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HOUDINI'S ON FIRST

by Hilary Scarlett White

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CHARACTERS

2M / 2F

HOUDINI: *Handsome, dark hair, clean shaven. Compact but powerfully built.*

CELESTE: *Houdini's Assistant; Female, elfin, spritely. May or may not be Ariel from The Tempest.*

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE: *Large build, tall, moustached.*

LADY DOYLE: *Sir Arthur's wife. A medium. May be doubled with CELESTE.*

SETTING

1914 Chicago and 1926 Detroit.

AUTHOR'S NOTE ABOUT ARIEL

Ariel is Prospero's "tricksy" spirit servant and attends to Prospero's every need. Unlike Caliban, Ariel has a (mostly) warm and loving relationship with Prospero, who saved Ariel when he arrived on the island. The evil witch Sycorax imprisoned Ariel in a tree for 12 years because the "delicate" spirit didn't have the heart to do her bidding.

Ariel is Prospero's eyes and ears throughout the play, using his magical abilities to cause the tempest in Act One that gives the play its name. Ariel isn't a servant by nature; he primarily wants his liberty, but, knowing that it will come, serves Prospero wholeheartedly and happily.

Ariel is notable for his use of white magic in the play, but also for his empathy and goodness. Most telling is his report on the three traitors: Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonso. He claims that their state is so pathetic, if Prospero saw them he would be moved to mercy and sympathy. Ariel thinks he himself would have that same tenderness, were he human. While we are reminded that this is a spirit of a not-human nature, he seems filled with angelic grace—even about human matters.

*ARIEL: Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.*

PROSPERO: Dost thou think so, spirit?

ARIEL: Mine would, sir, were I human.

PROSPERO: And mine shall. (5.1.21-27)

Prospero has just transformed from a revenge thirsty magician to a human being with the capacity to forgive his enemies and feel "tender(ness)" toward those who betrayed him and exiled him to the island. In other words, Ariel's compassionate spirit is the catalyst for Prospero's change. Without Ariel, Prospero may never have learned that "the rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.35-36).

HOUDINI'S ON FIRST

by Hilary Scarlett White

ACT I

Scene 1

AT RISE: *Afternoon, October 30, 1914. HOUDINI and CELESTE are backstage at a theatre on First Avenue in Chicago. There is a table with chains, locks and other magic props, large stacks of books piled around the floor, a coat rack, a provocative sequined costume hanging on the wall, and a dry, glass chamber, like a telephone box. An upright piano down left.*

The doves.

HOUDINI

CELESTE, paces briskly backstage, re-arranges props.

The doves.

HOUDINI *(Cont'd)*

CELESTE continues busily in her work, ignoring HOUDINI.

(Cocks head quizzically)
Appear to be dead.

HOUDINI *(Cont'd)*

He moves a wooden box, emphasizing the sound of dead weight clunking from side to side. Long pause.

Maybe they're just *resting*.

CELESTE

No. I think... *(Slides open a secret door on one side of the box and peeks in)*... Yes, quite dead.

HOUDINI

*SFX: Muffled sounds of audience yelling
Encore! Encore!*

ANNOUNCER VO (*Offstage*)

Once again, ladies and gentlemen. The Mystical, the Magical, the Incomparable...Houdini!

SFX: Applause. HOUDINI and CELESTE disappear behind the curtain upstage. Music plays and after several moments, SFX of dozens of cooing, flapping doves are heard to the applause of the few audience members. They emerge from behind the curtain to center stage.

They *were* dead, though. Before. Earlier.

HOUDINI

Hmmm.

CELESTE

Fascinating.

HOUDINI

Yes.

CELESTE

You know, one gets sick and they all just seem to pop off. Poof!

HOUDINI

Yes...poof.

CELESTE

But then, they never just *poof* revive! Especially not all of them at once!

HOUDINI

Yes.

CELESTE

Strangest damn thing!

HOUDINI

(*Cheerfully*)

Perhaps they're Lazarus Doves!

CELESTE

(*Examining the box*)

HOUDINI

Hmmm, yes, Lazarus Doves. New invention, new breed, new strain, I s'pose...science...

CELESTE

(Exasperated)

Science! Yes! You can't stop progress! There it is, then, science hard at work again!

HOUDINI

Yes! You know just the other day I was just reading about that Einstein chap. He's got all sorts of new theories, you know, about how energy and time are affected by gravity and...

CELESTE

Uh huh.

HOUDINI *(Cont'd)*

(Searches through the stacks of books)

The curvature of time and space and...and something about the light and deflection and the sun's gravity...in any event it was fascinating!

CELESTE

You know it's my day off.

HOUDINI *(Cont'd)*

You know he even has a theory about why the sky is blue! I can't remember what it is but, capital, isn't it? What did you say?

CELESTE

I said, 'You know it's my day off.'

HOUDINI

Of course! Not to undermine your efforts in science.

CELESTE

My efforts?

HOUDINI

Not yours personally, but you, you women. That Curie woman, the chemist, they just handed her another Nobel Prize. That's something, isn't it?

CELESTE

(Brightly)

Yes, I sat in on her inaugural class at the Sorbonne after poor Pierre was struck down by that horse cart. Sharp as a tack, that one!

HOUDINI

What?

CELESTE

(Quickly changing the subject)

Day off? One day off? One *whole*, entire day off! You promised!

HOUDINI

(Picks up chain with lock attached)

Yes, yes. I know, you deserve it, of course. Naturally!

CELESTE

Just because you work yourself to the bone...

HOUDINI

(Fiddling with a key on the lock)

This one's a bit trickier, you see, because of the...so you need just the right curve, you see, on this bit of the key and just the right angle, you see? Curves and angles, a bit like Einstein, me, really! And like so... *(Demonstrates)*.

CELESTE *(Cont'd)*

...doesn't mean that I can't occasionally, just the once, actually, *leave* the theatre and go...well, *technically* to another theatre...but to one I'm not actually *performing* in and try and enjoy...

HOUDINI

(Picks up the dove box again)

And I appreciate you being here, nonetheless.

CELESTE

Nonetheless...

HOUDINI

(Turning box over and over energetically)

I'm sorry. I just don't understand how...

CELESTE

(Firmly)

It's my day off. The entire day *and* night. You promised. There's a comedy at the Blackstone.

HOUDINI

"As You Like It." Not my favorite. Orlando...bit of a milquetoast if you ask me.

CELESTE

(Indignant)

I don't remember inviting you, anyway.

HOUDINI

(Looking in mirror)

Of course, I'd be quite smashing in the part. The part of the *lovah*. *(Admires himself)* Eh, darling? *(Nudges her; She sniffs)* I've got a face for the pictures, eh, don't I? *(Sucks teeth with tongue)* Teeth aren't the best, but you can't have it all I suppose. Actors, bah! I can act better'n any of 'em! Chaplin – nonsense. What's he doing? He's not *doing* anything! Totters around with his cane making faces with that ridiculous moustache in ill-fitting trousers and that's entertainment, eh? I can do what he does upside-down, underwater AND in chains! Let's see 'em do that, eh?

HOUDINI puts his finger in above his lip to imitate Chaplin's moustache and feigns fright. She laughs.

HOUDINI

(Raging)

Yet they all *flock* to the pictures to see...nothing! Half full. The house is half bloody full! They're all across the street watching a bunch of no-talent clowns!

She sighs.

HOUDINI

Flat, two-dimensional images on a screen. They call that magic? Pfft! Shadows! When we're living and breathing and giving them magic right before their very eyes! What do I have to do? Jump off a bridge? *(Pulls out notebook and pen)* Say, that's not a bad idea!

CELESTE

(Sighs)

So, I'm to stay, then.

HOUDINI

(Writing)

Damn right! What's the biggest bridge in Chicago? No! New York! Got to be New York. Biggest bridge in New York. We have to give 'em what they don't know they want. But what they *deserve*, eh?

CELESTE

(Mockingly)

Pardon, master. I will be correspondent to command. And do my spiriting gently.

HOUDINI

What? Oh. Sorry about all that...but...never mind. It's your day and *night* off. And, of course, you may go. You are free to go.

CELESTE

Thank you!

HOUDINI

You didn't have to stay, you know. You knew you could go at any time and you stayed anyway.

CELESTE gathers her coat and hat, turns to leave.

HOUDINI

(Pleadingly)

Why did you stay? A beautiful young, er, lady, um, like yourself must have a phalanx of beaux waiting in the wings.

CELESTE

Never even had just the one. Singular. Beau. Beau. *(Relishes the word; smiles at HOUDINI)*

HOUDINI

Ah! You're just being coy. *(Admiringly)* Look at you! *(Looks in mirror, frowning, speaking to his reflection)* Look at you.

There is silence for several beats. He passes his hand down in front of his face and back up again to reveal a fake smile, flashing it at her. CELESTE turns again to leave and HOUDINI'S face falls into a frown once again. Slumps into the chair in front of the props table.

CELESTE

(Turning back to HOUDINI)

What will you do?

HOUDINI

What?

CELESTE

About the evening show?

HOUDINI grunts unintelligibly.

CELESTE

What?

HOUDINI

(Distractedly works on picking a lock)

Oh, I'm working on a new device! A device that will allow me to escape from... from...

CELESTE
Yes?

HOUDINI
Water.

CELESTE
Oh!

HOUDINI
Underwater.

CELESTE
(Sings)
Full fathom five.

HOUDINI
Fathom...what?

CELESTE
Nothing.

HOUDINI
Yes, in this chamber filled with water.

CELESTE
An underwater escape! Excellent! Always a handy trick to have at one's disposal.

HOUDINI
And blindfolded, manacled and in a straightjacket!

CELESTE
Oh. That, uh, you know, might be a little, um....

HOUDINI
Out of my depth?

CELESTE
Hah! Yes, exactly! Has it ever been done?

HOUDINI
No. Not to my knowledge, no. I intend to be the first and I think it might be just the thing that puts me back on top!

CELESTE
Well, Bravo! Bravo. I'm sure it'll be a smashing success!

HOUDINI

Thank you. Thanks. *(The lock fails to open. HOUDINI throws the key on the floor in disgust)*
Blast! Blast, blast, blast!

CELESTE touches his face tenderly.

HOUDINI

You know, not many people understand me the way that you do.

She beams.

HOUDINI

(Drops to his knees, dramatically)

But, you know, I really do need you for the evening show...

CELESTE

No! I told you. One night off!

