

HAND THROUGH THE VEIL

A Play In One Act

by

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Cast of Characters

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Author

Harry Houdini: Magician/Escape Artist

Mina Crandon: Purported Medium

Scene

Somewhere on the east coast.

Time

October 1926.

ACT 1

Scene 1

SETTING: An empty stage save for a large steamer trunk. It has seen a lot of wear.

AT RISE: ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE a tall, stately looking man in his late 60's or so walks on and contemplates the trunk for a moment then sits on it. He begins to speak in an accent that is a quaint mixture of Scottish and formal British.

DOYLE

(contemplates audience)

Damndest thing being trapped by the very thing you created. Had no intention of having Holmes go on and on like that but they kept throwing money at me. And nothing else seemed to stick in the public's mind like he did. Professor Challenger anyone?

(Pause)

Any one? Thought so. Right. So there you have it. My one profitable little monster. That I loathe. Well...perhaps a bit strong and ungrateful but ...he's not me you know. Based him on a professor of mine. Extraordinary certainly but not me. Scientific, shrewd. LOGICAL. Not sure I could lay claim to any of those at this point. Logical. Logical. Logical. What comfort can that be? One body. One world. A finds B and then C and the dots all connect to Z and then we're done. Although some never get to Z. Stopped at M or I or even B. Why? I don't know but doesn't seem logical so many I loved will never see my Z. Think I may be rounding V about now. There has to be an answer...

(Trunk begins to shake and bang)

Oh, damn ..

(DOYLE stands and looks at the trunk with a mixture of awe and fright as the lid bangs open and out steps HOUDINI clad only in

boxers and chains which
he sheds.)

Jesus Harry!

HOUDINI

Doyle! Good to see you ..
(Offers his hand then
thinks better of it)
no, no .

DOYLE

What's wrong?

HOUDINI

You don't want to know where that hand has been.
(Irritated)

Little too enthusiastic in the hiding. Had to almost
dislocate my shoulder to reach it.

DOYLE

I am afraid to ask.

HOUDINI

(Grins)

The pin. Well, well, you'll forgive me but I don't think I
will be sitting down for awhile. Body cavities are a funny
thing

(Goes offstage still
talking, ever the
showman until he's not)

you know last time I performed that I nearly swallowed it
and choked, my that would have been a strange autopsy and
spoiled it all, but anyway, decided to NOT put it behind
...ah, ah, no although I know

(returns with pants
draped over his shoulder
and with a chair that he
plunks it down next to
Doyle)

that you long ago figured it out. Sherlock would know it
all before I got into the damn thing. Thank goodness he's
fiction.

DOYLE

Yes, I suppose.

HOUDINI

(Puts on pants and
addresses audience)

So it takes a lot of work to be a good fraud. Magician.
Same thing. Really it is except maybe a magician gives you
back innocence while a fraud takes it. I read

(book shelves crammed
with books on
philosophy, science,
psychology, magic and
the occult appear)

so much because to be Houdini I have to know everything.
About you

(right at audience)

And you and that child who you dragged here when they'd
rather be with their friends and YOU! Yes I see you
slumping in your seat trying NOT to be noticed. I see you.
I know you. Or I could very shortly. We could chat ..5
minutes maybe and

(points to head)

right here. But right here as well

(points to heart)

I hope so.

(Points to steamer
trunk)

This trick, ha you won't see it again sooo let me explain.
Mind and body. Arms long body short mind sharp, I am built
for this. I can dislocate my shoulders at will, reach
...ANY WHERE. Which comes to the next thing. Can you guess?
Where I put the pin or key. Sometimes both.

(Leaps into the audience
and assumes the position
against the stage. Doyle
looks mortified but
slightly amused)

DOYLE

Quite the showman.

HOUDINI

SEARCH ME!

(Pause. Drops his pants)

Go ahead. It is ...ok. No takers.

(Turns around)

Well when I perform this, being locked in a jail cell or in a straight jacket, sometime some combination, one of you would. A pastor, or a mayor or society matron. Then key or pin in mouth. I tape it to the back of my teeth. Other times it goes elsewhere. Like maybe with the police. I have to know where certain people will put their hands. That is what magic is. Knowing where to put the key.

DOYLE

My friend is being modest.

HOUDINI

Never

(Pants back on)

Modesty pays no bills

DOYLE

No. He is-

HOUDINI

Not this again.

(Removes pin from
pocket)

Here is my proof! Fraud. Charlatan. Magician. Nothing more.

DOYLE

So you insist.

HOUDINI

(offers him pin)

Here. Keep it.

(Doyle does not take it.
Houdini puts pin back in
pocket)

So Doyle, I have no interest.

DOYLE

Why?

HOUDINI

They are all the same-disappointing.

DOYLE

She won't be I promise. She's like you except she acknowledges her gift. Offers it as a way to help. She isn't-

HOUDINI

Selfish.

DOYLE

I reserve judgment. But please, as my friend or someone who was a friend. Please come with me.

HOUDINI

No. Not for my own amusement or hope; or your pain.

DOYLE

Then I will go alone. I'll give you a full report.

(He leaves and Houdini
watches him).

HOUDINI

(To audience)

That old man wants to be tricked so badly. Whoever she is ...it won't take much: a ringing of a bell, a strange voice that he wants to recognize. And she will run through the whole alphabet finding a name he will know. "I am getting a P, as in Paul maybe Pal. No? What about Peter, Oh he isn't speaking very loudly perhaps it's a not P but B, oh what did you say? Who called you pal? Yes I am getting a southern accent. An old friend, oh isn't that nice he stopped by for a visit. You weren't really close, you found him rather rude? Well, I think he has come to apologize." If he is lucky or she is especially talented, then a few objects in the room may get thrown about courtesy of an

accomplice or her foot working a string as she shakes in the throes of possession. Entertaining him, teasing, never giving what he really wants but enough so there will be a next time.

(Beat)

Of course I'm going.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 2

Stage totally dark. Then from what seems like far backstage we see a small white light. It starts to move toward us, floating with a will of its own. Then finally we see Houdini dressed in all black except for his shirt and a diamond stickpin. He looks, what's a good old fashioned word? Natty. Spiffy. He carries the ghost light almost reverently and then when he reaches center stage sets it down. He kneels.

