

HOLDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The **STORY** of
A **STRANGE**
FRIENDSHIP

The curious narrative
describing the rela-
tionship between the
leading exponent of
Spiritualism and his
foremost opponent



BY **BERNARD M. L. ERNST AND
MEREWALD CARRINGTON**

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

by
Bernard M. L. Ernst
and
Hereward Carrington

HARRY HOUDINI spent the last years of his life in a crusade against fake spirit mediums. He wanted to believe in spiritualism, but he could not.

Conan Doyle devoted to the cause of spiritualism all the money and fame he got out of Sherlock Holmes; he cared more about spiritualism than about anything else in the world.

These men had diametrically opposite views on the subject which meant most to them; yet they were friends and mutual admirers, and they kept up for many months the correspondence on which this book is based. They wrote mostly about the subject nearest their hearts. Doyle arranged sittings with mediums for Houdini;

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The authors wish to acknowledge with thanks the courtesy of the publishers in permitting quotations from the following works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: *The Edge of the Unknown*, G. P. Putnam's Sons; *Memories and Adventures*, Little, Brown & Company; *Our American Adventure*, Doubleday, Doran and Company.



CONAN DOYLE AND HOUDINI

HISTORY
Ernst

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

**THE STORY OF A
STRANGE FRIENDSHIP**

BY

BERNARD M. L. ERNST

PRESIDENT OF THE PARENT ASSEMBLY OF THE SOCIETY OF
AMERICAN MAGICIANS

AND

HEREWARD CARRINGTON

MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH



ALBERT AND CHARLES BONI, INC.

NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1932, BY BERNARD M. L. ERNST

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE HOUDINI-DOYLE CORRESPONDENCE

BOTH *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini were household names throughout the world—the one primarily for his tales of Sherlock Holmes, the other for his remarkable escapes from jails and restraints of every variety.*

Both men were outstanding characters of pronounced strength and individuality. Both men became, during the latter years of their lives, profoundly interested in Spiritualism and the subject of spirit-return. Yet from what different standpoints! Houdini, in his varied experiences, seemed to have encountered nothing but fraud and trickery. Doyle asserted, on the contrary, "I KNOW spirit-return to be a fact."

The direct issue! Reading their correspondence, one cannot but be struck by the earnestness of both men, so opposed in thought. Their letters show this. They also show the admiration each man had for the other—surely one of the most curious friendships in history!

These Titans met in battle. Each man had a silent army behind him, urging him on: those who believe in a spiritual world, and those who do not; those who are personally and profoundly convinced, and those who believe not at all.

The world owes both these men a debt of gratitude. Hundreds of thousands have read Conan Doyle's stories, and have been thrilled, amused and entertained by them. He created, in Sherlock Holmes, an immortal character in English fiction.

Hundreds of thousands, again, have been stirred, puzzled and entertained by Houdini's extraordinary feats—his dexterity, ingenuity and skill, and by the man himself. For he himself is an immortal character in the lives of many.

Their letters constitute a unique document.

CONTENTS

THE HOUDINI-DOYLE CORRESPONDENCE...	5
CHAPTER I	11
Houdini: life and character — His performance at the Palace, Blackburn — His collections — His training — Conan Doyle's estimate of his character — Doyle: his beliefs, his attitude toward fraudulent mediums — Sketch of his life — Sketch of Houdini's career — The question of the Davenport Brothers — Doyle's belief that Houdini had supernatural power.	
CHAPTER II	47
Doyle's explanation of fraud among mediums — The exposure of Chambers — The Spiritualists themselves the leading unmaskers of fraud — Eva C. — Mrs. Wriedt — Dr. Crawford and his "cantilever theory" of levitation.	
CHAPTER III	69
Houdini's performance at the London Hippodrome — His brush with Jess Willard — Kellar on Spiritualism — Mrs. Brittain.	
CHAPTER IV	89
Sir William Crookes's investigations of spiritualistic phenomena — D. D. Home, Kate Fox, Florence Cook — The case of Slade and his slate-writing — The Wright "fairy photographs" — Doyle believed Houdini was super-normal — Instances of Doyle's keenness — Doyle and the banquet of the Society of American Magicians — Doyle puzzles the conjurers with the monsters in "The Lost World" — Houdini dragged on the stage at Raymond Hitchcock's "Pinwheel Revue."	

CHAPTER V	109
Brief history of Spiritualism: the Fox Sisters; the Davenport; Home; Annie Eva Fay; Florence Cook; Palladino; Mme. Blavatsky; foundation of the British Society for Psychical Research; Mrs. Piper; Eglinton; the Bangs Sisters; Anna O'delia Diss DeBar — Mrs. L. E. Piper, William James, and Sir Oliver Lodge — Bert Reese — Houdini's account of his experiences with Reese, Fräulein Rothe, and Baynes, and his own early Spiritualistic performances — Palladino — Spirit photographs — Ada Besinnet.	
CHAPTER VI	132
The "Crewe Circle" — Doyle's defense — Edward H. Morrell, the original of Jack London's <i>Star Rover</i> — Doyle inspects Houdini's collection of literature on Spiritualism — Houdini's account of how Doyle was deceived at seances — Houdini's explanation of Hope and Palladino — A message "from Houdini's mother" — correspondence with the <i>New York Times</i> — A present from Houdini to Doyle.	
CHAPTER VII	154
The Houdinis and the Doyles at Atlantic City — Automatic writing — Lady Doyle gives a sitting — Houdini's account — His article in a New York paper — Doyle's reply — Houdini's explanation — Doyle's insistence — Houdini's sworn statement — His habit of rationalization.	
CHAPTER VIII	186
The <i>Scientific American</i> Prize — Houdini's membership on the committee, and Doyle's attitude toward this — the Margery case — Doyle and the Zancigs; Kemp; Mrs. Eddy — Father Heredia — Rinn — Doyle's Western tour in 1923 — the beginning of the break — The end of a strange friendship.	
CHAPTER IX	206
Correspondence between Doyle and Mrs. Houdini after Houdini's death — Mrs. Houdini tries to get spirit communications from her husband — Some important letters from the Houdini collection — Messages from Houdini?	
CHAPTER X	228
Correspondence between Doyle and B. M. L. Ernst — Death of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle — More efforts at communication with Houdini — The Ford message — Letter from Doyle to Harold Kellock, Houdini's biographer — Inexplicable "spiritualistic" feats performed by Houdini.	

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER ONE

THIS is the story of one of the strangest friendships in history.

It is that between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—physician, author, creator of the world-famed Sherlock Holmes—and Harry Houdini, master magician, escape artist, jail breaker, mystifier extraordinary.

Both men, during the latter years of their lives, became profoundly interested in the subject of Spiritualism and spirit-return. Yet their views differed from one another's as widely as the views of any two men well could. Houdini the sceptic, the exposé of fraudulent mediums, the Doubting Thomas; Doyle the believer, the champion of Spiritualism not only as a fact but as a religion.

They disagreed absolutely on almost every conceivable point connected with the subject. In the press and on the public platform they launched vigorous campaigns against each other. Each man tried to convert the other to his views through propaganda and

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

correspondence. Their minds remained as divergent as the poles.

Nevertheless each man had profound respect, admiration, almost affection for the other. They met, they discussed these topics, they disagreed more fundamentally than ever. Yet Houdini is constantly reiterating his friendship and his esteem for Conan Doyle; and Doyle wrote, in one of his letters to Mrs. Houdini: "He was a great master of his profession and, in some ways, the most remarkable man I have ever known."

Houdini visited Sir Arthur in his home in England. Doyle visited Houdini in his home in New York. They spent several week-ends together, during which they spent long hours discussing psychic phenomena. Houdini attended Doyle's lectures, while Doyle witnessed Houdini's exhibitions upon the public stage. Doyle attended a meeting of the Society of American Magicians. Houdini obtained sittings with scores of mediums, both in this country and abroad. Lady Doyle gave a private sitting to Houdini, in an endeavor to convert him to the belief in spirit return. Houdini gave private demonstrations to Conan Doyle, performing well-nigh miraculous feats, in an endeavor to convince him that baffling and incredible mysteries could be evoked by pure sleight-of-hand.

And all this time their personal regard and esteem for one another remained unaffected!

It was only after several years that the rift be-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

tween them began to widen—that their letters became briefer and fewer—until they finally ceased altogether, some two years before Houdini's death.

Less than four years later, Sir Arthur himself passed into the Great Beyond, in the reality of which he so firmly believed. He awaited the end tranquilly and peacefully, writing and battling for the Cause to the last, and anticipating the renewal of his controversy with Houdini as soon as he had crossed the Border. In a letter to Mr. Ernst, written shortly before, he had said:

“... I write this in bed, as I have broken down badly, and have developed Angina Pectoris. So there is just a chance that I may talk it all over with Houdini himself before very long. I view the prospect with perfect equanimity. That is one thing that psychic knowledge does. It removes all fear of the future...”

Manly words from a fine, brave soul.

Typically, Houdini died fighting to the end. The facts connected with his death are well known, and need not be reiterated—how a powerful blow on the abdomen ruptured his appendix, how he concealed his injury from everyone and insisted upon giving his last performances while bathed in sweat, writhing in agony and so weak he could not lift his foot from the stage. He felt that he had conquered everything in life before, and that he would conquer this too. His will and his determination carried him through. At the conclusion of the performance he collapsed; he was rushed to the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

hospital, operated upon immediately, but it was then too late. Yet even then, when the attendant physicians expected every hour to be his last, he lived on for days and days, finally dying in his wife's arms, unable to speak, but with his mind still keen and alert, his eyes fastened upon her face.

Their deaths were typical of their lives: Conan Doyle peaceful, serene, confident of meeting his loved ones in the Great Beyond; Houdini questioning, fighting—fighting to the last with indomitable energy.

No better illustration could be found of Houdini's life and mind, perhaps, than the following account of one of his "challenges," when he was still presenting his handcuff act. It gives us a vivid picture of the man's courage, skill and invincible determination. It is:

(From *The Star*, Blackburn, England, Oct. 25, 1902)

MANACLED BY A STRONG MAN

Unparalleled Scenes at the Palace Theatre

NEVER in the history of Blackburn or music hall life has there been witnessed so remarkable a scene as occurred last night. Houdini, the Handcuff King, and Mr. Hodgson, principal of the School of Physical Culture, provided a big sensation for the patrons of the Palace Theatre, Blackburn.

Houdini, who has been appearing at the Palace during the week, claims to be able to release himself from any of the regulation shackles or irons used by the Police of Europe or

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

America, and offered nightly to forfeit £25 if he failed to prove his claim.

Mr. Hodgson . . . took up the challenge, stipulating that he was to use his own irons and fix them himself. Houdini consented, and deposited the £25 with the editor of the *Daily Star*.

The trial of skill and strength was fixed to take place last night, and the crowd which came together to witness it crammed the theatre literally from floor to ceiling—even standing room being utterly unobtainable.

Shortly after ten o'clock the parties of the challenge faced each other, and excitement at once became intense.

Mr. Hodgson produced six pairs of heavy irons, furnished with clanking chains and swinging padlocks. These were carefully examined by Houdini, who raised some disappointment and much sympathetic cheering by stating that his claim was that he could escape from "regulation" irons. The "cuffs" brought by Mr. Hodgson, he said, had been tampered with—the iron being wrapped round with string, the locks altered, and various other expedients adopted to render escape more difficult.

Mr. Hodgson's answer, given dramatically from the stage, was that he stipulated that he should bring his own irons.

Houdini again protested that Mr. Hodgson was going beyond the challenge, but added that he was quite willing to go on, if only the audience would give him a little time in which to deal with the extra difficulties.

This announcement was greeted with great cheering, and the work of pinioning proceeded.

First, Mr. Hodgson, with the aid of a companion, fixed a pair of irons over Houdini's upper arm, passing the chain behind his back and pulling it tight, and fixing the elbows close to the sides.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

To make assurance doubly sure, he fixed another pair in the same way, and padlocked both behind.

Then, starting with the wrists, he fixed a pair of chained "cuffs" so that the arms, already pulled stiffly behind, were now pulled forward. The pulling and tugging at this stage was so severe—the strong man exerting all his strength to some purpose—that Houdini protested that it was no part of the challenge that his arms should be broken.

He also reminded Mr. Hodgson that he was to fix the irons himself.

This led to Mr. Hodgson's assistant retiring.

Proceeding, Mr. Hodgson fixed a second pair of "cuffs" on the wrists and padlocked both securely, Houdini's arms being then trussed to his sides so securely that escape seemed absolutely impossible.

Still Mr. Hodgson was not finished with him.

Getting Houdini to kneel down, he passed the chain of a pair of heavy leg irons through the chains which bound the arms together at the back. These were fixed to the ankles, and after a second pair had been added, both were locked, and Houdini now seemed absolutely helpless.

A canopy being placed over Houdini in the middle of the stage, the waiting began, and excitement grew visibly every minute.

Meanwhile Mr. Hodgson and others kept strict watch on the movements of Houdini's wife and brother (Hardeen), who were both on the stage.

At the end of about 15 minutes, the canopy was lifted and Houdini was revealed lying on his side, still securely bound. It was at first thought he had fainted, but he soon made it known that all he wished was to be lifted up. This Mr. Hodgson refused to do, at which the now madly excited audience hissed and "booed" him for his unfair treatment, and Hardeen lifted his brother to his knees. The curtain of the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

cabinet was again closed.

Another 20 minutes passed, and again the curtain was lifted. This time Houdini said his arms were bloodless and numb owing to the pressure of the irons, and asked to have them unlocked for a minute so that the circulation could be restored.

Mr. Hodgson's reply, given amidst howls, was, "This is a contest, not a love match. If you are beaten, give in."

Great shouting and excited calling followed, which was renewed when Dr. Bradley, after examining Houdini, said his arms were blue and it was cruelty to keep him chained up as he was any longer.

Still Mr. Hodgson was obdurate, and the struggle proceeded, Houdini again appealing for time.

Fifteen minutes more: Houdini appeared and announced that one hand was free.

This was the signal for terrific cheering, which was continued after the canopy was dropped.

At intervals Houdini now appeared, and announced further progress in his escape; and when, shortly after midnight, he came out with torn clothing and bleeding arms, and threw the last of the shackles on the stage, the vast audience stood up and cheered and cheered, and yelled themselves hoarse to give vent to their overwrought feelings. Men and women hugged each other in mad excitement. Hats, coats and umbrellas were thrown up into the air, and pandemonium reigned supreme for fifteen minutes.

Houdini, when quietness had been restored, said that he had been doing the handcuff trick now for fourteen years, but never had he been subjected to such brutality as that to which his bleeding arms and wrists gave witness.

When Houdini again obtained a hearing, it was to state that, not only had the irons been altered but the locks had been plugged.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

It was well after midnight when the huge audience left the theatre, and broke up into excited, gesticulating crowds.

When Houdini turned his attention to the investigation of Spiritualism, he attacked the problem with his customary vigor and energy. He obtained sittings with a number of mediums, both in this country and abroad, and noted the results of his sittings in his Diary. Sir Arthur gave him cards of introduction to a number of these mediums, on which he frequently stated that, while Houdini had the reputation of being antagonistic, he was not so in reality, but was actually searching for the truth. These sittings almost invariably yielded negative results, or were complete failures. Houdini also bought up extensive collections of books, and at the time of his death possessed hundreds of volumes dealing with the subject, as well as letters and documentary evidence of all kinds.

Houdini's collection of material bearing upon magical and psychic topics of all kinds was a fearful and wonderful thing. His purely magical library was of course the finest in the world (with the single exception of that owned by Mr. Harry Price), while his collection of hand-bills, programmes, posters and advertising matter of all sorts was unique and unparalleled. His collection of works dealing with Spiritualism and psychic phenomena was, however, far more unequal and lopsided. He possessed scores of volumes of old spiritualistic magazines, such as "The Spiritual-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

ist," "Medium and Daybreak," etc., neatly and uniformly bound. He had gathered together hundreds of pamphlets of all sorts on the subject, newspaper clippings by the thousand, advertising matter, letters, posters, material bearing upon the subject in every conceivable way. He had shown himself to be a veritable magpie, in collecting material of this sort! Personal letters from many of the old Spiritualists were bought by him, read and annotated. He even possessed a very complete collection of letters and documents relating to the famous Diamond Necklace mystery—including personal letters from Cagliostro, Marie Antoinette, Cardinal de Rohan, and many others. In his secret archives he had, filed away, details and information, which he had unearthed, regarding the personal life-histories of practically everyone connected with the subject—and this, not only regarding mediums, but investigators and others as well! He had in his files records of these individuals back to the day of their birth, and, as one prominent magician said, not long after Houdini's death, "there are things in those files about me which I could swear no one but God knew!" The quantity of this material and testimony he had accumulated for his own records was almost appalling, and filled scores of huge packing cases, which were stored away in the cellar of his house.

He spared himself neither time, money nor effort in order to secure this material. He must have spent

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

thousands of dollars in acquiring it, and he employed a regular net-work of spies to conduct his investigations. Probably no other living man would have either the means or the inclination to prosecute this inquiry as he did, nor would he have had the interest and the specialized knowledge to do so. All this rendered him the formidable antagonist and the unique personality that he was. If he went into a thing, he did it thoroughly. If he studied locks, he bought up every lock he could trace for two or three hundred years, and studied the mechanism. When he first went to Germany, he apprenticed himself to a locksmith for two months, in order to learn the details of German locks. When he studied jail breaking, he visited almost every jail in Europe and America, and made his escape from most of them. When he studied safe-opening, he made a thorough historical and mechanical study of their mechanism, locks, combinations, vaults, the methods employed by burglars in opening safes, and so forth. Nothing proved too much trouble when he was on a quest of this sort. His active mind absorbed every detail, while his shrewd penetration enabled him always to keep just "one step ahead of the game." Had Houdini elected to be a crook, he would doubtless have been one of the world's greatest; but he always worked hand-in-glove with the police, and they availed themselves of his expert knowledge on more than one occasion.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In addition to his extraordinary knowledge of the history and methods of crime and trickery of all sorts and of every variety, Houdini also possessed other remarkable and unique qualities and characteristics which served to place him on quite a different level from his many imitators. It is for this reason that there will probably never be another Houdini. He possessed great physical strength, and was a powerful long-distance swimmer. He could hold his breath for approximately three minutes, while under water. He inured himself to cold by daily baths in ice water, with large cakes of ice floating on the surface! He could use either hand with almost equal dexterity, and in addition to this had trained his feet so that he could pick up a needle and thread it with his toes! This he doubtless found of the greatest use in some of his handcuff escapes. Houdini was also a contortionist, and could manipulate his arms and shoulders in a way that would be quite impossible to the ordinary man. This he had learned as a boy, when travelling with a circus. In addition to all this, Houdini rarely slept more than four hours, and, no matter how late he had gone to bed the previous evening (he often worked all night), he would be up early the next morning, thinking and planning some new escape, or absorbed in some matter which occupied his field of attention for the time being. In these respects, Houdini was a remarkable man—ingenious, resourceful, tireless and de-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

terminated. It is unlikely that the world will see his equal, again, for many years to come.

Sir Arthur's estimate of Houdini may be gathered from his own summary, in his *Edge of the Unknown* (pp. 1-62), which incidentally gives a very judicious summary of many points in his character. After dealing at some length with Houdini's great courage, his love of home and wife, and his charity, he continues:

... A prevailing feature of his character was a vanity which was so obvious and childish that it became more amusing than offensive. I can remember, for example, that when he introduced his brother to me, he did it by saying, "This is the brother of the great Houdini." This without any twinkle of humour and in a perfectly natural manner.

This enormous vanity was combined with a passion for publicity which knew no bounds, and which must at all costs be gratified. There was no consideration of any sort which would restrain him if he saw his way to an advertisement. Even when he laid flowers upon the graves of the dead it was in the prearranged presence of the local photographers.

It was this desire to play a constant public part which had a great deal to do with his furious campaign against Spiritualism. He knew that the public took a keen interest in the matter, and that there was unlimited publicity to be had from it. He perpetually offered large sums to any medium who would do this or that, knowing well that even in the unlikely event of the thing being done he could always raise some objection and get out of it. Sometimes his tactics were too obvious to be artistic...

Apart from his amazing courage, he was remarkable

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

for his cheery urbanity in every-day life. One could not wish a better companion so long as one was with him, though he might do and say the most unexpected things when one was absent. He was, like most Jews, estimable in his family relationships. His love for his dead mother seemed to be the ruling passion of his life, which he expressed on all sorts of public occasions in a way which was, I am sure, sincere, but is strange to our colder Western blood. There were as many things in Houdini which were Oriental as there were in our own Disraeli. He was devoted also to his wife, and with good reason, for she was as devoted to him, but again his intimacy showed itself in unconventional ways. When in his examination before the Senatorial Committee he was hard-pressed by some defender of Spiritualism who impugned his motives in his violent and vindictive campaign against mediums, his answer was to turn to his wife and to say, "I have always been a good boy, have I not?"

It is curious to note that this charge of personal vanity might perhaps be laid at the door of Sir Arthur himself, though in a lesser degree. If Houdini felt that *his* must be the final word upon the settlement of this question; if he constantly inserted photographs of himself in his various books, in company with various celebrities, so also did Doyle. Thus, in an article in the *Journal* of the Society for Physical Research (Vol. XVII, p. 273), he says: "With all modesty I am inclined to ask, is there any man on this globe who is doing as much psychic research as I?" In his *Second American Adventure*, Doyle publishes photographs of himself in company with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, the Rev. Vale Owen, and other celebrities.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Many examples of this unconscious vanity might be found in his writings.

It is indeed a curious thing that both these men, whom one would expect to find so cautious and so accurate in their published works, were alike extremely careless in their summaries of historic material. In his *Magician Among the Spirits*, Houdini is guilty of many historic blunders—names, dates, facts of all kinds being incorrectly given. It would be possible to fill several typewritten pages with these errors. Doyle, on the other hand, in his *History of Spiritualism*, makes many inaccurate and erroneous statements—even when the actual reports, from which he was quoting, were before his eyes. Both men wrote heatedly and with obvious bias. Both lacked that calm, judicial attitude toward the question, which is so essential for forming any just estimate of it. As Dr. Prince remarked: "Houdini shows his bias especially by the selection, for the most part, of mediums and phenomena long regarded, by most careful researchers in America and England, as either spurious or very dubious, and by silence concerning psychics and phenomena generally treated with respect by such persons. Doyle shows his bias by the ingenuity of his defense of some of the most doubtful characters of the past and by his oversight of unpleasant particulars."

The approach of Conan Doyle and Houdini to these questions was naturally as different as their

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

respective viewpoints would lead us to expect. Houdini's mental attitude would probably have been: "Here is some new and clever trick which I must expose." Doyle's attitude, on the other hand, would have been: "I am in the presence of a new revelation from the Great Beyond; I must approach it in a spirit of reverence and prayer." He implicitly and firmly believed in the reality of spirit-communication, and in the overshadowing presence of a spiritual world, and he moulded his life and his thoughts accordingly.

Doyle not only believed in the actuality of this super-sensible world, but he also felt firmly convinced that it was peopled with invisible beings like ourselves, freed of their material bodies, who could and at times did communicate with us, through the instrumentality of certain individuals termed "mediums." The proof of their persistence consisted for the most part in these very communications, and the proofs which were apparently offered of their presence and personal identity. These "proofs" theoretically consisted of statements regarding their own past memories and lives, which the medium apparently could not have known, but which were subsequently verified and found accurate—or in manifestations of an extraordinary character, which seem to run counter to the accepted order of nature, and which could only have been produced by beings no longer subject to its laws. The former represent the mental phenomena, while the latter ex-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

press the purely physical. We shall not now discuss the validity of either of these contentions—that is not the province of the present editors. The fact remains that Doyle fully accepted the reality of these phenomena, on the strength of his reading and his own personal experiences, while Houdini completely rejected them, for precisely similar reasons. There are those who think that Doyle was right, there are those who think that Houdini was right—and there are those who believe that *both* men were mistaken in their hundred-per-cent acceptance or rejection of psychic phenomena. The truth in this matter is assuredly largely pragmatic, and must be settled by each individual in his own manner, and to his own ultimate satisfaction.

And now a few words regarding Conan Doyle the man, and his viewpoint. Doyle was of course a Spiritualist, in every sense of the word. He believed implicitly in the reality of a spiritual world, and in the possibility of survival and communication. He believed that this had been demonstrated to him time and time again, in the course of his investigations, and especially through the mediumship of his wife, Lady Doyle, who had developed the faculty of so-called automatic writing. Once thoroughly convinced, Doyle threw himself into the fray with every ounce of energy and enthusiasm he possessed. He wrote, he travelled, he lectured constantly upon the subject. Doubtless he exerted no little influence upon a certain section of the public,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

by reason of the sincerity of his convictions and the true uprightness and nobility of his character. If ever there was a whole-hearted believer, he was one. And it may be as well, just here, to state exactly——

WHAT AND WHY CONAN DOYLE BELIEVED

This may, perhaps, best be stated in his own words, when he says (*Memories and Adventures*, pp. 392-94):

“People ask me, not unnaturally, what it is which makes me so perfectly certain that this thing is true. That I am perfectly certain is surely demonstrated by the mere fact that I have abandoned my congenial and lucrative work, left my home for long periods at a time, and subjected myself to all sorts of inconveniences, losses, and even insults, in order to get the facts home to the people.

“To give all my reasons would be to write a book rather than a chapter; but I may say briefly that there is no physical sense which I possess which has not been separately assured, and that there is no conceivable method by which a spirit could show its presence which I have not on many occasions experienced. In the presence of Miss Besinnet as medium, and of several witnesses, I have seen my mother and my nephew, young Oscar Hornung, as plainly as ever I saw them in life—so plainly that I could almost have counted the wrinkles of the one and the freckles of the other.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

"In the darkness the face of my mother shone up, peaceful, happy, slightly inclined to one side, the eyes closed. My wife upon my right and the lady upon my left both saw it as clearly as I did. The lady had not known my mother in life but she said, 'How wonderfully like she is to her son,' which will show how clear was the detail of the features.

"On another occasion my son came back to me. Six persons heard his conversation with me, and signed a paper afterwards to that effect. It was in his voice and concerned itself with what was unknown to the medium, who was bound and breathing deeply in her chair. If the evidence of six persons of standing and honor may not be taken, then how can any human fact be established?

"My brother, General Doyle, came back with the same medium, but on another occasion. He discussed the health of his widow. She was a Danish lady, and he wanted her to use a masseur in Copenhagen. He gave the name. I made inquiries and found that such a man did exist. Whence came this knowledge? Who was it who took so close an interest in the health of this lady? If it was not her dead husband then who was it?

"All fine-drawn theories of the subconscious go to pieces before the plain statement of the intelligence, 'I am a spirit. I am Innes. I am your brother.'

"I have clasped materialized hands.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

“I have held long conversations with the direct voice.

“I have smelt the peculiar ozone-like smell of ectoplasm.

“I have listened to prophecies which were quickly fulfilled.

“I have seen the ‘dead’ glimmer up upon a photographic plate which no hand but mine had touched.

“I have received through the hand of my own wife, notebooks full of information which was utterly beyond her ken.

“I have seen heavy articles swimming in the air, untouched by human hand, and obeying directions given by unseen operators.

“I have seen spirits walk round the room in fair light and join in the talk of the company.

“I have known an untrained woman, possessed by an artist spirit, to produce rapidly a picture, now hanging in my drawing-room, which few living painters could have bettered.

“I have read books which might have come from great thinkers and scholars, and which were actually written by unlettered men who acted as the medium of the unseen intelligence, so superior to their own. I have recognized the style of a dead writer which no parodist could have copied, and which was written in his own handwriting.

“I have heard singing beyond earthly power, and

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

whistling done with no pause for the intake of breath.

“I have seen objects from a distance projected into a room with closed doors and windows.

“If a man can see, hear and feel all this, and yet remain unconvinced of unseen intelligent forces around him, he would have good cause to doubt his own sanity. Why should he heed the chatter of irresponsible journalists, or the head-shaking of inexperienced men of science, when he has himself had so many proofs? They are babies in this matter, and should be sitting at his feet. . . .”

It must not be thought, however, that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle shut his eyes to the fraud which frequently came to light upon careful inquiry. But he did believe that many of the “exposures” of mediums were not really exposures, but rather represented unconscious fraud on the part of the medium, or occasionally a deliberate “frame-up” on the part of the investigators. Yet he admitted, of course, that trickery often existed. Thus he wrote:

“A retinue of rogues has been attracted to Spiritualism by the fact that séances have been largely held in the dark, when the object has been to produce physical phenomena. This has served as a screen for villainy. When such fraud has been discovered it has naturally come before the police courts and been re-

ported in the papers, while the successful work of the honest mediums gets no public notice."

There is some truth in what Sir Arthur claims, to be sure, and impartial and unbiased accounts of any psychic phenomena are the hardest things in the world to procure. Unpleasant material always makes "news," while pleasant material does not! An exposure or a medium's "confession" will attract wide publicity, whereas a whole series of strikingly successful séances will never be noted at all. Furthermore, it is known that unconscious fraud frequently *does* exist. In a case investigated by Professor Hyslop, some years ago, the medium said that she would give the signal for the taking of flashlight photographs, when phenomena were in actual progress. She gave the signals sure enough, and the flashlights were taken—which, upon development, plainly showed the medium herself producing the manifestations! When she was shown the photographs, she was dumbfounded. Her arms had become insensible during the séance, and she had no idea what they were doing. When she found that she was producing the manifestations herself, she promptly stopped giving séances. Here, then, was a case in which unconscious fraud was clearly evidenced. But of course the "phenomena" ceased to be phenomena in consequence, and resolved themselves into normally produced movements of objects, of which the medium was not conscious.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Again, in a letter to "Samri Frikell," Sir Arthur says:

"We should have no hushing up or apologies but always face the facts and so cleanse the movement. . . . Judas always turns up.

"You are wrong in saying I object to conjurers. Jeffry, the chairman of the Scottish Amateur Conjurers, is a spiritualist and a friend. So are others. But I object to any man who comes to a sitting throwing out thoughts of suspicion and ill will. 'Of one accord,' says the Bible, and that is my experience. If a critic had been in the upper room they would never have got the tongues of fire. Harmony is everything. After all, no conjurer was needed to expose the Thompsons, nor can I remember any case where more was needed than common sense. I am sure no medium has ever deceived me. . . ."

In this, of course, Conan Doyle was undoubtedly in error. Probably no living man could say that. But the above extracts will at least serve to show that Doyle was perfectly open-minded and sincere in his acceptance of proofs—once those proofs were actually forthcoming.

It is indeed interesting to compare the lives of these two men—so different in their points of view—for their relative material and mental backgrounds must constitute, in a sense, a key to their later beliefs. A greater contrast can hardly be imagined.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh, in 1859, into a fairly well-to-do family of Irish descent. As might be expected, he was reared a stanch Roman Catholic, and was sent to a Catholic school, where he was trained under the Jesuits, first at Hodder and afterwards at Stonyhurst. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University, finally taking there his degree of M.D. For many years after that, he remained a struggling young doctor, in London, and it was during this period of his life that he became virtually a materialist, feeling forced to give up the earlier orthodox beliefs in which he had been grounded. As he says of himself, in his *Memories and Adventures*:

“Judging . . . by all the new knowledge which came to me both from my reading and from my studies, I found that the foundations not only of Roman Catholicism but of the whole Christian faith, as presented to me in nineteenth century theology, were so weak that my mind could not build upon them. It is to be remembered that these were the days when Huxley, Tyndall, Darwin, Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill were our chief philosophers, and that even the man in the street felt the strong sweeping current of their thought, while to the young student, eager and impressionable, it was overwhelming. . . . It was, then, all Christianity, and not Roman Catholicism alone, which had alienated my mind and driven me to agnosticism. . . . This negative position was so firm that it seemed to me to be a

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

terminus: whereas it proved only a junction on the road of life where I was destined to change from the old well-worn line on to a new one. . . .”

In 1880, young Doyle, then a third-year medical student, spent seven months whaling in the Arctic. The next year, as a full-fledged doctor, he took a trip to West Africa, in the capacity of ship's surgeon. On his return to England, and the resumption of his medical practice, he began to write—at first short articles and stories and, later, novels. His first work of consequence was *The Firm of Girdlestone*; this was followed by *A Study in Scarlet*, *Micah Clarke*, *The Sign of Four*, etc., leading naturally to the “Sherlock Holmes” stories, which assured his literary fame. Thenceforward, his output was almost continuous. He gave up his medical practice, devoting his entire time to literary activities. These were several times interrupted, however, by adventurous interludes. He accompanied Kitchener in his Egyptian campaign, went through the Boer War in South Africa, and the World War, on the British, French and Italian fronts. He visited America in 1914. His immediate family lost heavily in the war, his beloved son Kingsley being among them. It was only with the coming of peace that Doyle decided to devote the remainder of his life to the furtherance of the subject now nearest to his heart—the propagation of Spiritualism as a fact and as a religion.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

It must not be thought that Doyle's interest was new, however, or that the death of his son Kingsley had influenced him greatly in the direction of belief. He had in fact joined the Society for Psychological Research some thirty years before, and had been a student of the subject ever since. In 1920, he visited Australia on a lecture tour, and, in 1921-22 and again in 1923, he toured America, addressing large audiences everywhere on the subject of Spiritualism. It was during these trips that he came into close touch with Houdini, and the two spent many hours together, discussing the subject.

Houdini's career was as different from that just depicted as anyone can well imagine. Born in 1874, of Hungarian parents—his real name being Ehrich Weiss—Houdini ran away from home when twelve years of age, and for a number of years thereafter appeared in saloons, music halls, side-shows and museums as a magician and minor escape artist. He joined a circus, ran a Punch and Judy show, became a ventriloquist, a comedian, a trapeze artist, a tie-cutter—everything, in short, which offered an outlet for his superabundant mental and physical energy, and which served to make honest money. His first escape work was from rope-ties, which gradually led into handcuffs and other similar methods. For several years he specialized in this, before branching out into his more spectacular feats—escapes from prison cells, bags,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

boxes, milk-cans, coffins, strait-jackets, barrels, glass tanks, restraints of any and every description. For some time, he did a "mind-reading act" with his wife. It was only natural that a man with his training and background should remain completely sceptical of the performances of professional "mediums," and when, during the latter years of his life, he delved deeply into this subject, it was in order to expose the tricks and the huge underground system of fraud which his experience and his investigations had shown him to exist.

In so far as it was devoted to this end, no reasonable person could criticise Houdini's activities; every intelligent spiritualist, every competent psychic investigator, knows that there is an enormous amount of swindling going on all the time, by bogus mediums, "clairvoyants" and fortune tellers; they have in fact unmasked much of this themselves. The ire of the spiritualists was aroused, however, when Houdini proceeded to attack everything and everyone connected with the movement. They claimed (not without justification) that Houdini knew very little of the purely *mental* phenomena, having come in contact almost exclusively with the so-called "physical" manifestations, and that there were many competent and intelligent investigators who, while fully alive to the difficulties and fraud connected with the subject, nevertheless believed, on the strength of their own personal experiences, that genuine phenomena existed. It was largely upon this

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

point that Houdini and Sir Arthur clashed. The former contended that genuine psychic phenomena do not exist and never have existed; the latter that they both *do* and *have*, and that they may ultimately be encountered by any honest searcher after the truth.