HOUDINI

(Kisses her hand profusely)

Yes, yes...I know, I know...but Orlando can wait. Can't he? *(Mumbles)* Just so damnably bland, him, really, never did like him. *(Charming)* And I really can't do the show, properly, without you.

HOUDINI produces a bouquet of red roses from thin air, offers them to CELESTE.

CELESTE

Well, that's true. Gosh, these are beautiful! No one's ever given me roses!

HOUDINI smiles roguishly.

CELESTE

Oh! Blast it all! *(Stamps foot)* This is how you always get me! Well, I'm staying. But not because I *have* to. Because I *choose* to! I'm nobody's slave!

HOUDINI

Of course. Sorry, darling. You just can't help that you're utterly powerless against my not inconsiderable charms.

CELESTE

You do owe me, though, you know. When I arrived you were...

HOUDINI

Less than solvent, financially, yes, far less...

CELESTE

Quite the opposite, in fact! Too solvent, actually, I should say. Physically, I mean. Underwater, in handcuffs, encased in that giant glass tube of liquid. More than less than solvent...actually...less than...

HOUDINI

In a bit of a bad state, certainly. Less than...

CELESTE

Less than...alive.

HOUDINI

Less than...uh, what?

CELESTE

Alive. Less than alive.

HOUDINI

Say again?

CELESTE

Dead, actually, might describe the situation a bit more accurately.

HOUDINI

Hmmm...no.

CELESTE

Yes. Dead. Is the state. That I found you in. When I arrived. More or less.

HOUDINI

Really? No.

CELESTE

Yes.

HOUDINI

Dead....how? Spiritually? Metaphorically, perhaps....

CELESTE

Literally. Physiologically, I'd say....

HOUDINI

Hmmm. Fascinating.

CELESTE

But I don't want to hold that over your head. I mean, I would never. Me of all people! But all this talk of water and magic and death is making me...think of...oh my. I'm not feeling well. (*Slumps into chair*)

HOUDINI

Sorry, my dear. Let me get you something to drink.

CELESTE

Yes, that would be...

HOUDINI

(*Bellows offstage*)

Sycorax!

CELESTE

(*Freezes in fear*)

Ahh! (*Looks over her shoulder*) What the...?

A mechanical dog noisily makes its way toward HOUDINI.

CELESTE

(*Relieved*)

Oh my goodness! Oh.

HOUDINI

(*Laughs*)

Gets you every time!

CELESTE

Yes. How amusing. You know, I really wish you'd consider calling it something else.

HOUDINI

Him. He's a him.

CELESTE

It...him...*that!* Miserable metal creature you call...oh it's too horrible! How can you? You know what she did to me!

HOUDINI

(*Puts his arm around her, consoling*)

I know, love. The tree business and all. Terrible thing. But didn't you gain just a little perspective while you were trapped in there all that time? Hmmm? I mean adversity has a way of teaching us, you see, giving us perspective.

CELESTE

Perspective?

HOUDINI

Yes. Didn't you glean any insight during your, what was it, dozen or so years of imprisonment?

CELESTE

And ensuing indentured servitude...

HOUDINI

...and ensuing indentured servitude, yes. Did you learn anything? From your trials?

CELESTE

No. Not really. Must there always be something to learn from suffering? Mostly, it just made me angry. Really angry.

HOUDINI

Mmmm...yes...explains a lot.

CELESTE

Bitter and angry.

HOUDINI

C'mon. You must've come away with something valuable from the whole sordid experience!

CELESTE

Alright...let's see. Yes! In fact, I did. Never trust a magician. Huh? How's that?

HOUDINI

That's not entirely fair.

CELESTE

And don't inadvertently offend an angry witch.

HOUDINI

That's certainly sound advice...

CELESTE

I'll pretend you didn't just say that.

HOUDINI

But, witch or no, it's just such a great name, though. Sort of, I don't know, futuristic. *(To the dog)* Sycorax, sit. Sycorax, fetch a glass of water. Fetch, Syc! *(SYCORAX retreats offstage)* Got a lovely ring to it! Been training him to attack, too. Surrounded by thieves on every tour, in every city. My best pair of handcuffs were stolen just last night. When we were on stage! What does a thief want with handcuffs? Sic 'em Sycorax! Sic Syc! Sic boy! *(Laughs)*

CELESTE

(Sighs)
It's really not that clever.

HOUDINI

(Defensively)
Bess likes it. She thinks...

CELESTE

(Hisses)
I don't care what Bess likes. I don't LIKE Bess! And I can't believe you like her, either.

HOUDINI

Well, she doesn't understand me the way you do, naturally, but...

CELESTE

Can Bess do this?

*She waves her hand against the curtain,
sound of celeste plays, and the lights change
colors.*

HOUDINI

Oh! That was quite good! Amazing, actually! When did you....?

CELESTE *(Cont'd)*

No! She can't, can she? Can she do THIS!

*CELESTE waves her hand; celeste plays
lights change and morph into different
colors.*

HOUDINI

(Claps)
Brilliant! Saving it for the evening show, eh? *(hugs her)* Darling, that's genius! They'll go mad....

CELESTE

(Shakes him off)
No! She can't, can she? She can't do anything! She's useless. Just sits there like a lump. A great big useless lump!

HOUDINI

Good gracious! Your kind is so...temperamental.

CELESTE

My *kind*?

HOUDINI

Yes. My Shakespeare's a little rusty, sorry darling. What's Ariel, er, are you, exactly? A fairy of some sort?

CELESTE

(Angrily)

I'm not Ariel anymore! That name has a lot of, let's just say, negative associations. I'm Celeste now! And I'm not a fairy!

HOUDINI

Yes, see! Temperamental! Sort of wild. Flying about all sorts of places, hither and thither, hither and yon, anytime at all. Like a gypsy! A bit feral, your kind! It's brilliant!

CELESTE

I'll have you know there is no more of my *kind*. I'm one of a *kind*! There is no other *kind* to liken me *to*!

HOUDINI

But you had parents, I assume.

CELESTE

Oh, you wouldn't even begin to understand. Do go on, though. About my *kind* of which you know ever-so-much about!

HOUDINI

I'm just trying to explain, very badly, I suppose, that women, er, females, uh, here, are a bit more, well, docile.

CELESTE

Docile. I see. Well if a mealy-mouthed little mouse is what you want then, by God, you're in luck!

HOUDINI

You, ah, mean, er...

CELESTE

Struck the mother lode with good old dull-as-dishwater Bess! Bore ya to tears and back again before you can say "boo." She's where a nap goes for inspiration.

HOUDINI

Well, what would you have me do? You know I prefer your company. Infinitely more so. I'd much rather spend all my time with you but you're a, well...

CELESTE

Go on say it!

HOUDINI (*Cont'd*)

...a bit touchy, I know, about all that. You can't really be jealous. Look. What if the positions were reversed? Eh? What would you do in my place?

CELESTE

She was sitting with Doyle, you know, Bess. During the show. They looked quite cozy.

HOUDINI

Mmmm...trying to pry my secrets out of her, no doubt.

CELESTE

Prying in the wrong place for that. The only thing he'll pry out of her is inane conversation.

HOUDINI

This jealousy is really unbecoming and quite unnecessary. Bess is...

CELESTE

But, oh! What wouldn't the clever Sir Arthur do to get his hands on me, though! With his mediums and séances attempting to conjure spirits.

HOUDINI

Shameful, really! I've debunked every single one of those hacks Doyle goes on about. A little off his rocker, really. Claims I have paranormal abilities and that's how I'm able to do my tricks.

CELESTE

Uh, well, he might actually have a bit of a point there.

HOUDINI

(Ignoring her)

That such a brilliant mind can be so easily swayed by those, those...charlatans! Why he believes in that great lot of bunk I'll never know! It's beyond me!

CELESTE

Beyond you, yes. Oh, Harry, if I wanted to, I could really give 'em something to write about, eh?

HOUDINI

Give 'em a heart attack, likely. Looking a little paunchier these days, Doyle, isn't he? All that sitting around scribbling...

CELESTE

...is making him quite a bundle. Very wealthy. Terribly amusing, too, his scribbles, the latest one has his detective...

HOUDINI

(Proudly pats his stomach)

Fit as a fiddle. Tight as a drum. Go on, take a poke. Hard as you can! Won't feel a thing...

CELESTE

Now who's jealous! What wouldn't rich old paunchy old Doyle give to be alone with me for five—

HOUDINI

To the Devil with Doyle! Blast it! Darling, you know I'm not serious about Bess. Not really. But she's sweet and...

CELESTE

Simple. Slow, some might say, and...

HOUDINI

...and human.

CELESTE

Using that against, me, eh? That's hitting below the belt.

HOUDINI

(holds her) We could be together, you know.

CELESTE

(breaks away) It's impossible.

HOUDINI

There's a way. You know there is.

CELESTE

But there'd be no more magic!

HOUDINI

(grabs her from behind and holds her again) Oh, I think there'd be plenty of that.

CELESTE

Harry! Seriously, how would we live?

HOUDINI

(Offended)

I think you're underestimating me.

CELESTE

Harry...really.

HOUDINI

No! I mean, I'm no wizard but I do have some small talent. I was getting by all right before you came along.

CELESTE

You were deceased before I came along. Demised.

HOUDINI

A bit stunned, perhaps...

CELESTE

Bereft of life. An ex-magician.

HOUDINI

Let's not exaggerate, now. I believe I calculated that I had at least 18 seconds left...

CELESTE

Dead! As dead as those dead doves that were, in fact, as you quite correctly pointed out earlier, dead!

HOUDINI

Mmmmm, a little logy, maybe.

CELESTE

Dead! Dead! Dead!

HOUDINI

Let's agree to disagree on that point, darling. The point is...

CELESTE

Harry, I think you're an incredible magician. The best I've ever seen. Maybe the best that's ever been, but you continually want to do things that aren't actually possible. It's a bit of a problem. But that's where I can help you...now! I don't think you understand what you'd be giving up.

HOUDINI

You're afraid. I understand. To lose your freedom. To lose the life, everything, as you know it.

CELESTE

Yes! You're right! Yes, I am! I'd have to give up everything. Everything, do you understand? I'd have to give up flying!

HOUDINI

You can fly with me. I can fly! You've seen it!

CELESTE

(Laughs)

In that...absurd, rickety metal contraption, yes. Slap a pair of wings on that canine of yours, why don't you? Just about as effective as that flying...machine!

