

The Doctor, the Magician and the Medium

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Almost one hundred years ago, the greatest mystifier and magician of all time, Harry Houdini, and Arthur Conan Doyle, the inventor of the greatest detective of all time, met, collaborated and ultimately clashed over a subject that attracts attention even today: whether the living can contact the dead via the services of a medium. And it may surprise you who ended up on the side of logical investigation, observation and deduction.

Arthur Conan Doyle was born on May 22, 1859, in Edinburgh, Scotland. The Sherlock Holmes Companion: An Elementary Guide, Daniel Smith, Castle Books, New York, 2011. His father, Charles, was an artist, but his descent into alcoholism, caused Arthur, his mother, and the family much grief. His father was often institutionalized and his lack of sustaining a trade or profession would keep the family finances in an unstable and precarious situation. A favorite subject for Charles was the painting of fairy folk.

As often seems to be the case under those circumstances, Arthur's mother, Mary Foley, provided the love and support her son (and his six surviving siblings) required. Arthur was close to her. She sent him to a Jesuit school in England, where Arthur fell in love with the literature of, among others, Edgar Allan Poe.

While raised Catholic, the strict environment of the school had the not uncommon effect of causing Arthur to leave the church at a young age. He later attended another Jesuit school in Austria, before going to University. (It always strikes me as interesting that certain individuals are described as poor,

but seem to have access to excellent educational opportunities at a time when very few even graduated from a secondary school). Perhaps Arthur's uncle Henry, Founder of the National Gallery of Ireland, helped out. Arthur's family was actually artistically prominent. His grandfather, John Doyle, was also an artist and considered a founder of satirical cartoon illustrations.

Although descended from an artistic family, (in the painterly sense I suppose), Arthur went to medical school. (Does the starving artist as a parent somehow cause a child to join a stable profession while the stable professional's offspring longs for some artistic expression?), Just a thought.

Arthur, as we all know, was able to have it both ways. He did become a doctor, having graduated from the University of Edinburgh while his father (a "great unrecognized genius" according to Arthur) was in a sanatorium. Dr. Doyle first job was interesting. He was the ship's surgeon on a whaling ship bound to West Africa.

He then became partners in a medical practice in Plymouth, but when that relationship soured, he "hung up a shingle" in a Portsmouth suburb. He married the sister of a patient, and with his practice somehow leaving him time to write (something to which our doctors in attendance cannot relate I am sure) he created Holmes and Watson, whose first adventure, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published in 1887.

With his writing career taking off (he actually saw himself as a writer of historical fiction like Sir Walter Scott and had a strained relationship with his

detective), he studied ophthalmology in Vienna, then set up a practice in London. He had a daughter in 1887 and a son, Kingsley, in 1892. He wrote plays, more historical fiction, but it was Sherlock Holmes who kept the money flowing.

His father died in 1893 and his wife began suffering from tuberculosis. While trying to care for his family, he met a beauty name Jean Leche, with whom he supposedly had a platonic affair, until they were married a year after his first wife's death in 1906.

Besides practicing medicine, caring for his family, finding another love, producing financially rewarding Sherlock Holmes' and other stories, Doyle volunteered as a doctor in a British field hospital during the second Boer War in 1900. This led his writing a defense of the war which earned him a knighthood.

He undertook public campaigns to obtain the pardons of a half-Indian attorney wrongfully convicted of horse-maiming, a wrongfully convicted murderer and a treasonous Irish nationalist (this latter campaign was unsuccessful). He even opposed Belgian colonialism in the Congo.

He was a staunch British patriot, as his defense of the Boer War would predict, and warned of the approaching German threat before World War I. During that war, Arthur lost his brother, nephews, and his son Kinglsey in the 1918 influenza epidemic. (Although another source says his son died of pneumonia contracted after being treated for wounds received in France). But



his path was soon to cross with a man who could not have seemed more different, although who was just as famous.

