

Chapter 23: Finger-Printing the Spirits of the Dead Story of Mrs. Margery Crandon

- Nandor Fodor -

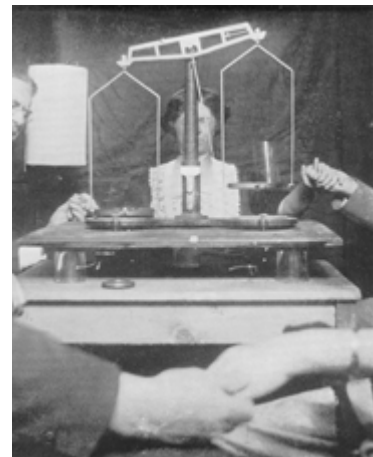
THE GREAT Finger-print Mystery! The words spell a thrilling story. But not fiction this time. It is the most amazing true story of the century. It is the story of a woman who claims to finger-print the spirits of the dead.

The statement may rightly turn Bertillon in his grave. Scotland Yard opening a finger-print department in heaven is not a bad idea for a farce. But when it comes to a definite assertion that the dead can prove their survival by leaving fingerprints behind, the reader is forgiven for a violent start. He may not believe in survival at all. If he does, one thing seems pretty certain. The physical body dies. Even if the surviving ego knew something about the creases, sweat-pores and papillary ridges of his finger-tips, how could it reproduce them?

That is the question! How?

For it appears to be an established fact that through Mrs. Margery Crandon, of Boston, at least in one instance, a dead man claimed to prove his survival by impressing his "ectoplasmically" reborn digit into dental wax. His name was Charles Stanton Hill, a judge of the United States Court in Boston, a member of the Margery Circle. He died on September 2nd, 1930. Previous to his death a register was made of the finger-prints of all the sitters. During the sittings they were obtaining supernormal imprints in wax from "Walter", an entity which purported to be the deceased brother of Margery. And it occurred to them that by the same manifestation in the event of the death of a member of the circle, his survival could be proved.

Judge Hill was the first to go. Six weeks after his death he purported to communicate. While the medium's hands were held under strict control a phantom thumb was seen making three imprints. Mr. J. W. Fyfe, a Boston finger-print expert, examined the prints carefully. He found them perfectly identical with the prints made by Judge Hill during his life.



Super-physical suction cylinder, invisible and impalpable, photographed by fused quartz lens with Margery Crandon.

The facts have not been challenged. The evidence appeared to be perfect. But seance-room happenings are so strange and so much at variance with accepted scientific beliefs that no amount of proof could wake up the world to their significance.

Since 1926 Walter has been delivering hundreds of prints of his ghostly fingers. Among those who testified to the supernormal reception of these imprints was Dr. Robin J. Tillyard, Chief Entomologist to the Commonwealth of Australia. He obtained them in a solus sitting with Margery under conditions that could not be bettered. Moreover, from human fingers only negative imprints can be made. But Walter, the ghost, could produce, by twisting about in his hypothetical fourth dimension, positive, mirror negative and mirror positive imprints as well. He could also enlarge them so that they suggested a giant's thumb. His ingenuity in devising these experiments was simply inexhaustible.

On February 16th, 1932, in the presence of Mr. William H. Button, President of the American Society for Psychical Research, he made a thumb print inside a heavy locked box which could not be opened without the fact immediately becoming apparent. Before two scientists and a fingerprint expert he demonstrated the feat again and again.

That the prints were his own rested solely on Walter's testimony. On a razor, which he used in his lifetime, a partial finger-print was discovered. But it was not sufficient for identification.

Some time after the Hill incident it was discovered that a finger-print alone may not be foolproof evidence of the identity of a ghost. In July, 1931, Walter produced thumb-prints which he declared to be those of Sir Oliver Lodge, who was, at the time, in England, 3,000 miles away. The prints were sent over to England. Mr. Bell, of Scotland Yard, subjected them to a thorough examination and pronounced them identical with the prints of Sir Oliver.

Nineteen such prints were delivered in Boston by Walter without Sir Oliver Lodge having the least idea how his finger-prints were "borrowed" by this ingenious ghost. No mould can be made from a two-dimensional finger-print. An expert would have little difficulty in recognizing a fingerprint made from a mould. If, then, the fingerprints of a living man could be "stolen" survival cannot be proved by finger-prints alone. So much less so as there was apparently no limit to Walter's versatility.

