

The First Two Pages: “The Case of the Singular Hands” by Scott Adlerberg

From *The Speculative Detective Agency:*

Case Files of the Supernatural and the Fantastic

Edited by Matthew David Goodwin and Richie Narvaez (Diversion Books)

An Essay by Scott Adlerberg

When offered a chance to submit a story for a new anthology titled *The Speculative Detective Agency: Case Files of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*, I set to work thinking up a character and plot that would fit the anthology’s requirements. The guidelines said the book would be an interconnected collection of stories. Each story was to be a case tackled by one of the agency’s detectives, who each author would create. The SDA would be one of the members of the International Association of Speculative Detectives, and that association is now completing its membership renewal. As part of the renewal process, each detective agency must submit an example of their most interesting cases from the past five years (2020-2025). The world of the anthology would be our world, except that speculative investigation agencies exist. The public knows of them and accepts them. They do solid business, in fact—and concerning the story itself, the editors granted us wide leeway. We could tap into any of the speculative genres: science fiction, horror, fantasy, the supernatural, folklore, etc. Final points, and very important: both the mystery itself and the means of solving the case could be speculative in nature, meaning that we did not have to write a story that seemed

fantastic only to end with a rational (or what some might call a “realistic”) solution.

The story opens with a short paragraph to establish some basic information about my protagonist, the detective. He’s the narrator, and every sentence in the paragraph conveys something essential to understanding either his character or his job.

I don’t have to like all my clients, and I certainly didn’t like Corville Lamont when I met him. But what he described to me, with its uncanny elements, I couldn’t help but find fascinating. As a speculative detective, I was eager to investigate. Besides, I’m a professional. Lamont had contacted our office, and Brooks had assigned me to the case. I love my work, but as with everyone, I need to get paid.

There’s never time to waste in a short story, and in these opening lines, we learn precisely what type of detective our narrator is and his attitude toward his work. The point also is made that he’s a professional, not a sleuth in the amateur tradition, and that he gets his cases assigned to him through his agency. Whether he likes a client or not is immaterial to his job. But who is this client who has contacted the agency office? The name Corville Lamont, I’m hoping, has the sound of a name of someone who is, shall we say, from the upper classes.

Second paragraph:

That morning, dressed in a suit, I left my desk and took the 4 train over to Grand Central. From there, I walked the five blocks up to Lamont’s Park Avenue office. The guard behind a counter in the lobby nodded when I said my name, and he gave me a slick badge with a bar

code that opened the security gate to the elevator terminals. The car I stepped into glided in silence to the thirty-second floor, and after a ping, the doors released me. I met resistance from a wide glass door that blocked access to the reception area, but the young woman sitting there at her computer pressed a button that let me through.

These lines get the story proper started, with the detective in motion to start his work on his case. They also set the scene—mention of the “4 train” and “Grand Central” and “Park Avenue” making it clear that the action is taking place in New York City, specifically Manhattan. Then, when the detective arrives at his appointment, the office receptionist asks him his name, as people do even when they’re expecting that person.

“Mr. Wyvern?”

The name “Wyvern” alludes to *The Wyvern Mystery*, a Victorian-era novel by the Irish author Sheridan Le Fanu. Le Fanu, a master of horror, Gothic drama, and suspense, is best known for his vampire novella, “Carmilla.” That story is one of five in his esteemed collection *In a Glass Darkly*, which purport to be selections from the posthumous papers of one, Dr. Martin Hesselius. In fiction, Hesselius is among the very first occult detectives to appear, and Le Fanu’s classic ghost story, “Green Tea,” which leads off *In a Glass Darkly*, is a story I re-read before starting my speculative detective tale. In “Green Tea,” Hesselius tells us about an English clergyman who is stalked by a spectral, demonic monkey. Nobody else but the clergyman can see the monkey, and it appears to him in private and public spaces.

The clergyman is convinced that the infernal primate is trying to destroy his life, and Hesselius winds up looking into the situation in his attempt to help the man. Similarly, in “The Case of the Singular Hands,” we will get a story about a haunting and an investigation. The title itself hearkens back to the sort of titles a Le Fanu or a Conan Doyle might have used, writers who loved to straddle the line in a mystery between the rational and the supernatural. Wyvern’s case, of course is contemporary, and Wyvern’s client, we will learn, is not a man to just accept that the paranormal has entered his life.