HOUDINI

Oh Baphomet my dark lord. My master, I plead with thee to hear thy apt pupil and gift me with thy presence. I summon in the name of all the shadows and damned souls who lurk here. I offer much for a glimpse of your foul divinity.

(A faint breeze. Is this a response?)

I feel you. Yes, come to me master. I kneel for you. Show me thy face and then take my eyes for I will no longer need to see.

(Wind increases)

He is coming! I hear you in the name of Belzelbub and Gader'ell andMammon and ...Nebuchadnezzar. I am a child, master. Your child. Lift me in your arms. Carry me Father.

(He raises his arms like a child asking to be picked up and stands. Slowly his feet leave the ground.)

Yes! Yes! Further! LET ME SEE YOUR FACE!!

(Light flashes, could that be thunder?)

I can offer much! I have a sacrifice. I HAVE THEM
(Points at the audience)

TAKE THEM!

(He rises further almost soaring and then with a grin he begins to twirl. The twirl is slow. He seems irritated).

All right that's enough.

(Lights go up and we see the wires and the fans blowing. He is lowered and unhitches himself.)

Nebuchadnezzar? That would never do in an actual performance. Went blank there for a second. Getting old and rusty and not really mine. Just a little demonstration, with apologies to that great Scottish faker Daniel Dunglas Home.

(A stagehand appears with a wig and glasses which Houdini puts on and adjusts.)

Levitation was a specialty of his you see. They all have their specialties. Ectoplasm, levitation, some keep it simple with a cold read. I knew one particularly fond of ectoplasm and had it shooting out of certain ...orifices, on occasion. We shall see.

(Then as if rehearsing, he strikes a pose and ...)

I AM HOUDINI AND YOU ARE A FRAUD!

(Satisfied he turns around, picks up the ghost light and walks back the way he came. Stage goes dark and we follow the bobbing ghost light.)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

A small, fairly drab
hotel room. Doyle is
seated on a loveseat
that is RC. At center
stage is a round dining
table and DR a small
night table with drawer.
He speaks as MINA
CRANDON paces. Lithe in
mind, body and spirit.

DOYLE

So I think I may have piqued his interest. Enough anyway.

MINA

May?

DOYLE

Well can't be certain, it's been a while-

MINA

FUUUUCK!

DOYLE

-No, He'll have to think-

MINA

FUCK!

DOYLE

LANGUAGE!

MINA

FUCK, FUCK, FUCKITY, FUCK, FUCK-

DOYLE

I will go.

MINA

Bye FUCKER!

(He stands. She pushes
him back down and cups
his face in her hands.)

I need him here.

DOYLE

I think he will be.

(Removes her hands)

Let's dispense with this.

MINA

What?

DOYLE

Seduction. Totally unnecessary.

MINA

SEDUCTION! This isn't seduction. It's ...VAMPING. This is
vamping.

DOYLE

The difference?

MINA

Well, not to make you blush, but if this were seduction I
wouldn't be touching your face.

(He blushes)

Ha! You're so easy. Vamping is like hypnotism.

DOYLE

No need to vamp.

MINA

It can be fun.

DOYLE

STOP!

(Removes her hands)

Come sit with me.

(She does)

I promise you that I will get him here. If not today, then I'll try again.

MINA

I don't have that kind of time. I told Le Roi I'd be back in a few days. Lately he's been like a man evicted from a mirage, forced to wander the desert. Lost because of me, lost without me.

DOYLE

He told me no. Didn't tell him it was you of course, but he can't resist a debunking, a chance to humiliate. So I'm almost sure.

MINA

Except he won't this time. Not that he did then. He was sure.

DOYLE

When he comes can you promise no embellishments?

MINA

That's the whole point right? That I don't need that. I am so fucking gifted ...this whatever it is will be enough. But you know it never is. People always want more. More than I can give, more than they have any right to. They all want the same thing: comfort- with a show of course. Comfort with a side dish of spirit goo.

DOYLE

Even if those manifestations were true I have always found them a bit vulgar. Surely those in the afterlife find the value in discretion.

MINA

Why the hell do you think it's so difficult? They have no manners at all. Like a bunch of fucking children all rushing to the podium at once. Discretion? They do, say anything-some of it filthy, horrible. I'm the podium. Have no say who speaks.

DOYLE

Walter then.

MINA

Yes. And you know he favors the rude ones. Finds them more interesting. And how the hell do I know if that is Aunt Sylvia or not? He's always playing tricks. I filter as best I can but he's in charge.

DOYLE

I am afraid Harry won't buy any of that. So Walter needs to be on his best behavior. Your giving him a voice, all of them a chance to talk. You have to be the one in control.

MINA

You really don't understand any of this do you? If I was in control don't you think I would have provided your son?

DOYLE

(Beat)

I've never asked you-

MINA

Yes, which is exactly why I've wanted to give him to you. Not once. That's what I mean. I can't control who comes through. I know you hoped.

DOYLE

Probably my fault. Perhaps I should have asked. Always seemed to be somebody more desperate at the table. Maybe he just doesn't want to see me. But look, when Harry comes I think I should do the talking, unless there is some sort of appeal you wish to make.

MINA

I'd like to tell the son of a bitch to fuck off.

DOYLE

So there it is. You go into the bedroom until he and I have talked.

MINA

I'd love to hear what you have to say.

DOYLE

Between him and me.

(She gets up from the
couch and starts to
pace.)

MINA

I hate this! You interceding for me.

DOYLE

I don't mind.

MINA

YES YOU DO! Your jaw sets in this odd way and your teeth grind every time you talk about him.

DOYLE

I never noticed-

MINA

I want to bite my tongue in two rather than speak his name.

(Thoughts racing)

Being put on a pedestal sure beats wallowing in the gutter. It was nice up there. I don't mean worshiped- that's rather annoying. Or even admired ...that can be dull. Just to be noticed for something important.

DOYLE

(He really does)

I completely understand.

MINA

Speaking of worshiped-he certainly doesn't mind it. The instant he arrived all those men turned into little boys. I think I heard a couple even giggle. OR WORSE-like slobbering puppies, drooling, waiting for a pat on the head! I went from belle of the ball to their crazy, smelly aunt, who carries cats in her purse, in a matter of seconds. They agreed to anything he wanted. "Can Mr. Crandon sit over there? Good. I'd like to have Mrs. Crandon in this box-" Strapping me in a damn chair like I was a criminal to be executed! Walter wanted none of it.