By the time, Harry Houdini met Arthur Conan Doyle and his second wife, in the Doyle home in 1920, Houdini was without a doubt the most famous magician in the world, and maybe one of the world's most famous figures. See The Secret Life of Harry Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero, William Kalush and Larry Sloman, Atria Books, New York, 2006. But if you had been in the home where Houdini was born as Erik Weisz in Budapest, Hungary, in 1874, you would have needed spiritual powers yourself to have predicted it. Erik was the fourth son of a recent law school graduate, Mayer Weisz, who had started out as a soap maker. Two years after Erik's birth, his father left for a new life in America, leaving the family behind to be sent for later, as was often the case. In 1878, the family journeyed to America, first to New York, then on to Appleton, WI. Mayer had moved there at the request of a friend from the "old country" who had become a prominent businessman.

With limited to no knowledge of English, Houdini's father accepted the position his friend offered: to be the town's rabbi. Houdini as a child was a natural athlete who, at the age of seven, began mimicking the tight rope walkers he had seen in a traveling circus. The whole family was naturalized in 1882. But things then become precarious for the Weisses (as they now spelled it) family.

Rabbi Weiss had alienated his congregation, which wanted someone younger and more in tune with the times, so he was fired (sound familiar to any of my Protestant friends?). The family moved to Milwaukee where they frequently had to dodge the rent collector. Houdini and his brothers helped support the family with jobs right out of Dickens or Alger, shining shoes, and selling newspapers and flowers on the street corner.

At eleven, his parents sent him back to Appleton, where he apprenticed to a gun and locksmith shop owner. His future as an escape artist was founded here by the learning he received and the training he gave himself in devising lock picks.

After returning to Milwaukee and the death of his older half-brother, he ran away from home at the age of twelve, following a troop of Army cavalry into the Wisconsin countryside. Now going by Harry White (Eric's nickname was "Ehrie" which became "Harry" and "Weiss" is just German for "White"), he was taken in by a couple in Delavan, Wisconsin (whom he visited once he became famous). He soon reunited with his father, now a Hebrew tutor in the tenements of New York City, and became a messenger boy. He was also a talented amateur boxer and long distance runner.

He pursued an interest in magic, and learned coin and card tricks and began performing in the neighborhood. He studied the life of French magician Robert Houdin then soon "Harry Houdini" was born.

His career began in earnest when he and his partner/brother performed at the 1893 Chicago World Fair, the year after his father's death. They returned to New York and worked the Corey Island joints, beer halls and theaters. Their claim to fame was the box trick called "Metamorphosis". His brother would stand inside a curtained area after Harry had been bound and placed in a bag which was tied and the bag was then locked in a trunk. After a count of three, the curtain would rise and the Houdini brothers had magically switched places. The show continued with Harry's new wife Bess later replacing his brother.

As the Houdini's traveled with carnivals and medicine shows, Harry would go to the local police station and offer to free himself from their handcuffs. When he inevitably did, the sought after publicity was achieved and he was on his way to being called the Hand-Cuff King. But that was not all they had in the repertoire.

Houdini and his wife also began to work as spirit mediums on stage, but his fame came through his escapes. In 1900 he travelled to Europe, first London then Germany, where he escaped from cuffs, chains, and leg irons. He overcame the Berlin police who had placed five cuffs (behind his back), two pair of leg irons, a gag and thumbscrews. *Id.* at 113. (He also gave mysterious "reports" to the head of Scotland Yard, leading some to think he was a sort of spy.)

But the highlight of the tour for Houdini was when he brought his mother, Cecelia, over to Budapest, for a reception. He had even purchased for her a dress originally created for the recently deceased Queen Victoria. Not bad for a former shoe shine boy.

Houdini's exploits are now legendary. He toured Czarist Russia and escaped from the dreaded Siberian Transport Cell, a combination cage/stage coach for the transport of prisoners. He reportedly turned down an offer to become an advisor to Czar Nicholas II, a wise move given the fate of Rasputin, who later got the job. Houdini returned to the United States and continued his handcuff and jail escapes. In 1906 he escaped from one cell in the U.S. Jail in Washington, D.C., then re-arranged the other prisoners in the cell block by opening their cells and moving them into each other prisoner's cell.

