

**A MAGICIAN
AMONG THE SPIRITS**

BY
HOUDINI

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SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE AND HOUDINI PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE
AUTO CLUB, LONDON, ENGLAND

IN WORSHIPFUL HOMAGE
I
DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO THE MEMORY OF MY SAINTED MOTHER
IF GOD
IN HIS INFINITE WISDOM
EVER SENT AN ANGEL UPON EARTH IN HUMAN FORM
IT WAS MY
MOTHER

INTRODUCTION

FROM my early career as a mystical entertainer I have been interested in Spiritualism as belonging to the category of mysticism, and as a side line to my own phase of mystery shows I have associated myself with mediums, joining the rank and file and held seances 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. I was a mystifier and as such my ambition was being gratified and my love for a mild sensation satisfied. After delving deep I realized the seriousness of it all. As I advanced to riper years of experience I was brought to a realization of the seriousness of trifling with the hallowed reverence which the average human being bestows on the departed, and when I personally became afflicted with similar grief I was chagrined that I should ever have been guilty of such frivolity and for the first time realized that it bordered on crime.

As a consequence my own mental attitude became considerably more plastic. I too would have parted gladly with a large share of my earthly possessions for the solace of one word from my loved departed—just one word that I was sure had been genuinely bestowed by them—and so I was brought to a full consciousness of the sacredness of the thought, and became deeply interested to discover if there was a possible reality to the return, by Spirit, of one who had passed over the border and ever since have devoted to this effort my heart and soul and what brain power I possess. In

this frame of mind I began a new line of psychical research in all seriousness and from that time to the present I have never entered a seance room except with an open mind devoutly anxious to learn if intercommunication is within the range of possibilities and with a willingness to accept any demonstration which proves a revelation of truth.

It is this question as to the truth or falsity of intercommunication between the dead and the living, more than anything else, that has claimed my attention and to which I have devoted years of research and conscientious study. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle says in one of his lectures:

“When one has a knock at the door, one does not pause, but goes further to see what causes it and investigates, and sooner or later one discovers that a message is being delivered...”

So I have gone to investigate the knocks, but as a result of my efforts I must confess that I am farther than ever from belief in the genuineness of Spirit manifestations and after twenty-five years of ardent research and endeavor I declare that nothing has been revealed to convince me that intercommunication has been established between the Spirits of the departed and those still in the flesh.

I have made compacts with fourteen different persons that whichever of us died first would communicate with the other if it were possible, but I have never received a word. The first of these compacts was made more than twenty-five years ago and I am certain that if any one of the persons could have reached me he would have done so. One compact was made with my private secretary, the late John W. Sargent, a man of mature years. We

were very much attached to each other. The day before he underwent an operation he said to me:

“Houdini, this may be the end. If it is, I am coming back to you no matter what happens on the other side provided there is any way I can reach you. And if I can come, you will know it is I because I am going to will it so strong that you cannot be mistaken.”

He died the next day. That was more than three years ago and there has been no sign. I have waited and watched believing that if any man ever could have sent back word he would have been the man. And I know that our minds were so close to each other that I would have received the signal that my friend wanted to call me. No one could accuse me of being unwilling to receive such a sign because it would have been the greatest enlightenment I could possibly have had in this world.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a sincere and confirmed believer in Spirit phenomena whose acquaintance I esteem, advises me that I do not secure convincing results because I am a skeptic and I therefore want to make it clear that I am not a scoffer. I firmly believe in a Supreme Being and that there is a Hereafter. Therefore since their departure from this earth it has been my practice, as a final duty, to visit the sacred resting places of my dearly beloved parents, and ask their protection and silent blessings through the Omnipotent Almighty. The very first place I visit when I return from a trip is this same hallowed spot. Both promised me faithfully innumerable times in this life that if they could aid and protect me from their graves or from the Great Beyond, they would do so. My mind has always been open and receptive and ready to believe. In attending seances I have always made a pledge of honor with myself to banish all profane thoughts from my mind to the utmost of my

ability. I further pledge myself to concentrate. I have persuaded my whole soul, brain and thought to a point where the medium has my attention to such an extent that at the finish I feel as much exhausted as the medium who shows to those present the effects of great strain irrespective of its cause. Thus it must be seen that I am not a skeptic. However, it has been my life work to invent and publicly present problems, the secrets of which not even the members of the magical profession have been able to discover, and the effects of which have proved as inexplicable to the scientists as any marvel of the mediums, and I claim that in so far as the revelation of trickery is concerned my years of investigation have been more productive than the same period of similar work by any scientist; that my record as a “mystifier of mystifiers” qualifies me to look below the surface of any mystery problem presented to me and that with my eyes trained by thirty years’ experience in the realms of mystery and occultism it is not strange that I view these so-called phenomena from a different angle than the ordinary layman or even the expert investigator.