Next paragraph:

We proceeded down a long hall. The receptionist knocked on a door, opened it, and ushered me into an immense office. Behind a desk the size of a compact car sat Lamont, immaculate in his light blue suit, hands folded together on his blotter. The office had dim lighting, a luxurious carpet, paintings on the walls, books on shelves. Near at hand was a bar cabinet and huge windows gave out on Manhattan to the north and east, with Queens visible. I saw a rich, powerful man in his perch, whose demeanor matched the role he indeed had in life— a bank president. But despite the trappings and his air of authority, I could also see the unease Brooks had told me Lamont had reported to him. I knew Lamont’s face from photos I’d eyeballed after googling his name, and in the shots I’d seen of him, he hadn’t had bags under his eyes. At sixty- one, he exuded fitness, with a flat stomach and broad shoulders (I figured he did regular work outs at some fancy gym), but the slump in his shoulders, the language in his body, revealed a lot. The “phenomena,” as he had outlined them to Brooks, were getting to him.

This passage gives the reader their first direct look at Corville Lamont. He sits in his element, a bank executive’s office that’s spacious and elegant, with an

impressive view, a man you assume normally radiates confidence. He would seem to be a man who has a firm sense of control over his life. But Wyvern has his sharp detective's eye, and as the paragraph moves along, he describes what he sees beneath Lamont's veneer of strength. Something is unsettling this client, but that Lamont has apparently referred to this something as "phenomena" tells us that Lamont isn't ready to accept whatever it is that's troubling him. The word implies a belief in a rational universe. Lamont's conflicted attitude toward his problem and the way he needs to project calm and control in the face of something he can't understand comes out in the conversation that follows.

First Lamont offers Wyvern a drink, a worrisome sign considering that it's the morning, and then Lamont talks with a defensiveness that only serves to betray his fear and anxiety.

"Anyone who knows me," he said, voice a self-important bass, "knows I don't believe in nonsense."

"Nonsense?" I said.

"That's right. Nonsense."

I felt a smile coming on but restrained it.

"Mr. Lamont, with all due respect, can you define what you mean by 'nonsense'?"

"I mean the supernatural," he said, one arm now upraised, an index finger pointed at the ceiling. "I never have, and goddamn it, I'd like to say I never will."

"Fair enough," I said. "I'm not here to insult your beliefs."

"My beliefs, Mr. Wyvern? Beliefs? That's what you call them?"

"Whatever you call how you view the world."

"Accurately," he said. "That's how I view it. Without illusion."

"I hear you," I said.

You get the sense that Wyvern isn't fazed by Lamont's bluster, and in the next paragraph, I explain why. Wyvern is quite familiar with the belief system and personality traits that Lamont possesses.

He reminded me of my father, the criminal prosecutor, an ambitious and successful man who'd carried himself with a similar vainglory. He'd never cottoned to my interest in the esoteric and had tried to dissuade me from choosing the career I embarked on. It's one step above charlatanism, he'd said, and his dismay about my work, though it kept me fed and housed and fulfilled, had stuck with him till the day he died.

In a few sentences here, I give a little background information about Wyvern. If truth be told, I did not have this passage in the version of the story I first submitted to the editors, but when they accepted the story for inclusion in the anthology, they supplied some notes, one of which said that Wyvern's voice is engaging but that his interiority a bit limited. The reader, they said, will want a slightly deeper sense of what drives Wyvern, and I could provide this by presenting a few glimpses of his backstory. I agreed with the suggestion and spent a day writing this seventy or so words. The challenge I had: how to weave in background context succinctly, without slowing the narrative, while making the details about Wyvern illustrative of his character. I decided that remarks about his father would work, since it could give a hint of what Wyvern himself has faced in life. And if his father had a disposition not unlike Corville Lamont's, which Wyvern points out, then that resemblance would help him understand his client quickly. Moreover, the

idea of father-son tension will be developed later in the story – the relations between Lamont and his own son are tense – and later too, in another passage I added in response to the editors’ notes, Wyvern will refer to his father again. He’ll allude to both his parents. Contrasting his father’s disdain for his profession with his mother’s more sympathetic view, he will say that it was his mother who encouraged him to develop his gift for “nonrational insight.”

It goes without saying that he will use this gift, as well as logical reasoning, to solve the case Lamont hires him for. It will be a case involving a locked room murder and a pair of avenging, ghostly hands. And by the end of his investigation, Wyvern will have another file to add to the archives of the Speculative Detective Agency.

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Scott Adlerberg is the author of five novels: *Spiders and Flies*, *Jungle Horses*, *Graveyard Love*, *Jack Waters*, and *The Screaming Child*. He has written many short stories and contributes pieces regularly to sites such as *CrimeReads* and *Mystery Tribune*. Every summer, he hosts the Word for Word Reel Talks film commentary series in Bryant Park in Manhattan. He was born in New York City and lives in Brooklyn.

