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## PARALLEL LIVES

The lights were low, the music soft as the audience settled into their seats in the largest building in Garnett, Kansas, that cold Sunday night in November 1897. They were there to see a travelling variety show whose star attraction the local *Evening Review* had hailed as “the World Famous Medium” who, the paper noted, “has been prevailed upon by popular request of the public to give a Spiritualistic séance . . . Pianos will float over the head of the audience, tables will be levitated by unseen hands, messages will appear,” the report added, a prospect sufficient for 1,034 customers to pack the plush, vaguely Romanesque Opera House to the rafters—an impressive turnout in a farm town of only 6,000 inhabitants.

Harry Houdini did not disappoint them. Bounding on stage, the wiry, tousle-haired twenty-three-year-old, dressed in ill-fitting tails, was able both to produce the promised psychic phenomena, and to reveal certain disquieting personal details about members of the audience, including the news that one well-known businessman who was present was “cruelly neglecting to tend his own mother’s grave” despite enjoying “many merry excursions with [his] lovely secretary,” a charge that led the man to make a hurried departure from the hall amid some mirth from the crowd. Houdini went on to state that a young mother who was in the theater was undoubtedly thinking of her deceased baby Louise, “whom the Lord has been pleased to call at an early age.” Shielding his eyes as though squinting into the heavens, he added that “Louise and many others are here with us tonight.” The remark was greeted by “audible gasps,” the paper reported. After more in this vein, Houdini announced that he would conclude the performance by unmasking the murderer

of a local woman named Sadie Timmins. “We propose to contact our friends and ancestors on the other side,” he went on. “You cannot hide a nefarious deed from the spirits, and Mademoiselle Beatrice, a trained psychometric clairvoyant, will assist me.” At that Houdini was joined on stage by Mlle Beatrice, in reality his twenty-one-year-old wife Bess, a petite brunette from Brooklyn who was clad in a lace wedding dress. Bess sat down in a chair and Houdini tied a blindfold around her head, the better “to concentrate her energy and filter out extraneous vibrations.”

As the orchestra struck up the mournful chords of “Nearer My God to Thee,” Bess suddenly groaned and slumped forward in her chair. “She is in a trance state,” Houdini explained, always conscientious about informing his audience of exactly what they were witnessing on stage. After appealing for silence, he then began to question his wife, who answered him in an unusually low, moaning voice.

“Was Sadie Timmins murdered in her own home?”

“Yes.”

“Where did the deed occur?”

“In her kitchen.”

“With what instrumentality?”

“She was hacked . . . seventeen times . . . with a butcher knife.”

“Did she know her killer?”

“Yes.”

By this time there was something approaching a small riot in the hall. The murder of Sadie Timmins had been an especially brutal one, even by the standards of turn-of-the-century Kansas, and local emotions ran high. Suspicion had fallen on several prominent Garnett citizens, including the town’s hot-headed young lawman, Sheriff Keeney. Hysterical denunciations, screams, and sobbing drowned out Houdini’s next few remarks, and a minute or more passed before he once again turned to his wife.

“What is the killer’s name?” Houdini said it so softly that everybody fell quiet. “Answer. Now. *What is his name?*” he asked, ever more insistently.

But neither Bess, nor the spirits possessing her, would ever solve the terrible mystery of Garnett, Kansas. As Houdini repeated the question, now all but shouting in his wife’s face, Bess dramatically swooned sideways in her chair, her chin lolling onto her chest. “She’s fainted!” Houdini announced in a quavering voice, before stepping forward to the footlights with the time-honored enquiry: “Is there a doctor in the house?” The curtain fell. The next minute saw a steady crescendo in the sort of rowdy chanting and whistling normally associated in Garnett with burlesque shows, although the audience acclaim was now unmistakably tinged with

the renewed sound of women crying. Some thirty years later, Houdini was still able vividly to remember the events of that night, and even willing to reveal some of his methods. His shaming of the local businessman had owed more to diligent research than to spiritual guidance. “That Sunday morning,” Houdini recalled, “accompanied by the sexton and the oldest inhabitant of the town, we walked out to the village cemetery, and I had a notebook, and what was not [apparent] from the tombstones—any information that was lacking, the sexton would tell me the missing data, and the old Uncle Rufus would give me the scandals of everyone sleeping in God’s acre. And you can imagine my going out there and retailing that terrible stuff.” There had never been a serious prospect of Bess exposing the murderer of poor Sadie Timmins. It was “all humbug and a good presentation mixed together.” The presentation came with a mythic penumbra, too, of the sort of fictional “whodunnit” epitomized by the hugely popular cases of Sherlock Holmes. By 1900, Houdini was sometimes billed as “Sherlock Holmes Eclipsed,” and the critics and public alike routinely compared him to the legendary detective.