HOUDINI

(Proudly)

A Voisin biplane. It's French.

CELESTE

French! Oh, well, then...by all means...the celebrated *French* engineering...

HOUDINI

It's been documented! On film! One hundred feet in the air! Exhilarating! Got nearly four miles in Australia!

CELESTE

(Mumbles)

I can put a girdle round the earth in 40 minutes.

HOUDINI

What?

CELESTE

Nothing.

HOUDINI

And remember when we flew together? In the balloon.

CELESTE

Oh, that was nice. Yes.

HOUDINI leans in for a kiss.

CELESTE

(Dodges contact)

Still. I would have to give up everything. Everything I was, everything I am. To be with you for whatever little amount of time we'd have.

HOUDINI

Our entire lives!

CELESTE

(Soberly)

Human lives.

Pause.

CELESTE

What's that? A minute. A breath.

Pause.

HOUDINI

And?

SYCORAX enters with a glass of water balanced on his back. HOUDINI takes the glass and begins to offer it to CELESTE. Sound of "Poof." HOUDINI tosses the contents of the glass in the air and a blizzard of glistening silvery white snowflakes rains down on them all.

HOUDINI

(Laughs)

See? I can conjure a storm, too!

CELESTE

(Laughs)

Yours is much prettier.

HOUDINI

C'mon. You said it yourself. You are, admittedly, the only one of your kind. That's got to be lonely. And girdling the earth by one's self every three quarters of an hour or so is bound to get a little old after 300 or so years, right? How old are you again?

CELESTE

299.

HOUDINI

Mmmmm...born in 1610 would make you...

CELESTE

1611! Not 1610. Gosh! Alright! I'm 303! Happy, Sherlock? You make me wish I were back in that tree sometimes!

HOUDINI

(Touches her face tenderly)

Where thy groans did make the wolves howl? My poor dove.

CELESTE

Oh, Harry! How did you...?

HOUDINI

I don't dislike the *entire* Shakespeare canon, you know. Anyway...you can still make this wolf howl...grrrr.

CELESTE

You'll miss my magic. You will. I'll be as dull and dreary as boring what's-er-name. A great lump, lumping about.

HOUDINI

Probably.

She pouts.

HOUDINI

But, well, you've still got it. For the moment, anyway.

CELESTE

True.

HOUDINI

Once more, for old times sake, wouldn't hurt.

CELESTE

For old times sake. One last time.

HOUDINI

And now, ladies and gentlemen...

CELESTE

(Facetiously)

For my last and final trick...

She claps her hands twice together; the lights go out

HOUDINI

(In darkness)

Now that was a cheap trick!

CELESTE

(Giggling)

Right. I'm off to the theatre!

HOUDINI claps twice, lights come back on.

CELESTE has gathered her belongings and exits stage left.

HOUDINI

(Shouting)

Fine! I don't need you, you know! And I wasn't dead!

A loud male bellow is heard stage right.

HOUDINI

(Fiddling with lock again)

We could've at least practiced the key pass! Out of my depth...hmmmp! We'll see about that!

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE enters hopping on one leg, in pain, rubbing his wounded leg.

HOUDINI

Doyle! What happened?

DOYLE

Blasted contraption bit me!

HOUDINI

Sycorax! That's brilliant! I've been teaching him to attack, you know! Sic 'em, Syc! Very funny. *(Laughs)* First time he's done it though! Brilliant!

DOYLE

Yes, well, don't worry. I'm fine.

HOUDINI

Yes, fine. *(Yelling offstage)* Good job, Syc! Good boy! *(Barks; beat)* Oh, sorry Doyle! You alright?

DOYLE collapses into the chair, mopping his face with a large red handkerchief that he produces from his pocket with a flourish.

DOYLE

I should say so! Lived through far worse than merely getting maimed by a miserable, misguided, mechanical monstrosity!

HOUDINI kneels down and rolls up DOYLE'S pant leg and check the wound.

HOUDINI

He's actually quite well-behaved, normally.

DOYLE waves him off dramatically with the handkerchief.

DOYLE

Been to Greenland on a whaler. West Africa too during the Boer War! No arrogant, addlepatated, automaton is going to intimidate me!

HOUDINI

Oh, yes! Well, quite.

DOYLE

(Waves the handkerchief)

Yes! Past that!

HOUDINI

(Confused)

Past that! Yes!

DOYLE

Who put that two-bit tin can together anyway?

HOUDINI

(Sheepishly)

I did.

DOYLE

What the Devil for?

HOUDINI

Oh, for fun, mostly. And the crowds, they adore him. Showmanship, Doyle. Showmanship. Just the simplest thing, bringing my top hat in on his back, and the people eat it up. They simply eat it up Doyle! Cost me maybe ten cents in parts from the scrap yard. But the payoff has been *(Mispronounces)* incalculatable! Incalculatable. Is that right?

DOYLE

Incalculable.

HOUDINI produces small notepad and pen from his waistcoat pocket, writes.

HOUDINI

Incalculable. Showmanship, pure and simple, Doyle.

DOYLE

Yes! Exactly! To the matter...

HOUDINI

Where's Bess?

DOYLE

Lady Doyle took her for a nice cuppa so I could discuss important business with you.

HOUDINI

(Relieved)

Oh good! Such a fine lady, your wife, sir. Regal. Like a queen, almost. And knows innately, instinctively what to do in every situation. You know, Bess and Celeste, a bit like oil and water if you get my drift.

DOYLE

(Gravely)

Yes.

HOUDINI

Fire and water, really, if I think about it.

DOYLE

Mmmm, yes. *(Waves his hanky at a slinky sequin costume hanging on the wall)* The oil. The fire.

HOUDINI

(Nudges him suggestively)

Eh?

They laugh knowingly. Doyle produces a cigar. Lights it and offers it to Houdini. HOUDINI shakes his head no. DOYLE raises one eyebrow, continues to hold out the cigar to him. HOUDINI takes it and sits down. DOYLE produces another cigar and lights it for himself.

HOUDINI

I suppose I should offer you a drink but I don't indulge. Have to keep my wits about me, you know.

DOYLE

Never touch the stuff. I tell my children, "If not for your own sake, for mine, avoid alcohol at all cost. That way safety lies!" *(Waves cigar around)* Nevertheless, a man has got to have a vice!

HOUDINI

(Leans back in the chair to caress the sequin costume on the wall)

Yes, I suppose that's true.

DOYLE

Now. *(Long pause)* That last maneuver was simply stunning! Simply stunning! Houdini, my friend, by Jove, you have done it! Never seen anything like it!

HOUDINI

The doves? You know, it's strange you say that because Celeste calls them Lazarus doves, which I haven't entirely looked into the prospect of and sounds reasonably...

DOYLE

No, no, no, no, no! No! Before that. The wall! You walked through that solid brick wall right in front of our very eyes! Simply astounding!

HOUDINI

Ah! Yes! That's a neat trick, actually, and when you know how it's accomplished, actually not that difficult at all! You see...

DOYLE

You have outdone yourself!

HOUDINI *(Cont'd)*

...it's actually very simple and if you recall, it wasn't exactly right before your eyes at all, really...

DOYLE

Nonsense. *(Gets up pats him on the back)* You are simply the most Amazing! Astounding! Mystical...

HOUDINI

(Finishing)

Magical, Incomparable! The King of Cards! The Prince of the Air! Don't believe the hype, Doyle. You see, it's all just sleight-of-hand. Very well done, sleight-of-hand, mind you. The best in the business. Extremely well thought out and executed by the best illusionist in all America! All the world!

DOYLE

Illusion. Ah.

HOUDINI

Illusion. Yes.

DOYLE

Illusion and truth. Two sides of the same coin. You may fool the rest of them. But you can't fool me, Houdini. I know.

HOUDINI

Know...

DOYLE

That's it. I simply know.

HOUDINI

Well that's nice, seeing there's nothing to *know*.

DOYLE

Oh, but I think there is.

HOUDINI

Then you are mistaken.

DOYLE

I think not.

HOUDINI

Think again.

DOYLE

(Laughs heartily, slaps him on the shoulder)

You play the part so well, my friend! Bravo! Bravo! *(Coughs; stubs out cigar)* You should be in pictures! You're almost as funny as Chaplin!

HOUDINI

Chaplin! Does anyone talk about anything but Chaplin? Little Tramp my eye! Do you know I can literally, literally, Doyle, do what he does underwater and in chains, and with so much more showmanship. And in front of a live audience too! No take two for me! It's one and done!

DOYLE

Do not mistake me, my friend. You are the real thing.

HOUDINI

It's films that are tricking people. Not me. It's trickery, by gum! Jiggery-pokery! I swear to God, Doyle, if I had a mind I could be in pictures, and not just starring in them, but have my own studio and direct and produce and probably edit them, to boot! I've never tried it but I'm sure I could. I have twice the talent and could do it in half the time.

DOYLE

I've thought about this quite a bit. Quite a bit. And I've come to the conclusion that there can only be one explanation.

HOUDINI

Doyle, you're an expert in solving mysteries but I'm telling you there is no mystery here to unravel.

DOYLE

Isn't there?

HOUDINI

(Sighs)

No! I mean, not about me, anyhow.

DOYLE

I know what you are, Houdini. You are the real thing. You are that which I seek.

HOUDINI

But that *is* a mistake, Doyle. I seek it too, believe me, I do. I want it more than anyone. Even more than you, I fear. Ever since my brother died. And now mother. There is nothing more that I want in this world, nothing more I'd rather have or believe to be real. But I haven't found it either. It isn't real -- quite the opposite, in fact, and God knows, it's not me!

DOYLE

But you would say that, wouldn't you?

HOUDINI

I'm standing here. Telling you. Man to man. Friend to friend. What I do are tricks! It's all an illusion! Why would I lie? What would I have to gain?

DOYLE

Ah, that's not the question. Rather, what do you have to protect?

HOUDINI

Lying to you would mean denying that I am the world's greatest magician. Which I am! A magician who has worked on his incomparable skills since childhood. And that is an understatement. I have honed the finest and most obscure talents from the keenest sources while building my physical abilities to the point most human mortals can only dream about! The hours I've spent holding my breath in icy cold water. Upside-down. Inside-out. Chained, gagged, bound, freezing, cramped, punched in the gut more times than I can remember. Do you know how it feels to purposely dislocate your shoulder? Do you? It's indescribably painful and then to have to relocate again?

