‘Faerie,’ write Brian Froud and Allen Lee, ‘can revel itself, bright and glittering without warning, anywhere and just as suddenly disappear. Its frontiers of twilight, mists, and fancy are all around us, and like a tide running out, can momentarily reveal Faerie before flowing back to conceal it again.’

Something very valuable is learned with the Shee, but the evidence to convince the naysayers will never convince the naysayers not only because the sayers say nay but because the Shee dance and play and escape their own empiricism.

The question of proof is a tricky one. Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney and Frank Podmore provided hundreds of documented examples of telepathy and other psychical abilities in their 1886 book *Phantasms of the Living*. It is proof indeed, yet naysayers said nay at the time of the book’s publication. Naysayers say nay today.

‘The DMT world is undeniable,’ Gallimore told us, ‘it cannot be denied once you’ve been there.’ Right – but of course many do not go there, and thus many do deny it. Those who have never experienced a ghost may feel justified in denying ghosts. Never attend a séance and deny mediumship. Synchronicity is only synchronicity if recognised as synchronicity. If denied, then it never was synchronicity.

There is no photograph that will capture the Shee sufficient to prove the Shee to those who need proof of the Shee. Proof comes in many shapes and sizes, and not all evidence fits the required parameters. There is a beautiful tale – perhaps a cautionary tale – that relates to this rich riddle, and that continues to enthral a century on.

Theosophist, impassioned spiritualist, former member of SPR, and author of *Sherlock Holmes*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, became swept up in an enchanting and memorable Faery drama. The story of the Cottingley Fairies is well-known, so I’ll recap only briefly.

July 1917. Two young cousins, Elsie and Frances, living together in Elsie’s house in Cottingley, Yorkshire, liked playing in the beck behind the house, and they blamed the fairies for their arriving late for tea wet and mucky. Elsie borrowed a camera – a rare item in households then – from her father Arthur and the girls took a photo which, when developed by Arthur in his darkroom, showed the girls playing with fairies. They borrowed the camera again two months later and snapped Elsie holding out her hand to a gnome. Arthur was blasé over what he saw to be a childish prank, but Elsie’s mother, Polly, paid closer attention.
Polly had an interest in magic, astral projection and past lives. As with Kirk, Yeats, Lang and Evans-Wentz, spiritualism and Faery drift in and out of each other. She took the photographs to a Theosophical Society meeting in Bradford concerned with ‘Fairy Life’ and showed them to the speaker. The photographs were then displayed a few months later at the Society’s annual conference in Harrogate, where they came to the attention of Edward L. Gardner, a leading member of the Society. He had the photos scrutinised for possible trickery and none was found.

Doyle had been commissioned by *Strand Magazine* for an article on fairies for the 1920 Christmas edition, and he requested the Cottingley photographs from Gardner. Curious about their authenticity, he showed them to Sir Oliver Lodge, physicist, spiritualist and twice President of the SPR, who took the fairies to be puppets created by the girls. Doyle sent Gardner back to Cottingley with a camera for the girls for more fairy photos. He completed the *Strand* article and left for a lecture tour of Australia. The magazine volume sold out, and Doyle maintained regular communication with Gardner, who sent him press clippings. The *Strand* article, the fairy photos, parts of this correspondence, and other reflections, were published as a book by Doyle in September 1922, entitled wonderfully *The Coming of Fairies*.

The story has far more turns and twists, but what particularly catches my eye is Doyle and Gardner’s emphatic – and at times quite funny – defence of the photographs as *empirical proof of the existence of fairies*. From the outset, Doyle presents the photographs as evidence before jurors. ‘I consider,’ he states at the beginning of the *Strand* article, ‘after carefully going into every possible source of error, that a strong *prima-facie* case has been built up.’ His accusers are those who cry ‘fake’; yet, he declares, they do so only because they are unfamiliar with the case. He defends the honesty and integrity of all parties: ‘The father holds a position of trust in connection with some local factory, and the family are well known and respected,’ and he runs meticulously through the various positive assessments of the authenticity of the photographs, including the experts of Kodak, Ltd.

Why so insistent?

Doyle had long defended the veracity of spirit photography, those images appearing on photographic plates since the early days of photography of spirit apparitions, ectoplasm, and anomalous physical apportions. He had even resigned from the SPR over the Society’s scepticism over the matter. The fairy photographs were, in his and Gardner’s eyes, aspects of the same phenomena.