By the time Houdini looked back on his youthful performance in Garnett, he had long since abandoned any pretense to mystical powers. In the first paragraph of his 1924 book *A Magician among the Spirits*, he wrote, “I associated myself with mediums, joining the rank and file and hold[ing] séances as an independent medium to fathom the truth of it all. At the time I appreciated the fact that I surprised my clients, but while aware of the fact that I was *deceiving* them I did not see or understand the seriousness of trifling with such sacred sentimentality and the baneful result which inevitably followed. To me it was a lark.” A bit later in the text, Houdini added, “Spiritualism is nothing more or less than mental intoxication; intoxication of any sort when it becomes a habit is injurious to the body, but intoxication of the mind is always fatal to the mind,” before calling for a law that would “prevent these human leeches from sucking every bit of reason and common sense from their victims.”

People pretending to enjoy occult powers, if not actual communion with the dead, is a theatrical trick as old as storytelling. But in Houdini’s case there may have been more to his early Spiritualistic revues than merely a desire to separate the public from their money. In December 1885, his beloved half brother Herman had died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-two. Houdini, who was eleven, attended a series of séances, or at least what were described as “perfumed conclaves,” in a failed attempt to communicate with Herman’s spirit. Three years later, he went to

the home of a medium in Beloit, Wisconsin, where a voice purporting to be that of Abraham Lincoln could be heard echoing from a trumpet that swung across the room. The astute fourteen-year-old soon realized that the voice was produced by a hidden gramophone player, and that the trumpet was flying around on an invisible wire.

Even then, Houdini was prepared to suspend his disbelief. Two nearly identical, walrus-mustached brothers from Buffalo, New York, Ira and William Davenport, had toured the world in the 1860s and 1870s with a show whose most famous effect saw them lashed together inside a packing crate—the so-called “spirit cabinet”—that also contained musical instruments such as a tambourine, a trumpet, and a violin. Once the box was locked, the instruments would sound. When it was unlocked, the deadpan-faced brothers were found to be still securely tied in place. When the lid went down, the music started again. Sometimes the whole pantomime lasted as long as an hour. There were those who believed that supernatural forces were at play, and when reading the news reports the young Houdini declared himself “enthralled” by this “truly wonderful business.” Houdini’s brother Theo remembered him as being “a great worshipper of the Davenports” for several years into his early adulthood. Their ability to inhabit even a large wooden box while under restraint was to be the starting point for a number of Harry’s own illusions. In July 1910, Houdini made a 900-mile journey to visit Ira, by then the only surviving Davenport brother, who at this time finally felt able to reveal the secret of the “Davenport Rope-Tie” that had allowed the brothers to slip in and out of their bonds. Poignantly, the seventy-year-old Ira, although ravaged by throat cancer, wanted Houdini to join him on a new worldwide tour in which they would present the old trick, but with added twentieth-century props such as the latest police-issue steel handcuffs. Ira died before plans could be made, but, even then, Houdini was reluctant to “out” the Davenports, writing somewhat ambiguously only that, “I can make the positive assertion that [they] never were exposed.”

In October 1892, Houdini’s father Rabbi Mayer Weiss died in New York at the age of sixty-three. His eighteen-year-old son sold his own watch in order to pay for a “professional psychic reunion” with the deceased, who had left behind various debts. The medium was apparently able to materialize Rabbi Weiss, who was reluctant to dwell on earthly or financial matters, but instead assured his son that he was “very happy.” “It seemed strange to me that my father, knowing our pinched circumstances, would say any such thing,” Houdini remarked. But even then he held to the view that there were legitimate “sensitives” who could bring word from the beyond. While Houdini’s purely theatrical use of Spiritualism over the next few

years gave way to what he called “a realisation of the seriousness of toying” with the occult, he never abandoned his attempts at paranormal communication. On a six-month tour of Europe in 1920, Houdini attended more than a hundred séances, and two years later was ready to sit in a darkened Atlantic City hotel room where he was rewarded by a fifteen-page letter, channeled through a medium, apparently dictated by his late mother.