DOYLE

I think I have some idea. More than most. I'm a doctor. A physician by trade. Seen some of the worst injuries imaginable. Pain? I know a thing or two about that too. I know as much as anyone alive about physiometry and what the human body and mind are capable of. But what you're doing? It's beyond the pale of human possibility. This, I know. This, I am quite sure of.

HOUDINI

(outraged) Jesus! How can you be so easily duped? I'm sitting here telling you that what I'm doing is not real! I've never pretended that it was real! And I'm shouting it from the rafters to you now that it is not real! My God! The creator of the most methodical, logical, rational detective the world has ever seen! The keenest mind the world has never even have the imagination to dream of until you created it...and yet!

DOYLE

(Smiles gleefully)

Grip this fact with your cerebral tentacle/The doll and its maker are never identical.

Long weighty pause; SYCORAX noisily makes his way onstage. Both HOUDINI and DOYLE roll their eyes and he turns and saunters off again.

DOYLE

Say what you like, Houdini. I know the Catholic Church holds a certain power, if you will. And maybe we can't speak as freely as we'd like, even here in America, where I believed the church held considerably less sway than abroad. But there's the government, of course. Wouldn't want that bandied about, naturally. Dangerous. Look, I want to speak to you openly, honestly, about the mystical, about the spiritual. Of course, you can pretend it's a trick. You'd have to. But because of my position, my status, I have the luxury of exclaiming my beliefs without fear of recrimination. I daresay you have the same luxury, if you choose to.

HOUDINI

The choice is not mine, or rather there is no choice! I speak freely and honestly! Here, abroad, everywhere! You know, what? I'll tell you something I've never told anyone. I've never even really admitted it to myself, if you want to know the truth.

DOYLE *nods.*

HOUDINI

In fact, it may have been where it all started. My obsession with the art of illusion. I wasn't born in Appleton, Wisconsin. I'm the not the All-American boy they'd have you believe. I'm Jewish, you know.

DOYLE

Yes, your father was a rabbi. And your real name is Erik Weisz. Or Erich, depending on the source.

HOUDINI

Touché.

DOYLE

Did a bit of sleuthing. Not a complete rube, you know.

HOUDINI

Nor was I born on April 6. I was born on March 24. In Budapest. Near a steel mill on the river Danube. Horrible place, the cacophony, day and night, night and day, drove mother insane. That's why dad left. To come to America. Thank God.

DOYLE

But why April 6?

HOUDINI

Do you know what March 24 was in ancient Rome? It was celebrated as the Day of Blood. And it was believed that any child born on that day would be punished by an early death.

Long pause.

HOUDINI

But April showers bring May flowers!

He produces a bouquet of flowers and offers them to DOYLE.

DOYLE

(Gleeful)
Oh, Jean will love these!

HOUDINI

Celeste did, too. Didn't stop her from leaving but...

DOYLE

Yes, I had so looked forward to seeing your lovely assistant again. Sorry, I couldn't quite remember her name, Cecilia, you said?

HOUDINI

Celeste. Cecilia was my mother's name. She...passed last year.

DOYLE

Oh, yes, right, so sorry. The names are so similar. I knew you were close.

HOUDINI

Yes.

DOYLE
Celeste. Is she here, then?

HOUDINI
Not presently. *(Coughs)*

DOYLE
Where did you two meet?

HOUDINI
Meet? Oh, I don't know. She just sort of...turned up. I was in the middle of a new trick, the underwater handcuffs escape. *(Walks around the large, dry, glass shower-like enclosure)* Having a bit of trouble, actually. Designed the damn thing to go off just so and then...it didn't, naturally. But, here's the thing, I actually had 18 seconds before she went and, oh, maybe not 18 but it was a fair amount of time, believe me, it was at least...

DOYLE
Before she...?

HOUDINI
Well, before she got me out. However she did it. I was just in, underwater, and then I was...

DOYLE
Out.

HOUDINI
Out.

DOYLE
And was there anyone else there?

HOUDINI
No.

DOYLE
But how is it possible that she...? She's, what, 5' 2"?

HOUDINI
At most, I mean, I didn't really question...

DOYLE
And you're not huge, I mean, what, 175, 180 pounds?

HOUDINI
Something like that, I guess, I mean, I don't know how exactly she accomplished it but believe me, it wasn't magic.

DOYLE walks around, thoroughly inspecting the device.

DOYLE

No.

HOUDINI

I mean, I can't exactly explain it either but I know there is an explanation and that's what's important here.

DOYLE

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

HOUDINI

What?

DOYLE

Nothing.

HOUDINI

Certainly, she's a little, well, eccentric. Most people in our position are, naturally. Show folk. Performers. All the travelling and whatnot. And for a woman, a single woman, it's extremely stressful! Almost unnatural!

DOYLE

Unnatural, yes. Eccentric, how?

HOUDINI

Well, I'm extremely fond of her, you know. Extremely. I've never met a woman like her, you understand. More like us, you know? More like a man. Very, well, free and understanding of, well, things, you know.

DOYLE

Understanding, yes. Understanding of things. Yes, I understand.

HOUDINI

Yes, I mean she's awfully sweet, though, really, underneath it all. The anger. And beautiful. And talented. But theatre folk, you know. A bit mad.

DOYLE

Mad.

HOUDINI

(Whispers)

She thinks she's a magical spirit! *(Laughs nervously)* And not just any magical spirit, Ariel from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*! *(Laughs again)*

DOYLE sits back and pulls out a pipe, lights it and smokes. HOUDINI continues to laugh intermittently and nervously.

HOUDINI

I mean, it's ludicrous. Kind of endearing, though, really, don't you think? Such a wild affectation, if you want to call it that. Quirk?

DOYLE

But isn't Ariel, wasn't he a boy?

HOUDINI

Spirits can take on many different forms. She said. I mean you English really have cornered the market on the eccentricity. There's one in every family, they say, and it's really quite an innocent fantasy that isn't hurting anyone, really.

DOYLE is silent. Smokes.

HOUDINI

I mean, you can't think that...There isn't any chance that...She's not Ariel!

DOYLE glances briefly at him, then away.

HOUDINI

Why did I say anything! I know this is pure folly. But you! I should've known this is something you'd actually believe! A man of your stature. Believing in fairies!

DOYLE

But you can't say exactly how you got out, can you?

HOUDINI

Well, er, um, eh...not exactly.

DOYLE

How does one get into this chamber?

HOUDINI

There's a pulley and the stagehand usually lowers me in – and out of course, after I pick the locks and get out of the restraints. The whole thing usually takes a matter of seconds, less than a minute, all told.

DOYLE

But I've seen you do this, and you're virtually naked! Where could you possibly hide the key?

HOUDINI

Ah, trick of the trade! Can't reveal it, I'm afraid. To a civilian.

DOYLE

No matter.

HOUDINI

You see, I discovered long ago that the key to getting and holding the public's imagination was to give them the illusion of danger. Just the slightest whiff of death and you'll be packing 'em in! So I took that to the logical extreme. To literally put myself in the jaws of death. Hanging like a rack of meat, underwater, in stocks, unable to breathe where every moment counts. Each second marking the minute division between life and death. That is no trick, certainly. That's sheer determination. The ambition and the desire to give people what they deserve. Not what they want, but what they deserve. And I'm the only one that can do it, too. I invented this illusion. I designed and built this chamber. And I'll sue anyone that tries to imitate it too! Not that they ever really could...

DOYLE

But why didn't the stagehand lift you out?

HOUDINI

The pulley was stuck. Now, normally he would have an axe on hand to break the glass, just in case. But we had rehearsed this so many times without a hitch, I guess he forgot to have it at arm's reach that day. He left me there in the chamber to go find it. At two minutes and 42 seconds. You see, I could hold my breath at the time for only three minutes. I've since added nearly 15 seconds on since then, but at the time, three was my limit. Very irresponsible of him not to have the axe on hand. I fired him immediately, of course.

DOYLE

Of course. So no one was present when she somehow pulled you to safety.

HOUDINI

Correct.

DOYLE

And the pulley was stuck. And there was no axe at hand. And she was suddenly just there. And claimed she got you out?

HOUDINI

Yes. Quite the coincidence her being there at that very moment. Even though I was nearly drowned and slightly shaken, I'll admit, for the first time in my life, I quite clearly and vividly remember looking up at her and this halo of light just seemed to surround her little face and the

HOUDINI (*Cont'd*)

only thought that filled my mind was "radiant beauty!" For a second, I thought I might have actually died and gone to heaven and was staring down the face of an angel.

DOYLE

Monumental!

HOUDINI

And then I vomited water all over her little green slippers.

DOYLE

You know Celeste means heavenly in French?

HOUDINI

(Takes out notepad and pen and writes)

No. Heavenly, eh? Not exactly the way it turned out but...

DOYLE

But what was she doing there? At the theatre?

HOUDINI

Oh, said she said she was answering the (*French pronunciation*) 'advertisement' for an assistant. Of course, I hadn't remembered placing an advertisement, er, advertisement.

DOYLE

She said 'advertisement'? Where in Le Figaro?

HOUDINI

Exactly! I thought she was French but it turns out she's as American as apple pie. Raised in New Jersey. Bit of a mystery, though. Bet Sherlock could solve it, though! There's always a logical explanation.

DOYLE

Can't swing a cat around here without hitting Sherlock! Books, stage, they're talking pictures now, too, you know. You know how many Sherlocks I've seen on treading the boards? It's mind-numbing. You know I never wrote the words, "Elementary, my dear Watson?" One of these theatrical Sherlocks said it. It's taken on a whole life of its own.

HOUDINI

Extremely flattering, I would think.

DOYLE

Think again.

HOUDINI

You've created the most famous, cleverest detective in the world and that makes you the cleverest mystery writer in the world.

DOYLE

You could say it is Sherlock Holmes who has created me.

HOUDINI

My inventions may be brilliant but they are ultimately ephemeral. I create illusions on stage that just as quickly disappear forever into the ether. They only live on in the minds of the audience. You have this character, these books, which will last forever.

DOYLE

A noose around one's neck may be ephemeral, as well. Short-lived but memorable. I think you're lucky. What they'll remember is you. Houdini.

HOUDINI

What they'll remember is who they want me to be. The Great Entertainer.