On March 9th, 1932, he made a print "of an infant not yet born but expected in a certain family". It was the imprint of a baby's foot. Walter gave the names of "Mary Jane" and "Mary and Jane". The baby was born, but, unhappily, family reasons made it impossible to obtain verification.

Soon after a bomb exploded, the tremors of which were registered throughout the psychic world.

Mr. E. E. Dudley, the major domo of the Crandon seances for years, announced that the Walter thumb-prints produced in dental wax were found to be identical with those of Dr. X. of Boston, the dentist of Margery. To back up this startling charge, he appealed to finger-print experts of both the Massachusetts State Police and of the Bureau of Criminal Identification of New York City. The experts agreed that the right thumbprints of Walter and the dentist, as submitted to them, were one and the same. The left thumb differed.

The inference which Mr. Dudley drew was that no two man's finger-prints are identical, therefore they are not Walter's. He did not question their supernormal delivery, though. He hardly could have done so, as he had been testifying to that fact for years. But as the investigation ordered by Mr. W. H. Button was drawing out over a long period, Dr. Walter Franklin Prince, the Director of the rival Society of Psychical Research in Boston, rushed into print with the charge that they had been produced by fraud.

The commitment seemed to be over-hasty when, end of 1933, the long-awaited report of the American Society for Psychical Research, with 300 photographic plates, has seen the light. It is a monument of patient and painstaking study. It was drawn up by Mr. Brackett K. Thorogood, former instructor in the mechanical engineering department of Harvard University, Director of the Franklin Union, and Research Consultant of the American Society for Psychical Research. He scrapped the work of many years and, beginning at the beginnings, he claims to have established without a shadow of doubt that:

1. There is no evidence of fraud, trickery, or the use of any normal mechanism in connection with the seance production of the Walter fingerprint phenomena.
2. These Walter phenomena are definitely proved by the evidence to be supernormal.
3. Neither of the Walter hands as a whole nor as to any of the component parts is identical with that of any known person or persons.

The photographs which accompany the report are most impressive. The medium is shown with both hands held while another hand issues from her body around her waist. It was a living human hand, for it gave a vigorous handshake to Dr. Richardson. Instead of fingers, as before, it made impressions, in huge slabs of dental wax, of the whole palm and fingers, so that it was possible to co-ordinate all the prints which were previously obtained. The authenticity of the left thumbprint could not be questioned because of a definite scar cutting

across the thumb at an angle of 30 degrees with the joint line. This scar Walter claimed to have received as a boy while whittling. Of the right thumb-prints micro-photographs are in existence showing the differences of structure between the delta of Walter's right thumb and the delta of Dr. X.'s right thumb.

Except by accusing people of renown and reputation of the greatest and most brazen fraud of the century, it is hardly possible to get away from the fact that the mediumship of Margery has withstood the most rigorous tests that scientific ingenuity could devise.

Incidentally, such an accusation is implied in the answer of the Boston S.P.R. (Bulletin XXII), but the rejoinder, last August, of the American S.P.R. claims crushing counter evidence, little hope being held out for ever achieving general acceptance of the particular facts over which psychical researchers themselves are in passionate disagreement.

Yet the Great Finger-print Mystery is but a sidelight of Margery Crandon's amazing personality. First, she is not a professional medium. She is the wife of Dr. L. R. G. Crandon, who was Professor of Surgery at the Harvard Medical School for sixteen years, and is the author of a standard textbook on surgical after-treatment. Mediumship came to her in experiments undertaken at home partly as a joke, partly out of curiosity. The phenomena which developed were beyond the power and control of the sitters. They brought them proof of human survival and filled them with missionary zeal to prove the same to an abusive and obdurate world of science. As an epic of human heroism little can rival their twelve years' history. The scientists usually quarrelled with each other before they could reach a verdict. But many of them discovered the horizons of a new world with immense vistas of knowledge. None of them has ever brought forward the slightest proof against the Crandons' integrity.