What a clash of opinion! Never, perhaps, in the history of the world have two men, holding such diametrically opposite views, been brought into friendly contact, and never have they, while continuing to hold their views, held one another in higher personal esteem. The mutual admiration of these two men, one for the other, is very evident throughout their correspondence, and the earnestness and sincerity with which each of them pleaded his cause cannot be gainsaid. In his own mind, each man was a Champion, battling for the cause of Truth! As Dr. Walter F. Prince so aptly put it, in his *Enchanted Boundary* (p. 152):

“Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini, who seemed personally to like, even though they belabored, each other, resembled one another in several respects. With each, propaganda in relation to Spiritualism partook of a religious nature, and perhaps with each it was a substitute for the religion of his youth. Doyle was reared a Roman Catholic, which religion he forsook. When he became a Spiritualist, he avowedly adopted Spiritualism as his religion. Houdini was reared in the Hebrew religion and was the son of a rabbi and descendant of a line of rabbis. He gave

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

up Judaism,* but the fervor with which he carried on his anti-Spiritualistic propaganda, not publicly only but in earnest private conversation, was to me so striking, that I once told him that the preaching-zeal of his fathers had descended to him, only it was turned in another direction. It was his religion. Both men carried on their propaganda with apostolic zeal, one to preach the gospel of Spiritualism, the other to banish the superstition of Spiritualism. . . . Each felt that his personal work was vastly important to mankind. . . .”

All this is undoubtedly true, and it would have been interesting and curious indeed to have overheard some of their personal conversations upon the subject, when they finally met and discussed it! Unfortunately, these have gone beyond recall; but their letters exist—doubtless expressing in modified form what they then said. And the letters, from any point of view, are of extreme psychological interest, giving us, as they do, a glimpse into the minds of these two men, so different, yet in some ways so alike.

Owing to the fact that some of the earlier letters do not seem to have been preserved, the correspondence begins somewhat abruptly. Evidently, Houdini had sent Sir Arthur one of his books—probably *The Unmasking of Robert Houdin*—in which reference is made to the Davenport Brothers, two famous mediums who flourished about the middle of the last century, becoming

* [This is an error. Houdini never abandoned Judaism.—Editors.]

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

very famous not only in America but also in Europe. They visited England, France, Germany, and other countries, and created a sensation wherever they went. They sat in a wooden cabinet, and were securely tied to their seats by means of many yards of rope, various committees doing the tying. Despite the efforts of these committees, however, manifestations were nearly always produced. No sooner had the cabinet doors been closed than rappings would be heard, the bell and tambourine would play, hands would appear at the openings of the cabinet doors, etc. Examination of the mediums at the conclusion of the séance, or at any time during its progress, revealed the mediums tied as before, apparently securely lashed to their chairs.

Naturally the question arose: Were the Davenport Brothers genuine mediums, or were they merely clever tricksters, who somehow managed to free themselves from their bonds and produce the manifestations themselves? That was the point at issue, concerning which violent controversy raged—and still rages! Robert Houdin, the magician, published an extensive exposé of their work (in his *Secrets of Stage Conjuring*, pp. 160-228) in which he gave what he believed to be the secret of their methods. On the other hand, Dr. Nichols, Mr. Ferguson and others published lengthy books in their favor, while a most curious and interesting biography of the brothers was published in Boston in 1869—*The Davenport Brothers*. There

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

the case rests to this day. It was concerning these famous mediums that the opening gun in the Houdini-Doyle war was fired,—Doyle naturally defending them, and Houdini (although he does not actually say so) implying that they were clever tricksters. This question of the possibly genuine mediumship of the Davenports crops up from time to time, as may be seen, throughout the entire correspondence, and in the very first letter the controversy begins. It was written early in 1920, and runs as follows:

Windlesham,
Crowborough,
Sussex.
March 15th, 1920.

Dear Mr. Houdini:—

I thank you for your book and I am much interested, for it treats with authority some points upon which I want information. I have always wondered whether the Davenports, for example, were ever *really* exposed. As to Spiritualist "Confessions," they are all nonsense. Every famous medium is said to have "confessed," and it is an old trick of the opposition. The Davenports gave their first performance when they were little more than children, so it cannot have been elaborate art. I can only learn, so far as "exposure" goes, that there were occasions when they could not undo the knots, but as there are intermittent periods in all real mediumship, that is not against them. It is the man who could always guarantee spirit action whom I should suspect most.

Thanking you once again,

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Some of our people think that you have yourself some psychic power, but I feel it is art and practise.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In various subsequent letters, Sir Arthur reverts to the Davenport Brothers repeatedly, writing:

I value your testimony about the Davenports greatly. Many of those early exposures were really exposures of the ignorance of the investigators. . . . I've been reading the Davenport book you gave me. How people could imagine those men were conjurers is beyond me. The want of power of appreciating evidence is very great in the world. I envy you the privilege of having met Ira Davenport.

Houdini subsequently sent Sir Arthur a photograph of Ira, in company with himself, writing at the time:

March 28, 1921.

My dear Sir Conan Doyle:

The enclosed photograph of Ira Erastus Davenport and myself will, I believe, interest you.

It was taken on July 6, 1910, and is the last time Ira E. Davenport was photographed before his death, which occurred on July 8, 1911. It also bears the distinction of being the first picture of him after the death of his brother, William Henry Harrison Davenport.

Curiously enough, I had made an appointment with Ira E. for July 9, 1911, and was making ready for my trip to his home in Maysville, N. Y., when the sad news reached me of his death on the 8th.

I trust you are well. Though belated, my very best wishes go to you for a happy Easter.

I am kept very busy on a new venture, which, however, looks promising.

With kind regards and best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Conan Doyle was in Australia at the time the photograph arrived, but immediately upon his return he wrote to Houdini:

April 26, 1921.

My dear Houdini:—

Only just home after many adventures. I shall soon bring out a book, "Wanderings of a Spiritualist," which will recount them. We were 7 in party, but not one day in bed for any of us, which was a miracle in itself, with 3 children in the tropics. I did not come back by America or would certainly have come to see you, tho' we could in any case hardly have taken possession of your house. Thank you all the same—and for Davenport's photo. His brother lies at Sydney. I can't think it was a trick and not spiritual, or he would not have engraved the Cabinet, ropes, etc., on his brother's grave.

All greetings to your wife,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

In a later letter (January 26, 1922), Sir Arthur writes:

You are to me a perpetual mystery. But no doubt you are to many. You do (and say) things that are beyond me. As an example of the latter, you said that Ira Davenport did his phenomena by normal means. But if he did (which I really don't believe) then he is manifestly not only a liar but a blasphemer, as he went round with Mr. Ferguson, a clergyman, and mixed it all up with religion. And yet you are photographed as a friend with one whom, under those circumstances, one would not touch with a muck-rake. Now, how can one reconcile that? It interests me as a problem.

It is interesting to compare this early estimate of Houdini's powers with the one which Doyle formed

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

later on—for it is now common knowledge that he believed Houdini to possess supernormal power of some kind, which enabled him to make his escape from various restraints, and which came to his assistance in time of need. In his book *The Edge of the Unknown*, he defends this view at some length, in his chapter "The Riddle of Houdini." Sir Arthur could not bring himself to believe that trick devices, resourcefulness and skill alone enabled Houdini to make his escape from the complicated restraints placed upon him—and this in the face of Houdini's constant denial that he possessed any such power. Of course the secrets of the majority of his methods are now well-known to magicians, and many of them have been published in Gibson's book *Houdini's Escapes*. On the face of it, it seems preposterous to assume that Houdini possessed any such power, and most men would merely smile at the very suggestion. Houdini himself repeatedly asserted that he effected his releases by purely natural means. Yet Doyle could not believe this, partly because he could not see how such escapes were possible, and partly because of certain remarks in Houdini's letters which he interpreted to mean a roundabout admission of the possession by Houdini of psychic power. We shall come to these in due time. Meanwhile, the gradual change in attitude manifested by Sir Arthur towards Houdini's powers is interesting to watch, since his letters show the evolution of his belief in the supernat-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

ural character of certain of his exhibitions.

It must not be thought that Sir Arthur himself was not aware of the seeming absurdity of his position,—even though he had an answer to his critics,—for he himself wrote:

It is said, "How absurd for Doyle to attribute possible psychic powers to a man who himself denies them!" Is it not perfectly evident that if he did not deny them his occupation would have been gone forever? What would his brother magicians have to say to a man who admitted that half his tricks were done by what they would regard as illicit powers? It would be *exit Houdini*.

He concludes, however, by saying:

Be his mystery what it may, Houdini was one of the most remarkable men of whom we have any record, and he will live in history with such personalities as Cagliostro, the Chevalier D'Éon, and other strange characters. He had many outstanding qualities, and the world is the poorer for his loss. As matters stand, no one can say positively and finally that his powers were abnormal, but...there is a case to be answered.

In answer to Sir Arthur's early letter, Houdini had written as follows:

Empire, Sheffield
17.3.20.

Dear Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,

Pleased to hear from you and that you were interested about some of the points in my book.

Regarding the Davenport Brothers: It will interest you to know that I was an intimate friend of Ira Erastus Davenport, and was the last man outside his family circle to visit

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

him in Maysville, Chautauqua County, New York. In fact he was waiting for me and had passed away the morning I was leaving to pay him my annual visit.

I can make the positive assertion that the Davenport Brothers never were exposed. Their first trouble at the Salle Herz, in Paris, came about through the fact that one of the legs of the cabinet was dislodged, and the cabinet tripped over, and this happened only a short time after the arrival of the brothers in Paris.

The trouble they had in Leeds and Liverpool did not arise from the fact that they were exposed. Mr. Ira Davenport told me they were bound so inhumanly that Dr. Fergusson cut the rope before the séance started, (in Liverpool).

I know for a positive fact that it was not essential for them to release these bonds in order to obtain manifestations.*

The reason why Mr. Ira Davenport became so friendly with me was that, during my tour round the world, I visited the cemetery where his brother William Henry Harrison was buried,—near Melbourne, Australia. His grave had not been visited for many years and I had it put in order.

I have all the Davenport Brothers' scrapbooks, and intend, some time in the future, to write a biography about their career from a different "angle" than any which has hitherto appeared.

I trust you will not think I am egotistical in making this statement; that I know more about the Davenport Brothers than anyone living. The widow is still alive and there are two sons and a daughter in this "vale of tears."

* What Houdini doubtless meant by this was that it was *not necessary* for the Davenports always to free their hands, in order to produce manifestations, many of which could be produced with their hands still tied—just as, in the famous "cotton bandage test" of Annie Eva Fay, her phenomena could be produced without any actual release, owing to the peculiar nature of the tie employed.

Houdini's positive statement that the brothers were never actually exposed is, however, of great historic value, from any point of view.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I remember distinctly, in talking to Mr. Davenport, that he was astonished at my knowledge of their tours, and he remarked, "Houdini, you know more about myself than I do!"

Regarding my own work, I never claim spiritualistic or supernatural aid, always informing the public that it is accomplished by natural means, or as you suggest by "art and practice."

I don't want to write a long letter, so will close.

Sincerely yours,

HARRY HOUDINI.

P.S. My escapes from prison and police cells, under test conditions, have never been solved. Am sending you an old book of mine, in which you will find a number of certificates from Chiefs of Police, and I pledge you my word of honour that I was never given any assistance of any kind whatever, nor was I in collusion with anyone; and that everything was accomplished through my own "art and practice." *

H. H.

* This statement of Houdini's is also of considerable interest, inasmuch as it is certain that many of his imitators employed confederates, bribery, etc., in order to insure their escape from prison cells, locked rooms, and the like.

CHAPTER TWO

THE remarkable friendship which existed between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Houdini is nowhere so well exemplified as in their letters to one another, wherein each man taxed the other's credulity to the utmost in asking him to believe the statements he made. Doyle would narrate a series of phenomenal happenings, which Houdini rejected; Houdini would put forward a series of "explanations" which Doyle similarly rejected. Thus, in one of his letters, Sir Arthur tells Houdini:

I have had very conclusive evidence since my two books were written—six times I have spoken face to face with my son, twice with my brother, once with my nephew—all beyond doubt in their own voices and on private matters. So for me there is not, nor has there been for a long time, any question. I *know* it is true, but we can't communicate that certainty to others. It will come—or not, according to how far we work for it. It's the old axiom of "Seek and ye shall find."...

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I am convinced that the powers of spirits are subject to exact limitations like our own. People either give them no power or give them all power, and both are wrong. I have no reason to think that they can certainly, unless they had a remarkable earthly medium to help them, see a message in a shut box. . . . Such experiments are always one-sided, for if it fails people use it as an argument against Spiritualism, while if it succeeds they would always say it was telepathy of some sort. Funk quotes at least one case where it did come off, but no one seems to accept it!

In another letter, early in 1920, he writes:

I see that you know a great deal about the negative side of Spiritualism—I hope more on the positive side will come your way. But it wants to be approached not in the spirit of a detective approaching a suspect, but in that of a humble, religious soul, yearning for help and comfort. This need not preclude all common sense in judging results.

These clairvoyants, whose names I have given you, are passive agents in themselves and powerless. If left to themselves they guess and muddle—as they sometimes do. When the true connection is formed, all is clear. That connection depends on the forces beyond, which are repelled by frivolity or curiosity, but act under impulse of sympathy. Thus, if you think of your lost friend before going, and breathe a prayer that you may be allowed to get in touch, you will have a chance—otherwise none. Most investigators have ruined their investigation before it began. It really does depend upon psychic or mental vibrations and harmonies. To disregard this is folly.

I fear there is much fraud among American mediums, where Spiritualism seems to have deservedly fallen into disrepute. Even when genuine, it is used for Stock Exchange and other base, worldly purposes. No wonder it has sunk

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

low in the very land that was honored by the first spiritual manifestation of this series.

Here I think it is reasonably pure, tho' occasionally we catch a rogue. Most of our great mediums at present are unpaid amateurs, inaccessible to any but spiritualists. I have sampled nearly all of them, and they are beyond suspicion. When we get a trickster we publish his name in the Spiritual papers, and that is the end of him—or her. We did it lately with a *materialization medium* called Chambers, whom we caught in muslin, doing impersonation. . . .

An account of the exposure of Chambers was published at the time, as Doyle says, in one of the leading Spiritualistic journals, and reads as follows:

(November 22, 1919)

A FRAUDULENT MATERIALISING MEDIUM UNMASKED

GHASTLY TRAVESTY EXPOSED BY SPIRITUALISTS

On reading an account of a *séance* given by Mr. Chambers, appearing in one of the Spiritualist papers, the President and Committee of the Walthamstow Spiritualist Church engaged him for a series of materialising *séances*, to be held at the house of Mr. Murch (the President). My wife and I were invited to attend one of the series, and on Monday last, November 10th, went to the house for that purpose. Two *séances* had already been held, and although several forms had appeared from the cabinet—which was formed by a curtain being stretched across a corner of the room—a number of the sitters were far from satisfied with the results, and formed the opinion that fraud had occurred. On the occasion of my visit the medium was searched by two of the intending sitters, and the cabinet inspected.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The séance began in the usual manner, and I occupied the seat nearest the cabinet. About twenty minutes elapsed, and a form appeared full length, clad in white drapery. I was enabled to handle this without the knowledge of the "form," and discovered that it was composed of muslin. I said nothing of my discovery except to my wife and a lady sitting near to her, both of whom could see the texture of the muslin in the light, which was rather more brilliant than is usual for such séances. Other forms appeared, alleging to be well-known characters. It was seen that the forms had boots on in some cases, and stockinged feet in others, whilst in all there was a trouser leg rolled up to the knee. At the conclusion of this ghastly travesty I informed the circle of what I had seen, and it was decided to let Mr. Chambers hold the last séance on the following night, after which he was due in Brighton. The next séance was duly held with a fresh lot of sitters, with one or two exceptions, and the first form appeared. On the second form coming out, one of the sitters flashed a strong torch-light on it. I rushed forward, and behold! there was Chambers with his coat and waistcoat removed, his boots off, and his trousers turned up to the knee. He had a white cloth suspended from his waist, and a handkerchief on his head, and was shrouded in a quantity of white muslin. On first being discovered he pretended to be under control. In the cabinet was a bottle of scent (he had promised that the spirits would bring flowers), and on the chair were his coat and waistcoat, placed obviously to look like a form. I requested him to sign a confession, which he did, and which is appended.

This is not the first time, by at least five, that this arch humbug has been exposed, and yet he can find, in his journeys in the North, plenty of dupes. However, London has proven his downfall, and I trust we have seen the last of him.

PERCY R. STREET.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

CHAMBERS'S CONFESSION

I, Christopher Chambers, do hereby confess that I have been guilty of heartless fraud and deceit in the course of a séance held at Mr. Murch's house, 39, Rectory-road, Walthamstow. I dressed myself under cover of the cabinet with muslin cloths and attempted to impersonate the spirits of the loved ones of those attending. I swear by Almighty God I will desist from this imposture and never again seek engagements as a materialising medium. I make and sign this confession of my own free will, and in the presence of these witnesses.

C. CHAMBERS.

Witnesses:—

Percy R. Street (resident Speaker, Reading Spiritual Mission),

Wm. Murch (President, Walthamstow Spiritualist Church),

Joseph Thomas (Vice-President, Walthamstow Spiritualist Church),

Bernard Dewick.

We print the above account with mixed feelings. We regret bitterly that anyone can be found so destitute of the most elementary notions of honour and decency as to impersonate the spirit friends of bereaved people, and that so loathsome a practice should be associated, even remotely, with a cause we all hold dear. On the other hand, it is a satisfaction to know that the deception has been unmasked by Spiritualists, whose plain duty and interest it is to have no traffic with, or toleration for, any form of deception and imposture. LIGHT, as its files show, has always been active in keeping the movement clean of all such roguery, although in a few cases want of absolute proof of suspected imposture has compelled us to refrain from definite accusation. In this

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

instance, we have the "medium's" own confession that he was "guilty of heartless fraud and deceit." We ask our contemporaries in the Press, who may give further publicity to this exposure, in fairness to record our attitude and to note that the exposure was carried out by Spiritualists, who are sufficiently experienced in their own subject to be able to distinguish between genuine phenomena and bogus imitations.

Ed. LIGHT.

There has been, unfortunately, much fraud of this kind in the history of Spiritualism, and scores of mediums have been exposed in the past, attempting much the same sort of thing. Houdini himself caught a number of mediums tricking, and so have other magicians. It is only fair to state, however, that the majority of exposures which have been made in the past have been by psychic investigators themselves, and when a sceptical critic wishes to cite material for the purposes of his argument, he has to fall back, as a rule, upon the reports of various researchers, which have been published from time to time! A book by one of the present editors, for example * has been considered one of the completest exposés of fraudulent methods so far issued; and Houdini, in a letter written from Melbourne, Australia, March 8, 1910, said: "Your book is certainly the best ever written on the subject,—at least that I have ever read." Yet the author of that book is a firm believer in the reality of certain psychic

* *The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism.* By Hereward Carrington.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

phenomena, which, he feels assured, are genuine and supernormal. It is very evident, therefore, that there is room for a wide diversity of opinion upon this subject, and that, despite the fraud, which is constantly being brought to light, many fair-minded students continue to believe that psychic studies present a valuable field for experimentation.

An example of the difficulties often encountered, in investigations of this sort, is well illustrated by a series of sittings which the Society for Psychical Research had with a well-known medium named "Eva C." These were held in London, at the rooms of the Society, under test conditions, and Houdini was invited to participate in several of these, in order that the investigators present might avail themselves of his expert opinion, while he was in England, and available.

The comments of Houdini regarding his sittings with the medium Eva C. are of considerable interest, as embodying his personal reactions at these séances. Eva C. had been "discovered" some years before by Mme. Bisson, of Paris, and Dr. von Schrenck-Notzing, of Munich, and a long series of sittings had been obtained by these investigators, the results of which they had embodied in their books upon her mediumship. Von Schrenck's book, *The Phenomena of Materialization*, has been translated into English, and contains a number of most curious and extraordinary observations. Micro-photographs are published of analyses of the al-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

leged "ectoplasm," which issued from her mouth, and various parts of her body, as well as motion pictures of the process of materialization and vanishing of this "substance." At a number of test sésances, the medium was stripped, carefully searched, and sewn up in black tights; net veiling was then placed over her face, and sewn to the tights round the neck; similar veiling was placed over the hands, and sewn round the wrists. Both hands were held. Under these circumstances, and in dim red light, the medium succeeded in producing "ectoplasm," which visibly resolved itself into hands, heads and bits of bodies. On a few occasions, tiny scraps of this substance were collected, adhering to the tights, and analyzed, chemically and microscopically. These results have been published, and are most curious. The "substance" appears to be an odd hodge-podge of organic material, unlike anything known to orthodox biology.

The question naturally arose, as to whether these phenomena were produced normally or no; and if normally, how? In order to study the case at first hand, the British S.P.R. invited Eva C. over to England, and had a long series of sittings with her in 1920. Houdini was present at five of these sittings. No definite decision was arrived at by the Committee, as the result of forty sésances. It was felt that there was some evidence in favor of the genuineness of the phenomena, and also some evidence against it. The final Report was there-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

fore non-committal. Eva C. married shortly after her return to France, and discontinued her séances. There the case rests to the present day, with the majority of the British investigators "on the fence" with regard to the interpretation of the manifestations, and the majority of the Continental *savants* quite convinced of their authenticity. Here we have quite a typical case in the annals of Spiritualism—one which brings home to us the old adage that it is "the most fascinating and the most annoying topic in the world!"

The Committee appointed to investigate Eva C. consisted of the Hon. Everard Feilding—Secretary of the Society for many years—and Mr. W. W. Baggally, an amateur conjuror, and exposé of many fraudulent mediums. Both of these gentlemen had had wide experience, and had investigated, among other mediums, Eusapia Palladino, in Naples. The third member of the Committee was Mr. Eric J. Dingwall, at that time research officer of the British S.P.R., a member of the Magic Circle of London, and of the Society of American Magicians. This was the group which Houdini joined. Mme. Bisson was also present, but took no part in the control of the medium. She was the wife of a celebrated playwright, in Paris, and had brought Eva C. to England for investigation. A more cautious and competent group could hardly have been selected.

Several of the sittings attended by Houdini were

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

complete "blanks"—nothing happened. He tells this to Sir Arthur, in a letter dated June 19th. He continues, however:

"Baggally and Dingwall inform me that she has really mystified them, with her manifestations, and I am rather keen to be present, and am going again Monday night."

After attending this séance, Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur, under date of June 22nd, 1920, as follows:

My Dear Sir Arthur,

Well, we had success at the séance last night, as far as productions were concerned, but I am not prepared to say that they were supernormal.

I assure you I did not control the medium, so the suggestions were not mine. They made Mlle. Eva drink a cup of coffee and eat some cake (I presume to fill her up with some food stuff), and after she had been sewn into the tights, and a net over her face, she "manifested,"

1st. Some froth-like substance, inside of net. It was about 5 inches long; she said it was "elevating," but none of us four watchers saw it "elevate."

Committee, Messrs. Feilding, Baggally, Dingwall and myself.

2nd. A white plaster-looking affair over her right eye.

3rd. Something that looked like a small face, say 4 inches in circumference. Was terra-cotta colored, and Dingwall, who held her hands, had the best look at the "object."

4th. Some substance, froth-like, "exuding from her nose." Baggally and Feilding say it protruded from her nose, but Dingwall and I are positive that it was inside of net and was

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

not extending from her nose; I had the best view from two different places. I deliberately took advantage to see just what it was.

It was a surprise effect indeed!

5th. Medium asked permission to remove something in her mouth; showed her hands empty, and took out what appeared to be a rubberish substance, which she disengaged and showed us plainly; we held the electric torch; all saw it plainly, when presto! it vanished.

The séance started at 7.30 and lasted till past midnight.

We went over the notes, Mr. Feilding did, and no doubt you will get a full report. I found it highly interesting.

The next séance attended by Houdini was again a "blank," but he continues (June 24th): "Madame Bisson and Mlle. Eva return to Paris next Wednesday, and I hope to attend a meeting at their own home." He adds: "I have had a wonderful lot of interesting sittings during my stay over here, and thoroughly enjoyed them."

Houdini's personal reactions to these sittings may perhaps be further gleaned from the following extracts from his Diaries. They are brief and non-committal, it is true, but at least give us a glimpse into his mind at the time. Thus, under date of June 18, 1920, we find:

Séance at 20 Hanover Square.* Present Mr. and Mrs. E. Feilding, Baggally, Dingwall and myself. 7.30 to 11. Nothing happened. A nail in chair discommoded Eva. After

* This was the old headquarters of the British Society for Psychological Research.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

the séance I went to 5 John Street with the Feildings. Had a cup of coffee.

On June 20th and 23rd we read:

Séance at 20 Hanover Square. Mlle. Eva.
Séance with Eva.

The entry under date of June 24th is a little more explicit:

Séance at 20 Hanover Square. Bisson very angry with Feilding. Thinks he is against her, which is not the case. Nothing happened. Dingwall and I understand each other, not to let ourselves be hoodwinked.

The following day, June 25th, however, something *did* happen. The entry is as follows:

Séance at 20 Hanover Square. Present, Feilding, Dingwall, Dr. E. E. Fournier D'Albe, translator of the Schrenck book. After a few hours the veil was cut off by Madame Bisson. Eva produced a membrane-like substance.

It was this "substance," the comings and goings of which certainly seemed to puzzle him at the time, which was mentioned in his letter to Sir Arthur. But it is very evident that these sittings were poor ones, at which relatively little, of a convincing nature, happened.

After receiving this letter, descriptive of his séances with Eva C., Sir Arthur wrote back, on June 25th:

That is very interesting. I am glad you got some results. It is certainly on the lowest and most mechanical plane

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

of the spiritual world, or borderline world, but at least it is beyond our present knowledge....

During his stay in England, however, Houdini was constantly attending sittings with mediums, and evidently importuned Sir Arthur to introduce him to as many of them as possible, for, in a letter dated April 11th, Doyle wrote:

I will do what I can that you may have practical experience. The great physical mediums are all in the provinces.

In a letter to Sir Arthur, written shortly after this, Houdini said:

I went to two séances on Tuesday; Mr. W. H. Robinson arranged both. In the morning I had a séance with Mrs. Annie Robinson (no relation to the gentleman who took me there). She was quite remarkable, and I became greatly interested. So much so that she has, of her own volition, arranged a special séance to which I will take Mrs. Houdini in the afternoon.

At Mr. Robinson's home I met a clairvoyant medium, Mrs. Anna Brittain, who claims she has five "Controls." She was also very interesting to me, and that is all I can say about this medium.

The trumpet medium is at Hartlepool, so I cannot get a séance with her. The collier who gave a séance here six years ago, at Mr. Robinson's home, and about whom I spoke to you, is named Chambers.

Do you know a medium named Miss Dane? I received a letter in which she says she is willing to give me a private séance in London. Before I reply to her, I will await an answer from you.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Regarding his sitting with Mrs. Brittain, Houdini writes in his *Diary*, under date of April 25th, 1920:

Clairvoyant medium, Mrs. Anna Brittain, 3 o'clock. Bess and Julia along. Held at home of W. H. Robinson. . . . Robinson's daughter admitted that she did not believe in the Past she used to "see." Confessed it was not true. Fooled her parents. . . . Mrs. Brittain not convincing. Simply kept talking in general. "Saw" things she heard about. One spirit was to bring me flowers on the stage. All this is ridiculous stuff.

In reply to the inquiry regarding Miss Dane, Sir Arthur replied as follows:

May 1, 1920.

My dear Mr. Houdini:—

Chambers is a notorious rogue who was exposed in the *Spiritual* papers some 9 months ago. I am sorry you were brought in contact with this humbug who ought to be gaoled.

No, I don't know about Miss Dane, but Mr. Gow would probably know. We have had the Crystal vision lady in London this week, and many verified her assertions, but she returned to Bradford. I'll keep you in touch with any psychic chances—apart from the clairvoyants I gave you. Curiously enough, my favorite is Mrs. Annie Brittain, but it is clearly a different woman to the one you mention. Did I tell you that Mrs. Harris was under suspicion, and so I can't recommend her with confidence. And yet *in her day* I am sure she was "right."

Yours very sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

And in a later letter (May 21st) Sir Arthur says:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Mrs. Brittain, who has been giving birth to a little medium, is now back at work. . . . I have an idea that your wife would get better results than you. Why not send her first? You follow in a day or two.

About this time, Houdini obtained a sitting with Mrs. Wriedt, of Detroit, a celebrated "independent voice" medium, concerning whom Dr. I. K. Funk, Admiral Moore and others had written at considerable length in their books. Her address had been given by Sir Arthur, who, in a letter dated May 18th, had written:

Mrs. Wriedt is to be heard of now at 59 Holland Park. She is good, but varies.

Evidently Houdini did not waste much time in obtaining this sitting, for just two days later we find the following entry in his Diary, under date of May 20th:

Visited Mrs. Wriedt, trumpet medium, with Dr. Abr. Wallace of 146 Harley St. She knew me from Detroit. Also came over on same boat. W. T. Stead lost his life when on his trip to get her to come over. She failed to get any voices. Sat over an hour. My belief—she was afraid of me.

Houdini evidently communicated this result to Sir Arthur, who replied the next day:

So sorry you got nothing with Mrs. Wriedt. I hope she will come down here for two days and I will have a try. She is either splendid, or an utter failure, which is as it should be.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Mrs. Wriedt *did* visit Sir Arthur shortly afterwards, and he was enabled to write to Houdini:

I had a sitting with Mrs. Wriedt the other day. Only my wife, self and Major Wood present. We sang, and while I could quite clearly hear Mrs. W's voice on my right, and the other two as well, a fourth voice joined powerfully in. Now, is not that quite final? It was in the children's nursery here. What possible loophole is there in that for deception?

When visiting Sir Arthur, Mrs. Wriedt had evidently intimated that Houdini was, in her opinion, out "to make trouble" in her séance, and this fact was communicated to him. In reply, Houdini wrote:

Re Mrs. Wriedt; she is mistaken. I never look for trouble, and regret that she weighed me up in that light.

In a final word regarding this medium, Sir Arthur writes:

I am sorry you and Mrs. Wriedt don't hit it. She seems to think that you are out to make trouble. I assured her it was not so. She sat in our nursery with my wife and me, and Major Wood. We sang together. As we sang, and as I clearly heard all four voices, a fifth very beautiful one rose up in our midst. That is surely occult beyond doubt.

There is, indeed, no reason to think that Houdini ever "made trouble" in the sense commonly supposed—that he "grabbed" the medium, turned on the lights without warning, etc. Indeed, one medium with whom Houdini sat some years ago said that she considered him an ideal sitter; he never moved, never left his chair,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

or interfered with the manifestations in any sense whatever. He said to her at the time, "Now, just tell me what you want me to do, and I will do it. I promise not to interfere with the phenomena in any way whatever, and to be perfectly quiet. I will merely sit here and observe." And, according to this medium, that is precisely what he *did* do, so that she had no complaint whatever regarding his general conduct and behavior in the séance. He merely formed his opinion from what he saw at the time, and he never resorted to any underhanded methods in his exposés of these mediums, so far as we know.

In addition to obtaining sittings with a large number of mediums, during his sojourn in England, Houdini also made it a point to meet as many prominent writers and investigators as possible, and to collect historic material of all kinds, bearing upon the subject. He speaks, in his letters, of meeting Miss Fields and Mlle. Tomczyk, and in his Diary of meeting Dr. Crawford.

Dr. W. J. Crawford, of Belfast, Ireland, was a practical engineer, who had the fortune to encounter a young woman, by name Kathleen Goligher, who seemingly possessed extraordinary mediumistic powers. In her presence tables would be lifted from the floor, raps would resound, and a number of so-called "physical phenomena" occurred. Being an engineer, Dr. Crawford said to himself: "If a table is lifted or 'levitated,'

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

something must move it, and we ought to be able to find out what that 'something' is." He placed the medium on the platform of a weighing machine, and found that the medium increased by the weight of the table whenever a levitation occurred. The reaction of the table was therefore upon her body—which would be true on any theory. He placed a spring balance beneath the table, and at a certain distance the reaction of the table upon the scales was noted. To make a long story short, he finally worked out what is known as the "cantilever theory" of table levitations, which is that a sort of psychic arm, or lever, composed of ectoplasm, extended from the medium's body to the under side of the table, and that this lever was the cause of the levitations. He also succeeded in obtaining impressions of "raps" upon wet clay, and altogether his account is one of the most interesting and curious in the whole history of psychics.

After Dr. Crawford's death (he committed suicide) the investigation was continued for a time by Dr. Fournier D'Albe, who arrived at a negative conclusion with regard to her phenomena. She thereupon refused to sit again, and, so far as any investigation goes, her case ceased at that point. She has apparently given no séances since that date.

Sir Arthur and Houdini naturally take opposite sides in their correspondence—the former championing the case, the latter rejecting it.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Houdini met Dr. Crawford several times at about this time, and had long conversations with him. The entries in his Diary speak of several meetings, the first on May 23rd, when he first mentions him—"met Dr. Crawford who has an ectoplasmic girl in Belfast,"—and later on May 30th, when we find the following entry in his Diary:

... On Feilding speaking of materializationists and the brutal manner in which Eberhart was exposed by another medium, who found two wigs and a few masks in the chair, and Mr. Chambers' written confession, the talk turned on the work, and I mentioned that no one had done anything worth while. Crawford said "Yes, Crookes had," and he believes implicitly in Crookes. That made me falter *re* Crawford, and I wonder if he is being deluded. *I think so.*

This was, of course, purely a snap judgment on Houdini's part, since Crookes's experiments have never been explained, and remain a problem to this day. Many of the phenomena took place in fair light, in his own laboratory and were checked by scientific instruments. They were of an extraordinary character. Crawford's results are certainly more debatable; but the fact remains that Houdini had rather jumped to conclusions, merely because of this remark by Dr. Crawford, whether his results were verified by subsequent investigations or not.

In a letter dated June 25th, 1920, Sir Arthur wrote:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

... Mr. Crawford sent me four photos to show that he has photographed the same stuff (ectoplasm) pouring from Miss Goligher. This is the *third* separate medium from whom it has been photographed. Incredulity seems to me to be a sort of insanity under these circumstances. The Goligher photos are most curious. The stuff seems to come from the womb....

Before leaving England, Houdini met Sir Arthur several times, and had long conversations with him regarding the history and status of Spiritualism. Very early in their correspondence, Doyle had stated that he hoped they might meet, "when our busy orbits happen to intersect." This was followed by a definite invitation to visit him in Crowborough: "Why not run up and see me? I would come down, but this is my one resting week, amid many lectures, and my wife holds me to it. . . . We lunch at one, but you can't come too early—any day."

Houdini promptly availed himself of the opportunity, writing the very next day:

12th, April 1920.

My Dear Sir Conan Doyle,

Thanks for your letter and will avail myself of the opportunity of calling on you Wednesday morning.

Will arrive some time between eleven and twelve o'clock, —all depending on the roads.

Mrs. Houdini is with me, but will not be able to come along at the present time, and wishes to thank you for your kind invitation.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I look forward with great pleasure to our meeting on Wednesday.

Kindest regards and best wishes,
Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

After this conversation with the Doyles, Houdini made the following notations in his Diary (April 14, 1920) :

Visited Sir A. Conan Doyle at Crowborough. Met Lady Doyle and the three children. Had lunch with them. They believe implicitly in Spiritualism. Sir Arthur told me he had spoken six times to his son. No possible chance for trickery. Lady Doyle also believes and has had tests that are beyond belief. Told them all to me.

This is, of course, rather a large order, and doubtless merely a picked selection of incidents was narrated, which had struck the Doyles as particularly evidential. However, the entry serves to emphasize the extent to which Houdini was impressed by their sincerity and earnestness at the time, and, if only for that reason, serves as an interesting historic note in the controversy which later developed.

Soon after this Houdini returned to America, while Doyle and his family journeyed to Australia, as told in his *Wanderings of a Spiritualist*. Upon his return, the correspondence began anew, picking up threads which had been dropped and branching off into new byways. It was not long after this that Sir

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Arthur visited America, and the two men were again destined to meet, under new conditions and in a new environment. What happened then must be told in another chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

IT HAS been said that three problems confronted the mind of primitive man. These three problems were: The nature of the figures seen in dreams, the difference between living and lifeless matter, and the fate of the individual soul after bodily death. Curiously enough, these three problems still confront us. While science has done much to explain dreams, there is yet much concerning them which remains mysterious. The difference between living and lifeless matter is of course a biological question, dealing with the nature or essence of life, and it would be a bold biologist indeed who would assert that we today know in what this consists. It too remains an unsolved mystery. And from the days of Ancient Egypt—and long before—men speculated and wondered what happened to them in some future life,—in the reality of which all men believed, and concerning which they were all fearful.

