THE COMING OF THE FAIRIES

BY

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOKS EDITION BY

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University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London
**INTRODUCTION**

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In November 1920 the celebrated author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle announced the beginning of a new "epoch in human thought." He believed that he was presenting "a strong *prima-facie* case" (pp. 39-40) for the existence of fairies, based on photographs taken by two young girls in July and September 1917. Noting that "in a matter involving so tremendous a new departure one needs overpowering evidence before one can say that there is no conceivable loophole for error," (p. 40) Doyle laid out the case for the existence of fairies in the village of Cottingley, Yorkshire. Some have seen this announcement in *The Strand* magazine and Doyle's subsequent book *The Coming of the Fairies* as the writings of a sixty-one-year-old who was losing his ability to think rationally. But to truly understand why the creator of Sherlock Holmes, one of the most unsentimental and logical characters in literature, would believe in fairies requires an understanding of Doyle's life, his general acceptance of spiritualism, and what he felt would be the result of widespread acceptance of the Cottingley photos. While it is clear—despite the protestations of some supporters even to this day—that the photographs were faked by the young protagonists, this introduction aims to provide the reader with sufficient back-
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ground to appreciate Doyle's claims and to understand why Doyle wanted fairies to exist.

DOYLE'S LIFE

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh to Irish parents in 1859. Though given a Jesuit education, he rejected Christianity in 1875 before entering the University of Edinburgh, from which he graduated in 1881 with an MB CM. He briefly served as a ship's doctor on a voyage to the West African coast, and then in 1882 set up a practice in Plymouth. This practice was unsuccessful, however, and while waiting for patients Doyle began writing stories. He received an MD from Edinburgh in 1885 for his work on syphilis. After moving his practice to Southsea he began to achieve literary success, and his first major work, A Study in Scarlet, which introduced Sherlock Holmes, was published in 1887. It was around this time that Doyle became interested in psychic phenomena. The success of Holmes—particularly when he began to appear in short stories in The Strand—led Doyle to fear that he would be forever associated with that character rather than with the historical fiction he favored, and in an 1893 story Holmes apparently perished at the hands of his arch-nemesis Professor Moriarty. In the years leading up to World War I, Doyle successfully gained public notice as a historical novelist, and he eventually resurrected Holmes. His defense of British actions during the Boer War earned him a reluctantly accepted knighthood in 1902. Not afraid to take on unpopular causes, he crusaded against the Belgian slave trade in the Congo, supported legalization of divorce, championed Irish home rule, defended the Irish rebel Roger Casement, and vocally helped expose miscarriages of justice in the cases of George Edalji and Oscar Slater.

Doyle married Louisa ("Jane") Hawkins in 1885, a marriage that would last until her death from tuberculosis in 1906. He also maintained a strong platonic relationship with Jean Leckie, whom he married in 1907. His first marriage resulted in two children, Mary and Alleyne Kingsley, and the death of the latter in 1918 of pneumonia aggravated by war wounds propelled Doyle further into an examination of spiritualism. Thus began what Owen Dudley Edwards has termed Doyle’s “world crusade to evangelize for spiritualism.” A series of books resulted: The New Revelation (1918), The Vital Message (1919), The Wanderings of a Spiritualist (1921), Case for Spirit Photography (1922), The Coming of the Fairies (1922), Our American Adventure (1923), Our Second American Adventure (1924), and the two-volume History of Spiritualism (1926). To understand Doyle's support for spiritualism, and how the Cottingley fairies played into that, it is best to first examine spiritualism as a movement.

SPIRITUALISM

Doyle was one among many who believed that there was a “spirit world” and that communication was possible between our plane and that one. The Swedish
scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) is credited as the first significant promoter of Spiritualism. He claimed to be able to communicate with spirits and to travel through the spirit plane, and his writings on the subject were said to be inspired by spirits and angels. The idea that spirits could actively help people and that a medium was required to access this source of knowledge formed the basis for the development of modern Spiritualism. After Swedenborg’s death an American medium named Andrew Jackson Davis claimed to contact his spirit in 1844, and Davis’s work *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (1847) offered the form of cosmic evolutionism that would become evident in Spiritualism in the subsequent 150 years.  