DOYLE

And they'll remember The Great Detective. You know, the first one, 'A Study in Scarlet' was met with a resounding silence. I hadn't the slightest compunction to revive the characters of 221B Baker Street ever again! Told the Mam I was going to make my mark as an author of historical novels. Managed a few. Got good notices. Then along came Joe Stoddart over at *Lippincott's Monthly* out of Philadelphia. I arrived for dinner at his behest at The Langham Hotel and there's Stoddart sitting with Oscar Wilde. He left with orders for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and I got *The Sign of Four*. Funny, when Lippincott's put it out, they loathed Dorian almost as much as they ignored Sherlock in *Scarlet*! Said it was immoral. I wrote to Wilde myself telling him, if anything, it was almost too obviously moral.

HOUDINI

Is that true? That's fascinating!

DOYLE

Of course it's true! Stoddart's to blame! Now I can play two rounds of golf and knock out a Holmes story in the same day. Holmes is a noose, a golden noose, but a noose.

HOUDINI

I know a thing or two about nooses.

DOYLE

Can you show me how to get out of one as gracefully?

HOUDINI

A hypothetical, fictional literary one? Not my area of expertise. But anything I willingly put myself into, I'm equally sure I can find a way out. So I'd say if you wrote yourself into it, then you should be able to write your way out of it.

DOYLE

Excellent advice and exactly what I plan on doing. Sherlock is a mere mortal, after all. Not some otherworldly creature, capable of superhuman feats of strength, endurance and supernatural powers. Which brings me to you and matters much more important than my small creation.

HOUDINI

Not the supernatural again.

DOYLE

Love.

HOUDINI looks surprised.

DOYLE

Oh, I can tell by the look on your face whenever you speak of her. Your eyes...they go all soft. Why, you're in love. It's easy for anyone to see!

HOUDINI

It is? Oh dear. Love?

DOYLE

You're surprised? I'm absolutely stunned by your lackluster powers of deduction!

HOUDINI

She did let me kiss her once and I enjoyed it very much.

DOYLE

Stunned. Well, you're young and anyway that's why I'm here. I can always tell when a woman is in love. I've had plenty of practice, believe me.

HOUDINI

(snickers)

Oh? I'll bet, do tell...

DOYLE

(Conspiratorially)

You have no idea. *(Changing quickly)* Having a good wife is the key in the life. The key Houdini! I adore the Lady Doyle. Every spring I make a special pilgrimage to the garden to pick her the first wildflower of the season because she is the wildflower of my heart. That's real love,

DOYLE (*Cont'd*)

Houdini. That's devotion. Now, look here, I don't like you leading Bess on and neither does Lady Doyle. She's a lovely girl and will make someone a lovely wife. Just not you. You, you need excitement! You need passion! You need fire! You need a true partner in crime, as it were! You need (*Indicates costume on wall*)

HOUDINI

(*Flustered*)

Gosh she's just so...keen!

DOYLE

Keen? Oh dear, I'm going to have to loan you a few books. Young chap, round your age. D.H. Lawrence, we'll start there. Anyway, where is that divine, mad little creature of yours, then, eh?

HOUDINI

She went to the Blackstone. To see a play. It's her day off and I pretended to forget because really I didn't want her to go. I need her, you see, I mean for the act...

DOYLE

She's gone off all by herself, unaccompanied in this big, dangerous city? You really ought to take better care of her, Houdini! There's hoodlums, thieves, and worse lurking around almost every corner!

HOUDINI

You should know, I suppose. Perhaps you're right. She's just so independent. And I've just so used to her insisting that she can go and do just as she pleases any time at all, but, ah, I think you're right. I shouldn't let her go about alone in the city!

DOYLE

Well, now, if she's as independent as you say she won't want you telling her what to do. It simply won't work!

HOUDINI

It won't?

DOYLE

No! Of course not! You have to make her think it's her idea, you see. That's the key!

HOUDINI

I see! The key!

DOYLE

Now, I'll take care of everything. Give me that pad and pen.

HOUDINI does. DOYLE scratches out a note and returns the folded paper to HOUDINI.

Give this to that stagehand of yours.

DOYLE

Syc!

HOUDINI

SYCORAX comes briskly in, stopping at HOUDINI's heels.

You see. I don't even have to get up!

HOUDINI

(Warily)
Mmmm. May be useful when properly trained.

DOYLE

HOUDINI puts the note around a chain around the ROBOT's neck and he exits.

We pass notes like this off and on stage all the time. Comes in handy.

HOUDINI

Sort of digitized, doddering dumbwaiter.

DOYLE

If you like.

HOUDINI

Shouldn't be long now. Where's the Blackstone, exactly?

DOYLE

Half a block south.

HOUDINI

Mmmmm. And how long's she been gone?

DOYLE

Oh, an hour or so.

HOUDINI

Long silence.

DOYLE

Play any games?

HOUDINI

Not bad at cards. *(Pulls a deck out of thin air)* Pick a card.

DOYLE

Oh, really! This old gag? Come on, Houdini. Isn't this a waste of both our time?

HOUDINI

Isn't that kind of the point? Anyway, this has got a bit of a twist. I'm going to *read your mind*. Go on, pick a card, any card. Just a normal deck. Nothing tricky see?

HOUDINI hands the deck to DOYLE to inspect.

HOUDINI

Go on, inspect it Inspector! Nothing fishy about it, right?

DOYLE

(Examines the deck carefully)

Right! *(Hands it back to HOUDINI)*

HOUDINI

(Spreads out the deck)

Now. Pick a card. Any one at all.

DOYLE picks.

HOUDINI

Now place it back in the deck. Anywhere at all. Go ahead.

DOYLE does so, obscuring the card from HOUDINI. He shuffles and cuts the deck numerous times.

HOUDINI

Now, using only the power of my mind and the super-kinetic powers that I naturally possess, I am going show you which was the card you chose.

HOUDINI spreads out the deck, card by card, looking deeply into DOYLE's face as he does so. HOUDINI discards several groups of cards, placing them face down on the table, until he is holding only one group of cards, one of which is the one DOYLE

selected. HOUDINI shuffles these last cards, and holds them out in front. HOUDINI waves his index finger above the cards and the card DOYLE chose magically rises up above the rest.

DOYLE

(Visibly impressed)

Ah!

Short pause; HOUDINI smiles and turns his hand to side, repeating the card levitation to show that it was his hidden pinkie pushing the card up, and not magic.

DOYLE

(Crestfallen)

More of a cricket man, myself. *(Picks up cricket bat from the prop table)* Played at Edinburgh University. And founder and Captain of the Portsmouth Cricket Team! You a cricket man, Houdini?

HOUDINI

'Fraid not. That's just what we use to kill the rats.

DOYLE

(Sets it down)

Skiing, now that's a sport. The sport of the future! Doctor sent us to Switzerland for Lady Doyle's health. Hurling headlong down the vertiginous mountains in that glorious air is getting as near to flying as any earthbound man can experience. In the future, Englishmen will flock to Switzerland in winter to experience that once-in-a-lifetime sensation!

HOUDINI

Skiing. Huh.

DOYLE

Rugby, golf, billiards...

HOUDINI

Billiards, now that's a game!

DOYLE

Ah, yes! The Diogenes Club in London has the most exceptional billiards table!

HOUDINI

Well, I'd put it up against the Chicago Club any day! *(Looking at watch)* We can have a game or two and be back in time for the evening show!

DOYLE

I'm game. Let's make it interesting. I win, you let Lady Doyle hold a séance and summon Cecilia for you.

HOUDINI

Er...I...

DOYLE

It's what you want more than anything, I know. I'm quite close to my mother, as well. And Lady Doyle is truly the most remarkable medium. She can contact anyone from beyond, anyone at all virtually anytime at all. Bang!

HOUDINI

I'm sure, it's just that...

DOYLE

Houdini, you will be astounded! Now, I know, you've been reluctant because some of the other mystics I've praised in the past had some questionable techniques, perhaps, that you had objections with, that perhaps weren't as authentic as I'd been led to believe....

HOUDINI

Well, that's putting it mildly...

DOYLE

But Lady Doyle is the real thing, my friend! And I'm not just saying that because I'm biased, truly. And that's why I'd only recommend her and only her to you for contacting your dearly departed Cecilia! And she loves you like her own son and wants to do this for you. A gift, you could call it. Don't disappoint, her, eh Houdini? We'll speak to her on the way back...

CELESTE enters, fuming mad.

CELESTE

What the hell have you done Harry?

HOUDINI

Oh. My goodness. Celeste! Um, Doyle, er, Sir Arthur, is here and...

DOYLE saunters far stage left.

CELESTE

How could you? This is beyond, Harry! Beyond what I ever even imagined you to be capable of in my wildest dreams. In my wildest of wild dreams!

HOUDINI

(To DOYLE)

Hmmm, what *have* I done?

CELESTE

That you could stoop to, would stoop to! It's simply beyond explanation!

HOUDINI

What did I do? I wonder? Didn't read the damn note is what I did!

CELESTE

Didn't even make it to intermission! Oh, Harry! Oh, Harry! Have you completely lost your mind?

HOUDINI

You're one to talk.

CELESTE

Oh, don't even! No! I would never, could never, do what you just did today. Never in three hundred odd years. Never in a million years. And to get me to come back here, what, an hour early?

HOUDINI

Doyle!

CELESTE

It's unthinkable. It's unfathomable, it's...

HOUDINI

Dammit Doyle!

CELESTE

Don't blame him! It's your fault!

HOUDINI

What do you mean? I didn't do anything!

CELESTE

Sitting there, just enjoying myself, having a lovely time, at a lovely play, with lovely actors, in a lovely theatre! Oh, it was so much fun! I found myself wishing you were there. You know, Orlando really was quite a milk sop...

HOUDINI

I told you!

CELESTE

Yes, you were right, darling (*Swept away with emotion, she caresses his face tenderly*) you're always right! I kept hearing your voice in my head. I thought of all the brilliant ways you would have torn into him and mocked him. It was great fun! Oh! And you would've loved the staging, they did a nice thing for the forest, sort of tromp l'oeil.

HOUDINI smiles. CELESTE remembers her anger.

CELESTE

Anyway, no sooner had Jacques started 'All the world's a stage' when a boy bursts in to the theatre and starts yelling 'Fire!' 'Fire!' and sure enough, a large flame appears in the back of the theatre, and everyone just panics. Kids screaming, mother's wailing, dogs barking and men running like mad for the exit.

HOUDINI

What? Goodness!