Few in Houdini’s audience that night in Garnett could have known how deeply his father and others had impressed him with their advocacy of what Rabbi Weiss called a “strict and strenuous”—and deeply traditional—Judaism. Though somewhat fitful as a breadwinner, the rabbi was widely respected as a man of letters, whom the *Volksfreund*, the weekly German-language paper in his adopted home of Appleton, Wisconsin, called “gebildeter”—“very cultured.” After he had become a global celebrity, Houdini informed a reporter that his proudest achievement was to have on file “records for five generations that my direct forefathers were students and teachers of the Bible, and recognised as among the leading scholars of their times.” Always a bibliophile, he frequently reminded audiences that his father “bequeathed me all of his texts,” before adding, “and I have read every one.” As a child, Houdini also came to appreciate that Rabbi Weiss, with his four-cornered miter and black, floor-length cassock, cut an exotic and, to some, sinister figure in rural Wisconsin, and he would encounter more virulent displays of anti-Semitism throughout his own career. When visiting Russia in 1903, for example, Houdini learned that “Hebrews” were allowed in “only with a licence, like a dog, and even then no Jews are allowed to sleep in Moscow or St. Petersburg.” Despite this and numerous other cases of harassment over the years, he kept a faith that was “profound and unquestioning,” he once remarked, if not always based on complex theological arguments. As a middle-aged man, Houdini was to tell an interviewer that he had the “utmost reverence” for the biblical texts, which he followed like a “good, willing child.” Asked by the reporter who his favorite author was, he replied, “My dad.”

While in Appleton, Houdini would also have been aware of a popular philosophy that already had a long history, some of it quite reputable, by the time he came to trifle with it professionally. Spiritualism, the premise that man’s physical shell disintegrates at death, but that his soul survives exactly as it was, only on another plane, could be traced back at least as far as the writings of the Swedish mystic-philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who claimed to have had a vision one night while dining in a London tavern. According to Swedenborg, who was

fifty-six at the time, “a darkness fell upon [my] eyes and the room changed character,” at which point a luminous figure appeared in the gloom and announced, “Do not eat too much!” The same apparition then came to Swedenborg later that night in a dream and proclaimed that he was the “Lord Jesus Christ [who] had selected me to reveal the spiritual truth of the Bible.” The result was Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia* (“Heavenly Secrets”), which appeared in eight volumes between 1749 and 1756, and whose closely argued central thesis defeated all but the most agile minds of the day. In 1766, Immanuel Kant published his own considered opinion that Swedenborg’s accounts were “nothing but illusions,” although even he allowed that there seemed to be “a strain of divine inspiration” to some of his writings.

Showmanship first came to pervade Spiritualism in 1848, when the Fox sisters, Margaret, aged fourteen, and Kate, aged twelve, apparently began to hear nocturnal “bumps and raps” in the bedroom of their small farmhouse in Hydesville, New York. The girls’ mother became convinced that an unseen force she named “Mr. Splitfoot” was communicating with them, and that “distinct manifestations of an intelligent life” continued even when she and the children moved home. Within a year, the sisters and their mother had become a popular attraction in theaters up and down the American east coast. The author James Fenimore Cooper, the anti-slavery campaigner and journalist William Lloyd Garrison, and George Bancroft, recently retired as Secretary of the US Navy, were among the many eminently respectable figures to endorse the demonstrations as genuine. In 1850, Horace Greeley, a Whig politician, editor of the influential *New York Tribune* (and widely credited with having coined the phrase “Go west, young man”), took up the girls’ cause in a series of front-page articles, though privately he came to express regret that even as teenagers Margaret and Kate had “taken a sip,” the beginning of a serious drinking problem in their later days.