It is only within the past fifty years that science

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

has turned her attention to this problem, and begun to regard it as a scientific question rather than as one of faith and tradition alone. On the one hand academic science has become more and more assured that "thought is a function of the brain," and that death consists merely in the cessation of life-activities, with nothing beyond. On the other hand, we have constantly reported instances in which individuals have claimed to talk face to face with those who have "died," and to have received lengthy and circumstantial communications from them. The controversy between the believers and the disbelievers as to which of these alternatives is the right one, has therefore become more and more acute. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Houdini are typical representatives of these two factions. Doyle contended that spirit-return was a demonstrable fact, while Houdini contended that it was all fraud, delusion and trickery.

The question is assuredly an interesting and important one, whatever view we may take concerning it. "All men are mortal." We must all, at some time or another, "shuffle off this mortal coil," and solve the Great Mystery for ourselves. Meanwhile, we should like to know something about it, if evidence could conceivably be secured. Is man essentially body or spirit? Is he a body with a fleeting, evanescent mind; or is he an abiding spiritual entity, temporarily inhabiting a physical organism? Our outlook upon life must largely

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

be colored by the answer we are inclined to make to this question.

Modern Spiritualism claims to give us a definite and positive answer. It contends that those who have "died" still continue to live in some spiritual world, and that they can communicate with us, under suitable conditions, through the instrumentality of certain peculiarly endowed individuals termed Psychics or mediums. That is what Conan Doyle believed, sincerely and implicitly, and he spent the last years of his life in endeavoring to bring home to the public the reality of this great truth, as he conceived it. Houdini, on the other hand, completely rejected the reality of such communications, contending that they were one and all purely human fabrications. His training and his experience had led him to that conclusion—just as Doyle's training and experience had led him to the opposite viewpoint. Despite their admiration and respect for each other, both men continued to hold tenaciously to their beliefs until the last days of their lives.

It seems almost incredible that a friendship could have continued under such a vital strain; and yet it did, and the fact that it did renders their communion one of the strangest friendships in history.

It was only during the last decade of their lives that both men threw themselves so whole-heartedly into the subject of Spiritualism. While they had been interested in the subject, from entirely different points of

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

view, Doyle had busied himself in his medical and literary activities, while Houdini had devoted his time and his energies to escape work, for which he became justly famous. At first he specialized in handcuffs and rope-ties, and he made a really scientific study of locks of every description—his collection of these going back for several hundred years. Later, he branched out into new fields, escaping from jails all over the world, and then from restraints of every description, until it seemed that nothing could hold him! He succeeded in escaping from all the more important jails in Europe, and, on his return to America, accomplished the same thing here—much to the amazement of the police officials who had securely and confidently locked him in. Whenever Houdini heard of a cell which was supposed to be particularly burglar-proof, that was the one he promptly selected from which to make his escape. The following Testimonial—one of many—is quite typical of the sort of thing he constantly attempted:

UNITED STATES JAIL

Washington, D.C., January 6, 1906.

This is to certify that Mr. Harry Houdini, at the United States Jail today, was stripped stark naked, thoroughly searched, and locked up in Cell No. 2 of the South Wing—the Cell in which Charles J. Guiteau, the assassinator of President Garfield, was confined during his incarceration, from the date of his commitment, July 2nd, 1881, until the day on which he was executed, June 30th, 1882. Mr. Houdini,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

in about two minutes, managed to escape from that cell, and then broke into the cell in which his clothing was locked up. He then proceeded to release from their cells all the prisoners on the ground floor. There was positively no chance for any confederacy or collusion.

Mr. Houdini accomplished all of the above mentioned facts in addition to putting on all his clothing, in twenty-one minutes.

(Signed) J. H. HARRIS.

Warden United States Jail, D-C.

Houdini was also constantly issuing "challenges," insisting no one could manacle or fasten him in any form of restraint from which he could not make his escape—and this led to some extremely precarious situations, from which he only succeeded in extricating himself with the utmost difficulty—finally emerging utterly exhausted and with bleeding wrists and hands. Only his great physical strength and his dogged will and determination enabled him to overcome the difficulties he had to face. The following account is quite typical of the sort of thing he encountered during this period of his career.

(From the *Daily Illustrated Mirror*, March 18, 1904.)

Not a seat was vacant in the mighty Hippodrome, yesterday afternoon, when Harry Houdini, the "Handcuff King," stepped into the arena, and received an ovation worthy of a monarch.

For days past all London has been aware that on Saturday night a representative of the *Mirror* had stepped into the arena, in response to Houdini's challenge to anybody to

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

come forward and successfully manacle him, and had there and then made a match with America's Mysteriarch for Thursday afternoon.

In his travels the journalist had encountered a Birmingham blacksmith, who had spent five years of his life in devising a lock which, he alleged, "no mortal man could pick." Promptly seeing he was in touch with a good thing, the press man had at once put an option upon the handcuff containing this lock, and brought it back to London with him.

It was submitted to London's best locksmiths, who were unanimous in their admiration of it, asserting that in all their experience they had never before seen such wonderful mechanism.

As a result the editors of the *Mirror* determined to put the lock to the severest test possible by challenging Mr. Houdini to be manacled with the cuffs.

Like a true sportsman, Mr. Houdini accepted our challenge in the spirit in which it was given, although, on his own confession, he did not like the look of the lock.

MIGHTY AUDIENCE

Mr. Houdini's call was for three o'clock yesterday, but so intense was the excitement that the 4,000 spectators present could scarcely restrain their impatience whilst the six excellent turns which preceded him, cheered to the echo on other occasions, got through their "business."

Waiting quietly and unnoticed by the arena steps, the *Mirror* representative watched Mr. Houdini's entrance, and joined in giving his opponent-to-be in the lists one of the finest ovations mortal man has ever received.

"I am ready," said Houdini, concluding his address to the audience, "to be manacled by the *Mirror* representative if he is present."

A hearty burst of applause greeted the journalist as

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

he stepped into the arena and shook hands with the "Handcuff King."

Then, in the fewest possible words, the press man called for volunteers from the audience to act upon a committee to see fair play, and Mr. Houdini asked his friends also to step into the arena and watch his interests.

HOUDINI HANDCUFFED

This done, the journalist placed the handcuffs upon Mr. Houdini's wrists and snapped them. Then, with an effort, he turned the key six times, thus securing the bolt as firmly as possible.

The committee being satisfied as to the security of the handcuff, Mr. Houdini said:—

"Ladies and Gentlemen:—I am now locked up in a handcuff that has taken a British mechanic five years to make. I do not know whether I am going to get out of it or not, but I can assure you I am going to do my best."

Applauded to the echo, the Mysteriarch then retired within the cabinet that contains so many of his secrets.

All correct chronometers chronicled 3.15.

In a long line in front of the stage stood the committee. Before them, in the center of the arena, stood the little cabinet Houdini loves to call his "Ghost House." Restlessly pacing to and fro, the *Mirror* representative kept an anxious eye on it.

FALSE HOPE OVERTHROWN

Those who have never stood in the position of a challenger can scarcely realize the sense of responsibility felt by one who has openly thrown down the gauntlet to a man who is popular with the public.

The *Mirror* had placed its reliance on the work of a British mechanic, and if Houdini succeeded in escaping in the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

first few minutes it was felt that the proceedings would develop into a mere farce.

But time went by; 5, 10, 15, 20 minutes sped. Still the band played on. Then, at 22 minutes, Mr. Houdini put his head out of the "ghost house," and this was the signal for a great outburst of cheering.

"He is free! He is free!" shouted several; and universal disappointment was felt when it was ascertained that he had only put his head outside the cabinet in order to get a good look at the lock in strong electric light.

The band broke into a dreamy waltz as Houdini once more disappeared within the canopy. The disappointed spectators looked at their watches, murmured "What a shame!" gave Houdini an encouraging clap, and the journalist resumed his stride.

At 35 minutes Mr. Houdini again emerged. His collar was broken, water trickled in great channels down his face, and he looked generally warm and uncomfortable.

"My knees hurt," he explained to the audience. "I am not done yet."

The "house" went frantic with delight at their favorite's resolve, and this suggested an idea to the *Mirror* representative.

He spoke rapidly to Mr. Parker, the Hippodrome manager, who was at the side of the stalls. The gentleman looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded his head and whispered something to an attendant.

A WELCOME CONCESSION

Presently the man appeared with a large cushion.

"The *Mirror* has no desire to submit Mr. Houdini to a torture test," said the representative; "and if Mr. Houdini will permit me, I shall take great pleasure in offering him the use of this cushion."

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The "Handcuff King" was glad, evidently, of the rest to his knees, for he pulled it through into the "ghost house."

Ladies trembled with suppressed excitement, and, despite the weary wait, not a yawn was noticed throughout the vast audience. For 20 minutes more the band played on, and then Houdini was seen to emerge once more from the cabinet.

Still handcuffed!

Almost a moan broke over the vast assemblage as this was noticed. He looked in pitiable plight from his exertions and much exhausted.

He looked about for a moment, and then advanced to where his challenger stood.

"Will you remove the handcuffs for a moment," he said, "in order that I may take my coat off?"

For a few seconds the journalist considered. Then he replied: "I am indeed sorry to disoblige you, Mr. Houdini, but I cannot unlock those cuffs unless you admit you are defeated."

The reason was obvious. Mr. Houdini had seen the cuffs locked, but he had never seen them unlocked. Consequently the press man thought there might be more in the request than appeared on the surface.

FROCK COAT SACRIFICED

Houdini evidently does not stick at trifles. He maneuvered until he got a penknife from his waistcoat pocket. This he opened with his teeth, and then, turning his coat inside out over his head, calmly proceeded to tear it to pieces.

The novelty of the proceeding delighted the audience, who yelled themselves frantic. The *Mirror* representative had rather a warm five minutes of it at this juncture. Many of the audience did not see the reason for his refusal, and expressed their disapproval of his action loudly.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Grimly, however, he looked on and watched Mr. Houdini once more reënter the cabinet. Time sped on, and presently somebody recorded the fact that the Mysteriarch had been manacled just one hour. Ten minutes more of anxious waiting, and then a surprise was in store for everybody.

VICTORY

The band was just finishing a stirring march when, with a great shout of victory, Houdini bounded from the cabinet, holding the shining handcuffs in his hand—free!

A mighty roar of gladness went up. Men waved their hats, shook hands with one another. Ladies waved their handkerchiefs, and the committee, rushing forward as one man, shouldered Houdini, and bore him in triumph round the arena.

But the strain had been too much for the "Handcuff King," and he sobbed as though his heart would break.

With a mighty effort, however, he regained his composure, and received the congratulations of the *Mirror* in the true sportsmanlike spirit he had shown throughout the contest.

PRESENTATION MODEL

The journalist intimated to the audience that a beautiful solid silver model of the handcuffs would be made, and asked Mr. Houdini's permission to present this to him at no distant date.

A SPORTSMAN'S TELEGRAM

Late last night Mr. Houdini sent us the following telegram:

Editor "Mirror," 2, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.

Allow me to thank you for the open and upright manner in which your representative treated me in today's contest.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Must say that it was one of the hardest, but at the same time one of the fairest, tests I ever had.

HARRY HOUDINI.

As an example of Houdini's fearlessness may be cited the wordy clash he had with Jess Willard, December 1, 1915, when Willard was heavy-weight champion of the world, and himself a popular figure. This occurred in Los Angeles, at the Orpheum Theatre, where Houdini was performing at the time. Willard had evidently dropped in to "see the show," and bought a seat in the balcony, where he was seated with some friends, when Houdini called for volunteers to step upon the stage and supervise his escapes. Willard ungraciously refused to do so, even when urged by the audience, and this led to the verbal duel between them. The incident was naturally played up by the papers the following day,—the Los Angeles *Record* saying:

Boxing has been given its worst black eye here today by none other than Jess Willard, heavy-weight champion, who was so badly worsted in a wordy clash with Harry Houdini, last night, that the audience hissed him from the house.

Nearly two thousand persons were present at the dramatic scene and seemed unanimous in groaning, hooting and booing Willard.

The trouble was precipitated by Willard's gruff refusal to comply with a friendly request made by Houdini that he act on a Committee to watch the performer's act from the stage.

It was not known that Willard was present until Houdini

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

came before the footlights and requested any gentleman in the audience to step on the stage and guard those present from any possible deception.

After about ten men had stepped on the platform, Houdini stepped forward and said smiling:

"Now I need three more gentlemen on this stage and there is a man here tonight who doesn't know I am aware of his presence. He will be enough for three ordinary gentlemen if he will serve on this Committee.

"He is Jess Willard, our champion."

Taken by surprise, the audience was silent for a moment and then broke into tumultuous hand-clapping. Cheers and shrieks resounded throughout the house.

Houdini looked up at the balcony, where Willard was seated, and said:

"I will leave it to the audience, Mr. Willard. You see they want to see you."

A fresh outburst occurred, even more violent than before.

"Aw, g'wan with your act," came Willard's rough reply, as the audience stilled itself. "I paid for my seat here."

"But, Mr. Willard," expostulated Houdini, "I—

"Give me the same wages you pay those other fellows and I'll come down," rumbled Willard's deep voice.

The audience, scenting something unusual, was very quiet.

"Sir, I will gladly do so," returned Houdini heatedly. "Come on down—I pay these men nothing."

"Aw, g'wan with the show," roared Willard, growling something that sounded like "four-flusher" and "faker."

Willard's boorish replies evidently displeased those present, for a few scattered hisses came about this time.

Houdini stepped to the footlights and held up his hand for silence.

It was readily granted.

"Jess Willard, I have just paid you a compliment," said

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Houdini dramatically. "Now I want to tell you something else."

"I will be Harry Houdini, Jess Willard, when you are NOT the heavyweight champion of the world."

A roar of applause shook the house. Men and women alike joined in the clapping and cheering.

A deep rumble from the balcony indicated that Willard was trying to make some retort, and the cheers veered suddenly to hoots and groans.

"I made a mistake," said Houdini, addressing the audience. "I asked GENTLEMEN to step on this stage, and gentlemen only."

A renewed outburst occurred, during which Willard evidently left the theater. He was not to be found after the next act had started.

Houdini was not afraid of attacking anybody or anything which he believed unjust or fraudulent; and it must be admitted that Conan Doyle was of much the same temper. He fought as no man ever fought before for the validity and reality of Spiritualism; he defended its advocates in his books and upon the public platform, and he constantly crossed swords with Houdini in debate and in the press. Yet their personal relations remained unaltered, and their letters continued to flow back and forth, constituting a link and at the same time a valuable historic series of documents, providing us with a number of keys to the hidden workings of their inner minds. These letters, it is true, were more frequent and more amicable during the early years of their friendship than towards the end, and this

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

was inevitable, under the circumstances. Yet they continued to exchange views, information and material to the very last.

It will be remembered that their curious correspondence began with a discussion of two famous old-time mediums—the Davenport Brothers, who were noted in their day for their “rope-tie,” and the mysterious manifestations which occurred in their presence, when they were apparently securely bound by members of the audience or Committee. Realizing that Houdini had unearthed a quantity of valuable historic material concerning these mediums, Conan Doyle had asked him whether, to the best of his knowledge and belief, the Davenport Brothers had ever been publicly exposed. Houdini had replied that they had *never* been “exposed”—meaning by this that no record existed of their having been caught red-handed in fraud. It was after he had received this letter, and carefully perused Houdini’s book, which had been sent him, that Doyle replied as follows—sending his letter to The Empire Theater, Sheffield, where Houdini was then playing.

March 18, 1920.

My dear Sir:—

I think your book, which I have now fully read, is very remarkable, for you really have got to the bottom of things in a way that is rare. These old forgotten worthies must rejoice in your vindication.

I feel the same about early Spiritualists, who asserted with much bravery things which I now know to have been true,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and who are still vilified even in their graves. Davenports are a case in point for our enemies continually allude to their "exposure," their "confession," and so on. Unless I hear to the contrary, I will take it that I may use your authoritative statement as the occasion serves. It is the same with Home, who was not even a professional medium, and yet shares the abuse, tho' he gave his whole life for the instruction and elevation of humanity.

I hope we may meet when our busy orbits happen to intersect.

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

To this letter Houdini replied as follows:

Palace Theatre,

Hull, March 23rd, 1920.

My Dear Sir A. Conan Doyle,

Thanks for your letter, and I hasten to reply, so that you will know your letters to me are digested.

When I wrote my book, I had not met Mr. Davenport, and the letter, or portion I published, was one received before our actual meeting.

His first letter was written to me Jan. 1909, and I met him 1909, July.

He had been living quietly and rarely saw visitors.

It required over twenty years for the book to be finished, and, not knowing Davenport while writing it, there can be no doubt as to the sincerity of my convictions.

Am rushing this letter through to you, and, if it appears a bit disconnected, attribute it to my haste.

Sincerely yours, with best wishes,

HOUDINI.

P.S. I have letters from Ira Davenport in which he expresses his ambition to return to Liverpool even at his age, and perform what is termed in America as a "Come Back."

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In his reply to this letter, Sir Arthur comes directly to the point:

March 26, 1920.

My dear Mr. Houdini,

I am sending you two little books of my own on psychic matters, though I fancy in your busy life you have little time for reading. I had meant to ask you, in my last, and I will do so now, whether you, with your unique experience, consider that the Davenport phenomena were clever physical tricks, or whether their claim to occult power was a true one. Their first manifestations seem to have begun when they were quite boys. Of course both alternatives might be true, for when psychic force has failed it might be imitated by skill. Your word on the matter, knowing as you do both the man and the possibilities of the art, would be final.

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

Houdini's only comment on this, in his next letter, was: "Regarding the Davenport Brothers, I am afraid that I cannot say that all their work was accomplished by the spirits."

This is surely non-committal enough! What he really thought of the Davenport Brothers may be found in his book *A Magician Among the Spirits*. He was quite convinced in his own mind that they were clever tricksters, partly as the result of a study of the available historic evidence, and partly because of the personal conversations he had had with Ira Davenport, the surviving brother. Houdini does not even intimate this, however, in his reply, and it was appar-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

ently only much later, in personal conversation with Sir Arthur, that he told him his real beliefs concerning their alleged manifestations.

And yet, curiously enough, in this very same letter, Houdini stated some of his views at the time with the utmost frankness. Speaking of his attitude in general, he says:

... You will note that I am still a sceptic, but a seeker after the Truth. I am willing to believe, if I can find a Medium who, as you suggest, will not resort to "manipulation" when the Power does not "arrive"... In fact, I have gone out of my way for years to unearth mediums, so that I could really find a truthful representative—and regret to say that, so far, I have never witnessed a séance which had the ring of sincerity.

I made a compact with an old friend of mine, many years ago, that, whoever passed over first, would be the other's Guide. He has gone over the Borderland, and, so far, I have not received any sign. I have given him every opportunity to reach me, and am still in hopes that some sign will be given... And still, I want to believe that there is such a thing! Dean Harry Kellar, who now lives in retirement in Los Angeles, California,* at one time had a standing challenge to all mediums (1876 to 1899), and even he will not come right out and say that all of it is humbug. And I think he knows *more* about the mysteries of magic than anyone living...

It is interesting to note, in this connection, that Harry Kellar emphatically stated, at one time in his career, that he had seen and heard psychic phenomena

* Kellar died some years ago.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

which he was totally unable to explain. In a letter to the *Indian Daily News*, Calcutta, January 25, 1882, he says:

In your issue of the 13th of January, I stated that I should be glad of an opportunity of participating in a séance with a view to giving an unbiassed opinion as to whether, in my capacity as a professional prestidigitateur, I could give a natural explanation of effects said to be produced by spiritual aid.

I am indebted to the courtesy of Mr. Eglinton, the spiritualistic medium now in Calcutta, and his host, Mr. J. Meugens, for affording me the opportunity I craved.

It is needless to say I went as a sceptic, but I must own that I have come away utterly unable to explain, by any natural means, the phenomena that I witnessed on Tuesday evening. . . . Forty-eight hours before I should not have believed anyone who described such manifestations under similar conditions. I still remain a sceptic as regards spiritualism, but I repeat my inability to explain or account for what must have been an intelligent force, that produced writing on the slate, which, if my senses are to be relied on, was in no way the result of trickery or sleight-of-hand.

And in the same paper, on January 30th, Kellar still further amplifies his views. He then said:

. . . The party having joined hands, to form a circle, I having hold of Mr. Eglinton on one side, the lights were put out. Almost immediately afterwards I felt Mr. Eglinton's leg brushing past mine, as he commenced to ascend; as he got up to the full extent of my arm, still keeping a firm hold of his hand, I jumped on my chair and subsequently mounted on the table. Mr. Eglinton still continued to ascend, and for a few seconds lifted me off my feet several inches above the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

table, when the gentleman holding my left hand, let go, on which Mr. Eglinton fell heavily on the table, and I slid backwards onto my seat. . . . The zither next passed close to my head, just brushing my forehead; shortly after a slight ray of moonlight was visible through a portion of one of the window shutters. I leaned back in my chair so as to get this beam of light in a line with my vision, and almost immediately I saw the zither pass across, and can swear it was floating by itself. . . . I may state that my chair was frequently jerked from under me with great force, and when the light was turned up I found it on the table. . . . In conclusion let me state that, after a most stringent trial and strict scrutiny of these wonderful experiences, I can arrive at no other conclusion than that there was no trace of trickery in any form, nor was there in the room any mechanism or machinery by which could be produced the phenomena which had taken place. The ordinary mode by which Maskelyne and other conjurors imitate levitation, or the floating test, could not possibly be done in the room in which we were assembled.

It is possible that Kellar changed his mind, in later years, regarding these experiences—as his utterances would seem to indicate—but there can be no doubt of his complete conviction, at the time, that he had witnessed extraordinary things in Eglinton's presence. What the cause may have been of his reversal of opinion as to these séances is not clear.

In a subsequent letter, Doyle endeavored to make plain to Houdini why his friend had not "returned" to him, according to his point of view. He wrote (April 2, 1920) :

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In the matter of your friend coming, of course he could not do so unless you got the conditions right at this end. I advise you, when you get back to town, to try two or three of these mediums, all of whom are honest, so far as my experience goes. Mrs. Brittain is the best. . . . In a series of 72 clients whom I sent her, she got through 60 times, 5 failures and the rest half and half.

When my son came back to me, my friend Cyholm had a journalist pal talking direct to him at the same moment that my son was talking to me. Four other sitters testified to the facts, as they overheard it. What could be more final?

To these overtures on Doyle's part, Houdini replied:

I am very, very anxious to have a séance with any medium with whom you could gain me an audience. I promise to go there with my mind absolutely clear, and willing to believe. I will put no obstruction of any nature whatsoever in the medium's way, and will assist in all ways in my power to obtain results. I give you my tour for the next four weeks, and if you can arrange for a séance for any Sunday I could come to Town.

I am asking this of you, as I believe that you are one of the most serious men I know, on the positive side of this Question, and trust implicitly in your endeavors.

It was doubtless because of this appeal on Houdini's part that Conan Doyle arranged a number of sittings for him in London and elsewhere—the details of which will be given later on.

CHAPTER FOUR

JUST sixty years ago, if anyone had peered into the laboratory of England's foremost chemist, he would have discovered him engaged in a series of *bizarre and puzzling* experiments which our observer might well have racked his brains to explain. For the chemist in question would not be found bending over his familiar retorts and crucibles, but seated in a semi-darkened room, watching objects move about apparently of their own accord and volition, or observing the movements of a scantily clad, feminine form, gliding along the floor of his room,—whose anatomical details seemed to have aroused in our Professor the liveliest kind of speculative interest!

Our learned chemist is none other than Sir William Crookes, discoverer of the element thallium, and inventor of the Crookes Tube, which rendered the X-rays possible. He was, at this period of his career, devoting a great deal of time and attention to the investigation of Spiritualistic phenomena, which were

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

alleged to occur in the presence of D. D. Home, Kate Fox, Florence Cook, and one or two other celebrated mediums of his day. Crookes was among the first to apply laboratory methods in his investigations—his only predecessor having been Professor Augustus Hare, of the University of Pennsylvania. Crookes, however, carried his instrumental tests much further, devising a number of ingenious pieces of apparatus for this purpose. He passed high-tension electric currents round a wire cage, inside which an accordion could be heard and seen playing, manipulated by no material hands. He built a delicate weighing apparatus, so constructed that no amount of physical pressure exerted by the medium's hands could affect it, but which nevertheless recorded definite pressures exerted spasmodically, as though by some invisible force. He proved the objective character of certain percussive sounds, or "raps," by means of a stretched membrane and tiny grains of sand. He verified with his own hands and arms, and to his entire satisfaction, the complete "levitation" of the medium from the floor—sometimes chair and all! He saw objects moved about, phantom hands materialize and vanish, and even noted carefully the anatomical and physiological differences between a materialized form, which appeared in a room in his own house, and the entranced medium—observing their differences in pulse, respiration, the fact that one had her ears pierced for ear-rings while the other

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

did not; and so on. These facts Crookes reported in his book *Researches in Spiritualism*, and in various reports in the *Proceedings and Journals* of the Society for Psychical Research. They have constituted an astounding and unsolved puzzle to this day.

In their early correspondence, Conan Doyle and Houdini naturally deal with these celebrated mediums to some extent, as historic oddities and as subjects for controversy. Kate Fox, one of the two Fox Sisters, who founded modern Spiritualism, and Miss Cook, the medium through whom the well-nigh incredible materializations occurred, are touched upon only incidentally, though each man treated these cases at considerable length in his books, from totally different standpoints. Home, however, is discussed at greater length, and in a number of letters. In one of his first, Houdini had written:

Regarding D. D. Home, I have hundreds of clippings of the trial—possess a number of his private letters—and believe he is one of the few mediums who was not properly, if I may use the word, “exposed.”

To which Sir Arthur had replied: “No, Home was never exposed, ‘properly’ or not. He was, I think, above suspicion.” *

* D. D. Home was in some ways the most famous “physical medium” who ever lived. A large number of striking phenomena were said to have taken place in his presence. He wrote several books upon the subject himself. He became involved in a lawsuit with a Mrs. Lyon; this, however, involved not the question of his mediumship, but money matters, and is probably the greatest shadow on his career.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

On a number of occasions Home was reported to have been lifted or "levitated" from the floor, and on December 13th, 1868, a most extraordinary thing occurred. Home was, according to the testimony of three witnesses, floated out of one window and in at another, at a distance of seventy feet from the ground! The witnesses were the Earl of Dunraven, Lord Crawford and Captain Charles Wynne. Inasmuch as this particular séance is of such historic importance, a brief quotation from the record will doubtless prove of interest.

... We heard Home go into the next room, heard the window thrown up, and presently Home appeared standing upright outside our window; he opened the window and walked in quite coolly. "Ah," he said, "You were good this time," referring to our having sat still and not wished to prevent him. . . . I got up, shut the window, and in coming back remarked that the window was not raised a foot, and that I could not think how he had managed to squeeze through. He arose and said, "Come and see"; I went with him; he told me to open the window as it was before, I did so: he told me to stand a little distance off; he then went through the open space, head first, quite rapidly, his body being nearly horizontal and apparently rigid. He came in again, feet foremost, and we returned to the other room. . . .

In Houdini's Diary (May 6th, 1920) the following entry appears:

I offered to do the D. D. Home levitation stunt at the same place that Home did it in 1868, and G—— shirked and messed it up. He is a fourflusher of the dirtiest kind.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

It is of course impossible to tell precisely what Houdini had in mind, but he had evidently made a careful examination of the premises, with his customary thoroughness, and had decided that it would be possible to duplicate this performance, with suitable assistance. The assistant was apparently to have been G——; but the latter for some reason or other became frightened at the prospect, and backed out of the bargain. This at least would seem to be the logical inference to be drawn from the entry in Houdini's diary; and no one who knew him would doubt for a moment that Houdini would willingly have risked his life in some perilous leap or climb in order to "duplicate" this occurrence as nearly as possible. Whatever the facts in the case may have been, however, it is evident that it was never attempted—with the result that this historic feat of Home's remains as great a problem as ever.

.

Another famous case over which Doyle and Houdini clashed was that of the celebrated medium Slade, who flourished about sixty years ago, and who was famous for his "slate-writing" tests. He would hold a cleaned and examined slate under the edge of the table, and after a few minutes the sound of "writing" would be heard upon the slate's surface. While the sitter remained spellbound, the scratching sounds continued, and presently Slade would remove the slate, and, lo and behold! upon its upper surface a more or less lengthy

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

message would be found, addressed to the sitter, and usually signed by some friend or relative who had passed into the Great Beyond. This is known as "independent writing." Slade was certainly caught in trickery on several occasions, notably by Sir E. Ray Lankaster, who prosecuted him in court. His most famous experiments were those conducted by Professor Zöllner, of Leipzig, who was completely convinced of his powers. He subsequently published a book upon these results, entitled *Transcendental Physics*.

Houdini was most anxious to run everything to earth that he possibly could regarding Slade, and took pains to meet the men who were personally responsible for his "exposure." On May 13th (1920) he met Sir R. Donkin, who was associated with Sir E. Ray Lankaster in Slade's exposure and trial; and on June 26th he met Sir Ray Lankaster himself, and in his Diary says—

"... He told me how he caught Dr. Slade. Kiddled him along. Pretended he was simple. Asked if the spirits would write for him if he had the slates. Led S. on. S. got *very* careless. Told L. to come next Tuesday. Got Donkin and when S. had written on slate L. held it and took slate away. This at second sitting...."

What had happened at this historic sitting was that Sir Ray Lankaster had suddenly seized the slate, which, on examination, was found to bear a written message. Slade's defence at the trial was that he had

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

already heard the writing going on, and had so stated. The evidence was considered in many quarters inconclusive. However, Slade was found guilty and sentenced to three months' hard labor—from which he escaped only by a legal technicality. He left England immediately, and went to the continent, where he continued his sittings.

It has frequently been asserted that Zöllner was old, half-blind and doddering at the time of his experiments with Slade, and consequently that his testimony was valueless. This has frequently been quoted, and is mentioned by Houdini, in one of his letters to Conan Doyle. Investigation seems to prove, however, that there is no logical and justifiable ground for this belief. In his letters, Sir Arthur says:

“Zöllner had never a day's illness till six years after his tests with Slade. See the Certificate from the Head of Leipzig University (*Widow's Mite*, p. 276).

•

“The stroke came on at breakfast, when he was in full health. He became unconscious and died. Zöllner died in 1883, from an attack of apoplexy. Büchner, of his University, gives an account of it, quoted by Funk. I think Slade was capable of cheating, but I am sure he did not always cheat. The Ray Lankaster conviction seems to me a just one, but on the other hand his work before Zöllner, Weber, Scheibner and the Court Conjuror Bellachini was, I think, beyond all doubt.”

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Houdini's comment on this, in a later letter, was:

"In all my tests in Germany the great Scientists were so extremely honest that they reminded me of country boys, who have had a strict bringing-up and had their Dear Mother's respect."

.

And then there were the fairy photographs. Houdini had no comment to make on these, in any of his letters—perhaps because he could not bring himself to discuss them seriously. They were first mentioned, almost incidentally, in a letter of Sir Arthur's, written June 25th, 1920. Houdini had asked whether one or more of Dr. Crawford's photographs might be procured, and Doyle had replied:

The Crawford photos—the best of them—are away. I'll send them when I hear how long you will be in town. They are too precious to have lying around. . . . But I have something far more precious—two photos, one of a goblin, the other of four fairies in a Yorkshire wood. A fake! you will say. No, sir, I think not. However, all inquiry will be made. These I am not allowed to send. The fairies are about eight inches high. In one there is a single goblin dancing. In the other four beautiful, luminous creatures. Yes, it is a revelation.

The story connected with the so-called "fairy photographs" is probably too well known to the general public to necessitate more than the briefest recapitulation. It is that two young girls, Elsie and Frances Wright, living in Cottingley, Yorkshire, in 1917, re-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

ported that they had frequently seen "fairies," when out playing in the woods. Their father, Mr. Wright, possessed a small Kodak, and he allowed them to take this with them on several occasions, in order to photograph the fairies, if possible. They took several "snaps," with the result that photographs were obtained of beautiful, fairy-like creatures, a few inches in height (quite traditional fairies). The circumstances were painstakingly investigated, some time later, by Mr. E. L. Gardner, Member of the Theosophical Society of England, and by Sir Arthur himself, who later published his book, *The Coming of the Fairies*, in which the details connected with this curious case are given. Naturally, suggestions were forthcoming as to how these results might have been obtained by "faking," and considerable controversy raged at the time regarding this series of pictures. The incredible nature of the alleged facts naturally aroused scepticism, while the partisans of the Wright family contended that the girls did not know enough about photography to produce such perfect results. The interested reader is referred to Doyle's book for the particulars, wherein the various attacks and criticisms are printed, together with the available evidence. Suffice it to say that the "fairies" have not been seen since, either by the Wright girls or by any others, and that the lonely spot where they were supposedly photographed is now, we understand, a busy mining center. Nothing *pro* or *con* has been

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

heard of these events since the publication of Doyle's book, to the best of our knowledge.

.

In addition to their verbal and epistolary controversy regarding historic and contemporary mediums, Conan Doyle and Houdini were also continually arguing as to whether or not Houdini himself possessed supernormal powers, the reality of which he elected to deny. Houdini constantly reiterated that he had no such powers, but that everything he did was accomplished by pure trickery and skill. We have seen how Doyle himself took this stand in his initial letters; but he finally changed his point of view, until he became more or less firmly convinced that Houdini *did* in very truth effect some of his escapes by preternatural methods. In one of his early letters (March 24th, 1920) Houdini writes:

Herewith you will find enclosed the *Hull Morning News*, and although I never, in any way, try to make believe that I have occult aid, nevertheless, paragraphs on the style of the enclosed frequently appear.

To which Sir Arthur replied:

I don't wonder they put you down as an occultist. As I read the accounts, I can't conceive how you do it. You must be a very brave man as well as extraordinarily dexterous.

And again:

How you get out of the diving suit beats me—but the whole thing beats me completely.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In a later letter, Sir Arthur says:

Yes, you have driven me to the occult! A friend assures me that the breathing holes are the center of your operations, but I can see no connection, so I must leave it at that. . . . I heard of your remarkable feat in Bristol. My dear chap, why go around the world seeking a demonstration of the occult when you are giving one all the time? Mrs. Guppy (a well-known medium) could dematerialize, and so could many folk in Holy Writ, and I do honestly believe that you can also,—in which case I again ask you why do you want demonstrations of the occult? My reason tells me that you have this wonderful power, for there is no alternative, tho' I have no doubt that, up to a point, your strength and skill avail you. . . .

As you will probably, through Mrs. Jeffrey, get into touch with Sloan or Phœnix in Glasgow, you should get your proofs soon, unless all proofs and all higher personal developments are cut off from you because you are not playing the game with that which has been given to you already. That is a point of view to consider. Such a gift is not given to one man in a hundred million, that he should amuse the multitude or amass a fortune. Excuse my frank talking, but you know this is all very vital to me. . . .

I am amused by your investigating with the S.P.R. Do they never think of investigating *you*?

And nothing that Houdini could say deterred Sir Arthur's slowly-forming belief in his preternatural powers!

Yet it must not be thought that Conan Doyle was always unduly credulous, or that he "swallowed everything" offered him in the name of Spiritualism. His critical faculties were indeed often keenly alive. The

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

following incident will serve to show this. On January 6th, 1922, Houdini wrote Sir Arthur the following letter:

My dear Sir A. Conan Doyle:—

Along with this letter am sending you a photograph which I think will interest you.

This photograph was secured about four months ago, while my new photoplay called "Haldane of the Secret Service" was in the making. In this photoplay I portray the son of a murdered high police official, and, in one of the scenes, while on my way from the Club, I meet a young lady who is running madly down the street before pursuing thugs. *She runs into my arms for protection.*

We had a cameraman on the scene, to make an instantaneous photograph of the action, and the result was the picture I am sending to you. This is not a trick picture, that I know. It is not a double exposure, yet how would you explain it? Does it look like ectoplasm?