To-day, as a result of instrumental testing, stupendous facts are hammering at the doors of science. It has been proved as well as science is capable of proving anything in the world that the "direct voice" of Spiritualism is no myth, no delusion of fevered imagination. B. K. Thorogood constructed a cubical box consisting of layers of seven different materials, sheathed in copper and soft iron, weighing over a hundred pounds, completely sound-proof, closed and padlocked, containing a large, very sensitive microphone which was connected by two wires emerging from the box to a loudspeaker in a distant room. The voice in space which Walter claimed to be his own was asked to speak into the microphone within the box. He agreed. While the sitters in the seance-room heard nothing the voice of Walter issued from the loudspeaker in another room, proving that it had its origin through the microphone in the box.

This was a conclusive and final proof of the independence of Walter's voice from Margery's.

The voice is full, resonant and masculine; it approximates in range, quality and volume an ordinary human voice. It talks intelligently, shows a great sense of humour, answers questions and carries on argument and conversation in a way that any clever mortal would. The personality of Walter is just as human as that of the sitters. He claims to manifest through the forces provided by the organism of his sister, Margery. He shows no pretence of saintliness and, on occasions, swears and curses in justified indignation. He caught Houdini, at the time of the investigation arranged by the Scientific American in 1923, in "framing up" Margery for purposes of Press sensationalism. He used the most fearful and unprintable language that ever issued from the Great Beyond. It sent Houdini cowering and almost weeping in protest(1).

(1) Malcolm Bird: "Margery, the Medium", London, 1925.

Walter never pretends to know what he can do, but is always ready to try and learn himself.

"I don't give a damn about convincing the public or anyone," he said more than once. "My crowd came here because we liked you people, and you kept us here working at this damn thing."

A few months ago his voice was broadcast from a Boston studio from a gramophone record

which was made in the séance-room. It began:

"This is the voice of Walter speaking."

There followed a hodge-podge of whistling, of amiable nonsense and of threadbare homilies in verse and prose. He parodied Longfellow's poem in this manner:

*"Lives of great men all remind us
That we all can be a bore,
So I'll can this deathly chatter
And I'll whistle something more."*

Then he went on in earnest:

"My friends, I come to you at the request of some of our group to let you hear the sound of a dead man's voice. Years ago, the agency through which I speak would have been thought of as the works of the devil. The Medium would have been burned. You are progressing. Remember the first chapter of Jeremiah, 19th verse: 'And they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee!'

"Many of our sitters have criticized the fact that we from the other side do not bring you facts more necessary to your lives. As a matter of fact, you know all things that (pause) that you ought to know - things to make life better and bigger. The simplest things of life are best - love, honour, all the things that go to unite mankind."

The proofs of Walter's supernormal power are so varied that it is difficult to choose from a great number of startling demonstrations. He claimed that he has superphysical instruments to achieve his ends. In one of the scale experiments of the Scientific American Committee a curious, semitransparent cylinder was photographed with a quartz lens, which is sensitive to the ultra-violet end of the spectrum, when nothing was visible to normal eyesight. It was registered on seven out of twelve exposed plates. The pan that carried it was up. The deduction was that the cylinder is a sort of suction pump to keep the lighter pan up. So Walter's claim forced itself on scientific consideration.

On March 17th, 1928, in red light and with closed eyes Margery began to write in Chinese. She does not know Chinese, nor did the sitters. The purpose, as Walter explained, was to demonstrate that minds other than the sitters and the medium are at work. Walter announced an experiment in "cross-correspondence" with Dr. Henry Hardwicke, a medium of Niagara Falls, a distance of 450 miles from Boston. He asked Malcolm Bird, then Research Officer of the American Society for Psychical Research, to pick out a sentence which should be given in Chinese through Hardwicke. Malcolm Bird chose: "A rolling stone gathers no moss. Hardly was the sitting over when a telegram arrived from Niagara Falls. A few days later it was followed by the original witnessed copy of Dr. Hardwicke's script. It showed a Maltese cross within the circle, a rectangle enclosing the name Kung-fu-tze, the symbols for Bird and Hill, and the Chinese sentence, the general meaning of which is: "A travelling agitator gathers no gold." A further analysis revealed on the left-hand column the words in Chinese: "I am not dead, Confucius." The duplicate of this is in the right-hand column of the Margery script.

These cross-correspondence experiments were repeated through other mediums who knew not a word of Chinese.

Do they leave any avenue of escape from the conclusion that, as claimed, intelligences out of flesh have been devising them? To say that there is another solution is to set up the greatest puzzle which men have ever been called to unravel.