It was around this time—March 25, 1848, to be precise—that Leah, Catherine (“Kate”), and Margaretta (“Margaret”) Fox reported that they were able to communicate with spirits in their home in Hydeville, New York. The Fox sisters developed a system consisting of specific numbers of raps that allowed them to communicate with what they claimed was the spirit of Charles B. Rosna, who had been murdered by the previous owner of the house. The sisters became instant celebrities, and soon hundreds of people were flocking to the house to witness the phenomenon. The sisters eventually began to use automatic writing and, later, voice as means of communicating with Rosna’s spirit. Leah, Kate, and Margaret eventually went on tour and conducted séances for profit, often channeling the spirits of famous individuals such as Ben Franklin. Celebrities such as P. T. Barnum, James Fenimore Cooper, and Horace Greeley offered enthusiastic support. These séances were, however, not without problems. Leah was often accused of trying to glean personal information from the sitters before the séance, and when one sitter noted that Franklin’s spirit spoke in an unexpectedly ungrammatical fashion, Margaret left the séance table exclaiming, “You know I never understood grammar!” This did not dampen belief in the sisters, and indeed the Spiritualist movement soon took on religious overtones. In 1853 the first Spiritualism church was founded, and membership in Spiritualist organizations reached about two to three million.

The central belief of this movement was that a spirit world overlaps the material one. Death causes the subconscious spirit—the essence of the human—to move into a realm where it can continue to progress, becoming closer to God. Psychic experiences, it was claimed, provide evidence for this immortal soul and a close link between the conscious (earthly) and unconscious (spirit) realms. Spirits can communicate with the living through mediums or psychics, such as the Fox sisters, and thus act as guides for mortals. Mediums are able to access the spirits because they are able to raise their natural “vibration” and thus be in tune with the vibrations of the spirits.

Some bad blood, however, did develop between the Fox sisters. Kate and Margaret felt that Leah was spending the great majority of the money paid to them. Perhaps as a form of revenge, the two younger sisters appeared at the New York Academy of Music on October 21, 1888. On stage, Margaret admitted fraud, stating that they initially created the rappings by tying an apple to a string and hitting it
against the floor or wall. Later the sisters had produced the spirit raps by cracking their toe joints. Margaret proceeded to demonstrate this to the audience of two thousand. Kate sat silently, watching from a box overlooking the stage.  

It would appear that Spiritualism had been dealt a coup de grâce. As it turned out, Kate refused to either confirm or deny the confession, and it was later learned that a reporter had offered $1,500 to Margaret and Kate if they would admit to fraud. Margaret recanted her confession in writing shortly before her death in 1895. Whatever the nature of the confession (and recantation), many Spiritualists, Arthur Conan Doyle among them, refused to see the episode as tarnishing the evidence for communication with the spirit realm. In any case, by the 1880s Spiritualism’s influence had waned, and many Spiritualists shifted to newer religions such as Christian Science and Theosophy, or to more secular movements like Freethought, Anarchism, and Communism.

It is in this atmosphere that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky investigated spiritualist activity in Vermont in 1874. Blavatsky’s early life is somewhat mysterious. Born in the Ukraine in 1831, she married Nikifor Blavatsky (twenty-three years her senior) just before turning seventeen. Separating from Nikifor within a few months, she entered a twenty-five-year period that believers refer to as her “Veiled Years.” According to Blavatsky, she spent this time traveling the world, eventually entering Tibet to study with a group she called the “Brothers.” In 1871 she appeared in Cairo where she formed the Societe Spirite, which closed after dissatisfied customers complained of fraudulent activities. In 1873 she emigrated to New York, where she impressed people with her apparent ability as a medium and clairvoyant.

While in Vermont Blavatsky encountered the journalist Henry Steel Olcott. Together, they founded the Theosophical Society in November 1875. In a series of often dense works, beginning with *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, Blavatsky outlined the key points of Theosophy and in so doing embraced elements of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Romantic idealism, as well as religious traditions such as Buddhism, Sufism, and Qabbalah.

Briefly put, Theosophy sees itself as a manifestation of the Ancient Wisdom tradition. Philosophically monistic (i.e., denying a separation between mind and matter), it holds that the universe has exhibited a goal-directed, purposive, evolutionary pattern, which includes the reincarnation of the individual human consciousness. This gives rise to the belief that human life is meaningful and purposeful, and various ethical rules that stem from the view that all objects in the universe—both living and non-living—are imbued with consciousness or spirit. Individual humans are aided in their progress to ultimate consciousness through the teachings of various sages or prophets.

Significant in relation to the Cottingley fairies is the Theosophical concept of death. Death is not seen as a terminal event but rather as the beginning of the next phase of an individual spirit’s development. It is only through dying and shedding the
material world that progress can be made to the ultimate truth, though reincarnation in human form is a possibility for individuals who have not learned the lessons from past actions. Human life exists on one of a number of planes of existence; evidence is sought both for the presence of these various planes and communication between them.