Perhaps inspired by the Foxes’ example, a variety of late-nineteenth-century public figures and other citizens on both sides of the Atlantic, some of them already veterans of the vaudeville stage, began to speak of their religious or extra-sensory encounters. “A mystical feeling about oneself comes easily to performers in the spotlight,” the author Gary Wills has said, and significant numbers of the political, scientific, or artistic elite now came to express their own strong sense of communion with worlds unseen. Many of these contacts took place under the stressful conditions of the illness or death of a family member. In 1849, Charles Dickens began to attempt “mesmeric cures” of his young sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth, who was said to be suffering from “intestinal evil.” The novelist reported that his performances of “animal magnetism,” as hypnotism was then called, also

afforded him clairvoyant power. Personalities as diverse as Queen Victoria, the poet W. B. Yeats, and the Norwegian Symbolist painter Edvard Munch all later engaged in Spiritualistic efforts to reach a departed loved one. There was a dramatic surge of interest in the paranormal in the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War, with its 620,000 military casualties and undetermined number of civilian deaths. In the White House, Abraham Lincoln and his wife held a series of candlelit séances following the death of their eleven-year-old son William of typhoid fever in 1862, by no means the last time a US President was to engage in the occult. On the public stage, meanwhile, a long parade of mesmerists, table-tappers, furniture-levitators, speakers-in-tongues, yogic fliers, healers, and seers held paid demonstrations of their apparent ability to invoke the spirits. There was a particular vogue for the “automatic writing” pioneered by the American medium Henry Slade, who claimed to receive paranormal messages on a small slate blackboard he held in his hands. Some of these performers bore scientific scrutiny better than others, but there was no denying the influence of the movement as a whole. By the time the young Houdini arrived in the country in 1878, more than 11 million Americans admitted to being Spiritualists. According to Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, there were 742 Spiritualistic churches established in the United States and “upwards of 30,000 Trained Ministers,” meaning mediums or clairvoyants, dedicated to “furthering the New Revelation.”

In late-Victorian Britain, the fashion for Spiritualism often came with a feminist subtext. Women were thought to be uniquely qualified to communicate with spirits of the dead, and in the séance room, at least, a medium could enjoy a degree of independence and authority not readily available to her elsewhere. There are no reliable figures on actual attendance at séances or services, although it was widely believed at the time that an increasing number of the nominally respectable were dabbling in psychic affairs. When reviewing the history of Spiritualism in the United Kingdom, Houdini would remark that “[b]y the 1870s an invitation to tea amongst London’s gentility would often conclude with a candlelit course in which the spirits would be asked to reveal themselves by rotating or lifting the table, among other manifestations, to the delight of the audience.” At the end of that decade there would be three regularly published British magazines dedicated to the paranormal, as well as a growing amount of hardcover literature. By 1882, the British movement as a whole was sufficiently widespread to bring about the creation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), with a committee of largely Cambridge-based academics promising “to approach [Spiritualist] issues without prejudice or prepossession of any kind, and in the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned en-



quiry which has enabled Science to solve so many problems, once not less obscure nor less hotly debated.” The SPR initially set up five subcommittees, to variously investigate Mesmerism, Mediumship, Reichenbach Phenomena (electromagnetic forces), Apparitions and Haunted Houses, and Séances, as well as a Literary Panel to study psychic history and conduct surveys. In one early census, the SPR asked 17,000 adults whether they had ever experienced a “spiritual hallucination” while fully awake and in good health. Of the 1,684 who said they had, there were those who insisted that they had been physically “embraced” or “kissed” by an unseen force, among several other less conventional liaisons.



In 1893, a thirty-four-year-old Scots-Irish doctor, lecturer, seafarer, sportsman, pamphleteer—and globally renowned author of the Sherlock Holmes stories—named Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle applied to join the SPR. Although striking, this wasn’t the abrupt leap from the famously rational world of Holmes to the shadowy one of Ouija boards and ghosts some have suggested. The president of the SPR who approved Conan Doyle’s application was no less solid a figure than Arthur Balfour, a former Conservative leader of the House of Commons and future prime minister, whose friend Annie Marshall regularly brought him letters written to him from the Other Side. Among the society’s other prominent members were the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin’s peer in the theory of natural selection; the physicist Oliver Lodge, one of the developers of wireless telegraphy; Lodge’s fellow scientist William Crookes, a commercially successful inventor and founding editor of *Chemical News*; and the pioneering Fabian author Frank Podmore. The list isn’t exhaustive. In its prospectus, the SPR made it clear that it sought to bring what it called “coldly scientific logic” to its investigations, which then ranged from its meticulous census work to a perhaps more engrossing paper on a Holmes-like case filed under the name of “the Spectre Dog of Peel Castle.” It was an approach that would have commended itself to a young medical man with an open mind on basic theological issues.