DOYLE chuckles to himself

CELESTE

Yes, yes. Utter chaos!

HOUDINI crosses to her.

CELESTE

But guess what? No smoke! I've seen a fire or two in my time. Why no smoke, I thought? Where there's no *smoke*, there's...

DOYLE

No *fire*.

HOUDINI

(Tries to hold and console her)

Oh, my dove, are you alright?

CELESTE

(Shoves him away)

My dove my arse!

HOUDINI

Darling! Doyle!

CELESTE

To the Devil with Doyle!

HOUDINI

Sorry, Doyle, I told you. Very temperamental. Oh, why am I apologizing to you?

CELESTE

And then I recognized the voice. It was Jimmy's voice. Jimmy the stagehand. After everyone cleared out, there was Sycorax, barking like mad, marching up and down the aisle with a scrap of flash paper burning pathetically off his collar.

HOUDINI and DOYLE repress laughter.

CELESTE

Really! The nerve! The utter nerve!

HOUDINI and DOYLE chuckle.

CELESTE

People could have been killed you know!

DOYLE

Yes. *(Chuckling)* Terrible.

HOUDINI

I bet Orlando wet himself running for the exit!

He and DOYLE burst into uproarious laughter despite themselves.

CELESTE

Really! It's bad enough that Harry...but Sir Arthur, you're a knight! What...what would the king say?

DOYLE

(Charming; kisses her hand)

Sorry, Madame. Deepest pardons. I'm so pleased you came through this unscathed and no one was harmed. And I'm so charmed to finally make your acquaintance. Enchante!

CELESTE

(Flattered)

Enchante! *(To HOUDINI)* I told you, you should learn French!

HOUDINI

Apparently. Apparently I should! Because speaking a flouncy foreign language apparently makes up for the fact that HE did it!

CELESTE and DOYLE

What?

HOUDINI

He did it! He engineered the whole debacle! I sat here! He wrote a note...

CELESTE

On your pad, with your pen.

HOUDINI

Yes! On my pad with my pen. How do you know it was my pad and my pen? I thought it was on fire!

CELESTE

Because Jimmy handed me the note afterward.

HOUDINI

And what did it say?

CELESTE

(Blushing)

You *know*. Being a lady, I won't repeat it...

DOYLE

Lawrence, D.H. Told you, Houdini.

CELESTE

Are you saying Sir Arthur wrote...? No, Harry. No, no, no. *(Hyperventilating)* No, this...!

HOUDINI

No, of course not, darling! I wrote it! Every word of it! *(Mutters through teeth)* Doyle!

CELESTE

Because I don't think I could bear going on living if someone else, if someone were to, say the things, know the things that were written and, oh *(Swoons away, fainting)*

HOUDINI

Damn you, Doyle! What the hell did you do? What the hell did you say? And who's D.H. Bloody Lawrence?

DOYLE

You'll thank me in the end.

HOUDINI

For nearly setting a bloody theatre on fire? For making it look like I did it? For saying God knows what to the woman I love?

DOYLE

Yes, for all that and more. You'll thank me. Eventually. Virtue is its own reward.

HOUDINI

Virtue! You're a bloody madman Doyle!

DOYLE

Hah! Showmanship, Houdini!

HOUDINI

Not funny! Help me get her to the...

DOYLE easily picks up CELESTE and carries her to a chaise, laying her down with her head in his lap.

DOYLE

I've got her. Go fetch some water and ice if you can.

HOUDINI exits.

DOYLE pulls some smelling salts out of his pocket and places them under her nose. She immediately awakens.

CELESTE

What was...what happened?

DOYLE

You fainted, my dear.

CELESTE

That's preposterous. I've never fainted in my life. Why would I do that?

DOYLE

There's a first time for everything. I've fainted once myself. It's technically due to a lack of oxygen to the brain, whether due to shortness of breath or a lack of sufficient oxygen in the environment. *(Pause)* I'm a doctor.

CELESTE

Oh.

They look deeply at each other.

DOYLE

(Slightly flustered by her effect on him)

It's very stuffy in here. We need to open a window or...

CELESTE

I'm alright.

DOYLE

(Feels her pulse)

It's a bit elevated. Are you quite sure you feel well?

CELESTE

Yes, I'm, I think I'm much better now, thanks.

She squeezes his hand, signaling him to get up.

DOYLE

Oh, yes, sorry, I was trying...there wasn't room to...

CELESTE

It's quite alright.

DOYLE

Yes.

Pause.

CELESTE

I'm so sorry about my behavior. Earlier. I'm afraid I'm not as, um, refined as the ladies you're used to.

DOYLE

Nonsense. You're perfectly lovely. Refreshing!

CELESTE

No. You see I was raised, er, a little differently than most and allowed certain freedoms, you see, that, well, and my parents were rather, ehm, non-conformists, if you follow me.

DOYLE

Bohemians, eh?

CELESTE

Exactly.

DOYLE

I've run across one or two of you theatre folk, don't you worry!

CELESTE

Some of you scribes may be included in that category, as well, I would think, doctor.

DOYLE

I daresay I have a strong Bohemian element in me. Discovered that aboard the S.S. Hope. A whaler. Headed for Greenland. Nothing like it. I came of age at sea. Turned 21 at 80 degrees north latitude.

CELESTE

Hah!

DOYLE

The pirate yarns we'd spin! Friendly boxing matches on the foredeck!

CELESTE

Ah!

DOYLE

Scored 3,600 seals. Clubbed 55 of them myself!

CELESTE

(Disgusted)

Oh, no. *(Changing the subject)* Tell me, doctor, what exactly do you think of our friend, Mr. Houdini? Is he a Bohemian?

DOYLE

No. I don't think so.

CELESTE

Really. Why?

DOYLE

Well, he has a bit of the Gypsy in him, to be sure. Have to for this lifestyle. Like a circus, travelling all about.

CELESTE

I don't think he'd have it any other way, either. I've never seen a person so suited for this life. Normal life bores him to tears. I don't blame him. I was ruined for normal life long ago. Long, long ago. The road and magic and adventure is our life now. Onward and upward is the only way forward for us.

DOYLE

Yes. Feet planted firmly on the ground but his head's floating in the firmament. Not that unusual. Hard balance to strike, though.

CELESTE

Doctor *(Touches his hand)* you must believe in Harry, you know.

DOYLE

I do! Without a doubt, my dear, I heartily do!

CELESTE

That he is the greatest magician alive. And simply that.

DOYLE

My dear, there are things in this world, beyond this world, of which you simply cannot conceive. Things that cannot fully be measured or quantified or explained. And it's that that is my real passion in life. What lies beyond this life is the chief concern and intellectual obsession of my entire waking consciousness.

CELESTE

I daresay Harry would agree with you. It's why he routinely straddles the line between life and death without so much as a thought. It's why he's the greatest illusionist the world has ever known.

DOYLE

Yes. We share this passion. This obsession. The obsession of the possibility of life beyond death. It bonds us and will bond us forever, no matter how strenuously either of us objects. And we both have, objected, that is, at some time or other. I have a theory about him. Houdini. I think he's more than just a mere mortal. I think he's...I believe he is something different. Something special. Something the world has yet to fully experience and may never fully accept. I have accepted it though. Fully and freely. He either resists this or denies it.

Pause.

DOYLE

I didn't set out to tell you any of this, you know. Quite the opposite. I've only just met you and yet, it's quite strange how I can be so frank with you.

CELESTE

I have that effect. On some people.

DOYLE

(Looks at her in a new light)

Yes. Yes! I can see how Harry would be so totally and completely in love with you.

CELESTE

(Shyly)

He is?

DOYLE

Of course! How could he not? You are simply...enchanted!

CELESTE

(Tearing up)

You have no idea!

DOYLE

He fools himself thinking he can settle down with ah, with ah, that other... what's her name? She'll never make him happy. How could she?

CELESTE cries.

DOYLE

(Holds her)

But why would you be distraught, child? You love him too! I see that very clearly!

CELESTE sobs.

DOYLE

Is there some impediment? Are you, is there, do you have other entanglements? Husband?

CELESTE shakes her head no.

DOYLE

Is there... a child?

CELESTE shakes her head no.

DOYLE

Well, then, my dear, I don't see anything else that could impede your future with Houdini! There, there, now *(Dries her eyes with his handkerchief)*. And don't worry about your little secret, my dear. It's safe with me.

CELESTE

Secret?

DOYLE

He told me all about what you *are*. We English...

CELESTE

Scottish...

DOYLE

British... are quite used to eccentricities. I'd be surprised if you didn't have any, well, some quirk or other. And Houdini doesn't mind in the slightest! Thinks it's charming! And as for myself, well... truth be told, I did engineer that whole debacle. To get you back here. But not for the reason I told him.

CELESTE

Which was?

DOYLE

Oh, love or some such thing. I didn't give a damn. Just wanted to meet you. Suss you out. About him, of course. His powers. Find out how much you knew.

CELESTE

Ah, sleuthing!

DOYLE

Precisely. But I can clearly see what's going on. Everything that's going on, as a matter of fact.

CELESTE

Really?

DOYLE

Don't you worry. I mean it, this time. You see, there's nothing more in this world that I want than to see Houdini attain his fullest potential. I mean, the things he's capable of now! One can only imagine the heights he'd reach, the progress he'd make side by side with the perfect partner. The ideal mate! You!

CELESTE

Oh!

DOYLE

You can help him, my dear. I told Harry the key to life is a good wife. And I meant it. Do you think Sherlock could've happened without Lady Doyle? Nonsense! Still be on that damn whaler in Greenland!

CELESTE

The poor seals.

DOYLE

Yes! You see! Men! We're barbarians. Brutes!

CELESTE

Yes.

DOYLE

Yes! And we, he needs the correct female influence to counterbalance all that. And that's where you come in. You understand him. You, my dear, are the key!

CELESTE

I am? I'm the key?

DOYLE

You understand his life and his passion better than anyone. You encourage and facilitate it. Of course! With your help, his powers will double, perhaps even triple! Oh, this has fallen out far better than I could have devised! Most exciting! The Lady Doyle and I will do everything in our power to clear the way to you and Harry's happiness!

CELESTE

Oh?

DOYLE

We'll have your whole family in, Lady Doyle will wire them, from, where did he say you were from? New York?

CELESTE

I'm uh...

DOYLE

Well, we'll have the wedding there, then, I don't think Harry will object! He's just got the two brothers now. It should be done immediately!