By 1882 the Theosophical Society became an international organization, and its headquarters was moved to Adyar near Madras, India, thus reflecting the ties between Theosophy and Eastern thought. This in turn led to the formation of a national section in England in 1888, which became influential as Blavatsky resided in London from 1885 until her death in 1891. It was in London that she produced some of her most noted works—The Secret Doctrine (1888), The Voice of Silence (1889), and The Key to Theosophy (1889)—while supported by a committed group that included the Freethinker and Fabian socialist Anne Besant (who would assume control of the international Society in 1907 following the death of Olcott). It was around this time that one of Arthur Conan Doyle’s patients, Major General Alfred Wilks Drayson, first exposed him to Theosophy, and while Doyle became doubtful of the movement after a brief two-year flirtation, it nevertheless gave him the plot of his first novel, The Mystery of Cloomber (1888).

THE COTTINGLEY FAIRIES

The facts of the Cottingley case are relatively simple. Ten-year-old Frances Griffiths and her mother, Annie, were staying at the home of Frances’s cousin, sixteen-year-old Elsie Wright. The two girls spent a large amount of time playing near Cottingley Beck, a narrow brook running between steep forty-foot banks. Frances would often return home with her shoes wet, and when challenged as to why she kept going to the beck when forbidden to do so, she replied that she was returning to see the fairies, a statement that was seconded by Elsie. Needless to say, they were not believed by their parents.

One afternoon in July 1917, Frances and Elsie borrowed Arthur Wright’s camera, and in less than an hour they returned, asking Wright to develop the plates. In Wright’s darkroom Elsie exclaimed, “The fairies are on the plate!” The resulting photo apparently showed Frances surrounded by five dancing fairies.

Arthur Wright was skeptical, but the girls’ mothers, Polly Wright and Annie Griffiths, were less certain. Significantly, both women were becoming interested in Theosophy. Nothing else was thought of the matter until August, when the two girls again borrowed the camera and returned with what was apparently a photo of Elsie with a gnome. The girls stuck to their story, and although the parents searched the girls’ bedroom, no evidence for trickery was found. Prints of the photos were circulated among family and friends, but, as Wright refused the children access to the camera, no further images were forthcoming.

In 1919 both Polly Wright and Annie Griffiths attended meetings of the Theosophical Society in Bradford. Polly herself claimed to have some memories of
past lives and experience with astral projection. At one meeting a lecture on fairies prompted Polly to mention the prints. The family was persuaded to let members of the Bradford Lodge have the glass negative plates and the original photographs, and these eventually came to the attention of Edward L. Gardner, president of the Blavatsky (London) Lodge, in early 1920.

By May 1920 Gardner was using slides of the pictures at lectures. Doyle heard of the prints from a friend, who put him in contact with Miss E. M. Blomfield, a cousin of Gardner, who then provided copies. The two men met in London, and after seeing Gardner, Doyle wrote to Elsie and her father on June 30. Doyle had been asked by The Strand to write something about fairies for the Christmas 1920 issue, and he asked permission to use the photos in his article, suggesting that “no name be mentioned, so that neither you nor your daughter be annoyed in any way.” Wright agreed and the Strand piece was completed—accompanied by sharpened versions of the prints—before Doyle sailed to Australia in early August for a lecture tour on Spiritualism.

The issue sold out within a few days, and naturally there was reaction to Doyle’s article. Vehement attacks were penned, and each was answered by Gardener. The Westminster Gazette sent a reporter to Yorkshire after discovering the names of the two girls (Doyle had used the pseudonyms “Alice” and “Iris”), and in a piece in the January 12, 1921, edition the reporter noted that he failed “to secure evidence, if possible, which would prove or disprove the claim that fairies existed” (p. 61). The reporter noted that Elsie claimed “she had seen [the fairies] since, and had photographed them, and the plates were in the possession of Mr. Gardner” (p. 69). Doyle would use this second batch of photos in a subsequent Strand article describing accounts of alleged sightings.

In July Gardner had traveled north to Cottingley and proceeded to investigate the matter with the cooperation of the Wrights. In August, while Doyle was bound for Australia, Gardener left two cameras and twenty plates with the family, hoping that, as Frances was to be holidaying from Scarborough where she now lived with her mother, further evidence could be collected. On Thursday the nineteenth of August the girls delivered two photos: one of Frances and a leaping fairy and a second of Elsie being offered flowers by a fairy. On Saturday the twenty-first a final picture resulted, one of fairies in a sun bath.

These were to be the last photos of the Cottingley fairies. In August 1921 the girls were brought together again with “the very best photographic equipment, including a stereoscopic camera and a cinema camera” (p. 105). After a fortnight no new images were captured. Doyle blamed the “incessant rain,” the discovery of a coal seam which had resulted in the area being “greatly polluted by human magnetism,” and effects of “change in the girls, [Elsie] through womanhood and [Frances] through boardschool education” (p. 105). This despite the fact that Elsie claimed to have seen fairies during those two weeks, and a clairvoyant (Geoffrey Hodson) present felt the glen was “swarming with many forms of elemental life... not only wood-elves, gnomes, and goblins, but the rarer undines, floating over the stream” (p. 107).
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With no further evidence appearing, The Coming of the Fairies was published in 1922 by Hodder & Stoughton. In addition to material discussing the Cottingley case, Doyle collected “independent evidence for fairies,” “some further cases,” and ended the book with a chapter consisting largely of Gardner’s notes on the “Theosophic view of fairies.” To a modern reader this last chapter is an amazing piece of what can only be called science fiction. Gardner claims that the fairies are “allied to the lepidoptera, or butterfly genus, of our familiar acquaintance rather than to the mammalian line” (p. 174). (Doyle himself was willing to claim earlier in the book that “elves are a compound of the human and butterfly, while the gnome has more of the moth” (p. 55).) Gardner continues, “[Their] normal working body is not of human nor of any other definite form. . . . One can only describe them as small, hazy, and somewhat luminous clouds of colour with a brighter spark-like nucleus” (p. 176). In this form they work “inside the plant structure” using magnetism to affect “cell construction and organization” as well as root development. If desired, human form can be “assumed in a flash.”

Doyle clearly did not wish to distance himself from such Spiritualist and Theosophic ideas. He approvingly quotes the Theosophist C. W. Leadbeater (1847-1934), claiming that there are two major classes of fairy, one of which, the elementals, are “the thought-forms of the Great Beings, or angels, who are in charge of the evolution of the vegetable kingdom” (p. 187). Doyle also echoes the Spiritualist theory of vibrations in noting that as “a race of beings which were constructed in material which threw out shorter or longer vibrations, [fairies] would be invisible unless we could tune ourselves up or tone them down” (p. 14). Our inability to detect these vibrations means that we are usually unable to detect the “existence upon the surface of this planet of a population which may be as numerous as the human race, which pursues its own strange life in its own strange way” (p. 13). All of this seems fairly fantastic to most modern individuals and leads one to ask why Doyle not only believed in the Cottingley fairies but also in the metaphysical speculations of Leadbeater and his like.

“BREAKING DOWN MATERIALISM”

For Doyle, the importance of the Cottingley fairies lay not so much in proving their existence but in the observation that “once fairies are admitted other psychic phenomena will find a more ready acceptance” (p. 98). Like many in the early twentieth century, Doyle saw a world destroyed not only by human violence but also by scientific materialism. The success of science—particularly biology—appeared to have stripped nature of its magic and left traditional religion reeling, and Vernon Kellogg’s Headquarters Nights (1917) reported that “the creed of the Allmacht [omnipotence] of a natural selection based upon a violent and fatal competitive struggle is the gospel of the German intellectuals.” When faced with the apparent nihilism of Darwinism, biologists were seeking solace in vitalist or Lamarckian the-
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ories that allowed for purpose and direction in life. Physicists such as Lord Rayleigh, J. J. Stokes, Arthur Thomson, and Oliver Lodge proposed the æther as a bridge between science and religion. While religion was seen by many as a spent force—particularly when faced with the rationalist arguments of E. Ray Lankester, Arthur Keith, and Karl Pearson—spiritualism was advocated by many who, like Doyle, sought “a guiding hand in the affairs of man. [one] we can but trust and follow” (p. 58).¹⁰

Proving the existence of fairies would lead to a reenchantment with nature. Doyle’s original Strand article notes that

“these little folk who appear to be our neighbours, with only some small differences of vibration to separate us, will become familiar. The thought of them, even when unseen, will add a charm to every brook and valley and give romantic interest to every country walk. The recognition of their existence will jolt the material twentieth-century mind out of its heavy ruts in the mud, and will make it admit that there is a glamour and a mystery to life.” (pp. 57-58)

Such a view is perhaps not surprising from one who, in his Through The Magic Door (1907), cited Scott, Carlyle, Stevenson, and Melville as influences. But this hoped-for reenchantment is not the sole reason Doyle hoped that the Cottingley evidence was unassailable. In a letter to Gardner sent from Australia (October 21, 1920) he notes:

“The matter [of the fairies] does not bear directly upon the more vital question of our own fate and

that of those we have lost. . . . But anything which extends man’s mental horizon, and proves to him that matter as we have known it is not really the limit of our universe, must have a good effect in breaking down materialism and leading human thought to a broader and more spiritual level.” (p. 98)

While Doyle ultimately is more interested in the afterlife and the fate of the human soul (perhaps because of the death of his son in 1918), he sees that proof of the existence of fairies can at best only offer arguments against materialism and perhaps also a negation of the “muddle-headed indifference and the moral cowardice” (p. 99) that he observed. As he noted in his preface, “This whole subject of the objective existence of a subhuman form of life has nothing to do with the larger and far more vital question of spiritualism,” which he sees as “the continued existence of the individual” (p. xxiv). This separation is probably just as well, as the Cottingley fairies do not represent evidence for the “existence of a subhuman form of life” but in fact were a hoax perpetrated by two young girls.

A HOAX REVEALED

As Doyle noted, the case is “either the most elaborate and ingenious hoax ever played upon the public, or else [the photos] constitute an event in human history which may in the future appear to have been epoch-making in its character” (p. 13). Eighty years later we know that the photos were faked and,
when seen with modern eyes, would certainly not be called evidence of an "elaborate and ingenious" hoax. In a series of interviews with Joe Cooper in the early 1980s, Frances and Elsie admitted that the first four pictures were faked but insisted that they had seen fairies. In July 1917, partly to play a trick on the adults and partly to cheer up Frances, they used pictures (as some had suspected) from Princess Mary's Gift Book (1914) as a model for constructing figures that they fastened together with hat pins (also as suspected). After taking the photos the girls dropped the models into the stream and returned home. In August Elsie wanted to have a photo of herself with the nature spirits and, after making a gnome cutout, was photographed by Frances. In this photo one can easily see the point of a pin on the gnome's midriff. (Doyle claimed that this represented the gnome's umbilicus!) In August 1920 the cousins collaborated in generating the third and fourth photos. The provenance of the fifth image is somewhat ambiguous; while Frances claimed that the picture was of real fairies, Elsie admitted that it was of cutouts.  

While Cooper seems willing to allow for the possibility that the fifth photo is real and ultimately supports the existence of fairies, it is probably more correct to side with the writer for Truth magazine who, on January 5, 1921, declared that "for the true explanation of these fairy photographs what is wanted is not a knowledge of occult phenomena but a knowledge of children." The cousins may indeed have thought that fairies existed but, as has long been noted, the burden of proof is on those making extraordinary claims. It is unfair to force Doyle to wear the mantle of his creation, the ultra-rationalist Holmes. Like many of his time, he saw spiritualism as a means to answer the great questions and to provide hope in a time of political and cultural change. While we cannot agree with Doyle, we can, at least, try to understand him.

NOTES

I would like to express thanks to Heather Lundine for her patience and assistance with this introduction.

1. Doyle was Sir Arthur's surname. In later life he increasingly went by "Conan Doyle." Following the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (see note 2), I will refer to him as Doyle.


4. The definitive account of this performance is found in Reuben Brigg Davenport, The Death-Blow to Spiritualism: being the true story of the Fox sisters, as revealed by authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jen-chen (G. W. Dillingham, 1888).

5. Doyle discusses the Fox sisters in chapters 4 and 5 of volume 1 of his History of Spiritualism, available online at http://www.classic-literature.co.uk/scottish-authors/arthur-conan-doyles/history-of-spiritual


8. This initiated a series of letters between Doyle and Wright, available online at http://www.randi.org/library/cottingley/ (accessed October 25, 2005).


10. For a discussion of science, religion, and spiritualism during this period, see P. J. Bowler, Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early-Twentieth Century Britain (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

11. See J. Cooper, "Cottingley: At Last the Truth," The Unexplained, no. 117 (1982): 2,338-40. Strangely, Cooper seems to accept the claim that the fifth photograph may indeed provide evidence for fairies.

PREFACE

This book contains reproductions of the famous Cottingley photographs, and gives the whole of the evidence in connection with them. The diligent reader is in almost as good a position as I am to form a judgment upon the authenticity of the pictures. This narrative is not a special plea for that authenticity, but is simply a collection of facts the inferences from which may be accepted or rejected as the reader may think fit.

I would warn the critic, however, not to be led away by the sophistry that because some professional trickster, apt at the game of deception, can produce a somewhat similar effect, therefore the originals were produced in the same way. There are few realities which cannot be imitated, and the ancient argument that because conjurers on their own prepared plates or stages can produce certain results, therefore similar re-