(She abruptly goes to a drawer, pulls out some candles, and then retrieves a lace table cloth which she spreads on the small circular dining table.)

Let's practice.

DOYLE

What?

MINA

Let me take another stab at bringing you Kingsley.

DOYLE

Honestly think that's up to him. No offense but can't imagine you or your kind, how few or many are the only avenue available. You know I take naps, not because I lack vigor or am old, though I am. I hope to dream. Of him. Once. Not a damn memory, have those fading, yellowing, but a dream, Maybe playing cricket or watching a game of football. Not talking, just being together again. Once thought I saw him when I went skiing. Flying down the hill and then out of the corner of my eye I saw a shadow and then spilled. Bye the time I got up, whatever was gone.

Like to think he was looking out. Wishful thinking and the sun I suppose conspiring against me, but felt a kind of joy the rest of the day.

MINA

I'll bet it was him

(He shrugs)

They like it when you think of them. Not all the time but like anyone they don't want to be forgotten. Come on. Sit down and focus.

(She dims the light)

Don't be afraid Arthur.

(Holds out hands)

Sit.

(He reluctantly sits and takes her hands.)

DOYLE

I won't blame you if nothing happens-

MINA

Be positive Arthur. Help me.

(They are silent. 5 seconds. 10 seconds. The room seems to grow darker. She relaxes. Breathing becomes slow.)

Walter. Walter, I need you. I have someone here who dearly wishes to speak to one who has crossed over. Walter, do you hear me?

(Nothing. Seconds go by)

Walter?

(Tick. Tock.)

WALTER!

MINA(WALTER)

JUST A SECOND! What am I at your beck and call?

(This is Walter. The voice is just a bit deeper, not a male voice.)

MINA

THANK YOU!

(Walter takes his time.)

Jesus.

MINA(WALTER)

Ain't seen him. Crossed over? What do you ...who's that with you? I recognize him. He's been here before.

DOYLE

Yes, it's Conan Doyle my ...er friend.

MINA

Sssh.

MINA(WALTER)

Bit worse for wear since the last time I saw you. Still always an honor. Mina, it's been a while. What dooo yoou want? Shit! Shit!

MINA

What?

MINA(CHILD)

Wo ist meine Mutter? Wo ist meine Mutter?!

MINA(WALTER)

Verschwinde! Get out of here! Can't help you. Ich kann dir nicht helfen.

MINA

Walter who is that? Don't be mean!

MINA(WALTER)

Some kid. There's always one . Don't know what is going on.

MINA(CHILD)

Bitte! Bitte! Wo bin ich?-

MINA (WALTER)

Ich kann dir nicht helfen!

MINA (CHILD)

Bitte! Ich habe Angst!

MINA (WALTER)

You're in hell, all right! Du bist in Der Hölle

ARTHUR

IF I MAY!

(Very grandfatherly)

Kannst du mich hören, kleiner Junge? Kannst du mich hören?

Hab' keine Angst.

(Beat)

MINA (CHILD)

Wer bist du?

DOYLE

Ein freund. Kannst du mich sehen? Walter let him come.

Kannst du mich sehen?

MINA (CHILD)

Nein.

DOYLE

Schau genau. Kannst du mich jetzt sehen?

(Beat)

MINA (CHILD)

Ja. Ich sehe dich ein bisschen. Du bist alt!

DOYLE

(Laughs)

Ja das stimmt, ich bin sehr alt.

MINA(CHILD)

Nicht so alt wie mein Großvater aber viel älter als mein Vater.

DOYLE

Wie heisst Du?

(No answer)

Hallo, ich würde gerne deinen Namen wissen.

(Beat)

MINA(CHILD)

Peter. Und wie heisst Du?

DOYLE

Arthur. Freut mich, Sie kennenzulernen.

MINA(CHILD)

Arthur kannst du mir helfen? Ich habe mich verirrt und möchte nach Hause gehen.

DOYLE

Hab keine Angst. Kannst Du eine Frage beantworten?

MINA(CHILD)

Was?

DOYLE

Wo sind deine Eltern? Deine Großeltern?

MINA(CHILD)

Meine Eltern essen zu Abend und meine Großeltern leben weit weg. Oh, mein Großvater Johann ist tot.

DOYLE

Erzähl mir von ihm.

MINA(CHILD)

Warum?

DOYLE

War er wie ich?

MINA(CHILD)

Kein bart. Er war sehr groß und ahte diesen Hund namens Willie. Er ist auch tot.

DOYLE

Peter, kannst du an Großvater und Willie denken? Stell sie Dir in Deinem Kopf vor und denke Sie wirklich über sie nach.

MINA(CHILD)

Ja, aber warum?

DOYLE

Bitte. Ich werde dir helfen.

MINA(CHILD)

Wie soll mir das helfen?

(Beat)

Also gut, ich stelle sie mir jetzt vor.

DOYLE

Gut. Kanst du sie sehen?

MINA(CHILD)

Nein.

DOYLE

Versuche es weiter !

(Long Beat)

MINA (CHILD)

Warte! Ich höre Willie
 (There is a loud knock
 on the door)

ARTHUR

Peter, kannst Du-
 (Another knock.)

MINA (CHILD)

Arthur, Ich sehe Willie-

HOUDINI'S VOICE

Hello. Doyle?

MINA

I am losing them! Walter!

MINA (WALTER)

You're fading.

MINA

The boy-

ARTHUR

(desperate, forgetting)

Peter do you see-

MINA

Gone. All gone.
 (Houdini enters wearing
 wig and glasses.)

HOUDINI

Mina? Or is it Margery? Doyle?

MINA

(Not missing a beat)

I AM MINA, AND YOU ARE AN ASSHOLE.

(BLACKOUT?)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 4

(A few minutes later.
While not exactly
blocking the door Doyle
stands in front of it.
Houdini is throwing away
his disguise.)

DOYLE

I'd forgotten your love of incognito.

HOUDINI

The element of surprise is as important, or more so, in
detection as it is in magic.

(Referring to Mina)

You should know I hate repeating myself.