CELESTE

Well, ah...

DOYLE

Just send the Lady Doyle all the details and addresses and she'll make all the arrangements, unless of course your mother would like to arrange everything

CELESTE

She, ah...

DOYLE

But nevertheless I'd still include the Lady in on all your plans as she is quite adept at these sorts of things.

CELESTE

Sir Arthur, I could never, we could never, how could we ever ...

DOYLE

And of course you can count on us for all the financial arrangements! We'd be honored! Why, you're like a daughter to me already. And Harry a wayward son! It'll all be splendid! You'll see! Splendid!

SFX of celeste plays and CELESTE kisses him tenderly on the cheek.

HARRY enters.

HOUDINI

What's going on in here? Doyle? You stealing away the best assistant I've ever had?

Celeste *exits*.

HOUDINI

Well, what did you do to her now?

DOYLE

(Deeply moved; collecting himself)

Not a thing. Not a thing old chap.

HOUDINI

Where'd she go?

DOYLE

Not to worry. Not to worry, old chap. Capital girl. Capital girl, that girl.

HOUDINI

Yes, I know.

DOYLE

(Regaining some of his faculties)

Where'd she say she was from?

HOUDINI

New Jersey.

DOYLE

Jersey, eh? Funny, not much of a New Jersey accent. Something, French, was it about her?

HOUDINI

Something, French, perhaps, yeah.

DOYLE

Huh.

HOUDINI

Huh.

DOYLE

Well, I'm off.

HOUDINI

Off? That's it?

DOYLE

Must rush off I'm afraid. The Lady Doyle will have been expecting me. I'll speak to her about the séance. Perhaps we can even squeeze it in tonight! What time is your evening show?

HOUDINI

10:00 pm. *(Surprised)* But we never played, you never won...!

DOYLE

Nonsense! It's my gift to you. It's our gift to you. Mine and hers *(Indicates CELESTE'S costume)*. Capital! Midnight. We'll do it at midnight. *(Exiting talking)* Dawn, dusk and midnight are the most spiritual times. The magical division between morning and night, night and morning and day to dawning day. Magic...

HOUDINI

(Defeated)
But... *(Sighs)*

DOYLE

(Offstage)
Tata old chap!

HOUDINI sits at piano. Begins playing Chopin's Nocturne No. 2 in E flat major.

CELESTE enters after a few bars. She closes her eyes, listening. He stops playing for a moment.

CELESTE

Sublime.

HOUDINI

Chopin in love. Composed it for one of his students. Fell in love with her and wrote this for her.

CELESTE

You can hear it. Every note.

HOUDINI

Played it for her. The student. His love. *(Resumes playing for several bars)* It was his proposal of marriage. And she turned him down. Her parents said he was too fragile. Not in good health.

CELESTE

I can't imagine turning down anybody that could write something like this.

HOUDINI

Fragility. That's something no one's ever accused me of, that's for sure. Hah! Should've been born with an iron stomach, like me. Then he would've gotten his girl.

CELESTE

(Dreamily)

Angel fingers.

HOUDINI

Eh?

CELESTE

George Sand called him "angel fingers."

HOUDINI

(Struggling to recall)

Hmm, George Sand. She dressed like a man, they said. *(Resumes playing)*

CELESTE

Who could resist someone that that could play like...I didn't know you played!

HOUDINI

My mother taught us. She taught my brother and I. Father didn't care for music. Didn't care much for my brother and I, really, either.

CELESTE eyes him tenderly.

HOUDINI raises both his hands over his head as the player piano continues.

HOUDINI

Although I really wasn't much of a student.

CELESTE covers her mouth in shock.

HOUDINI

Haha! Illusion!

CELESTE

A pianola!

BOTH laugh uproariously. Beat. Turns somber. HOUDINI turns off the music.

HOUDINI

(Lasciviously)

You know, we never practiced the key pass.

CELESTE crosses to the prop table, picks up a key and puts it in her mouth. She crosses to him and sits on piano bench next to him. He kisses her, passing the key from her mouth to his. He smiles, taking the key out and setting it down on the piano. She lays her head on his shoulder. He strokes her hair and kisses her gently on the forehead.

HOUDINI

This is no trick, though, you know. *(Grabs her chin and gazes into her eyes)* It's magic.

She responds by kissing him on the mouth, gently. They look into each other's eyes for several beats.

CELESTE

Play again. Play for real this time.

HOUDINI sighs.

CELESTE

You can play. A little, anyway. Can't you.

HOUDINI

Yes.

HOUDINI looks down at the keys, somberly. With one hand, he plays the first eight notes of Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer."

CELESTE finishes the second eight notes.

They both look sad. Several beats.

HOUDINI then touches a button to turn on a lively rendition of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody." HOUDINI and CELESTE dance together. He twirls her and she twirls offstage to exit left. He pauses as she goes, standing still for a few beats before walking slowly off stage right.

ACT II
Scene 1

AT RISE: *Midnight, October 30, 1914. Backstage at the same theatre in Chicago. DOYLE and HOUDINI sit on either side of the props table, which has been cleared except for a white candle in the center, a legal-size pad of writing paper and a pen. DOYLE produces a photograph from his pocket to show HOUDINI.*

DOYLE

You see? You can clearly see the spirit extras hovering over this coffin!

HOUDINI

(Takes the photo, skeptically eying it)

Mmmm...well that one just looks like a drop of water.

DOYLE

Naturally the spirits would congregate around recently departed. It's possible one of them is even the spirit of the dearly departed.

HOUDINI

I've seen photos like this before. They used pre-prepared plates...

DOYLE

Ada Deane. Mark my words, my friend, she's a sensitive of the highest order. She has other photographs like this, as well. Women are the only creatures with right sensitivity, the correct energy, to draw the spirits from their resting place, you know.

HOUDINI

Yes. Curious. I've often wondered why most the successful mediums have been women. I have a theory. Well, more than a theory actually. There is documented proof on the subject.

DOYLE

Really?

HOUDINI

Yes. Remember Madame du Verny? The renowned Belgian medium?

DOYLE

Yes! We had a séance with her. Spectacular woman.

HOUDINI

Quite. Spectacularly beautiful.

DOYLE

Yes.

HOUDINI

Who is currently serving two years in the Joliet Penitentiary for fraud, forgery and the corruption of a minor.

DOYLE

Look what they did to Joan of Arc!

HOUDINI

Women may be more capable of luring spirits...and coincidentally they are also more capable of luring guileless men to believe in them.

DOYLE

I can assure you she held absolutely no sway over me!

HOUDINI

I do not doubt your absolute fidelity to Mrs. Doyle, my friend. I am only suggesting that other, less moral figures, may be susceptible to, well, whatever goes on in a dark room with an attractive but inscrutable female medium under a cloth covered table.

DOYLE

(Laughs)

Well, rest assured that nothing of the kind will be going this evening!

HOUDINI

(Laughs)

I doubt it not.

DOYLE

The Lady Doyle will astound you, my friend. Simply astound you with her extrasensory talents. She is an extraordinarily gifted woman. In so many ways!

HOUDINI

I've no doubt.

DOYLE

She is everything to me.

HOUDINI

Where, um is she?

DOYLE

In the lavatory.

Oh. HOUDINI

DOYLE
Preparing herself for communion. With the spirits.

Ah. HOUDINI

DOYLE
It's a process.

HOUDINI
Yes, I'm familiar. With this process. In my experience, it usually involves a lot of rouge and lip varnish.

DOYLE
(Ignoring him)
She will emerge if and when the spirits are ripe for communication!

HOUDINI
Not that Lady Doyle needs any embellishment.

DOYLE
Well, frankly, she does a bit. Nonetheless...

HOUDINI
Nonetheless...

DOYLE
You know, you amaze me Houdini.

HOUDINI
I amaze everyone, no?

DOYLE
You joke and jest and indulge your inner skeptic. But deep down, you would like nothing more than to speak to your beloved mother again, eh?

HOUDINI
You have no idea.

DOYLE
I have some idea. Bess told us. About how you would spend months with your beloved mother, wearing only the clothes she had given you because you knew it would please her.

HOUDINI

And lay my head on her breast to hear her heart beat. If there ever was a son who idolized and worshipped his mother, whose every thought was for her happiness and comfort, that son was myself. My mother meant my life. Her happiness was synonymous with my peace of mind. There is no one and nothing closer to my heart than my sainted mother. (*Fingering CELESTE'S costume*) Virtually no one. There's nothing I wouldn't do to hear her voice one last time. To hear her heart beat once again. To feel her presence once again would mean the easing of all the pain that I have in my heart.

DOYLE

And yet, you are the consummate skeptic. The Great Debunker. Why, of all people, wouldn't you give yourself to the promulgation of the pathway to the other side? The promotion of the free and open exchange between realms? Eh? Why wouldn't you use everything in your considerable power to further this union, this reunion? This movement towards reunification of our world and the world beyond? The ultimate reality! The consummate magic!

HOUDINI

I believe I have. And I believe that I continue to do so.

DOYLE

Then you must open your mind to it. You have no idea what you could do for the Spiritualist movement. You're capable of superhuman feats. You're practically looked upon as a God. Escaping, time and time again, for seemingly impossible predicaments. Why, don't you know that people see that as a metaphor for their own lives. As an affirmation of the human capacity of overcome extreme adversity?

HOUDINI

Did you know that I was medium, Doyle?

DOYLE

It doesn't surprise me, no.

HOUDINI

Well, it's the truth. I've dedicated my life to debunking phony mediums, fraudulent fakes whose only real power is to ruin people's lives because I've seen it. I've done it. I don't know if I told you, but early in my career, very early on, I was one of those frauds. November 27, 1897. The opera house in Garnett, Kansas. I billed myself as Houdini: The World-Famous Medium who, by popular request of the public, would give a Spiritualistic séance! Tables will be levitated! Pianos will float overhead! There wasn't an empty seat in the house. I gave them exactly what they wanted.

DOYLE

Tables levitating, pianos floating?

HOUDINI

Oh, yes. And, as usual, so much more! The consummate showman!

DOYLE

I would quite like to have seen that myself!

HOUDINI

(Sneers)

Oh, I was quite the sight in my tattered, ill-fitting tails. Bounding around through the audience "revealing" all the private tragedies and sordid secrets of the townspeople with my amazing "physic abilities." Visiting the local graveyard, chatting with the local gossips, and culling through garbage, that is. It was rather amusing, I'll admit, when I was able get one of the town's prominent businessmen running for the exit by reprimanding him for neglecting his mother's grave in favor of bestowing several lovely bouquets on his secretary!