His SPR membership, in fact, was only the most recent—if the most public—sign that Conan Doyle was something more than the parodically stuffy relic of God and Empire sometimes portrayed. To some later detractors, even his appearance was held against him. Doyle was tall, squarely built, heavily mustached, with plastered-down brown hair. He carried his umbrella at the furl; his bearing was military; and he lived in a large, red-bricked suburban villa stuffed with mahogany tables, marble busts, and hunting prints. On the surface, he was the epitome of a

late-Victorian clubman. His exquisite manners were proverbial, and he was unfailingly courteous even in the most trying of circumstances. Some thirty years later, Conan Doyle received the disturbing news from a “spirit guide” named Pheneas that the world would soon suffer a cataclysmic event in which “there will be great loss of life. It will be terrific. All humanity will be shaken to the core,” although, Pheneas added, “No one will suffer who should be spared. It will be like a great sieve passing through all that is worthless, retaining only the fruit.” “I am greatly obliged to you,” Doyle replied urbanely. Houdini would once remark that his future opponent struck him as the “very perfect specimen of an Englishman.” Somewhat belying his young-fogey image, the Conan Doyle who joined the SPR was also a lapsed Roman Catholic, an inquisitive student of practices such as mesmerism and telepathy, and increasingly receptive to the possibility of a wide range of other psychic phenomena.

Even so, Conan Doyle’s full-scale conversion to Spiritualism was an unusually protracted one. In January 1880, when he was twenty and struggling as a medical assistant in Birmingham, he attended a public lecture with the title “Does Death End All?” writing afterward that it was “a very clever thing . . . though not convincing to me.” He later reported that he had “had the usual contempt which the young educated man feels towards the whole subject which has been covered by the clumsy name of Spiritualism,” a subject he then saw as a litany of fraudulent mediums, spurious phenomena, and other “bogus happenings” that had duped the public.

As early as July 1882, Conan Doyle wrote a story (published a year later in *Bow Bells*) entitled “The Winning Shot.” Squarely in the Gothic tradition, it dabbles in the world of mesmerism and thought-transference before building to a vaguely supernatural climax in which a young man taking part in a rifle contest is unnerved to see a vision of himself standing immediately in front of the target. Conan Doyle’s contemporaneous account of the story to his mother as “a very ghastly Animal Magnetic vampirey sort of tale” suggests that he was still using the paranormal primarily for its narrative potential rather than to change peoples’ hearts and minds. Among Doyle’s next efforts was “The Captain of the ‘Polestar,’” in which he allowed his fictional hero, like him a young doctor, to refer mockingly to “the impostures of Slade,” the American slate-writer. Later in 1883 came a story he called “Selecting a Ghost,” in which a wealthy shopkeeper seeks to audition spooks to haunt his mansion. In his early twenties, the age at which Houdini was staging his own Spiritualist revues in America, Conan Doyle still took an essentially lighthearted, if not comic view of the supernatural, a subject not only rich in its own right, but with the added

commercial advantage of being topical. Both men would grow noticeably more earnest on the issue in years ahead.

In late 1883, Conan Doyle made the acquaintance of one of those faintly eccentric polymathic figures so prevalent in Victorian public life. Alfred Drayson, a fellow member of the Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society, was a distinguished former soldier and prolific author on everything from the game of billiards to the rotation of the earth, on which he wrote a sophisticated, if controversial monograph. Physically, Drayson was the epitome of a retired major general, with a richly tinted complexion and a luxuriant waxed mustache. He was also a practicing Spiritualist who believed not only that ghosts could be summoned by a medium, but that they were frequently accompanied by the “apport,” or materialization, of everyday household objects. Drayson reported that he had once been present at a séance where a dozen fresh eggs appeared on the table in front of him. By some arcane process of deduction, these were said to have been beamed into the room from suburban New York. Conan Doyle may not immediately have been converted by Drayson, but it was said in a private report of the Society’s proceedings that he “allways Loved the distinguished Member’s speeches.” Doyle later dedicated a collection of short stories to “my friend Major-Gen A. W. Drayson,” although in doing so he cited only his admiration for his “great and as yet unrecognised services to astronomy.”