The gentleman with the straw hat is your good friend Houdini. The girl, whose face is unfortunately turned away from the camera, is Miss Gladys Leslie. She also cannot account for the picture.

You will note that the figures of the persons making up the crowd on the sidewalk are sharply defined. They are watching the action and, as you can see, were greatly interested. I should like to have your opinion regarding the picture.

Am playing a brief tour, but letters directed to my home address will always reach me.

With very best regards and with heartiest greetings for the New Year,

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

To this Sir Arthur replied:

The effect is certainly produced by the whisk of the lady's dress as she rushed into your protective arms. It then wrapped itself 'round her legs. It is certainly not ectoplasm!

And again, in commenting on some other photos which Houdini had evidently sent, Doyle wrote:

Many thanks for the photos. The so-called "faces" are obviously produced by the distemper wash upon the wall. The streak of light, however, is more interesting, though I am by no means convinced that it is a psychic effect. The plate may have been scratched in some way—indeed the way that the line broadens out at the end suggests a scratch.

Many thanks for the photos from Los Angeles. I won't call them "spirit" photos, for they were very unconvincing to me. The faces on the wall seemed quite absurd.

Furthermore, Sir Arthur was enabled, on at least one occasion, to turn the tables rather neatly upon Houdini and the magicians generally, by showing them something which kept them guessing for some little time. This was on the occasion of one of the annual banquets of the Society of American Magicians (S. A. M.), when Doyle showed the moving pictures of his prehistoric monsters which were afterwards incorporated in his film *The Lost World*. It came about in this way. On June 18th, 1922, Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur:

I am sending you an official invitation for the Society of American Magicians' annual banquet. You will meet some notable people and, incidentally, this is quite an affair to our organization, as some of the city officials and big business

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

men will be there. . . . I know that you will be interested in witnessing the magicians' performance from a looker-on viewpoint.

To this, however, Sir Arthur had replied:

I fear that the bogus spiritual phenomena must prevent me from attending the banquet, which you have so graciously proffered. I look upon this subject as sacred, and I think that God's gift to man has been intercepted and delayed by the constant pretence that all phenomena are really tricks, which I know they are not. I should be in a false position, for I must either be silent and seem to acquiesce, or else protest, which a guest should not do.

This was evidently a serious disappointment to Houdini, for he replied at once:

May 24, 1922.

My dear Sir Arthur:—

I am very sorry indeed to note that you would not care to be my guest Friday, June 2, at the Society of American Magicians' Annual Banquet, on account of some of the entertainment which was to take place.

I assure you it was only with a view of letting you see mysterious effects and only for your special benefit that this was being put on; therefore I assure you as a gentleman that there will be nothing performed or said which will offend anyone. My motive was a sincere desire from the heart and an expression of good will.

The Society of American Magicians is composed of gentlemen who would not stoop to any indignity to an invited guest. I trust you will reconsider, under the circumstances, and please tell me that Lady Doyle and yourself will honor us that evening.

In passing, would like to inform you that the big

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

literary men will be present, Mr. Ochs of the N. Y. Times, Postmaster Morgan, Mr. E. F. Albee and J. J. Murdock, the heads of the Keith interests, Mr. Bernard Gimbel of Gimbel Brothers and Mr. Howard Thurston, one of the representative magicians of America who is a firm believer in spiritualism.

Regards to Lady Doyle and yourself, in which Mrs. Houdini joins, and awaiting your reply, I beg to remain,

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

The next morning Houdini received a telegram, which read:

WE SHALL BE DELIGHTED TO COME.

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

And on the following day, a letter:

My dear Houdini:

Of course we will come. All thanks. But I feel towards faked phenomena as your father would have felt towards a faked Pentecost.

Yours very sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

P.S. Nearly through—thank God!

Nowhere, perhaps, is Conan Doyle's sympathetic, whole-hearted generosity of nature better exemplified than in this response to Houdini's invitation, in which he put personal feelings entirely to one side, and entered into the spirit of the evening with genial and broad-minded tolerance.

It was at this annual banquet of the S. A. M. (Society of American Magicians) that Sir Arthur

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

rather turned the tables on his hosts—much to his inner delight and amusement—by showing them some of the film, afterwards incorporated in his picture *The Lost World*, depicting various prehistoric monsters apparently alive and active in their native haunts. These creatures were of course miniature models, artistically constructed, but the illusion created was almost perfect, and doubtless many of the magicians present were puzzled for the time being. Sir Arthur introduced them in a cleverly thought-out speech, in which he succeeded in leaving the impression upon the minds of his audience that they were truly “psychic,” without actually saying so—thus leaving the audience to form its own conclusions! As reported in the press the next morning, after a brief preliminary talk upon Spiritualism in general, Sir Arthur said:

“These pictures are not occult, but they are psychic, because everything that emanates from the human spirit or human brain is psychic. It is not supernatural. Nothing is. It is preternatural in the sense that it is not known to our ordinary senses.

“It is the effect of the joining on the one hand of imagination and on the other hand of some power of materialization. The imagination, I may say, comes from me—the materializing power from elsewhere.

“There would be great danger if the original were shown instead of the counterfeit, but what you will see is a living presentment.”

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

After this mysterious utterance Sir Arthur said:

“I would like to add, to save myself from getting up again, that, if permission is granted for me to show this, they will speak for themselves. I will answer no questions regarding them either for the press or the others present.”

The pictures were then shown, creating no little sensation. The following day, in order to prevent any misconception, Sir Arthur wrote the following letter, doubtless with an inward chuckle:

June 3, 1922.

THE AMBASSADOR
NEW YORK

My dear Houdini.

My Cinema interlude, upon the occasion of the Magicians' dinner, should I think be explained now that its purpose was fulfilled. That purpose was simply to provide a little mystification for those who have so often and so successfully mystified others. In presenting my moving Dinosaurs, I had to walk very warily in my speech, so as to preserve the glamour and yet say nothing which I could not justify as literally true. Thus, I was emphatic that it was not occult, and only psychic in so far as all things human come from a man's spirit. It was preternatural in the sense that it was not nature as we know it. All my other utterances were, as I think you will agree, within the actual facts.

The Dinosaurs and other monsters have been constructed by pure cinema art of the highest kind, and are being used for "The Lost World," a picture which represents prehistoric life upon a South American plateau. Having such material at hand, and being allowed by the courtesy of Mr. Watterson Rothacker to use it, I could not resist the tempta-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

tion to surprise your associates and guests. I am sure they will forgive me if, for a few short hours, I had them guessing.

And now, Mr. Chairman, confidence begets confidence, and I want to know how you got out of that trunk!

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

A day or so later, Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur:

... There is one thing positive, and that is that the little stunt at the banquet created a great deal more newspaper talk than anything on the program. I am very much obliged to you for your kindness in doing it, and trust that Lady Doyle and yourself had an enjoyable evening. It is the most historic dinner we have ever had, and this is our eighteenth annual dinner. . . . I ran a moving picture, taken at the banquet, and if you desire a copy, I shall be pleased to let you have one. It is a remarkably good picture of Lady Doyle, and you have a very amused expression on your face as if you were in a good humor—and I hope you were!

Just before Sir Arthur and his family returned to England from their first lecture tour in America, and a few days after the above episode at the S. A. M. banquet, both men became the central figures in a dramatic and quite unexpected series of events. Houdini had written to Sir Arthur:

Mrs. Houdini and I are going to celebrate our twenty-eighth marriage anniversary June 22nd. Would you care to join us in a little box party? If so, we will go to see our friend Raymond Hitchcock, who was the Master of Ceremonies at the Magicians' dinner, and who, at the present time, is starring at the Carroll Theater in his own Company, which he calls *Pinwheel*, a hodge-podge of good-natured stuff.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Sir Arthur accepted the invitation for himself and his family—although it was his last night in the country,—and they attended the performance. What happened may perhaps be gathered from the following, which appeared the next day:

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Lady Doyle, who are sailing for England tomorrow on the *Adriatic*, unconsciously became the central actors in an extraordinary scene at the Earl Carroll Theatre last night.

The distinguished English visitors, with Mr. and Mrs. B. M. L. Ernst, were the guests of Houdini and Mrs. Houdini at a theatre party, to witness Raymond Hitchcock's "Pinwheel Revue." It was an opportunity that the irrepressible Hitchcock, with his manner of intimacy with his audience, could not overlook. He called the attention of the audience to the presence of the noted author, and then, turning to Sir Arthur himself, inquired of him if he thought Sherlock Holmes could tell what Margaret Asquith herself wanted.

Having made his start, Hitchy kept right on going. He announced the presence of Houdini and asked the arch-mystifier to come to the stage and do a little stunt. Houdini arose and bowed his acknowledgments to the applause that followed, but Hitchy was not satisfied with acknowledgments and insisted that Houdini help him make good his promise. Cries of "The Needle Mystery" came from the house. Houdini sat down; the audience continued to clamor while Hitchcock pleaded. In his plea he had an able backer in Sir Arthur, who literally pushed the unwilling Houdini upon the stage.

What followed is a chapter for theatrical history. Houdini explained he had come to the theatre not to work but to be entertained. The cry for "the needle mystery" again arose, and Houdini finally announced that to make good Hitchy's promise he would do just one stunt—either the needle or the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

rope mystery. He left the audience to choose, and it decided upon the needle trick.

The performance of the "Pinwheel Revue" was stopped. Stage carpenters and electricians, principals and chorus people who, according to the rules of the theatre, should have been in their dressing rooms, flocked out on the stage.

Anything that the stage manager of the show may have done to time the performance was work done for naught—at least on this occasion.

At Houdini's request, a Committee of three came upon the stage, and Houdini performed his needle mystery of swallowing five packages of needles and twenty yards of thread and bringing up the needles threaded.

Seldom has there been heard such applause as that with which Houdini was greeted at the conclusion of the mystery. He finally made his way to his seat, but, with the audience speculating on the mystery, the "Pinwheel" performance was curtailed and the show swung into its closing number. Such an incident is unique, for, though theatrical history records instances of artists "stopping the show" in which they were appearing, it contains no mention, in the memory of the theatrical historian, of the feat of an artist not only stopping but curtailing a show in which he was not programmed to have a part.

The next day Sir Arthur and his family sailed for their native shores, and the following telegram was placed in his hands as he stepped on board:

BON VOYAGE. MAY THE DECREE OF FATE SEND YOU BACK HERE SOON FOR ANOTHER PLEASANT VISIT. REGARDS.

HOUDINI.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN the strange friendship and the equally strange correspondence between Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first began, in 1920, the former was touring the British Isles, mystifying the inhabitants with his marvellous escape acts, while Sir Arthur was just beginning his active propaganda work in Spiritualism. In their early letters, before Houdini had obtained sittings with any of the well-known contemporary mediums, it was only natural that they should discuss the history of the subject and the reality of the powers which these older mediums were said to possess. It is a difficult matter to present much of this material interestingly and intelligibly for the average reader—though the student of the subject would know well enough what they were talking about. But, unless some brief historic summary be given of the lives and times of at least certain of the mediums mentioned in their letters, the references would convey little or nothing to the reader—though of considerable intrinsic

interest. A very brief explanation will doubtless serve to make everything clear.

What is known as Modern Spiritualism began in 1848, in Hydesville and Rochester, New York. Two young girls, Margaret and Kate Fox, obtained "rappings" which gave intelligent replies to their questions. In this way a sort of "code" was seemingly established for the first time with the "spirit world." Some contended that the young Fox girls were clever tricksters, producing the rappings with their toes, concocting the replies as they went along. On the other hand, many stated that the children could not possibly have made up the replies given, and, further, that rappings frequently occurred all over the place, at considerable distances from the children. What the ultimate truth may be regarding these historic occurrences we shall probably never know. Both girls in later years confessed to trickery—and then recanted their confessions, stating that they made them for the sake of the money they derived from doing so! Whatever the truth may be regarding them, the fact remains that the movement spread rapidly, and new mediums sprang up all over the country—several of the most noted going abroad, where they gave demonstrations of their powers, in England, France, Germany, Russia and elsewhere. The Davenport Brothers were among the most famous of these—producing many so-called "physical phenomena." D. D. Home was studied by Sir William

Crookes and other scientists. Slade gave exhibitions of his slate-writing. Miss Fay and Florence Cook gave demonstrations of physical manifestations and materialization. The last-named medium had a "Guide" or "Control," it was claimed, named Katie King, daughter of John King, who in life (so 'twas claimed) was none other than Sir Henry Morgan, noted Buccaneer! Later, Eusapia Palladino, celebrated Italian medium, gave séances to scientific committees in nearly every capital in Europe. Mme. Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society, in India, performing many "miracles" to support the occult doctrine she was teaching. An investigation conducted by Dr. Richard Hodgson, of the British Society for Psychical Research, seemed to prove that these alleged miracles were spurious. When the Society was founded, with Barrett, Myers, Gurney and Sidgwick as the active workers and heads, investigations continued more vigorously than before. Mrs. L. E. Piper came to the fore—having been "discovered" by Professor William James, and by him turned over to Dr. Richard Hodgson for investigation. Eglinton was another famous medium of those days. The Bangs Sisters, of Chicago, claimed to produce "spirit paintings," unpainted by any mortal hand. Meanwhile, a notorious adventuress, Anna O'Delia Diss DeBar—of many aliases—in New York, founded a cult and swindled a wealthy lawyer, Luther B. Marsh, out of hundreds of thousands of dol-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

lars. She was eventually convicted and imprisoned. A medium by the name of Bailey claimed to produce solid objects in a closed room—and did so until exposed. The same was true of Fräulein Rothe, of Germany, who produced bouquets of flowers, freshly cut. Many other mediums figured in the historic pages of early Spiritualism, but these are some of the more important characters, often referred to, and it is concerning them that frequent references are made in the letters which passed between Doyle and Houdini, during the early days of their acquaintance.

Into a fiery maelstrom of controversy concerning these historic figures Doyle and Houdini plunged at the very outset. It would be impossible to follow them in their various debates, but a few quotations from their letters will doubtless be of interest, as illustrating their respective points of view, and possibly as throwing light upon these historic personages. Each tried to persuade the other of the correctness of his standpoint, by argument and the citation of cases, but each remained firmly convinced of the justice and common-sense of his own view. Thus, on March 30th, 1920, Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur, from Nottingham, where he was playing, in a letter of thanks for two books which had been sent him:

Your two books arrived yesterday, and I wanted to read them both before replying to your welcome letter.

I am very, very busy, but I managed to take the time,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and read your books through *twice*.

I digested all the material, and when you say there are ninety-six volumes on your desk, it may interest you to know that I travel with a book-case containing over one hundred volumes, and recently, in Leeds, I bought two libraries on Spiritualism. I found an exceptionally fine collection of pamphlets, and expect to go over them when I get a few days to myself.

It may interest you to know that Dr. Funk—of Funk and Wagnalls Company—left a letter behind, sealed, which, up to the present time, has not been read; but Dr. Frank Vizetelly, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Standard Dictionary*, had a dream or vision, in which he spoke to Dr. Funk, who told him that he had left instructions to bring out, in special volumes, Victor Hugo's works.

During my tour in Australia, I met a man who was supposed to have laid low Mrs. Piper; I was in Berlin, Germany, at the trial of Miss Rothe, the flower medium; I know the methods of the Bangs Sisters, the famous Chicago mediums; I was in court when Anna O'Delia Diss DeBar, who was mixed up with the lawyer Luther Marsh, was sentenced. Carl Hertz, the magician, showed the Court some of her Hocus Pocus. By the way, Miss DeBar claimed to have been the daughter of that once beautiful Lola Montez, who made two thrones totter. I visited her grave two years ago, in Brooklyn, and there she lies, alone and forgotten.

Did you ever read *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*, written by a friend of mine—David P. Abbott? If not, I shall be pleased to send you a copy, as I know where I can lay my hands on one.

Well, I won't bore you with more of my writing. Thanking you for your kindness in sending the books, I beg to remain,

Sincerely yours,

HARRY HOUDINI.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In his Diary (May 30th, 1920) Houdini made the following entry:

Had a long chat with Carl Hertz *re* his exposure of Anna O'Delia Diss DeBar, in 1888, in the Luther Marsh case. Told me he exposed her—the writing paper trick. He would change the blank paper for the written-on paper which he had under his vest.

Abbott's book, to which Houdini referred, is a mine of information regarding mediumistic trickery of all kinds. Nevertheless, Abbott is open-minded regarding psychic phenomena, and for years was a member of the Society for Psychical Research. He invented the "talking tea kettle," and many other clever illusions, and is well known to magicians throughout the world.

Mrs. L. E. Piper, above referred to, is probably the most celebrated medium who ever lived. No "physical phenomena" ever occurred in her presence, her demonstrations being mainly automatic speech and writing. She is the medium largely responsible for the initial conversion of Sir Oliver Lodge, Dr. James H. Hyslop, and many others, to Spiritualism. She was "discovered" in 1885 by Professor William James, and has been before the scientific world ever since. Her complete honesty and sincerity were proved many years ago, and have never been questioned by anyone acquainted with the facts. She is still alive, though she has not given regular sittings for some years past.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The spirit pictures produced by the Bangs Sisters are certainly questionable and subject to diverse interpretations. Mr. Abbott claimed to have worked out a method for producing them, by trickery, and somewhat crude copies of their portrait mystery were subsequently produced upon the stage by Thurston, Selbit, Henry Clive and other magicians. There are many who contend, however, that these imitations bear little semblance to the originals.

Replying to Houdini's letter, Sir Arthur wrote on April 2nd:

My dear Houdini:

There are points in your letter that I am not very clear about. I don't want to involve you in a correspondence, so I just note them for your consideration, but not necessarily for your answer. . . .

I know a good deal about Crookes's life and experiments. I know there were only a few mediums whom he trusted. Home, Mrs. Jencken (Kate Fox), Mrs. Corner (Miss Cook), and Hope, the Crewe photographer. None of them ever played him false. I should like to know who it was that did so, for it was no one whom he ever quoted. . . .

Fräulein Rothe, the flower medium, I know little of, but I notice that von Schrenck-Notzing, the German scientist, holds that her case was one of "transfiguration," and that there was an error of judgment. I think this error is often made by ignorance of the laws. . . .

Excuse this rigmarole—caused by my taking this subject very seriously.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In reply to this, Houdini took it upon himself to show Sir Arthur the error of his ways by the citation of certain cases. He deals first of all with Bert Reese (since dead). Reese was a remarkable character. He was a short, fat, completely bald, well-paunched, cherubic-faced little Polish Jew, with a kindly heart, keen mind and delightful sense of humor. He reminded one of a little gnome, with his pop-eyes and pot-belly. But he was a remarkable personality. He had travelled extensively, and come into contact with royalty and celebrities in many different countries. His home was filled with presents which these individuals had given him. In his tie was a huge diamond pin, which had been given him by the late King of Spain; upon his finger an even bigger diamond presented by the Sovereign of another country. In the opinion of many, Reese possessed remarkable powers—though he certainly added to these, whenever possible, by any normal means possible, and his truly extraordinary insight into human nature and human motives. Thomas Edison, the late Dr. William Hanna Thomson, and many others, publicly affirmed their belief in his preternatural faculties over their own signatures, in the *New York Times*. Reese worked with pellets, which he doubtless “switched” by clever sleight-of-hand, thus gaining a knowledge of their written contents. Even assuming this, however, many have contended that the *answers* given by Reese to these questions were often most re-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

markable and uncanny; that, granting he had been enabled to read their contents by trickery, he nevertheless must have possessed some extraordinary power to reply to these questions in the way he did. This is one of those questions most difficult to decide. Reese was arrested under the Fortune-Telling Act, some years before his death, tried before Judge Rosalsky, gave a demonstration of his powers in court, before witnesses and "hard-boiled" detectives, succeeded in completely convincing them, and was honorably discharged. An amusing incident occurred in connection with this demonstration. After giving these tests, Reese turned to one of the detectives present, grabbed his scarf-pin, and said to him: "Now, I'm going to tell you where you got that pin!"

"No you don't," said the detective, apprehensively, "get out!"

Writing of Reese and other mediums, Houdini said:

3rd April 1920.

Dear Sir Arthur Conan Doyle:

Am only too delighted to correspond with you, and if there is anything in my little Kingdom of Knowledge that you wish to know, will only be too pleased to give you any information that I may possess.

For I am seeking truth, and it is only by knowing that Analytical Minds are going in for it, that I am treating this matter seriously.

As a rule, I have found that the greater brain a man

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

has, and the better he is educated, the easier it has been to mystify him.

A man in New York, named, or calling himself—Dr. Reese, is, without doubt, the cleverest reader of Messages that ever lived.

He has deceived the great minds of Germany—in the Courts—winning a lawsuit, and in America, I know he has made children of our brainiest men.

Edison actually believes in him, and when charged with fortune-telling in Judge Rosalsky's Court, he gave a test for that shrewd man of the world, and convinced him that he was genuine; and was discharged.

Reese knew who I was, when I called for a sitting, and I will say that, of all the clever sleight-of-hand men, he is the brainiest I have ever come across.

He performs the Pellet Test in such a marvellous manner that, if you ever come to America, I want you to have a séance with him, and wonder if you could "fathom" his work.

I was amazed at his skill, and if I had not been extremely familiar with all sleights, and all moves of Mediums, who resort to the Pellet Test, I would have been completely fooled.

Why, he allows you to hold the Pellets in your hands, place them in your pocket, and asks you which one he will read and answer first—you open them yourself,—and, sure enough, it has been properly read!

He failed to answer one peculiar question I put in writing:—"What am I building,—and for whom?"

Rather a strange question, but it happened that I was having constructed an Exedra for my Beloved Mother, and naturally he could not "guess," though, from the other questions he answered, he is a gifted reader of character and judges human beings perfectly.

I caught him red-handed, and he acknowledged it was

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

the first time in his life that anyone had ever "recognized his Powers." And I'll put it in writing he was the slickest I have ever seen. . . .

Fräulein Rothe, I have every reason to believe, was actually detected, and there is not even the slightest doubt that she was a poor, deluded quasi—"wishing to entertain" medium.

In fact, it was not even mysterious. Have you ever seen the two cowboys who did that as a Vaudeville turn a few years ago? Why, they were placed on the top of a step-ladder, after being searched, and produced hundreds of flowers.

I, at one time, made exhaustive notes on all these items, but when I became too busy to witness the various demonstrations—why, I let it go.

When I was in Australia, in 1910, I met Driver and Hoskins. Driver was instrumental in exposing one Baily; and Hoskins gave me the inside information regarding Mrs. Piper, and a good many others. [*Interlineation in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's handwriting: Mrs. Piper's record was never impugned.*]

Hoskins has since passed away, but Driver is very much alive. I did not bother about their work—perhaps I had run across too many fake demonstrations.

I have read M. Sage's work *Mrs. Piper and the Society for Psychical Research*; the manner of watching the medium is uncertain. It explains how Dr. Hodgson had Mrs. Piper watched. A school-boy would probably do it that way. If there was any trickery, the poorest medium in the world could have circumnavigated this watching.

The successful Mediums I have come across (none of any reputation), fail at their first or second test; and, when the sitter arrives at the next sitting,—All's well!

They have a system of having the sitters watched. [*Interlineation in Sir A. Conan Doyle's handwriting: My experience has been the exact opposite.*]

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In St. Joe, Mo., I had a unique experience about 22 years ago.

The Medium held his sittings near the Public Library, and "WE" would leave the place, after he had managed to get all our names.

He had a local citizen, who "cued" him as to the proper persons, walk over to the Library, get out old City Directories, and, in his séance, would mention addresses where their grand-fathers and grand-mothers had lived.

For, by questioning, he could easily find out if they had lived in certain neighborhoods.

This St. Joe Medium, "Baynes,"—I was supposed to expose, but, the year before that, when I did try to expose a certain "Pettibone," for taking money from the poorer class of people, they tried to kill my performances,—hiring hooligans; but my show went on.

The following year, they tried to engage me to expose their "Star Medium."

I said I would, but the man threw himself on my mercy and I did not do so.

He eventually exposed himself, having taken someone into his confidence, and he had to leave the town.

Unfortunately, I have never seen Mrs. Piper, and will admit that I never went out of my way to get a sitting, being under the impression all the time that it was the usual "accomplishment."

And I am still in the dark regarding the same.

In my early days, I actually discovered a murder in Wilmington, Delaware, during my search for news; and that was one of the reasons that I gave things up.

I was then engaged to expose Baldwin, who has now retired, and who was prognosticating terrible things for the town; and the people were terror-stricken.

In confidence, I wish to tell you that I have since become well acquainted with S. S. Baldwin, and there is no such thing

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

in his life as "real mediumship." * [*Interlineation in Sir A. Conan Doyle's handwriting: Never heard of him.*]

He is living in San Francisco, and made a number of world tours, exploiting the "Katie King Séance." . . .

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

It was only natural that Sir Arthur should endeavor to enlighten Houdini as to the facts in the case concerning Dr. Hodgson and Mrs. Piper, and he wrote in reply (April 5th, 1920):

. . . Dr. Hodgson was judged to be the greatest of all psychic detectives by those who knew his work. It was he who exposed Madame Blavatsky, and he also, at Cambridge, who first showed that Eusapia Palladino occasionally cheated, when her psychic force failed. You may be sure, therefore, that he really checked Mrs. Piper in all possible ways. I know that Myers did so in this country, when she was a complete stranger. He even controlled all her correspondence, and a detective was put on to watch her. There is no possible doubt that her powers were genuine, tho' she has her off-days, as every medium has.

Hereward Carrington was a renowned exposé, as you have clearly seen, but he has now publicly admitted his conversion, so perhaps some day the evidence may come to you. . . .

I won't worry you any more on the subject. If you ever index your psychic library I should like to see the list. I have 200 now—and have read them too!

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

* S. S. Baldwin was a magician, who also gave pseudo-psychic demonstrations upon the stage. He styled himself "The White Mahatma," and wrote a book entitled *Secrets of Mahatma Land Explained*. Doubtless he did not believe in psychic phenomena.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

It is true that Mrs. Piper was subjected to innumerable tests, especially during the early years of her mediumship, when little was known about her, and it was then clearly proved, to the complete satisfaction of all investigators, that no *possible* system of trickery could account for the facts obtained; and furthermore that no trickery was ever attempted. An interesting life of Mrs. Piper has lately been issued by her daughter, Miss Alta Piper, where the full account of her experiences may be found. Mr. F. W. H. Myers—author of that remarkable book *Human Personality: and Its Survival of Bodily Death*—took the utmost pains to verify the facts when Mrs. Piper was his guest for some weeks in England. She was in a strange land, and nearly all her sitters were introduced under other names; nevertheless an extraordinary quantity of apparently supernormal information was obtained, for which no adequate explanation has ever been forthcoming.

As for Eusapia Palladino, she was investigated by scientific groups for many years, in nearly all the principal cities of Europe; every Committee admitted that she would cheat whenever the opportunity to do so was given her; but every one of these groups emerged convinced of the actuality of the facts. She produced a great variety of curious physical phenomena, one of the oddest being a “cold breeze” which issued from her forehead, after a séance. This was

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

obtained even when her mouth and nose were carefully held, and was certainly objective, since it would cause a small flag to wave vigorously, when held in the path of the "breeze." It was suggested at the time, that this might have been made by means of her mouth,—but this was clearly disproved by the fact that her mouth was sometimes securely held, as stated. Palladino came to America in 1909-10, and gave a number of sittings here. The majority of these were extremely remarkable and convincing to those who witnessed them; but during the latter part of her stay her powers seemingly waned, and she resorted to more than her usual amount of fraud, in an attempt to supplement manifestations which failed to appear. The result was that the American Committee came to a negative verdict concerning her phenomena. This did not, however, materially influence European investigators, who had seen more striking manifestations under better conditions. Palladino, however, had shot her bolt; she never did anything worth while after her visit, until her death, some years later. The discussion of Palladino practically closed the controversy regarding the older, historic mediums; henceforth the controversy raged over contemporary, living mediums—such as Powell, Hope, Mrs. Deane, and others, to whom we shall come later.

And meanwhile this amazing friendship continued unabated and unaffected by their vigorous contra-propaganda.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

"Is luncheon at the Automobile Club, Pall Mall, at one o'clock, on Tuesday next, a possibility?" wrote Doyle.

"Your luncheon invitation for Tuesday next has been received with much pleasure," replied Houdini, "and on behalf of Mrs. Houdini, her cousin and myself, shall be delighted to accept."

And he added:

"If you would care to see the performance at the Palladium, please let me know how many seats you want, and for which performance."

Doyle and Houdini had many such conferences, while the latter was in England, and these were continued when Doyle came to the States. They exchanged books and book lists—"swapped," as Sir Arthur said in one of his letters—and sent each other telegrams of good wishes on their departure from their respective native shores. On June 19th, Houdini wrote:

I have just received a lot of stamps, and happen to "remember" that Lady Doyle collects stamps, so I am taking the liberty, which I hope you will pardon, of mailing them to you.

Photographs, pamphlets and other data were similarly exchanged; and each would write the other regarding his activities at the time. Thus on April 23rd, Sir Arthur wrote:

My dear Mr. Houdini:

I've been planting seeds in the West—Bristol, Bath, Swindon and now back in London. I go to the famous spirit

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

photographer Hope today (he is a week in town), and I hope to get what I got last time, which was very convincing.

Glad you are trying the Spiritual churches because sooner or later you will happen on some good clairvoyant. They vary greatly. I saw one at Battersea, lately, get 20 names and descriptions right in succession. He was a Yorkshire man named Sutton, and it was his first "show" in London. Something must come your way if you really persevere and get it out of your mind that you should follow it as a terrier follows a rat. Mental harmony does not in the least abrogate common sense.

About my experience with Powell,* they were six separate lengths of stout twine. The chair was not fastened. It was a stout armchair. The "control" was talking thro' Powell most of the time, and we could tell where he was. But, if he had been loose, he could not have got my son's voice (he never met him), nor the private matter he spoke of, and the *two* voices simultaneously, one to me and one to Cyholm.

All remembrances to you both,

Yours very sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

And a day or two later, Sir Arthur again wrote:

I hope you will have some success with Mrs. Roberts Johnson. She is rather more flippant than I like, but she is genuine. But, as I have said before, it is intermittent and can't be controlled. "It bloweth as it listeth!"

We went again to Hope, the spirit photographer, who is for a week in London, and got another "extra" under test conditions. I think it is my brother, but it won't be printed for a week. I sent a sceptical American, Mr. Walcot, a banker. To his great delight and astonishment he got one also.

* Powell is a well-known physical medium in London.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

In one of his last letters, before sailing from England, Houdini asked:

Do you know the ultimate finish of the medium Eglinton? According to Dean Harry Kellar, he must have been good.

To which Sir Arthur had replied:

Eglinton was a great medium, and was long above suspicion. Then one or two cases arose—his power may have declined—which were suspicious. Finally he married money, forswore the occult, and now lives somewhere up the Thames, and is, I hear, the owner of a rich collection of Oriental bric-a-brac. Yes, Kellar endorsed him in Calcutta. . . .

And so ended Houdini's eventful trip in England. He sailed on July 3rd, 1920, returning to his home in New York, and to his devoted mother. Henceforth the correspondence was carried on across the water. But this was not for long, for Sir Arthur soon thereafter made his first tour of the country, lecturing on Spiritualism, and he and Houdini again met repeatedly, while he was here. One or two letters were exchanged, however; Houdini wrote soon after his arrival:

July 27th, 1920.

My dear Sir Arthur,

Been busy trying to get back to home life, after my trip abroad, and am just commencing to feel "at home."

The house has been all fix't up, and, if you will honor us, by making this your home when you visit New York City, I know you will be comfortable.

If you will accept our invitation, please let me know ahead of time, so that you will find yourself right at home.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The American papers are reprinting Vale Owen's* article, and it is causing a lot of talk.

If time permits, I shall go to Lily Dale, and look around at the various mediums and their work. I'll report to you in detail.

By the way, will you please tell me who made that photograph of your boy? You spoke to me one time about this, and the thing made quite an impression on my mind.

Had he ever posed in the position which was shown to you and was there any evidence it was taken from any paper?

I remember you telling me that the case was remarkable, and was telling it to some of my friends, when I was asked who took it, and I was "stalled."

I am on the track of one here who has, so 'tis said, given great satisfaction, and am arranging for a séance some time this coming month.

Remember us kindly to all your folks, from Mrs. Houdini and Miss Karchere. I remain

Sincerely your friend,

HOUDINI.

Sir Arthur replied to this:

Glad to hear you are safe back among your books. . . . Don't neglect the proofs you have had, for evil lies that way.

It was good of you to send me the N. Y. H. contradiction of that impudent lie. A French paper, *La Liberté*, started it. A confounded *Liberté*, I call it! They said a medium had been convicted in England, and had said she had personated my son, and I had seen him and recognized him. I have never seen him and there has been no such incident. I have heard him and he has touched me, but that was under test conditions with an amateur. . . .

* The Rev. Vale Owen, who died recently, was a clergyman of the Church of England who became converted to spiritualism, and published a number of books dealing with the subject.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I remember your kind invitation, but you will understand that I have to be semi-public for my job's sake. But I want to see your psychic library and I want still more to see you.

I have had some great psychic experiences since Australia. In a fair light I saw my dead mother, as clearly as ever I saw her in life. I am a cool observer and don't make mistakes. It was wonderful—but it taught me nothing that I did not know before.

All good wishes to you, my dear Houdini. Do drop these dangerous stunts.

Time sped rapidly, but there was still time for a brief exchange of letters before Sir Arthur sailed. Upon hearing that Sir Arthur and his family were coming to the States, Houdini wrote:

Awfully pleased to hear definitely that you are coming to America and anticipate the pleasure of greeting you.

I wonder if you could possibly spend an hour as a guest of the Society of American Magicians? I know that, in London, you attended a meeting of the English Society, and it would be a wonderful thing for the American Mystifiers to know you personally.

Did you hear of this girl in Omaha,—Gene Dennis,—who is being watched by Abbott? He claims that it is the first time in his life he has run across the genuine thing. . . . I am sure that you will have a highly interesting and pleasant journey in America.

To this Sir Arthur replied:

March 14, 1922.

My dear Houdini:—

I shall not be available for any meetings until my book is done, which will carry me well into May—possibly all May. But I shall always be ready to see you.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I have no belief in Mr. Abbott and these other exposers. They ruin their own results and are often as much objects of suspicion as anyone they investigate. We have been infested by several of them on this side. This talk of "fake" is in most cases perfect nonsense, and depends upon our own imperfect knowledge of conditions and of the ways of the Controls, who often take short cuts to their ends, having no regard at all for our critical ideas. This is shown very clearly by the Psychic College report on Miss Besinnet, which I am just reading in proof. If that had not been in the hands of really experienced and sympathetic people, it would have seemed like a huge exposure, and yet it is clearly shown how honest the medium is, how true are her phenomena, and how, in trance, she is certainly at the mercy of her control who mixes the normal and the supernormal. After I had seen my mother in her presence I did not want any proof as to her powers.

Our best remembrances to your wife and self. For God's sake be careful in these fearsome feats of yours. Surely you could retire now.

Yours very sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Some points in this letter will doubtless require elucidation. The Psychic College, in London, was founded by Mr. and Mrs. Hewat McKenzie, as a sort of informal headquarters for mediums to give séances, lectures, conduct "development classes," and so on, under its auspices. Mrs. Deane, Mrs. Cooper, Powell, and many other mediums, have given séances here for years. It constitutes a sort of half-way house between the Spiritualistic Churches and the Society for Psychological Research. Among the mediums who gave a long

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

series of sittings there was Miss Ada Besinnet, of Toledo, who obtains materializations and physical phenomena. At the last séance she gave there, a flash-light was suddenly turned upon her, disclosing Miss Besinnet leaning over the table, seemingly swathed in some sort of white material about her head and shoulders. The lights in the room were almost immediately turned up, and, strange to say, Miss Besinnet was discovered leaning back in her chair, with no sign of white material anywhere visible! The more sceptical sitters naturally concluded that this constituted an "exposure"; others, on the other hand, contended that the white material about her head was true "ectoplasm," which dissolved under the influence of light. Otherwise, where did it go? It was certainly a puzzling incident, which has never been satisfactorily explained to the comfort of all concerned. Subsequent search failed to reveal any material. Considerable controversy naturally raged at the time, in which Doyle took an active part. When in America, Sir Arthur gave Houdini a card of introduction to Miss Besinnet, but he never succeeded in obtaining a sitting with her.

