materializations took place. There was no possible chance for the medium to have confederates enter the room, nor is there any explanation of the materializations except that given by the medium."

I smiled, and agreed to do whatever I could to learn what deception the medium was practising in his séances.

"It sounds very convincing," I said. "But there must be some plausible, natural explanation. If, in my study of spiritualistic phenomena, I had accepted defeat every time I was baffled by something that I could not explain, then I would not have got very far with my investigations. Instead of saying that there is no explanation except an acceptance of spiritualism, I have said to myself merely, 'I have not yet found the true explanation.' It may be that I shall absolutely fail to pierce the methods of this charlatan who has tricked you. My failure would not prove that the medium had power to call spirits into materialization. There is no reason we should accept spiritualism, which is contrary to all our natural experiences, unless we have absolute proof of it. Failure to disprove spiritualism is far from being positive proof of the reality of spiritualism. I am as open-minded as anybody else on this subject, but I want positive proof. Mere failure to prove fraud in any given case is not a proof of spiritualism. It is simply an indication that the true explanation of the medium's phenomena has not yet been fathomed."

IT was the following night that I was to assist my friends in attempting to show up the medium. The more I pondered the deception played on them, the more inexplicable seemed the materialization. I was certain that the alleged materialization was nothing more nor less than a flesh and blood human being in the employ of the medium. There must be some way of entry to the room. My friends had locked the door and the window. It occurred to me that the medium or his confederate might have had a pass key, or he might have made his way over the transom, or the lock on the window might be broken. I have had too much experience in opening locks to believe very strongly in their power to keep people out of rooms.

We met, late at night, in the third story of an office building, the minister, the lawyer, and myself. The medium and several men and women were already there. The third of the trio who had called on me arrived a little later. He was a grocer or confectioner—I do not remember which. The medium remarked that there were certain psychic influences in the room that worked against any spiritualistic manifestations, and looked pointedly, as he spoke, at the grocer, who was a small man with cold, skeptical gray eyes and rather a determined chin. I had been introduced to the medium as Mr. Kochler, and evidently he did not suspect me.

My eyes traveled around the room. There was but one window, and the door was secured by a Yale lock. It could be opened from inside. Immediately it flashed through my mind that the medium had a confederate in the room, who would open the door and admit the materialization, but the grocer pointed out to me that this could not be done, because there was a light burning in the hall, and this would be visible to those in the room if the door were opened. I answered, rather curtly, that it should be a comparatively easy matter to extinguish the light in the hall, and my friend merely shrugged his shoulders in reply.

There were about a dozen in the room besides the medium when the séance began. Seven of these were women, although the usual proportion of women at a spiritualistic séance is much higher. The medium aroused my suspicions immediately by throwing a double curtain over the window, "to keep out the light," as he explained. The night was dark, and only a very little light could enter the room from outside. One black curtain would be sufficient. When the medium used two, I felt sure that he wished to conceal the entrance of someone through the window after the room should be plunged in darkness. I had examined the window carefully before the curtains were put up, and satisfied myself that there was no means of getting to the window from outside, as there was a drop of two stories to the ground, and no fire escape near, but the action of the medium in arranging a double curtain over the window caused me to revise my theories.

We were required to join hands in a circle around a central table. The lights were put out at the wall switch, and also individually, to prevent any skeptical person in the circle suddenly arising and flashing them on. The grocer, however, at my advice, had brought a strong pocket flashlight, so we were prepared.

THE séance was opened by the company singing a hymn. Then there was silence for a space, and more singing, while the medium, tied up in a black bag, went into a trance. The proceedings were directed by a woman who, I think, was a sincere believer in spiritualism, and wanted to make all psychic conditions right for opening spirit communications.

I noticed that the singing was loud enough to deaden any sounds a person might make by entering the room either by the door or through the window, and I knew that if the medium had unlocked the window while he was putting up the

drapes, it could be opened very easily without being heard above the noise of the singing. I was uneasy, however, and feared that I was on the wrong track, because I saw no way by which an outsider could gain access to the window, which was too far above ground to be reached by ladder.

Finally the spirit manifestations began. There were table rappings, twanging of mandolins, movements of the speaking trumpet, ghostly touches in the dark—all the old claptrap of spiritualistic séances. Then the messages began, the spirit control being ostensibly an Irishman named Mike, who talked in a thick brogue and cracked numerous jokes, even banging the grocer sharply over the head with the mandolin to cool his skepticism. The medium, during all this excitement, was supposed to be in a deep trance, with his hands made useless by being sealed into the black bag, which in its turn was covered with postage stamps on which everyone present had placed marks by which we should know that the medium had not emerged from the bag. This also is a time-worn device of spiritualistic charlatans. It does not hamper the medium's movements as much as might be expected.

Mike, the spirit control, then asked every person in the circle to think very hard of some departed friend or relative whom they wished to see, for the psychic conditions were right for a materialization. The room was very hot and close, but an almost imperceptible breath of air fanned my cheek, and I knew that the window had been opened. The medium, of course, had unlocked it when he was putting up the curtains.

I moved my chair back, out of the circle, and the grocer, who was on my left, moved in a little to take up part of the space I had occupied. I freed my left hand carefully, and substituted the grocer's hand in the hand of the woman on my left, who must have thought that I sat on her right, still holding her hand. My purpose in leaving the circle was to make an investigation. I wanted a look at that window.

A phosphorescent glow emerging from the cabinet now showed vaguely a human face, whether of man or woman I could not say. But the grocer and lawyer were there to attend to the materialization. It was my purpose to learn how the materialization had gained access to the room. I wormed my way down into the cabinet, and through an opening in the back I reached the window very easily. The double curtain bulged out with a slight breeze, and I knew that the window was open.