In 1884, Drayson introduced Conan Doyle to the teachings of Madame Helena Blavatsky, a stout, middle-aged Russian-born Spiritualist who had emigrated to New York and co-founded the Theosophical Society there. The Theosophists propounded various unorthodox views on reincarnation and time travel, and came to be identified by some with the idea of Aryan supremacy. Madame Blavatsky later moved on to India and eventually England, where her apparent demonstrations of mental psychic feats including levitation, clairvoyance, and telepathy attracted widespread comment. In December 1885, the Australian lawyer Richard Hodgson published a report in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* charging Blavatsky and the Theosophists with persistent fraud. We know that Conan Doyle followed both the debate, and the furious Theosophist response to the SPR, but, again, kept the paranormal firmly in check in his own writings.

When Conan Doyle started his first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, in March 1886, he had several goals, avowed and secret, but psychic instruction was not among them. Some thirty-five years later, he was still at pains to keep his personal beliefs separate from those of his fictional detective. “This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain,” Holmes remarks in the

somewhat macabre story of “The Sussex Vampire.” “The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply.”

In November 1886, Conan Doyle signed over the rights of *A Study in Scarlet* in perpetuity to Ward, Lock and Company, a publisher of pulp fiction, for the unpromising sum of £25. “I never at any time received another penny for it,” he recalled in his memoirs. At the same time, he was conducting a series of experiments in which he and an architect friend named Henry Ball would sit in adjoining rooms and attempt to project their thoughts to one another, apparently with some success. On January 24, 1887, Conan Doyle, Ball, and a small group of like-minded researchers met in the darkened dining room of a house in the north end of Portsmouth. The initial results of their séance were disappointing, although after half an hour of silence the dining table itself began to tap up and down in a kind of Morse code they interpreted as “You are going too slowly. How long are you going to take?” Some time later, the group made contact with a local professional medium named Horstead, “a small bald grey man with a pleasant expression,” who was seemingly able to levitate the table in front of them, as well as to channel the spirits of the ancients. At a sitting on June 16, Horstead began to speak in a low, tremulous voice and, turning to Conan Doyle, remarked that his was “a great brain” that was “full of magnetism.” Horstead then passed him a scrap of paper on which he had written, “This gentleman is a healer. Tell him not to read Leigh Hunt’s book.” As Doyle had recently been thinking of buying that critic’s 1840 *The Comic Dramatists of the Restoration*, it appeared to be a notable feat of prediction. He would later conclude that “this message mark[ed] in my spiritual career the change of ‘I believe’ into ‘I know.’”\*

Less than a month later, Conan Doyle published a letter in *Light*, one of the now half-dozen popular British psychic magazines. Acknowledging that he was a “novice and inquirer” in the field, he noted, nonetheless, it was “absolutely certain that intelligence [can] exist apart from the body.” The message from the Portsmouth medium had apparently convinced him of life’s ultimate meaning. With his characteristic gift for the lucid phrase, Doyle assured the readers of *Light* of the unimpeachable logic of his position. “After weighing the evidence,” he wrote, “I could no more doubt the existence of the phenomena than I could doubt the

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\* Horstead’s insights should be set against the fact that Conan Doyle had already been practicing medicine locally for five years, and that he was known to share his reading habits with friends and colleagues.

existence of lions in Africa, though I have been to that continent and have never chanced to see one.”