What happened at this historic séance will probably never be known. It remains a mystery, with opinion divided.

.
This was the last letter which passed between them before Sir Arthur left England, for his first lec-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

ture tour in America. On the eve of sailing, Houdini sent him a wire: "GOOD LUCK. BEST WISHES." It was a pleasant voyage, and soon these men were destined to meet once again—this time on American soil—and continue their friendship, their discussions and arguments, and to live their respective, eventful lives, which many times "intersected," as Sir Arthur had once said, during his visit here. But all this must be reserved for another chapter, in which the more intimate and personal sides of these two men will be brought more vividly to light.

CHAPTER SIX

THE subject of psychical research is one upon which I have thought more and about which I have been slower to form my opinion, than upon any other subject whatever," wrote Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in his *New Revelation*. Surely the words of such a man deserve careful consideration; and Sir Arthur has stated his conviction of the reality of psychic phenomena in no uncertain terms. "I *know* spirit communication is a fact," he wrote. He arrived at this certainty of conviction through his own personal experiences—experiences which he contended others could likewise enjoy if they went about their investigations in the right spirit.

Sir Arthur gave his first lecture in Carnegie Hall, New York, on his arrival in America, before a crowded house. It was quite a gala occasion, and a number of the city's élite were present—many perhaps to hear what he had to say, and probably more to see and meet the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories! It must

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

have been a hectic, busy week for Sir Arthur; no wonder he wrote to Houdini:

Until Thursday is over I shall be in turmoil. Then, when I can breathe, I hope to see you—your normal self, not in a tank or hanging by one toe from a skyscraper.

The Doyle family found time, however, to witness Houdini's performance, and to see the illusion of the vanishing elephant, which he was then presenting. A few days later, however, we find Doyle and his family taking a well-earned rest, before starting on their trans-continental tour. The following letter is most characteristic:

April 13, 1922.

My dear Houdini:—

We are living in a shack on the shore—no servants, telephone, telegraph or any other of the inconveniences of civilization. One needs to live thus to get in real touch with one's own family. I am a nailer at peeling potatoes.

I have written a book on Psychic Photography with special reference to the Crewe Circle. The evidence in their favour is overwhelming, tho' what happened on a special occasion with 2 amateur conjurers, out for a stunt, and a third (Dingwall) behind them is more than I can say. We find that another test was independably carried out about the same time, when the Kodak Co. marked a plate. The mark was found by them all right afterwards, and also an extra. Our opponents talk of one failure and omit the great series of successes. However, truth wins and there's lots of time.

I expect I'll be with you again in April.

Yours,

A. C. D.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The "Crewe Circle," so called, consists of two mediums—Mr. William Hope and Mrs. Buxton. They live in Crewe, England—hence the name. For many years, individual sitters had gone to these mediums, and had obtained, often upon their own plates, heads and "spirit faces," frequently recognized by the sitter as some lost friend or relative. Even experienced photographers had obtained these results, but no systematic investigation had been undertaken by a committee of experts trained in trickery. In January, 1922, Mr. Harry Price obtained a sitting with these mediums; and before going he had had a number of plates secretly marked, by means of X-rays, by the Imperial Plate Co., makers of the plates. These X-ray marks, it was claimed, were invisible upon the undeveloped plates, but came out perfectly clearly upon development. This test had been devised by Mr. Price, in conjunction with Mr. Seymour, and more indirectly Mr. William Marriott and Mr. Eric J. Dingwall. The result was that Mr. Price obtained a psychic "extra" on one of his plates, but it was discovered that two of the plates had been substituted *by someone* for two others, since both of these lacked the X-ray markings which were upon all the original plates taken by Mr. Price to the séance. Fraud had evidently been practised by someone, therefore, in effecting this substitution—either by Hope, or by someone connected with the handling of the plates before, during or after the sit-

ting. The detailed report of this exposé may be found in the *Journal S.P.R.*, May, 1922.

A prolonged controversy followed this alleged exposure, some thinking it a clear case of fraud on Hope's part, others that, owing to certain considerations which it would take too long to enter into here, fraud had probably been practised by someone else who was connected with the plates. The Society was strongly of the opinion that Hope himself was the guilty party; and suspicion would naturally fall upon him, as a professional "spirit photographer." No reasonable motive could be brought against any of the investigators connected with the case. Sir Arthur, perhaps naturally, championed the Crewe Circle in this controversy, contending that they were the injured parties. It should perhaps be added that, although the Crewe Circle has continued to give sittings ever since, no formal proof of fraud on their part has been forthcoming, to the best of our knowledge, since then.

Later, on his return to England, Sir Arthur took up the controversy where he had been compelled to drop it on his departure. On July 8th, he wrote to Houdini:

Here things are in some confusion. I have already written a letter to the Magic Circle tackling their Report, which is a flimsy and ill-informed document. I shall then turn to the more formidable task of Hope and the S.P.R. I know Hope to be a true psychic and will give my reasons when I treat of it; but you can give no man a blank check

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

for honesty on every particular occasion; whether there is a temptation to hedge when psychic power runs low is a question to be considered. I am for uncompromising honesty—but also for thorough examination based on true knowledge. . . .

(August 6th): We seem to have knocked the bottom out of the Hope “exposure.” The plates were marked by X-rays and we find by experiment that X-ray marks disappear on a 20-second exposure, which was the exact time given. Our time is continually wasted over nonsense of this sort, but I suppose it has to be done. . . .

(August 22nd): I am very busy doing a pamphlet on psychic photography, with reference to Hope’s powers. The evidence for that power is quite final, but when one comes to individual cases it is not so easy. The present case is in such a snarl that Solomon himself could hardly make head or tail of it. . . .

Hope is a perfectly genuine medium, as I can and do prove in a dozen different ways, but he is a fanatic, and in my opinion would do anything his “guides” had ordered him to do, which has led him into some very queer and dangerous positions. He practically charges nothing and lives in a hovel—still wears the same suit as when I first saw him. He is a great character—and a great medium.

Still later (October 29th) Sir Arthur wrote:

The Hope case is more intricate than any Holmes case I ever invented. I am sure now that there was trickery on the part of the investigators and that the marked plates were not in the packet when taken to the dark room. One of them was returned by post anonymously *undeveloped* to the S.P.R.

Now since Hope and the College people knew nothing of the test, until four months later, how could they return an undeveloped plate, for how could they pick it out as a marked

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

one, since the marking only shows on development? Clearly it was done by one of the Conspirators, and he could not have picked it out of all the other plates in the dark room, even if he had access to it. It is clear to me therefore that it never went to the dark room at all, but was taken out before. My pamphlet is ready but I hold it back in the hope of learning who the rascal was. . . .

Sir Arthur finally published his book upon the subject under the title *The Case for Spirit Photography*. No further references to it occurred in their correspondence.

About this time, Houdini ran across a remarkable case—that of Edward H. Morrell, whom he referred to Conan Doyle, after interviewing the man himself. It was a weird story, and even Houdini seems to have been considerably impressed by it at the time, for he wrote to Sir Arthur:

I have given a letter to Mr. H. Morrell, the original of Jack London's *Star Rover*, a man who has had the most unique experiences, according to his story, of any man I ever met, and you know I have run across many, many humans.

I think you will be very interested in having a chat with Mr. Morrell, as he is in the unique position of having sensitized his faculties to a higher degree than is the opportunity of anyone.

This man, Edward H. Morrell, had had a most extraordinary experience. He was brutally confined in a strait-jacket, the straps being drawn so tight that he was in terrible agony as the result of the constriction. Lying upon the floor, writhing in his torment, his

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

“soul” seemed suddenly to leave his body; he stood apart from it, viewing it objectively as one might view the body of another. He retained consciousness throughout the experience, he contends, but no longer felt any pain. He seemed to live in *another* body, for the time being, separate and distinct, in which he enjoyed perfect serenity and peace. For twenty-four hours he remained “separated” in this manner. When his jailers came to release him, he laughed at them—for which they gave him twenty-four hours more! He claimed, in short, to have actually projected himself in his “astral body,” retaining consciousness all the time, while his physical vehicle lay bound and helpless upon the floor. It is on any view a highly interesting and suggestive case, similar to many of a like nature which have been reported from time to time in the past.

.

The Houdinis attended Conan Doyle's next lecture, and an appointment was made for Sir Arthur to visit Houdini's home, and see his collection of books, letters, autographs, etc. He did so, bringing Lady Doyle with him, and we find the following entry in Houdini's Daybook,—evidently made later the same day. It is quite illustrative of Houdini's naïve, almost childlike, vanity:

May 10, 1922.

To-day at 11 o'clock Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle came up to 278, for a visit.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Sir Arthur was very anxious to see my collection of books and became very much interested. I went all over the house and got together all my rare tracts, and he seemed very much surprised at my collection of literature on Spiritualism.

I gave Sir Arthur one of the pamphlets given to me by Ira Erastus Davenport, with which he was greatly pleased, and also gave him duplicate of "Cotton Mather" and a biography of Davenport.

Showed him the various letters of D. D. Home and also Davenport.

There is no doubt that both Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle believe absolutely in Spiritualism, and sincerely so. They related a number of incidents which they accepted without proof.

They stopped for lunch and we enjoyed the visit very much. Lady Doyle passed a comment that this was the most home-like home that she had ever seen. After luncheon we called a car and took them to the Ambassador Hotel.

The next day Sir Arthur wrote:

Just a line to say how much we enjoyed our short visit yesterday. I think what interested me most was the little "trick" which you showed us in the cab. You certainly have very wonderful powers, whether inborn or acquired. . . . Your collection is very short of positive books—you have very few of the really classic and interesting books of the great pioneers, or their modern followers. But these are what really count. . . . The whole tribe is here, very noisy and happy. Toronto tomorrow!

Replying to this, Houdini wrote:

Thanks for yours of the 13th, and note what you say about my library. There are a number of books that you

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

mention as being missing which we overlooked, but your letter has given me a thought. I am going to take the floor upstairs and devote it entirely to Spiritualism, and think that, in a week or two, I will cart up all the books from my downstairs office and bring everything upstairs and will have it card-indexed. This will give me a better idea of what is there. . . .

P.S. Am going to Newark Sunday to investigate a most unique Spirit Photograph.

Just what this alleged photograph turned out to be we do not know; but a day or so later Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur as follows, regarding quite a different matter:

May 15, 1922.

My dear Sir Arthur:—

Something interesting has just occurred. When I was a boy at school in Appleton, Wis., my school teacher, a Miss Sanborn, was a great friend of Alice and Phoebe Cary, who, as you know, wrote some rather exquisite poems. I received a book with all the poems in it, but in the progress of time it was lost.

Last week, while browsing around a book stand, I happened to find a book, and if it is not the same one it must be an exact duplicate. I did not know that the girls were spiritualists but, on looking through the book, two nights ago, I ran across the enclosed copy of a poem written by Alice Cary, who was a firm believer in communication with those who have gone before.

Am sending it on to you, as Alice Cary must have written it with her heart. Hope you are having a nice trip. With kindest regards and best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Laugh, you who never had
Your dead come back; but do not take from me
The harmless comfort of my foolish dream:

That these our mortal eyes,
Which outwardly reflect the earth and skies

Do introvert upon eternity;
And that the shapes you deem
Imaginations just as clearly fall,
Each from its own divine original,
And through some subtle element of light,

Upon the inward spiritual eye,
As do the things which round about them lie,
Gross and material, on the external sight.

About this time Sir Arthur obtained sittings with Miss Ada Besinnet. In a letter dated May 21st, 1922, Conan Doyle wrote:

Mr. Keedick came with me last night to sit with Miss Besinnet. Shackleton rose up before him. You should have heard his cry, and he is not a nervous man. It was his first séance, and he knows now how true is all that I have said.

Later, Doyle gave Houdini a letter of introduction to Miss Besinnet, writing Houdini at the same time:

I have gone far in giving you that letter to Miss B., for you have the reputation, among Spiritualists, of being a bitterly prejudiced enemy, who would make trouble if it were possible. I know that this is not so, and I give you this pass as a sign that I know it. She is safe in your hands.

.

The proposed séance, however, never "materialized!"

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

And now for a "lucid interval!" It was soon after this that the Houdinis went to Atlantic City, and it was during their trip that Lady Doyle gave Houdini his automatically written message, as coming from his mother. This has been described fully elsewhere. During the trip, however, other incidents of interest occurred, and in Houdini's memoranda the following notes were found:

June 17, 1922.

Atlantic City, N. J.

Today, at 4:30, Sir Arthur, Dennis, McHolm, the two boys, and myself met in the swimming pool of the Hotel Ambassador.

I taught the boys how to dive properly and then taught one of them how to float flat on his back. Sir Arthur, who was in the tank with us, greatly enjoyed my under-water endurance, and he watched carefully how I inhaled and exhaled when I get ready for a long endurance plunge.

When I arose, after remaining under water about two minutes, he asked me why I inhaled as I did, and I explained to him my secret of endurance,—the inhaling and exhaling six or eight times seems to give oxygen in the lungs.

As there was to be a swimming contest that evening, we left at five o'clock, dressed and went out on the beach. . . .

Lady Doyle was there with us and, while they were exercising physically, Sir Arthur and I sat in beach chairs and spoke of spiritualism. He related a number of incidents of the wonderful way in which Mrs. Deane of London gave a friend of his, who had just landed, a marvelous spirit photo, and all the time I knew that the "Magic Circle" of London had apparently trapped Mrs. Deane with marked plates. One *flagrante delicto* case where she exchanged a plate in her bag.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Sir Arthur told me that he had over 25,000 pounds which he had earned on his lecture tour, and which he was going to give to the spiritualists in England, for the cause.

I noticed that, at a *séance*, Sir Arthur would ask a question and then change his mind and ask another one. Eventually, when he would get an answer to a question, he had evidently forgotten that he had asked that specific one, and, on receiving a reply to same, would naturally think that he had never spoken on the subject before. All during the *séance* he was willing to believe. It was not a case of being deceived, but merely a case of religious mania, and in knowing, in his own mind, according to his powerful deductions, that he was in the presence of the Almighty or that he was holding communion with the dead.

His voice and mannerisms are just as nice and sweet as any mortal I have ever been near. Lady Doyle told me that he has never spoken a cross word in his life. He is good-natured, very bright, but a monomaniac on the subject of spiritualism. Being uninitiated in the world of mystery, never having been taught the artifices of conjuring, it was the simplest thing in the world for anyone to gain his confidence to hoodwink him.

He showed me a photograph of a coffin, covered with flowers, from under which the pale, eerie face of a dead woman of past middle age was visible, and there were two "spirits," of a man and of a woman, one on each side of the coffin. Lady Doyle said that no one could be so despicable as to do anything by fraud in such an environment. I replied that I could not conceive how any human being could be so sacrilegious as to delude anyone by doing such a thing, and as I looked at the photograph I did say to myself "although these photographs look to be real, they have been obtained by some legerdemain." I cannot see how anyone would be so vile and despicable as to do such a thing.

It seems that, in speaking to Doyle, he showed me a

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

letter from his friend in England in the newspaper called *Light* which informed him of the "reported" exposé of Hope and Mrs. Buxton at Crewe.

What I can remember of the letter which Sir Arthur read to me was that Hope and Mrs. Buxton are with him. They have come to him for assistance and wished that he was there in order to give them his aid. Using the American idiom, I believe that this is all a "frame-up."

Sir Arthur asked me to give him what assistance I could, and that he had this money which he was taking back to England and would spend it. From the letter it seems that he will give it to the law courts.

I told Sir Arthur that I was positive it would be a great big case and in fact a historical event, on a par with the D. D. Home affair. Personally, I believed that the Crewe mediums, as well as Mrs. Deane, would be shown up publicly through the newspapers, but that, as usual, they would find willing believers in the genuineness of their tests. At this late date, Home is still supposed to be a genuine levitator, able to float from one end of the room to another. Scientists still say that Palladino, although exposed, and although she cheated at times, nevertheless was honest sometimes,—about the wind that came from the top of her head, which was supposed to be something psychic.

Dr. Sulzberger told me of a case of a boy who had fractured his skull, and, this fracture never properly healing, he was able to blow wind right through the back of his head.

There was a freak appearing at Huber's Museum who could blow balloons through his eyes. There is no doubt in my mind that Palladino had some practical freak make-up, which enabled her, in a natural way, to do some of the things attributed to her. My contention is that they actually thought that what they wrote about her was true, but it couldn't possibly be exactly as they described it,—although, from their manner of investigation, it was exactly as they claimed.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Sir Arthur told me of a séance he had with Mrs. Pruden, of Cincinnati, Ohio, an old lady who held the slates under the table and brought back writing on same. He asked a number of questions, so he tells me, of which no one else knew. Especially about the investment of some money which he called the spiritualist money, in this doctor (?) proposition. The answer came back, I forget just from whom it was, but I believe it was from Sir Arthur's son, that it was quite all right, for the doctor was an honest man.

Sir Arthur told me of a number of cases, and he assured me that they were actually done without illusion.

Sir Arthur asked Lady Doyle who was standing alongside of me, and was it my mother? Lady Doyle's hand struck the table three times, signifying "yes," that my mother was alongside of me. I tried to imagine that my dear mother, whom I worship and always will, was alongside of me, and tried all I possibly could to think of a number of trivial things of which my mother and I often had spoken, and if she had been actually present she would have given me some sign.

The children are unafraid of death, believing implicitly in the teachings of their parents,—that even if they are dead, they still live, and hold conversation with their dead relatives. Death doesn't mean anything to them,—except to live on a higher plane of life.

The children are very bright, very affectionate, and one of the boys came up to his mother in the midst of his play, saying, "Mother, I was so lonesome I came over to give you a kiss."

He kissed her caressingly on the mouth, picked up her hand and kissed each finger in as courtly a manner as any prince kissing his queen's hands. They are wonderful children, both in mind and body.

Saturday evening we attended the swimming contest which was very interesting, but which after a while became

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

tiresome, on account of the great length of the program.

Miss Bleibtrey, the swimmer and champion, gave a number of exhibition sprints. Three other girls swam with their hands and feet tied. Sir Arthur was bored and wanted to get up and leave the place, but we told him that they were working expressly for us, and as long as they lived they would look upon it as a slight.

He was very nice about it and we sat through the performance until Miss Bleibtrey said, "that's all there is, there ain't no more." He then excused himself, saying he had a headache, and retired.

.

It was now nearly time for Sir Arthur to return to England, since his first lecture tour had come to a close. Before going, however, he took time to see Houdini's film "The Man from Beyond,"—which he warmly praised,—and to write to Houdini:

I can see you sometime, as your true experiences accumulate, giving a wonderful lecture, "Phenomenal Spiritualism—True and False," in which, after giving an account of your adventures with fakes, you will also give an account of those which bear inspection. It would be a very great draw. Fake photos and true ones. I could fit you up with a few of the latter. But you have other things to do at present. I may say that your mother again came back with words of passionate love through Mrs. M— of Brooklyn last night. She said, "My son has now told his wife that he is mentally convinced of the truth of this revelation, but he does not see his way and it is dark in front of him. He is now seated in his room thinking it over." That would be about 11, or between 11 and 12 on Sunday night. I give it as we got it. . . .

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

And so the Doyles left America, and as they sailed Houdini naturally "snapped" them as they stood by the steamer railing. Later, he sent them prints, with a brief note, which ran:

Enclosed you will find two snapshots taken on the steamer the day you sailed away. I am pleased to see that there is a photo of Lady Doyle smiling. She told me it was very hard to get a good-natured photograph of herself, but you will agree with me that both of you are beaming with joy!

A day or two later Houdini wrote:

I have mailed you a number of articles which appeared in the New York papers, as you might be interested in what they said after you sailed. . . . Every big newspaper man I have spoken to complimented you, to me, on the dignity with which you carried on your lecture tour. . . . I hope you had a pleasant trip . . .

Despite the maelstrom of activity into which Conan Doyle plunged immediately upon his return to England, he nevertheless found time to write Houdini—a brief note on the day of his arrival, and a longer letter a couple of days later. In it he said:

My dear Houdini:

I have a moment to look Westward instead of downwards, and I think of you among the first. . . .

What about Bert Reese? Is he the medium whom you quoted as having been exposed by Dingwall at your prompting? Because I hear stories of his proof in court to a New York magistrate, and also to Edison, which don't seem to fit into fraud.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

There are the usual futile bickerings here—mere waste of breath and ink. I had a sitting with Mrs. Silbert, an Austrian, who could talk no English, and we had (six of us) plenty of ectoplasm in a good light—the substance which the four professors of the Sorbonne have been unable to see! I daresay Eva is getting rather played-out. . . .

I had to write to the New York *Times* the other day about conjurers. Some fellow, whose name I have forgotten, had questioned my facts, which is always a dangerous thing to do, for I have chapter and verse fairly ready.

In his letter he said that you had “exposed” Eva. Of course I know that you have made no such claim, though you can truly say that you got no results from her. Madame Bisson also, in her private sittings, has recorded in her book that she frequently got no results. The word “exposure” is used in the most ridiculous way, but I am quite sure that you have never made such a claim.

All kind regards to you, my dear Houdini, and to your wife. . . .

Yours very sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

Houdini generally replied very promptly to any letter he received from Conan Doyle—he seemed to enjoy the correspondence! The present case is no exception. Immediately he received the above letter, he evidently sat down to answer it, which he did in his characteristic manner. On August 8th he wrote:

You may have heard a lot of stories about Dr. Bert Reese, but I spoke to Judge Rosalsky and he personally informed me that, although he did not detect Reese, he certainly did not think it was telepathy. I am positive that Reese resorts to legerdemain, makes use of a wonderful memory and

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

is a great character reader. He is incidentally a wonderful judge of human beings.

That he fooled Edison does not surprise me. He would have surprised me if he did not fool Edison. Edison is certainly not a criterion, when it comes to judging a shrewd adept in the art of pellet-reading.

The greatest thing Reese did, and which he openly acknowledged to me, was his test-case in Germany when he admitted they could not solve him.

I have no hesitancy in telling you that I set a snare at the séance I had with Reese, and caught him cold-blooded. He was startled when it was over, as he knew that I had bowled him over. So much so that he claimed I was the only one that had ever detected him, and in our conversation after that we spoke about other workers of what we call the pellet test,—Foster, Worthington, Baldwin *et al.* After my séance with him, I went home and wrote down all the details.

I am looking up the report of the man I sent to Crewe, and who brought back photographs with spirits on them. I instructed this man to let Mr. Hope and Mrs. Buxton go as far as they liked. The method of manipulation, as described, is very interesting. It is too bad you were so rushed when you were in America; otherwise, I could have shown you the report. . . .

I believe you will find my answer in the *Times*, informing the gentleman who said I exposed Eva, that such was not the case. It was necessary for me, however, to make the statement that there was nothing there to convince me, or that she had, during the eight séances I visited, caused me to change my mind.

The other night I delivered a lecture on some slides which I had made, and notice that the papers put words in my mouth which I never used, which as usual I must get up and deny, as half the words attributed to "yours truly" were never said. . . .

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Houdini's letter to the *Times* was as follows:

HOUDINI ON SPIRITUALISM

Times—July 5, 1922.

HAS WITNESSED MANY SÉANCES IN THIRTY YEARS BUT IS NOT
CONVINCED

To the Editor of the New York *Times*:

Have read the letter of H. Edwards-Ficken and believe it calls for an explanation on my part. I did not expose Mlle. Eva, the protégée of Mme. Bisson, and had given my promise not to do so to the Hon. Everard Feilding, during the eight séances at the rooms of the Psychic Research Committee, in London, at which I was his guest.

I gave him my word that nothing would be published by me until after the Psychic Research Committee had published its proceedings regarding its séances. They were published about a month ago, which released me from my promise, and I can now give my views publicly. I feel that it is necessary to explain that I did not expose Mlle. Eva in London.

In the majority of these séances I was one of the Committee to examine and hold Mlle. Eva in the cabinet. Each séance lasted three hours, so I had ample opportunity in the twenty-four hours, which were spread over a period of at least one month, to carefully note what the medium was trying to do.

She positively did not do anything that would cause me to believe she was doing something which was not produced by natural means.

Have made minute detailed notes of the hundred séances which I attended and participated in on my last trip abroad, and although those present saw and heard extraordinary things, I was not convinced.

Am afraid that the greater part of things we read about in full-page articles are very much like Sabonee's materializa-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

tion, which is now being so vigorously denied. At the time it appeared I knew it was not possible, and having gone carefully through Schrenck-Notzing's book, all I can say is that to my belief it could not have happened, but it might have happened in the minds of some who were there, or their confidences have been betrayed.

I have one of the largest libraries in the world on psychic and spiritualistic data; have personally met all the great mediums and am yet open to be convinced. I want to be put on record that I do not say there is no such thing as spiritualism, but state that, in the thirty years of my investigation, nothing has caused me to change my mind.

HOUDINI.

New York, June 30, 1922.

To Houdini's letter Doyle replied:

Many thanks, my dear Houdini. If you say you *know* Reese to be a trickster, I shall take him as such. I hear he is in London, but have not seen him. . . . I shall have the pleasure of seeing you both again soon, as we return (the whole tribe) to finish my job in America. Then I am ready to sing "*Nunc dimittis, domine!*"

Sir Arthur also wrote a letter to the *Times*, regarding Houdini's status, in which he said:

New York, June 18, 1922.

A CORRECTION.

To the Editor of the New York *Times*:

Would you kindly note that it was Houdin, not Houdini, whom I quoted as having supported psychic phenomena. The latter is, I believe, quite open-minded on the subject.

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

New York, June 22, 1922.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

The story of Doyle's Second American Adventure must be told in another chapter. It was full of stirring conflict. But meanwhile the personal friendship and regard of these two strange men, each for the other, continued unabated. Even at the height of their controversy, Sir Arthur wrote:

For goodness sake take care of those dangerous stunts of yours. You have done enough of them. I speak because I have just read of the death of the "Human Fly." Is it worth it?

And Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur, in a postscript to one of his letters:

It may interest you to know that I have just obtained a collection of over 100 autographed letters written by your father, Charles A. Doyle, to F. S. Ellis; all written in a humorous vein and relating amusing social experiences and exhibitions, with a great many clever pen-and-ink and water-color drawings. The letters are dated from 1845 to 1853.

There is one letter in particular, which has two wonderful drawings and is highly interesting. He writes: "My dear Ellis: Here is a design for an historical picture. The subject is a battle in which the souls of the dead rose into the air and renewed the fight. If you like the subject, I think I will do a picture of it as large as life. Only I am afraid no one will appreciate its fineness and the grandeur of the two principal groups. Here is the night after the battle. What do you think of it? Have you read the last number of Dombey, and if so how did you like it; is not the description of Mr. Goot's dog capital? It is the very image of our old dog Prinnz, especially in his propensity to bark in his sleep, which he used to do in a manner that was enough to make a horse laugh."

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I do not know whether you know of the existence of this collection.

H. H.

After his death, this collection was sent to Sir Arthur by Mrs. Houdini. He greatly appreciated and prized it.

And so their strange friendship continued . . . and Doyle and Houdini again met for what was destined to be the last time. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS a warm, sunny afternoon in June, 1922. Throngs of boys and girls, of young men and young women, were entering or leaving the water, swimming, or idly lying upon the beach. For the summer season had begun early in Atlantic City—and we must transport ourselves in imagination to its sunny shores. Among its thousands of visitors, one couple strikes our eye: the woman, slim, lithe and attractive; the man, keen, alert, bright-eyed, with a massive head set upon a pair of equally massive shoulders. It is no ordinary couple, this; they are none other than Bessie and Harry Houdini, sunning themselves and taking a few days' well-earned rest, after a strenuous season.

Yes, that is doubtless one reason for their presence there. Another, and stronger, reason is that Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle are also spending a few days at the Ambassador Hotel, and Houdini, as usual, lets no opportunity slip by when he can cross swords with his friendly enemy! Sir Arthur himself had suggested the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

trip, writing on June 9th, "Why not come down—both of you?" And he whimsically added: "The children would teach you to swim! and the change would do you good."

Houdini evidently jumped at the idea, for he replied at once:

"Mrs. Houdini joins me in thanking you for the invitation to come to Atlantic City, and if you will be there next Saturday or Sunday, Mrs. Houdini and I would like to spend the week-end with you. . . . Most important of all, if the kiddies want to teach me to swim I will be there, and in return will show them how to do one or two things that will make it very interesting."

To which Sir Arthur characteristically replied:

Yes, we shall certainly be there. There will be a few *Spiritualistic friends from Brooklyn (barristers)* but you won't clash.

And so we find the Houdinis in Atlantic City, on this eventful afternoon—for such it turned out to be. Along the beach come a small boy and a powerful, athletic, ruddy-faced man. The small boy is acting as a guide; the man is none other than Sir Arthur himself. He has come to suggest that Lady Doyle should give Houdini a private sitting, at which she would endeavor to obtain for him a message from his beloved mother, through the instrumentality of her own mediumship, by means of automatic writing. Here was the opportunity of a life-time! A medium in whom even Houdini

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

believed had offered to give him a sitting, and to obtain for him, if possible, messages from the one person from whom, above and beyond all others, Houdini desired most to obtain some personal message—his mother! He accepted the invitation with alacrity.

It is now a well-recognized fact that automatic writing of this sort *occurs*—words and whole sentences being written, while the scribe remains totally unaware of what his or her own hand is writing. Frequently, the communications obtained in this manner take on a decidedly spiritistic appearance—the alleged intelligence doing the writing claiming to be a discarnate entity. In the vast majority of cases we have no reason to suppose that any intelligence is involved beyond the subconscious mind of the scribe himself (or herself), and most “messages” obtained in this manner can clearly be traced to this source. Occasionally, however, we encounter material which is not so easily disposed of—cases in which information is given, seemingly beyond the knowledge of the writer, and only subsequently verified. In these cases we have an interesting problem before us. The alleged “communicator” claims to be an independent spirit. He often gives his name, and states certain facts concerning his past life which the writer never knew. In such cases the question is: Is an independent entity actually present, doing the writing, or is it again merely the subconscious mind of the medium, dramatically personified, and pretending

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

to be an independent being, aided by telepathic and other supernormal powers? That is the great point at issue: the *crux* of psychical investigation.

Lady Doyle possessed this gift of automatic writing. She had obtained many messages purporting to come from spiritual beings, many of which proved clearly convincing to herself and to Sir Arthur. She knew that she herself was honest in their delivery; they did not emanate from her own conscious mind. She felt convinced that they were truly derived from the spiritual world. Here, then, was an opportunity to convince Houdini, inasmuch as he believed in her honesty and sincerity. If she could only obtain, through her own hand, some message which would prove convincing to him, what a conquest that would be! According to Sir Arthur's account, Houdini himself requested this sitting; according to Houdini's, it was volunteered by Lady Doyle. Whatever may be the truth concerning this, the fact remains that on June 17, 1922, Lady Doyle gave Houdini a sitting, in which "messages" were obtained, claiming to come from his deceased, or, as he would say, "sainted" mother. Sir Arthur's account of this, contained in his book *Our American Adventure* (pp. 167-68) reads as follows:

The reason, however, why I refer to my wife's remarkable power, which only came by slow development, is that my friend, Mr. Houdini, the greatest of magicians, sat with us one afternoon, and received a fifteen-page letter from his

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

mother which made him very grave and thoughtful, though he is a most difficult man to convince. It was sudden inspiration of mine to ask him up to our room and see if we could get any evidence or consolation for him.* It was a singular scene, my wife with her hand flying wildly, beating the table while she scribbled at a furious rate, I sitting opposite and tearing sheet after sheet from the block as it was filled up, and tossing each across to Houdini, while he sat silent, looking grimmer and paler every moment. We asked him to think a question in silence, and a correct name came instantly through my wife's hand. But then occurred the most marvellous thing of all. Houdini sat playing with the pencil when his hand was suddenly moved and he wrote the name "Powell." Now, Dr. Ellis Powell, my dear fighting partner in Spiritualism, had just died in England—worn out, I expect, by his own exertions, for he was a desperately hard worker in the cause. I was the man he was most likely to signal to, and here was his name coming through the hand of Houdini. "Truly Saul is among the Prophets," said I. . . . He muttered something about knowing a man named Powell, down in Texas, though he failed to invent any reason why that particular man should come back at that particular moment. Then, gathering up the papers, he hurried from the room . . .

Houdini's account of this sitting, as might be expected, gives an entirely different account of what occurred, since it gives his version of the Powell incident,

* In his *Edge of the Unknown*, however, (p. 44), Sir Arthur says: "The method in which Houdini tried to explain away, minimize and contort our attempt at consolation, which was given *entirely at his own urgent request* and against my wife's desire, has left a deplorable shadow in my mind which made some alteration in my feelings towards him. Conscious as I was of his many excellent and wonderful qualities, such incidents took the edge off my sympathies, and put a strain upon our friendship."

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and also his personal viewpoints and reactions to the message which was actually received, and which is quoted in full.

It must have been a dramatic scene: through the window, the wind-blown surf beating upon the beach, and the subdued voices of passers-by filtering in through the opened windows. At the table sat Lady Doyle, pencil in hand, awaiting a message from the Beyond. Sir Arthur himself, his kindly, genial face turned toward his wife, sympathetic, encouraging, sitting at one side. Houdini, pale and grim, on the opposite side of the table, awaiting the supreme test of his life, in the shape of some possible "message" from his beloved mother, through the hand of the one medium whose honesty he trusted. Doubtless his heart beat with unwonted rapidity during those tense moments! And then, Lady Doyle's hand began to move, to write, and as each page was finished, Sir Arthur tore it off and passed it across to Houdini, where he sat awaiting the result. No doubt his emotions were highly stirred during that historic sitting. Any reference to his mother was bound to produce that result. Was he really about to receive a genuine message after all? Could his mother's spirit communicate with him in this manner, and convey to him words of love and hope? Page after page the writing continued; Houdini read them silently and kept their contents to himself. Here is the message, just as it was written by Lady Doyle's

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

hand, together with Houdini's account of the incidents which led up to this historic séance. Houdini writes:

June 18, 1922.

Atlantic City, N. J.

I was seated in one of those comfortable chairs facing the beach, with Mrs. Houdini, when a small boy came along with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, showing him where we were sun-bathing.

It appeared that Lady Doyle wanted to give me an automatic writing séance, in order to see whether it was possible for her to give me some indication from the spirit world, and she had sent Sir Arthur to find me.

Sir Arthur apologized to Mrs. Houdini for not inviting her to the séance, saying that two people who were of the same mind, either positive or negative, would possibly hurt, and if this was so Lady Doyle would not be able to get any writing from any of the spirits who would control her. So I followed Sir Arthur, but not until the boy who had found me for him had taken a snapshot of both of us, ere we left.

We went to the Hotel Ambassador, where we all were stopping,—for, at the invitation of Sir Arthur, Mrs. Houdini and myself went to Atlantic City for the week end. Our room was next to their suite.

Lady Doyle was very charming. Curtains were drawn, writing pads placed on the table and also two pencils of the ordinary kind. Sir Arthur, with his head bowed down, just like a simple child, uttered a prayer, calling upon the Almighty to let us have a sign from our friends from beyond.

He placed his hands caressingly upon Lady Doyle's, to give her more power. I closed my eyes and eliminated from my mind all thoughts but those of a religious order, so that I could help as much as possible.

She took a pencil and, with spasmodic jerks of her right hand, in no gentle way, started to strike the table, explaining

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

that the forces had taken hold of her in the most energetic manner that they had ever done at any séance at which she was doing the automatic writing.

For a few moments she seemed to be struggling with it, but then the pencil began to move. She asked of the spirit, "Do you believe in God?" Upon having her hand beat the table three times she said: "Then I will make the sign of the cross."

She did so, marking the sign of the cross on the edge of the pad on which she was writing.

I think that, in her heart of hearts, Lady Doyle is sincere, and I am positive that Sir Arthur is just as religious in his belief as it is possible for any human being to be. As from time to time Lady Doyle started to write, he would soothe her as if admonishing the spirit not to be too forcible with her. These two spoke as if there was someone in reality standing alongside of us.

Eventually, in asking the question, "who was there," and whether it was my mother, her hand struck the table three times signifying "yes." She then wrote:

"Oh, my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through.—I've tried, oh so often—now I am happy. Why, of course, I want to talk to my boy—my own beloved boy—Friends, thank you, with all my heart for this.

[*Marginal note:* Message written by Lady Doyle claiming the spirit of my Dear mother had control of her hand—my sainted mother could not write English and spoke broken English.]

"You have answered the cry of my heart—and of his—God bless him—a thousand fold, for all his life for me—never had a mother such a son—tell him not to grieve, soon he'll get all the evidence he is so anxious for—Yes, we know—tell him I want him to try to write in his own home. It will be far better so.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

"I will work with him—he is so, so dear to me—I am preparing so sweet a home for him which one day in God's good time he will come to—it is one of my great joys preparing it for our future——

"I am so happy in this life—it is so full and joyous—my only shadow has been that my beloved one hasn't known how often I have been with him all the while, all the while—here away from my heart's darling—combining my work thus in this life of mine.

"It is so different over here, so much larger and bigger and more beautiful—so lofty—all sweetness around one—nothing that hurts and we see our beloved ones on earth—that is such a joy and comfort to us—Tell him I love him more than ever—the years only increase it—and his goodness fills my soul with gladness and thankfulness. Oh, just this, it is me. I want him only to know that—that—I have bridged the gulf—That is what I wanted, oh so much—Now I can rest in peace—How soon——"

When we got as far as "I wanted, oh so much—Now I can rest in peace," Sir Arthur requested me to ask some sort of a question, as a test that it really was my sainted mother at my side.

Lady Doyle did not seem to think that the spirit would answer direct questions, and I purposely evaded asking anything which might embarrass the medium, as I wanted to help all I could, so I thought of the question proposed by Sir Arthur, "Can my mother read my mind," in this way answering any question of which I might think.

So I just thought of the question in the ordinary way, and before I had the question firmly formed Lady Doyle started to write.

"I *always* read my beloved son's mind—his dear mind—there is so much I want to say to him—but—I am almost overwhelmed by this joy of talking to him once more—it is almost too much to get through—the joy of it—thank you,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

+

I H H

Oh my darling thank God
thank God at last I'm
through - I've tried oh so
often - now I am happy

Why of course I want to
talk to my boy - my own
beloved boy - friends thank you
with all my heart for this
you have answered the cry of
my heart - and of his - God

Reproduction of the first two pages of the "automatic message"
written by Lady Doyle at the sitting which she gave for Houdini in
an effort to communicate with his mother.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

thank you, thank you, friend, with all my heart for what you have done for me this day—God bless you, too, Sir Arthur, for what you are doing for us—for us over here—who so need to get in touch with our beloved ones on the earth plane——

“If only the world knew this great truth—how different—life would be for men and women—Go on, let nothing stop you—great will be your reward hereafter—Goodbye—I brought you, Sir Arthur, and my darling son together—I felt you were the one man who might help us to pierce the veil—and I was right—Bless him, bless him, bless him, I say from the depths of my soul—he fills my heart and later we shall be together—oh, so happy—a happiness awaits him that he has never dreamed of—tell him I am with him—just tell him that I’ll soon make him know how close I am all the while—his eyes will soon be opened—Goodbye again—God’s blessing be on you all——”

There is no doubt in my mind that questions are asked and answered in this self-same way, and as the questioning goes on eventually some one happens to think of something that has not been answered, and in this way the “spirits” answer questions which no one else knew about.

After the séance was over, and I had asked about trying out the automatic writing in my own home, I took a pencil and wrote the name “Powell.” It was like an electric shock to Sir Arthur, for a friend of his by that name, the editor of *The Financial News*, of London, had died about a week previously.

I wrote the name because I was thinking of Powell, the magician. It seems that he had been the subject of conversation between Mrs. Houdini and myself. Mrs. Powell being very ill, the question arose as to whether he ought to work with a young woman as his assistant.

Mrs. Houdini said it was not fair, but she did not want me to interfere. I think it is perfectly all right for a magician

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

to have young blood in his act, when his wife cannot assist him, and, when I took up the pencil, very likely this discussion was very keen in my mind. This being the most prominent thing in my mind, I wrote out "Powell."

Sir Arthur asked me a number of questions, all of which I answered to the best of my ability. He thought that the spirit of his friend "Powell" was trying to come through to him, but I am certain it was simply for the sake of writing something that I wrote this name,—just the same as when I am waiting for a telephone message, with the receiver in my hand, my other hand is marking down numerals and letters.

I explained things thoroughly to Mrs. Houdini, as she is just as keen an observer at séances as I am. We both came to the conclusion that it was because of our discussion regarding Powell that I had written the name.

Regarding the writing of the name "Powell" by Houdini, the latter asserts most positively that he did this of his own volition (see *A Magician Among the Spirits*, p. 155). He there says:

I must emphatically state that this name was written of my own volition and in full consciousness. . . . There is not the slightest doubt of it having been more than a deliberate mystification on my part, or let us use a kindlier word regarding my thoughts and call it "coincidence."

When Houdini speaks of a "deliberate mystification," he surely did not mean by this something he did purposely to trick or mystify Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle. It would be inconceivable to believe this, in view of the circumstances. What he doubtless meant was

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

that he wrote the name, while fully conscious, as it popped into his mind; and there is no logical reason to suppose that his explanation as to how it got there is to be questioned. He doubtless had his friend Powell in mind, and he wrote it—just as any name in the forefront of the subconscious mind might have been written at the time. It was a coincidence that this should have meant so much to Doyle at the moment; but that is a very different matter from “deliberate mystification” on his part. He was careless in the use of language, very often, and this is undoubtedly a case in point. One must exonerate Houdini from any attempt to mislead the Doyles intentionally—while granting the extraordinary nature of the coincidence. With this explanation, the case can doubtless stand on its own merits, as reported. A few days later, Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur as follows:

June 19, 1922.

My dear Sir Arthur:

On my return home I found the enclosed letter from my friend, F. E. Powell, whom I evidently meant when I wrote that name. I judge it was just one of those coincidences; and there is also a personal matter in connection with Powell, which I must explain privately.

Mrs. Houdini joins me in kindest regards.

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

Shortly after this historic sitting, Houdini evidently sent to Sir Arthur his version of the Powell

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

incident (*letter lost*), and to this the latter replied characteristically:

No, the Powell explanation won't do. Not only is he the man who would wish to get to me, but in the evening Mrs. M., the lady medium got "there is a man here; he wants to say that he is sorry he had to speak so abruptly this afternoon." The message was then broken by your mother's renewed message, and so we got no name. But it confirms me in the belief that it was Powell. However, you will no doubt test your own powers further. I'd like to see that report on Hope's mediumship, or anything about Marriot when I come.*

Nothing further seems to have passed between the two men regarding the incident until the following November, when Houdini published an article in one of the New York papers, violently attacking the subject, in which he mentioned the Doyle sitting in rather uncomplimentary terms. To this Sir Arthur replied, in the following letter to Houdini:

Nov. 19, 1922.

My dear Houdini:—

They sent me the New York *Sun*, with your article, and no doubt wanted me to answer it, but I have no fancy for sparring with a friend in public, so I took no notice.

But none the less, I felt rather sore about it. You have all the right in the world to hold your own opinion, but when you say that you have had no evidence of survival, you say what I cannot reconcile with what I saw with my own eyes. I know by many examples the purity of my wife's mediumship, and I saw what you got and what the effect was upon

* Mr. William Marriot, of London, is a professional magician, who for a time interested himself in psychics, largely in order to expose possible fraud.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

you at the time. You know also that you yourself at once wrote down with your own hand the name of Powell, the one man who might be expected to communicate with me. Unless you were joking when you said that you did not know of this Powell's death, then surely that was evidential, since the idea that out of all your friends you had chanced to write the name of one who exactly corresponded, would surely be too wonderful a coincidence.

However, I don't propose to discuss this subject any more with you, for I consider that you have had your proofs and that the responsibility of accepting or rejecting is with you. And it is a very real lasting responsibility. However, I leave it at that, for I have done my best to give you truth. I will, however, send you my little book on Hope, but that will be my last word on the subject.

Meanwhile, there are lots of other subjects on which we can all meet in friendly converse. I hope your fine film will make your fortune, and that you will then cut the whole manufacturing side of it out, for it will bring you annoyance and loss and divert your mind from bigger things.

Yours very sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

To this letter Houdini responded as follows:

December 15, 1922.

My dear Sir Arthur:—

I received your letter regarding my article in the *New York Sun*. You write that you are very "sore."

I trust that it is not with me, because you, having been truthful and manly all your life, naturally must admire the same traits in other human beings.

I know you are honorable and sincere, and think I owe you an explanation regarding the letter I received through the hands of Lady Doyle.

I was heartily in accord and sympathy at that séance,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

but the letter was written entirely in English, and my sainted mother could not read, write or speak the English language. I did not care to discuss it at the time because my emotions, in trying to sense the presence of my mother, if there was such a thing possible, kept me quiet until time passed and I could give it the proper deduction.

Regarding my having written the name Powell. Frederick Eugene Powell is a very dear friend of mine. He had had two serious operations. He was financially embarrassed. Furthermore, Mrs. Powell had had a paralytic stroke at that time. He was practically stranded in a lone Texas town, and, although he never asked for any assistance, it was on my mind to financially aid him onto his feet,—he having been one of our star performers in his particular line when I was a struggling mystifer,—he having played the finest theatres in America, giving an entire performance,—he having been a professor of mathematics in the Pennsylvania Military College and now, with all his ability, education and experience he was unable to make both ends meet.

That was in my mind, and I cannot make myself believe that my hand was guided by your friend. It was just a coincidence.

I trust my clearing up the séance from my point of view is satisfactory, and that you do not harbor any ill feeling, because I hold both Lady Doyle and yourself in the highest esteem. I know you treat this as a religion, but personally I cannot do so for, up to the present time, and with all my experiences, I have never seen or heard anything that could really convert me.

Trusting you will accept my letter in the same honest good faith and feeling as that in which it was written.

With best wishes to Lady Doyle, yourself and the family, in which Mrs. Houdini joins.

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Later, Sir Arthur wrote to Houdini again, regarding the difficulty he experienced in accepting this as a genuine message from his mother, saying:

Concerning your difficulty about your mother's language, there is really nothing in that. Mrs. Wriedt or any trance or half-trance medium might get the Hebrew through. I don't think a normal automatic writer ever would. It would always come as a rush of thought, which is translated in coming, or else as a message through the Control of the medium. In your case, the great excitement assures me that it was direct.

You will remember that you asked a mental question, and admitted at the time that the answer was to the point. Also, that very night, we had allusions to what had occurred through an independent person who knew little of the matter. If all this is coincidence, and Powell a coincidence as well, then it is more marvellous than the very simple explanation that love can bridge the grave and show that it can, if we obey the laws. . . .

By the way, Mr. Bird told me that, in the very complete test given you by your mother, you found it incredible that she, a Jewish lady, should put a Cross at the top. The cross is put by my wife above the first page of all she writes, as we guard against lower influences, and find it protective. . . . Only a trance medium gets unknown tongues. A normal inspirational medium is used to transmit the thought, and often character and even phrases,—but not unknown tongues. . . .

Some six months later, Houdini evidently thought it would be well to file an official and legal disclaimer; he accordingly wrote out the following statement, which he had duly signed and witnessed before a Notary Public.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

THE TRUTH REGARDING SPIRITUALISTIC SEANCE GIVEN TO HOUDINI BY LADY DOYLE

Fully realizing the danger of statements made by investigators of psychic phenomena, and knowing full well my reputation earned, after more than thirty years' experience in the realm of mystery, I can truthfully say that I have never seen a mystery, and I have never visited a séance, which I could not fully explain; and I want to go on record regarding the séance given to me by Lady Doyle in the presence of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, at Atlantic City, June 17, 1922.

Lady Doyle told me that she was automatically writing a letter which came through her, and was guided by the spirit of my beloved, sainted mother. Every boy who has ever had a worshipping mother and has lost earthly touch knows the feeling which will come over anyone at the thought of sensing the presence of his mother.

There was not the slightest idea of my having felt my mother's presence, and the letter which follows I cannot possibly accept as having been written or inspired by the soul or spirit of my sweet mother.

And the more do I refuse to accept the above letter, as, although my mother had been in America for almost fifty years, she could not read, speak or write English, and spiritualists claim that when you are possessed by the same spirit, who does not speak the language, they automatically write, speak or sing in the language of the deceased.

Regarding my having automatically written the name "Powell" on a piece of paper, I must emphatically state that this was written of my own volition; I knew what I was doing. I had the name in mind, and there was not the slightest chance of it having been more than a deliberate mystification

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

on my part, or let us say a kindlier word regarding my thoughts, and call it "coincidence."

I put this on record so that, in case of my death, no one will claim that the spirit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's friend Ellis Powell guided my hand.

(Signed) HARRY HOUDINI.

State and County of New York,

Sworn to before me this 19th day of Dec., 1922.

Agnes P. R. Boyd,

Notary Public Bronx Co., No. 141,

Certificate filed in N. Y. Co., No. 819.

Witnessed by,

James A. Jackson,

220 W. 42nd St.,

N. Y. C.

Were one to attempt to sum up Houdini's reaction to this alleged Message from his mother, it would probably be somewhat as follows: He believed in the perfect honesty and sincerity of both Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle. He knew that anything obtained through her would represent her earnest effort to secure some convincing message for him. When, however, he saw the Cross on the top of the paper, and the lengthy message in English which followed, he at once became convinced, in his own mind, that it certainly did not emanate from his mother, but rather from the subconsciousness of Lady Doyle herself, which composed this "communication" within itself, just as many similar communications have been composed in the past, by perfectly honest individuals. The message would repre-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

sent, on this view, just the *sort* of communication which Lady Doyle's subconscious mind would imagine *might* be sent, and her hand wrote it out accordingly. All this was doubtless at the back of Houdini's mind, as he sat there. At the same time, he was doubtless profoundly stirred, partly by the sympathetic beauty of the message itself, and partly by recollections of his mother, which any mention of her name was bound to evoke. He hardly dared trust himself to speak. Yet he did not wish to upset or offend Sir Arthur or Lady Doyle by seeming to doubt the authenticity of the message, which would appear ungracious indeed, after their whole-hearted and spontaneous attempt to supply him with this evidence. At the same time he could not accept it as coming from his mother. In his highly emotional state, he could but keep silent. It was only when he was enabled to analyze the message, dispassionately, later on, that his natural scepticism asserted itself, and he expressed his conviction that it did not, in truth, come to him from the spirit of his beloved mother.

There is no doubt that Houdini wavered, from time to time, in the firmness of his convictions; that he was frequently impressed, for the moment, by some experience which he only succeeded in "analyzing away" to his own satisfaction subsequently. The Doyle message is a case in point, for he seems to have been deeply and emotionally influenced at the time, and only after-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

wards did he come out with the statement that there was "nothing to it."

A case more to the point, however, was his investigation of the Eva C. mediumship, in England, in conjunction with Messrs. Dingwall, Feilding and Bagally, on behalf of the British S.P.R. There can be no doubt whatever that he was strongly impressed by these sittings, and stated his conviction to one of the editors of this book, soon after his return to America, that what he had seen could only be accounted for by "regurgitation,"—that is, the ability on the part of the medium to bring up certain material from the stomach (as the cow does its cud), and eject this from the mouth during the séance as alleged "ectoplasm." The ability of certain individuals to do this is well known, and is of course a physiological freak of nature. This theory had been advanced, in the case of Eva C., it should be said, and great pains had been taken to verify it in one way or another by psychic investigators. X-rays had been taken of her stomach; an emetic given immediately after the séance, etc.—with negative results. It was in order to test this hypothesis that the medium was asked to drink a cup of coffee immediately before the séance—*not*, as Houdini suggests, in order that she might have some food in her stomach at the time, but in order to color brown any "substance" which might subsequently be "regurgitated" in the form of pseudo-ectoplasm.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Be all this as it may, the fact remains that Houdini was sufficiently puzzled at the time to believe that "regurgitation" was the only rational explanation for what he had seen. Yet we find him, a year or two later, confidently asserting that simple fraud was the all-sufficient explanation of the facts which he had then encountered! There is a certain subtle shifting in his point of view, therefore, which is difficult to account for; and it is of this that Conan Doyle complains. It is a perfectly understandable human quality; but it is annoying just the same to one personally convinced of the facts! Subsequent cold reflection, the pressure of one's environment, and the "common sense" of everyday life, all combine to make the subject believe that he *must* have been mistaken. The mind gradually changes its angle of belief. The curious events which had been witnessed, and which at first seemed to find temporary lodgment in the mind, now roll off it like rain from a mackintosh. This is a well-known psychological phenomenon, and nearly every psychic investigator of note has gone through this same period of wavering belief. In an excellent article "On the Conditions of Certainty" (*Proceedings S.P.R.*, XIV, pp. 152-57), Prof. Charles Richet, the eminent physiologist of France, says:

. . . I took part, then, in those celebrated Milan séances with Eusapia Palladino; and while those séances were going on I was fully convinced of the reality of the phenomena.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Numerous precautions were taken; the incessant repetition of tests and experiments satisfied the most scrupulous mind. When I left Milan I was fully convinced that all was true; as also were the eminent *savants* who took part in the sittings—Brofferio, Gerosa, Finzi, and the great astronomer Schiaparelli.

But at this point a remarkable psychological phenomenon made itself felt,—a phenomenon deserving of all your attention. Observe that we are now dealing with observed facts which are nevertheless *absurd*; which are in contradiction with facts of daily observation; which are denied not by science only, but by the whole of humanity; facts which are rapid and fugitive, which take place in semi-darkness, and almost by surprise; with no proof except the testimony of our senses, which we know to be often fallible. After we have witnessed such facts, everything concurs to make us doubt them.

Now, at the moment when these facts take place they seem to us certain, and we are willing to proclaim them openly; but when we return to ourselves, when we feel the irresistible influence of our environment, when our friends all laugh at our credulity,—then we are almost disarmed, and we begin to doubt. May it not all have been an illusion? May I not have been grossly deceived? I *saw*, no doubt; but did I see aright? Who can prove to me that I did so?

And then, as the moment of the experiment becomes more remote, that experiment which once seemed so conclusive gets to seem more and more uncertain, and we end by letting ourselves be persuaded that we have been the victims of a trick.

Our own conviction,—the conviction of men who have seen,—ought properly to convince other people;—but, by a curious inversion of *rôles*, it is *their* conviction, the negative conviction of people who have *not* seen, and who ought not, one would think, to speak on the matter, which weakens and ultimately destroys our own conviction. This phenomenon oc-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

curred in my own case with such intensity that scarcely a fortnight after witnessing the experiments at Milan, I had persuaded myself that there had been nothing beyond fraud and illusion.

Nevertheless, I wished to repeat these experiments; and at Rome, in company with an eminent *savant*, Schrenck-Notzing, and a celebrated painter, H. Siemiradzki, I again made experiments of the most decisive kind. But a second time I found that doubt seized me after a short interval. I was not yet satisfied; and I invited Eusapia to my house for three months. Alone with her and my excellent friend, Ochorowicz, a man of penetrating perspicacity, I renewed the experiments in the best possible conditions of solitude and quiet reflection. We thus acquired a positive proof of the reality of the facts announced at Milan. . . .

In the meantime it is quite possible that my friends and I may lose that vigor of conviction which recent experience gives. We may return to that curious state of mind of which I have already spoken. The real world which surrounds us, with its prejudices, well or ill founded, its scheme of habitual opinions, holds us in so strong a grasp that we can scarcely free ourselves completely. *Certainty does not follow on demonstration; it follows on habit.*

But the duty of the *savant* is precisely not to allow himself to follow the routine of unreasoning respect for what Bacon termed *idols*. Our mission is to seek truth, without caring for the opinion of the vulgar. What should we care for popularity? Sarcasm or indifference ought to leave us equally unmoved.

If we have been credulous, our credulity has not been spontaneous and easy; we have made, as you have seen, an obstinate defence. It took me twenty years of patient researches to arrive at my present conviction. Nay,—to make one last confession,—I am not even yet absolutely and irremediably convinced! In spite of the astounding phenomena

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

which I have witnessed during my sixty experiments with Eusapia, I have still a trace of doubt; doubt which is weak, indeed, to-day, but which may perchance be stronger to-morrow. Yet such doubts, if they come, will not be due so much to any defect in the actual experiment, as to the inexorable strength of prepossession which holds me back from adopting a conclusion which contravenes the habitual and almost unanimous opinion of mankind.

There is doubtless a great truth in the words of Professor Richet, and many of us, we fancy, have undergone very much this same experience. Certainly it has been the case with one of the present editors. This seems also to have been the case, to a certain extent, with Houdini, only he did not, unfortunately, have the opportunity for prolonged experimentation, which would have settled his beliefs in one direction or in the other. His final, negative verdict seems to have been arrived at, not so much as the result of definite negative evidence (in the case of Eva C., for example) as because of that peculiarity of the human mind portrayed so well by Professor Richet in the above quotation. Houdini seems to have remained, to the day of his death, a sort of half-believer in possible "communication." Why, otherwise, should he have taken such pains to leave a definite code message, for his identification, in case of his "return"? Why otherwise his constant dabbling in the subject? Why otherwise his seeming half-belief in the possible return to him of his mother, spoken of by Mrs. Houdini in her letters? A complete

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and convinced materialist would not act in that manner. The theoretical possibility of communication must ever have been in his mind; and it was only his constant detection of fraud, and the infamous practices of bogus professional mediums, which he continually encountered, which served to embitter him and turn him into the relentless and powerful enemy of Spiritualism and mediums which he became during the latter years of his life.

It must be remembered that, if Houdini had been forced to the admission that *one single case* of genuine mediumship had ever been observed—if one single psychical phenomenon had ever really occurred—the props would be knocked out from under his mental edifice, and the whole superstructure of his public attitude would be liable to collapse. Hence the validity of that one case must never be granted; even genuine telepathy could not be accepted as a reality, as bordering upon the “supernatural.” That was doubtless the reason why he hastened to assail and “duplicate” the striking results obtained by Sir Gilbert Murray, when the reports reached him, of the latter’s seemingly striking successes in thought-transference, conducted in England. Of course, the mere fact that a clever and resourceful showman like Houdini could apparently “duplicate” Sir Gilbert Murray’s results, by sheer trickery, does not in the least serve to prove that Sir Gilbert himself resorted to fraud! It merely proves—if it proves any-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

thing—that what appear to be genuine phenomena can be so cleverly imitated that the layman cannot tell the difference between the two. Sir Gilbert is one of the most distinguished and learned men in Europe, and to attribute to him any other motive than purely scientific interest in his own results would of course be absurd. Yet he obtained some exceedingly striking results in his telepathic experiments. These Houdini hastened to deny at once; and he could logically do so only by seemingly imitating them so perfectly that the newspaper men present went away completely mystified and unable to explain what they had seen. The suggestion thus insinuated was that the original series of experiments could be explained by trickery also—without actually saying so in words. This was doubtless a clever, showman-like stroke on Houdini's part.

Houdini's mind had this curious and somewhat devious twist to it which, in the estimation of many, prevented him from being one hundred per cent. intellectually honest—though he himself was doubtless perfectly unconscious of this quirk in his nature. He was accustomed to keeping secrets, and never divulging anything unnecessarily. This is shown over and over again in his correspondence with Conan Doyle. When he believes that a certain medium is a fraud, he keeps his own counsel without saying so. Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that he did not wish to hurt Sir Arthur's feelings, for which he had great sympathy. It

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

was, however, doubtless due also to the innate inability on his part to impart secret information which he had acquired. A greater contrast, in this respect, can hardly be imagined than that between Houdini and Sir Arthur, whose almost child-like ingenuousness Houdini has portrayed from time to time in his Diary notations, made after some prolonged discussion of the subject between them.

Those who believe in the reality of certain psychic phenomena cannot but feel that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle undoubtedly *did* witness many genuine occurrences during his life, but they are also strongly of the opinion that he endorsed many mediums and manifestations which were most dubious and even certainly fraudulent. He seemed to possess no ability to distinguish the one from the other. In this he differed from the trained psychic investigator. To him Spiritualism was a religion, rather than a science. He frankly said so in his various writings. He must be regarded in the light of a Bishop of a Church, rather than as a psychical investigator, bent only upon obtaining accurate evidence under stringent test conditions. His own nature was, in a sense, his worst enemy. He was so frank, so kindly, so sympathetic, so generous, that it appeared incredible to him that one-half of humanity should be out to trick the other half! Yet such is unfortunately the case; and we know that a vast, subterranean system of fraud has been built up by professional mediums,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

in this country, intricate and ingenious, which could have been subverted only by a regular net-work of spies, directed by a Master Mind thoroughly familiar with their methods, which Houdini was *par excellence*. In exposing this he accomplished a vast amount of good, though he doubtless threw discredit upon the whole subject at the same time, while doing so.

It must always be remembered that the magician is almost invariably interested, primarily, in the so-called "physical phenomena," knowing little or nothing of the mental or purely "psychic" manifestations. The reason for this is obvious. He deals with objective, tangible realities, in his profession; and when he sees or hears of some slate-writing trick, some new rope-tie, or some novel form of materialization, he is naturally interested in detecting and duplicating it upon the stage. True, there are professional "mind-readers," but these individuals never pretend, to their fellow showmen, that what they do is anything more than clever artistry, and hence are regarded by the professional as brother entertainers. If the public chooses to take their work seriously, and believe in it, that is their own look-out! Advertising clairvoyants and fortune-tellers fall into a different category. They *do* pretend that they possess genuine supernatural gifts, and they draw upon themselves the fire of the magicians accordingly.

Aside from these dubious manifestations, however, there are all sorts of curious and apparently genuine

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

experiences which individuals have had, which they know are not to be accounted for by any system of fraud; and it is these experiences which have largely kept the movement and the interest in the subject alive. Many of these are what are known as "spontaneous"—that is, they happen quite unexpectedly, to normal, healthy individuals, in the absence of any professional medium whatever. Odd occurrences at the moment of death belong to this category, of which thousands of well-evidenced cases might be cited. Telepathic flashes, "hunches" and seemingly premonitory dreams are experiences which many people have had in their own lives. "Coincidences," it may be said. If only a few cases of this character existed, we should have every right to conclude that such was the case. But when hundreds, thousands of such cases are recorded, the theory of chance coincidence has to be stretched to the breaking point, in order to account for them. Many years ago, the Society for Psychical Research published a so-called "Census of Hallucinations," based upon 30,000 replies received in answer to a Questionnaire which the Society sent out, relative to apparitions and other experiences coincidental with death. After discarding all doubtful cases, and putting the results to the mathematical test, it was found that these coincidences were far more frequent than chance alone would account for, and the Report concluded with these words:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Between deaths and apparitions of the dying person a connection exists which is not due to chance alone. This we hold as a proved fact.

Now, if such a condition actually exists, it is a most significant fact. It seems to show us that the mind of man is capable, at times, of manifesting at a great distance, irrespective of the physical brain; and if that be the case it is but a short step to the belief that the human spirit is capable of existing independently of the brain altogether—which is one of the two essential pillars of modern Spiritualism. The other is that this spiritual entity, possessing its memories and personality, is capable, at times, of communicating with those still living, through the instrumentality of certain peculiarly endowed individuals known as psychics or mediums. Whether they ever actually do so is, of course, a matter of evidence, which can be decided only by the actual facts in the case. It is upon the existence of these alleged facts that modern Spiritualism is built.

Doyle says that such facts exist; Houdini asserts that they do not. How is this matter ever to be settled? Surely, by actual experimentation. "But," you may say, "Doyle experimented and found them, while Houdini experimented and did not! The same facts which Doyle accepted Houdini would in all probability have rejected." Up to a point this argument is doubtless perfectly valid. It must be remembered, on the other hand, that Doyle saw many things which Houdini did

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

not see—mental as well as physical cases; amateur as well as professional mediums. Furthermore, personal experience counts for much. It is impossible, logically, to prove a negative. So, there are those who continue to believe as Conan Doyle believed, and there are those who believe as Houdini believed—partly as the result of their own experiences, and partly, no doubt, because belief is, after all, largely a temperamental thing in the last analysis.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE year 1923 was destined to be the last which united Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Houdini in their remarkable friendship. Before the year was over, strange things were to happen. Yet it began most propitiously—Conan Doyle writing to Houdini on January 1st:

The best of wishes to you and your dear wife from all of us for 1923. April 3 should see me in New York, and April 6 I hope to face the music once more.

Early in 1923 the *Scientific American* had offered a prize of five thousand dollars to any medium who could produce phenomena of a physical character which should be declared such by the unanimous vote of their Committee of five, appointed to investigate them. The Committee consisted of Dr. William McDougall, of Harvard University, psychologist; Dr. Daniel F. Comstock, of the Mass. Institute of Technology, physicist; Dr. Walter Franklin Prince, Research Officer of the Society for Psychical Research;

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Hereward Carrington and Harry Houdini. There were thus on the Committee one psychologist, one physicist, two professional psychical researchers, and one magician. All these men had had much experience in psychic investigation, and theoretically a better Committee could hardly have been selected. Mr. J. Malcolm Bird, then associate editor of the *Scientific American*, was appointed Secretary to the Committee, and much of the routine work fell upon his shoulders. Houdini was "on the road" at the time, and seems at first to have had only a very vague idea of what "it was all about," for he wrote to Sir Arthur, on February 20th:

The *Scientific American* has asked me to act as one of the five on the Committee to investigate mediums accepting some kind of a challenge which they are supposed to have issued. Not knowing exactly what the challenge is, and thinking it would be best for me to be "among those present," I willingly accepted. . . .

Sir Arthur, however, had his doubts as to the personnel of the Committee, and particularly as to Houdini's place upon it, for he wrote in answer to this:

I see that you are on the *Scientific American* Committee, but how can it be called an impartial Committee when you have committed yourself to such statements as that some Spiritualists pass away before they realize they have been deluded, etc.? You have every possible right to hold such an opinion, but you can't sit on an impartial Committee afterwards. It becomes biassed at once. What I wanted was five good, clear-headed men who would stick to it without any prejudice at all—like the Dialectical Society of London, who

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

unanimously endorsed the phenomena. However, it may work out all right. . . .

And later Sir Arthur wrote:

The Commission is, in my opinion, a farce, and has already killed itself. Can people not understand that "psychic" means "of the spirit," and that it concerns not only the invisible spirit or the spirit of the medium, but equally those of every one of the Investigators? A delicate balance and harmonious atmosphere are needed. I fear some of your recent comments which I have read would not only keep away every decent medium—for they are human beings, not machines, and resent insult—but it would make spirit approach impossible, for they also do not go into an atmosphere which is antagonistic. Thus a certain class of researcher always ruins his result before he begins. However, no one is the worse, save himself, for there is a huge responsibility in the matter . . .

The upshot of the *Scientific American* investigations is now a matter of history. Several mediums appeared, but were in turn discredited by the Committee, actual fraud being proved in these cases. In one case, a medium claiming to produce "independent voices" was proved to have been constantly out of his chair, during the séances, by means of a delicate electrical apparatus which showed that he had left it and walked about the room, producing "phenomena." In another, a medium claimed to produce "independent writing" on blank cards, in varying colors, after the petals of flowers had been placed between the cards. In this case, actual substitution of cards was effected—as proved by the fact that the cards on which the writing appeared were

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

slightly different in size from those which had been supplied her for the test. In still another case, it was shown that the medium could have slipped out of his bonds, and produced manifestations by means of his free hand. When Houdini was there and took three-quarters of an hour to tie up the medium so that he could not escape, nothing happened. And so it went. Finally, the Margery Case was encountered, and on this the Committee disagreed and finally came to grief. Two members were of the opinion that genuine phenomena occurred; Houdini was violently opposed to this conclusion; while other members of the Committee remained "on the fence," and were unwilling to get off, on one side or the other. No conclusion was therefore arrived at, and the time-limit set by the donors ran out with no conclusion having been reached. Inasmuch as a *unanimous* vote of the Committee was required before the prize was awarded, this was never given, and the investigation finally dissolved into nothingness. The various pros and cons of this investigation, which was only concluded after the termination of the present correspondence, may be found elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the correspondence continued, though it was now nearing the time for Sir Arthur's trip to America, on his second lecture tour. Just before leaving, he wrote Houdini:

I fear the Thomsons of Chicago, like the Thompsons of New York, are wrong ones. I have never heard any good of

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

either, but I think the Chicago ones have some psychic power mixed with roguery. The *Scientific American* money offers are sure to bring the worst to the top.

I wish Frau Silbert was over there. I saw her last week—a little peasant woman, with lightning playing round her head. I saw her also in a good light bring several articles which we laid on the floor up through the table—she never stooping the while. There were ten of us present. And yet, if we had had one of those blessed “researchers” present, I dare say all would have stopped, and he would have thought us all dupes, whereas it would have been his own incredulity which had brought the mischief.

Well, here I am arguing with you, when I said I would do so no more. We have lots in common besides this.

Once more, all greetings,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

And so, Conan Doyle set sail, and soon began the second tour of the states, lecturing from coast to coast on Spiritualism. Houdini meanwhile was also on tour, and the two men met in several cities—Denver and elsewhere. In Washington, Doyle met Julius Zancig, the well-known stage mind-reader, and, after seeing his work and having several long conversations with him, became quite convinced that he possessed genuine psychic power, for on April 30th he wrote:

I have tested Prof. and Mrs. Zancig today, and am quite assured that their remarkable performance, as I saw it, was due to psychic causes (thought transference) and not to trickery.

He added, however, in reply to Houdini’s criticisms:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

I never said Zancig was a medium. I said he did his feats sometimes by telepathy, which has nothing to do with mediumship. . . .

And later:

When you get *Our American Adventure*, you will find some details of our Zancig experiments. Mrs. Z. told me how, at Cambridge in England, she could not get her husband's message because her mind was full of T's—and it transpired afterwards that a whole line of students had united for fun in trying to send T's. This surely is proof positive of telepathy, for there was no reason for her to tell me this story. But telepathy is very simple—far more so than a code. I was able, with one good subject, an architect, to get figures reproduced. Prof. Gilbert Murray was great at it, and had an article upon his results in the *Journal* of the Society for Psychical Research. The only thing I can't understand is why Z. should wish to hide it from you, and mislead you, but I suppose people do try to cover the trail of how they do things, and give fake information rather than true. . . .

It was very pleasant to meet you both. I hope that some better psychic evidence will come your way. I have found the mediums very averse to sitting with you, and they all regard you as one who has insulted them, but I do my best to clear away that impression.

I wasted a whole day yesterday in answering an article of Joseph F. Rinn's. I think it broke the record of all the fallacious statements which I have ever had to correct. I hope my answer may appear in the same syndicated papers. . . .

It was good of you to give those poor invalids a show, and you will find yourself in the Third Sphere all right, with your dear wife, world without end, whatever you may believe.

Pray remember us all to your wife. Mine is, I am afraid, rather angry with you.

Yours very sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Nevertheless, Doyle continued his endeavors to provide some conclusive evidence for Houdini, by introducing him to one medium or another. He gave the latter a note of introduction, for example, to Mr. Kemp, of Chicago,—an “independent voice medium,” writing:

Dear Mr. Kemp:

I hope that you will give a sitting to Mr. and Mrs. Houdini, who are deeply interested in psychic phenomena. With Mr. Perlman you will make quite a sympathetic circle. I should much like him to hear “Redfoot’s” voice.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Sir Arthur was evidently very anxious that this meeting should come about, and more than once, in subsequent letters, inquired about it:

I wonder if young Bruce Kemp gave you a demonstration of his Indian’s powers? I had a nice note from him, but he did not mention it. . . .

