

Arthur Conan Doyle

The New Revelation



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Аннотация

"The New Revelation" is a firsthand account of investigation into the world of spiritualism. The treatise deals not only with the issue of physical versus metaphysical, but also considers the problem of death (and afterlife) and the question of communication with the spirit world. Conan Doyle's captivating prose and pragmatic, yet human, voice makes for an enlightening exploration of some eternally relevant questions-and possible answers.

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The New Revelation

by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Preface

Many more philosophic minds than mine have thought over the religious side of this subject and many more scientific brains have turned their attention to its phenomenal aspect. So far as I know, however, there has been no former attempt to show the exact relation of the one to the other. I feel that if I should succeed in making this a little more clear I shall have helped in what I regard as far the most important question with which the human race is concerned.

A celebrated Psychic, Mrs. Piper, uttered, in the year 1899 words which were recorded by Dr. Hodgson at the time. She was speaking in trance upon the future of spiritual religion, and she said: "In the next century this will be astonishingly perceptible to the minds of men. I will also make a statement which you will surely see verified. Before the clear revelation of spirit communication there will be a terrible war in different parts of the world. The entire world must be purified and cleansed before mortal can see, through his spiritual vision, his friends on this side and it will take just this line of action to bring about a state of perfection. Friend, kindly think of this." We have had "the

terrible war in different parts of the world." The second half remains to be fulfilled.

A. C. D. 1918.

Chapter I. The search

The subject of psychical research is one upon which I have thought more and about which I have been slower to form my opinion, than upon any other subject whatever. Every now and then as one jogs along through life some small incident happens which very forcibly brings home the fact that time passes and that first youth and then middle age are slipping away. Such a one occurred the other day. There is a column in that excellent little paper, *Light*, which is devoted to what was recorded on the corresponding date a generation – that is thirty years – ago. As I read over this column recently I had quite a start as I saw my own name, and read the reprint of a letter which I had written in 1887, detailing some interesting spiritual experience which had occurred in a seance. Thus it is manifest that my interest in the subject is of some standing, and also, since it is only within the last year or two that I have finally declared myself to be satisfied with the evidence, that I have not been hasty in forming my opinion. If I set down some of my experiences and difficulties my readers will not, I hope, think it egotistical upon my part, but will realise that it is the most graphic way in which to sketch out the points which are likely to occur to any other inquirer. When I have passed over this ground, it will be possible to get on to something more general and impersonal in its nature.

When I had finished my medical education in 1882, I found

myself, like many young medical men, a convinced materialist as regards our personal destiny. I had never ceased to be an earnest theist, because it seemed to me that Napoleon's question to the atheistic professors on the starry night as he voyaged to Egypt: "Who was it, gentlemen, who made these stars?" has never been answered. To say that the Universe was made by immutable laws only put the question one degree further back as to who made the laws. I did not, of course, believe in an anthropomorphic God, but I believed then, as I believe now, in an intelligent Force behind all the operations of Nature – a force so infinitely complex and great that my finite brain could get no further than its existence. Right and wrong I saw also as great obvious facts which needed no divine revelation. But when it came to a question of our little personalities surviving death, it seemed to me that the whole analogy of Nature was against it. When the candle burns out the light disappears. When the electric cell is shattered the current stops. When the body dissolves there is an end of the matter. Each man in his egotism may feel that he ought to survive, but let him look, we will say, at the average loafer – of high or low degree – would anyone contend that there was any obvious reason why THAT personality should carry on? It seemed to be a delusion, and I was convinced that death did indeed end all, though I saw no reason why that should affect our duty towards humanity during our transitory existence.

This was my frame of mind when Spiritual phenomena first came before my notice. I had always regarded the subject as the

greatest nonsense upon earth, and I had read of the conviction of fraudulent mediums and wondered how any sane man could believe such things. I met some friends, however, who were interested in the matter, and I sat with them at some table-moving seances. We got connected messages. I am afraid the only result that they had on my mind was that I regarded these friends with some suspicion. They were long messages very often, spelled out by tilts, and it was quite impossible that they came by chance. Someone then, was moving the table. I thought it was they. They probably thought that I did it. I was puzzled and worried over it, for they were not people whom I could imagine as cheating – and yet I could not see how the messages could come except by conscious pressure.