He was also, at the time, ardently defending spiritualism against charges of fraudulence. It was a sensitive time; the air was thick with war bereavement; mediumship and chicanery grew
in equal measure. He had attended hundreds of séances, and had no doubts as to the survival of the soul and its ability to communicate with the living. ‘After weighing the evidence,’ he had written back in 1887, ‘I could no more doubt the existence of the phenomena than I could doubt the existence of lions in Africa.’

Doyle pursues the fairy case with great longing, suggesting not only that ‘with fuller knowledge and with fresh means of vision these people are destined to become just as solid and real as the Eskimos,’ but that we must be very careful to treat this hidden, natural land and inhabitants with the gentleness, respect and grace that they demand. Like Aldous Huxley after him, who wrote of the ‘antipodes of everyday consciousness,’ populated by ‘all sorts of creatures at least as odd as kangaroos,’ Doyle employs a geographical, exotic, metaphor, evoking the discovery of Faery – and its proof through the photographs – with the discovery of the New World. Let us hope, he implores, that there is no need of some new Las Casas to defend the rights of the natives. We must tread carefully. Wise words.

Yet I don’t think Doyle trod very carefully. I think he wanted to parade the fairies captured on film before an awestruck audience. He desperately wanted to convince people. His defence of the photographs is at times a little unhinged. Oliver Lodge pointed out how like cardboard cut-outs the fairies seemed to be. Another observer remarked that their coiffures had much of the of the Parisienne look. One scrutinous fellow even pointed out the hatpin employed by the girls to prop up a fairy. Doyle saw it as the fairy’s umbilicus, proof that fairies give birth like humans, a valuable addition to our knowledge of fairy physiology…

Again, why so insistent?

Here, of course, Evans-Wentz’s psychological theory proves very useful. The germ of the idea acting on nature. He was insistent because the germ of the idea was insistent.

In 1918 Doyle’s son, Kingsley, wounded in the Battle of the Somme, died from pneumonia; and in 1919 Doyle’s brother Innes also died from pneumonia. Shortly after the war he lost two brothers-in-law and two nephews. He was devastated, yet consoled through the knowledge that their spiritual existence might continue. And the accusers’ knives were out: renowned sceptic Joseph McCabe published a booklet entitled Is Spiritualism Based on Fraud? which claimed Doyle had been duped by the mediums’ deception. Doyle was defending his firm and evidence-based belief whilst overcoming his own grief.

Grief is very powerful. But I am not saying that he was blinded by grief – on the contrary – eruptions of the unconscious, as Jung pointed out, tend to cluster around trauma. Weird shit occurs around death, loss and grief (as weird shit occurs around birth, growth and joy.) Death,
slaughter, destruction. Powerful psychic forces that fuck with coordinates of space-time were unleashed.

The horror of surviving the First World War. The industrial, technological carnage. The most monstrous manifestation of maniacal masculine mechanistic modernity. So many men lost.

And there, amidst this bleak, barren, battle-scarred landscape, appear two beautiful girls playing so innocently with fairies. The photos are enchanting – their tumbling locks and flowers and pinafores and the misty waters of the beck. Such stunning contrast. The beauty, innocence, mystique and magic of the girls, the fairies, the flowers, the beck and the rural Yorkshire environment. The girls are Faery.

Dion Fortune, another intrepid explorer of these daimonic lands, suggested in the level-headed *Psychic Self Defense*, that rather than the fairy folk being the souls of the dead, they might be souls of the living – they might be the living. This seems the case with Elsie and Frances. The girls are undines, water nymphs. They are the Cottingley Fairies.

Gardner and Doyle were enthralled by their anima, captive to fairy glamour. The whole saga was powerful compensation for the ghastliness of the war, and the brave Knight Sir Arthur was gallant in defence of the girls and their fae fairy friends.

Faery as compensation. Jung would describe the phenomenon as psychoid manifestation. Importantly, Conan Doyle paid close interest in his *History of Spiritualism* to the manifestation of the angels on the battlefield of Mons and of the ghostly English bowmen from Agincourt, witnessed by many battle-weary troops. Insightfully, he recognises that ‘at such times of hardship the psychic powers of man are usually most alive.’

There is an immediate parallel with the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I became familiar with this astonishing phenomenon in 2016, when invited to examine a PhD thesis on Jungian approaches to apparitions of the Virgin Mary. With the focus on Our Lady of Zeitoun, who appeared, repeatedly, to thousands for many months above St. Mary’s Coptic Church, Cairo, in 1968, one principle angle of the thesis was the balancing, harmonising, power of the apparition. In a time of religious intolerance, social unrest and threats of war, the apparition of the BVM, as representation of the goddess archetype, helped lessen the tension and spread a message of tolerance, compassion and peace.