But entertainment halls and jails were not grand enough stages for Houdini. So why not jump off bridges into rivers while handcuffed? From Detroit to Rochester to Pittsburgh, Boston, San Francisco and New Orleans, thousands would see the maestro, wrapped in chains with his hands secured behind his back, leap from bridges into dark waters below, then, free from the restraints, being fished out by waiting boat crewmen.

Escaping from near drowning became an established part of Houdini's stage act, too. In 1908, the year after he first began his bridge jumps, he introduced his water can escapes. He would be manacled then placed into a

galvanized steel can, filled to the brim with water. The lid was locked on and he was left to drown or escape. He didn't drown.

In 1912 he had even upped the ante on his bridge jumps. Instead of jumping in, he was locked inside a trunk, which was then lowered into the water. This was a sort of analogue to his most famous illusion of all, the Chinese Water Torture Cell. Debuting in Berlin in 1912, Houdini would be locked into a board by his ankles, then lowered head first into a glass container full of water (he did not die by drowning while performing the trick, as popular legend holds).

He simply escaped the way he always did, possessing supernatural powers, he dematerialized, floated through whatever shackled or entombed him, then rematerialized, free of any restraint. Or so some theorized.

Even though Houdini possessed seemingly magical powers, he also had other interests. In addition to his stage work, he was an early lover of aviation. He saw the Wright Brothers demonstrate their plan in France in 1909, and in 1910, while on tour in Australia, guess who become the first person to fly an airplane on the continent of Australia? His plane, a Voisin, had "Houdini" in large letters on the rear panel. Combining adventure, danger and advertising (and mystery) was a never to fail formula.

He could also escape without using his magical powers. He may perhaps be most well known today for contorting and wriggling himself free from a strait jacket, in full view of the crowd below, while dangling upside down from a cable



suspended from a building in one of the cities where he was performing. You can watch these escapes on Youtube.

While in Europe again on tour in 1913, he received word that his beloved mother, Cecilia had died. This profoundly affected a man who had his mother's letters to him typed and bound so he could carry them with him. He harbored a desire to be able to speak to her again. And the avenue by which that was accomplished was by the use of a spirit medium.

Houdini and Doyle had a strong interest in what was called at the time "Spiritualism." It had obtained something of the status of a religion. It was the creator of the keenly analytical Sherlock Holmes, though, who was the true believer and the magician who was the sceptic.

And they would come to clash over one of the most famous spirit mediums of the 1920's. She was known as "Margery". Has anyone ever heard of her?

Mina Crandon was a farm girl from Canada who moved to Boston, along with her brother Walter, who was killed in a train accident. She married and had a child. In 1917 her fortunes changed when she was operated on by a Dr. Le Roi Crandon, a wealthy Harvard man. Soon, she divorced and became his third wife. In 1923, at a seance in their home, her powers as medium supposedly manifested for the first time with the table rocking, rising and crashing to the floor. As she developed her "powers", the spirit she channeled

was none other than her long-dead brother Walter. He would be the voice and guide from beyond to her and her followers.

Dr. Crandon sent a letter to none other than Doyle, now a proselytizer from the Spritualist movement, and invited him to a séance. The doctor and his wife went to London, where they gave seances, including one in Doyle's home. Doyle was mighty impressed with the levitating table, and a flower that materialized from a shelf to a floor. So impressed was he, that Doyle nominated her for a prize to be given to one who could produce a "visible psychic manifestation," to be awarded by Scientific American magazine of all publications.

Let's return for a moment to 1920, when Houdini travelled to London and met Doyle. By this time, Doyle was a complete believer in Spiritualism and had claimed to have made contact with this deceased son Kingsley six times. Doyle also watched Houdini's magic act and was convinced Houdini really had magical powers. Houdini's escapes from inside locked boxes while handcuffed were not demonstrations of trickery, but proof he would dematerialize! (it was about this time Doyle was fooled by pictures of girls cavorting with fairies. The "fairies" had been cut out from a children's book and photographed with the children).

Houdini also had Doyle to his own home in New York City in 1922. Houdini used a slate writing trick, where a phrase one writes in seclusion is reproduced on a slate produced by the magician. Doyle wrote "mene, mene,

tekel, upharsim”, which Houdini’s magic board repeated. More proof of his great powers to Doyle.