About this time – it would be in 1886 – I came across a book called *The Reminiscences of Judge Edmunds*. He was a judge of the U.S. High Courts and a man of high standing. The book gave an account of how his wife had died, and how he had been able for many years to keep in touch with her. All sorts of details were given. I read the book with interest, and absolute scepticism. It seemed to me an example of how a hard practical man might have a weak side to his brain, a sort of reaction, as it were, against those plain facts of life with which he had to deal. Where was this spirit of which he talked? Suppose a man had an accident and cracked his skull; his whole character would change, and a high nature might become a low one. With alcohol or opium or many other drugs one could apparently quite change a man's spirit.

The spirit then depended upon matter. These were the arguments which I used in those days. I did not realise that it was not the spirit that was changed in such cases, but the body through which the spirit worked, just as it would be no argument against the existence of a musician if you tampered with his violin so that only discordant notes could come through.

I was sufficiently interested to continue to read such literature as came in my way. I was amazed to find what a number of great men – men whose names were to the fore in science – thoroughly believed that spirit was independent of matter and could survive it. When I regarded Spiritualism as a vulgar delusion of the uneducated, I could afford to look down upon it; but when it was endorsed by men like Crookes, whom I knew to be the most rising British chemist, by Wallace, who was the rival of Darwin, and by Flammarion, the best known of astronomers, I could not afford to dismiss it. It was all very well to throw down the books of these men which contained their mature conclusions and careful investigations, and to say "Well, he has one weak spot in his brain," but a man has to be very self-satisfied if the day does not come when he wonders if the weak spot is not in his own brain. For some time I was sustained in my scepticism by the consideration that many famous men, such as Darwin himself, Huxley, Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, derided this new branch of knowledge; but when I learned that their derision had reached such a point that they would not even examine it, and that Spencer had declared in so many words that he had decided against it on a

priori grounds, while Huxley had said that it did not interest him, I was bound to admit that, however great, they were in science, their action in this respect was most unscientific and dogmatic, while the action of those who studied the phenomena and tried to find out the laws that governed them, was following the true path which has given us all human advance and knowledge. So far I had got in my reasoning, so my sceptical position was not so solid as before.

It was somewhat reinforced, however, by my own experiences. It is to be remembered that I was working without a medium, which is like an astronomer working without a telescope. I have no psychical powers myself, and those who worked with me had little more. Among us we could just muster enough of the magnetic force, or whatever you will call it, to get the table movements with their suspicious and often stupid messages. I still have notes of those sittings and copies of some, at least, of the messages. They were not always absolutely stupid. For example, I find that on one occasion, on my asking some test question, such as how many coins I had in my pocket, the table spelt out: "We are here to educate and to elevate, not to guess riddles." And then: "The religious frame of mind, not the critical, is what we wish to inculcate." Now, no one could say that that was a puerile message. On the other hand, I was always haunted by the fear of involuntary pressure from the hands of the sitters. Then there came an incident which puzzled and disgusted me very much. We had very good conditions one evening, and an amount

of movement which seemed quite independent of our pressure. Long and detailed messages came through, which purported to be from a spirit who gave his name and said he was a commercial traveller who had lost his life in a recent fire at a theatre at Exeter. All the details were exact, and he implored us to write to his family, who lived, he said, at a place called Slattenmere, in Cumberland. I did so, but my letter came back, appropriately enough, through the dead letter office. To this day I do not know whether we were deceived, or whether there was some mistake in the name of the place; but there are the facts, and I was so disgusted that for some time my interest in the whole subject waned. It was one thing to study a subject, but when the subject began to play elaborate practical jokes it seemed time to call a halt. If there is such a place as Slattenmere in the world I should even now be glad to know it.

I was in practice in South sea at this time, and dwelling there was General Drayson, a man of very remarkable character, and one of the pioneers of Spiritualism in this country. To him I went with my difficulties, and he listened to them very patiently. He made light of my criticism of the foolish nature of many of these messages, and of the absolute falseness of some. "You have not got the fundamental truth into your head," said he. "That truth is, that every spirit in the flesh passes over to the next world exactly as it is, with no change whatever. This world is full of weak or foolish people. So is the next. You need not mix with them, any more than you do in this world. One chooses one's

companions. But suppose a man in this world, who had lived in his house alone and never mixed with his fellows, was at last to put his head out of the window to see what sort of place it was, what would happen? Some naughty boy would probably say something rude. Anyhow, he would see nothing of the wisdom or greatness of the world. He would draw his head in thinking it was a very poor place. That is just what you have done. In a mixed seance, with no definite aim, you have thrust your head into the next world and you have met some naughty boys. Go forward and try to reach something better." That was General Drayson's explanation, and though it did not satisfy me at the time, I think now that it was a rough approximation to the truth. These were my first steps in Spiritualism. I was still a sceptic, but at least I was an inquirer, and when I heard some old-fashioned critic saying that there was nothing to explain, and that it was all fraud, or that a conjuror was needed to show it up, I knew at least that that was all nonsense. It is true that my own evidence up to then was not enough to convince me, but my reading, which was continuous, showed me how deeply other men had gone into it, and I recognised that the testimony was so strong that no other religious movement in the world could put forward anything to compare with it. That did not prove it to be true, but at least it proved that it must be treated with respect and could not be brushed aside. Take a single incident of what Wallace has truly called a modern miracle. I choose it because it is the most incredible. I allude to the assertion that D. D. Home – who, by

the way, was not, as is usually supposed, a paid adventurer, but was the nephew of the Earl of Home – the assertion, I say, that he floated out of one window and into another at the height of seventy feet above the ground. I could not believe it. And yet, when I knew that the fact was attested by three eye-witnesses, who were Lord Dunraven, Lord Lindsay, and Captain Wynne, all men of honour and repute, who were willing afterwards to take their oath upon it, I could not but admit that the evidence for this was more direct than for any of those far-off events which the whole world has agreed to accept as true.

I still continued during these years to hold table seances, which sometimes gave no results, sometimes trivial ones, and sometimes rather surprising ones. I have still the notes of these sittings, and I extract here the results of one which were definite, and which were so unlike any conceptions which I held of life beyond the grave that they amused rather than edified me at the time. I find now, however, that they agree very closely, with the revelations in Raymond and in other later accounts, so that I view them with different eyes. I am aware that all these accounts of life beyond the grave differ in detail – I suppose any of our accounts of the present life would differ in detail – but in the main there is a very great resemblance, which in this instance was very far from the conception either of myself or of either of the two ladies who made up the circle. Two communicators sent messages, the first of whom spelt out as a name "Dorothy Postlethwaite," a name unknown to any of us. She said she died

at Melbourne five years before, at the age of sixteen, that she was now happy, that she had work to do, and that she had been at the same school as one of the ladies. On my asking that lady to raise her hands and give a succession of names, the table tilted at the correct name of the head mistress of the school. This seemed in the nature of a test. She went on to say that the sphere she inhabited was all round the earth; that she knew about the planets; that Mars was inhabited by a race more advanced than us, and that the canals were artificial; there was no bodily pain in her sphere, but there could be mental anxiety; they were governed; they took nourishment; she had been a Catholic and was still a Catholic, but had not fared better than the Protestants; there were Buddhists and Mohammedans in her sphere, but all fared alike; she had never seen Christ and knew no more about Him than on earth, but believed in His influence; spirits prayed and they died in their new sphere before entering another; they had pleasures – music was among them. It was a place of light and of laughter. She added that they had no rich or poor, and that the general conditions were far happier than on earth.

This lady bade us good-night, and immediately the table was seized by a much more robust influence, which dashed it about very violently. In answer to my questions it claimed to be the spirit of one whom I will call Dodd, who was a famous cricketer, and with whom I had some serious conversation in Cairo before he went up the Nile, where he met his death in the Dongolese Expedition. We have now, I may remark, come to the year 1896

in my experiences. Dodd was not known to either lady. I began to ask him questions exactly as if he were seated before me, and he sent his answers back with great speed and decision. The answers were often quite opposed to what I expected, so that I could not believe that I was influencing them. He said that he was happy, that he did not wish to return to earth. He had been a free-thinker, but had not suffered in the next life for that reason. Prayer, however, was a good thing, as keeping us in touch with the spiritual world. If he had prayed more he would have been higher in the spirit world.

This, I may remark, seemed rather in conflict with his assertion that he had not suffered through being a free-thinker, and yet, of course, many men neglect prayer who are not free-thinkers.

His death was painless. He remembered the death of Polwhele, a young officer who died before him. When he (Dodd) died he had found people to welcome him, but Polwhele had not been among them.

He had work to do. He was aware of the Fall of Dongola, but had not been present in spirit at the banquet at Cairo afterwards. He knew more than he did in life. He remembered our conversation in Cairo. Duration of life in the next sphere was shorter than on earth. He had not seen General Gordon, nor any other famous spirit. Spirits lived in families and in communities. Married people did not necessarily meet again, but those who loved each other did meet again.

I have given this synopsis of a communication to show the kind of thing we got – though this was a very favourable specimen, both for length and for coherence. It shows that it is not just to say, as many critics say, that nothing but folly comes through. There was no folly here unless we call everything folly which does not agree with preconceived ideas. On the other hand, what proof was there that these statements were true? I could see no such proof, and they simply left me bewildered. Now, with a larger experience, in which I find that the same sort of information has come to very, many people independently in many lands, I think that the agreement of the witnesses does, as in all cases of evidence, constitute some argument for their truth. At the time I could not fit such a conception of the future world into my own scheme of philosophy, and I merely noted it and passed on.

I continued to read many books upon the subject and to appreciate more and more what a cloud of witnesses existed, and how careful their observations had been. This impressed my mind very much more than the limited phenomena which came within the reach of our circle. Then or afterwards I read a book by Monsieur Jacolliot upon occult phenomena in India. Jacolliot was Chief Judge of the French Colony of Crandenagur, with a very judicial mind, but rather biassed against spiritualism. He conducted a series of experiments with native fakirs, who gave him their confidence because he was a sympathetic man and spoke their language. He describes the pains he took to eliminate fraud. To cut a long story short he found among them every

phenomenon of advanced European mediumship, everything which Home, for example, had ever done. He got levitation of the body, the handling of fire, movement of articles at a distance, rapid growth of plants, raising of tables. Their explanation of these phenomena was that they were done by the Pitris or spirits, and their only difference in procedure from ours seemed to be that they made more use of direct evocation. They claimed that these powers were handed down from time immemorial and traced back to the Chaldees. All this impressed me very much, as here, independently, we had exactly the same results, without any question of American frauds, or modern vulgarity, which were so often raised against similar phenomena in Europe.

My mind was also influenced about this time by the report of the Dialectical Society, although this Report had been presented as far back as 1869. It is a very cogent paper, and though it was received with a chorus of ridicule by the ignorant and materialistic papers of those days, it was a document of great value. The Society was formed by a number of people of good standing and open mind to enquire into the physical phenomena of Spiritualism. A full account of their experiences and of their elaborate precautions against fraud are given. After reading the evidence, one fails to see how they could have come to any other conclusion than the one attained, namely, that the phenomena were undoubtedly genuine, and that they pointed to laws and forces which had not been explored by Science. It is a most singular fact that if the verdict had been against spiritualism,

it would certainly have been hailed as the death blow of the movement, whereas being an endorsement of the phenomena it met with nothing by ridicule. This has been the fate of a number of inquiries since those conducted locally at Hydesville in 1848, or that which followed when Professor Hare of Philadelphia, like Saint Paul, started forth to oppose but was forced to yield to the truth.

About 1891, I had joined the Psychical Research Society and had the advantage of reading all their reports. The world owes a great deal to the unwearied diligence of the Society, and to its sobriety of statement, though I will admit that the latter makes one impatient at times, and one feels that in their desire to avoid sensationalism they discourage the world from knowing and using the splendid work which they are doing. Their semi-scientific terminology also chokes off the ordinary reader, and one might say sometimes after reading their articles what an American trapper in the Rocky Mountains said to me about some University man whom he had been escorting for the season. "He was that clever," he said, "that you could not understand what he said." But in spite of these little peculiarities all of us who have wanted light in the darkness have found it by the methodical, never-tiring work of the Society. Its influence was one of the powers which now helped me to shape my thoughts. There was another, however, which made a deep impression upon me. Up to now I had read all the wonderful experiences of great experimenters, but I had never come across any effort