DOYLE

You do the same acts all the time on tour-

HOUDINI

People come to see me because the result could be
different. Each night I know it could be different. This
will be the same-come on, you're coming with me!

DOYLE

How's that?

HOUDINI

You're retracing your steps. Lost. You've nothing new to
offer. Our fight is done. If it's any consolation I'm not
enjoying the victory much.

DOYLE

What victory? I've assumed this was a mutual search that
led us to divergent paths. At least despite your best
efforts, I've tried to see it that way.

HOUDINI

Dead end old man. How do I explain this to you? Since I was
a boy and crawled under carnival tents with my brother I've
seen these people work. I LEARNED FROM THEM. In some ways I
am- but I could never use someone's grief against them. I
have felt that pain too severely. We are supposed to miss

people Doyle. It is a way we measure how much they mean to us.

DOYLE

But when we met you talked with such enthusiasm-

HOUDINI

Hope is a stupid thing. Sometimes it has to be beaten before it gets the message. And ...I was a fan.

DOYLE

Oh no.

HOUDINI

A man of letters who invented this incredible character-I read several stories! My one doubt of myself is my education; the way I speak, write-and you were not a snob who thought of me as only an entertainer, you were kind. This educated man wanted to talk to me. When you spoke of spiritualism I wanted to believe. You spoke with such passion about it I wanted to.. maybe really for the first time.

DOYLE

Well I know what changed that-

HOUDINI

Yes. That. But there were other things before. And I knew that because I am Houdini I could see things you could not. But ...it was as if being deceived did not bother you. You had to know on occasion! I was faced with the choice of either my friend is a fool or helping them.

DOYLE-

Maybe both.

HOUDINI

Leave with me. I cannot promise how things will be between us. But your legacy is important. We have no business thinking about an afterlife. It gives us excuses and gets in the way. Better to believe it all ends here.

DOYLE

(Rueful smile)

You've been a terrible partner to Death, Harry. You've used him in your act, cheated him of his due, and now diminish him by implying he has dominion over nothing but clay turning to dust.

HOUDINI

If we actually meet I'll be sure to apologize.

(They laugh. It seems
to surprise them that
they still could.)

DOYLE

(Almost afraid to break the moment)

I can't leave.

HOUDINI

Why?

DOYLE

My journey began with betraying my father and as it nears its end I seek to redeem myself with one so much like him.

HOUDINI

I don't understand.

DOYLE

With all the loss, the wars, I knew there had to be answers that conventional thought could not provide. I felt like an explorer, sailing to the unknown. There were setbacks. I was polite and moved on. Wasn't interested in fighting but in discovery. And there were glimpses, moments, enough to keep me going. Finally one day, I found myself staring at one of my father's painting hung patronizingly in my office.

HOUDINI

You showed me his paintings. They were strange but very beautiful.

DOYLE

Ghosts and demons and fairies, drawn with an intimate knowledge that my younger self had refused to see ...he used to send me drawings asking "is this the work of a madman?"

HOUDINI-

I must ask what this has to do with Mina Crandon?

DOYLE-

My father was scorned and imprisoned for his gift. He could not control what he saw any more than Mina can guarantee who or what speaks through her. The talent is wild and flawed and must be protected.

HOUDINI-

From me?

DOYLE-

From me. The way I was. I have always suspected you share their talent but have only allowed it to peek out now and then, afraid that if released it would turn against you.

HOUDINI-

And I have said you were wrong. I have worked very hard with no assistance from another realm.

(Pause)

Well, I will leave you to your grifter's paradise. Enjoy.

(He moves toward the
door and Doyle
blocks him)

So now you're blocking the door? Very nice. And what, I'm not going to get by? Stand aside, I'm leaving.

DOYLE

(weary)

Just let me finish.

HOUDINI

It was all finished. She was finished last year. I saw her act. Act. That is what it was. Nothing different. A few well executed tricks. I see magicians hat in hand, starving, who are as good. As for you and I-

DOYLE-

Well that's where I should have started isn't it? You and I. First of all I owe you an apology. Through all the back and forth, letters, public attacks-

HOUDINI

I apologize for nothing.

DOYLE

No, you did nothing so why should you. I suppose attacking my wife was in your eyes totally correct.

HOUDINI

She deceived me.

DOYLE

Yes she did. I will never know what exactly possessed her except a genuine attempt to give you comfort.

HOUDINI

My mother. She said it was my mother.

DOYLE

She had the best intention for the right reason. Totally wrong. Misguided. I love her Harry but I have been dealing with this mania of hers for years. She believes it so fervently. She and Phineas-

HOUDINI

How is he?

DOYLE

Aligned almost precisely with her wishes. It's a bit of a game. Where should we vacation, England or South of France? Oh, well, seems Phineas thinks it's imperative that we spend time with her mother. The whole house is run by him. Can't have dinner without a séance to let cook know what to serve.

HOUDINI

So why am I here when even you don't believe?

DOYLE

I didn't say that. I am here because it is my fault you don't believe, a burden I wish to disappear. The man I first met approached everything with a child like hope. You seemed sure like I was, am, that there is a thin divide between this world and the next and somewhere a hand that can reach through and connect us. WE, my wife and I took that away from you. Not Mina.

HOUDINI

She isn't worth that last scrap of faith old man. I staked my reputation and I was right. They were ready to give her the prize money but all I needed was two sessions .

MINA

(Appearing from the
bedroom)

You know the money meant nothing? Le Roi takes care of that side of things. 2,500? Please. Drop in the bucket compared to what I could get. I could make more than you. I've never taken a dime for anything.

DOYLE

Not his point I think-

MINA

No. It's mine. His ego couldn't take someone becoming more famous.

HOUDINI

I have wished a long time to meet a natural. For that person I would step aside. I am all craft. But no such person exists. As you can see I still exist despite your curse. It's been over a year since you told me I'd be dead soon.

MINA

Well I wasn't exact about it. Sentiment hasn't changed.

HOUDINI

That you're honest about-good. So you hate me, I despise you

(turning to Doyle)
and we have said all we need to.

MINA

Whatever conditions you want I'll agree to. Name them.

HOUDINI

No.

DOYLE

You know Harry from what I heard you didn't really convince the panel. Planted the seed of doubt but convinced ...bit strong. A couple of them felt you had a strong bias.