It may be relevant, even so, to bear Conan Doyle’s personal circumstances in mind alongside his more stringently analytical powers at the time he made his later public commitment to psychic exploration. In the autumn of 1893, what one observer called “Conan Doyle’s unfailing optimism [and] schoolboy high spirits” were sorely tested by two family tragedies. On October 10, his father Charles died at the age of sixty-one at Crichton Royal Institution, a Scottish mental hospital. The older Doyle (who never used the compound surname) was a gentle, unworldly man whose undoubted artistic talent rarely met with commercial success. From around the age of thirty he began, instead, to drink heavily. Toward the end of his life, Charles Doyle kept an illustrated journal on whose front page he wrote, “Keep steadily in view that this Book is ascribed wholly to the produce of a MADMAN. Whereabouts would you say was the deficiency of intellect? Or depraved taste? If in the whole Book you can find a single Evidence of either, mark it and record it against me.” The drawings within reveal a fascination with sprites and fairies, along with piercing jolts of insight into the artist’s own deteriorating mental condition. One picture shows Doyle being swallowed alive by a ferocious-looking Sphinx, over the caption, “When I was drawing the Royal Institution, Edinburgh, I was a good deal worried by sphinxes.” Arthur had done his best for Charles and, poignantly, even commissioned him to illustrate an early reprint of *A Study in Scarlet*, but the full horror of his father’s descent into alcoholism and mental turmoil was a tale for which he clearly felt his public wasn’t yet ready. Charles himself called his condition his son’s “dreadful secret.” Rather than travel to Scotland to help with the arrangements for his father’s funeral, Conan Doyle chose to stay home and attend a lecture entitled “Recent Evidences as to Man’s Survival of Death.”

Conan Doyle was thirty-four years old at the time his father died. One journalist has said that as a result “he sank into a deep, impenetrable silence, stun[ned] by the supreme tragedy of his life to date.” But another, perhaps even greater blow would follow almost immediately. That same month, Conan Doyle’s thirty-six-year-old wife Louisa was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and given only a few months to live. “I am afraid we must reconcile ourselves to [it],” Doyle wrote to his mother. “I had Douglas Powell, who is one of the first men in London out on Saturday and he confirmed it.”

It may not be coincidental that Conan Doyle made his application to join the SPR within a month both of his father’s death and his wife’s diagnosis. Both events, with an emphasis on “bodily life’s fragility [and] decay,” would seem to have

accelerated his researches in the supernatural. Conan Doyle might have argued, too, that he was really doing no more than refining the fundamentals he'd learned at home and at school—Spiritualism, as he often reminded people, essentially being just the scientific extension of orthodox religion. Even so, Doyle wouldn't yet allow the intellectual attractions of the paranormal to affect his writing. His fiction was unabashedly mass-market art, and his frequent literary allusions to the mystic were often comic, never didactic and always in the interests of the story. Some of the true flavor comes through in an 1893 letter from Robert Louis Stevenson, who greets Conan Doyle with the genial salutation, "O! Frolic fellow Spookist."



Who, then, were these two men who were to leave such an indelible impression on the debate about life after death?

In some ways they were almost comically different. They were born fifteen years apart, Conan Doyle on May 22, 1859, into a Roman Catholic family largely composed of artists, in Edinburgh; Houdini on March 24, 1874, in Budapest, where his father made a living as an itinerant soap salesman and lawyer before practicing as a rabbi. As an eight-year-old, Doyle went away to boarding school and eventually earned a medical degree at Edinburgh University. Houdini's formal education ended at the age of twelve when he ran away from home, and he spent much of his adult life compensating by compiling what, with typical restraint, he called "the world's most expensive private collection of books," rich in both the classics and in texts on comparative religion, Spiritualism, and above all, magic. Houdini, of course, was a showman, and as such never a victim to false modesty—he "makes an introductory speech telling how good he is," the *New York Telegraph* noted of one performance, "and you wonder why he doesn't get on about his business of breaking out of handcuffs." Conan Doyle, though not free of authorial vanity, was rather more of the genial, self-effacing Scot who remarked of his early struggles as a writer, "My dear, I am continually sending things to the *Cornhill* and they send them back with a perseverance worthy of a better cause." Even physically, the two cut a sharp contrast. Houdini was short and lean, with the physique of a flyweight boxer, and was often described as "wound up like a coiled spring"; Doyle was big and raw-boned, and is remembered as once playing in a match (with some distinction, it should be said) at Lord's cricket ground, "breath[ing] heavily, the sweat beading his thick moustache, while he lumbered amiably around the outfield." One modern journalist has made the facetious but not wholly inapt comment that when standing together, Conan Doyle and Houdini "looked like Pooh and Piglet."