Let me know if you heard from Bruce Kemp, the young voice medium. If you have Alfred Russel Wallace’s *Life* in your library, do me a favor and read Vol. II, p. 275 onwards. It is a fine narrative of personal experience from a very great man. . . .

Meanwhile, the usual information was exchanged regarding their relative movements and interests. Thus, Houdini wrote:

In my last letter, I believe, I told you that I had two sittings with Mr. Alexander Martin of Denver. I will show

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

you the photographs at the first opportunity. I have been invited this evening to a séance of a trumpet medium in the offices of the *Scientific American*. If you will send me your address, I will give you the full facts.

And Sir Arthur wrote back:

Five thousand people last night, and a good, psychic, religious atmosphere. It is a really splendid place and fine people. I am very much impressed.

I read the Eddy article. The whole story seems to me an extraordinary example of human credulity, but she must surely have been a very magnetic, remarkable woman, for there are no effects without causes. I can see nothing in the whole business, for "faith healing" is as old as history. And yet they have filled the world with their great temples, while we, with the greatest revelation that the world has ever known, can hardly get a roof to cover us. But poverty wins in the long run!

The "Arena" is not to hand yet, but I have no doubt I shall get it. Our affectionate remembrance to your lady, whom we much admire. You are among the eternity mates—most marriages are temporary.

It was in Denver that Conan Doyle and Houdini met, and here evidently occurred several prolonged and serious conversations between them,—detailed Notes of which Houdini subsequently made in his Day-book. They discussed Father de Heredia, a Jesuit priest who was at that time touring the country, giving lectures on Spiritualism, with demonstrations of certain trick methods, and also Dr. Carl Wickland, of Los Angeles, who claims to cure cases of genuine spirit Obsession by

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

spiritual means. (See his book *Thirty Years Among the Dead.*) After this conversation, Houdini wrote:

Denver, Colo., May 8th, 1923.

Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle and family came to the Orpheum Theater as my guests; they sat in a box and certainly enjoyed the show.

We sent them a bunch of violets and five pounds of candy for little Billy, the little tom-boy daughter of the Doyles.

Sir Arthur came back to the Dressing Room between acts and I had a long chat with him. I showed him a number of books that I was reading, relative to the power of the mind and the body.

Sir Arthur said that he was capable of detecting trickery, and we had a discussion in which I said that I did not think he could. He looked amazed at me, and I said, "Why, Sir Arthur, I have been trained in mystery all my life and every once in a while I see something I cannot account for."

He replied, "I am perfectly willing to stand by my offer of two hundred pounds if Rinn will produce spirit photographs under test conditions the same as Hope's."

I said: "But then it is a simple matter to get figures on a plate." He said: "Yes, but I shall ask him for one of my relatives." I said: "You might be able to take care of yourself, but when it comes to trickery, you can rely on me for any assistance in my power." "That is very nice of you, Houdini, and I will remember it." I showed him the MacVicker photograph, and he became greatly interested in it, and will look into it when he gets to Los Angeles.

Denver, Colo.,

May 9th, 1923.

Went out with Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle; left about 11 o'clock A.M.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Sir Arthur told me about a Dr. Wickland who would have people come to him who were possessed with evil spirits. He would lay them down and have the evil spirits go into the body of his wife. The evil spirits would leave the body of the possessed and get into the body of his wife, and the wife, being a very healthy creature, Dr. Wickland easily made the evil spirits leave his wife's body. In this way he cured patients.

He insisted that Zancig was genuine. He said that, at the time he gave his lecture, no word was spoken. Mr. Zancig's back was turned, and the medium duplicated the ship that Sir Arthur drew. I tried to tell him that Zancig acknowledged to me in front of witnesses that he never claimed telepathy, but all this did not move Sir Arthur or Lady Doyle.

Regarding Rinn, Sir Arthur feels confident Rinn cannot duplicate Hope's tests, and on my asking to be allowed to be one of the Committee, he said he would leave the entire thing to the *Scientific American*.

He told me that Father Heredia was caught at the *Scientific American*, when he put his hand on the plate. He asked someone to write the name on an exposed negative first, and then said "I might as well sign it." As we put his hand on the plate, someone in the office saw that he had some object in his hand.

Father Heredia is supposed to have said: "Let us go through with this now."

Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle believe that the Thomsons are unscrupulous and possess a lack of morality, but believe they are genuine. As Lady Doyle said: "There are great opera singers who are immoral, but who have a great voice, and may be compared with unscrupulous mediums."

Sir Arthur said he was convinced that Mrs. Besinnet was genuine in everything she did.

After an hour's drive, we sat in a park for half an hour.

As Sir Arthur came into the Dining Room, he gave me

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

a letter of introduction to Mr. Bruce Kemp, Chicago, Ill., to give me a trumpet séance.

I told Sir Arthur I tried hard to get his version of his "Adventures in America."

He said he never gave them, but sent for typewritten copy and that he had the MSS in rough form.

"When I get the book ready I will let you have it. Now it is all scribbled."

I said, "That is just the beauty of the MS."

. . . "As soon as I return, I will send it to you."

. . . "I assure you I will appreciate it very much."

He said: "You will have it on my return."

Denver, Colo., May 10th, 1923.

Mrs. Houdini went to the Lecture last night with Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle and, as I was standing in the Lobby, Sir Arthur profusely apologized to me for the challenge which appeared in the *Denver Express*, and of which herewith a copy is attached.

He stated positively and emphatically that he had been misquoted, and that he did not challenge me in any way at all. I told him that I had not seen the challenge, and that it would not make any difference to me, as frequently the papers misquote people.

Regarding this man Kemp, in Chicago, to whom Sir Arthur gave me a letter of introduction, Sir A. C. Doyle said that the voice was so powerful that it hurt his ear-drums, and he had to ask the Indian Guide to moderate his voice, as he was not in his own "wigwam."

Sir Arthur told me that he had hold of the medium's both hands, and that it was a physical impossibility for him to have spoken into the trumpet.

Of course this is his description to me and, upon investigation, very likely I shall find things entirely different.

I told Sir Arthur that I had a number of extraordinary

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

spirit slate tests of a mechanical order, and that I would allow him to examine the slates thoroughly, and that I thought it would be next to impossible to discover the method. He did not seem greatly interested in Slate writing.

Coming back to the Thomsons, I explained to him that, without my permission and sanction, there was a flashlight photograph taken by the photographer. He said he had seen the various photographs and believed positively that what I thought was a veiling was a transfiguration which, he said, meant that the Ectoplasm oozed out of the body of the medium and covered it, while she was in an unconscious state, and would go walking out of the cabinet covered with that ectoplasm.

With all his brilliancy and child-like faith, it is almost incredible that he has been so thoroughly convinced, and nothing can shake his faith.

Mrs. Houdini returned, telling me it was quite a strain on Sir Arthur, the lecture running for an hour and a half, and she suggested that after an hour's lecture Sir Arthur should have a rest period of ten or fifteen minutes, allowing the audience to talk and soft music to play. He could have a large arm chair, to take the required rest.

Sir Arthur thought it was an excellent idea and thought seriously of going through with it.

In the *Denver Post* there was hardly anything about Sir Arthur's lecture at the Ogden Theatre. The Theatre was comfortably filled but I do not think it was a "turn away." In my estimation, if this man was circussed he would be turning away thousands.

Sir Arthur said he was too busy, when he played Rochester, to go to Hydesville, but that he was liable to go at the end of his Lecture Tour, and that it was agreeable to him that we should both visit Hydesville, making a special trip to go there, so we could make the pilgrimage together.

He told me that he was going to write a History of

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Spiritualism, and as a start he said he had already a man (Canow) who was "deviling" for him. He meant the man was doing Research work for him.

He said that McCabe had written a History of Spiritualism but like a man half-convinced, and he, Sir Arthur, thought that he could write the book and make it interesting and important.*

Denver, Colo.

Dictated May 11th, 1923.

I called Sir Arthur's attention to a book that was loaned to me by a lady stopping at our hotel, Mrs. Eleonor P. C. Lewis: the book called: *Life Understood*, by F. L. Rawson.

I asked Sir Arthur if he was acquainted with this man and he said: "Yes, this man is no good. During the war he would charge the women 30Sh. for a prayer which, he said, would keep the bullets from wounding their sons. He is a bad lot," repeated Sir Arthur. "Any man that does that cannot be good."

I am writing these things in my day-book, realizing that Sir Arthur is a huge success in the literary world, and a great many things he says or does will be of interest at some future time.

And now occurred one of those incidents which serve to show the generous, whole-hearted nature which was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's. In the course of conversation, he had promised the MS of his forthcoming book to Houdini, and the latter had reminded him of that fact. Having temporarily forgotten the incident, Sir Arthur wrote back:

* Joseph McCabe, the noted Rationalist, has since written his *History of Spiritualism*; also *Is Spiritualism Based on Fraud?* and other works. He debated the subject publicly with Conan Doyle in London, some years before the latter's death.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

A promise—especially to a friend—is very binding with me, but I wish you could recall more precisely to my memory how I promised you last year to send you the MSS of *Our American Adventure*. I think that you surely confused the book with the MSS. I can't help feeling that the latter should be kept in my family, for my descendants, for if this mission of mine has any appreciable effect in altering the religious opinion of the world, then the time will come when the account of my travels may be very interesting and even valuable to those who follow me. I may say that the value of one of my longer MSS now, in the open market, is several hundred pounds, but that would not in the least prevent my fulfilling a promise if such a promise was made. But I have no recollection of speaking of anything beyond the printed book. Or was it in a letter?

When Houdini recalled the conversation to his mind, however, he wrote back at once, and without a moment's hesitation:

You shall certainly have the MSS. You will excuse me if, in the rush of events, I did not carry it in my mind.

It was only a few days after this, however, that Sir Arthur was forced to write:

Los Angeles,

May 23, 1923.

My dear Houdini:—

I have had to handle you a little roughly in the *Oakland Tribune*, because they send me a long screed under quotation marks, so it is surely accurate. It is so full of errors that I don't know where to begin. I can't imagine why you say such wild things which have no basis in fact at all. I put the Thompsons down as humbugs. I never heard of my son or brother through the Thomas brothers. They were never ex-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

posed. I never said the Masked Medium was genuine. I wish you would refer to me before publishing such injurious stuff, which I have to utterly contradict. I would always tell you the exact facts as I have done with the Zancigs.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

I hate sparring with a friend in public, but what can I do when you say things which are not correct, and which I have to contradict or else they go by default? It is the same with all this stuff of Rinn's. Unless I disprove it, people imagine it is true.

And the next day he followed this with another letter:

Los Angeles,

May 24, 1923.

Dear Houdini:—

In continuation of my letter of yesterday, I must really ask you to deny over your signature these three injurious statements which you have made, none of which have the slightest truth in them—so that this denial may be published in the Oakland or any other paper which has contained such statements.

They are:

1. That I ever endorsed the mediumship of the Thomp-sons.
2. That I ever claimed that my son or brother came through the Thomas mediums.
3. That I ever endorsed the mediumship of the Masked Lady.

I am very sorry this breach has come, as we have felt very friendly towards Mrs. Houdini and yourself, but "friendly is as friendly does," and this is not friendly, but on

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

the contrary it is outrageous to make such statements with no atom of truth in them.

I do not wish to argue the points, but simply that you accept unreservedly my assurance that all three statements are false and that you contradict them.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

No wonder Sir Arthur was constrained to write, shortly after this:

Our relations are certainly curious and are likely to become more so, for so long as you attack what I *know* from experience to be true, I have no alternative but to attack you in return. How long a private friendship can survive such an ordeal I do not know,—but at least I did not create the situation.

Houdini was by now back again in New York, and actively participating in the *Scientific American* sittings. The results of some of these investigations—which, it was definitely understood, should not be made public before the official publication of the results in the magazine itself—had somehow leaked out, and the evidence seemed to point to Houdini, as having divulged it. This Houdini denied. Some rather acrimonious controversy ensued, and Houdini felt constrained to write to Sir Arthur about it, giving his side of the case. He wrote:

May 28, 1923.

My dear Sir Arthur:—

I am commencing to believe that at last I am “famous”? Newspapers are misquoting me.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

There is quite a stir here about a medium who was detected, and it seems that the *Times* had one of their reporters at the séance, with the understanding that the manner in which the medium was detected would not be written until the *Scientific American* had been published. A very big misunderstanding has arisen, in which the giving out of the information is placed up to me, which I can easily explain.

It is too long to write about it, but will tell it to you in person when you arrive.

Mrs. Houdini joins me in sending kindest regards and best wishes to Lady Doyle, the children and yourself.

Sincerely yours,

HOUDINI.

Seemingly, no further correspondence ensued until the following December—an interval of seven months. At all events, no copies of such letters are to be found. In the interval, Houdini had definitely launched his anti-Spiritualistic campaign,—lecturing throughout the country and exposing mediums whenever possible in every city he visited. This marked the end of the friendship between Doyle and Houdini. No friendship could stand the strain. On December 24th, 1923, Sir Arthur wrote:

Dear Houdini:

I was surprised and sorry to get your letter because you force me to speak, and I have no wish to offend you. But you can't have it both ways. You can't bitterly and offensively—often also untruly—attack a subject and yet expect courtesies from those who honour that subject. It is not reasonable. I very much resent some of your press comments and statements, and I wrote you from San Francisco to tell you so.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

At the same time I wish you personally all good—and your wife most cordially the same.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

And now we come to the last letter which passed between them—the last link in the chain of this extraordinary friendship, which had lasted for four years, despite its frequent buffetings. Evidently, Houdini's violent campaign had decided Sir Arthur that further controversy was useless, and, in reply to some request by Houdini for information of one kind or another, Sir Arthur had replied:

Feb. 26 (1924).

Dear Houdini:

I am answering you by the first post. I could not make myself clear in a cable.

You probably want these extracts in order to twist them in some way against me or my cause, but what I say I say and I do not alter. All the world can quote.

What you quote, however, about your own frame of mind is obviously a back-number.

The assertion about the bones in the Fox house should be referred to its origin—*The Boston Journal*, Nov. 23, 1904.

I read an interview you gave some American paper the other day, in which you said my wife gave you nothing striking when she wrote for you. When you met us, three days after the writing, in New York, you said—"I have been walking on air ever since," or words to that effect. I wonder how you reconcile your various utterances!

I observe that, in your letter, you put down my starting my world-mission "in a crisis of emotion." I started in 1916.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

My son died in 1918. My only emotion was impersonal and the reflection of a world in agony.

Our regards to Mrs. Houdini.

Yours faithfully,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Houdini's note written on May 5th, 1924, offering to send a copy of his book *A Magician Among the Spirits*, remained unanswered.

And so ended this historic correspondence, and with it ended one of the most remarkable friendships in history. Henceforth, Doyle and Houdini were destined to travel their respective paths alone, and develop their rival propaganda in their own ways. Sir Arthur threw himself more vigorously than ever into the Spiritualistic cause, while Houdini similarly attacked it more fiercely than ever. For nearly two years longer he was destined to carry on his activities, when that Great Avenger, Death, claimed him in the heyday of his energetic campaign. The story of his last days has been graphically told by Mr. Kellock in his life of Houdini, and was as dramatic as his life had always been. Not long afterwards he was followed into the Great Beyond by Sir Arthur himself, who fully anticipated a renewal of their friendship in the Next World, and spoke of it in one of his subsequent letters. After Houdini's death, the correspondence was continued between Sir Arthur and Mrs. Houdini, and further letters of extreme interest passed between Doyle

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and Mr. B. M. L. Ernst. They will be dealt with in the next Chapter. But for the present the curtain is lowered, and the strange friendship which had for so long existed between these equally strange men came to a halt—unless indeed it was to be renewed in some new and stranger Sphere—as Sir Arthur himself believed—where all animosities would be cleared away, and where only harmony and sympathy would prevail. There, let us hope, their friendship may be eternally renewed. . . .

CHAPTER NINE

IN THE heyday of his activity, popularity and power, Death claimed Houdini, terminating unexpectedly and abruptly the campaign in which he was engaged, and writing *Finis* on that strange friendship which had for several years existed between himself and Conan Doyle. The dramatic story of Houdini's tragic end has already been told by Mr. Kellock in his life of Houdini, and need not be repeated here. We know how a blow on his abdomen ruptured his appendix, and how, with characteristic determination and iron will, Houdini had paid no attention to it until it was too late; we know how he continued his performances until he collapsed on the stage, and how, when he was finally operated upon, recovery was then impossible—but how, even then, he continued to live on for days, to the amazement of the physicians attending him. He died October 31st, 1926, in Detroit, and was buried in the metal coffin in which he had “duplicated” Rahman Bey's performance of being sealed within it for more than an

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

hour, under water,—and which, strangely enough, he had carried with him on tour. His wife was with him at the time, and he died with her arms about him, conscious to the last.

Some time after this, Beatrice Houdini wrote to Sir Arthur, offering him a number of books in the Houdini collection, dealing with Spiritualism and allied topics. She doubtless felt that these would be more appreciated by Sir Arthur than by anyone else, in view of the friendship which had for so long existed between them, and also because of their intrinsic interest. Conan Doyle, however, felt rather averse to accepting them, in view of Houdini's violent anti-spiritualistic campaign, during the last years of his life, and wrote to Mrs. Houdini, to tell her so. He said:

Dec. 3, 1926.

Dear Mrs. Houdini:

I thank you for your kind letter & your offer of books. I appreciate it much.

At the same time it might place me in a delicate position if I were to accept them. I shall probably sooner or later have to write about this remarkable man, and I must do so freely and without any sense of obligation. I am sure you will understand.

I have never concealed my belief that some of his "tricks" were of psychic origin. On one occasion he told my wife that you yourself did not know how he did *some* of them. The fact that he has not left his secret—a valuable asset—would seem to point to the same thing. Now that he has gone, I don't see that it can harm him in any way to discuss the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

idea,—as I may do, since there is no reason why a man should not have psychic power—save that it seems illogical to deny it to others if you have it yourself.

I am sorry that shadows grew up between us. There was some story in the papers here of his having shown up my wife's mediumship, so I had to contradict as in the enclosed. We had (in our family circle) several warnings as to his approaching end, but what could we do, for he would have only mocked at them, and us, if we had sent them on.

I am sure that, with his strength of character (and possibly his desire to make reparation), he will come back. I shall be very glad, if you get a message, if you will tell me. Zancig writes me that he has had a prearranged test message from his first wife.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

To this Mrs. Houdini replied:

December 16, 1926.

My dear Sir Arthur:—

Just read your letter and I am indeed sorry my offer of the books is refused. I fully understand how you feel about them, but I also understand that whatever you do write about Houdini would just be of your belief and his,—that surely would not be detrimental to Houdini the man, or yourself.

This same subject has been sadly abused by the press. Words were printed that Houdini never said or used. I, who have lived with him so many years, know what his beliefs were. If, as you believe, he had psychic power, I give you my word he never knew it. Often, in the night, I would waken and hear him say, "Mama, are you here?" and how sadly he would fall back on the pillow and sigh with disappointment. He did so pray to hear that sentence from his beloved mother,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

but as the world did not know of the secret buried in his heart (his Sainted Mother died before he reached her side) he hoped, and never, despite what was printed, gave up hope of hearing that one word—"forgive."

Two days before he went to his beloved Mother, he called me to his bedside (I had been very ill and forbidden to embrace him, as my illness was contagious), grasped my hand and prayed as only such a loving son could pray. He held my hand to his heart and repeated our solemn vow of our compact. "Mother has not reached me, dear. I never had that one precious word, but you, dear, must be prepared, if anything happens, dear, you must be prepared."

As my illness was so much more dangerous than his, at that time, and the doctors feared for my life, I naturally laughed at his fears—"Nothing, dear heart, will happen. We will soon be together on our vacation and forget all this illness." But it did not satisfy him. He again repeated the words in formation—"When you hear those words you will know it is Houdini speaking. The same message will go through to Sir Arthur, but in that formation only. Never, despite anything, will I come through otherwise; and with his dying kiss (although we did not know it then) I vowed to wait for that, and only that, message.

Dear Sir Arthur, Houdini was a level-headed man. He was deeply hurt whenever any journalistic arguments arose between you, and would have been the happiest man in the world had he been able to agree with your views on spiritism. He admired and respected you; therefore, as you say, you would be free to discuss this subject. Do so, surely it cannot harm him. Two remarkable men with different views.—It is usually the third party that distorts the word or meaning.

I will never be offended by anything you say for him or about him; but that he possessed psychic powers—he never

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

knew it. As I told Lady Doyle often,—he would get a difficult lock, I stood by the cabinet and would hear him say, “this is beyond me,” and after many minutes, when the audience became restless, I nervously would say, “Harry, if there is anything in this belief of Spiritism,—why don’t you call on them to assist you?” and, before many minutes passed, Houdini had mastered the lock.

We never attributed this to psychic help. We just knew that that particular instrument was the one to open that lock, and so he did all his tricks. He buried no secrets. Every conjurer knows how his tricks were done—with the exception of just where or how the various traps or mechanisms were hidden. You, Sir Arthur, could do the same tricks. It was his stunts that were dangerous,—but it was Houdini himself that was the secret. His personality, his brilliant mind, that carried him through, and perhaps it will be this same Houdini who will come through to you or me.

Surely, our beloved God will let him bring me the message for which I wait, and not the silly messages I get from the various people who claim they hear from him.

Please believe me when I say that I have taken an oath to tell the world when I do hear from him,—also if a message directly to you, with our code comes through. The hour his soul went to his Maker (Sunday, at 1:26 P.M., October 31, 1926) and every Sunday at the same hour, I spend with him, alone, in prayer.

Write, Dear Sir Arthur, just as your heart dictates. My beloved will understand, and no one else counts.

My love to you and yours,

B. H.

P.S. One exception to your article enclosed. Houdini’s mother never spoke Yiddish, not even Hebrew,—German, French, Italian, Spanish and her own Hungarian only. Is

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

there any objection to me presenting the sketch-book of your father or other books to your boys or Billy? Again lots of love to you all.

B. H.

Answering this long letter, Sir Arthur wrote:

1926.

My dear Mrs. Houdini:

Your letter was a very beautiful one & I appreciated it much. Any man who wins the love and respect of a good woman must himself be a fine and honest man.

I think it is likely that the pressmen used to excite him and that he gradually got worked up upon this question. But you can understand that, to those of us who had personal experience, a hundred times over, in the matter, it was annoying to be placed in the position of either being a fool or a knave. So far as his work was confined to really fake mediums, we were all in sympathy. But he got far past that. It was a general wild attack upon all that we hold dear. But behind all that, I can see quite a different person,—a loving husband, a good friend, a man full of sweet impulses. I have never met anyone who left so mixed an impression upon my mind.

That he had psychic power—not himself understanding it—is surely borne out by your own experience when, faced by a lock which he could not force, he would make a mental appeal to what we should call his guide. He once said to my wife that even you did not know how he produced some of his effects, but I think he might have said “even I.” I see no reason at all why he should not use such power if he had it. The Davenports had it, and I, knowing his early acquaintance with Ira Davenport, thought that he might have got some power from him.

I will never say anything unkind of him, but I may dis-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

cuss the general question of his powers when I have more leisure.

We should welcome your kind offer of my father's sketch book. It is most generous of you.

Yours very sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

P.S. The only Houdini return utterance which seemed to me to have some sign of truth was from Mr. Burr, of Rochester, who has probably written to you. He said in it that there was no compact or test cypher as between me and Houdini. This is true & it was stated otherwise in the press, so that it read as if the message might be correct.

If your test sentence represents an idea you may get it. If it represents meaningless words or a collection of figures or letters you can hardly hope for it. They work by conveying ideas thro' the medium's brain, but it is much more difficult—nearly impossible—to get a mere symbol.

By the way Zancig, in Washington, had a Danish sentence which was to be the test with his first wife. He has now received that sentence which has quite converted him. I was wondering whether you could not get into touch with the same medium. It would be a great day for all of us, and, I believe, for him also, when you could say to the world "My doubts are gone. I have most undoubtedly had my message."

And as a sort of postscript, Sir Arthur wrote in a subsequent letter:

1927.

Dear Mrs. Houdini:—

I have just been re-reading your letter, and am much impressed by the beauty of it. He was fortunate to have such devotion.

If I have been rather restive under H's handling of the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

psychic question, you will understand, from the enclosed letter (typical of others), which I have had. Please burn it when read. It goes out of my memory.

I am going to see one or two mediums in the immediate future, and will let you know if I get results. If it is a sentiment you will get it. If it is a cypher, which means nothing, you will never get it.

With our affectionate regard.

A. CONAN DOYLE.

over

We *do* meet in sleep, so it may have been that, when he woke as you describe, speaking of his mother, there was in his subconscious mind some reflection of the switched-off actual interview.

The "enclosed letter" referred to by Sir Arthur was the following, which had been written him just before Houdini's death:

Oct. 21st, '26.

My dear Sir Arthur:

I trust you will forgive me writing you, but I feel that I am justified in doing so. I have only just returned from seeing the celebrated illusionist—Houdini, at the Princess Theatre here in Montreal, and it is of this I am writing you. I feel that you should know of the remarks passed about you and your beliefs. During the latter part of his programme, Houdini spoke of fraudulent mediums and demonstrated how they deceive the victims. After his demonstration he set aside a period for questions, and it was during this time that I took strong exception to his remarks. The inevitable question was asked—"how was it that such eminent men as yourself thought it worth while to study psychic phenomena." His reply was grossly insolent, insofar that he spoke of you as being just a "writer of detective stories,"

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and eaten up with but one subject. Furthermore he said you were no different from the ordinary man—intellectually that you were not a scientist—and acted like a “big school boy” at a conference in New York. He also stated you would believe anything—and the contemptuous manner in which he passed this remark was exceedingly unfair.

And now I come to the more important part. As a final retort he said he wished you were there in front of him. He would “tear you to ribbons.” Obviously he was taking advantage of the distance between London & Montreal. As these remarks were passed publicly, before a large crowd, I think it only right you should know of them. I was crowded down when I indignantly objected—he had the crowd with him. I felt I could not let this go without remark, since it might hurt your reputation here in Montreal. I could not tolerate the unfair and insolent manner in which he described you.

I shall be extremely glad if you will acknowledge this letter, so that I may know you received it safely.

Yours very sincerely,

JAMES P. CLARKE.

To this Mrs. Houdini hastened to reply:

January 12, 1927.

My dear Sir Arthur:—

I am indeed glad you read my letter as I wished you to. Again I want to tell you that, no matter what I read about my dear one, it could not cause me pain.

You know now that Houdini was a fine and good man; I have known it always. That his views were different, we knew. He did honestly try to get results, but failed. Referring to the letter from a Mr. Clarke, whenever Houdini spoke of you, it was with the greatest respect. The very worst thing he ever said against you was that you were credulous. He

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

would tell the audience that you were angry with him—his words were “not for what I said, but for what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was told I said.”

How terribly distorted a phrase may become! Mr. Clarke's next “important part” (?) is that Houdini wished you were there, so he would tear you to ribbons! That is too ridiculous for words. What Houdini did say, not only at that performance, but all—“I can tear all books on Spiritualism to pieces,” meaning he could (as he thought) refute them. Houdini's two secretaries took short-hand notes at every performance (in view of our many law suits), so I can give proof positive *re* his speeches.

I have heard Houdini tell a man, during the open forum, who asked “are all spiritualists crazy? Is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle crazy?”—“All spiritualists are not crazy. You do not have to be a spiritualist to be crazy, and I wish I were as sane as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.” No doubt you will hear many stories. The reporters are ever at my door. I know if I say “boo,” they will print “boo boo,” so I don't see them, but send them to my attorney, Mr. B. M. L. Ernst (whom you perhaps remember: he is now President of the Society of American Magicians and a wonderful man, also one of your greatest admirers and defenders. I will send you his address. I am sure you would be well repaid by sending him a line) and he tells the reporters just what he thinks of you.

My dear friends, if only you knew how my heart yearns to hear the precious message from my beloved,—it must be as he says, though. I have obeyed him all our life together. I will obey him in death. How strange it is, I have been reading his beautiful letters to me, and in all he signs himself, “yours in this life, in the next, and ever with you.”

I have taken a liberty with your beautiful Christmas card (for which I thank you very much).

In Sing Sing prison, a man [the late Charles Chapin, two volumes of whose correspondence have been published.—

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Ed.] (at one time a well-known Editor of a New York paper) had been sentenced for life. He committed a murder, some ten years ago. He killed the woman he loved devotedly, his wife, whom he wanted to spare all the ugliness of poverty; he tried to die himself, but failed. I knew his sad story, and Houdini was his very dear friend. I correspond with this man frequently, but as the subject of his wife is a most delicate one, I refrain to speak of her, but the message on the card seemed to fit him. I sent him the card, with a note telling him from whom I received it, asking if he could read a message of forgiveness and condolence.

I am sure you will also forgive me sending it, as that poor lonesome soul will surely get from that message what his hungry heart looks for, and we, you two dear people and I, will be rewarded in the happiness it gives him.

I am sending you the book of Dr. Charles Doyle. It is beautiful, and Houdini always intended to present it to you, that was the one thing in his huge library that was sacred and marked "not to be sold at any price." I am doubly glad to send it, as the thought of having had it hawked about after my death was repulsive.

I find it is more a collection of letters, but the letters are so beautifully sketched and you will find, as Houdini did, many beautiful forms of angels. My great grief is that my dear one was called before he himself could give it. When next I go to my dear one's last resting place, I will place a flower there for you.

My love to all of you,

B. H.

In answer to this letter, Sir Arthur wrote:

Jan. 23, '27.

My dear Mrs. Houdini:

The book has arrived and filled me with surprise. It is beautiful and will mean much to the family, but it really

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

seems like a series of miracles,—first that it should exist still, then that it should cross the Atlantic and finally that it should come back to me. I accept it as a peace-offering from your husband, and thank him as well as you.

There is, after death, a period of complete rest which varies in different cases. When H. has emerged from this, I am quite sure, knowing his determined character, that he will get back to you. I wish you would find out the medium from whom Zancig got the test from his wife. I wish also that you would get an interview with the gentleman whose name I enclose. Send him my card, but write as Mrs. H.—no name. Mediums always, if they are honest, get better results when they know nothing of their clients. When you go, tell him nothing save that you would be glad of any help you can get. He is an amateur and a nice fellow with good honest gifts. Please remember me to Mr. Ernst. I have not forgotten him.

Yours very cordially,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

It is evident from the preceding letter that Mrs. Houdini had been trying various mediums, in an endeavor to obtain some authentic “message” from Houdini himself, and if possible the Code message which had been agreed upon before his death. This had not so far been obtained, but some minor “communications” of a more general character had been received, and concerning these Mrs. Houdini had written Sir Arthur. One or two of these had to some extent impressed her, and this much had been admitted. It was only natural, therefore, that Sir Arthur should have written to her, in reply to these preliminary tests:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

My dear Mrs. Houdini:—

I am most thankful that you have got so far. Now the more intimate test should come. How can we tell the difficulties & disabilities upon the other side? He may say afterwards "Why, you might as well have asked a man on a desert island to telegraph you."

Thank you for your bravery & frankness in admitting the facts. You have now earned the fulfilment. It *may* have been a test of you.

Yours sinc.,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Mch 8, 1927.

At the same time, Sir Arthur thought it well to make it perfectly clear that no post-mortem test had been arranged between Houdini and himself, and he accordingly wrote to Mrs. Houdini:

Dear Mrs. Houdini:

There was a statement in the paper that you had said that I had some posthumous test with Houdini. I assure you this is not so. I had no such understanding.

I have had a number of letters on the subject. One from a Miss or Mrs. —, who asserts that Houdini had a presentiment that he would not return from this circuit. I wonder if this was true.

Yours sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Among his remarkable collection of miscellaneous material, Houdini had a collection of letters of all kinds—from old-time researchers, mediums, Spiritualists, etc.,—which he had picked up in the course of his travels. Many of these were in the handwriting of the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

men themselves, and of extreme rarity. Quite typical of these is the following letter from Judge Edmonds, written in 1859, regarding some sittings of his own.

Judge Edmonds was a well-known man in his day—of considerable importance and influence. He became a convert to Spiritualism, and wrote, jointly with Dr. Dexter, a voluminous work on the subject of historic interest (1853). The following hitherto unpublished letter to Mr. William D. Chapin, of Bloomfield, Wis., is of no little interest, therefore, since it embodies his views at the time, and answers some objections which had been raised by Mr. Chapin, based on the seemingly unruly character of the alleged “influences.” It runs as follows:

New York, Dec. 4, 1859.

Dear Sir:

I have met in my reading and in my experience with many cases similar to that of young Kimball which you mention, and I have become fully aware that what appears distasteful to us need not disturb us.

Let me mention some cases, for thus practically you will get an answer to your inquiries.

I read in the history of New England 160 or 170 years ago, of persons being violently seized and acting in spite of their own will in a violent manner inconsistent with their natural disposition. In such cases, in those days, they called in the Priest, who with his Latin exorcised the Devil—they called in the Doctor, who with his nostrums tried to physic the Devil out of the party possessed and, failing in that, they hung or burnt or drowned somebody for having bewitched the party. And thus the thing ended. The people did not know

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

how rationally to use what was in their midst and the manifestations had to cease.

In our day it is very different. We have the same manifestations, but we know what to do with them.

Soon after I began to look into Spiritualism I became connected with a circle to whom were introduced, as entire strangers, a Mr. and Mrs. S. Our medium was one of the Fox girls and the rappings were our mode. At one of our meetings, after the usual performances, Mrs. S. became violently agitated. She was a very modest, gentle, retiring woman and shrank from everything like notoriety or observation. But now she flew around the room as if mad. She spoke in loud tones—came up boldly to me and in a domineering manner challenged my admiration of the performance. I was inexpressibly disgusted and I said, "If that is Spiritualism I'm done with it," and I left the house.

The next day Mrs. S. visited the medium and said she had been conscious of all she had done, but could not help it. She had seen how offended I was and she would not again come to the circle, etc. The spirit however spelled out to her, "Do not stay away. We will explain it to the Judge."

When next our circle met, it was rapped out to me that they would be more gentle with Mrs. S. She was accordingly again influenced and was soon running round the room like one insane. I spoke out somewhat sternly—"Is that what you call being more gentle?" And instantly—without a moment's delay—the whole vehement manifestation ceased.

We went on with her from that time until she was fully developed as a seeing and speaking medium, and it was through her that for a period of several ensuing years I received the most of my communications, and she continued, from 1851 until her death last summer, to be one of our very best, most gentle and most reliable mediums. To that condition she was developed by judicious treatment, out of harshness as vehement as that which has attracted your attention.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

But this was not done at once. It took time. Her physical system had to become wonted to a new and extraneous influence. Her own opposition and struggles against it had to be overcome and the spirits had to learn by experiment how to use their power over her.

And her development was facilitated by the good sense of herself and husband, by their self-sacrificing disinterestedness and by a prayerful and devotional spirit in the circle.

We dealt with it without cowardice, without selfishness and with good sense, and we were rewarded by having at our command a most admirable medium, through whom came from on high many of the important truths which I have given to the world.

Suppose I had dealt with it as they did in New England in the olden time? Or suppose I had yielded to my first feeling of disgust and like one whom you mention refused to have anything to do with it? How much knowledge and happiness should I have denied to myself and others!

My daughter, who has now been for several years a very gentle and reliable medium, was when first used so vehemently handled that she broke a mahogany table to pieces with her hand.

This vehement handling seems sometimes to be a necessity at the beginning, and that necessity often springs from the struggles of the medium against the influence, and is at times resorted to in order to enable the medium to know that it is not his own mind—a matter not always an easy task with those who are not much in the habit of self-examination.

