

The Medium Problem

Chapter 1

Holmes and I agreed to suppress these events due to the emotional duress and virulent reaction should they be made public. However, sufficient time has passed and passions have subsided enough that my friend has now granted permission for publication.

“Disturbed by an item in the paper, Watson?” Holmes remarked, as he reclined upon the carpet cleaning his pistol.

My companion’s exemplary deductive powers were hardly necessary to read the disgust upon my face or to decipher the violence with which I turned the pages.

“What’s that? Yes, I should say so,” I spat out.

“That medium business again, I presume,” chuckled Holmes as he sighted down the end of the barrel.

“Holmes, do you realize that Lady Winfield is now a devotee of that charlatan?”

“Ah, if I recount correctly, she is the third noble added to the stable,” he smirked.

“I don’t see any humor in the situation,” I rebuked. “This ‘Antoinette’ is nothing more than a swindler. Do you know she accepts money for her *services*?”

“And well she should. I take it that Lady Winfield desires that Antoinette put her in contact with her late husband? If she can do so, I see no reason why she shouldn’t be compensated.”

“Holmes, you know as well as I that this Antoinette is a fraud. She can no more contact the dead than you or I. She is merely deceiving these people during her *séances*.”

“You may soon be in the minority in that opinion,” laughed Holmes. “It seems that this Spiritualism craze has taken firm root in London.”

“Don’t you see? That is what makes the situation so vexing! People are being duped en masse and you merely snigger.”

“My dear Watson, when you attend the theater, are you permitted to enter for free?”

“Of course not,” I huffed.

“Indeed. You pay admission in hopes of being entertained. If the company did its job, you leave happy, having received what you desired. This is no different. The clients of this swami come to her in desperation and sadness. If she succeeds in making them believe that she has put them in touch with their dearly departed, they leave elated. What is the harm in that?”

“Clearly, Holmes, you see the harm. It is fraud. It is deceit. When I take in a show, the man upon the stage does not claim to be the real Richard III. The audience knows it is a performance. This Antoinette makes no such distinction.”

“Ah, well, we shall have to disagree then,” Holmes replied, waving the issue away with his hand.

“But, Holmes,” I persisted, “couldn’t you expose this woman? Surely with your skills of observation, you could determine how she is able to deceive these people.”

“To what end, Watson?” Holmes replied, his voice taking on a tone of seriousness for the first time.

“Why, to correct a great injustice of course,” I stated, amazed that an explanation should be necessary.

“Watson, you are well aware of the successes I have had in my field,” he said without any feigned modesty. “My achievements are the result of observation and logic. My methods hold no sway over those ruled by emotion. Do you know how many cases I have solved where a mother refuses to believe her son committed the crime, despite my presentation of irrefutable proof?”

He stood, tossing his revolver upon the sofa. “Let us say you had unassailable evidence that Jesus did not walk on water. Perhaps you discovered that there was a submerged reef in the Sea of Galilee, upon which Jesus had treaded. Do you truly think Christians would thank you for that information, or do you suppose you would be attacked for your exposé?”

Holmes smiled slightly before continuing. “My dear friend, try telling a Mohammedan that his prophet’s dream of the Arch Angel giving him instructions to found Islam was a sham. Or, on second thought don’t—he may remove your head with a scimitar.”

I am not certain if it was my silence or facial features that betrayed my comprehension of Holmes’s argument.

In a softer tone he continued, “Spiritualism has become a religion to many, and although I do not doubt that I could determine how the mediums perform their trickery, it would be a worthless endeavor that would serve no

constructive purpose. Spiritualists would be less than impressed with my efforts and I would waste valuable time that would grant many a criminal a reprieve.”

My friend was correct about the adherents of Spiritualism. The movement had steadily gained followers since its inception at the hands of the Fox sisters some fifty years prior and, despite the findings of the Seybert Commission in '87, the numbers continued to grow. One would think that, when a scientific panel from the esteemed University of Pennsylvania decreed the mediums to be frauds, the movement would have disintegrated. However, even the renowned chemist and physicist William Crookes remained a steadfast practitioner. And Crookes is hardly the only respected personage to tout the “religion.”