In some other ways, they were astonishingly similar. Neither belonged to the traditional ruling class, and it's difficult to imagine either succeeding without having taken real risks with his life and work. Detective fiction barely existed at the time Conan Doyle introduced Sherlock Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, and a lesser man might have been discouraged by the initially lukewarm reaction to it. As it was, the young author was compelled to take whatever commissions came his way (including his translation of a German article submitted to the *Gas and Water Gazette*) while persevering with the stories that made Holmes, and himself, famous. Houdini, too, overcame almost insuperable odds, which included not only the constant and very real threat of his injury or death, but also the material challenges of surviving in the shark-filled waters of the late-nineteenth-century American vaudeville circuit, before emerging as the world's highest paid public performer.

Conan Doyle and Houdini shared certain other broad patterns and personal characteristics. Both were the sons of kindly but commercially failed fathers. Both had a particular lifelong aversion to alcohol. Both formed deep sentimental attachments to their mothers, whose influence over them was evident even as they became rich and famous men. Both were self-invented, in the sense that Doyle, the model of an English gentleman, was really part of a colorful Scots and Irish tapestry, while Houdini, who later billed himself as "the greatest of all American stars," was born Hungarian. In time, each man became the financial prop of a large extended family. There was barely a relative they didn't support or help to support, although in Houdini's case there was also the paradox of a man who would blow \$35,000 (around \$1.2 million today) to buy a film-processing laboratory in the somewhat whimsical hope that it would help make him a movie mogul, while still fretting over a \$1 dry-cleaning bill. Sometimes the parallel between the two men was more material, even comically so. In 1908, Houdini appeared as a character in a German dime novel with the title *Auf den Spuren Houdinis* in which he is rescued by Holmes, "his great admirer," from a gang of rivals who seek to murder him by pouring sulfuric acid into his escape apparatus.

Conan Doyle was solicitous about his first wife, nursing her through what became a thirteen-year physical decline, even if the marriage was based more on mutual respect and fondness than any grand passion. He was also fiercely loyal to the former Jean Leckie, whom he married a year after Louisa's death, all part of an elaborate etiquette of correct behavior toward women. For years, Houdini, too, was sometimes thought "excessively uxorious," at least according to the *Los Angeles Call*, which noted that "he held [Bess's] hand, kissed her, put his arm around her, and in many other ways showed how much he loved her," though by the same

token he seems not to have been above a brief affair with the widow of the novelist Jack London. In public, Houdini referred to Bess as his “Sweet Wife,” among other endearments, and for thirty-two years issued her with a nearly daily stream of love notes and trinkets. One of the last acts of Conan Doyle’s life was to struggle into his garden and pick the first wildflower of the spring for his wife. By a mild coincidence, both Jean Conan Doyle and Bess Houdini were trained singers, though Bess’s repertoire later inclined more to the popular music-hall fare of the day. Conan Doyle advocated a muscular approach to life that in his case included cricket, soccer, bicycling, boxing, equestrianism, mountain-climbing, surfing, skiing, and golf (in the last two he was something of a pioneer); was long intrigued by classical displays of virile or gymnastic ability; and was once a judge of an Albert Hall competition to find the strongest man in the world, in which the contestants paraded by clad in Roman sandals, black tights, and leopard skins. Such a man can hardly have failed to appreciate what Houdini called his own “gospel of strenuousity,” and the sheer physical prowess he brought to his public escapes.

“The more I reflect on Houdini [and] Doyle,” wrote Walter Prince, an ordained minister and a member of the American Society for Psychical Research in the 1920s, “the more it seems that the two men resembled each other. Each was a fascinating companion, each big-hearted and generous, yet each was capable of bitter and emotional denunciation, each was devoted to his home and family, each felt himself an apostle of good to men, the one to rid them of certain beliefs, the other to inculcate in them those beliefs.” Both Conan Doyle and Houdini brought a religious zeal to bear in their bitter clash about Spiritualism, and it’s arguable that this was a substitute for the religion of their youth. Part of the historical image Houdini sought to cultivate was that of the original thinker as well as the man of action, while Doyle gave early evidence that he had more to offer the world than merely the fictional detective of whom he once said, “He is becoming such a burden to me that it makes my life unbearable.” When two supremely intelligent and ambitious public propagandists meet and they are, like Conan Doyle and Houdini, men of private religious intensity, the stage is set for real drama.