I POKED my head out, and was amazed at what I found. To the left of the window a ladder was hanging from the roof above my head. It was a fireman's extensible hooking ladder, about fifteen feet long, which had been thrust out of the window above, and attached to the top of the building so that the medium's "materialization" could climb down from the window in the third story.

Behind me a scream arose, which I did not take time to investigate. It was a girl's scream, and the name "Marion" was repeated several times.

I tried to push the hooking ladder off from the roof, but I could not dislodge it. The ladder was in two sections, and the lower section, being loose, merely slid upward in its grooves. The upper part of the hooking ladder was securely attached to the roof, and could not be lifted out unless I could raise the rigid upper part of the ladder. So I climbed out, and went up to the window in the story above. Behind me still arose the girl's scream: "Marion! Marion! Oh, God, it's Marion!"

I found the window in the fourth story open. I sat on the sill, lifted the hooking ladder from its position and shoved it in the room. The escape of the medium's materialization was cut off, and my own return by the window was also blocked. I found the door locked from the inside. Evidently the "materialization" wished to make himself secure from intruders while he waited for the singing to tell him that the time had come for him to put out his ladder, attach it to the roof, and descend to take his part in the séance.

I made my way quickly through the corridor and down the stairs to the room of the séance, and found everything in turmoil. I had missed the unmasking of the fraud, but I had prevented the escape of the "spirit." What happened while I was going out of the window and removing the ladder, if told in fiction, would seem like stretching the long arm of coincidence so far that it would break under the strain. That is why I said, at the beginning of this article, that the story would be unconvincing if told by a novelist, because of its improbability.

I had wormed my way into the cabinet and was approaching the window when the grocer flashed his pocket light upon the supposed materialization. A woman's scream split the darkness, and the flashlight was violently knocked from the grocer's hand, but the young woman had thrown her arms around the ghost and was covering his face with kisses, scream-

ing "Marion, Marion! It's you! For God's sake, speak to me, Marion!"

While some tried to find the switch, only to find the lights turned off at the chandelier too, someone probably the medium, was striking the girl's hands with a blackjack, endeavoring to break her hold, and the ghost was muttering in great fright: "Frances, let go of me; you're smothering me, Frances," and fighting to free himself. The combined efforts of the medium and the ghost finally freed him from the girl's hysterical embrace, but the means of escape was cut off by my removing of the ladder. The ghost was a real flesh and blood one, and could not dematerialize into the world of shadows.

THE girl, Frances, whose surname I will not mention here, as she is still living, had attended the séance in good faith, and when the spirit control asked everyone present to hold in mind the image of a dear departed one, so that the spirit might be aided in showing itself, she concentrated her thoughts on her fiancé, who had died a little less than a year before.

Out of the cabinet, dimly seen by a phosphorescent glow from the features of the ghost, stepped the materialization. The girl stared, hoping that this was indeed her fiancé, trying to believe, her heart beating between skepticism and faith, when the grocer's flashlight lit up the features distinctly. It was only for an instant, for the flashlight was knocked from the grocer's hand almost immediately, but that instant was enough.

The ghost that had emerged from the cabinet was the man she had been engaged to marry, the man whom she had seen laid away in his coffin and buried in the earth!

Is it any wonder that the poor girl became hysterical? Is it any wonder that she threw her arms about her beloved dead, and sought to hold him in the land of the living? Possessed for the moment of an unnatural strength, she held him tight, screaming her love at him, until the struggles of the ghost and the cruel blackjack of the medium had broken her hold.

The materialization, of course, was a paid employe of the medium. And he really was the girl's fiancé!

It transpired that the man, who lived in Chicago, had a twin brother in Wyoming, who was slowly dying of consumption and had gone west to work on a ranch in hope that the high altitude would help him. Frances knew of the

existence of this twin brother, but she had never seen him. Marion, realizing that the end was near for his brother, had himself heavily insured in his brother's name. He sent for the brother, who came to Chicago while Frances was in Montana with relatives. In Chicago Marion changed lodgings to break contact with those who knew him, and he took his brother's name, and gave his own name to his brother. The brother died in a Chicago hospital under the name of Marion, but Marion was speeding west to Wyoming when the end came. Letters from Frances in Montana were found in the pockets of the dead man, and a telegram brought the heart-broken girl back to Chicago to attend the funeral of her fiancé, as she supposed. Marion, by this fraud, was able to collect the insurance on his own death.

The money did him very little good, however, for he squandered it in mining stocks and gambling and other means, and was soon penniless. He then obtained employment as assistant to the charlatan medium, and did materializations for him, with his face smeared with phosphorescent paint that gave a pale, unearthly radiance to his features in the dark, and yet did not light them up enough so that anyone could certainly recognize his face. It was the flashlight of the grocer that accomplished that.

The strangest part of the whole occurrence is that the girl and the man should meet in this strange way. He had not the slightest notion in the world that his fiancée was in that room, while she, of course, believed him dead.

The insurance company prosecuted the man for fraud, but the medium who employed him departed suddenly, and may still be preying, under another name, upon the credulities of those who want to communicate with their beloved dead. He was a clever magician, and under whatever name he perpetrates his fraudulent tricks, he should be very successful. It is much more lucrative to be a charlatan medium than an honest magician, for rich dupes pay well, whereas the amount of money that can be made by parlor magic is relatively small.

THE girl, Frances, refused to have anything to do with her fiancé thereafter, for the fraud he practised both on her and on the insurance company killed her love. She went to the hospital, suffering from a nervous collapse, after her hysteria at the séance, but she recovered, and afterward returned to Chicago.

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