HOUDINI

Of course I did and it was justified-

DOYLE & MINA

JUSTIFIED!

MINA

YOU planted that ruler!
(Houdini tries to push
past Doyle.)

HOUDINI

No Madame. You were careless.

MINA

Any conditions. Test me magician. If you catch me, no better, if you don't find me genuine I'll go on your little radio show and denounce myself as a fraud. Hell, half the world already thinks so. Oh and I'll be sure to say Great and Houdini at least 4 or 5 times while I am there. Want me to sign something. I will. But what will you give me if you can't prove it?

HOUDINI

I don't have to prove anything. You do. Beyond a shadow of my doubt.

MINA

What then?

HOUDINI-

I will say I was wrong. Withdraw from public life.

DOYLE

On the radio? An admission?

HOUDINI

I will say I was wrong.

MINA

Done! Shall we get started?

HOUDINI

Not so fast Madame. It occurs to me that our wagers are not even. My reputation against yours?

MINA

So money is-

HOUDINI

I need a bigger fish.

(Looks at Doyle)

What do you say Doyle? Will you back your artifact?

DOYLE

What are you asking ... precisely?

MINA

This is between you and me-

HOUDINI

You win Doyle, she somehow proves to me ...I will do what I said. I win; you accompany me on the last few stops of my tour. You will be part of my act and admit Mrs. Crandon and

all her kind as frauds, and denounce spiritualism. Do we have a deal?

DOYLE

You've had this in mind a while I think.

HOUDINI

No. But I am one to seize an opportunity.

(Beat)

(Beat)

MINA

SAY YES! I'm neither noble nor unselfish. I've never wanted to hear yes more in all my life.

DOYLE

Well then. Yes. I accept. Let's proceed.

(Houdini takes his jacket off. Doyle slowly takes a chair and Mina goes back into the bedroom.)

(BLACKOUT?)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 5

(One hour later. Doyle is alone, seated on one of the chairs at the table, drumming his fingers impatiently. Houdini walks in barefoot with his jacket and shirt over one arm and carrying his shoes.)

DOYLE

I thought you might have deserted us.

HOUDINI

Being thorough takes time. And being Houdini can sometimes be inconvenient. When Houdini comes to your door and asks to examine your room it is no ordinary request, no daily event and you must take advantage of it. The room to your left was empty so in exchange for an autograph the manager let me in. Nothing. The room below held a nice elderly gentleman who seemed thrilled that I wanted to examine his ceiling in exchange for a card trick. He was very unimpressed with the trick, and I felt that somehow I cheated him so I walked on my hands for a few feet. He laughed and clapped like a child. Now, the couple to the right -more difficult. The wife nearly went into convulsions when she saw me. I thought she was going to scream-

DOYLE

You think you'd be used to it by now.

HOUDINI

(Getting dressed)

Oh, I am but still annoying, but this couple they were lovely and they said they were going out and would I mind watching their little boy while I examined their room. What! Houdini a nanny? So I said yes. They promised to be back in 15 minutes so I examined their walls and yes, since they were gone looked in their closets. Nothing. Oh the boy

was fine. A piggyback ride and making a coin appear behind his ear and I have a fan for life.

DOYLE

You make it all sound so easy.

HOUDINI

So it appears that the adjoining rooms have no peepholes. I found no magnets or strings and although one can never be sure, their occupants unaware of Mrs. Crandon and unlikely ..accomplices. Where is our would be witch? Is she ready?

DOYLE

You've been gone long enough I think she took a nap.

HOUDINI

Good. I want her at her very best.

MINA

(Entering in a kimono
and slippers)

Ah, Thurston has returned. Ooops ,pardon. I get you magicians mixed up. Can we get on with it.

HOUDINI

Is that what you're wearing?

MINA

It's what I usually wear. Either this or nude. Given my audience I thought this most appropriate.

HOUDINI

Do you mind untying your ..er..robe.
(She does so and
performs a little twirl
revealing a slip.)

MINA

Satisfied? No pleasing skeptics. If nude then I'm trying to seduce you, if clothed I'm concealing something. I will admit that when nude, particularly at a session with men, there doesn't seem to be much focus on the dead.

HOUDINI

May I have the belt?

MINA

(sitting down)

What, you want to tie my hands? Or

(raises legs onto table)

bind my feet together?

(wiggles feet)

Go ahead.

HOUDINI

Not you. Doyle? Will you allow me to tie your hands?

DOYLE

I beg your pardon?

HOUDINI

I really must insist.

MINA

If he doesn't punch you I might.

HOUDINI

What do you say?

DOYLE

May I ask why?

HOUDINI

You know. Your faith has been backed against a wall.

DOYLE

So you're implying-

HOUDINI

It's a short road from desperation to deceit.

MINA

I am not listening-

DOYLE

It's all right. Go ahead.

MINA

It is not ALL RIGHT. He's humiliating you!

DOYLE

Just desserts, right Harry? No, it's fine Mina.

(Offers his hands)

(Houdini walks to Doyle
and ties a rather
elaborate knot around
his hands. Yes. He does
seem to be enjoying it.)

HOUDINI

Now I think we can begin. Not too tight Doyle? Wiggle your fingers.

(He does)

Not trying to cut off circulation, just trying to help you avoid temptation. To ..assist.

DOYLE

Very considerate. Shall we?

(With the tablecloth in
place as before, MINA
lights the candles. Mina
and Houdini sit down.)

Doyle as best he can
holds their hands.)

HOUDINI

So anything before we begin?

MINA

Wait, something to write-
(gets up)

Arthur, do you have a pencil and some paper?

DOYLE

In my bag.

HOUDINI

Let me.

(Retrieves bag and
rummages around)

I found a pencil but no paper.

DOYLE

My journal. Just tear a few pages out
(He does and puts them
and the pencil on the
table)

HOUDINI

While I am thinking about it.
(Takes the bag and put
it in the bedroom.)

MINA

Might not need that. I mean most prefer to speak through me
but occasionally in the rush to the podium there's always
one sneaky bastard trying to write his memoirs.

HOUDINI

(Re-entering)

How much do they write?

MINA

A few sentences usually. Never more than a page or two.

HOUDINI

Not 15 pages?