Although still aggravated by the situation, I acquiesced to Holmes’s reasoning and tried to divert my mind from the subject. I folded the paper and shoved it across the table, exchanging it for a volume of Tennyson. A half an hour had passed before the wall clock chimed, reminding me that I must be off.

“Dr. Watson, what brings you out on this fine day?” The familiar voice of Inspector Dickerson arrested my departure from our doorstep.

“Hello, inspector, I was just about to check on a patient. Is it official business then? Should I stay?”

“Oh, hardly that,” he laughed. “I was merely passing by and thought that I would return the notes Mr. Holmes loaned me during that nasty affair over at Charing Cross.”

“Alright then, good day inspector.” As I started off, I was surprised to find Dickerson had taken hold of my arm.

“Doctor, do you know why I haven’t returned these notes earlier? Well I am not proud to admit it, but I mislaid them,” the heavyset officer confessed, stroking his reddish sideburns.

“Oh, is that so?” I answered, trying to continue on my journey. However the inspector still gripped my arm, having not completed his explanation.

“Do you know of Commodore Peters?” he asked.

I nodded in affirmation as I transformed from hostage to dedicated listener at the mention of the name. Indeed, I had heard of ‘the commodore.’ Uriah Peters was an Englishman of unclear origins who claimed to have led a fleet of armed merchant ships in the Black Sea during the Crimean War. This unconfirmed service decades ago, however, is not what had thrust him into the public conscience. He was the protector and agent for the illustrious Antoinette.

Dickerson continued, “Well, that gentleman paid me a visit the other day and invited me to one of Antoinette’s séances. He stated that having a member of Scotland Yard at the event would help dissuade skeptics. It was astounding! Astounding! Antoinette’s spirit guide, Oliver, rang an electric bell that was housed in a wooden box under the table. He even spoke to us through Antoinette! He said he sensed duress upon me. He said I had lost something. Which of course I had! He told me to look behind the file cabinet in my office. Doctor Watson,” he tightened his grasp on my arm, “that is exactly where I found Mr. Holmes’s notes! It was so amazing that my wife and I have attended several more séances. They have all been fruitful, too!”

As I sauntered down Baker Street, I shook my head in wonderment. Could Dickerson really be that naïve? Certainly, he possessed one of the dullest minds on the force, but to believe such tripe! It was no secret that he attained his position due to the fact that his uncle was a Member of Parliament. And unlike other inspectors, who only begrudgingly asked Holmes’s assistance, Dickerson had no qualms about consulting my friend upon the most trivial matters. I suspect Holmes would have denied him aid more frequently had he not pitied the dimwitted, though good-hearted, inspector. It seemed inconceivable that even he could not see the charade performed upon him, but when I asked him if the notes had disappeared before or after the commodore’s visit, and he replied that he had seen them shortly before, but could not find them afterward, this fact elicited no illumination. I suppose Holmes is correct; the devout believe only what they desire.

My mind began to navigate the bits and pieces reported about Antoinette. She was an American, approximately thirty years of age. Although I had never seen a photograph or rendering, sources described her as beautiful. Her hair was said to be flaxen, almost platinum in color, which contrasted greatly with large, extremely dark eyes. Bodily, she was more than adequately proportioned and of greater than average height for a woman. She claims to have been a school teacher at one point before the appearance of her “spirit guide” less than two years ago. This “Oliver” allegedly came to her in a vision as she was reading one evening. Her surname has never been revealed, nor is it certain that “Antoinette” is her true Christian name. When prodded upon the subject, she stated that Oliver forbid her to answer, as since her “awakening” her previous identity ceased to be relevant.

The woman’s association with the commodore is equally murky. He had the bearing and manner of a well-bred man. He was reportedly silver haired and mustachioed, tall and thin. His voice was smooth and his demeanor impeccable. His deportment cast doubt upon the premise that he was a former seaman. How he became associated with the lady, he refused to say, beyond that they had both been travelers “drawn together by fate.” When pressed about his background, he offered little, claiming that Oliver had forbid him speaking about the subject. He would neither confirm nor deny the origin of his title of “commodore,” but did allude to spending some time in Russia.