A memorable incident in my life and one that shows how little the world at large understands the methods by which my mysteries are produced and also shows how easy it is for even a great intellect, faced with a mystery it cannot fathom, to conclude that there is something supernatural involved, has to do with Madame Sarah Bernhardt.

During one of my various engagements in Paris she had witnessed my performances and was anxious to see one of my outdoor exploits, so, when we were both playing at the same time in Boston, out of good camaraderie I gave a special performance at my hotel adding a few extra experiments for her benefit. As we were seated in the motor car on the way to my demonstration she placed her

arm gently around my shoulder, and in that wonderful speaking voice with which she was gifted and which has thrilled thousands of auditors, but now stilled forever, she said to me:

“Houdini, you do such marvellous things. Couldn’t you—could you bring back my leg for me?”

I looked at her, startled, and failing to see any mischievous sparkle in her eye replied:

“Good heavens, Madame, certainly not; you cannot be serious. You know my powers are limited and you are actually asking me to do the impossible.”

“Yes,” she said as she leaned closer to me, “but you do the impossible.”

We looked at each other; she, the travel-worn, experienced woman of the world; I, the humble mystifier, nonplussed and thunderstruck at the extraordinary, unintentional compliment she was paying me. Then I asked:

“Are you jesting?”

“Mais non, Houdini, j’ai jamais été plus sérieux dans ma vie,”¹ she answered as she slowly shook her head.

“Madame, you exaggerate my ability,” I told her.

Each of the marvels of modern scientific achievement such as the telephone, radio, flying machine, radium, etc., were at one time classed as impossible and would have been looked upon as supernatural, if not Spiritual manifestations. Similar mysteries, but more frail in principle and constructive detail, were the instruments

used by the priestcraft of ancient religious cults for the purpose of holding the mass of unintelligent beings in servitude.

It is not unusual for the eye or ear to play tricks with one but when such illusions and delusions are taken for the Spirit forms of the departed and voices of the dead instead of being recognized as some subjective phenomena brought about by a physical cause the situation takes on a grave aspect. It is this transfer of an inner reaction to an external object which constitutes practically all that is necessary to be placed in the category of "psychics," who represent the priests and ministers of Spiritualism.

Distressed relatives catch at the least word which may remotely indicate that the Spirit which they seek is in communication with them. One little sign even, which appeals to their waiting imagination, shatters all ordinary caution and they are converted. Then they begin to accept all kinds of natural events as results of Spirit intervention. This state of mind is productive of many misfortunes, including suicides by those who think they are going to happiness with loved ones beyond the pale. When in Europe in 1919 finishing an engagement interrupted by the World War I was impressed by the eagerness of grief-stricken parents for the solace of a word from the boy who had passed on and my desire for the truth was renewed with fresh vigor. I am informed that so great has the "medium" craze become in Berlin that the grief-stricken residents have spent great sums of money in the hope of discovering mediums who will "guarantee them a glimpse behind the veil." It is with the deepest interest and concern that I have watched this great wave of Spiritualism sweep the world in recent months and realized that it has taken such a hold on persons of a neurotic temperament, especially those suffering from bereavement, that it has become a menace to health and sanity.

Professor George M. Robertson, eminent psychopathologist, and Physician-Superintendent of the Royal Edinburgh Mental Hospital, made the danger of insanity resulting from strong belief in Spiritualism by neurotics the subject of a part of his annual report in 1920. He says:

“Those who had sustained bereavements during the war and bore them with equanimity in the days of crowded incidents and amidst the pressure of war activities, such as Red Cross and other work, find it much harder to bear up now, although time has elapsed. Some have broken down since the war came to an end. Many, as a solace to their feelings, have taken an interest in Spiritualism. Since Dr. Charles Mercier quoted in the preface of his book ‘Spiritualism and Sir Oliver Lodge’ my warning on the danger of neurotic persons engaging in practical inquiries of a Spiritualistic nature, I have received many requests to say more on the subject. I have little to add save to reaffirm the statement then made.

“I do not consider either Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Sir Oliver Lodge to be safe judges, whose opinion should be accepted on this difficult and important subject, in view of their bereavement and unconscious desires. If the wish be father to the thought, it is mother to the hallucination of the senses.

“The tricks the brain can play without calling in Spiritualistic aids are simply astounding, and only those who have made a study of morbid as well as normal psychology, realize the full truth of this.”

I have read with keen curiosity the articles by leading scientists on the subject of psychic phenomena, particularly those by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sir Oliver Lodge, in which they have discussed their respective conversions to a belief in communication with the

dead. There is no doubt in my mind that some of these scientists are sincere in their belief but unfortunately it is through this very *sincerity* that thousands become converts. The fact that they are *scientists* does not endow them with an especial gift for detecting the particular sort of fraud used by mediums, nor does it bar them from being deceived, especially when they are fortified in their belief by grief, for the various books and records of the subject are replete with deceptions practised on noted scientists who have essayed to investigate prominent mediums. It is perfectly rational to suppose that I may be deceived once or twice by a new illusion, but if my mind, which has been so keenly trained for years to invent mysterious effects, can be deceived, how much more susceptible must the ordinary observer be.

During my last trip abroad, in 1919, I attended over one hundred seances with the sole purpose of honest investigation; these seances were presided over by well-known mediums in France and England. In addition to attending these seances I spent a great deal of time conferring with persons prominently identified with Spiritualism. In the course of my intense investigations I have met most of the famous mediums of our time. I have submitted to conditions imposed by them and religiously awaited results, but I still question any so-called proof of the existence of Spirits who are interested in any way, physically or mentally, in the welfare of mortal men. It is not within the province of this book, which is the result of my years of investigation, to give all the historical detail concerning every medium mentioned, though enough are furnished in each instance to establish my claims, each of which is based on a thorough study of the records as are also my statements many of which are supported by documentary evidence in my possession.

I have spent a goodly part of my life in study and research. During the last thirty years I have read every single piece of literature on the subject of Spiritualism that I could. I have accumulated one of the largest libraries in the world on psychic phenomena, Spiritualism, magic, witchcraft, demonology, evil spirits, etc., some of the material going back as far as 1489, and I doubt if any one in the world has so complete a library on modern Spiritualism, but nothing I ever read concerning the so-called Spiritualistic phenomena has impressed me as being genuine. It is true that some of the things I read seemed mystifying but I question if they would be were they to be reproduced under different circumstances, under *test conditions*, and before expert mystifiers and open minded committees. Mine has not been an investigation of a few days or weeks or months but one that has extended over thirty years and in that thirty years I have not found one incident that savoured of the genuine. If there had been any real unalloyed demonstration to work on, one that did not reek of fraud, one that could not be reproduced by earthly powers, then there would be something for a foundation, but up to the present time everything that I have investigated has been the result of deluded brains or those which were too actively and intensely willing to believe.

HOUDINI.

PREFACE

GLADLY would I embrace Spiritualism if it could prove its claims, but I am not willing to be deluded by the fraudulent impositions of so-called psychics, or accept as sacred reality any of the evidence that has been placed before me thus far.

The ancients' childish belief in demonology and witchcraft; the superstitions of the civilized and uncivilized, and those marvellous mysteries of past ages are all laughed at by the full grown sense of the present generation; yet we are asked, in all seriousness, by a few scientists and scholars, to accept as absolute truth such testimony as is built up by their pet mediums, which, so far, has been proven to be nothing beyond a more or less elaborate construction of fiction resting on the slenderest of foundations, or rather, absolutely no foundation.

Not only educated men and women with emotional longings for some assurance of the continued existence of departed loved ones, but people of all phases and conditions of life, have completely surrendered themselves to belief in the most monstrous fiction, vouched for by only a single witness of the so-called phenomenon, and that too when the medium, through whom the phenomenon was supposed to have presented itself, had been caught cheating time and again.

I believe in a Hereafter and no greater blessing could be bestowed upon me than the opportunity, once again, to speak to my sainted Mother who awaits me with open arms to press me to her heart in welcome, just as she did when I entered this mundane sphere.

H.

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