Skeptic at Heart, Believer in Spirit

"This is indeed a mystery" remarked Watson. "What do you imagine that it means?"
"I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." -- Sherlock Holmes, A Scandal in Bohemia

If a character more suitable than Sherlock Holmes to symbolize the principles of critical thinking ever grew from an author's fertile imagination, it has escaped my purview. How ironic then, that the Baker Street detective was the creation of Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle (1859-1930), the noted British author whose later years were characterized by an overwhelming belief in Spiritualism and the paranormal. Doyle grew up in the Roman Catholic faith, but later became an agnostic through his readings of Darwin and Huxley during his training to be a doctor. Living in conditions of poverty, he practiced medicine from 1882 until 1890 in Southsea, until his literary accomplishments allowed him to write full-time. His interest in Spiritualism did not, as many assume, begin with his son Kingsley's death shortly after the end of World War I. Doyle had first conducted experiments in telepathy in 1887, showing "beyond any doubt that I could convey my thoughts without words," as he wrote in his memoires. He became interested in Theosophy and Spiritualism, joined the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1892, and participated in numerous table-turning seances. He was knighted for his literary accomplishments in 1902 along with his soon-to-be close contemporary Sir Oliver Lodge, spiritualist, SPR president, and author of *Raymond*, a book that described the alleged communications through the medium Mrs. Leonard with his dead son, who, like Kingsley, was also a casualty of the war. Doyle was surprisingly a friend of Harry Houdini, arch enemy of spiritualism, although perhaps their friendship was tested often, as revealed in Houdini's *A Magician Among the Spirits*. Doyle, in his last book, *The Edge of the Unknown*, described the deceased Houdini in glowing terms. "Who was the greatest medium-baiter of modern times? Undoubtedly Houdini. Who was the greatest physical medium of modern times? There are some who would be inclined to give the same answer."

After the war, the tragedy of the loss of his son and many friends moved him to devote full time to assuring himself and others of the reality of survival after death. He used his "superb reasoning faculties ... in building elaborate, well-wrought cases for the psychic upon the most unreliable foundations of physical mediumship", and endorsed the physical phenomena of almost every medium of his time, from the Fox sisters onward. He became president of the London Spiritualist Alliance, the British College of Psychic Science, and the Spiritualist Community, and refined his beliefs to a Darwinian theory of the evolution of the spiritual life of mankind in the afterlife. He suffered the disapproval of the clergy, who objected to communications with the dead that were explicitly forbidden in the Bible, and because his theories ran counter to the Christian idea that the dead sleep until resurrection. He was mocked by the scientific writers of his time, but continued to struggle to "get the facts home to the people." Near the end of his life, his wife developed mediumistic powers and revealed through an Arabian spirit (Pheneas) that he must prepare the world for a great calamity. He died at the age of 71, secure in the belief that he was only beginning his journey in the next life.

There are two incidents in the life of Arthur Conan-Doyle that reveal the picture of a man so caught up in his beliefs that he sees only what he wants to see. The first is the case of the Cottingley Fairies, aptly described by James Randi in *Flim-Flam*. In 1917, a sixteen year-old girl and her ten year-old cousin take several pictures of fairies and gnomes that come to the attention of Doyle. Despite obvious evidence of fakery, including the two-dimensional appearance of the fairies, the employment of the older girl in a photography shop, and the opinion of the Kodak Company that the pictures could have been produced by natural means, Doyle enthusiastically accepted them as evidence that "matter as we have known it is not really the limit of our universe". Perhaps Doyle's motives are clearest when he expresses his view in a 1920 letter to Edward Gardner, a theosophical advocate: "Fairies cannot be destroyed by antediluvian tests, and when once fairies are admitted, other psychic phenomena will find a more ready acceptance." Perhaps Doyle should have listened to his alter ego Sherlock. In 1980, computer enhancement technology confirmed the two-dimensional nature of the fairies, and in 1985, the now elderly perpetrators of the hoax admitted that the pictures were faked. And yet I found on a bookstore shelf a recent reprint of Gardner's book *Fairies* with the following overleaf advertisement: "Since that time [1920] many scientific experts have tried to prove that the photographs were not legitimate ... all this was tested and probed to the limits possible. To this day the photographs have never been discredited. No flaw, no fraud, no deceit has ever been discovered in spite of intense scrutiny." Caveat emptor!

The second incident is not as well known, yet is similarly revealing. In Peter Haining's *Ghosts: The Illustrated History*, the picture at the left is described as "a photograph of a phantom monk in Bristol" that was investigated by ghost-hunter Elliott O'Donnell in the 1930s. This report is corroborated by D. Scott Rogo in *The Haunted House Handbook,* which shows the same photograph, described as "being taken in a haunted house in England in the 1930's." Yet quite a different view of the same picture is described by Ian Wilson in *The After Death Experience*. Apparently, for many years Doyle carried this photograph that was supposedly one of the best-ever photographs of a ghost, taken on the night of July 27, 1909 by a group of Bristol University students at Brockley Manor, a few miles south of Bristol. The picture showed the figure of a monk, transparent against the Manor's paneling. Unfortunately for Doyle, the photograph was revealed to him in 1929 as a simple double exposure by a dental student at Bristol who had dressed in monk's garb. Caveat emptor!

In the book *In Search of the Dead*, Jeffrey Iverson denotes the seriousness with which we should take reports of ectoplasmic activity: "The writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a spiritualist and a man not easily deceived, judged by his creation Sherlock Holmes, wrote at a seance ... he saw ectoplasm in a good light." Caveat emptor!

And yet, as an Holmes devotee from early childhood, I would quote from Christopher Morley's preface to the 1930 memorial edition of The Complete Sherlock Holmes. "There was no stage of the life, from the poor student doing without lunch to buy books to the famous author enduring painful hostility for his psychic faith, which did not reflect the courage, the chivalry, the sagacity ... of the creator of Holmes. Certainly it was characteristic of that student of mysteries to attack the greatest one we know. Those of us who in earliest boyhood gave our hearts to Conan Doyle ... find our affection unshakable." I quite agree.

"The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes." -- Sherlock Holmes, Hound of the Baskervilles

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