(Looks at Doyle hard.
Doyle returns the
glance)

MINA

(To Doyle)

What's going on?

DOYLE

A misunderstanding.

HOUDINI

A deception.

(To Mina)

Something you're familiar with.

DOYLE

Lady Doyle's error in judgment hangs over this proceeding I am afraid. I may be doing you a disservice my dear by letting us continue. Harry here is incapable of being open minded and I contributed mightily to that fault.

HOUDINI

It is entirely up to Mrs. Crandon. Doubting Thomas is here. Make me believe.

MINA

I'm ready.

(Mina gives Doyle a
reassuring look and all
join hands. As before: a
perfect silence. 5
seconds. 10 seconds.)

Longer still. Nothing is happening except the room seems to grow darker. Whatever was left of the evening's light disappears. She relaxes. Breathing becomes slow. Eyes open.)

Walter. Walter? I know this is a bit strange that we speak again so soon but ...I need you. I have two gentlemen with me and I'm sure there must be someone who wishes to communicate with one - or perhaps both. Walter?

(Beat)

Walter it's important.

(Long Beat)

Please my love. Answer me.

(Beat)

MINA- (WALTER)

The great Houdini thinks you're full of shit.

MINA

I know.

MINA (WALTER)

Then why am I here? Oh hello Doyle. This is getting to be a habit.

MINA

Walter I need you to behave, all right? It's very important.

MINA (WALTER)

Weelllll, that's entirely up to them. You know how it works. Pick someone or let me do it. I mean, I don't see George Washington on a fucking white horse anywhere but I am sure I could find someone interesting.

(Mina looks to Houdini who shrugs and looks away. Then, beseechingly to Doyle.)

DOYLE

I will try.

MINA

Don't be afraid. Just ask.

DOYLE

(whispers)

Kingsley. Kingsley Doyle.

HOUDINI

(Not unkindly)

My God, Doyle-

DOYLE

Please ...son. Kingsley? Just a moment.

MINA (WALTER)

ALL RIGHT THEN. The name again?

MINA

KINGSLEY. Kingsley Doyle.

MINA (WALTER)

Don't yell. Odd name don't you think? I mean, I've heard much worse but kind of a hard name to live up to.

MINA

WALTER!

MINA (WALTER)

I'm asking. KIIIIIIINGGSLEEEEEYYYYYYY! DO I HAVE A KINGSLEY?

HOUDINI

(Aside)

At least she's entertaining this time.

MINA (WALTER)

Hold on. Think I got him.

DOYLE

Really!

MINA (WALTER)

Yes. Go ahead-KINGSLEY!

MINA (NOT KINGSLEY)

Hello? Who are you. Guess it doesn't matter. Can you get a message to Susan-

DOYLE

(Crestfallen)

Mistake I 'm afraid.

MINA (NOT KINGSLEY)

...that I know she and my brother-

DOYLE

That is not-

MINA (NOT KINGSLEY)

...were having an affair. You weren't fooling me Susan! I knew it! Well guess what? Two can play at that game-

MINA

Walter! This isn't funny!

MINA (WALTER)

(Laughing)

OOOHH, ha, ha, all right off you go! Who's next?

HOUDINI

This is cruel, although perhaps now-

DOYLE

Mina. Mina, please don't bother-

MINA

WALTER, FUCK OFF!

(Beat)

(Beat)

(Beat)

MINA (WALTER)

What?

(Beat)

MINA

Fuck. Off. Go. Away

(Beat)

MINA (WALTER)

Really? Think you can handle things all by yourself?

(Beat)

(Beat)

MINA

Go away. Let them come.

(Silence. Then we hear a faint hum, like maybe a far off swarm of bees. It grows louder. Not bees. Voices. Many, many voices. Mina eyes grow wider and she becomes rigid. She starts to mutter. Is that Dutch? More muttering maybe English, maybe French, perhaps just gibberish.)

DOYLE

MINA! I think we should stop.

HOUDINI

Not on your life old man!

(Her muttering continues but now some of it seems to be coming from outside her. It starts to fill the room. Snatches of phrases and emotions, much of it just noise. But then, as it starts to reach a crescendo it becomes like an orchestra of accomplished musicians with no conductor. We hear notes of despair, joy, anger and laughter. Maybe love. We hear humanity. It becomes almost deafening and then subsides quickly, there but faint, then gone except for Mina's muttering. She goes face down on the table seemingly unconscious.)

(BLACKOUT?)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 6

(Two minutes later.
Everyone exactly as we
left them. Neither
Houdini or Doyle has
moved a muscle. Mina is
still unconscious.)

DOYLE

What should we do?

HOUDINI

I'm not sure. I'm hoping this is intermission and that act two will be coming shortly.

DOYLE

You really are just a closed box. Mina? Mina, please wake up. Its Doyle, dear. Can you hear me!

HOUDINI

Mina, I must say you have improved-
(She starts to stir and
looks at Doyle. No
recognition at all. Her
eyes seem to take in her
surroundings, widely
frightened. Then she
looks at Houdini. Her
face brightens. Joy.
Love. Pride.)

MINA

Erik!

(Beat)

MINA (HUNGARIAN)

Erik, fiam, kedves fium (Erik, son, my lovely boy.)

DOYLE

MY GOD!

HOUDINI

Ah, learned a phrase in Hungarian did we? Nem csapsz be
(You are not fooling me)

MINA

Miről beszélsz? (What are you talking about)

HOUDINI

Kérlek, ird le a szobát. (Describe the room please.)

MINA

Mit? Miért? Erik, hol vagyok? (What? Why? Erik, where am
I?)

HOUDINI

Kérlek, ird le a szobát.

MINA

Nem örülsz, hogy látsz (You are not glad to see me.) Ez
furcsa. (This is strange)

(Beat)

Nagyon jól. (. (Very well) Sötét van. Nem látok tisztán.
Néhány gyertyát látok. (It is dark, I can't see clearly. I
see some candles.)

HOUDINI

(Just a bit unsure)

Mi mast? (What else)

MINA

(Looking around)

Latom egy kis kanapet es te. Idosebb lettel de meg mindig
olyan szep- (I see a small sofa and you. You have gotten
older but still so handsome-)

HOUDINI

Describe the gentleman across from me.