upon their part to build up some system which would cover and contain them all. Now I read that monumental book, Myers' Human Personality, a great root book from which a whole tree of knowledge will grow. In this book Myers was unable to get any formula which covered all the phenomena called "spiritual," but in discussing that action of mind upon mind which he has himself called telepathy he completely proved his point, and he worked it out so thoroughly with so many examples, that, save for those who were wilfully blind to the evidence, it took its place henceforth as a scientific fact. But this was an enormous advance. If mind could act upon mind at a distance, then there were some human powers which were quite different to matter as we had always understood it. The ground was cut from under the feet of the materialist, and my old position had been destroyed. I had said that the flame could not exist when the candle was gone. But here was the flame a long way off the candle, acting upon its own. The analogy was clearly a false analogy. If the mind, the spirit, the intelligence of man could operate at a distance from the body, then it was a thing to that extent separate from the body. Why then should it not exist on its own when the body was destroyed? Not only did impressions come from a distance in the case of those who were just dead, but the same evidence proved that actual appearances of the dead person came with them, showing that the impressions were carried by something which was exactly like the body, and yet acted independently and survived the death of the body. The chain of evidence between

the simplest cases of thought-reading at one end, and the actual manifestation of the spirit independently of the body at the other, was one unbroken chain, each phase leading to the other, and this fact seemed to me to bring the first signs of systematic science and order into what had been a mere collection of bewildering and more or less unrelated facts.

About this time I had an interesting experience, for I was one of three delegates sent by the Psychical Society to sit up in a haunted house. It was one of these poltergeist cases, where noises and foolish tricks had gone on for some years, very much like the classical case of John Wesley's family at Epworth in 1726, or the case of the Fox family at Hydesville near Rochester in 1848, which was the starting-point of modern spiritualism. Nothing sensational came of our journey, and yet it was not entirely barren. On the first night nothing occurred. On the second, there were tremendous noises, sounds like someone beating a table with a stick. We had, of course, taken every precaution, and we could not explain the noises; but at the same time we could not swear that some ingenious practical joke had not been played upon us. There the matter ended for the time. Some years afterwards, however, I met a member of the family who occupied the house, and he told me that after our visit the bones of a child, evidently long buried, had been dug up in the garden. You must admit that this was very remarkable. Haunted houses are rare, and houses with buried human beings in their gardens are also, we will hope, rare. That they should have both united in one

house is surely some argument for the truth of the phenomena. It is interesting to remember that in the case of the Fox family there was also some word of human bones and evidence of murder being found in the cellar, though an actual crime was never established. I have little doubt that if the Wesley family could have got upon speaking terms with their persecutor, they would also have come upon some motive for the persecution. It almost seems as if a life cut suddenly and violently short had some store of unspent vitality which could still manifest itself in a strange, mischievous fashion. Later I had another singular personal experience of this sort which I may describe at the end of this argument¹.

From this period until the time of the War I continued in the leisure hours of a very busy life to devote attention to this subject. I had experience of one series of seances with very amazing results, including several materializations seen in dim light. As the medium was detected in trickery shortly afterwards I wiped these off entirely as evidence. At the same time I think that the presumption is very clear, that in the case of some mediums like Eusapia Palladino they may be guilty of trickery when their powers fail them, and yet at other times have very genuine gifts. Mediumship in its lowest forms is a purely physical gift with no relation to morality and in many cases it is intermittent and cannot be controlled at will. Eusapia was at least twice convicted of very clumsy and foolish fraud, whereas

¹ Vide Appendix III

she several times sustained long examinations under every possible test condition at the hands of scientific committees which contained some of the best names of France, Italy, and England. However, I personally prefer to cut my experience with a discredited medium out of my record, and I think that all physical phenomena produced in the dark must necessarily lose much of their value, unless they are accompanied by evidential messages as well. It is the custom of our critics to assume that if you cut out the mediums who got into trouble you would have to cut out nearly all your evidence. That is not so at all. Up to the time of this incident I had never sat with a professional medium at all, and yet I had certainly accumulated some evidence. The greatest medium of all, Mr. D. D. Home, showed his phenomena in broad daylight, and was ready to submit to every test and no charge of trickery was ever substantiated against him. So it was with many others. It is only fair to state in addition that when a public medium is a fair mark for notoriety hunters, for amateur detectives and for sensational reporters, and when he is dealing with obscure elusive phenomena and has to defend himself before juries and judges who, as a rule, know nothing about the conditions which influence the phenomena, it would be wonderful if a man could get through without an occasional scandal. At the same time the whole system of paying by results, which is practically the present system, since if a medium never gets results he would soon get no payments, is a vicious one. It is only when the professional medium can be guaranteed an annuity

which will be independent of results, that we can eliminate the strong temptation, to substitute pretended phenomena when the real ones are wanting.

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