By the time I had mulled over these facts, I had traversed the dozen blocks to the home of Mrs. Saunders. The day previous, I had been summoned to the Saunders residence to examine their governess, a Miss Ripley. After her noon meal, the young lady began to feel faint and troubled about the stomach. It seemed likely that she was suffering from a mild food poisoning and that her condition would correct itself once her body had purged the contamination. However, in order to be sure that the ailment was not something more sinister, I assured her that I would call again today.

My ruminations faded as I entered the foyer. The maid showed me up to the young lady's room, where I found her much improved. She was out of bed and busy composing a letter.

"Well, Miss Ripley, I see that the crisis has passed," I stated light heartedly.

"Why, yes, Doctor Watson, I feel tip top," she smiled back.

"Let me just have a look at you then, and you can get right back to your correspondence."

"Certainly," she replied as I removed the stethoscope from my bag. "I am anxious to complete this thank you note to Miss Antoinette."

I was not sure I heard her correctly, so I removed the earpieces of the instrument. "Pardon?"

"After you left, Mrs. Saunders received a package from Antoinette, the medium," she searched my eyes to be certain I recognized the identification. "It contained a note stating that she had a premonition that a member of the household was ill and that the elixir in the package would affect a cure. I am truly indebted to her. I took the medicine last evening, and this morning when I awoke, I was my old self!"

"Where is this 'medicine'?" I asked, trying to suppress my anger.

"I consumed it as directed. However, this is the vial it was in," she replied handing me a small bottle.

"Miss Ripley, do you recall my diagnosis?" I asked, somewhat harshly.

"Certainly, Doctor Watson, you said food poisoning."

"Did I not tell you that it would likely leave you before today?"

"Why, yes, you did, but I was suffering, so I could not wait. Sir, what is the difference? I am cured, is that not the important thing?"

In her eyes, I read the devotion of which Holmes had spoken. This innocent girl failed to comprehend that she *did* wait. During the night, the toxin dissipated and this morning, she felt well again just as I had predicted—and I used no magical powers to reach that conclusion. I saw no reason to reprimand the girl further; she had already decided the issue.

"I am glad you are feeling better. Good day, Miss Ripley."

Upon descending the stairs, I looked about for the maid. "Excuse me, young lady, is Mrs. Saunders in?"

"Yes, sir. Wait in the parlor, I will get her."

I paced the room, my teeth clenched. How dare this charlatan interject her fraud into the medical field! It was one thing to pretend to speak with the dead, but this was going too far. Her parlor games could very well cost someone their life!

By the time the lady of the house entered, I had mastered my emotions.

"Dr. Watson, thank you so much for coming back to check on our Miss Ripley," she said as she entered the parlor.

"As I said that I would," I returned. "Madam, how is it that my instructions were not followed?" When a confused look swept across her face, I furthered, "I did not prescribe any medicine."

"True enough, doctor." She smiled and sat down upon the sofa, folding her hands in her lap. "But neither did you prohibit it. When the messenger arrived from Antoinette, I could hardly refuse! She had clairvoyance enough to know that our governess was ill, why should I then doubt her power to produce a remedy?"

The lady's expression was so solemn; it was obvious that her faith in the medium was complete. At once, I determined that chastising her would be fruitless, yet my blood was boiling.

"May I ask how it is you know Antoinette?" I tried my best to stifle my anger.

"My husband and I have attended two or three of her séances."

"I see." I bid Mrs. Saunders good day and left.

"Watson, whatever can you be up to?" Holmes asked as he entered our rooms.

"What's that? Oh, it's you, Holmes?" I recovered from the intrusion. "I hope you don't mind, but I needed to make use of your chemistry equipment."

"Not at all, Watson, but pray tell what the experiment is. Have you developed a serum for brain fever?" he jested.

"I am trying to ascertain what resided in this bottle," I returned, holding up the tiny container the governess had surrendered.

"Any luck, old man?" my roommate asked, hanging his hat upon the rack.

"No, I am sorry to say. The vial is bone dry and there appears to be no film or residue left on the inner walls."

"Give it here," Holmes commanded, striding over to the chemistry table.

He pulled out his magnifying lens and stepped close to the window to take full advantage of the late afternoon sunshine.

"Useless," he replied, tossing the bottle to me.

"Yes," I sighed heavily.

"All right Watson, no need for melodrama. I can see that you need to unburden yourself. I am all ears," he said, seating himself.

"Ha! What do you suspect that vial contained?" Holmes queried after I had recounted what had happened.

"I believe that it was some benign substance, perhaps sugared water."

"Very likely, Watson. Assuming that your diagnosis was correct and the governess had not contracted some malady requiring actual medication."

"I am certain of that, Holmes."

"So by your reckoning, the young lady would have recovered anyway and the remedy sent by the mystic did nothing to affect a cure."

"Yes, Holmes, that is exactly how I see it."

"Your deductions are possible, Watson, but they need to be shifted from the possible to the probable. How did this Antoinette know that someone was ill in the house? Further, if the vial contained a mere placebo, how was she certain that the young lady's illness was one from which she would recover without true medication?"

"Perhaps the patient told someone my diagnosis, and it was forwarded to the medium."

"Ah, Watson, now we are getting somewhere. You must go back to the house and follow up on that line of deduction," he said pulling an index from the shelf, effectively terminating our conversation.

"Oh. I was hoping that I had piqued your interest enough that you might accompany me."

"It is hardly a case requiring my expertise, Watson. Do let me know how it turns out, though."

"So, you told no one other than Mrs. Saunders about my diagnosis?"

"No," the governess replied, perplexed at my return.

"Thank you," I said, exiting the room. "Oh, and you're still feeling alright?" I asked, almost as an afterthought.

"Yes sir. Perfectly fine."

As I left the house, I tumbled the problem over in my mind. Surely Mrs. Saunders had not informed Antoinette. She said that the medium had clairvoyantly determined that the girl was ill, and her amazement at the arrival of the package was genuine. Could this woman actually possess some metaphysical powers? I wondered almost aloud.

"Good day, sir."

Lost in thought, I brushed past the maid sweeping the walk and almost failed to hear her.

I stopped and retraced my steps. "Excuse me."

"Yes, doctor?" The young lass halted her work.

"Did you happen to see the messenger who brought the package of medicine yesterday?"

"Aye, sir. I was scrubbing the front hallway when he arrived.

"What did he look like? Can you describe him?"

"Certainly, sir. He was a little man; dark skin, dark hair, clean shaven. He had dark eyes. There was also a scar on his cheek below the left eye."

"That is a fairly complete description! How can you be so precise?"

"Well, sir, it is the second time I saw him in as many days. He was at the kitchen door yesterday noon."

"What's that? Why was he there?" I sputtered out, shocked by the revelation.

"I cannot say, sir. I guess he was making a delivery to the cook. She was preparing lunch at the time."

I did not want to spar with the devout Mrs. Saunders, so rather than reenter the house through the front door; I hurried around to the rear, anxious to interview the cook. I found her scrubbing out a large pot and she complied when I asked her to step outside for a moment.

"Yes, doctor, what can I do for you?" the portly lady asked, closing the door behind her.

"Did a man approach you yesterday when you were preparing lunch?"

"Yes, sir. He had a sack, and said that he was delivering the tomatoes I had ordered. When I told him I had made no such order, he said that perhaps the lady of the house had. I answered back that that was not possible, as I did all of the grocery purchasing. He became agitated and ordered me to ask Mrs. Saunders. I told him there was no need, but he insisted that he was not about to return to the market to be sent back again because I was in error. Seeing that he would not be denied, I went off to find Madam. When I returned to tell him that she had not placed the order, he accepted the news and left."

"Do you know the man?"

"The delivery man? No, sir. I had never laid eyes on him before."

"Do you use a particular grocer? Where might I find this tomato courier?"

“Oh, I usually order our produce from Giovanni; he has that little shop on Kensey Street. But, like I said, sir, I never saw him before, so I doubt if he works for Giovanni. I suspect he was from a different grocer and mistook our house for the proper one.”

“I have one further question. When you left to consult your mistress, was there anyone left in the kitchen?”

“Why, no, sir. Erin, the maid was here when he first arrived, but I think she grew uneasy at our heated exchange, so she had scurried off.”