In the case of Mrs. S., whom I have mentioned, this was shown. She was not of much education and had never been taught self-examination, and with all her experience of years as a medium, she could not get rid of her doubt that it might be her own mind that was doing these things. And so the spirits, in order to remove all doubts and to thoroughly convince her, allowed an unpleasant influence to guide her,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

against which she struggled until convinced, and then it left her.

These instances will I think answer your inquiries and convince you that you have at your command an instrument for doing great good to yourselves and others and that it rests with you to do that good or omit it.

Of one thing you must be made aware, and that is, that you must not use this instrumentality for selfish or worldly purposes. If you do, you will surely be misled. You must use it solely for the good of mankind, and then you may be assured of the presence of the pure and the good ever around you. And you must use it in a spirit of prayer and submission to the will of God, for then you may be sure of divine protection against the unhappy influences which are ever around our earth and seeking to avail themselves of every opportunity of communicating with us.

You have now proffered to you an opportunity rarely accorded to anyone and everything depends on the manner in which you use it. If you treat it merely as matter of curiosity or of philosophy, you can have no assurance that it will not be disastrous; but if you treat it as matter of religion, as a revelation from on high, you will be blessed indeed and can advance on and on to a knowledge of the great truths which the grave has hitherto hidden from our sight.

Truly yours,

J. W. EDMONDS.

Wm. D. Chapin,
Bloomfield, Wis.

Mrs. Houdini had evidently offered Sir Arthur a number of letters of this character, and, in writing to thank her for her offer, in July, 1927, he had written:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

It is very generous of you to offer me those letters, which of course would be appreciated, but I really think you should read my article about Houdini's powers before you make me presents. But you know that I (I should say "we") have every respect for you personally, and for him also, so long as he does not stand in the way of the most important thing upon earth, which is to *prove* immortality. . . .

The letters were sent, however, and in writing his thanks for these Sir Arthur said:

Dear Mrs. Houdini:

I thank you heartily for the letters. I can see that they are of great interest, but have not had time to examine them closely.

I hope to have some psychic news for you presently. Mr. McKenzie of the College got in touch, as he believes, with Houdini thro' a trance medium, Mrs. Garrett. I will have a sitting as soon as I can possibly arrange it. According to the McKenzie message, H. was still rather clouded in his mind, which is natural enough after the physical change. As he clears, the messages should clear.

Yours sincerely,

Sept. 2, 1927.

A. CONAN DOYLE.

And then followed one of those generous, whole-souled messages so typical of Conan Doyle in life:

Dear Mrs. Houdini:

I should like to send a message of good will upon the occasion of the unveiling of your husband's monument. All differences must be suspended at such a time. He was a great master of his profession and, in some ways, the most remarkable man I have ever known.

Yours sincerely,

Oct. 14, 1927.

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

It was about this time that Mrs. Houdini was trying out her new illusion for vaudeville—a man frozen in a solid block of ice—and she wrote to Sir Arthur, describing it in some detail. A curious coincidence had also occurred: a mirror had broken in her home, for no apparent cause, and the idea occurred to her that this might possibly be some “manifestation”—some sign from Houdini, inasmuch as mirrors do *not* usually break without some good reason for their doing so. She wrote to Sir Arthur concerning the incident, and he replied:

Dear Mrs. Houdini:

I wish you every possible success with your new act. It sounds very marvellous—and a little dangerous—but that no doubt is just the attraction. May all go well. I shall be anxious.

I think the mirror incident shows every sign of being a message. After all such things don't happen elsewhere. No mirror has ever broken in this house. Why should yours do so? And it is just the sort of energetic thing one could expect from him, if for some reason he could not get his message. Supposing our view of the future is true, is it not possible that the Powers might for a time forbid him to use those gifts which he was foremost in his lifetime in denying? But you will get your test. I feel convinced of that.

Once more, all best wishes,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

Feb. 12, 1928.

Though Houdini had now passed into the Great Beyond, Sir Arthur's interest in him still continued,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and his admiration for his remarkable qualities also continued to live—as manifested in the articles he wrote about Houdini after the latter's death. In a letter written June 20th, 1928, Sir Arthur said:

I have been writing a little monograph upon your wonderful husband (whatever view one takes of the origin of his powers, they are equally wonderful). . . . Every detail about him and his remarkable powers is of deep interest to me . . .

As we know, Doyle subsequently published a lengthy article upon Houdini, in which he embodied his own views of some of the things Houdini did, in his *Edge of the Unknown*. He also continued to seek some authentic "message" from Houdini, through one medium and then another, partly because of his own interest in such a message, and partly, no doubt, that he might be enabled to send the message, if received, to Mrs. Houdini. Writing some time later, regarding these trials, Sir Arthur said:

Dear Mrs. Houdini:

I can report two recent cases of interest. In the first, a friend of mine, Mrs. Stobart, had a message from a stranger. The message was that Houdini desired to send a message to Mrs. Stobart,—that she should go to a medium, and that a bunch of roses would be the sign that it really was Houdini who was speaking. She went accordingly to Mrs. Barkel (who had not been specially recommended). When Mrs. Barkel went into trance she said "there is a spirit here who desires to send a message, and carries a bunch of red flowers as a sign." No name was given, and then another power broke in and

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

the first message was never given. But it struck me that the red flowers in themselves might possibly mean something.

In the other case, several messages came through to me, purporting to be from him, but nothing that convinced me. He finally was supposed to say, "I am not developed enough yet over here to get difficult tests through, but I have attracted my wife's attention by sounds & other signs of my presence, but there is an atmosphere of doubt & fear around her which is hard to penetrate." I give this for what it is worth.

A. C. D.

This was the last letter written by Sir Arthur to Mrs. Houdini of which there is any record. It is quite possible that other letters were exchanged between them, of which no copies were kept—and indeed the contents of some of the letters indicate this. But the above will at least serve to illustrate the continued interest of Sir Arthur in Houdini, even after the latter's death, and will show how anxious he was to secure any possible trace of evidence as to Houdini's continued persistence and potential "communications." They are also profoundly interesting historic documents, as illustrating the fine, high-spirited character which everyone acknowledged was Sir Arthur's. Whatever view one may hold as to his personal beliefs, there can be no doubt as to his sincerity, his earnestness, and his upright, generous, manly spirit. And what, after all, is so worthy, so admirable? Whether or no one may happen to agree with a man's personal beliefs concerning some particular subject, is this after all the essential

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

thing? Is not the attainment of a fine, sympathetic, generous character the greatest aim and end of life? However erroneous a man's beliefs may be, these would not in the least detract from his personal qualities; and when, in addition, that man's beliefs are true—as many thousands believe them to be—he would represent for them, also, a splendid, fearless champion, fighting for a worthy and vitally important Cause. There are many who regard him in this light; but even those who could not accept his beliefs must acknowledge the sterling quality of his personality and the high-mindedness of his ideals. A little less than four years after Houdini's death, this vital personality also passed through the Last Door which ever opens,—facing the end, as he wrote to Mr. Ernst, “with perfect equanimity.”

CHAPTER TEN

IN HIS capacity as the President of the Parent Assembly of the Society of American Magicians, and as the friend and attorney of both Houdini and Doyle, it was only natural that Mr. Bernard M. L. Ernst should correspond with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle upon a variety of topics concerning psychical phenomena, and, when he became the owner of Houdini's Diaries, letters and personal documents of all kinds, he naturally again resumed the correspondence, and a number of letters of extreme interest passed between them. Mr. Ernst had met Sir Arthur years before, and in one of his early letters, in which he thanked Mr. Ernst for a memorandum sent him ("I have never read, if I may say so, a clearer statement"), he recalled an evening they had spent: "It was a pleasant evening that we had together, tho' poor Houdini had needles instead of a liqueur."

A year or two later a movie-film was made, showing the tricks of fraudulent mediums, entitled "Was

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Conan Doyle Right?" Thinking that perhaps Sir Arthur might wish to stop the film, on account of his name's being used in connection with it, Mr. Ernst wrote to him, explaining the matter, and asking him what he wished done about it. The answer was wholly unexpected—though perhaps not wholly so, either, for one who knew the man. His answer was:

Dear Mr. Ernst:

Very many thanks. But if this film is warning people against fakers it is doing good work. I would help it—not hinder.

All remembrance,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

That was in 1923. The correspondence was renewed again some five years later—after Houdini's death. Much had happened during those five years. Houdini had launched his campaign against fake mediums, lecturing throughout the country, making arrests, giving demonstrations of the possibilities of trick methods on the public platform. Death had claimed him in October, 1926. During those same years, Conan Doyle had similarly increased his activities in the opposite direction, writing and lecturing constantly, in his endeavor to spread the Gospel of Spiritualism, and stimulate the public interest and belief in this subject. Both men threw themselves into their self-appointed tasks with characteristic energy, and neither spared time, money or effort in attempts to propagate the

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

Truth—as he conceived it—of his own ideas and beliefs.

Almost immediately after his death, it became known that Houdini had left a code message with his wife, which, if given correctly through some medium, would be the final proof of his return and actual “communication.” Within the next few months, a number of mediums claimed to have received messages from Houdini—all of which, upon examination, turned out to be completely wide of the mark, and to bear no resemblance whatever to the message actually devised by Houdini before his death. Later, Arthur Ford, of New York, claimed to have received the actual code message, and at first Mrs. Houdini was evidently under the impression that something had been obtained startlingly like the original. Further inquiry, however, evidently caused her to change her mind, and to reject its authenticity, for she issued a statement on March 19th, 1930, in which she asserted that “for three years she had sought to penetrate beyond the grave and communicate with her husband, but had now renounced faith in such a possibility: she denied that any of the mediums presented the clew by which she was to recognize a legitimate message.” There are many factors in connection with this alleged “message” which remain obscure, and which may possibly never be cleared up satisfactorily; but the fact remains that, while Doyle asserted his belief in Ford’s powers, and suggested that

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

“this might become *the* classical case of after-death return,” Mrs. Houdini, Mr. Ernst and others intimately connected with Houdini’s affairs disclaimed its authenticity and rejected the validity of the alleged message which was said to have been obtained. And there the case rests to the present day.

Meanwhile, in letters to Mr. Ernst, Sir Arthur had communicated various items of considerable interest. Thus:

Zancig wrote to me, several years ago, to say that he had embraced Spiritualism—the reason being that he had got a message in Danish which was pre-arranged with his first wife, which came back to him through a medium who did not speak Danish. . . .

I have been looking over my old Houdini bundle of letters, and I came on two or three very beautiful ones written by Mrs. Houdini after his death. I notice one allusion to you in which, after your name, she puts “President of the Society of Magicians and a wonderful man.” . . . I write this in bed, as I have broken down badly, and have developed Angina Pectoris. So there is just a chance that I may talk it all over with Houdini himself before very long. I view the prospect with perfect equanimity. That is one thing that psychic knowledge does. It removes all fear of the future. . . . I have just read an article by Will Goldston, in which he declares Spiritualism to be a truth—and adds that Maskelyne was always of the same opinion. . . . I dislike Ford’s advertisement very much. At the same time, when I remember Houdini’s advertisements, there does seem a rough justice about it. . . . I send you a few notes which may help you. As to my own letters, use your own discretion. So long as they don’t give pain to *third* parties, I have no objection

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

to their publication. . . . Long experience has taught me that, if you don't play fair with the spirit-world, there is no more luck for you in this world. Poor H. was a conspicuous example; but I notice it continually. . . .

Shortly before his death, Sir Arthur also wrote a long letter to Mr. Harold Kellock, regarding his book, *The Life of Houdini*, and more particularly the references to himself in that book. His letter covers many points of considerable interest, and runs as follows:

19th Sept. 1929.

Dear Mr. Kellock:

I have just finished your book about Houdini, and would like to say a few words upon the subject.

First of all, I would say that I like the book very much. It is written in a nice, bright style and traces the character of the man, or some aspects of it, very clearly. Up to a point, there are few men for whom I have a greater respect. He was pure-minded, which is a noble quality in a man. He was exceedingly lovable, he was charitable and I suppose he was the bravest man in our generation. These are great points, and if there were some shadows, it was not for you, as his biographer, to dwell unduly upon them.

But now "after compliments," as the Chinese say, I want to take you to task a little. First of all, as to your remarks about Spiritualism,—I do not mean matters of opinion, for we all have a right to them, but I mean matters of fact. You make about as many errors as Houdini himself made in his book *A Magician Among the Spirits*, and I do not think that one can say more than that! However, it would take a book in itself to go over the ground and to show you where you have been mistaken, so I will confine myself to those allusions

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

which you made about me personally. There is hardly one of these which is correct, and I will take a few in their order.

First, the fairy photographs. Every sentence about these is wrong. It is true that I may have brought them in my trunk to the United States in 1922, but, to the best of my belief, I never exhibited them. Next, no photographic expert in the United States ever saw the negatives, and it is impossible to judge the veracity of the photographs without the negatives.

The negatives were, however, examined by some of the best experts in England, including the Kodak Company, none of whom found fault, while one declared he found distinct traces of motion in the figures. For many reasons the rag-doll idea, which was thoroughly explored, is an impossible one.

Next, you say the father ran a photographic studio. He was a very humble worker on an electric installation, and had nothing whatever to do with photography, save that he had a small private Kodak. Lastly, I wrote to Price, the candle makers of whom you speak, and asked them if it was true that their advertisement was claimed to be like the Yorkshire fairies. They replied that it was not true, and anyone who looks at the two pictures can see there is no resemblance. Thus, you see that every point in your account was incorrect. Why not consult my book *The Coming of the Fairies*, which gives all the facts,—none of which have been controverted? There is no doubt at all that the photographs are perfectly honest.

Now I take the Crandons. You say on Christmas morning I sat down in my study in England and wrote a defence of Margery, whom I had never seen. The Christmas morning is the only thing of truth in this sentence. My article was written in a Swiss Hotel, and I knew the Crandons, having sat in séance with Margery the year before, in London. I had before me, as I wrote, a stenographic account of every word spoken at the séance in Boston, to which you allude,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and I am perfectly certain that it was an exposure, not of Margery but of Houdini. I have not the faintest doubt, from the evidence, that it was he who played the tricks against which "Walter" so vigorously protested.

You will remember that "Walter," on that occasion, prophesied Houdini's death. In my private circle, at home, in March of that year, my wife, under spirit influence wrote, "Houdini is doomed, doomed, doomed." We were shocked and, if our prayers could have saved him, he would have had them. There was no use, however, my warning him, for what could either he or I do to turn away impending fate? I have noticed, in many cases, what a very dangerous thing it is not to play fair in these spirit matters. Honest doubt is all right, but anything like perverse opposition is to the last degree dangerous.

Now, I will take what you say about Houdini's death. So far as the prophecy goes, what the cause of the death was is quite immaterial. My remark about the alleged cause being probably apocryphal is due to the fact that, as a doctor, I should not think it possible that gangrene of the appendix could result from an outside blow of the fist. If so, one would expect many of our boxers to die in that way, since such blows are common. I have no doubt at all that Houdini died as the doctors said, but what the cause of the gangrene was is quite another matter. However, as I say, the cause of the death is immaterial. What is material is that the prophecies were fulfilled. I have never said anything about the "ectoplasmic hand."

The detail about his talk in his delirium to Robert Ingersoll was taken from one of the ordinary papers and had nothing to do with psychic gossip. I will look it up among my cuttings.

Now a few words as to the letter written by my wife, under inspiration, and purporting to come from Houdini's mother. Of course we knew about the love he bore his mother,

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

before the sitting. No doubt that was the reason why my wife, rather against her will, consented to give him a sitting at his own request. Houdini, and incidentally you in your account,—but he of course is the culprit, since you followed him,—shows complete ignorance of what inspirational mediumship is. A medium in a trance might be obsessed, and in that condition might speak a language which she did not herself normally understand, but an inspirational medium is a medium to whom emotions and thoughts are conveyed by the spirit, and who has to put it in her own way. This of course is what my wife did. I think that the letter was a very beautiful one, and I have not the least doubt that it came from the mother. Houdini entirely accepted it at the time. He sat pale and trembling, and when we met him in New York and he accompanied us aboard the steamer he said to us, "I have been walking on air ever since."

One detail which he has omitted in his account is that, in the middle of the letter, my wife paused and said "Ask your mother a question in your mind quickly." Houdini said, "Yes, I have done so." My wife wrote something down on paper and threw it across at him. He said, "Yes, that is the correct answer." You will observe in the letter that nothing which Houdini states that Mrs. Houdini told us the night before came through in the letter as one would expect to have been the case, if the letter had come from my wife's own subconscious mind.

On the other hand, why on earth should the mother in her outburst of love say it was her birthday? Both of them knew that, and there was nothing whatever to be gained. On page 155 of his book, Houdini makes the shocking confession that, while we were putting ourselves out to console him, he in cold blood was laying a trap for us. Personally, I do not believe that he did anything so base, and I think that he made this confession simply because he could see no other way to explain the fact that he wrote down the word Powell,—that

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

being the name of the one man on the other side who might wish to communicate with me. He said in his book in italics, "I wrote the name 'Powell' entirely on my own accord." That would be a shocking confession, if true. It would show that he was faking, while we were in earnest, exactly as he faked with the Crandons, while they were in earnest. It leaves a dark shadow in my mind when I think of it.

Just one more point. I notice that you go through the cipher used by the Houdini's in their act. I have seen it stated in the papers that this accounts for Ford getting a posthumous message. This, however, I am sure you realize, is not correct. It was not the cipher that formed the test, but it was the message which was written in the cipher, and Ford could not have got that out of your book. As to the general mistakes, I will not go into them for I have troubled you quite enough with this long criticism. I think, however, that you may take the words "An unsolved mystery" off your cover. It is I who have solved the mystery of Houdini and I have no more doubt that he used psychic powers than I have that I am dictating this letter. Surely you cannot in your own mind seriously believe that, when a man's two hands are padlocked four feet away from each other, he can use a picklock in order to free himself, or that there is any normal way in which a man can get out of a paper bag unbroken or out of a sealed glass tank?

I am sending this by my friend Ernst, for I think the contents would interest him.

If you ever come to England, I should be glad to have a chat.

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

It would be only fair to publish this letter—or the corrections, in any further edition of the book—or in the press.

Replying to this letter, Mr. Kellock wrote:

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

November 25th, 1929.

Dear Sir Arthur:—

I wish to thank you, somewhat belatedly, for your most amiable letter on my biography of Houdini. Indeed, you write in such a courteous spirit that it is difficult to disagree with you in any respect. I realize now that the impatient-tempered Houdini was under a great handicap, in his various controversies with you, and I can the better appreciate the many expressions of affection for you that were found among his papers.

I am afraid that we disagree about some matters of fact, as well as matters of interpretation. Such differences hardly afford a common ground for discussion. I do wish, however, to apologize for stating in my book that you had never seen Margery, now that you have assured me that you had a séance with her a year before her sessions with Houdini. I took my information from Houdini's papers, and regret my error. In the case of the fairy photographs, I wrote from a number of press clippings found among Houdini's papers.

In regard to the letter written by Lady Doyle from Houdini's mother, may I suggest that I do not believe that Houdini was laying a trap for you? He was in a difficult position, surely. I gather from his diary and other writings that he was thoroughly convinced of Lady Doyle's sincerity, and of yours, and was deeply touched by your tenderness, but he could not bring himself to believe the message was genuine. The situation presented a delicate problem to him. Perhaps he could have handled it better. Probably I could have presented the incident more tactfully. I certainly could not ignore it; but I greatly regret that my treatment of it has troubled you.

I do not anticipate another edition of the book, but, if one appears, I shall request the publishers to embody your letter in it, or to admit corrections of errors of fact. Meanwhile, both the publisher and I would be glad to have you make

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

your letter to me public, in your own way, if you so desire. Ernst is also agreeable to this.

I observe that your *Sherlock Holmes* is again appearing—this time in the cinema—throughout our country, and that Gillette is about to give a revival on the stage in New York. Holmes is a persistent character. He, at least, is a spirit who seems to have no difficulty in returning to earth!

Sincerely,

HAROLD KELLOCK.

Sir Arthur's reply to Mr. Kellock is characteristic:

Dec. 9th, 1929.

Dear Mr. Kellock:

Many thanks for your kindly letter. I am greatly interested in all that you say about Houdini. I seem to have become a kind of clearing-house for Houdini information. Mr. Ernst has been most kind and helpful.

I have written a little pamphlet, expounding my reasons for thinking that Houdini had mediumistic powers, as the Davenport's undoubtedly had, and that he used them upon the stage. My reasoning is cumulative, coming from many quarters, and all pointing to the same end, though he was most clever about the use of trick boxes and so on, in concealing the true source of his powers. Finally, he became so careless that he would do it in any old box—which, of course, shows that the trick boxes were camouflage.

Of course, I agree with you that Houdini was not trying to deceive me, when he wrote the name Powell. It was genuine, but, in order to escape the inference that he was himself the medium he undoubtedly was, he put forward the excuse that he was trying to trick me. He says so himself in this book.

I foresee that a great literature is going to rise up about

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

this man, and think your book will always be an authority upon the subject.

With best wishes,

Your sincerely,

A. CONAN DOYLE.

It is very evident from these letters that Sir Arthur had gradually become more and more convinced, in his own mind, that Houdini possessed supernormal powers—in spite of the constant disclaimers on Houdini's part that he possessed any such powers. Mr. Gibson's book, *Houdini's Escapes*, should certainly go far toward proving that everything which Houdini did was accomplished by purely natural means, and he was certainly sincere in his disclaimers. It is true that certain odd incidents occurred in his life, but these he was always inclined to "explain away" by that blessed word—*coincidence!* Thus, he narrated to the editors of this book how he saw a vivid apparition of his mother, the very night she died—he being in Germany at the time, and she in New York. (He was quite unaware of her illness.) This he acknowledged as really happening, but he put it down to coincidence—quite ignoring the fact that "coincidences" of the type had long since been mathematically proved far too numerous to account for in this manner. Again, when he and Mrs. Houdini were performing their mind-reading act, years before, so many strange "coincidences" occurred, in connection with the answers given in reply to the

questions asked, that they began to think there was something "uncanny" about it, and decided to give it up for that reason. Incidents such as these would seem to indicate that Conan Doyle was possibly right in his belief that Houdini possessed some psychic power, perhaps unknown to himself—but *that*, of course, is a totally different thing from believing that he made his escapes from boxes and packing cases by "dematerializing" out of them! All his *physical* escapes were unquestionably due to clever trickery, resourcefulness and skill, and to nothing else. There is a great difference between occasional psychic impressions of a genuine character and physical miracles, dependent upon the actual dematerialization of the performer's body!

It is also true that Houdini sometimes had a provoking way of performing seemingly "impossible" feats, and refusing to disclose afterwards how he had accomplished them. Mr. Ernst vividly remembers how Houdini once produced a series of extraordinary table-levitations, in good light, which puzzled him exceedingly, and for which he could never find an adequate explanation. Houdini refused to tell how he had succeeded in producing them. He was constantly doing things of that sort. One of the most striking cases of this character was a "test" which Houdini gave to Sir Arthur and Mr. Ernst—for the former's especial benefit—in his own home, some years before his death. It was certainly a most extraordinary and inexplicable

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

feat, and Houdini positively refused to tell how he had accomplished it. It was as follows:

Houdini produced what appeared to be an ordinary slate, some eighteen inches long by fifteen inches high. In two corners of this slate, holes had been bored, and through these holes wires had been passed. These wires were several feet in length, and hooks had been fastened to the other ends of the wires. The only other accessories were four small cork balls (about three-quarters of an inch in diameter), a large ink-well filled with white ink, and a table-spoon.

Houdini passed the slate to Sir Arthur for examination. He was then requested to suspend the slate in the middle of the room, by means of the wires and hooks, leaving it free to swing in space, several feet distant from anything. In order to eliminate the possibility of electrical connections of any kind, Sir Arthur was asked to fasten the hooks over anything in the room which would hold them. He hooked one over the edge of a picture-frame, and the other on a large book, on a shelf in Houdini's library. The slate thus swung free in space, in the center of the room, being supported by the two wires passing through the holes in its upper corners. The slate was inspected and cleaned.

Houdini now invited Sir Arthur to examine the four cork balls in the saucer. He was told to select any one he liked, and, to show that they were free from

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

preparation, to cut it in two with his knife, thus verifying the fact that they were merely solid cork balls. This was accordingly done. Another ball was then selected, and, by means of the spoon, was placed in the white ink, where it was thoroughly stirred round and round, until its surface was equally coated with the liquid. It was then left in the ink to soak up as much liquid as possible. The remaining balls Sir Arthur took away with him for examination, at Houdini's request.

At this point, Houdini turned to Sir Arthur, and said: "Have you a piece of paper in your pocket upon which you can write something?" The latter stated that he had, also a pencil. Houdini then said to him: "Sir Arthur, I want you to go out of the house, walk anywhere you like, as far as you like in any direction; then write a question or sentence on that piece of paper; put it back in your pocket and return to the house." Sir Arthur walked three blocks and turned a corner before he wrote upon the paper,—doing so in the palm of his hand. He then folded the paper, placed it in an inside pocket, and returned to Houdini's home. Meanwhile, Houdini had kept Mr. Ernst with him, in order to see that he did not leave the house.

Upon Sir Arthur's return, Houdini requested him to stir up the cork ball once more in the white ink, and then to lift it, by means of the spoon, and hold it up against the suspended slate. He did so, and the cork

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

ball *stuck* there, seemingly of its own volition! It then proceeded to roll across the surface of the slate, leaving a white track as it did so. As the ball rolled, it was seen to be spelling words. The words written on the slate were: "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin." The cork ball then dropped to the floor, and Houdini invited Sir Arthur to take it home with him, if he so desired. Sir Arthur extracted the piece of paper from his pocket, and upon it he had written, "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin." The message written upon the slate was therefore an exact copy of the message which Sir Arthur had written upon the paper.

Both witnesses were completely nonplussed and unable to explain what they had seen. Houdini then turned to Conan Doyle and said to him: "Sir Arthur, I have devoted a lot of time and thought to this illusion; I have been working at it, on and off, all winter. I won't tell you how it was done, but I can assure you it was pure trickery. I did it by perfectly normal means. I devised it to show you what can be done along these lines. Now, I beg of you, Sir Arthur, do not jump to the conclusion that certain things you see are necessarily 'supernatural,' or the work of 'spirits,' just because you cannot explain them. This is as marvellous a demonstration as you have ever witnessed, given you under test conditions, and I can assure you that it was accomplished by trickery and by nothing else. Do, therefore, be careful in future, in endorsing phenomena

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

just because you cannot explain them. I have given you this test to impress upon you the necessity of caution, and I sincerely hope that you will profit by it. . . .”

Sir Arthur, certainly, was completely baffled by what he had seen, and Mr. Ernst was also quite unable to explain it. The miracle of the writing was one thing; how Houdini had managed to obtain a knowledge of the contents of the written message was another. The conditions seemed fraud-proof. Sir Arthur came to the conclusion that Houdini really accomplished the feat by psychic aid, and could not be persuaded otherwise. . . . Mr. Ernst made a suggestion: he said, “Well, Houdini, you could settle the matter very definitely, one way or the other, by disclosing either to Sir Arthur, or to me, just how the feat was accomplished.” This, however, Houdini refused to do, and there the matter rested. What is one to think of this extraordinary occurrence? Bearing in mind all the details of the illusion, it seems indeed incredible that it could have been accomplished by means of simple trickery; and yet few people, we imagine, would seriously consider the possibility of its being anything else! Houdini was constantly doing things of this sort, and his refusal to disclose the secret of his methods must have been thoroughly tantalizing to those who were half-inclined to believe that what he did was really genuine, and that he merely refused to admit the fact. There are many, doubtless, who will feel as Sir Arthur felt, while sceptics

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

will see in all this nothing more than an ingenious illusion. All this happened years ago . . . and the mystery of that slate-test remains as great a mystery as ever!

Was Houdini entirely sincere in his attitude—in his scepticism and in his persistent refusal to acknowledge the reality of psychic phenomena? Some psychic students have rather questioned this; those who knew Houdini intimately strongly uphold his complete sincerity. That he was dogged and persistent no one denies. His attitude toward the “Margery” case forces this question upon us perhaps more forcibly than any other incident in his career. He was violently antipathetic, as everyone knows, and asserted that he “could” have exposed her—though, as a matter of fact, no actual exposure was effected. He quarreled with Mr. Bird about the case, and subsequently published a small booklet entitled *Houdini Exposes the Tricks of the Boston Medium Margery*, which was lavishly distributed. It is highly probable that the reading public, and magicians generally, accept this pamphlet as representing with one-hundred per cent of accuracy, what occurred at those historic séances. Without discussing dubious incidents, and leaving personalities entirely out of consideration—and without the editors in any sense setting themselves up as judges of the intricate evidence in the Margery case—the fact remains that some of Houdini’s statements, and some of his illustra-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

tions, are certainly open to further examination. Thus, his illustration (Fig. 1), reproduced on Page 6 of his pamphlet, is entirely unlike the conditions, shown by the photograph taken at the time by the Crandon Circle (v. p. 418, *Margery the Medium*). Houdini's explanation as to the ringing of the bell in the Bell-box (p. 25 of his pamphlet) had occurred to one of the present editors, and actual measurements of the chair and apparatus by him showed that this manœuvre seemed impossible. In other words, Houdini had apparently imagined that certain phenomena *might possibly* have been produced in certain ways, and then proceeded to assert dogmatically that they *were* actually so produced. This is a perfectly understandable foible of the human mind, but can hardly be classed as scientific accuracy. Again, on a certain occasion, a folding ruler was found in the cabinet in which Margery was encased. Houdini accused Margery of having concealed it there; Margery accused Houdini of the same thing! Naturally, a violent controversy ensued, in which personalities were involved. Those who knew Houdini could not believe him guilty of such an action; those who knew Margery could not believe her guilty of it either. The only alternative, to which many were driven, was that some third person had placed the ruler in the cabinet, or that it had been left in it accidentally, on some previous occasion. This is one of those difficult cases in which personal factors are largely in-

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

volved, and in which "outsiders" can hardly be expected to come to any definite conclusion. This would depend upon their training, experience, point of view and knowledge of the facts and personalities involved. Two sharply defined opinions concerning this case, therefore, continue to exist, and it is not the duty of the present editors to decide between them. We can only hope that future experimentation will settle the matter one way or the other!

There are many who believe that both Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Houdini were right in their attitudes toward psychic phenomena—and that both of them were also wrong! That Sir Arthur was right in his acceptance of the reality of certain psychic manifestations, and that Houdini was right in his exposures of fraudulent mediums; that Sir Arthur was wrong in his wholesale acceptance of Spiritualism, and that Houdini was wrong in his wholesale rejection of it. Personalities, prejudice, emotionalism and vituperation should be rigidly excluded from investigations such as these,—which require the most calm, judicial, level-headed and impartial analysis. This and this alone will ultimately arrive at the truth—whatever that may prove to be—as in all other scientific inquiry, and extreme partisan pleading will probably only serve to hinder, rather than to help, the ultimate attainment of this truth.

All this, however, it must be admitted, is an ideal;

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

and both Conan Doyle and Houdini were human beings, with strong feelings and convictions. They therefore presented their utterly divergent viewpoints as forcibly as possible. Both men, perhaps, were at times somewhat unduly over-confident and dogmatic. Both were certain that they were right. Both were special pleaders for their Cause. A brilliant lawyer once remarked: "Socrates was a great man, but I would not give him a job in my law office!" He saw both sides of every problem too clearly; he was no special pleader; he probably would not win his case in court! Nevertheless, in all scientific inquiry, this rigid impartiality is the greatest of all assets, and this attitude of mind is the one which is most likely to arrive at ultimate truth. Neither Doyle nor Houdini followed this method exclusively; they represented opposite camps, and propagated their views with all the virile enthusiasm of their natures. Under these circumstances, it was hardly possible that they could ever have arrived at any mutual understanding or similarity of viewpoint. Their paths were bound to become more and more divergent as they proceeded.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, in view of these facts, that their mutual respect, admiration and almost affection for one another should have continued for so long under these circumstances; that Conan Doyle and Houdini should have corresponded as they did, and that their relationship should have

HOUDINI AND CONAN DOYLE

continued so cordial for so long a time. That this was the case is evidenced by their letters, and even more by the remarks of each man concerning the other in private conversation. It was assuredly one of the most remarkable friendships in history—uniting two manly, courageous, vital souls into a warm, personal relationship, despite the diametrically opposed characters of their minds and their radically different viewpoints. The Doyle-Houdini correspondence undoubtedly constitutes a series of fascinating historic documents, bringing to light not only many interesting facts in connection with the history of Spiritualism, but also the lights and shadows of the personalities of the men themselves. It was one of the strangest friendships of which we have any record, and the story of it will serve to illumine the thoughts and lives of these two strong, strange men—Conan Doyle and Houdini.

THE END

Houdini took Doyle to banquets of the Society of American Magicians; Doyle thought Houdini did his tricks by supernatural power; the magicians were puzzled by the movies of prehistoric monsters in Doyle's *Lost World*.

Finally, Lady Doyle, Sir Arthur's wife, got a "message" in "automatic writing" from Houdini's mother. It was only when Houdini found himself unable to believe in the reality of this message (though he had no doubt of Lady Doyle's sincerity) that a break did come. Shortly after, Houdini died; Doyle followed soon. Perhaps they have become intimate again; who knows?

This story of their friendship is told by Bernard M. L. Ernst, Houdini's attorney and close friend, president of the Society of American Magicians, and Hereward Carrington, well-known as a leading psychic investigator, author of *The Story of Psychic Science*, and friend of both Doyle and Houdini.

THE STORY OF MEDICINE

Victor Robinson, M. D.

WITH rare skill and unflagging vigor the author points out that technical progress is not necessarily the antidote for credulity or stupidity. The era in which the circulation of the blood was demonstrated, and the microscope revealed a new world to man, was also the era of the witch-hunt. The nation which produced Newton, master-worker in light, also produced legislators who put a tax on windows in tenement, poor-house and prison—with the result that "Blocked up every window to lessen the burden of the window-tax," became a familiar phrase.

The bulk of the volume naturally deals with the progress of scientific medicine, but much space is devoted to magic, superstition, and the Golden Age of Quackery, including the mysteries of Mesmerism. Because of its importance in medical history, the gruesome story of the body-snatchers or Resurrection-Men is told in considerable detail. Although written for the public, the author of the book realizes that "the Victorian age of literature" is past, and he has discussed in a frank manner the social significance of venereal disease and prostitution.

Among the hundreds of characters who come and go in this ever-moving panorama throughout the ages, the following are representative:

HIPPOCRATES [460—370 B. C.]

The Father of Medicine who created rational medicine by demonstrating that disease is not dependent upon supernatural causes.

GALEN [130—200 A. D.]

The Father of Anatomy who was never permitted by the blood-thirsty Romans to dissect a human cadaver.

RHAZES [860—932]

The Persian whose separation of Smallpox and Measles is a landmark in clinical medicine.

ROGER BACON [c. 1214—1294]

The Franciscan monk who visualized the Machine Age, and even anticipated the x-ray.

VESALIUS [1514—1564]

The Belgian whose scalpel opened up the era of modern medicine.

HARVEY [1578—1657]

The Italian-taught Englishman who modernized physiology by his demonstration of the circulation of the blood.

HUNTER [1728—1793]

The hot-headed biologic Titan of his time, whose researches raised surgery from a technique to a science.

JENNER [1749—1823]

The country-doctor whose ivory scarifier wiped out the never-absent plague which in the eighteenth century alone destroyed sixty million human beings.

MENDEL [1822—1884]

The Augustinian who planted peas in his cloister-garden and became the father of genetics.

PASTEUR [1822—1895]

The chemist who dreamed of the Diseaseless Future and became the Father of Preventive Medicine.

LISTER [1827—1912]

The Quaker who showed that pus is neither laudable nor necessary, and ushered in the Era of Antiseptic Surgery.

FREUD [1856—]

The Jewish physician who established the Confessional in comparison with which the auricular confession of the Church is child