DOYLE

(Laughs knowingly)

Hah! *(Scoffing)* Neglecting his own mother's grave!

HOUDINI

Ah, but wait! For my coup de gras! I claimed that I was also a trained psychometric clairvoyant adroit in communicating with spirits from beyond. I declared that I would reveal the murderer of a local woman called Sadie Timmons.

DOYLE

Houdini, I'm chuffed! A real-life whodunit!

HOUDINI

Precisely. You'll be amused to know that I was sometimes billed as "Sherlock Holmes Eclipsed." I couldn't pick up a newspaper or speak to someone in the audience then who didn't compare me to your detective.

DOYLE

Damnable press. No imagination.

HOUDINI

And I was about as real as Sherlock Holmes is. I pretended to go into a trance and proceeded to channel the spirit of Sadie Timmons. The young lady who had been stabbed 17 times in her kitchen with a butcher knife.

DOYLE

17 times? Now that's something *(Produces an identical pad of paper and pen as Houdini's; writes)* Garnett, Kansas. Timmons, you say?

HOUDINI checks pocket. Notices his pad and pen are missing. Eyes Doyle suspiciously.

HOUDINI

Is that my pad and pen?

DOYLE

(Continues writing)

I'm afraid I've picked up a bit of this sleight-of-hand business.

HOUDINI laughs.

DOYLE

Not very difficult, actually.

HOUDINI

You're frightfully good at it too. Should I worry about you putting me out of business?

DOYLE

Eh? Oh, I should think if I had a mind to, I give you a run for your money. The Lady wouldn't like it though. Jumping off bridges into freezing water and the like. But this *(Indicates pad and pen)* is simply, well it's all about misdirection.

HOUDINI

Exactly.

DOYLE

(Quoting)

A pretty assistant is the most effective form of misdirection. Who said that? *(Changing the subject back to Garnett)* Do you have the clippings? This might be one for the books, so to speak. And you solved the mystery? In Garnett?

HOUDINI

There were accusations and innuendo throughout the town about who had actually done in the poor lass, including the town's quick-tempered sheriff, if I recall.

DOYLE

(Lights pipe)

Mmmm...

HOUDINI

Of course, I had no idea who actually had done the deed. I pretended to faint away dead just as I was about to reveal the name. You can imagine the reaction of the crowd.

DOYLE

Utter pandemonium.

HOUDINI

Utter. And which contained, naturally, several of Sadie's relatives. I never stopped to think of that. Only the shocked and surprised reaction of the crowd. And my own aggrandization. Not the incalculable hurt I must have caused reliving that ghastly moment in front of her loved ones and friends. And I kept on doing it, too. After Garnett, Kansas. I kept on deceiving people. People who had lost loved ones. Who were in pain. Who desperately wanted some connection with the other side for reassurance. For peace of mind. I was intentionally toying with the sacred, turning tragedy into entertainment.

DOYLE

For every silver living there is a cloud. For every legitimate surgeon, there is a back-alley butcher.

HOUDINI

Jack the Ripper. Pleased to meet you.

DOYLE

(Laughs)

Well Lady Doyle is no Dr. Jekyll, I can assure you. She is the very embodiment of supernatural grace and enlightenment and as skilled a surgeon as ever wielded a scalpel.

HOUDINI

Sir Arthur, I promise you what I vow to myself at every séance I attend. That I will go into this with an open mind and unbiased attitude. I swear, at this moment, to purge all earthly thoughts and give over my entire soul to this séance.

DOYLE

Splendid. Three will do. But where is Celeste? Although you were magnificent as usual, the act suffered some from her absence this evening.

HOUDINI

(Disturbed)

Yes. She wasn't feeling well.

DOYLE

Ah, yes. She fainted. I hope I didn't upset her too much with my little prank. *(Laughs)* I think she rather enjoyed it, myself. Shows you were thinking of her. And the D.H. Lawrence bit – ah Houdini! Between you and me I think that was the clincher!

HOUDINI

Yes, I still don't know what I, er you, said there. We'll have to discuss that sometime Doyle. Seriously.

DOYLE

(Pats him on the back)

Yes, that's the girl for you, by gum! By the way, Houdini, let's keep that little incident between ourselves, yes? Lady Doyle wouldn't be too keen on it, you see.

HOUDINI

Yes, of course. I am worried about Celeste, though. She has never missed a show. Not in all the time I've known her. Doyle, I'm...I'm afraid. *(Quietly)* I don't believe I've ever said those words before...out loud.

DOYLE

Don't worry.

HOUDINI

Perhaps I pushed her too far. Or didn't push her enough. Oh, blast it! I don't know! How is one supposed to know with these creatures?

DOYLE

(Knowingly)

She'll be back. Mark my words.

LADY DOYLE enters solemnly. She is wearing a veil, like a yashmak, over her head, so that only her eyes are visible. She sits at the center of the table, facing the audience. A long silence.

LADY DOYLE

Please place your hands upon the table.

They all do so.

LADY DOYLE

Let there be nothing but Light surrounding this gathering and its participants and let us only communicate with powers and entities of the Light. Protect us, protect this house, the people in this house and let there only be Light and nothing but Light, Amen!"

ALL

Amen!

LADY DOYLE

(Lighting the candle)

As I light this candle, bless this sacred place. Let the light of this flame radiate love and protection to all four corners of this room. Bathe this room and cleanse it with white light for the inspiration of my higher perceptions and the purity of my soul. Dear Spirit! We open our hearts

LADY DOYLE (*Cont'd*)

to you and surround you with love and light! I will be true to you and hear and your gentle guidance.

Pause. Silence.

LADY DOYLE

(Voice trembling)

Spirits! Hear me! And give me your message!

DOYLE puts his arms around her, trying to calm her. She shakes him off, her body shaking and her hand thumping hard against the table.

LADY DOYLE grasps a pen and writes a large cross at the top of the pad of paper. She writes quickly. At the end of the first sheet of paper, DOYLE tears it off and hands it to HOUDINI.

HOUDINI

(Reading, shakily)

Oh my darling, thank God, thank God at last I'm through! I've tried oh so often and now I am happy. Why, of course, I want to talk to my boy my own beloved boy. Friends, thank you with all my heart for this...God bless you Sir Arthur for what you're doing for us for us over here who so need to get in touch with our beloved ones on the earthly plane.

DOYLE hands HOUDINI another sheet.

HOUDINI

(Reads, more serenely)

Tell my darling boy that I love him and that I am so happy in this life – it is so full and joyous – beyond the scope of the human imagination. My only shadow has been that my beloved one hasn't known how often I have been with him all the while. I am with him always and his goodness fills my soul with gladness. I want him only to know that I have bridged the gulf and now I can rest in peace. I want him only to know that I have bridged the gulf and now I can rest in peace.

DOYLE

My good man, ask the spirit, er, your mother a question so you can rest assured in your mind that this is indeed your saintly mother.

HOUDINI

(Flustered)

What should I ask?

DOYLE

I've found that telepathic communication with spirits may be most effective. Concentrate on what you desire in order to impart to this spirit!

HOUDINI

(Aloud)

I wish that my mother could read my mind! That she could read my thoughts and know the deep desire I have at all times in my heart and soul to rejoin with her.

LADY DOYLE writes frantically. DOYLE hands HOUDINI another sheet.

HOUDINI

(Reads)

He needn't worry, I can read my beloved son's mind at any time. I know his every wish, his every thought. That is why I am here. Because I know he wishes to speak to me now. And I am here and overwhelmed with joy of speaking to him now once more.

DOYLE hands HOUDINI the final sheet.

HOUDINI

(Reads)

It is almost too much...the joy of it...thank you. Thank you, friends. With all my heart for what you have done for me. For us. Thank you, Sir Arthur. You are doing God's work on earth. God's blessing on you all!

LADY DOYLE

The spirit has spoken! *(Slumps over and DOYLE helps her out)*

DOYLE re-enters energetically. HOUDINI is poring over the papers.

DOYLE

I told you Houdini! Didn't I tell you? She could summon up a spirit, poof! Like that! Unbelievable!

HOUDINI

(Pensive)

Yes. Unbelievable.

DOYLE

She was here I felt her! It was as if she was standing next to me, er, us! You must've felt it too!

HOUDINI

Uh, well...

DOYLE

You're just overcome with emotion. I understand. It's quite exhilarating but draining too. I've seen the Lady summon loads of spirits and the effect of everyone is very much the same. You're simply overwhelmed!

HOUDINI

Perhaps that's it.

DOYLE

What do you mean perhaps!

HOUDINI

Perhaps that's why I don't feel...anything.

DOYLE

Yes. I see that. You are strangely unmoved, my friend, after such an unbelievable display.

HOUDINI

Yes, unbelievable.

DOYLE

(Incensed)

Why...you can't tell me you don't believe the proof. The proof in your very own hands.

HOUDINI

I never said... *(Looks around)* Where is the Lady?

DOYLE

She's resting. It takes a great deal of energy to channel such strong energy and she is utterly limp at the moment. She's resting in your chambers.

HOUDINI

I'm grateful for her laborious services. Truly grateful to you both for all you have done for me. Your undying friendship and all you strive to do to satisfy my heart's desire. But I am grateful she is not here at present.

DOYLE

What do you mean?

HOUDINI

My friend, although my sainted mother had been in America for almost fifty years, she could not speak, read or write English.

DOYLE

And?

HOUDINI

Spiritualists claim that when a medium is possessed by a spirit who does not speak the language she automatically writes, speaks, or sings in the language of the deceased. You must know this as well as I!

DOYLE

Ah! But it is also true that a spirit becomes more educated the longer it is departed! Your blessed Mother had been able to master the English language in Heaven!

HOUDINI

I hold both Lady Doyle and yourself in the highest esteem. I was heartily in accord and sympathy at the séance. I was hoping and wishing that I might feel my mother's presence. There wasn't even a semblance of it. Everyone who has ever had a worshipping Mother and has lost her, knows the feeling which will come over him at the thought of sensing her presence.

DOYLE

You cannot blame the Lady Doyle for your lack of sensitivity!

HOUDINI

I know you treat Spirituality as a religion but I'm afraid, Sir Arthur, I cannot.

DOYLE

Blast it! This is my wife we are speaking of now!

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes