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## SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE FAIRY FOLK

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**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed that there was photographic evidence of the existence of fairies. In his 1922 book, *The Coming of the Fairies*<sup>1</sup>, he wrote:**

“It was about the month of May in this year that I received the information [...] to the effect that two photographs of fairies had been taken in the North of England under circumstances which seemed to put fraud out of the question. [...] The evidence was so complete and detailed, with such good names attached to it, that it was difficult to believe that it was false ...”

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It was not often that I myself brought problems to my friend Sherlock Holmes, but the following case was unusual. I arrived, by hansom of course, paced briefly outside the familiar door of 221B, rang the familiar bell, was shown up to the familiar chamber, and hung my hat on the familiar hat-rack. My friend sat gazing out of the window: I could see only the back of his head and wreaths of foul blue smoke.

“Good day, Watson! You have come to consult me about your patient, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.”

“How in the world can you possibly know”, I asked, “(a) that it is I, and (b) that I am worried about Sir Arthur?”

“Elementary. Mrs Hudson did not accompany you upstairs (therefore you are known to her), you have taken the stairs two at a time (therefore you know the stairs well), you tripped over the mat at the top (which has been there only for two months and you have not been here for three). Anyway, I can see you in the mirror and you have a copy of Sir Arthur’s book sticking out of your pocket. Anything else?”

“Well, you are quite right”, I said. “I have been treating him for some minor aches and pains, but recently he confided in me that he believes in fairies, and presented me with a signed copy of his book.”

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor’s note.] Arthur Conan Doyle (1922) *The Coming of the Fairies: Illustrated from Photographs*. New York, Toronto and London: Hodder & Stoughton.

As I scoffed the familiarly excellent breakfast which Mrs Hudson had kindly brought me, Holmes began his cogitations.

“I have already given the case some thought of course, since it affects me personally.”

“But how can Sir Arthur’s beliefs about the spirit world affect you?”

“You are sometimes rather slow, Watson. If it gets around that my creator believes in fictional beings, this will reflect badly on me. I see the headlines: *Star sleuth is as fictional as fairies.*”

“But”, I averred, “you are yourself indeed pure fiction, so what does it matter if the fairies are also fictional.”

“You could have put that more tactfully, Watson. Have some more coffee. The vital question is: Who has led Sir Arthur to these beliefs? These are deep waters, in which I see Moriarty’s hand. We must thwart him at his own game.”

Holmes paused and puffed out more obnoxious blue smoke.

“The motive, as I say, is clear: to throw doubt on my own existence.

“We could try to show that Sir Arthur did not write the book at all: he is the victim of a fiendish publishing fraud. Someone is using his name to sell books. The problem is that he clearly did write it. And he has since written another book<sup>2</sup> in which he argues that Houdini had supernatural powers.

“Alternatively, we could try to show that he did write the book, but intended it as a joke. After all we did completely reject the supernatural in the Baskerville case. The problem here is that he has been giving lectures on fairies all over London.

“So, I must adapt one of my own precepts: When we have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, even if it is more impossible, must be the solution. We have to show that he did write the book, that the stuff about fairies is in fact true, and that he is not deluded at all.”

“Will this not be above even your powers?”, I asked.

“You are being singularly discouraging this morning, Watson. Have some more coffee. Let us review the logical possibilities.”

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<sup>2</sup> [Editor’s note.] Arthur Conan Doyle (1930) *The Edge of the Unknown*. New York, London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons.

I had long been overwhelmed by the facility for logical synthesis which Holmes had made his special province and listened intently.

“We could try a deductive argument, where the conclusion is already contained in the premises. ‘If there are fairies at the bottom of the garden, then it follows logically that there are indeed fairies at the bottom of the garden.’ Not really convincing, is it? Such tautologies wouldn’t even convince you on one of your bad days.”

I felt that Holmes was now being discouraging, but held my peace.

“We could try an inductive argument (of the kind which everyone seems to think I use, although I don’t).”

Since I had always had faith in my friend’s inductive methods, I again held my peace.

“We could argue as follows: ‘There are lots of photos of fairies taken by reliable people, therefore fairies exist.’ Also not very convincing. There are precisely two not very clear photos obviously faked by a couple of precocious and rather nasty small children.”

Holmes puffed briefly and then developed a brilliant strategy.

“We’ll start with a little bit of logic: You can never prove a negative. *No evidence of fairies* is not the same as *evidence of no fairies*. Perhaps one will pop up next week and confound us all.

“Then we can give abductive reasoning a whirl: nobody understands it (except me and Charlie Peirce), and we might just get away with it. We will assume what it is we want to prove – there are fairies at the bottom of the garden – and select possible premises that, if also assumed true, support the conclusion, even if not uniquely. For example: ‘When people claim to see fairies, they report their claims. People make such claims, therefore they might have seen fairies.’

“Then we throw in Ockham’s razor. ‘People claim to see fairies. What is the simplest explanation of these claims of fairy-sightings? Well, that people have seen fairies of course!’ QED.”

“There really are fairies”, I exclaimed.

“That is not quite what I said”, muttered Holmes in some irritation.

So, here is what we did. We flooded the media with stories of fairy-sightings. We scoured meetings of the spiritualist society for members prepared to give us sworn testimony of their semi-transparent green friends. We used photoshop to fake more and more pictures of diminutive and graceful little people. Holmes sent out

the Baker Street irregulars to find every inhabitant of Iceland living in London. In Iceland, so it seems, everyone believes in elves, trolls and whatnot, and they provided details of sightings by themselves, their grandmothers, and the advertising staff of the Iceland tourist board.

We persuaded particularly gullible members of parliament to ask contradictory questions in the House: “May I ask the Secretary of State for Immigration what precautions he is taking to defend our islands against the influx of alien beings as reported in the *Daily Mail*?” “May I ask the Secretary of State for the Environment what steps he is taking to defend the endangered first nations of the fairy folk?”

In short, we created so much confusion that the whole business of Sir Arthur’s original book was pretty well forgotten.