‘The recognition of their existence,’ writes Doyle of the fairies, ‘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.’ Precisely the glamour and mystery that had been so savagely
destroyed in the war. It is a touching narrative. Fairies, like the battlefield angels and the Blessed Virgin Mary, emit that weird healing magic.

With typical Jungian symbolism, the examination of the thesis took place on the very day of electoral victory of the current president of the US. We remarked on the need for the goddess, the Holy Mother, the sacred and wise feminine, in an age dominated by the bullish, aggressive, macho posturing of this reality-show tycoon and his bully-boy henchmen.

Again with Jungian sensibility we did not get hung up on the physical origins of the manifestation. How did she appear? Is she a joke, a jest, a hoax or a ghost; a mirage, illusion, fantasy or collective hallucination? What if there was some sniggering prankster projecting her image from behind a rooftop niche? It is interesting to speculate, but not at the expense of the essential issue: she appeared. As she also appeared to Bernadette at Lourdes or the children in Fátima; and still worked her blessed, loving, forgiving magic.

‘These little figures,’ writes Doyle of the fairies, ‘would seem to have an objective reality, as we have ourselves, even if their vibrations should prove to be such that it takes either psychic power or a sensitive plate to record them.’ Well they clearly do have their own objective reality: the photographs!

The girls, decades later, coyly admitted to having made the fairies out of paper, then floating the evidence down the beck after the photos. The girls were quite flummoxed by the business – these earnest moustachioed gentlemen from London so insistent, so persistent, so dogged in their determination to defend the girls. They never admitted this so as not to embarrass Gardner and Doyle. Of course they played along. How could they not? They were protecting them.

I love that… the roles reversed… the grown-ups doe-eyed like kids… the kids like grown-ups spinning fairy yarns…

Doyle was speaking the truth in his bombastic book title. The fairies did come. The fairies have always come, in one form or another, in stories and sketches, figurines and fables, in dreams and reveries, woodland meditation, mushroom adventures and DMT cosmonautics. Their materiality is immaterial.

Splendidly, the tricks go deeper. The girls seem quite amused by the whole charade, until the third gentleman appeared on the scene: Geoffrey Hodson, medium, psychic, sensitive. He went with them to the beck and gleefully saw fairies a-plenty when the girls pointed them out to him. They were simply pointing at the grass and bushes. They saw him as the fraud. The tricksters were not tricked.
And the tricks go deeper. Whilst the elderly ladies admitted to cutting the fairies from paper, they maintained that the fifth and final photo – the fairies in their sun-bath – was genuine. And they both claimed to have taken the photo…

And so it is important not to get stuck on the rude logic and crude binary of real/not-real. *They are fake!* cried the naysayers (of which there were plenty, including, decades later, the Amazing Randi). *They are real!* cried Gardner and Doyle. They are right. They are wrong. The fairies did appear. The fairies did not appear. It is all real and make-believe, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, simultaneously. This, my friends, is the imaginal.

All the while the children were mystified not by the fairies but by the flustery, blustery reaction of the grown-ups.

‘Children,’ wrote Doyle, ‘claim to see these creatures far more frequently than adults. This may possibly come from greater sensitiveness of apprehension, or it may depend upon these little entities having less fear of molestation from the children.’ Or maybe children are simply less strung out by the need to prove...

Children – yes, this is the key. There is a childish innocence associated with the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary; indeed as with Lourdes or Fátima, she is generally seen only – or at least at first – by children. She is the Faery Queen. Faery is the essence of childhood enchantment. Fairy stories, delicate flower fairies with gossamer wings, naughty elves and mischievous goblins. The Tooth Fairy whom the child slowly begins to suspect is Mum whilst continuing the drama or risk losing the coin, like the farmer who when asked why he left a saucer of milk out for the fairies replies ‘because I’d be a fool not to.’ Kids have that pragmatism.

The loss of childhood is the loss of enchantment. Fairy tales are abandoned, the last molar wobbles loose, the books cast aside or – with luck – boxed away until parenthood and fresh enchantment. Education drills left-right-left-right. Things are or things are not. Or things are both or things are neither. Matter and fact become matter-of-fact. And they matter. It’s a fact.

Unless, of course, enchantment slips through the cracks, slinks through the chinks, billows on the breeze. And such experiences of enchantment are enchanting because they catch that spirit of childhood – of delight and fear and uncertainty and excitement. Things are not what they seem. They are and are not simultaneously. The dream lingers in the day and the day lingers in the dream. The enchantment of enchantment.