

Extract: Teller of Tales - The life of Arthur Conan Doyle (Daniel Stashower)

*At first blush*¹, it is difficult to imagine two men less alike than Harry Houdini, the *brash*² American showman, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the *genial*³ spiritualist. When they met, Houdini had already cultivated a reputation as the world's most *outspoken*⁴ anti-spiritualist crusader, which he came to regard as the most important work of his life. Houdini had been drawn into the spiritualist arena by a genuine desire to contact the spirit of his beloved mother, but with his knowledge of stagecraft he easily saw through the deceptions of the typical séance room. By rights, this should have made him the natural enemy of Conan Doyle, who had come to resent what he called the "Conjurer's Complex" of such magicians as P.T. Selbit and John Nevil Maskelyne, who insisted on **explaining away**⁵ psychic phenomena in terms of simple magic tricks.

Even physically, the two men presented a study in contrasts. Houdini, whom the press invariably described as "somewhat undersized", had angular features, blue eyes that often betrayed anger and impatience, and thick, black curly hair. Conan Doyle, in spite of his earlier course of muscular development had grown somewhat *portly*⁶ in his advancing years. His hair had *thinned*⁷ and deep lines showed in his face, but the photographs of his later years usually find him *beaming*⁸ with the contentment of his happy home life...

Below the surface there were compelling similarities. Both had drifted away from a strong religious background. As children, both had weak, absent fathers, and later compensated for the *privations*⁹ of childhood by showering wealth on their strong-willed mothers. A famous piece of Houdini *lore*¹⁰ has him returning from an early success with gold coins concealed in his clothing – "Shake me, Mama! I'm magic!" he is supposed to have said. The young Conan Doyle had done much the same thing on his return from the Arctic.

¹ At first blush: (idiomatic phrase) when first seen or considered

² Brash: (adjective) extremely confident in oneself and maybe showing a lack of respect for others

³ Genial: (adjective) friendly and pleasant

⁴ Outspoken: (adjective) expressing strong opinions on a topic

⁵ To explain away: (phrasal verb) to give the reason for or cause to (to account for something)

⁶ Portly: (adjective) fat and round (especially middle-aged men)

⁷ To thin: (verb) become less thick

⁸ To beam: (verb) smile with lots of pleasure

⁹ Privation: (noun) a lack of basic things

¹⁰ Lore: (noun) traditional stories or beliefs associated with a person, place or thing.

Questions

1. We can conclude from the first paragraph that Houdini's understanding of magic tricks
 - a) closed his mind to spiritualism from the start
 - b) underpinned his desire to reject the claims of spiritualists
 - c) ensured that he and Conan Doyle would be enemies

2. In paragraph one why does the author make reference to P.T. Selbit and John Nevil Maskelyne?
 - a) To provide support for the view that Conan Doyle and Houdini should have been natural enemies
 - b) To show a common tendency among magicians in terms of their approach to spiritualism
 - c) To underscore Conan Doyle's dislike of magicians

3. In the second paragraph, the physical description of Conan Doyle suggests that
 - a) He looked old for his age but had a happy demeanour.
 - b) He had been athletic when younger
 - c) He seemed much older than Houdini.

4. We can conclude from the third paragraph that
 - a) Both Houdini and Conan Doyle were very generous
 - b) Both Houdini and Conan Doyle loved their mothers very much
 - c) Both Houdini and Conan Doyle came from impoverished backgrounds

SEE ANSWERS OVERLEAF

COMPREHENSION B2: 2



Answers

1. b
2. a
3. b
4. c