MINA

Miért beszélsz angolul? Tudod, hogy nem tudok angolul.
Kérlek a mi nyelvünkön beszélj.. (Why do you speak English?
You know I cannot. Our language please.)

HOUDINI

Írd le a velem szemben álló urat.(Describe the gentleman
across from me.)

MINA

Miért van összekötve a keze??(Why are his hands tied?)
Idősebben jóképű. Kedves szemek. Nagyon tetszik a bajsza.
Sokkal jobban néz ki, mint az apád. (He is handsome in an
older way. Kind eyes. I love his moustache. Much better
looking than your father.)

HOUDINI

Mit?(What?)

MINA

Ne beszéljünk róla. Hogy vannak a testvéreid? Hogy van
Theodore? (Let us not talk of him. How are your brothers?
How is Theodore?)

HOUDINI

Mi van az apámmal? (What about my father?)

MINA

Azt mondtam, nem.(I said no)
(Suddenly sharp)
Hogyan lehetséges ez? Halott...vagyok. Hogyan lehetséges ez?
Halott...vagyok. Hogyan lehetséges ez?! Mit csináltal? Nem
sabad beszelnünk!(How is this possible? I am ...dead. How is
this possible?! What did you do? We should not be
speaking!)

HOUDINI

Mi van az apammal!

MINA

Nem! (No)

HOUDINI

- Írd le az apámat!
(Describe my father.)

MINA

Nem tetszett a szakálla! Rossz szaga volt! (I did not like his beard! It smelled!)

HOUDINI

Mama, ez nem volt kedves! (Mamma that is unkind!)
(Beat. He realizes what he said.)

MINA

Nem adott nekünk életet. Jobb ember vagy te, mint ő valaha volt. (He gave us no life. You are more of a man than he ever was.)

HOUDINI

Hagyd ezt abba ! (Stop this!)

MINA

Igazad van. Nem kellene így beszélnem idegen emberek előtt . Ki ez a személy, akin keresztül beszélek? Boszorkány?
(You are right. I should not be talking this way in front of strangers. Who is this person I am speaking through? She is a ...witch?)

HOUDINI

I did not think so.

MINA

Es rossz! (This is wrong!)
(Mina suddenly starts to write with her right hand even while Doyle attempts to hold on.)

DOYLE

My God!

(Faster and faster ,
never looking at what
she is writing pages fly
off the table. Doyle
cant hold on . Houdini
reaches over to try and
stop her hand but she
keeps going.)

HOUDINI

(almost a sob)

It's Hungarian! IT's Hungarian!

(She throws his hand
off. Faster, faster and
then the pencil tears
through the last piece
of paper. Mina flings
the pencil away.)

MINA

ELEG! (Enough)

(Mina collapses. Nobody
moves. Doyle stands.)

DOYLE

We need a damned light!

(He walks over to the
lamp and turns it on.
With effort he wriggles
out of his knot. Houdini
is on the floor cradling
the pages.)

DOYLE

Harry?

(Houdini gets up and
suddenly ,pages in hand,
runs off stage.)

DOYLE

Harry! Stop!

(Doyle is helpless. Spent. Seeing Mina still unconscious at the table, a mixture of awe, admiration and love come over his face. He picks her up and gently places her on the loveseat, hesitates and then starts to leave. When at the door he looks back at her. Wearily, with a sigh of resignation and the look of a loyal Bloodhound he turns around, grabs a chair and sits beside her.)

(BLACKOUT?)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 7

(The following morning. Mina and Doyle have been sleeping through the night. She still on the loveseat, he now on the floor, using his jacket as a pillow. He starts to snore. Loudly. Perhaps this just started because few could sleep through this. It could wake the dead, so to speak.)

MINA

(Waking)

Wha...Dear Jesus! Doyle. Doyle. DOYLE! For God's sake please wake up.

(Nothing. Still in slumber land. Her face betrays a moment of irritation but softens quickly into deep affection. She gently tickles him around and then tweaks his moustache. He awakes with a snort.)

MINA

Well rather obvious Lady Doyle sleeps in another room.

DOYLE

How's that?

(She giggles and imitates his snoring.)

Oh, yes I've heard. She rather elaborately portrays it as an elephant's mating call. Claims that one day we'll find some escapee from a circus trumpeting its desire at my bedroom window.

MINA

Quite possibly. You're a dear. Look at you all rumpled and creased.

DOYLE

Well, nothing a change of clothes won't cure.

MINA

I wasn't talking about the clothes.

(Kisses him on the
cheek)

What happened? Where's Houdini?

DOYLE

Left. Took the letters and ran out.

MINA

Letters?

DOYLE

How much do you remember?

MINA

Give me a moment. Gaaah. I've such a headache. My head is pounding. God, focus Mina.

(Beat)

Everything. Everything. Except maybe towards the end. I remember starting to write but after ...It was like, after a while being at some sporting event. Watching keenly but not participating. Like there was a pane of glass between me and my body.

DOYLE

You were extraordinary.

MINA

In what way?

DOYLE

In every way. It was a privilege, hands tied be damned. Everything I ever thought possible, all these years and there it was. The pinnacle. You. My search is over. Oh, I knew it would be, but this was better, far better than I could have hoped or imagined.

MINA

And Houdini?

DOYLE

He was stunned. His face had no answer for what it saw. He left so quickly but what I saw was a kind of beatific confusion. Like one who has made a pilgrimage to a saint and been cured of some horrid disease. Joy mixed with a reverent fear.

MINA

That sounds ...good?

DOYLE

More than good.

MINA

So do you think he-

DOYLE

Yes. If he is a man of honor and I believe he is. At his heart, take away all the showmanship and bravado, he is a very ethical human being.

MINA

I wish I shared your confidence.

(Pause)

There is something I clearly remember. Walter was very cruel. I am so sorry. I can't possibly attempt it today, but maybe I can put off Le Roi for another day or so and we can-

DOYLE

No need. Done with all that.

MINA

I'm so sorry.

DOYLE

No. Let me explain. With all the extraordinary things that happened, perhaps for me anyway, the most was when the séance had ended. I was exhausted but initially tried sleeping in the chair, but too uncomfortable, so I settled in on the floor and eventually dozed off. And dreamed. Kingsley. He came to me and exactly as I thought it might, there we were watching a cricket match. Not saying a word. Then, he turns to me and says "Dad, get on with it." For some reason I kept staring at the match and then he says it again "Get on with it, Dad. All right?" and you must understand, it wasn't said in an unkind way at all. Quite the opposite.