Doyle would return the favor. He would have Houdini to his hotel where he would establish for him his own wife, Lady Jean Doyle’s bona fides as a medium. You see Doyle’s second wife claimed psychic powers too. She practiced what was called “spirit writing”, where frantic scribbling of messages supposedly from beyond were written down. Lady Jean Doyle was able to contact none other than Houdini’s late mother Cecilia who sent her love and gratitude but who would not answer direct questions.

Doyle thought he had introduced one magical being to another but this proved to be the beginning of the end of any friendship. There was a bit of a problem Houdini had been too polite to mention at the time. His mother did not speak or write English. Just a few months later, Houdini wrote an article in which he said he had yet to see proof at any seance of communications “from beyond”. Doyle felt betrayed. The Doyles soon announced that at that same séance, Lady Doyle had been told Houdini would die soon. Those Spiritualists were somewhat thin-skinned.

In 1924, Margery, a favorite of Doyles, tried for the Scientific American prize. The showdown occurred July 25, 1924. And one of the judges was Houdini himself. Margery was nervous and vomiting that morning in Boston. . Margery’s twelve year old son had been locked in his room, so he could not be

accused of helping his mother. Her husband sat on her right to hold the limbs on that side, with Houdini on the left.

In the customary pitch black conditions, the spirit of Margery's brother Walter overtook her and began to speak. The spirit claimed to have been with Houdini and another witness on their train to Boston. The spirit made a bell ring, a megaphone fly through the air, and knocked over a cloth three-sided screen used to surround the seance. But Houdini, in the dark, had "seen" through all of it. When one of the circle, a confederate of the mediums, was told by the spirit to fetch something, she was only controlled on the right side by her husband. She could then put the megaphone on her head with her right hand and put her right foot under the screen. All she had to do was flick her foot to knock over the screen and her head to move the megaphone.

Houdini had felt Margery moving under the table with his legs, which he had tightly wrapped with a rubber bandage below the knee. The swollen, tender, bottom half of his leg was susceptible to the slightest touch or movement and movement he had felt.

They conducted a second séance the next night. Houdini felt under the table and touched Margery's's head which she had ducked under the table to try to move it. Her stocking even got caught in one of Houdini's garters when she tried to ring a bell which had been placed between Houdini's feet.

In August, 1924 Houdini attended another session with Margery. This time she was to be encased in a wooden box of his design with holes for her

arms but her legs would remain inside. Her head would protrude from the top. In the dark, she managed to faintly push the bell box which sounded, but when the lights went up, Houdini noticed two brass strips were bent and accused the medium of bending them as she bent forward to ring the box with her forehead. The seance recommenced and Margery got into the cabinet again, but "Walter" accused Houdini of planting a ruler inside to make it look like she had hidden a tool for herself to use. Whoever planted it that was a good excuse to end the session. But not before "Walter" put a curse on Houdini.

It took a couple of years, but oddly enough for a man seemingly possessed of supernatural powers, Houdini did die. He had allowed himself to be punched in the stomach backstage after a show in Montreal as a test of his strength. As the show must go on, he performed, then travelled to Detroit, and performed again. He later collapsed back stage, was hospitalized and died of acute appendicitis on October 31, 1926 (Halloween).

Doyle died in 1930 at 71. His reputation at the time was somewhat tarnished by a reputation for gullibility. But he was a steadfast believer in the spirit world to the end. He wrote in his two-volume The History of Spiritualism, Cassell and Company, LTD 1926, that "I cannot recall one single case where it was clearly shown that I had been mistaken upon any serious point, or had given a certificate of honesty to a performance which was afterwards clearly proved to be dishonest." But his reputation today stands because of his



creation of the legendary detective. Perhaps Doyle should have listened to himself when he had The Detective in "The Sign of the Four" say that "[t]he emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning."

And as for Margery, she lasted until 1941. She died an alcoholic and a proven fraud, when fingerprints left by her spirit guide and brother Walter somehow matched those of her living dentist. But she would never outright confess to her deceptions.