MINA

Did you reply?

DOYLE

Not with words, but I nodded my head. Looked him in the eye and nodded and he smiled. Then we went back to watching the match. So, I intend on keeping my promise. I will "get on with it." Life, I think he means.

MINA

I suppose that's what I should do as well. Doubtful he'll be back. But I took him on. And although I am hardly impartial I feel I won.

DOYLE

In my eyes certainly.

MINA

Not that it should be about winning-but still.

DOYLE

I can always go by where he is staying. Or maybe trot by the theater. He might be preparing for his show.

MINA

I think he is leaving town. Doyle you look exhausted. Please get some sleep. If he does come I'll call you and let you know how it went.

(Pulls him up)

DOYLE

I think I may get some breakfast. You'll be fine? No leftovers from last night?

MINA

You mean spirits hanging around. No, not for me.

(They hug and then he leaves. Mina wanders slowly around the room, like she is getting reacquainted with her surroundings. A knock at the door. She answers and Houdini walks in.)

MINA

Well...you ...look like...shit.

HOUDINI

I return the compliment.

MINA

You didn't see Doyle? He just left.

HOUDINI

On purpose. What I have to say is for you. He and I will talk later.

MINA

So.

HOUDINI

So. So.

MINA

You ..what did you think?

HOUDINI

I am still thinking. I shall be for days. But what you are looking for I can't give you right now.

MINA

You bastard.

HOUDINI

The conditions were you prove to me beyond a shadow of a doubt. That shadow still exists. Except now I don't just doubt you. I doubt myself as well. My eyes, my judgement. What I saw last night was powerful-but was it real?

MINA

Yes, I'm telling you, how was it not real?

HOUDINI

What is not in doubt is you have marvelous abilities. But in the supernatural or in magic? You are either a true medium or the most gifted magician I have ever seen.

MINA

A better magician than you?

HOUDINI

We have different specialties.

MINA

I see.

HOUDINI

(Pulls out letter)

This letter. I watched you write it last night with incredible speed and in a language not your own. But there were several misspellings. My mother was not an educated woman so ...and this is where I do not know. She never said those things about my father, to me, but there were undercurrents. How did you know?

MINA

Much of last night was like being outside a window. I could see it all but someone else was doing it. I have no idea if it was your mother, sister or any relative of yours. It wasn't me.

HOUDINI

I was so sure. Nothing but a circus act. What I witnessed before was a silly carnival act compared to this. Some of it, there is a logical explanation.

MINA

Such as?

HOUDINI

Skepticism does not die just because it sees a miracle. It ponders it, tries to understand it, looks for underpinnings.

MINA

Sounds like you will find an explanation to fit. And skeptic sounds like another word for frightened. Scared of a little unknown. A child afraid to go to bed at night because of the monster under the bed that he now knows is real.

HOUDINI

I must go on tour. But when it is over, I will come to you in Boston. Then we will have a long talk.

MINA

About what?

HOUDINI

I don't know. But we will talk. About last night and probably many other things. I haven't slept. I need to rest, you will excuse me? Soon Mrs. Crandon. You are an extraordinary individual.

(He leaves. She watches from the door way and then goes to the love seat and sinks in. Gets up and makes herself a drink and then sits back down. The glass begins to shake violently. She is on the verge of tears. Light fade down.)

(BLACKOUT?)

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 8

(Lights slowly rise on a bare stage with MINA sitting cross legged. She might be smoking or have a drink in hand or just contemplating what to say. She appears to start and stop several times. Finally...)

MINA

He never did come back or come to see me in Boston. Houdini. Not quite 2 weeks later he died on Halloween. Great for his legend I suppose, although sure he would have liked a few years more. Bad luck for me. I can't see him as an old man; I don't think he would have cared for it. So maybe my curse finally reached him. All that time those words spinning in space, riding the wind until nearly forgotten then- Bam! You heard all sorts of rumors: he died from a punch in the gut, that some idiot whacked him with a piece of wood to the stomach. The fact is he died from appendicitis. Guess he thought he was still in control so didn't go to the hospital, kept performing until it was too late. The show must go on and then it went dark. Arthur and I exchanged several letters but I didn't see him again until just a few months before ...we both knew. He had a dreamy faraway look like he could already see a new world. Well, maybe you wouldn't recognize it but I did. So we sat in his flower garden side by side rarely saying anything. When we did it felt a bit awkward and then it was time to go and I had so much to say to this man. So I gave him this enormous hug. Goodbye friend. Thank you. Don't you be afraid! We never said a word or wrote about what happened that day. For my part I felt a bit guilty. Truth is in the details? Depends on whose details they are. Embellishments. They had become a bad habit. Over a year is a long time to learn and plan and practice. I've no idea where the truth ended or where I began. You want to play a game with me? I am going to do it whether you join me or not but it will be a lot more fun if you help. Let's conjure Houdini. The greatest magician of all time and he hasn't figured out how to escape the afterlife. Let's give him a key. Ready. After me. OH GREAT HOUDINI. OH GREAT

HOUDINI! One more time, you know, for his ego. OH GREAT, GREAT HOUDINI. We summon you. You promised to let us know about the afterlife and since I know there is one-come on. WE summon you in the name of not demons but of all the great mediums: Nostradamus, Cayce, Palladino, Crandon

(winks at the audience)

sorry couldn't resist, and so many more. Hear us. Now everybody think real hard about him.

(Beat)

Are you thinking about him? Yes? Ok. We'll give him a little bit more time. LITTLE BIT TOUGHER THAN A STRAIGHT JACKET HUH? Follow my voice

(A noise, like an object being dragged waaaaay backstage)

Hmmmm.

(Turns)

Hello?

(Shrugs)

One more time: WE SUMMON YOU HOUDINI

(Beat)

Well. Sorry. He isn't going to show. Probably afraid to face me. Shows over. Thank you!

(She walks off and the stage goes dark. Another dragging noise. Then, is that something ... opening? Beat. Beat. *The ghost light turns on.*)

THE END